John Donne Journal
Vol. 16 (1997)

Donne's Obscurity: Memory and Manuscript Culture

Richard B. Wollman

> For, here we see God *in speculo*, *in a glasse*, that is by reflexion,
> And here we know God *In aenigmate*, sayes our Text, *Darkly*,
> (so we translate it) that is, by obscure representations.
> (*Sermons* VII: 220)

The discovery of over 250 seventeenth-century manuscripts of Donne's verse, in addition to Ernest Sullivan's documenting of the poet's considerable presence in print in his own lifetime, has proven the label "coterie poet" an inadequate description of Donne.[1] His manuscript habits cannot be isolated from his presence in print since Donne was aware of his popularity in both media, and both systems of transmission in a complex way helped define and identify his audience and shape his poetic practice. The nature of his metaphysical conceits needs to be once again addressed if we are to understand how the *conditions* of writing—the interplay between the manuscript transmission and the wide unauthorized circulation in print, the present and future audiences—so deeply affected the writing itself.

Recent critics (some consciously, others not so consciously) have revived old arguments over the "obscurity" of the verse itself.[2] Arthur Marotti calls attention to Donne's "magnificently unnecessary difficulty" and concludes that although Donne at times invites a certain "intimacy" with his readers, his relation to his audience is also "insulting" and "adversarial."[3] John Carey also interprets Donne's "obscurity" as the choice of a "superior" and "difficult" poet to alienate an audience of "barbarous clods and half-wits" while communicating more or less directly with a "few kindred spirits."[4] These modern views echo old

opinions held by readers—from Ben Jonson and William Drummond to Samuel Johnson—who sought to define (negatively) the practice of those poets who, in Dryden's well-known disparagement, "affect[ed] the Metaphysics."[5] Unlike T.S. Eliot, who while reading Donne in the light of the French Symbolistes, insisted that "poets . . . must be *difficult*," most readers of Donne's conceits have found his "difficulty" unsettling, if not simply hard to account for.[6]

Although those after Eliot investigated with unparalleled creativity and vigor *how* metaphysical conceits worked, they were often forced into the role of apologists who were at times uneasy with Donne's obscurity. Under the influence of the alluring formulations of Eliot, the critics of the forties, fifties, and sixties gave us a Donne who "felt [his] thought as immediately as the odour of a rose," and many times treated the difficulty of Donne's conceits as unfortunate hyperbole.[7] Eliot notes Samuel Johnson's distaste for the "limitations" of the "obscure" metaphysical poets, although he thought this to be a trumped up charge, and he challenged his readers to assimilate and master Johnson's criticism in order to "break up the classification" that placed Donne with lesser poets. Despite Eliot's perceptive reading of Johnson, an explanation for *why* metaphysical poets wrote the way they did has never been convincingly put forward, in part because Donne's obscurity is always being interpreted in light of Johnson's criticisms and in part because studies of Donne's poetics have been focussed disproportionately on social and political explanations.

In shaping their image of Donne, Marotti and Carey turn to the actual conditions of writing, but because the lens they read through unnaturally magnifies the importance of patronage and "social environments," we are once again presented with a Donne whose difficulty is attributed to the failure of a manuscript poet's lonely superiority. Marotti's belief that Donne's contemporary readers "found themselves unable to maintain social and intellectual contact through the medium of a relentlessly perplexing text" leads him to conclude (using Stanley Fish's phrase in another context) that Donne's poems are "self-consuming artifacts" that ". . . undo their own deceptive lines of development as they become virtual meta-poems, that is lyrics that are

about the nature and process of writing" (*Coterie Poet*, p. 71). Such a rendering neglects the possibilities Donne saw for the future of his verse and underestimates the power of manuscript poetry as a powerful means of preserving the poems and the poet. Donne's conceits were built to last; their obscurity was a functional part of how the poet sought in manuscript to "preserve frail transitory fame" for "future times."[8]

When Ben Jonson proclaimed that "Donne himself, for not being understood, would perish," he was commenting on the nature of Donne's wit (which Jonson, on some occasions, failed to appreciate), particularly his opinion that Donne's metaphysical conceits were too obscure to survive over time, much less in their present time. To Jonson—the poet who fastidiously prepared his own *Workes* for print—Donne was obscure because he not only used language that seemed to refuse to accommodate his general reader but also because he chose to remain in manuscript. Jonson's Donne is a stubborn manuscript poet whose far-fetched conceits would perish as a result of their own brilliance and the audience's inability to apprehend them. Jonson, for different reasons, like Marotti, tends to confuse "wit" with "obscurity" when speaking of Donne even though the terms ought not to be equated. In *Timber*, Jonson defines wit in terms hostile to the poetry of Donne, explaining that "style in writing" should "be not winding, or wanton with far-fetched descriptions" since "either is a vice." Jonson, following Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, praises the elegant use of metaphor employed "fitly" and with "propriety," in contrast to metaphors "farfet" which "hinder to be understood."[9] Donne, who Jonson said "for not keeping of accent deserved hanging," seems to be the antithesis of the kind of poet whom Jonson most esteems—though Jonson had also said, according to Drummond, that "He esteemeth Donne the first poet in the world, in some things."

Donne's wit, however, is predicated on the "far-fetched," and indeed, in certain senses which must be explored, intentionally meant—only upon *initially* apprehending his images—to "hinder to be understood." Yet Donne, the manuscript poet, was also concerned about the survival of his works and refers in several places in his poems to a future audience, as Achsah Guibbory has claimed.[10] In "A Valediction: of the

Book," Donne explains "How I shall stay . . . And how posterity shall know it too" by studying the "Records," "Annals," and "manuscripts" of the "letters" that will become the "rule and example" for future lovers. His verse is a "peece of Chronicle" in "The Canonization;" the "paper" that teaches a future "age" in "The Relique"; and in the numerous references to his own writing in the verse letters, Donne is aware that his audience extended well beyond his immediate circle of like-minded wits. On the other hand, Donne would not wholly agree with Milton in *Areopagitica* that "Books are not absolutely dead things," or at least he was more concerned with their tendency to die without "treasuring up a master spirit" for "a life beyond life." "For with how much desire," Donne writes in a letter to George More, "we read the papers of any living now (especially friends) which we should scarce allow a . . . shelf in our library, if they were dead?"[11] Books and writing, according to Socrates, who prefers like Donne "living discourse," serve only to "remind one who knows that which the writing is concerned with," but Socrates "allows that writing serves the purpose of storing experience in the memory for oneself and posterity."[12] Medieval Platonists and Aristotelians all agreed, as Mary Carruthers explains in *The Book of Memory*, that "writing on the memory is the only writing truly valuable for one's education, literary style, reasoning ability, moral judgment, and (later) salvation, for in memorizing one writes upon a surface one always has with one." She continues, "what one writes on the memory can be at least as orderly and accessible to thought as what it is written upon a surface such as wax or parchment."[13]

Donne shares this medieval regard for the memory and adapts it for his own use in metaphors that describe the effects of "writing on the memory." In a verse letter, "To Sr. Edward Herbert. At Julyers," he praises Herbert in terms pulled from the medieval art of memory:

> This makes it credible, you have dwelt upon
> All worthy bookes, and now are such an one.
> Actions are authors, and of those in you
> Your friends finde every day a mart of new. (47-50)

Using an extraordinary word to extend the metaphor of memory, Donne exclaims that Herbert has "disaforested his minde" (l. 10), an English pun for the Latin *silva*, which was, according to Quintilian, the memorial forest of the mind, "a mass of unrelated and disordered material" where one's "beasts" run wild and are therefore hidden from view.[14] Edward Herbert becomes the "worthy books" he reads because he has an ordered memory which has "assign'd" a "due place" (*locus*) to "his beasts" (ll. 9-10).

In "To Sir *H.W.* at his going Ambassador to *Venice*," Henry Wotton's knowledge of "learned papers" is "stor'd" in the "rich treasury" (ll. 9-11) of his memory, where Donne asks that his own "honest paper" be "admit[ted]" and given "audience" (ll. 17-8). The Countess of Bedford is "all record, and prophecy" of "past and future stories," a living reader whose memory Donne calls "the transcript" ("To the Countesse of Bedford," ll. 51-2, 56). And, punning on his own name, Donne writes of the "destiny" of what he has written to Magdalene Herbert, "When thou hast done, / Perchance her cabinet may harbour thee . . . " ("To Mrs. M.H.," ll. 33-4). Donne imagines a life beyond life for his poems, preserved for the future without print and without regard for the immediate physical survival of the paper on which they are written. For writing on the memories of such readers both immortalizes his subject and the poet himself, a process Donne likens to "resurrection" in another verse letter, "To Mr. T.W." (Thomas Woodward). After having waited eagerly for his letters, Donne finally receives one and writes back to say

> And now thy Almes are given, thy letter'is read,
> The body risen againe, the which was dead,
> And thy poore starveling bountifully fed. (7-9)

Donne's use of the medieval metaphors for memory is not restricted simply to speaking *about* the memory; we must examine the role of the memory in Donne's shaping of his own conceits, for it works in distinct ways to ensure survival of the poems not in books or on paper but in the reader who encounters the poet's conceits and then lodges them in his or her own memory.

The metaphysical conceit acts as a mnemonic device that imprints itself (unforgettably) as an image in the memory of the reader, where an idea may be abstracted and passed on to the judgment to be understood. "Man cannot understand without images [*phantasmata*]," according to Aquinas, and for Donne it is also true. Aquinas, following Aristotle's *De Anima* as he received it through the translation of William of Moerbeke, conveys the dual role of the memory as receiver and transmitter of those *phantasmata*. He raises the question as to what part of the soul the memory "belongs," then locates the faculty of memory in the "phantasy" [or imagination], the "sensitive part of the soul," which, according to Frances Yates, "takes the images of sense impressions."[15] "But," Aquinas says, the "intelligibilia are *per accidens* memorable, for these cannot be apprehended by man without a phantasm" (Yates, p. 71). The intellect shares the faculty of memory with the imagination for from images it abstracts ideas. Images first reach the common sense (*sensus communis*) then are referred to the imagination or phantasy or sometimes directly to the memory, depending on when the recipient of the image needs it—and depending upon, at least for Donne, whether the reader has what he calls in the *Anniversaries* an "impotent receiver." It is easier to remember images than words or ideas, *memoria rerum* easier than *memoria verborum*, but for Aquinas and Donne alike, an image without a word, a phantasm without an idea abstracted from it, fails to produce *pathos* or affection, which is the end result of a memory properly trained not simply in the practice of rote memorization but in the creative activity of the faculty of memory.[16] The memory itself is neither image nor idea but a habit of mind in all the moral and ethical senses which Aristotle intended for the word.[17] The manuscript poem is an *aide de memoire* in which Donne presents distinctive, seemingly incomprehensible, images that "hinder to be understood" so that the image may be lodged more securely in the memory, which for Donne was the middle faculty of the soul between the understanding and the will, where it may then become comprehensible once the reader discards the image and gets the idea.[18]

Achsah Guibbory and Noralyn Masselink have traced the importance of the memory in Donne's epistemology, both focussing almost

exclusively on the *Sermons*, where Masselink shows how Donne relies upon the Aristotelian Thomists for his formulation of the importance of memory as a "*necessary condition* for the function of reason."[19] But far from being restricted to the *Sermons*, Donne's claim that "the art of *salvation*, is but the art of *memory*" helps explain how the poet came to think of his poetic conceits as serving both the earthly and heavenly purposes contained in the word "salvation." For when connected to the memory, "salvation" retained the meaning—from Aquinas onward—of preserving an image in human memory *and* of making a soul fit for heaven—important aims for both the poet and the reader encountering the poems.

Donne drew upon the practice of the ancient art of memory as it was filtered through the Christian thinking of Aquinas. Citing Cicero "in his Rhetoric," who himself was drawing upon the *Ad herrenium*, Aquinas adapts the classical prescriptions for unusual imagery to his own precepts for memory, commenting that "what is strongly impressed on the soul slips less easily away from it."[20] Echoing Cicero in *De oratore*, who calls for "images which are active, sharply defined, [and] unusual," Aquinas explains that one who wants to remember "should assume some convenient similitudes," but should not choose ones that are "familiar," since "we wonder more at unfamiliar things and the soul is more strongly and vehemently held by them." Both Aquinas and Cicero make use (for different purposes) of the *imagines agentes* described in the *Ad herrenium* as the kind that "adhere longest in the memory" because they "establish similitudes as striking as possible." The author of *Ad herrenium* characterizes *imagines agentes* in terms strikingly similar to Samuel Johnson's *discordia concors* in his famous definition of the metaphysical conceits of Donne and his followers. For Johnson's "combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike" and the "yok[ing] by violence together [of] heterogeneous ideas" are definitions of the metaphysical conceit which conform to the "striking similitudes" prescribed for the memory in *Ad herrenium*, in which one must "assign to [the image] exceptional beauty or singular ugliness . . . or somehow disfigure them . . . so that its form is more striking."

Through Aquinas, who justifies the use of the so-called artificial memory by passing Cicero's ideas through the filter of Aristotle's *De Anima*, Donne finds a way to apply what was once strictly a mnemonic art to the creation of the most unusual and striking poetic conceits. Through a mistranslation of Cicero, Aquinas substitutes *solicitudo* for *solitudo*, a subtlety which introduced a powerful devotional and meditative component to the function of memory which not only ennobled that faculty of the soul but also opened up the possibility for a poet like Donne to see it as the proper function of poetry. Aquinas himself said that "to proceed by various similitudes and representations belongs to poetry which is the lowest of all doctrines";[21] this, I think, shows Donne's extraordinary use of Aquinas's ennobled faculty of memory to ennoble poetry itself and shows how it came to be true that, in Sidney's words, "verse far exceedeth prose in the knitting up of memory."[22] Aquinas provides Donne with the framework for using exceptional and striking imagery in the service of the memory and with a way to record those images in the memories of his readers who will preserve Donne's name.

The outrageous, even obscure, nature of metaphysical conceits that so graveled Samuel Johnson (and continues to frustrate modern readers) did so, however, because Johnson had no taste for the subtle way in which the terms of Donne's outrageous conceits are also just or appropriate once understood. To get to what Drummond—also negatively—described as the "scholasticall quidditie" or essence of the conceit requires an action of the mind (for Donne an action of the soul) that extracts in almost alchemical fashion the *just* idea from the *outrageous* image imprinted as a seal in wax upon the memory. We must acknowledge that Donne's conceits are strange, but there is a meaning and a method to the strangeness that corresponds to the three parts of the soul—the understanding, the memory, and the will—which he draws upon to preserve the manuscript poet's meanings in the memories of the souls of readers.

The striking images of the "stiff twin compasses" in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and the "bracelet of bright hair about the bone" in "The Relique" are also (but not only) mnemonic devices. Both

conceits indeed use conventional material—the compass, the love token—but employ them in unusual ways to make them, among other things, memorable. If the reader relies solely on the visual content of Donne's conceits, however, the images, though fixed in the part of the memory that merely stores—in the Anglo-Saxon "keep," the "wordhoard," the "treasury," the "file cabinet," or the computer's "folder"—will nevertheless remain unintelligible phantasms and will remain obscure. For as Lodowick Bryskett explains, the common sense "moueth the understanding *after* it hath received the formes or images of things fro[m] the outward senses, & layeth then up materiall in the memory where they be kept."[23] Understanding Donne's "images" involves moving beyond the visual apprehension of the "outward senses" to what Burton calls the "wit," the "agent. . .which abstracts those intelligible species from the phantasy, and transfers them to the passive understanding" where they may be judged "true or false," and "being so judged . . . commit[ted] . . . to the passible to be kept."[24] Donne's images that "hinder to be understood" use obscurity to begin the process which implants his conceits in the memory so that they may be understood: after the outrage, we may "see" that they are just.

To illustrate the epistemology at work, I find it worthwhile to do what sometimes seems out of fashion these days: to read a well-known poem again rather than avoid it:[25]

When my grave is broke up againe
Some second ghest to entertaine,
(For graves have learn'd that woman-head
To be to more than 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 there 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;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time, miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles we harmelesse lovers wrought.

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
Yet knew not what wee lov'd, nor why,
Difference of sex no more wee knew,
Then our Guardian Angells doe;
Comming and going, wee
Perchance might kisse, but not between those meales;
Our hands ne'r toucht the seales,
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free:
These miracles wee did; but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should passe,
Should I tell what a miracle shee was.

The "bracelet of bright hair about the bone," which is startling in its novelty, provides the reader's eyes with a profane image of sexual intercourse, which Donne has us see so we may move beyond it to his idea of a divine love that will resurrect him on "the last busie day." The image alone serves as a mnemonic device, but if left in the reader's memory *as* an image, remains incomprehensible and contradictory. The poem is filled with puns and the verbal pyrotechnics which readers of Donne have come to expect; however, Donne's wit hinges not upon local ingenuity or metaphysical sleight of hand but upon the deeply serious business of enacting in the poem (and in the reader) a transformation that allows him to *do* what he says: to "sp[y]" a profane image but to "*thinke*" the sacred thought "that there a loving couple lies" (my emphasis). The idea of his conceit issues forth from an image but may not by earthly sight be (finally) apprehended.

But how is the process of "seeing" with the memory enacted in this poem (and others), how would a reader see *in essentiam* and not *per accidens* (through sense and fantasy) so that the image is transformed into conceit, from visual form to abstracted form, and therefore understood? The intellective act in collaboration with the memory—after the understanding has been confounded, or in the instance of some readers, offended—takes place in part in Donne's use of language, where etymology becomes essence through puns. For Donne uses wordplay to extract the essence or idea from his image of the bracelet of bright hair about the bone.

Donne asks his reader not to be the gravedigger who commits a "misdevotion" by seeing rather than thinking, and the poet, more explicitly than might seem at first, announces that he is employing a conceit by declaring that he himself "thought" the bracelet to be a "device" in the sense of literary emblem or conceit. We see the hair about the bone but must think and know that "a little stay" is an etymological rendering of the word "bracelet," and if we follow the rapid associations of Donne's wit, we know too that a brace may also be a pair.[26] The pair of lovers wish to make "a little stay" on "the last busie day" at which time they may meet and linger between the temporal "business" and the eternal rest (which would presumably be the great "stay"); the "little stay" "at the last busie day" or the Resurrection is Donne's attempt to make a profane image lead logically and analogously to a meeting of the eternal and the temporal. And all through a witty conceit for sexual union since the bracelet and the little stay are one and the same "device."

Those who misdevote by relying upon their eyes alone will make a relic of the bracelet, in effect will practice a devotion which, according to Donne's precise logic, would be idolatrous.

With Christ-like impatience (for those who seek visible signs), Donne proceeds to instruct those who are seeking miracles in this time of misdevotion. And like Christ, Donne deals in miracles to explain those "we harmelesse lovers wrought." Understanding this phrase necessitates a shift from eye to ear, since it is crucial when we read the

word "harmelesse" to hear the word "armless," as it would be pronounced by Donne's readers.

The bracelet, which is an emblem for the pair of lovers, shows them in their present state of dissolution without arms or "*brachia*"—without its etymological root, the "harmeless lovers" are transformed into a little nothing; the pair literally and figuratively provide an answer to the "phoenix riddle" of "The Canonization": "So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit. / Wee dye and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love" (25-27).

The armless embrace at once points to sexual union even as it seeks to suppress and surpass it as the image of earthly love gives way to the idea of divine love. To make such an analogy, Donne must have had in mind the armless embrace which Augustine speaks of in Book X of *The Confessions* in which he instructs his reader to think "not" of "the embrace of limbs" but of the "embrace of God."[27]

The resurrection of the lovers which Donne seeks in "The Relique" may be wished for in the language he uses, and by moving away from image towards idea, he shifts from *memoria rerum* to the more difficult *memoria verborum*; but it is structure finally that allows Donne to make his conceit just and to surpass the limits of a language which has no vocabulary for the "miracles" his "harmelesse lovers wrought." "All measure, and all language, I should passe," he concludes, "Should I tell what a miracle shee was," yet the poet has other means of eloquence to effect his salvation through resurrection "at the last busie day" and to make his poem speak.[28]

That there is no vocabulary for talking about what happens to the souls in "The Relique" Donne makes clear; however, the structure of the poem indeed "speaks" of resurrection. Donne informs us in a sermon of the problems that attend attempts to understand the resurrection:

> The Resurrection of Christ, was so far from being cleare and obvious to the best, and the best illumined understandings, as that, though Christ himselfe had spoken often of his Resurrection, to his Disciples, and Apostles, yet they did not clearly, thoroughly, (scarce at all) understand his Resurrection . . . .

> Christs Resurrection, even after it was actually accomplished, was still a mystery, out of the compasse of reason.[29]

"Out of the compasse" of "reason," but not of memory, which is the faculty linked to resurrection through remembering oneself and Christ:

> That man, who through his own *red glasse*, can see Christ, in that colour too, through his own miseries, can see Christ Jesus in his blood, that through the calumnies that have been put upon himself, can see the revilings that were multiplyed upon Christ, that in his own imprisonment, can see Christ in the grave, and in his own enlargement, Christ in his resurrection, this man . . . beholds God.[30] (1622 Sermon on Job 36:25, IV: 174)

Donne, who says that "There may be enough in remembring our selves" (II: 74), asks the reader of "The Relique" to behold the image of the bracelet and the poem itself and to remember, that is to see in the memory the "loving couple" rather than the decayed carcasses, their bodies resurrected "at the last busie day." Memory is necessary for understanding and seeing after the faculty of reason or understanding has been thwarted by Donne's phantasm.

Resurrection and sex, however, are difficult to talk about since it involves for us (and for Donne) something there is no real vocabulary for. It is easier to get it wrong than to get it right, which, I suspect, is a large part of Donne's point in this poem. In another poem—"Resurrection, imperfect"—Donne indeed ceased speaking after 22 lines and seemingly left the poem unfinished while appending the Latin tag, "*Desunt caetera*," "the rest is lacking." Donne left the poem intentionally unfinished because he was not yet privy to the full significance of the mystery of resurrection that would explain how one might apprehend Christ's "power to make even sinfull flesh like his."

"Resurrection, imperfect" in its very imperfection helps us read "The Relique," for Donne tells us that "Had one of those, whose credulous pietie / Thought" (rather than relied on his eyes to understand

or "leaden and iron wills" to apprehend Christ), "that a soule one might discerne and see / Goe from a body, 'at this sepulcher been, / And, issuing from the sheet, this body seen, / He would have justly thought this body 'a soule, / If not of any man, yet of the whole."

Whether this poem is unfinished or not seems to me questionable, since its 22 lines—precisely two thirds of the 33 lines of "The Relique"—point to Donne's intention to stop short of supplying the missing third of the poem. What is lacking is the memory which would abstract the universal truth ("whole") from the sensible particular ("any man"), and without the memory of Christ and oneself, "this [resurrected] body" may be "seen" but not "thought"—"sinful flesh" remains so since all correspondence is gone. Seeing and thinking, image and idea, accident and essence fail to align themselves in proper relation, which results in a poem "lacking" a complete body.[31]

Not so in "The Relique," however, a finished poem in which Donne accomplishes something he could not in "Resurrection, imperfect" by incorporating (both literally *and* figuratively) the problem of the difficulty of understanding that mystery of resurrection that is "out of the compasse of reason" even to Christ's own disciples. The structure of "The Relique" speaks of perfection in three stanzas which comprise 33 lines, Christ's perfect age at the resurrection, and provides what was lacking in the other poem, the "device" which enables a reader to "justly thinke a body a soule." The poem and the paper it's written on provides an image of sex which is at first outrageous then just in its idea of a resurrection, perfect.

The structure of 33 lines is not the meaning but the means by which Donne may speak of things otherwise left unsaid. Form speaks but in a murmur and the structure reinforms the words and images, which should make the reader, who by now has firmly lodged Donne's image in the mind, abstract from that image the idea of divine love, of resurrected flesh, and of the power of the memory in the service of salvation. Donne both illustrates and enacts the process and makes good on his role as the poet of memory who sings like Moses to a future audience at the end of the *Second Anniversarie*. Inscribed and imprinted unforgettably on his reader's memory, Donne has no need

and in fact must avoid drawing too much attention to the "paper" on which he has written his lesson in meditative mnemonics. He shuns print not to remain in obscurity but to make that obscurity functional and just, for to mistake the physical poem for its meaning is to make it a relic and to misdevote, rather than to turn body into soul and perfect the poet's resurrection through memory.

The metaphysical conceit as mnemonic device is Donne's answer (in advance) to Hobbes's view of the memory as nothing more than "decaying sense," and it is where he locates the primary office of the poet: to "enrol" the "fame" in "verse," which he tells us in the *First Anniversarie* has a "middle nature"—that place of memory between the understanding and the will where Donne entrusts his poetry, where the perplexed understanding is rectified by the ennobled memory, and where the manuscript poet placed his own hopes for salvation.[32]

Simmons College

Notes

1. In "The 'Press and the Fire': Print and Manuscript Culture in Donne's Circle," *SEL* 33:1 (Winter 1993), 85-97, I suggest that although the label of "coterie poet" may speak to Donne's desire to control the circulation of his poems—especially early in his career—the proliferation of manuscript transmission makes clear that he knew audiences other than his immediate coterie would be reading his poems. As Dayton Haskin points out, "New Historical Contexts for Appraising the Donne Revival from A.B. Grosart to Charles Eliot Norton," *ELH* 56:4 (1989), 873, "the idea that Donne was a coterie poet . . . was already known to the nineteenth-century revivers." J.B. Leishman, in "'You Meaner Beauties of the Night': A Study in Transmission and Transmogrification," *The Library*, 4th ser., 26 (1945), was the first to revive the idea in this century. Leishman, and more recently, Arthur F. Marotti, in *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), rely heavily upon Donne's lack of presence in print to help shape their idea of his poetic practice. Alan MacColl's careful speculations in "The Circulation of Donne's Poems in Manuscript," *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A.J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972) are based upon close study of the transmission of known manuscripts; however, he grants that the *Songs and Sonnets* "are a more complicated and uncertain case" (p. 42). New information about the number of Donne's extant manuscripts and significant presence in print should put an end to the speculations about this "coterie poet" by giving us more of an understanding of the complex nature of his role early and late in his own century. Even if Donne had wanted to restrict his audience to a coterie of like-minded wits—and certainly he was not without ambivalence about this—his verse had, according to Ernest W. Sullivan, a "more general readership" and "through acknowledged or unacknowledged intertextuality . . . became part of the discourse of an entire society . . . ." See *The Influence of John Donne: His Uncollected Seventeenth-Century Printed Verse* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), pp. 2-3, 7.

2. In 1946, Arnold Stein, "Donne's Obscurity and the Elizabethan Tradition," *ELH* 13 (1946), 98-118, writes that "Donne's purpose, in all these kinds of obscurity . . . is to stimulate his fit readers, to increase the pleasure and profit of his communication to them, and at the same time to discourage the unfit by making the labor of appreciation too strenuous" (p. 104). Robert Lathrop Sharp, in "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," *SP* 31 (1934), 497-518, like Stein, understands Donne's obscurity as the "result of intention" (p. 497) on the part of the poet. These critics, no doubt inspired by T.S. Eliot's declaration that modern poets must be "difficult," appreciate Donne's obscurity and emphasize its power to be "stimulating" (Stein, p. 103). They acknowledge that Donne's art is an exclusive art, but seem to have much less of a problem with

that idea than this century's readers. I am indebted to Dayton Haskin for both of these references.

3. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet*, pp. 23, 70-71. Marotti, who calls Donne's verse "metacommunicative," "self-reflexive," and "self-consuming," considers every social, political, and economic circumstance which might have influenced Donne, but since he deems the difficulty of the verse an obstacle, does not imagine that Donne put his poems together in such a way as to be understood by both a coterie audience, a wider public audience, and even a future audience. He concludes that Donne's poetry "invites deconstructive readings" [*Critical Essays on John Donne*, New York: G.K. Hall, 1994, p. 5].

4. John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 19.

5. Drummond complains in a letter to the King's physician Arthur Johnston of "Men of late" who "abstract" poetry to "*Metaphysical* Ideas, and *Scholastical* Quiddities" and whose verse is too difficult to "understand, and reach the Sense of the Writer" [*Literary Criticism of Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Edward W. Tayler, New York: Knopf, 1967, pp. 215-16]. Jonson, as reported by Drummond, thought the "*Anniversarie* was profane and full of Blasphemies" because Donne's conceit failed to reach the sense of that reader ("Certain Informations and Maners of Ben Johnsons to W. Drumond," Tayler, p. 84.) Samuel Johnson, who found Donne's "combination of dissimilar images" perverse and the poet's "yok[ing]" of ideas "violent," both admired and scorned those writers he "termed" the "metaphysical poets," and like those who preceded and followed him, had trouble figuring Donne's relation to his contemporary audience. Dryden worried (facetiously) that Donne's "nice speculations of philosophy" would "perplex the minds of the fair sex," which shows if nothing else that the "perplexity," "obscurity," and "difficulty" of Donne's conceits has always been a preoccupation of Donne's readers.

6. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), p. 65. Eliot directs us to twentieth-century France where poets employ "curiously similar" techniques to those of Donne and the Metaphysicals: "obscure words" and "simple phrasing." Although Eliot himself was not troubled by the "obscurity" of Donne's conceits, he never read them *as* conceits, but as "images"; his defense of Donne continues to be the basis of others' attacks.

7. I have in mind the mixed praise of Grierson's 1921 "Metaphysical Poetry," in *Seventeenth-Century English Poetry: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. William R. Keast (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 12-13: "If some of the elegiac pieces are packed with tasteless and extravagant hyperboles, the *Anniversaries* (especially the second) remains, despite all its faults, one of the greatest poems on death in the language. . . ." In Brooks's "The Language of Paradox: The Canonization," in *John Donne: A Collection of Critical Essays*,

ed. Helen Gardner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 100, we can hear the critic consider and deflect criticism of Donne's difficulty even as he tries to make it "normal": "Even the apparently simple and straightforward poet is forced into paradoxes by the nature of his instrument . . . . Such a method, like any other, carries with it its own perils . . . . The method is an extension of the normal language of poetry, not a perversion of it." No, indeed, but Brooks, like many others, did not consider *why* the method may have been consciously chosen by Donne.

8. "To the Countesse of Bedford. On New-yeares day." *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York University Press, 1968), ll. 11, 14. Subsequent references to Donne's poems are from Shawcross.

9. *Timber: or Discoveries*, *The Complete Poems*, ed. George Parfitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), pp. 427, 431.

10. "A Sense of the Future: The Projected Audiences of Donne and Jonson," *John Donne Journal* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1983), pp. 11-21. Guibbory writes that ". . . Donne at times wanted an influence greater than the circle of the present could afford. So he prophetically looked towards the future for his largest audience . . ." (p. 13). Although I don't think that Donne's work may be properly termed "prophetic" in the sense that Milton's is, Guibbory is surely right in claiming that Donne "envisions a large future audience that will be taught, even transformed by his poems" (p. 13). My aim here is to show the epistemological basis for the transformation.

11. "To Sir G. M[ore]," Edmund Gosse, *Life and Letters of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899; rprt., Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 1:123.

12. Plato, Phaedrus 275D

13. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 30.

14. According to Carruthers, "Without the sorting structure [of the memory], there is no invention, no inventory, no experience and therefore no knowledge—there is only a useless heap, what is sometimes called *silva*, the pathless 'forest' of chaotic material" (p. 33).

15. *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 71.

16. "*Memoria* refers not to how something is communicated, but to what happens once one has received it, to the interactive process of familiarizing—or textualizing—which occurs between oneself and others' words in memory" (Carruthers, p. 13).

17. For a more thorough and eloquent account of the background and relation of *ethos* and *mneme*, see Carruthers, who sums it this way: "The basic connection between the process of sensation which ends in memory, and that

of human emotional life is fundamental for understanding the crucial role memory was thought to have in the shaping of moral judgment and excellence of character" (p. 68). Carruthers's observations pertain to the medieval period, but apply to the Renaissance as well. My aim is not to claim that Donne was medieval in his thinking but to trace how he complicates and expands the medieval materials at hand to address his own current concerns as they are changed by the advent of print.

18. Edward W. Tayler, *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in "The Anniversaries"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), shows how Donne follows Augustine's "tendency in arguing that the most important of the three psychological powers or faculties is not the reason or the will but the memory" (p.40).

But unlike St. Ignatius, whose meditations must begin with the memory (*compositio loci*), proceed to the understanding, then to the will (colloquy), Donne "[in the *Anniversaries*] radically changes the order and importance of these faculties as they are codified by Ignatius" (p. 84) by placing the understanding "prior in order but not in importance; memory, which is first in psychological and theological power" is second in order (p. 88). Tayler explains most eloquently how in the *Anniversaries* "Donne . . . puts his trust in the memory, giving to that faculty the dignity and power it had acquired in Plato and Augustine—far beyond anything attributed to it in the Jesuit 'composition of place'" (p. 87). This is also true of both the religious and profane poetry Donne wrote prior to the *Anniversaries*, for Donne never trusted the process of earthly seeing to understand what is presented before one's eyes. Although he begins with the faculty of understanding, his metaphysical conceits actually *thwart* our eyes with incomprehensible images in the hope of progressing to the kind of "seeing" performed by the memory that after lodging the image produces something like an idea. Understanding by seeing an image is followed by another kind of seeing with the memory, which entails better eyes.

19. Noralyn Masselink, "Donne's Epistemolgy and the Appeal to Memory," *John Donne Journal* Vol. 8, Nos. 1 & 2 (1989), p. 57; and Achsah Guibbory, "John Donne and Memory as 'the Art of Salvation,'" *Huntington Library Quarterly* 63 (1980), pp. 261-74. Masselink presents Donne as a strict Aristotelian Thomist in his thinking about the faculty of memory, and her thesis is sound: ". . . memory is a prerequisite for understanding; without memory, reasoning is impossible" (p. 57). Without the Platonic- Augustinian tradition provided by Guibbory, Chamberlin, Mueller, and Webber (from whom Masselink distances herself), an understanding of Donne in sermons and in poetry is incomplete. For Aquinas' model of the mind—and Donne's—draws equally upon Aristotle for abstractive cognition (*De Anima*) and upon Augustine (*De Trinitate*) for its tripartite structure. My aim is to show not that Donne is "Platonic-Augustinian" or "Aristotelian- Thomistic," but how he marshalled his

materials of thought from all that was available and modified the role of the three faculties according to his own wit.

20. Quaestio XLIX, *De singulis Prudentiae partibus*: articulus I, *Utrum memoria sit pars prudentiae.* Cited in Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 73.

21. *Summa theologiae*, I, I, quaestio I, articulus 9. Yates, p. 78.

22. *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones and J. van Dorsten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 101.

23. Lodowick Bryskett, *Literary Works*, ed. J.H.P. Pafford (Amersham, England: Gregg International, 1972).

24. *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Pt. I, Sec. I, Mem. 2, Subs. 7.

25. While participating on a panel discussion of "The Relique" at the 1995 John Donne Society Conference, I was at once amazed, pleased, and concerned to listen to what the witty moderator referred to as "a ninety-minute freefall." Different readers hawked their readings, some alternately chiding Donne for his profane images and admiring his verbal ingenuity, others looking to provide contexts historical, political, social, or biographical to explain what was there in the poem. I heard in virtually every opinion a desire to understand the poem, although the image of the bracelet brought out such consternation and ferment as to make me wonder if we could get past the image *as* image and get *at* what the image, and therefore the poem, meant. For there is no other way to understand (in every sense of that word) without *seeing* the very image that for some confutes the understanding with the outrageous power of a phantasm. I hazard a reading of this familiar and extraordinary poem here for anyone who believes that indeterminacy does indeed lie in the eye of the beholder, who wants to distinguish between unfortunate hyperbole and metaphysical wit, and who wants a place to land (after the heady and precipitous freefall) somewhere reasonably closer to where the poet might have stood.

26. I am indebted to Michael Mack for his invaluable help in reading this poem.

27. In the *Symposium* Plato talks about climbing the ladder to have intercourse with being at the top. For other possible sources or precedents for such union of sacred and profane love, see the Psalms, in which God is Israel's "helpmeet fit"—an unexpected spin on Genesis, where to be in God's image, according to the Hebrew syntax, has something to do with being both male and female.

28. See M. Thomas Hester, "'this cannot be said': A Preface to the Reader of Donne's Lyrics," *Christianity and Literature* 39:4 (Summer 1990), for his excellent treatment of the trope of inexpressibility in Donne. Hester sees Donne's restrictions as to what he can or cannot say as part of a "theological lexicon" Donne draws from recusant discourses and his Catholic background—

the "spiritual (and political)" "Counter-Reformation vocabulary" which informs the poems. This is a different approach from the one I take here, although certainly not incompatible, and the context Hester provides helps us understand why Donne might find the art of memory appropriate to speak of "mysteries": "The embedded allusions to the Eucharist in Donne's analogies of sexual and divine intercourse . . . exploit an article of faith which both churches agreed was finally 'mysterious'; but the doctrinal vocabulary used to present his outrageous metonymies transfers the terms identified with the warring parties in the controversy about the Sacrament and the government's statutory responses in that war to the speaker's defense of and the auditor's response to his (libertine) amatory creed of sexual incarnation" (p. 374).

29. *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (10 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953- 1962) VII: 99-100.

30. See Masselink for her many examples of Donne on memory in the *Sermons*. Donne's epistemology, in Masselink's formulations, is more or less based in Ignatian meditation. She traces Donne's thinking back to Aquinas with skill, though she tends to conflate the faculties of memory and understanding.

31. See Kate Gartner Frost, "Magnus Pan Mortuus Est: A Subtextual and Contextual Reading of Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect'," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T.* Shawcross," ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995), pp. 231-261, in which she sees "Resurrection, imperfect" as a completed 23-line poem.

32. This essay is dedicated to George Getz, a grandfather and a scholar. A shorter version was presented at the 1995 MLA convention in Chicago in a session sponsored by the John Donne Society.