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1590 / 1950: John Donne, June Wayne, and Concrete Expressionism

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Donne has taken to erupting in strange places of late. First, it was on the stage, in Margaret Edson's *W;t*; then, more recently, in the Metropolitan Opera House production of John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, where a musical version of "Batter My Heart" brings down the curtain on the first act; and now more quietly in the leaves of June Wayne's lithographs illustrating Donne's *Songs and Sonets*. "Now" turns out to be a bit misleading in Wayne's case. Her *John Donne Songs & Sonets* was originally published some fifty years ago, in France, in 1959, but it has only recently come to the attention of Donne scholars, its obscurity largely a feature of its original publishing circumstances as a "*livre d'artiste*." Limited to only 110 copies, and then some, it has primarily been known in private quarters, a rarity enjoyed by the collecting elite, as was sometimes the case with Donne's early poems too. These havens today include special collection libraries as well as the private reserves of print-work enthusiasts and wealthy patrons willing to kick out cash for a book that requires careful opening and unfolding. One doesn't so much turn the pages of the Wayne Donne as separate them, individually, careful to remove the thin veil of tissue paper protecting print from text, in order to view the two together, that is poem and print, and their respective makers Donne and Wayne, or perhaps, more intimately, John and June.[1] Why does Donne possess this multi-performative appeal, one wonders? And who is June Wayne?

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[1]Indeed, Wayne's emphasis on mirroring helps to shape the format for the title of her *livre d'artiste*. The title's appearance in gold lettering on the two plates that grace the box housing the book are repeated on the frontispiece:

The latter question is easier to address. The hefty 2006 *catalogue raisonné*—a variorum of a kind—authored by Robert Conway and published by Rutgers University Press is called, simply, *June Wayne: The Art of Everything*. The subtitle indicates, at once, the variety of formats and media in which Wayne has worked over her lengthy career from 1936 to 2006—oil painting, lithography, both color and monochrome, and tapestries, and the expansive, indeed restless and experimental, nature of the artist's intelligence, an intelligence that realizes itself not simply in a quest for assimilating new material and ideas into her work, whether it is a concern with optics, the atom bomb, or her relationship with her mother, but also the capacity to affect significantly the institutional life of art in this country.

In this latter sense, in particular, her name has long been identified with lithography: the complicated and collaboratively challenging art of print-making by using a stone to carry the image to be pressed onto a sheet of paper. The process had been founded in the late eighteenth-century by Aloys Senefelder, a Bavarian playwright; and by the nineteenth century it had expanded rapidly to include many artists, from Daumier to Degas, in part because the process encouraged a democratization of the image through poster art (think of those fancy signs advertising the Moulin Rouge), a process that continued into the early twentieth century in the U.S. in the hands of artists responding to the needs of newsprint. These included such familiar names as George Bellows, John Sloan (indelibly linked with the Ashcan school of art), and Edward Hopper—all connected with New York City—but regionalists as well such as Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton. But lithography fell into decline, indeed almost disuse in the U. S., by the middle of the twentieth century. In part, this was because its association with

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On the top, black plate appears:	JOHN DONNE SONGS & SONETS
On the bottom, gray plate appears:	LITHOGRAPHS BY JUNE WAYNE

Wayne's use of an ampersand in her title here, whereas on other pages of the book she spells out the word "and," permits a balancing of the line lengths that reflects the overall symmetrical mirroring of poet and artist that is a major thematic concern of the project.

commerce and its methods of printing were thought to be too redundant and limiting. The poet Richard Wilbur tells the story of his father forsaking lithography for exactly these reasons to become "a truly fine portrait painter in the tradition of his teacher Robert Henri."[2] But it was also the case, as we might glimpse from this anecdote by a poet associated with the formalism so valued by New Criticism, that modernism was not especially wedded to the lower strata of arts represented by lithography. This was especially so in the decade of the 1950s. The dominant mode of Abstact Expressionism shared little common ground with the social realism of print, and while there were occasional examples of artists like Jackson Pollack and William de Kooning experimenting with print—indeed the latter artist participated in the intaglio project of *21 Etchings and Poems* in 1951—it wasn't until the end of that decade, with the establishment of "Tatyana Grossman's lithographic workshop at West Islip, Long Island, in 1957, and its West Coast counterpart the Tamarind Lithography Workshop under June Wayne in 1960, that the leading abstract expressionist painters started to make prints in any serious way."[3] I am quoting here from the exhibition catalogue for a recent show mounted at the British Museum in 2008 called *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock*. Although Wayne's work is not included in this exhibition, in every other way it pays homage to her fundamental role in resuscitating lithography as a serious art form, where it remains today, a field in which, at over 90, she continues to be a dominant force.

What has any of this to do with John Donne, you might ask. In one sense, "everything," since Wayne's successful completion of the Donne book—it took a Biblical seventy days and seventy nights of work, accomplished in collaboration with the Parisian printer, Marcel Durassier—led directly to a Ford Foundation grant, which she then used for the unusual purpose of establishing Tamarind, unusual because most artists parlay their winnings to fund their own work. But the Donne book also speaks clearly to Wayne's pioneering intelligence as an artist as well, and as a way to give a context for the specific comments about the

[2]Wilbur, *Seven American Poets in Conversation* (Surrey: Waywiser Press, 2008), p. 418.

[3]Stephen Coppel, ed., *The American Scene: Prints from Hopper to Pollock* (London: The British Museum Press, 2008), pp. 37–38.

poems and illustrations to follow, I want to hazard a few familiar generalizations.

The first is simply that prints, as image and texts, have a long history together dating well back to the middle ages, on the one hand, in such works as the Biblia Pauperum, the Bible for the Poor, in which wood block illustrations were used as a means to provide a religious language for those not verbally literate, and on the other, in the very expensive and beautiful works of illuminated manuscripts, such as those produced by the Limbourg brothers for the Duc de Berry. But with the invention of the printing press in the middle of the sixteenth century, the two texts together, written word and graphic image, assumed a new form of sophisticated popularity in the hands of the great German artist, Albrecht Dürer. Although Dürer's wood block prints, as done, for example, for his series on the *Apocalypse* in 1496, reveal a new level of interpretive skill with regard to the Biblical text, crowding a dense array of Scriptural allusions into a single sizeable page, it was his work, and the work of his followers, that exploited the subtleties of engraving and established new possibilities for collaborative work between word and image.

As a bookish art, quite literally, prints have a different origin and altogether different visual context than, say, most paintings, a point that can be quickly understood if we recall a well-known work by one of Dürer's contemporaries: Titian's *Assumption*, painted around 1515 for the Frari Church in Venice. The painting still hangs in the church today, at the east end of the nave, where it serves as the focal point of the whole for all coming in to worship or to visit. It is a highly colorful, emotional painting. Titian's skillful depiction of Mary's bold, bodily ascent, in the red triangular uprush, immediately helped to establish the young painter as the next great Venetian artist and worthy successor to Giovanni Bellini. By contrast, Dürer's fine prints—and those of his many descendants working with word and image, including June Wayne—require an altogether different involvement: one often more private (books are held in the individual's hand or, in her case, placed on a table), and requiring a different kind of literacy: patient, reflective rather than emotional, quietly attuned to the fine points of detail and shading. As Robert Conway remarks about Wayne, she "fell in love with lithography because of its potentially infinite range of middle tones," and "developed this technique to unprecedented levels of complexity." Indeed, Wayne

herself speaks of color actually getting in her way because it comes with too many cultural preconceptions: "Red is always blood or danger. Blue is bad because of our associations with the sky and water. Yellow is so hard to handle that hardly anybody uses very much of it, including van Gogh."[4]

June Wayne's folio-sized "Donne" book descends from Dürer, which is one way to say it keeps very good company. This print tradition of text and image includes other notable artists: Blake, of course, who produced water color drawings for his own *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and the magnificent series of illuminations for Milton's *Paradise Lost*; and in the last century, we might note the continuation of visually interpreted classic texts in the illustrations that Henri Matisse supplied for the New York edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1935. June Wayne's "Donne" belongs to this subtle but ambitious tradition of a visual artist exploring her or his talents while interpreting (not just illustrating) the work of a celebrated author or text, and by the mid-1950s, Donne's stock was never higher, the equivalent of Shakespeare in some quarters. No less an actor than Richard Burton would produce a recording of some of Donne's most famous poems, and, in many academic circles, the mighty Milton was made temporarily to bow to the author of the *Songs and Sonets*. With the launching of Sputnik in 1957, moreover, Donne had become regarded as the rocket scientist of verse. Pointy-headed and passionate, he wrote about man's uncertain place in the cosmos—and woman's, too, as June Wayne's stellar backdrops often reveal, an effect created, incidentally, by sprinkling sand on the stone. Her own representation of Donne's famous effigy in St. Paul, for instance, the first of her studies in the Donne series, is beautifully and dramatically ungrounded (see Gallery, fig. 1, p. 175). The poet floats magisterially in space, perfectly upright, standing on the burial urn. He is ghostly bright in his niche, now appearing as a coffin or white sepulcher, set solidly and starkly against the sparkling, dark heavens, with several stones at loose ends. Whether as cenotaphic remnants or possible lithos in the making, they hint at the oblique sympathy linking this seventeenth-century poet and twentieth-century artist.

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[4]Conway, *June Wayne: The Art of Everything. A Catalogue Raisonné: 1936–2006* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), p. 70.

None of these comments suggest that Wayne ran with the pack or was a slave to tradition, or an unconscious reflex of this historical moment. Anything but, in fact. Her way into Donne was not initially textual but aural—through the intimacy of listening to his poetry spoken, and her preferred reader was, and remains, not the declamatory Burton proclaiming love from a Welsh hilltop, but the more intensely lyrical Christopher Hassell, sounding the individual words in the service of Donne's speech. Wayne's preference for lithography over etching was also a preference for spontaneity and love[5]—the paradoxical "quickness" or life of the stone in her hand over the slow process of etching, followed by an acid bath (not much love there), a quickness potentially attuned, moreover, to the celebrated speed of Donne's thinking. And yet, for all Donne's mid-century canonization, there remains nothing to rival Wayne's "Donne" book, either in the number, variety, wit, or depth of her illustrations. Furthermore, her pronounced attention in these prints to the human figure (as in the case of the striking Donne effigy), or paired figures often intertwined together represents not just a new emphasis in her own art but one that ran directly against the tide of Abstract Expressionism sweeping through America in the 1950s. In this, she is allied with another celebrated illustrator of fine press books and prints in the twentieth century, the post World War II wood-cut engraver Leonard Baskin. For Baskin, the human figure, under threat of extinction first by the Holocaust and then Nuclear War, was "also threatened with artistic extinction by abstraction."[6]

In its own way, Donne's "concrete expressionism," the vivid image in a few words, which encouraged comparison in his own day with the miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard, was, in the 1590s, in radical protest against the abstract expressionism of his day: the often worn Petrarchism practiced by many poets of the period wishing to claim a place at Elizabeth's imperial court. Donne's protest took many forms, as we know, but none bolder than venerating human love, the body erotic, by subsuming and re-determining monarchical authority in the concentrated focus on personal relationships. "To'our bodies turne wee then" (69) is the famous line from "The Extasie" that Wayne chose to

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[5]Mary W. Baskett, *The Art of June Wayne* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1969), p. 53.

[6]Coppel, ed., p. 34.

pencil in at the bottom of each color lithograph on this poem (see Gallery, fig. 11, p. 195).[7] Not all relationships in Donne's love poetry are happy ones, of course, and one of her most striking in this mode is "The Apparition." As with Donne's poem, it has a comical touch to it. The lovers are stacked one above the other, double-decker style. The rejected male lover has turned his back on the scene. The scornful female, Donne's "poor Aspen wretch" (11), looks out, covering one ear, so as not to hear the promised curse, which will never come, from a looming, gossamer-like, ghost figure that stone, paradoxically, has somehow been able to reproduce.

To jump from the 1590s to the 1950s, we might say that if Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s was associated with the post-war empire, with New York City, not Paris, as the new economic and cultural capital of the world, and if it is also largely associated with the work of male painters like de Kooning and Pollock with their huge canvasses, then what could be more a statement of independence (born of circumstance) than a female artist going to Paris to create a book focusing on those elemental shades of life, love, and death that the light and dark tones of lithography were so attuned, in Wayne's hand, at evoking? "Licence my roving hands, and let them go, / Behind, before, above, betweene, below."[8]

Donne's "The Anniversarie" is one of the poet's most triumphant lyrics; and the same must be said for the accompanying lithograph: boldly stuck, bright with radial light stretching to the edges of the paper—an announcement of love (see Gallery, fig. 3, p. 179).[9] In celebrating the two lovers together—the "thou and I"—Donne's anniversary poem recollects the intimate fireworks found in both "The Good Morrow" and "The Sunne Rising"—two poems, indeed aubades,

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[7]Donne, "The Extasie," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 130–132. All future quotations from Donne's *Songs and Sonets* are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text. (The complete text of "The Extasie" appears above, pp. 193–196.)

[8]Donne, "To his Mistress going to Bed," lines 25–26. I cite the text of this poem as it appears in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne. Volume 2: The Elegies*, ed. Gary Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 163.

[9]For the complete text of "The Anniversarie," see above, p. 178.

that Wayne has rightly associated together through the spiraling halo of stars around the lovers in each. But the "Anniversarie" lithograph is attentive not just to the explosion of light that is love but to the altogether different rhetorical pitch of the poem it accompanies and illuminates. The two morning poems, "The Good Morrow" and "The Sunne Rising," and their accompanying lithos reflect the dazzle of Donne's dialectical wit.[10] The first is nothing if not a star dust of encircled pleasure found in naked companionship. Wayne has caught much of Donne's compressed wit in the way the lovers' heads form, at one remove, a tight image together, presumably with each looking into the other's eyes, a mirroring also captured in their parallel kneeling, as if taking vows, but intensified into a duet of quiet yearning through their clasped hands (but outstretched fingers), his crossed feet, and her right hand casually placed on his shoulder. Their nearly parallel postures indicate, visually, their mutual intimacy, again as suggested by the immediacy of Donne's colloquial speech. And yet at a further remove, which includes more of a peripheral view, the image of a skull appears, reminding us as well of the death's head always lurking somewhere in the aubade tradition. "What ever dyes," as Donne says, "was not mixt equally" (19). The lithograph captures this hint of mortality but not at the expense of the poem's—and the print's—rhetorical exuberance.

The idiom sounded in "The Anniversarie," by contrast, is seasoned by many nights and days, by time and experience. It proclaims a love above and beyond the glory of "All Kings, and all their favorites" (1), a love more lasting than even the Sun itself. The poem is consequently stately in its decorum, each stanza supported by the firmness of concluding quadruple rhymes along with a final alexandrine, that is, a line with an extra poetic foot to it for extra support or emphasis. And yet, for all its rhetorical stateliness, the poem is blasphemously heterodoxical in celebrating the anniversary of unmarried love. The lovers will not be permitted to be buried in the same grave, as the first line in the second

[10]For Wayne's lithograph of "The Good Morrow," see Gallery, fig. 4, p. 181; the complete text of the related Donne poem appears on p. 180. For Wayne's lithograph of "The Sunne Rising," see Gallery, fig. 6, p. 185; the complete text of the related Donne poem appears on p. 184. Additional lithographs inspired by individual lines from "The Sunne Rising" appear in the Gallery as figs. 7 (p. 186) and 8 (p. 187).

stanza makes clear, and which was allowed husband and wife. Even more to the point Donne is not proclaiming the triumph of their souls over time, which was the usual Christian thing to do, but the primacy of earthly love. In what is perhaps the most touching image in the poem, Donne laments that, in death, they "Must leave at last . . . these eyes, and eares / Oft fed with true oathes, and with sweet salt teares" (15–16); and while the poet finds some solace in the fact the lovers may be equally blest in death, heavenly blessing comes as something of a disappointment to Donne since at that point we are "no more, then all the rest" (22), whereas while we are "here upon earth . . . Kings, and none but wee / Can be such Kings" (23–24). The egotism, fed by love, is delicious. They are prince enough for one another.

June Wayne captures the splendid confidence of Donne's lovers. They are figured on a cloud, like Jupiter and Juno, with their own regal status suggested by the image of the sun, which creates a floral canopy of light that illuminates their bodies with a clarity and particularity not to be found in any of the other lithos in this series. And, of course, their bed is in the shape of a crown, but inverted, thus recalling the poem's central metaphor. Sumptuous enough to fill the frame of the picture to the edge, the bed holds the couple up to our full view. Their posture is remarkably relaxed, their different genders lightly indicated. She has a fine rump. With his right arm touching her body, he seems to be propping up his head with his left hand (or is it her right hand we see? I think it's his), as if speaking to her, perhaps reciting the poem itself, or the lines about "these eyes and eares" (15), since he is apparently looking at her, and she is listening. If the setting is regal, the scene is informal, intimate, even tender. They are alone, together, in the universe, long-legged, at ease, with sufficient space between them to honor their separate identities—those textually individuating pronouns "thou and I"—and yet with enough mirroring (look at their under legs) to recall Donne's phrase, "who Prince enough in one another bee" (14).

If there is a sense of mortality in the picture, as there certainly is in the poem, indeed in all of Donne, it is simply a feature of their being human, even slightly frail. In "The Good Morrow" litho, the lovers' darkened heads double as the skull's eye sockets. Elsewhere, of course, there are many manifestations of death—perhaps most interestingly in the spectral blur of bodies in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which both the lithograph and the poem invite us to regard departing as

a rehearsal for dying (see Gallery, fig. 10, p. 191).[11] But here mortality is a matter of having a body: to look closely is to begin to see the marks of time, either in the play of light and shade on the limbs, or simply in a receding hairline. But standing back, we're most struck by the scope of design, almost heroic in scale, the lovers pitched against the dark, leaning toward each other. Albrecht Dürer's strong-lined woodcuts are perfectly suited for apocalyptic drama. June Wayne's lithographs invite us to glimpse both the outlines and the many shapes and shades of human emotion.

To close by returning to the first of my questions: what is it in Donne that enables his multi-performative appeal? Wayne's work offers one, albeit partial, answer, appropriate to her visual medium. Obviously "drawn" to the subject matter of love, her lithos are inwardly infused, strong, striking responses to an image or an idea often at the heart of Donne's lyric, and in this quick response she differs significantly from an illustrator of epic, like Gustave Doré, who renders in painstaking detail a visionary scene meant for the mind's eye. "Goe, and catche a falling starre," Donne says, and here is Wayne's litho, struck in response (see Gallery, fig. 5, p. 183).[12] Who among us would have had the speaker falling through space? Perhaps only an artist chasing after her subject? As a lyricist, Donne creates an immediate stir with his strong lines. But equally important is the fact that he is a poet of sharp, discontinuous imagery, a master of metonomy as well as metaphor: "a hand, or eye / By *Hilliard* drawne, is worth an history" ("The Storm," 3–4). In this complex exchange between the arts, both Hilliard and Donne make a gift of suggestion, a gift that will also allow a later artist, like Wayne, the intellectual and creative freedom to roam in the course of making a response—some breathing room for *her* thought and invention. Donne's question: how do I use an image persuasively is really no different in kind from the question Wayne poses in her lithographs. Only the results are, and then only according to the laws of their separate universe and the limits of their genius.

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[11]For the complete text of "A Valediction forbidding mourning," see above, pp. 190, 192.

[12]For the complete text of "Song (Goe, and catche a falling starre)," see above, p. 182.