Ann Chou

Love Poetry

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Erik Gray

**The Urgency of Message and Sound in “Go, Lovely Rose”**

In Edmund Waller’s poem “Go, Lovely Rose”, the speaker addresses a personified rose who is to be a messenger to the speaker’s beloved. The beloved is a young and beautiful woman, who, being shy, shuns the lover’s attention. The speaker uses the rose to simultaneously praise the beloved’s beauty and remind her of her mortality, thereby urging her to accept his admiration. This carpe diem message is enriched by the central metaphor between woman and flower. This metaphor is effective because it connects an awareness of nature to an awareness of mortality, lending the speaker’s message a sense of urgency and legitimacy. This connection to nature and sense of increasing urgency is underlined by diction, syntax, deviations from iambic meter, and the quatrain form.

The speaker’s selection of a rose as his messenger is important because the rose also functions as an object of comparison to the woman. In the first stanza, this comparison expresses the speaker’s admiration for the beloved—in comparing her to the lovely rose, he is praising “how sweet and fair she seems to be” (5). This metaphor develops further in the second stanza, where the shy woman is compared to a rose sprung in the desert whose beauty will never be appreciated. Part of this image extends in the third stanza, which declares “Small is the worth / Of beauty from the light retired” (11-12). The double-meaning of the word “light” reflects the ability of these lines, and this belief, to refer to both woman and rose. The beauty of a plant starved of sunshine will quickly fade. The value of a woman’s beauty hidden from the light of attention will also diminish, for no admirer can assign it worth. The next word “retired” has another double-meaning. It can, on one hand, describe seclusion; on the other, a time of age. Beauty is diminished when it is hidden, but also when one grows old—an image that contrasts with the primary identification of the woman as “young” in line 6 and also predicts the message of the fourth stanza. There, the final command “then die” reminds the woman that she and the rose share another common trait: both are mortal. The rose is not just a symbol of beauty, but of ephemeral beauty. Just as the rose in the desert will die uncommended and the lovely Rose here dies upon the speaker’s command, the woman too will die.

This placement of the speaker’s beloved within the natural process enriches the carpe diem message of the poem. The comparison with nature and natural process shares the same premise which underlies the perspective on sexual desire in book four of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*. Even though Lucretius and Waller produce incompatible messages, the connection between the poems is worth appraising because both are enriched by similar arguments—you are part of nature and so should act in a certain way. Book four assumes there is a prescriptive connection between human experience and natural processes. Man and animal are subject to the same laws of nature. The causes and manifestations of their physical desires are interchangeable and the same conclusions can be drawn for both. For instance, by likening human and animal desire within the category of physical instinct, Lucretius can use knowledge of animal sexual habits to suggest what would be natural for humans (as he does when describing the female experience of sex or the best position for conception). And by categorizing sexual desire as a physical instinct, Lucretius is also able to distinguish it from romantic love, which is not a satiable, and therefore natural or good, instinct.

By a similar method, Waller’s metaphor between the fate of a desert rose and that of his beloved is effective because the woman and the rose are defined as objects directed by the same rules of nature. The speaker uses the awareness of this nature—specifically the process of aging and the inevitable end in death—to urge the woman’s submission to desire and admiration. Parallel to the promise in “De Rerum Natura” that understanding erotic desire on the level of natural sensory processes leads to a better understanding of how to manage erotic love, is the exhortation in “Go, Lovely Rose” to allow your behavior to be guided by knowledge of mortality.

Both also use this connection to nature to encourage the pursuit of gratification. The motivating force behind both speakers is not a fear of death, but a fear of waste and the assumption that waste should be avoided. Lucretius describes how love’s victims “waste away” (1119), and pass away all their strength, days and wealth in pursuit of an illusory satisfaction. The speaker in “Go, Lovely Rose” is concerned about the waste of “her time and me” (2)—his beloved’s beauty and his admiration, neither of which cannot outlast age. Gratification is the natural response to a concern about wasted vitality or gifts. Lucretius advises the pursuit of immediate sexual pleasure as a healthy course of behavior; for instance, in the absence of the beloved, the lover ought to “turn the mind away , and throw / The pent-up fluid into other bodies / And let it go” (1064-6). The speaker in “Go, Lovely Rose” asks the rose to impart a sense of urgency in the beloved.

Having established a carpe diem message by relating the woman to the rose, Waller underscores this message through the language of the poem itself, which becomes progressively more urgent and effusive. Urgency increases in the directives given to the rose. Each of the commands—“Go” (1), “Tell” (2), “Tell” (6), “Bid” (13), and “die” (16)—demands more from her and the coinciding trochaic substitutions (for all these commands except the last one) make them sound more forceful.

The poem also becomes more effusive and emphatic in tone. Three instances of syntactical inversion emphasize three distinct points in the poem’s progression in meaning. First, “When I resemble her to thee, / How sweet and fair she seems to be” (4-5) marks the speaker’s praise of the woman’s physical beauty. Then “Small is the worth / Of beauty from the light retired” (11-12) introduces an opinion. The last lines are then the least grammatically straight-forward:

Then die—that she

The common fate of all things rare

May read in thee;

How small a part of time they share

That are so wondrous sweet and fair! (16-20)

These evoke the most emotional plea for understanding. Also conspicuous here is the straddled adjective “rare.” It seems superfluous to specify that death is the common fate of all things rare when it suffices to say death is the common fate of all things. Yet, by specifying the woman’s rareness among all common things, the speaker emphasizes how much more tragic her uncommended death would be.

Increasing excess and effusiveness can also be identified in the poem’s quintain form. Within the ABABB rhyme scheme, the fifth line is not needed to provide closure in rhyme. However, in the first two stanzas, each fifth line functions to provide closure in meaning. But in the third stanza, the fifth line only repeats the message of the fourth line, and in the fourth stanza, the fifth line only further specifies the subject of the fourth line. So in the latter two stanzas, the second line in the final couple is nonessential. This excess makes the poem seem more effusive. The final line specifically creates a more decisive and effusive tone. The phrase “sweet and fair” appears first in line 5 as a description of the rose and the woman. It repeats again in the final line, as a description of those beautiful rare things which yet must die, and because that is lamentable, “sweet and fair” is enlarged into “so wonderous sweet and fair!” (20).

And so, Waller uses the connection between the woman and nature, as well as a progressively urgent tone, to enrich the carpe diem argument. Like *De Rerum Natura*, this poem is meant to advise its reader. We are reminded of this didactic purpose in line 18, where the word “read” is used to describe the act of seeing a dead rose. This would be an odd use of the word, except it is important for the woman read in both senses of the word: to see and to understand, both images and words. Like Lucretius, the speaker of “Go, Lovely Rose” uses poetry, disguised as an address to a rose, to teach understanding and advise behavior.

Works Cited

Lucretius. On the Nature of the Universe. Trans. Sir. Ronald Melville. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997. Print.

Waller, Edmund. “Go, Lovely Rose.” Love Poems. Ed. Peter Washington. New York: Random House, 1993. 45. Print.