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“VISIONS OF ECSTASY IN JOHN DONNE’S *SONGS AND SONNETS*”

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Abstract

Motifs of visuality saturate John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* as the primary action of many poems consists of the speaker looking at his lover or the lovers looking at each other. Often times this act of looking results in ecstasy: the speaker and his lover being removed from their physical bodies. By examining three poems: "The Ecstasy," "The Good-Morrow," and "A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window," this thesis uses the lens of ecstasy to explore themes such as individual vs. collective selfhood, mutuality, and perpetuity. Ultimately this thesis will argue how successful ecstasy is dependent upon mutuality between the lovers, and how Donne uses ecstasy to grant his speakers romantic endurance.

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Introduction

One of the most dominant motifs in John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* is visuality; the main impetus of many poems is the speaker looking at his lover or the lovers looking at each other. In these instances, the poems describe the sight of the speaker's lover as triggering a profound and moving emotional connection within him. The basis of this premise derives from Renaissance Platonism, a popular philosophical system in the late Elizabethan Era that often manifested in poetry. One of the tenants of Platonism is a clear disaggregation of bodily relations from intellectual, emotional ones, characterizing the latter as true intimacy and the former as merely superficiality¹. Simply looking at one's lover was considered the first step of platonic love; according to Clay Hunt, the sight of a beautiful woman initiated a specific and rather convoluted psychobiological process; after the image strikes the lover's eye, it is conveyed to the heart, which releases "spirits" that activate the soul, which in turn opens the pores of the body who release the "spirits" so that they may be absorbed by the woman². In *Songs and Sonnets*, this process often occurs in a very specific manner: that of the speaker looking into his lover's eyes and seeing his own image reflected. In this sense, Donne subtly amends the platonic trope to involve reflection as well as visuality; Hunt articulates this equally convoluted phenomenon as:

The eye emit beams which strike on external objects; when the eye-beam impinges on an object it picks up one of the 'phantasms,' or images of itself, which the object emits; and this image is carried back along the eyebeam to the eye of the beholder. This theory conceives of the reflection then, as something existing apart from the body which is looking, and Donne obviously visualizes the reflection as more or less a concrete object which comes from the outside and impinges on the eyeball.³

¹ Doggett, Frank A. "Donne's Platonism," 1934.

² Hunt, Clay. *Donne's Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis*, 1954.

³ Ibid

Significantly, the phenomenon the Clay is describing here is *ecstasy*- not the emotion of intense excitement or pleasure, but the Greek word *ekstasis*, which signifies a standing outside of oneself: a separation from one's own body.

This thesis will draw upon three poems: "The Ecstasy," "The Good-Morrow," and "A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window" to demonstrate how Donne's use of ecstasy allows him to impart romantic endurance upon his lovers. Ecstasy breaks the rules of earthly space in the sense that it allows a person- in the case of *Songs and Sonnets*, two people- to stand separately outside of their body. I intend to outline how it also breaks rules of earthly time because, in standing outside of their body, Donne's lovers live forever as they are separated from the unavoidable decay of their bodies.

This thesis will also address the recurring tension between singularity and multiplicity in these poems by demonstrating how when the lovers experience ecstasy, they step outside of their bodies and become perpetually conjoined: going from two individual people to one fused person. Importantly, their romantic endurance is contingent upon this fusing. This fusing happens differently in each poem: in "The Ecstasy," although the lovers are conjoined before they experience ecstasy, ecstasy allows their souls to negotiate, furthering their already profound intimacy. In "The Good-Morrow," ecstasy directly enables the fusing because when the lovers see themselves reflected in the other's eye. Their eyes are metaphorized as two individual hemispheres which combine in the third stanza of the poem to form the singular "globe" or world of their love. In "A Valediction," ecstasy allows the dead speaker to perpetually rest in his beloved's eye as he carves the image of his name into a mirror that she will always look at.

This tension between "one-ness" and "two-ness," most explicit in "The Good-Morrow," both connects these three poems and reveals a crucial difference between them. Although all

three poems feature ecstasy, only in “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow” do the lovers successfully achieve endurance. The reason for this is because in “A Valediction,” the lovers’ affection is not mutual; the speaker is possessive and controlling: he has imprisoned his beloved within the mirror. He has experienced ecstasy in the sense that his presence exists outside of his dead body, but he cannot find another permanent resting place within his beloved because she resists him. He fails to successfully embed himself in her mind, heart, and body as well as her eye, and thus he fails to achieve endurance. His inability to successfully embed himself in her mind, heart, and body reveals another crucial aspect of Donne’s conception of ecstasy; Donne asserts that ecstasy requires exiting your body and entering into a distinct new space. This successfully occurs in “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow” due to the equal nature of the lovers’ relationship. In “The Ecstasy,” the visibility of the lovers’ intimacy allows them to be immortalized in the eyes of external onlookers who witness and reproduce their love, thus carrying on their legacy. In “The Good-Morrow,” Donne crafts a poetic space, one that is insulated from earthly rules of time, that the lovers enter into. Here, the lovers may watch the world without actually participating, and thus are exempt from aging. In “A Valediction,” the speaker escapes the physical parameters of his body through the carving of his name into the mirror but his lover resists him when he attempts to enter into her body. Thus he cannot escape the bounds of earthly time as entering into his lover is what would immortalize him. This reveals an important aspect of Donne’s conception of space: the lovers must exit their bodies and enter into a new space together; this space is not infinite, it is bounded and still maintains rules about equality and mutuality as it’s the space of their shared intimacy. The speaker in “A Valediction” successfully exits his body but fails to enter into this new intimate space with this lover.

Chapter 1: “The Ecstasy”

The tension between singularity and multiplicity dominates “The Ecstasy,” whose speaker’s oscillation between singular and plural pronouns renders it unclear whether the lovers share a soul or possess their own individual souls. This oscillation presents a rhetorical and logical problem which the poem addresses in a peculiar, characteristically Donne-ean way. Lines 41-46 explain how love transforms the individual souls,

When love with one another so
Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.
We then, who are this new soul, know
Of what we are composed and made⁴

This passage describes the powerful effect of the speaker’s love: how it “animates” both souls and brings them together. Importantly, the souls are described as plural in line 42 yet singular in line 45. This indicates that they have *combined* into the “we” of “this new soul,” of line 45. Through this logic, we can presume that the speaker is both a singular and plural entity: it is the combination of the lovers’ souls in which the souls still maintain their own distinct identity. I argue that Donne offers this complex combination, which I term “the We,” as a rhetorical solution for his profound desire for both intense intimacy with his lover and individual autonomy. This chapter will explore how ecstasy grants the We endurance.

Though the We is composed of souls, Donne asserts the importance of the body by demonstrating how the body and soul work in tandem to create the unique experience of intimacy. In the poem, the We experiences ecstasy in the sense that its soul separates from its body; however, this ecstasy is eventually reversed as Donne affirms the importance of both body

⁴ Bennett, Roger E. *The Complete Poems of John Donne*. All future citations will be taken from this source

and soul. The body is significant in its ability to reproduce- specifically, to generate a reproduction that is material and visible, which Donne uses as a vehicle for the We's romantic endurance. The We propagates both material: visible, and immaterial: invisible forms of reproduction throughout the poem. One of these visible propagations is the We's body itself, which functions as legible proof of the We's love that can be witnessed and reproduced by an outside observer. Crucially, this too is an example of ecstasy as it allows the We to exist outside of its physical body. The role of the outside observers is similarly pivotal as it is implied that they embody and carry on the legacy of the We's love, thus guaranteeing the We endurance and perpetuity.

The logic of the We- its existence as a simultaneously singular and plural entity- is elusive but is supported through multiple images throughout the poem. For example, in line 7, Donne describes the lovers looking at a shared object, and how their individual gazes combine to create something new: "our eye-beams twisted, and did thread / our eyes upon one double string" (7-8). Although their "eye-beams" are separate, they are intertwined forming the "string" of their shared gaze. The individual beams fuse to become the "double" string. Later, he describes "intergraft hands" (9): two individual hands combining to create a singular entity. Continuing with the metaphor of hands and fingers, Donne claims later in the poem that "such fingers need to knit / that subtle knot that makes us man" (63-64). The image of the knot supports the logic of the We as it is composed of two individual strings tied together to create something new. Importantly, in all of these instances, the individual eye-beams, hands, and strings still maintain their integrity as individual objects while belonging to a larger, plural object. Just like the We, they are simultaneously singular and plural. Thus, the imagery of the poem supports the logic of the We.

In the early passages of the poem, ecstasy facilitates the separation of the We's body and soul, which reveals differences in their respective functions. This occurs in lines 15-20 as the We's souls depart from their bodies to have a conversation:

Our souls (which to advance their state
were gone out) hung 'twixt her and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all the day (15-20)

Here, the We is speaking from the perspective of the bodies as they watch their souls "gone out:" separate from them, and "hang" between them. This physical disaggregation of the soul and body, an example of ecstasy, is important because it highlights how the body and soul are separated by both distance and function: the souls are described as dynamic and intelligent- able to move, speak (as indicated by lines 25-26), and negotiate. The bodies, on the other hand, are immobile and silent. The use of "sepulchral" suggests they are gloomy, sorrowful, and perhaps even close to death without the souls present to "animate" them. In this passage, the souls occupy a separate space from the bodies, both in a physical and functional sense. At this point readers are encouraged to ask: does the We need the lovers' bodies to exist and thrive? This question is tricky because on the one hand, the We is speaking from and about the lovers' bodies; on the other, the language privileges intimacy of the soul over intimacy of the bodies.

Although lines 15-20 privilege the soul over the body, later passages in the poem argue that the bodies are crucial for the We to connect in the first place. The We ruminates:

Our bodies why do we forbear?
They're ours, though they're not we; we are
The intelligences, they the spheres.
We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their senses' force to us (50-55)

The perspective shifts slightly here in that it is still the We, but speaking from the souls instead of the bodies. Further complicating the logic of the We, which is already quite tangled, this passage executes a simultaneous aggregation and disaggregation of the body and soul. In line 51, the phrase “they’re ours” asserts that the lovers’ bodies belong to the We: the We has ownership and control over them. This claiming of the bodies indicates that the We needs the bodies- it cannot thrive as souls alone. Thus, by claiming “they’re ours,” the We asserts the necessity of the bodies. However, in the latter half of that line, the We clarifies that the bodies “are not we:” the souls still exist independently outside of the bodies. The body and soul work in conjunction but they are also separate; like the We itself, they are simultaneously singular and conjoined entities.

This is further developed in the next four lines as the We explains that the soul needs the body because the body is the vehicle for the senses. The senses allow the lovers to see and touch each other, which leads to the “interanimation” (42) of the souls: the impetus for the initial creation of the We. If we think back to the beginning of the poem, we remember that it was the speakers’ bodies which allowed them to touch and conjoin in the first place: “So to ‘intergraft our hands, as yet / Was all the means to make us one” (9-10). This emphasis on the value of the physical senses is further developed in lines 61-67 when Donne proposes that the body and soul must lessen their physical distance and interact in order to reproduce. Just as the two individual lovers had to conjoin to form the We, the body and soul must come together for the We to beget new creations:

As our blood labors to beget
 Spirits, as like souls as it can,
 Because such fingers need to knit
 That subtle knot which makes us man,
 So must pure lovers’ souls descend
 T’affections, and to faculties,

Which sense may reach and apprehend.

Here, Donne that the souls must descend down from their higher position in order to tend to the “faculties” and “senses” of the body. Importantly, in affirming the necessity of this body-soul interaction, Donne executes a reversal of the ecstasy that occurred in lines 15-16 as the souls return to the body. Though the soul is more “pure” than the body, the body is figured as a vehicle or medium for the soul; its blood “labors” so the soul can “apprehend” the world. Moreover, this passage crucially introduces the theme of reproduction as demonstrated by the use of “beget” in 61. The physicality of the body is the first step in creating immaterial forces such as spirits which are “purer” than the body but nonetheless rely on the body to engender emotional intimacy. Thus, this passage conveys not only the necessity for the body and soul to work in conjunction, but for them to physically come together, intertwining like a “knot” that binds the two lovers as it binds the body and soul. This is crucial because it allows the We to apprehend the world and each other, and for the We to produce “spirits.”

As seen in lines 61-67, in the beginning of the poem, the We does reproduce but the reproduction that occurs always begets an *immaterial* creation- one that is only visible to the lovers themselves. For example, the We states,

So to'intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the mean to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation. (9-12)

Here, the lovers are looking at the same thing (presumably each other, see the “eye-beams in line 7), and the shared image reflected in their eyes is a form of “propagation:” breeding, transmission, or creation. Notably, although this is a highly erotic poem, the use of “as yet” (9) and “all the means” (10) implies the lovers are not having sex and thus the immaterial pictures are the only form of offspring being created at this time. Similarly, when the souls are both

speaking in lines 26-28, a “new concoction” is created; this concoction is the We itself, which is composed of souls and does not have a physical manifestation. So, at this point, the We has reproduced, but its offspring consist of “pictures in our eyes” which are immaterial and private: they cannot be seen by anyone else but the We.

The immaterial and invisible nature of the We’s propagations crucially invert towards the end of the poem when Donne asserts the visibility and legibility of the We’s love through the metaphor of the book and an external onlooker. Donne states,

To’our bodies we turn then, that so
Weak men on love reveal’d may look;
Love’s mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book. (69-72)

The metaphorizing of the body as a book figures the We’s body itself as a propagation because it exudes visible, legible evidence of their love- so much so that an external onlooker can “read them like a book.” Crucially, this propagation is physical and visible, and can be witnessed by the anonymous “weak men.” The specific metaphor of the book, an object that connotes an instruction manual, fable, or parable, implies that these onlookers will witness the We’s idyllic love and reproduce it in their own lives. This is an example of ecstasy; when the “weak men” reproduce the We’s love in their own lives, the We exists as an entity separate from its body (as it now exists in the relationship of the “weak men.”) Significantly, the visibility and physicality of the We’s bodies enabled this ecstasy to occur because it allowed the external onlookers to witness the We in the first place.

Though ecstasy also occurred in lines 15-16 when the souls separated from the bodies, this instance of ecstasy is the crucial climax of the poem because this ecstasy is what ultimately leads to endurance. The poem’s initial reversal of ecstasy: the reunification of the We’s body and soul was crucial because the We’s body itself acts as visible proof of their love- it is figured as

reproduction in its own right. While reproduction is not necessary to constitute the ecstatic relationship between them, it is necessary for them to become visible to others. The materiality of their body is necessary to ensure that onlookers are able to look at them; paradoxically, this looking is an *immaterial* transmission but one that imparts romantic perpetuity because once the onlookers witness their love, they can manifest it in their own lives and perpetuate a continual reproduction of the We by carrying on its legacy. The sight of the onlookers witnessing the We becomes an elongated vision that extends into the future. The complex relationship between materiality, immateriality, and visibility is aptly summed up by the use of the book metaphor. There is no actual physical book, but the use of the metaphor transforms the We's body into something legible that can be read and reproduced. Significantly, this impression that they leave on the onlooker is an example of ecstasy because the We exits their body and enters into the vision, and thus the life, of the onlooker. He carries on their legacy, re-printing the book, and ensuring that their legacy endures even when their body decays. Thus, the We's ecstasy grants them perpetuity. This also re-affirms the absolute importance of visuality and visibility in this poem; if we return to the very beginning of the poem, the twisted eye-beams lines 7-8 remind us that the We's intimacy was initially framed through visuality as the sight of one another "interanimated two souls" (43).

The extreme importance of the external onlooker is tricky because the logic of the poem so far has implied that the We's exceptionality is predicated on its insularity. The entire poem takes place in the lovers' bed: a location that is traditionally seen as the emblem of domestic intimacy and privacy. However, the presence of the "weak men" asserts the We's endurance because they act as witnesses, confirmations, and imitators of the We's love. The outside onlookers authorize the unique-ness and legitimacy of the We such that, when the We's bodies

have perished “some lover” (73) might look upon them and see only “small change” (76), because the We has endured past its death. Ultimately, though the We’s souls are portrayed to be more evolved, the We’s body is crucial because it constitutes visible proof of the We’s love that can be witnessed and reproduced by others. The continuing tension between materiality and immateriality reaches a climax through the metaphor of the book, which figures the We’s body as a legible object of intimacy. Perhaps ironically, the way this intimacy enables endurance is through the immaterial transmission of an external⁵ character witnessing and reproducing the We’s special love, which is an unconventional instance of ecstasy but ecstasy nonetheless. It is this ecstasy that guarantees the We romantic endurance and immortality.

⁵ To the We, not to the poem.

Chapter 2: “The Good-Morrow”

Aside from both poems telling a story about two people in love, “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow” initially don’t seem to have much in common. This is partially because they vary drastically in form; at 76 lines, “The Ecstasy” is the longest poem in *Songs and Sonnets*, while “The Good-Morrow” is on the shorter side at 21 lines. “The Ecstasy” contains no stanza breaks, and winds through a variety of intertwined metaphors in a somewhat random and jumbled manner while “The Good-Morrow” is quite dense and tightly organized, and its three stanzas develop in a logical way⁶. While the form of the two poems leads to drastically different reading experiences, both are grounded in their exploration of visibility and visuality. The early metaphor of the eye-beams in “The Ecstasy” foreshadows the importance of these motifs; in the climax of the poem, the visibility of the We’s love enables the We to experience ecstasy as the We’s body is figured as a book that can be read and reproduced by an outside onlooker, thus guaranteeing the We endurance. In “The Good-Morrow,” Donne centers the importance of reflection as the lovers see themselves reflected in the eyes of the other. This is an example of ecstasy because it allows them to stand outside of themselves and look at themselves from an outside perspective. This inaugurates a transformation in which the lovers fuse to become one single person instead of two individual people. Moreover, the use of geography metaphors demonstrates how, when the lovers exist their bodies, they are ushered into a new space- one that is not bound by earthly rules of time. Lastly, Donne continually emphasize the mutual and equal nature of the lovers’ relationship throughout the poem; this indicates how it was this mutuality that allowed them to fuse and experience both ecstasy and endurance. Ultimately, this reveals crucial connections between “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow:” not only is visuality the

⁶ The stanzas develop temporally: the first stanza reflects on the speaker’s past, the second addresses his present, and the third looks into his future.

impetus for ecstasy in both, but in both poems, when the lovers experience ecstasy they exit out of their body and enter into a distinct new space, one that will allow them endurance.

“The Good-Morrow,” which opens on lovers having just woken up, derives from two closely related genres in Renaissance love poetry: the *aubade*, “a morning serenade from a lover to his mistress,” and the *aube*, “a love poem which presents a conversation between two lovers as they awaken at dawn after a night of love”⁷ (58). In the case of this poem, the new day that dawns upon the speaker and his lover marks their transition from adolescence to adulthood, a transition that is characterized by forgoing lustful “fancies (5)” and instead embracing an emotional and intellectual connection. While “The Ecstasy” explored both physical and non-physical relations between the lovers, “The Good-Morrow” explicitly values an emotional and intellectual connection over a physical one. This becomes obvious in the opening of the poem. The speaker opens by reflecting on past relationships that were driven by lust: “What thou and I / Did till we love’d? Were we not wean’d till then, / But suck’d on country pleasures childishly?” (1-3). These lines directly conflate lust with infancy as the language gestures towards breastfeeding, but also physical sexuality: “suck’d” was a common visual pun in this period as the letters “s” and “f” looked similar in print, “country” was Renaissance colloquialism for gross sensuality⁸, and some critics have interpreted this line as “cunt-ry pleasures.”⁹ Importantly, the dominant motif of this transition from adolescence to maturity is sight: “If ever any beauty I did see / Which I desir’d, and got, ‘twas but a dream of thee.” (6-7). The speaker characterizes his past sights as merely “dreams” and “fancies,” where the sight that he describes in stanza two

⁷ Hunt, Clay. *Donne’s Poetry: Essays in Literary Analysis*, 1954.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Bell, Ilona. “The Role of the Lady in John Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*,” pg 121, 1983.

involves a profound emotional and intellectual connection summed up by the serene and confident tone of “And now good morrow to our waking souls” (8). This poem draws on the genre of *aubade* not only in the literal sense of the lovers having just woken up, but in a metaphorical sense of the lovers having previously been asleep and having their eyes closed to the pleasures and complexities of emotional intimacy. This is further confirmed by the first stanza’s emphasis on how the speaker had previously been sleeping: “Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den?” (4) Ultimately, the first stanza proposes that the lovers experience the new sight of true intimacy, and this intimacy is constituted by an emotional insight that is more than just skin deep.

The rising action of “The Good-Morrow” is the lovers looking into each other’s eyes and seeing their own images reflected. “My face in thine eyes, thine in mine appears, / And true plain hearts do in the faces rest” (15-16) constitutes a moment of true intimacy in the sense that the lovers are not just looking at each other, but into each other; they see each other’s emotion and interiority. The use of “true” and “plain” suggests that their relationship is built on honesty and transparency; Donne brings new meaning to the colloquial phrase “wear your heart on your sleeve” as he proposes that a true lover will be able to see your heart simply by looking into your eyes. Importantly, according to William Shullenberg, this moment is emblematic of a specific type of intimacy that Donne continually seeks and creates throughout *Songs and Sonnets*: “this image seems to crystallize the erotic wish that motivates the poems: a moment of loving intensity that takes the loving self outside itself: both concentrates the self and dissolves it in the mirroring sight of the beloved” (52). Shullenberg characterizes this scene as a moment of ecstasy as the lovers are able to see themselves from an outside perspective as they recognize their own images reflected in the eyes of each other. The paradox of this phenomenon, as indicated by

Shullenberg, is that ecstasy creates a space in which the lovers' individual selfhood is both strengthened and diluted by the presence of the other.

A Lacanian lens can help us understand the psychological repercussions of this instance of ecstasy. In his formative essay "The Mirror-Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan asserts that every pre-linguistic baby shares a common experience: that of seeing himself in the mirror and identifying with the wholeness of his reflected form. Lacan's mirror stage theory speaks to the fact that a mirror, in its basic function, is a vehicle for ecstasy because it allows one to stand "outside" of themselves in their reflected image. Lacan explains,

"We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image." (1164)¹⁰

When Lacan says "when he assumes an image," he is talking about the moment a baby sees his own reflection, recognizes his image, and joyfully identifies with his coherent self. This moment is formative in the infant's sense of self and, according to Lacan, he spends the rest of his life seeking this sense of wholeness through external sources: "But the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego [in a fictional direction] which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone" (1165). In "The Good-Morrow," the beloved's eye acts as the mirror in which the other lover joyfully identifies themselves. Thus, each lover experiences ecstasy (as they see themselves reflected in the eye of the other) while simultaneously seeing the other. The lovers experience both ecstasy and the "wholeness" of the Lacanian mirror stage at the same time. The speaker describes this unique sensation:

¹⁰ Cain, William E., et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience"

And now good-morrow to our waking souls
 Which watch not one another out of fear;
 For love all love of other sights controls (8-10)

The “other sights” the speaker describes are the sights of each other and the sights of themselves: two new sights that they otherwise wouldn’t have access to if they hadn’t entered into this special union. This passage also emphasizes the mutual faith the lovers have in each other and the fact that they watch each other out of happiness and not distrust or fear of infidelity.

However, as hinted at by Shullenberg, Lacan’s theory also highlights a paradox in the logic of the lovers’ mutual reflection and feelings of wholeness. As the lovers see themselves in each other’s eyes, the sight of the other simultaneously reinforces their individual completeness *and* their reliance on each other for this completeness. According to Lacan, the mirror stage “situates the agency of the ego [in a fictional direction].”¹¹ The baby’s experience of wholeness is ultimately a fiction because his image in the mirror makes him feel like he’s not alone, when in fact his reflection is an illusion of a companion. This initially suggests that the speaker’s experience of wholeness is similarly a false; however the shift between stanza two and stanza three addresses this tension. At the end of stanza two, the speaker declared, “Let us possess one world: each hath one, and is one” (14). This line indicates that each lover is an individual world holding the world of the other in their eye. They are connected by their shared gaze and they “possess” each other, but, crucially, they remain as two separate, individual people. In stanza three, however, the speakers go from two individual people to one conjoined person:

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... (15-17)

¹¹ Ibid

“Hemisphere” signifies half of a world. The fact that this line mentions two hemispheres indicates that the lovers themselves are two individual hemispheres that have now merged to form the whole sphere, or “world,” of their love. The lovers fusing to become one person demonstrates how Donne amends Lacan’s mirror stage to sidestep the paradox mentioned above; in this case, the mirror is the lover’s eye so the speaker is able to see himself *and* his lover- the woman who makes him whole- at the same time. Moreover, he will never be alone because he is now permanently conjoined with his lover.

Another crucial aspect of this fusing is how Donne’s rhetoric indicates that the lovers’ relationship was completely equal and mutual before they fused. The line: “Let us possess one world: each hath one, and is one” (14) affirms that the lovers have an equal relationship in which they are each a world who belongs to the other. This is an explicitly a statement of balance and reciprocity, and it proves that when they merged, the decision was completely mutual. Mutuality is very important in the context of ecstasy because it allowed them to both exit their bodies and enter into a new composite body. They have also entered into a new space: one of idyllic intimacy.

The use of geography motifs demonstrates how the speaker’s relationship is superior to other men’s relationships because others are confined to the laws of the earthly world which the speaker exempts himself from. The geography references littered throughout “The Good-Morrow” implicitly compare the speaker’s love with the excitement of discovering new land, one of the most thrilling occasions of the early 17th century. The speaker declares,

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. (12-14)

Notably, the use of past tense in lines 12 and 13 with “have” implies that the speaker is not only comparing his personal romantic journey with the expeditions of other men, but subtly implying that his is better and that he does not need to partake in those other journeys because he has his own. Thus, the repetition of “let” takes on the tone of “let others have these journeys, because we have our own that is perfectly satisfying and perhaps even superior.” Remarking on this tone through the lens of the hemisphere metaphor, Clay Hunt explains,

Donne sharpens this theme by giving it a precise logical basis in one of the philosophic commonplaces of his age: the concept that man is a microcosm or ‘little world.’ The world is well lost because, since each of the lovers is, from a philosophic standpoint, a complete world, each has gained an entire world merely in possessing the other. (63)

Given this context and the tone of these lines, it is clear the speaker feels he has no need to participate in physical, earthly world: a world that, according to Hunt, “is well lost.” This is further confirmed by the speaker asking, “Where can we find two better hemispheres, / Without sharp North, without declining West?” (17-18). Here, the speaker expresses that he wants to live without the confines of earthly geography. In fact, his confident tone indicates that this question is rhetorical; the speaker is claiming that the world of his love does not participate in earthly rules of geography and that is why his relationship is superior to other’s relationships. Just as ecstasy took the lovers outside of themselves and allowed them to see themselves from an external perspective, their own idyllic intimacy takes them outside of this physical world and allows them to contentedly watch the “sea-discoverers” without participating.

Donne’s rejection of earthly geography is crucial because it introduces his unique positioning of spatiality. In this poem, Donne’s conception of spatial vastness enables a type of temporal vastness and thus guarantees the lovers endurance. In describing the unique space of the lovers’ intimacy, Donne claims that it “makes one little room an everywhere” (11). The room that he is describing is the space that the lovers entered into when they exited their bodies and

fused together. When he says that this room is “everywhere” it is unclear how, exactly, he is framing this spatial vastness. However, putting this line in conversation with the last line of the poem crucially demonstrates how this spatial vastness enables temporal vastness: “thou and I / Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die” (20-21). The speaker’s declaration of immortality allows us to read “everywhere” as the lovers’ relationship expanding infinitely not necessarily across space, but across time. Thus, ecstasy: exiting out of their bodies *and* the earthly world allows the speakers to live forever in their idyllic intimacy. This ties back to my above point about how, when the speakers experience ecstasy, they are ushered into a space where they can witness the world without participating in it. Donne’s rejection of geographic limits is also a rejection of temporal limits. The idea of one little room being an everywhere is certainly paradoxical, as “one little room” by nature is a contained space. However, this further confirms that the “everywhere” is referring more to temporal endurance than spatial vastness, as perpetuity is ultimately Donne’s main goal in this poem.

Another crucial point worth reiterating is how the lovers’ mutuality enabled both ecstasy and endurance. Line 19 confirms that “whatever dies was not mixed equally;” here, Donne further emphasizes that it was the equal relationship between the lovers that allowed their entrance into a space of perpetuity. This is because the reciprocity of their initial gaze allows them to fuse and exit their bodies in the first place. Ultimately, in both “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow,” visibility and visuality enables ecstasy which consists of the lovers exiting their bodies and entering into a new space. In “The Ecstasy,” this space was the eye of the external onlookers, who witnessed the We’s lover and reproduce it in their own lives, carrying out the We’s legacy and guaranteeing it endurance. In “The Good-Morrow,” the lovers enter into a new conjoined body, one that exists in a space “without sharp North, without declining West” (18).

This space is part of the world but does not participate in the world as it is exempt from rules of earthly time, thus also guaranteeing the lovers perpetuity. Donne's emphasis on spatiality is very important to keep in mind when we read "A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window" and notice the ways in which that poem differs dramatically from this one. The mutuality of the lovers' relationship in "The Good-Morrow" is also crucial in comparing it to "A Valediction" as the lack of mutuality in "A Valediction" is what ultimately leads to the speaker's failure to achieve endurance.

Chapter 3: “A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window”

The premise of “A Valediction: Of My Name in the Window” differs greatly from “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow” because in “A Valediction,” the speaker is dead and therefore cannot physically be with his beloved. So, he fashions what I am calling the “name-as-presence” construct: he carves his name into a reflective pane of glass so that every time his beloved looks into it and sees her reflection, she sees his name superimposed on her and they are together in her mind’s eye. Thus, the name-as-presence construct is a metaphorical solution to a geographic problem; it allows the speaker to remain attached to his beloved wherever she may go. It is also an example of ecstasy as it means the speaker exists outside of his body. He is essentially split into two parts: his physical body in the grave, and his presence in the glass.

At first glance, “A Valediction” seems like an explicit and straightforward instance of ecstasy, perhaps even more explicit than in “The Ecstasy” and “The Good-Morrow” because the speaker’s ecstasy is the premise of the poem. However, as the poem unfolds, it quickly becomes clear that ecstasy is treated differently as the speaker actually exists in *many* places outside of his body. He is not just inside of the glass; he constantly amends the metaphor so that he is inside many agents of the poem and is constantly moving around. While it’s obvious that the speaker seeks to build a relationship with the beloved that will allow him to endure despite his death, it’s unclear why he feels the need to move around to accomplish this. In this chapter I will demonstrate how the speaker continually pivots within the metaphor because he ultimately seeks to embed himself inside the beloved’s mind, heart, and body. This will allow him to move around with the beloved wherever she may go; it will fulfill their relationship *and* grant the speaker endurance. This pivoting is also necessary because the beloved does not want him to

remain with her: unlike the ecstatic union of the other poems, the name-as presence construct is not mutual or consensual.

Although the speaker's constant amendment of the construct is supposed to keep the beloved trapped inside, it in fact opens the door for the beloved to reclaim her agency and amend the metaphor herself, inviting another man in. Ultimately, the speaker's failure to enter into the beloved confirms two crucial patterns presented by "The Ecstasy" and "The Good-Morrow." Firstly, according to Donne's formulation of ecstatic intimacy, a successful execution of ecstasy constitutes a separation from oneself and admittance into another space: a space that exists outside earthly rules of time and thus allows the lovers endurance. This space of intimacy is something that must be created by the lovers working together in a mutual and equal way; for Donne, ecstasy not only involves exiting your body, but entering into a new space with your lover. The speaker cannot enter into this new space if his lover refuses to create it and enter into it herself.

Stanza two inaugurates the central drama of the poem, which is the speaker's claim that, via the glass, he and his beloved are perpetually tethered: "Here you see me, and I am you" (12). The speaker is able to make this claim through the terms of name-as-presence construct, which are explained in stanza one. Importantly, the ambiguity in the initial description of the construct already indicates how the speaker continually moves around, occupying different positions within the metaphor. Donne's language explicitly yokes the speaker, the beloved, the glass, and the carving instrument by describing how the roles they perform are very similar:

My name engrav'd herein
 Doth contribute my firmness to this glass,
 Which ever since that charm hath been
 As hard as that which grav'd it was.
 Thine eye will give it price enough to mock
 The diamonds of either rock. (1-6)

In “as hard as that” (4), the “that” simultaneously refers to the carving instrument, the speaker’s name, and the beloved’s eye, which all act upon the glass in similar ways. The carving instrument is “hard” because it is able to pierce the glass. The double use of “firmness” in line 2 indicates not only the physical mark (the image of his name) the speaker has left on the glass with the carving instrument, but how his name endows a sense of value to the glass. Similarly, by looking at the name, the beloved attributes to it both the value and solidity of a diamond. The beloved’s gaze becomes an instrument in itself, modifying “that charm” to include her gaze as well as the image of the name and the carving instrument. The speaker is physically connected to the carving instrument as he uses it as a physical and metaphorical vehicle to transfer his presence, and the beloved’s gaze is an instrument itself, thus intimately tying the speaker, the carver, the glass, and the beloved together in their shared role. There are explicitly sexual connotations to this metaphor as the reflective nature of the glass also figures the beloved herself as the glass, which the speaker aims to penetrate. Barbara Estrin affirms this idea when she explains how

The diamond needle penetrates the glass to make it equal to [the speaker.] In its firmness, the needle is an extension of the lover; in its shining it is an extension of the glass. The connecting needle is a link and a parallel for all the things connected- window and lover. Since the glass has been acted upon by the needle, it becomes the lover. (348)¹²

Estrin’s analysis upholds my interpretation above, which is that the beloved is both the glass and the carving instrument, and the speaker is the carving instrument himself. Thus, the speaker does not only exist in the glass via the image of his name, but also in the carving instrument, and the beloved’s gaze which is figured as an analogous carving instrument. The ambiguous use of

¹² Estrin, Barbara, “Framing and Imagining the You: Donne’s ‘A Valediction: of my Name in the Window’ and ‘Elegy: Change.’” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 1988, 345-362.

pronouns in “Here you see me, and I am you” (12), reflects how the “me,” “I,” and “you,” become confused as the speaker continually moves in between them, occupying each of them at different times. At this point, it is clear that the speaker is not satisfied having his presence reside only in the glass; he also wants to be in the carving instrument and in the beloved’s eye.

Not only does the speaker change location in the metaphor, he also changes the signification of his name. He does this in a somewhat arbitrary manner, desperately manipulating the metaphor and trying different formulations to see what will “work.” However, it is unclear what the metaphor “working” will look like as his ultimate goal remains ambiguous- there’s little indication as to where he is trying to end up, only that the previous locations of glass, carving instrument, beloved’s eye, etc are insufficient. The speaker proposes,

Or think this ragged bony name to be
My ruinous anatomy

Then, as all my souls be
Emparadis’d in you (in whom alone
I understand, and grow, and see), (23-27)

Here, the speaker asserts that his name represents both his body and his soul. These lines provide crucial insight into his ultimate motivation. When the speaker claims that “all my souls be / emparadis’d in you,” he expresses his truest desire: to be inside his lover- not only in her eye, but her mind, heart, and body. He has spread himself thin in occupying so many different places in the metaphor, but ultimately aims to gather these pieces together and ingrain, or “emparadis” them within the beloved. This is confirmed later in the poem when he expresses his desire for the beloved to “repair/ And recompact my scatter’d body so / As all the virtuous powers which are / Fix’d in the stars are said to flow” (32-35). This idea of “recompacting” is key; the speaker aims to insert the pieces of himself into his lover so he may enter her. Although the image of his name is already in her eye through the glass-mirror, he wants it to be in her heart and mind as well.

This way, no matter where she may travel, he can always move around with her. This will fulfill their relationship as well as granting him endurance. Just as the quasi-spiritual “virtuous powers” are “fix’d in the stars” and the image of his name is ingrained in the glass, the speaker desires for the whole of him to be ingrained in his lover.

However, of course, if the speaker was successful in this pursuit to embed himself in the beloved’s heart and mind then he wouldn’t need to spread himself so thin in the first place. It quickly becomes clear that their relationship is not mutual or equal; the beloved is resisting him because she is being held in the metaphor against her will. This is confirmed by lines 25-27: Then, as all my souls be / Emparadis’d in you (in whom alone / I understand, and grow, and see). This is not a statement of love or respect; rather, it’s one of exclusive legibility and possession. Not only does the speaker demand that she understands his name in a certain way, but he claims that he is the only one who will ever understand her. He uses this idea of legibility to trap her. In “The Ecstasy,” the legibility of the We’s intimacy is what enabled ecstasy and immortality to occur via the gaze of the external onlooker. In “A Valediction,” the theme of legibility is used quite differently as it reveals and confirms that the lovers’ relationship is not equal or consensual.

One of the many peculiar aspects of this poem is that the speaker is fully aware that the relationship is unequal; in his anxious fantasy, the beloved is constantly looking for ways to escape. The speaker imagines her falling in love with another man and attempting to replace him, a sacrilege equal to flinging open his coffin¹³: “When thy inconsiderate hand / Flings ope this casement with my trembling name” (43-44). He also imagines the beloved reading love letters written by another man:

And when thy melted maid,

¹³ The implication here is that by trying to escape the name-as-presence construct, the beloved is committing an act of betrayal akin to flinging upon the speaker’s coffin and desecrating his dead body. This is an especially interesting idea when put in conversation with “The Flea,” another poem in *Songs and Sonnets*.

Corrupted by thy lover's gold- and page,
 His letter at thy pillow'th laid
 Disputed it, and tam'd thy rage,
 And thou beginn'st to thaw towards him for this (49-53).

These passages reinforce the possessive, controlling tone of the speaker and provide more context to why the beloved is seeking to escape him. Moreover, they highlight that the speaker is changing the metaphor so frequently because the beloved is continually resisting his efforts; he is trying to find a version of the metaphor that will allow him to successfully embed himself in the beloved, but she resists him at every turn.

Paradoxically, the speaker's continual changing of the metaphor weakens it because it does not signify any specific thing anymore. Despite the speaker's insistence on the metaphor's "firmness," (2) "hardness," (4), "all-confessing" and "through-shine" (8) nature, the metaphor is not strong or clear; it is quite fluid and murky because neither the beloved, the speaker, or Donne's audience knows what, exactly, the name is referring to at this point. Crucially, this allows the beloved to step in and reclaim her agency by changing the metaphor herself. The beloved commits her act of rebellion against the name-as-presence construct by taking advantage of the fluidity and writing another man's name over the speaker's: "And if this treason go / T' an overt act, and that thou write again" (55-56). It is implied that she is able to write another man's name because, in trying to secure his endurance, he has provided a widow, or "casement," (44) into a new possibility: the possibility of her reclaiming her romantic agency through a seizing of authorial agency.

Moreover, the way the speaker treats the rules of time and space crucially aligns with and differs from the speakers in "The Ecstasy" and "The Good-Morrow." One of the reasons that the speaker continually changes the metaphor is to avoid rules of earthly time, space, and the logic of the poem itself. Right before the speaker makes his famous "I am you" claim, he asserts that "All

such rules love's magic can undo" (11). While this line clearly references the "I am you" claim, which is a bold development in the poem and requires justification, it also references the general sense of agency the speaker bestows upon himself to change the metaphor in ways that will secure his own endurance. In "A Valediction," the speaker breaks the rules of time by attempting immortality through embedding himself in his beloved. Moreover, he breaks the rules of space by occupying multiple different spaces at a time: the glass, the carving instrument, the beloved's eye, etc. And of course, he breaks the rules of the poem itself by continuing to undermine and rewrite his own metaphor. The speakers in "The Ecstasy" and "The Good-Morrow" broke the rules of earthly space and time as well; in "The Good-Morrow," the lovers guaranteed their endurance by using ecstasy to craft an insular space that wasn't beholden to the rules of earthly time. In "The Ecstasy," the lovers entered into the eyes, minds, and hearts of the external onlookers and this granted them endurance. Both these instances were facilitated by ecstasy; in "A Valediction," the speaker experiences ecstasy, breaks the rules of time and space, but is ultimately unsuccessful in his conquest to "break into her." The reason that the poem offers up for this failure, as well as the reason that is highlighted when all three poems are put in conversation, is that their relationship was not based on mutual love and trust. The speaker in "A Valediction" tries to enter into his beloved in order to achieve endurance, but she resists him because she is not in love with him. Thus, the speaker's attempt at embedding fails, and he fails to achieve endurance like the other lovers. This is confirmed by the final stanza of the poem, which describes the speaker as close to death:

Near death inflicts this lethargy,
 And this I murmur in my sleep.
 Impute this idle talk to that I go,
 For dying men talk often so. (63-66)

The speaker is clearly dying here, and confesses his failure as begs the audience to dismiss all his previous claims, characterizing them as merely the “idle talk” of a “dying man.” The speaker did ultimately achieve ecstasy, as the name-as-presence construct allowed him to exit his body, but since he failed to enter into the new space of his beloved’s heart and mind, he did not achieve ecstasy.

It is helpful to think about the speaker’s failure in “A Valediction” in terms of the success of the “little room an everywhere” in “The Good-Morrow.” In “The Good-Morrow,” the lovers exited their body and entered into a new space. This space was not an amorphous void; it was a specific place created by Donne’s poetry. However, it was also created by the lovers themselves because they built the “little room” of their intimacy together when they both gazed into each other’s eyes. They exited not only their bodies but the earthly world which would have held them to the rules of time, and that is what made their little room a temporal “everywhere” and guaranteed them endurance. In “A Valediction,” the speaker experienced ecstasy through the name-as-presence construct but his beloved did not experience ecstasy nor did she consent to being implicated in the construct. Because he unfairly trapped her in this bind of exclusivity, the beloved continually resists him as he tries to embed himself not only in her eye, but her mind, heart, and body, as well. Thus he cannot create the “little room” of his intimacy because the room requires mutuality and reciprocity between the lovers to exist. This is ultimately why he fails to achieve endurance, as indicated by the final stanza of the poem.

Conclusion

Though visuality and visibility are the strings that tie these three poems together, the crucial way in which they diverge speaks to one of Donne's overarching interests in *Songs and Sonnets*: the magic of poetry to create spaces which are not bound by earthly rules of time. Indeed, according to Philip Sidney in his *Defense of Poesy*: "the poet is a maker" (8), and Donne uses his skills as a maker to create spaces of intimacy that are simultaneously bounded: limited exclusively to the speaker and his lover, and boundless: stretching endlessly through time so that the speaker and his lover will never die. However, although these spaces are under Donne's control, they are not lawless, and Donne prescribes very specific rules in order to enter them. As we see in a comparison of "The Ecstasy," "The Good-Morrow," and "A Valediction," Donne demands that the lovers' relationship must be mutual and equal in order to enter this immortal space. This exploration of spatiality is why ecstasy is a unique and helpful lens to analyze the ways in which Donne continually grants his speakers romantic endurance. Ecstasy allows the speaker to exit out of his body and enter into this new world fashioned within the poem by Donne.

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