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"The Good Morrow" and the Modern Aubade: Some Impressions

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Of course it was Grierson who was largely responsible for making Donne a central poet of the modernist twentieth century, and in the process of doing so, as it happens, for turning "The Good Morrow" into an "inaugural" poem. In his 1912 Oxford edition, the poem not only first acquired pride of place in *The Songs and Sonnets* but, because this group of lyrics appeared first in the volume, it now marked the entry into Donne's poetical works as a whole. On the facing page, moreover, staring out at the reader, was printed a copy of the 1591 engraving of the youthful Donne, hand on sword, dressed in doublet, sporting a cruciform ear-ring, wide-shouldered. Young Donne: a new day, a new kind of poetry, a new world. A good morrow.

Grierson's roving editorial hand was exercising some license here, as readers have recognized, but until recently most modern editions of Donne have borne his substantial ordering imprint. This was the case with A. L. Clements 1966 Norton edition of Donne's poetry, my first introduction to Donne, which opens with "The Good Morrow"; and it was true as well for Frank Warnke's Modern Library edition published the next year, and for both Signet and Laurel editions brought out earlier in the same decade under the general editorships, respectively, of John Hollander and Richard Wilbur. Perhaps even more important, it was the case, too, that Grierson chose "The Good Morrow" to inaugurate his

famous 1921 edition of *The Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century,* which got the whole metaphysical ball rolling. From the 1950s through the 1970s, the hey-day of New Criticism, furthermore, you could hardly write a book on Donne without allotting a separate chapter to "The Good Morrow." In the early 1950s Clay Hunt pronounced the poem to be "the densest and most tightly organized of Donne's major love poems"; in 1971, Wilbur Sanders placed it in his top tier of Donne poems—the two disagreeing mainly about whether the poem's quality could be explained biographically, that is, by the presence of Anne More.[1] Although most of Donne's editors knew better than to trust any particular order of the poems as "authorized," it wasn't until the end of the century that this view became widespread. With the publication of the 7th edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* in 2000, the new millennium witnessed a more textually scrupulous team of editors finally follow the order of the 1635 edition of Donne's *Poems*, depose "The Good Morrow" from its sovereign spot, and restore "The Flea" to its rightful place as the first among *The Songs and Sonnets*, with a justifying note appended that "The Flea" was "extremely popular" in its day. A quiet revolution had occurred. Long live the flea.

Depositions, even quiet ones, prompt reflections, and in the following pages, I want to pursue a few related ideas about some consequences stemming from the long reign of "The Good Morrow" as an inaugural poem. And here I mean to say little explicitly about the pedagogical impact of the shift. Both "The Good Morrow" and "The Flea" are high-octane performances in the classroom, although they offer, as Grierson understood so well, different introductory impressions of Donne. But the prominence of "The Good Morrow" for much of the twentieth century does raise some issues unique to this poem as well as heighten a

[1]See Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 53, and Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 60-68.

particular view of Donne that left its mark on some important poetry written in the century. Since these issues coalesce around the poem's genre, I want to begin by exploring the repeated claim that the poem is an "aubade," that is, a "dawn song," from the French noun (feminine) aube for dawn, as in L'aube du jour, rendered in the title of another Donne poem, as "Break of Day." A secondary sense, stemming from alba, is glossed by the New Cassell's as a "priest's vestment" (from the Latin albus meaning "white"). The priestly associations might remind us of the famous allusion to the "two Flamens" at the end of Carew's elegy on Donne *("Here lie two Flamens, and both those, the best, / Apollo's first, at last, the true Gods Priest").*[2] But in "The Good Morrow," Donne is clearly "Apollo's first," and in more than one sense, as he presides over the dawning of a new kind of love that is both intimate and global, carnal and spiritual, and for which the engraving by Jacopo de' Barbari of *Apollo and Diana* (1500) forms an interesting gloss.[3]

With the rough idea of a dawn song in mind, Donne's editors and critics have rightly connected "The Good Morrow" with "The Sun Rising" and "Break of Day." The last mentioned poem, spoken from the point of view of a woman, is the purest lineal descendant of the popular troubadour tradition of a dawn song sometimes sung by a woman.[4] It might also be noted that the first

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[2]*The Poems of Thomas Carew,* ed. Rhodes Dunlap (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), p. 74.

[3]See Denis Cosgrove, *Apollo's Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2001), p. 2.

[4]See Alfred Jeanroy, *La Poésie Lyrique des Troubadours,* 2 vols. (Paris: Henri Didier, 1934), 1: 292-97, and *Cant voi l'aube dou jor venir,* attributed to Gace Brulé, in *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvéres: An Anthology and a History,* trans. Frederick Goldin (Garden City N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 402-05. I am indebted to Frank Manley, "Formal Wit in the *Songs and Sonnets,*" for the reference to Jeanroy and several other instances of the aubade tradtion. See his essay in *That*

OED citation of "aubade" dates from the 1678 edition of Edward Phillips's *New World of English Words,* in which the musical element and setting are seen as the mode's most prominent features, as befits the frequent stage appearance of "aubades" in the Restoration ("Songs or instrumental music, sung or played under any one's chamber window in the morning"). Teaching the poem, most of us, I suspect, allude quickly to the exquisitely balanced lyrical exchange between Juliet and Romeo in the second balcony scene involving birds and all the temporal difference they symbolize in act 3, scene 5, although scholarly annotations sometimes also seek a connection with the more temporally distant Ovid and Petrarch, and the more immediate (but unlikely) Gascoigne. Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse,* strikes a distinctly modern—and Donnean—note when, under "Aubade," he remarks: "Various modes by which the amorous subject finds upon waking that he is once again besieged by the anxieties of his passion."[5]

Even a thumbnail sketch like this points in several important directions: to the poem's potential hospitality (as opposed to hostility) toward the female and the consequential act of imagined pronominal braiding of speaker with subject that is one of the "wonders" of this poem: "My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears, / And true plain hearts do in the faces rest";[6] and to the way in which a "dawn song" has been suddenly grounded in lyric speech, become a "Donne" poem in Barthes's sense of a speaker waking to the anxieties of his passions, and giving them a personal

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Subtile Wreath: Lectures Presented at the Quatercentenary Celebration of the Birth of John Donne, ed. Margaret W. Pepperdene (Atlanta, Ga.: Darby Printing Co., 1973).

[5]*A Barthes Reader,* ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 445.

[6]Quotations from "The Good Morrow" are from *John Donne: The Major Works,* ed. John Carey (Oxford: World's Classics, 2000), pp. 89-90.

inflection: "And now good morrow to our waking souls, / Which watch not one another out of fear." Fear of what, we might ask? C. A. Patrides's remark that the poem "is a variation of the traditional *aubade* or piece of music played or sung at dawn" is on track but doesn't say quite enough.[7] In "The Good Morrow," talking in bed—to point ahead to Larkin—becomes a subject, perhaps for the first time in English verse.

I don't expect either claim to take many by surprise. "Colloquial Donne" is one of our cherished critical clichés, partly sponsored by Grierson's placement of this poem, and further cultivated by the civilized notion promoted under New Criticism of lyric as a genre of poetry that is "overheard." One can't quite say the same thing about "The Flea" or the edgier satires, for sure; they're much more in-your-face poems. But here in "The Good Morrow," what we "overhear" is talk: racy, intimate, sublime, anxious. The shifts in register are so swift and subtle, on the one hand, that an apparently small aside like "and got" can fill a page of critical commentary, and on the other, so potentially inclusive and worldly, that a reference to "the seven sleepers" requires annotation from a no less voluminous authority than Gibbons,[8] and even that annotation does not touch on the legend's controversial place in Reformation England. (In John Bale's anti-Catholic satire, *Three Laws* [1538], the seven sleepers are represented as university students needing to be roused by Hypocrisy to advance the Pope's decrees.) It is this Donne, in particular, whom Barbara Everett had in mind when she recently described English literary history, stretching from 1590-1680, as an era that "with very great originality developed a new

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[7]Patrides, *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1985), p. 48.

[8]See *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets,* ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 198.

language of private experience that was not recessive,"[9] and then struck the parallel with the modernist writers of the twentieth century.

At this point, you might be relieved to learn that I am not going to claim that all modern verse is a footnote to the Donnean aubade. The early or high modernists, Eliot and Stevens, in fact, were more invested metaphorically in evenings than mornings—to put the matter crudely. Pound did write several "Albas" as part *of Lustra* (1915): a three-line imagist poem of that title appears immediately underneath the more famous "In a Station of the Metro," and the exquisitely modulated "Alba" prefaces the section called *Langue d'Oc.* But Pound was experimenting with original Provençal, not Elizabethan phrasings, especially in the latter case, as Hugh Kenner has shown.[10] "Aubades" of a suspiciously Donnean and modernist flavor, however, do begin to appear by the middle of the twentieth century. For the most part, the mode becomes darkened, ironized, or terrorized. I have in mind, especially, Lowell's "Man and Wife," from *Life Studies* (1956), which is deadly from the get-go: "Tamed by *Miltown,* we lie on Mother's bed; / the rising sun in war paint dyes us red; / in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine, / abandoned, almost Dionysian." There's also W.D. Snodgrass's "Vampire's Aubade," an admitted trifle from *After Experience* (1958) that, in a kind of pun on authorial names, plays off not Donne but Suckling ("Why so drawn, so worn, / My dearest"). Compared to these two poets, Richard Wilbur manages, with some relief, to be graciously decadent in "A Late Aubade," a poem from *Walking to Sleep* (1963) that mixes Donnean familiarity of speech with an artfully Stevensesque setting, in which the lovers put off thinking about time flying until noon—and then put it off further with some blue

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[9]Everett, "Donne and Secrecy," *Essays in Criticism* 51 (2001): pp. 58-59.

[10]Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 85.

cheese and crackers, chilled white wine, and "some fine / Ruddy-skinned pears."

Still, there's not much youthful Donnean doing in these differently belated lyrics. Lowell's, in fact, reminds us as much of his lifelong problems with Milton as with his marriage—the intimacy is of a desperate, self-lacerating kind:

> All night I've held your hand,
> as if you had
> a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad—
> its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye—
> and dragged me home alive....Oh my *Petite.*[11]

Morning brings with it only the recognition of isolation and division, a separation of one person from another represented by the self-reflectively inward nature of the monologue itself and altogether achieved when we turn to the next poem and hear the story of betrayal and distrust from the other side. "'To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage'" gives the wife (the quotation is from Chaucer's Wife of Bath) a chance to recount, at night, the brutalities she undergoes: "Gored by the climacteric of his want, / he stalls above me like an elephant." One might say that these poems are "in dialogue" with each other, but not their speakers. They are Dionysian, not Donnean.

As the twentieth century aged, the aubade, as a genre, might be seen to wither with it. Always potentially elegiac ("Whatever dies, was not mixed equally"), the mode becomes positively indistinguishable from elegy in Auden's 1972 poem called "Aubade," but parenthetically subtitled, "In Memoriam Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy." By way of honoring the polymath's accomplishments, it strikes a note of Donnean intimacy in the marked emphasis on pronouns:

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[11]Lowell, "Man and Wife," *Life Studies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1956), p. 87.

> Within a Place, not of Names
> but of Personal Pronouns,
> where I hold council with Me
> and recognise as present
> Thou and Thou comprising We,
> unmindful of the meinie,
> all those We think of as They.[12]

And in "The Ashen Light of Dawn," the title Anthony Hecht gives to his recent translation of Baudelaire's *Le Crepuscule du Matin* in *The Darkness and the Light* (2001), any pleasure two people might find in waking and talking—to say nothing of love making—has conspicuously vanished in light of the upcoming "daily grind":

> All pink and green in flounces, Aurora strolled
> The vacant Seine embankments as the old,
> Stupefied, blear-eyed Paris, glum and resigned,
> Laid out his tools to begin the daily grind.[13]

It is in the poetry of Philip Larkin and Elizabeth Bishop that the idea of a Donnean aubade gains more traction and resonance. Given their long interest in the seventeenth-century poets, this shouldn't be altogether surprising, but their means of engagement also couldn't be more opposed. As the poet C. K. Williams notes, in a recent essay comparing Larkin with Herbert, Larkin's poems seek to shed completely "any pretension toward personal mythologizing, toward situating the self in an overt spiritual or philosophical context."[14] And part of this process of shedding

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[12]Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 658-59.

[13]Hecht, *Collected Later Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), p. 203.

[14]Williams, "Unlikely Likes: George Herbert and Philip Larkin," *The Yale Review* 88 (2000): 126.

involves visibly discarding, like so many old clothes, earlier poetic forms—think of "Church Going"—in which the spiritual or metaphysical was once made to reside. A case in point is the little poem "Talking in Bed," first collected in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964). It is more than an aubade ironized or darkened, and yet not an anti-aubade, for while it empties the conversational assumptions at the core of the modernist versions of "The Good Morrow," it achieves a Donnean directness of talk, but from the underside, that is, without the metaphysical bells and whistles:

> Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
> Lying together there goes back so far,
> An emblem of two people being honest.[15]

With the appearance of that new "emblem" of "Lying together" we watch not only the Donnean notion of directness ("true plain hearts do in the faces rest") disappear into a lie, that seems also true, but also the larger world of connections and correspondences sustained by an emblematic view of language:

> Yet more and more time passes silently.
> Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
> Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,
>
> And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
> None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
> At this unique distance from isolation
>
> It becomes still more difficult to find
> Words at once true and kind,
> Or not untrue and not unkind.

[15]Larkin, *Collected Poems,* ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), p. 129.

Even by Larkin's minimalist standards, this poem manages to be a virtuoso study in self-isolation and insecurity, of bad faith but not false consciousness—one measly pronoun ("us") existing in a world of baffling indifference and drifting toward, not even death, just an enigmatic, tongue-tying suburban silence. Donne's poem is not a "source" in the sense that Sidney's is in Larkin's "Sad Steps," and the pun on "lying together" is likely to remind readers as well of Shakespeare's sonnet 138, with its concluding couplet, "Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be."[16] But I find it hard to imagine that the deliberately talky beginning—let alone the remaining lines—could have been written without Donne serving as a scale on which to weigh this cagey exercise in rhetorical and amatory undoing.[17]

A decade later Larkin was to pursue the temporal, rather than the amatory, bleakness of the modern aubade into new dark corners—the spiritually vacuous life of the average Joe. "I work all day, and get half-drunk at night" is the dead-end opener of "Aubade," published in 1977 and one of the last poems he wrote.[18] Although Larkin's interest in dawn poems dates back to the plaintive, Elizabethan-sounding song, "The horns of the morning" (1943-44), this last is the only one he identified by its genre. It is very much a final stop (the poem was several years in

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[16] *William Shakespeare: The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint,* ed. John Kerrigan (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), p. 145.

[17] Larkin seems to have regarded Donne as the gold standard for direct speech. See the closing comments to his brief essay on "The Poetry of Hardy," in which he defends Hardy's quaintness as "a kind of striving to be accurate (1968)," in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (1983; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 175-76. Quoting Hardy ("Not a line her writing have I, not a thread of her hair"), Larkin concludes, "Donne couldn't be more direct than that."

[18] Larkin, *Collected Poems*, pp. 208-09.

composition),[19] as it opens a curtain on not "restless" or even "devouring" but "unresting death":

> Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
> In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
> Till then I see what's really always there:
> Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
> Making all thought impossible but how
> And where and when I shall myself die.
> Arid interrogation: yet the dread
> Of dying, and being dead,
> Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

Donne feared annihilation for many reasons, but in "The Good Morrow" that fear is explicitly linked to losing another person: "For love, all love of other sights controls." But in Larkin's "Aubade," there is no "other," of any kind, only an omnipresent, creeping recognition of eventually being nothing, a controlling recognition that fills the room anew every morning, and the speaker's consciousness—"making all thought impossible"—with its utterable truth. "The mind blanks at the glare," Larkin goes on to say in an adeptly maladroit line that points to the relief that would come if the phrase would only read the usual way: "the mind stares at the blank." That would at least attribute some power to thinking; the mind's eye could avert its gaze. But here the paradoxical "glare" of nothingness blinds the speaker to all other possibilities. If Larkin's diction were less direct, less exact, the gravitational pull into the *via negativa* of "total emptiness," would seem, perhaps, avoidable:

> The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse
> —The good not done, the love not given, time
> Torn off unused—nor wretchedly because

[19] Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 442.

> An only life can take so long to climb
> Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;
> But at the total emptiness for ever,
> The sure extinction that we travel to
> And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

Although it is impossible to say whether Donne's aubade underlies Larkin's, the reversal couldn't be more complete. If Donne imagines love turning one room into a dazzling everywhere, Larkin writes of the opposite, claustrophobic experience. There's no exit from the room—or from his ruminations.

> Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.
> It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,
> Have always known, know that we can't escape,
> Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.
> Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
> In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring
> Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
> The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
> Work has to be done.
> Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

As Larkin's biographer remarks, the poem is "the culmination of a lifetime's dread."[20]

With Bishop, the case for Donne and the aubade can be stated more positively, and because it can, it is also more complicated and can be sketched only lightly here. Bishop was particularly fond of "morning" poems in general. Early in her career, she published both "A Miracle for Breakfast," her sestina about the Depression, and "Roosters," a barnyard aubade-cum-antimilitary allegory, written in expanding Crashavian tercets, on the eve of the German

[20]Motion, *Philip Larkin,* p. 469.

invasion of Norway and Finland. (These poems were first collected in *North and South,* published in 1946.) Much later in life, she concluded *Geography III* (1976), her final, single volume of poems, with a morning meditation entitled "Five Flights Up," this time a poem about personal depression.[21] What sets her aubades off from the variously dark performances we've been considering is simply a spoken sense of spontaneous joy in love, a sense of "wonder" or sweet sensation enabled, in part, one must add, by the private circumstances of their creation. Like Donne's poetry generally, these amorous, same sex wakings belong to Bishop's personal, unpublished life—the notable exception being "Roosters," with the allusion to Donne's "The Sun Rising," situating the speaker in the bedroom with an unnamed lover. (The roosters are likened specifically to Donne's unruly sun breaking into their private space.) But morning love remains deeply recessed in this poem, depending, in fact, on a literary allusion to give it a place, and the subject was otherwise repressed from her published work, including *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*, brought out in the same year as her death. Her aubade to Marjorie Carr Stevens, dating from the 1940s, and beginning,

> It is marvellous to wake up together
> At the same minute; marvellous to hear
> The rain begin suddenly all over the roof,
> To feel the air suddenly clear
> As if electricity had passed through it
> From a black mesh of wires in the sky,

[21]I have discussed more fully these poems, as well as Bishop's interest in Donne and other seventeenth-century poets, in "The Baroque and Elizabeth Bishop," *The John Donne Journal* 21 (2002): 101-133.

wasn't discovered until 1987.[22] And not until the recent, double Christmas issue of the *New Yorker* (December 23 & 30, 2002) did the following "Breakfast Song," dated 1973, appear in print. The subject is the more moving because of the poem's posthumous appearance some two decades after Bishop's death. Its surprise surfacing was also greeted, I can assure you, with a touch of epiphanic wonder by someone slated to talk about "The Good Morrow" at Gulfport. To specialists in seventeenth-century verse, it's like hearing from a long-lost friend. There's more Herbert here ("My Joy, my life, my crown") than Donne, and a touch of Marvell as well in the reference to the grave as a lonely, ugly (rather than fine) place. But the repeated refrain, "your eyes are awfully blue," and the exquisite unbalancing into emphatic speech that follows, lets us know that, for Bishop, like Donne, the blue of heaven is found in the eye of the earthly other, and made more instant in the morning:

> My love, my saving grace,
> your eyes are awfully blue,
> I kiss your funny face,
> Your coffee-flavored mouth.
> Last night I slept with you.
> Today I love you so
> How can I bear to go
> (as soon I must, I know)
> to bed with ugly death
> in that cold, filthy place,
> to sleep there without you,
> without the easy breath
> and nightlong, limblong warmth
> I've grown accustomed to?
> —Nobody wants to die;

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[22]The poem is printed in Lorrie Goldensohn, *Elizabeth Bishop: The Biography of a Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 27-28.

tell me it is a lie!
But no, I know it's true.
It's just the common case;
There's nothing one can do.
My love, my saving grace,
Your eyes are awfully blue
Early and instant blue.

Perhaps the best gloss on the experience recorded here is, simply, the opening line of "The Good Morrow": "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I / Did, till we loved?"[23]

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[23]I wish to thank the following for helpful suggestions: Tobias Gregory, Anthony Hecht, Joshua Scodel, and Stephen Yenser. This essay is dedicated to Joseph H. Summers, scholar, mentor, and friend, known to all readers of the *JDJ*, who died in February 2002.