John Donne Journal
Vol. 37 (2018-2019)

"Pictures" of the Mind and the Tongue's "Translatõns": Donne's Conceits Reconsidered

Sean H. McDowell

Roger Kuin's and Anne Lake Prescott's decoupling of conceit from image in their reconsideration of Pierre de Ronsard's poems alerts us to the anachronism in some formulations of the metaphysical conceit from at least Helen Gardner's editions onwards.[1] In this fashion, their account is as enlightening as K. K. Ruthven's honest discussion of "far-fetched" and Katrin Ettenhuber's more recent explication of catachresis as battleground terms in discussions of metaphysical wit.[2] Kuin and Prescott succeed, I think, in "resor[ing]" the conceit to "its wider sense of a clever and original idea, a 'find' or *trouvaille* which brings a pleased smile to the poet's face as it comes to him, and which he hopes will, if not please, at least startle his readers into a greater tension of consciousness."[3] This restoration, in turn, "returns" the image "to its proper place as the vehicle for the conceit rather than the conceit itself." We suddenly see the conceit not

[1] See, for example, Gardner's introduction of *The Metaphysical Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. xxiii.
[2] K. K. Ruthven, *The Conceit* (London: Meheun & Co. Ltd., 1969), pp. 11-16; and Katrin Ettenhuber, "'Comparisons are Odious'? Revisiting the Metaphysical Conceit in Donne," *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 62.255 (June, 2011): 393-413.
[3] See "Imperfect Pearls from France: Ronsard's Conceits Meet Donne's" in the present volume, p. 40.

just as fodder for critical evaluation but as a means for pleasure in the writer's living practice.

What, then, of the image as vehicle in the phenomenon we call "conceits"? Some blurring of boundaries between idea and image, invention and metaphor, concept and *concetto* occurred all around Donne during the period in which he wrote. Donne seems to have taken great pleasure in this blurriness as he found those startling images that rendered ideas as part of his descriptions, arguments, and meditations. He was not alone in this. John Hoskyns begins his *Directions for Speech and Style* (circa 1599) by staging this blurriness in the first sentence: "The Conceipts of the minde are pictures of things and the Tongue is Interp[re]ter of those pictures."[4] Although his *Directions* center on prose, Hoskyns is one of, if not *the* best rhetoricians for studying Donne's poetry. He was a friend of Donne's and fellow participant in Donne's earliest coterie exchanges of manuscript circulation; he wrote his directions for an unnamed newcomer to the Inns of Court; and his descriptions and examples, more often than not, are straightforward in ways other manuals of the period are not. For Hoskyns, the "Conceipts of the minde" are implicitly ideas, but the poet in him also stipulates they have a visual dimension: they are "pictures of things." Meanwhile, what we twenty-first century scholars would call "poetic images" Hoskyns reminds us are merely words, interpretations of those pictures made by the "Tongue," itself a reminder that, for Hoskyns, writing creatively was still very much an auditory phenomenon and not an appeal to the eye alone. Whereas we might want to treat the poetic image with the substantiality of a painting (an implied metaphor itself), Hoskyns and his Inns of Court contemporaries defined metaphor merely as a manipulation of words: "A *Metaphore* or Translatõn is the friendly & neighbo[r]ly borrowing, of one word to expresse a thing w[th] more light & better note: though not soe directly & proplie as the naturall name of the thinge meant would signify; . . ."[5] A metaphor quite

[4] Louis Brown Osborn, *The Life, Letters, and Writings of John Hoskyns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), p. 116.

[5] Ibid., p. 121. I wonder whether Hoskyns's emphasis on words merely reflects, in a transhistorical way, a writer's unblinkered understanding of the nature of his artistic medium. In another century, E. M. Forster offered an analogously startling definition of fictional characters as nothing but "word-masses." "The novelist," he explains, "unlike many of his colleagues [in other

literally is a translation, a carrying across, of thought from poet to reader through the medium of words. Interestingly, and in keeping with Kuin's and Prescott's description of the pleasure of poetic invention, the ensuing two-ness of thought and translation is "pleasant because it enricheth o^{r} knowledge wth two things at once wth the truth and wth similitude."[6] Seeing image and signification simultaneously and marveling at the novelty of their connection creates delight in a perceptive reader. It also instructs, as signified and sign, the "truth" of a thing and its "similitude," illuminate each other.

Pictures, then, connect ideas and words, though the degree to which concept-pictures (the mind's "pictures of the things") and word-pictures (the "Tongue's" translations of these onto the page) coincide with each other might vary considerably, depending on the occasion. If we consider those word-pictures we call "conceits" in Donne's poetry, two distinguishing features strike me as fundamentally important. The first concerns extension. Some critics use "conceit" to describe single-line instances of metaphor—what I call "flashbulb metaphors," metaphors that flash quickly in a line and are left behind. Yet what most of us consider Donne's marquee conceits tend to be larger, meatier, longer than a line or two and thus more easily equated with the central idea of a poem, especially a short poem, because they occupy a greater percentage of its lines: bait in "The Bait," for example; usury in "Loves Usury"; legacies in "The Legacy"; siege in "Batter my heart"; maps in "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last Going into Germany"; music in "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse"; and of course, the compass in "A Valediction forbidding mourning." These are extended metaphors that typically involve multiple subsidiary similitudes or points of comparison. Technically, Hoskyns and his peers defined this usage of metaphor as "allegory," another term that, like conceit, has acquired in modern critical discourse associations not entirely consonant with its early modern usage: "allegory" invokes Spenser much more readily than Donne. Nevertheless, what Hoskyns says about

---

arts], makes up a number of word-masses roughly describing himself (roughly: niceties shall come later), gives them names and sex, assigns them plausible gestures, and causes them to speak by the use of inverted commas" (*Aspects of the Novel* [New York: Harcourt, 1927; rep. 1955], p. 44).

[6] Ibid., p. 123.

allegory pertains directly to Donne's conceits: an "*Allegory* is the continuall following of a *Metaphor*" and is "pportionable through the sentence, or through many sentences . . ."[7] As with single-word metaphors, it runs the risk of becoming "too bold, or too far fetcht," but it also can be "too base," which Hoskyns suggests may pose a greater danger. For this reason, he stresses the need for cleverness in choosing source materials for one's allegories:

> Therefore to delight gen^{er}ally take those Termes from ingenious & seu^{er}all pfessions from ingenious [Arts] to please the learned, & from seu^{er}all Arts to please the learned of all sorts, as from the Meteors, Planetts, & Beasts in naturall philosophie from the stars, spheres, & their mocõns in Astronomie, ffrom the better pte of husbandry, from the politique gou^{er}ment of Citties, from Navigacõn, from military pfession, from Phisick, but not out of the depth of these misteries but euer (unlesse yo^{r} purpose bee to disgrace) let the word be taken from a thinge of equall or greater dignity, as speaking of virtue, the skye of pfect virtue, euer clouded wth Sorrow, where he [Sidney] thought it vnfitt to stoope to any metaphore lower then heaven; yo^{w} may assure yo^{r} selfe of this observacõn & all y^{e} rest if yo^{w} but compare those places in yo^{r} booke noted wth this note & in truth it is y^{e} best flower growing most plentifully in all *Arcadia*.[8]

Does this account of desirable source materials sound familiar? Though referencing Sidney, whom he uses as a model for eloquence throughout the *Directions*, Hoskyns speaks as if he had Donne specifically in mind as well.

Technically, then, if we wish to call them what he likely would have, we should speak of Donne's marquee conceits as "allegories," or perhaps "inversia," the Latin equivalent of "allegoria" in the writings of Quintilian.[9] But for the sake of clarity here, I will continue using "conceit," so long as it is understood I mean extended metaphors, extension being the distinguishing characteristic.

---

[7] Ibid., p. 122.
[8] Ibid., p. 123.
[9] See *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), VIII.vi.44ff.

The second distinguishing feature to notice about Donne's conceits (his extended metaphors) is their frequent and necessary participation in larger processes of thought, feeling, and figuration. Donne's poems bristle with multiple instances of figurative language. His fecundity of images showcases his wit and the liveliness of his voice. One thought might trigger a simile, which blooms into a conceit but not without admitting additional flashbulb metaphors enriching other subsidiary thoughts that otherwise would emerge too prosaically. Thus, we almost never can speak fully of any one instance of figurative language in isolation. The play of words around it informs its unfolding and often enough affords glimpses into Donne's mind at work.

Consider, for example, Donne's early verse letter to Thomas Woodward, beginning "Pregnant againe with th'old twinnes Hope and Fear." This poem is also known by the Variorum siglum *TWPreg*. The situation informing the poem, in brief, is this: Donne apparently had not heard from his friend Woodward in some time and then receives a letter from him. The verse letter describes the before and after of this letter's arrival in largely figurative terms. These enliven it in virtually every line. Sonnet-like in appearance (fourteen pentameter lines), the poem counters sonnet expectations with three rhyming triplets in lieu of one octet or three quatrains and concludes with a quintet rhyming ddeff in lieu of a sestet.[10] This strange mash-up of the English and Italian sonnet forms might be Donne's canny way of signaling something is, or was, off about his circumstances, a suspicion endorsed by the first line. Donne begins with a pregnancy metaphor intended to convey the size and strain of his emotions as he awaited news of his friend:

> Pregnant againe with th'old twinnes Hope and Fear
> Oft have I askd for thee, both how and where
> Thou wert, and what my hopes of letters were, (ll. 1-3)

Here, as he does so often, Donne immediately and clearly establishes his situation so that he can launch from it. Yet while the flashbulb pregnancy metaphor memorably communicates the weight of his two

[10] Donne uses this same novel sonnet form in "At once from hence my lines and I depart" (*TWHence*), one of the other verse letters to Woodward.

emotions, it cannot do much more than this. Much of the story of this moment of friendship remains untold, and Donne's use of the past tense implies more to come.

So the poet develops a different metaphorical comparison: of himself as beggar. While no one can say for certain, I think the detail of repeatedly asking for news triggered this next comparison in Donne's imagination: as he asked for news, so a beggar asks for coins. Regardless, this new comparison begins formally as a simile in the second tercet before swelling into a full-blown conceit by the end of the third:

> As in our streets sly beggers narowly
> Marke motions of the givers hand and ey,
> And evermore conceive some hope therby.
> And now thyne alms is given, thy letter's red,
> The body risen againe, the which was ded,
> And thy pour starveling bountifully fed. (ll. 4-9)

The frequent asking becomes a beggar's pleading in the second stanza, and Donne completes this mini portrait with an image of the beggar's acute scrutiny of the "givers hand and ey." In the process, he implicitly reframes the depiction of hope: no longer a hefty twin fetus in the pregnant poet, hope is now the desired outcome of conception through staring. This similitude extends into a conceit through the implicit subsidiary metaphorical comparisons attached to it. Donne equals beggar, Woodward equals alms giver, the letter equals alms. The first comparison conjures the others and shapes the narrative of receiving the letter. The beggar simile-turned-conceit allows Donne to describe the effect of receiving and reading Woodward's letter as much-needed alms. But even this comparison does not suffice. A beggar receiving coins or food cannot quite capture fully enough the energizing effect of receiving the letter. So for a moment, Donne playfully, hyperbolically trots in a catachresis: Woodward's words have raised his body from the dead. The need for a third "-ed" rhyme in this tercet may well have suggested this line as much as its humor (Woodward suddenly becomes a Christ figure). But it is worth noticing that this metaphor is unrelated to the beggar conceit. Christ raised three men from the dead in the biblical account of his ministry, none of whom were beggars. This metaphor, then, merely serves to describe a feeling the rest of the conceit fails to convey quite fully enough.

Donne's conceits often contain metaphors unrelated to the conceits in which they appear. Furthermore, he was not alone in interspersing metaphors in this fashion. Shakespeare had a particular fondness for doing so. In sonnet 74, for instance, his metaphorical comparison of the speaker's agedness to a tree in late autumn includes the metaphor of denuded branches as the arches of a ruined church:

> That time of year thou mayst in me behold
> When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
> Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
> Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang. (ll. 1-4)[11]

That flashbulb metaphor—"bare ruined choirs"—turns a vehicle image within a larger conceit ("those boughs which shake against the cold") into the tenor of a new metaphor. Such metaphors-within-metaphors maintain the liveliness of the expression. With such unexpected turns, readers can never be entirely sure where the poet's mind will go next. This, one might say, is the beauty of the flashbulb metaphor.

His body raised, Donne declares his "starveling" self "bountifully fed." That adjective cues the final image—and movement—of this short verse letter:

> After this banquet my soule doth say Grace.
> And praise thee for'it, and zealously embrace
> Thy love, though I thinke thy love in this case
> To be a gluttons, which say midst their meate
> They love that best of which they most do eate. (ll. 10-14)

Reading the letter, a "banquet" for his "soule," transforms the beggar into a glutton, who has fallen in love with the addictive "meate," the letter. None of the images is isolated as a set pieces in this poem. All participate in a process of metaphor- and conceit-making that proceeds largely by association. The comparisons enliven the account as narrative as well as work to convey in more concrete terms the emotions involved in Donne's experience of receiving the letter.

---

[11] William Shakespeare, *All the Sonnets of Shakespeare*, ed. Paul Edmundson and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

When we study the role of individual conceits within the unfolding of multiple lyrics, we soon discover that Donne tends to develop them in primarily two ways. In some poems, a conceit aligns with, even enacts the main idea of a poem. This is conceit in the most obvious modern sense of a metaphor encapsulating an idea. "The Relique," for example, suggests its central conceit—the lovers as saints in a religion of love—right from the start. The title of the poem advertises it synecdochically. Though typically we must not lean too heavily on the titles of Donne's poems, all the surviving manuscripts of "The Relique" but one (B13) carry this heading. It thus appears authorial. The "bracelet of bright hair" image cements the conceit in the account of the speaker's exhumation at some indeterminate future. This account trots in all the subsidiary comparisons within the conceit (the lovers as saints, the heretical land of mis-devotion, the "miracle" of sexual abstinence, etc.). Similarly, and in keeping with the theme of imagined death, this time the death of temporary absence, Donne frames the development of "The Legacie," now dubbed "Elegie" in the Variorum, through its central conceit as well.[12] Only this time, working out the terms within the conceit becomes a problem the poem works to solve. If leaving his lover is a death—"When I dyed last, (and deare I dye / As often as from thee I goe)," (ll. 1-2)—what kind of bequest would such a death warrant? In the opening lines, he seems to have no idea: "I can remember yet that I / Something did say, and something did bestowe." Then he spends the rest of the poem determining just what this second "something" was, that strange heart he discovers in the final movement. The fun of such a poem as "The Legacie" comes in watching how the conceit plays out and relishing the surprising, sometimes humorous details emerging along the way. These details are why seeing Donne's conceits as extended metaphors makes the most sense as a distinction.

Donne likes to begin poems with their central framing conceits. Sometimes he emphasizes first the vehicle of the conceit before developing it, as in the case of "The Flea": "Marke but this Flea, and

[12] Donne likely left this poem untitled. The heading "The Legacie" appears only in WN1 and in all the seventeenth-century print editions, from which it passed to modern editions. Nine other mss. (B7, C4, CT1, DT1, H4, SA, SN4, TT1, and TT2) call it simply "Elegie," though some of these likely passed this title to each other. The Variorum uses DT1 as its copytext, hence "Elegie" as the new title.

marke in this, / How little that which thou deniest me is" (ll. 1-2).[13] We see the flea first and then its wild, inventive significations. Sometimes Donne jumps right to the vehicle of the metaphor, as in "Loves Usury" ("For everye hower that thou wilt spare mee nowe, / I will allowe / Vsurious God of love, twentye to thee" ll. 1-3) or in "Loues Dyett" ("To what a cumbersome vnwieldines / And burdenous Corpulence my loue had growen," ll. 1-2). In other cases, a conceit clearly foregrounds the central conception and structure of a poem, but the poet does not reference it quite so obviously or immediately. In "The Canonization," for example, the canny reader might discern in its opening stanza a parallel between Donne's brash response to a presumably well-intentioned friend and a would-be saint's response to the devil's advocate in a Catholic-inspired canonization processus. But more than a few readers appeared to miss this parallel until it was noted in the twentieth century.[14] Nevertheless, procedurally, "The Canonization" moves as quickly into the terms of its framing conceit as "Loues Dyett." The Songs and Sonets alone cannot lay claim to this habit. Donne launches several of the elegies in this same fashion—"Elegy 7: Loves War," for instance:

> Till I haue peace with thee, warr other Men;
> And when I haue peace, can I leaue thee then?
> All other warrs are scrupulous; Only thou
> O fayr free Citty, must thy selfe allow
> To any one; . . . (ll. 1-5)

The conceit love-as-war drives the rest of the poem as Donne works out the subsidiary comparisons, connections, and nuances it suggests as well as comments on military wars elsewhere. It opens a field of possibilities that the poem then can explore. Moreover, the siege conceit of the Holy Sonnet "Batter My Heart" does the same thing, this time battering our eyes and ears in its opening lines. The novelty of their extended metaphors, which also happen to encapsulate main ideas, makes these front-loaded poems memorable.

---

[13] I quote from the B40 version here, which the Variorum prints as the second lost original holograph.

[14] See John A. Clair, "Donne's 'The Canonization," *PLMA* 80 (1965): 300-302.

Yet while framing poems according to conceits is his most obvious way of creating them, Donne also finds in conceit-making a necessary tool for discovery as a poem unfolds. Sometimes Donne fashions conceits within a larger process of figuration, as we have seen in *TWPreg*. There, flashbulb metaphor segues into conceit as the poet works to figure comparisons capable of playfully conveying his emotions and reactions to Woodward's letter. Donne's beggar conceit is an event in the poem but not necessarily the main one. His second approach to conceits, then, illustrates the poet thinking and feeling aloud on the page. In several poems, he seems to be zeroing in on or discovering what he wants to say as he says it. In *TWPreg*, the poet-as-beggar conceit prepares the way for the concluding conceit of feasting and the gluttonous appetite for more letters. It is a stop along the way, not the entirety of the poem or even the final destination. The same cannot be said of "The Flea," "The Canonization," or "Loues Dyett."

Of course, in some memorable instances, Donne does fashion conceits as the culmination of a discovery process. An interesting example is "The Broken Harte," strange as that may seem. While the title of this poem sets the theme, nothing quite prepares the first-time reader for how the ensuing verses enact it. This poem additionally is one of Donne's best examples of revivifying a dead metaphor, the heart as broken. But while the title, which so obviously points to the conclusion, might seem to be another example of the poet framing his conceit from the start, that title likely was not Donne's. "The Broken Harte" is the heading in two mss. (O34 and WN1) and all the seventeenth-century editions. Eleven other mss. simply call it "Song," and five call it "Elegie," to cite the most common variants. The poem as a whole enacts a process of discovering a conceit new and complicated enough to capture more nuances of the feeling of unrequited love than the idea of brokenness would accomplish in the hands of someone less imaginative.

As he does elsewhere, Donne begins *not* with his conceit but with a list of short, extreme analogies meant to convey the vehement discomfort of being in what he assumes must be unrequited love:

> He is stark mad, who ever saies,
> That hee hath been in loue an hower
> Yet not that loue, so soone decaies,

> But that it can ten in lesse space deuoure.
> Who will beleeue mee if I sweare,
> That I haue had the Plague a yeare
> Whoe would not laugh att mee, if I should saie,
> I sawe a flash of powder burne a daie? (ll. 1-8)

Donne almost never seems to offer just one example when speaking of strong, even violent emotions; rather, they seem to come in waves, or at least, in threes. Notice, though, that none of these forecast the fragile heart we soon encounter. They do, however, foreshadow the violence of the blow that shatters this heart. The heart as a glass trinket, a curiously precise concretization of the broken heart image, must be discovered, and that process is less straightforward than its sometime title suggests.

This process of discovery begins with the speaker's objectification of his heart in terms much less precise than those he will imagine. "Ah what a trifle is a hartt, / If once into loues hands it comme?" he exclaims (ll. 9-10). What kind of trifle, he does not say. Nor does he elaborate on the heart's objectification in the lines immediately following. Instead, he takes pains to expound on the griefs love inflicts on the hapless or the unwitting. Love, he says, "swallowes vs, And neuer chawes / By him as by chaine=Shott whole rankes doe die / Hee is the Tiran Pike, our harts the frie" (ll. 14-16). The verb "swallowes" returns us to "deuoure" in the first stanza, as does the image of "chaine=Shott," which connects to the burning flash of powder. The image of the "Tiran Pike" gobbling hearts as "frie," however, hearkens rather to the piscine imagery of "The Bait." Furthermore, the heart-as-fry metaphor steps away from the vague objectification of the heart as a trifle with which the stanza began. For, a presumably living fry is a different sort of object than the inanimate "trifle" mentioned a few lines earlier. So far in the poem, Donne has concentrated his energies on the search for a precise figurative description of the shock of falling in love. He has tried five images to this point: two comparisons centered on consumption; two involving military paraphernalia; and one, illness. All seem to grasp threads of what this manifestation of unrequited love feels like, yet none holds the whole cloth.

It is not until Donne grounds his efforts in an account of his first meeting with his would-be lover that he can arrive at a more affectively accurate figurative description of this shock of falling in love. His account forces him to be more precise about what kind of object his

heart has become in the face of love—and it also opens an (unlooked for) opportunity for describing the consequences of this love, which becomes Donne's way to end the poem with a firm sense of closure. He asks himself what became of his heart when he first saw his mistress. His answer:

> I brought a hart into the roome,
> But from the roome I caried none with mee:
> If it had gone to thee, I knowe
> Myne would haue taught thy harte to show
> More pittye vnto mee. But loue alasse
> At one first blowe did shiuer it as glas (ll. 19-24)

The sixth image turns out to be the charm: that wonderful verb "shiuer" beautifully captures in fresh, vivid terms the sudden, localized feeling of falling hard for someone. Donne succeeds in "making" the dead metaphor "new," as Ezra Pound would say. The way to "shiuer" required Donne first to define the composition of the heart-as-trifle more precisely as glass. Looking back from line twenty-four to line one, we see the gradual unfolding of ideas through images rather than the presentation of an image as a conceit from the start.

The next and final movement of the poem proceeds from an implicit question precipitated by the shivering of the speaker's glass heart: If this heart was shattered at a blow, what happened to all the pieces? As he ponders, he corrects an earlier observation. It is not true that he "caried" no heart with him from the room after that first encounter, for

> nothing canne to nothing fall
> Nor any place bee empty quite,
> Therefore I think my Brest hath all
> Those peeces still, though they bee not vnite.
> And now as broken glasses shewe
> A hvndred lesser faces soe
> My raggs of Hart can like, wish, and adore,
> But after one such loue, can loue no more. (ll. 25-32)

His formerly whole heart, even if only a trinket made of glass, still had the reflective benefits of its wholeness. Shivered now, it acts as a broken mirror, reflecting faces in a disjointed, fragmentary fashion. This image

explains why he foresees that any subsequent infatuation will lack the wholeness and intensity of his love for the shatterer. It is a little surprising Donne did not take advantage of the sharpness and insidiousness of glass splinters to figure the pain of being unrequited love. Nevertheless, the broken mirror image is a powerful way to describe the distraction wrought by this would-be love as well as, perhaps, implicitly plead for that love to take notice of her hapless victim. A witty poem in its own right, "The Broken Hart" also exemplifies Donne's use of conceit as the culmination of a process, here a process of refinement and discovery.

Like "The Broken Hart," "The Sun Rising" ("*Ad Solem*" in the Variorum) similarly makes new conventional poetic materials, this time not a dead metaphor but the received signification of sunrise within the aubade tradition. Furthermore, this poem also discovers a conceit in its final movement. At pains to distinguish the isolated, private life he shares with his lover from the social world of king and court, Donne settles into the cosmological conceit that reconfigures conventional understandings of valuation, but he does not posit this conceit initially. In the first stanza, he counters the traditional aubade convention that sunrise signals an end to the night of lovemaking and dismisses the busy world of employment and preferment seeking. None of this—yet—has anything to do with cosmology *per se*, but he starts inching toward it with his thinking about time. He and his lover will stay in bed because "Loue, all alike, noe Season knows, nor Clyme. / Nor houres, Dayes, Months, which are the raggs of Time" (ll. 9-10), which he considers an enduring truth about their soulful love. But this temporal re-evaluation is not comprehensive enough. So in the second stanza, after dissing the sun and dropping a line of collateral flattery of his lover's beauty ("I wold not loose her sight so long"), he extends his re-evaluation of priorities to spatial terms by substituting the microcosm of their bed for the macrocosm of all the kingdoms of the world: "Aske for those Kings, whom thou sawest yesterday / And thou shalt heare, All here in One bed lay" (ll. 19-20). Clearly taken with this idea, he expounds upon it in the last stanza:

> Thou Sunne art halfe as happy as wee
> In that the worldes contracted thus
> Thyne Age askes Ease, and since they duetyes bee

> To warme the worlde, that's done in warming vs.
> Shine here to Vs, and thou art euery where,
> This Bed thy Center ys, these walls thy Spheare. (ll. 25-30)

His line of thinking becomes an argument for the sun to dilate its attention to all that matters in this newly configured cosmos: their bed. What started as a rejection of an aubade convention, and a defense of lovers' time against implied social and vocational obligations, becomes a much more encompassing definition of the primacy of soulful love through Donne's Aristotelian/Ptolemaic conceit. This conceit, in turn, allows the poet to convey an energia of empowered exuberance capable of capturing the moment. It also offers the perfect note on which to end.

Then, of course, there is arguably the most famous of Donne's metaphysical conceits, the compass image at the end of "A Valediction forbidding mourning." This one is so famous that it has leapt off the page and become the logo of the John Donne Society (Fig. 1). Yet it too emerges spontaneously as part of an effort to think through and describe a feeling in terms as precise as possible. The need to comfort his lover in the face of their parting—an affective emergency—throws Donne's conceit-making into overdrive. The poet starts with one of his most reliable gambits—the "religion of love" conceit. Yet figuring himself analogously as a dying man of virtue and any onlookers at the place of departure as "Laity" proves ineffective at quelling the "teare-flouds" and "sigh-tempests" of his lover. So, he starts again, this time on a geological tact that quickly turns cosmological. Earthquakes are scary enough up close but prove insignificant against the larger motions of planets in cosmic spheres. This line of thinking handily positions him to offer the best description in his entire poetic corpus of the distinction between lustful, genital love and the soulful love he celebrates so memorably:

> Dull sublunarie Louers, loue
> (Whose soule is sence) cannot admit
> Absence, because it doth remoue
> Those things which elemented it,
> But wee by a loue soe much refin'de
> That our selues knowe not what it is
> Inter-assured of the minde

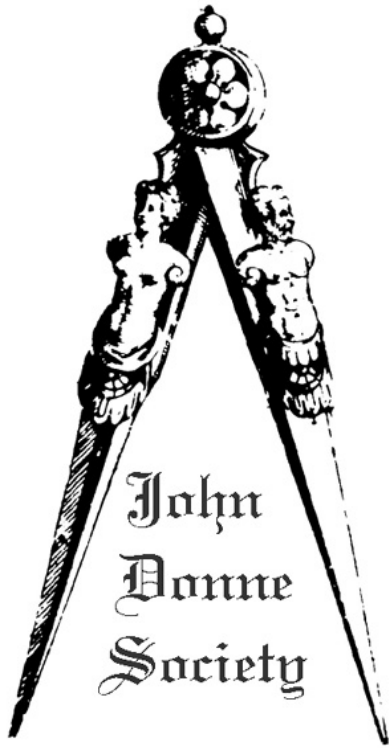

Fig. 1.

Careles eies, lipps, and hands to misse (ll. 13-20)

How then to define the mystery of their love if "our selues knowe not what it is"? Perhaps the verb "elemented" triggered a possible solution—gold: the hammering of separation attenuates their love like "gold to aiery thinnesse beate" (l. 24) but cannot break it. Even as he posits this similitude, however, he seems to realize its insufficiency in providing comfort. Absence cannot help but accentuate the individuality of the two lovers, their dire, inescapable separateness when apart. Can an object alone suffice or is it better to lean into verb? Donne returns to cosmology, here stressing not spheres but circles, and more particularly the action of drawing them. The overarching motion of what the poet hopes his travels will entail—a departure and return—

suggests the compass, another two-in-one image, used to draw the most perfect shape of all. Their love will allow them to draw it together, and this thought *can* console someone overcome with sadness because it gives her a role as well as makes a promise. In spite of his oblique running, he tells her, "Thy firmness makes my circle Iust / And makes mee end, where I begun" (ll. 35-36). This is the best he or likely anyone could do under the circumstances. We sometimes act as if the compass conceit were a foregone conclusion all along, but the journey of the entire valediction suggests otherwise. Donne arrives at it out of necessity through a process he follows in poem after poem.

Both of Donne's usual ways of crafting conceits—as the vehicle for the central idea of a poem, presumably imagined at the start, and as means of discovering an insight through a meditative process fully alive to the senses—yield a single truth: conceits, for Donne, are not ornamental but instrumental. They are outcomes of intense consideration in the real-time of poetic unfolding. They enable the poet to think imaginatively and feelingly. They allow him to concretize the abstract in startling, unforgettable ways that dazzle us and inspire discussion even four centuries later.

Seattle University