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'Til We Meet Again: The Soul's Alchemy in John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*

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‘TIL WE MEET AGAIN:
THE SOUL’S ALCHEMY IN JOHN DONNE’S SONGS AND SONNETS

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'TIL WE MEET AGAIN:
THE SOUL’S ALCHEMY IN THE SONGS AND SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE

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Abstract

Alchemy, in his Songs and Sonnets, offers John Donne a realm devoted to the paradoxical, one from which he selects material to be artistically altered by his trademark "metaphysical wit." It also provides him – in the intensely-prescribed process of coniunctio – with a paradigm for passion, for the irresistible conjunction and inevitable separation of lovers. Drawing upon the writings of Twentieth-century psychologist, C.G. Jung, whose study of alchemy informed much of his own work, it is possible to uncover both within and among nine diverse selections from the Songs and Sonnets a poetic opus circulatorium. A circular sequence of painful separations and joyous reunions in the poetry seems to track with events in the life of the poet himself. Donne’s art renders the refinement of devotion between soul-mates even as it transforms the consciousness of a man very much like John Donne.
To

John D. Meek, who introduced me to the writings of John Donne on Friday, November 22, 1963.
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Preface

For most early modern Londoners, alchemy was “an inclusive and heterogenous body of knowledge and pseudo-knowledge” (Duncan 257), an ancient practice founded on the belief that all metals could be transmuted into gold. In A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery, Lyndy Abraham discusses alchemy’s application to the perfectibility of the human soul: “Alchemy is based on the view that man had become divided within himself, separated into two sexes, at the fall in the garden of Eden and could only regain his integral Adamic state when the opposing forces within him were reconciled” (36-37). This fusion of opposites (whether in the perfection of an alloy or the reconciliation of a troubled soul) is the goal of alchemy, and it is achieved through a patient, cyclical process of refinement. So aware were adepts of the highly charged nature of the elements which they attempted to draw together, that they employed sexual imagery to describe their work. They referred to fusion, separation and re-fusion of elements as the coniunctio. Traditionally, there were four progressively more intense fusions, but by the sixteenth century, there were just three: nigredo, in which the material is reduced to its blackened base elements and “dies;” albedo/citrinitas in which the soul – released by the dying body – rises to embrace the spirit and returns to “whiten” the dead material; and rubedo, accomplished at the most intense heat when the whitened material produces the “red” elixir or stone (Jung, Psychology and Alchemy 229).

Alchemy’s power, according to Robert E. Knoll, was respected by both the “enlightened and powerful” and the “porters and mechanics” of early modern England (131). Alchemists themselves, however, were widely ridiculed. So in 1610, when Ben Jonson staged The Alchemist, the audience’s appreciation of the satirical treatment of charlatans would likely have done little to diminish their faith in alchemy itself (Knoll 124). In addition, for those intrigued
by the power of the written word, alchemy’s arcane texts were of great interest not in spite of their cryptic language but because of it:

...the early modern intellectual took great delight in deciphering the meaning of an emblem or motto, or in ‘reading’ the iconography of a pageant, play or painting. Books of emblems ... were extremely inviting targets of study ... All the same, this activity was not necessarily mere entertainment or diversion, but often a key part of the serious intellectual quest for knowledge. (Newman 181)

While Judith Scherer Herz ("Reading and Rereading Donne" 101) mentions that in his poetry John Donne “tries out the discourse of alchemy,” both Edgar Hill Duncan and Joseph A. Mazzeo have made detailed studies of Donne’s use of alchemical imagery in the *Songs and Sonnets*. In addition, both Thomas W. Hayes and Lynn Veach Sadler have identified in single poems from the *Songs and Sonnets* the three-stage process of alchemy. What seems to have been missed by such earlier scholarship, however, is a close study in the *Songs and Sonnets* of the pattern of the lovers’ intimate unions and painful separations. The preparation of this paper was not unlike the steps an aspiring alchemist would have to take in order to find the secret recipe for *chrysopoeia* (“gold-making”) buried in a treatise comprised largely of pseudo-chemical language. According to Newman and Principe, the alchemist scattered parts of his formula throughout a larger text and “readers [and hopeful adepts] recognized their obligation to hunt down, identify and rejoin these dispersed fragments” (186-187). By first noting how Donne’s use of the three-stages of *coniunctio* (*nigredo, albedo and rubedo*) drives the meaning in several of his *Songs and Sonnets*, this paper then links them in a sequence that itself demonstrates transformation.

From available sources, it does not appear that anyone has connected Donne’s use of alchemy in the *Songs and Sonnets* with the work of C.G. Jung, many of whose psychological
theories arose directly from his study of alchemy. In his memoir, Jung writes as one whose reaction to the discovery of long-buried alchemic treatises closely resembles that of early modern scholars to whom Newman and Principe refer above. Jung writes, “It was a long while before I found my way about in the labyrinth of alchemical thought processes ... I worked along philological lines, as if I were trying to solve the riddle of an unknown language ... I soon [saw] that analytical psychology coincided in a most curious way with alchemy” (Memories, Dreams, and Reflections 205). This paper relies not only on Jung’s study of coniunctio, but also on his profile of the alchemist-physician, Paracelsus (Philip Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541), whose insistence upon refining the “medicinal force hidden in [an] herb” made him the first “chemo-therapist” (Pachter 56). Jung, Paracelsus and Donne form an interesting trio in their involvement with alchemy for the purposes of this paper: Jung focuses on the soul (psyche), Paracelsus on the body and Donne on the full composite of man: soul, body and spirit.

The poems studied in this paper were selected with Dame Helen Gardner’s landmark study of the Songs and Sonnets in mind, along with biographical scholarship on Donne by Gosse, Bald and Bell. “Love’s Alchemy” and “The Undertaking” show the speaker’s predisposition to transformation, from a man with limited self-awareness to one who had learned the value of a little mortification. The next seven poems (“Air and Angels,” “The Expiration,” “The Dissolution,” “The Good Morrow,” “Witchcraft by a Picture,” “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” and “A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day, Being the Shortest Day”) are arranged to show alternately conjunction and disjunction as the speaker and his beloved learn from Donne that, with practice, lovers can transcend physical absence by a deliberate act of hope: by meditating on one’s soul-mate and imagining their inevitable reunion. This is the experience of love with which the tempered devotion of the alchemist holds the ideal comparison.
In every era, there are individuals whose sensibilities run counter to the norm. Carl Jung suggests that such a person’s “relative lack of adaptation turns to his advantage; it allows him to follow his own yearnings far from the beaten path” (The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature 82).

The English poet John Donne (1572-1631) was both an educated man of his time and an “outsider” whose thinking often conflicted with his culture’s dominant views. Born to devout Catholics in a country that had been officially Protestant for only fifty years, Donne learned at an early age that he must find a way to engage the world while never quite “belonging” to it (Bald 230). Of the middle class, he attended both Oxford and Cambridge, and studied law at Lincoln’s Inn, one of the “suburbs of the court” where those hoping for royal appointment practiced the art of rhetoric (Prest 223). Donne possessed an “idiosyncratic temperament” (Gardner xxx), the result perhaps of simultaneously harboring “contempt for the ways of the Court” and doing his utmost to secure a position there. He considered the sole point on which the Protestant and Catholic churches agreed – the resolution of disputes via capital punishment/martyrdom – to be its own pillory, deserving of satire (Bald 122, 222-223). So if his formidable body of writing seems in places to contradict itself, perhaps it is due to the paradoxical position in which he so often placed himself.

Donne’s relationship with his world caused him to generate lyrics unlike those that he believed merely “passed for poetry” among ambitious courtiers (Marotti 33). And not surprisingly, Donne’s verse is unique in its keen respect for the inexplicable, the paradoxical, the oppositional. Just as an alchemist combines disparate materials in order to reduce them to one common essence, so Donne draws together conflicting elements in human experience and
subjects them to the heat of his imagination in order to touch upon the truth, intuited that paradox is where one is most likely to find it. Many of his Songs and Sonnets share imagery associated with alchemy while others seem to be driven by its principles of transformation. In these, Donne is more than a poet; he is “poet-alchemist,” both maker and adept becoming one with the work. His inspiration for both pursuits could be the “god of paradox,” Mercury, described by Ben Jonson as the “President of Language,” the “poet’s tool” and by Henry Reynolds as the “father of alchemy” (both qtd. in Sadler 69). More than a catalyst, Mercury (Mercurius) behaves—in countless hermetic writings—as though he has a personal stake in the success of each alchemic undertaking, in the joining of body, soul and spirit (Jung, Alchemical Studies 237). Therefore, within the Songs and Sonnets, it is possible to link a number of the alchemy-driven poems by their reliance upon the ever-attempted, ever-unsuccessful alchemical practice of coniunctio—the joining together and the breaking apart. For it is through a coniunctio, a metaphysics of his own creation that Donne records the gradual transformation of a man very much like himself.

Paradoxes, Donne once wrote, “are rather alarums to truth to arme her then enemies” (qtd. in Colie 37). Not only may they be understood as “doing two things at once, two things which contradict ... one another,” but paradoxes are also “…formulation[s] of any sort running counter to received opinion” (Colie 8-9). Paradox does not argue a position, it reveals a “characteristically simple” truth and just keeps “circling and spiraling around its central fixed point, always deepening, thickening, reinforcing our awareness of how multiplex any simple truth is” (Colie 519). This is a lovely idea to hold when reading the Songs and Sonnets, itself a

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1 The word “poet” is derived from the Greek word poiein, which means, “to make.” Even more significant to any assessment of Donne’s work is the Latin word for poet: vate or “seer.” See Sidney 84-87.
nonlinear sequence. Donne's speaker moves in a series of concentric circles, a man who keeps retracing the steps that led him to a glimpse of truth and — through the love of one woman — to both a higher level of consciousness and an “unsatisfied yearning,” Jung’s term for a requisite quality in the soul of an artist (The Spirit 82).

Cleanth Brooks writes of metaphor (the implied resemblance between two elements) that “even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes” (9). Donne, however, is regarded as the master of a particular kind of metaphor, in which the revelation of paradox extends beyond the resemblance between two dissimilar ideas to their fusion. A.J. Smith uses the term “metaphysical wit” to describe this poetic faculty (6). We commonly think of wit as clever repartee, the mark of a keen intellect, and so it was understood in sixteenth-century England. What has been lost to us, though, is a deeper understanding of the relation of wit to paradox. Murray Roston refers to the work of S.L. Bethell, for whom wit means more than “nimble wordplay.” In Donne’s time, wit was one of three primary modes of mental “conceits,” which “... [took] the form of arguments urbanely fictitious” (qtd. in Roston 76). Of the three, Roston writes, rhetoric aims to persuade and, while dialectic argues in order to establish truth, wit is the attempt to reveal truth “of that divine order of the universe which unites the apparently disparate” (76). When A.J. Smith applies the term metaphysical [“meta-” meaning “beyond”] to this high-functioning human capacity for fusing opposites, he alludes to that most fundamental of fusions, “we are body and soul together” (6). Underpinning Smith’s comment is the fact that wit, while expressed in the form of an “intellectual conceit,” retained in the late sixteenth century another, older meaning: “Any one of certain particular faculties of perception, classified as outer

2 In alchemy, Mercury is represented by the “uroboros,” the serpent which devours its own tail and gives birth to itself. Forming a complete circle, it symbolizes the circular nature of the transformative process. See Abraham 207.

3 Samuel Johnson first used the term “metaphysical” with regard to Donne. See The Lives of the English Poets: And a Criticism on Their Works, v.1, 19-20.
(outward) and inner (inward) or ghostly, and commonly reckoned as five of each kind" (OED). The five physical senses, then, were originally called “the five wits” (OED). And wit as “sense” was the means through which the five physical powers of perception “… [were] viewed as forming a single faculty in contradistinction to intellect” (OED, emphasis added). Alongside the five inner wits, imagination behaves as a “sixth outer wit,” a property of the soul. And, Jung writes, it was believed that the soul “was by no means a merely intellectual concept; it was visualized sensuously as a “breath-body” which permeated and “wrapped itself around” the physical body (Mysterium Coniunctionis 525). Jung also observes that tradition held that the soul “… functions (operatur) in the body, but has the greater part of its function (operatio) outside the body … and it imagines far higher things than the body … can conceive” (Psychology and Alchemy 279). So wit operates beyond both dialectic and rhetoric because every human faculty – not intellect alone – is involved in bringing into conjunction what would otherwise be considered mutually exclusive.

The simultaneously physical and spiritual human person, then – one with all of his wits about him – is a paradox in his own right. An inborn circumspection predisposes him to apprehend paradox everywhere (Mazzeo 228). Donne’s near-contemporary, the revolutionary alchemist Paracelsus (Philip Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493-1541) believed that the imagination (the wit of the soul) is like a magnet, drawing in all sorts of phenomena from outside itself (Pagel 122). Donne’s poetry testifies to a man in full possession of his wits, eager to deploy his imagination as he takes on the world. Referring to Donne’s poetry, Cleanth Brooks uses the term “creative imagination” in which “fusion is not logical; it apparently violates science and common sense; it welds together the discordant and the contradictory” as it reveals paradoxical truth (17).
In “Reading and Rereading Donne’s Poetry,” Judith Scherer Herz says of the Songs and Sonnets that Donne “... discards the ready-made Petrarchan discourse... and tries out the alchemical” (101). Alchemists, still furtively active during Donne’s time, 4 “were ultimately concerned with the union of substances, the reconciliation of opposites” (Abraham 35) so in alchemy Donne found a paradigm for the exercise of his wit, for synthesizing the contradictory. It may be argued that of great significance for Donne, “a lyric poet distinctively gifted in showing how [human awareness] is affected by ... the constants of death, parting and change” (Sherwood 79) was alchemy’s insistence upon the ultimate human paradox: that life lived authentically is a repeated exercise in suffering, death and rebirth.

Alexander Roob, in The Hermetic Museum: Alchemy and Mysticism, has assembled over five hundred pages of emblematic text from dozens of ancient alchemic manuscripts dealing with alchemical transmutation, during which the male and female elements are brought together. Included in the book is the poem “Sol and Luna,” as it was illustrated in 1550 in “one of the first alchemical picture books,” the Rosarium Philosophorum. Two figures are engaged in sexual intercourse: “Sol” (the male figure) represents the hot and dry elements and “Luna” (the female) depicts the cold and wet (365). According to Abraham, Mercury (Mercurius) is “the Cupid ... who shoots the magnetic arrow of love” 5 as well as “the priest who ties the marriage knot” (127-128) in what is referred to as the “sacred marriage” or coniunctio (127-128). The sequence of illustrations depicts what is hoped to be achieved by the skilled adept when heat under the material is steadily increased: hard matter is dissolved (solve) and soft or flowing matter is hardened (coagula). If the heat is properly controlled, the material is refined by alternating between these two states until the elixir is produced (Abraham 109).

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4 Alchemy was part of the renaissance milieu, although Donne gives no hint as to where his knowledge of alchemy derived. See Duncan 257-258.

5 In Roman mythology, Cupid is the son of Mercury and Venus. See Bulfinch’s Mythology 897.
In the lyrics to be discussed below, Donne employs this three-stage alchemical cycle—in whole or in part—as he sets out to resolve a lover’s problem with a paradox. In the process, he brings home to the reader in meticulously beautiful poetry how circuitous is the course of human love and how critical is its completion to the development of consciousness. Jung concurs when he writes that “the goal of psychic development is the self [and] ... there is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self” (Memories, Dreams, Reflections 196).

Alluding perhaps to Ben Jonson’s comment about his friend and contemporary—that “Donne himself, for not being understood, would perish” (Gosse 1-83)—Herz argues that Donne employs the “poetics of concealment” in the Songs and Sonnets (“An Excellent Exercise’...” 3), even though she makes no reference to the fact that alchemists were notoriously secretive in the pursuit of their work (Eliade 165). One might suggest that Donne anticipated a connection that, according to John Clay, was made by Carl Jung three centuries later: “…that the alchemical process replicated the process of creation—from massa confusa to nigredo to refining process ... to whitening ... purification [albedo] ... and finally to [rubedo] gold” (234). One may, then, take issue with Herz’s intimation that Donne merely “[tries] out alchemical discourse” in the Songs and Sonnets (“Reading and Rereading” 101). When applied to Donne’s poetry, the word “metaphysical” allows for more than one definition: in addition to “beyond,” the prefix meta-can signify “transformation” (OED). Donne’s art employs the transformative principle of alchemy itself: the power of the adept’s meditatio to change not only the material, but his own consciousness. Jung summarizes this principle in Mysterium Coniunctionis:

Take ... a dream, an irrational mood, an affect, or something of the kind, and operate with it. Give it your special attention, concentrate on it, and observe its alterations objectively. Spare no effort to devote yourself to this task, follow the subsequent transformations of the spontaneous fantasy attentively and carefully.
Above all, don't let anything from the outside, that does not belong, get into it, for the fantasy-image has everything that it needs. In this way one is certain of not interfering by conscious caprice and of giving the unconscious a free hand. In short, the alchemical process seems to us the equivalent of the psychological process of active imagination. (526)

And this applies to Donne's practice, his own craft of "creative imagination" (Brooks 17).

"Love's Alchemy"

The title of this poem could be an alternate to *Songs and Sonnets*, since the collection's common theme is the power of love to transform a man by first throwing him off balance and then forcing him to right himself. In "Love's Alchemy," with a ventriloquist's virtuosity, Donne presents the inevitable disappointment one experiences when appearance is mistaken for substance.

Some that have deeper digged love's mine than I,
Say, where his centric happiness doth lie:
I have loved, and got, and told,
But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,
I should not find that hidden mystery;
Oh, 'tis imposture all. (1-6)

Sour with skepticism, "Love's Alchemy" is, strictly speaking, neither a song nor a sonnet.  

Rather, it is an example of what Helen Gardner calls Donne's "hybrid" style, one that combines in one stanza both "the weight of the decasyllabic [sonnet] with the lightness of the octosyllabic [song]" (xxvi). Applying Gardner's insight to "Love's Alchemy," the reader can follow Donne's

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6 Donne was a "conscious innovator in prosody" who "saw that new effects of beauty and passion were to be won" by breaking with conventional styles in order to "approximate direct, unconventional, colloquial speech." See Leischman 34.
oscillation between lines which suggest substance and lines which do not, as the speaker conducts an oral argument with himself in two acerbic stanzas.

"Some that have deeper digged love's mine than I, / Say, where his centric happiness doth lie" (1-2). Alchemy had its origins in metallurgy (Holmyard 24) and according to Mircea Eliade, "It was the encounter with the symbolisms, myths and techniques of the miners, smelters and smiths which probably gave rise to the first alchemical operations" (148). Donne's mining analogy is, therefore, apt. Yet the speaker's frustrated attempts, "I have loved, and got, and told, / But should I love, get, tell till I were old, / I should not find that hidden mystery" suggest that because he has never found a woman worthy of a deep and lasting love, neither exists. He has apparently experienced no small amount of exasperation in his search, but he speaks with the same degree of frustration as a man who has given up trying to find a stylish pair of comfortable shoes. By confessing that he has not "digged love's mine" as deeply as "some," he effectively admits that he is drawn to women whose focus on their physical beauty renders them one-dimensional. In a narrative reminiscent of that in Chaucer's "Canon's Yeoman's Tale" (370-372), Donne's speaker continues to ridicule the pursuit of love:

And as no chemic yet the elixir got
But glories in his pregnant pot,
If by the way to him befall
Some odiferous thing, or medicinal,
So, lovers dream a rich and long delight,
But get a winter-seeming summer's night. (7-12)

The speaker insists that the building up of expectations will lead only to disappointed lovers or delusional druggists. Yet for him — like Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman who repeatedly tried and failed to transform base metal into gold — a focus on externals will never bring centric happiness. The speaker's diatribe suggests that he has no idea what love is, much less where — or how — to find it. As he mocks the search for this hidden mystery by ridiculing alchemists generally, his
declaration, “Oh, ‘tis imposture all” is less a cynical assertion than a display of his ignorance. Eluned Crawshaw quotes the alchemist Jacob Boehme in presenting the cardinal principle of alchemy:

Alchemy did not draw hard and fast lines between the material and the spiritual. The qualitities ascribed to matter often had moral connotations, and, since ‘the whole external world with all its creatures is an indication or figure of the inner spiritual world,’ the physical process of purifying metals was thought to be paralleled by a spiritual one, the adept undergoing purgation simultaneously with the metals. (325)

The speaker in “Love’s Alchemy” is one whose ideal is wholly outside; whose superficiality allows to him evade a deeper call to responsiveness (Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* 8). He strikes one as a man who has never known heartbreak, as one for whom the all-too-human purgation (*nigredo*) of having been rejected in love is completely foreign. The second stanza of “Love’s Alchemy” points further to the speaker’s preoccupation with appearances: “Our ease, our thrift, our honor, and our day, / Shall we for this vain bubble’s shadow pay?” (14-15). He may have traded his comfort, his capital and his reputation for pleasure in the company of beautiful women, but since his purchases were made with things superficial, women have no more value to him than a “vain bubble’s shadow.” You get what you pay for.

The final stanza of the poem reads:

    Ends love in this, that my man
    Can be as happy as I can, if he can
    Endure the short scorn of a bridegroom’s play?
    That loving wretch that swears
    ‘Tis not the bodies marry, but the minds,
    Which he in her angelic finds,
    Would swear as justly, that he hears,
    In that day’s rude hoarse minstrelsy, the spheres.
    Hope not for mind in women; at their best
Sweetness and wit, they’re but *Mummy*, possessed. (15-25)

The ironic observation, “Ends love in this, that my man / Can be as happy as I can if he can / Endure the short scorn of a bridegroom’s play?” directs the reader’s riveted attention from the speaker to “his man.” A minor, but arguably valid, form of *nigredo* — “hoarse minstrelsy” — is being transformed by that “loving wretch” who is simultaneously undergoing a transformation by enduring it. Jung notes that at such fully engaged moments, one “projects his own psychic background” onto what he experiences (*Psychology and Alchemy* 244). Through love’s alchemy, what grates on the speaker (“hoarse minstrelsy”) really does become the music of the spheres for the “loving wretch,” because it has personal significance that its poor quality disguises. And because he imagines his beloved to have the mind of an angel, to him she does.

Paracelsus once wrote, “If [a] person believes … he will be sure that it comes true, and see it before his imagination. The imagination produces the effect” (qtd. in Pachter 232).

As “Love’s Alchemy” concludes, Donne has given the speaker’s “man” a heart of gold, but the speaker himself does not recognize what has happened right in front of him. Since he will not consider the possibility that his search for centric happiness necessitates taking a good long look at himself, it only follows that he is unable to see beyond another’s outward appearance. So if, to the speaker, all women are nothing but mindless (if fetching) bodies, perhaps it is because, lacking even a grain of imagination, he has never really “dug love’s mine” at all, but rather picked up pretty rocks here and there, “getting and telling” and — with eyes wide shut — tossing them away again.

Arthur Marotti has written that “Love’s Alchemy” is a brilliant palinode, composed around the year 1595 by Donne the coterie poet indulging in a thorough debunking of Neo­-platonic love verse (111). Gardner calls it a “bitter masterpiece,” a departure from the “theme of mutual love” which characterizes the *Songs and Sonnets* written after 1602 (xxvii-xxviii). One
could argue, though, that "Love's Alchemy" is a retrospective look at a foolish, younger self by one who has come to see how misguided he was. Lacking a center, he had no circumference but wandered clueless in a labyrinth 7 of closed-mindedness out of which not even the mighty Mercury could lead him. Such a man bears a curious resemblance to John Donne during his days at Lincoln's Inn of Court in the 1590's. Bald writes that Donne was a "...fastidious young man about town, distinguished for the daring of his wit and for his rather startling verses; ... not the earnest seeker after truth of Walton's early pages is the Donne whom most of his contemporaries knew" (73). Sir Richard Baker describes him as a "great visiter of the ladies" (qtd. in Bald 72) and in July of 1596, he volunteered to sail with Essex "in order to escape from amatory adventures" (Gosse 1, 50). If, as Ilona Bell suggests in "Courting Ann More," the Songs and Sonnets were "encoded poems" of Donne's secret courtship of his future wife (64), it is conceivable that the language of alchemy - so rife with multiple meanings - was far and away the richest code for a poet of Donne's wit to exploit.

It is interesting to note with what apparent smugness the speaker in "Love's Alchemy" uses the term "Mummy possessed" to derogate women (24), assuming that their value is - at best - comparable to bits of an embalmed corpse retrieved for palliative purposes. But (as Donne may very well have known) for Paracelsus, mummy (or mumia balsamita) is a synonym for the elixir. The elixir was also known as the "protoplasm," a word Paracelsus adopted from the Greek proto-plastus, which means "wisdom of the body," but translates literally as "first man" (Pachter 243). The speaker's words ring with a truth he lacks the conscious awareness to hear: that in woman man might just be fortunate enough to find the essence of his own human-ness.

7 Alchemists used "the image of the labyrinth in a symbolic way to designate a place of confusion, geographical or mental. . . when [the adept] learns to discriminate between the true and the false, he emerges from the labyrinth unscathed." See Abraham 113.
Such rich irony allows the reader to conclude that when the speaker uses the phrase “vain bubble’s shadow,” he is inadvertently describing himself.

Rich in paradox, “Love’s Alchemy” illustrates how willful ignorance prevents the deepening of consciousness by rendering a person impervious not only to the potential richness of his own wit, but to the transformative power of love. Assuming that in “Love’s Alchemy” Donne casts himself as the cynical speaker, he uncovers the truth in that which he appears to ridicule, and secretly announces to one very special woman – Anne More – in what high esteem he has come to hold her.

“The Undertaking”

Written as a seven-stanza, octosyllabic song (Gardner xxvi), “The Undertaking” begins with the declaratory “I have done,” spoken in a tone that quickly turns confessional as the speaker employs the loaded language of a devout spiritual alchemist, language that conceals as it reveals:

I have done one braver thing
Than all the Worthies did,
And yet a braver thence did spring,
Which is, to keep that hid. (1-4)

In true Donnean form, paradoxical images take up residence together. To “undertake” implies the assumption of a purposeful project, while undertakers are in the business of burying their work. On the one hand, it is difficult to interpret the verb “spring” as anything other than a spontaneous impulse upward; on the other hand, a good way to keep something “hid,” is to bury it.
In the second and third stanzas, which exhibit increasing syntactic complexity, the speaker implies that what he has done is comparable to building a shrine out of material that can no longer be found:

It were but madness now to impart  
The skill of specular stone,  
When he which can have learned the art  
To cut it can find none. (5-8)

Specular stone was used in ancient times in the building of exterior temple walls since, as Donne himself stated, "it was transparent as glasse, or crystal, so as they which walked without in the streets, might see all that was done within" (qtd.in Ringler 334). Alchemists prized specular stone for its transparency, since "the purer a substance is the more likely it is that the light will shine through" (Crashaw 327).

Perhaps Donne chose a sing-song meter for "The Undertaking" because it imitates a back-and-forth sawing motion. When the cutting device hits a hidden snag, the rhythm is interrupted and rendered uneven, as in the lines "When he which can have learned the art / To cut it can find none" (7-8). And if Donne intends for the speaker in "The Undertaking" to assemble the material he has cut, the third stanza lends a believable sense of measuring, trimming and fitting each irregular piece:

So, if I now should utter this,  
Others (because no more  
Such stuff to work upon there is)  
Would love but as before. (5-13)

The awkward phrase "because no more such stuff to work upon there is" accommodates the idea that the speaker is assembling something whose arrangement is not arbitrary; material must be

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8 Scholars agree that Donne's reference to specular stone was taken from Rerum Memorabilium Deperditarum by Guido Pancioli (1523-1599) in which the term for mica (a transparent glazing material) was confused with phengites (a translucent building material). See Ringler 333.
wedged and shifted in order to fit a pre-designed scheme. Pierre Legouis provides valuable insight into one’s reading of “The Undertaking” when he writes:

Donne’s use of stanza-forms was no mere dallying ... and the most surprising fact, metrically, about the *Songs and Sonnets*, is the fidelity with which the second and next stanzas reproduce the first, however careless and haphazard its design may seem ... Donne pays great attention to the working up of ideas, and there is a close relation between the artistic structure and the ... import of his lyrics. (25,46-47)

It is not until the thirteenth line of the poem that the reader encounters the analogue for the measuring, cutting and fitting of specular stone: love. But we are to understand that this is love of a unique dimension, one which no one could ever replicate. In the fourth stanza, then, it seems that this metaphorical “cutter of specular stone,” – unlike the speaker in “Love’s Alchemy” – has rejected the physical body for an idealized soul:

But he who loveliness within
    Hath found, all outward loathes,
For he who color loves, and skin,
    Loves but their oldest clothes. (14-17)

The next stanza would seem to confirm that our speaker has chosen to apprehend the beloved by somehow rising above the physical and he urges the reader to follow suit:

If, as I have, you also do
    Virtue attired in woman see,
And dare love that, and say so too,
    And forget the He and She... (17-20)

In these well-crafted, intricate lines, Donne furthers the reader’s understanding that this speaker has no intention of ever touching “virtue attired in woman.” Woman in this sense is a kind of collective abstraction. Rather, the speaker’s desire is to enshrine his ideal of woman in pure crystal through which he may (forgetting “the He and She”) contemplate pure “virtue.”
In the final stanzas, the speaker encourages those who themselves seek virtue to "loathe"
the physical as he himself has done:

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

Then you have done a braver thing
Than all the Worthies did.
And a brave thence will spring
Which is, to keep that hid. (21-28)

The word "profane" (22) reinforces his intent by marking as unworthy those who are outside the
temple, who lack the capacity for a love so refined it is disembodied. And, although he has
come full circle in a work whose final stanza is a near replica of its first, that circle is one from
which the speaker has deliberately excluded himself. Both hidden to others and idealized in his
own mind, the object of his devotion and the speaker remain disconnected.

Lyndy Abraham notes that "the alchemist [was advised] to take the matter ... and lock it
up in a glass house" or alembic in order that repeated heating and distillation would produce its
elixir (104). In "The Undertaking" the speaker has performed painstaking labor (in its way a
form of nigredo as the poem's increasingly complex syntax demonstrates) that has two effects.
First, by building the "perfect" glass house in which to produce the purest elixir, the speaker has
done a very brave ("splendid") thing. The second effect is alluded to in the speaker's reference
to "the Worthies." Edgar Hill Duncan writes, "transmutation depends upon the purity of the
[lesser metal] and its aptitude to receive projection as well as upon the power of the transmuting
elixir" (274). In the lines, "For he who color loves, and skin / Loves but their oldest clothes"
(15-16), the speaker refers to "color" as an external quality, but during alchemy's albedo /
citrinitas stage: "When the alloy is first whitened, it is indeed whitened on the outside but at the
same time is yellowed on the inside" (Hopkins 71). One can infer, then, that the desired gold has
been produced. But, rather than allow himself to be tinged – to be touched and more completely transformed in his substance – he has chosen to keep “hid” what he has so meticulously wrought, so that he might worship in private.

There is no touching in “The Undertaking”; there is no reference to feeling at all. In “Reading and Rereading Donne,” Herz argues, “The metaphysical yearning to get beyond the body ... is a powerful drive in Donne’s poetry, but at least as important, indeed possibly more so, is the sense of the physical in the metaphysical, the here and now of the body. It is a poetry that takes the pulse, that searches the heart as organ as much as abstraction” (111). In “The Undertaking,” the speaker has made himself “un-tinge-able” by keeping the object of his adoration – the one whose touch could transform him – safely sealed in glass. Paradoxically, he has labored long and hard to accomplish something “braver” (more splendid) than all the Worthies did: by building a temple in which to keep an ethereal treasure out of reach, the speaker made himself worthy of being unworthy. Going to whatever lengths necessary in order to ward off Mercury’s “arrows of Eros,” the speaker refuses to so much as visualize a body. Donne’s keen insight in “The Undertaking” rings of an observation recorded three hundred years later. In Psychology and Alchemy, Jung writes,

...that we should follow the ideal and seek to become like it ought logically to have the result of developing and exalting the inner man. In actual fact, however, the ideal [is] turned into an external object of worship, and it is precisely this veneration for the object that prevents it from ... reaching down into the depths of man’s psyche...[He] remains untouched in the deepest part of him. (7)

In The English Lyric from Wyatt to Donne, Douglas L. Peterson describes Donne as an “Aristotelian realist” for whom the neo-Platonic distinction between mind and body destroyed the “essential unity of man” (184). Peterson deems “The Undertaking” an exception to the rest
of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* in their celebration of the human person's mind/body composite (290). One wonders, if this is the case, why "The Undertaking" is included in the collection at all. Perhaps Helen Gardner hit upon the reason: "Donne's idiosyncratic temperament transformed ... the refined sentiment of Petrarch [and] he turned to his own uses his reading in the Neoplatonists" (xxx). Indeed, something happened to John Donne after his coterie years at Lincoln's Inn of Court, after his return from military service with Essex, after a very young woman moved into quarters he was allowed to share with his new employer, the Lord Keeper of the Royal Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton. In 1597, Anne More, the niece of Egerton's second wife, came to live with them in London. She was thirteen years of age and Donne, the Lord Keeper's secretary, was twenty-five.

Bald writes: "When Donne fell in love with Anne More and what first attracted him to her are now beyond conjecture" (109). But in "Courting Anne More," Ilona Bell cites documentation recently uncovered which attests to Anne's extensive formal schooling. From this Bell concludes that Donne would have been attracted to her intellectual prowess and that he "seems to have had utter faith in Anne's ability to appreciate and respond to his intellectually challenging and emotionally charged literary style" (62-63). However, in addition to the age difference between them, an obstacle even more difficult for Donne to overcome should he attempt to pursue this girl, was her social class: she was well above his station. Bald writes, "Donne knew that, whatever his prospects might be, he could not hope to offer himself to [Ann's] father as a suitor, since his own dwindling resources could never make him a match for the daughter of one so secure in his landed possessions as Sir George More" (109).

Perhaps then, in an attempt to dissuade himself from entertaining thoughts of courting the un-courtable, Donne turned to the tried-and-true Neoplatonic love poem (deliberately set in non-Petrarchan, plain-styled song format nonetheless). Donne had encountered the "unhoped-for
mind in woman,” but the woman was beyond his reach, so in “The Undertaking,” he settles for “adoring the unattainable” (Edwards 41). One pictures the lovesick Donne, the reluctant Petrarchan poet carefully composing and then hiding this gem of admiration from its subject...at least for a time.

In “Love’s Alchemy,” Donne presents his failed spiritual transformation through a speaker who declares, “Hope not for mind in women” (23). In “The Undertaking,” the man laboriously constructs an alternative path to transformation, a hidden shrine honoring a woman whose mind is even more desirable than her body, but who exists on much too high a plane for him to ever reach. Donne substitutes worship for love when circumstances demand that the speaker abort his attempt at transformation, by loathing the body and forgetting “the He and She” (14, 20). In both “Love’s Alchemy” and “The Undertaking,” Mercury is unable to penetrate the speaker’s self-imposed barriers to transformation. The intentional juxtaposition of these two poems forms a spectrum of human consciousness: the speaker is preoccupied with the body in the first and is hopelessly in awe of the soul in the second. It is when the speaker relents and gives in to the irresistible that Love the Alchemist can bring the two together.

“Air and Angels”

The imagination of Donne - so alert to subtlety - is equally capable of giving aura to a poem. Reading “Air and Angels” for the first time, one can almost detect a “soul-like breath-body, permeating and wrapping itself around” the poem (Jung Psychology and Alchemy 279).

Twice or thrice had I lov’d thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
Angels affect us oft, and worshipp’d be;

9 There have been feminist critics who consider John Donne a “misogynist solipsist.” See Saunders 26.
Still when, to where thou wert I came,
Some lovely glorious nothing I did see. (1-6)

Subsequent readings suggest qualities of air that are not immediately perceived but which the alchemist Michael Sendivogius (1566-1636) aptly describes: "The air is a pure uncorrupted element, in its kind the most worthy, being uncommonly light and invisible, but inside heavy, visible, and solid" (qtd. in Jung Psychology and Alchemy 280). In "Air and Angels," by means of an oblique allusion to the alchemical process of coniunctio (Abraham 35) Donne explores the magnetic unfolding of human love expressed in all of its dimensions: body, soul and spirit.

Both Raymond B. Waddington (59) and Peter de sa Wiggins (88) write that "Air and Angels" consists of two stanzas, each based on the Petrarchan sonnet structure, but with the sestets coming before the octaves. Waddington notes that, although each stanza follows the two-fold "argumentative structure" (problem followed by resolution) the inversion of the octave and the sestet "[has] the effect of making the answers seem more difficult to reach" (59). Perhaps, but neither Waddington nor Wiggins points out the possibility that Donne knew that "inversion" was the alchemist's term for the repeated refinement of material: the coniunctio. According to Lyndy Abraham, "During the process of solve et coagula, the states of matter are being constantly reversed – hard matter must be dissolved, while soft or flowing substance must be hardened" (109). Coagulation increases mass, so it gravitates to the bottom of the vessel. Hence the octaves occupy the lower part of each stanza. Of "Air and Angels," Wiggins writes that that it "seems to consist of two sonnets so closely linked as to comprise one poem" (88), without mentioning how very similar they appear on the page. While any two Petrarchan sonnets, laid one over the other, seem to merge into one, each of the two sonnet-stanzas in "Air and Angels" is customized by its inverted structure. Neither would "blend" with a standard Petrarchan sonnet.
The poem’s first sestet is a single sentence in which the speaker recalls a certain heightened awareness that came over him on certain occasions, of something real but intangible:

Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name;
So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame
*Angels* affect us oft, and worshipped be … (1-4)

While Wiggins (91) and Waddington (59-60) believe the first two lines refer to the speaker’s earlier disappointing romantic encounters, it is just as conceivable that they describe an extrasensory attraction unlike anything he has experienced with a woman before. The speaker, whose wits seem altogether missing in “Love’s Alchemy,” and who endures purifying privation in “The Undertaking,” here and now exhibits newfound presence, hard-won “firmamental virtue,” the term Paracelsus gives to one who is aware of the “incorporeal” part of himself (Pagel 68). Akin to modern-day radar, the speaker’s sixth sense – the “magnet” of his imagination – has on more than one occasion detected something that was “not there.” When a stranger’s voice sounded oddly familiar, or the flicker of a candle seemed to prompt a forgotten memory, he experienced something none of his five physical senses had registered but which inexplicably pulled him into another’s invisible realm. Moving into the poem’s present – and into the presence of the addressee – the speaker has the experience again, a poetic *déjà vu*, as it were:

“Still when, to where thou wert, I came, / Some lovely glorious nothing I did see” (6-7).  

Richard Hooker once wrote that angels have an “insatiable longing” to do good to men “in the countenance of whose nature, looking downward, they behold themselves beneath themselves” (qtd. in Wiggins 91). Inversely, Paracelsus believed that “each human possesses an inner magnet in his or her senses that lures wisdom and knowledge from above, hence attracting

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10 For the humanist Nicholas De Cusa (1401-1461) the term “‘nothing’ … in the equations of transcendence [is] the same as both ‘all’ and ‘infinity’…” See Colie 27.
subtle sidereal [heavenly] bodies'" (qtd. in Daniel 137). In "Air and Angels," with all the
aplomb of Mercury himself, Donne transforms his speaker from the adorer of unapproachable
feminine virtue in "The Undertaking" to a man aching for the physical embodiment of what he
hopes is not a figment of his imagination. This new level of consciousness makes him
irresistible to the one he had held so far above himself. Unlike "The Undertaking," which
depicts a unilateral love-affair of the mind, "Air and Angels" involves two lovers, one of whose
body will incarnate for the other everything he ever worshipped in woman and more:

    But since my soul, whose child love is,
    Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do,
    More subtle than the parent is
    Love must not be, but take a body too... (7-10)

The speaker has been influenced by this creature before ("Angels affect us oft, and worshipped
be") but only in that part of him which wraps itself around his body. In other words, she
penetrated his soul. But in order for his body and its five wits to encounter her, she must have a
body, too.

The next quatrain reads:

    And therefore what thou wert, and who,
    I bid Love ask, and now
    That it assume thy body, I allow,
    And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow. (11-14)

How human of the speaker to "fix" his love on the person whose spirit was drawn to him as to a
magnet.\(^{11}\) How angelic of her ethereal presence to introduce the speaker to his spirit, to a much
refined version of himself. Jung uncannily describes this exchange – perhaps without ever
having read the Songs and Sonnets – as a coniunctio brought about through mutual meditatio,

\(^{11}\) Jung believed that, "Everything unknown ... is filled with psychological projection, as if [one's] own psychic
background were mirrored [therein]." See Psychology and Alchemy, 228.
the "internal talk of one person with another who is invisible, as in the ... communion with oneself, or with one's good angel" (Mysterium Coniunctionis 497).

The second sestet begins:

Whilst thus to ballast love I thought,
And so more steadily to have gone,
With wares which would sink admiration,
I saw that I had love's pinnace over fraught ... (15-18)

The speaker is attempting on the one hand to keep his love from floating away. On the other hand, he must not destroy her buoyancy and by extension his own. Donne's use of the word "pinnace" is brilliant here, since he was no doubt aware of its being "fraught" with connotations. Aside from the loaded sense of its homonym "penis," pinnace could mean "small boat" or "mistress" (OED). A boat overloaded with cargo (wares) will sink, and a woman (mistress) whose "wares" are proportionally overlarge loses her attractiveness. Such witticisms aside, another allusion might be more appropriate here: the Latin word for "wing" (pinna), which no angel could be without, but which ceases to function as a wing if it is too heavy (Waddington 65n). While his every impulse seems to be driving the speaker toward the full manifestation and possession of the one he has been longing for – the realization of his anima – he sees that he must instead exercise restraint: "Ev'ry thy hair to work upon / Is much too much, some fitter must be sought" (19-20). This remarkable person has already refined the speaker, tinged him with love's transformative power. Out of his own "angelic" substance comes the insight that, while the physical cannot be ignored, it must not overpower the soul, since it was his soul that drew her to him in the first place,

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12 The word "wares" can mean "the privy parts of either sex." See OED.

13 The alchemist's attempt to reconcile the male with the female influenced Jung's development of the archetype he identified as anima/animus: a man's unconscious image of the feminine and a woman's of the masculine. See Storr's Jung 44-45.
For, nor in nothing, nor in things
Extreme, and scatt’ring bright, can love inhere ... (21-22)

To “inhere” is to “remain or abide in something immaterial” (OED). As an angel, his beloved is pure spirit: “nothing.” His love has caused her to materialize, to take on “lip, eye, brow” and “scatt’ring bright” hair nearly too fine for his touch, but still “much too much” for love to inhere. The physical image Donne has drawn of these two – the earthbound man and the ethereal woman – renders them inherently ill-matched, but it is in their physical union that their souls are joined, and it is in their souls that love inhere.

Scholars from Leishman (32) to Marotti (222) have puzzled over the last six lines of “Air and Angels” and have suggested that Donne considers men’s love to be purer than women’s:

Then, as an angel, face, and wings
Of air, not pure as it, yet pure, doth wear,
So thy love may be my love’s sphere;
Just such disparity
As is ’twixt air and angels’ purity,
‘Twixt women’s love, and men’s will ever be. (23-28)

After twenty-two lines in which the speaker rhapsodizes over his beloved, such a conclusion is baffling. The speaker has done his best to give his love a body, but her nature can handle only the lightest touch. In precisely the same way, her soul – like the souls of mortals – surrounds her airy body in time and place, making it possible for him to find her, because where she is, he wants to be – surrounded by her: “So thy love may be my love’s sphere” (25). It is in the conjunction of their bodies that their souls merge and are purified on the level of the spirit, which is, of course, home to the speaker’s beloved. “Air and Angels” may thus be likened to the opus circulatorium, the “circular work of the elements” as they are repeatedly dissolved and converted into each other by unifying the qualities each element has in common, eventually forming from four distinct elements one indivisible – circular – quintessence (Abraham 137-138). Two lovers, through repeated coniunctionis, create their own microcosm, in which they can no longer be
distinguished one from the other, having effectively become one another’s “sphere.” The truth revealed in “Air and Angels” is that there is no disparity between this man’s and this woman’s love; there is no longer any distinction between them at all (c.f. Waddington 68 and Wiggins 101).

Balz writes that between 1597 and 1600, there were in York House “opportunities for intimacy to ripen” between John Donne and Anne More, until Anne returned to her father’s residence after Lady Egerton died in January of 1600 (109). According to Gosse, Anne stayed on at York House until Lord Egerton remarried in October of that same year. Edward LeComte confirms this: “What conditions, spring, summer and early fall for the ripening of love!” (qtd. in Bell’s “Donne’s Love Letters to Anne More” 31). Gosse, gathering information from Izaak Walton’s biography of Donne, writes that the couple seemed to “have enjoyed complete immunity from the protecting wing of any chaperon” in York House and that Donne “fell into such a liking as, with her approbation, increased into love for this young woman” (96).

In “Love’s Alchemy,” the speaker has no use for women beyond the physical, and in “The Undertaking,” he is determined to keep his distance from a woman because he is profoundly attracted to her on a level that leaves him feeling unworthy. In “Air and Angels,” this same speaker becomes aware that – remarkably – she is attracted to him, too. Mercury oversees an impossible conjunction as the intrepid speaker pulls the incomparable one down to his plane as she draws him up to hers. Together, they are transformed, and their mutual purification will occur whenever their bodies move together, surrounded by their indistinguishable spirit-enhanced souls, in the act of love. Everyone knows that angels and men exist in two completely separate spheres and can never be joined. Except that they are, in “Air and Angels.”
"The Expiration"

In some manuscripts, "The Expiration" is entitled "Valediction" (Clements 44n), and, just as *separatio* is a form of *nigredo* in alchemy, for the speaker in many of the *Songs and Sonnets*, to be separated from his beloved is to die a little. 14 It is said that no one likes long good-byes, but in "The Expiration," the sudden parting of lovers is itself a kind of climax:

So, so, break off this last lamenting kiss,
Which sucks two souls and vapors both away;
Turn thou, ghost, that way, and let me turn this,
And let ourselves benight our happiest day ... (1-4)

This is no ordinary farewell and this is no ordinary kiss: these lines are delivered by a speaker whose "elegance of diction" betrays a feeling so intense that he is compelled to "record it" (Lord Neaves, qtd. in Hudson 7).

We asked none leave to love; nor will we owe
Any so cheap a death as saying, "Go";

"Go"; and if that word have not quite killed thee,
Ease me with death by bidding me go too.
Or, if it have, let my word work on me,
And a just office on a murderer do,
Except it be too late to kill me so,
Being double dead, going, and bidding go. (5-14)

These two stanzas resemble in form and function the classic Greek epigram, which J.W. Mackail describes as "...a very short poem summing up as though in a memorial inscription what it is desired to make permanently memorable in a single action or situation" (qtd. in Hudson 7). 15 A kiss which "sucks two souls" and "vapors them away" acts as the visual inscription, since, even as it has been broken off, it is indelibly imprinted on the hearts of the lovers and etched in the reader's imagination. Herz writes that "Donne is the master of the monosyllable, the small word

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14 In his "Song (Sweetest Love I Do Not Go)" Donne speaks of partings as "feigned deaths." See Clements 10-11.
15 William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) once wrote "...if he would, [Donne] might easily be the best Epigrammist we have found in English." See Keeble 76.
that holds the line taut ...but that carries the line along in rhythms of speech” ("Reading and Rereading Donne” 106). “The Expiration’s” initial words “So, so” could be the “exhales” of the “two souls” in the second line. And, with the unyielding “Go” of line six, they do seem to hold the stanza “taut.” Between these monosyllables, the alliteration in “last lamenting kiss” and “sucks two souls and vapors” has the consistency of whispers and caresses. In addition, the lines, “Turn thou, ghost, that way, and let me turn this, / And let us ourselves benight our happiest day” are largely monosyllabic, but each word possesses “dramatic possibilities” for the expansion of feeling (Morris 235).^1^ The stanza’s final word, “Go” is testimony to the speaker’s resolve that this parting will be memorable because he wants no real trace of their relationship left behind when they depart.

The second stanza begins with a repetition of the last word in the first:

“Go”; and if that word have not quite killed thee,
Ease me with death by bidding me go too.
Or, if it have, let my word work on me,
And a just office on a murderer do,
Except it be too late to kill me so,
Being double dead, going, and bidding go. (7-12)

The speaker’s words have lost all softness: no longer does one hear the soothing s, but rather the emphatically hard d: “quite killed,” death by bidding,” “on a murderer do,” “double dead, going, and bidding go.” Juxtaposition then, both within and between the two stanzas is, according to Hudson, what distinguishes an epigram “… antithesis, paradox, and punning provide the witty and ingenious turns” and for a poet to “cast [his] thought into antithetic form is likely to heighten concision and sententiousness” (4). Not only do the sounds of “The Expiration’s” two stanzas

^1^ The comparative failure of the settings of all Donne’s Songs and Sonnets except [“The Expiration”] stems from the mistaken attempt to fit the poetic rhythms into set musical phrases. It is a central quality of Donne’s verse that it senses and exploits the unpredictability of human speech. Only with the advent of opera does it become possible for music to treat words rhetorically and freely... Rhythmically, Donne was half a century ahead of the musicians.” See Morris 236.
behave antithetically, but in each of them the speaker uses the alchemic language of *coniunctio* to describe the act of parting. What gives this farewell particular abruptness is that the stages of *coniunctio* are abbreviated and occur in reverse order. Two souls simultaneously evaporate (*albedo/rubedo*) before their bodies have a chance to die (*nigredo*). When the speaker addresses his beloved, “Turn thou, *ghost*, that way, and let me turn this, / And let ourselves benight our happiest day” (3-4 emphasis added) he could be using one of alchemy’s terms for the feminine soul (*Jung, Alchemical Studies* 39), but since both of their souls have already been “vapored away,” perhaps “ghost” is really a homonym. When one reads this passage aloud, one hears the speaker say, “Turn thou, *goest*, that way.” Such punning, as Hudson noted above, both abbreviates language and doubles meaning, a paradoxical maneuver, to be sure. In the same line, Donne’s speaker repeats the word *turn*: “Turn thou, ghost, that way and let me turn this” as if playing upon a fundamental epigrammic principle: the “ingenious *turn* of thought” (Hudson 4 emphasis added).

The effective pivot of “The Expiration” is another doubled word, “Go.” Repeated as the first stanza ends and the second begins, it seems to act as a hinge between them, allowing the second to swing back against the first. The second stanza, then, is the poem’s *epiphonema* (in Greek, a “cry of assent”) the “emphatic summary of what has already been presented or a *distillation* from it” (Hudson 4, emphasis added). For alchemists, according to Abraham, distillation is “the process of purification ... whereby the ... spirit is extracted directly from the impure body. This process of refinement is achieved by rapid vaporization through applied heat”

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17 One of the techniques used by alchemists in recording their processes was “syncope,” the deliberate omission of an ingredient or a step in the process. See *Newman and Principe* 187.
or in this case, through the overwhelming intensity of one very significant kiss. In this second stanza, then, the speaker will carry out the nigredo that seems to be missing from the first:

“Go”; and if that word have not quite killed thee,
   Ease me with death by bidding me go too.
Or, if it have, let my word work on me
   And a just office on a murderer do,
Except it be too late to kill me so,
   Being double dead, going, and bidding go. (7-12)

In the second stanza, as monosyllabic words predominate, the poem becomes an alchemist’s reverbatory, a “furnace in which the flame or heat is forced back upon the substance which is already being heated in it” (Abraham 171). To “reverberate” is to “re-echo” or “resound” and the speaker’s words – like miniature epigrams inside an epigram – do just that. His request to be “killed” – by the one whose killing of him will kill her so that they will both be equally dead – bounces against the oppositional request to let the word “go” do its “work” on him. As this vivid poetic rendition of the last stage of nigredo quickens its pace, the rapid-fire “too late to kill me” collides with the spinning phrase, “double dead, going, and bidding go” (11-12)

Marotti writes: “The image of the lovers’ souls in their breaths is not only a version of the conventional soul-kiss that is a familiar figure in Renaissance poems of parting but also a reappearance of the Donnean conceit of interanimation…a metaphor for mutual commitment in love” (175). Few readers would argue with Marotti when he writes, “the expiration of the breath of the two lovers in the sorrowful sighs of parting becomes the symbol of their intimate oneness” (175). Nor can anyone question Donne’s “interanimation” of two lovers. But for the alchemist, “this last lamenting kiss” might be seen as an abbreviated coniunctio. Under Mercury’s influence, two souls join so intensely that they evaporate before their bodies have died, so those
bodies remain behind, still impure until they are “benighted” in nigredo, along with what had been this couple’s “happiest day” (2-4).

Scholars have pieced together a sketch of Anne More and John Donne during the period following the death of Lady Egerton in January of 1600. Letters were exchanged between the two, proving – to the satisfaction of Ilona Bell – that “Donne’s attraction to Anne More was inextricably tied to her learning. Even more important, they show that Donne courted her in witty, metaphoric, sprightly enigmatic language... exactly the kind of language that undergoes ‘Rimes vexation’ in his Songs and Sonnets” (63). In “Courting Anne More,” Bell writes, “Since poems of courtship are typically used in clandestine love affairs such as John Donne’s and Anne More’s, their private meanings are often encoded so as to be accessible only to the poet/lover’s mistress” (64).

According to Bell, the “courtship seems to have prospered in great secrecy until December 1600 when Sir Edmund Neville told Sir George More about the affair” (60). Anne was ordered back to her father’s house at Loseley, but, as Gosse writes, “it was too late” (96). The coniunctio of this couple underwent its first serious separatio, and “though Anne and [Donne] pledged themselves to one another and made resolutions to remain faithful, they parted with no assurance that they would ever meet again, and only a vague hope that Sir George would not provide a husband for his daughter before they could prevent it” (Bald 109).

Looking at the first stanza of “The Expiration,” we see that the speaker’s words in lines 4-6 are almost declaratory, “And let ourselves benight our happiest day; / We asked none leave to love; nor will we owe / Any so cheap a death as saying, ‘Go’;” (4-6 emphasis added). The situation in which these lovers find themselves corresponds to Donne’s and Anne More’s: it is one which they have chosen, knowing full well that their physical and spiritual conjunction would very likely involve death by separation, for a time: “We asked none leave to love” (5).
Had they asked permission to love one another, they would have had a corresponding obligation to whoever granted it to end it, to let it "expire." But this is not a casual rendezvous, nor is it a melodramatic moment in a forbidden liaison. This is an occasion of substantial love, defined as "necessarily paradoxical – in time but resistant to change, erotic but spiritual, worldly and other-worldly, contemplative and active – because it is a relationship between beings whose very substance is, paradoxically, both matter and spirit" (Peterson 314). These lovers have been deprived of a proper farewell, but at least this is their farewell. Since the hieroglyph of one "lamenting" but depth-charged kiss both seals their souls and pledges a reunion, "The Expiration" might better be called "The Interruption," since these lovers have pledged faithfulness and promised reunion, regardless of how far away from one another their bodies "Go."

"The Dissolution"

The embodiment of mutual love so beautifully rendered in "Air and Angels" and signified in "The Expiration" is intimately drawn in "The Dissolution," a work representative of those *Songs and Sonnets* written in elaborate, carefully wrought stanzas which mingle slow-paced decasyllabic lines with shorter and then longer ones (Sharrock 45-46):

She's dead, and all which die
To their first elements resolve:
And we were mutual elements to us,
And made of one another.
My body then doeth hers involve,
And those things whereof I consist, hereby
In me abundant grow, and burdenous,
And nourish not, but smother.
My fire of passion, sighs of air,
Water of tears, and earthly sad despair,
Which my materials be
(But near worn out by love's security),
She, to my loss, doth by her death repair;
And I might live long wretched so,
But that my fire doth with my fuel grow,
    Now, as those active kings
Whose foreign conquest treasure brings,
Receive more, and spend more, and soonest break:
This (which I am amazed that I can speak)
    This death, hath with my store
My use increased.
And so my soul, more earnestly released,
Will outstrip hers, as bullets flown before
A latter bullet may o’ertake, the powder being more. (1-24)

Lovers who physically consummate an attraction that is more than physical find themselves transformed: no longer two disconnected selves, they become *inter*-connected soul-mates.

Gardner argues that “The Dissolution” is the poetic expression of the “ending of such a union by death” (liii) and it is quite possible to read the poem in this way. However, an alchemist, one always seeking the essence of matter in matter, might be more inclined to see in “The Dissolution” two passionately vital lovers engaged in *coniunctio*: the joining of souls in the sexual union of their two bodies. For Jay Levine, “The Dissolution” refers to “sexual congress” (qtd. in Sherwood 139-140) and his interpretation corresponds with Achsah Guibbory’s view that Donne believed “erotic love is the fullest expression of human nature” (146).

The poem begins, “She’s dead, and all which die / To their first elements resolve” (1-2). It is possible that the speaker’s beloved is physically dead, however, as Roberta Albrecht notes, for Elizabethans the phrase, “to die” was a euphemism for sexual climax (97). So Donne may or may not be speaking of the body’s final decay. It is distinctly possible that he is conflating the euphemistic “to die” with the alchemist’s initial, *nigredo* stage of the transmutation process. At the moment of ejaculation — of “ex-spira-tion” — the body releases the soul and begins its requisite decay, so that it might be revived (*reborn*) upon the purified soul’s return. In “The Dissolution,” as the couple engages in sexual intercourse, the woman climaxes first:

She’s dead, and all which die
To their first elements resolve;
And we were mutual elements to us,
And made of one another. (1-4)

The problem facing the lovers in this poem is the timing of coitus: if orgasm (nigredo) is not simultaneous, what will happen to the fusion and purification of their souls (albedo)? How will their bodies be brought to the same level (rubedo) of passion for future conjunctions, if they are not at the same stage of coniunctio now?

And we were mutual elements to us,
And made of one another.
My body then doth hers involve,
And those things whereof I consist, hereby
In me abundant grow, and burdenous,
And nourish not, but smother. (3-8)

For the alchemist, according to Jung, “…nigredo [is] produced by the separation of the elements. If the separated condition is assumed at the start … then a union of opposites is performed” (Psychology and Alchemy 230-231). In “The Dissolution,” though, the couple are one already (“…mutual elements to us / And made of one another”), so they must be separated if they are to be joined in coniunctio. Lyndy Abraham confirms this understanding when she writes that, during the alchemical process “The male and female opposites … [body and soul] … cannot be united at a refined level until they have been first separated or divorced” (56). At the point of the woman’s climax, her soul is released, but her body dissolves into itself: into him. Fearing his inability to keep up with her, the speaker wonders if “those things whereof [he] consists” will grow “burdenous” and “smother” him before his dissolution can take place:

My fire of passion, sighs of air,
Water of tears, and earthly sad despair,
Which my materials be
(But near worn out by love’s security),
She, to my loss, doth by her death repair. (9-13)
“By love’s security” would seem to indicate that the elements of his body (fire, air, water, earth) are held in lien by Love the Alchemist and are to be spent exclusively in sexual intercourse. Yet, just as he is about to wear them out – to *dissolve* – the speaker is inundated by his lover’s orgasm with a fresh supply. The paradoxical line “She, to my loss, doth by her death repair [my loss]” is the heart of this poem. The lover is at this moment *completely involved* with the beloved’s body but her *soul* has escaped him, and it his desire to be reunited with her *soul* that re-inflames his passion, his *suffering*. Fed by his loss, he undergoes a more intense *nigredo* than he had earlier, as if Mercury had turned up the heat: “...my fire doth with my fuel grow.” Rather than “live long wretched,” the speaker will accelerate his own dissolution, so that his orgasm, fed by hers, will “outstrip” hers and he will arrive at the level of the spirit ahead of her:

This (which I am amazed that I can speak)
This death, hath with my store
My use increased.
And so my soul, more earnestly released,
Will outstrip hers, as bullets flown before
A latter bullet may o’ertake, the powder being more. (19-24)

Terry G. Sherwood writes that for Donne the physical and emotional release in “…sexual consummation is an instructive correspondence to spiritual union” (108). With Mercury’s steady erotic influence, Love the Alchemist will bring about a transformation of lovers through increasingly intense stages of refinement – through ever more passionate embraces – peaking in a re-union of souls.

In “Donne’s Love Letters to Anne More,” Ilona Bell argues that the lovers corresponded while they were apart (52), even though Anne was under the watchful eye of her father at their home in Loseley. When Anne accompanied him to London for the opening of Parliament in the Fall of 1601, her father “[busied] himself trying to find a suitable husband for her” (Bald 128). But Donne heard that she was in town and “it was not long before they met secretly” (Bald 128).
The lovers were closer than ever and, Gosse writes, "It was now or never" (98). The two eloped in early December, 1601. Having once been separated by a force outside themselves, the couple, in marrying, denied the authority of anyone to supersede the pledge they had made to one another a year earlier. Their circling souls had found their true center and they had sealed their fate.

The structure of "The Dissolution" is highly suggestive in its own right, although Legouis describes it simply as "a non-stanzaic poem" (16). Albrecht arbitrarily divided it into three stanzas of eight, seven and nine lines respectively, with a hidden solution to the riddle of the poem implied between the fifteenth and sixteenth lines (96). The "solution" is obvious, though, when one studies the poem in its single-stanza format: The appearance of "The Dissolution" on the page (the lines wax and wane, like a visible pulsation, between an initial six syllables and a final fourteen) is reminiscent of the untouched residue on bed linens where lovers have recently embraced. Given the determination of the Donnes to defy convention and marry, "The Dissolution" — far from being the poetic expression of "the ending of ... a union by death" (Gardner liii my emphasis added) — may be read as an epitaphalmon, marking its official beginning.

"The Good Morrow"

Among the lyrics Gardner believes are "celebrations of union" (liii), "The Good Morrow," in three seven-line stanzas shows the progression lovers make — the transformations they undergo — when an intense physical desire brings about an even deeper, more lasting attraction. Donne has built this poem around a simple but profound concept: that the love two people share becomes its own sphere, in perfect balance, free of division, unique to them alone. Donne strategically places this sphere — this "one little room" — in the very center of the poem,
where it “controls” both the past and the future and stretches as far as the macrocosm of the universe.

In the first stanza, the speaker seems nonplussed by his good fortune:

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers’ den? (1-4)

If this were a poem celebrating Platonic affection, one might hear in the speaker’s subsequent questions a rhetorical device for the exaltation of a spiritual connection between two people who are above the distracting and mundane desires of the physical. But for Donne, Sherwood argues, “...consciousness includes a charged sense of residence in a body indelibly part of the human composite” (16).

The poem’s critical first words, “I wonder” introduce three questions, but as they are presented, the shift from singular to plural suggests that a joint experience of nigredo has taken place: “...were we not weaned...” “...did we not snore?” The speaker’s tone is that of a man humbled by a profound awareness; his consciousness has taken on a new dimension as the result of an encounter with his beloved:

...but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, ‘twas but a dream of thee. (5-7)

As Legouis has pointed out, at the beginning of the second stanza the speaker does not refer to awakening bodies (53): “And now good-morrow to our waking souls” (8). Still, it is because of their bodies’ conjunction that the lovers’ souls are infused with the spirit (albedo) and the whole person’s consciousness – body, soul, spirit – is heightened. Love the Alchemist must work with human nature, which dictates that “the body’s experience is necessary for the soul’s” (Sherwood 16). “And now good-morrow to our waking souls, / Which watch not one another
out of fear” (8-9) could therefore imply a kind of “shyness” on the part of these two lovers, suggesting the condition of Adam and Eve who found themselves naked after the Fall in the Garden of Eden. But “fear” in the context of the stanza might better be construed as respect, or fear of offending. The lovers recognize that from now on, each must hold the other in the highest regard, not only for that person’s sake but for the sake of making “one little room their everywhere.” Having responded completely to one other, they have become responsible for one another. Everything else is overruled, “For love all love of other sights controls” (10).

While it has been argued that Donne was not a Neoplatonist, he may well have been influenced by the Gnostic writings of Plotinus, particularly the dictum, “To know the universe, then, you must look within” (qtd. in Ball 146). In their infinitely vast “little room,” the speaker and his beloved have moved very far indeed from “the Seven Sleepers’ den.” How beautifully Donne creates “figures of thought” (Colie 111) in the lines:

[Love] ... makes of one little room an everywhere.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one. (9-12)

From his prized and enviable vantage-point, the speaker surveys seas yet to be discovered and potential worlds beyond worlds explored, only to return to the one world that, for him, consists of everywhere.

Alchemists would regard this spacial juxtaposition as a reference to the microcosm, one of alchemy’s terms for the philosopher’s stone, the longed-for substance produced when nigredo, albedo, and rubedo are successfully achieved in the alchemic process of coniunctio. Abraham explains:

18 Toward the end of the 16th century, Donne began reading cabbalistic works, the writers of which had adopted much of the thinking of neo-Platonic humanism. See Gardner lxi.
The creation of the Stone involves the duplication of God's own macrocosmic creation in miniature, in the microcosmic world of the alembic. The Stone, which is said to be composed of 'body,' 'soul' and 'spirit,' was thought of as a perfect little world in which all the elements are united and harmonized, a perfect reflection of the macrocosm. (129-130).

Indeed, the promise of adventure and discovery awaiting those who seek to expand the known limits of earth seems to hold comparatively small attraction for the speaker. Even though, as William Empson once wrote, "Donne’s mind is so invincibly balanced… it cannot help seeing all of the alternatives as if in a chess game" (qtd. in Herz 103), the speaker's focus parallels the steps to a greater inner consciousness once outlined by Trithemius, Abbot of Sponheim (1467-1516). This scholar-alchemist (many of whose ideas were adopted by Paracelsus) once wrote, "Study generates knowledge; knowledge bears love; love – likeness; likeness – communion; communion – virtue; virtue – dignity; dignity – power; and power performs the miracle" (qtd. in Pachter 83). The miracle is mutual understanding, which “for Aristotle is in itself a mode of possessing and becoming” (Peterson 315). So much is implied in that one word “possess” (14) that, no matter how great or how small is the larger milieu in which these lovers find themselves, their love overrules all other considerations; their love is one and it is theirs.

The final stanza of “The Good Morrow” acts as the rubedo stage of the lovers' transformation. No longer do they avoid eye contact (9); on the contrary, they gaze at one another:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest … (15-16)

In Mysterium Coniunctionis, Jung writes that for alchemists the albedo stage is successful at the point of unus mentalis, when “the one figure … is the mirror-image of the other” (507), and so it
is in "The Good Morrow." One sees oneself in the eye of one's soul mate and is reaffirmed. That is, one is affirmed as a person in possession of oneself, and simultaneously re-affirmed as another's beloved. Jung writes as well that the final rubedo stage produces unus mundus, by which that indelible "mirror-image" constitutes "one world" (Mysterium Coniunctionis 534). The speaker in "The Good Morrow" outlines the perfect shape of the world he and his beloved comprise: a sphere, with no vertical or horizontal vectors interrupting the perfect motion of love's timelessness; its endless movement back into itself:

Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp north, without declining west? (17-18)

No longer the cynical, self-deluded speaker in "Love's Alchemy," this is a man who, in allowing love to remake him, has a center, from which he casts a newfound perspective. He has found wholeness in a shared balance, carefully, consciously, lovingly tended:

Whatever dies was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike that none do slacken, none can die. (17-21)

Ironically, in the context of "The Good Morrow," after their marriage, things did not go well for the Donnes. Initially, they made no mention of their vows to members of Anne's family and she returned to Loseley with her father at the end of December, 1601. It was two months before Donne finally sent Sir George a letter whose tone was "scarcely calculated to assuage the anger that Donne had every reason to anticipate," informing him of the marriage (Bald 135). More was livid and, after contacting Egerton, had Donne thrown in prison for two weeks. When the dust settled, More was unable to succeed in having the marriage annulled, so he "surrendered Anne to her husband with bad grace ... Donne might have her, but [More] refused to contribute a penny to her support" (Bald 140). Egerton had appeased More by dismissing Donne, whose inheritance had been exhausted. No one else would offer Donne a position, so the couple
accepted the hospitality of Anne’s cousin and Donne’s friend, Francis Wolley, who owned an estate at Pyrford. Here they kept a low profile as they learned to live in reduced circumstances, in “little rooms” of another kind.

Earlier, in “Air and Angels,” “The Expiration,” and “The Dissolution,” the speaker experienced loving as an opus circulatorium, a “circular work” in which both lovers gave all of themselves – gave everything, equally – to their “work.” Jung writes that just as “primitive consciousness is constantly liable to ... fall apart, as it were, in four directions, ... the combination of the elements and the final synthesis of male and female is an achievement of the art and a product of conscious endeavor” (Mysterium Coniunctionis 460). So in “The Good Morrow,” there will be no equal division of material between these partners, because in repeated coniunctionis, all that they have and all that they are has been and will be repeatedly dissolved and transformed into a renewed oneness. Like the alchemist’s hoped-for elixir, produced when the four-squared elements are transformed into one quintessential circle (Abraham 137-138), their love will never slacken, never die.

“Witchcraft by a Picture”

Bald writes that Donne traveled to France with Sir Walter Chute between the years 1604 and 1606. From what we know, this was the first major separation between John and Anne Donne since they took up residence at Pyrford. The couple had experienced dramatic good-byes before, when Anne was suddenly sent home to Loseley in 1600, and when they spent the first four months of their marriage separated from one another. But this is the first recorded instance in which the English Channel would divide them. In “Witchcraft by a Picture,” the speaker’s subtle suggestion of his death by drowning in her tears may very well allude to this nigredo moment of their impending separation:
I fix mine eye on thine, and there
Pity my picture burning in thine eye
My picture drowned in a transparent tear,
When I look lower I espy,
Hadst thou the wicked skill
By pictures made and marred, to kill,
How many ways mightst thou perform thy will!

But now I have drunk thy sweet salt tears,
And though thou pour more I'll depart;
My picture vanished, vanish fears
That I can be endamaged by that art;
Though thou retain of me
One picture more, yet that will be
Being in thine own heart, from all malice free.

While in Petrarchan poetry tears are an indicator of frustrated passion (Herz 101), in alchemy, they are a sign – as droplets form along the inside wall of the alembic – of Mercury’s influence in the successful completion of the coniunctio (Abraham 128). So in “Witchcraft…,” read alchemically, tears may be seen as emblems of what Sherwood has called “resolved love,” the mutually fulfilling experience of two souls united in the conjunction of their bodies (16). By imprinting the speaker’s image on each of his lover’s tears, the poet-alchemist renders the emblems doubly rich: each tear simultaneously bears the speaker’s image and is an image of the depth of his lover’s emotion (Miner 132). Donne may even be borrowing from alchemical legend in the line “My picture drowned in a transparent tear” (3). Abraham writes: “The Golden Tract tells of the bride hermetically sealed with her husband in the ‘prison’ of the vessel, dissolving into endless tears when she sees her husband melted with excessive ardour” (78). In “Witchcraft,” however, tears are emblems not of her lover’s “excessive ardour,” but of her own passionate reluctance to let him go. And, since theirs is a substantial love, not one that “seeks physical satisfaction without regard for the integrity of the other person involved” (Peterson

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19 “The emblem falls within the scope of epigrammic poetry …it is …a kind of inscription …but its homiletic nature [sets] it apart from the true epigram.” See Hudson 33.
313), the speaker has learned to read his lover’s soul in the actions of her body – even to the slightest expression on her face (Sherwood 72). He understands that hers are not tears of ecstasy, but of a heartfelt anxiety over his impending departure. In reading “Witchcraft …” one is moved by the speaker’s generosity and understanding, since there is no reason to assume that he is any more eager to leave his lover than she is to have him go. Alluding to “witchcraft [and] the reputed practice of killing a person by making and then destroying a picture of him” (Clements 28n), Donne’s speaker suppresses his own sadness and resorts to humor in his attempt to console his beloved:

Hadst thou the wicked skill  
By pictures made and marred, to kill,  
How many ways mightst thou perform thy will! (5-7).

Every tear holds his image and the tears have become a deluge.

The speaker, in touching self-defense, kisses each tear away: “But now I have drunk thy sweet salt tears” (8). In Mysterium Coniunctionis, Jung considers salt and the alchemist’s belief that its “most outstanding properties … [are] bitterness and wisdom” (246). Jung goes on to state that these two properties (which hold salt in a constant state) form a pair of opposites, necessitating a third thing between them: “The factor common to both, however incommensurable the two ideas may seem, is, psychologically, the function of feeling. Tears, sorrow, and disappointment are bitter, but wisdom is the comforter of all psychic suffering” (246). The speaker’s feeling is manifested in his wisdom (albedo): he cannot remain without prolonging the intensity of her sorrow over his leaving. Thus, in a subtle twist of logic, he determines that the event causing his lover’s tears will be past:

And though thou pour more I’ll depart;  
My picture vanished, vanish fears  
That I can be endamaged by that art;  
Though thou retain of me  
One picture more, yet that will be,
It is interesting that “in antiquity salt denoted wit ... insight, understanding” (Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* 242). In “Witchcraft...” Donne has made salt a kind of secondary emblem, hidden inside those “sweet tears.” Rather like a poor man’s gold, salt is a tincture of sorts – a *rubedo* – since from ancient times it has been prized as a preservative. As the speaker drinks his beloved’s sweet *salt* tears, they not only lack the power to take his life, but will in fact *preserve* it.

For our lovers in “Witchcraft...,” this good-bye is less frantic than the one they had to settle for in “The Expiration,” in which one devastatingly concise kiss “sucked” what was elemental in their relationship into itself and vanished, leaving only its *impresa* behind (Smith 65). In “Witchcraft ,” the speaker has time to draw from the tear emblem a coded reminder to his beloved that they know how to communicate with one another even when they are not in the same room, about the same city, on the same landform. Their microcosm is “an everywhere,” so this occasion should be no more disruptive than their earlier separations, which were ultimately ineffective in dividing them. The speaker certainly does not want her to forget his face while he is away, but by imprinting his image on a heart constitutionally incapable of malice, where she feels rather than sees him, he will be safely preserved.

“*A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*”

Donne’s travels with Chute kept him away from Anne for a year and, upon his return, he found a residence for the family closer to London, in Mitcham. In a letter to his friend, Sir Henry Goodyer, Donne conveys his devotion to Anne:

I write not to you out of my poor library, where to cast mine eye upon good
authors kindles or refreshes ... meditations not unfit to communicate to near
friends ... nor from the highway, where I am contracted and inverted to myself ... but from the fireside in my parlour, and in the noise of three gamesome children; and by the side of her, whom because I have transplanted into a wretched fortune, I must labor to disguise that from her by all honest devices, as giving her my company and discourse; therefore I steal from her all the time which I give this letter, and it is therefore that I ... gallop so fast over it. I have not been out of the house since I received your packet. (Gosse 1.214-215)

From Mitcham, which Bald describes as his home as well as a “place of retirement where he could pursue his studies,” Donne traveled regularly into London, where he “followed the Court and cultivated patrons and patronesses” (155). After repeated (and failed) attempts to procure permanent employment, Donne’s poetry eventually earned him a new patron, Sir Robert Drury. In 1611 Donne was asked to accompany Drury to France, but “concerned over Anne’s anxiety at his leaving her [Donne] resolved not to go” (Gosse 279). When Donne was told that the journey would last “only two months,” Anne gave “faint consent,” according to Bald, who is among those scholars who believe that “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” was written for Anne at the time of this departure (242).

As one accustomed to farewells, the speaker in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” reminds his beloved that although separation from one another is excruciating, they have survived such pain before. Like good men who do not draw attention to themselves when they most deserve to be attended to, the speaker and his beloved are skilled veterans in the art of saying goodbye:

As virtuous men pass mildly away,
And whisper to their souls to go,
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,
“The breath goes now,” and some say, “No,”

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
‘Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity of our love. (1-8)

The physical separation of passionately devoted lovers need not be borne stoically, but histrionics would be completely out of place. Such soul-mates will have learned that separations – *solvae* – are preludes to reunions – *coagulae*. “So let us melt” suggests one last sexual embrace between these two before their inevitable leave-taking, which will be marked by an understanding much too sacred for outward display: “‘Twere profanation of our joys / To tell the laity of our love” (9-10).

In the next two stanzas, Donne’s speaker compares the steadfastness of his relationship with his beloved to stability on a macrocosmic level:

Moving of the earth brings harms and fears,
Men reckon what it did and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater far, is innocent. (9-12)

Just as an earthquake can strike terror in the hearts of men who may wonder if the world might be meeting its final cataclasm, so the parting of some lovers leaves them scrambling for meaning and reassurance. All the while they remain completely oblivious to the far more dangerous trembling of the firmament itself, the “trepidation of the spheres” (11). For “virtuous men” (1) and “substantial lovers” (Peterson 314), the realm of the immediate may be unsettling at times, but it cannot threaten (with “harms and fears”) bonds forged in the physical which, by the power of Mercury, extend to the metaphysical. Earth’s contingencies cannot affect the conjunction of souls so often tried, tested, found true, and innocent.
Continuing the image of the celestial, the speaker seems to peer down upon those whose love has never known real passion, real nigredo and who, therefore, have not undergone real transformation:

Dull sublunary lovers’ love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it. (13-16)

Sherwood uses the phrase “... [a] preoccupation with unenlightened sexuality” (75) to describe the mindset of those lovers whose “soul is sense” (15). What is critical here, as Sherwood might be the first to argue, is that the physical is necessary for, but does not constitute, human wholeness: “Sexuality ... obviously encourages fixation ... but the body's keenly felt experience is the emblematic book for understanding the soul...” (72). Those who have never suffered nigredo in mutual passion cannot be expected to remain faithful to one another if separated. Nothing of the other has been imprinted on either one. There has been no union of souls, and thus there is nothing beyond the physical that can endure ... that can “admit absence” (15).

What a contrast is the union between the speaker and his beloved:

But we, by a love so much refined
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss. (17-20)

The speaker acknowledges that Love the Alchemist has transformed him and his beloved. They are “...so much refined / That our selves know not what [our love] is” (17-18). Refinement here is akin to the repeated process of the coniunctio of alchemy, the solve and the coagula by which two souls – in two bodies – become “inter-assured of mind” (19). The physical is not to be underestimated in a love that is substantial, however, as Donne makes clear by the use of an
understated monosyllable in the stanza’s concluding line: “[We] Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss” (20 emphasis added). As Sherwood writes,

Donne [stands] body and soul in separate dimensions, but hangs their respective fulfilment on mutual use. The human soul pursues fulfilment by imprinting spiritual form in other souls through...the body... Human memory can maintain spiritual imprints pressed deeply enough; but...man, not just through weakness, but more significantly, though his essential nature, yearns for the physical embodiment of the spirit. (79)

Donne’s speaker does not mean to imply that he and his beloved will not miss one another’s physical presence. They have come to an awareness of one another that is intense in its physicality even as it heightens their appreciation of a bond “so refined” that they themselves do not know what it is” (18). Although he cannot explain the nature of their love, the speaker is adamant about reassuring his beloved that it is impossible to separate them:

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

For the alchemist, gold is the purest state to which matter may be refined, one whose resilience is unparalleled. Able, like the truest, most substantial form of human love, to withstand the heaviest blows, gold remains intact. Sherwood clarifies what he believes is a critical element in Donne’s psychology: that “…mutual love follows sexuality upward to recognition that only spiritual union can expand toward fulfilment” (108). So it is with these lovers' soul (“two souls therefore, which are one”). Their bodies are governed by time and space, but their joined souls are not, so his leaving cannot create a breach between them. It can only create an expansion (23), one that will extend between England and France.
In “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,” the speaker finds for his beloved what Sherwood calls an “artifact,” an image which will remind her of what binds them as soul-mates while he is physically away from her:

If they be two, they are two so
   As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
   To move, but doth, if the other do; (25-28)

By contradicting “Our two souls therefore, which are one” with “If they be two,” the speaker resolves the problem of physical separation with a paradox. Separated, but not separate, the lovers relate to one another as the two necessary components of one whole:

And though it in the center sit,
   Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
   And grows erect, as that comes home. (25-32)

Their is a conjunction of souls. Fused at the center, each leans in the opposite direction – toward one another – in order to maintain that conjunction:

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
   Like the other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
   And makes me end where I begun. (33-36)

It is worth noting that, “In terms of Renaissance emblematology ... it is not the set of compasses that is of primal significance but rather the circle it forms” (MacKenzie 98). Jung writes that for alchemists, the scintilla or “point” is the “soul-spark,” the “spark of stellar essence” and consists “in a conjunction of male and female” (Mysterium Coniunctionis 48-49). A perfect, “just” circle, then starts with the “point of conjunction” or the lovers’ coniunctio. This is their common-soul’s “spark” and, like a beam of light spreading itself outward – or “gold to airy thinness beat” (24) – the path of a compass cannot be other than circular.

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20 Donne’s figure of the twin compasses may not be original. Paracelsus once wrote, “For in the point the circle also exists not less than in the whole circle. For no matter how much greater the circle than the point, yet the two are integral. Thus, then, it comes about that the fixed foot ... gives the other...spacious periphery.” See Murray 123.
Further, with regard to the presence of the circle image in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” Donne’s use of the word “trepidation” (11) is significant. “Trepidation” is an astronomical term for the oscillation of the earth’s axis, and is manifested by precession, “the slow retrograde motion of the equinocial points along the elliptic... caused by the slow change of direction of the earth’s axis of rotation which describes an approximate circle around the pole of the elliptic once in about 25,800 years” (OED). Like the alternating rhythm of solve and coagula in the alchemist’s work, the macrocosm quietly oscillates along a circular path of its own, even as our microcosmic lovers contemplate how their souls will successfully encompass this imminent separation. So Donne employs the most significant of alchemical symbols by which the speaker encourages and reassures his beloved. Because she must stay and the speaker must go, they will together form the perfect circle. And, like the uroboros, he will always return to where he started. After hearkening and leaning toward him, she will stand erect, and he will do what he has always done: he will rejoin her.

“A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day, Being the Shortest Day”

Approaching this poem, one notices on the page that it is comprised of five nine-line stanzas, each of whose structure is reminiscent of the two-chambered vessel used in the process of alchemy: the alembic. Thomas W. Hayes points out that “…the hour-glass structure of each stanza… characterizes the poem’s movement…” (58), but more significantly, the first four lines in each are steadily shortened from five to four to three feet, just as the upper chamber of the alembic narrows as it joins the lower. It is through the bridge or “neck” of the alembic that the material to undergo coniunctio flows from the upper to the lower chamber, even as the fifth line in each stanza of the poem effectively divides that stanza in two:

‘Tis the year’s midnight and it is the day’s,
Lucy's who scarce seven hours herself unmask:
The sun is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rays;
The world's whole sap is sunk;
The general balm the hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed's-feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and interred; yet all these seem to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their epitaph. (1-9)

In “A Nocturnal...”, unlike most of the Songs and Sonnets, Donne sets the scene in the first stanza. On this, the longest night of the year, a speaker so often concerned with his microcosm turns his attention to the macrocosm: he gazes at the night sky. As the word suggests, a nocturnal is a “night-piece” and Donne’s description of darkness in terms associated with light (Latin = lux, from which the name “Lucy” is derived) is rich with contrast. Roob writes that, “Before the Fall, according to the Gnostic-Cabalistic myths, the whole of heaven was a single human being of fine material, the giant androgynous, primordial Adam, who is now in every human being ... waiting to be brought back to heaven” (20). So the opening lines of “A Nocturnal...” suggest that the speaker, through this “sidereal material,” or what Paracelsus would call his “astral body” (Jung, Alchemical Studies 130) is attempting to communicate with the stars. Yet they flicker with inattention (“light squibs”) and the quatrain’s infusion of the somnolent letter s gives the impression that the speaker is the only person awake in the universe: even the heavens seem to snore in their collective sleep.

Paracelsus believed that, “All action is by sympathy and antipathy ... [including] correspondences between the celestial and sublunary worlds” (Pagel 221). So it is that the heavens’ withdrawal produces a corresponding retreat in that part of the macrocosm which is terrestrial:

The world's whole sap is sunk;
The general balm th' hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed's feet, life is shrunk
Dead and interred ... (5-8)
On this, the longest night of the year, the elements that maintain life seem to be out of balance. As if mirroring the heavens’ retreat, fire has been swallowed by air, air and fire have been engulfed by water, and the three together – now the consistency of sap – have been sucked into the earth. “Sunk,” “drunk,” “shrunk” are monosyllabic end-rhymes of past-tense finality. The heavens might be “sleeping,” but the world appears to be dead. Life and time both seem to have run out, giving this stanza a two-fold sense of gravity: the imagery exerts a cumulative pull downward, and lifelessness has never felt heavier or more painfully sad:

...life is shrunk,
Dead and interred; yet all these seem to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their epitaph. (7-9)

Effectively condensing all of the dead-ness that came before – “Compared with me, who am their epitaph” (9) – the speaker figuratively draws all of it to the bottom of an alembic. The paradox in attributing to something already dead and buried the ability to laugh is experienced as the dramatic spasm of someone attempting to describe his own dissolution. The stanza leaves the reader feeling drained as the overwhelming sense of the poem becomes one of bereavement.

By apostrophe – since he seems all alone in the universe – the speaker feels compelled to alert vulnerable would-be lovers as the second stanza begins: 21

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next spring;
For I am every dead thing
In whom love wrought new alchemy. (10-13)

Here again, Donne employs oppositional contrasts. The “me” in this stanza’s first line refers to the “me” in the last line of the first stanza: the self-proclaimed testament to (“epitaph” for) deadness. The imperative, “Study me” is balanced by a sweet hopefulness: “you who shall lovers be,” only to be effectively obliterated by the stanza’s foreshortened second couplet. Lest

21 For this stanza, the edition available from the database Early English Books Online was used, rather the Clements edition, which places a comma at the end of line 12.
we misunderstand the speaker’s purpose, though, the contrast of “lovers” and “spring” with “every dead thing” is his way of cautioning those who are eager for passionate union. With a sense of urgency – not cynicism – the speaker recalls his reduction and transformation by that most powerful of all alchemists, love:

For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations and lean emptiness
He ruined me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not. (14-18)

The speaker may be aware that they “who shall lovers be” would have difficulty accepting what experience has taught him, that “Suffering remains the condition of mortal life” and will test love’s ability to carry the burden (Sherwood 107). All the same, his direct knowledge of love’s power is worth his struggle to communicate it.

As if recalling the “vain bubble’s shadow” he was in “Love’s Alchemy,” the speaker describes the process by which those pitiful elements that constituted his character were “expressed,” squeezed out of him. This correlates with the preparatory alchemical stage Duncan describes: “…complete transmutation depends upon the purity of the body and its aptitude” to undergo coniunctio, in which “considerable attention is given to the cleansing and preparation of metals” before they are conjoined (274). This recognition by the speaker of his “dull privations” and “lean emptiness” is very close to what alchemists found during meditatio. The long, slow stage of nigredo required concentration upon the material. It meant:

introversion, introspection … and the careful investigation of desires and their motives; … the disciple [had] every opportunity to discover the dark side of his personality, his inferior wishes and motives, his childish fantasies and resentments, etc; in short, all those traits he habitually [hid] from himself;… he
[was] confronted with his shadow. (Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* 473) 22

The purpose of such intense concentration for the speaker is comparable to that of the alchemist: “In refining the impure, complex, and material ore, the alchemists brought to light what had been hidden in the slag...” (Pachter 119-120). In these lines one can visualize the hard-working glass cutter in “The Undertaking,” exhausted but freshly conscious of his unworthiness. By subjecting him to an encounter with his darker side, Love the Alchemist has “fortified” the speaker’s nothingness “beyond its grade,” 23 so that he might be joined with his opposite and “learn to know his soul” (Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis* 473). In the third stanza, Donne describes the process:

All others, from all things, draw all that’s good,
Life, soul, form, spirit, whence they being have;
I, by love’s limbeck, am the grave
Of all that’s nothing. (19-22)

“All” is repeated twice and stands in pointed contrast to the preceding stanza’s lexicon of loss (“privations” “emptiness” “absence” “darkness” “death”). The speaker’s opposite – who draws all that is good to herself – needed no prior purification. Here, the speaker might be remembering his “Air and Angels” moment, when “life, soul, form, spirit, being” drew him upward into her sphere as she was pulled downward into the vacuum his purified emptiness had become. He was transformed – he became the “grave of all that’s nothing” – when their two essences met head-on and became one altered state.

This brilliant description of the lovers’ first solve (it all happened by “love’s limbeck”) prompts memories of many coniunctios (solves and coagulas) which these conjoined souls later experienced:

22 Jung suggests that in the “shadow,” alchemists had discovered the unconscious mind. See *Mysterium Coniunctionis* p.199.

23 Paracelsus wrote that quintessence is “nature fortified beyond its grade.” See Pachter p.119.
Oft a flood
Have we two wept, and so
Drowned the whole world, us two; oft did we grow
To be two chaoses, when we did show
Care to aught else; and often absences
Withdrew our souls, and made us carcasses. (22-27)

When Donne pictures these lovers' microcosmic intimacy - their *albedo* - the speaker relies on images from both the macrocosm and the microcosm. For two people who are "the world" to each other, such comparisons are touchingly authentic: theirs is a love sublime in its earthiness; sublunary and, at the same time, celestial. Still, to remember is to be willing to suffer the painful moments all over again in order to relive the joyful ones. Active memory - like active imagination - brings together oppositional occasions in order to make sense of them, and consciousness expands along with the capacity for exploring the uncomfortable, whether past or present. So, in "The Expiration" it was one "last lamenting kiss" which "withdrew their souls" when lovers were forced to part. The "whole world" was "one little room" for them in "The Good Morrow," once they had sealed their union in the "flood" of "The Dissolution." Tears "wept" were the bodily expression of the soul's overflowing tenderness in "Witchcraft by a Picture," and physical "absences" from one another - as in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" - caused their souls to go missing as well. The *coniunctionis* came not only in the sexual expression of their mutual devotion, but in the spiritual as well. "Floods" of tears - whether shed out of love during a sexual embrace or in moments of great pain or great joy - have had the same wellsprings in their hearts. The cycle of *nigredo, albedo* and *rubedo* in the repeated *solvae* and *coagulae* is the same for all authentic human experience, and the speaker looks back as if into a pool, to see his life as a series of concentric circles.

The "absences" to which the speaker refers in the third stanza of "A Nocturnal..." (26) eerily foreshadow the devastating one in stanza four, as we come to understand the depth of his
lonesome reverie: “But I am by her death…” (28). These six monosyllables fall heavily, one after the other, like repeated blows from a blunt instrument. “But I am by her death (which word wrongs her)” is the beaten and shattered groan of the bereaved, who cannot, at any level, connect the love of his life with permanent physical death (28, emphasis added).

But I am by her death (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing the elixir grown … (28-29)

Having had his “lean emptiness” (16) reduced to nothing, only to be transformed into “all” through conjunction with his beloved (22-23), the speaker has been dissolved a second time by her death, effectively becoming “Of the first nothing the elixir grown” (29). Now his nothingness is proportionate to the love that had so expanded him: it is astronomical. Just as the speaker had no idea how great his capacity for love might be until completely overcome by it, so now he is traumatized by the void his beloved has left behind. For him, whose every previous separation from his beloved was followed by a reunion, utter and complete emptiness is all that remains.

Recalling the implosion of natural elements in the first stanza of “A Nocturnal…,” the fourth shows the speaker taking full measure of everything he no longer is:

Were I a Man, that I were one
I needs must know; I should prefer,
If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means; yea plants, yea stones detest
And love. All some properties invest. (30-24)

Every layer of the speaker’s consciousness, having been first distilled and then enriched by Love’s Alchemy, is now pummeled by grief. He appears to have lost his wits and is unable to locate any part of himself anywhere:

If I an ordinary nothing were,
As a shadow, a light and body must be here. (35-36)
As one who seems anesthetized by grief, there is not enough left of him to constitute a shadow, much less cast one.

Then, as the fourth stanza flows into the fifth, something happens to the speaker:

But I am none; nor will my Sun renew.  
You lovers, for whose sake the lesser sun  
At this time to the Goat is run  
To fetch new lust, and give it you,  
Enjoy your summer all; (35-41)

In keeping with the alchemic movement of the poem, its final stanza seems to have an altered composition, a mood less constrained – but not until its second line. The initial, “But I am none; nor will my Sun renew” seems to belong with the preceding stanza, while the surprising change in tone as the speaker addresses “You lovers” suggests that the material undergoing nigredo has imploded under the pressure and released its essence (albedo) to rise in the alembic. Indeed, as the speaker continues, his words are distinctly lacking in gravity. It appears that the earth has not died after all; rather, it dreams in dormancy of the spring it will release in a matter of months: “...the lesser sun /At this time to the Goat is run /To fetch new lust and give it you, /Enjoy your summer all” (39-41). These lines echo line 11, “next world, that is, the next spring” (11) whose fecundity will reach its peak at the summer solstice, the longest day of the year.

What has brought about the speaker’s transformation? And why does Donne appear to have hidden it in the last stanza rather than give it a stanza of its own? Paracelsus provides a clue:

At the end of the process ... a ‘physical lightning’ will appear, the ‘lightning’ of Saturn’ will separate from the lightning of Sol, and what appears in this lightning ... does not take anything away from the body’s weight but only

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24 In astrology, the winter solstice marks the moment when the sun enters the tenth house of the zodiac, Capricorn (Latin for “goat’s horn”), which is represented by a he-goat, a symbol of lust. See Snodgrass 183-184.
from its ‘turbulence’ ... leaving ‘tranquility of mind.’ (qtd. in Jung, Alchemical Studies 152)

Meteorological lightning appears as a flash, so it follows that the speaker is jolted out of his reverie. The dark pressure of sadness exerted by the first four stanzas of “A Nocturnal...” is a powerfully composed nigredo of grief. In the final stanza, in the deepest hour of the longest night of the year, macrocosm and microcosm abruptly change direction. Donne effects this suddenness by reversing the movement of the poem mid-stanza. Had he related this moment of “universal transformation” in a separate stanza – situated between stanzas four and five – the reader might miss its suddenness. Looking even more carefully at the text, one wonders if Donne the poet-alchemist is deliberately hiding direct reference to the true source of his speaker’s abrupt transformation. Perhaps it was not the force of the sun’s movement into the House of Capricorn that “lightened” the speaker as the universe shifted its season. Perhaps he was struck by a source of light even more powerful than this “lesser sun.” Donne does not tell us in the poetry, but the reader projects the image of the speaker encountering again the light of his life, the one whose presence his five wits missed the first time she came to him in “Air and Angels.” Donne could very well be employing the alchemist’s technique of syncope, the “omission” of a step or steps in the process (Newman ... 186). As heavy and mournful as are the poem’s first four nigredo stanzas, this “stanza” is so light and joyful that it is not there. The albedo and rubedo stages are abbreviated – “vapored away” – just as they were in “The Expiration” (1). We have evidence from the speaker’s newfound tranquility that something has changed him profoundly, but perhaps, because the source of his transformation (the mumia who never failed to restore his soul when she embraced and restored his body) is no longer present materially, neither could any poetic image represent her. The “absent” stanza belongs with the absent beloved.
Other separations from his beloved – as painful as they were – could be tolerated because the speaker had memorized her “lip, eye or brow” (“Air and Angels” 14) and he could dream of the moment when he could hold her in his arms again. In “A Nocturnal …” having placed his broken-hearted emptiness under the blackened winter sky, he subjects himself to nigredo in order to meditate on all that he had lost, and, by the power of love – just as in “The Undertaking” – such self-negation draws his soul into its rightful sphere. Jung notes this profound paradox in Alchemical Studies when he writes, “One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (265-266).

Over the course of their sixteen-year marriage, the Donnes lived on the perimeter of London society. Their decision to defy convention and marry had left them plagued with financial hardships, which could not have helped Donne’s tendency toward melancholia (Bald 157). In 1615, James I finally succeeded in persuading Donne to take Holy Orders, the profession for which he had long believed himself to be both unworthy and ill-suited, but which turned out to be the ideal venue for his wit and learning and which gained him the reputation as an original, passionate and dynamic preacher (Edwards 332). The Donnes’ situation had finally changed for the better, but two years after her husband’s ordination, having delivered a stillborn daughter (the twelfth child she carried to term) Anne More Donne died at age thirty-three. Donne was heartbroken (Gosse 2-101).

Abraham refers to the alchemist’s synonyms for the philosopher’s stone produced after the repeated stages of the coniunctio were completed successfully; among them were “mumia” and “balm” or balsamum (147). Among the OED’s definitions for the word balsamum is this entry: “Everything hath in it … a natural Balsamum, which if any wound or hurt which that Creature hath received be kept clean … will heal itself.” Is it any surprise that the source of this definition is John Donne (Sermon XXXII)? In The Arte of English Poesie, George Puttenham
attributes to Paracelsus an insight gained from the folk medicine of the sixteenth century: that
like cures like. In Chapter XXIV, "The Forme of Poeticall Lamentations" he says:
...death and burials, ... th' aduersities by warres, and ... true loue
lost or ill bestowed are th' onely sorrowes that the noble Poets sought
by their arte to remoue or appease, not with any medicament of a
contrary temper, as the Galenistes vse to cure contraria contrariis, but
as the Paracelsians, who cure similia similibus, making one dolour to
expell another, and in this case, one short sorrowing the remedie of a
long and greiuous sorrow. (qtd. in Sadler 73)
For our speaker, then, grief is a painful indulgence which he must suffer through – a one-person
nigredo of remembering – in order that he might make a connection (albedo) with a love that is
still very much alive. Even without the benefit of his beloved's body, he has gained an
overwhelming consciousness of himself as body, soul, and spirit (rubedo).

Incorporating the idea that in time all things come full circle, the poem's final couplet
may be seen as ballast for the first. In "A Nocturnal....," Donne has revealed the universal
tendency toward circumambulation with particular acuity and feeling. 25 What comes down must
go up, as the alembic releases "odoriferous" essence ("Love's Alchemy"10), and the earth sleeps
not in death, but in dormancy. The speaker – having encountered the "light of his life" –
receives from her once more the healing balm of love. As he turns toward morning and another
year's cycle begins, she will be both within and ahead of him. From now on, every thought of
her will heal him a little ... as it brings him ever closer to her.

25 Circles and spirals are the paths along which all animate parts of the created world are inclined to travel. See
Davis 3–4.
Carl Jung writes, “Even the wise man could not reconcile the opposites unless ‘a certain heavenly substance’ … came to his help, namely the ‘balsam,’ the quintessence, the philosophic wine, a ‘virtue and heavenly vigour’ – in short, the ‘truth’” (Mysterium Coniunctionis 477). This sequence of lyrics would seem to substantiate Jung’s claim.

John Donne was in the midst of writing an acrimonious poem, Metempsychosis: The Progress of the Soul when Anne More appeared in his life. She was thirteen, twelve years younger than he but with a presence persuasive enough, Edwards suggests, that Donne lost interest in composing vitriol (62). Relying upon sources recently uncovered, Bell insists that while a man of Donne’s reputation and charm would have no difficulty finding feminine companionship, a man with his learning and wit could not possibly lose his heart to a woman who was not his intellectual equal. Even though a formal education was not a prerequisite for marketability among the gentry, “all evidence suggests that Anne More was extremely well educated…” and recent scholarship suggests “that Sir George More saw education as essential to his daughters’ place in society” (Bell “Courting…” 62-63). A very young woman in the possession of a strong mind and exceptional learning would have been a paradoxical figure for a man like Donne, whose admiration for her Donne traces to her earliest days at York House in London (Bald 109).

The discourse of alchemy was prevalent during Donne’s time, since many people dabbled in it (Duncan 257). Only a few generations earlier, the earth – recently demoted to planetary status – had been circumnavigated, and a rogue alchemist had turned Galenist medicine on its

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26 Anne More’s father, Sir George More, was educated at Oxford, travelled widely with Sir Philip Sidney, and “contributed generously to the library at Oxford, named for his friend, Sir Thomas Bodley”. See Bald 129.
head (Pachter 44-45). For Donne to borrow principles of alchemy in his attempt to understand the dynamics of love was less a reliance on questionable chemistry than a way of medicating himself with words, while a woman only slightly more than half his age proceeded to sweep him off his feet.

Of the Songs and Sonnets, Deborah Aldrich Larson writes, “Donne seems to offer ... a clear account of an event or a series of events, if only the poems could be put in their ‘proper’ order. He seems to offer the reader a complicated but tangible love story and yet he seems at great pains to keep this story the deepest of secrets” (62). Larson (perhaps unknowingly) speaks volumes in the phrase “the deepest of secrets,” since for Donne the poet-alchemist, life itself is an open secret and this study suggests that he was quite familiar with the alchemist’s clever wordplay (c.f. Newman and Principe 186-187). His art challenges the imagination of his reader to think in circles, to look for paradox beyond the imagery and, always, to reconsider what aspect of truth that reader’s earlier consciousness might have missed.

The lyric sequence developed in this paper forms a backdrop to what we know of Donne during the years he spent with his wife. It supports the conclusion Edwards draws, that marriage to Anne More “transformed” Donne (298). As an angel, she led him (it was never Mercury at all) deeper within himself, refining his passion until it became a curative balm: she raised him above his grade. Their love took on the quality of gold “to an airy thinness beat” when forces worked to pull them apart: their love expanded and held firm (“A Valediction...” 24). Donne learned that nigredo shared with one’s beloved would be dissolved by albedo and their common soul invigorated by rubedo. Donne’s experience told him that departures (little deaths) would always be followed by homecomings. If Anne’s death left him with a sorrow too deep for tears, it nevertheless filled him – just as her “death” in “The Dissolution” had filled him – with the “fuel” of her love. With her love for spiritual nourishment, he placed his hope in a refined
determination to continue alone the purifying process of *nigredo*, *albedo*, and *rubedo* in order to one day be found worthy of a heavenly reunion with her.

Among the testaments to his undying love for Anne— he remained a devoted husband to her until his own death— is a sonnet of uncertain dating, which was not discovered until the latter part of the Nineteenth-century:

> Since she whom I loved hath paid her last debt  
> To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,  
> And her soul early into heaven ravished,  
> Wholly on heavenly things my mind is set.  
> Here the admiring her my mind did whet  
> To seek Thee God; so streams to show their head;  
> But tho' I have found Thee, and Thou my thirst hast fed,  
> A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.  
> But why should I beg more love, when as Thou  
> Dost woo my soul for hers, off'ring all Thine:  
> And dost not only fear lest I allow  
> My love to saints and angels, things divine,  
> But in Thy tender jealousy dost doubt  
> Lest the World, Flesh, yea Devil, put thee out?

The circumference of the love between John Donne and Anne More was eventually pushed beyond time and space, but she was ever its center. She left Donne a paradox which was to inspire works he produced over the next fourteen years: she left him with both a high level of consciousness and a hope-filled yearning that could only be satisfied by a final *coniunctio* of their souls in Heaven.
Note


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