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Donne's Poetics of Absence

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"All that the soule does," Donne writes, "it does in, and with, and by the body."

> And therefore . . . the body is washed in baptisme, but it is that the soul might be made cleane . . . And again, . . . My body received the body of Christ that my soule might partake of his merits. . . . These two, Body and Soule, can not be separated for ever, which, whilst they are together concurre in all that either of them doe. (*Sermons*, 4, 358)[1]

Does this hold for reading and hearing, writing and speaking? Is interpretation, the mind's or souls' interiorization of discourse, done "in, and with, and by the body"? In some sense, are not our words "extensions of the body," as Arthur A. Vogel suggests, are they not "meaning in matter, a location of presence"—an embodied presence? Meaning is in words, Vogel argues, "as we are in our bodies,"

> and it is only because we are our bodies that we can "be" our words—or, as it is usually put, mean what we say. We can stand behind our words because our presence overflows them and is more than they can contain, but we choose to stand behind them with our infinite presence because we are also in them.[2]

Such is the existential foundation of Donne's own incarnationist theology of language, one that would claim the power to transubstantiate discourse, turning the poetic text from an imitation to an icon—which, as Alla Bozarth-Campbell observes, "does not represent" but, rather,

"evokes presence." And the poem-as-icon, she adds, is "sacramental in this sense":

> On a symbolic level the icon is a material body that moves on to a spiritual form, to unite the percipient with its prototype through the invocation of being and the evocation of presence. It is a meeting place, filled with the indwelling energy of its archetypal reality. Its energy is not that of *mimesis*, but of *logos*.[3]

The poetic text becomes a "meeting place" for the reader and the reality to which it gives presence, initiating a dynamic confrontation between two substantive presences: the reader and the subject evoked within the text's (sacred-)space.

The poem, then, is far from the passive instrument of a writer's (or reader's) will; itself an active presence, the incarnationist text claims the power to transform the interpreter, who does not read so much as *listen* to the discourse, "receiving the word of the text into one's own being."[4] Jacques Derrida is right, it seems: an incarnationist theology of language is inherently phonocentric, the poem realized as an aural presence "immediately united to the "voice and to breath," a writing whose nature "is not grammatological but pneumatological. It is hieratic, very close to the interior voice . . . the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself: full and truthful presence of the divine voice in our inner sense."[5] Suggestively, then, in an epistle to the Countess of Montgomery, Donne admits "what dead carkasses things written are, in respect of things spoken." In religious and devotional writing, however, "that soule that inanimates them, receives debts from them":

> The spirit of God that dictates them in the speaker or writer, and is present in his tongue or hand, meets himself again (as we meet ourselves in a glass) in the eies and eares and hearts of the hearers and readers: and that Spirit, which is ever the same to an equall devotion, makes a writing and a speaking equall means to edification. (*Letters*, p. 25)

Vox and *verbum*, voice and word, form a theological unity; meaning, self-presence, and self-identity are aspects of the spoken word. Such a text, nonetheless, is "inanimate[d]" by the living trinity of writer, reader,

and "the spirit of God" which "dictates" and "is present" *in the writing.* Thus Donne himself describes reading as a dialogic encounter, a "dictation" or conversation between two subjects mediated by the living, breathing word. Speech is produced and received by means of bodily organs; it habitus is the flesh—speech, literally, *is* the word made flesh. The soul that "inanimates" such discourse "meets himself again . . . in the eies and eares and hearts of the hearers and readers," those who literally incarnate the discourse.

As a simultaneously theological and rhetorical perspective, incarnationism asserts the unity of dual worlds, the fact that souls dwell in bodies, the fact that souls or spirits can cohabit, meeting in the same sacred space—the body consecrated as God's Temple. As Donne prays in *Essays in Divinity,* "Though this soul of mine, by which I partake thee, begin not now, yet let this minute, O God, this happy minute of thy visitation, be the beginning of her conversion, and shaking away confusion, darknesse, and barrenesse; and let her now produce Creatures, thoughts, words, and deeds agreeable to thee" (p. 37). Man's own "Creatures," therefore, his living creations, are his "thoughts, words, and deeds," born in response to God's "visitation," his indwelling presence in the speaker's soul. And though Donne complains elsewhere that words, "which are our subtillest and delicatest outward creatures, being composed of thoughts and breath, are so muddie, so thick, that our thoughts themselves are so," yet human discourse is at least partially restored by "that advantage of nearer familiarity with God, which the act of incarnation gave us" (*Letters,* pp. 110-11). Life and language thus intersect, words "being composed of thoughts and breath," providing the material shape that incarnates spirit; even God, he notes in prayer, "hast contracted thine immensity and shut thyself within Syllables" (*Essays in Divinity,* p. 37). Donne elaborates in an early sermon, perhaps his boldest assertion of an incarnationist rhetoric: "The Son of God, is *Logos, verbum, The word;* God made us with his word,"

> and with our words we make God so farre, as that we make up the mysticall body of Christ Jesus with our prayers, with our whole liturgie, and we make the naturall body of Christ Jesus appliable to our soules, by the words of Consecration in the Sacrament, and our soules apprehensive, and capable of that body, by the word Preached. (*Sermons,* 3, 259-60)

While prayer and liturgy turns the congregation itself into "the mysticall body" of Christ, "the word Preached" works upon the individual soul, making it "apprehensive, and capable" (from the Latin *capax*, "roomy" or "spacious")—clearing and cleansing the soul, as if it were a room or recepticle for Christ's indwelling Presence. What power, however, is expressed in "the words of Consecration"? If they make "the naturall body of Christ Jesus *appliable* to our soules," do they also somehow "make" this body—that is, literally *create* it? Surely this would imply a belief in transubstantiation and, on the strength of such a passage, we might assume that Donne's theology of language is in essence Catholic-sacramental; this, however, would be a dangerous assumption. Time and again an older Donne explicitly rejects the linguistic theology of Roman Catholics, who "bring the body of God, that body which the God the Sonne hath assumed, the body of Christ, too neare in their Transubstantiation. . . . We must necessarily complain, that they make Religion too bodily a thing" (*Sermons*, 9, 77). We are posed with a question, then: Does Donne the poet claim a power for language which Donne the preacher, as a spokesman for the Anglican Church, either cannot or dare not claim? Or does this poetry explore the *loss* of this sacramentalism and the subsequent undermining of incarnational rhetoric? If Catholics "make Religion too bodily a thing," one wonders what Donne the preacher would say of Donne the love poet?

Indeed another question arises, one that points, paradoxically, to the very dualism that incarnation would overcome: In seeking to wed soul and body, does such a rhetoric not also admit their radical separateness? Regardless of God's active intervention in the world by means of Christ's coming, the spirit has never learned to trust the flesh, nor does the flesh even believe in the spirit; life is itself countered by death, presence by absence—in short, a rhetoric of incarnationism implicates language in epistemological problems that have plagued both Christianity and Western Philosophy from their inception. Even as it struggles to assert and maintain unity, a rhetoric of incarnationism faces continuously the prospects of divorce, separation, dissolution, absence—effects of its own dualistic epistemology, which are themselves inscribed in the nature of writing. Perhaps "an Epistle is *collocutio scripta*," a "written conversation" (*Sermons*, 1, 285)—perhaps, indeed, "*Scriptor manu praedicat*," as Donne asserts in *Essays in Divinity* (p. 41), the writer's hand speaking or preaching metonymically, in place of the living voice. Like so many of his comments on language, though, the terms struggle against each other. Is epistolography a mode of conversation or of

writing? Are the terms equivalent? If not, which shall prevail? Is writing simply a transcription of living speech, or is it the death of speech and the loss of authorial presence, as postmodern theory suggests? While speech seems to unite two subjects in a dialogic encounter, writing offers but the *simulacrum* of a living, breathing presence within the words of the text. Incarnationism, in other words, and the very theology of Catholic sacramentalism come to rest perilously upon an argument for the performative—as opposed to the figurative—nature and effects of poetic/priestly language.

As an exploration of these issues, Donne's sonnet-letter to Thomas Woodward ("Hast thee harsh verse") becomes a self-conscious writing upon writing. Ostensibly addressed to the poet's friend, the poem in fact speaks to itself, becoming a self-critical exploration of its own aims and of the power of its language:

> Hast thee harsh verse, as fast as thy lame measure
> Will give thee leave, to him, my pain and pleasure.
> I'have given thee, and yet thou art too weake,
> Feete, and a reasoning soule and tongue to speake.
> Plead for me,'and so by thine and my labour
> I'am thy Creator, thou my Saviour. (1-6)

In Petrarchan manner, the sonnet-letter is asked to "plead" or intercede for the poet during his physical absence from the friend, becoming "Saviour," paradoxically, to its own creator. It is to save him from at least two conditions: his friend's absence, which makes the poet's city dwelling a hell (9-10), and "infections" (12) of a plague which has emptied the streets, threatening the poet himself with death. But to these the poet adds a third "absence" or emptiness which the letter is commanded to overcome, the poet's own physical absence from a text that must substitute, therefore, for his speaking presence. It is an inadequate substitute, one might add, since the language is at once "too weake" to figure forth "a reasoning soule and tongue."[6] The ending couplet thus describes two possible functions for this sonnet-letter: "Live I or die, by you my love is sent, / And you'are my pawnes, or else my Testament" (13-14). In either case the writing seeks to become something other than lyric, transforming itself into a more powerful performative or socially binding text; more than polite compliment or fiction, it claims the status of a legal document. As his "pawnes" it would become the author's IOU, a collateral or record of debt. Or, should the poet die of the plague, it

would become his "Testament," a Last Will bequeathing his love to his friend.

For "letters have truly the same office as oaths," Donne writes, optimistically, to Henry Goodyer: "As these amongst light and empty men, are but fillings, and pauses, and interjections; but with weightier, they are sad attestations: So are Letters to some Complement, and obligation to others." Anticipating the speech-act theories of J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle, Donne here describes letter-writing as a symbolic action and social *trans*action, a complex unity of "deeds and words."[7] And yet the poem, "Hast thee harsh verse" raises a second (though related) issue, one confronted, if implicitly, by each Renaissance poet: the capacity of writing to validate literary genre and to perform (indeed, to become) what a poem formally claims. And in this particular case the performance fails—consciously so, one might argue, for by dwelling on the proximity of death and offering itself as the document that legally records the poet's death and debt, the poem admits its failure to represent, and thus preserve, the poet through language. The poem fails, in short, to substantiate him as a living, speaking presence—the sonnet-letter provides little preservative against either plague-death or poetic absence. And yet such preservative, presencing power is precisely what the epistolary form traditionally claims. "Sir," the poet writes in the verse epistle "To Henry Wotton," "more than Kisses, letters mingle Soules / For, thus friends absent speake" (1-2). Donne elaborates wittily upon these propositions in a prose letter to Geroge Garrard, only to deny their possibility: "Sir, i should not only send you an account by my servant,"

> but bring you an account often my self, (for our Letters are our selves, and in them absent friends meet) how I do, but that two things make me forbear that writing: first, because it is not for my gravity, to write of feathers, and strawes, and in good faith, I am no more, considered in my body, or fortune. And then because whensoever I tell you how I doe, by a Letter, before that Letter comes to you, I shall be otherwise, than when it left me. (*Letters*, p. 240)

Thus the writer writes to declare what makes him "forbear . . . writing." Writing provides no antidote for change: the speaker whom it seeks to represent is "already otherwise." The "Song: Goe, and Catch a Falling Star" reaches the same conclusion. The poet would refuse to go to his

friend should he find a faithful lover, for, "though shee were true, when you met her,"

> And last, till you write your letter,
> Yet shee
> Will bee
> False, ere I come, to two, or three. (23-27)

Not the lady simply but the letter would prove false. Writing fails to fix either the world or the human personality.

Continually, then, if implicitly, Donne raises the question: Can the letter, as a written text, ever overcome its orphanage from the author's speaking presence? "No other kinde of conveyance," Donne writes to Henry Goodyer, "is better for knowledge, or love." Yet the physical and temporal distance of texts from their authors imperils all "conveyance," all writing—all meaning and value, especially of epistolography: ". . . though all knowledge be in those Authors [of letters] already,"

> yet, as some poisons, and some medicines, hurt not, nor profit, except the creature in which they reside, contribute their lively activitie, and vigor; so much of the knowledge buried in Books perisheth, and becomes ineffectuall, if it be not applied, and refreshed by a companion, or friend. Much of their goodnesse, hath the same period, which some Physicians of *Italy* have observed to be in the biting of their *Tarentola*, that it affects no longer, than the flie lives. For with how much desire we read the papers of any living now, (especially friends) which we would scarce allow a boxe in our cabinet, or shelf in our Library, if they were dead? And we do justly in it, for the writings and words of men present, we may examine, controll, and expostulate, and receive satisfaction from the authors; but the other we must beleeve, or discredit; they present no mean. (*Letters*, pp. 105-07)

The ambivalence here expressed toward writing echoes the Platonic dialogue, *Phaedrus*, where writing is termed a *pharmakon*, simultaneously "medicine" and "poison" to memory—Donne's terms precisely. If writing could establish a living presence, could speak in dialogue on

behalf of its author, a reader could "examine, control, and expostulate, and receive satisfaction" from the text as from the author himself. Text and author would speak with one voice; the text would *be* his voice. But radically separated from their writer's living presence, texts "present no mean" for testing their assertions and arriving at a meaning sharable by both reader and author. For writing is a dead thing, devoid of (though imitating the form of) human consciousness, in the same way that the representations of painting produce little more than death masks: "the painter's products," Socrates notes, "stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words":

> they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever. And once a thing is put into writing [it] drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to help, being unable to defend or help itself."[8]

Donne could as easily write these words, who shares Plato's fear of misinterpretation, his recognition of a text's stubborn silence before readers, and the need to discover "right readers." More importantly, Donne shares with Plato a mistrust of writing itself—"I know what I shall suffer from many interpretations" (*Letters*, p. 196)—a sense of its inadequacy, its potential for abuse, and its failure to represent an author's meanings fully or faithfully (or, indeed, to re-present the author within its space).

With this ambivalence toward writing in mind we might turn back, if briefly, to the sonnet-letters, particularly one to Thomas Woodward, which dwells on the problems of authorial presence and the performance or validation of genre. The poet begins by admitting his physical separation from the writing ("At once, from hence, my lines and I depart, / I to my soft still walks, they to my Heart" [1-2]), but then raises the possibility that his verse, "The strict Map of my misery, / Shall live to see that, for whose want I dye":

Therefore I envie them, and doe repent,
That from unhappy mee, things happy'are sent;
Yet as a Picture, or bare Sacrament,
  Accept these lines, and if in them there be
  Merit of love, bestow that love on mee. (8-14)

The act of composing becomes an act of love which seeks to "merit" love in return. The reader should take the theological, indeed Catholic implications of the term seriously, for the poem, in the final lines especially, invokes a theology of language upon whose workings the success or failure of the genre itself hangs. The letter is itself offered as a "Sacrament," which Donne's editor, Wesley Milgate, glosses as a legal term, "a pledge which each of the parties deposited or became bound for before beginning a suit."[9] In this sense of the word, the poem would again become a pawn or pledge—and once again, therefore, the poet could claim to validate the literary text by making it something other than literary (that is, a legal or socially binding document). But "Sacrament," surely, has religious connotations as well. From the standpoint of Catholic theology, the poem-as-sacrament might claim, if blasphemously, the capacity to substantiate the poet through its own words of (self-)invocation. Need we remind ourselves, though, that the various Reformation theologies differ most crucially in their interpretation of the sacraments? Each theology's understanding of their nature, number, and efficacy would have profound implications for the poet as well as priest (or indeed, the poet as secular priest). *Can* the poem-as-sacrament be transubstantiative in a Catholic sense, asserting the power to re-present or incorporate the poet in the flesh of language? Or, following the more extreme Calvinist and Zwinglian interpretations of Eucharistic theology, is the poem reduced to a commemorative event, a representation or "Picture" (10), to use the poet's own word? What could a "*bare* Sacrament" suggest if not this latter, more radically Protestant interpretation, one that empties the priest's—and poet's—language of being, restricting the words of Eucharistic celebration to a figural representation rather than a re-presenting or presencing of its transcendental subject? And as "bare Sacrament," what can the poem hope to achieve? The problem of validation, the ability of a literary form to enact an author's aims, has at once become a problem, not simply of performative language, but of the warring linguistic theologies of the Reformation.

A final letter to Thomas Woodward ("Pregnant again with th'old twins Hope, and Feare") describes reading itself as a sacramental event: "And

now thine Almes is given, thy letter'is read, / The body risen againe, the which was dead, / And thy poore starveling bountifully fed" (7-9). The letter which inspires Donne's response has "fed" the poet, restoring his body, "the which was dead." Reading becomes a mode of consumption; but mixed in with the grosser language of gormandizing is a more reverential language of sacramental communion, turning Woodward's "Almes," the charitable offering of his letter, into a spiritual "banquet" for which the poet's "Soule doth say grace,"

> And praise thee for'it, and zealously imbrace
> Thy love; though I think thy love in this case
> To be as gluttons, which say 'midst their meat,
> They love that best of which they do most eat. (11-14)

The "body risen" suggests that the reader's own flesh has become a receptacle of the risen Christ, than an infusion of grace, by means of communion, has renewed the reader, both body and soul. Thus the allusions to prayer, to praise, to the reader's "zealous embrace" of the alms-giver's love all mark the poem as a communicant's reverent thanksgiving for receiving of the sacrament. But whether material, literary, or spiritual, *what sort of feast* would the poet of this sonnet-letter love "best" and, therefore, eat "most"? Explicitly he pleads for more letters; indirectly, perhaps, he alludes to the rarity of Eucharistic celebration in the contemporary Anglican Church. Either way he makes claims for the *nature* of this language-feast, suggesting the possibility that writing re-presents the poet to a reader-communicant in the same way that the sacrament expresses Christ's Real Presence.

What tone is present in the sonnet-letters, though? How might the extravagant compliment ironize the sacramental theology here invoked as a theory of reading? Does Donne's poetry—the love lyrics especially—ever achieve this sacramental power? Before we can even hazard an answer we must consider the poet's own place in the Reformation controversy. For Protestantism seeks to deconstruct the linguistic theology of Roman Catholicism, reducing the sacrament of Eucharist from a presencing or transubstantiative to a consubstantiative (and, in its extreme Zwinglian interpretation, a commemorative) event, at the same time reducing the language of sacrament to "figurative speeches and Metonymies." Thus William Perkins, one of the more influential English Calvinists, describes a thoroughly figurative Eucharist in which the bread becomes a "signe" of Christ, its transcendental signified:

> There is a certaine agreement and proportion of the externall things with the internall, and of the actions of one with the actions of the other: whereby it commeth to passe, that the signes, as it were certaine visible words incurring into the external senses, do by a certaine proportionable resemblance draw a Christian minde to the consideration of the things signified, and to be applyed.[10]

By such an account the Lord's Supper does not embody so much as "resemble" its transcendental signified, becoming a representation of that which exists nowhere but in the mind or memory of its participants and is thus physically absent. Calvin himself defines sacrament as "an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith,"[11] and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church is largely in agreement:

> Transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasions to many superstitions.
>
> The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the means whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.[12]

And what of Donne? Though his youthful verse letters and much of the love poetry invoke a Catholic-sacramental theory of language, his later theological writings explicitly repudiate that "heresie of Rome, That the body of Christ may be in divers places at once, by the way of Transubstantiation" (*Sermons*, 9, 201).[13] Adopting an explicitly Calvinistic view, Donne inveighs against those who "attribute too much, or too little to Christs presence in his Sacraments," who would "imprison Christ *in Opere operato*." For "it is enough," the preacher concludes, "that thy Sacrament be a signe" (*Sermons*, 7, 267), a sign that awakens hope and memory rather than invoke Presence, working its changes in consciousness (that is, in the participants' "consciences") instead of the bread and wine. Directing attention to the past (or future, as Calvin's

"external sign . . . seals on our consciences the *promises* of his good will") rather than the present Eucharistic celebration, such language speaks only of the deferral of the signified, the absence of the Person from the words. Indeed, though Donne is generally thought to have repudiated Zwinglian interpretations,[14] he often describes the Eucharistic celebration as a fundamentally significative and thus commemorative event. "God in giving the law, works upon no other faculty but this,"

> *I am the Lord thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt*; He only presents to their memory what he had done for them. And so in delivering the Gospell in one principal seal thereof, the sacrament of his body, he recommended it only to their memory, *Do this in remembrance of me*. This is the faculty that God desires to work upon. (*Sermons*, 2, 237)

Elsewhere again Donne suggests that the priest "*offers up* to God the Father (that is, to the *remembrance*, to the contemplation of God the Father) the *whole body* of the *merits of Christ Jesus*" (*Sermons*, 7, 429). Thus *corpus* becomes *opus*, a figurative body: Christ's Real Presence, the theological ground of the Catholic priest's essentialist theory of language, retreats into memory and promise as it shrinks to metonymy, becoming (like the poet of Donne's youthful verse letters) a merely figurative presence that heralds absence.[15] Only language remains.

Where are we left? It may suffice to observe that Donne's verse letters explore the problems of authorial presence and literary form, that they undercut their own claim to express a priestly, presencing language and repudiate poetic form by turning into so many death notices and documents that record debt. Yet such observations bring us, more importantly, to a consideration of the *Songs and Sonets*, works occupying a middle position between the implicitly Catholic sacramentalism of the early verse letters and the figuralist reduction of the sacraments in Donne's sermons. Surely such theological distinctions as transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and commemoration bring changes to one's understanding of the powers of poetic language. We might ask, then, Does the poetry of Donne's middle years admit or lament the loss of sacramentalism? Or does Donne attempt to compensate for this loss by relocating Catholic modes of worhsip—of idolatry, some might say, and superstition—within the poetry of love? Donne the preacher condemns

the Roman Church for ascribing an "effective," that is, a performative power to ceremonies originally intended to be "significative":

> To those ceremonies, which were received as *signa commonefacientia*, helps to excite, and awaken devotion, was attributed an operation, and an effectual power, even to the ceremony it selfe; and they were not practised, as as they should, *significativè*, but *effectivè*, not as things which should signifie to the people higher mysteries, but as things as powerfull, and effectuall in themselves (*Sermons*, 10, 90-91).

Would Donne the preacher equally accuse Donne the poet, who makes similar claims for his rituals of language? The "bracelet of bright haire" described in "The Relique" has elicited responses ranging from wonder to repulsion; what, indeed, is the poet's attitude toward an image simultaneously sacramental and necromantic?

> When my grave is broke up againe
> Some second ghest to entertaine,
> (For graves have learn'd that women-head
> To be to more then one a Bed)
> And he that digs it, spies
> A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,
> Will he not let'us alone,
> And thinke that there a loving couple lies,
> Who thought that this device might be some way
> To make their soules, at the last busie day,
> Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?
>
> If this fall in a time, or land,
> Where mis-devotion doth command,
> Then, he that digges us up, will bring
> Us, to the Bishop, and the King,
> To make us Reliques; then
> Thou shalt be'a Mary Magdalen, and I
> A something else thereby. . . . (1-18)

The opening puns (ghest/ghost, entertain/inter) and the reduction of graves to adulterous beds are simultaneously witty and blasphemous,

though not so outrageous as the poet's own implicit apotheosis, his claim to become "a something else"—that is, a resurrected Christ to the lady's Mary Magdalen. Most readers have emphasized the poem's ambivalent attitudes toward love and death; what, we might ask, are its attitudes toward contemporary practices of faith? In fact the arguments remain ambiguous. Does "mis-devotion" reign *because* of an age's superstitious belief in relics and miracles? Or might this relic and the "miracles" (22) of love be in fact curative to an age's mis-devotion? Indeed, might the poet's own be such a time "or land, / Where mis-devotion doth command"? The gravedigger who finds this bracelet is hardly likely to gain favor before a Protestant "Bishop" or "king," who would more likely burn their bones than "make [them] reliques." But if this "mis-devotion" is no more than superstitious relic-worship, then the lyric itself is at once disabled along with the Catholicism. In fact the poem would admit a double failure: "These miracles wee did; but now alas, / All measure, and all language, I should passe, / Should I tell what a miracle shee was" (31-33). The failure of words (and the refusal, finally, to write of transcendent experience) is only the second of the poem's disablements: first and most significant is the loss of the *world* here described, a world of miracles and relics and "Guardian Angells" (25) as well as of faithful love. For miracles have ceased, many Protestants would assert. And unless the poet's present age can learn from "this paper" (21)—that is, the poem itself, particularly the third stanza, designed to have "taught / What miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought" 921-22)—then more shall have died than the two lovers: true love and true piety, true devotion shall have died along with miracles, along with poetry itself.

Reformation controversy, then, remains a subject of Donne's love poetry. And though the crisis is largely displaced, focused now on the acts and words of private lovers, his writing continues to dwell in a crisis of faith, which itself remains a crisis of sacramental, performative language. Perhaps the poet becomes his own priest? Does he not claim (though nostalgically, naively, perhaps) to create an imaginative realm in which the transforming powers of sacrament remain possibilities of poetic language? (Who but a believer, a reader who participates in its sacramental reality, could ever know?) Or is the poet's liturgical, sacramental language but a nostalgic glance backwards, empty of mystery, an elegiac commemoration that admits its own weakness? Is it, finally, an exercise in sheer wit, a verbal play that denies its truth-function at each turn, denying love-poetry in the process? It is, perhaps, all of these at

once, though the reader must make his or her own choice; Donne, I believe, knew this as well, that his invocations of sacramental theology would challenge their readers' faith as well as their powers of interpretation. In "Twicknam Garden," for example, the poet visits the Bedford ancestral estate not simply as an abject suiter but as a Romish priest, a "selfe traytor" (5) who brings with him the "spider love, which transubstantiates all" (6)—turning his "Manna," an Old Testament type of the Eucharist, to "gall" (7), thereby denying its powers to "cure" (4) or heal the love-sick poet. His tears, in addition, become "loves wine," invoking Christ's blood in the sacrament; but with what effect?

> Hither with crystal vyals, lovers come,
> And take my teares, which are loves wine,
> And try your mistresse teares at home,
> For all are false, that taste not just like mine. (19-22)

Though Gardner glosses "crystal vyals" as lachrymatories, tear-bottles left as funereal tribute to the dead, the passage is in fact an elaborate parody of the Roman Mass, the poet's tears miraculously transformed into wine which others are to bear, in chalices, to their own lovers—as both a communion sacrifice and a test of their faith. The poet-priest's communion, then, becomes a communion in bitterness and sorrow; though it can test a communicant-lover's faith, its saving power is denied.

While this and other lyrics ("The Canonization," say, and "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day") invoke the language and liturgical practices of Romanism, my point is not that Donne remains Catholic—though, of course, the influence of his religious upbringing would remain, regardless of later choices.[16] Nor am I interested in Reformation controversy *per se*, though even the most secular of Donne's writings often take this as a theme, at times indirectly, at times explicitly. I am interested, rather, in the *consequences* of this controversy, how it affects the poet's attitudes toward the powers and possible functions of language. Naively, then, the *Songs and Sonets* often cling to belief in a powerful, performative language; naively, they hold fast to the hope of poetic presence, even as they admit the loss of Catholic sacramentalism. Often, rather, they attempt to compensate for this loss by appropriating alternative belief systems, alchemy especially, to prop up their essentialist theory of language. There is, after all, an implicit identification between Hermeticism and "such Catholic sacramental rites" as transubstantiation, where

"the words uttered by the priest are considered to give effect to the miraculous change that occurs, the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ."[17] Paracelsus, for one, describes the *opus alchymicum* as a saving sacrament, turning the alchemist's art into a private priesthood, one that retains the miraculous power of language.[18] Of course, this displacement of sacramental theology from the priest to the alchemist is hardly a solution for the Protestants, who tend to treat Hermeticism with much the same skepticism. "There is a great difference," Luther writes, between such a sacrament as baptism and "all others invented by men," including the rites of "magicians" who "employ a sign or creature, such as a root or herb, and speak over it the Lord's prayer or some other holy word and the name of God, whereby "it should possess power and accomplish what it is used for." But "it is nothing and counts for nothing," Luther adds, "no matter what sign or word is used." Indeed, "even baptism would not be a sacrament without [God's] command."[19] The alchemist's language, like the priest's (like the poet's?), lacks power in itself. God's grace, not man's words, is the effectual force in the sacraments; baptism itself would fail, were it not for God's intervention.

Thus Donne's alchemical allusions raise the same interpretive problems as the allusions to Catholic sacramentalism; both invoke a theory of performative language whose workings are claimed for the poem itself, but whose validation remains outside the poem, in the reader's response. Like religious ritual itself, the poem's performative rites are fundamentally appeals to a reader's faith, an invitation to worship within the poetic space, to join in communion with the magus or poet-priest. Whether writing provides this sacred space, whether the text becomes the scene of presence, remains an issue as well. The remainder of this essay, then, explores the ways Donne's incarnational rhetoric is questioned and undermined by the nature of writing itself, by the written text's loss of authorial presence. I turn specifically to two poems of departure and absence, "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" and "A Valediction: of the Booke." For, more ambitiously than the verse letters, the valedictions search for a rhetoric to perform or enact the aims of their genre, a rhetoric—that is, a theology of language—that would enable the spiritual union of lovers (indeed, the continued *communion* of lovers) in spite of physical absence. One must still ask, of course, whether they succeed in this task, since they call self-critical attention to the problem of their own discursive procedures. How powerful, after all, how *presencing* is a rhetoric of icons (of homunculi drifting in tears and reflected on the surfaces of eyes)? Or of emblems (of compasses and

beaten gold)? Or of signatures? And yet, is there ever a stronger charm than one's name? Scratched in a window, cannot the poet's name express, as in Plato's *Cratylus*, the full powers of its object? Or is the inscription always too weak, always a *figurative* presence—always, as the Calvinist Perkins would say, a sacramental *metonymy*?

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"A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" oscillates between anxiety over absence and an extravagance of wit designed, it would seem, to defend against this anxiety, allaying it by rationalizing it away. But to such precarious swings of mood and argument the poet adds an attitude of linguistic skepticism. Early stanzas, admittedly, invoke an essentialist theory of language similar to that of the "*Cabalists*," those "Anatomists of words" who "have a theologicall Alchimy to draw soveraigne tinctures and spirits from plain and gross literall matter." By means of this verbal alchemy the Cabalist is able to discover the "mystick signification" and properties found "almost in every Hebrew name and word" (*Essays in Divinity*, p. 48), properties that the poet's own English name might share.[20] The poet seeks to become just such an "Anatomist of words," conjuring the lady's fidelity by means of his signature. The signature becomes coextensive with the living personality; to keep the name "alive," to keep it in memory by means of a written text or monument, is to preserve the man himself—for a man is otherwise "but oblivion," as Donne writes elsewhere in sermon, "his fame, his name shall be forgotten" (*Sermons*, 9, 62). It is as a charm against "oblivion," then, a charm against his own loss of "fame" and identity—in short, his loss of a "name"—that the poet inscribes his signature in the lady's window. And yet the argument ultimately turns in upon itself, ironically questioning the power of such a charm, indeed questioning the poem's own capacity, as writing, to persuade and sustain love in absence.

I

My name engrav'd herein,
Doth contribute my firmnesse to this glasse,
Whiche, ever since that charme, hath beene
As hard, as that which grav'd it, was;
Thine eyes will give it price enough, to mock
The diamonds of either rock.

II

'Tis much that Glasse should bee
As all confessing, and through-shine as I,
'Tis more, that it shewes thee to thee,
And cleare reflects thee to thine eye.
But all such rules, loves magique can undoe,
Here you see mee, and I am you.

III

As no one point, nor dash,
Which are but accesarie to this name,
The showers and tempests can outwash,
So shall all times finde mee the same;
You this intirenesse better may fulfill,
Who have the patterne with you still. (1-18)

The poet begins by asserting an absolute identity between *res* and *verbum*, the name sharing in the powers of the person. The name becomes, in Donne's own Cabalistic language, a "soveraigne spirit" that substitutes for the poet's living personality, sharing in the poet's life—a spiritual double that grants him the power literally to be in two places at once, expressing his "firmness," his fidelity, his "through-shine" or innocent nature.

Praise of the lady's eyes is a well-worn Petrarchan compliment, her gaze imparting to the engraved name a value greater than diamonds. The compliment also serves to draw her eyes to the text of his inscribed name, a text which, as she reads, he shall interpret—and in interpreting, in drawing "soveraigne tinctures and spirits from plain and gross literall matter," the poet shall "charme" the lady's understanding. The glass, however, the otherwise frail "body" which this name-spirit now inhabits, is itself multivalent: on the one hand, its transparency reveals the poet's selfless and pure devotion; on the other, it acts as the lady's mirror, reflecting her beauty (or her vanity?). Like the deep-drawn lines of his etched signature, neither "showers" nor "tempests" can "outwash" the poet's fidelity. And the poet's own interpretation of this fragile text (this vitreous union of opposites, of transparency and opaque reflection), discovers yet another "mystic signification": with her reflected image superimposed upon his engraved name, the glass asserts, or rather inscribes, their essential unity—"Here you see me, and I am you." The

poet's own name thus claims the lady's reflection or visual representation as its signified, declaring its right and power to name her, in fact to possess her in the way that each mystic *verbum* invokes and unites with its *res*. "Loves magique," therefore, which here can "undoe" the "rules" or laws of separate physical identities, proceeds by an act of nomination.[21] But even as the poet rules over its interpretation, it is the lady who must "fulfill" this text, who must complete and actualize it in her own life. She alone ensures its "intirenesse," its unity of signifier and signified (that is, of the poet's name and the lady's self-image) by remaining in its physical presence; she must herself "read" it and adopt it as a "patterne" or Platonic ideal to emulate. "Patterne" does, of course, enjoy this mystic sense, one that emphasizes the divine reality of archetypal love ("The Canonization" [45] providing a more famous example of this usage). Yet it can also refer to the art of pattern-cutting or engraving, a meaning which emphasizes the sheerly material, even decorative rather than spiritual reality of this signature. Upon careful scrutiny, then, the language of this third stanza—even as it argues for the text's "firmnesse" and "entirenesse"—becomes progressively unsettled. Though "no one point, nor dash" of this signature can be "outwash[ed]," nonetheless the engraving, the written inscription, has become "but *accessarie* to this name," but an *accidens* or supplement. A wedge is at once driven between the living name and the dead letter, between the material sign and the breathed utterance. To work "Loves magique," the name must be conjured—that is, *spoken*, rehearsed and invoked into the audience's (or speaker's own) mental presence, drawing its life-blood parasitically from the speaker's spirit-breath. From this point on the poem asks, metadiscursively, Does the material inscription express the same powers as living speech? Does writing, and reading, imperil the workings of a word's magic? Is it unity and presence, or the poet's very absence, that his written name asserts? The Cabalistic "charme" of his name would unite the poet and lady, body and soul, signifier and signified in a *mysterium conjunctionis* of spoken language; from this point on, almost with each succeeding stanza, the name loses more and more of this power, shattering the unity of the sign, of the lovers's souls, of the poet's own living relation with his discourse.

So long as the poet serves as her tutor, interpreting its meaning in her physical presence, her fidelity, he feels, is secure; in his absence, though, how shall the lady herself choose to read it? By its very nature esoteric, does not the Cabalistic text prove inaccessible—senseless, worthless

even—to all but the adept? In the poet's presence, the name is "hard" (4), firm and constant; in his absence it becomes, of a sudden, "*too* hard and deepe" (19), its "learning" (20) lost. Thus the poet casts the efficacy of his signature in doubt, questioning the capacity of writing to "teach" fidelity:

III

Or if too hard and deepe
This learning be, for a scratch'd name to teach,
It, as a given deaths head keepe,
Lovers mortalitie to preach,
Or thinke this ragged bony name to bee
My ruinous Anatomie. (19-24)

The lady has not learned this Cabalistic power of names, a power which would preserve the poet's living presence; as his "bone" (28) and skeleton, the etched lines become but fragments of the poet's "scatter'd body" (32)—like a "deaths head," then, the engraved name shall "preach" of "Lovers mortalitie." More, in fact, than a *memento mori*, the inscription commemorates the author's own death and dismemberment in writing, his "ruinous Anatomie." For it is in the very nature of writing that it inscribe "absence, darknesse, death; things which are not" ("A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day," 18); though it attests to an author's desire for presence, the poem itself becomes a sign or Zwinglian record of absence, the written trace of a (once-)living consciousness.

Lacking the power to sustain life, the name leaves behind but a lifeless death-mask made in promise of return. Thus admitting the failure of Cabala, the poet turns suddenly to the Christian *Eschaton*, when "the same body, and the same soul, shall be recompact again, and be identically, numerically, and individually the same man."[22] Here in sermon, a maturer Donne restates with absolute conviction the ultimate restoration of soul and body, a doctrine of theology that the poet now appropriates for his own "Scriptural" text, his signature: though the poet and name alike suffer death-in-absence, his return, recapitulating Christ's resurrection, will "repaire / And recompact" his "scatter'd body" (31-32), restoring breath and life to his "bony name" (23). Still, the name's promise of a future resurrection offers little control over the present situation, a loss which the poet attempts to redress by reclaiming some measure of its former power. Though its "soveraigne spirit" has fallen silent, the poet now endows the word with the "vertuous powers"

of "love and grief," twin "starres . . . in supremacie" whose "influence" flowed into the word's "characters" at its conception/inscription:

VI

Till my returne repaire
And recompact my scatter'd body so,
As all the vertuous powers which are
Fix'd in the starres, are said to flow
Into such characters, as graved bee
When those starres have supremacie,

VII

So since this name was cut
When love and grief their exaltation had,
No door 'gainst this names influence shut;
As much more loving, as more sad,
'Twill make thee; and thou shouldst till I returne,
Since I die daily, daily mourne. (31-42)

The argument, though neat, is undercut by its own rhetoric. Stars may, perhaps, influence earthly creations; what influence, though, can "love and grief" exercise when theirs is but a figurative "exaltation"—when astrology is itself reduced to metaphor? Paradoxically, the poet's death-in-absence becomes his own best argument for her continuing fidelity: if not love, then a widow's grief shall compel some observance of chastity, making her "daily mourne."

While early stanzas are complimentary, the tone and attitude thus darken with each subsequent stanza, modulating from praise, to "teach[ing]," to "preach[ing]," to ironic rebuke. For as his name weakens in its powers, the lady's potential for infidelity seems steadily to increase, turning her from a Laura worthy of Petrarchan admiration into a Catullan Lesbia. And what begins as elegant, if somewhat extravagant compliment degenerates into domestic comedy:

VIII

When thy'inconsiderate hand
Flings out this casement, with my trembling name,
To looke on one, whose wit or land,
New battry to thy heart may frame,
Then thinke this name alive, and that thou thus
In it offendst my Genius.

IX

And when thy melted maid,
Corrupted by thy Lover's gold, and page,
His letter at thy pillow'hath laid,
Disputed it, and tam'd thy rage,
And thou begin'st to thaw towards him, for this,
May my name step in, and hide his.

X

And if this treason goe
To'an overt act, and that thou write againe;
In superscribing, this name flow
Into thy fancy, from the pane.
So, in forgetting thou remembrest right,
And unaware to mee shalt write. (49-60)

One notes the patent unpersuasiveness of such spells and the poet's comic inability to control either the language or the lady. He offers but the illusion that his name shall come alive, becoming the author's "Genius." And though the pane seems to trembl[e], in fear of its own violation, when her "inconsiderate hand" flings open the casement, yet the text-window remains a dead letter: the lady shall but "thinke this name alive." In his physical absence, moreover, a maid will take the poet's place as her tutor, "disput[ing]" with her the truth and worth of a competing text, a rival's letter. Incapable of preventing the lady's "treason" (her own letter-writing to the rival), the most powerful defense his name now offers is a temporary dislexia—a misreading, and a miswriting, on the lady's part. "In superscribing" or addressing her letter his own name shall "flow" into her "fancy," and "unaware to mee shalt write." Far from sustaining her memory, the inscription is no longer faithful even to itself: reduced to forgery, to its own misappropriation of another's writing, the poet's signature can hope only to contaminate the lady's own text and interpretation, causing her to "forget" rather than "remember right."

In *Essays in Divinity* Donne meditates upon a similar theme, the weakness of engravings or "Medalls" to sustain memory:

> Amongst men, all Depositaries of our Memories, all means which we have trusted with the preserving of our Names, putrifie and perish. Of the infinite numbers of

> the Medals of the Emperors, some one happy Antiquary, with much pain, travell, cost, and most faith, beleeves he hath recovered some one rusty piece, which deformity makes reverend to him, and yet is indeed the fresh work of an Impostor.
>
> The very places of the *Obeliscs*, and *Pyramides* are forgotten, and the purpose why they were erected. Books themselves are subject to the mercy of the Magistrate: and as though the ignorant had not been enemie enough for them, the Learned unnaturally and treacherously contribute to their destruction, by rasure and misinterpretation. (*Essays in Divinity*, pp. 43-44)

In what sense can poetry do better? Tied to the problem of preserving one's name and memory is the problem of forgery, of substitution-in-absence which mocks the "faith" of those deluded by such fiction. Texts, like "Medals," become the "fresh work of an Impostor." Later in this essay Donne compares the book composed by human hands to the "*Book of Life*," an originary or arche-writing of which God is the author, and "Names honour'd with a place in this book, cannot perish, because the Book cannot" (*Essays in Divinity*, p. 44). Yet man's own writings, the "means which we have trusted with the preserving of our Names, putrifie and perish." In a similar vein, "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" describes the poet's loss of the power of naming (and of self-presencing, self-preservation through naming). Far from sustaining his own living voice, the engraved name becomes the poet's grave—a gruesome pun that has echoed throughout the poem from the beginning stanza.

Writing, then, both the name and the poem itself, cannot guarantee the lady's faith. Indeed the poem ends by denying its own arguments, explicitly rejecting the claim that writing sustains love:

> XI
>
> But glasse, and lines must bee,
> No meanes our firme substantial love to keepe;
> Neere death inflicts this lethargie,
> And this I murmure in my sleepe;
> Impute this idle talke, to that I goe,
> For dying men talke often so. (61-66)

Their "firme substantial love" is a love in and of the flesh—unashamedly so, given the suddenly sexual overtones of the poet's language. As a "dying" man, upon whom "Neare death inflicts" a "lethargie," one might imagine that the poem's climax becomes the poet's own, each spent in an act of verbal/sexual eroticism (as if the final stanzas had been spoken not from the window but from the bed). Truly, only their continued physical presence can keep the (male) poet's (fleshly) love "firme" and "substantial." Unless, of course, the whole poem has been but fiction, but an elaborate fantasy of power, jealousy, infidelity, and sexual possession all played out in the space of writing. And though the lady is imaginatively present in the poem, is she present in the act of writing (dying-spending)? It seems that the poetry of incarnationism, of sacramental, bodily presence, is suddenly reduced to carnal fantasy. All, even the dramatic situation, has been played out in the imagination; all is in fact already absent—all is wish-fullfillment, all is writing. A letter may "be written far off," yet acts of writing and reading become a "Conference, and *seperatos copulat* . . . we overcome distances, we deceive absences, and wee are together, even then when wee are asunder" (*Sermons*, 1, 285). Donne cites St. Ambrose as his authority; one wonders, though, if the ambiguities and implications of the language here exceed the preacher's intentions, questioning even the possibility of an incarnationist rhetoric. For the letter does not "overcome" so much as "deceive" absences, its feeling of intimacy and of dialogue reduced to an effect of language, to a sophist's deception. Indeed the phrase, *seperatos copulat*, suggests the sort of fantasy-union that Derrida, interpreting Jean jacques Rousseau, terms a "dangerous supplement," a transformation of written discourse into an act of auto-eroticism—surely a blasphemous thought, given Donne's divine subject, and yet it is only within a genuinely sacramental theology of language that such union-in-absence is ever more than a poet's, or reader's, narcissistic fantasy.[23] And the poet of "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" is unable to claim for his language the power either of Hermetic or of sacramental presence.

The subject of this final stanza is thus simultaneously sexual and textual, a (written) fantasy of speech and physical presence. Observe the dual reference in "lines," for example, suggesting both the etched lines of the engraved signature and the poet's verses about them—in a word, the present poem, which ends by ironizing the whole enterprise of valediction, turning itself into "idle talk." And beyond its possible sexual overtones, what is this "lethargie" that "Neare death inflicts" if not the poem itself? Writing, Derrida reminds us, is "the becoming-absent and

the becoming-unconscious of the subject," the subject's "relationship with its own death." "On all levels of life's organization, that is to say, of *the economy of death*, all graphemes are of a testamentary essence."[24] Certainly "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window" discovers such a grapheme in this name, the poem itself preaching the death of living speech, the death of the transcendental subject, the death of the author, in writing.

"Amongst men, all Depositaries of our Memories, all means which we have trusted with the preserving of our Names, putrifie and perish" (*Essays in Divinity*, p. 43). Thus Donne describes the humanist problem of history and cultural loss. In apparent contradiction, "A Valediction: of the Booke" turns to writing—the "booke" especially, that so thoroughly humanist symbol—as an antidote and preservative against time, absence, loss, ignorance, schism:

> I'll tell thee now (deare Love) what thou shalt doe
> To anger destiny, as she doth us,
> How I shall stay, though she esloygne me thus,
> And how posterity shall know it too;
> How thine may out-endure
> Sybills glory, and obscure
> Her who from *Pindar* could allure,
> And her, through whose helpe *Lucan* is not lame,
> And her, whose booke (they say) *Homer* did finde, and name.
>
> Study our manuscripts, those Myriades
> Of letters, which have past twixt thee and mee,
> Thence write our Annals, and in them will bee,
> To all whom loves subliming fire invades,
> Rule and example found;
> There, the faith of any ground
> No schismatique will dare to wound,
> That sees, how Love this grace to us affords,
> To make, to keep, to use, to be these his Records. (1-18)

"Destiny," so dreaded a divinity in the song, "Sweetest love, I do not goe," is here reduced to a court decree, "esloyn[ing]" (that is, eloining or banishing) the poet from realm and lady alike. And in this banishment lurks a double crisis. The preservation of their love depends on the preservation both of their "learning" and their "faith" (15)—each of which, in turn, shall depend on the lady's acts of reading and writing.[25]

She is urged to "Study" their "manuscripts, those Myriades / Of letters" and, in an act of humanist philology, to rewrite them, rendering them into a book of "Annals."

Such an act, such a *text*, would resolve the intellectual crises of Donne's age, completing the humanist recovery of ancient wisdom, the confirmation of modern science, and the Reformation defense of "faith" from schism. The lady is to wage a pamphlet war, as it were, against love's "Vandals" (25) and "schismatique[s]" (16), "anger[ing]" the very forces that banish the poet from his homeland and his love. Recovered and reinterpreted as history, their letters shall become no less than the repository of all recorded wisdom, of all cultural accomplishments and value, a veritable "universe" (26) of knowledge. The lady herself becomes polymath, wisdom's protector and polemicist—a *defensor fidei* whose own fame, enrolled in the writing, shall "out-endure / Sybills glory" and all the great women of legend and literary history. But more than legend, more even than intellectual history, her writing shall be divinely inspired, for she has been chosen as Love's Exegete, a type of St. Paul whose words shall achieve the status of Holy Writ. The lady and poet together are thus "to make, to keep, to use, to be these his Records." Of course such language is either profoundly innocent or blasphemously arrogant in its implications: not only "mak[ing]" but "be[ing]" these "Records," the lovers become simultaneously the living witnesses and written Testaments to a god that has chosen them, called them to his priesthood, and inspired their "Booke" or Bible.

Then again this, precisely, is the aim of valediction, to admit no divorce between lady and letter, name and numen, poet and poem. By becoming love's priests, by invoking a theology of language that preserves presence in writing, the poem unites (or confuses?) *ethos* and *bios*, writing and life. Her book becomes the means by which the poet "shall stay" with her, the means by which "posterity" shall know their love, and the means by which the lady shall herself remain faithful. Thus the permanence and security of their love rests thoroughly, and perilously, in writing:

> This Booke, as long-liv'd as the elements,
> Or as the worlds forme, this all-graved tome,
> In cypher write, or new made Idiome;
> Wee for loves clergie only'are instruments.
> When this booke is made thus,
> Should again the ravenous

> Vandals and Goths inundate us,
> Learning were safe; in this our Universe
> Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick,
> Angels Verse. (19-27)

"Long-liv'd as the elements," a *monumentum aere perennius*, the book shall preserve learning from violence and loss, offering "rule and example" to its readers. Indeed the next three stanzas catalog the kinds of learning, secular as well as religious, this text shall offer. Here "Loves Divines" (28) may study the more "abstract spiritual love" (30) whose meaning lies beyond the physical act of sex, or, "loth so to amuze / Faiths infirmitie," such students of their love might instead "chuse / Something which they may see and use" (32-34): their love-making, rendered as a text or symbolic action, shall offer a sensuous "type" (36) of spiritual union—a material signifier to "figure" (36) or represent the spirit, enabling it to be "see[n] and use[d]." Lawyers, too, shall learn here "More then in their books" (38), while "Statesmen, (or of them, they which can reade,) / May of their occupation finde the groundes" (46-47).

But how should writing accomplish this? The present poem does not itself claim to preserve love, either by enacting, sustaining or commemorating it; rather it *urges the lady to write* this saving, preserving text. The poem also records a tension common to all Donne's valedictory poetry, the tension between speaking and writing: the poet will "tell" (1) the lady what she herself should write, and what the effect of the writing should be, all the while hiding from himself the written nature of his own discourse, the fact that he asserts for her "Booke" or text a preservative power he does not claim for his own. Thus the security and continuance of love lies forever outside the present poem in a future writing, a new book which, alone, would be "long-liv'd as the elements." It would be, that is, *if* it were written; and even if written, in what way would it be interpreted? Composed "in cypher . . . or new made Idiome," who other than the two lovers shall be able to read it? The poet has already questioned whether many "Statesmen," the poet-priest's secular counterpart, "can reade" (46) such a text, and indeed, while none whom they now govern "dares tell" their "weaknesse" (52), those who can read it shall find that it "deadly wounds" their "art" (48)—becoming "subject," one might presume, "to the mercy of the Magistrate . . . as though the ignorant had not been enemie enough" (*Essays in Divinity*, p. 44). Their "learning," then, the very text she is supposed to write, would be endangered by its subversive doctrine on the one hand, and on the other

by its occult idiom, its heiroglyphics or grammatology. Like Scripture or a newly recovered ancient text, her book becomes not the preservation of learning but itself an object of "Study," in need of translation (and capable, it would seem, of mistranslation and misuse).

"In this thy booke," the poet adds, "such will their nothing see, / As in the Bible some can finde out Alchimy" (53-54). What is this final knowledge, then, this "nothing"? Is the hidden widom of "Alchimy" actually recoverable from the Bible, or do they search the book in vain for a knowledge that is nonexistent, truly nothing at all? "As though the ignorant had not been enemie enough" for such a book, "the Learned unnaturally and treacherously contribute to [its] destruction, by rasure and misinterpretation" (*Essays in Divinity*, p. 44); indeed, the book is put under erasure (*sous rature*, in Derrida's formula) even before it is written. For if Holy Writ cannot escape misreading, how can the lady's? Though "the word of God is an infalible guide," Donne the preacher observes,

> God hath provided thee also visible, and manifest assistants, the Pillar his Church, and the Angels his Ministers in the Church. The Scripture is thine onely, Ephod, but *applica Ephod*, apply it to thee by his Church, and by his visible Angels, and not by thine own private interpretation. (*Sermons*, 1, 283)

The word is itself "an infalible guide," and yet it remains in need of a professional priesthood, a professional critic or interpreter. The individual reader, uninspired, will inevitably find "nothing," or simply read wrong. Of course, the two lovers are to be its "clergie," a priestly caste in control of its interpretation; their own tradition, therefore, and not the individual reader's weakened powers, is to regulate the meaning. So long as they live and serve as its "Ministers," the book can be sustained in its singular and determinate, though mystic meaning; with their death, however, the book loses its priesthood—and that which is to preserve culture shall fall silent, its learning forever inaccessible to the world. Though "long-liv'd as the elements," in what way can this book claim, therefore, to live? Is its claim to life and permanence not undercut by its very status as an "all-graved tome"? Once again the writing heralds absence: the "all-graved tome," an obviously punning phrase, becomes grave and tomb for the lovers, their faith, their private experience and knowledge. One is brought to remember that the "well-wrought urn" of Donne's "Canonization"—that seemingly firm and eternal monument

to love—is a funeral urn, a literary monument that commemorates, and in commemorating proclaims but the absence, and the death, of the author in writing. For "it is this life of the memory," Derrida observes, "that the *pharmakon* of writing would come to hypnotize: fascinating it, taking it out of itself by putting it to sleep in a monument."[26]

"Thus vent thy thoughts," the poet advises, reducing her writing to a purgation or exhalation (a dissemination?): "abroad I'll study thee, / As he removes farre off, that greate heights takes";

> How great love is, presence best tryall makes,
> But absence tryes how long this love will bee;
> To take a latitude
> Sun, or starres, are fitliest view'd
> At their brightest, but to conclude
> Of longitudes, what other way have wee,
> But to marke when, and where the darke eclipses bee?
> (55-63)

One must "take" or survey loves, like "great heights," from a distance. No longer an involuntary banishment, the poet's departure becomes an attempt to gain perspective, to distance himself from his own subject of "study," the lady's love and continued fidelity. Just as eclipses are used to measure longitude, the poet's absence now "tryes how long this love will bee." Departure has thus turned into a test, while the lady has herself turned into a text, the subject of reading interpretation. Her writings, her actions, her fidelity in his absence will be carefully observed and evaluated (from an academic perspective, "graded") by the poet. Far from overcoming or lamenting his absence, the poem ends by rationalizing it—justifying it, as it were, "in the interests of knowledge."

On the surface, then, "A Valediction: of the Booke" expresses confidence in the lady's devotion and in the strength of their relationship; beneath the surface, however, and beneath the extravagant, Petrarchan praise lies a challenge to the lady, that she not slacken in her love. It is a challenge which the poem offers, but one whose outcome the poem cannot guarantee; thus the phrase, "dark eclipses" casts its pall over the preceding stanzas, reminding lovers and readers alike of what is actually at stake. Occasioned by the poet's departure, the valediction turns self-consciously to an exploration of poetry itself, of its in/capacity to sustain life and ensure the fidelity, not simply of the woman, but of writing. For it is not just the physical separation of lovers, and not just the

separation of spirit from flesh, that such a poem seeks to overcome; it must seek, ultimately, to overcome the separation of *verba* from their *res*, enabling the poet and lady, as two of its crucial signifiers, to be incarnate in the flesh of language, literally to be in, indeed, *to be* those "Records" inscribed in the text. And if this incarnationism is denied? What happens when sacramental presence, the alchemy of poetic language, is reduced to a mere trace of memory? Then writing provides but a weak compensation and surely no antidote for absence, becoming a *pharmakon* or drug—or, more precisely, a compulsive action that seeks to allay (though it can never cure) the anxiety of separation.

Notes

[1] The sermons are quoted from *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953-62). The love lyrics are quoted from Helen Gardner's edition, *John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965). Donne's familiar letters are quoted from *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholar's Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977). The verse letters are quoted from *John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters*,, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967). *Essays in Divinity* are quoted from Evelyn M. Simpson's edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952).

[2] *Body Theology: God's Presence in Man's World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 92.

[3] Alla Bozarth-Campbell, *The Soul's Body: An Incarnational Aesthetic of Interpretation* (University: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1979), p. 104.

[4] Bozarth-Campbell, *The Word's Body*, p. 39. And "with the interpreter's bodily presence placed at its disposal," the poem thus "receives a human voice and achieves its entelechy, while at the same time it gives its potential speech over to a human subject" (p. 43).

[5] *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), p. 17. This phonocentrism, as Derrida observes, is implicitly theological in character, the foundation of Western metahysics: "The system of 'hearing (understanding)—onself-speak' through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch," emphasizing the difference "between the worldly and the nonworldly, the outside and the inside," the "transcendental and empirical" (pp. 7-8). Phonocentrism thus provides the basis—or illusion, Derrida would suggest—of "the self-presence of the cogito" and of intersubjectivity in general, "the co-presence of the other and the self" (p. 12). Of course, Derrida sets writing against the rhetoric of presence, denying the interiority of phonocentrism and radically separating the signifier from its transcendental signified—denying, therefore, the very possibility of an incarnationism that asserts the unity of speech, meaning, and subjective consciousness—in terms of Christian theology, of the Word made Flesh. Unlike the naive essentialism of Romantic poetry (the most common prey of deconstructive readings), Donne's writing proceeds from an explicit and largely systematic theology of language, one which Donne himself simultaneously exploits and questions; the problem Donne's writing poses, then, is not simply the phonocentrism, but whether or not the poet discovers an adequate *theological* solution to the problem of presence, sacramentalizing language in such a way that the poem becomes a sacred space evoking the Real Presence of its subject. Incarnationist rhetoric is always subject to deconstruction (that is, to linguistic and epistemological skepticism); my own reading of Donne seeks to demonstrate as much, though we should also seek to understand this rhetoric *on its own terms* and explore its resources of argument, acknowledging its dominance in many of Donne's writings, secular as well as religious.

[6] Alexander Sackton notes the problematic nature of these lines, where "the poem is made at once able and unable to speak": "Donne and the Privacy of Verse," *Studies in English Literature* 7 (1967), 77. His remains a useful survey of Donne's early sonnet-letters, though see also Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 34-43 *et passim*.

[7] "In the History or style of friendship, which is best written both in deeds and words, a Letter . . . is of a mixed nature, and hath something of both" (*Letters*, p. 114). See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), and J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969).

[8] *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), p. 521.

[9] *The Satires, Epigrams, and Verse Letters*, p. 214.

[10] *The Golden Chain*, in *Workes* (London, 1612), I, 82. Quoted in Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 80.

[11] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, 14, 1, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1277.

[12] Article XXVIII, *Of the Lord's Supper*. Quoted in E. J. Bicknell, *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, ed. H. J. Carpenter (London: Longmans, 1957), p. 382. The next article elaborates, the nature of sacrament being that of a "sign" (Article XXIX).

[13] Also rejected is "that dream of the Ubiquitaries, That the body of Christ must necessarily be in all places at once, by communication of the divine Nature. For, if the angel argue fairely, logically, sincerely, (*He is not here, for he is risen*) then there is no necessity, there is no possibility of this omni-presence, or this multi-presence. . . . Because he is ascended, he cannot be here, here in the Sacrament, so, as you may break or eat that body" (*Sermons*, 9, 201-02). Thus Donne rejects the sacramental theologies of the Lutherans (that is, the "Ubiquitaries") as well as Catholics. Elsewhere Donne terms transubstantiation an "hereticall Riddle of the Roman Church, and Satan's sophistry, to dishonour miracles, by the assiduity and frequency, and multiplicity of them" (*Sermons*, 7, 294). The implication is poignant: miracles (of language, certainly) have ceased—for the poet, one might presume, as well as the priest—since "the word of consecration alter[s] the bread, not to another thing, but to another use . . . the enunciation of those words doth not infuse nor imprint this grace, which we speak of, into that bread" (*Sermons*, 2, 258).

[14] See Itrat Husain, *The Dogmatic and Mystical Theology of John Donne* (London: Macmillan, 1938), p. 29.

[15] Finally, this devaluation of Catholic sacramentalism reflects the age's broader revaluation of its cultural past, a rediscovery of history that displaces the "eternal present" of the medieval consciousness. It is ironic that Petrarch, among the first to devote his life to the recovery of the past—one who writes epistles to the great authors of antiquity—is also the first person to sense the irrecoverability of their voices as a living presence. Virgil has fled into the imperfect records of his language; no longer, as for Dante, is he a present guide through the world. Promise and commemoration assert only future and past referents. Yet the individual must still discover in his or her own life the present assurance of a salvation which has at once been made uncertain. Predestination, through the inscrutible workings of providential history, reduces the future to a divine factandum; original sin, the genetic encoding of sin into the human organism, projects itself through time, limiting the freedom and powers of the individual living in the present moment. What certitude does one find in a theology of language that defaces the present before the tyrannous hold of past and future event, reducing religious rituals of language to commemoration and promise?

[16] For biographical discussion of Donne's Catholicism, see Dennis Flynn, "Donne's Catholicism," *Recusant History* 13 (1975-76), 1-17, 178-95. Marius Bewley ("The Mask of John Donne," in *Masks and Mirrors: Essays in Criticism [New York: Atheneum, 1970], pp. 18-49) and John Carey (John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press], pp. 159-59) both speculate on the ways in which Donne's Roman Catholic upbringing influenced his sensibilities as a poet.

[17] John G. Burke, "Hermetism as a Renaissance World View," in *The Darker Vision of the Renaissance: Beyond the Fields of Reason*, ed. Robert S. Kinsman (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974), 102. In many respects, Burke adds, Hermeticism arises in response to Reformation controversy, seeking "to promote toleration between Catholics and Protestants" as well as "to reconcile and reunite Christianity" (114). See Frances A. Yates, "Religious Hermeticism in the Sixteenth Century," in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 169-89 et *passim*, and Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), pp. 3-173.

[18] See Carl Jung, *Alchemical Studies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1967), p. 186.

[19] D. Martin Luthers Werke, XLIX (Weimar, 1913), pp. 128-29. Quoted in Burke, pp. 102-03. "Surely," Perkins writes, "if a man but take a view of all Popery, he shall easily see that a great part of

it is mere magic" (*The Golden Chain*, I, 40). Both Calvin and, in the following passage, Bishop Hooper argue similarly: the Roman Mass is "nothing better to be esteemed than the verses of the sorcerer or enchanter . . .—holy words murmured and spoken in secret" (quoted in Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 53).

[20] *The Divine Names* of Pseudo-Dionysius and Cornelius Agrippa's *Philosophy of Natural Magic* are among the many possible sources for Donne's "theologicall Alchimy." For discussions of Donne's use of the occult sciences see Joseph A. Mazzeo, "Notes on John Donne's Alchemical Imagery," in *Renaissance and Seventeenth Century Studies* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), pp. 60-89, and Eluned Crashaw, "Hermetic Elements in Donne's Poetic Vision," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), pp. 324-48. For a useful general study see Brian Vickers, "Analogy versus Identity: The Rejection of Occult Symbolism, 1580-1680," in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 95-163.

[21] Thomas Docherty reads the valediction as an ironic exploration of the powers of naming, though he offers Biblical rather than alchemical parallels (*John Donne, Undone* [London: Methuen, 1986], pp. 174-85). A suggestive general discussion of the problem of nomination is Geoffrey Hartman's "Words and Wounds," in *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 118-57.

[22] *Fifty Sermons*, 29. Quoted in Husain, *Dogmatic and Mystical Theology*, p. 73. Noting the poem's continuous allusion to Scripture, Gary Stringer offers a typological interpretation, where Christ's death and resurrection, his departure and promised return to the disciples provides the theological basis for the poet's own promise of return: "Learning 'Hard and Deepe': Biblical Allusion in Donne's 'A Valediction: Of My Name, in the Window,'" *South-Central Bulletin* 33 (1974), 227-31. While Stringer's analysis uncovers the incarnationist theology of language that underlies the poem, other readers have questioned and ironized the poem's rhetorical procedures. John Barnard, for example, suggests that the poem explores "the subliminal struggle of faith and doubt in the religion of poetry" ("Orthodoxia Epidemica: Donne's Poetics and 'A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 71 [1972], 384); though it initially claims the power of magic, it admits, ultimately, that "not magic but rules govern our lives" (p. 388). I would add, simply, that Donne's skepticism is simultaneously linguistic and epistemological, an argument already partially outlined by D. H. Roberts, who suggests that the poem illustrates the "ultimate denial of identification" between signifier and signified ("'Just Such Disparitie': The Real and the Representation in Donne's Poetry," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 41 [1976], 101).

[23] *Of Grammatology*, pp. 141-64.

[24] *Of Grammatology*, p. 69.

[25] Suggestively, Anne Ferry describes "A Valediction: of the Booke" as Donne's deliberate divergence from the classical conventions of "eternizing verse": *All in War with Time: Love Poetry of Shakespeare, Donne, Jonson, Marvell* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 67-125. In contrast, Raman Selden analyzes the poem as an expression of the poet's "incarnational conviction." See his article, "John Donne's Incarnational Conviction," *Critical Quarterly* 17 (1975), 55-73.

[26] *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 105.