John Donne Journal
Vol. 28 (2009)

Donne's "Breake of Day" and the Female Perspective in June Wayne's Timeless Lithograph

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June Wayne's stone lithograph, created in December 1958, in response to one of John Donne's most dramatic and in-the-world poems, namely, "Breake of Day," is remarkable in the way that it grants material and cognitive form to the perspective inscribed in the words of one of Donne's rare female speakers.[1] First, however, some historical context seems appropriate, given the epistemological bearings of both Donne's poem and Wayne's lithograph.

Living during an unprecedented time of change, Donne seems to have reacted most dramatically, in the *Songs and Sonets* edition of his poetry primarily, to what became labeled the Copernican revolution,[2]

[1]Wayne, *John Donne Songs & Sonets—Lithographs by June Wayne* (West Berlin: Brüder Hartmann, 1959). The book includes fifteen lithographs; "Breake of Day" is No. 6. For details surrounding the challenges that June Wayne met in creating and printing (with Marcel Durassier in Paris) the stone lithographs, see Robert P. Conway, *June Wayne: The Art of Everything. A Catalogue Raisonné 1936–2006* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), pp. 119; 143–155 and Wayne's "Chronology," pp. 411–454.

[2]See Nicholas Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium (1543) (or The Revolutions of the Spheres of the Universe)*, trans. John F. Dobson and Selig Brodetsky as *Occasional Notes of the Royal Astronomical Society*, vol. 2, no. 10 (London: Royal Astronomical Society, 1947). See also Hans Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World,* trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1987). The German edition of Blumenberg's text was published in 1975.

which dates from the publication of the treatise by Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus Orbium Caelestium,* in 1543*,* and, later, the formative work of Johannes Kepler (*Astronomia Nova–the New Astronomy* [1609]) and Galileo Galilei. With the aid of the telescope, Galileo confirmed that the long-standing Ptolemaic cosmology and the geocentric theory of the universe could no longer be upheld, that the "unruly" sun that we encounter in "Breake of Day" and in another of Donne's poems, namely, "The Sunne Rising," has usurped the earth's unique and distinguished position. Galileo wrote in 1610, in *The Starry Messenger* (*Sidereus Nuncius*)*,* that, with the aid of his "Spyglass," he was now observing, for himself, not a finite, closed universe, but "innumerable" stars never before seen with the naked eye.[3] For Galileo, this observation signaled an open world rather than the earlier closed universe with the earth at its center and what were conceived of as "fixed," pre-ordained, relations. As Angus Fletcher writes in his study of time, space, and motion in the early modern world: "Over and over, the *Songs and Sonets* speak to the issue of our not being able to make time stand still, while space opens out before us like a receding shadow on the ground."[4] The openness and empiricism of Donne's innovations in poetic form, in my view, bear out this historical context.

Received truths thus hold much less sway in this time period. For example, we witness the rise of empiricism with the modern inductive—and empirical—scientific method accompanying the development of the new optical science and its instruments, such as the telescope and the microscope. Othello's reply to Iago when Iago raises doubts in Othello's mind about the faithfulness of Desdemona comes to mind. Othello calls for "ocular proof."[5] He must see for himself. Truth becomes relative to the perspective of the individual observer, to which Donne's poem and Wayne's lithograph bear witness.

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[3]Galileo, *The Starry Messenger* (*Sidereus Nuncius*), in *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, trans. Stillman Drake (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 21–58; quotation from p. 21.

[4]Fletcher, *Time, Space, and Motion in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 112.

[5]William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 3.3.360.

In response to the expanding universe and related threats to established notions of the world, space, and the self, what we witness in Donne's poem—and in Wayne's lithograph—is a counter-movement inward, a retreat into the integrity—and "stillness" of the private inner space against the claims of the expanding cosmos and the public realm, witnessed most vividly in the "new world" sensibility of Donne's lovers, here and elsewhere in his poetry, seeking, through their self-imposed boundaries, a private and lasting union. Something similar occurs in early modern theatre, which was flourishing in Donne's word, as it also increasingly assumes a psychological and thus ontological focus.

One significant effect of this movement inward can be seen in Donne's creation of a hybrid poetic form, evident in at least nine of his *Songs and Sonets,* but perhaps most vividly evident in "Breake of Day," "The Flea," "The Good-Morrow" and "The Extasie," namely, the dramatic monologue, a form "without precedent," as Helen Gardner points out.[6] The early modern world's paradigmatic shift toward empirically derived truths becomes an *operative* feature of Donne's dramatic monologues. Robert Browning, an admirer of Donne's poetry, later adopts the form, but his dramatic monologues generate somewhat different dramatic effects, given their emphasis on characterization and their ironic constructs. What, then, are the formal conditions and epistemological bearings of "Breake of Day" as dramatic monologue that invest it with the kind of dramatic realism, or sustained presentness, that inspired its continuity with Wayne's material lithograph? First, the opening of "Breake of Day" *in medias res*—"'Tis true, 'tis day, what though it be?"[7]—enlists the reader's collaboration by situating the reader within a verbal exchange in which the single speaker is responding to a lover's *implied* declaration that "it's morning, and so I must depart to the

[6]Gardner, ed., *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1963), p. xxvi. In an earlier study, I classified five additional poems in *The Songs and Sonnets* as dramatic monologues: "The Dreame," "The Sunne Rising," "The Canonization," "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," and "The Anniversarie." See Brooks, "'This Dialogue of One': John Donne and the Genre of the Dramatic Monologue," PhD diss., Stanford University, 1980.

[7]For the text of "Breake of Day," I am citing John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 106. The poem is reproduced above, p. 176.

world of business." Most likely, the dialogic effect of this poem owes itself in part to the poem's connection to the popular Provençal *Alba,* which, with the French Troubadours, developed into a distinct literary form, in which two lovers lament the break of day and an end to their night of love. Here, however, we discover quickly—and perhaps surprisingly—that Donne's speaker is a woman, who appears to be engaged in "re-writing" traditional male forms, such as the *Alba*, from a female perspective. As Pierre Legouis observes, she speaks "so well that this piece alone would suffice to prove Donne's ability to express the feelings of others, and allow us to surmise that even when the speaker is a man he need not be the poet's own self."[8]

In view of such distinctly dramatic features, "Breake of Day clearly resists being read as a "lyric" poem. As with the audience in theatre, the dramatic monologue occupies the space and time of the reader. And thus like his contemporary playwrights, Donne is composing highly dramatic "in-the-world" poetry, that is, "bodies in space," speaking in the vernacular rather than in courtly discourse, and often expressing new and even competing viewpoints. The vernacular, favored by Donne, grants physicality to the words, and thus a heightened sense of the embodied "presence" of the speaker. In "The Flea," also a dramatic monologue, the single speaker is a male, who composes and speaks words *for* the female interlocutor, mindful of theater in Donne's day, when men (most often young men) were performing women's roles and thus were, in fact, *speaking for women.* But in "The Flea," as we abruptly learn, the female interlocutor does physically intervene by breaking through the established form—notably, into the neutral space between the stanzas—to kill off the parasitic flea, a long-standing male poetic device. In "Breake of Day," however, also composed at the "dawn" of the modern world, the female speaker is empowered from the beginning to speak in her own voice and thus to re-write gendered poetic conventions. But at the same time, she, unlike her male lover from the world of "business," remains confined to the private, or domestic, space of the bedroom, as opposed to the public space of business. Thus, with the advent of money and banking and, significantly for the poem at hand, of capitalism, "Breake of Day" clearly documents the heightened awareness of the re-

[8]Legouis, *Donne the Craftsman: An Essay upon the Structure of the Songs and Sonnets* (Paris: H. Didier, 1928), p. 51.

inscription of space, with private and public worlds now at odds with one another at the "dawn" of this new day.

But the truly distinctive and even vitalizing feature of Donne's dramatic monologue is the presence of a single speaker in the company of a second person, or interlocutor, who is clearly signaled by the speaker as being present in the same space, but who does not speak directly in the text of the poem. This poetic innovation, on the part of Donne, makes the scene highly dialogic, but *all* that we, as readers, know about the interlocutor and the surrounding space derives solely from the words of the single speaker, who, in this instance, is a female speaker. With this unprecedented feature, namely, the signaled presence of a silent, but implicitly responsive interlocutor, Donne creates an "opening," or entry-point, for the reader.[9] Thus, unlike lyric poetry, here, the reader is granted access to the poem's dramatic plane of reality, or, perhaps more specifically, is enlisted in the collaborative act of filling out and thus concretizing the lovers' fragmentary dialogue. The effect, then, for a reader disposed to granting the text his or her dramatic sympathy, is to *fully grasp as a cognitive reality* the dramatic scene as it emanates from the mind—and words—of the single speaker. The constitutive reader therefore serves to animate and thus grant dramatic presentness to the dialogic text as it registers on the reader's consciousness. T. S. Eliot alludes to a similar cognitive effect sought by the metaphysical poets, including Donne, namely, that "they were, at best, engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent for states of mind and feeling."[10] It seems that some attention should be given here to the intriguing possibility of a relationship between the reader's collaborative role with the single speaker of the poem and the advent of linear perspective in the early fifteenth century. Correlations exist with art of the period in which the vanishing point, or perspective, also merges with the inner thoughts of the viewer, endowing such effects with what has come to be defined in

[9]See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[10]Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1960 and 1964), as excerpted in "The Metaphysical Poets," in *John Donne's Poetry, A Norton Critical Edition*, 2nd ed., ed. Arthur L. Clements (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 158–165; quotation from p. 163.

Donne's spiritual poetry as Eucharistic form.[11] Of particular relevance here is June Wayne's certification in Production Illustration at the California Institute of Technology during World War II, having become adept in the application of the rules of perspective. The Science of Optics fascinated her from the beginning, along with the "aberrations" present in linear perspective, all of which is clearly evident in her vibrant lithographs. According to Wayne, the aberrations in linear perspective clear a space for the artist to create something new and personal.

The conceptual role of perspective in the act of reading and of viewing art thus illustrates the principle inherent in generic distinctions, that we know things in relation to their modes of knowledge. That is, when we read a literary text, our understanding is conditioned by the modal form in which the text inheres. Meaning, therefore, inheres in the reader's grasp of the text's perspective, or epistemological bearings, a sign, perhaps of not only the impact of Renaissance humanism and its refocus on the individual, but also the impact of print culture on the role of readers in the evolution of literary forms. Here, then, we find Donne concerned with the ontology of form as he turns from earlier conventions toward verse that resists narrative, or non-dramatic, form, so as to remain *contiguous* with the reader, who is enlisted in an act of dramatic sympathy with its single speaker. As in the theatrical world, art and life stand in a closer relationship to one another in Donne's dramatic monologues.

Turning now to June Wayne's stone lithograph, created in response to Donne's dramatic poem, we witness a cosmic image that renders the empirical nature of Donne's poetry with remarkable insight and conceptual form (see Gallery, fig. 2, p. 177). In looking at her lithograph, our attention is drawn immediately to the womb-like space surrounding the bed that the two lovers occupy. The image is mindful not only of the circumscribed world of Plato's cave, but also of the long-standing symbolism surrounding the womb as the site of new life, which the

[11]See, for example, Caravaggio's *Entombment of Christ* (*c.* 1603; Vatican Museums). Wylie Sypher's long-standing study of Renaissance art and perspective is particularly valuable here: *Four Stages of Renaissance Style* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955). See also Eleanor J. McNees, *Eucharistic Poetry: The Search for Presence in the Writings of John Donne, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, and Geoffrey Hill* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992).

lithograph so powerfully calls attention to by the way it foregrounds the female speaker, who is, interestingly, injecting "new life" into both literary and artistic forms.

Also striking in Wayne's visualization of Donne's poem is the way that the play of light and dark in the poem figures significantly in her stone lithograph. In the challenging process of creating the lithograph, Wayne rubbed the stone with a cloth soaked in benzene to create the light image out of the dark tusche ground.[12] This chemical process, like the realism of Donne's highly dramatic verse, is not without its unexpected turns and twists. The culmination of the process in Wayne's lithograph was the halo-effect surrounding an eclipsed sun. The eclipsed sun is a brilliant symbol in her lithograph in the way that it reinforces the epistemological bearings of Donne's poem. But how can the eclipsed image of the sun connect directly to the form and substance of Donne's poem?

One explanation that Wayne's lithograph brings out is that since "Breake of Day" issues out of the mind of the single speaker (in keeping with the fragmentary form of the dramatic monologue), what we actually apprehend when reading and filling out the text of the poem is the female speaker's inner, psychological landscape. The reader's imagination is enlisted from the beginning to infer that her lover has declared that he has to leave, a declaration that literally invades both the physical and mental space of the female speaker with the first words of the poem. In the text of the poem, her thoughts are almost wholly fixed on negating the break of day, which she fears will take her lover away from the private world of their bedroom. In her mind, their special relationship *transcends* the temporal play of dark and light, and thereby eclipses the sun's traditional roles in any aspect of their love. For her—unlike her lover—the sun has no bearing on their timeless relationship. Wayne's brilliant imaging of the sun as eclipsed thus makes clear that the subjective, inner reality—or sanctuary—of the female single speaker is the cognitive locus of the poem, wholly in keeping with the formal conditions of Donne's dramatic monologues. Wayne has created—on a stone surface—both a material and visual equivalent of the fact that we are reading—and filling out—the poem through the eyes and mind of the female speaker, literally internalizing her words, as the dramatic monologue form enlists its

[12]See Conway, cat. no. 143, p. 147.

readers to do, in order that the female speaker's relationship with her lover may be empirically grasped—and thus concretized—in its ontological form. With his emphasis on the empirical, Aristotle's words on the nature of divine thought seem germane here:

> Since, then, thought and the object of thought are not different in the case of things that have not matter, the divine thought and its object will be the same, i.e., the thinking will be one with the object of thought.[13]

For Aristotle, unlike Plato, the true objective of the fine arts is the expression of an inner, psychological truth, or "the mental life," rather than the "imitation" of "a series of outward phenomena."[14] Mary W. Baskett's study similarly conceives of each of Wayne's lithographs of Donne's poetry as the product of Wayne's "cerebration of the image."[15]

Of particular significance in this context, Wayne's lithograph positions the woman as physically on top of the man, though not fully over-taking him, signifying, it seems, that, for Wayne, the woman *is* gaining psychological ground in her struggle to occupy a dominant position, not only as the sole speaker of the poem, but in her re-inscription of what historically has been male-dominated space, namely, conventional and, most often, courtly literary forms. If we look closely, Wayne's twentieth-century image of the male lover is a much more passive figure than the male lover we encounter in Donne's poem, perhaps even yielding to her compelling words and body with his open hands. In Wayne's image, he does not appear to be, at least at this arrested moment, returning to the male-dominated world of business.

The lithograph thus makes transparent what might otherwise elude readers of Donne's poem. The sun, of course, isn't actually eclipsed in the outer world, but in the mind of the female speaker, it is, or at least should be if her lover were true to what she regards as their timeless relationship rather than as a "one-night-stand." But his is a very different

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[13]Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard McKeon (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), bk. 12, ch. 9, p. 326.

[14]S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York: Dover, 1951), pp. 122–124.

[15]Baskett, *The Art of June Wayne* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), p. 57.

mental space, namely, the public world of work and "business," to which the male lover in Donne's poem is apparently bound, as he continues to prepare to depart. In the first line in the last stanza, she questions him: "Must businesse thee from hence remove?" The next line, clearly an almost despairing reaction on her part to his implicit and continuing assertion that he must leave, laments: "Oh, that's the worst disease of love." Thus, from the opening words of the poem, her psyche remains inscribed on all facets of the image.

Here, then, poetic space is no longer tied to medieval notions of fixed relations, having become "open" to re-inscriptions of gender and the growing dominance of the secular world. What we thus encounter in the re-inscription of space in Donne's poem is the toll that the secular and commercial world is taking on human lives, while at the same time such challenges are opening up artistic space for more voices, and here, a female voice, to be heard. The impact of another often-unrecognized historical event deserves at least brief mention here, that is, when the call of church bells gave way to the call of commercial time with the advent of clock technology in the fourteenth century. With this event, secular time and sacred time became differentiated, as they appear to be in the mind of Donne's male lover.

It is conceptually imperative, it seems, that the ending of Donne's poem resists closure at this highly dramatic and arrested moment in time, that is, on the threshold of the modern era, signaled not only by the imminent departure of the work-driven lover from the traditional space of courtly love poetry, but also by the re-inscription of the long-standing poetic conventions by the subjectivity of the female speaker. The openness of the ending also invests the two lovers with an ongoing presence and, perhaps even more importantly, a future, if an uncertain one. Donne has therefore created—with his dramatic monologues—new aesthetic laws that enable him to free his speakers—and conceivably himself—from historical claims by situating his speakers within an imagined or psychologically determined space, a space, through the collaborative presence of the reader, that grants the inner sanctuary of his speakers' thoughts an ontological and enduring presence. To this end, the poem—and its lithograph—succeed, in the words of Angus Fletcher referenced earlier, in "mak[ing] time stand still."

Donne's dramatic monologue, then, like Wayne's stone lithograph, hovers, literally, between the physical and the spiritual, between the

temporal and the timeless, and thus, significantly, between life and art. Fortunately for us and for future generations, both Donne's poem and Wayne's lithograph are truly "open" works of art, to be re-animated by their readers and viewers for all time.

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