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“‘TWAS OF MY MIND, SEIZING THEE”

Contentless Contagion and the Creation of Meaning in the Love Poetry
of John Donne

by
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A Fever

O do not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,
That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember, thou wast one.

But yet thou canst not die, I know;
To leave this world behind is death,
But when thou from this world wilt go,
The whole world vapours with thy breath.

Or if, when thou, the world's soul, goest,
It stay, 'tis but thy carcass then,
The fairest woman, but thy ghost,
But corrupt worms, the worthiest men.

O wrangling schools, that search what fire
Shall burn this world, had none the wit
Unto this knowledge to aspire,
That this her fever might be it?

And yet she cannot waste by this,
Nor long bear this torturing wrong,
For much corruption needful is
To fuel such a fever long.

These burning fits but meteors be,
Whose matter in thee is soon spent.
Thy beauty, and all parts, which are thee,
Are unchangeable firmament.

Yet 'twas of my mind, seizing thee,
Though it in thee cannot persevere.
For I had rather owner be
Of thee one hour, than all else ever.

John Donne

Introduction: What I Am Not Doing and Why

Very early on in the development of this project, I ran into a former professor of mine walking down the pathway to our Humanities building. He was on sabbatical for the year, only on campus to see a talk that had been given that afternoon, and as such, I stopped to catch up, happy to chat with him while I could. Inevitably, questions turned to the thesis writing process, and he asked about my intended topic. At the time, I had hoped to undertake an examination of the language of contagious illness in the love poetry of both John Donne and William Shakespeare-- though I have since had to jettison Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. I was hoping to analyze the poetry's potential for community building and boundary crossings between the poetic and the "real" world. The professor was slightly taken aback. Surely, he said, in an examination of contagion and community, I would have to look at Donne's sermons, at his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, which deal directly with questions of illness and decay and which come equipped with the model of a religious communion and community. Surely, he thought, I would want to study Shakespeare's plays, which were performed in an environment in which disease loomed over them, as the theatres which were closed down in times of plague over public health concerns could confirm. Surely, these were the obvious places to start.

Retrospectively, I can see why they might be the obvious places to start for some projects regarding illness in literature. Philip Seargeant's analysis of the textual articulation of the experience of epidemic disease in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature, for example, uses both plays and sermons as sources.¹ He contends that the multifaceted way in which subjects

¹ Philip Seargeant, "Discursive Diversity in the Textual Articulation of Epidemic Disease in Early Modern England," *Language and Literature* 16, no. 4 (2007): 323-344, doi: [10.1177/0963947007082990](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947007082990).

understood the plague and its origins both caused and reflected the disorder associated with living through plague times, and posits disease as both a cause and topic of literary production for preachers, playwrights, and pamphleteers. However, poets are notably missing from that list. Poets were apparently engaged in some different practice, in Seargeant's eyes. From the beginning, I intuitively agreed, particularly with regard to Donne's poetry.

Donne's interest in disease insofar as his love poetry is concerned does not involve mimetic descriptions of illnesses or their symptoms. As far as I can tell, he is not interested in representing illness particularly well at all, and yet, he insists upon referencing it. In an article contextualizing Donne's medical knowledge within the Renaissance understanding of medicine at large, Don Cameron Allen remarks upon the oddity of Donne's penchant for referencing them. "It seems curious that Donne," Allen writes, "who was less of a sick man than Herbert and less of a physician than Vaughan, should be a more habitual employer of medical allusions than they."² Allen attributes these allusions to a pride of knowledge on Donne's part, a desire to show off that which he had learned, but specifically in the case of illness, this feels like a flimsy justification, particularly given that as Allen himself states, "Donne's knowledge of disease is seldom as exact or as specific as his knowledge of anatomy and physiology."³ Pride of knowledge can hardly be the main justification if one is then going to proceed not to display said knowledge. Instead, what this suggests is that Donne is interested in illness for a different reason, for its structure, for the concept of disease rather than the reality of it, and it is for this reason that I have resisted the narratives of scholars such as Ernest Gilman,⁴ who attempt to inscribe

² Don Cameron Allen, "John Donne's Knowledge of Renaissance Medicine," in *Essential Articles: John Donne's Poetry*, ed. John R. Roberts (Hamden: Archon Books, 1975), 106.

³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴ Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Donne's poetry into the genre of plague literature from which it was left out by Seargeant.

Donne's sermons I will concede, perhaps even his religious poetry, but the way he employs illness in the love poems is distinctly un-real, perhaps even ahistorical. Seargeant, I believe, was right to leave it out. But then the question remains, what is one to do with it?

It is that question which I have endeavoured to answer by means of this project. Chapter One establishes the essential qualities of illness as Donne depicts them in his love poetry, focusing in on one poem in particular: "A Fever." Over the course of a close reading of the poem, I attempt to make legible Donne's consideration of the diegetic reality of illness within the poem and the structural possibilities it opens up outside itself through a heavy reliance upon apostrophe. I consider the ways in which illness allows Donne to connect rather than sever relationships between the various parties involved in the text, paying specific attention to the contact it facilitates between the beloved and the reader and the ways in which relationships in the poem are mutually constitutive and transferential rather than unidirectional.

Chapter Two begins to examine illness in a more allusive form, tackling poems which explicitly invoke illness as a metaphorical tool as well as those which implicitly feature structures of contagion but lack any explicit vocabulary of illness. In this chapter, I seek to explore the ways in which illness is embedded in language itself as Donne employs it, with all communication framed as a form of contagion and contamination. Chapter Three looks to Donne's incorporation of death into the paradigm of illness, examining its potential as a subset of illness rather than a necessarily opposing force. In the process, I also investigate the origins of the contagious community and the ways in which the antisocial behavior of spreading disease can be read as that which creates the possibility of any society at all. And finally, Chapter Four

examines the ways in which critics of Donne's love poetry have enacted both the cyclical paradigm of illness he employs in the poems themselves and embodied the contentless contagion enabled by the very communication of communication at stake in Donne's work.

My work is narrow insofar as it looks at only a small selection of poems, mostly divorced from the cultural context which created them. However, it attempts to access a fundamental quality of communicability shared by both language and illness. The substitutability and identification involved in Donne's love poetry provide a unique opportunity for Donne to establish contagion and communicability as those which constitute both one's relationships to the external world and to one's self. As such, this project examines the way in which Donne was able to make use of disease in order to establish, test, and override the boundaries between life and death, reader and writer, and outside and inside of the poem. Illness does more work for Donne than simply indexing what one might call reality. In these poems, he uses it to examine the origins of poetry itself.

I

The Beloved, The Fever, and Death: The Allies and Adversaries of John
Donne in “A Fever”

In an examination of the language of contagious illness in the love poetry of John Donne, it makes a great deal of sense to begin with his poem titled “A Fever,” a work which actually tackles the theme of illness as well as the metaphorical resonance. However, this poem does more than mimetically represent illness in verse. In fact, one might argue that it does not really do *that* at all. Instead, “A Fever” uses its opening apostrophic gesture to mirror the liminal space of illness, carving out a poetic space that is both sincere and artificial. In bringing this duality to light, Donne is able to establish a relationship with both the reader and the beloved through the second person address while avoiding the designation of any party as more or less “real” than the others. Over the course of the poem, as a function of shifting forms of address, Donne is able to enact the effects of the fever upon both the beloved and the reader in order to create a community of the infected and thus bolster the continued identity and existence of all parties involved. Donne thus establishes contagion as a social rather than an antisocial behavior, taking advantage of its usefulness for community building rather than destruction and emphasizing the potential of its continuity and reiterability as a tool to act against the finality of death. With this poem, Donne reconfigures the very relationship between life and death through a negotiation of illness as a structure, revealing its structure in the creation of meaning and poetry itself.

“A Fever” begins-- in contrast to the antagonistic “Busy old fool!” of “The Sun Rising”⁵ and the curmudgeonly “For God’s sake hold your tongue...” of “The Canonization”⁶-- with what seems to be an almost startling expression of sincerity, as the vulnerability displayed strays so strongly from the teasing voice of so many of Donne’s love poems. With a vocative “O,” Donne attempts to circumvent language in order to communicate through semantic emptiness, through pure emotionality, through that which Jonathan Culler designates “the pure O of undifferentiated voicing.”⁷ The sound is both full of meaning as a function of this unguarded openness and devoid of it because of its linguistic sparsity, a duality which Donne carries through the entirety of the stanza, writing:

O do not die, for I shall hate
 All women so, when thou art gone,
 That thee I shall not celebrate,
 When I remember, thou wast one.⁸

The vocative O is in itself notable, but perhaps more notable is the solemn tone taken towards death by Donne in this stanza. Here, Donne displays none of the nonchalant flirtatiousness exhibited in “The Legacy,” where he uses death as a means of displaying his devotion. He begins that poem with the following: “When I died last, and dear I die / As often as from thee I go...”⁹ Death is not finite but repetitive, not so much an end as an edge, a marker between two states

⁵ John Donne, “The Sun Rising,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 6.

⁶ John Donne, “The Canonization,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 9.

⁷ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 142.

⁸ John Donne, “A Fever,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 14.

⁹ John Donne, “The Legacy,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 13.

which can be inhabited and vacated freely. However, the posthumous speech allowed to the narrator in “The Legacy” is by no means implied to be a possibility for the beloved in “A Fever,” and the changed stakes of the world thus lend weight to Donne’s imperative, which, as it straddles the line between coaxing request and unreasonable demand, displays an unusually complicated power dynamic.

A power imbalance is inherent in the form of the imperative, as commands typically come from a place of power, given by an authority figure to a subordinate, and as such, Donne’s opening command might be taken as an unnecessarily cruel thing to say to an ailing woman. Though she is poetically animated by Donne’s apostrophe, presumably so she might fulfill his commands, what he asks of her is ultimately out of the control of both parties. Jonathan Culler claims that the point of apostrophe is usually to “will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire.”¹⁰ And yet, the woman’s death is not up to her. He appears to apostrophize the wrong force in this situation, as she can no more refuse to die than he can refuse to let her do so. The threat that follows in the rest of the stanza is thus almost unfair, an unjust penalty for something the beloved cannot help, and yet, with the callousness of the command undermined by the sincerity of the vocative “O,” Donne begins the poem by painting himself as a tender and tyrannical lover in turns. However, following the logic of the threat all the way through to its conclusion, the consequence he promises is revealed to be the emptiest of threats.

Do not die, he warns, or else I will stop loving you. If she dies, Donne claims that he will hate the entirety of her sex, including her, in a way that should free him from the pain of her

¹⁰ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 139.

absence. If he hates her, then he has no reason to be saddened by her death. The difficulty, for Donne, is that if he has no reason to be saddened by her death, then he has no reason to hate all women, and in turn no reason to hate her, at which point he is returned to his default position as her lover, ending the stanza just as he began it. If she dies, his will be an unavoidable grief, and the force and potential cruelty of the threat is lost in this realization. The threat is no more than a rationalization, an attempt to use logic in order to evade the inexorable pain that Donne's narrator knows he will face. Just like the opening vocative, the stanza fills and empties itself, packed with emotion by its contents and drained by its form.

The same might be said of the beloved under the jurisdiction of the apostrophe, which comes to serve as both the most direct and indirect form of address in the poem, granting and removing agency from the beloved in one motion. Describing the power of apostrophe, Barbara Johnson claims, "The fact that apostrophe allows one to animate the inanimate, the dead, or the absent implies that whenever a being is apostrophized, it is thereby automatically animated, anthropomorphized, 'person-ified.'"¹¹ Working within this model, one would expect Donne's address of the woman to bring her to life, to revive, resuscitate, or otherwise heal her. However, the address seems instead to give power to the fever, underscoring human helplessness in the face of disease by asking her to accomplish something impossible to guarantee and rendering her less conscious or less alive than she was before she was animated. Before there was nothing-- no woman, no fever, no death. But after the apostrophe, she is simultaneously brought to and taken from life. This ambiguous threshold state of the beloved brought about through her illness bears directly on an ambiguity implicit in the nature of poetic address itself: the essential animating

¹¹ Barbara Johnson, "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 34, www.jstor.org/stable/464649.

quality of apostrophe means that she is given personhood, but the presupposition that what is being animated is not originally animate takes it from her. The compromised state of her personhood is further borne out by her ambiguous position as both subject and object in the opening stanza, particularly in the concluding lines. The second person address of the verbs grants her agency and subjectivity, but the construction of the concluding line undermines that as “thou wast one” is formed as the direct object of the verb “remember.” Even in her agency, even while she is the subject of the verb “wast,” the beloved is objectified. In this way, the apostrophe serves to further complicate the power dynamic in the poem. It not only renders the beloved inert but also opens up the possibility of another addressee lurking in the poetry, of a triangulated communication directed at another entity: the fever.

Donne does not apostrophize the fever in a way that brings it under his poetic control as he does with the beloved, but rather treats it as an equal, as a rival poet of sorts, striving towards his same goal of possessing the woman in question. The beloved’s lack of response to the apostrophe is thus not necessarily a failure on the part of the device but a misrepresentative metric with regard to measuring its success in animating her, for in choosing to apostrophize the woman rather than the fever, Donne designates the fever as the listener in the three-way relationship, a fact that becomes increasingly evident as the poem progresses. Comparing apostrophe to Northrop Frye’s model of the lyric, in which the lyric poet pretends to address nature while in actuality addressing an audience, Jonathan Culler claims that apostrophes are “invocations... which turn away from empirical listeners by addressing natural objects, artifacts,

or abstractions.”¹² The fever, paradoxically, is the listener from whom Donne turns away, his true addressee, possessing the power to fulfill Donne’s command that his beloved lacks.

As the poem progresses, Donne continues negotiating his relationship with both the fever and the beloved, manipulating her and her personhood in order to act against the fever. By oscillating between second and third person pronouns, Donne is able to pull her closer to him and push her away, moving her from animate to inanimate and back again, and making her more and less present, perhaps even more and less real, at his will. What Donne does not do, however, is associate either the second or the third person definitively with proximity or distance, presence or absence, or reality or fictiveness, instead imbuing both persons with ambiguity.

The beloved’s presence in the second person pronouns which are assigned to her through apostrophe is palpable, though even this is accomplished through both upholding and subverting expectations surrounding apostrophe. In Barbara Johnson’s explanation, apostrophe serves as “a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.”¹³ The beloved in the poem is not active in her silence in the same way that the woman in “The Flea” is active as she crushes the parasite and thus proves Donne’s point about the triviality of sexual relations, nor is she active in the way that the beloved is active in “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” as that woman essentially performs a strip-tease in anticipation of physical intimacy. The reader knows of the actions of these women based on an assessment of Donne’s responses. By contrast, the beloved in “A Fever” is not active in her silence but by means of her silence. As the apostrophe creates the inert figure it

¹² Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 138.

¹³ Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 30, www.jstor.org/stable/464649.

describes, silence becomes her actual activity. In the case of the beloveds in “The Flea” and “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” they are not actually silent. That is merely a limitation of the poetic form. They are moving, speaking, challenging Donne, but the reader is left to piece together their actions as though he or she were listening to only one side of a telephone conversation. In “A Fever,” the reader has access to both sides of this one sided conversation as he or she listens to a man talk to himself while pretending someone else can hear him. The apostrophized silence is a potent moment of tangibility for the beloved in which her absence becomes her presence, and thus the direct address through the second person pronoun might be seen as the most direct form of contact.

The third person pronoun appears to leave her farthest away from Donne, as it is during such pronominal uses that the fever is raging hardest, when Donne gives up on apostrophe and leaves her to languish in her illness insensibly. There is no use speaking to her, then, only of her. By the time of the pronominal switch in the fourth stanza from second to third person, she is reduced to a mere object, for as Emile Benveniste explains, “‘Person’ belongs only to I/you and is lacking in he.”¹⁴ The opening line of stanza five, in which Donne asserts that “she cannot waste by this” echoes the first line of the second stanza, in which Donne states, “thou canst not die...” The difference is that in the opening line of the second stanza, Donne is kept company by the figure of the beloved, inanimate though she may be. The third person pronoun in stanza five leaves Donne alone with his thoughts, or possibly, alone with the reader. This may be read as the moment in which the fever has the strongest grasp on her, the moment in which she is closest to losing her battle with the fever-- or when Donne is closest to losing his battle with the fever.

¹⁴ Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 217.

And yet, the moments in which Donne writes about her in the third person are also the moments in which she is most effectively folded into his poetic world, the moments in which she is one of his characters rather than a human being with thousands of uncontrollable variables dictating her existence. The more fictional she becomes the more easily identifiable she becomes, locatable as a character on the page as opposed to existing in the shadowy realm of deictic demonstratives. Benveniste writes, “There is no ‘object’ definable as *I* to which these instances can refer in identical fashion. Each *I* has its own reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such.”¹⁵ The *I*/*you* pronouns are forever shifting and as such impossible to grasp. The reality of the pronoun changes every time it is used. By contrast, *he*/*she* pronouns are reliably referential. The ‘object’ to which they refer is fixed and therefore tangible. In that sense, the beloved is therefore also at her *closest* to Donne in such instances of the third person pronoun because of her clarity and stationariness.

With these instances of oscillation and ambiguity, Donne thus prepares his reader for the meta-turn in which he recasts the drama in all its instability as an embodiment of the fever of poetic creation itself, as with the seventh and final stanza of the poem, Donne’s relationship with the beloved is motivated most clearly through an identification with the fever. The power dynamics of this poem are constantly shifting, but so are the contests, as it initially appears to position the beloved as an adversary to Donne, someone to whom he can give commands and against whom he can make threats. In light of the deflation of the threat in the first stanza and the deanimating function of the apostrophe, the beloved is revealed as more of a prop than an adversary, and focus shifts to the fever as the opponent at hand. However, with the final stanza,

¹⁵ Ibid., 218.

Donne changes the perspective again, gesturing towards his similarity to the fever rather than their difference, establishing a common motivation. He writes:

Yet 'twas of my mind, seizing thee,
 Though it in thee cannot persevere.
 For I had rather owner be
 Of thee one hour, than all else ever.¹⁶

In his description of the fever “seizing” the beloved, Donne evokes his own treatment of the woman. Seizing and releasing, drawing her close and then pushing her away, his manipulation of the beloved’s pronouns have been an enactment of the “burning fits” of the fever described in stanza six all along-- the establishment of Donne’s own poetic fever to be transmitted-- and a point of contagious contact between Donne and the reader.

The pronominal confusion between reader and beloved is a side effect of the utilization of apostrophe, a device which allows Donne to heighten both the sincerity and the artificiality of his emotions, making it explicit that the poem is a construction as opposed to reality while also claiming to be able to convey reality into that fictive world, for the more apparent the artificiality becomes, the less artificial the apostrophe becomes. While it would be out of place in common speech, it is at home within the limits of poetry, not artificial at all but instead native to the environment. Thus, Donne draws the poetic world and the world external to it together, collapsing them into one in the space of the second person address. This collapse, this contact, is evident early in the poem not as contact at all but as distance, as the poem begins with a vocative O and a command not to die. There is no pronoun there, second person or otherwise, to help

¹⁶ John Donne, “A Fever,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 14.

situate the reader in the poetic world. Instead, the apostrophe seems to reach out to the reader's world and the reader is left defensively reassuring themselves that they were not in fact going to die, not imminently, at least. The reader's activity and vitality is contrasted against the beloved's insensibility as they push against each other, competing for space in the subsequent second person pronouns.

The tension between them is only exacerbated by the following stanza, in which it quickly becomes clear that Donne's speech is functioning on both a diegetic level and a metatextual level, as he writes:

But yet thou canst not die, I know;
 To leave this world behind is death,
 But when thou from this world wilt go,
 The whole world vapours with thy breath.¹⁷

As a poetic conceit, it establishes the beloved as the defining quality of the world. Her presence in it is essential for its existence. However, as a result of the ambiguity of the second person, the statement might also, and more accurately, be applied to the presence of the reader in the poetic world, acknowledging the reader's part in constituting the world and bringing its characters to life. When the reader leaves the poem, the poem is left lifeless and the poetic world evaporates. It is only through the act of reading, through a cooperative participation in the project of the poem, that the characters can be animated at all. Without the reader, they are only sketches of people, not detailed portraits. The world is but a "carcass" as Donne asserts in the next stanza, without the being that inhabits the second person. "The fairest woman" is but a "ghost."¹⁸ The traces are

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

there, but the vitality is lacking. And as such, when Donne turns back to the second person in the concluding stanza after several stanzas of third person address, it is not at all clear whether the body being “seized” belongs to the beloved or the reader. Being “seized” by another voice is exactly the experience of reading poetry, after all, and therein lies the explanation for the tension between making and unmaking that wracks this poem. The reader constitutes and vivifies the world of the poem but is also seized or dominated by it. The reader governs the writer and the writer governs the reader, a fact which Donne illustrates by means of his poetic fever.

Donne begins his poem with attempt to stave off the limits of his beloved’s existence, to delay the definitive end of her being at the hands of death, but he does not state exactly that he wants her to get well again. This is not necessarily the case. Instead, what he wants is to be the one who sickens her, who “seizes” her and whoever shares the second person space with her. Donne and the fever compete for space and access to the beloved just as the reader and beloved compete for space in the second person pronoun, for the poem’s creative power relies upon the constant inhabiting and evacuating of authorial and readerly positions. Donne and the fever are not competitors because they want different things for the beloved. They are competitors because they want the same thing in the same way, and only one can accomplish that at a time. Ultimately, Donne’s contest with the fever is one he both wins and loses as a function of his identification with the disease. In striving to outdo the fever, he is forced to adopt its structure, competing by likening himself and his methods of pursuit rather than bending it to his will.

Perhaps most significantly, however, the identification with the fever signals yet another shift in the contest in which Donne is engaged and compels the consideration of a third and final opponent, for while Donne and the fever compete with each other for possession of the beloved,

they work as a team against death's victory over her. Illness itself is set against the finality of death, as the poet maintains the beloved in perpetual creative oscillation between presence and absence, vitality and inertness, and sincerity and artificiality as a way to ward off any conclusive end to her being. The struggle between Donne and the fever can be viewed as a proxy war as they both contend against death. Donne's desire to outdo the fever, then, can be understood to have been motivated not by jealousy with regard to the fever's relationship with the beloved but by a desire to improve upon the fever's model in order to better his own chances against death, for in this poem, Donne repeatedly establishes time as the fever's weakness.

Donne's description of the fever's inability to "persevere" in the final stanza serves to impose a final temporal limit on the illness that was already introduced in the fifth stanza, in which Donne writes:

And yet she cannot waste by this,
 Nor long bear this torturing wrong,
 For much corruption needful is,
 To fuel such a fever long.¹⁹

As in the second stanza, Donne establishes the reasons that his beloved cannot die, though in this case, it is a matter of time rather than space. Previously the beloved could not die because her position in the world was essential to the world's existence and definition as a world. Now, she cannot die because the fever cannot persist in her, as she is not corrupt enough to continue providing it with material to burn. Within the logic of the poem, a temporal constraint is placed

¹⁹ Ibid.

on the fever by her goodness, and the brevity of her fever provokes consideration of the permanence of death as that which makes them different.

Though it is almost always a retroactive distinction in real life, the feature that marks being ill and dying as different states is the replicability of the former, the fact that one ends in recovery (and thus vulnerability to repetition) and the other ends in death (permanent stasis). In this model, time is the ultimate enemy of the fever regardless, as the fever must relinquish the beloved in both cases, either leaving her body because she has recovered or because she grows cold in death. And yet, the potential for reinfection inheres in the state of recovery, as demonstrated in the inescapable cycle set up in the very first stanza wherein Donne's recovery from his sorrow over the death of the beloved only sets him up to be stricken with that same sorrow once more. Just as in his possession and dispossession of the beloved through the oscillation between second and third person pronouns, Donne incorporates the shifting into the structure of the fever. The recovery is part of the illness, and in this way, it is unshakeable. Over the course of the poem's plot, the fever attacks and recedes several times, as Donne interrupts the trajectory of recovery and decline with interjections. "But yet," begins the second stanza. "Or if" is the start of the third. "And yet" stands at the top of the fifth stanza, and a final "yet" initiates the seventh.²⁰ The contradiction of the fever in the form of adversative conjunctions becomes as characteristic of its progression as actual advancement.

Even the indefinite article assigned to the title of the poem testifies to this fever's insignificance amongst the many, past and future. This is not "the fever" but "a fever." The fever will not kill his beloved. It cannot kill his beloved, because that would be a disruption of the

²⁰ Ibid.

cycle, that would mean that death has interfered with the fever, not that the fever has succeeded. Only death can kill his beloved, and Donne uses his poetic illness to exclude death in the way that the real illness cannot reliably do, inscribing his beloved into his own poetic temporality. He repositions the reader in the logical realm of poems such as “The Legacy,” which he had seemed to abandon with his opening treatment of death, as previously mentioned. Death in “A Fever” is disruptive and permanent. In “The Legacy” it is far more like illness. The oscillation between death and life implied in the opening lines of “The Legacy” is the same system Donne attributes to the fever in “A Fever” and the same system poetry itself can be said to employ. As Stanley Fish explains:

As objects themselves [words] do not survive the moment of speech; once they have been uttered or read and worked their effect on the reader-respondent’s mind, they die, except for the life they continue to live in that effect; and that life has nothing to do with their relationship to things and concepts in the phenomenal world and everything to do with the interior motion they induce in concert with other similarly strategical words.²¹

For Fish, poetry and writing do not create immortality but on the contrary, radical mortality. The words die and are resurrected over and over again in a way that defies logical paradigms surrounding death, but nestles perfectly into the framework Donne builds in “A Fever” surrounding illness. The poetry and the fever are thus linked by their extreme terminability and repetition, blurring the lines between the illness as illness, illness as structure, and structure as structure.

²¹ Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 14.

In making illness out of language itself, Donne increases the potential for boundary crossing by means of poetry, making poetry a space in which life and death can be brought into contact and freely passed between, a space in which a device like apostrophe is able both to animate and kill off that which it addresses. Each boundary is crossed, even this biggest one, but then, most importantly for Donne, it is recrossed, and in this sense, the way that meaning is generated in Donne's poetry of this kind might be more Freudian than Fishian. Fish illuminates the way in which death can be constituted as a possibility for language, but he takes this transformation as irrevocable and complete for having passed through the death. In Donne's poems, the words pass through and come back, and it is in the back-and-forth that meaning is created. Fish puts power in the mind of the reader but denies it to the writer. For Donne, the power and the meaning come from the place between writer and reader, relationally, even transferentially determined as Freud describes the phenomenon.

While treating a patient to whom he gives the name Dora, Freud makes note of a psychological phenomenon known as transference, in which feelings for or about one person are shifted onto the physician. In Dora's case, as she deals with (or rather, is unable to deal with) complicated feelings about a man named Herr K.-- who has made romantic proposals towards her--, about that man's wife, and about her own father, Freud claims that she shifts those feelings onto him. When she recounts a dream to him, later adding the detail of the presence of cigar smoke, Freud believes that the smoke indicates his implication. He attributes Dora's coy behavior in treatment to a flirtatious desire for romantic engagement with him. As he explains, "[A] whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as

applying to the person of the physician at the present moment.”²² He describes the same temporal circumvention employed by Donne in “A Fever.” As a result of transference, that which has happened to Dora has not “happened” to her at all. It is *happening* to her even as he treats her.

Freud continues:

[T]he patient’s condition shows no noticeable alteration even though considerable progress has been made with the work of analysis... It is true that the symptoms do not disappear while the work is proceeding; but they disappear a little while later, when the relations between patient and physician have been dissolved.²³

So long as Freud treats Dora, she will continue to act out the feelings and experiences which brought her to him in the first place. However, if she had seen her treatment through to completion, she would have been freed from the symptoms which troubled her upon its conclusion and the conclusion of her relationship with Freud, and that is the principle upon which Donne relies. So long as he has a relationship with the beloved, the symptoms of the fever which keep her alive will be perpetuated. The same turn away from the apostrophic addressee and towards a true addressee that can be seen as Donne addresses the fever through the beloved is the essential quality of transference, as Dora turns away from Freud, to whom she allegedly addresses her attentions, and towards Herr K. The openness of the second person pronoun in lyric is precisely where the apostrophe occurs and simultaneously, where the reader is always lurking, a doubling that gets at the structure of transference perhaps better than transference itself does. The relationship with the reader, with the analyst, ensures that there is something to be analyzed, as the transferential cohabitation of the same pronominal space is both a cause and a

²² Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Dora),” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 234.

²³ *Ibid.*

symptom of the beloved's poetic existence. One might even go so far as to suggest that Donne's transferential relationships raise the stakes which Freud set out, for in Freud's model, there is an outside to the relationship, there is a cure to be had. In Donne's model of illness and transferential constitution, the relationships are ongoing. The beloved will never get well, not really, and the reader will never shake off the writer. The shifting is repeated perpetually such that the parties turn away from each other again and again, only eventually to return to the positions in which they started, as Donne does in that opening stanza. The reader is relied upon to perpetuate the relationship and continue animating the poetry, but in exchange, the poetry helps constitute the reader as reader.

Implicating the reader as it does in the accomplishment of its eventual goal, "A Fever" goes beyond itself as poetry, a condition palpable even in the stanzas on the page. The uniqueness of the sincerity in the opening stanza already invites an uncanny sensation, as the second stanza would serve as a far more comfortable beginning, dealing with the more familiar traditionally Donnian theme of the all encompassing nature of the beloved. "She's all states, and all princes I,"²⁴ one cannot help but think when one reads its conceptual counterpart here: "The whole world vapours with thy breath." The second stanza also bears the marks of Donne's trademark logical rationalizations, as he persuades himself of his beloved's immortality just as he persuades the virginal beloved to yield to sexual temptation in "The Flea," with the logic of the poem bleeding into the reality of the poetic world. That which Donne "know[s]" in the second stanza is starkly contrasted against the uncertain feelings in the first which inhere in the pleading

²⁴ John Donne, "The Sun Rising," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 6.

vocative, and as a result, the poem almost seems to begin before it begins, with the first stanza existing as a kind of anticipated vestigial trace of poetry that is yet to come.

The poem similarly exceeds its bounds on the latter end, as Donne includes one too many syllables for the meter in the final line. The rest of the poem is written in iambic tetrameter, but in lines two and four of the final stanza, “persevere” and “ever” each add one too many beats. Where “e’er” might have fit the meter, “ever” causes it to overflow, spilling outside of the neat confines of poetry and into the wider world of language and speech, out of the world of the poetic beloved and into the world of the reader.

The centrality of apostrophe to this poem cannot be overstated, as the apostrophe as Donne uses it is the site of tension between knowledge and emotion, between Donne and the beloved, and between artificiality and reality. As a rhetorical device, the apostrophe is creative and destructive simultaneously, creating the poetic conditions necessary for the progression of the poem and emphasizing the artificiality and constructedness of those conditions. But the centrality of apostrophe runs deeper than this. Jonathan Culler claims that “[A]postrophe... makes its point by troping not on the meaning of a word but on the circuit or situation of communication itself.”²⁵ Apostrophe is not about what is communicated but about communication and communicability, just as the entirety of “A Fever” is about the simulation and transmission of the titular condition. Donne’s use of the opening apostrophe ensures that the moment the reader has entered the poem, the reader is concerned with and infected by the poetic fever that runs through it. Apostrophe allows Donne to expand his authorial reach beyond the beloved and beyond the fever into the extratextual world of the reader.

²⁵ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 135.

Collapsing the distinction between the fever as illness and the fever as poetry, Donne creates a network of relationships between parties that are all as real as the others. The distinction between the beloved as a poetic creation and the reader as a “real” being is erased by the fact that Donne manages to infect both reader and beloved with the same disease. According to Culler, “The apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces.”²⁶ Apostrophe, for Culler, opens up agentive possibilities everywhere as all forces have the potential to act regardless of their perceived ability to do so in the “real world.” In “A Fever,” Donne supports this claim as the truth, as through this poem, the writer, reader, and poetic beloved are shown to be different in degree rather than kind.

²⁶ Ibid., 139.

II

Liminal Spaces: Illness, the Text, and the Poetic Voice

Donne often praises or urges silence in his poetry. “The Triple Fool” blames his need to make his sorrow into art for spreading it. “The Undertaking” boldly opens with a statement that not only has Donne accomplished something braver than the heroes of yore, but he has done something a step braver than that in keeping it hidden. In each of these cases, Donne uses the paradoxical nature of a voiced call for silence to illuminate the constitution by negation at the heart of poetic meaning and the problems and possibilities of contagion as a social force, forming communities but hollow at its center. Donne’s poem “The Canonization” begins with this same movement towards silence, as in this case, it is silence that allows Donne to speak, or to love, as he requires a lack in order to manifest his love. So long as his interlocutor is speaking, there is no space for Donne’s love or speech. It is only after his companion leaves off that Donne is presented with a void which can be filled by means of his love poetry, for as in “To His Mistress Going to Bed,” the way Donne loves is often by giving voice to the emotion-- the speaking of it brings it into being. In that poem, it is his verbal undressing of the beloved that gives her form. She does not have a waist until he narrates the removal of her girdle. Here, it is the act of speaking which gives shape to his love. He writes:

For God’s sake hold your tongue, and let me love,

Or chide my palsy, or my gout,

My five grey hairs, or ruined fortune flout...²⁷

²⁷ John Donne, “The Canonization,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Iona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 9.

The opening of the poem is highly argumentative, as Donne appears to be fighting against an external pressure placed upon him which represses his own capacity for speech, but the poem begins at a moment of heightened drama, in which Donne interrupts the previous speaker with an interjection. The conflict is not just in speaking vs. silence in the speaker vs. the audience. However, though the interjection is certainly an assertion of dominance, the hortatory interjection “let me love” betrays some level of subordination. Donne is subject to someone whose permission he must seek to love as he wishes-- someone whom he feels comfortable challenging, but someone to whom he reports nonetheless. As in “A Fever,” although Donne is the poet and should consequently be in charge of the narrative, his power is undermined by the poem’s content, just as his desire for silence is undermined by his filling of the silence. The strange invocation of silence as the originating point of his poems establishes his own voice and capacity for meaning as that which is constituted against its own sound, depending on what it opposes. One gets the sense that the opening of this poem is merely “A Fever” repeated, in which he does not really want to be beloved to get well but instead wants to be the one that sickens her. Here, too, he advocates for silence, but it is clearly not silence he wants. He wants the opportunity to be the one speaking, the one needing to be silenced. He wants both to interrupt and to be interrupted, not mastery over his opponent but parity such that they can continue their contest ad infinitum, and as such, any time he asserts dominance, he must also undercut his assertion.

He further undermines this claim to dominance in the lines immediately following the first one of the poem, as his strong statement is weakened by the offered options. If option A does not appeal to the listener, perhaps B or C might work? The listener needn’t be silent so long

as he does not interfere with the love-- Donne even offers up his own physical ailments or limitations as options for ridicule. Though chronic conditions, they are reduced to distractions from the problem at hand found in Donne's love. His incorporation of them into a list, one after the other, even reduces the sense of them as distinct ailments. If anything can be said to be wrong with Donne, it is not palsy or gout or advanced age, but palsy and gout and advanced age. There is a cumulative or additive quality to them, as they seem to define and bolster Donne as a character as much as they might weaken him physically. The same constitution by negation is at work in Donne's description of his own ailments as in his verbal undressing of the beloved in "To His Mistress Going to Bed" or in his plea for silence here which frames his love.

The self-constitutive nature of the aforementioned ailments seems to be underlined by their status as non-communicable conditions. They are internal to Donne, not external to him, and thus of little concern. When he does invoke contagious illness, it is to emphasize the difference between that and the symptoms of love which plague him now. He writes:

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?
 What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?
 Who says my tears have overflowed 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?²⁸

Thus Donne asserts the non-contagion of his ailments, putting the burden on his addressee to provide proof that he is a danger to society rather than really proving his own innocence. He asks

²⁸ Ibid.

for evidence of the community he has allegedly created, not of what injuries he has done but of who has been injured. Contagion is framed as an opportunity for person to person contact, as a mode of connecting human lives, taking what might ordinarily be conceptualized as an antisocial or at best asocial behavior-- spreading disease-- and rendering it social. However, while he acknowledges the potential for such sociality, he appears to deny it in his own life, rendering his circumstance almost suspiciously non-contagious and asocial. Perceived as rhetorical questions, these inquiries appear to beg *no one*, *none*, and *never*, as answers. However, when read in the context of other poems of Donne which invoke the metaphor of love as illness, this non-contagion comes to seem highly unlikely.

The metaphorical connection between love and illness is most explicitly framed in Donne's poem "The Broken Heart," which emphasizes the same temporal constraint Donne identified as characteristic of illness in "A Fever." He writes:

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?²⁹

Disenchanted with love, he compares it to the fleetingness of physical illness, specifically naming one with a fast course. The plague does not linger. Either one dies or one gets well. It is not like the gout or palsy of "The Canonization," not assimilable to one's sense of self. Love,

²⁹ John Donne, "The Broken Heart," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 36.

like illness, is framed as something that consumes and consumes quickly. If it is pleasant for a time, that is only because it has not yet fully run its course.

Paired with that consumption is a sense of contagion. It is not an illness experienced alone, even if one is the sole displayer of symptoms. Whether or not Donne's beloved in "The Broken Heart" is also affected by love's misery, Donne's heartsickness relies upon her existence. Whether she experiences symptoms or is merely a carrier, he caught this from her, a fact which is more apparent in poems such as "The Undertaking" and "The Triple Fool," which do not explicitly use the language of illness but rely heavily upon structures of contagion. The commonality between the two poems is their expressed desire for silence, as "The Undertaking" lauds Donne's ability to keep from naming his bravest deed, which is the non-naming of itself, and "The Triple Fool" laments Donne's inability to keep his romantic thoughts and feelings to himself and the consequent spread of foolishness and grief. Both accomplish that which they discourage by spreading the melancholy symptoms of love, enacting Donne's principle of constitution by negation, one which cannot be denied, as all attempts to escape the structure, to negate it, to push it away, only succeed in inscribing one further in it. By attempting to avoid contagion, Donne ensures contagion's occurrence, as in "The Undertaking," in which the *praeteritio* creates the madness it claims to seek to avoid.

This exponential growth of contagion is established both by a negation in which one inscribes oneself further and further in the contagious occurrence and by the creation of communities surrounding the infection, as demonstrated by his poem "The Undertaking," in which the stated goal yields to the contagious momentum by the time of the poem's conclusion. The poem opens as follows:

I have done one braver thing
 Than all the Worthies did,
 And yet a braver thence doth spring,
 Which is, to keep that hid.³⁰

Donne establishes the feat that is truly bravest not as the original one-- competing with the mythological heroes of old-- but in fact as Donne's success at keeping that feat to himself, and he maintains throughout the first half of the poem the imperative nature of its secret. The feat, which is revealed to be an ability to love purely in later stanzas, would only taunt men now, for the ability to accomplish it no longer remains in the world. To tell people about it would only be cruel, for they cannot also achieve it. However, speaking of not speaking, as he does in the opening to "The Canonization," Donne both spreads and does not spread the information. He begins the third stanza with the protasis of a conditional statement that appears to be hypothetical but is in actuality being played out as it threatens its consequence. Donne writes:

So, if I now should utter this,
 Others (because no more
 Such stuff to work upon, there is,
 Would love but as before.³¹

With the deictic marker "this," Donne undermines the potentiality implied by "should." That which the verb indicates only might occur is revealed to be occurring presently by the demonstrative pronoun. The information is cast as both real and not real and as such can and cannot be transmitted.

³⁰ John Donne, "The Undertaking," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*

In the following stanzas, Donne abandons all commitment to keeping his secret from his reader, instead inducting the reader into an in-group of people who are also secret keepers, transforming secrecy from that which isolates into the very grounds for community. He explicitly discusses the love of virtue that goes beyond the physicality of men and women and subsequently turns to another conditional statement, with the verb in the protasis in the present tense, but the verb in the apodosis in the past tense, setting up a mismatched temporality that recasts the protasis with its conclusion. He writes:

And if this love, though placed so,
 From profane men you hide,
 Which will no faith on this bestow,
 Or, if they do, deride,

Then you have done a braver thing
 Than all the Worthies did.
 And a braver thence will spring
 Which is, to keep that hid.³²

Conditional statements usually imply some degree of subsequent time, but this one indicates prior time with its apodosis in the final stanza of the poem, retroactively coloring the protasis as a more definite occurrence. The substitution of the perfect for the future perfect tense that one might expect changes the potentiality of the protasis to concretely implicate the reader in the act of keeping the secret. By the end of the conditional statement, the question of whether or not the

³² Ibid.

reader is a participant has resolved itself, for somewhere between stanzas six and seven, the reader apparently undertakes the same braver thing undertaken by the narrator. It is not that the secret is not kept, for Donne uses the temporality constructed by the verb tenses to ensure that the reader is already in the know by the time he entrusts the reader with the secret. Donne obscures the moment of communication, substituting instead a model in which the reader knows all along that which Donne describes, only, the reader does not know that he knows. Love is simultaneously contagious and contained, caught by those who have already caught it but unknown to those who have not. Both potential and already realized, the temporal sliding of these conditional statements embodies the paradox of the social secret that can be both kept and shared by the members of the community it creates.

“The Triple Fool” operates similarly, as by the conclusion, the number of fools has grown, but it is also holding steady as a result of the multiplicity of the narrator. Again, as in the previous poem, communication is cast as the vehicle for contagion. Donne writes: “I am two fools, I know, / For loving, and for saying so / In whining poetry...”³³ The enjambment between the second and third lines leaves open a brief moment wherein any communication-- “saying so” at all-- is to blame for the augmentation of this foolishness, before it is qualified by the caliber of the poetry. Given the conclusion of the poem, in which the narrator becomes a third fool for writing good poetry as opposed to whining poetry about his griefs, resulting in the proliferation of the work in relation to other people through recitation and song, one may conclude that that brief moment in the midst of the enjambment is entirely correct.

³³ John Donne, “The Canonization,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 10.

“The Triple Fool” works against its object, if its object is to avoid the suffering it laments, in many ways, constituting itself as against itself. Donne increases his own foolishness by writing beautiful poetry. He increases the sorrow in the world by providing performers with lines to recite in verse and song, spreading to great crowds. And even the poem itself, which is meant to contain sorrow, lets it out. At the conclusion of the first stanza, Donne writes, “Grief brought to numbers cannot be so fierce, / For he tames it, that fetters it in verse.”³⁴ Like in “A Fever,” Donne retains some idea of conquering or at least competing with the ailment by translating it into poetic terms as opposed to biological ones. However, even this hope is dashed in the second stanza. He writes:

But when I have done so,
 Some man, his art and voice to show,
 Doth set and sing my pain,
 And by delighting many, frees again
 Grief, which verse did restrain.³⁵

In this stanza, the poetic conventions betray Donne and his desire to be soothed by them, as here the device of enjambment ensures that the poem does not fetter grief, but frees it. The word stands exposed at the head of a line, not beginning a sentence in a way that compels it into the orderly organization of grammatical rules, but instead breaking open the sentence to reveal its raw edge. The poem about the danger of writing poetry demonstrates the consequences which it describes.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

With the link between poetry and contagion established as such in other poems, the insistence upon non-contagion in “The Canonization” is rendered even more unusual, unless it is not only a rhetorical insistence upon non-communicability but also a literal concession to communicability. We can get at this paradoxical relationship between communication and non-communicability through Paul De Man’s “Semiology and Rhetoric.” While describing what he terms the rhetorization of grammar, De Man seizes upon rhetorical questions as the site of an irresolvable conflict between grammar and rhetoric. The grammar of these questions begs an answer and insists upon the inquiries’ interrogative natures, while the rhetorical connotation of a rhetorical question does not seek any answer at all, but imbeds an answer in the asking, usually in the negative. As such, the dual readings of the question impede not just the answering but the asking of such a question. De Man writes, “[T]he literal meaning asks for the concept... whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning.”³⁶ In Donne’s case, the literal meaning asks for the names of the men he has harmed, but the figurative meaning insists that there are no such men. One cannot be sure which reading to perform, and indeed, according to De Man, the readings are inextricable from each other, meaning that one must read both communicability and non-communicability into the potentially rhetorical questions. De Man writes, “The two readings have to engage each other in direct confrontation, for the one reading is precisely the error denounced by the other and has to be undone by it... none can exist without the other’s absence. There can be no dance without a dancer, no sign without a referent.”³⁷ If this can be applied to “The Canonization,” it would imply that there can be no rhetorical closure without

³⁶ Paul De Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 1519.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1521.

communicative opening, no non-contagion without contagion. Precisely in this denial, something is transmitted.

Of course, in such a discussion of contagion, one must ask oneself exactly what is being transmitted by the infectious parties. Is it a disease? Is it a collection of symptoms? Is it love? Love poetry? Meaning itself? In some way, it is all of these things. Donne plays into the fairly conventional “love as illness” model, though he takes it a step further, and to get at this logic of contagion, it may be helpful to examine the conditions of metaphor in Donne’s poetry more closely. In their work on metaphor, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write of the device: “The essence of metaphor is the understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another.”³⁸ The model is not exactly one of substitutability. It is not that love is illness but that love is experienced in the same terms that one might use to describe illness. Lakoff and Johnson provide examples such as, “This is a sick relationship” or “Their marriage is on the mend.”³⁹ The experience of the two is conflated even if the reality of them is distinct. However, such an understanding of metaphor only works when the boundaries between reality and experience are firm. When they are blurred, as they are in Donne’s poetry, the relationship between the two like but distinct entities involved in the metaphor changes.

A metaphor has two readings-- one in which the disease is “real” and one in which it is being used as figurative language to make a point. It is either realized in the universe of the poem or recognized as metaphor without. For Donne, it is more and less than this. In one version, the illness exists diegetically within the poems, as in “A Fever.” It is a plot point, part of the unfolding drama-- “real” within the poetic conceit and thus not necessarily instilled with a

³⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

double reading as an entity which represents or refers to something else. It is illness. In another version, illness exists as something close to the metaphorical model, as in “The Broken Heart,” wherein Donne’s narrator attempts to create an understanding of the temporal conditions of love by comparing them to those of illness-- a fairly direct application of metaphor as Lakoff and Johnson describe it. However, this illness is not meant to be conceived of as “real” even diegetically, even within the world of the poem. It is only a figurative device, even within the poetic conceit and both the in-text narrator and the out-of-text reader recognize it as such. And finally Donne presents his reader with a version of illness that spreads into the “real” world-- that is, the shared world of the reader and poet-- by using language to rhetorically elicit symptoms that might ordinarily accompany illness, such as the back and forth of the fever in “A Fever” or the hazy delirium reminiscent of the lack of self-definition Donne goes on to lay out in “The Canonization.” This is not just literal illness put to figurative use, but instead a contagious fusion of the states of reality and fiction. Illness is a metaphor for Donne, but it is also not a metaphor.

In drawing conclusions about his Dora Case, Freud posits the following: “The symptoms of the disease are nothing else than the patient’s sexual activity.”⁴⁰ Dora’s hysterical state, according to Freud, has caused her to sublimate her sexuality into physical symptoms so that what she experiences as illness is actually desire. Poetry for Donne functions in the way that hysteria does for Freud-- as a tool by means of which mental activity is converted to physical sensation, resulting in a deep internalization of metaphor that unsettles the very boundaries of inside and out. Because of this hysterical ability to manifest symptoms, the bilayered model posited by Lakoff and Johnson, in which metaphor is “real” or “rhetorical,” is rendered

⁴⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (Dora),” in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 233.

irrelevant. Here, it is both real and rhetorical, much like Dora's hysteria, which both causes and responds to physical illness so that the two are in a way indistinguishable. As Freud writes, "The fever may have been organically determined-- perhaps by one of those very frequent attacks of influenza that are not localized in any particular part of the body. Nevertheless it was now established that the neurosis had seized upon this chance event and made use of it for an utterance of its own."⁴¹ The mental does not just produce the physical. The physical produces the mental as well, and the ability to draw distinctions between them becomes as diminished as the use of doing so. In one extreme form of the presentation of illness in Donne's poetry, the illness is real. In another, it is a metaphor for metaphor itself, a representation of the sliding scale of meaning inherent in poetic comparisons.

With duality thus inherent to illness itself, the community formed by contagion in "The Canonization" which Donne casts as solitary with his rhetorical questions is thus opened up, and room is made for the role of a reader in two ways. On one hand, just as apostrophe required the presence of a reader to recognize it as such in order for it to function as apostrophe rather than simple address, the rhetorical question must be recognized by a reader of poetry as such rather than as a genuine and simple question. In order for the rhetorical question to imply solitude with its answers of *no one*, *none*, and *never*, an outside party found in the reader must verify it as such while at the same time interrupting that solitude. In the opposite way, however, if the question is not taken as a rhetorical question but as a genuine question, the potential is opened up for the person on the receiving end of these queries to start naming victims. The reader is simultaneously recognized both as a reader and as a character in Donne's unfolding drama,

⁴¹ Ibid., 226.

allowing Donne to begin the process of constituting and reforming his readers as this relational identification shifts into focus as the primary objective of the poem.

The angry rejection of his interlocutor's advances in the opening lines is far from the doting attention to which Donne responds in the latter half of the poem, as Donne seizes control of the reader's voice over the course of the work in order to establish himself as the nonpareil he is by the end of the poem. This is most dramatically undertaken in the final stanza, in which Donne responds to his own poem in an overt prosopopoeia, praising himself through the guise of a suppliant reader. However, it begins much earlier, perhaps even as early as those curmudgeonly opening lines. Donne's interjection implies that there is something into which one can interject, creating the sense that the poem begins sometime before it begins, and potentially catching the reader off guard. "Don't talk about my love!" the opening lines command. The reader can but defensively stake a claim to innocence, having done no such thing, not yet. It is not until the reader is forced to respond to Donne's objection that they contemplate his love at all, and thus the interjection creates the conditions under which it can justifiably interject. He puts words into the mouth of the reader and in repudiating them, the reader actualizes the words as their own. Even a flat denial-- "I'm not talking about your love!"-- proves itself false through its stating. In attempting to deny participation, the reader is thus compelled to contaminate themselves with a repudiation, participating in the negatively constitutive structure of contagion. In attempting to get outside of the structure, one becomes further entangled.

Donne pushes this further in the following stanzas, as the potentially rhetorical questions place words in the mouth of the reader in response. He is asking, but he is really telling-- asking but also answering. This tactic of responding to his own requests is even more blatant in the

following stanza. “Call us what you will...” Donne begins stanza three, “we’re made such by love; / Call her one, me another fly, / We’re tapers too, and at our own cost die...”⁴² Donne gives a command to the reader, telling the reader/responder to call them whatever the responder desires or sees them as. However, in the next line, Donne tells that responder exactly what to call him. Donne tells the responder what he or she wills, further inhabiting the persona, and consequently rendering the rest of that stanza extremely apt as a description for the relationship between writer and reader in this poem. They constitute each other, they “die and rise the same” as their fates are intertwined, and lastly, they “prove / Mysterious by this love.”⁴³ Donne’s deep identification with the beloved has merged with his appropriation of the readerly persona, engaging the reader in a structure of transference-love all but identical to the structure of “real” love he claims with the beloved, expanding the community of those infected by the love disease with each readerly approach. The troubled love with which Donne begins the poem has vanished. That which warrants criticism is exchanged for a faultless reenactment or re-imagining in which the figure of the reader is substituted for that of the lover. This substitution combined with the identificatory impulse inherent to Donne’s conception of what it means to be in love ensures that the rest of the poem can progress in perfect harmony. With Donne inhabiting the personas of writer, reader, and beloved, there is no room left for dissent. In projecting and subsuming his love, Donne manages to assume control of both the inside and the outside of the poem, and the vestigial feeling of the concluding stanza is thus rendered less strange than it might first seem.

The concluding stanza’s overt prosopopoeia in the form of an invocation of the Canonized Donne and his Beloved ends the poem in a similar yet crucially different mode than

⁴² John Donne, “The Canonization,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Donne began it. Putting words in the reader's mouth in the form of denial at its start, he now exerts even more power over the reader/responder by speaking for him. Where before the reader/responder was provoked into a response, here Donne inhabits the role of the responder, taking even that small autonomy from the reader, who has been entirely reformed over the course of the poem. Just as Donne incorporates his gout and palsy into his sense of self, by the end, he also incorporates the reader, and thus plays back into that model of non-contagious contagion established by poems such as "The Triple Fool" and "The Undertaking." His social disease, the heat that fills his veins, is rendered asocial by the assumption of the readerly persona. Whatever disease we once may have been able to catch from Donne is no longer transmissible-- not because the disease has disappeared but because we have. The personal boundary which the disease would have needed to penetrate is dissolved by the poet. The reader is thus unable to be infected because the boundaries of the reader are too blurry. There is no self to be invaded by the pathogenic particles of love.

In the process, however, Donne also destabilizes his own position. In moving beyond the reader through that prosopopoeia, he also moves beyond the poet. In discussing an intertextual approach to the analysis of the effects of prosopopoeia in Romantic poetry, Cynthia Chase suggests the following: "Identification with natural objects, in an evasion of temporality and death, rather brings on or constitutes that very death-- which is not a state of rest but a state of constant motion, precisely like the endless change and placeless place of words or the imagination."⁴⁴ The very impulse to speak to that which cannot hear us, or more precisely, to imagine that the inanimate object of the prosopopoeia has heard us and speaks in response,

⁴⁴ Cynthia Chase, "'Viewless Wings': Intertextual Interpretation of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale,' in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 220.

presumes some commonality between the speaker and the addressee. They share a language, as well as a state of being. The consequent assumption of the object of the prosopopoeia into the world of the poem appears to stave off the non-existence of death by removing it from a world in which death acts as a divider. However, what it actually does is invite such non-existence. The apostrophe of “A Fever” brings the inanimate beloved to life, but the prosopopoeia of “The Canonization” renders both poet and addressee lifeless, deanimated by the invasive and constitutive prosopopoeia. They echo each other back and forth forever such that neither exists as a discrete person, but both exist in the relational space of the echo. Just as Donne and his beloved are “two being one,” the separate entities of the reader and writer are melded into one being that exists neither here nor there. Once again, Donne creates a world of radical mortality, one in which things die repeatedly and therein achieve a state which is the opposite of suspended animation-- one of animated suspension. The very bouncing back and forth between living and dead is that which allows for the continued existence of both poetic personas, readerly and writerly. Donne evades death by permanently inhabiting the liminal space of illness.

Silence/Speaking, Death/Life, Writer/Reader... Donne repeatedly sets up false binaries only to inhabit the space between the oppositions, which come to be defined by that echoing elicited by bouncing between them. Paul De Man explains a similar structure while discussing Wordsworth as follows:

Wordsworth’s claim for restoration in the face of death, in the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, is grounded in a consistent system of thought... that converts the radical distance of an either/or opposition in a process allowing movement from one extreme to the other by a series of transformations that leave the negativity of the initial relationship (or lack of

relationship) intact. One moves, without compromise, from death *or* life to life *and* death.⁴⁵

Donne's poetry functions similarly, as he opens up and then occupies the space between opposing forces through the use of rhetorical techniques while simultaneously maintaining their distance from each other. Silence is present in two forms in Donne's poems-- both in spoken calls for such a state, lauding a lack of speech with an abundance of it, and in the conspicuous refusal to speak the subject of the poems into existence. "The Undertaking" and "The Triple Fool" both employ praeteritio in order to substitute discussions of silence for discussions of the secrets they keep, at least temporarily, and as such, a specific sort of silence is achieved through speech in the form of Donne's constructed poetry. The boundaries between life and death are repeatedly crossed and recrossed as Donne manipulates the cyclical and transferential nature of illness in order to inhabit both at once, achieving immortality through the creation of an extreme and replicable mortality framed around the structure of illness, which is the embodiment of this fortified and breached opposition, finite and infinite at once. And perhaps most significantly, Donne takes it upon himself to fashion and refashion an audience, collapsing the line between writer and reader until they are in what De Man refers to as the "autobiographical moment," which happens "as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution."⁴⁶ One is left with the text as a mediating force somewhere between the two, in the fashion of the final lines of "The Canonization" which seem to belong neither to the writer nor the reader of the poem. The prosopopoeia persists clearly through the invocation of "you whom reverend love / Made one

⁴⁵ Paul De Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 925, www.jstor.org/stable/2906560.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 921.

another's hermitage..." and "You, to whom love was peace..." but the last two lines shift focus away from invocation and towards third person description, as Donne writes, "Countries, towns, courts, beg from above / A pattern of your love."⁴⁷ A third party has entered into the I/You relationship. Some mediator has been introduced, which is perhaps the medium of poetry itself, as for Donne, Poetry, Illness, and the Text are all located on the divide, in the distance between binaries rather than on either side.

Donne thus establishes both a poetic infection and a poetics of infection. He creates a readerly community by establishing a bond between the writer and the readers of poetry through the process of infection, linking parties in the relationship by means of a shared condition. However he also uses that shared linguistic condition to create linguistic meaning and explore the origins of voice. Embedded in Donne's interest in contagion is an interest in transfer, a structure which seems to necessitate having a "patient zero" for the outbreak. Someone must acquire the condition before community building contagion can occur, but for Donne, this "patient zero" comes to be retroactively created by the very contagion he or she facilitates. As in the argumentative opening of "The Canonization," the voice once conceived of as the origin is already inscribed as against an opposing force. The complicated power dynamics in "A Fever" and "The Canonization," in which the speaker assumes both a position of dominance and submission by making threats which redound against himself in their consequences or constructing commands that require both permission and authority, are indicative of this blurred origin. The power of the narrator is defined as much by what he cannot do as by what he can do, as much by the way his voice reigns over the poem as by the way it is reigned over. As with the

⁴⁷ John Donne, "The Canonization," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 9.

contagion Donne plays out in the plots of his poems, the poems themselves rely upon the implication of the reader. The poems appear to start before they actually do. There is action prior to the opening lines in which the character of the reader is apparently involved, but of which the reader is unaware. Both in the cases of contagion and the poetry itself, the reader is implicated before there is even a structure in which to be implicated, demonstrating the strange condition of ordinary contagion, which becomes a contagion of the condition of meaning, of relationality itself.

III

Sickness Unto Death: The Problem and Possibility of Death as Illness

Donne's establishment of illness as the central model of creation and destruction in his romantic poetry does not preclude the possibility of death in his poems. On the contrary, it simply means that death is recontextualized, reconsidered, addressed more often as a space or a range than as a point or a moment. Death is more complicated than a limit which represents the end of one's life. When Donne considers death, he does so as both a boundary and as the area which that boundary demarcates. Like everything else in Donne's poetry, it is multiplicitous.

Maurice Blanchot describes the twofold death as follows:

[T]here is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die and the capacity to take mortal risks; and there is its double, which is ungraspable. It is what I cannot grasp, what is not linked to *me* by any relation of any sort. It is that which never comes and toward which I do not direct myself.⁴⁸

The former sort of death is that which can be accomplished, experienced. It is both freeing and restricting, as this death allows one to clearly cordon off one's life and thus to have a life. Having a limit against which to push allows for that which came before to constitute itself as an entity. For Donne, this is the kind of death that can be survived, the kind that results in the ghostly undead which he depicts so frequently in the *Songs and Sonnets* as the boundary between life and death is crossed and recrossed. The ghosts are dead, have died, and yet, they retain control of themselves and their beings, and so, in a way, they have not died. Their deaths recall what

⁴⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 104.

Blanchot posits about Camus' Kirlov with regard to the possibility of suicide. "When someone says to him, 'But many people kill themselves,'" Blanchot writes, "he does not even understand. As far as he is concerned, no one has yet killed himself: no one has ever died by his own hand in a real coming to grips, a full and heartfelt grasping of the situation which would make this act an authentic action."⁴⁹ These people have killed themselves in such a way that they have been able to experience the former sort of death, but not the latter, not the ungraspable sort. The former sort of death, in fact, might be thought of as a death that is not death, for as Blanchot continues, "A death that is free, useful, and conscious, that is agreeable to the living, in which the dying person remains true to himself, is a death which has not met with death."⁵⁰ Instead, it might be considered a death which is a sort of illness, something assimilable to one's sense of self, even constitutive of that sense of self, but not oblitative, not disruptive. In Donne's work, illness and death share a sort of liminal quality, as death appears most often in the *Songs and Sonnets* as undeath, and nowhere is the similarity and dissimilarity between death and illness so plainly displayed as in Donne's poem "The Apparition."

"The Apparition" provides Donne's reader with a glimpse of a different role for Donne. It is still love poetry. There is still a beloved. But that beloved is all but despised. Here, a vengeful Donne comes up against a similar emotion to the one he paradoxically describes in "A Fever" in which his hatred or resentment of the beloved and the entirety of her sex ultimately licenses the affection he holds for her. In "The Apparition," that affection is clear only through his desire to punish the beloved. Given the ironic intratextual reversals and intertextual inversions that characterize much of the scene described in this poem, one can similarly assume that his

⁴⁹ Ibid., 98-9.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 101.

retaliation against her scorn is to be taken as evidence of his lost regard. In “A Fever” the hatred is the hypothetical which the reader must imagine. Here, that hypothetical possibility is the love.

Donne writes:

When by thy scorn, O murd’ress, I am dead,
 And that thou think’st thee free
 From all solicitation from me,
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
 And thee, feigned vestal, in worse arms shall see;⁵¹

He attributes responsibility for his death to her so fully that she is deemed a “murd’ress” almost proleptically, with the death that renders her such coming only at the very end of the line. She is thus a murderess even before he is dead, as though that is somehow intrinsic to her identity or an inborn quality rather than something relationally determined. In Donne’s love poetry, the lovers are usually drawn so closely together by their desire that they fuse into one being, as they do in “The Good Morrow,” “The Legacy,” and “Song (‘Sweetest love I do not go’).” The extreme separability of Donne and the beloved in this poem is thus the first of the unexpected inversions established here.

Tied up in this placement of blame is yet another inversion, one which interacts almost directly with the refusal to place such blame in “The Canonization.” There, he writes, “Call her one, me another fly, / We’re tapers too, and at our own cost die...”⁵² There, too, love proves fatal to the lovers, but Donne is clear that they are responsible for themselves alone. It is not that

⁵¹ John Donne, “The Apparition,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 36.

⁵² John Donne, “The Canonization,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 9.

one is a taper and one is a fly, killing each other upon contact. Instead, both of them are both elements, destroying themselves in simultaneity as a result of love, but not in a way that holds the other accountable. The ease and directness with which Donne assigns blame to the beloved's scorn in this poem stands as a stark contrast.

The conclusion of the poem inverts the protective quality of silence which Donne has heretofore established. Unlike "The Triple Fool" or "The Undertaking," in which speaking one's emotions aloud is represented as the dangerous action, here, withholding his words creates the sense of danger. He writes:

What I will say, I will not tell thee now,
 Lest that preserve thee; and since my love is spent,
 I had rather thou should'st painfully repent,
 Than by my threat'nings rest still innocent.⁵³

Donne refuses to provide relief to the beloved in the form of a warning as to that which he will say when he appears to chastise her in his ghostly form. He would rather see her wracked with guilt upon the actual confrontation than give her advanced warning about what he will say to her and why, thus giving her time to process this information and denying him the opportunity to see her initial reaction. In other poems, Donne makes claims to silence but ultimately realizes that which he intends to smother over the course of the poem. The in-group of knowers expands as the readers learn that they knew what he was referring to all along, a function of the unifying impulse of love poetry. However, in this instance, Donne does not reveal that which seems to be hidden. This is not a rhetorical trick in the fashion of the praeteritio of "The Undertaking," but a

⁵³ John Donne, "The Apparition," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 36.

rhetorical promise in the form of *recusatio*. The threat with which Donne begins “A Fever” is empty when one unfolds the logic to its conclusion, but this threat of silence is not empty. It is fulfilled, with active, not passive, quietude.

The intratextual reversals are largely focused upon the methodology of his punishment of the beloved. Having regarded him with scorn, she is to be scorned. A “feigned vestal,” she is to be undone by her new lover’s “false sleep,” as he misinterprets her pinching and pawing at him in terror as a desire for further sexual engagement. The moment which should result in the most intimacy between the two lovers is cracked open as Donne comes between them, distancing her from both himself and the new man, inverting desire itself to produce horror. But perhaps the most dramatic reversal is presented as the stated result of Donne’s trick, as he anticipates her response upon his appearance. He writes, “And then poor aspen wretch, neglected thou / Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lie / A verier ghost than I...”⁵⁴ The ultimate objective is to force her to exchange places with him, for her to suffer as he believes she made him suffer, and as a result, his ghostly undeath and her sickly state are rendered interchangeable.

Donne’s adjectival flourishes link the beloved’s experience of terror to his own experience of illness in previous poems. His invocation of the aspen tree, known for its leaves which tremble in even the slightest of breezes, indexes the shivering one might associate with a fever, the back-and-forth oscillation that Donne enacts so vividly in his poem “A Fever.” This volatility is in turn only accentuated by his description of her “cold quicksilver sweat.” The word “quicksilver” accomplishes a descriptive feat on two levels for Donne, as the metallic quality of the substance combined with its “tendency to form small droplets”⁵⁵ creates the sense of a

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “Quicksilver.”

sweat-induced sheen on the skin of the beloved while the volatile properties of quicksilver, which is known for its “rapid movement,”⁵⁶ calls back to the same feverish oscillation invoked by the beloved’s aspen nature. She is perhaps not sick as a result of an infection, but she is ill nonetheless. The “burning fits” of “A Fever” apply just as well to this beloved as to the ailing woman in that poem and thus illness is established as a counterpart to Donne’s undeath, perhaps even a more accurate version of it. In her infirmity, the beloved is to be a “verier ghost” than the ghost himself, and illness thus persists as a dominating paradigm in spite of the introduction of death into the poetic world, as Donne establishes a state of undeath that is itself contagious. In the poems discussed in Chapters One and Two, death is dangled before the reader and the beloved as a possibility but never a reality. Here, Donne is able to realize the space of death while preserving the importance of the reiterative illness through the depiction of this spreading ghostly state, creating a version of death which is not disruptive but continuous, for even in a comparatively more secularized space when taken as against his religious poetry, Donne’s poetry conceives of an afterlife or an undeath as a diegetic possibility, available to speakers with the world of the poetry in addition to the more metatextual possibility of undeath available to authors through their poetry.

Donne pushes harder on a contagious death in his poem “The Expiration,” in which he laments the deaths of both his beloved as a result of having to be sent away and himself as a result of having to send her. He writes:

So, so, break off this last lamenting kiss,
Which sucks two souls, and vapours both away;

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Turn thou, ghost, that way, and let me turn this,
 And let ourselves benight our happiest day;⁵⁷

The anadiplosis with which he begins formally foreshadows Donne's double death at the end of the poem and provides the readers with a sense of multiplication, reproduction, and even contagion. After all, the subsequent kiss is described as a lose-lose situation for the parties involved. The action of sucking typically involves a subject drawing something out of an object, but the case is not here that one party is stealing or drawing out the breath from the other. Here, the kiss itself, which should only be the mode of transfer, is draining the life from both of them. Nobody benefits from this endeavor. Nobody possesses the vacuumed souls, rendering this model perhaps more akin to contagion than multiplication or reproduction, as this is not really a transfer but a contamination. Reproduction breeds a new model to replace the old one when that model begins to fail. One replaces the other. But in structures of contagion, just because an illness has been spread from one party to the next does not mean that the first party is no longer ill. The mutual drain functions similarly, as the beloved's loss is not Donne's gain.

The anadiplosis itself is repeated midway through the poem, as Donne issues the killing command, writing:

We asked none leave to love, nor will we owe
 Any, so cheap a death as saying, Go;
 Go, and if that word have not quite killed thee,
 Ease me with my death by bidding me go too.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ John Donne, "The Expiration," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 52.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

“Go; / Go...” functions as a doubly determined echo, as the word echoes itself and the figure echoes the previous anadiplosis. However, it is a more shadowy rendition of anadiplosis than the first, as here the repeated words are not entirely equal. Here there is some stake in which word is which, as one of them delivers the killing blow and the other is either preemptive or recapitulatory. The either/or distinction is difficult to make, however, lending ease to the conception that perhaps both are responsible and both are blameless. The one is preemptive and the other is recapitulatory. As with the spread of information in “The Undertaking,” the actual moment of communication is obscured. The death in this poem is so overdetermined that it is impossible to assign direct blame for it, for indeed, death is not single but multiple. The beloved is addressed as “ghost” before the killing blow has been dealt. Donne delivers a killing blow twice but expects it to be only half effective, hoping she might do the same for him, though in the end, Donne describes himself as “double dead, going, and bidding go.”⁵⁹ Death is ubiquitous and repetitive, something that can be experienced in degree rather than kind. Ultimately, it functions as both a severing force and a uniting one as the separation death creates produces a community of ghostly undead to share the soulless experience, geographically alone but formally not unique. The more severed they are from their lives and from each other, the more deeply they are inscribed into the afterlife and the social sort of death which accompanies it.

The interchangeability of life and death are put on clearest display in the final lines of “The Computation,” in which Donne catalogues his time spent away from the beloved-- twenty years here, forty years there, a thousand years spent lamenting their separation. When one does the computation, these values add up to 2,400 years, suggesting that in fact, he has passed only a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

day apart from her, but that each of the 24 hours felt like 100 years. He concludes his hyperbole with the following: “Yet call not this, long life, but think that I / Am, by being dead, immortal; can ghosts die?”⁶⁰ He makes a grand and dramatic comparison, drawing on the same idea that he dies in his beloved’s absence which is central to “The Legacy,” and explains his long suffering with a state of undeath. Because he is dead, he will live forever, he posits, only to undermine the stature of the whole heightened poem with what almost feels like a tiny aside-- “can ghosts die?”

Unlike the questions of “The Canonization,” this question is not most easily read as rhetorical. The supernatural qualities of a ghost are not scientifically verifiable, not statistically factual, as the answers to those questions were. Here, Donne exposes a potential problem in his plan, as though he is fact-checking his assumptions with an outside party. He assumes ghosts cannot die, but can they? It feels remarkably similar to the question posed by the titular queen in Shakespeare’s *Anthony and Cleopatra*: “Can Fulvia die?”⁶¹ For Cleopatra, her incredulity is a function of her conception of Fulvia as more of an idea than a woman, more a symbol than a flesh and blood being, and as such, news of Fulvia’s death gives her pause as she wonders whether something some mortal can be accomplished by someone (or something) so incorporeal. For both Cleopatra and for Donne, death, which should be a certain limit, is opened up as a possibility instead, more like the neither-here-nor-there quality of illness than the typical understanding of death itself as an ending. As Blanchot writes, “What makes me disappear from the world cannot find its guarantee there; and thus, in a way, having no guarantee, it is not certain. This explains why no one is linked to death by real certitude. No one is sure of dying. No

⁶⁰ John Donne, “The Computation,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 53.

⁶¹ William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 166, I.iii.58.

one doubts death, but no one can think of death except doubtfully.”⁶² Donne’s narrator is already a ghost. He has already experienced Blanchot’s first definition of death given at the opening of this chapter, that which “circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty...”⁶³ and passed into a place of uncertainty. However, as this passage indicates, that uncertainty and possibility characterizes both forms of death, as the other, ungraspable death is uncertain in a different way. The first death is uncertain and thus a place of possibility because it is neither one thing nor another. Death has come but it has come to the living, and it has been survived. The man remains in control of himself enough to continue with his intellectual projects and poetic conceits. The second is uncertain because it is not survivable, because it is unclear to whom it will happen or if it can be experienced at all.

The situation for Donne’s ghost, lingering painfully and indeterminately without his beloved, is akin to the experience of despair as Blanchot defines it-- “not what Kierkegaard calls ‘sickness unto death,’ but the sickness in which dying does not culminate in death, in which one no longer keeps up hope for death, in which death is no longer to come, but is that which comes no longer.”⁶⁴ The first model of death-- the survivable model-- presents a sociable model of death and disease, one in which communities can be formed by those who are infected or contaminated by death. The second model of death-- the ungraspable model-- is that which closes out “The Expiration:” asocial, solitary, and potentially unending. But the uncertainty which characterizes sickness is intrinsic to both of them, and runs deep enough that one may even struggle to tell them apart. The ghost, already having experienced one death, wonders at the possibility of

⁶² Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 95.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

another, but whether he recognizes that death as an obliterative death or a reiteration of the repeatable death is never clear.

Donne's poem "The Paradox" both complicates and simplifies the framework surrounding death in his love poetry, immediately launching into a consideration of the limitations placed on love and death by speech and the limitations placed on speech by death and love. He writes:

No lover saith, I love, nor any other
 Can judge a perfect lover;
 He thinks that else none can or will agree
 That any loves but he:
 I cannot say I loved, for who can say
 He was killed yesterday.⁶⁵

As he depicts it, the act of loving can be pronounced neither in the present nor the past tense, as the latter in particular is rendered impossible by the deadly implications of love. Having loved in the past tense is the same as having been killed in the past tense. It precludes the possibility of a present moment for which that can be a past state and renders any claim in the present to such an history impossible. While loving, the experience is so singular that to give a name to it is impossible. No one, whether on the inside or outside of a relationship, knows exactly what it would mean to love in the present tense-- definitions of the practice vary too much for a strict definition-- and by the time it is over, the party who might have been able to make such a

⁶⁵ John Donne, "The Paradox," in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 53.

declaration of love is destroyed. Donne continues to elaborate upon the relationship between love and death as follows:

We die but once, and who loved last did die,
 He that saith twice, doth lie,
 For though he seem to move, and stir awhile,
 It doeth the sense beguile.⁶⁶

Love and death are correlated such that they happen simultaneously-- to love is to die-- but they happen only once, a fact established by this poem which leads to yet another intertextual contradiction, as this poem challenges both the established idea of silence as a protective measure rather than a failure or weakness and the reiterability of death. It comes most directly into conflict with death as it is depicted in "The Legacy," in which death occurs repeatedly and frequently, as often as the speaker leaves the company of the beloved. The version of Donne which appears in this poem calls the honesty of the speaker in "The Legacy" into question, accusing him either of lying or of being tricked by false signs of life, which he compares to the lingering heat of embers that have ceased to burn. And yet, Donne ends the poem with the following:

Once I loved and died; and am now become
 Mine epitaph and tomb.
 Here dead men speak their last, and so do I;
 Love-slain, lo, here I lie.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Donne becomes his own epitaph, embodying the postmortem message of his death, but in so doing, he contradicts his earlier statement that men cannot say they loved, employing the same past tense form of the verb which he declared to be unutterable. “I cannot say I loved” acquiesces quickly to “I loved and died.” With this uncertainty already planted, Donne concludes with a line that compels a reader to recontextualize the entirety of the poem, for while the last line can be taken in one sense as a standard epitaphic signpost marking the resting place of a man, the earlier usage of the word “lie” to mean telling an untruth throws this usage into doubt. Perhaps, here, Donne lies prone in his verse, but perhaps here he lies to the reader. The aspersions he cast upon the speaker of “The Legacy” now themselves come into doubt as it is suddenly unclear which of them is lying.

The nature of death, which is uncertainty, is rendered uncertain, for when the poems are put in conversation with each other, they communicate uncertainty between them, building the in-group of the infected across another dimension as Donne’s poems create a community of various speakers as well as various readers. The doubt and death which affects the speaker of “The Legacy” turns back on itself to infect the speaker of “The Paradox,” realizing a multiplying effect which Blanchot describes in relation to suicide. Blanchot writes:

The expression ‘I kill myself’ suggests the doubling which is not taken into account. For ‘I’ is a self in the plenitude of its action and resolution, capable of acting sovereignly upon itself, always strong enough to reach itself with its blow. And yet the one who is thus struck is no longer I, but another, so that when I kill myself, perhaps it is ‘I’ who does the killing, but it is not done to me.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 107.

The personas behind the pronoun “I” are separated out by the ability and inability to die exhibited by the two parties. “I” can provide the killing blow but cannot receive it because of its inability to be experienced and the being that lives and the being that dies are thus divided. The same holds for the concluding line: “Love-slain, lo, here I lie.” The “I” who cannot say he loved at the start of the poem is cleaved from the “I” who says so at the end, love-slain. “I” cannot say he loved, and so when “I” says so, one can conclude that is no longer “I.” The identity cleaves along the impossibility, just as it does intertextually when the “I” of “The Legacy” who “die[s] as often as from thee I go”⁶⁹ and the “I” of this poem who “die[d] but once”⁷⁰ fracture apart with the ambiguous lie. The lying thus destabilizes both poems, but it also helps to stabilize them as belonging to the same infected body of work. The contagion which plagues them is irresolvable, as each poem bounces back and forth between falsehood and truth when read against the other, shifting from well to ill to well in the same cyclical illness depicted again and again in Donne’s poetry.

The multiplicity of the narratorial voice is thus the foundation of the community constituted by contagion, as it allows for the possibility of communicating between one’s selves. Each “I” is also “Other.” In Chapter One of this project, Emile Benveniste was quoted to illuminate the fixity of third person pronouns as opposed to first and second person pronouns, but the here a quote from the same passage sheds different light. Benveniste writes, “There is no ‘object’ definable as *I* to which these instances can refer in identical fashion. Each I has its own

⁶⁹ John Donne, “The Legacy,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 13.

⁷⁰ John Donne, “The Paradox,” in *John Donne: Selected Poems*, ed. Ilona Bell (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 53.

reference and corresponds each time to a unique being who is set up as such.”⁷¹ Every time, the “I” produced by the act of writing or speaking is new and limited. Every time, a new referent is at stake. The problem of originary contagion is bound up in the paradox of this absolute and yet reiterative subject, which is constituted in the same image of love and of death. Each time “I” is both the complete authority over its own subjectivity and only part of a whole. Love is both singular and temporary, both true and false at once. And finally death is both the outcome and the possibility. Therefore, in Donne’s romantic poetry, death, love, and subjectivity itself are all embedded in the framework that has come to be defined by illness and all experienced as that same cyclical relationality transmitted by Donne’s written word.

⁷¹ Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 218.

IV

“Not A Little Infected With It”: Contagion and the Critic

Examining the critical response to John Donne’s poetry, it is clear that for some critics, what is communicated by the poetry is contagion itself. Donne’s cyclical illness paradigm is pervasively present in the written response to his work, whether those writing were celebrating or denouncing Donne’s style and skill; regardless of whether they were in favor of the model, his critics could not help but participate in the system which Donne sets up, as the attempts to negate or push against it affirmed its communicatory principles as well as praise did. The oscillation in Donne’s critical reputation, for example, perfectly embodies the model of illness established in his poetry as he is well regarded, ill regarded, and then well again. The deferral of death is especially apparent in the fulfillment of this pattern, as so long as there is regard, ill or well, Donne and his poetry live on. But this model is present also within the individual pieces of criticism in addition to being an observable trend in his critical reputation over time, and it is in these instances that it is most apparent that Donne’s paradigms are visible even in the criticism which really does critique him. One such response appeared in *The Guardian* in 1713 stating the following:

Our writers generally crowd into one Song Materials enough for several; and so they starve every Thought, by endeavouring to purse up more than one at a time... [O]f all our Countrymen, none are more defective in their Songs, through a Redundancy of Wit, than Dr. Donne and Mr. Cowley. In them one Point of Wit flashes so fast upon another, that the Reader’s Attention is dazzled by the continual sparkling of their Imagination; you

find a new Design started in almost every Line, and you come to the end, without the Satisfaction of seeing any one of them executed.⁷²

This redundancy, the notion that the poems play with words that are ultimately not going anywhere, can be tied to the cyclical logic of these words, much like those which characterize the opening stanza of “A Fever.” Indeed, “A Fever” displays just the dazzling and flashing wit that is so criticized here, as each stanza brings a new conceit. First he desperately begs her not to die and then he changes the rules so that she cannot do so. The poem that is begun in the first stanza is almost unravelled by the second, and the work thus becomes about change in a way that admittedly does not bear out the consequences of any one of the single stanzas. Although the author of this letter does not seem to like poetry, he or she does seem to understand the way it works, feeling the back and forth of the content in a way that leaves one dazzles and perhaps slightly dizzy.

Others criticize Donne in a more paradoxical way, objecting to the cyclical style which characterizes his works while absorbing the paradigm of illness that supports them into their criticism. Though they hold unfavorable views, they have caught the sense of contagion. In 1754, David Hume wrote the following about the tradition in which Donne was writing: “Though the age was by no means destitute of eminent writers, a very bad taste in general prevailed during that period; and the monarch himself was not a little infected with it.”⁷³ The literary taste embodied by men like Donne warped one’s sense of quality literature and perhaps worse than that, was transmittable to the surrounding society. One of the great features of illness is that in

⁷² *The Guardian*, March 30, 1713, quoted in A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 185.

⁷³ David Hume, *The History of England: 1754-62*, (1813), 171, quoted in A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 212.

the absence of effective medicinal resources, it does not discriminate, affecting anyone from the lowest servant to the highest ruler. With his emphatic emphasis on the King-- the “monarch *himself* (emphasis mine)”-- Hume makes clear that this infection does indeed go all the way to the top. It is not something that can be stamped out by the best tutors or the most available reading material. Surely if it could be staved off by means of wealth and privilege, the king would have been spared, but in this case, that was not to be.

The critic Robert Southey would push this metaphor even closer to Donne, explicitly invoking contagion and the spread through cultural contact in a way that allows for the retrospective construction of the same community of the infected that Donne’s poetry might have created originally. Describing Donne’s work, he writes:

That style of poetry belongs to it which Johnson has called the metaphysical... Whether this style spread like a contagion from Italy to Spain and England, or whether it originated in the intellectual temperature of the age, and thus became endemic in three countries, may be questioned.⁷⁴

What apparently may not be questioned is that the style is a disease, contagious or endemic. If the former, however, Southey specifically traces it back to social interactions held in each of the three countries. In a footnote to this suggestion, he writes, “Donne passed some years in Italy and in Spain; he therefore may be supposed to have contracted the fashion in these countries, having ‘returned into England perfect in their languages.’ -- Izaak Walton.”⁷⁵ It is specifically speaking to and associating with people from these countries which may have allowed Donne to become the vehicle for contagion. Having “contracted” this style from someplace else, Donne is thus

⁷⁴ Robert Southey, *The Life of William Cowper*, quoted in A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 285.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

framed as both infected and infecting, leaning into the sense of Donne as both the narrator in control of the text and a force upon which other parties act, a persona Donne sets up through the complicated power dynamics of his poetry. In Southey's account, it is possible that Donne is in control of the illness and that the illness is in control of Donne. Of course, the possibility also remains open that Donne and his style are a symptom rather than a cause of the disease, as Southey allows for the chance that something inherent to the contemporary intellectual culture produced the fashion and that it only shows itself through Donne in the way that a rash gives evidence of scarlet fever. Regardless of its origin, however, Southey is clear that something is spreading, and the meta-textual circumstances of this quotation prove him right. Southey quotes Walton on Donne in a footnote which is then printed by A.J. Smith in a compendium of criticism and ultimately embedded in this text. A simple fact about Donne's linguistic abilities is distilled four times to get to the current reader, having passed through four different literary lenses, and as such, what makes it most interesting at this point is not even really the content but the chain of communication involved in reproducing it.

The sense of contagion is not only limited to critics who think ill of Donne, however. In fact, the transmission of concepts of contagion is perhaps even more palpable in critics who engaged favorably with Donne such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge or T. S. Eliot. On a thematic level, Coleridge's annotations on Donne's poems seem to grasp and enact the fluid boundaries between writer and reader. Writing in Charles Lamb's copy of Donne's poems, Coleridge has the following to say about "The Canonization:"

One of my favorite poems. As late as ten years ago, I used to seek and find out grand lines and fine stanzas; but my delight has been far greater since it has consisted more in

tracing the leading through thro'-out the whole. The former is too much like coveting your neighbor's goods; in the latter you merge yourself with the author, you *become He*.⁷⁶ Coleridge has given up on the excerpting which so frustrated earlier readers, the sense that, as Joseph Spence put it, Donne's poems are "nothing but a tissue of epigrams."⁷⁷ Reading the work as a whole piece allows Coleridge access to the poems as creations and access in turn to the position of creator, a position which he acts out by producing marginalia in books belonging to someone else. He can only produce such marginalia as this, which is specifically commentary on the poems which appear in these pages as opposed to doodles or unrelated personal thoughts, by occupying the space of the reader. However, in writing in someone else's book, he ensures that some other body will read his handwriting, taking him on as an outside authority. He may not be *the* writer in those pages-- that honor goes to Donne himself as a function of the command of the printed word-- but he is undoubtedly *a* writer. Even the mischievous half-apology he gives to Lamb for using his books in such a way claims something of the immortality typically associated with writers. "I shall die soon, my dear Charles Lamb," writes Coleridge, "and then you will not be vexed that I had describbled your book."⁷⁸ The inscription ensures that Coleridge will persist through his marginalia, as it infects its reader with guilt for having been vexed. Without this melodramatic note, the writer of the marginalia and that which he wrote might simply have faded into anonymity-- out of sight out of mind. But in invoking his own death, Coleridge ensures that

⁷⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notes Theological, Political, and Miscellaneous* (1853), 255-261, quoted in A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 268.

⁷⁷ Joseph Spence, *Quelque Remarques Hist: sur les Poets Anglois, ?1732-3*, quoted in J.M. Oxborn, "The First History of English Poetry," in *Pope and His Contemporaries*, ed. J.L. Clifford and L.A. Landa (Oxford: 1949), 247, quoted in A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 195-6.

⁷⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notes Theological, Political, and Miscellaneous* (1853), 255-261, quoted in A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 265.

the more Lamb tries to push this out of his mind or the more upset he becomes at the transgression, the more guilt he feels, and the more vividly Coleridge is thus represented, demonstrating the same constitution by negation employed by Donne in his poetry. Furthermore, in another way true to the subsequent historical reality, Coleridge might be insinuating that after his death, Lamb will be glad to have these annotations both as something to remember him by and as an artifact of literary value due to the insight they provide into Coleridge's own reading and critical habits. They will be something of the poet which remains alive and relevant even after his death, and in fact, the annotations are not printed until 1853, some years after the poet's death,⁷⁹ when Coleridge's then finite body of writing was all the more valuable because of its limitedness. Donne's persona is in fact so contagious that it is passed through the poetry unto Coleridge, who inhabits it by acting in turn on the poetry, strengthening the communal nature of the company of readers and writers.

Eliot, however, is perhaps the critic whose relationship with Donne best exemplifies the contagious community built by Donne's poetry, as Eliot's influence over the school of New Criticism helped return Donne's reputation to a favorable place. As both a poet himself and a reader through his capacity as a critic, Eliot inhabited both the readerly and writerly positions needed to transmit Donne's infection. As George Williamson claims, "Most of the contemporary poets who have been influenced by Donne have been influenced by those aspects of him which T. S. Eliot has made accessible to our time."⁸⁰ It is not simply Donne with whom the poets in the early twentieth century were interacting, but Donne made legible through Eliot, and in making him so legible, Eliot thus inscribed himself into the chain of contamination. Without the

⁷⁹ A.J. Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 265.

⁸⁰ George Williamson, "Donne and the Poetry of Today," in *A Garland for John Donne: 1631-1931*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), 155.

discussion of critics like Eliot, the literary disease that Donne had spread so effectively in prior centuries might have died out, but Eliot's contraction of the illness and subsequent dissemination ensured that Donne's poetry would not be relegated to a single historical moment. Williamson continues:

In nothing are Donne and Eliot more alike than in the fact that each has taught his fellow poets what it means to be 'contemporary.' The immediate result in both cases has been that their idioms have become extremely contagious and their attitudes the attitude of a generation. To be contemporary in the right sense means to find the peculiar emotional tension of the time and to mould language to its expression.⁸¹

In Williamson's account, that which is most "contagious" about the two poets is their usage of idioms, a type of speech which relies upon in-groups and out-groups with meaning generated from a cultural and social context rather than from an objective technical definition. Their outlandish linguistic frameworks, as by necessity idioms make little sense when taken literally, are nonetheless transmitted successfully to the writing populations of their times such that they contaminate the culture. The idiomatic expressions are singular enough to be transmitted, unique enough to be reiterable, functioning as death does in Donne's poetry. The idiom stands as the limit of language, as one of the outermost constructions that can be understood as connotation strains against denotation, and yet it is also a space of linguistic freedom and possibility, where anything can mean whatever one wants it to mean, a fact in which poets inventing their own idioms must revel. Eliot's position thus renders him the perfect character to join Donne's community, as he is both someone who can be identified with Donne and someone who can be

⁸¹ Ibid., 165.

distanced from him, someone close enough in kind to carry and transmit the same infection Donne peddled three centuries prior but different enough to transmute it for the modern era. But perhaps most importantly, he was someone with an audience as both a poet and a critic, which obscures the origin and blurs the line between production and reproduction in much the same way that Donne's passing over the moment of infection in his poetry allows for the possibility of Donne's existence as infected and infecting, both a victim and a perpetrator.

Eliot's own account of the rise in Donne's popularity describes this paradox of originary contagion just as Donne does, as he recounts how he came into contact with Donne again and again in his academic career. He writes:

Professor Briggs used to read, with great persuasiveness and charm, verses of Donne to the Freshmen at Harvard assembled in what was called, as I remember, 'English A.' I confess that I have now forgotten what Professor Briggs told us about the poet; but I know that whatever he said, his own words and his quotations were enough to attract to private reading at least one Freshman who had already absorbed some of the Elizabethan dramatists, but who had not yet approached the metaphysicals.⁸²

Donne came to Eliot mediated already through another source, as the "persuasiveness and charm" of Professor Briggs cannot be discounted in the allure of Donne's work such that one must consider it Briggs' Donne which caught Eliot's attention as opposed to Donne alone. In much the same way that Donne comes to be composed of his various ailments in "The Canonization," his poetry here is composed of the various mediating forces which have an effect on it. However, what is perhaps more striking is that Eliot does not remember what he was told

⁸² Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," in *A Garland for John Donne: 1631-1931*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1958), 3.

about Donne. The actual original point of contact is lost to him. He can only remember going back to Donne's writings on his own, after the fact.

Indeed, the course of study which Eliot builds on this empty center is one which he replicates again and again in relation to Donne, as he depicts a modern society in which everyone is studying Donne and yet no one is studying Donne. He writes:

[W]hen I came to London I heard more of Donne, in social conversation, that I had heard before. It was partly because Desmond MacCarthy talked enthusiastically about Donne; and everyone knew that MacCarthy had for years been designing to write a book about him. MacCarthy's book, I am sorry to say, has not yet been written-- no one really expected that it would be.⁸³

Eliot encounters Donne specifically in social conversation, not professional conversation, getting at the social aspect of the antisocial condition of contagion, while also demonstrating the emptiness of it. The conversation Eliot describes is one in which society members discuss the intention of discussing Donne, as what is contagious is apparently contagion itself. Donne's practice of threatening his beloved with threatenings in "The Apparition" relies upon this same full yet empty structure, for in threatening to threaten or in discussing the plan to discuss, the actual threat or discussion is in some form carried out, but it is also hollowed out such that the possibility of it ever really occurring is deferred. Donne is discussed more than ever, but that discussion is framed potentially as that which holds off the substance of the discussion rather than that which creates the conditions under which it might move forward. The indefinite deferral inherent in Eliot's adverbial "yet" is presented almost as a function of the great

⁸³ Ibid.

discussion which has come before, a discussion which hinted to everyone involved that the book at hand would never come to pass.

The world of academia has no better luck with considerations of Donne's poetry, according to Eliot, who describes an atmosphere in which the environment is saturated with Donne's poetry and still, a full understanding of it has not been achieved. He writes that "[B]y 1926, when I gave some lectures on Donne, the subject was already popular, almost topical; and I know that by 1931 the subject has been so fully treated that there appears to me no possible justification of turning my lectures into a book," while conceding that "It is not exactly that anyone has actually written a definitive book."⁸⁴ For Eliot, this is a function of Donne's re-emergence as a temporarily culturally relevant force. However, for Donne, this contagion without substance is indicative of a cycle which he has already set in motion with his poetry, something which is inherent in that first vocative O with which this project of comprehension began.

The O was empty and full, artificial and sincere, constitutive and constituted, and as it turns out, it is also a representative model to use to convey the essence of Donne's poetry, which is also all of those things. Infinite in its finitude, the closer one looks the more generalized the discussions must become until discussions of a topical theme such as illness give way to discussions of the operation of language itself. The spread of Donne is thus framed and enacted as a contentless contagion, in which everyone knows *about* his poetry but few *know* his poetry, in which his poetry can be discussed but in which discussing it too closely causes it to vapour with one's breath. Like the illness which is a metaphor for metaphor itself, for the sliding scale

⁸⁴ Ibid., 4.

of signification, one can never quite get at Donne's poetry, as it is always deferred by the still distant "yet," even amongst academic circles, while the poetry itself simultaneously gets at the reader.

V

Post-Script

At the risk of this becoming too autobiographical, I would like to conclude with a brief note about my own inscription into Donne's project of production and reproduction and the communication of communicability. As I was writing my acknowledgments for this thesis project, thinking intently about my first experience in the classroom with Professor Pye, I realized that it was through him that I first encountered John Donne. At first, I had given the credit for introducing me to the poet to Professor Kleiner, with whom I studied the following semester and indeed did read my first of Donne's poems. However, upon reflection it occurred to me that I encountered Donne in just the way that T.S. Eliot describes in Chapter Four of this project-- as structure but not content.

I encountered Donne through an essay by John Guillory on canon formation,⁸⁵ which looked specifically at T.S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks and their participation in the construction of a canon at the start of the twentieth century and the subsequent inclusion of Donne in this canon. Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*,⁸⁶ which utilizes a close reading of "The Canonization" in order to establish paradox as the language of poetry, is discussed at length by Guillory, who takes the opportunity Brooks neglects to pun on the process of "canonization" in service of his own argument, and as such, my first introduction to Donne was through Professor Pye's reading of Guillory's reading of Brooks' reading of Donne, but for me, at the time, there was nothing in that center. Donne was a poet of whom I had never heard and whose work I had definitely not read,

⁸⁵ John Guillory, "The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (1983), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343411>.

⁸⁶ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1975).

and as such, I was tasked with retrospectively reconstructing the poetry as I understood it, having been filtered through these various critics. I was compelled to inhabit the writerly space of John Donne, but I was working backwards with the hope of meeting him in the middle, which in this case meant John Guillory's article. In balancing these readings of his work against each other, I enacted exactly the relationality which is found in Donne's poetry, discovering and trampling over the unstable boundaries between text and context, between inside and outside the poetry that he established and that the subsequent critics highlighted. I participated unknowingly in Donne's reiterable contagious communication, coming unflinchingly into contact with the paradox of originary contagion without even recognizing it as a paradox, and I have been attempting to participate knowingly ever since.

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