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DISTRACTED CENTER:  
A STUDY OF  
ASYMMETRY, OBSCURITY, AND DIALECTIC  
IN THE POETRY OF JOHN DONNE  
by  
PAMELA DI PESA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate  
Faculty in English in partial fulfillment  
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1974

This manuscript has been read and accepted  
for the Graduate Faculty in English in  
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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## INTRODUCTION

The title of this study is taken from Donne's "Elegie upon the untimely death of the incomparable Prince Henry," in which reason and faith are conceived of as two centers of the mind. When both assert their influence equally, the course of thought is elliptical or imperfect, as is a planetary orbit with its double foci. Were the two centers to coalesce, the mind's motion would be perfected. But the coincidence of reason and faith, though the mind strives for it, is perhaps never to be achieved: "For reason, put to'her best extension,/Almost meetes faith, and makes both centers one." The important word here is "Almost": a few lines later, the poem produces an image of man as an imperfect being exactly because his center is "distracted," or drawn in different directions. This might almost be called a "source image" in Donne, for thematically it generates numerous other images in his poetry, all connected to the idea of the incoherence, disproportion, and disintegration that result from the lack of an organizing center. <sup>1</sup> But it is not the thematic importance of "distracted center" that prompted its choice as title; it was, rather, the fact that the term dovetailed

neatly with a modern approach to the interpretation of structures that influenced this investigation of Donne.

One source of this approach is Claude Lévi-Strauss's "Overture" to Le Cru et Le Cuit. There Lévi-Strauss explains why the myth that he has chosen as the "reference myth" yet does not deserve that special status:

[This reference myth] is a more or less extended transformation of other myths which have originated either in the same society or in other near and distant societies. Because of this, it would have been quite possible to take our point of departure from any single representative of the group.<sup>2</sup>

In order to see the relevance of these words to our present concern, we must substitute "body of poems" for "body of myths" as that which manifests "a-centeredness." The type of cohesion existing among Donne's poems is similar to that existing among myths produced by one culture: they are connected not by their organization around a single poem, but by their embodiment, in various forms, of the same forces and relationships. Thus it is possible to choose any one of them as our starting point, and still to arrive at the same structural description. The particulars vary from poem to poem, but the kinds of relationships that organize those particulars are constant.

These relationships we have characterized by their properties of asymmetry, obscurity, and dialectic, properties which, far from being arbitrary, derive in part from specific historical, cultural, and literary forces in some way acting on Donne--although to describe these forces at all comprehensively, and to translate that vague phrase "in some way" into more exact terms, would be a monumental task. Rather than attempting it, we have chosen to deal with a more manageable problem, and have tried, in the first chapter, to suggest some of the ways in which changes in contemporary prose style might have pushed Donne's poetry in the directions it took. The three following chapters try to define, and to explore in particular poems, those tendencies.

We have assumed, in the process, that because Donne's poetry as a whole is characterized by asymmetrical, obscure, and dialectical relationships, our discussion of an admittedly small number of poems will be in some way representative. We have also found it to be the case that these three types of relationships are inextricably bound to each other, so that a consideration of any one necessarily involves us in a consideration of the others. Thus it would have been possible to arrange our chapters differently, since the modes with which they deal are intertwined in a circular,

not a hierarchical, fashion. Similarly, an analysis of a particular poem may begin indifferently with meter, syntax, or rhyme, for each avenue of investigation will bring us to the same crossroads.

This apparently infinite self-reflexiveness of a poem means that the process of describing it is never complete; as Lévi-Strauss has said of mythical analysis,

[There is no] secret unity which one can seize hold of at the end of the analysis. The themes can be subdivided endlessly. When we think that we have unraveled one from the other and can maintain them separately, we soon find that they are blending together as though under the pressure of affinities we had not foreseen.<sup>3</sup>

A kindred feeling has attended this investigation of Donne at every step, for each attempt to isolate a particular characteristic has seemed arbitrary, and yet corrective efforts to locate it in the total network of characteristics have always risked redundancy. But there is no direct route to the "center" of a poet's work, the essential must be found everywhere, in the continuously revealed relationships of all of its parts to each other --for so " . . . the peeclesse centers flow,/And are in all the lines which all wayes goe."<sup>4</sup>

We hope, then, by following devious paths to come at something essential in Donne. Perhaps in the process it will also be possible to make a contribution to an ongoing speculation both about what was important to his poetry, and about those, coming after him, to whom his poetry was important.

## Footnotes

1

The lines referred to are 21-24 in the "Elegie," in H.J.C. Grierson, ed., The Poems of John Donne, I (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912):

If then, least Movings of the Centre make  
 (More then if whole Hell belcht) the World to shake,  
 What must This doo, Centres distracted so,  
 That Wee see not what to beleeve or knowe?

(The emphasis is Donne's.) Imagery related to this theme is surveyed in Ch. 3 of Marjorie Nicolson's The Breaking of the Circle, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1960).

2

Le Cru et le Cuit (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1964). This translation of the "Overture" by Joseph H. McMahon, which originally appeared in Yale French Studies, 1966, is reprinted in Jacques Ehrmann, ed., Structuralism (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 31-56. This passage is on pp. 32-33. A further treatment of the idea of the decentralization of structures may be found in an essay by Jacques Derrida, "La Structure, le signe et le jeu," in L'Écriture et la différence (Paris: Seuil,

1967), reprinted in a revised version and translated as "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., The Structuralist Controversy (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins Press, 1972), pp. 247-65.

3

"Overture," p. 37.

4

From Donne's "To the Countesse of Bedford" ("Honour is so sublime perfection"), ll. 47-48. In W. Milgate, ed., The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

## CHAPTER I

## POETRY AND PROSE

. . . the blinde fate of language, whose tun'd chime  
More charmes the outward sense . . .

Thomas Carew

To appeal more to the outer than to the inner sense, to fail to be a fit instrument for thought, to deflect one from essentials: such is the blind fate of all words. Carew's elegy on Donne repeats an ancient judgment, one that can be traced at least as far back as the distinction made in Plato's Phaedrus between language and the "living word," the true writing engraved in the heart.<sup>1</sup> Yet despite Carew's acknowledgment of the universal condition (he realizes that Donne's poetry must eventually yield to the fate that covers all), he nevertheless grants Donne a prominent place in the hierarchy of the damned. Below him will be those "Libertines in Poetrie" whose wit, unlike Donne's, was not sufficient to the task of matching language to imagination. Carew alludes here not only to those who have weakened the language by servile imitation of the classical poets, but also to the turgidity of the English language itself, which stubbornly opposes any attempt to toughen it.

Abundant evidence indicates that the efforts by the late-sixteenth-century poets to make a "crude" language eloquent were followed by a counter-movement to refine the language by destroying that eloquence.<sup>2</sup> Although it was possible in 1579 for "E.K." to comment enthusiastically on Spenser's use of rhetorical figures in the Shepherd's Calendar, by 1640 (the publication date of Ben Jonson's Timber, or Discoveries) there were some indications of reaction, perhaps the most notable being Jonson's remark that "Spencer, in affecting the Ancients, writ no Language."

Jonson's preference for "a plaine downe-right wisdome, [rather] then a foolish and affected eloquence" has sometimes been seen as a declaration of his allegiance to the Metaphysicals. But his classicism committed him to the middle road; he warned, in the same work, that a writer should take care that his style "be not winding, or wanton with far-fetched descriptions"<sup>3</sup> --which certainly sounds like an allusion to the enjambed lines and "Metaphysical" conceits of Donne. As a critic, Jonson serves as a useful barometer, indicating at least that poets were conscious of the stylistic changes taking place.

But it should be remembered that Donne was trying to modify only that kind of eloquence which characterized his

immediate predecessors--though to some of his contemporaries it seemed that all eloquence was being sacrificed to a new crudity, not only of diction and imagery, but of meter and syntax as well. (Some of the confusion might be explained by the fact that to the early Elizabethans "refine," when used in respect to language, meant chiefly "polish or make elegant," whereas by Donne's time the word was beginning to suggest subtlety and precision in addition.) Carew's evocation of Donne's wit is helpful here in defining one of the primary intentions of his poetry: to educe from an eloquence of surfaces an eloquence of structures.

Donne's achievement is, then, pre-eminent because of his superior wit. But if we take "superior" to mean only "superior to his contemporaries," we are reading Carew naively. There is no doubt that Donne excelled in originality (and Carew does comprehend the word in its modern sense when he says that Donne gleaned matter for his verse from the "bare lands" of what was purely his), that he imposed spartan laws on a slack language, that, in short, he wrote a new kind of poetry. But if at the periphery of Carew's praise of Donne is the thought that "He was better at something than anyone else today," at its center is quite another: "He was very good at something no one ever really succeeds in."

For language is not a divine activity. It cannot claim to have a privileged relation to truth. Yet where the inadequacies of language are much dwelled upon--for example, in Plato--there often is an implication that one kind of language is more true than the others. The language of the philosophers is considered "less external" than the language of the rhetoricians or the poets. A seventeenth-century formulation of this idea may be found in Bacon: for him, philosophy has reference to man's reason, while poetry, which refers only to the imagination, cannot legitimately be characterized as "knowledge." In addition, philosophic discourse (or what Bacon called the "way of probation"), because it mirrors the processes of thought that have gone into its formation, and thus is capable of self-criticism, functions as a dialectical instrument.<sup>4</sup> It is possible to see in Carew's elegy an implicit answer to the Baconian position, insofar as it suggests that Donne's intellect has succeeded in making a philosophical tool of his language, and has therefore done as much as can be done to redeem poetry from perishing.

Indeed, much has been made of the dialectical nature of Metaphysical poetry, its commitment, shared with "Metaphysical" prose writers like Browne, to the reconstruction

of thought.<sup>5</sup> One way of approaching the poetry of Donne, Herbert, and Marvell is to see it as part of a long-standing conspiracy to usurp part of philosophy's domain. That some contemporary readers saw it as such is indicated by Drummond of Hawthornden's comment that "in vain have some Men of late (Transformers of every Thing) consulted upon her [poetry's] Reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to Metaphysical Idea's [sic.], and Scholastical Quiddities, denuding her of her own Habits, and those Ornaments with which she hath amused the World some Thousand Years."<sup>6</sup> There is some insight here, though one would like to refer the writer to Dante. It is necessary, in any case, to recall that the medieval practice of referring to the poet as a philosopher was far from dead in Donne's time. Sidney's defense of poetry rests in large part on the idea that poets were the original philosophers, and Ben Jonson, too, affirms that "Poesy" is "a dulcet and gentle Philosophy . . ."<sup>7</sup>

To mention the identification of poetry with philosophy (and consequently, the struggle on the part of each to break free of the other) raises a specter of imposing dimensions. Moreover, there are others that follow suit: the association of poetry with rhetoric, on the one hand,

and with music, on the other. That rhetoric still exercised powerful dominion over poetry in the Renaissance is a well-known fact. The figures of speech, topics of invention, and theory of the three styles provided much common ground.<sup>8</sup> The practice of early writers on rhetoric of finding illustrations in the poets continued into the Renaissance, as well as the reverse being true: most Renaissance works on "poetic" were really on rhetoric. While it is true that as early as Aristotle's Rhetoric distinctions between poetry and rhetoric had been made, it is also true that poetry, as a rule, suffered more heavily from its association with rhetoric than did rhetoric from its association with poetry.<sup>9</sup> (There is a significant amount of criticism that approaches the poetry of this period from the direction of rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> At its best, this kind of criticism uses the intimate connection between poetry and rhetoric to illuminate the former; at its worst, it feeds confusion by avoiding the issue of why poetry is not rhetoric.)

Treatises such as Sidney's Apologie and Puttenham's Arte of English Poesie testify that the late sixteenth-century was still under the heavy influence of the tradition that pictured poetry flanked by the sister arts of rhetoric and philosophy. In fact, it was not until the eighteenth

century that this tradition lost its hold, and then it was at some expense. For it was that long-standing association which had bestowed upon poetry part of its "rationality"; the subsequent reference of poetry exclusively to the domain of the imagination (a tendency which began with Bacon) resulted in the development of a precarious situation. Not for two centuries would there be a theory of the imagination able to sustain the linking of poetry with the irrational. Until then, it could not afford to lose the support of philosophy and rhetoric: that support was one of the conditions that allowed it to exist as poetry. Thus the heavy participation by poetry in the activities of prose--the freedom enjoyed by poets such as Spenser, Davies, and Greville to be "philosophical"--was in part a good thing; the advancing separation of poetry and prose in the latter half of the seventeenth century was accompanied by the trivialization of the former: it had always been the handmaid of truth, but truth was then in the hands of the scientists.

One final tie should be mentioned--that between poetry and music. That much of Metaphysical poetry represented a movement away from lyric-as-song is generally accepted; no Renaissance theory of song-phrasing will account for the complex rhythms of Donne. But there has been a tendency,

since the Romantics, to conflate the idea of music and the idea of personality, "lyric" being the bond. Such conclusions as Victor Hamm's (in "Meter and Meaning")<sup>13</sup> that "subjective (lyrical) feeling seeks rhythms that approximate the effects of music" are still possible, as long as we do not take "music" to be what the seventeenth century took it to be. If we are to understand "music" in its seventeenth-century sense, then we must allow what is by now axiomatic: that Donne's poetry, at least, is opposed in conception to the song forms then current. Much of its interest derives from the fact that while the form of a song is retained, a complexity of syntax, rhythm, and meter is engendered that cannot adequately<sup>14</sup> be rendered musically.

Why his poetry especially, as a corpus purporting in some ways to be "philosophic," had to separate itself from music is made clear by Saint Augustine's distinction between song and speech: since the purposes of speaking are to teach and to remind, words joined to music only for pleasurable effect produce a sound that "can be called singing, but it cannot be called speaking."<sup>15</sup> In short, speech, however faulty, can make a connection to Logos; song cannot.

But if music cannot be an adequate determinant of lyric, neither can a simple concept of individuality. Both "Come Away, Come, Sweet Love!" and "The Good-morrow" have a right to the same name. What can be said is that there appears to be a connection between Donne's kind of individualized lyric and the diminution of the "musical" component in poetry. The reverse is also true: "insofar as the age [the sixteenth century] is one in which 'music and sweet poetry agree' it is one with a bias toward generalized and impersonal lyric poetry."<sup>16</sup>

The suggestion that musicality in verse underwent a change between Sidney and Spenser's time and Donne's (it is a suggestion one finds also in Carew's elegy) might seem to play either into the hands of those observers of Donne who, like Jonson, acknowledged that he might be "the first poet in the world in some things," but insisted that he, "for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging"<sup>17</sup> --or into the hands of such unpoetic sensibilities as Thomas Sprat's, whose commendation of Cowley's irregular meter in the Pindarique Odes was based on its supposed "near affinity with Prose."<sup>18</sup> Occasionally a modern critic will echo this left-handed praise by claiming that Donne, in his anxiety to transcend Elizabethan fluency,

deliberately ignored metrical considerations: "not to  
 19  
 bother about one's metre was a token of intimacy."

Although it is by now a commonplace that Donne's  
 verse incorporates the rhythms of the spoken language--  
 and innovatively so--it is unjustified to assume, first,  
 that what we find in him is a cavalier flaunting of  
 metrical norms, and second, that this behavior derives  
 from his inordinate attachment to conversational  
 verisimilitude. There has been enough evidence assembled  
 to indicate that Donne is "unmetrical" or harsh chiefly  
 20  
 in his satires, and there was precedent for that. (The  
 larger questions of the roughness, density, and asymmetry  
 of his non-satiric verse will have to be deferred until  
 later chapters.)

More illuminating in respect to Donne is T.S.  
 Eliot's assertion that the task of his own generation of  
 poets was the enlargement of poetry to include "non-poetic"  
 21  
 elements. This statement was made by way of criticizing  
 Milton for his self-consciously "poetic" diction; it  
 probably would not have been made if Donne had not set a  
 precedent for the inclusion of "prose" elements in verse.  
 Here, as Arnold Stein has pointed out, it is not so much  
 Donne's use of logic and rhetoric, even when these are  
 employed in a structurally significant way, that is

important; what is relevant is his ability to put the syntax, rhythm, and diction of colloquial speech to poetic use.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the prose of Donne's time was in the process of finding itself so flexible an instrument must have constituted a particular threat to poetry, one that would force it to enlarge in order to become a more all-encompassing medium.

It might prove fruitful, when examining the meter, rhythm, syntax, and diction of Donne's verse for the so-called "non-poetic" elements contained therein, to recall the fact that at one other time, at least, in the history of poetry (Dante's), extreme pressure from the direction of prose resulted in an extraordinary extension of the poetic boundaries. (However, it must be acknowledged that in Dante's case the competition was formidable not only from prose, i.e. theology, but also from poetry.)<sup>23</sup> One might assume, as Erich Auerbach has done, that the pressure on Dante to defend poetry was so great, and his desire to autonomize poetic elements so strong, that subjugation of the allegorical dimension to the literal resulted. As Dante has been accused of letting his characters overrule the Christian allegory, so Donne has been accused of allowing his characters (the dramatic voices in his poetry) to overthrow him as craftsman. But it is as little justified

to blame "mimesis" for making Dante too much of a poet (as opposed to allegorist) as it is to blame it for making Donne too little of one. It would be fairer to say that both poets learned to wage battle on the enemy's ground (in some ways one might read Dante instead of Aquinas, and Donne instead of Montaigne), and that an unusual degree of poetic freedom resulted from the challenge of the competition.

Shared, too, by both poets is a precarious individuality which, seeing the Divine as the source of its poetry, is capable of lurching from the extreme of pride to the extreme of humility, depending on which perspective is taken. (One does not ordinarily think of Donne as a consciously theocentric poet--as, for example, Herbert and, more subtly, Marvell, are--but theocentric theories of art were very  
24  
much alive in his time. He is echoing an ancient idea when, in his sermon on Easter Day, 1622, he likens the poet's work to God's: " . . . Poetry is a counterfeit Creation, and makes things that are not, as though they  
25  
were." ) But though Donne's poetry contains both extremes, it does not succeed in establishing a continuum between them, as Dante's does; however, no succession of brief lyrics  
26  
could achieve the continuity of the Divina Commedia.

Nevertheless, Donne's inability to effect a total reconciliation between conflicting extremes in his poetry might be attributed to a suspicion on his part that poetry--even if "divine"--was somehow a dangerous activity, didactic works in prose necessarily being safer. And while his comment on poetry assuredly did not intend the pun, there is perhaps a sense in which Donne's poems were "made against" the activity of the Creator, his sermons, on the other hand, being "made for" it.

For Donne's poetry is very much a dialectical endeavor. His success in evoking the knottedness of experience by the knottedness of words raises the same query as do some of Milton's more spectacular syntactical maneuvers: whether the fall into dialectic was not rather a fortunate consequence of man's original sin. (That the Fall did entail a fall for language is one of the unavoidable implications of Paradise Lost,<sup>27</sup> though the association of man's distance from the Divine with the opacity of language need not be sought in the Christian tradition only: witness the ever-present sense of linguistic transparency--a state imagined but never to be achieved, because it is in some way a contradiction in terms--in the Platonic dialogues.) It is, paradoxically, the fallen state of language that allows the human mind to distinguish itself. As Kenneth Burke has

said, what sets man apart is not so much the ability to use language as it is the ability to use language to talk about language.  
28

And dialectic is the self-critical mode par excellence. Depending on one's point of view, its use may be regarded either as a self-abasing activity serving primarily to emphasize the limits both of language and of the mind--or as a self-glorifying activity on account of its metalinguistic nature. As Marvell, for example, uses dialectic, the former seems to be true; he "makes hay ropes" as one might climb hand over hand: the goal is kept in mind, but it never appears in sight. On the other hand, Donne's use of dialectic, a shade more ambiguous than Marvell's, suggests a mind which revels in that tortuous activity. (The differences between the two poets warrant further discussion; these general remarks are intended simply as preliminary to the extended discussion of dialectic in Chapter IV.)

But whatever the differences between them, Marvell and Donne become temporary allies in spirit when compared to Herbert. The emblematic elements in his poetry, his use of figure, in a visual sense, have often been commented upon.  
29

Insofar as the emblematic, by virtue of its

immediate link to allegory, entails a "this equals that" mode, Herbert's poetry may be said to strive for stasis.<sup>30</sup> Central to his work are the concepts of light and silence --attributes of the Eternal--whereas in Donne, motion,<sup>31</sup> "darkness," and speech are the givens. Another way of stating the difference between the two is to say that if inherent in Donne's use of figurative language is a paradox (since, as Rosalie Colie demonstrates, all figurative language points to the disabilities of language<sup>32</sup>), then inherent in Herbert's kind of figuration is the same paradox translated into other terms.

For even the most "transparent" language is image-laden, since the word itself is but a representation of a representation. Meaning, then, always lies behind a veil, and, as C.S. Peirce has said, "This clothing never can be completely stripped off, it is only changed for something more diaphanous."<sup>33</sup> But behind Herbert's figuration lies an attempt to dispense with the intermediate nature of images; it holds up, in its evocation of a transparent simplicity, "a-figurativeness" as an ideal.

To claim, in contrast, that part of Donne's "darkness" derives from his use of the figures of speech, and especially of trope, might, however, lead to a too-facile conclusion:

that Donne was a typologist manqué, and would have liked to have been an emblematicist had he lived a little earlier, but was forced by the temper of his time into a more private, and thus obscurer, kind of figuration. <sup>34</sup> But there is too much difference in intention between Donne's conceits and Herbert's for this hypothesis to be acceptable: Donne as conceitist is not basically visual in orientation. To seek the source of his poetic in Continental theories of the emblem is a misguided endeavor; although both the poet's use of language and an emblem may be called "figuration," the common term rests on a bifurcation of meaning.

A most succinct formulation of this difference may be found in Robert Klein's chapter on the emblem in La Forme et L'Intelligible, which points out that conceitism (one of the essential marks of which is the movement from verbal figures to quasi-visual representation) rests on the fact that the metaphor involved is an image at once discursive and capable of visual representation--is, indeed, anterior <sup>35</sup> to the distinction between the two modes that express it. That metaphor in Donne is not anterior to this distinction can be demonstrated by attempting to follow some of his conceits visually; to do so would turn a poem like "The

Exstasie" into an exercise in the grotesque. (Of course, certain Metaphysical images can be read visually without becoming grotesque, although a grotesque effect is often the inadvertent result of a "visual intention" on the part of a Metaphysical poet--Crashaw, for one.)

Yet it is not completely unwarranted to posit some kind of continuity between a characteristically sixteenth-century form of image-making and the techniques of the Metaphysical poets, although that continuity cannot rest simply in the desire of the poets to "select such particulars as will best indicate the intended universal"--a desire which, according to Rosemond Tuve, unites the Elizabethan  
36  
with the seventeenth-century poets. (Other critics, too, have argued that Donne is organically linked to the Renaissance emblem tradition and the "poetic of correspond-  
37  
ence." ) But it would seem that the tendency to universalize particulars is shared by poets of all eras, and cannot justly be regarded as the distinguishing link between the Elizabethans and the Metaphysicals.

What was common to the poetic imagery of both the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries was the frequent appearance of what Kenneth Burke has called the "noblest synecdoche," namely, that proclaiming the identity of macrocosm and microcosm. Burke calls this form of the figure

an "ideal synecdoche" because of its complete reversibility: since "the individual is treated as a replica of the universe, and vice versa . . . microcosm is related to macrocosm as part to whole, and either the whole can represent the part or the part can represent the whole . . . One could thus look through the remotest astronomical distances to the 'truth within,' or could look within to learn the 'truth in all the universe without.' "

Not a Renaissance invention, this equation of inner with outer reality yet had particular significance for the age. The well-known studies by Burckhardt and Cassirer have demonstrated that the human mind was thought of as both central and infinite, as being situated at the center of the universe and at the same time capable of infinite expansion. "Man, the Ego, appears to the universe, the world, at once as the enclosing and the enclosed."

However, the microcosm-macrocosm relation is not an unambiguous one; two different views of the proposition "Man is a little world" may be taken, depending on whether one puts the emphasis on "little" or on "world." Exploiting the microcosm concept as alternately ennobling and humiliating is as characteristic of Metaphysical prose as it is of the poetry: in the former (Donne and Browne especially), the technique of instantaneous reversal may be

considered a norm. Morris Croll has said of Browne's style that the periods always open outward, losing themselves in a hint of infinity.<sup>41</sup> But what has been called his "generative style"<sup>42</sup> has its counterpart in a "degenerative" mode, when the universal is suddenly collapsed into an insignificant particular and exalted rhythms become paltry.<sup>43</sup>

Several scholars have found in the Metaphysicals' habit of alternating between extremes (and especially in their attempt to incarnate the infinite, suggesting the abstract and remote through images of physicality) a characteristic particularly baroque.<sup>44</sup> Yet it is likely that any poetry which is consciously part of the Christian tradition would tend to do this; we can at most assume that the Metaphysicals simply exploited in their own way a potentiality inherent in Christian poetry in the West. How much the seventeenth-century poets--and the stylistic revolution that they were part of--owed to Christianity cannot be over-emphasized. Whether or not the body of poetry is particularly "religious" (though it happens that the Metaphysical mode does encompass a significant body of religious verse) is not really the point: it is the precedent set by Christian writings that is important.

Taking the Incarnation as the inspiration for all subsequent conjoinings of humble and exalted, and the New

Testament's combination of a plain style with sublime matter as a literary source, Erich Auerbach demonstrates how the Classical concepts of stylistic genres were gradually broken down: the fusing of humble and sublime in Christianity is incompatible with the separation of styles in Antiquity. (A further impetus to the disintegration of stylistic genres might be seen in the fact that the separate functions of the genus humile--to teach--and the genus grande--to move--are telescoped into one in the Bible.) The Divina Commedia, it need not be said, merges both of the extremes and both of the functions in an exemplary fashion.

If these precedents are kept in mind, some of the genre violations attributed to Donne (e.g., Dryden's assertion that he broke the rules of love poetry by "affecting the metaphysics") become comprehensible. The plain style in England--the one associated with a "philosophic" poetry as opposed to the "sublime" Miltonic mode --had long been a vehicle for religious and love poetry as well as for satire. The peculiar kind of individualism that combined with a philosophizing abstraction to produce the prose of Montaigne and Browne also pushed Donne in the direction of a trans-genre poetry.

As has been well established, these two characteristics of Senecan prose were directly related to the

rejection of Ciceronian periodicity. The periods which "open into infinity" do not employ a tight "circular" form of organization, in which each member points either forward or back to a central or climactic member; they rely, according to Croll, on parataxis in the curt, or abrupt, style, and, in the loose style, either on coordination or on a casual form of hypotaxis (in which, for example, subordinating conjunctions are used as a necessary means of advancing an idea, but the tight construction implied by their use is relaxed). Characteristic of the loose style is a certain method of asymmetrical construction which employs ablative absolutes and appositional phrases as semi-independent members of a period; it relies, as well, on the phenomenon known as terminal linking (particularly characteristic of Browne), in which a member depends not on the entire thought of the previous member, but on the last word of it only.

49

Donne's epistolary style provides an excellent example of this mode:

No other kinde of conveyance [than a letter] is better for knowledge, or love: What treasures of Morall Knowledge are in Senecaes Letters to onely one Lucilius? and what of Naturall in Plinies? how

much of the storie of the time, is in Ciceroes Letters? And how all of these times, in the Jesuites Eastern and Western Epistles? where can we finde so perfect a Character of Phalaris, as in his own Letters, which are almost so many writs of Execution? Or of Brutus, as in his privie seals for monie? The Evangiles and Acts, teach us what to beleeve, but the Epistles of the Apostles what to do.

50

(It is, by the way, characteristically Senecan to attribute didactic superiority to the letter as a form.)

One observation Croll has made (in "The Baroque Style in Prose," pp. 212 and 223) about this kind of utterance is that, although it is not paratactic, its use of weak connectives, loose constructions, and frequent repetitions approximates the "simultaneity" of the curt period, in which the first member states the kernel of a thought, and the subsequent ones develop it in a series of imaginative elaborations. In other words, Croll is suggesting that Senecan prose, when considered in relation to logic, is often given to jumping up and down in one place, as opposed to the clearly progressive mode of the Ciceronian period. This implication of verticality in parataxis is not gratuitous: the mode is used, as Erich Auerbach points out in Mimesis, when the interest of a writer resides not in the logical or

temporal relations between events, but in the ultimate terms, the "ground which gives those events significance."<sup>51</sup>

Hypotaxis, on the other hand, is related to an interest in the continuum of events. It is the mode of the historian, as opposed to the chronicler of the inner life; earthly events, if one knew enough, could be fitted together as are the pieces of a puzzle, but any account of the soul's relation to God will contain some unbridgeable gaps. Auerbach regards the Bible as the prototypical source of parataxis, since the particulars with which it deals attain significance not from their relation to each other in time, i.e., on a horizontal axis, but rather from their common relation to God. (It should also be noted here that parataxis, when not related to the Biblical use of figure or type, can be an indication of a concern with the discontinuous, the fragmentary, and the individual per se; Croll has regarded as such its use in Senecan prose.)

It should now be clear why the use of figure by the Church Fathers contributed to the annihilation of the "circular" language of classical antiquity: the connection between the figure and its fulfillment is not temporal or causal, but vertical, since the key is their common link to Providence. (Dante's "Farinata and Cavalcante" episode in the Divina Commedia--in which Auerbach sees the voices of

the two damned as being so powerful in their earthliness that they break out of, and deflect our attention from, the Divine scheme that governs them--is then adduced as an instance of triumphant hypotaxis, as if Dante had somehow been caught concentrating on the historicity of a figure rather than on its eternal significance.)

This brings to light an apparent paradox in relation to Donne: his poetry as a whole cannot be considered particularly paratactic (Josephine Miles notes that it is distinguished from that of the other "clausal" poets by its exceptionally frequent use of connectives)<sup>52</sup>, yet neither does it seem entirely alien to the "psychology" of the paratactic mode. Donne assuredly possesses an individual and individualizing voice, he is without doubt to be affiliated with the Senecan movement in terms of both theory and practice, and yet his poetry does not evince an overwhelming use of discontinuous structure on the sentence level.

A clue will perhaps be provided if we modify the antithesis between parataxis and discontinuity on the one hand, and hypotaxis and continuity on the other. (There is reason to suppose, for example, that hypotaxis might occur apart from a continuous development of thought.) To expect that a fragmented psychology would always manifest itself in

parataxis is to assume, rather reductively, a totally reciprocal relationship between world-view and style. Furthermore, in many cases there is simply no consistent world-view available. This caution applies particularly to Donne, for the same poet who used the death of Elizabeth Drury to exploit the "loss of proportion" theme in the two Anniversaries could also convincingly evoke the traditional images of the fittingness of things:

The correspondence and relation of all parts of Nature to one Author, the concinnity and dependance of every piece and joynt of this frame of the world, the admirable order, the immutable succession, the lively and certain generation, and birth of effects from their Parents, the causes; in all these, though there be no sound, no voice, yet we may even see that it is an excellent song, an admirable piece of musick and harmony . . .

(It is worth pointing out here, as does John Hollander in The Untuning of the Sky, that Donne's use of the musical metaphor more for homiletic purposes than as an "ontological qualification" belies the very assertion of complete harmony --i.e., the metaphor is already somewhat dead.) The point is that both possibilities (of fragmentation and of harmony)

are capable of being held in the mind simultaneously, and of being evoked poetically in different ways.

But Donne's choice of the word "concinnity" in the context of universal harmony cannot help but echo its commoner use to describe the harmonious fitting-together of parts in the Ciceronian period. (The O.E.D. certifies that both uses were current in the seventeenth century.) Cicero's assertion that a relationship of harmonious inseparability exists between word and thought is paralleled by Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine that the soul is not just related to the body as internal to external, but mirrors exactly the changes in the body, the relationship between them being one of unbroken proportion or "concinnity."<sup>55</sup> All of this suggests that the premises of Ciceronian eloquence, in at least one way, fed into Renaissance ideas of harmony to produce a continuous triad: word, mind, cosmos.

As we have said earlier, any formulation about writing and world-views as comprehensive as this one invites qualification. Nevertheless, as a proposition about the early Renaissance intending to distinguish it from the seventeenth century, it is not unjustified; the emphasis was surely placed, in the earlier period, on the idea of cosmic harmony, and, in the later period, on the assaults

made on that articulated vision. The seventeenth-century sense that coherence was lacking in the outer world, that there was no language that could join time to eternity, found some analogue in the literature of the age. (Encouraging, insofar as it reinforces the validity of this parallel, is Donne's use of the idea of syntactic completion as a metaphor for Eternity: he calls time an accumulation of words that cannot make up one syllable, towards this Eternity, the period of this blessednesse." )

We may, then, want to accept the notion that the seventeenth century was a period when ideas of cosmic harmony were dissolving. But to do so does not automatically mean that we can "place" Donne by saying that he was a poet of that century, any more than we can accurately describe him by saying that he belonged to the previous one. (Chronologically, of course, both statements are true.) For in his poetry we do not find a mere reversal of the norms of Ciceronian concinnity. What, then, do we find?

To answer that question, we shall first have to recognize that, in a time when great stylistic changes are taking place, no consistent function can be ascribed to any one feature such as hypotaxis. For example, where a loose form of hypotaxis does occur in Donne's poetry, it is not employed in the service of the smooth horizontal interweaving

of parts characteristic of the Ciceronian period, but rather is used in the manner of the casual Senecan period, to effect a "vertical" intensification of thought.

As we have said, Auerbach relates parataxis to the use of typological figure; but we may also connect it-- along with the loose hypotaxis that approximates its effects--to the use of figure as conceit. That is, either mode may be used to elaborate a Metaphysical conceit in a manner that suggests "jumping up and down in one place." But whether we are speaking about a paratactic structure or about a hypotactic one, the image that best describes the thrust of the syntax is "vertical." To illustrate the first principle, a brief example from Donne--though it is perhaps an extreme case--will serve. His method of proceeding in "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, being the shortest day" is in several ways typical of his best-known lyrics. The first stanza presents the governing conceit (which, roughly stated, is "It is the year's, the day's, and the poet's midnight or nadir"), while the following four develop it. The manner of development, however, is rather that of intensification than of expansion: a multitude of repetitions-with-variation follow ("The Sunne is spent," "The world's whole sap is sunke," "life is shrunke," etc.), until the poem ends in almost the same words with which it began.

But it would be grossly inaccurate to say that the poem has therefore "gone nowhere"; rather, our concept of "going somewhere" must be large enough to include intensification as well as progression. The same conceit reappears in each stanza in slightly different form, its terms undergoing minor permutations; we do not have to wait for the end of the poem to find out what is going on. To pursue our original image further, we might say that in this poem Donne jumps up only just enough to allow him to come down again in the same place with fuller force. An examination of "The Funerall," "Loves Alchymie," "A Valediction: of Weeping," "The Dreame," "Twicknam Garden," and "The Sunne Rising" (to name a few) will reveal a similar phenomenon.

This technique of metaphoric intensification provides a kind of poetic parallel to the imaginative exhaustion of thought which Croll sees as characteristic of the loose Senecan period. Not all of the features named by Croll can, however, be found in "A Nocturnall" or in other poems of its type; the search for ablative absolutes and terminal linking is not a fruitful one. Nevertheless, some things are shared by Donne's poem and the typical loose period: the former has a high ratio of coordinate to subordinate conjunctions

(thirteen of the former and five of the latter in forty-five lines), in addition to five appositional phrases that all make some pretense to syntactic autonomy. (In four of the five cases, the semi-independence of the phrase in apposition is emphasized by its occurrence at the end of a line: "who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes," "no constant rayes," "who am their Epitaph," and "things which are not." The first is the most interesting example of this tendency toward independence, since its following "Lucies," rather than "Lucy," involves a slight grammatical lapse.)

This latter phenomenon may be related to the loose Senecan period insofar as it constitutes a case in which subordinate constructions are used in the service of verticality rather than as a means of establishing circularity. For while each phrase in a Ciceronian period contributes to the development of a total "symphonic" rhythm, and cannot be grasped except as part of that governing pattern, the more loosely-constructed phrases of a Senecan period can suggest a kind of semi-resolution in which expectations are raised and requited intermittently.

At its best, this style can be used as an instrument to capture the exact order in which a thought is formulated--

or rather, it was thought by seventeenth-century theorizers that it was such an instrument. (The question of whether the Senecan style was in fact any less censored and artificial than the Ciceronian becomes less relevant in the light of twentieth-century linguistic philosophy, but certainly it was considered a legitimate question three centuries ago.)

At its worst, the freedom of the Senecan period resulted in a kind of libertinism in which the successive members of a period, instead of growing out of each other, were attached simply by means of casual association. Bacon, for one, saw the antithetical possibilities inherent in this principle of generation when he altered his original praise of the Senecan style to blame. The anti-Ciceronian period, in its attempt to avoid a false sense of completion, had early been related, for him, to the probing method of induction; later, he saw the conciseness of the style as deceiving in its own fashion, since it pretended to a weightiness it did not always have.

59

The possibility, then, of formal structures becoming gratuitous must be considered. We have seen how this possibility is inherent in Senecanism per se, for there is the danger, in the loose style, of intensification degenerating into redundancy, of agglomeration becoming merely quantitative.

The revolution in prose style that began as a reaction to Ciceronian mannerism was itself subject to degeneration: in its eagerness to avoid a falsifying symmetry and eloquence, it sometimes fell into an equally falsifying asymmetry and roughness. Obscurity, the hallmark of the Senecan writers, did not always result from complex thought, but sometimes was merely willful. An analogous phenomenon can be found in some seventeenth-century poetry; it is often true of the jaded Metaphysical style as it is found, say, in Cleveland, that surfaces are not justified by depths.

In Donne, however--as the following chapters hopefully will demonstrate--the Senecan characteristics of asymmetry, roughness, and obscurity have been transferred to the poetic medium in a way that is seldom unmotivated, but rather attests to a true complexity of thought behind them. In short, Donne's poetry reflects the real intentions of the Senecan movement. Such an assertion can only be made, of course, with the understanding that in many ways the intentions of prose and poetry do not coincide; the norms of one are not always the norms of the other. Nevertheless, both Donne's poetry and Senecan prose confronted the same "blinde fate" simply by virtue of being linguistic constructions--and as long as we make the necessary accommodations, we will find a likeness in the ways in which they tried to oppose it.

## Footnotes

1

Cicero (De Oratore, III, xvi, 60-61) accuses Socrates of being the first to err by separating the tongue from the brain. His claim that the pre-Socratics saw the aims of philosophy and oratory as one must, however, be viewed with scepticism in light of the relativism--linguistic as well as epistemological--of the early Sophists. See Cicero, De Oratore III, Trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, and London: Heinemann, 1960), and Kathleen Freeman, Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), especially for Gorgias, Protagoras, and Xenophanes of Colophon.

2

The seventeenth century's destruction of the older kind of eloquence may be seen as exploratory to the task of constructing a new kind. A somewhat different view offered by Richard Foster Jones, is that "the seventeenth century accepted the characterization of the language as eloquent, and set about to make it grammatical"--i.e., more aware of grammatical relations. (The Triumph of the English Language: A Survey of Opinions concerning the Vernacular from the

Introduction of Printing to the Restoration [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1966], p. 284. But his distinction implies that the seventeenth-century poets were trying to deepen the sometimes superficial eloquence of the Elizabethans: deepen in the sense that they made a more sophisticated poetic use of syntax.

3

Another possible allusion to the Metaphysicals is in Shakespeare's Sonnet #76: "Why with the time do I not glance aside/To new-found methods and to compounds strange?". Jonson's comments are to be found in Timber, or Discoveries, in C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, eds., Ben Jonson (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1947), VIII, pp. 574 and 617. For a study of the relationship between Jonson's poems and plain-style ideology, see Wesley Trimpi, Ben Jonson's Poems; A Study of the Plain Style (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1962).

4

Poetry, as "Feigned History," does have some participation in divineness, in that it satisfies the mind where nature disappoints it. But for this reason Bacon calls poetry a "theatre" of the mind which it is not good to dwell in too long. Reason, however, is "the judicial place or palace of the mind, which we are to approach and

view with more reverence and attention." See Book II of the Advancement of Learning, in vol. VI of The Works of Francis Bacon, ed. James Spedding, Robert Ellis, and Douglas Heath (Boston: Taggard and Thompson, 1863), pp. 182, 203, 206, and 289-90.

5

Morris Croll discusses dialectic in seventeenth-century "Senecan" prose in "The Baroque Style in Prose," in J. Max Patrick, Robert O. Evans, et al., eds., Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm: Essays by Morris W. Croll (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 210. Others have drawn analogies to Metaphysical poetry. See especially Earl Miner's third chapter in The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969).

6

From Drummond's letter "To . . . Arthur Johnston, Physician to the King," rpt. from the 1711 ed. of Drummond's works in Edward W. Tayler, ed., Literary Criticism of Seventeenth-Century England (New York: Knopf, 1967), pp. 215-218.

7

See Sir Philip Sidney, An Apologie for Poetrie (1595), in G.G. Smith, ed., Elizabethan Critical Essays (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1904), I, p. 151 ff, and Jonson's Timber, in Herford and Simpson, p. 636. E.R. Curtius discusses the

idea of the poet as philosopher in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard Trask (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 207 ff.

8

Rosemond Tuve, in Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth-Century Critics (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947), goes to great lengths to discover evidence of rhetorical training in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets. In addition to the imagistic use of the figures and topics, the poetry, she finds, generally upholds the classical stylistic criteria, eclogues and satires being written in the base style, non-satirical verse letters, love poems, and elegies in the middle style, and epics and hymns in the high style. Most Metaphysical poems belong to the middle range, except for some instances of satire and dialectic that introduce base-style conventions. See especially pp. 238-42 for a discussion of the stylistic genres.

9

There are numerous studies that deal with the relation between rhetoric and poetry in the Renaissance. See especially C.S. Baldwin, Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice; Classicism in the Rhetoric and Poetic of Italy, France and England, 1400-1600, ed. D.L. Clark (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), and W.S. Howell,

Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1956).

10

Another extensive treatment, in addition to Rosemond Tuve's is Sister Miriam Joseph's Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1947). William Empson, in "Donne and the Rhetorical Tradition," The Kenyon Review, 11 (1949), pp. 571-87, looks with a critical eye on these two studies.

11

See Advancement of Learning, Book II, p. 182.

12

Kenneth G. Hamilton's The Two Harmonies; Poetry and Prose in the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963) studies the evolution of the deeper separation of the two forms from each other.

13

PMLA, 69 (1954), p. 710.

14

For a discussion of the changing relations between music and poetry in the Renaissance see Jerome Mazzaro, Transformations in the Renaissance English Lyric (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970). Catherine Ing, Elizabethan Lyrics; A Study in the Development of English Metres and their Relation to Poetic Effect (London: Chatto and Windus, 1968) is also helpful. But for a fuller

discussion of why Donne's rhythms are not "musical," John Hollander's "Donne and the Limits of Lyric," in A.J. Smith, ed., John Donne: Essays in Celebration (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 259-73, is indispensable.

15

Concerning the Teacher, trans. G.C. Leckie, in Whitney J. Oates, ed., Basic Writings of Saint Augustine (New York: Random House, 1948), I, p. 361.

16

G.K. Hunter, "Drab and Golden Lyrics of the Renaissance," in Forms of Lyric; Selected Papers from the English Institute (New York and London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970), p. 5.

17

From The Conversations of Ben Jonson and William Drummond of Hawthornden (1619), rpt. in part as the Appendix to vol. I of J.E. Spingarn, ed., Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 211-12.

18

From An Account of the Life and Writings of Mr. Abraham Cowley: Written to Mr. M. Clifford (1668), rpt. in Spingarn, II, p. 132.

19

A. Alvarez, in The School of Donne (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), p. 33.

20

See Arnold Stein, "Donne's Prosody," PMLA, 59 (1944), pp. 373-98.

21

In "Milton II," On Poetry and Poets (1943; rpt. New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), pp. 181-82.

22

In John Donne's Lyrics (Minneapolis, Minn.: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 204.

23

See "Farinata and Cavalcante," in Mimesis, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 151-77.

24

Both Sidney (An Apologie for Poetrie, p. 154) and Jonson (Timber, p. 636) subscribe to the Platonic idea of the poet as divinely inspired. For continental versions, see "Theological Art-Theory in the Spanish Literature of the Seventeenth Century," Excursus XXII in Curtius, pp. 574-59.

25

George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., The Sermons of John Donne (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1953-1962), IV, p. 87. Hereafter cited as Potter and Simpson.

26

I owe several of these remarks on Dante to material

presented by Professor Allen Mandelbaum in a Fall 1968 course on The Art of Dante at the City University of New York Graduate Center.

27

This thesis is explored in Stanley Fish's Surprised by Sin; The Reader in Paradise Lost (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967).

28

In A Rhetoric of Motives (1950; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1969). See especially pp. 267-94 on "Pure Persuasion."

29

The chapter on Herbert in Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books (New York: Octagon Books, 1966) is helpful.

30

Bridget Gellert Lyons of Rutgers University drew this and several other parallels between Herbert's poetry and the emblem tradition in "George Herbert: The Speaker and the Picture," a paper delivered at the 1972 convention of the Modern Language Association in New York.

31

Mark Taylor, in treating the ideas of silence, time, and light in Herbert's poetry, relates them to the thought of Saint Augustine. See "George Herbert's Poetry: The Soul in Paraphrase," Diss. City Univ. of New York, 1969.

32

Paradoxia Epidemica; The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 516.

33

Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Vol. I, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 171.

34

Of course, obscurity attaches to the emblematic use of figure as well, but it is an obscurity that is clarified once the significance of the emblem's parts is understood. Tropical (i.e., metaphorical) use of language is not always subject to explanation in the same way; metaphors may still seem obscure even after they are "understood."

35

I have here closely paraphrased a passage from "La Theorie de L'Expression Figurée dans les Traités Italiens sur les 'Imprese,' 1555-1612," in La Forme et L'Intelligible (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 133. The author's words are as follows: ". . .le passage de la «figure» de style à la représentation quasi visuelle, et l'exploitation de l'image ainsi obtenue par le discours, est une des démarches essentielles de concettisme; le concettisme est possible, et lié étroitement à l'impresa, parce que la métaphore est, à l'origine, un revêtement de la pensée avant l'expression, image à la fois

discursive et capable de représentation visuelle, ou plutôt antérieure à la distinction des deux moyens qui l'expriment."

36

Imagery, p. 43.

37

See especially two papers by Joseph Mazzeo, "A Seventeenth-Century Theory of Metaphysical Poetry" and "Metaphysical Poetry and the Poetic of Correspondence," both in Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964). Also relevant is Mario Praz's Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery, 2nd ed. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1964). Worthy of noting in this regard is the O.E.D.'s mention that the meaning of "figure" as metaphor had not been totally separated, in the seventeenth century, from the suggestions of "visual image" and "emblem." See "figure," II, 12 and V, 21b. A comprehensive treatment of the word's history may be found in Erich Auerbach's "Figura," trans. Ralph Manheim, in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, pp. 11-79 (New York: Meridian Books, 1959).

38

A Grammar of Motives (1945; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1969), p. 508.

39

See Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore, 2nd ed. (1878; rpt. London: Phaidon Press, 1944), especially "The Discovery of Man," pp. 184-99. Georges Poulet discusses consciousness in relation to the ideas of center and circumference in The Metamorphoses of the Circle, trans. Carley Dawson and Elliott Coleman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1966).

40

Ernst Cassirer's chapter on "The Subject-Object Problem in the Philosophy of the Renaissance" provides an excellent analysis of this concept. See pp. 123-91 in The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy, trans. Mario Domandi (1963; rpt. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

41

"The Baroque Style in Prose," p. 228. Browne himself, in a passage about the inability of reason to fathom the mysteries of religion, declared "I love to lose my selfe in a mystery, to pursue my Reason to an o altitudo." (Religio Medici, Part I, sect. 9).

42

By Edwin Morgan, in "'Strong Lines' and Strong Minds," Cambridge Journal, 4, no. 8 (1951), pp. 481-92.

43

Donne's fourth Meditation in Devotions provides a good example, since it begins by declaring that except for God, "man is a diminutive to nothing," moves to a consideration of man's paradoxical nature, and ends by discrediting the original statement. Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Together with Death's Duel (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1959), pp. 23-25.

44

For studies on the baroque in literature see Roy Daniells, Milton, Mannerism and Baroque (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1963); Odette de Mourgues, Metaphysical, Baroque and Precieux Poetry (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953); and Lowry Nelson, Baroque Lyric Poetry (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1961).

45

See "Sermo Humilis," in Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, trans. Ralph Manheim, Bollingen Series LXXIV (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1965), pp. 25-67.

46

"He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage

their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love." Dryden goes on to indict Cowley on the same grounds. "A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire" (1693), in W.P. Ker, ed., Essays of John Dryden (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), II, p. 19.

47

See Josephine Miles, Eras and Modes in English Poetry (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1957), pp. 23-24.

48

Douglas Peterson's The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne; A History of the Plain and Eloquent Styles (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967) makes this clear.

49

These are the characteristics discussed by Morris Croll in "The Baroque Style in Prose."

50

The letter, tentatively dated at 1604, to Sir Henry Goodyer, may be found in Donne's Selected Prose, chosen by Evelyn Simpson, ed. by Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 121.

51

Along with "Farinata and Cavalcante," see "Roland Against Ganelon," pp. 96-123 in Mimesis.

52

Eras and Modes, p. 21.

53

From his sermon preached at Whitehall, April 19, 1618. Potter and Simpson, I, pp. 289-90.

54

The Untuning of the Sky; Ideas of Music in English Poetry, 1500-1700 (1961; rpt. New York: Norton, 1970), p. 265.

55

De Oratore, III, v, 19. Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of the interdependence of the soul and body is explained by Cassirer, pp. 129-30.

56

From the sermon preached at St. Paul's Cross, November 33, 1629. Potter and Simpson, IX, p. 112.

57

Others are: "who am their Epitaph"; "For I am every dead thing"; "He ruined mee, and I am re-begot/ Of absence, darknesse, death"; "I, by loves limbecke, am the grave/ Of all, that's nothing"; "But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)/ Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown"; "But I am None." The edition to be used throughout for the Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets is Helen Gardner's: John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

58

This distinction is made by George Williamson in The Senecan Amble; A Study in Prose Form from Bacon to Collier (1951; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 55.

59

Williamson, pp. 150-86, discusses in detail Bacon's growing rejection of Senecanism.

## CHAPTER II

## ASYMMETRY

"In the one case, the values of being, in the other, the value of change. In the one case, beauty resides in the determinate, in the other, in the indeterminate."

Heinrich Wölfflin, contrasting tectonic and a-tectonic (closed and open) form in Renaissance art.

Kenneth Burke has written, as an epilogue to The Rhetoric of Religion, a scenario in which The Lord, who has been debating whether or not he should carry out his plan to create man, explains to Satan his reasons for finally deciding the matter in the affirmative. "It will," he says, "round things out, with the symmetry of the circle." Satan, who plays the part of an admiring but somewhat bewildered pupil, puzzles over this statement for a moment, but soon comes to see the rationale behind it: "If nature gives birth to an animal that can talk, then by the same token nature becomes able to comment on itself." Thus, as The Lord adds with a touch of pride in the perfection of his conception, "nature can circle back on itself." <sup>1</sup> As seen by God, the plan is undeniably impressive, since it arranges for everything to return to Him in the end. Had God decided not to bestow

language on man, the Creation would have been simply an emanation, proceeding from but not necessarily returning to Him--or rather, its return would have been somewhat of a mechanical affair, not very interesting to watch. Satan, too, must have something to occupy himself with until Judgment Day, and, as he quickly realizes with delight, the addition of language-using creatures opens up infinite possibilities of fruitful complication.

For even though the Devil must lose the game in the end, there are enough twists built into the rules to put him and the Creator on speaking terms. Above all, there is the fundamental irony that the perfection, or symmetry, that God has conceived can be accomplished only at great expense: in order for man's obedience to be meaningful, it must be a product of conscious choice, which means that the Creator will have to let loose on the world all the agonies of freedom. The figure of the serpent biting its own tail, usually an emblem of eternity, can also represent the eternally self-destructive activity of Satan, which wounds but never consumes.

Man, too, as Donne is well aware, is a kind of  
2  
serpent "vexed by contraries," a condition he never would have suffered if God had kept matters simple. Instead, He formed a creature continually at war with himself, whose

"vehement griefe" on that account "hath beene/Th'effect  
 and cause, the punishment and sinne."<sup>3</sup> The subject of  
 this paradox, man, may not properly be called symmetrical,  
 at least insofar as the term pertains to his psychic and  
 not physical being, for the contraries, not being static,  
 do not cancel each other out, but produce instead a  
 constant state of motion in which rest is impossible. The  
 parts of the psyche do not effect a balance as do the  
 limbs of the body, nor do they evince that "due or just  
 proportion" and "harmony of parts with each other" which  
 is another definition of "symmetry."<sup>4</sup> (Here we may  
 remember from the discussion of "concinnity" in Chapter I  
 that quite similar phrases define that word. In his dis-  
 proportion and unrest, man threatens universal harmony  
 and symmetry both.)

It may be true that "The way, to peace, is the  
 mid way," and that "all analogie, symmetrie, harmony, in  
 the world, goeth by it"<sup>5</sup> --but it is also possible that for  
 creatures of extremes the achievement of the "mid way" is  
 unlikely, and even, for certain recalcitrant spirits like  
 Donne's, undesirable.<sup>6</sup> He understands that man, like the  
 salamander to which he is compared, thrives on extremes,  
 and needs not moderation, but "contrary musique to charme  
 him, contrary physick to cure him."<sup>7</sup> But neither the

"musique" nor the "physick" can be his own; the human imbalance can be stabilized only by an application of the Divine paradox. Of this Donne is perfectly aware: his Holy Sonnets come close to covering, in a very brief space, the spectrum of paradoxical stances that can be generated by a mind seeking God. The voice that calls out in these nineteen poems frequently supplies its own answers; Donne knows about the distance--qualitative rather than quantitative--that separates man's being from God's. This sense of incommensurability governs Herbert's poems as well, but his attribution of his own power as a poet, his constant recognition of God as his source, saves him when he approaches dangerous ground. Donne, however, takes fuller responsibility for his communications with God; one feels that if a spark should miraculously bridge the gap between him and his Creator, more of the credit would be due to the linguistic ingenuity of the former than to the beneficent grace of the latter.<sup>8</sup>

For underlying the structure of these sonnets is a fundamental irony--namely, that the Divine, which has been called into being by the poet's language, can easily sink into nothingness if that language ceases. (Burke treats this situation gently, and with a sense of humor, when he

has The Lord, in almost Socratic fashion, tease the realization out of Satan that they both will cease to exist when the human species does. The symmetry that has been generated by man's ability to comment on nature can readily be reversed: if he starts at the point at which the circle was completed and retraces his steps, he will eventually arrive at point zero, thus erasing the figure completely.)

But we should be careful to remember that this irony does not emerge as more than a suggestion--albeit a heretical one--in the Holy Sonnets. Donne was never as bold a writer as Pascal. If the idea of the "wager" enters at all into these poems, it enters implicitly, by way of certain formal structures, and not explicitly at all. To directly posit the incommensurability of the human and the Divine was not much of a possibility in seventeenth-century England--and, lest we think Donne's time guilty of a special kind of fanaticism, we should remember that, according to Iamblichus, the Pythagorean Hippasus was drowned for his revelation that the diagonal of the square was an irrational (incommensurable, or, in Greek, asýmmetron)<sup>9</sup> number. These considerations may seem to take us far afield of Donne's sonnets, but in fact the

awareness of oppositions, disproportions, and incommensurabilities that characterizes his religious temperament finds an analogue in the asymmetrical structures of these poems. A closer look, hopefully, will bring them to light.

Most readers of Donne have noticed that he is a poet of extremes rather than a poet of the middle way. Some of his images cause relations to be made between extreme unlikes, often with unfortunate consequences (as, for example, when he compares his gratitude to the Countess of Bedford to the embalming fluid that preserves a  
10  
corpse ). The idea that Donne works by juxtaposing thematically distant terminologies--e.g., by using sensual imagery when dealing with matters spiritual, or vice versa--can be traced at least as far back as Herbert Grierson's, and after him, T.S. Eliot's, judgment that  
11  
somehow Donne thought his feelings and felt his thoughts. Once it is realized, however, that a whole tradition of mystical poets had written of the spiritual in erotic terms, and that Petrarch and his followers had written of the erotic in spiritual terms, this view of Donne seems less illuminating.

Moreover, a clearcut distinction between love and death, the sensual and the spiritual, feeling and thought is somewhat spurious in any case, so that Donne cannot justly be characterized as a poet of extremes solely on the grounds that he can allude to these several things in one breath.<sup>12</sup> But even if we do not accept the Grierson-Eliot view, we can at least acknowledge the fact that Donne considered certain phenomena "opposite," if not by nature, then at least by virtue of their conventional situation at opposite ends of a hierarchical scale. Then to juxtapose distant elements and separate proximate ones may be regarded as an "extreme" activity, since it threatens an established order and unbalances the hitherto balanced.

It has been pointed out that one way in which Donne throws things out of their expected relation is to avoid or disturb the normal hierarchical ordering of a series--as, for example, in "The Sunne Rising," when he moves from "Late schoole boyes" to "sowre prentices" to "Court-huntsmen" to "the King," then drops suddenly to "countrey ants."<sup>13</sup> Ordinarily one might not want to make much of the fact that the King and country ants are juxtaposed, but this is probably not accidental in a poem that

declares the power of love to transcend the seasons, eclipse the sun, outweigh all princes and states, and re-define values such as "wealth" and "honor" in its own terms. Love, in short, is being made into a new standard, one that does not merely cause a re-ordering of the members of the old hierarchy around itself, but rather abolishes altogether former ideas of degree.

Similarly, the extremes of pride and humility that characterize the Holy Sonnets operate as "degree-breakers." The "normal" relationship between man and God, in which each has a certain place and function that is not violated, does not exist here--or rather, it exists only as a sort of rule to be broken. At some points, Donne adopts a proud or ironic stance which greatly increases the distance between himself and God; at others, he adopts an attitude of such humility that God is "forced" to descend to his level. Sometimes the combination of irony and humility results in a kind of see-saw effect, as in the sonnet which opens with the poet hailing the souls of the dead ("At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow") as if he were God at the Last Judgment, then turns abruptly to a personal plea for grace. But that plea is itself tinged with an ironic note in the conditional "Teach

mee how to repent; for that's as good/As if thou' hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood."

Another familiar sonnet ("Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you") derives its energy not only from the urgency of its paradoxical requests ("That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee"), but also from an obvious irony: the creature who is humbly begging to be overthrown has so far been strong enough to resist God's efforts to subdue him. If God's viceroy in man, his reason, has proved too weak or untrue to withstand the onslaughts of Satan, then some of the fault must lie with God, who created this imperfect instrument. Furthermore, if the speaker has been "betroth'd" to Satan, the responsibility, again, is not entirely his, for the word means not only "plight one's troth to" but also "contract two persons to each other in marriage." God, in other words, has brought about the unholy union between man and Satan, and if Christ's death succeeded once in breaking that knot, why then does He not do something to untie it again? (Or better yet, why did not that first untying serve for all time? The sacrifice of Christ could not really have saved man, if he can fall just as easily after it as before it.)

Although the speaker does accuse himself of being flawed (since God is seeking to mend him), God after all is the creator of this flawed object, and rather than accepting His error and attempting to make man anew, He is somewhat negligently, and without too much of an expenditure of energy, trying to patch up this cracked vessel. What caps the irony is Donne's choice of "three person'd" as his opening epithet for God: if there are "three" of Him and only one of Donne, why is Donne winning this battle and losing his soul? The ingenuity of this poem lies in its use of self-abasing postures to camouflage an underlying hubris. Donne has taken a situation which derives from an internal conflict, and has treated it in such a manner as to imply that the antagonists are in fact two external forces, God and Satan, he being merely an innocent pawn in their game.

By shifting the responsibility for his failures from himself to God, the speaker negates the premises on which the poem is built, for if the trap man falls into has somehow been set by God, there is no point in praying to Him to undo it. The poem is, then, hovering on the brink of collapse; it appears stable only as long as the basic contradiction between its surface structure (prayer)

and its sub-structure (the ironic implication that prayer is useless) remains unexposed. A discrepancy of this kind does much more to create an imbalance than does its superficial exploitation of paradox, since if the poem is to be consistent, it must in effect erase itself.

Similar ironies revolve around the issue of responsibility in another Holy Sonnet ("As due by many titles I resigne") where, though Donne seems to admit that he has betrayed himself, God is still accused of failing to fight for his own possession against the usurpations of Satan. The passive construction of "when I was decay'd" in line 3 also suggests that something other than man himself has caused the decaying to occur, since, analogously, one would not say "when I was betrayed" if "when I betrayed myself" was meant. Also, the fact that "decay'd" rhymes with "made" in the previous line strengthens the impulse to mentally supply the phrase that would make the two lines in parallel construction: ". . . O God, first I was made/By thee, and for thee, and when I was decay'd/By thee . . ." If one accepts this hypothesis (that the poem generates, but then blocks, the impulse to read "By thee" at the beginning of line 4), then the sounds that do occur in that and the following lines seem far from accidental. For just at the point where "b"

followed by "th" might have occurred, we find instead "Th" followed by "b" in "Thy blood," and that is then reversed in the "b"- "th" of "bought that." And in case the "the" sound has not already been sufficiently emphasized, line 4 also provides "the" and "thine." The rest of the poem, too, fairly inundates us with "th" sounds (there are eighteen of them in the remaining ten lines), eleven occurring in the form "thee," "thou," "thy," or "thine," which serves further to suggest the idea of God's ownership.<sup>14</sup>

We might say that by overloading the circuits in this manner, Donne is trying to effect a feat of verbal magic, as if God could be conjured to appear and acknowledge His role. The repetitions of the personal pronoun, as well as the infiltration of its initial sound into other words in the poem, have the effect of "coloring" the entire sonnet with the speaker's wish--that God would in fact claim what belongs to Him. Phonetically and lexically, the sonnet may be called "imbalanced," since there is such a high proportion of words that share the same sound, and, among those, a high proportion of sounds that fall into the same semantic group.

We might say, then, that although in this poem the stated distance between man and God is great, a

particular structural element, namely, the repetition of one sound, serves as a counterforce by "drawing" God closer. A similar phenomenon occurs in the Holy Sonnet beginning "Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?" where one pattern of alliteration reinforces, and the other counters, the main movement of the poem. The movement described is one in which the speaker, seeing despair behind him and death before him, on the one hand is powerless to make the motion he wishes to make--namely, to raise his eyes to God--and, on the other, is drawn downward toward Hell against his will. He is unable to look upward because despair and death have paralyzed his vision, drawing him away from God and toward themselves. Part of their power over him derives from the fact that they are actively making motions toward him, while God, so far, is remaining still. Paradoxically, the speaker is not resisting these efforts; this is because he still suffers the burden of the flesh, which acts as a weight to draw him down.

But there is a suggestion that part of the responsibility for the speaker's downward motion lies with God, since it is only "by his leave" that the sinner may look upward and rise. And God Himself will make no motion--although His enemies pliantly extend themselves--toward the

speaker: even when the countering force of His grace is mentioned, in the last two lines of the sonnet, God as its source is called "Adamant," which signifies, chiefly, the loadstone, but also carries the secondary association of impenetrable hardness. Thus the earlier suggestion that God can somehow remain unmoved by man's suffering, choosing at will to ignore it or to relieve it by the gift of grace, is reinforced.

Significantly, the "g" sound of "Grace" occurs only once in the poem, i.e., with the mention of that word, while the "d" of "death" and "despair" is repeated eleven times, as an initial sound in those and other words, in the first eight lines. It then occurs only once more in the poem, in the "draw" of the last line, which suggests that the intervening "Grace" is strong enough to conquer at one stroke the amassed force of the "d" collocation. And yet there remains an imbalance between the seemingly conclusive "argument" of this phonetic scheme and the hesitancy of the last two lines: "Thy Grace may wing me . . ." (emphasis mine).

Furthermore, the ambiguity is strengthened by the poem's second main sound-repetition scheme, that made up of the various "i" sounds that derive from the central word "eye." Thematically, the word is central, since it is the

speaker's eyes which indicate his soul's direction (if Satan is drawing him, his eyes are dimmed and incapable of moving; if God is drawing him, his eyes are freed to look upward), and this thematic centrality is reinforced by heavy phonetic emphasis. There are a total of twenty-one "i" sounds in the poem, slightly over half of them (eleven) occurring either in the word "I" or in the associated words "my" and "mine." Thus this one sound forms a "knot" joining the two opposing themes of the poem: on the one hand, the speaker's stubborn individuality that wills motion toward Satan rather than toward God, and, on the other, the eye as an emblem of that part of his spirit which the speaker cannot control, but which can be activated only by God. A resolution of this opposition seems to be suggested in the "our old subtle foe" of line 11, since the speaker is here aligning himself with God of his own will--but that the alignment is only temporary is implied by the pun in the following line: ". . . not one houre I can my selfe sustaine" (emphases mine). Thus the basic thematic imbalance of the poem is reflected in its sound patterns: the "I-eye" conflict is never really silenced, or the reconciling "our" really sustained, by the "g" of "Grace."

We have seen, then, some of the ways in which Donne creates various kinds of poetic imbalance: he produces a conceptual imbalance by disturbing the normal order of elements in a hierarchical series, or by suddenly reversing ordinarily fixed roles (man's and God's); he allows a central ambiguity to stand unresolved by playing off the contrary tendencies of lexical and phonetic elements against thematic elements; and finally, he generates a more basic difficulty in which the conflicting implications of surface structure and sub-structure make it impossible for the reader to "balance" the poem.

It would be natural to expect that, under these circumstances, Donne's prosody would reinforce this sense of instability. The more regular and thus metrically more balanced lines of Pope, or even of Marvell, would not "fit" Donne's poetry; many of his readers share the feeling that the irregularities of his meter, in the Satires and the Songs and Sonnets, as well as in the Holy Sonnets, are somehow appropriate to their context. A brief discussion of two metrical phenomena--stress maximum and caesura--will perhaps provide some solid support for this impression.

Morris Halle and Samuel Jay Keyser, in their paper on Chaucer's prosody, defined a stress maximum as "a syllable bearing linguistically determined stress that is

greater than that of the two syllables adjacent to it in the same verse." According to Halle and Keyser, stress maxima can fall only on the even positions in a line of English iambic pentameter verse; a stress maximum in an odd position is considered unmetrical. (In determining position, rules governing elision and substitution--e.g., allowing two syllables to occupy one position--must be taken into account.)<sup>15</sup> But at least one critic has found Donne's lines to be frequently unmetrical in regard to the stress-maximum rule, even if allowances are made for elision and substitution. Joseph G. Beaver, in "A Grammar of Prosody," finds that Donne deliberately allows the stress maxima to fall on the odd positions, as the first one does in "Thou has made me, and shall thy worke decay?". Beaver's opinion that this shifting of emphasis underscores the basic conflict in the poem is consonant with our earlier analysis of this sonnet.

Furthermore, in comparing Donne's Holy Sonnets to Shakespeare's sonnets, Beaver finds that the latter most frequently have stress maxima at the middle and end of lines, while in the former they fall at the beginning and end. His conclusion is that Donne sacrifices the medial stability of his line, creating, through his emphasis of the beginning and end, a kind of "suspension bridge"

structure. If this account is correct, there is further evidence to support our theory, advanced earlier, that Donne is a poet of "extremes" and not of "means."<sup>16</sup>

Another way in which Donne avoids the middle is to eschew the regular use of the medial caesura. The striking variety that characterizes his caesural practice is most readily seen in the Satires, where, in the space of five lines, it is possible to find lines with zero, one, two, or three caesuras (e.g., the first five lines of Satire IV<sup>17</sup>). And, when some regularity does occur--for example, in lines 6-8 and 10-13 in the same Satire, which all have one caesura--Donne varies the position of the caesura so that it does not always fall in the middle of the line. (Especially characteristic of Donne's enjambed lines in the Satires, as Arnold Stein has pointed out, is the placement of the caesura near the end of the line, so that in effect a new rhythm begins and carries over into the next line<sup>18</sup>.)

Although Donne's lyrics do not always manifest quite this range of variety, they still are far from being predictable. Aside from the fact that he often uses different meters within the same poem,<sup>19</sup> so that, for example, a dimeter is followed by a pentameter line,

creating an unequal visual pattern--

Let me powre forth

My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here

--he also places the caesuras irregularly to create the same effect, as in the first stanza of "Communitie":

Good wee must love,/ /and must hate ill,

For ill is ill,/ /and good/ /good still,

But there are things indifferent,

Which wee may neither hate,/ /nor love,

But one,/ /and then another prove,

As wee shall finde our fancy bent.

Of course, the perception of irregular groupings that results from noticing the caesura placement is subtler than the awareness of varying line lengths in a stanza, since, far from being a totally visual experience, it depends on an understanding of the sense of the line: the separation between the two "goods" that one would read into line two above presupposes a grasp of the fact that the first is nominal, the second adjectival.

It has been said that Donne often uses caesuras to  
 20  
 define the pivots of his thought. It is a statement worth exploring, but one which is not immediately pertinent. For the moment, it is enough to point out that Donne's flexibility regarding caesura use tends to result

in an asymmetrical line, in that the line cannot regularly be divided into halves. (Of course, even in verse where a fairly regular medial caesura occurs--for example, in the Augustan couplet--the line does not divide exactly in half, since the caesura comes, usually, after the second foot, not in between the second and the third foot. But this is close enough to give the sense of bifurcation.)

Hermann Weyl, in writing of symmetry in art and nature, has said that the reason bi-lateral symmetry prevails in nature (in the human body, for example) is that "a state of equilibrium is likely to be symmetric," for "under conditions which determine a unique state of equilibrium the symmetry of the conditions must carry over to the state of equilibrium."<sup>21</sup> If this is true, and if drawing an analogy between two such different objects as the human body and a poem is not too risky an endeavor, then perhaps we can say that the lack of bi-lateral symmetry in Donne's poetry suggests a corresponding disequilibrium in the forces that produced it--though to leap immediately from imbalances in the poetry to imbalances<sup>22</sup> in the poet is unjustified. There are certainly connections between the "form" of the poet's mind and the "form" of his poetry, but they are not much easier to discern than those between nature in general and the human body.

It might be useful at this point to compare to Donne a poet who is unquestionably considered more "symmetrical" in several ways--namely, Pope. Intuition would support the theory that phenomena in Pope which are thought of as symmetrical, for example, his use of parallel constructions, or the closed couplet, would be met with corresponding asymmetries in Donne--and in fact, enough evidence can be assembled to indicate that Donne is fairly consistently asymmetrical, as Pope is fairly consistently symmetrical, in respect to other poetic features besides prosody. Since much of the investigation necessary to support this conjecture has already been done by Seymour Chatman in a paper which considers Donne's Satire IV and Pope's version of it, we will briefly summarize his findings here.

In his study of rhyme, alliteration, and closure, Chatman finds first, that, while Pope seldom rhymes a stressed with an unstressed syllable, Donne frequently does so, as in "Sir/Westminster," "alone/fashion," "one/prison," and "get/merit"; second, that Donne twice as often as Pope alliterates contiguous syllables (that is, syllables that are not both metrically stressed), while Pope in general makes alliteration coincide with metrical

stress; third, that Pope foregrounds the pattern of bisyllabic modifier-monosyllabic head by alliterating (as in "Gracious God" and "popish plot"), while Donne tends to alliterate words that do not fall into a structural pattern ("dare drown," "win widows")<sup>23</sup>; and fourth, that while Pope often (77% of the time) uses punctuation to indicate a terminal juncture at the end of the second line in a couplet, Donne does this seldom (36% of the time), 15% of his couplets having stronger junctures at the end of the first line. In sum, then, Donne prefers a degree of imbalance in his rhymes, avoids a high percentage of coincidence between his sound effects and his syntactic and metrical structures, and tends toward an "open" couplet.<sup>24</sup>

Lastly, we should note that parallel thoughts in Donne's verse are often expressed in non-parallel fashion, as when he reverses the adjective-noun order in "As prone to' all ill, and of good as forget-/full, as proud, as lustfull', and as much in debt," or produces the awkward "My minde, neither with prides itch, nor yet hath been/Poyson'd with love to see, or to bee seene" (ll. 13-14 and 5-6). Pope, however, regularizes these lines so that parallel thoughts are framed in parallel

syntax, and the latter, in turn, corresponds with line and (needless to say, Pope would not think of enjambling "forget/full," or, as Donne does later, "egge/shels"): the first passage becomes "As prone to Ill, as negligent of Good,/As deep in Debt,without a thought to pay"; the second "With foolish Pride my Heart was never fir'd,/Nor the vain Itch t'admire, or be admir'd" (emphasis Pope's). As has been pointed out by M.F. Moloney in "Donne's Metrical Practice," Pope's lines give metrical confirmation to the rhetorical parallels implicit in Donne's, since the parallel phrases appear as full lines. In effect, Pope's use of parallelism and balance makes a virtue of the necessity of filling out an end-stopped line; Donne does not operate under these constraints. <sup>25</sup>

A comparison of the rhyming practices of Pope and Donne in the two satires will indicate that Donne is without doubt the more asymmetrical of the two, in that rhyming words are commonly made up of different parts of speech, nouns rhyming with verbs, adjectives with pronouns, verbs with conjunctions, etc.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Donne's rhymes are more often "dissonant" in some fashion: he uses off-rhymes ("are/dare"), partial rhymes ("naturall/all"), and occasionally a combination of partial rhyme and masculine-feminine opposition, as in "second/found."

But W.K. Wimsatt has shown that, in other places, "Pope's rhymes are characterized by difference in parts of speech or in functions of the same parts of speech, the difference in each case being accentuated by the tendency of his couplets to parallel structure"<sup>27</sup>--a conclusion which may shed some light on why Donne's surfeit of asymmetry in the Satires is not always effective. That is, an asymmetry, to be fully appreciated, must occur in the context of some symmetry or correspondence; if there is no ground against which the figure can appear, then the figure as such loses its significance.

A more successful kind of asymmetry occurs when Donne establishes a pattern of parallelisms which he then deviates from or varies in subtler ways. If, for example, we examine the first stanza of "The Canonization," we find a rather complex pattern composed of the ten imperatives and their objects. The first two commands, "hold" and "let . . . love," have post-positional single objects ("your tongue" and "me"), while the third, "chide," has a double post-positional object joined by "or." A change comes with the fourth imperative, "flout," which has a double pre-positional object joined by "or," and the fifth, "improve," which has two pre-positional objects not joined by any conjunction, and a chiasmus in the arrangement

of the objects and the accompanying prepositional phrases: "With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve." The next two lines fall into symmetrical patterns ("Take you a course, get you a place, / Observe his honour, or his grace"), but the seventh, which appears to continue the parallelism by supplying two more objects for "Observe," is in fact asymmetrical by virtue of its ambiguity. For "Or the Kings reall, or his stamped face" can be read either as an object of "Observe" in line 6, or as an object of "Contemplate" at the beginning of line 8, and this imperative, in turn, is followed by the temporarily ambiguous phrase "what you will," which, before it finally settles with "approve," seems to be an object of "Contemplate."<sup>28</sup> Further asymmetries may be seen in the fact that line 7 is the only enjambed line in the stanza, and "Contemplate" the only trisyllable imperative; the function of the two lines as the stanza's fulcrum of imbalance is reinforced by these phenomena.

As we have been attempting to demonstrate, Donne consistently tends to exploit the inter-relationship between metrical, phonetic, semantic, and syntactic phenomena for asymmetrical effect. Seldom in his lyrics do we find a regular correspondence between syntax and line end, for example, or between word boundaries and foot boundaries.

This latter may be illustrated by an example from the stanza considered above; scansion of the one line

x / x /  
Contém/pláte, what/yóu will, /appróve

reveals that the four feet are all variously composed, the first being formed by two syllables of a trisyllabic word, the second by the third syllable of that word plus a monosyllable, the third by two monosyllables, and the fourth by a bisyllable. Conversely, whenever Donne establishes a repeating pattern of syllabic distribution, he varies the metrical pattern, so that there is not a complete overlap between the two. For example, lines 2 and 7 open with the same syllabic arrangement, three monosyllables and a bisyllable, but the meter counters this parallel: line 2 has "Or chide my pálsie," line 7 "Or the Kings réall."

The question of enjambment is a more interesting one, since there is more involved that is unique to Donne. If we look at the enjambments occurring in the five stanzas of "The Canonization," we will find neither a random pattern nor a symmetrical one, but again, a pattern that exploits the principle of imbalance. The rhyme scheme is abbaccaa; for convenience' sake, let the first occurrence of each rhyme be designated by the subscription "1," the second by "2" and so on. The first stanza, then,

contains only one enjambment, on  $c_3$  ("face"), and that, as we have mentioned above, co-occurs with a syntactical ambiguity. In the second stanza, enjambments occur at  $c_1$  and  $c_3$ , the latter being involved in a slight semantic ambiguity (the "still" of ". . . and Lawyers finde still/Litigious men" can be linked adverbially either with "finde out," or with "Litigious"). Stanza three enjambes on  $c_1$  and  $a_3$ , the first time an enjambment occurs outside of the "c" complex. The rhyme word in this line, "prove," also constitutes the middle member of an asymmetrical triad, since it is bounded on one side by the non-enjambes "approve" in the first stanza, and by the enjambes "approve" in the fourth, both occurring in the  $a_3$  position. (There is also a minor pattern which develops out of the play on similar-sounding words, and on different meanings of the same word, falling in the same two positions: stanza 1 has "improve" at  $a_2$  and "approve" at  $a_3$ ; stanza 3 has "prove" at  $a_3$ ; and stanza 4 has "prove" at  $a_2$  and "approve" at  $a_3$ .) Stanza 4 also has enjambments on  $b_1$  and  $c_2$ , which make it the only stanza to have enjambments at all three rhyme-complexes, "a," "b," and "c." Finally, the fifth stanza enjambes at  $a_1$ ,  $a_2$ , and  $a_3$ .

The conclusion we can now draw is that some regularities in the poem's enjambment pattern occur as a kind of backdrop to the irregularities: every stanza contains an enjambment somewhere in the "c" complex, but stanza 4 is the only one to enjamb on "a," "b," and "c"; sometimes an enjambment coincides with an ambiguity or word-play, but more often it does not.

As with the caesura, enjambment offers the possibility of increasing the complexity of poetry. Donne's use of it to suggest ambiguities of construction looks forward to some of Milton's practices in Paradise Lost--practices which, like the use of blank verse, have occasionally been regarded as the coward's way out of writing poetry. A contemporary of Donne's, Dudley North, criticizes enjambment in an essay that, although it never mentions names, quite clearly alludes to the Metaphysicals in its condemnation of the poetry that "abounds in wit, high conceit, figure, and proportion." North claims that

It cannot bee good in limited lines, which are a purposed pause to the voyce, to carry with a counter-time the period of the sense to the body of the next line, much lesse to dismember an innocent word, that every child according to nature, and use, in spelling would put together; and words have a naturall ayre,

accent, and quantitie, whence to strayne them is to rack both them and the reader . . . whose Genius was borne for prose, let him write prose, rather than affecting Verse to make such unnaturall stuffe, as shall bee good neither.<sup>29</sup>

North's comments are echoed by Ben Jonson, who, in addition to criticizing Donne's "strained accents," scorned the practice of enjambling lines, ". . . for a child . . . may writte after the fashion of the Greeks and Latine verses in running . . ." <sup>30</sup> (But Jonson, not one to be frightened by the hobgoblin of foolish consistency, himself did not eschew enjambment--and, in fact, in the Cary-Morison ode, enjambed more daringly than Donne ever did.<sup>31</sup>)

The implication of these remarks--reinforced by Jonson's indication elsewhere that rhyme provides the only caesura for verses in the "Vulgar Languages"<sup>32</sup>--is that verses need some kind of assistance, whether it be the repetition of a sound or the pointing that indicates a syntactical break, to signal their end. Undoubtedly this opinion derives from the comparison of the period in prose to the poetic stanza, a comparison Jonson almost surely knew from Cicero's Orator. In addition, Cicero says that the verse (hexameter was meant) corresponds to the

colon, or member of a period, and the hemistich to the comma, or phrase.<sup>33</sup> Given the assumption of this correspondence (Jonson's admission to Drummond of Hawthornden that he wrote his verses first in prose comes to mind here), it is not surprising that he and North would expect something to substitute for the cadences which, in classical oratory, fell at the end of cola; what is surprising is their predecessor George Puttenham's assertion, in The Arte of English Poesie, that the comparison of the colon to the verse is not legitimate. There he says that commata and cola are used in prose when the sense decides the caesura, but these divisions do not apply to poetry, "since euery verse is . . . a clause of its selfe, and limited with a Cesure howsoever the sense beare, perfect or imperfect."<sup>34</sup>

In other words, a sense of completion attaches to the verse line itself, without the assistance of any external props such as rhyme or punctuation; the line, as Puttenham implies, possesses a kind of autonomy which can choose to exert itself against the force of syntax. What results from this phenomenon of enjambment, or carrying "with a counter-time the period of the sense to the body of the next line," is the possibility of exploiting a whole range of fruitful tensions. A number of contrastive

relationships is made possible by enjambment: the tension between the progress of the syntax and the end of the line allows for greater rhythmic interplay (between the phrases embodied in the line and those which constitute a syntactic unit), increases the option of syntactic and semantic ambiguity, and also, because it tends to foreground the word occurring last in the line, permits a contrast to exist between an important metrical position and an "unimportant" verbal element such as a preposition or a conjunction. All of these possibilities are exploited to varying degrees by Donne.

Enjambment does constitute an asymmetrical feature of Donne's verse; yet, because it is by definition a kind of fluidity, it also helps to preserve his poetry from collapsing under the pressure of other asymmetries. The "architectonic" quality of some Renaissance poetry, founded on elaborate iterative and bi-lateral symmetries in metrical and stanzaic patterns<sup>35</sup>, can lead to rigidification; however, Donne's imbalances, when taken too far, threaten his poetry with disintegration. But, as Heinrich Wölfflin has pointed out in discussing the "a-tectonic" qualities of baroque painting, "the really unbalanced is no longer art";<sup>36</sup> Donne's poems remain poems only by virtue of possessing a certain equilibrium. Like some seventeenth-

century pictures, they have an aversion to grouping themselves around a central axis and exploiting the principle of correspondence; pure symmetries either have disappeared or have been made inapparent by slight disturbances of balance. This does not mean that the poems fail to cohere; as Wölfflin notes, the difference between symmetric and asymmetric art is defined by the analogous concept in mechanics of stable and unstable equilibrium: the latter functions by creating a "relation of oscillating balance."<sup>37</sup>

One last analogy drawn from Renaissance art might further clarify this point. Out of the pose known as the contrapposto in antique sculpture (in which the parts of the body were arranged asymmetrically, with the turn of the head opposed to that of the hips, and so on) emerged the winding or twisted body (figura serpentinata) of Mannerist art. In the classical statue, all asymmetries were reconciled in a final balance, but, in its Renaissance adaptation, the organic displacement expressed energy and contrast between the two sides of the body, the sense of arrested motion creating a tension between the parts. When this figure is tripled, as it is in Giovanni Bologna's "Rape of the Sabine," and when this tripling is successful, a more complex balance is the result. From every new angle,

the three figures re-group themselves into a new pattern; the balance between them is continually being created and destroyed.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the compositional elements in one of Donne's lyrics are always in the process of re-grouping as new relationships emerge: parallels may develop in one dimension, but they are interrupted by discontinuities in another, so that the poem never quite stabilizes itself. Perhaps this is true of all poetry--but what makes Donne's particularly impressive is that it pushes the principle of imbalance to the limits. It is poetry that exploits its shifting idiom to the fullest, and yet maintains a tenuous balance; "it is always composed."<sup>39</sup>

## Footnotes

1

From The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology (1961; rpt. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1970), p. 276.

2

See his Holy Sonnet beginning "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one." The edition used for the Holy Sonnets is Helen Gardner's, John Donne: The Divine Poems (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

3

From Donne's Holy Sonnet beginning "O might those sighes and teares returne againe."

4

See the O.E.D. entry under "symmetry," 2.

5

This excerpt from Bishop Andrewes' sermon on the Resurrection is cited in the O.E.D. as a 1609 use of the word "symmetry" to mean "proportion" or "consonance." See "symmetry," 2c.

6

Arnold Stein, in John Donne's Lyrics, presents Donne as a poet who, at his best, succeeds in resolving the contradictions and mediating the extremes which he is so drawn to using as material for his poetry. Stein

concedes that Donne enjoys exposing the mind's contradictions and limitations, but argues that finally he is a poet "deeply eager to break through the intellectual complexities, and to use them against themselves as a means of discovering, or rediscovering, the simple truths which the mind complicates." (p. 196) Stein's claim that Donne's poetry is ultimately "resolved" depends heavily on evidence drawn from the Sermons; I do not think that a reading of the lyrics themselves warrants this conclusion.

7

From Donne's Sermon "Preached at White-hall, the first Friday in Lent," 1622/3. Number 13 in vol. IV of Potter and Simpson, p. 327.

8

An unpublished paper by Barry Bissell of the City University of New York Graduate Center perceptively analyzes the function of the imperative in the Holy Sonnets ("Donne's Holy Sonnets: The Imperative as a Stylistic Organizer").

9

See the entry under asýmmetron in Greek Philosophical Terms; A Historical Lexicon (New York: New York Univ. Press, and London: Univ. of London Press, 1967).

10

In lines 5-6 of "To the Countess of Bedford. Begun in France but never perfected." "That thankful- nesse your favours have begot/In mee, embalmes mee, that I doe not rot." J.B. Douds, in "Donne's Technique of Dissonance," PMLA, 52 (1937), pp. 1051-62, discusses Donne's indecorous imagery as one source of his dissonance.

11

Grierson's remarks were made in the introduction to Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), Eliot's in "The Metaphysical Poets," from Selected Essays 1917-1932 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1932).

12

Clay Hunt, in the concluding chapter to Donne's Poetry, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954; rpt. Archon Books, 1969), compares Donne unfavorably to Spenser and Marlowe in regard to poetic range. He argues that many kinds of experience, including facets of the erotic, that were dealt with by the Elizabethans were ignored by Donne. See pp. 118-29.

13

Douds, pp. 1056-60, observes that this method is one of several Donne uses to break down hierarchies. Another is the violation, through diction, of the principle of decorum.

14

Grierson notes the extraordinary use of assonance in the sonnet beginning "O might those sighes and teares returne againe," in which the "i" sound is heavily stressed in the first eight lines of the poem, but does not appear at all in the remaining six. (It seems that Grierson has made an error here: the sound does occur in the ninth line of the sonnet, but not after that.)

15

"Chaucer and the Study of Prosody" (1966), reprinted in Donald Freeman, ed., Linguistics and Literary Style (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), pp. 366-427. Stress maximum is defined on pp. 380-81.

16

This paper, written in 1968, is reprinted in Freeman, pp. 427-48. Pp. 441-44 deal with the differences between Shakespeare and Donne.

17

"Well; I may now receive, and die; My sinne  
 Indeed is great, but I have beene in  
 A Purgatorie, such as fear'd hell is  
 A recreation to, and scant map of this.  
 My minde, neither with prides itch, nor yet hath been  
 Poyson'd with love to see, or to be seene." W.  
 Milgate's edition, John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters, will be used for all references to the Satires.

18

One example Stein gives is "By drawing forth heavens Scheme/ /tell certainly/What fashion'd hats, or ruffles, or suits/ /next yeare" (lines 60-61 of Satire I). His paper devotes special attention to Donne's caesura and enjambment practices. See "Donne and the Couplet," PMLA, 57 (1942), pp. 676-96.

19

Pierre Legouis, in Donne the Craftsman; An Essay upon the Structure of the Songs and Sonnets (1928; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), notes that out of the forty-nine stanzaic poems in this group, only seven are isometrical; the others employ two, three, or four different measures. Legouis also points to a kind of asymmetry residing in the fact that the number of stanzas in each poem is in inverse ratio to the length and complexity of the stanza form. See pp. 18 and 26.

20

By William Bowman Piper in The Heroic Couplet (Cleveland and London: Case Western Reserve Press, 1969), p. 207.

21

Symmetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 25.

22

Some critics, as, for example, Helen White in

The Metaphysical Poets (New York; Macmillan, 1936), lean too heavily on the character created by Izaak Walton in his life of Donne in order to draw correlations between Donne's personal conflicts and the tensions in his poetry.

23

This is close to the tension in baroque prose that "arises when the syntax is doing one thing grammatically and another rhythmically." See Jonas Barish, Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy (1960; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), p. 70.

24

See Seymour Chatman, "Comparing Metrical Styles," in Thomas Sebeok, ed., Style in Language (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 149-73.

25

PMLA, 65 (1950), pp. 232-40.

26

Apropos of this discussion is Roman Jakobson's idea that ". . . the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity and contrast"; rhyming words can be "grammatical and anti-grammatical but never a-grammatical." See Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, Fundamentals of Language, Janua Linguarum #1 ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1956), p. 81. Part II, from which this quotation is taken, is by Jakobson alone. Donne's rhyming practices, if we apply Jakobson's

distinction to them, clearly lean toward the anti-grammatical. A concept similar to Jakobson's is Samuel Levin's "poetic coupling" (the reinforcement by phonic or semantic equivalence of units occurring in equivalent syntagmatic positions). See p. 41 of his Linguistic Structures in Poetry, Janua Linguarum #23 ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1962).

27

"One Relation of Rhyme to Reason," in The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 157.

28

This reading deviates from the Gardner edition, which has "And" instead of "Or" at the beginning of line 7, on the grounds that the 1633 manuscript's "Or" was a result of editorial misreading engendered by the syntactical ambiguity we are discussing here. Gardner also changes the comma after "contemplate" to a semi-colon so that the second ambiguity we have mentioned (pertaining to the objects of that verb) will be precluded. But there seems to be no reason to assume that Donne would have preferred to erase the ambiguities from the text. Grierson's reading, following the 1633 text, seems preferable here.

29

From the preface, "Concerning petty Poetry,"

to A Forest of Varieties, written ca. 1610. Reprinted (pp. 157-66) in Edward Taylor, ed., Literary Criticism.

30

From his Conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden, p. 212 in Spingarn, vol. I.

31

Relatively few times in the Songs and Sonnets does Donne carry the sense of a period across a stanza boundary, and even when he does, some pointing occurs. He never does anything like Jonson's trans-stanza enjambment of his own name in the Cary-Morison ode.

32

In "A Fit of Rime against Rime." There he says that "Tyran Rime hath so abused" modern verses "That they long since have refused/Other ceasure." (emphasis Jonson's)

33

Orator Ixvi, 222-23. Cicero takes as his norm the four-member period (corresponding to the four-line stanza), Interesting in this regard is William Davenant's statement, in the Preface to Gondibert (1650), that he "endeavor'd that each [of his four-line stanzas] should contain a period." The Preface is reprinted in Spingarn, vol. II, pp. 1-54; this statement is on p. 19.

34

P. 76 in The Arte of English Poesie, ed. by Gladys D. Willcock and Alice Walker (1589; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936).

35

These structural features are the subject of Alastair Fowler's Triumphal Forms; Structural Patterns in Elizabethan Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970). Especially relevant is Chapter Five, on "Styles of Symmetry."

36

P. 130 in Principles of Art History; The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art, trans. M.D. Hottinger (1932; rpt. New York: Dover Publications, n.d.).

37

P. 130.

38

This discussion of the figura serpentinata and Bologna's "Rape of the Sabine" is taken from John Shearman's Mannerism (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 81-88.

39

Shearman, p. 88, on the "Rape of the Sabine."

## CHAPTER III

## OBSCURITY

Plainly if it is possible to express a subtle and recondite thought on a subtle and recondite subject in a subtle and recondite way and with great felicity and perfection, in the end, something must be sacrificed, with so trying a task, in the process, and this may be the being at once, nay perhaps even the being without explanation at all, intelligible.

Gerard Manley Hopkins  
Letter to Robert Bridges  
November 6, 1887

Donne's poetry, as we have seen, achieves a complex balance that embodies the contradictory principles of symmetry and asymmetry, rest and motion. Like any poet, he works for a balance of poetic elements, but he characteristically chooses a devious and indirect route, operating on the theory that the subtle harmony is better than the obvious. And just as a balance can be achieved that takes into account partial imbalances, so can a greater harmony result from lesser dissonances, and a final clarity grow out of temporary obscurities. All three--balance, harmony, and clarity--are features of Donne's poetry, although many readers have not found them there. This problem, however, can be solved by understanding Donne's

method, which, as we have suggested, is that of proceeding to one goal by means of its opposite. We have examined this method as it pertains to the question of balance; it now remains to consider the problems of harmony and clarity.

A brief look at the doctrines of certain Renaissance philosophers might help to explain the relationship between Donne's asymmetry and his obscurity. For, as Edgar Wind has shown, the concept of God was often connected to the idea of His hiddenness--a conjunction which produced the doctrine of "light-in-darkness."<sup>1</sup> The antecedents of this doctrine can be traced back to antiquity: one source lies in the mystery religions of ancient Greece, whose members were thought to possess "deep" knowledge hidden from the uninitiated; another lies in certain strands of pre-Socratic philosophy that proclaimed the union of the Many in the One. According to this philosophy, the changing and finite phenomena we know are all embodiments of one unchanging and infinite Truth, and what appears dark to us is, under the aegis of the Universal, clear. Some of the shadows clouding the human mind can be penetrated by striving to see the One behind its various manifestations; in fact, no other process of illumination is possible, since the Universal does not make itself known directly, but

only through particulars: as Wind says, "poetic pluralism is the necessary corollary to the radical mysticism of the One."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, to reach light, one must descend into darkness;<sup>3</sup> the illumination of the Divine, like the corresponding attributes of stasis and harmony, must be approached by way of its opposite. This doctrine was epitomized in the Docta ignorantia of the Renaissance philosopher Cusanus, with whose works Donne was acquainted (see Wind, p. 225). In order to convey the idea of approach by indirection, as well as to suggest the nature of a hidden God possessing contradictory attributes, Cusanus devised several "experiments in metaphor." All of his examples, drawn from common experience, were prosaic in themselves, but were given "mystical" interpretations. For example, he discussed the eyes in a portrait that are stationary and yet "follow" the beholder as he moves; the spinning of a top, that, when it comes to a stand, combines a state of rest with the greatest speed of rotation; and a spheroid or bowl, oblate on one side and prolate on the other, which must be propelled slantingly in order for it to end up straight.

The interest in these "serious games" was not limited to Cusanus; that it must have been a popular one

as well is indicated by the appearance of the latter two games, similarly interpreted, in Quarles' book of Emblems (1635).<sup>4</sup> (As an interesting aside, Wind notes [p. 223] that studies of Renaissance games of perspective suggest that some of them were based on the same principle as Cusanus' games: that equality can come about by means of inequality, and stability can be achieved over and above partial disturbances.)

Furthermore, Giordano Bruno's Eroici furori, with its dedication to Sir Philip Sidney, did a great deal to popularize among the Elizabethans the idea of God as a coincidence of opposites, including the particular manifestation of the idea--manens moveor, or the coincidence of motion and rest--that we have discussed as having special relevance to Donne.<sup>5</sup> In fact, if Donne's poems had been available to Cusanus, he might very well have used one of them as an illustration of his principle. Of course, in Donne there tends to be more emphasis on one member of the pair than on the other--that is, on imbalance, discord, or obscurity rather than on balance, harmony, or clarity. Donne's poems are embodiments of the principle manens moveor, but they are embodiments in which the moveor has greater immediate weight than the manens.

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Donne's preference for indirection and avoidance of certain types of symmetry or closure is the source of much of his difficulty. His poems, like Herbert's, are often puzzling, but what is needed to penetrate them is not so much a key to their allusions as an understanding of their deviations from a poetic norm.<sup>6</sup> These deviations occur at every level, requiring a consideration of phonetic as well as syntactic and semantic collocations.

It was conventional, for example, to regard Donne's "harshness of sound" as a "dark" device. The two concepts of harshness and obscurity were closely intertwined for Elizabethan critics, the former being linked with the latter by way of being "rude."<sup>7</sup> One of the chief ways in which Donne was thought to be harsh was his use of heavy consonantal clusters, which, when combined with frequent elisions and irregularity of accent, produced a rough, staccato effect.<sup>8</sup> It is, of course, chiefly in the Satires that one finds lines like "Kinde pittty chokes my spleene; brave scorn forbids" and "He, like to' a high stretcht lute string squeakt, 'O Sir'" (III,1; IV, 73)-- but these effects, aside from the fact that they often, as here, attest to an admirable expressiveness on the poet's part, were expected to accompany moral chastisement.<sup>9</sup>

Even in his lyrics, though, Donne produces sound patterns that cannot be considered harmonious, if harmony is taken to depend on a smooth and even distribution of vowels, consonants, and caesuras.<sup>10</sup> There one will find lines, far from atypical for Donne, like "let/Mee travell, sojourne, snatch, plot, have, forget" and "Can call vow'd men from cloisters, dead from tombes"--lines whose "clash of consonants" prevents that flow of words into each other which the Ciceronians considered the foundation of euphony.<sup>11</sup>

But the lines, though by no standards euphonious, cannot be considered unharmonious in their contexts; their very harshness serves a purpose and thus is part of an overall design. For example, the manner in which six verbs are crowded into the first line suggests the manner in which the speaker in this poem would like to crowd a wealth of amorous activity into a brief space. However, more is going on here than simply the creation of a uniform effect; there are relationships between individual elements that, far from being discordant, are quite in harmony with their meaning. The contrast between "sojourne" and "snatch," for example, is emphasized not only by the length of the words but also by the "diminution" that occurs in relation to the consonants "s" and "n." The first word stretches

the distance between them; the second abruptly diminishes it.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Donne has taken a device which is conventional in one genre, satire, and has transferred it to another, the love poem, where it is not. Nor is his transfer arbitrary, since these "love poems" are unmistakably satirical; harshness, then, may serve the same expressive purpose in them as it does in the Satires. The borrowing by love "songs" of the strong "line/Of masculine expression" for which Carew praised Donne, and which was previously associated only with satire and elegy, has definitely resulted in the blurring of some genre distinctions.<sup>13</sup>

But before considering the results of these "non-lyrical" intrusions, it might help to review the characteristics of the "strong line."

Primarily, it was marked (aside from its harshness) by various types of discontinuity.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Fuller, speaking of Cleveland, ascribes that poet's strength--which he uses as a synonym of "difficulty"--to his compression: "His lofty fancy may seem to stride from the top of one mountain to the top of another, so making to itself a constant level and champaign of continued elevations." Fuller then distinguishes between the "Vein" and the "Strain" of poetry (the former "Flow[s] with facility," while the

latter is "pressed with pains, and forced with industry"), and explains that Cleveland's poems "do partake of both, and are not to be the less valued by the reader, because most studied by the writer thereof."<sup>15</sup> We should keep in mind the fact, when looking at the ways in which Donne's line is "strained," that syntactic compression is an important part of his strength also.

In this respect, Donne's prose techniques are similar to his poetic ones. In her discussion of syntactic discontinuities in Donne's prose style, Joan Webber has found that two devices (characteristic of the Senecan prose writers) are used to create a disjunction of parts: first, the wedging apart of a sentence by the interpolation of parenthetical phrases or clauses, and second, an arrangement of words that separates closely related pairs, such as coordinate subjects, a noun and its modifier, or a pronoun and its antecedent (hyperbaton being the rhetorical name for this latter device).<sup>16</sup>

Correspondingly, the use of parenthetical clarification is quite common in Donne's poetry, frequent instances being scattered throughout the Songs and Sonnets. (Interjections such as "alas" or "we said" may be discounted as non-significant occurrences.) Most important are those

occurrences in which the parenthetical phrases make a contribution to the development of thought in the poem, as in these examples from "The Exstasie": "Our soules, (which to advance their state,/Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her, and mee"; "He (though he knew not which soule spake,/Because both meant, both spake the same)/Might thence a new concoction take"; and "A single violet transplant,/The strength, the colour, and the size,/(All which before was poore, and scant,)/Redoubles still, and multiplies."

In each of these cases, the parenthetical remark, coming between subject and verb, serves to clarify the thought in a non-linear fashion; there is an interruption in the progress of the syntax which causes us to halt, register a new piece of information, and readjust our understanding of the poem in order to take account of developing complexities. This process, which does not rely on a mode of unbroken logical progression, but rather depends on a method of complication and intensification, is related to the verticalizing tendency, discussed in Chapter I, of the repetitions in "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day." There the repetition develops the thought, but not continuously--just as here our comprehension proceeds by fits and starts, enlarged and deepened by the irregularities of the parenthetical insertions. (We might also note here,

as an aside, that two of the three parentheses engender a minor asymmetry in that they cut across line boundaries.)

A similar effect is achieved by the use of hyperbaton which, in some of its manifestations, is close to the avoidance of parallelism that we discussed in the last chapter. For example, in the following lines from "Loves Progress" there are two disruptions created by the separation of modifying phrases from their grammatical heads: "Were not a Calf a monster that were growne/Fac'd like a man, though better than his owne?". (The sense of the lines is "Would not that calf that grew a human face be called a monster, though that face is better than his own?".) In the case of "though better than his owne," the head noun "face" does not even appear in the line, but is left to be understood.

Other types of discontinuity that by their initial obscurity encourage the reader to reconstruct the steps in the development of the poem are syntactical inversion and compression. In lines like these the subject-verb inversion and ellipsis force us to read carefully:

But as wee in our Ile emprisoned,  
Where cattell onely,' and diverse dogs are bred,  
The pretious Unicornes, strange monsters, call,  
So thought he good, strange, that had none at all.

("The Perfume," , 11.47-50)

(There is also an instance of hyperbaton in the separation of the modifying clause in line 2 from "Ile" in line 1.)

Donne's abrupt transitions, however, are often used slightly differently, more to place ironic emphasis on the disjointedness of the experiences being described than to make close reading a necessity. The suddenness of the question in the opening couplet of "Womans Constancy"-- "Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,/To morrow when thou leav's't, what wilt thou say?"--does more in its compactness to evoke the idea of inconstancy than do the several expostulations that follow. Donne seems especially aware of the paradoxes of experience--that the mind and body which experience are the same and yet not the same at different times, and that consciousness is continuous and yet a new experience can seem totally unconnected to anything that went before it. The abrupt openings, as well as the transitions, in many of his lyrics point up this sense of strangeness. Sometimes the impression is achieved by the interrogative: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I/Did, till we lov'd?" ("The Goodmorrow"); at other times, it hinges on a plunge in medias res, the effect of which can be violent, as with "When I dyed last, and Deare, I dye/As often as from thee I goe" ("The Legacie"), and "Oh

doe not die, for I shall hate/All women so, when thou  
art gone" ("A Feaver").

This attachment to abruptness and compression seems to be exactly what Hobbes, reflecting on the Metaphysical poets, censured in his "Answer to Davenant's Preface to Gondibert" (1650):

To this palpable darkness I may also add the  
ambitious obscurity of expressing more then is perfectly conceived, or perfect conception in fewer words then it requires. Which Expressions, though they have had the honor to be called strong lines, are indeed no better then Riddles . . . 17

The assumption here seems to be that any technique of implication, ellipsis or otherwise, is open to the charge of willful obscurity, as if the poet were being arbitrarily difficult.

A similar assumption has been made of Donne's semantic obscurity as well. However, when his diction is obscure, it is seldom because he employs an archaic vocabulary; rather, it is because he engages in a kind of "leveling," whereby words drawn from all areas of discourse appear in all types of poetry. There is no special category of words set aside for use in love poetry, another for use in religious poetry, and yet another for use in satire. It

is exactly this appropriation of "sweats" and "fleas," "compasses" and "lymbecks," that twentieth-century critics (especially T.S. Eliot) have praised in Donne, on the grounds that a successful absorption of the colloquial is a testament to the transforming power of poetry.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, this semantic freedom was heavily criticized by Neoclassical critics such as Dryden and Dr. Johnson, who saw in it a violation of decorum.<sup>19</sup> However, they were in some ways closer to the truth than those who, in an attempt to explain Donne's semantic obscurities, have argued that he is allied to Chapman's cultivation of the "haughty obscure style," and to Harington's and Harvey's theories that the poet was an esoteric philosopher to be read by only the most learned. This claim, made by Arnold Stein, is supported by Roy Daniells, who also believes that Chapman and Donne are linked by way of the cult of "significant darkness," and who offers Henry Reynolds' Mythomystes as a theoretical explanation for both.<sup>20</sup> That work, however, considers poetry an instrument for veiling profound doctrines from the vulgar, and thus seems much closer to Chapman's aims than to Donne's.

But perhaps the best way to support our contention that Donne's obscurity is different from Chapman's is to compare two passages in terms of their semantic obscurity.

For this purpose, we have chosen to discuss lines from "Hero and Leander," since in that poem Chapman was not trying to be recondite. And for comparison, we have selected the second and third stanzas of Donne's "The Anniversarie," since that lyric is one of the few written in couplets (though they are of varying line lengths) whose tone is not satiric.

In the following lines (250-67) from the Fourth Sestiad of "Hero and Leander," Venus is rebuking Hero for breaking her vow of chastity:

Loue makes thee cunning; thou art currant now,  
 By being counterfeit: thy broken vow,  
 Deceit with her pide garters must reioyne,  
 And with her stampe thou countnances must coyne:  
 Coynes, and pure deceits for purities,  
 And still a mayd wilt seeme in cosoned eies,  
 And haue an antike face to laugh within,  
 While thy smooth lookes make men digest thy sin.  
 But since thy lips (lest thought forsworne) forswore,  
 Be neuer virgins vow worth trusting more.  
 When Beauties dearest did her Goddesse heare,  
 Breathe such rebukes gainst that she could not cleare;  
 Dumbe sorrow spake aloud in teares, and blood  
 That from her grieve-burst vaines in piteous flood,

From the sweet conduits of her sauor fell:  
 The gentle Turtles did with moanes make swell  
 Their shining gorges: the white black-eyde Swans  
 Did sing as wofull Epicedians . . . 21

If we omit considerations of sound and syntax, and concentrate on the semantic dimension of these lines, we shall see that, despite the relative absence of archaisms, coinages, and obscure allusions, words are being used in a redundant and conventional manner. The first pun (on "currant" and "counterfeit") explains something about Hero's state, but the following plays on words ("coyne" and "Coynes," "pure deceits" and "purities") seem to be more superficial, serving primarily as phonetic links between or within lines. A similar echoing (combined with chiasmus) occurs with ". . . digest thy sin./But since thy . . ." in lines 257-58. The "paradox" of "Dumbe sorrow spake aloud in teares" is flat, as is the near-oxymoron of "the white black-eyde Swans"; neither does much to advance the meaning of the passage. Similarly valueless are "Beauties dearest" as an epithet for Hero, "wofull Epicedians" for the swans, and one circumlocution striving for epic resonance ("the sweet conduits of her sauor"). We might say of the passage as a whole that it is characterized by an uneconomical use of words; more is being said

(quantitatively) than need be because of the failure to engage in a full semantic (or qualitative) exploitation.

To this phenomenon Donne's stanzas provide a marked contrast:

Two graves must hide thine and my coarse,

If one might, death were no divorce.

Alas, as well as other Princes, wee,

(Who Prince enough in one another bee,)

Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and eares,

Oft fed with true oathes, and with sweet salt teares;

But soules where nothing dwells but love

(All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove

This, or a love increased there above,

When bodies to their graves, soules from their graves remove.

And then wee shall be throughly blest,

But wee no more, then all the rest.

Here upon earth, we're Kings, and none but wee

Can be such Kings, nor of such subjects bee;

Who is so safe as wee? where none can doe

Treason to us, except one of us two.

True and false feares let us refraine,

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 reigne.

We can see, first, that although there is a frequent repetition of words in these lines, it is done not gratuitously, but for contrastive purposes. For example, "When bodies to their graves, soules from their graves remove" uses a parallel structure and the repetition of "their graves" to emphasize the substitution of one preposition for another--a very small difference and yet a very large one, since it mirrors the opposite directions taken by body and soul at death. Significant, too, are the repetitions of "wee" in the first half of the second stanza: they echo the modulations in the thought of the first stanza. That is, The lovers, when in heaven, are going to experience beatitude, but it will be a beatitude equal to that of the other souls; this much is known. The question, however, is whether their earthly love will be experienced in heaven with an equal or an increased intensity. But the answer to this question must remain unknown; all that the lovers can know is that on earth they are supreme. The various emphases on the personal pronoun make us follow the poem's changing viewpoint, as complete heavenly bliss pales, in its universality, beside the uniqueness of the earthly variety. Another example of repetition, that of "yeares" in the penultimate line of the second stanza, may not seem

so evidently contrastive, and yet it is, for the first two instances refer to future years, and the third to past ones.

It is true that Donne slips once into conventional phraseology, with "true oathes" and "sweet salt teares," but otherwise the language is straightforward. "Graves," for example, are directly--and unconventionally, for love poetry--named. And calling the lovers "Princes" and "Kings" is not hollow, but explains the nature of their love.

In conclusion, Chapman's lines seem fogged by both a superfluity of words and a discrepancy between the epic tone and what is actually occurring. The mournful birds are out of place in this scene; the situation has not been made serious enough for them to be justified. This breach of decorum acts as do the other overstatements: to introduce an unwitting note of parody. But Donne's introduction of thoughts of the grave into a love poem (something which he does often) does not trivialize love; in this poem it emphasizes its importance. When love is trivialized in Donne's verse, it is a result of a conscious satirical intent to parody "high" sentiments, as in "Perfection is in unitie; Preferre/One woman first, and then one thing in her"; or

"As the Almighty Balme of th'early East,/Such are the sweat drops on my Mistris breast."<sup>22</sup>

It should be evident from this comparison that even when Chapman is not being esoteric, he is obscure in a way that Donne is not; it is more difficult to find the sense of his lines, and the outcome of the search does not always reward the effort. Donne's obscurity, on the other hand--and this is true of his phonetic harshness as well as of his syntactic and semantic deviations--is generally designed to clear up, and not to befog, the issues.

With this distinction in mind, we can see why Mytho-mystes cannot be used as a theoretical justification for both poets. For, despite Reynolds' criticism of the "flowres of rhetorick" (with which Donne would have sympathized), he regards as totally superficial the debates over "where the strong line (as they call it), where the gentle sortes best."<sup>23</sup> But, as we have been arguing all along, the strong line was not seen by its practitioners as merely a casual option: it was associated with the higher and more refined pleasures of the intellect as opposed to the sensual pleasures of a smoother line, an association which Donne himself makes ("I sing not, Siren-like, to tempt; for I/Am harsh").<sup>24</sup> The strong line assured that the reader would stop to think as he read, rather than being swayed by

eloquence, which Montaigne describes as

that foolishnesse and facilitie, which is found in the common multitude, and which doth subject the same, to be managed, perswaded, and led by the eares, by the sweet alluring and sense-entrancing sound of this harmonie, without duely weighing, knowing, or considering the trueth of things by the force of reason.<sup>25</sup>

And what Coleridge said of Donne's third Satire could also be applied to his Songs and Sonnets: "If you would teach a scholar in the highest form how to read, take Donne, and of Donne this satire. When he has learnt to read Donne, with all the force and meaning which are involved in the words, then send him to Milton, and he will stalk on like a master enjoying his walk" (emphases his).<sup>26</sup> Even Dr. Johnson's small praise for the Metaphysicals acknowledged that "To write on their plan it was at least necessary to read and think."<sup>27</sup> If the way through Donne is sometimes arduous and indirect, it is necessarily so, for

On a huge hill,  
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;  
And what th'hills suddennes resists, winne so.<sup>28</sup>

But in the course of trying to "reach Truth" in his love poetry, Donne sinned against "naturalness" in two ways. First, he chose to be "rugged" in verse, "whose true nature and use," according to some of his contemporaries, "is to worke a kind of Charme upon the mind, even with slightnesse of matter, by the well wrought and exquisite harmony of their Cadence, and sound."<sup>29</sup>

(The offense is worse, of course, because it is committed in verses about love.) Second, Donne has introduced into his love poetry some "deep thoughts," which, as Dryden reminds us, have no place in "amorous verses, where nature only should reign."<sup>30</sup> But the "soft melting Phrases" of earlier love poetry were not natural to Donne, and taking a "hard line" ideologically--i.e., ironizing about Petrarchan conventions--was necessarily related to the "hard line" of his verse, for both were part of his re-definition of the nature of love poetry.<sup>31</sup>

If Donne had wanted to write a simpler kind of love song, he could have, but he must have thought that the more public and "pleasing" nature of songs prevented them from capturing thoughts as successfully as could a more private type of verse.<sup>32</sup> The several songs that Donne did write were acceptable as such; and "The Baite," his reply to

Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," is a perfect tour de force in that its cheerfully obscene parody of the convention is never once betrayed by any rhythmic unconventionality. (Worthy of note, however, is the fact that when Donne's songs were set to music, some of the slightest deviations from a perfectly regular and euphonious norm were "corrected" in the setting. For example, the heavy "th" alliteration in the second line of "The Apparition"--"And that thou thinkst thee free"--is reduced, in the Lawes setting, to "and thou shalt thinke thee free."<sup>33</sup>)

But Donne's real songs seem addenda to, rather than integral parts of, the Songs and Sonnets. At any rate, we do not think of them when recalling his characteristic voice, for that is bound up with his attempt both to capture the varying moods and subtleties of love, and to upset a convention. The discontinuities upon which Donne necessarily relied could not have been handled in the song form. The relationship between genre and form was captured very well by Coleridge (we cite him again here because his remarks are so perceptive) when he observed that Donne's efforts to "wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots" were guided by a muse that "trots on a dromedary."<sup>34</sup> If Donne had wanted only to satirize the Petrarchisms of his predecessors, he

could have managed very well by using their poetic forms while twisting their language, as he did in "The Baite"/ but the fact is that he was interested, as well, in developing a more personal and intellectual form, and therefore did not stop at parody.

In conclusion, the obscurity in Donne's poetry is close in spirit to that of the Senecan prose writers, for he, as did they, used various types of discontinuity both to suggest the fragmentary and disjointed nature of experience and to attempt a faithful reproduction of the stages of thought.<sup>35</sup> Since such an attempt must take account of certain processes--for example, association--that are not logical by nature, a certain amount of obscurity is inevitable.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes, too, more obscurity than is necessary is generated in order to suggest the murkiness and opacity of thought.<sup>37</sup>

The Aristotelian virtue of clarity may be upheld as such when one's motives are chiefly rhetorical--that is, when the desire to communicate is uppermost--but it is not necessarily consistent with the aim of portraying a private and individual reality.<sup>38</sup> And just as the poet is under no obligation to be readily comprehensible to the public, he need not defer to the implied rhetorical situation of a poem: that is, he need make no concession to the fiction

that the real audience of his poem is the lady to whom it is addressed.<sup>39</sup> Certainly the focus of Donne's poems is the poet--and not so much his emotions as his flexibility in making poetry of them. George Puttenham, although he conceived of the love poem as primarily an address, understood that it could not be confined to the song form alone, for love.

requireth a forme of Poesie variable, inconstant, affected, curious and most witty of any others, whereof the ioyes were to be vttered in one sorte, the sorrowes in an other, and by the many formes of Poesie, the many moodes and pangs of louers, throughly to be discovered.<sup>40</sup>

## Footnotes

1

For a history of ideas background to this chapter, Wind's Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance (1958; rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967) is especially helpful, particularly his chapter on "The Hidden God," pp. 218-36. Also important is D.P. Walker's The Ancient Theology (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1972), chapters 1-5 especially.

2

Wind, p. 218 .

3

Apropos are Donne's lines from "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany": "Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light:/To see God only, I goe out of sight."

4

Cusanus' games, and their appearance in several Renaissance emblem books, are discussed by Wind, pp. 222-23.

5

Wind, p. 225.

6

For a discussion of what makes Herbert's poems, very different from Donne's, difficult, see Joseph Summers'

chapter on "The Poem as Hieroglyph" in George Herbert; His Religion and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 123-47.

7

See Arnold Stein's paper on "Donne's Harshness and the Elizabethan Tradition," Studies in Philology, 41 (1944), pp. 390-410.

8

This aspect of Donne's verse is considered by R.L. Sharp in "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," Studies in Philology, 31 (1934), pp. 497-519, and by Stein in "Donne's Harshness," p. 402.

9

Stein, in "Donne's Harshness, p. 408, "gives a helpful summary of ideas of decorum in the Elizabethan satirists, emphasizing that writers such as Marston and Hall planned the "rudeness" of their lines to fit their "lewd halting age."

10

Sharp, p. 518, discusses the clash of Donne's metrical practices with Augustan ideals of harmony, taking Gray's "Elegy" as an embodiment of the latter.

11

From "Loves Usury" and "Loves Exchange." For the Ciceronian definition of euphony, see De Oratore III, xliii, p. 171.

12

The term "diminution" is Kenneth Burke's. His investigation of effects that are musical without necessarily being euphonious is helpful; see "On Musicality in Verse," Appendix in The Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1967).

13

However, Sharp argues in the above-mentioned paper, p. 518, that the difficulties deriving from harshness of sound are absent from Metaphysical lyrics, and occur only in satire, elegiac, and various expository forms where they are more conventional.

14

For a definition and abundant examples of strong lines, George Williamson's essay by that name should be consulted. See pp. 120-32 in Seventeenth Century Contexts (1961; rev. ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969).

15

Fuller's remarks are in The Worthies of England (1662), ed. John Freeman (London: Allen and Unwin, 1952), p. 323. Despite his claim that Cleveland is the "eminent Poet" of strong lines, a modern reader will probably agree with Dryden's assessment: "There is this difference betwixt his [Cleveland's] Satires and doctor Donne's;

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that the one gives us deep thoughts in common language, though rough cadence; the other gives us common thoughts in abstruse words." ("An Essay of Dramatic Poesy," Essays I, p. 52.)

16

Contrary Music; The Prose Style of John Donne (Madison, Wisconsin: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 35.

17

Reprinted in J.E. Spingarn, ed., Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century II, pp. 54-67. This passage is on p. 63.

18

This is Eliot's view of Donne's colloquialism in "Milton II," On Poetry and Poets, p. 182.

19

For the reference for Dryden's remarks, see Ch. I, fn. 45. Dr. Johnson's may be found in "Abraham Cowley," Lives of the English Poets (1779-81; rpt. New York: Dutton, and London: Dent, 1968), I, pp. 19-22.

20

Stein's argument is made in "Donne's Obscurity and the Elizabethan Tradition," English Literary History, 13 (1946), p. 111; Daniells' in an essay on "English Baroque and Deliberate Obscurity," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 5 (1946), pp. 115-21. See also the

introduction to The Poems of George Chapman, ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett (1941; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962), p. 11; and the chapter on Chapman and Donne in George Williamson's The Donne Tradition (New York: Noonday Press, 1930). For Chapman's own theory of poetic obscurity, see especially his Epistle to Mathew Royden prefacing Ovids Banquet of Sence, in Bartlett, pp. 49-50.

21

The Poems of George Chapman, p. 149.

22

From "Loves Progress," ll. 9-10, and "The Comparison," ll. 3-4.

23

Mythomystes (1632) is reprinted in Spingarn, I, pp. 141-80. This passage is on p. 143.

24

Lines 9-10 of "To Mr. S.B."

25

Stein, in "Donne's Obscurity," p. 116, quotes this description of eloquence. See Montaigne's Essays, trans. John Florio (1603; rpt. New York: Dutton, and London: Dent, 1965), I, 51, pp. 346-47.

26

See Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century, ed. Roberta F. Brinkley (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 521. Coleridge's remark was made in an unpublished marginal notation.

27

In "Abraham Cowley," Lives, I, p. 13.

28

Satire III, lines 79-82.

29

From Dudley North's "Concerning petty Poetry," p. 162 in Edward Taylor, ed., Literary Criticism. See Ch. II, fn. 29 for further information.

30

See Ch. I, fn. 45.

31

In his elegy on Donne, Carew uses "Soft melting Phrases" to characterize the language of earlier love poetry.

32

Donne refers playfully to the "easier" nature of songs when he says in "The Triple Foole" that, after he has successfully "fettered" his pain in verse, someone comes along, sings his lines, "And by delighting many, frees againe/Griefe, which verse did restraine."

33

The Lawes setting, which is incomplete, is printed in John Shawcross, ed., The Complete Poetry of John Donne (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 84.

34

In a quatrain written on Donne, originally published in vol. I of Coleridge's Literary Remains, ed.

Henry N. Coleridge, 1836. Rpt. in Brinkley, ed.,  
Coleridge, p. 526.

35

Morris Croll discusses the Senecans' idea of writing according to the "order of nature" in "The Baroque Style," pp. 224-29.

36

Nevertheless, the attempt to deliver knowledge "in the same method wherein it was invented" aimed, as Bacon stated, at eliminating the "contract of error between the deliverer and the receiver"; a writer "may revisit and descend unto the foundations of his knowledge and consent; and so transplant it into another as it grew in his own mind." See The Works of Francis Bacon, VI, pp. 289-90. The emphasis above is Bacon's.

37

The point is made about Montaigne's style by R.A. Sayce that ". . . inconsequent syntax not only suggests the spoken word, it is a principal contributor to the depiction of moving thought, a pointer to the paths of the labyrinth . . ." See "The Style of Montaigne: Word-Pairs and Word-Groups," Literary Style: A Symposium, ed. Seymour Chatman (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 400. But perhaps Donne is also motivated by a

Mannerist conception of the virtú that consisted in difficulty overcome. This is discussed by John Shearman in Mannerism, p. 21, and by Heinrich Wölfflin in Principles, pp. 196-221.

38

See Morris Croll, "Attic Prose," pp. 85-6, and Stein, "Donne's Obscurity," pp. 114-18.

39

Helen Gardner points out, in her introduction to The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets, that while Donne's contemporaries were producing sonnet sequences, Donne produced a corpus of discrete poems; there are no links suggested between them by the use of an imaginary lady's name.

40

The Arte of English Poesie, I, xxii, p. 45.

## CHAPTER IV

## DIALECTIC

A development that seemingly repeats the stages already passed, but repeats them otherwise, on a higher basis ('negation of negation'), a development, so to speak, in spirals, not in a straight line;--a development by leaps, catastrophes, revolutions;--'breaks in continuity';--the transformation of quantity into quality; the inner impulses to development, imparted by the contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body, or within a given phenomenon . . .--the interdependence and the closest, indissoluble connection of all sides of every phenomenon . . .--such are some of the features of dialectics as a richer (than the ordinary) doctrine of development.

V.I. Lenin, from "Karl Marx."

Before considering the dialectical aspects of Donne's verse, we might cast a backward glance at previous chapters to see their relation to the present one. Aside from the fact that when discussing various phenomena (e.g., parataxis) earlier, we suggested that they might be related to the question of dialectic, there is the more important fact that these chapters have themselves been concerned with dialectical relationships. Some of these relationships were made explicit: the first chapter was devoted to the study of the interdependence of poetry and

prose. As Croll tried to show how seventeenth-century prose had pre-empted some of the techniques of poetry (especially metaphorical and syntactic freedom), so did we speculate on the reverse process--namely, the assimilation of prose elements and concerns by the poetry. The second and third chapters, as well, dealt with the interrelationship of opposites (symmetry and asymmetry, clarity and obscurity), and suggested that Donne's poetry arrives at some kind of synthesis, in the form of an "asymmetrical symmetry" and a "clear obscurity."

But there has been another dialectical relationship implicit in our previous discussion--a relationship to be discovered not between elements in each chapter, but between the chapters themselves--specifically between Chapters II and III. That is, asymmetry and obscurity are interrelated because certain asymmetries can lead to obscurity, and that obscurity, or difficulty of interpretation, then produces a further asymmetry, in that there is a lack of correspondence between the surface of the text and its depth, or meaning. It is exactly this dialectic with which the act of interpretation is concerned. (In no poem, of course, is there a complete correspondence between surface and depth, since no linguistic artifact is transparent; thus, the dialectic of interpretation is

always present.) In Donne, however, the general dialectic between surface and depth is fed by a more specific dialectic--that existing between structural elements in his poems.

In recent years much mention has been made of structural dialectic in Donne. The confusion that has arisen over the use of the word "Metaphysical" to describe his poetry has prompted more than one critic to seek another term to replace this troublesome one.<sup>1</sup> The idea that Donne's poetry is logical, his images ratiocinative, and his technique argumentative to a degree not found in English poetry before him has suggested to at least two critics re-definition along these lines: J.B. Leishman prefers "scholastic" or "dialectical" to "Metaphysical," and Earl Miner also regards "dialectic" as a distinguishing characteristic of Donne.<sup>2</sup>

But the choice of "dialectical" by Leishman and Miner re-creates some of the same problems engendered by the use of "Metaphysical," since it is not being used in a technically exact sense either. Both critics use "dialectical" to refer to the logical (as well as to the argumentative and dramatic) elements of verse, an equation which, although it is not precise enough for modern ears, did occur in the Renaissance. (Wilbur S. Howell discusses

the identification of logic and dialectic in Thomas Wilson's Rule of Reason and other sixteenth-century handbooks of logic in England. According to Howell, Ramus also defined logic and dialectic identically as "the art of disputing well."<sup>3</sup>)

Although Donne's contemporaries may have understood dialectic to be simply formal logic, we would do an injustice to both history and Donne's poetry if we ignored the variety of meanings the word has had at other times. Investigating Donne for evidence of formal logic is a worthwhile endeavor, for the number of poems in the Songs and Sonnets that engage in logical or pseudo-logical analysis, employ various forms of syllogistic reasoning, or seem to refute propositions by examining their logical consequences, is formidable.<sup>4</sup> Thought often develops "not in a straight line," but by means of argument, and the action of the poems is frequently dramatic because of the implicit presence of a voice answering the speaker's. However, since a great deal of work has been done on Donne's "dramatism," we have simply taken for granted this aspect of his verse, and have decided to look instead for analogous processes in the structures of his poems.<sup>5</sup> When searching for the interplay of opposing voices, we shall ascribe those voices variously to semantic, phonetic, or metrical

structures, rather than to the speakers, explicit or understood, in the poems.

In short, we are trying to use one poetic process as a metaphor for another. We might look at "The Prohibition" in order to illustrate this point. This poem explicitly reasons in a dialectical manner, with the first stanza exploring the consequences of one possibility (that the speaker's mistress love him wholly), and the second exploring the consequences of its opposite (that she hate him wholly). Since each, if carried out, would lead to internal contradictions, the speaker concludes that a synthesis of the two is the only solution: "Then, least thy love, and hate and mee undoe,/Oh let mee live, Yet love and hate mee too." There could hardly be a better image of the union of opposites in a higher synthesis than this idea of love and hate joined in a single mind. The preceding line ("So shall I live, thy Stage, not Triumph bee") also offers a model of a dialectical process: if not destroyed by the triumphant force of his mistress' hate, the speaker says, he shall live as the battleground whereon her victory over him shall constantly be re-enacted.

In other words, from the interplay of opposites perpetual action results, thus preventing any one element

from becoming hypostatized. (Our discussion of asymmetries in the second chapter offered examples of this phenomenon.) This process can be seen in a sonnet we have already considered, "Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?". There, as we saw, the thematic conflict between God and Satan is paralleled by a phonetic opposition, but both are contained, and thus surmounted, by the word "eye," which is linked semantically with the theme of grace, and phonetically with the theme of despair. Since the word functions in more than one way, it keeps alive the conflict upon which the poem is built, but as a unit, it joins the conflicting elements in a higher synthesis. In doing so it reminds us of the real subject of the sonnet, the human mind, which in a like fashion unites opposing forces.

A similar phenomenon may be seen at work in images as well as in single words. We might take "The Broken Heart" as an example. There the speaker, by examining the logical consequences of each of the poem's hypotheses, implicitly refutes his opening declaration that "He is starke mad, who ever sayes,/That he hath beene in love an houre." The second and third stanzas are designed to reinforce this claim; the third, however, questions it

indirectly by refuting two secondary propositions that entail a revision of the first (the speaker admits that his heart cannot have been stolen from him after one brief hour of being in love). Thus he concludes that he has his heart back, though it is in broken pieces. Nevertheless, he insists that the original declaration is still true, since a broken heart is incapable of loving.

However, this analogy does not work in the way the speaker intends it to; it is really presenting an unspoken argument opposed to his spoken one. For a broken mirror does not cease to reflect; it simply reflects in miniature. Similarly, a broken heart may love "brokenly," i.e., by sheltering many shattered images of the beloved. Thus, just as the speaker offered one explanation for his condition that he subsequently refuted, we must use the argument implicit in his mirror analogy to refute his refutation. It is not true that by loving he has lost his heart forever, but neither is it true that he has it back in pieces unable to love. What is true is really a combination of these statements--that is, he has his heart back, but it is in a different state; and it does love, but it loves differently. The poem is playing with the dialectic of love, with the idea that "different" is in

some way "the same." Uniting the concepts of "has" and "has not," "is" and "is not," is the synthetic mirror analogy.

In a sense a dialectical function of this type is less complex than the type exemplified by "eye" in the Holy Sonnet, for the words of the analogy are being activated on the semantic plane only, rather than on both the phonetic and semantic planes simultaneously. The phonetic structure of "broken glasses" is not relevant to an understanding of the phrase's importance in the poem, but the phonetic value of "eye" is.<sup>6</sup>

Since we have ascertained that both phonetic and semantic structures can play a part in a dialectical relationship, it is natural to inquire whether a metrical structure can do so also. Intuition suggests an affirmative answer--in fact, it seems likely that a "metrical dialectic" would be one of the more frequent types. We do not hope to make a thorough investigation of all the possibilities here, but rather to suggest where such an investigation might begin.

A simple example from "The Prohibition" will serve as illustration. As we said earlier, the last line of the poem synthesizes two antithetical injunctions ("If thou

love mee, take heed of loving mee" and "If thou hate mee, take heed of hating mee"), each of which has occupied the final line of a stanza. All three injunctions, then, occur in parallel positions. However, there are several formal features that emphasize the parallelism in the first two instances, but counter it in the third. First, the last lines of the first and second stanza have identical syntactic structures which are reinforced by their identical metrical structures (both have stresses in the first, third, sixth, eighth, and tenth positions). Second, both lines end on the same rhyme. And third, both lines end with a falling cadence, for the final syllable in each case does not have as strong a stress as the syllable in the eighth position, which in turn is not as strongly stressed as the one in the sixth ("heed," in both lines, receives the strongest emphatic stress).

In contrast to these two, the final line of the poem employs a different syntactical construction, changes to a different metrical pattern, and ends on a different rhyme. For the opening conditional clauses of the two other final lines, it substitutes an imperative; for the combination of two trochees and three iambs, it substitutes five iambs; and for the "mee" at the end of the other two lines, it

substitutes "too," a word which receives a strong metrical (because of a strong syntactic) stress. The effect of finality adhering to the poem's last line is partly generated, then, by its regularization of the metrical pattern of the other two lines. In fact, the last line presents a synthetic metrical pattern when considered in relation to all of the other lines in the poem, since its five regular iambs are composed of ten monosyllables, and though the poem contains lines that are constituted of only monosyllables, and others constituted of five regular iambs, it does not contain any other line that is both monosyllabic and metrically regular at once.

Another area in which we can see a formal synthesis take place is enjambment. If we look, for example, at the enjambment patterns in the first four stanzas of "The Canonization," we shall see not only relationships of asymmetry (such as were discussed in Chapter II), but also a progressive movement in which the rhyming elements are more fully implicated in the enjambments as we go from stanza to stanza. (There are four nine-line stanzas, each containing three rhymes.) The first stanza has only one enjambment; the second has two, but not on two different rhymes; the third also has two, and they are on different rhymes; and the fourth, finally, has three, and on all three

different rhymes. We can see why this process is dialectical if we realize that there are two forces at work here (one quantitative, i.e., the increase in the number of enjambments from stanza to stanza; and the other qualitative, i.e., the complexity of the enjambments as measured by their involvement of the different rhymes), and that the two forces are being more tightly interwoven as the poem goes on. As the number of enjambments per stanza increases, there is an almost steady corresponding increase in the number of different rhymes involved, so that "more" enjambment occurs on two levels. If we regard the fourth stanza as the one in which the intertwining is most complex, the fifth stanza must be seen as anti-climactic, for though it increases the number of enjambments, there is a decrease in the number of rhymes drawn in. Thus the synthesis which was attained before is beginning to disintegrate.

A similar process takes place--only seemingly in reverse--in "The Apparition." If we consider the interrelationship of three types of phenomena (the enjambed words, the words immediately following the enjambed words, and the position of each enjambed word in the rhyme scheme), we see that the poem begins at a peak of complexity, with maximum correspondence among the various forces. It then

gradually relinquishes these correspondences until none occur, at which point it begins to build them up again. The first enjambment ("free,/From all solicitation from mee") links the enjambed word to the following line in two ways: via the alliteration with "From" and the rhyme with "mee." The second enjambed word ("thinke") is connected phonetically to "Thou" immediately following it in the next line, but it is not connected to that line by way of rhyme. In this sense it is a freer enjambment than the one before it. Finally, "thou," which is the third enjambed word in the poem, is freest of all, since there is neither an alliterating word at the beginning of the next line nor a rhyming word at the end of it (the rhyming word for "thinke" comes two lines later, but here it comes three lines later). However, this steady progress toward freedom for the enjambed word is suddenly reversed in the fourth case ("lye/A veryer ghost then I"), which re-institutes the linking by way of rhyme.

Although this process seems to be the reverse of that occurring in "The Canonization," it is really not; there appears to be a difference between them because the poems begin at different points in the dialectical process. "The Canonization" takes two strands, which for the sake of convenience we may call "A" and "B," and interweaves

them in such a way that a point "C," representing the unity of "A" and "B," is reached. "The Apparition," on the other hand, opens as the complexity of "C" is on the point of dissolving into its constituent elements.

These dialectical processes, though they have developed because of the "contradiction and conflict of the various forces and tendencies acting on a given body," have nevertheless been characterized by a certain kind of continuity: there has been either a gradual increase or a gradual decrease in complexity. But there is another type of dialectic in Donne's poetry that relies heavily on discontinuity, developing a relationship between elements by means of sudden reversals and transformations.<sup>7</sup> For an illustration we may turn to the rhymes in Donne's Holy Sonnet "Death be not proud," comparing their pattern (which is ABBAABBACDDCAA) to the grammatical classes into which the individual rhymes fall. In the first quatrain, the "A" rhymes belong to the same grammatical class (pronoun), while the "B" rhymes do not. In the second quatrain, the "B" rhymes belong to the same class (verb), but the "A" rhymes do not. Finally, in the third quatrain, in neither rhyming pair is there any sharing of grammatical function. The correspondence between rhyme pairs and grammatical class that seemed to be developing (so that

the third quatrain would manifest a complete correspondence between the two) is suddenly abandoned in favor of a total lack of correspondence.

But this reversal, though arbitrary, is not senseless; it represents the sudden assertion of freedom on the part of the poet. If the first two stanzas show us that he can intensify the link between words already bound by rhyme, the third shows us that he can weaken it. We might interpret other asymmetrical rhyme pairings (e.g., of masculine with feminine, or of monosyllabic with polysyllabic) similarly--that is, we may see in them a reminder of the dialectic between freedom and constraint that is an essential part of rhyme. Donne seems determined to keep the dialectic alive (he never writes in blank verse except when translating some of his Latin poems), and to prove, both by his employment of a wide variety of rhyme schemes in the Songs and Sonnets, and by his flexible use of rhymes, that constraint is merely an excuse for invention. It is no accident that he takes more liberties with rhyme in the Satires than anywhere else, since it is there that the exigencies of rhyme are the greatest.

Thus a structural discontinuity which itself may be characterized as dialectical has led us to a kind of

"metadialectic," in which the nature of a formal feature (rhyme) is commented upon,. Donne's metrical irregularities and his exploitation of enjambments might be seen as having a similar intent, for by allowing a conflict between metrical stress and speech stress, the poet maintains an on-going dialectic. We cannot read a line according to metrical stress alone or according to speech stress alone; we must determine how to read it by taking both into account.<sup>8</sup> And when we come to the end of an enjambed line, we must regard it as both closed and open at once. The structural dialectic engendered by these asymmetries is what makes a line what it is; to try to read in ignorance of it would be as disastrous as to try to read one of Donne's love poems without a knowledge of his deviation from the tradition--for that too results in a dialectic (between past and present forms) that is essential to an understanding of what the poet is doing.

If we remember the syntactic deviations also discussed in the last chapter, we can see how those examples of obscurity work in a dialectical fashion as well: part of the purpose of obstructions and gaps is to tell us something about the relation of thought to writing-- i.e., that thought does not necessarily develop in the

linear, sequential mode implied by syntax. Distorting syntax is a way of using the medium to make a critical comment upon itself, for what the distortions aim at is a simultaneity impossible in speech or writing. (Nevertheless, to continue to write poetry, a poet must in some way have accepted the limitations of the medium.) But before drawing our conclusions about the nature of Donne's dialectic, and the role played in it by discontinuity, we should give some attention to his conceits, for in them many of the problems that we have been considering are concentrated.

In discussing the discontinuous aspect of Donne's metaphors, however, we must realize that since any metaphor involves a discontinuity, we shall in part be describing Donne in relative terms. Dr. Johnson can take the most credit for initiating the tradition of placing the imagery of Donne on the far end of the spectrum, for it was he who suggested that what makes this imagery "metaphysical" is its attempt to join together concepts that bear little relation to each other in reality. Lying behind this formulation, one assumes, is the idea that there is a kind of imagery that somehow arises more directly from the poetic subject. But even the "physical" imagery

of, for example, Marlowe's "Hero and Leander," although its pertinence is more readily apprehensible, is logically distant from the subject.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Dr. Johnson's claim that Donne's conceits suffer from a more violent yoking than other poets' seem intuitively correct: Donne does have a preference for the juxtaposition of animate and inanimate, living and dead, sacred and profane. And although metaphorical discourse by definition involves a conceptual discontinuity (for, as Hegel says, in that "more oblique form [poetry] some phenomenon of affinity merely and one even aloof from the essential significance of our subject is made present to us"), it is possible that the terms in some metaphors will seem more violently joined than in others.<sup>10</sup> What Hegel concludes of all poets seems especially true of Donne: metaphor involves disjunction exactly because the object of importance here is not so much to make the fact clear and distinct to the vision; on the contrary the metaphorical employment of these outlying phenomena is itself the aim proposed. The emotion of the poet concentrates itself as the centre, which the environment enriches with its wealth; it absorbs this as part of itself, adapts it with genius

and wit to its adornment, steeps it in its own life, and finds in this movement to and fro, this elaboration and self-reflection of its creation its own source of delight.<sup>11</sup>

The chief insight here lies in Hegel's connection of individualism, the all-transforming spirit of the artist, with a pleasure in the distant. Arnold Hauser, in discussing mannerist art, also sees a connection between its individualist bias and its tendency to "overleap the straightforward and obvious," and finds an analogy in Metaphysical poetry to mannerism's desire "to magnify the leap as much as possible, to focus attention on the mobility, range, and self-sufficiency of the leaping spirit . . . "12

Nevertheless, what has so often been taken to be one of the "radical" aspects of Donne's imagery--that there is only one point of contact between the two terms of the image--certainly characterizes much of Shakespeare's imagery as well.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Donne's famous compass image in "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" does not seem radical at all, although it is often cited as the prototypical Metaphysical image. It is true that there is only one point of comparison between the lovers' souls and the

feet of a compass, but as the compass was a conventional emblem of steadfastness, it is unlikely that Donne's readers would have had any difficulty making the necessary connection.<sup>14</sup>

But the idea that "yoking" is characteristic of Donne is a useful one, especially if we extend it to cover all types of poetic combination. We have seen that the bridging of gaps is an essential part of reading Donne's syntax; it is an activity that pertains as well to the reading of his metaphors. And when searching for what distinguishes Donne's image-making from that of other poets--especially from the emblematic images of Herbert--we are likely to be more successful if we concentrate on the discontinuities involved in his manner of presenting images, rather than on those inherent in the terms of the image itself.

First, Donne has a habit of plunging us into his images, explaining, if at all, only after the initial shock has registered--a habit which may be seen as a technique of argumentation, as is his disruption of syntax, for in both cases something occurs that first blocks and then furthers the thought. An example is this image from "Twickenham Garden": "But O, selfe traytor, I do bring/The

spider love, which transubstantiates all,/And can convert Manna to gall."<sup>15</sup> The strangeness and suddenness of "spider love" make us stop short in bewilderment as we try to "figure out" the image. And even when, as here, some sort of explanation follows, Donne exploits the initial moment of shock or wonder excited in the reader in order to make him an "understander." Often, too, the ensuing elaboration does not at all diminish the sense of wonder; it deepens it by making us aware of subtleties that were not immediately apparent, as in "The Relique"':s explanation that the "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" was the device of "a loving couple" who thought that it would insure the meeting of their souls at Judgment Day.

This exploitation of wonder in the poetic image has an analogue in the theatrical practice of Donne's time. The masque, especially, adopted some of the techniques of imprese in order to produce a wondrous vision that first surprised, then delighted the spectators as they came to understand its significance.<sup>16</sup> Even in the Jonsonian masque, where poetry vied in importance with spectacle, the "marvelous" had a place: its role was to make an intellectual appeal by way of the senses.<sup>17</sup> Insofar as it does so, there is a similarity in intent between the vision of

the masque and the poetic image.

However, there is an important difference between the two, and that is that the masque excites wonder by presenting an allegorical scene, a living emblem that the poetry then interprets, but the Donnean image is not static or equative in this way--it will seldom hold still long enough to be framed. There is a principle of constancy operative in the staging of the masque that is absent from Donne's image-making. Furthermore, as Angus Fletcher has shown, the principles of perspective were brought to bear on the conception of the stage vision, so that everything was unified by one frame and one picture plane; thus the effect of the whole could be fully appreciated by only those situated at a central vantage point (i.e., the King and his companions).<sup>18</sup> A fixed perspective, then, was necessary for both the construction and the comprehension of the stage scene. Donne's manner of presenting images, however, is much more dramatic than the masque's, for it hinges on the opposite principle of inconstancy: if any one thing is necessary for the understanding of Donne's images, it is certainly the ability to follow the changes in perspective that they entail.

For even when Donne seems to be designating something as an emblem, a static equation is not the result. "The

Flea," for example, opens as if an emblem were being pointed to: "Marke but this flea, and marke in this,/How little that which thou denyst me is;/Mee it suck't first, and now sucks thee,/And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee." However, the "emblem," though it represents the commingling of the lover's and his mistress' blood, does not by itself convey the idea of the insignificance of the favor that is being requested of the lady; that is explained only by the subsequent action of the poem. We have to know that the lady kills the flea before we can understand the "moral"--that to mingle bloods and "die" will cause her as little loss as did the flea's death. The significance of the flea changes with the successive stages of the action, and cannot be represented by one "picture." Since emblems cannot allow for movement, we can conclude that this poem does not work emblematically.<sup>19</sup>

A similar process occurs in "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," in which the first two stanzas establish a correspondence between one situation and another (the soul's imperceptible departure from the body of a virtuous man, and the parting of the two lovers). The comparison implies first that, as are body and soul, the lovers are different in nature, and second, that a real

separation is going to occur. Stanzas three through five, however, argue that the lovers' souls are of the same essence, and that thus they shall be united even in absence. And the final compass image suggests that if they must in some way be two when separated, they should be as the two parts of a compass, that even when apart are connected. But how does this progress in the poem's thought affect the initial analogy? Perhaps we are to go back to it and read it in the light of what has followed; we might infer, then, that the parting of body and soul is but a temporary separation of two parts of the same being, parts which eventually will end as they began: united. The imperceptibility of the soul's departure from the body can thus be attributed not to the resignation of a virtuous man, but to the fact that in a virtuous person soul and body are already one, so that at death they too endure not "A breach, but an expansion."

It is easy to see that this process of re-vision cannot fit into an emblematic mode when we look at a poem that does present its images emblematically--for example, Herbert's "The Church-floore." Its opening stanza presents the first of four emblems ("Mark you the floore? that square & speckled stone,/Which looks so firm and strong,/"

Is Patience"), in which parts of the church represent various virtues. The concluding stanza, by summing up the previous emblems (showing that the floor as a whole represents the human heart), does not alter their character in any way. What has occurred is explication and not change. Emblematic equations like this abound in Herbert: "flesh is but the glasse, which holds the dust/ That measures all our time"; man "is a brittle crazie glasse"; the soul is "a shepherd too; a flock it feeds/Of thoughts, and words, and deeds."<sup>20</sup>

In general, Herbert's images act as centering forces; they condense and focus the meaning of the poem. Donne's, on the other hand, are more frequently a part of a development that results in a change in their original meaning. The discontinuity in Herbert is almost all within the image itself, and if he does occasionally use some type of dissonance, it is with the purpose of pointing us toward ultimate harmonies. If he leaves the discordant elements in a poem unreconciled, he does so only temporarily, in order to make us aware of the ground in which those elements are reconciled. ("The Deniall" is a good example.) In Marvell, too, argumentative and dramatic forms often point to, if they don't actually embody, the transcendence of

antithesis or distance. (Some examples are "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure"; "The Coronet"; and "Clorinda and Damon.")

One theory that perhaps explains something about what Herbert and Marvell were doing, although it does not seem applicable to Donne, is offered by Frank L. Huntley in a study of discordia concors. Finding that the Metaphysicals employed a "yoked" form of antithesis and the Augustans a "balanced" form, Huntley concludes that the former is connected to the Platonic and Christian traditions by virtue of its joining a lower and a higher value in order to arrive at a third, and that the latter is related to Classical ideas of harmony and balance.<sup>21</sup> The similarity of this idea to Erich Auerbach's analysis of parataxis in the early Christian writers (which we discussed in Chapter I) leads us to think that one of the functions of metaphorical conjunction in Christian poets such as Herbert and Marvell is similar to the function of temporary discordance: it places an emphasis on the ultimate source in which all things are joined. When reading Herbert's poem, one should not be distracted by the incongruity of "floore" and "heart," but should think of the creator who has made it possible to see in humble things emblems of great ones.

Forms of yoking in Herbert and Marvell, then, often call attention to something beyond themselves; their purpose would be defeated if they called attention to themselves and kept it there. But Donne's conjunctions do just this; their purpose seems to be not to transcend themselves, but rather, by emphasizing the distance that exists between the conjoined elements, to foreground the individuality of the elements themselves. Even when his conjunctions are part of a dialectical process that is ultimately unitive, the discontinuous or discordant elements are never quite subsumed in the whole. Out of them may come a new poetic synthesis that completes and makes understandable the elements of which it is composed, but the synthesis itself can be understood only in the light of those elements. The role played by these is, then, not a self-transcending but a self-fulfilling one; their completion is to be found within the poem itself. The dialectic of Herbert and Marvell is self-critical, founded on the sense of absence and incompleteness, on the knowledge of what the poem lacks; Donne's dialectic, however, is a dialectic of fullness, predicated on that which has been made present and complete in the poem.

If it is true, as Kenneth Burke has said, that the very use of language commits us to a belief in an

absolute of some sort, then Donne's poetry is committed, implicitly, to such a belief as much as the poetry of Herbert and Marvell is.<sup>22</sup> Yet Donne, as a poet to whom the exercise of reason, with all of its weaknesses and contradictions, is essential, offers for our admiration not the single image of unchanging and absolute Truth, but the many images of changing and relative truths-- understanding, perhaps, that even though reason cannot renounce the absolute, it cannot attain it without encountering, at the same moment, its own abolition.<sup>23</sup>

## Footnotes

1

Joseph Mazzeo provides a survey of modern definitions of Metaphysical poetry in "Modern Theories of Metaphysical Poetry," a 1952 paper reprinted in Frank Kermode, ed., The Metaphysical Poets (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publ., 1969), pp. 158-77.

2

Leishman's views may be found in The Monarch of Wit (London: Hutchinson Univ. Library, 1967), p. 19, Miner's in Chapter III, The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley. Joseph Summers, in The Heirs of Donne and Jonson (London and New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 13, has several other suggestions to make for a replacement of "Metaphysical."

3

In Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1956).

4

See especially Elizabeth Wiggins, "Logic in the Poetry of John Donne," Studies in Philology, 42 (1945), pp. 41-60; and Rosemond Tuve's section on "The Logical Functions of Imagery," in Imagery, pp. 251-411.

5

The essays by T.S. Eliot ("Donne in Our Time") and Mario Praz ("Donne's Relation to the Poetry of His Time") are important here. Both are in Theodore Spencer, ed., A Garland for John Donne 1631-1931 (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), pp. 1-21 and 51-73 respectively. More recently, A.J. Smith has studied the relation of Donne's dramatic forms to dialectic, in "Donne's Invention," from Donne, Songs and Sonnets (London: Edward Arnold, 1964), pp. 7-26, rpt, in Kermode, The Metaphysical Poets, pp. 181-203.

6

Apropos here is Dell Hymes' concept of the "summative word" in a poem--one which is thematically central, contains the dominant sounds in the poem, and is placed so as to have a culminating effect. If a word meets only the first two of these criteria, Hymes calls it a "key word." See "Phonological Aspects of Style: Some English Sonnets," in Thomas Sebeok, ed., Style in Language, pp. 109-33.

7

Failure to recognize that sudden transformations are an integral part of the dialectical process has led some critics to regard the reversals and discontinuities in Donne's thought as unmotivated, whimsical, or careless.

In "Donne in Our Time" T.S. Eliot says that "there is in his poetry hardly any attempt at organization; rather a puzzled and humorous shuffling of the pieces" (p.8)--a sentiment that is echoed in Wylie Sypher's comment that "Donne employs a great many logical devices but is entirely careless of the direction in which his logic leads him" (emphasis his). See Four Stages of Renaissance Style (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), p. 119.

8

The development of exactly this dialectic between metrical pattern and speech stress is the subject of John Thompson's book on The Founding of English Metre (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966). Of Donne, Thompson says "his phrases demand the living voice, and at the same time the line can be reconciled to the metrical pattern, not in speech, it is true, but in that counterpoint of speech and metrical pattern which today we usually recognize and value." See p. 16.

9

Johnson's description of discordia concors in the Metaphysical poets is in "Abraham Cowley," Lives of the English Poets, I, pp. 11-12. Recently an attempt has been made by S.L. Bethell to clear up some of the confusion

about Donne's conceits. He finds that there are three basic types: the analogical, the merely superficial, and the genuinely metaphysical, which point to a metaphysical relationship between two terms in the realm of being. But "metaphysical" is not defined clearly enough for us to understand the difference between these images and the others. See The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963), pp. 89-92.

10

G.W.F. Hegel, The Philosophy of Fine Art, trans. F.P.B. Osmaston (London: G. Bell, 1920), IV, p. 62.

11

Hegel, p. 61.

12

In Mannerism; the Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art, trans. Eric Mosbacher (New York: Knopf, 1965), I, p. 291. W.K. Wimsatt finds that in Metaphysical metaphor both tenor and vehicle are specifically named objects; thus the source of the poet's originality lies in the relations he establishes between those objects, his aim being always to exploit their ontological distance from each other. See "The Substantive Level" in The Verbal Icon, pp. 133-53. Also relevant here is S.L. Bethell's study of Donne's conceits in relation to Emanuele Tesauro's theory of

wit (connecting the two is the latter's belief that "the metaphor is more witty and acute when the notions are very remote"), in "The Nature of Metaphysical Wit," a 1953 essay reprinted in Frank Kermode, ed., Discussions of John Donne (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1962), pp. 136-50.

13

The term "radical image" was defined by H.W. Wells in Poetic Imagery (1924; rpt. New York: Russell and Russell, 1951). J.B. Douds, in "Donne's Technique of Dissonance," pp. 1053-55, finds that Donne's most typical images are "radical," and that they are related to a more widespread dissonance. A.D. Nuttall's discussion of "The Shocking Image" in Donne cites several passages from Shakespeare to prove that he also uses imagery of the same basic type. Nuttall's essay, from Two Concepts of Allegory (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp. 81-91, is reprinted in Kermode, The Metaphysical Poets, pp. 146-58.

14

A.J. Smith believes that the material for many of Donne's conceits, including this one, is often to be found in the compendia of emblems popular in the Renaissance. See "Donne's Invention," pp. 181-90.

15

These lines are cited by Douds, p. 1055, as an example of a dissonant image.

16

For the relationship between the impresa, Italian theories of stage design, and the English masque, consult Allardyce Nicoll, Stuart Masques and the Renaissance Stage (1938; rpt. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), pp. 154-57. It is worthy of note that in Tesauro's poetics, surprise was one of the elements of a witty conceit. See Bethell's discussion in "The Nature of Metaphysical Wit."

17

This is discussed in part two of Stephen Orgel's The Jonsonian Masque (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965).

18

Fletcher describes the effect of perspective on stage design, and the function of meraviglia in the masque, in pp. 79-86 of The Transcendental Masque (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971).

19

This analysis of dialectic in "The Flea" is similar to Earl Miner's in The Metaphysical Mode, pp. 133-35, although our approaches are different.

20

From "Church-monuments," "The Windows," and "Christmas." The Works of George Herbert, ed. F.E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

21

"Dr. Johnson and Metaphysical Wit; or, Discordia Concors Yoked and Balanced," in Robert Scholes, ed., Poetic Theory/Poetic Practice (Iowa City: Midwest Modern Language Association, 1969), pp. 103-13.

22

A Rhetoric of Motives, pp. 276-77.

23

These last words are a partial paraphrase of Edmond Ortigues in Le Discours et le Symbole (Paris: Aubier, 1962), p. 227: "Nous y apprenons aussi que la raison ne peut sans se méconnaître renoncer à l'absolu, bien que cependant elle ne puisse atteindre un terme absolu sans y trouver du même coup sa propre abolition, dans la nuit sans retour."

## CONCLUSION

In many ways Donne's poetry may be seen as an experiment the effects of which on English poetry were great, although they have not always been acknowledged. We know from Carew's elegy that some of Donne's contemporaries had an accurate conception of what he was about--that they saw in his metrical and syntactic variety, his unique idiom, and his undermining of certain genre distinctions, the sophisticating influence of an original mind. But we also know that the significance of Donne's experiments became obscured fairly rapidly, so that more and more he was praised--or condemned, as the case may be--on the basis of his wit alone, and not on the basis of his total accomplishment. As the second half of the century brought a theory and practice of poetry different from Donne's in several important respects, it became more difficult both to see the rationale behind his innovations (that is, to understand his continuity with the past), and to recognize the possibilities for the future development of English verse that were inherent in them. Less than a half-century after the death of Donne, Dryden stated that "were he translated into numbers, and English, he

would yet be wanting in the dignity of expression . . . "

--a judgment that was one of many to present Donne as an anomaly, the leader of a peculiar "race of poets" alienated from the mainstream of English poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Donne was different from his contemporaries; this much we have been arguing all along. And, as Patrick Cruttwell has said, his difference from the other poets of his time "[was] not one of themes, or of subject-matter, or of ideas"--it was not on these grounds that Dryden censured Donne. "The difference [was] in language. And that, in poetry, is the only difference that matters."<sup>2</sup> In order to understand exactly what was new about Donne, it has been necessary for us to stress the degree to which his language represented a rupture with the past, to describe not only the discontinuities in his poetry, but also the discontinuity of his poetry. Nevertheless, this discontinuity was not (as Dryden's remark makes of it) a question of mere eccentricity, for some of the ways in which it manifested itself were to set an important precedent for other poets to follow. Despite Dryden's own view, at least one twentieth-century poet--T.S. Eliot--has seen in him a kinsman to Donne, on the grounds that his attempt (and the attempt of Wordsworth after him) "to escape from a poetic idiom which had ceased to have a

relation to contemporary speech" had taken some inspiration from Donne.<sup>3</sup>

Eliot's assertion may be true in a general sense, but it is necessary to remember that there are important differences between the way Donne introduced natural language into his poetry, and the way Dryden or Wordsworth did so. Donne's mode was to distort the common idiom; everywhere in his verse there are palpable signs of the pressure to which it has been subjected. These skewings are not to be found in Dryden, and undoubtedly his awareness of them in Donne had something to do with his suggestion that his predecessor needed "translating." Beyond that, there was inherent in Dryden's neoclassicism an attitude toward genres radically from Donne's, for the concept of "register" that began to dissolve in Donne's love poetry was upheld in Dryden's verse. But these generalizations, deriving, of course, from the more basic distinction between a public mode and a private one, are well known; we mention them here only in order to amplify Eliot's statement, which does not distinguish between kinds of colloquialism. Certainly Donne's idiosyncratic molding of the spoken language is not without philosophical implications, for whereas Dryden could rely, in the linguistic

struggle against what Carew called "blinde fate," on his quality of publicness, on the appeal of a language held in common, Donne had the problem of showing that the private idiom need not be ephemeral. Since this was not a problem of primary interest to the eighteenth century, the significance of his response to it went temporarily underground.

It was to surface, however, with his revival at the hands of the Victorians; in Browning, especially, one feels on familiar terrain, although his linguistic distortions are sometimes more extreme than Donne's. But we might wonder why Donne's influence was not felt earlier, why not he, but Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton provided the models for much of Romantic poetry, which, after all, comprised a large body of lyrics. If Eliot is correct in linking Wordsworth, as the initiator of the second great move toward colloquialism in English poetry, with Donne, why is there not more evidence in him of Donne's influence?

We can begin to answer this question by recalling that the "humble" language of the "rustic" that Wordsworth proposed to adopt in the lyrical Ballads was chosen because it "more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated" the "elementary feelings." This speech of the common man was at the opposite extreme from Donne's

idiosyncratic voice, though it also tried to avoid a poetic diction, for it represented not a private but a universal idiom, "arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings . . ." such as might be representative.<sup>4</sup> Though Wordsworth was interested in the presentation of character, he did not lean toward dramatic presentation; and when he tried to capture emotions, his method was chiefly reflective.

To pick up the thread of Donne's influence, we must turn from Wordsworth to Browning, and in doing so, turn from poetry created by the power of an often simple syntax to poetry created by the intensity of dramatic distortions. Here we find again the many-sided lyric voice that characterizes Donne, even though Browning was less conscious than Donne of projecting himself, conceiving instead of his poems as projections of the voices of other characters. Nevertheless, below the surface of Browning's "objectivity" lay the Donnean aspiration to stall fate by the exercise of linguistic virtuosity, to make of the lyric a more difficult music. In both Browning and Donne, poetry tried to act as a philosophical, in the sense of exploratory, instrument; this is one alternative it can take when the poet is no longer Sidney's "popular philosopher." Our reaction to this alternative need not be

nostalgic: much can be discovered in a season--to adapt  
the words of W.H. Auden in "1929"--when it was necessary  
to "find/An altering speech for altering things,/An  
emphasis on new names . . . "

## Footnotes

1

The significance of Dryden's remark (in Ker, ed., Essays of John Dryden, II, p. 19) is discussed by George Williamson in The Donne Tradition (New York: Noonday Press, 1958), pp. 216-17.

2

In "The Love Poetry of John Donne: Pedantique Weedes or Fresh Invention?" Metaphysical Poetry, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), pp. 35-36.

3

The Words are T.S. Eliot's in "Milton II," On Poetry and Poets, p. 181.

4

From Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of the Lyrical Ballads (1800), rpt. in David Perkins, ed., English Romantic Writers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), p. 321.

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