John Donne Journal
Vol. 18 (1999)

Philosophy and the City: Space in Donne

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John Donne was a Londoner born and bred, and his poems take much of their life from the life of that city.[1] His lovers think of taxes, coins, and compasses. They know boys go to school, lawyers make money, ships come in; the business of life goes on outside their rooms. His most tender poems have that satirical edge — the awareness of an outside world that has no time for love.[2] It makes them seem real, and immediate. Such immediacy is all the more striking, however, because Donne's poems are rarely simply immediate. In the midst of the city, his lovers call upon images of the cosmos; space is the imaginative language they use to describe love's privacy, and its power. They imagine the cosmos opening in spheres around small rooms, and they contract its vast spaces into the small and private space of love; but this bold openness shows love in its vulnerability as well as its strength. In this way, Donne makes space a quality of tone. Space in his poems is domestic, but it is also emblematic, and often exhilarating.

Donne creates a sense of place with startling economy:

> Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
> Why dost thou thus,
> Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?[3]

Sun, windows and curtains: "The Sunne Rising" opens with just enough of fact to imagine a world around. Our sense of the real in this poem derives largely from the lover's tone of good-humored impatience.[4] He is wittily willful and defiantly individual, and yet he speaks from a place that is the bare poetic *topos* of morning. This room, with

the sun looking in, means morning for lovers in Ovid and Marlowe. Shakespeare plays upon it in *Romeo and Juliet*; and Donne uses it in his other aubade, "Breake of Day." It is an old stage, and this allows Donne to assume a great deal. Indeed, this poem of extravagant fancy is extraordinary for all it does not say. It does not describe the past or the place of these lovers. Its abrupt opening throws us into a scene, with a face turned outwards.

This poem has a vitality that comes from the bold appropriation of things that are old. Its philosophy of space is old. The lover speaks as if he had never heard of the "new Philosophy," as he imagines love at the center of the cosmos.[5] He sends the sun out to a world where all the riches of space are measures of time: "both the'India's of spice and Myne" are a day the sun has left behind; kings are yesterday, and tomorrow, and love alone keeps the pleasures of the night. Time in this poem is the natural arc of the sun and the turn of the year. But time in this poem is also human. Lateness is a schoolboy, and soon the king will ride. Lovers have their own seasons. The sun itself is a "Busie old foole," a chiding Polonius, calling on lovers and hurrying "sour prentices." Donne sees these natural and social forms of time as if from a distance. His perspective shrinks harvest workers into scurrying ants. Our sense of his newness comes from our shock, as he makes these traditional forms of time faintly ludicrous images of his own private love.

For us, space is an abstract emptiness. When we read "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," we realize how differently Donne stages his world. He often speaks of the new philosophy, but he thinks in terms of the old. "God hath wrapped all things in Circles," he says in a sermon.[6] For him, concentric circles are the basic forms of space, and they form the building blocks of his imagination. In "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," space opens outwards across concentric horizons of consciousness. The poem starts with the image of an intimate, human circle: a circle of friends around a dying man:

> As virtuous men passe mildly away,
> And whisper to their soules, to goe,

Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,
The breath goes now, and some say, no:

Death is held between two breaths: the seeming end, when some say "now," and the next apparent breath, when "some say, no." There is no momentous end, no moment when "the King / Be witnessed — in the Room."[7] "As ... Whilst"--we read the first stanza waiting to hear whatever happened elsewhere in this pause, only to find that this "As" leads into an image, and not a clause. The stanza hangs forever in that apparent pause, and its suspended end hangs over this poem--a poem that ends, after all, with a beginning: "Thy firmnes makes my circle just,/ And makes me end, where I begunne."

This poem uses all the appurtenances of time and logic; and yet, from the first suspenseful, suspended stanza, we find the forward sequence of this poem is neither logical, nor temporal, but spatial. The poem opens circular images around an imaginary event — a death which, in its quiet extremity, serves as a model for love. Love, on this model, is a sacred enclave: "'T' were prophanation of our joyes / To tell the layetie our love." And yet, the next image exposes that enclave to the cosmos. Suddenly, his love is superlunary:

Dull sublunary lovers love
(Whose soule is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love, so much refin'd,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

His mind opens outwards, past the horizon of place, into a space beyond matter and experience, a dimension of awareness, formed by the old philosophy of the cosmos. He claims this dimension as the space of love.

This claim rests on the idea that his love is as pure as superlunary space—traditionally considered so pure that philosophers after Aristotle debated whether it constituted a fifth element.[8] When the lover claims "a love, so much refin'd,/That our selves know not what it is," he makes that old philosophical question a private mystery of love. In doing so, he gives that privacy an openness—to space, philosophy, and history —which makes these lovers seem as vulnerable to their own souls as they are to the heavens; and yet he uses the image to assert the invulnerability of this love.

It often happens in Donne's writing that his boldest assertions are finely balanced against a sense of his vulnerability. That balance gives his writing a nervous energy, which reads as self-awareness.[9] Where his bravado is a quality of tone, his vulnerability is often an effect of his imagery, which brings large and distant forces into his poems. The lover in "A Valediction: forbidding mourning" uses an image of beaten gold to demonstrate the enduringness of love:

> Our two soules therefore, which are one,
> Though I must goe, endure not yet
> A breach, but an expansion,
> Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate.

His argument twists through qualifications and negatives: "therefore ... Though ... not yet ... but ...," until, in the last line, his close-turning argument suddenly opens into that strange new image of beaten gold: filmy, fragile, delicate. He leaves that image floating there, a brave conclusion that floats, inconclusively, in the air.

Whenever Donne uses that same image elsewhere, he uses it as an image of fragility: "(for, as gold is gold still, the heaviest metall of all, yet if it be beat into leaf gold, I can blow it away)"; "Gold may be beat so thin, as that it may be blowne away."[10] This poem, which starts with an image of death, hangs that end at its start on an uncertain breath — "Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,/ The breath goes now, and some say, no" — and all the grand cosmic structures he builds around that first image of death end in an image of gold, "beat so thin" as that it, too, waits upon a breath. His bold statement of love uses a fragile

image; that fragility and delicate attention is the counterpoise of his bravado in this poem, and together they create its teasing effect of mock-grandeur and tender reassurance.

At that apparent sixth stanza end, the poem starts up again, with a new image of compasses and the spiraling logic that leads to another ostensibly conclusive and yet suspended end.

> If they be two, they are two so
> As stiffe twin compasses are two,
> Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
> To move, but doth, if the'other doe.
>
> And tho it in the centre sit,
> Yet when the other far doth rome,
> It leanes, and hearkens after it,
> And growes erect, as that comes home.
>
> Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
> Like th'other foot, obliquely runne;
> Thy firmnes makes my circle just,
> And makes me end, where I begunne.

How do two compass legs come together, if the outside leg draws a circle around the other?[11] This compass-image is strikingly immediate, for compasses are practical, physical things, and yet the image turns upon a spiritual mystery, set of old in spatial terms by Neoplatonic philosophy. In *Heroic Exaltations*, Giordano Bruni gives the mystery currency. There, Tansillo explains to Cicada why the movement of a circle is the movement of love:

> [drawn out] while the heart is flying toward a place it cannot arrive at ... trying to embrace what it cannot comprehend ... the pursuit of course not partaking of the nature of physical motion in space, but of a certain metaphysical motion, which progresses not from the imperfect to the perfect, but goes circling through the degrees of perfection till it reaches that infinite centre.

Like many critics of Donne's poem, Cicada responds, "I would like to know how by going in a circle you can ever reach the center." Tansillo answers, "I can't imagine." Cicada asks, "Then why do you say so?" And Tansillo concludes, "Because that is something I can do, leaving you to think it out...."[12] Donne finds a contemporary image for that ancient Neoplatonic spatial metaphysics. His image turns the spiritual mystery into a practical riddle, which leaves the poem suspended between real and metaphysical space.

"A Valediction: forbidding mourning" is a strangely teasing poem. I suggest that it is so partly because it uses images of things we can barely assimilate — death, the cosmos, old metaphysics — and it makes that imaginative distance a quality of tone. Donne is emphatic, familiar, modern, immediate; and yet his images of the cosmos reach outwards, and backwards. They are distant; they stand outside the scope of personality. But Donne forces them into human terms.[13] That appropriation demands a defiant assertion of individuality; and in this way, even Donne's non-dramatic poems have dramatic energy, as he takes over these old images of space and makes them images of private love, or human inwardness. At the same time, these images resonate in a wider space of tradition and philosophy. This allusiveness carries Donne's poetry beyond the Roman game and swagger of love in the city. Though his tone is often familiar, and even deliberately harsh, his images open the poems to a world that is not merely social, nor simply immediate.

"Let mans Soule be a Spheare," he cries in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward." In this poem, he imagines the world as a bare arrangement of space. It is a remarkably controlled and astringent poem, and yet its precision of imagination is only equal to its sense of pain, as he rides through a cosmic image of his own soul. The poem has no other people in it, and nothing that is natural. It is space, clarified by philosophy and cartography, and the rider imagines his soul in these unforgiving spatial terms.

The poem makes cosmic structures props of consciousness. And yet his first image of the cosmos is as old as his society. All its surprise lies in the first imaginative leap; the humanization of that

cosmic image. The cosmos he goes on to describe is the cosmos of the old philosophy:

> Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
> The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
> And as the other Spheares, by being growne
> Subject to forraigne motions, lose their owne,
> And being by others hurried every day,
> Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey.

Donne writes here, again, as if he had never heard of the new philosophy. His image of space suggests not only the rider's isolation, but also his yearning for a world of certainties certainly lost by 1613. It has the tired, explanatory nostalgia of someone drawn at the same time forwards, into a social world of "Pleasure or business."

Donne's image of the heavens in this poem derives from Plato's account of heavenly motion in *Timaeus*. There, Plato argues that the outermost sphere turns evenly because nothing impedes it, whereas the inner spheres must turn against each other, and therefore fall behind their purposes. It is a deeply traditional image. Donne himself uses it elsewhere, in a prose letter describing friendship to his best friend, Goodyer:

> The first sphere only which is resisted by nothing, absolves his course every day; and so doth true friendship well placed often iterate in act or purpose the same offices. But ... the lower spheres, subject to the violence of that, and yet naturally encouraged to a reluctation against it, have therefore many distractions and eccentricities, and some trepidations....[14]

His image is startling because it is so detached. It brings a great distance of time and space into a close personal relationship. But in "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," that set-piece is startling, because he rides through it. Its distance become a distance of self-awareness.

The space of this poem bends and warps, as the perspectives that play against each other show the crookedness and indirections of human vision: "here I never saw my selfe," says Donne, "but in disguises."[15] In "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" he plays the flat space of a map against the space of the cosmos. He rides between compass points, the great polar opposites of east and west, and yet the spheres arch over his head and bend the map-space through which he rides. That paradox fascinates Donne: "in the round frame of the World, the farthest West is East," he says in a sermon; while in his "Hymn to God my God, in my sicknesse" he makes that spatial paradox a spiritual mystery:[16]

> As West and East
> In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,
> So death doth touch the Resurrection.[17]

In "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" he rides through this spatial paradox, and it shuts him in a sad imaginative riddle. It is doubt, and not space, that takes him from his God, for the directions of East and West are indirections to a God "whose hands span the poles." And though he imagines Christ as a sun that rises and falls in the East, soon the sun that he leaves behind will arch over his head to face him when it falls. This is the mercy he speaks of, when he says,

> I turne my back to thee, but to receive
> Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.

He will turn from that sun again, if he turns to the east in the afternoon. These problems of space stretch out his inward struggle with himself.

It may clarify the distinctive nature of Donne's spatial imagination, to consider it as part of a large contemporary debate about space. He writes at a time when it seems the world is changing shape around him. The "new Philosophy calls all in doubt" because the old cosmology held two-thousand years of philosophy in place.[18] The uncertainties of space offer Donne a new way to imagine human inwardness. In the

Anniversaries, he treats that cosmic uncertainty as an image of human decay, as if the old philosophy were not so much mistaken as worn away. In these poems, the soul of the girl, Elizabeth, who held the world together, rises after her death through the concentric spheres of the old cosmology; and yet elsewhere in these poems he argues that the cosmos is "all in peeces, all cohaerence gone."[19] This juxtaposition warps the spaces we imagine as we read. In this way, Donne makes us see the limitations of human vision.

The *Anniversaries* are disconcerting and richly difficult poems. They are massively detailed catalogues of the world; they recall the great medieval encyclopedias. But they have no comprehensive cosmic structure to hold their catalogues together. They leave us to seek a pattern in the repetition of phrases: "Shee, shee is dead; shee's dead." But that repetition offers a pattern that is not so much a pattern as the return to a beginning that allows no progress but this return: "Shee, shee is dead; shee's dead."[20] Instead, they mark themselves as part of a world that has lost its structure. They are in part accounts of that loss. That sense of lost certainty makes these poems peculiarly modern, and yet they are so because of their consciousness of the past, and their deep rootedness in their own time. They are, inescapably, poems of the English Renaissance, which come close to us because they are so deeply involved in their own time; they make the spatial controversy an image of something inward and human. In this way, Donne finds a new language for human consciousness in the spatial uncertainties of his time.[21]

Notes

1. See Barbara Everett's essay, "Donne: A London Poet," first published as the Chatterton Lecture on an English Poet, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1972, reprinted in Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 1-31.

2. T. S. Eliot claims metaphysical wit involves "a recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible." See his essay on Andrew Marvell in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 31 March 1921, 201-2; reprinted in T. S. Eliot, ed., *Selected Essays (1917-1932)* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932; 1948), p. 303.

3. I quote throughout from Herbert J. C. Grierson's edition of *Donne's Poetical Works*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912). I have modernised the *f* to an s.

4. This bare place and full tone together provoke the strangely mixed response Gosse describes: "there is something so convincing in his accent, poignant and rude at once. . . ." Edmund Gosse, *The Life and Letters of John Donne*. 2 vols. (London: William Heinemann, 1899), 1. 62.

5. "The First Anniversary," l. 205.

6. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), 7: 396.

7. To recall Emily Dickinson's dramatization of suspended death in "I heard a fly Buzz, when I died": *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 3 vols. ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 2: 591.

8. See R. Sorabji, *Matter, Space and Motion: Theories in Antiquity and Their Sequel* (London: Duckworth, 1988), chapter 2, for an overview of the debate.

9. Barbara Hardy argues that "Donne's frequent achievement is to remind us of opposition. He is always aware of the rest of experience": "Thinking and Feeling in the Songs and Sonnets," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 73-88.

10. *Sermons* 7: 403 and 8: 119-20. Also see, "no metall is so extensive as gold; no metall enlarges itself to such an expansion, such an attenuation as gold doth, nor spreads so much, with so little substance": *Sermons*, 8: 240.

11. I would like to re-open the old debate about this image by suggesting a new source. See, for instance, John Freccero, "Donne's 'Valediction: forbidding Mourning'," *ELH*, 30 (1963): 339; James Winny, *A Preface to Donne* (London: Longman, 1970), p. 140, and David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, N. Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 56-57.

12. Giordano Bruno, *Heroic Exaltations*, tr. Arthur Livingston, from a selection printed in Giorgio de Santillana, *The Age of Adventure: The Renaissance Philosophers* (New York: New American Library, 1956), pp. 274-75. Tansillo takes up the geometric symbolism of the Neoplatonist, Plotinus, who claims:

> Every soul that knows its own history is aware, also, that its movement, unthwarted, is not that of an outgoing line; its natural course may be likened to that in which a circle turns not upon some external but upon its own centre, the point to which it owes its rise. The soul's movement will be about its source; to this it will hold, poised intent towards that unity to which all souls should move ...

Plotinus: *The Enneads*, tr. S. MacKenna.; rev. B. Page. (London: Faber and Faber, 1956; 1969), VI. 9. 8.

Thus, "In body, centre is a point of place; in Soul it is a source ... that around which the object ... revolves": *Enneads,* II. 2. 2.

13. As Ellrodt argues, "Les correspondances cosmiques et métaphysique qu'il évoque sont les correspondances communément admises. Les analogies nouvelles qu'il perçoit ... semblent uniquement destinées à éclairer chaque fois une situation psychologique particulière." *L'Inspiration Personelle et l'Esprit du Temps chez les Poètes Métaphysiques Anglaises,* 3 vols (Paris, Librairie José Corti, 1960), 1. 99.

14. *Letters,* 1: 225.

15. *Sermons,* 9: 129.

16. *Sermons,* 10: 52

17. *Divine Poems*, 50.

18. "An Anatomy of the World," l. 205: W. Milgate, ed. *John Donne: The Epithalamions, Anniveraries and Epicedes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

19. See "The Second Anniversary," ll. 188-210; "The First Anniversary," l. 214.

20. Louis L. Martz traces a pattern of meditation in these poems — a structure of looking — and yet the poems never offer a spiritual reason for that structure, itself undermined by the cosmic contradictions and uncertainties that he catalogues in the poems. See *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Renaissance Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954; rev. edn., 1962).

21. A form of this paper was presented at a panel on "Donne and Humanism" at the 1999 MLA conference in Chicago.