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"A Valediction forbidding Mourning": Traditions and Problems of the Imagery

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A manuscript entitled "A Study of the Imagery of ...," I suspect, would have a hard row to hoe before it found, if ever it did, a place in a contemporary learned journal. That kind of approach sounds so out-of-fashion in an age of reading for fields of political force, traces of marginality, otherness, oppression, suppression and the prized ore of subversion. Yet the imagery, as a whole, of *A Valediction*, and its images understood as metaphors, similes, analogies and conceits, comprise the subject matter of the majority of learned treatments of the poem. Many have anticipated, others echoed, Leonard Unger's observation that the image, or conceit, of the stiff twin compasses, is the most famous in Donne.[1] It has been proclaimed the epitome of Metaphysical wit. The body of scholarly and critical commentary is so great as to preclude a treatment here in any detail of the contributors to the several traditions of interpretation.

Even so, though many contributions have been made to explicating the enormous wealth of learning on which our immoderate, hydroptique author draws in fashioning his *Valediction*—such as the lore of gold, alchemy, numerology, doctrine of souls, sacred geometry, consolation, cosmography, logic, rhetoric and autobiography—satisfactory readings of the poem's culminating figure, and recognitions of what and how it culminates, are rare. With what may look like fearful immodesty, but is actually trepidation, I shall propose just such a reading via the poem's imagery, after we have first surveyed some of its notable aspects.

As M. H. Abrams's definition, or definitions, of "Imagery" remind us,[2] New Criticism elevated imagery, in the sense of vehicle for metaphor and simile, to a place of unrivalled prominence in the discussion of poetry. It no longer enjoys such kudos, and now sits on the bench recuperating from the heavy workout. But will it recover? And if so, will it have enough edge to anatomize pre-Romantic, specifically late-Renaissance, poetic thought?

Abrams cautions that "Imagery" is "one of the most ambiguous" terms in modern criticism. Certainly it is a befuddled creature, tangled up in the corporeal senses, and their objects. Abrams writes of imagery as "signifying all the objects and qualities of the senses." The senses and their impressions underwrote the modern project of knowing the material world as truth, even as the Romantics sought to ride upon them into a numinous beyond. Consider these lines from Wordsworth, from his, as it were, Valediction Forbidding Mourning:

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.[3]

The contrast with Donne could scarcely be more pointed: as Wordsworth finds the "anchor of [his] purest thoughts" in the "language of the sense," in imagery, Donne locates his anchor in the mind divested of sense, a kind of anti-imagery.

In what follows I shall explain and develop this theme, rather than attempt an image-by-image *explication de texte*. Some of the imagery of the poem seems to me unproblematical—such as "Dull sublunary lovers love"(13), where the concept of "sublunarity" needs no gloss for learned readers. I try to attend rather to what seems to me the main line of the irresistible power of mental progression in the poem.

The "As .... So ...." analogy of stanzas 1 and 2 which puts in train the expectation of progressions from body to soul, from matter to ethereal, from profane to sacred, also initiates a series of delicate diminuendi of the clamorous senses. "Whisper" (2) dies to "no noise" (5) just as in stanza 3 palpable fear is replaced by an invisible and immaterial calm.

These first three stanzas may justly be said to proceed by images of sense: visual, auditory, tactile, attended by a rhetorical logic which seeks to persuade that they—the senses—are of an inferior order of reality, and that a higher perception is available to a species of virtue active in sacred love and in

wisdom. As sad friends, who apply their senses to detecting the moment of death of their dying friend, cannot perceive the motion, "goe," so "layetie" cannot perceive the motion of sacred love, nor fearful men the motion of the wise mind in contemplation of the furthest reaches of the creation.

Of the first word, Terry Sherwood shrewdly notes its ambiguity: we expect either a comparison to follow, or an adverbial clause of time. "So" sets the delimiting logical frame. In his subtle reading, therefore, is developed a tension within the poem between "the flawlessly plotted logic" and human time in the motions of the body\soul composite.[4] Sherwood's mind\sense dichotomy is consonant with the view I present here.

By way of contrast is the interpretation of Donne's poetic purposes as "here as elsewhere, in order to express a supreme love, Donne attributes philosophic validity to the sentimental conceits of madrigalesque Petrarchism."[5] Guss's formulation accords priority to Donne as poetic craftsman aiming primarily to create new and original conceits and images upon an inherited stock of gestures. Much discussion of Donne's imagery approaches from a similar direction, although it is a less populated route of late.

I should want to respond that Guss's view is probably truer elsewhere than here in the *Valediction.* Not only are the Petrarchan emblems of stanza 2—"tear-floods," "sigh-tempests"—rejected as irrelevant gestures, but Donne's extraordinarily compact formulation of these tropes shows his complete lack of interest in exploring them. They do not impede the mental progression. The treatment of the same tropes in *The Canonization* makes an instructive contrast.

The verb-image "to melt" has attracted interpretive commentary. John Carey seeks to explain its force in the sense impression of leaving fading warmth and by calling on the other instances of the verb in *Sermons* and *Poems*. Carey expatiates at large on Donne's fondness for fluidifying, and reveals the poet as a man with an "hydroptique fixation." I take this to signify a mental illness which the poet is unable to control. Likewise his imagery. With an unfortunate turn of phrase Carey tells us: "Yearning and melting are bonded together in [Donne's] imagination."[6]

Arnold Stein corrects Carey thus: "The melting is not, as Carey proposes, one more example of Donne's obsession with thoughts of dissolution, but is instead a translated echo signifying the peaceful death of the man of reason and self-control."[7] Stein has asked not what fixations image and image patterns might suggest, but what Renaissance poets would have known.[8] For rational *consolatio* Donne goes, as Stein points out, to the large similitude of

parting to death, and the small precise similitude, the single word, "melt." Seneca's 26th Epistle is cited by Stein.[9] I translate it as follows:

> It is the height of inconvenience, you say, that we perish by diminishing, when in the strict sense I would say [we] liquify . . . .Is any exit better than at the end for our nature, melting, to dissolve?

Three verbs in the passage—*liquescere, solvere, dilabor*—may be rendered "to melt."

Stein, like Carey, invokes instances of "to melt," specifically in Sermon 13, where Donne figures the action of rhetoric upon the mind as melting it, and imprinting on it "new formes, new images, new opinions."[10] In reverse order, this is the rhetorical progression of *A Valediction*: opinions ("some ... doe say"), to images, to forms (the form of gold and its signifier, the circle, its circumference and center.) This progress is the aim of philosophy in Plato's exposition, both explicitly in several dialogues, and implicitly in the structure of other dialogues. It also conforms to Augustine's ascending scale of images from the corporeal up to the intellectual vision,[11] which like the final figure of this poem, has no need of the corporeal.

Of "trepidation" much might be conjectured. Some cosmographers, like Thomas Blundeville in *The Theoriques of the seuen Planets* (1602), developing the work of others like Leonard and Thomas Digges, postulated apparent retrograde motions for some planetary spheres in order to bring the duration of their cycles into line with recent, more accurate mathematical calculations and to account for eccentric orbits. Perhaps Donne reflects here on the paradox of planets both moving and standing still, according to the dictate of mind. John Shawcross's note— "the supposed tremulous movement of the *primum mobile*"[12]—is helpful here, whereas Carey's gloss, "tremors in outer space,"[13] misleads both because of its anachronism (outer space is a later concept), and because of the physicality of it. The point is, and must be according to the rhetorical progression of the poem, the intellectual supposition.

I shall dwell only briefly on stanzas 4 and 5. They perform the transition from images to forms. They are careless of images, but assured of the mind. There is no composition of scene according to sense impression, or memory of sense impression, here, for none is needed. But the concept of refinement is introduced for its use in the stanza 6 figure of "gold to ayery thinnesse beat." This begins the great figure of the compasses by enacting the

dissolution of matter, the highest incorruptible matter (much, of course, may be said of the alchemistry of gold), into the perfect mathematical figure. Carey notes that Mersenne calculated that 1 oz. of gold could be beaten out to 105 sq. ft., but the image need not be limited by that physical property, for, as Carey also reminds us, Tertullian likened the soul's growth to beaten gold,[14] a likeness almost certainly known to Donne.

If we raise again here Arnold Stein's question, with particular application to Donne writing this poem, "What would he have known?" I think that one more candidate could be confidently proposed. Giordano Bruno and Donne have been linked from time to time in scholarly works, but, to the best of my knowledge, Bruno's *De Imaginvm, Signorvm, & Idearum compositione* (1591) recently translated into English for the first time as *On the Composition Of Images, Signs, & Ideas,*[15] has not been proposed. Cryptic, difficult where it is not cryptic also, abbreviated and incomplete, Bruno's book is nevertheless just the kind of taxonomy of imagery and philosophy of mind, with special reference to memory and Platonic forms, to which the philosophical poet would turn. Frances Yates has described it as an "architectural memory system of terrible complexity."[16] She has also recognised in Bruno one who taught "a religion which was to transcend religious difference through love and magic."[17] Donne at Oxford 1584-87 is highly likely to have heard the 1585 debates in which Bruno took part. We may imagine the *frisson* imparted by this seeker after the source of religious certainty to the troubled spirit of Donne. Bruno's apostasy leading to his 1600 fiery martyrdom would not readily fade from the mind of Donne in 1611, himself a *de facto* apostate, whose mind was running on the subject of martyrdom. Composing *A Valediction* to Ann More Donne in that year, the poet might well turn to the image of Bruno.

Be that as it may, *De Imaginvm* is full of talk of virtue, orbits, perfection, the sense of sight, movement, and the superiority of idea over image, the inner eye over the external organ. To summarize, Bruno presents, as in his title, an ascending Platonic hierarchy of image to sign to idea, which parallels the movement in Donne's poem. Thus stanzas 1, 2, 3 present images ascending from body to heaven; stanzas 4 and 5 signs—of dull sublunary folk, and of those refined by love, while the rest of the poem moves into the realm of idea, what I have described elsewhere as the "mathematics of Mind."[18]

I must apologize for the fact that the great compasses image—I should prefer to use "figure"—receives such scant attention in this discussion of the imagery of the poem. It is immensely, perhaps inexhaustibly, resonant. No

construction of the Renaissance mind (none known to me) so brings home the fundamental interconnectedness of thought in the Renaissance ideal, and the hydroptique desire of all human knowledge and the divine center which animates it. By the same token, none so plangently evokes the impending dissolution of that world–view.

As Donne prepared for his parting, the sea voyage, he must have consulted the sea charts for the English Channel printed in *The Mariners Mirrour* (1588). They bear ornamental representations of compasses (often golden) designed to operate so that when the outer leg has "come home" to the fixed foot, a perfect circle is formed at the apex of the compasses. The movement of the outer foot, which "far doth roam," does not describe a just circle, as many readers of the image have assumed, but rather two spirals inscribed in the mundane plane, spirals which mathematical navigators of the time often termed "paradoxal" lines. What poet could resist thinking about that kind of movement?

For recognition of the mathematical complexity of Donne's figure, the significance of spirals, and their Platonic philosophical nexus, we are in debt to John Freccero's seminal study of 1963.[19] Although an article of forty pages, it is justly described by Terry Sherwood as an "admirably concise treatment" of the history of circular motion.[20] And Sherwood is one of those -- others have not -- who have taken the point of spiral motion. I would add to the many resonances and sources the significance of navigational lore. Spiral theory led to the great *Atlas* of Mercator (1595) which Donne must have known. My gesture to conciseness must be to end my discussion here by pointing to its title, which reads like an epigraph for the Renaissance world, and auspicious premonition of *A Valediction*: COSMOGRAPHICAE MEDITATIONES DE FABRICA MUNDI ET FABRICATI FIGURA.

We might object that Wordsworth's valedictory poem also links cosmos, mind and world by fabricated figure with his faith in "nature and the language of the sense." But even in the poem the imaged sensations are dissolving beyond their half-life. Specifics have melted into mere "things," as in a solipsistic one-way spiral. Donne, on the other hand, by refining his thought out of the decaying elemental matter of the senses, and depositing it in the vault of the mind's mathematics, has left us his enduring figure.

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Notes

[1]*The Man in the Name* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), p.73.

[2]*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Fourth edition, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1981).

[3]"Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," ll. 93-102.

[4]*Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), p. 26.

[5]Donald L. Guss, *John Donne Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in "The Songs and Sonets"* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1966), p.74.

[6]*John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 176-78.

[7]*The House of Death* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 212.

[8]This is the title of his first chapter.

[9]Specifically, "*Incommodum summum est, inquis, minui et deperire et, ut propriae dicam, liquescere . . . . Ecquis exitus est melior quam in finem suum natura solvente dilabi?*" p. 292.

[10]"The way of Rhetorique in working upon weake men, is first to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgement, to smother and bury in it, or to empty it of former apprehensions and opinions, and to shake that beliefe, with which it had possessed it self before, and then when it is thus melted, to powre it into new molds, when it is thus mollified, to stamp and imprint new formes, new images, new opinions in it": *Sermons* 2:282. This sermon contrasts the power and verbal violence of rhetoric with the plain simplicity of Jesus's "*Sequere me,* Follow me."

[11]As Stein points out, p. 186.

[12]*The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 87.

[13]P. 122.

[14]Carey, p. 186.

[15]Trans. Charles Doria, edited and annotated Dick Higgins (N.Y.: Willis, Locker & Owens, 1991).

[16]*The Art of Memory* (1966) p. 295. Quoted in Doria and Higgins, xvii.

[17]*The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (1972), p.136. Quoted in Doria and Higgins, xviii.

[18]"Donne's Visual Imagination and Compasses," *JDJ* 8 (1989): 36-56.

[19]"Donne's 'Valediction: forbidding mourning,'" *ELH* 30 (1963): 335-375.

[20]Sherwood, *op. cit.*, p. 205 n.23