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Riders to the West: "Goodfriday, 1613"

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East and west are the most important compass points in Donne's symbolic and poetic landscape. Images of maps appear frequently in his work, mostly in his *Divine Poems* and in his sermons. East is consistently associated with Christ and the Resurrection, west with death. These ideas are not unique to him. A. B. Chambers shows in some detail that a long line of Christian geographical symbolism, beginning with Zachariah and extending through the imaginative literature of the Church Fathers into the Renaissance, preceded him in making these same associations.[1]

In the tradition and in Donne's poetry the map metaphor works like this: we are born in the east, and like the sun we are delivered into our grave in the west; but death means resurrection from death, the circle is completed by a kind of fiat, and west automatically becomes its opposite, the east, this time as the eternal joy of heaven. We can watch this symbolism working in one of Donne's finest religious lyrics, the "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse":

> Whilst my Physitians by their love are growne
> Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie
> Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
> That this is my South-west discoverie
> *Per fretum febris*, by these streights to die,
>
> I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;
> For, though theire currants yeeld returne to none,
> What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
> In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
> So death doth touch the Resurrection.[2]

The "South-west discoverie," Clay Hunt says, "refers to the discovery of the navigational passage which the merchant explorers had sought for

generations, an ocean passage to the Orient."[3] He means the Straits of Magellan, the stormy passage the navigator discovered on his way west to the Pacific and the Philippines, where he died. In a similar way, the speaker knows, he must pass "through the strait of fever," as the Latin phrase has it, on his journey west and to death, whose "currants yeeld returne to none." But he joys to see his west because touching death he touches its opposite. "Take a flat Map," says Donne, "a Globe *in plano*, and here is East, and there is West, as far asunder as two points can be put: but reduce this flat Map to roundnesse, which is the true form, and then East and West touch one another, and are all one. . . ."[4] As Hunt puts it nicely,

> He does not regret that the currents will allow him no return from his passage, and he is not afraid to face the hardship and danger which he may expect as he goes farther into the West that now opens before him. . . . He thinks of the West (death) simply as the region that he must pass through to arrive at the East (resurrection and the joy of eternal life in heaven), the goal which all men have dreamed of and which truly adventurous men have actually sought.[5]

It is in this general sense that the symbolism of "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" has traditionally, and rightly, been understood. So far so good. But "Riding Westward" was a colloquialism of Donne's time that meant literally "going to Tyburn"—going to hang on the Middlesex gallows, sometimes called Tyburn tree, located in the west end of London on the west bank of the Tyburn tributary.[6] The speaker of this poem is a man condemned to die, and riding out, in no uncertain terms, to be executed. To appreciate the drama of this poem we must read it as it was understood by Donne's contemporaries, who would have recognized in it the elaborate conceit so highly dated that it has become lost since, and with it part of the poem's coherence and wit.

The *OED* does not record the phrase "riding westward" as ever having had a usage other than as the subtitle of Donne's poem. It does give "to westward," however, as having had the particular connotation I mention, citing the following example from H. Parrot's *Cures for the Itch* (1626): "'If anything happen . . . , it must accrew from the next Sessions, provided there be some to travel westward.'" I have discovered several other witty allusions to this sense of the phrase which the subtitle of Donne's poem seems to echo. Robert Greene concludes his tale of

"howe an honest substantiall Citizen was made a Connie," in his *Third Part of Conny-catching* (1592), with an observation that the masters of those houses that fence stolen goods may "beare countenance of honest substantiall men, but all their living is gotten in this order, the end of such (though they scape awhile) will be sayling westward in a Cart to Tiborn."[7]

There is a passage in Thomas Dekker's *Belman of London* (1608) describing London's society of cut-purses and pickpockets within which "The Treasurers office is very truly (though he be an arrant theefe) to render an account of such moneies as are put into his hands uppon trust: for of every purse (that is cleanly conveied and hath good store of *Shelles* in it) a ratable proportion is deliverd . . . to the Treasurer, to the intent that when any of them is taken and cast into prison, a *Flag* of truce may presently be hung out, and composition offered to the wronged party, thereby to save a brother of the society from riding *Westward*."[8]

Finally, as a transition from the allusion to the poem itself, I wish to cite this passage from the sermon, quoted previously, that Donne preached upon Easter Day 1619, on this text from Psalms 89:48: "What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death?"

> Wee are all conceived in close Prison; in our Mothers wombes, we are close Prisoners all; when we are borne, we are borne but to the liberty of the house; Prisoners still, though within larger walls; and then all our life is but a going out to the place of Execution, to death. Now was there ever any man seen to sleep in the Cart, between New-gate, and Tyborne? between the Prison, and the place of Execution, does any man sleep? And we sleep all the way; from the womb to the grave we are never throughly awake; but passe on with such dreames, and imaginations as these, I may live as well, as another, and why should I dye, rather then another? but awake, and tell me, sayes this Text, *Quis homo?* who is that other that thou talkest of? *What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death?*[9]

It pleased Donne to think of death as an execution. This idea is not necessarily a conceit: insofar as to be a Christian means to imitate Christ, it has an historical justification in the Crucifixion; and some correspondence, actual or symbolic, in the manner of dying, was, for Donne, both inevitable and good. Such a view of death, I am arguing, is the

controlling metaphor of "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" and a key to understanding it.

"Goodfriday" falls into two parts, and in each the meaning of death is different. It is first of all a dramatic poem: it records a change of mind, as the Holy Sonnets do frequently. The first part, which constitutes the bulk of the poem, ends with a series of rhetorical questions. While they are being asked, a change of heart occurs and the rider resolves to embrace the kind of death, literally or symbolically, that his religion and faith require.

As the poem opens, the rider betrays that he is dying a kind of spiritual death. Pleasure and business have taken over from devotion and the proper rule of his soul and are whirling him away from the risen Christ of the east, on whom the rider's attention is fixed, and toward the west, distancing him, as he perceives it, from his true faith.

> Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
> The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
> And as the other Spheares, by being growne
> Subject to forraigne motions, lose their owne,
> And being by others hurried every day,
> Scarce in a year their naturall forme obey:
> Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit
> For their first mover, and are whirld by it.
> Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West
> This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.

Chambers shows that Donne has reversed his cosmology. The primum mobile, in a tradition stretching far back into antiquity, was always westward in motion. Its influence on the spheres, whose motions were naturally recalcitrant and desired to turn eastward, forced them to whirl westward with it. It was the same with the soul. The rational faculties of the soul were also, like the primum mobile, naturally "westward" in motion. They compelled the irrational faculties of the soul to whirl with them against the inclinations of their own baser nature.[10] Whereas, in the traditional cosmology, it was natural for the rider to be carried toward the west, here Donne makes the motion of the first mover naturally eastward in direction in order to emphasize that death is the consequence of the rider's betrayal. Behind and above him in the east, the risen Christ hangs bloody, ragged, and torn. The speaker's predicament is that he cannot, or will not, turn his face to the east: he is afraid to die.

> Yet dare I'almost be glad, I do not see
> That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
> Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
> What a death were it then to see God dye?
> It made his owne Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
> It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.

Though my interpretation of this poem, emphasizing the nature of punishment and expiation, is fundamentally different from that of Chambers, who analyzes it in terms of the nature of the soul, I agree fully with his observation that at this point the "westward journey . . . becomes not a rational movement but a departure from the Christian path, a turning from light to enter the ways of darkness."[11] I agree, too, that the rider, at once both Donne and Everyman, "must be pierced, must assume the 'rag'd and torn' apparel of God, and must then be scourged of the deformity thus put on."[12]

The journey westward is both right and wrong. I am assuming that for Donne it is right because, as a follower of Christ, he is naturally, ineluctably, pursuing the path which Christ took as a mortal man—westward to death and execution. Of the inevitability of his end the rider is painfully aware. The journey is wrong, on the other hand, because he is at this moment afraid to meet his fate. Again, we must interpret the essential ambiguity of the poem in terms of Crucifixion. For the rider, the Crucifixion—his Tyburn, if you will—means both the agony of his physical death and his death to the pleasure and business of the world which have usurped the operation of his soul. For Donne and the poets of his time, the word "sun" could hardly pass from pen to paper without a thought that the reader would immediately check for a play on the well-worn tradition that associated sun with Son, by an effective cosmological analogy, as the two rulers of the heavens. When meditating on the agony of the Crucifixion, the speaker acknowledging that it made "the Sunne winke," he is only too conscious of the physical and spiritual pain he himself must undergo in order to die fully into his faith. Being able to behold the east means being able to make this leap, and he finds the thought of it excruciating:

> Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
> And tune all spheares at once, peirc'd with those holes?
> Could I behold that endlesse height which is
> Zenith to us, and to'our Antipodes,
> Humbled below us? or that blood which is

> The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
> Made durt of dust, or that flesh which was worne
> By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?
> If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
> Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
> Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus
> Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?

In posing these questions, however, he becomes able to answer them. He finds that he can meet his religion on its own terms, for we find that in the next few lines, the second and concluding part of the poem, the speaker is anticipating his punishment with resolution and even eagerness:

> Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
> They'are present yet unto my memory,
> For that looks towards them; and thou look'st towards
> mee,
> O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;
> I turne my backe to thee, but to receive
> Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
> O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
> Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
> Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
> That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

When the speaker recognizes that his westward journey is good—"I turne my backe to thee, but to receive / Corrections"—he accepts the destiny of Christ as man; and in this acceptance and awareness of it he becomes, as it were, fully awake: "was there ever any man seen to sleep in the Cart, between New-gate, and Tyborne? between the Prison, and the place of Execution, does any man sleep? And we sleep all the way; from the womb to the grave we are never throughly awake. . . ." The rider is now "conscious." He now sees his death, physical and spiritual, as a punishment which redeems.

Christ is a military figure in this poem, at least inasmuch as Nature is "his owne Lieutenant." And Christ himself, of course, was the victim of a state execution, crucifixion being the punishment commonly reserved for traitors and slaves. He was a traitor by Roman law and paid with his life for the crime. In this sense, the rider is like Christ: for he also is, or was, a traitor, by virtue of his weakness to pleasure and business which he admitted at the outset. Hence his desire for punishment: to be

redeemed from fire by fire. By a kind of irony it is Christ, however, who will become his executioner. The moment of his freedom becomes the moment of his ultimate captivity. The speaker resolves the dilemma of his western movement like this: he accepts the consequences of proceeding westward as necessary, even though they mean spiritual and eventually physical death. He accepts them because the punishment which is consequent upon his spiritual death will reform him, just as the fact of his physical death will mean eventually his resurrection. I believe that, for Donne, to turn one's face to the east is possible only after death; for it is presumably only on Resurrection Day that Christ will reappear to the eyes. In making his plea for dissolution, the speaker finds some solace in what Chambers calls his "devotional memory."[13] By this means, as a guide to repentance, the Christian can contemplate the spectacle of the Crucifixion by such imperfect means as are available to him.

When Donne rode westward on the day he composed this poem, as seems fairly certain, he was meditating on several important matters. He was about to enter holy orders—a step he had delayed until he could be sure his mind was set wholly on heavenly things. He was about to die, he must have felt, to a whole way of life. Perhaps it struck him as a strange coincidence, even as a kind of fate, that the eve of his conversion was Good Friday. The speaker of this poem, whether Donne or not, is a man sentenced to die. "That [Christ] was crucified with his face towards the West," says Sir Thomas Browne, "we will not contend with tradition and probable account. . . ."[14] This is the significance of the subtitle and such phrases as "carryed towards the West," "as I ride," and "punish mee." I do not believe that the poem dramatizes the meditations of a man actually being carted off to Tyburn, only symbolically, insofar as he is Everyman, and inasmuch as he is, in a minor key, by imitation, Christ himself, as I have tried to show. This poem records a crucial moment in the man's moral life when he becomes fully conscious of his dying, yet manages to meet it with humility and acceptance, though not without fear and trembling. He accepts that to ride westward is not only inevitable but finally more good than bad, since that was the path Christ himself took, who suffered a real death, both before and during the execution, and who yet knew, paradoxically, that in his case, as in the case of all those who, like the rider, imitate Christ, death means life.

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Notes

[1] A. B. Chambers, "'Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward': The Poem and the Tradition," *ELH* 28 (1961), 31-53.

[2] *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), p. 50. References to poetry are from this edition.

[3] Clay Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954), p. 101.

[4] "Preached to the Lords upon Easter-day, at the Communion, The King being then dangerously sick at New-Market." Sermon No. 9 in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), II, 199.

[5] Hunt, p. 102.

[6] "Tyburn," in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1911), XXVII, 493-94; and *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Micropaedia*, 15th ed. (London: Helen Hemingway Benton, 1974), X, 215.

[7] Robert Greene, *The Third and Last Part of Conny-catching*, ed. G. B. Harrison, Elizabethan and Jacobean Quartos (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1966), p. 20.

[8] Thomas Dekker, "The Belman of London," in *The Guls Hornbook and the Belman of London* (London: J. M. Dent, 1928), pp. 150-51.

[9] Sermon No. 9, ed. Potter and Simpson, II, 197-98.

[10] Chambers, pp. 31-41.

[11] Chambers, p. 48.

[12] Chambers, p. 52.

[13] Chambers, p. 51.

[14] Sir Thomas Browne, "Hydriotaphia," in *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), p. 139.