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Distance, Demystification, and Donne's Divine Poetry

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In the introduction to their collection of critical essays, *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus praise the recent criticism whose "explorations of gender, ideology, power, and language in the Renaissance have not only provided radically new understandings of familiar texts but have also forced us to reexamine the critical, historical, and cultural presuppositions on which our readings are based."[1] Such criticism as is represented in this collection does invite us to conceive "the relationship between literature and history in a new way." But by "interpret[ing] their task as demystification rather than celebration" and by "maintaining a skeptical distance from the belief structures of the writers they discuss," these critics create some new problems that may actually lead us further away from understanding the literature of this period.

Stanley Fish's essay, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power," which appears in this collection, is an excellent example of new criticism which achieves this demystification and distance.[2] But is such criticism useful? We may be amused by Fish's own "amazing performance" with words; we may snicker when he calls Donne a linguistic "bulimic, someone who gorges himself to a point beyond satiety, and then sticks his finger down his throat and throws up" (223). But when Fish admits up front that the only reason he reads this "sick" poetry by this "sick" poet is that "the pleasures of diagnosis have replaced the pleasure [he] was unable to derive from the verse," we might ask ourselves if "diagnosis" is what literary criticism is all about.

At best, such criticism as Fish offers us here is entertaining. At worst, it is unhelpful and unsatisfying, and ultimately uninteresting.

Brian Vickers focuses on such issues in *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels*, in which he argues vigorously against modern schools of criticism which use texts "to validate [their] own theories, overlooking rejecting, and falsifying whatever does not match the template which they superimpose on literature."[3] Although such criticism will "display the right social virtues" and will be "politically motivated, perhaps even ethically justifiable," Vickers argues instead in favor of criticism that "respects the integrity" of the work rather than "reducing the enormous range and variety of imaginative writing to some lowest common denominator" (325). As Frank Lentricchia states the problem, "Texts are not read; they are pre-read."[4] This is the metacritical lens through which I read Fish's "diagnosis" of Donne. In his determination to expose the gender implications of Donne's manipulation of the language, Fish is combative and adversarial, essentially closing down other fields of inquiry; in insisting that we read Donne's divine poetry within the perhaps socially-significant but critically-restricting paradigm of masculine verbal abuse, Fish dismisses other interpretive possibilities, particularly those which might be informed by important historical considerations in an age of sharp contrasts and abrupt transitions, and by the discourses of both religious and literary paradox.

Let me acknowledge here at the outset that Fish is certainly not alone in his less than positive response to Donne (although I have not yet come across anyone more crude). Both Harold Bloom and William Kerrigan, for example, express their hesitations. Bloom, in the introduction to his recent (1986) edition on Donne, admits that he is "of a different critical generation from that of Kermode," and is relieved that "The Eliotic vogue" for Donne has passed.[5] While claiming that new critical essays "manifest a serious attempt to appreciate the school of Donne on a basis very different from the one that extends from Eliot to Kermode," Bloom still offers great praise for Donne as a "principle devotional poet in the language, hardly equaled by Hopkins or by the Eliot of the Quartets or the later Auden" (8). Kerrigan, whose essay

appears in Bloom's collection, begins his analysis by noting the "peculiar violence in [Donne's] sensibility," conceding that "Qualities that made Donne a love poet of sublime egotism also, for some critics, damaged his religious verse irreparably."[6] What is at issue in "Batter my heart," argues Kerrigan, is Donne's "eagerness to... imagine with some detail the sexuality of God." Here, the critic addresses the issue by thoroughly examining the poem's language, often (like Fish) within psychoanalytic and feminist paradigms, yet also (unlike Fish) without seriously diminishing or eliminating the larger historical and literary contexts. Kerrigan's essay leads us through a detailed analysis of the sexual imagery, in particular the "extraordinary emphasis to the penetration of a tight body" (43), leading us to his initial conclusion:

> Donne has contrived a most "awful discrimination" of the human from the divine. Though all of sexuality . . . may in theory lie folded within the ancient metaphor of marriage, Donne has opened a suggestiveness near to crude anthropomorphism. And crude anthropomorphism is another name for outright blasphemy. (43)

Before giving further comment on Kerrigan's analysis, let me first present a comparable passage from Fish's new essay, one which deals with the sexuality of the divine poetry, and which also offers a fair representation of Fish's general critical attitude:

> The plot is the same, an original artificer now threatened by the rival artisan . . . and a complaint against change in the name of a control that would be absolute. Of course in the "sacred" version the complaint is uttered not by the about to be supplanted creator, but by the creature eager to remain subject to his power . . ; nevertheless, the relational structure of the scene is the same, a structure in which masochism (and now sadomasochism) is elevated to a principle and glorified, earlier in the name of a frankly secular power, here in the name of a power that is (supposedly) divine. The fact that Donne now assumes the posture of a woman and like the church of "Show me deare

> Christ thy spouse," spreads his legs (or his cheeks) is worthy of note, but to note it is not to indicate a significant (and praiseworthy) change in his attitude toward women and power; it is rather to indicate how strongly that attitude informs a poetry whose center is supposedly elsewhere. (242)

I offer these two passages for comparison quite simply to suggest that I am not categorically dismissing "recent criticism" in favor of that which is considered more "traditional." I see clear critical integrity in Kerrigan's analysis of sexuality and violence in "Batter my heart"; I do not see it in Fish's "Donne and Verbal Power." Kerrigan's purpose in drawing our attention to the sexual images is to lead us to "appreciate the uncommon power" of the poem's closing paradox, showing us how it "translates readers from the familiar life of the body to the inexpressible life of the soul. We approximate transcendence with the aid of a marvelous proportion: as ravishment is to the body, so chastity is to the soul" (46). Fish's purpose is quite different: "Ostensibly the poem is an extended plea to be possessed (in every sense) by God, but in fact it is a desperate attempt to leave something that will say, like Kilroy, 'Donne was here'"(242).

My concern with such critical claims is certainly not that Fish traces the strategies of the sacred poems as they reappear in the context of the profane, nor that the "posture of a woman" brings with it the connotations of manipulation, subordination, and abuse. These by themselves are obviously neither exclusively twentieth-century ideas, nor are they critical templates imposed irresponsibly upon the texts from without. Obviously, illuminating sexual metaphors in the religious poetry of this period has done much to further our understanding of the desire of the faithful to be possessed and dominated by their God, inviting us into some truly intriguing critical conversations that wrestle with the essential paradoxes of these poems.

But Fish's arguments here are conversations-*stoppers*: Donne is no more poetically significant than Kilroy, and if he is interesting at all, he is so only in ways "related to the contemporary critical scene"(223) as some kind of disease to be diagnosed by our postmodern minds; his

divine poems are not inherently different from the love poems because the linguistic mechanisms within the verses (our "skeptical distance" prevents our considering anything outside of them) are basically the same in both categories; and he's a misogynist to boot. So there. If it is true, as Fish declares, that "The object of [Donne's] desire and of his abhorrence is . . . the power that words can assert"; that "Whatever else Donne's poems are, they are *preeminently* [my emphasis] occasions on which this power can be exercised"; and that "It is as if Donne could only imagine a God in his own image, and therefore a God who acts in relation to him as he acts in relation to others, as a self-aggrandizing bully" (241)—if such claims are true and we can only discuss Donne's divine poetry within the context of "attitudes toward women and power," then where do we go from here? Fish's essay offers us, I think, the sort of criticism Lentricchia warns us about: it is "the sort that stems from the sense that one is morally superior to the writers one is describing" (3). Or, to alter Lentricchia's example a bit, "John Donne was a misogynist and I am not. Therefore I am a better person than Donne. Imitate me, not Donne." And instead of feeling that we have gained insight into the poetry, we may respond with something like "Fish was here."

That much of Donne's religious poetry displays an intense verbal power struggle is not, I think, up for current debate; that this struggle often manifests itself in the language of abuse, even of rape, is perhaps equally uncontroversial. But to leap from these points directly to the reduction that Donne is therefore a misogynist and a "sick" poet is possible only if we consciously and deliberately ignore other important aspects of his poetry. Harvey and Maus explain how the ideas of the New Critics, who "tended to take paradox as the expression of a necessarily contradictory but eternal human truth—the simultaneity of death and life, disorder and harmony, sensuality and spirituality, weakness and strength, and so forth," have been [thankfully?] replaced by those of the postmoderns, who "are likely to see paradox or contradiction as the site of some unresolved conflict, a strategy of management and containment as well as of revelatory expression" (xi). I will admit that I am not entirely sure what "strategies of management

and containment" look like, but apparently this is part of what is meant by "demystification" as an important new critical strategy: looking at paradox as a conflict to be "resolved"—or perhaps fixed, or cured, as though there were something wrong with it in the first place—and as though such resolution were indeed possible. Paired with "maintaining a skeptical distance from the belief structures of the writers they discuss," this demystification allows the critic to lift the literature under examination out of its historical context, to probe it and dissect it, in order to "escape . . . the simplifying tendency of historical explanation."

Such strategies may avoid simplification, but they do not necessarily get us any nearer to the truth. As "modern" readers and thinkers, we have a natural desire to somehow translate the concept of a reality that transcends the world of information and common sense to more straightforward statements that operate within the framework of empirical verifiability. But if it is possible to "know" only what lies within the boundaries of our sensory experiences, then what are we to do with that which is ultimately beyond our understanding? What do we do with elements of language that do not have any corresponding verifiable entity? If what is transcendent must also be unintelligible, and what is unintelligible cannot be described in an acceptable vocabulary, then how can we say something significant about the world of ideas and abstractions? Furthermore, by reducing problematic elements—such as paradoxes—to propositions that are understandable only in a twentieth-century context, the literary critic may be creating a new problem. Generally, we reduce problematic propositions by restating them in unproblematic terms—often by fitting them with a new vocabulary which is less mysterious and more familiar, and therefore more understandable to our sensibilities. But in doing so we must be careful to retain the original meaning. Examining such a dilemma in the context of the philosophy of language, Simon Blackburn calls our attention to the "considerable tension between the disappearance of the problem, and the equation of meaning."[7] In fact,

> if the reduction is really well motivated, then it cannot be true. For example, we have given our moral vocabulary a meaning

> which results in verification, of truth and objectivity. For this very reason, we might urge, they cannot be identical in meaning with other statements which do not pose these problems. (154)

So, if we reduce the proposition so that the "problem" disappears, if we resolve the paradox we have to be careful that our reduction—our critical conclusion—is still valid. Those of us who work in language, then, who attempt to resolve paradoxes by demystifying the mysterious are, I think, in danger of seriously altering meaning.

Philosophical questions such as these are particularly at issue concerning this body of seventeenth-century poetry which has come to exemplify the category of the "metaphysical," for such poetry, I believe, was written in response to the belief structures of the age, of which the acceptance of paradox as an "eternal human truth" was an integral part. If we reject the whole universe of theological and philosophical discourse of the period in favor of modern explicitly political ideologies, are we then any further ahead in our efforts to understand the poetic imagination of a seventeenth-century priest? At the risk of being labeled critically naive or old-fashioned, I suggest that in order to keep moving ahead in our understanding of Donne's religious poetry—especially those poems which dramatize the crucial theological paradoxes of, say, the crucifixion—sometimes it may be helpful to look backward.

Although Bloom states confidently that the "Eliotic vogue" for Donne is over, Eliot's "Clark Lectures" reprinted as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* still offer a solid grounding for any exploration into Donne.[8] Eliot reminds us that "in literary criticism, heredity is not to be overlooked, and the ancestral dispositions behind Donne seem pretty clear" (71). The extensive and well-documented studies of Donne's family, and its place in the controversies of the time, tell us much about how this particular poet perceived what was important in his world. Eliot's criticism stresses the uniqueness of this period in history, not only that "every man was a theologian at least to the extent that he lived in a world where questions of theology had become identified with politics"(74), but more important that

> in certain periods the revolution of the sphere of thought will so to speak throw off ideas which will fall within the attraction of poetry, and which the operation of poetry will transmute into the immediacy of feelings. It is these moments of history when human sensibility is momentarily enlarged in certain directions to be defined, that I propose to call the metaphysical periods. (53)

Aside from the dilemma of his decision to enter the Anglican priesthood, it seems clear that Donne was caught in one of these historical moments, as if he were standing at the center of colliding social, political, philosophical, and religious realities and the force of the collision propelled his sensibilities upwards into the abstract space that hovers just above ordinary sense experience—the space we normally associate with transcendent experience. Eliot's definitional metaphors are still helpful: metaphysical poetry "clothes the abstract, for a moment, with all the painful delight of flesh"(55); it is poetry "of the first intensity, work in which the thought is so to speak fused into poetry at a very high temperature" (50). Eliot is obviously borrowing here from Coleridge's metaphor of fusion to describe the activity of the poet in general, who "diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination."[9] As Coleridge explains,

> It is impossible to pay a higher compliment to poetry, than to consider the effects it produces in comment with religion. . . . That both poetry and religion throw the object of deepest interest to a distance from us, and thereby not only aid our imagination, but in a most important manner subserve the interest of our virtues; for that man is indeed a slave, who is a slave to his own senses, and whose mind and imagination cannot carry him beyond the distance which his hand can touch, or even his eye can reach.[10]

Applying these two concepts—the metaphor of fusion and the relationship between poetry and religion of the period—to the poetry of

Donne, we can see that Donne's religious poetry indeed makes visible the invisible—with all its inherent complexity and without the risk of losing equation of meaning. This poetry does not attempt to reduce or translate or clarify or simplify that which is by nature complex, obtuse, abstract, mysterious and paradoxical. In fact, if we are seeking clarification or explanation, then perhaps we should not be reading metaphysical poetry in the first place.

Interestingly, we do not really need to create a new, modern vocabulary in order to talk about this kind of poetry. Coleridge's extensive commentary on the nature of the imagination already provides us with much of what we need, and so I offer two pertinent passages here:

> The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct from , but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is still repelled, and creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely, the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image.[11]

And the familiar "opposites theory":

> Imagination . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with differences; of the general with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and of freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession, with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement.[12]

These are oft-quoted passages, likely employed over the years for a variety of critical purposes (perhaps even cross-purposes); I quote them again here, not to buttress an outdated or decaying argument, but to emphasize that this critical framework still helps us understand what is essential about the poetic imagination, especially as it manifests itself

in the work of a poet like Donne, and it gives us the critical vocabulary to talk about it. Moreover, such definitions lie at the heart of the metaphysical conceit—that peculiar type of image whose juxtapositions bother us. But this is the point. Such imagery is *supposed* to be jarring. It is supposed to make us look twice, and then we can scratch our critical chins, and think hard about the dynamic of the metaphor in order to "extract every ounce of emotion suspended in it" (Eliot 86). And in surrendering to the power of the metaphor, we are likely to feel a sense of dislocation. Like the jangle of *Sanctus* bells at the Eucharist, it wakes us up and gets our attention so that we can focus on what is happening in front of us.

What I find to be so profound and yet so simple here (profound perhaps because it is so simple) is that this business of metaphor has less to do with allowing us to make "sense" of something than it has with allowing us to "experience" that which we are ultimately unable to experience; it gives us access to the inaccessible. As such, what we gain is the experience of a truth, but not necessarily the explanation for it. As William Halewood explains in distinguishing between the "truth" in the realistic novel and the "truth" in a seventeenth-century metaphysical poem,

> Modern realism has accepted the limits of a "social vision," and the complexities which it has represented have been those of human relationships and human institutions; its"problems," large and small . . . have been basically ethical . . . The vision of the metaphysicals, on the other hand, while obviously not excluding the area of human relationships, consistently suggests a larger background for them then the merely ethical. Human destiny and divine providence, grace, salvation, mortality, and sin form the context in which the human event occurs, and the event is modified by its context.[13]

This difference between the context of a social truth and that of a spiritual truth is, of course, not the case for all novelists and poets, but I think it is helpful in preventing our criticizing the metaphysical poet

for not being more "realistic." Context is crucial. Ultimately, we must distinguish between the thing we see (or imagine) and our perceptions of that thing, and how our perceptions are going to be influenced by our experiences and our abstractions about the world. Again, this is not a new idea. In his analysis of the Four Idols in *Novum Organum*, for example, Bacon delineates the obstacles encountered when humans attempt to observe and articulate what they experience in the world around them. The problem in man's search for truth, as Bacon sees it, is not so much that man cannot accumulate a vast amount of information, but that the truth of any conclusion based on human observation depends on the human doing the observing. The mind is influenced by countless preconceptions that will distort our judgment, as well as by problems with language as we assess and evaluate our observations and experiences. Certainly, literature of all kinds is subject to the experiential lens through which the writer views his object, and it is also subject to the shaping power of the words with which he describes it. And when we talk about metaphor, we add yet another element to this problem, for we are dealing with, using Blackburn's terms, "an expressive phenomenon of interest to the philosophy of language," not limited to literature (171).

Admittedly, Blackburn's philosophical purpose is to dismiss metaphor as a "poor relation of proper judgment" (172), to argue "that understanding things metaphorically is not understanding them at all, although it may often yield understanding, and guide it and increase it" (179). But the analysis itself—the breakdown and description of four categories of metaphor—is valuable for the literary critic. The first category is the "prosaic end of things" in which "the custom has hardened into a convention." These are the metaphors which we really no longer see as metaphors, for they have become such a regular part of our language that they are "merely ideomatic." Next are the metaphors that "maintain an open-ended or creative element. The range of features indicated remains indefinite: both speaker and listener are able to explore the comparison or image suggested, and find new features of the subject matter as a result" (174). This particular category shows metaphor to be

> both valuable and ineliminable. It is valuable because it directs our attention towards aspects of things which we might not otherwise have thought of. It is ineliminable because there is not a single list of literal thoughts which cashes it in. In this respect the metaphor may work like a picture. (174)

The use in this second category "defends" metaphor, and yet Blackburn still qualifies it as "a means to and end"; it is but a vehicle to reach "appreciation of a literal truth" (175). The third grouping takes this a step further, "alleg[ing] that there is a distinct, intrinsically metaphorical, way of understanding. The appreciation of the metaphor constitutes a different, distinctive success of its own: the success of seeing one thing as another." Blackburn's eventual rejection of metaphor in the fourth category focuses on "truth conditions": a man "thinks he is rich when in fact he has a cheque which he cannot actually cash" (176); therefore, metaphor "does not have truth conditions, but is successful or not in a different dimension" (179). The third part of this definition, however, provides the close and important link between the philosophical and the literary elements of language, for it makes explicit the connection between a thing, or an idea, and the creative, imaginary processes we go through in describing it. So, even Blackburn's rejection of metaphor is inherently useful to the literary critic: it is precisely this "different dimension" that so intrigues us. As readers of poetry, we are not trying "realistically" to define reality; we are not (or we should not be) trying to "get around" figurative language. In fact, if we are willing to operate in this "different dimension," then it is indeed possible for us to cash in our metaphorical cheques.

In a poem such as "Goodfriday, 1613, Riding Westward," which I will explore in some detail below, the individual conceits combine their metaphoric energy to focus our attention on the central paradox of the poem—on the central paradoxical premise, in fact, of Donne's catholic faith: the crucifixion. Even a cursory discussion of this one poem will, I believe, illustrate my claim that the best critical approaches to Donne's divine poems operate within the context of metaphor and paradox as

they were understood and accepted in Donne's own time. To do otherwise is to do a serious disservice to the poetry.

Contrary to Harvey's and Maus's claim, much of the newest writing on Donne's religious poetry does not fit the critical posture of distance and demystification. Several recent pieces provide the grounding for my reading of "Goodfriday." J.T. Rhodes and Dennis Flynn, for example, both take on the question of Donne's Roman Catholicism: Rhodes assesses the "ongoing" Catholic tradition from the 1570s to the 1630s and the "wider significance" of Donne's ancestry;[14] Flynn explores the "continuity and discontinuity" in "our understanding of the complex sociological developments attending the Anglican Establishment, the missions of Jesuits and seminaries, and the Elizabethan persecution."[15] This leads Flynn to the conclusion that Catholics such as Donne, "[d]eprived of normal conditions for spiritual and institutional development," found themselves "isolated" in "painful and confounding" ways that, interestingly, "became the source of their increasingly ineffectual ironies about religion" (8). In an analysis of the paradoxes themselves, Ann Hurley discusses "Goodfriday" specifically within the contexts of the Catholic meditative tradition, the Renaissance understanding of the power of images and "spiritual seeing," and the collapsing of "reading/looking/feeling/thinking distinctions."[16] Patrick F. O'Connell and David M. Sullivan each focus on specific images in the poem, showing how our understanding of those images is aided by our understanding of Renaissance features of language or thought. O'Connell looks at the poem's opening cosmology, and then explains—using examples from Donne's personal letters to show the progression of the idea—how Donne uses the Copernican system as a metaphor for a "Christ-centered" universe.[17] And, addressing the problematic ending of the poem, Sullivan bases his interpretation of the phrase "riding to the west" on the seventeenth-century colloquialism "riding to Tyburn," or, literally, riding to one's execution.[18] All of these critics, though they in fact disagree about final interpretations, lead us closer to the meaning of the poem. While I am not attempting a comprehensive explication, this sampling of recent

essays offers critical approaches quite different from those promoted by Harvey and Maus and exemplified by Fish.

Structurally, "Goodfriday" has been variously divided into two or three sections. I see it primarily in three: the cosmological frame of the opening, followed by the series of rhetorical questions and tableaux of the crucifixion, and then the speaker's closing appeal. The opening eight lines have received thorough examination by A.B. Chambers,[19] and more recently by Donald Friedman whose central argument is that "the poem's initial conceit is based on an inversion of the spherical analogy [Donne] has documented."[20]

> Let man's soul be a sphere, and then, in this,
> The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
> And as the other spheres, by being grown
> Subject to foreign motions, lose their own,
> And being by others hurried every day,
> Scarce in a year their natural form obey:
> Pleasure or business, so, our souls admit
> For their first mover, and are whirl'd by it.

This is, in part, a description of the microcosm within the larger celestial conceit—man as a "little world." In fact, O'Connell makes explicit the connection between this poem and the "I am a little world" sonnet: "Both begin with a microcosm-macrocosm analogy, proceed to the speaker's recognition of his own sinfulness, and conclude by addressing the Lord directly" (13). In "Goodfriday," however, O'Connell notes that the picture is larger—it is "man's soul," not just "my" soul—and so the "systemic disorder" is more serious. Man's being "whirl'd" by "Pleasure or business" accounts for his sinful behavior, for this is analogous to the planets' being controlled by external forces. So, suggests O'Connell, Donne has created something quite different from the usual idea of the microcosm, because, "instead of the harmony of the universe being epitomized in man, the geocentric universe of Ptolemy is perceived as corresponding to the moral disorder of man" (15). Given this kind of reading of the opening, the primary paradox of the poem in the next two lines makes sense:

> Hence is't, that I am carried towards the west
> This day when my soul's form bends towards the east.
> (ll. 9-10)

The rider's westward motion, then, is "the product of a disordered system," and his own responsibility is "effectively minimized"; O'Connell calls this the "deceptive, perhaps above all self-deceptive, reasoning of man the sinner" (16). Friedman, in a similar argument, draws our attention to the rhetoric:

> The initial conceit . . . is intended to serve for his audience as an example of learned, but essentially misdirected intellect or wit and that the exemplum is cast in a mode that would be familiar to the poem's presumptive readers—the witty analogies and illogical proofs that distinguish so many of Donne's poems.
> (426)

Friedman shows us how the speaker is "willing to take refuge in the cogent, but hollow, arguments of his agile mind" (426). In any case, it is the speaker's overwhelming passivity here that is so troubling. But this passivity, I think, draws our attention to the paralyzing anxiety of the image in the "Hence" couplet, an image of body and soul being pulled apart. O'Connell argues that this is figuratively, though obviously not literally, reversed later in the poem when the speaker is finally able to refocus his attention, shifting it from himself to Christ. Such refocusing then shifts the entire cosmic picture to its proper design, from the Ptolemic to the Copernican model in which the planets are controlled by the sun [Son]. With an orderly and logical and "Christ-centered" cosmos, a change in the rider's direction is possible, but what this actually means for the rider himself remains unclear.

The long middle section of the poem transports us through different images of the crucifixion itself. In some ways, the images themselves change as the poem progresses, suggesting movement from an abstract vision of Christ's death to something more concrete—from something ethereal to something fleshy and human. At the same time, as Hurley's

analysis suggests, the idea of "seeing" changes—and with it, the rider's sensibilities:

> [The speaker's] imaginative "seeing" in the first ten lines of the poem has not yet begun, but its potential is suggested by the fact that his literal "seeing" has evidently already been turned off. . . . His spiritual "seeing" in fact begins on the intellectual level, in his review of the paradoxes. . . [and] as the "spectacle" of the crucified Christ, brought into focus by the review of these paradoxes, takes shape, it gains detail and effective potency. The speaker is increasingly anguished as the product of his visually-tutored memory and his own image-making faculty begin to intersect. (74-75)

The first kind of "seeing" is phrased in an unspoken conditional: if the rider were to turn around, he "should see (l. 11), but of course, he does not, which he confesses in line 15. Then in the next eight lines, he suggests a couple of possible very explicit and dramatic visions, and we are forced to realize that he does not literally see them. Further, we are drawn into the rider's concern that he might not have the emotional stamina to view such a scene.

> Could I behold those hands which span the poles
> And tune all spheres at once, pierc'd with those holes?
> Could I behold that endless height, which is
> Zenith to us and our antipodes,
> Humbled below us? or that blood which is
> The seat of all our souls, if not of His,
> Make dirt of dust, or that flesh which was worn
> By God for His apparel, ragg'd and torn? (ll. 21-28)

What we get here is a detailed and graphic description of that which the speaker insists he cannot see, which he admits he really does not want to see. This is a picture of a Christ who is both divine and human—who is "Zenith to us," and yet whose flesh quite simply tears and bleeds, whose dripping blood turns dirt to dust. At this point, explains Hurley,

the speaker's "picture-making faculty is not deeply engaged" (75); he is indeed "seeing" the crucifixion in his imagination, and the image is so real that at the moment of "seeing," he pulls back from the horror of Christ dying on the cross and shifts our sights to Mary at his feet—a picture that is less graphically horrible, but no less disturbing.

> If upon these things I durst not look, durst I
> Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
> Who was God's partner here, and furnish'd thus
> Half of that sacrifice which ransom'd us? (ll. 29-32)

I am reminded here of Kerrigan's concern, that we are made uneasy by Donne's forcing us to imagine "in some detail the sexuality of God." In these lines from "Goodfriday," Mary is "God's partner." To a degree, this makes us see Mary as more divine, but mostly it forces us to see God as more human, inviting us to imagine Christ as the product of a physical, human union. So, the scene presents us with the death of a very real child. Through our imagination, explains Hurley, we can feel this loss, and by the power of our imagination, we can also be propelled into that "different dimension" of divine loss. Can we otherwise comprehend this death of God? Can we otherwise comprehend the divine nature of this sacrifice? This is the heart of Christian paradox—the Word made Flesh, the unintelligible made intelligible, carrying us, in Coleridge's words, "beyond the distance" of ordinary experience.

Hurley's analysis further establishes this sequence of different kinds of "seeing" within the realm of "composition," or "memory"—the first stage in the practice of "Catholic meditational techniques"—building on the definition of this stage from Louis Martz' earlier study: it is "the stimulation of memory through 'composition of place, seeing the spot,' a practice as Martz says 'of enormous importance for religious poetry' and . . . for Donne's religious poetry in particular" (67). In exploring the Renaissance "fascination with the picture-making faculty," Hurley explains that "the image, it was believed, was projected into the mind in the same manner that an artist produced that image on canvas" (68). Interestingly, it was understood that the "sensual quality"

of this image-making faculty could prove dangerous to those whose "impure" hearts might provoke "lascivious impulses." The relevance here to any discussion of Donne's divine poetry is clear:

> he seems to have thought recurrently throughout his life about the role of images, specifically in reference to their curious dual nature, on the one hand supplying clarity and focus to the meditative act, on the other potentially dangerous, even damning, in their appeal through sensuality. (74)

Moreover, the meditative experience "insists that the image and the act of imaging are central to our emotional and cognitive immersion in the text . . . one cannot evade that awful image of the crucified Christ even if one wants to" (70). This is the imagination at work, and it leads us to a plausible interpretation of the poem's fuller meaning:

> The syntax of the poem . . . suspends that central tension within an extended negative: though the speaker "should see" the crucified Christ on this Good Friday, he insists that he "do[es] not"—until his imagination, against his will, through the dynamic action of its peculiar property, picture-making, forces a resolution. (74)

Hurley denies that this "resolution" is a success in terms of meditation, because "To meditate on the passion is, as the manuals tell us, to arouse compassion, not guilt" (76), and it is guilt that we sense from the rider in the end. Although the poem certainly ends with the potential for compassion, or perhaps more likely for the completion of the sequence of "guilt, punishment, and grace," the rider does not, in fact, turn his face.

> Though these things as I ride be from mine eye,
> They are present yet unto my memory,
> For that looks toward them, and Thou look'st towards me,
> O Saviour, as Thou hang'st upon the tree.
> I turn my back to Thee but to receive

> Corrections till Thy mercies bid Thee leave.
> O think me worth Thine anger, punish me,
> Burn off my rusts and my deformity,
> Restore Thine image so much by Thy grace
> That Thou may'st know me, and I'll turn my face. (ll. 33-42)

And so, in Hurley's opinion, the poem "documents a failure or, at best, an interruption, in the meditative process" (76). O'Connell's reading supports this, suggesting that, even though the Christ-centered cosmos is established by the end, the rider's spiritual condition is still doubtful. O'Connell sees movement from fear, to sorrow, and finally to shame (something in between compassion and guilt, perhaps?) which "prompts the rider, almost without realizing it, to acknowledge his own involvement in the crucifixion, a confession that paradoxically makes him its beneficiary as well" (23). Consequently, O'Connell disagrees with Friedman's final analysis which takes the extra step to a glorious resolution:

> . . . it turns out that the speaker has been riding in the right direction after all; not just because to ride toward death is to ride toward resurrection, or because to ride west is ultimately to ride east, but because all man's paths lead to Christ, and because although man can be misled by the eye of the flesh, the inner eye of memory can never be blurred. (442)

Like O'Connell and Hurley, I am not convinced that the closing lines support such a definitively celebratory conclusion as Friedman's. After all, the rider neither reverses his direction nor turns around in the saddle to "see/ That spectacle of too much weight for me" (ll. 15-16). Also, if "all man's paths lead to Christ," then where is the dilemma? As Robert Shaw explains in his study of the poem in the context of Donne's sermons, a true resolution requires both "a turning from our sins, and a returning to our God" (53). Hurley's claim makes sense. Specifically as an example of a Catholic meditation, the poem does perhaps "document a failure." But this is not to say that the poem itself is a failure. The

uncertainty of the ending is reflective of the poem's pervading sense of paradox—paradox that does not necessarily require "resolution" to be "understood." Part of the problem in the final sestet is that we are indeed unsure of exactly what the speaker intends in his plea for punishment. It could, as Shaw observes, reveal "a penitent frame of mind," even though it is still a little too passive (53); it could also be suggestive of redemption "from fire by fire" (Sullivan 7), which hints at something more spiritually profound than mere "Corrections." According to this interpretation, the rider has accepted his sinful nature, and understands what he must do in order to be "worth" God's attention; and we in turn understand implicitly that the potential redemption may take place at some future time. But we are made uneasy by the closing couplet in which the speaker seems to be negotiating with God. We can suggest that redemption may come at a later time under other circumstances (assuming that God accepts the terms of the negotiation), but even the speaker here is hinting towards his own understanding that the solution itself may be very simple (not easy or simplistic, but simple)—that "know[ing]" God may simply be a matter of imagining God. Paul Harland argues that through this exercise of memory, imprinting the image of Christ's suffering on the "soul's form," the rider has already "appropriated" the crucifixion "into his own life's circumstances"[21]: he can, therefore, continue riding westward, towards his death, "asserting his selfhood" (175), confident that such appropriation is sufficient "because direct sight of God is denied humans in the present life" (177).

There are several intriguing elements in Harland's interpretation. He is not the first reader to point out that the imprint of the crucifixion on the soul of the rider is the result, perhaps even the manifestation, of the sequence of imagined/remembered images. Hurley's criticism emphasizes this same point, as well as bringing to our attention the important reciprocal "looking" between Christ and this sinner, as it appears in lines 33-36:

> Though these things as I ride be from mine eye,
> They are present unto my memory,
> For that looks toward them; and Thou look'st toward me,
> O Saviour, as Thou hang'st upon the tree.

Hurley explains that this quatrain illustrates the purpose of the meditative practice—"to imitate Christ... that is, the individual was to be stimulated to imitate Christ by refining and then imitating the image of Christ within himself" (72). Harland's critique is similar: "Simultaneously, as Christ pierces through the deformity of sin to recognize his own image in the speaker, the speaker pierces through the ugliness of the crucified Christ to see Christ's essential beauty" (168). The activity of "imaging," then, allows, on one hand, for Christ and the speaker to mirror one another, on the other hand, for Christ to be within the soul of the speaker. Both of these suggest the ultimate joining of the two, although Hurley maintains that this union is still undercut by the rider's refusal to turn his face.

Admittedly, Fish does not specifically treat "Goodfriday" in his essay on Donne's verbal abuse, but in critiquing the "verbal felicity" in the "triumph of rhetorical flourish" at the end of "Death be not proud," Fish states

> Once again, the strong demonstration of verbal power—of the ability to make any proposition seem plausible so long as one doesn't examine it too closely—undermines its own effects. In the end the poet always pulls it off but that only means that he could have pulled it off in the other direction, and that only means that the conclusion he forces is good only for the theatrical moment of its production. This is true not only for his readers but for himself . . . The effort of self-persuasion—which is also at bottom the effor to confirm to himself that he is a self, someone who exceeds the theatrical production of signs and shows—fails in exactly the measure that his rhetorical effort succeeds. (247).

In short, Fish asserts that these poems destroy themselves by their own rhetorical power. Harland would probably agree to the extent that the common claim against Donne's "self-absorption" is that it "limits his ability to sympathize, to pity, to understand with tenderness those who are truly other and not merely versions of his multi-faceted self" (162). However, the Passion poems, says Harland, "tell a different story."

"Goodfriday" is one poem which simply does not match Fish's template of verbal self-consumption. It is true that the rider seems inordinately concerned with maintaining his self-hood, although this focus does shift as the images of Christ's suffering and death grow more vivid in his imagination. Still, the speaker's refusal to turn around and "face" Christ's death is also a rejection of the redemptive promise of life-in-death. He chooses to continue to ride westward to his own death—even to his "execution" if we read the phrase within the context of "riding to Tyburn," as Sullivan suggests—in which case the rider's death is seen as even more deliberate and inevitable. Sullivan, however, uses this colloquialism in order to make the larger point that,

> It pleased Donne to think of death as an execution. This idea is not necessarily a conceit: insofar as to be a Chrisian means to imitate Christ, it has an historical justification in the Crucifixion: and some correspondence, actual or symbolic, in the manner of dying was, for Donne, both inevitable and good. (3)

Sullivan states that his interpretation of the ending is in sympathy with that of Chambers: The speaker's predicament is that "he cannot, or will not, turn his face to the east: he is afraid to die" (4), even though he is willing to accept the spiritual consequences. And he is willing to accept them, argues Sullivan, because "for Donne, to turn one's face to the east is possible only after death; for it is presumably only on Ressurection Day that Christ will reappear to the eyes" (7).

I do not wish to distort the influence of Donne's personal life on his poetry, or to suggest that his religious apostacy must inform all of our reading of his divine poems, but the fact that "Goodfriday" was written only two years before his problematic ordination to the priesthood suggests that the rider's passivity and indecision may reflect the poet's own anxiety about his "calling." In fact, while Fish gives Donne's poetry the derogatory lable of a "high-wire act," Raymond-Jean Frontain uses this same metaphor in a positive way, claiming that

> [Donne's] religious poetry records the paralysis of a spiritual trapeze artist willing to take the death-defying leap only if he can be certain that some one will catch him in his mid-air flight. Desire for reassurance . . . threatens to undermine the very experience of faith. The speaker's longing to transcend sacred time and space may actually entrench him the more deeply in the mortifying realm of the profane.[22]

The large amount of biographical data on Donne informs Shaw's claim that "concern with vocation is the force" behind the poem (35). The connection Sullivan makes is also quite specific: "When Donne rode westward on the day he composed this poem, as seems fairly certain, he was meditating on several important matters," among them his ordination. "He was about to die, he must have felt, to a whole way of life" (7)

I believe it is possible to read and to come to some real understanding of this poem without making an explicit connection between the vocational anxiety of the man and his poetic persona. What I think we cannot separate our reading experience from is the religious environment of the poet's own time and, within that environment, the profoundly mysterious but accepted notion of paradox: not only the core Christian paradox of the Word made Flesh, but also the basic struggle of the human will, the "contrary" natures of the spirit and the flesh, the soul and the body riding in different directions. Concerning "Goodfriday," much negative criticism has been directed to the rider's passivity, and yet that same passivity is presented in scripture as the central problem and paradox of faith. Christians are called to walk by faith, not by sight. Perhaps "seeing" the crucifixion in his imagination is all that this westward rider's faith really requires.

At the end of the poem, as all of these critics point out, we are left with questions. Does death mean rejection or acceptance? Does the rider's refusal bar his participation in the Resurrection? Or does he "appropriate" the crucifixion in his imagination? Is there a promise of future redemption? Can he really "see" without "looking"? Can he

continue to ride to the west while his "soul's form bends towards the east"? Can he make that death-defying leap into faith? Can we as readers accept these paradoxes as paradoxes and not insist on resolutions? We may not have answers, but we should still be asking the questions. Eliot's advice to the literary critic is this: "One must always be as exact and clear as one can—as clear as one's subject matter permits. And when one's subject matter is literature, clarity beyond a certain point becomes falsification" (59). Donne was a religious man. His divine poems are ultimately informed by subject matter that by nature resists clarity; to attempt to understand this poetry by "maintaining a skeptical distance" from the religious and theoretical foundations of the period and by trying to demystify that which is inherently mysterious, is to find ourselves concluding that the poetry just doesn't make sense—or worse, that it is "sick."

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Notes

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2. Stanley Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power," in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, eds. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

3. Brian Vickers, *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* (New Haven: Yale, 1993), 372.

4. Frank Lentricchia, "Last Will and Testament of an Ex-Literary Critic," *ALSC Newsletter* 2:4 (1996): 4.

5. Harold Bloom, *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 8.

6. William Kerrigan, "The Fearful Accomodation of John Donne," *ELR* 4:3 (1974): 37.

7. Simon Blackburn, *Spreading the Word: Groundings in the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 154.

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9. Shedd, ed., *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1858), 3:374.

10. Kathleen Coburn, ed., *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 325.

11. Ibid.

12. Shedd, 374.

13. William H. Halewood, *The Poetry of Grace* (New Haven: Yale, 1970), 6.

14. J.T. Rhodes, "Continuities: The Ongoing English Catholic Tradition from the 1570's to the 1630's," *John Donne Journal* 12:1-2 (1993): 140.

15. Dennis Flynn, "The 'Annales School' and the Catholicism of Donne's Family," *John Donne Journal* 2:2 (1983): 4.

16. Anne Hurley, "Donne's 'Goodfriday, Riding Westward, 1613' and the Illustrated Meditative Tradition," *John Donne Journal* 12:1-2 (1993): 70.

17. Patrick F. O'Connell, "'Restore Thine Image': Structure and Theme in Donne's 'Goodfriday.'" *John Donne Journal* 4:1 (1985).

18. David M. Sullivan, "Riders to the West: 'Goodfriday, 1613.'" *John Donne Journal* 6:1 (1987): 15.

19. A.B. Chambers, "'Goodfriday, 1613, Riding Westward:' The Poem and the Tradition," *ELH* 28 (1961).

20. Donald M. Friedman, "Memory and the Art of Salvation in Donne's Good Friday Poem," *ELR* 3 (1973): 419.

21. Paul W. Harland, "'A True Substantiation': Donne, Self-Love, and the Passion," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination,* Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi, eds. (Conway, Arkansas: UCA, 1995), 162-80.

22. Fontain, *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, 16.