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**The Nature of Man: John Donne's**  
*Songs and Holy Sonnets*

**By Donald E. Zimmerman**

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EMPORIA, KANSAS

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Vaine lunatique, against these scrapes I could  
Dispute, and conquer, if I would,  
Which I abstaine to doe,  
For by to morrow, I may think so too.  
—*Woman's Constancy*

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## FOREWORD

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One of the remarkable things about Donne's poetry is that, seemingly in any age, it remains *avant garde*. One rather suspects that this verse is as close as it is possible to come to literary abstractionism; certainly, Donne's symbolism is as far removed from the traditional poetic imagery as Picasso's *Seated Woman* is from Whistler's *Mother*. Further, if there had been jazz in Donne's time, one supposes that Donne might well have been chief among its exponents. Like the young men of our time, Donne had a fervent desire to experience, to know; he pursued a disturbed quest for truth in an age of shifting values; and he was shaken by soul-deep doubts of his own worth or identity.

Some critics seem to doubt that Donne ever gets around to formulating a philosophy, that his claim to fame lies elsewhere. For example, Joan Bennett feels that "Donne and the poets most influenced by him were not speculating about the nature of things." Although she is not alone in this opinion, it seemed ill-considered to me. Other critics, including Tillyard, believe that Donne *is* speculating about the nature of things, specifically about the *nature of man*. Considering Donne's evident intellect and known history, I was inclined to agree with the latter point of view.

D. E. Z.

*Emporia, Kansas*  
April, 1959

# The Nature of Man: John Donne's *Songs and Holy Sonnets*

by

Donald E. Zimmerman\*

## I

### THE NATURE AND DEVICES OF DONNE'S METAPHYSICS

Stand still, and I will read to thee  
A Lecture, love, in Loves philosophy.  
—A Lecture upon a Shadow

Donne's poetry is said to be *metaphysical*, yet to each person who employs this term, it often suggests a different meaning. For example, the term may designate the work of certain seventeenth century poets who departed from the tradition and convention of Elizabethan poetry. Or, it may characterize the works of poets who investigate the abstractions of Man and God. In a still more limited sense, the term may indicate that poetry in which an author attempts a fusion of thought with image, of idea with emotion. To H. J. C. Grierson, the term meant that which ". . . has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence."<sup>1</sup> Such an abstruse statement is as close as many have ever come to a general definition. As the prefix *meta* suggests, *metaphysics* is a philosophy beyond or on the "further side" of physics. Metaphysical beliefs, unlike those of the physical sciences, are not provable, for metaphysics deals in the realm of the abstract, in supposition of what *may* or *must be* the nature of things in the spiritual realm. It does not deal in concrete fact and formulae. It is the investigation of the spiritual nature of man and his soul, and of his soul's relation to other souls, to the universe, and to his God. For Donne, at least, metaphysics is a philosophical approach to the study of man, and, as such, it is essentially a moral and religious enterprise.

The term, *metaphysical poetry*, suggests a kind of verse which is best defined by an investigation of its characteristics, for it is not enough to say that this poetry deals with *metaphysical* concepts. In the first place, there are certain aspects which distinguish it from other poetic styles. Although various critics will emphasize one at the expense of another, these aspects entail the use of a complexity of attitudes, conceit, imagery, a restricted subject, a restricted verse, and a frequent use of paradox. Samuel

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Johnson, in applying the term *metaphysical* to poets of the seventeenth century, stressed the wit of these men. In the life of Cowley, he stated: "But wit . . . may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike."<sup>2</sup> Johnson seems not to have cared for the metaphysical poets, but he made valuable contributions to criticism in his definition of the metaphysical image and in his application of the term, *discordia concors*, the forerunner of today's conceit. T. S. Eliot, for example, writes: "The conceit itself is primarily an eccentricity of imagery, the farfetched association of the dissimilar, or the elaboration of one metaphor or simile."<sup>3</sup> Others believe that the conceit is the metaphysical poem. John C. Ransom asserts that the definition of *conceit* is the definition of *metaphysical poetry*: "For the critical mind Metaphysical Poetry refers perhaps almost entirely to the so-called 'conceits' that constitute its style. To define the conceit is to define small-scale Metaphysical Poetry."<sup>4</sup> According to Allen Tate, the conceit is ". . . an idea not inherent in the subject, but exactly parallel to it, elaborated beyond the usual stretch of metaphor into a supporting structure for a long passage or even an entire poem."<sup>5</sup> Cleanth Brooks states the idea more firmly: "We cannot remove the comparisons from their [the metaphysical poets'] poems, as we might remove ornaments and illustrations attached to a statement, without demolishing the whole poem. The comparison is the poem in a structural sense."<sup>6</sup> Leonard Unger offers a different point of view. While acknowledging the importance of the conceit, he emphasizes *complexity of attitudes*.<sup>7</sup> His decision establishes a valid criterion, for complexity is a definite characteristic of metaphysical poetry. The wit of a metaphysical poem arises from a complex employment of conceit and imagery, hyperbole, urbane and scientific language, and startling comparisons drawn from science and learning. The conceit is an integral part of much of this kind of poetry. According to Grierson, a comparison of dissimilar objects or abstractions, startling in nature, comprises the metaphysical conceit, ". . . ingenious, erudite, and indiscriminate, not confining itself to the conventionally picturesque and poetic, [rejecting] nothing as common or unclean."<sup>8</sup> The imagery is drawn from many places and is frequently startling and surprising, because it departs from the orthodox "nice poetic language" and becomes not infrequently bizarre and arresting. Perhaps, the most inclusive statement of metaphysical poetry lies in Grierson's following comment:

It lays stress on the right things—the survival, one might say, the reaccentuation of the metaphysical strain. . . in contrast to the simpler imagery of the classical poetry. . . the more intellectual, less verbal, character of their wit compared with the conceits of the Elizabethans; the finer psychology of which their conceits are often the expression; their learned imagery; the argumentative, subtle evolution of their lyrics; above all, the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which is their greatest achievement.<sup>9</sup>

Most significant, perhaps, of all the attributes which Grierson has listed is

the last—the blend of passion and thought—one of the outstanding characteristics of Donne's poetic style. Metaphysical poetry, then, connotes certain distinct characteristics. Its subject matter, for example, is drawn from facets of love and death; and its form, using the term in a very free sense, is that of devout verse—the elegy, the eulogy, the love song, or, as in Donne's holy sonnets, the prayer. Furthermore, it is characterized by wit, learning, subtlety, and subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> It turns feeling into thought;<sup>11</sup> *i. e.*, things ordinarily comprehended in thought are brought within the realm of feeling, or things are transformed into thought, without ceasing to feel.<sup>12</sup> Style is characterized by "extravagant metaphor."<sup>13</sup> It is often replete with original expression and experimentation, especially with regard to stanzaic form and line length.<sup>14</sup> It is marked by the presence of direct and forceful language, ridding poetry of the imitation, superficiality, facility, and sensuousness of verse after the Petrarchan or Spenserian manner.<sup>15</sup> It is the result of an effort to bring the poetic language within the realm of the conversational, to capture the rhythm of an ordinary, spoken discourse.

That John Donne is intellectual as well as intellectually sensuous, that he is sophisticated, urbane, cynical, and shocking, that he is witty, and inventive, in both an Elizabethan and modern sense, are important characteristics of the poet and his work. That he is aware of the new learning is obvious from a cursory reading of his *Songs and Sonnets* (1633). He draws from many areas of learning and science, both old and new: from mathematics, geometry, astronomy, astrology, cartography, and medicine, among others. However, he is not interested in the immediate social or philosophical aspects of this new learning. Rather, he makes it a tool of his poetic technique, and it becomes the basis for a great deal of his imagery.<sup>16</sup> Three major devices common to his poetry are the *telescoped image*, the *dynamic image*, and *paradox*. The telescoped image, a convention of the time, is a device for which Donne can take little credit other than as an adapter. The seventeenth century was an age of analogy, and basic to this analogical atmosphere was the man-universe (microcosm-macrocosm) concept in which the nature of the universe was found, in miniature, in man. This "telescoping" technique Donne uses, at times, to *enlarge* the scope of an image, or at others, to *diminish* it. For example, in "The Flea," he reduces the scope of the image from the two lovers to the single flea; but in "A Valediction: of Weeping," he enlarges the image from a tear, to a flood, to a sea.

Donne lived in an age still strongly influenced by medieval thought and thought-processes, and one of the most important heritages of his age was the Chain of Being, with its several planes and correspondences (or equivalences) between the elements in these various planes. The correspondences were, to the Middle Ages, almost mathematical formulae that revealed the truth of the order,—harmony, perfection, and unity of creation.<sup>17</sup> The equivalences within the correspondent planes were more

than Dr. Johnson's "occult resemblances." They were *real*. They were more than figures of speech; they were accepted as *truths*. E. M. W. Tillyard has explained the situation in this manner:

Modern astronomers, hating the asteroids for being so many and so obstructive, have named them the vermin of the sky. To use this is no more than a metaphor with an emotional content. To the Middle Ages the observation would have been a highly significant fact, a new piece of evidence for the unity of creation: the asteroids would hold in the celestial scale of being the position of fleas and lice in the earthly. The Elizabethans could take the matter either or both ways.<sup>18</sup>

Whether or not the analogy was accepted as fact or as metaphor, the technique was, nevertheless, present and very much a part of John Donne's time. Finding correspondences within the planes of the Chain of Being was essentially a *telescoping* process. It was a convention which Donne, at times, treated in a conventional manner. In *The Extasie*, he wrote: "Wee [the souls] are / The intelligences, they [the bodies] the spheares." He finds correspondence between these two aspects within the human being (the microcosm) and the same two aspects (the intelligence and the sphere) within the Celestial Being (the macrocosm). The analogy is, therefore, traditional in manner and pattern. Many of Donne's poems contain instances of telescoping, but two, in particular, will serve to illustrate his employment of this device. In "A Valediction: of Weeping," Donne introduces two lovers on the verge of separation. The man who is to sail to a foreign shore entreats his lady not to weep, lest her tears teach the sea to drown him and her sighs teach the winds to do him greater harm than simply that of blowing him across the sea. The poem begins with the tear as being nothing more than a tear: "Let me powre forth / My tears before thy face, whil'st I stay here." But the tear becomes more—it is a kind of coin: "For thy face coins them, and thy stampe they beare, / And by this Mintage they are something worth." The telescoping begins with these lines. As a tear is shed, it reflects the lady's face, even as a coin is stamped with an impression in the minting process and becomes, thereby, a thing of intrinsic value. Yet, the tear is still more. It is a sign of grief:

For thus they bee  
Pregnant of thee;  
Fruits of much grieffe they are, emblemes of more,  
When a teare falls, that thou falls which it bore,  
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore.<sup>19</sup>

Donne has now enlarged upon the image, with a variety of associations of pregnancy, childbirth, separation, *all* and *nothing*. When the tear falls, it separates the two lovers, and being apart, they are *nothing*. In the second stanza, Donne telescopes each tear into a *world*. Because each is round and contains the woman's reflection, and because the woman is the speaker's *all*, Donne shows the tear as a world. However, their mingling tears dissolve this reflection—the lovers' world—as the deluge from heaven dissolved the earth. The speaker now becomes an *earth*, by implication;



and the woman becomes a *heaven*. Their tears, are, first, a *deluge*, and next, an *ocean* flooding the world: "Till thy teares mixt with mine doe overflow/This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so." In the third stanza, Donne has the maiden become a *moon* to act upon this tidal wave of tears:

O more than Moone,  
 Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy spheare,  
 Weape me not dead, in thine armes, but forbear  
 To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone. . . .

In addition to the sexual associations of these lines, this woman, this *more than moon*, draws up the tide of tears, likely to engulf the man as a sea might do. Their sighs, then, become *winds*; their weeping, a *storm*. The poem ends upon a purely figurative image. Each of the lovers sighs so strongly that he takes the other's breath away and "hastes the others death." This poem illustrates Donne's imaginative *enlargement* of a small thing which, by itself, is relatively barren or, at least, undirected in its meaning. Through telescoping, he makes the tear become something beyond, but analogous to itself. Not only are its physical bounds altered, so also its intellectual range. It becomes pregnant with meaning through association and connotation. On first reading, the resemblances between the objects may, indeed, seem occult, as Johnson predicted; however, without these resemblances, the poem could hardly have escaped the tag of sentimentality, a criticism precluded by Donne's intellectualism.

On the other hand, "The Flea" is a poem conceived in a different vein, for its subject is not, perhaps, of the same high level as that of the former poem; but its structure is based largely upon the trick of the telescoped image, this time in *reverse*. It concerns a young man's attempt to seduce a reluctant maid. The would-be seducer uses the flea as a symbol of himself and the young lady. As the flea *is*, they *are*. It drew blood from each of them and, satisfied, swelled without shame or sin. The young man concludes that the flea is *three lives in one*. If she should yield, they could be satisfied. If she should become pregnant, they could produce a swelling of three lives in one, like the flea. They would be married, in this sense, as they already are in the flea. Here, again, Donne's telescoping is an imaginative and witty device, but he maintains a rational basis in his discovery of resemblances and in his development of them. The image reveals the range of material from which he draws his analogies and the "imaginative distance" that separates the things which he unites.<sup>20</sup> There is always a justification for his choice and use of comparisons, whether the justification be actual or imaginative. His telescoped conceits, therefore, are of two kinds: the *expanded* conceit, which extends a comparison; and the *contracted* conceit, which develops thought by means of a ". . . rapid association or sudden contrast."<sup>21</sup> Donne's conceit, then, is effective because of its intellectual, imaginative, and witty character. It compels the reader to exercise his intellect, to draw comparisons, to make sudden shifts

in association, and to be aware of various levels of interpretation, at one and the same time.

The *dynamic image* (a basic metaphysical image) is that of motion, of how things act or interact.<sup>22</sup> Unlike the static image which describes the appearance, taste, smell, or feel of an object, comparable to painting, the dynamic image is comparable to the dance. It is not based upon the impression of the senses; indeed, it is based upon a similarity between actions.<sup>23</sup> The end of the dynamic image is to make clear a mental or psychological action by expressing it in terms of a physical movement. Donne uses dynamic images when he philosophizes or when he describes a psychological state of mind. It is through such imagery that he achieves the peculiar blend of passion and thought which marks his poetic style.

Finally, as the metaphysical poem is built around the conceit, so is Donne's philosophy built around *paradox*. His concept of man is a concept of duality, of matter and spirit. Man is not actually *one*; he is *two*. He is body and soul—a dichotomy. The reconciliation of these opposites is the problem which Donne sets for himself, one which he temporarily solves in *The Extasie* and permanently settles in his holy sonnets.

## II

### LOVE IN THE SECULAR POEMS

Dear love, for nothing lesse than thee,  
 Would I have broke this happy dream,  
     It was a theame  
 For reason, much to strong for phantasie. . . .  
                                   —*The Dreame*

Within the secular poems, Donne shows man in a state of relatively free existence, a human condition, for the most part, unencumbered by theories of life. Instead of abstraction, Donne presents life itself; instead of disputation and dialectic, although the latter is an important feature to his technique, he writes of primary human emotion.<sup>24</sup> In doing so, he develops four themes of love: *sensual love*, physical in nature and devoid of spirituality; *spiritual love*, non-dependent upon sex or other physical aspects; *integrated love*, simultaneously spiritual *and* physical; and *Petrarchan love*, conventional and of no major importance. In addition, he employs a sustained analogy of love and Christian theology. This comparison is a significant part of his secular poems, for through it, he reveals an attitude toward love and a concept of the condition of the human being.

In the majority of the secular poems, Donne unfolds his theme of sensual love. Brazen, unromantic, realistic in detail, and dramatic in situation, it is in direct contrast to the sweet, bitter-sweet Petrarchan concept, and it is quite the opposite of spiritual love. The tone is bitter, never

sweet; cynical, never romantic; bombastic, never quiet. Within these verses, Donne writes of a gentle disbelief in woman's fidelity, as in "Goe, and catche a falling starre;" of an utter disillusionment, as in "Loves Alchymie;" and of the rage of thwarted love, as in "The Apparition." Not even feminine beauty nor goodness escapes the poet when in this mood. In "Communitie," he writes with biting malice:

Chang'd loves are but chang'd sorts of meat,  
And when he hath the kernell eate,  
Who doth not fling away the shell?

In many of these poems, Donne views love not as fanciful emotion that causes one to burst into lyrical joy (for love is not a delightful thing), but, rather, as in "Loves Alchymie," as an *agitation*. Because these lovers *think* too much and *feel* too little, and because their sensibilities are not attuned to refined feeling, they never realize a quiet, contented repose. They are too nervous. Like the lovers in "The Prohibition," they are never mentally at rest, even in their most passionate embrace. Yet, within this group of poems, Donne evolves a variant theme, that of delight in love, a real excitement and enjoyment of mutually responsive love-making, as in "Elegy XIX." In addition to a delicious anticipation, there is a sureness of love, illustrated in "Lovers Infinitenesse," and the grudging realization that love must admit interruption, as in "Breake of Day." Throughout these poems, Donne shows the selfish, exclusive love of those who mutually enjoy on a physical basis.<sup>25</sup>

A second theme in the secular poems is that of spiritual love, highly Platonic in character. Following the principles of the Platonic doctrine, Donne explains that love is a spiritual thing above body and above sense, the unreal materials of life. Spiritual love results from the employment of the intellect, the mind, or the soul, which are the reality of man, so that man can join and commune spiritually with his loved one. Spiritual love becomes an intellectual contemplation of souls, not a sensual use of the body, although Donne stresses the body as a means to the end. Several poems illustrate this theme. For example, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," in which he shows the unity of lovers' souls through the medium of his much-discussed compass image, he presents a love much different from the one he employs in "A Valediction: of Weeping," in which the love described is dependent upon the senses. In "Forbidding Mourning," Donne writes of lovers who are on the verge of imminent separation:

As virtuous men passe mildly away,  
And whisper to their soules, to goe,  
Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,  
The breath goes now, and some say, no.

So let us melt, and make no noise,  
 No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,  
 T'were prophanation of our joyes  
 To tell the layetie our love.

Here, there is no sad farewell, no *prophanation* of emotion; there is merely a *quiet* acceptance of separation. Donne continues:

Moving of th'earth brings harmes and feares,  
 Men reckon what it did and meant,  
 But trepidation of the spheares,  
 Though greater farre, is innocent.

In these lines, essentially a telescoping of the preceding stanzas, Donne refers to concepts of astronomy. One must recall that, in the Copernican theory, the earth, once thought to be stationary, was held to move about the sun. The Copernican theory, then, was a revolutionary concept responsible for much concern in Donne's time.<sup>25</sup> His analogy, therefore, is drawn between the upsetting influence of this doctrine and the upsetting character of bodily death. The *trepidation* was an uneven, sideward movement of the spheres of the universe in the pre-Copernican astronomy.<sup>27</sup> This movement was accepted as natural, and it excited no great concern. The analogy is, then, between this movement and the movement of the souls. Donne emphasizes that the motion of the trepidation was greater than the earth's but more natural. Like the soul's movement, it was not an occasion for "teare-floods" or "sigh-tempests," as death should not be:

Dull sublunary lovers love  
 (Whose soule is sense) cannot admit  
 Absense, because it doth remove  
 Those things which elemented it.

Earthly lovers, those whose love is not Platonic, cannot endure a separation because a division would preclude physical contact. Donne characterizes the earthly lover, as he did in "The Flea," as one whose "soule is sense." In the next stanza, he presents an essential thought, almost in the exact wording of *The Extasie*:

But we by a love, so much refin'd  
 That our selves know not what it is,  
 Inter-assured of the mind,  
 Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

To these lovers, the bodies are not important. Theirs is a love dependent upon the minds and the souls, not upon the bodies:

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
 Though I must goe, endure not yet  
 A breach, but an expansion,  
 Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate.

Their souls are one. A separation of their bodies would not cause a breach of their souls, for their souls are like a compass, an image replete with dual meanings. Like the lovers at one point in *The Extasie*, these two have discovered a spiritual love predicated but not dependent upon their bodies.

The theme of unrequited love does not assume a position of very great importance in these verses; it has little to do with Donne's philosophy. Love unattainable is a Petrarchan convention which Donne treats in an un-Petrarchan manner, for example, in "The Blossome." In "The Undertaking," the life of the unsatisfied lover is an ideal, an end in itself beyond the reach of most men.<sup>28</sup> More often, however, it is accompanied by a sense of incompleteness, as in "The Relique;" a reluctant acceptance of the situation, as in "Twickenam Garden;" or with the intention, as in "The Blossome," to give love "to another friend, whom woe shall finde / As glad to have my body as my minde."

Lastly, Donne arrives at the statement of love involving both mind and body. In these poems, he resolves the dichotomy of man's constitution and finds a love that satisfies the relation between mind and body, as he exemplifies in "The Good Morrow;" or that discovers the security of such a relationship, as he shows in "The Anniversarie;" and that establishes the unity of lovers, as he argues in *The Extasie*, wherein he establishes an *integrated love*, uniting body and soul. He maintains that lovers must be "inter-assured of the mind," joined in spirit and intellect in a love which transcends mere sex. In this unity of both physical and spiritual elements, he leaves Platonism, and his philosophy becomes Pauline. He suggests that human love is a great mystery which few understand. His comprehension of the human condition, of the dichotomy which constitutes man's essential being, results in his discovery of integrated love. In "The Dissolution," he writes,

Shee' is dead; and all which die  
 To their first Elements resolve;  
 And wee were mutuall Elements to us,  
 And made of one another.  
 My body then doth hers involve,  
 And those things wereof I consist, hereby  
 In me abundant grow, and burdenous,  
 And nourish not, but smother.

He involves the individuals with the four primary elements recognized by the ancients. He makes the individuals an element of each other. In this way, he arrives at a perfect unity of their bodies and spirits. He predicates love upon the body, and suggests that it is composed of elements of the body. He writes in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" that the bodies are ". . . those things which elemented it [love]." In this passage, then, he concludes that spiritual love is dependent upon the body; and he indicates that without elemental physical love, spiritual love could not be. Further, however, he conceives the proposition that man achieves perfec-

tion (simultaneous use of all his faculties) only by combining the physical and the spiritual into an integrated love. Were one to devise an algebraic substitution for the steps of Donne's progression to his solution of the problem, he might see, perhaps more clearly, the nature of the paradox and the nature of Donne's reconciliation of the dichotomy:

*sensual love* = matter (body and sense)

*spiritual love* = spirit (soul and intellect)

*integrated love* = matter and spirit (perfection)

The paradox consists of opposites, body and soul. His solution is to integrate them, thus forming an united whole. It is important to observe that sensual love becomes the first step in his movement toward integrated love. As previously indicated, Donne never belittles the importance of the body in its role of awakening the soul to the tenets of spiritual love. Furthermore, he never belittles the importance of the body *within* the integrated love.

An infusion, as it were, of the Platonic and Christian principles of his philosophy, Donne's comparison of the elements of human love with the elements of theology is an elaboration which assumes an importance in his secular poems. The analogy is, in fact, a specific application of the general moral and ethical principles underlying his philosophy. He writes of man's love for woman as something analogous to a mysterious, religious experience. He frequently uses the term *love* in this special, narrow sense to indicate an emotion like that of the devout in religion. Furthermore, he uses this analogy throughout the secular poems in developing each of his love themes. Invariably, he indicates that this experience is one which only a few realize because of its mystical nature. Regardless of the particular theme which he is developing at the moment, Donne suggests that these select few are the *saints* of love who have achieved initiation into love's mysteries. Within the Church of Love which Donne thus establishes, there are many who are uninitiated.<sup>29</sup> These, then, are the *laity*, whose ignorance and misunderstanding cause them to *profane* the saintly emotions. In all but the poems on the theme of sensual love, there are two opposing forces within the Church of Love—spiritual and physical love. In *The Extasie*, Donne reveals the basic doctrines of the Church and the manner in which one may become cognizant of the supreme mysteries of the Faith. In "The Good-Morrow," he contrasts these two kinds of love, as he relates the experience of the couple who suddenly discover the joy and wonder of spiritual love: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I / Did, till we lov'd?" With such lines, he leads the reader to anticipate a poem dealing with the excitement of physical love. But he continues, ". . . were we not wean'd till then? / But suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly? / Or snorted we in seaven sleepers den?" Herein is his physical kind of love. This new love, therefore, must be of a different composition. The lover can hardly believe the wonder and joy that he and his mistress have denied themselves. They have been wasting their time on naive

diversions when they might have been enjoying a truer love. They have been practicing a simple, lustful relationship. They have been as if asleep and "out of things."<sup>30</sup> As if in a dream, their former pleasures have been unrealities: "If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desired, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee." The lover sees that the women he has known were not real, because he did not know their souls, nor they, his. They were merely physical, shadowy suggestions of the reality of his true love.<sup>31</sup> The reality is not only sensually perceptible, but it is also perceptible to the mind and the soul. In the next stanza, Donne suggests the nature of these two kinds of love, as his couple experience the "revelation" and undergo the intellectual awakening by which they become aware that love is not lust. Their new love does not force upon either of them the question of the other's constancy, because their attraction, now, is strong enough to over-power a desire to seek satisfaction, elsewhere. In each other, then, they possess the world. Indeed, their room *is* their entire world. Their love is at once a sensual and transcendental satisfaction:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
And true plaine hearts doe in faces rest,  
Where can we finde two better hemispheares  
Without sharpe North, without declining West?

Such a love is faithful, guileless, and stable, involving no cause for suspicion, dalliance, or deceit.<sup>32</sup> Their love, no longer merely lustful as in their earlier experiences, shows them a better world without earthly change in climate and temperature or lustful change in partners, without the corruption of alteration and mutability. Hopefully, they say their love is immortal:

Whatever dyes, was not mixt equally;  
If our two loves be one, or thou and I  
Love so alike, that none doe slaken, none can die.

Spiritual love, then, is not subject to mutability. On the contrary, it is *immutable*. And its dissolution is not possible. Love cannot, under these circumstances, be dissolved, because there is no contrariety in its elements.<sup>33</sup>

A poem which very fully explores the minuteness to which Donne carries the analogy of erotic and religious experience is "The Canonization." Simply to examine this usage, one may exclude the first two stanzas. Donne begins, in the third, with a study of physical love, which, by the end of the verse, he has caused to assume the quality of spiritual love. The first four lines admit the lust of the person speaking:

Call us what you will, wee are made such by love;  
Call her one, me another flye,  
We're Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,  
And wee in us finde the'Eagle and the Dove.

Both the fly and the taper are symbols of lust and the shortness of life.

These two lovers are compensating for their relationship in their own way. They are unlike others, in that they are a mixture of sense and spirit, "the Eagle and the Dove." Their union is not only physical but also mysterious.<sup>34</sup> Donne exclaims, "The Phoenix riddle hath more wit / By us, we two being one, are it." These lovers illustrate the Phoenix riddle in that, like this mysterious bird, they are two sexes in one: "So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit. . . ." In their union, they make one sexless thing. Wittily playing upon words, Donne next submits this kind of love to an intense analogy, involving Christian theology. Although theirs will be a sexual death, these lovers can, like saints, be martyrs to their faith:

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,  
And if unfit for tombes and hearse  
Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse.

A *legend*, of course, was the story of a saint's life. The *hearse* was a canopy constructed over a tomb, the burial place of someone who had accomplished something material in life and who had received public approbation for the deed. These are conditions which a martyred saint probably could not meet. A saint's life is a subject for verse—in the Petrarchan tradition, a more lasting and fitting memorial. The lovers, too, would find immortality in verse. The image suggests, also, another characteristic of Donne's lovers—their isolation. Since they, alone, are acquainted with love's mysteries, society does not recognize them, as it does not recognize a "living saint." Therefore, they will eulogize their own love and isolation, themselves: "And if no peece of Chronicle we prove, / We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes. . . ." Returning to the more superficial, a *chronicle* is the antithesis of a *legend*, for the former is a history of vain-glorious worldly achievement. If these lovers have done nothing that can be chronicled, perhaps they have done something that can be put into legend and sung about in sonnets (*hymns*). When society acknowledges the worthiness of their love by singing their hymns, they will have become glorified—*canonized*:

As well a well wrought urne becomes  
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombes  
And by these hymnes, all shall approve  
Us Canoniz'd for Love. . . .

In these stanzas, it is obvious that Donne has employed the conventions of the church—the legends, the hymns, the beliefs, and the rituals of the saints, and, finally, the *canonization* theme itself—from which to draw his parallels.<sup>35</sup> It is clear, then, that he either states or implies much of the ritual and doctrine of the Catholic Church in his metaphor. However, one must not overlook the "double-dealing," as it were, of these lines from "The Canonization," in particular, or of the metaphor, in general. The sexual puns (on such words as *dye*, *martyr*, *urne*, *half-acre tombes*, and *canonized*) are deliberate and calculated. One must recognize the tension



which Donne creates while making his image operative upon several levels at once, for this technique reveals that, in this analogy of love and theology, he has a purpose beyond that of mere wit, which occupies him from his first secular poem to his last holy sonnet. It reveals, therefore, his characteristic attitude, or his truth-vision, which is, in short, that man must be aware of every level of his being. With his concept that spiritual love proceeds from physical love, Donne orients himself within the center of a paradox, for these two are antithetical by nature. He can resolve the paradox only by adopting a system of morality which emphasizes the achievement of the "Good Life," the virtuous life that may lead to the Eternal, or to the Eternal Beauty. Essentially, he is concerned with the ageless problem of body and spirit, material and ideal, earth and heaven. In *The Extasie*, he rationalizes a solution to the problem with its concomitant physiological, psychological, and metaphysical aspects.

## III

## THE EXTASIE: AN EXPLICATION

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
To say, which have no Mistress but their Muse.

—*Loves Growth*

*The Extasie* is primarily a study of the paradox of man, but the poem is also an analysis of love. In both respects, it concerns a reconciliation of opposites, for man, a unit of one, is composed of disparate things: body and soul, or the material and the spiritual. Because of his dual constitution, man is prone to develop one side of his nature at the expense of the other. He is likely to become essentially a materialist or essentially an idealist. He becomes chiefly concerned with things of the senses or, conversely, with things of the spirit. He tends to become one-half of what he is capable. In *The Extasie*, Donne endeavors to reconcile these opposites in such a way as to leave the basic unity of man intact, or to establish such a unity, without sacrificing one opposite to the other. This problem has, of course, intrigued mankind since ancient times. It is one of the archetypal themes of religion and morality, and it is one of the basic themes of literature, as well. When man reaches a certain cultural level, he seems always to arrive at the place wherein he needs to explain his existence, to explain the force outside himself which is responsible for his and the world's existence. He seems to find the idea of an accidental or spontaneous generation of the universe untenable. He knows, or needs to know, that there must be a responsible force. If for no other reason than personal comfort, he evolves the idea of God, of the material and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural, the explicable about which he frequently conjectures, and the conjectural about which he is frequently quite explicit. He fashions a soul for his body, the external within the mortal, and establishes himself in

a never-ending attempt to reconcile the two. To placate his senses as well as his spirit, to harmonize the mortal body with the divine soul is ever his constant struggle. *The Extasie* is Donne's attempt to reconcile these disparate aspects of man's being in relation to love. It is an attempt to integrate the physical and the Platonic as a love that satisfies both body and soul.

Donne achieves a solution to the paradox of love by means of a three-fold progression of thought. First, he examines the nature and characteristics of physical love. Secondly, he analyzes Platonic love. Thirdly, he combines physical and Platonic love into one that includes physical gratification and spiritual satisfaction, simultaneously. Usually, he treats one or another of these three kinds of love within a poem, although, in each case, one usually possesses over-tones of the other, because he seldom, if ever, makes a complete separation of thought from emotion. In no other poem, however, does he so completely analyze, coordinate, and correlate these three loves as in *The Extasie*. This poem becomes, then, a kind of standard by which the treatment of love in his other verses may be analyzed and placed within his total concept. It provides the key to his love-philosophy in the secular poems. The key is this: love is a *two-one-two phenomenon*; i. e., love begins with a man and woman, two physical beings. In their physical, lustful love, they become one. This unity, however, is a fleeting thing. It will last so long as the man and woman remain physically close. However, this physical unity *may* excite their two souls, which *may*, through a mysterious process, become united, a spiritual entity, completely devoid of sex. But, Donne maintains, the resultant spiritual relationship, though ideal, is impossible to sustain. The souls will return to the two bodies, even though love is an alloy, incorporating the two bodies and the two souls into a commodity that transcends basal lust. The new love is now a mysterious phenomenon which operates upon these two levels, at once. It is neither wholly physical nor wholly spiritual, but a partaker of both levels. Donne is revealed, thereby, as working within the paradox of lust versus spirituality in love. It is a familiar paradox, one which may be established in any number of ways: material / spiritual; concrete / abstract; emotional / intellectual; the body / the soul. Donne always works within this paradox, the reconciliation of opposites, which is one of the great philosophic problems, not only inherent in metaphysical poetry, but also in the seventeenth century, the conflicting themes of which, along with the temper of philosophic thought, gave rise to metaphysical poetry.

*Ecstasy*, a Platonic concept, is a quasi-religious, trance-like state in which a mystic loses personal consciousness and receives divine knowledge or insight. It is a form of madness, according to Plato, in which a person merges with the infinite and, under such inspiration of "divine frenzy," becomes conversant with the true wisdom and true knowledge of that which is infinite.<sup>36</sup> *Ecstasy*, the "special gift of heaven, and the source of the

chiefest blessings among men," may be passive and trance-like or orgiastic in nature.<sup>37</sup> In either case, it takes the individual out of himself so that he becomes established and enraptured in the divine.<sup>38</sup> This madness, superior to sanity because of divine origin,<sup>39</sup> is the ancient prerogative of the mystic who, like the poet, seeks divine revelation, for ". . . there is no invention in him until he has been inspired, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles."<sup>40</sup> The ecstatic trance causes him to forget earthly interests and to become rapt in the divine so that only the intellectual functions remain active while the body resembles a carcass.<sup>41</sup> One must not, however, overlook the purely sexual kind of ecstasy, for it is possible to interpret *The Extasie* on a solely physical level. One may, for example, argue, without fear of contradiction, that the poem is a wittily disguised plea for seduction. In "The Canonization," as well as in *The Extasie* and other poems, one is aware that Donne invariably operates on numerous levels simultaneously involving all human experience, from basal lust to the highest degree of spirituality. Whichever kind of love he treats, Donne never completely separates one from the other, for he seeks to discover the oneness of man. Consequently, when he speaks of a spiritual love, his imagery is replete with references and implications of physical love. When he writes of physical love, there are over-tones of spirituality and, at times, of theology. Therefore, *The Extasie* is both a statement of the nature of man and an argument for seduction.

The poem opens with a sensual image. It suggests spring with its grassy meadows, flowered hills, and general voluptuousness. In fact, it suggests a hedonistic splendor of sense impressions, erotic in nature, highly physical and sensual, an image of sex and pregnancy. The dominant characteristic of the image is that of the quiet, restful, yet almost soothing fertility of the scene in its swollen fruitfulness. The image accomplishes a great deal, largely by association. It depicts the whole area of sense perception, or the physical man and his worldly environment:

Where, like a pillow on a bed,  
A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest  
The violets reclining head,  
Sat we two, one anothers best.

The words are chosen for their erotic associations and for their overall impression in a tightly conceived development. The word *pillow*, for example, suggesting rest and physical comfort, is related to *bed*, which suggests, in addition, a setting for physical love. *Pillow* is related, then, to *head* in the third line; to *banke*, the major term of the simile, in the second line; and, because of a similarity in shape, to *pregnant* and *swell'd*. *Pregnant*, *banke*, and *swell'd* are related through their connotations and through *pillow* to *bed*, which, in turn, is related to *rest* and to *reclining*. The entire image is one of love, birth, union, fertility. The word

*pregnant* provides the dominant associational basis of these lines with its further suggestion of birth, propagation, and generation. It leads these lines into those which are to follow, for there is more than a physical pregnancy; there is more than a world of sense. *Pregnancy*, then, must be observed upon two levels: (1) in the purely physical concept; and (2) in the spiritual understanding to which the physical leads. The physical begins to disappear in ll. 5-12, still a picture of union and generation; and the ideas presented become more distinctly metaphysical, as well as Platonic, in nature. The sensuality of the material world and the sexual relationship begins to alter, to assume a new character and a different value. The hedonistic sensuality begins to give way to the Platonic wisdom of later lines. Here, the way opens for the discovery of Platonic insight:

Our eyes,  
upon one double  
string;  
line missing

Our hands were firmly cimented  
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,  
Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred  
So to'entergraft our hands, as yet  
Was all the means to make us one,  
And pictures in our eyes to get  
Was all our propagation.

These lines introduce two images: the grafting of the hands and the twisting of the eye-beams. The first simply means that the two are holding hands and that their joined hands are, so far, the only means to make them one. However, the balm or moisture enters, too, with its sexual connotations. The second image, however, is more complex. Eyes were believed to emit beams which picked up the image of whatever was beheld. In turn, these beams transferred this image to the eye itself. The image of a loved one was then carried to the heart which, as a result, became heated and released spirits into the blood. With the release of such spirits, the soul became activated.<sup>42</sup> In the image presented, the lovers' eye-beams *twisted*; *i. e.*, as they looked into each other's eyes, their eyes were threaded on a double string of eye-beams, double because each lover's eyes emitted a beam. The pictures or reflections in the eyes were their only propagation; *i. e.*, love was their only propagation. Inasmuch as love was an experience thought to be engendered in the eyes, this image is a further indication of union, of the oneness of the lovers.

The eyes have set in motion the process necessary for the release of the souls. Ultimately, the lovers will gain the knowledge which can be attained by the mind, but only when it is apart from the instruments of sense perception.<sup>43</sup> At this point, however, the souls are uncertain, since they are newly freed from the senses; and they merely hang, suspended:

As 'twixt two equal Armies, Fate  
Suspends uncertaine victorie,  
Our soules, (which to advance their state,  
Were gone out,) hung 'twixt her and mee.

On one level, of course, these are physical souls, the appurtenances of sex; on the other level, however, they are real souls. In the complete silence which pervades the scene, there is no bodily activity, no sensual distraction, to disturb them. However, they are soon drawn together in intellectual contemplation. The bodies, meanwhile, without their intelligences, lie as if dead. Body and soul are separated, then, into distinct categories:

And whil'st our soules negotiate there,  
     We like sepulchrall statues lay;  
 All day, the same our postures were,  
     And we said nothing, all the day.

The word *negotiate* implies a kind of intellectual activity. The souls are conferring, bargaining, discussing their state and relationship outside the body. (Again, the image goes in both directions and operates on the physical, as well as on the spiritual level.) *Wee* refers to the bodies. *Sepulchrall* suggests death and burial; a dismal color; or a low, and hollow tone. *Statues* are mere representations of the human figure. The bodies are "sepulchrall statues" because their souls, the activating forces, have fled them. *Postures* suggests an attitude or a position, and, particularly in this context, a state or a condition. These lines, then, present the nature of the two bodies, silent and deathlike, throughout the day, as the souls commune between them.

Donne next makes a transition from the more concrete to the more abstract theory of life and love (*ll.* 21-28):

If any, so by love refin'd,  
     That he soules language understood,  
 And by good love were grown all minde,  
     Within convenient distance stood,  
 He (though he knew not which soule spake,  
     Because both meant, both spake the same)  
 Might thence a new concoction take,  
     And part farre purer than he came.

The phrase, "so by love refin'd," refers to a third person refined in the same manner and to the same extent as the other two. Such an individual knows the distinction between body and soul, and he can separate the merely physical from the intensely spiritual. The word *refin'd* further implies the process by which a metal is separated from its base ore, producing pure metal and useless slag. Good love, of course, is the kind of love that Donne is herein examining. It connotes a person who transcends gluttony and sensuality to be concerned with wisdom and virtue, or it designates a person who, at least, makes the physical aspects of love a means to the ultimate perfection and realization of the spiritual. Good love is not possible to the sensuous person.<sup>44</sup> An individual who is aware of such a love is

above materialism, for he is more concerned with the intellect and the soul, with thought and perception, than he is with the body, or with sense and feeling. Such a person is not one who loves sights and sounds, fine tones, colors, and forms *per se*, or the artificial products made from them, for he who is so concerned is incapable of seeing or of loving absolute beauty.<sup>45</sup> A person who is "growen all mind" and who distinguishes between the body and the soul and is refined into pure metal, might, with looking upon the scene and listening to the conversation of the two souls, depart more knowledgeable.

So far, the poem has been fairly literal for Donne. At least, it has considered concepts that were current in Donne's age, for it has dealt primarily with the ideas of body and soul, the material and spiritual. At this point, however, Donne shifts into a complete paradox—that of love and the relationship of the body and soul *in love* and *to love*. The poem, henceforth, becomes more personal. As Donne starts his analysis of this paradox, examining and stating his theory of the reconciliation of these opposites, the poem also becomes more Pauline and less Platonic. Now, the ecstasy "doth unperplex," because the lovers are able to conceive absolute beauty and absolute good. In this state, the soul has rare insight into the infinite truths. With such new, inspired knowledge, the lovers discover that they can solve the problem, because Donne finds a way in which the struggle between body and soul can be resolved into an integrated love which includes sex, but which is essentially neither of matter nor spirit, but of a mixture of the two:

This Extasie doth unperplex  
 (Wee said) and tell us what we love,  
 Wee see by this, it was not sexe,  
     Wee see, we saw not what did move:  
 But as all several souls contain  
     Mixture of things, they know not what,  
 Love, those mixt soules doth mixe againe,  
     And makes both one, each this and that.

Tillyard suggests that the word *unperplex* has two meanings: first, to *enlighten*, and, secondly, to *unravel* the strands which bind the body and soul.<sup>46</sup> In the ecstatic state, the body and soul are completely separate, and the soul, furthermore, is educated and enlightened with true knowledge. The lovers see that it was not sex that moved them. With its analogy between theirs and common souls, it shows them that they were, in fact, ignorant of what did move them.<sup>47</sup> Physical love has led them, however, to this vision by means of which they understand the true nature of love: *i.e.*, love is essentially above sex. Through sexual means they have reached a love that is based upon soul.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the disparity, this new love is an entity, better than either before:

A single violet transplant,  
 The strength, the color, and the size,  
 (All which before was poore, and scant,)  
 Redoubles still, and multiplies,  
 When love, with one another so  
 Interanimates the two soules,  
 That abler soule, which thence doth flow,  
 Defects of loneliness controles.)

The new soul, *interanimated* by love, redoubles and multiplies into an abler one, which cures the defects of the single, independent souls. Together, they are an entity superior to the souls of the earlier state. The *unperplex* idea, paradoxically, leads to this further *perplexing*, to the joining of the two souls. One must not, however, overlook the physical implications of the image. If one takes the "single violet" to mean the male, he concludes that Donne, herein, is suggesting the act of intercourse. He executes the image with no uncertain deliberation. This, of course, is further evidence of his desire to discover the oneness of man.

At this stage, Donne has presented disparate kinds of love—the one purely sensual, the other spiritual. He has not yet resolved the differences between the two, nor has he yet joined them in any kind of satisfactory relationship. He has shown, however, that one has the characteristics of the other. To resolve this dichotomy, he abandons his Platonism, largely responsible for the paradox. The move toward resolution enters the poem when the souls first realize that they need not abstain from their bodies, when they realize that, in fact, they do not have to abstain:

Wee then, who are this new soule, know  
 Of what we are composed, and made,  
 For, th'Atomies of which we grow,  
 Are souls, whom no change can invade.  
 But O alas, so long, so farre,  
 Our bodies why do we forebeare?

On the physical level, these lines are a continuation of the earlier image; and the new soul is now the new life conceived in the act of love. On the spiritual level, the souls now realize that they are unalterable, immutable, incorruptible, and that they need not forbear their bodies for fear of corruption. They are, of course, a true essence which by its very nature is incorruptible. Next, the souls must realize the true relationship that exists between the body and the soul. The soul is the intelligence, the moving force of the body. It is the governor; therefore, the body is the governed:

They're ours, though they're not wee, wee are  
 The intelligences, they the spheare.  
 We owe them thanks, because they thus,  
 Did us, to us, at first convey,  
 Yelled their forces, sense, to us,  
 Nor are drosse to us, but allay.

The belief that each sphere is governed by an intelligence, a celestial spirit, is Platonic. Donne's analogy involves the microcosm-macrocosm concept and is used in a metaphorical sense as he points out that even celestial quintessence is moved by an inseparable intelligence. The body, therefore, must not be separated from its motivating force. Still on the physical level, these lines are a continuation of the argument for seduction, the protagonist insisting that they should make good use of their bodies, since they are, after all, not *drosse* but *allay*. Furthermore, the stars exert a direct influence upon the lives of all mankind:

On man heavens influence workes not so,  
But that it first imprints the ayre,  
So soule into the soule may flow,  
Though it to the body first repaire.

As the stellar influence must pass through the air before it reaches man, so must a soul pass through the body before it can join another soul. Both levels of interpretation meet in these lines, and Donne achieves a beautiful unification of divergency. The souls (on both levels of interpretation) owe the bodies a debt of gratitude because the bodies brought them together. Therefore, the function of the body is a sense function. With the souls, the bodies make an alloy, a base metal that is mixed with a finer one. In order to realize itself, then, the soul must have the body. Donne finally achieves a reconciliation of the opposites:

As our blood labours to beget  
Spirits, as like soules as it can,  
Because such fingers need to knit  
That subtile knot, which makes us man;  
Co must pure lovers soules descend  
T'affections, and to faculties,  
Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

Body and soul must meet in the knot which the *fingers* of the spirits have knit. If this meeting be not fulfilled, the soul cannot realize itself. Here, on the physical level, Donne relates the process of pregnancy to the conception of new life. In order to create life, that embryonic "subtile knot, which makes us man," the lovers must use their bodies, else the soul (again, on both levels) lies imprisoned like a great prince.

To'our bodies turne wee then, that so  
Weake men on love reveal'd may looke;  
Loves mysteries in soules do grow,  
But yet the body is his booke.

The *book* image suggests a transmutation from something concrete and material into something intangible but, nonetheless, real. A book, until read, is actually nothing. Until it has been conveyed to the mind by way



of the senses and there transformed into thought and idea, it is a barren thing composed of scraps of paper, printed words, and, perhaps, a cloth binding. So it is with the body. Until it has been used, until it has been transformed by way of the senses, it is nothing. Until the senses awaken the soul, imprisoned like ideas in a book, the body is, as the book was, a barren commodity. As the letter means nothing until the spirit enlivens it, the body means nothing until the spirit directs it. The body is the book; the soul is the idea contained, or the reality.

Throughout his love philosophy, Donne never discredits the senses. Love is, first of all, the physical act. The body is significant to his concept of *integrated love*—the transformation of the physical into the spiritual relationship, with a concomitant interdependency of body and soul within the experience.<sup>49</sup> Thus, he rationalizes a solution to his paradox. The physical aspects remain much as they were in basal lust; however, a metaphysical change will have taken place to alter the *end* of love, not the *visible means* to love. His paradox is resolved with Pauline wisdom. Ultimately, he reaches his conclusion with respect to *secular love*. Upon finding the physical lacking, because man is an inconstant animal in whom physical love imprisons the soul, Donne considers the qualities of the Platonic. He supposes the latter to be too ideal, because of the mixed constitution of man. For that matter, he finds neither kinds of love, alone satisfactory. He rejects the first, because it is too material. He rejects the second, because it is too ideal in its ignorance of the body. And, he concludes that it is possible—in fact, *necessary*—for man to possess a love which includes the physical but does not exclude the spiritual.

#### IV

#### THE POET IN PRAYER

. . . though truth and falsehood bee  
 Neare twins, yet truth a little elder is;  
 Be busie to seeke her, beleeeve mee this,  
 Hee's not of none, nor worst, that seekes the best.

—*Satyre III*

Donne reaches the final step in the development of his philosophy in the questionings which occur in his divine poems. A man whose natural propensities lean toward the divine, he finds in God the mystical truth of the relationship of body and soul. In his dealings with his God, Donne finds a mystery and an awe which are stronger, and in a sense, more real than anything possible in the relationship of man and woman. In treating man's relation to God, Donne achieves his mature statement of the nature of man. The holy sonnets are, in fact, the prayers of one who has discovered the truth of his own being and the certainty of God's. Yet, these poems reveal little of the serenity usually associated with such certitude,

for Donne knows the weaknesses of humanity and the dangers of its complacency. From his own range of experience, he knows the dangers inherent in man's duality; he feels that God, once found, is easily lost. He is not a dissembler before his God. His purpose in his holy sonnets is to concentrate all of the powers of man's being—the spiritual and the sensual—in the act of prayer.<sup>50</sup> Without losing his sense of mystery, Donne makes his relationship to God more immediate and personal through physical analogy.

His holy sonnets are, then, records of his personal religious experiences in which he learns to submit his will to the will of God. With a recognition for the dangers of over-simplification, one may plot the movements of Donne's thoughts *from* a questioning of God's love (Sonnets I-VII), *to* a demand for God's love (Sonnets VIII-XIV), *to* a holy fear of God's love (Sonnets XV-XIX):

*Sonnet I.* I am Your creation, Lord. Shall I be permitted to decay with sin? You can prevent it if You will.

*Sonnet II.* Why, Lord, do You let the devil tempt me? You know how weak I am.

*Sonnet III.* I wish that all my suffering were not in vain. I shall repent; then, I shall knowingly suffer, as I did not realize I suffered in sin.

*Sonnet IV.* My soul is black with sin. There is only one way I may become clean—I must wash myself in the blood of Christ.

*Sonnet V.* O, Lord, my body and my soul are black with sin. Lord, burn me clean.

*Sonnet VI.* My time for death is come, and my body and my soul will be separated. I wish my sins would fall away from my soul, as my body shall. If that should happen, then I should be righteous and purged of evil.

*Sonnet VII.* But after I die, it is too late. Lord, teach me how to repent before it is too late.

*Sonnet VIII.* I must turn in my grief to God. He put the grief in my soul.

*Sonnet IX.* Lord, why should I be damned? Why is sin so foul in me, simply because I can reason? Why do You threaten me? O, I cannot dispute with You. I only hope that You will forget my sins.

*Sonnet X.* Now, I can begin to hope, for now I begin to see. Death, you cannot kill me. I see that we wake eternally after one short sleep.

*Sonnet XI.* I have sinned. I sin daily. Christ has died for me; God has suffered on my account.

*Sonnet XII.* But I am unworthy. I am the weakest of creatures. I have sinned; yet, Christ died for me.

*Sonnet XIII.* My soul, look into my heart at the picture of Christ's suffering and crucifixion there. How wicked I am. How beautiful and pitious is Christ.

*Sonnet XIV.* My God, I love You. In spite of my wickedness, You must love me, too. I stand before You in my nakedness. I never shall be holy, never chaste, unless You love me and force me to be righteous.

*Sonnet XV.* O, my soul! What love is God's that He should build a temple in thy breast! What love, that He has given His son for us! What love, that He should make man like Himself; but what greater love than in Christ He should make Himself like man.

*Sonnet XVI.* Christ gives me conquest over death. He gives me a legacy of love.

*Sonnet XVII.* Lord, she whom I love has died, and her soul is flown to You. I have found Thee, too. But though You have quenched my thirst, I thirst yet. Why should I beg more love when I have all? Because the danger is that the world, the flesh, the devil may put Thee out of me.

*Sonnet XVIII.* In order that this may not happen, show me Thy Church, Lord, that I may love and worship Thee through it. Is Thy Church in Rome, or Germany, or here? Or, must I find it for myself? Show me, Lord.

*Sonnet XIX.* I am too inconstant. A ceaseless war between the flesh and the spirit rages within me. One day, I am too evil to look to Heaven; the next, I would court the Lord. I shake as with an ague; my best days are those when I shake with fear of the Lord.

Within these sonnets, one sees a progression toward holiness. This movement leads to a final truth: because man's will is free, he is free to choose. Man can elect to follow the demands of the body, in which case he is damned unto Hell. Or he can attempt to succeed to Heaven. God is there, and He will accept man; but the effort, the movement, the determination, and the surrender must come from man himself. God lowered Himself to man's level, once; He will not do it, again. Therefore, man must raise himself to God. Because this upward striving is not easy, Donne pleads, begs, demands, defies, submits, falters, questions, and *accepts*. Only after these very human paroxysms of fear and love can Donne say, "I have found myself, for I have found my God." Donne's overwhelming preoccupation, in these sonnets, is love, but a love far different from that of the secular poems. To witness this alteration, one must note the areas of similarity and difference in the two groups of poems. At the outset of such a comparison, one must mark two significant areas of similarity. First, the secular poems, like the holy sonnets, are actions, not the reports of actions. Secondly, all of man's powers are concentrated in the act of love. In the secular poems, Donne analyzes man's love of woman, a relationship upon which man desires to impose a spirituality. In the holy sonnets, Donne investigates man's alliance to God, a relationship which *is* spiritual. The spiritual attitude toward love of woman results from several causes. It is a convenient analogy which helps man to raise himself from his worldly estate. It is also a traditional poetic concept, and, one suspects, it is natural enough for man in love to idealize his emotion and his loved one.

This ideal view of love, however, is more strongly entrenched than this, for it is externally imposed upon love by organized Christianity. It is a view sanctioned and propagated by the Church. Yet, Donne treats man's love for woman in a bitterly cynical vein in the secular poems. His reasons are not difficult to ascertain. Being mortal, woman is subject to all of the insecurities and errors of passion and pride which seem to exist inherently in the human condition. Man, likewise, is mortal, and his love is subject to the vagaries of human behavior. It remains doubtful, therefore, that he can achieve a true spiritual love of woman, or even that he desires it, or having once attained to it, that he can sustain it. Donne's recognition of the human inconstant nature gives rise to his doubts of the possibility of ideal love. These doubts, in turn, are responsible for his cavalier attitude toward woman and love in the secular poems. They are, also, largely responsible for his placing faith in God, the only constancy. As suggested earlier, Donne sees that man tries to elevate his love for woman above the mere physical milieu in which it is conceived by recognizing a physical and spiritual love. The last, he associates with the noblest thing he knows—his God. The fact remains, however, that woman is mortal, and being so, she is fickle. In his relationship to God, on the other hand, man finds no fickleness, except in himself. Donne's certain knowledge of God's reality provides, then, the assurance of the holy sonnets. In these verses, he realizes his own moral weakness and the awful constancy of his Lord. Therefore, when he comes to write the divine poems, Donne abandons his cynicism and replaces his doubt for womankind with an assurance of God.

His methods do not change in that interval of maturation which separates the non-secular from the secular verses. For example, his use of the language of love is the same in both groups of poems. Other techniques of diction also remain constant. Noteworthy is his diction of excited thought. One example may serve to illustrate this latter usage. In "Loves Usury," Donne writes, "Till then, Love, let my body reigne, and let / Me travell, sojourne, snatch, plot, have, forget. . . ." In *Sonnet XI*, he uses the same technique: "Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side, / Buffet, and scoff, scourage, and crucifie me . . . ." Most characteristic, however, is his use of the language of love. In *Sonnet XVIII* ("Show me deare Christ, thy Spouse"), for example, Donne depicts the Church as the bride of Christ, a conventional metaphor providing him material for an intensely personal, and characteristic treatment:

. . . like adventuring knights  
 First travaile we to seeke and then make love?  
 Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sight,  
 And let myne amorous soul court thy mild Dove,  
 Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then  
 When she 'is embrac'd and open to most men.

A husband, such as the one herein described, would be, at best, a cuckold. His wife, a harlot. The action, adultery. Her partner, a sinner. These, how-

ever, are concepts of human behavior. When they are transplanted in divinity, they cease to be human. Reciprocation between the poet's "amorous soul" and Christ's Church is not adultery. It is not sin. Rather, it is the means to man's salvation. Christ is universally generous. He has not selfishly established His Church. On the contrary, this bride is meant to be pursued, embraced, and loved by man, as passionately as he would court and seek the favor of a beautiful woman. In other sonnets, as well, Donne employs this language of love, notably in *XIII*, *XIV*, *XVII*, and *XIX*.

With respect to Donne's method, Kermode suggests that his practice is ". . . to achieve a vivid image, enforce it with appropriate similitudes, and then pray accordingly."<sup>31</sup> Any of the holy sonnets illustrate this method; for example, the first of the series, "Thou has made me." Donne states the image in the first two lines: "Thou hast made me, and shall thy worke decay? / Repaire me now, for mine end doth haste." In the octave, he imagines the approach of death, and he feels despair in his ill preparation for it: "I runne to death . . . all my pleasures are like yesterday. . . Despair behind. . . death before. . . my feeble flesh doth waste. . . it towards hell doth weigh." After thus enforcing the image with thoughts of death, sin, decay, hell, terror, and other corruptions, Donne prays, with some hope that one so afflicted may be permitted, again, to rise: "Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his [the devil's] art, / And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart." Obviously, this method is not far different from that which he has employed in many of the secular poems. For example, in "The Sunne Rising," he likens the sun to a foolish old busybody who is neither as smart nor as important as he likes to think. He enforces the image variously: the lovers do not need the sun because "Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme, / Nor hours, dayes, months, which are the rags of time." Furthermore, the wealth of the world is really to be found in these lovers' bed, because the lovers are all the world. Then, he concludes with the "prayer:"

Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee  
To warme the world, that's done in warming us.  
Shine here to us, and thou are everywhere;  
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare.

Once again, the steps in this poem are those of image, enforcement, and adjuration; and Donne is as clever in his application of the method in his divine poems as he was in his secular verses. Certainly, cleverness in language and imagery are significant features of his holy sonnets. Possibly, however, one will accept the cleverness in respect to love of woman more readily than he will in respect to love of God. In *Sonnet XIII*, "What if this present were the world's last night?", Donne writes:

. . . as in my idolatrie,  
I said to all my profane mistresses,  
Beauty, of pity, foulness onely is

Asigne of regour: so I say to thee,  
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned,  
 This beauteous forme assures a pitious mind.

Unless one seriously misreads this passage, he sees that Donne is employing the imagery of sex. Reference to the organs of reproduction are, perhaps, somewhat indelicate in a holy sonnet, particularly when the image is singled out for comment. In the whole poem, however, when the image is taken in its true context and in recognition of the poet's purpose (the transformation of sexual into mental activity, and of physical into spiritual activity), the image becomes meaningful. In many of the divine poems, Donne maintains this precarious balance between cleverness and holy passion, for he proceeds on the assumption that wit is a serious matter.<sup>52</sup>

Since Donne's thought patterns do not change, one must detect the real difference between the secular and non-secular poems in the referent to which Donne's thought is addressed. In the secular works, the referent is woman. In the non-secular poems, it is God. Each of these—woman or God—Donne treats with paradoxes peculiar to the situation, but more importantly, in each of these instances, he is always aware of the major paradox, the dichotomy of man's dual nature. In the holy sonnets, the paradox remains the primary clue to Donne's concept of man. His preoccupation with human interests, human affairs, and the qualities of human nature reveals what is probably the most important of Donne's theses—that perfection, as far as man can hope to attain it, is the realization and use of the disparity which constitutes man's unity. "Whatever dyes, was not mixt equally," writes Donne. This idea is an underlying theme of all his verse, for life, to him, was a mixture of sense and spirit, of various levels of being. Man, in order to perfect himself, must learn to live on all such levels, simultaneously. Donne seeks self-fulfillment and self-realization of the whole man. It is this end which accounts for his refusal to separate thought from feeling, sense from spirit, mind from matter, or the divine from physical love. The profound stimulus of love, whether worldly or holy, alerts the whole being for Donne. The response to this excitation involves the reaction of man's entire faculties until the whole man responds on every level of his being.

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 H. J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, p. xii.
- 2 Samuel Johnson, *Prose and Poetry*, ed. by Mona Wilson, pp. 789-99.
- 3 T. S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," *A Garland for John Donne*, ed. by Theodore Spencer, p. 16.
- 4 J. C. Ransom, *The World's Body*, p. 136.
- 5 A. Tate, "A Note on Donne," *On the Limits of Poetry*, p. 331.
- 6 C. Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, p. 15.
- 7 L. Unger, *Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism*, p. 67.
- 8 Grierson, *op. cit.*, pp. xlii-iii.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- 10 R. L. Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden, the Revolt against Metaphysical Poetry*, p. 42.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 12 T. Spencer, *A Garland for John Donne*, p. 58.
- 13 Sharp, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- 14 R. L. Sharp, "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," *SP*, XXXI (December, 1934), pp. 515-18.
- 15 R. L. Sharp, *From Donne to Dryden*, p. 47; cf. Sharp, "Some Light on Metaphysical Obscurity and Roughness," p. 498.
- 16 C. M. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*, for a full discussion of Donne in his relation to science.
- 17 E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, p. 92.
- 18 *Loc. cit.*
- 19 John Donne, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. by C. M. Coffin; all future quotations from Donne's poems are taken from this edition.
- 20 G. Williamson, "The Nature of the Donne Tradition," *SP*, XXV (October, 1928), pp. 422-23.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 22 A. S. Brandenburg, "The Dynamic Image in Metaphysical Poetry," *PMLA*, LVII (December, 1942), pp. 1039-45.
- 23 *Loc. cit.*
- 24 J. Bennett, *Four Metaphysical Poets*, p. 18.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 26 Cf., C. M. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 28 Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 29 The present author uses the expression, *Church of Love*, simply as a useful descriptive phrase to characterize Donne's comparison of love with theology and Christian principle. He employs this analogy in many of his secular poems as he draws parallels between these seemingly diverse experiences. Many poets, of course, find a similarity between the devotion of love and the mysteries of religious worship. Donne's usage is inclusive in range and inseparably a part of the whole poem; it is not, in other words, mere decoration. One must note that in the non-secular poems, Donne reverses the analogy to compare religion and theology (divine love) with human love. This method is further discussed in a later section of this study.
- 30 Clay Hunt, *Donne's Poetry, Essays in Literary Analysis*, p. 54.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- 34 Donne, *The Poems*, II, p. 16.
- 35 Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
- 36 Plato, "Phaedrus," *The Works of Plato*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, p. 388.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 401.
- 38 G. R. Taylor, *Sex in History*, p. 247.
- 39 Plato, *op. cit.*, p. 402.
- 40 *Ibid.*, "Ion," p. 287.
- 41 Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- 42 Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 61-63.
- 43 A. Taylor, *Platonism and Its Influence*, p. 32.
- 44 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett. Sensualists ". . . never pass into the true upper world, thither they never look, nor . . . find their way, neither are they truly filled with true being, nor do they taste of pure and abiding pleasure. . . . They fatten and feed and breed, and in their excessive love of delights, they kick and butt. . . and kill one another, by reason of their insatiable lusts," p. 486.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 280.
- 46 Tillyard, *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 48 Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 50 F. Kermode, *John Donne*, p. 38.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

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