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Phonological Analysis and Donne's "Nocturnall"

Sara Anderson

During my drive home from the 2000 John Donne Conference, immediately after the lively panel discussion of "A Nocturnall Upon St. Lucies Day," I experienced a terrific urge to address the debate with the method of interpretive phonological analysis I had presented to the 1998 conference in a paper on "Twicknam Garden." Indeed, the "Nocturnall" was one of the main pieces that had stimulated my fascination with the sounds of poetry to begin with; I had been enraptured by my undergraduate professor's performance of it, a performance that convinced me that the piece was constructed so as to convey every bit of pain and hopelessness that my professor so skillfully put into his rendition. After I later became familiar with the dispute between what Kate Gartner Frost has conveniently termed the "School of Despair" and the "School of Regeneration," I remained certain that the poem's phonological structure supported the former interpretation—the details of which support form the subject of the present paper—but I also felt the need to take into account the evidence, discussed most recently by Frost, for the latter interpretation, namely, that the speaker believes in his own regeneration in the next life if not in this one.[1] In the present paper I wish to suggest an answer to this basic interpretive question, an answer suggested by the poem's various features and the way they play against each other as well as by the very interplay of cognitive

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[1]"'Preparing towards her': Contexts of *A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day*," in *John Donne's "desire of more": The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry*, M. Thomas Hester, ed. (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 1996), p. 149.

processes with emotional expressiveness, a concept I shall return to at the end of my analysis.

Phonological analysis seeks out sound-based interpretive clues, in the form of structural components (which are automatically present in every vocalization of a poem, such as alliteration or meter) and performance possibilities (which the performer chooses whether to include, such as exaggerated angry emphasis of a particular word).[2] In developing the method, my hypothesis was that in many poems these phonological clues support certain interpretive performances more completely than other interpretive performances, and that this support constitutes evidence in favor of the interpretations whose performances are thus facilitated. As Alexander Pope declared, "the sound must seem an echo to the sense"; therefore, for poems whose sense is in question, phonological analysis seeks to discover *which* sense the sounds are better able to echo. In the case of the "Nocturnall," we are trying to determine whether its phonological components are more supportive of a performance of the speaker's utter despair or one in which the destruction he has experienced is accompanied by a hope of renewal.

The question is hard to settle because it is not simply a question whether the speaker is devastated—everyone agrees he is—but whether he also sees no hope for relief. Some readers seem to feel that what has been called the poem's "hyper-hyperbole" of destruction precludes any hope whatsoever for the person experiencing that destruction.[3] Others view certain elements in the poem as hints that, although his devastation is genuine, the speaker does have hope that it will be alleviated, either here or in the hereafter. Since the fact of the speaker's pain is not at issue, what I want to do is move quickly through most of the poem, sketching the ways the sounds support the depiction of devastation. I will look more closely at the passages wherein the sound patterns touch on the crucial question of the speaker's personal hope or despair, especially as it arises out of the

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[2]Expressive structural elements are sometimes termed *phonesthesia* or *phonetic symbolism*, which is defined in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* as "vocal sound that suggests meaning" (769).

[3]R. S. Edgecombe, "Out-Heroding Herod: Hyper-hyperbole in *King Lear* and Donne's *Nocturnall*," *Theoria* 63 (1984): 67-72.

basic distinction he draws between himself and the rest of the universe.

The "Nocturnall" has no shortage of phonological features that equip a performer to express the speaker's desolation. None of Donne's poems contains more of what Coleridge called the curiously strong "force and meaning . . . involved in the words," which one modern critic describes as "a strange and original music, derived . . . from . . . the accents of emotionally heightened conversation."[4] Such conversational music is a primary element by which a poem can convey emotion, and in this highly emotional poem Donne seems to have chosen and arranged his words in order to include every imaginable possibility for imparting the speaker's despair. When my undergraduate professor, C. William Durrett, read the piece aloud from his commanding position as pedagogue enlightening young minds, his voice carried by turns bitterness, resignation, anger, and despondence—all those varying emotions of defeat to which Donne's speaker lays claim. In the opening stanza Durrett's deeply resonant vocal cords buzzed and hissed on the [z] and [s] sounds that occurred every few syllables, an effect I instantly recalled years later when in graduate school I encountered A. J. Smith's comment that "the constant repetitions . . . set up a kind of tolling—'yeares . . . dayes . . . Lucies'; and the effect is sustained over eight lines of . . . pondering . . . the single irreducible point."[5] The way this phonological effect seems to work is that the hissing and buzzing form a kind of deathly background hum to which the speaker returns every few syllables. In lines 1–5, where the device is most concentrated, it is as though he continually falls back into either the buzz of consciousness bereft of all vitality or the lighter-sounding hiss of what Ben Jonson called the serpent's letter, which with its less full-bodied sound is menacing in a different way:

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[4]*Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1955), p. 521; Frank Warnke, qtd. in Hollander, *Vision and Resonance*, p. 45. I owe the Coleridge reference to Arnold Stein, *John Donne's Lyrics: The Eloquence of Action* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 27.

[5]*John Donne: The Songs and Sonets* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 38.

> Tis the yeares midnight, and it *is* the dayes,
> Lucies, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes.
> The Sunne is spent, and now hi*s* flasks
> Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes;
> The worlds whole sap is sunke.

When Durrett spoke that last phrase, he prolonged the [s] sounds in a searing expression of hostility that culminated in a sharply clipped [k], so that "sunke" was effectively spit out in anger. The compelling phonetic structure of the line had thus enabled him to give a sound-of-sense performance that will be etched in my memory forever.

The next line contains another, more potent opportunity for forceful chopping: the unusual combination of all three voiceless stops ([p], [t], and [k]) in the space of two syllables in "hydroptique." Having the sentence accent fall as it does on the word makes for an especially vivid effect: the inherent harshness of the stop consonants means that when they are part of an adjective meaning "rabidly thirsty," which is emphasized as the main point of the sentence, the word can carry as much bitterness as the performer wishes to inject into it.[6] (When Durrett read, he chose to inject quite a bit.)

The [s] and [z] alliteration returns, albeit at a lesser intensity, in lines 7 and 8, which feature the third consecutive line-ending -unk rhyme and the syntactically, metrically, and phonetically foregrounded "Dead and enterr'd." The vocal power of this phrase stems from its brevity, its metrically irregular trochaic opening, and its alliterated [d] sounds, which enclose the four compact syllables consisting of front stops and predominantly front vowels ([d] and [t]; [ɛ] in "dead" and "en-," [æ] in "and," and [ɜ˞] in "-terr'd"), so that the phrase offers a vivid phonetic contrast to "shrunke" with its mid vowel, back nasal consonant, and back stop ([ʌ], [ŋ], and [k]). Moreover, the spotlight on "dead," highlighted as it is by the repetition of the near-synonym and by the closure of the phrase with the same heavy [d] stop with which it begins, establishes a thematic word that will be echoed throughout the poem.

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[6]Empirical evidence for the perceived harshness of the stop consonants is provided by—among others—Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive?* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1992), p. 3.

The sounds in the stanza's final clause, "yet all these seeme to laugh / Compar'd with mee, who am their Epitaph," have been commented on frequently; perhaps most significant for our purposes is Theodore Redpath's observation that line nine closes with a "laconic snap."[7] Though Redpath, like many other critics who attempt cursory sound analysis in the midst of other types of readings, declines to elaborate, saying only that the effect is "astringent," what he seems to be getting at is the concentration of meaning and sound in the sentence -accented and stanza-final "Epitaph." The thought of the sentence is carried entirely by this word, which has two accented syllables, the second of which closes the phonetically rich stanza not with a prolonged hiss but with a short (because utterance-final) [f], thereby producing the sensation of a sharp cutting off. The impression conveyed is one of close-minded, hopeless negativity.

The second stanza opens with the speaker's proposal that the ordinary lovers learn from his example, and this temporary focus on others is fittingly couched in sounds that are less oppressive than those of stanza one. But as soon as he resumes talk of himself, the device of emphatic shortening, which Smith describes as imparting "a most telling finality," functions with special brilliance in line 12: "For I am every dead thing." The sentence stress falls on the entire phrase comprising the last three words, and the monosyllabic final foot disrupts the iambic regularity of the line, slowing the tempo on "dead" and "thing" and making for weighty pauses on both parts of the thematically central noun phrase. To appreciate the effect fully, imagine that Donne had instead written "For I am every fallen thing." Although the same words would still be accented, the meter would be normal for the line's position in the stanza, rendering the emphasis considerably less powerful.

The strong phrasing is particularly apt because it is here that the speaker first makes explicit the distinction between himself and the rest of the created world, which becomes the poem's controlling idea. What happens both here and in the succeeding stanza is that after opening with the focus outward and the cadence and syllable sounds appropriately energetic compared to stanza one, the speaker returns to

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[7] *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne,* 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 38.

the [s] and [z] alliteration; in the present passage, although the [s] and [z] sounds still alternate, the emphasis is now on hissing, augmented by the repeated -esse rhyme:

> For his art did expresse
> A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
> From dull privations, and lean emptinesse[.]
> He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
> Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not.

John Hollander explains how the accent on "not," which results from the word's being used as an adjective rather than merely a negative particle, regularizes the meter and makes for a poetic statement that renders "Love's alchemy far more impressive" than it might seem otherwise.[8] So in the stanza as a whole, the dichotomy between the speaker and the rest of the world is expressed by the sounds as well as by the lexical meaning of the words and sentences. Beginning with "For I am every dead thing" and continuing through the alliterated hissing to the final "not," the speaker's feeling about himself—hopelessness—is clearly distinguished phonologically from his feeling about the future lovers, whose essence is expressed by the lighter cadences of the first two lines.

Stanza three's similar brief focus on the rest of humanity, which reiterates the speaker's alienation from it, is also expressed with a phonetic change of direction in its first two lines. Following the buzzing and hissing and the terse, exaggerated end-stopping of "not," lines 19 and 20 have a vibrant sound structure to match their brief excursion into the realm of the productively living. The collection of living substantives is introduced by a relative clause starting with a contraction ("that's"), the casualness of which seems to capture the speaker's envious recognition of the lightness of the other creatures's situations when viewed alongside his misery. Then the string itself offers, by the structural dissimilarity of the four nouns built on four different vowels—"life, soule, forme, spirit" ([ai], [ou], [ɔ], and [I], respectively)—a phonetic liveliness that points up their distinctness from the dying -esse nouns of the preceding stanza. But when the

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[8] *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), p. 53.

speaker returns to the other half of the dichotomy—himself, the opposite of the living things—the buzzing and hissing return as the most audible feature of some new negative nouns: "Chaosses" (25), "absences" (26), and "carcasses" (27), all of which, by virtue of being the plurals of words whose singular forms end in [s], contain both [s] and [z] segments, making for an even greater concentration of the fricative sound than is present in the preceding stanzas. This stanza is therefore even more noticeably divided phonetically as well as lexically into positive and negative—living and dead—portions.

The fourth stanza, although it contains extravagant expressions of deepest emotion, is, with regard to form, the most strictly logical part of the poem. In it, the speaker shifts from simple description of his feelings to some strenuous mental gymnastics: the "first nothing" conceit, which extends the alchemical metaphors of the second stanza to and even past their logical extremity, and the syllogistic reasoning that occupies the rest of the stanza. This mental activity on the parts of both the speaker and his listeners or readers takes the edge off the immediate emotional impact of the content, and accordingly, the sound structure is more neutral here than in the previous stanzas. But regarding the middle portion of the stanza, Smith makes an interesting comment: "Formal pattern and rhetorical scheme here have very much the effect of pointing. 'Were I a man, that I were one, / I needs must know; I should preferre, / *If I were any beast* . . .'—the sudden extra-emphatic rising line is slipped in to say with far greater and pithier vehemence that he is not even a beast" (38). The extra emphasis Smith finds in line 32 stems from the particularly strong contrast between the weak and strong metrical positions; although the surrounding lines are likewise iambic, only 32 features null-stressed and almost null-stressed syllables in every weak position and strongly stressed syllables in every strong position (since "any" receives emphatic stress by its meaning in the sentence). The conspicuous sense of rising thus created ("If—I . . . were—AN . . . y—BEAST") is enhanced by the line's brevity; together these metrical features foreground the phrase the poet wants to emphasize in reiterating the contrast between the speaker and the rest of creation. The effect is surpassed only slightly in line 35, where the radical unfamiliarity of the expression "ordinary nothing" causes it to be pronounced carefully and emphatically beyond what would normally be required, thus causing

the performer to give maximum accent to these words, which again underscore the fundamental difference between the speaker and ordinary beings.

The opening clause of the final stanza, "But I am None," structurally highlighted by its stanza-initial position and its stark monosyllables, states the matter straightforwardly, with the speaker following the dichotomy to its logical conclusion as he explains point-blank why he cannot participate in the hope of regeneration that attends the rest of the world, from the next year's lovers to the anthropomorphized plants and stones. Four lines later, another extra-emphatic rising three-foot line serves to emphasize the speaker's subtly sarcastic admonition to the new lovers to "Enjoy your summer all" (41). The phonetic structure of the sentence-accented "enjoy" is especially suited to carrying an intonational pattern that captures precisely the speaker's muted resentment; the stressed syllable "-joy," phonetically a heavy syllable by virtue of its diphthong, and following as it does the light, unstressed "en-," provides the performer with sufficient force and duration to inject a definite intonational gesture of envious sarcasm.[9] ("EnJOY your summer all.") Such a performance is all but dictated by the arrangement of the poem, since the line's brevity suggests emphasis but, as test-performing shows, it is difficult to add any stress to "enjoy" beyond the bare sentence accent without doing so sarcastically—and thereby voicing the speaker's sense of his basic difference from the other humans. The final four lines of the poem close the speaker's case with quiet resignation and a matching phonetic calmness achieved by—among other elements—an extra syllable in line 43, unless "towards" is pronounced monosyllabically, which seems not to have been the case for most English speakers of

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[9]The distinction between heavy and light (or strong and weak) syllables is phonetic and is not to be confused with the distinction between stressed and unstressed syllables, which is, of course, a lexical and syntactic concept. In *The Sound Pattern of English* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle define a strong syllable as consisting of either any vowel followed by a consonant cluster or a complex vowel (that is, a long vowel or diphthong) followed by any number (including zero) of consonants (29). While there is no necessary connection between strong and stressed or weak and unstressed syllables, common sense indicates that strong syllables are more equipped to carry stress, and that supposition is made in this study.

Donne's time.[10] The extra syllable breaks the rising of the important "Let mee prepare towards her," rendering its sound more in accord with the speaker's depression than with any vital hope for heavenly reunion. If the speaker really believed he were going to join his beloved soon, it seems he would sound a bit happier; as it is, the melody of the line, with the sentence accent on "towards," is quietly expressive of his melancholy, perhaps not merely over death but also over the possibility, noted by Achsah Guibbory, that his movement toward woman is an idolatrous movement away from God.[11] The metrical structure at this critical juncture supports despair rather than regeneration.

The closing couplet repeats the poem's opening words in a slightly different arrangement, which will likely be sounded with a lowering of pitch to mark the repetition, helping to communicate the speaker's perception of precisely the same ruin he described at the beginning. Moreover, the only substantial change from the opening line is the insertion of "deep" to intensify his description of the midnight quality of both the physical and his psychological landscape. As the only new information provided, "deep" will receive the sentence accent, and its monosyllabic form with the initial forceful stop [d] recalls the recurring thematic "dead" and "death," thus making for a final echo of that overriding statement. The rest of the sentence repeats the phonetic structure of the opening, with the tolling on "yeares" and "dayes" and especially the return in the poem's final phonetic segment, the [z] of "is," to the buzz of nonexistence that dominated the sound of the first three stanzas. True to the speaker's insistence throughout, the phonological structure supports his view of himself as fundamentally unlike other creatures in the radical desolation of his despair, although he knows other humans do experience hope. "Of the first nothing"—the nihilo of creation ex nihilo—he not only feels no

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[10]I base this assertion on the evidence of Early Modern English pronunciation compiled by E. J. Dobson in *English Pronunciation 1500–1700,* 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968). Specifically, he notes that several contemporary sources mentioned *toward* as an example of the loss of the sound [w] when that letter was initial in a syllable, thus implying that *-ward* was indeed pronounced as a second syllable (2:982).

[11]"Fear of 'loving more': Death and the Loss of Sacramental Love," in Hester, *John Donne's "desire of more,"* pp. 217–221.

better than when he began his speech, the midnight he feels locked into seems, if anything, deeper than ever. Judging by the sounds built into the lines, "A Nocturnall upon St. Lucies Day" *works* as a poem of utter despair to a degree that it cannot work as a poem of hope.

What, then, are we to do with the various suggestions noted by the School of Regeneration that indicate religious hope for the speaker's personal renewal? Although the phonology indicates that he feels no hope whatsoever, the content and structure seem in many ways designed to include the possibility of his regeneration, as Frost argues in her examination of the poem's alchemical and liturgical references.[12] All of those elements, however, are primarily cognitive rather than emotional in nature; they are imbedded in the structure of the lines or alluded to by the language chosen and, as such, are thoughts the speaker has deliberately placed in the poem, instead of being directly and immediately a function of his emotional state, as the sounds of his voice inevitably are. The phonology necessarily carries the emotional impact in a way that the cognitive elements cannot. Thus it seems that Donne has again created, to borrow Guibbory's expression, a "profoundly indeterminate" work,[13] which teases us with its complexity yet commands our admiration because that complexity reflects a simple truth about human nature: we can believe something intellectually—as the speaker does with the cognitive suggestions of regeneration—yet utterly disbelieve the same proposition emotionally, as the poem's phonological structure helps him demonstrate through the sounds of his speech. Simply put, we can think one thing and feel another. Donne's persona in the "Nocturnall" has command of the intellectual trappings of faith and hope, but in his heart he suffers from the bleakest of disbelief and despair.

Jackson, Mississippi

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[12]"'Preparing towards her,'" pp. 149–171.

[13]"Fear of 'loving more,'" p. 220.