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Personalism in John Donne's Art

Phillip Shaw
Western Kentucky University

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PERSONALISM IN JOHN DONNE’S ART

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Phillip Daniel Shaw

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PERSONALISM IN JOHN DONNE'S ART

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This study examines personalism in John Donne's art: to what extent his poems are a product of his personality over and above conscious invention and artifice. It argues that Donne writes the way he does because, for the most part, he fails to attain distance from his work. The subjects that he writes about regularly are straight from his own life, and his take on them is highly personal. This paper brings in some biographical details but in general is concerned with scrutinizing Donne's writings in order to understand his imagination. Its primary method is to trace the repetition, resonance, and echoes of words, ideas, and themes throughout Donne's opus. Donne uses the same word or phrase repeatedly throughout his writings to dissect a single idea, so this essay discusses letters and sermons at the same time as love poetry and divine poetry. All are the product of a single imagination, and no genre necessarily precludes personalism.

The first chapter looks at Donne's approach to art. Because he rarely writes explicitly about art itself, his approach must be reconstructed from his work. An inter-chapter follows, examining the effect of apostasy on Donne's work. The second chapter treats Donne's memories of the past that appear frequently in his poems and prose. The third chapter shows how Donne's formal invention is itself a product of his irrepressible personality, and the fourth chapter looks at his uses of argument and conceit and examines the structure and sources of some of his ideas.
1. “Irremediably Donne”: Donne’s Poems as a Product of His Personality

Frank J. Warnke warns against reading Donne’s poems with a modern, or at least a postromantic, conception of lyric creation—that the lyric is a direct and sincere expression of the poet’s own experience. A consideration of Donne’s work as a whole ought to suggest the degree to which he shared with other Baroque poets a conception of the lyric as dramatic, fictive, and in the seventeenth-century sense of that term, “artificial.” (31-32)

This is a good suggestion in the abstract. But a consideration of Donne’s work as a whole suggests the degree to which his own imagination shapes his poetry and to which his personality dominates it. In his sermons, his letters, his love poems, and his religious poems, Donne is thinking about his own past. For instance, almost all of the infrequent personal references to himself in his prose discuss his conversion and his early Catholicism. In the Preface to Pseudo-Martyr he writes, “I used no inordinate hast, nor precipitation in binding my conscience to any local Religion. I had a longer worke to doe than many other men; for I was first to blot out, certain impressions of the Romane religion, and to wrastle both against the example and against the reasons, by which some hold was taken” (313). The subject is personal. In Biathantos, he explains that he often thinks of suicide and wonders whether it be, because I had my first breeding and conversation with men of supressed and afflicted Religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin’d Martyrdom; Or that the common Enemie find

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1 All prose quotations are taken (unless otherwise noted) from Charles Coffin’s The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne. All poetry quotations are from C. A. Patrides’s The Complete English Poems of John Donne.
that doore worst locked against him in mee; Or that there bee a perplexitie
and flexibility in the doctrine it selfe; Or because my Conscience ever
assures me, that no rebellious grudging at Gods gifts, nor other sinfull
concurrence accompanies these thoughts in me, or that a brave scorn, or
that a faint cowardliness beget it. (303)

Once again, he is writing about something that is deeply personal. This revelation
perhaps also alludes to one of his poems. Donne opens “Satire III” with the famous lines
“Kinde pitty chokes my spleene; brave scorne forbids / Those teares to issue which swell
my eye-lids.” The satire is about his apostasy; in fact, John Carey claims that it is “not an
account of a crisis but an operative part of one” (29). Donne confesses twice, then, that
when for some reason he thinks about his conversion, he feels “brave scorn.” His other
poems (as we shall see) are filled with religious images and allusions to heresies and the
religious controversies in which he so fervently took part.

Donne often puns on his name, another way of putting his personal stamp on his
work. In the first stanza of “A Hymne to God the Father,” for example, he writes,

Wilt thou forgive that sinne where I begunne,

Which is my sin, though it were done before?

Wilt thou forgive those sinnes, through which I runne,

And do run still: though still I do deplore?

When thou hast done, thou hast not done,

For, I have more.

Donne prays to God for forgiveness, but realizes at the end of the stanza that when God
forgives him, He still does not “have” him, for Donne still has more sins. That “done” is
“Donne” is obvious enough, but there is a slightly bitter pun on “More.” Donne does not only have more sins, but also Anne More, his wife. His love for her keeps him from God. Fortunately for him, by the end of the poem he realizes that “Thou haste done, / I feare no more” (17-18). These puns have the Shakespearean effect of self-realization of the speaker in the poem (“This is I, Hamlet the Dane”; “My name’s Macbeth!”); in this case, the speaker is Donne himself. This effect is intensified by Donne’s puns on his name in his personal life. In a letter to Sir George More, after Donne had married his daughter without his consent, the son-in-law writes,

Sir, I acknowledge my fault to be so great, as I dare scarce offer any other prayer to you in mine own behalf than this, to beleve this truthe, that I neyther had dishonest end nor meanes. But for her whom I tender much more than my fortunes or lyfe (els I wouuld I might neyther joy in this lyfe, nor enjoy the next), I humbly beg of you that she may not to her danger feele the terror of your sodaine anger. I know this letter shall find you full of passion; but I know no passion can alter your reason and wisdome, to which I adventure to commend these particulers; that it is irremediably donne; that if you incense my Lord you destroy her and me; that it is easye to give us happines, and that my endevors and industrie, if it please you to prosper them, may soone make me somewhat worthyer of her. (367)

According to tradition, Donne signed the letter, “John Donne, Anne Donne, Vndonne.”

At a moment of great personal pain, then, Donne thinks of his name. Also, marrying Anne More impulsively and without permission was most certainly an irremediably
Donnean thing to do. This letter is one of Donne’s most personal because his marriage to Anne More and his struggle with Sir George More were among the most difficult times in his life; in another letter from the same time, Donne writes, “The whole world is streight imprisonment to me” (369).

These letters give expression to deeply personal sentiments, as Donne himself acknowledges. In a letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, he says of letters in general that “No other kinde of conveyance is better for knowledge” (370). He cites Seneca’s letters and St. Paul’s. “But it is the other capacity which must make mine acceptable, that they are also the best conveyers of love” (370). Donne can best voice his love—and perhaps all his emotions—in letters. And in letters connected to matters of great personal importance, he puns on his name. Donne, self-conscious and self-realized, writes the letter as himself. When discussing the same topic, his wife, in his poems, he also puns on his name. This suggests Donne’s own personal stake in his poetry.

The themes and ideas that recur in Donne’s writings connect so closely to his personal life that they sometimes make him ashamed. For example, in a letter to Sir Henry Wotton, Donne writes:

to my satyrs there belongs some feare and to some elegies and these perhaps, shame. Against both which affections although I be tough enough, yet I have a riddling disposition to bee ashamed of feare and afrayd of shame. Therefore I am desirous to hyde them with out any over reconing of them or there maker. But they are not worth thus much words in theyre disprayse. I will step to a better subject [. . .]. (364)
He never boasts, as his contemporaries do, that he will make any one immortal by celebrating her in his poetry, though he believes such a thing is possible, for he says in “A Valediction: Of the Booke” that, “To anger destiny” (2) his beloved should “Study our manuscripts, those Myriades / Of letters, which have past twixt thee and mee, / Thence write our Annals” (10-12). This book would make them immortal—but, significantly, he has not written it. In “The Canonization,” Donne claims that the legend of the love between him and his beloved

will be fit for verse;

And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,

We’ll build in sonnets pretty roomes;

As well a well wrought urne becomes

The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombs,

And by these hymnes, all shall approve

Us Canoniz’d for Love. (30-36)

Even here, though, it is their love that causes the immortal poetry, not the poetry that causes immortal love. This is not the case in Spenser’s Amoretti, whose speaker’s poems “shall eternize” the “vertues rare” of his beloved (“Sonnet 75” 11). Nor is it true of Sidney’s Astrophel, who wants to write verse to display his love, so that his beloved “might take some pleasure of my pain, / Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know. / Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain [. . .]” (“Sonnet 1” 2-4). In some of the most popular poems of the Renaissance, then, the poet writes poems to immortalize or win love. But for Donne, poetry, like “The Canonization,” is the result, not the cause, of immortal love. And though the speaker of “The Canonization” improves
on "the Phoenix riddle," a more typical example of Donne's vision of his poetic immortality might be found in another poem: he is "re-begot / Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not" ("A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day" 17-18). In fact, Donne seems to suggest at one point that his poems lead not to "eternization" but annihilation: "Thou Love taughtst mee, by making mee / Love her, who doth neglect both mee and thee, / To'invent, and practise this one way, to'annihilate all three" ("The Will" 53-54).

Donne's poetry contrasts with Sidney's in another way. In *Astrophel and Stella* 1, Astrophel says that he studies other poets' "inventions fine," so that he may entertain his beloved's wits (6). But he has studied too much, and "words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay" (9). Invention, he says, is "Nature's child"; "Study" is its abusive "stepdame" (10). Three times Sidney mentions *invention*. It is for him the goal of the artist. Thomas Carew praises Donne for planting "fresh invention" in a garden overgrown with "Pedantique weedes" (25) and "The lazie seeds / Of servile imitation" (26-27). But Donne's inventions are actually a reflection of his personality (see Chapter 3). Even though Donne's poems are technically inventive, they are also deeply personal. For example, he knows that poetry alone, without a knowledge of love and its darker side, can make only weak art: "Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use / To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse" (11-12). Donne is doing more than mocking earlier poets; he may be anticipating a movement in poetry that becomes fully realized under the Romantics and (perhaps) culminates in the Confessional poets of the middle of the twentieth century, though of course his poems bear little resemblance to theirs. But Donne tries to capture love and religion as he felt it, and to do this his poems often get
personal. At any rate, metaphysical poetry might have been oddly conducive to personalism, for George Herbert, whose poems are so well wrought that they even look like angel’s wings, wonders,

Who says that fictions onely and false hair
Become a verse? Is there in truth no beautie?
Is all good structure in a winding stair?
May no lines passe, except they do their dutie

Not to a true, but painted chair? ("Jordan [1]" 1-5)

Herbert sees his task as a poet to find not invented or artificial beauty, but beauty in truth. That, he argues, is all he needs to know on earth, and all he needs to know ("I envie no mans nightingale" [13]). So even though Astrophel’s muse tells him, “Fool, [...] look in thy heart, and write” (14), what he finds is “invention, invention, invention.” When Herbert’s “friend” whispers to him to look in his heart, Herbert finds not invention but “a sweetnesse readie penn’d" ("Jordan [2]" 17). This sweetness is not “quaint invention” (3), which in fact had been interfering with his ability to write true poetry. When Donne looks in his heart, as he does in several places, what he finds is Catholicism and sex and death. He, unlike Herbert, can locate no truth, but, unlike Astrophel, it is truth he looks for.

John Donne’s poetry is a part of himself. In general, it is not only fictive or artificial; it is more than the creation of a brilliant wit. If that were the case, then any number of equally qualified poets who were his contemporaries might have written it. Its startling originality and force is a product of the same imagination that apostatised as a
young man, that feared betrayal, that read every religious book in print, that was interested in bodies and studied them scientifically (he published medical treatises), that was both rebellious against some authorities and truckling to others. Donne’s poems are recognizable as his own because of his extreme personalism. Each one of his best poems (and most of his worst) reflect his image or bear his stamp. He knew this, and he feared his own poems. But the constant, nagging intervention of his irrepressible, irremediable personality is to his credit. By presenting to his readers the world as he saw it, Donne helped to inaugurate a new age of poetry and increase its scope. Helen Gardner writes that “Donne’s strength as a preacher, as it is one of his greatest strengths as a poet, is that he constantly recurs, or brings us back, to the ‘real state of sublunary nature’ and to the ‘actual course of the world.’ As he preaches he speaks to men from the situation he and they are in” (Imagination 102). Donne knew the treachery, the ecstasy, and the fleetingness of love among sublunary lovers, as well as the torments of piety, and he captured them in verse like no poet before him. He was able to do this because, as we shall see, he constantly meditated over his own life, and his personality always managed to creep into his art.
Somewhere between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, John Donne lost the faith of his fathers and converted from the Roman Catholicism of his family to the Anglicanism of his country. He did this for three reasons, according to John Carey, the leading interpreter of the effects of Donne’s conversion: “he was ambitious, he was an intellectual, and he was reacting, in a not uncommon way, against the love and admiration he had felt as a child for his elders and teachers” (31). These causes are important because they are a product of the same personality traits that Donne exhibits in his poetry. The effects of his conversion, often responsible for much of the emotion in his poetry, can also be felt throughout it, so they should be examined alongside it.

Donne was ambitious. Catholicism stood in the way of his ambition because Catholics were prohibited from holding high offices and taking degrees at the universities; the doctor of “Dr. Donne” was possible only after his conversion. That Donne was as ambitious as Carey has made him out to be is disputed by many. It might be enough to say here that someone as intelligent as Donne would feel extremely frustrated by the restrictions placed on him because of his religion. He would, no doubt, search for freer movement, especially if his religious views tended toward moderation, as Donne’s did. At any rate, two chapters—“Apostasy” and “The Art of Apostasy”—in Carey’s book *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* strongly demonstrate the importance of Donne’s conversion on his work.

Donne’s reaction against his elders and teachers is important to note. He was descended from the family of Sir Thomas More. Two of his uncles, Jasper and Ellis Heywood, were fierce anti-Protestants who encouraged English Catholics not to placate
the Queen but to pursue martyrdom aggressively. Donne’s own brother died in jail after being incarcerated for harboring a priest. Fourteen of his family members from his own and preceding generations were martyrs. Of the exact number (probably around two hundred) of Catholics executed during the sixteenth century by Henry VIII and Elizabeth, estimates vary, but members of Donne’s family made up a measurable percent of the total. It is reasonable to assume that the Catholic terror affected him more than it did others, as indeed it did. The deaths of his family members weighed on his mind throughout his life. For example, in one of the few personal references in his prose works, he writes in *Pseudo-Martyr*: “I have beene ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stocke and race, as, I believe, no family, (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches,) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine” (310).

Donne grew to be rather intolerant of calls for martyrdom, though, since it was Jesuit martyrs (like his own family members) who gave the English such a strong distaste for Catholicism. To the Elizabethans, Catholics seemed more like terrorists than Christians. Donne was repulsed by intransigent Catholicism. He opens “Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” approving a quiet death. One should die, he says, “As virtuous men [who] passe mildly away, / And whisper to their soules to goe” (1-2)—quite the opposite of martyrs. In his poems, schools wrangle (“A Feaver” 13), and “Schismaticks” and “Roman Catholiques” are equally mocked (“The Will” 19-20). In his sermons, he tells vicious stories against Jesuits, and once proclaimed that letting a Jesuit escape England was like allowing a fox or a wolf to live. He preached, “As a father, as a master, I can preserve my family from attempts of Jesuits” (qtd. in Carey 35). As a preacher, he
was one of the most important proponents of the *via media*, second perhaps only to Lancelot Andrewes, who was less famous. Donne argues in his prose work *Pseudo-Martyr* that Catholics should take the Oath of Allegiance to the King. He writes against martyrdom by declaring that “no man by law of nature may deliver himselfe into a danger which he might avoide” (312). He also berates martyrs in *Ignatius, His Conclave*, a companion in spirit to *Pseudo-Martyr*, and depicts Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, as treacherous and dangerous. In that strange prose farce, Donne imagines Ignatius in Hell, holding the office of Satan’s advisor. The speaker calls Ignatius “a subtile fellow” (323) and a “French-spanish mungrell” (327), and says that “Ignatius [is] more subtil than the Devill, and the verier Lucifer of the two” (329). At the end of the story, Satan expels Ignatius from hell because he thinks the saint is too dangerous. All this lashing out was in part a reaction against Donne’s family and his early tutors. The son is adopting values antithetical to the father’s and defending them passionately.

Donne’s rebelliousness appears not only in his religious works but also in his secular writings. He makes fun of the previous generation of poets (even though he often echoes them—influence is not always willed or conscious), those “living before this age of wit,” who, he says, could find no way into a woman’s bed other than “by Tylting, Turnying, and riding through Forrests” (291). Often he is iconoclastically rebellious, shattering sacred conventions with his close-fisted wit. Take, for example, the sun. For many Renaissance and seventeenth-century poets, the sun was Phoebus, dutifully driving his golden chariot, deserving of praise because none but he could do it. Here is one of Spenser’s descriptions:
Now gan the golden Phoebus for to steepe
   His fierie face in billowes of the west,
   And his faint steedes watred in Ocean deepe,
   Whiles from their journall labours they did rest.

(The Faerie Queen 1.11.31.271-74)

And Robert Herrick, in “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” calls the sun “The glorious lamp of heaven” (5). Donne will have none of that. In “The Sun Rising,” for example, the Sun is “unruly” (1), a “Busie old foole” (1), a “Sawcy pedantique wretch” (5). The speaker “could eclipse and cloud [the Sun’s beams] with a winke” (13). For Donne, the sun has no gravitas, nor do most of the common themes of his predecessors.

Donne’s view of love reflects this rebelliousness. Love for Donne is almost always sexual, and never abstractly so. He is often in bed with his beloved, or just as often trying to get her there. Even the act of sex is not tempered by metaphor, only by a simile with religious undertones:

Licence my roaving hands, and let them go,
   Before, behind, between, above, below. [. . .]
   Full nakedness! All joyes are due to thee,
   As souls unbodied, bodies uncloth’d must be,
   To taste whole joyes. (“Elegie XIX” 25-35)

Donne’s poem is a dramatic scene in which he tries to convince his beloved to take off her clothes so that they can have sex. It contrasts with the (generally) abstract, Petrarchan, and courtly yearnings of the lovers of previous generations. Donne, then, was reacting both against religious extremism and poetic decorum. And yet the religious
simile suggests that Donne’s reaction was not a result of aesthetic values only. Something more personal was driving it. Donne’s reaction against poetic propriety is part of his rebellious personality and thus may be connected to his apostasy.

Donne’s apostasy is important in interpretation because, along with its causes, its effects appear in his writing. Apostasy was a flame that burned him, still painful years later, and still visible in his poetry. One of Emily Dickinson’s stanzas might be about Donne and apostasy:

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us—
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are— (5-8)

All of Donne’s obsessions that this paper will treat—death, religion, sex, appearances of reality—might be considered the head or the suppuration of the apostatic wound. Donne obsessed about death, for example, because when he changed religions, he faced very real dangers, both during life and in the afterlife. By choosing Protestantism, he was essentially choosing eternal damnation, at least from the perspective of his upbringing. And Donne believed in the torments of hell.

Religious ideas torture and plague Donne like boils and tumors, as if he were the victim of the old Spanish curse. Donne often associates religion and death. The link may be most obvious in *Biathanatos*, a prose work which attempts to justify suicide as an act that was not necessarily immoral. These religious ideas can be felt in his poetry, too. “Satire III” is an intimate look at Donne’s apostasy, not just at what he is thinking but at
what he is feeling: “Kinde pitty chokes my spleen; brave scorn forbids / Those tears to issue which swell my eye-lids; / I must not laugh, nor weepe [. . .].” (1-3). In the poem, Donne desires a single, attainable truth. As he envisions it, the only way to arrive at truth is through intellectual labor:

on a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,
Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night.
To will, implies delay, therefore now doe.
Hard deeds, the bodies paines; hard knowledge too
The mindes indeavours reach, and mysteries
Are like the Sunne, dazzling, yet plaine to all eyes [. . .]. (79-88)
The tor is cragged and ominous and not easily surmounted. It is in the foreground, and whatever is in the background is duskily concealed. Donne does not set truth in a pasture, surrounded by lowing cattle, but in a surreal landscape, like that in Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.” Surreal settings are common in Donne; the love poems are often lit by blinking candles or lightning. Even his comic poetry is haunted by nightmarish figures, like “The eight-fōot-high iron-bōund séerving-mán,” all eight feet of whom must be filled with spondees (“Elegie IV. The Perfume” 31). All these images may be a result of his conversion and the terror he endured before and because of it.

Another lasting effect of Donne’s apostasy was his learning. At the time of his apostasy, he began a reading program which he did not quit until he died. R. C. Bald,
Donne’s standard biographer, reports that Donne was “by habit an avid and voracious reader, who to aid his memory formed at an early age the habit of taking systematic notes, and almost everything in print seems to have come under his eager scrutiny” (48). Much of Donne’s reading was religious, an attempt to solve his crisis. Donne writes that he “surveyed and digested the whole body of Divinity, controverted betweene ours and the Romane Church” (Pseudo-Martyr 314); Walton verifies this (Lives 25). When he was young, Donne rose at four in the morning to read, and at his death selections were found from 1400 authors, “most of them abridged and analysed with his own hand” (Walton 66). The ideas that Donne read about appear regularly in his poetry, as we shall see, and, as Evelyn Simpson, an editor and interpreter of his prose, points out, “outworn controversies, and lumber inherited from the Fathers and Schoolmen” fill his prose (Simpson 11). Both his wide-ranging allusions and his tendency to argue with fine distinctions and controversions—the mode of religious discourse of his day—indicate his voluminous reading.

Sex reflects both a cause, rebelliousness, and an effect of Donne’s apostasy. Long after he was married and began earning a reputation for himself as a citizen, he continued to write sexually explicit lyrics. In 1641, Sir Richard Baker offered this pithy description of Jack Donne, the young rake of London from four decades before: he was “not dissolute, but very neat; a great visiter of Ladies, a great frequenter of Playes, a great writer of conceited verses” (Smith 1: 126). How many ladies he visited and what exactly constitutes a visit are debated, but when he was young Donne probably saw enough beds to know that “Variety” is “Loves sweetest Part” (“The Indifferent” 20). We can imagine, too, that he sought refuge in sex when he could find none in religion, though there is only
poetic (no biographical) evidence for that conjecture. Bald reaches the conclusion that "One does not claim that Donne, before marriage, was devoid of all sexual experience, but rather that he was not the licentious figure that some of the elegies might suggest" (7). Bald's assessment should be accepted. The sexual and emotional realism of Donne's poetry indicate that Donne probably had some sexual experience, at least enough to allow him to understand the dynamics of sexual politics. However, one might compare him to Mark Twain, who wrote about sex all his life, and even privately published some pornography, but who was nonetheless almost certainly a virgin when he married at age thirty.

During middle age, Donne's early writings embarrassed him. He sent a copy of *Biathantos* to Sir Robert Ker, and asked the borrower to "Keep it, I pray, with [. . .] jealousy; let any that your discretion admits to the sight of it know the date of it, and that it is a book written by Jack Donne, and not Dr. Donne. Reserve it for me if I live, and if I die I only forbid it the press and the fire [. . .]" (Gosse 2: 124). Walton tries to show that this distinction between Dr. Donne and Jack Donne is real, but it is not. Donne's habitual thoughts and images recur throughout works written at all times during his life. The same is true of his love poetry, too. Some of the most explicitly sexual lyrics were written late in Donne's life, after he had married and begun writing religious poetry (e.g., Warnke 6-7). His constant thinking about sex is a result of his apostasy because he was probably most promiscuous around the same time as his conversion (a young man, not yet married). That the apostasy wounded him deeply is the best explanation for his repeated—and sometimes disturbing—linkage of sex to religion.
Many of Donne’s youthful attitudes became a permanent part of his personality. Not just the obsession with sex, but the rebelliousness persists, for example. A plausible explanation for this is that the wound from his apostasy never healed, and so his preoccupations—sex, rebelliousness, betrayal, death, past sins—stayed with him the rest of his life.

Donne’s religious difficulties, then, help explain three important characteristics of his writings: his obsession with the past, the subject of the second chapter of this essay; his repeated themes and poetic rebelliousness, especially in the form of strong lines and controversions, the subject of the third chapter; and his use of argument and conceit, the subject of the final chapter. Most importantly, though, apostasy may be a primary source of Donne’s extreme personalism. Because his imagination was captivated by his apostasy and his early Catholicism, and because he frequently writes about these, he is rarely able to separate himself from his writing. His most characteristic and effective writing depends not so much on his “invention” or “art” or “artificiality,” faculties praised by his contemporaries, but on his irrepressible personality, which forces its way into his best art. His apostasy and his obsession with religion is both a cause and the most obvious manifestation of that personalism.
2. "Blacke Memorie": Donne, His Past, and Uncertainty

Walt Whitman, opposite of Donne in that his poetry strives for the universal while Donne's is bound by the personal, writes that he “could turn and live with animals” because “They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins” (218). He is parodying a man like Donne, who spends a lot of time in both his poems and his prose remembering the past. Mostly, the past for Donne is sin. “I have sinn’d, and sinn’d,” he writes in “Holy Sonnet XI” (3). He asks in “A Hymne to God the Father,” “Wilt thou forgive that sinne which I did shunne / A yeare, or two: but wallowed in, a score?” (9-10) Indeed, he prays in “Holy Sonnet IX” that on the Day of Judgment God will not remember his sins but forget them:

Oh! of thine onely worthy blood,

And my teares, make a heavenly Lethean flood,

And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie;

That thou remember them, some claime as debt,

I thinke it mercy, if thou wilt forget. (10-14)

The balanced final two lines are typical of Donne the rhetorician; the sentiment is typical of Donne the man.

Donne prays that Christ’s blood and his own tears will mix in a Lethean flood and erase his sins. The image is a bit gruesome, but again, typical of Donne, who is always interested in bodily fluids. In “Elegie VIII. The Comparison,” for example, Donne writes about an ugly woman: “Ranke sweaty froth thy Mistresse’s brow defiles, / Like spermatique issue of ripe menstruous boiles” (7-8). This fascination with the human body is one of the many parallels between Donne and Marcus Aurelius, whose description of
the body is a lot like Donne's: "As one already on the threshold of death, think nothing of
the [flesh]—of its viscid blood, its bones, its web of nerves and veins and arteries" (45).
Donne writes, "My body [is but] a sack of bones" ("Elegie V" 9). And Marcus Aurelius
elsewhere observes, "What do the baths bring to your mind? Oil, sweat, dirt, greasy
water, and everything that is disgusting. Such, then, is life in all its parts, and such is
every material thing in it" (125). When Donne looks at people, he sees their bodies. In a
sermon on Psalme 32, he even preaches about throats and the "Adams apple" (461).
Seeing the body as a body is part of Donne's realism. The human face for him is not a
garden, not "A heavenly Paradise [. . .] / Wherein all pleasant fruits do flow" as it is for
Campion (3-4). The nipple on Julia's breast is, for Donne, a nipple, not "A red rose
peeping through a white" or "else a cherry (double graced) / Within a lily center-placed"
(Herrick "Nipples" 2-4). His body is a sack of blood and bones and semen; it is the soul's
house and will decay, as all houses do. Even Christ's body is made of the same stuff
(though "Christs body did not see corruption, [. . .] because God had decreed it shold
not" [Deaths Duell 583]), and he wants Jesus's blood and his own tears to wash and
purify him. Donne paradoxically is fascinated by the body while striving to disdain the
sins that come as a result of it. It is the mystical side of his personality colliding with the
realistic side.

When Donne remembers past sins, he often thinks of the human body because his
own sins were primarily sexual—or so he would have us believe. But even as a young
man he thought of old age as a time when people dwell on the sexual encounters of their
youth. In "Elegie IV. The Perfume," for example, Donne writes about his beloved's
mother, who is suspicious of the young couple and, in order to learn just how physical is
her daughter’s relationship, retells “The sinnes of her owne youths ranke lustinesse” (24). When he grew old he began to think back on his sins, sometimes with pleasure, sometimes with pain. In “A Funeral Elegie,” Donne writes about “aged men [who] are glad / Being tastelesse growne, to joy in joyes they had” (51-52). Likewise, in “An Anatomie of the World (The First Anniversarie),” Donne thinks about “Old Grandsires” who “talke of yesterday with sorrow” because it has passed (131). In “Holy Sonnet XIII,” Donne remembers his “idolatrie” and his “profane mistresses.” He links pleasure again with the past in “Holy Sonnet I”: “I runne to death, and death meets me as fast, / And all my pleasures are like yesterday” (3-4). Two of the Holy Sonnets, “III” and “XIX,” treat past sins at length, but it should be noted that remembering the past is not confined to Donne’s poetry. In “The Second of My Prebend Sermons upon My Five Psalms,” a sermon preached on January 29, 1625/6, Donne writes,

Let me wither and weare out mine age in a discomfortable, in an unwholesome, in a penurious prison, and so pay my debts with my bones, and recompence the wastfulnessse of my youth, with the beggary of mine age; Let me wither in a spittle under sharpe, and foule, and infamous diseases, and so recompence the wantonnesse of my youth, with that loathsomnesse in mine age. (517-18)

And in his final sermon, Deaths Duell, Donne preaches, “Our youth is worse than our infancy, and our age worse than our youth. Our youth is hungry and thirsty, after those sinnes, which our infancy knew not; And our age is sory and angry, that it cannot pursue those sinnes which our youth did (581). In his sermons and in his secular and sacred
poetry, in his youth and his old age, Donne is caught up in the remembrance of things past.

Two of the Holy Sonnets explore remembrance and past sins. The first, “Holy Sonnet III,” is full of words that resonate throughout Donne’s work.

O might those sighes and teares returne againe
Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent
That I might in this holy discontent
Mourne with some fruit, as I have mourn’d in vaine;
In mine Idolatry what showres of raine
Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?
That sufferance was my sinne; now I repent;
‘Cause I did suffer I must suffer paine.
Th’hydroptique drunkard, and night-scouting thiefe,
The itchy Lecher, and selfe tickling proud
Have the remembrance of past joyes, for reliefe
Of coming ills. To (poore) me is allow’d
No ease; for, long, yet vehement grieve hath beene
Th’effect and cause, the punishment and sinne.

The “sighes and teares” of the first line are common in Petrarchan poetry, but they nonetheless recall the opening lines of “Twicknam Garden,” one of the Songs and Sonets:

Blasted with sighes and surrounded with teares,

Hither I come to seeke the spring,

And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,
Receive such balmes, as else cure every thing [. . .].

In “Twicknam Garden,” the poet comes to partake of the balms in the garden to cure his battered spirit. Balms in turn appear in “A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day”: “The generall balme th’hydroptique earth hath drunk, / Whither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunke, / Dead and enterr’d” (6-8). This ghastly scene “seemes to laugh, / Compar’d with me, who am their Epitaph” (8-9). The word “hydroptique,” of course, reappears in “Holy Sonnet III,” describing the drunkard. Donne is a four dimensional poet, flying up to heaven, crashing down to Earth, riding Westward while looking Eastward (in “Goodfriday 1613”), and living in the present while remembering the past. In order to pin him down at any one place, a reader must triangulate his meaning, tracing words back and forth through his poems. This is possible because his thought processes really did not change, though some of his ideas did. He uses the same images and words over and over, sometimes to say exactly the opposite of what he has said before.

In “Holy Sonnet III,” Donne wants the sighs and tears to return. He is trying to mourn, he is in a state of “holy discontent,” but there is no “fruit” of his emotion. It is because of this hollowness that he elsewhere prays for God to batter his heart. Here, Donne remembers his “Idolatry,” as he does in “Holy Sonnet XIII.” In his idolatrous—he probably means Catholic or sinful—youth, he cried showers of tears. He has now repented, but he still suffers. He is different, he continues, from other sinners, because his idolatry produced nothing but frustration. He has nothing to think back upon fondly, and even worse, his idolatry was the source of his current discontent. Drunkards and lechers, on the other hand, found what they were looking for and can joy at least in what they
have done by remembering it. Perhaps their “remembrance of past joyes” echoes

Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XXX”:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unused to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.

But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.

Shakespeare writes that when he is recollecting the past in tranquility, he sighs at “the lack of many a thing he sought” and “weeps afresh love's long since cancell'd woe”; he weeps for many a rose-lipt maiden and many a lightfoot lad. He feels the past as if it were real. And yet, when he thinks of his “dear friend,” “All losses are restored and sorrows end.” Donne’s allusion to Shakespeare (whether intended or not) shows by contrast the disorder of Donne’s emotional state in this sonnet. Donne would be relieved if he could feel even the way that Shakespeare feels in the first twelve lines of his poem. If only
Donne could cry, if only he could sigh, then he would be happy. He wants to feel *something*; after all, words without feelings do not to heaven go. But, "To (poore) [Donne] is allow’d / No ease." The reprieve that Shakespeare ultimately enjoys is not available to Donne in this sonnet.

Donne’s poem ends on an explanatory paradox, that the grief that he was forced to feel for punishment of his idolatry was in itself a sin that keeps him now from weeping. This may reflect an early Jesuit influence, which in turn enriches Donne’s personalism and memory. After a scrape with the law for sexual misconduct, the Marquis de Sade wrote a letter that echoes Donne’s poem; in it, Sade asks, “How many redemptive actions must I engage in to be allowed to see into myself! Give me the means to do so, I beg you, monsieur, by permitting me to visit with a priest. Through his good guidance and my sincere repentance, I hope to soon be allowed to share in the sacred emotions whose very neglect was the principal cause of my ruin” (qtd. in Du Plessix Gray 68). Sade’s biographer, Francine Du Plessix Gray, comments that this statement constitutes a “very Jesuitic ‘examination of conscience’” (68; for more on the Jesuit influence on Donne’s “Holy Sonnets,” see below, Chapter Four). She explains this:

The Jesuit’s attitude toward the sacrament of confession affected him [Sade] deeply. The importance of diagnosing the roots of our sinfulness is emphasized more by Jesuits than by any other Catholic order. In their view, the diligent dissection of trespasses is at the core of the spiritual life. It could even be said that Jesuit-style confession tends to be lenient toward sin by valorizing the process of analyzing it. (39)
Donne’s sins were hardly Sade’s, and Donne’s reader is struck by his honesty, while
Sade’s letter is “most cunningly” constituted (du Plessix Gray 68). Still, their instincts
seem to be the same, and the men have in common a Jesuit upbringing. They both strive
for redemption and analyze themselves to find it. They both feel what is lost as a result of
sin. Donne’s poem, then, both remembers his past and remembers it in such a way
(Jesuitically, in the honest sense) as to bring his past to mind once again.

Complexities and tergiversations characterize Donne’s divine poems. He wants to
feel but cannot; he could feel when he sinned, but emptiness defines his piety. Donne
knows how he is supposed to feel, yet he cannot feel it. The “Holy Sonnets” are the
torturous explications of a soul trapped between the past and the future, between sin and
salvation, longing for either.

The last Holy Sonnet, “XIX,” not printed until the nineteenth century, is Donne’s
ultimate statement in that sonnet series about his spiritual indirection.

Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vowes, and in devotione.
As humorous is my contritione
As my prophane Love, and as soone forgot:
As ridlingly distemper’d, cold and hott,
As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day
In prayers, and flattering speaches I court God:
To morrow I quake with true feare of his rod.

So my devout fitts come and go away

Like a fantastique Ague: save that here

Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare.

"Contraryes meet in one"—that summarizes Donne's spiritual condition, full of irony and paradox, even at its best state. And once again Donne puts forth a paradox, that he has made a constant habit of inconstancy. He changes vows and devotion, even when he does not want to. One might ask here whether this flux were not a result of a single initial change, his public renunciation of Catholicism. Typically, as he does when anything resembling religious change appears in his poems, he thinks about his "prophane Love" and remembers his past. His contrition is as "humorous" as was his love, and as fickle. Having mentioned humor (as in the four humors of the body), he pursues it in "distemper'd." He then lumps opposites side by side, indicative of his vacillation: prayer, silence; infinity, nothing. In the past, he writes, he dared not look toward heaven, yet today he courts and flatters God. But tomorrow he will quake with fear. He is inconstant; his "devout fitts come and go [. . .] / Like a fantastique Ague" (12-13). This fantastic Ague is another reference to the human body and its ailments, though of course here it is referring to a spiritual malady ("fantastic" may mean both "large" and "of the faculty of fantasy").

Throughout his poems and prose, then, Donne is constantly reminded of his youth, his love affairs, his "Idolatrie." Although his divine poems are public and meant to be read (as opposed to Biathanatos), he makes it clear by his constant references to women and religion that his condition is a result of his own past. Donne is not searching
for lost time, but he is remembering things past, and his poems are those of a man who has not come to terms with who he has been or with what the world is. This remembrance unsettles him, and he can be steady only in his unsteadiness. He can find truth only in paradox; for him, something so straightforward as “whatever is, is right,” is not possible. Complexity characterizes all his work, from his love poems, which are often nasty, brutish, and short, to his sermons, which are ornate and eloquent. He belongs to a long tradition of thinkers, quite apart from Plato and Aristotle (though Donne alludes to those two frequently), who have an unsettling intellect that is more likely to find uncertainty than certainty. These include Thucydides, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Hobbes, and Nietzsche. and possibly even the ancient Cynics, Skeptics, Stoics,¹ and even Epicureans. Indeed, sometimes Montaigne’s words could be Donne’s own: “My conception and my judgment move only by groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering; and when I have gone ahead as far as I can, still I am not at all satisfied: I can still see country beyond, but with a dim and clouded vision, so that I cannot clearly distinguish it.” And, he says of himself as an author, “I hold myself in pity and disdain” (“On the Education of Children” 6).

An early hypothesis of the origin of the West Nile Virus in America is that a disoriented African bird could find no place to land, so she soared across the Atlantic Ocean in a single flight before she found rest. She is like Donne, who sometimes soars to great heights but only rarely finds solid ground to land on. He moves only by groping, stumbling, and blundering; for long periods of time, he cannot rest. And, at least according to some of his own accounts, he carries with him a disease.

¹ Dennis Flynn interprets Donne’s early motto, Antes muerto que mudado. “as a version of the Senecan heraldic motto, Non moveri; and thus as part of Renaissance aristocracy’s absorption of Roman Stoicism in order to fortify itself against unusually dangerous and unstable times” (9).
And yet sometimes Donne does enjoy moments of emotional repose and calm, though they are still fraught with paradox and intellectual energy. Such a moment occurs in “Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.” He opens the poem with a conceit, “Let mans Soule be a Spheare.” The intelligence that moves the celestial spheres should also guide his soul. But just as the heavenly spheres are often deflected from their proper course, so his soul often gets distracted by “Pleasure or business” (7). “Hence is’t,” he says, that I am carried towards the West

This day, When my Soules forme bends towards the East
There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,
And by that setting endlesse day beget;
But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,
Sinne had eternally benighted all. (9-14)

His soul’s form leans toward the East because it is Good Friday, but his body is carried westward on business.\(^2\) If he were in the East, he says, he would see a “Sunne, by rising set.” This paradox puns on sun/Son, and works because Jesus, who according to theology dies and is reborn every year, rises on the cross to his death, but by his death (his setting) begets endless day. For if Jesus had not risen and fallen on the cross, Donne explains, Sin would have eternally benighted all.

\(^2\) Incidentally, despite the personalism that this paper postulates, we need not assume that Donne was actually riding westward on Good Friday in 1613, though he may well have been. He did write poems about events in his life. The Valedictory poems describe his departure for the continent on business, and “Holy Sonnet XVII” is about the death of his wife. Moreover, he confesses that one of the “ordinary forges of Letters” to his friends is on “the high way, where I am contracted, and inverted into my self” (377). So there may have been a specific (if unrecorded) moment on the highway which sparked this meditation.
This spectacle is so intense that Donne is “almost [. . .] glad” that he does not witness it. It is “too much weight” for him (15-16).

Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
What a death were it then to see God dye?
It made his owne Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.
Could I behold that endlesse height which is
Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,
Humbled below us? or that blood which is
The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
Made durt of dust, or that flesh which was wonne
By God, for his apparell, rag’d, and torne? (17-28)

Donne wonders what must happen if one sees God Himself die, since even seeing His living face means death. Nature shrank before the spectacle of Jesus’s death; the Sun winked. Donne then catalogues the awesomeness.

In the next lines, Donne’s mind changes direction. Even too much awe of the magnitude of God, like too much irony, can be tiring. An Anglican for over a decade, Donne then thinks about Mary (could it be that the “winking” sun has reminded him of one of his youthful poems, “The Sunne Rising,” and thus of Catholicism?):

If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
Who was Gods partner here, and furnish’d thus
Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom’d us? (29-32)
Donne claims that Mary is half responsible for the salvation of humanity; God, for the other half. The adoration of Mary is a vestige of Catholicism that never left him; he died with a picture of her in his house. At any rate, Catholicism haunts him here, as it does in many of his poems, especially his best. Were this poem written by any of his Protestant contemporaries, these four lines would have been omitted. They are not necessary to the poem, though they do add effect. This poem bears the indelible mark of Donne’s imagination.

He continues:

Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
They’re present yet unto my memory,
For that looks toward them; and tho look’st toward mee,
O Saviour, as thou hang’st upon the tree;
I turne my backe to thee, but to receive
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
That thou may’st know mee, and I’ll turne my face. (33-42)

Though Donne is looking away from Jesus’s tattered rags and His mourning mother, he thinks about them in his memory, which always looks toward them. (His memory did indeed always look toward Mary.) Donne addresses Jesus, pleading that he only turns his back to receive corrections, until he is granted mercy to turn. Donne wants to be worth Jesus’s anger and punishment. He wants to be God’s coin: “Burne off my rusts,” he begs,
and stamp your impression on me (Donne) again. Stamp me “so much” that you will
know me, and I’ll turn my face, he concludes. “I’ll turn my face” is one of the happier
moments in Donne’s poetry. For once he has come to terms with his contradictory course
through life and expresses hope for his future. His emotional state here contrasts sharply
with that in the Holy Sonnets. He has authentic feelings and hope here, rather than just
yearning.

The poem has motion in all four dimensions. Donne looks up to God, down to the
antipodes, westward on his horse, eastward in his mind, and backward through time. He
is moving away from God. But, he realizes, this is proper; he needs correction. In time,
he will turn. “Be still, and know that I am God” is not a commandment that Donne could
ever listen to. Donne is himself like a planet that not only moves around in the solar
system, orbiting the sun, but also turns on its axis. Though his spirit is less troubled here
than in some of the Holy Sonnets, it maintains a high level of energy. It is typical of
Donne that he seeks not eternal rest in God, not requiem aeternam, but motion toward
ultimate union. Were Donne a composer, he would write Mozart’s Requiem mass, with
its fearful Dies irae, not Faure’s, with its quiet and repeated “requiem aeternam.” Even in
one of the most serene Holy Sonnets, “X,” Donne does not pray to reach quietly the
“short sleep” of death, but to wake eternally after it.

In his own life, Donne did not value rest and sleep. After contracting an illness, he
reported difficulty sleeping; but “it is no strange thing,” he writes to Mrs. Cokain, “that I
do not sleep well; for, in my best health, I am not much used to do so” (412). His large
body of writings testifies to his tirelessness. Donne’s energy may be part of his larger
philosophy. Friedrich Nietzsche, whom I have located in the same tradition as Donne,
mocked “sages” who over-valued rest and sleep. “Honor sleep and be bashful before it,” Zarathustra hears a wise man say. “And avoid all who sleep badly and stay awake at night.” Zarathustra scoffs; “Blessed are the sleepy ones: for they shall soon drop off” (140-41).

Donne’s mind was restless and indefatigable. In his life, he suffered periods of insecurity and even danger, which he never forgot. His mind worked over them continually. His poetry captures moments of great despair, of absolute “holy discontent.” But at other times all his energy and motion unite with his great intellect to create islands of emotional calm, where even his black memory can rest. In “Goodfriday 1613,” Donne seems content all but to acknowledge his repressed Catholicism and embrace his own personality. The contrast between this poem and many of the Holy Sonnets demonstrates Donne’s range as a poet. And yet they are both obviously the product of a single imagination, for they both remember Donne’s early life—his Catholicism, apostasy, idolatry, and profane mistresses.
3. “Masculine Persuasive Force”: Donne’s Manner, Meter, and Form

Thus far I have primarily spoken of Donne as an unsettled, disturbed, and problematical poet. It should be remembered, though, that he was original and imaginative, as his contemporaries knew. William Drummond of Hawthornden, for example, was probably referring to Donne when he wrote to his friend Dr. Arthur Johnston about “transformers of everything” who have “consulted upon [poetry’s] reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to metaphysical ideas and scholastical quiddities, denuding her of her own habits and those ornaments with which she hath amused the world some thousand years” (Masson 357). Dryden and Dr. Johnson later picked up on Drummond’s hint, and because of them the accepted word for poetry in English in the style of Donne is *metaphysical*. Ben Jonson famously called Donne “the first poet in the World in some things” (1: 135). Donne was aware of his own originality, too. In a 1614 letter asking for money from his generous friend Sir Henry Goodyer, Donne writes, with an odd twinge of self-deprecation that we have seen before, that he knows his poems are “startling” and that he “shall suffer from many interpretations” because of their unconventionality (Gosse 2: 68). Donne’s originality lies in part in his peculiar use of form, diction, and meter. Arriving at an understanding of Donne’s formal originality is important because his poetic forms intensify his striking thoughts, and both reflect a small group of obsessions. These obsessions—death, religion, unity and uniqueness, sex, and especially apostasy—are a reaction against normal Renaissance modes, and are part of a larger movement that has been variously categorized as “baroque” or as “mannerism.”
In a verse letter, "To Mr. S. B.,” Donne writes “I sing not, Siren like, to tempt; for I / Am harsh” (9-10). And harsh he is, as critics have discovered. C. A. Patrides, for example, begins his introduction to Donne’s poetry by commenting, “Donne is in the first instance coarse” (14). Donne can write lines so terse that they are comprised almost entirely of spondees; take for example this line from “A Valediction forbidding mourning”: “Cáre lésse, éyes, lips, hánds to misse” (20). Six out of seven syllables are accented. It is for muscular lines like this that Ben Jonson wickedly pronounced, “Done for not keeping of accent deserved hanging” (1: 133).

Donne’s coarseness is apparent throughout his career and not only in his meter. In his youthful “Satyre II,” for example, he writes about unoriginal poets in almost obscene and irreverent language:

But he is worst, who (beggarly) doth chaw
Others wits fruits, and in his ravenous maw
Rankly digested, doth those things out-spue,
As his own things; and they are his owne, ‘tis true,
For if one eate my meate, though it be knowne
The meate was mine, th’excrement is his owne:
But these do mee no harme, nor they which use
To out-doe Dildoes, and out-usure Jewes;
To out-drinke the sea, to out-swear the Letanie [. . .]. (25-33)

This adequately represents Donne’s relationship, as he saw it, to the poetry of his time; it also reveals how foul his mouth could be. And this selection is no exception; “Dildoes,” for example, appear elsewhere, in the Elegies. His diction, then, matches the exuberance
of his meter. His diction is also religious, and often Catholic. He writes of Schoolmen, canonization, and angels so often that readers are apt to overlook them. (Donne’s “angel lore” in particular is “precise and abundant” [Tillyard 43]). When Herrick writes,

Bid me to live, and I will live

Thy Protestant to be:

Or bid me love, and I will give

A loving heart to be,

critics spend a great deal of time reckoning what “Protestant” does and means (“To Anthea, Who May Command Him Anything” 1-4). But Donne’s poems are inundated with politico-religious terms; they are at its deep heart’s core.

Donne’s verse is harsh and sinewy. In “Elegie [XVI]. On His Mistris,” Donne speaks of the “masculine persuasive force” of his words (4). In “An Elegie upon the death of the Deane of Pauls, Dr. John Donne”—which is “the seventeenth century’s most perceptive exercise in literary criticism” (Patrides 15)—Carew writes of Donne’s “masculine expression” (39). Josephine Miles’s analysis has proved Donne and Carew right (as much as modern gender wisdom may have proved them wrong), showing that Donne uses two more verbs per ten lines than the average poet. He also uses six to twelve more connectives, placing him in this respect in a category of his own among English poets from any time period (Miles 275). Because of the verbs and connectives, John Carey has observed: “Words are packed into the poems like boulders, and the voice clambers over them,” which occasionally gives the effect of making the “verse form [. . .] seem the wrong size” (117). He is echoing Carew, who writes that
to the awe of thy imperious wit
Our stubborne language bends, made only fit
With hér tóugh-thick-rib’d hoópes to gird about
Thy Giant phansie, which had prov’d too stout
For [. . .] soft-melting Phrases. (49-53)

Carew writes Donnean lines, full of spondees, to drive home his point that Donne bends
the language for his own use. Donne’s style, then, is brash and active and complex, and it
matches the rest of the formal elements of his poems.

Add form to his originality, along with his meter, diction, and style; for none of
the Songs and Sonets known to be Donne’s are sonnets, and most of them make use of a
verse form that he employs only once—Patrides calculates the ratio of unique to repeated
verse forms as four to one (20). A striking example of Donne’s form can be found in
“Song (Goe, and catche a falling star).” The rhyme scheme is ABABCCDDDD; the
number of syllables per line is consistent throughout the three stanzas (with one
exception), and is 7, 7, 7, 7, 8, 2, 2, 8. The form is so irregular that the stanzas look top
heavy, like a cube teetering on the tip of a cone. Look at the first stanza, single-spaced for
proper visual effect:

Goe, and catche a falling starre,
Get with child a mandrake roote,
Tell me, where all past yeares are,
Or who cleft the Divels foot,
Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,
Or to keep off envies stinging,
And finde
What winde
Serves to advance an honest minde.

The lines sound uneven, too. The two short lines do not seem to be able to support the
longer ones preceding them; they trip the reader up not only because they are short, but
because they are iambic, while the other lines are trochaic. The form depicts the off-
balance nature of the content and gives a clue about how to read the poem—not too
seriously. Take for example the lines, “And sweare / No where / Lives a woman true, and
faire” (16-18). These lines are misogynistic, to be sure, but without malice, it might be
argued, because the poem that they are in stumbles upon itself with self-conscious
clumsiness, rather like Chaucer’s “Tale of Sir Thopas.” It might be concluded that in
variety and originality of form, among poets unafraid to use rime and meter, perhaps only
Hardy outdoes Donne.

These blunt instruments make Donne Donne. It is true that both Jonson and
Sidney average the same number of verbs per line as Donne (Miles 276) and that there is
plenty of obscenity and hyperbolic invective in Renaissance verse (such as Shakespeare’s
“You mad mustachio purple-hued maltworms” and “You fustilarian! I'll tickle your
catastrophe!”) But the connectives give Donne’s poems the particular philosophical,
Scholastic quality that is uniquely his own (Miles 275). It is in the connectives that
Donne’s argument turns back on itself, that the poems undercut themselves, that the
arguments are reined in by exceptions. Most of the Songs and Sonets, as Miles has
shown, start out by making strong statements or asking questions which require support,
but digress as they continue and are often undermined by a counterstatement; Miles
writes: “This pattern and its resultant feeling, the loving support of a strong and even
excessive demand by a resolving of all the exigencies, and a saving resolution by a shift
into human terms, constitute a metaphysic” (276-77). That is, however striking or
straightforward Donne’s opening lines seem to be—“For Godsake hold your tongue, and
let me love” (“The Canonization”), “When I dyed last” (“The Legacie”), “Spit in my face
you Jewes, and pierce my side, / Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee” (Holy Sonnet XI”)—they are frequently followed by however and yet, by ifs, ands, and buts, which open the poem to other possibilities. This method of composition, along with the formal elements already examined, is at the heart of Donne’s “metaphysic.” One cannot know the meaning or significance of a conversation without considering how it is spoken; one cannot hear what Donne says without knowing how he is saying it. And he is saying it with connectives and restructions.

“The Good-Morrow” provides an example of Donne’s use of connectives and voltes-face and as the usual first poem in his Songs and Sonets introduces many of his characteristic themes and obsessions:

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov’d? were we not wean’d till then?
But suck’d on countrey pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers den?
T’was so; But this, all pleasures fancies bee
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desir’d, and got, t’was but a dreame of thee.

And now good morrow to our waking soules,
Which watch not one another out of feare;
For love, all love of other sights controules,
And makes one little roome, an every where.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have showe,
Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest,
Where can we finde two better hemispheares
Without sharpe North, without declining West?
What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.

The poem opens with a typically memorable line-and-a-half: “I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I / Did, till we lov’d?” To explore this question, Donne asks three more: “were we not wean’d till then? / But suck’d on countrey pleasures, childishly? / Or snorted we in the seven sleepers den?” (2-4). The answer is, “T’was so” (5), but these new questions have introduced both religion and inappropriate sexuality into what seemed a straightforward love lyric. The seven sleepers were early martyrs, Christian youths who fled persecution and, according to tradition, slept for two hundred years—that is how the religion has sneaked in. The sex creeps in perhaps in the word “countrey.” Hamlet puns on the word, and the rest of “The Good-Morrow,” as we shall see, supports the suggestion of vulgar, and therefore inappropriate, sexual words, even at this early point in the poem. The religion and the sex anticipate the forthcoming undermining of the central idea. Moreover, the poet has already included an “and,” a “but,” and an “or”; another “but” and an “if” remain in the stanza.
All past pleasures were only fancy, the poet continues, and all women were but a
dream of his beloved. Fancy and dreams contribute to the theme of appearance versus
reality, which pops up frequently in Donne, often in coins, mirrors, or even the shadows
of bubbles. Immediately, though, Donne undercuts his own statements. She is the woman
of his dreams, he tells her, and here he reaches a point where more prudent men would
stop talking. But he goes on, mentioning all the women he has desired in the past. It is
possible at this moment to imagine the visage of his beloved assuming a quizzical
expression. And yet he still does not stop; he adds, “And got,” as only he could. Here we
can feel her pulling away from him, for who, while in bed with her lover early in the
morning, wants to hear of his past encounters? Perhaps he notices her draw back, too, for
he throws in “t’was but a dreame of thee,” hastily ending the first stanza with a
comparatively long breath unit and opening the second on a new subject.

“And now good morrow to our waking soules” (8), he tells her, but he keeps
talking and undercuts this as well: “to our waking soules / Which watch not one another
out of feare” (8-9). He has introduced an element of fear, of jealousy, into a dialogue in
which there was none before. If two lovers are not suspicious of each other, there is no
reason to bring up fear. But in the first stanza he was thinking about his past experiences,
and that has led him to bring up suspicion in the second.

The poet continues, claiming that true love controls all love of everything else.
Space collapses around it; love “makes one little roome, an every where” (11). Donne
elsewhere asserts similarly: “She’is all Sates, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is” (“The
Sunne Rising” 21-22). But as he says this in “The Good-Morrow,” he refutes it, for he
starts to think about sea-discoverers and new worlds and maps. One little room is not an
everywhere; too many other places come to mind. The whole universe is hardly contained in their bubble room. While in this room, though, he continues, "Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one" (14). Here is Donne's desire for absolute union and exclusivity, which appears in many poems. It is theological in a sense, as the next stanza makes clear. It should also be noted, in keeping with Miles's thesis, that two of the lines in this stanza open with connectives, and three with hortatory subjunctives—three "Let"s which link their lines together. These "Let"s form an anaphora which develops Donne's idea and gives rhetorical support to his argument, as if the poem were a university exercise.

Donne opens the third stanza by looking at his beloved, but all he sees is himself. Such egotism is also characteristic of Donne. He tells her that he can see her sincerity in her face: "true plain hearts do in the faces rest." This seems winsome enough, but it is unsupported by the rest of the poem. Elsewhere Donne refutes his own assertion; in "Twicknam Garden," he says, "Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine" (24). Moreover, looking in her eyes this early in their love life and proclaiming her unlikely to cheat is an odd way of courting. But it is the sort of thing that one learns to expect from Donne, and from Donne only.

Having gotten the idea of the new world in his head—even though he claims that all space has collapsed and that he is only thinking about the girl before him—he asks, "Where can we finde two better hemispheares / Without sharpe North, without declining West?" (17-18). North is mythically associated with cold, West with death, and the entrance of these into the poem, even to deny them, undercuts the speaker's attempt to claim that their love is pure and secure and warm. The final triplet draws upon Scholastic
philosophy, of which Donne read much. The verse declares that nothing correctly blended will "slacken" or "die"; he hopes that their love is so equally mixed. (It was believed that sickness and death were the result of improper mixture of the bodily humors; St. Thomas wrote that "corruption is not found except where contrariety is found; generation and corruption arise from contraries and in contraries" [qtd. in Daiches 185]). This wish for perfect mixture follows up on the desire for unity that he expressed in the second stanza.

Donne opens the poem with "I," his concern throughout, and ends it with "die," another of his obsessions. Between the two, he brings in maps and the world, jealousy, unity and exclusivity, religion, and Scholastic philosophy. His argument contradicts and falls back on itself, and it demonstrates the connectives that Miles analyzed. He does all this in an aubade, a poem celebrating morning. All these characteristically Donnean elements emerge from a meditation on time, both on the time of day and on time in general, for, as David Daiches points out, the first stanza concerns the past, the second the present, and the third the future (178).

"The Good-Morrow," then, is full of the stylistic qualities—statements and retractions, connectives and controversies—that Miles identifies. The context of the poem shows why Miles's analysis is significant. Donne does not use "and" and "but" to fill feet but to guide the reader down the channels and alleys of his thought, to explore all the possibilities and ramifications of an initial statement or sentiment. He cannot rest at peace with absolutes, no matter what his first lines say; his is the realm of qualification. This is why his poetry has been described aptly as "metaphysical."
Two portraits and the overall pattern of Donne's life provide an interesting metaphor for his poetic style. In general, his life might be summarized thus: he was born into a prominent Catholic family, grew up believing strongly in his religion, ultimately apostatized to Anglicanism for a number of complicated reasons, got married, subsequently lost his employment, struggled to succeed at anything, eventually took orders, and became Dean of St. Paul's and the most popular preacher of his day.

A young Catholic in a country where the Protestant government tortured Catholics, Donne escaped to take a tour of the Continent, travelling to Spain, Italy, and France, all (significantly) Catholic countries. In 1591, his nineteenth year, Donne had a portrait made, probably a miniature, of which William Marshall later made an engraving.

![Portrait of Donne in 1591](http://www.ncsu.edu/johndonne/)

Fig. 1. Engraving of Portrait of Donne in 1591. http://www.ncsu.edu/johndonne/

In the picture, Donne rather awkwardly holds a sword, projecting an air of defiance. His hair is long and curly, and a fuzzy moustache is beginning to cover his upper lip. He has earrings, and his doublet is cut to make him look broad-shouldered and trim. There is a
motto in the upper right-hand corner, *Antes muerto que mudado*: “Sooner dead than changed.” Scholars have demonstrated great energy in interpreting both picture and motto, which definitely exude defiance and confidence. William Empson has suggested that the Spanish of the motto is significant, as if a young American in his time were to display a motto in Russian (Carey 23)—or today, perhaps, in Arabic. The words, “sooner dead than changed,” are so striking that they might be a first line of one of Donne’s own poems. And they are even more appropriate considering that not many years later Donne did change. He forsook Catholicism and became an Anglican; his life undercut his own boasts. He wrote a book that attracted the king’s attention and was urged to take orders. He refused at first, but then changed his mind again (Gosse 2: 101). He advanced quickly in the church after ordination; the king, after all, had insisted that he become a minister and had intended him to have a successful career.

Donne preached, often about death or the condition of the body after death, until he himself grew sick unto it. Then, he preached his own funeral sermon, “Deaths Duell.” He consented to a monument being erected over his grave, designed it himself, and posed for it. Donne sent for materials and for someone to sketch the picture that would later be used to craft the monument. Walton reports the scene:

“Several Charcole-fires being first made in his large Study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand, and, having put off all his cloaths, had this sheet put on him, and so tyed with knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed, as dead bodies are usually fitted to be shrowded and put into their Coffin, or grave. Upon this *Vrn* he thus stood with his eyes shut, and with so much of the sheet turned aside as
might shew his lean, pale, and death-like face, which was purposely
toward the East, from whence he expected the second coming of his and
our Saviour Jesus.” In this posture he was drawn at his just height and
when the Picture was fully finished, he caused it to be set by his bed-side,
where it continued, and became his hourly object till his death [. . .]. (78)

![Donne in His Death Shroud](http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/pictures.html)

Fig. 2. Donne in His Death Shroud. http://isu.indstate.edu/ilnprof/ENG451/ISLAND/pictures.html. This image, an engraving of the original picture, was affixed to a volume of sermons.

Donne preached his own death sermon and posed for his own grave monument. This man is obsessed with death. Note also that even at his death he was thinking about East and West, just as he had in his poems written decades earlier. The “lean, pale, and death-like
face” of Walton’s description (which does not quite match the engraving) seems to glare at the ghastly images of dead bodies that appear throughout his work; if only a sick and winking taper were glinting in his eyes, the image would be complete. Like “The Good-Morrow” and the earlier portrait, the engraving is stamped with Donne’s personality. If we did not know that was he in the picture, we could guess. Donne’s life, full of strong statements and retractions, of dramatic scenes, and of obsessions about death and east and west, imitated his art.
Montaigne seeks “in the reading of books, only to please myself, by an honest diversion; or, if I study, ‘tis for no other science than what treats of the knowledge of myself, and instructs me how to die and how to live well” (195). Many of Donne’s poems meditate on death. Some might even be called thanatopses—“A Valediction of My Name in the Window,” “A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day, Being the Shortest Day”—but the first stanza of “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” constitutes a thanatology, a lesson (in Montaigne’s words) that instructs how to die well. According to the poem, one should die

As virtuous men passe mildly away,

And whisper to their soules, to goe,

Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,

The breath goes now, and some say, no. (1-4)

To die quietly, according to this poem, is to die virtuously.

Donne did not always think that a quiet death was best, however. At the very end of his life, he reconsidered this position. In Deaths Duell, the sermon he preached only weeks before his own death, Donne writes,

The tree lies as it falles, it is true, but it is not the last stroake that fells the tree, nor the last word nor gaspe that qualifies the soule. Stil pray wee for a peaceable life against violent death, and for time of repentance against sudden death, and for sober and modest assurance against distemperd and diffident death, but never make ill conclusions upon persons overtaken
with such deaths; *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis, to God the Lord*

belong the issues of death. (587)

Donne realizes that virtuous people’s lives sometimes end violently; what matters is not the way they die but the state of their souls at death. Helen Gardner, cited earlier for her comments on this sermon, notices that “Donne’s strength as a preacher, as it is one of his greatest strengths as a poet, is that he constantly recurs, or brings us back, to the ‘real state of sublunary nature’ and to the actual course of the world.’ As he preaches he speaks to men from the situation he and they are in” (*Imagination* 102). We are also reminded of Miles’s idea that Donne’s poems end in “a saving resolution by a shift into human terms” (277). Donne cannot content himself with positive statements that allow no exceptions because his primary interest as a preacher is to help his congregation. If there is someone who hears his message and who is an exception, she needs to hear the exception. Donne’s demeanor in the pulpit reflects this concern for his congregation. As Walton describes it, Donne was

a Preacher in earnest; weeping sometimes for his Auditory, sometimes with them: always preaching to himself, like an Angel from a cloud, but in none; carrying some, as St. Paul was, to Heaven in holy raptures, and inticing others by a sacred Art and Courtship to amend their lives; here picturing a vice so as to make it ugly to those that practised it; and a vertue so as to make it beloved even by those that lov’d it not; and all this with a most particular grace and an unexpressible addition of comeliness. (49)

Donne’s contemporaries write of him as preaching with “Humility,” “gravity,” and “mildness”; one distinguishes him from the “Sons of Zeal” who “fiercely [. . .] storme” in
their pulpits “to reforme / Their hearers” (qtd. in Gardner Imagination 104). Thus, Donne’s sermons are the product of his devotion and his earnestness, not of his theatricality. His words represent, in short, what he sincerely believes, not what he wants to act out on a particular day. If Donne contradicts himself in his works, it is because he changes his mind. He does this occasionally. However, his mind continues to work in the same way throughout his life. He is always willing to qualify or retract what he has said before, just as he is unwilling to accept any absolute decrees. Deaths Duell, then, expresses almost the opposite idea of “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” that people can die virtuously in a variety of ways. No matter how much he loathes those who die spectacular but unneccessary deaths (specifically Jesuit martyrs), at the end of his life Donne realizes that he cannot declare that one type of death is more virtuous than another, so he reconsiders, and preaches the opposite opinion.

About a quarter century before he preached Deaths Duell, though, Donne had confessed to have a different viewpoint from either the sermon or the poem—in Biathanatos, a prose treatise examining the “paradox [. . .] that selfe-homicide is not so naturally a sinne, that it may never be otherwise” (303). Donne’s thesis exhibits the qualifications that occur in his poetry. “Not so naturally” and “may [not] never be otherwise” are elaborate litotes. Suicide is not always wrong, he writes, carefully creating a nuance that allows him to avoid writing that suicide is right. In Biathanatos, Donne confesses that “whensoever any affliction assails me, mee thinks I have the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine own sword” (304). Indeed, Donne confesses that he often has “a sickly inclination” to take his own life (303). This admission is very human. Suicide is not a quiet, peaceful
death, brought on by old age, or by any of death's masters, "Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men" ("Holy Sonnet X" 9).

Donne wrote at least three conflicting accounts of virtuous deaths. One cannot excerpt lines or opinions, therefore, and claim to have discovered "Donne." It is better to understand the mechanisms of Donne's mind than to isolate certain ideas. How Donne works is as important as what Donne says. Indeed, how he speaks, as we have seen, often undermines his purported meaning. But he uses other techniques than connections and controversies. Specifically, his use of argument and conceit shapes his thoughts to such an extent that they cannot be taken out of context easily. This is the case in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning."

In "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" a quiet death is a measure of character, the ultimate manifestation of Stoic virtue. The courage expressed in the first stanza echoes throughout the poem but is given a specific voice in the next lines:

So let us melt, and make no noise,

No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,

T'were prophanation of our joyes

To tell the layetie our love. (5-8)

This stanza completes the first conceit; just as a virtuous person dies quietly, so should the speaker and his beloved express their love restrainedly. Donne describes his love in religious terms: "profanation," "layetie." As in "The Good-Morrow," he juxtaposes love, death, and religion. Here, love and death together give off an air of quiet dignity, which is intensified by the long "o"s and all the "s"es: "passe," "whisper," "soules," "some," "sad," "say," "So," "noise," "sigh-tempests"; "goe," "no" (repeatedly), "no noise,"
“joyes.” These two sounds appear in most of the important words in the stanzas and magnify the meaning of the words. The meter also calls attention to these words: “teare-floods” and “sigh-tempests” are spondees.

Also as in “The Good-Morrow,” ideas stick in Donne’s mind. He develops an idea in one stanza that he had mentioned in a previous one. The third stanza thus picks up “teare-floods” and “sigh-tempests”—that is, the upsetting of the earth.

Moving of th’earth brings harmses and feares,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the sphareas,
Though greater far, is innocent. (9-12)

Astrologists came up with the concept of the trepidation of the spheres to explain why stars were not always where they were supposed to be according to the Ptolemaic system. By Donne’s time, more accurate explanations of the solar system had been devised. Donne was aware of them, of course—he knows enough of Copernicus’s theories to condemn their author to Hell—but he ignores them here. Frank J. Warnke offers an important insight, not to be forgotten when reading Donne’s poems: “one must take note of Donne’s deep-seated intellectual conservatism,”—the damned men in Ignatius, His Conclave are all “innovators”—“curiously co-existing not only with his fascination with new ideas but also with the radical and experimental nature of his artistic techniques” (89). Warnke then contrasts Donne to Milton, who was politically radical but artistically conservative (89). This “curious co-existence” is another characteristic contradiction in Donne’s thought.
Donne continues the astronomical metaphor in the fourth stanza and in the fifth finally brings the metaphors to bear on himself and his beloved:

Dull sublunary lovers love

(Whose soule is sense) cannot admit

Absence, because it doth remove

Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love, so much refin’d,

That our selves know not what it is,

Inter-assured of the mind,

Care lesse, eyes, lips, hands to misse.

The speaker has finished with his astronomical references and has turned to alchemy, as indicated by “elemented” (16). He develops this allusion later with “refin’d” (17) and “gold” (24).

Alchemy and chemistry, like astronomy and astrology, were still closely related in Donne’s time. For example, alchemy is the principal concern of more than a third of Sir Isaac Newton’s writings. However, even though “science” as we know it was invented by the Victorians, its prototype was being developed in the seventeenth century. Sir Francis Bacon died after catching cold trying to understand the freezing properties of snow on chickens, and other scientists were experimenting at the same time, including Harvey, Huygens, and Pascal. Donne’s younger contemporary George Herbert criticizes alchemists in “Vanity (1).” He calls their work “subtle” (15), a word that meant not only “Characterized by penetration, acumen, or discrimination” but “insidious” and
“treacherously or wickedly cunning” (OED). Subtle is also the name of the eponymous character in Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist. (It is this connotation of “subtle” that Donne uses in his descriptions of Ignatius in his farce.) Alchemy, then, was already a morally and scientifically suspect pursuit among Donne’s contemporaries. His use of it here indicates once again his intellectual conservatism.

In the next stanza, Donne comes to his point:

Our two soules therefore, which are one,

Though I must goe, endure not yet

A breach, but an expansion,

Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate. (21-24)

Because they are not sublunary lovers, their love will not break at his leaving, but will expand, malleable as gold. This is a conceit of “concentrated and brilliant wit” (Warnke 48). In it, Donne’s alchemical allusions find gold, for he has not just continued with the ordinary Renaissance similes comparing a woman’s locks to gold, but, by comparing their love not to the appearance but to the metallurgical properties of the element, he has sifted through all the dust and found a sparkling nugget. Donne has turned to his advantage what had threatened to be tired and suspect references to alchemy and astronomy. The conceit provides an example of how Donne’s poems sometimes go down well-trodden paths, but then bring home something new when they return.

In the final three stanzas of the poem is perhaps Donne’s most famous conceit. The lovers’ souls are one, the speaker says, or

If they be two, they are two so

As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the’other doe.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth rome,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And growes erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
Like th’other foot, obliquely runne,
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne. (25-36)

Donne opens the poem by thinking about death and brings in sex imagery at the last. But the imagery here is unusual for him because he reverses sexual attributes. His beloved stays home but “growes erect.” Her “firmness” makes his “circle just.” One might consider the possibility that a woman is speaking these lines, and not entirely without justification. Three of the Songs and Sonets are spoken by women: “Confined Love,” “Breake of Day,” and “Selfe Love” (possibly spurious). Donne also wrote the first lesbian poem written in English, “Sapho to Philaenis” (Patrides 189), which has a woman speaker. However, the close connection between “A Valediction” and Donne’s own life makes a woman speaker unlikely. The reason he reverses the images, perhaps, is generosity. Donne does not look into the eyes of his beloved and see himself, as he had in “The Good-Morrow”; instead, he sees her sadness. The love is still sexual, as it always is,
but it is not only sexual, but sublime. He loves all of her, and he does not want her to be sad. To convey that to the reader, he reverses attributes; the focus is not on sex but on love.

Another reason that Donne reverses the genital images is to show union. Even though the lovers are apart, he writes, they will still be united. Such a union suggests sex, during which (of course) two bodies merge into one. Sexual union resonates deeply in Western literature, from the transcendent mystics who sought sexual union with Christ (as Donne does), to the vulgar, who, like Iago, emphasize even in crude metaphors the union brought about by sex—it is “the beast with two backs.”

In “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” as in “Good Friday 1613,” Donne reaches rare heights, even for him. He looks beyond himself; he crafts a poem which builds upon itself; he mixes smooth and rough lines effectively. In this poem, many of his familiar themes appear—death, sex, learning, religion, union, maps (on which the compass would be used). But they appear in fresh and exciting ways. “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” is an excellent example of how Donne works when he is at his best.

Argument is another hallmark of Donne’s style. His poems are filled with complicated arguments, sometimes sublimely ridiculous ones, either to get a girl into bed (“The Flea”) or get God into bed (“Holy Sonnet XIV”) or quarrel with a girl or with God. “The Flea” is a famous example. One flea bites the speaker and his beloved, mingling their blood. There is now no reason to abstain from sex, according to the speaker, since the flea has seen to it that “wee almost, yea more than married are” (11). Note the
epanorthosis, which adds a realistic touch, as if he believes what he is saying. His argument continues for two stanzas, after which it fails, because (Cruell and sodaine!) she kills the flea. He then viciously turns his argument against her and ends with an ambiguous triplet: "learne how false, feares bee; / Just so much honor, when thou yeeld’st to mee, / Will wast, as this flea’s death tooke life from thee" (25-28). Is he arguing that when she yields to him, she will lose no honor because the sex act is not dishonorable, or because she has no honor, having lost it long before? It is not possible to know. It is a subtle end to a poem filled with fine, specious arguments.

Arguments pile on top of arguments in "A Feaver," even more rapidly than in "The Flea":

O doe not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,
That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember, thou wast one.

"O do not die" is a natural thing to say to a beloved on her deathbed. Donne gives voice to the urges inside people—to spitefulness, anger, scorn, love, fear of betrayal, and frustration. His urgency in this poem contrasts sharply with his self-possession in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," but there he was talking about departure, not death. Here, he does not want his beloved to die, and he expresses his longing by giving her a command she cannot possibly fulfill. And yet for all his love of her, it is he who immediately becomes the subject of the poem: it is "I [who] shall hate." The argument of this stanza, to keep her from dying, is that he will grow to hate all women and so will no
longer celebrate her memory because she is a woman, and he will hate women. The logic
is brilliantly convoluted.

The speaker’s command stays in his mind, and he realizes that it is ludicrous, but
not for the reason we would suppose. He continues:

But yet thou canst not die, I know,

To leave this world behinde, is death,

But when thou from this world wilt goe,

The whole world vapors with thy breath.

Since his beloved cannot stay, the world will die with her. He is making her into a cosmic
principle. He develops this in the next stanza:

Or if, when thou, the worlds soule, goest,

It stay, tis but thy carkasse then,

The fairest woman, but thy ghost,

But corrupt wormes, the worthyest men.

Carey comments that the stanza contains “typically Donnean exorbitance. The upsurge
towards the unmatchable is a constant mark of his poetry. His soul felt impelled to reach
for peaks and zeniths” (100). Such peaks and zeniths are the hallmark of hyperbole, one
of Donne’s favorite rhetorical strategies (Redpath 348); consider, “Thou art so truth, that
thoughts of thee suffice, / To make dreames truths; and fables histories” (“The Dreame”
7-8). Donne seeks absolute truth but knows he cannot find it and rarely hides his
disappointment. In “A Feaver,” Donne keeps his disappointment quiet, but the poem
represents only the first variable in the Donnean formula, hope or elation; he does not
give it time to arrive at the second, disappointment. In “A Lecture upon the Shadow”

Donne notices that, in the morning of love,

to brave clearness all things are reduc'd.

So whilst our infant loves did grow,

Disguises did, and shadowes flow,

From us, and our cares [. . .]. (8-11)

However, the sun will pass overhead, and shadows will grow. Shadows are jealousy or
death or all things that bring an end to love. The poet concludes: “Love is a growing, or
full constant light; / And his first minute, after noone, is night” (26-27). “A Feaver” has
no shadows; it should be read alongside “Twicknam Garden,” where Donne comes to the
poem already disappointed.

The fourth stanza of “A Feaver” provides a slightly discursive look at philosophy:

O wrangling schooles, that search what fire

Shall burne this world, had none the wit

Unto this knowledge to aspire,

That this her fever might be it?

The Stoics thought that the world would end in conflagration; early Christians agreed.

Various sects contended about the source of the fire. Donne develops the allusion in two
concise lines and then brings the poem to his beloved again. He displays both his wit and
his learning and argues that her fever will be the source of the ultimate inferno.

The fifth stanza is a doctor’s argument; the poem moves from eschatology to
philosophical medicine:

And yet she cannot wast by this,
Nor long beare this torturing wrong,
For much corruption needfull is
To fuell such a feaver long. (13-16)

The idea of corruption leading to death always fascinates Donne; we have seen it before in “The Good-Morrow”: “What ever dyes, was not mixt equally” (19). It is perhaps more appropriate here than there, for here he is discussing disease.

The last two stanzas also repeat images he uses elsewhere:

These burning fits but meteors bee,
Whose matter in thee is soone spent.
Thy beauty, ’and all parts, which are thee,
Are unchangeable firmament.

Yet ’twas of my minde, siesing thee,
Though it in thee cannot persever.
For I had rather owner bee
Of thee one hour, than all else ever.

He has made the girl into a cosmic force and now is thinking in those terms. The fevers are meteors, signs of improper mixture at the cosmic level, but she is unchangeable, and therefore eternal, firmament. Once again, Donne knew that the Ptolemaic system had been discredited: he jokes in Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions that the rotation of the earth makes him “giddy” (454); he admits that the earth is “round” and has only “imagin’d corners” (“Holy Sonnet VII” 1). In Ignatius, His Conclave, the speaker admits that Copernicus spoke the truth; his detractors, falsehood (324). Donne himself perhaps
tells us, in a sermon “Preached at the Funeral of Sir William Cokayne” on December 6, 1626, why he uses the metaphors of both the Ptolemaic and the modern systems: “I need not call in new Philosophy, that denies a settledness, an acquiescence in the very body of the Earth, but makes the Earth to move in that place, where we thought the Sunne had moved; I need not that helpe, that the Earth it selfe is in Motion, to prove this, That nothing upon Earth is permanent [. . .]” (526). He picks and chooses his metaphors not for their implications but for their poetic feasability and malleability. Thus, the Earth revolves around the Sun when he needs the world to be impermanent; when he wants to emphasize corruption, the Sun revolves around the Earth, as in “Meditation II”: “The Heavens are not the less constant, because they move continually, because they move continually one and the same way. The Earth is not the more constant, because it lyes stil continually, because continually it changes, and melts in al parts thereof” (416). Donne’s use of both the Copernican and Ptolemaic solar systems provides a good example of how his specific understanding of a theme is not as important as how he uses it.3

Donne’s conceits build layer upon layer, and for their richness they require versatility. Gardner offers a definition of “conceit” that has an almost Donnean modification: a conceit is “a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or, at least, is more immediately striking” (Poets 19). Most immediately striking about the compass in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” are the many obscure parallels to its tenor—Coleridge thought that “Nothing was ever more admirably made

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3One cannot be too hard on Donne for his poetic mixture of Ptolemy and Copernicus. After all, as Umberto Eco points out, “Today we know that the Ptolemaic hypothesis was scientifically false. And yet, if our knowledge is by now Copernican, our perception is still Ptolemaic: we not only see the sun rise in the east and travel through the arc of the day, but we behave as if the sun turns and we remain immobile. And we say, ‘the sun rises,’ ‘the sun is high in the sky,’ ‘it sinks,’ ‘it sets.’ Even your astronomy professors speak Ptolemaically” (16-17).
out than the figure of the Compass” (Smith 1: 268). Likewise, the various arguments in “A Feaver” are interesting in their development—or, at least, are more immediately interesting. Underneath, there may be profound connections, not readily apparent and buried by wit. It is neither safe to draw too many hasty conclusions from Donne’s metaphors nor to ignore them altogether.

Thus, in “A Feaver” and in “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” we find alchemy and astronomy, two subjects that fascinated Donne because they provide microcosms, appearances of entire realities. Donne shares the Renaissance fascination with appearances; his poems are full of images that are really images of images. In “A Valediction: Of Weeping,” for example, Donne writes three stanzas, each of which concerns a representation of a reality:

Let me powre forth

My teares before thy face, whil’st I stay here,
For thy face coines them, and thy stampe they beare,
And by this Mintage they are something worth,
For thus they bee
Pregnant of thee;
Fruits of much griefe they are, emblemes of more,
When a teare falls, that thou falls which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore.

In this first stanza, Donne cries, and his teares reflect the image of his beloved. They are thus like coins, and they are valuable like coins because they are pregnant with her. “Pregnant” is doubly appropriate because they contain her as a womb does a baby and
because they are swollen, as if pregnant. They are fruits of much grief because they fall
because of his sadness, and yet they are also emblems of more grief because her picture is
in each one. Like fallen tears, he and his beloved “are nothing then, when on a divers
shore.” (Like “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” this poem may have been
occasioned by Donne’s trip to the continent.)

Images are not only contained in coins and tears and reflections but also in maps
and globes, which are images of the world. Donne brings in globes in the second stanza:

On a round ball,

A workeman that hath copies by, can lay

An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,

And quickly make that, which was nothing, All:

So doth each teare,

Which thee doth weare,

A globe, yea world by that impression grow,

Till thy teares mixt with mine doe overflow

This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so.

Lest we miss that Donne is talking about images, he makes his globe a blank one, on
which a workman will draw an image of the earth from other copies. It is an image of an
image of an image. On a globe, or any of Donne’s favorite microcosmic images, the poet
can “quickly make that, which was nothing, All.” He can make “One little roome, an
every where,” or at least he can try. This, in a sense, seems to be what Donne aims for in
poetry. What he generally hits when he aims, though, is apparent at the end of the last
stanza:
O more than Moone,
Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy spheare,
Weepe me not dead, in thine armes, but forbeare
To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone;
Let not that winde
Example finde,
To doe me more harme, than it purposeth;
Since thou and I sigh one anothers breath,
Who e’r sighes most, is cruelllest, and hastes the others death.

In keeping with what we have seen, Donne mentions “heaven” and “waters” at the end of the second stanza and thinks about the moon and the tide in the third. The last two lines, “Since thou and I sigh one anothers breath, / Who e’r sighes most, is cruelllest, and hastes the others death,” are like the mention of fear and jealousy in “The Good-Morrow.” Donne’s own fears and jealousies creep into the poem. (Donne is king of his poetic realm, and each poem is a coin, stamped with his image.) The reason that Donne is interested in appearances is because with them he can make that which was nothing, all, but also because the appearance is as tenuous as reality. Bubbles pop, tears fall, and fleas are crushed. These images capture not only reality’s essence, but also its fleetingness.

Finally, it should be noted that Donne echoes the last two lines of “A Feaver”— “For I had rather owner bee / Of thee one houre, than all else ever”—in “Loves Usury”:

For every houre that thou wilt spare me now,
I will allow,
Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee,
When my browne, my gray haires equall bee” (1-4).
And also perhaps in “The Legacie”: “And Lovers houres be full eternity” (4). Donne has been criticized for all this repetition. C. S. Lewis, for example, wrote that “Some scraps of learning […] come rather too often—like soldiers in a stage army” (68). But the repetition throughout Donne’s poetry forces readers to compare his use of an idea or image in one poem to his use of it in another. The repetition also indicates how close to his heart many of these themes are. His repeated themes, use of argument (from his reading), and development in one stanza of thoughts stated earlier (as if he cannot stop himself from talking), appear throughout his poetry, secular and religious. Like the connectives, diction, form, and meter examined in the previous chapter, these techniques are essential features of Donne’s style and constituents of his personalism.

Keeping all this in mind is helpful when reading Donne’s poetry, which is filled with allusions, arguments, theology, and, of course, personalism and memory. “Holy Sonnet XIII,” for example, tries in fourteen lines to make use of many (perhaps too many) of the techniques that can be found throughout Donne’s body of work.

What if this present were the worlds last night?
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,
The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
Whether his countenance can thee affright,
Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light,
Blood fill his frownes, which from his pierc’d head fell
And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
Which pray'd forgivenenesse for his foes fierce spight?

No, no; but as in my idolatrie

I said to all my profane mistresses,

Beauty, of pitty, foulnesse onely is

A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,

To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,

This beauteous forme assures a pitious minde.

Complications arise almost immediately and continue throughout the poem, even through the final couplet. The poet imagines that this night is the world’s last and contemplates the figure of the crucified Christ. Donne apostrophizes his soul, which, he notes, dwells in his heart. The soul was generally thought to live not just in the heart but in every part of the body, a doctrine handed down from Augustine. Donne usually follows Augustine, as he does elsewhere on the abode of the soul. In a letter to Mrs. Cokain on the death of her husband, for example, Donne writes with the ingenuity of mind that characterized the philosophy and theology of some earlier ages, “Our Souls are trulie said to be in everie part of our bodies; but yet, if any part of the bodie be cut off, no part of the soul perishes, but is suckt in to that soul that remains, in that that remains of the body” (406). Why then does he write differently in “Holy Sonnet XIII”? Perhaps because a phrase from one of his love poems escapes him. In “Elegie V. His Picture,” Donne writes, “Here take my Picture; though I bid farewell, / Thine, in my heart, where my soule dwells, shall dwell” (1-2). Whether consciously or not, he has spoken words in prayer that he had once spoken to a woman. They are also words that Sidney’s Astrophel has spoken, in “Astrophel and Stella 1”: “Fool, [. . .] look in thy heart, and write” (14). Herbert later
echoes them, too, in “Jordan (2),” as we have seen. At a conscious level, Donne is probably appropriating secular themes and dedicating them to God. But the problem is complicated by the words “No, no” (9). These may also echo an earlier poem, “Elegie XII. His Parting from Her”:

Oh Love, [. . .]
Is’t because thou thy self' art blind, that wee
Thy Martyrs must no more each other see?
Or tak’st thou pride to break us on the wheel,
And view old Chaos in the Pains we feel?
Or have we left undone some mutual Rite,
Through holy fear, that merits thy despight?
No, no. The falt was mine, impute it to me,
Or rather to conspiring destinie,
Which (since I lov’d for forme before) decreed,
That I should suffer when I lov’d indeed. (13-24)

Donne answers, “no no” to a series of questions, the content of which perhaps recurs in a different Holy Sonnet, “III.” There, Donne claims that the feelings he expended during his youthful love affairs are “both th’effect and the cause, the punishment and the sin” of his current languid state; here, his earlier love “for forme” has interfered and made him suffer in love. The phrases and thoughts that originate and arguments in Donne’s love poetry (and in Sidney’s; Stella says “No, no” to Astrophel) but appear here perhaps make him think too much about the women to whom those earlier poems were addressed.

Having invoked these muses, they appear, later in the sonnet (9-12).
The literary antecedents of the poem lie not only in Sidney (and the Petrarchan convention) but also, oddly enough, in the writings of the mongrelous butt of Donne’s farce, St. Ignatius of Loyola. “Holy Sonnet XIII” completes an Ignatian Spiritual Exercise, by reckoning on the status of salvation on the Day of Judgment and by contemplating the image of Jesus on the cross. What is to be made of Donne’s use of the ideas of a man whom he scathes elsewhere? Probably not too much. Scholars have shown that Ignatius’s *Exercises* were part of the intellectual currency of Donne’s day, and many seventeenth century writers reflect their influence. If nothing else, Donne was appropriating them, as he did secular poems, for his own religious ends. Or perhaps Donne’s latent Catholicism seized on them since they (like his incessant quoting of Augustine) allowed him to confess it in a socially acceptable way.

There is yet another possible allusion at the end of “Holy Sonnet XIII,” to Spenser. What if it were the end of the world, Donne imagines; how would he fare? He commands his soul to examine the image of Jesus on the cross to see if His tears and blood frighten him. Can “that tongue adjudge thee unto hell, / Which pray’d forgiveness for his foes fierce spight?” (7-8). Happily, “No, no.” He argues that when he had sex with women, he tried to convince the beautiful ones that, because of their beauty, they ought to be merciful. He tells his soul, “To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign’d / This beauteous forme assures a pitious minde” (13-14). That is, the image of Jesus on the cross is beautiful; therefore He will have pity on him in the final judgment. John Carey reads the poem as relying on “logic [that] is patently worthless [. . . and even] gruesome. We cringe from the blasphemy” (47). Even David Edwards, the staunchest modern defender of Donne’s rectitude, admits that the poem contains an “error of taste” (234). P.
M. Oliver attempts to exonerate Donne by calling the poem “the most developed example of a mock-meditation to be found among the *Holy Sonnets*” (118). But Oliver may be overlooking the allusions to Donne’s earlier poems and the sincerity expressed in the “No, no”—where Donne takes a breath and gathers himself before continuing—and in Donne’s memory of his earlier days, which sounds too authentic to be part of a mock-meditation.

Fortunately for Donne, the argument of the poem did not originate with him but in Spenser’s *Amoretti* 31:

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Ah why hath nature to so hard a heart
Given so goodly gifts of beauty's grace?
Whose pride depraves each other better part,
And all those pretty ornaments deface.
Sith to all other beasts of bloody race,
A dreadful countenance she given hath,
That with their terror all the rest may chase,
And warn to shun the danger of their wrath.
But my proud one doth work the greater scath,
Through sweet allurement of her lovely hue:
That she the better may in bloody bath
Of such poor thralls her cruel hands embrew.
But did she know how ill these two accord,
Such cruelty she would have soon abhored.
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The general argument is that beauty should make mercy. Donne, gleaning, picks this up and uses it in his religious poem, where its relevance may seem dubious now, as it does to Carey. "Holy Sonnet XIII" is not one of Donne's best—it is only rarely anthologized—and the argument seems vacuous, at least to many modern readers. Read in a Renaissance context, however, the poem is richer. It calls to mind Sidney, Spenser, Ignatius, Augustine, and the early Donne. It relies on Donne's soul's black memory of both prophane mistresses and of prophane poets. Sir Frank Kermode explains: "We are usually content to be cleverer about the love of women than the love of God; therefore the *Songs and Sonets* keep better. But Donne was clever about both, and sometimes in much the same way; our awkwardness here leads us to charge 'Elegy XIX' with blasphemy and 'Show me, dear Christ' with indelicacy"—we can include "Holy Sonnet XIII" here, too. "Donne himself [Kermode continues] was not blind to some of the dangers of his method: in the 'Litanie' he writes, 'when wee are mov'd to seeme religious only to vent wit, Lord deliver us'" (40). The line between confessional piety and blasphemy is drawn in a different place for Donne than it is for us.

Hardly a "mock-meditation," "Holy Sonnet XIII" is a piece of Counter-Reformation piety and demonstrates how feeble Donne's "Protestantism" actually could be. His work, always personal, is filled with references to the Virgin Mary, "Gods partner" ("Goodfriday, 1613" 31), to crucifixes, to martyrdom, Catholicism, and his ancestry. He brings his religious reading to bear on his secular reading and his religious poems to bear on his secular poems so continually that there seems to have been no distinction for him between the two.
The memory of his past in "Holy Sonnet XIII" is anything but unusual for Donne. He writes poem after poem to come to terms with who he was as a young man and who he has become as a famous Anglican preacher. If he did nurse a latent Catholicism, then he would have had some difficult problems of identity to solve as Dean of St. Paul's. At any rate, Donne’s poems are the highly personal record of a mind besieged by doubt and memory, yet which at times enjoys moments of blissful repose. His incessant harping on religious themes can leave no doubt that he, the survivor of terror and persecution and the bookish university student, is the speaker of many of his own poems. We cannot tell the dancer from the dance.

John Donne’s complicated personality, ambition, personal and professional failures and successes, high profile, intellectualism, and conservative politics and ideas (which exist alongside his flirtation with radical new ones) make him an interesting study for biography. Because he apostatized publicly, took orders, and was appointed Dean of St. Paul’s, he was unique among Elizabethans. His original poetry and distinctive prose ensure, despite a long period of undervaluation, perennial interest in his art. His real greatness, however, may be the union of his irremediable personality with his giant fancy and fine invention. Harold Bloom writes, “That extreme personalism, that never left Donne, can be regarded as the peculiar mark of his genius” (267). Bloom is exactly correct; this personalism distinguishes Donne among his contemporaries and makes his poems recognizable and memorable.
Study me then, you who shall lovers bee

At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:

For I am every dead thing,

In whom love wrought new Alchimie.

For his art did expresse

A quintessence even from nothingness,

From dull privations, and leane emptinesse:

He ruin’d mee, and I am re-begot

Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not. ("S. Lucies" 10-18)
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