

IRONY AND THE SECULAR POEMS OF JOHN DONNE

by Robert A. Banet

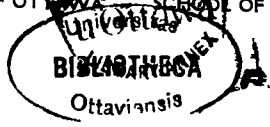
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CURRICULUM STUDIORUM

Robert A. Banet was born August 29, 1926, in New Albany, Indiana. He received the Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy from Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1951. He received the Master of Arts degree in English Literature from the University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, in 1956. The title of his thesis was The Uses of Irony in "Moby-Dick".

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since T. S. Eliot, in 1921, first published his essay on the metaphysical poets, a large number of critics have interested themselves in the study of John Donne. Works on his prose and poetry, his sermons and his lyrics have abounded in the past four decades. Such a proliferation of studies on Donne indicates one or more of several things: 1) that Donne is a current literary fashion; 2) that he has a particular significance in the twentieth century; or 3) that he is a timeless poet for all ages. The present study was undertaken on the assumption that the complexity, the attitudes, and the ironic style of the seventeenth century poet strike sympathetic chords in the twentieth century and that, consequently, he is of some significance to this century.

The star of irony, like that of John Donne, has had a similar rise in the present age, though its rise has not been attended by a great number of works devoted specially to it. There has been, however, a sufficient amount of critical attention given to irony so as both to broaden the concept and establish it firmly as a tool of criticism. Its various manifestations, recently explored, have proven useful in explaining poets from Sophocles to T. S. Eliot. Since, therefore, the poetry of John Donne and the concept of irony seem to have attained a certain significance in the present age,

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it is not inappropriate to apply the concept of irony to Donne's poems as a means of describing and evaluating them.

The present study takes as its scope the Songs and Sonets and the Elegies. The Epigrams, Epithalamions, Satyres, the verse letters, and the Anniversaries were excluded, somewhat arbitrarily, both because a limit needed to be set somewhere and because the irony in these poems was scant and hardly perceptible. Originally, the study projected an analysis, not only of the secular poems, but of the Divine Poems as well. Preliminary research, however, indicated that a thorough analysis of the Divine Poems would result only in negative conclusions.

A word of explanation is necessary at this point. The Divine Poems contain many turns of speech and attitudes that might be called, in a loose, colloquial way, irony. A critical examination of the poems, however, indicated that whatever other tropes and attitudes may characterize the poems, irony, strictly so called, plays little part. In the Divine Poems, Donne employs abundant paradoxes; he makes startling, even shocking comparisons in regard to religious matters; he juxtaposes sacred and secular in a way that must seem sacrilegious to pious ears; he stands amazed at the seemingly contradictory workings of Providence: but in all this, irony plays no part. Only in a loose, inaccurate sense can the term irony be applied in the Divine Poems to Donne's

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wonder-inspired paradoxes, his unconventional metaphors, and his seemingly irreverent coupling of sacred and secular. True irony, in the sense explained later, occurs so seldom as to justify the exclusion of the Divine Poems. The task undertaken here, then, is that of studying the Songs and Sonets and the Elegies.

In order to provide a clear and full understanding of irony and its many forms, the contemporary criticism on the subject is examined and a number of examples of irony, drawn from literature of all types, are explained. The major forms that irony has taken in the past and in the present are defined and exemplified. A brief analysis of satire and paradox was deemed appropriate, since they are in some ways similar to irony, yet very different: a precise use of the term irony demands a clear distinction between it and its cognates.

Thus armed with an accurate critical tool, the study proceeds to describe the irony of the poems under three headings: verbal, structural, and attitudinal. Donne's own use of irony invites such a classification, rather than other, more conventional, headings. In these three chapters an attempt is made to classify and explain all of the manifestations of irony in the Songs and Sonets and the Elegies.

As one of the means of evaluating the irony, a brief survey of twentieth century ironists is undertaken to

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indicate the perennial attraction of irony. Finally an attempt to weigh the importance of irony is made by analyzing the advantages it offers to the poet and its effect on the finished poem.

An index of the poems referred to is included for easy reference.

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF IRONY

Irony, like many terms in the critic's vocabulary, has a wide range of application. Like Romanticism, which can be extended to the passivity of Wordsworth as well as the exuberance of Whitman, irony encompasses the oratory of Mark Antony's "Friends, Romans, countrymen" as well as the Biblical Job's quiet comment to his would-be consolers, "No doubt but ye are the people and wisdom shall die with you".¹ In the first instance, Mark Antony's irony throughout his long speech is purposive and dynamic. He means to do the very opposite of his avowed intention: "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him".² It grows in intensity with each repetition of "Brutus is an honorable man". The effect of the speech is to move the crowd to a course of action opposed to the literal sense of the orator's words, a course which he fully intends they should adopt, but one that he apparently deplors. This is powerful, motive, oratorical irony; the quiet comment of the patient man of Hus, referred to above, is of a different cast, but it is irony none the less. Job rejects the pretentious wisdom

1 Job 12:2.

2 William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, Act III, Sc. II, l. 79.

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of Eliphaz and Zophar, not by saying so directly, but by saying the very opposite, Job's "No doubt but ye are the people and wisdom shall die with you" is a conversational riposte. It lacks the dramatic purpose of Mark Antony's speech as well as the dynamic intensity of its repetitious "Brutus is an honorable man". Yet its tone is basically identical with that of the longer speech. The concept of irony is broad enough to include these two widely differing utterances.

And, again like Romanticism, irony is broad in other ways. It is a timeless phenomenon as ancient as Socrates and as modern as the contemporary classroom. Socrates, assuming the role of the ignorant searcher of truth, characteristically employs this posture to expose the ignorance of others as well as to manifest his own wisdom. Time has had little influence on the effectiveness of this device. If Socrates used the ironic pose to advantage in classical times, an occasional experienced teacher finds it equally effective in exposing the sophomoric wisdom in the classrooms of today. Like poetry itself, irony is not superseded nor made obsolete by the inventions of a subsequent age.

A further comparison of irony and poetry may be helpful at this point to suggest the great range of irony. Poetry is a grand concept, expansive, large. It is readily applied to works that are themselves grand, expansive, and large. Thus we call Paradise Lost and the Iliad poetry.

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But this does not preclude humbler applications of the word. We can describe a single phrase of Mark Antony, "sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor dumb mouths", as poetry. So too irony. Irony is grand enough to permeate the very fabric of a great work like Moby Dick. It colors the attitude of the narrator Ishmael to the extent that the book becomes a way of viewing life and not merely a great adventure story of Good and Evil. Impressive as it is in a great novel, irony is yet homely enough to give life to the simple phrase, "Oh yeah"! which says one thing and means another. Irony is humble enough to be used by almost anyone having the power of speech, and yet its potential is such as to give form to a complete philosophical attitude towards the universe, such as that of Ishmael.

If irony is not limited as to its quality of its expression, neither is it limited as to the literary genre which employs it. While dramatic and narrative works, generally speaking, are more suited to a varied use of irony, lyric poetry also makes use of it. Almost any discussion of irony invariably includes an analysis of the irony of Sophocles. Bishop Connop Thirlwall, who may be considered the pioneer in the criticism of irony by virtue of an essay published in 1833, devotes much of his analysis to the plays of

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Sophocles.³ His lead has been taken up by almost all later critics. Although much emphasis has been laid on dramatic irony, the lyric poets, particularly those of the twentieth century, find in irony an exact expression of their mood. Some would extend irony beyond belles-lettres to history. Professor J. A. K. Thomson, whose work is the first notable discussion of irony since Thirlwall, has a tendency to equate irony with the Greek temper. Not only does he find irony in Homer as well as the dramatists, but in the historians, Herodotus and Thucydides as well. Of the latter's History of the Peloponnesian War, Thomson says that Thucydides yearned to tell of Pericles' dream come true.

The dream did not come true, and the History had to tell why. It is, to the reader who is not deceived by its studied absence of emotion, one of the unhappiest books in the world.

The studied absence of emotion--is not that but another name for Irony?⁴

And of Herodotus:

...a spirit at once grave and gay, idealizing and critical, half-doubting and half-believing. A profound simplicity is in him--an Ironical simplicity.⁵

³ Connop Thirlwall, On the Irony of Sophocles, 1833. This work is not easily available. A readily accessible digest can be found in Alan Reynolds Thompson's The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1948, pp. 143-148.

⁴ J. A. K. Thomson, Irony; An Historical Introduction, London, George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1926, p. 139.

⁵ Ibid., p. 134.

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Doubtless these applications of the term are warranted, though not all critics would agree with Thompson's wide extension of the term. He is particularly useful at this point to urge that irony is not limited to any one particular genre, and indeed that it extends to types of literature other than belles-lettres.

In the foregoing remarks, I have tried to suggest only the extension of the concept of irony. It is of such breadth as to make hazardous any attempt at definition. To quote one student of irony, G. G. Sedgewick, it changes shape "as readily as the Old Man of the Sea".⁶ Alan Reynolds Thompson, in a work that is invaluable for any study of irony, is even more discouraging:

To treat fully the ironic sense in our time alone would involve nothing less than the spiritual predicament of modern man, yearning for faith in a world not made for his needs.⁷

Irony is indeed a complex concept. It not only assumes many shapes, as has already been seen, but it differs according to the author using it. The differences thus resulting, it is true, are often mere differences of degree. Thus, for example, one may say that the irony of T. S. Eliot is not so

⁶ G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1948, p. 4.

⁷ Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1948, p. vi.

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bitter as that of the early John Donne. On the other hand, a study of the irony of a particular author often yields a species of irony not found in another author. Thus, the irony of impropriety, used by Herman Melville in Moby Dick, will not necessarily be found in other ironists. Professor J. A. K. Thomson, in his historical introduction to irony, says,

The Irony of great writers differs as much as the men themselves, and will often give more of their true quality than any other element of their style.[§]

The personal uses of irony added to the complexity of the concept itself suggests a phenomenon of such amorphous proportions as to defy any attempt at definition. The discouragement that irony invites, however, is balanced by the challenge it presents; sooner or later, every student of literature attempts to arrive at a workable, if not entirely satisfying understanding of the literary concepts he is most interested in. Like poetry itself, irony is a term that critics cannot long ignore. Those who note and enjoy the presence of irony in its many forms are sooner or later tempted to formulate a definition.

Irony is many things. Or rather it is a single phenomenon with a multitude of applications. It is a figure of speech wherein the intended meaning is the opposite of the

§ J. A. K. Thomson, Irony; An Historical Introduction, p. 91.

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literal sense of the words. It is a "response of the mind to the perplexities of living, and its workings are sometimes extraordinarily complex".⁹ It goes beyond a mere manner of speaking and becomes a "war upon Appearance waged by a man who knows Reality: now...a process deadly to empty pretense, now a sort of kindly pruning, vital to growth in truth".¹⁰ While elusive of definition, irony can be felt and its presence is "marked by a grim sort of humor, an 'unemotional detachment' on the part of the writer's emotions are really heated".¹¹ The "grim...humor" noted by Thrall and Hibbard is at the heart of every form of irony. Alan Thompson offers an easy way of accepting this apparent contradiction:

The pleasure in mild physical pain is a normal experience. We enjoy a sore tooth, or tickling, or amorous violence, until, as we say, "it hurts": and our enjoyment is keenest just before that point is reached. Thus there should be not difficulty about accepting the paradox of pleasant pain in art, where all pain is imaginative.¹²

Although Thompson does not explain the curious phenomenon of the physical pleasant pain, its analogousness makes the "grim

9 Haakon M. Chevalier, The Ironic Temper; Anatole France and His Time, New York, Oxford University Press, 1932, p. 10.

10 G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, p. 13.

11 William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, New York, The Odyssey Press, 1936. p. 219.

12 Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, p. 22.

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humor" of irony more acceptable.

Irony is sometimes a feeling, sometimes a rhetorical device; on the other hand, it can sometimes characterize a whole attitude and become the basis for a pattern of thinking. David Worcester has indicated the wide range of the modern concept of irony when he says that, in its own right, irony "has expanded from a minute verbal phenomenon to a philosophy, a way of facing the cosmos".¹³ He who is foolhardy or brave enough to try to lay hold of irony finds that, as has already been noted, it changes shape as readily as Proteus; any one definition of irony is given the lie the moment a fresh example is introduced. There have been, however, more or less successful attempts to define a single characteristic common to all forms of irony.

In The Art of Satire, David Worcester finds that "the distinction between the world of the uninitiate, common souls and the select few who share some special knowledge underlies every form of irony".¹⁴ Thus the uses of irony in literature appeal to an intellectual aristocracy by implying that the author and his reader belong to a group who possess an insight into reality not shared by another (unidentified) group. The ironist recognizes the difference between appearance and

¹³ David Worcester, The Art of Satire, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1940, p. 75.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

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reality. He knows that things are not what they seem and that they are not what they should be. He delights in this knowledge for two reasons: it makes him superior to those not appreciating the contrast between appearance and reality and between the real and the ideal; and, secondly, he is able to convey this feeling of superiority to his reader, not by direct statement, but by subtle implication. The reader, too, takes a similar delight in irony for much the same reasons: he is accepted into the world of the initiate and, in not having to be told directly of this acceptance, he finds a further delight.

There are those who accept the superficial value of things as the reality and there are those who recognize the superficial as superficial. Such is the ironist. His contention is that things are not what they seem or what they profess to be. He does not always pretend to know the true meaning, but he does insist that the apparently true is not the really true. Yet his method of expressing this view is indirect. He not only perceives the irony of life, but expresses it in an ironical way; that is, presenting the appearance of a situation, as G. G. Sedgewick says, he leaves "the truth to be understood from tone, gesture, or known circumstances".¹⁵

15 G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, p. 5.

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The distinction between appearance and reality is helpful in understanding irony; likewise David Worcester's distinction between the "world of the uninitiate, common souls and the select few who share some special knowledge" is a penetrating, helpful way of understanding irony, though sometimes not so easy to apply. There is, however, a more basic way of reducing irony to its elements: irony, reduced to its simplest terms, is one-ness comprehending two-ness. In irony, there is always a duality of some sort: either a double view, a double standard, a double attitude, a double meaning, or a double personality; in irony, there is likewise a one-ness: a single individual, a single mind, a single word. In some way, the single individual takes a double view, a double attitude; a single situation takes on a double significance; or a single word or phrase has a double meaning. When the one-ness comprehends, or understands, or expresses the two-ness, a certain clash results, not unlike the flash of electricity resulting from the union of the positive and the negative charge. The clash resulting from the union of the one-ness and the two-ness is a necessary quality of irony. Otherwise, irony is not present. For it is not ironical that a single room houses two persons nor that a single cooking vessel contains two potatoes. The clash comes about only when the one-two situation is accompanied by either unexpectedness, inappropriateness, impropriety, grimness, or some

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other quality equally able to render the one-two combination unusual. The following dialog illustrates the one-two situation together with the necessary clash:

"I'm going to will all my money to the government".
 "Sure you are".

It is the answer of the second speaker that interests us here. On a literal level, he agrees emphatically with the first speaker. Yet we know that, on an unspoken level, he intends to convey his incredulity. Thus we have a one-two situation: one remark expressing two meanings, one on a literal level and one implied. Thus the first requisite for irony obtains. The second, more difficultly defined, is also present in the mild impropriety of communicating one idea by stating its contradiction. For, although this kind of irony is widely practiced, yet there is an unusualness, even a trace of impropriety, in saying one thing and meaning another. If, in the place of the ironic response, a more normal, a more usual response is posited, the irony disappears:

"I'm going to will all my money to the government".
 "I don't believe you".

The ironic impact of the first example is missing. True, the same incredulity of the first example is conveyed as unmistakably in the second, but it is incredulity clothed in the words of incredulity, whereas in the first example the negative meaning was arrayed in affirmative veil. The result: irony. Perhaps the point is labored, but it seems that irony,

in all its forms, is here reduced into its most basic elements: one-ness comprehending two-ness accompanied by a clash, the clash being a product of impropriety, unexpectedness, inappropriateness, or some other quality equally capable of rendering the one-two combination unusual.

These notions of irony, as is the inevitable practice in literary criticism, have been arrived at only after examining examples of irony. Since the time of Aristotle, theory has consistently followed practice. Although this time-honored habit has the support of all critics, yet it is question-begging. For, before examining the examples of irony, the critic must have some notion of what irony is. Since, however, there is no other way to go about it, the question-begging procedure is necessary. The result is that the critic begins with a general, vague notion of irony; and, in accordance with his examination of examples, modifies, broadens, or narrows his original concept into a delimited, defined, sharpened tool for further study.

With such a tool, then, it is possible to proceed with the investigation of irony. It seems best, in order to emphasize the many shapes of irony, to analyze each of the major classifications. Bishop Connop Thirlwall, writing in 1833, was the first to suggest the wide range of irony by discussing five forms thereof: the irony of detachment (between the artist and his characters), the irony of fate,

Sophoclean, tragic, and dramatic. His division is not widely followed today. The "irony of fate" has been overused and applied to situations not genuinely ironic. The terms "Sophoclean", "tragic", "dramatic", are now generally united under the single term "dramatic".¹⁶ Thus, Thirlwall's division seems inadequate for the present study.

Alan Thompson's threefold division of irony, irony of speech (verbal irony), irony of character (irony of manner), and irony of events (dramatic irony)¹⁷ would be more serviceable, although there are species of irony that would not easily fit into any of the three classes. Moreover, Thompson himself finds his basic division somewhat inadequate in that, later in his study, he discusses five further forms of irony: comic, sentimental, tragic, melodramatic, and philosophical. Instead of these are proposed the following six types, which have been most helpful in arriving at an understanding of irony: verbal, dramatic, irony of impropriety, attitudinal, romantic. Except for attitudinal irony and the irony of impropriety, the terms are used in the same sense as

¹⁶ Thus, G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, p. 22: "For our present purpose the three epithets-- 'Sophoclean', 'tragic', 'dramatic'--need not be distinguished. ...For nearly a century they have all meant the same thing to most people who utter them". This view is commonly held.

¹⁷ Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, Chapter I, "Form of Irony".

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that employed by other commentators. The two exceptions refer to types of irony noted by others but called by different names. The terms above seem less ambiguous than other possible choices.

1. Verbal Irony.

Verbal irony is irony in its simplest, most easily recognized, and most widely practiced form. In essence, it is an utterance which says one thing and means another. The previously quoted comment of Job, "No doubt but ye are the people and wisdom will die with you",¹⁸ is a fitting example. Literally, Job compliments his would-be consolers on their wisdom. When they die, their survivors will suffer a great loss, he seems to say. However, Job's attitude towards his friends, manifested clearly in the context, furnishes the tone for the remark, a tone which completely converts the literal compliment into an unmistakable insult.

The one-two clash of the meanings produced by the bitterness of the remark should be sufficiently clear from a previous, homelier example¹⁹ not to need further laboring here. David Worcester's distinction, however, between the world of the uninitiate and that of the elite deserves

¹⁸ Job 12:2.

¹⁹ See above, p. 11.

application here.²⁰ Although hardly anyone would misunderstand Job's comment, Worcester's distinction implies an audience so obtuse as to miss the irony, an audience made up of "the world of uninitiate, common souls". The other world, that of "the select few who share some special knowledge" are those who understand the implied insult in Job's apparent compliment. If Worcester's distinction seems pretentious when applied to this instance, it must be granted that it is basically just. For without the implied audience of the common, uninitiate souls, even though they do not exist, the remark loses its effect.

In addition to the contrast between these two worlds of souls, another contrast is present in most forms of irony: the contrast between appearance and reality. Care must be exercised here to concentrate only on the verbal irony, for it is inviting to go beyond Job's remark to the ironic vision or perception which prompted it. Job perceived the contrast between the appearance (Eliphaz the wise consoler) and the reality (Eliphaz the pietistic fool). While this itself is an ironic perception, it is not that species of irony which is being considered here. Rather it is the contrast in the words themselves: the contrast between the appearance (a compliment) and the reality (an insult).

²⁰ David Worcester, The Art of Satire, p. 111; also see above, p. 8.

Verbal irony is irony in its commonest, most recognizable form. It is that figure of speech which is defined first in dictionaries under the entry "irony": "a method of humorous or sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning of the words used is the direct opposite of their usual sense: as, the speaker was using irony when he said that the stupid plan was 'very clever'".²¹ Because of its familiarity, it makes a convenient bridge to the other forms of irony.

2. Dramatic Irony.

The world of the uninitiate and the world of those who share some special knowledge finds an application in dramatic irony. In this form of irony, the character or characters of the literary work, whether it be fiction or drama, make up the world of the uninitiate and the readers or spectators constitute the others. As in other forms of irony, the effect of dramatic irony depends on knowledge and ignorance: the ignorance of one is comprehended by the knowledge of another. It is the irony, as Miss Germaine Dempster says,

²¹ Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Cleveland, The World Publishing Company, 1957, p. 773.

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resulting from a strong contrast, unperceived by a character in a story, between the surface meaning of his words or deeds and something else happening in the story.²²

Thus the irony of a particular situation in a novel or play is not always felt until the whole story is unfolded. It sometimes happens that an incident is ironical in view of what has already happened, while sometimes the incident becomes ironical only in the light of another event yet to come. It is "the sense of the contradiction felt by the spectators of a drama who see a character acting in ignorance of his condition".²³ For "spectators of a drama", "readers of a novel" can easily be substituted.

Another view of dramatic irony finds that it is present in almost all novels in that the reader is allowed a knowledge of the characters that they do not share in.²⁴ The reader is presented with a map laid clearly before him which the character perceives only dimly, if at all. While this does create a true dramatic irony, the concept is rather too broad to have application here.

22 Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1932, p. 7.

23 G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially In Drama, p. 49.

24 David Worcester, The Art of Satire, p. 120.

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Characters acting in ignorance of their situation do not always present dramatic irony. If a man habitually takes the 8:10 train to work and, on Friday, that train is derailed, he acted in ignorance of the impending catastrophe. This would seem to fit the definition of dramatic irony. Since, however, there was nothing unusual in his boarding the train and since the catastrophe does not hark back in a poignant way to his taking that particular train, the situation is only one of disaster and not of irony. Or, to modify the example, if the man who habitually does not take the 8:10, does so on the Friday that the train is derailed, the result might be termed "the irony of fate". This term, however, is not in high repute among critics, since it is a rather imprecise, colloquial term generally applied to any untoward situation. Miss Germaine Dempster limits dramatic irony to those situations in which the words or deeds are "something more than the natural and adequate reaction of a character to a situation as it appears to him".²⁵ There is nothing unnatural or inadequate in the reaction of the characters in the above examples; the events, as related, were on a merely physical level with no psychological implications. Consequently, they do not qualify as examples of dramatic irony.

²⁵ Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer, p. 8.

Dramatic irony can be created by actions or words. When it comes about by the speech of a character, it may be considered as unconscious verbal irony. While this is an accurate label, it suggests an affinity to that form of irony which is a figure of speech, previously discussed. The unawareness on the part of the speaker of unconscious spoken irony constitutes a radical difference between the two. In simple verbal irony, the speaker says one thing and means another, whereas in unconscious spoken irony, the speaker says one thing and means one thing. With his superior knowledge, it is the reader, not the speaker, who makes possible the irony. It is the knowledge of another circumstance of the story which renders the speech ironical. Since the irony derives from the story and the words, not from the words alone, it is more properly designated dramatic rather than verbal.

Hardly a single discussion of dramatic irony fails to deal with Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. The play is an excellent subject for a study of dramatic irony, for its central interest revolves around Oedipus' acting in ignorance of facts which are known to the audience. Unknowingly, he has committed two horrible crimes: parricide and incest. Oedipus, King of Thebes, knows that he has killed a man, but what he does not know is that the man he killed was Laius, his predecessor on the Theban throne. Nor does he

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know that the man was his father. Although he knows that Jocasta, the woman he married, is the widow of Laius, he does not know that she is his mother.

It comes to light that the pestilence visiting Thebes will persist until the murder of Laius is avenged. Oedipus institutes a relentless inquiry into the identity of the murderer, eventually discovering what the audience knew all along: Oedipus is the murderer of Laius and Laius was his father. The unspeakable corollary is also part of Oedipus' discovery: his wife Jocasta, Laius' widow, is also his mother. The irony of the earnest detective discovering that he has committed the murder which he has so relentlessly investigated is poignant enough; but the concomittant discovery that he has begotten children by his own mother comes close to the ultimate in poignant dramatic irony. The following dialogue is the high point of the play. Oedipus the king questions the servant who knows the origins of Oedipus the infant:

Oedipus: Did you give this man the child of whom he asks?

Servant: I did. Would I had perished on that day!

Oedipus: You will come to that unless you tell the truth.

Servant: I come to far greater ruin if I speak.

Oedipus: This man, it seems, is trying to delay.

Servant: Not I. I said before I gave it to him.

Oedipus: Where did you get it? At home or from someone else?

Servant: It was not mine. I got him from a man.

Oedipus: Which of these citizens? Where did he live?

Servant: O master, by the gods, ask me no more.

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Oedipus: You are done for if I ask you this again.
 Servant: Well then, he was born of the house of
 Laius.
 Oedipus: One of his slaves, or born of his own race?
 Servant: Alas, to speak I am on the brink of horror.
 Oedipus: And I to hear. But still it must be heard.
 Servant: Well, then, they say it was his child.
 Your wife who dwells within could best say
 how this stands.²⁶

The servant tried several times to halt the investigation. He withholds the awful truth of the child's (Oedipus') parentage until the king forces him to say that the child was Laius' own son. This revelation brings an end to the dramatic irony which has sustained the play up to this point. The ignorance of Oedipus and the knowledge of the spectators which constitutes the dramatic irony no longer obtains; for, by his ruthless inquiry, he becomes aware of the truth which the spectator has long known.

Although dramatic irony finds a natural setting in the stage, it is not uncommonly found in the novel as well. One of the finest of the novels of Henry James, What Maisie Knew, is built on a major dramatic irony: the ignorance of the child Maisie in an evil (to her, innocent) adult world and the knowledge of the reader, who sees more than Maisie sees. The irony would be present even if the author had told the story from an omniscient point of view. James, however, chooses to relate the incidents through the eyes of the observant, precocious, yet quite young, Maisie. Thus,

26 Sophocles Oedipus Rex 1156-1171.

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Maisie tells of the meetings of her father with his "friends", of her mother's meetings with her "friends". Maisie, in her innocence, finds nothing objectionable in this; the reader, however, interprets her story in the light of his own more mature experience. The result is the one-two clash of irony: a single story told exclusively by an innocent child which encompasses two distinct interpretations, Maisie's own and that of the reader. James is not content with a general dramatic irony. He invests many of his scenes with further dramatic ironies. In a dialogue between Maisie and her nursemaid-teacher, Mrs. Wix, Maisie suspects that her own moral sense is being called into question. The discussion is centered around what would happen if Mrs. Beale, Maisie's stepmother, were unkind to Maisie's stepfather. Mrs. Wix asks Maisie what she would do.

Maisie met her expression as if it were a game with forfeits for winking. "I'd kill her!" That at least, she hoped as she looked away, would guarantee her moral sense.²⁷

Maisie's words, shocking as they are to us, were intended by her to exhibit her moral sense. They have a chilling double meaning. James depends for his effect on the world of the uninitiate, common soul (Maisie) and the world of the initiate elite (the reader). Again, let it be noted that, as in the

²⁷ Henry James, What Maisie Knew, Garden City, N. Y., Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1954, p. 226.

previous example, the irony is not verbal, although it comes about by means of words. Verbal irony posits the knowledge of the double meaning in the speaker; dramatic irony depends on the speaker's ignorance of one of the meanings.

As might be expected, dramatic irony is found only in narrative and dramatic writing, that is, writing in which a clear distinction obtains between writer and work. Without a character, separate from the writer, dramatic irony is impossible. Lyric poetry and purely descriptive writing, with its absence of characters, employs other forms of irony. Occasionally, a poem which is traditionally thought of as lyric, is re-interpreted as dramatic. Thus it is possible to view some of John Donne's love poems as dramatic monologues. With the consequent implication of a character distinct from the poet, dramatic irony is possible. The lyric as lyric, however, excludes this form of irony.

3. Irony of Impropriety.

The irony of impropriety refers to events or situations perceived to be incongruously improper. Both terms are important. For not only must the situation be improper, that is, out of line, bad, wrong, but it must also be strangely or unusually or unnaturally so. Cheating at cards, for instance, is improper but not ironical; but a man who denounces dishonest practices in the morning and who cheats

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at poker in the evening presents an ironical situation. "Improper" extends beyond the moral to anything unfitting. Thus if a man, on his way to the judge's stand to receive an award for graceful dancing, stumbles on the stage step, the event is ironical even though there is no morality involved. The term "impropriety" includes both the moral and the non-moral.

As in other forms of irony, the one-two clash obtains in the examples just offered. In the latter, the image of a graceful dancer clashes with the image of the clumsy walker. The walker and the dancer are the same individual: one comprehends two in an unexpected, embarrassing, or shocking manner. A further distinction, that between the world of the initiate and that of the uninitiate, does not have application here, unless we posit the world of the uninitiate common souls who would not perceive the incongruity of the event. However, since the irony is present whether or not the imaginary world is supposed, it does not seem necessary to urge this distinction.

The irony of impropriety differs from verbal irony in that speech is not required in the former. Speech may be involved, but it is the event or the situation which is referred to as ironical.

The distinction between dramatic irony and the irony of impropriety is not so easily drawn, for dramatic irony can extend to actions as well as words. A man can act, as

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well as speak, in ignorance. If Greek stage conventions had allowed, Oedipus might have (unwittingly) killed his father on the stage. With the audience's knowledge of Laius' identity, the action would have constituted dramatic irony. To resolve the distinction, then, between dramatic irony and the irony of impropriety involves more than the distinction between word and action.

It may be said that the difference lies in this: the irony of impropriety does not demand ignorance on the part of the character whereas dramatic irony does. For instance, the citizens of a Christian community noted for its vice could be well aware of the incongruity of their supposed Christianity and the ugly fact of their notorious vice. The situation would be ironic, though not dramatically so, for dramatic irony assumes ignorance on the part of the actor or character.

It will be noted that the analysis of irony of impropriety challenges David Worcester's notion that "the distinction between the world of the uninitiate, common souls and the select few who share some special knowledge underlies every form of irony".²⁸ Yet the situation described above seems to have that incongruous ambiguity which is irony. The one-two clash, urged previously, obtains in the single phenomenon of the city encompassing two very different aspects:

²⁸ See above, p. 8.

advertised Christianity and widespread vice. The perception of this creates irony, that of impropriety.

4. Attitudinal Irony.

Although the irony of impropriety has been described as the perception of an incongruous situation, yet the emphasis is on the situation rather than the perception. Attitudinal irony, on the other hand, focusses the interest on the perceiver rather than the thing perceived, on the subject rather than the object. In all forms of irony, the subject, or perceiver, is necessary; for irony does not exist in the abstract. Just as an event is neither interesting nor uninteresting until it is interpreted as such, a situation is not ironical until it is interpreted as ironical by an observer. In forms of irony previously analyzed, the major concern was with the incidents or words viewed as containing irony. In attitudinal irony the attention shifts to the observer whose attitude finds all of life ironical.

This type of irony is a way of life transcending manners of speaking or dramatic effects. It is the philosophy of a man who is convinced that appearances so successfully hide reality that it becomes wiser to suspend judgment and to admit the inscrutability of reality. He abstracts himself completely from the affairs of men. This he cannot do on a practical level; however, he can separate himself from

the rest of mankind who mistakenly claim to know what is good and what is evil, what is true and what is false. The ironist places himself in a select group who share the knowledge that the rest of mankind are deluded. Ironists alone know that reality is unattainable, incomprehensible, and as a consequence, futile.

How can such an attitude be termed ironical? It can be properly so termed for, perceiving the distinction between appearance and reality, it wages war against appearance in that it refuses to be guided by those false values which it knows to be only apparently true. Moreover, there is a further reason for considering this attitude one of irony rather than one of skepticism. It has been argued that underlying every form of irony is a distinction between the world of the initiate and the world of those sharing some special knowledge. The ironist considers that this knowledge of his own ignorance distinguishes him from those common souls who are ignorant of their own ignorance.

The application of the one-two clash is a further aid in describing attitudinal irony. One observer beholds simultaneously two views of the world: one view is that of a purposeful world with men engaged in purposeful pursuits; the other sees men acting aimlessly and ignorantly. The ironist, perceiving the frenzied activity which he knows to be purposeless, emotionally withdraws himself from the world.

Refusing to be "taken in", he detaches himself and observes the world as a god.

Ishmael, the narrator of Melville's sea classic, Moby Dick, is an exponent of attitudinal irony. He observes the rest of the ship's crew engaging in a frenzied whale hunt, a hunt that they have invested with meaning. Aloof and detached, he knows that their activity has no meaning, and further, that they are in ignorance of this fact. Concluding that the whale hunt is the life itself writ small, Ishmael looks upon all the world, as he himself says, as "a vast practical joke".

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. However, nothing dispirits, and nothing seems worth while disputing. He bolts down all events, all creeds, and beliefs, and persuasions, all hard things visible and invisible, never mind how knobby; as an ostrich of potent digestion gobbles down bullets and gun flints. And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker.²⁹

Other men might be persuaded to take life seriously, but not Ishmael. He knows that the things men regard as most important, even life and death, are nothing but "jolly punches

²⁹ Herman Melville, Moby-Dick or The Whale, ed. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent, New York, Hendricks House, 1952, p. 225.

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in the side" delivered by the old joker, God himself. Ishmael enters into the spirit of the joke and assumes the aloof, bemused attitude of the "old joker" himself. This is attitudinal irony. Alan Thompson, speaking of the man of genuinely ironic disposition (and this would seem to include Ishmael) says that such a man

is to some extent split-souled, and his irony is both an expression of his inner strife and a defense against it...Anyone with philosophical and religious intelligence is likely to suffer it, for a clash between aspiration and reality is a necessary condition of life.³⁰

Whatever its causes or necessity, attitudinal irony is a philosophical view of the world as if from the outside. It is as if the ironist observes the (purposeless) activities of men from a planet outside the solar system.

5. Romantic Irony.

Romantic irony is included here for the sake of completeness and in deference to the historical use of the term. Many commentators do not mention romantic irony. Although romantic irony occurs primarily on the stage, G. G. Sedgewick,³¹ in his work on irony in the drama, does not include it. Nor does J. A. K. Thomson³² in his historical

³⁰ Alan Thompson, The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, p. 131.

³¹ G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama.

³² J. A. K. Thomson, Irony; An Historical Introduction.

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presentation of irony found in classical Greek writings. Even Alan Thompson, who devotes a chapter to Romantic irony, has misgivings about it: it is almost a misnomer. In its simplest meaning, says Thompson very succinctly, it is "the willful destruction of illusion in works of fiction and drama".³³ He shows a number of plays, mostly from the German Romantic period, which exhibit this trick of mocking illusion.

Puss in Boots, a play by the German Romantic, Ludwig Tieck, has as characters an "audience" as well as an "author". The play involves a talking cat. The "audience" objects, contending that a talking cat destroys the illusion! From time to time, the "author" exchanges comments with the "audience". Thus the illusion of the play is deliberately destroyed by means of romantic irony.

It is difficult to test the various notions of irony against the preceding example. The one-two clash in which a one-ness comprehends a duality of some sort does not seem to apply, nor does David Worcester's distinction of the uninitiate and the elite. G. G. Sedgewick's description of irony as "a war upon Appearance waged by a man who knows Reality"³⁴ could be applied to romantic irony only with a

³³ Alan Thompson, The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, p. 51.

³⁴ G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama, p. 13.

great deal of subtle and ultimately unconvincing juggling of terms. Thus it seems best to consider Romantic irony as a doubtful form.

The foregoing classification of irony into its many forms suggests the elasticity and range of irony. This paves the way for the further elasticity encountered when irony is examined in a certain writer. For, just as the pure white light of irony is refracted into several colorful forms, one or more of those forms are further refracted by the prism of a certain writer's work into further forms. Thus, in the poetry of John Donne, one might find several distinguishable forms of the irony of impropriety or of verbal irony, examples differing not only thus in kind, but in intensity or in seriousness or in object. As has been urged before, irony is as changeable, as malleable, as Protean as poetry itself.

6. Irony Evaluated.

The presence of irony affords a distinct intellectual pleasure to the keen-minded. It permits two meanings where only one is stated. In thus enlarging the powers of the mind, it feeds human pride and the result is intellectual pleasure. This is true as long as the perceiver of irony remains detached, for if he finds himself emotionally involved in the situation or finds that he is the object of

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the ironical statement, he is less likely to respond favorably. But as long as he can remain emotionally uninvolved, the subtle ambiguities of irony create a delight comparable to that of discovering something entirely new and heretofore unknown.

As an artistic device, irony can serve as both a means of exposition and communication of tone. In the statement, "The Christian city of Liverpool supported 2,900 prostitutes", there is not only the revelation of fact, but an indication of a writer's attitude. Such verbal economy is an indication of a writer's attitude. Such verbal economy is an indication of a writer's ability to invest his material with a significance which it does not have naturally. His use of irony has freed him from the necessity of adding the further observation, "Can such a city be called Christian"? Already his art of irony has implied both the question and its answer. The verbal economy in irony may be thought of as appealing purely to the intellect in that it allows the intellect to admire its own power over words and its ability to abstract meanings and implications from words which are seemingly barren.

In addition to this process, which takes place within the mind and is concerned with words, there is a further pleasure in contemplating the objective reality and the objective appearance to which the words refer. In the

preceding example the objective appearance ("Christian city of Liverpool") is compared with the implied objective reality (not-so-Christian Liverpool). G. G. Sedgewick describes the pleasure of contrasting appearance with reality as "one of the keenest and oldest and least transient pleasures of the reflective human mind".³⁵

For those to whom the inconsistencies of life present a maddening problem, the ironical attitude can, at least for the moment, offer an acceptable solution.

[I]rony tends to neutralize all passions and to turn all men into spectators of the human comedy. Up to a point, this is a useful function. Irony delights in the collision of opposites. When the mind is paralyzed by conflicting drives, irony offers a way of escaping from the conflict and rising above it. The reason is saved from the shattering effects of divergent commands and the mind preserves its equilibrium.³⁶

This kind of irony has been referred to as attitudinal irony, which is not found primarily in the work of the artist, but rather in his attitude toward the world. It is the kind of irony which Chevalier declares to be

the product of certain radical insufficiencies of character and a mode of escape from the fundamental problems and responsibilities of life.³⁷

35 Ibid., p. 5-6.

36 David Worcester, The Art of Satire, p. 141.

37 Haakon M. Chevalier, The Ironic Temper; Anatole France and His Time, p. 12.

It may enhance the work of art, but it diminishes the character of the man.

It should be emphasized that irony, as used in this sense, does not refer to an artistic device, but to a way of life. It is the abuse of irony as practiced by the man who finds all life ridiculous and absurd. Attitudinal irony, at its "most extravagant, convey[s] an impression of megalomania and frustration--of weakness, not of strength".³⁸ In this view of life, action loses all its value; only the unemotional, aloof, critical attitude has any importance.

P. J. Proudhon apotheosizes irony: it is a sweet, pure, chaste, and discreet goddess. He continues:

Irony, true liberty! it is thou who deliverest me from the ambition of power, from the servitude of parties, from the respect for routine, from the pedantry of science, from the admiration of great persons, from the mystifications of politics, from the fanaticism of reformers, from the superstition of this great universe, and from self-adoration. Thou revealest thyself long ago to the Sage on the throne when he cried in view of that world in which he figured as a demigod, Vanity of Vanities.³⁹

Viewed this way, irony is comparable only to a state of suspended animation. Thompson, who quotes the above passage, says that the true ironist would not agree with such lavish

³⁸ David Worcester, The Art of Satire, p. 144.

³⁹ P. J. Proudhon, Les Confessions d'un Revolutionnaire pour servir a l'histoire de la Revolution de Fevrier, quoted by Alan Thompson in The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, p. 251.

praise and would probably laugh at Proudhon's commendations.

Irony, as an attitude, is sometimes helpful in preserving sanity. For those who believe in a good God who created a good world, the presence of evil creates an enigma which cannot be solved directly. Irony enables one to rise above the question with a grim, half-sneering smile. The ironist escapes, saying, "Perhaps the difference between Good and Evil is only apparent. Or perhaps God Himself is in reality a principle of Evil as well as of Good. Or perhaps he is playing an immense practical joke on us all. But after all, what does it matter"? For the serious thinker who cannot approach the problem of good and evil in a direct manner, the escape provided by the ironical attitude, while not wholly reliable, is one alternative.

Irony is not necessarily the highest literary virtue, nor does it answer the major problems of literary criticism. The critic must be mindful that irony is not the alpha and omega of his trade, remembering Matthew Arnold's sobering observation that the scholar is prone to overrate his subject "in proportion to the trouble which it has cost him".⁴⁰ Like paradox in certain writers, irony may become an obsession.

⁴⁰ Quoted by Alan Thompson in The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, p. 247.

Irony has become a valuative term in modern criticism. The critic must beware that irony, while possible a desideratum in art, should not enter the fabric of his own output, which is intellectual rather than artistic. His observations are expected, and rightly so, to be clear, rational, unemotional; his judgments are expected to be explicable. Speaking of art, Jacques Barzun says that it

puts a premium on qualities of perception which are indeed of the mind, but which ultimately war against Intellect. The cant words of modern criticism suggest what these qualities are: ambiguity, sensibility, insight, imagination, sensitive, creative, irony. All these, in art, declare the undesirability, perhaps the impossibility, of articulate precision and thus defy, counteract, or degrade the chief virtue of Intellect.⁴¹

Although Barzun speaks of art, he implicitly warns the critic not to take refuge in suggesting that his judgments and perceptions are inexplicable. His criticism should employ only those terms which he can rather precisely define. The warning is perhaps even more pertinent for the critic who proposes to examine irony itself.

7. Satire and Irony.

Generally, one concept is elucidated when contrasted with a kindred subject. The nature of tragedy, for instance, becomes clearer when compared with the nature of comedy.

⁴¹ Jacques Barzun, The House of Intellect, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1959, p. 17.

Satire and paradox are terms that naturally come to mind when the subject of irony is discussed. An examination of these terms should sharpen the concept of irony.

David Worcester, in The Art of Satire, is more interested in discussing satire and irony as a means of enjoying literature rather than in distinguishing nicely between the two. In one place he speaks of irony as the highest expression of the satiric spirit;⁴² in another, he refers to "three of the most fascinating subjects in the world, irony, laughter, and satire".⁴³ In the first instance, he implies that irony is a species of satire; in the second, irony and satire are complementary, like tragedy and comedy. The arrangement of his book suggests that irony is a kind of satire: *The Proteus of Literature; Invective; Burlesque; Irony, the Ally of Comedy; Irony, the Ally of Tragedy; The Evolution of English Satire*. The book itself, while avoiding a precise statement of their relationship to each other, suggests that both irony and satire are the more or less refined offspring of a tremendous, primitive spirit.

The older meaning of satire is not pertinent here: satire as a particular rigid verse form after the manner of Horace or Juvenal. Rather, the present concern is with the

⁴² David Worcester, The Art of Satire, p. v.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 9.

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more modern use of the word, since it is that which is most akin to irony. Satire, as used here, is exemplified in Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels, Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock, Lord Byron's Don Juan, Evelyn Waugh's The Loved One, or Aldous Huxley's Brave New World. The various forms of satire might be considered here, such as farce, burlesque, and the take-off; but since the purpose of introducing satire into a study of irony is to examine the basic differences of the two, it seems unnecessary to examine also the accidental differences distinguishing the several forms of satire.

Several differences can be noted between irony and satire. The first, and least satisfactory, is that satire is the name of a certain type of work, whereas irony is not. Byron's Don Juan is referred to as a satire; Melville's Moby Dick, regardless of its dependence on irony for its effect, is not called an irony. The term, "an irony", while sometimes used to refer to a single passage or situation, is never used as the name of the type the work represents. Thus satire is the name of a type of literature; irony is not.

It will be recognized that this distinction, while valid, fails to specify the essential difference between irony and satire. Passing on from a rather superficial difference, we come to another element which might serve as a more substantial difference: the quality of humor. Both irony and satire are akin to humor. While not necessarily

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evoking laughter, they depend on humor for their method in that they, like humor itself, depend on incongruity. The difference between them lies in the quality of their humor. Generally, the humor of irony tends to be more quiet, more grim, more meditative than the humor of satire, which is usually more blatant, more laugh-provoking than irony. A. E. Housman's The Shropshire Lad was written by an ironist: it is grimly humorous, thoughtful. Byron's Don Juan, on the other hand, is outrageously humorous, at least occasionally. It might be said that satire emphasizes the ridiculousness of the situation, whereas irony aims at calling attention to the undesirability of the situation. Satire aims at producing laughter, then meditation; irony seeks primarily to induce meditation. Both are species of humor: the one, loud, external; the other, quiet, meditative.

The quality of humor can act as a fairly reliable touchstone in identifying irony and satire. It is, however, at best a subjective measuring rod. And, as long as it remains true that one man may find a work riotously funny while another finds it only mildly amusing, the quality of humor must be considered a fallible means of distinguishing between irony and satire. The essential difference between the two lies not in the quality of their humor, but rather in their method of operation: satire works by exaggeration; irony, by inversion. Thus Shakespeare, calling attention

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to the pedantry of multiple classification, has Polonius say,

The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible or poem unlimited.⁴⁴

A reasonable division of plays would include tragedy, comedy, history, and possibly pastoral. Plays which were combinations of the above would be implicit in the four main categories. Excessive enumeration is pedantry; Shakespeare satirizes such pedantry by the method of exaggeration.

Irony operates by inversion rather than by exaggeration. An ironical rejoinder to the above-mentioned speech of Polonius might run thus: "Surely my lord hath missed a few". The speaker would say that the catalogue was incomplete, yet he would mean to convey that it was excessively long; he invests his meaning rather than exaggerates it. Shakespeare, through the mouth of the unwitting Polonius, calls attention to the practice of over-enumeration; the ironist, the imaginary speaker in the instance above, also calls attention to the same practice. One, the satirist, uses a ridiculously long catalogue to achieve the effect; the other, the ironist, verbally inverts his thought to achieve the same effect. This seems to be the essential difference between irony and satire.

⁴⁴ William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II, Sc. II, ll. 415-419.

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8. Paradox and Irony.

Another artistic form akin to irony is paradox. Paradox springs from the same genius as irony, and indeed at first blush, the two seem almost identical. Both seem to be outside the normal pattern of speaking and thinking; both have a shocking quality about them. Yet there is a difference between the paradox of John Millington Synge's Playboy of the Western World and the irony of Job's reply to Eliphaz. In the former instance, the reader is faced with the very supportable view that men are sympathetically inclined toward those with evil reputations: the hero of Synge's play, an alleged parricide who at first is received with open arms, is repudiated when it is discovered that he did not actually murder his father. In the latter instance, Job's famous reply to Eliphaz, "No doubt ye are the people and wisdom shall die with you", spoken by a somewhat bitter Job to his would-be consolers. The first instance, Synge's play, is a paradox; the second, Job's comment, is irony. Synge's paradox, that men are sympathetic towards those with evil reputations, is accepted, though perhaps reluctantly, since men prefer to think that they are attracted by the good; Job's remark, on the other hand, is not accepted, at least literally, but interpreted to mean its opposite. Alan Reynolds Thompson pinpoints the difference very neatly when he says, "An irony says the expected and means its opposite,

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whereas a paradox says and means the opposite of the expected".⁴⁵

On the face of it, the relationship between irony and paradox is thus clearly defined. It happens, however, that the relationship is occasionally more involved. For instance, a statement which is paradoxical when it is first read in a poem may become ironical in the light of the subsequent development of the poem. A. E. Housman, in a poem from The Shropshire Lad, "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff", offers an example. Terence, the speaker in this dramatic dialogue, is a poet, who says, rather unexpectedly for a poet:

And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man.⁴⁶

The unexpected comment, however, after some reflection, is accepted as true. A poet is not expected to speak against poetry. But perhaps, the reader thinks, this poet has become cynical of the merits of his art and even that of Milton. The result is a paradox, which, according to Thompson's formula; says and means the opposite of the expected. But the poem continues, and Terence's thesis is thus expounded:

⁴⁵ Alan Reynolds Thompson, The Dry Mock; A Study of Irony in Drama, p. 117.

⁴⁶ A. E. Housman, "Terence, This is Stupid Stuff", The Pocketbook of Modern Verse, ed. Oscar Williams, New York, Pocketbooks Inc., 1954, p. 164.

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they survive who immunize themselves to evil by absorbing small doses of evil from time to time; my poetry shows you the evil side of life; therefore drink of it. Thus in the context of the total poem, the meaning of the passage,

And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to man,

becomes inverted. It literally asserts the impotence of poetry; in the context of the poem's thesis, however, it implies the opposite: poetry is powerful, for it immunizes its devotees against the miseries of life. The result is a paradoxical irony. In this way, the two opposed forms, irony and paradox, can be united. Ordinarily, the two remain distinct and are not found thus united; a poet who enjoys the devious interplay of logical operations, however, will make use of this possibility.

9. Summary.

Irony, like poetry itself, is so varied in its forms and its expression that a definition satisfying all instances is likely to be vague, unwieldy, or inexact. However, a study of many examples of irony on its several levels yields the following definition: one-ness comprehending a two-ness accompanied by a clash, the clash being the result of impropriety, unexpectedness, inappropriateness or some other quality equally capable of rendering the one-two combination unusual. The lack of conciseness in the definition

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is compensated by its accurate applicability to all forms of irony: verbal, dramatic, irony of impropriety, and attitudinal irony.

Verbal irony, irony in its simplest form, consists of a word or a statement which says one thing and means another. As a rule, the implied meaning of a verbally ironic statement is the opposite of its literal meaning. Unlike verbal irony, dramatic irony can occur in word or in action. According to Germaine Dempster, it consists in the contrast, unperceived by the character in a story, between the surface meaning of his words or deeds and something else in the story. It occurs in dramatic and narrative works rather than lyrical. The irony of impropriety, unrestricted as to the type of work it appears in, refers to events or to situations that are perceived to be incongruously improper, but improper in a markedly incongruous way.

The preceding three forms of irony are concerned primarily with the object: the word, the action, or the situation. Attitudinal irony, on the other hand, is concerned with the subject, the perceiver. Attitudinal irony is a habit of mind, a view of things, a veritable philosophy which makes of the subject a detached observer of the things around him. This kind of irony guards the observer against emotional involvement and committal.

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The last form, romantic irony, is least worthy of consideration. A dubious form of irony, it refers to the deliberate destruction of illusion in a novel or a play. It was employed chiefly by certain Germans of the Romantic period.

Irony offers a distinct intellectual to the keen-minded, in that it allows two meanings where only one is stated. The ability to see the difference between appearance and reality has been described as one of the most lasting pleasures. More objectively, irony has value in that it is artistically economical: it often communicates a fact as well as the attitude of the speaker. Irony can increase the value of a work, but caution should be employed in considering irony an absolute value. In modern criticism, its use as a valuative term is increasing; it should be remembered that irony for the sake of irony is a poor recommendation.

Irony can be clearly distinguished from satire. The quality of humor in the two is a valid, but fallible, means of comparing them. Irony produces a humor that is either quiet or meditative or grim; the humor of satire, on the other hand, is more often loud and blatant. To offset the subjective element in such a distinction, a further difference can be seen in their method of operation: satire operates by exaggeration; irony, by inversion.

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Paradox and irony, another pair of closely related tropes, are both outside the ordinary patterns of speech; both are somewhat shocking. A clear distinction, however, can be stated: irony says the expected and means the opposite, while paradox says and means the unexpected. Ordinarily, this distinction serves adequately; occasionally, because of very complex psychology, a poet will contrive to combine the paradox and irony in the same statement.

CHAPTER II

VERBAL IRONY

1. Introductory.

The preceding chapter was intended to suggest the great range of irony and to dissipate the vagueness that accompanies this great Proteus of literature. The result is a rather precise notion of irony which can serve as a tool to explore thoroughly at least one aspect of the poetry of John Donne. It is not necessary here to summarize the findings of the preceding chapter, but it would be well to emphasize two important points: the one-two clash and David Worcester's distinction between the world of the uninitiate and that of the select few.¹ In irony, there is always a one-ness comprehending a two-ness: the duality may be a double view, a double standard, a double meaning, or a double personality; the one-ness may be a single person, a single mind, a single word. In some way, the one-ness comprehends, or understands, or expresses the two-ness resulting in a certain clash brought on by incongruity or impropriety or unexpectedness. The clash is a necessary element of irony.

The second point, David Worcester's distinction between the two worlds, should also prove helpful in clarifying

¹ See above, p. 8.

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Donne's use of irony. Worcester believes that underlying every form of irony a group of two groups of people are implied: one group shares with the ironist a special knowledge and the other remains ignorant. While both groups are assumed to come into contact with the irony (that is, view the situation, read the poem, or however else the irony is communicated), only the first group understands it. The fact that the group of initiates are aware of the ignorance of the second group makes possible the irony. This distinction is useful in appreciating much of Donne's irony.

To anyone familiar with his Songs and Sonets, two terms immediately suggest themselves: paradox and cynicism. Before proceeding to the study of irony in the poems, it would be well to indicate that paradox and cynicism, although often associated in a loose way with irony, are nevertheless distinct from irony and consequently are not being studied here. Paradox, like irony, is a device of rhetoric, and again, like irony, is somewhat devious or indirect in its method. The difference, explained more thoroughly in the preceding chapter, can be thus briefly stated: a paradox says the unexpected and means it, irony says the expected and does not mean it. Donne makes use of both devices, but only irony is under examination here.

The distinction between cynicism and irony is perhaps more valuable, and at the same time more difficult to

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make; for, whereas irony and paradox are more often distinct and separate, irony and cynicism go hand in hand and are frequently found in the same poem, the same person, the same statement. Both reflect adverse, negative comments on a current situation and both reflect a bitterness, though this is more noticeable in the cynic and, in the ironist, can even become a gentle bitterness. The difference between the two lies in this: cynicism is an attitude and irony is a means of expressing an attitude. "Cynical" implies a disbelief in sincerity and rectitude; cynicism may be expressed in a forthright, direct way or by an inverted method of irony. One man may say, "No man can be trusted. Everyone is motivated by selfish impulses. All women are false". Another may express the same view in an ironical way: "I would trust any man with my money, my secrets, my wife. Surely men act in most cases out of a feeling of generosity towards their fellow men. The base stories we hear of false Cressidas and Delilahs are gross slanders". Both speakers are cynical; the last is also ironic, if the irony is established by the context.

The possible cynicism of Donne is not an issue here, but it is important to show that irony and cynicism differ. The following instance illustrates this. Gamaliel Bradford does not find John Donne a cynic. In a work which emphasizes the intensity and vitality of the poems, Bradford says

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...Donne had nothing of the cynic about him. The thing above all that makes him beautiful and lovable is his tenderness, which separates him absolutely from the mockery of Heine and still more from the savage invective or satirists like Marston...²

By his terms of comparison, Heine and Marston, Bradford makes a good case for Donne's tenderness. Other critics, emphasizing poems like "Goe, and catche a falling starre" and comparing poets such as Donne and Sidney, rather than Donne and Heine, could conceivably reach an opposite conclusion. The issue here, however, is not to determine the degree of Donne's cynicism but to show that cynicism and irony, though often found together, are separable.

The poem referred to above is a good example of a cynical, non-ironic poem. In substance, Donne says in this poem ("Goe, and catche a falling starre"), "It is more possible to catch a falling star than it is to find an honest woman. If such a woman would be found, she would be false to two or three men before I could visit her". The distrust of women, albeit expressed in an exaggerated way, is obvious. It is not, however, an ironical statement; for he says and means that women are dishonest. An ironist would work by the more indirect method of saying that women were honest, but would imply that this is the opposite of what he means.

² Gamaliel Bradford, A Naturalist of Souls, Studies in Psychography, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1926, p. 88.

The poem might be called satirical, by virtue of its exaggeration; but the absence of the inverted meaning, which is essential to irony, makes the poem merely cynical or satiric, but not ironic. Since the present study limits itself to irony, and since irony and cynicism are most often found together in the poems of Donne, it seems necessary to insist thus on the difference between the two.

The term irony is frequently used in a looser sense than indicated above. Leonard Unger, in Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism, frequently uses the terms witty, ironical, complexity of attitude in describing Donne's poetry. His use of the word irony is usually as strict as that proposed in this thesis. In discussing the poem, "Goe, and catche a falling starre", however, he seems to equate irony with wit. He does not appeal to the distinction between irony and cynicism, or between the method of irony and that of satire. He describes the first two stanzas of the poem as ironical.³ In the terms of the present study, the witty exaggerations of the first two stanzas are properly referred to as satire. Since the distinction is of some importance, an inclusion of the first two stanzas here is warranted.

³ Leonard Unger, Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1950, p. 38.

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Goe, and catche a falling starre,
 Get with child a mandrake roote,
 Tell me, where all past yeares are,
 Or who cleft the Divels foot,
 Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,
 Or to keep off envies stinging,
 And finde
 What winde
 Serves to advance an honest minde.

If thou beest borne to strange sights,
 Things invisible to see,
 Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
 Till age snow white haire on thee,
 Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell mee,
 And sweare
 No where
 Lives a woman true, and faire.⁴

The meaning of the poem is that true and fair women cannot be found anywhere, under any circumstances. The implication is that it is easier to perform the strange and impossible feats enumerated in lines 1-18 than to find an honest woman. Donne uses an unusual manner of speaking, a witty set of images, an exaggerated species of deeds. But he does not say one thing and mean another. This seems to rule out the possibility of irony. The attitude of the poem may be described as cynical and the method of expression satirical, but the inverted method of irony is not operative here.

⁴ John Donne, The Poems of John Donne, London, Oxford University Press, 1912, edited by Herbert J. C. Grierson, Vol. 1, Song, ll. 1-18, p. 8. All subsequent quotations of Donne's poems are taken from Volume 1 of Grierson's edition; reference will be made only to the title of the poem, the line and page number.

The cynical aspect, then, of Donne's poetry, is not a proper object of study here. Likewise paradox, as distinct from irony, is excluded. It has been noted that paradox, in a certain complicated form, can become a kind of irony. This occurs when a statement, considered in itself, is paradoxical, but which, when viewed in the total context of the poem, takes on a meaning opposite to that which it had in itself.⁵ This involved situation occurs but rarely. Insofar as it is irony, it will be considered; paradox as paradox, however, is excluded.

In addition to these exceptions, two further are noted: for the sake of convenience they are referred to as textural irony and historical irony.

By textural irony is meant that unexpected combination of harshness and beauty or of jagged and smooth rhythms or of thought and feeling in a single poem. Many critics have referred to this phenomenon in Donne's work, although they have not designated it as textural irony. Thus, Sir Herbert J. C. Grierson, whose edition of the poems is accepted and respected by all Donne scholars, notes that the "distinctive note of 'metaphysical' poetry is the blend of passionate feeling and paradoxical ratiocination".⁶ T. S.

⁵ For a fuller explanation, see above, p. 42.

⁶ H. J. C. Grierson, "The Metaphysical Poets", The Background of English Literature, London, Chatto and Windus, 1925, p. 118.

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Eliot, in a work which has become the spiritual parent of many another work on the metaphysicals, takes cognizance of the element of disparity in Donne, although he emphasizes Donne's "unification of sensibility":

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.⁷

Grierson and Eliot are talking about the same thing: a blend of disparate elements, a union of "opposites", the "one-ness" of a poem comprehending the "two-ness" of experience. This has a certain effect on the texture of the poem and it could be argued that the effect so produced comes about by a species of irony, since style and content are organically linked.

Gamaliel Bradford, ignoring the particular blend of thought and feeling noted by Eliot and Grierson, finds another blend of opposing forces which may also be called textural irony. Donne, he says,

⁷ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Penguin Books, Ltd., 1953, edited by John Hayward, "The Metaphysical Poets", p. 117.

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blends beauty and grace with his harshest rhythms, with the subtlest refinements of his thoughts. This is supreme excellence, the merit that makes one overlook all his faults, if it does not outweigh them.⁸

Nearly all of Donne's critics refer to Donne's habit of "mar-ring" the texture of his poems by the infusion of opposing elements. Most critics respond favorably; J. E. V. Crofts offers a dissenting opinion. Speaking of the unorthodox quality of sound in Donne, Crofts has this to say:

His poems often begin with a noble resonance, but it is seldom maintained beyond a few lines and nearly always degenerates before the end into an ugly cross-hatching of verbal noises. In some cases this is of course deliberate:

Good we must love and must hate ill;
For ill is ill and good good still.

Plug-ugly verse of this kind is evidently intended to jolt the ear.⁹

Crofts' obvious disapproval is not important here. Donne's "noble resonance" degenerating into "ugly cross-hatching of verbal noises", however, is a species of textural irony and, as such, is an example of what is being discussed here.

A study of the textural irony as it occurs in various poems could no doubt be profitably embarked upon. Other

⁸ Gamaliel Bradford, A Naturalist of Souls, Studies in Psychography, p. 90.

⁹ J. E. V. Crofts, "John Donne" in Essays and Studies by members of the English Association, collected by Helen Darbshire, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1937, Vol. XXII, p. 137.

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critics, however, have commented on this aspect of Donne's poems sufficiently, although they have not referred to it as textural irony. For this reason, a systematic investigation of this species of irony is thus bypassed in favor of those which have not received adequate critical attention.

A second species of irony not to be analyzed in the Songs & Sonets is historical irony, or, if the term were not so cumbersome, historical-linguistic. It is an accidental irony, wholly unintended by the author, coming about because of certain linguistic changes and because of certain historical developments. Doniphan Louthan, in a recent study of the poetry of Donne, calls attention to the strange way that history has influenced the reading of Elegie XVI, Of his Mistris. The passage in question reads

Men of France, changeable Camelions,
Spittles of diseases, shops of fashions¹⁰

"Spittles of diseases" originally referred to hospitals, which in Donne's time were quite filthy. The passage, then, for Donne, had a connotation of dirtiness and unsavoriness. Today, we no longer connect "spittle" with "hospital"; if we did, the effect of the line would be lost, for today, "hospital" connotes spotless disinfection, germfree cleanliness. However, in a curiously ironical way, the line still connotes today what it did in the time of Donne, in spite of

10 Elegie XVI, Of his Mistris, ll. 33-34, p. 112.

the changed condition of hospitals; for "spittle" suggests dirty, ill-kempt sidewalks, thus preserving the original connotation of the passage. In this roundabout way, in spite of the historical change in hospitals ("spittles"), the essential flavor of the line is retained. "Ironical", at least the popular sense of the word, is the epithet most descriptive of the curious way in which the passage has weathered the vicissitudes of history and language.¹¹

Interesting and valid as this type of irony may be, it is nevertheless an irony that is external to the poem.. It is an irony, too, that depends on a rather special kind of knowledge in the seventeenth century use of words. The present study aims at presenting Donne to a twentieth century audience, an audience presumably more interested in Donne's attitudes and his expression thereof than in the comparatively arcane matter of seventeenth century vocabulary and medical practices. Consequently, irony arising from historical events subsequent to Donne's writing does not seem proper in a study which is concerned with the internal ironies of Donne's poetry.

The exclusion of historical irony and textural irony, of paradox and cynicism may seem to leave only the shell of

¹¹ Doniphan Louthan, The Poetry of John Donne, New York, Bookman Associates, 1951, p. 34.

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Donne's poetry. A great amount of material, however, yet remains to be explored.

The problem of organizing the analysis of the poetry into intelligible units was not one that suggested an immediate answer. It was rendered more difficult that the object of Donne's irony is fairly well restricted to one item: faithlessness in love, thus ruling out any convenient division of his irony on the basis of the object of his irony. It seemed best to organize the analysis under the following headings, based on the mode of irony in the poems:

1. Verbal Irony
2. Structural Irony
3. Attitudinal Irony

Verbal irony refers to those words or phrases which are rather obviously ironical in themselves. Structural irony refers either to phrases that become ironical in the context of the whole poem or to poems which themselves are built on a basic irony. Attitudinal refers to that detachment from life, irony carried to its ultimate conclusion.

The secular lyrics studied in this chapter are somewhat arbitrarily limited to the Songs and Sonets and the Elegies.

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2. Verbal Irony.

Verbal irony is the simplest, most understood, and most frequently used form of irony. It occurs when the intended meaning of a word or phrase is the opposite of the literal, or stated, meaning. The term refers especially to those ironical words and phrases which are evidently ironic in their immediate context; the reader, as soon as he comes into contact with the word or phrase, recognizes it as ironic.

Even in the use of this simple device, there are degrees of complexity. As an aid to understanding verbal irony, the several examples have been arranged in the order of their increasing complexity. Or, as William Empson says in his difficult study of ambiguity, "to arrange them [the ambiguities] in order of increasing distance from simple statement and logical exposition".¹² Ambiguity is not exactly synonymous with irony, but they are similar in that both are forms of non-logical statements. Proceeding from the simple to the complex, as Empson does in regard to ambiguity, seems a logical, reasonable method in analyzing irony, which, like ambiguity is not eminently logical.

¹² William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Norfolk, Conn., New Directions Books, 1930, p. 7.

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An example of the simplest form of irony is found in The Apparition.

When by thy scorne, O murdresse, I am dead,
 And that thou thinkst thee free
 From all sollicitation from mee,
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
 And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse armes shall see;¹³

"Fain'd vestall", an allusion to the Vestal Virgins of Roman antiquity, is ironic; in view of the context, the reference to the woman's virginity cannot be understood seriously.

"Fain'd vestall", then, is an ironic dig. But the phrase does not come to rest with this reading, for ^{if} "fain'd" derives from "fain", it means "glad", "willing", "reluctantly willing", "eager"; if it derives from "feign" it means "fictitious", "pretended", "sham". Both meanings, when coupled with "vestall [virgin]", are uncomplimentary and ironic: both "willing virgin" and "pretended virgin". "Willing virgin" is the more ironic since the whole phrase is literally complimentary and implicitly uncomplimentary; "sham virgin", on the other hand, is only half ironic, since the "sham" is not ironic, saying and meaning, as it does, only one thing. The phrase is ironic, however, no matter which derivation of "fain'd" is accepted.

Another example of the single ironic phrase is found in Womans constancy:

¹³ The Apparition, ll. 1-5, p. 47.

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Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
 Tomorrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?¹⁴

The "whole" of "one whole day" seems to suggest a great period of time; it implies a tested worthiness and fidelity of the mistress. When coupled with "day", however, the rather bitter joke of the poet is evident. What seemed to be praise now has a sour taste. The ironical effect is achieved by fusing the attitudes (seeming praise and sneering irritation) into the economy of a single phrase. If Donne had said, more straightforwardly, "I know we haven't known each other for long, but what are your plans for tomorrow"? he would have lost the effect of the introduction which sets the stage for the further ironies of the poem. For the whole poem is ironical; the poem is an attack on woman's inconstancy which belies its demure title.¹⁵

Often the verbal irony is extended beyond the single phrase to a whole series of ironical remarks. Thus Elegie XVII, Donne begins:

The heavens rejoyce in motion, why should I
 Abjure my so much lov'd variety,
 And not with many youth and love divide?¹⁶

14 Womans constancy, ll. 1-2, p. 9.

15 The more complicated ironies of this poem will be taken up at a more appropriate place.

16 Elegie XVII, Variety, ll. 1-3, p. 113.

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The poem continues, drawing examples from history and nature, in the same vein of extolling diversified love:

How happy were our Syres in ancient times,
 Who held plurality of loves no crime!

 Women were then no sooner asked then won,
 And what they did was honest and well done.¹⁷

Throughout seventy-odd lines, almost every couplet praises the "antient liberty" of unrestrained love. The poem is an excellent example of Donne's use of the single ironic phrase extended over many lines through examples and repetition.

The poem ends with the assertion that, as one ages, love will be directed to a single individual. Constancy in love is advocated, not because of respect to the principles of true love, but because of the wisdom of "firmer age".

What time in years and judgement we repos'd,
 Shall not so easily be to change dispos'd,
 Nor to the art of severall eyes obeying;
 But beauty with true worth securely weighing,
 Which being found assembled in some one,
 Wee'l love her ever, and love her alone.¹⁸

The conclusion of the elegy, in its quiet assertion of the claims of single love, does not invalidate the irony of the first seventy-odd lines. Rather, it emphasizes the irony by making clear that the poet must have been joking previously in his praise of multiple love.

¹⁷ Ibid., ll. 38-39, 44-45, p. 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., ll. 78-83, p. 115-116.

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Donne uses the same kind of extended verbal irony in Elegie III. Several comparisons are drawn between women and the arts, women and animals, and women and rivers.

Women are like the Arts, forc'd unto none,
Open to'all searchers, unpriz'd, if unknowne.

.....
Foxes and goats; all beasts change when they please,
Shall women, more hot, wily, wild then these,
Be bound to one man,?

.....
Though Danuby into the sea must flow,
The sea receives the Rhene, Volga, and Po.¹⁹

Donne develops the present elegy in much the same way as Elegie XVII. He does not, however, conclude with a favorable statement on true love. On the contrary, change is extolled as the "nursery of musicke, joy, life, and eternity". Thus, it might be argued that the poem is not ironic at all, but a serious commendation of amatory experimentation. Since this interpretation, however, does not adequately account for the fact that the poem thus read runs counter to the basic assumption in all love poetry, the ironic reading seems preferable.

The irony of the preceding poem, as in many others, depends on the voluntary, inexcusable fickleness of women. Donne pretends to argue for the naturalness of the inconsistency and change which he finds in women; on the non-literal level of irony, he is attacking women for their

¹⁹ Elegie III, Change, ll. 5-6, 11-13, 19-20, p. 82-83.

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inconsistency. But there is another view: the vicissitudes of love are but part of the general picture of instability in nature. This is the view advanced by W. J. Courthope, in his History of English Poetry, who says, of Donne:

To him love, in its infinite variety and inconsistency, represented the principle of perpetual flux in Nature. At the same time, his imagination was stimulated by the multitude of paradoxes and metaphors which were suggested to him by the varying aspects of the passion. He pushed to extremes the scholastic analysis and conventional symbolism of the Provencals; but he applied them within the sphere of the vulgar bourgeois intrigue...²⁰

Although Courthope speaks of "passion", he obviously does not think of Donne as being in the throes of passion, but rather as a calm metaphysician viewing the eternal flux of the universe and applying it, still as the calm metaphysician, to the inconsistency of love. In this view, the fickleness of women would be, inferentially, not especially voluntary nor inexcusable. Donne's Elegie III, then, which equates the promiscuity of beasts with that of women, is a seriously argued poem: women have a right to be fickle since all Nature is so. The view taken in this study assumes that Donne was a metaphysician, but not a dispassionate one; that he viewed women as not irresponsibly fickle. As a corollary, any poem which supports the inconstancy of women

20 W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1903, Vol. 3, p. 154.

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must be interpreted as ironic.

Elegie III, then, is here interpreted as having been written against that universal backdrop of all love poetry: faithfulness in love is desirable. The poem, then, consists of a string of ironical remarks.

Another poem, The Relique employs a less pervasive use of verbal irony. In this poem, Donne speaks somewhat generally of his love as it might be viewed when his grave is invaded to inter a second corpse. Although there are references to relics and miracles, the kind of love implied is not a purely Platonic relationship, since there is in the poem a suggested similarity between a bed and a grave as well as a mention of a loving couple lying together. The love, probably connubial, is perfectly innocuous and there is no hint of the libertinism or cynicism reflected in other poems of Donne, so that there is no need for Donne to be apologetic about his love, even though it is sexual. That it is sexual can be inferred from several passages: "(For graves have learn'd that woman-head/ To be more then one a Bed)"; "...there a loving couple lies"; "then/ Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I/ A something else thereby".²¹ Yet towards the end of the poem, Donne makes this startling and incredible announcement:

21 The Relique, ll. 3-4, 8, 16-17, p. 62.

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Differēnce of sex no more wee knew,
 Then our Guardian Angells doe;
 Comming and going, wee
 Perchance might kisse, but not between those meales;
 Our hands ne'r toucht the seales,
 Which nature, injur'd by late law, sets free:²²

The reader comes up with a start at these lines. "Whom are you trying to kid"? might be an honest response of the serious reader. It is precisely the same effect as that of catching a man running away with a sack of meal on his back and having him answer your accusation with: "What sack"? It is similar to the wife in Bloy's novel who was surprised with her lover flagrante delicto: "Will you believe your eyes", she replied to her accusing husband, "or what I tell you"? The analogies here presented are exaggerated, but the effects produced are somewhat similar.

Grierson suggests that the woman in The Relique is Mrs. Herbert, in which case the interpretation offered above would not stand up.²³ Grierson's comment is arrived at from evidence external to the poem and hence, respecting the scope of this paper, is not especially pertinent. For the ordinary critical reader, the view based on the ludicrous effect of the ironic twist is at least possible, if not definitely established.

22 Ibid., ll. 25-30, p. 63.

23 John Donne, The Poems of John Donne, Vol. 2, p. 49.

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The delightful irony towards the end of The Relique is matched in The Extasie. It was argued above that the kind of love referred to in the first part of The Relique is probably sexual love; the love in The Extasie, on the other hand, is definitely Platonic. The irony at the end of the latter poem is consequently more startling. In this poem, Donne rhapsodises on the Platonic joys of two embodied souls who have found a most satisfying, purely spiritual communion. A eulogizing analysis of this most happy state continues for about seventy lines. Then comes the return of the souls to their respective bodies, so that, as Donne says, "Weake men on love reveal'd may looke"; although Donne hereby places himself outside the category of weak men, the rest of the poem indicates that he too is one of the weak. He intends, of course, that his remark will give the lie to his explicit admiration of Platonic love.

Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,
 But yet the body is his booke.
 And if some lover, such as wee,
 Have heard this dialogue of one,
 Let him still marke us, he shall see
 Small change, when we'are to bodies gone.²⁴

With this, the poem becomes an elaborate joke. "Platonic love is desirable, uplifting, satisfying", Donne says for seventy lines; "but", in a much shorter punch line, "let's be practical". This change in the evaluation of love is not

24 The Extasie, ll. 72-77, p. 53.

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blatantly, obviously, or directly stated; it is rather communicated by ironic understatement: "he shall see/ Small change, when we're to bodies gone". Gransden, in his John Donne, points out the ironical note at the end of the poem, showing that it works to the poem's advantage in maintaining the ideal quality of love alongside its less ideal aspect.²⁵ He does not look upon the poem as a joke, as suggested above. Whatever view of the poem is taken, it is certain that the verbal irony of the "small change" plays a large role in its final interpretation.

Edward Dowden, a late nineteenth century commentator on Donne, notes the shift in the kind of love discussed in the poem, but explains it in terms of human nature.

But why should not hand meet hand and lip touch lip? There is an ascent and a descent in this complex nature of ours; the blood rarifies into the animal spirits, [..] and in like manner the soul must descend into the affections and the lower faculties.²⁶

The irony of the "small change" is completely overlooked. Rather, Dowden seeks to explain the poem by excusing Donne for being human.

The interpretation of the tone of The Extasie is a point on which many critics disagree. J. B. Leishman, who

25 K. W. Gransden, John Donne, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1954, p. 75.

26 Edward Dowden, "The Poetry of John Donne" in New Studies in Literature, Boston, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1895, p. 114.

cannot be accused of not admitting the difference between Donne's "serious" poems and his "light" ones, does not agree with Professor Legouis that the poem is "a kind of solemn and elaborate joke, a dramatic lyric in which Donne has chosen to represent himself as a hypocritically philosophical Don Juan".²⁷ Elsewhere in his sometimes penetrating work, Leishman chides other critics who take the "outrageous poems too seriously and the more serious poems too lightly";²⁸ his admission of "outrageous" poems in Donne's canon makes it difficult to understand his view of The Extasie as

the most analytic, conceptual, and, in a sense, philosophic of Donne's love-poems: his most elaborate attempt to describe that something that was neither merely visible beauty nor merely 'vertue of the minde', which he had declared in Negative Love that he was searching for, and which he had now found.²⁹

Leishman does not offer a complete analysis of the poem; the difficulty presented by "small change" is not taken into account.

The view of the poem taken by this study, namely, as an elaborate joke is supported by K. Gustav Cross in a short but persuasive article, "'Balm' in Donne and Shakespeare". Noting that a sweaty palm in Donne's time prognosticated

27 J. B. Leishman, The Monarch of Wit, New York, Hutchinson's University Library, 1951, p. 220, n. 1.

28 Ibid., p. 175.

29 Ibid., p. 220.

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lust, Cross argues that "balm", occurring as early as line six in the poem, is a euphemism for "sweat".³⁰ Thus, the lines,

Our hands were firmly cimented
With a fast balme, which thence did spring,³¹

foretell the non-Platonic direction the poem takes towards its conclusion. "Balm" on a literal level has an innocuous, even pleasant tone; as verbal irony, it damages, if not demolishes, the ethereal Platonism which the poem advances on a literal level.

The verbal irony in The Extasie might be called playful: no one is hurt by Donne's sly suggestion that sexual love is necessary. In other poems, however, Donne uses irony as a weapon intended to wound. The Prohibition, which advises the lover neither to love nor to hate the poet, offers this reason for not hating:

Take heed of hating mee,
Or too much triumph in the Victorie.
Not that I shall be mine owne officer,
And hate with hate againe retaliate;
But thou wilt lose the stile of conquerour,
If I, thy conquest, perish by thy hate.³²

30 K. Gustav Cross, "'Balm' in Donne and Shakespeare: Ironic Intention in The Extasie", Modern Language Notes, Vol. 71, p. 481.

31 The Extasie, ll. 5-6, p. 51.

32 The Prohibition, ll. 9-14, p. 67.

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"Don't hate me", the poet says, "not because you fear I will retaliate, but because you will thereby destroy me, consequently sacrificing the glory of conquest".

On a literal level, the poet is solicitous for his lover's sense of vanity: he is unwilling that she be denied any of her triumph. On the implicit level, the level of irony, however, the statement is a caustic dig at her potential change of affection. It is not uncharacteristic of Donne to be thus sarcastic in assessing the role of the female.

The object of Donne's irony is most frequently the lack of female stability in love, as in The Prohibition. Occasionally, however, Donne turns to other subjects, as he does in The Canonization. This poem is, of course, like others of Donne in its subject of love, but the verbal irony in the poem is directed against something other than love. In The Canonization, the poet argues that, since no one is hurt by his loving, he should be allowed to continue without being annoyed. "Who is injured by my love"? he asks. "It does not affect business; neither has it added one more name to the plaguey bill". So far, the argument is mere playful sophistry. However, the next arguments seem to be an ironic comment on the quarrelsome disposition in humans. Continuing his list of persons not adversely affected by his loving, Donne says,

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Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.³³

The irony is not pronounced. It comes so unexpectedly that it is almost missed. The careful reader learns to expect wry comments about women, but he can easily fail to notice the remark about so unwonted a target as the irrational inclination of men to quarrel. Had Donne exaggerated his case, the irony would have been more obvious: "No one is injured by my love. Business goes on as usual: murder, prostitution, thievery". Donne is more subtle than this, but the object and quality of the irony is approximately the same. Along with the normal, ordinary, pleasant aspects of everyday life, he lists wars and litigation, as if to include these among the normal, the ordinary, and the pleasant. The attentive reader, even if he be a professional soldier or a lawyer, will note that the lovers non-interference with litigation and war is not something one boasts of. "Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still/ Litigious men" can only be looked upon as an ironical comment on the depravity of those who instigate wars and litigation.

No discussion of Donne's use of verbal irony would be complete without an analysis of The Indifferent, whose irony is more characteristic of Donne than the verbal irony

33 The Canonization, ll. 16-18, p. 14.

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of The Canonization. Almost every line betrays a caustic remark directed against untrue women, a remark based on the inverted method of irony. In the poem, Donne repudiates women who are true in love. He can love any woman as long as she is not true. Faithfulness is a vice, those who practice true love are heretics in the matter of love, variety is the sweetest part of love, constancy is dangerous. Speaking of truth in love, the poet asks

Will no other vice content you?
 Will it not serve your turn to do, as did your mothers?
 Or have you all old vices spent, and now would finde
 out others?

.
Venus heard me sigh this song,
 And by Loves sweetest Part, Variety, she swore,
 She heard not this till now; and that it should be so
 no more.
 She went, examin'd, and return'd ere long,
 And said, alas, Some two or three
 Poore Heretiques in love there bee,
 Which thinke to stablish dangerous constancie.³⁴

The poem is shot through with brilliant inversions of the accepted values of love. It is not too sweeping a statement to say that without the irony the poem would cease to be a poem, but only the expression of a deep rooted cynicism.

While the irony in The Indifferent is incontestable, that of Farewell to Love isn't susceptible of so undisputed an interpretation. The poem professes to be a veritable, bona-fide farewell to love: an act repeated a number of

34 The Indifferent, ll. 10-12, 19-25, p. 12-13.

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times loses its thrill; love-making has a depressing after-effect; it also diminishes life. Therefore, since love is so damaging, it is given up. It is possible thus to read the poem as meaning what it says. It is also possible to read the poem as a fine, unaccented bit of irony.

But, from late faire
 His highnesse sitting in a golden Chaire,
 Is not lesse cared for after three dayes
 By children, then the thing which lovers so
 Blindly admire, and with such worship wooe;
 Being had, enjoying it decays:³⁵

"After three days, children grow tired of even a magnificent spectacle. No less do lovers grow tired of love-making. After experiencing it, they no longer find pleasure in it". These lines, very soberly enunciated, could have been intended to deceive a portion of readers. And, to recall the distinction made earlier between the world of the elite and the world of the uninitiated, the opposite meaning of the lines could have been intended for the world of the elite: "you who are experienced know that I am not speaking in earnest, that making love only increases the appetite for further experience".

Thus too, with Donne's conclusion:

Since so, my minde
 Shall not desire what no man else can finde,
 I'll no more dote and runne
 To pursue things which had indammag'd me.³⁶

35 Farewell to Love, ll. 11-16, p. 70.

36 Ibid., ll. 31-34, p. 71.

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Like the passage above, Donne's conclusion can be read with tongue in cheek. It is possible that the lines were written in the same hypocritical vein as that of Don Juan in Moliere's Le Festin de Pierre. Don Juan, claiming a conversion, promises his father that, since he now sees the error of his ways, he will give up forever his licentious mode of life. It is of course a sham conversion.

The tone of the poem, it is true, does not support an ironic reading. An appeal to the use of irony in other poems together with their rakish promiscuity would urge an ironic reading of Farewell to Love. However, if the poem is to be judged individually, the ironic reading cannot be insisted upon. Indeed, if the concept of happiness is looked upon ironically, as Doniphan Louthan suggests,³⁷ the tongue-in-cheek reading is less plausible. That is, if happiness is viewed by Donne as encompassing post-coitus depression; if happiness truly diminishes life; then perhaps it is really not worth the candle. Louthan would then interpret the poem as straightforward and serious, a poem based on an inverted notion of happiness.

Whatever reading is accepted, the poem is difficult. Within it occur, to quote John Hayward, one of Donne's twentieth century editors, "the most unintelligible [lines]

³⁷ Doniphan Louthan, The Poetry of John Donne, p. 158.

in the whole canon of Donne's poetry".³⁸ The lines referred to are the last three of the following stanza:

Ah cannot wee,
 As well as Cocks and Lyons jocund be,
 After such pleasures? Unlesse wise
 Nature decreed (since each such Act, they say,
 Diminisheth the length of life a day)
 This, as shée would man should despise
 The sport;
 Because that other curse of being short,
 And onely for a minute made to be,
 <Eagers desire> to raise posterity.³⁹

"Unlike the other animals, we cannot be happy after intercourse. Nature decreed this so that we would despise the sport, since it diminishes life by a day". Even though a modern might quarrel with the Renaissance notion of the diminution of life caused by intercourse, he would find the argument thus far at least logical. The following lines, however, do not seem to fit: "Because the brevity of intercourse eagers, (that is, increases) the desire to raise posterity". Of all motives to raise up posterity, brevity of intercourse is the least likely to persuade anyone.

It may be that irony provides the clue to the puzzling lines. The general tone of the poem is serious; nothing would indicate that Donne's Farewell to Love is anything but an honest repudiation of love. Nothing, that is, except

³⁸ John Donne, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose, edited by John Hayward, New York, Random House, Inc., 1930, p. 766.

³⁹ Farewell to Love, ll. 21-30, p. 71.

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the outrageous illogicality of

Because that other curse of being short,
And onely for a minute made to be,
(Eagers desire) to raise posterity.

It is not unlikely that Donne wrote the seemingly-ill-advised lines to serve as a key to the irony of the rest of the poem. Donne's predilection for irony can be substantiated by other poems; the irony ranges from gentle to abusive, from subtle to blatant. Farewell to Love, it can be argued, offers a subtle, almost hidden irony for which there is no clue except the obvious nonsense of the lines just quoted. Thus Donne's assertion in the poem that the enjoyment of love-making decays and that he will no more "dote and runne/ To pursue things which had indammag'd" him can be understood as ironic.

The verbal irony of Farewell to Love is difficult to arrive at. As has been seen from previous examples in other poems, Donne's irony is most often more accessible. It is usually more obvious and needs less proof. As is also apparent from previous examples, Donne's verbal irony ranges in tone from the bitter, as in The Indifferent to the playful, as in The Extasie. Although the target of his irony is usually love in one of its many aspects (Platonic love, woman's infidelity), he occasionally extends the irony to other fields, as in The Canonization, in which he comments on men's perverse inclination to seek out quarrels. Verbal irony, of whatever quality or tone, contributes to the

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make-up of a good number of his poems.

While it may be disputable whether some of the poems analyzed above are ironic, it would be readily admitted that, granted an ironic interpretation, certain lines and phrases of the poems are recognized as verbal irony. This is not true, however, in all forms of verbal irony. One dubious form stands apart: the pun, the ironical nature of which is not so clearly seen. That certain words are intended as puns will be admitted, but that these words are ironic is another matter. It seems necessary, then, to offer a defense of the pun as irony.

While the pun does not always afford the emotional eclat usually ascribed to other forms of irony, it is nevertheless true that the pun is a one-two situation; it is one word with two meanings. That it is mildly humorous by no means detracts from its being ironical; for in every form of irony there is humor. Ironical humor is most usually grim, or cynical, or grisly, but it is nevertheless humorous. The pun, in itself, does not carry overtones of this type of humor; rather it is less serious and usually more objective. The one-two situation and the humor of the pun seem to support its ironical nature.

One more notion needs to be added, that of deception. Properly speaking, only the pun which intends to deceive a portion of its audience can be called ironic. Juvenile

riddles usually are built on puns not calculated to deceive, at least to deceive past the point of hearing. Thus the riddle, "What's black and white and red all over? A newspaper", depends on the double meaning of "red". The speaker endeavors to deceive to the extent of hiding the verbal meaning by strongly suggesting the color meaning. He does this, of course, by putting "red" in close proximity to "white" and "black". Up to the time that the answer to the riddle is given, there is deceit. After that time, when all become aware of the double meaning of "red" the irony of the riddle is no longer operative. However, as long as it is conceivable that some may continue to be in ignorance or be deceived, irony, in a very mild form, may be said to operate.

William Empson, in his Seven Types of Ambiguity, is helpful at this point.

If a pun is quite obvious it would not ordinarily be called ambiguous, because there is no room for puzzling. But if an irony is calculated to deceive a section of its readers I think it would ordinarily be called ambiguous, even by a critic who has never doubted its meaning.⁴⁰

Empson here is concerned with defining "ambiguity" rather than "pun". But his notion that the deception of a portion of readers influences the quality of the word is pertinent in the present analysis. In the poetry of Donne, it is often possible to assume that not all readers are aware of the

⁴⁰ William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, p. x.

ambiguity of a certain word. The two kinds of readers bring to mind the distinction between the world of the elite and the world of the uninitiate, another characteristic of irony. As long as it is conceivable that some will be deceived, it seems reasonable to identify the pun as a type of verbal irony, even as Empson says, "by a critic who has never doubted its meaning".

Donne is not an inveterate punster like James Joyce. His use of the device is very limited. His most important use of the pun centers around one word: die. In Middle English, the word meant, in addition to its modern meaning, sexual climax. That Donne utilizes the double meaning is obvious in some poems. Thus, in The Prohibition, Donne pleads with his mistress neither to love him nor to hate him, lest he thereby perish. As the poem progresses, the attitude changes: love me and hate me.

Love mee, that I may die the gentler way;
Hate mee because thy love is too great for mee;⁴¹

The comparative form, "gentler", implies another term of comparison; the more usual meaning of "die" is used earlier in the poem. In this instance, the sexual meaning, determined by "gentler way" is the primary meaning; the soberer meaning of the word hovers about the line, but is kept in abeyance by "gentler". In other instances, the more ordinary

⁴¹ The Prohibition, ll. 19-20, p. 67.

meaning of the word prevails, as in The Computation. In this short lyric, the poet exaggerates the degree to which he misses the loved one by various hyperboles concerning time: "twenty yeares", "forty more", "a thousand more", etc. The poem ends:

Yet call not this long life; But thinke that I
Am, by being dead, Immortall; Can ghosts die?⁴²

"Die" in the last phrase, in proximity to "Immortall" primarily means "to end life". However, the overtones of its other meaning still influence the reading of the line so that "Can ghosts die"? becomes a sly injection of the more sensual aspect of love in a poem which is predominantly a serious, if exaggerated, account of the poet's sense of time in his Love's absence. The pun adds to the complexity of the sentiment.

The Computation ends with a rakish pun which has an enlivening, unsoftening effect on a sweet, serious lyric. Similarly, The Damp concludes with a pun which helps to transform a rather lugubrious, scornful poem into one that approaches debonair hedonism. The poem might be paraphrased thus: "An autopsy performed on me will show that you killed me. Your picture, found in my heart, will have a chilling, even killing effect on those performing the autopsy. If you wanted to be brave and chalk up some real victories, you

⁴² The Computation, ll. 9-10, p. 69.

would give up your disdain, your honor, and your other arts".

The poem concludes:

For I could muster up as well as you
 My Gyants, and my Witches too,
 Which are vast Constancy, and Secretnesse,
 But these I neyther looke for, nor professe;
 Kill mee as Woman, let mee die
 As a meere man; doe you but try
 Your passive valor, and you shall finde than,
 In that you'have odds enough of any man.⁴³

"Allow me to love you. Submit, in a passive way, to my demands and you will thereby overcome me". Such a reading is possible if "let me die/ As a meere man" is admitted as a pun and a key to the tonal change from scornful to flippant.

Donne's punning does not characteristically serve to signal a change in tone. More often than not, it enriches the poem by developing the original idea. A passage from The Canonization is a case in point. Even if the poem is not looked upon as a strict dramatic monologue, the sophisticated argument of lines 23-27 become more (intentionally) absurd with the pun.

The Phoenix ridle hath more wit
 By us, we two being one, are it.
 So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,
 Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
 Mysterious by this love.⁴⁴

The phoenix, a legendary bird who rises anew from his own ashes is mirrored in the two lovers who "dye and rise the

43 The Dampe, ll. 17-24, p. 64.

44 The Canonization, ll. 23-27, p. 15.

same". Joseph Duncan, in The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry, contends that The Canonization is one of the best examples of Donne's dramatic monologues. In it, "the speaker justifies the religion of love to an unamorous layman who cannot really understand".⁴⁵ In this view, the irony of the pun is intensified since the world of the uninitiate (the unamorous layman) and the elite (the poet and his reader) is established to the point that the reader comprehends and enjoys the imaginary unamorous layman's ignorance. The layman, the reader might assume, is deceived by the phoenix argument; the reader understands that the poet is having a joke at the expense of the layman by the pun, "Wee dye and rise the same". If the poem is interpreted as a dramatic monologue, the pun here becomes a vehicle for dramatic irony, a type not found in purely lyric poetry.

In the several poems considered above, the role of the pun has been defined as influencing the reading of a particular passage, as in The Canonization, or to indicate a change in the tone of the poem, as in The Computation and The Damppe. In analyzing another poem, A Valediction: forbidding mourning, Allen Tate finds that the pun is operative in the total structure of the poem. The poem attempts, very

⁴⁵ Joseph E. Duncan, The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1949, p. 57.

successfully, to show that a higher, spiritual love transcends the limits of space, that such a love thrives on physical separation. Although the word "die" is never used in the poem, the pun is concealed in various euphemistic images: "passe away", "The breath goes now", etc.

As virtuous men passe mildly away,
And whisper to their soules, to goe,
Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,
The breath goes now, and some say, no:

So let us melt, and make no noise,
No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
T'were prophanation of our joyes
To tell the layetie our love.⁴⁶

The elaborate simile here asserts on several planes the analogy between the act of love and the moment of death. But if you happen to know that in Middle English and down through the sixteenth century the verb die has as a secondary meaning, "to perform the act of love," you are able to extend the analogy into a new frame of reference. The analogy contains a concealed pun. But we are detecting the pun not in order to show that a man in the late sixteenth century was still aware of the early, secondary meaning of die; we are simply using this piece of information to extend our knowledge of what happens in the first eight lines of the poem. It is of no interest to anybody that Donne knew how to make this pun; it is of capital interest to know what the pun does to the meaning of the poem.⁴⁷

Two items are important here: first, that Tate considers a pun possible even though the double-meaning word is not used; second, that a pun can affect the meaning of the whole poem.

⁴⁶ A Valediction: forbidding mourning, ll. 1-8, p. 49-50.

⁴⁷ Allen Tate, On the Limits of Poetry, New York, The Swallow Press, 1948, p. 122.

Tate considers the poem eminently worthy of comment, for he expands, in a later work, his notion of what "the pun does to the meaning of the poem".

The structure of the poem, at the level of trope, turns on the pun to die: orgasmic ecstasy as the literal analogue to spiritual ecstasy; physical union as the analogue to spiritual. Between these extremes of inert analogy we find the moral, or tropological movement of the poem, the central action--the passage in actualized experience from the lower to the higher. But without this egregious pun, the whole range of the pun, at that: its witty, anecdotal, even obscene implications: without it the poem would not move; for the pun is its mover, its propeller, its efficient cause.⁴⁸

This is high praise for the lowly pun. Tate's assessment of the role of pun in A Valediction: forbidding mourning may seem exaggerated, but a reading that is conscious of the concealed pun reveals that, if the analogy between spiritual and physical is allowed to carry through, the two are not disparate, separate elements, but aspects of the same thing. Tate does not find it necessary to explain in detail the workings of the analogous pun. It would seem to operate thus: In the mild manner that virtuous men die, so let us make love (die); they are comparable on several points. If the pun is kept in mind throughout the reading of the poem, the poet's experience of passing from the lower to the higher love is more convincing than without the pun.

⁴⁸ Allen Tate, "The Point of Dying: Donne's 'Virtuous Men'", Sewanee Review, Vol. 61, p. 79-80.

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A Valediction: forbidding mourning is one of Donne's best poems and his use of the pun therein is probably his most important, and certainly his most complicated use of the pun. In other poems, most often the pun colors a phrase or passage without affecting greatly the larger elements of the poem. Donne's poems are not built on puns, (with the possible exception of A Valediction: forbidding mourning), nor can the pun be said to characterize his verse. However, the pun is important in the various poems in which it appears. Much of the rakish, flippant, shock value of the poem would be lost without an adequate understanding of the pun.

It should be remembered that the pun is properly considered ironical only when it is possible to conceive that a portion of the readership is deceived by the double-meaning word. It is not necessary to identify the benighted readers. It is not even necessary to stipulate that they actually exist. But the potential division between the elite and the uninitiate should hover about the pun in order that its irony be operative. This distinction plus the double meaning of the pun insures its being properly considered verbal irony.

Verbal irony of any kind has the effect of protecting the poet from sentimentality. More sophisticated than ordinary modes of expression, it is thus insured against the ordinary excesses of sentiment. As a corollary to its sophistication, irony presupposes a certain amount of

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objectivity: A man who is too close to his subject finds irony impossible. A man who is very much involved in his love or in his hate can say only "I love you" or "I hate you" in a number of variations. What he says is dictated by the passionate, irrational element in him. Irony in a poem is an indication that a certain emotional distance separates the poet from the theme, or subject, of his poem, rendering the passionate, irrational element subservient to the governing principles of conscious art. While scorn, for instance, is the dominant passion in a poem like The Apparition, it was not the primary motivating factor.

When by thy scorne, O murdresse, I am dead,
 And that thou thinkst thee free
 From all solicitation from mee,
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
 And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse armes shall see;⁴⁹

The irony of "fain'd vestall" indicates an emotional distance between the poet and the object of his scorn; for, had he not been able to separate himself from his scorn, only a more direct word like "harlot" would have been possible. Detachment, or emotional distance, is a property of irony which makes possible a more artistic composition, for art demands a certain amount of dispassionate, rational, governing power in the choice and arrangement of its materials. However, let it be noted that the detachment that irony provides does

49 The Apparition, ll. 1-5, p. 47.

not insure an artistic work; it only makes it more possible.

Properly speaking, the emotional distance discussed above is not an effect of irony; it is rather a concomitant property of irony. The irony of "Fain'd vestall" is merely a signal to the reader that it is the poet who is in charge of writing this particular poem, not his emotion of scorn.

While the emotional distance is not an effect of irony, the closeness of the poet and reader is, properly speaking, an effect of irony. The reader and the poet are drawn together particularly in those poems which might be thought of as dramatic monologues; in a less definite way, however, the effect is noticeable in other poems as well. "A conspiracy of the candid", a phrase which has been referred to satire,⁵⁰ might also be referred to irony. Reader and poet are in league against the uninitiate, the obtuse, the unsophisticated, the romantic. The ironic poet invites his reader to be undeceived, worldly, knowing, skeptical; in a word, to be a member of the elite who know love in all its aspects.

The Canonization, a poem which very easily may be considered a dramatic monologue, is a case in point. The first line, "For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love",

⁵⁰ Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, Introduction to Desiderius Erasmus' The Praise of Folly, translated from the Latin, with an essay and commentary by Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, Princeton, N. J., Princeton University Press, 1941, p. xiii.

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indicates that the poem is addressed to a second person, a person who, it may be inferred from the remainder of the poem, is deceived by the false analogy between saints and lovers drawn by the ironic poet. The whole poem has this effect, but since verbal irony is being considered here, it is proper to investigate that aspect of the poem. The pun on die in The Canonization has already been treated:

Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love⁵¹

The speaker and the reader realize that the lovers are not really like the Phoenix, as the speaker argued earlier in the poem, but rather that they die in a sense not grasped by the unidentified second person (the "you" of "For Godsake hold your tongue"). The double meaning of die, not understood by the unamorous layman, acts as a wink, performed by the speaker inviting the reader to enjoy a private joke at the expense of the unamorous layman. The wink establishes a bond of fellowship between poet and reader. Furthermore, the fellowship is increased to the degree that the unidentified audience is excluded. The exclusion, of course, depends on the ease or difficulty of positing the benighted audience. The more easily such an audience can be imagined, the stronger

51 The Canonization, ll. 26-28, p. 15.

the sense of communion between reader and poet.

In Farewell to Love, a poem which does not as readily admit of being a dramatic monologue as The Canonization, nevertheless is found a verbal irony effective in the same way as that of the latter poem, though perhaps not to the same degree. If the Farewell to Love is read as a hypocritical, simulated repudiation of love, irony is very likely and consequently, the bond between poet and (enlightened) reader is established.

But, from late faire
His highnesse sitting in a golden Chaire,
If not lesse cared for after three dayes
By children, then the thing which lovers so
Blindly admire, and with such worship woee;
Being had, enjoying it decayes:

.
Since so, my minde
Shall not desire what no man else can finde,
I'll no more dote and runne
To pursue things which had indammag'd me.⁵²

If the poem is "a cynical discussion of sexual love" written in a "carefree mood",⁵³ irony in the poem is problematical. Granted their irony, however, they bring about a rapport between ironical poet and the enlightened reader. Their knowledge that others reading the poem will be deceived into believing that Farewell to Love is what it claims to be. Special, almost secret, knowledge such as this, forms the

⁵² Farewell to Love, ll. 11-16, 31-34, p. 70, 71.

⁵³ Katherine T. Emerson, "Two Problems in Donne's Farewell to Love", Modern Language Notes, Vol. 72, p. 93-95.

basis for an implicit brotherhood.

The reader's election to an elite creates an appeal to his intellectual superiority. His pleasure in finding that he can respond to the poet's inverted, indirect statements is the measure of his own subtlety. In this way, which is somewhat extrinsic to the poem, irony contributes to making the poem what it is.

3. Summary.

The basic notion of verbal irony, that is, a statement which says one thing and means another, is extended to embrace a larger literary idiom: one-ness comprehending or containing or expressing two-ness in a way that is unorthodox, improper, or incongruous. In accordance with the development of modern criticism, the operation of irony is not restricted to the word or phrase, but is amplified to describe a larger structural unit and even an attitude.

Because of the great incidence of both irony and cynicism in Donne, the two need to be distinguished. Cynicism is an attitude expressing the most unfavorable attitudes towards mankind. It imputes base motives universally and trusts no one. It may or may not be expressed by irony: it may use the inverted method of saying one thing and meaning another, and it may also express itself in a more forthright declamation. If Donne's irony is quite often a vehicle

of his cynicism, especially in his assessment of women, it is also put to other uses. Donne's cynicism, then, as such, is not an object of study here.

Similarly, what may be called textural irony is also bypassed. By textural irony is meant the juxtaposition or concurrence of opposites: rarified thought and passionate feeling; jarring rhythms and sweet sentiments. The startling effects created by such unwonted yokings have, since the time of Samuel Johnson, been amply described and accounted for by other critics. Likewise, historical-linguistic irony is not taken into account. This is an exclusively external form of irony resulting from the unforeseen changes in the meanings of words or any other historical phenomenological change. While it is true that these ironies enrich the reading of many of the poems for the twentieth century reader, they do not belong, in a formal way to the poem itself.

In an effort to avoid an unmanageable proliferation of classifications, Donne's uses of irony have been divided into three major areas: verbal, structural, and attitudinal. Verbal irony, the most readily appreciated, is found in words or phrases which say one thing and mean another. Structural irony is that which, in a large measure, determines the make-up of the poem. Attitudinal irony, quite different from the other forms, reveals an inclination of the speaker to detach himself from the affairs of men and to view them as if from afar.

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Donne's use of verbal irony ranges from the very obvious to the very doubtful. The "fain'd vestall" of The Apparition can hardly be mistaken for anything but an ironic meaning. His farewell to love, however, in another poem, is not so obviously ironical: does he intend to be understood seriously when he says, "I'll no more dote and runne/ To pursue things which had indammag'd me"? A case has been made for the ironical interpretation of the lines. Most often, the ironical word or phrase lasts only for the duration of the line; occasionally, it echoes in other parts of the poem. In addition to verbal irony strictly so called, the pun is also considered as an application of this form of irony. Donne's use of the pun is virtually restricted to the word "die", but he uses it extensively, and, in at least one poem (A Valediction: forbidding mourning), very powerfully. Although verbal irony is not to be found in all of the poems, it may be said to be characteristic of the secular poems: they would be essentially different without the irony. Donne would be forced to express his cynicism in more direct, probably harsher, and certainly less subtle, ways.

CHAPTER III

STRUCTURAL IRONY

Verbal irony can easily be localized. A passage or phrase can be pointed out and described as verbal irony. When the whole poem is an ironic statement, however, or when the impact of the irony derives from the poem as a whole, it is not possible to single out one passage as being ironical. When a strong ironical tone is found in a poem in which no phrase or statement adequately accounts for the irony, some larger concept must be invoked to explain what happens in the poem. It sometimes happens that a poem containing several verbal ironies is built around a major irony, often suggested in the title, to the total effect of which the individual verbal ironies contribute their individual forces. The term structural irony is intended to cover such cases.

An example will clarify the meaning of the term.

The Token is an eighteen-line poem of which the poet spends sixteen urging what not to do, the remaining two lines being left to convey the positive message.

Send me some token, that my hope may live,
Or that my easelesse thoughts may sleep and rest;
Send me some honey to make sweet my hive,
That in my passion I may hope the best.¹

1) Sonnet. The Token, ll. 1-4, p. 72.

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After this introduction, a development of "token" and "honey" might be expected. The expectation is fulfilled, albeit in a negative way:

I beg noe ribbond wrought with thine owne hands,
 To knit our loves in the fantastickstraine
 Of new-toucht youth; nor Ring to shew the stands
 Of our affection, that as that's round and plaine,
 So should our loves meet in simplicity;
 No, nor the Coralls which thy wrist infold,
 Lac'd up together in congruity,
 To shew our thoughts should rest in the same hold;
 No, nor thy picture, though most gracious,
 And most desir'd, because best like the best;
 Nor witty Lines, which are most copious,
 Within the Writings which thou hast adrest.

These negative lines make up the bulk of the poem. It should be noted that the several tokens mentioned, (ribbond, Ring, Coralls, picture, witty Lines) are not spoken of derogatorily. They are not rejected because they misrepresent the love, nor because they are superficial symbols of the love. No reason is advanced why the tokens are unacceptable. In fact, the poet's explanation of their symbolic value is based on a favorable attitude towards love and towards the symbols; it is an explanation devoid of cynicism, flippancy, or bitterness. But for some (unstated) reason, the poet advised against them, concluding the poem with:

Send me nor this, nor that, t'increase my store,
 But swear thou thinkst I love thee, and no more.

Surely if the mistress's protest that she thinks the poet loves her is so important, it deserves at least the same sympathetic treatment in the poem as the rejected tokens.

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It is difficult to maintain that, unless some pervasive irony were operative here, her belief in his love can be dismissed thus summarily in a final couplet, while the professedly unimportant part of the poet's message occupies sixteen lines. The case would be greatly altered had the poet assigned uncomplimentary interpretations to the several tokens, but each of them is spoken of favorably. Hence the problem.

The positing of an irony underlying the total structure of the poem would be an aid in interpretation, if the poem is reduced to a statement: "Send me a sign of your favor, not the usual, very fine, much desired, truly symbolic emblems; only say you think I love you". If this statement, (by compression, the total poem) is understood ironically, the negative protest of the "very fine, much desired, truly symbolic" can be explained: the poet really wants the conventional symbols of love; he is only afraid of being thought too superficial if he demands them in a more straightforward manner. Obviously, he protests too much in the sixteen lines; if the total poem is thought of as an ironic statement, the excessive protestation is explained.

The irony in this poem is gentle, one might almost say bashful. It is far from the irony of The Indifferent, which almost approaches invective, or The Extasie, which is flippantly sly. It operates, however, in the usual inverted method of irony.

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The Token contains no appreciable verbal irony, unless each of the negative injunctions is considered individually; the irony lies in its poetic statement. Obviously, a poem need not be "free" of verbal irony to qualify for structural irony. The Canonization, a poem rich in verbal irony, is also ironic in a larger way. Joseph Duncan's view, previously referred to is helpful on this point: The Canonization is a dramatic monologue "in which the speaker justifies the religion of love to an unamorous layman who cannot really understand".² Once the imaginary layman is posited, the poem becomes an ironic pretense. The poem is too long to quote, but its stanzaic structure may be reduced thus:

- I. You could find better ways to spend your time than by chiding me.
- II. No one is injured by my love, neither merchandise, land, lives, soldiers, lawyers.
- III. We lovers become immortal by love.
- IV. We are made saints by love.
- V. You may invoke us in heaven.

Donne enumerates the "better ways" in stanza I; they are even less profitable than scolding Donne (chiding his grey hair, contemplating the king's face, etc.) Stanza II is an elaborate non sequitur: granted that his love does not injure the items mentioned, the important moral and psychological

² Joseph E. Duncan, The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1949, p. 57.

issues are completely ignored. The non-seriousness of stanzas III and IV is underlined by puns on die. The last line "Beg from above/ A patterne of your love!" is a final signal to the reader, if not to Duncan's "unamorous layman", that the whole poem is designed to obfuscate the issue of love by false logic, irrelevant arguments, and inverted reasoning. The verbal ironies, discussed previously,³ are inadequate to explain the larger ironical effect of the poem. Rather than only an occasional ironic passage, the entire skeleton of the poem is influenced by a species of irony.

A Valediction: of weeping is similarly, though more subtly and more richly, directed by an encompassing irony. K. W. Gransden speaks of the various ways in which Donne assesses the role in love: sometimes it is less subtle and sad, sometimes more brutal and cynical, sometimes rakish. "Sometimes", he continues,

as in Of weeping, it is the intellectual who is speaking, and beneath the jesting irony lies the psychological statement which saves Donne's best metaphysical poems from being merely conceit...⁴

Gransden's evaluation of the (unidentified) jesting irony is not pertinent here, but his noting of the presence of irony in a poem which, at first blush, seems to have no irony is

³ See above p. 83; 89.

⁴ K. W. Gransden, John Donne, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1954, p. 69.

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important. Similarly, J. E. V. Crofts alludes to an element of the poem, which, though not irony, is not entirely unrelated. He quotes part of the final stanza,

O more than moon,
 Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere;
 Weep me not dead in thine arms, but forbear
 To teach the sea what it may do too soon.⁵

and follows up with this comment, "In such a passage one seems to detect the same principle of opposition that governs the technique of his verse". Crofts does not expound the opposition which he finds in the verse. And, while the nature of the opposition is not clear, it is unwise, without further evidence, to deny it. It is more to the present purpose to agree tentatively and to note that opposition (of meaning) and irony are related terms.

One further difficulty with the irony in this poem must be noted before proceeding to its solution. K. W. Gransden makes a point which will be more readily accepted if the poem is fresh in mind.

5. J. E. V. Crofts, "John Donne" in Essays and Studies by members of the English Association, collected by Helen Darbshire, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1937, Vol. XXII, p. 143.

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Let me powre forth
 My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here,
 For thy face coines them, and thy stampe they beare,
 And by this Mintage they are something worth,
 For thus they bee
 Pregnant of thee;
 Fruits of much grieffe they are, emblemes of more,
 When a teare falls, that thou falst which it bore,
 So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore.

On a round ball
 A workeman that hath copies by, can lay
 An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,
 And quickly make that, which was nothing, All,
 So doth each teare,
 Which thee doth weare,
 A globe, yea world by that impression grow,
 Till thy teares mixt with mine doe overflow
 This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven
 dissolved so.

O more then Moone,
 Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy spheare,
 Weepe me not dead, in thine armes, but forbear
 To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone;
 Let not the winde
 Example finde,
 To doe me more harme, then it purposeth;
 Since thou and I sigh one anothers breath,
 Who e'r sighes most, is cruellest, and hasts and
 others death.⁶

Gransden's comment is directed primarily to the second stanza.

This verse is highly ingenious and very difficult: the poet's tears stand for the world, made out of nothings (empty globes of water) by her image, while her tears, achieving only the ironically-meant physical comparison to a flood, promptly drown that world when she, too, weeps.⁷

6 A Valediction: of weeping, p. 38-39.

7 K. W. Gransden, John Donne, p. 66-67..

Why is the comparison of her tears to a flood meant ironically? Or, to return to a passage cited from J. E. V. Crofts, wherein does the opposition in stanza three lie? If the poem is in some way conceived as based on a structural irony, the answers to these questions become more possible. The interpretation of this poem, which seems to be a straightforward, seriously-intended lover's lament occasioned by impending separation, lies in the direction of structural irony. Although William Empson does not use the term, his explication of the poem makes use of the construct.

A Valediction, of weeping weeps for two reasons, which may not at first sight seem very different; because their love when they are together, which they must lose, is so valuable, and because they are "nothing" when they are apart. There is none of the Platonic pretence Donne keeps up elsewhere, that their love is independent of being together; he can find no satisfaction in his hopelessness but to make as much of the actual situation of parting as possible, and the language of the poem is shot through with the suspicion which for once he is too delicate or too preoccupied to state unambiguously; that when he is gone she will be unfaithful to him.⁸

If the poem is shot through with suspicion, stated ambiguously, it is possible to view the difficulties raised by the passages from Gransden and Crofts as tenuous instances of that very suspicion.

⁸ William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Norfolk, Conn., New Directions Books, 1930, p. 139.

In the more familiar phraseology of this study, the ironic statement of the poem is that the tearful departure is thus tearful because of a love solidly based on an unswerving trust. The inverted truth of the irony is that the poet is doubtful of the lady's faith. The doubt is not stated so sharply as in Womans constancy or The Indifferent nor is its irony so stated unmistakably as in The Canonization, but it is not easy to deny its presence.⁹ Gransden supports the "suspicions" of Empson by saying that the poet forbids the lady to express "emotions which he feels are as false and destructive as the elements". Concluding his remarks on the poem, he says very convincingly, "The amount of irony in this poem is the amount required to enable the reader to swallow it".¹⁰

The gentleness of the irony in A Valediction: of weeping is the antithesis of that found in The Dissolution. If the poet refrains from referring to his mistress's forthcoming defection bitterly in the Valediction, he is eager to do so in The Dissolution.

⁹ Doniphan Louthan takes issue with Empson's reading of the poem. The poem is not ironic, Louthan contends, but sincerely-meant and "Petrarchan".

Doniphan Louthan, The Poetry of John Donne, New York, Bookman Associates, 1951, p. 187.

¹⁰ K. W. Gransden, John Donne, p. 67.

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Shee'is dead: And all which die
 To their first Elements resolve;
 And wee were mutuall Elements to us,
 And made of one another.
 My body then doth hers involve, 5
 And those things whereof I consist, hereby
 In me abundant grow, and burdenous,
 And nourish not, but smother.
 My fire of Passion, sighes of ayre,
 Water of teares, and earthly sad despaire, 10
 Which my materialls bee,
 But neere worne out by loves securitie,
 Shee, to my losse, doth by her death repaire,
 And I might live long wretched so
 But that my fire doth with my fuell grow. 15
 Now as those Active Kings
 Whose foraine conquest treasure brings,
 Receive more, and spend more, and soonest breake:
 This (which I am amaz'd that I can speake)
 This death, hath with my store 20
 My use encreas'd.
 And so my soule more earnestly releas'd,
 Will outstrip hers; As bullets flowen before
 A latter bullet may o'rtake, the powder being more.¹¹

If the poem is taken as a Petrarchan lament on the death of the loved one, the boasting tone of lines 20-24 is out of place. It is not likely that the poet's increased prowess in love-making should be attributed to her death unless there is some reason. Nor is it likely that the poet presents himself, vulture-like, in lines 5-8, as glutting himself on her remains. And, again, if the "loss" in line 13, that is, the restoring of my passion is to be understood literally, the triumphant tone bespeaking the results of that restoration (lines 20-24) are unintelligible.

11 The Dissolution, p. 64-65.

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A straight reading of the poem can be approximated thus: "It is really unfortunate that she is dead, for she has thereby increased my potential in the field of love-making. My forcefulness in love is, strange to say, actually increased by her death". A macabre, ghoulish poem would result from such a reading, a reading which is none the less warranted by the literal meaning of the lines.

Structural irony makes possible another, more palatable reading. "Her death is actually a blessing to me. (Or alternatively, her jilting me is a blessing.) I have consequently found a great deal more freedom and variety in my escapades". The poem thus becomes an ironic retaliation for her previous infidelities; thus, the poet gleefully says, my soul will "outstrip hers". The "outstrip" has significance only if her prior defection is granted.

Thus the presence of irony provides a satisfactory interpretation of the poem. It obviates the ghoulishness suggested earlier; it explains how the restoration of passion can be thought of as a loss (line 13); it explains the indelicate crowing over the death of the mistress (lines 20-23).

The irony of some of the poems is more obvious and needs less support than in The Dissolution. Confined Love is a fable-like projection of the origin of the laws of love. Conceivably some readers might be taken in by The Dissolution;

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it is unlikely that any reader take seriously the argument for diversity in love in Confined Love. "Some man unworthy to be possessor/ Of old or new love", Donne begins, decreed that a strict one to one relationship obtain in love. But is this reasonable, Donne asks?

Are Sunne, Moone, or Starres by law forbidden,
To smile where they list, or lend away their light?
Are birds divorc'd, or are they chidden
If they leave their mate, or lie broad a night?
Beasts doe no joyntures lose
Though they new lovers choose,
But we are made worse than those.

Who e'r rigg'd faire ship to lie in harbors,
And not to seeke new lands, or not to deale withall?
Or built faire houses, set trees, and arbors,
Only to lock up, or else to let them fall?
Good is not good, unlesse
A thousand it possesse,
But doth wast with greedinesse.¹²

There is no verbal irony in the poem; yet the presence of some kind of irony is obvious. Donne says and means: the sun and moon are not forbidden to smile where they list, birds are not upbraided when they stay abroad at night, ships are made to seek new lands. No case for verbal irony can be made here since, taken individually, the statements say one thing and mean that one same thing. Even the last statement, based on the dictum that good is diffusive of itself, is intended literally. What is ironic about the poem is the application of Donne's arguments. He implicitly, though

¹² Confined Love, ll. 8-21, p. 36.

never directly, draws an analogy between the world of sun and moon, birds, ships, on the one hand, and the love of men and women, on the other. The same law, he suggests, should apply to both spheres. This implicit analogy gives the poem its meaning, its direction; it is never stated, but informs the true framework of the poem. If the unstated analogy is intended seriously, there is of course no structural irony. The principal argument for the irony is the unlikelihood of the poet's tantamount equation of laws governing love and laws governing the movements of celestial bodies.

The irony of Confined Love turns on a rather complicated sophisticated analogy, complicated, at least when compared with Elegie XIII, subtitled Iulia. The thirty-two line poem is a mass of colorful and imaginative invective. The offending mistress is a "she Chymera, that hath eyes of fire"; she is

Tongued like the night-crow, whose ill boding cries
Give out for nothing but new injuries,
Her breath like to the juice in Tenarus
That blasts the springs,...¹³

Her hands, her heart, her mind are separately dissected and found full of noxious elements. A more complete denigration of character is not to be found in Donne. The poem is modified with an ironical understatement,

13 Elegie XIII, Iulia, ll. 17-20, p. 105.

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...Would to God she were
 But halfe so loath to act vice, as to heare
 My milde reproofe. ...

Although the passage is ironic on a verbal level, it operates virtually throughout the poem. It colors each of the directly stated barbs, none of which can be thought of as a "milde reproofe". If it is a scathing denunciation, that is one thing; if, on the other hand, it is presented and referred to as a "milde reproofe", it is irony. The poem is an example of a verbal irony effectively inverting the composition as a whole.

The irony in Elegie II, subtitled The Anagram operates in a similar manner; the tone, however, is amusing, as contrasted with the denunciatory tone of the previous poem. The poem begins with an innocent-sounding statement that, in the subsequent development of the poem, becomes ironic:

Marry, and love thy Flavia, for, shee
 Hath all things, whereby others beautious bee,

She has all the earmarks of beauty, it seems, but they are all misplaced. The ironist, in line after line, damns with faint praise.

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If red and white and each good quality
 Be in thy wench, ne'r aske where it doth lye.
 In buying things perfum'd, we aske; if there
 Be muske and amber in it, but not where.
 Though all her parts be not in th'usuall place,
 She'hath yet an Anagram of a good face.

.....
 Women are all like Angels; the faire be
 Like those which fell to worse, but such as shee,
 Like to good Angels, nothing can impaire:
 'Tis lesse grieffe to be foule, then to'have been faire.¹⁴

The verbal irony of the first couplet,

Marry, and love thy Flavia, for, shee
 Hath all things, whereby others beautious bee,

is developed by showing that each of her virtues (read vices),
 whether physical or moral, is laudable (read abhorrent).

The result of the poem is a laugh at the expense of the un-
 fortunate Flavia. The amusement comes about because of the
 contrast between the professed intent (the praise of Flavia)
 and the actual result, (the damning of Flavia), which was of
 course intended from the beginning.

The irony is developed more systemetically than in
 the preceding Elegie, in which the "milde reproof" is allowed
 to hover about the individual reproaches. In Elegie II, the
 poet is careful to see that his original ironic statement is
 shown to be true (that is, false) in a detailed list of
 Flavia's parts, each entry of which list is expounded in the
 same manner: damning with faint praise. The irony of course
 lies in this device of employing the apparently favorable to

¹⁴ Elegie II, The Anagram, ll. 11-16, 29-32, p. 81.

bring about the really unfavorable.

Donne's use of irony is not always as patent as in the preceding instances. Loves Usury, a poem which makes little sense without appealing some kind of irony, poses questions as to the nature and operation of the kind of irony it apparently contains. Donne invokes the god of love to spare him in his youth, so that he may devote himself to the more diversified pursuits of lust. Later on when he is old, he will repay the usurious god of love twentyfold. The poem could be looked upon as a serious, if rakish, affirmation of lust as opposed to love were it not for the difficulty created by the concluding lines:

Doe thy will then, then subject and degree,
And fruit of love, Love I submit to thee,
Spare mee till then, I'll beare it, though she bee
One that loves mee.¹⁵

While it is understandable that a dissipated rake asks to be spared from the demands of true love, it is not clear why he needs to bear such a blessing. Ordinarily, favors sought and granted are gratefully received and are not thought of as burdens to be borne. Whence, then, the need to bear what he has earnestly sought?

Perhaps the answer lies in irony. "I'll beare it" is spoken by the lover who yearns for faithful, constant, true love. The phrase is a rent in the cloak of sexual

¹⁵ Loves Usury, ll. 21-24, p. 14.

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promiscuity that the poet affects; it is a slip, probably intentional, in the pose that the speaker pretends. If this is so, "I'll beare it" is the key to the ironical cast of the whole poem. On a literal level, the poem is a paean of praise for license, an argument for lust against love. "I'll beare it" gives the lie to the poem, making it an ironic protest against promiscuity and infidelity. "True love has no place in the world of youth; it is tolerable in old age" is the protective pose of the lover who, for fear of appearing sentimental and unsophisticated, finds it impossible to make the more direct statement: "It is regrettable that the weakness of human nature makes true love out of reach for young bloods".

Doniphan Louthan, in a useful comment on Loves Usury, does not find any great difficulty in the poem. It is just what it pretends to be, a pagan affirmation of promiscuous lust. Louthan does not offer a complete analysis of the poem; he does not find it necessary to explain the "I'll beare it", that is, the need to bear something eagerly sought. His brief analysis of the poem centers around the pun on "houre" in the first line: "For every houre that thou wilt spare mee now,/ I will allow,/ Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee".

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Hour and whore undoubtedly homonyms in Donne's time (there was more than one pronunciation of whore). The speaker of "Loves Usury" is seeking, not only time (every hour he can be spared), but opportunity (every whore available); at an advanced age he will have little use for either hours or whores.¹⁶

The hour-whore pun provides a good reading of the poem as a piece of rakish sensuality. It does not, however, take into account the curious logic of "Spare mee till then, I'll beare it". The view of the poem as irony masking a conventional attitude towards true love seems to answer more of the difficulties than does the pun in the first line.

Once the concept of a disillusioned lover who still finds value in the ideal principles of love is granted, the mask of irony can be seen operating in a number of poems. The fashionable lover-about-town, impudent, sensual, flip-pant, adopts a cynical front that is half pose and half faith in a pure Petrarchan love. Thus Communitie, a poem which literally asserts that women are to be neither loved nor hated, can be read as an ironic lament that all women are not lovable. As in other poems, Donne presents a formal argument for his case.

16 Doniphan Louthan, The Poetry of John Donne, p. 24.

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Good wee must love, and must hate ill,
 For ill is ill, and good good still,
 But there are things indifferent,
 Which wee may neither hate, nor love,
 But one, and then another prove,
 As wee shall finde our fancy bent.

If then at first wise Nature had
 Made women either good or bad,
 Then some wee might hate, and some chuse,
 But since shee did them so create,
 That we may neither love, nor hate,
 Onely this rests, All, all may use.

If they were good it would be seene,
 Good is as visible as greene,
 And to all eyes it selfe betrayes:
 If they were bad, they could not last,
 Bad doth it selfe, and others wast,
 So, they deserve nor blame, nor praise.

But they are ours as fruits are ours,
 He that but tasts, he that devours,
 And he that leaves all, doth as well:
 Chang'd loves are but chang'd forts of meat,
 And when hee hath the kernell eate,
 Who doth not fling away the shell?¹⁷

The proposition that women to be neither hated nor loved, to be neither blamed nor praised is so opposed to common sense and common experience that it is not unreasonable to read such an argument as ironic. Cleanth Brooks, though not speaking particularly of Communitie, formulates a general rule which is helpful in reading Donne: "Logic, as Donne uses it, is nearly always an ironic logic to state the claims of an idea or attitude which we have agreed, with

17 Communitie, p. 32-33.

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our every day logic, is false". Confined Love, Loves Usury are but two of many examples of this; Communitie is noteworthy because of the formal syllogistic logic employed in the service of irony. Stanza I states the case that all things are divided into good, bad, and indifferent; Stanza II explains how indifferent things are to be treated; Stanza III, the most formally logical of all, proves in a well-drawn disjunctive syllogism, that women are indifferent; Stanza IV explains how such a conclusion is applicable in love.

The contention that women are neither good nor bad, if taken seriously, is monstrous. Their goodness or badness, their blameworthiness and their praiseworthiness depend on their humanity; they are properties of human nature. To deny the properties is tantamount to denying the nature. It is not reasonable here to read the poet as excluding women from the human race. Rather, this literal meaning should be read as an ironical statement having an opposite meaning. That opposite meaning may be: 1) Some women are good and some are bad, would that they were all good; or 2) Almost all women are bad, would that the distribution proportion between good and bad were more even.

Common sense urges an ironic interpretation. There may be a further clue that the poem is not to be taken at

18 Cleanth Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, Cornwall, N. Y., Cornwall Press, 1947, p. 193.

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its literal meaning in the first two lines. The first is not objectionable, although perhaps too obvious: "Good wee must love, and must hate ill"; the reason given for this moral injunction is, at least, tautological: "For ill is ill, and good good still". Surely such an argument cannot be advanced with any hope of convincing. To say that ill is ill is, to be sure, incontestable, to the extent that it means anything; but to offer it as a proposition predicating something about the nature of ill is a kind of fatuity, a fatuity that, in view of the obvious syllogistic cleverness of the third stanza, must be looked upon as intentional. As an intentionally foolish remark, it is a key to the "foolish" reading of the poem which it introduces. That is, it is a clue that the poem which follows is not to be taken solely at its literal level.

A further suggestion that the poem is ironic occurs in line 22, "Chang'd loves are but chang'd sorts of meat". If women are not to be loved, the reader might ask, what does the poet refer to in "chang'd loves"? Does the answer lie in the poverty of the language, or perhaps a poverty in the poet's vocabulary? Or, perhaps out of habit, does the poet refer to the object of his affections as "loves"? Can it be argued that the word refers, not to persons, but to the subjective state of the poet? Hardly, for the metaphor ("Chang'd loves are but chang'd sorts of meat") would have

no meaning. Nor do the other suggestions concerning poverty of language or habit seem relevant. Surely the sophisticated, conscious poet of the preceding stanzas is not at a loss for a word like the twentieth century "affair" nor is he a slave to locutional habits. The answer may lie in the kind of intentional slip invoked in the analysis of a previous poem.¹⁹ After spending twenty-one lines proving that women are not to be loved, the poet "forgets" and refers to them as "loves", thus further insuring that the careful reader understand the poem as not intended literally.

Communitie, then, is a poem which literally says that women are indifferent, but means something else. That "something else" may be any of several meanings: all women are bad, would that it were not so; most are bad, would that the proportion be less; some women are good and some are bad, would that they could all be good. It is not necessary to settle for one meaning exclusively. What is to be noted is that the various meanings can be stated more or less clearly. This is not the case in all poems. While the literal meaning is clearly not intended, the intended meaning is not always statable. Witchcraft by a picture may be such a poem.

¹⁹ See above, p. 109-110.

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I fixe mine eye on thine, and there
 Pitty my picture burning in thine eye,
 My picture drown'd in a transparent teare,
 When I looke lower I espie;
 Hadst thou the wicked skill 5
 By pictures made and mard, to kill,
 How many wayes mightst thou performe thy will?

But now I have drunke thy sweet salt teares,
 And though thou poure more I'll depart;
 My picture vanish'd, vanish feares, 10
 That I can be endamag'd by that art;
 Though thou retaine of mee
 One picture more, yet that will bee,
 Being in thine owne heart, from all malice free.²⁰

Attention is called to the verbal irony in the last line. Her own heart cannot be thought to be free from malice since her evil intentions are never doubted (lines 5-7).

Whatever else the final lines might do, they emphasize in an ironical way what was stated previously in a positive way.

The verbal irony towards the end of the poem is not, in itself, relevant in this discussion of structural irony. However, insofar as its (intended) meaning complicates the rest of the poem, it is pertinent.

The first stanza says: If you had the power, you would find many ways to do me harm by mutilating my image through sympathetic magic. The stanza ends on a note of security for this reason only: she has no skill in voodoo. The second stanza, however, introduces a new note. The poet will depart, fearing nothing for his future safety, not for

20 Witchcraft by a picture, p. 45-46.

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the reason implied in the previous stanza, but because her tears, in his absence, will no longer reflect his image. An important shift in reason has taken place; line 11 indicates a belief in sympathetic magic. The shift from non-belief to belief is nevertheless conceivable, and hence the poem would read without great difficulty. However, the matter does not rest there; the poem is greatly complicated by the irony of the conclusion, which says: Even though you have one more image of me, (in your heart), I need not fear you since your heart is free from all malice. This, as demonstrated above, is to be understood ironically. When the whole poem is considered in the light of the final verbal irony, a tension lays hold of the poem. Is the sympathetic magic thought of as being in the realm of the possible? Is she thought to be morally capable of such if it were possible? In the poem previously analyzed, three readings were possible: all women are bad; most women are bad; some women are good and some, bad. One of the meanings could be applied in each of several readings. Such is not possible in the case of Witchcraft; the last three lines seem to demand both readings at once. The conjunction "though" indicates a belief in witchcraft, whereas the lack of fear indicates the opposite. Note that the ostensible reason given for lack of fear (her lack of malice) is untenable.

Properly speaking, the tension provided in the poem would not be termed irony. It seems appropriate here, however, since it is akin to irony and since it is a structural effect partly induced by the verbal irony of the last line:

The tension in Witchcraft by a picture furnishes a useful introduction to what may be called the unresolved quality of the irony in the next several poems. This does not mean that, in the course of the poem, the original attitude of the poet changes. This particular kind of shift will be considered in its proper place. Rather, various elements of the poem operate in opposite directions without any of them being resolved to the prejudice of the others. Such a poem is The undertaking.

After an introductory stanza saying that the poet has done a braver thing than all the worthies did, he says that there is little use to talk about it since the conditions of Platonic love no longer exist. This takes twelve lines. In the remaining sixteen, the poet expatiates on the very thing for which he says the possibility no longer exists: Platonic love. He rhapsodizes over inner loveliness, virtue, and the ignoring of sex. There is nothing in the tone of these four stanzas (the greater part of the poem) to indicate that they are offered ironically. Nor does the poem end on a note which rather definitely marks the foregoing stanzas as irony.

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But he who lovelinesse within
 Hath found, all outward loathes,
 For he who colour loves, and skinne, 15
 Loves but their oldest clothes.

If, as I have, you also doe
 Vertue'attir'd in woman see,
 And dare love that, and say so too,
 And forget the Hee and Shee; 20

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

Then you have done a braver thing 25
 Then all the Worthies did;
 And a braver thence will spring,
 Which is, to keepe that hid.

Any strong note of rancor, of flippancy, or of cynicism would resolve the poem as an incredulous jibe directed at Platonic love. In the absence of these (though a minimal cynicism might be granted in lines 5-12), the disbelief of the first part of the poem works in some opposition to the ethereal Platonism of the last part. The Platonism has bulk and the strong end-position in its favor; the incredulity, more briefly expressed, less strategically placed, and understandably less eulogistic yet cannot be forgotten. The later lines are haunted and given the lie to be the former; and, in the second reading, lines 5-12 are softened by the willingness to give credence to the ideal love described later. Taken as a whole, the poem has a double, unresolved meaning.

A similar irresolution is seen in The Apparition.

The verbal irony of "fain'd vestall" in this poem has already

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been commented on, but a larger irony may be seen operating in this macabre poem. The first and last parts of the poem will be sufficient to illustrate this.

When by thy scorne, O murdresse, I am dead,
 And that thou thinkst thee free
 From all solicitation from mee,
 Then shall my ghost come to thy bed,
 And thee, fain'd vestall, in worse armes shall see; ' 5

What I will say, I will not tell thee now,
 Lest that preserve thee'; and since my love is spent 15
 I'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent,
 Then by my threatnings rest still innocent.²³

As in The undertaking, two opposing attitudes seek expression.

In this poem, however, one is implied rather than directly stated. On the one hand, the poem is vindictive, cruel, and inspired by jealous hatred; on the other, the poem implicitly pleads with the scornful mistress to relent and to accede more generously and more faithfully to his demands. The first attitude needs little textual support. Lines 14-17 refrain from stating what the ghost will say to the mistress, lest she be thereby frightened into remaining faithful to him. In a sadistically perverse way, the speaker urges the scornful mistress to persist in her evil ways, so that her punishment may thereby be the greater, ("I'had rather thou shouldst painfully repent").

23 The Apparition, ll. 1-5, 14-17, p. 47-48.

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The second attitude is difficult to support from the text and must be based on an appeal to reason and common sense. It seems reasonable that the speaker would not wish his own death, a death, it is to be noted, by the agency of his mistress's scorn. It is true that modern psychology admits of a death wish. While it is not impossible, such an interpretation is not considered as likely here. The death can be averted by a more generous disposition on the part of the mistress. On the almost universally accepted assumption that death is to be postponed if possible, it should follow that a man will do what he can to avert death. In the present instance, he can do so by regaining his mistress's favor. That he does so in the very strong, contradictory tones of irony may be explained by the sense of urgent desperation which the speaker feels.

It may be argued of course that the speaker did not really believe in the visitation of ghosts any more than he believed that he would die by his mistress's scorn. Such an objection must be considered irrelevant; literalism has no place in this poem, which is basically a fictitious device to communicate a curious love-hate emotion.

To return to the two attitudes, the one vindictive and the other pleading, the text unequivocally supports the former, while reason supports the latter. The hopeless despair of line 15 ("since my love is spent") and the

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intensity of the remaining couplet argue strongly for the vindictive interpretation, while common sense affirms that no man would urge his mistress to indulge a practice that would eventually result in his death.

Thus both attitudes contend for supremacy in the poem, just as they contend, perhaps, in the experience of the speaker of The Apparition. If so, the poem is an eminently successful one. If the poem is read in its literal, vindictive sense, reason says that what has been read must not be understood literally, but ironically. If the "reasonable" reading is taken, the text argues for the vindictive reading. Unresolved, the poem has no final interpretation.

Breake of day, a less serious poem in that it does not concern itself with murder and vengeance, ends on a similarly unresolved note. As a very playful poem, it hardly seems to merit discussion; essentially, however, it has its place here because of the slight, ironical ambiguity at its conclusion. The poem is a request for the lover's continued presence. He has apparently pleaded business as an excuse to depart. The speaker, here seemingly a woman, considers this the worst of all deterrents to love.

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Must businesse thee from hence remove?
 Oh, that's the worst disease of love,
 The poore, the foule, the false, love can
 Admit, but not the busied man.
 He which hath businesse, and makes love, doth doe
 Such wrong, as when a maryed man doth woove.²⁴

The object of the affection of the married man in the last line is, presumptively, someone other than his wife; otherwise, the analysis offered here is inadequate, since it does not take into account the irony of the wrongness of a married man wooing his wife. For the present, at least, the wrongness of a "maryed man" wooing lies in his wooing someone other than his wife.

Verbal irony probably governs the lines, "The poore, the foule, the false, love can/ Admit, but not the busied man". In the same tone as that of a pretended pout which is recognized by both sides as a pretense, the lines advance an argument heretical in the religion of love. The lines are ironical, even though neither he nor she look upon it as seriously contended, but rather as a penultimate, sophisticated, attempt to detain the lover.

The verbal irony condemning business continues into the next couplet, though inconclusiveness of which reflects back on the structure of the last stanza:

He which hath businesse, and makes love, doth doe
 Such wrong, as when a maryed man doth woove.

²⁴ Breake of day, ll. 13-18, p. 23.

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The inconclusiveness of the line is predicated on the doubtful identify of the injured party of the first half of the statement. Is business injured or is love injured by their occurring in the same man? Would the alteration, "He which makes love and hath business, doth doe such wrong", shift the emphasis? Is the wrong done considered as inimical to either love or business, or is it considered as wrong in itself, without reference to an object? If the combination of love and business is a wrong in se, no irony can be invoked. If, on the other hand, either love or business is considered to have been wronged by the combination, the question arises: Is business thought of as the wronged member? An affirmative answer seems preferable simply for a syntactical reason: "businessse" occurs before "love" in the subordinate clause. If the speaker had wished to express the primacy of love, she would have said, "He which makes love, and hath business".

This interpretation, of course, goes contrary to the tenor of the poem. The major interest of the speaker is undoubtedly amatory; consequently, if the above couplet is thought of as moralizing the injury done to business, it must be viewed as ironic. The last four lines of the poem, interpreted as verbal irony, bring the poem to a restful conclusion.

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The poore, the foule, the false, love can
 Admit, but not the busied man.
 He which hath businesse, and makes love, doth doe
 Such wrong, as when a maryed man doth woee.

If the penultimate couplet, however, is thought of as an exaggerated comparison to induce the lover to remain rather than an inverted irony, then the final couplet leaves the general attitude of the poem ambiguous and inconclusive.

Breake of day does not represent the best and clearest illustration of the structural irony referred to as unresolved or lingering. There is, in fact, a possible reading of the poem which sees no irresolution. The Apparition should be taken as the archetype of the ironically unresolved poem, with The undertaking furnishing a subtle variation.

The three poems above were interpreted as having two attitudes running concurrently through the poem. Or, to put it another way, the reader was left uncertain as to which of the two attitudes was to be considered the dominant. In another species of structural irony, two attitudes again provide the irony, this time not concurrently, but consecutively. The poem, sometimes after much shifting about, finally takes a single direction at the end.

The Message is clearly constructed on this pattern. Not only as a whole poem is it so constructed, but each of the first two stanzas.

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Send home my long strayd eyes to mee,
 Which (Oh) too long have dwelt on thee;
 Yet since there they have learn'd such ill,
 Such forc'd fashions,
 And false passions, 5
 That they be
 Made by thee
 Fit for no good sight, keep them still.

Send home my harmlesse heart againe,
 Which no unworthy thought could staine; 10
 But if it be taught by thine
 To make jestings
 Of protestings,
 And crosse both
 Word and oath, 15
 Keepe it, for then 'tis none of mine.

Yet send me back my heart and eyes,
 That I may know, and see thy lyes,
 And may laugh and joy, when thou
 Art in anguish 20
 For some one
 That will none,
 Or prove as false as thou art now.²⁵

In the first stanza the injunction, "send my eyes", is reversed: "yet keep them". The second stanza repeats the pattern: "send my heart; keep it". Then, in the second reversal, the final stanza rescinds what has been established in the first two: "Yet send me back my heart and eyes".

Clearly, a reversal of attitude, and a fortiori a double reversal, is out of the ordinary in any prepared piece of writing. In conversation or in thinking aloud, an adaptation or revision of a view is sometimes appropriate because of contradictory evidence introduced by an

25 The Message, p. 43.

interlocutor or as a second thought. Or, in two distinct writings of the same author, retrenchment or revision is called for an intelligible. But in a single poem, which has presumably been edited or prepared before circulating, the shift is clearly out of the ordinary.

What is not so clear is that this is a species of irony. The support of irony may begin by answering the question, why does the poem include the reversal if it intends all along to revert to its original position? Since "send back my eyes and heart" is the intention of the poem, why not maintain that thought throughout? A re-writing of the poem, omitting the ironical reversal, is helpful in establishing an answer to the question.

Send home my long strayd eyes to mee,
Which (Oh) too long have dwelt on thee;
Even though there they have learn'd such ill,
Such forc'd fashions,
And false passions,
That they be
Made by thee
Fit for no good sight, yet send them still.

The second stanza would read similarly. "Send home my harmless heart againe, even if it has been taught by yours to make jestings of protestings, and cross both word and oath; send it, even though 'til none of mine". The final stanza, which originally reverses the rest of the poem would continue the thought established in the revision. "So send me back my heart and eyes, etc."

The resulting difference in the tone of the original and that of the recension is noticeable. The revision retains the conceits of the original, but the omission of the change of mind renders the second version coldly logical, petulant, smug; Donne's original, although smug and somewhat petulant, is also vacillating and changeable.

The general import of the poem, it can easily be admitted, is identical in both versions: the mistress is rebuked for "false passions", "forced passions", taking love lightly, and breaking her word. One method uses a double reversal to convey the thought, the other does not. It has been asserted that irony is operative in the first. A comparison of the two indicates that such is the case.

The reversal of attitude in Donne's original is not really a reversal at all. That is, the change of attitude can be understood only as a rhetorical device or a poetic fiction, not representative of real change within the poet at the time of composition. For, as has been argued previously, any published poem has been presumably edited; and, while retrenchment of position is understandable in conversation and in consecutive writings, it ordinarily has no place in a single written work. When it does occur in a single writing, it serves as a rhetorical trope. In the present poem, the reversal seems to be merely an ironic way of expressing what the revision of the poem expressed in a

non-ironic way.

Although support for this view is tenuous, yet the argument has some weight. The poet, here assumed to be in command of his material, knows the conclusion to his thought: "Send me back my heart and eyes". In the course of the poem, he indicates that he is quite aware that these members have been corrupted by his mistress. The poem is intended as a reprimand; hence, the corrupting influence of the mistress is of paramount importance. Two methods of making clear the precise relationship of "send back my heart" and "you have corrupted it" are open to the poet: "send back my heart, even though you have corrupted it"; or the apparent shift of attitude, which the poet actually uses. In both cases, the "even though" relationship is indicated; in one case, literally; in Donne's poem, by a reversal that is not a reversal. Donne's poem apparently says, "Send it; do not send it; send it"; this, however, turns out to be an ironical statement of "Send it, even though you have corrupted it". Donne builds each of the first two stanzas on a reversal; the final stanza then, in turn, reverses the other two.

The Prohibition follows almost exactly the same structural pattern. Like The Message, it consists of three stanzas, the first two each reversing themselves and the third reversing the reversals. The difference lies in the directness in the statement of the reversal. The Message

uses words with explicitly opposite meanings: send, keep;

The Prohibition uses one phrase in two different senses:

"take heed" meaning to exercise caution and "take heed" meaning to cease. The last meaning has no dictionary support but it seems implicit in the first two lines of the poem:

Take heed of loving mee,
At least remember, I forbade it thee;

The ambiguity of the phrase is made more evident at the beginning of the final stanza. A reconstruction of the poem will make this clear.

Take heed of loving mee,
At least remember, I forbade it thee;
· · · · ·
If thou love mee, take heed of loving mee.

Take heed of hating mee,
Or too much triumph in the Victorie.
· · · · ·
If thou hate mee, take heed of hating mee.

Yet, love and hate mee too,²⁶

"Yet" here has the sense of "nevertheless"; it introduces an element which stands in opposition to what has gone before.

A parallel use of "yet" occurs in The Message. After advising the mistress to keep his eyes and heart, the speaker says, "Yet send me back my heart and eyes",²⁷ indicating his change in attitude. Thus, The Prohibition follows the same

26 The Prohibition, ll. 1-17, p. 67.

27 The Message, l. 17, p. 43.

structural pattern as The Message. The double reversal is more definite in the latter poem because the key word, "send", is unequivocal; in The Prohibition, the double reversal is rendered less obvious because of the ambiguity of "take heed", meaning "be careful" as well as "stop".

Needless to say, a double reversal is not essential for irony. A single reversal would provide the two attitudes, one of which is understood in an ironical way. Womans constancy exemplifies a number of types of irony, but only the reversal at the conclusion is pertinent here. Donne argues passionately, albeit sophistically, through most of the poem; at the end, a flippant remark reverses the poem.

Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
 To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
 Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
 Or say that now
 We are not just those persons, which we were? 5
 Or, that oathes made in reverentiall feare
 Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?
 Or, as true deaths, true maryages untie,
 So lovers contracts, images of those,
 Binde but till sleep, deaths image, them unloose? 10
 Or, your owne end to Justifie,
 For having purpos'd change, and falsehood; you
 Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
 Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could
 Dispute, and conquer, if I would, 15
 Which I abstaine to doe,
 For by to morrow, I may thinke so too.²⁸

The first thirteen lines are an expression of outrage. Sarcastic and bitter, they are aimed at the woman's inconstancy.

²⁸ Womans constancy, p. 9.

a trait which, the reader is led to believe, the poet abhors and eschews. Such inconstancy would be unthinkable in the poet. "Vaine lunatique", however, paves the way for the reversal. She is a vain lunatic either because she believes that her (imagined) arguments are irrefutable or because she is assumed to take his rage seriously. Both reasons should be read here; the former looks back to the preceding thirteen lines, the latter to the reversal at the end.

K. W. Gransden explains the conclusion of the poem as an example of Donne's "good humor", his "clear wit", and, he continues,

...a very Jacobean sense of the tragicomedy of life
 [.../ Womans constancy ends with Donne abstaining
 from arguing with a woman who has her excuses for
 fickleness ready upon her tongue, because (how
 urbane the admission is) by tomorrow, I may think
 so too.²⁹

Gransden approaches the poem biographically and historically. Viewed as an entity existing in its own right, the poem is more satisfactorily explained as structurally ironic. The poem pretends to be a splenetic outburst directed against a fickle daughter of Venus. The arguments used (lines 3-13) are themselves to be understood ironically; however, since they do not affect the structure of the poem, they are incidental at this point. The pretended outrage of the poem is

29 K. W. Gransden, John Donne, p. 74.

shattered by the final line: "...by to morrow, I may thinke so too". The shift comes somewhat unexpectedly. True, it is prepared for by the double reason, suggested above, for "Vaine lunatique": "vain", either because she thinks her arguments cogent or because she is assumed to take his rage seriously. However, the definition of his shift in attitude becomes explicit only with the last line.

The reversal affects the total poem. The "urbane admission", to use Gransden's term, transmutes the angry belligerence of the first thirteen lines into a jest, a jest, it is true, that is at least half serious. The precise effect of the shift on the rest of the poem is difficult to chart, but it is certain that the seriousness of the venomous outburst is impaired in no slight degree. The importance of the shift to the poem is not to be underestimated. Without the shift, the tone of the poem would be hardly distinguishable from other of Donne's poems in which a mistress is verbally chastised for fickleness. The structural irony of Womans constancy differentiates this poem from The Message, which is, ultimately, a rebuke for falseness.

Some of the poems are blatant and obvious in their reversal; some are so subtle as to pass unnoticed. A Val-
ediction: forbidding mourning, for example, has so delicate an irony that it is almost presumptuous to press the case. Indeed, the poem is generally looked upon as belonging to

that class of poems written to Anne, and consequently, innocent of irony. Gransden speaks for most critics when he refers to the "gentle tone and absence of irony" of the Valediction, clearly a personal poem for Donne's wife.³⁰ A poem, Gransden continues, "in which an actual and very simple emotional situation is presented with as much simplicity as was ever possible to him".³¹ Whether or not the poem was written for Donne's wife is of course irrelevant; "the absence of irony", however, is to the point, although somewhat exceptionable. Perhaps the reconciliation of Gransden's "absence of irony" and the delicate irony urged in this analysis lies in his contention that the Valediction is "presented with as much simplicity as was ever possible to Donne". Donne was never entirely simple; each experience he communicates is attended by all the qualifying emotions which made the experience what it was. Thus, even in a "sincere" poem, if the slightest doubt as to the wisdom of the separation of true lovers colors his experience, that doubt will find its way into the poem. Such an instance may occur in A Valediction: forbidding mourning.

³⁰ Allen Tate is a notable exception. See his "The Point of Dying: Donne's 'Virtuous Men'", Sewanee Review, Vol. 61, p. 79; also above p. 84-86.

³¹ K. W. Gransden, John Donne, p. 60.

Thus, a reversal in attitude occurs in the last stanzas of the poem. After singing the superiority of spiritual love, the poet voices an incipient doubt in the "if" of line 25, and by line 32 has subtly shifted his ground. Having extolled separation as an indication of the lovers' independence of matter, his standard of comparison becomes that of the "dull sublunary lovers". The speaker's retrenchment is not glaringly obvious, as in Womans constancy. Indeed, it most often escapes notice in this poem which is so obviously and sincerely eloquent in its praise of Platonic love.

Granted the irony, the poem may be viewed as the manful attempt of an idealistic lover to face an impending separation, an attempt which, in the course of the poem, is doubtful, if not explicitly unsuccessful.

The structural irony of A Valediction: forbidding mourning is based on the conflict between the speaker's Platonic tendency and his realization of the importance of physical contact. Loves Deitie is also based on a conflict of attitudes concerning love, this time between the sentimental idealist and the disillusioned realist. The attitudes are approximately those of the previous poem, if "true" and "constant" be substituted for "spiritual" and "Platonic". Donne yearns for the time when love was not practiced according to the more natural rules of constancy and reciprocity.

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I long to talke with some old lovers ghost,
 Who dyed before the god of Love was borne:
 I cannot thinke that hee, who then lov'd most,
 Sunke so low, as to love one which did scorne.
 But since this god produc'd a destinie, 5
 And that vice-nature, custome, lets it be;
 I must love her, that loves not mee.³⁴

The view expressed here is clear: the speaker, a sentimentalist, is grieved that his love is not returned, a situation that he blames on the god of Love. The poem proceeds through two more stanzas, showing how the true concept of love has been perverted. The third stanza concludes with a wish that the tyranny of the god of Love be overthrown so that reciprocity in love would again be the rule. The final stanza, however, introduces a reversal.

Rebell and Atheist too, why murmure I,
 As though I felt the worst that love could doe?
 Love might make me leave loving, or might trie
 A deeper plague, to make her love mee too, 25
 Which, since she loves before, I'am loth to see;
 Falshood is worse then hate; and that must bee,
 If shee whom I love, should love mee.

As if awakening from a daydream, the speaker disabuses himself of any notion of his love being returned. Far from being desirable, reciprocal love is an explicit evil, that is, if "to make her love mee too" of line 25 is in apposition to "A deeper plague". The attitude is more complex than this, however. In line 26, the speaker is "loath to see" her love him too, for this somewhat self-contradictory

34 Loves Deitie, ll. 1-7, p. 54.

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reason: if she says she loves him, she must be lying, since she already loves someone else before. It turns out that there are two possibilities (line 28), falsehood and hate. True love, vaguely assumed to be possible at the beginning of the poem, is out of the question; any pretended reciprocal love is based on a lie; falsehood is worse than hate. The conclusion, an implicit, enforced satisfaction with the scorn of the mistress is a view quite different from the longing for reciprocal love in the first three stanzas.

The complexity of attitudes in such a poem as Loves Deitie is generally looked upon by modern critics as a necessary and suitable corresponding to a similar complexity in the emotional attitude to be communicated. W. J. Courthope, however, noting the reversal in the last stanza, finds that the poem comes to an intelligible conclusion at the end of the penultimate stanza:

Oh were wee wak'ned by this Tyrannie
To ungod this child againe, it could not bee
I should love her, who loves not mee.³⁵

Courthope admits that such straightforward logic would not have suited the "super-subtle character of Donne's intellect". Donne, he continues, "proceeds to invert his reasoning, and to close his poem with a stanza of pure paradox, leaving the

35 Ibid., ll. 19-21.

mind without that sense of repose which art requires".³⁶

The sense of repose is not so stable a norm of criticism as it was when Courthope wrote his history of English literature. Rather, the tension brought about by the complexity of attitudes is viewed as a positive value. However, no evaluation of the irony is here attempted; it is sufficient to describe the double attitude as a one-two clash providing irony.

K. W. Gransden, a more recent critic, does not find the reversal worthy of comment, although he does detect a certain irony in the poem. Sometimes, Gransden contends, Donne is willing to be quite naive about love, "completely committed and completely vulnerable". But in Loves Deitie, he seeks invulnerability from the god of love by constructing a logical, ironic defence against him".³⁷ The irony in this case consists in the reversal of attitude, on which the poem is based.

The complexity of attitude often makes it difficult to determine whether there has been an actual change of attitude. Loves Deitie represents a comparatively clear-cut case: the sentimental idealist becomes, in the course of the poem, skeptical about the possibility of his love's being

³⁶ W. J. Courthope, A History of English Poetry, London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1903, Vol. 3, p. 166.

³⁷ K. W. Gransden, John Donne, p. 71.

returned. In a poem which contains a series of verbal ironies as well as a reversal of attitude, the attitude becomes highly complex. Elegie XVII is such a poem. The elegy, titled Variety, has been previously analyzed on the basis of its verbal irony.³⁸ The speaker draws an analogy between the variety in Nature and the variety in love: both are desirable. Variety in love, in women is to be sought. The poem closes with a reversal: with "firmer age", we will settle down to "love her ever, and love her alone".

What makes Elegie XVII different from the other examples of reversal is that the reversal is only apparent. The attitude expressed in the first part of the poem (approbation of promiscuous love) is expressed in a verbally ironic way, which means that the opposite of what is said is meant. The upshot is that actually only one attitude is expressed throughout the poem, once ironically and once directly. However, while there is not a real shift in attitude, there is apparently such a shift.

One further qualification needs to be made in describing the reversal in Elegie XVII. The reversal is not a complete about face, as often happens in the other poems, but a modification of opinion brought about by increasing age. It is not as if the speaker praises (or pretends to

³⁸ See above ("Verbal Irony"), p. 62.

praise) promiscuity and then, somewhat unwarrantedly, abjures such an opinion. It is rather the recognition that maturity or advanced age (the poem is unclear on this point) will bring about a kind of wisdom which regards the promiscuity of youth as a species of folly. Or alternatively: maturity (or advanced age) brings along with it certain limitations which prevent the excesses of youth! Either reading seems possible. At any rate, the ageing provides a basis for the change of attitude. After seventy-odd lines of tongue-in-cheek praise of variety, the speaker says:

But time will in his course a point discry
 When I this loved service must deny,
 For our allegiance temporary is,
 With firmer age returns our liberties.
 What time in years and judgement we repos'd,
 Shall not so easily be to change dispos'd,
 Nor to the art of severall eyes obeying;
 But beauty with true worth securely weighing,
 Which being found assembled in some one,
 Wee'll love her ever, and love her alone.³⁹

The only point to be made here is that the passage of time provides the speaker with a means of accounting for his shift in opinion. More often the shift comes about more unexpectedly and with little foundation, as witness the conclusion of Womans constancy:

39 Elegie XVII, Variety, ll. 74-82, p. 115-116.

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Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could
 Dispute, and conquer, if I would,
 Which I abstaine to doe,
 For by to morrow, I may thinke so too.⁴⁰

Thus, even within one category of structural irony, Donne sounds a number of variations, each giving the poem, or at least contributing to, its characteristic tone. In one poem the reversal brings about a tone that may be described as flippant urbanity, in another, a tone of quiet wisdom. In another, The Legacie, the speaker sounds another variation, mild (pretended) shock.

The speaker addressed his loved one. He is well disposed toward her and wishes to bequeath her something of value. His attitude is generous and open, though complicated by the fiction of his having died ("When I dyed last, Deare",) and his referring to himself as the first person and also as the third person, and even the second. Once the grammatical complication is unraveled, the attitude seems clear enough: he loves her, assumes that she loves him, wants to make a bequest upon her. He searches about for a fitting gift, decides that his own heart would be appropriate, but when he looks in the place where the heart usually is, he finds none. The absence of the heart is a source of disappointment, since it seems to him that he is forced to cheat her out of

⁴⁰ Womans constancy, ll. 14-17, p. 9.

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something due her:

It kill'd mee againe, that I who still was true,
In life, in my last Will should cozen you.

The reversal, occurring in the final stanza, consists in the enlightenment of the speaker.

Yet I found something like a heart,
But colours it, and corners had,
It was not good, it was not bad,
It was intire to none, and few had part.
As good as could be made by art
It seem'd; and therefore for our losses sad,
I meant to send this heart in stead of mine,
But oh, no man could hold it, for twas thine.⁴¹

In the conceit of inspection of the heart-like object, he reluctantly disabuses himself of his naive notion that the lady had been true to him alone. He makes the painful discovery in the last line of the poem. The new emotion introduced is not scorn, for the discovery is too recent for that, but shock, accompanied by disillusion. Love does not give way to hate; nevertheless, it seems proper to speak of a structural reversal. "Reversal" is not restricted to the embracing of an attitude in direct opposition to the one first offered in a poem. Love, in the poem, is not displaced by scorn, or hate, but rather by a kind of sad disillusionment, or, to use K. W. Gransden's phrase, "ironic regret".⁴²

41 The Legacie, ll. 15-24, p. 20.

42 K. W. Gransden, John Donne, p. 73.

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Is much too much, some fitter must be sought; 20
 For, nor in nothing, nor in things
 Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love inhere;
 Then as an Angell, face, and wings
 Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth weare,
 So thy love may be my loves speare; 25
 Just such disparitie
 As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie,
 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee.⁴³

The poem is remarkable for its reverential tone, its convincing suggestion of the fragile beauty of women's love. There is not a hint of verbal irony to suggest that the praise of women's love is anything but what it pretends to be. The "shapeless flame" (line 3) and the "lovely glorious nothing" (line 6) are more than adequate in suggesting the angelic nature of the subject. There is no reason to suppose that the speaker has his tongue in his cheek. By comparison, The Extasie, reveals early its ironic intention. The Extasie is a similar poem in that it begins with the praise of a spiritual Platonic love, but the ironic reversal towards the end of that poem is signalled quite early by Donne's euphemistic use of the word "balm" in the lines: "Our hands were firmly cimented/ With a fast balme, which thence did spring".⁴⁴ Gustav Cross, cited previously in a lengthier analysis of The Extasie,⁴⁵ argues that "balm",

⁴³ Aire and Angels, p. 22.

⁴⁴ The Extasie, ll. 5-6, p. 51.

⁴⁵ K. Gustav Cross, "'Balm' in Donne and Shakespeare: Ironic Intention in The Extasie", Modern Language Notes, Vol. 71, p. 481.

Donne's brilliant euphemism for "sweat" is a clever indication of the non-Platonic nature of the love. Aire and Angels does not deal with the Platonic-vs.-sexual opposition, but rather the man-vs.-woman. The point on which they are being here compared is not precisely their subject matter, though the fineness and purity of both the Platonic love in The Extasie is matched by those same qualities in Aire and Angels.

The more relevant point here is that The Extasie prepares for its concluding reversal early in the poem; Aire and Angels, however, maintains its reverential tone almost to the very end. The effect is that the praise of the beautiful nature of women's love is understood in the most serious way; it is not "marred", if this term is applicable, by an ironic undertone, as in The Extasie, in which every succeeding praise of Platonic love after the "balm" line is rendered ironic. The reversal at the end of the poem is thus more surprising and more ironic than a similar reversal in The Extasie.

The total poem is exceedingly complex, but the second stanza, especially so. Leonard Unger offers the following paraphrase, which succeeds in unraveling Donne's complications:

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The second stanza begins with a conceit by which love is equated with a ship. The speaker of the poem says that in having love assume the body of the woman he thought to have given it stability and fixation--as one ballasts a ship with weight--but he discovers that he has overweighted it. This is explained, after the conceit has been dropped, by the statement that the woman, in all her detail, "for love to worke upon/ Is much too much". In other words, it turns out that the woman, as she appears to him, as she represents the ideal object of love, is more than his love can manage to attach itself to. For as his love could not formerly come to rest, when there was no basis on which it might rest, so now it is not able to partake of an extreme and ultimate fulfillment. Consequently, it must abandon this fulfillment of the ideal and adjust itself to the love that the woman offers, not to the woman herself. This adjustment is possible because woman's love is less than man's and hence can be the "spheare" of man's love, just as an angel's body, though pure, is less pure than the angel's soul contained therein.⁴⁶

Unger's extended comment clarifies the discursive involutions in the content of the poem. It should be added that, regarding the tone of the second stanza, there seems to be no note of cynicism or flippancy or offensive bumptiousness. The speaker is merely asserting a fact, a fact, it is true, which he does not prepare for, but nevertheless a fact stated without malice. Joan Bennett, whose criticism of Donne's poetry tends generally to ignore its irony, finds neither cynicism nor irony nor even a reversal of attitude in the poem. The keynote of the poem is to be found in the first line of the poem, a line not uncomplimentary to women.

⁴⁶ Leonard Unger, Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1950, p. 43.

"The lady's love for him, Donne is saying, can embody his love for her as the air embodies the angel". The woman is the next step below man, but this is not uncomplimentary.⁴⁷ Mrs. Bennett adequately defines the tone of the poem, but the concluding twist of the poem is best accounted for by Leonard Unger, who appreciates the irony of the twist:

...the lover addresses the woman he loves in terms of praise, exalting her above himself, until almost the end of the poem. And then it develops that this discussion leads to a statement that the woman is in a respect lower than the lover. With this surprising reversal, seemingly unprepared for, the poem ends. The reversal is surprising, and a calculated surprise is witty. Moreover, the reversal makes for irony: one attitude is apparently prepared for, and then its opposite is given.⁴⁸

The irony is not trenchant; Donne is not here using irony as a vehicle for cynicism, as he often does. Mrs. Bennett's view that the poem is "not uncomplimentary" to women is not necessarily incompatible with the interpretation of the poem as "witty" or ironical. For it is inescapable that an unprepared-for reversal has taken place and that such a clash provides irony. And it is also arguable that the poem has none of the flippant urbanity of Womans constancy, nor the possible obscenity of A Valediction: forbidding mourning, nor the half-concealed jocularity of The Extasie. The "hidden" implications of the last two poems have been uncovered by recent critics. Whence the inference: the

⁴⁸ Leonard Unger, Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism, p. 44-45.

apparently sincere, reverential, approach to woman's love, though certainly modified by the unexpected conclusion, probably remains sincere and reverential; if the poem had been intended as an unmitigated blast of woman's love, modern criticism would not have been thus slow in making the discovery.

If this view of the "not uncomplimentary" ironic reversal of attitude can be accepted, Donne's range in the use of irony is extended appreciably. For irony, like wit, is generally offensive to someone or something. It usually attacks. Donne most often attacks an individual woman, the entire sex, the conventional view of love, or the sentimental view. Sometimes it is subtle, sometimes obvious. Usually it is offensive, but it can be very gentle, if the foregoing analysis be found tenable.

Summary.

Structural irony refers to irony as a plan for the composition of the poem. In a two-stanza poem, for instance, the second stanza may reveal an attitude which is in opposition to the first, resulting in an irony best described as structural. Or the entire poem may be a development of a single verbal irony expressed early in the poem. In one variety of structural irony, the irony is resolved with the poem. Thus, in The Token, sixteen lines are devoted to

saying one thing, with the final few lines culminating in a quasi-negation of the longer part of the poem. The first sixteen lines instruct in detail what kind of token not to send to the speaker; the final couplet states positively what to send. The bulk ratio, however, (sixteen lines to two), together with other factors, argues for an ironical understanding of the poem. Whether to send or not to send is the question in the reader's mind during the progress of the poem; the question is resolved with the completion of the poem: the "send not" of the major part of the poem is really "send". In other poems, the irony goes unresolved. The Apparition, for instance, urges two contradictory attitudes: one, continue to be unfaithful to me, so that I can wreak vengeance on you after my death; and two, discontinue your unfaithfulness. The poem ends, as it were, on a dominant seventh chord, suspended. Neither attitude has a clear pre-dominance over the other. Irresolution is the keynote of this group of poems, an ironical irresolution corresponding precisely to the irresolution in the speaker's emotion. In still other poems involving structural irony, a new aspect appears: reversal of attitude. The well-known Womans constancy sardonically chastises the mistress for a fault which, in a surprising reversal at the end of the poem, the speaker himself admits he may cultivate on the morrow. The irony cannot be said to operate only in the initial denunciation

nor only in the speaker's "defection" at the end, but rather in the way the two parts of the poem operate on each other.

As noted before, it is difficult to lay a critical finger on structural irony and to identify it precisely; the temptation to label as structural irony anything which is not definitely verbal irony is constantly inviting. The temptation has been overcome, it is hoped, with the result that structural irony emerges, not as a catch-all, but an important use of Donne's irony. It falls into three main divisions: that understood with the poem, as in *Elegie II*, unresolved structural irony, as in *The undertaking*; and finally, a change in attitude, as in *Aire and Angels*.

Elegie II is a systematic development of a verbal irony introducing the poem: the total intent of the poem is seen to be ironic, but this is clear only at the conclusion of the poem. In the second variety, the irony again cannot be explained by any single line. It is rather the whole poem which is built on two opposite attitudes, neither of which is resolved to the prejudice of the other; the lasting ambiguity rests on the poem's structure. *Aire and Angels*, as an example of the third type, clearly shows a reversal of attitude, without which the poem would not be ironical in any sense. It has been shown that the shift in attitude, intended by the speaker from the beginning of the poem, directed the construction of the last lines of the poem,

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thus reversing (or at least "influencing") the tone of the previous part of the poem.

Donne's structural irony permeates his most difficult poems. Along with the involved conceit, it helps to complicate and enrich the poems, making them correspond to the complex emotional-intellectual feelings of the reality he attempts to communicate.

CHAPTER IV

ATTITUDINAL IRONY

The term "attitudinal irony" may be easily misunderstood. Obviously, it does not refer to the shift in attitude as described in the previous section. It refers rather to an attitude of the speaker which detaches him from the current scene; it is an attitude which tends to make a spectator out of a participant. Attitudinal irony is the irony of detachment, the irony of separation. It is that habit of mind which enables the speaker to view himself in a given situation as if he were a third person, as if he were an objective observer. It is an attitude which the speaker in Donne's secular verse betrays quite often in varying degrees.

Attitudinal irony, or the irony of separation, comes about whenever the poet (or actor, or person) seems to detach himself from his current role and to speak as if he were a person other than that he at first seemed to be. When an actor on a stage delivers an aside, this is something like attitudinal irony since he momentarily separates himself from his environment in the play to confide in the audience. But if an actor, during the performance of a tense murder mystery suddenly turns to the spellbound audience, and says, "You poor fools! What are you so worked up about?"

This is only a play!", this is a rather complete separation of the actor and the man. It is as if a single person split his personality (or his person), presented one personality as an actor, and then immediately, without transition, presented another as a man. This is an extreme example; the irony need not result in so violent a disillusionment. It can happen in a conversation with less dramatic trappings. If, for instance, in an ordinary conversation, one of the participants indulges in a long bit of wistful reminiscing, then, after a pause accompanied by an inaudible chuckle, says, "I sound like an old timer, don't I?", he becomes a commentator on himself and achieves a momentary separation between himself in his role of unconscious reminiscer and himself as a conscious critic. This is the irony of separation; it is basically the same as the previous example in that it brings about a separation of roles in the speaker. Both are accompanied by a kind of disillusionment on the part of the audience. In the first case, the disillusionment is shocking, startling; in the second, it is less so.

J. E. V. Crofts, while not using the concept of irony as a critical tool, notes the prevalence of such an attitude in Donne. He contends that the whole body of the love poetry is held together by the "implicit drama of the defeated coxcomb". The coxcomb is further identified as

the man who is impelled to adore what he would fain despise, and who, when the truth of his feelings is extorted from him, gives rein to hyperbole and grotesque exaggeration as a kind of sneering comment on his own seriousness.¹

To say that attitudinal irony is a commentary on one's own position or attitude is an adequate phrase to describe the workings of attitudinal irony: the speaker viewing himself as if he were another person, as if he were uninvolved, as if he were emotionally and even physically detached from the situation he describes. Crofts' extension of this attitude to the whole body of the love poetry could probably be supported without great difficulty; however, the present purpose is to analyze attitudinal irony only in those poems in which it is more or less explicit. The poems offered for study here are arranged according to the completeness of their ironical detachment.

The Apparition offers a good example of incomplete separation of the speaker from himself. The first line, "When by thy scorne, O murdresse, I am dead", sets the pattern for the dichotomy between Donne-living and Donne-dead. Living, he is emotionally concerned with his mistress' treatment of him. Irony allows him to abstract himself from the pleasant and to imagine himself dead. It is not, however,

¹ J. E. V. Crofts, "John Donne" in Essays and Studies by members of the English Association, collected by Helen Darbshire, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1937, Vol. 22, p. 132.

so complete that he thinks of his ghost as another person, for, later in the poem, when he refers to his post-death visit, he still speaks in the first person: "What I will say, I will not tell thee now".²

The same degree of incomplete detachment obtains in The Dampe. The first line, "When I am dead, and Doctors know not why",³ parallels the detachment of the preceding poem. Both poems describe future situations; the poet projects the circumstance of his death and imagines its effect on the living. This constitutes a mild form of detachment.

Womans constancy, previously referred to as an example of the structural irony of reversal, is also a clear instance of attitudinal irony. The poem is a raging torrent of abuse, a bitter, if sophisticated, denunciation of the infidelity of the mistress. The speaker is patently caught up in his wrath; yet at the conclusion of the poem, he disengages himself from his emotional involvement and takes a completely objective view. The first thirteen lines of the poem present an impassioned declamation against the faithlessness of the mistress. Clearly, the poet is emotionally involved in this situation. In the concluding four lines, however, he detaches himself from this involvement, and says,

2 The Apparition, l. 14, p. 48.

3 The Dampe, l. 1, p. 63.

with dispassionate objectivity:

Vaine lunatique, against these scapes I could
Dispute, and conquer, if I would,
Which I abstaine to doe,
For by to morrow, I may thinke so too.⁴

This is more than a reversal of attitude. That is, it says more than: "Formerly I cared whether you would be faithful, but now I don't". It is this, but it is more. It is the critical comment on the poet by the poet. It is made possible by the separation of the poet-lover from the poet-commentator, of the passionate doer from the calm critic. Yet these two "persons" are the same man. The separation has been brought about by the objective irony of the poet.

It may be argued that the "Vaine lunatique" being addressed in the passage quoted above refers not to the speaker, but to the mistress, since the "thou" of the unquoted portion of the poem clearly refers to the mistress. Admittedly, an uncertainty exists here. The reading of "Vaine lunatique" as referring to the speaker was suggested by a perhaps misleading analogy with Sir Philip Sidney's "Fool, I said, look into thy heart and write". It is far from clear, in the context of the poem, whether the poet is addressing the mistress or himself. However, since it is at least possible that the latter was intended, that reading is offered here. In any case, however, the presence or absence

⁴ Womans constancy, ll. 14-17, p. 9.

of irony does not depend on the referent of "Vaine lunatique". For the distinction between the irate, cynical lover of the first part of the poem and the suave, devil-may-care ironist of the last four lines is sufficiently established by the poet's saying: "I could refute the arguments if I desired, but I don't want to, since tomorrow I may think the way you do".

Elegie XV is similar to Womans constancy in theme and attitude, though the precise tone of the attitude is probably more tongue-in-cheek. Like Womans constancy, the elegy undertakes to score the mistress for her infidelity. You will be false, the poet says, until the Thames freezes over in June. In this poem, however, a third party is introduced upon whom the total blame for the defection is placed. He is cursed roundly:

Let all eyes shunne him, and hee shunne each eye,
Till hee be noysome as his infamie;
May he without remorse deny God thrice,
And not be trusted more on his Soules price;
And after all selfe torment, when hee dyes,
May Wolves teare out his heart, Vultures his eyes,
Swine eate his bowels, and his falser tongue
That utter'd all, be to some Raven flung,
And let his carrion coarse be a longer feast
To the Kings dogges, then any other beast.⁵

Then, detaching himself from his wrath as if he were another person, the speaker continues without a break:

5 Elegie XV, The Expostulation, ll. 43-52, p. 109-110.

Now have I curst, let us our love revive;
In mee the flame was never more alive;

As in Womans constancy, something more than a change of attitude takes place. The speaker, in commenting on his own wrath, disengages himself from his role of impassioned vilifier to assume that of practical sensualist.

In this poem, the detachment is as yet, comparatively incomplete. The speaker-lover looks back with a considerable lack of interest on the speaker-curser. The speaker is essentially the same. In The Blossome, however, a more distinct separation sets in. The poet's heart (that is, his love, his affective part) is addressed as a creature with an identify all its own. The poet must go abroad to London and is persuaded by his heart to go alone, leaving the heart behind with an untrustworthy mistress. By the end of the poem, the duality of persons is fait accompli.

Meet mee at London, then,
Twenty dayes hence, and thou shalt see
Mee fresher, and more fat, by being with men,
Then if I had staid still with her and thee.
For Gods sake, if you can, be you so too:
I would give you
There, to another friend, whom wee shall finde
As glad to have my body, as my minde.⁶

The poet is obviously infatuated with a certain mistress, recognizes the fact, and, by means of the conceit of the dismembered heart, views his passion dispassionately. His

⁶ The Blossome, ll. 33-40, p. 60.

attitudinal irony enables him to disentangle himself from his attachment and to comment on its impending disastrous effects. He himself, however, will not be adversely affected since he is going to London; that is, he will not become emotionally involved in a fatal way.

The Blossome may be, as Clay Hunt argues, "an engaging piece of social comedy",⁷ a conclusion which his lengthy analysis of the poem bears out. But, in view of the above interpretation, it is difficult to agree with Hunt's general view of the separation of the speaker from his heart: a playful device which gives the speaker an opportunity to poke fun at the Petrarchan naivete of the heart. The view taken in the present study is rather that the separation is psychological, and not merely rhetorical. A real dichotomy has set in between Donne the lover (the heart) and Donne the enlightened observer (the "I" of the poem).

The Blossome, employing the conceit of the dis-severed member as a distinct person, furnishes an easy introduction to Loves exchange, in which the poet views his whole self as separate. It is a study in objectivity in which the poet fancies himself being literally dissected by love. The poem is too long for complete quotation and the detachment can be appreciated by paraphrase: Love makes many demands

⁷ Clay Hunt, Donne's Poetry, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954, p. 50.

but gives nothing in return. Love is very powerful. I have exposed Love and shown its true power and its face. If Love wants to punish me, all right. But by torturing me and cutting me up, I will serve as an example to others who might otherwise be attracted to Love. They will see Love for what it is and renounce it. So, all right, Love, kill me and dissect me if you want to punish me; but you will be defeating your own end.

Several types of irony are discernible even in the paraphrase of the poem, but only the non-interfering passivity of the speaker as he calmly contemplates the prospect of his body (almost as if it were not his) being dissected by Love. As in The Damp, the objectivity is focused on an event in the future. The detachment is there, but it is less compelling than when directed to a situation or an event which has happened or which is happening. In Loves diet, the speaker achieves an almost complete break between himself and an (integral) part of himself: between "I" and "my love" ("love" as an emotion, not as a person). "My love", though in reality a part of the poet's emotional constitution, is considered as distinct from the person of the speaker. "My love" achieves a separate identity of its own, as much as "my valet" or "my dog" would. The separation begins with the poem itself:

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To what a combersome unwioldnesse
 And burdenous corpulence my love had growne,
 But that I did, to make it lesse,
 And keepe it in proportion,
 Give it a diet, made it feed upon
 That which love worst endures, discretion.[§]

Even at this early stage in the poem, "I" and "it" are separate. The one of separation might be paraphrased thus: "I noticed that my (choose one: love, valet, dog) was getting too fat, so I put (choose one: him, it) on a diet". As yet the love is referred to by the neuter pronoun. As the poem progresses, Donne endows the non-existent second (grammatically, the third) person with more of a personality by switching to the masculine pronoun. Beginning in the second stanza, "my love" becomes "he".

Above one sigh a day I'll allow'd him not,
 If he wroung from mee'a teare, I brin'd it so
 With scorne or shame, that him it nourish'd not;
 What ever he would dictate, I writ that,
 But burnt my letters;

The diet is apparently a success, for the wayward love is brought to subjection:

Thus I reclaim'd my buzard love, to flye
 At what, and when, and how, and where I chuse;

But "I" and "my love" retain their separate identities through the poem. This is so even after the "buzard love" is reclaimed, even after the opposition between the two

§ Loves diet, ll. 1-6, p. 55.

ceases. The separation has a definite ironic impact when it is realized that the two persons spoken of are not two after all, but two only as a result of the ironic separation.

Leonard Unger, whose criticism of Donne centers around the poet's complexity rather than his irony, notes the ironical character of the detachment with which the speaker regards his attitude and finds an additional element of complexity therein.⁹

Loves diet develops the conceit of the poet's love as a separate individual; the conceit is coterminous with the poem. Obviously, attitudinal irony does not demand such a procedure. A Valediction: of my name, in the window begins with a conceit expressing irony. But, while the conceit is not discarded in the course of the poem, the attitudinal irony develops independently. In the first stanza, the speaker refers to his name inscribed on a window of his mistress. In the second, he begins to lose his identity to her:

'Tis much that Glasse should bee
As all confessing, and through-shine as I,
'Tis more, that it shewes thee to thee,
And cleare reflects thee to thine eye.
But all such rules, loves magique can undoe,
Here you see mee, and I am you.¹⁰

⁹ Leonard Unger, Donne's Poetry and Modern Criticism, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1950, p. 56.

¹⁰ A Valediction: of my name, in the window, ll. 7-12, p. 26.

As yet, his sense of separation from himself (in this case, his transferal of identity to her) is unconvincing, playful and grammatical, as it is. "It shewes thee to thee" (note the absence of the reflexive "thysel") of line nine seems to depend on this argument: In a way, I have become you; implicitly, my name also has become you; therefore, the glass shows you to you. The argument seems to derive some support from line twelve: "and I am you". The poem continues to develop the theme of the love and grief accompanying departure. The speaker professes great love for his lady, and there seems to be no reason to suspect an ironical overtone in these laudatory lines:

Then, as all my soules bee,
 Emparadis'd in you, (in whom alone
 I understand, and grow and see,)
 The rafters of my body, bone
 Being still with you, the Muscle, Sinew, and Veine,
 Which tile this house, will come againe.

He is thus explicit in his feeling for her. If he does not extol their mutual love, he at least betrays no suspicion of infidelity on her part. In stanza eight, however, the tone changes. Up to this point, the tone might be described as "sincere", affectionate, and, if not passionate, at least loving. With stanza eight, the speaker calmly detaches himself from the love-and-grief theme of parting, and comments:

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When thy inconsiderate hand
 Flings ope this casement, with my trembling name,
 To looke on one, whose wit or land,
 New battery to thy heart may frame,
 Then thinke this name alive, and that thou thus
 In it offendst my Genius.

The speaker's reaction to his mistress' probable infidelity is completely dispassionate, almost as if he were an uninterested party. The bitterness of the first part of a poem written under similar circumstances, Womans constancy, offers a good measure for the degree of unconcern expressed in the present poem. The speaker's attitudinal irony detaches him from the emotional situation and allows him to say, "Oh, by the way, when you fall for another chap while I'm gone, I'll be offended".

The separation here is clearly of a more urgent, a more real nature than the grammatical loss of identity in stanza two. It should be noted, however, that the lackadaisical detachment here is attenuated by an apology in the final stanza, where the speaker enjoins the mistress to impute his seeming lethargy to impending death, that is, departure.

Neere death inflicts this lethargie,
 And this I murmure in my sleepe;
 Impute this idle talke, to that I goe,
 For dying men talke often so.

He brings himself back to the real situation with these lines. The objective commentator has left the stage to give way to the emotionally involved lover. However, the previous air

of detached unconcern, though momentary is still to be considered attitudinal irony.

If the degree of separation in the window Valediction is incomplete and momentary, that in The Legacie is not. In this poem, the distinction between the speaker and the circumstance he is commenting on is more definite. The separation is coterminous with the poem.

When I dyed last, and, Deare, I dye
 As often as from thee I goe,
 Though it be but an houre agoe,
 And Lovers houres be full eternity,
 I can remember yet, that I
 Something did say, and something did bestow;
 Though I be dead, which sent mee, I should be
 Mine owne executor and Legacie. 5

I heard mee say, Tell her anon,
 That my selfe, (that is you, not I,) 10
 Did kill me, and when I felt mee dye,
 I bid mee send my heart, when I was gone,
 But I alas could there finde none,
 When I had ripp'd me, 'and search'd where hearts
 did lye;
 It kill'd mee againe, that I who still was true, 15
 In life, in my last Will should cozen you.

Yet I found something like a heart,
 But colours it, and corners had,
 It was not good, it was not bad,
 It was intire to none, and few had part. 20
 As good as could be made by art
 It seem'd; and therefore for our losses sad,
 I meant to send this heart in stead of mine,
 But oh, no man could hold it, for twas thine.¹¹

The fiction of the speaker's viewing his own death and its aftermath has been introduced in other poems (The Apparition,

¹¹ The Legacie, p. 20.

The Dampse). One of the differences between The Legacie and the two poems discussed earlier lies in the time element: The Legacie refers to the action as past; the other poems, to the action as future. It might be argued that this brings about a more distinct cleavage between speaker and situation. Then, too, the absence of the first person reflexive pronoun increases the sense of detachment: "I heard mee say", (line nine); "I felt mee dye", (line eleven); "I bid mee send my heart", (line twelve); "When I had ripp'd me", (line fourteen). That the apparent reflexive "my selfe" functions as a noun, and not a pronoun, is made clear by the speaker's parenthesis in line nine: "Tell her anon,/ That my selfe, (that is you, not I,)"

It is necessary to imagine several Donnes in this poem: Donne the deceased, Donne the executor (line eight), and Donne the legacy itself (line eight). Presiding over all these (perhaps "viewing" would be a more accurate term) is Donne the speaker, the somewhat detached observer from afar. K. W. Gransden maintains that the "schism" created by the first two stanzas is healed in the final stanza; the macabre situation fades "gently, into the single sorrow of this wonderful finale", the last couplet.¹² However, it seems more likely that the air of detachment (we need not

¹² K. W. Gransden, John Donne, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1954, p. 72.

insist on the continuance of the macabre quality) prevails even in the last stanza. The final stanza begins, "Yet I found something like a heart", and when the question "where?" is posed, the split between Donne the deceased and Donne the executor must be appealed to. Donne the executor "found something like a heart" in the place he was searching, which place is rather gruesomely identified in line fourteen ("When I ripp'd mee..."). Thus even in the final stanza, the separation seems to continue.

Donne is not yet the complete ironist in The Legacie. The complete ironist views a situation from afar, having no concern for the outcome of events, having no interest in the fate of the parties involved. He looks, with a kind of mild amusement, at the sometimes frantic activities of his fellow men. The speaker in The Legacie has not reached this point. Lines fifteen and sixteen betray a disappointment in the speaker's being forced, as it were, to deceive his legatee; "It kill'd mee againe", he says, "that I [∟.∟] in my last Will should cozen you". Even if these lines are understood as verbal irony, which they might well be, the interestedness of the speaker is manifest; for, if he cares enough to be ironically spiteful, he is involved to some extent in the event. His involvement is, of course, in inverse proportion to his attitudinal irony. The most that can be said of this poem, in regard to attitudinal irony, is that the separation

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of speaker and situation is greater than in any of the poems previously discussed, but that it is still incomplete.

The most perfect expression of attitudinal irony is found in Negative Love. The speaker withdraws intellectually and emotionally from his affairs. He is still physically involved; that he cannot help. But in other ways, he is a stranger to the events around him.

I never stoop'd so low, as they
Which on an eye, cheeke, lip, can prey,
Seldome to them, which soare no higher
Then vertue or the minde to'admire,
For sense, and understanding may 5
Know, what gives fuell to their fire:
My love, though silly, is more brave,
For may I misse, when ere I crave,
If I know yet, what I would have.

If that be simply perfectest 10
Which can by no way be exprest
But Negatives, my love is so.
To All, which all love, I say no.
If any who decipher best,
What we know not, our selves, can know, 15
Let him teach mee that nothing; This
As yet my ease, and comfort is,
Though I speed not, I cannot misse.¹³

In keeping with his theme of negative love, the speaker understandably refrains from defining his kind of love. He admits that there are two kinds beneath him: one, which he never indulges, is either sensual love or Petrarchan adulation; the other, definitely Platonic and spiritual, to which he seldom descends. His love is greater than these,

¹³ Negative Love, p. 66.

seemingly because it is unidentified. The skepticism is underlined in the final couplet of stanza one: May I fail, if I ever know what I want. Not only does he admit his skepticism, but he revels in it. His lack of intellectual contact with, his lack of understanding of love is a separation, one which he encourages. The separation, or detachment, is purely intellectual, not emotional; for line nine indicates that the unfulfillment of desires would cause concern. He does not need to identify his desires intellectually, but needs them fulfilled. There remains, then, at least a trace of emotional involvement. The final punctuation in the couplet may be taken as an indication that emotional involvement is minimal: the period suggests a calmer statement than would an exclamation point. This argument, however, cannot be pressed with any urgency, for Donne is extremely chary in his use of the exclamation mark in the Songs and Sonets.¹⁴

The second stanza continues the theme of skepticism: my love is best expressed by negatives; if anyone presumes to be able to understand this matter, just let him teach me! The stanza culminates in a nearly complete ironical detachment: I am happy in that even "though I speed not, I cannot misse". In the context of the poem, this means that, because my goal is unknown and unidentified, I never know

¹⁴ Only three instances have been found.

whether I have attained it or not, so I may as well say that I have attained it. Or, alternatively, since I have not bothered to define my goal, whatever I strike at will be a hit. The poem makes most sense when looked upon as the statement of the ironist who is uncommitted; the man who refuses to make judgments for fear of being wrong; the man who knows that, though he may never be right, at least he will never be wrong. In a modern prose idiom, the poem reads: Personally, I don't get involved in the nice questions about love. I don't know what it's all about; that way I can't miss. Others profess to know what it's about. Me, I'm agnostic. I may not get very far or go very fast, but "I cannot misse".

The poem seems to be concerned with matters intellectual; the teaching, the knowing, the expressing, of stanza two are matters of the mind rather than of the feeling. That is, the poet says, "Since I refuse to make any intellectual judgments, I cannot be wrong". Implicitly, however, the poem goes beyond this. Since it concerns love, can it not be assumed that the poem, at least implicitly, is concerned with emotional commitment or a rejection of commitment? It does not seem unreasonable to make such an assumption. The poem then reads: "I neither know nor care about love. Occasionally I dabble in it, though I am not foolish enough to take it seriously. I never get emotionally

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involved in it. In this way, though I may not make much progress, at least I will never be hurt by love".

If this is an acceptable reading of the poem, and it seems at least possible, Donne reaches his highest point in his ironical detachment. In other poems discussed in this section, the speaker sometimes expresses a momentary attitudinal irony, sometimes a merely grammatical detachment. If the above interpretation of Negative Love can be accepted, the poem expresses, of all the poems, the most complete and consistent sense of separation between the speaker and the world around him. At least where love is concerned, is he uncommitted: he neither professes to be able to describe it nor cares to experience it. It is this species of irony that William O'Connor finds a dangerous extreme. He does not speak of Donne, but his description of what in this study is called attitudinal irony is to the point.

The ironist, because of dependence on his own mental agility, risks backing himself into a corner. The most obvious danger perhaps is that, in feigning indifference and in striving to see what is irrational, he will become passionless and come to suspect all reason.¹⁵

The danger in such an attitude aside, the description of the workings of attitudinal irony seems applicable to Negative Love.

¹⁵ Wm. Van O'Connor, Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 131.

No conclusion concerning Donne's own commitment to life and love is here attempted. As the composer of poems expressing greater or lesser ironical detachment, he was of course, familiar with such an attitude. Whether it formed part of his own psychology is a question better answered by a biocritical, rather than a purely literary, study.

Summary.

In a way attitudinal irony is not a literary, but rather a philosophical form of irony. It bespeaks the relationship of the writer to the world in which he finds himself; in its extreme form, the speaker detaches himself from life and becomes an observer. Although every poet, in the act of composition, maintains a detachment to some degree, the detachment is deliberate and pronounced in the attitudinal ironist. He is not a social hermit, for he remains close enough to the world to deliver himself of skeptical comments. He has lost interest in participating but never tires of expressing his aloofness. Attitudinal irony occurs in mild form in a number of the poems. It never reaches the completeness described above; Negative Love is the nearest Donne approaches a philosophical detachment. In it, the speaker professes no involvement in sexual love, little even in Platonic. Indeed, he is at a loss to describe love and implies that no one knows what it is. He is content, however,

in his ignorance; for, in this way, he will never be hurt. In Negative Love, the irony is coterminous with the poem; in other works, the irony is maintained only through a phrase, or sentence, or at most, a stanza. Donne's irony is manifestly an important aspect of his achievement. Its many variations, even within the three suggested categories, help to explain why his unique theme, love, can be sounded in the many poems without a sense of boredom or monotony. And, perhaps most important, his use of irony confirms that sense of kinship between poet and reader by suggesting a gentle conspiracy of the elite against those who would be taken in by appearances.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION

The difficulty in evaluating the irony in the poetry of John Donne should not dissuade the critic from undertaking the task. It is fitting that a study such as this, after answering questions about the nature of the classification of irony in the poetry, should attempt to assess its importance. The present evaluation will proceed according to the following plan: first, a brief sampling of modern poems will be offered to indicate that irony is still a force in contemporary poetry; second, an examination of the effects of irony itself in Donne's poetry will be offered as a means of measuring its value in the poems.

1. Irony and Modern Poetry.

That modern poets are frequently ironists is a thesis for which evidence is not lacking; many poets of the twentieth century find in irony their characteristic response to the contradictory practices of society. The point to be established here is that, if irony today remains an interesting, valuable, and effective instrument of poetic communication, it very probably has merit. It is generally true that any belief, institution, or practice that has survived centuries has an inherent validity about it. Notable exceptions

will immediately come to mind. But generally, institutions which have long flourished, beliefs which have long been held, and devices which have long been found effective have an undeniable intrinsic merit. The art of story telling serves as an example. Poets have been telling stories for many centuries and are continuing to do so today. Ever since the days of Homer, men have found stories entertaining and instructive. The first poets discovered a means of communicating a thought, an ideal, a complicated truth; history shows that this means has perdured and that stories, whether those of Homer or Sinclair Lewis, are still entertaining, pleasant, and communicative. There is something in the story form itself which gives it its value, its merit, its effectiveness. Other examples from the arts and sciences could be multiplied, but the point need not be labored.

Granted that some artistic forms and devices have an intrinsic merit, there remains the question of whether irony belongs to that category. On the premise that it has endured to the present day, there is reason to see in irony a perennial, and hence worthy, quality. The present plan is to analyze the ironic content of a number of twentieth century poems, representative of the period, and to infer that irony is still an operative poetic device. No attempt is made to suggest that irony is the characteristic mode of expression in the twentieth century nor even that the practice is

widespread, although there may be a worthy field here for a further study to explore.

Wilfred Owen, a World War I poet, is not one of the great poets of the age, but his ironic response to war is representative of much war poetry in the twentieth century. Out of a number of possible poems, "Arms and the Boy" is offered here as a short and pointed illustration of his use of irony:

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.¹

The title, "Arms and the Boy", is an obvious allusion to the opening line of the Aeneid, "Arma virumque cano", "I sing of arms and the man". A comparison is thus urged between Virgil's great, heroic tale and Owen's brief unheroic comment on the glories of war. Virgil idealizes his warring hero and approves of the conditions which try his mettle. Wilfred Owen, on the other hand, with his title calling up

¹ Wilfred Owen, "Arms and the Boy", Pocket Book of Modern Verse, edited by Oscar Williams, New York, Pocket Books, Inc., 1954, p. 380.

the Virgilian picture, speaks of bayonets and cartridges in a way that only ironically resembles the Roman poet. "Keen with hunger of blood", "like a madman's flash", "famishing for flesh"; "blind, blunt bullet-heads/ Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads", --these phrases can only be taken as ironic condemnation of war. In themselves, they may be understood as merely bitter, but when viewed simultaneously with the picture conjured by the title, they can be taken as a kind of inverted praise of war, praise which in reality is a sober denunciation.

In a similar way, the last stanza suggests the evil consequences of war on the participants. On a literal level, the personality of the soldier will not be changed by war; there is no need to fear that he will grow bestial and predatory. On an ironic level, however, the implication is that the very opposite is true: talons will grow at his heels and antlers through his curls. The last stanza, then, says the opposite of what it means when read with the title and the preceding stanzas in mind.

In the terms of the preceding chapters, Owen's poem is an example of structural irony. It brings to mind one evaluation of war and heroism: Virgil's romantic Aeneid; it then juxtaposes a more cruel, more realistic description of war and its effects. The poem as a whole is an ironic comment on the Virgilian picture. In addition to the general

structural irony, certain individual lines may be shown as examples of verbal irony. Each of the last three lines may be construed as an ironic statement in itself.

There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;
And God will grow no talons at his heels,
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

Thus, the irony of the poem may be described as 1) structural, in that the total poem, in an indirect way, challenges the validity of a certain concept of war; and 2) verbal, in the three concluding statements of the poem, each of which means the opposite of what it literally says. The poem is an illustration of a successful use of irony: the intended concept of war is conveyed and, what is more important, the somewhat bitter and dissatisfied attitude of the author is communicated.

The Great War has inspired a number of poems in the twentieth century. Archibald MacLeish, an American poet, takes the futility of war as his theme in "Lines for an Interment".

Now it is fifteen years you have lain in the meadow:
The boards at your face have gone through: the earth is
Packed down and the sound of the rain is fainter:
The roots of the first grass are dead:

It's a long time to lie in the earth with your honor: 5
The world, Soldier, the world has been moving on:

The girls wouldn't look at you twice in the cloth cap:
Six years old they were when it happened:

It bores them even in books: "Soissons besieged!"
As for the gents they have joined the American Legion:10

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Belts and a brass band and the ladies' auxiliaries:
The Californians march in the OD silk:

We are all acting again like civilized beings:
People mention it at tea...

The Facts of Life we have learned are Economic: 15
You were deceived by the detonations of bombs:

You thought of courage and death when you thought
of warfare:
Hadn't they taught you the fine words were un-
fortunate?

Now that we understand we judge without bias:
We feel of course for those who had to die: 20

Women have written us novels of great passion
Proving the useless death of the dead was a tragedy:

Nevertheless it is foolish to chew gall:
The foremost writers on both sides have apologized:

The Germans are back in the Midi with cropped hair: 25
The English are drinking the better beer in Bavaria:

You can rest now in the rain in the Belgian meadow-
Now that it's all explained away and forgotten:
Now that the earth is hard and the wood rots:

Now you are dead...² 30

Like Wilfred Owen's "Arms and the Boy", "Lines for an
Interment" is an ironic indictment of war. Owen is concerned
with the ill effects of war on the soldier who survives;
MacLeish addresses himself to the soldier who did not survive.
He does not, however, confine his interest to the dead

² Archibald MacLeish, "Lines for an Interment",
Chief Modern Poets of England & America, edited by Gerald
deWitt Sanders and John Herbert Nelson, New York, The
Macmillan Company, 1943, p. 860. Ellipses are poet's.

soldier; rather, he uses the soldier as a springboard to broader themes: the futility of war; the deception practiced on the soldier; the indifference of the public. It is a more difficult poem than "Arms and the Boy", not because it sounds more themes, but because of a kind of double irony that hovers over the poem. It operates by making a certain statement and assuming a conventional reaction to the statement; then, irony takes over and inverts the original reaction; finally, another irony comes into operation and suggests that the original reaction is the proper, intended reaction.. An example of this occurs in lines 21-22:

Women have written us novels of great passion
Proving the useless death of the dead was a tragedy:

Upon reading this, a certain reaction set in: the perceptive women served a useful purpose in providing us with a true interpretation of the war dead. The next line, however, reverses this decision:

Nevertheless it is foolish to chew gall:

The poet's statement about the lady novelists now seems ironically intended. The statement now seems to call for a different reaction: the novels may have had a point to them, but, after all, it is unprofitable to dwell on past misfortunes. Thus operates the first irony: the literal meaning, of the lines compliments the novelists; the intended meaning, it is now clear, is to point up their foolishness. In the context of the total poem, however, such an

interpretation cannot be accepted as final reading of the lines. For the poem is unmistakably a grim indictment on the useless carnage of war and on the blithe indifference of the survivors. In this total meaning, the original reaction to the lines in question seems more nearly right: it was a good and noble thing for the novelists to prove that useless death is a tragedy.

It is not necessary here to analyze the ironies of the poem in a detailed way. It is sufficient to note that irony is operative throughout the poem, not only in an occasional phrase. Like Owen's "Arms and the Boy", it is built on the ironic inversion of the literal picture presented: that the soldier has been forgotten is not tragic.

Obviously, the poem depends on irony for its total effect. A poem written in a more straightforward manner, yet intending the same meaning, would be a totally different poem. "It is tragic that the cruel lessons of war are so easily forgotten": this theme might well be put forth in a direct non-ironic way, but it would not be "Lines for an Interment". Irony is of the very essence of MacLeish's poem.

W. H. Auden, another contemporary ironist, turns his attention, not to the soldier, but to the common man in a poem, "The Unknown Citizen", subtitled (To JS/O7/M/378 This Marble Monument Is Erected by the State). The impersonality of the inscription is a clue to the way in which the unknown

citizen is regarded by his world. On the surface, Auden approves of the way the world evaluated the unknown citizen. Throughout the poem he speaks quietly of the normality of the citizen's occupation, opinions, possessions, and lastly, his family. He notes that the "Social Psychology workers", "his Union", the "researchers into Public Opinion", the "Eugenist" all found JS/O7/M/378 exemplary, content, normal. Auden concludes his poem:

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.³

It is obvious that the question is not absurd; that, if anything had been wrong, it could have been ignored or covered up by the official statisticians. It is obvious that a man's happiness or unhappiness is not determined by his not having been fired from his job, or by his having left the hospital cured, or by his having "a phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire".

Auden's poem may be described as a quiet challenge to an official, mechanical means of determining happiness. His irony is not raging nor is it bitter. In the final couplet, he suggests that what he has said in the preceding twenty-seven lines was a statement, not of his view of happiness, but of an official view which he questions. This is

3 W. H. Auden, "The Unknown Citizen", Pocket Book of Modern Verse, edited by Oscar Williams, New York, Pocket Books, Inc., 1954, p. 478.

not to say that Auden here exemplifies what has previously been called irony of reversal, for he does not change his attitude at the end of the poem. On the contrary, the tongue-in-cheek attitude is evident from the subtitle; the numerical and impersonal coldness of the Orwellian inscription could not be quoted with serious approval. Furthermore, Auden's non-standard use of capitals, "served the Greater Community", "the Installment Plan", "our Social Psychology workers", "researchers in to Public Opinion", can only indicate that these institutions are not as infallibly competent as they think. Any doubts as to the ironic tone of the poem can be resolved by noting the name of the citizen's employer: Fudge Motors, Inc.

The poem presents a detailed recipe for happiness. Insofar as that total picture is challenged ironically, the poem is structurally ironic. Individual statements within the poem may be construed as verbal irony; for instance, the answer to the question, "Was he happy?":

...The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

But the total poem, like those of Owen and MacLeish, is an example of structural irony.

It seems appropriate, in this brief survey of modern poets, to take note of T. S. Eliot, whom many consider the foremost influence in modern poetry. Eliot's use of irony is more literary and more subtle than that of the poets

previously cited. Beside Eliot, W. H. Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" is crude and obvious. Wilfred Owen, on the other hand, approaches the literary allusiveness of Eliot in his oblique reference to Virgil, "Arms and the Boy", although the poem itself is less recondite than much of Eliot. All this is merely to say what has been said in an earlier chapter, that irony takes shape according to the personal use of the particular poet.

From the many possible examples, a portion of "A Game of Chess" from The Waste Land is here offered as a comparatively accessible illustration of irony.

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines
 From which a golden Cupidon peeped out
 (Another hid his eyes behind his wing)
 Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra
 Reflecting light upon the table as
 The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,
 From satin cases poured in rich profusion;⁴

The poem continues in this vein for a number of lines to establish the desired impression: beauty, splendor, luxury, elegance, and, by implication, fulfillment, contentment. The pleasant picture is ironically inverted, however, by a speech, presumably by the woman referred to in the first line:

⁴ T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land", The Complete Poems and Plays, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1930, p. 39, ll. 77-85.

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.
 "Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.
 "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?
 "I never know what you are thinking. Think."

The dramatic monologue implies a speaker who is lonely, insecure, unfulfilled; a speaker whose depressed spirit is not matched by her surroundings. The irony lies in the inversion of the impression created by lines describing her room. As previously indicated, Eliot creates an impression of opulence, taste, luxury, beauty--all of this with the implication of happiness and emotional security. To a reader who is acquainted with the monologue which follows the description, the lines and their implication are ironic: opulence, taste, luxury, beauty are not productive of happiness and emotional security. In terms of the preceding chapters analyzing Donne's use of irony, this portion of The Waste Land could be adequately described as the irony of reversal, a species of structural irony, in which the meaning of the poem is reversed by its conclusion. In the present poem, it is not the whole poem whose meaning is reversed, but only a forty-line section thereof.

The foregoing analysis of the irony in four contemporary poems, sketchy and incomplete as it is, indicates that irony is still a force in literature three hundred years after the time of John Donne. Not all contemporary poets are interested in irony, but the four quoted are not untypical. Although the vigor and influence of some of the

four may be in question, the stature and position of T. S. Eliot is widely acclaimed. To a lesser degree, W. H. Auden and Archibald MacLeish have established themselves as notable poets. Even Wilfred Owen, the least known of the four, has been anthologized in a number of collections.

The themes sounded in the four poems quoted could doubtless have been expressed without the use of irony: the ill effects of war on young soldiers, the futility of war, the depersonalization of society, the deceptive satisfaction of wealth. The themes are susceptible of more direct attacks. The resulting poems, however, while thematically identical with the present poems, would have been essentially different poems. The point is that the poems could have been so written that the themes did not dictate that irony be used: the individual poets chose irony as a means of producing a certain effect. That these worldly-wise twentieth century poets chose it at all is a strong indication that irony is of solid, lasting value; that it is not an artificial device suited only to one age and to one theme. And the fact that they used it well is an indication that irony remains an effective means of communicating an attitude precisely.

2. The Effects of Irony.

The value of irony is not absolute. Its value can be arrived at only by examining its effects or by considering it as an effective or ineffective means to an end. Its mere presence in a poem does not insure the worthiness of the poem, any more than rime or lack of rime determines the goodness or badness of a poem. What William Empson says of ambiguity can easily be applied to irony:

An ambiguity, then, is not satisfying in itself, nor is it, considered as a device on its own, a thing to be attempted; it must in each case arise from, and be justified by, the peculiar requirements of the situation.⁵

It is necessary, then, to study the "situation", that is the particular emotion or experience to be communicated. As a method of arriving at the situation, irony will be considered in its relation to the poet and to the poem itself.

Earlier in this study, much was made of David Worcester's distinction between the world of the elite and the world of the uninitiate, which distinction, says Worcester, obtains in all forms of irony. On the strength of this distinction, it is possible to find a further, less worthy use of irony for the poet: irony allows him to speak a single word (or phrase, or sentence) which will be

⁵ William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, Norfolk, Conn., New Directions Books, 1930, p. 235.

comprehended in its fulness by one hearer but will be only half-understood by another. The doubtful value of such a use of irony is made possible by the creation (if only in the imagination) of a class of reader to whom the poet together with his more perceptive readers can feel superior. It is as if a speaker told a joke which was understood completely by one portion of the audience but was only partially understood by another. If this effect were intended by the speaker, the ignorance of those who did not completely understand would render the joke even more amusing to the speaker and to those who understood. Such an effect is produced in almost all instances of Donne's verbal irony: "Love me that I may die the gentler way" (The Prohibition), "Fain'd vestall" (The Apparition). A more difficult example occurs in The Canonization:

Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.⁶

That this almost casual attack on man's propensity to quarrel may escape the notice of some readers promotes the brotherhood of superiority between the poet and his more knowing readers.

Such a use of irony can hardly be called worthy. It smacks of snobbishness, a not wholly admirable quality. It

⁶ The Canonization, ll. 16-18, p. 14.

seems entirely reasonable, however, that such a use of irony, worthy or not, is operative, particularly in Donne's verbal irony.

Irony as a safeguard against the charges of both sentimentality and cynicism is a further use of irony for the poet. It is of course possible to avoid being sentimental by being completely cynical, that is, by rejecting completely the concept of human love, by denying completely that faithful love is possible. And conversely, it is possible to avoid cynicism by accepting a blind, uncritical faith in sentimental love. Donne rejects both extremes, though it can hardly be said that he follows the middle course, tending as he does to be denunciatory rather than calmly judicious. He expresses his rejection of the two extremes even in his most pagan praises of lust, which poems might be expected to contain no note of the ideal, faithful love. Loves Usury is a plea to the god of love to spare the poet in his youth so that he may enjoy the diversified pursuit of lust. It seems to be a hymn to lust and a repudiation of true love. Towards the end of the poem, a clue to the irony of the poem indicates that, in spite of the poet's rejection of true love, there is also a belief, admittedly minimal and almost reluctant, in the possibility of a true love. A fuller analysis of the workings of structural irony in this poem

has previously been offered.⁷ It is sufficient to note here that the irony in Loves Usury, as well as in most other poems denouncing true love, affords the poet the means of avoiding, on the one hand, a total cynicism, and on the other, an uncritical sentimentalism.

A further use of irony provides the poet a fitting way to present conflicting emotions. On the premise that conflicting emotions present a possible theme to a poet, irony takes on a definite value as a means, probably the best means, of communicating the unresolved emotion. Donne's The Apparition is the clearest example of this use of irony. In this poem, Donne expresses a cruel, almost sadistic hatred for his scornful mistress; he threatens to haunt her after his death. At the same time, an (unstated) plea for her return runs through the poem. Thus, the vindictive desire to punish and the opposing plea to return are concurrent themes in the poem, just as they are concurrent themes in the poet's emotional state. The ironic style, then, in such poems as The Apparition, is an adequate and useful style because it is an exact expression of the poet's mind. Other methods of expressing the conflict, for instance, consecutive descriptions of the two emotions, might well communicate this idea adequately enough; but it is doubtful whether such a

⁷ See above Chapter III, p. 109 ff.

style would adequately communicate the experience. It seems likely that the structural irony in The Apparition and similar poems is the best way, if not the only way, to communicate such a complex experience.

Some critics do not consider emotional uncertainty to be a fitting theme for the highest poetry. K. W. Gransden probably has a work like The Apparition in mind when he says,

Much of his work just fails, by an excess of intellectual complexity, to attain that luminous certainty of statement, that profound feeling of universality and stability, which belong to the art.⁸

If "luminous certainty" be admitted as a requisite for the greatest poetry, it must be admitted that the ironic poems of Donne would fall far short; if, on the other hand, "perfect expression" be among the highest criteria, they would rank much higher.

Thus, irony has at least three distinct uses for the poet: as a snobbish device in deceiving a portion of his readers; as a safeguard against both cynicism and sentimentalism; as an artistic synthesis of simultaneous conflicting emotions. Obviously, they are not equally worthy: the ascending order in which they are listed above is intended to suggest their relative merit.

⁸ K. W. Gransden, John Donne, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1954, p. 53.

The distinction made between the value of irony for the poet and to the poem is likely to seem, at best, artificial, and, at worst, questionable. Nevertheless there seems to be some basis for such a distinction in that the poet and the poem, in reality, are distinct. It would seem possible, for instance, to speak of the artistic merit or the objectivity of a poem without necessarily referring to the poet.

Irony endows the poem with emotional distance, a requisite for all art. The less the emotional distance, the more like nature or life the poem becomes; the more like nature or life it becomes, the less art it has. Such a conclusion rests on the premise that art and nature are two distinct things and should remain so. Art may interpret nature, comment on it, and even resemble it, but the closer it approaches to becoming nature, the less it remains art.

Particularly in Donne's use of verbal irony, his poems indicate that necessary emotional distance. The irony indicates that the poem is sufficiently removed from the poet to be artistic. For instance, in The Apparition, the mistress is chastised with the ironic epithet "fain'd vestall". Had the artist in the speaker been less removed from the indignant suitor, an epithet like "false Cressida" or, even more bluntly, "faithless whore" would have taken the place of "fain'd vestall". The irony of Donne's epithet

implies a certain presence of mind, a control of emotion, an objectivity not implied by the other two phrases. The poem itself is the beneficiary of the objectivity; with this, it has a better chance of standing as art.

The same effect can be noted in other poems which employ verbal irony, such as Womans constancy. The sarcastic irony of "Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day", while less scathing than the preceding example, is just as much controlled, hence just as emotionally distant.

While this effect of irony is most noticeable in the uses of verbal irony, it can also be found in structurally ironic poems. In Donne's eighteen-line Sonnet. The Token,⁹ the major part of the poem is spent in cataloguing the items not to be sent to the writer; the ironic intent of the poem, however, is that these very items are the ones to be sent. A poem devoid of the necessary emotional distance would have been simply an eager plea to send the items in question. Donne's poem, on the contrary, by its structural irony indicates that the proper emotional distance separates poem and writer.

This effect of irony is most fully exploited in what has been called attitudinal irony. Donne does not often employ this type of irony in its pure form. In Negative

⁹ See above, p. 94.

Love, which comes closest to being a true example of attitudinal irony, he achieves an almost complete intellectual and emotional separation from the world around him. The result is a poem of fine skepticism, a disinterested skepticism which acts, for the poet, as a protective shield against the unfeeling arrows of faithless love. While there are advantages in such an ironic skepticism, its extreme form can result in a dehumanization of the poet. William O'Connor, in Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry, notes that there is a danger for the ironist who feigns complete indifference to all around him, a danger that "he will become passionless and come to suspect all reason".¹⁰ Attitudinal irony can be the means of viewing life in a detached, philosophical way. As such, it can arrive at valid, more objective judgments about life's annoyances as well as its joys. Carried to an extreme, however, it can reduce the poet-philosopher to a mere vegetable observer of life, passionless, inactive, unmotivated.

In analyzing the effects of irony as a means of evaluating it, an attempt has been made to claim only such virtues as are warranted. The inclination to evaluate the subject in proportion to the effort expended in exploring it

¹⁰ William Van O'Connor, Sense and Sensibility in Modern Poetry, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, p. 131.

has been, it is hoped, successfully overcome. The failings of irony have been listed along with its merits. The "Snob" appeal of the double-meaning verbal irony and the tendency of attitudinal irony to make a vegetable spectator of the ironist; the ability of both verbal and structural irony to artistically fuse simultaneous, conflicting emotions; its aptness in providing emotional distance--all have been considered in deciding the merit of irony. While irony can be abused and sought after for its own sake, and while its mere presence in a poem does not guarantee the success of the poem, it is, as William Empson says of ambiguity, "a thing which the more interesting and valuable situations are more likely to justify".¹¹ If the experience to be communicated is itself complicated, conflicting, and two-sided, the ironic style provides a perfect means for exact communication.

¹¹ William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity, p. 235.

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Irony has been used by a great number of writers in a great number of ways. It appears in prose and poetry, in lyric and dramatic, in ancient and modern literature. It has inaccurate, colloquial meanings as well as more precise, critical definitions. By accepting tentatively the definition of irony as a statement which says one thing and means another, it is possible to examine a number of possible examples of irony, and thereby formulate a refined definition, one that is broad enough to include the many forms of irony and narrow enough to exclude expressions which only superficially resemble irony.

An analysis of many examples and of contemporary criticism reveals that irony, reduced to its elements, is one-ness comprehending two-ness accompanied by a clash, the clash being the product of impropriety, unexpectedness, inappropriateness, or some other quality equally capable of rendering the one-two combination unusual. The one-ness may be a single individual, a single mind, a single word. In some way, the single individual takes a double view, a double attitude; the single situation takes on a double significance; or the single word or phrase has a double meaning. The way in which the one-ness comprehends the two-ness must be inappropriate, unexpected, improper or unusual in some other way.

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Irony is conveniently classified into five groups: verbal, dramatic, irony of impropriety, attitudinal, and romantic.

Of all forms, verbal irony is the simplest and most easily understood. It is an utterance which says one thing and means another. The comment made by the Biblical Job to his consolers is a fitting example: "No doubt but that ye are the people and wisdom will die with you". Literally, the statement is complimentary; on another level, however, it is a thinly veiled insult. While the example is clear enough, it is well to note that the force of the irony probably depends, to some extent at least, on an implied distinction between the world of the elite and the world of the uninitiate. The former understand the inverted meaning of the statement, the latter do not. The irony is savored the more by the elite because of their awareness of the ignorance of the uninitiate. The distinction between these two worlds is operative in all forms of irony.

Dramatic irony demands a speaker and an audience: a speaker who is not aware of the full import of his words, and an audience who is. Sophoclean tragedy offers many examples. Oedipus the King, in the play of the same name, seeks the murderer of King Laius. His words and actions pressing toward the discovery of the murderer have a terrible-ness that he does not suspect; for, unknown to him but known

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to the audience, Oedipus himself is the murderer. When the words or actions of a speaker have an import unknown to him, the result is dramatic irony. Needless to say, this form of irony occurs almost exclusively in narrative and dramatic literature; it can occur in lyric poetry only when the poem can be viewed as a dramatic monologue.

The irony of impropriety refers to events or situations perceived to be incongruously improper. Both terms are important. For not only must the situation be improper, but it must be strangely, or unusually, or unnaturally so. Cheating at cards, for instance, is improper, but not ironically so; but a man who denounces dishonest practices in the morning and who cheats at poker in the evening presents a possibility of irony. Objectively speaking, such a situation might be termed hypocrisy. When it is perceived, however, by someone who takes a grim delight in the disparity between theory and practice, the result is best termed irony. Unlike dramatic irony, the irony of impropriety can be found in all literary forms, whether dramatic, narrative, or lyric.

Attitudinal irony shifts the attention from the thing observed to the observer. As the term implies, this form of irony bespeaks an attitude. It is the philosophy of a man who is convinced that appearances so successfully hide reality that it is wiser to suspend judgment and to admit the inscrutability of reality. In so far as it is possible, he

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abstracts himself from the affairs of men. He separates himself from the rest of mankind who (mistakenly) claim to know what is true and what is false. The ironist places himself in a select group who share the knowledge that the rest of mankind are deluded. Thus described, attitudinal irony reaches its zenith; it can, of course, be professed and manifested to a lesser degree.

Romantic irony, included here for the sake of completeness, is not mentioned by most critics. At best, a dubious form of true irony, romantic irony is "the willful destruction of illusion in works of fiction and drama". It occurs largely in plays of the German Romantic period, in which a character, by stepping outside his role and addressing the audience or by a similar device, destroys the theatrical illusions of reality. It is difficult to support such a device as a true form of irony.

The elasticity and range of irony as suggested in the foregoing classification facilitates the understanding of its elasticity and range when encountered in a single writer. In the poetry of John Donne, the preceding analysis should make easier the detection and understanding of the many forms of the irony of impropriety and of verbal irony, examples differing not only in kind, but in intensity or in seriousness or in object. Irony is as changeable and as Protean as poetry itself.

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Irony affords a distinct pleasure to the keen minded. As long as men continue to take delight in noting the disparity between appearance and reality, so long will irony be valuable. As long as the perceiver can remain emotionally uninvolved, the subtle ambiguities of irony create a delight comparable to that of discovering something entirely new. Viewed artistically, irony has merit as a device of economy: it communicates fact and tone simultaneously. The statement, "The Christian city of Liverpool supported 2,000 prostitutes", reveals not only a fact, but the writer's ironic attitude as well. In addition to the intellectual pleasures and artistic economy of verbal and dramatic irony, the philosophical detachment known as attitudinal irony often acts as a psychological safety valve for those who become depressed or obsessed with the contradictions and hypocrisies of human life. At the same time, the caveat should be sounded that attitudinal irony leads to complete detachment and to dehumanization.

Irony should not be considered the highest literary virtue; its presence in a poem does not insure greatness, or even success. In those situations which find in irony their best poetic expression, irony is indeed the best expression. Absolutely speaking, however, irony has no more merit than any other literary device.

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Because satire and paradox are, like irony, concerned with inequities, contradictions, and the like, they are often conceived as identical, or nearly identical with irony. While all three spring from a common root, their differences are appreciable. Simply stated, satire differs from irony in that satire operates by exaggeration whereas irony operates by inversion. Further differences in mood and purpose are illuminating: satire is outrageously humorous and glaring, its purpose a change in the social order; irony is grim and reflective, its purpose, apparently quiet meditation.

The difference between paradox and irony is that paradox says and means one thing, whereas irony says one thing and means the opposite. The paradox appears to be untrue, but, after examination, the truth of the apparent contradiction is evident. Irony is never thus resolved; it continues to have two meanings, one literal and one implicit. Occasionally, a poet who enjoys an overweening interplay of logical operations will fuse paradox and irony; ordinarily, however, the two remain separate and distinct.

Donne's Use of Irony

The verbal irony in the poems of John Donne is varied. Sometimes it is expressed in a single ironic phrase; sometimes it is extended through the whole poem. The Apparition contains a single ironic phrase, "fain'd vestall",

whereas Elegie XVII is almost wholly a series of ironic couplets, each praising the plurality of loves. The Extasie presents an example of a single ironic sentence influencing the interpretation of the rest of the poem. Towards the end, the tongue-in-cheek "he shall see/ Small change, when we're to bodies gone" is a clue that what seemed to be an earnest poem of Platonic love is in reality an elaborate joke.

Donne's irony is not always employed in the service of love.

In one instance, The Canonization, he ironically alludes to the quarrelsome disposition of men. In answer to his question, "Who is injured by my love?", he answers, "Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still/ Litigious men, which quarrels move,/ Though she and I do love". Even here, the criticism of the inclination to quarrel is inspired by a question of love. Most often, however, the irony is more precisely directed at some aspect of love.

The pun is a valid form of verbal irony as long as it can be conceded that it intends to deceive a portion of its readership. The use of the pun is limited almost exclusively to the word "die". Donne plays on the word in a large number of the poems, and in most of them it seems probable that the author depends on the conjecture that "unamorous laymen" will not comprehend both meanings of the word. In the instances alluded to, the word is always directly expressed; but it has been argued by at least one critic that the pun

in A Valediction: forbidding mourning operates on an implicit level, the word itself being omitted.

When the total poem is an ironic statement, or when the impact of the irony derives from the poem as a whole rather than from an individual line or phrase, structural irony is said to be in operation. The Token, for instance, spends sixteen lines urging the lady what not to send as tokens of love, whereas the final couplet, spending only two lines on what she should send, indicates that the total love-message is to be understood ironically. "Send me not these many tokens; send me only word that you think I love you" is the literal meaning of the poem. Read ironically, the poem says, "Send me these many tokens; in that way, I will be assured that you think I love you".

Structural irony operates also when the poet is unable to resolve his emotions. In The undertaking, he believes that the conditions for Platonic love no longer exist; he also lauds this kind of love as if it were possible to exist. The irresolution of his hopes and doubts results in a poem which says two things, a structurally ironic poem. In yet another type of poem, a certain opinion, stated at the beginning, is reversed in the course of the poem. The reversal is considered a species of structural irony. Donne uses this device a number of times and occasionally, as in The Message and The Prohibition, a double reversal is

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employed. Structural irony, in one of its three forms, engages Donne's most difficult poems. It is more obvious in some poems than in others. Like verbal irony, it is sometimes bitter and cynical, sometimes playful. More often it is a poetic vehicle for a complicated state of unresolved emotions.

Attitudinal irony, which enables the speaker to view himself in a given situation as if he were separated from it, occurs rather seldom in the poems, and never with any degree of completeness. It occurs when the poet addresses himself as if he were an outside observer in a single sentence of Womans constancy; it occurs in a more complete degree in Loves diet, in which a separation between himself and his emotional love (considered in the poem as a distinct, second person) is maintained throughout the poem. Negative Love is Donne's closest approximation to a full attitudinal irony. In it, he expresses an ignorance of and an indifference to the workings of love; he is a skeptical, uninterested commentator, an atypical role for Donne.

In assessing the importance of irony in general, its continued employment by twentieth century poets is a fairly reliable index. A survey of four poems, by authors of various sensibilities, indicates that irony is still a useful force in expressing a certain kind of response to experience. Its perduring quality is a persuasive argument

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that it, like other time-honored modes of expression, has an importance that transcends a single poet or a single literary epoch.

As to the poems of Donne in particular, irony makes several distinct, though unequal, contributions. On the assumption that an unidentified portion of the readership will be deceived by the various ironies, the sophisticated reader enters into an elite brotherhood with the poet and others of his class, relishing the ignorance of those who are not aware of the inverted workings of irony, especially, though by no means exclusively, in one of its forms, the pun. Although this is one of the least worthy effects of irony, it helps to account for that distinctively intellectual flavor of the poems, a quality praised by many contemporary critics.

An allied effect is the opportunity to view the clash between appearance and reality, a distinct pleasure for the keen minded, which, as one critic has it, is one of the most enduring of human pleasures. The clash between the appearance of "fain'd vestall" and its less savory reality, between the appearance of Platonic love and reality of its less ethereal expression, between the appearance of an earnest entreaty not to send certain love tokens and the reality of the need for those very tokens: these are but a few of the ironic clashes that Donne presents. For those

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who relish the subtle expression of the perennial war between appearance and reality, irony scores a point not marred by the overtones of snobbery indicated previously.

Irony provides an economical way of communicating both fact and tone. Although communication of fact is not so important in lyric as in narrative writing, yet the knowledge of the poem's circumstances is necessary to an understanding of the lyric. In the first line of Womans constancy, "Now thou has lov'd me one whole day", Donne communicates both the factual information as to the duration of the attachment and his half-contempuous attitude toward the parting lady. "Whole" thus coupled with "one...day" expresses both fact and tone. Such economy does not of course pertain exclusively to irony, but to other modes of expression as well.

Donne uses irony as a means of expressing an attitude which avoids two undesirable extremes, sentimentality and cynicism. Although the former presents little temptation to Donne, those of his poems whose tenderness shows a tendency toward sentimentality are often saved therefrom by a gentle touch of irony. Cynicism, to which Donne is more inclined, is likewise averted by the use of irony: the emotional distance needed to call a faithless mistress "fain'd vestall" precludes the pure cynicism of a more direct epithet, such as "harlot".

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Attitudinal irony, the philosophy which allows the poet to stand aloof from human affairs, protects him from the disappointments of life and love. Its skepticism and lack of involvement, as in Negative Love, are psychologically beneficial if worn as an occasional shield; habitual and extreme attitudinal irony, however, lead only to a completely uninterested vegetable existence.

Perhaps the greatest merit attaching to irony lies in its addressing the complicated and unresolved emotions of Donne. If it is conceded that the irresolution between an ardent hope for faithful love and a deep distrust in its occurrence is a fitting theme for poetry; if the unresolved desire to punish and the desire to forgive is a fitting theme; if the irresolution between the need to love and the inclination to hate is a fitting theme; then irony should find a place among the more useful modes of expression, for it contrives to maintain, at the end of the poem, the exact state of emotional irresolution in the poet's experience itself. For Donne, who wished to sound such complex and unresolved themes, irony was a useful, almost a necessary, tool.

Finally, irony is malleable; it can be varied to suit the mood of the poem. Sometimes, Donne's irony is harsh and bitter, sometimes gentle and playful. In some poems, its appearance is glaring and blatant; in others, subtle and barely perceptible. Its range increases its

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usefulness for a poet who knows how to handle it.

It should always be remembered that irony as an unwarranted ornament makes no contribution to the success of a poem. As such, it may have brilliance, but no basis. Irony must never be irony for its own sake; it must always have a center. An ambiguous emotion, an unresolved state of mind, or a necessity to say two things at once must always underlie the brilliance of irony; otherwise, it is cheap and meretricious. Irony that is introduced to complicate what was originally a simple thought or emotion is deliberate and, in the pejorative sense, artificial; irony that is intended to reflect the tortuous psychology of a Donne-like lover is a desirable quality of the style of a poet who wants to sacrifice none of the psychological intricacies of such a lover to a barren, though lucid, style. For the speaker in the poems of Donne is not the simple lover found in early ballads. He is a type of modern man and his response to amatory experience needs for its expression a style more complicated than the clear flatness of the ballads. A study of Donne's poems indicates that his use of irony was honest and well-founded: the quality of experience he wished to convey called for the subtle twists and variations of irony.

The present thesis attempts only certain conclusions about the nature of irony in Donne's Songs and Sonets and his Elegies. It does not presume to define the relationship

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between Donne the man and Donne the speaker in the poems. Nor does it define the relationship of irony to the Metaphysical School in general. In addition to these topics, future studies of Donne might address themselves to the classification and evaluation of certain features of the Divine Poems, features such as paradox and "improper" imagery, which, while not precisely irony, belong to the same family.

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APPENDIX

ABSTRACT OF

Irony and the Secular Poems of John Donne¹

The continued attention which twentieth century scholarship has given to John Donne, together with the importance attributed to irony as a criterion in contemporary criticism, indicated that a study of the irony in Donne might be of some value, inasmuch as even a cursory reading of Donne's poems reveals a high incidence of irony. This thesis was undertaken to clarify the general notion of irony, to identify and classify the irony in Donne's poetry, and finally to evaluate the irony. The thesis is limited to the Songs and Sonets and the Elegies.

An analysis of many examples of irony reveals that basically it is one-ness comprehending two-ness accompanied by a clash, the clash being the product of impropriety, unexpectedness, inappropriateness, or some other quality equally capable of rendering the one-two combination unusual. The one-ness may be a single word, a single mind, a single individual; the two-ness may be a double meaning (of a word or a situation) or a double attitude.

¹ Robert A. Banet, doctoral thesis presented to the English Department of the University of Ottawa, Ontario, February, 1961, viii-222 p.

Generally speaking, irony is classified into five groups: verbal, dramatic, irony of impropriety, attitudinal, romantic. Verbal irony consists in an utterance which says one thing and means another. Dramatic irony demands a character and an audience: a character who is not fully aware of his situation and of the import of his own words and deeds; and an audience who is aware of the dramatic circumstances and of the character's ignorance thereof. The irony of impropriety refers to events or situations which are perceived to be incongruously improper. Both terms are essential: not only must the situation perceived be improper, but it must be strangely, or unusually, or unnaturally so. Attitudinal irony shifts the attention from the thing observed to the observer. The attitudinal ironist is convinced that appearances so successfully hide reality that it is wiser to suspend judgment and to admit the inscrutability of reality; he detaches himself emotionally from the affairs of men and views the world in an objective, uninvolved manner. Romantic irony, a dubious form of true irony, is "the wilful destruction of illusion in works of fiction and drama": a character, by stepping outside his role and addressing the audience, destroys the theatrical illusion of reality.

Donne's irony is here studied under three main headings: verbal, structural, and attitudinal.

His use of verbal irony is varied. Sometimes it is expressed in a single phrase; sometimes it is extended throughout the poem. In most instances, the irony is employed in the service of love; in at least one poem, however, Donne uses irony in an oblique reference to man's irrationality. The pun, considered here as a legitimate form of verbal irony, is frequently operative in a Donne poem, but is virtually limited to a single word.

Structural irony is said to be in operation when the total poem is an ironic statement or when the impact of the irony derives from the whole poem rather than from an individual line or phrase. It also occurs when the poet is unable to resolve the dominant emotion in the poem. Reversal of opinion in the course of the poem is considered as a type of structural irony.

Attitudinal irony, which enables the speaker to view himself in a given situation as if he were separated from it, occurs rather seldom in the poems, and never with any degree of completeness.

The importance of irony in general is indicated by its continued employment in the twentieth century. A study of several twentieth century poems argues that irony remains an effective poetic device. Aside from this historical evaluation, Donne's irony can be said to form the basis for an elite brotherhood between the poet and the reader who is

sophisticated enough to appreciate the various ironies.

Further, the poems provide an opportunity to view the clash between appearance and reality, one of the more enduring of human pleasures.

Irony is economical in that it can communicate not only necessary factual information, but also the tone of the speaker. In yet another way, irony is a safeguard against the two extremes of sentimentality and cynicism. The greatest merit attaching to Donne's irony lies in its providing an adequate vehicle for the complicated, ambiguous, and unresolved emotions of the speaker.

Irony that is artificially introduced into a poem is meretricious. Donne's irony is used not for the sake of brilliance alone, but as a functional ornament necessary to express complicated themes.

Further studies suggested by this thesis include: a biocritical study of Donne's irony; the importance of paradox and unorthodox imagery in the Divine Poems; and the importance of irony as a characteristic of the Metaphysical School.

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