

Donne: Three Close Readings

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What is a person? Even Descartes had to admit that “the spirit is not in the body like a pilot in a ship” —but he failed to say how it is supposed to be in the body. Generally speaking, the more we consider the matter, the less explanatory value we find in the notion of a non-material soul. There is another answer to our initial question (“What is a person?”) that is basically Aristotelian. It is a non-reductionist theory of mental and physical properties that avoids Descartes’ picture of two kinds of substances. Strawson developed this fundamentally Aristotelian view in 1959. It is a subtle view according to which persons are irreducible subjects of *both* mental and physical properties: one and the same thing or substance (viz. a person) is said to think, to feel, to run, and to stand 170 cm tall. The obvious duality of properties remains (with thinking, or at least having a sensation, being fairly clearly on one side of the division, standing 170 cm being very clearly on the other, and running probably being a mixture of elements from both sides, since it involves both actual movements and intentions to move). Strawson did not suggest that one set can be reduced to the other, and he explicitly denied that the two kinds of properties call for two kinds of substances. On Strawson’s view of the matter, we cannot even think of a person as an *embodied spirit* (ego, mind, etc), because we cannot even so much as think of a spirit without reference to the body of the person to which the spirit belongs. He wrote, “A person is not an embodied ego, but an ego might be a disembodied person, retaining the logical benefit of individuality from having been a person” (103). He added:

Then two consequences follow, one of which is commonly noted, the other of which is perhaps insufficiently attended to. The first is that the strictly disembodied individual is strictly solitary, and it must remain for him indeed an utterly empty, though not meaningless, speculation, as to whether there are any other members of his class. The other, and less commonly noticed point, is that in order to retain his idea of himself as an individual, he must always think of himself as *disembodied*, as a *former* person. (115-16)

It is this idea of a person that I wish to discuss here. In particular, I shall say that it is also Donne's conception, in three of his more controversial poems.

Elegy 19

The first 18 lines are straightforward: the man invites the woman to bed. I do not see much need to comment on these opening lines. Then:

In such white robes, heaven's angels used to be
Received by men; thou, Angel, bring'st with thee
A heaven like Mahomet's Paradise; and though
Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know
By these angels from an evil sprite:
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

The woman is the angel who prompts sexual response in the speaker; that response is the mark of the angelic in her. Clay Hunt (1954) reads this poem as leading to a materialistic identification of God with the woman's genitals, because contact with the intimate part of her body is the goal of this man's quest, and Hunt sees it as a religious quest for God. However, I take the comparison of the woman to an angel as a metaphor only, not as a symbol inviting a religious interpretation. It is common to attribute so-called Neoplatonic themes to Donne, and Donne did (e.g.) allude to St. Augustine in

his prose, but I question such an interpretation of the poems that I will discuss here. In particular, I do not think that Elegy 19 is more than a poem about physical love. The man's erection is the criterion of the woman's being an "angel." Sexual union with her is just that, not union with God, and consequently there is, contrary to Hunt's reading, not the taking up of "philosophic materialism" (216). God (or pure spirit) is not rendered material (as female genitalia, in a manner that Hunt admits "certainly makes extraordinary demands on the reader") in this picture, because God is not in this particular picture at all.

Then (lines 25-30) there is the conceit in which conquest of the woman is compared to the discovery of the Americas. Some have taken offense at this comparison, since the woman is seen as subjugated by the man (see e.g. John Carey 1981, 124); but we should bear in mind that this is the man's perception, as his excitement grows. Joan Bennett (1938, 179) praised this aspect of Donne's love poetry: "The poem is not about her exquisite body, but about what he feels like when he stands there waiting for her to undress." A woman can see in a mirror how she looks, but it "may interest her to know what it feels like to be a man in love."

Next (line 31) there is the idea that "To enter in these bonds is to be free." He becomes free in his physical bondage to her. Compare "The Ecstasy" (lines 65-68)

So must pure lovers' souls descend
To affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

To be released from "prison," i.e. to be free, is to "descend" to the physical world from the Neoplatonic dream world (somewhat as one could not be free without gravity to bind one to the Earth). With that insight, the man enters

the bond gladly.

I disagree also with Hunt's interpretation of lines 33-35:

Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee,
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be
To taste whole joys

Hunt (208) regards these lines as referring "to the intellectual joys which the soul can experience fully only by direct contact with God in heaven." But I read them as referring straightforwardly to physical pleasure. Hunt relies on the following equations: "the body = clothes" and "the soul (or spiritual essence) = the naked body." He concludes that "enlightened, Platonic lovers" want their women naked, so that they (the men) may achieve the "Beatific Vision = the sexual orgasm." Now, who knows what Donne really had in mind? Hunt's reading makes sense, despite its "extraordinary demands" on the reader. However, a less strenuous effort is needed to see just a plain simile here. The word "as" means "like," not "in the role (or place) of." The naked body is "like" the Platonic soul; indeed, being fully naked is as much like being "unbodied" as we can ever be, in this world (where we are decidedly *not* "as angels;" cf. Sermon 154, quoted by Hunt in note 6, 212). "Whole joys" are not the "intellectual joys" of contact with God, but the sensible joys of spiritual union with a woman in this world. Such real joys can be achieved only by using the body. Compare "The Ecstasy" (lines 49-60), which tells us that when we return to our bodies, "soul into the soul may flow." The goal is not to remove the body from the soul, as Hunt suggests; it is to find the soul properly embodied. There is then no question of reaching God in heaven; the point is only to commune with the soul of the other in this world. Hunt fails to see this, because he accepts a dualism such that once the soul is embodied at all, it disappears, reducing to the purely material. He writes, "Donne thus obliterates, by a single stroke of wit, that sharp

dichotomy between ... body and soul, temporal matter and eternal spirit, 'things visible' and 'things invisible,' which was not only the central organizing concept in his own thought but also one of the fundamental conceptual antitheses of the whole Renaissance" (207). Consequently, for Hunt, if I understand him correctly, once the soul is embodied, even God reduces to a part of the material world. Since I regard the poem as about this world and intersubjective relations within it, not as about heaven, God or pure, Platonic spirit at all, I do not see the complete, obliterating collapse of spirit into the flesh that Hunt describes. The dualism of body and soul remains, even after the soul is embodied, for it is an Aristotelian dualism that we find in Donne, as I read him. We are to seek the soul of the animal in the body of the animal; God, angels and other pure spirits (bodiless spirits) are beside the point and not affected by the dialectic. In this dualism, the animal body is not (contrary to Hunt 207) clothing for the soul of the animal, but the very substance of that kind of soul. To find the animal soul we must turn to the body of the animal. (The soul of God or angels remains another matter entirely.)

In this project of finding the soul of the other, we should not be misled by "gems":

... Gems which you women use
 Are like Atlanta's balls, cast in men's views,
 That when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,
 His earthly soul may covert theirs, not them.

Gems are just gems, or perhaps they symbolise clothing or other decorations of the body; they do not represent the body itself (contrary to Hunt again; see 209). "Them" of line 38 refers to the bodies of women, as they embody the soul (of course, and not as the "sepulchral statues" of "The Ecstasy," line 18). Wise men seek the animated bodies of women, not the costumes that they put

on. Therefore, the speaker of Elegy 19 urges his woman to undress.

Lines 39-43 compare women to “mystic books.” The animated body is the woman, and that is the “book.” Hunt points out that the “contrast between the binding and the book as an image for the distinction between the body and the soul is a common metaphor in Elizabethan literature” (note 6, 210). However, for Donne in Elegy 19 the woman is the book, and I understand that to mean that her body is the book itself, not just its cover. Consequently, we are not in any manner “led beyond this physical experience to a rational response to the beauty of her soul and thus to an awareness of the eternal reality of spirit, of which the beautiful body is merely a transitory physical manifestation,” as Hunt alleges. On the contrary, the spirit that we are led to is hers, and it is there in her body; the “book” contains it all.

Hunt sees the “elaborate structure of philosophic idealism, . . . Platonic Love and Christian mysticism . . . merely as an imaginative analogue to . . . the sheer physical pleasure of sexual intercourse” (213). In my opinion, there is no such elaborate structure in Elegy 19 at all. All I find is the direct presentation of physical lust as an Aristotelian “Stair of Love” into the animal herself. In his argument Hunt makes much of the concept of “mysticism,” seeing it as signaling Donne’s jump (in the “imaginative analogue”) to the “final stage of the Platonic progression” (211). However, in my opinion, the word is practically meaningless, meaning too many things to too many people (see Larson’s discussion of this point; 1989, 149-50). For example, I take it to mean nothing more than the awareness of spirit in the physical world. To place Christian or Neoplatonic weight on it is unwarranted, I believe. To see it as generating a vast Platonic analogue of worldly love is to neglect the Aristotelian alternative, which is, to my mind, a simpler and more elegant way to make good reading of Elegy 19. Let us see if we can take other poems by Donne in the same way.

“The Ecstasy”

The first 12 lines present the picture of the couple sitting on a bank of violets. The man says that the only physical contact so far has been “to intergraft our hands” and to twist and thread “our eye-beams ... upon one double string.” There is, however, the suggestion of deeper union:

So to intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.

As yet these are the only forms of unity, but he intends to have more, including full “propagation.” There is thus the feeling of peace associated with the initial image of lovers on a flowery bank, who have nothing more pressing to do than to sit hand in hand and gaze into each other’s eyes; but there is also the tension of the man’s as yet unfulfilled intention.

Line 13 introduces a brief allusion to the standard Petrarchan image of love as a confrontation of “two equal armies.” However, the image was for Donne utterly conventional, unprovocative, and not at all suggestive of any disruption of the tranquility of the scene. Indeed, on the contrary, the couple can be seen, still, as playing a quiet lovers’ game; all they have done is to introduce a bit of intellectual play, alongside the hand-holding and so on. The utter familiarity and blandness (for them) of the Petrarchan conceit is proof of this. The only new tension is in the words (line 15): “Our souls (which to advance their state/ Were gone out) ...” But this adds to the tension only by suggesting again the man’s wish for “advance.”

A negative element, which does significantly increase the tension, appears in lines 17-18:

And whilst our souls negotiate there,

We like sepulchral statues lay.

When the souls are pictured (in the Petrarchan, Platonic way) as beyond the body, the bodies are reduced to lifeless stone, suitable for decorating a tomb. With this simile, the previous Petrarchan martial simile acquires new force too: the contrast between the dynamic martial image of the spirit and the “sepulchral” image of the body is stark indeed. If we are at all realistic, at all alive to the demands of the body itself, this contrast prepares us already for the demand in lines 49ff for a return to the body.

However, in lines 21-48 peace is temporarily restored, as the Platonic dream of purely spiritual communion is explored. The witness to this communion is someone who is “grown all mind” (line 23). The mood here, however, is subjunctive (“If any ... were grown all mind,” etc). It is not a report of reality as the lovers live in it. In line 30, however, the mood changes. Now (lines 29-36) we have a report of what the lovers (not any hypothetical passers-by) actually learned:

This Ecstasy doth unperplex,
We said, and tell us what we love;
We see by this it was not sex;
We see we saw not what did move ...

The past tense “said” indicates that this was a prior epistemic state of theirs, however. The reference to “This Ecstasy” was part of their attempt to be Platonic, part of the Platonic dream that they temporarily entertained. The dream is shattered in lines 49-50:

But oh, alas, so long, so far
Our bodies why do we forbear?

The body is there; why not use it? That is the theme of this poem as I understand it. It represents an Aristotelian conception of the self, as an embodied animal. It is a dismissal of Platonism (see Bethell 1948).

Apparently against my reading, however, we have the thought (lines 51-52) that our bodies are “ours, though they’re not we, we are/ The intelligences, they the sphere,” which seems to introduce the notion of an otherworldly being for our souls. But I regard this as a strategic maneuver on the part of the speaker. This is a poem of seduction, after all (as various critics have pointed out; see Legouis 1928; Kermode 1957). It does not follow that the man is tossing out nothing but lies, of course, since the truth is often effectively seductive. He is out to persuade her to join in a physical relationship with him, but he too feels the pull of the Platonic dream; he too falls under its spell for a while. In line 49, his sense of reality comes back to him. But he must soften the blow, not only for her, but also — perhaps — for himself as well. Therefore he resorts to the image of the separate souls, the “intelligences” within but distinct from (and in possession of) the “sphere” of the body. The next stanza gives slightly more metaphysical weight to the body:

We owe them thanks because they thus
Did us to us at first convey,
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay.

Our bodies are not all bad, in other words. The return to reality is in progress. It becomes “philosophical” (in a popular, astrological, sense) in lines 57-60, where the need for the body in intersubjective communion is compared to heaven’s need for air, if it is to influence mankind. This intellectualization is continued in the following stanza, where the astrological parallel is dropped, but another quasi-scientific one is adopted. The point is that there

is a "subtle knot which makes us man." The mind is in the body in a subtle way (not like a pilot in a ship, to use Descartes' image). At this point in his seduction of the woman, the speaker has already given the flesh that much dignity. (To repeat: the fact that the poem is produced as an obvious piece of sexual seduction in no way detracts from its logic or truth.)

Then the speaker announces the deep need for the body, the necessity of turning to it, "Else a great Prince in prison lies." As remarked above, to be released from "prison," to be free, the "Prince" (i.e. the soul) must return to the physical world (from the Neoplatonic dream world).

To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look ...

The "weak men" are just the lovers themselves, and others like them; namely, ordinary human beings, as opposed to angels, or subjunctively invoked viewers "grown all mind." In physical love they can see spiritual love too. Indeed there is (for "weak men") really no other way to see spiritual love at all. The Platonic image is left behind as a dream (of angels and other superior beings who are not of flesh).

The final stanza tells us that that there is nothing of real value that is lost in the return to Aristotelian reality:

And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we're to bodies gone.

According to Martz (1969), "These last lines prove the purity of their love. If there is small change when the souls are to bodies gone, then spiritual love has succeeded in controlling passion.... From this standpoint Donne is

misleading us with false expectations by the physical imagery of the opening part. . . . The libertine suggestions are finally dominated and transcended by a richer, more inclusive, more spiritual view of love" (180). Martz calls this interpretation Aristotelian, and it may be, since Aristotle's thought exhibits great diversity. However, it is not the (Aristotelian) view that I recommend. There is at the end of the poem the possibility of all the physical passion promised at the beginning. The claim that there will be "small change" to be seen by any human witness, when desire is fulfilled, implies, not a more spiritual view of love, but rather a more physical view of spirit. When the lovers are gone to bodies, then their spiritual love can be realized in their "libertine" passion. There will be no loss of "richer, more inclusive, more spiritual" love, in this realization of spiritual love. There is rather the realization of what was once only a confused dream.

"Air and Angels"

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;

The opening lines are paradoxical. How can anyone love anyone without knowing "face or name"? We are prepared for a poem about love of an ideal, or about very naive love. The next two lines deepen the puzzle:

So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipped be;

Here there is apparently a comparison of the beloved to an angel, a creature not of this world. Both the "naive" and the "ideal" readings remain open. Assuming that the beloved is a woman of this world, the following lines deepen the paradox:

Still when, to where thou wert, I came,
Some glorious nothing did I see.

How can the speaker find a “glorious nothing” in the flesh-and-blood woman? One interpretation is that he was looking for an angel, a “nothing” in the material world, and he found one embodied in the woman that he met. Naively, he thought he saw the angel in her (the “intelligences” within the “sphere” of “The Ecstasy,” line 52).

His body declares itself, however, perhaps in the way it detects an angel in Elegy 19, line 24 (i.e. with “flesh upright”). The return to the flesh needs a warrant and it is forthcoming:

But since my soul, whose child love is,
Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,
More subtle than the parent is
Love must not be, but take a body too;
And therefore what thou wert, and who,
I bid Love ask, and now
That it assume thy body, I allow,
And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow.

Typically of Donne, the resort to the body is swift, and the union with the woman follows. The distinctions between his love of her and her as his “love” are swiftly blurred. His love of her assumes her body itself, in all its material loveliness.

A Petrarchan conceit follows (he pictures himself as a ship overloaded with her beauty), fully adorned with bawdy puns (“pinnacle,” or “prostitute,” echoing “penis”; cf. Mauch, 1977, 108-11) and fantastic hyperbole (“Every thy hair for love to work upon/ Is much too much ...”), again typically of Donne, as relief from the heavier point of the poem. The serious metaphysical theme emerges again in lines 21ff.

For, nor in nothing, nor in things
 Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love inhere;

Human love requires more than the Platonic spirit, and also more than the material body alone.

Then as an angel, face and wings
 Of air, not pure as it, yet pure doth wear,
 So thy love may be my love's sphere;

He has already conflated his love for her with her as his beloved. Now he sees her love for him as the "sphere" (or body) for his own love's soul: his love for her is thus embodied in her love for him (compare "The Ecstasy," lines 35-6: "Love these mixed souls doth mix again,/ And makes both one, each this and that"). The images are convoluted and confusing, but they are supposed to be, to mirror the chaos in his mind as he falls in love with the human woman (who is ever so much more complex than the simple, pure angel of his boyish dreams).

Then there is the controversial conclusion (see Larson's account of the discussion of these lines, 1989, 16, 30, 109ff., 121-13, for example). The problem is to "unify the troublesome concluding lines with the rest of the poem," she says. Are they necessarily troublesome, though? Larson cites with some approval Arthur Marotti's view that in the earlier part of the poem, Donne presents "an encomiastic poet-suitor, employing the arguments and terms of Neoplatonism," but at the end of the poem he shifts from that role (Larson 1989, 122). Marotti (1986) says, "As the lines return to the Platonic valuation of male love as superior to female love ... they engage in some witty antifeminist teasing ..." (220) That "antifeminist" interpretation is what offended Gardner (1959, 68), however; and I think it is otiose, in fact.

I agree that Donne uses Neoplatonic ideas (much as he uses Petrarchan

elements) as a tool of seduction (see my discussion of “The Ecstasy” above), but that does not mean that the suitor is entirely immune to the dream that he plays with. He too may be under the spell of the dream, as the opening lines of “Air and Angels” suggest. The point of the whole poem, as I understand it, is the awakening from that dream, which comes when the suitor realizes the deep need for the body. By telling the woman about that need, he is of course contributing massively to the seduction, but that does not mean that he is deceiving her. He is, on the contrary, reporting the (happy) truth that he has found. It is a truth about the need to see the spirit as embodied. As we have seen, the embodiment is complex and convoluted. A central element in it is the fact that her love for him is seen as embodying his love for her, in the words of “The Ecstasy,” making “both one, each this and that.” In the concluding lines

Just such disparity
 As 'twixt air and angels' purity,
 'Twixt women's love and men's will ever be

there is not a denigration of women's love. These lines say that women's love is the embodiment that man's love needs in this world, where we are not “as angels” (cf. Sermon 154). In the material world, “Angels' purity” requires air to stand revealed (i.e. to exist); similarly, men's spiritual love requires “women's love” (communion with an earthly woman). Men's love is not thereby elevated to a Platonic realm of purity. There is no such realm at all; the image of it was only a naive dream, or an unrealistic ideal. With the recognition of the metaphysical need for the woman, the man's love is bound to this world. It cannot ascend “higher” than this world, since this is where spirit exists (i.e. in the human animal). His love is, therefore, no less “impure” than hers. The appearance of an antifeminist theme is due to the fact that the poem is in the voice of the man. The final union of the lovers (which makes

"both one, each this and that," in the words of "The Ecstasy" once again) makes an antifeminist interpretation impossible; because of the union of the two, any truth about *her* is ipso facto about *him*.

As in my readings of "The Ecstasy" and Elegy 19, in my interpretation of "Air and Angels" I rely on an Aristotelian conception of persons. It is, in a sense, reading a lot into Donne, but in another sense it is a modest attribution, since it is a simple way to make sense of some of his more controversial poems, as I have tried to show.

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