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Donne's Suns and the Condition of More

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D*esunt cætera.*"—the Latin tag attached by an unknown hand to "Resurrection, imperfect" in the 1633 *Poems* and all subsequent seventeenth century print editions[1]—asks the reader to consider why, in a Donne poem, we are so rarely done: too often it feels as though there should be more. "The rest is lacking": in Donne's lyric the only finality that the supposedly final act of resurrection is granted comes, grammatically, from the period planted at the end of the Latin phrase. That is, the tag is allowed a more definitive closure than the poem itself inasmuch as the only closure that "Resurrection, imperfect" offers comes from an unidentified voice that seems to sound from outside the poem proper. This seems perversely appropriate when "Resurrection, imperfect" is set among so many other Donne poems in which speakers search for stability in a world marked by disintegration and flux, and exuberantly celebrate change, variety and indifference as the "dull sublunary" world's only constants. Robert B. Shaw has compared the frantic "movement of Donne's thought" to a squirrel turning round and round on a wheel in its cage, exerting enormous energy yet failing to

[1]The tag likewise appears at the end of the verse epistle "To the Countesse of Bedford. Begun in France but never perfected." However, the tag apparently does not appear in any seventeenth-century manuscript copy of "Resurrection, imperfect," suggesting that it was supplied by the printer. I am grateful to Gary Stringer and the textual editors of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne* for sharing with me their initial collation of seventeenth-century manuscript and print editions of "Resurrection, imperfect." Quotation of Donne's poetry throughout is from John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967).

move forward.[2] But I wonder if a more appropriate analogy might not be to a Slinky toy walking downstairs, turning over and over on itself in its search for a permanent footing.

Whatever their penchant for making bold, absolute statements ("I am every dead thing" ["A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day," 12]; "She'is all States, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is" ["The Sunne Rising," 21–22]), few of Donne's poems follow the example of "Holy Sonnet: Death be not proud" and allow the reader such emphatic closure or certainty as "Death thou shalt die." Does the female interlocutor drop that final piece of clothing in "Elegie: Going to Bed" and allow the speaker the revelation that he so ardently desires? Does God scourge the back turned toward him at the close of "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" and thereby guarantee the speaker a sign that he has been vouchsafed the grace necessary for salvation? Or does the three-person'd God agree to batter a flawed, adulterous, and hitherto mutinous heart and thereby "make . . . new" the spiritually frantic speaker of "Holy Sonnet: Batter my heart"? Rather—to borrow the final image of "A Hymne to God the Father"—a good number of Donne's poems end with the speaker stranded on the shore, waiting to be carried to deliverance across the sea, after having progressed as far as he could under his own power, which is more often than not the power of his wit or an act of linguistic alchemy. Or, rather, the reader is oftentimes left in a state of expectancy, like the speaker of "The good-morrow" who promises his female interlocutor an unflagging erection and a Tantric-like psychosexual ecstasy *if only* she will guarantee that she loves him as much as he loves her. Needless to say, the voice of the addressee does not sound within that poem, which allows the possibility that she will prick the bubble of the speaker's exuberance and tell him, Prufrock-like, "That is not it at all, / That is not

[2]Shaw, *The Call of God: The Theme of Vocation in the Poetry of Donne and Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1981), p. 51. Shaw's comment pertains specifically to the speaker's anxiety over his spiritual state in the *Holy Sonnets*, but may be applied as well to many of the other devotional and amatory poems. Shaw's analogy is supported by Jeffrey Johnson's argument "that Donne's work is characterized by a pervasive and a profound rest-lessness, and this, in part, is the distinguishing imperfection found in Donne, and a quality of mind that draws us to him" ("Donne, imperfect," *John Donne Journal* 27 [2008]: 9). In his essay, Johnson provides a substantial reading of "Resurrection, imperfect" that I find persuasive.

what I meant, at all." The potency of a Donne poem lies in its ability to defer the very closure that, simultaneously, it so eagerly anticipates. Or it may be more precise to say that the power of a Donne lyric—its peculiar energy—derives paradoxically from its heightened awareness of its ultimate impotency: when they are done, so many of Donne's poems are not done, for their speakers still hope for more.[3]

Thus, we should not be surprised that Donne's "Resurrection, imperfect" appeared in print with the aforementioned Latin tag attached. The reader's uncertainty as to whether "*Desunt cætera*" represents Donne's own hope of eventual resurrection, or an early reader/editor's statement of textual expectancy, only highlights the nature of human incompleteness inscribed within the poem. The former stance is taken, among others, by Kate Gartner Frost, who argues that "Resurrection, imperfect" is "a finished poem concerned with unfinished time."[4] I leave

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[3]I am thinking, for example, of those verse epistles which the speaker insists must be completed by the recipient, their worth being guaranteed by their reception. Or of *Satyre III*, in which, uncertain which is the true Bride of Christ, the speaker resolves to "doubt wisely," thereby suspending any more decisive action. I address the performative basis of certain other Donne lyrics in "Donne's 'Valediction of the booke' as a Performative Action," *ANQ: American Notes and Queries* 21.2 (Spring 2008): 25–34; "Redemption Typology in John Donne's 'Batter my heart,'" *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 8 (1987): 163–176; "'With Holy Importunity, with a Pious Impudency': John Donne's Attempts to Provoke Election," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 13 (1992): 85–103; and "Donne, Spenser, and the Performative Mode of Renaissance Poetry," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 32.1 (Summer 2006): 76–102. I am in sympathy with Judith Scherer Herz's description of Donne as "the master of complex, unsettling, prickly poems, poems that simply will not resolve" ("'An Excellent Exercise of Wit That Speaks So Well of Ill': Donne and the Poetics of Concealment," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986], pp. 3–14; quotation on p. 5).

[4]Frost, "*Magnus Pan Mortuus Est*: A Subtextual and Contextual Reading of Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect,'" in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), pp. 231–261; quotation on p. 231. See also Ruth E. Falk, "Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect,'" *Explicator* 17 (1958): item 24, and Frontain, "Donne's Imperfect Resurrection,"

the implications of the latter position to be addressed by other members of the panel while I concentrate specifically on the speaker's desire of more.

The poem is set at a critical moment, the "now" (9) when the Son of God, who is the Light of the World, is resurrected on Easter Sunday and, having harrowed Hell while his body lay in the tomb ("For these three daies become a minerall," 12), now hastens to heaven (10) and effectually transforms a world blighted by Original Sin into a realm that now possesses the possibility of being spiritually perfected.[5] The world of time, symbolized by the daily rotation of the "old sun," has been superceded by the realm of eternity made manifest by Christ's resurrection. Consequently, the speaker does not worry about the darkness that will result in the mortal world should the cosmological sun, exhausted by its daily effort of orbiting the globe, heed the speaker's directive to sleep in on Easter morning. For Christ's death and subsequent resurrection allow believers to anticipate a world of full joy in which the soul can look upon the glorified Son and not be blinded.[6]

Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature 26 (1990): 539–545. Frost analyzes the alchemical, cosmological, mythographic, and arithmological means by which Donne inscribes within the poem a tension between incompleteness and the "All."

[5]A. J. Smith assumes that "the time of the poem is before sunrise on Easter Monday" (*Complete English Poems*, corrected ed. [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1973], p. 650 n. 1). But line 4's taunt that "A better Sun rose before thee to day" seems to signal that the "old Sun"—exhausted by the "wound" that it took on Good Friday when an eclipse occurred during Christ's passion on the cross—has been slow to rise or "prevented" (in the etymological sense of "arriving before") by the Resurrection. (Frost argues a liturgical context for the poem, setting its action at midnight on Holy Saturday, when a Christian church is transformed from darkness to light. Significantly, the Holy Saturday midnight mass is the only liturgy that James Joyce continued to attend after leaving the Roman Catholic Church of his youth, so powerful did he find the symbolism.) Christ's glorified body recreates the world, typologically shattering darkness as, at the original moment of Creation, light was separated from darkness. The "better Sun," thus, enlightens humans spiritually and delivers them from the darkness of sin.

[6]What scholarly attention the poem has received has been in reference to its alchemical conceit. "'Resurrection, imperfect' shows Christ conquering hell ('enlightned hell,' l. 6) by his superior fire ('And made the darke fires languish,' l.

The poem is of a piece with much else in Donne's canon. In what follows, I concentrate upon three interrelated tropes.

First, the "soul of the whole." While Christ's body lay in the tomb, the "better Sun" (4)—in order that "he might allow / Himselfe unto all stations, and fill all" (10–11)—harrowed Hell, thus overrunning the boundaries between heaven and earth, and between earth and hell. In that process the "better Sun" demonstrates itself able to function not only above ground (like the "old Sun"), but below as well. Unifying the realms of existence in a way that the "old Sun" is unable to do, the "better Sun" reveals itself to be the "soule . . . of the whole" (21–22). Thus, "Resurrection, imperfect" must be read as part of Donne's desire to "Make all this All" ("Upon the translation of the Psalmes," 23)—that is, to return the jagged, and oftentimes incoherent, pieces of the sin-shattered world to their prelapsarian harmony and integrity. "Perfection is in unitie," asserts the speaker of "Elegie: Loves Progress" (9), and "Resurrection, *im*perfect" paradoxically celebrates the perfection that unites all the elements of creation: "From thence are all deriv'd, that fill this All," as the speaker of *Metempsychosis* (27) observes of the Church as a type of Noah's Ark. Comparison with no other poem reveals so clearly why Donne's *Anniversaries* proved so disturbing to an early reader like Ben Jonson, for the language applied to Elizabeth Drury in those companion poems—"shee which did inanimate and fill / The world" (*First Anniversarie,* 68–69) was "all this All" (*Second Anniversary*, 376)—is in "Resurrection, imperfect" applied to Christ.

Second, the fatigue of the sun is a trope to which Donne repeatedly returns. The sun initiates the order of creation, Yahweh's first recorded act having been to call light into existence (Genesis 1:3–5). But the diurnal course of the sun both symbolizes its great age ("The Sun it selfe . . . / Is elder by a yeare now" ["The Anniversarie," 3–4]) and its exhausting exertion ("Thine age askes ease" ["The Sunne Rising," 27]).

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7). Thereby, he conquered Satan's power ('our fires grew pale,' l. 8), releasing multitudes of souls for salvation," notes Roberta Albrecht in *The Virgin Mary as Alchemical and Lullian Reference in Donne* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2005), p. 148. Thus, as alchemical tincture, he will not "tinge other (human) metals" (Albrecht, p. 147). Or, as Frost notes, "In spiritual alchemy, the stage of spiritual gold was achieved by union with Christ, the white tincture" (p. 242).

In the verse epistle "To the Countesse of Salisbury. August. 1614" ("Faire, great, and good"), the sun has positively "Growne stale" (3), and the slowness of the sun's movement on the wedding day of the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine leads the speaker to ask,

> But oh, what ailes the Sunne, that here he staies,
> Longer to day, then other daies?
> Staies he new light from these to get?
> And finding here such store, is loth to set?
> (57–60)

The speakers of Donne's poems are fascinated by what the sun might see on its diurnal journey: "Looke, and to morrow late, tell mee . . ." the speaker of "The Sunne Rising" commands (16), while the speaker of *Satyre IV* echoes the Preacher of the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes when he asks,

> . . . Thou which since yesterday hast beene
> Almost about the whole world, has thou seene,
> O Sunne, in all thy journey, Vanitie,
> Such as swells the bladder of our court?
> (165–168)

Conversely, the witnesses at the wedding of the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine are allowed to "see / What the sunne never saw" (19–20).

But in his poetry Donne seems most interested in the sun as an emblem of "working vigour" ("Loves growth" 10) that may not be renewed ("A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day," 37). Indeed, Donne took an ongoing and richly perverse delight in the paradox that the light- and warmth-imparting sun, essential to human existence and well being, is part of an old order that has been transcended by Christ in "Resurrection, imperfect," and by the beloved in poems like "The Sunne Rising," "The Anniversarie," and "A nocturnall upon *S. Lucies* day."[7]

[7]I confess that I have never tried to teach "Resurrection, imperfect." The closest that I have come to developing a pedagogy for the poem has been to direct students in my Seventeenth-Century Literature survey class who are at a loss for a term paper topic to compare the setting of the "old sun" in "Resurrection, imperfect" with "The Sunne Rising" as evidence of the

After "Resurection, imperfect," the competition between the two orders is presented most provocatively in "A Letter written by Sr. H. G. and J. D. *alternis vicibus,*" whose second stanza (which editors agree was written by Donne) runs:

> For since one old poore sunn serves all the rest,
> You sev'rall sunns that warme, and light each brest
> Doe by that influence all your thoughts digest.
> (4–6)

Such a competition is essential to the Somerset epithalamion (105–110), the "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington" (25–28), and the *Second Anniversary* (4–6, 350).[8]

Finally, in its supposition of the presence at Christ's sepulcher of "one of those, whose credulous pietie / Thought, that a Soule one might discerne and see / Goe from a body" (17–19), "Resurrection, imperfect" shares in the trope of the hypothetical witness who may or may not understand the significance of what he or she has been vouchsafed to see. In the opening stanzas of "A Valediction forbidding mourning," for example, "sad friends" gathered at the deathbed of a "virtuous" man debate whether "The breathe goes now" or not. The virtuous man's death provides a model for how quietly the speaker hopes to part from his

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seventeenth-century world of symbolic confluences and typological associations that quake significance as their tectonic plates shift. Such a study reveals how often the trope of an old or exhausted sun recurs in Donne, as well as invites consideration of how often Donne uses the sun to establish the excellence of a competing order. In "The Anniversarie," "The Sun it selfe" signals the world of "decay" in contradistinction to the speaker's love, which "truly keepes his first, last, everlasting day" (stanza 1); whereas in "Song: Sweetest love, I do not goe," the speaker promises to return more quickly to his beloved than the sun daily does because the speaker takes "More wings and spurres" than the planet (16); and in "A nocturnall," the speaker—after complaining that "nor will my Sunne renew"—contrasts his greater Sun (his dead beloved) with "the lesser" one that "At this time to the Goat is runne / To fetch new lust, and give it" to young lovers (37–40).

[8]Robin Robbins (*The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. [Harlow: Pearson/ Longman, 2008]), summarizes portions of Donne's sun lore in his glosses to the verse epistle "To the Countess of Bedford" ("You have refined me"), 2:224, and to "Obsequies to the Lord Harrington," 2:319.

mistress, thus ensuring that their "joyes" will not be profaned by "the layeite" witnessing the mystery of their love. The credulous witness of "Resurrection, imperfect" is akin to those French Roman Catholics whose "mis-devotion frames / A thousand praiers to saints, whose very names / The ancient Church knew not, Heaven knowes not yet" (*Second Anniversary*, 511–513) and the antithesis of the hypothesized witness in "The Extasie" who has been "so by love refin'd / That he soules language understood, / And by good love were growen all minde" and, thus, will "part farre purer then he came" after seeing the ecstasy of the speaker and his beloved (stanzas 6–7).

Thus, by direction or indirection, such references posit the existence of a cognoscenti or spiritual elite who can "see, and Judge, and follow worthinesse" (*First Anniversarie*, 4). Donne's questioning who has the ability not only to see spiritual occurrences, but to understand the significance of what he or she has seen, proves a means of suggesting what cannot be adequately represented, of intimating what is present by its absence. The more I think about this maneuver by Donne, the more I wonder if it is not an analogue to Paul's claim to have known "a man in Christ above fourteen years ago" who—whether "in the body" or "out of the body," Paul cannot say—was "caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for man to utter."[9]

"*Desunt cætera.*": the rest is lacking. Poetically, Donne's end lies in his beginning; the title is explained by the tag. The poem leads the reader to the point of revelation, only—as in the much-debated final episode of television's *The Sopranos*—to pass abruptly to black. The subject of the poem is what cannot be put into words, the soul's life once it is released from the body. It's a brilliant maneuver, and one thoroughly Donnean, to advertise that something is lacking in a poem that purports to celebrate the source of "all"; indeed, the very last phrase of the fragment proper is "of the whole." Donne's Slinkey toy can never complete its walk downstairs, but must pause expectantly in mid-spring, un-done, or not-yet-done, in its anticipation of the All. "Resurrection, imperfect" reminds us that, in Donne, there is always something more.

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[9]Holy Bible, King James or Authorized Version (Nashville, TN: Gideons International, 1975), 2 Corinthians 12:2–4.