

John Donne's Poetic Philosophy of Love  
By Dr. David Naugle

*Stand still, and I will read to thee,  
A lecture, love, in love's philosophy.*  
—John Donne, "Lecture upon the Shadow"

For the enormously complex and vexed John Donne (1572-1631), the one in whom all "contraries meet," (Holy Sonnet 18), life was love—the love of women in his early life, then the love of his wife (Ann More), and finally the love of God. All other aspects of his experience apart from love, it seems, were just details. Love was the supreme concern of his mind, the preoccupation of his heart, the focus of his experience, and the subject of his poetry. The centrality and omnipresence of love in Donne's life launched him on a journey of exploration and discovery. He sought to comprehend and to experience love in every respect, both theoretically and practically. As a self-appointed investigator, he examined love from every conceivable angle, tested its hypotheses, experienced its joys, and embraced its sorrows. As Joan Bennett said, Donne's poetry is "the work of one who has tasted every fruit in love's orchard. . . ." (134).

Combining his love for love and his love for ideas, Donne became love's philosopher/poet or poet/philosopher. In the context of his poetry, both profane and sacred, Donne presents his experience and experiments, his machinations and imaginations, about love.<sup>1</sup> Some believe that Donne was indeed "an accomplished

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Martz notes that "Donne's love-poems take for their basic theme the problem of the place of love in a physical world dominated by change and death. The problem is broached in dozens of different ways, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, sometimes by asserting the immortality of love, sometimes by declaring the futility of love" (169). In any case, the overwhelming question for Donne, according to Martz, was "what is the nature of love, what is the ultimate ground of love's being?" (172). N. J. C. Andreasen has devoted a whole book to the subject of Donne's philosophy of love in which he deals with what he called "the central problem in Donne's love poetry: the nature of love dramatized in each poem and the attitude expressed by the poem toward that kind of love and toward the nature and purpose of love in general" (13).

philosopher of erotic ecstasy” (Perry 2), but such a judgment seems to be too much. T. S. Eliot’s observations about Donne in this regard are more exact.

In his whole temper, indeed, Donne is the antithesis of the scholastic, of the mystic and of the philosopher system maker. . . . Perhaps one reason why Donne has appealed so powerfully to the recent time is that there is in his poetry hardly any attempt at organisation; rather a puzzled and humorous shuffling of the pieces. . . . His attitude towards philosophic notions in his poetry may be put by saying that he was more interested in *ideas* themselves as objects than in the *truth* of ideas. . . . The usual course for Donne is not to pursue the meaning of the idea, but to arrest it, to play catlike with it, to develop it dialectically, to extract every minim of the emotion suspended in it (8, 11, 12-13).

Donne was not an accomplished philosopher of eroticism *per se*, but rather a psychological poet who philosophized about love, sometimes playfully, sometimes seriously.<sup>2</sup> The question, thus, arises as to the nature and content of Donne’s philosophy of love serendipitously expressed in his sacred and profane poetry. In this paper I will attempt to answer this question by arguing that the Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions of erotic love poetry (upon which Donne drew in his own compositions) which raise

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<sup>2</sup> Contrariwise, A. J. Smith writes that “The poems themselves show him consciously formalizing his experience [of love] in a precise scholastic way” (131). On the other hand, N. J. C. Andreasen views Donne as “a great poet and psychologist rather than a great philosopher” (19). Furthermore, this same critic writes that “. . . determining whether Donne is being satiric or serious [in his poetry] is so often a problem” (12); and C. S. Lewis would seem to agree for he says that “in one sense these poems are not serious at all. Poem after poem consists of extravagant conceits woven into the preposterous semblance of an argument. The preposterousness is the point. Donne intends to take your breath away by the combined subtlety and impudence of the steps that lead to his conclusion.” On the other hand, “The effect of all these poems is somehow serious. ‘Serious’ indeed is the only word. Seldom profound in thought, not always passionate in feeling, they are none the less the very opposite of gay. It is as though Donne performed in deepest depression those gymnastics which are usually a sign of intellectual high spirits” (118-119).

poignant questions, and create profound tensions, find answers and resolutions in Donne's own Christian Platonism which constituted his fundamental outlook and engendered his philosophy of love. I will also argue that this particular philosophical perspective in Donne established the basis for the intimate connection between his profane and sacred poetry in which religious and sexual themes are closely linked and intermeshed. After briefly touching on the intellectual atmosphere in which Donne worked, I will proceed to examine the Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions in Donne's amatory lyrics, and their respective contributions to his philosophy of love.

No doubt the time in which Donne lived and worked was at an intellectual crossroads. The tectonic plates undergirding Western civilization were shifting, and Donne, who possessed "the mind of a man of his own time" (Eliot 8), recognized the magnitude of the transformation taking place from medievalism to modernity. As he put it most famously in "An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary,"

*And new philosophy calls all in doubt  
The element of fire is quite put out;  
The sun is lost, and th' earth, and no man's wit  
Can well direct him, where to look for it.  
And freely men confess, that this world's spent,  
When in the planets, and the firmament  
They seek so many new; they see that this  
Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
'Tis all in pieces all coherence gone;  
All just supply, and all relation: (lines 205-214).<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Paton Ramsay in her discussion of "Donne's Relation to Philosophy" (1931) believes that in composing his poetry, Donne drew on two sources for inspiration, namely his own intellectual genius, and the patterns of thought current in his own time. In her estimation, this meant medieval scholasticism which imparted to his work its distinctive "metaphysical" substance. She also asserts that as Dante's work

Within the ebb and flow of these shifting cultural patterns, Donne, operating within a generally Christian framework, drew on deeply ingrained and then popular traditions in the composition of his love poetry. Andreasen explains.

. . . a sizable number of Donne's poems can with some fairness be seen as subtypes within three general categories, each of which concentrates on a particular literary tradition. One group, those poems which treat love cynically or see it as limited to sexual attraction, follows the Ovidian tradition. Although Donne is sometimes said to be anti-Petrarchan, mostly because of the anti-idealism which characterizes his Ovidian poems, there is another group of poems . . . which

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crowns medieval scholastic philosophy as its ultimate literary expression, so "the metaphysical poetry of Donne and his period was born in its disintegration and decline as a universal mode of thought" (109). The decline of scholasticism and the medieval, essentially Christian, world view was brought about by a "new philosophy" which according to Ramsay and other critics was "the new physical science . . . the discoveries of Copernicus and others" (111). ". . . the displacement of the earth from the centre of the material universe, and a new conception of natural science, might well seem to strike at the heart" (112) of the standard medieval Christian conception of reality. This raises the important question about Donne's relationship to medievalism: did he remain with it, modify it, or break with it entirely. Opinions seem to be mixed. Ramsay in her dissertation (*Les doctrines médiévales chez Donne*, 1917) argues that Donne was "a true child of the Middle Ages and that he was to be understood only by tracing his origins to their medieval sources" (Moloney 210). On the other hand, critic W. J. Courthope suggests that Donne abandoned medieval scholasticism entirely, and finds himself tempest tossed by the new science without any kind of intellectual moorings (Ibid.). Moloney himself makes the rather radical suggestion that Donne "did break finally and irretrievably with his medieval heritage . . . and casts his lot with the [pagan] naturalism of the new age" (211). This naturalism was not just an acceptance of new scientific findings, but apparently a substantive change in metaphysics. Though he says that Donne broke with his medieval background, his shift in paradigms was ultimately "unsuccessful" since he was "so much the medievalist, yet so deeply and characteristically modern" (212). This cleavage can be traced, he believes, in his work. Charles Monroe Coffin in his work *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (1958) believes that he "does not fit into classifications, and so personal is his attitude toward any subject that we cannot associate him with specific and well-defined currents of opinion or schools of thought." For Donne, he says, "moral life is kaleidoscopic." (294). I think that Donne was indeed a confusion of flavors— theistic, naturalistic, dogmatic, skeptic, medieval and modern—but essentially he was one whose central, sustaining orientation was originally (Roman Catholic) and finally (Protestant/Anglican) Christian.

draw on Petrarchism and portray a more impassioned and romantic love. And finally there is a group which reflects the doctrines of Christian Platonism, although in this case the tradition upon which Donne draws is perhaps more philosophical than literary. But whenever he writes, Donne assumes an audience which accepts Christian teachings about love, and consequently its ethic indirectly informs nearly all his love poems, even the pagan Ovidian ones, and gives them their unifying and governing principle (17).

Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 B. C. - A. D. 18) was, of course, the racy Roman writer known for his explorations of erotic love especially in his works *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria*, and *Remedia Amoris*. Though his works were suppressed and only read surreptitiously during the medieval Christian era, Ovid experienced a rebirth in the Renaissance, especially in Chaucer and Gower. Also the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries became England's Ovidian age when Marlowe, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Donne (among others) borrowed lines, situations, and themes from the celebrated Augustan poet (Drabble 726). Ovid's writings on love and lust are risqué, satirical, cynical and ironic. In the several works mentioned above (which were the most influential on Donne), Ovid presents a threefold program of love. "First, to explain how love can be won [by lies and deception]; second, to treat the more difficult problem of how love can be kept once it has been won [by humiliation and self-deception]; and third, to suggest ways in which love can be remedied when the lover is unsuccessful or disillusioned [strength of will and reason]" (Andreasen 47). J. B. Leishman in his volume on Donne entitled *The Monarch of Wit* (1965) has, like many, recognized the use Donne made of Ovid's amatory agenda, especially in his *Elegies* and in selected poems in the *Songs and Sonnets*. Noting that Donne's predecessors had drawn on themes in classical mythology and legend, and upon Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Leishman argues that Donne purposed to do something much more daring and original: "he proceeded to

reproduce something of the tone, the situations and the cynical wit of Ovid's *Amores*." He details his use of Ovid in this manner.

There are, it is true, great differences in style: the smooth progression, the details seldom in themselves extravagant, the crackling fire of epigram which distinguished Ovid's *Amores* are very different from the drama, the extravagance, the vivid realism, the subtle analogies and the syllogistic arguments of Donne. What Donne has caught are the impudence and insolence and the assumptions about the true nature and end of love and the proper attitude to husbands (56).<sup>4</sup>

Eschewing the notion that these poems are in any sense autobiographical, or that they convey anything of "Donne's own conduct, morals and opinions" (58), Leishman finds evidence of Ovid's influence in numerous poems. These texts convey typical Ovidian themes including triangular situations between poet, mistress and husband, secret signs exchanged between lover and beloved, personal training in the theory and practice of love, the virtue of inconstancy, the vice of fidelity, and so on. One example Leishman develops is Donne's elegy entitled "Jealousy" (drawn from Ovid's *Amores* I. IV. 15-31, 51-54) in which the wife, hypothetically, would be unable to weep at the death of her husband, but would rejoice in his demise since it provides her with erotic freedom; on the other hand she has wept over his mad jealousy engendered by her amatory liaisons with the poet the solution to which was for them to carry on their affair in another location where they could resume their mockery of him. If he should die,

*Thou wouldst not weep, but jolly, and frolic be,*

*As a slave, which tomorrow should be free;*

*Yet weep'st thou, when thou seest him hungerly*

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<sup>4</sup> A bit later on Leishman adds that "Donne seems to have been the first to perceive what novel, surprising and shocking effects might be produced by exploiting the more realistic and naturalist Ovid of the *Amores*," especially in his Elegies (58).

*Swallow his own death, heart's bane jealousy (Carey 14).*

From the *Songs and Sonnets*, Leishman selects Donne's poem "The Indifferent" as illustrative of another Ovidian theme based on the latter's work *Amores* II. IV. In the Fourth Elegy of the Second Book, Ovid declares that he is addicted to love, and that his erotic weakness is not kindled by desirable feminine traits, but rather by the simple fact that a woman is a woman. Whatever qualities she possesses are the very reasons for seeking to pursue and conquer her. Donne captures this attitude of indifference toward womanizing, reminiscent of Don Giovanni's mindset in Mozart's operatic masterpiece, in the first stanza of the text.

*I can love both fair and brown,  
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays,  
Her who loves loneliness best, and her who masks and betrays,  
Her whom the country formed, and whom the town,  
Her who believes, and her who tries,  
Her who still weeps with spongy eyes,  
And her who is dry cork, and never cries;  
I can love her, and her, and you and you,  
I can love any, so she be not true (Carey 93).*

Here and elsewhere, Donne capitalizes on "the witty depravity, the entirely unidealized and unspiritualized sensuality, of Ovid, . . ." (Leishman 149). He combines Ovidian themes with aspects of his own poetic personality and scholastic sensibility in many other "promiscuity poems" (Stampfer 65-83) which makes Donne appear to be the forerunner and advocate of a sexual libertarianism.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the Ovidian component in

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<sup>5</sup> Stampfer identifies the following as Donne's "promiscuity poems." "Go and Catch a Falling Star," "Woman's Constancy," "Love's Usury," "Community," "Confined Love," and "Love's Diet." Leishman explicates these texts as exemplars of Ovid's influence on Donne: "Jealousy," 58ff; "Nature's lay idiot," 62ff; "The Perfume," 63ff; "His Parting from her," 65ff; "The Expostulation," 66ff. In the *Songs and Sonnets*, Leishman

his love poetry portrays “. . . a boy of high theoretical daring, for all his chaste, windy bravura, waving his boyish sword in all directions as he treads gingerly forward. Only the doctrine of intercourse is suggested, the exhilaration of chasing women, not the experience that follows catching them” (Stampfer 83). Donald Guss’ threefold summary of Donne’s “sexual poems” is helpful in understanding the Ovidian strand in Donne’s love poetry (146). First of all, he says, these works are characterized by flagrant promiscuity and amorous insouciance. Second, he notes that these texts imply a ribald naturalism by promoting promiscuity on the basis of the sexual behavior of animals (“Community” and “Confined Love”), and on the ground of the moral neutrality of women as well as their physiological capabilities. The third characteristic according to Guss is Donne’s calculating practicality expressed by their complete lack of sentimentality (as seen, for example, in “The Bracelet”). In these ways, Donne seemed to draw upon the Ovidian tradition in his love poetry.

There are, however, a couple of significant questions associated with Ovid’s amatory poetry and its relationship to Donne. The first one concerns the ancient author’s original intentions. Were his precepts and examples about love presented as lascivious lessons in the unvarnished art of lust, or was he writing as a moral satirist in an attempt to demonstrate the foibles and frustrations associated with prurient sexuality? The second question has to do with Donne’s own use of Ovid. Did he deploy Ovidian themes and imagery in order to explore and perhaps promote a rank sexuality, or did he possibly draw upon the Roman writer satirically and for implicitly moral purposes?<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, what contribution does the Ovidian tradition make to John

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analyzes “The Sun Rising,” 188ff, and “The Indifferent” as examples containing Ovidian influence. Carey in his volume of Donne’s poetry specifically links the third, eighth, and tenth of the Elegies (his numbering), and “The Indifferent” to Ovid.

<sup>6</sup> N. J. C. Andreasen argues that because J. B. Leishman does not read Donne’s poetry with the Renaissance Ovid in mind, he finds them totally playful (that is, “preposterous, impudent, ingenious, mockingly illogical and paradoxical, and

Donne's overall philosophy of love? Is there a place in his schema for ribald sexuality? Is amoral or immoral lust a central component of his outlook? Did he really advocate this kind of insouciant approach to love and to women, primarily in his younger years, only to repent of it in maturity? For the moment I will leave these questions unanswered in order to proceed to an investigation of the Petrarchan component to Donne's erotic poetry.

Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca, A. D. 1304-74) was the famous Italian poet and humanist who is best known for his "Rime Sparse," a collection of Italian lyrics which includes the long series of poems in praise of mysterious "Laura," the yet-to-be identified woman who inspired his love poetry. Though he is rightly regarded as the father of Italian humanism especially through his revival of the study of Greek and Latin literature, Petrarch and his medieval followers were the chief inspiration for the early English sonneteers including Surrey, Wyatt, Drummond, and of course, Donne (Drabble 757). Donne was such an admirer of Petrarch's that he took a line from his *Canzoniere* (CCVI) as his personal motto and inscribed it on the flyleaf of his books: "*Per Rachel ho servito, e non per Lia*" (For Rachel I have served, and not for Leah). Presumably this indicated that his true commitment was to the contemplative rather than the active life, a

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intentionally shocking and outrageous"). "What one misses in Leishman's study is Ovid the moralist, the [alleged] Ovid which Donne knew and used" (17). Indeed, Andreasen believes that when the Roman Ovid writes on the art of love, he does so tongue-in-cheek (at least part of the time), and that the Renaissance reader of Ovid focused on this aspect of the Roman poet's work seeing a moral purpose in his compositions. "They were intended to point up the inconsistencies and contradictions which characterize lustful love, the follies and humiliations which lustful lovers endure, so that men would avoid it and would find a better kind of love instead. Ovid was a moral satirist, and to imitate Ovid meant to write of sexual passion, usually with satiric undertones" (53). If this is indeed the case, then perhaps Donne's use of Ovid followed suit, and his poems were drafted for satirical and moral purposes. In view of such an interpretation, he was not advocating an irresponsible ethic of love, but was providing an essentially spiritual service for his own generation. This seems highly questionable, however.

motto that seems appropriate not only for Donne, but also for his hero (Andreasen 134-35).

The Ovidian and Petrarchan poetic traditions have typically been considered antithetical, and in a sense this is true. However, both deal with the same topic (love), both describe ways in which love can be expressed and abused (physically and spiritually), and both suggest ways in which abused love can be remedied. Furthermore, the dialectic of their diverse styles (tones and techniques) can also be worked into a complementary synthesis. "Petrarch writes under the aegis of the tragic mask and Ovid under the comic. . . . Ovid is satiric and ironic whereas Petrarch is serious and straightforward; Ovid deals in giggles and Petrarch in sighs and tears; Ovid would correct by indirection and Petrarch by direction. . . . taken together these two traditions cover the whole range of possibilities for dramatizing profane love" (Andreasen 54). This last point is important, for Donne did exploit both traditions to their fullest extent in his own poetic musings about the nature of human love. Frequently he would insert Ovidian and Petrarchan elements in the very same poem to heighten its effect.

For present purposes, the most important issue is discovering the precise way in which Donne was a Petrarchist. Donald Guss in his book *John Donne: Petrarchist* (1966) argues that the Petrarchan tradition is the key that unlocks the meaning of much of Donne's love poetry, believing as he does that Petrarchism supplies him with his basic subject, amatory themes, and evocative images. However, he hastens to point out that there were two modes of Petrarchism. One mode he calls "Humanistic Petrarchism" which "aims at universal truth, eternal emotions, and neoclassical decorousness: it is elegant, idyllic, and sentimental" (18). This form of Petrarchism was in vogue in England and on the continent in the mid-sixteenth century just slightly prior to Donne's time. On the other hand he argues that "Extravagant Petrarchism" was Donne's actual poetic tradition which provides the context within which his work may be aptly read and interpreted. It is "characterized by fantastic arguments, emotional extravagance, and

peregrine [= foreign] comparisons” (18), a style created by Petrarch himself and embellished by his followers (for example, Serafino, Tasso, and Guarino).

The subject of Petrarchism was “love,” of course, emotional and spiritual love “conceived as a noble way of life, and the lover as an aristocrat of feeling” (Guss 49). Donne’s development in his profane poetry of the nobility and aristocracy of Petrarchan love was by means of these essential themes including,

. . . the proem, the initiation of love [“The Good Morrow”], the complaint against the lady’s obduracy [“Twickenham Garden”], the expression of sorrow at parting [“The Expiration”], the remonstrance against the god Love [Love’s Exchange”], the elegy on the lady’s death [“A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day, being the shortest day”], and the renunciation of love [“Farewell to Love”]. Other common themes are the lady’s eyes, her hair, her illness [“The Fever”], the dream [“The Dream”], the token [“A Jet Ring Sent”], the anniversary of love [“The Anniversary”], and the definition of love [“Negative Love”]. [With few exceptions]. . . , Donne uses all these themes: few of the *Songs and Sonnets*, indeed, are on un-Petrarchan themes (Guss 49-50; 197, note 11).

While Donne’s subject and themes were clearly Petrarchan, the most obvious aspect of his adoption of this poetic heritage is found in his use of Petrarchan language and imagery with which his verse is surfeited. Here are some examples of Donne’s use of Petrarchan patterns of language and the poems in which they are found.

. . . deaths for love [“The Damp,” and “The Expiration”], sun-darkening ladies [“The Sun Rising,” and “The Bait”], pictures on hearts [“Witchcraft by a Picture”, and “The Broken Heart”], ships of fools [“Air and Angels”], floods of tears [“A Nocturnal” and “The Canonization”], and miraculous ladies [“Loves Exchange” and “The Relic”]. . . . Donne uses the Petrarchan language freely; but he uses it, in the *Songs and Sonnets*, almost exclusively (Guss 50; 197, note 12).

Other critics have noticed these and similar Petrarchan themes in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*. Andreasen isolates four in particular. First is the motif of scorn, that is, the disdain of the beloved for the lover and the lover's reaction to it, including the idea that the latter's death is immanent if love is not returned (as in "Love's Deity" for example). A second overture concerns the reaction of a lover who has loved his beloved inordinately such that when she dies, he is overcome with irresolvable grief and despair, especially in realizing that the beloved was, after all, only mortal ("A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day" is illustrative). The third proposition developed by Donne is that of self-deception, namely that lovers trick themselves by believing that their relationship is the paragon of human love, and that it presents an impeccable model for all others on earth to follow (as seen in "The Canonization" and "The Ecstasy"). A final Petrarchan conception has to do with a twofold remedy for disordered love. Idolatrous Petrarchan love is typically characterized by pain and misery, especially when such improvident love is not returned. One solution to this plight is characteristically Ovidian: the pain of unrequited emotional and spiritual love can be soothed or offset by reciprocated physical love. Reciprocated physical love with a new partner (though lower) is better than the pursued, but unreturned, emotional love (though higher) of a true object of affection.<sup>7</sup> Thus one remedy to unrequited love is to replace it with the experience of *luxuria* or lust (as in "Love's Diet" for example).

The second solution to excessive, idolatrous love is uniquely Petrarchan in that it imitates Petrarch's response to the death of Laura to whom he was idolatrously attached. The lover must repent, and reorder his love properly toward the beloved and toward God. "The idolatrous Petrarchan lover rectifies his love by redirecting it toward

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<sup>7</sup> This reminds me of the lyrics of a contemporary pop song by Steven Stills entitled "Love the One You're With." The central theme of the song is conveyed in this line: "And if you can't be with the one you love [really and truly], then love the one you're with [sexually]."

the unchanging *image Dei* within his beloved or by scorning the worldly and transient and turning to divine love” (Andreasen 179). Such may have been Donne’s response after the death of his own wife Ann More.

This aspect of the Petrarchan legacy is particularly theological in substance, and has been worked out quite well by Andreasen who reads and interprets Donne’s love poetry within this framework. Indeed, he believes that both the Ovidian and the Petrarchan traditions “were . . . read from the perspective of Christian moral theology, and both were thought to express its assumptions about the nature and purpose of love: profane love should be corrected because it draws man’s love away from God and turns it instead toward earthly objects to an inordinate and excessive degree” (54). His lines of argumentation along these lines are worth rehearsing.

He begins by registering the notion that the ubiquitous Petrarchan legacy can be clarified only if a distinction is made between two types of love that are inherent within it. First of all there is what he calls “profane Petrarchan love” characterized by *cupiditas* (wrongfully and pridefully directed love). The tale of love told in the *Canzoniere* is a developing one, and it begins with Petrarch’s love for Laura which today we would classify as deeply romantic and erotic. It is a violent, excessive, restless, maddening love that is ultimately irrational and incapable of satisfaction. Recognizing that such a love is concupiscent, the lover knows that he must either repent or be damned. But because he is enfolded, octopus-like, in the grip of uncontrollable passion, he is unable to achieve the necessary transformation in thought and action. Consequently, enormous spiritual and emotional conflicts plague the soul of the Petrarchan lover. Thus the mood of misery, despair, and unhappiness, expressed in sighs and tears, is most characteristic of this aspect of Petrarchan love.

Second of all there is in the Petrarchan schema what Andreasen calls “holy Petrarchan love” characterized, not by *cupiditas*, but by *caritas* (redirected, rightly ordered, self-giving, and benevolent love). He notes that in Petrarch’s *Secretum Meum*

("My Secret")—three confessional dialogues between the author and St. Augustine written prior to Laura's death, but not published until after his own—the true nature of the profane love which reigns in the *Canzoniere* is clarified. Throughout the dialogues (which contain humorous elements displaying Petrarch's vanity concerning his perceived virtue), St. Augustine serves as his confessor and spiritual guide, enabling him to recognize the error of his excessive love. In short, Petrarch's love for Laura is inordinate and therefore idolatrous, for he has loved her with the kind of love that should be reserved for God alone. He has inverted the cosmic moral order with his disordered love as St. Augustine makes plain in this excerpt from their dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

*St. Augustine:* Nothing so much leads a man to forget and despise God as the love of things temporal, and most of all this passion we call love; . . . She [Laura] has detached your mind from the love of heavenly things and has inclined your heart to love the creature more than the Creator: and that one path alone leads, sooner than any other, to death.

*Petrarch:* I pray you make no rash judgment. The love which I feel for her has most certainly led me to love God.

*St. Augustine:* But it has inverted the true order.

*Petrarch:* How so?

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Musa also recognizes the importance of the *Secretum* for understanding the *Canzoniere* and the conflict in Petrarch between passion for Laura and love for God. He writes: "In both works Laura is immutable, fixed in her perfection, while Petrarch, the lover, wavers, changes moods, and experiences a variety of emotions. Both works deal with the passing of time, the effects of age on Laura's beauty, and her premature death. The *Secretum* not only confirms many of the concerns underlying the Italian poems of the *Canzoniere*, it also suggests that Laura was, indeed, a real woman. And the *Secretum* has a particular analogue in the *Canzoniere*: the *canzone* 'From thought to thought' . . . , which moves with the grace and force of the poet's spiritual struggle between passion and self-deception" (xi).

*St. Augustine*: Because every creature should be dear to us because our love for the Creator. But in your case, on the contrary, held captive by the charm of the creature, you have not loved the Creator as you ought (quoted in Andreasen 56-57; *Secretum Meum* 124-135).

Augustine continues his counsel by pointing out to Petrarch that his misery and unhappiness are but a consequence of his profane and inordinate love, and that if his love for Laura was redirected and proper, he would be free from such afflictions. By the conclusion of the *Secretum Meum*, Petrarch is converted to Augustine's position, and this is the viewpoint Andreasen believes that Petrarch comes to in the *Canzoniere* as well. He summarizes his reading of Petrarch in these succinct words.

Thus the *Canzoniere* is built upon the opposition between two kinds of love, *cupiditas* and *caritas*, the former urged by passion and the latter by reason; both of these can properly be called Petrarchan, one of them being characteristic of the early parts of the sequence [*cupiditas*] and the other the culmination toward which the whole sequence works [*caritas*]. Petrarch's love develops from sinful love of mortal things, whether of the lady's beauty or of the lady herself in *toto*, into a proper love of God and of mortal things only for the eternal *imago Dei* which resides in their mortal garb (66).

Isn't this the essential pattern that we find in the love poetry of John Donne as well? Isn't there a comparison to be made between this linear progression in Petrarch's poetry from *cupiditas* to *caritas*, and a similar orientation in Donne's Ovidian and Petrarchan poems in which he transitions from a preoccupation with lust and love to a reformed, affirmative poetry of love as well as to what we find in the holy sonnets?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sandra Dooley (one of your former students, Dr. Turbeville!) in her UTA masters thesis emphasizes the notion that Donne underwent a considerable transition in his experience with love: "Carnality of love that first gave Donne subject matter for poetry is replaced first by marital love and then by love of God and desire for his grace" (21). Later she adds that "During his lifetime, Donne underwent three major con-

Doesn't Donne also reflect a moral progression from *cupiditas* to *caritas* after the manner of Petrarch, and even before that in the paradigmatic example of St. Augustine as well?<sup>10</sup> This comparison may be made plain by considering the third basic aspect of Donne's love poetry, namely the Christian Platonic component.

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versions; from Catholicism [sic] to Anglicanism, from the libertinism of youth to true and deep love with Ann More, and from religious cynicism to sacred love in the priesthood" (68). Some critics have buttressed this perspective by suggesting that a distinction should be made between the libidinous "Jack" Donne's early licentious life with its focus on the flesh, and the mature "Dr. Donne" who mediated between the flesh and spirit. A. J. Smith points out that "Izaak Walton's myth of the two Donnes, Jack and the Doctor, does invite one to find such a division in the love poetry too; as though the 'great Visitor of Ladies' with his exuberantly virile imagination and sceptical wit were by some alchemy of the sentiments metamorphosed into the celebrant of mutual love" (126). Most, however, believe that this kind of sharp division in Donne's life is too severe, and that the alleged "two Donnes" can be reconciled into the life of the one man. Smith continues by saying: "Yet the one man is recognisable in the other however the occasion and concern may have changed, and essentially the same mind and imagination are at work" (Ibid.). With this judgment, T. S. Eliot concurs: "We agree that it is one and the same man in both early and later life" (9); and Leishman also writes that "there is indeed continuity between Jack Donne and Dr. Donne. . ." (267). If any thing, the "two Donnes" theory exemplifies in his single life the biblical and Pauline struggle between the flesh and the spirit.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Sherwood notes in this vein that "Donne uses his Petrarchan forms to express his personal need for a penitential change from one kind of love to another" (143). This author also reminds critics of the "contours of Donne's Augustinian legacy. Explicit borrowings from the *Confessions* in the *Essays in Divinity* (pp. 15ff.) and in early sermons (e.g., *Sermons*, V, 237) indicate the importance to Donne of Augustine's experience" (144). Augustine was the first in the history of the West to record for posterity his own pilgrimage through the labyrinth of *cupiditas* into the freedom and joy of *caritas*. Of all individuals, Augustine through firsthand experience knew the consequences of disordered sexual love, of idolatrous devotion, and of the immensity of the struggle to overcome these maladies. The parallel to Donne's poetry and personal life is remarkable. Sherwood writes of this comparison in these words: "The competition in the *Confessions* between divine love and profane love of the creature, plus the power of remembered sins and tenacious habit—the analogues in the *Holy Sonnets* are compelling. Prior to Augustine's dramatic conversion, growing spiritual love competed with idolatrous sexual love; and only Grace decided the conflict. For Augustine the force of habit maintained the past in the present; the memory of harboured 'images of such things, as my ill custom there fixed' [*Confessions* 10.30.41]. Donne's paraphrase of Job's statement expresses his fundamental empathy with that notion: 'my best actions, now in my age, have some taste, some tincture from the habit, or some sinfull memory

In seeking to analyze the models of love which Donne poeticized and what his attitudes toward these models were, we have observed that he wrote of lust (Ovid) and idolatry (Petrarch), of physical love and inordinate love, of love which over emphasizes either the carnal flesh or the quixotic spirit, lecherous body or romantic soul. The sin of lust errs in that it reduces the object of *luxuria* to the category of the sub-human (a mere animal); the folly of romantic idolatry is that it elevates the object of devotion to the class of the super-human (the angelicated or apotheosized woman). But neither animals nor angels can meet the need for a truly human and humanizing love. Of “animals” it asks too little; of “angels” it asks too much. Therefore, these two paradigms raise profound questions about the nature, not only of human loving, but concomitantly, and primarily, about the nature of human beings.

How can a man and a woman achieve a love which is not based on rank sensuality, and yet which recognizes human physicality and ascribes a proper role and function to the body? How can a man and woman love one another with deep spiritual intensity and soulful devotion, and yet at the same time stop short of romantic or emotional idolatry? How can both components of humanity—body and soul—be brought together into a happy synthesis to create a love that eschews the problems of Ovidian immorality and Petrarchan idolatry, but is rather ordinate and rightly ordered?<sup>11</sup>

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of the acts of sin in my youth’ (*Sermons*, V, 358). For both Augustine and Donne, only experience of reformed life can superimpose to reshape such imprints, just as new experience habituates the will anew. Donne’s youthful sexual sins do not continue; but the idolatry informing them must be reformed by new habits and experiences” (144). Sherwood also cites these works develop the Augustinian legacy in Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*: Patrick Grant, *The Transformation of Sin: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Vaughn and Traherne*, 1974; William H. Halewood, *The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes and Structures in English Seventeenth-Century Poetry*, 1970; Richard E. Hughes, *The Progress of the Soul: The Interior Career of John Donne*, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Here is Andreasen’s version of the questions posed by the presence of the Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions in Donne: “How can a man and a woman achieve a love by which they can live rather than die, a love which is intense without being

The answers to these questions and the resolution of these tensions are found in Donne's concept of idealized love generated largely under the influence of a Christian Platonism which establishes the *sine qua non* of his philosophy of love.<sup>12</sup> It is a philosophy of love that seeks to balance the roles and establish right relations between both body and soul. In the history of the West, hegemonic metaphysical or ethical perspectives have lopsidedly emphasized the role of either the body or the soul, but failed to bring them into equilibrium. Epicureanism and Naturalism in general diminish the soul and dissolve it into the body. On the other hand, Manicheanism and Absolutism in general squelch the body and submit it to domination of the soul. Both are guilty of reductionism, either to aestheticism or asceticism, and of inclining adherents to either hedonism or mysticism. In both cases, it would seem, human life and human loving would be distorted and incomplete. On the other hand, Christian Platonism, though it may have an inclination to favor the soul, especially in its more ethereal formulations, seeks to bring the two together into a happy harmony, substituting wholism for a disintegrating dualism. This, I believe, along with a chorus of critics, was John Donne's essential outlook, a perspective which finds poetic embodiment in his poem "The

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inordinate, a love which can exist in the world without the taint of worldly mutability, and love which can satisfy their thirst without being jealous or possessive?" (191).

<sup>12</sup> Andreasen believes that Donne's philosophy of love was essentially conservative, yet revolutionary. Though he could revolutionize poetic conventions, create fresh images, and devise a new voice in which to speak of love, nonetheless he could not invent new kinds of love "for lust and idolatry and charity are old as Ovid and Petrarch, old as St. Augustine, old as the Old Testament and the New, old as man himself. And he [Donne] ultimately judges these varieties of amatory experience from the hierarchical perspective of the ordinary sixteenth century man: lust is bad and idolatry is worse; charitable love for other human beings is good and divine love still more intensely satisfying" (77). Hence, there are a limited number of mutually exclusive models of love from which to choose, and perhaps Donne, as a man who did indeed have the mind of his age, did embrace a fairly typical perspective.

Ecstasy" (which I will analyze a bit later).<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Donne himself recorded his position on love in a letter to Sir H. Wotton, Amiens, dated February 1612 which is worth mentioning at this point: "You (I think) and I am much of one sect in the philosophy of love; which, though it be directed upon the mind, doth inhere in the body, and find pretty entertainment there" (quoted in Perry 2).<sup>14</sup>

There are several pieces to the puzzle of Donne's Christian Platonic philosophy of love which I would like to try to put together. In fine Augustinian fashion, Donne apparently did weary of an entirely hedonistic and disorder approach to love after the manner of Ovid. This is suggested first of all in Donne's poem "Farewell to Love." Here the idea is presented that things desired but not yet obtained grow or diminish in stature

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<sup>13</sup> This "chorus of critics" includes the following. Herbert Grierson: "There emerged in his [Donne's] poetry the suggestion of a new philosophy of love which, if less transcendental than that of Dante, rests on a juster, because a less dualistic and ascetic, conception of the nature of the love of man and woman" (quoted in Perry 2); Donald Guss, who believes that Donne offers "no inconsiderable theory of love" which is "one of the most appealing, less trivial, of Renaissance justifications of love" says this about it: "Donne . . . fully reconciles many Neoplatonic theories with both philosophic idealism [soul] and an exact observation of lovers as they are [body]" (153-54); Louis Martz: "His best poems are . . . those in which the physical and the spiritual are made to work together, through the curiously shifting and winding manner that marks Donne's movements toward Truth" (172); A. J. Smith: "'love . . . though it be directed upon the mind, doth inhere in the body.' I've argued that the poems give point to this understanding, which must have mattered crucially for Donne himself and matters now for our idea of his poetry" (131).

<sup>14</sup> In what John Carey labels "Paradox 6," Donne argues the point that "the Gifts of the Body are Better than those of the Mind, or of fortune." In this brief statement Donne shows the dependence of the soul or mind on the body which is the real source of the mind's pleasures. "Then our soul (me seems) is enabled by our body, not this by that. My body licenseth my soul to see the world's beauties through mine eyes, to hear pleasant things through mine ears, and affords it apt organs for conveyance of all perceivable delights. . . . For I feel her [= soul] often solaced with beauties which she sees through mine eyes, and music which through mine ears she hears. This perfection then my body hath, that it can impart to my mind all her pleasures; . . . (15-16). Perhaps in some such way love which adheres in the mind finds "pretty entertainment" in the body! Both mind and body, then, are necessary for love.

or importance as desire for them increases or decreases. "Thus when / Things not yet known are coveted by men / Our desires give them fashion, and so / As they wax lesser, fall, as they size, grow." So it is with the experience of sexuality. As an unknown or inexperienced thing, sexual love is coveted or desired greatly by lovers whose ardent desire enhances its importance all the more. On the other hand, unlike a child's toy which continues to stimulate interest and provide enjoyment, once sexuality is had and experienced, interest in it is lost and eventually it fails to satisfy. In other words, familiarity with sexuality in and of itself ultimately breeds contempt for it. It becomes common place, ordinary, and eventually unfulfilling. After a while, it even imparts to the mind the residue of ennui or boredom.

*But, from late fair*

*His highness sitting in a golden chair,*

*Is not less cared for after three days*

*By children, than the thing which lovers so*

*Blindly admire, and with such worship woo;*

*Being had, enjoying it decays:*

*And thence,*

*What before pleased them all, takes but one sense,*

*And that so lamely, as it leaves behind*

*A kind of sorrowing dullness to the mind (Carey 136).*

In addition to the recognition that Ovidian sexual love fails to sustain is the knowledge that excessive devotion to women is also idolatry which separates one from God. The reference here in the Ninth Holy Sonnet uses profane love to illustrate faith in Christ's pity. But the important idea is that Donne recognizes that the amorous period of his life was a time of "idolatry."

*No, no; but as in my idolatry*

*I said to all my profane mistresses,*

*Beauty, of pity, foulness only is  
 A sign of rigour: so I say to thee,  
 To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned,  
 This beauteous form assures a piteous mind (Carey 177).*

Perhaps it is fair to say that the boredom associated with disordered sexual love, and the idolatry of his devotion to his mistresses caused him to reconsider the nature of true love. As a backlash to the intense level of frustration and disappointment associated with Ovidian and Petrarchan love, it would be natural to pursue its antithesis in the form of a purely spiritual, transcendent, or “Platonic” conception of love. The integer of the spiritual needed to be inserted into love’s equation. Was Donne, then, a neo-platonist in the ethereal, disembodied sense in which the union of minds or souls constituted the sum and substance of love?<sup>15</sup> This, of course, is a much debated question, and there are numerous texts in his poems which would seemingly confirm this. These lines in “The Undertaking” are certainly descriptive of Donne’s Platonic streak: “But he who loveliness within / Hath found, all outward loathes, For he who colour loves, and skin, / Loves but their oldest clothes.” (Vv. 13-16; Carey 92). His recognition of the Platonic orientation is found in the first stanza of “Negative Love” in which he indicates that he is episodically inclined to that version of love.

*I never stooped so low, as they  
 Which on an eye, cheek, lip, can prey,  
 Seldom to them, which soar no higher  
 Than virtue or the mind to admire,  
 For sense and understanding may  
 Know, what gives fuel to their fire (Carey 133).*

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<sup>15</sup> See A. J. Smith’s piece, “The Dismissal of Love, Or, Was Donne a Neoplatonic Lover?”

Finally, in “A Valediction: of the Book,” the Platonic/physical antithesis is presented to his readers as a choice: do they prefer abstract spiritual love, or that which is the fleshly bane to the Christian faith? Yet physical beauty may be the sign or symbol of the heavenly.

*Here Love's divines (since all divinity  
Is love or wonder) may find all they seek,  
Whether abstract spiritual love they like,  
Their souls exhaled with what they do not see,  
Or, loth so to amuse  
Faith's infirmity, they choose  
Something which they may see and use;  
For, though mind be the heaven, where love doth sit,  
Beauty a convenient type may be to figure it (Vv. 29-36; Carey 107).*

That there was a strong Platonic element in Donne's thought seems crystal clear, but it is not the whole show; it is “real, but secondary” (Perry 90).<sup>16</sup> His Platonic outlook must also be wed to his Christian conceptions, which, I think, would result in the following synthesis. First would be the doctrine that God is good, the creator of all things. Since his good creation would include the human soul and body, both must be

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<sup>16</sup> There is, of course, the important question about where Donne would have received his Platonic “training,” so to speak. Andreasen writes: “Any one or two or three of several great Platonists could have inspired Donne: Bembo, Ficino, Leone Ebreo, Castiglione, LaPrimaudaye, Pico. He could have gotten his Platonism from Augustine or Cicero, from Desports or Ronsard or Spenser, perhaps even out of the air without ever reading a Platonic word. But Donne, intellectual that he was, probably went to the philosophers of the Academies. . . . He read the Christian Platonists of the Florentine Academy” (69-68). What is quite interesting, however, is that even Plato himself did not lopsidedly emphasize soul over body, but advocated, at least in one place, a necessary and beautiful balance between body and soul. As he wrote in the *Timaeus*, “The due proportion of mind and body is the fairest and loveliest of all sights to him who has the seeing eye” (87).

included and given their due in a comprehensive understanding of love. Second, since God is the creator of all things, all things do indeed participate in and reflect or “figure” the Creator and his goodness. After the manner of love presented in Plato’s *Symposium*, physical beauty in the body would reflect spiritual beauty in the soul, and spiritual beauty in the soul would reflect the very beauty of God. There is, therefore, a ladder of ascent from the physical to the purely spiritual, but both would be necessary in the grand unity of things. And finally in this world view, three types of unions would be possible. There would be the union of human bodies sexually, the union of souls emotionally, and the union of souls with God spiritually. In this scenario, to limit love to the union of bodies, or to focus on the union of souls apart from bodies would be disordered and/or incomplete. And to experience the union of both bodies and souls, but without union with God would be idolatry. Hence, comprehensive union is need to understand Donne’s total pattern of love: body, soul, God. These notions, I believe, constitute Donne’s Christian Platonism, and inform his final philosophy of love. N. J. C. Andreasen summarizes Donne’s Christian Platonism and its relation to his view of love in these words.

Although human beings may enjoy and love transient physical beauty, it alone will never satisfy, and so they must also love spiritual qualities and ultimately the eternal and unchanging *imago Dei* which shines within the beloved; when people do love the image of God, their love helps them climb toward God; such love is lasting, because it is founded on something not subject to change; and because such love is selfless, sympathetic, and charitable, it produces an unshakable spiritual union between two partners (197).

Many of Donne’s critics believe that his understanding of the synthetic role played by both the body and the soul in a proper conception of love is presented nowhere better than in his poem “The Ecstasy.” In this text, with reference to the psychosomatic unity of human beings, he speaks of “that subtle *knot* that makes us man”

(emphasis added). It is the *locus classicus* of Donne's philosophy of love, and Martz puts it clearly: "Although we do hear the souls of the lovers speak in a Neoplatonic state of ecstasis, in which the souls go forth from the body to discover the True and the One—nevertheless the Truth that they discover is in fact the Truth of Aristotle and the synthesis of St Thomas Aquinas: that the soul must work through the body; such is the natural state of man" (180). Love, for Donne, was not body only, nor soul only, but soul and body working together in tandem.

The structure of the poem is easy to discern. It consists of three groups of five quatrains each: strophes one to five, eight to twelve, and thirteen to seventeen. Strophes six and seven are transitional and introduce a hypothetical listener. Strophes eighteen and nineteen return to a listener and present the poet's conclusion. Part one is governed by both a sensual atmosphere ("pillow on a bed," "pregnant bank," "our hands were firmly cemented"), and by the quest of the souls of the lovers seeking union with one another.

1. *Where, like a pillow on a bed,*
2. *A pregnant bank swelled up, to rest*
3. *The violet's reclining head,*
4. *Sat we two, one another's best;*
  
5. *Our hands were firmly cemented*
6. *With a fast balm, which thence did spring,*
7. *Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread*
8. *Our eyes, upon one double string;*
  
9. *So to' intergraft our hands, as yet*
10. *Was all the means to make us one,*
11. *And pictures in our eyes to get*
12. *Was all our propagation.*
  
13. *As 'twixt two equal armies, Fate*
14. *Suspends uncertain victory,*
15. *Our souls (which to advance their state,*
16. *Were gone out) hung 'twixt her, and me.*
  
17. *And whilst our souls negotiate there,*
18. *We like sepulchral statues lay;*

19. *All day, the same our postures were,*  
 20. *And we said nothing, all the day.*

We see here in these first five stanzas both platonic and sensual imagery in operation, the former in lines thirteen through sixteen, and the latter in the previous three strophes. The point of contact and union between the two lovers is by the clasp of their hands, and also through their eyes. Their souls are exchanged with one another through the gaze of their eyes which were thread together as if on a double string. In this context, Donne employs horticultural imagery to convey the notion that the only means by which they had become one was by means of intense, sweaty-palm hand holding, and the only way they had propagated was via direct eye contact. The reflection of the one in the other's eyes was the only form of reproduction they had accomplished. "But the main meaning is that so far their only union is through the corporal sense of touch and the spiritual sense of sight. It is by these means, particularly through their gazing into each other's eyes, that soul is being 'conveyed' to soul and such an ardent desire for union is being engendered as will cause the souls of each other to abandon their bodies" (Gardener 234). This anticipates one of the main themes of the poem, and stands at the heart of Donne's philosophy of love: the integration of the mental and physical aspects of this experience. There is an emphasis on both soul and body, but especially the soul, in the relationship of love between the two lovers. What the souls say to each other in this moment of suspended animation can be known only if there is a bystander who can interpret their language. In the next two strophes, Donne calls on this observer.

21. *If any, so by love refined,*  
 22. *That he soul's language understood,*  
 23. *And by good love were grown all mind,*  
 24. *Within convenient distance stood,*
25. *He (though he knew not which soul spake*  
 26. *Because both meant, both spake the same)*  
 27. *Might thence a new concoction take,*  
 28. *And part far purer than he came.*

The kind of lover summoned must possess two qualifications. First, the he must be refined by love itself such that he understands the language of the soul. Second, the lover must by the experience of "good" or non-lustful love be all mind, that is, be dispossessed of the body, free from its attractions, and free for pure mental love. If such an one was close at hand, or stood within a convenient distance, he was to be summoned to observe the lovers in their spiritual ecstasy. And he will take with him from the experience a new "concoction," and leave purer than when he came.

The second main section conveys the disembodied, non-sensual ecstatic experience of the two lover's souls.

29. *This ecstasy doth unperplex*  
 30. *(We said) and tell us what we love,*  
 31. *We see by this, it was not sex,*  
 32. *We see, we saw not what did move:*
33. *But as several souls contain*  
 34. *Mixture of things, they know not what,*  
 35. *Love, these mixed souls doth mix again,*  
 36. *And makes both one, each this and that.*
37. *A single violet transplant,*  
 38. *The strength, the colour, and the size,*  
 39. *(All which before was poor, and scant,)*  
 40. *Redoubles still, and multiples.*
41. *When love, with one another so*  
 42. *Interanimates two souls,*  
 43. *That abler soul, which thence doth flow,*  
 44. *Defects of loneliness controls.*
45. *We then, who are this new soul, know,*  
 46. *Of what we are composed, and made,*  
 47. *For, th' atomies of which we grow,*  
 48. *Are souls, whom no change can invade.*

What is the illumination the lovers received in their ecstasy? This question is answered in this section. What they learn about is what it is they really and truly love in the other. They learn about what was hidden from the lovers in "The Relic" who "loved

well and loved faithfully,” “Yet knew not what they lov'd, nor why.” This ecstasy will “unperplex” them, and give them clarity. What Donne proposes is that it is *not* sex, that is, the other's gender, or the other's masculinity or femininity that they loved in each other. Rather, in the ecstasy they did not see what moved, but what did not move, something permanent and stable. In short, they fell in love with each other's minds, the union of their intellectual and spiritual souls, which will continue forever. But given the nature of human nature, can this love be sustained apart from or without the body?

The final section returns again to the significance of the body. Anthony Perry has suggested that the argument of “The Ecstasy” is based on this pun: “For Donne loving is knotty but not naughty. Rather than an indecent proposal, his call to return to the body is an act of integration, a binding of our opposite tendencies into a unified and living being through that subtle knot that defines our humanity and that is delicately alluded to as a ‘naked thinking heart’” (“The Blossom”; 5).

49. *But O alas, so long, so far*  
 50. *Our bodies why do we forbear?*  
 51. *They are ours, though they are not we, we are*  
 52. *The intelligences, they the sphere.*
53. *We owe them thanks, because they thus,*  
 54. *Did us, to us, at first convey,*  
 55. *Yielded their forces, sense, to us,*  
 56. *Nor are dross to us, but allay.*
57. *On man heaven's influence works not so,*  
 58. *But that it first imprints the air,*  
 59. *So soul into the soul may flow,*  
 60. *Though it to body first repair.*
61. *As our blood labours to beget*  
 62. *Spirits, as like souls as it can,*  
 63. *Because such fingers need to knit*  
 64. *That subtle knot, which makes us man.*
65. *So must pure lovers' souls descend,*  
 66. *T' affections, and to faculties,*  
 67. *Which sense may reach and apprehend,*

68. *Else a great Prince in prison lies.*

Helen Gardener believes that "with the revelation that their love is immortal, the ecstasy of the lovers reaches its climax. Unless they are to enjoy the 'blessed death' of ecstasy, they must return to their bodies" (238). As in the universe, so in the person: the lower must unite with the higher, and the higher with the lower, the spiritual with the physical, the physical with the spiritual, the superior with the inferior, the inferior with the superior. Anthony Perry is of a similar opinion, but he offers a better explanation of what is meant by a "return to the body."

The final section of "The Ecstasy" is thus not adequately described as a return to the body. It rather extends one of Donne's main preoccupations—finding a ballast for love—by delineating an area of consciousness and experience, situated between idealisms and bestiality, where human beings may dwell and love. The summons to return to the body is, more than a call to physical delight, [but rather] an affirmation of the unity of upper and lower through the efficacy of that subtle knot that defines and guarantees our humanity (97).

In lines 61-64, Donne's definition of humanity is presented: we are a combination, a "subtle knot", of blood (or body) and spirit (or soul). Our blood or body labours to beget spirit or soul. In crasser parlance, the body seeks to copulate and to produce other souls. Blood and soul combine or knit together that alloy or that "subtle knot" which defines and guarantees our humanity.

Donne in his theological writings presented this same point of view that is contained in "The Ecstasy," a position which is considerably distant from the medieval *contemptus mundi* and *contemptus corpus*.

Our nature is meteoric, we respect (because we partake so) both earth and heaven; for as our bodies glorified shall be capable of spiritual joys, so our souls demerged into those bodies are allowed to take earthly pleasure. Our soul is not

sent hither [here], only to go back again; we have some errand to do here” (quoted by Perry 1).

As thou didst so make Heaven, as thou didst not neglect earth, and madest them answerable and agreeable to one another, so let my soul's Creatures have that temper and harmony, that they be not by a misdevout consideration of the next life, stupidly and treacherously negligent of the offices and duties which thou enjoynest amongst us in this life. . . " (quoted in Perry 98).

In the final two strophes, Donne draws his final conclusion in stating the purpose of returning to the body.

69. *To our bodies turn we then, that so,*  
 70. *Weak men on love revealed may look;*  
 71. *Love's mysteries in souls do grow,*  
 72. *But yet the body is his book.*
73. *And if some lover, such as we,*  
 74. *Have heard this dialogue of one,*  
 75. *Let him still mark us, he shall see*  
 76. *Small change, when we' are to bodies gone.*

The body must be incorporated into life and love for this reason: to reveal the nature of true love to others. There must be a turn or a return to the body so that when weak men of small understanding look upon the true nature of love revealed, they will understand its composite nature, its knottiness, its alloy. It is true that the mystery of love is cultivated primarily in the soul; however this could never be seen, observed or read without the body. The body and soul in love and life are distinguished, but never separated.

If Donne were to read a lecture in love's philosophy, or if he were to summarize the sect of philosophy of love to which he belongs, then perhaps he would offer something like the above summary as contained in this profound piece of poetry.

Donne's perspective is an attempt at integration, at wholeness, a striving at the reconciliation of opposing, dialectical forces. It seems that ever since the fall of hu

manity, life has been characterized by division and fragmentation: God vs. man, heaven vs. earth, man vs. woman, body vs. soul, action vs. contemplation, theory vs. practice, and so on. Donne seeks to heal and harmonize at least one aspect of a divided world: his view is body and soul, not body or soul. He defines and describes the component parts of love in light of the comprehensive nature of humanity. His position would seem to answer the questions and resolve the tensions created by the Ovidian and Petrarchan traditions in his love poetry. It would avoid the Ovidian problem of sexual immorality, and Petrarchan problem of romantic idolatry. Love is powerful, and it may very well abuse the body or the soul in its quest for satisfaction. But it can be rightly ordered as well. Donne's outlook finds an appropriate place for both the body and the soul in a rightly ordered love. When coupled with his devotional poetry, the pattern indeed becomes complete, for it is in the love of God, which is the highest of all love, that human love itself finds its meaning and final reference point.

If it is true that all human love has as its source and meaning in the very love of God, then there must be a reciprocal relationship between these two forms of love, the infinite and the finite. God's love validates human love, and human love reflects and images God's. There is an intimate connection between love both human and divine. This would certainly be true in Donne's Christian Platonism in which all things on earth, including human love, are a reflection of and point to things in heaven. The fundamental biblical motif of Israel as the wife of Jehovah, and the Church as the bride of Christ supports this connection as well. The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann has commented on the significance of this biblical theme.

And yet is it not significant that the relation between God and the world, between God and Israel, His chosen people, and finally between God and the cosmos restored in the Church, is expressed in the Bible in terms of marital union and love? This is a double analogy. On the one hand, we understand God's love for the world and Christ's love for the Church because we have the experience of

marital love, but on the other hand, marital love has its roots, its depth and real fulfillment in the great mystery of Christ and His Church. . . . The Church is the Bride of Christ. . . . This means that the world—which finds its restoration and fulfillment in the Church—is the Bride of God. . . (61-62).<sup>17</sup>

Notions such as these are probably the reason why Donne felt free to use religious language to express erotic concepts, and why he also employed sexual language to communicate the holy and divine.<sup>18</sup> As an example of the former, consider the phrase, “We die and rise the same and prove / mysterious by this love.” Here in “The Canonization,” Donne seems to connect rising from orgasm, signified by the word “die,” and the death and resurrection of Christ, both of which prove the mystery of love. On the other hand, Donne freely employs sexual language to speak about divine love, especially in the Holy Sonnets. Two poignant examples come to mind. Donne begins Holy Sonnet Eighteen with a request to see the true Church, here designated as Christ’s spouse: “Show me dear Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear.” After puzzling

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<sup>17</sup> This biblical conception is developed with great detail, and applied to Donne’s Holy Sonnets by Robert S. Jackson, *John Donne’s Christian Vocation*, especially in chapter eight, “Donne’s Sonnet on Christ’s Spouse,” pp. 146ff.

<sup>18</sup> This inner connection between the love of God and the love of man and woman is the basis for what Charles Williams has termed “romantic theology.” As C. S. Lewis points out, “romantic theology” is not being romantic about theology, but rather being theological about romance. Williams argument is that in experiencing romantic love, we experience God. God as love has been in romantic experience from the beginning, and the more we learn about it, the more we learn about him. Romantic theology is a theology as exact as any other kind, but has for its cause and subject those experiences which are generally termed romantic. Williams believes that the genius of Dante first showed us what may be called the religious spirit in love. He makes us aware of the profundities of passionate devotion. The first example in English of what Williams called Dante--the religious mind in love and brooding over its experience—is John Donne. Donne, he points out, writes ordinary religious language in the language of love, and writes ordinary love poetry in the language of religion. He connects ordinary love poetry and religious love poetry. For his comments on Donne, see his *Outlines of Romantic Theology*, pp. 61ff.

over the nature and identity of the true church, he returns at the end of the sonnet to his initial request, but in explicitly sexual language.

*Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,  
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove,  
Who is most true, and pleasing to thee, then  
When she' is embraced and open to most men (Carey 288).*

The innuendoes seem clear enough. He wants to see Christ's spouse, the church, in all her naked glory in order that his soul might court or commune with her. Oxymoronically, she is most true or faithful to her calling, and most pleasing to God when she is polygamous, that is, when she is open to and embraced by many lovers.

The final example comes from Holy Sonnet Ten: "Batter my heart, three-personed God." Though the initial imagery is martial, it becomes marital or sexual in the tenth line.

*But I am betrothed unto your enemy,  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

Despite his spiritual captivity, at the deepest level of his being, Donne is conscious of the fact and confesses that he dearly loves God, the one to whom he rightly belongs. Furthermore, he admits that his desire is not only to love God, but also to be loved by Him ("would be loved fain"). And yet that which he desires he is not capable of performing or experiencing. The mote which separates him from God is God's enemy—Satan—to which he is "betrothed." With the use of the word "betrothed," the imagery of the marital is introduced. Donne is in intimate relations with God's enemy (the devil), a bond which must be severed if he is to be freed and made new. The intimate relation which he sustains with the demonic must experience separation and divorce. The

imagery is marital and the tone desperate. The phrase "Take me to you" sounds romantic. The phrase "imprison me" may be sexual in tone, suggesting that Donne wishes to be put into God's prison of love. As a lover, God must act as a seducer who brings his lover to himself ruthlessly. The very last line employs sexual imagery and insists that spiritual chastity depends, paradoxically, upon being inflamed or ravished by divine love. Purity comes only by means of a divine rape.

From this it is easy to see the relationship between Donne's profane and divine poetry. Donne was well aware of the nature of the connection between them. There is indeed a link between God and man, and between body and soul, and love is the key that ties them all together. Such was the essence of John Donne's poetic philosophy of love.

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