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A "Re-Vision" of Donne: Adrienne Rich's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning"

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> In a world where language and naming are power, silence is oppression, is violence.
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> —Adrienne Rich, 1977[1]

It is not all that surprising to find the distinguished twentieth-century American poet Adrienne Rich inspired to undertake a "re-vision" of John Donne's well-known seventeenth-century poem "A Valediction forbidding mourning."[2] Here we find Rich's own farewell, a valediction, or departure, from what she conceives of as the claims of male-dominated discourse on her poetic voice, a farewell to much, but not all, that Donne's poem, for her, invokes. In an essay written in 1971, entitled "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich draws on Ibsen's play *When We Dead Awaken*, which, according to Rich,

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[1]"Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 204.

[2]The title as it appears in the 1633 edition of Donne's poetry. My quotations from Donne's "A Valediction forbidding mourning" are from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 87–88. My quotations from Rich's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" are from *The Will to Change: Poems 1968–1970* (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 50; see Appendix to this essay, p. 362. My quotations from Rich's "Implosions" (p. 34), "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (pp. 40–43), and "Diving into the Wreck" (pp. 53–55) are from *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York and London: Norton, 1993). References to lines from these verses by Donne and Rich will be cited parenthetically in the text.

> is a play about the use that the male artist and thinker—in the process of creating culture as we know it—has made of women, in his life and in his work; and about a woman's slow struggling awakening to the use to which her life has been put.[3]

For Rich, "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival," for "until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves."[4]

What I have found valuable for the following study is an unstated, but compelling correlation between Rich's response to Donne's "Valediction" and her essay "When We Dead Awaken," written approximately one year after her "Valediction" poem was composed in 1970. In the essay, Rich states:

> It is exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting and painful. This *awakening of dead or sleeping consciousness* has already affected the lives of millions of women, even those who don't know it yet. It is also affecting the lives of men, even those who deny its claim upon them.[5]

Read in the context of her personal essay, Rich's re-vision of Donne's poem assumes a new emphasis. Written out of her "awakening consciousness," Rich's "Valediction" forbids "mourning," but not because of an imminent "parting" of two lovers who are destined to remain connected until the speaker's return, as we find in Donne, but because, in her words, she has awakened from her former "dead consciousness." I am proposing that Rich's poem, which is suffused with images of death, is a valediction, or parting with the male poetic discourse that once inhabited her now "dead consciousness." Unlike Donne's speaker, Rich is not "returning" to a "fixed" past, *unchanged,* but instead is re-visioning the

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[3]"When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971), in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose,* pp. 166–177; quotation, p. 167.

[4]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 167.

[5]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 167 (italics mine).

past via Donne so as to liberate herself from its claims on her thoughts and language and thus move forward in search of her own voice: "When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever" (15). To this end, Rich calls for a rethinking of literature and its role in the discursive construction of identity:

> A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live afresh.[6]

Although the discussion that follows does not presume to offer an exhaustive comparison of the two "Valediction" poems, there are features common to both poems that seem crucial to understanding the intertextual dimensions of Rich's dialogue with Donne, a comparison that has received limited attention. Of course, one must remain aware of the interpretive issues that can be raised by a reading "back" into Donne's seventeenth-century poem with a range of twentieth- (and now twenty-first-) century perspectives.

First, which may seem obvious, and therefore escape the need for extended attention in this context, are the spatial preoccupations of the two poems. For Donne, quite likely the key historical factors underlying his recognition that the world "'Tis all in pieces, all cohærence gone" (213),[7] declared in *The First Anniuersary*, are succinctly described by Margaret Llasera:

> Donne is situated in a world in movement, where forms are unstable, identity uncertain, point of view changing, and interpretation arbitrary.[8]

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[6]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 167.

[7]*The First Anniuersary,* in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer, vol. 6, *The Anniversaries and the Epicedes and Obsequies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 7–17.

[8]"Perspectives," in *Le Continent Européen et Le Monde Anglo-Américain Aux XVIIe et XVIIIe Siècles* (Champagne-Ardenne: Presses Universitaires de Reims, 1987), pp. 65–70; quotation, p. 67 (my translation).

A universe constructed along a "fixed" hierarchical Chain of Being no longer seemed tenable. The historical period spanning the late middle ages to the early modern era is a period marked by such boundary-breaking events as the demise of feudalism, the advent of printing, the Protestant Reformation, the rise of pragmatic politics, Galileo's confirmation of a heliocentric universe, the transgressing of artistic forms, and explorations of new territories of the Self and Other. The accompanying crisis of knowledge and authority brought with it both a challenge to the dominant order of belief and, simultaneously, a heightened effort to preserve that order. These events, which helped launch what is perceived now as the early modern world, generated some of the most dramatic and innovative works in intellectual and cultural history, with Donne's writing clearly among them.

This historical threshold and the responses to it produced what has been described as the "open work."[9] Umberto Eco finds that the "open work serves to explain and justify the apparently radical difference in character between modern and traditional art," or, "what Eco calls 'works in motion,'" and giving to Donne's poetry its early modern texture.[10] What "open" works share, according to David Robey's study of Eco,

> is the artist's decision to leave the arrangement of some of their constituents either to the public or to chance, thus giving them not a single definitive order but a multiplicity of possible orders. . . . Traditional or 'classical' art, Eco argues, was in an essential sense unambiguous. It could give rise to various responses, but its nature was such as to channel those responses in a particular direction. . . . Much modern art, on the other hand, is deliberately and systematically ambiguous.[11]

Eco elaborates further on this shift toward inductive rather than deductive thinking, or, in other words, toward "the *visual* (meaning that the subjective element comes to prevail) and attention is shifted from the

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[9]An artistic term formulated by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work,* trans. Anna Cancogni, with an Introduction by David Robey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[10]Robey, Introduction to *The Open Work,* p. ix.

[11]Robey, pp. ix–x.

essence to the *appearance* of architectural and pictorial products."[12] This emergent paradigm "reflects the rising interest in . . . an empiricism which converts the Aristotelian concept of real substance into a series of subjective perceptions by the viewer . . . and the whole construct expands toward a totality which is close to the infinite," for "it refuses to be hemmed in by any ideal normative conception of the world."[13] There is a shift, then, in sixteenth-century emergent modernism, from monism toward pluralism, a shift we find clearly delineated in the writing of Donne, but even more so in Rich's twentieth-century "re-vision" of Donne.

Rich's poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" was written in 1970 at the height of the Women's Liberation Movement. She remarks that her "style was formed first by male poets: by the men I was reading as an undergraduate—Frost, Dylan Thomas, Donne, Auden, MacNiece, Stevens, Yeats," and what she "chiefly learned from them was craft."[14] Rich adds a note to her essay in 1978 in which she states: "I spent months, at sixteen, memorizing and writing imitations of Millay's sonnets, and in notebooks of that period I find what are obviously attempts to imitate Dickinson's metrics and verbal compression," and "I knew H. D. only through anthologized lyrics; her epic poetry was not then available to me."[15]

In tracing Rich's development as a writer, and, in particular, as a woman writer, we find a growing independence in her self-expression. Nancy Milford's study points to different stages in Rich's writing.[16] Rich, who has been awarded virtually every major prize for writing, graduated from Radcliffe College in 1951. She has published several books of poetry, the first of which is *A Change of World,* published in 1951, following the War, when Rich was twenty-one. One of her major collections of poetry, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971–1972* (1973), earned the National Book Award. *What Is Found There: Notebooks on*

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[12]Eco, p. 13.

[13]Eco, pp. 13–14.

[14]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 171.

[15]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," p. 173, n. 6.

[16]"This Woman's Movement," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*, selected and ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York and London: Norton, 1975), pp. 189–202.

Poetry and Politics was published in 1993, following Rich's tenure as Professor of English at Stanford University (1986–1993). More recently, she published *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000–2004* (2004). Milford finds an "increasingly political thrust" in Rich's writing over the course of its development, which Milford defines as "those acts of conduct within her own time, that governance of her self among other selves, through which she tries to come to terms with her sex in this time."[17] In his Introduction to Rich's first book of poems, W. H. Auden suggests that her work is "modest," which Milford describes as reflecting Rich's "concerns . . . with form and with restraint in that a violation of restraint spelt excess."[18] Milford found that "the only problem with the book was that her own voice was thin, it was not rich enough."[19] But for Auden and Milford, this was appropriate for her age and for the time. Auden writes: "Radical changes and significant novelty in artistic style can only occur when there has been a radical change in human sensibility to require them."[20] Donne's world—and writing—certainly signaled this kind of change, but we will return shortly to that subject.

Between her second book of poetry in 1955, *The Diamond Cutters,* and her third, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954–1962,* published in 1963, Rich was relatively quiet, but as Milford points out, Rich wrote poetry, but she was occupied primarily with the care of her three sons until they were of school age. What Milford finds distinctive about *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* is its "departure" from Rich's earlier poetic voice. Here we find "a remarkable group of poems—the title poem as well as 'Merely to Know,' 'Double Monologue,' and 'Readings of History.'"[21] Crucial to Rich's departure and to her response to Donne was her refocus on the past, which had always been of interest to her, but she "was now set to examine it closely, to find what it held in especial for her; and to ask herself also whether even that reading was done 'to shut out the tick-tock of self.'"[22] Now, however, she was ready to confront the "situation of some women of our time," as we find in the

[17]Milford, p. 191.
[18]Milford, p. 192.
[19]Milford, p. 192.
[20]Cited in Milford, p. 192.
[21]Milford, p. 192.
[22]Milford, p. 192.

poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." In her decision to do this, Rich "confronted full face what the history of these women suggested—the odds against any woman doing, making anything difficult of her own, for her own sake, for her own use."[23]

Albert Gelpi agrees that this book of poems—*Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*—is "the transitional book in Adrienne Rich's development."[24] Here, according to Gelpi, "her themes—the burden of history, the separateness of individuals, the need for relationship where there is no other transcendence—begin to find their clarifying focus and center: what she is as a woman and poet in late-twentieth-century America."[25] For Gelpi, "the ten sections of 'Snapshots' comprise an album of woman as 'daughter-in-law,' bound into the set of roles which men have established and which female acquiescence has re-enforced."[26] With its growing concreteness, Rich's poetry "was becoming primarily visual rather than aural, and she has been increasingly successful in imprinting images so indelible that they convey the meaning without comment or conclusion."[27] I am proposing that one other way to contextualize this change in her style is to situate it within the earlier Imagist movement in poetry, to which I will return when analyzing her poetic imagery.

In Rich's book of poems entitled *Leaflets,* published in 1969, just prior to the publication in 1971 of *The Will to Change: Poems 1968–1970,* which contains "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," Rich "threw the weight of her voice and of her poetic skill into passionate resistance":[28]

> I wanted to choose words that even you
> would have to be changed by
> ("Implosions" [1968], 4–5)

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[23]Milford, p. 193.

[24]"Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 282–299; quotation, p. 285.

[25]Gelpi, p. 285.

[26]Gelpi, p. 286.

[27]Gelpi, p. 286.

[28]Milford, p. 197. *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970* (1971) earned Rich the Shelley Memorial Award (Poetry Society of America).

Her poetry becomes increasingly political, a product in large part of her outspoken resistance to the Vietnam War. This is the voice we hear in her "Valediction," where Rich bids farewell to a literary past marked by the "dominant modes" of the 1950s and 1960s, by patriarchal discourse, conformity, repetition, and meaninglessness. And yet, in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (1971), included in that same collection of poems (*The Will to Change*), Rich laments the inescapable dilemma confronting women poets:

> knowledge of the oppressor
> this is the oppressor's language
>
> yet I need it to talk to you
> (38–40)

Her words are mindful of those of another accomplished female poet, Lady Mary Wroth, living not in the twentieth century, but in seventeenth-century England, and thus a contemporary of Donne:

> Am I thus conquer'd? have I lost the powers
> That to withstand, which joy's to ruin mee?
> Must I bee still while itt my strength devowres
> And captive leads mee prisoner, bound, unfree?
> (1–4)[29]

As more than one study has emphasized, the language of women writers is often inscribed with colonialist discourse and the loss of agency.[30] Inspired to write, yet both Wroth and Rich feel constrained to insert themselves into the male poetic tradition in order to acquire authority,

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[29]Sonnet 14 of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, in *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), pp. 94–95. All references to lines from Wroth's sonnet are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[30]Even earlier, we find the French writer Christine de Pizan, in her book entitled *Livre de la cite des dames* [*The Book of the City of Ladies*] written in 1405, lamenting the misogynist views that pervade the treatises of male writers in her era. She takes it upon herself to rewrite women's history based upon her own experience rather than the authority of others. See *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1998).

while at the same time struggling for self-expression based upon their own experiences. But whereas Wroth ends her sonnet with the despairing words "farwell liberty" (14), Rich bids "farewell" to much that Donne's poem—and the male poetic tradition in general—imposes on her language and thus on her creative freedom. As the final line of Rich's "Valediction" makes clear, she now seeks "To do something very common, in my own way" (18), which Craig Werner reads as anticipating "the dominant tones of the voice Rich will adapt as she gradually shifts her attention away from the deconstructive aspects of her position following *The Will to Change*."[31] Moreover, the three discrete lines, and the closing couplet of her "Valediction"—consisting of two spatially separated and end-stopped lines—signal Rich's growing confidence and self-"conscious" break with the gendered ideology and containment inherent in the stanzaic form and rhyme scheme of Donne's poem. Werner notes that Betsy Hirsch has identified Rich's "Valediction" poem "as one of Rich's most important aesthetic statements."[32]

Thus from the outset of Rich's poem, we are confronted by images of her now "dead" past. The opening two lines, expressing thoughts echoed in her essay "When We Dead Awaken," capture the impact of her "awakening consciousness" on her re-vision of Donne's poem:

> My swirling wants. Your frozen lips.
> The grammar turned and attacked me.
> (1–2)

Her "swirling" desires cannot be contained within the closed world configured by Donne's male-constructed image. Nor can male speakers, whom Rich relegates to the dead past, continue to speak for her with their "frozen lips" as they have done within the long-standing male poetic tradition. Rich's husband, Alfred Conrad, from whom Rich separated in the summer of 1970, committed suicide in Vermont in October 1970, near the time that her "Valediction" poem was composed. The image of "your frozen lips" may therefore signify also his death along

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[31] *Adrienne Rich: The Poet and Her Critics* (Chicago and London: American Library Association, 1988), pp. 134–135.

[32] Werner, p. 133.

with the silencing of the "whisper" that emanates, in the opening lines of Donne's "Valediction," from the mouths of "virtuous" dying men. With both her separation from her husband as well as his subsequent death, the title of her "Valediction" could be read as an inversion of Donne's speaker's parting and anticipated "return."[33] As Werner's study points out, "the simple juxtaposition" of the feminine and the masculine in a single line—"My swirling wants" and "Your frozen lips"—"plunges her into an antagonistic relationship with the masculine presence of both Donne and the 'you' of the poem," and unquestionably brought out in the line following: "The grammar turned and attacked me."[34]

Here, Rich comes to see not only the way she has been "drugged," or insulated from herself, but also her entrapment by the male-dominated language and forms in which she has been writing and, consequently, the meaninglessness of her "notations":

> Themes, written under duress.
> Emptiness of the notations.
>
> They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds.
> (3–5)

"Written under duress" also resonates with thoughts expressed in "When We Dead Awaken":

> No male writer has written primarily or even largely for women. . . . But to a lesser or greater extent, every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf [*A Room of One's Own*, 1929], she was supposed to be addressing women. If we have come to the point when the balance might begin to change, when women can stop being haunted, not only by "convention and propriety" but by internalized fears of being and saying themselves, then it is an extra-ordinary moment for the woman writer—and reader.[35]

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[33]Werner, p. 133. See also Amy Sickels, *Adrienne Rich* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005) for a biographical study of Rich.

[34]Werner, p. 133.

[35]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," pp. 169–170.

But the "awakening" is not, as Rich observes, without its "pain" when she sees "the use to which her life has been put," obscured by a culture that works to "drug," or suppress her self-consciousness.[36] To adhere mindlessly to established male poetic conventions is now seen for what it is: "the experience of repetition as death" (7), that is, the death of consciousness and thus of her own self-determination. Hence, Rich's one-line allusion to the graveyard of artificial images, or, in her words, "a cemetery of plastic wreaths" (11), into which she now intervenes, uttering instead words that come *naturally* to her thoughts, namely, "A red plant" (11).

Donne's "Valediction" thus provides Rich with ample material for her own "movement" away from an over-determined past toward self-representation, an identity that in many ways stands in direct contrast to the image of the silent woman in Donne's poem. When we bring these two accomplished poets together we discover not only what makes each unique, which seems to lie at the heart of Rich's feminist project, but also what they, at certain points, seem to unconsciously share as poets in and across time. For this is not to claim that Donne enjoys complete poetic freedom.

To some extent, Donne's "Valediction" shares with Rich the need to part ways with conventional poetry. For Donne, his "farewell" here, and elsewhere in his writing, such as "The Canonization," is to courtly forms and stock Petrarchan images, forms which no longer speak to the historic pressures in which Donne's consciousness is immersed. Graham Roebuck's study of Donne's "Valediction" points to the Petrarchan discourse of "teare-floods" (6) and "sigh-tempests" (6) imaged in the second stanza of the poem, which the speaker urges his beloved to resist, and, as Roebuck observes, they are swiftly "rejected as irrelevant gestures."[37] But like Wroth and Rich, Donne here also feels compelled to insert himself into traditional courtly forms, such as the "valediction," in order to establish his authority, but at the same time to re-write that tradition in keeping with his experience of a radically changing world. Rich's prefatory citation to her collection *The Will to Change,* which

[36]Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," pp. 169–170.

[37]"'A Valediction forbidding Mourning': Traditions and Problems of the Imagery," *John Donne Journal* 13 (1994): 143–149; quotation, p. 145.

includes her "Valediction," carries particular force here: *"What does not change / is the will to change" (Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers").*

Perhaps more surprising is the struggle common to both poets with self-representation in their "Valediction" poems. As Thomas Docherty's study of Donne's poetics contends:

> Donne writes at the moment of an incipient empiricism. . . . There is clearly a nagging doubt in this mode of thinking that truth is becoming 'positional' (i.e. dependent solely upon the site from which it is spoken) rather than 'transpositional' (which is how one might expect truth to be considered in a culture so heavily weighted by a theological thinking).[38]

In a time of profound change and challenges to dominant notions of the self, the divine, and the universe, Docherty claims that we find Donne

> playing with space and time . . . an attempt to fix or stabilize the here and now, it would seem: he wishes to arrest the flux of time and space, to control his environment, to generate a stable—and self-legitimising (i.e., quasi-transpositional)—Subject position for the 'I.'[39]

For Docherty, one recurring feature of Donne's poetry, which bears directly on Rich's "re-vision" of Donne, is the inclination to posit an Other—most often a female—in order that the speaker may talk about himself, or "to reduce alterity to Identity," so as "to conceive of the Subject position as transpositional."[40] In "The Good Morrow," for example, "the world of the other (in this case, the woman as object of the gaze) is translated into the terms of the Self (the lascivious eye of the persona speaking the text)."[41]

The reciprocated love that informs more than one of Donne's *Songs and Sonets* depends, to a large extent, on a similar identification and, according to Docherty, on the co-option of the silent, but "present"

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[38]"Donne: The Body Without Organs, the Mechanics of Love and Truth," *John Donne and Modernity*, in *Confluences* 11 (1995): 51–61; quotation, p. 54.

[39]Docherty, p. 54.

[40]Docherty, p. 55.

[41]Docherty, p. 55.

female auditor. Docherty conceives of this impulse in Donne as an "aspect of the modernity of Donne," which "depends upon the construction of exterior space in relation to an identifiable, 'I'-centred point in space, that of the empirical eye."[42] For Docherty, "such an eye cannot see alterity at all, in fact; rather, it sees only a mirrored reflection of the self," and in so doing, "space, *as extension* (and hence, of course, the world itself) is fundamentally lost in this claustrophobic manoeuvre."[43] Catherine Belsey offers a Lacanian perspective on the subject:

> For Jacques Lacan, it is one of the tragedies of love that while it is precipitated in the symbolic, it seeks satisfaction in the imaginary. Produced by the inability of the subject to be present to itself in its own utterance, desire seeks reaffirmation of subjectivity in the return of its own image and the assurance of its own singularity: 'the first object of desire is to be recognized by the other.'[44]

Belsey contends that "the ultimate object of desire is the unmediated, unimagined, unimaginable I Am."[45] Thus in the face of an unstable world, Donne "takes possession of a space to create and populate a microcosmic private world, designed to keep at bay the public world of the economy, politics and history."[46]

Armand Himy's study makes a similar claim about Donne's poetry, and specifically about "A Valediction forbidding mourning." Himy describes Donne's circle "as a minute circle encapsulating feelings, sensations, dreams, a kind of mental place, a body capable of thought, that is elastic or flexible, now concentrated on itself, now expanding."[47]

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[42]Docherty, p. 55.

[43]Docherty, p. 55.

[44]"Worlds of Desire in Donne's Lyric Poetry," *John Donne and Modernity*, in *Confluences* 11 (1995): 83–102; quotation, p. 88. Belsey cites Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 33.

[45]Belsey, p. 92.

[46]Belsey, p. 101.

[47]"Donne and the Question of Dualism," *John Donne and Modernity*, in *Confluences* 11 (1995): 37–50; quotation, p. 42.

Himy adds that "Georges Poulet has shown that God's circular hieroglyphs in the XVIIth century are not only a divine emblem, but also an emblem of man's body and of man's ego."[48] Donne has therefore "taken great care to describe the space and the dimensions, the depths and corners in which he finds his bearings."[49]

At the same time, the growing uncertainty surrounding the nature of identity in Donne's world quite likely contributes to the unrelenting drive of Donne's speakers for authority and selfhood; in his Holy Sonnet "Batter my heart," the speaker implores God to "make me new" (4).[50] This recurring impulse in Donne's poetry may account in large part for Rich's attraction to Donne, namely, her own quest for self-expression, "to do something . . . in my own way" (18), and thus here, for Rich, seemingly independent of divine intervention. Montaigne, writing in the late sixteenth century, expresses this new conception of selfhood, of identity. In "Apology for Raymond Sebond," Montaigne vouches for a self in process, a fluid self mediating between "being" and "becoming."

But the words of Donne's speaker can also be understood to betray a deep anxiety about the "fixity" of his beloved's devotion to him while they are physically separated. This creates the conditions for her consignment to the private, or domestic, sphere while granting the male speaker the customary privilege to come and go, knowing that he can "return" home to his faithful beloved and the safe space of the private world. In fact, Donne's elaborate conceit of the compass inheres in her fixed position. But at the same time, he endows the image of their union with its dual nature, that is, its circularity, or spiritual dimension, as well as its spiral movement, or worldly nature.

In one sense, then, the silent female interlocutor is subjected to Donne's poetics rather than being the speaking "subject" of the poem. This construct brings to mind the portrayal of another contemporary female role in the person of Emilia in Shakespeare's *Othello*. In the final scene of the tragedy, Iago orders his wife, Emilia, to "Be wise, and get you home." Her defiant response, "I will not," enrages Iago and brings

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[48]Himy, p. 41.

[49]Himy, p. 42.

[50]Holy Sonnet 10 (Revised Sequence), in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne. Volume 7, Part 1: The Holy Sonnets*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 25.

him to kill her.[51] Male anxiety about the emergent woman and the impact of such changes on the social content of literary forms thus surfaces here as well as in Donne. But Donne's poem, unlike Shakespeare's text, is open-ended with respect to the woman's response to the male speaker's demand that she remain within the confines of the private sphere. And the final three lines of Rich's poem bear witness to a similar open-endedness and perhaps uncertain future. Edward Proffitt thus aptly observes:

> In sum . . . because [Rich's "Valediction"] is, in fact, highly personal, its allusions might be taken to signify that the poet has still to separate herself from her male mentors (Eliot, and through Eliot, the Metaphysicals), or is beginning to do so here. About language and personal need, the poem is also, then, about poetry: by way of allusion, Rich conjures up a tradition that she would shed as she strikes out on her own.[52]

The co-option of the female voice is particularly true of Donne's dramatic monologues (other than in "Breake of Day," spoken by a woman) such as his "Valediction" and "The Flea," some instances of which are "unprecedented."[53] In Donne's appropriation of the form, the setting is constituted by a single speaker and a silent, but dramatically present, interlocutor. Because the interlocutor does not speak in the poem, the reader is dependent upon the words of the single speaker to fill out the fragmentary form. This form not only grants the single speaker the sole authoritative voice for the reader, but it also is a form in which the silent woman's speech is composed for her by the male speaker. His language becomes—at least implicitly—her language, which is at the heart of Rich's rewriting of Donne's poem. We see a related situation in the theatrical world of Donne's era when men performed female roles. "The Flea," which is one of Donne's most vivid dramatic monologues, adheres closely to the generic form, but at the same time subverts the

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[51] *Othello*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin, 2nd ed. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 5.2.223.

[52] "Allusion in Adrienne Rich's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,'" *Concerning Poetry* 15 (1982): 21–24; quotation, pp. 23–24.

[53] See Helen Gardner, *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. xxvi.

form with the female auditor's refusal to be constrained by male-dominated forms. She intervenes at one point—physically—in the neutral space between the two stanzas, disrupting and transgressing the male narrative. We therefore encounter in Donne, but also in Rich, the growing presence of less determinate forms, such as theater, which open up space for new and even competing voices.

But Docherty adds a cautionary note to his argument, which bears directly, in my view, on Donne's "Valediction." Docherty also finds in Donne's inscription of space heightened anxiety about the possibility that the lover "will cast her eye elsewhere."[54] But as Docherty rephrases it, "philosophically expressed, the problem is that Donne is aware of the fallacious basis on which the hoped-for transpositionality of his truth is grounded," that is, "he finds a stable Subject position built upon the sands of impermanence, of change and mutability . . . of seeing the Self as threatened by Alterity, by a becoming different."[55] Docherty points to "A Lecture upon the Shadow" as one of the clearest illustrations of this view. In fact, the speaker in Donne's "Valediction" specifically claims that his "return" to the point at which he began his unspecified journey[56] depends upon his lover's "fixed" devotion during his physical absence. And the added emphasis on the necessity for "assurance" expressed in Donne's newly coined word "Inter-assured" (19)—at the center of the poem—underscores further an overall threat of mutability at the center of the speaker's concerns. This preoccupation with the mutability of the self

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[54]Docherty, p. 56.

[55]Docherty, pp. 56–57.

[56]One recurring explanation, as noted by John T. Shawcross, in his edition of *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, is that "according to [Izaak] Walton, [the poem is] written to Donne's wife when Donne went to the Continent with Sir Robert Drury in 1611" (p. 87). This reading has been questioned, given Walton's lack of evidence for his reading of the occasion for the poem. For further discussion of this contested issue, see Judith Scherer Herz, "Reading [out] Biography in 'A Valediction forbidding Mourning,'" *John Donne Journal* 13 (1994): 137–142; quotation, p. 140. See also Janet E. Halley, "Textual Intercourse: Anne Donne, John Donne, and the Sexual Politics of Textual Exchange," in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, ed. Sheila Fisher and Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 22 (cited in Herz).

calls to mind Montaigne's early modern consciousness of the self, discussed earlier, as one forever in motion, forever in a state of becoming.

Ilona Bell addresses the conflicting views surrounding Donne's representation of the role of women in the *Songs and Sonets,* and she concludes that despite the fact that her view may be regarded as "a minority perspective," she offers "some speculations as to why Donne has been unjustly accused" of writing poems that are "more as an assertion of Donne's ego than a response to the lady's feelings."[57] Bell proposes "some arguments for granting Donne what he in fact achieves: an empathetic, imaginative, and varied response to the lady's point of view."[58] For Bell, "Donne's poems are less dramatic self-assertions of the man speaking than dramatic discoveries of the speaker learning to recognize and accommodate the power of the force addressed."[59] "The Flea," for example, seems to clearly accord with Bell's viewpoint as the speaker in this instance finds himself repeatedly forced to plead a new argument in response to her persistent objections to his seductive appeals. Elsewhere, Bell writes:

> Unlike his Petrarchan predecessors, when Donne writes of love he writes not of imagined love or exalted beauty but of loving and being loved, at times, of hating and being hated, not of ladies seen and admired from a distance but of a lady who is highly present, loving, and criticizing, judging as well as admiring.[60]

Andrew Hadfield notes also that "Donne reacts against prevailing Petrarchan conventions in his work, representing women at times as equals, at others as despicable creatures (although perhaps no more contemptible than the men he represents in the *Satires*), not perfect and distant beauties who can ennoble their men."[61] Judith Scherer Herz

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[57]"The Role of the Lady in Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *Studies in English Literature* 23 (1983): 113–129; quotation, p. 113.

[58]Bell, "The Role of the Lady," p. 113.

[59]Bell, "The Role of the Lady," p. 127.

[60]Bell, "The Role of the Lady," p. 129.

[61]"Literary contexts: predecessors and contemporaries," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 49–64; quotation, p. 57.

contends that "for all the vaunted mutuality of Donne's so called serious love lyrics, there is a nearly complete absence of another," so that one could claim that "she, you, the silent presence in the we—these exist largely to make accessible the solipsism of the speaking "I" rather than perhaps Donne's granting presence to the mournful Anne at his imminent departure.[62]

We should perhaps consider here Donne's own thoughts on the nature of the union we find articulated in the "Valediction," and elsewhere, such as in "The Good Morrow" and "The Extasie." In a sermon, Donne writes:

> For love is so noble, so sovereign an affection, as that it is due to very few things, and very few things worthy of it. Love is a Possessory Affection; it delivers over him that loves into the possession of that that he loves; it is a transmutatory Affection; it changes him that loves, into the very nature of that that he loves, and he is nothing else.[63]

Given this view of love, the compass becomes a material—and gendered—*instrument* of the lovers' spiritual union, creating an enduring image of the speaking "I," but predicated on a reciprocal devotion. Theirs is a "new world," self-contained, and thus in some ways mindful of Rich's effort to break with a past in that it, like Rich's poem, is discontinuous with anything that precedes it. For Donne's two lovers, it is a world wholly contingent upon the ongoing spiritual union of their minds. This reading of Donne's love poems frees his speakers, at least to some extent, from the charge of "solipsism," but the speaker's desire to validate the self through union with the Other continues as an interpretive—and perhaps overriding—possibility. In the face of an outwardly expanding universe, Donne, and his contemporaries, often respond with a counter-movement inward, re-establishing, in a psychological sense, new and safer boundaries.

Bell emphasizes the importance of keeping in mind that "Donne's attitude toward women and gender roles varies considerably, depending on the audience the poem envisions and the situation it inherits,

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[62]Herz, p. 139; cf. n. 56 above.

[63]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 1:184–185.

comprises, or seeks to bring about."[64] Citing the Latin epitaph that was written upon Anne's death, Bell observes that "Donne describes [his wife] as the most important subject and reader of his poems, and it is my belief that many of his love poems were written to and for her."[65] Thus, modes of production and one's readers, whether patrons, other writers, or the general public, particularly in Donne's time, play crucial roles in how writers compose their texts. Whereas Rich's work has been published, "most of Donne's poems circulated in manuscript, remaining within Donne's private circle for years after they were written and not appearing in print until after Donne's death," with the first edition published in 1633.[66] "Reading the poems today," Bell notes, "in an anthology or a collection of Donne's poetry, we may forget that we are eavesdropping on one side of a conversation that was both deeply private and culturally situated, both permeated with personal allusions and imbued with society's norms and expectations."[67]

In one of the most extensive studies of Donne's "Valediction," John Freccero proposes that Donne's metaphysical conceit, or elaborate image of the compass, also departs from traditional poetic devices. As such, it serves to overcome "in the name of incarnation . . . the neo-Petrarchan and neo-Platonic dehumanization of love" by tracing a dynamic process in the figure of a spiral, which was regarded as "the archetypal pattern of Love's universe, the principle of coherence joining matter and spirit throughout all levels of reality."[68] Freccero finds this conception of the spiral in the writing of the Greek fourth century Christian exegete Chalcidius:

> In antiquity, the spiral was considered to be the harmonization of rectilinear motion with circularity. Chalcidius, in his commentary on the *Timaeus*, describes spiral motion precisely in the terms of the two-fold movement of the compass: radial,

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[64]"Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, pp. 201–216; quotation, p. 202.

[65]Bell, "Gender matters," p. 202.

[66]Bell, "Gender matters," p. 202.

[67]Bell, "Gender matters," p. 202.

[68]"Donne's 'Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,'" *English Literary History* 30 (1963): 335–376; quotation, pp. 336–337.

> from center to circumference, and circular, around the circumference.[69]

According to Freccero, the same movement constitutes "the dynamism of humanity," for "with its whirling motion, the compass synthesizes the linear extension of time and space with the circularity of eternity."[70] In the same way that for the virtuous, dying brings with it the "assurance" of life eternal, so for charitable lovers, physical separation brings with it the assurance of their immutable love. This analogy helps to explain why the reason for the lovers' separation remains unstated. In view of their charitable love, death poses no more threat than does separation for other reasons. With the "death" of the temporal self necessary to a selfless, or unconditional love, the two lovers spare their love the fate of an earthly, and hence changeable, "sublunary lovers love" (12).

Donne therefore employs the action of the compass in order to convey the functional distinction between the two legs of the compass as the precondition for apprehending the two lovers' metaphysical interrelationship. What we find is a sympathetic interaction: "Thy soule, the fixt foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the other doe" (27–28). The legs of the compass, like the two lovers, are both two and one: their individual identities and, simultaneously, their joint identity within a reciprocal relationship. The "going out" in order to come together in a new identity, the joint dying out of self into the beloved, alone eventuates in intimations of immortality. From the speaker's opening exhortation to virtuous love, the two individuals evolve into the *realization* of such an interrelationship: "Our two soules therefore, which *are* one" (21, italics mine).

Roebuck's study of Donne's conceit and contexts for the image of the compass provides us with wide-ranging images of compasses, some drawn from Donne's own time, which may cast further light on Donne's gendered compass. One, in particular, appears in a chart of the English Channel, which Donne may have consulted if he were about to set sail for France. Stanton J. Linden's study, in which this particular image is discussed, locates a decorative pair of compasses in the sea chart in the English *Mariners Mirrour* (1588), adorned with "male and female torso,"

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[69]Freccero, p. 341.

[70]Freccero, p. 341.

which Roebuck states "might be thought to have 'elemented' the famous conceit."[71]

Thus, Donne, as Proffitt observes, "through [his] conceits and elaborate metaphorical extension, suggests a supreme confidence in language" and in the force of his intellectual argument.[72] In Rich's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," we find little evidence of a confidence in language, and particularly in male-dominated discourse, to articulate her speaker's personal thoughts. Instead, we are confronted by discrete lines containing "unglossed" images of "hair, glacier, and flashlight" (13), mindful of the Imagist movement in poetry in the early twentieth century that attracted such poets as F. S. Flint, Ezra Pound, H. D., William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. Their abiding principle was "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective."[73] These poets—and Rich, in this instance—resist rationalizing their own content and drawing on symbols, given that symbols function by virtue of established referents. Rich, it seems, distinctly alludes to the Imagist project in one of her major poems, "Diving into the Wreck," written in 1972:

> the thing I came for:
> the wreck and not the story of the wreck
> the thing itself and not the myth
> (61–63)

Another American poet, Archibald MacLeish writes: "A poem should not mean / But be" (23–24).[74] Imagist poetry works by disjunctions and complex juxtapositions in order to divest words of their received meanings and to grant to the image its non-referential, objective

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[71]"Donne's Visual Imagination and Compasses," *John Donne Journal* 8 (1989): 37–56; quotation, p. 45. Roebuck cites Stanton J. Linden, "Compasses and Cartography: Donne's 'A Valediction: forbidding Mourning,'" *John Donne Journal* 3 (1984): 23–32.

[72]Proffitt, p. 22.

[73]F. S. Flint, *Poetry* 1 (March 1913): 198–200; quotation, p. 199 (cited in *The Imagist Poem,* ed. William Pratt [New York: Dutton, 1963], p. 18).

[74]"Ars Poetica," in *Collected Poems, 1917–1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), pp. 106–107.

character. Rich writes: "I could say: those mountains have a meaning / but further than that I could not say" (16–17).

Murray Roston's study, *The Search for Selfhood in Modern Literature,* points to the impact of Galileo's sightings on the Ptolemaic system of belief and the biblical account of creation, seeming "at the time to 'place all in doubt,' undercutting the concept of an ordered hierarchy with God at its head."[75] With the "new world" mentality that suffused Donne's era, previously allocated space became neutralized, and thus open to new inscriptions of significance, such as that inscribed by Donne's now-famous compass. But Roston finds that a "twofold counter-movement that came to dominate both art and literature during the seventeenth century in the form of Mannerism and Baroque not only offered the Christian believer a comforting haven from disbelief but served to shore up and reinvigorate religious faith."[76] What seems crucial here in the context of Donne's poetic responses to these changes is Roston's claim that

> the poetry of John Donne and the paintings of Tintoretto and El Greco confronted that contemporary scientific challenge not by denying the validity of the new evidence, but by transcending its implications. Donne . . . minimised the implications of the new scientific theories by discounting them as applicable merely to the physical world, while he focused instead upon the inner, spiritual experience of the true believer, circumventing the factual discoveries of the scientists to reach out to a more gratifying paradoxical, spiritual reality beyond.[77]

Donne's "Valediction" well-illustrates Roston's conception of Donne's verse. Here, in fact, we find Donne invoking a physical image—a compass—that simultaneously gives forth a spiritual significance. In doing this, Donne preserves the medieval world's notion of "correspondences," that the physical realm mirrors the spiritual realm, and that the Book of Nature, like the Book of God, is a source of

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[75]*The Search for Selfhood in Modern Literature* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, England, and New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 14.

[76]Roston, p. 14.

[77]Roston, pp. 14–15.

knowledge about the Divine. In this instance, the compass becomes a visual image, not of their physical relationship, but of their spiritual union, a love such that they transcend the physical self, and thus "Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse" (20).

Rich, however, seems to take issue with perhaps a less obvious implication of this model of love, and in her "re-vision" of Donne strives to obviate that implication, namely, the overall shaping influence of the lovers' spiritual union on the status of sexual identity. If we accept the conditions inherent in the analogy between the "virtuous" dying men and the separating lovers, namely, that both undergo a kind of physical "death" preliminary to their spiritual union, separation, in either case, implies the "death" or surrender of one's sexual identity for the sake of an enduring union in their common object of love, namely, the divine in which each is created. Rich, it appears, parts way with Donne's model of identity, given its dialectical nature and suppression of sexual identity, for the freedom to assert and thus preserve her separate female consciousness, that is, "To do something very common, in my own way" (18).

But whereas the twentieth-century female speaker in Rich's "Valediction" seeks a clean "break" with the past so as to overcome the mental and verbal dependencies that we find in Donne's "Valediction," Donne's speaker seeks to reconcile the Neo-Platonic antithesis of matter and spirit so as to overcome the threat of mutability and change. Hers is not a "return" to the past and the "fixed relations" vital to the integrity of the medieval Chain of Being, but instead a going forward to a future free of prescriptive identities, both masculine and feminine.

Rich's frustration in gaining freedom from the narrative order in which she finds herself inscribed calls to mind the opening line of a poem by another distinguished female writer, Gertrude Stein: "How I wish I were able to say what I think" (1).[78] Here, in both women writers, we find the struggle against male claims on language and thus on the discursive construction of identity. By this I mean the constitutive role that language plays in how we—male and female—see ourselves and how

[78]Stanza XVII from part IV of *Stanzas in Meditation*, in *Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems [1929-1933]*, vol. 6 of *The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein*, Select Bibliographies Reprint Series (1956; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 79–80.

others see us.[79] When language is dominated by male discourse and, more specifically, when the poetic tradition has been the product primarily of male writers, female poets, such as Rich and Stein, who feel compelled to mount a feminist critique of literature, are faced with re-inscribing language with their own experiences and therefore with rewriting the myths that have dominated male discourse. Rejection of an over-determined past permeates every line of Rich's "Valediction" as she has come to realize how women have been constituted as "subjects" by male writers—by their "plotting" against them—and, by implication, by the language and form of Donne's poems as well.

Proffitt's study of the two "Valedictions" calls further attention to the protracted influence of male poets on Rich's writing. He finds Rich's poem "highly allusive," with, of course the allusion to Donne captured in the title, but beyond Donne to perhaps Andrew Marvell and more certainly to T. S. Eliot. Proffitt finds the possible allusion to Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" in Rich's "linking of 'landscape' and 'time,'" with Marvell's "'world enough and time,' which both heightens the sense of urgency of Rich's speaker and underscores . . . by way of contrast, *her* need."[80] A second allusion is less uncertain, namely, Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." For Proffitt, "Rich's speaker is much like Prufrock, who also finds it impossible to say just what he means," but, again, "the function of the (possible) allusion is mainly that of contrast: Prufrock remains trapped; struggling rather than conceding; Rich's speaker, one feels, will break out."[81]

But as Rich "re-visions" Donne's poem out of her newly "awakened" consciousness, she gradually comes to see that she can intervene in masculine language: "A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor." Here, as Werner observes, Rich seems to be asserting that "'the oppressor's language' bears no special relationship to a 'transcendent signified,'" but instead, "it is simply a 'dialect,' the expression of a particular cultural group, in this case composed primarily of Euro-

[79]See Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–1075, esp. pp. 1056–1057.

[80]Proffitt, p. 22.

[81]Proffitt, p. 22.

American males with some degree of economic and social power."[82] Rich "concludes the stanza with a self-conscious refusal to return to naïve figuration: 'I could say: those mountains have a meaning / but further than that I could not say.'"[83]

And yet, Donne's "Valediction" poem, and elsewhere in his writing, does re-appropriate words in such a way that they could be construed to function much like Werner's concept of the "transcendent signified," discussed earlier, or perhaps more specifically like that which Sigurd Burckhardt perceptibly defines as

> a class of statements called 'operative,' which do not describe but rather perform by statement. The sacramental statements are the readiest instances. . . . Feelings, and consequently meanings, can never be enough here; what is wanted is an *operative* word, not a meaning—a sacramental word, which carries its sacramental force within it, as an immanent meaning. And that means: a word no longer a sign; a word removed from the mutability of things, the infinitely greater mutability of feelings, of which ordinary words are the signs. This kind of word does not *have* meanings, but rather *gives* them.[84]

With the speaker's opening words in Donne's "Valediction," we are alerted to the fact that the intangible nature of the love that he and his beloved share—"Inter-assured of the mind" (19)—requires for its understanding that one be disposed to share its perspective, much like Burckhardt's "operative" word, or phrase. That the two lovers' dialectical relationship denies ordinary modes of perception is evident in the speaker's distinction between "the layetie" (8) and, by implication, the two of them as priests of love. The lovers' mission, like that of the exemplary pair in Donne's "The Canonization" and "The Extasie," is to reveal—to Donne's adept readers—"virtuous" love rather than merely "to

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[82]Werner, pp. 133–134. Donne's coinage "Inter-assured of the mind" (19), however, does seem to imply some degree of "transcendent" significance.

[83]Werner, p. 134.

[84]"The Poet as Fool and Priest," *English Literary History* 23 (1956): 279–298; quotation, p. 294. Here, Burckhardt acknowledges his debt to "the Oxford philosophers," who "have recently called attention to a class of statements called 'operative'" (p. 294).

tell" of their relationship as though it were a purely physical one: "'Twere prophanation of our joyes / To tell the layetie our love" (7–8). Donne's image of the compass is therefore an outgrowth of the movement of consciousness from the verbal to the non-verbal, not simply an ornamental, discursively constructed figure. It appears when the consciousness is moved, or "awakened," mindful of Rich, to reconcile its unprecedented insights to their cognitive form.

Similarities therefore exist, in my view, between such defining elements in Donne's poetry and Rich's attraction to features found in the Imagist movement, discussed earlier, that is, in divesting words of historicized "meanings" in order to render the inner life—such as "Inter-assured of the mind" (19)—as imminent, and thus as a uniquely personal and "unglossed" (13) event. This recurring feature of Donne's poetry may account in large part for his appeal to Rich.[85] Rich's speaker, as we have seen, similarly strives—to the end of the poem—to divest words and images of their accretion of meanings so that she can "do something very common, in my own way" (18).

It seems crucial here to not overlook the fact that in her "Valediction" Rich ends her poem with the phrase "To do something," rather than "To say something" in her "own way" (18), as one might anticipate. This unexpected phrasing lends itself to the possibility that Rich, mindful of Donne, is seeking throughout her revision of Donne "operative" words, words which do not merely "tell the layetie," but rather *give* their non-referential, "unglossed" "meaning," as Burckhardt proposes.

It could be said, then, that Donne's contingencies of "meaning" and selfhood continue to inspire Rich's newly "awakened" consciousness and desire to fashion a non-hegemonic, de-colonizing discourse for herself out of what she conceives of as the graveyard, or "cemetery" (11), of male-dominated poetry. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer a useful distinction here:

> just as the male artist's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what [Harold] Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is

[85]See, for example, Theresa M. DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999).

> not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of *her*.[86]

Rich's "Valediction" thus both conforms to and subverts Donne's poem, and in so doing, creates a less determinate, but at the same time a more supple framework for her "re-vision" and ongoing self-creation. The risk, of course, is that the fragility of the form will threaten the fragility of the emergent—and unformed—self that inhabits it.

In light of the historical pressures and destabilized forms that mark Donne's world, David Buck Beliles offers a different—and compelling—reading of Donne's love poetry, one that also resists the single-minded charge of patriarchal domination in Donne's speakers:

> Mutuality in love is different from equality in the overall relationship of man to woman. When we read [Donne's love poems] keeping in mind the actual situation of women in society, we remind ourselves that the positions of men and women are by no means equal. We need to be aware of the social situation and read as historicists, and yet not insist that the social situation makes all professions of mutuality and equality in love merely ploys for disguising male power.[87]

Beliles urges instead "a pluralist hermeneutics of faith," which "allows us to regard the situation as a case of both/and rather than either/or."[88] Beliles argues that Donne's "repeated insistence on mutuality . . . does not mask a cynical desire to exercise power even as he conceals it; rather, it reveals a recognition of the full humanity and the equality of the woman in the personal sphere, in the privacy of the face-to-face encounter of lovers."[89] For Beliles, "meaning . . . does not lie in one or the other of the coexisting contexts, the social or the private. . . . Both

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[86] *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 49.

[87] *Theoretically-Informed Criticism of Donne's Love Poetry: Towards a Pluralist Hermeneutics of Faith* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 113. For Rich's discussion of the complex term "patriarchy," written about one year after her "Valediction" poem was published, see her essay "The Antifeminist Woman" (1972), in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, esp. pp. 78–84.

[88] Beliles, p. 113.

[89] Beliles, p. 113.

meanings exist; both are valid."[90] What is questioned by Beliles is the interpretive impulse toward "monism," particularly in Donne's dramatically changing and unstable world:

> A pluralistic hermeneutics of faith addresses this [issue]; by granting meaning and validity to both contexts, we search for new meaning created between the conflicting truths, in much the same way that metaphor creates a new coherence from the collapse of literal sense.[91]

In the comparison of Donne and Rich, I find Beliles's commanding grasp of Donne's early modern poetry and its resistance to hegemonic readings of Donne to be an interpretive model also befitting Rich's twentieth-century dialogue with Donne. The reason for this somewhat unexpected correspondence between the two poets inheres, it seems, in the *intertextual* nature of Rich's feminist "re-visioning" of Donne, that is, in her combined adherence to and departure from Donne's poem. It is intriguing to consider Donne's own historical moment and poetry as likewise both a continuation of the past and a going forward into an undetermined and thus "open" future.

In 1997, Rich was selected to be one of twelve recipients of the National Medal for the Arts, an honor that Rich chose not to accept, given her perception of the "increasingly brutal impact of racial and economic injustice" that she had witnessed over the past two decades and the decline in funding for the arts. Rich's rejection of the award, which was expressed in her letter to The National Endowment for the Arts, casts further light on her vision of the artist's role in society:

> I believe in art's social presence—as breaker of official silences, as voice for those whose voices are disregarded, and as a human birthright. I do know that art—in my own case the art of poetry—means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage. . . . In the end, I don't

[90]Beliles, p. 113.
[91]Beliles, p. 113.

> think we can separate art from overall human dignity and hope.[92]

But as Sherry Lutz Zivley's study of Rich and Donne concludes, underscoring further their pluralistic contexts, "behind the apparent chaos and doubt," which permeates the worlds of both poets, "there is both order and hope."[93]

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[92]Rich, from her letter, dated 3 July 1997, to Jane Alexander, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC (with a copy to President Clinton).

[93]"Adrienne Rich's Contemporary Metaphysical Conceit," *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 12.3 (1982): 6–8; quotation, p. 8. Zivley's study focuses on the conceit in Rich's poem "A Marriage in the 'Sixties'" (1961) as one drawn from particle physics. Although Zivley regards Rich's world as "vastly different" from that of Donne, she nevertheless sees a number of parallels between the "microcosm of the atom and macrocosm of the couple's experiences" and Donne's conceit of the compass, finding in the conceits of both poets "an underlying order" (p. 8).

Appendix

A Valediction Forbidding Mourning[94]

Adrienne Rich

My swirling wants. Your frozen lips.
The grammar turned and attacked me.
Themes, written under duress.
Emptiness of the notations.

They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds.

I want you to see this before I leave:
the experience of repetition as death
the failure of criticism to locate the pain
the poster in the bus that said:
my bleeding is under control.

A red plant in a cemetery of plastic wreaths.

A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor.
These images go unglossed: hair, glacier, flashlight.
When I think of a landscape I am thinking of a time.
When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever.
I could say: those mountains have a meaning
but further than that I could not say.

To do something very common, in my own way.

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