

John Donne: The Meditative Voice

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the Meditative Voice

SOME TIME AGO, while reading in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, I came across two poems, side by side, that seemed to give an almost perfect definition of the poetry of John Donne, and indeed, of a world-wide kind of poetry that I should like to call the meditative poem. It is the kind of poetry that, in Stevens' words,

to find what will suffice,
Destroys romantic tenements
Of rose and ice. . .

If one thinks of the rose in the cheeks of every Petrarchan mistress, and of the equally inevitable ice in her heart, the lines may seem a perfect account of the impact of Donne upon English poetry, especially as Stevens concludes the first of these two poems, "Man and Bottle":

The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind,
As the mind, to find what will suffice, destroys
Romantic tenements of rose and ice.

And then the companion-piece, "Of Modern Poetry," completes a definition of "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice":

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It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear. . .

This actor, he adds, is "A metaphysician in the dark, twanging / An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives / Sounds. . . . Wholly containing the mind." He is an actor who achieves, in the end, "The poem of the act of the mind."

In describing this kind of poetry, Stevens thoughtfully uses both the word *meditation* and the word *metaphysician*, thus allowing us to call this poetry either *metaphysical* or *meditative*. There is, I guess, no hope of discarding the worn term, *metaphysical poetry*, despite its vague and wandering applications; it is historically established; it serves to indicate certain qualities of style; and, more important, it serves to indicate the goal of such a poet as Donne: to reconcile the Many and the One. But if we cannot discard this venerable term, we can at least to some extent displace it by using another term, *meditative poetry*, on all appropriate occasions.

The term *meditative poetry* becomes especially appropriate when we fix our attention upon the total process, the total action, of such poems as Donne's "Holy Sonnets," or "Divine Meditations," to use the alternative title of some manuscripts. For here is poetry that meets exactly the account that Stevens gives of "modern poetry." It is the poem of the mind, seeking to find what will suffice. It destroys the old romantic tenements, and in their place constructs a stage on which an insatiable actor presents to the mind the action of an inward search. Recall, for example, how frequently Donne places a part of himself as an actor on a stage. It may be the deathbed, as in Holy Sonnet 4, imaged as a scene of legal trial:

Oh my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned
By sicknesse, deaths herald, and champion. . .

Or, in an image almost too good to be true for my argument, we have the deathbed stage of Holy Sonnet 6: "This is my

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plays last scene.” It may be “the round earths imagin’d corners” at the Judgment Day (Holy Sonnet 7), or the scene of the Passion (Holy Sonnet 11):

Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side,
Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,
For I have sinn’d, and sinn’d, and onely hee,
Who could do no iniquitie, hath dyed. . .

Or it may be the siege of a city, as in the famous “Batter my heart, three person’d God” (Holy Sonnet 14).

Next, Donne allows this projected part of himself, this actor, to speak, dramatically, its meditated problems on that stage, as in the earlier version of the middle lines of Holy Sonnet 6:

And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt
My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space,
Or presently, I know not, see that Face,
Whose feare already shakes my every joynt. . .

Then, in the finale, usually in the whole sestet of the sonnet, this projected self, this insatiable actor, merges with the whole, larger mind of the meditative man, finding what will suffice “In an emotion as of two people, as of two/Emotions becoming one”—to continue with Wallace Stevens’ words in “Of Modern Poetry.” So, in Holy Sonnet 4, the “blacke Soule” is advised by the larger mind, speaking in a sort of dialogue:

Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;
But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?
Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red soules to white.

So, too, at the close of Holy Sonnet 8, we have the dramatic reconciliation of two selves, of actor and mind, or of Soul and Self (to use Yeats’s terms), as the total self, the total mind, concludes:

Then turne
O pensive soule, to God, for he knows best
Thy true grieffe, for he put it in my breast.

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Thy, the actor's, true grief, for he put it in *my*, the whole man's, breast.

Now let us watch the full development of the meditative action in a complete Holy Sonnet, the thirteenth. Here we have what might be called a double stage: an outer stage which is the scene of the Judgment Day, and an inner stage which is the scene of the crucified Christ beheld within the heart of the meditative man:

What if this present were the worlds last night?
Mark in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,
The picture of Christ crucified, and tell
Whether that countenance can thee affright. . .

What should the Soul see and ask at such a scene as this? The next quatrain tells us, by blending in its imagery the glory and terror of the Second Coming with the love and mercy of the first:

Tearcs in his eyes quench the amasing light,
Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell.
And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,
Which pray'd forgivenessse for his foes fierce spight?

And now the whole mind of the meditative man begins to explain, answering the projected and implied questions of the Soul:

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

And thus Soul and Self, actor and total mind, are joined in the finding of what will suffice on this occasion. The essential process of all true meditative poetry depends thus upon the interaction between a projected, dramatized part of the self, and the whole mind of the meditative man.

Such is the interior quest—to find what will suffice—that

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underlies and directs the course of Donne's entire poetical career. "Seeke wee then our selves in our selves," Donne writes to his friend Rowland Woodward, in one of the verse-letters of his middle years, where Donne looks back upon his own earlier career and regrets that he

to too many'hath showne
How love-song weeds, and Satyrique thornes are growne
Where seeds of better Arts, were early sown.

"Love-song weeds," "Satyrique thornes," "seeds of better Arts"—where shall we ever find a better account of the peculiar blending of diverse elements that constitutes Donne's poetry? Wherever we turn in his poetry, whether early, middle, or late, we are likely to find that his greatest achievements occur when these three elements are struggling toward a reconciliation: the love-song, the satire, and certain religious arts, among which we must give a primary place to those arts of self-analysis and meditation by which religious men of the late Renaissance sought to find the sufficing poise and stability of religious virtue.

We have already watched the action of this mingling in Holy Sonnet 13, where, using the verse-form along with certain motifs consecrated to Petrarchan ladies, the meditative man speaks scornfully of his idolatry of profane mistresses; but we can see the working of these three elements more clearly if we turn from the poetry of Donne's middle years and watch the materials jostling together in what appear, for the most part, to be among Donne's earliest poetical efforts, his love-elegies. Here indeed we can find the very rankest growth of love-song weeds in all Donne's poetry (and in fact some of the rankest of the Renaissance), along with a great many harsh satirical thorns. I think those critics are right who have argued that we must regard most of these Elegies as witty, primarily literary excursions into the popular libertine mode stemming out of Ovid and reinforced by Montaigne: they show how thoroughly Donne was aware of the libertine aspects of the Renaissance; but they have probably only a slight bearing upon Donne's actual life.

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The second Elegy, for instance, is a literary exercise in sheer ingenious fun, as the Roman name of the mistress indicates:

Marry, and love thy *Flavia*, for shee
Hath all things, whereby others beautious bee,
For, though her eyes be small, her mouth is great,
Though they be Ivory, yet her teeth be jeat,
Though they be dimme, yet she is light enough,
And though her harsh haire fall, her skinne is rough. . .
Though all her parts be not in th'usuall place,
She'hath yet an Anagram of a good face.

This tone of literary comedy dominates fifteen out of the twenty Elegies; and yet I do not mean to dismiss them as insignificant parts of Donne's work. Viewed as a whole, with all their levity, with all their witty, outrageous distortion, the Elegies succeed in creating a powerful sense of the fickleness, the instability, the treachery, of physical existence. Here is a world corrupted by jealousy, spying, deceit, disloyalty, sickness, and death, as in the cruel opening of Elegy 1:

Fond woman, which would'st have thy husband die,
And yet complain'st of his great jealousie;
If swolne with poyson, hee lay in'his last bed,
His body with a sere-barke covered,
Drawing his breath, as thick and short, as can
The nimblest crocheting Musitian,
Ready with loathsome vomiting to spue
His Soule out of one hell, into a new,
Made deafe with his poore kindreds howling cries,
Begging with few feign'd teares, great legacies,
Thou would'st not weepe, but jolly, 'and frolicke bee,
As a slave, which to morrow should be free;
Yet weep'st thou, when thou seest him hungerly
Swallow his owne death, hearts-bane jealousie.

This is: you want him to die; well, jealousy will kill him, so why complain about his jealousy?

O give him many thanks, he's courteous,
That in suspecting kindly warneth us.

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This sense of decay and disloyalty, we see, is not at all limited to the world of lovers: Donne's images and allusions extend the range of implication to include, first, that glimpse of avaricious kinsmen, and then the outer world of city, kingdom, and church, as in the conclusion of Elegy 1.

Now I see many dangers; for that is
His realme, his castle, and his diocesse.
But if, as envious men, which would revile
Their Prince, or coyne his gold, themselves exile
Into another countrie, 'and doe it there,
Wee play'in another house, what should we feare?
There we will scorne his houshold policies,
His seely plots, and pensionary spies,
As the inhabitants of Thames right side
Do Londons Major [Mayor]; or Germans, the Popes pride.

Thus, too, in Elegy 4 he speaks of the treacherous perfume that has betrayed his presence to a suspicious father:

But Oh, too common ill, I brought with mee
That which betrayed mee to my enemie:
A loud perfume, which at my entrance cryed
Even at thy fathers nose, so were wee spied.
When, like a tyrann King, that in his bed
Smelt gunpowder, the pale wretch shivered.

Or in Elegy 11 he speaks thus of the Spanish coins that are corrupting all Europe, those coins

Which, as the soule quickens head, feet and heart,
As streames, like veines, run through th'earth's every part,
Visit all Countries, and have sliely made
Gorgeous *France*, ruin'd, ragged and decay'd;
Scotland, which knew no State, proud in one day:
And mangled seventeen-headed *Belgia*.

More important, five of the Elegies deal with human insecurity in a much more painful, powerful, and sombre way. Elegy 5, "His Picture," is based upon the speaker's steady consideration of the possibility that his physical handsomeness may be destroyed during a forthcoming military expedition—a

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clear allusion, it seems, to Donne's participation in the expedition to Cadiz or to the Azores in 1596 or 1597. The lover has given his picture to his lady, and he urges her:

When weather-beaten I come backe; my hand,
Perhaps with rude oares torne, or Sun beams tann'd,
My face and brest of hairecloth, and my head
With cares rash sodaine stormes, being o'rspread,
My body'a sack of bones, broken within,
And powders blew staines scatter'd on my skinne;
If rivall fooles taxe thee to'have lov'd a man,
So foule, and course, as, Oh, I may seeme than,
This shall say what I was: and thou shalt say,
Doe his hurts reach mee? doth my worth decay?
Or doe they reach his judging minde, that hee
Should now love lesse, what hee did love to see?
That which in him was faire and delicate,
Was but the milke, which in loves childish state
Did nurse it: who now is growne strong enough
To feed on that, which to disused tasts seemes tough.

Miss Helen Gardner [*Modern Language Review*, 39 (1944), 333-7] has well explained the religious implications of the closing lines, which are built upon traditional distinctions between lower and higher modes of love, with particular reference to the following passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews (5. 12-14):

ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

The seeds of better arts are indeed beginning to grow beyond the weeds and thorns.

Elegy 12, "His parting from her," shows a lover who is desperately attempting by ingenious vows of constancy to rise above the Ovidian world of flux and mutability, while Elegy

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10, "The Dreame," shows another true lover poignantly oppressed by the world's instability:

So, if I dreame I have you, I have you,
For all our joyes are but fantasticall.
And so I scape the paine, for paine is true. . .
Alas, true joyes at best are *dreame* enough;
Though you stay here you passe too fast away:
For even at first lifes *Taper* is a snuffe.

More powerful still, the famous Elegy 16, "By our first strange and fatall interview," gains most of its drama from its view of the various dangers that would beset his mistress if she should accompany him abroad disguised as a page:

Thy (else Almighty) beautie cannot move
Rage from the Seas, nor thy love teach them love,
Nor tame wild Boreas harshnesse; Thou hast reade
How roughly hee in peeces shivered
Faire Orithea, whom he swore he lov'd.

And the Elegy concludes with an overwhelming apprehension of physical danger as he begs his mistress:

nor in bed fright thy Nurse
With midnights startings, crying out, oh, oh
Nurse, ô my love is slaine, I saw him goe
O'r the white Alpes alone; I saw him I,
Assail'd, fight, taken, stabb'd, bleed, fall, and die.

Consider finally the famous Elegy 9, "The Autumnall" (probably a later composition than most of the other Elegies)—consider how its power lies in this: that the Autumnal Beauty of this wise, temperate, middle-aged lady is poised so precariously between the gay volatile beauties of youth and the inevitable state of those Donne calls the "*Winter-faces*," "whose skin's slacke; / Lanke, as an unthrifts purse; but a soules sacke." The whole poem is dominated by images of the grave and death, as when he compliments this lady's wrinkles:

Call not these wrinkles, *graves*; If *graves* they were,
They were *Loves graves*; for else he is no where.

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Yet lies not Love *dead* here, but here doth sit
Vow'd to this trench, like an *Anachorit*.
And here, till hers, which must be his *death*, come,
He doth not digge a *Grave*, but build a *Tombe*.

Such is the funereal atmosphere which this one rare lady, for the moment, transcends.

In all these ways, then, Donne's love-elegies prepare the way for the shattering portrayal of the world's instability that forms an essential part of the two great *Anniversaries* composed by Donne as he was approaching his fortieth year. At the same time, the Elegies prepare us for the second essential aspect of those *Anniversaries*—the religious counterpoise to the world's decay, an element we have already seen at the close of the fifth Elegy. Sometimes, in the Elegies, these seeds of better arts put forth their sprouts among the weeds and thorns in full awareness of their ironical incongruity—as in the angelic and mystical imagery of the gay Elegy 19, "Going to Bed," or in this passage near the end of Elegy 11, "The Bracelet," a passage which, taken by itself, might almost form a part of some devout prayer:

But, thou art resolute; Thy will be done!
Yet with such anguish, as her onely sonne
The Mother in the hungry grave doth lay,
Unto the fire these Martyrs I betray.
Good soules, (for you give life to every thing)
Good Angels, (for good messages you bring)
Destin'd you might have beene to such an one,
As would have lov'd and worship'd you alone:
One that would suffer hunger, nakednesse,
Yea death, ere he would make your number lesse.

But of course the Angels here are gold coins, sacrificed according to his mistress' will, in order to replace the lost bracelet. So, among Donne's Elegies, the best are those that, like "The Autumnall," deal primarily with the threat of death and decay; or those other, quite different, Elegies, such as "Going to Bed," where religious images work wittily to effect the disintegration of their native virtue.

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But, among Donne's earlier poems, it is in the Satires that we find the most striking example of a successful coordination of what I have called the three prime elements of his poetry. Everyone has recognized that, among Donne's five Satires, only the third rises to really distinguished poetry, but exactly why it is successful has not perhaps been adequately estimated. It is, I think, because the poem succeeds in coalescing, absorbing, all the extravagant and wheeling interests that we have seen in the Elegies. Its basic metaphor comes from the love song: the search for the ideal mistress; but the Mistress here is true religion:

Is not our Mistress faire Religion,
As worthy of all our Soules devotion,
As vertue was to the first blinded age?

And he proceeds, a few lines later, to play this concept off against the poses of the Elizabethan lover:

and must every hee
Which cries not, Goddess, to thy Mistresse, draw,
Or eate thy poysonous words? courage of straw!

Those who love the world, he says, carrying on the image, love only "a withered and worne strumpet," and the problems of the search for true religion are imaged under a series of false mistresses or false attitudes toward woman:

Seeke true religion. O where? Mirreus
Thinking her unhous'd here, and fled from us,
Seekes her at Rome, there, because hee doth know
That shee was there a thousand yeares agoe,
He loves her ragges so, as wee here obey
The statecloth where the Prince sate yesterday.
Crantz to such brave Loves will not be intrall'd,
But loves her onely, who at Geneva is call'd
Religion, plaine, simple, sullen, yong,
Contemptuous, yet unhansome; As among
Lecherous humors, there is one that judges
No wenches wholesome, but course country drudges.
Graius stayes still at home here, and because

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Some Preachers, vile ambitious bauds, and lawes
Still new like fashions, bid him thinke that shee
Which dwels with us, is onely perfect, hee
Imbraceth her, whom his Godfathers will
Tender to him, being tender, as Wards still
Take such wives as their Guardians offer, or
Pay valewes. Carelesse Phrygius doth abhorre
All, because all cannot be good, as one
Knowing some women whores, dares marry none.
Graccus loves all as one, and thinkes that so
As women do in divers countries goe
In divers habits, yet are still one kinde,
So doth, so is Religion. . .

Those Roman names (with the one comic Dutch intrusion), the coarse language, the rough meter, the tone of fierce contempt, all this is part of the poem's satiric base, as the title and the opening have indicated:

Kinde pittie chokes my spleene, brave scorn forbids
Those teares to issue which swell my eye-lids;
I must not laugh, nor weepe sinnes, and be wise,
Can railing then cure these worne maladies?

And indeed the satiric tone of "railing" dominates the first two-thirds of the poem. Yet it is, curiously, not like the public railing of the Roman satirists. The opening lines suggest a self-address, a self-questioning: a manner which the following lines enforce by coming close to Donne's personal experience: first his sense of apostasy from those "seeds of better Arts":

and shall thy fathers spirit
Meete blinde Philosophers in heaven, whose merit
Of strict life may be imputed faith, and heare
Thee, whom hee taught so easie wayes and neare
To follow, damn'd?

And then that Donne who was willing to sail off on the military expeditions to Cadiz and the Azores:

Dar'st thou ayd mutinous Dutch, and dar'st thou lay
Thee in ships wooden Sepulchres, a prey
To leaders rage, to stormes, to shot, to dearth?

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So the exhortations continue, from beginning to end:

Foole and wretch, wilt thou let thy Soule be tyed
To mans lawes, by which she shall not be tryed
At the last day?

Are these the public exhortations of the satirist, or the intimate self-addresses of one who knows how to practice the religious art of seeking himself in himself? They are both, simultaneously; in this hovering between the public and the meditative voice lies the essential art of the poem. It belongs to no single genre: it is neither purely satiric nor purely meditative; it is a unique and perfectly Donneian blending of love-song weeds, satiric thorns, and those better arts sown early in his life.

Lastly, we must note the curious compounding of these elements that occurs frequently among Donne's "Songs and Sonets." Consider, for example, "Twicknam garden." This is a poem that has puzzled students of Donne, since the title alludes to the Countess of Bedford's estate, which she occupied in 1608: this is a fairly late poem, then; and Donne is a thoroughly married man. Can it be that Donne has developed feelings about the Countess of Bedford as strong as those developed in the poem? There is more than courtly compliment of a patron here. What does it all mean?

I suggest that the poem need have nothing at all to do with the Countess of Bedford in person, but only with her garden, which the lover has used as an imagistic contrast with his own state of mind, as a stage upon which he can seek himself in himself, by projecting there his tormented sense of grief:

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,
Hither I come to seeke the spring,
And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,
Receive such balmes, as else cure every thing;
But O, selfe traytor, I do bring
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
And can convert Manna to gall,
And that this place may thoroughly be thought
True Paradise, I have the serpent brought.

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This actor is a traitor to himself: love in his case is a poisonous spider, which transubstantiates, in a bitter way, all life-giving elements. He has brought the serpent within himself to this place. Why? Because, the next stanza tells us, he is in love, and yet in some “disgrace” at the same time: *disgrace*, a rich word, which in this context seems to carry the full range of its many implications: a state of disfavor, dishonor, reproach, and humiliation:

But that I may not this disgrace
Indure, nor yet leave loving, Love let mee
Some senslesse peece of this place bee;
Make me a mandrake, so I may groane here,
Or a stone fountaine weeping out my yeare.

He feels called upon to protest his fidelity through a strained and curious conceit that suggests a Petrarchan service of communion:

Hither with christall vyals, lovers come,
And take my teares, which are loves wine,
And try your mistresse Teares at home,
For all are false, that tast not just like mine;
Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine,
Nor can you more judge womans thoughts by teares,
Then by her shadow, what she weares.
O perverse sexe, where none is true but shee,
Who's therefore true, because her truth kills mee.

What shall we make of this satirical outburst, especially the last two lines? On the surface they seem to carry a conventional meaning: that some true woman has denied this lover her favor, for she is true to someone else, or to some other principle. Yet there may also be the deeper suggestion that this lover's grief comes from the fact that he has in some way trespassed, or is accused of having trespassed, against the loyalty and love of the one woman whom he truly loves and who truly loves him. Perhaps the sighs and tears of the opening line are hers as well as his, the sighs and tears of a woman whose “truth” fills this suspected and perhaps erring lover with a killing sense of grief.

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Similarly, we may gain a deeper appreciation of Donne's great "Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the Shortest day," if we disregard the coincidence that the Countess of Bedford's name happened to be Lucy. The poem, I deeply believe, is a meditation upon the death of Donne's wife; and if this is so, it is a poem written after August 1617, more than two years after Donne had become a clergyman. Miss Gardner has recently given the strongest kind of support to this view, for she notes that the "Nocturnall" appears only in the late manuscripts of Donne's poems: "Its appearance in manuscript connects it with the Hymns rather than with the Songs and Sonnets." [*Review of English Studies*, n.s. 8 (1957), 199.] Thus the "Nocturnall" seems to be one of Donne's latest poems, written perhaps eight years later than most of the Holy Sonnets. And why should this not be so? The "Nocturnall," like the early Satire 3, displays Donne's representative texture: that blending of the love-song, the satire, and the meditation; but here, as would befit a priest, the meditative form is basic, dominant, firmly established.

We may take the poem, then, as one of the final achievements in Donne's lifelong effort to control his sense of the dissolution and fragility of worldly things: for with the death of this most loved of bodily things Donne's sense of the world's emptiness has reached an absolute conclusion. Isaac Walton, in his *Life of Donne*, has given us the proper setting for this poem, when he speaks of how Donne buried "with his tears, all his earthly joys in his most dear and deserving wives grave; and betook himself to a most retired and solitary life." "In this retiredness," Walton continues, "he became *crucified to the world*, and all those vanities, those imaginary pleasures that are daily acted on that restless stage; . . . for now his very soul was elemented of nothing but sadness; now, grief took so full a possession of his heart, as to leave no place for joy."

So it is with the "Nocturnall," where the first stanza thus sets a sombre stage upon which this speaker may project his own sense of deadness:

Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes,
Lucies, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes,

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The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes;
The worlds whole sap is sunke:
The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the beds feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and enterr'd; yet all these seeme to laugh,
Compar'd with mee, who am their Epitaph.

Having projected this aspect of himself, he proceeds, in a meditative way, to analyse that state of mind:

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations, and leane emptinesse:
He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not.

"Oft a flood/Have wee two wept, and so/Drownd the whole world, us two," he recalls, alluding perhaps to the kind of situation dramatized in his "Valediction: of weeping"; "oft did we grow/To be two Chaosses, when we did show/Care to ought else," he continues, alluding perhaps to the kind of situation dramatized in "Twicknam garden"; "and often absences/Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses," he adds, alluding perhaps to the kind of situation dramatized in his "Valediction: forbidding mourning."

But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown;
Were I a man, that I were one,
I needs must know; I should preferre,
If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means; Yea plants, yea stones detest,
And love; All, all some properties invest;
If I an ordinary nothing were,
As shadow, a light, and body must be here.

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“But I am None”; he declares, “nor will by Sunne [the beloved] renew.”

Then, in a vehement resolution, he turns upon all worldly lovers with one harsh satirical thorn that demolishes all their love-song weeds; and he ends by preparing himself to join his beloved in the after-life, thus converting the conventional “Saint” of Petrarchan poetry—the saint of rose and ice—into the image of a true religious goal:

You lovers, for whose sake, the lesser Sunne
At this time to the Goat is runne
To fetch new lust, and give it you,
Enjoy your summer all;
Since shee enjoyes her long nights festivall,
Let mee prepare towards her, and let mee call
This hour her Vigill, and her Eve, since this
Both the years, and the dayes deep midnight is.

So, in Wallace Stevens’ terms, our meditative poet has given us the poem of the mind, in the act of finding what will suffice. He has built a sombre stage; he has placed an aspect of himself as “Epitaph” upon that stage; and he has allowed that insatiable actor, slowly and with meditation, to speak like a metaphysician in the dark.*

* This essay is a revision of a lecture delivered at Mount Holyoke College in March, 1959.