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Eschatological Elements in Donne's "Anniversarie"

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Although most readers of "The Anniversarie" have pointed to a central contrast between worldly time and timeless love, none (so far as I can tell) has commented on the theological conceits that underpin this division. John Carey, for example, has observed that the "first three lines of the poem, blending kings and glory with the sun, sound like a fanfare to majesty. But they are a dirge. The gorgeous blaze darkens, and the poet's individual claim springs clear of the dying splendours massed at the start. It is over the wreck of empires and solar systems that first stanza strides forward."[1] He makes no effort, however, to explore the empowerment of that stride, which would seem to have been exempted from sublunary decay. The integrity of Donne's love is like a snag in a mighty river, resisting an otherwise ineluctable flow:

> Only our love hath no decay;
> This, no tomorrow hath, nor yesterday,
> Running it never runs from us away,
> But truly keepes his first, last, everlasting day.[2]

While "All other things to their destruction draw" refers primarily to the mortality of a world governed by the inconstant moon, it also suggests the eschatological march of matter toward the destruction set forth in the book of Revelation.

If, therefore, love is to escape the exigencies of Ptolemaic theory on the one hand, and of the *eschaton* on the other, it will have had to enter the empyrean, for only in the home of God is there neither motion nor decay. According to Dante, the souls of the blessed all participate in the existence of God, an existence *de facto* immutable:

De' Serafin colui che più s'india,
Moïsè, Samul, e quel Giovanni
che prender vuoli, io dico, non Maria,
non hanno in altro cielo i loro scanni
che questi spirti che mo t'appariro,
n hanno all'esser lor più o meno anni;
ma tutti fanno bello il primo giro,
e differentemente han dolce vita
per sentir più e men l'etterno spiro.

[Not he of the Seraphim that is most made one with God, Moses, Samuel, or whichever John thou wilt—none, not Mary herself, have their seat in other heaven from these spirits that have now appeared to thee, nor for their being have more years or fewer; but all make fair the first circle and hold sweet life in different measure as they feel more and less the eternal breath.][3]

Given this half-declared preemption of heaven, it is not surprising that Donne should now allude to Revelation 22.13 ("I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last") retaining those adjectives of sequence: "But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day." He seems to have chosen the obsolete form of the neuter possessive because, on the evidence of other songs and sonnets, he preferred it at this stage of his career. There is evidence, however, that "his" could sometimes, at the same time as it registered a neuter identity, carry a weak charge of personification. In *Hamlet*, for example, the astral theory of the *Timaeus* works with the possessive to impart a faint animism to Barnardo's star: "When yond same star that's westward from the pole, / Had made his course t'illume that part of heaven / Where now it burns" (I.i). Working from similar stylistic premises, one could argue that Donne wrote "But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day" to have it resonate with "*His* first, last, everlasting day," and so to register the lovers' participation in the eternity of God, an eternity encompassed by Alpha and Omega. In any event, the adverb "truly" manages to take up human faithfulness into an abstract horological perfection.

In "The Anniversarie," the immortality of the love figures as a *donnée*—to understand *why* the lovers have been sanctified by love, we have to turn to "The Canonization," where, by practising *contemptus mundi* and "dying" to the world, they are shown to have entitled themselves to sainthood. The same sense of *contemptus mundi* also figures the first stanza of "The Anniversarie," but Donne does not treat it as a means to sanctification. Instead he seems to be renouncing the world not by an act of will, but by an act of cognition, one offered not so much *sub specie aeternitatis* as *ex aeternitate*. The *mundus* of this judgment extends beyond mere worldliness to include the very fabric of the decaying cosmos. It is as if the love, by replicating the Alpha and Omega of a teleological vision, replicates not only the immortality, but also the omniscience of God Himself.

We might pause here to consider how the ideas of perfection (from *perficere*) and completed pattern are etymologically entwined. To have apprehended the perfected pattern of time is in effect to have apprehended the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," and so to have become "perfect man." "The Greek word for perfection, *teleiosis*, springs from *telos*, an end accomplished, and it should come as no surprise to find Origen arguing in the *Peri Archon* that "One must therefore pourtray the meaning of the sacred writings in a threefold way upon one's own soul, so that the simple man may be edified by what we may call the flesh of scripture, this name being given to the obvious interpretation; while the man who has made some progress may be edified by its soul, as it were; and the man who is perfect . . . this man may be edified by the spiritual law . . . ."[4] The word translated as "perfect" is *teleios*, suggesting that salvation hinges to some extent on a privileged arcanum, a *gnosis*. This is precisely what Donne claims for the lovers when he reviews the world's imminent destruction, and at the same time stresses their exemption from that disaster. They have preempted heaven, and so have purchased their redemption from physical harm.

In addition to the setting up the claim of their worldly "martyrdom," Donne would also seem to imply that the lovers have earned their immortality by a unique mutual faithfulness. Their relationship

"truly keepes his first, last, everlasting day"—a fidelity which hints at Revelation 2.10. This text promises a "crown of life" to those who are "faithful unto death." Furthermore, by reverting once again to "The Canonization," we can see that they have to some extent abolished the boundary between *agape* and *eros*: "You whom reverend love / Made one anothers hermitage."

Of course the mere renunciation of the world (enforced by the persecutions of Ann Donne's father, perhaps) and the mere fact of fidelity cannot of themselves support the massive claims that Donne makes for his love. The hyperbole of "The Anniversarie" more obviously springs from Neo-Platonism. Edgar Wind has remarked that because Pico, in describing "'la violenza dello amor celeste,' borrowed his images from a flaming passion, it seems not surprising, nor is it un-Platonic, that Divine Love should in the end have fostered a spiritual cult of the senses."[5] Donne might also have been influenced by the age-old hermeneutic strategy that converted a Hebrew epithalamion (the Song of Songs) into a discourse about God and the soul. Furthermore, with these traditions to guide and fashion his responses, he could have fused the event of his marriage with mystical experiences undergone at roughly the same time. Speaking of Dante's Paradiso, for example, Dorothy Sayers has suggested that it might well have originated in spiritual transport: "As it draws near to God the intellect penetrates so deeply into the knowledge of the Supreme Good that when the experience is ended human memory is unable fully to recall it. This is an awareness common to the mystics and it is not impossible that Dante underwent a mystical experience of which Paradise is the reasoned, logical humanized expression in terms of poetry."[6]

It is worth recalling that another feature common to mystic experience is that of being privileged with conspectus of creation. We are told, for instance, how, when praying at his window one night St. Benedict felt, "omnis etiam mundus velut sub uno solis radio collectus, ante oculos ejus collectus est,"[7] ["that the entire world had been encompassed by a sunbeam and set before him"]. Many of the "marital" poems in the *Songs and Sonnets* record precisely the same

sort of condensation and compacture of experience: "The Good-morrow"—"Let us possesse our world, each hath one, and is one"—and "The Canonization": "You . . . Who did the whole worlds soule extract, and drove / Into the glasses of your eyes." These conflationary moments have some bearing on "The Anniversarie" as well, for to have encompassed the first and last, and fused these components into the revelation of an eternal purpose is similarly to have experienced a God's-eye view of creation.

So, even though Helen Gardner has claimed that "The Anniversarie" and its congeners are "too far from the reality we know of for us to speak of them as written to Ann More, or even about her" (p. xxviii), that biographical discrepancy does not of itself rule out the fact that the withdrawal entailed in Donne's marriage to Ann might have supplied the grit for these extravagant baroque pearls. Carey joins Gardner in assuming that the start of stanza two places the lovers outside the marriage bond. *He* writes "'The Anniversarie' indicates that the woman addressed was not Donne's wife ('Two graves must hide thine and my coarse')"; while *she* observes "Their love is clandestine. They may not, as married lovers may, expect to be `married in the dust'"(199). However, I am much more convinced by A. J. Smith's exegesis of the problematic line: "*Two graves must hide thine and my corse* because they would otherwise not wish to leave their bodies, so that death would not divorce body and soul as it should."[8] Donne is not describing a circumstance, but rather issuing a testamentary imperative, as for example, "I must be cremated, and my ashes scattered in such and such a place."

But why, if we adopt Smith's reading, do the lovers run the risk of forgoing resurrection—is it simply a whimsical conceit to stress their mutual attachment? The answer must surely be sought once again in the eschatological dimension of the poem. If the lovers have anticipated the fulfilment of paradise, and, extrapolating from the perfect sufficiency of their love, have grasped the grand design of creation, they will feel no inclination to convert the subjective reality of their love into the objective reality of heaven of which it is the type. John and Ann

Donne, in a word, will be tempted to continue living as the anagogical *figurae* of heaven instead entering it *in propriis personis*.

This conscription of secular persons to represent divine realities might at first sight seem outrageous, but several precedents can be adduced, not least the presence of a pagan suicide in *Purgatorio*. This is how Auerbach interprets the typological significance which Dante attached to Cato of Utica:

> It is Cato of Utica whom God has here appointed guardian at the foot of Purgatory: a pagan, an enemy of Caesar, and a suicide. This is startling, and the very first commentators, such as Benvenuto of Imola, expressed their bewilderment. . . . The story of Cato is removed from its earthly and political context, just as the stories of Isaac, Jacob etc., were removed from theirs by the patristic exegetes of the Old Testament, and made into a *figura futurorum*. Cato is a *figura*, or rather the earthly Cato, who renounced his life for freedom, was a *figura*, and the Cato who appears here in the Purgatorio is the revealed or fulfilled figure, the truth of that figural event. The political and earthly freedom for which he died was only an *umbra futurorum*: a prefiguration of the Christian freedom whose guardian he is here appointed, and for the sake of which he here again opposes all earthly temptation; the Christian freedom from all evil impulses, which leads to true domination of self, the freedom for the acquisition of which Dante is girded with the rushes of humility, until, on the summit of the mountain, he actually achieves it and is crowned by Virgil as lord over himself. Cato's voluntary choice of death rather than political servitude is here introduced as a *figura* for the eternal freedom of the children of God, in behalf of which all earthly things are to be despised, for the liberation of the soul from the servitude of sin.[9]

Much of this could be re-applied to "The Anniversarie." If Cato renounced his life for freedom, Donne can be said to have renounced his political life for love. He accordingly projects himself (and Ann) as *figurae* for "the eternal freedom of the children of God, in behalf of which all earthly things are despised."

I have always found the last lines of stanza two extremely difficult, and can construe them only in terms of my hypothesis that Donne projects the love as a sort of *eschaton*. Taking Smith's paraphrase of the first two lines as the correct one, I would suggest that, working from the premise of a separate burial, Donne now assumes that the two souls *prove* the doctrine of the resurrection by escaping death as an enforced separation and converging in heaven, a state which will either be continuous with their love on earth, or appreciably enhanced. Almost all the commentators on the poem—Smith, Gardner and Redpath[10]—construe "prove" as "experience," but so far as I can see, the syntax will admit only the logical, not the experiential sense of the verb. If "prove" governs "this" as an object of experience, how can it also accommodate the last line, with its theorem-like formulation? If on the other hand, Donne is offering us a *quod erat demonstrandum*, "this" functions as *quod*, set in apposition to a logical proposition: Souls wholly given over to mutual love, will, in the case of separate burial, prove this: viz., that the loving souls exit the grave at the instant of burial, and prove it because their love is co-equal with (or slightly less intense than) the love that characterises beatitude.

Stanza three sustains the construction that I have put upon the preceding lines. Again I find myself diverging from the commentaries I have encountered. Redpath, for example, takes up where Grierson left off, and remarks of the opening ("And then wee shall be throughly blest, / But wee no more than all the rest"):

> 'But *in heaven* we shall be no more blessd than anyone else.' (Grierson points out, however, that in fact the Scholastic Philosophy, to which Donne is probably alluding here, held that all are equally *content* in heaven, but *not* equally *blest*. Donne is therefore either inadvertently misinterpreting the Scholastic view, or wresting it in the interests of the poem.) (37)

But perhaps it is not Donne who has inadvertently misinterpreted Scholastic theology (a notion I find hard to accept), but rather his modern readers. Surely the contrast applies to the "heavenly" lovers in

respect to the world. While for the time being they sense their supernal privilege in relation to kings, favourites *et al.*, this distinction will be effaced in the community of heaven. "Hanno *avuto* dolce vita / per sentir pi e men l'etterno spiro," but when they find that all about them share their state, they will know that they have crossed into paradise. Donne seems therefore to offer an immediate rather than a proleptic comparison.

The rest of the stanza shores this assumption up with another reference to Revelation. In "Here upon earth, we'are Kings, and none but wee / Can be such Kings, nor of such subjects bee" we hear an echo of verses from Chapter 1:

> [5] And from Jesus Christ, *who is* the faithful witness, *and* the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood,
> [6] And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Ä'–mên.

Donne seems furthermore to have fashioned his conceit from the Chiliast heresy, which claimed that Christ would come again to reign *with* his saints on earth. He takes this eschatologically regal image (also implicit in such images of the crown held in reservation for the faithful, and of the elders casting down their crowns), and applies it to a present, not a future state. Celestial kingship has been translated into an earthly analogue, different in turn from those kings and favourites which in stanza one were consigned to destruction along with the very fabric of the cosmos.

As if to confirm this preemptive salvation, Donne seems in the same breath to hint at the *Dies Irae*, where the passage from this world to the next is presented in terms so terrible, that even the righteous must quail at the prospect of judgement:

> Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?
> Quem patronem rogaturus,
> Cum vix justus sit securus?

While at first sight the metaphor of treason would seem to restrict the security of the lovers to the tenure of their throne, the open-endedness of the *quis est homo* formula in "Who is so safe as wee?" makes it clear that Donne is ranging over the whole of society, and speaking of anagogic rather than political safety. The king conceit, alluding to the promise of Revelation, also suggests the eschatological passage from life to eternity, and so grants the lovers an exemption from the judgment, an automatic passport to salvation. If we assume that "The Anniversarie" records the first encounter with Ann More, then Donne must have written it at least eight years before Middleton's *The Witch* and nine before *Macbeth*. Even so, he would certainly have been familiar with the thought informing an interpolated scene (III.v) in Shakespeare's play:

> He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
> His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear;
> And you all know, security
> Is mortals' chiefest enemy.

Security—the overweening certainty of salvation—runs the risk of following the opposite path to perdition. Donne must therefore have felt supreme security about his security, empowering it with Neo-Platonist thinking about *amor celeste*, and investing it with eschatological privileges.

That is why, at the very moment that he seems to be recalling the jussives of a pagan poet (*Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus*) and substituting a sum of years for a sum of kisses, Donne is also placing his love in context of Psalm 90, which allots to each person an average span of threescore years and ten. This sort of numerological thinking is important to Donne, as witness his use of the creative hexameron in "The Blossome" ("Whom I'have watch'd six or seaven days"—) and it also provides a way out of Carey's discomfort with the passage: "the vision of the sexagenarian lovers in the last line doesn't, when dwelt on, carry much comfort" (111)—even less comfort, one imagines, if the lovers were octogenarian, which is what the arithmetic dictates if they

were not infants when they first one another saw. Clearly the number cannot be literal, but must rather be interpreted as carrying a typological charge:

> Let us love nobly, 'and live, and adde againe
> Yeares and yeares unto yeares, till we attaine
> To write threescore: this is the second of our raigne.

The lovers have come together as one flesh, and, as the type of the *Adam novus*, are figurally entitled to a paradisal life of sixty (i.e. seventy) years—the metre will not admit of the statutory sum, though it is clearly implied, as it is in William Oldys's Anacreontic, "On a Fly Drinking out of His Cup" ("Thine's a summer, mine's no more, / Though repeated to threescore").[11] This quasi-Chiliast reign, participating in the kingship of Christ as it does in His teleological perfection (first, last, everlasting day) will with the dissolution of the seventy-year old "body," a body forced apart by a separate burial, blend into an actual beatitude. At this point, though "throughly blest," the lovers will no longer sense the privileged status they had on earth, but, in the community of the blesséd, *han dolce vita* with them all.

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Notes

[1] John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) p. 111. Page-number references in the text are to this edition.

[2] John Donne, *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 71. Page-number references in the text are to this edition.

[3] Dante, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Italian Text with Translation and Commentary*, tr. John D. Sinclair, 3 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), 3:62-63.

[4] Origen, *On First Principles, Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis*, trans. G. W. Butterworth, intro. Henri de Luback (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 275-76.

[5] Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (1958; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 141.

[6] Dante, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri the Florentine*, tr. Dorothy L. Sayers, 3 vols. (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1962), 3:58.

[7] St. Gregory, *Sancti Benedicti Vita* in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, (Paris, 1866) 66:197.

[8] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 355-56.

[9] Erich Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (1959; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 65-66

[10] John Donne, *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne: An Editio Minor with Introduction and Explanatory Notes*, ed. Theodore Redpath (London: Methuen, 1956), p. 37. Page-number references in the text are to this edition.

[11] William Peacock (ed), *English Verse*, 5 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), 3:199.