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“These Hymnes may work on
future wits”

The Search for and the Conveyance of
Knowledge in the Poetry of John Donne

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Chapter 1

“Worne as by severall men in sinne”: The World of the *Satires*

(1.01) Introduction to the *Satires*

In a verse letter addressed to “Mr E. G.” and probably composed during the summer of 1594 (Milgate, 216), John Donne describes London as follows:

There thou o’erseest London: here I have been
By staying in London too much overseen.
Now pleasure’s dearth our city doth possess,
Our theatres are filled with emptiness;
As lank and thin is every street and way
As a woman delivered yesterday.
Nothing to laugh my spleen espies
But bearbaitings or law exercise. (ll. 5-12)

At that time the city was afflicted by a new visitation of the plague that lasted from “August 1592 until 1594” (Milgate, 216) and that had serious consequences over the possibilities of entertainment that a young Inns of Court student like Donne could enjoy. The theatres, one of the most culturally lively places in London, were closed for fear that the great amount of people that were drawn to their shows might spread the disease (Stubbs, 45); the entertainments of the court were a privilege of the aristocracy and of the

people who were at its service; moreover, Donne's family was recently stricken by the death of one of its components, John's brother Henry. As John Stubbs reports in his biography of the poet: "In the spring of 1593, Topcliffe's Papist-hunters had turned their attention to Henry Donne, by now also a "gentleman of the Inns of Court". Agents raided Henry's lodgings, and there discovered William Harrington, a twenty-seven-year-old Yorkshireman who had trained as a seminarian priest in Europe. Both men were taken" (43). Henry died a few weeks after his imprisonment in Newgate prison, probably overtaken by the terrible sanitary conditions of the jail and by the spread of the plague of those years (44-45). It is apparent that the atmosphere depicted in this verse letter would not be a cheerful one, given the bleak circumstances of Donne's both personal and public life, but putting aside the biographical sources of this mood, the social world picture that can be drawn from this poem is one of complete cultural exhaustion and political unrest.

The poet introduces the reader to the situation in London by saying that he stayed there "too much overseen". Grierson, in his commentary to the poem, gives two possible interpretations of this expression: "in London I am too much overlooked, disregarded. But it is not clear. He may mean I am too much in men's eye or kept too strictly under observation" (Milgate, 169). If the first meaning is the correct one, then the poet feels as if he was an irrelevant part of the social body of the city, just one nobody among others without any important role to play in society. On the other hand, if the second meaning is the correct one, his situation changes dramatically: far from being considered an irrelevant Londoner, he finds himself being the object of scrutiny of some unidentified entity that is watching his every movement. Considering the fact that he came from a prominent Catholic family and the fate that befell his brother (Stubbs, 42-43) it is possible that the city would have felt like a very hostile environment. What both these interpretations highlight, however, is a sense of frustration with the social environment that the poet is experiencing in his stay in the city. Being either ignored or threatened leads to the same outcome, which is a sense of thwarted opportunities and danger that will be reiterated, in other contexts, in the following lines.

At lines 7-8, the poet describes the toll that the plague has taken as far as entertainment was concerned. He writes about "pleasure's dearth" (l. 7) and of the desolate emptiness of the theatres. The only relief from "spleen" (l. 11) that the city can offer in these dire times are not intellectually stimulating for the poet. Bearbaiting was a cruel, bloody and predictable kind of entertainment: "Either the bear, chained to a post, was torn apart, or managed to dismember the hounds that were set upon it" (46). On the other hand, the "law

exercise" (l. 12) were none other than "half-hearted legal arguments" (46). It appears that the plague had deprived London of all the cultural and artistic stimuli the Donne felt he needed to enjoy in order to overcome the worries that had their probable source in that feeling of frustration previously mentioned. Moreover, by listing among the possible entertainments left the "law exercise", and placing them at the same level as bearbaiting, he is probably suggesting that his studies at the Inns of Court were not as relevant to his wellbeing and his education than the theatre. What seems relevant, though, is the feeling of complete cultural exhaustion that weighted upon London during the plague, which was not just the physical disease that is described in many of John Donne's later poetry, but was also a cultural disease, a "spleen" that affects the mind of the poet as well.

The sense of political frustration and cultural exhaustion that pervades the London described by the poet find its embodiment in the image at the centre of the quoted passage: "As lank and thin is every street and way/ As a woman delivered yesterday" (ll. 9-10). The city, once a fertile place in which any kind of cultural initiative could grow and develop, is now an empty womb, a barren place where the only things that can be found are deadly: the disregard or the threats of a hostile society, the boredom of repetitive and useless entertainments, the irrelevance of the studies undertaken.

This poem introduces the reader to a cultural landscape that is devoid of opportunities and that is in a dramatic need of criticism and reform. It is not unintentional that the poet would call "spleen" his state of mind while he roams the empty streets of London. As Milgate points out in his commentary to the poem, "[t]he reference to the satirist's 'spleen' in l. 11 might be the self-conscious remark of a newly fledged writer of satire, as this I suppose Donne to have been in 1593" (216). It will be the task of this "new satirist" to pinpoint the most culturally relevant problems of his time, a task that John Donne will undertake with his five Satires.

As it has been argued above, the problems that English society had to deal with at the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign were not just of a hygienic nature. As Tom Cain argues in his essay on the political attitudes present in the poetry of John Donne, "The *Satires* do, [...], testify to Donne's serious disillusionment with the last decades of Elizabeth's reign. Like many contemporaries, especially those with a catholic background, he looked forward to the coming of the intellectual and supposedly more tolerant James" (87). The aim of the satirical writing of Donne was twofold: on the one hand, he expressed a strong disapproval

of the politically and religiously oppressive regime of the time, (the tragic death of his brother was a powerful reminder of the violence of the establishment); on the other hand, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the state of a culture that suffered greatly from the conservative dispositions of the court. It is important to point out, though, that much of this criticism originated from the fact that, as an Inns of Court student, he was excluded from much of the contemporary political and cultural life. The attitude towards power of the Inns of Court satirist is best expressed by Bosola, one of the characters of John Webster's play *The Dutchess of Malfi*: "Indeed, he rails at those things which he wants" (I, 1, 25). It seems, therefore, that "there was a strong anti-courtly impulse shared by many Inns men, reinforced by their common frustration in their search for preferment" (Marotti, 33). In order to better understand the instances, both of indignation and ambition, that forged the satiric writing of Donne, it is necessary to investigate first the cultural environment formed around the Inn of Court and the models that were employed for the writing of satires.

The cultural environment in which the *Satires* were written was that, as previously mentioned, of the Inns of Court. These institutions were not merely schools for the legal education of their students, they were also an important centre for the formation of the cultural elite of the time. As John Stubbs relates:

The Inns of Court as they were at this time [the 1590s] are difficult institutions to classify. Together they were frequently depicted as a third English university, in addition to Oxford and Cambridge, with each of the Inns comprising an autonomous "house" or "hall" equivalent to the university colleges. Ostensibly, the Inns provides only legal training, but they also accommodated a great range of literary, political and theological activity, and thus stood as a kind of finishing school for Oxbridge alumni. They were select communities, each Inn having only about two hundred active members. These came from all over the country. [...] Only ten per cent of Law students were Londoners; together, therefore, the Inns reflected a national elite. (36)

If the verse letter "to Mr E. G." is taken into account, though, it seems that for Donne the literary, political and theological discussions that were taking place at the Inns were more important than the "law exercises" (l. 12). Indeed, as the poet himself suggested in his writings, "he would write years later that he was 'diverted from' this practical occupation by his 'immoderate desire for humane learning and languages'. Such subjects were 'beautiful ornaments to great fortune; but mine needed an occupation', he accepted dolefully" (Stubbs, 37). Finding an occupation, though, was not an easy task for a student that came from the middle class like Donne.

The Inns of Court, indeed, provided only the education needed for the students to go into the world of the state and of the Court, but they did not foster their advancement. Once with a degree, the Inns former student needed to find by himself his own employment in a world ruled by patronage. If the career of some of the most famous Inns of Court graduate is taken into account, it will be apparent that the prospects of a graduate were not at all secure:

Drawn to London by the promise of a living, the members of the Inns were themselves a mobile and in some respects a marginal class, searching for niches in a system that could be maddening unstable. The Inns produced their Egertons and Lees, their Chancellors and Lord Mayors, as well as their suburban bureaucrats, the Thynnes and Guilpins. But in William Goddard they produced a demobbed soldier and begging epigrammist. For young John Davies, the son of a Wiltshire tanner, expulsion from the Middle Temple was a more immediate concern than the Attorney Generalship of Ireland, which lay a dozen years down the road; and for Thomas Bastard, the end of the road was death “in a mean condition” in a Dorchester madhouse. (Manley, 428)

In order to procure themselves a job, many of the Inns students had to look for opportunities outside their social environment, and the place that, most of all, attracted their ambition was the court; and what they were looking for was a wealthy and powerful patron who could use their skills. But this dependence on the whims of the court and of its members aroused ambiguous sentiments in those who sought offices that were a prerogative of the court (Marotti, 32). Moreover, their studies alone were not sufficient in order to receive patronage, they needed also to demonstrate that they could move around the court with ease, as if they were members of it, and they, therefore, needed to have a certain degree of sophistication, especially as far as poetry was concerned (33). Even in this case, their ideas about what kind of poetry was more suitable was a matter of controversy.

Inns students, than, spent a great amount of time learning the court ways. “Their cultural heroes,” as Marotti puts it, “were courtly figures like Sir Philip Sidney and the Earl of Essex, their gossip was often ‘courtly news’, and much of the literature published for their consumption [...] was courtly literature” (33). On the other hand, the search for patronage was a very frustrating process that depended on the favour of certain individuals more than on a *cursus honorum*; this situation aroused a considerable amount of frustration that was voiced by most of the poets who came out of the Inns with a vigorous anti-courtly satiric language. Their attitude was a “ kind of moral and satiric disengagement from the courtly

world, a stance of [...] criticism of its rules, of its styles, and of its [...] corruptions” (33) that led, at least as far as poetry was concerned, to a shift of interest from more courtly genres (for example, the sonnet sequence, and traditional courtly poetry in general) to a plainer style that needed to be simpler and freer.

Satire could take many forms: it could be “a poem, a play, a novel, an epigram” (Patterson, 117) but what was central for the writer was describing an attitude towards society that can be described as “a public engagement with the times: a critical engagement; sometimes a hostile and contemptuous one” (117). The kind of critical engagement that satiric writing implies was not just a critique of a kind of social environment that needed to be radically changed, it was also a plea from the part of the writer towards a world from which he was excluded. The criticism of the court was actually one of the advices that were suggested in probably the best manual for courtiers of the Renaissance, *Il Cortigiano* by Castiglione. As Peter DeSa Wiggings points out in his study on the influence of Castiglione on Donne: “To recognize and to be able to laugh at the incongruity of the real with the ideal, of social practice with social norm, is, instead, one of the foremost qualifications, according to Castiglione, of persons who would attempt to improve social conditions, or at least retard their decline” (22), and as far as the attitude of the satirist towards the court and the prince, he comments, “Is not your poetry only your manner of elbowing your way into the Prince’s company and making believe that you have weighty business to discuss with him?” (34). Criticism of the court through satirical writing was then not only a way to criticize the way the ruling classes behaved, it was one of the ways through which bright young men could enter the establishment and become themselves part of the ruling class. This was particularly true for Elizabethan England in the 1590s, the period that saw the flourishing of the satiric genre in a political system that, as previously mentioned, was based on patronage and where one of the means of advancement was literary fame (Marotti, 101).

The ambivalent attitude of the English satirist towards patronage found its roots in a court that was ruled by “[t]he Queen’s favour and disfavour, amorous intrigues, the ruthless ambitions of would-be officeholders and the importunity of spindrifts aristocrats and gentlemen who looked to licenses and monopolies to rescue them economically” (103). In a system like this the possibilities of advancement were very few, and not at all connected with the personal skills and experience of the office seeker: in order to obtain a place at the service of the establishment the abilities that were required were concerned mainly with the complete loyalty to the patron and a certain amount of political shrewdness. Moreover, the court of Elizabeth was not keen towards religious tolerance, therefore not only

political, but also a firm protestant faith was a mandatory requirement for whomever wanted to join the court (Cain, 87). In this context, the fights between different courtly factions facilitated the rise of particular kinds of writings that can be described as “flattery, gossip, and libel” that, in the minds of the satirists of the time were considered “the abuses of language associated with such a world [the court]” (Marotti, 103). The kind of attitude that the satirist proposed in his verses was one that challenged and fiercely criticized not only the practices of the court, but also the language and the rhetoric that were considered the norm as far as the depiction of society was concerned. The satirist presented himself as distant from the courtly environment, describing, at the same time, how the court was the main source of corruption and the main place of power and opportunity of the times (102-103). The ambivalence of his attitude, and therefore of his “spleen”, derived from the fact that “the gestures by which he separates himself morally from the inhabitants of such an environment reveal a fear of guilt by association” (103), an association that was inevitable if the poet did not want to limit his action to mere criticism, but he seeks also reform. This kind of problematic attitude depicted perfectly in the satiric writing of John Donne who, at the same time, criticized and aspired to be part of the court, and was particularly interested in the relationship between power and language.

John Donne is the author of five satires, four of which were probably composed when he was still a student at the Inns of Court and before (Marotti, 38) he became secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Seal and the senior judge in the court of Chancery under Elizabeth I (Stubbs, 89), and became thus part of the establishment he previously criticized. The contents and the tone of these poems reflect the ambivalent relationship that then existed between the Inns students and the political and cultural power that emanated from the court: as Marotti suggests “all these poems are the works of a man eager to become a part of the Establishment but angry about the forms of self-abasement necessary to succeed in a world of social, economic, and political power relationships” (38). Their purpose, then, is twofold: on the one hand, they serve as a critique of the mechanisms of selection and appointment that are inherent to the court and that have very negative repercussions on the whole texture of society; on the other hand, they are a way to give free rein to the frustration and stress that such a system of power-relationship produces in the office-seeker. This double nature allowed them to become a very popular genre among the ambitious Inns student, who become their primary audience, given the fact that most of

the students were “similarly impatient for preferment and fond of asserting their intellectual, moral, and social autonomy” (38). The satires, though, were not only a response to the frustrating political environment of the time, they were mostly, at least as far as Donne’s satires are concerned, a cultural and literary critique of the ways of representing a world that was quickly changing.

In order to put his satiric “spleen” into a suitable form, Donne had to look for inspiration both in the classical literary heritage of the poets of the imperial Rome and to contemporary London, the place he was in constant contact with (Hadfield, 49). The link between these two very different environments, and the reason why the poetry of the former period seemed so suitable to describe the contemporary situation, lied in the fact that the Rome described by poets such as Juvenal and Horace was “the greatest city of the ancient world on the cups of its expansions and assumptions of world domination, and a similar situation in contemporary England” (49). Moreover, the satiric poetry of imperial Rome, mainly through the works of Horace and Juvenal, provided Donne with a useful example on the best way to criticize contemporary society¹. As Milgate argues, in the satires of John Donne we find all the features that characterized their classical forerunners: “the blending of reflection, narrative and direct denunciation; the humour and the scorn; the terse vigour; the ‘dark’ and ‘harsh’ style; the urban setting; the uncompromising realism; and the mixture of conversational directness and ironical allusiveness” (xvii-xviii). What makes these satires different from other satires of the time, often a mere modernization or copy of the classics (xviii), are three essential features: firstly, the constant confrontation with the literary establishment of the time, as far as literary language was concerned; secondly, the complex and lively depiction of the society of his time, from the

¹ Selden summarizes the most important feature of Horatian and Juvenalian satire in this way: “(1) Horace prefers a tone of jesting (*ridiculum*) which is moderate and rational in its approach to the reforming role of the satire. Juvenal’s tone is indignant and irrational. (2) Horace expresses a concern for formal correctness and artistic labour. Juvenal affects a careless contempt for literary artifice for its own sake, a stance which is consistent with the unstrained spontaneity of the satire’s *ira*. (3) Horace’s ethical philosophy is relativistic and permits a rational discrimination between degrees of wrongdoing. Juvenal’s moral stance is Stoic and absolutist, in that it does not permit such discrimination: affectation in dress is castigated as vehemently as infanticide. On the other hand, the moral stance in Juvenal is usually complicated by irony and is often entirely lacking. (4) In respect of social and political attitudes, Horace is a well-integrated and quiescent conformist, while Juvenal is a disaffected and reactionary Jeremiah. Horace is a common-sensical and moderate elitist, while Juvenal is a dogmatic reactionary whose idealism has gone sour. (5) Horace’s satire is based upon the plain-style values of *sermo*: it is essentially conventional and familiar. The adoption of the plain-style basis enables Horace to satirise by means of irony and the deployment of delicate *nuances* of style. Juvenal’s satire is rhetorical and declamatory, and its effects are often derived from violent juxtapositions of high and low styles. He is especially fond of witty incongruity produced by the scornful application of epic style to the victims of satire.” (42)

lowest to the higher social environments; thirdly, the endless pursuit of a reform for the fault of the world depicted in his verses.

The first feature is embodied in the use of two of the tropes for which Donne is most famous: the simile and the metaphor. In his satires these two figures of speech assume a vivid and excessive form, extending themselves for several lines or even creating entire chains of metaphors or similes, tending to give a sense of disproportionate “force inward toward the one central idea or effect” (Zivley, 90). For example, the lawyer in *Satire II* is compared first to a hunter with “nets, or lime-twigs” (v. 46), then to winds “in our ruin’d Abbeys” (v. 60), then to “inbrothel’d strumpets prostitute” (v. 64), then he is “Idl[e], like prisoners” (v. 67) and a “King’s favourite” (v. 70) and finally he is compared to “carted whores” (v. 73). The effect is twofold: on the one hand, as Zivley argues, the aim of the poet is not to exhaust the reader but to force him, through the device of a restless and varied repetition, to “learn exactly the lesson or see precisely the characteristic which Donne intended” (90). On the other hand the poet, by putting side by side all these different images, criticizes not only the main topic he is debating in the satire (in the case of *Satire II* corruption of lawyers) but draws a picture of the world in which corruption is reflected by corruption, thus arguing that not only a small part of society is in need of reform, but indeed all society is (in this case the city environment (inbrothel’d strumpets prostitute), religion (our ruin’d Abbeys) and the political power (King’s favourite). Nonetheless the images used in these tropes are not only related to the world the poet is criticizing, but they can also have a much more mundane nature, giving way to allusions and ironies that are a characteristic of the classic roman satire (Milgate, xix). For example, in *Satire II*, the following passage appear:

For as a thrifty wench scrapes kitching-stuffe,
And barrelling the droppings, and the snuffe,
Of wasting candles, which in thirty yeare
(Relique-like kept) perchance buyes wedding eare;
Peecemeale he gets lands, and spends as much time
Wringing each acre, as man pulling prime. (ll. 81-86)

In this case the thriftiness of the kitchen wench is used to describe the land-grabbing disposition of the lawyer, but in the way the simile is constructed there is something particular to Donne. As Milgate argues, “Donne turns the device to original use by almost invariably making the minor term of the image, or the thing to which reference is made,

itself an object of satire or an emblem of corruption” (xix); therefore the poverty the underlies the thrifty action of the servant, the reference to the storage of “reliques”, the reference to gambling, not only highlights the avarice of the lawyer, but are themselves elements of corruption deserving the disparagement of the satirist (xx).

The crowd of images that is the trademark of Donne’s tropes is also a characteristic of the social environment that is described in his satires. These poems, as it was previously mentioned, cover the whole spectrum of English society under Elisabeth I and this world “ranges from kings to kitchen-maids, from the patriotic ape to treacherous officer of state, from pursuivants to poets” (Milgate, xix). The variety of the environment, the crowds of characters that populate the satire create a sense of fullness that highlights the corruption and the stupidity of this busy world and create also the possibility of an endless reserve of anecdotes that can be used to vivify a parade of voices and faces that would otherwise be poor sketches (xix). Donne’s anecdotes make his “fools and knaves [...] up and doing, vividly active before our eyes, [...] you have only to step outside your door, it would seem, to be plunged in this welter of evil and stupidity” (xix).

This world, though, is not only criticized in order to calm the frustrations of the poet, is not only the enraged outburst of a satirist who is “at the very outside boundaries of privileged circles and communities of honour –the nobility, the court, the City commune, the legal profession” (Manley, 390), but is also a careful and thorough examination of all the aspects of society that are in need of urgent reform. What the poet attempts to achieve in his poems is finding “a safe and unafflicted vision of the truth, a vision of the truth compatible with the pursuit of office and the attempt to reform the world” (397). This aspect more than others differentiate Donne’s satires from their classical models. The witty and cynical detachment of Horace and the destructive fury of Juvenal were not aimed at reform but at an ironic and sarcastic description of their world; Donne’s satires, however, always try to find a truth beyond the chaos and when they inevitably fail at this task (being the genre of the satire not the proper mean to convey reform), and the come closer and closer in their scrutiny, they push him, as satirist, further and further toward that soulful isolation which alone can authenticate his being and vision. To the extent that the simulation of virtue usurps the reality, the satirist’s only truthful act must be a confession of his inability to represent a social order where the differences between true and false, feigned and counterfeit no longer matter” (397). Nevertheless the powerful images of the satire start a process of critique of contemporary society and knowledge that will be paramount in Donne’s poetic and that will be the focus of this dissertation. In order to see where this

critique will focus its goals it is important to analyse some of the most famous satires of John Donne, starting with *Satire I*.

(1.02) *Satire I: a World Gone Mad*

In a letter where the addressee is unknown (probably Donne's long-time friend Sir Henry Wotton) John Donne comments the fate of Pope Celestine V at the beginning of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*:

Even when I begun to write these, I flung away Dante the Italian, a man pert enough to be beloved and too much to be believed. It angered me that Celestine, a pope so far from the manners of other popes that he left even their seat, should be by the court of Dante's wit be attached and by him thrown in his purgatory, and it angered me as much that in the life of a pope he should spy no grater fault than that, in the affection of a cowardly security, he slipped from the great burden laid upon him. (Donne, 7)

It is unclear whether the poet agrees with the renunciation of the papacy on the part of Celestine or not, nevertheless what is apparent is the fact that he does not agree with the punishment that Dante reserved to him. Is there no greater sin, Donne asks, that the renunciation of the papal seat, given the fact that popes before and after Celestine were far from holy figures? Is it not better to renounce to a symbol of worldly corruption, even if "cowardly", to lead a life of quiet contemplation far from the world?

These questions are paramount in the first satire composed by Donne, in which, like in Dante's *Comedy*, a scholar is driven away from his studies by a person who will guide him through the hellish and corrupted streets of London. However, the poet's guide is not a wise classical figure like Virgil, but a "fondling motley humorist" as corrupt as the city he explores:

Away thou fondling motley humorist,
Leave mee, and in this standing wooden chest,
Consorted with these few bookes, let me lye
In prison, and here be coffin'd, when I dye; (ll. 1-4)

The situation at the beginning of the satire is at the same time different and similar from the story of Celestine V: like Celestine, the poet is driven away from his duty in order to pursue different matters; unlike Celestine, though, the poet is not convinced to leave worldly businesses to concentrate on more spiritual matters, but exactly the opposite. His annoyance at the humourist conceals a fear of the busy and lively world outside the “wooden chest” (the cell of the students at the Inns of Court)², and his fear is so great that he would prefer to die in his little chamber, transforming it into a prison where he would be “coffin’d” for ever. But his apartments are not as secure as the poet would make the “motley humourist” believe: as Milgate points out the word “chest” used to describe the little room “often meant ‘coffin’” (118), and perhaps this deadly connotation derives from the “few books” the poet seems so fond of. But what manner of books are these?

Here are Gods conduits, grave Divines; and here
Natures Secretary, the Philosopher;
And jolly Statesmen, which teach how to tie
The sinewes of a cities mistique bodie;
Here gathering Chroniclers, and by them stand
Giddie fantastique Poets of each land.
Shall I leave all this constant company,
And follow headlong, wild uncertaine thee? (ll. 5-12)

In this passage are mentioned, from the most important to the most trivial, all the aspects of the education of a young learned man of the time, but each one is accompanied by terms that seem to connote them as negative. The theological books that should serve as the interpretation of God’s will are written by “grave Divines”, and here the verb “grave” could stand either for serious or for tedious and mind-numbing. The philosopher, by many commentators identified as Aristotle (Smith, 470) (Milgate, 118) is labelled “secretary”, which could mean the he is a thorough scholar of scientific disciplines but also that he could be the one who holds Nature’s secrets (Smith, 470) not to reveal them but to conceal them. The statesman who is so attuned to the “sinewes of a cities mistique bodie” is also “jolly”, that is “overweeningly self-confident, full of presumptuous pride, defiantly bold, arrogant, overbearing” (Milgate, 118), not an edifying picture for an educator in political matters. The chronicler limits himself to gather information, and finally the poets (both

² “each chamber was divided into two, and each half-chamber seems to have consisted of a bedroom and a study divided off by wainscots partitions” (Milgate, 118)

foreign and local) are described as “giddy” and “fantastique”, that is to say frivolous and not interested in reality. Here, though, the poet is trapping himself in his own argument: if theoretical learning is so fruitless and frustrating, why is he resisting so strenuously to the invitation of the humourist? Probably the reality of the city streets is even worse. After all, this life of fruitless learning is what the poet knows, the little “chest” is where he feels more comfortable, and what frightens him most is the uncertainty both of the city and of the character and reliability of the humourist.

In order to assure his wellbeing, the poet tries to bound the humourist to some rules:

Not though a Captaine do come in thy way
Bright parcell gilt, with forty dead mens pay,
Nor though a briske perfum'd piert Courtier
Deigne with a nod, thy courtesie to answer,
Nor come a velvet Justice with a long
Great traine of blew coats, twelve, or fourteen strong,
Wilt thou grin or fawne on him, or prepare
A speech to court his beautious sonne and heire. (ll. 17-24)

The humourist should not stop if these public figures cross his and the poet's path. They are the representative of the secular ruling class of the English society of the time: the “Captaine” represent the military; the courtier resides in the political heart of the state, the Court; the justice epitomise the power of the Court of Chancery, “a court with two major functions. It was both a court of equity and an administrative organ, a duct through which every major private and civic matter passed for determination or approval” (Stubbs, 96), that is to say the core of the bureaucratic administration. Similarly to the writers of the books present in the poet's chambers, even these figures are connoted negatively. The “Captaine” is dishonest and corrupt and takes advantage of his privileges by stealing the pay of soldiers who have been dead for a long while. The courtier is “briske perfum'd piert”, suggesting vanity and ostentation without any real power. The Justice is accompanied by a “Great traine of blew coats, twelve, or fourteen strong”; the “blue coats” being the servants, a train of twelve of them would have been considered a “show of extravagance and ostentation” (Milgate, 120). The poet, first bored by his study, is nevertheless preoccupied with the representatives of the real world as well. Starting with figures of political and institutional power, he condemns the importance that the humourist gives to them, and by doing so he attempts to criticize two aspects that were paramount in

the political life of the times: firstly, he condemns servile patronage, the practice of selling someone's services to a person of wealth and power; secondly, he defines this patronage as harmful by describing people in places of power as ostentatious and hollow of any real power.

His condemnation of the behaviour of the humourist is not over, though, and after the poet has examined the character of the people who can give patronage, he scrutinizes the psychology of the seeker of patronage, the humourist himself.

Oh monstrous, superstitious puritan,
Of refin'd manners, yet ceremoniall man,
That when thou meet'st one, with enquiring eyes
Dost search, and like a needy broker prize
The silke, and gold he weares, and to that rate
So high or low, dost raise thy formall hat:
That wilt consort none, untill thou have knowne
What lands hee hath in hope, or of his owne,
As though all thy companions should make thee
Jointures, and marry thy deare company. (ll. 27-36)

If in the previous passage the humourist seemed to play the part of a fool blinded by a show of power devoid of any virtue or reality, here the poet describes the seeker of patronage as an individual who exploits the arrogance of the powerful in order to advance himself. The humourist is "monstrous" in two particular aspects of his behaviour: he is a "superstitious puritan", obsessed and over-scrupulous³ with the forms of religious devotion, and, despite being of "refined manners" he is "cerimoniall", that is to say "addicted to ceremony or ritual, precise in observance of form of politeness" (Milgate, 120). Combining these two aspects, the poet suggests that the practice of seeking the favour of the powerful has become a sort of sacred practice for the humourist, a practice that is described in details. Like a broker, he appraises his target by the "silke, and gold he weares", focusing more on the wealth than on the spiritual qualities of a person, and then "to that rate /So high or low, dost raise thy formall hat", a mention to the practice to "lowering the topsails in submission, or in courtesy, to another vessel" (Milgate, 121), which means a false and ceremonial show of respect. Nevertheless the humourist is not fooled by the ostentatious show of wealth that the people he seeks are so famous for. He

³ "superstitious: punctilious, over-scrupulous (O.E.D 3)" (Milgate, 120)

wants assurances about the real amount of their possession, and that is why he will not stop enquiring after “lands hee hath in hope, or of his owne,” as if he was a man seeking marriage, or “Jointures” (“strictly speaking, signifies a joint estate, limited to both husband and wife” (121)).

The poet has criticized the behaviour of the humourist towards appearances and now he condemns his attitude towards virtue:

Why should'st thou (that dost not onely approve,
But in ranke itchie lust, desire, and love
The nakednesse and barenesse to enjoy,
Of thy plumpe muddy whore, or prostitute boy)
Hate vertue, though shee be naked, and bare?
At birth, and death, our bodies naked are;
And till our Soules be unapparrelled
Of bodies, they from blisse are banished. (ll. 37-44)

The poet's argument is all based on the concept of nakedness. He contrasts the nakedness of virtue, stripped of any clothes and even of the human body, since it can only be seen when the soul is “unparalleled” , that is to say “undressed” (122), by the body, with the nakedness that is more appealing to the tastes of the humourist. The nakedness he enjoys is connected not only to simple lust, but to a lust connected to “prostitute boys” and “plump muddy whores”: in this case the key-word is “muddy”, which, as Milgate points out, means “morally impure, dirty, with some reference, perhaps, to her [the whore's] complexion” (122). The kind of nakedness he enjoys is not only immoral, but has also the appearance of a physical disease.

The picture of complete moral corruption that the poet does of the humourist and of the world he inhabits might seem a sufficient reason for the poet no to follow his annoying companion. Nevertheless the two decide to finally venture forth into the streets of London, and here, as the poet foresaw, the humourist immediately leaves him to pursue his hunt of patrons:

But sooner may a cheape whore, that hath beene
Worne by as many severall men in sinne,
As are black feathers, or musk-colour hose,
Name her child's right true father, 'mongst all those:

Sooner may one guesse, who shall beare away
Th'Infant of London, Heire to'an India:
And sooner may a gulling weather-Spie
By drawing forth heavens Scheame tell certainly
What fashion'd hats, or ruffles, or suits next yeare
Our subtile-witted antique youths will weare;
Then thou, when thou depart'st from mee, canst show
Whither, why, when, or with whom thou wouldst go. (ll. 53-64)

Here is an example of a chain of extended metaphors that have the aim of both insult the humourist and criticize some aspects of English society. Firstly, he is compared to a “cheape whore” who cannot name the father of her children because she laid with too many men, underlying the fact that the humourist has extensively tried to get patronage throughout the city without getting any stable results. Then his future is deemed as obscure as the one involving who shall marry the fictitious “Infant of London”. Here the poet comments both on the precarious state of the life of the humourist and the similarly precarious political situation of England. As Milgate suggests, this is a “reference to the clam of the Infanta of Spain to the throne of England. A Bull of Sixtus V (1588) confirmed the deposition of Elizabeth I and named Philip II of Spain King of England; in Roman Catholic circles the Infanta was recognized as the heir to the English crown” (123); the poet by mentioning this fact seems to link closely the unstable life of the humourist with the lack of stability and the fear of political unrest that was paramount at the end of Elizabeth’s reign. Finally, though, he concentrates once again on the frivolity of the humourist by comparing his unreliability to the futile practices of an astrologer that has nothing better to do than devise “What fashion'd hats, or ruffles, or suits next yeare /Our subtile-witted antique youths will weare”. In this case the poet condemns “antic youth”, that is to say the vain dandies that populate the city, for “discriminating and penetrating intellects in their pursuit of fashion” (123); they, like the humourist, degrade serious study and knowledge if it is not bent to serve their frivolous whims.

After the humourist has left, though, the poet does not return to his books and his studies, but plunges forth into the corrupt streets of the city to observe more the activities of the humourist.

Now we are in the street; He first of all
Improvidently proud, creeps to the wall,

And so imprison'd, and hem'd in by mee
Sells for a little state his libertie;
Yet though he cannot skip forth now to greet
Every fine silken painted foole we meet,
He them to him with amorous smiles allures,
And grins, smacks, shrugs, and such an itch endures,
As prentises, or schoole-boyes which doe know
Of some gay sport abroad, yet dare not goe. (ll. 67-76)

Here the poet describes in great detail the action and movements that the humourist does when he sees a potential patron on the streets. First, he creeps, a term that underlines maliciousness, to the wall, taking “the place of honour, the wall side, given in politeness to one’s superior” (Milgate, 124). He is improvident though, in two very particular ways: primarily because the “outside position was more hazardous, involving the risk to mire underfoot and of refuse thrown from the windows above” (124); consequently his care for his clothes makes him change position, thus losing his freedom of movement along with the possibility of catching the eye of a any courtier (124). His disappointment is connoted by “grins, smacks, shrugs”, a childish behaviour that is linked to the one of “prentises, or schoole-boyes which doe know /Of some gay sport abroad, yet dare not goe”. Here a new trait of the psychology of the humourist is added: he is not only mischievous but he also has unreasonable expectations, and as a result his behaviour is both highly crafted and immature.

The poems continues for several lines its description of the misadventures of the humourist until an episode signals a shift in the attitude of the poet towards him: if the poet, at first, was disgusted by the humourist, now he seems to take pity on him.

He heares not mee, but, on the other side
A many-colour'd Peacock having spide,
Leaves him and mee; I for my lost sheep stay; (91-93)

The episode that triggers the pity is similar to previous ones: the humourist leaves the poet in order to pursue a more worthy relationship. This episode, though, arrives after the poet has witnessed to and meditated on the level of degradation a person has to endure to live in a society ruled by appearances and devoid of virtue. When the humourist leaves him the poet “for [his] lost sheep stay”. The roles have changed: if the humourist, at the beginning

of the poem, needed to be the active part of the relationship, being the one who had to instruct the poet in the ways of the world, he now has shown everything that the poet needed to see; the poet thus becomes the active part of the relationship, trying to give the humourist a presence he can return to, as the sheep returns to its shepherd.

Nevertheless, the humourist is beyond salvation, and the last lines of the poem highlight his tragicomic fate:

At last his Love he in a window spies,
And like light dew exhal'd, he flings from mee
Violently ravish'd to his lechery.
Many were there, he could command no more;
He quarrell'd, fought, bled; and turn'd out of dore
Directly came to mee hanging the head,
And constantly a while must keepe his bed. (ll. 106-112)

The humourist reaction when he sees his lover is predictable: as if she was a courtier, the humourist leaves the poet on the street and evaporates like dew in the morning. He is “Violently ravish'd to his lechery”, an expression that reveals the lustful and conflictual relationship that he has with his lover, highlighting another aspect of the humourist life that is ruled by vice and not virtue: his relationship with women and his conception of love in general. Unfortunately, he finds that his woman is entertaining some of her lovers; he then fights with them and is beaten very hard. He will have to stay in bed for several days, and the poet rejoices sarcastically for that, given the fact that rest will be the only constant action that the inconstant humourist will be forced to endeavour, at least for a while (Milgate, 127)

Describing the relationship and the adventures of the humourist and of the poet, Donne wanted to criticize the basis upon which society was built at the time. Knowledge, symbolized by the books in the poet's chamber, was devoid of meaning and purpose and the real world, based on the appearance of wealth and power and not on the firmer foundation of virtue and truth, is governed by hollow institution and is constantly on the brink of unrest and chaos. The figure of the humourist, then, at first disparaged and condemned by the poet, becomes the victim of a set of rules that degrade the individual and his talents, and taint every aspect of a person's life: his talents are ruined, his ambitions thwarted and his personal and intimate life degraded.

This kind of decay finds the best way to communicate itself by the means of literature, and particularly love poetry, an aspect that will be analysed by Donne in his second *Satire*.

(1.03) *Satire II: The Bureaucratization of Love Poetry*

A. J. Smith begins his commentary of *Satire II* with a brief summary of the plot of the poem: “The butt of this *Satire* is a bad poet who becomes a worse lawyer and the voraciously misuses the law to enrich himself” (474). The *Satire*’s themes are much more complex than this summary suggests. In it, Donne elaborates his only “disquisition on poetry and its social uses” (Wiggins, 34) and one of his few statements about the corrupting force that power has on the artistic mind.

In Donne’s *satire* there is no place for the “exalted claims of Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* or Jonson’s aspirations to political influence through laureateship” (34), as it is apparent from the beginning of the poem:

Though Poetry indeed be such a sinne
As I thinke that brings dearths, and Spaniards in,
Though like the Pestilence and old fashion'd love,
Ridlingly it catch men; and doth remove
Never, till it be sterv'd out; yet their state
Is poore, disarm'd, like Papists, not worth hate. (ll. 5-10)

After reassuring the unknown addressee of this *satire* on his hate towards the city, and after disparaging the writers of poetry as most detestable sort of men, the poet begins his disquisition on the evil of poetry. First and foremost poetry is a “sinne”, that is to say something that is not in accordance with religious virtues and is thus immoral. It brings “idleness and effeminacy, takes men from fruitful labour and is enemy of the military virtues” (Milgate, 129) thus rendering a Spanish invasion quite possible. It is, finally, a pestilence that propagates very quickly, and men can survive it only by “starving out the ailment” (129) or by reducing someone’s diet, if desire is still in the sanguine state (129). Surprisingly, despite the fact that poetry is described as such an apocalyptic danger to society, the poet seems to find some sympathy and pity for poetry writers and he describe them as “poor” and “disarm’d”, and links them to papists. This is an odd comparison,

considering the threat that a Catholic power like Spain posed to England at the time. Probably this plea of mercy towards poets and papists was inspired by the personal vicissitudes of Donne's family, especially his brother, "died in 1593 as a result of his violation of the statute referred to [failing to take the oath of supremacy]" (130).

Another reason to be merciful towards poets, though, is the fact that exists another figure in English society that is far worse: it is the figure of the lawyer-poet embodied by Coscus, the protagonist of this satire. Before the reader is introduced to him though, the poet describes and mocks his character, his behaviour and his career:

One would move Love by rimes; but witchcrafts charms
Bring not now their old feares, nor their old harmes:
Rammes, and slings now are seely battery,
Pistolets are the best Artillerie.
And they who write to Lords, rewards to get,
Are they not like singers at doores for meat?
And they who write, because all write, have still
That excuse for writing, and for writing ill.
But hee is worst, who (beggary) doth chaw
Others wits fruits, and in his ravenous maw
Rankly digested, doth those things out-spue,
As his owne things; 'and they are his owne, 'tis true,
For if one eate my meate, though it be knowne
The meate was mine, th'excrement is his owne. (ll. 17-30)

The poet describes poetry as a weakening force: like witchcraft, it is more an old superstition than a powerful force of magic that can move Love; "rammes and slings" are outdated weapons in the war of love that is now fought with the "Artillery" of money (131), highlighting the propagation of prostitution not only as a profession, but also as a favoured kind relationship between lovers. Even writing in order to get patronage is not as remunerative now as it was in the old days. The poets who still practice this "ill writing" are like "singers at doores for meat", beggars whose writing is more funny than harmful. Other creatures are far more dangerous, and here Coscus makes his entrance into the poem. He is described as the worst of his kind, the poet who, for lack of inborn talent, prays on "Others wits fruits" and presents it as his own work. According to the poet "imitation is a bondage, stifling to one's genius, distracting to one's memory, pedantic, plodding, illiberal,

graceless. Stepping oneself in literary art is, at best, a form of idleness; at worst, the escapist obsession of a beaten man” (Wiggins, 38). His is then compared to an excrement that is recognizable by anyone as Coscus’s work, since it is apparent that the meat (the source) of his lines lies in other poets works.

Coscus, therefore is not only dishonest, but he was able to render dangerous a form of art that had lost its power, and the means by which he performed such a feat reside in his blending the words of poetry with the words of legal procedure:

But these do mee no harme, nor they which use
To out-doe Dildoes, and out-usure Jewes;
To'out-drinke the sea, to'out-sweare the Letanie;
Who with sinnes all kindes as familiar bee
As Confessors; and for whose sinfull sake
Schoolemen new tenements in hell must make:
Whose strange sinnes, Canonists could hardly tell
In which Commandements large receipt they dwell.
But these punish themselves; the insolence
Of Coscus onely breeds my just offence,
Whom time (which rots all, and makes botches poxe,
And plodding on, must make a calfe an oxe)
Hath made a Lawyer, which was (alas) of late
But a scarce Poet; (ll. 31-44)

Here there is another example of how Donne uses a chain of images, in this case to highlight both the corruption of the images themselves and the character of Coscus. The aim of this passage is to show how Coscus is worse than the worse sinner. The poet affirms that people who “out-doe Dildoes”, “out-usure Jewes”, “out-drinke the sea” and “out-sweare the Letanie” are far more reliable and harmless than Coscus, even if they commit sins of the worse kind (the mention to the “Litanie” was omitted in all edition of Donne’s poetry until 1669 (Milgate, 132)). Those people who are as familiar with sin as confessors are, and for whom scholars have to invent new regions in hell to put them, are still less deserving of disparagement than the vile Coscus. Even the ones who committed such crimes that the canon-lawyers (“canonists”) (132), those expert in religious law, could not condemn them for lack of sins to ascribe to them, are a better sort than Coscus. The crimes described in this passage are of various kind: their nature is sexual, moral,

economic and religious, but they all seem more forgiving because what Coscus did was making language ambiguous and confusing by mixing two registers, the poetic and the legal, thus making impossible for everyone who might hear him or read his writing understand what is true from what is false, what is sinful from what is virtuous. This perversion arises the “just offence” of the poet and his bitter and resentful judgement on the figure of the lawyer-poet.

The outcomes of this mixture are exposed by the poet in a scene in which Coscus tries to seduce a lady by using pre-eminently legal terms:

Then are new benefic'd ministers, he throws
Like nets, or lime-twigs, wheresoere he goes,
His title'of Barrister, on every wench,
And woos in language of the Pleas, and Bench:
'A motion, Lady.' 'Speake Coscus.' 'I have beene
In love, ever since tricesimo' of the Queene,
Continuall claimes I have made, injunctions got
To stay my rivals suit, that hee should not
Proceed.' 'Spare mee.' 'In Hillary terme I went,
You said, If I returne next size in Lent,
I should be in remitter of your grace;
In th'interim my letters should take place
Of affidavits--': words, words, which would teare
The tender labyrinth of a soft maids eare, (ll. 45-58)

His new titles are used as traps to catch unwilling victims and his title of “Barrister” is thrown towards “every wench” in the hope that some of them might fall for him. The language of his wooing pertains to the legal practice, particularly “the language of the Court of Common Pleas and the Queen’s Bench” (Milgate, 133). Here starts the dramatic dialogue between Coscus and the Lady she is wooing, filled with legal terms that resemble closely “the actions by which one could claim possession of a contested piece of land” (133). This kind of terminology, other than mocking the clumsy attempts at seduction employed by Coscus, reveal an aspect of love poetry all bent towards material gains and completely oblivious of a more spiritual side to the game of love. Thus Coscus addresses a “motion”, that is to say “an application for a rule of order of the court, permitting the case to proceed” (133), towards the Lady; he affirms he has been in love since the “tricesimo’

of the Queene”, “1588, the thirteenth year of Elizabeth’s reign (133); his love is made of “Continuall claimes” (a claim “formally reiterated within statutory intervals so that it might not be deemed to be abandoned” (133)), “injunctions” (“judicial processes, which could be issued by Chancery to stay proceedings of the Common Law courts if the suit was unjust or had been brought on insufficient grounds” (133)), both means to retain the love of the Lady and scare rival suitors. The lady asks him to spare her more of this kind of wooing but he is relentless: he speaks of a deal they made in which it was said that he could resume his wooing at “Hillary terme”, and that is precisely what he intends to do. In the meantime, his love letters should have the same legal value of “affidavits”, that is to say “sworn statements” (Smith, 476). The passage ends with an image of violence: the ugliness of Cocus rhetoric is so unbearable that a maiden’s ear would be wounded by it, thus suggesting not only that this kind of pomposity is an affront to both poetic and legal language, but it is also harmful for virtue itself, here embodied by a “soft maiden”. The following line constitute a chain of insults to Cocus that was analysed at pages 9-10. What worries the poet most, though, is the kind of power that Cocus could attain if he succeeds in achieving a new status with his new, degrading language:

Shortly ('as the sea) hee'will compasse all our land;
 From Scots, to Wight; from Mount, to Dover strand.
 And spying heires melting with luxurie,
 Satan will not joy at their sinnes, as hee.
 For as a thrifty wench scrapes kitching-stuffe,
 And barrelling the droppings, and the snuffe,
 Of wasting candles, which in thirty yeare
 (Relique-like kept) perchance buyes wedding geare;
 Peecemeale he gets lands, and spends as much time
 Wringing each Acre, as men pulling prime. (ll. 77-86)

The new legal-poetic language that was employed, in the previous passage, to gain the favour of a lady, is now engaged in sustaining Cocus’s hunger for wealth and property. If he puts it to good use he will be the owner of all the English isles, from Scotland to Dover. Moreover he will take pleasure in the fact that he took the land from their rightful owners by instilling the seed of lust in their minds, undoubtedly thanks to the charming power of love poetry rhetoric. The use of the sin of lust in this passage is not unintentional: it is unquestionably a reference to the nefarious influence of love poetry; nevertheless, linked to

the figure of the young and naïve “haïres” of large estates, it highlights the pleasure that Coscus gains in stripping them of their possessions. Indeed, “heirs were not supposed to get rid of their estates by mere gluttony, a vice of older age, but by debauchery generally” (Milgate, 136). Moreover, “Luxurie implies lasciviousness, and ‘melting’ is therefore doubly appropriate since not only the heir’s estate dwindles, but also his bodily substance” (136). His pleasure in collecting land is similar in baseness and avarice to the pleasure that a “thrifty wench” feels when she scrapes “kitching-stuffe” and treasure the as “reliques”⁴. Finally, his mastery over his corrupt language allows him to break the law by writing false and invalid documents without the danger of being discovered:

But when he sells or changes land, he impaires
His writings, and (unwatch'd) leaves out, ses heires,
As slily'as any Commenter goes by
Hard words, or sense; or in Divinity
As controverters, in vouch'd texts, leave out
Shrewd words, which might against them cleare the doubt. (ll. 97-102)

His language has evolved so much by now that any trace of poetry has been absorbed and the result is a kind of writing that resembles more the one of dishonest commentators or deceitful Divines. Its use is still dedicated to the land-grabbing scheme, that it is now so refined that his documents, when no one is watching, can be forged by simply leaving out the so called “ses heires”, “the phrase which ensures that property passes to a man’s heir after his death. By omitting the words from the deed of conveyance the land grabber thinks to recover the land himself when the buyer dies” (Smith, 479). His work is not similar to the one of the poet anymore, he does not have to create new documents in order to enrich himself, he just has to modify and interpret in his favour what is already existing. Thus the comparison with the commenter and the controverter: they both interpret texts, the first works of literature and the second works of religion, and when they find passages they do not understand, they simply ignore them or make explanation up with the intention of covering their own ignorance (Smith, 479). Coscus has then triumphed: his corruption, started with the imitation of poetry migrated into a blend of legal and poetic language and ended in the forgery of legal documents. Language, therefore, has been corrupted in all its

⁴ A more exhaustive analysis of this passage can be found at page 10.

aspects: in the act of creating it, in the act of using it, and in the act of give a right and honest interpretation.

The only hope for the poet, and the only means of salvation for poetry, is acknowledging that power, or the desperate pursuit of it, corrupts language. As Peter DeSa Wiggins points out “Power corrupts language, along with everything else, insists the speaker of satire II, and there is no escape from the impasse except the partial one that comes with candidly acknowledging it. Political and economic power may turn poetry into neck verse, but in the mouth of lawyers it makes language a murderous weapon” (Wiggins, 39). The solution, therefore, is to break the bonds between the political/economic power and poetry, thus inventing new ways of expression and a new form of poetry. This will be one of the themes that John Donne will develop throughout his poetry, especially in the *Songs and Sonnets*.

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Chapter 2

“If any, so by love refined that he souls language understood”: The New Philosophy of Love in the *Elegies* and the *Songs and Sonnets*

(2.01) The Love Poetry Tradition

Donne's attitude towards the idea of Love was varied and wavered consistently from a fierce critique of the failures of courtly love, to a celebration of physical desire and from a sarcastic and cynical game of love with a woman to the consecration of mutual love between a man and a woman. In the chapter dedicated to the *Satires* the critique of a political use of love poetry mingled with the tradition of patronage and the unwelcome mixture with the language of the legal practice has already been discussed, although the iconoclastic and sarcastic force of the *Satires* will be employed again by Donne in the poems that are the object of the first part of chapter 2: the *Elegies* and the libertine poems of the *Songs and Sonnets*.

In order to introduce the themes that will be analysed in this chapter it might be better to start from an interesting poem from the *Songs and Sonnets*, *The Dampe*:

When I am dead, and doctors know not why,
And my friends' curiosity
Will have me cut up to survey each part,
When they shall find your picture in my heart,

You think a sudden damp of love
Will thorough all their senses move,
And work on them as me, and so prefer
Your murder to the name of massacre.

Poor victories ; but if you dare be brave,
And pleasure in your conquest have,
First kill th' enormous giant, your Disdain ;
And let th' enchantress Honour, next be slain ;
And like a Goth and Vandal rise,
Deface records and histories
Of your own arts and triumphs over men,
And without such advantage kill me then.

For I could muster up, as well as you,
My giants, and my witches too,
Which are vast Constancy and Secretness ;
But these I neither look for nor profess ;
Kill me as woman, let me die
As a mere man ; do you but try
Your passive valour, and you shall find then,
Naked you have odds enough of any man.

As Theodore Redpath argues in his commentary, this is clearly a witty and brilliant poem of seduction (154) but what is most interesting about it is the fact that this seduction happens post-mortem and is carried on through a series of patters that reproduce the various literary fashions of Donne's times. The first stanza in the aftermath of the poet's death for love: the causes of his death are unknown and doctors and friends gather around his body to perform an autopsy in order to find out what happened, but when they recover from his heart the picture of the lady he loved a sudden dump of love kills the all. The idea of the picture fount in the lover's heart is not original and it likely derives from stambotto 89 from the Italian poet Serafino, where he affirms that "if his breast were cut open everyone would recognize the image of his lady on his heart" (154); what is new in Donne's poem is the slaughter of friends and doctor that the discovery causes. The "dampe

of love” (l. 5) has the nature of a “noxious exhalation, a poisonous fume” (Smith, 365) that will cause a “massacre” (l. 8) instead of a single death. Although the topos of the death by love is a common Petrarchan theme (365), the fact that in this poem the death is not the private one of the lover but the public one of the community of friends and doctors might suggest two possible interpretations: the first is that the relationship between the lovers, when becomes public, sets a negative example on society then thus die metaphorically because they are exposed to a poisonous relationship; from a more literary point of view, though, the problem may arise from that the relationship between the lovers is a classic Petrarchan example of unfulfilled love between a tyrannical lady and a servile poet, a kind of literary fiction that, during Donne’s times, was being fiercely criticized by a new generation of poets (Donne among them). The tone of the first stanza thus seems to be ironic, even comic, and aimed at ridicule a certain kind of love relationship, a mockery that continues in the second and third stanza.

In the two following stanzas, in addition to the Petrarchan personae of the distant lady and the beseeching poet there is also a display of comic-epic imagery. In order to even the ground between the two, the lover defies the lady to get rid of the two giants that guard her “Disdain”(l. 11) and “Honour” (l. 12) and needs to repudiate her past behaviours by letting hordes of “Goths and Vandals” (l. 13) destroy the history of her past mistakes; he also warns her that he too is capable to evoke his own monsters and witches in the form of “Constancy and Secretness” (l. 19). Here Donne, merging “allegorical figures [coming] from medieval romance, on which, of course, Tasso and Spencer drew considerably” (Redpath, 155), and the language of courtly love, he states a critique of Petrarchan love poetry which needs to start with the behaviour of the woman. It is she herself, in fact, and not her lover that needs to “forgo the ritual defences of the courtly mistress that give women such an unfair advantage over their lovers” (Smith, 365) in order for the lover to forgo himself the characteristic that have been assigned to him by the rules of courtly love. The only act that they need to interpret is the following one: “Kill me as woman, let me die/ As a mere man” (ll. 21-22). Here the *double entendre* is obviously sexual (Smith, 365) but its implications go beyond the mere display of wit. Firstly, in order to enjoy sexual pleasure the two lovers need to forego their previous roles of dominance and submission in order to find themselves on the same level, thus the slaying of those giants that represent the classical poses of the courtly mistress and lover. Secondly, they need to change literary genre to deal with their past roles: the change from Petrarchan convention in the first stanza to a mock-epic-romantic mixture in the second suggest a radical disagreement of the

poet with previous modes of expression of love. Thirdly, the mistress needs to be educated to a new way of loving (in this case of an erotic and sexual nature) in which she will discover her “passive valour” (l. 23) as well, and she will thus be able “Naked, you have odds enough of any man”(l. 24), that is to say she will find new ways to master the attention of her lover. The poem itself is the tool of learning that the mistress needs, a poem that, by criticizing and using “heretically” the patterns of courtly love and romance, finds new ways to experience and express love. Nevertheless, the critique of the old ways comes first and that will be the focus of the first part of this chapter.

In order to fully understand the depth of the critique and the novelty proposed by John Donne’s poetry it is advisable to mention first the importance, both cultural and political, that love poetry, and especially Petrarchan and courtly love poetry, had in renaissance England. This is hardly the place for a thorough investigation of this vast and complex literary genre, nevertheless it is necessary to highlight its most important features and the interpretation of them given by the most important poets of the time, given the fact that Donne’s poetry debates with and contrasts that of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors, namely Thomas Wyatt, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare.

Before the various patterns of Petrarchan and courtly love are examined, though, it is necessary to mention the fact that this kind of poetry would not have been possible without the new stress on individuality posed by Renaissance Humanism. In his seminal work on the culture of the Renaissance, the Italian philosopher and critic Eugenio Garin thus describes the new man of letter:

Uno dei caratteri salienti della letteratura del Rinascimento è senza dubbio la frequenza di personaggi non comuni che cercano di realizzare in se medesime l’immagine dell’uomo universale teorizzata dai filosofi. L’uomo che sa tutto, che fa tutto, che può tutto, che è tutto – che è un microcosmo in cui si riunisce il macrocosmo. (143)

One of these men is without a doubt Petrarch: humanist, translator, philosopher and poet, he is the perfect example of an intellectual who has a “heightened awareness of subjectivity and individuality” (Norbrook, 4) and that underlines the aspiration to universal recognition through “the significance of the individual voice” (4). This new subjectivity is

particularly important as far as artistic creation is concerned: literature is in fact the place where the new philological and philosophical discoveries of the humanists intermingle with the personal subjectivity of the artist, thus creating something new and different from the works of medieval writers (4). Once again Eugenio Garin highlights better this point when he affirms:

Se il Rinascimento ha significato nella storia europea un deciso mutamento di prospettiva e di costumi, è pur vero che ha manifestato nelle arti una individualità inconfondibile raggiungendo in essa le maggiori altezze: e vuol dirsi soprattutto nella pittura, nella scultura, e nell'architettura, anche se il rinnovamento letterario costituì il punto di riferimento della nuova civiltà, a cui dette un contenuto e una sostanza attraverso il ritorno al mondo classico. (142)

This statement sounds particularly true if the masterwork of Petrarch, the *Canzoniere*, is taken into consideration. Its success and influence in European literature was unprecedented, especially because it presented a new model for the expression of individuality.

The first two elements of the *Canzoniere* that will produce a widespread imitation in Europe are, firstly, the narration, through a series of sonnets and songs, of the relationship of the poet with his beloved (Guss, 24), and secondly the fact that through these poems the poet is able to express the depth and variety of his feelings (Segre, 599). Petrarch achieves this goal by refining what Cesare Segre defines as “paradosso trobadorico” (599), that is, a relationship in which a lover expresses through verses his sentiments for a lady that is either unaware or cold towards his attention. This produces in the lover a sense of unquenchable desire, giving to the poet the possibility of continuing the analysis of his sentiments even after the death of the lady (599). The *Canzoniere* is, in fact, divided into two sections, the first “in vita” and the second “in morte” of Laura, the addressee of the poems. Thus the period encompassed by the poems, probably many decades (Guss, 25) allows Petrarch to express both his maturations and his reflections upon life (25). Thus, the story is shaped in a way that resembles a confession (and here the model of *The Confessions* by St. Augustin is apparent (Segre, 598)) of the poet's own moral weaknesses that will lead to a life of asceticism and spiritual contemplation (599). In this case the death of the beloved is fundamental because, given the fact that the physical object of desire is

no longer attainable, the same desire must be driven towards other regions, in the case of Petrarch the regions of spiritual and religious contemplation (Guss, 25).

The way in which both the story and the psychological analysis of the sentiments are related by the poet employs a complex and ingenious exploitation of classical and contemporary tropes at the service of a style that is highly individualistic and personal. Petrarch, indeed, either renews, adapts or rejects elements of classical or courtly love tradition to suit the purpose of his narration and the goal of his analysis (Segre, 598). “Latinity, Romanticism and Augustinianism” (Guss, 27) are among the most relevant traditions employed by the Italian poet in his work, although they are not models to follow but sources of inspiration for a highly personal style. Indeed, as Donald L. Guss argues, “Petrarch self-analysis echoes the *Confessions* [by St. Augustin], but it also echoes the amorous psychology of Provençal lyricists and chivalric romancers. Petrarch’s linguistic stylization reflects Roman aulicism, but it reflects also as well the Provençal conceit” (27). An interesting example of this mixture is proposed by Cesare Segre in his introduction to *Antologia della poesia Italiana- Il Trecento*, an example that deals with the theme of metamorphosis in the collection. Segre states:

Petrarca introduce miti e simboli propri della sua vicenda: l’amata Laura s’identifica anche con il lauro della Gloria poetica, e con l’alloro in cui fu trasformata Dafne (che diventa un suo doppio), mentre il poeta stesso ora s’affianca come rivale, ora s’identifica con Apollo, il dio che per troppo desiderio provocò la metamorfosi di Dafne in pianta. (598)

Petrarch, therefore, is not interested in retelling the story of Daphne and Apollos but is interested in how elements of that story can be employed to highlight certain aspects of the relationship between him and Laura. Moreover, the mention of poetic glory given by the image of the laurel betrays the poet’s ambition to literary greatness thus giving new insights on the reasons that brought him to venture in this literary experiment (the sonnet sequence). Finally, the element of metamorphosis gives the reader a sense of the mutability of the psychology of the poet who reaches thus new levels of psychological depth never achieved before in this genre (598).

Nevertheless his personal adaptations do not stop with imagery and rhetorical figure but they venture as far as the form of the poems themselves. Petrarch is the poet who institutionalises the form of the sonnet (two quatrains and two tercets in hendecasyllabic verse) as the best kind of poem for psychological analysis (600). Moreover, he employs the

song and the madrigal as companions to the sonnet form, and utilises them to give more psychological insight or to comment on specific plot elements of his relationship with Laura.

The success of the *Canzoniere* was widespread across Europe and it gave rise to a literary fashion called Petrarchism. Petrarchist poets try to imitate Petrarch both in his psychological analysis and in his poetic experimentations, but most of those who are contemporary or immediate successor to the Italian poet never achieve the uniqueness and depth of feelings of their predecessor (Segre, 600). Nevertheless, during the Renaissance, attempts at personalise and even surpass the Italian master are not uncommon. Indeed, as Daniel S. Guss argues, “Petrarchism is an evolving, not a static mode” (22), a mode that personalises some elements of Petrarch’s poetry to suit the need of new individualities and to scrutinise new aspects of each poets’ life. The first element of Petrarchism is the so called Petrarchan attitude, that is to say “amorous devotion, dependence, adoration, dolor, and despair” (23), all features that express a complicated relationship with the beloved and give the poet an excuse to reason on the nature of desire and on the frustration that derives from the impossibility of fulfilling it. The stylistic companion to this attitude is to be found in the second element of Petrarchism, that is to say the employment of a series of images that go from “fires of passion, tempests of sighs” (23) to “dying and resurrected lovers and pictures of ladies engraved on lover’s hearts” (23). These images can be used either figuratively or literally, some can be used as “passionate hyperboles and others [...] are literally true, the fires burning houses and the sighs moving ships” (24). The third element of Petrarchism lies in his collection of commonplaces of amorous philosophy, that is to say “the two-in-oneness of the lovers, the distinction between base and spiritual love and the neo-platonic amorous ladder” (24). Finally, the fourth element of Petrarchism employs a range of situations that goes from “the initiation of love [to] the parting of the lovers and the despairing poet complaining of his lady’s hardness” (24). All these elements are crucial to understand the particular branch of Petrarchism that is introduced by poets such as Thomas Wyatt at the English court. Indeed in England, the characteristics of Petrarchism will help poets develop new themes that are closely linked to the way the English court was shaping itself from the beginning of the 16th century onward.

Translations from the *Canzoniere* by Petrarch were introduced in England in the first half of the 16th century in a world that was being shaped by the court of the Tudors. This fact

had a great influence in the way Petrarchism was assimilated by English poets, because it had to deal with a situation in which the court was at the centre of the political and cultural life of the country and the most influential figure arising from it was the courtier, modelled after the courtier described in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, that is to say an intellectual that uses literature and the arts to advance politically through the favour of the monarch. Therefore, in order to describe the kind of Petrarchism that took roots in England it is useful to mention what was the court in Renaissance culture and what part the courtier played in it.

The Renaissance court, as previously mentioned, was the centre of political power and the source of cultural innovation in Renaissance society. It was a "public space- a place for display and showing off- where all the aspects of the drama [that is to say, the relationships within the court] were cultivated, developed and exploited to the full" (Bates, *Literature* 343), but it was also a place that produced, probably in response to the over-exposition that such an environment demanded, some of the most intimate and introspective works of literature of the period (343). It is apparent, though, that the court was public only to a certain extent: as Catherine Bates explains, "[t]he court was an exclusive preserve of aristocratic privileged, a rarefied coterie setting in which courtiers amused each other by imitating poetic models then fashionable" (343). The court was, therefore, the place where the privileged classes oriented the cultural tastes of a whole nation. It was in fact the nobility who had "the means and the leisure to cultivate the arts" (344) and, since the court was not only a place of culture, but also a place of power, every kind of literature was produced according to its rules and followed its influence. The aristocracy, though, was no longer the producer of literature, as it was in Middle Ages, but the consumer of it. Courtly literature was the way through which people with great knowledge but no noble birth entered the world of the court. The court, therefore, was also "a place where literature came up from below and where writing enabled men to work their way up to what Sir Thomas Wyatt had called 'the slipper top/ Of court's estates'" (343). Literature thus became the primary form of "public relations" (345) and could be used to "serve the encomiastic needs of the prince and so contribute to the smooth running of the state as a whole" (345). Consequently, it is not strange to have important poets in relevant administrative roles within the state or as personal secretaries to important members of the court. In fact, the most important poets then present at court were either member of the bureaucracy or servants to powerful patrons, even if these two positions were very

different. The situation of the poet member of the bureaucracy is thus described by Catherine Bates:

Bureaucracy gave writing a new functionality [...] as state services increasingly took the form of literacy rather than military expertise. Abilities which, in the Middle Ages, had largely been confined to the clerical class were now being developed by a newly educated professional and secular class. From keeping records and drafting reports to turning out panegyrics on request, the ability to write became what would these days be called a transferable skill, and men like Edmund Spenser and John Donne, trained at the universities and the Inns of Court, were able to put themselves forward as private secretaries, civil servants and officers of the state. At the most practical level, such posts furnished would-be writers with a livelihood, enabling them to pursue literary careers in tandem with their official duties (345-346)

This advantageous situation, though, was not as common as it might seem. Indeed, the figure of the professional writer was part of a minority, if the role of patronage is taken into consideration. This method relied, as was explained in chapter 1, on a relationship of strict dependence to a wealthy patron who might have bestowed his favour upon patronage-seeker if his writing were considered pleasing and flattering. This was not just a method used by aristocrats with people who sought entrance in the world of the court, but it was the backbone of the court system itself. Its structure worked in a very rigid manner: “[t]he monarch stood at the top of the pyramidal system itself in which favoured courtiers could, in their turn, bestow sought-after positions as administrators and tutors on men for whom writing was a direct way of demonstrating their intelligence, learning and intellectual clout” (346).

At the centre of this system, apart from the monarch, stood the figure of the courtier, someone that used the rhetoric of courtship given by courtly love tradition as a political tool for his own advancement and for the advantage of his loyal subjects. This had a great influence in the way the rhetoric of love poetry was to be constructed, especially in England. In order to understand how the new love poetry took shape at court it is advisable to analyse in depth the figure of the courtier and how his dealings in the court influenced the relationship between the lady and his beloved in courtly love poetry.

During the Renaissance the word “courtier” underwent considerable changes in meaning. Originally it referred to the person residing at the court of a nobleman or a king, but with

no reference to a particular role played precisely for the court environment. The courtier was usually a nobleman or a bureaucrat at the service of, and residing in the same household with, his lord (Bates, *The Rhetoric* 7). During the Renaissance, the word “courtier” began to refer to a particular set of rules and roles attached to those who wanted to advance in a society that was starting to become particularly dependent on the favour of the monarch. According to Catherine Bates:

From the fifteenth century [...], the court became a self-conscious model for the exercise – social, autocratic, and public- of royal hegemony. As D. A. L. Morgan has recently argued, while the language of courtesy had an indisputably medieval pedigree, extending back as far as at least the troubadours, the language of the court was (certainly in England) a fifteenth-century phenomenon. Perceived as a centre of political and cultural activity, the court became a focus of scrutiny, and its members, the courtier and the prince, were formalized by Castiglione and Machiavelli as rhetorical role-models and categorical types. (9)

From this passage it is clear that the new world of the courtier was the result of two distinct phenomena peculiar to the Renaissance period (particularly to Tudor England): the first, political, has to do with the centralization of power towards the courts of national monarchies as a consequence of the consolidation of certain ruling dynasties on a given territory (for example, the Tudors in England) (8); the second has to do with the new way in which the courtier and the Prince related to each other: the Prince showed his favour rewarding the courtier with honour and offices, but in order to obtain them the courtier had to resort to flattery and deceitfulness.

It is apparent that the new political and cultural environment had a strong influence in the way the new love poetry was going to be written. As Catherine Bates points out, in the Middle Ages the rhetoric of love poetry was not centred on the court vocabulary but on the object of love: the woman, or donna (10). Indeed, the verbs that expressed “to woo” in the continental languages were “domneirer” in Provençal, “donoier” in French and “donneare” in Italian (10). This kind of vocabulary denotes a certain passivity as far as the woman was concerned, with all the action relying on the poet and with the woman fulfilling her role of silent object of worship: an aspect that can be seen as the major difference between the old and the new love rhetoric. As Bates suggests “courtship began to be perceived as a shared activity, a behaviour in which both parties, male and female, were subject to a milieu that

was figured as external: the court” (11). In the new love poetry, in fact, the poet and the beloved had both a role to play which was extremely similar to the relationship between courtier and monarch (Jones, Stallybrass, 54). Therefore the kind of rhetoric used in courtly love poems partook of all the devices and paradigms of the court environment, thus acquiring diverse negative connotations such as flattery, deceitfulness and abuse (Bates, 11). It is a language that often defines the lover’s behaviour “as Spenser’s cunning Paridell ‘courted [Hellenore], yet betrayed euery word” (10).

One of the paramount problems with the new courtly love language, therefore, seems to be related to the high degree of fiction of the rhetorical devices employed in the act of courting a woman, especially if it is considered that the language of love used by Renaissance poets has its origins in the language of flattery used to wheedle the monarch (Bates, 14) (Jones, Stallybrass, 64). “To court”, in this context, primarily means “to use courtly rhetoric” as a political tool. If the rhetoric of courtly love was so intertwined with the political rhetoric of the court, that meant that not only the language of love poetry was seen as devious and flattering, but also that its purpose was to gain something from the beloved, something of a sexual, and therefore immoral, nature (Bates, 37). The semantic field of courtly love, though, was not always seen as negative: it could express also “model eloquence and etiquette [...] as the most upright and exemplary relationships” (43-44). The fluidity of the concept derives from the fact that “to act in a courtly fashion” is, indeed, an “act”, a series of pre-conceived patterns that can be used one way or another with the same efficacy (47). What this rhetoric entailed, though, was a diffused sense of frustrated desires and ambitions that were both political and literary: political, because the attempts to gain favour through exhibiting one’s ability with love rhetoric was often frustrated; literary, because courtly love poetry from the beginning, especially in England, was accompanied by a disparagement of the artfulness of the rhetoric of courtly love that, nonetheless, was essential to write love poetry. Indeed, the first poet who harshly criticized the rhetoric of courtship in the love poetry that was being written at court was Thomas Wyatt, one of the first translators of Petrarch into English and one of the finest courtly poets of his period.

The biography of Thomas Wyatt describes a man who was both a part and a victim of the court system. As a part of the diplomatic body of the English court he served as ambassador in Spain at the court of Charles V and participated in various diplomatic missions in Italy and France (Bertinetti, 73). His success as a courtier though did not last and he was in fact incarcerated for treason twice, the first time for offending the duke of Suffolk and the second time for being part of a plot against the king along with queen

Anne Boleyn (73), even if he managed both times to get a royal pardon. This turbulent life led him to distrust and criticize harshly the court environment, an environment of which once he was the perfect embodiment. As Donald S. Guss argues, “Wyatt is a continental traveller in the courts of the High Renaissance. He is the teacher and model of Surrey, and Elizabethan prototype. And he is a courtier in Castiglione’s sense: abroad, he affects his country’s policies, and at home he entertains its rulers, and enriches its language and learning” (34). The most interesting way in which he enriched the court’s language and learning was by translating and introducing to the English court sonnets from Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* and adapting the language of love of the Italian poet to the English courtly environment. His, though, are not just simple translations but, to a certain extent, adaptations. Firstly, he changes the Petrarchan sonnet divided into two quatrains and two tercets and creates the English sonnet form, composed by three quatrains and a final couplet. He thus imports the “beautiful rhetoric” (34) of the Italian sonnets adapting it in order to reform and English way of doing poetry that was still heavily influenced by music (Bertinetti, 73) giving to the sonnet a more meditative and epigrammatic form. His adaptation was not only formal but also thematic, and the most relevant changes from Petrarch regard the relationship between the two lovers. The Petrarchan relationship of a lover reasoning and desiring a woman that is often idealized and distant, more a product of imagination and memory than a real woman, is rejected by Wyatt (74). The woman described by the English poet is present in the poet’s life and her attitude towards him is frivolous and unstable (74). As Donald L. Guss suggests, “Wyatt changes the central contrast between the lady’s unconscious grace and her lover’s timid calculation to an opposition between a faithless lady and her loyal, manly, mistreated lover” (36) thus creating a new figure of lover, no more aspiring to spiritual matter once the impossibility of his erotic desire is apparent, but endlessly frustrated with the business of courting a capricious lady. Thus his poems take a “sceptical view of the courtly rhetoric of praise” (Norbrook, 15) and become a way to unveil the corruption deriving from the mixture of love poetry and courtly rhetoric. His poem become, therefore, “[a journey] behind the public scene, into a world where political and erotic life are both composed of ever-shifting tactical alliances, and even the occasional success is attributed to ‘fortune’” (15).

In order to understand better how Wyatt’s poetry distances itself from Petrarch’s it is useful to compare a poem by the Italian poet with its English translation:

Una candida cerva sopra l’erba

verde m'apparve, con duo corna d'oro,
 fra due riviere, all'ombra d'un alloro,
 levando 'l sole a la stagione acerba.
 Era sua vista sí dolce superba,
 ch'i' lasciai per seguirla ogni lavoro:
 come l'avaro che 'n cercar tesoro
 con diletto l'affanno disacerba.
 " Nessun mi tocchi - al bel collo d'intorno
 scritto avea di diamanti et di topazi - :
 libera farmi al mio Cesare parve ".
 Et era 'l sol già vòlto al mezzo giorno,
 gli occhi miei stanchi di mirar, non sazi,
 quand'io caddi ne l'acqua, et ella sparve.

In Petrarch's sonnet the vision of a beautiful "cerva" drives him away from his work to contemplate the beauty of the animal. In this case the hind is a symbol for his beloved Laura and her great beauty; a beauty, though, that is unattainable. The writings that appear on her collar, in fact, define her as made free by God (Guss, 37) and thus unapproachable by the poet. His action, therefore, is limited to the contemplation of beauty and on the meditation on the "irraggiungibilità metafisica che impedisce il congiungimento degli amanti, o la natura stessa del desiderio amoroso che non può fermarsi" (Bertinetti, 74). Indeed, this sonnet invents a situation in order to argue and reason on a certain abstract topic, in this case "the beauty and unapproachability of Laura, and [the] amazement at the speed with which his life has passed in eager and fruitless desire of her" (Guss, 37).

In Wyatt's case the situation, although metaphoric, refers to a more concrete situation:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
 But as for me, hélas, I may no more.
 The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,
 I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
 Yet may I by no means my wearied mind
 Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore
 Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
 Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about:
Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.

Differently from Petrarch, caught by the beauty of the hind while he was meditating on something else, the English poet addresses directly the reader saying that he knows where they can find a hind in order to pursue love, but suggesting that it would be a pursuit that would only cause frustration. Instead of the bucolic and artificial situation related by Petrarch, Wyatt describes a pursuit of the hind that refers to a precise social context in which the hunt for favour, both erotic and political, at court, leaves the hunter exhausted (Guss, 38). The hind, in fact, is not, as in the case of the Italian sonnet, unreachable because made free by God, but she is unreachable because she belongs to Caesar (this might be a reference to the relationship between Anne Boleyn and Henry VII (Bertinetti, 74)). Wyatt is thus criticizing the way the court works, a way that leaves the hunter frustrated and powerless but that, nevertheless, bounds him to utter "Fainting I follow" (l. 7) thus implying that this kind of system is unavoidable.

The only solution to end the frustration is to leave the court altogether, a situation that is described by Wyatt in his poem "Myn Own John Poyntz". This poem is, as many by Wyatt, and adaptation from an Italian original, in this case "the classicising satire by Florentine poet Luigi Alamanni" (Norbrook, 15). In this poem Wyatt describes the superiority of a world devoid of the dealing of the court while contrasting it to the court itself. The way in which he criticises his former place of residence and work is particularly interesting because it points out the degrading mixture of love and power:

I cannot honour them that setters their part
With venus and baccus all theyr lyf long
Nor hold my peace, of them Allthoo I smart
I cannot crowche nor knelle to do so great a wrong
To worship them lyk gode on erthe alone
That are as wollffes thes sely lambes among (ll. 22-27)

In this passage the criticism is focused exactly on the mixture between the rhetoric of praise and the true meaning of love at the court. Love is none other than unbridled Eros, as the mention to both the goddess of love (“venus” l. 23) and the god of debauchery (“baccus” l. 23) suggests, and to honour courtiers that follow this kind of behaviour and that, by the arts of deceit, are more “wolffes thes sely lambes” (l. 27) would be something too degrading for the poet. The mixture of love poetry and courtly rhetoric, therefore, has a double nature: on the one hand is necessary to advance in the courtly environment, on the other causes frustration and disillusionment in the poet who practices it, because it seldom gets the results hoped for. This is not, though, a sentiment expressed only by Thomas Wyatt; indeed it will become of paramount importance in the sonnet sequences written during the Elizabethan age.

The public discourse involving queen Elizabeth during her reign was essentially twofold: to her country she proposed herself as a protective and affectionate mother, to her court as a Petrarchan lady ready to be wooed. The mother-imagery was the result of a need for England to stay united in a world that was characterized by social, political and religious unrest. In order to be able to control the changes that her society was undergoing she proposed an image of the female monarch as a “natural [...] mother in the care for her children” (McEachern, 332) personifying her subjects as “dutiful children” (332). Her aim was to forge “[a] language of royal personhood [that] serves both to reinforce and to render familiar the bonds of state” (332) thus creating a sense of vicinity and intimacy with her subjects otherwise impossible with the common figure of the European male monarch, on the throne because of his divine rights. In the self-fashioning of her royal figure Elizabeth instrumentally used her virginity as a symbol of the purity of an entire nation, that was therefore necessary to protect at all costs (331). This raised in her subjects a “chivalrous indignation [...] in defence of a tender national honour” (331) giving a sense of interdependence between the safety of monarch and the wellbeing of the nation. It is apparent, therefore, that she “invoked a language of her own personhood, her common affinity with her subjects, and the affective nature of her bond with them” (331), a language that shifted to a more erotic and Petrarchan setting when it had to deal with the court system.

The main reason why the rhetoric of Petrarchan love poetry adapted itself so naturally to the court of Elizabeth was because it was a court built around a female monarch, therefore

“the whole rhetoric of courtly service and reward could readily be transported into an erotic key” (Bates *Literature*, 361) since the monarch herself played the part of the lady to woo. As Catherine Bates suggests:

In a world where the normal gender roles were reversed and where men were forced to sue to a woman for favour, courtiers found in the Petrarchan conventions of courtly love a ready-made language of gesture and ornament with which to declare their devotion and to pledge themselves as the Queen’s most faithful servants. Elizabeth, it seems, did nothing to stop them (363).

Male members of the court, therefore, readily exploited the seemingly natural identification of courtiership with courtship in order to gain political advancement, but many were also frustrated by a game that, they realized, was firmly in the hand of Elizabeth (361). Indeed, for the monarch the language of courtly love was the best way to control the men at her court: by letting her courtiers woo, court and make love to her, she could manage the delicate mechanisms of power by controlling the emotions, the jealousy, and the desire of her courtiers.

The heavily political use of Petrarchan courtly love language, though, did not weaken the appeal of this genre in the eyes of poets of the Elizabethan period. On the contrary, “as a strategy which made an inaccessible female the object of universal inquiry and fascination” (363), courtly love became the main cause for the revival of the sonnet as a form of flattery and love-making and open the way for the vogue of the sonnet sequence in the 1580s and 1590s (363). It is important to point out, though, that the sonnet form acquired the status of high literature only after the publication in 1591 of Philip Sidney’s sequence *Astrophil and Stella*, and previous attempt at establishing the genre failed to be successful. Indeed, the publication in 1557 of Tottel’s *Miscellany*, containing the poems of Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard among others, did not produce imitations of note (Marotti, 396). The sonnet remained confined to a variety of uses that went from commendatory and dedicatory poetry to epitaphs, epistles, didactic and religious verse and so on (396). It probably gained prominence with Sidney because of the role that the English poet played in the mind of his contemporaries. He was, in fact, both a political and a cultural hero, a warrior who died bravely in the field of Flanders and a refined and chivalric courtier who wrote a sonnet sequence (appeared posthumously) that dazzled and inspired a new generation of courtiers (Duncan-Jones, IX). Only by through his fame, therefore, he “raised

the status of the sonnet in the hierarchy of genres within the literary system of his time and virtually authorized poets of different social classes to undertake the composition of amorous sequences” (Marotti, 397). It was not only the fame, though great, of Sidney that brought about the fashion of the sonnet sequence, it was employed as a continuation and a deepening of the same themes expressed by Thomas Wyatt more than fifty years before: the mixture between courtly language and Petrarchan love rhetoric, and the analysis of the frustrating nature of desire. Wyatt expressed these themes by occasional translations of Petrarch that did not have, as the sequences have, a series of poems interlinked to each other which narrated and meditated on a relationship with a particular woman. His poems were occasional and their imitation of Petrarch was limited to experimenting with certain situations, tropes and with the form of the sonnet. The sonnet sequences writers from Sidney onward, on the other hand, imitated and adapted the model of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* in a more complex and experimental way. From the *Canzoniere* they what Catherine Bates defines as the “horizontal” and “vertical” structure of the sequence (*Desire*, 110), that is to say the horizontal element of the love story with the lady that encompasses the whole of the poems, and the vertical element that makes of every poem a meditation on this or that theme, whether it is the nature of love, the nature of desire or the artful description of the lady of a particular situation. Their imitation of the *Canzoniere*, though, stopped at the structure of the sequence and at the preponderant use of the sonnet form; their ideology, instead, was still based on the same sentiments that Wyatt expressed in his poems: the refusal to drive their erotic desire to more spiritual matters, the narration of a realistic love story with a lady that often speaks for herself, the meditation on the nature of desire and the impossibility to fulfilling it. Especially the latter theme will be the main focus of the sonnet sequences, so much so that the impossibility of fulfilling desire will become the within the sonnet sequence will become the hallmark of this kind of literary genre.

In the sonnet sequences the word “desire” is paramount but its nature is always negative: it describes the longing for something that is missing or wanting in the life of the poet (Bates *Desire*, 105) or, more accurately, a permanent state of lack of deficiency, a state of missing or not having something (105) that cannot be fulfilled. This existential state of unfulfilled longing became somewhat a common place trope in sonnet sequences, so much so that, as Catherine Bates persuasively argues, this kind of representation of love prevented any kind of relationship, whether courtly or not, to be showed as possibly successful (107). There were, of course political reasons for this poetic of frustration, and these are to be found in

the stress that was posed on courtly love language at the court of Elizabeth I, as previously mentioned (Marotti, 398-399). On the other hand, there were also more philosophical and literary reasons that principally related to a shift from a use of the sonnet, as previously described, as a courtly tool relegated to the specificity of some particular situation or person, to a use of the sonnet in a sequence that was not so much interested in describing the story of a love relationship, but was more interested in meditating on the concept of desire in a relationship. As Catherine Bates accurately describes:

Nevertheless, however much the 'I' might fill the frame with details of the mistress's beauty, fame or virtue, it is not she who is the prime concern and not she, when all is said and done, whom the sonnet sequence is really about. Ultimately, the focus of interest is not the desired object but the desiring subject. Indeed, the first is little more than a pretext or precondition of for the second. Thus, however passionately the speaking voice might insist that he aches for his beloved –however urgently he might call on her name, however devoutly he might wish for of earnestly beseech her- the one thing he does not want, or not yet, is for her actually to materialize, to come down from her pedestal, or to acquiesce to his demands. So long as she is held off at a discreet distance –as an addressee to be importuned, a 'you' to be apostrophised or invoked- she creates a situation in which there is necessarily an addressing, importuning, apostrophising 'I'. And so long as she continues to deny her lover what he says he wants, the identity of that 'I' remains affirmed as that of a subject, a subject who desires. (*Desire*, 107)

Although the “desired object”, to lady, might have a more important role than Bates acknowledges, it is apparent that the focus of the sonnet sequences is on the action of desiring on the part of the poet, who is thus able analyses this sentiment from a variety of points of view. But why poets actively refuse to deal with the possibility of satisfying desire? On the one hand because they are fascinated “by all aspects of this experience, paradox included” (109), on the other because what they seek to achieve is not only a through meditation on the nature of a particular sentiment, but also they are interested in literary greatness. Indeed, desire is not just a sentiment that relates to love, but also to fame. As Catherine Bates further suggests, “if the sonnet speaker does not exactly desire to persuade [...] then perhaps we should say that what he really desires to do is *to write great poetry*, and here we are on much stronger ground” (113, italics in the original text). The origins of this desire of fame can be found in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* and in his fascination

for the “lauro”, that is to say the tree that symbolises poetic fame. In the *Canzoniere*, though, part of the poetic greatness relied in finally overcoming frustration to achieve spiritual wisdom, an aspect that is nowhere to be found in English sonnet sequences. Thus, frustration does not limit itself to love but to fame as well. The speaker in the sonnet sequences, therefore, certainly wishes to persuade his beloved, “but what actually does is create an arena for the endless staging of his words’ failure, finally, to effect very much at all” (115). He, consequently, fails to leave a solid monument that would impress future generations because he “creates a scenario in which his words disconcertingly escape him, melt away and evaporate before his eyes” (115). These themes will be developed in different manner and different context by the most important poets of the Elizabethan period. Three in particular, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, developed them to the fullest, describing not only the frustrating nature of desire when dealing with love and fame, they also used this form to meditate on the various forms of love that were present during their time. The next session of this chapter will focus on these three poets specifically and will explain their personal interpretation of desire and love, interpretations against which John Donne will propose his own philosophy of love and desire.

(2.02) Sonnet Sequences: The Case of Sidney, Spenser and Shakespeare

Astrophel and Stella was the first sonnet sequence to appear in Elizabethan England and its fame was so widespread that it originated imitations throughout the 1590s (Peterson 164), the most famous being the one from Spenser and Shakespeare. However its success didn’t bring just imitation, but a more deep understanding of love language and the need to distance it from the court rhetoric (Marotti 405). In fact Sidney, as Marotti argues, “invited his sophisticated readers to exercise their critical faculties” (406) towards a kind of literature and a type of society that needed a radical reformation.

Sidney himself suggests his intention in his first sonnet:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she (dear She) might take some pleasure of my pain:
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain;

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
 Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain:
 Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
 Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burn'd brain.
 But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,
 Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows,
 And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.
 Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
 Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite--
 "Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart and write."

The first stanza opens with a very bold statement: "Loving in truth" (l. 1) and expressing this love through writing poetry close to this sentiment of truthfulness is the main goal of the poet and the best way to the grace of his beloved. The main theme of his poetry will be "my pain" (l. 2), the pain caused by the desire of her, described in such a way that she might be moved by it. But writing about pain and love does not seem an easy task, and the second and third stanza express this difficulty: in the second stanza he expresses the desire to "paint the blackest face of woe" (l. 5) and in order to do so he studies what "others' leaves" (l. 6), that is to say other writers before him, have written on the subject. This is the common trait of the renaissance courtly poet, a writer that needed to have a great knowledge on convention, especially as far as poetry was concerned, in order to be to be successful in his flattery (Duncan-Jones, VII). Despite his efforts though, the words of previous poets do not seem to be fit for describing his pain, so much so that "others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way" (l. 11). This realization leaves the poet baffled and is not until the final verse, when his muse declares "look in thy heart and write" (l. 14) that he realises how foolish he was in thinking that convention might be of use for him. His poetry, in order to be successful, needs to be a spontaneous outpouring from the heart, and be as sincere as possible.

But his intentions remain frustrated because Astrophel cannot escape the language of convention nor the aims towards which this language is used for, that is sexual favour from the beloved (Roche 216). It appears, therefore, that through the failing of Astrophel, Sidney was trying to reason on the tragic condition of the courtly lover, seen as a character chained to a world of fiction that prevented any kind of truthfulness in amorous relationship, forever tainted by the fiction of courtly rhetoric (Jones, Stallybrass 65). This

becomes evident after a close reading of some of the sonnets and songs present in the sequence. Indeed, Astrophel cannot keep up with his programme and he bases entire sonnets on the rewriting of other poets' works. This is true of sonnet 9 "Queen Virtue's court, which some call Stella's face" based on sonnet 157 of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* "Quel sempre acerbo et honorato giorno" (especially on the final sextet) (Ringler 463), or sonnet 11 "In truth, oh Love, with what a boyish kind" based on Du Bartas' *Premier Jour de la première Sepmaine* lines 155-60 (Ringler 464). Moreover, his desire to gain Stella's favour is the cause, in sonnet 63, of a grammatical misunderstanding of the "double negative" of Stella's speech:

[...] She, lightning Love, displaying Venus' skyes,
Lest once should not be heard, twice said, "No, no."
[...] But grammar force with sweet success confirms:
[...] That in one speech two negatives affirms. (Lines 7-8, 11, 14)

Here the double nature is not the one of Stella's negatives, but the one of Astrophel's error. As William A. Ringler suggests, the affirmative sense of the double negative was not, at the time, a fixed rule of English, but of Latin; therefore Stella's negative response cannot be seen as an affirmative but as a repetition for emphasis (478). The two negatives do not invalidate but they strengthen each other.

What seems apparent is that Astrophel falls into convention because that is what the courtly environment he lived in taught him to do. Since his mind is driven more by Desire than Reason (Rogers 213) he needs a series of devices that were constructed expressly for the utterance of desire, thus disregarding completely the command of his muse in sonnet 1. Sonnets 52 and 71 confirm this thesis.

A strife is grown between Virtue and Love,
While each pretends that Stella must be his:
Her eyes, her lips, her all, saith Love, do this
Since they do wear his badge, most firmly prove.
But Virtue thus that title doth disprove:
That Stella (oh dear name) that Stella is
That virtuous soul, sure heir of heav'nly bliss,
Not this fair outside, which our hearts doth move;

And therefore, though her beauty and her grace
Be Love's indeed, in Stella's self he may
By no pretense claim any manner place.
Well, Love, since this demur our suit will stay,
Let Virtue have that Stella's self; yet thus
That Virtue but that body grant to us.

In this sonnet a debate is staged between Love and Virtue on which of these to possess Stella's true nature. In the first stanza Love argues that the physical qualities of Stella, her beautiful body and her bright face show "his [Love's] badge" (l. 4). In the second and third stanza Virtue, though, argues that her true nature relies in her soul and not in her physical appearance and that her physical appearance is only a covering of her true self. In the first two lines of the last stanza the argument of Virtue seem to win on the one of Love. The poet affirms that Virtue should indeed have Stella's self, but his true intentions are revealed in the last, striking verse: "that body grant to us" (l. 14) he exclaims, thus revealing that he does not seek Stella's love, but he wants only to fulfil his sexual desires. In this poem he seems to make this decision willingly, nevertheless, as sonnet 71 demonstrates, he is a prisoner of his desires.

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How Virtue may best lodg'd in beauty be;
Let him but learn of Love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.
There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of Reason, from whose light those night birds flee;
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
And no content to be Perfection's heir
Thyself, dost strive all minds that way to move,
Who mark in thee what is in thee most fair.
So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy virtue bends that love to good:
"But ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food."

The whole of the poem tries to demonstrate how Stella's beauty can be seen as the true site of virtue. The first stanza opens with a general statement that declares that, according to the "book of Nature" (l. 1) virtue resides in beautiful things, and what is more beautiful than Stella's body? The second stanza relates how it was possible for Stella to be such a paragon of beauty and virtue combined: she overthrew all vices through "sweetest sovereignty/ of Reason" (l. 6-7). Within her, therefore, there is no place for "rude force" (l. 6) and her reason is so powerful that, as the third stanza explains, "dost strive all minds that way to move" (l. 10). Hence, she is not only a natural place for virtue but she is also able to inspire others to follow the path of reason. Unfortunately, Astrophel is not one of them: in the last verse he expresses the tragedy of being a prisoner of desire. The line "'But ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food.'" (l. 14) marks the defeat of the poet, who is not even able to speak for himself: it is Desire, in fact, that takes possession of his body and utter those words, thus confirming the fact that the true language of Astrophel is the one of desire, not the one of love. The most dramatic testimony of his failure of expressing honest love through courtly poetry is expressed in the eighth song, where Stella finally speaks and explains to Astrophil why his desire is destined to frustration.

When Astrophel and Stella confront each other in the Eighth song, it seems evident that their love is doomed to failure because Astrophel is controlled by his passion while Stella tries to reason with him (Roche 216). Stella is indeed extremely precise in exposing the biggest obstacle to their relationship:

[...] "If more may be said, I say,
All my bliss in thee I lay;
If thou love, my love content thee,
For all love, all faith is meant thee.
Trust me, while I thee deny,
In myself the smart I try;
Tyrant Honour doth thus use thee
Stella's self might not refuse thee." (Eighth song, lines 89-96)

This passage requires particular attention. Indeed, as Roche argues: "Stella's love for Astrophel is one of Sidney's most brilliant strokes. [...] It removes Stella immediately from the category of proud and aloof sonnet lady" (216); it appears, then, that is Stella the one who really brakes the convention. She is also particularly sensitive about the social

status that she represents (that of the married noblewoman) and of the fact that she might lose it if she agrees to surrender to Astrophel's desire. "Tyrant Honour" is the key expression: "'tyrant' is her mere concession to Astrophel's obsession, her grace to the grieving lover" (216) while Honour points out the impossibility of Astrophel's wishes. Honour for Stella means not to submit to Astrophel, otherwise "lust would radically lower her status" (Jones, *Stallybrass* 66); it is this concept that Astrophel does not understand because his logic, a part from being governed by passion, follows the logic inherent to the political side of courtly rhetoric (66). Indeed, only a female monarch like Queen Elizabeth would see her honour enriched by submitting to a suitor's demands, it would be seen as "the liberality of royal munificence" (66) and the erotic language of courtly love would be the best tool for the courtier to advance in her favour. The same rhetoric, though, fails completely when faced with a more intimate kind of relationship that is not based on the gain and concession of favour, but should be based on mutual respect and love. Astrophel's erotic rhetoric, therefore, has been tainted by the political environment in which he lives in, and he is doomed to failure because he does not recognize, like Stella, the nature of this corruption (66) (Roche 216).

The pollution of love rhetoric from the political practice of courting the monarch is present from the first sonnet of the sequence. When Astrophel, in the much praised gradatio of sonnet 1 "Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,/ Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain" is not just portraying the phases through which the beloved might be affected by his work, but also how the monarch might be persuaded to favour his "courtier". But it is in sonnet 69 that the almost Machiavellian logic of the court completely overcomes the language of love:

[...] For Stella has with words where faith doth shine,
Of her high heart giv'n me the monarchy:
I, I O I my say that she is mine,
And though she gives thus but condition'lly
This realm of bliss, while virtuous course I take,
No king be crown'd, but they some covenant make. (Lines 9-14)

Here the pollution is complete. The triumphant voice of Astrophel, bursting with egoistic joy ("I, I, O I"), is not the voice of a lover satisfied with the approval of his beloved, but the one of the crafty courtier who has just seen that all his flatteries and machinations have

paid off at last, in this case in the form of Stella's kiss. It is apparent, then, that Astrophel is not able to distinguish the language of the court from the language of love; it seems even that "the logic of his poems coincides with political rhetoric in ways that raise the question of whether the lover-poet is in control of the situation –or whether he is constructed by it" (Jones, Stallybrass 55). Astrophel's language is utterly corrupted, and the outcome for him can be only tragic: "Most rude despair, my daily unbidden guest, / Clips straight my wings, straight wraps me in his night." (sonnet 108, lines 7-8) . Sidney's sequence, finds the causes of the impossibility of fulfilling desire in the language of courtly love itself, a language that, being too much corrupted by politics, has forfeit any efficacy when it comes to real love relationships.

The case of Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* is altogether peculiar: his sonnet sequence follows the same philosophy of unfulfilled desire as any other sonnet sequence of the Elizabethan era; yet the relationship between the lover and the beloved, the often ironic and light tone and a peculiar structure that suggest a continuation beyond the sequence itself, suggests that the place of the *Amoretti* in the debate on the use of Petrarchan love rhetoric is of paramount importance.

The first important feature of the sequence is that it is not addressed to a lady of the court with a fictional name like Stella or Laura, but it is addressed to Elizabeth Boyle, wife of the poet (Prescott, 152). This explicitly autobiographical component of the sequence might be the reason for the variety of themes and tones that the poet employed in the composition of the sonnets. Spenser's wife, in fact, was between 15 and 20 years younger than the poet and, moreover, not being a component of the court she would need to be educated in the language and the proceedings of a place from which her husband derived his status and his fame. Indeed the attitude of the lover of the *Amoretti*, despite the usual Petrarchan poses, often assumes the role of "moral educator" (Marotti, 416): he "criticizes his mistress' personal vanity and egotism,[...] her coquettishness,[...] her hubristic self-assurance[...] and, most importantly, her fear of commitment" (416-417).

The themes that need to be touched in order to educate his soon-to-be wife are many and they encompass the whole thematic spectrum usually present in a sonnet sequence. Some sonnets are Neo-platonic in the way they describe Elizabeth as "the idea of beauty and Goodness" (Prescott, 152). Some are more classically Petrarchan,

on the one hand because the form of the sonnet (and of the sonnet sequence) requires it, but also for more philosophical reasons: the poet knows that Petrarchan rhetoric is perfect to describe “that Eros really can cause anguished desire, inward confusion, pained resentment” (152). There is room, though, also for mocking such postures. Indeed, both the poet and Elizabeth know really well that they a game, a very elaborate one, but still a game in which “a little Petrarchism never hurts” (153), they both know that “Petrarchan mood swings are often theatre” (153).

Nevertheless, a part for the use of mockery, the collections still revolves around the same theme as other sonnet sequences, that is to say “the lover [...] longs for a sexually unavailable beloved” (153). The particular way in which the sonnets are structure, though, seem to hint to a possible solution to the problem of unfulfilled desire. As Anne Lake Prescott persuasively argues, the structure of the poems might hint to a way of reading the *Amoretti*: “as a wreath of pages/leaves and an engagement ring anticipating the wedding ring, circles and garlands of the wedding poem to come” (153). The structure of the *Amoretti* is thus described by the scholar:

After twenty-one sonnets that include a reference to January comes a sonnet on the ‘holy day’ of Ash Wednesday in which [...] the lover worship in the lady’s temple; next comes as many sonnets as there are days in Lent, counting Sundays; then, right after the lady lets herself be caught, there is a shout of triumph at Easter [...]; and finally come another twenty-one sonnets, with indications at the end of coldness and separation. (153-154)

This structure suggest that, unlike love in other sonnet sequences, his love can be satisfied, and yet it cannot be fulfilled within the sonnet sequence. Prescott gives a religious interpretation of the reasons for this omission of marriage in the sequence, and she explains that “Christians still endure separation and alienation in a long and anticipatory season of Advent” (154), a persuasive argument that, nevertheless does not take into consideration the form in which Spenser was writing. The sonnet sequence is the genre of frustrated desire, and Spenser respects too much established conventions to include fulfilment in his sequence. Marriage will be the main theme of the companion of the *Amoretti*, his wedding song *Epithalamion*. In order to understand better how the sonnets in the *Amoretti* work, some examples is required.

In the last sonnet of the sequence the poet mourns the separation from his beloved:

Lyke as the Culver on the barèd bough,
 Sits mourning for the absence of her mate:
 And in her songs sends many a wishfull vow,
 For his returne that seemes to linger late,
 So I alone now left disconsolate,
 Mourne to my selfe the absence of my love:
 And wandring here and there all desolate,
 Seek with my playnts to match that mournful dove:
 Ne joy of ought that under heaven doth hove,
 Can comfort me, but her owne joyous sight:
 Whose sweet aspèct both God and man can move,
 In her unspotted pleasauns to delight.
 Dark is my day, whyles her fayre light I mis,
 And dead my life that wants such lively blis.

The first stanza presents the first part of a simile through which the poet describes himself as a mournful “Culver” (l. 1), that is to say a dove (McCabe, 696). The image is apt especially if it is considered that poetry still retained a link with music; moreover, the image of the dove is a symbol for faithful love (696), therefore the poet is mourning for the frustration of his desire. Indeed, as the second stanza reveals, his love is absent and he wanders aimlessly “here and there all desolate” (l. 7). Not even the comforts of this world can bring him joy because his only source of pleasure is Elizabeth, his beloved. She is so beautiful, the poet argues, that her appearance “both God and man can move” (l. 11), a rather hyperbolic statement that nonetheless is consistent with the heavily Petrarchan imagery of the whole poem. The Petrarchan imagery continues in the final couplet, where the poet states that, since Elizabeth is his life and light, without her his life is “dead” (l. 14), thus concluding the poem with one of the best known common places of the Petrarchan tradition: the living death. As previously mentioned, the use of hyperbolic Petrarchan statements in the Amoretti is used as a sort of private joke between the lovers, therefore the last poem of the sequence is not to be taken seriously, especially if imagery used is so explicitly conventional. The best attitude for reading these kind of poems is explained in Sonnet LIII,:

OF this worlds Theatre in which we stay,

My loue lyke the Spectator ydly sits
 beholding me that all the pageants play,
 disguising diuersly my troubled wits.
 Sometimes I ioy when glad occasion sits,
 and mask in myrth lyke to a Comedy:
 soone after when my ioy to sorrow flits,
 I waile and make my woes a Tragedy.
 Yet she beholding me with constant eye,
 delights not in my merth nor rues my smart:
 but when I laugh she mocks, and when I cry
 she laughes, and hardens euermore her hart.
 What then can moue her? if nor merth nor mone,
 she is no woman, but a sencelesse stone.

Immediately in the first line the poet describes the world as a "Theatre" (l. 1) where both he and his beloved play as if they were in a theatre production, thus revealing the highly fictional poses that the two assume throughout the sonnet sequence. Elizabeth is indeed the spectator of performance, although her position is not a silent one. While the poet, in the second stanza, makes of his joys a comedy and of his sorrows a tragedy, denouncing with this statement the fact that he artfully inflates the real measure of his sentiment, his lady, in the third stanza, has the most bizarre and frustrating of reactions. To the poet's consternation, "when I laugh she mocks, and when I cry/ she laughes" (ll. 11-12); consequently the poet accuses her of being "a sencelesse stone" (l. 14) probably thinking that she was laughing about his true sentiments. He, though, is probably mistaken: it was his hyperbolic and unrealistic language that caused the wrong reaction from the woman. Furthermore, by mocking the artful Petrarchan language of her suitor, Elizabeth is criticizing the use of an unsuitable language for true lovemaking.

The last sonnet of Amoretti analysed here, Sonnet XXXVIII, seems to express that fact that the poet is well aware that Petrarchan language, and the genre of the sonnet sequence, is not fit for a happy ending, and he cleverly suggests that the solution will be found when the sequence is ended:

Lyke as a ship, that through the ocean wyde
 By conduct of some star doth make her way,

Whenas a storm hath dimd her trusty guyde,
 Out of her course doth wander far astray,
 So I, whose star, that wont with her bright ray
 Me to direct, with cloudes is over-cast,
 Doe wander now in darknesse and dismay,
 Through hidden perils round about me plast.
 Yet hope I well that, when this storme is past,
 My Helice, the lodestar of ray lyfe,
 Will shine again, and looke on me at last,
 With lovely light to cleare my cloudy grief.
 Till then I wander carefull, comfortlesse,
 In secret sorrow and sad pensivenesse.

The first two stanzas propose a simile that conveys a sense of discomfort: as a ship that is blocked in a storm because it lost sight of its guiding star, the poet is trapped in discomfort because the star of his life, Elizabeth, is angered with him. Her face with “cloudes is over-cast” (l. 6) has thrown him among “hidden perils” (l. 8) and he fears for the survival of his love. Yet, the third stanza opens with an hopeful statement: “Yet hope I well” (l. 9) he declares, that the storm will pass and he shall regain the favour of his beloved. In the meantime, as the final couplet suggests, he will “wander carefull, comfortlesse,/ In secret sorrow and sad pensivenesse” (ll. 13-14). The key word to understand the meta-literary implications of this poem is the name of the star that the poet hopes will clear his future way: “Helice” (l. 10). This name carries a double meaning: on the one hand is “the constellation of the Great Bear by which Greek mariners navigated” (McCabe, 680); on the other hand, “the name also recalls Helicon, the source of poetic inspiration” (680). The second meaning is particularly important because it does not simply refer to Elizabeth as a source of poetic inspiration for the poet, but refers to a poetic inspiration that will “cleare my cloudy grief” (l. 12) permanently. It might be referring, therefore, to a better way of handling love poetry, probably outside the sonnet sequence itself and already foretelling of the blissful marriage of the lovers described in *Epithalamion*. This hope is also probably the reason for the unusually non hyperbolic and mocking tone of the poem, a poem that looks to the future with almost sure hope.

The sonnet sequence that seems to break all convention regarding the genre is the one by William Shakespeare. His, indeed, does not seem to even be a sonnet sequence: it is, in fact, addressed to at least two characters, one of whom is a man. The distribution of the sonnets goes as follows: “in order as we have it, Sonnets 1-126 are closely concerned with a young man; from Sonnet 127 until 152, the so-called Dark Lady becomes a focus of attention. The sonnets ending the collection, 153 and 154, are playfully mythological poems” (Cousins, 125). The poet in Shakespeare’s sonnets is therefore divided between two important characters that do not seem to have anything in common, thus breaking the convention of having just one lady as the focus of an entire sequence. This is the only first challenge to the Petrarchan convention that the poet displays throughout the sonnets, and his challenge is so subtle that many of his poems still seem classically Petrarchan. Undeniably, his sonnets still acknowledge the concept of desire expressed by Petrarchan sonnets sequences, nevertheless Shakespeare employs desire in very un-Petrarchan situations (134). While in the *Canzoniere* the object of love was a fair-haired woman, in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* “the speaker identifies a fair-haired young man, not a blond woman, as the focus of his concern” (134). Moreover, his desire for the Dark Lady is a desire for a woman whose “dark colouring he connects with a darkness of personality that he alleges is hers as well” (135). His desire, it seems, is divided between two people with an opposite nature, one a blond man and the other a dark-haired woman. This division suggests that Shakespeare described two possible relationships in which desire could display its many implications; nonetheless, if the last two sonnets are taken into consideration, the two different storylines seem to converge on a similar result. Indeed, the last two sonnets meditate on the nature of desire as unquenchable, associating it with disease and destruction (125). Considering that both the relationship with the Fair Youth and with the Dark Lady are characterized with frustration and bitterness, especially in the last sonnets of both storylines, it seems apparent that not even Shakespeare was able to break the conventional interpretation of desire as unappeasable, thus reaffirming the negative nature of the sonnet sequence.

The relationship with the Fair Youth runs, despite the sex of the beloved, on the same lines as other, more conventional sonnet sequences: in it “Shakespeare presented himself [...] as the insecure petitioner who seeks the continuing favour of a patron in order to enjoy social reward” (Marotti, 410). As in any other relationship described in other sonnet sequences, the poet declares his love and friendship for his beloved, but his ambitions, as the genre demands, will be thwarted. The way in which the speaker in Shakespeare’s sonnets stages

the failure of this relationship is through the rivalry for the favour of the Fair Youth with another poet (411-412). The Youth, indeed, favours the rival poet, forcing the speaker to confront his disillusionment (Cousins, 131). He realises that the Youth is essentially “uneducable, morally obtuse and generally unworthy of anything more sincere than the kind of praise rendered in encomiastic formulae” (Marotti, 412), thus realizing not only that his beloved is too ignorant and too vain to understand his plights, but also that the language of courtly love is not the best tool to express desire born out of love. These themes culminate in the last sonnet dedicated to the Fair Youth, where the speaker puts his beloved in front of his own vanity:

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power
Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his sickle hour;
Who hast by waning grown, and therein showest
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self growest.
If Nature, sovereign mistress over wrack,
As thou goest onwards still will pluck thee back,
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill
May time disgrace and wretched minutes kill.
Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure!
She may detain, but not still keep, her treasure:
Her audit (though delayed) answered must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.

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The beginning of the first stanza opens with an appeal to the “lovely boy” (l. 1) who has in his hand power over the passing of time. Nevertheless, he is still a “boy”, too immature to understand that that time is a double-edge sword: on the one hand makes the boy grow, on the other causes “Thy lovers withering” (l. 4). The ignorance of the boy shows his carelessness in handling something that he clearly does not understand, and the first to pay the price of his inexperience is the speaker himself. The second stanza tries to remedy to the ignorance of the boy: the speaker explains to him that it was Nature who gave his powers to the youth, and Nature, as the speaker knows, is a very dangerous mistress. Indeed, she is “sovereign mistress over wrack” (l. 5), and she is protecting the boy from the

ugliness of old age because she is in a contest with Time, and she wants to win by demonstrating to him that she can keep someone beautiful even after many years (Duncan-Jones, 366). The third stanza delivers the angry admonition of the speaker to the boy: he needs to be careful and stop being “minion of her pleasure” (l. 9), because Nature could easily dispose of him if she wanted. The exclamation of the poet suggest an implicit criticism of the careless attitude of his beloved: the boy seems to be indeed a wilful minion of Nature and is probably unaware of his precarious position because of his arrogance. Yet, the most frightening statement of the speaker resides in the final couplet, which is absent. Indeed, the third stanza finishes in a truncated sentence, dramatizing the final descent into nothingness and death that awaits the boy when he is no longer in Nature’s favour. The speaker thus demonstrates the ineffectiveness of his love rhetoric to reform his beloved: he is a slave of Nature’s vanity, and all that he can expect is death.

Differently from the relationship with the Youth, the one with the Dark Lady does not express the unfulfillment of desire but its frustration when it is driven toward an unworthy object. Indeed the Dark Lady is not only the opposite of the Petrarchan lady, she is also “a manifestly non-aristocratic woman who is neither young nor beautiful, intelligent nor chaste, but [...] provides a perfectly adequate outlet for male desire” (Duncan-Jones, 47). The sonnets that speak of her do not even create a feeble storyline, they are simply descriptions, sometimes tender but mostly harsh and sarcastic (47), of a relationship that is only bent towards the fulfilment of sexual needs. Sonnet 131 describes perfectly this kind of relationship while subtly commenting on the language of courtly love applied to the Dark Lady.

Thou art as tyrannous, so as thou art,
As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel;
For well thou know'st to my dear dotting heart
Thou art the fairest and most precious jewel.
Yet, in good faith, some say that thee behold,
Thy face hath not the power to make love groan;
To say they err I dare not be so bold,
Although I swear it to myself alone.
And to be sure that is not false I swear,
A thousand groans, but thinking on thy face,
One on another's neck, do witness bear

Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place.
In nothing art thou black save in thy deeds,
And thence this slander, as I think, proceeds.

The speaker, in the first stanza, declares the his mistress is quite tyrannical, even though she does not have the qualities to be so. The speaker is referring to the fact that the Dark Lady does not fit the profile of the classical Petrarchan lady. Moreover, he wittily imply, by saying “As those whose beauties proudly make them cruel” (l. 2) that his beloved is not beautiful by any objective standards, and that she has no reason the be so cruel to him. He is willing to concede, though, that in his eyes (but in his eyes only) she is the “fairest and most precious jewel” (l. 4). In order to tame her, in the second stanza he communicate to her a slander that is circling around on the fact that she is too ugly to be loved. The exact expression is “to make love groan” (l. 6), that is to say to make lovers lament as in the Petrarchan tradition of courtly love. The speaker seems to partly agree with this slander, especially when he declares “To say they err I dare not be so bold” (l. 7), once again confirming that a tyrannous and Petrarchan disposition does not suit his beloved. To reassure the Dark Lady that, despite her non-Petrarchan aspect, the speaker still loves her, he comically starts groaning while he swears that “Thy black is fairest in my judgment's place” (l. 12); this scene “activates a suspicion that the speaker’s response to his lady is not wholly adoring” (Duncan-Jones, 376). Finally, the speaker reassures her that slanders are uttered only because of her tyrannical disposition, that she is deemed ugly because her deeds are “black” (l. 11). The speaker, in this poem, uses the Petrarchan tradition in a comic and slightly sarcastic way, implying that, though his love is base, yet convention is false and not useful to describe reality.

The frustrating results of the speaker’s love relationships drive him to meditate on the nature of desire itself. In the last sonnet of the collection, the poet examines the contradicting elements of desire, finally declaring the impossibility of dealing with it.

The little Love-god lying once asleep,
Laid by his side his heart-inflaming brand,
Whilst many nymphs that vowed chaste life to keep
Came tripping by; but in her maiden hand
The fairest votary took up that fire
Which many legions of true hearts had warmed;

And so the General of hot desire
Was, sleeping, by a virgin hand disarmed.
This brand she quenched in a cool well by,
Which from Love's fire took heat perpetual,
Growing a bath and healthful remedy,
For men diseased; but I, my mistress' thrall,
Came there for cure and this by that I prove,
Love's fire heats water, water cools not love.

The first stanza starts a narration that seem to relate the origins of the kind of desire that is unquenchable, at the base of the Petrarchan tradition. “The little love-god” (l. 1), Cupid, fell asleep by a pool and laid by his side a rod, his instrument of love. A company of nymphs was passing by in that moment and one of them, the one who possessed a “maiden hand”, stole the rod to his proprietor. This image seems to mirror the one of the chaste lady in the Petrarchan tradition, desirable yet distant because of her virtue, especially the reference to the virginity of the nymph. The second stanza comments the loss of the rod by Cupid. That rod was particularly precious because “legions of true hearts had warmed [it]” (l. 6), that is, it contained the yearning that love produces in the hearts of men. The third stanza narrates that the nymph plunged the rod into a pool that, from then on, became hot and was considered a remedy for anyone who suffered of love-sickness, or at least that is what the speaker thought. Indeed, the final couplet reveals the true nature of the pool and, consequently, of desire: He went to the pool in order to be freed from the bondage that his desire for his beloved had wrapped around his heart but what he found was that “Love's fire heats water, water cools not love” (l. 14). This is the last line of Shakespeare’s sonnet, a line that declared desire born out of a Petrarchan relationship based on unfulfillment can bring just more pain and anguish. The courtly love tradition, therefore, is declared too immature to sustain a relationship based on the fulfilment of desire.

(2.03) “A sodaine dampe of love”: John Donne and the Critique of Contemporary Love Poetry

Donne’s response to the tradition of love poetry described in the previous pages is of complete rejection. As it was described at the beginning of the chapter through the poem

“The Dampé”, the models proposed by Donne go against the most diffused rhetoric of his times, that is the Petrarchan courtly love poetry, and the sonnet sequence fashion in particular. With poems such as the *Elegies* and the *Songs and Sonnets*, Donne wanted to firstly criticize the existing literary models, and secondly propose a new way of writing love poetry that would overcome the problem of the frustration of desire. The focus of this section of chapter 2 will be the more critical and destructive of the love poems of John Donne: through the *Elegies* and of part of the *Songs and Sonnets*, it will be demonstrated how the English poet attacked and dismantled the old tradition of love poetry and how he was able to prepare the way for a new philosophy of love based on mutuality that will be the focus his more famous poems.

The themes developed in the *Elegies* and some of the *Songs and Sonnets* find their source in the iconoclastic and anti-courtly environment of the Inns of Court. A description of the social importance and of the kind of social model proposed by the Inns was already developed in the first part of chapter one, but in order to fully understand the innovative power of Donne’s poetry it is useful to mention again some of the most important cultural characteristic of this lively ambiance. One of the most important characteristics of the Inns of Court poet was his fierce anti-courtly sentiment, that found its best target in the culture of patronage that ruled the court during the Elizabethan period. As it was explained during the analysis of Satire I, patronage transformed intelligent and witty intellectuals in “Motley Humorists”, always begging for favours from the first courtiers they could get their hands on; when it comes to love poetry, though, the critique against patronage assumes a misogynistic and anti-Petrarchan hue that expresses the frustration of living in a court where patronage was controlled by a woman. As Achsah Guibbory argues, “the conventions of courtly love poetry, with its chaste, unattainable, superior women, desired and sought by an admiring, subservient, faithful male suitor, were especially appropriate for articulating complex relationships between Queen Elizabeth and the ambitious courtiers seeking her favour” (814). Having a woman in a position of power, therefore, allowed a mixture between Petrarchan love poetry and the practice of patronage that was deemed unacceptable by Inns of Court’s poet, who were the first victim of such a mechanism (814). Consequently, the “socially, economically and politically vulnerable Inns gentlemen [...] found it pleasant to turn the tables imaginatively by composing, circulating and collecting love poetry of another sort, literature that celebrated male social, economic and sexual power” (Marotti, 73). This kind of poetry had, as a goal, “the rejection of courtly love and the assertion of the self [...] achieved in large part through a ritualized verbal

debasement of women” (Guibbory, 814). The models for this new kind of poetry were found, as it was the case for the satires, in classical models, especially the epigram and the erotic poetry of Ovid’s elegies.

The tradition of the elegies has its roots at the beginning of Greek literature. The term elegy “designava originariamente un componimento letterario, a carattere talvolta mestamente sentimentale, caratterizzato dalla forma metrica del distico elegiaco che alternava un pentametro e un esametro” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 46); moreover, its themes encompassed a large number of different topics: “dalla politica alla guerra, dalla fuggevolezza della vita al godimento del simposio, da problematiche sociali a considerazioni morali, e infine dalle meditazioni sentimentali ai coinvolgimenti amorosi o specificamente erotici” (46). It was a genre, therefore, that proposed both a thematic and a stylistic model that could be easily adapted in different environments. That is the case of Augustan Rome, where the genre of the elegy saw a revival thanks to figures such as Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid. These poets concentrated their imitation on the stylistic side, importing from the Greek form the metrical form of a couplet, nevertheless the themes developed were limited to the realms of the sentimental and the erotic (46). The best poetry of the period, though, and the one towards which Donne and the other Inns’ poets looked up to, was the poetry of Ovid. The model proposed by the Latin poet in his books *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria* is summarized by Bigliuzzi and Serpieri:

Dai tre libri di elegie degli *Amores* [Donne] attinse più volte, rinvenendovi non tanto una figura femminile, più o meno reale e coinvolta in varie vicende sentimentali, quanto il motivo inesauribile del desiderio amoroso che si spinge alla ricerca di un soddisfacimento, mai però totale e duraturo. E anche nell’*Ars Amatoria* [...] dove si accentua il gioco dissacrante dell’amore come una partita relazionale in cui l’amante e l’amata impiegano varie tecniche di seduzione e tradimento, fedeltà e infedeltà, dedizione e volubilità, licenziosità e gelosia. (47)

Furthermore, this kind of licentious poetry provided Donne and the Inns’ poets with a model to both contrast courtly love rhetoric and describe the environment they were living in. Indeed, “the genre [...] presented an appealing alternative to the plaintive sonnet” (Armstrong, 419) and through “its wit, sensuality and urban ambiance” (419) proved congenial for the expression of frustration derived from a social environment, that of the court, considered hostile. Nevertheless, the treatment of erotic and licentious themes

achieves its full polemic potential thanks to the use of the epigrammatic form, a kind of poetry that depicts the same themes as the elegies but with a more satiric temperament. The epigram, especially Martial's, is especially praised for its dramatic potential: as A. LeBranche argues, "the epigram generally proposes either a topic or a visual object upon which to focus its sense of incongruity. It is this procedure of vivid, external focus [...] which becomes a serious dramatic technique" (358). In the case of Donne's poetry, the employment of the epigram is mainly rhetorical, and focuses on the "brevity and point" (Gardner, XXVI) of the epigrammatic form. In the Elegies and some of the Songs and Sonnets, the object of scrutiny is not observed from a distance by the poet, as in the case of the epigram which shares with the satire the aloofness of the poet from the world he is criticizing, but is the speaker himself and his reaction towards the relationship with a woman that is scrutinized. Therefore, the epigrammatic form is used by the poet only as a witty device and not as a comment on something that is distant from him (LeBranche, 358).

It is probably Donne who exploits better the stylistic and thematic heritage of classical erotic poetry, his ingenuity, though, lies in the way he is able to build psychologically complex speakers for his poems, an aspect of his poetry that is also the poems' main source of originality. The speakers present in the Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets analysed in this section of chapter two belong mainly to three types.

The first type of speaker is a libertine figure whose main purpose is to denigrate the figure of the Petrarchan lady. The origins of this character are both literary and political: it is the speaker who proposes a libertine stance against the courtly language fashionable at the court of Elizabeth (Marotti, 51). The woman portrayed by this speaker is an "economic symbol" (51), a symbol that invites the reader to see that "Mammon was disguised as Cupid even in Petrarchan and Neoplatonic love poetry" (51). The relationship with women suggested by this speaker is purely sexual, since women "are no more 'wise and good' than men" (Guibbory, *Erotic Poetry*, 135). A relationship only based on sex, though, proves frustrating to the poet, mainly because the reality of his time continued to have a woman at its top. Thus the images that describe women as base creatures might suggest an inherent weakness on the part of the speaker: as Achsah Guibbory suggests, "the very metaphor describing women contains a disturbing potential for suggesting women's resistance to any individual man's control. The *Elegies* show a recurring tension between the male mastery asserted and an implicit female resistance to mastery which undermines the restoration of male sovereignty" (*The Politics*, 823), a male sovereignty that is purely fictional.

The second type is the so-called *praeceptor amoris*, that is to say, an educator in love matters. This speaker has a more constructive attitude than the previous one, despite the fact that his opinion on women does not change. The figure of the tutor in love “is part of the elegiac scheme to overthrow conventional worldly values and substitute for them a relationship stripped of all but the essential truths” (LeBranche, 363). This speaker’s focus is only on the essential communication between man and woman, a communication that is sexual rather than sentimental, and its aim is a love free of rhetorical and dramatic constrictions, such as those of the court. His proposition to the woman, that is, following the simple path of love, often turns out not to be a simple path at all: it is often “mined with pitfalls and barriers, and the speaker is turned back to debate with himself” (363). The figure of the *praeceptor amoris*, therefore, is a half-mocking and half-serious posture, because he often come to realize that there is no such thing as simple “free love”, something that actually turns out to be a sham, “and the road to a truer union is longer and more difficult than expected” (364).

The third type of speaker belongs more to the *Songs and Sonnets* than to the *Elegies*. His nature is more meta-literary, and it confronts the ultimate frustrating nature of both courtly and elegiac love poetry. As it was explained previously, both the misogynistic speaker and the *praeceptor amoris*, come to the conclusion that the poetry they are the embodiment of ends in frustration because it either conveys an illusory sense or wrongly suggests that the path towards love is a simple one. The third speaker, contrary to his predecessors, composes lyrics that are, in the words of Arthur Marotti, “‘self-consuming artifacts’ - works that undo their own deceptive lines of development as they become virtually meta-poems, that is lyrics that are about the nature and process of writing certain kinds of verse and about the communicative relationship of poem and reader” (71). This speaker, therefore, does not only meditate on the use of Petrarchan and elegiac rhetoric, he strives to find new way of defining and communicating love poetry, an attitude that will find its best achievements in the poetry about mutual love.

the models proposed by this three speakers are present into two main types of character, described by Helen Gardner as “the young man about town [...] who takes his pleasure at will” (XXVII) and “the lover who loves without reward” (XXVII). The first character is more frequent in the *Elegies* and the second is the main figure of some of the *Songs and Sonnets* and this is the division in which the poems of this chapter will be presented.

The first four poems analysed in this section are part of the Elegies and their tone reflects the irreverent libertinism of his speakers. The first poem, *The Anagram*, describes in a comic and paradoxical way the characteristic that a perfect woman should have:

Marry, and love thy Flavia, for she
Hath all things, whereby others beauteous be ;
For, though her eyes be small, her mouth is great ;
Though they be ivory, yet her teeth be jet ;
Though they be dim, yet she is light enough ;
And though her harsh hair fall, her skin is tough ;
What though her cheeks be yellow, her hair's red,
Give her thine, and she hath a maidenhead.
These things are beauty's elements ; where these
Meet in one, that one must, as perfect, please. (l. 1-10)

The speaker of this elegy starts what seems a plight in favour of Flavia, the woman that the addressee of this poem should marry. The Latin name of the woman testifies of the fact that the imitation of classic models is still paramount for the elegiac poet. Nevertheless, the mocking description of Flavia that follows enumerates the characteristics of a Petrarchan woman, albeit combined in a rather peculiar way. The lines from 2 to 7 list elements that belong to a canonical beauty described by courtly poetry, but these elements are displaced and form an ensemble altogether unattractive: for example, “What though her cheeks be yellow, her hair's red,” (l. 7) says the poet, thus inverting the healthy image of a blond woman with rosy cheeks with that of a sick one with yellow skin and reddish hair; or “Give her thine, and she hath a maidenhead” (l. 8), he declares, once again turning the tables on the Petrarchan tradition of the virginity of the lady, that here is such only because she took it from her beloved, thus implying that previously she was not chaste at all. The speaker concludes by saying that what is most important is to find in a woman the elements of beauty, because “where these/ Meet in one, that one must, as perfect, please” (l. 9-10), the fact that these elements in Flavia are mixed in chaotic and displeasing manner should not detain the listener from marrying her.

In the following lines the speaker explains further his reasons in favour of Flavia:

Though all her parts be not in th' usual place,

She hath yet an anagram of a good face.
If we might put the letters but one way,
In that lean dearth of words, what could we say? (l. 15-18)

Here the speaker admits that her beauty does not lie in the “usual place” (l. 15), yet she has “an anagram of a good face” (l. 16), that is to say that she possesses the essential elements of what is considered beautiful by society. His following statement is particularly interesting, if it is considered that Flavia is a caricature of a Petrarchan lady: the speaker asks “If we might put the letters but one way,/ In that lean dearth of words, what could we say?” (l. 17-18), and this question is more meaningful than it seems. Indeed, here the speaker is questioning the rigidity of the Petrarchan canon: the reference to the right disposition of letters (the elements defining a Petrarchan lady) and the mention to the “dearth of words” (l. 18) testifies of the uneasiness of the elegiac poet towards a convention that he considered barren and worn out. Therefore, “letters” (l. 17) might refer also to continuing production of poetry in the courtly Petrarchan manner.

The poet continues to justify the worthiness of Flavia by paradoxically praising her ugliness:

Things simply good can never be unfit ;
She's fair as any, if all be like her ;
And if none be, then she is singular.
All love is wonder ; if we justly do
Account her wonderful, why not lovely too?
Love built on beauty, soon as beauty, dies ;
Choose this face, changed by no deformities. (l. 22-28)

Here the speaker contrasts the goodness of Flavia with the beauty of other ladies. “Things simply good can never be unfit” (l. 22), he affirms, implying that she might be more resistant to decay than others famous for their beauty. Then he enunciates a series of statements that, without admitting that Flavia is ugly, yet confirm her worth: she is not uglier than other women (l. 23), if she is singularly ugly then she can be considered special (l. 24), if she makes people wonder, and wonder is the starting element of love, then she must be lovely too (l. 25-26). The last statement, though, seems more truthful: “Love built on beauty” (l. 27) is not going to last, because beauty is a wanes with the passing of time.

Flavia's face, on the other hand, is already ugly, therefore she will remain unchanged for longer. The speaker, then, is building his argumentation on the stability of ugliness contrasted with the mutability of beauty, as though that is reiterated in the following lines:

For one night's revels, silk and gold we choose,
But, in long journeys, cloth and leather use.
Beauty is barren oft ; best husbands say,
There is best land, where there is foulest way.
Oh, what a sovereign plaster will she be,
If thy past sins have taught thee jealousy!
Here needs no spies, nor eunuchs ; her commit
Safe to thy foes, yea, to a marmoset. (l. 33-40)

The first item in favour of ugliness is its durability: "silk and gold" (l. 33) last only one night, but when one decides to take a longer journey he chooses "cloth and leather" (l. 34), more resistant and appropriate for the active life. The second reason is in favour her being not a virgin: beauty, the speaker affirms, often conceals barrenness, while the ugliness of Flavia is fertile in the opinion of many, probably because she remained pregnant many times due to her lustiness. The listener does not even have to worry about her being unfaithful: indeed, her genitals, symbolize by the marmoset (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 462), smell in such a bad way that all possible lovers will be driven away. The poem continues in this fashion for several lines, always contrasting conventional beauty with ugliness and concludes with this statement:

One like none, and liked of none, fittest were ;
For things in fashion every man will wear. (l. 55-56)

The speaker here clearly states that it is better the singularity of ugliness than the fashionable plurality of beauty. By praising ugliness, therefore, the speaker wants to point out that the lady praised by Petrarchan tradition has only feeble and passing qualities, especially if rendered conventional and banal by "fashion" (l. 56), that is, the fashion of courtly rhetoric and, possibly, of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence.

In *Elegy VII*, Donne employs a different method to criticize Petrarchan tradition, and the speaker he fashions in this poem is a frustrated *praeceptor amoris* engaged in a quarrel with a surprisingly sly woman:

Nature's lay idiot, I taught thee to love,
And in that sophistry, O! thou dost prove
Too subtle ; fool, thou didst not understand
The mystic language of the eye nor hand ;
Nor couldst thou judge the difference of the air
Of sighs, and say, "This lies, this sounds despair" ; (l. 1-6)

The angered speaker starts this poem with an insult: his lady is described as a "Nature's lay idiot"(l. 1), that is an "ignorant uninitiated in the workings of nature" (Smith, 420), who clearly misinterpreted the teachings of her lover. She, indeed, learned just the "sophistry" (l. 2) of what is later revealed to be the philosophy of love. She stopped only at the exterior signs, but she has completely disregarded the "mystic language of the eye" (l. 4) or the right way to interpret sighs. These first few lines, and those that follow, describe a woman distant from the Petrarchan tradition: the Petrarchan woman remained distant from the language on love, which was a male expression of devotion and sentimentality, she limited herself to react to the language of her suitors by some gesture or a timid word; the woman described in this poem, on the other hand, has learned from her lover the stylistic secrets of love rhetoric and his using them to her own advantage. Nevertheless, she does not understand their true purpose, that is the expression of a true sentiment of love and she is therefore labelled a "fool" (l. 3) by the speaker.

In order to make the woman realize that all her knowledge came from her angry lover, the speaker reminds her about the time when she was innocent and unrefined:

Remember since all thy words used to be
To every suitor, "Ay, if my friends agree ;"
Since household charms, thy husband's name to teach,
Were all the love-tricks that thy wit could reach ;
And since an hour's discourse could scarce have made
One answer in thee, and that ill array'd
In broken proverbs, and torn sentences.
Thou art not by so many duties his—

That from th' world's common having sever'd thee,
Inlaid thee, neither to be seen, nor see—
As mine ; who have with amorous delicacies
Refined thee into a blissful paradise. (l. 13-24)

From line 13 to line 19 the speaker reminds his lady of how much her language used to be naïve: to every suitor that appealed to her she had to ask permission to see them to her relatives (friends here means member of the family (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 491)) (l. 13-14); she used to make little spells belonging to popular tradition (490-491) in order to divine the name of her future husband (l. 15-16); she could not answer, if not with muttered words and common place phrases, to a long speech, presumably from her suitor (l. 17-19). Moreover, in the following lines, he announces her the he is still her best chance to be free. Indeed, other suitors might sever her from the world and reduce her in a state in which she would be able “neither to be seen, nor see” (l. 22). The speaker is the one who made her “into a blissful paradise” (l. 24) and is the only one who can value the person she has become, mainly because she is his work of art.

Nevertheless the woman seems to have forsaken him and the last lines of the elegy express his anger and his frustration:

Thy graces and good works my creatures be ;
I planted knowledge and life's tree in thee ;
Which O! shall strangers taste? Must I, alas!
Frame and enamel plate, and drink in glass?
Chafe wax for other's seals? break a colt's force,
And leave him then, being made a ready horse? (ll. 25-30)

The speaker is unable to face the fact that the woman he loved could use the gifts he taught her to pick independently a suitor of her choosing. Here the objectification of the woman is complete: she is compared to an “enamel plate” (l. 28), to wax (l. 29) and finally to a horse (l. 30). These last lines testify the fact that Petrarchan love rhetoric was not controlled by male poets anymore, but it had become a system by which powerful and educated women could use to choose their lover. Courtly love rhetoric, therefore, is seen as corrupted and no longer a viable option for a relationship based on love and trust. Moreover, the

misogynistic language of the poem is a testimony of the frustrating desires of male lovers at a court, the Elizabethan, where power was held by powerful women.

Frustrating experiences with either ugly or untrustworthy women bring some of the speakers of the elegies to a complete distrust of the sentiment of love. In the case of *The Dream*, frustrating images of bleak reality are confronted with the paradise of dreams:

Image of her whom I love, more than she,
Whose fair impression in my faithful heart
Makes me her medal, and makes her love me,
As kings do coins, to which their stamps impart
The value; go, and take my heart from hence,
Which now is grown too great and good for me.
Honours oppress weak spirits, and our sense
Strong objects dull ; the more, the less we see. (ll. 1-8)

The speaker of this poem tries to depart from his lady because her love has become too intense for him to bear. He starts by describing that the picture of her beloved impressed on his heart, a very Petrarchan image, has turned him into an object, a medal, that the woman has started to love intensely, as a king loves the coin with his image. The woman thus becomes the active and “masculine” part of the relationship, giving a love that is so strong that dulls the speaker, as a “Strong objects dull[s]” (l. 8). He, therefore, asks the image “whom I love, more than she” (l. 1) to depart his heart and let him rest a little from a love that has become “too great and good for me” (l. 6).

Consequently the speaker can concentrate on his fantasy, which, he declares, is the way in which he can love his woman better:

When you are gone, and reason gone with you,
Then fantasy is queen and soul, and all ;
She can present joys meaner than you do,
Convenient, and more proportional. (ll. 9-12)

In order to fantasise freely he needs reason to leave as well. This is because it was believed that reason “is seated in the heart and works on real things” (Smith, 426); only then can fantasy rule. Here the speaker continues his identification of the woman as masculine;

reason, the “male” and “kingly” characteristic of the woman is put aside the “female” and “queenly” fantasy, which is the main characteristic of the speaker’s soul. By proposing this reversal the poet is commenting, as the poets of the previous elegies, on a rhetoric of love that seems now a female prerogative, not a male one. Here though, the harshness and satirical spleen of other poems is absent, and the tone is more playful and dramatic. Nevertheless, in the following lines he explains why fantasy is preferable to him: fantasy is able to present “joys meaner than you do,/ Convenient, and more proportional”(ll. 11-12), that is, joys that he can control so that his heart and soul can enjoy fully their pleasure.

The description of the joys of fantasy continues in the following lines:

So, if I dream I have you, I have you,
For all our joys are but fantastical ;
And so I 'scape the pain, for pain is true ;
And sleep, which locks up sense, doth lock out all.
After a such fruition I shall wake,
And, but the waking, nothing shall repent ;
And shall to love more thankful sonnets make,
Than if more honour, tears, and pains were spent. (ll. 13-20)

The first two lines of this passage reveal the reason why fantasy is so crucial for him: in the reality created by his mind he can reverse the table and be he the one who possesses the woman, and not the other way around. The emphatic exclamation “I have you, I have you” (l. 13) makes known that he is fantasising about a relationship in which he is the active part and not the passive component. Only through fantasy he can escape the pain, “for pain is true” (l. 15) as the love of the woman is true, because governed by reason. Indeed, the best way to fantasise is through dream, especially because they “locks up sense” (l. 16), and the only remorse they cause is the awakening, which is bearable because it stopped a fantasy that can be staged over and over again, through other fantasies and dreams. Fantasy is also a better source of inspiration for poetry than reality: sonnets generated by fantasy are more joyous while those based on reality are born out of “honour, tears, and pains” (l. 20).

Yet, in the last lines of the poem, the speaker changes abruptly idea:

But, dearest heart and dearer image, stay ;
Alas! true joys at best are dream enough ;

Though you stay here, you pass too fast away,
For even at first life's taper is a snuff.
Fill'd with her love, may I be rather grown
Mad with much heart, than idiot with none. (ll. 21-26)

The exclamation at verse 21 retract all that was said in the previous lines. At the possibility of losing his beloved in reality, he begs her to stay, and to her image he does not ask to leave anymore. He realized in fact that the intense joys of reality are themselves too feeble to be permanent, they could go away in the blink of an eye, because “true joys at best are dream enough” (l. 22). Considering the that life is short, even the suffocating attention of the lady are too important to be disregarded. Indeed, the speaker, at the end of the poem, prefers to stay “Mad with much heart, than idiot with none” (l. 26). The key expression here, though, is “Fill'd with her love” (l. 25): confronted with his own mortality the speaker is ready to pay the price of passivity, as the expression subtly suggests, in order to be loved. He therefore take a pragmatic stance towards the new set of rules, a passive man and an active woman, that govern the rhetoric of love poetry.

The pragmatism of the speakers of the *Elegies*, though, is still concerned with finding a new philosophy of love that does not entail being too much in the power of women, as in *The Dream*. The model of this new philosophy is developed in the elegy entitled *Love's Progress*. Here will be analysed only the first part of the poem because in it is displayed the core of the libertine philosophy of the *Elegies*.

Who ever loves, if he do not propose
The right true end of love, he's one that goes
To sea for nothing but to make him sick.
Love is a bear-whelp born: if we o'erlick
Our love, and force it new strange shapes to take,
We err, and of a lump a monster make.
Were not a calf a monster that were grown
Faced like a man, though better than his own? (ll. 1-8)

The speaker of this poems warns immediately his readers that if they “not propose/ The right true end of love” (ll. 1-2) they might be as “one that goes/ To sea for nothing but to make him sick” (ll. 2-3), that is, they might have unsatisfactory experiences that might

make them regret love. The speaker affirms that true love need to be shaped correctly, otherwise is no more than a shapeless and mysterious feeling. The image he uses to illustrate his thought is that of the mother bear that shapes its cub by licking it, and old belief that considered bears formed by the shaping of “mere lumps of malleable flesh” (Smith, 444). Through this image the speaker tries to hint at the physicality at the base of his philosophy.

The speaker then continues his argument by shifting his focus on the role of the woman in a love relationship:

Perfection is in unity: prefer
One woman first, and then one thing in her.
I, when I value gold, may think upon
The ductileness, the application,
The wholsomeness, the ingenuity,
From rust, from soil, from fire ever free;
But if I love it, 'tis because 'tis made
By our new nature (Use) the soul of trade. (ll. 9-16)

Here “unity” (l. 9) has the meaning of singularity (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 574): therefore a true lover has to first find a woman among many, and then prefer only one of her qualities before the others. This is the meaning of his opening statement “Perfection is in unity” (l. 9). In order to expand on this thought he proposes the example of valuing gold: gold is not precious, he says, for its “ductileness” (l. 12) and “application” (l. 12) or his “wholsomeness” (l. 13) and “ingenuity” (l. 13) but because is useful for trade. It is its use, then, not its properties that make it valuable. Considering that the speaker is using this metaphor to talk about women, it is clear the role that they have in his philosophy is of a practical and sexual nature.

His defining of women as sexual objects begins by defining what women are not compared to men:

All these in women we might think upon
(If women had them) and yet love but one.
Can men more injure women than to say
They love them for that by which they're not they?

Makes virtue woman? Must I cool my blood
Till I both be, and find one, wise and good?
May barren angels love so! But if we
Make love to woman, virtue is not she,
As beauty's not, nor wealth (ll. 17-25)

The speaker concedes that it is reasonable to ponder on the other qualities of women but when it comes to love only one is important. His demonstration starts with a quite misogynistic statement: he asks his readers if men should love women for what they are not, and that would be virtuous. The bases of his philosophy, therefore, is assuming that all women are untrustworthy creatures unless they are used for sexual pleasure. Indeed, he continues by saying “Must I cool my blood/ Till I both be, and find one, wise and good?” (ll. 21-22), revealing that when he speaks about love is actually describing lust. He might even concede that some woman “wise and good” (l. 22) exists, but he is not willing to wait for her. “May barren angels love so!” (l. 23) he angrily exclaims, thus also commenting on the conventional Petrarchan love relationship, where a chaste woman is wooed by a suitor who eventually never has a sexual rapport with her. Indeed he further criticises the Petrarchan mode by affirming that making love to a woman has nothing to do with her virtue, her beauty or her wealth.

The focus of love, therefore, is of sex and physicality, as the following lines explain:

He that strays thus
From her to hers is more adulterous
Than if he took her maid. Search every sphere
And firmament, our Cupid is not there;
He's an infernal god, and under ground
With Pluto dwells, where gold and fire abound:
Men to such gods their sacrificing coals
Did not in altars lay, but pits and holes. (ll. 25-32)

He continues with a variation on the same themes: he that prefers other qualities to her sexual one, is as adulterous as if, instead of having sex with his lady, he had sex with her maid. Nevertheless, the focus of the following line is proposing a new mythology of love. According to the speaker Cupid, the god of love so popular in Petrarchan courtly poetry, is

not a celestial god, but a base god that inhabits the underground along with Pluto, the god of hell and money. The speaker here hints at the fact that a lover should approach a woman “con oro nella borsa e fuoco nel cuore” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 576), implying that women can be convinced either with gold or with lust. The new love proposed by the speaker is therefore purely sexual and dismisses the spiritual, considered too compromised by Petrarchan rhetoric, as useless and harmful.

The true object of love, therefore, should not even be the entire body of a woman, but only a particular part:

Although we see celestial bodies move
Above the earth, the earth we till and love:
So we her airs contemplate, words and heart
And virtues, but we love the centric part. (ll. 33-36)

Here the speaker assigns different sentiments to different parts of the woman: to men’s contemplation should go women’s “airs” (l. 35), “word” (l. 35), “heart” (l. 35) and “virtue” (l. 36), yet love’s reign should be “the centric part” (l. 36). Here the body of the woman is compared to the Ptolemaic celestial system which had the earth in the central position, and since men prefer to “till and love” (l. 34) the earth, it is apparent that by “centric part” (l.36) the speaker is referring to female genitalia. The new philosophy of love, and the new relationship between man and woman, needs to be built around sex and disregard more spiritual sides because considered polluted by Petrarchan courtly rhetoric.

If the speaker of the *Elegies* is often bent towards the physical satisfaction of his needs, his libertine equivalent in the *Songs and Sonnets* has a more subtle and pessimistic way to deal with the difficulties of finding a new philosophy of love. In *The Flea*, for example, a relationship between a man and a woman is described as seemingly Petrarchan, albeit with clear sexual innuendoes, until an act of cruelty dispels the illusion:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is ;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.

Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead ;
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two ;
And this, alas ! is more than we would do. (ll. 1-9)

The speaker tries to drive the woman's attention on a flea that sucked both his and her blood in order to demonstrate to her how little her lover asks of her. Indeed, their blood has mingled without "A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" (l. 6), therefore the denial of the woman seems cruel and unreasonable. All the lady needs to do to be convinced is take a look at how satisfied and happy the flea is while enjoying the blood she sucked, a blood that did not require wooing first in order to be got. The speaker here is suggesting that the Petrarchan stance of the woman as aloof and cruel is irrational in the face of a reality in which the enjoyment of sexual pleasure could bring happiness to both the speaker and his beloved.

The poet continues his persuading speech by identifying their mingled blood in the flea as a marriage bond, thus rendering legitimate their possible sexual union:

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three. (ll. 10-18)

The speaker is worried that the cruelty of the woman might kill the flea, the main rhetorical tool he possesses to convince her. In order to save the little creature he constructs a witty conceit that explains the symbolic nature of the flea: since she sucked both the speaker's and the lady's blood, it has de facto become a part of them; moreover, she partakes of a third nature, that is "Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is" (l. 13). Its nature, therefore, as become as sacred as a marriage bond and it would be "sacrilege" (l. 18) to kill it. The woman and her parents might not be happy about this marriage, nevertheless they

“[a]re met” (l. 14). If she wants, she could kill him, though this killing here assumes a double nature: “il doppio senso è che: a) l’amata, secondo la tradizionale ristosia della donna ‘crucele’, può ‘uccidere’ negandosi; b) l’amata, secondo l’uso sessuale, è adatta a ‘uccidere’ l’amante facendogli raggiungere l’orgasmo” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 113). The important thing, though, is that she does not kill the flea, because, by doing so, she would not only commit sacrilege, but also murder (killing her lover) and suicide (killing herself), because the flea has their blood.

Yet, the speech of the speaker cannot prevent the killing of the flea. Therefore, in the last stanza, he denounces the woman as cruel and unfeeling:

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.
'Tis true ; then learn how false fears be ;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee. (ll. 19-27)

The speaker scolds the woman because she “has Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence” (l. 20), since the flea had not done her any actual harm, it only sucked a drop of blood. Here the symbolic nature of the flea is forgotten to highlight the unnecessary cruelty of the lady, who actually triumphs when she demonstrates, by her act of killing, that she has not committed the crimes of which the lover had accused her. Indeed, she “Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now” (l. 24), thus proving the fickleness of the speaker’s previous argumentations. Yet, the speaker has one last card to play: he uses the killing of the flea to demonstrate how little the woman would lose if she let her lover make love to her. Thus the speaker comments on the lack of honour of the lady, since if sleeping with him would not yield to any loss of honour, it is therefore possible that the woman had no honour to begin with and consequently she has nothing to lose by sleeping with her lover. The poet has demonstrated the unreasonable pose of the Petrarchan lady who never yield to her lover, suggesting that honour is just of a lady is only an obstacle to the right enjoyment, both sexual and spiritual, of love.

Nonetheless, the frustration of the speakers in the *Songs and Sonnets* sometimes returns on the misogynistic and erotic themes of the *Elegies*, albeit in a more subtle and less patronising way. That is the case of *The Indifferent*, which exposes a misogynistic and erotic conception of love in a cynic and playful way:

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 plays ;
Her whom the country form'd, 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. (ll. 1-9)

The first stanza of the poem is a comprehensive selection of all the possible women that the speaker could: they could be rich, poor, beautiful, ugly, from the country or the city, the overemotional and the cold. The only characteristic that seems an absolute requirement for the lover is that “she be not true” (l. 9), that is, he does not want her to be faithful (Redpath, 136). The worst vice for a woman seems to be, paradoxically, what in the Petrarchan courtly tradition was considered the paramount quality of a lady, her honesty. The analysis on this “vice” is the main topic of the second part of the first stanza:

Will no other vice content you ?
Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mothers ?
Or have you all old vices spent, and now would find out others ?
Or doth a fear that men are true torment you ?
O we are not, be not you so ;
Let me—and do you—twenty know ;
Rob me, but bind me not, and let me go.
Must I, who came to travel thorough you,
Grow your fix'd subject, because you are true ? (ll. 10-18)

Here virtue is considered as a fake pose that conceals the true nature of human beings. The speaker starts his argumentation by asking why the woman should be virtuous, since her ancestors were not so, unless she has “all old vices spent” (l. 12) and she has to turn to virtue and make it a new sin. The reason of her being virtuous might a wrong assumption that men are so, therefore she is only trying to imitate them so as not to be thought unworthy in their eyes. The speaker reassures her by affirming “O we are not, be not you so” (l. 14), affirming thus that the true nature of men and women has nothing to do with virtue. Their nature, or at least the speaker’s nature, is based on absolute freedom, as line 15 suggests: what the speaker fears is to be bound in a relationship where the dishonest bondages of faithfulness suffocate free love. The last lines of the stanza confirm his libertine philosophy by explaining the unfair assumption that faithfulness creates in the minds on women: he wants to stay free and he will not commit to a marriage-like relationship just because “you are true” (l. 18).

The second stanza changes setting. It is told that Venus, the goddess of love, listen to the lament of the libertine speaker and was profoundly touched by it:

Venus heard me sigh this song ;
And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore,
She heard not this till now ; and that it should be so no more.
She went, examined, and return'd ere long,
And said, "Alas ! some two or three
Poor heretics in love there be,
Which think to stablish dangerous constancy.
But I have told them, 'Since you will be true,
You shall be true to them who're false to you.' " (ll. 19-27)

Touched by the mournful song of the speaker, Venus decides that love built on faithfulness “should be so no more” (l. 21). Venus here is presented as a goddess who prefers “love's sweetest part, variety” (l. 20) to any other kind of love and she is therefore shocked that the rhetoric of Petrarchan love, based on faithfulness, should be so popular and practiced by contemporary women (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 149). She then states an inquiry into this kind of love, and her founding drive her to declare : “"Alas ! some two or three/ Poor heretics in love there be,/ Which think to stablish dangerous constancy.” (ll. 23-25) thus confirming the dangers expressed by the speaker in his plight in favour of free love, and the dangerous

diffusion of “constancy” (l. 25), a pillar of courtly love. Her punishment for these constant lovers is harsh: “You shall be true to them who're false to you” (l. 27) she proclaims, thus punishing the constants with the pain of having unfaithful lovers. By employing the figure of Venus, the highest authority in love matters, the poet seems to suggest that a radical change is needed in the way love relationships are portrayed, and since men and women are too occupied in the Petrarchan game of virtue and faithfulness, there must be a figure of authority that, by decree, will change decaying constant love into lively libertinism. The dangers of a relationship based on Petrarchan tradition are clearly exposed in the poem *The Broken Heart*:

He is stark mad, whoever says,
That he hath been in love an hour,
Yet not that love so soon decays,
But that it can ten in less space devour ;
Who will believe me, if I swear
That I have had the plague a year?
Who would not laugh at me, if I should say
I saw a flash of powder burn a day? (ll. 1-8)

In the first stanza the speaker comments on the absurdity of who affirms that love can be a sentiment with a beginning and an end. None can say that “he hath been in love an hour” (l. 2), because that would as absurd as saying that “I have had the plague a year” (l. 6) or that “I saw a flash of powder burn a day” (l. 8). Love is too powerful a sentiment to be dismissed as temporary: indeed, it is so strong that it can “ten in less space devour” (l. 4), that is it can consume ten victims in an hour (Smith, 359).

The speaker continues his argumentation in the second stanza by proposing the example of what happened to his heart when it was laid in love’s hands:

Ah, what a trifle is a heart,
If once into love's hands it come !
All other griefs allow a part
To other griefs, and ask themselves but some ;
They come to us, but us love draws ;
He swallows us and never chaws ;

By him, as by chain'd shot, whole ranks do die ;
He is the tyrant pike, our hearts the fry. (l. 9-16)

In order to describe the terrible power of love, the speaker begins the stanza by affirming that “a trifle is a heart” (l. 9) when is possessed by love. Indeed, love is the most demanding of all feelings. The speaker argues that other kinds of “griefs” (ll. 11-12) are more bearable because they influence only a part of a man’s being and “They come to us” (l. 13), therefore they are more manageable. Love, on the other hand, attracts men to itself, whether he likes it or not. The speaker then constructs a series of images that depict love as ruthless, cruel and deadly: it is like a “chain'd shot” (l. 15), that is “cannon balls or half-balls chained together, which normally separate in flight to chain length, and could cut down whole ranks of men” (Redpath, 167-168), or to a “tyrant pike” (l. 16) that cruelly pierces innocent fishes. Here love is described as a binding force, much like the one which was criticized in *The Indifferent*, a love that does not contemplate freedom but only bondage and pain.

The speaker, in the third stanza, proposes his own personal experience, and addresses directly the woman he fell in love with:

If 'twere not so, what did become
Of my heart when I first saw thee?
I brought a heart into the room,
But from the room I carried none with me.
If it had gone to thee, I know
Mine would have taught thine heart to show
More pity unto me ; but Love, alas !
At one first blow did shiver it as glass. (ll. 17- 24)

The speaker asks his beloved where did his heart go when he first saw her. He has lost it since then and now “I carried none with me” (l. 20). He knows that it is not possible that the woman has it, mainly because his was a gentle heart and it would have taught her to be gentle as well, and evidently this is not the case. This statement suggests that the love the speaker is talking about is indeed the frustrating and painful one pertaining to the Petrarchan love tradition, a system in which the woman seldom shows pity on her suitors. Nevertheless, the speaker knows what became of his heart: Love “At one first blow did

shiver it as glass” (l. 24) and now lies broken in the room that saw the beginning of his love.

In the last stanza, the speaker explains why this love has shattered his hopes of ever loving again:

Yet nothing can to nothing fall,
Nor any place be empty quite ;
Therefore I think my breast hath all
Those pieces still, though they be not unite ;
And now, as broken glasses show
A hundred lesser faces, so
My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore,
But after one such love, can love no more. (ll. 25-32)

Line 25 and 26 express the impossibility that the place where the speaker’s heart was is now empty: indeed “no matter can be totally annihilated, nor can there be a complete vacuum” (Smith, 360). He thinks that the pieces of his heart are still in his chest, but they are fragments beyond repair. Indeed, his heart is composed by “broken glasses [which] show/ A hundred lesser faces” (ll. 29-30) that can reflect only meek sentiments as “like, wish, and adore” (l. 31). What is certain, though, is that he “after one such love, can love no more” (l. 32). The intensity of the passionate desire required to sustain a Petrarchan-like relationship with an unkind and distant woman is too much to bear for the speaker of this poem. This is the *leitmotiv* that runs through much of the *Elegies* but finds in the *Songs and Sonnets* its most desperate and pessimistic development.

An alternative, nevertheless, is possible, and it is the one expressed at the beginning of this chapter with the analysis of the poem *The Dampe*. The solution is a new conception of love based on mutuality, privacy and the fulfilment of intellectual and sexual desire. Moreover, this new kind of love needs to be taught through examples to future generations, given the fact that the contemporary scene is still governed by courtly Petrarchan rhetoric. A new philosophy of love and its communication to future generations will be the focus of the most famous and important poems of the *Songs and Sonnets*.

(2.04) The New Philosophy of Love and Panofsky's concepts of retrospective and prospective burial imagery.

In the previous section of chapter two it was explained Donne's negative reaction toward a love poetry based on Petrarchan and courtly love rhetoric. *The Elegies* and the libertine poems of the *Songs and Sonnets* show a destructive reaction: their aim is to propose a new, libertine and explicitly sexual model of love poetry in order to contrast the poetic of the unquenchable desired proposed by such fashionable genres as the sonnet sequences. Nevertheless, these poems "share the general corruption of society. [They] involve secrecy, adultery and betrayal in all directions" (l. Low. 38) and they are therefore limited in their criticism. In the most famous poems of the *Songs and Sonnets*, though, he proposes a new kind of poetry based on principles that passed "from something essentially social and feudal to something essentially private and modern" (33). These poems, therefore, can safely be defined as those who lay the ground for what Anthony Low as described a "reinvention of Love" (33), thus creating a true and believable alternative to Petrarchan tradition. The most important elements defining this new approach to love are mainly three: mutual love between the lovers, clear distinctions between the outer world and the self-sufficient world of the lovers, the private nature of the relationship (Low, 50).

The nature of mutual love, an aspect that to modern perspectives might seem obvious, at Donne's time carried a powerful "anti-social" component: indeed, mutual love in the *Songs and Sonnets* is not "the bond of marriage, a contract entered into before the eyes of the world, bringing joys and grief but also responsibilities" (Gardner, XXVIII), let alone a relationship of superiority and servitude as displayed in courtly love rhetoric. It is a love that defies both social and literary conventions and sometimes also the scientific rules that govern the world: "the lovers in these wonderful need fear no sublunary consequences of their ecstatic unions any more than Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde, Troilus and Criseyde" (XXVIII-XXIX). The love described in these poems, therefore, is considered as the "*summum bonum*" (XXIX) of which the lovers are the embodiment, that transcends and is superior to the busy and corrupted public world ruled by the duties of everyday life. In order to preserve this private "microcosm" privacy, secrecy and self-sufficiency are of paramount importance (Guibbory *Erotic*, 140). Indeed secrecy is a fundamental condition of self-sufficiency, because protects from "the fragmentation and corruption that the speaker finds in the world" (141) and permits the creation of a love that, contrary to the one proposed in the libertine poems based on the speaker's autonomy, is

based on a “égoïsme à deux” (Gardner, XXIX) that is characterized by an expansion of the autonomous sphere to the beloved (Guibbory *Eros*, 141). This new model is necessary because Donne is “keenly aware of the instability of desire” (141) proposed by Petrarchan tradition, and its intent is to eliminate “the conflict between our longing to dissolve the boundary between self and other and our impulse to withdraw and reassert the self’s separate identity” (141). He thus proposes the image of an aloof couple, severed from the busy world to such an extent that it defies the law of science and declares itself eternal. The insistence on the eternity of love, though, becomes problematic when the lovers are forced to stay away from each other for a time. This is the main theme on many of the valedictory poems present in the *Songs and Sonnets*. Here the speaker is interested in both reaffirming the eternity of the lover’s sentiment and express “the ferocity with which he attempts to prolong that moment [the eternity of love] for as long as he can, knowing full well that its end may be near” (Targoff *Body*, 49). The speaker is therefore aware that the love he shares with his beloved still needs to confront separation and death, despite his declaring the contrary. He therefore “at the same time [...] recognizes the common and mutual necessity of one another, [and] he acknowledges the fragility of the dependence created by a bond between two ultimately separable creatures” (51). Once that this situation is recognized the poet tries to fight it as best he can: on the one hand he “ensures the possibility of future reunion in the face of impending division” (50) (see the analysis of *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* below), a kind of solution that regard only the two lovers; on the other, he tries to preserve a testimony of his love in order to pass it to future generations, and here death and separation are crucial elements. Indeed, as Anthony Low argues, “his saturnalia is at several removes: first it requires the death of the lovers, then their projection into an imagined future [...], finally their reconstruction, by the imagination of imagined admirers as living role models” (56). There is, therefore, a clear projection into the distant future in which the mutual love of the speaker and his beloved will finally become public and they will re-live through imitation.

The aim of this thesis, from now on, will be to analyse two key aspects of the poetry of John Donne: on the one hand, the dissertation will focus on the main characteristics that describe the new model of love proposed in the mutual-love poems; on the other, it will focus on how these characteristics are passed on to future generations. Since Donne clarifies in many of his poems that the communication of the new love model will be possible only when the lovers have been dead for a long time, and since this kind of communication is developed through images such as funeral monuments (*The Canonizations*), testaments (A

Valediction: of the Book) and epitaphs on a tomb (*A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day*), it is useful, in order to facilitate the analysis, to ponder on the way communication through funerary monuments works. The analysis of this particular aspect of funerary representations is intelligently exposed in Erwin Panofsky's *La Scultura Funeraria*. In his seminal essay, the German historian distinguished between two main models of communication present in funerary sculptures and monuments, one "retrospective" and the other "prospective" (Panofsky, 16-17). Indeed, his argumentations can be summarized as such:

La scultura funeraria [è] imperniata sul movimento pendolare tra concezione 'prospettiva' e 'retrospettiva'. La prima, tipica della civiltà egizia ma anche –fatte naturalmente le debite differenze- di quella cristiana, corrisponde al desiderio di provvedere al futuro del defunto e di garantirgli una beata esistenza *post mortem*; la seconda, attestata dall'antichità classica e recuperata dalla cultura rinascimentale, tende invece a glorificare la vita passata e le conquiste terrene, concentrandosi più su quanto il defunto ha fatto che su quello che farà o potrà fare. (Conte, XXV).

The concepts of prospective and retrospective imagery are paramount to understand the formation and the conveyance of knowledge in John Donne's love poetry (and not just love poetry) (Targoff, Posthumous, 8).

The "retrospective" poems can be divided into two kinds. The first kind proposes the representation of negative models of love: in it are analysed the frustrated lovers of Petrarchan courtly tradition, the libertine and cynical lovers of the Elegies and the pessimistic and depressed lovers of some of the Songs and Sonnets. The aim of these poem is to destroy models that are considered outdated and corrupted. Their characteristic have been already analysed in the previous section of chapter 2. The second kind of "retrospective" poems proposes the representation of positive models based on mutual love between the lovers, the self-sufficiency of this new kind of relationship and its private nature. These poems' intent is to reform the convention of love poetry in order to propose new and healthy models to future generations. The communication of the new model to future generations is the main aspect of the "prospective" poems. These poems, while presenting a summarized version of the love described in the "retrospective" poems, focus their attention on the various ways in which the message can be conveyed. Since those information need to be passed on after the death of the lovers, these poems concentrate on

fashioning information in a way that will be as clear and as resistant as possible to the passing of time, and that will be a fit commemoration of mutual love.

The analysis of retrospective and prospective elements within the poems will be the focus of the next two sections of chapter two.

(2. 05) “We two, being one, are one”: The New Philosophy of Love (Retrospective Elements)

The new model of loving proposed by Donne in his more complex poems is, as previously explained, based on mutuality and the fulfilment of desire. The birth of this new conception of love in the minds of the lovers is cleverly shone in *The Good-Morrow*:

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved ? were we not wean'd till then ?
But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly ?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den ?
'Twas so ; but this, all pleasures fancies be ;
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee. (ll. 1-7)

The speaker opens the poem by asking himself and his beloved what they did when they were not in love with each other. From the very beginning the pronoun “we” (l. 2) is used instead of the division between “me” and you”. This shift marks the passage from a way of loving that is considered childish, and that was a matter of scorn in the Elegies and in the more libertine of the Songs and Sonnets, to a conception of love based on mutuality. The childishness and immaturity is expressed by the following verses: the speaker asks if they were still fantasising in a bucolic environment (“in the seventeenth century the infants of well-to-do families were sent to a wet nurse in the country” (Smith, 378)) or “snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den” (l. 4), referring here to the legend of “the cave in which seven Christian youth, walled up alive in the persecution of Decius (A.D. 249), slept miraculously for 187 years” (378). He confirms, then, that they did pass the time childishly before they loved each other; so much so that the speaker includes among his juvenile

games the conquest and desire for other women, sentiments that are not considered serious but “dream” (l. 7) if compared to his relationship with the lady.

The second stanza affirms both the novelty and the private and self-sufficient nature of their relationship:

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear ;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone ;
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown ;
Let us possess one world ; each hath one, and is one. (l. 8-14)

The exclamation to the new day at verse 8 testifies also of the birth of a new way of loving, in which the souls of the lovers “watch not one another out of fear” (l. 9). The situation has changed consistently from the time in which a Petrarchan lady could, with a simple frown, throw her suitor into fits of depression. Here the figure of the lady and of the suitor disappear to make place to two simple “souls” (l. 8). Verse 10 and 11 enunciate the characteristics of the private nature of the relationship: their love is so powerful that “love of other sights controls” (l. 10), that is resides in the pleasure provoked by anything beautiful (Smith, 379), and being the woman the most beautiful sight, it makes of the room where the speaker and she are in “an everywhere” (l. 11). They have no interest in “charts of the heavens” (Smith, 379) or of maps that describe the wonders of earth and sea; indeed, they “possess one world ; each hath one, and is one” (l. 14). They are, therefore, an independent microcosm when they are in love, an image that is further developed in the last stanza:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest ;
Where can we find two better hemispheres
Without sharp north, without declining west ?
Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally ;
If our two loves be one, or thou and I
Love so alike that none can slacken, none can die. (ll. 15-21)

Lines 12 and 16 seem to comment further on the peacefulness of this new kind of relationship: the speaker uses the Petrarchan commonplace of the beloved's face reflected in the lover's eye, as a sign of mutual love, because their eyes reflect mutually each other faces. Moreover, "true plain hearts" (l. 16) are reflected in those faces: here the speaker is probably commenting on the false and complex nature of other kinds of relationships, mainly the feudal one proposed by courtly love traditions. In the following line the image of the microcosm returns: here the lovers are two hemispheres that make up the self-sufficient world of mutual love, a world that is peaceful, "Without sharp north, without declining west" (l. 18), that is without "bitter bleakness and falling off, the common lapse of human attachment from which their mutual love is exempt" (Smith, 379). The parity and unity of their love then is at the bases of their relationship, so much so that "If our two loves be one, or thou and I/ Love so alike that none can slacken, none can die" (l. 20-21), that is their love will be immortal. The kind of relationship described in this poem is completely different from those described by Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Donne himself in his libertine poems: their love was still built on a Petrarchan set of rules, rules that here are broken. If a relationship is built on mutual love, than it is happy and immortal. The element of privacy, at least while the lovers are still alive, is essential for the positive outcomes of mutual love. In *The Sunne Rising*, for example, the speaker instructs the sun itself on the differences between the outside world and the microcosm of the lovers:

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows, and through curtains, call on us ?
 Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run ?
 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
 Late school-boys and sour prentices,
 Go tell court-huntsmen that the king will ride,
 Call country ants to harvest offices ;
 Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time. (ll. 1-10)

The lovers are disturbed by the raising of the sun, who scolded by the speaker for his intrusion. In his opinion, the sun's movement should not "lovers' seasons run" (l. 4)

because the love he and his beloved share is eternal, as will be revealed at the end of the stanza. These rude statements brake the tradition of the *albada*, a kind of poem celebrating the rising of the sun and celebrating it as a life-giving god (Smith, 402): indeed, here the lovers do not need a source of life because their love is self-sufficient. Nevertheless, the speaker incites the sun to find other people to illuminate and the list he proposes covers all the public activities of society: learning and working (l. 6), accompanying the king for a hunt (l. 7) and finally political businesses at court (l. 8). These social environment need the sun in order to better regulate and exploit time, something that the lovers do not need. Their love, in fact no season knows nor clime,/ Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time” (ll. 9-10). their love is timeless, therefore the sun is useless for them.

In the second stanza, the speaker invites the sun to consider the lovers as a world entire in itself:

Thy beams so reverend, and strong
Why shouldst thou think ?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long.
If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Look, and to-morrow late tell me,
Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, "All here in one bed lay." (ll. 11-20)

The speaker boasts that the might of the sun, so much revered by previous poets, is actually powerless against him and he “could eclipse and cloud them [the sun’s rays] with a wink” (l. 13). He dare not do so, though, because he could lose sight of his beloved. He subsequently invite the sun to recognize them as a little world, comprising the riches of both the East and the West Indias, that is Asia and America (Redpath, 234). Moreover, the lovers are identified as kings of this rich microcosm, once again declaring the independence of this relationship from the world external to their bedchamber. Indeed, the insistence of the speaker on a clear division between the external world and the private microcosm of the lovers, attests a disbelief on the possibilities of reforming a world that still worries too much about public and trivial matters. The world described in the first

stanza is a world of constant and futile movement, and the only way to survive it is retiring with a lover somewhere and enjoy a private life distant from society and public striving. This idea is reinforced in the last stanza, where the poet finishes the description of his microcosm:

She's all states, and all princes I ;
Nothing else is ;
Princes do but play us ; compared to this,
All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy.
Thou, Sun, art half as happy as we,
In that the world's contracted thus ;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere ;
This bed thy centre is, these walls thy sphere. (ll. 21-30)

The chiasm at verse 21 confirms the closure of the microcosm of the lovers: the statement “She's all states, and all princes I;/ Nothing else is” (ll. 21-22) affirms the absolute sovereignty that the lovers have over their relationship and the exclusion on anything else. Indeed, the world they created is far superior to the real one: “Princes do but play us; compared to this,/ All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy” (ll. 23-24) the speaker claims, defining the rest of the world a “flashy pretence” (Smith, 403) of the microcosm built by the lovers. The sun, moreover, cannot be as happy as them, because he is alone while the lovers have each other's happiness. Nevertheless, after having scolded him, the speaker invite the old sun to shine upon them: by doing this, the poet guarantees, “thou art everywhere” (l. 29). At this point, the speaker has annihilated the real world and substitute it with the one of the lovers, which has become a cosmic system where “This bed thy [the sun's] centre is, these walls thy sphere” (l. 30). A relationship based on mutual love, therefore, creates an alternative world of bliss and happiness for the lovers, and actively contrasts, to the point of eliminating it, the real world of busy apprentices and dutiful courtly members.

In *The Canonization*, the same themes are developed even if the accent is here posed on the right way to communicate the new philosophy of love to one of the speaker's friends:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love ;
 Or chide my palsy, or my gout ;
 My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout ;
 With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve ;
 Take you a course, get you a place,
 Observe his Honour, or his Grace ;
 Or the king's real, or his stamp'd face
 Contemplate ; what you will, approve,
 So you will let me love. (ll. 1-9)

The poem, as in *The Sunne Rising*, begins with a scolding, yet in this case is not the sun who is disturbing the speaker, but probably a friend (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 158). The shift from a celestial body to a person allows the speaker the possibility to illustrate what the world he built along with his lover consists of, and what it is compared with the real world. Indeed, the speaker incites his intrusive friend to, if he likes, make fun of him but let him free to love the way he chooses. Apparently his love does not entail a series of activity that are quite normal in the real world, especially for a courtier: increasing ones status with wealth and culture (l. 4), engage in the game of courtly business (ll. 5-6) or flatter the king (ll. 7-8). The picture that the speaker is describing is that of a world in which love has no part, where only politics and money (and therefore corruption) are important. Indeed, this is the “world of ambition from which he and his mistress have deliberately excluded themselves by their love” (Smith, 360).

The kind of love that the speaker refers to does not follow the hyperbolic rhetoric of courtly love inspired by Petrarchan tradition, as the second stanza clearly shows:

Alas ! alas ! who's injured by my love?
 What merchant's ships have my sighs drown'd?
 Who says my tears have overflow'd his ground?
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?
 When did the heats which my veins fill
 Add one more to the plaguy bill?
 Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
 Litigious men, which quarrels move,
 Though she and I do love. (ll. 10-18)

The second stanza is both an ironic comment on the flamboyant images of Petrarchan rhetoric and declaration of independence from the world on the part of the speaker and his beloved. Their love is harmless, and does not follow the commonplaces of courtly rhetoric: the sighs, tears, colds and heats (ll. 11-14) of the lovers did not harm anybody or anything and they let alone “the unedifying traffic” (Smith, 360) described in the first stanza. Indeed, love rhetoric in general has is not very influential in the real world since “Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still/

Litigious men,” (ll. 16-17) while the two lovers are making love. By this statement, the speaker reaffirms the opposition between the private world of love and a public world characterized by violence and corruption.

The speaker, though, does not limit his speech to a scolding. He tries, in the third stanza, to explain to his friend the nature of this private world of love:

Call us what you will, we are made such by love ;

Call her one, me another fly,

We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,

And we in us find th' eagle and the dove.

The phoenix riddle hath more wit

By us ; we two being one, are it ;

So, to one neutral thing both sexes fit.

We die and rise the same, and prove

Mysterious by this love. (ll. 19-27)

The image chain of images that the speaker proposes is very intricate. He declares that he and his lover are both flies and taper, suggesting by this image that they are attracted to each other and that “at our own cost die”(l. 21), that is they “squander their life as well as their fortunes for love” (Smith, 361); love of a sexual nature, since the word “die” was an established symbol for orgasm (361). Moreover “we in us find th' eagle and the dove” (l. 22), which means that they both possess feminine and masculine quality that render their love perfect (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 160). Consequently, their union is symbolized by the Phoenix: since the lovers become one being when they unite in sex they become hermaphrodite as the mythological bird; moreover, since the phoenix resuscitate from its ashes, so the lovers resuscitate after every orgasm to enjoy sexual pleasure over and over

again (160-161). Thus they add wit to the riddle of the flaming bird and, most importantly, they “prove/ Mysterious by this love”(ll. 26-27). The mystery of their relationship is crucial to the poem, because it testified of the impossibility of the speaker’s friend to understand this new kind of love.

The means by which this mysterious love can be communicated are the main theme of the fourth stanza:

We can die by it, if not live by love,
And if unfit for tomb or hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse ;
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms ;
As well a well-wrought urn becomes
The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
And by these hymns, all shall approve
Us canonized for love ; (ll. 28-36)

The speaker is envisioning here a future of public exposition of his otherwise very private love. He seems to be quite sure that his relationship based on mutual love will be the source of legends, but he is unsure about the right medium to spread it: he names: “tomb or hearse” (l. 29), that is an exposition through a funerary monument;

“piece of chronicle” (l. 30), that is as part of a history book, therefore part of official history (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 162); “We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms” (l. 32), that is, they will begin a new kind of love poetry. What is important though, is that their mysterious nature will prompt future generations to make a new religion out of their relationship and the possible poetry inspired by them will be considered as “hymns” (l. 35). Therefore the will be “canonized for love” (l. 36) and will become the saints of the new religion of love.

The last stanza registers the imagined reaction of the faithful on the new religion:

And thus invoke us, "You, whom reverend love
Made one another's hermitage ;
You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage ;
Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes ;

So made such mirrors, and such spies,
That they did all to you epitomize—
Countries, towns, courts beg from above
A pattern of your love." (ll. 37-45)

The future described in a first person speech by one of the future faithful is not different from the world the lovers inhabit while they are alive: it is a world where love is rage (l. 39) where the example of the peaceful love of the couple is a vital alternative to a bleak reality. Moreover, they embody a new world altogether because in their eyes, become mirrors, they epitomize "Countries, towns, courts" (l. 44), that is a new world order. Thus, they are asked to intercede "on behalf of later lovers for the blessing of a love patterned on this one, love's highest condition" (Smith, 362). Therefore, the speaker has denied the possibility that his love could reform the world while he and her lover are still alive, and has projected it into a future that might be more receptive to a new way of loving. Although this poem seems to be built as a prospective poem, that is a poem that meditates on the way in which new knowledge might be passed to future generation, it is actually a poem very much engaged with its contemporary situation. Indeed, the whole poem can be read as an intricate demonstration discussed by a speaker whose primary intent is to show his annoying friend his ignorance as far as true love is concerned. The future imagined by the speaker, with the lovers surged at a role of world-shapers, is contrasted to the barren world of money and power that so preoccupies the friend. *The Canonization*, therefore, is still a poem that describes the nature of the new love, particularly its mysterious and mystical nature.

In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, the speaker describes the continuation and strength of mutual love when confronted with the physical separation of the lovers:

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
"Now his breath goes," and some say, "No."

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move ;
'Twere profanation of our joys

To tell the laity our love. (ll. 1-8)

The first two stanza of the poem propose an anti-Petrarchan alternative to the hyperbolic rhetoric of courtly love tradition: “Twere profanation of our joys” (l. 7) affirms the poet, to use violent images as the tear-flood or the sigh-storm (l. 6) to describe the parting of the lovers. A peaceful, noiseless simile like the one of the quiet death of an old man, is sufficient and bespeaks of the peaceful nature of the relationship between the lovers. Moreover, they have to maintain secrecy on their relationship, otherwise the “laity” (l. 8), that is “those who do not understand such love and will profane it if they know of it” (Smith, 405), will know about it.

The reasons of the ignorance of the “dull sublunary lovers” is explained in the next three stanzas:

Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears ;
Men reckon what it did, and meant ;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love
—Whose soul is sense—cannot admit
Of absence, 'cause it doth remove
The thing which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
That ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assurèd of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss. (ll. 9-20)

The laity of the previous stanza is attracted only by the violent earthquakes that shake the earth, an attraction that, applied to the rhetoric of leaving in love poetry, would make them attracted only by explicit and hyperbolic showings of grief as storms of sighs and floods of tears. The movements of the lovers, on the other hand, are, as those of the celestial spheres, far greater, yet they pass unnoticed because they are “innocent” (l. 12) (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 330-331). Violent love, therefore, is the love of “Dull sublunary lovers” (l. 13), a love that

depends “upon physical proximity and share the fleeting condition of all things beneath the inconstant moon” (Smith, 406). Mutual love does not suffer such troubles: although the lovers do not know themselves its true nature, they are sure that it does not need the proximity of “eyes, lips and hands” (l. 20) to last the time of their separation.

The key to their peaceful union is the fact that they share the same soul, thus they can never be really divided:

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat. (l. 21-24)

Indeed, the speaker affirms, if anything their soul will be expanded by their separation “Like gold to airy thinness beat” (l. 24). This simile, and especially the use of the word “airy” in it, suggests that “their love will be so refined by absence as to pass beyond the highest condition of material nature to the still more exalted quality of air or spirit” (Smith, 406). Therefore, parting will only increase the value and importance of their relationship. The last three stanzas express in detail the way in which the parting of the mutual lovers does not change their relationship:

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two ;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run ;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun. (ll. 25-34)

The image of the compass is probably one of the most famous in John Donne's poetry. It gives, at the same time, a sense of stability (since the two arms of the compass are never divide, as the souls of the lovers) and of tender compassion between the lover (particularly the lines "when the other far doth roam,/ It leans, and hearkens after it" (ll. 30-31)). Moreover, it is the better vehicle to express the concept of the perfection of the couple's unity: "Thy firmness makes my circle just,/ And makes me end where I begun" (ll. 33-34). The poem demonstrate that, unlike lovers of following the Petrarchan tradition, the lovers who follow mutual love cannot be divided by physical absence, which becomes only the means through which they reach new level of "just" perfection.

As it was shown, these poem describe the characteristics the are at the base of mutual love, and how this kind of love is not welcome in a world of violence and corruption. Therefore, while the lovers live privately their new relationship, the speaker of the poems is preoccupied by the conservation of this love. He is aware, as it was seen in *The Canonization*, of the powerful fascination it might cause on future lover, and he thus tries to devise, in the "prospective" poems, the better way to convey the new philosophy of love.

(2.06) "Study me then, you who shall lovers be": The New Philosophy of Love (Retrospective Elements)

The three poems presented here are all preoccupied with the best way to convey a new philosophy of love based on mutuality. In the first poem, *The Relic*, the speaker meditate on the possible readings that future generations might apply to his relationship with his beloved:

When my grave is broke up again
 Some second guest to entertain,
 (For graves have learn'd that woman head,
 To be to more than one a bed)
 And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
 Will he not let'us alone,
And think that there a loving couple lies,

Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their souls, at the last busy day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (ll. 1-11)

The situation envisioned by the speaker is quite macabre: he describes someone that, while digging his grave in order to bury someone else, finds attached to the lovers body a wreath of bright hairs. Indeed, the gravedigger will think that “his customary token of love is a clever device of lovers to exploit the circumstances of the Resurrection, when our souls will have to scurry about the earth gathering in our scattered members” (Smith, 398). By that device they will not have to look around for each other because they are already partly united. They will, indeed, “Meet at this grave, and make a little stay” (l. 11) thinks the gravedigger, and immediately, as the next stanza shows, will express so much wonder for that discovery that he will treat his finding as a sacred relic:

If this fall in a time, or land,
Where mis-devotion doth command,
Then he, that digs us up, will bring
Us to the bishop, and the king,
To make us relics; then
Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I
A something else thereby;
All women shall adore us, and some men;
And since at such time miracles are sought,
I would have that age by this paper taught
What miracles we harmless lovers wrought. (ll. 12-22)

The gravedigger will take the relic to a bishop or a king, but what the speaker worries about is that this finding will happen in a time and a land where “mis-devotion doth command” (l. 13) and where the real message of the wreath of hair will be misunderstood. Indeed, he worries that “the lovers’ remains will command the devotion that is rightly due to love itself” (Smith, 398). He, nevertheless, could take advantage of their misconception and devotion: since “All women shall adore us, and some men” (l. 19) and since “at such time miracles are sought”(l. 20) he could take the opportunity pass, as a testament, the poem itself, so that it could impart lessons on a new, less idolatrous way, of loving. At any rate,

the love symbolized by the lovers already seems miraculous to future onlookers, probably still surrounded by a world of violence and corruption as the one described in *The Canonization*.

The last stanza explains the miraculous propriety of the lovers' relationship:

First, we lov'd well and faithfully,
 Yet knew not what we lov'd, nor why;
 Difference of sex no more we knew
 Than our guardian angels do;
 Coming and going, we
Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;
 Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals
Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free;
These miracles we did, but now alas,
All measure, and all language, I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was. (ll. 23-33)

The love described here is not based on sex but its base is still a mutuality of sentiment between the lovers. Their miracles are: loving faithfully one another (ll. 23-24); limited physical contact, although kisses and touching seem necessary (ll. 27-30); disregard for the laws of men and respect for the laws of nature predating the original sin (ll. 33) (Smith, 398). Nevertheless, all these miracles are surpassed by the beauty and worthiness of the beloved, images of such intensity for the speaker that he is not able to describe them. This poem proposes itself as the right means for the communication of the new philosophy of love, especially a non-programmed finding as the one of the gravedigger might prompt dangerous misreading.

The verbal medium is chosen by the speaker of *A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day* as well. Here the speaker meditate on the better way to convey the sense of loss when the beloved is dead:

'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's,
Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmasks ;
The sun is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rays ;

The world's whole sap is sunk ;
The general balm th' hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed's-feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and interr'd ; yet all these seem to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their epitaph. (ll. 1-9)

The image pictured by the speaker is an utterly bleak one. The world, in the shortest day of the year, appears dead and spent: the sun's rays are not constant and they appear as mere "light squibs" (l. 4); the life-force of the earth, that "general balm" and "sap" (ll. 5-6) that helped to preserve and enhance life on the globe (Smith, 391), is gone; life in general appears "shrunk,/ Dead and interr'd" (ll. 6-7). Yet, these images retain some consistency, contrary to the poet, who is reduced to the mere word of an epitaph.

In the second stanza, the poet explains to future lovers his new status, and invites them to learn from it:

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next spring ;
For I am every dead thing,
In whom Love wrought new alchemy.
For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations, and lean emptiness ;
He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death—things which are not. (ll. 10-18)

The poet declares that his time is passed, yet he has to impart a useful lesson for lovers "At the next world, that is, at the next spring" (l. 11). Here the stress on the education of a new generation of lovers is crucial: in order to love well, the new lovers need to fully understand the power that love has even when their beloved is dead. This is exactly what the speaker explains in the next lines. Here is enunciated a process of "alchimia negativa" (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 300) in which love infuses with a "quintessence even from nothingness" (l. 15) the new form of the poet, who is now reborn "Of absence, darkness, death—things which are not" (l. 18). He is referring to the death of his beloved, with whom he shared that kind of love described in the previous section of chapter 2.

In the next stanza the speaker describes the distress that death has brought upon him:

All others, from all things, draw all that's good,
Life, soul, form, spirit, whence they being have ;
I, by Love's limbec, am the grave
Of all, that's nothing. Oft a flood
Have we two wept, and so
Drown'd the whole world, us two ; oft did we grow,
To be two chaoses, when we did show
Care to aught else ; and often absences
Withdrew our souls, and made us carcasses. (ll. 19-27)

The speaker states that he no longer has what constitute a living being, that is “Life, soul, form, spirit” (l. 20). “by Love's limbec” (l. 21), that is by the processes of negative alchemy, he has become, as he previously hinted, everything that life is not. At line 22 he stops his lecture on nothingness for a moment, and focuses his attention on his dead mistress, speaking directly to her. He affirms that their grief has drowned and killed the world, yet not the real world, but the private and self-sufficient world of mutual love. Moreover, they became “two chaoses” (l. 25) when “they showed concern for anything besides each other because either of them was the other’s true place in the scheme” (Smith, 392). Finally, he states that when they were divided they experienced a death-like status because their bodies were mere shells when they were away from each other, being the soul they shared the main recipient of their love (see *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* for a description of the superiority of the soul over the body).

In the fourth stanza the speaker laments his new status:

But I am by her death—which word wrongs her—
Of the first nothing the elixir grown ;
Were I a man, that I were one
I needs must know ; I should prefer,
If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means ; yea plants, yea stones detest,
And love ; all, all some properties invest.
If I an ordinary nothing were,

As shadow, a light, and body must be here. (ll. 28-36)

The speaker affirms once again the fact that his nothingness is akin to the original nothingness, that is a quintessence of death itself (Smith, 392). To strengthen his argument, he compares his status to that of other being and things. He is sure that he is no longer a man and he wishes he could be either an animal, a plant or even a stone; indeed, stones, although they have no life, still retain the properties of magnetism, from thence the reference to “detest,/ And love” (l. 33-34), and give a sign of existence. Even shadows, “ordinary nothing” (l. 35), an inconsistent phenomena that still depends on the existence of something.

In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker finishes his lecture to future lovers and incites them to live their love while they can:

But I am none ; nor will my sun renew.
You lovers, for whose sake the lesser sun
At this time to the Goat is run
To fetch new lust, and give it you,
Enjoy your summer all,
Since she enjoys her long night's festival.
Let me prepare towards her, and let me call
This hour her vigil, and her eve, since this
Both the year's and the day's deep midnight is. (ll. 37-45)

The speaker's sun, his beloved, is forever gone. He therefore invites future lovers to enjoy the renewal brought by a particular astrological coincidence, in which “the sun enters the constellation of Capricorn at the winter solstice, the agent of our life thus replenishing itself at the source of sexual energy” (Smith, 393). Here the poet describes the death of the microcosm created by mutual love, hence the reference to the sun of his beloved and the “lesser sun” (l. 38) of future lovers. By establishing this hierarchy he considers his love, of a more spiritual nature, superior to the love that awaits future lovers; yet his teachings still remain and the future lovers still know that an a more spiritual alternative exists, otherwise the study of the epitaph at stanza two would be completely useless. As far as the poet is concerned, he will prepares himself to meet her after his death and rejoices of the fact that she now “enjoys her long night's festival” (l. 42). This poem reaffirms the power of

communications attributed to words. The epitaph is a perfect instrument for the transmission that is thought crucial for the formation of future lovers.

Yet, the poem which systematically theorises about the transmission of the knowledge gathered by the lovers is *A Valediction: of The Book*. This poem can be considered a true manifesto of the educational aims of John Donne's poetry:

I'll tell thee now (dear Love) what thou shalt do
 To anger destiny, as she doth us,
 How I shall stay, though she esloygne me thus
And how posterity shall know it too;
 How thine may out-endure
 Sybil's glory, and obscure
 Her who from Pindar could allure,
 And her, through whose help Lucan is not lame,
And her, whose book (they say) Homer did find, and name. (ll. 1-9)

The speaker is departing from his beloved and in order to anger destiny, which divided them, asks his mistress to compose a book that will celebrate their mutual love and though which she will become more famous than the Sybil, the Greek prophetess (Smith, 407) and even more famous than some women of classic love literature: Corinna, the poetess who defeated Pindar (407); Lucan's wife, to whom his epic *Pharsalia* was dedicated (407); Phantasia, the woman that, according to legends, had written the Iliad and the Odyssey instead of Homer (407).

The next stanza describes in details the composition of this new book of love:

Study our manuscripts, those myriads
 Of letters, which have past twixt thee and me,
 Thence write our annals, and in them will be
To all whom love's subliming fire invades,
 Rule and example found;
 There, the faith of any ground
 No schismatic will dare to wound,
 That sees, how Love this grace to us affords,
To make, to keep, to use, to be these his records. (ll. 10-18)

The speaker instructs the woman on how to compose the book: she needs to collect “those myriads/ Of letters” (ll. 10-11) that they exchanged during their relationship and create “our annals” (l. 12), that is the chronicle of the development of their love. This book will contain enough instructions on how to love properly, and future lovers will find it extremely useful. Indeed, these teachings will appear so true that “No schismatic will dare to wound” (l. 16). Moreover, this book will serve also as a testimony of “how Love this grace to us affords” (l. 17) and will propagate their fame and make them live in the future. In order to express the complete novelty of the philosophy exposed in it, the book will be written in a new language:

This book, as long-lived as the elements,

Or as the world’s form, this all-graved tome

In cipher writ, or new made idiom;

We for love’s clergy only’ are instruments,

When this book is made thus,

Should again the ravenous

Vandals and the Goths invade us,

Learning were safe; in this our universe

Schools might learn sciences, spheres music, angels verse. (ll. 19-27)

The speaker compares the knowledge collected in the book to the elements that form a new world (Smith, 408). Therefore the language in which it is written needs to be new as well, either “In cipher writ, or new made idiom” (l. 21). One of the main reasons for writing in this new language, though, resides in the possibility that the teachings exposed in the book might be mistaken by non-initiate in the new philosophy of love. Indeed, the target of the book is not the general population but “for love’s clergy only” (l. 22), that is those more attuned to the new teachings. Indeed, should another barbaric invasion sweep the land, with a book written in a new and mysterious language “Learning were safe” (l. 26), because love’s clergy would retain a monopoly on it and could spread it again when the menace is passed. New schools of love, then, may learn “sciences, spheres music, angels verse” (l. 27), all characteristic of the new world built on mutual love.

In the next three stanzas the speaker treats influence that the new philosophy of love will have on religion, law practice and the running of states. It is not necessary to quote them

because the pieces of information they provide are quite clear and can be easily summarized. In the religious stanza, the new philosophy proposes a model based both on a spiritual enjoyment of love and a physical fulfilment of desire: indeed, the soul and the body are inter-dependent and “though mind be the heaven, where love doth sit,/ Beauty’s a convenient type may be to figure it” (ll. 35-36). In the stanza dedicated to the law, the new philosophy give instruments to lawyers who want to confront women that seem to follow the Petrarchan model of the aloof and cold lady: in the book, they will find how to win over their “honor, or conscience” (l. 44), the great chimeras which rule their life. In the stanza dedicated to government, the new philosophy will show that contemporary rulers command on false bases: their language of love is the void one of courtly love, something corrupt that wounds and create distress. By this book all their falsity shall be revealed, and there could be no false interpretations, as the one of those who “in the Bible [...] can find out alchemy” (l. 54).

In the last stanza the speaker closes his argument with a praise of mutual love:

Thus vent thy thoughts; abroad I’ll study thee,
As he removes far off, that great heights takes;
How great love is, presence best trial makes,
But absence tries how long this love will be;
To take a latitude
Sun, or stars, are fitliest viewed
At their brightest, but to conclude,
Of longitudes, what other way have we,
But to mark when, and where the dark eclipses be? (ll. 55- 63)

The speaker himself will study the book composed by his beloved, since distance could only increase his understanding and give him new perspectives. Indeed, distance from his lover could make him understand his love better since “presence best trial makes,/ But absence tries how long this love will be” (ll. 57-58). The speaker here affirms the main tenets of mutual love: in order to grow and be strong it needs the physical vicinity of the lovers, yet to test its strengths and durability it is best that the lover stay away from each other for a while, so that they will surely now if their love is of a superior sort (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 236). The last lines strengthen the concept by employing a geographical image, thus confirming that mutual love creates a microcosm of the lovers: the poet affirms that as

longitude is calculated by observing eclipses (Smith, 410), so the duration of love is better measured by separation. *A Valediction: of the Book* is probably the best and most detailed account of prospective elements in John Donne's love poetry: in it the poet devises, with the help of his beloved, a system of knowledge based on mutual love that will not only show future generation new ways of loving, but also will give them the right tools to develop a new foundation of the world, from its language to religion, law and the state. Indeed, this poem is of the best examples of how Donne's poetry has not only an intimate and private nature, but it also has a clear intention of reforming a reality seen as corrupt and degraded.

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Chapter 3

Anatomies and Progresses: The World of the *Anniversaries*

(3.01) Displaced Worlds

“Donne, [...], from a very early age, was interested in getting to another planet much as kids are nowadays; he brought the idea into practicality all his best love-poems, with the sentiment which it still carries of adventurous freedom” (Empson, 78). Thus William Empson in his seminal *Essays on Renaissance Literature* described the desire of Donne to create an alternative and perfect world which, through his poems, served as an imaginary alternative to a world otherwise corrupt and chaotic. As it was explained in chapter 2, he was able to create such a world by revolutionizing the way in which poetry should describe a love relationship: casting away the Petrarchan and courtly love models of unfulfilled desire in a relationship between a distant and

tyrannical woman and a pathetic and frustrated suitor, and replacing them with a relationship based on mutual love, self-sufficiency and privacy, Donne managed to create a microcosm that clashed directly with a world in which decay and violence were the norm. Nevertheless, his interest did not limit itself to find a necessary alternative to the world of the court; indeed, chaos and confusion were the main characteristics of a world that was changing rapidly not only politically, but also scientifically and philosophically. What Donne tried to do was to find a way to investigate these new conceptions of the world and to propose his alternative to a world picture he thought inherently corrupt. This is the aim of the two *Anniversaries*, the poems that deal directly with the changes his world was undergoing.

The main concern of the *Anniversaries* is finding a new way of poetic expression in a world that was profoundly changed by the Copernican revolution. Indeed, as it will be explained in the next pages, the scientific reform brought about by the Polish scientist's studies changed completely the world picture the Renaissance man imagined, especially as far as the centrality of the world, and of mankind in it, was concerned. But what kind of world was disrupted by Copernicus's studies? It was the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian cosmology, which, thanks to the Christianisation made of it by Thomas Aquinas, put man and the world at the centre of the universe and in a unique position to be the recipients of God's grace:

The Ptolemaic-Aristotelian cosmology, once 'Christianised' by Aquinas and brought into harmony with the Platonism of the Middle Ages, while respecting the difference between matter and spirit, presented the world as a great organization of interlocking parts. This system, wrought on the anvil of Aristotelian dialectic into a grand unity of inanimate nature, man, and God, nevertheless did not fail to appreciate the complexity of the whole and the profoundly paradoxical nature of things. As the whole may be inferred from the part, or if the part is linked in the mind to the whole, the association in a poetic figure –either congruous or incongruous- of the part with a concrete fact of human experience will communicate to the particular situation being treated by the poet the metaphysical value attributed to the whole. (Coffin, 19)

The Ptolemaic world picture was therefore based on clear divisions and correspondences. The divisions concerned primarily the spiritual and the physical

world: the physics of the heavens consisted in a perfect and immutable world of pure spirituality in which the celestial bodies moved in a circular way (circles being a symbol of perfection) (Rossi, 11); the physics of the world investigated the mutability of all dying things and therefore expressed the corruption of the world, a world that was, nevertheless, at the centre of the universe (11). Moreover, the physical world was considered finite and without any movement, and proof of it was the Bible (11-12). This fixity and immutability brought about the conception that the world worked of fixed and clear correspondences and that every small environment was a miniature replica of the larger world order (Coffin, 19). Indeed, the various “microcosms” that reflected the larger “macrocosm” followed a rigid hierarchy of divine conception: it was the so-called Chain of Beings, which “graduated upward from inanimate nature to God and knit together by the influence imposed by the higher upon the lower” (21) in which every element had its fixed place and change was regulated only by the decay of matter and death. The new philosophy proposed by Copernicus and developed by Kepler and Galileo among others, completely disrupted the bases of the old world and proposed a new one which had no centre and in which scientific and spiritual discipline did not influence each other as they did in the past. The main principles of new philosophy were:

1) Non esiste un solo centro di tutti gli orbi celesti o sfere [...]; 2) il centro della terra non coincide con il centro dell'universo, ma solo con il centro della gravità e della sfera della luna [...]; 3) tutte le sfere ruotano intorno al Sole [...]; 4) tutti i moti che appaiono nel firmamento non derivano dai moti del firmamento, ma dal moto della Terra. Il firmamento rimane immobile, mentre la Terra, con gli elementi a lei più vicini, [...] compie una completa rotazione sui suoi poli fissi in un moto diurno. (Rossi, 80-81)

The new world picture completely revolutionized conceptions of the world that until then were considered true and immutable. The world, therefore, was displaced from a place of centrality and truth, to a place of marginality and doubt. Indeed, the greater part of the revolution consisted in the way the research on the world's phenomena was undertaken: while, with the Ptolemaic-Aristotelian system, the truths of the world were revealed by scriptures or were considered self-evident and not needing explanation (Coffin, 21), the new system employed “reason critically to an acute

observation of the stubborn facts of nature” (21), that is, it regarded every aspect of the world as needing a full and critical exploration that disregarded previous dogmas and favoured the observation and study of physical phenomena. Thus, as Rossi argues, thanks to new ways to observe the universe, the heavens were not considered as something outside the physical world but a possibly limitless extension of it (78), the Earth lost its centre in favour of the Sun (79), and a world thought as fixed suddenly acquired movement (79). These new concepts did not encounter immediate favour among Copernicus’s contemporaries (Kuhn, 238-239) yet, during Donne’s times, the debate between conservatives and “new philosophers” was at its summit (Boas, 91).

A large part of the scientific world was immediately persuaded by the theories of Copernicus; indeed, the new system envisioned by the Polish scientist allowed men of culture formatted under a new, anti-medieval and anti-Aristotelian philosophy, to find a new way to interpret the world (96). As far as the non-scientific world was concerned, though, reactions were mostly negative (Kuhn, 241). The criticism against the new celestial system were brought about especially by poets and philosophers, that is by those whose works, until then, had close relations with a system of knowledge based on classic tradition and the teaching of the Bible. To them, scientific novelties meant conceiving doubts on a world picture that they considered already established in its truths and fixed in its nature (244). Conservative attacks based their argumentation on mainly two themes. The first declared that the Copernican system was “a violation of both common sense, and of the apparent order and harmony of the universe” (Boas, 100), a criticism based mainly on observations taken from everyday life: the movement of the Sun in the sky, the slow passing of the stars during the night, and so on (101). The second kind of criticism was of a more theological nature: poets and theologians, in fact, soon realized that Copernicanism could profoundly shake the bases of an entire world system that was based on a close relationship between cosmology, morality and theology (Kuhn, 247). The fact that the earth was no longer at the centre of the universe, that the universe was infinite and that it was also not a part of a spiritual heaven but an extension of the physical cosmos, challenged the core beliefs of the previous world picture and created many fundamental problems for people Kuhn defines as “Cristiani militanti” (247). Some of the questions where:

Se, per esempio, la terra fosse semplicemente uno fra sei pianeti, come potrebbero essere considerate ancora valide le storie della caduta e della salvezza, con il loro immenso peso sulla vita cristiana? Se vi fossero altri corpi sostanzialmente simili alla Terra, in conseguenza logica della bontà di Dio, dovrebbero anch'essi essere abitati. Ma se esistessero uomini su altri pianeti, come potrebbero discendere da Adamo ed Eva e aver ereditato il peccato originale, il quale spiega il travaglio dell'uomo, altrimenti incomprensibile, sopra una terra creata appositamente per lui da una divinità onnipotente e buona? [...] E se la terra è soltanto un pianeta e quindi un corpo celeste fuori dal centro dell'universo, che succede alla posizione dell'uomo, intermedia ma focale fra i diavoli e gli angeli? [...] E, più grave di ogni altra cosa: se l'universo è infinito, come ritenevano fra i più recenti seguaci di Copernico, dove può collocarsi il trono di Dio? In un universo infinito, come può l'uomo trovare Dio e Dio l'uomo? (Kuhn, 247-248)

The reactions to this complete displacement of the old system brought to the Copernican theory many accusation, the most common being the one of atheism. Indeed, writers and poets described the new system as completely absurd and Copernicus and his followers as dangerous fools who upset the natural order of things (242). Nevertheless, near the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th, Copernicus's theories began to be taken more seriously, therefore the criticisms of poets and writers shifted from a complete rejection of the new model to a pained and pessimistic description of a displaced and abandoned world in opposition to the blissful and ordered world awaiting men in the afterlife. This new stance is epitomized by John Donne in his *Anniversaries*.

The occasion for the composition of the *Anniversaries* was the death of the daughter of Donne's patron at the time, sir Robert Drury (Stubbs, 281). He never met Elizabeth Drury, a girl who died in her teenage years, nevertheless, in order to please her father, he envisioned her as the protagonist of two of the most complex and challenging poems of his career. Nevertheless, his contemporaries did not appreciate his effort: for Ben Jonson the poems were "profane and full of blasphemies" (281) because they did not describe Elizabeth as she really was in life, but presented her as a symbol "of an idealized pattern of virtue" (Manley, 281) that served to explained, in Donne's mind, the place that man and its soul had in the new Copernican cosmos.

In the first *Anniversary* he envisions a world whose virtuous part (Elizabeth Drury) is forever gone and now lies in decay and death (274); the concern of this poem, therefore, is to analyse this cause of this loss through the anatomy of the dead world, a technique that was “in voga dalla prima metà del Seicento [...] come un tentativo di spiegare ogni cosa, di rilevare tutto pienamente e metodicamente” (Taschini, X). In the second *Anniversary*, the reforming of the soul is the poet’s main concern; here Elizabeth is described as a symbol of redemption whose example should be followed by every man who wishes to be saved (Sherwood, 87). Indeed, he describes the reformation of his own soul as a proof of the efficacy of Elizabeth’s example, in what might be called an example of self-analysis (Targoff, 79). Moreover, his decision to focus on himself “might derive from his desire to produce an extensive and probing exploration of a soul” (88); he thus highlights the problems, the contradictions and the ambiguous desires of the human soul. The model Donne proposes with these two poems does not define the Copernican theories as complete nonsense but accepts them as the ultimate proof of the decadence of the world (Kuhn, 249). This is probably the reason that sparked so much controversy with his contemporaries. In Donne’s opinion, the new ideas about the order of the universe caused a profound and irreversible division between the physical and the spiritual world, and between the ways the two worlds need to be analysed. Indeed, for Donne the physical world has become the realm of *Scientia*, while the spiritual world can be reached only with *Sapientia* (Taschini, XXXV). *Scientia* is the discipline that concentrates on “la conoscenza dell’uomo naturale, quella che si limita ai sensi e all’intelletto, [...] una conoscenza parziale e necessariamente imperfetta” (XXXV), while *Sapientia* is “una conoscenza spirituale, un intendimento attraverso cui è possibile raggiungere una profonda comprensione di questo mondo e dell’altro [...] è una conoscenza perfetta e la sua perfezione deriva da un’origine divina” (XXXV). The first *Anniversary* exploits, through the imagery of the anatomy, the concept of *Scientia* in order to diagnose the maladies of a world displaced by the Copernican revolution, while the second *Anniversary*, through the self-analysis of the poet’s soul, describes the possible ways in which the human soul might reach the necessary *Sapientia* to enter the ordered and perfect world of God.

By employing such techniques and theme, Donne constructs two poems in which retrospective and prospective elements assume a fundamental role, especially considering the fact that they not only praise the soul of a dead girl, but also propose

directly to the reader a way to interpret and live in the world. The majority of retrospective elements can be found in the first *Anniversary*, where the world of the past is described in all its decrepitude and corruption. This description serves as an analysis of the maladies of the mortal soul, sort of a diagnosis without which the reader will not be able to cure himself. The majority of the prospective elements can be found in the second *Anniversary*, where the poet proposes a cure from the decadence of the mortal soul by enlightening future readers on the best way to reach a wisdom that will finally bring solace and order, envisioning a life after death where the grace of God is still the first law of the universe.

(3.02) *An Anatomy of the World: Descriptions of a World of death*

The first *Anniversary*, as previously mentioned, deals directly with the causes that brought the material world to its decay. Through a process inspired by the then common procedure of the autopsy, the poet analyses the maladies that brought the world to its death and confronts it with the purity of the soul of Elizabeth Drury, here idealized as a paragon of virtue and as the essence of goodness that the world has lost (Milgate, 126-127). The poem offers then series of images and themes that concern the past and the present state of humanity and of the universe that need to serve as a negative example to the reader. The aim of the poem is to show the reader what he should not do, and the best way to show the wrongness of the past is to analyse the anatomy of a world considered dead and corrupt. Indeed the poem, after opening with and appeal to the readers' souls (because only the soul can learn the lesson given by the poet), describes the world immediately after the death of his purest inhabitant, Elizabeth:

This world in that great earthquake languished;
For in a common bath of tears it bled,
Which drew the strongest vital spirits out.
But succour'd then with a perplexed doubt,
Whether the world did lose, or gain in this
—Because, since now no other way there is,
But goodness, to see her, whom all would see,

All must endeavour to be good as she—
This great consumption to a fever turn'd,
And so the world had fits; it joy'd, it mourn'd; (ll. 11-20)

Loosing Elizabeth has catastrophic consequences on the world: it is shattered by an earthquake and its “strongest vital spirits” (l. 13), that is “the spirits of the human blood” (Milgate, 130), are completely dry and all creations lies in mourning of her. Yet, what at first seems a great loss, thanks to a “perplexed doubt” (l. 14) that suddenly arises in the speaker’s mind, sheds a new light on the death of Elizabeth: her death is indeed a great loss, yet, at the same time, her loss obliges all who seek salvation “must endeavour to be good as she”(l. 18) and have to turn to goodness in order to be saved. It appears that, although virtue died along with Elizabeth, her example is still alive and useful to everyone who has a listening soul. Therefore, “This great consumption to a fever turn'd” (l.19), that is the maladies of this world passed from a passive “devitalizing disease that consumes the body” (130) to an active fever that makes the world have fits of both mourning for the loss of Elizabeth and joy for the anticipation of “seeing her in heaven” (130).

The speaker is nevertheless aware that a thorough analysis of the illnesses of the world is still necessary to fully understand how the soul can reach salvation. Therefore, he embarks in the description of the anatomy of the physical world;

But though it be too late to succour thee, [...]
I—since no man can make thee live—will try
What we may gain by thy Anatomy.
Her death hath taught us dearly, that thou art
Corrupt and mortal in thy purest part.
Let no man say, the world itself being dead,
'Tis labour lost to have discovered
The world's infirmities, since there is none
Alive to study this dissection;
For there's a kind of world remaining still;
Though she, which did inanimate and fill
The world, be gone, yet in this last long night
Her ghost doth walk, that is, a glimmering light, (ll. 55-70)

The poet addressed directly the world in this passage, and declares that an autopsy is the only way to help the world, since the death of Elizabeth makes any attempt to save it not effective. Indeed her death has shown that even the parts of the physical world that were thought more noble are indeed affected by decay (ll. 61-62). Nevertheless, the death of the world has not killed hope as well: mankind can still learn from “world’s infirmities” (l. 64) because “there’s a kind of world remaining still” (l. 67). Here the poet is referring both to the usefulness of the dead body of the world, essential for the autopsy and for the diagnosis of diseases, and to the fact that the example given by Elizabeth during her life is still alive in the memory of the people who knew her, and especially the speaker’s: indeed “Her ghost doth walk” (l. 70) the world still and gives to the poet that “glimmering light” (l. 70) he needs to give purpose to his endeavour. The example of the soul of Elizabeth Drury is fundamental for the salvation of the soul of mankind, a theme that will be developed fully in the second *Anniversary*. The reference here serves to justify the act of the autopsy as the better way to prepare oneself to accept Elizabeth’s model in the most effective way, by first dealing with the sins and the decay of the mortal soul. The speaker, therefore, begins his autopsy by commenting on the shortness of human stature, both physically and morally, comparing it to the heights reached by mankind in a past golden age:

There is not now that mankind which was then,
When as the sun and man did seem to strive
—Joint-tenants of the world—who should survive;
When stag, and raven, and the long-lived tree,
Compared with man, died in minority; [...]
When, as the age was long, the size was great;
Man’s growth confess’d, and recompensed the meat;
So spacious and large, that every soul
Did a fair kingdom and large realm control;
And when the very stature, thus erect,
Did that soul a good way towards heaven direct. (ll. 112-126)

The speaker confirms the decay of mankind from the very first lines, joining its fate with that of the Sun, thus implying that the golden age of the past did not envision just a different sort of humans, but a different universe altogether. This is the first of many references to one of the main causes for the decay of the world, which is the displacement of the earth caused by the Copernican revolution. The golden age he is referring to is the one of the Patriarchs of the old testament (Milgate, 135) who were believed to enjoy a better degree of life than animals and plants (ll. 115-116), who were thought physically bigger due to the better kind of food they could find in the world (l. 122), and whose bodies were so big that “every soul/ Did a fair kingdom and large realm control” (ll. 123-124) (Milgate, 135). Their physical magnitude reflected their spiritual greatness, as much as the shortness of contemporary men and women testifies of their moral corruption, definitively assured by the discoveries of the new philosophers. Indeed, mankind did not just shorten its own stature; its corruption, derived from its curiosity to know the physical world, influenced all of creation:

And, as our bodies, so our minds are cramp'd.

'Tis shrinking, not close weaving that hath thus

In mind and body both bedwarfed us.

We seem ambitious God's whole work to undo; (ll. 152-155)

In this passage the speaker explains that the causes of the decay of mankind are to be found in a shift from a pursuit of knowledge that focused on the spiritual side of creation and on the salvation of the soul, to a pursuit of knowledge which, by investigating and questioning the phenomena of the physical world, has displaced the right use of the human intellect. The poet stresses this topic by opposing the actual shrinking (l. 153) of man's faculties and bodies against the illusory strengthening that the new focus on the physical world has brought about. Indeed, what seems a “close weaving” (l. 153) that is a rational consolidation of knowledge proposed by the new science, is actually an undoing of “God's whole work” (l. 155) that rejects the conception of a perfect world based on harmony and on the correspondence between spiritual and physical world (Milgate, 137). This undoing is wilfully pursued by mankind in an attempt to reach objective truths that are not necessarily in accordance with the version given by the Scriptures or by the scientific models that originated

from them. The freedom from old shackles that derives from this new scrutiny is illusory, as the poet will demonstrate in the next lines:

And learn'st thus much by our Anatomy,
The heart being perish'd, no part can be free,
And that except thou feed, not banquet, on
The supernatural food, religion,
Thy better growth grows withered and scant;
Be more than man, or thou'rt less than an ant. (ll. 185-190)

The first results of the autopsy show, therefore, that the core of human understanding and virtue that was symbolized by Elizabeth Drury, perished, and exposed the corruption and the decay of the world. Indeed, now that learning has shifted its interests from *Sapientia* to *Scientia*, from the spiritual to the physical domain, “no part can be free” (l. 186), that is the mortal parts of creation, defined by the fact that they ultimately decay and die, have taken control over the life of men, who therefore have no longer the possibility of redemption afforded by a system of knowledge that put the centrality and the salvation of the human soul at its base. Indeed, the only way for the soul to survive this “atheist” universe (Milgate, 138) is to turn back to “The supernatural food, religion” (l. 188) and privilege spiritual learning over mundane one. Mankind need to aspire to a higher degree of being otherwise it will remain a vile and abject thing (Smith, 599).

The next step of the autopsy shifts its focus from the decay of humanity to the displacement and fall of the whole universe:

Then as mankind, so is the world's whole frame,
Quite out of joint, almost created lame;
For before God had made up all the rest,
Corruption enter'd and depraved the best.
It seized the angels, and then first of all
The world did in her cradle take a fall,
And turn'd her brains, and took a general maim,
Wronging each joint of th' universal frame.
The noblest part, man, felt it first; and then

Both beasts and plants, cursed in the curse of man. [...]
 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. (ll. 191-214)

The speaker affirms that the universe suffered two major crisis: the first flung the world into a state of corruption while the second gave it the killing blow. Indeed the universe, before the creation of the physical world, was “almost created lame” (l. 192) as the speaker puts it, because the heavens were shuttered by the fall of the angels led by Lucifer (Manley, 139). The whole chain of being, therefore, was tainted by corruption and decay, because the degeneration that first hit the angels was passed onto humans first, since they partake of a spiritual and a physical nature (139), and then to all creation (l. 200). Hence a world that was already “Quite out of joint” (l. 192) was completely dislodged by the discoveries of Copernicus and his followers. “And new philosophy calls all in doubt” (l. 205) affirms the poet, who afterwards lists all the novelties that have disrupted the Ptolemaic system previously in use: the existence of the element of fire, who was believed to form “the outermost of the concentric spheres of the elements whose centre was the earth” (Smith, 599), was denied by the heliocentric system envisioned by Copernicus; the planets and the stars are no longer distributed according to the geocentric order of the universe and are therefore lost and unreachable by “man's wit” (l. 207); some astronomers even “revived ancient speculations concerning a plurality of worlds inhabited, it might be, by being like men” (Milgate, 140), probably because they felt that this world was nearing its end and they needed a substitute. It is a desolate picture the one that the poet paints, where “all coherence gone,/ All just supply, and all relation” (l. 213-214), where a system based on spiritual truths was completely shattered by a new model based on doubt and on the division between *Sapientia* and *Scientia*. The

attitude of the poet towards the new philosophy, though negative, is not dismissive: this passage demonstrates, by linking the two falls, that the new discoveries seem to be a logic consequence of the inherent corruption of the physical world. They are therefore accepted by the poet, who nevertheless will try to find, through the autopsy of the dead world, an alternative that will give mankind the salvation it needs. From this passage on, the Anniversary will propose, along with the further results of the autopsy, also ways to contrast actively corruption and decay.

In the next passage, the poet urges the reader to deflect his or her interest in the world to more spiritual subjects:

And learn'st thus much by our Anatomy,
That this world's general sickness doth not lie
In any humour, or one certain part,
But as thou saw'st it, rotten at the heart.
Thou seest a hectic fever hath got hold
Of the whole substance, not to be controll'd;
And that thou hast but one way, not to admit
The world's infection—to be none of it. (ll. 239-246)

This passage reaffirms what has already been said at lines 185 to 190, yet the message is strengthened. If before the speaker advised the reader to divert his interest from the subject of science to that of religion, now the advice is to reject the physical world altogether. The autopsy has shown that, after the analysis of the two falloffs of the universe, “this world's general sickness” (l. 247) does not lie only in a particular vision of the world that mankind has, but is “rotten at the heart” (l. 249), that is corruption and decay are inborn defects of the creation. The speaker points to the reader that the “whole substance” (l. 251) of creation was affected by the violent fever of corruption and that the only way to salvation is “to be none of it” (l. 246). Here the poet introduces what will be the main theme developed in the second *Anniversary*, which is the active practice of the *contemptus mundi*, the estrangement and refusal of all the aspects of the physical world in favour of a life dedicated to the pursuit of spiritual salvation.

The poem continues much on the same subjects from this passage on, reaffirming the dangers of the new philosophy and analysing in further detail many aspects of

creation that, if at first sight seem untouched by corruption, are actually not safe from it. Beauty is gone (l. 250), the universe lies demolished by the new science (l. 262), Proportions are disfigures (l. 302), Colour has disappeared from the face of the earth (l. 340), and so on. The autopsy, though, cannot go on indefinitely. The poet realises this and proposes a new course of action:

But as in cutting up a man that's dead,
The body will not last out, to have read
On every part, and therefore men direct
Their speech to parts that are of most effect;
So the world's carcass would not last, if I
Were punctual in this Anatomy;
Nor smells it well to hearers, if one tell
Them their disease, who fain would think they're well.
Here therefore be the end; (ll. 435-443)

The decay of the world has not stop with its death, therefore the autopsy, in order to be effective, needs to concentrate only “to parts that are of most effect” (l. 438). The poet has done that by focusing mainly on the description of the consequences that the new philosophy had on the structure of the world and on the revelation that the creation was born with corruption as one of its fundamental elements. Moreover, the poet is well aware that if readers are given only a description of their maladies, they would scarcely believe what he hears because they “would think they're well” (l. 442). The autopsy need to end then, and the focus of the readers needs to be diverted to more edifying subjects. they now possesses all the retrospective elements of their own corruption and now need those prospective elements that could lead to salvation. This is the aim of the second *Anniversary*, dedicated to the right education of the soul and to its redemption.

(3. 03) *Of the Progress of the Soul: Salvation and the Soul*

While the first *Anniversary* served as a sort of diagnosis of the world's and mankind's sickness, the second *Anniversary* proposes a therapy that might lead the

soul of man to salvation. Indeed “the entire poem surges upwards towards eternal life” (Manley, 274), in hopeful anticipation of the delight of heavenly existence after death. Once delivered from the decadence of the physical world, the soul will be able to acquire true knowledge, or *Sapientia*, which can be “secured [only] in the love of God” (281). Yet, the readers’ souls still need education in order to find wisdom, therefore the poet uses the education of his own soul as an example to follow. Indeed, the whole poem is both a meditation on the right use of knowledge and on the more effective way to deliver it. The prospective elements are consequently paramount in the poem, and give the reader one of the most explicitly educational works in John Donne’s poetry.

The educational purpose of the poem is made immediately explicit by the speaker:

Yet in this deluge, gross and general,
Thou seest me strive for life; my life shall be
To be hereafter praised, for praising thee.
Immortal maid, who though thou wouldst refuse
The name of mother, be unto my Muse
A father, since her chaste ambition is
Yearly to bring forth such a child as this.
These hymns may work on future wits, and so
May great-grandchildren of thy praises grow; (ll. 30-36)

The world, as it was demonstrated in the first *Anniversary*, is dying in “deluge, gross and general” (l. 30) , yet the poet still alive and he will dedicate his life to praise the virtues of Elizabeth Drury, the symbol of the perfect soul. She is actually asked to become the muse of the poet, so that he might write poetry that will influence and inspire “future wits” (l. 35), who will themselves write poetry to educate the soul to salvation. Here the poet displays his plan that does no limit itself at the salvation of the readers’ souls, thus limiting the reach of the poem to a small readership: his plans involve a new way of making poetry altogether, much in the same way as the *Valediction: of the Book* was written to help future lovers to write love poetry in a new way. The poetic envisioned by the second *Anniversary* consists both in a praise of the soul of Elizabeth Drury and on an active effort on the education of the widest

readership possible, propagating a model of living based on spirituality and *contemptus mundi*, a concept already hinted at in the previous poem.

The poet then starts to educate his reads by addressing directly his soul, so as to make an example out of it:

Forget this rotten world; and unto thee
Let thine own times as an old story be.
Be not concern'd; study not why nor when;
Do not so much as not believe a man.
For though to err, be worst, to try truths forth
Is far more business than this world is worth. (ll. 49-54)

This passage is built on two fundamental concepts: the refusal of the world or *contemptus mundi*, and the rejection of the kind of knowledge proposed by the new philosophy. The poet urges his soul to consider his life on earth as “an old story” (l. 51) without any consequence on its future, being the world dead and beyond salvation. What is crucial though, is that the soul needs to stop listening to men that bring forth a kind of knowledge that will divert the soul’s attention from his salvation (ll. 52-54). The key expression here is “study not why nor when” (l. 51): the study reference here is the study of the physical world undertaken by the new philosophers and that brought the world, at least in the poet’s opinion, to his present state of living death. It is a corrupt and corrupting knowledge that the soul will need to resist with all his strengths. Indeed, the new philosophy, by displacing the previous order of things, disrupted also many of the hopes for salvation that mankind had: being the world not at the centre of the universe anymore, the soul was no longer in a privileged position for salvation, and death was therefore approached with great fears.

A new conception of death is therefore needed, and that is the next step in the education of the soul:

Think then, my soul, that death is but a groom,
Which brings a taper to the outward room,
Whence thou spiest first a little glimmering light,
And after brings it nearer to thy sight;

For such approaches doth heaven make in death.
Think thyself labouring now with broken breath,
And think those broken and soft notes to be
Division, and thy happiest harmony. (ll. 85-92)

The speaker's presentation of death is altogether positive. He describes physical and eternal life as two adjacent rooms (Milgate, 158) with death as a groom who accompanies the soul from his immature, mortal state to a more perfect, spiritual one. Indeed death has the power to prepare the soul to a most rewarding vision of heaven, presumably after Judgment day (158). Finally, death is presented as a messenger sent directly from heaven (l. 89) to deliver the soul from its earthly burden. This positive depiction of death is not surprising, considering the fact that the physical world described in the first *Anniversary* was plagued by decay and chaos. Death is therefore the perfect and definitive medicine for the soul, whose suffering will be ended by it. Moreover, the soul should welcome the agony caused by the sickness of the body as an anticipatory ecstasy of death. The last sighs of a diseased body are compared to "broken and soft notes" (l. 91) that anticipate the celestial music of the heavens that will be heard by the soul after the "Division" (l. 92) is complete. After the body has expired, the soul will experience once again that "happiest harmony" (l. 92) that was lost thanks to the discoveries of the new philosophy.

In order to convince the soul on the goodness of death, though, the poet needs to explain further how the corruption of the body affects the it:

Yet death must usher, and unlock the door.
Think further on thyself, my soul, and think
How thou at first wast made but in a sink.
Think that it argued some infirmity,
That those two souls, which then thou found'st in me,
Thou fed'st upon, and drew'st into thee both
My second soul of sense, and first of growth.
Think but how poor thou wast, how obnoxious;
Whom a small lump of flesh could poison thus. (ll. 156-164)

Here the poet explains to the soul its origins and in order to do so he employs the theory of Traducianism, that is “the theory that the soul is generated inside the body [...] also referred to as *ex traduce*- in opposition to the theory that the soul is created separately by God and then infused into the body before birth” (Targoff, 82). The soul was “made but in a sink” (l. 158), a derelict physical vessel ruled by “those two souls” (l. 160) thought by Aristotle to be “the vegetative and sensible souls” (Milgate, 160), the essences of growth (and therefore decay) and of irrational instincts. The rational soul, the one the poet is speaking to and the only one that will be able to reach higher existential states, was made “obnoxious” (l. 163), here meaning “liable to be hurt, vulnerable” (160), by the influence the corruption of the physical world it was exposed to. Death, therefore, will purify it from the weakens he acquired while it was living in that “small lump of flesh” (l. 164).

Death, though, is not enough to free the soul. While he still lives, he has to open its understanding to more spiritual matters and cast off all the learning he acquired by studying physical sciences:

When wilt thou shake off this pedantry,
Of being taught by sense and fantasy?
Thou look'st through spectacles; small things seem great
Below; but up unto the watch-tower get,
And see all things despoil'd of fallacies;
Thou shalt not peep through lattices of eyes,
Nor hear through labyrinths of ears, nor learn
By circuit or collections to discern.
In heaven thou straight know'st all concerning it,
And what concerns it not shalt straight forget. (ll. 291-300)

Here the poet illustrates the fallacies of an intellect educated only on earthly knowledge. It was believed that “what we do not know the world outside immediately, but that our different senses carry impressions to a part of the mind called fantasy, which makes a synthetic image of the object perceived called a phantasm”(Manley, 167); therefore, knowledge acquired through contemplation of physical objects is only partial and, at best, distorted, it cannot lead the rational soul to any kind of useful or meaningful learning, and is consequently labelled by the poet

as “pedantry” (l. 291). Moreover, the study of physical phenomena gives a distorted account of reality: the soul sees through “spectacles” (l. 293) distorted images of greatness that, once seen from the right perspective of the heavens, appear as small, unimportant and “despoil’d of fallacies” (l. 195). Indeed, the body that the soul inhabits is the main obstacle, with its “lattices of eyes” (l. 296) and “labyrinths of ears” (l. 297), to just and holy learning. The soul is thus encouraged to turn his mind away from mundane knowledge in order to embrace true knowledge after death, when it will straight know’st all concerning it,/ And what concerns it not shalt straight forget (l. 299-300).

The kind of knowledge the soul should focus on is of a purely spiritual essence:

Double on heaven thy thoughts on earth employ’d.

—All will not serve; only who have enjoy’d

The sight of God in fullness can think it;

For it is both the object and the wit.

This is essential joy, where neither He

Can suffer diminution, nor we; (ll. 439-444)

The first four verses of this passage seem to contradict what has already been said by the poet through the poem, that is that the soul will be saved if shifts its focus on more spiritual matters. The poet affirms that no matter how much the soul “Double on heaven thy thoughts” (l. 439) he will never reach the full understanding required to appreciate heavenly bliss. Indeed, only who have enjoy’d/ The sight of God in fullness can think it” (l. 441), that is only those who had a direct experience with the divinity can fully understand what the sight of God is. God is both the object seen and the means by which it can be understood (l. 442), it is a self-subsistent being whose understanding, according to Aquinas’s definition “is natural to the divine intellect alone; and this is beyond the natural power of any created intellect” (Milgate, 173). Yet, in the last two lines, the poet affirms that the blissful condition previously described is an “essential joy” (l. 443) where both God and the soul of men will not “suffer diminution” (l. 444). This passage, therefore, does not proclaim the impossibility of the soul to ever know the truth of God, but only that, while still alive in a physical body, no learning will suffice to reach the ecstasy of divine learning. Death, one again, is hinted at as the right tool that will bring the soul to the

essential joy it deserves. The poet thus completes his argument in favour of the practice of the *contemptus mundi*, and finishes his lesson to his soul, and consequently to the readers' souls as well.

The poem ends with a last praise of the soul of Elizabeth Drury, without which the poet would have not been able to impart his own lessons:

Thou should'st for life and death a pattern be,
And that the world should notice have of this,
The purpose and th' authority is His.
Thou art the proclamation; and I am
The trumpet, at whose voice the people came. (ll. 524-529)

The life and death of Elizabeth Drury should serve as an example for all mankind to follow. The poet's role will be that of being the trumpet who, through the poems dedicated to her, will spread her "proclamation" (l. 528) to the people, just as a herald does with royal proclamations (Smith, 617). The explicitly educational aim of the *Anniversaries* is therefore reiterated at the end of the second, thus completing the greatest didactic endeavour attempted by John Donne. With the second Anniversary he completes a mechanism of education through retrospective and prospective elements that originated in the love poetry and that is one of the most important elements of his poetry in general. Here, first through an autopsy of the original illnesses of the world, and then through the education on the future of the soul, Donne tried to reform the very system of knowledge that stood at the base of his contemporary society and opened the way to the more private meditation on God and salvation to which his religious poetry is dedicated.

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Chapter 4

“On a huge hill, cragged and steep, Truth stands”: Seeking the Truth in the Religious Poetry

(4.01) Private Meditations

John Donne’s relationship with religion was always complicated. As it was explained in chapter 1, he was born in a Catholic family in a society that was predominantly Anglican and Protestant, and had to live as a recusant (a sequestered catholic) (Stubbs, XVIII) for the most part of his young years. He then joined the Anglican majority, took holy orders and initiated a career in the official church that allowed him to become, at the end of his life, Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral (340). His life then seems divided into two phases: in his youth he remained a Catholic and in his maturity he converted to Anglicanism. Yet, as his poetry shows, if his public figure maintained an appearance of certainty, his private self was riddled with doubt.

Indeed, in his third satire, Donne every aspect of Christianity present then in English society, and after finding some faults in every creed he comes to the conclusion that spiritual truths are beyond any official theology:

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must and about must go,
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.
Yet strive so that before age, death's twilight,
Thy soul rest, for none can work in that night. (ll. 79-84)

The path that leads to truths, the poet affirms, involves many digression and backtrackings, yet every individual has the necessity of overcome the difficulties of this endeavour. Moreover, this undertaking needs to commence in the early years of a man's life because no one will have the necessary energy in old age. This passage shows young man who is hungry for intellectual challenges and that already thinks about old age as the period in which he will enjoy the fruits of a truth he had fought hard to reach. Yet, seeking truths and assurances directly from God will be the focus of his mature sacred poetry, where a mature man nearing the end of his life, turns directly to his divine Master in order to find consolation and relief.

The early seventeenth century saw a new interest on devotional poetry arising in English society. One of the reasons might be the preference of the new king, King James I, for this kind of compositions that thus became the fashion at court (Shuger, 512); yet, the private nature of many of the poems composed by the most important authors of the time, Donne included, suggests that this new interest was caused by a need for a kind of meditation on spiritual matters that was free from the polemics and controversies that defined theological writing during the Stuart age. Indeed, poetry was a private reaction to a public situation that was controlled by the so called "holy prose" (514) which included "sermons, meditations, spiritual guides, emblem books, rules for holy living and holy dying, manuals of public and private prayers" (515). Despite the fact that prose and poetry shared common themes such as meditations on *contemptus mundi*, the personal dialogue between God and the human soul, the longing for salvation (524), prose was constantly under the scrutiny of the public and

of the authorities, thus not allowing the writer the necessary freedom and ease to express his deeper feeling and doubts. Donne's divine works are a perfect example of this double dealing with spiritual matters: on the one hand, in the sermons he delivered as a preacher, while expressing the despair and suffering about religious matters he had passed (518), he nevertheless never tried to express his doubts in a way that would contrast with the authorities' position; the private nature of poetry, on the other hand, allowed him the free expression of his doubts and desperation concerning divine problems. Indeed, "the divine poems seem not to have circulated more widely; in sharp contrast to the *Satires* and the *Elegies*, they leave almost no trace in the verse miscellanies of the period. The late sonnets, including the one on his wife's death, are preserved in a single manuscript" (518). Poetry, then, was felt by many poets, and especially Donne, as the true means by which they could confront their doubts and fear, and the best form for this kind of personal meditation was the sonnet.

The sonnet form allowed the poet to fulfil two basic spiritual needs: on the one hand it permitted the expression of the need for spiritual comfort and reassurance, on the other satisfied the need to speak directly with God (Wilcox, 148). The established and strict rules of composition that define the genre were particularly fitting to express the poet's feeling in the most effective way and with the highest emotional intensity. Indeed, "in a short poem, an arresting opening and strong ending are crucial, and in the intervening lines a tightly structured discourse maintains the sonnet's closely wrought tension" (149). Moreover, especially in Donne's case, the highly controlled form of the sonnet allows the poet "to manage or control the existential extremity of the situations he imagines. [...] with its built-in mechanism for posing and answering its own questions, the sonnet allows [the poet] to unleash and then rein in his imaginative reach, to create hypothetical and counterfactual scenarios that can be poetically if not devotionally resolved" (Targoff, 107). The sonnet serves therefore as a direct and punctual analysis of the poet's feelings towards questions such as sin, mortality, the afterlife and the personal relationship with God. Yet these are very personal meditations that often picture a relationship with God that is problematic and, in Donne's case, almost aggressive sometimes. This testifies of the fact that the sonnet, previously used in Petrarchan love poetry, still retained in its divine form, some of the motives and characteristics of its more profane counterpart. Indeed, "the language and assumption of the secular sonnets shadow the

sacred, and earthly love is never far from the imagination of those who write of things immortal” (Wilcox, 148). Sacred sonnets, therefore, are not mere meditations in poetic form, but accurate description of the poet’s relationship with God, a kind of relationship that resembles closely that of a suitor and his lady in the Petrarchan tradition, especially for the fact that God is often silent and the poet has no other choice but to argue with an absent figure. This tension between meditation and personal relationship with God is of paramount importance in the sacred sonnets written by John Donne.

The link between divine sonnets and meditation was established by professor Louis L. Martz in his seminal work *The Poetry of Meditation*. In it, the American scholar argued that the structure of the sonnets of John Donne followed a pattern of meditation quite similar to that proposed by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*⁵, which proposed a method of meditation based on three principle: “composition (memory), analysis (understanding), and colloquy (affections, will)” (Martz, 43). This tripartite method seemed to adapt itself particularly well to the form of the sonnet, a poetic composition that is divided, in the traditional Petrarchan version, into three parts as well, two quatrains and a sestet. According to Martz, in the first quatrain the poet would conjure the scenario on which to meditate, in the second he would analyse the scene he had visualized and finally he would petition or resign himself to the divine will (Targoff, 109). What this interpretation fails to grasp, though, is that the structure of the sonnet only superficially reflects that of Ignatius’s *Meditations*, and disregard the influence of the Petrarchan love sonnet tradition in depicting the relationship between the speaker and God. Indeed, many of Donne’s sonnets can be seen as love poems to God (Wilcox *Devotional*, 159), and the relationship described by the poet as “as troubled and varied and experience as

⁵ Helen Gardner, in her introduction to her edition of the divine poetry of John Donne, summarises the practice of meditation in this manner: “the meditation is a very old religious exercise. Its essence is an attempt to stimulate devotion by the use of the imagination. The method of meditation was systematized in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius Loyola, whose *Exercitia Spiritualia* was printed with Papal approval in 1548. A meditation on the Ignatian pattern, employing the ‘three powers of the soul’, consists of a brief preparatory prayer, two preludes, a varying number of points and a colloquy. The preparatory prayer is ‘to ask God our Lord for grace that all my intentions, actions and operations may be ordered purely to the service and praise of His divine Majesty’. The first prelude is what is called the *compositio loci*: the seeing ‘with the eye of imagination’ either a place ‘such as the Temple or the Mountain where Jesus Christ is found’, or, if the meditation is of an invisible thing such as sin, a situation: ‘that my soul is imprisoned in this corruptible body, and my own compound self in this vale [of misery] as in exile amongst brute beasts.’ The second prelude is a petition ‘according to the subject matter’; thus, if the meditation is on the Passion, the petition will be for ‘sorrow, tears and fellowship with Christ in his sufferings’; if the meditation is of sin, the petition will be for ‘shame’. The meditation proper follows, divided into points, usually three or five. Lastly, the memory, the storehouse of images, having been engaged in the preludes, and the reason in the points, the third power of the soul, the will, is employed in the colloquy, which is a free outpouring of the devotion aroused” (L)

that depicted in his secular love poetry” (150). The personas of the speaker and of God therefore assume many of the characteristics of the suitor and the lady in Petrarchan love poetry: the speaker, besides meditating on various theological points, often gives free rein to emotive expression that encompass “suspicion, resentment, refusal to subject himself entirely to the divine will” (Stanchniewski, 690); God, on the other hand, being more of an “absent presence” than an actual being the speaker can talk directly to, is nevertheless often depicted expressing “jealousy, a distorted perspective on events, and a capacity to violate the apparent autonomy of His creatures” (690). It is apparent that the kind of relationship that was rejected by Donne in his profane poetry for the high degrees of unnecessary frustration it entailed, seems to be the perfect medium to describe a different and most spiritual kind of relationship that is, nevertheless, based on the same principle of a frustrated suitor and a silent addressee. The poses that the speaker embodies in the various poems have all the purpose of “command, inquire, rationalize, imagine, and expostulate their way into God’s attention, whether by groans or trumpets blasts” (Wilcox *Divine*, 152). Yet, a response from God never arrives, therefore the poet transforms the sonnets into prayers that aim to “comforting fears” (154) and provide the reassurance that would otherwise come from God (Targoff, 110).

What is the purpose of these poems, though? What kind of reassurance the speaker asks from God? The answer is not simple, mainly because every sonnets meditate on a different topic. What they are all interested on, though, is the pursuit of the kind of knowledge that can come only from God, that is reassurance about forgiveness of earthly sins and on the actual existence of the afterlife (Targoff, 119). The speaker searches a direct contact with God because his personal intervention through teaching would be the only real guarantee of true knowledge about the mysteries of the faith (119). Differently from his love poetry and the *Anniversaries*, therefore, the speaker of Donne’s holy sonnets is no longer a teacher who passes new knowledge to future readers; on the contrary, he has now assumed the role of the pupil, who describes his past life and his sins in order to convince God that he is worthy of the wisdom necessary to have reassurance about the afterlife. The retrospective elements present in the holy sonnets, are therefore the means by which the speaker tries to build his case to reach God’s attention.

(4.02) “*To (poore) me is allowed no ease: The Poet as Truth-Seeker in the Holy Sonnets*”

The variety of themes expressed by the holy sonnets, as previously mentioned, is too vast to be exhaustively analysed in this chapter. The sonnets presented below are therefore a selection of the most significant example of poems that deal directly with the search for knowledge by the poet. The speaker of these poems deals with his career as a profane poet, with the language of profane love applied to the divine context, with the death of his wife, and finally with a direct appeal for God’s intervention for the salvation of the speaker’s soul.

In the sonnet “Oh, to vex me” the speaker asks himself if his past as a profane poet will influence his devotion towards God:

Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
A constant habit; that when I would not
I change in vowes, and in devotione.
As humorous is my contritione
As my prophane Love, and as soone forgott:
As ridlingly distemper'd, cold and hott,
As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day
In prayers, and flattering speaches I court God:
To morrow I quake with true feare of his rod.
So my devout fitts come and go away
Like a fantistique Ague: save that here
Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare.

What Donne deemed necessary for a healthy love relationship in *Love’s Progress*, that is the inconstancy of the lover who never stays with a woman for too long, is considered sinful if the relationship is with God. Inconstancy has acquired the status of a second nature for the speaker of this sonnet, an unnatural state where two “contraryes meet in one” (l.1), that is his inconstancy has become the norm of his behaviour, a “constant habit” (l. 3) of his. Indeed, he changes “vowes” (l. 4) and

“devotions” (l. 4) in divine matters as much as a lover would in erotic ones. The whole poem is built upon this parallelism between profane and divine love, highlighting the fact that for the poet a change of habit is almost impossible. He states that his contrition, the attitude that should be assumed by a sinner like him when praying to God, is as fleeting as that shown for the lady to whom his profane love was dedicated (ll. 5-6). The kind of relationship that the speaker has with God is therefore a “humorous” (l. 5) one, based on a “forte tensione dialogica col divino” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 1971), where the ever-changing attitude of the speaker, as described by the series of contradictory and classically Petrarchan behaviour of the second stanza, personalises the painful relationship he has with the divine, a pain that is partly derived by the silence of God on the topics on which the speaker shows more interest. The third stanza reiterates the precarious and shifting position of the speaker’s devotion: in his past, his mind was not bent on divine matters, while suddenly the present is filled “prayers, and flattering speeches” (l. 10) that have the purpose of flatter God so that he might shed some light on the poet’s doubts. Yet, “To morrow I quake with true feare” (l. 11) at the thought of God’s punishment for his erratic behaviour. Doubt over the right course of action and the more effective way to express his devotion is the main concern of the poet, whose best days are those in which he “shake with feare” (l. 14), because he knows that “sono quelli [the days] migliori, essendo il momento in cui torna in lui la sincera, e quindi salvifica, devozione per Dio” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 1969). The Petrarchan model applied to devotion, therefore, allows a more dynamic and dramatic relationship with the divine, but does not clear the doubts that fill the speaker’s heart.

The wrong employment of pain, dedicated more to earthly matters, particularly erotic ones, than divine ones, is the theme of “O! might those sighs”:

O! might those sighs and tears return again
 Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
 That I might in this holy discontent
 Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourn’d in vain.
 In mine idolatry what showers of rain
 Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?
 That sufferance was my sin, I now repent;
 ’Cause I did suffer, I must suffer pain.

Th' hydroptic drunkard, and night-scouting thief,
The itchy lecher, and self-tickling proud
Have the remembrance of past joys, for relief
Of coming ills. To poor me is allow'd
No ease; for long, yet vehement grief hath been
Th' effect and cause, the punishment and sin.

In the first stanza the speaker laments the fact that he has already spent all his “sighs and tears” (l. 1), symbol of repentance from sin (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 880), for earthly matters, and now he has none for express his devotion. He lacks the proper expressions that might allow him to “Mourn with some fruit” (l. 4) in his newfound condition of “holy discontent” (l. 3), that is, a state of just sufferance provoked by the love for God (Bigliuzzi- Serpieri, 880). Indeed, as the second stanza reveals, his mourning was dedicated in the past to an “idolatry” (l. 5) that is connoted as profane love by the following image of a “showers of rain” (l. 5) pouring from the speaker’s eyes, a clear reference to the hyperbolic imagery of the Petrarchan tradition that was already defined negatively in Donne’s profane poetry. His past sufferings were useless and now he has to suffer even more, without any consolation. This is the main theme of the third stanza, which defines the position of the speaker and confronts it to that of other sinners. The poet affirms that a various other sinners, a drunkard (l. 9), a thief (l. 9), a libertine (l. 10) and a proud man (l. 10), at least have the memory of past joys to alleviate their present state of divine suffering, while the poet, who spent his life suffering for irrelevant reason “is allow’d/ No ease” (ll. 12-13) he has no joyous memories to conjure up when the contrition is too heavy to bear. This sonnet not only describes the suffering of a poet converted from an idolatrous religion of love to a true religion inspired by God, but also describes the great difficulties and the ultimate impossibility for a poet to convert his past code of expression from profane to divine poetry. Indeed, the forms and expressions of love poetry are apt to express pain and discontent that a direct relationship with God entail, but they fail when they try to solicit answers to ease the poet mind.

Not even the death of the poet’s wife is sufficient to guarantee that God will respond to the speaker’s prayers:

Since she whom I lov'd hath paid her last debt

To nature, and to hers, and my good is dead
 And her soul early into heaven ravished,
 Wholly in heavenly things my mind is set.
 Here the admiring her my mind did whet
 To seek thee, God; so streams do show the head;
 But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed,
 A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.
 But why should I beg more love, whenas thou
 Dost woo my soul, for hers off'ring all thine,
 And dost not only fear lest I allow
 My love to saints and angels, things divine,
 But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt
 Lest the world, flesh, yea devil put thee out.

The first stanza presents a widowed speaker who, after the death of his beloved, has his mind set only on divine matters. The ambiguity of that “and to hers” (l. 2) poses some problems of interpretation on the meaning of the role played by the woman’s death. Bigliuzzi and Serpieri, in their commentary to the poem, illustrate three possible interpretations: the first links her good to that of the poet, thus suggesting that the woman died for both her and her husband’s good, she being already in heaven and he being free to set his mind wholly on divine matters (958); the second links her passing to “her last debt/ to nature” (ll. 1-2) thus implying that she has paid the debt with her mortality (958); the third reads “to hers” as “to her relatives”, thus proposing a figure of the woman as a good wife and mother who has paid her debt of mortality by being virtuous (959). The Italian scholars seem to prefer the first interpretation, even if with some caution (959), yet what seems more important is the depiction of the woman as a medium of some sort between the speaker and God. The second stanza defines her role more clearly when the speaker affirms that “the admiring her my mind did whet /To seek thee, God” (ll. 5-6). The woman is thus presented as a “*donna angelicata*” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 956) who functions as a means by which the poet can reach more clearly a communication with God. Finding God though, is not enough for the poet: despite the chiasm structure of line 7 (“*I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed*” italics not by the author) suggests an established closeness with the divinity, a thirst for a closer relationship still lingers in

the speaker's mind. Up to this point it seems that a relationship based on love between the speaker and God, with the woman as intermediary, has resolved the problems of communication expressed in the previous two sonnets. Yet, as the third stanza shows, once the woman is dead the parts of suitor and beloved change, and now is God who courts the speaker's soul. God puts himself in place of the woman in the speaker's affection, mainly because he is worried that the poet's mind, without the right substitute, will turn his love to "the world, flesh, yea devil" (l. 14), that is he will return to a world of earthly activities that were the main cause of pain in the previous poems (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 957). Here the poet presents the "tender jealousy" (l. 13) of God, his divine intervention, as the only means by which the poet's soul can be saved (957). Even the help of the woman as an intermediate is not a guarantee for salvation, and only a direct intervention from God can solve the speaker's problems. The direct intervention of God is the main concern of one of the most famous among the holy sonnets, "Batter my heart":

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town to another due,
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
But am betroth'd 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.

The beginning of the first stanza immediately calls for the direct intervention of God: "Batter my heart" (l. 1) the poet commands, employing a military image referring to the action of a battering ram during a siege (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 939). As the second line suggests, divine tutelage over the speaker's soul has been too soft, therefore a

more brutal course of action needs to be taken. The quick series of monosyllabic terms that the poet use to incite God's action testify of his desperation that he might not be saved unless his divine master "break, blow, burn, and make me new" (l. 4). The dire situation in which the speaker finds himself is expressed in the second stanza continuing on the isotopy of the siege: the soul of the speaker is under control of hostile forces, possibly symbolising the microcosm of earthy and sinful matters (Bigliazzi-Serpieri, 939), who prevents it to wilfully admit God's grace. Moreover, Reason, the faculty that permits a closer relationship with the divine, is actually "captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue" (l. 8). The picture that the poets paints in the first two stanza is one of complete distrust in human faculties to engage in any meaningful relationship with the divine. The only hope for salvation is a direct, violent and purifying intervention of God, an intervention imagined in the third stanza. Here the poet substitute the isotopy of the siege for a set of images that belong to profane love poetry: the soul is betrothed to earthly life and need the intervention of God to "untie or break that knot" (l. 11) that still makes it a captive of mortality. The solution, though, is, paradoxically, another kind of captivity, a just one, where God is the absolute master over the speaker: indeed, the poet incites the divinity to enthrall and ravish his soul so that he might be free from sin and from earthly needs. This poem confirms what the other sonnets analysed suggested: any human effort to acquire knowledge and reassurance from God is destined to stay unanswered. This is the main theme that runs through all the holy sonnets, and it probably the reason why Donne thought that this kind of poem was the more appropriate to express this frustrating experience. As it was explained in chapter one, the sonnet form was preferred poetic form for the expression of courtly Petrarchan love, a love that was defined by frustration and unfulfillment. It seems only appropriate, therefore, that the form of the sonnet, employed for divine purposes, should describe the same kind of situation. Frustration is therefore the result of the relationship described in the holy sonnets, with their constant resort to pleas and menaces and violent prayers in order to try to acquire from God the knowledge the poet so desperately needs. Frustration is also the reason for the abundance of retrospective elements in the sonnets: with no clear future for his soul to envision, the poet has no other choice but to constantly scrutinize his past in order to find the means to connects himself with God. A partial resolution can be found only in a new kind of rhetoric, present in the Hymns.

(4. 03) “*Thou hast done, I fear no more*”: Relief in the *Hymns*

The first aspect that the reader notices about the *Hymns* is the complete change of tone from the sonnets: while the latter are violent, depressed and fearsome, the former are calm and almost triumphant. The reason for this change is not, though, a final acquisition of knowledge and certainty, but the imminence of death. Indeed, as Helen Gardner argues, the *Hymns* were written by Donne “in moments of crisis” (XXXIV) when a sudden illness was threatening the poet’s life (XXXIV). The imminence of death moves the poet to concentrate his poetic efforts not towards a bitter assessment of God’s silence, but to praise the Lord and ask for his forgiveness. He trusts that God will judge hi fairly (XXXIV) and thus he aid him toward a quicker resolution of his sins, as in *A Hymn to God Father*:

I have a sin of fear, that when I have spun
 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
 Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
 And, having done that, thou hast done;
 I fear no more. (ll. 13-18)

After listing all the sins he was guilty of in the first two stanzas of the poem, in the third and final one the poet declares his biggest one is “a sin of fear” (l. 13), of distrust in the salvific power of God. This is the fear expressed in the holy sonnets, that in the imminence of death is cast away in exchange of reassurance from the Lord that Jesus Christ, “thy Son” (l. 15) will shine on his salvation. This is all the poet asks, after that he will “fear no more” (l. 18). Although knowledge of the afterlife is neither asked nor given by God, the elements that characterize the *Hymns*, as the *Hymn to God the Father* has shown, are mainly prospective: the poet has his mind set on the future bliss he will enjoy once in heaven, and all he asks from God is the assurance that, once he is dead, his soul will be saved.

The most thorough testimony of the anticipation of future bliss can be found in *A Hymn to God my God in my Sickness*:

Since I am coming to that holy room,
 Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music; as I come
 I tune the instrument here at the door,
 And what I must do then, think here before. (ll. 1-5)

The change of attitude from the holy sonnets is striking: here the poet presents himself as a man preparing peacefully his parting from the mortal world. The heavens are pictured as a room where a divine court of saints sings the music of God (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 994), a music of which the poet will be part soon. In the meantime, while he is waiting to die, “what I must do then, think here before” (l. 5), thus testifying from the beginning that his mind is completely set on the future and that the pains and doubts of the past are now irrelevant.

In the following stanzas the poet explains his reasons for not being afraid at his imminent death:

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
 Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
 That this is my south-west discovery,
 Per fretum febris, by these straits to die,

I joy, that in these straits I see my west;
 For, though their currents yield return to none,
What shall my west hurt me? As west and east
 In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
 So death doth touch the resurrection. (ll. 6-15)

The poet here describes his body as a map on which his physician, turned into cartographers, try to devise how he will pass away. He describes his illness as “fretum febris” (l. 10) playing on the double meaning of “fretum”, which can mean both “sea strait” or “tremor, heat derived from fever” (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 995), and he happily passes to these straits to “see my west” (l. 11), that is, his death. His calm

derives from the fact that, being a map, for him there is no difference between east and west, therefore “death doth touch the resurrection” (l. 15). This simple yet effective sophism is all he needs to consider with excited expectation a meeting with God that in the holy sonnets was either dreaded because the poet thought himself too sinful, or commanded in the form of a violent ravishing. In the next stanza he explains the theological reasons for his calm behaviour:

We think that Paradise and Calvary,

Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place;

Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;

As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,

May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace. (ll. 21-25)

Here the poet continues the concept of the coincidence of death with the resurrection. With an astute chiasm, “Paradise and Calvary, /Christ's cross, and Adam's tree” (ll. 21-22), he bonds images referring to the death of Christ and belonging to the earthly Paradise in order to strengthen his previous argument: since all these elements, representing death and resurrection are present in one place, the city of Jerusalem (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 999), therefore death and resurrection must be the same thing. In the next lines the poet argues with God that he can find in the poet's dying body the characteristic that might bring him the resurrection he described earlier. Indeed, he affirms that he bears the characteristics of “both Adams” (l. 23): of the first Adam, the progenitor of mankind, he bears the sweet that symbolises pain and mortality (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 999); from the second Adam, Christ, the poet hopes to be embraced by his salvific blood so that his soul might be saved (999).

The last stanza ends the poet's argumentation with a reference to the way God bestows grace upon his believers:

So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;

By these his thorns, give me his other crown;

And as to others' souls I preach'd thy word,

Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:

Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down. (ll. 26-30)

The poet encourages God to receive his soul purified by Christ's blood and to give him finally the "other crown" (l. 27) that symbolises his definitive entrance into Heaven (Bigliuzzi-Serpieri, 999). Yet the poet's last thoughts are towards the theme of suffering: his celestial crown, in fact, will be exchanged with a crown of thorns, a clear reference not only to Christ's suffering during his passion, but also to the human condition, defined by toil and pain. Indeed, this hymn itself should be "my sermon to mine own" (l. 29), the poet affirms, a sermon that will remind him that "he may raise, the Lord throws down" (l. 30). This last line explicates a philosophy of grace that poses human suffering at the centre of salvation: the more a person suffers, the greater his salvation will be after death. The certainty expressed by this last line marks the greater difference between the hymns and the holy sonnets: while in the sonnets the poet, haunted by his previous mistakes, tries to connect directly with God in order to find answers that might ease his pain, the speaker of the Hymns finds solace in the fact that his past, now that death is near, is irrelevant, and that God will grant his grace if the poet truly repents and accepts that his pain was only a means to salvation. The Hymns therefore, do not offer definite answers to the question expressed in the holy sonnets, they can only look prospectively to an eternal life of bliss and music.

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