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The Things Not Seen in Donne's "Farewell to Love"

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Donne's "Farewell to Love" is based on an analogy between religion and love. The speaker traces his history as a lover, looks back on the time when he had yet to experience love and was a naive believer in its divinity, and professes his current rejection of such faith. His perspective is that of a disillusioned atheist who is all the more scornful toward religion because he once believed in a divinity only to conclude, on the basis of experience, that his creed was false and his god a non-entity. In describing his former, naive self, however, the speaker uses a simile—that of the dying atheists—which undercuts his current attitude of unbelief; and as he goes on to denigrate "the thing which lovers so / Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe" (14-15), his profane allusions to scripture do not so much support his case against the religion of love as cast an ironic light on his worldly-wise stance. Indeed, both the opening simile and the witty echoes of scriptural language throughout the poem imply that in the realm of love, as in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, only "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 14: 1).

At the beginning of "Farewell to Love," the speaker draws the analogy upon which the rest of the work builds:

> Whilst yet to prove,
> I thought there was some Deitie in love
> So did I reverence, and gave
> Worship, as Atheists at their dying houre
> Call, what they cannot name, an unknowne power,
> As ignorantly did I crave: (1-6)

The speaker's point in these lines is to compare the credulity of a man who has never yet "prove[d]"—that is, really experienced—erotic love, and who therefore worships it in ignorance, with the ignorant "call[s]" of atheists reaching out for "some Deitie" *in extremis*. Both the atheists and the credulous would-be lover "crave," or pray to and long for, something essentially unknown to them, outside their ken, outside their experience; the speaker is stressing that he has moved from naivete to bitter enlightenment.

But from the point of view of Donne the poet (who was never an atheist), there is an ironic contrast hidden within this analogy. God exists. Thus, though the atheists' deathbed prayers may be fruitless, their ignorant cravings (and, by implication) the speaker's youthful belief that there is something divine in love, are closer to the truth than the atheists' former disbelief and the cynical attitude that the speaker has now adopted. Whereas the atheists move from a life of misguided unbelief to a well-directed though ignorant craving for a God who *does* exist, the speaker moves to his present disillusionment from a life of worship and reverence for a "Deitie" whose existence he now implicitly denies. But mightn't the "Deitie" in love be as real as the unknown power called on by the dying atheists? If so, then the terms of the speaker's own analogy undermine his pose of enlightened skepticism, revealing that he was wiser when he embraced love ignorantly than he is now when he rejects it in light of "prove[n]" experience. For Faith, according to the Christian definition, is hope in and aspiration toward something that is as yet unknown, but is nevertheless real. As Hebrews 11:1 puts it, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Donne's "Farewell to Love" involves a witty and somewhat blasphemous application of that verse to the Religion of Love.[1]

The language of Hebrews 11:1 is echoed in the poem. As the verse is translated in both the Geneva and King James Bibles, the apostle twice uses the word "things"—"things hoped for, . . . things not seen." And the verses that follow give numerous examples of such things: through faith, Noah received warning of the flood before it occurred, Abraham set out for a promised land he had never seen, and Sarah

conceived a child she had thought inconceivable. In Donne's poem, then, the love previously unknown to the speaker and the God of the dying atheists are both objects of faith, "Things not yet knowne" (8). However, from the perspective of the speaker, who has now lost his faith in love, what St. Paul calls the "substance of things hoped for" has turned out to have no substance at all. He declares that "the thing which lovers so / Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe" (14-15) is no deity, but mere sensual pleasure, mere mortal delight which "Being had, enjoying it decayes" (16). The "thing" here is sexual pleasure itself; and it is also, the phrasing implies, both the penis (which "decayes" [16] in detumescence and "leaves behinde / A kinde of sorrowing dulnesse to the minde" [19-20]) and the vagina, the "thing" (14) which is (according to Renaissance slang) "no-thing," but which the male lover still "with such worship wooe[s]" (15) and longs to "see reveal'd" ("Elegie XIX" 43).[2] It is pointless, the speaker of "Farewell to Love" insists, to seek such revelation; for the unveiling of the female no-thing reveals that the male lover's search has been futile. The "thing" (14) he has sought for and now possesses is a void; there is no "substance" to hope for, no legitimate object of faith in the Pauline sense.

Erotic love, the speaker has concluded, is no true faith but—as he puts it in stanza 3—a "sport," and a dangerous one at that. He thus resolves, in the final stanza, that his "minde / Shall not desire what no man else can finde" (31-32), that he will no longer "pursue things"—objects of naive faith—that, when it came to really experiencing them, "had indammag'd" him (34). As a replacement for the "Deitie in love," he looks to "wise / Nature" (23-24) as the authority governing relations between the sexes. He speculates that she has made sex less than perfectly satisfying in order to counter the mortal creature's tendency to desire procreative activity. This quasi-scientific view of human beings as creatures whose needs are driven and curbed only by Nature replaces his former belief in love as something transcendent, something divine. It is true, as Andreasen argues, that the speaker appeals to "the orderly Law of Nature" rather than to the laws "of amoral and libertine nature" and that "Nature" as the speaker defines it "is . . . hierarchical, decreeing one set of laws for rational man and another set for animals" (127). But

the speaker theorizes about the magisterial *Natura's* decrees only in response to his own desire to be more like the beasts, and his speculations about how Nature has programmed the human sex drive have nothing to do with man's rational capacity. The "minde" as he conceives of it is not so much the seat of reason (the *imago dei*) as of appetite. His concern about its susceptibility to "sorrowing dulnesse" (20) reveals that, for him, the "minde" is just another "thing," just another detumescent organ. It is his "minde" (31) that he must control if he is to keep his sexual passions in check, and thus he must swear specifically that "my minde" will no longer "desire what no man else can finde" (32). In citing Nature's precepts, he makes a show of deferring to her, but in fact the alleged natural laws he invokes are merely rationalizations designed to explain emotions and physical responses he finds baffling. His "minde" makes a bid to rule over Mat(t)er (Nature) by codifying her ordinances in terms he finds physiologically tenable.

Such a bid, Donne's poem suggests, proceeds from an attitude that is antithetical to faith of any sort. According to one of Donne s sermons, it is the atheist who insists on Nature as the explanation for all phenomena. He "ascribes all to nature, and *sayes in his heart. There is no God* (Ps. 14:1)" (*Sermons* 9:168-9). And indeed, though the speaker of the poem denies the "Deitie in love" rather than the Christian God, his character is clearly modeled on that of an atheist as the Renaissance mind conceived of it.[3] One must take this definition into account if one is to appreciate the speaker's metaphorical atheism and the way in which the poem as a whole undercuts his cynical attitude toward love.

The word "atheism" was used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to encompass a wide range of disbelief. Donne devotes a number of passages in his sermons to asserting that non-Christians ought to be considered atheists.[4] And at times, he even goes so far as to charge that fundamental error in matters of religion—such as Protestants perceived in Roman Catholicism—amounts to atheism.[5] But the most common way to define an atheist was as a person who rejected all religion. As the pious mind of sixteenth and seventeenth-

century England characterized them, moreover, atheists were libertines who, in order to countenance their depraved lifestyles, did all they could to convince themselves that God did not exist. As Richard Hooker explains,

> They of whom God is altogether unapprehended are but few in number, and for grossness of wit such, that they hardly and scarcely seem to hold the place of human being. . . . [But] . . . a wretcheder sort there are, on whom whereas nature hath bestowed riper capacity, their evil disposition seriously goeth about therewith to apprehend God as being not God. . . . The fountain and wellspring of which impiety is a resolved purpose of mind to reap in this world what sensual profit or pleasure soever the world yieldeth, and not to be barred from any whatsoever means available thereunto. (*Laws* V.ii.1)

Despite his disillusionment with the pleasures of sex, it is something approximating this latter sort of atheism that the speaker of "Love's Deitie" embraces, for his denial of love's divinity and his resolution to abandon the practice of its religion (the sexual "worship" of those men who still "wooe" female beauty) is based upon his desire for a more enduring physical and emotional delight than is afforded love's devotees. When he sighs, "Ah cannot wee, / As well as Cocks and Lyons jocund be, / After such pleasures[?]" (21-23), one cannot help but recall Hooker's amazement "that base desires should so extinguish in men the sense of their own excellency, as to make them willing that their souls should be like to the souls of beasts" (*Laws* V.ii.1).

The speaker of "Farewell to Love" also resembles atheists as Hooker describes them in that he is given to a derisive, jesting style of argument. The flippancy of his attitude toward "some Deitie" in which he no longer believes, his bawdy puns on the words "thing" and "Taile," and his over-arching stance of blasé disdain reflect "a new method [atheists] have of turning things that are serious into mockery, an art of contradiction by way of scorn. . . . This they study, this they practise, this they grace with a wanton superfluity of wit" (Hooker, *Laws* V.ii.2).

Such scornful quipping might, if tales were true, extend even to an atheist's deathbed moments. The ecclesiastical commission that investigated the alleged atheism of Sir Walter Ralegh and his friends at Cerne Abbas in March 1594 reported that a man named Allen, the Lieutenant of Portland Castle,

> tore two leaves out of a Bible to dry tobacco on, and spoke as he denied the immortality of the soul, saying, on an occasion when he was like to die and one persuaded him to make himself ready to God for his soul, that he would carry his soul up to the top of a hill, and "Run God, run Devil, fetch it that will have it." (recounted in Harrison 295)

Reflecting on such attitudes in his *Sermons*, Donne remarks that the habit of scornful jest is so ingrained in the atheist that he may be incapable of abandoning it even when, at the moment of death, he faces divine truth:

> [T]here will alwaies be *Scorners, Iesters, Scoffers* and *Mockers* at *Religion*. . . . [And] hee that gives himselfe the liberty, of *jesting* at *Religion*, shall find it hard, to take up at last; as when *Iulian* the *Apostata* had received his Deathes-wound, and could not chuse but confesse, that that wound came from the hand, and power of *Christ,* yet he confest it, in a Phrase of *Scorne, Vicisti Galilæe, The day is thine, O Galilean*, and no more; It is not, Thou has accomplish't thy purpose, *O my God*, nor *O my Maker*, nor *O my Redeemer*, but, in a stile of contempt, *Vicisti Galilæe*, and no more. (*Sermons* 8:65-66)

From the Dean of St. Paul's perspective, the joke is on the jester in such a case, for the habit of scorn prevents him from articulating devout expressions of belief even when he is most desperate to do so.

The opening analogy of "Farewell to Love," like Donne's sermon on Julian, presupposes a non-atheist's condescending sense of superiority toward those who reject God during life but come running to Him at the end. It is thus ironically out of character for the disillusioned and

cynical speaker we come to know through the rest of the poem. If a jesting un-believer wishes to mock his own past credulity, surely the image of a desperate and inarticulate deathbed conversion is not the ideal way to go about it! It is precisely this out-of-character image, however, upon which the rest of the work builds, for the poem depends upon an ironic distance between the self-defeating speaker and the poet who constructs him. As a preacher, Donne would argue that "The bestiall Atheist will pretend that hee knows there is no God; but he cannot say, that he knows, that he knows it; for, his knowledge will not stand the battery of an argument from another, nor of a ratiocination from himselfe" (*Sermons* 8:225). In the poem, the speaker reveals himself as just such a self-defeating beast, for the too-much-protesting tone of his argument leads only to an anticlimactic conclusion in which he acknowledges and shrugs away the likelihood that all his resolutions will fail.

In fact, in the final lines of "Farewell to Love," the speaker circles back to a version of the analogy with which he began; he once again alludes to an atheist's "dying houre" (4), for he anticipates the moment in his future when, "If all faile" (39), he will once again engage in the "Act" (24) that "Diminisheth the length of life a day" (25) and is known as "dying." That future deathbed/sexual scene as he envisions it will not, however, involve a last-minute conversion back to the religion of the love god; on the contrary, it will deepen his "atheism," making a mockery even of the quasi-divine authority he currently claims to acknowledge, for it will scorn the precepts of "wise / Nature" (23-24). However one interprets the convolutions of lines 26-30, it is clear that *Natura* (as previously invoked by the speaker) takes into account the generative function of sexual intercourse, that she monitors it carefully as the means by which human beings "raise posterity" (30). But at the poem's conclusion, the speaker denigrates procreation, reducing sperm to "worme-seed" and paralleling the infusion of the male seed into the vagina with the application of a laxative suppository to the anus.[6] Children thus begotten are, at best, worms (as Hamlet implies when he tells Polonius that "if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog," then, "as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't" [*Hamlet* II.ii.181, 185-

6]) and, at worst, mere excrement. But whereas Hamlet equates himself with the sun and Ophelia with what he calls "a good kissing carrion" (line 182), Donne's speaker draws an analogy between the women's beauty and the "summers Sunne" (36) which men ought "shun" (38) when it "Growes great" (37). He himself is the dead (or dying) flesh in which the "heat" (38) of "moving beauties" (35) generates the vermiculate motion of corruption.

Indeed, the speaker might well put to himself Hamlet's self-indicting question, "What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" (III.i.126-8). But he does not; for unlike the Danish prince, he is a man devoid of spirituality. At 1 Corinthians 2:14, St. Paul says that "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." For Donne as he explores the theme of love in many of his other poems, the mysteries of erotic love are higher mysteries, unknowable by those who—like the speaker of "Farewell to Love"—recognize only the dictates of "wise / Nature."

Those who turn away from such natural wisdom in favor of an "unknowne power" may, even if they worship ignorantly, be on the right track. For as an "unknowne power," the love referred to in the opening stanza of Donna's poem resembles the Athenian deity mentioned in Acts 17:22-23: "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, . . . as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." According to the apostle, true wisdom lies not in rejecting the unknown God, but in moving from ignorant worship to revealed truth. Read in light of the scriptural passages it evokes, "Farewell to Love" implies that the speaker has made the mistake of rejecting not only the naive superstition of his youth, but the One True Faith that should have grown out of it.

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Notes

1. As a preacher, too, Donne alludes wittily to Hebrews 11:1 when conjuring the image of an atheist at his dying hour: "Poore intricated soule! Riddling, perplexed, labyrinthicall soule! . . . I respit thee not till the day of thine own death, when thou shalt have evidence enough, that there is a God, though no other evidence, but to finde a Devill, and evidence enough, that there is a Heaven, though no other evidence, but to feele Hell" (*Sermons* 8:332-3). In this apostrophe, Donne plays upon the rationalist's demand for empirical proof of God's existence, but he also alludes to Paul's definition of faith as "the evidence of things not seen." The dying atheist will not see God or heaven, but he will have ample negative proof of their existence in the first-hand experience of his own damnation.

2. See Elaine Perez Zickler: "The masculine 'thing' which keeps popping up in these stanzas is, like the feminine 'nothing' in other poems, a play on having or not having as the essence of love. 'Things' are defined as the props of a dying desire, indeed, of a dying subject of desire; and this false worship of things, this idolatry of the phallus itself, "His highness sitting in a golden Chaire" (1.12), is repudiated by the end of the poem . . ." ("'nor in nothing, nor in things': The Case of Love and Desire in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *John Donne Journal* 12 [1993]:30-31).

3. There has been a great deal of debate among twentieth-century scholars on the question of whether it was possible to be an atheist in Renaissance England. Some scholars have argued that atheism—in the twentieth-century sense of the word—did not exist during the period when men such as Marlowe and Ralegh were accused of being atheists. Most of the "evidence" available is unreliable because the atheistical statements attributed to individual Elizabethans and Jacobeans are to large extent recorded only in the documents accusing them, rather than in their own letters or other private testimonials. But whether or not there were any genuinely atheistical souls in the England of Elizabeth and James, Renaissance Christians had no doubt: some wicked persons were, indeed, what they (the Christians) called "atheists." For a recent overview of the atheism debate as it applies to Marlowe in particular, see Davidson.

4. See *Sermons* 7:266, where Donne presents a rather sensational rendering of Ephesians 2:12. In the King James Bible, the verse says "That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world"; according to Donne, "S. Paul sayes, *He is an Atheist, that is without Christ.*" On non-Christians as atheists see also *Sermons* 3:312, 4:131, 9:56, 169.

5. See *Sermons* 4:131: "There is a *sine Deo*, a left handed Atheism, in the meer natural man, that will not know Christ; and there is a *sine Deo*, a right handed Atheism in the stubborn Papist, who is not content with Christ. They preach Christ Jesus and themselves, and make themselves Lords over you in Jesus place, and farther then ever he went." Even more provocative is Donne's contention that "There cannot

be a deeper Atheisme, then to impute contradictions to God; neither doth any one thing so overcharge God with contradictions, as the Transubstantiation of the Roman Church" (*Sermons* 7:294-5). See also *Sermons* 5:389.

6. See Shawcross's note to line 40, Morillo, and Masselink. Shawcross interprets the line as saying "that if he does nonetheless succumb to woman's 'heat,' it is only applying his generative seed to her (to beget children)" (Donne, *Complete Poetry* 152). Morillo refutes the assumption (originating with a 1929 note by John Hayward) that "worme-seed" was used as an anaphrodisiac and stresses that "tail"—though used to refer to the penis—was more frequently used to refer to the female genitalia; he concludes by paraphrasing lines 39-40 as saying that "If, in spite of my resolution to avoid sex, I succumb, then I shall console myself with the rationalization that the act is committed with purely curative intent—a 'spermifuge,' as it were" (39-40). Masselink offers two alternative readings. According to the first, the speaker is saying that his various resolutions (to control his mind and actions and to avoid beautiful women) all miss the point, that they can no more cure the essential corruption of his lust, idolatry, and self-love than "worms or wind" can be cured "by applying laxatives to . . . sexual organs" (14). According to the second reading Masselink proposes, "Taile" refers to the posterior or anus, and the speaker is proposing a feeble stop-gap measure, since the herbals recommending the use of "worme-seed" as a purgative note that it is far more potent when taken orally than when applied in a clyster or suppository (12) and the speaker "is unwilling to take the drastic steps (ingestion of the herb) necessary for a complete purgation" (14).

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