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Just Circles: Proportion and the Metaphysical Conceit

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In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle tells us what the best kind of metaphor is: "Of *Metaphors* the most *gracefull* is that which is drawne from *Proportion*."[1] In his original Greek, Aristotle's word for proportion is *analogian*—analogy—a word so familiar in English that it is often left untranslated. But the force of the Greek *analogos*—well-proportioned, appropriate, apt, corresponding—goes beyond the "comparison" that analogy has come to mean in English. For Aristotle, a metaphor is not only an identification of similitude but also a relationship, a geometric responsiveness between sign and signified. In the highly spacialized logic of classical Greece, Aristotle insistently frames the proportional relationship of metaphor in terms of proximity: the best signs cannot be "far-fetched", for "we must make use of metaphors and epithets that fit together. This will come from analogy [proportion]".[2] But neither can they be too close, for "metaphors should be drawn from things that belong to the object but are not obvious". Metaphors must at once "fit

[1] Given here in Thomas Hobbes' translation, *The Art of Rhetoric* (London: Thomas Cotes for Andrew Crook, 1637), p. 171. The original Greek is "Τῶν δὲ μεταφορῶν τεττάρων οὐσῶν εὐδοκιμοῦσι μάλιστα αἱ κατ᾽ ἀναλογίαν" [of the four metaphors which exist, the most esteemed are those drawn from proportion], which in John Henry Freese's 1926 Loeb translation is rendered "Of the four kinds of metaphor the most popular are those based on analogy"), Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, Loeb Classical Library (LCL) 193, trans. J. H. Freese, rev. Gisela Striker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 1411a.

[2] *Art of Rhetoric*, 1405a.

together" and "grasp the similarity in things that are far apart"—they must bring sign and signified into proportion with one another—so that the reader might say "Yes indeed, but I missed it."[3]

The metaphysical conceit, harnessing the joys of delayed recognition and unexpected similitudes, would seem to fit Aristotle's definition precisely. However, following Samuel Johnson's dismissal of the metaphysical conceit as a form in which "The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together",[4] the conceit has tended instead to be treated as an exercise in *dis*proportion. As in Horace's lines from *Ars Poetica* (and St Paul's invocation of them in 2 Corinthians 6:14) which Johnson draws on, when disparate things are "unequally yoked"—whether syllables of verse as in Horace, partners as in St Paul, or ideas as in Johnson—then like disproportionately-sized oxen, they cannot plough on ahead.[5] For Johnson, the metaphysical poets pursued "a kind of *discordia Concors*; a combination of dissimilar images".[6] Faced with these discordant resemblances, Johnson warns, the reader does not exclaim "Yes indeed, but I missed it" along with Aristotle—instead, "the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found."[7]

In the centuries since, critics have tended to follow Johnson's reading of the conceit as inherently disproportionate. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics such as William Hazlitt, George Saintsbury, and Helen Gardner regularly emphasised the disproportionate nature of the metaphysical conceit through pronouncements of extravagance and far-fetchedness —Hazlitt in particular described metaphysical poetry as "intricate, far-fetched, and improbable", their comparisons "as odious

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[3] *Ibid.*, 1412a.

[4] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the English Poets*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), I: 200.

[5] Horace, "versibus impariter iunctis", *Ars Poetica*, l. 75, *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry,* LCL 194, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926); *2* Corinthians 6:14, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers", *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[6] Johnson, I: 200.

[7] Ibid.

as they are unjust."[8] Most influentially, T.S. Eliot described the conceit in terms of stretched proportions, as "the elaboration . . . of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it."[9] In recent years, critics like Katrin Ettenhuber have worked to excavate early modern conceptions of comparison from under comments like Johnson and Hazlitt's; but for Ettenhuber, too, extravagance (in the form of catechresis) is fundamental to how the conceit works.[10] Similarly, Peter L. Rudnytsky has suggested that Donne stretches similitude so far as to snap any real conjunction between sign and signified.[11] In previous work, I have also thought of the conceit as seeking recondite links of similitude which allow "language to stretch out in all directions".[12]

Yet while the conceit certainly plays with stretching proportions—with the farfetched, the extravagant, the heterogeneous links that might be yoked together—the conceit does not aim to create odious or unjust comparisons. The conceit is not surrealist, and most readers *can* say along with Aristotle, "Yes indeed, but I missed it." For its practitioners, Donne in particular, the metaphysical conceit was not a way to create false relationships; rather, it allowed poets and readers to work out the proportions of relationships and connections which resist our understanding. What is the proportionate relationship between body and soul, earth and heaven, life and death, human and God? While neither Donne nor other poets (Herbert, Marvell, Cowley, Crashaw, Vaughan) generally termed "metaphysical" described their work in that

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[8] William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Comic Writers* (Lecture III: On Cowley, Butler, Suckling, Etheredge, &c.), in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1930–1934), VI: 49, 58; George Saintsbury, *The History of Elizabethan Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1887), p. 369; Helen Gardner, *The Metaphysical Poets*, 2nd edn. (London: Penguin, 1967), p. xxiii.

[9] T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *The Times Literary Supplement* (20 October 1921), reprinted in *Selected Essays: 1917–1932* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), pp. 267–77, p. 268.

[10] Katrin Ettenhuber, "'Comparisons are Odious'?: Revisiting the Metaphysical Conceit in Donne," *Review of English Studies* 62 (2011): 393-41.

[11] Peter L. Rudnytsky, "'The Sight of God': Donne's Poetics of Transcendence," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 24.2 (1982): 185-207.

[12] Alison Knight, *The Dark Bible: Cultures of Interpretation in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 252.

way, critics since Dryden have been quite right to note their pursuit of (in the words of Gardner), "the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses."[13] The metaphysical (and the poets we describe as metaphysical) seeks, as reflected in the Greek *meta* ("after" or "beyond"), to harness through the physical those things beyond the physical, the world of ideals, abstract qualities, and the very essence of being itself. *Beyond* the physical world, but not separate from: the Greek *meta* also means "with" or "alongside," and for poets like Donne, not only were higher aspects of being—what it is to be in love, to have a soul, to reach for heaven—best explored *through* the physical world, the nature of the physical world's connection to them was the entire point. What is "[t]hat subtile knott which makes vs man"?[14] What brings divine and earthly into true and meaningful proximity? And as Donne puts it in a sermon preached at Whitehall (likely on 13 February 1623/4), how can we analogise from this world to the next when "*Finite* and *Infinite* have no proportion to one another"?[15] The metaphysical conceit, far from yoking together skewed and frivolous comparisons, aims to set disproportionate (or perhaps, unproportionable) things in proportion—to establish a sense of scale between the physical world and that which is beyond it.

The classical rhetoricians which most influenced early modern literary thought (most notably Aristotle, as we have seen, and Cicero and Quintilian) consistently framed literary *decorum* as finding proportionate metaphors.[16] Cicero declares in *De Oratore* that "far-fetched" figurative language gives "very great pleasure", as long as one

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[13] *Metaphysical Poets*, p. xxx.

[14] *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 4.3, gen. ed. Jeffrey s. Johnson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

[15] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 7: 357. While Potter and Simpson give a likely date for the sermon of 11 February 1626/7, the *Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, gen. ed. Peter McCullough, provides a date of 13 February 1623/4, placing it in vol. 2, *Sermons Preached at the Jacobean Courts, 1619-1625*, ed. Hugh Adlington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

[16] For a more thorough overview, see Quentin Skinner, "The Uses of Imagery", in *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 181-211.

avoids "going astray" into comparisons that are "too far-fetched".[17] Similarly, Quintilian explains in *Institutio oratoria* that "The more remote the source of the Simile, the more novelty it produces", whilst also warning that "unreal and far-fetched" comparisons become merely ridiculous.[18] This emphasis on decorum as a negotiated proximity responds again to the spatial logic of classical thought; while, as Lakoff and Johnson have outlined, physical proximity is one of the most fundamental modes of metaphoric cognition across a range of cultures (similar things are often "close", dissimilar things "far apart"),[19] in ancient Greece and its many cultural inheritors, similar ideas are also "parallel", unreasonable ideas "obtuse", unexpected ideas "oblique", insightful ideas "acute". Metaphor is itself metaphorised in proximate or proportional terms in classical Greek, with *metapherō* meaning to carry across, and analogy, as we have seen, meaning well-proportioned and fitting together. The most famous late antique example is, of course, the parables of Christ; in the Greek New Testament, Christ's analogies are *parabolas*—literally, throws alongside. The term *parabolē* is also used by classical rhetoricians like Aristotle, Isocrates, and Plato to mean a "comparison", something thrown outwards and drawn back alongside, moving again in a spatial negotiation between familiarity and unfamiliarity.[20]

Classical emphasis on proportion was by no means limited to literary style—nor, indeed, to other aesthetic forms like visual art and architecture. The philosophic linkage between the good, the beautiful, and the proportionate underlies Greek thought writ large; as summarised by Plato in the *Timaeus*, "All that is good is fair, and the fair

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[17] Cicero, *De Oratore,* III.XL.160-XLI.163, *On the Orator: Book 3. On Fate. Stoic Paradoxes. Divisions of Oratory,* LCL 349, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942).

[18] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria,* 8.3.75–8.5.20-22, *The Orator's Education*, vol. 3, *Books 6-8*, LCL 126, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[19] See in particular George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live B*y (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[20] See, for example, Plato, *Philebus*, 33b; Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, 1393b3; Isocrates, *Panathenaicus*, 227.

is not void of due measure".[21] Proportion underpinned classical conceptions of the body (as, for example, in the Vitruvian man, whose proportions express mathematical harmonies), time (in the "right time" or "due measure" of *kairos*),[22] and space—geometry in particular. As the study of proportion itself, geometry was framed as the ultimate linkage between abstract truth and perceptible reality; just as no physical circle is perfectly circular, perfect circularity nevertheless can be conceived and measured. In this way, the study of proportion was also the study of the analogical relationship between heaven and earth; as John Dee put it in his preface to Euclid's *Elements*, the study of proportion is like a fishing line connecting heaven and earth, "liftyng the hart aboue the heauens, by inuisible lines".[23] It stands

> betwene thinges supernaturall and naturall . . . not so absolute and excellent, as thinges supernatural: Nor yet so base and grosse, as things naturall: . . . thinges immateriall: and neuerthelesse, by materiall things hable somewhat to be signified.[24]

Drawing on this classical inheritance, early modern discussion of proportion and its capacity to analogically reflect divine order on earth underlies a wide range of aesthetic and philosophical fields, from music to visual art, garden design, or the court masque. This emphasis is reflected in early modern rhetorical manuals, in which proportion is praised on the level of both form (metrical, stanzaic, rhyme) and content, with (true to classical models) considerable attention to "apt", "meet", or "just" figurative language.[25] Henry Peacham, for example, describes the power of "Apt Metaphors", which

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[21] Plato, *Timaeus*, 87c, *Timaeus. Critias. Cleitophon. Menexenus. Epistles*, LCL 234, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

[22] See Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin, eds., *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

[23] John Dee, preface to *The Elements of Geometrie of the Most Auncient Philosopher Euclide of Megara* (London: John Daye, 1570), sig. ☛4r-A4v, sig. a2v.

[24] *Ibid*., sig. ☛4v.

[25] Although, as Peter Mack has noted, English rhetorical manuals were not nearly as widely circulated or used as Latin rhetorical textbooks, they do provide a window on the saturation of classical ideas of proportion into early

> by the aptnesse of their proportion, and nearenesse of affinitie, they worke in the hearer many effects, they obtaine allowance of his iudgement, they moue his affections, and minister a pleasure to his wit. . . . they are not onely as pleasant colours of all kinds, but also as readie pensils pliable to line out and shadow any maner of proportion in nature.[26]

For Thomas Wilson, this proportion is described as "order", akin to the fixed measures of craftsmen:

> By an order we deuise, we learne, and frame our dooynges to good purpose. By an order the Carpenter hath his Squyre, his Rule, and his Plummet. The Tailour his mette Parde, & his measure: The Mason his Former, and his Plaine, and euery one accordyng to his callyng frameth thynges thereafter. For though matter be had, and that in greate plentie: yet al is to no purpose, if an order be not vsed.[27]

Framing a composition along principles of order is thus "a certaine bestowyng of thynges, and an apte declaryng, what is meete for euery parte".[28] George Puttenham devotes one of the three books of *The Arte of English Poesie* to proportion ("Of Proportion Poetical"); he explains that "all things stand by proportion . . . without it nothing could stand to be good or beautiful. . . . God made the world by number, measure and weight".[29] Throughout the book, he emphasises that "the chief prayse and cunning of our Poet is in the discreet vsing of his figures, as the skilfull painters is in the good conueyance of his coulours and

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modern thought. See Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), p. 76.

[26] Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London: R. F. for H. Jackson, 1593), pp. 13-14.

[27] Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetoric* (London: Richard Grafton, 1553), fol. 83v

[28] *Ibid*., fol. 84r.

[29] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London: Richard Field, 1589), p. 53.

shadowing traits of his pensill, with a delectable varietie, by all measure and just proportion".[30]

This confidence in proportion as a reflection of divine order expressed in rhetorical manuals—and by many poets, such as Philip Sidney, who explains in his *Defense of Poesy* that the poet "cometh to you with words set in delightful proportion"[31]—could be more elusive for Donne, but it is not something his poetry works to overthrow or disregard. Certainly, his poetry does not tend to aim towards *reflecting* classical and divine proportions, with balanced, Augustan poise, of the sort Dr Johnson preferred. Proportion is not something *presumed* in Donne's verse; rather, it is something for which Donne *searches* insistently in his conceits. In the consummate example of the conceit, the compass analogy of "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning", we see that search playing out in terms of the spiritual connection that persists between lovers when their bodies are apart. The speaker reassures the lover who remains home that, in her firmness and steadfast love, she is like the fixed foot of a mathematical compass, maintaining the proportions of their relationship and ensuring that the roaming lover will return to exactly the same (emotional) place. As I have noted elsewhere, Donne is not cryptic about the nature of the similitude between compasses and lovers; the poem clearly spells out their similarities ("As stiff twin-compasses are", "Such wilt thou bee to mee", ll. 26, 33).[32] As several critics have noted, the poem is motivated by an overarching logic of "proof by analogy"[33]; it thinks through the problems of parting and the relationships between bodies and souls by finding points of reference and comparison—the passing of a virtuous man,

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[30] *Ibid.*, p. 115.

[31] Philip Sidney, *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), p. 92.

[32] *Variorum*, vol. 4.2.

[33] Gardner, *Metaphysical Poets,* p. xxvi; see also Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947); Clay Hunt, *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit: An Analytical and Comparative Study of the Poetry of John Donne* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1951); and Graham Parry, "John Donne: Patronage, Friendship, and Love", in *Seventeenth-Century Poetry: The Social Context* (London: Hutchinson, 1985), pp. 42-73, amongst others.

earthquakes, gold leaf, compasses. The poem seeks to ensure the endurance of essentials despite changed proportions—"gold to aiery thinnesse beate" (l. 24) can cover a much wider area, but it is still gold; lovers can remain close when far apart. But equally, the poem and its conceits explore the functioning of analogy itself. How can ideas be transformed into other guises and remain the same? We might think of the two feet of the "twin-compasses" as the tenor and vehicle of metaphor, able to stretch their relationship, but also keep rationally connected. In order for a compass to function (that is, to draw a proportionate or "just" circle), it must have the solidity of the fixed foot maintaining a consistent centre, but it must also have a hinge (a yoke, if you will) which can be both moved and stabilised. In this way, the roving foot can stretch far away from the fixed foot, but still maintain consistent proportions relative to it such that the circle it draws ends exactly where it begins. Without mobility, the compass doesn't work, but without stability and limits, it doesn't work either. A hinge, a yoke (a connection, we might say), that can both move and stay, that can be both near and far, is the crucial, unspoken requirement in the poem, the connection that in this poem stretches and maintains the proportions between both lover and beloved as well as sign and signified.

The importance of the circle in Donne's thought has frequently been commented on, generally in reference to the considerable early modern fixation on the significance of the circle in Neoplatonic conceptions of the universe and Hermetic understanding of God as an infinite circle.[34] As many critics have noted, Donne returns across his writing to Hermetic descriptions of God as a circle: "considered in thy selfe, art a

[34] See, in particular, Margorie Hope Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the "New Science" Upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949; rev. ed., 1962); and Michael L. Hall, "Circles and Circumvention in Donne's Sermons," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 82.2 (1983): 201-214. See also Mary Ellen Williams, "'Orbe of Man . . . Inexplicable Mistery': A Study of Donne's Use of Archetypal Images in the Round," University of Wisconsin PhD Dissertation, 1964; James L. Spenko, "Circular Form in Two Donne Lyrics," *ELN* 13 (1975): 103-07; Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 30-34, 58-64; Eileen Reeves, "John Donne and the Oblique Course," *Renaissance Studies* 7.2 (1993): 168-83.

Circle, first and last, and altogether; but considered in thy working upon us, art a *direct line*, and leadest us from our *beginning*, through all our wayes, to our *end*".[35] What often goes unsaid is that this is a conceit, one that responds deeply, like the compass metaphor, to the way metaphors work and the way we can meaningfully conceptualise the proportional connection between physical and metaphysical.

The search for that proportional connection motivates Donne's conceits. Not all circles are "just"; for Donne, the assumption that the world or the body stand, like the Vitruvian man, as perfectly proportionate, harmonious, mathematical reflections of divine order, or that language can establish that proportionate relationship, could no longer be taken for granted. Nor could it be denied—but *how* to analogise between heaven and earth, how to establish scale between physical and metaphysical, were for Donne the most pressing questions. As he repeats across his oeuvre, "*Finite* and *Infinite* have no proportion to one another",[36] for "the disproportion between the least thing, and nothing, is more infinite then between the least thing, and the whole world."[37] There is, he says, no proportion in good works: "The *best* works of the *best* man have no proportion with the kingdome of heaven"; nor is there proportion in faith, for "*Faith*, that is of infinite value above works, hath yet no proportion to the kingdome of heaven".[38] There is no proportion in majesty nor riches, for "a King that possest the whole earth, hath no proportion at all to God, (he is not a dramme, not a grain, not an atome to God)".[39] There is no greatness that can be measured in God's terms: "No man is so little, in respect of the greatest man, as the greatest in respect of *God*; for here, in that, wee have not so much as a *measure* to try it by; *proportion* is no measure for *infinitie*."[40] How can humans try to bring the infinite within their grasp or the inconceivable within their conception? Those who "dare / Seeke new expressions"—or clever conceits—for God "doe the circle square, / And thrust into strayt Corners of poore witt / Thee who art cornerlesse and infinite" (ll.

[35] *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 9-10.
[36] *Sermons*, 7: 357
[37] *Ibid.*, 3: 50.
[38] *Ibid.*, 10: 164.
[39] *Ibid.*, 7: 357
[40] *Devotions*, p. 12.

1-4).[41] How can we analogise from this world to the next? How can we establish just proportions between incommensurate things?

These are the overriding questions asked in the only poems Donne published in his lifetime, the *Anniversaries*. In these poems, he expresses severe doubt in poetic proportion, in the capacity of language to analogise between heaven and earth. These poems have tended to be read (e.g., by Coffin, Nicolson, Empson, and more recently, Grady)[42] as explorations (both positive and negative) of Donne's sense of the loss of "commerce twixt heaven and earth" (l. 399) occasioned by the destabilising effects of the "new Philosophy" (l. 205).[43] Crucially, the crumbling of "commerce twixt heaven and earth" which the poems explore is also an aesthetic one. The poem questions the artist's capacity to bring heaven and earth into relationship:

> What Artist now dares boast that he can bring
> Heauen hither, or constellate any thing,
> …
> The art is lost, and correspondence too.
> For heauen giues little, and the earth takes lesse (ll. 391-97)

Donne explores this loss of correspondence in terms of a central conceit which has, since the poems' publication, been criticised as disproportionate: the representation of Elizabeth Drury, the deceased 14-year-old daughter of his patron Sir Robert Drury, as *anima mundi*, the animating soul of the world. For Ben Jonson, this choice made the poem "profane and full of Blasphemies . . . if it had been written of the Virgin Marie it had been something". Donne's reported rebuttal, that "he

[41] "Upon the Translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countess of Pembroke his Sister," *Variorum,* vol. 7.2.

[42] Charles Monroe Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927); Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle*; William Empson, *Essays on Renaissance Literature,* vol. 1: *Donne and the New Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Hugh Grady, *John Donne and Baroque Allegory: The Aesthetics of Fragmentation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017). A summary of the numerous publications addressing Donne and the "New Philosophy" is provided in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 6, *The Anniversaries and the Epicedes and Obsequies*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 403-11.

[43] "The First Anniversary," *Variorum,* vol. 6.

described / the Idea of a Woman, and not as she was",[44] indicates that, whatever else the "Shee" of the poem might represent (Beatrice, Platonic Ideal, the soul), "Shee" is a metaphor, a manifestation of correspondence and readable connection between earthly and divine that has been lost.

The poem is an exercise in the destabilisation of proportion that accompanies the breakdown of a clear point of scale between Heaven and earth that Drury represents. Without analogies like Drury, which bring the divine into meaningful contact with earth, "the worlds beauty is decayd, or gone, / Beauty, that's colour, and proportion" (ll. 249-50). Without a stabilising yoke like Drury, physical manifestations of divine order—the stars, the earth—lose their proportional relationships, their imagined reflections of divine order becoming "Eccentrique" (l. 255) and "ouerthwart[]" (l. 256). While "We thinke the heauens enioy their Sphericall / Their round proportion embracing all", the astronomical map becomes a web of imperfect circles, "various and perplexed" (l. 251-53). Like a mathematical compass without a stable hinge, relationships wobble and swerve:

> . . . nor can the Sunne
> Perfit a Circle, or maintaine his way
> One inche direct; but where he rose to day
> He comes no more, but with a cousening line,
> Steales by that point, and so is Serpentine:
> And seeming weary with his reeling thus,
> He meanes to sleepe, being now falne nearer vs.
> So, of the stares which boast that they do runne
> In Circle still, none ends where he begunne.
> All their proportion's lame, it sinks, it swels. (ll. 268-77)

The Sun becomes a serpent stealing and cozening its (erratic, weary, reeling) way throughout the heavens, the stars lamely sink into the horizon far from their origins, spiralling far away from the perfection of a "just circle". Earth, too, cannot keep "her round proportion still" (l.285), for

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[44] *Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. R. F. Patterson (London: Blackie, 1923), p. 5.

> Doth not a Tenarif, or higher Hill
> Rise so high like a Rocke, that one might thinke
> The floating Moone would shipwracke there, and sink?
> Seas are so deepe, that Whales being strooke to day,
> Perchance to morrow, scarse at middle way
> Of their wish'd iourneys end, the bottom, dye.
> And men, to sound depths, so much line vntie,
> As one might iustly thinke, that there would rise
> At end thereof, one of th'Antipodies: (ll. 286-94)

Rocky outcroppings threaten to shipwreck the moon, which "floats" in an aquatic sky; the seas are so deep as to seem inverted, a line both plumbing the depths and rising up out of the Antipodes. This is because "beauties best, proportion, is dead" (l. 306). Without Drury as proportion personified, "Shee by whose lines proportion should bee / Examin"d" (ll. 309-10), all that remains "Is discord, and rude incongruitee" (l. 324).

The crumbling of proportion in the *Anniversaries* begs the question of how finite and infinite can ever have commerce—but further, where does it leave us if they don't? Crucially, the *Anniversaries*' attempts to describe the breakdown of the relationship between heaven and earth are dominated by conceits: the sun is a serpent, the sky an inverted sea; the world's soul is a teenage girl; the world is an anatomized corpse; the world is a ring lacking its gemstone; man and his offspring are self-begetting phoenixes; earth is a beheaded man, grasping lifelessly for its severed soul; death is a midwife; the soul is an anchorite in a filthy cell. The anniversaries describe a world in which conceits cannot work—a world where "art is lost, and correspondence too"—but in which they are returned to reflexively as a crucial, sole means of grasping at the divine, like the beheaded man reaching through death for impossible reconnection.

The *Anniversaries* show, then, the side of Donne's thinking that suspects the impossibility of finding proportion or metaphoric correspondence between heaven and earth. At the same time, they show the conceit's crucial intervention in that impossibility, their responsiveness to the *need* to find proportion, to search for correspondence and scale, to connect. In others of Donne's works, this search is more optimistic (indeed, few works are as pessimistic as the *Anniversaries*). Finite and infinite may have no proportion to one

another, but as Donne states in a sermon preached on I John 5:7-8, "God descends to meanes proportionable to Man".[45] In many of Donne's works, that means is Christ, who is as close as we can come to a true yoke that provides scale between heaven and earth. Christ "is the image of the invisible God, and so more proportionall unto us, more apprehensible by us",[46] but also, in his role as "exemplar man", "our great example and pattern", he is "more proportional to God who is all spirit".[47] We are carried in a perfectly proportionate circle from finite to infinite through Christ—the circle again being the conceit most commonly used to express this proportional relationship and perfect completion: Christ "makes up *Gods circle*" in applying his Resurrection, his move from finite back into infinite, to us.[48] As Donne suggests in a 1621 sermon preached at the marriage of Margaret Washington,

> When I consider Christ in his Circle, in glory with his Father, before he came into this world, establishing a glorious Church when he was in this world, and glorifying that Church with that glory which himself had before, when he went out of this world; and then consider my self in my circle, I came into this world washed in mine own tears, and either out of compunction for my self or compassion for others, I passe through this world as through a valley of tears, where tears settle and swell, and when I passe out of this world I leave their eyes whose hands close mine, full of tears too, can these persons, this Image of God, this God himself, this glorious God, and this vessell of earth, this earth it self, this inglorious worm of the earth, meet without disparagement?
>
> They doe meet and make a mariage; because I am not a body onely, but a body and soul, there is a mariage, and Christ maries me.[49]

Here, Donne presents Christ and human as two overlaid circles, reminding him that the human, too, is a blend of finite and infinite—

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[45] *Sermons*, 5: 132.
[46] *Ibid*., 2: 320.
[47] *Ibid*., 2: 257-8.
[48] *Ibid*., 8: 97.
[49] *Sermons*, 3: 250-1.

"not a body onely, but a body and soul". How body and soul are yoked together (what is the "subtile knott which makes vs man"?) is just as perplexing, just as needful of conceits to explore and explain, but the human participates in both sides of the equation.

On this basis, Donne can turn more confidently to other humans to provide points of scale between finite and infinite. One such point of scale can be found in Donne's "*Elegie* On the vntimely Death of the *incomparable Prince*, Henry".[50] Written on the occasion of the death of James I and VI's eldest son Henry Stuart, the poem (printed in Joshua Sylvester's 1613 memorial compendium *Lachrymae Lachrymarum*) has been criticised as extravagantly witty and obtusely speculative. According to Ben Jonson, Donne's intention in writing the elegy was "to match Sir Ed: Herbert in obscurenesse."[51] We might treat this assertion sceptically, but the poem certainly explores the boundaries of obscurity and ineffability. It opens, again, with a conceit of overlaid circles, at the centre of which are reason and faith. The circle with reason at its centre is finite:

> For, into our *Reason* flowe, and there doe end,
> All that this naturall World doth comprehend;
> *Quotidian* things, and Equi-distant hence,
> Shut-in for Men in one *Circumference*: (ll. 5-8)

The circle with faith at its centre, on the other hand, is infinite, to the point that spatial relationships no longer make sense:

> But, for th'enormous *Greatnesses*, which are
> So disproportion'd and so angulare,
> As is GOD'S *Essence*, *Place*, and *Prouidence*,
> *Where*, *How*, *When*, *What*, *Soules* do departed hence:
> These *Things* (*Eccentrique* else) on *Faith* do strike; (ll. 9-13)

The "enormous *Greatnesses*" of God and the soul are so profoundly encompassing as to lose all proportions. They are so encircling as to become angular, and only brought into a stable centre by faith. In the figure of Prince Henry, faith is *almost* able to align with reason, to the

[50] *Variorum*, vol. 6.
[51] *Conversations with William Drummond*, p. 12.

point that these circles, finite and infinite, can meet in the same centre—can share some of the same proportions. At least, "nothing euer came so neer to This, / As *Contemplation* of the PRINCE wee misse" (ll. 17-18).

In the loss of Henry, we "misse" this overlaying of centres, both in the sense of mourning and falling short. His death has pulled these overlaid circles father apart – these "*Centres* distracted so" (l. 23), his loss puts into sharper relief the fact that he could "th'eternall ouertake" (l. 36), and that "*His* Times might haue stretcht out so far/ As to touch Those of which they *Emblems* are" (ll. 37-38). Henry's reign would have allowed his virtues to stretch out and touch the eternal virtues of which human iterations are only emblems. However, despite the fact that, as in *the Anniversaries*, Death "broke-off such a Link as *Hee*" (l. 76), Henry can still provide a link between finite and infinite; through contemplation of his memory, Henry can still serve as "Our *Soule's* best Bayting and Mid-*period* / In her long *Iourney* of *Considering* GOD) / . . . I can reach Him *thus*" (ll. 85-87).

In the elegy on Prince Henry, the *living* Henry (like Elizabeth Drury) was the true linkage between earthly and divine, although humans can still contemplate and appreciate his metaphoric potential to link earthly and divine in death. In "Obsequyes vpon the Lord Harrington",[52] this tension between earthly and heavenly models is compounded. The speaker asks the departed soul of Harington if he can now act as a waypoint between heaven and earth: "If looking vp to heauen, or downe to vs / Thou findst that any way is peruious / Twixt heauen and earth" (ll. 5-7). If Harington can act as that waypoint and open a channel between earthly and divine, then the speaker hopes he "can make by this soft Extasy / This place a Mapp of heauen" (ll. 13-14). To make a map is to analogise proportionally, to bring that which is too big to conceive into a smaller and more graspable form whilst maintaining the same proportions and relationships. Harrington's ability to look towards both the speaker and God allows him to act not only as a map, but also as a form of periscope:

> All the world growes transparent, and I see
> Through all both Church and State in seeing thee,

[52] *Variorum*, vol. 6.

> And I discerne, by fauour of this light,
> My selfe, the hardest Obiect of the sight.
> God is the glasse: As thou, when thou dost see
> Him who sees all, seest all concerning thee:
> So, yet vnglorifyd, I comprehend
> All, in those mirrours of thy way and end.
> Though God bee truely our Glasse through which wee see
> All, since the beeing of all things is hee:
> Yet ar the Trunks, which doe to vs deriue
> Things in proportion fitt by perspectiue,
> Deeds of good men. For by theyr beeing heere,
> Vertues, indeed remote, seeme to bee neere. (ll. 27-40)

By seeing himself through Harington, the speaker can see around corners, can see himself as God sees him. While not quite the seeing "face to face" promised by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12, neither is this seeing through a glass darkly. Harington acts as a "trunk", a telescope, which brings "Things in proportion fitt by perspectiue" into view.

The conceit of Harington as a "trunk" (in the sense of a telescope, a usage also employed by Henry Wotton and Ben Jonson)[53] responds to the pervasive nautical imagery of the poem, as the speaker bewails the vast, ungraspable nature of metaphysical virtue:

> For fluid vertue cannot bee lookt on
> . . .
> And as if on a streame I fixe mine eye
> That drop on which I lookd is presently
> Pushd with more waters from my sight, and gon:
> So in this Sea of Vertues can no one
> Bee insisted on . . . (ll. 43-51)

The infinite cannot be grasped, just as accurate measurements cannot be taken when there are no stable points of reference. This is what motivates the search for a point of scale that underlies the metaphysical conceit: the awareness that when we're at sea, when confronted with the infinite, we need something to fix on to establish proportion. In this way, the poem invokes another contemporary meaning of "trunk": the scale of a map. As Thomas Blundeville records in his 1594 *Exercises*, "to

[53] "Trunk, n." *OED*, III.14.

knowe the distance of places . . . there is woont to be set downe in the Mariners Carde a scale, otherwise called by the Mariners a Tronke".[54] By acting as a trunk, Harington provides scale between Heaven and earth, allowing a sense of wayfinding in the infinite.

The poem extends this telescoping and scaling metaphor in its bewailing of the shortness of Harington's life. The speaker asks:

> Ô Soul ô Circle, why so quickly bee
> Thy ends, thy birth, thy death closd vp in thee?
> Since one foote of thy compass still was plac'd
> In heauen, the other might securely haue pac'd
> In the most large extent, through every path
> That the whole world, or Man, th'Abridgment, hath. (ll. 105-10)

Returning to the compass conceit, Donne asks why, since Harington's fixed foot was always established in Heaven, he could not have drawn a wider circle on earth. For although

> Thou knowst that though the Tropique Circles haue
> (Yea and those small ones which the Poles engraue)
> All, the same roundnesse, evennesse, and all
> The endlesnesse of th'Equinoctiall
> Yet when wee come to measure distances
> How heere how there the Sunne affected is
> Where hee doth fayntly worke and where prevayle
> Onely greate Circles, then, can bee our scale: (ll. 111-18)

The poles are just as circular as the equator, tracing the same proportions—but like the infinite circle of faith in "Elegy on Prince Henry", they cannot encompass the same range. Harington showed "how to liue well young and how to dye" (l. 122), but the infirmities of age also "neede the scale of truth" (l. 127). Moving from compasses to clocks, another conceit in which proportions must fit together, the speaker observes that small pocket clocks can tell the time just as well as clock towers, but "greate Clocks which in steeples chime" are "Plac'd

[54] Thomas Blundeville, *M. Blundeuile his Exercises* (London: John Windet, 1594), fol. 325v.

to informe whole Townes t'employ theyr time" (ll. 143-44). Harington, then,

> A Clock so true, as might the sunne controule
> And dayly hadst from him who gaue it thee
> Instructions, such as never yet could bee
> Disordred, stay heere, as a Generall
> And greate Sunn-dyall to haue sett vs all? (ll. 150-54)

Here, the poem reveals a tension in its framing of Harington's exemplarity: as a soul in heaven, he can act as a waypoint, a periscope, a trunk of scale between heaven and earth. But as a soul embodied on earth, a compass planted in heaven and travelling the widest compass in the world, he could act as a more widely graspable "scale of truth".

These poems—all elegies mourning the disconnection between heaven and earth, life and death, body and soul—speak to the heart of what drives the metaphysical conceit: the desire to sketch out dimensions upon which we might say finite and infinite *do* have proportion with one another. In each poem—each filled with conceits which stretch reason, pulling its circle within the circle of faith—there is both an attempt to "weau[e] out a net, and this net throw[] / Vpon the Heauens" (*FirAn,* ll. 279-80) and also a hope that we might have a line cast down from heaven. Drury, Prince Henry, and Harington are invoked as points of analogy between heaven and earth, working best when graspable on earth, but also more animating in their divine exemplarity, driving further conceits to grasp the ungraspable within the compass of the world.

The fact that their divine exemplarity is "missed" speaks to the *work* inherent in Donne's conceits. Poetic proportion is not, for Donne, something that is bestowed from on high nor a polishing of heavenly resonances pre-existent in the world and words—it is neither the Vitruvian Man nor the circle squared. While his work responds to the emphasis on proportion maintained throughout the classical and early modern periods, for Donne, the ability to access that which is *beyond* the physical *through* the physical, to analogise from earth to heaven, is to reconnect with something that has been severed. It is to say "Yes indeed, but I missed it"—a stepping past and turning back, seeing ourselves once again in something lost and projecting ourselves forward where we have not been, a parabola thrown out and returned. In this

way, Johnson is right to criticise the heterogeneous ideas yoked together in the conceit; perhaps this is exactly the point. What could be more heterogeneous than life and death, body and soul, finite and infinite? In his conceits, Donne looks into the infinite and traces a map of our own proportions.

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