# The "Turning Wheele": Carew, Jonson, Donne . . . Law of Motion

Anthony Low

When "great DONNE" died, Carew informs us in "An Elegie upon the death of the Deane of Pauls," widowed poetry followed him to the grave not long afterward. That the "death of all the Arts" (76) did not follow immediately—apart from the fact that Carew himself had written a poem fully worthy of his subject—was apparently owing to a certain momentum, which belongs to the very nature of things in this world:

> So doth the swiftly turning wheele not stand
> In th'instant we withdraw the moving hand,
> But some small time maintaine a faint weake course
> By vertue of the first impulsive force. (79-82) [1]

For a modern reader, I believe, although this metaphor continues to reflect the driving wit that Carew sustains so forcefully over the course of his poem, it also has a kind of dignity and even a natural inevitability. The metaphor seems natural both because we know from practical, everyday experience that a wheel will indeed continue to spin for a while before it stops, and also because we know for theoretical reasons that it belongs to the nature of any motion to continue onward until some force, such as friction or air resistance, brings it to a halt. Donne and Carew shared our first, practical response, but it is an interesting question whether they shared the second. Consideration of that question reveals that there are weighty implications in Carew's metaphor that might not be immediately apparent to a hypothetical modern reader.

Louis L. Martz suggests that one source of Carew's wheel image may have been lines 7-8 of Donne's *Second Anniversary*, which describe the continuing motion of a ship after the sails have been furled.[2] It is difficult to know whether or not those lines were actually Carew's source; nevertheless, their context

proves remarkably suggestive in the present connection, for like Carew Donne is employing a metaphor of momentum to describe an otherwise puzzling and even horrifying movement that continues after death. The passage is worth quoting in full, because it suggests something about the nature and power of the emotions that could be raised by the idea of such a momentum, natural enough to us but for Donne, of course, an apparent violation of the basic assumptions underlying the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic universe.

> But as a ship which hath strooke saile, doth runne,
> By force of that force which before, it wonne,
> Or as sometimes in a beheaded man,
> Though at those two Red seas, which freely ran,
> One from the Trunke, another from the Head,
> His soule be saild, to her eternall bed,
> His eies will twinckle, and his tongue will roll,
> As though he beckned, and cal'd backe his Soul,
> He graspes his hands, and he puls up his feet,
> And seemes to reach, and to step forth to meet
> His soule; when all these motions which we saw,
> Are but as Ice, which crackles at a thaw:
> Or as a Lute, which in moist weather, rings
> Her knell alone, by cracking of her strings:
> So strugles this dead world, now shee is gone;
> For there is motion in corruption. (7-22)[3]

The first image that Donne employs in order to evoke the idea of inertial motion seems on its face to be entirely natural and innocuous, even momentarily lovely, although the second line of the couplet turns—significantly, it develops—tortured and difficult. But the ship is soon displaced, and the impression it has made on the reader is overwhelmed by the violent and bloody image of the beheaded corpse, whose shocking grotesqueness results chiefly from unnatural movement. The twinkling of the eyes, the rolling of the tongue, the grasping of hands, and the pulling up of feet are chiefly horrible because they imitate the behavior and especially the movements of a living man. In responding to this passage, we may well feel that a corpse ought not, in all propriety, to behave like this; it ought not to imitate life; in particular it ought not to continue moving about beyond the moment of its death. Much the same may be said about the unnatural movements of the crackling ice, and of the lute that, warped by moisture, rings its own death knell, though untouched by living hands. Finally, in the statement

toward which all these similes have been leading, Donne concludes that the whole world is likewise struggling on past death, after the living soul has gone from it. The essence of that unnatural but persistent struggle is summed up in a last gruesome image based on continuing movement: "For there is motion in corruption."

In connection with Carew's image of the turning wheel, Edward I. Selig has cited without comment still another passage, this one from Ben Jonson's "Elegie on my Muse," the ninth poem in the sequence "Eupheme" on the death of Lady Venetia Digby:

> Thou hast no more blowes, *Fate*, to drive at one:
> What's left a *Poet*, when his *Muse* is gone?
> Sure, I am dead, and know it not! I feele
> Nothing I doe; but, like a heavie wheele,
> Am turned with an others powers. (27-31)[4]

Jonson explains in a brief preface that before she died Lady Venetia had given him permission to call her his Muse; as a result her death has penetrated to the very roots of the poet's psyche. Also probably relevant to the stunned tone of these lines is the fact that Jonson had suffered a stroke in 1628, which had left his poetic powers in considerable doubt (see lines 23-26 and "Ode to Himselfe"). At this moment he feels more like an automaton moved by an exterior force than a living, feeling man possessing free will. Although Jonson—who was by nature less scientifically curious than either Donne or Carew—does not specifically evoke that force which would later be called the inertia of a moving object, he does suggest that some unknown, horrifying power is continuing to turn the wheel representing his poetic creativity even though the inward spark of mind and inspiration has died. Thus, in a fashion that begins to seem familiar, only a semblance of life, embodied in motion, remains after the inward spirit that should properly drive the wheel has departed.

Although "Eupheme" did not appear in print until the publication of *Under-wood* in 1640, according to Herford and Simpson Jonson sent it to Sir Kenelm Digby in 1633,[5] which was also the year in which Carew's elegy was printed with Donne's *Poems*. While it would be difficult to prove that either poet provided the other with a source, the evidence certainly suggests that something in the air in the early 1630s led both of them to employ a similar image in even more similar contexts, having to do not only with the death of a friend but also with a more universal death. Perhaps not entirely coincidentally, 1633 also saw another event

that may be seen in retrospect as marking a climax in the struggle between the old and the new sciences: in that year Galileo was sentenced to life imprisonment.

A basic assumption of the old science, which the Renaissance inherited from Aristotle, is that unless continuing force is applied to an object it will come to rest. Rest is the natural state and the end of all things. Thus Jonson's Lady Venetia, like the Good Centurian (Matt. 8:9), was in life something of a Prime Mover:

> She swaid all bus'nesse in the Familie!
> To one she said, Doe this, he did it; So
> To another, Move; he went; To a third, Go,
> He run; and all did strive with diligence
> T'obey, and serve her sweet Commandements.
> (168-72)

But after death her soul attained its proper end:

> That great eternall *Holy-day* of rest,
> To Body, and Soule! where *Love* is all the guest!
> And the whole *Banquet* is full sight of *God*!
> Of joy the *Circle*, and sole *Period*! (63-66; see 197)

In the Aristotelian system there are, basically, two kinds of motion. One is the movement of objects that have earlier been displaced by some force, and are therefore seeking their proper places: as fire will rise, or a stone fall to earth before coming to rest. Donne appeals by analogy to such natural motion in Holy Sonnet 3:

> Then, as my soule, to'heaven her first seate, takes flight,
> And earth-borne body, in the earth shall dwell,
> So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
> To where they'are bred, and would presse me, to hell.[6]

Donne implies that, because it belongs to the nature of the physical order for all objects to seek their proper places or origins, therefore it is only natural that his sins should fall to hell and his soul rise to heaven. Of course, he knows that such an outcome is certain only in a conceit; yet though sin and the soul do not answer to the laws of matter, his intense wish may yet be awarded with grace and thus analogy be converted into fact.

The second kind of motion (which, it may be seen, is a precondition of the first) is movement caused by life or particularly by intelligence: animal, human, angelic, and divine. Ultimately, all

movement in the Christian-Aristotelian system may be traced back to the First Mover. The Renaissance was far from seeing that Mover as having acted only once. Movement still required the persistent application of force by intelligence. The universe, with everything in it, was impelled by the continuing intervention of Providence as well as by the actions of individual created agents. The most familiar kind of circular motion, for example, that of the heavenly spheres, continued in its eternal dance only because it was sustained by God and his appointed angels. Thus Dante concludes his *Commedia* with praise for that force which keeps the universe in being: "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle"; and Donne begins "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" with an appeal to the "intelligence that moves" the spheres. In brief, motion reflects the presence of life. It is only natural that Donne, Carew, and Jonson all saw the cessation of motion, the withdrawal of the impelling hand or of the inward vital spirit, as an apt symbol for death.

Motion in the old system also typically had moral and teleological implications, which are lacking in a mechanical universe. Natural and violent motions—therefore implying good and bad—are clearly distinguished in "Goodfriday, 1613." Like those "forraigne motions" that deflect the wandering planets from the "naturall forme" of the fixed stars' westward course, the outward distractions of business or pleasure carry the rider toward the west even as his inward soul "bends toward the East." In the first of the Holy Sonnets added in 1635 the speaker admits to a deadly motion caused by sin and the fall: "I runne to death, and death meets me as fast." Fortunately, grace initiates a counter-motion: "Onely thou art above, and when towards thee / By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe." In a universe in which, as Milton writes, "All things proceed" from God "and up to him return, / If not deprav'd from good" (*P.L.* v.469-71), movements often tend to take one either toward or away from God or one's proper end in life, and even inanimate objects are said, in the language of Aristotelian physics, to love and to hate.

But, of course, the seventeenth century witnessed a revolution in the perception and understanding of motion. It is arguable that, although more spectacular theories and discoveries were announced, changing perception of the nature of motion was the most basic underlying factor in the transformation of a vital into a mechanical model of the universe. The way of looking at things, thoroughly familiar to us, that is embodied in such concepts as momentum and the inertia of a moving body was first adumbrated toward the end

of the sixteenth century in the work of Galileo. Historians of science generally agree, however, that although Galileo's work clearly implies the concept of inertia as something belonging to motion as well as to rest, he was never quite able to come to terms with that concept or to formulate it explicitly. Indeed he seems even to have argued against it in his correspondence. Therefore it remained for his followers to complete what he had started. Francesco Cavalieri, a Jesuit professor at Bologna, published work pointing toward a modern conception of motion in 1632. Galileo's own *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* also appeared in 1632, and in 1638 he finally published the *Two New Sciences*, containing work on the mechanics of motion dating back to the 1590s. Pierre Gassendi, in *De Motu Impresso* (1642), extended Galileo's ideas to horizontal motion. Toward the latter part of the century both Hooke and Huyghens worked in the area, although they were slow to publish. It was, of course, Sir Isaac Newton who put the finishing touches on this gradual working out of Galileo's insights, with the publication of his First Law of Motion in the *Principia Mathematica* (1678). It had taken roughly a century from the first hint that there might be a new way of looking at things to the authoritative formulation and general acceptance among intellectuals of the mechanical model of the universe.[7]

Among the first in England and in Europe to accept the new model was Thomas Hobbes. Thus we find near the beginning of *Leviathan* (1651) a statement that is remarkably close to Newton's formulation of the First Law: "When a Body is once in motion, it moveth (unless something els hinder it) eternally."[8] Likewise in *De Corpore* (Latin 1655, English 1656) Hobbes writes: "whatsoever is moved, will always be moved, except there be some other body besides it, which causeth it to rest."[9] Under Hobbes's modernist eye phenomena seemed to reverse their appearances. Rational forces did not give rise to motion; rather motion gave rise to the appearance of rationality. Life did not give motion dignity and purpose; rather life might be reduced to a series of mechanical motions. "For seeing life is but a motion of Limbs," Hobbes writes in the Introduction to *Leviathan*, why should not man create an artificial life? "For what is the *Heart*, but a *Spring*; and the *Nerves*, but so many *Strings*; and the *Joynts*, but so many *Wheeles*, giving motion to the whole Body, such as was intended by the Artificer?" (p. 81).

Even earlier than Hobbes Francis Bacon had also speculated about the possibilities in mechanical motion. Readers of *The New*

*Atlantis* (1627) were informed that a primary aim of Salomon's House was to investigate the nature of motion: "The End of our Foundation is the knowledge of Causes and secret motion of things." Subsequently Bacon goes into considerable detail concerning those proposed investigations:

> We also have engine-houses, where are prepared engines and instruments for all sorts of motions. There we imitate and practise to make swifter motions than any you have, either out of your muskets or any engine that you have; and to make them and multiply them more easily and with small force by wheels and other means. . . . We imitate also flights of birds; we have some degrees of flying in the air; we have ships and boats for going under water. . . . We have divers curious clocks and other like motions of return and some perpetual motions. We imitate also motions of living creatures by images of men, beasts, birds, fishes, and serpents. We have also a great number of other various motions, strange for equality, fineness, and subtlety.[10]

While Bacon has nothing to say about inertial motion as such, it is clear enough that he was as fascinated as Hobbes by the idea of motion as a mechanical rather than a living process, and also that he thought that close investigation into the nature of motion might well produce many surprising and useful discoveries.

On the new theory of motion, as is sufficiently evident in the early chapters of *Leviathan*, rested Hobbes's radical revision of faculty psychology and his entire political philosophy. As C. B. Macpherson writes (somewhat simplifying the contribution of Galileo):

> He had absorbed the implications of Galileo's law of inertia, that simple but profound reversal of assumptions about rest and motion. In the old prevailing view, rest was the natural state of things—nothing moved until something else moved it. Galileo postulated that motion was the natural state—things moved unless something else stopped them. Hobbes would apply this to the motions of men, would get a system which would explain their motions relative to one another, and would then deduce what kind

> of government they must have to enable them to maintain and maximize their motion.[11]

Although Hobbes did not publish his ideas about motion until 1651, they are to be found in an unpublished treatise, the *Short Tract on First Principles*, which scholars date somewhere between 1630 and 1636—around the time of Hobbes's third continental trip (1634-37), during which he met with Galileo and joined the circle of New Scientists who surrounded Mersenne in Paris.[12]

While it is just possible that Hobbes may have directly or indirectly influenced Carew and Jonson, whose poems were written no later than 1633, that would plainly be impossible in the case of Donne, whose *Second Anniversary* was published in 1612. What is far more likely in any event is that all three, like Hobbes, were simply responding with the sensitivity one might expect of such men to a major current running through their century. Indeed, the more one considers the matter, the less inherently improbable appears the proposition that, during an age in which science was not notably specialized, poets should have been among the first to attune themselves to new ideas and even to bring them to light. Even in our own more specialized age, fiction has often preceded fact. The theory of inertial motion was not, so far as one can tell, the invention of any single person. Rather it represented a deep sea-change in the way a great many people began to look at things, and moreover it was deeply implicit in the New Astronomy and related to many of the other discoveries of the New Sciences.

For example, inertia had obviously major implications for the mind-body problem raised by Descartes, which was already troubling Donne and others. The problem that was raised early in the century—How does the soul bridge the gap between spirit and matter and cause the body to move?—inevitably began giving way to a more perturbing question—If movement can be accounted for mechanically, why is it necessary to posit the existence of a soul? For example, although Donne writes in "The Extasie" that, in the absence of their souls, the lovers' bodies are no more than motionless "sepulchrall statues," and he later insists that "Wee are / The intelligences, they the spheare," nonetheless there are more than a few signs scattered about the *Songs and Sonets* (as critics have often noted in connection with Eliot's theory of unified sensibility) that Donne was not wholly confident in the power of spiritous "fingers" firmly to knit "That subtile knot, which makes us man."[13] *The Anniversaries* have been characterized in a number of ways; it would not be entirely unreasonable to propose still

another: that they are enormous poetic expansions on the Cartesian mind-body problem, in this case the mind and body of an entire world.

The passage concerning inertia in the *Second Anniversary* is the heart of Donne's recapitulation of the *First*. Taken as a whole, the two *Anniversaries* may be summed up as follows. Donne briefly announces the separation of the world's soul from its body. The rest of the *First Anniversary* and the beginning of the *Second* are an anatomization of the corpse, which examines and describes that corpse's various meaningless motions and activities. I do not wish to suggest by any means that motion is the exclusive theme of this portion of the two poems, but it is certainly an important one, and intimately connected with the main themes of separation, decay, and death. Thus, for example, in the famous astronomical passage, Donne does not even raise what for us would seem to be the central question, with which he was certainly familiar: Does the earth or the sun stand at the center of the universe? Instead, he concentrates almost exclusively on a breakdown in the traditional beauty, moral proportion, and divine purpose embodied in the movement of the spheres:

> They have empayld within a Zodiake
> The free-borne Sunne, and keepe twelve signes
> awake
> To watch his steps; the Goat and Crabbe controule,
> And fright him backe, who els to eyther Pole,
> (Did not these Tropiques fetter him) might runne:
> For his course is not round; nor can the Sunne
> Perfit a Circle, or maintaine his way
> One inche direct; but where he rose to day
> He comes no more, but with a cousening line,
> Steales by that point, and so is Serpentine. . . .
> So, of the starres which boast that they do runne
> In Circle still, none ends where he begunne.
> All their proportion's lame, it sinks, it swels. . . .
> Loth to goe up the hill, or labor thus
> To goe to heaven, we make heaven come to us.
> We spur, we raine the stars, and in their race
> They're diversly content t'obey our pace. (263-84)

Not only has the circle of perfection been broken; motion in the heavenly realm, which ought to offer a model of virtuous behavior, has become violent and aberrant, while impious men, who should climb up toward their heavenly rest, have instead preferred to pull the stars down from their courses upon their own heads.

Of course, the *Second Anniversary*, the body of which is entitled "Of the Progres of the Soule," tells of a countervailing movement. The soul of Elizabeth Drury speeds faster than a bullet shot from a rusty, exploded musket, piercing the spheres like beads on a string, up to the heaven of heavens. There is meant to be some comfort in this conclusion. Yet I do not personally consider that it outweighs or entirely cancels the deep and omnipresent difficulties that Donne has raised with such thoroughgoing persuasiveness. One small sign of lingering trouble is that Elizabeth's soul, even on its journey to the beatific vision, passes through the universe not of Ptolemy but of Tycho Brahe—that popular but at best awkward compromise with the encroachment of mechanism.[14] Donne can assure the reader of the promised end, but only by leaping abruptly beyond his disintegrating planetary system; meanwhile there is small balm for those still left in a decaying world.

What was pleasing to men like Bacon and Hobbes was seriously troubling to those with an emotional investment in the old world system. There had, of course, always been certain pragmatic difficulties in the Aristotelian system. Why, for instance, should an arrow or a bullet continue to move after it had left the bow or the gun? Apparently it must have had something to do with the air rushing in behind and pushing it. For that matter, why did a wheel continue to spin after the spinner took away his hand? For a considerable time questions like those had continued to puzzle the curious; but the small discrepancies that they uncovered were hardly sources for anxiety, much less for the kind of violent emotional response that is associated with inertia in all three of the passages under consideration. The simplest interpretation of all the evidence is that, as early as 1612, Donne's acute and penetrating mind had sensed that there was some kind of sinister connection between the inertial motion of a ship after the wind had dropped or the sails were furled and the death of an entire world. It is now obvious to us that indeed there is a connection, and one that is especially relevant to a pair of poems in which the "new Philosophy cals all in doubt." By 1633, although an explicit formulation of the First Law was yet to be published, thinkers in different parts of Europe were already groping toward that solution, and Hobbes was able—or shortly would be able—to gather together all the pieces of the puzzle and to assemble them into a new model of human psychological and political behavior and of universal natural law.

Considering that Carew, Donne, and Jonson all were writing elegiac poetry, it is perhaps not surprising that they all took as

major themes and dominant images the death of a whole world, which had been abandoned by its virtuous, vital spirit. Such a universalization of individual death is not unusual, and it may be accounted for as the appropriate psychological and artistic response to each particular occasion for mourning. But the appearance in all three poems of the troubling phenomenon of inertial movement, or of an outward mechanical force that replaces living self-activation, as if a corpse continued to stir after its soul had gone, is much more difficult to explain in those terms. One explanation we have suggested: that all three poets sensed that there was a menacing threat to their world in the very concept of momentum—of dead movement. In addition to that, we may conjecture that, at some deeper level, they sensed that inertia was not only a potentially destructive agent, seemingly outside human and divine control, but that it offered a shockingly accurate model of precisely what was being done to the Christian-Classical universe into which they had all been born. That world was perceptibly decaying, and not in the old-fashioned way that allowed some Jacobeans to luxuriate in a comfortable sort of pessimism and even Donne partly to mask the sources of his anxiety. Indeed, that world might fairly be said already to have died. But, like a vast wheel, the old system continued to turn. Poetry lent life to it for quite a number of years, even as poetry also was the first to proclaim the subtle signs of its inexorable demise.

*New York University*

NOTES

1 Text from *The Poems of Thomas Carew*, ed. Rhodes Dunlap (Oxford: Clarendon, 1949).

2 *The Wit of Love* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Univ. Press, 1969), p. 199, n. 20.

3 Text from *The Epithalamions Anniversaries and Epicedes of John Donne*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978).

4 Text from *The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson*, ed. William B. Hunter, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1968); Selig, *The Flourishing Wreath: A Study of Thomas Carew's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1958), p. 171, n. 24.

5 *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, XI (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), 103.

6 Texts of "Holy Sonnets" and "Goodfriday, 1613" are from *The Divine Poems of John Donne*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

7 See, inter alia, Alexandre Koyré, *Newtonian Studies* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1965), pp. 185-91. Possibly Descartes's theories of motion may also have been influential, although in the end his chief contribution was to set such men as Hobbes and Newton to arguing against him; see E. J. Aiton, *The Vortex Theory of Planetary Motion* (London: Macdonald, 1972).

8 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 88 (I.ii).

9 *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, I (London: John Bohn, 1839), 115; italics removed.

10 Francis Bacon, *A Selection of His Works*, ed. Sidney Warhaft (London: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 447, 454.

11 *Leviathan*, ed. Macpherson, p. 19.

12 See Macpherson, pp. 18-19; Frithiof Brandt, *Thomas Hobbes's Mechanical Conception of Nature* (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1928), pp. 282-85; Richard Peters, *Hobbes* (Harmondsworth: Peregrine, 1967), esp. pp. 84-85; Thomas A. Spragens, Jr., *The Politics of Motion: The World of Thomas Hobbes* (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1973), pp. 53-76.

13 Text of "The Extasie" from *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1912), 2 vols.

14 This explains the puzzling order of the spheres–on which I once began a note before finding I had been anticipated by John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Norton, 1967), p. 296, n. 189-206.

# Two Types of Traherne *Centuries*

Stanley Stewart

Commentary on Traherne's *Select Meditations* has focused on the similarity between this recently discovered work and the *Centuries*. In announcing the discovery James Osborn wrote, "'To me it reads like Thomas Traherne,'" and Louis Martz responded, "'You are absolutely right, this is Traherne.'"[1] There were good reasons for this judgment, not the least of which was the catalogue description to which John Hayward had drawn Osborn's attention. The manuscript was designated *Select Meditations: Four Centuries*, and since this "unknown major work" was arranged in the same form as the *Centuries*, Louis Martz, observing "characteristic phrasing, along with [Traherne's] characteristic spelling and punctuation (or lack of punctuation)," and a typical reliance on Augustinian techniques and aims of repetition, inferred that Traherne had a "planned set of Centuries fully in mind."[2]

Although my present aim will be to show how these works differ, let me concede first that one can without difficulty find passages in both works which are strikingly similar in diction, syntax, and theme. As for method of organization, many readers will recall that in the *Centuries* Traherne links various entries, forming clusters of meditations on particular themes: "Your Enjoyment of the World is never right"; "Yet further, you never Enjoy the World aright . . . ," and so on.[3] Likewise, in *Select Meditations*, often meditations amplify motifs enunciated in preceding entries. The theme of *Select Meditations* III.8 is familiar to Traherne readers: "For I being a Divine Lover of all Angels and Men am concernd in their felicity as much as mine own."[4] Since God's goodness reflects itself in infinite ways, it follows that in order for man fully to enjoy all men of all ages his soul must be infinite too. Hence, God could not create man "of limited comprehensions, becaus that would be a loss of infinit Happiness." This view is a spatio-temporal leitmotif