

T.S. Eliot wrote in his 1921 essay that the metaphysical poets successfully fuse both reason and passion. Many of these poets have tried the daunting task of weaving juxtaposing ideals of thought and feeling into a cohesive unit, but John Donne eschews the cohesive unit and ingeniously intermingles metaphysical ironies without changing their fundamental substances. Donne synthesizes both elemental polarity and unity in his poetry, wherein the corners of metaphysical paradoxes merge in a single space and juxtapose each other without detracting from their original opposition. Where other metaphysical poets attempt alchemy, Donne takes a more hardened approach and gives us chemistry. Specifically the paradoxes of the sacred verses the secular, the physical in relation to the intellectual, and the enigma of love and death influence Donne's poetic style and his maneuvering of contradictions. We see in Donne three poets: the moral poet in works such as "Holy Sonnet 14" and "The Canonization" concerned with the destiny of the eternal soul, the public poet in poems as "The Flea" and "The Sun Rising" concerned with the body and intellect as a microcosm and society as a macrocosm, and the personal poet in "The Ecstasy" and "A Nocturnal Upon Saint Lucy's Day" concerned with his own feelings and fears in these three separate faces of this metaphysician. In all of Donne, there exists a struggle with separating the physical body and its foibles from the higher offices of human existence: the spirit in the moral poetry, the mind in the public poetry, and the heart in the personal poetry.

The circumstances behind Donne's poetry remain a little obscure. Donne emerged into Catholicism from his birth in 1572, distantly and significantly related to Sir Thomas More on his mother's side, and raised by an equally devout Catholic medical practitioner as a step-father after his mother was widowed, the president of the Royal

College of Physicians. As it may be assumed, the existence of Catholics during the reign of Elizabeth I could prove gratuitously difficult despite her rather egalitarian religious policies. Donne renounced Catholicism eventually in his twenties after his studies at Oxford, and turned instead to the less risky Anglican religion (Parker 5-11). His keen ambition and acumen combined with a rebellious intelligence bolstered his desire to separate from his religious constraints. “[Donne] 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” (Carey 31). Perhaps the knowledge that Donne could not truly become successful as a poet inside the constraints of Catholicism helped propel him into a conversion of greater convenience, with the added catalyst of his obligation to subdue his talents to avoid sinful pride. Donne’s cerebral temperament could not, justifiably, survive long in the mythical elevation of saints and sacraments, and really, it would be a bit much to expect of him.

Donne did not enjoy his desired freedom from persecution for long, for he was secretly married in 1601 and was briefly imprisoned in the not altogether unexpected rage of his father-in-law, and was consequently dismissed from the Navy (Parker 23-35). He retired to a country life wherein he fathered twelve children (seven of whom survived), and not surprisingly met with financial difficulties. His wife Ann died at the age of thirty-three. In 1615 Donne was ordained in the Church of England by James I, the final step to his total renunciation of Catholicism. Not surprisingly, a life of inconsistency, grief, and internal incompatibilities propelled Donne to write from a wide variety of perspectives, many of them paradoxical, all of them intriguing.

Faith, in Donne's eyes, is the ultimate unity of the world. The aspiration behind the moral poet in Donne reconciles desire, verses the fulfillment of that desire. He tried valiantly to unite the concepts of sacred love and secular love from his youth. "Donne was transmuting the urges of sex, the powerful erotic surges which he recognized as so important a part of his personality...to power the almost erotically intense sermons of his middle and old age" (Parker 16-17). One cannot read Donne's poetry without noting this intense sex drive, even if we do not intend to include experience in the equation. He often seems to equate the idea of purity with his wife Ann, and his love for her in his poetry often tries to transform its eroticism into sanctity. At Ann's death fifteen years after their marriage, his virile expressions turned to a love for Christ. At that point, his sexuality became a channel to attaining spiritual coitus with God (Bald 303). Though the preacher Donne and the poet Donne often appear to be completely different people, in actuality they perform a dialogue between them on paradoxical terms. Donne saw his more tentative, somber initiation into the clergy as an opportunity to redeem the conflicting natures of sex and spirituality, and thus to separate his physical aphrodisia from his spiritual asceticism. Yet through the attempt at separation, he only proved how inseparable they become.

Donne's "Holy Sonnet 14" reveals the conflict between the sensual and the spiritual in a startling combination of an intellectual stoicism and a lascivious sexuality. Donne pleads with God to "batter," "o'erthrow," "breake, blowe, and burn" him (1-4). Later in the sonnet Donne discusses a betrothal to Satan (10), and asks God to divorce him from this enemy. In the sonnet's last lines, Donne pleads with God to "ravish" him (14). Clearly the distinction, or rather the confusion, renders itself starkly evident of

Donne's equation of prurience to purity, and his ensuing guilt over the attempt to make that distinction. "In these poems we find implicit references to Christ as a delighted cuckold, and to God as a burly rapist or jealous lover" (Louthan 120). The stresses in this sonnet seem to reinforce the meaning, or Donne's desire to be battered by God, and the more ironic meaning that one only achieves the chastity Donne yearns for from being forcefully "raped" by God. The sonnet contains a juxtaposition of heavily accented syllables which convey a heavy, unassailable roughness.

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
 Except you 'enthrall me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me (12-15).

This final paradox seeks to unify the elements of sacred and secular love while still conveying their separation. Donne, in this way, not only shows the relatedness of these two loves, but the close proximity (spatially and physically) of two forces which convincingly oppose each other, but in reality lie in subtle propinquity. Payne points out that Donne transitions from a "tinker's creation" that is broken in the first quatrain, to a village that is taken in the second, and finally to a beloved fiancée in the third (36), perhaps signifying that the further the "battering" goes, the more holy the creation becomes. One may question to what degree the Holy Sonnets are heretical, but they are wonderfully so, for Donne's struggle between the forces of fornication and fortification are, if not lyrical, noble.

In the poem "The Canonization," we see that same attempt to unify the sacred and the profane loves inside a paradox. The title itself is a paradox; profane love is the equivalent to divine love. We cannot be sure to whom the poet is speaking, but we may

assume that the person addressed represents the secular world through the unlikely medium of the Catholic Church:

With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,
Observe His Honor, or His Grace (4-6).

Donne makes use of Petrarchan traditions here, but seems to mock them instead of embrace them. Donne makes an ardent defense of his love, though even he admits that such love, instead of sanctifying him, puts him in the same position as a fly (20). The poem implies that the world endures far greater infirmities of mankind (namely Donne) to focus upon than the follies of love, and that the person (or persons) addressed should mind his own business anyway. “The poem then is a parody of Christian sainthood; but it is an intensely serious parody of a sort that modern man, habituated as he is to an easy yes or no, can hardly understand” (Books 101). The word “hermitage” in line 38 gives the lovers certain purity, sardonic because Donne’s love was anything but pure, or else he probably would refrain from such heated extremes of anger altogether. (Interestingly, Carey (43) notes that Donne usually recounts his Catholic attitudes when there appears any apparent guilt.) As the poem progresses and concentrates less on religion, it ironically becomes more sacred in nature.

You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
Who did the whole world’s soul contract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes (39-41).

Donne converts his lover’s eyes into the complex alchemist’s laboratory—“the glasses in which he would distil the ‘soule’ or essence of an element such as gold or mercury” (Carey 159). The conflict between the outside world and the lovers’ world runs with a certain bitter antagonism in Donne’s tone. We cannot escape from a reading of this poem

without noting the extreme paradoxical themes and ironic tone Donne uses to profane the sacred and sanctify the irreverent.

Louthan points out that though Donne was significantly interested in law, he was not very interested in lawyers, and there are not many law images in his poetry (81). Donne is, however, a casuist poet, a skeptic, a master at using subtlety to make a moral generalization. Cathcart notes that Donne's faith separates him from classical skepticism (64). His morality adds another dimension to his poetic genius. He engages himself with the forces that separate man from other men and from society. Even when he does find universal patterns and laws, he appears to reconcile his own truths past the universal patterns. For example, the flea that bites the two lovers separates them from the rest of the world, and thus from the rest of moral laws. Though the generalizations Donne makes about morality are exclusive, they can easily be applied to other individuals. In the same vein the "sunne" receives a contradictory retort by Donne in "The Sun Rising," when he supposes that he and his lover are the earth. (Unfortunately, it does not go without noting that the earth *does* revolve around the sun, and even Donne eventually admits this.) Casuistry applies most often to particular cases, not to universals, and Donne uses particular cases to make his points, or rather exaggerated exceptions. At the same time, Donne seems poignantly aware that his poetry, though witty and in essence logical, is not practical for moral application.

In the poem "The Flea," a mock battle of wits ensues, wherein Donne tries to convince a lady that because their bloods are mingled (according to a Renaissance idea that blood is shared during sex) in the digestive system of a flea, that intercourse must be

the inevitable outcome because presumably the flea enjoys the blood-mingling as much as the activity of intercourse would be enjoyable to the two lovers.

Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do (7-9).

He argues a case, like a lawyer, and in so doing uses a flea bite to justify fornication, and even goes so far as to say sex is sanctified because the flea mingled their body fluids within itself. Donne utilizes the Petrarchan tradition that ladies seem to derive a particular pleasure from tormenting their lovers (Louthan 84). The presence of a lady addressed in the poem is quite obvious, and Donne notably restructures his argument to meet with her objections. “Cruel and sudden, hast thou since / Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?”(18-20). Donne glorifies the flea and dispenses with making allusions to the girl’s body and says the flea has more life than the sun, an idea of Saint Augustine’s that living things are always greater than nonliving things, no matter how magnificent (Carey 147). Donne’s conscience thinks independently of law altogether. He addresses a societal and ethical issue with a casuistic voice, saying that law “presupposes the existence of another kind of truth, different from “the law,” and arising out of a different source” (Cathcart 65). This is not to imply that Donne had no conscience, or that he did not follow the societal conscience, but rather that he tried to polarize accepted moralities and practices into casuist situations, mostly for his own benefit.

“The Sun Rising” is another of Donne’s casuist poems, an aubade. He argues that time has nothing to do with him and his lover, because in essence they are between both night and day. Though he sets up a witty argument, at the poem’s close in Donne’s assertion that the two lovers are the earth, “as a law governing behavior and when applied

to...the situation, it denies the validity of a law which certainly has greater probability: that lovers do, after all “run” to the sun’s motions” (Cathcart 115). Though Donne’s voice speaks apparently oblivious to anything but himself and his lover, in reality he is keenly aware of the rest of the world going about its business. The sun does not enjoy divinity in this poem, but is rather only a projectile that Donne would dearly love to order around.

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
Why dost thou thus
Through windows and through curtains call on us? (1-3).

In essence, the poem is an attempt to reconcile two contraries: the will and the forces of duty and obligation. The poem has a self-conscious wit about it, and unlike “The Flea,” does comply in the end with the forces outside the will, albeit rather reluctantly. Donne’s argument is casuist even if his conclusion complies with universal laws. His wish for the sun to listen to him, however, epitomizes Donne’s self-conscious didacticism, and one cannot deny the daring nature of the poet to question the laws of nature.

T.S. Eliot believed Donne to be blind (Carey 131), and indeed his eyesight both physically and artistically seems poor. Truly, one cannot read Donne without noticing his distinct lack of aesthetic cultivation. He does not supply us with bountiful metaphors involving the extravagant beauty of nature and its relevance to mankind, nor does he give us mellifluous rhyme schemes and attractive word-play. His poetry is rough, sounding and appearing unedited, a little craggy, and startling. This may perhaps be because in the poet’s eye beauty often equates joy. Donne saw little to be joyful about in his dark and beleaguered Christianity, and he condemns the visual pleasures equally as much as the physical ones. In fact, Donne seems to afford his joy from the sardonic. “Terror afforded

him a histrionic triumph” (Carey 134). Donne’s strongest lines emerge when he describes mummies and rotting bodies. He tries to conceive truths in the physical body and in sexuality, where Spenser tries to find truths in the rolling hills of pastorals.

Donne usurped his imagery, ironically, from the Church Fathers, including Augustine and Chrysostom (Carey 136). He seems to reuse familiar images often, which leads us to question how he could write such profound love poetry and express such beatific grief over death when he writes as if he is impervious to aesthetics and the emotions which propel humans to appreciate them. There remains little dispute about the pivotal importance of Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets* since their publication in 1633. They do not give us hope or elevate our spirits, but rather appeal to the nature of transcendent love. Donne uses the Petrarchan style once more (yet this time not in a mocking way) in his adoption of the jilted lover wooing the unattainable lady, yet his poetic immediacy is all his own. He uses the Petrarchan style where it suits him, and never in imagery. His mission here, as with his moral and public poetry, is the separation of love and grief (or the emotional elements of the human) from the physical body.

“The Ecstasy” concerns Donne’s essential conflict between body and heart. Though he uses the same dialectic mode as in the flea, his goal does not appear to be seduction. In fact, this poem contains a startling intimacy and does not convey heavy sexual overtones as much as his other works (though it still exists even here). Pinka, however, says that the landscape of this ecstasy resembles an erotic pastoral hillside (133).

Where, like a pillow on a bed,
A Pregnant banke swel’d up, to rest
The violets reclining head,
Sat we two, one anothers best (1-4).

The word begins with an exposition to his beloved about what has already happened between them. Its statement is that in human relationships, bodies are necessary to the communication of souls. At the same time bodies are burdens.

Our bodies why do we forebear?
They are ours, though they are not we, We are
The intelligences, they the spheres (50-52).

The bodies, thus, remain transient, but essential. There is an implicit statement in “The Ecstasy” as well, that “ecstasy—a temporary abandonment of body by soul—is a very rare state, a spot of time or epiphany remote from everyday experience. If we seek, then, a more accessible means of communication on the level of souls, we must resort to the aid which bodies can give” (Louthan 87-88). Farmer points out that ambiguity is important in this poem because it is Donne’s method of blurring the customary distinction between body and soul, and thus tightening in line 64 “That subtle knot, which makes us man” (207). Donne cannot seem to grapple with the thought that if body and souls intertwine so essentially, that perhaps the soul and its longings are just as temporary. In this poem, all of the communion and communication, sexually and non-sexually, takes place without the bodies, perhaps implying that bodies only detract from the overall purpose even if they remain essential.

Donne’s struggle with love and death marks itself vividly in “A Nocturnal Upon Saint Lucy’s Day,” as it poetically attempts to reconcile the opposing forces. A nocturnal was a Roman Catholic song, sung between midnight and four o’clock in the morning that welcomed the new day (Pinka 152). The speaker parodies the religious forms of welcome to the morning to convey his agony and despair. Again, love exists as the higher state of man, and the force of death mars it. The speaker’s beloved has died

already in these lines. The poem is thought to be a response to Spenser's "Epithalamion," a grief-ridden focus on the deathbed, or an anti-epithalamion. The reference to the sun is seasonal. "Donne had before him a ready-made correlation between the microcosm and the macrocosm: at this time of year nature, like his own spirits, was at an ebb" (Louthan 145). This weakness in the speaker gives the poem a certain rawness and potency. The reasons for that particular day explain themselves, for seventy percent of Saint Lucy's Day is spent in darkness. Saint Lucy, by her name's meaning, promises light and restored vision, yet the day's darkness remains irreconcilable with the promise to Donne.

The world's whole sap is sunke:
The general blame th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the beds-feet is shrunke,
Dead and enterr'd" (5-8).

Donne moves full circle from his despair in the beginning to an acceptance, back to an agony in the end with a vow to mark the solemnity of this death "...since this / Both the year's and the day's deep midnight is" (45). The poem contains obvious inevitability, and we once more witness the latent frustration Donne has with his physical body and the passing of that physical body.

These six poems give us a small glimpse into the realm of Donne's genius and his attempt to transfigure the realms of the metaphysical soul, divided into its four parts (spirit, mind, heart, and body) and withheld by its physical part. In his moral voice, we witness the battle between sacred and sensual and its implications for mankind. In his public voice, we see his mathematical didacticism in his resolution to convey laws from a casuist perspective (or rather a paradoxical perspective) and to show the discrepancy between universals and exceptions. Finally, in his personal voice, we see the bare and

angry man pleading for reconciliation between the glory of his soul and the putrid rot of his body. His poetry, one might say, resolves to leave the sediments of Being in their respective geological strata without trying to mix them. Donne mingles his potions well, yet instead of attempting alchemy, he seems only to say that when one combines unimpressive elements, one cannot change their substances to gold, no matter how tempting. It would take a few more years before many were persuaded of this reality, unfortunately for Donne.