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Donne on the Growth and Infiniteness of Love

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John Donne's "Loves Infiniteness" immediately follows his poem "Loves Growth" in Helen Gardner's edition of the *Songs and Sonnets*;[1] read together, and with the titles assigned, the similarity in their underlying spirit is readily perceived. In the 1633 edition, however, the title of the second is given as "Lovers Infiniteness," although, as Gardner notes, the only title appearing in manuscript is "Mon Tout," and she follows Grierson's suggestion in emending "Lovers" to "Loves," but commends the 1633 editor for the appropriateness of his choice. An alternative manuscript title for the first poem, it should be noted, is "Spring." While it may not be immediately apparent that "growth" catches the academic tonality of that poem better than the word "Spring," both titles in fact reveal the 1633 editor's rather clear understanding of the scholastic flavor of the two poems, scholastic at least in the sense that "growth," *augmentatio* (with its correlative *diminutio*), and "the infinite," *infinitum*, had long been the subjects of technical university commentary.[2]

My principal aims here will be to offer a more exact reading of "Loves Infiniteness" by clarifying the nature of its roots in scholastic discussion of the infinite; to suggest reasons for believing that while "Loves Infiniteness" is a good title, it is not very much better than "Lovers Infiniteness," and indeed that the title "Loves All" might be more accurate than either of the others; and, finally, to refine our appreciation of the relative merits of the two poems by an analysis of "Loves Growth" which proceeds from a correction of the readings of line 18 ("Starres by the Sunne are not inlarg'd, but showne") offered by Grierson and Gardner.

It is necessary, first of all, to divest the word "infiniteness" of any aroma of contemporary astronomical theory, of any sense, that is, of vastness and mystery which might be thought

to hang about it from the new cosmological speculations which came to flower in works like Bruno's *De l'infinito universo e mondi*. The infinite and the infinitesimal had been subjects of philosophical inquiry among the ancients, and were standard intellectual fare in the universities since the thirteenth century. Aristotle treats the matter in the third book of his *Physica*, immediately following his initial discussion of motion, the four types of which were qualitative change (*alteratio*), growth (*augmentatio* and *diminutio*), coming-to-be and passing-away (*generatio* and *corruptio*), and local movement (*translatio*). The general subject of the *Physica*, of course, is the science of nature or of "mobile being,"[3] and such concepts as change, increase, magnitude, and so forth, obviously figure largely in the treatise.

Aristotle begins the second part of his third book by distinguishing among the various senses of the term "infinite." It may, he says, refer to that which by nature has no boundary; or that which in a particular case has no boundary even though by its nature it could have one; and it may refer both to the capacity for being multiplied indefinitely and for being divided indefinitely. The Philosopher makes it clear that he is thinking of infinity not in the mathematical sense but in the physical sense, as an attribute of a sensible quantum; as for the mathematicians' habit of conceiving of magnitudes so great they can never be gotten to the end of, that is simply irrelevant to his discussion. What he wishes to determine is whether or not there is actually any physical body or substance that is infinite in extent, and he concludes that with reference to the meaning "capable of umlimited multiplication" there is not. Even Aristotle's universe, we may recall, is a closed, finite system. With reference to the meaning "capable of unlimited division," however, he decides that the infinite does exist "potentially and by division"[4] [i.e., for approximation by successive division of intervals], and he goes on to define it in this way:

> *Accidit autem contrarium esse infinitum quam sicut dicunt. Non enim cuius nihil est extra, sed cuius semper aliquid est extra, hoc infinitum est. . . . Infinitum quidem igitur hoc est, cuius, secundum quantitatem accipientibus, semper est aliquid accipere extra. Cuius autem nihil est extra, hoc perfectum est et totum. Sic enim definimus totum, cui nihil abest, ut hominem totum aut arcam. Sicut autem singulare, sic et quod proprie, ut totum cuius nihil est extra: cuius autem absentia extra est, non omne est, cum absit.*[5]

> (It is the case, then, that the infinite is the opposite of what it is usually said to be. For the infinite is not that outside of which there is nothing, but that outside of which there is always something else. . . . This therefore is the infinite: that of which, for those taking quantitative parts of it, there is always something left to take. That outside of which there is nothing is a complete thing, a "whole." And we define a "whole" as that to which nothing is lacking, as a whole man or chest. And just as when the word is used in particular instances, so too when it is used in its proper sense [that is, with reference to the universe]: the "whole" is that outside of which there is nothing; that, however, which has outside of itself something absent, is not "all," since something is missing.)

Aquinas, in his Commentary, assents to all of Aristotle's propositions in this section, and amplifies his conclusions in the following way:

> *Ex hoc autem quod est sicut ens in potentia, non solum hoc sequitur, quod infinitum contineatur et non contineat: sed etiam sequuntur duae aliae conclusiones. Quarum una est, quod infinitum inquantum huiusmodi est ignotum, quia est sicut materia non habens speciem, idest formam, ut dictum est; materia autem non cognoscitur nisi per formam.*
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> *Alia conclusio est, quae ex eodem sequitur, quod infinitum magis habet rationem partis quam totius, quia materia comparatur ad totum ut pars. Et recte infinitum se habet ut pars, inquantum non est de ipso accipere nisi aliquam partem in actu.*[6]
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> (From this that [the infinite] is something like being in potency, it not only follows that the infinite is contained, and does not contain; but two other conclusions follow as well. One is that the infinite as such is unknown, since it is like matter without "species," that is, form, as has been said. For matter is known only through form.

> The other conclusion, which follows from the same thing, is that the infinite has more the character of a part than of a whole, because matter stands in relationship to the whole like a part. And rightly does the infinite have the status of a part, inasmuch as only a certain part of it can be taken in act.)

In such a light, it would be a mistake, I think, to approach the poem "Loves Infiniteness" from any sort of modern sentimental standpoint involving a notion of the infiniteness of love as a commendable attribute. The infinite is rather that which is imperfect, incomplete, related to perfection and wholeness only as part is related to whole, and is something like matter deprived of form. The problem for the speaker is to find the calculus which will eliminate the interval between a thing "of which no matter how much has been taken, there is always more to take," and the "all," the "all" being a term which, in its proper sense applies only to the universe itself.

"All" is clearly the central word in the poem. It occurs eleven times in a poem consisting of three eleven-line stanzas; it is in the rhyming position five times, and is the last word in each of the stanzas. But since it is also the final syllable of the words "partiall," "generall," and "liberall," it imparts a special emphasis to those words. The first stanza turns on the supposition that the lady's gift of love was "partiall," that is, infinite, as anything infinite is necessarily partial, and leads to the pessimistic conclusion that the All of the lady is forever beyond reach. The second, however, revolves about the alternative supposition that he has been granted her All of love, and thus has received a gift which is a whole rather than something partial, but this leads to the reflection that an All given at one time may undergo increase (by the loving attentions of other men) at another time. This produces the fear that this new love will not be his due, a fear which is quelled, however, by the thought that the gift of a whole is a "generall" gift, and thus any new love arising should be his by right. The final stanza opens with an admission that a problem of infiniteness remains—his love grows day by day, and her deservingness grows with it. A Platonic exchange of hearts is quickly rejected in favor of a way more "liberall" to "joyne them:"

> But wee will have a way more liberall
> Then changing hearts, to joyne them, so we shall
> Be one, and one anothers All.

That this conjunction is sexual intercourse is clear enough simply from the logic of the poem, and from similar playful conceits about lovers "mingling their bloods" in poems like "The Flea" and "The Extasie," but the word "liberall," a powerful word in its immediate context, confirms it. There is a witty sort of irony not only in the fact that "liberall" continues the emphasis on the word "all," but in the way that it implies a triumph over the niggling and constraining legalism suggested by the words "partiall" and "generall." Simply in its general sense, that is to say, it carries a strong connotation of expansiveness or capaciousness, and placed where it is brings the poem to a moment of poise, prepares the reader for what he knows will be a witty solution to the problem of achieving the All. But that solution is already implicit as an undercurrent of meaning in the word "liberall," which was also commonly used in the sense of "freedom from restraint or prudence," and sometimes in the pejorative sense of "licentious," as in Shakespeare's

> . . . . A ruffian
> Who hath indeed most like a liberall villaine,
> Confest the vile encounters they have had.
> (*Much Ado*, IV, i, 93)[7]

The final lines may be reminiscent of the image of the "little world" created by the two lovers found in such poems as "The Good-Morrow" ("Let us possesse one world, each hath one and is one"), but the imaginative treatment and the language in this case remain faithful to scholastic discussions of the infinite.

The 1633 editor undoubtedly recognized this fact in assigning the title he did. To emend "Lovers" to "Loves" may represent some improvement, but it seems to me that either title would serve, since Donne seems not to have been interested in keeping a clear distinction between the lovers and their love, as suggested by the lines: "If yet I have not all thy love" and "Deare, I shall never have Thee All." The manuscript title "Mon Tout" is better in some respects, since the poem concerns the problem of acquiring the lady's "all," and since "all," in the context of academic discussion, is as technical a term as "infinite." All things considered, "Loves All" might have been a happier choice for the 1633 editor. In the final analysis, however, what may be most remarkable about the poem is the extent to which Donne, while relying on a technical distinction between the "all" and the "infinite," has managed to stay fairly free of the dryasdust terminology of the lecture hall.

It is in "Loves Growth" that Donne actually uses the word "infinite" to describe love, but the curious thing about it is that it is not employed there in a technically accurate sense, or at least not in the sense in which "infiniteness" is an appropriate term to apply to the love of the lady and the lover of "Loves Infiniteness" before the solution to the problem of making it "all" has been discovered:

> Me thinkes I lyed all winter, when I swore,
> My love was infinite if spring make it more.

Here the word has to mean "boundless" or "inconceivably large"—so vast that it is incapable of addition. While that is not the technical scholastic meaning of the term there is ample precedent for it both in classical Latin poetry, and even in Aristotle's own usage when he is speaking generally rather than precisely or when he is referring to discussions of the matter by other thinkers.[8] It may be that since the basic conceit of the poem has to do with "growth," and, to the extent that it is technically based at all, is grounded in the concept of augmentation and diminution ("No winter shall abate the springs encrease"), Donne simply employed the word "infinite" in its general or "poetic" sense because of his greater concern with the poem's central paradox of a growth which is not an increase.

The argument of the poem seems to come down to this: If spring brings increase of love, then love may be said to grow, which means that it is neither pure nor infinite, but elemented, and takes its "vigour" from the sun. This "growth" is not simple augmentation, however, but increase of "eminence,"

> . . . As, in the firmament,
> Starres by the Sunne are not inlarg'd but showne.

Or it is a "growth" akin to the widening circles made by stirring water (hence, not growth at all), or if the "growth" is an addition of heat to the love, it can be justified on the analogy of taxes imposed during wars but not remitted in peace.

Clearly, there is a breakdown in the logic of the poem in the last four lines (25-28), if it has not already broken down in lines 19-24. The imaginative task Donne has set himself is to come up with examples of things that seem to be instances of growth but in fact are not, and the difficulty he found himself in is highlighted by the problematical lines (17-18) just quoted. Grierson's solution, "that stars are not enlarged by the sun, but are made to seem larger," which is rejected by Gardner, seems to me more plausible on the face of it than her own, which necessitates taking the phrase

"by the Sunne" in the sense "near the sun," and explaining that "Love has risen higher in the heavens by spring and shines the more brilliantly as do stars when near to the sun."[9] Unless by "stars" Gardner means the planets (Venus as "morning star" and "evening star," Mercury, Mars, and so forth), and this does not seem to be the case, we may ask whether in fact stars do shine more brilliantly when near the sun, or, for that matter, whether they are ever near the sun.

Now Donne may have meant by "starres" the *stellae erraticae* (or *errantes*), that is, the *planetae*, rather than the *stellae fixae*, the fixed stars, and this could be so even though the sun, like the moon, was commonly recognized as a "planet," one of the "seven planets," which were also referred to as the "seven stars."[10] He may, that is to say, have been using "starres" to indicate the five planets properly so called, all of which receive their illumination from the sun, and are thus "shown" by the sun although not enlarged by it. This would of course necessitate our taking the word "firmament" in its general sense of "the heavens," rather than in its strict sense, in the old astronomy, as the sphere of the fixed stars.[11] This seems so unlikely, however, that it seems far more plausible to choose the other alternative. If, therefore, we must suppose that he meant stars in the strict sense—*stellae fixae*—a solution is nevertheless possible, I would say, if it is sought in the context of technical discussion about the sun and the stars as bodies capable of radiation and reflection, that is, in the tradition of scholastic analysis of what was called "perspective."

The enormously popular *Perspectiva communis* of John Pecham, which was printed nine times in the sixteenth century was the subject of lectures at many universities from the fourteenth century through the sixteenth,[12] touches on the question in a discussion of the proposition: "Certain stars appear to twinkle because they reflect solar rays." Pecham's explanation of the phenomenon rejects as the sole cause a defect of the eyes, and proposes instead the theory that stars (even though they radiate light of their own) are in fact solid bodies with uniform, reflective surfaces, and that their continual motion causes continual variations in the angle of incidence of solar rays, producing the effect we call "twinkling."[13] They are thus "shown" by the sun,[14] by being made to sparkle and thereby attract attention, rather than merely to emit a steady pin-point of light. Donne's image, therefore, may be explained in this way. The speaker's love grows "eminent" without increase, as the stars come to twinkle by reflection of the sun's rays without undergoing any increase in size.

Of the two poems, "Loves Infiniteness" appears to be much the more sharply conceived and skillfully designed. "Loves Growth," especially in the second stanza, seems to strain after metaphors, and to suffer from a contradiction in the logic which has set the poem in motion. The speaker's love having first been declared to be more "eminent," but not greater, is in fact later defined as having become precisely that, greater, by the addition of new "heat." And the simile involving the taxes imposed in war and retained in peace, meant to justify the "growth" in the speaker's love, seems a very lame effort to certify an imaginative concept that is presented in a somewhat confused fashion.

The difficulty surrounding the sun and stars imagery is symptomatic of the general failure here of the precision we are accustomed to finding almost everywhere in Donne's poetry. Approached as companion poems, "Loves Infiniteness" and "Loves Growth" offer an interesting study in a more successful and a less successful adaptation of academic technicalities to the psychological or emotional currents of a man's experience of love.

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Notes

1 John Donne, *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965). The two poems are printed on pp. 75-76. For the information about the titles I am indebted to Professor Gardner's notes, pp. 206-08.

2 The third book of Aristotle's *Physica* consists entirely of a preliminary account of motion, followed by a discussion of the infinite. For the *Physica* I have used the Latin translation made by William of Moerbeke for St. Thomas Aquinas, included in the Leonine edition of Aquinas's commentary on the *Physica*. See *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Commentaria in Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis*, in *Opera Omnia* (ed. Leonina), Vol. II (Roma: S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1884).

3 Aquinas explains: "Et quia omne quod habet materiam mobile est, consequens est quod ens mobile sit subiectum naturalis philosophiae" (*Commentaria*, p. 4).

4 "Aliter quidem igitur non est, sic autem est infinitum, potentia et divisione" (in *Commentaria*, p. 131).

5 In *Commentaria*, p. 135. The translation is mine, although I have consulted with profit the English translation from the Greek of *Aristotle's Physics*, trans. Richard Hope (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 46-57.

6 *Commentaria*, p. 137. The translation is mine, although I have consulted the *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics by St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirlkel (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 153-85.

7 See *OED*, s.v. *Liberal*, A. *adj*. 3.

8 To be technically accurate Donne would have had to use a word like "total," or "perfect," or "entire," instead of "infinite." See above, p. 00. For examples of the term in poetic contexts, see Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *infinitus*; for the various senses in which Aristotle employs the word, see the *Physics*, trans. Richard Hope, pp. 41-57 (Book *Gamma*, 200b-208a).

9 Gardner, *Songs and Sonnets*, p. 207.

10 See, for example, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (Frankfurt, 1601; rpt. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964), p. 396: "Ex istarum autem septem stellarum ingressu & progressu per 12 signa & egressu ab eisdem variantur & disponuntur omnia, quae in hoc mundo inferiori generantur & corrumpuntur."

11 See *OED*, s.v. *Firmament.*

12 *John Pecham and the Science of Optics. Perspectiva communis*, ed. and trans. David C. Lindberg (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1970). See pp. 29-32.

13 *Perspectiva communis*, pp. 208-11. Note especially the explanation:

> *Cum enim stelle sint corpora solida equalis superficiei necesse est ut habeant superficies speculares; reflectunt ergo radios solares. Sed quia continue moventur corpora celestia variatur continue angulis incidentie, et per consequens reflexionis sensibilis variatio facit quandam vibrationis apparentiam.*
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> (For since stars are solid bodies of uniform surface, their surfaces must be reflective, and consequently they reflect solar rays. But since celestial bodies are continually moved, the angle of incidence is continually varied, and the resulting sensible variation in relation produces a certain appearance of vibration.)

14 See *OED*, s.v. *Show v.* II, 11, c. "Of a luminous body: To display (its light)." Donne's usage is of course transitive rather than (as in this definition) intransitive.