Metaphysical Poems
for
Poetry Responses

Platonic Love

Abraham Cowley
(1618-1667)

Indeed I must confess,
When souls mix 'tis an happiness,
But not complete till bodies too do join,
And both our wholes into one whole combine;
But half of heaven the souls in glory taste
Till by love in heaven at last
Their bodies too are placed.

In thy immortal part
Man, as well as I, thou art.
But something 'tis that differs thee and me,
And we must one even in that difference be.
I thee both as a man and woman prize,
For a perfect love implies
Love in all capacities.

Can that for true love pass
When a fair woman courts her glass?
Something unlike must in love's likeness be;
His wonder is one and variety.
For he whose soul nought but a soul can move
Does a new Narcissus prove,
And his own image love.

That souls do beauty know
'Tis to the body's help they owe;
If when they know't they straight abuse that trust
And shut the body from't, 'tis as unjust
As if I brought my dearest friend to see
My mistress and at th' instant he
Should steal her quite from me.

The Fair Singer

Andrew Marvel
(1621-1678)

To make a final conquest of all me,
Love did compose so sweet an enemy,
In whom both beauties to my death agree,
Joining themselves in fatal harmony;
That while she with her eyes my heart does bind,
She with her voice might captivate my mind.

I could have fled from one but singly fair;
My disentangled soul itself might save,
Breaking the curled trammels of her hair.
But how should I avoid to be her slave,
Whose subtle art invisibly can wreath
My fetters of the very air I breathe?

It had been easy fighting in some plain,
Where victory might hang in equal choice,
But all resistance against her is vain,
Who has th' advantage both of eyes and voice,
And all my forces needs must be undone,
She having gained both the wind and sun.¹

¹In earlier warfare (especially at sea) the force with the wind and sun behind it had distinct advantages.

The Pulley

George Herbert
(1593-1633)

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by,
"Let us," said he, "pour on him all we can.
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span."

So strength first made a way;
Then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said he,
"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature;
So both should loser be.

"Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness,
Easter Wings

George Herbert

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more
Till he become
Most poor:

With thee
O let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin;
And still with sickness and shame
Thou didst so punish sin,
That I became
Most thin.
With thee
Let me combine,
And feel this day thy victory;
For, if I imp my wing on thine,
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

1 The words "this day," which are superfluous in the metrical scheme of the poem, were perhaps included in the early editions to emphasize the occasion, Easter. They are omitted, however, in the only surviving manuscript of Herbert's poem.

2 A term from falconry: additional feathers were "imped" or grafted onto the wing of a hawk to improve its powers of flight.

The Collar

George Herbert

I struck the board* and cried, "No more; I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large are store.*
Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial* fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays 1 to crown it,
No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age

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Housewifery

Edward Taylor

(1642-1729)

Make me, O Lord, thy spinning wheel complete. 1
Thy holy word my distaff make for me.
Make mine affections thy swift flyers neat,
And make my soul thy holy spool to be.
My conversation make to be thy reel,
And reel the yarn thereon spun on thy wheel.

Then clothe therewith mine understanding, will,
Affections, judgment, conscience, memory,
My words and actions, that their shine may fill
My ways with glory and thee glorify.
Then mine apparel shall display before ye
That I am clothed in holy robes for glory.

1 In the first stanza, parts of the spinning wheel specified are: the distaff, which holds the material to be spun; flyers, which twist the thread as it conducts it to and winds it upon the bobbin; spool, on which the thread is wound as it is spun; reel, which receives the finished thread.

2 quills are the spools of a looming machine.

3 In the fulling mills, the cloth is "fulled" or milled by being pressed between rollers and cleansed with soap or fuller’s earth.

4 ornamented

5 luminous
Bells for John Whiteside’s Daughter

John Crowe Ransom  
(1888-1974)

There was such speed in her little body,  
And such lightness in her footfall,  
It is no wonder her brown study  
Astonishes us all.

Her wars were bruited in our high window.  
We looked among orchard trees and beyond  
Where she took arms against her shadow,  
Or harried unto the pond

The lazy geese, like a snow cloud  
Dripping their snow on the green grass,  
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,  
Who cried in goose, Alas,

For the tireless heart within the little  
Lady with rod that made them rise  
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle  
Goose-fashion under the skies!

But now go the bells, and we are ready,  
In one house we are sternly stopped  
To say we are vexed at her brown study,  
Lying so primly propped.