John Donne Journal
Vol. 32 (2013)

Donne's *First Anniversary* as Baroque Allegory: Fragmentation, Idealization, and the Resistance to Unity

Hugh Grady

Walter Benjamin's 1928 *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, translated into English by John Osborne as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,[1] is a unique work and one that is widely acknowledged to be both a rich resource for subsequent critical theory and a challenge to read and comprehend. Its belated reception has unfolded slowly and unevenly—and relatively selectively, with the theory of allegory, usually in relation to Modernism, getting the most attention.

The work, however, is also highly relevant to early modern literature—and to the works of John Donne specifically—for two principal reasons. First, Benjamin developed the theory precisely for the age of the German baroque in the early to mid-seventeenth century, and he included aspects of the somewhat earlier playwrights Shakespeare, Marlowe (at least implicitly), and Calderón as well, so it is specifically crafted for Donne's era and its baroque connections. Second, its discussion of a unique idea of the allegory and its differentiation from the symbol, and its speculation on how the form arose in English Renaissance plays (as well as in the later seventeenth-century German baroque dramatists who are Benjamin's main topic) is particularly germane here.[2] At this point in his intellectual development Benjamin

[1]The book was written in the period 1924–1925.

[2]See my *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 133–154, for a much fuller discussion of Benjamin's theories of *Trauerspiel* and allegory and their relevance to Shakespeare, a discussion from

was a Hegelian working under the influence of two brilliant early twentieth-century Hegelian cultural theorists, Bernadetto Croce and Georg Lukács. Borrowing generally from Hegel and these critics, he emphasized large-scale intellectual periods developing over time and expressing themselves as the Zeitgeist of literary-historical-philosophical works.

Accordingly, Benjamin argued, the form of ancient Greek tragedy had disappeared from the world, just like that of Greek heroic epic, and the latter (as Lukács argued) had transformed itself into the modern novel.[3] But taking a further step that Lukács himself had resisted, Benjamin thought that tragedy had developed into an essentially new form that he called, using a traditional German term that he now differentiated from its German cognate *Tragödie,* the *Trauerspiel* (or "mourning-play"). The tradition of drama, he argued, consequently took on different forms thereafter. In the early modern brave new world, intrinsic meaning was no longer to be found in the environment but became the object of quests. The world and its objects were emptied of intrinsic worth, and this created the conditions for the emergence of the modern allegory. Thus, the allegory of early modernity arose in the new worldview. No longer organically unified, nature in the new era is open to allegoricization in fragments. That is to say, the world loses any intrinsic meaning and becomes a set of hieroglyphs open to allegorical interpretation, a kind of script, he says, to be read as needed. The allegorist gives meaning like "a stern sultan in the harem of objects," or like a sadist who "humiliates his object and then—or thereby—satisfies

---

which I draw in what follows. Other applications of Benjamin's theory of the allegory to early modern literature include Susan Zimmerman, *The Early Modern Corpse and Shakespeare's Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), especially pp. 13–18; Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 34–59; Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare Among the Moderns* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 1–14; and Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, "Introduction: Towards a Materialist Account of Stage Properties," in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Harris and Korda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 12–13.

[3]Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971).

it. And that is what the allegorist does in this age drunk with acts of cruelty both lived and imagined."[4]

Many readers will have already recognized in this description the affinity with some of Donne's poetic practices inherent in the theory. Indeed, as we will see, this summary of Benjamin's main idea of baroque allegory could serve particularly as a description of the themes and practices of one of Donne's baroque masterpieces, *The First Anniversary*: *An Anatomy of the World*. And in addition to its formal affinity to Benjamin's theory, the poem also investigates two prominent features of emerging modernity: science and aesthetics. Both of these cultural developments related to the new world embodied in and expressed by the poem. In this way, Donne's *First Anniversary* exhibits those qualities of the baroque implicit in Benjamin's theory and explicitly defined in a ground-breaking book on the baroque by Gregg Lambert. In Lambert's reading the baroque—traditionally defined as a set of stylistic conventions in the art and literature of much of the seventeenth century—is in many ways a figure for modernity itself, in its contradictoriness, and its constant re-assertions of novelty in an unfolding that then is incorporated within a new "modern." "'Modernity,'" Lambert writes, "defines an act whose desire is to cause the past to pass in its entirety, without trace or residue; to evoke the arrival of a new moment that inaugurates the re-commencement of time from this moment onward"—but a moment which also (and he quotes Octavio Paz), "has been 'repeated over the past two centuries,' [a movement that] underscores its obsessive, repetitive, pathetic and even addictive character."[5] The baroque is thus in an important sense the first appearance of aesthetic modernity, but in a form that is in another sense already postmodern. These qualities apply equally as well to Donne's poem and to Benjamin's theory of baroque allegory.

The allegory's resistance to unity is important in this context. A key element of Benjamin's theory were the different types of aesthetic unity or disunity epitomized on the one hand by Greek art and its symbolic

---

[4]Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977); originally published as *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Berlin: E. Rowohlt, 1928), pp. 184–185.

[5]Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 55.

practices and on the other by baroque art with its allegorical ones. "In the field of allegorical intuition," Benjamin writes, "the image is a fragment, a rune. . . . The false appearance of totality is extinguished."[6] The disunifying, fragmenting qualities of the allegorical extend into several aspects of the work. Baroque allegory deploys a "disjunctive, atomizing principle at work" in several ways, some of which will be investigated below in relation to Donne.[7] What is valued in it above all is "the fragmentary and the chaotic."[8] Thus, Benjamin is in profound agreement with what Donne writes of the world in one of *The First Anniversary*'s most famous lines, "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone."[9]

Benjamin, ever the definer of dialectical opposites, notes as well that while the method of the allegory presupposes a meaningless world of empty objects, it also empowers its images, "raises them to a higher plane," by giving them aesthetic meanings. The allegorical world is thus "both elevated and devalued."[10] And it is like a kind of holy scripture which aspires to become "one single and inalterable complex" of meaning.[11] Later, in his next major project, he added: "Modernity has, for its armature, the allegorical mode of vision."[12] What I want to argue in this essay is that *The First Anniversary* is an example in the lyric mode of the kind of allegory Benjamin defined for early modern drama (and later Modernist/Symbolist poetry).

In particular Donne's works share in the immersion in the baroque melancholy which Benjamin emphasized was implicit in the allegorical emptying out of the meaning of things in the rise of modernity. As critic Howard Caygill puts it, Melancholy "is less a psychological state than an ontological property of things. For Benjamin it is not humans that are

---

[6]Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 176.

[7]Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 176.

[8]Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 209.

[9]Donne, *An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary,* in *John Donne: The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (1971; repr., Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1975), line 213. Subsequent citations to the poem are from the same edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

[10]Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 175.

[11]Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 175.

[12]Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), p. 336.

melancholy before physical and creaturely nature, but nature that is melancholy under the gaze of the human."[13]

This sharing is most explicit, as I have emphasized, in the first great *Anniversary* poem, *An Anatomy of the World*, and I will focus on it here. But in the *Second Anniversary* and in the *Songs and Sonnets* as well, there is a strong strain of melancholy—and also an even stronger manifestation of the baroque allegory's contradictory impulse towards redemption. In these works Donne emerges as an allegorist of the utopian, mixing melancholy and exaltation in a lyric mode that has long resisted critical attempts at unifying. Such resistance is in fact one of the chief qualities of the baroque allegory as Benjamin defines it. While the allegory, Benjamin asserts, discloses a world in decay, it also shows how the elements of decay can be re-born as new art in a new and different era:

> The exuberant subjection of antique elements in a structure, which, without uniting them in a single whole, would, in destruction, still be superior to the harmonies of antiquity, is the purpose of the technique [of allegory] which applies itself separately, and ostentatiously, to realia, rhetorical figures and rules.[14]

* * * *

Unusually for a Donne poem, both the date and the occasion for the writing of *The Anniversaries* are well known. The poems seem to have been commissioned by the wealthy Drury family following the sudden death of their fourteen-year-old child Elizabeth. Donne had not met Elizabeth Drury in her lifetime, and his initial knowledge of the family seems to have been through intermediaries—most likely his sister—but subsequently he became close enough to the family to travel with them in France, where he wrote at least portions of *The Second Anniversary*.

Biographers surmise that the interactions began when Donne wrote a Latin text used in Elizabeth's death memorial in Surrey and that this led in turn to his writing first a "Funeral Elegy" and then the poem we know

---

[13]Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's Concept of Cultural History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 88.

[14]Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 179.

today as *The First Anniversary*. These two poems appeared in print, along with an unsigned introductory poem by a second party (generally thought to be Donne's friend Joseph Hall) in a 1611 publication—it was Donne's first printed poetry—entitled *An Anatomy of the World*, with the subtitle *Wherein, By Occasion of the vntimely death of Mistris Elizabeth Drvry the frailty and the decay of this whole world is represented*.

A year later, in 1612, this poem and its surrounding material were reprinted, with a new title, *The First Anniversary* (followed by the older title and subtitle) in a new volume, which also included the new poem called *The Second Anniversarie: Of The Progres of the Soule*, with its own subtitle, *Wherein, By Occasion of The Religious death of Mistris Elizabeth Drvry, the incommodities of the Soule in this life, and her exaltation the next, are Contemplated.* There was a new verse introduction to the new work, also thought to be by Joseph Hall, "The Harbinger to the Progresse."

In the subsequent critical reception of the work, attention has generally been directed primarily to the two main poems, collectively called *The Anniversaries*, and each of these poems is an excellent example of Donne's poetry sharing in the spirit of the baroque *Trauerspiel* described by Benjamin and using as well the allegorical mode of representation he defined. But the two poems, while skillfully interconnected, have very different emphases, with the first one, *An Anatomy of the World*, more invested in fragmented, melancholy mourning while the second, *The Progress of the World*, develops in a more utopian mode making use of the visions of the Christian afterlife—without ever completely leaving behind its melancholy account of the secular world. Here I will discuss *The First Anniversary*, reserving the occasion to discuss the *Second*.

Like the *Trauerspiel*, both *The First Anniversary* and the poems taken together enact an elaborate practice of mourning, are bathed in an atmosphere of melancholy, but also manage to signify a utopian sense of possible redemption from within the melancholy ruins. And as in the allegorical mode described by Benjamin, they avoid organic unity, emphasize fragmentariness, and resist unified interpretations.

* * * *

While the term "anatomy" in the original title of *The First Anniversary* already had meanings akin to those displayed in Robert

Burton's celebrated 1621 *An Anatomy of Melancholy*, signifying a kind of analytic treatise on a selected theme, Donne's general usage of the term within the poem is metaphorical and relies on a primary meaning of a medical analysis of a dead body, in this case especially one established by the dissection of a corpse—what we would call an autopsy, a practice that was well established in his lifetime. An anatomy in this sense is thus a catalogue of (body) parts once united, now displayed as autonomous fragments. In Donne's poem the world is dead, and its parts are now specimens in a similar textual catalogue. It is a fragmented poem in a very basic sense.

Another way to look at the poem's overall structure as in the spirit of Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* is to recognize its allegorical properties, not only at the level of its lack of organic unity and its fragmented nature, but seeing it also as an allegory with an extensive second set of meanings (unevenly) connected to its enabling fictions. These double meanings are set up by the poem's chief hyperbolic conceit, the idea that the untimely death of this virtuous young girl is the last blow in a long process of decline and decay which has been the world's history, and so the world is dead, leaving behind a corpse for a diagnostic dissection. But this organizing allegory, which gives the poem its title, is only gradually arrived at in a complex and shifting narrative that moves through several stages, first diagnosing sickness, then namelessness, speechlessness, and amnesia, and finally climaxing these metaphorical qualities with death itself, 55 lines into a poem of 474 lines:

> But though it be too late to succour thee,
> Sick world, yea dead, yea putrefied, since she
> Thy'intrinsic balm, and thy preservative,
> Can never be renewed, thou never live,
> I (since no man can make thee live) will try,
> What we may gain by thy anatomy.
> (55–60)

The movement from "sick," to "dead," to "putrefied" exemplifies something important about the puzzling relation of the two levels of the allegorical structure of the poem. The overall allegory—the enabling fiction that the world itself has died—wavers in and out of existence in the poem. It is established only starting in line 55, and over the course of the next 400 lines or so it is qualified, re-defined, and put in precarious

relation to the sense of hope the poem also invokes in its hyperbolic praise of Elizabeth's virtues and its evocation of the consolations of the afterlife. Indeed, the author of the poem's verse preface, "To the Praise of the Dead, and the Anatomy," picked up on this instability in his observation, "Yet how can I consent the world is dead / While this Muse lives?"[15] This wavering, this flickering in and out of the two terms of an allegory, is very much a part of the allegorical mode of representation defined by Benjamin and well exemplified by this and other Donne poems.

One example of this quality is that no sooner does the poem's speaker announce this conceit of the world's death than it has to be qualified to justify the labor of analysis to come:

> Let no man say, the world itself being dead,
> 'Tis labour lost to have discovered
> The world's infirmities, since there is none
> Alive to study this dissection;
> For there's a kind of world remaining still,
> Though she which did inanimate and fill
> The world, be gone yet in this last long night
> Her ghost doth walk; that is, a glimmering light,
> A faint weak love of virtue and of good
> Reflects from her, on them which understood
> Her worth.
>
> (63–73)

And then, as the argument continues, this ghostly glimmering is transformed into a new world, a kind of paradise:

> The twilight of her memory doth stay;
> Which, from the carcase of the old world, free,
> Creates a new world; and new creatures be
> Produced: the matter and the stuff of this,
> Her virtue, and the form our practice is.
> And though to be thus elemented, arm

[15]"To the Praise of the Dead, and the Anatomy," in John Donne, *The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World* (London: 1621), Renascence Editions http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/donne1.html, accessed 22 July 2013.

> These creatures, from home-born intrinsic harm,
> (For all assumed unto this dignity,
> So many weedless paradises be. . . .
> (74–82)

Thus, before the first quarter of the poem has been achieved, the argument establishes the two contradictory, even competing allegorical narratives that give the poem much of its dynamism and resistance to unification: a dead world of a decayed earth vs. a utopian world of contrary idealization. One way to characterize this, as Louis L. Martz wrote in a ground-breaking 1947 article, is to see the poem as attempting to unite a caustic, deflating satire with a Petrarchan idealization of a beloved. Martz had Dante's Beatrice and (especially) Petrarch's Laura in mind—beloveds not merely idealized for beauty and virtue, but ultimately seen as celestial figures glorified by God. While the (apparent) lack of eros and desire for Elizabeth Drury in Donne's poem makes this Beatrice or Laura significantly different from those two famous idealized heroines of Italian sonneteering,[16] Martz thought that this combination of satire and idealization was ultimately incoherent, and he faulted the *First Anniversary* for its lack of unity and claimed the second was superior to it on this very score. Martz saw in *An Anatomy* "a central inconsistency which defeats all Donne's efforts to bring its diverse materials under control," claiming the poem needs a "dominant symbol of virtue's power."[17] But such refusal of unity and lack of a central,

[16]But see Ronald Corthell, "The Obscure Object of Desire: Donne's *Anniversaries* and the Cultural Production of Elizabeth Drury," in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), pp. 123–140, for a sophisticated Lacanian analysis of the two poems as about "the process of male loss and recuperation" (p. 134), with a central component of Lacanian Desire.

[17]Martz, "John Donne in Meditation: *The Anniversaries,*" *ELH* 14.4 (December 1947): 247–273, quotation from p. 256. Much of this article was later incorporated into Martz's influential *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study of English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (1954; revised ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 221–248. Martz's diagnosis of lack of unity is extended to both poems in James Andrew Clarke, "The Plot of Donne's *Anniversaries*," *SEL* 30.1 (Winter 1990): 63–77. Patrick Crutwell, *The Shakespearean Moment: And Its Place in the Poetry of the Seventeenth Century*

unifying symbol is precisely what is to be expected from baroque allegory according to Benjamin, and far from being a fault, this quality is part of what makes this poem an aesthetic success and a work which shows new facets from our twenty-first century perspective.[18]

Having established a fictional audience for the poem, then, the speaker begins an earnest catalogue of the world's ills, beginning a section demarcated in the poem's marginal commentary as "The sicknesses of the world." The catalogue begins in Eden and the elemental human functions of procreation and birth, seen as poisoned by original sin:

> We are born ruinous: poor mothers cry,
> That children come not right, not orderly,
> Except they headlong come, and fall upon
> An ominous precipitation.
> How witty's ruin! How importunate
> Upon mankind! it laboured to frustrate
> Even God's purpose; and made woman, sent
> For man's relief, cause of his languishment.
>
> For that first marriage was our funeral:
> One woman at one blow, then killed us all,
> And singly, one by one, they kill us now.
> We do delightfully ourselves allow
> To that consumption; and profusely blind,
> We kill ourselves, to propagate our kind.
> (95–110)

(1954; repr., New York: Random House, 1960), also wrote that *The Second Anniversary* is "by far the better of the two" (p. 83).

[18]Cf. Corthell, who wrote, "In *The First Anniversary* the Idea [of a woman] is mostly felt as absence and loss. . . . *The Second Anniversary* gradually pulls away from the imagery of the world's decline, recuperating speaker and reader through a positive identification with Elizabeth as a religious master signifier of power" (p. 124). Readers familiar with this essay will note several parallels with my own, though finally different analysis. The mutual affinity of Benjamin and aspects of Lacanian and Kristevan psychoanalysis was pointed out by Lupton and Reinhard, pp. 34–59.

Any reader of the elegies and *Songs and Sonnets* will recognize these misogynistic, sex-sick themes—except here the tone seems deadly serious, unlike the wittiness and play of most of the elegies and love poems on similar issues. There is, of course, an arresting mention of "wit" in this passage: "How witty's ruin!" That is, how witty is ruin. The phrase acts as a prelude to the following grim contrast Donne makes, defining the transformed effect of women on men after the Fall. The ruin brought about by original sin was "witty" in that it brought about a crucial, chiasmic reversal through two overlapping metaphors in which the compared elements are opposites: marriage becomes funeral and propagation death.

This kind of wit is, to say the least, little appreciated today but was copiously illustrated thirty years after Donne's poem in the compendium of witty poetic practices compiled by the young Baltasar Gracián in his *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (*Wit and the Art of Ingenuity*).[19] The formal wit signals, as Gracián notes early in his treatise, that the writer is pursuing not only (poetic) truth, but also beauty—an austerely intellectual beauty to be sure.[20] It is Donne's playful but serious contention that Woman, who according to Genesis was God's gift to Adam to overcome his loneliness, becomes his hindrance by bringing sin into the world, setting up a situation in which a male's coitus with a woman shortens his life, killing in the well known double sense, meaning both to cause death and to cause orgasm. The ingenious "wit" here is formal and devoid of humor and laughter. It is instead a catalogue of unrelieved mourning, continuing into the next section on the increasing brevity of life and the diminution of stature of men according to Biblical accounts (and also agreeing with the Greco-Roman view of the decline of humanity from the golden to the iron age). The idea of progress was essentially an Enlightenment invention, and Donne's pessimistic account of human development is one shared generally by the culture—where it is, however, mitigated by

[19]Gracián, *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (1st ed., 1642; enlarged 2nd ed., 1648), ed. Evaristo Correa Calderón, 2 vols. (Madrid: Clásicos Castalia, 1969). For a much earlier study of Gracián's *Agudeza* and its relation to English Metaphysical poetry, see my "Rhetoric, Wit, and Art in Gracián's *Agudeza*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 41 (March 1980): 21–37.

[20]"No se contenta el ingenio con sola la verdad, como el juicio, sino que aspira a la hermosura" (Gracián, 1:54). [Ingenuity does not content itself only with truth, like the judicious mind, but also aspires to beauty.]

the Christian narrative of human redemption, which Donne here defers in his hyperbolic mourning. But the pessimistic emphasis is an extreme version of a widespread tendency of the era, sharing qualities with the bitter satire of some of Donne's elegies—or the bitter discourse of late Elizabethan and Jacobean satirical tragedies (Benjamin would call them *Trauerspiele*) like *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida, King Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, *The Malcontent,* and so on.

The new scientific and geographical knowledge of the era, which was encouraged and celebrated by a more optimistic contemporary like Francis Bacon, is seen in this poem (and in the roughly contemporaneous prose satire *Ignatius His Conclave*[21]) as only adding to the stores of human misery:

> With new diseases on ourselves we war,
> And with new physic, a worse engine far.
> (159–160)

The reference to physic is to what we call medicine and echoes the familiar complaint of the age that doctors are often worse than the diseases they aim to cure. The new diseases, it is often thought, probably include syphilis, quite common in Donne's London. But physics in the modern sense—or its subdivision astronomy—does appear in what became in the twentieth century the most famous lines of the poem:

> And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The element of fire is quite put out;
> The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it.
> And freely men confess that this world's spent,
> When in the planets and the firmament

[21] *Ignatius His Conclave*, an attack on the Jesuits set in hell and written in Latin, was finished, according to internal evidence, in late 1610 and published in early 1611. An English translation, probably by Donne, appeared later that year. Elizabeth Drury was buried 17 December 1610, and the first printed edition of *The First Anniversary* appeared in 1611. These two works were written very close to each other, and each shows considerable interest in the emerging scientific astronomy of Tycho Brahe, Kepler, and Galileo; for further discussion of this work, see below, n. 24.

They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation:
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.
This is the world's condition now.
(205–219)

This is the passage in the poem that most clearly links the hyperbolic vision of the world's decay and death to the actual historical milieu which conditions and informs it. It clarifies the topical or social meanings of this challenging and enigmatic poem of baroque hyperbole, and, remarkably, Donne has singled out a truly world-historical moment for central thematic development: the pivotal moment of shift from geocentric to heliocentric understandings of humanity's place in the cosmos in the wake of Galileo's and his contemporaries' spectacular scientific discoveries. And Donne focuses on this moment at a time so close to the discoveries that for many they were simply matters of idle curiosity. To be sure, Shakespeare (among others) had used astronomical references as metaphors for a world in decay. One thinks, for example, of old Gloucester's comments to his son on the deleterious effects of "these late eclipses of the sun and moon" on divisions in the royal family and in his own.[22] Such perceptions of epochal change were "in the air" in the late Elizabethan/early Jacobean period, and no one, single event is behind Donne's pessimistic theme. But that he adds Galileo's discoveries into his litany is nevertheless a remarkable instance of proleptic understanding.

One of the key differences between Donne and Shakespeare in their astronomical allusions, in fact, is that Shakespeare never refers to the new discoveries made by the telescopic observations of 1609–1610, nor ever

[22]William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974), 1.2.103; future quotations from *King Lear* are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically. This connection was pointed out decades ago in Crutwell, pp. 55–56.

questions the Ptolemaic geocentric model of the universe, which was received cultural wisdom until the later seventeenth-century digestion of Copernicus's heliocentric model and Galileo's discoveries.[23] In these remarkable passages, however, Donne, just months after Galileo's discoveries were announced,[24] takes them in and clearly grasps that, as

[23]Of course, *King Lear* (*c.* 1606) pre-dated these discoveries, but they are not alluded to in later Shakespearean works either. The Copernican theory, also ignored in Shakespeare, dates to 1543, however.

[24]Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius* [*The Starry Messenger*], which gave an account of discoveries to an educated but unmathematical audience in Latin, was published in Venice in March, 1610. That Donne was familiar with Galileo's discoveries, as well as the work of the other key contributors to the emergence of scientific astronomy like Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, and Johannes Kepler, is made clear in *Ignatius His Conclave*, where they are all brought forth in highly uncomplimentary terms as inmates of Hell guilty of innovation and thus confusing mankind—at least in the eyes of the poem's narrator—with useless knowledge, along with other innovators like Machiavelli, Columbus, and others for good measure. A similar skeptical attitude towards the new philosophy is evident in *The First Anniversary*. Donne's interest in the "new philosophy" was the subject of Charles Monroe Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937)—a work, however, which needs correction in several of its supporting details. Coffin had assumed Donne was sympathetic to the "new philosophy," but a closer look will show a strongly skeptical attitude towards it—as was pointed out by several subsequent critics. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the "New Science" upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (1949; revised ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), also thought Donne's work displayed a strong influence from the new astronomy and should be studied as part of the transition from the medieval to the modern mentality. An excellent summary of the work of critical correction to Coffin up to 1971 can be found in R. Chris Hassel, Jr., "Donne's *Ignatius His Conclave* and the New Astronomy," *Modern Philology* 68.4 (May 1971): 329–337. There has been in turn a reaction against these corrections, represented by the posthumous publication of William Empson, *Essays on Renaissance Literature 1: Donne and the New Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). A more recent discussion, Julián Jiménez Hefferman, "John Donne and the New Universe: Retaking the Issue," *Sederi: Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies* 8 (1998): 71–82, argues that Empson over-stated the case but maintains that Donne was more open to aspects of the new astronomy than has been supposed in the reaction

Galileo would famously later argue, they deeply call in doubt the Ptolemaic cosmos and make at least plausible Copernicus's (1543) heliocentric model of the solar system:[25]

> The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it.

The reference to "new stars" alludes to both Tycho Brahe and Kepler, who each had discovered a *nova* or new star (Tycho on two occasions) and thus overthrew the received wisdom of the permanence of the heavens; and to Galileo, since one of the many sensational reports from his telescopic observations was the news that the Milky Way can be resolved into a cloud of stars and that more generally the sky is revealed to be full of thousands of previously unknown stars invisible to the naked eye but clearly revealed in the telescope; and he identified previously unknown mountains and plains (misinterpreted as seas) on the moon.[26] Most famously, Galileo had discovered the four largest moons of Jupiter revolving around that giant planet, and called them the "Medicean stars" (today they are known as the Galilean moons). This discovery in fact was one of the strongest arguments in favor of Copernicus's heliocentric model, since it showed the existence of heavenly bodies that did *not* revolve around the earth.

It should be noted too that Galileo was not the only person who in the months just before the composition of *The First Anniversary* pointed a telescope towards the heavens and found new wonders. We now know that Sir Thomas Harriot also observed the skies telescopically, and in fact

---

against Coffin—arguing specifically for an important influence from Giordano Bruno.

[25]While Kepler and Galileo supported Copernicus's heliocentric model, Tycho (1546–1601) created his own hybrid theory, arguing that the sun and moon orbited the earth while the other planets orbited the sun. This hybrid theory undoubtedly helped shape Donne's view of a "lost" sun and earth, such that "no man's wit / Can well direct him where to look for it."

[26]Galileo Galilei, *The Starry Messenger*, in *The Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, trans. and ed. Stillman Drake (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), "the moon is not robed in a smooth and polished surface but is in fact rough and uneven, covered everywhere, just like the earth's surface, with huge prominences, deep valleys, and chasms" (p. 28).

a few months *before* Galileo did—there is a documented drawing by him of craters on the moon dated 26 July 1609, about five months before Galileo's observations.[27] But Harriot refrained from publicly writing about them—he had already been briefly imprisoned as a suspect in the Gun Powder Plot and seen two patrons imprisoned for longer terms as well, and it is reasonable to assume he decided not to risk problems of the type Galileo in fact experienced. But it is not impossible, of course, that in the small world of intellectual London Donne had heard of Harriot's observations and was also drawing on these in the poem's astronomical allusions.

In these references to the historical discoveries of his day, then, Donne evokes the theme of a world in transition, the breaking up of an old order in favor of an unknown, but frighteningly chaotic new one in which the traditional social hierarchy is crumbling and traditional sources of knowledge called in question. Clearly, Donne's is a version of the retrospective narrative that we construct to understand the Renaissance as one of the key transitional ages, moving from a traditional, pre-modern society to an early modernity marked by economic change destructive of the old feudal order and its hierarchies as well as by the slow development of modern scientific techniques and knowledge.[28] But for Donne, the Enlightenment's and our own culture's optimistic inflection of these changes is reversed. Instead of the progress the Enlightenment saw, Donne sees decay and decline, and in this he is very much like his contemporary Shakespeare and many other Renaissance intellectuals. For us, living in a time when, as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno wrote, "The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant,"[29] this pessimism takes on new meaning, just as Benjamin thought the spirit of the *Trauerspiel* repeated itself in the depression and

---

[27]Ian Sample, "Did an Englishman Beat Galileo to the First Moon Observation?," Blogpost to *The Guardian Online*, 14 January 2009, http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2009/jan/14/thomas-harriot-galileo-moon-drawings, accessed 9 December 2012.

[28]Zimmerman emphasized the links between Benjamin's depiction of the fragmentation of the baroque era with the contemporaneous scientific revolution, pp. 13–18.

[29]Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1977), p. 3.

spleen of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and in the pessimistic Modernist literature descending from it.

And like *King Lear*, in which "one daughter . . . redeems nature from the general curse" (4.6.205–206) in the figure of the utopian character Cordelia, so Donne has recourse to Elizabeth Drury, the late deceased, as a female figure of redemption. But as every reader soon recognizes, the fictional figure of Elizabeth in this poem goes far beyond the actual figure she is based on. This allegorical structure, in which the figure of Elizabeth takes on such extraordinary significance, constitutes the second and competing set of double meanings that counter-acts or even contradicts the first one of the death of the world as a signifier of deep social and intellectual disorder and confusion.

Donne begins to build this level of meaning in earnest in the very middle of his catalogue of the world's and mankind's ills, just after he has announced one of the major themes: "'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone; / All just supply, and all relation" (213–214). Elizabeth Drury (though significantly, she is almost exclusively called "she" in this connection, broadening the reference) is evoked as nothing less than an agent of unity for the fragments of the world:

> She that should all parts to reunion bow,
> She that had all magnetic force alone,
> To draw, and fasten sundered parts in one.
> (220–223)

It goes without saying that this is a fantastic claim to make about a fourteen-year-old English girl, however virtuous she might have been, and the extravagance famously puzzled Ben Jonson and doubtless other contemporaries. There are in fact several traditional concepts or figures that have been proposed as figural or allegorical meanings for Elizabeth, and I will turn to those below shortly.

But having introduced these extraordinary claims, the speaker then returns to his anatomy, again concentrating on things astronomical (251–284) as well as referring to the earth's uneven, highly irregular spherical surface (as had Galileo in *The Starry Messenger*) and the great depths of the ocean (285–301). The deformed earth, it devolves, is mirrored by a deformed social world:

> The world's proportion disfigured is
> That those two legs whereon it doth rely,
> Reward and punishment are bent awry.
> (302–304)

But then the poem returns to a utopian mode, with a new series of extraordinary claims made for Elizabeth, this time centered on her virtually Platonic embodiment of ideal proportion and harmony—like a work of art:

> She by whose lines proportion should be
> Examined, measure of all symmetry,
> Whom, had that ancient seen, who thought souls made
> Of harmony, he would at next have said
> That harmony was she, and thence infer,
> That souls were but resultances from her,
> And did from her into our bodies go,
> As to our eyes, the forms from objects flow;
> She who if those great Doctors truly said
> That the Ark to man's proportions was made,
> Had been a type for that, as that might be
> A type of her in this, that contrary
> Both elements, and passions lived at peace
> In her, who caused all civil war to cease.
> She, after whom, what form soe'er we see,
> Is discord, and rude incongruity;
> She, she is dead, she's dead.
> (309–325)

The references to visual beauty resume below when, with an allusion to "beauty's other second element, Colour, and lustre now," said to be at present lacking on the earth after the death of Elizabeth, who is said to be the source not only of proportion, but of color as well:

> But she, in whom all white, and red, and blue
> (Beauty's ingredients) voluntary grew,
> As in an unvexed paradise; from whom
> Did all things verdure, and their lustre come,
> Whose composition was miraculous,
> Being all colour, all diaphanous,
> (For air, and fire but thick gross bodies were,

> And liveliest stones but drowsy, and pale to her,)
> She, she, is dead; she's dead.
> (361–369)

It seems Donne had been reading in Renaissance aesthetics and the theory of beauty, very possibly with a neoplatonic bent, given the references to Elizabeth as a Platonic ideal.

Donne in fact uses the word "artist" in the next section of the poem, but it does not mean a practitioner of the "fine arts" (a meaning only coming into use in the Enlightenment). He is referencing an "art" similar to what Shakespeare's Prospero practices, a combination of astrology and the manipulation of the "correspondences" between heaven and earth to influence events on earth (without, however, the aid of the "airy spirit" Ariel to carry out his wishes):

> What artist now dares boast that he can bring
> Heaven hither, or constellate anything,
> So as the influence of those stars may be
> Imprisoned in an herb, or charm, or tree,
> And do by touch, all which those stars could do?
> The art is lost, and correspondence too.
> For heaven gives little, and the earth takes less,
> And man least knows their trade, and purposes.
> (391–398)

This last claim for Elizabeth's powers, that she embodied the set of parallels between heaven and earth that lay at the heart of the late medieval/early modern "Elizabethan world picture,"[30] is perhaps the most

[30]This is the term made famous by E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1943; repr., New York: Vintage, n.d), which argued that underlying Shakespeare's works, and particularly the history plays, was a stable view of the world thought of as structured in inter-related layers of higher and lower beings, with each level sharing the same hierarchical structure, so that the different layers—the chief ones being the astronomical heavens, the political kingdom, and the "little world" or microcosm of the individual human—corresponded to one another and influenced one another. In the turn to the new historicism and cultural materialism in the 1980s, Tillyard's diagnosis of Shakespeare as uncritically sharing this worldview came under acute criticism, and the idea fell out of favor in the field. However, the ideas of hierarchy and correspondence are

startling of all, coming as it does after the proclamation of the coming of "new philosophy" which calls all in doubt. In effect, the poem announces both the disintegration of the fullest Western pre-modern picture of the world and the advent of the modern, skeptical scientific method that both derived from it and in the end undermined and replaced it. And it does so in the deepest spirit of pessimism and mourning. There is no positivity left on earth after Elizabeth's departure—all that is ennobling having joined, or rather, become mystically enclosed within, Elizabeth's soul in heaven.

Elizabeth, then, is clearly an allegorical figure, but she is more the Beatrice of *The Divine Comedy* than that of *La Vita Nuova*. That is, the series of meanings she signifies rises far beyond her initial appearance as a flesh and blood character and becomes celestial and cosmological, as in the following lines:

> She whom wise nature had invented then
> When she observed that every sort of men
> Did in their voyage in this world's sea stray,
> And needed a new compass for their way;
> She that was best, and first original
> Of all fair copies; and the general
> Steward to Fate. . . .
> . . . . . .
> She to whom this world must itself refer,
> As suburbs, or the microcosm of her,
> She, she is dead; she's dead: when thou knows't this,
> Thou know'st how lame a cripple this world is.
> (223–229, 235–238)

She seems in fact the very Form(s) of virtue, beauty, and order in a world seen as dead or dying from their lack.

These notions may be behind Donne's language in his reported reply to Ben Jonson's complaint about *The Anniversaries* mentioned earlier, that "if it had been written of the Virgin Mary it had been something," but that, as it was, "Donne's *Anniversary* was profane and full of

---

certainly to be found in many early modern texts, and Shakespeare—and here also Donne—references them consciously and often, albeit in many cases to put them in doubt, rather than simply uncritically to reproduce them.

blasphemies." Jonson reported Donne replying "that he described the idea of a woman and not as she was."[31] Donne's language here could be Platonic, though in this context not conclusively so. Nevertheless, the meaning of Idea as a Platonic Form conforms to much of the intellectual content of the extravagant language naming Elizabeth Drury as the source of all virtue, form, color, and beauty of a destitute world.

In this case, though, one wonders if Donne had not been reading Dante through, perhaps, neoplatonic lenses—though the last poems of Petrarch's *Rime* might also have served as a partial model. Martz, for one, argued that the dead Laura represents the most apt parallel, especially to the less cosmic Elizabeth of the second poem.[32] Unlike in Dante's work, however, the principle of order and beauty is shown not as the ultimate reality of a cosmos infused, even in its darkest pits, with divine love, but as something that has deserted the world and left it bereft.

There are a number of precedents besides Dante's Beatrice and Petrarch's Laura, however, for the figure of the cosmic Elizabeth. Martz, in the article just cited, notes parallels with meditations on the Virgin Mary (and credits Ben Jonson with perspicacity in his evocation of Mary as a more suitable subject for the poem). William Empson thought that Elizabeth represented nothing less than the Divine Logos introduced in the Gospel According to Saint John, the very principle of order and law in the cosmos.[33] Others (notably Frank Manley) have discussed the relevance of the figure of Sapienza or Wisdom figured in a number of Renaissance paintings. Deriving ultimately from the Book of Wisdom, Sapienza was a female personification of some of the attributes of God, and there are parallel figures in the Kabbalah.[34] Elizabeth's significations are open-ended and suggestive, rather than definitive, and poetic rather than philosophical in the strict sense. Her allegorical meanings are a kind of photographic negative of the degraded, fragmented, unmeaningful

---

[31]Jonson in William Drummond, "Ben Jonson's literary table-talk (1619)," *English Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), p. 530.

[32]Martz, pp. 249–257 *et passim*.

[33]Empson, *English Pastoral Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1938), p. 84; cited in Martz, p. 256, n. 13.

[34]Manley, ed., *John Donne: The Anniversaries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963), pp. 19–20.

world she left. In a sense it doesn't matter whether we call the exalted figure created in this movement Sapienza, or a second Beatrice, or the Platonic Forms. All of these rarefied conceptions share commonalities with the unique figure created by Donne in *An Anatomy of the World*, but the figure of Elizabeth is *sui generis*, an ideal that emerges quite specifically out of the empty world the poem posits. Her cosmic significations seem to me to be primarily a variation on the central theme of *An Anatomy* of the loss of world-historical coherence. She is a figure for a kind of paradise lost, an archaic world of harmony, correspondence, and intrinsic meaning and beauty. The poem announces the end of that pre-modern dream and the advent of a modernity of fragments. Of Donne too we can say what Walter Benjamin said of Baudelaire, a poet writing some two hundred years after Donne, but one who shares many of his qualities: his "genius, which is nourished by melancholy, is an allegorical genius. . . . This poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man."[35] In the case of Donne, of course, the city had not yet developed into the phantasmagoric realm of dazzling commodities of Belle Epoque Paris described by Benjamin. But the world of the Jacobean era presented enough of Paris's combination of exuberant vitality and melancholy to supply Donne with the numerous objects of his conceits and the pervasive ambience of mourning which this poem displays.

There is, however, some consolation at the end of this dark work, as was called for in the tradition of funeral elegies. The consolation involves another, and in Donne's age, not-yet-existing sense of the word art—poetry as an art of memorialization and place-holder for all that has been lost and is being mourned. Donne invokes the example of Moses, who at God's command had composed a song so that God's message might be recalled even in those times when Israel had forgotten all:

> Vouchsafe to call to mind, that God did make
> A last, and lasting'st piece, a song. He spake
> To Moses, to deliver unto all,
> That song: because he knew they would let fall
> The Law, the prophets, and the history,

[35]Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), p. 40.

> But keep the song still in their memory.
> Such an opinion (in due measure) made
> Me this great office boldly to invade.
> (461–468)

The last comparison of this metaphor-filled poem combines prison, grave, dead bodies, and verse, in a last extraordinary claim, this time for something like an idea of art as a repository for what has been lost in the great ruptures of modernity destructive of a unified world and depriving it of intrinsic meaning and worth. Art in Donne's *First Anniversary* becomes the compensating marker of absence that is also a new presence and gift to the world. And this (like its invocation of an emerging modern science) is another of the poem's prescient intimations of modernity.

The First Anniversary is an anatomy of exactly the kind of world perceived by Benjamin both in Baudelaire's poems and in Shakespeare's and in the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiele*: a modernizing world of fragments deprived of intrinsic meaning by the epochal world-historical changes it had undergone, but presenting the allegorical poet with the ruins that could be incorporated into new art for a new time.

Arcadia University