

Poetic Premises and Logical Limitations
in John Donne's Poetry

by

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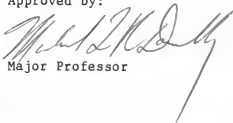
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I The Search for Truth

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John Donne's poetry leads us to believe he dissected the world of ideas to find truth. He habitually broke his subjects into component parts, scrutinized them, and rejoined them in a new order to analyze meaning. This life-long search for truth resulted in expert skill in logic, a vast knowledge of literature, and a worldly skepticism that reinforced his Christian faith. The literary side of this habit produced lusty poems, religious sonnets, and learned sermons. As Donne searched for truth in the language of poetry, he raised more questions than he answered, and he required the readers of his poems to do the same.

Donne's experiments with formal logic and figurative poetry produce unexpected conclusions that juxtapose seemingly unlike objects or ideas, forcing his readers to question both logical and poetic language. Sometimes, having a good question is more meaningful than having an answer, and depending on the gravity of the subject, this probing process affects readers by producing humor, wonder, irony, disturbance, or shock. Few people can read Donne's poetry passively, because this poet asks his readers to do something. He doesn't simply perform; he asks us to perform. Consequently, we

feel obligated to respond to his request with at least a yea or nay.

Critics have long noted the analytic quality of Donne's poetry. In 1921, T.S. Eliot defended Donne's poetry against some critics who faulted it or restricted it as "metaphysical," "witty," "quaint," or "obscure" (250). By refuting Samuel Johnson's warrant that because poetry was an imitative art, Donne's analytic dissections could not be poetry, Eliot seized Johnson's own observation to define metaphysical poets as analytic:

Johnson has hit, perhaps by accident, on one of their peculiarities, when he observes that 'their attempts were always analytic.'

(Eliot 245)

In further defining metaphysical poetry, J.B. Leishman persuasively argued in 1951 that Donne wrote poetry about thought rather than perception (228) and "Donne's poems are nearly always argumentative . . . to the development and illustration of some very definite point" (232). Despite these critical strides, about 20 years later, Joseph Summers insisted the term "metaphysical" still was sufficiently vague to include

such diverse poets as Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray, Robert Burns, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Algernon Charles Swinburne (107). Donne's poems are unusually analytic and logically argumentative, but confusion about the meaning of the term "metaphysical" continues to obscure these important critical distinctions.'

By combining the objective machinery of the deductive syllogism with the persuasive analogy of figurative language, Donne explored the nature of meaning. In this sense, he may have been a pioneer of modern deconstruction, saved from skepticism by his religious faith. Donne tried to map the logical limitations of language, and he circulated examples in poetry for his readers to negotiate. Donne's coterie of readers was a very select audience. Generally refraining from printing his poems for mass-distribution, he preferred to circulate manuscripts among close friends and colleagues. His readers shared a number of common attitudes, assumptions, and general knowledge about the world (Crutwell 22), including the dialectic, scholastic use of logical syllogism (30). The reader was equal to the poet (26), and their familiarity allowed a two-way communication.

This dialectical dialogue between Donne and his reader is a logical process, not illogical as some recent critics have suggested. Arthur Marotti insists that Donne is "wittily illogical" as he amuses and challenges his readers with strings of short arguments based on "false logic" (47). He cites the fallacy of the undistributed middle term in this syllogism from "The Anagram": All love is wonder; if wee justly doe / Account her wonderfull, why not lovely too?" (Gardner, Elegies 25-26). Marotti holds this up as evidence of an invalid syllogism, but this transparently improper argument serves Donne's larger argumentative strategy: Donne expects this minor argument to be rejected because his major argument, outlined below, assumes that she is not lovely:

Beauty is the desire of all men.

Flavia is not a beauty.

Flavia is not the desire of all men.

The desire of all men is likely to be unfaithful.

Flavia is not the desire of all men.

Flavia is not likely to be unfaithful.

Donne allows his readers to reject one syllogism, only

to trap them in another unexpected syllogism that produces ironic juxtaposition: Marry Flavia because she always will be faithful. Why? Because nobody else wants her. This is ironic advice, of course; Donne wittily is advising his friend not to marry Flavia. This method of argument is complex, but it is amusing and persuasive to his intimate coterie of readers, and it is based on the traditional conventions of logic.

John Carey also attacks Donne's use of logic by claiming it is "patently worthless" in "What if this present were the world's last night?" because "the argument [Donne] recalls using for getting girls into bed (that only ugly girls are unyielding) was always fatuous, and applied to Christ on the cross it is gruesome" (47). Donne, however, is not arguing that only ugly girls are unyielding; he is presenting this statement as a universal premise based on inductive experience along with its complement, physical beauty is a sign of pity. By deduction then, if Christ's form is beautiful, then Christ's form is a sign of pity. If the reader accepts this conclusion, it is because he accepts the premises; if he rejects either premise, he must reject the conclusion. Donne notes this is the same argument he used on his mistresses. This analogy may be indecorous, but the creation of meaning by revealing new

relationships between familiar objects is the heart of the poem. It is logical, sincere, and enlightening, but the violation of accepted decorum may not be persuasive to some readers.

As Donne explores new relationships, he often violates traditional decorum because he seeks meaning and truth at the expense of conventional language. A structural analysis of many of his poems reveals deductive syllogisms with at least one figurative inductive premise. Thus, his arguments involve two logical operations: acceptance of the inductive premise through appeals to experience and faith, and acceptance of the conclusion through the mechanical operation of the deductive syllogism. Induction produces only probable truths, however, and technically then, inductive premises are classified logically as false premises even though a particular inductive statement might be true.

Jerome Dees sees a similar interplay of two logical systems in Donne's sermons. Though I am limiting my comments to the poems, I would like to appropriate Dees's claims that tensions between two logics create emotional power:

. . . the logic of Donne's announced structure

gives way in the course of the development of the sermon to a different logic, usually implicit in the Biblical text, so that the sermon is obeying simultaneously two separate logical principles. . . . [T]he emotional and theological power of these sermons largely depends upon the tensions between the two logics

(79)

Similarly, tensions between induction and deduction raise the reader's emotional response to many of Donne's poems.

Aristotle defined the deductive syllogism as "discourse in which, certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so" (24). Donne seems to enjoy taking common assumptions about the world, forcing them into syllogisms, and then marveling at what "follows of necessity." A syllogism can be valid but false if one of the given premises is false, and because an induction is a generalization that can be evaluated only by inference from particular experiences, experiments, or examples, it is either a statement of faith or only probable truth, and it may be true to one reader's experience while being false to another's experience.

A valid syllogism may not produce absolute truth, but it does produce one valid conclusion. If a conclusion is unacceptable to the reader, it indicates one of the premises is false. Donne repeatedly uses such arguments in his poetry to produce an ironic conclusion that indicates one of the premises is false. This is his method of argument: he intends for his reader to discover the false assumption, which also is the reader's internalized assumption because of his implicit acceptance of the premises, and through this critical act that includes self-analysis, the reader experiences the emotions of humor, wonder, irony, disturbance, or shock, depending on his faithful acceptance of premises or his absolute rejection of them.

II Limits of Logic

Everyone involved in logical discourse must agree to initial assumptions before valid conclusions can be drawn. Dialectic, a form of deductive logic, involves questioning the listener until he or she agrees with two premises that necessarily lead to a particular conclusion. This was Socrates's method of argument when he was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens with his alleged atheistic ideas (Plato 410-11), and it remains an effective courtroom tool of trial lawyers during cross-examinations.

Itinerant teachers in ancient Greece filled a growing need for higher education and training in how to get ahead in life. A member of this profession was called a Sophist, a word that originally meant "wise man" (Hammond 1,000). Some Sophists were highly ethical, but many demonstrated dialectical techniques for arguing either side of a question regardless of its truth. Thus the term developed pejoratively until today the definition often connotes one who argues deceptively. Donne often seems like a congenial sophist who expects to be found out as he presents strings of arguments--some false and others true--based on certain assumptions that can be combined in a syllogism.

In Donne's era, the Aristotelian syllogism had become the backbone of higher education. Wilbur Howell claims the "accepted tradition in English logic during the first seventy years of the sixteenth century is best described by saying that the logical treatises of Aristotle, as construed by commentators of the ancient pagan world and by their Christian and Mohammedan successors, were the ruling authorities" (6). This tradition was called scholastic logic, and an Oxford scholar like Donne could not have escaped its influence:

Scholastic logic as a system of precepts for the teaching of learned communication had come during the sixteenth century to divide itself into two procedures Invention, or inventio as it was expressed in Latin, consisted of the methods by which debatable propositions could be analyzed to determine what could be said for or against them. Judgment or disposition, termed iudicium in Latin, consisted in methods of arranging words into propositions, propositions into syllogisms or inductions, and syllogisms or inductions into whole discourses. Taken together, these two procedures constituted a machinery of analysis and synthesis on the level of language--a machinery for

assembling materials to prove the truth of an assertion and for combining those materials into complex discourses.

(15)

Like complex discourse, mathematical communication also requires clearly stated assumptions. Jonathan Holden suggests an important relationship between mathematics and poetry as arts of measurement:

Measurement is done . . . by imposing upon the world constructions of the imagination, ideal structures, terms which can only be sustained through something akin to [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief that is poetic faith.' This identical phrase could be used to describe exactly the kind of assumption--the kind of 'faith'--which is the basis of every mathematical construction, construction which begins with the implicit if not the explicit injunction 'Let us assume that'

(773)

Algebra is not absolute truth. An equation is true only if one accepts the axioms of the man-made system. "The

terms in literary works are, of course, far less universally acknowledged than the truly international language of number, but both languages clearly depend upon a suspension of disbelief," Holden argues. "The implicit 'Let us assume . . .' that makes mathematics possible is the convention . . . that makes extrapolation possible to begin with, leading toward any number of constructions . . ." (778).

This "let us assume" approach underpins the structure of Donne's poetry. The congenial sophist first asks his readers to accept his premises through a "willing suspension of disbelief." Then he shows where these assumptions lead logically. The conclusion sometimes is false, but Donne may strategically expect to be found out, as in "The Flea," where he ironically presents two pleas to save the life of a flea that is about to be crushed by his mistress:

This flea has co-mingled our blood.

Co-mingling blood is innocent.

This flea is innocent.

Our lives are our blood.

Our blood is in this flea.

Our lives are in this flea.

The woman rejects both arguments and kills the flea because she considers the insect a trivial nuisance--not their "marriage bed" (Gardner, Elegies 13). The sophist speaker in the poem has her right where he wants her, though, turning her rejection to his advantage in two linked syllogisms based on her own implicit premise:

A flea is a trivial concern.

Our co-mingled blood is in this flea.

Our co-mingled blood is a trivial concern.

Our co-mingled blood is a trivial concern.

Yielding to me sexually is co-mingling our blood.

Yielding to me sexually is a trivial concern.

He now agrees with her that his fears about killing the flea were unfounded, and he uses her assumption about fleas to show that she should not worry about giving in to his sexual advances:

'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee;
Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,
Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from
thee. (Gardner, Elegies 25-27)

If this type of playful sophistry doesn't seriously deceive the reader of the poem, what does it do? I believe it deflates logic by reducing it to the status of a game, which leads to a skepticism about the ability of logical reasoning to arrive at truth. Thus, Donne uses logic to defeat logic much as a deconstructionist shows how all texts contradict at some point.

John Milton also deflates logic in Paradise Regained by contrasting logic, the tool of Satan, and faith, the consolation of Jesus. Satan's temptation speeches are typically logical; Jesus responds with simple expressions of belief. This passive resistance to logical debate ultimately defeats Satan, who can win only in a controlled game of logic. Because Jesus will not argue, Satan cannot win the fame he attributes to those who rule by wise persuasion.

To see this relationship, consider Book IV, lines 221-235, where Satan tempts Jesus by offering him all the wisdom in the world:

Be famous then
By wisdom; as thy Empire must extend,
So let extend thy mind o're all the world,
In knowledge, all things in it comprehend,
All knowledge is not couch't in Moses Law,

The Pentateuch or what the Prophets wrote,
The Gentiles also know, and write, and teach
To admiration, led by Nature's light;
And with the Gentiles much thou must converse,
Ruling them by persuasion as thou mean'st,
Without thir learning how wilt thou with them,
Or they with thee hold conversation meet?
How wilt thou reason with them, how refute
Thir Idolisms, Traditions, Paradoxes?
Error by his own arms is best evinc't.

Satan, who avidly seeks followers, reveals his own strategy when he ironically advises Jesus that ruling will make him famous: since wise persuasion is ruling, wise persuasion will make him famous. This deductive argument depends on the listener's acceptance of two premises. The conclusion is true only if Jesus believes ruling brings fame and wise persuasion is ruling; it is relevant only if Jesus regards fame as a worthy goal.

Satan is suggesting that Jesus use wisdom to persuade the gentiles to follow him by refuting their idols, traditions, and paradoxes. If Jesus accepts this argument, Satan expects to claim a victory by persuading the Son of God and then to gain a large following through the fame this brings. Instead, Jesus rejects his

argument; he replies that he needs no doctrine other than what God gives to him (288-290). Satan's true temptation, then, is the temptation of logical debate, and Jesus will not fight arguments with arguments, which "are false, or little else but dreams, / Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm" (291-292). Satan's temptation is a classic deductive argument based on two premises. A correctly deduced syllogism is normally regarded as valid, but it is based on two prior beliefs and therefore not necessarily true. Jesus concerns himself with truth, while Satan is concerned only about validity.

Jesus points out that even "The first and wisest of them all profess'd / To know this only, that he nothing knew (293-294):" This is an allusion to Socrates, who tested his wisdom by exposing the folly of those who claimed to be wise (Plato 404-05). While Socrates claimed to know nothing, he was not deceived like others who claimed wisdom and still knew nothing. Socrates' lack of self-deception elevated his wisdom above the wisdom of others. Jesus doesn't claim to know nothing, but he does claim to know only what comes from God. He stumps the logical Satan by citing the founder of dialectic to help establish his foundation of faith.

For Milton and Donne, logical deduction is a man-

made means to an end that cannot be evaluated sufficiently by that means. For them, the argumentative machinery of the deductive syllogism is too limited to produce truth.

III Figures of Speech

Donne's poetry explores meaning with figures of speech, particularly similes, symbols, and metaphors, as well as the rational machinery of logic. Figures of speech are subject-predicate constructions that depart from customary order or significance to achieve special effects or meanings. Many of Donne's poems are experiments with these special subject-predicate relationships as he uses syllogisms to fit a new predicate to a certain subject. In "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," Donne asks his lover to believe that their souls are like one piece of gold or two legs of a compass. Again, if she refuses to accept the first argument, there's always the second:

Gold is perfected through expansion.

Our souls are like gold.

Our souls are perfected through expansion.

The moving compass point returns to its beginning.

I am like the moving compass point.

I will return to where I began.

Though similes are not normally used in syllogisms,

the argumentative poem raises important questions: How can one thing be like another and still be different? What does it mean to be like or as something else without being the other thing? Only a suspension of disbelief allows the figurative language to work, creating two wonderful metaphysical conceits, one based on the alchemical perfection of gold (Khanna), the other on the navigator's mathematical two-pronged compass. Like gold, their souls will be perfected through expansion, and like the moving point of a compass, he will return to where he began. Does this mean his lover won't regret his leaving? Probably not, but the images are persuasive in a pleasing, enchanting, and consoling way.

Holy Sonnet 10, "Batter my heart, three person'd God," presents an extended metaphor of God as a mender of pots and pans (Gardner, Divine Poems 2-4). Since pot-menders beat, bend, and buff their old metal wares to make them new, God must do the same with people who need spiritual renewal:

God is a mender.

A mender breaks, blows, and burns.

God breaks, blows, and burns.

A simple metaphor would compare God to a tinker, a mender of pots and pans. Donne produces an extended metaphor by starting with the simple metaphor as a premise for a deductive syllogism. By analyzing how a tinker changes metal, he makes some deductions about how God changes people. This poem raises important questions about the nature of change: Can people positively uplift themselves without negatively destroying their old selves? Is this act creation or destruction?

In "What if this present were the worlds last night?" Donne asks us to accept that physical beauty is a sign of pity. This suggestion is pleasant; we'd like to believe it, and accepting this idea in a poem seems harmless enough, but it is not literally true. As soon as we accept it, the machinery of logical deduction urges us to accept the conclusion that Christ will pity the speaker in the poem:

What if this present were the worlds last
night?
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost
dwell,
The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
Whether that countenance can thee affright,
Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light,

Blood fills his frownes, which from his
 pierc'd head fell,
And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
Which pray'd forgivenessse for his foes fierce
 spight?

No, no; but as in my idolatrie
I said to all my profane mistresses,
Beauty, of pittie, foulnessse onely is
A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,
This beauteous forme assures a pitious minde.

(Gardner, Divine Poems)

The deduction is this: Physical beauty is a sign of pity; Christ's form is beautiful; therefore, Christ's form is a sign of pity. The analogy concerning his mistresses is indecorous because logic works independently of decorum. The same logical strategy can be decorous or indecorous depending on the gravity of the subject.

The tone of the poem, however, suggests that Donne is not entirely convinced. Assurances are not always accurate. Neither are assumptions. In fact, all editions of this poem before Sir Herbert Grierson's The Poems of John Donne (Oxford, 1912), reproduce "assures" in the

last line as "assumes" (Bald 38), and assumptions--as we have seen--are not always true. Furthermore, the repetition of "no" in line 9 indicates a faltering response to his own question; perhaps physical beauty is not a sign of pity, or perhaps the painter of the picture made a false assumption (or assurance).

Much of Donne's poetry follows deductive syllogisms based on inductive premises that are figures of speech. The figurative turn of meaning is turned again by unusual juxtapositions that elicit responses from readers ranging from the irony of "The Anagram," the humor of "The Flea," and the wonder of "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning" to the disturbance of "Batter my heart three person'd God" and the shock of "What if this present were the worlds last night?" The precise response is determined by the gravity of the subject from the reader's point of view.

Donne's fanciful figures interact with his strict syllogisms to produce new relationships among old ideas. This logical-poetic process stimulates strong emotional responses but almost no certain truths.

IV Reader Participation

The First Anniversary. An Anatomy of the World may be the gravest subject Donne addressed in his poetry, and because of his indecorous method of ironic juxtaposition--joining two seemingly unrelated objects or ideas by syllogism--this poem often has drawn the most severe reader reaction: rejection. Many readers who can happily accept that Donne plays games with logic to show off his intellectual cleverness and metaphysical wit react with dismay to a similar play of mind in this poem (Manley 14-15). They do not expect such games in a funeral elegy.

In the poem, Donne establishes that the world has died with Elizabeth Drury, a 14-year-old girl who was the only surviving daughter of Sir Robert Drury, one of Donne's patrons.² The poet asks his readers to accept an unusually difficult premise: The world is Elizabeth Drury. This synecdoche, in which the whole signifies the part, would not be difficult for her father to accept. The deductive syllogism follows:

The world is Elizabeth Drury.

Elizabeth Drury is dead.

The world is dead.

In this and other syllogisms I have presented, readers may be tempted to reverse the terms of the first premise. Imagining the part as "representing" the whole may be easier than vice versa, but both statements are valid synecdoches. Because a valid syllogism must contain a common term in one subject and one predicate of the two premises, reversing the first premise above to "Elizabeth Drury is the world" creates the fallacy of the undistributed middle term. Furthermore, if Elizabeth Drury is the world, there is no logical reason why the reverse is not true: the world is Elizabeth Drury.

Following the syllogism above, Donne catalogues the general decay of the world and alternately praises a girl he never knew. Is this indecorous? Yes. Is it a flaw? No. The indecorum is an integral part of the poem. As Zailig Pollock points out, indecorum "is what the poem is about" (302). Pollock claims the poem concerns death and putrefaction: "As the poem's wit insistently demands that we fix our gaze on the object, the smell becomes increasingly distracting, until we finally realize that the distractions are the poem" (308). Pollock focuses on Donne's conclusion:

. . . the worlds carcasse would not last, if I

Were punctuall in this Anatomy.
Nor smels it well to hearers, if one tell
Them their disease, who fain would think
they're wel.

(Milgate 439-442)

The narrator clearly states that readers may be offended by the poem because it forces them to see their own corrupt mortality. The narrator admits An Anatomy of the World is offensive because the world is offensive.

Is the poem logical? Wesley Milgate thinks so (xxxiv, xli). He claims an innocent girl can represent "the whole human condition," and her death, therefore, can be compared to the death of the whole human condition. Thus Elizabeth Drury is a metaphor for the world. Reacting to this metaphoric identification, Ben Jonson claimed The First Anniversary was "profane and full of Blasphemies," and that if it had been written about the Virgin Mary, "it had been something." Donne defended the poem and hinted at his metaphoric premise by saying he was writing about "the Idea of a Woman, and not as she was" (Shawcross 405).

Frank Manley defends the identification, too, adding the Wisdom of God is Elizabeth Drury's soul (20-40). Since her soul still lives, the Wisdom of God still

lives:

The Wisdom of God is Elizabeth Drury's soul.

Elizabeth Drury's soul is alive.

The Wisdom of God is alive.

This syllogism is less evident in The First Anniversary than in The Second Anniversary. Of the Progress of the Soule. Manley claims the second completes the first:

The total movement of The Second Anniversary is harmonious and organic not, as is usually believed, because it is a success and The First Anniversary a failure, but because through the purgative process of The First Anniversary the soul has at last arrived at a right valuation of this world, and of the next, and rests secure in the love of God.

(49)

Donne's Anniversaries do not present the world of Elizabeth's human survivors as much as they present the transmutation of her soul into a new spiritual world. In The First Anniversary, the human world is dead to her soul; in The Second Anniversary, her spiritual soul soars toward eternal life.

In a seventeenth-century medical sense, an anatomy was a dissection of a physical structure, though it was being used in a figurative sense as well. In 1621, for example, Robert Burton published The Anatomy of Melancholy, a carefully structured, three-part work that analyzed the causes and symptoms of melancholy, its cure, and its main forms. The Oxford English Dictionary notes that even Aristotle used the Greek root of the word "anatomy" to mean logical dissection or analysis. Therefore, anatomy, analysis and syllogistic reasoning are closely related activities.

In Donne's analysis of the world, some confusion results from his failure to accept the separate and simultaneous existence of soul and body. When Donne refers to Elizabeth, he refers sometimes to her worldly body and sometimes to her spiritual soul. Carey explains that Donne believed the soul was inseparable from the body (one and the same) until death (162-64). For Donne, there was no soul/body dualism, though he believed the soul lived after death. Thus, in one sense, Elizabeth dies and lives, but inserting the dualism may help:

The physical world is Elizabeth Drury ('s body).

Elizabeth Drury ('s body) is dead.

The physical world is dead.

The spiritual world is Elizabeth Drury ('s soul).

Elizabeth Drury ('s soul) is alive.

The spiritual world is alive.

Donne is aware of the difficulties his anatomy metaphor presents. If the world is dead, who can learn from this structural analysis? Someone must be there to perform and witness the anatomy, so he creates some sort of "new world": "This new world may be safer, being told / The dangers and diseases of the old" (87-88). Manley ties this new world directly to the Wisdom of God, represented by Elizabeth's soul (Manley 41). This spiritual world justifies hope for the future and keeps the poem from sinking into nihilism. The somewhat repetitive lessons of the anatomy echo the controlling syllogism: the whole is the part; the part is diseased; therefore, the whole is diseased:

And learn'st thus much by our Anatomee,
The heart being perish'd, no part can be free.

(185-86)

And that, not onely faults in inward parts,
Corruptions in our braines, or in our harts,

Poysoning the fountaines, whence our actions
spring,
Endanger us: but that if every thing
Be not done fitly'nd in proportion,
To satisfie wise, and good lookers on,
(Since most men be such as most thinke they
bee)
They're lothsome too, by this Deformitee.

(329-36)

Donne claims inward faults poison external actions, which corrupt us in the eyes of wise men, who suffer the same fate. The poem catalogues the corruption of parts of the physical world leading to the corruption of all worldly things, including the reader.

An important part of Donne's art is his ability to persuade his readers to accept a figurative statement as a logical premise. Here, the figurative identification is an attractive idea. Imagining an innocent 14-year-old as the embodiment of the purest "human condition" is not difficult; it seems natural, and Donne encourages the imagination. Kathleen Kelly describes his persuasive power in The First Anniversary:

It is not only that the speaker plays the

role of biblical prophet. We also play the role of the biblical prophet's audience, at first skeptical of his authority, initially unable to share his vision. Only when the prophet persists in establishing his authority --through his compelling sense of urgency, through his claim to a higher source of wisdom, through his holy indignation--only then does the community finally begin to embrace his vision, to become his audience.

(156)

The acceptance of premises, however lengthy or difficult the process, is an inductive act based on experience and faith. It is not deduction; this is where deductive logic begins. Once the reader, whom Donne knew well, has assented, "For the sake of argument, I will consider the world and Elizabeth Drury as the same," a deductive syllogism leads to the death of the world, a juxtaposition that shocks the reader into a new awareness of everyday life.

Donne's preoccupation with logical syllogism and figurative poetry is related to his life-long interest in paradoxes, which mark the limits of human logic and the beginnings of divine faith. Donne used deductive

sylogisms with figurative premises to reveal new relationships among familiar ideas in his search for truth. The syllogistic structures of his poems create juxtapositions that urge his readers to question both logical and figurative language, and this active participation by the readers intensifies their emotional responses to his poetry.

Notes

¹ Leishman (20) argues persuasively that Donne's poetry is not philosophical, as the term "metaphysical" suggests, but rather scholastic or dialectic. For critical summaries of the uses of scholastic and dialectic logic in Donne's time, see Wilbur Samuel Howell, Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500-1700 (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1956) and Walter Ong, Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958).

² The structural time pattern of the poem lacks measured intervals, order, and consecutiveness. It can be summarized best by direction (toward decay) and various causes. For a more complete summary of The First Anniversary, see Earl Miner, The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969), 63-66.

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Poetic Premises and Logical Limitations
in John Donne's Poetry

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Abstract. A structural analysis of John Donne's poetry reveals deductive syllogisms with figurative inductive premises. Because figurative language is not literally true, such premises technically are false unless the reader allows a suspension of disbelief, which is poetic faith. Donne combines logic and poetry in a search for meaning and truth. He uses the machinery of the logical syllogism to produce new relationships between familiar ideas by joining two seemingly unlike objects or ideas in a deductive syllogism. This juxtaposition produces unexpected or ironic conclusions that raise questions about the ability of logic and poetry to produce truth. Donne expects his coterie of readers to analyze his arguments, and each reader's participation in this critical analysis intensifies his or her emotional responses, which range from ironic humor to shocked rejection. (JLM)