Donne's (Im)possible Punning

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In recent years I have been interested in various forms of (im)possible punning—that is, counterlogical and paralogical puns that from one point of view defy rational context, whether syntactical, commonsensical, philosophical, or all three, but from another point of view have a strange appropriateness. These puns can cut below or rise above ordinary meaning.[1] At some level, I suppose any pun gestures toward these effects and those that interest me merely exhibit them more radically, yet they do so strongly enough that in fact we are likely to deny or suppress them. In other words, the sub-category of the (im)possible pun, both in a single word and in a phrase or clause, like any credible category or sub-category, has fuzzy edges. Aside from marginal fuzziness, the phenomenon of (im)possible punning to which I refer is categorically not a denial of context, like that reductively attributed to Derridean deconstruction, nor, indeed, even a denial of the primacy of context. It is instead a recognition of the artificiality of contextual limits and of the intensity of the pressures pushing perceptually against them. By "artificially" I mean human construction, both cultural and mental, and by "perceptually," I certainly mean audibly, visibly, and emotionally, but I also mean imaginatively and conceptually: what we perceive certainly includes

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[1] On paralogic, see Thomas Kent, *Paralogic Rhetoric: A Theory of Communicative Interaction* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1993). Simply put, paralogic exceeds the merely rational.

but also exceeds sensation. Variously, these pressures can be read within a psychological system of interpretation, or they can be read linguistically, for example as the differential resistance or the creative supplementarity of the signifier; or they can be read more rationally as deliberate, agential wit. They can also be recognized as an overdetermined or ambiguous result combining these and other possibilities.[2]

Before getting down to notoriously punny Donnean cases, I'd like to highlight one kind of psycholinguistic exploration that seems useful to me in its implicit confirmation of the existence of (im)possible puns. This is Jean Aitchison's discussion of the various models proposed for the working of our mental machinery in selecting and recognizing words. Aitchison has evidence to support the viability of such puns: "where more than one meaning is plausible," she reports, subjects in experiments "are likely to activate all of them," and for an ambiguous word, they "simultaneously activate more than one meaning…even when the context strongly biases them in one direction." Moreover, they "briefly activate both meanings of a homonym, even in cases where one of them is inappropriate." Indeed, according to one model, "A whole army of words, it seems, marches up for consideration each time a word begins." Aitchison's explanation of homonymic punning is readily extended to a syntactical construction or to the alternative significations of a single word.

The model of verbal selection and recognition Aitchison favors over the organized grouping—the "army," or "cohort," model—

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[2]An excellent review of recent work in literary criticism on punning (e.g., Stephen Booth, Patricia Parker, Joel Fineman, Harry Berger) can be found in Mark Womack's "Undelivered Meanings: The Aesthetics of Shakespearean Wordplay," in *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements*, ed. Mark David Rasmussen (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 139-58. Womack is interested in "unharnessed" puns (in Booth's terminology), seemingly fortuitous puns, whereas my interest is in those quite thoroughly harnessed but outrageous enough often to be resisted or denied. My puns are relatively more patterned and contextualized.

however, is a more complex "interactive activation model." This she envisions in terms of an electrical circuit board with multidirectional, reciprocal flows between semantic and phonological components, including rhythm. This model, too, puts both sounds and meanings in play, and it shows that "the human mind is capable of massive parallel processing."[3] She also observes that such a model accords "with what we know about the human brain," whose billions of neurons and connecting synapses are excited interactively (p. 208).

Aitchison has limited her inquiry to native speakers and auditors of modern English, who, she notes, are disproportionately literate and monolingual compared to those in many other cultures, yet it surely remains suggestive for past and present writers and for readers as well. In fact, the generic expectation of verbal play—even license—in poetry, together with the opportunity to comprehend written words more slowly on the page, could also increase the kind of interaction she envisions. Of course in the late sixteenth and earlier seventeenth centuries, poetry could very likely have been read aloud, and habits of reading and conventions of writing still show numerous signs of earlier oral traditions. Compared to the Freudian-Lacanian slippery slope of association and displacement and the popularly construed Saussurean-Derridean version of ungrounded arbitrariness, Aitchison's work is particularly useful for my purposes in its reliance on experiment, including neurological evidence, in its relative novelty, and perhaps only therefore in its seeming neutrality. While I readily grant its hypothetical, hence fictive, dimension, this appears at present to be less codified than that of other approaches—at once more open to experiment and more

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[3]Jean Aitchison, *Words in the Mind*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 214-21, but all of chapters 17-18 should be consulted.

materially based. Thus it can serve at least to reopen the critical discussion attuned to it.[4]

Whatever the workings of our mental circuitry, Donne's poetry, like that of Spenser, Shakespeare, and Jonson, is full of (im)possible punning. Like theirs, it brings into heightened awareness what Aitchison describes half, but only half, the time, as an "unconscious" process, or in what I consider a more accurate word, an unrealized one. I would take as a familiar, obvious, and outrageous example, the pun on the verb *die*—"sexually consummate" or "mortally expire"—at the end of "The good-morrow." In most editions, this pun is *overlooked*, a term that I use punningly myself to mean "looked beyond" or "neglected" and thus "transcended," "suppressed," or indeed "sublated," even though its very familiarity also ensures that the editors must notice but rule out its possibility. Precisely this (im)possibility is what I want to discuss, but without claiming the primacy or overriding reality of its significance.

Given the familiarity of "The good-morrow" to readers of this journal, I'll plunge into the midst of its final stanza:

> Where can we finde two better hemispheares
> Without sharpe North, without declining West?
> What ever dyes, was not mixed equally;

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[4]An approach to punning such as Jonathan Culler's is more wonderfully free and more romanticized than seems to me characteristic of Donne's relatively more motivated punning, but it is nonetheless of interest here. Culler describes what he calls "the call of the phoneme, whose echoes tell of wild realms beyond the code and suggest new configurations of meaning…[realms where] supposedly discrete meanings threaten to sink into fluid subterranean signifieds too undefinable to call concepts: a commingling of 'stable' and 'stables'." This sounds more like Shakespeare than Donne, or at least more like some of Shakespeare's characters at some times: "The Call of the Phoneme: Introduction," in *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*, ed. Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 1-16, here p. 3.

> If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
> Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.[5]

Whether by means of the Scholastic philosophy or the alchemy invoked in the line about an equal, or perfectly uniform, mixture of elements, the usual gloss on the last line concludes that their combined loves will not be subject to the mutability and deprivation of death. Instead, their love will live forever, and they will live in it. This is certainly a reasonable and obvious meaning. But even aside from the word "die," whose discussion I defer, the last line is puzzling. Why the combination "can die" rather than the more likely "will die"? And why the word "slacken," rather than a word not only literally but also figuratively consonant with the mixing of elements? Does the emphatic repetition of "none" in the last line refer to neither love or to neither person or to their combined love or combined persons? In the ambiguous "none," emphatically repeated, is there thus an assertion of the achieved oneness of two or a reminder of the singularity of each—the punning "no *one*" of us two? In other words, is there transcendence of physically separated oneness or an insistent reminder of its reality? Or could the real point be that there is simultaneously both?

Persistently in the five lines I have quoted, even while the geographically physical world is being surmounted, sexuality is explicitly called back to mind and to mind-made transcendence: the image of sexual erection implicit in the needle of the compass pointing "sharpe North" and the sequent, inevitable post-coital declination of westering are familiar instances of it, even though north and west are explicitly invoked here as representatives of the physical limitation and imperfection that are being transcended. A similar reminder of physicality is present in the conditional protasis of the final two lines: "If our two loves be one, or, thou and I /

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[5]Unless otherwise indicated, I am citing *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

Love so alike." First in this protasis, the possibility of a union of essence, or philosophical *ens*, is considered and then the possibility of an "alikeness": this alikeness is either a true union purely through action, or *esse*, a possibility that the auxiliary verbs "do" and "can" conspicuously reinforce, or else it is merely the appearance of true union and thus merely an artificial likeness.

By now it must be clear that I read the concluding pun on "die" in the sexual sense as well as in the obvious, primary sense "cease to live."[6] A sexual state in which none slacken or die, of course, is (im)possible. This is a suspended, perpetual state of heightened excitation and arrested animation—pure potential, not to say potency, without cessation. In this very physical defiance of physical limitation, however, there is also a lack of completion—no lack of act, but lack of fulfillment. (I never read the poem without being reminded of Keats's "Grecian Urn," on which the two figures ever young and ever about to be lovers are never joined.) The pun on "die" therefore conveys more than a spiritual transcendence of mortality, the primary sense of the line, and more than merely a subversive reminder of mortal limitations, the predictable secondary sense, although it carries both these meanings. Going beyond a logical either/or, however, its simple, conclusive, simultaneity conveys transcendence both from within and despite the physical world. This is its (im)possibility. This is also its artificiality and absurdity, and its imaginatively palpable expressive achievement.[7]

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[6] Edgar Wind's tenth chapter, "Amor as a God of Death," offers a relevant gloss on the pun: *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Eng.: Penguin, 1967), pp. 152-70.

[7] Cf. Culler, p. 12: "we should ask whether in fact the language one speaks and writes is not always exposed to the contamination of arbitrary [i.e., Saussurean] signs by punning links—between the desire to write and to get it right, between the sound of music and sound argument; whether effects of motivation are not inseparable from—central to—the workings of language; and whether this does not trouble the framing gesture that seeks to separate" the inside "of the system from the outside

Before bidding "The good-morrow" good-bye I want briefly to wonder aloud both what besides love it is *finally* about and how finally to read it. For example, is it about language or punning or about philosophical realities, such as essence, potency, and act, or about an attitude, conventional aspiration, or poetic form, such as an *aubade*? Is the speaker of the poem in control of the final pun, as I am inclined to take him, or is he controlled and exposed by it? That is, does the savvy, irreverent speaker of the beginning turn into a self-deluding idealist at the end, or does he turn out to be a supremely well-rounded, but still witty, realist there, that is, a realist in *every* sense? I am not certain that an answer excluding any of these possibilities is credible in light of the poem itself. And they are surely not the only questions to be asked, insofar as I also wonder how the strange state realized at the end of "The good-morrow" compares to that at the beginning of "The Extasie" and to that in the more obviously related (and for present purposes conveniently shorter) "Sunne Rising," which is at once an *aubade*, or dawn-song, and a literalization of the *carpe diem* mode and to which I would now turn for further (im)possible punning.

"The Sunne Rising" is more openly fictive than "The good-morrow," and perhaps for this reason, even its (im)possible puns, while more numerous, are less startling. I want to engage the poem in the midst of its middle stanza, right after the speaker has declined to "wink" or simply to close his eyes to the physical world of the sun; instead, he would compete with it. "Look," he challenges the sun, and see that the world's riches really "lie here with me." The pun on *lie*—"recline" or "speak untruly"—is clear enough, but its conjunction with the word "here" may be of greater importance as the poem shifts from the invocation of a dominantly visual mode to an aural one. A Shakespearean critic like Bruce Smith might argue that such an aural mode is at once more purely

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of practice." It is my assumption, with significant differences, that such workings can also be planned and manipulated or just overheard or discovered and subsequently developed in poems.

verbal and more fully embodied, thus seeking to counter the privileging of the typographic, along with the visual.[8] But Donne is never so easy: this move from visual to aural is also what others would describe as a move from reality to rhetoric: variously the result of this move is therefore more real or less so, but either way, and this is the important point, it is *variously real.*

The latent and (im)possible pun on the word "here" in the phrase "lie here" is fully realized in the next two lines, which twice invoke it and end the stanza: "Aske for those Kings whom thou saw'st yesterday, / And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay." Not only does the contrast between seeing and hearing now come insistently into the open, but also in the phrase "All here," there ambiguously *lies*, in addition to an extravagantly simple assertion of inclusiveness, the irresistible intimation of mere "hearsay," an idea familiar in Donne's time.

The final and most outrageous stanza of the poem expands the claim "All here": "She'is all states, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is." Nothing besides exists, or otherwise, nothingness is come again. Of course there is a claim to physical existence in the compression of all worldly value into the lovers, as well as in the pun on *thing*—"no-thing"—whether this thing is woman herself, the male or female genitals, or matter in general. But the external world is specifically said to be "contracted" to and by the lovers, rather than compressed, and this pun activates the lawyerly sense of a formal agreement, whether oral, or by Donne's time, more likely written. In an implicit expansion of the legal metaphor in the contractual pun, the rest of the final stanza incorporates the sun into a geocentric claim: "Shine here to us, and thou art every where; / This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare." The verb "shine" goes beyond felt solar warmth in the previous line to mark the return, under contract, of a visual dimension. The imperative

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[8]Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

"Shine here" is oxymoronic, visual and aural at once, a final epitomizing claim to all-inclusiveness.

Although the term *incorporate*, with which I described the poem's designs on the sun, is explicitly my pun rather than Donne's, it captures the poem's attempt to bind a physical metaphor—*corpus*, the body—to a transcendence of physical, and more generally of all worldly, limitations. In transcending, Donne would again take the physical with him—have his cake and eat it, too, so to speak. Rather than naively mistaking fiction for reality, however, the poem actively and openly shapes reality to fiction and, more exactly, to the fiction of the *carpe diem* mode. Literally, *carpit*, the poem "seizes" the sun, source of daylight, thus co-opting a poetic convention into a *realized* fiction, in both the perceptual and expressive senses. Yet this fiction proclaims itself real and outrageously invites our assent to its contract, or proposition. Once again, as in "The good-morrow," our separating the poem's unified claims, indeed, its demands, into a merely self-deluding speaker and a single, readily defined reality underestimates and resists the radicalness of Donne's play with the paradoxical *life* of fiction.[9]

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[9]From a very different angle, Marcy North's discussion of Donne in her chapter on Coterie Anonymity could be taken to provide support for less, or for a less exclusive, emphasis on an individualized, dramatized speaker: *The Anonymous Renaissance: Cultures of Discretion in Tudor-Stuart England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 193-203, esp. pp. 200-01. For a strong version of the argument that supports the dominance of dramatized speakers in Donne's lyrics, see Tilottama Rajan, "'Nothing Sooner Broke': Donne's *Songs and Sonets* as Self-Consuming Artifact," *ELH* 49 (1982): 802-28, esp. pp. 810-15. For a powerful statement from the opposite side of the argument, see Judith Sherer Hertz, "'An Excellent Exercise of Wit that Speaks So Well of Ill,'" in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 3-14. By "Donne," meaning the voice of the poems, Hertz argues that "Donne is never there, that the urgent speaking voice we think we hear in the poems is a calculated illusion," that "Donne

What Wolfgang Iser has characterized as "the fictive" has some resemblance to Donne's play in these poems and affords a final, suggestive comment on their propositions. Like Donne's (im)possible puns, Iser's category of the fictive is not tied to "the old dichotomy of fiction and reality." The fictive "keeps in view what has been overstepped," but it is nonetheless "an act of boundary-crossing" that at once "disrupts and doubles the referential world."[10] In the simultaneity of Donne's (im)possible punning, as in the pastoral narratives that Iser privileges, the crossing of boundaries, disruption of the everyday, and doubling of reference actually *trans-figure* the world that we know, rather than merely reflecting, refusing, or rising above it.

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disappears into his own illusions" (pp. 3, 5). My own argument, which is more oriented to the play of language as such, would tend to see that of Hertz as still centered on the dramatized persona and therefore merely on its absence (or deconstruction) in the focal passages I have cited. The fact that I write in 2004 and Hertz in 1986 is not irrelevant here; her article remains important.

[10] *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. xiv-xv.