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Doing Things with Tears

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John Donne wrote four poems we call "Valediction," one of weeping, one of an imaginary book, one of his name written with a diamond on window glass, and one forbidding mourning as he leaves. While these poems speak to one another, while they enliven our sense of the whole of Donne's poems, I'm not aware of any general accounting of the poem of farewell. We're used to thinking about waking lovers bidding a reluctant goodbye in the aubade, and of course the elegy has found a thousand ways to say goodbye, though more often than not the word is (as Anne Carson's wrenched translation of Catullus puts it) "soaked with tears."[1] The poem of valediction remains unelevated to the level of genre because all lyric poems, even poems of joy, are creating forms of farewell.

Some poems advertise their valedictory purpose: "She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die," says Keats in the "Ode on Melancholy," "And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu."[2] "Good night, ladies," says Eliot, quoting Shakespeare's Ophelia.[3] But all poems are either conscious (or actively engaged in suppressing their consciousness) of waving goodbye.

> That would be waving and that would be crying,
> Crying and shouting and meaning farewell,
> Farewell in the eyes and farewell at the centre,
> Just to stand still without moving a hand. (ll. 1-4)

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[1] See all of Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010).

[2] John Keats, *The Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 284.

[3] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), p. 59.

Merely to exist in the moment, says Wallace Stevens in these lines from "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu," constitutes the act of bidding farewell.

> To be one's singular self, to despise
> The being that yielded so little, acquired
> So little, too little to care, to turn
> To the ever-jubilant weather, to sip
>
> One's cup and never to say a word,
> Or to sleep or just to lie there still,
> Just to be there, just to be beheld,
> That would be bidding farewell, be bidding farewell.
> (ll. 9-16)[4]

The act isn't subtle or contained, as Stevens describes it. Merely to exist is to weep, to shout, to rend one's garments. To turn to the weather is to wave goodbye. To sleep, to lie awake, to be, and, most importantly, to behold is to wave goodbye. Also to be beheld. Because we see, we weep. Because we live in time, our joy is bidding farewell.

Donne's four poems are known by the titles, maybe not his own, "A Valediction of Weeping," "Valediction of the Book," "A Valediction of My Name in the Window," and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning."[5] They all appear in his posthumously published poems along with "Song" ("Sweetest love") and "The Legacy," which might be called valedictions as easily as Donne's "The Sun Rising" might be called an aubade; "Donne's poetics of love," Ramie Targoff has ventured, "is a poetics of taking leave."[6]

Eliot was famously a devotee of the Donne who dramatizes states of mind "composed of odds and ends in constant flux," and, though the earlier Eliot approved of that quality, while he later disapproved,

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[4] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, eds. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), p. 104.

[5] All quotations of Donne's poems are from *Collected Poetry*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin, 2012).

[6] Ramie Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 50.

Donne's achievement is bigger than that.[7] I'll have most to say about "A Valediction of Weeping," probably because this poem is the most enigmatic of the four and has attracted tellingly the least attention (with the exception of William Empson, himself a poet of goodbye). Justin Sider's *Parting Words* has accounted for valediction in Victorian literature, but the implied dramatic situation of "A Valediction of Weeping" is a the epitome of the lyric poem as we've come to know it over the last thousand years.[8]

Here, in Ilona Bell's recent edition, is the first of the three stanzas of Donne's poem.

> Let me pour forth
> My tears before thy face, whil'st I stay here,
> For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
> And by this mintage they are something worth,
> For thus they be
> Pregnant of thee,
> Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more;
> When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,
> So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore.
> (ll. 1-9)

Brazenly I imagine myself beginning to write this poem. I've got a strong pentameter in mind, a syntactically complete imperative, mostly monosyllables, which, being Donne, I rather like: "Let me pour forth my tears before thy face." But something about that imperative doesn't seem right; the emphasis is off, the tone too self-assured ("For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love," the first line of "The Canonization," is not what I'm listening for); so I break the syntax, the resulting enjambment putting pressure on the emergent spondee in the second foot ("pour forth") in order to emphasize the act of production over the produced: *Let me* ***pour forth*** *my tears before thy face.* And pour forth I will. In argument and in tears.

This, as I hear it, is the crux of the whole poem, which is torn between weeping and nattering, between the blunt knowledge that to

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[7] T. S. Eliot, "John Donne," *Nation & Athenaeum* 33 (1923): 331-32.

[8] See Justin Sider, *Parting Words: Victorian Poetry and Public Address* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

exist is to weep and the desperate wish that to keep talking is to evade mortality. In his too-brief account of "A Valediction of Weeping" in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Empson speaks of the poem's abruptly emphatic final lines ("Since thou and I sigh one another's breath, / Whoe'er sighs most is cruelest, and hastes the other's death"), but his observation obtains in our experience of the entire poem, from beginning to end:

> to say this is to abandon the honest luxuriance of sorrow with which [the lovers] have been enlivening their parting, to try to forget feeling in a bright, argumentative, hearty quaintness (the good characters in Dickens make the orphan girl smile through her tears in this way); the language itself has become flattened and explanatory; so that [Donne] almost seems to be feeling for his hat.[9]

To this thrilling sentence ("honest luxuriance of sorrow"), I would add that to feel for one's hat is also to weep, just as sleeping or lying awake or turning to the weather is to weep: we can be said truly to exist in the present, says Heidegger in *Being and Time*, only inasmuch as we inhabit the knowledge that we will not exist; to *be* is to know we *will have been*.[10] Let me weep in your presence, before I depart, says Donne in a poem whose last word is death, so that my tears may be emblazoned with your image. When each tear falls, he continues, you fall as well: "So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore."

Up to this point, this valediction might seem to be describing an existential inevitability: we weep because we know that, whether we separate or not, we will eventually be nothing, a nothing as incontrovertible as the "first nothing" to which Donne is reduced in "A Nocturnal upon St Lucy's Day." Yet my recourse to Heidegger may nonetheless seem heavy-handed, for the work of the whole of "A Valediction of Weeping" (not only its final lines) is charmingly to evade this inevitability—to believe one could continue forever to be something, rather than to acknowledge that weeping is being. This effort accounts for the quality of "hearty quaintness" to which Empson

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[9] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 145.

[10] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

refers, and we all know this quaintness from daily life, or from the moments when a sudden recognition of someone else's mortality catches daily life unaware; we say too little, or more often, we say too much. It may seem heavy-handed to describe "A Valediction of Weeping" as an inhabitation of what Heidegger calls being-towards-death, but I think one nonetheless needs to feel this weight troubling the poem, as we feel that weight troubling many lyric poems written over the last couple of thousand years, even as we also feel the inappropriateness of bringing it up.

Why else would the poem keep nattering? Having committed myself to an opening two-beat line, thinks Donne as he's making this poem, I want to return to that kind of line, though not predictably. So he fills out the stanza's opening *abba* quatrain asymmetrically, with three pentameter lines, following them with two dimeter lines rhymed to make a couplet. Inevitably this mid-stanza moment of metrical contraction, reinforced by the accelerated rhyming, hurries the syntax, inflating the argument with epigrammatic charisma—the sound convinces before the sense: "For thus they be / Pregnant of thee." In the second stanza, the syntax of the dimeter couplet lacks a predicate, throwing us headlong into the three longer lines with which the stanza concludes: every poem is itself a temporal experience, and this one, beginning with its prematurely enjambed opening line, is on the fast track.

> On a round ball
> A workman that hath copies by can lay
> An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
> And quickly make that, which was nothing, all;
> So doth each tear
> Which thee doth wear,
> A globe, yea world, by that impression grow,
> Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow
> This world, by waters sent from thee, my heav'n dissolved so.
> (ll. 10-18)

Forget what the first stanza argued about the incipient nothingness of both tears and the selves they reflect—that's already in the past; in this stanza tears are now worlds, bigger than both of us, unless the beloved join the lover in his weeping and their world is drowned.

How did we get here? This is the third and final stanza.

> O more than Moon,
> Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere,
> Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
> To teach the sea what it may do too soon;
> Let not the wind
> Example find
> To do me more harm than it purposeth;
> Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,
> Whoe'er sighs most is cruelest, and hastes the other's death.
> (ll. 19-27)

Having begun the poem with an injunction to let him weep, the lover now prohibits all weeping, the pouring forth of tears re–placed with the pouring forth of conceits.

It's typical that a Donne poem ends with proclaiming the opposite of its beginning, though "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" argues against weeping ("no tear-floods"), and so does the aptly-named (at least in this context) "Song," eloquently so: "When thou weepst, unkindly kind, / My life's blood doth decay." But while the third and final stanza of "A Vale–diction of Weeping" is more extravagant even than the second, the beloved compared to the tide-altering moon who must not make the rising tide rise higher, it's telling that the poem stops here—and that it stops with an abruptness Empson noted with a little alarm. Provoked to want more, we receive only three stanzas of increasingly clever argument, in contrast to the eleven stanzas of the even more extravagantly conceited "Valediction of My Name in the Window."

This valediction concludes by admitting it has nattered powerlessly, if pleasurably, the poem playing with the early modern sexual implications of the word "die," and the poem acknowledging that an existential dilemma has been implicit from its inception. The eleven numbered parts of this valediction are almost all one sentence, and almost all the parts begin with a prominent subordinating conjunction or adverb (*as, if, until, so, when*), turning from the resulting dependent clause to the more rousing independent clause that follows.

IX

And when thy melted maid,
Corrupted by thy lover's gold and page,
His letter at thy lover at thy pillow'hath laid,
Disputed it, and tamed thy rage,
And thou begin'st to thaw towards him, for this,
May my name step in, and hide his.

X

And if this treason go
To'an overt act, and that thou write again,
In superscribing, this name flow
Into thy fancy from the pane.
So, in forgetting thou rememb'rest right,
And unaware to me shalt write.

XI

But glass and lines must be
No means our firm substantial love to keep;
Near death inflicts this lethargy,
And this I murmur in my sleep;
Impute this idle talk to that I go,
For dying men talk often so. (ll. 49-66)

Why doesn't "A Valediction of Weeping" admit that it, too, like every lyric poem, is the idle talk of a dying man, *dying* understood in any way we like? Why doesn't it, too, know that the conceit of another lover, whether his name is obscured or not, is just words? "A Valediction of Weeping" concludes by hastening to say the very thing it hastens to postpone forever ("Whoe'er sighs most is cruelest, and hastes the other's death"): is this conclusiveness—this desperation to live within the conceit, rather than within the making of conceits—the poem's way of acknowledging its dissatisfaction with its own argument, or at least with its inability to sustain the argument any further?

Poems, like people, happen in time. Three nine-line stanzas: the repetitions of the rhyme scheme of "A Valediction of Weeping" (*abbaccddd*) stand at odds with the repetitions of the metrical scheme (a dimeter, three pentameters, two more dimeters, two more pentameters, and a final heptameter), and the constituent pieces of the poem's syntax align themselves with neither the metrical nor the rhyme

scheme, except when the sonic pressure of that mid-stanza dimeter couplet (the only point at which the repetitions of meter and rhyme collide) force the syntax-driven argument to a pitch: "For thus they be"—"So doth each tear"—"Let not the wind."

These repetitions may be mapped, but we readers, who ex–perience the poem incrementally, over time, don't experience such repetitions as confirmation; we experience them as surprise, no matter how many times we've read the poem. The final iteration of the refrain "The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind" feels heartbreakingly different from the first iteration; the song's temporal unfolding makes the reiteration of what we already know feel like discovery. Because we listen to them, we're more aware of the temporality of songs, but even if a poem may look as if it's standing still, especially in the print culture we take for granted, the poem is moving relentlessly forward, it's waving goodbye, it's soaked in tears. If it weren't, we wouldn't want to read it again. "One likes," says Stevens, "to practice the thing."[11]

Imagine yourself as the author of the yet-to-be-written article on valediction in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, a brief essay to stand beside those on aubade and epithalamion. Implausibly I find this more difficult than imagining myself as the author of "A Valediction of Weeping." "Oh who will give me tears," asks George Herbert, tortured by the wish to weep when he cannot. "Weeping is the ease of woe," says Richard Crashaw, but tears may help only the weeper.[12] Stevens's friend Henry Church, the philanthropist and publisher to whom "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is dedicated, died in 1947, and "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" appeared in *Horizon* that fall: Stevens wanted to get the poem into print quickly, and the poem was conceived as a valediction; he wanted its subtitle to read, "Goodbye H. C." Stevens's "mythology of modern death" includes three figures of the mind: sleep, peace—

> And a third form, she that says
> Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly there,
> To those that cannot say good-by themselves. (ll. 4-6)

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[11] Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, p. 104.

[12] George Herbert, *The English Poems*, ed. C. A. Patrides. (London: J. M. Dent, 1974), p. 170; Richard Crashaw, *Complete Poetry*, ed. G. W. Williams (New York: Norton, 1974), p. 128.

This third form, visible only to the eye that needs it, "speaks, because the ear repeats, // Without a voice, inventions of farewell."[13]

Donne's poems repeat farewell in many ways, but it takes a hundred poems from the past to make a decent poem in the present, and, as I've said, all poems are waving goodbye, even if they've also gained. They're also written out of a Heideggerian being-towards-death, a sense that *to be* is always to know we *will have been*. It seems to me unavoidable that we feel that way, reading a poem, and inevitably a poem asks its reader to think about the feeling of being absent as the poem creates its wonderful illusion of presence.

"What is left / to mind but remembrances of the world," asks Allen Grossman recently in the title poem of *How to Do Things with Tears*.

> The people of the road, in tears, sit down
> at the roadside and tell stories of the world.
> Then they rise in tears and go up.
>
> The mill sits in the springs. The water wheel whacks
> round: Alive. *Whack*. Dying. *Whack*. Dead. *Whack*. Nothing.
> How then to do things with tears? (ll. 30-35)[14]

The question, which needs to be asked, is nonetheless moot, for the doing has already been done. It is the poem, which is a remembrance of the world. But because the wheel keeps turning, we need another poem.

The author of "A Valediction Forbidding Weeping" uses the word *valediction* only once in his prose, and it occurs in reference not to a beloved (he thought letters just as intimate, perhaps more so, than poems) but to the rising print culture he otherwise disdained. "I am brought to a necessity of printing my poems," wrote Donne, who ultimately didn't do it, a task that also meant tracking the poems down: "I am made a rhapsoder of mine own rags, and that cost me more diligence, to seek them, than it did to make them. . . . I must do this,

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[13] Stevens, *Collected Poetry*, p. 371; *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 566.

[14] Alan Grossman, *How to do Things with Tears* (New York: New Directions, 2001), p. 4.

as a valediction to the world, before I take orders."[15] In order to change careers, he must be a rhapsoder of his own rags, who once called our meager temporal measurements the rags of time: "Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime," a younger Donne said in "The Sun Rising," "Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time." In his letter he says, in other words, that he's behaving towards his poems as hours or days do to the passage of time, as he once said himself in a poem. Or he's saying he's waving goodbye.

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[15] John Donne, *Selected Letters*, ed. P. M. Olivier (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 79-80.