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Into the Shadows . . . : Donne's "Farewell to Love"

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"Farewell to Love" is not so much neglected as avoided. Its notorious difficulty has not proven to be the scholarly aphrodisiac predicted by D. F. Rauber. That very difficulty should arouse Donne enthusiasts, he wrote, quoting Job 39:25 for encouragement: "He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha! And he smelleth the battle far off."[1] Given the popularity of Donne studies this century, and the consequent search for pastures relatively untrampled, the list of scholars who have engaged "Farewell," either glancingly or head-on, is not very long. Those who have written in recent times on the poem, or its crux or its final line — Rauber himself is one (others include Patricia Pinka, A.J. Smith, Theodore Redpath, Elaine Hoover, Arthur Marotti, James Baumlin, Noralyn Masselink, Christopher Ricks, Elaine Perez Zickler, and George Klawitter) — have found no consensus beyond the obvious certainty that it is a poem expressive of disillusionment at the possibility of fulfilment of sexual love.

The prospect of critical consensus is, perhaps, as Donne says in another context, a vaine chimera,[2] bred of ignorant craving. Or it could be a cause for rejoicing that there is life in the corpus yet. In one of the most sustained discussions of "Farewell," "The Dismissal of Love: Or, Was Donne a Neoplatonic Lover," A.J. Smith attempts to crack this "tough nut" by testing it against theories of love, only to discover that Donne's kind of sexual consciousness was undefined until that time in European literature, and that Donne himself had no desire of such finality: "To be absolute for final truth is alien to the temper of Donne's poetry."[3] This may not be the sound of trumpets, but it is, at least, a reassuring note on which to go forward.

This essay is not a line-by-line reading of the poem, nor a fresh attempt to solve the crux of lines 23-30, characterized by John Hayward in his 1949 edition of Donne as "the most unintelligible in the whole canon of Donne's poetry," nor to try to solve the problem of "worm-seed" and "tail" — for these may be things that no man else can find. This essay concludes, however, with an excursus on "wormseed." My assumptions about the primary meanings of the text, and the origins of such assumptions, will be clear as the essay proceeds to suggest philosophical and literary contexts that clarify what Donne is up to in this poem.

First, as so often with Donne, is the matter of autobiographical reference. Critical opinion is quite contradictory. On the one hand is the view that the poem is an intensely personal confession of disgust, a direct equivalent of the poet's state of mind — at some point in his lfe — in its extreme cynicism. On the other hand is the view that the poem is not personal expression. Among those of the first view, Rauber finds that "the extent of Donne's despair" in "Farewell to Love" is so wide, and the "feeling of betrayal" so intense that they make the "so-called bitter or cynical poems almost pleasant" in comparison (51). A.J. Smith takes the poem's "blunt . . . terse" manner to signal Donne's "brusque impatience" with neo-platonism (113). Elaine Hoover likewise takes its "bitter scorn" as a sign of Donne's disenchantment with love, and thus assigns it to the putative "later" lyrics.[4] Thereby she joins in the sport, initiated long ago, of teasing out the lineaments of a sexual, amorous biography of Donne from *Songs and Sonets.* Leishman's account — more than sixty years since — plays that theme, inviting subsequent variations. As a chivalrous young man who really thought that there was such a thing as true love, Donne "was deceived, and for a time inflamed with hatred and bitterness, but gradually developed a cynical philosophy of love; resolved to get what enjoyment out of it he could, but not let it unduly disturb his peace of mind."[5]

Catching the elusive tone — that is the key to success at the biography sport. But it can become a solipsistic exercise, as we all know: position, "earlier" or "later" in a presumed sequence, predicates tone; assumed tone predicates place in a sequence. In his *Reinvention*

of Love Anthony Low recommends cutting "the knot of biographical indeterminacy simply by cutting the connections between Donne and the speaker . . . in his poems." Whether this speaker is to be termed, in the older manner, the "persona" or "protagonist" or, in the more recent manner, the "self-fashioner" or "self-presenter" is not of central importance.[6]

But this is not the *answer* to understanding Donne (nor does Low claim it as such), merely a preliminary tactic. To abandon the effort to tie up that subtle knot of poem, poet, and his world— not omitting from it our world of the reader's lived, imaginative experience — would be another form of solipsism. Patricia Pinka in *This Dialogue of One,* using the distancing term "persona," nevertheless attends to Donne in his world.[7] She proposes a taxonomy of speakers in *Songs and Sonnets* such as the "Witty Lover," the "Hedonist," and the "Dreaming Cynic," and suggests that Donne guides the reader's response to these types by control of tone (15). On this view, Donne is a lyrical Theophrastus. I pass over discussion here of how well this scheme works for the other poems. For "Farewell" it is promising. The speaker is a "jaded sensualist"(*x*), an intellectually superior hedonist at one end of the spectrum of types, perhaps a scientist, Pinka suggests. Such persons "create the cosmos in their own image," and when sensuality cloys, the concept of love is seen clearly by them to have been a sham (53). Pinka also highlights the "we" of stanza 3: "Ah, cannot wee, / As well as Cocks and Lyons jocund be" (64). Who is the imagined audience? A coterie of jaded sensualists about town, perhaps? Marotti has argued that "Farewell," in fact, was a "specially private work,"[8] basing the argument on the poem's rarity in MSS, and suggesting that "Farewell" was one of those "'loosely scattered in [his] youth.'"[9]

Are we in the confessional listening to Donne, or among his witty friends, diverted by this pleasantry, this "serment de comédie d'un libertin" [comical oath of a libertine] professing ironic reformation of his ways, from tomorrow on?[10] Or are we reading an instructive Theophrastan character? I propose, lacking biographical facts, a blend, unique to Donne, of all three elements. As Cruttwell observes, in an essay rejecting interpretive tendencies that diminish Donne's original-

ity — and especially the originality of Donne' s imaginative range — every aspect of love is liable to be present in Donne's imagination at any time.[11] In the spirit of Cruttwell's salutary remarks I would add that the aspects revealed in "Farewell" stood before his imagination with peculiar insistence for they bring into play his deepest and most persistent concerns — I am tempted to call them anxieties — which include

1) the specter of the universe as merely mechanistic,
2) an almost pyrrhonist skepicism,
3) the uncertainty of his redemption,
4) heroic isolation and suicide.

I do not say that these are fully present in the consciousness of the speaker, for I do accept that the poem is a dramatic monologue, as others have argued. The tortured syntax of the poem enacts the intellectual struggle of the speaker against the bondage of his condition, while the cool cynicism of his attitude projects a wished-for freedom from that bondage that we know he will not achieve.

Dramatic monologues are not positioned at a fixed distance from their authors. Browning's "My Last Duchess," for instance, built on an historical narrative, seems to stand in a different relationship to its author than "Farewell to Love," if it is indeed a dramatic monologue, stands in relationship to Donne. Comparing those two relationships, it is a great deal more uncertain that one understands Donne's. In some way, then, as we attend to the speaker's argument, doomed, as it is, to futility by its solipsism, we discover those pervasive concerns of the poet, discovering their presence, one might say, by their shadows. C.S.Lewis, doubting that Donne describes love (at least, as Lewis understood it) wrote of "the amazing shadows cast by love upon the intellect, the passions, and the appetite" in Donne's poems.[12] His suggestive remark, if not true of other Donne poems, has a resonance for "Farewell."

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The opening analogy of the (presumably young) neophyte in love, to the (presumably old, or older) neophyte in religion, sounds the note

of skepticism: they are linked by their ignorance and their bodily craving. One craves selfish pleasures; the other craves preservation of the self. Neither is engaged in an act of worship, as the verb "crave" reveals. Neither has a name for the object of craving. Thus the speaker fashions a general theory of knowledge along skeptical lines. Rising and falling desire — the penile comparison is obvious — creates phantasms of the mind, not realities. This illusion the now-wised-up speaker rejects. It is noteworthy that his argument goes on also to reject raising up posterity (at the end of stanza 3), that is, it rejects a concrete reality that can be known.

How does this absurdity come about? His "theory" in stanza 1 first links naming with knowing, or rather, being unable to name with being unable to know. James Baumlin, reflecting on the connection of naming with knowing, notes that the same problem faces the mystic as well as the cynic, and asks whether the lack of a stable verifiable referent devalues the language of poetry, of love and of theology alike.[13] However, as if unwittingly, our speaker talks of "things not **yet** knowne," allowing, therefore, that some "things" — this gesture of a word is redeployed tellingly in 1. 14 — can be known.

In the final stanza he speaks from such knowledge as he has found, about the knowledge that can *not* be found, and makes his resolution accordingly. What has he found? That is the subject of stanza 2. It is the empirical, and commonplace, discovery that sensual pleasure decays. Blindness, lameness, and dullness of the mind are the fruits of his reverence. The sum of his experience, which he brings to the examination of his present state in stanza 3, is that his quest was of no more value than gingerbread cast aside after three days by children. "His Highness," "golden chair," and "three days" are suggestive to the reader, if not to the speaker. Rauber, cautiously enough, takes these lines to be, in a "very indirect and allusive way a parody of Christian belief and the doctrine of the Eucharist"(57). This may be so, but what is clearer is that the speaker's condition was, and is, childish and natural. It is profound disappointment with the low, trivial and quotidian. Children discard merely a decorative gingerbread (if that is the meaning of the trope); the speaker discards a "thing" he never knew or saw.

He questions "wise" Nature. Given his credentials, he will learn little, and so it proves. Why can "wee" not be "jocund" after such "pleasures" (we have just heard his testimony that copulations are sorrowing dullness to the mind, not pleasure)? The jocundity of fowls, according to Aristotle is a form of suicidal exhaustion: they do it like crazy 'til they drop. The jocundity of lions, on the other hand, has diminishing returns until the semen dries up, another type of death, especially for a sensualist (Rauber, 62,n.7). Wise Nature has decreed two things:

1) **tristesse** to dissuade man from expending a day of life for each frantic copulation. Nature, therefore, prompts you to despise the sport in the interests of your own survival. "We kill our selues, to propagate our kinde", as Donne puts it in *The First Anniversary,* 1.110;

2) **desires to raise posterity** because we are short — i.e., quite simply, our lives are short (no clever quibbles needed here). Hobbes's characterisation of Man in the state of nature could serve as a gloss on this idea, and a summary of the speaker's mood: "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."[14] In an even more literal way are we short. As Donne puts it in *The First Anniversary,* 1.144, "So short is life.... We're scarse our Fathers shadowes cast at noone." And, of course, the moment of sexual exstasy is short: "for a minute made to be / Eager." (This reading rejects Grierson's emmendation of lines 29-30: "Eagers desire to raise posterity" and accepts MS Stow 691 punctuation.)

Nature may or may not be wise, but for this questioner she offers two, only, courses:

1) copulate furiously — but that means swift death, and an unbearable burden of dullness; or

2) refrain from sex, and thwart Nature's decree that we raise posterity. Raise no posterity. Live longer, though short, oneself. Of course, on the speaker's admission in stanza 1, his reverence for the deity of love had nothing to do with raising posterity. Both solutions are wholly solipsistic.

In the final stanza the speaker, whose mind has been swamped in "sorrowing dullness," now supposes that he can will that his mind shall

be free of desire. From the outset of the monologue, the speaker, notwithstanding his confessions, has held to the philosophy that he is in control of himself. This is, in effect, the new materialist philosophy of Iago:

> Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners; so that if we plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many - either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry - why the corrigible authority of this lies in our wills . . . .we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts. (*Othello* I.3.320 ff)

Clearly his resolution cannot succeed, "endamaged" as he is by "things" — again, the unnameable. And, indeed, the speaker cannot name the spiritual state to which he is bound. Lust, declares Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* is incurable.[15] Donne himself says as much in *Essayes in Divinity* "Mine inward corruptions have made me mine own *Pharaoh,* and mine own Egypt." We recall that as God hardened Pharaoh's heart (Ex 9:12), so neither Donne nor Pharoah by any act of their own volition could change their case. Donne's delivery, therefore, from the Egypt of lust is brought about solely by "the inhabitation of thy Spirit," he writes, addressing God, "and the application of thy merit." Thus, with God as the medicine, Donne is enabled to be his own physician. His deliverance is multiple: from "an Egypt of dulnes and stupiditie," from Egypts of "confidence and presumption," of "despair," of "sin," and of "painfull and wearisome idleness." His delivery from the Egypt of lust, unlike deliverance from the other evils he lists, is specifically by way of the institution of marriage — by "confining [his] affections."[16] But that is no part of the poem's valedictory plan.

The speaker of "Farewell," "if all fail," will become physician to his own body, and mind, applying that bitter herb, wormseed, *semen sanctum,* derived from "holie wormwood," as Gerard's *Herbal* (1597) describes it — the 1633 edition discusses Egypt as a source of Wormwood — adding, "about which there hath been great controversie

among writers."[17] And so the controversy continues, among critics and scholars. Christopher Ricks paraphrases the poem's conclusion thus: "If the worst comes to the worst, I can always clap an anaphrodisiac to my penis." It is for Ricks an act of revulsion that inspires revulsion in him; an unworthy ending with which Donne "endamages" his poem, yet a strong one, for "it usurps entire rights over the poem, and becomes its point. But the success of the ending is the failing of the poem, since it demeans."[18]

Noralyn Masselink, however, casts serious doubt on the interpretation of wormseed as anaphrodisiac — and, hence, tail as penis — showing that contemporary authority describes its use as a purgative to rid the body of worms, that is, the winds and humours of passion, and that it can be taken orally — to greater effect — or anally — to lesser effect. She makes the telling point that, given all Burton has to say about love melancholy, if wormseed were an anaphrodisiac, he would not have failed to mention the fact.[19]

Masselink's argument notwithstanding, some subsequent readings of the poem need anaphrodisiac so that "Taile" can be penis. Elaine Perez Zickler's wide-ranging essay on love and desire in Donne[20] argues against the reductionist equation of Ricks's essay which represents writing poetry and making love as analogous occupations, both of which Donne repudiates by "endamaging" gestures. Zickler, unlike Ricks, takes the poem to be "very funny . . . because it is implicitly phallic from the first stanza to the last pun, 'Taile'"(30). Yet, funny as it may be, this "idolatry of the phallus," by the poem's logic, must lead to "a suicidal cancellation of desire"(31). Perhaps the crucial difference between these readings is the "distance" they measure from poet to speaker. George Klawitter, seeing "little flippancy" in the poem, reads it as phallic, and as homosexual. For him, too, "wormseed" is an anaphrodisiac, and he speculates that as, in his view, the herbalists are quiet, the "remedy may well have slipped into the recesses of arcane medicine."[21]

Insoluble as "wormseed" seems to be, the significance of sun and shadow in the love poetry hardly needs pointing out. Nor have the lines

35-39 in which the speaker proposes to avoid the temptations of "moving beauties" as one avoids the sun by seeking out the shadow, received very much attention. Constancy and mutuality in love, that rare but sublime and precarious achievement, "the high'st degree," is likened in "Lecture upon the Shadow" to standing at noon beneath the sun at its zenith. Then the lovers "doe those shadows tread." Any inconstancy means that the "first minute after noone, is night." Often, as in this instance, Donne's lovers even at the exuberant moment of achievement, think on, or philosophize about the shadow of death. Yet the lover is valiant. He ventures all for heroical love, the achievement of "a brave clearness" to which "all things are reduced." But the speaker of "Farewell," who deludes himself that he has ventured — he gave worship and he ignorantly craved — will, unheroically turn aside into the shadows, even as he talks of his brave resolution, "I'll no more dote and runne." Like Overbury's "Amorist," for him female favour **is** the sun, which he now will shun. Rauber argues that the speaker who, above all, wants to perpetuate his being, ends in "an overall rejection of life, a withdrawal from life" (61). This is, of course, an irony that the poet surely intends us to catch, which marks the poem as standing at some distance from Donne himself. But as Mark Allinson has shown, not wanting to live and not wanting to die are inseparably tied in Donne's psyche. Yet, far from paralysing the psyche, these longings animate it, giving rise to "soul-making alchemy."[22] Allinson sees Donne as "the insecure Herculean captain of his soul"(40). Although I do not think the speaker of "Farewell to Love" is Donne revealing his own story to us as a labor of Hercules, in this striking trope of the shadows we may catch a hint of Donne, the hero of the imagination, exploring through a persona the penumbra of extinction. The speaker's unheroic wanting to live leads only to having to die. Like the lovers of "Lecture upon the Shadow," he will depart into the shade and into the night, but unlike them, he will never have seen the light. If so, we may see the poem as journey down into the Egypt of self-love.

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Excursus: "wormseed"

As we have seen, Gerard's *Herbal* of 1597 glosses "holie wormseed" — perhaps there is another ironical ignorance of the speaker suggested by this title. It is characterized as very bitter. It has many properties, such as removing "lothsomeness," but, as Masselink asserts, none is anaphrodisiac. The 1633 edition adds that Ovid declares "Ponticke Wormwood is extreme bitter," and it quotes a version of an Ovidian couplet:

> Turpia deformes gignunt Absinthia campi
> Terraque de fructu, quam sit amara docet

and translates it:

> Vntilled barren ground the lothsome Wormwood yields
> And known it's by the fruit how bitter are the fields.

This turns out to be *Epistulae ex Ponto,* III.viii.15-16. The Loeb edition gives the first of the two lines as "tristia deformes pariunt absinthia campi" and renders the two lines as "Harsh wormwood is the product of the unsightly plains, and by this fruit the land proclaims its own bitterness."

"Absinthia" — wormwood — is rare in Ovid, occurring three times only, and in each case in the works of his bitter exile, *Tristia* (V.xiii.21) and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (the other instance is III.i.23). All three emphasize bitterness, the harshness of the region of his exile, the blackness of his fate. The tone of these exilic works is marked by Ovid's regret for his offences against Augustus that have doomed him to this half-life and separation from his beloved wife. One offence lay in his erotic writings, which he now regrets writing. The other remains a mystery, despite much speculation. No doubt Donne knew this side of Ovid's writings just as he knew the love elegies and the other works which were all the rage in the Europe of his day.

In Donne's poetry "worme-seed" is unique to "Farewell to Love" (although "wormwood" occurs twice in *Lamentations of Jeremy*). It is possible that Donne was reading these bitter Ovidian verses, or called them to mind, when writing "Farewell." It adds another dimension to the sense in which the speaker and, possibly, the poet, like Ovid, say "vale!": farewell to love.

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Endnotes

1. "Donne's 'Farewell to Love': A Crux Revisited," *Concerning Poetry* 3.2 (1970): 51-63.

2. "A Valediction of the Book."

3. *John Donne: Essays in Celebration,* ed. A.J. Smith (London: Methuen & Co., 1972), pp. 90, 125-26.

4. Elaine L. Hoover, *John Donne and Francisco de Quevedo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 185-94.

5. J.B.Leishman, *The Metaphysical Poets: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), p. 19; also quoted in Deborah Aldrich Larson, *John Donne and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), p. 140.

6. *The Reinvention of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.33-34.

7. *This Dialogue of One: the Songs and Sonnets of John Donne* (University of Alabama Press, 1982).

8. Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 17.

9. See Marotti pp. 297-8 where he refers to Robert A. Bryan's search for Donne poems in seventeenth-century commonplace books — a search of nineteen that yielded no instance of "Farewell."

10. This is the reading of Yves Denis, "'Adieu à l'amour" by John Donne," *Cahiers Elisabéthains* 13 (1978): 35-39. Denis is in no doubt that the poem is ironic through and through.

11. Patrick Cruttwell, "The Love Poetry of John Donne: Pedantique Weedes or Fresh Invention?" in *Metaphysical Poetry,* eds. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1970), 11-39.

12. Quoted by Cruttwell, p. 19.

13. James S. Baumlin, *John Donne and the Rhetoric of Renaissance Discourse* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 222 - 23.

14. *Leviathan,* Part 1 Ch 13, "Of the Natural Condition of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery."

15. Subsection 2 of the First Member of Section 2, Partition III, Love Melancholy, "How Love Tyrannizeth Over Men."

16. *John Donne: Selected Prose*, chosen by Evelyn Simpson, eds. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 79.

17. John Gerard, *The herball or generall historie of plants* (London: J. Norton, 1597), pp. 941-942. It is a herb associated with deception, in that London apothecaries have paid high prices for what they supposed to be wormseed — an exotic plant — which turned out to be a counterfeit, a common plant grown

extensively in London gardens. Children with worms in their bellies were no better for taking it.

18. "Donne After Love," in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), pp. 34-5.

19. "Wormseed Revisited: Glossing line forty of Donne's 'Farewell to Love,'" *ELN* 30.2 (1992): 11-15.

20. "'nor in nothing, nor in things': The Case of Love and Desire in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *JDJ* 12 (1993): 17-39.

21. *The Enigmatic Narrator* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p.187.

22. "Re-Visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide," *Mosaic* 24.1 (1991): 31-46.