

THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNITY  
BEHIND JOHN DONNE'S SONGS AND SONNETS

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## THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNITY BEHIND JOHN DONNE'S SONGS AND SONNETS

John Donne's Songs and Sonnets contains some of the most complex love poems in all of English literature. The group is composed of some fifty poems dealing with various love themes, ranges of moods, and dramatic situations. All aspects of love between men and women are considered. All that is but one. Donne never speaks in the voice of one who is overwhelmed with love nor does he fall at the feet of his lady and adore her for her virtue.<sup>1</sup> But all other voices appear throughout the poems: that of the cynical lover who loves both "fair and brown," that of the witty seducer who uses a flea to entice his mistress, that of the disdainful lover who chides the sun for disturbing him and his mistress, that of the vindictive lover who curses his former mistress, that of the lover who regrets having a Platonic relationship with one who is too true, and finally, that of the contented lover who finds complete happiness in his beloved's arms. The combinations and situations seem almost endless, and a reader coming to the poems for the first time is awed by the variety of faces the lover in the poems assumes. Scholars from H.J.C. Grierson to Helen Gardner have paid ample tribute to this kaleidoscope of situations found in the Songs and Sonnets, and they have highly praised the wit of a poet who could at one moment wear the face of a libertine rake and at the next the face of a contented, devoted lover. But one of the most significant aspects of these poems is not the variety of love which they display,

but rather the uniformity of an overall philosophy of love which they reveal. This aspect of the poems has only been suggested by recent critics of Donne and has yet to be completely examined.

That is not to say that John Donne's philosophy of love has failed to interest the critical world. H.J.C. Grierson, who first mentioned this subject in the introduction to his classic edition of the poems in 1912, argued with great conviction that Donne in his rebellion against the Petrarchan love convention is more than just a dissatisfied poet rebuking an outdated tradition. Rather he is a poet of deep feeling and insight who, if not a philosopher in the truest sense of the term, is nevertheless capable of conveying the fullness of his relationships, whether real or imaginary. In fact, Grierson maintained that in "the simple and purer, the more ideal and tender of Donne's love-poems,"<sup>2</sup> he suggests "a new philosophy of love which, if less transcendent than that of Dante, rests on a greater, because less dualistic and ascetic, conception of man and woman."<sup>3</sup> These poems were, Grierson believed, written to Donne's wife Ann More, and they demonstrated a frankness and honesty toward the ideal love relationship that was often lacking in the earlier writers in the Petrarchan tradition. From Donne's rebellion against the Petrarchan tradition of love there emerged "a justification of love as a natural passion in the human heart the meaning and end of which is marriage."<sup>4</sup> In this treatment of ideal love Donne sought to do "justice to love as a passion in which body and soul alike have their part, and of which there is no need to repent."<sup>5</sup> This justification of natural love as fullness of joy and life is, according to Grierson, the deepest thought in Donne's love poems, "far deeper and sincerer than the Platonic conceptions of the affinity and identity of souls with which he plays in



some of the verses addressed to Mrs. Herbert."<sup>6</sup> Grierson made it clear, however, that he saw no philosophical connection between those "more ideal and tender" of Donne's poems and those that deal with the sensuality and exaggerated cynicism of the libertine lover. The connection that he did see is one of intense passion that dominates both types of poems. "The passion that burns in Donne's most outspoken elegies, and wanton Epithalamia," and we might add, with Grierson's consent, in the more outrageously cynical poems of the Songs and Sonnets, "is not cast out in The Anniversarie or The Canonization, but absorbed. It is purified and enriched by being brought into harmony with his whole nature, spiritual as well as physical. It has lost the exclusive consciousness of itself which is lust, and become merged in an entire affection, as a turbid and discolored stream is lost in the sea."<sup>7</sup> Passion, then, became for Grierson the unifying element in Donne's poetry, and the philosophy of love, which must not, after all, be taken too seriously, was secondary to the wit and passion of the poet. Grierson's emphasis on Donne's wit and his concept of the poet's philosophy was generally accepted throughout the twenties and thirties. Donne was heralded as the original thinker of his day, a man three hundred years ahead of his contemporaries in his attitudes about love, and he was praised for his unique, twentieth-century attitudes about the complexities and ambiguities arising from man's natural desires and needs in love.<sup>8</sup>

A growing antagonism toward this conception of Donne as a "modern" lover began in the forties, however, and reached its climax with the publication of J. B. Leishman's Monarch of Wit in 1951. Leishman attempted to place Donne back in his seventeenth century context, and he studied the poet's work, not as an example of a writer in revolt, but rather as a distinct product of certain defined movements in the late sixteenth and

early seventeenth-century literature. Like Grierson, Leishman tried to separate the purely witty poems from the more serious poems in the Songs and Sonnets, but he tended to read the more serious poems as an attempt by the poet to understand and communicate the mysteries of mutual love. The more cynical poems were inspired, he believed, by the poet's reading of Ovid. Thus no philosophy of love was intended in the poems. Most of the poems, Leishman felt, were merely displays of exaggerated wit and did not qualify as serious philosophic speculations about love. "For a philosophical poem," he said, "is one in which the author, whether or no he employs traditional or technical philosophic concepts, is trying to express, according to the laws of poetic beauty and truth, a vision, or part of a vision, of life, of existence, as a whole." He goes on to say:

. . . in the Songs and Sonnets and elsewhere, we shall sometimes find him making a more serious use of scholastic or philosophical concepts, using them not merely for fun, as it were, but in order to illuminate portions of his experience; nevertheless, I doubt whether even on the strength of such poems he may appropriately be called a metaphysical poet . . . . In fact, he might far more appropriately be called an argumentative or dialectical than a metaphysical poet . . . . For it is not merely his logical or argumentative capacity that distinguishes and differentiates a philosopher or a philosophic poet: it is, as I have said, his capacity to see life as a whole, to apprehend the meaning of life as a whole. . . . The arguments employed by Donne, however logical, concentrated and consecutive, are seldom more than half-serious; that element of wit of detachment, on which I have so often insisted, is nearly always present.<sup>9</sup>

For Leishman, then, Donne is not a visionary lover who, in rebelling against the sweetness of the Petrarchan poets, establishes a "new philosophy" of love. Indeed, he is not even a philosophical poet in the truest sense of the term. He is argumentative, witty, and delightfully passionate, but in his poetry we can trace the influences of his age. His phi-

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losophy, if such it may be called, is composed of elements from Ovid, Petrarch, and personal experience but in his poems there is no attempt to present a unified concept of love.

In 1959, A.J. Smith, following Leishman's advice to study Donne in the context of his own period, presented a fresh look at Donne's "new philosophy." In his essay "The Metaphysic of Love,"<sup>10</sup> Smith maintained that we must go outside Donne's poetry to the literary context of his period. We must not, in other words, look for Donne's personal psychological adjustment or his personal philosophical outlook in the poems because they are written within a long tradition. "We are at least becoming aware," he wrote, " . . . that our primary office for this poet is not to invest him with current aims and seek covert reports on his psychological condition, but discarding our determinedly inward-focused modern spectacles, to establish a full technical context and to trace material sources."<sup>11</sup> Smith then proceeded to give the historical background for the concept of "oneness" in pure love that Grierson had called Donne's "new philosophy," tracing the concept to its Italian sources, and showing that the idea owed its popularity to the work of Ficino and the great Neoplatonists of Florence. "There was," he wrote, "general agreement that the chief effect of the higher kinds of human love was the conjoining of the souls of the lovers to make a perfect union, or unity."<sup>12</sup> The joining of two souls to form a new whole required "what Leone Ebreo called 'the ecstasy,' or alienation, produced by amorous meditation. This love-ecstasy was sometimes said to be brought on above all when 'we direct our eyes in the face, and in the eyes of the person who so much pleases us . . . ; the effect of which was that for the marvel of it we became as persons stupefied.'"<sup>13</sup> It is just this concept, according to Smith, that Donne

explored in "The Exstasie." After analyzing the poem in light of this philosophical background, Smith came to the conclusion that very little of the poem reflects Donne's personal philosophy, that it is rather a witty handling of a well established concept. "It is the play of the figure which is original," he commented, "not the idea."<sup>14</sup>

In Smith's remark we have come to an about-face on the issue of Donne's concept of love in the Songs and Sonnets. Grierson's contention that a "new philosophy" of love emerges from Donne's poetry finds little support in Smith's detailed study of the Italian influences in Donne's verse, and more recent critics have tended to accept Smith's view of the poems and deny or ignore the existence of any personal philosophy reflected in the poems. This tendency is most notably displayed by Helen Gardner in the introduction to her 1965 edition of the poems. She notes that Donne deserves his reputation as one of our greatest love poets, not because he offers us any unique view of love, but because he shows us love in all its variety. We are not to look for philosophical insight from one of our greatest love poets, but rather to appreciate the witty manner in which he handles numerous love themes and to admire the dramatic intensity created in each situation. Gardner goes on to assure us that in isolating Donne's Platonic poems from his more cynical ones, she is not suggesting any personal philosophic interest on Donne's part. In the Platonic poems Donne, she says, is merely writing about the theme of mutual love, and if she calls them philosophic, it is only with the proviso that she does not intend by this "to suggest that they were written to expound a philosophy of love."<sup>15</sup>

Although, as she explains elsewhere, she cannot believe that "Donne's poetry has no relation to the development of his moral, intellectual, and emotional life,"<sup>16</sup> she does deny that Donne has any specific message to

give us about love. He is merely trying to express in a dramatic manner some of the theories he had been studying about love. At one moment he may wear the mask of Ovid, but the next the mask of a contented lover. While he may in some poems deal with the concept of love as union, he does not intend anything beyond the mere exaltation of that union as an end in itself."

Undoubtedly, according to Gardner, Donne's imagination seized on the Neoplatonic concept of love as a union, but he ignored the philosophy of which it is part.<sup>17</sup> Like Leishman and Smith, Gardner sees little in the Songs and Sonnets that could be construed as a personal philosophy. For Gardner the value of the Songs and Sonnets lies in the witty and intellectual manner in which they handle certain themes current in seventeenth century literature, and not necessarily in any unified insight they may give into the complex mysteries of loving. Thus in her remarks, she comes perilously close to returning to a view of Donne paralleling Dr. Johnson's on the metaphysical poets in general, that to show their wit and learning was their whole endeavor.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, we have reached a new epoch in Donne scholarship with the publication of Gardner's edition of the Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets. For the first time an effort has been made to arrange the poems in a chronological sequence. Unlike previous editors, Gardner decided not to follow the ordering of the 1633 edition in which the poems appear to have been "flung together at the end so carelessly that youthful extravagances of witty sensuality and pious aspiration jostle each other cheek by jowl."<sup>19</sup> Instead she attempts to classify the Songs and Sonnets by objective criteria, namely metrical form, textual data, manuscript authority, and theme. She divides them into two distinct groups, those written before 1600 and those written after 1600, when Donne married Ann More. Interestingly enough, most of the cynical poems appear in the

first group and most of the Platonic poems appear in the second. If we accept this division of the poems, it is now possible to trace the intellectual development of the writer from his earlier to his later poetry.

One such study has recently been made by Roger Sharrock who, in his essay, "Wit, Passion and Ideal Love: Reflections on the Cycle of  
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 Donne's Reputation," has again hinted that there is indeed a unified philosophy of love that emerges from the Songs and Sonnets. Basing his study on Gardner's division of the poetry into early and later poems, Sharrock notes that the specifically Platonic poems have been isolated for the first time in Gardner's edition, and that we are now in a position to analyze the poetry in light of the theory expressed in these later Platonic poems. Following the lead of Smith and Gardner, Sharrock views Donne's philosophy as one based on the Platonic theory of man's hermaphroditic nature before the Fall and his subsequent division from one sexless entity into man and woman. In his poetry, Donne portrays perfect love as the means of spiritually reuniting the two elements of man, male and female, to create a new and entire spiritual being that transcends the physical and temporal world around it. Thus, Donne's lovers become a "new world" separate and apart from the fallen world in which they find themselves. Sharrock believes that this Platonic concept of "one of two" underlies all of the poems in the Songs and Sonnets. He tends to deny, for the most part, Donne's emphasis on physical union of the lovers, who must return to their bodies, "not in order to copulate and provide what would satisfy some critics as a satisfactory balance of soul and body but in order to be an example  
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 to the world."

Although Sharrock has undoubtedly made a major contribution to the understanding of Donne's concept of love through his insistence



that the poems are philosophically related, he has not gone far enough in his definition of that concept. Like Gardner and Smith before him, Sharrock seems content to present Donne's philosophy as a simpler version of that found in Ebreo, and in doing so he opens himself up for the same charges that William Empson leveled at Gardner in his review of her edition:

. . . she wants the poet's head to be practically empty till he is converted to platonism. During the leisure after his marriage he is to discover Leone Ebreo, who had published in 1535, and use his ideas for daydreams. But the main claim of Donne's early poetry, which must have been recognized as he founded schools of satirists, was to revolt against the platonizing then current and let in the fresh air of realism. Of course he knew about the things he excluded; you might as well say he didn't know classical mythology. Later (though before the turn of the century, I think) he took to "inverted platonism"; but this was very different from copying out the simplicities of Ebreo, whom he would have considered out of date when he began his career. It is by the easy device of ascribing all poems which make thoughtful reflections about love, however boyish, to this late date that Professor Gardner builds up her striking picture.<sup>22</sup>

Just such a picture of Donne as the late Neoplatonist is presented in Sharrock's work. Though he has demonstrated a fascination in the early poems for the ideal union of lovers, he has not demonstrated how such poems, written presumably before Donne read the theory of Ebreo, could be related to the philosophy found in the later poems. They could only be related if Donne already had, as a young man of the world, a belief in the validity of the ideal love relationship, not as an end in itself, as Professor Gardner would have us believe, but as a means to fulfillment of man's destiny in the universe, a destiny which included man's procreation as well as his perfection of spirit. Thus, the concept of ideal love takes on a much deeper meaning than the critics have allowed.

Furthermore, there is too much insistence in Sharrock's work, as indeed there is in the writings of Smith and Gardner, on the unification of the souls and too little emphasis on the unification of the bodies in Donne's verse. In their attempts to place Donne in a long established tradition, they have overlooked what Grierson describes as a "justification of love as a natural passion in the heart." They fail to realize the significance of the fact that Donne conceives the theory of oneness in terms of a physical as well as a spiritual fulfillment, indeed that he conceives a fulfillment of the spiritual only through the physical or sensual being, and, finally, that he sees the procreation of man as the natural result of such a fulfillment. It is only in poems dealing with the entirety of this theory that Donne reaches a full expression of his concept of love in the Songs and Sonnets. While it will not be possible in the scope of this paper to treat Donne's philosophy of love completely as it is found in all of the poems, we can attempt to define its parameters in those dealing with the philosophy in its totality and seek some evidence of its development in his earlier verse. But before we look at these poems which are basic to an understanding of Donne's philosophy, we must first look briefly at the tradition out of which they grew.

Donne's philosophy grew out of a traditional view of love associated initially with Plato, specifically those views of love expressed in his Symposium. Donne probably adopted for his own purposes Plato's story in the Symposium of man's fall. This story dealt with man's hermaphroditic nature at the beginning of the world. According to the story, when man fell by his own rebellion the gods bisected him, thus creating man and woman. Because man seeks to regain his former oneness, mutual attraction--mutual love--was the natural child of this cleavage, and the man and



woman could only regain their former purity by rejoining with each other.<sup>23</sup> The desire for union between the unnaturally separated lovers became the explanation for man's passionate nature, and the complete union of lovers became the symbol of pure love for the Italian Neoplatonists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, one of these Italian Neoplatonists, Leone Ebreo, discusses this concept in great detail in his Philosophy of Love, relating man's union with woman to his eventual spiritual repair after the Fall:

From that time forth, love, which heals man's wounds and restores the unity of his primeval nature, was engendered amongst men; and by its restoration of two into one it is the remedy of the sin which led to one being made into two. Love in every man is, therefore, male and female, for each of them is but a half and not a whole man, and therefore desires to be made whole in its other half. Wherefore, according to this legend, human love was born of the division of man. And its parents were the two halves, both male and female, loving each other that they might achieve their former unity.<sup>25</sup>

Love, then, leads man to his spiritual fulfillment. It is the "remedy" of man's original sin, and through it man can regain his former divinity and oneness. It is this ideal of natural attraction and mutual love that Donne borrows from the Platonic tradition, and in his verse he strives, with an almost religious intensity, to convey the kind of love "which heals man's wounds and restores the unity of his primeval nature."

This Platonic theme of "two into one," with its emphasis on the physical and spiritual union of the lovers, was later espoused by Castiglione in the fourth book of his Book of the Courtier through the character of Maister Pietro Bembo. Bembo, discussing the virtuous state of ideal love, stresses the importance of the physical senses as a means of uniting the spiritual or intellectual souls of the lovers and justifies physical union on the grounds that it is necessary to release the souls of the

enraptured pair of lovers:

Therefore the woman to please her good lover, beside the graunting him mery countenances, familiar and secret talke, jeasting, dalying, hand in hand, may also lawfully and without blame come to kissing: which in sensual love according to Lord Julian's rules, is not lawful. For since a kisse is a knitting together both of bodie and soule, it is to bee feared, lest the sensuall lover will be more enclined to the part of the bodie, than to the soule: but the reasonable lover woteth well, that although the mouth be a parcell of the bodie, yet is it an issue for the wordes, that be the interpreters of the soule, and for the inwarde breath which is also called the soule.

And therefore hath a delite to joyne his mouth with the womans beloved with a kisse: not to stirre him to any dishonest desire, but because hee feeleth that that bond is the opening of an entrie to the soules, which drawne with a coveting the one of the other, poure them selves by turne the one into the others bodie, and bee so mingled together, that each of them hath two soules.

And one alone so framed of them both ruleth (in a manner) two bodies.<sup>26</sup>

When physical union is achieved by such "reasonable lovers," so powerful is the effect that each lover's soul is translated to the other, creating a new soul in both "so framed of them both" that it rules as "one alone." Donne will make good use of this idea in his own expression of ideal love, but Castiglione advances the concept of perfect union to its ultimate Platonic conclusion. The souls of the pair transcend their bodies and attain a purified state which removes them from the physical world and its natural passions. "A kisse," Bembo continues, "may be said to be rather a coupling together of the soule, than of the body, because it hath such force in her, that it draweth her unto it, and (as it were) separateth her from the bodie. For this doe all chaste lovers covet a kisse, as a coupling of soules together. And therefore Plato the divine lover saith, that in kissing, his soule came as farre as his lippes to depart out of the bodie."<sup>27</sup> Thus the kiss becomes the avenue by which

the souls can escape the confines of the lesser sensual world and ascend into the higher realms of intellectual contemplation of the ideal, an act possible, as Bembo says, only in "reasonable lovers" who seek more than mere sensual gratification. The inferior state of the sensual body is abandoned for the purity of the divine union of the souls. The body as an inferior element in the love relationship functions solely as an instrument for the coupling of the souls. The lovers must eventually transcend the sensual desires of their corporeal natures to experience the highest perfection of their love.

In the Platonic doctrine of love, then, the lovers in their quest for pure love ascend from the sensual into a spiritual union. The body and its natural passions are eventually discarded in the ecstasy of pure ideal love. This emphasis on the body as a lower element in the love relationship is not an exclusive element of Neoplatonic idealism, but it is an important one, and we find it widely expressed throughout sixteenth-century English literature. We find it in Edmund Spenser, for example, who is probably one of the greatest English proponents of Neoplatonism in the century.<sup>28</sup> Although he reflects other philosophical elements in his verse besides Neoplatonism, Spenser does present many characteristics of that philosophy which were currently held in his period. Thus, if he accentuates physical beauty and the fruition of physical love in a poem such as the Epithalamion, he makes it clear that the contemplation of beauty in the features of his mistress is justified because it will eventually lead to a contemplation of her divine virtues. This transcendence from the lower physical realms to the spiritual realms of love is aptly depicted in the progression of the Epithalamion. After lushly describing the bride's goodly eyes, her forehead white, her lips like

cherries, her breasts like cream, her paps like lilies budded, and her snowy neck, the poet notes a higher beauty that lies beyond the lower planes of sensual apprehension:

But if ye saw that which no eyes can see,  
 The inward beauty of her lively spright,  
 Garnisht with heauenly guifts of high degree,  
 Much more then would ye wonder at that sight,  
 And stand astonisht lyke to those which red  
 Medusaes mazeful hed.  
 There dwels sweet loue and constant chastity,  
 Vnspotted fayth and comely womanhood,  
 Regard of honour and mild modesty,  
 There vertue raynes as Queene in royal throne,  
 And giueth lawes alone,  
 The which the base affections doe obay,  
 And yeeld theyr seruices vnto her will,  
 Ne thought of think vncomely euer may  
 Thereto approach to tempt her mind to ill.  
 Had ye once seene these her celestial treasures,  
 And vnreuealed pleasures,  
 Then would ye wonder and her prayses sing,  
 That al the woods should answer, and your echo ring.<sup>29</sup>

That "inward beauty" of the lady where "virtue raynes" and controls "the base affections" is far worthier the poet's contemplation than her mere physical beauties. However, it is only after contemplating her outward beauty which is created by God that the poet reaches that plane of moral perfection when he can see and present in his poem that inward beauty "which no eyes can see." For a moment he enters into a higher realm and attempts to describe the qualities of eternal Beauty possessed by his bride, but in the end he can only stand astonished at her "celestial treasures." Indeed, in "An Hymne in Honour of Beautie" the poet notes that whatever excites man's desire does so because it is created by God and reflects His beauty:

. . . as every earthly thing partakes  
 Of more or lesse, by influence diuine,  
 So it more faire accordingly it makes,  
 And the grosse matter of this earthly myne,

Which clotheth it, thereafter doth refyne,  
 Doing away the drosse which dims the light  
 Of that faire beame which therein is empight,  
 (11. 43-49)<sup>30</sup>

For Spenser physical love is an important aspect of the ideal relationship, but it is not important simply because it gratifies the sensual desires of the lovers. It is important because it is the medium through which the lovers may enter into a more perfect understanding of the divine nature of ideal love. There is obviously a great deal of Augustinian Christianity mixed with Spenser's Neoplatonism, but in his poetry he emphasizes the ascendance of the spiritual element in pure love. He does not treat sensual enjoyment as an end in itself or as a purely negative or evil thing to be wholly avoided and suppressed. On the contrary, he frequently treats it as a means to a higher development of spiritual awareness between the lovers.

A much stronger statement is made against mere sexual enjoyment, even in the expression of true love, by George Chapman in his conclusion of Marlowe's Hero and Leander:

By this the soueraigne of Heauens golden fires,  
 And yong Leander, Lord of his desires,  
 Together from their louers armes arose:  
Leander into Hellespontus throwes  
 His Hero-handled bodie, whose delight  
 Made him disdaine each other Epethite.  
 And as amidst the enamourd waues he swims,  
 The God of gold of purpose guilt his lims,  
 That this word guilt of his Incontinence,  
 Might be exprest, that had no stay t'employ  
 The treasure which the loue-god let him joy  
 In his deare Hero, with such sacred thrift,  
 As had beseeemed so sanctified a gift:  
 But like a greedie vulgar Prodigall  
 Would of the stock dispend, and rudely fall  
 Before his time, to that unblest blessing,  
 Which for lusts plague doth perish with possessing.  
Joy graven in sense, like snow in water wasta;  
Without preserue of vertue nothing lasts.  
 (11. 17-36)<sup>31</sup>

Leander's sin has been, once again, the gratification of his sexual appetite without the full involvement of spiritual love that must come only through marriage. He stands condemned for the "guilt of his Incontinence," because he has enjoyed Hero out of wedlock, and their complete spiritual union is therefore impossible. There can be no "marriage of true minds" between those intent on the mere gratification of the senses for "Joy grauen in sence, like snow in water wasts:/Without preserue of vertue nothing lasts." If this emphasis on the pure union in marriage is didactic, it is also based on the Platonic concept of a perfect union between the lovers which knows no hours, days, or months, "which are the rags of time."

The tendency, then, in the Platonic love tradition, was to de-emphasize man's natural passions in order to exalt the purity of ideal love. The natural passions were not to be trusted and they were to be used only as a means of achieving a total union of the two souls. They were the means to an end—the attainment of ideal beauty or spiritual fulfillment. Once the purity of love was attained the souls of the lovers could escape the confines of their impure bodies. It is out of this tradition that Donne presumably developed his philosophy of love.

As Helen Gardner has insisted in her introduction to the poems, Donne had, in all probability, read the works of Ficino and the Neoplatonists of the Florence academy, and he was well aware of at least the argument in Leone Ebreo's Philosophy of Love.<sup>32</sup> We can see the influence of these writers in Donne's conception of pure love as the perfect union of two lovers who formed a complete new whole, a world entire unto itself. This view plays a central role in Donne's Platonic poems where the lovers are frequently referred to in terms of their mysterious oneness. Consider the following examples:



'Tis much that Glasse should bee  
 As all confessing, and through-shine as I,  
 'Tis more, that it shewes thee to thee  
 And cleare reflects thee to thine eye.  
 But all such rules, loves magique can undoe,  
 Here you see mee, and I am you.  
 ("A Valediction: of my Name in the Window," ll. 7-12)<sup>33</sup>

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

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
 Though I must goe, endure not yet  
 A breach, but an expansion,  
 Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate.  
 ("A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," ll. 17-24)

When love, with one another so  
 Interinanimates two soules,  
 That abler soule, which thence doth flow,  
 Defects of loneliness controules.  
 ("The Exstasie," ll. 41-44)

Shee'is dead; And all which die  
 To their first Elements resolve;  
 And wee were mutuall Elements to us,  
 And made of one another.  
 ("The Dissolution," ll. 1-4)

In each of these poems we see the mystical "oneness" of the lovers who through their ideal love transcend the world around them. In the first example the poet is able to see in the image of his name engraved in a glass the identities of both himself and his mistress. Like the image, which is engraved in clear glass, the poet is "all confessing" and self-revealing. Yet the same glass reflects the image of his mistress. Thus they are both, figuratively, on the glass, which represents their spiritual oneness, "Here you see mee, and I am you." In "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" and "The Exstasie" the souls of the lovers are no less joined than in the previous example. Both pairs of lovers have been so much

refined by their mutual loves that they have become spiritually united in an "abler soul." And in "The Dissolution" the spiritual union is intact though the physical union has been severed. The remaining lover will seek his spiritual whole when he, too, has resolved to his "first Element." As Sharrock has indicated, this ideal of complete spiritual oneness holds a special fascination for Donne and it is a constant theme throughout his Platonic poems. The male and female essences of his lovers join mysteriously to complete the state of man before the Fall. They become a complete creature, separate from the fallen world around them because more pure.<sup>34</sup>

But in his Platonic poems, Donne makes it quite clear that this perfect love relationship must begin and end with the human body. The lovers must return to their sensual souls to express their mutual love. It is this emphasis on the necessity of physical expression that distinguishes Donne's use of the Platonic ideal from that of others in his period, and it is only in poems that deal with this sensitive balance between the sensual and spiritual souls of man that he reaches a philosophical completeness in his poetry. In such poems oneness of the lovers is only possible through the mutual gratification of their sensual and spiritual souls.

Nowhere does Donne capture this concept of complete oneness more vividly than in "The Exstasie." One of the longest and most philosophically complex of all Donne's love lyrics, this poem has continued to attract the attention of critics seeking to understand the poet's philosophy. "No other poem," Grierson writes, "makes one realize more fully what Jonson meant by calling Donne 'the first poet in the world for some things.'"<sup>35</sup> Later critics have found the poem less satisfying than Grierson on purely aesthetic grounds, but few would doubt that it lies



at the center of Donne's vision of ideal love. As Gardner has noted, "It is a poem that only Donne could have written; and it holds the key to Donne's greatest love poetry."<sup>36</sup>

The poem begins with a brief description of the lovers sitting together holding hands and calmly staring into each other's eyes. The emphasis is on the sensual awareness that each lover has for the physical presence of his beloved. The imagery, deliciously sensuous, displays the purely carnal delight that each lover experiences. Thus we are told that their hands are "firmly cemented" with the "fast balme" of perspiring excitement, and their "Eye-beams" thread their eyes upon "one double String." The sensual appeal of this description is quite Ovidian in its eroticism, and we are at once attracted to the intensity of these lovers. In the third stanza the Platonic theme of oneness is first introduced as the desire of the pair for a complete physical uniting is described:

So to'entergraft our hands, as yet  
Was all our meanes to make us one,  
And pictures on our eyes to get  
Was all our propagation.

(ll. 9-12)

At this stage in their realization of complete union, the lovers can only join and become one through their natural senses. Their hands, for example, are "intergrafted" to form one, and each views his image in the eye of his beloved. The eye of each lover, then, contains the image of the other, and each person is figuratively joined in the body of the other. One is made from two.

With their natural desires thus united, the lovers are free to transcend their bodies and join in a spiritual contemplation of love's mystical state. The poet makes it quite clear, however, that their language is the language of pure souls, and can be understood only by someone who has

been refined by love. If he is a true Platonic lover who "by good love were grown all minde," he might even learn something from their speech and "part far purer than he came." In their "dialogue of one" the souls relate what they have learned from their mystical union. They have learned that they did not understand before what aroused their passions. Previously they had thought it was sexual attraction; now they realize that true love takes its origins from something higher than man's sensual appetites. Still, just where love's power lies is beyond their comprehension:

This Exstasie doth unperplex  
 (We said) and tell us what we love,  
 Wee see by this, it was not sexe,  
 Wee see, we saw not what did move:

But as all severall soules containe  
 Mixture of things, they know not what,  
 Love, these mixt soules, doth mixe againe,  
 And makes both one, each this and that.  
 (ll. 29-36)

True love is an unknown power that can mix souls--which are themselves composed of unknown elements--and create a completely new substance that is superior to either of its parts. This "stronger" soul is capable of bringing contentment and fulfillment to both lovers whom it unites:

When love, with one another so  
 Interinanimates two soules,  
 That abler soule, which thence doth flow,  
 Defects of lonelinesse controules.  
 (ll. 41-44)

True love, then, is based on a paradoxical situation. The lovers are united and form a new soul, stronger because more complete than the individual soul which languishes in the grip of loneliness without its other half. Each soul contributes its individuality to the newly created soul. By itself, each soul is incomplete, but in the greater soul it is fulfilled when the lovers become, as it were, paired individuals in the

most idealistic sense of the term.

Until now, Donne has closely adhered to the Platonic doctrine of love in the poem. Indeed, in the lines we have looked at, he seems to be simply restating in a dramatic manner the Platonic ideal we have previously encountered in Castiglione and the Neoplatonists of the sixteenth century. The lovers have, after the initial physical correspondence, transcended their corporeal bodies to reach a higher spiritual plane of fulfillment; they have contemplated the uniqueness of their mysterious ascension into a higher form. All of this is most certainly in the Platonic tradition, and Donne is merely exploring a commonly held view of ideal love. But at this point Donne shifts the emphasis from the spiritual union itself to the participation of the body in that union:

But O alas, so long, so farre  
Our bodies why doe wee forbear?  
They're ours, though they're not wee. Wee are  
Th'intelligences, they the speare.  
(ll. 49-52)

Throughout the remainder of the poem Donne emphasizes the importance of the body and its senses to the complete union of the souls. The bodies are the instruments of the souls, and it is only through the bodies that the souls can communicate. Man's sensual nature plays an important part in the love relationship, and it cannot be denied once the souls have reached the ideal state of perfection. On the contrary, the souls owe their ability to experience their highest form of love to the bodily senses because the senses are their only means of expressing their loneliness and longing for completeness:

As our blood labours to beget  
 Spirits, as like soules as it can,  
 Because such fingers need to knit  
 That subtile knot, which makes us man:

So must pure lovers soules descend  
 T'affections, and to faculties,  
 That sense may reach and apprehend,  
 Else a great Prince in prison lies.  
 (ll. 61-68)

The "Prince"--the greater soul--cannot be realized without the senses. For Donne, just as there is a duality of soul and body, so is there a duality of physical and spiritual fulfillment in the truly pure love relationship.

From the spiritual fulfillment grows an "abler soul" which is more pure and thus more perfect than either of the individual souls. Such is the purpose of the Platonic relationship, to purify man and raise him once again to his perfect oneness before the Fall. On the other hand, from the physical fulfillment the lovers will create another body, a child, containing part of them both and yet more pure than either of its parents. The lovers have not yet, we are told in the opening lines of the poem, the means of propagation. They can only create their image in the eye of their beloved. Before their souls join they hang for a moment like equal armies outside the bodies<sup>37</sup> until they become that "abler soul" which speaks in the language of true love and tells them the secret of their attraction for each other. It was not mere sex that attracted the lovers, but a spiritual longing to be joined into a complete oneness again. From such a union, they are told, they can, like the violet transplant, "redouble still and multiply." Thus, they return to their bodies that weak men "on love reveal'd may looke." But that love is to be seen through their conception of an offspring as well as through their ideal

spiritual oneness. The spiritual oneness of the souls will not change when they return to their bodies, but from their union a child will grow and earthly love, which leads to divine love, will be perpetuated. Donne does not intend that the lovers should merely return to their bodies in order to copulate, though this might provide what some critics would consider "a satisfactory balance of soul and body." Nor do they merely return to their bodies to be an example to the world. Instead they return to perpetuate the human race, "that weak men on love reveal'd may looke." By understanding this emphasis on human reproduction as an end result of love in "The Exstasie" we can better understand Donne's insistence on the equality of the bodies with the souls in the ideal love relationship, and the poem takes on added dimensions.<sup>38</sup>

The body, though it is less pure than the soul, is no less important in any meaningful union between lovers. It is the book in which love can be recorded; it is the instrument through which love can be experienced; and it is the means by which love can be carried on. This is the message that the Platonic lover, who has "by good love grown all minde," must heed when he hears the dialogue of the souls. He is perfectly aware of the mystical union of lovers' intelligences, but he is not aware of the necessity of sensual expression and enjoyment even after the more perfect, higher plateau has been reached. If he can comprehend the importance of the body in ideal love, he will "some new concoction take/ And part far purer than he came." This emphasis on the duality of body and soul in the total picture of ideal love is not just restatement of the Platonic theme as some of Donne's critics would like to make it. The human race, God's children, cannot be continued through Platonic love. In this matter Donne is much more realistic in his approach to the marriage of

true minds than many of his contemporaries. For him there can be no union of the minds if the instrument of their expressive powers--the body--is abandoned. Or, as Joan Bennett so aptly puts it, "For Donne, if delight in one another is mutual, physical union is its proper consummation but, if the lovers are not 'inter-assured of the mind,' then 'the sport' is 'but a winter-seeming summers night,' and

. . . at their best  
Sweetness and wit they are but mummy possest.<sup>39</sup>

"The Exstasie," then, presents a total picture of the true love relationship. The lovers are satisfied, both in their desire for divine fulfillment of their souls and in their desire for natural fulfillment of their senses. Grierson notes that this poem is rather disconcerting because there hangs about it "just a suspicion of the conventional and unreal Platonism of the seventeenth century. In attempting to state and vindicate the relation of soul and body he [Donne] falls perhaps inevitably into the appearance, at any rate, of the dualism which he is trying to transcend. He places them over against each other as separate entities and the lower bulks unduly."<sup>40</sup> But, it is just this equal union of body and soul that Donne seeks to emphasize as the basic ingredient in pure love. He would hardly agree with Pascal's statement that "in love the body disappears from sight in the intellectual and spiritual passion which it has divided."<sup>41</sup> On the contrary, man's rational soul is inseparably mixed with his animal spirits while he is confined to earth's sphere. Thus, the rational soul can only communicate its purity and potential perfection through the natural soul of the body, and any true love relationship must be a completion of this equal union between body and soul in the nature of man. "The Exstasie" pleases our rigorous aesthetic demands,

and it deserves Coleridge's praise as one of the truly excellent poems in the metaphysical tradition because it mixes the elements of the earthly in such a way as to create a new realization of ideal love, a love entirely satisfying in its completeness and stronger than either of its parts. The poem is, then, philosophically complete, presenting a well-rounded concept of ideal love between a man and a woman.

This emphasis on the duality of man's physical and spiritual nature, which recognizes the equal importance of both in the ideal love relationship, lies at the center of Donne's philosophy of love, and it plays a major role in his Platonic poems. In "The Canonization," for example, Donne again attempts to demonstrate the importance of the physical as well as the spiritual union of lovers who seek perfect oneness. The speaker of the poem, who we must assume is being chided by a witty cynic for his impractical love, begins with what appears to be a denial of all material cares and wants:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
Or chide my palsie, or my gout,  
My five gray haire, or ruin'd fortune flout,  
With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,  
Take you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honour, or his grace,  
And the Kings reall, or his stamped face  
Contemplate; what you will, approve,  
So you will let me love.  
(ll. 1-9)

The lover is asking to be left alone by those who seek material wealth or political favors in a world that is run on practicality. His love has nothing to do with the mundane acts of a material world. The speaker's love transcends such thoughts as "ruined fortune," "palsie," "gout," or "gray haire," and it has no time for those who care for such things.



The speaker is flippanant in his answer to those who question the benefits of love, stressing the fact that even though he loves, the rest of the world still functions and nothing is changed by his loving. He continues in the second stanza to ridicule the Petrarchan convention and the courtly tradition of loving by presenting himself as the conventional lover who "sighs," "weeps," turns cold and hot, and faints from the fever of loving. And he again charges his foe to tell him who is injured by his loving. The speaker still maintains a tone of disdain for those who shun the higher realms of love for the advantages of a material world. Throughout this stanza he contemptuously addresses the greedy and materialistic "others" who do not care for the impracticabilities of love.

But in the third stanza a shift in the speaker's tone is noticeable as he begins to analyze his own love. Like the lovers of "The Exstasie," he discovers that perfect love involves the mysterious union of the lovers into a greater being:

Call us what you will, wee'are made such by love;  
 Call her one, mee another flye,  
 We'are Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,  
 And wee in us finde th'Eagle and the Dove;  
 The Phoenix riddle hath more wit  
 By us, we two being one, are it,  
 So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit.  
 Wee dye and rise the same, and prove  
 Mysterious by this love.  
 (ll. 19-27)

Again, love is the controlling force greater than either of the two lovers it brings together, but, as in "The Exstasie," the lovers first feel their natural desire through the physical senses. Thus the images in the first half of the stanza lead us slowly but surely from the lower attractions of bodily lust symbolized by the fly, through a more refined period of mutual desire in which the lovers are as "Tapers"



who "at their own cost die," to the "Eagle and the Dove" which symbolize strength and contentment, and eventually to the mystical union in oneness symbolized by the Phoenix.<sup>42</sup> The progression, then, is based on the Platonic ideal of love; the lovers gradually advance through a refinement of their senses to the ultimate spiritual realization of oneness.

But Donne does not let matters rest there. Throughout the remainder of this stanza he emphasizes the oneness of the lovers in both body and soul. They have become a hermaphrodite, the "one neutrall thing," that Plato tells us all men were before the Fall, and they have risen from earthly concerns in their new oneness. With the seventeenth century pun on the word "dye," the speaker can tell us that this new being can now "dye and rise the same, and prove/ Mysterious by this love." Because the lovers have died for love, they can then be treated as martyrs for their faith and canonized for their love. Thus, those who seek a pattern for pure love may look to this pair:

And thus invoke us; You whom reverend love  
 Made one another's hermitage;  
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;  
 Who did the whole worlds soule extract, and drove  
     Into the glasses of your eyes,  
     So made such mirrors, and such spies,  
 That they did all to you epitomize,  
     Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above  
     A patterne of your love!

(ll. 37-45)

Even in this invocation of the lovers by the laity, their total oneness is again singled out as the important pattern, and once more we are reminded that these "canonized saints" are very earth-bound in their union. Theirs is no spiritualized abstraction of intellectual admiration. They are "one another's hermitage," and though they may have renounced the world and become a world unto each other, they nevertheless love and

express their love through the physical senses. Thus, like the lovers in "The Exstasie" these lovers are joined in perfect union of body and soul, and they feel it is no shame to "dye" by love. On the contrary, they give meaning to the Phoenix riddle through their ability to "dye and rise the same;" as Cleanth Brooks notes in his study of the poem, their love is not diminished by the act of physical consummation.<sup>43</sup> In fact, these lovers do not expect to live by love; they expect, and want, to "dye" by love.<sup>44</sup> Again, these lovers are responding to the procreative urge, and unlike the speaker in "Farewell to Love" who intends to leave off pursuing "things which had indammag'd" him, these lovers joyously seek the consummation of their love, for through it they are canonized. Thus, Donne is suggesting in this poem that the lovers achieve the spirituality and purity symbolized by the Phoenix only through the sensual gratification that accompanies perfect physical union.

Once again, we find the philosophy of oneness has been completely presented in "The Canonization." The concept of absolute physical and spiritual fulfillment has been wittily portrayed by a brash young lover who revels in the absolute superiority he and his mistress enjoy. We are challenged by the arrogant lover to find any fault with him for his perfect relationship with his mistress; indeed we are spurned by him for our lesser insights and baser desires and are told to invoke these true lovers to "beg from above/ A patterne of your love." If the tone of the speaker is less serious than that of the lovers in "The Exstasie," his conviction as to the totality of his love is no less, nor is his belief in the encompassing nature of ideal love any less firm than theirs. Like the lovers in "The Exstasie," this lover sees the significance of

the sensual union in the total concept of an ideal love relationship that equally combines both elements of man's dual nature.

Even in poems dealing with that strong spiritual bond of oneness that exists between separated lovers, Donne emphasizes the importance of the physical bond as well. In "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," for example, we are told that true love can stand the pain of absence because the object of its love does not rest in the body, but in the mind. Or, as the lover tells his mistress:

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

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

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
 Though I must goe, endure not yet  
 A breach, but an expansion,  
 Like gold to avery thinnesse beate.  
 (ll. 13-24)

But we should not assume, as some critics have, that these lovers, who "Inter-assured of the mind,/ Care lesse, eyes, lips and hands to misse," are mere representatives of ideal Platonic love, or that their oneness exists only through their souls. These lines do not mean that the lovers will not miss their physical relationship, or that they will not feel incomplete and unfulfilled until they are reunited, but rather that the lovers, who enjoy a sensual and an intellectual relationship in their love, will miss the physical attraction less than those who merely love sensually. That they will, indeed, miss their physical oneness, in spite of the constancy of their spiritual souls, is brought out in the famous

image of the compass with which the poem closes:

If they be two, they are two so  
 As stiffe twin compasses are two,  
 Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show  
 To move, but, doth, if the 'other doe.

And though it in the center sit,  
 Yet when the other far doth rome,  
 It leanes, and hearkens after it,  
 And growes erect, as it comes home.

Such wilt thou be to mee, who must  
 Like th'other foot, obliquely rume;  
 Thy firmnes makes my circle just,  
 And makes me end, where I begunne.  
 (ll. 25-38)

Longing for her mate, the female soul "leanes, and hearkens" after him, growing ever more erect as the angle between them diminishes to resume its former unity. He, in turn, completes his circular rotation around his axis, a rotation rendered stable and "just" by the "firmnes" of his "fixt foot," and returns home for reunion with his mistress who is symbolically the center of the universe. Nor must we miss the possible sexual pun intended on the word "erect," for, just like the lovers in "The Exstasie" and "The Canonization," these lovers seek the physical consummation of their love through perfect oneness. As this image of the compass indicates, then, the lovers are not happy and complete until they are, once again, joined in physical and spiritual union.

Further instances of this mysterious oneness in which the lovers give themselves totally to each other can be seen throughout Donne's later poems in the Songs and Sonnets. Sometimes we find the oneness expressed in terms of a new, purer world where love only reigns, as in "The Good-morrow":

And now good morrow to our waking soules,  
 Which watch not one another out of feare;  
 For love, all love of other sights controules,  
 And makes one little roome, an every where.  
 Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
 Let Maps to others, worlds on worlds have showne,  
 Let us possesse our world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares,  
 And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest,  
 Where can we finde two better hemispheares  
 Without sharpe North, without declining West?  
 What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;  
 If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
 Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die.  
 (ll. 8-21)

Or as in "The Sunne Rising":

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,  
 Nothing else is.  
 Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,  
 All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie.  
 Thou sunne art halfe as happy'as wee,  
 In that the world's contracted thus;  
 Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee  
 To warme the world, that's done in warming us.  
 Shine here to us, and thou art every where;  
 This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare.  
 (ll. 21-30)

Sometimes this union is expressed in mystical terms, as in "Aire and Angels" where the souls of the lovers, after properly taking on a physical form to communicate, join to form an "abler soul" of pure love:

For, nor in nothing, nor in things  
 Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love inhere;  
 Then as an Angell, face, and wings  
 Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth weare,  
 So thy love may be my loves spheare;  
 (ll. 21-25)

or again in "A Valediction: of the Booke" where the man and woman become a new universe where only love's children may live, and their love

becomes a sacred book fit only for love's clergy:

This Booke, as long-liv'd as the elements,  
 Or as the worlds forme, this all-graved tome,  
 In cipher write, or new made Idiom;  
 Wee for loves clergie only'are instruments.  
 When this booke is made thus,  
 Should againe the ravenous  
 Vandals and Goths inundate us,  
 Learning were safe; in this our Universe  
 Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels Verse.  
 (ll. 19-28)

In each of these poems the lovers enter into a union that is more powerful than anything around it. Through it they transcend an imperfect world where things are "not mixt equally" and enter the higher, more spiritual world of love where, if "none do slacken, none can die." For them, nothing else is. They have become the supreme symbol of perfect love, and they are its chief perpetuators, not only in mind, but also in body. Through their example lies our only hope to escape the "Vandals and Goths" who may, otherwise, some day "inundate us." Secure in the knowledge of their power, they can afford to scoff at the world around them where, compared to their purity, "All honor's mimique; all wealth alchimie." Honor and wealth cannot save mankind; only the power of their love can. Like the lovers in "The Exstasie" and "The Canonization," these lovers have united their physical and spiritual natures to complete the image of the hermaphrodite, and from their oneness all good life, both physical and spiritual, flows. These lovers must "die," as we are told in "Farewell to Love," in order to "raise posterity."

Throughout these poems the mutual love between the lovers is understood. They have accepted each other as the fulfillment for the pangs of loneliness they have experienced. The "abler soul" which they enter

into in their ideal union all "defects of loneliness controls," making them a sufficient world unto themselves. Donne seldom mentions this loneliness which causes the lovers to seek each other out. But in the opening lines of "Aire and Angels" the poet draws our attention again to the lovers' urge to find each other:

Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee,  
 Before I knew thy face or name;  
 So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame,  
Angells affect us oft, and worship'd bee;  
 Still when, to where thou wert, I came,  
 Some lovely glorious nothing I did see.  
 But since my soule, whose child love is,  
 Takes limmes of flesh, and else could nothing doe,  
 More subtile then the parent is,  
 Love must not be, but take a body too,  
 And therefore what thou wert, and who,  
 I bid Love aske, and now  
 That it assume thy body, I allow,  
 And fixe it self in thy lip, eye, and brow.  
 (ll. 1-14)

Again, we can see the emphasis here on the role the body plays in the love relationship. Love, who is a child of the soul, must, like its parent, "take a body too." But our main attention is directed to the speaker's search for his ideal spouse. Twice or thrice before, he tells us, he had loved the image of his mistress before he found the true object of his desire, which turned out to be the "Some lovely glorious nothing" described in "Negative Love." The speaker's longing for fulfillment and his subsequent search for his mistress is not unlike that of the lover in "The Good-morrow" who joyfully tells his mistress that all previous pleasures were but fancies because "If ever any beauty I did see,/ Which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dreame of thee." In both these poems the lovers fulfill the Platonic concept of the hermaphrodite who



was cloven in half after the Fall. They were destined only for each other, and once united they are, as we are told in "Love's Infiniteness," "one anothers All."

Furthermore, if the lovers are perfectly paired, their love will grow more eminent with each succeeding season. Such is the message of the two delicate lyrics, "Loves Growth" and "Loves Infiniteness." In "Loves Growth" the speaker ponders the contradiction of a pure love that seems to grow more pronounced with each season's passing. In spring the speaker's love for his mistress seems to increase so that he feels he "lyed all winter," when he swore "My love was infinite." He at last comes to the conclusion that true love is, paradoxically, a continually growing state in which "No winter shall abate the springs increase." In "Loves Infiniteness" the poet explores the ambiguity of the perfect love relationship in which the lovers can neither have nor give all of the love they possess because it is constantly growing. The poet sums up love's riddle in the following lines:

Loves riddles are, that though thy heart depart,  
It stayes at home, and thou with losing sav'st it:  
But wee will have a way more liberall,  
Then changing hearts, to joyne them, so wee shall  
Be one, and one anothers All.

(ll. 29-33)

Thus, ideal love is based on a paradox very similar to the one expressed in Mark 8:35, which reads: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it." By giving themselves to love the lovers have given up their secular lives, but at the same time they have gained a purer more perfect world where love alone reigns and where "none can doe/



Treason to us, except one of us two" ("The Anniversarie," ll. 25-26). In these poems the lovers are once again presented as superior to the world around them, but these poems also testify to love's procreative power. In "Loves Growth" we are told that love is at its strongest in the spring, a time when all of nature is alive with its own procreative acts. The imagery in the poem is obviously pregnant with implications, and we are told that the lovers are awakened by the impulses of the natural world around them: "Gentle love deeds, as blossomes on a bough,/ From loves awaken'd root do bud out now." Generation is an important element in the poem and the poet notes that spring adds "new heat" to the lovers, and that each passing season adds to the lover's awareness of true love's infiniteness. From ideal love more love grows; thus it renews itself through the joining of the lovers physically and spiritually into a new oneness, a new whole.

We need only look at such poems as "Loves Alchymie," "The Blossome," and "Twicknam Garden" to see the effects of love when body or soul is ignored in the relationship of the lovers. In these poems we see the dissatisfaction that exists in the "Dull sublunary lovers/ (Where soule is sense)" and in the Platonic idealists who "by good love were grown all minde." Neither group is satisfied with the fruits of love and, since their love is not complete, they do not transcend the world around them and enter into that "abler soul" of perfect union. In "Loves Alchymie" the lover, who has "lov'd, and got, and told," admits that love's hidden mystery has escaped him, and must, therefore, be reserved only for those who "have deeper digg'd loves Myne" than he. But such a person, he believes, is not the Platonic lover who loves the mind of woman, for

the speaker in "Loves Alchymie" has found that at their best, sweetness and wit, women "are but Mummy, possest." Sensuality by itself, then, does not hold the key to perfect love. Neither, we are told in "The Blossome" and "Twicknam Garden," does purely intellectual, or spiritual, love hold the answer to love's mystery. In "The Blossome" we are made quite aware of the fact that the poet finds such idealized love as unsatisfying as purely physical love. In "Twicknam Garden" he registers his dissatisfaction with ideal love in the closing lines: "O perverse sexe, where none is true but shee,/ Who's therefore true, because her truth kills mee" (ll. 26-27). Perfect love must be a balance between these two extremes, and to create their perfect world the lovers must create a balanced relationship based on trust and mutual acceptance, a relationship so secure that there is just cause on the part of the participants to "watch not one another out of fear" ("The Good-morrow" l. 9).

While we must be careful to heed Leishman's advice not to read Donne's poetry too seriously and, in doing so, read more into it than is there, we must not fail to see the role that procreation plays in Donne's emphasis on the physical union of the lovers. We find it expounded by the soul of love in "The Exstasie," and hinted at by the act of consummation in "The Canonization" and "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning." For Donne, the creation of an offspring is a further dimension of and a logical conclusion to the ideal union of the lovers. The elements of the lovers come together and are joined at conception in the literal sense of the word. Thus, a "greater Prince" is formed in a natural as well as a spiritual sense. It is not important that we see this emphasis in all of Donne's later poems, but it is important that we see it in the

greater scope of his overall concept of love. If procreation is indeed a part of the ideal relationship, marriage is the ultimate goal of true love, and, as Grierson noted in his edition of the poems, Donne seeks to present "a justification of love as a natural passion in the human heart the meaning and end of which is marriage."<sup>45</sup>

In these later poems, then, we see Donne presenting various love themes, ranges of moods, and dramatic situations but essentially the same concept of love. It is a concept based, in part, on the Platonic theory of oneness where the lovers rise to spiritual perfection through the mystery of their union, but it is clear that Donne interprets this theory in terms of a physical as well as a spiritual fulfillment, as indeed a fulfillment of the spiritual only through the physical or sensual soul. In their rise to spiritual oneness Donne's lovers, unlike the typical lovers in the Platonic tradition, do not leave their bodies behind. Nor do their bodies "bulk unduly" in their relationship as Grierson maintains, for it is only through the union of these bodies that total love can be actualized. Implicit in this emphasis on physical union is a belief in the procreative power of love. It is a power that should be reserved only for pure love, for those who "blindly admire" the mere sexual act soon find that once "being had, enjoying it decays." In "Farewell to Love" we are told that this safeguard was installed by nature to protect the procreative powers of love from misuse:

Nature decreed (since each such Act, they say,  
Diminisheth the length of life a day)  
This; as shee would man should despise  
The sport,  
Because that other curse of being short,  
And onely for a minute, made to be  
Eager, desires to raise posterity.  
(ll. 24-30)

These poems, then, are not mere restatements of the Platonic doctrine of ideal love as Gardner would have us believe, nor expressions of a type of "inverted platonism," as Empson suggests. On the contrary, they attempt to deal with love in a realistic manner, and while they pay tribute to its power to elevate the souls of the participants, they also note the importance of man's natural "desires to raise posterity" as a necessary ingredient in that elevation.

All in all, these poems present a clear, balanced picture of the dualistic nature of love. Their lovers share equally in a union where neither is exploited by nor exploits the other, a union so complete that all previous relationships were but dreams and images of it, a union in which the loneliness of the lovers is at last resolved. Therefore if these poems please us it is partly because they convey a well-rounded attitude about love. But if we have in fact found a consistent philosophy of love in them, if Donne is actually trying to convey what he believes to be the meaning and purpose of love between man and woman, if he is trying to capture the very essence of the ideal relationship, we should now be able to turn to that other group of poems in the Songs and Sonnets which Gardner ascribes to Donne's earlier life and see implanted in them the seeds from which that philosophy--that vision of life--grew.

It is obvious when we go back to these poems that we are in a new arena where the mysteries of love do not always purify and ennoble the lovers. Absent are the contented, devoted couples that play so prominent a role in Donne's later verse. They appear momentarily in such poems as the "Song: Sweetest love I do not goe," and "The Expiration" where one of the lovers is forced to leave. But for the most part they are strikingly absent in these poems. In their place, more often than not, are lovers who are being or have been victimized in an unbalanced love affair.

They have either experienced rejection, as in "Loves Deitie," "A Jeat Ring Sent," "The Dampie," "The Apparition," "The Message," "The Legacie," and "The Will"; fear being rejected as in "Song: Goe, and catche a falling starre," "Witchcraft by a Picture," "Womans Constancy," "The Prohibition," and "Loves Exchange"; or intend to be untrue, as in "Communitie," "A Confined Love," "The Indifferent," "Loves Usury," and "Loves Diet." These lovers have found little in love that is spiritually purifying, and yet throughout these poems we can detect a belief in and a desire for that kind of perfect oneness described in the later poems.

In the song, "Goe, and catche a falling starre," for example, we are confronted with a witty young rake who has tasted the pleasures of love and has decided, like his more sophisticated counterpart in "Loves Alchymie," that "'tis imposture all." There is no such thing, he tells us, as "a woman true, and faire," but he adds:

If thou findst one, let mee know,  
 Such a Pilgrimage were sweet,  
 Yet doe not, I would not goe,  
 Though at next doore wee might meet,  
 Though shee were true, when you meet her,  
 And last, till you write your letter,  
     Yet shee  
     Will bee  
 False, ere I come, to two, or three. (ll. 19-27)

Certainly one of the principal sources of pleasure in this poem is the superb life and vitality that it displays, and it well deserves Leishman's praise as an apt illustration of the "rollicking exaggeration and high-spiritedness" frequently displayed in Donne's verse.<sup>46</sup> But if we must be careful not to forget that one of the essential elements in Donne's poetry, especially his more cynical poetry, is its learned wit, we must also be careful not to let that wit interfere with our appreciation of fine textures of passion woven throughout the verse. In the above poem the lover obviously has very little faith in woman's constancy, and he seems to take great satisfaction in his ability to pro-

nounce judgment on it. But even in this wittiest of poems we can detect a momentary note of longing in the lover for a woman who would indeed be both true and fair. "If thou findest," he says, "let mee know,/ Such a Pilgrimage were sweet." For the briefest second the cynical mask is off and the lover's "defects of loneliness" have slipped to the surface. This hint of human longing is ever so lightly emphasized, but it gives the speaker a human dimension he would not otherwise have, and it registers a clear dissatisfaction with inconstancy in love. If we do not find the concept of perfect love expressed blatantly in the earlier poems, we find at least a momentary longing for it.

We find this desire for faithfulness in woman more dramatically expressed in "Loves Deitie," where the poet marvels at the unfairness of love because he has been destined to love one who does not love him. Throughout the poem the poet rails against the god of love because he has allowed the poet to "love her, that loves not mee," and he has allowed his own "deitie" to be disgraced by inconstancy. "To rage, to lust, to write to, to commend," the man fumes, "All is the purluwe of the God of Love" (ll. 17-18). Such a god, we are told, should be dethroned. And yet the situation as it is cannot be changed, and the poet concludes:

Rebell and Atheist too, why murre I,  
 As though I felt the worst that love could doe?  
 Love might make me leave loving, or might trie  
 A deeper plague, to make her love mee too,  
 Which, since she loves before, I'am loth to see;  
 Falsehood is worse than hate; and that must bee,  
 If shee whom I love, should love mee.  
 (ll. 22-28)

In these lines the poet displays the utmost regard for constancy in love. Like the Platonic lover in "Twicknam Garden" who laments the faithfulness

of his mistress because "none is true but shee,/ Who's therefore true, because her truth kills mee," this speaker feels the dissatisfaction of unrequited love. But he cannot wish that his mistress would love him because she already loves someone else and to love him she must be untrue to the other. The lover realizes that ideal love, where the lovers join so irrevocably and completely that they form a new oneness, depends on the fidelity of each, and he would therefore mistrust his mistress if she loved him, because she would then be false to another. And falsehood, he tells us, is worse than hate. Constancy, then, is a necessary ingredient in love.

But this poem also shows other affinities with Donne's later verse through its insistence that true, perfect love must be reciprocal. The speaker instinctively feels that it "cannot be/ Love, till I love her, that loves me." He longs to return to the beginning of time "before the god of Love was born" to talk "with some old lovers ghost" and discover, if he can, what true love was before man deified it:

Sure, they which made him god, meant not so much:  
 Nor he, in his young godhead practis'd it.  
 But when an even flame two hearts did touch,  
 His office was indulgently to fit  
 Actives to passives: Correspondencie  
 Only his subject was. It cannot bee  
 Love, till I love her, that loves mee.  
 (ll. 8-14)

At one time, then, the god of love actually brought lovers suited for each other together, fitting "actives to passives" and making "correspondencie" the true end of love. This was, the speaker believes, the original purpose of love; in fitting actives to passives, thus men to women, love was fulfilling the divine plan of "they which made him."



And, intuitively, the speaker is sure that his own state "cannot bee/  
 Love, till I love her, that loves mee." In this stanza we come very close  
 to a description of the ideal oneness found in so many of the later  
Songs and Sonnets. Moreover, in the fitting of the "actives to passives"  
 in the above lines there is, again, the suggestion of love's procreative  
 power. "God," Ebreo says in his Philosophy of Love, "only bestows his  
 eternity on those that are capable of its enjoyment, and such are the  
 intellect, the seat of the Ideas, and first matter, which is chaos: for  
 the one is pure actuality and form and the other pure potentiality and  
 wholly formless matter, the one being the universal father of all things  
 and the other the universal mother. These alone could partake of the  
 divine eternity; but their children who through the medium of their two  
 parents are made and formed by God (as is the whole universe and each of  
 its parts) are not capable of such eternity."<sup>47</sup> But if the parents only  
 are capable of partaking in divine eternity, it is because they are in  
 part fulfilling a divine decree in the creation of a new child who carries  
 with him the active or passive potential of his partner. Through their  
 union love is continued, and Love's "office" is fulfilled. But con-  
 stancy in the lovers is the key element. This is why the speaker in  
 "Loves Deitie," though he laments his own unfulfilled passion, desires  
 that his mistress remain true to her lover, for falsehood, which destroys  
 love, is worse than hate.

Inconstancy and unrequited love form a basic theme in these early  
 poems. We find it in "The Message" where the lover who has been exploited  
 in love desires to see the day when his cruel mistress will lie:

. . . in anguish  
 And dost languish  
 For some one  
 That will none,  
 Or prove as false as thou art now.  
 (ll. 20-24)

or in "The Broken Heart" where the lover's heart was shattered in one blow by unrequited love:

I brought a heart into the room,  
 But from the room, I carried none with me;  
 If it had gone to thee, I know  
 Mine would have taught thy heart to show  
 More pity unto me: but Love, alas,  
 At one first blow did shiver it as glasse.  
 (ll. 19-24)

and, again, in "A Jeat Ring Sent" when the lover, reflecting on a gift ring, ponders the infidelity of his mistress:

Yet stay with me since thou art come,  
 Circle this fingers top, which did'st her thombe.  
 Be justly proud, and gladly safe, that thou dost dwell  
 with me,  
 She that, Oh, broke her faith, would soon breake thee.  
 (ll. 9-12)

In all of these poems the lovers who desire the perfect union are thwarted by an imperfect mate. The lover in "The Message" tells us that his eyes and heart were true until he gave them to his inconstant mistress who has forever ruined them by teaching them "forc'd fashions, / And false passions" (ll. 4-5) and the speaker in "A Jeat Ring Sent" had thought his love as precious and as tough as a marriage contract, but found that it was brittle as glass. In all of these poems the lovers have been exploited by their partners in an unequal relationship while they themselves have given their all to that relationship.

Destined by the god of Love to be true to those who are false to them, these lovers will never experience that ecstasy of oneness described in the later poems. Not only are they denied spiritual fulfillment, but they are also denied sensual fulfillment because, as the lover in "The Broken Heart" notes, "after one such love," they "can have no more" (l. 32). Thus, the sense of loneliness mentioned in "The Exstasie," "Aire and Angels," and "Loves Alchymie" haunts these poems, and gives them added depth and poignancy.

Recognizing this sense of frustration and loneliness in these poems, we are better able to understand and appreciate the revengeful lover in "The Apparition" who has been "murdered" in love by his unfaithful mistress and seeks only to make her "painfully repent":

When by thy scorne, O murdress, I am dead,  
 And that thou thinkst thee free  
 From all solicitation from mee,  
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,  
 And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse armes shall see;  
 Then thy sicke taper will begin to winke,  
 And he, whose thou art then, being tyr'd before,  
 Will, if thou stirre, or pinch to wake him, thinke  
 Thou call'st for more,  
 And in false sleepe will from thee shrink,  
 And then poore Aspen wretch, neglected thou  
 Bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat wilt lye  
 A veryer ghost then I;  
 What I will say, I will nottell thee now,  
 Lest that preserve thee; 'and since my love is spent,  
 I'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,  
 Then by my threatnings rest still innocent.  
 (ll. 1-17)

In this poem we see more than a hint of the concept of ideal love found in the later poems. This lover, like the lovers in "The Message," "The Broken Heart," and "A Jeat Ring Sent," has given himself entirely to his love for the woman, but he has been rejected and denied

the reciprocal love he needs to survive. Thus he is symbolically dying and his love has been spent on one who is untrue. Because he desires a complete relationship with the woman his love is more pure than that of the man he expects to find her with soon. Indeed, that love will be based on nothing more than sensual appetites; the "sicke taper" will begin "to winke" when she views the apparition of his truer love, and she will lie neglected, "Bath'd in a cold quicksilver sweat." The picture of the woman huddling in her fear is gruesome, and the speaker's desire for such revenge might seem surprising at first. But when we remember Donne's emphasis on the procreative power of love, we can well understand this speaker's anger and hatred for this woman. Through her scorn of his true love she has killed his love and denied him that ideal union from which future love grows. Like the lover in "The Broken Heart" this man can, perhaps, continue to like, wish, and adore, "But after one such, can love no more," and, therefore, by his revenge he seeks to correct nature's balance.

This desire for that perfect balanced relationship presented in the later poems, is found again in Donne's cynical verse, but nowhere is the philosophical relationship between the earlier and later poems more readily seen than in "The Flea." In the image of the flea, as Sharrock has noted, we find a superb parody of the Platonic concept of oneness.<sup>48</sup> But if we study the image closely, we can see that it deals with much more than just a union of the lovers. If it is indeed a parody of the ideal androgynous union, it is also a parody of Donne's belief that the true end of ideal love is marriage and procreation. In the poem the seducer craftily propositions his mistress with an analogy to a flea

that has crawled from him to her:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,  
 How little that which thou deny'st me is;  
 Kee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,  
 And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;  
 Confesse it, this cannot be said  
 A sinne, or shame, or losse of maidenhead,  
 Yet this enjoys before it wooe,  
 And pampers'd swells with one blood made of two,  
 And this, alas, is more then wee would doe.

Oh stay, three loves in one flea spare,  
 Where wee almost, nay more then maryed are:  
 This flea is you and I, and this  
 Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;  
 Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,  
 And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.  
 Though use make thee apt to kill mee,  
 Let not to this, selfe murder added bee,  
 And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.  
 (ll. 1-18)

In this flea the lovers are symbolically joined and form "one blood made of two," thus completing the hermaphroditic union of ideal lovers. But the poet carries the allusion one step farther and tells his mistress that they are now married in the flea. It has become "our mariage bed" and through the physical union they enjoy in its body they ascend as a spiritual oneness, and the flea now becomes their "mariage temple." They meet in its "living walls of Jet," and it would now be a sacrilege to destroy this, their temple. Thus, perfect physical and spiritual oneness is implied in the symbol of the flea, but the order of the images indicate, once again, that the sacred union these lovers enjoy occurs when they are, first, physically joined in the flea. Moreover, the emphasis on the marriage bed further completes the allusion to ideal love. It is only through marriage that such a love has lasting significance. Finally, the flea is the symbol of the child that may grow

blood of the two lovers; therefore it is "three loves in one." In this poem, then, we have a complete parody, much exaggerated by wit, of the philosophy expounded in the later poems.

As these poems demonstrate, there is a unity of thought, a philosophical relationship, among the various poems in the Songs and Sonnets. They are not meant to be merely a collection of unrelated pieces which show the face of love in all its variety as some critics claim, although they do have variety; nor are they meant to be a simple restatement of the platonic philosophy found in Ebreo and the Neoplatonists, although they do deal with that philosophy. Rather, these poems reflect the vision of one who had deeply "digg'd loves Myne" to find "where his centrique happiness doth lie," and they present a unified picture of what Donne believed to be the true meaning and end of love between man and woman. True love is not found in the mere gratification of the sensual passions; nor is it found in the intellectual contemplation of ideal beauty. It lies somewhere between these two extremes, and it includes man's physical desire to continue his race as well as his spiritual desire to seek and obtain divine perfection. Even in his earliest poetry Donne seems resolved that both of these desires spring from God, and that both bring man inevitably to "a marriage of true minds" (and bodies) which represents God's sanction for perfect oneness in love. In Donne's early poetry we see the seeds for the concept of love he expresses in his later poems, and we must not be too upset if, at times, Donne seems to stretch that concept to its furthest limits, for as he says in "Satyre III":

. . . on a huge hill,  
 Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will  
 Reach her, about must, and about must goe;  
 And what the hills suddenness resists, winne so;  
 Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,  
 Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night. 49  
 (ll. 79-84)

Largely owing to Donne's own attempt to ascend the hill of love and express the truth he found there, we may look on love revealed in the Songs and Sonnets.



## NOTES

- 1  
Helen Gardner, ed., John Donne, The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. xvii.
- 2  
H. J. C. Grierson, Poems of John Donne (1912; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1958), II, xlix.
- 3  
Grierson, p. xxxv.
- 4  
Grierson, p. xlv.
- 5  
Grierson, p. xlvi.
- 6  
Grierson, p. xlvi.
- 7  
Grierson, p. xlvi.
- 8  
T. S. Eliot added greatly to this "modernization" of Donne in his study "The Metaphysical Poets," in Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), in which he introduced his now famous phrase "the dissociation of sensibility." Admitting his debt to Grierson's commentary and edition of the poems, Eliot praised Donne as a writer who could capture in his poetry the "sensuous apprehension of thought" and could demonstrate the unified sensibility that many who came after him lacked.
- 9  
J. B. Leishman, The Monarch of Wit (1951; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 135-136.
- 10  
A. J. Smith, "The Metaphysic of Love," Review of English Studies, 9 (1958).
- 11  
Smith, p. 363.
- 12  
Smith, p. 364.
- 13  
Smith, p. 365.

- 14  
Smith, p. 375.
- 15  
Gardner, The Elegies . . . , p. liv.
- 16  
Helen Gardner, ed., John Donne, A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 12.
- 17  
Gardner, The Elegies . . . , p. xxx.
- 18  
Samuel Johnson, Lives of the Poets, ed. George Birbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), I, 19.
- 19  
Grierson, p. lv.
- 20  
Roger Sharrock, "Wit, Passion, and Ideal Love," in Just So Much Honor, ed. Peter Amadeus Fiore (University Park: Pa. State University, 1972), pp. 33-56.
- 21  
Sharrock, p. 48.
- 22  
William Empson, "Donne in the New Edition," Critical Quarterly, 18 (1966)
- 23 Plato, The Great Dialogues, trans. W.H.D. Rouse, ed. Eric H. Warmington and Philip G. Rouse (New York: New American Library, 1956). pp. 85-87.
- 24 In the fifteenth century a Platonic revival began in Italy under the leadership of Marsilio Ficino and his disciples at the Platonic academy in Florence. These Neoplatonists sought to combine the teachings of Plato with the teachings of the Church, and their concept of true love contained elements of both pagan and Christian philosophy. But they agreed with the Platonic doctrine which emphasized the spiritual fulfillment of the lovers over their mere sensual enjoyment. For these Neoplatonists man's love of nature and natural beauty was a gift of God, and by following his physical passions and desires man could ultimately seek the Godhead through his ideal or perfect act of loving. They believed in the harmony of the body and soul, but they also believed that the purpose of Man's love was spiritual perfection, and they saw the ideal love relationship as one ascending gradually from the sensual passions of man into a higher plane of spiritual purification. For a further discussion of this see Herschel Baker, The Image of Man (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), pp. 241-257.

25

Cited in Sharrock, p. 48.

26

Baldassare Castiglione, The Book of the Courtier, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (1561; rpt. New York: Dutton, 1966), p. 315.

27

Castiglione, p. 315. In "The Soul in the Kiss" The Criterion, II, p. 349 ff. (April, 1924), Sir Stephen Gaselee traces the influence and imitations of this idea through world literature, finding it in Bion's Lament for Adonis (l. 45 f.), in Meleager (A.P., V, 171), in Favorinus of Arles (first half of the second century A.D.), in Achilles Tatius' erotic romance (fourth century A.D.), in Aristaenetus. Among the Romans he names Petronius (c. 79 and c. 132) and Gellius (XIX, 11). Then come Politian and Pontano in Italy, with Latin verses, and, in England, Marlowe (Dr. Faustus, sc. 14), Herrick (the epigram "Love Palpable"), and Donne (ed. Grierson [1912], I, 180, 1). For the above information on Gaselee's work see Ernst Robert Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 292.

28

William Nelson, in The Poetry of Edmund Spenser: A Study (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), notes that Spenser is not as Neoplatonic as critics in the past have assumed. There is a great deal of insistence, Nelson says, on the physical aspects of love in Spenser's verse. In fact, Spenser "saw a likeness between the love that draws the sexes together, producing noble deeds and perpetuating the race, and the love that draws man to God and fills the world with beauty" (p. 115). If we accept this view of Spenser's concept of love as procreative in nature, we can see an interesting parallel between the views of this poet and those of John Donne.

29

Edmund Spenser, The Works of Edmund Spenser: A Variorum Edition, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, et al. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), VIII, 246.

30

Spenser, I, 205.

31

George Chapman, The Poems, ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962), p. 134.

32

Gardner, The Elegies . . . p. lvii. It should be pointed out that while Gardner does not specifically name Ebreo in the introduction to the poems, she does insist that he probably read the Neoplatonists of Rome when he was in forced retirement with his wife shortly after their marriage in 1601. She notes that two of the poems, "Image and Dream" and "The Exstasie" "can be shown to be closely dependent on a Neoplatonic source, and mark, I would suggest, the beginning of a fresh impulse to

write lyrics." If she hesitates to name Ebreo in the introduction to the poems, she is braver in Appendix D of her edition and braver still in her essay "The Argument About 'The Ecstasy'," in Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies Presented to Frank Percy Wilson in Honor of His Seventieth Birthday (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), in which she argues that "The Exstasie" was based on Ebreo's Dialoghi d' Amore. "When Donne was inspired by the Dialoghi d' Amore to write a poem showing the achievement of union in love, he caught from his source that tone of persuasion which has misled readers." (p. 304).

33

John Donne, "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window," in The Elegies and Songs and Sonnets, ed. Helen Gardner (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 64. All further quotations of Donne's poetry will come from this edition and will be referred to by the title and line number of the poem in the text.

34

For a more complete discussion of Donne's use of the concept of "one of two" see Sharrock, pp. 48-55.

35

Grierson, p. xlvii.

36

Helen Gardner, "The Argument About 'The Ecstasy'," in Elizabethan and Jacobean Studies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 304.

37

Yvor Winters finds the comparison of the lovers' souls to armies a distressing and inept comparison. In his book, Forms of Discovery: Critical and Historical Essays on the Forms of the Short Poem in English (Albuquerque: Allen Swallow, 1967), he writes "The Exstasie shows Donne's virtues fragmentarily and his faults at length . . . Lines thirteen to forty-four inclusive form another unit, that in which the souls of the two lovers are united to form a third soul. The passage begins with a comparison of the two souls to armies, a false comparison, for the two souls are not in conflict but about to unite." (p. 76) However, in his account of the contending souls Winters has failed to consider an earlier poem written by the younger John Donne. In his elegy, "Loves War" the poet had worked out the paradox that exists when love making is compared to war making. Through the sexual "combat" of the lovers in the elegy life is created whereas in natural warfare life is destroyed. This image of the souls which hang like equal armies outside the body until fate decides their issue is not so inept when we consider it in light of the earlier elegy. Through their struggle and joining together, the souls are also going to create a new being, a greater soul. Thus the image creates another added paradox in the poem.

38

For a different reading of this poem see Gardner's edition of the poems, p. 262.

39

Joan Bennett, "The Love Poetry of John Donne," Seventeenth Century Studies Presented to Sir Herbert Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 91.

40

Grierson, p. xlvii.

41

Quoted in Grierson, p. xlvii.

42

It should be noted that these images work on the level of physical love as well. The physical attraction of the lovers is aptly conveyed in the succeeding image.

43

Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1947), p. 16.

44

Brooks, p. 16.

45

Grierson, p. xlv.

46

Leishman, p. 155.

47

Sharrock, p. 47.

48

Sharrock, p. 50.

49

John Donne, The Complete Poetry of John Donne, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1967), p. 25, ll. 79-84.

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THE PHILOSOPHICAL UNITY  
BEHIND JOHN DONNE'S SONGS AND SONNETS

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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## REPORT ABSTRACT

John Donne's Songs and Sonnets has been studied by many critics since it was first published in 1633. Scholars such as H. J. C. Grierson, J. B. Leishman, and Helen Gardner have paid ample tribute to the variety of love's faces, moods, and themes found there. But, until recently, little attempt has been made to distinguish a unity of thought or a consistent philosophical attitude toward ideal love in the poems. With Gardner's chronological ordering of the Songs and Sonnets which separates the earlier and the later poems, a new approach is now possible. We are now able to see Donne's philosophy of love emerging in its fullest complexity in such later poems as "The Exstasie" and "The Canonization." It is a philosophy based, in part, on the Platonic conception of ideal union in which the lovers become one; but inherent in Donne's philosophy is a belief in the validity of the ideal love relationship, not as an end in itself, but as a means to fulfillment of man's destiny in the universe, a destiny which includes man's procreation as well as his perfection of spirit. From this ideal relationship comes a harmonious joining of the two lovers who give unselfishly of themselves to each other in perfect love. It is the frustration of this ideal union that forms the basis of Donne's "cynical" earlier poems, thereby indirectly anticipating the fuller statement of the philosophy in the later poems.