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# Suns and Lovers: Instability in Donne's "A Lecture upon the Shadow"

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There is a Zone whose even Years
No Solstice interrupt—
Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon
Whose perfect Seasons wait—

Whose Summer set in Summer, till
The Centuries of June
And Centuries of August cease
And Consciousness—is Noon.
--Emily Dickinson

So shadows define the real.
--Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

"I will read to thee," the speaker of Donne's "A Lecture upon the Shadow" says, "A Lecture, Love, in loves *philosophy*."[1] The speaker's amusingly mock-pedantic tone ought not to distract one from the significance of the lecturer's choice of topic: the "love of wisdom" proper to love itself. While the choice of the term "philosophy" of course constitutes part of the poem's generic ruse (here is a lyric masquerading as a lecture), that term also locates the poem within a specific intellectual tradition. As a result, the poem invites an analysis of the nature and degree of its participation in the field of philosophical

discourse. The rhetoric of sunlight and shadow that informs "A Lecture upon the Shadow," for example, recalls the Platonic ontology expressed in the allegory of the cave in Book VII of the *Republic*. More recently, Jacques Derrida's meditation on the role of the sun in the production of metaphor offers a similarly useful gloss on this poem's comparison of the course of the sun to that of love.

Plato's allegory provides an appropriate hermeneutic to the poem as a whole. As in Plato's fable, the "Sunne" that appears "just above" the lovers' heads provides the necessary condition for their vision, whereas the shadows that dog their every step (the word "shadowes" occurs five times in the poem) threaten to deceive and blind them. The language of vision and insight, of blindness and deceit, pervades the poem. "So whilst our infant loves did grow," the lecturer tells his mistress, "Disguises did, and shadowes, flow, / From us" (9-10). In the first of the two epigrammatic couplets in the poem, vision and sunlight are explicitly linked: "That love hath not attain'd the high'st degree, / Which is still diligent lest others see" (12-13). The verb "to blind" occurs at lines 16 and 18, while the idea of the lovers' masquerade is repeated in the conditional sentence of the following lines: "If our loves faint, and westwardly decline; / To me thou, falsly, thine, / And I to thee mine actions shall disguise" (19-21). In addition, as a lecture, the poem functions as a visual demonstration—the speaker points out the noonday clarity and illustrates his lesson vividly throughout.

While invoking yet crucially differing from Plato's visionary metaphysics, Derrida's discussion of the sun's paradoxical status in philosophical tradition as "the paradigm of the sensory *and* of metaphor"[2] provides another perspective on the centrality of the sun to the structure of Donne's lyric. Since according to Derrida the sun acts as the problematic metaphysical "ground" or basis for metaphor at the same time that it serves as "the sensory signifier of the sensory par excellence" (251), the presence (and absence) of the sun in Donne's "lecture" might be said to reflect the very instability Derrida perceives in the project of metaphysics itself. The sun apparently appears and disappears in the poem, for the "Sunne" is explicitly mentioned only once, in line 6, yet its metaphorical significance irradiates the entire poem, suffusing

especially the last three lines in the references to "loves day," "full constant light," "noone," and "night." It may be argued, then, that the sudden, dramatic epiphany followed by the unremarked withdrawal of the sun in "A Lecture upon the Shadow" not only indicates the speaker's elemental anxiety about the love he shares with his mistress, but the final impossibility of ever achieving any metaphysical stability in that love as well.

According to the analogy drawn in Plato's allegory of the cave, the light of the sun makes vision possible. Since the Platonic paradigm likens the fostering influence of the sun—both with respect to its clarity and its nurturing power—to the work of the mind, the light of the sun becomes metaphorically transfigured into the light of reason (in a gesture that *naturalizes* the intellectual metaphor throughout the subsequent development of philosophy in the West).[3] "The Sun not only makes the things we see visible," Socrates says, "but also brings them into existence and gives them growth and nourishment; yet he is not the same thing as existence" (*Republic* 509B).[4]

In the corollary to this solar metaphor, the domain of shadows becomes the domain of delusion. It is the realm of the second-hand and imperfect—the world of "dull sublunary lovers love" ("A Valediction forbidding mourning," 13)—whereas the higher ground of unimpeded light provides access to the original and real. In the terms of the Platonic parable, the proper orientation to the source of light, or wisdom, becomes a moral and intellectual imperative. In the course of his conversation with Glaucon, for instance, Socrates comments on the state of a shrewd but dishonest man in the following manner:

> And yet if the growth of a nature like this had been pruned from earliest childhood, cleared of those clinging overgrowths which . . . hang upon the soul, bending its vision downwards; if, freed from these, the soul were *turned round towards true reality*, then this same power in these very men would see the truth as keenly as the objects it is turned to now (emphasis mine) (519b).

The emphasis here upon the soul's orientation towards the sun adds something new to the debate about the direction taken by the lovers during the course of the speaker's lecture, a debate that asks such questions as: In which direction do the lovers walk? What symbolism attaches to any given direction? Do the shadows fall before or behind the lovers? and How does the direction affect the situation established in the lecture?[5] In fact, the centrality of the sun in Plato's parable makes the results of that debate critical indeed, for if the lovers turn their faces away from the sun, they must inevitably succumb to the desultory, delusory sway of the shadows that are bound to surround them. At the same time, however, a westward walk in the direction of the setting sun also suggests the inevitably mortal march toward death of every human being (as "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward" demonstrates).

Just as Donne's persona introduces and then neglects the sun in his poem, Derrida points out a similar revelation and withdrawal that occurs in Plato:

> In the *Republic* (VI-VII), before and after the Line which presents ontology according to the analogies of proportionality, the sun appears. In order to disappear. It is there, but as the invisible source of light, in a kind of insistent eclipse, more than essential, producing the essence—Being and appearing—of what is. One looks at it directly on pain of blindness and death. Keeping itself beyond all that which is, it figures the Good of which the sensory sun is the son: the source of life and visibility, of seed and light. (242)

The image of the sun functions in the same way in Donne's poem, for the speaker's brief but compelling reference to it organizes his entire lecture. The "shadowes" that menace speaker and mistress alike remain precariously at bay because of the "extreme, and scattring bright" ("Aire and Angels," 22) clarity of the noonday sun.

A web of linguistic and intertextual connections frame the text of Donne's poem, clearly indicating the speaker's desire for the solace of an eternal permanence. Three of the most striking of these links include

the poem's allusion to (1) the miracle recorded in Joshua 10:12-14, in which the Lord causes the sun and moon to stand still for "a whole day,"[6] (2) the metaphor of the summer solstice,[7] and (3) the etymological and theological pertinence of the term *hypostasis* to the language and ethos of the poem.

"Stand still," instructs the hectoring lecturer of Donne's poem, echoing the Lord's command, "Sun, stand thou still" in Joshua 10:12.[8] The echo suggests that the instability associated with the sun—for the cosmology of this poem is clearly geocentric—may well also characterize the mistress being addressed, which accounts for the speaker's (possibly nervous) recourse to the imperative mood. The allusion suggests that only something beyond the normal course of nature can maintain the speaker's love in the state in which he desires to preserve it.

The metaphor of the summer solstice that Roger A. Cognard believes to be at the heart of "Lecture"[9] complements Donne's allusion to the Lord's command in the book of Joshua, since the solstice refers to "one or other of the two times in the year, midway between the two equinoxes, when the sun, having reached the tropical points, is farthest from the equator and appears to *stand still*" (emphasis added). Both the definition and the etymology of the word *solstice* effectively repeat the Biblical command, for the word derives from the Latin *solstitium*, which itself derives from *sol* ("sun") and the participial stem of *sistere* ("to stand still").[10] In addition, the fact that the summer solstice is the longest day of the year also reflects the speaker's desire for clarity and stability in his relationship with his mistress.

If the speaker's initial command to "stand still" is an expression of his desire for stasis throughout the poem, an investigation of the word *hypostasis*, a technical term etymologically related to *stand*, "sheds some light" on that desire. For example, the word can mean "base, foundation, groundwork, prop, support," and the speaker of the poem clearly seeks a foundation upon which to secure his love. As the word developed through its use in metaphysics, *hypostasis* also came to mean "that which subsists, or underlies anything; substance: (a) as opposed to qualities, attributes, or 'accidents'; (b) as distinguished from what is

unsubstantial, as a *shadow* or reflection" (emphasis added). Additionally, *hypostasis* may also mean "essential principle."[11]

The etymology *hypostasis* confirms the metaphysical and theological dimensions of the speaker's desired "stillness" or "standing," already intimated by his allusion to Joshua 10:12 and to the significance of the solstice metaphor throughout his lecture. In fact, the Latin verb *sistere* that provides one of the two roots in the word *solstice* is "akin to . . . *stare*," the Latin root of both *hypostasis* and the poem's own *stand.* This philological information underscores the intensity of the desire for constancy on the part of the speaker in "Lecture"; his quest entails a vision of love as an essential substance inevitably at odds with the deceptive threat posed by insubstantial shadows.

Despite these (and undoubtedly other) expressions in the poem of the speaker's desire to make his love lasting and perfect, the poem also displays a great deal of doubt or anxiety about the possibility of fulfilling such a desire. As Tilottama Rajan argues; "Donne cannot envision, for more than a moment, a language free of shadow: free of unsaid implications that contradict and deconstruct what is being said."[12] An application of "White Mythology" to Donne's poem simply reaffirms this point, for Derrida's destabilizing analysis of the role of the sun in the operation of metaphor unmoors the metaphysical basis for each of these three aspects—i.e., the Biblical allusion, the solstice metaphor, and the etymological relevance of *hypostasis*—associated with the poem. Under the twin pressures of the speaker's desire for a reassuring stasis on the one hand and his anxiety about the destruction of his love on the other, "the poem dissolves itself."[13] The lecture ultimately fails to deliver its deliverer from the exigencies of his own anxiety.

Derrida argues that the image of the sun functions as the ground of all metaphor within the traditions of Western philosophy and rhetoric. He urges, however, that thinkers delude themselves when they treat the referent to which the metaphor alludes as a metaphysical substance:

> the sun does not just provide an example, even if the most remarkable one, of sensory Being such that it can always disappear, keep out of sight, not be present. The very

> opposition of appearing and disappearing, the entire lexicon of the *phainesthai* [the act of appearing], of *aletheia* [truth], etc., of day and night, of the visible and the invisible, of the present and the absent—all this is possible only under the sun. (251)

In terms of Donne's poem, it is the central metaphor of the sun that permits the speaker's guiding fiction, for none of the circumstances necessary to the development of the lecture's crucial conceit would be available to the speaker without the apparently transcendental presence of the sun. As a consequence, Derrida's exposition of the circular logic involved in the treatment of the sun in Aristotle's theory of proper names unsettles the metaphorical/metaphysical context functioning as the poem's very condition, its imaginary and intellectual *sine qua non.* "There is only one sun in this system," he writes. "The proper name, here, is the nonmetaphorical prime mover of metaphor, the father of all figures. Everything turns around it, everything turns toward it" (243). Derrida further insists upon the "implication of the defined in the definition" of metaphor as given by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, pointing out that the necessary "recourse to a metaphor in order to give the 'idea' of metaphor... is what prohibits a definition" (253). Derrida's critique of the philosophical maneuver that establishes the sun as the symbol of an absolute, transcendent, and metaphysical point of origin calls into question the speaker's attempt to locate such a point—the *raison d'être* of his entire lecture.

It is in keeping with the poem's thoroughgoing ambiguity[14] that the incessant displacements of the sun, its rhythmic interplay of "day and night," irrepressibly intrude upon the speaker's very speech:

> The morning shadowes weare away,
> But these grow longer all the day,
> But oh, loves day is short if love decay (22-24).

A pronounced sense of the poem's radical ambiguity forces itself upon the reader; its constant clash of opposite positions culminates in the utter indeterminacy of the poem's closing couplet:

> Love is a growing, or full constant light;
> And his first minute, after noone, is night (25-26).[15]

The epigrammatic economy and taut energy of these lines (with each line functioning as the tersely-crafted half of a carefully balanced antithesis) intimates the intensity of the tension suppressed but nevertheless felt by Donne's persona.

Another crucial instance of the poem's indeterminacy occurs in the form of a single word, the passive participle "reduc'd," which appears only once in the poem, but in an end-rhymed and hence prominent position: "But, now the Sunne is just above our head, / We doe those shadowes tread; / And to brave clearnesse all things are reduc'd" (6-8). The significance of this word lies in the diametrically opposed meanings of just two of its several definitions. Deriving from a Latin verb meaning "to bring back, restore, replace," *to reduce* originally also meant "to bring back." This meaning seems still to have been in use in Donne's day; in fact, the *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes passages dating as late as 1706 that evoke this meaning of the word. The verb, then, can mean "to bring back, restore (a condition, state of things, time, etc.)," so that the line in which the verb occurs can mean "to brave clearnesse all things are restored." As Lynn Molella remarks, "in the seventeenth century, 'to reduce' most commonly meant 'to restore to truth or right faith, to bring back from error."[16] According to the more familiar, modern definition, however, *to reduce* can also mean "to bring *to* (or *into*) order, obedience, reason, etc., by constraint or compulsion"; "to bring down *to* a bad or disagreeable condition"; "to bring or draw together"; and "to bring down, diminish *to* a smaller number, amount, extent, etc., or *to* a single thing,"[17] and such a definition is supported by the menace of exposure posed by the "brave clearnesse" of the noonday sun. The second class of definitions involving the concept of diminishment or impoverishment is contrary to the first meaning of the word as an act of increase and restoration; the word's antithetical meanings violate normal logic: the poem either demands a potentially unsettling reading of both definitions at once or an equally troubling, uncertain choice of one meaning instead of another.

Moreover, because this participle completes the independent clause in which it occurs, and because that clause begins and ends with a single line of verse, the position it occupies exercises an even greater poetic impact. The accentual stress that falls upon the second syllable of this participial predicate also contributes to such an impact. These combined poetic devices place great emphasis upon the verbal adjective, directing the reader's attention to its remarkably polysemous value.

The extreme ambiguity of the definitions of the word *reduc'd* stands as only one example of the fundamental undecidability of "A Lecture upon the Shadow" as a whole. While critics have often acknowledged the significance of this ambiguity, some have nevertheless denigrated the imperfection of the analogy between love and the sun. Pierre Legouis, for example, seems to have first objected to the analogy, writing that "the similitude does not hold good, or at least . . . it is imperfect."[18] Derrida's argument about the general nature of solar metaphors contributes something important to the debate about the analogy that structures Donne's poem:

> Heliotropic metaphors are always imperfect metaphors. They provide us with too little knowledge, because one of the terms directly or indirectly implied in the substitution (the sensory sun) cannot be known in what is proper to it. Which also means that the sensory sun is always known and therefore im-properly named . . . . It does not yield itself upon command, and its presence is not to be mastered. Now, from this point of view, the sun is the sensory object par excellence. It is the paradigm of the sensory and of metaphor: it regularly turns (itself) and hides (itself). (250)

The sun's intractably sensory resistance to the assimilation of human thought prevents it from being finally or fully "mastered" by the efforts of philosophers. Derrida insists upon the impossibility of gaining access to literal ("proper") meaning apart from the mediations of metaphor. For him, the figure of the sun is at once both unavoidably *figurative* and irreducibly *literal.* This is the paradox that at once confounds the enterprise of metaphysics and the metaphysical yearning

that suffuses "A Lecture upon the Shadow." Far from being an inexplicable flaw in the design of the poem, then, the disparity between the two terms of the analogy demonstrates the recalcitrant insuperability of the speaker's impossible longing.

One final application of Derrida's observations to the structure of Donne's poem may help clarify further the character of that lyric's guarded uncertainty. Although "the sun is the unique, irreplaceable, natural referent, around which everything must turn, toward which everything must turn," Derrida paradoxically insists that

> we must reverse the proposition: the literally, properly named sun, the sensory sun, does not furnish poor knowledge solely because it furnishes poor metaphors, it is itself solely metaphorical. Since, as Aristotle tells us, we can no longer be certain of its sensory characteristics as of its "properties," the sun is never properly present in discourse. Each time that there is a metaphor, there is doubtless a sun somewhere; but each time that there is sun, metaphor has begun. If the sun is metaphorical always, already, it is no longer completely natural. It is always, already a luster, a chandelier, one might say an *artificial* construction, if one could still give credence to this signification when nature has disappeared. For if the sun is no longer completely natural, what in nature does remain natural? What is most natural in nature bears within itself the means to emerge from itself; it accommodates itself to "artificial" light, eclipses itself, ellipses itself, always has been other, itself. (251)

Just as for Derrida the sun is both natural (as phenomenon of nature) and artificial (as constructed metaphor), so the shadows that appear in Donne's poem are "natural" phenomena that are nevertheless (symbolically as well as literally) "produc'd" by the pair of lovers:

> These three houres that we have spent,
> Walking here, Two shadowes went
> Along with us, which we ourselves produc'd. (3-5)

"Just as the lovers 'produc'd' the first shadows, so they 'make' the later ones. They themselves are held responsible for the nurturing of love and for its destruction."[19] The inability to distinguish the boundaries between the wholly natural and the artificially constructed is a problem inherent in the very phenomenon of metaphor; because metaphor is a necessary condition for abstract thought, the mutual implication of the categories of the natural and the artificial in one another extends to the domain of metaphysics as well. The anxiety that generates the speaker's lecture undergirds the metaphysical resonances of Donne's poem, but that same anxiety represses the metaphorical basis of the metaphysical edifice it envisions. The lecturer necessarily undermines his suppression of the sun in the remainder of his speech that is so definitely organized around its resonant absence. The speaker's whole effort issues in the self-deluding erasure of the sun's metaphorical status in the very attempt to establish a sense of metaphysical security.

Despite such desperate efforts on the part of the speaker, the linguistic instability and tonal anxiety of "A Lecture upon the Shadow" produce a tear in the fabric of its text. The closer one examines the poem, moreover, the more profound this rip appears. The sun's symbolic eclipse, the exaggerated indeterminacy of the word "reduc'd," and the fact that the lecture ends with the word "night" jointly point up the fact that the lecturer's "oration" splendidly undoes itself. Indeed, Derrida's insights into the tangled relationship between metaphor and metaphysics in the tradition of Western philosophy provide an illuminating context for considering the ruptures that define the speaker's oral performance in Donne's poem. At the same time, such insights intensify the pathos of the poem by suggesting the impossibility of the desire it alternately reflects and deflects.

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Notes

1. Ll. 2-3; emphasis added. Donne's poetry is quoted throughout from *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1985).

2. Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology," *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) p. 250. Most subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

3. Derrida, pp. 251, 267. So Derrida argues:

> Insofar as it structures the metaphorical space of philosophy, the sun represents what is natural in philosophical language. In every philosophical language, it is that which permits itself to be retained by natural language. In the metaphysical alternative which opposes formal or artificial language to natural language, "natural" should always lead us back to *physis* as a solar system, or, more precisely, to a certain history of the relationship earth/sun in the system of perception. (p. 251)

Derrida later comments on the importance of *lumen naturale* in Descartes' philosophy: "Prior to every determined presence to every representative idea, natural light constitutes the very ether of thought and its proper discourse" p. 267.

4. *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (1941; New York: Oxford UP, 1957). Subsequent references appear in the text in parentheses at the end of quotations.

5. Mark Van Doren, "A Lecture upon the Shadow," *Introduction to Poetry: Commentaries on Thirty Poems* (1951; New York: Hill and Wang, 1966), p. 30; Theodore Redpath, ed. *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne* (1956; New York: St. Martin's, 1983), p. 194; M. A. Goldberg, "Donne's 'A Lecture upon the Shadow,'" *Explicator* 14 (1956): 50; Frederick Kiley, "A Larger Reading of Donne's 'A Lecture upon the Shadow,'" *CEA Critic* 30 (1968): 17; and Peter Moody, "Donne's 'A Lecture upon the Shadow,'" *Explicator* 20 (1962): 60.

6. John E. Parish, "'Sun, Stand Still!' Secular Parody of Sacred Wonders," *English Miscellany* 25 (1976): 191, 206-8.

7. Roger A. Cognard, "The Solstice Metaphor in Donne's 'Lecture upon the Shadow,'" *Essays in Literature* 7 (1980): 11, 15-16.

8. Parish, p. 205.

9. Cognard, pp. 11, 15-16.

10. "Solstitium," *Oxford Latin Dictionary,* 1983 ed.

11. "Hypostasis," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1991 ed.

12. Tilottama Rajan, "'Nothing Sooner Broke': Donne's *Songs and Sonets* as Self-Consuming Artifacts," *ELH* 49 (1982): 818. While Rajan's assumptions about Donne's intentions strike me as problematic, the insight (as applied to the language of the poem itself, rather than the mind of its author) remains sound.

13. John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981), p. 181.

14. Lynn Molella, "Donne's 'A Lecture upon the Shadow,'" *Thoth* 3 (1962): 71, 76-7.

15. Compare the following lines from Ben Jonson's lyric "Come, My Celia" (from *Volpone*):

> Suns that set may rise again;
> But if once we lose this light,
> 'Tis with us perpetual night. (6-8)

16. Molella, p. 75.

17. The fact that one of the other sets of meanings of the verb has to do with writing also suggests that "brave clearnesse" can refer to Donne's poem itself, the physical inscription of ink on paper.

18. Pierre Legouis, *Donne the Craftsman: An Essay upon the Structure of the Songs and Sonnets* (1928; New York: Russell and Russell, 1962) p. 44. Milton A. Rugoff, *Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources*, (New York: Corporate, 1939) pp. 197-98; John D. Russell, "Donne's 'A Lecture upon the Shadow,'" *Explicator* 17 (1958): 9; and Mark Van Doren, pp. 26-30, have all followed Legouis' lead in leveling similar criticism.

19. Molella, p. 74.