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NEGOTIATING THE THRESHOLD: SELF–OTHER DYNAMICS IN MILTON, HERBERT, AND DONNE

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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July, 1996
Abstract

Negotiating the Threshold: Self–Other Dynamics in Milton, Herbert, and Donne

by

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Donne, Herbert, and Milton share a persistent concern to excavate self-other dynamics. Despite differences of theology and ideology, these poets pursue others with similar complexity: longing for and seeking out, quarrelling with and striving to understand their primary "objects"—whether a woman or God, a spouse or "parent." Each poet seems preoccupied with testing the quality, and interpreting the meaning, of the self's relatedness to the other; speakers are in conversation with others, approaching the other with alternating delight, mistrust, and anxiety about the risks of contact. The prevalence of such moments throughout Songs and Sonets, The Temple, and Paradise Lost not only suggests the primacy of relational issues for these poets, but also testifies to the nuanced, idiosyncratic conflictedness of self-other engagement. Donne, Herbert, and Milton write from deep with a realm of intersubjective experience—a "relational matrix"—that requires an often precarious balancing act of contradictory imperatives. Such a dialectical process can be richly explored through the paradigms of object-relations psychoanalytic theory, which holds self and other to be inseparable and is broadly focused on inter- and intrapersonal conflict as the primary environmental determinant of "self." In particular, the work of D. W. Winnicott provides a unique set of terms with which to unwrap and sustain the liminality of object relating in these poets' work. Committed to "paradox,"
Winnicott believed that self and other, interior and exterior, reality and fantasy, autonomy and attachment all paradoxically coincide; this fundamental notion of the overlap of relatedness is especially suited for unpacking the ways in which relationality in these three poets seems strained and ambiguous, challenging and revisionary. My argument attempts to push this body of poetry past traditional characterization—to suggest that while the interdependence of self and other may require a constant negotiation of opposing claims, it also opens a space where revisions, exchanges, re-negotiations of gender and ideology transpire. By attending to the dialectical characteristics of these poets, one discovers how consistently they test boundaries, challenge hierarchies, and contrive to revise the terms by which “self” can be defined and experienced.
Acknowledgements

I am pleased first to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Deborah Harter, for her good-spirited willingness to read this project at a very late date, and for sharing with me her own work; Meredith Skura, an important advocate of psychoanalytic thinking who encouraged me to write this dissertation; and above all Edward Snow, a silent interlocutor throughout these pages. To Ed I owe a debt not easily repaid. His sensibility has forever changed the way I imagine and perform literary criticism, while at the same time sustaining my own impulse toward a certain way of reading slowly.

To Hinda Simon I am uniquely indebted. My work has been deeply, if indirectly, inflected by our long-term “conversations” of the past two years. Her psychoanalytic insights—at times even her language—are reflected here.

I am grateful to my family and friends, whose careful “handling” has been an underlying source of support throughout the process of writing. I want particularly to acknowledge my mother, Beth MacKenzie, whose interest in this material is both professional and personal, and who has informed my thinking about object-relations in complex ways. Tracy Volz, Pimone Triplett, Melinda Dougharty, Eileen Cleere, Seth Hurwitz, and Susan Davis seemed always to offer the needed word of encouragement at just the right moment. Special thanks to Michael Levine, for his logistical guidance no less than his belief that I could finish; and to Cyndy Williams, for always wanting to learn.

Finally, incalculable gratitude to Greg Fraser, who provided the “holding environment” in which these ideas gradually emerged. Without his heroic support this dissertation could not have been.
Portions of each chapter have been previously published or presented as conference papers, and I have benefitted from the discussions resulting from those presentations. The section on Donne’s “Song. Sweetest love” was read at the eleventh annual John Donne Society Conference in February 1996. A shorter version of my analysis of Herbert’s “The Holdfast” appeared in the _The George Herbert Journal_ 17, 2 (spring 1994). A compressed discussion of Eve’s revision of Michael’s speech in _Paradise Lost_ was presented at the Christianity and Literature conference at Baylor University in October 1995.
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Introduction

Donne, Herbert, and Milton share a persistent concern to excavate self-other dynamics. Despite differences of theology and ideology, these poets pursue others with similar complexity: longing for and seeking out, quarreling with and striving to understand their primary "objects"—whether a woman or God, a spouse or "parent." All three poets seem preoccupied with testing the quality, and interpreting the meaning, of the self’s relatedness to the other; again and again, speakers are in conversation with others, approaching the other with alternating delight, mistrust, and anxiety about the risks of contact. When the speaker of George Herbert’s “The 23rd Psalme” asks, for instance, “While he is mine, and I am his, / What can I want or need?” he verbalizes the sense of omnipotent gratification a child can experience within the space of relatedness to a parent. But the rhetorical form of the question belies the speaker’s apparent trust in that satisfaction, as if he requires external assurance; the temporality of “While” suggests a worry that the mutual, pleasurable “having” might not endure. Similarly, when the lover of Donne’s “The Extasie” describes “eye-beames twisted” (7), a hand that “entergrafs” another (9), palms that are “firmely cimented / With a fast balm” (5–6), and souls that “negotiate” (17) and “interinanimate” (42), his language conveys an anxious need to solidify a tenuous connection even as it recalls the physical and psychical entwining of the earliest bond between baby and caregiving body. And when Adam first addresses Eve in Paradise Lost as “Sole partner and sole part of all these joys” (4.411), his phrases pair wholeness and singularity with division and particularity, underscoring the conflict between a wish for seamless connection and the inevitability of separateness.
The prevalence of such moments throughout *Songs and Sonets, The Temple*, and *Paradise Lost* not only suggests the primacy of relational issues for these three poets, but also testifies to the nuanced, idiosyncratic conflictedness of self-other engagement. Donne, Herbert, and Milton write from deep within a realm of intersubjective experience—what object-relations psychoanalytic theory calls the "relational matrix" (Greenberg and Mitchell 189)—that involves an often precarious balancing act of contradictory imperatives. Poetic speakers negotiate the wrenched complexity of attachment in an interpersonal field that is in some sense always defined by the "intermediate area": a threshold space between, but also of, self and other, where the self sculpts a sense of identity through its gradual recognition of the separate subjectivity of its "objects." In such a dialectical process, the boundaries of self inevitably fluctuate. Thus Adam seems at once hurt by and in awe of Eve’s refusal to meet his need for an "individual solace" (4.486), one whose very separateness from him would signify her attachment, whose "individuality" would acknowledge an ontological debt to the rib he gave up in order to give her life. And even the lighthearted play on "all" in Donne’s "Lovers infinitenesse"—"If yet I have not all thy love, / Deare, I shall never have it all" (1–2); “Yet I would not have all yet, / Hee that hath all can have no more” (23–24)—records apprehension about what closeness might bring: an all-consuming demand on the self, an untenable wish to have all of, and be all to, the other.

The intricate self-other dynamics that Donne, Herbert, and Milton articulate can be richly explored through the paradigms of object-relations theory, which holds self and other to be inseparable and is broadly focused on inter- and intrapersonal conflict as the primary environmental determinant of "self."
work of D. W. Winnicott—the leading figure of the so-called British Independent school of object relations—is especially suited for unpacking the ways in which the phenomenon of relatedness in these three poets seems strained and ambiguous, challenging and revisionary. Winnicott was dually interested in the dialectical mother-infant “environment” out of which the self emerges (eliciting his claim that “There is no such thing as a baby,” but rather always a “nursing couple” [“Anxiety Associated with Insecurity” 99]), and in the tension of the threshold between subjective experience and objective reality. He thus provides a unique set of terms with which to unravel, and even to sustain, the liminality of object relating in the work of these poets. Winnicott’s commitment to paradox, moreover—to “the acceptance of the paradox” as “the essential feature in the concept of transitional objects and phenomena” (“The Use of an Object” 89; italics in original)—puts into sharp relief his belief that self and other, interior and exterior, reality and fantasy, autonomy and attachment all paradoxically coincide; this fundamental overlap of relatedness must be “accepted and tolerated and respected, and [not] resolved” (Playing and Reality xi). (Winnicott himself notes that the “intermediate area . . . appears in full force in the work characteristic of the so-called metaphysical poets” [Playing and Reality xi]). Winnicott’s investigation of what he termed “environmental provision” leads to a theory of selfhood in which no individual exists outside of its object relationships, even at the first stages of life; with so much at stake, self-other negotiations become charged with emotion and vulnerable to the possibility of “trauma.”

The central ideas of Winnicott’s metapsychology (transitional objects and potential space, the holding environment, mirroring, and play) evince the force of the “threshold.” Less an explanatory key than a method of asking questions, this
overarching notion of the “intermediate area” can focus attention on the many manifestations of threshold experience in these writers: Donne’s poems of parting; Herbert’s dialogic poems to and about God; the complex layers of connection and non-coincidence between Eve, Adam, and doctrinal demands on their selfhood. Each poet’s characteristic idiom of relating finds expression in Winnicottian metaphors that are themselves double-edged—originating in the earliest physical relation between infant and mother, but simultaneously (and increasingly as the self “grows up”) psychological. Because speakers engage with real people in the external world as well as with internalized images, object-relationships are made multiply dialectical; in the spaces of boundary and seam, transition and simultaneity, speakers discover and shape themselves, manipulate and modify their others.

Winnicott’s “transitional object” and “potential space” theorize what exists and occurs “between” self and other. Both allow the illusion of reunion with a caregiving body while simultaneously assisting the move into the external world. Initially a blanket or piece of cloth, a teddy bear or soft doll, the transitional object is perceived by the infant to be at once part of itself and part of the external world, reminiscent of the breast; potential space, a realm between complete subjectivity and objectivity, is primordially the psychic space that both separates and unites baby and caregiver. The term “potential space” suggests not that this realm lacks the full actuality of interiority or externality, but rather that—under “good enough” conditions—the self’s potential for creativity and wholeness can be fostered there; in the intermediate area the self can “rest” from the “perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separated but inter-related” (“Transitional Objects” 230).
But potential space is also one of continual overlap and negotiation, potential conflict and disappointment. Donne's evident fascination with thresholds brings into view the forms such transitional phenomena can take in adult patterns of relating—moments suspended between staying and leaving; teardrops poised to fall; the sensation of the self's "edges" touching those of another, psychically or during love-making. What some have characterized as Donne's "highly individualized style of contradictoriness"—a style marked by a "straining toward reconciliation" that resolves only into "an uneasy irresolution" (Summers and Pebworth xi–xii)—evokes the tension of the intermediate space, where self and other, internalized images and projected fears and desires, dialectically co-occur. Donne's manner of holding his speakers in the paradoxical moment of parting, hovering over the limbo of the threshold, is strongly evocative of potential space. Donne's "thresholds," far more psychic than physical, are doorways from which he looks back toward merger and turns away toward differentiation—like an infant, but very much as an adult.

In addition to its paradoxical quality, transitional experience is, in Winnicott's theory, profoundly creative. Just as the "magical" appearance of the breast or nipple allows the infant the illusion that it creates what it hungers for, the transitional object is made by the infant to bridge the gap between "in-here" and "out-there." The infant's early capacity for illusion leads directly to an ability to play, to exist in the potential space of the "playground" where inner psychic reality overlaps with the external, where self and object merge, and where acceptance of the other's "play area" does not inhibit the self's experience of its own interior space. Winnicott defines play as a coalescence of reliability and intimacy—a psychic activity dependent on the self's trust that the other will
neither abandon it nor intrude upon the privacy of its imagination. The overt linguistic wittiness of Donne and Herbert suggests “play” in a literal sense; but these poets, along with Milton, also seem “playful” at those moments when speakers can enjoy intimacy without threat—as in the sense of mutuality and care when God did “hold my hand, while I did write” in Herbert’s “Assurance” (30), or in the frequent images of Eve and Adam “hand in hand” throughout Milton’s epic (e.g., 4.689, 12.648). And a more active courting of the space of play occurs when speakers move beyond the rules of logic and boundary, when they revise: Donne’s lovers who might “forget the Hee and Shee” (“The Undertaking”), Adam’s “rewriting” of God’s curses to make them suit more comfortably his own vision of his future with Eve, Herbert’s subtle resistances to doctrinal curbs of the self.

Winnicott’s formulation of the “holding environment” extends his theory of potential space. Both a physical reality and a psychical metaphor, “holding” suggests, for example, not only the importance of adequately supporting an infant’s fragile neck, but also an entire “aesthetic” of relating (Bollas, “The Aesthetic Moment” passim) in which the infant’s needs, desires, anger, and fear—in short, the full range of its emotional makeup—confront the separate moods of a parent who may or may not be able to anticipate, assuage, or survive the intensity of the infant’s experience. This crucial dialectic between baby and caregiver forms the earliest matrix out of which the self emerges, establishing “a paradigm of subject relating to an object that transforms the subject’s being” (Bollas 44). Winnicott believed the holding environment to be an “essential” and “extremely subtle” element in “facilitat[ing] the maturational process” of the nascent self (“The Mentally Ill” 223); it follows, then, that the “earliest anxiety is
related to being insecurely held” (“Anxiety Associated with Insecurity” 98). Of the three poets to be considered here, Herbert gives voice most palpably to the many possible permutations of holding. The speaker of “Affliction (IV),” for instance, feels himself to be “Broken in pieces all asunder” (1) in the limbo space “Betwixt this world and that of grace” (6), and begs God for “help” (19) from the “thoughts” that are furious “knives, / Wounding my heart” (7–8) and “prick[ing] my soul” (12). The speaker of “The Search” also longs for union, and when his “sigh to seek thee out” (17) receives no response, fears that God may deliberately deny connection:

Where is my God? what hidden place
Conceals thee still?
What covert dare eclipse thy face?
Is it thy will? (29–32)

In Herbert’s many images of hands clasping and arms stretching, of distances and space and nests, in his recurring plea to be “heard” and answered, ancient anxieties are confronted, relived, suffered, and “worked through” again and again.

During the long developmental process of holding, infant and caregiver also “hold” each other in an intersubjective gaze, a “mirroring” exchange of looks in which the face of the caregiver “giv[es] back to the baby the baby’s own self,” allowing the infant to “find his or her own self,” “to exist and to feel real. . . . to exist as oneself, and to relate to objects as oneself” (Winnicott, “Mirror-role” 117). This mutual, “loving gaze,” by anticipating the infant’s “wholeness” (Flax 93), helps to establish a fundamental sense of self-integration as well as to introduce the presence, and the separateness, of the other. In Thomas Ogden’s words,
“this constitutes an interpersonal dialectic wherein ‘I-ness’ and otherness create one another and are preserved by the other” (94). Donne, Herbert, and Milton each express the cohering importance of reflective looks in various ways. Donne’s spotlight on teardrops and eyes, and Herbert’s on tears, dialogue, and fragmentation convey the desire to be “seen” in addition to the perils of being ignored. But the two “births” of Adam and Eve in Paradise Lost provide the most sustained depiction of the impact of identificatory looks on later selfhood: Eve’s exchange of “answering looks” (4.464) with a face in a pool of water perfectly evokes Winnicott’s notion of an anticipatory gaze that enables a state of secure “going-on-being,” while Adam’s anxious efforts to “see” himself in the world are met with “answer none” (8.285).

The resonance between object-relations theory and seventeenth-century literature has been formidably explored. Antoinette Dauber’s essay “Thomas Traherne and the Poetics of Object Relations” claims that the “grand goal of seventeenth-century poetry” is to “resurrect the satisfying illusion of the transitional phase” (139); poets achieve a “return to a sense of primal unity” (136) through mediatory objects, “sparkling, iridescent, or filmy things that leap beyond their boundaries” (139). Anna Nardo’s The Ludic Self, a study of “play” in seventeenth-century literature, reflects a similar interest in connecting dialectic and liminality in poetry with psychoanalytic theories of relating. Noting that the “divided world” of the Renaissance “produced an extraordinary array of self-conscious literary players” (1–2), Nardo links the generalized mood of sociopolitical conflict to psychoanalytic and anthropological theories of play, arguing that the safe frame of the “ludic self” provided “a new stance” whereby writers could “live within the contradictions and conflicts of their experience” (3).
Play becomes a mediatory outlook, as much as an actual activity, from which to cope with the resurgence of childhood conflicts, newly triggered by the turbulent landscape of widespread social change.

But while Dauber and Nardo offer apt descriptions of the liminality and the sense of powerful longing in seventeenth-century lyrics, both accounts seem ultimately to smooth over, not only what may feel contestatory or unresolvable in the poetry, but also the space of renegotiation that Donne, Herbert, and Milton all seem so often concerned to leave open. The contradiction and tension of the intermediate area is not always resolvable into “safe” acts of play, and the presence of “filmy” surfaces in these three poets’ work (teardrops, water, stars and sky) does something more interactively relational than simply signify a return to primal bliss. In her account of Donne, for example, Nardo seems to defuse the poet’s conflicts for him, toning down his ambiguity and restless motion by placing him always “at play,” and making of play a self-consciously controlled experience. Donne becomes a kind of poet-analyst who “mediate[s] the conflict he felt so keenly between separation and union” (53) in the “playground” (56) of threshold experience: “Whether exalting union or fleeing it, he is always self-consciously playing” (54). Thus the “radical contradiction” (49) of his fears about and desires for connection seem unproblematically contained by Donne himself in the play space of valedictory poems, of a bed in which both love-making and death might take place, of his “fooling around at every level of technique and content” (49).

With similar implications, Nardo argues that Herbert structures his lyrics around the space of “games” in which the contest between speaker and God results in an “expanded” self (86). In opposition with a “loving, accepting internal other,” Herbert’s “competing,” “various selves—sinful, weary, aging, know-it-all,
reluctant” (even a “whining” self [89])—are “reconcile[d],” and “Herbert wins a
sense of wholeness by losing the contest—by allowing his reluctant self to be
won by the image of God within” (93). Like Donne, Herbert is cast in the role of
self-conscious agon, engaging in “games” in which the self breaks apart and in
which God seems always to be victorious. Lost in statements about “courty
elegance,” “poetic order out of internal confusion,” and containment “in the play
frame” (103) is the sense of variousness in Herbert’s emotional relation to God,
as well as the important way in which he contrives to preserve a realm of human
agency independent from doctrinal decree. Thus Nardo’s description of Herbert
as a “Christian in a wholly Christian culture” (84) seems too pat a rendering of
Herbert’s poetic relation to theology, since what it means to be “Christian” is the
very question so many poems in The Temple are at pains to consider.

Despite the contr adictoriness apparent in their poetry, then, Donne and
Herbert in particular (neither Nardo nor Dauber discusses Milton) end up
seeming unexceptionally accepting—whether of gender, of doctrine, or of the
position of the self in relation to its significant objects. My argument here attempts
to push this collective body of poetry past such characterization and
categorization. By investing themselves so much in speakers’ efforts to retain a
distinct realm of self, and to address others as oneself, in Winnicott’s words,
these writers reveal something fundamental about their own creative priorities:
that while the interdependence of self and other may require a constant
negotiation of opposing claims, it also opens a space where revisions,
exchanges, re-negotiations of identity and ideology transpire. Resisting the
impulse to resolve seems to me one of Winnicott’s most “poetic” gestures, and it
is perhaps this fundamental interest in ambiguity that allows Donne, Herbert, and
Milton alike to slip out of established critical positions when considered from a
Winnicottian perspective. The transitional frame opens up a space where selves
may be at rest or in motion, at play or at odds. So Herbert can seem more flexible
and unpredictable, his conviction in something tender and reciprocal—in being
heard and believed in—more irrepressible, emerging again and again even in
poems that may otherwise measure a state of despair or announce a giving-over
of selfhood to doctrinal priority. Thus Donne becomes more centered (than a
concealed, slippery "I" manipulating women to ground himself) but also less rigid
(than a masculinist using paradox purely intellectually). His love poems record
caution, worry, and tentative doubt, but also generous intimacy and celebratory
acknowledgment of women's difference. And so one can appreciate the extent of
Milton's tendency to "re-write" and re-evaluate, as Adam and Eve "work through"
the experience of *Paradise Lost* toward a new hope, a potential space that is a
paradise they carry within and between them. By attending to the dialectical
characteristics of these poets, one discovers the degree to which they test
boundaries, challenge hierarchies, and contrive to revise the terms by which
faith, love, allegiance—in short, "self"—can be defined and experienced.

Certainly, conflictual issues of self and other arise in other poems not
mentioned here, and in other modes of discourse. But in the interest of space
and balance, I have chosen to concentrate my analysis of each poet on certain
poems in which the problematic of relationality leads to especially provocative
negotiations. At times my focus is on very familiar work, at others I discuss
poems or passages less frequently included in critical accounts of these poets. In
the case of Donne, a poem as underrepresented as "Song. Sweetest love" shares with the more canonical "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day" a focus on
selves working through difficult experiences of separation and loss, struggling to find a steady ground from which to affirm trust, connection, and faith in an unknowable future. "The Sunne Rising," too, so frequently cited as an example of Donne’s tendency toward masclulinist "colonizing," contains one of his most powerful tributes to the "all-ness" of the female other. All three poems exhibit something characteristic of Donne when he is most intensely positioned in "potential space": a propensity for anxious worry about the consequences of separation, matched by a capacity for pulling himself away from the verge of suspicion toward a belief in the reliability of love.

Herbert articulates a degree of intertwining with God suggestive of this Donnean relation to women—a dogged seeking out, an interest in dialogue, a sense of complex emotional and intellectual negotiation with the other. In a poem such as "Grief," Herbert expresses the sense of abject alienation that follows lack of connection with God; disunion not only makes the speaker feel he is incapable of producing the response he so desires from God, but convinces him, even more insidiously, that he is unworthy of connection at all. In "Clasping of Hands" the speaker seems comfortably intertwined with God, but must eventually admit the impossibility of a complete dissolution of boundary between his "hand" and God’s, between self and other. In "Deniall" and "The Holdfast," however, careful, confident articulations of reciprocity emerge from the self’s engagement with God.

Finally, my chapter on Milton concentrates on Paradise Lost’s multifaceted portrayal of the relationship between Adam and Eve (a relationship that contains within it the traces of their separate experiences of God). I have selected certain passages that are the site of intense critical debate and others that, to my
knowledge, have not received critical attention at all. Milton exploits the dramatic frame (and at times seems almost to revel in his capacity for dense textuality and ambiguity) to depict human relatedness in so rounded and yet so subtle a way as to suggest—as nearly as his intentionality can be guessed at—a deliberate transvaluation of the theologically dictated understanding of Adam and Eve.

In the fourteen-line catalogue of metaphors that constitutes Herbert’s “Prayer (I),” the speaker likens prayer first to a “soul in paraphrase” (3), then to “something understood” (14). Both render with great metaphorical compression the subtle experience of (and hope for) perfect communication between self and God in the act of praying. Both capture a sense of deep psychological attunement in which the self’s own “paraphrase” will be “understood” by the other. “Something,” too, suggests an indeterminacy that is inclusive at the same time that it specifies: whatever “something” is, it will be heard, acknowledged, interpreted in the intermediary space of psychical connection. Indeed, “something understood” seems to be potential, to exist in transition, to become a third term, as if created by two minds sharing the “in between” of mutual understanding. It is the restless effort to find the “something understood.” I believe, that characterizes the power of so many poems by Herbert, as well as by Donne and Milton. And it is perhaps that very “something understood” that becomes the site, the medium, for delicate re-negotiations of “self.”
Chapter 1
Donne’s Poetics of Parting

“Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one . . .”
—“Holy Sonnet 19”

For Donne the moment of parting is quintessential. Liminal in time as well as space, parting suspends him on a verge between contradictory, yet equally compelling, pleasures and dangers—for to remain is to bask in being enveloped and soothed, but to risk obliteration; and to go is to be adventurous and independent, or alienated and alone, fragmented, dying. The many poems in Songs and Sonets framed by the experience of leave-taking seem driven by the exploration of the self’s deep conflictedness about psychical attachment to the other, by desires to assuage or indulge in “the queasie paine / Of being belov’d, and loving.” These lines from “The Calme” intimate precisely what is at issue for the Donnean speaker still linked to a woman and yet poised on the threshold of severance. Far from defining and maintaining “love” as an unambiguous and unifying emotional experience, he grapples instead with the dialectic of “being belov’d” and “loving,” with the giving-forth of self and taking-in of other that characterizes the disorienting—if also exhilarating—exchange between two people. Roy Roussell, in his chapter on Donne in Conversation of the Sexes, calls these opposites the “twin inevitabilities of distance and desire,” which force an “endless argument” that is itself a search for the “ideal exchange which will return the lover to himself complete and whole, an exchange with another who, in the perfect coincidence of question and answer, becomes . . . no longer other” (7–9). Knotted in the multiple exigencies of intimacy and autonomy, Donne’s speakers reveal at times an ambivalence that can wither
even the most apparently unquestionable expressions of mutual, "mature" love; afraid of surrender to the other, equally afraid of losing the other, and all the while testing, even subverting, the boundaries between selves, Donne confronts the ambiguity of the threshold: a place neither in nor out (and yet both), where the self is neither connected and committed nor solitary and isolated (and yet, again, both). It is at such thresholds, in such moments of parting—often literal partings of voyage or death, but always symbolic of psychological states—that Donne manifests his most textured articulations of the negotiations between self and other.

The readings that follow will concentrate on those moods of uncertainty and caution, haunted by doubt and the specter of betrayal, that invade so many of Donne's love poems. I will be concerned with nodes of ambivalence where a self reluctant to yield to the other nevertheless desires to be enfolded by that other, or where a self troubled by suspicion and mistrust projects those fears onto his lover. Such familiar tropes as tear-drops, maps and globes, window-panes, sighs and breathing, and the compass will reappear in my discussion not as evidence of the poet's learned and logical poetics, but as representatives of his fascination with the delicate boundaries between attachment and loss. I am particularly interested in the dynamics of situations that seem to fracture speakers out of or into good feeling—that is, in the mental process that brings a speaker from insecurity to affirmation, or from pleasure to melancholic anxiety. What are the conditions of such reversals? Focusing on the way Donne's poems so often, and so unpredictably, "turn," I will be concerned as well as with those treasured—albeit rare—times at which speakers enjoy a sense of trust, and allow separation as proof, rather than destruction, of secure attachment.
I thus question those readings of Donne that foreground issues of power and language and portray him as a misogynistic colonizer whose poetic skill works to appropriate the very women that inspire that skill. Barbara Estrin’s assertions that “the poet-lovers of Donne’s poems claim to possess or to want to possess the beloved ‘you’ they address” out of a “desire to know, incorporate, and control” (345), seem paradigmatic of the still-frequent critical tendency to make of Donne a glib solipsist, unable to “see” the women he desires and seduces, and intrigued only by his own psychological response to those relations. Stanley Fish argues that the lesson of Donne’s “masculine persuasive power” is that Donne’s efforts to create self-mastery through his own verbal acuity merely demonstrate the fragility of the identity that needs so much to be “shored up.” Fish suggests that by creating a fixed and constant self, Donne inscribes language and representation onto women, depending on them to look back and reflect himself. I will argue instead that, at his most complex, Donne engages with women in deeply dialectical ways—loving them, pleading or arguing with them, wondering about their difference from (and similarity to) him, mourning their loss, worrying over the impossibility of fully knowing them, gesturing toward becoming them. In his search for reciprocity, moreover, there are moments when Donne allows, even enjoys, a blurring of gender distinctions. Winnicott’s broad theoretical concern—to explore how a child becomes aware of itself out of and within the “relational matrix”—will thus factor into my reading of Donne: to focus on the self’s vexed entanglement with others, and to re-evaluate the kinds of space left open to both self and other, man and woman, for contact, difference, identity.
As if turning back from the threshold of a doorway to face the woman he leaves behind, the speaker of Donne’s song “Sweetest love” begins not by bidding farewell to his mistress, but by seeming to deny the parting that is itself the occasion of the poem: “Sweetest love, I do not goe” (1). Initially, this negation seems directed outward, toward the other, in response to a perception of her sadness and desire for him to stay. The next three lines address implicit suspicions: that he is bored with her, that he leaves to seek out new romance. Quick to disclaim any such diminishing of love, and to explain the separation in a way that will circle back to affirm the strength of their love to withstand absence, the speaker makes of parting a kind of necessary “practice” for dying, then modulates through the familiarly humanized figure of the sun into a more cheering analogy meant to embody the surety of his return:

    Sweetest love, I do not goe,
    For wearinesse of thee,
    Nor in hope the world can show
    A fitter Love for mee,
    But since that I
    Must dye at last, ’tis best,
    To use my selfe in jest
    Thus by fain’d deaths to dye.

    Yesternight the Sunne went hence,
    And yet is here to day,
He hath no desire nor sense,  
Nor halfe so short a way:  
Then feare not mee,  
But beleeve that I shall make  
Speedier journeyes, since I take  
More wings and spurrees than hee. (1–16)

These first stanzas would seem to prove Donne’s ability to contain emotion through reasoning, analysis, and wit. At the level of prosody, there are few unsure steps to jar the seamless connection of two lovers into rough-edged disjunction: the rhythms are assured and soothing, the rhymes strong and containing; the voice speaks tenderly and sounds subdued, as if following the rhythm of slow breathing, of a hand wiping away tears or smoothing back hair; and it is a voice that smiles and calms, as if to hold back the other’s sobs. The atmosphere is one of intense privacy, and of a kind of unagitated confidence that meets the ensuing separation with figures of speech both exaggerated and obvious: from the sun’s dependable reappearance to his own requires of her but a simple shift of perception.²

These assurances of trustworthiness and belief in the strength of their relatedness are suffused, however, by more complicated emotions than a woman’s jealousy or unwillingness to be left alone. The speaker has a role to play in this parting, and as he tries so gamely to ameliorate her discomfort, one wonders whether he accepts the separation as readily as he encourages her to do. Read again, the first phrases of the poem are telling, for it is in the nature of negation that what is denied manages simultaneously to assert itself.³ Is it her suspicion of boredom, for instance, that the first two lines counter (“I do not goe,
/ For weariness of thee")—or his weariness, already experienced prior to this moment, implicitly acknowledged by the second line? Is it her worried jealousy that the following lines express ("Nor in hope the world can show / A fitter Love for mee"), or his own hope for future, further liaisons (does, after all, a "fitter Love" exist)? Are the "fain'd deaths" of parting in fact sexual deaths, not so much a "practicing" for the ultimate breach of the grave (as in the "two graves" that "must hide thine and my coarse" in "The Anniversarie" [11]), but rather for some encompassing, ecstatic union these lovers might share upon the speaker's return? All of these, I suggest, insinuate themselves into the texture of the first stanza; as the speaker soothes his mistress, he placates an anxiety that is figured as hers, while at the same time implying unspoken wishes of his own that may (or may not) have evoked that anxiety in her.

Simultaneously, though, the speaker's denial of the ostensible situation in the first line (as if to say, I know I am going, and yet "I do not go") signals a self-initiated, last-minute retreat from the threshold of "out-there." "I do not goe" is both a verbal assurance and an act of staying, a gesture outward toward her, as well as a movement within himself, a physical staying of his own motion (a motion that becomes increasingly metaphorical and symbolic in the second stanza, and will literally shut down by the end of the poem). He lingers over the threshold, and as he does so, it is as if his imagination becomes crowded with contradictory wishes and expectations: on one hand, that leaving might afford him a sense of freedom, allowing new pleasures, as well as a way to test their love, to convince them both of his commitment and convince himself of hers; but, on the other, that separation from each other may admit "fitter Love[s]" and that would be a kind of death to their relationship. Because for now his literal,
physical "going" is stayed, he can play out the various implications of movement, likening himself to the sun in an act of expansion in comparison with which his own projected motion will seem small and wholly tolerable, but also worrying that that motion will have effects beyond his control.

The idea of playing at dying (and resurrecting) in the first stanza brings forth the game of playing with the sun: stanza 2 turns on a childlike trust in the sun's renewal each day. But even so, the stock personification both masks and exposes an anxiety about unpredictability—again, what is said so trustingly offers up its opposite (a man is not like the sun). The speaker covers up mistrust with a somehow flattened-out sun (it is not a raging sun of passion and intensity; it has neither "desire nor sense," both of which, he implies, will bring him back to his love far faster than the sun). But it is this taking refuge in fanciful/fancy analogies in itself that intimates the speaker's uncertainty about the return that has already come to represent so much. The line that helps uncover the insufficiency of the analogy is also the analogy's pivotal move: "Then feare not mee" works within the terms of the metaphor (since you don't question the sun, and I am even more driven to return than the sun, "feare not mee") but also as a free-standing—and discomfiting—assertion. ("The good-morrow," a poem canonized as one of Donne's most unequivocal expressions of reciprocal love, also turns on such an assertion: "And now good morrow to our waking soules, / Which watch not one another out of feare" [8–9].) The command seems too much centered on the speaker's person ("feare not mee"), since one would more likely expect the woman to fear his absence, or the exact moment of his leaving, than she fears him. And yet the speaker locates her fear—that something might detain him, prevent him from returning on schedule as the sun
does—within himself, as if “her” fear is in fact a projection of his anxiety about his own motives and dependability. Not, necessarily, that he fears he might be unfaithful (though there is a potential of that, as the first stanza hints), but that a separation may feel so complete, so irreparable, that he doubts the very possibility of return.

As so often happens in Donne’s poetry (and as this chapter will suggest), increasingly overt articulations of doubt follow on the heels of what first appear to be benign statements of mutual, secure love. We have seen the ways in which the playfully jaunty tone of the second stanza is undermined by doubts that erupt through the surface of the poetry. As we read on into the third stanza, this language of uncertainty becomes far less disguised:

O how feeble is mans power,
That if good fortune fall,
Cannot adde another houre,
Nor a lost houre recall!
But come bad chance,
And wee joyne to’it our strength,
And wee teach it art and length,
It selfe o’r us to’advance. (17-24)

From the sure return the previous stanza had worked so ingeniously to promise, the speaker lapses into thoughts of falling and “bad chance.” The threshold beckons with the possibility of new opportunity, of freedom from “weariness” and of hope for “fitter” loves. But it also threatens “feeble” selves with the risks of separation: “good fortune” is all too fragile; it can “fall,” but cannot be retroactively buttressed with more time to spend together, more intimacy, more
trust. The speaker's eagerness to allay the fears of his mistress does not tell the whole story—or perhaps it does: by framing the anxiety of the moment of parting in terms of her doubt of him, he hides his own suspicions about what will happen to her while he is no longer there. If their relation feels primarily like his "good fortune," its dissolution would amount to a "falling" he lacks the power to prevent.

As these conflicting notions about connectedness unfold, making the speaker's position (now metaphorical) on the threshold more precarious, his entanglement with his lover comes to be figured in terms of the body, its sighs and tears and blood, and the anxiety about loss and separation becomes more explicitly aligned with death. The stock metaphors (sighs are souls, tears are life's blood) appeal not just to an immediately recognizable language of persuasion, nor solely to Donne's affection for images involving the four elements, but convey as well the extent of the deeply physical sensation of attachment and separation evoked by this scene of parting: there is not only pain, but the threat of decay, of wasting and wasting away.

When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not winde,
   But sigh'st my soule away,
When thou weep'st, unkindly kinde,
   My lifes blood doth decay.
   It cannot bee
That thou lov'st mee, as thou say'st,
If in thine my life thou waste,
   Thou art the best of mee. (25–32)

It is as if, lurking behind the humorous "argument," there are questions of a far
more serious nature—will this absence leave him feeling as if he were dead, as if she were? Will he, in fact, die from the loss of connection to her? Like an infant for whom physical union with a caregiver is experienced as a lack of psychological differentiation, the speaker entrusts to their bodies a need for psychical connection. The gently teasing quality of this stanza does not dismiss what is genuine—a desire for and anxiety about emotional connection. As the final stanza seems to wish, if only parting could feel like a night whose end is guaranteed by the dawn’s return, if only the speaker could be assured his lover will sustain and nourish him, not only “keepe” him in her heart (be faithful to him?), but keep him, most emphatically, “Alive”:

Let not thy divining heart
Forethinke me any ill,
Destiny may take thy part,
And may thy feares fulfill,
But thinke that wee
Are but turn’d aside to sleepe;
They who one another keepe
Alive, ne’r parted bee. (33–40)

By these last lines his destiny is in her hands (“heart”), reversing her “feare” of him that began the poem. Indeed, he seems now to fear her: what will she predict for him? Will she “fall”? Can she cause him to die, to be annihilated, if she “forethinke[s him] any ill” (whether that foretelling happens through a nightmare of him drowning at sea or through a rejection of him in favor of another suitor)? Perhaps he worries, too, that all these—his own—fears will come true, if he mulls too long over them.
Thus the image of sleep ("But thinke that wee / Are but turn'd aside to sleepe") carries such force. It pulls this all-too-quickly increasing doubt into a place of most intimate connection—the bed—in a way that suggests emotional closeness as much as (and perhaps, in this context, much more than) physical sexuality. The image of a couple "turn'd aside" in sleep introduces a renewed familiarity and softening of the rhetoric that inflates stanza 4: "but turn'd aside" conveys something inconsequential, unworthy of fear, doubt, or predictions of ill. The image seems to depend on a prior, mutual knowledge of what it feels like and means to sleep side-by-side; it invokes a habitual manner of sleeping together in the same bed—where turning away from each other happens innocently, causing (and out of a desire for?) a tolerable aloneness; where it is the comfort of and trust in an "other" body that provides the trust to turn away. At the same time, of course, the physicality of this image contains the two sides of the very dialectic being explored in the poem overall. Turning aside in sleep may elicit and result from trust, but it also means that the lovers turn their backs to each other—just as they must when parting. But here, "sleepe" seems the controlling metaphor: the turning aside takes place in the context of an insulating space in which they are both together and separate, drawn into themselves and yet still touching. Sleeping side-by-side in this way creates a kind of Winnicottian "holding environment," in which they "keepe" each other "Alive."^6

Confronting the dangers of the "threshold" through practice and pretending, immersing himself in a game that mimics the real but lacks the terrifying actuality, the speaker of "Sweetest love" holds onto a sense of integration, contact, and confidence. The local, evidently temporary, physical
separation of self and other that initiates the poem can be “used” as practice for a more ultimate parting—death, certainly, but also some breach of the relationship, which has the potential to feel just as final as death and of which he is so afraid. The speaker also “use[s]” himself in this “parting jest” that is also a test of their permanence. Object-use, according to Winnicott, is a dialectical process whereby the child’s “destruction” of its objects in fantasy leads the child, precisely because those objects actually survive, to a realization of their reality; the object’s reality, in turn, allows for further “destruction” in fantasy. This on-going dialectic constitutes the object as other and allows the self both trust in the other’s durability and love for the other as separate from the self. The speaker’s “use” of himself in “Sweetest love” suggests an understanding that to allow himself to leave (be parted from her) and then return (trust that she will still be there) depends upon both a recognition of her “otherness” from him, and a willingness to allow their relatedness (which at times may be tantamount to himself) to be “destroyed.” Separation means “destruction” to an infant; it feels annihilating, obliterating, as if both object and self might never return. Thus the speaker’s readiness to destroy himself—“thus by fain’d death to dye”—works to prove to them both his ability to return, to reassure himself as well of her durability.

Engaged at the level of both narrative and subtext with oppositions of going and returning, turning and returning, keeping and parting, living and dying, play and seriousness, with turning-asides that are profound gestures of remaining, of being there, of not parting, “Sweetest love” demonstrates a tendency to which Donne returns to again and again in the Songs and Sonets. For all its surface smoothness, and in ways less dramatic than many of the
poems to be discussed here, "Song. Sweetest love" contains paradigmatically
Donnean responses to issues of attachment and separation. Certainly a quiet
poem in many ways, with a relaxed and polished quality.7 "Sweetest love"
shows Donne capable of being playful, confident about being able to handle
distance, and not afraid of hints of close, habitual intimacy. At the same time,
many of what will appear in other poems as far more pronounced expressions
of doubt, anxiety, and fear, fray the edges of this tightly packed poem; though he
can pick himself up here, and her too, there are hints of falling and of dying. But
as the poem closes, the speaker seems captivated by the idea of keeping; to be
kept is to be held, to have one’s motion stayed in a way that is not suffocating so
much as reassuring.

II

"A Valediction of my name, in the window" raises the pitch of
psychological distress caused by parting to a point at which the self’s physical
wholeness dissolves. Where the speaker of "Sweetest love" was able in the
metaphor of sleep to "turn aside" from his mistress and to accept her turning
from him, the speaker’s effort to survive separation in "Valediction of my name"
foregrounds the importance of a dynamics of looking and being seen. Here the
speaker’s concerns about what will take place in his absence—about who will
take his place—both result from and give rise to a sense of his mistress’s power
over his emotional and bodily integrity. As the name in the window expands to
represent the body of the absent lover, and as the boundaries between this
name/body and the face/self of the mistress begin to merge, he seems to
depend upon her eyes' ability to hold his body and self intact. Far from becoming dismembered by the gaze of the woman that reminds him of his own inadequacy, and farther still from being able to strong-arm her vision, this speaker dismembers himself when he senses he is outside of a look that can restore and reconfigure him to wholeness.  

The "name engrav'd" into the glass of the window acts initially as a "charmme"; it softens the surface of the glass into which it is set, then hardens that glass by "contribut[ing]" its "firmnesse."

My name engrav'd herein,

Doth contribute my firmnesse to this glasse,

Which, ever since that charmme, hath beene

As hard, as that which grav'd it, was,

Thine eye will give it price enough, to mock

The diamonds of either rock. (1-6)

Here the name, and by extension the self it represents, is rendered harder than glass, as hard even as the diamond that engraves it, because of that firmness. But as the speaker prepares to depart across a complicated threshold, one wonders whether the audacity of these lines in fact denies the fear that accompanies separation, whether the name "engraves" a wish for constancy and devotion, some expectation of dependability, into the glass. Perhaps, too, it is his own insistence on being remembered, his single-minded purposefulness, that solidifies his self into a firmness as hard as rock. The transference of "firmnesse" from "name" to "glasse," so easily accomplished by the speaker verbally, suggests further a wish to project onto her (to impress into her as into glass) whatever certainty he here claims for himself—a "firmnesse" that is itself
without meaning, that does not exist, outside of his relation to her.

In the first stanza, both name-engraved pane of glass as well as the self now embodied there gain value by her “eye”; she—female “other”—does the looking. In Barbara Estrin’s reading, this act of a woman seeing happens only because the speaker “limit[s]—by contracting—the woman’s vision” (347). But this is not a moment of incipient self needing to be reflected back to itself in order to be actualized; so complete is the speaker in his “firmnesse” that here the gaze of his mistress upon him adds “price” but does not serve to constitute him. He is still the adult lover, boundaries intact, imagining himself seen by a separate, distinct other. And in the second stanza, the speaker pushes even further the “rules” that demand separate bodies, separate consciousnesses, separate positions from which to “look”; “loves magique . . . undoe[s]” those “rules” that demand that when she look into a reflecting surface she see herself, not him, and thus prevent his being seen. To undo such rules is to transport oneself psychically, to achieve a blurring of the difference that transfixes selves in the static linearity of gazer and gazed upon: not only does she see both herself and him when she looks into the window, he has become 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. (7-12)

Transparent, the window “confess[es]” all that occurs on either side of it—glass will not conceal her actions once he has gone, but neither will it hide his
watching. At the same time that glass is looked through, however, it can also superimpose¹⁰ their two "bodies": her face looking, his name being seen. The "magic" love might perform in subtler, more interior ways—effecting a blending of selves, of identities, in imitation of an earlier state of being—the window enacts physically. The speaker's manipulation of the frame of the window to capture her gaze and superimpose them leads Estrin to claim that "I am you" amounts to an "attempt to impose the 'I' unto the 'you'" and thus to "bind" her to him (346–47). "When he says 'I am you,'" Estrin writes, "he really means to deprive her of any selfhood apart from his," and ultimately, he "denies doubleness" (348). But the fact of being seen by her ("you see mee") leads less to an experience or confirmation of his autonomous existence (not "I am me") than to a total merging of their two identities into one ("I am you").

It is this blending together, I think, far more than any scopic pleasure produced by or masculine power producing the exchange of looks, that brings forth the sense of "intirennesse" in the third stanza:

As no one point, nor dash,
Which are but accessories to this name,
The showers and tempests can outwash,
So shall all times finde mee the same;
You this intirennesse better may fulfill,

Who have the patterne with you still. (13–18)

The name engraved in the glass retains its shape because it manages to achieve the physical permanence that is otherwise elusive, denied by the kind of "departure" this valediction marks (the "plot" of parting provides a context for more psychological forms of separation). Its integrity cannot be "outwash[ed]" by
the inundating fluidity of “showers and tempests.” But a certain kind of “intirenesse”—to be so whole as to include each “point” and “dash,” all the smallest “accessaries” of one’s “name”—the speaker finds only within his lover. She contains the “pattern” of him within; he becomes her as she looks upon the overlay of their two “bodies” in the window. Thus while the engraved name may independently claim “firmnesse” and constancy—“all times,” he tells her, “[shall] finde mee the same”—nevertheless he needs her to “better . . . fulfill” the “intirenesse” that will bring them together, bridge the space between, salve the hurt of parting.

At the start of the next stanza, the speaker retreats from the intensity of these desires as well as the implications of them; metaphor is reined in, as if he decides he has gone beyond himself, and risks losing the attention of his audience: “Or if too hard and deepe / This learning be, for a scratch’d name to teach . . .” (19–20). Even more, though, these lines signal an important turn: the “name engrav’d” ceremoniously into the window in the first stanza is now but a “scratch’d name”; where once it had worked like a “charm,” adding a “firmnesse” to the glass suggestive of emotional wholeness, of a constancy desired and projected, of the stiffness of sexual arousal, now it barely penetrates the surface of that hardened glass. The lesson he is trying so “hard” to convey is more than his “ragged bony name,” this meager sign of himself, can sufficiently “engrave” upon her, via her face reflected in the glass that contains his signature:

Or if too hard and deepe

This learning be, for a scratch’d name to teach,

It, as a given deaths head keepe,
Lovers mortalitie to preach,
Or thinke this ragged bony name to bee
My ruinous Anatomie. (19–24)

What, one wonders, propels the speaker all the way from that initial assurance that “my name engrav’d herein” could transmit “my firmnesse” to the pane of glass, to a body particulated out of “intirenesse” and into a “ruinous Anatomie”? What brings him from that sense of wholeness and durability to the near-catatonic depression that ends the poem? And why, similarly, does the speaker make himself an agent of ruin, as much as its proof (since “ruinous” is both cause and result)?

In the middle stanzas of the poem (three through seven), the speaker increasingly voices opposing responses to the experience of being attached to his mistress. These middle stanzas seem to obey the dictates of a profound emotional oscillation between the satisfaction and anxiety of containment, the desire for and fear of solitude. If in one stanza the speaker appears to celebrate their closeness so fully as to dissolve the distinction between them, in the next stanza he reacts to demands of that intimacy by losing hold of separate identity altogether, breaking down into a variety of bones and body parts barely held together any longer by the name carved into the window. In stanza 3, the woman “fulfill[s]” his “intirenesse”; she is filled with him in the way her face is “filled” with his name as she looks into the window, and somehow she brings the potential of his entirety into reality by containing the “patterne” of him within her. She is full with him, she fills him as well, and she retains this pattern “still” after he is gone. But no sooner is this sense of being “house[d]” within her articulated than it defracts into the “ragged bony name” of the following stanza. It
is as if the speaker's own expression of being so deeply embedded in the body of his lover (now figured as mother), so thickly entwined with her identity, overpowers the viability of the name that once withstood "showers and tempests." If, without her, there is nothing to hold him together; if he must depend on her for the blueprint of himself that will "repaire / And recompact" him (31–32); if there is no fundamental "pattern" of him without her, then the leave-taking this poem commemorates must bring forth intolerable fears of chaotic unraveling, a dismembering that leaves his body/self "scattered" (32).

Simultaneously, though, intimacy is itself a danger (even as separation from her carries the risk that he will fall to pieces) precisely because she becomes too large—or too constricting. What independent existence can his "self" attain if its very architecture relies, in order to be built, on a pattern she controls?

Thus the "scratch'd name" burgeons into a "deaths head," ominously warning her of "Lovers mortality." The name that could not be "outwash[ed]" just the stanza before is now the sign of the awful temporality of a love unguaranteed/unguarantee-able, no longer impervious to the effects of tempests both external and poetic and internal and psychic. The glass that was both charmed and "grav'd" (i.e., made serious? legitimized?) by the name it held now shows not a gracefully "accessorized" name that sloughs off rain but a "ragged bony name," a "ruinous Anatomie" that itself seems to "ruin" the glass and the love it is meant to solidify. Is it his own inevitable mortality that will "ruin" love? or perhaps his very self—entangled with hers for its identity, conflicted between desires to be "housed" and fears of being destroyed by that "fulfillment"—that fractures their connection out of seamlessness? His fantasy of a window that overlays them one upon the other seems both to manifest an
awareness of, as well as to display back to him the extent to which his identity (signed by his name) is contained within her face, the sign of her personhood. To be her ("I am you") is specifically to experience himself as within her, to want to be contained. But it is exactly this connectedness that then evokes fears of being frighteningly loosened and dissolved.

In the fifth stanza the speaker rebuilds himself. Declaring to her that "all my soules bee / Emparadis’d in you," and that she is the one "(in whom alone / I understand, and grow and see)" (25–27), he is newly confident that this core of connection between them will refashion again the "house" of "Muscle, Sinew, and Veine" (29–30), literally fleshing out the skeletal "rafters" (28) that remain following the self-annihilation of the previous lines. In his absence (he trusts? hopes?) she will "repaire / And recompact" (31–32) his "body" within her; but he must add the proviso, it seems, that she too remember and experience his "soules" 's residence within her (and his invocation of the "virtuous powers . . . / Fix’d in the starres" reiterates the importance of both fidelity and stability [33–34; italics added]). It is the very fact of his leaving and absence that makes such a condition, once again and finally, unguaranteed. Thus in the seventh stanza, the restructuring to wholeness of his body/identity shifts to a renewal of sadness and mistrust. Here he seems far less sure of what he can rely on in her:

So since this name was cut
When love and griefe their exaltation had,
No doore ’gainst this names influence shut,
As much more loving, as more sad,
’Twill make thee; and thou shouldst, till I returne,
Since I die daily, daily mourne. (37–42)
The plaintive instruction to her that she “shouldst” mourn his absence suggests a suspicion that she won’t (or wouldn’t automatically), that he cannot determine what she will do “daily.” The ambivalent connotations of “die,” as well, suggest that his own sadness at leaving her is both mollified by projected fantasies of pleasure he might have while gone, and intensified by fears of pleasure she might have in his absence. The stutter of “daily, daily” tolls the passing of a time about which he can only be uncertain, while the simultaneous extremes of “love and griefe” in the “exaltation” of parting confirm both the intensity and the unpredictability of attachment.

That doubts have surfaced in the speaker’s conscious mind becomes clear in stanza 8, where he imagines his lover’s “inconsiderate hand / Fling[ing] ope” (43–44) the window on which his name is scratched. That name, first “engrav’d,” then “scratch’d,” then “ragged” and “bony,” is now “trembling” (44)—both from the force of her opening the casement and the far more interior trauma of being passed over in favor of “one, whose wit or land, / New battry to [her] heart may frame” (45–46). Her flinging open the window is an act of tossing him aside, and the name that had been reduced to bones and rafters, sinews and veines to be recollected into wholeness, is now “alive,” stinging with hurt and offense at the imagined betrayal.

The casement that contains the name works again here as a barrier and a passageway between the room within and the world beyond. When he imagined her face reflected in the window surrounding his name, the window became a limit; both her image and the name would look back at her (he would look back at her), inverting and turning inward her act of looking outward. Now, as he imagines her receiving and greeting a new lover, the window once again
opens outward—literally, symbolically—to the world the speaker has himself entered, but from which he can’t help looking back, as it were, over his shoulder. These shifting attempts to manipulate and respond to space suggest again forms of attachment that are threatening and soothing at once. Framing himself in the casement—to be “encased”—provides some security, some firm sense of embodiment. To be embodied within the “face” of his lover is also to feel whole and (re)integrated. But the window that performs the superimposition also measures the limits of security, for there is a world beyond, one that seems excitingly full of possibilities and damagingly populated by potential rivals for his lover’s attentions. What happens to his name, his body and identity, if her face no longer looks through it in the window—if, indeed, the window is thrown aside to allow her clear view to another man’s “name”? More central an image, perhaps, than even the name itself, the window is defined by a transparency evocative of a desire to “see-through,” to know and be known: glass can be looked through and “look back,” like the eyes of a lover into which one stares as much from a desire to get beyond the boundaries of oneself as from a self-consciousness or desire to be seen.

“A Valediction of my name” organizes the space of the window (and the realms the window separates/joins) in a way that seems a habit of thought for Donne. Manipulations of space seem attempts to pull himself around himself, to be englobed, contained, held. The speaker literally embodies himself within his lover, imagining himself housed there, and in the window, held there safely as well. The fantasy of experiencing himself contained seems to allow him to stop a motion that is both inevitable (once again, the poem “bids farewell”) and feared. He is like a child looking in at a doorway to remind himself that mother is
there, reacquainting himself with her by her reassuring glance. Since he can’t look through the window in fact (and there is perhaps a voyeuristic wish here as well), he leaves something behind in fantasy and in the poem: a body scattered, a ruined anatomy, his bones, sinews, veins, and muscles—in short, himself, barely held together. In this context the phrase “Being still with you” takes on multiple meaning. The parts of him are still with her, with her as yet and always, waiting to be “bodied” again at his return. But there is also, I think, a wish to be motionless with her, at rest and calm, not experiencing himself scattered about and in a scary kind of motion.

This is what makes engraving so important; it grants a motionlessness to the speaker’s body (and emotions, devotions?) that is itself an expression of her movement away from him and toward other lovers. Estrin suggests that the speaker, by pinioning the face of his mistress against his name in the window, denies the possibility of an “other” capable of moving out of the frame he has created. But the very engraving of the name in the window suggests how far the poem goes to acknowledge her separateness from him. The engraved name will never move as his real body, her real face, so emphatically do. The repetition of “Till my returne,” “till I returne” signals visions of the blank space of his absence—which is also her absence from him—conveying both his anxiety about these absences and his determination to return. If there is a subtle warning here, he is also assuring her, and himself as well.

As the speaker hangs in the window as if by the frail threads of his own “trembling” signature, imagining that an already imagined scene of “treason” progresses to “an overt act” of infidelity, his name once again spells out a desired depth of connection to his lover:
And if this treason goe
To an overt act, and that thou write againe;
In superscribing, this name flow
Into thy fancy, from the pane.
So, in forgetting thou remembrest right,
And unaware to mee shalt write. (55–60)

As her hand writes the name of a new lover on the “merely paper pages” of a love letter,16 an act as “overt”17 as the speaker’s own carving of his name in the window-pane, that engraved name loosens, lifting off the glass as if to permeate her imagination. The poem’s many metaphors of architecture and physical reconstruction have their culmination in this more crucial emotional link: figuring his body as contained and “housed” within her provides him a satisfying sense of wholeness, but such completion seems almost useless without the more profound connection of his name (identity) and her mind and imagination. It is as if he longs for a bond so deep that she would no longer need to “remember” that he is emparadised within her, or to be instructed to keep the scattered parts of his body intact “till [his] returne.” Indeed, the influence of the name now in her “fancy” might be such that she “remembrest right” precisely through the act of “forgetting” constituted by her new act of writing. (And notice the adverb “againe,” so quiet at the end of a line, and yet so packed with worry. Does he mean that she writes to a new man where once she wrote to him? Or that she has already written to still other lovers, others before him? Or even that writing the name on the paper somehow repeats a sexual act he fantasizes has occurred in the room in his absence?) As the name in the window seems to glide fluidly from glass to mind, the significance of its “firmnesse” resounds; the
scratching of the name into the glass was to have “fix’d” him within her. But even at the last he is unsure of his influence: as he claims “to mee [thou] shalt write,” he also hints that she is “unaware”—not thinking of him, insensitive to his disintegration.

Thus the final stanza plunges once again into a level of dejection at the farthest possible remove from the voice that met parting so undauntedly as the poem began:

But glasse, and lines must bee,
No meanes our firme substantiall love to keepe;
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. (61–66)

Critics have responded variously to the apparent neatness of this ending, dismissing as it does (or seems to) all the prior anxiety and audacity into “idle talk.” Elaine Scarry writes that in these lines Donne, “as though exhausted by his own display of genius, announces that ‘our firme substantiall love’ has no need for this strange talk about ‘glasse and line’ which was, after all, only a man murmuring on the edge of sleep”; her effort to “restore” the “voice” of the poem to the body, “the site of all word-making” (83) pacifies the stanza’s despair. John Carey, characteristically, is more dismissive; he writes that the ending “shrugs off the poem . . . disowning it as mere pretense,” and “returns us to reality and firm substantial love” (195–96).18

But the apparent confidence of “firme substantiall love” seems heavily qualified, I think, by the weight of this stanza. No longer even a “trembling” body.
the speaker is now "inflít[ed]" by the "lethargie" of "neere death"; no longer boldly "confessing," he now "murmure[s]" as do sleeping and "dying men." What slows down the near-frenetic motion of body and mind that precedes this stanza? In contrast to Scarry's claim that the speaker reaffirms love's immunity to the kind of instability that would require "glasse, and lines" to compact it, I would argue that the speaker here tosses off not so much the frivolity of his previous metaphors as the very possibility of locating a space in which "firme substantiall love" might be kept. (And one recalls how important the notion of "keeping" was at the end of "Song. Sweetest love.") The overdetermined frame of the window, finally, does not seem capacious enough to hold them, one over the other, in place. Far from sounding like "nonsense," as Carey would suggest, the poem's excesses are all too true. At the threshold of being apart, the speaker murmurs a kind of dying babble; this, and the poem's "idle talke"—its jaunty certainty, its insinuations of betrayal and dissolution, its bitter sadness—are not to be dismissed as so much "bluster" (Carey 196) as he drifts off into an actual and cozy sleep, but rather attributed to the "neere death" of "goe[ing]," a separation that feels profoundly terminal.

Leave-taking requires Donne's speakers to negotiate a primordial dilemma that continues to vex the adult. Archaic and yet current, the apparent irreconcilability of desires for/fears of interfusion and solitariness seems to hold speakers at the double-edged boundary of the threshold, at which they simultaneously hover undecidedly and activate a mood of harried motion through metaphors of coming apart and wasting away. The tear-drop, like the window-pane, is one of Donne's most evocative representations of the delicate
boundaries that separate as well as connect self and external world. Fragile, rarely solitary, of a shape so distinctively recognizable and yet so easily ruptured, the tear-drop’s thin membrane perfectly imitates the edges between people Donne is always testing. The tear-drop itself, though knowable, meaningful, and extant only on the outside surface of the skin, is also somehow always “looking” inward, because it is so much of the body’s interior, always representing some internal state. The tear-drop thus adds another level to Donne’s play with intermediate spaces, one at which boundaries seem more precarious, more easily defocused in ways both pleasurable and threatening. The tear—like an eye or window—behaves like a tiny mirror, reflecting the face of the lover looking toward it; at the same time, the exquisitely delicate surface of a tear-drop makes it vulnerable to dissolution. Because of its capacity to contain and to mirror the two lovers’ images, the “whole world” in which they exist and love, the tear may expand to become itself a world, to mimic a globe. Yet at this point of powerful enclosure, fears of being engulfed often seem to arise, and the tear that had so gently held the lovers in its sphere now joins others in a drowning ocean.

The tension between these many oscillations is one Donne cultivates in several poems through the image of the tear-drop, but nowhere so dramatically as in “A Valediction of weeping.” The tear’s uniquely doubled nature—of the body yet always external to it, always falling away from the eyes that form it and yet the sign of some interior pain, or joy—is this poem’s emotional fulcrum, accentuating the fraught experience of existing both “in here” and “out there.” In this poem, tears have both psychological meaning, functioning as “weapons” with which to move the other as well as the product of efforts to rid the self of
pain, loss, and loneliness, and poetic meaning, as tropes representing the speaker’s anxious, chronic vigilance over the condition of his relatedness.

The poem begins with a literal outpouring of tears:

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 griefe 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. (1—9)

Before the tears become the coins, mirrors, fruits, emblems, and falling “pregnant” bodies they will simultaneously play in this stanza (with all surfaces imagined to contain some image of the woman), they are, at first, very much a part of the speaker’s body and emotional interiority. His first utterance—“Let me powre forth”—thrusts not only his tears but his very self into the space between him and his mistress: “Let me pour forth”; and “powre” connotes not so much the slipping of tears down a cheek as it does an uncontained, uncontainable raining of fluid. To the degree that this flood seems already to have inundated the poetic frame even as the speaker begins to talk, the first line sounds less like a request for her permission to cry than like the briefest introduction before these tears, whose internal pressure he can no longer sustain, rush forth. (Indeed, the spelling of “powre” echoes “power” so strongly as to suggest that tears explode from the speaker’s face with propulsive force, and that, once
begun, they will be unstoppable.) But "Let me" also expresses a plea, one that seems directed toward her and toward himself at once. In order to exhibit his own grief at this moment of leave-taking, he may need her reassurance about what she feels at parting from him, so uncertain are the implications of separating for the future of their love. At the same time, he seems to encourage himself toward a cathartic revelation of himself and the strength of his feelings about being apart. And this raises questions about the nature of his bond with her. Does something hold him back (has he been held back in the past) from a full experience of intimacy, such that now he feels inhibited from expressing grief? Would such exposure be risky for the same reason departure from her feels risky—because he does not completely trust her? Or is it (again, has it been) himself that he does not trust?

The dynamics of looking become ever more taut on this threshold of parting. He asks (asks himself?) to cry before her "whilst I stay here." as if there is something he needs from being seen crying. The implied face-to-face positioning of "Let me powre forth / My tears before thy face" (and it is her face that he specifies, rather than her eyes) suggests that looks are being exchanged, that he looks into her face in search of her whole expression, which he then encapsulates in his tears. His tears, not her eyes, accomplish the reflecting: he looks at her to capture what she looks like and integrates that look into himself, reproducing her in his tears while she faces him with her own face and being. It seems vitally important to this Donnean speaker that there is another body there, a face that looks back in a mutually created experience. Produced from within himself but reflective of her, his tears are now of self and other simultaneously; he seems—initially, at least—to experience her not as
something within him, but as something superimposed onto his tears and then looked at through the commingling medium of his own fluidity.

Once again, the speaker halts the moving away the poem itself records, both by the fact of speaking and by his assertion within that speech: “I stay here” (recalling the similar initiatory statement in “Sweetest love, I do not goe”). Again a speaker hesitates, stopping his own leaving; and the act of staying seems bound up with that of crying, as if he stays in order to cry with her. As the future draws near with all the disquieting ramifications of separation, the sadness specific to parting may be overshadowed by another sadness—the threat of “falling” and disloyalty—barely yet articulated in the poem. With her image contained in the tears that course across his face, he can “stay” and be still; it is as if her face “stays” him from the imminent leave-taking. “Here” suggests, therefore, “with you” (and thus not “out there”), but also “over here, where I am, on my side of the boundary between us.” With her image imprinted upon them, but shed only in the “absence” of her as one lover faces another, tears thus measure the irreducible distance between them. And into that space-between seeps doubt about what will happen when separateness becomes physical and definitive.

While he stays “here,” at least, the speaker’s tears reflect the face of the woman who gazes at them, and are figured first as a unit of exchange, “stampe[d]” as though with a royal head, and made valuable by that “Mintage” (the window-pane in “A Valediction: of my name in the window” likewise gained value). In the emotional economy between the two lovers—an economy of a grief troubled by worry about what might occur when they are no longer “face-to-face”—such tears might be “worth” something more, now that they are
impressed with her face. Via such currency, it seems, the speaker can try to expel from himself a grief that feels overwhelming but also worthless, and make it a part of her—she gives the tears their renewed worth. This value is complicated, however, by the unfolding of the metaphor of coinage. Because they are “stampe[d]” and “coine[d]” by her face, and “by this Mintage . . . something worth,” the tears are next imagined to be “pregnant of thee, / Fruits of much griefe they are, emblemes of more.” Tears do more than reflect or mirror a mere picture of her: they contain an impression as vital as the seed of her, as if they could give birth to her. At first, such fullness seems pleasurable—he can contain her within himself, if only on the outskirts of his body, at the boundary of himself and the out-there, within the fragile membrane of the tear. (The metaphor of pregnancy is prefigured in line 3 by “beare”; already the coins carry the “stampe” of her face like a pregnancy, and they are worth something for containing her in this way.) But the fantasy of being pregnant with her—of needing, as it were, to give birth to her (a new version?)—implies that he does not already have a connection to her that fulfills him the way her image “fulfills” the tear.21 and reinforces what seems to be a prior sensation—an emptiness exacerbated precisely because he is now “evacuating” parts of himself through his tears. Those tears are, as he quickly remembers, produced by “much griefe,” and while the ostensible meaning is clear (he is leaving), the phrase connotes as well something far more interior, as if “griefe” has been accumulating within him over countless unspoken betrayals. Indeed, the rest of the line—“emblemes of more . . .”—trails off vaguely, as if he can’t find words at all adequate to articulate the many reasons for these tears. His own descriptive metaphors work to belie what might seem important here to disguise: the progression from tears
coined by her image to tears pregnant with the “seed” of her leads him to the paradox of “fruits,” a word which carries suggestions of transgression and delight at once, as if the very objects by which he tries to hold her to him (in place?) become symbols of the kind of act that could breach that connection. The tears perform the transgressiveness, in fact, by “falling” as he cries them.

The parts of him that successfully “contain” her—those tears—are always already on the move away from him as soon as they achieve shape and meaning outside of his eyes (he, his body and “self,” can never really hold her as his tears do). Tears always fall; they can never go back in, never return to connection with the body that forms them. It is this incessant “falling” that triggers the shift in tone and emotion in the second part of the first stanza. It is as if his own image of pregnant tears, seeming to grant a wonderful wholeness, requires that he track back to the dangerous sexuality of which pregnancy is a literal “fruit,” and which causes even further pregnant tears. The tears that “bore” her detach from his eyes and give birth to a “fallen” her. His desire, and attempt, to retain a sense of her in his tears ends up “falling,” measuring as it does so how little he can ensure that she will not “fall” after he departs (or, perhaps more acutely, even prior to this moment). Nor can he guarantee in her the stasis that is so important to him; as if to counter his own assurance that “I stay here,” he seems to accuse her, “thou falst.”

From pregnant tears, to more and more grief, to falling—and the speaker rushes headlong into nothingness, diversity, separation. His lover appears on/in his tears precisely because he is opposite her, and he seems to cry because each temporary, physical leaving-taking symbolizes a far deeper, more inevitable separateness. In a kind of infinite regress of grief and disconnection,
the tears ("emblems" of "more" grief and "more than I can describe") represent the intermediary space between himself and her that becomes filled only by the tears that already represent its bottomlessness. Though these tears fuse the two lovers in a way their actual bodies cannot, blurring the distinction between them (as well as the boundary between the "inside" and "outside" of his body), the ability to superimpose is undermined by the fact that they result from, cause, and signify separation. As his beloved "falls," borne by the current of his tears, he is left "here" crying—"so" that he feels like nothing; as they part, "so" the couple they were is reduced to "nothing." William Empson notes in his discussion of the poem that "then means both 'when you fall' and 'when we are separated,' as if they were much the same thing" (141). To be "on a divers shore" from her feels tantamount to a loss of identity—both of his individual selfhood and of their mutual partnership.

Nonetheless the tear maintains its transformative powers in the second stanza, as if the speaker redoubles his efforts to locate spaces in which their two subjectivities can experience a pleasurable overlap:

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, Ali.
So doth each teare,
Which thee doth weare,
A globe, yea world by that impression grow. (11-16)

As the empty "round ball" devoid of meaning becomes an identifiable, navigable "Ali" with maps of the world pasted upon it, so the value of a tear
increases with her reflection “worn” within it; the “impression” of her face makes the tear an all, the way she—if she could also be contained within him—might grant him the completeness of a world. It is as if she covers him like the overlain “copies” of the continents, and fills him from within like tears “pregnant of” her, until the space they share “overflow[s]” with tiny crystalline worlds of which both have been the creators—she with her face and looks and presence, he as the “workeman” who cries the englobing tears. And while it seems that she too has begun to cry—“Till thy teares mixt with mine doe overflow / This world, by water sent from thee, my heaven dissolved so” (17–18)—“thy teares” may also refer, in a way that underscores the spatial and psychic entanglements the poem depicts, to his own tears, which “belong” to her because her face gives them meaning and worth, because it is her relation to the speaker that elicits them, and, perhaps, because they wet her face as he weeps. The conglomerate of “thy teares mixt with mine,” then, can attest to the strength of the emotional exchange being wished-for as well as the inundating potential of that connection. “This world,” a single tear made a world (and vice-versa) by her presence therein, and the fantasy of a stable “world” she might create within him and for them, is easily overflowed by the grief brought on by real separation and, perhaps, not-so-real betrayals. The “waters sent from thee” are then both her tears, overflowing herself (her own physical and psychic integrity “dissolved”) and the tears she causes him to weep, whose images of her are in turn dissolved by contact with each other. She is his “heaven,” saturated with tears; and tears dissolve his paradisal wish for something secure with her.

The penetrability of the tear-drop demonstrates the exciting experience of exceeding the limits of one’s boundaries in psychic exchange with another.
When man and woman cry together, their tears intermingle, blurring distinctions by combining the positions of mourned/mourner, performer/spectator, self/other. The act of crying itself in this poem repeats the reorientation of the gaze enacted by “A Valediction of my name, in the window”: initially, it is the man’s tears that are “pregnant” and pour forth uncontrollably, the man who is uncontained, flowing, fluid—and the woman who watches. Also, the many distortions of space (the proportions of the cosmos are stretched from micro- to macrocosmic, with tear-drops reflecting faces and encapsulating worlds, and a woman expanding to become the moon) exaggerates the poem’s willingness to ignore outline and limitation, its eagerness to experience a comfortable at-oneness. Indeed, this sensitivity to edges and to various ways of crossing or even dispensing entirely with boundaries—of the body, while crying; of tears, which dissolve; of the self, in love with another—seems reminiscent of an early phase of symbiotic merger between infant and caregiving body, a state in which “stable concepts of time, space, and reality dissolve . . . Neither are space and proportion a given” (Hamilton 16). But there are nagging doubts about the possibility of such unions as well as about the safety of the individual self within them. The tears that “emblematize” grief also signal the frightening fusion of overflowing worlds, dissolved heavens, and drowning seas. And in the midst of so much fluid ambiguity and overlap, one wonders if, while both speaker and lover “own” tears, participating in the shared ownership of the pool formed by their crying, their tears signify the same thing: do they grieve for the same separation, and in the same way? Are “thy teares” and “mine” finally not indistinguishable, but in fact as separate as the two faces that coin them?

At the start of the third stanza, the speaker’s entreaty to his lover—now in
the figure of the moon, with her power to influence and contain so much fluidity as well as his own solubility—seems nearly unavoidable:

O more then Moone,
Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy spheare,
Weepe me not dead, in thine armes, but forbeare
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 another's breath,
Who e'r sighes most, is cruell'est, and hastes the others death.

(19–27)

The multifacetedness of the speaker's attachment to his lover and of his worry about the uncertainty of parting is aptly suggested by Empson's serial interpretation of "more then Moone": the moon draws up the tides of their tears; she is both chaste and inconstant like the moon; the phrase deifies the mistress; she is bigger and more powerful than the moon for being the world, closer to him, and so forth (Empson 143). Yet even so insightful an unfolding of meaning does not quite capture the plangency of this address; its "logical" consistency vis-à-vis the metaphors of the second stanza becomes nearly irrelevant in the thrust of real grief and need somehow sobbed by the wide, drawn-out "O."
There is a sense of metaphorical excess having gone too far, a sense that the speaker invokes the stock symbol in a literal way—she is the moon for controlling the tides of his tears—but has also reached beyond it, to a deeply emotional place where the usefulness of language fails him. The anxiety of
imminent separation feels devastating and inundating.

"More then Moone" suggests the kind of excess the speakers of
"Sweetest love" and "A Valediction of my name, in the window" invested in the
women in those poems, omnipotent women who could house or fragment the
bodies of their lovers, look back in a mutual gaze or look away with murderous
unconcern. The woman who is more commands his very life; she is like a whole
world and a whole world dissolved. To be close to her is to experience his self
as dangerously loosened, so unpredictable is her "spheare": she can, and
might, "draw up seas" to drown him. "O more then Moone" pushes the third
stanza toward a fantasized—though no less palpable—threat of death. It is as if
she holds him in her arms like an infant, drowning him in the vastness of her
"spheare" and in its uncontainable sadness, weeping for him as if he were
already dead. And though that imagined mourning may demonstrate something
about her attachment to him, its occurrence seems to record as well what is
coursing beneath this poem: that once he is gone ("dead"), she is free
("dissolved"?) to pursue other lovers. Indeed, his pleas to her to "forbeare / To
teach the sea, what it may doe too soone," to "Let not the winde / Example
finde," disclose through the disguise of the metaphor the same worry that
invaded the first stanza: that sadness and separation may happen "too soone"
(which sounds like "soon enough" and suggests an inevitability); that whatever
actual danger exists in the literal plot of the poem is outweighed by the increase
in harm she could cause (she sets an "example" that is more than the moon, the
sea, the wind together). Even the personified "winde"—already perceived as a
malevolent force that "purposeth" to do him some degree of "harme"—might be
impelled toward "more harme" by her example. And that sense of conscious
intention to harm sounds the final note of a crescendo of doubt and fear: enmeshment with her is too threatening—in part, it seems, because her “purpose” is unknowable, disturbingly in question.

So much danger may be offset by the possibility of them “holding” each other and of being “held” in a space that staves off unstoppable floods. The chiasmic intermingling of breaths—her body contains his, his body her breath—works to control their lives and deaths. He wants them to “hold” each others’ breaths by not sighing, and so maintain a feeling of keeping-in, of repletion and completion. But of course they cannot hold their breaths forever, and the inevitable breathing-out (which he seems to watch and wait for in an agony of anticipation) is thus a cruelty that “hastens the others death.” Where sighs had so provocatively described the physical sensation of satisfying emotional connection in “Sweetest love,” here they join the tears to convey a bodily expelling—but also an exacerbation—of the unbearable experience of loss and loneliness. The breathing-out she controls endangers him with emptiness so utter it is very much like a dying inside. His attempts at “pregnancy” have fallen and failed.

The depth of ambivalence and doubt displayed by “A Valediction of weeping” appears in similar ways in two other poems from Songs and Sonets, poems that also fracture out of good feeling. “The good-morrow” and “A Valediction forbidding mourning,” despite their celebration by many critics as love poems of unmodulated emotion, contain shifts of tone and argument that reveal the kind of anxiety so tangibly at work in the poems discussed thus far. It is just such a turn that interests me about “A Valediction forbidding mourning,” in
which the dominant concern appears to be—once again—whether or not separation can be survived. What happens to cause confidence to fall away and to break the poem out of its initial mood of calm, gentle assurance? What precedes the “turn,” conditions it, assuages it?

As its title proclaims, the poem sets out to bid farewell by “forbidding mourning.” The opening analogy between parting lovers and dying men who “whisper to their souls, to goe” (1–2) makes the separation as natural—and the reunion as inevitable—as that of “virtuous” bodies and souls. It may be the certitude of rejoining that renders death a mild passing; the words of parting are whispered, and only the “sad friends” who cluster around the death-bed seem anxious about the exact moment at which soul withdraws from body. So subtle is this parting, in fact, that it is nearly imperceptible to others (as Geoffrey Hartman points out, “the evidence of life [hangs] on a word, on less than a word, on a vocal inflection or quantity, the difference between ‘now’ and ‘no’”22) and perhaps barely noticeable even to the self. Moreover, the stanza confuses slightly one’s sense of which it is—body or soul—that is figured as leaving. It is as if they both “leave”: the one “passe[s],” the other is whispered at “to goe,” they move away from each other as if simultaneously, and neither “stays.” And it may be a good man’s trust in what is to meet him as he crosses the threshold between life and death that allows him the readiness to release his soul:

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 tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
’Twere prophanation of our joyes
To tell the layetie our love. (1–8)

The multitude of “o” sounds in these two stanzas—“soules,” “goe,” “doe,” “now,” “no,” “so,” “floods,” “nor,” “move,” “our,” “To,” “our,” “love”—slows down the rhythm to a gentle, nearly chanting sound, as if the lines could whisper just as the breath slips unnoticed from the mouths of dying men. Saying good-bye, the speaker suggests, might be just as internal an event as this parting of body and breath—so private, others can’t perceive it; so “mild,” it feels less like a wrenching breakage than like melting. Let us part, he seems to say, as if only gradually dissolving, separating out of oneness and into twoness in a way that is simultaneously a melding; and let us do this so quietly that no one else will notice—it diminishes us to be exposed to the “layetie.” If the parting of body and soul will look like just one more exhalation of breath, so their parting should feel like just another normal parting; tears and sighs will only “profane” it.

But again, the imagery seems to tug in opposite directions. While on one level these lines sound placid and lulling, this sense of calm is set over and against an equally clear sense of movement—the leave-taking that occasions the poem, the going of the souls and breath, the “tear-floods” and “sigh-tempests” that might be “moved” by lovers mourning each other’s loss. There are counter-pulls of tension. For instance, the men of the first stanza must tell their souls to leave, as if there might be a degree of reluctance (will body and soul reunite?), or as if one has been ready all along, merely waiting for the other to prepare itself for this inevitable separation. And if so, how then does the
analogy inflect our understanding of the separation of the man who speaks the poem and his mistress? One wonders how firm a resemblance between body/soul and lovers is established by “So”—might the human pair be less assured of reunion than the “virtuous men”? Might they, indeed—he or she—want not to be reunited? If men and souls are moving “mildly away” from one another, then self and other, man and woman, might also “melt” away from, as much as into, each other.

Ambiguities of motion have everything to do with anxieties about parting. Despite the speaker’s confirmation that it is he who physically leaves (“I must goe” [22]), this poem, as so many others, expresses a familiar concern that his own leaving is being matched—even preceded?—by psychological movement away from him on the part of his lover. Notice that it is the breath that leaves, not the men who hold the breath; and the soul that goes, not the male body that houses the soul. And if the instruction to “make no noise” stems from a wish to protect “our joyes” from the misunderstanding of others, it seems also to register a need to soften the distress of separation, to “melt,” rather than give free rein to a storm of tears and sighs that might create a dangerous undertow to the confidence that dominates the early stanzas of the poem. (Here are the so-frequent internal storms stilled; there seems no need to “expell” anything and the melting together seems delicious as much as inundating.) So as not to disturb his own inner sense of equilibrium, he urges her not to “exaggerate” her sadness (we have seen such a projection already in “Sweetest love”), and he glides over that sadness to a statement reaffirming the presence of multiplied “joyes.”

The leap outward to the much larger and much more frightening “Moving
of th’earth” in the third stanza (whether internal quakes or cosmic rotation) thus discloses how disturbing both internal and physical acts of “moving” can be for the speaker:

Moving of th’earth brings harmes and feares,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the spheares,
Though greater farre, is innocent. (9–12)

Even as the image of the earth works to minimize and contain the separation between the two lovers by virtue of comparison (the lovers “melt,” while the earth “brings harmes and feares”; the earth causes men to “recon what it did and meant,” while the motion of the spheares is “innocent”), it also seems to implicate the speaker in the kind of worry and uncertainty he nearly scoffs at here. Can one trust, for instance, that the speaker is not one of the men who must “recon,” when he was so evidently aligned with the “virtuous men” of the first stanza? And if those other men must struggle for an interpretation of the meaning of the earth’s movement, is this man in a similar realm of supposition about his mistress’s “motions”? Might she, after all, love another? Trying to insulate them further still by a second pull outward—to protect them not only from the prosaic observations of onlooking “friends,” but from his own suspicions as well—he likens their parting to the “greater farre” and more “innocent” trembling of the spheres. But his metaphors belie his anxiety: though he means to dismiss their movement away from each other as a grand, cosmic “trepidation,” the very word conveys the extent of his own alarm; “innocent” proclaims the harmlessness of that movement, even as it suggests how haunted he is by the possibility of rivals. Thus their “greater farre” motion apart must be
made barely perceptible to others—even to themselves; spheres to the earth of
"dull sublunary lovers" (13), they must not sully their parting. nor their love, by
acting as the earth does.

Mere earthly lovers cannot tolerate physical absence precisely because
it deprives them of the one thing that comprises their love: the body, with all its
simple sensuality and reliance on the senses.

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

But we by a love, so much refin’d,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care lesse, eyes, lips, hands to misse. (13–20)

But a love that can withstand "motion" is one independent of physical
connection. Not having to rely on sight, touch, even the sound of each other's
voices, their love is of the spheres, "innocent" of the requirement of constant
contact. So "refin’d" is that love, they are made pure by it—made so subtle and
precise, indeed, that they cannot even define what it is that they experience
together, though they nonetheless escape the dull interpretation already
belittled in the third stanza. The speaker makes the terms of so fine a fit quite
explicit: to withstand physical separation, lovers must have internalized each
other as sustaining imagoes, carried within and related to as vividly as their
physical selves. To be "inter-assured of the mind" is to experience reciprocity
and understanding as *guaranteed* (as they were not in "A Valediction of weeping" and "A Valediction of my name, in the window")—and "inter-assured" seems precisely the right phrase, since it conveys the mutuality and exchange that are so vital, along with the sense of being *reassured* of a continued affection. Because (or more specifically, when) there is such psychical connection, physical disconnection feels neither obliterating nor even disruptive of love itself: they can "care less" about the absence of lips, eyes, hands. And the speaker, in turn, can also be "careless" about togetherness: he seems jaunty here, playful and confident. They do not—*he* does not (yet)—need to be vigilant about love, separation, or selfhood.

Not to know "what [love] is"—to be beyond (even prior to) explanations and definitions that would require observation of oneself and consideration of the self’s interaction with another—suggests a state of powerful, total union in which conceptions of "twoness" have no meaning. The "inter-assurance" of their minds creates an experience of oneness that, far from presupposing knowledge and experience of dualities, smudges all delimiting outline between their separate selves. So their "two souls therefore, . . . are one," and, equally paradoxically, the space that keeps them apart is but a continuation of themselves and thus of their bond, just as the ends of a sheet of gold hammered to thinness stand apart, yet uninterruptedly attached:

    Our two soules therefore, which are one,
    Though I must goe, endure not yet
    A breach, but an expansion,
    Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate. (21–24)

This last image of "gold to ayery thinnesse beate" is an index of the speaker’s
willingness to tolerate distance, and it sounds less like a buttressing of a vulnerable self (increasing its sense of identity, in effect, by adding her identity) than like a liberating continuum of connectedness in which confident selves expand toward the other and lose rigid definition in that intimacy. Whatever disappointment might be felt by the experience of loss, even abandonment, that parting entails, it seems, is assuaged by the ability to remember good feelings and to remain “in contact,” as it were, intrapsychically.

Again, however, the speaker weakens the strength of his own figurative language. He seems to assure her that, though he must go, their souls experience a pleasurable “expansion” rather than a painful “breach.” And yet he also seems deliberately to articulate a much less assured vision of their future: their two souls “endure not yet / A breach,” as if they will at some unspecified point in the extended separation that results from his going. If the “expansion” that is like pounded gold constitutes the parting at hand, the “breach” that occurs “not yet”—but is beyond his ability, poetic or otherwise, to prevent—would seem to signify both worry and certainty that some definitive break-up will occur in the future. In the context of such anxiety, the contradiction of a sheet of gold “beate” into “ayery thinnesse” conveys a threatening tactility set against the feel of a self wholly at ease with space and with the spatial relations of intimacy. Who is doing the beating that pushes speaker and mistress away from one another? Does parting feel more like a violent rending, after all, than like the smooth melting of the second stanza? A vaguely helpless tone resonates in the speaker’s aside, “Though I must goe,” as if he were compelled, even coerced, to leave by a force not completely in his command: his own insecurity, perhaps, or ambivalences he projects onto her. Finally, one notices that these lovers do,
indeed, “endure . . . an expansion”—as if it were not so pleasurable, nor so safe, after all.

Looking backward in the poem’s progression, it appears that the very “carelessness” that demonstrated the speaker’s “object constancy”—his ability to survive the absence of his lover, to retain his attachment to her and to trust in her return—signals the poem’s turn toward doubt, as if overconfidence breeds a renewed suspicion about what might go wrong when vigilance is relaxed. As if the image of the “gold to ayery thinnesse beate” threatens to dissolve the relationship into a nothingness the speaker can’t tolerate, the last three stanzas are tainted by a resurfacing feeling of uncertainty that even the renowned compass metaphor seems more to manifest than to ameliorate.

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

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

Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
Like th’other foot, obliquely runne.
Thy firmnes makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne. (25–36)
First, the two souls so clearly figured as one in the previous stanza are suddenly returned to a condition of divided twoness by the speaker’s curiously conditional “if they be two,” as if he can no longer be sure that they “are one,” and not two. Allowing that they might be two, the speaker tries again to render that doubleness in a way that will again symbolize their union. His light, somehow instinctive sense of assurance, conveyed by the airy gold, is replaced by the compass—a far more solid, unbreakable symbol of attachment. The lover is the “fixt foot” that “makes no show / To move” unless the other does, and one wonders where the need to immobilize her so has come from; his connection to her now seems tenuous and in need of ballast.

Like the leg of a compass joined at one end to the other leg, each lover’s motion is now contingent upon the other’s. She is “the fixt foot,” which “makes no show / To move, but doth, if the’other doe”; he, “the other,” which “far doth rome.” She is “the center,” still and sure, that marks the home base of the circle circumscribed around her by the speaker’s roaming. This would seem to substantiate some critics’ belief that the compass is used here as an emblem of constancy and that the speaker means to express his belief in (or anxious wish for?) his lover’s fidelity. Once more, however, the speaker nearly retracts what his ingenuity offers: the “fixt foot” (“fixed,” as if from without, put in place, even “corrected”?) “makes no show” to move—as if it might at any moment, unpredictably; as if she moves internally, imperceptibly, emotionally—in short, in some way that cannot be measured by outward show. Immobility is hardly guaranteed. The apparent readiness to follow after the “the’other” foot, then, along with the joint that holds the two legs of the compass together, are both undone by doubts only the grammar works to evidence.
In the next stanza, these suspicions—and confusions about which of them is the one who “moves”—become even more unignorable. As if to take into account his own vexing worry (and in a way that satisfies the logic of the compass analogy), the speaker allows that “though [the fixt foot] in the center sit,
/ Yet when the other far doth rome, / It leans, and hearkens after it. / And growes erect . . .” The stanza pulses with ambiguities. In a poem that has already subverted its own fiction\(^{26}\) through implications that it is the female other that “goes,” and in which issues of selfhood and subjectivity are very much at play for the speaker, the phrase “the other” seems suddenly to reverse the positions man and woman occupy in the terms of the compass analogy. Imagistically, “the other” defines the roaming man, but rhetorically it hints, once again, that the “self” of this poem—its male speaker—frets over the potential roamings (past or future) of his mistress. At the same time, of course, he fashions himself a wandering, even transgressive other, in terms of a stable “center” meant to establish origin and to contain his motion around her—as if whatever worry he has about her is compounded by worry about himself. Donne maximizes such “misidentifications,” I think, by relying on ambiguous pronouns: in four lines, three instances of “it” and one of “that,” detached from their referents, inhibit firm assignation of self and object (indeed, at line 31, “it” applies both to the man and to the woman). Furthermore, the fixed foot moves (already a paradox) not simply in a barely measurable circle controlled by the movement of “the other”; it actually “hearkens after” the other and “growes erect, as that comes home.” The masculinity of this description (even granting that the fixed leg of a widened compass would, literally, straighten as the other moved inward) cannot but increase one’s sense that, surprisingly, it is the man who
perceives himself as stationary. As she roams in a circle around him—a circle that will be narrowed only by her moving toward him—he wonders after her and growing erect at her return. (Notice too that the twin compasses are “stiffe” at line 26.) Psychically, indeed, the speaker’s physical departure from the woman may feel utterly indistinguishable from a gesture of separation he ascribes, in fantasy, to her.

“Such,” then, “wilt thou be to mee, who must / Like th’other foot, obliquely runne.” “Such” is a word like “so” (as in “A Valediction of weeping”), which sets up a comparison whose elements are already deeply conflicted and unclear. On the surface the word recovers the terms of the analogy from whatever may have problematized them in the previous stanza, and seems to confirm that she will be the one to lean and hearken after him. The syntactical progression of these lines, however, pulls out of shape what the speaker tries to render through his simile. “Such” seems to work backward to the immediately preceding phrase—as if to say, “you will be to me ‘as [the one] that comes home’”; to the degree that the penultimate stanza has already confused one’s sense of who stays, who leaves to roam, such a succession reinforces the subtext: he experiences himself as left behind by her. Thus “who” (in “Such wilt thou be to mee, who must . . . obliquely runne”) also seems detached, applicable to either of them grammatically as well as thematically. And which of them is “like th’other foot”? Must she, too, run? Do they both move, both grow erect at the prospect of reunion? Tellingly, the trope that is meant to show the two lovers in relation to each other in fact doubles them at first: they are “twin compasses,” identical.

The effect of so much layering of language and subjectivity (which may
also be its point) is to call radically into question that aspect of the love the poem describes which at least one of its readers has called "idealism." 27 The poem piles up images of attachment and motion, only to deny the fixity of meaning those very images seem to strive so much to assure. In the highly determined, seemingly stabilized space inside of which the poem comes to a close—the circle drawn by the compass in which, the speaker says, "Thy firmnes . . . makes me end, where I begunne"—there is a nearly kaleidoscopic interplay of position and movement that threatens to bulge the outline of that perfect circularity (the course of "th'other foot" is "oblique"; the poem ends by being "begunne"). 28 Thus the woman must be invested with "firmnes" to make things "just," to make him stop "running." She must stand firm, straighten up, perhaps, even get excited for him, in order for him to return. He depends on that reliable durability to counter his own ambivalent roaming, to reassure him that his own wanderings are "just," right, and safe, and to bring him around again to himself. And yet, simultaneously, he is like the child anxious about his mother's return. It is as if the poem's figurative language allows two stories to be told at once.

"A Valediction forbidding mourning," like "A Valediction of weeping," foregrounds symbols of space in a way that exteriorizes intense, internal dialectics of relatedness. The compass and its circle, the globes wrapped in maps, the world-like tears, all work to carve out areas through which speakers play out both possibilities for, and anxieties about, intimacy and abandonment, trust and suspicion. "The good-morrow"—another poem most often read, in David Daiches's words, as a statement of "mutual love" and "mutually
successful love-making" (183, 188)—likewise weaves its way through a tangle of spatial metaphors, and as it does so, the sure step that seems to open the poem falters irredeemably. In the course of its three stanzas, "The good-morrow" shifts abruptly from a full, uncomplicated experience of connectedness, to nihilistic, fractious, and embittered thoughts of death and separation. Once again the necessary questions include: How does this happen? What ruins the enjoyment of the first stanza and produces the last? What allows for the pleasure of the first stanza at all?

The mood of wonder that opens the poem feels rich and tactile, and the stanza luxuriates in sensual pleasure—pleasure both erotic and childlike:

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov’d? were we not wean’d till then?
But suck’d on countrey pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the seaven sleepers den?
T’was so; But this, all pleasures fancies bee
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desir’d, and got, t’was but a dreame of thee. (1–7)

The speaker seems to accept that he does not—cannot—know his lover, or her past, entirely. Instead he meets the morning with innocent fantasy and curiosity, as if paying a kind of marveling, rapt attention to the surprise of good feeling. "By my troth" adds a level of commitment to what might otherwise sound much more like suspicion. It is as if he is able to wonder through or because of a pledge of loyalty and faithfulness; otherwise, speculation would seem to have the potential to lead him toward more untrusting conclusions than the subsequent lines provide.
What the speaker wonders about, of course, is what they "Did," prior to a moment of loving that represents being "wean'd" from childish escapades. But the pleasure the stanza records is not the moment of adult sexuality that ostensibly inaugurates this "good morrow"; in fact, it is the pleasure of not being weaned. To be weaned is to be removed from and deprived of nursing at the breast; the speaker remembers—quite delightedly—having "suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly" (it is but a single instance of Donne's prosodic skill that the assonance and alliteration of these words fill the mouth with sound texture, as if the reader could "suck" on the line while the speaker fantasizes about having suckled at the breast). "Countrey pleasures" may be, as C. A. Patrides glosses in his edition, "rustic; hence unrefined" (48), but the phrase also connotes something instinctual and unruled. The allusion to the seven sleepers' mythic two-hundred years' sleep heightens the atmosphere of snug satisfaction, because it implies not just a space in which danger may be escaped, but a drawn-out expanse of replenishment as well. The speaker increases the sense of restful content with "den" and "snorted," which suggest a self so deeply comfortable it can be unconscious of the surroundings that enfold it. In these first few lines, pleasure is clearly attached to the deliberately and intensely oral behavior of childhood, not to the adult (i.e., genital?) sexuality that is supposed to have superseded it. Moreover, it is pleasure itself that the speaker sucks (rather than a breast or a body), as if it could be absorbed directly into the self—pure and undistilled.

The first is a stanza of affirmations, with everything culminating in the speaker's unequivocal "T'was so." The abundance of pleasure is accentuated by the two repetitions of the word ("Countrey pleasures" and "all pleasures"), as
well as by the fact that in both instances the word is plural: pleasures proliferate, and cannot be easily dismissed as silliness. Indeed, in the speaker’s compacted phrasing, “all pleasures fancies bee” suggests not so much that all those prior pleasures are mere fancies, but rather—and more emphatically—that all pleasures and fancies are, they exist. Except for this adult, complicated, divided love, he seems to hint, pleasure could be. Moreover, the ontological importance of the stanza lies in this metaphorical childhood, as a time not only of immediate gratification (desiring means getting, with no intervening wait to survive: “If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desir’d, and got . . .”), but also as a time in which the being emerges out of a bond between self and other defined by sucking and experienced not as a connection between two ultimately separable things but as undifferentiated pleasure itself. Difference itself is annulled: “all pleasures fancies bee.” The “dreame”-like quality of this prior existence reinforces a certain illusionary quality characteristic of the infant’s capacity to “create” what it needs.  

But if the womblike connotations of the “seaven sleepers den” and the sensual orality of sucking on pleasure convey an infantile union with a caregiving body, the first stanza is also underpinned by the desire for, and a worry about, a far more adult experience of fusion. The “wonder” that initiates this poem is not only a gesture of subordinating all other romantic encounters to the perfection of the one now enjoyed. It is also a very real questioning; the quizzical uncertainty of “wonder” heads, even if only just noticeably, into a feeling of doubt. (Notice that he does not directly ask her what she did before him, as if he does not really want to know; he inserts “and I” into the question, as if to diffuse it.) What is at stake here, I think, is the speaker’s concern about how
much he can know (how much he can know about), and be known by, his lover.

"The conviction that another person knows what we feel and listens compassionately to us and understands," writes N. Gregory Hamilton, "entails a blurring of self-other boundaries"; "feeling empathically understood" brings "warmth and pleasure" (17). As the speaker gazes upon his lover in this moment of waking—a moment of reuniting after the separation of sleep—he seems immediately compelled by the indeterminacy of what she is thinking. Can he tolerate never fully knowing what she "Did" before him, or what she might do after him? Can he ever really know her? However much he might speculate, yoking her prior experience to his in his pleased re-creation ("were we not wean'd till then," "snorted we"), the fundamental unknowability of her life seems a source of some anxiety. In the assertion that closes the stanza ("If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desir'd, and got . . ."), and which overlays adult sexuality on the fantasy of "childish" gratification, the earlier claims of "we" have become a statement about a solitary "I." Indeed, in the last line of the stanza—"Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee"—the "I" is at a maximum distance from the "thee," which hovers over the blank space between stanzas; in the first line, "I" had seemed to wrap itself around "thou" ("I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I . . .")

The second stanza cannot hold off reality any longer: but what does reality entail? What does "tomorrow" bring? If sex is a kind of threshold, psychic and physical, between the former country pleasures and the morrow, what do souls awaken to?

And now good morrow to our waking soules,
Which watch not one another out of feare;
For love, all love of other sights controules,
And makes one little roome, an every where.
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let Maps to other, worlds on worlds have shewne,
Let us possesse one world, each hath one, and is one. (8–14)

The deliberateness of “now” severs the link to the reverie of the first stanza and
thrusts the poem into an awakening suspicion. Tone and volume shift; no longer
are the speaker’s thoughts concerned with innocent, unadulterated pleasure,
but—somehow shockingly—with the very possibility of “adultery” itself. The
negation (“our waking soules . . . watch not one another out of feare”) reveals,
precisely because it denies, a worry about past experiences and future
trustworthiness. His waking soul watches her, and suddenly fear comes to
mind—so much so, it seems, that he must cast it off in the form of a negative (or
can he not look at her at all, so fearful is he?). Why? While many critics take the
speaker at his word, supporting his bid for the strength of the relationship (“we
are not afraid of anything”), I hear these lines as an anxious disavowal of a
fear that intimacy might require an uncomfortable degree of surveillance. It is as
if the speaker sticks too closely to his own organizing metaphor of the first
stanza, and finds himself sunk in the traumatic realization that adult,

independent sexuality entails abandonment and separation, that being
“wean’d,” however necessary a development that might be, feels painful and
rejecting.

The hopeful myth, that love “controules” one’s “sight” and keeps one from
looking at other possible lovers, seems even more poignantly to indicate the
speaker’s wish to be held in a perfectly mutual gaze with another. The language
in this stanza, hardly the relaxed, sensual richness of the first, works into a rhetoric of rigid oppressiveness: “feare,” “controule,” “possess[ion],” and a binding sense of space. To control his fear (of her “other sights”), the speaker contracts the room in which they awaken, pulling the walls in around them, making their “one little roome, an every where”; he reduces the threat of the world outside by turning it into the “in-here,” by making in-here the whole world. “All” and “one,” similarly, carry the same weight: connection to his lover is a oneness into which all is gathered, and in which more-than-one is reduced to a wholeness that is “all,” all-encompassing and entire.

But such a level of contact risks suffocation; the emphasis on “little,” the counter-intuitive “an every where” (as if to strong-arm the world’s vast variety into a singleness), make the room reverberate with stuff.\(^36\) It is this packed feel of oppression, perhaps, that motivates an immediate re-expansion into new worlds in the second half of the stanza, as though the speaker needed to voyage, even if figuratively and in the context of his metaphor’s dismissiveness, beyond the limits of the four walls he himself has determined. He affects a stance of disinterested, then magnanimous, nonchalance: so what if explorers have gone to new worlds, and shown those worlds with maps? Let it be that they have done so. But with the third “Let” his meaning shifts slightly; far from it being a given that the two lovers own their world, he seems to ask permission: 
allow us to “possesse one world.” With tropes first of discovery, then charting, organizing, and possessing the unknown world, the speaker seems at the farthest distance from the first stanza’s recollections of sensual, bodily, childhood pleasures. Far from that realm—one of enjoyment unmediated—the “Maps” that must show “worlds on worlds” are but mere representations; maps
instruct, illustrate, simplify, reduce, particularize, alter, mimic, and so on—but they are not real worlds. At the same time, it is precisely because there are maps that one can "stay here" (to reprise the words of the speaker of "A Valediction of weeping"), assured of continued, intimate interaction. Mapmaking may express, as John Carey suggests, a "compacting power," which can "put the world in your hands" and allow the poet to "play with space" (265, 264), but it also represents an anxiety-provoking multiplicity that is not the desired "all." Moreover, the world they possess together is undermined by the fact of "worlds on worlds"—theirs, like a mapped globe, is just a copy. One wonders, indeed, whether the speaker wishes to possess the world truly as a discoverer might, or, instead, to leave discovery to the discoverers, so that he can retreat back into the kind of fluid pleasure implied by the first stanza.

No sooner has the world been brought into the room than the speaker must open out again onto more freeing vistas; but such expanses of space seem next to trigger isolation and loneliness, and he re-establishes rhetorical control via the metaphor of possessing of just one world. This constant motion of contraction and expansion seems, finally, to produce a kind of psychic seasickness. Once sovereign over a world they ruled together, the lovers suddenly each "hath one"—they are separate rulers of different worlds. By the end of the line, the speaker winds down to the conclusion that "each . . . is one," as if to underscore a fundamental individuality, and an irremediable, painful separateness. By the end of the second stanza there seems no hope of their recovering the kind of attachment that (as in the first stanza) makes one feel nestled into the self, as in sleep—even while sucking from pleasure itself.

The last stanza produces a rapid-fire succession of thoughts and
associations that do little to explain their origin:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares,
And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest,
Where can we finde two better hemispheares
Without sharpe North, without declining West?
What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I

Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die. (15–21)

The speaker seems simultaneously to avow that their faces are perfect
hemispheres, and to speculate about the possibility of finding “better” ones,
hemispheres “without north and west.” He implicitly proclaims their love an
equal mixture, while calling forth the danger of a love that is not. Whence the
sudden thoughts of death? And why, most distressing of all, the unexpected
conditional that begins line 20? “The good-morrow,” Patrides writes, “delineates
an aspiration, not an accomplished fact” (24). But it is an aspiration strenuously
mediated by a doubt that borders, here, on despair. Because they are now two
separate worlds, they can try to recover something of the first stanza’s
undifferentiated pleasure by reflecting each other’s looks in a perfect exchange.
Eyes—like tears, like little worlds clothed in maps—return not the solitary look of
a self but a doubled self-other image that suggests mixture, interplay, mutuality.
And yet it is precisely this chiastic pattern of gazes that reinforces the
unequivocal distance- and difference-between that the first stanza succeeded
so resoundingly in escaping. The mysterious (indeed, ominous) “What ever
dyes, was not mixt equally” might have been assuaged by an unhesitating
reassurance of oneness—instead, “If our two loves be one” ushers the poem
toward its close under the standard of fear raised in line 9. The absence of the elided "if" in the penultimate line ("If our two loves be one, or, [if] thou and I / Love so alike") suggests that the speaker longs not only for a sense of unified love, but for an experience of unseparated being ("if thou and I be one"); an unflagging attachment demands absolute reciprocity, that "two" must be overlain like "worlds on worlds," engrafted or engraved into one, or a give-and-take so exact that the separate subjectivities of the participants in that exchange become irrelevant. Otherwise, he seems to say, if he perceives a slacking of their connection, he "slacken[s]" and "die[s]." Notice, too, the way in which the "not one" of the second stanza, and the "one" of the penultimate line, are swallowed up by and subsumed into the repeated "none" of the last, as if the poem would record the expiration of hoped-for, sought-after union in the very words that mean to signify its achievement.

"The good-morrow" describes a kind of literal "waking up," a deterioration of the "dream" of childhood pleasures about which one has neither to be critical nor suspicious. In that earlier time, unity and reciprocity, equality and satisfaction could all be experienced automatically; but confrontation with the waking reality of the morrow brings back the world beyond the bounds of potential space with a vengeance. Fear contorts pleasure into questions of control: Can he possess his object? How much control can he have over the world in which they both travel? Does she have other, unknowable, uncontrollable lovers? Will the loss of her love, or the potential of having to share her love, or the reality of not having "all" of her love, make him feel like dying, want to die—even experience something indistinguishable from death?

Such anxieties seem represented first by the spiritual "soules" that enter
to replace the first stanza's palpably, emphatically, bodily joy, and next by the overdetermined layering of physicality in the first lines of the final stanza: "My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares, / And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest." But it is "rest," I think, that so quietly contains all the worry, and all the hope, of this poem. If "true plaine hearts" could be located (and "plaine" seems exactly what the piling-up of imagery in the second stanza—all meant to quantify their love—is not), the tiring work of contraction/expansion, drawing-toward and pulling-away, might stop, and the speaker might come to "rest" in the omnipotence of a bond able to dispense with boundaries, between past and present, between self and other. The "good-morrow" that itself constitutes the inaugural motion of the poem and that is the boundary between sleeping and waking-up might be blurred into a state of "rest" that is, pleasurably, neither.

Why might waking feel so frightening, and why might sleep (with all its illusory dreams) be so provocative a notion for Donne? Sleep, akin to the union with the "caregiving" body\textsuperscript{40} in the very earliest stage of life, takes place in the intermediate area of potential space—where the edges of selfhood, of consciousness, are loosened. (Preparation for sleep may also constitute a form of transitional phenomena, the bedtime rituals preparing the self for departing from consciousness and slipping back into an undifferentiated state.) To wake, then, is to separate out once again into a conscious, boundaried, and distinct self. In "Song. Sweetest love," Donne's speaker imagined sleep as a time when closeness and separation could be perfectly matched; in "The good-morrow," waking is associated with thoughts of difference, mistrust, separation, and death.
III

There is no coming back from the pessimistic depth into which the speaker sinks at the end of “The good-morrow.” The poem seems to spend itself, and one is left feeling bewildered—even deflated—by the loss of good feeling in the latter sections of the poem. Yet there are instances in Donne’s work where the threshold becomes a place for “play” in precisely the Winnicottian sense outlined in the introduction to this project. Winnicott’s “play,” by definition a borderland activity, demands that overlap be tolerated, and involves a relaxation of boundaries that, in itself, requires that boundaries between self and other exist and be respected. To “play” is to court the paradox of simultaneity. I would like to describe as playful those poems, or those moments in poems, where the Donnean speaker, rather than surrendering to the forms of anxiety and sadness we have seen thus far, allows himself truly to “rest” in a pleasurable and generous intermingling of self and other.41

When the speaker of “The Relique” claims “we lov’d well and faithfully, / Yet knew not what wee lov’d, nor why, / Difference of sex no more wee knew” (23–25); when the speaker of “The Undertaking” suggests we “forget the Hee and Shee” (20); when the speaker of “The Dampe” ambiguously exhorts his audience to “Kill mee as Woman, let mee die / As a meere man”; and even when the “seducer” of “The Flea” becomes identified with the seduced through the mutual sucking of the insect (“It suck’d me first, and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled bee” [3–4]).42 realms of self and other, male and female, have begun to overlap—in a way that suggests less a witty exchange of positions than an eager dissolution of outline. The “expansion” of
“A Valediction: forbidding mourning,” similarly, like gold pounded into an “ayery thinnesse” (23–24), turns the distance-between into a continuum of connectedness, uncovering the paradox of what Winnicott calls a separation that is also a form of union. And when speakers manage to preserve a sense of self in relation to others, without feeling appropriated or annihilated by proximity to another’s psyche, often the connection is articulated through metaphors of sovereignty that describe both male speaker and female other: the lovers of “The Anniversarie” who “Prince enough in one another bee” (14); the lovers of “The Sunne Rising” whom “Princes doe but play” (23).

Indeed, “The Sunne Rising” may constitute Donne’s most singular poetic play with space. As Thomas Docherty writes of the poem in John Donne, Undone, “the single most fundamental point at issue is that the space is relativized and made mutable” (31). The world beyond the bed that contains the intertwined lovers is controlled by the speaker, first by a gesture of audacious dismissal, then by an act of encompassing inclusion. It is worth quoting the poem in full, to observe the trajectory of its manipulation of space:

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why dose thou thus,
Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?
Sawcy pedantic wretch, goe chide
Late schoole boyes and sowre prentices,
Goe tell Court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,
Call countrey ants to harvest offices;
Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,
Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time.

Thy beames, so reverend, and strong
Why shouldst thou thinke?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a winke,
But that I would not lose her sight so long:
If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Looke, and to morrow late, tell mee,
Whether both the 'India' s of spice and Myne
Be where thou leftst them, or lie here with mee.
Aske for those Kings whom thou saw' st yesterday.
And thou shalt heare, All here in one bed lay.

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Princes doe but place us, compar'd to this,
All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie;
Thou sun art halfe as happy'as wee,
In that the world's contracted thus.
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties bee
To warme the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art every where;
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphare. (1–30)
The window through which the voyeuristic sun intrudes is both barrier and passageway between two realms (as in "A Valediction of my name"), but here it
is not self and other, speaker and mistress, that the window uncouples into opposition; rather, the pair luxuriates in a loving “wee”-ness—reinforced by the many repetitions of “us,” of “bed,” of “warm,” of “all”—that is distinguished from the particulated world of “boyes,” “ants,” and “the rags of time.” It is just this sense of confident attachment, I think, of a union so solid as to be condensed into the solemnity of “Nothing else is,” that infuses the speaker with an illusion of magical control over the objects of the world. Such power appears closely tied to the speaker’s position in a “bed” that evokes not just the adult sexuality which the morning interrupts, but also a more childlike experience of what Margaret Mahler calls “belief in [one’s] own magic omnipotence, which is still to a considerable extent derived from [one’s] sense of sharing [the] mother’s magic powers” (20). Secure in his bond with his lover/other, the speaker can make the “out-there” accord with his own expectations and desires—he can define not only the movement and proportion of the world (e.g., “the King will ride,” and “both the’India’s of spice and Myne... lie here with mee”) but the very configuration of the cosmos as well (“This bed thy center is, these walls, thy sphare”). In Robert Wittenburg’s words, “The Sunne Rising” strikes us with its “imperative mood, gigantic, engorged with the physical and emotional immediacy and sufficiency of its experience of love,” an experience through which the self discovers “the power not only to shape itself... but to shape the world to itself” (421).

Rather than something that threatens with disturbing implications of unknowability, separation, and loneliness, then, the window takes on the intermediate nature of potential space, allowing the speaker imaginatively, and pleasurably, to push away (“goe chide,” “goe,” “tell,” “call,” “looke”) or pull in
("shine here to us") what lies beyond. Just as a child exploring the world beyond its primary object proceeds through a dialectic of carrying "parts" of the mother into the world and objects from the world back to the mother, the speaker of "The Sunne Rising" mediates his perception of what lies beyond the threshold of the window through his trust in the depth and durability of his relatedness to his lover. The intensity of the poem's articulation of potential space (neither "all-me" nor objects beyond the self's control) renders the "contraction" of the final stanza more an experience of "holding"—in which "wee" are "happy" and "warne" and the "center" of "every where"—than the oppressive space of "The good-morrow"'s "one little roome." Thus the line that critics so frequently seize upon as proof of Donne's colonizing stance toward women might be more provocatively read as a profound acknowledgment of one woman's utter completeness: less a strident "she is all the states, and I am all the princes" than a loving She is all states and all princes. Aye.

But Donne's most striking instance of affirmation comes, I would argue, in "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day." If Donne's concentrated experiences of intimacy so often spiral downward into despair, this poem would seem to represent a parting—the parting of death—too traumatic to repair. And yet the speaker of "Nocturnall" breathes in" again, allowing reincorporation and renewal to take place, at the very nadir of his grief and emotional exhaustion. Like the tear-drop whose existence is liminal, breathing activates the boundary of the body and requires a dual crossing-over, from inside to outside and back again; and like the tear whose exterior existence depends upon a moment that is more emergence than stasis, the point at which breathing-in becomes breathing-out is a barely identifiable one.
With each inhalation and exhalation, each traversal of that margin, the body alternates between sensations of wholeness and emptiness, completion and depletion, fulfillment and hunger.\textsuperscript{45}

The hourglass shape of the "Nocturnall" replicates formally and visually the poem's thematic interplay between these two states of feeling and being. The nocturnal signals the moment of shortest breath in preparation for the "inhalation" of the ensuing year; "midnight," both the deepest part of night and the faintest part of morning, is an hour of exquisite tension coiled on a literal threshold of old and new. Docherty links the "Nocturnall" to "A Lecture upon the Shadow" and describes midnight (like noon) as an "eternized present moment," an "evanescent 'present' instant" that, because it contains "both life and death," is "revolutionary" (97). Indeed, is breathing, like midnight, not always filled with a kind of suspense? Can one breathe in again? Will suffocation ensue? Will the world, the "year," be filled up again, or is "nocturnal" a moment of disjunction from which the self can never recover? Suspended over these doubts, at the uttermost point of a very long night, and drawn downward in what Docherty calls "a series of concepts of entropic exhaustion" (97). "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day" seems to wonder whether grief is a darkness out of which morning may never emerge.

In the first stanza, the world is washed by a pale, sickly light, so saturated by its immoderate thirst it seems in danger of imploding:

\begin{quote}
Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes,
Lucies, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes,
The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes;
\end{quote}
The world's whole sap is sunke:
The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the beds-feet life is shrunke,
Dead and enterr'd, yet all these seeme to laugh,
Compar'd with mee, who am their Epitaph. (1–9)

The world appears barely held together: its necessary "sap" and "balme" are "sunke" in and absorbed, yet "th'hydroptique earth" cannot be satiated. The world sinks into itself in a kind of simultaneous death and burial ("dead and enterr'd"), as though the body of the world, and the body of the self speaking, turn in upon themselves and are held within the thirsty, soggy earth. "Spent" seems the paradigmatic word here, conveying a consummation that depletes and exhausts both "Sunne" and self, draining away energy and effectiveness, using up generative, procreative possibility. Describing the world, the speaker communicates a sense of morbid wonder about himself, as if the experience of loss could carry him inward to the very core of grief, where it might be possible to take in and still be thirsty, or to take in too much and drown. It is as if he wonders how much must he absorb before he arrives at "midnight," that precise and delicate point of transformation.

As midnight, the turn of a year, balances "end" and "beginning" (the end of a breath and the start of a breath), the poem counterpoises all and nothingness, death and rebirth. Not only does the speaker figure himself as dead, he also represents, contains, somehow is "every dead thing":

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing.
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations, and leane emptinesse
He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not. (10–18)

But the speaker's claim to a universal absence is juxtaposed with the restorative possibilities of "the next Spring." The first two stanzas, in fact, offer hints of the regeneration to come: the thirsty earth taking in all that "balme" (won't it serve, at some center-most point, to replenish the plants?). the confirmation of the change of seasons, the future tense of "shall" in line 10, the young "lovers," the alchemy that promises new substance, the process of transition specified by the repetition of "next." Even the fact that the speaker presents himself as something to be studied and learned from depends, in order to have meaning, on some future moment. Indeed, these lines are full of such reversals. Love, that supreme alchemist, creates something from deprivation and emptiness—a "quintessence even from nothingnesse." The speaker himself seems to break down into raw elements; he is "ruin'd," then "re-begot." His catalogue of "things which are not." a kind of fascination with the feel of absence, works hard to express a self fragmenting into the chaos of loss, a self worrying its own pain. Yet notice the insistence of "I am," "I am," at lines 12 and 17, the insinuation of "things which are . . ." at line 18. The imploding world of these first stanzas—and the self that capsizes in a fluid grief—is also its own matrix, dense with the very seeds of its rebirth.
These contrasts of containment and expulsion surge into the third stanza, where the speaker opposes his annihilated self with reinvigorated expressions of growth and totality.

All others, from all things, draw all that’s good,
Life, soule, forme, spirit, whence they beeing have,
I, by loves limbecke, am the grave
Of all, that’s nothing. Oft a flood
Have wee two wept, and so
Drownd the whole world, us two; oft did we grow
To be two Chaosses, when we did show
Care to ought else; and often absences
Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses. (19–27)

The first lines, with their forceful inclusiveness, their admission of the presence of “good,” their ontological affirmation (all things have “beeing”), seem to fulfill the promise at which the end of the previous stanza hints. Here is an absorption, an extraction (“draw”) from the stuff of the world that is life-sustaining—not the sluggish and shrunken interment of the first stanza. Initially, at least, the speaker transforms the apparently resounding quality of “things which are not,” and of the “dull privations, and leane emptiness” that, in the second stanza, define him as absence, in a recognition of “all that’s good” and of the presence he so adamantly denies to himself. He continues to separate himself, nonetheless—a solitary “I” at the start of the line, barricaded as if by space and punctuation—from “all others”; and “beeing” stands in opposition to “the grave” that symbolizes the speaker’s existence. He is the grave of all that might be defined as nothing as well as the grave of a literal nothingness—as if
nothingness might somehow itself be dead, or as if death could be dead. To be the grave of “all, that’s nothing” is to be nothing (or does he minimize his existence as grave: it’s “nothing”?). But is this, in fact, an empty grave? Or a grave filled to the overflowing? For even as he asserts himself as a cavity of “all” that is absence and death, emptiness and deprivation, such possessiveness evaporates into the very nothingness he names and he becomes, simultaneously, a container. By the “limbecke” of the alchemy that transformed him into “absence” and “death,” he now holds within himself the vastness of “all.”

The first three-and-a-half lines of this stanza propel speaker (and readers) downward to the extreme of “nothing,” where the self feels emptied of anything “that’s good.” But the cæsura after “nothing” is not merely poetic. It is here, I would argue, that the speaker first begins to “inhale”; the poem has hardly prepared us for the “flood” that pours into the void created by “nothing.” Yet this gap, I think, paradoxically bridges the desperation of the first part of the poem and the speaker’s discovery of his own capacity for what Winnicott might think of as “going on being.” In the latter part of the stanza grief itself unites speaker and lover; through it—and through their withdrawal from “ought else”—they “grow / To be two Chaosses,” disturbing the world with their combined emotion. Not at all the disgorged shell he was in the previous stanza, the speaker now, through the reparative effect of memory and even in the swell of a drowning torrent of tears, shapes a sense of self in the fullness of “we.” The stark and pointed insistence on “I” prior to and following these five lines modulates, in his re-creation of a grief shared, to a rhythmic avowal of connection: “wee two,” “us two,” “oft did we grow,” “we did show,” “our soules,”
“made us . . ..” Even the continuation of sadness—one wonders why they have cried with such intensity, and the speaker supplies an answer: “often absences / Withdrew [their] soules,” leaving only “carcasses” behind—is expressed here in the context of mutuality.

And then a most dramatic ontological shift occurs:

But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown;
Were I a man, that I were one,
I needs must know, I should preferre,
If I were any beast,
Some ends, some means: Yea plants, yea stones detest,
And love, all, all some properties invest,
If I an ordinary nothing were,
As shadow, a light, and body must be here. (28–36)

“I am by her death” signals a newfound presence. “I exist” by her death, he seems to avow; “I am” via it, by virtue of it. The loss that had sapped the energy of the sun and pressed upon the earth with its massive sadness becomes the soil where new life can take hold; the speaker becomes “the Elixer grown” “of the first nothing.” From the image of “carcasses” (flesh devoid of life), he imagines himself a healing elixir; he grows directly out of that first nothing, and he is the elixir for that first nothing. His bewildering question—“Were I a man”—focuses the depth of the confusion produced by sadness, conveying a near-pathetic wish to be settled into an identity unencumbered by the risk of grief love makes inevitable, so destabilizing is loss. The addition of “That I were one” suggests even greater uncertainty, as if his existence as a man were merely an
agreed-upon condition, and not at all a reliable fact. His emphatic "I needs must know" confirms the disorientation of an existence lacking "ends" and "means"; even plants and stones, it seems, possess more life than her, more life than him. But in the poem's many progressions—from "things which are not" to a reaffirmation of "all others," "all things," and "all that's good," from "carcasses" to "I am by her death"—love factors significantly as a transforming force. Amidst the ontological puzzle of this stanza ("I am," "Were l"? "If I were"), "love" replenishes and fills up, love "invest[s]" with "some properties" "all, all"; like the four instances of that word in the previous stanza, this doubling sounds a counter-current to the nothingness that empties out and weighs down both world and self. And the stanza ends with a simple, but essential, confirmation: a "body must be here." Thus the speaker's next statement—"I am None"—serves less to certify that he has no, or is no, "body," than to suggest that "none-ness," like a black hole, pulls all matter within it.48

What finally introduces a principle of regeneration into "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day" is her—if only subtly, and in a manner that twists with paradox. As the "long nights festivall" stretches out in this suspended moment of midnight, the speaker similarly readies himself, "prepare[s]" himself, inclines "towards her" (43) to "enjoye" (42) the night—imaginatively and emotionally—with her. And if "this houre" (44) marks a series of externalized crossing-overs (from the "Sonne . . . to the Goat" [38–39], from night to day, from shrunken life to "new lust" [40], from "Vigil" [44] to Saint Lucie's Day), it also bears witness to the speaker's internal transition from an obsessive grief to an articulation of renewal.

But I am None; nor will my Sunne renew.
You lovers for whose sake, the lesser Sunne
At this time to the Goat is runne
To fetch new lust, and give it you,
Enjoy your summer all,
Since shee enjoyes her long nights festivall,
Let mee prepare towards her, and let mee call
This houre her Vigill, and her eve, since this
Both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight is. (37–45)
The request to “Let mee call / This houre her Vigill, and her eve” does not simply rename, as vigil and eve, this night that precedes the dawn of the festival. One also hears, I propose, “Let me call her Eve”—a stunning transvaluation of the lethargy that sags the poem. He seems both to “call” to her, and to ask to rename her, so that she might become the new beginning, the progenetrie of “all.” Here at “deep midnight,” now become a locus of calm and place of rest, the poem also rests, and the speaker releases his clutch at nothingness. From deep within his mood of vigilant sadness, he lets “Eve” emerge.

By the end of the poem a total revision of time has occurred, and with it, a revived sense of self, love, peace appears. From the poem’s first line—“Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes”—to its last line—“Both the yeares, and the dayes deep midnight is”—normal chronology (night-day, short-long, dark-light) becomes inverted. A deep midnight in the middle of day is, I think, a representation of unbearable sadness. But where in the first line things seem to come to an end (year, midnight, even day), the last line turns time and sadness inside out. The emphatic stress on is, at the end of the line and at the close of the poem, pulls the speaker out of nihilistic grief and into presence and being.
NOTES

1 The numerical designation is C. A. Patrides's. See his discussion of the difficulty of numbering Donne's divine poems on page 428 of his complete edition. All references to Donne's poetry are to the Patrides edition. Line numbers will be parenthetical and in the text.

2 John Carey's short paragraph on "Sweetest love" seems symptomatic of the tendency to deny certain poems the emotional depth they offer and to read Donne's attitude toward the women with whom he engages as flippant: Carey contends that the speaker provides "as an excuse for leaving the girl no pressing engagement but simply the explanation that Donne wishes to accustom himself to death. His departure is a joke, though a practical one. They will have to part when they die, so it is 'best' to get used to it . . . Her blubbery, he warns her, merely compounds ill fortune" (216; italics added).

3 My thoughts on negation, here and throughout the chapter, are informed by Freud's 1925 essay "On Negation," in which he writes that "there is no stronger evidence that we have been successful in uncovering the unconscious than when the patient reacts with the words, 'I didn't think that' or 'I never thought of that.'"

4 Docherty writes: "Perhaps the most frequent equation of 'going' with breathing comes in poems which make more or less explicit use of conventional Petrarchan idiom, where sighs of lovers at moments of separation are mediated as the final expiration of their souls" (110).

5 Janel Mueller's claim that the speaker of "Sweetest love" "lapses into self-regard . . . thus revealing at the critical moment of parting how tenuous an
achievement . . . sexual equality is," seems to miss the degree to which the poem looks outward to gauge the woman’s feelings, imagines her actions, trusts their attachment (147).

6See N. Gregory Hamilton’s discussion of Margaret Mahler and the so-called “autistic phase,” the period of undifferentiation in which the infant is “cloaked in the reveries of a sleeplike state,” which mimics the experience of being in the womb (36; italics added).

7Carey conjectures that Donne attempts with this poem to “prove” he is capable of writing in regularly measured, smooth-edged lines.

8The power and importance of her look will become evident in my discussion.

Cf. Estrin’s claim that “His vision controls” (347).

9As Ilona Bell writes of “The Sunne Rising,” “the speaker’s eyes are fixed unflinchingly on the lady’s . . . because he is inordinately concerned with her response” (“The Role of the Lady” 120).

10Cf. the “superscribing” of one name over another in the penultimate stanza of “A Valediction of my name” (57).

11See Estrin 351.

12In “Donne: ‘But yet the body is his booke,’” Elaine Scarry writes that “each is ’emparadis’d’ within the other.” But her evidence for the claim is extra-textual. First, “Donne’s habitual way of spelling his name—Johannes Donne—ensured that the name Ann Donne was present whenever his was,” and second, Ann More “bears their children . . . thus, he grows within her.” The latter point, in particular, rearranges the poem’s architecture. While man and woman are clearly intertwined in the poem, the speaker contains only himself within her: “all
my soules bee / Emparadis’d in you.” She is superimposed upon his name, which is contained within her face (82–83).

13In a provocative article arguing that three letters contained in the Burley manuscript and included in Simpson’s *Study of the Prose Works of John Donne* were not only written by Donne but by Donne to Ann More, Ilona Bell contends that the very vulnerable relationship between Donne and More influenced Donne’s love poems. The “blunt and startling jealousy” of “A Valediction of my name, in the window,” for example, “is more dramatically convincing . . . if the unsanctioned, insecure nature of the affair makes the speaker suddenly fear that in his absence his lover will marry ‘one, whose wit or land, / New battry to thy heart may frame’ (45–46), just as John Donne may have feared that Ann More would abandon him for a suitor who had more solid ground to stand on” (47). Rather than use the letters—if indeed they were written to Ann by John—to “prove” the poems, however, I prefer to view them as another space of writing in which Donne needs something back from a woman: not a passive, inert, silent slate on which to record his own controlling powers of language, but a writing, speaking, thinking, loving, acting woman in whose control he places himself, and who can determine both his fate and the fate of their relationship.

14Carey is interesting here: “The bones are now alive. The small, naked skeleton, quaking on the pane, trapped into overhearing its own betrayal, is an anatomical equivalent of the lover’s agitation: an X-ray photograph of his emotional disturbance” (146).

15Again, I disagree with Estrin here, who states that the woman is “imprisoned” by the speaker’s need for her to see and be him, and that “she must remain
constantly in place at the window" (350). The speaker can engrave only his own name in the fixed location of the window.

16 Scarry 81. Again, Scarry makes an interesting point, but reverses the direction of the poem. The speaker’s name in the window “gives the surface its solidity, its material substantiveness; and makes this page more authoritative than the merely paper pages with which it may have to compete, the rival letters his young wife is likely to receive from other men while he is gone.” Though the “melted maid” does lay a rival’s letter on the woman’s pillow, it is the letters she writes, more than the ones she receives, that actively concern the speaker here. The contest of solidity and constancy in the poem seems emphatically to be between the speaker engraving his own name in the glass and the woman “superscribing” another man’s name on a piece of paper.

17 In addition to “manifest” or “unconcealed,” the word “overt” has legalistic connotations. Cf. the OED: “an outward act, such as can be clearly proved to have been done, from which criminal intent is inferred.” Donne uses the word in such a way in one of his sermons: “Faith which by an ouvert act was declared and made evident.”

18 One is reminded as well of Christopher Ricks’ essay on “how unhealthily [Donne’s] poems end,” in which he writes that “the better the best things in his poem, the more Donne is driven to rend it with his ending” (33, 39).

19 In “The Theory of the Parent-Infant Relationship,” Winnicott writes that “there comes into existence what might be called a limiting membrane, which to some extent (in health) is equated with the surface of the skin, and has a position between the infant’s ‘me’ and his ‘not-me’” (45).
As D. N. Stern points out in *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (102).

Again, there is an echo of "A Valediction of my name, in the window," and the speaker's desire to be "fulfilled" by his lover.


John Carey responds to the confusion over the word "melt": "The queerness of 'melt' here has struck Allen Tate . . . In fact, a suitable dictionary meaning is not so hard to find . . . What is happening is that the lovers' bodies are separating, leaving their souls behind, and Donne asks that the bodies should disappear from the scene (a quite normal seventeenth-century meaning of 'melt') as quietly as if they were dissolving. It's true, though, that 'melt' distills into the stanza connotations of fading warmth and tenderness and soft reluctance which no dictionary equivalent can match, and the word's suffusing richness is an index of its poetic potential for Donne" (176). While I appreciate the richness of Carey's own language, it seems he slightly misreads the terms of the analogy in the first two stanzas. The lovers part from each other—melt—as the souls of virtuous men leave their bodies. It does not seem to me that the lovers' souls are also leaving their bodies at this point in the poem.

In *Self and Others*, Hamilton writes of splitting that it is "not only motivated by inherent destructive tendencies. It is equally motivated by loyalty to good internal objects and the good people with whom we identify . . . [C]ouples often cement their relationships by taking on a common adversary; they avoid the mundane world, because it intrudes upon their good relationship" (81). One thinks instantly of "The Sunne Rising," where the bed and then the room the
lovers inhabit is are first the "desert island" isolated from the bother of kings and
suns and "ants," then expands to encompass all of that, to become the whole
world. Here the (mis)interpretation of the "layetie" constitutes a soiling of the
lovers' pure joy. Such tendencies to "divide," as Hamilton suggests, arise from
"our deepest needs to attach" and "to protect that attachment by building
boundaries against the outside . . ." (82).

25See, for example, Graham Roebuck's essay "Donne's Visual Imagination
and Compasses," in which he states that "the main feature of Donne's famous
conceit—the compasses as emblematic of constantia (the 'firmness' of the 'fixed
foot')—is a commonplace of the period" (37). John Freccero, in "Donne's
Compass Image," writes that "Donne chose to compliment his beloved on her
constancy, her faith, with this emblem. At the same time he consoled her by
suggesting that they were as the will and reason respectively of a single soul . . .
As Adam represents ratio, or the highest faculty of the soul, so Eve represents
appetitus, which is in direct contact with the body. Together they are one" (23).

26I prefer to speak in terms of the poem's "fictional" plot, though critics seem to
agree with Walton here, that Donne wrote the poem prior to leaving for the
continent with Sir Robert Drury in 1611.

27Roger Rollin, "'Fantastique Ague': The Holy Sonnets and Religious
Melancholy" (133). See also John T. Shawcross, who describes the poem's
"statement of faith in love" as a "transmutation of their individualities into gold
through their faith in each other" (60–61). It is just such a notion of faith that the
last stanzas of the poem work to unravel.

28Graham Roebuck reproduces numerous examples of compasses from maps,
emblem books, and navigational guides in use in Donne's era "to probe the relationship of visual representation to poetic conceit in order to enhance our understanding of Donne's imagination" (37).

Ilona Bell, in "The Role of the Lady," renders the phrase "cunt-ry" (123) to underscore not so much the infantile sensuality being described but still a more oral one than the weaning intercourse of "lov'd."

Patrides notes that some manuscripts read "slumbred we in the seaven sleepers den?"; "slumbred" connotes, perhaps even more evocatively than "snorted," a slow, heavy atmosphere.

As Docherty notes, "There is clearly a great deal of stress laid on the pleasures of orality in the poetry." But he also mentions, in discussing "The Flea," the orthographic ambiguity of the word "suck'd" ("the letter 's' often took the form of the 'long s,' making it look very like an 'f'"), which merely blurs the distinction between those earlier, insignificant dalliances and the current, epitomized affair (232; 54).

In object relational terms, the early phase of attachment between infant and its caregiver is one of omnipotent illusion. As N. Gregory Hamilton writes, "The infant can readily feel that when he moves his eyes, searching for the mother, she magically appears. When he moves toward her breast, it spontaneously approaches. When the mother of symbiosis is sufficiently present, the infant can associate his need, his wish, his hunger to be fed with her presence, as if the wish and fulfillment were one thing" (40).

So powerful is the sense of connection with another, Hamilton contends, that being "understood" is akin to orgasm. Though Hamilton may stretch the
analogy, his point seems provocative—the intense pleasure of melding with another, of a perfectly attuned "communication."

34 Many psychoanalytic theorists propose a core of unreachable selfhood within each individual. Harry Stack Sullivan, for instance, believed strongly in the uniqueness of individual experience, that there is something fundamentally *inaccessible* about each person—we can never hope to understand another fully. Winnicott, too, believed in a private core, an "incommunicado element" which would protect itself from being "exploited" by others by remaining off-limits. See Greenberg and Mitchell, 89–90 and 197.

35 From a different perspective, Iona Bell suggests that "watch not one another out of feare" stems directly from Donne's unsanctioned relationship with Ann More: "Donne proclaims the uniqueness of the lovers who are confined to 'one little roome,' but he also shows the limitations and worries of lovers who cannot appear together in drawing rooms" (47).

36 In the second poem of *La Corona*, "The Annunciation," the speaker contracts and expands space in a similar way. Christ is figured as "All" and then spread over "every where" in a kind of double layer of infiniteness and limitlessness, but this "immensity" is imprisoned, "cloysterd," in the tiny space of the "little roome" of "thy deare wombe."

37 I am reminded of the play on "all" in "Lovers infinitenesse," a poem in which the conditional that so often concludes Donne's poems—as a late entrance of doubt and uncertainty—is instead the predating mood. The "if yet" construction that begins the poem ("If yet I have not all thy love, / Deare, I shall never have it all") ambiguates the temporal frame, establishing a condition but no surety.
There may have been a past—but will there be a future? Here the speaker’s fear, couched in the poem’s rhetoric of contracts and economy (he was meant to “have it all” as part of their original bargain) seems to be that he will lose his powers of persuasion, that the products of his body will be unable to move her, and that she will thus be unimpressionable (unengravable?). The notion of a “gift of love,” which threads through the poem, seems exactly the point: is such a gesture as unmotivated giving possible? Is “Deare” not just an epithet but a modifier of “thy love,” suggesting that she is too “expensive” for him to afford, that he can never have her all because he can never relinquish the “all” of himself such a sale would require?

38Sexual connotations, perhaps unusually for Donne, seem curious if at all present in these words, since the last lines are working for an articulation of the “immortality” of a love perfectly mixed. Read symbolically, the speaker seems to assert that between two people whose love is “so alike” that “none” lose erection, none can enjoy orgasm. It is perhaps the very forestalling of such an adult sexual gratification that prevents the end of a loving attachment, just as the first stanza intimates.

39See above (3), Winnicott’s statement that potential space allows the self to “rest” from the “perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separated but interrelated.”

40Care“taking” seems exactly the wrong word, since what is so gratifying, in the beginning of life at least, is the being given, not the giving up.

41Not unexpectedly, such moments are often described by critics as appropriative and evacuating of the woman’s “space.”
42 "The Flea" radically reevaluates the domineering, "male" sexuality it seems to be urging the woman towards: beneath the overt terms of its seduction, there courses a longing to do the passive thing, not just to pamper but to be pampered, not simply to suck but to be sucked (with implications both of nursing and of "fucking"). Wooing, here, and pampered swelling, come after enjoying, and not as requisite for. Moreover, it is this swelling that stands as "more" than "wee would do"—i.e., intercourse.

43 The "Sunne" intrudes like a little boy ("unruly son") and a meddling father ("old foole") as well as an aroused voyeur, as if to coalesce the speaker's multifaceted relation both to the woman he loves and to the world in which that love takes place.

44 See Anni Bergman's essay "From Mother to the World Outside" for a compelling discussion of the importance of thresholds, doors, windows, vehicles, closets, etc., in the child's development of "inner" psychic space and psychological separation from the mother.

45 I owe my thoughts on "breathing" as a form of transitional experience in the "Nocturnall" to two essays by Judith S. Kestenberg. Kestenberg writes, for instance, that "when we inhale deeply, taking someone else in and enlarging the image of our body-shape, we feel comfortable with the accepted object . . . Deep exhalation, releasing what we took in, leaves us with a shrunken, deflated body-shape . . . This constitutes the physical aspect of the rhythms of incorporation, associated with elation, and of projection, associated with a letdown, which are at the core of all relationships" ("Transsensus-Outgoingness" 68).
46 One hears an echo of Donne's mythic "immoderate thirst" for learning; cf. as well "Th'hydroptique drunkard" of Holy Sonnet 3, or the "holy thirsty dropsy" that "melts mee yett" of Sonnet 17.

47 Cf. Donne's "Holy Sonnet 10": "... death shall be no more. death. thou shalt die."

48 This "I am None" of the "Nocturnall" is thus not the "none" of "The good-morrow," which compresses "not one" and "one" in a way that destroys the longed-for union of self and lover.
Chapter 2
George Herbert:
A Language of Self

As we have seen, many of Donne’s secular speakers contend with the contradictory demands of home and travel, attachment and separation, adult sexuality and infantile desires, by putting themselves in motion across thresholds; they advance and retreat depending on what is discovered within the self as much as within the other. The Her bertian speaker, by contrast, seems more restlessly in pursuit, the focus of his attention a powerful other whose behavior is confusingly mysterious. And though the speakers of Herbert’s lyrics do often appear “childlike” in their negotiations with primary objects—the last line of “H. Baptisme (II)” declares that “Childhood is health”—the pleasures of the childhood that The Temple depicts are far from unambivalent or unambiguous.¹ Herbert seems to write with all the wrenched complexity of his identity as “son”—“weav[ing] [him]self into the sense” (”Jordan [II],” 14), as it were, of the parent-child relationship.

The quality of Herbert’s relatedness to God fluctuates repeatedly in The Temple, as speakers negotiate their desire for contact with an other whose presence is maddeningly unpredictable. In poems like “Church-musick” or “Paradise,” in the “sugred strange delight” of “The Glance,” there is something blissfully uncomplicated about connection with God; speakers are unfettered by worries about the loss of that connection or about “collapsing” into God’s pre-eminence.² Indeed, the omnipotence of the other becomes something in which the self can share, insuring that the self in turn is capable of experiencing its own interiority as a place of goodness. Herbert’s quiet musicality and careful prosodic
architecture (as well as, perhaps, the absence of Donne’s metrical and imagistic disruptiveness) support claims of psychological ease and unquestioned faith, serving to corroborate “the image of Herbert as perfect Anglican priest” (Clarke 23).

While some of Herbert’s speakers offer serene accounts of attachment, however, many others register palpable fears of being rebuffed by God, who can no longer be located either internally or “out there,” in a world grown unrecognizable for the absence of that connection. When the longed-for unity is definitively shattered, it is as if a childlike “hunger” reaches a critical state—the fragile self is threatened with psychic chaos; longing turns to trauma, and fragmentation, panic, rage ensue.

And there are still other poems in The Temple that open onto an intermediary realm—one in which the self is neither cheerfully blissful nor drastically alienated, but appears, instead, concerned to negotiate its interactions with a range of others (God, Christ, a “friend,” an unnamed but influential “one”). Speakers in “The Temper (I)” and “The Holdfast,” for example, seek contact, but do not wholly give themselves over to that contact; they are eager to express devotion in exuberant, even rapturous ways, but not to lose autonomy by becoming diffused in the demands of doctrine. These speakers appear most exuberant, finally, about the possibility of reciprocal—if asymmetrical—love between human believer and God. The unique space these poems carve out testifies to a relatedness that is not predicated on a capitulation to the other’s power. Winnicott’s theory of the “holding environment” will factor significantly in my discussion of these poems precisely because of the intermediary nature of potential space, and of the necessary presence of both baby and caregiver for
“holding” to take place. If holding has no existence, no meaning, without the presence of the self being held—as Winnicott writes, holding “is part of the infant,” and “follows changes belonging to the infant’s growth and development” (“Parent-Infant Relationship” 49; italics added)—Herbert’s vision of faith, similarly, seems strongest when that faith is defined by the mutual terms of self and other.

In this regard I take issue with both ends of a prevalent critical spectrum. Such critics as Richard Strier, Diana Benet, and Barbara Lewalski, following in the tradition of Rosemond Tuve’s A Reading of George Herbert, take a theological approach to Herbert and read The Temple through the lens of Protestant doctrine. Lewalski insists that “the new Protestant aesthetics” is “the very foundation” of Herbert’s poetry (283), and Strier is similarly adamant about the inseparability of Herbert’s verse and the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith: the poems only become “intelligible,” Strier writes, when read in the context of theology, without which we “miss or distort the actual shape and force of many of the poems” (65). Benet’s stated purpose is “to elucidate Herbert’s poetry by reference to grace and charity as two of the major themes of The Temple . . . lay[ing] the foundation for an understanding of Herbert’s poetic vocation” (2). Even Douglas Thorpe, as one critic who attempts to pay tribute to the human-ness of Herbert’s poetry, does so by subsuming that quality into the larger rubric of doctrine. While aptly observing that Herbert’s poems “reveal that whatever we know of the ‘ineffable’ is known precisely in our own labor, which is inevitably rooted in a concrete here and now,” Thorpe undermines his claim for human agency by characterizing that labor as “paradoxically . . . a giving up, a letting go, a dying to oneself” (5).

Thorpe’s use of the trope “letting go” is a clear reference to Stanley Fish’s
chapter on Herbert in his influential *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, "Letting Go: A Dialectic of Self in George Herbert's Poetry." Questioning the very ontological status of poetry itself, Fish proposes that Herbert's lyrics "can be viewed as a graduated series of 'undoings' and 'letting go's': . . . the undoing of the perceptual framework in which we live and move and have our (separate) beings . . . the undoing of the self as an independent entity . . . an undoing of the poem as the product of a mind distinct from the mind of God" (157–58). Fish claims that Herbert "writes himself out of his poems," that he "lets his poems go, so that both they and the consciousness whose independence they were supposedly asserting give themselves up to God" (190). "Letting go" signifies "the discarding of those very habits of thought and mind that preserve our dignity by implying our independence" (157).

Barbara Leah Harman's *Costly Monuments: Representations of the Self in George Herbert's Poetry* would seem to offer a less defeatist response to the problematic of self-representation in *The Temple*. Harman frames her reading of Herbert with questions concerning the Interplay between culture and self: "How does the self represent itself in writing? What enables representation? Are there ways in which the representation of self is compromised or disabled?" (35). Her focus on the dialectical in Herbert—between scriptural and poetic language, between divine and personal authority, between action and belief—promises to illuminate the poems in interesting ways. Quite rightly, I think, she takes Fish to task for not accounting for the "persistence" (34) of the self in so many of Herbert's poems, and asserts *contra* Fish that "Herbert's poems do not—in the ordinary sense of the word—vanish before our eyes" (136). But even Harman's subtle demonstration of the ways Herbert "*represent[s]* the self in the very
process of losing its access to conventional representation” (136; italics added) ends up, finally, echoing more than contesting Fish’s central claims. Poems may be careful to look after the self’s existence, but those same poems “record” the “silencing” of the self (35); her assertion that “the dissolution of a coherent view of self and sense is indeed Herbert’s subject . . . persistently his subject” (161) sounds very much like Fish indeed.

While readings such as Strier’s and Benet’s “hold fast” to a sense of the permanence of the individual in relation to God (Benet, for instance, writes that “the ‘collectivity’ that is the Church, or the Christian community, does not deprive the individual self of its experience or of its particular perception of the experience” [50]), they nevertheless bind that self to a theological structure, making Herbert seem unexceptionally, and often abjectly, doctrinal. Fish and Harman, by contrast, seem initially to offer a corrective to such doctrinal contextualization, honing in on the complicated self-other dynamics of Herbert’s work, where no less than a viable self is at stake; but they, too, work ultimately to diminish Herbert as an active agent of his own writing.

In the discussion that follows, I want to focus on the varying quality of relatedness described throughout *The Temple*, evocative of the shifting quality of a child’s interactions with parents—including the hopeful confidence of fusion as well as disintegration for selves whose ability to survive is compromised when attachment fails—which Winnicott termed in one instance “environmental vagaries” (“Fear of Breakdown” 88). But in particular, I will be interested in unwrapping those poems in which speakers desire, strive for, and pleasure in closeness to the other, but relinquish neither a sense of independent identity nor the possibility of self-representation. It is in such poems that Herbert seems to
negotiate his engagement with God in a spirit of confident faith—in God's willingness to "heare," in God as his "succour," and in the vital participation of the human self in this mutual object-relationship.

Herbert's expressions of uncritical devotion often take shape in images of fluidity, and at such moments Herbert seems to literalize what Melanie Klein called "maternal plentitude": in "Praise (II)," for example, the speaker "bring[s]" the "cream of all my heart" (11–12) to a Father grown "soft and moist with tears" (21). In the same poem he demonstrates his aptitude for (and delight in) a neatly symmetrical form that enacts both wish for and achievement of correspondence between the human speaker and his God. Each of three quatrains in which the speaker announces what he will do ("love thee" [2], "move thee" [4], "sing thee" [10], "praise thee" [18], and so on) is matched by a quatrain that assures what "thou" has done or will do; the seventh stanza gathers both together in the long promise of an "etermitie" spent in praise (27). The first pair may be taken as paradigmatic of the exactness of the relation between self and other:

King of Glorie, King of Peace,
I will love thee;
And that love may never cease,
I will move thee.

Thou has granted my request,
Thou hast heard me:
Thou didst note my working breast,
Thou hast spar'd me. (1–8)

The speaker declares not only his “love” but his determination to have that love make an impact on his “King,” who responds in just the way he hopes for. His desire “that love may never cease” is met by the “grant[ing]” of that “request”; moreover, not only are his efforts to “move” the other noticed and “heard” externally, but his internal, individual “working breast” is taken note of and rewarded as well. The value and the pleasure of such an exchange is signaled by the reiteration—the only one in the poem—of being heard: “thou hast heard me” [6] and “thou didst heare me” [16]).

In “Clasping of Hands,” the speaker’s confident declarations of ownership, which are greedily possessive and yet more ontological than material, play in Donnean fashion with the paradox of interconnectedness. In eighteen of the poem’s twenty lines, the speaker wonders about, and tests, the extent to which selfhood is either diminished or augmented by a deep intimacy with God:

Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine,
If mine I am: and thine much more,
Then I or ought, or can be mine. (1–3)

And concludes:

Yet to be thine, doth me restore;
So that again I now am mine,
And with advantage mine the more. (4–6)

Like hands clasping, human self and God intertwine, each contained within the other as the sound of “thine” echoes in “mine,” “mine” in “thine.” But the psychic effect for the speaker is far more profound than aural resonance. A potential
space has been formed, in which the self acknowledges the separateness of "I" and "thou," "mine" and "thine," while at the same time trying to dispense with the distinctions on which such separation rests. The self can be "me" and "not-me" at once ("I am thine," "mine I am"), and so become more "me" through that shared experience of being:

Since this being mine, brings with it thine,

And thou with me dost thee restore.

If I without thee would be mine,

I neither should be mine nor thine. (7–10)

The presence of each "in" the other "restore[s]" the self to itself. Indeed, the poem’s sole rhymes ("thine" and "mine," "more" and "restore") stand as a brevity that intensifies, through consolidation, the bond being articulated here, and underscores how enriching such a bond can be—it gives back, and in so doing makes more.

But the simplicity of rhyme in "Clasping of Hands" can also seem a facile attempt to reconcile that which can never completely meld and lose the difference-between: as the word "thine" will never be the word "mine," as one hand is never exactly like the other, so what is "mine" can never truly be "thine," and "I" can never be "thou." The very distinctions and categories the speaker seems so certain of ignoring in fact pulse through the poem—with each rhyme, in each line. Thus the final impassioned plea—"O be mine still! still make me thine! / Or rather make no Thine and Mine!" (19–20)—records its own futility, and ruptures both speaker and poem out of that paradoxical, potential space. And it is just this sense of uselessness, this suspicion of the impossibility of ever fully doing away with the categories by which self and other are bound and separated,
that pervades such distraught poems as "Grief," "Longing," and "Sighs and Grones."

In "Praise (II)," the fact of being "heard" by his primary object, with all the metaphoricity of that interaction, conducts the speaker to a self-reliance that allows him to declare "I will," "I can"; and though "eternitie is too short / To extoll thee" (27–28), one has the impression that the speaker's self-possession is sure enough to fill that space with all the assurance that undergirds his prior affirmations. Here, open-endedness seems not at all frighteningly unknowable, but instead a welcome expanse of time in which to offer his love and, over and over again, to be heard. In the poems I shall consider next, it is precisely not being heard that sends the self into a downward spiral of despair and disintegration. If, as the speaker of "Clasping of Hands" might say, being heard restores the self to itself, then not being heard can feel like an intolerable abandonment.

In "Grief," the same fluidity that elsewhere describes a copious outpouring of love between God and self is called upon to serve the self's need to express the pain of God's absence. Like the speaker in the saturated world of Donne's "Nocturnall," the speaker of "Grief" is filled with sadness and yet lacks the means with which to express that grief. He simultaneously projects his own extreme pain onto the "out there" and yokes that world to himself in his effort to find relief. "O who will give me tears?" he cries;

Come all ye springs,
Dwell in my head & eyes: come clouds, & rain:
My grief hath need of all the watry things,
That nature hath produc'd. Let ev'ry vein
Suck up a river to supply mine eyes,
My weary weeping eyes too drie for me,
Unlesse they get new conduits, new supplies
To bear them out, and with my state agree.
What are two shallow foords, two little spouts
Of a lesse world? the greater is but small,
A narrow cupboard for my grieves and doubts,
Which want provision in the midst of all. (1–12)

But where the excessive fluidity of “Nocturnall” becomes, by the end of that poem, amniotic and regenerative, the “watry things” of “Grief” seem caught in a repetitive cycle to which there is no end, resulting not in the rebith of “Eve” but only in more tears, more and more sadness.11 Grief creates a series of intense disjunctions: though his eyes are “weary” from “weeping,” the speaker is also, paradoxically, “too drie,” as if anything less than the overabundance of “all ye springs,” “all the watry things,” and “ev’ry vein” leaves him desolate and sere; while he appears unable to do anything on his own to compensate for that internal aridity and to assuage (by continuing) the flow of his grief, nature “hath produc’d” a multitude of watery things—springs, clouds, rain, veins, rivers; and even the display of emotion he manages to generate (his “weeping eyes”) are inadequate communicators—without “new supplies / To bear them out,” without “provision,” they do not “with [his] state agree.” Exterior and interior mismatch, and the speaker attempts to redress grief by seeking a kind of equilibrium between outward-turned “eyes” and inward “state,” between the world and a self diminished, in a direct way, by that grief. A “lesse world,” he is both a microcosm of the larger world beyond him as well as, I think, made less than “himself”
through loss. His sneering description of his own tears—"shallow foords" and "little spouts"—underscores their insufficiency.

I have been discussing the intensity of the speaker's emotion in "Grief," but the source of that emotion seems strangely unarticulated. The second part of the poem, which enacts structurally the poem's thematic disjointedness, gestures toward an answer:

Verses, ye are too fine a thing, too wise
For my rough sorrows: cease, be dumbe and mute,
Give up your feet and running to mine eyes,
And keep your measures for some lovers lute,
Whose grief allows him musick and a ryme:
For mine excludes both measure, tune, and time.

Alas, my God! (13–19)

If in the first section of the poem the speaker pleads for assistance (indeed, he makes of himself a kind of vortex into which all the waters of nature are drawn) in the second part he renounces the very medium by which that plea is recorded. Just as the speaker's own crying eyes are insufficient to the task of manifesting his "grievs and doubts," and require the "watry things" of nature to provide "new supplies" and "provision," his own verse fails to offer a fitting vocabulary: it is "too fine" and "too wise," even too contained—not enough the explosive, automatic, unmitigated experience of "rough sorrow." Once again what originates within the speaker, his creative effort, is cast aside and dressed down as deficient in the face of nature's prior productions. Simultaneously, of course, the poem is perfectly measured, rhymed, and tuned. What is at stake seems to be a feared inability, not to "produce," but to produce in such a way that the self's needs will
be met—heard—by the other. The speaker’s tears and verses do little to alleviate his own sorrow, but they appear to do even less to impact the God whom he invokes so plaintively at the last moments of the poem—but who does not answer. Returning briefly to the first line of the poem, the speaker asks “who will give [him] tears”—not “what”; by the end of the poem, one can almost understand by that question, “who has made me cry?” Finally, the grief that inhabits this poem, and the poem itself, find release only in those final words, “Alas, my God!” There is no resolution—no turn, no pun, no surprise—just the abrupt exclamation, occupying not even a full line, that bursts into the white space. And it is this last, truncated line that embodies the truth of the speaker’s despair.

In “Longing”—whose length and title seem to tell the whole story—the kind of stable exchange that takes place in “Praise (II)” collapses in irresolution and anguish. It is as if with each successive stanza the speaker redoubles his effort to make an impression on a God who does not, will not, reply:

With sick and famisht eyes,
With doubling knees and weary bones,
To thee my cries,
To thee my grones,
To thee my sighs, my tears ascend:
No end?

My throat, my soul is hoarse;
My heart is wither’d like a ground
Which thou dost curse.
My thoughts turn round,
And make me giddie; Lord, I fall,
Yet call.

From thee all pitie flows.
Mothers are kinde, because thou art,
And dost dispose
To them a part:
Their infants, them; and they suck thee
More free.\(^1\) (1–18)

In the progression of these initial stanzas, the speaker sets in motion a tonal fluctuation that manifests his contradictory perceptions of the object. In the first stanza, the double-beats of “to thee” swell the third and fourth lines and accelerate the fifth, seeming to grow louder at each instance, more emphatic with each piling-on of the self’s materiality—cries, groans, sighs, tears—as if it is only through substance and insistence that he can rise up to Goc. The precision of “ascend,” however, lies not so much in its literal meaning but in the fact that the word contains the very “end” the speaker so strongly desires: an end to the weariness, the hunger, the sorrow of his solitude. Yet the question that “ends” the stanza defers that longed-for end, rather than promising it. And in this question—“No end?”—questions proliferate: Is there to be “no end” of expulsions from the body of the self? No end to their ascension, because they will never be received? To whom is the inquiry posed, and, more pointedly, who will reply?

Because there seems no ready answer to these uncertainties, because, in fact, no one does reply, in the second stanza the speaker plunges downward. His body racked with the effort of his appeals (his very soul is “hoarse”), it is as if he
has been pushed down from the heights to which the first stanza tried to ascend, and reduced to a “wither’d” ground, “curse[d]” by the God to whom he “call[s].” The effect of such rejection is dizzying; confused and made “giddie,” he loses balance and falls. Again, the significance of “fall” seems to be less what the word describes about the movement of the self (a physical metaphor for an emotional, spiritual collapse) than what it implies about the failure of the other: to fall is to be let go, not to be held. The struggle to ascend in the first stanza, so precariously supported by “doubling knees and weary bones,” seems to beg not just for “cries” and “grones” to be noticed, but for the discontinuity, the disintegration, they represent—both within the self and between self and other—to be contained, soothed, corrected. The rhymed “fall” and “call” are exactly matched, since calling at once unrolls along and exposes the distance-between that, in turn, is caused by and exacerbates falling. “Yet call” tells what the speaker does and renews his cry to God; indeed, the subtle “Yet” suggests just how persistent those cries will be, “yet” undeterred by the silence they encounter.

The transition between the second and third stanzas is also a telling one. From the first two "stanzas of direct confrontation (or at least attempted confrontation) between the speaker and God,” as Louise Schleiner characterizes them (199), the third turns “reflective,” and does indeed “direct our attention away from [the] direct confrontation.” But something more than a simple withdrawal from confrontation to contemplation happens in the interval between “I fall, / Yet call” and “From thee all pitie flows.” The first stanzas seem to demonstrate precisely the opposite of an outpouring of pity from God; in fact, the first line of stanza 3 suggests that the speaker needs to convince himself of an a priori dictate that present experience is flatly disproving. It would appear, too, in the
unexpected introduction of “Mothers” into the poem, that the speaker retreats from the painful chaos of abandonment into a fantasy of a doubled, and specifically maternal, nurturing figure: the kindness of mothers stems directly from, and is thus magnified by, that of God, who “dispose[s] / To them a part”; the infant’s suckling of the mother links that infant, analogically, to the bountiful, flowing, “kinde” pity of God. The sudden abstraction of this stanza, what to Schleiner feels like cool reflection—he had been crying out of a very individual grief (notice the repeated “my cries,” “my grones,” “my sighs, my tears”), but now observes “Mothers” and “Their infants”—in fact serves an important psychical function, distracting the speaker from his own sadness even while attending to and soothing that sadness in fantasy.

But the imaginative departure that eases the speaker’s longing must also represent the very need for fantasy, bringing him back to the painful lack of union, as well as to a realization that the “Mothers” who provide comfort do so precisely because they are “More free” to “suck” from God and therefore “more free” from the kind of longing he experiences. Thus the third stanza acts as a curious pivot between the opening stanzas of the poem and the four that follow, in which the speaker fastens on the injuriousness of not being heard and descends into a state of near-annihilation. In the first two of these stanzas, the sheer number of exclamation points accentuates the misery of getting no response; he must speak louder and louder to turn this “confrontation” from a monologue to a dialogue:

Bowels of pitie, heare!

Lord of my soul, love of my minde,

Bow down thine eare!
Let not the winde
Scatter my words, and in the same
Thy name!

Look on my sorrows round!
Mark well my furnace! O what flames,
What heats abound!
What griefs, what shames!
Consider, Lord; Lord, bow thine eare,
And heare! (19–30)

The pitch of these stanzas reveals something about the power of the one that precedes them: indulging in a fantasy that affirms God’s accessible kindness and pity seems not to eliminate the pains named at the beginning of the poem but rather to replenish his anguish, which, accordingly, resurges with extreme force in stanzas 4 and 5. The speaker’s importuning penetrates to the very “bowels” of the Lord who does not answer, who will not relieve the self from the fiery hell into which he has fallen and from which he calls. Indeed, where the first two stanzas seem almost to languor in weary defeat, even resignation, the tone in the fourth and fifth turns to passionate, frustrated disbelief, as the speaker throws the onus of this grinding isolation onto God. The imperatives punctuating these stanzas—“heare,” “Bow down,” “Let not,” “Look,” “Mark well,” “Consider,” “And heare!”—take the lyrical prayer of Psalm 86 (“Bow down thine ear, O Lord, hear me”) and wrench it into a far more entangled depiction of the dialectic between helplessness and omnipotence, abjection and pity. Longing, desperate, for contact, the speaker’s language nevertheless conveys the extent to which he
desires, not simply closeness, but a participating God; “Bow down” maps an interesting spatial relation, as if to measure the distance God must travel to meet the self.

At the same time, of course, “Bow down” reveals an anxiety that the self’s voice might not be capable of extending all the way up to God. Indeed, how can he make such noise and still not be heard?16 How can the parent who gave him this tongue, this voice, yet ignore him? (As he asks explicitly further on, “how can it be / That thou art grown / Thus hard to me?” [62–64].) Such are the agonizing questions:

Lord Jesu, thou didst bow
Thy dying head upon the tree:
O be not now
More dead to me!
Lord heare! Shall he that made the eare,

Not heare?

Behold, thy dust doth stirre,
It moves, it creeps, it aims at thee:
Wilt thou deferre
To succour me,
Thy pile of dust, wherein each crumme

Sayes, Come? (31–42)

Does God not hear him? Or—and it is difficult to determine which has more drastic consequences for the speaker—does he choose not to respond to the self’s entreaties? Is God too preoccupied, or the self too insignificant? Is the
speaker heard, but ignored? Is he utterly abandoned and forsaken? The italics of the question "Shall he that made the eare, / Not heare?" indicate the paraphrase of a psalm but also emphasize the felt injustice; the mother-figured Christ has been "gone" too long and is feared to be "More dead to me!" As Winnicott writes in "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," "when the mother is away . . . she is dead from the point of view of the child. That is what dead means" (21–22). And that experience of loss works to confuse the speaker out of the organized selfhood from which, in the poem's first stanzas, he could produce sighs, groans, and tears and claim possession of them, into the particulated disintegration of a "pile of dust, wherein each crumme / Sayes, Come" in a chorus of pleading self-parts—a chorus that will break into the cacophony of a heart "broken now so long, / That ev'ry part / Hath got a tongue" (74–76) when the desired response refuses to "Come." The speaker modulates into an uneasy oscillation between expressions of self-assertion and self-denial. He may indeed be insignificant and inconsequential, but he is not immobilized and far from silent. "Behold," he commands his absent God, "thy dust doth stirre, / It moves, it creeps, it aims at thee." There is something uncannily animated here: a self close to the invisibility and insubstantiality of dust comes to life ("doth stirre"), agitates ("moves," "creeps"), then with purposeful and concentrated movement "aims" itself at the withholding God. The third-person observation of these lines seems detached and punitive at once—far from "restored" to himself, he seems to demean himself even while disclaiming authority for his own actions. At the same time that tone of objective description is belied by the sinister undertones of "aims at thee"; and "Wilt thou deferre / To succour me" sounds almost like a threat. God may have
let "all things to their course" (43), resulting in the chaotic inexplicability now faced by the speaker, but the self struggles to maintain a sense of agency, possibility, hope.

Finally, however, the cumulative impact of the speaker's desperate callings, which "speak and chide / And in thy bosome poure my tears" (70–71), is not sufficient to draw the contact for which he petitions. The deferral that thwarted him in the first stanza (the "no end?" that ends the stanza but not the longing) now becomes an explicit challenge ("wilt thou deferre . . . me?") and a woeful fear. Not at all the assured speaker of "The Holdfast" who declares of God that "he my succour is" (8), the speaker of "Longing" can only wait, uncertain of anything ("wilt thou deferre / To succour me?"); where the speaker of "The Collar" begins with energetic defiance ("I struck the board, and cry'd, No more" [1]) and ends by reporting the kind of exchange longed for in "Longing" ("Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child: / And I reply'd, My Lord" [35–36]), this speaker is "humble[d]" before the "board" of God (53) and is only "stil'd / Thy childe" (59–60) "While [he] remain[s] / In bitter grief" (58–59).

Distress mounts steadily through the poem until the last stanza, where the deprivation, now gone on far too long for the "imago" to have survived the absence of the object, becomes intolerable, and an "unthinkable anxiety" storms against the speaker's vulnerable self; the self itself seems to expire.21 There is one last poignant plea—

My love, my sweetnesse, heare!

By these thy feet, at which my heart

Lies all the yeare,

Pluck out thy dart,
And heal my troubled breast which cries . . . (79–83)
—and through the penultimate line of the poem it seems the speaker might muster the strength to go on talking, go on saying “Come.” But the final two-word line sounds a literal death-cry. Though one expects to hear what it is that the “troubled breast . . . cries,” this last “ejaculation”22 of the self is cut short: “And heal my troubled breast which cries, / Which dyes” (83–84). Agony has become unspeakable.

This self-abnegating Herbert, and the parent who cannot be impressed toward reunion by the pleas of the child—by its “sighs and groans”—appear with a vengeance in the poem by that name. The speaker of “Signs and Grones” begs piteously not to be “refuse[d]” (4) by God, not to have his need for contact shunned by the “mightie” (5) other, and experiences being rebuffed in a steady and ever-more intrusive escalation of fears of personal harm:

O do not use me
After my sinnes! look not on my desert,
But on thy glorie! then thou wilt reform
And not refuse me: for thou onely art
The mightie God, but I a sillie worm;
O do not bruise me! (1–6)

The entreaty of the first stanza records a familiar dichotomy. “Do not use me” pulls God toward the self in the fear of being consumed by his nearly sexualized wrath (“do not use me up, manipulate me”?); at the same time the punishing God remains austere and forbidding, seeming distantly to profit from possession of that self.23 Further, “after my sinnes” upholds the distance between (because of his sinfulness, blissful contact is impossible) but also contracts it (the punishment
may be as horrific as his own sin). Thus he tries to cast away the double-edged presence of God, imploring that parent-God not to ignore that he is a barren "desert," but not even to look upon that barrenness at all, as if it cannot be ignored. How can a glorious God be one that might obliterate the self "after"—according to, in the manner of—the lowly self's own, despicable sins? His fear of the possibility of this produces a need to idealize, which in turn demands that the self be emptied of anything worthy, that the self internalize all that is "bad" in the other. What is wished for so intently is less simple acceptance than radical renewal and restructuring. He wants not only to be corrected, but to be "reformed" as well; only then can he sustain hope of the contact so far from actually occurring here. "Bruise" seems exactly the apt verb in this context—it recalls God's curse on the serpent ("[her seed] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" [Gen. 3:15]), thereby underscoring the depth of the speaker's feeling of sinfulness, and conveys a fear of being wounded and battered that is also a profound wish to remain intact in both physical and psychological ways. The bruise raises the self's inferiority to the limit of the flesh where it becomes visible, while the boundary of the body remains unbroken.

In the second stanza, it seems, we have some explanation of the sins that render the speaker so base in the first.

O do not urge me!

For what account can thy ill steward make?

I have abus'd thy stock, destroy'd thy woods,

Suckt all thy magzens: my head did ake,

Till it found out how to consume thy goods:

O do not scourge me! (7–12)
The “sillie worm” is not to be made light of—it is neither inconsequential nor ignorable, just as the biblical serpent was not. The destructiveness only implied in the first stanza leads to the accounts of destruction claimed by the speaker in the second stanza where the biblical serpent’s avarice and the infant’s greedy appetite combine in a voracious attack on the parent’s “goods.” The speaker’s own aggressive potential—which, calling himself “sillie,” he both humbles and minimizes in the first stanza (“sillie” connotes triviality, weakness, lowliness; but also hints that he might deserve sympathy24)—seems to worry him at the start of the second, where his plea for God to “not urge” him nearly suggests that further provocation might impel him toward even greater damage than he has already wreaked. That prior consummation—he has “suckt” and “consume[d],” “abus’d” and “destroy’d”—is unquantifiable, inexplicable, unjustifiable; it cannot be “account[ed]” for even by the “ill steward” who is its cause. And that “steward,” caretaker of God’s creation,25 becomes even more fallible by his thoughtless insatiability—indeed, he “make[s]” nothing, only abuses, destroys, and consumes in a one-sided exchange that is no exchange at all.26 The speaker’s odd claim that his “head did ake” suggests a “hunger” both visceral and psychical; finding out “how to consume thy goods” relieves the ache and the emptiness, standing in, perhaps, for a contact more desired, and ultimately more fulfilling. There is a kind of jealousy to this description of blazing through God’s “goods” (God’s stores, what’s good in God), a jealousy about what other things the “parent” takes care of, and which the speaker so selfishly eliminates. “Scourge,” then, is again the apt verb, since it addresses the integrity of the body, as does “bruise,” and punishes that body for its wilfull, uncontained “eating.”27

In the third and fourth stanzas, terrible anxiety about wholeness, about
whether or not the self will suffer damage from the very real power of the other, manifests in images of the body’s boundaries receding, then coming back into focus:

O do not blinde me!
I have deserv’d that an Egyptian night
Should thicken all my powers; because my lust
Hath still sow’d fig-leaves to exclude thy light:
But I am frailtie, and already dust;
   O do not grinde me!

O do not fill me
With the turn’d viall of thy bitter wrath!
For thou hast other vessels full of bloud,
A part whereof my Saviour empti’d hath.
Ev’n unto death: since he di’d for my good,
   O do not kill me! (13–24)

From being full of the other’s “goods”—so full, there is nothing left to take in—the speaker is now barred from anything good. Lost in a darkness he has created himself out of guilt for the greediness, the “lust” with which he devours “all” the good stuff, he begs not to suffer a more permanent loss of sight that would forever bar him from the “light” he so desires but from which he is already kept away. The “sow’d fig-leaves” that “exclude” God’s light are the sign of the speaker’s “frailtie”—that infantile incorporation that “destroy[s]” “stock,” “woods,” and “magazens”; but as a symbol of that sin they also delimit the kind of transgression of boundary that such consummation entails. Thus in the third
stanza the speaker seems excessively bounded, prohibited from interaction with
God and God’s “good” by blindness, by clothing—a “thicken[ed]” self draped as if
in his own solitary embodiment. But the density of this—the bruised flesh, the
heaviness of a body having “suckt” so much into itself, the “powers” “thicken[ed]”
by appetite—literally flies apart in the subsequent image: not just frail but “frailtie”
itself, he is “already dust” threatened by further grinding, as if his discrete self
might be reduced to an invisible powder. When in the following stanza he is
reassembled and filled again, that re-embodiment is but momentary—since to be
filled not by the self’s own greedy incorporation of the other’s “goods” but by the
other, and with that other’s “bitter wrath,” is to be annihilated. 28 Being full this way
is to lose continuity of being, 29 to be “kill[ed].”

And so the speaker must beg for mercy, for “reprieve.”

But O reprieve me!

For thou hast life and death at thy command;
Thou are both Judge and Saviour, feast and rod,
Cordiall and Corrosive: put not thy hand
Into the bitter box; but O my God,

My God, relieve me! (25–30)

The omnipotent other is both prosecutor/persecutor (“Judge”), who threatens to
undo and obliterate the self, and life-sustaining nurturer (“Saviour”): the one
collides with the other in the full paradox of religion and parenthood (“thou hast
life and death at thy command”). The body of the parent is a bountiful, nourishing
“feast,” full of “goods,” but if the self “suck[s]” and “consume[s]” too much, that
parent becomes a murderous, “rod”-wielding avenger. In the apparent
irreconcilability of these highlighted opposites—the “Cordiall” from which the self
would drink and so be calmed and soothed might just as soon be a burning
"Corrosive"—the poem grinds to a halt. Even the speaker's final cry—"O my God
/ My God, relieve me"—sounds more heartrending, more poignant, more
aggrieved and hopeless than "do not kill me," since death might at least bring an
end to the uncertain status of the self, but the very cry to be relieved contains
within it the perpetuation of unbearable doubt, intolerable solitude. In this poetic
crescendo of desperation, the plangency of the final cry lies in its very open-
endedness—*does anyone reply?*

II

Those moments when Herbert can look within and "find" himself are rarely
achieved without struggle. The expression of self-sufficiency with which the poem
"Content" concludes comes only after thirty-four lines of internal argument with
"muttering thoughts" (1) that threaten to impell the self to "gad . . . abroad at ev'ry
quest and call / Of an untrained hope or passion", to "court each place or fortune
that doth fall" (5–8). The desire for a "pliant mind, whose gentle measure /
Complies and suits with all estates" (13–14) and a soul that can "span the world,
and hang content" (17–18), the fantasy of existing like "the fire [which] in flints
doth lie, / Content and warm t' it self alone" (9–10), all these describe a settled
and unambiguous inwardness, an elasticity of mood and aspect that nonetheless
conforms only to itself, and is "restored" to itself not through direct engagement
with the other but by discovering what was already there within the self: "He that
by seeking hath himself once found, / Hath ever found a happie fortune" (35–36).
The self/soul who is "found" can take himself wherever he goes, and this seems
the true happiness. In “Affliction (III),” introjected unpleasure is evacuated in the form of a heaving “O God!” (1), which both provides relief and suggests that the source or cause of grief—“sure the unruly sigh had broke my heart” (6)—is also its cure: “thou wast in the grief, / To guide and govern it to my relief” (2–3). The sighs that expell with them “some yeares” (10) of the very breath that gives life also serve to rid the self of the painful feeling of separation, and so leave that self “sooner to my blisse” (12).

More often, it is through deliberate, painstaking negotiation with others that selves are able to assuage feelings of a racked inner landscape. In “Deniall”—a study in the paradoxicalness of object relations—a self disintegrating in the rejection by and loss of its other manages to pull itself from the verge of dissipation by focusing on—remembering—the significant inclusion of the self’s half of a harmonious rhyme.

The poem begins with a familiar instance of non-communication that breaks the heart, and poetic skill, into disarray:

When my devotions could not pierce
Thy silent eares

Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:

My breast was full of fears
And disorder. (1–5)

Productions of the self are rendered meaningless by the absence—or is it merely the silence?—of the longed-for other. As in “Longing,” the ambiguities of God’s reaction and of the self’s standing with God are equally confusing: does God not hear at all (his ears are “silent”), or are the speaker’s prayers not good enough to be heard? In Winnicottian terms, is he not worthy of being held? The title of the
poem indicates that both are operative: "Denial" suggests that God denies the self’s "devotions," and that the self denies its own worth as well. Far from an inconsequential distinction here, these uncertainties work to multiply the speaker’s despair; getting no reply breaks his heart, fractures his poetry out of seamlessness ("pierce"/"verse" is a slant rhyme; the fifth line of each but the last stanza does not rhyme at all), and crams his breast full of fear. And the stanza introduces a verbal resonance to emphasize both cause and effect: "pierce" rhymes more closely with the "eares" to which the self appeals than the "verse" that breaks apart and fails; "heart," "breast," "fears" all recapitulate the primacy of "eares" and the desire to be—the fact of not being—heard.

At the same time, though, the first stanza reveals the interconnectedness of pleasure and aggressiveness, an intertwining that the second stanza will amplify. The first line—"When my devotions could not pierce"—signals hopeful attachment ("devotions" are quiet prayers; he is devoted to God), but also resentful aggression: "pierce" graphically conveys the energy, the precision, even the desired effect of the speaker's prior efforts to move God. Even so, he has been unsuccessful, and the impact of that failure takes shape in the next stanza:

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,
Did flie asunder:
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,
Some to the warres and thunder
Of alarms. (6–10)

A severe fragmentation occurs, as the speaker seems to lose the clarity and singleness of mind that might produce "devotions," and experiences his "thoughts" as "bent," "brittle," and scattered "asunder." But even as a nugatory
self whirls in chaos, the same thoughts that seem to disperse, erratically, in every direction, in fact “flie” like weapons and have a deliberateness of purpose: “Each took his way.” “Some,” the speaker says, appear to fasten on exactly that which eludes him a _propos_ of God—these “would to pleasures go”; others proclaim the inability to achieve that pleasure—they go “to the warres and thunder / Of alarms” (“would,” too, connotes inaccessibility in addition to habit, as if to underscore the unattainability of “pleasure,” even in fantasy). So bleak rejection mingles with an explosive discord (dis-_chord_), a loud and warring refusal to accept the “silence” that threatens to dissolve the self.

But in the middle two stanzas, it becomes clear that the condition that occasions the poem—“When my devotions could not pierce / Thy silent eares”—also occasions a frustration and sense of futility, which, in turn, threaten to render the speaker irrevocably despondent. What good does it do to call for God when God refuses to come? The repetition of several key phrases in these stanzas reveals how unignorable it is, how stinging an affront, not to be heard:

As good go any where, they say,
    As to benumme
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,

_Come, come, my God, O come,_
    But no hearing.

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
    To crie to thee,
And then not heare it crying! all day long
    My heart was in my knee.
But no hearing. (11–20)

In these two stanzas we hear the speaker’s piercing devotions and then witness the very “no hearing” the lines identify. The impact of accumulated prayers to a nonresponsive God numbs the speaker in just those places that try the hardest to impress God: a knee knelt on too long in praying, a heart worn out with the intensity of its longing. But it is a numbness that disguises an insupportable depth of pain, and one wonders if the self must affect such lack of feeling not just to ward off anguish but also to match, in a nearly competitive way, the baffling numbness of the other. The speaker labors under the many layers of a terrible paradox he cannot, on his own, resolve—that he is as insubstantial and dispensable as dust and yet was given a tongue with which to speak, that he uses that tongue to cry to God and yet receives no audience with God; the timelessness of “crying night and day,” “all day long,” against the steadily accumulated parts of time; the constancy of the pleader’s actively crying “Come, come,” in the face of the passive helplessness of his condition. The legalistic tone of “no hearing” evokes the contractual terms of the old Covenant, now ineffectual; but Herbert echoes and extends scriptural metaphor at once, suggesting not so much that the misguided self receives no response because he operates under the wrong system, as that no suit, no trial, none of the self’s arguments will seem meaningful by dint of the other’s inexplicable refusal to “hear” him, and hold him.

In the fifth stanza the speaker does not start up his “day long” crying again, as if by the second “no hearing” he cannot summon the presence to complain, or pray, or plea. Indeed, by this point he has become utterly undone; the musical simile foreshadowed by “bow” in the second stanza becomes explicit, ironically, only when the instrument of the soul is “untun’d” and “unstrung”: 
Therefore my soul lay out of sight,
Untun'd, unstrung:
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,
Like a nipt blossome, hung
Discontented. (16–25)

To be "out of sight" is the very opposite of being "restor'd" to oneself (as was the speaker of "Clasping of Hands")—the speaker’s soul is "out of sight" even to himself, so disorienting is this experience of being benumbed by grief. The two primary analogies of this stanza portray similar disjunctions: the speaker is an instrument capable of harmonious song, but without a response from the other the very parts of himself hang "unstrung" so that he cannot be played nor even tuned; he is a flower in bloom, but "nipt" prematurely, so that he hangs limply, his beauty, his delicacy, both unappreciated and uncared for. Both figures suggest potential and fragility at once—the instrument is easily undone, its music unheard; the "blossome" is transitory, easily spoiled. These subtle paradoxes are exhausting; the speaker’s spirit, now "feeble," is "unable to look right," by which he seems to mean that he can no longer try to make himself "look" worthy in the eyes of God, but also, secondarily, that he himself cannot "look" at the state of his relatedness to God in just the right way for that relation to be satisfying. "Discontented." I think, echoes in the negative the confident affirmation that closes "Content," where a self that "by seeking hath himself once found, / Hath ever found a happie fortune." The speaker of "Deniall" may have his supplications denied by God, but he also seems to deny himself in this stanza, making of himself a passive "instrument" of the other, to be played or disregarded at the will of that other.
But this penultimate stanza also explains—though fulfillment is as yet impossible—what is necessary for the self to become "restored": a *relationality* whose quality would be determined by the mutual participation of both self and other. So in the final stanza, a renewed sense of cooperation between speaker and God rectifies the poem’s many dislocations.

> O cheer and tune my heartlesse breast,
>  Defere no time;
>  That so thy favours granting my request,
>  They and my minde may chime,
>  And mend my ryme. (26–30)

Initially, the speaker continues to interact passively, to beg that God “cheer and tune” him; and his “breast” is “heartlesse,” recapitulating the “heart broken” metaphor of the first stanza. But a powerful change occurs in the “time” of the next line. “Defere no time” asks God not to wait any longer, but also that he not hold off time itself; “don’t keep me in the terrible stasis of the middle stanzas,” the speaker seems to say, where language itself stops changing, but make time *move*—by hearing, by responding. And something does happen in the interval between this line and the next—but it is not, I would argue, that “God answers prayers” (Benet 50). The last three lines of the stanza are in the future tense: they describe a possibility, not the arrival of a long-awaited reply. What changes the tone of these lines, then, is the speaker’s ability to imagine the simultaneity of God’s “granting” (exactly the opposite of the title) and “*my request,*” of God’s “favours” and “*my minde.*”

Without this granting, of course, the self unravels in loneliness and despair; thus I agree provisionally with R. V. Young’s claim that “it is the love of
God that fulfills human nature and makes possible the only complete self available to a human being" (181). Conversely, Young writes, "not to love God is tantamount to forgetting [one]self completely or to being completely forgotten by God" (180), and I am reminded of R. E. Money-Kyrle's mention of "the fear of not being able to give, and so of not deserving love" (132), characteristic of the child's response to greedy incorporation of good objects and projection of bad. Both the vital importance of reciprocity cited by Young, as well as the devastating implications of not being "able" to love described in different ways by Young and Money-Kyrle, seem evocative of the speaker's dilemma here: how to hold onto a sense of identity even in the brunt of an unresponsive other, how to exist in a space where self and other coincide.

God's answer, then, by itself, does not seem sufficient to "enabl[e] the self to exist" (Young 181). The crux, as I understand it, is the penultimate line—"They and my minde may chime"—in which the speaker recovers a crucial sense of his own value. R. V. Young seems exactly wrong in naming "submission of the mind and will to God" as paradigmatic of Herbert's poetic spirit (181): no longer a passive object to be played or plucked at will, the speaker now figures himself in terms of his own consciousness, the "minde" that desires, prays, believes, writes. Diana Benet argues that the "finally regularized rhyme in 'Deniail' is an indication of God's presence" (48), but I would argue instead that the symmetry that eases the poem out of its jarring dissonance represents mutuality, a reciprocity that is not similitude but correspondence, not equality but resonance, compatibility, shared significance. The harmonious synchronicity of "chime" and "ryme" requires "thy favours" and "my minde," a granting of "my request" to mend "my ryme." This is true potential space, where the speaker, trusting in the reliable
presence of the other, can experience himself as present (not "out of sight"),
creative, and necessary.

If the final stanza of "Deniall" gestures only toward the potential of such a
compelling self-other relation, "The Temper (I)" records its success. While the
speaker of "The Temper" seems initially in danger of total disappearance, so
precariously does he inhabit space, his dizzying oscillations of mood finally rest in
reciprocity with God. The poem begins with a wish for stability that finds
expression in a Donnean metaphor of engraving:

    How should I praise thee, Lord! how should my rymes
    Gladly engrave thy love in steel,
    If what my soul doth feel sometimes,
    My soul might ever feel! (1–4)

The first sentence works quickly to equivocate what sounds initially like an
enthusiastic tribute to God. The speaker's exuberant "praise" is in fact only a
condition of a constancy he cannot muster: he would praise, if only he "might
ever feel" that which his soul "doth feel sometimes." And yet the very rhymes the
speaker uses—whose firm repetition in this poem seems intended to counteract
his confession of inconstancy—are imagined as containing God's love,
impressing it into "steel" (in the manner of Donne's "A Valediction of my name,"
whose speaker scratches his name "in a window" to hold himself in place against
his lover's face). It is not so much the wayward feelings of the human soul, then,
that the hard metal stabilizes, but the love of the very God who would be
celebrated: "how should my rymes / Gladly engrave thy love in steel." Thus while
the stanza ostensibly records a self's inability to maintain a constant degree of
faith (a faith as anticipated and regular as rhyme), the metaphor of engraving implies the opposite—as if that self would accuse the praiseworthy “Lord” of inconstancy, as if God’s love wavers frighteningly and so requires securing.

As I suggested in the last chapter, Donne’s use of spatial images evokes again and again the delicacy of boundaries between selves or psyches, and that use is often playful—spaces are distended and contracted according to the speaker’s (albeit frequently shifting) desires. Here, the Herbertian speaker is all too aware of the distances between himself and his God, and the spatial fluctuations of the second stanza, whereby the speaker travels from self-appraisal to self-annihilation, seem to respond to a dramatic failure to find or maintain contact with that powerful other.

Although there were some fourtie heav’ns, or more
Sometimes I peere above them all;
Sometimes I hardly reach a score,
Sometimes to hell I fall. (5–8)

Indeed, this stanza rescinds the first stanza’s assurance—that a stable engraving would be forthcoming were it not for the speaker’s and God’s variances of feeling and attention—and sinks into indeterminacy. The many repetitions of “sometimes” combine with speculative counting (“some fourtie heav’ns, or more,” “a score”) and shifting locality (“peere above,” “hardly reach,” “fall”) to create a sense of maximum disparity. The imprecision of the first line (“some fourtie heav’ns, or more”) sounds, with each successive line of the stanza, off-handed and cocksure (“I peere above them all”); then unsure, even apologetic (“I hardly reach a score”); then outright dejected (“to hell I fall”). Moreover, what in the first stanza was relegated to the soul, a possession of the conscious, writing self (“If
what my soul doth feel sometimes, / My soul . . . "), becomes in the second
stanza connected to the "I" and thus descriptive of that "I" 's very selfhood ("I
peere," etc.). Barbara Harman finds in this stanza a "plurality of selves, driven to
multiplication by God's punishing changefulness," "geographically distinct from
each other and identified by wholly disparate sets of feelings," selves who "barely
recognize one another" (152). But it seems to me that it is not so much the "I" that
shifts from line to line as the quality of that "I" 's self-state and the nature of its
relation to the God who presides over those innumerable heavens.

By the third stanza, the vissicitudes of the soul named in the first stanza
are exteriorized to an explicit landscape of relationality. The speaker describes
trying to scale and plumb the dimensions of a world fashioned by, and measured
according to, the other:

O rack me not to such a vast extent;
Those distances belong to thee:
The world's too little for thy tent,
A grave too big for me. (9–12)

The proportions of the other swell beyond containment ("the world's too little for
thy tent"), and the self is swallowed up in "vast" expanses by which he defines his
worth ("a grave too big for me"). The unattainability of a steady, engravable "love"
and faith is gauged in "distances" that "belong" to the unattainable other. The
willful soul's inability to sustain an unvaried "rhyme" now seems produced by the
longed-for "thee" to whom "those distances" belong and who "rack[s]" the
speaker "to such a vast extent." Strained and pulled out of all proportion (tortured,
even, as Harman suggests [152]), the speaker soars and plunges willy-nilly as
God's unpredictable presence determines, but always ending up, somehow, self-
less and annihilated—too small to fill his own grave. At the same time the formidable other is “bigger” than the perceived world, far too big, indeed, to be engraved in the steel of a human poem.

That sense of enormity leads, in the fourth stanza, to the self’s near-disappearance into “a crumme of dust” that is unnaturally, even cruelly “stretch[ed]”—cruel because the self can never be sure whether God will “meet” his outstretched arms, reciprocating the desire to be joined, or abandon him entirely:

Wilt thou meet arms with man, that thou dost stretch
A crumme of dust from heav’n to hell?
Will great God measure with a wretch?
Shall he thy stature spell? (13–16)

Indeed, the sudden shift to the third-person here (he is relegated to one of “man,” dismissed as “a wretch,” neutralized as “he”) announces the success of the speaker’s disappearance into the “grave” of stanza 3. He regards himself now as if distantly; this tone of detached observation, in addition to the stanza’s three questions (the only questions in the poem and occurring in the poem’s central stanza), suggest how far the speaker has travelled from the first line’s distinct “I” and hopeful, energetic promise to praise, and convey, not the solid regularity of a rhymed poem of praise, but rather the unknowability of God, the uncertainty of the self’s relationship to God. From deep within a vast grave he is too puny to fill, the speaker seems dead to himself.

But this fourth of seven stanzas is a pivotal one, and despite its oddly removed tone, it begins to intimate the significance of the human self in this difficult relation with God. The first question in the stanza (“Wilt thou meet arms
with man . . . ?") does not, as one might expect, ask whether or not God will take
up man, or cease the unbearable stretching; instead, the specificity of “meet”
conveys a sense of necessary motion on both sides. And the paired second and
third questions (“Will great God measure with a wretch? / Shall he thy stature
spell?”) grant to the lowly “wretch” the means to designate the “stature” of God.
Subtle but compelling, these hints carry the speaker forward out of the abyss of
the “grave”; accordingly, his subsequent desire is to “roost and nestle” as if under
the eaves of the roof of God’s “stature”:

O let me, when thy roof my soul hath hid,
O let me roost and nestle there:
Then of a sinner thou art rid,
And I of hope and fear. (17–20)

This wish to “hide” under God’s roof would seem to involve a corresponding
decision to release his claim on his own autonomy, to become absorbed into the
wondrous safety of God, and, as Harman writes, to “live within safe limits,
protected from the dangerous form of relationship” (153) already laid out in the
poem. But the metaphor Herbert chooses here to describe a particular kind of
connectedness is, I think, more provocative than “safe” or “protected” would
indicate. Certainly, “roost and nestle” connotes a sheltered, even cuddled,
perching. But the phrase also rearranges the spaces and distances through
which the speaker has been—prior to this moment in the poem and, as we will
see, following—maneuvered by God. It is almost as if the speaker would inhabit
God, settling there with a stasis—and a status—that his formerly erratic
movements toward and away from God have prohibited; and (even more
audaciously), from within that capacious womb, incubate a self free from the
extremeties of “hope and fear” that characterize the second stanza. A desire for closeness and contact becomes a fantasy of generativity that, against Harman’s claim that the speaker “retreats from . . . difficulties” (153), works to “rid” the self of difficulty.

As if such ideas were too daring, however, in the next stanza the speaker once again gives over control of his bodily integrity to the powerful other, whose “way is best” (21), and who will “stretch or contract” the speaker in a contortion that returns to the drastic swings of the first two stanzas. But even as he figures himself here as the “poore debter” (22) of God, the speaker simultaneously imagines that these distensions of self are “but tuning of [his] brest, / To make the musick better” (23–24). Despite needing to be tuned, this speaker’s breast is not the “unstrung” soul of “Deniall”; it already makes music, and so plays on the paradigmatic Herbertian doubleness that a harmonious tune requires God’s tuning and the instrument/breast of the human self.

The first line of the final stanza reprises the poem’s vacillations of mood and metaphor (“Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust” [25]), and momentarily the speaker seems in danger of losing the kind of self-determination that turned “stretch or contract” into “tuning.” But in the last three lines of the stanza, a radical transformation occurs; the speaker resolves all the prior expressions of doubt, fearfulness, confusion, through an avowal of reciprocity put forth in powerful Winnicottian imagery:

Whether I flie with angels, fall with dust,
    Thy hands made both, and I am there:
    Thy power and love, my love and trust
    Make one place ev’ry where. (26–28)
Though both the angels and the dust that might accompany the speaker are made by God, and though the heights and the depths to which he “fli[e]s” or “fall[s]” may still be measured according to the “stature” of God, something different is articulated here: an unambiguous, self-possessed, undoubting declaration that “I am there.” And God, too, is transformed: no longer the “rack” upon which the self’s body is contorted, not even the musician (or mechanic?) who tunes the self’s breast. God is here the creator who makes with his hands; the phrasing—“Thy hands made both”—is tactile, even fertile. (In fact, these last lines are only suggestively metaphorical, as if the speaker now perceives his relation to God as newly clear and settled, and no longer resorts to figures of speech.) But the fact that “I am there” does not result from the productive power of God’s hands (not, “Thy hands made both, thus I am there”); rather, the connective “and” suggests independence and simultaneity: “Thy hands made both, and I am there.” What I want to suggest is that the focus on God’s prior “making” of things in the world—indeed, on the very hands that “made”—allows the speaker, not so much to experience himself as also “made” by God, but rather to believe in the reliable presence of a God with “hands,” and that that trustworthy handling, that holding space, brings forth the affirmation “I am there.”

This, in turn, elicits a still more profound expression of mutuality, that what makes “one place” an “ev’ry where” isn’t just God’s “power and love,” but the combination, the overlap, of God’s “power and love, my love and trust.”

Thus Barbara Harman’s contentions about the poem’s closure—that the speaker “relinquishes entirely the dream of being all together in one place at one time,” that he is thankful “for being many instead of one” (154), and that he has abandoned hope for a stable self and accepted a fundamental instability (151)—
are problematic in the extreme. Herbert carefully ensures the continuity of an integrated self in the powerful solidity of "I am there," and far from letting go of his wish to find and rest with God, the speaker gathers the poem's expanses and distances into "one place" that reverberates with shared love. By the end of "The Temper (I)" Herbert shows a self negotiating space, calling up his own love and trust to navigate the extremes of the heaven and hell. By no means a passive receiver, the self does: loves, trusts, goes on being there.

III

Of all the dialectical poems in *The Temple* in which speakers achieve a firm sense of self, even when the presence of the other is unassured or not immediately forthcoming, "The Holdfast" offers what may be Herbert's most sustained experience of reciprocity with God. Here the speaker struggles to "hold fast" to his ability to define the scope of his attachment to God, despite the intervention of an interlocutor whose role is to limit the forms such attachment can take. In the course of the poem's internal dialogue between the speaker and this doctrinal "other," a revisionary impulse radically surfaces, as the speaker—whether actively or instinctively—constructs his relationship to God and to faith. Far from dramatizing a self unable to speak or act in the face of doctrine (as Stanley Fish and Barbara Harman would suggest), the triangular dynamics of "The Holdfast" demonstrate the speaker's capacity to maintain a realm of human impulse over and against the theological proscriptions that would restrict the self's autonomy. The speaker tries to locate in the language of doctrine something on which to "hold fast," and concludes neither by effacing himself...
before God nor rebelliously rejecting his belief in favor of “himself.” Rather, he
construes an intricate interaction between self and God, a kind of reciprocal
transmittal where God’s actions and gifts have no outline, no meaning, without
the human speaker who experiences and expresses them.

The first stanza establishes the poem’s dialectic: a self attempting to set
the terms of its own spirituality, an anonymous other tempering that effort:

I threatened to observe the strict decree

Of my deare God with all my power & might.

But I was told by one, it could not be;

Yet I might trust in God to be my light. (1–4)

The striking abruptness of “I threatened”—hardly the expected verb in the context
of observing “strict decree[s]”—seems to thrust the speaker into the kind of
silence created in so many poems (“Grief,” “Longing,” “Sighs and Grones”) by the
lack of response from the other; like a devotion aimed to “pierce” the ears of God,
the threat asserts the self’s desire, right, and ability to “observe” and inserts him,
through language, into a space he hopes ultimately to share with God. Almost as
if uttered through clenched teeth, “threatened” also propels the poem forward,
working immediately to obviate any prior occurrence contrary to this intention to
follow “the strict decree.” The threat ignores (even as it comes into being
because of) that the speaker may have been told not to observe, or observe in a
particular way; that he may not be sure what such observance entails or what the
outcome might be; that experience tells him he might not, yet again, be heard.
That he chooses to go against whatever in the past has necessitated a threat—in
short, that he threatens at all—exemplifies what will come to distinguish the
speaker of “The Holdfast”: a powerful need to define his relationship with God in
his own way.

The second line makes clear what that way, at least initially, is to be—as well as why it is articulated via a “threat.” The speaker does not simply threaten “to observe the strict decree,” but to observe “with all [his] power & might.” As Harman writes, then, the speaker’s threat announces his conviction to bring his “all” to God’s decree (52): all that he contains, all that he can put forth into the world, all that he is, will be turned over to the project of devotedness. “Power” evokes the concentrated embodiment of the self’s dedication, as well as the strength of his resolve—and wish—to affect his “deare” God; and “might,” emphasized at the end of line 2, testifies to the intensity, even the authority, with which the speaker asserts both self and devotion, self as devotion.

Still, these lines seem packed with discordances. Why does such wholehearted—whole-selved—observance need to be “threatned” (rather than, for instance, “promised,” “pledged,” “vowed”)? How does the explosive energy of “threatned,” “power,” and “might” accord with the restraint and conformity of “observe” and “strict”? Why is so much power needed—to overcome the self’s own wavering, or God’s resistance? And why does the speaker “threat[en] to observe,” but not enact that observance, as if he would hold back, reserving something of himself and his faith? What would happen in the threat were carried out? And, finally, what is the “strict decree”?

Given the third line of the poem—“But I was told by one, it could not be”—many critics take the blunt opening “threat” (Herbert’s debt, perhaps, to Donne) to record an earlier impulse toward autonomy and agency that further “learning” has dispelled, uttered in spite of the obsolescence of old dispensation modes of conduct.38 But there are also, in the progression of these first lines, intimations of
the exigencies of entering into a doctrinally circumscribed relation with God.
Though the "strict decree" has been variously understood—as "Thy Word is all,"
the doctrine of justification by grace, and the "law of laws" ("And thou shalt love
the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soule, and with all thy might"
[Deut. 6:5]), for example—its exact definition is, in fact, prominently absent, as
if to suggest that what the speaker finds himself up against is less a specific
scriptural instruction than the language and form of such decrees in general—
which strenuously constrain his desire to observe in a certain way. The speaker
may wish to bring "all [his] pwer & might" to bear on his devotion, but the
"strict"ness of what "one" allows to him in terms of connectedness to God seems
to prohibit such an act, and to require the very threat that begins the poem. Note
how the second use of "might," as a verb in line 4, retroactively ambiguates the
first "might"; as a verb—registered only as a subsurface connotation in line 2—
"might" seems to recede into uncertainty: "I threatened to observe and I still
might, might yet"; "I threatened to observe with all my power & [I] might [do so, but
maybe not; such observance is not yet sure]." Thus the "righteous" beginning
backs away from its stance, and the speaker seems to thwart his own
determination to observe. His "deare" God is a valued but also an "expensive"
one—the cost to the self a potentially exhaustive consummation of "all" that he
has; the withering rejection he has received from so many "silent eares," in so
many other poems; or even the kind of restrictive prohibition delivered here by
"one."

The third line ("But I was told by one, it could not be"), because it signals
the entrance into the poem of the doctrinal interlocutor, seems to offer clarity and
stability. I want to argue, though, that as the speaker enters this struggle to locate
something on which to hold fast, line 3 merely exacerbates the poem’s initial uncertainty. For instance, “it” seems deliberately unclear: what cannot be—threats? observance? observance with all one’s power and might? or ever decrees themselves? Nor do we understand why “it” is not to be—is it simply impossible for anyone to give one’s all? Do doctrinal decrees not permit “it”? Further, where the speaker seems to recognize the scriptural command to “love the Lord thy God with . . . all thy might,” the interlocutor counters that “it could not be.” This adversarial “one” takes something away from the energetic speaker in the third line, denying him the language, and the manner, of his belief. As Harman contends, “it is simply inappropriate to threaten God,” and one would expect the speaker’s self-assertiveness to fade once the interlocutor has broken in: “the aggressive stance . . . is radically compromised and threats are diffused” (52).

But an ambiguity of direct and reported language in the poem opens onto another reading. If “I might trust in God to be my light” is not a verbatim restatement of the interlocutor’s instruction, but the speaker’s reworded formulation, then it seems the admonished self recuperates in the fourth line the self-determined faith that he loses in the third. The more powerful, nominal meaning of “might” extends from the second line to the fourth, and by way of his emphatic first-person construction the speaker transforms a commandment to a personal avowal (“I might trust,” not the scriptural “thou shalt”). He retains his own language from the rejected threat to the approbation, but softens “threat” to “trust,” muffles the blow of “my power” in the brilliance of “my light.” As A. D. Nuttall notes, “pronouns engage so much of Herbert’s energy” (60), and they are indeed remarkable in the first quatrain, where he seems to possess all: “my
deare God," "my power & might," "my light"; even the "one" who exerts influence on the speaker appears only in a passive construction ("I was told by one") that foregrounds "I" who takes control of the quatrain's active verbs. A first revision seems to have taken place, the speaker refining what he "was told" in a process Harman describes as "not so much accepting correction as working at self-invention, not so much rewriting as writing anew" (53).42

At the start of the second quatrain, the speaker's impulse toward revision becomes far more evident. Where "I might trust in God to be my light" stands as both a subtle modification of "I threatened to observe . . . with all my power & might," and, at the same time, would seem to report what he "was told" by the interlocutor, the speaker in line 5 starts to reshape in explicit terms what has been doctrinally allowed that he "might" do: "Then will I trust, said I, in him alone." This pointed substitution reveals, I think, more than a resolve to trust in God alone (and thus not the very interlocutor who speaks with presumed authority). The speaker's careful insistence on one-to-one connection voices his desire for a relationship with God unmediated by either human or scriptural complications, a desire to be secluded from just the sort of obtrusive voice that interrupts the first stanza with corrections and denials—in short, to be with God ("by myself"?), with God alone, and the only one with God.

But this avowal is, in turn, summarily denied by the interlocutor, whose strategy, it seems, is to steadily strip the self of its ability to devise, own, and maintain a vision of individualized faith:

Then will I trust, I said, in him alone.

Nay, ev'n to trust in him, was also his:

We must confesse, that nothing is our own.
Then I confesse that he my succour is. (5–8)

Having "resolve[d] to perform an act of the will (‘Then will I trust’)," writes Fish, the speaker "discover[s] that this arena too is preempted" (175). By this point, the interjections of the other no longer seem to be indirectly remembered (e.g., "I was told by one") but quoted directly; the shift suggests that the speaker has broken away from what he hears—with less and less in what doctrine demands of him, and allows to him, that he can internalize and rework, he stays distanced (even the indenting in this quatrain emphasizes the speaker’s detachment from doctrinal pronouncements).43 One purpose of this exchange of declarations and corrections is, I think, to call into question the very “lesson” they seem to be teaching—what Harman refers to as “the power and priority of Christ’s voice” (55). The speaker’s attempts to follow the dictates of the interlocutor—his unique “answers” to the catechism44—meet with denial and contradiction, forcing small revisionary moves that seem instinctive and spontaneous (and which will eventually go unheard, or unacknowledged, by the correcting voice). As one voice threading through the poem purports the impossibility of individual agency, the speaker’s responses describe a mind renegotiating, at each turn, the “humiliating implications” of doctrinal decrees (Fish 156).

Chana Bloch, in opposition to both Fish and Harman, describes Herbert’s poetry as “enacting a process by which believer makes biblical text his own” (35). The self, far from “humbled and subordinated,” is “vigorously at work and conscious of its own motions in bringing the [biblical] text to life” (30–31). Bloch acutely describes the central opposition here as “human wit” against “the authority of Scripture” (23), declaring that the “play of the mind . . . belies Stanley Fish’s picture of Herbert, martyr-like, building his poetry into a pyre of self-
immolation” (31). But the conflict of “The Holdfast” is not a simple matter of biblical interpretation, and what Bloch reads in somewhat spirited terms (the “play” of mind is “delighted”), seems in this poem a far more contestorial dialectic. Extending even St. Augustine’s vision of a flexible text,45 Herbert’s disagreement is not with another, human interpreter of Scripture, but with scriptural doctrine itself. And it is precisely the speaker’s interpretive work that contends against Fish’s claim that a passive self, abashed by the authority of Christ and forced to relinquish an existence separate from God (“humility and self-abnegation” prevail [175]), steadily gives up his desire for self-worth and his initial expressions of self-righteousness. Everything is not, in “The Holdfast,” owned by God.

The proof of this can be found in the last two lines of the second quatrains, in which the speaker verbalizes his most stunning assertion of self in the form of an individually defined, personal credo that disregards the immediately preceding doctrinal command. When the speaker responds to “I might trust in God to be my light,” with “Then will I trust . . . in him alone,” the shift is a subtle one; “him alone” does not so much refute or ignore “my light” as intensify a feeling of intimate spirituality. And now that the speaker has twice been refuted by the interlocutor (“it could not be,” “nay”), one might expect him to answer the next edict—“We must confess, that nothing is our own”—with a confession of owning nothing. Instead, “Then I confess that he my succour is” issues forth as if from some private realm of belief, wholly uninfluenced by the many constraints the interlocutor tries to place upon it. The speaker does indeed confess, but not at all to what his catechist would expect (catechism anticipates unsurprising answers). The interlocutor’s “nothing is” becomes the speaker’s “succour is” in a “confession” that—far from disclosing the self’s insufficiency before God or its
human sinfulness—affirms, recovering something that the speaker holds for himself.

Nor, I would argue, has the speaker been manipulated into a rebellious stance by the interlocutor. Though the speaker’s language of faith (and the nature of faith expressed therein) differ radically from what this poem’s articulation of doctrine would seem to allow, the easy flow of the poetry in these lines (regular iambic pentameter, plain syntax, the repeated construction “we must confess, that” / “Then I confesse that”) gives the feeling that “he my succour is” comes forth unpremeditatedly and instinctively as a personal avowal that simply lays claim to what doctrine denies. In fact, even after “he my succour is” has broken into the catechism, the interlocutor uncharacteristically makes no move to subsume the statement into the dialectic. It is as if the act of setting out to confess, as instructed, elicits what is most fundamental to the speaker about his faith in God—what had perhaps been unconscious until the dialogue brought it forth—that God his “succour is.”

Moreover, “he my succour is” suggests that the edict to confess specifically to nothingness elicits instead an impulse toward matter and elementality.46 “Is,” the only word the two speakers in “The Holdfast” share, declares presence and existence, but the interlocutor’s paradoxical affirmation (“nothing is”) recedes before the speaker’s far more emphatic, non-paradoxical “succour is.” “Succour,” a word that heals and relieves, provides and offers, rather than impoverishing the speaker of options, agency, or language, remains the speaker’s own to the end of the poem. And his very intentional use of “succour”—not “savior”—also implies that salvation is less crucial in “The Holdfast” than the comfort of faith in this life. Neither denied nor even directly
acknowledged—perhaps not even heard—by the interlocutor, "succour" and its connotatively soothing effect endure, they "persist," as Harman suggests (34). Indeed, they remain untouched by the doctrinal other.

The speaker takes possession of "succour" as he did of "light": "Then I confess that he my succour is," so that God is more than a generalized benevolence; and the statement is an ontological one, so that God is more than a mere offering of assistance. In the other's formulation, the speaker would have to recognize that even to claim nothing is to overstep his bounds; all that he "has" is to empty himself into God's omnipotence. In his own formulation, though, the speaker pulls toward himself what his interlocutor would take away. His statement is not that "God is my succour," with a declarative "God is" given prominence at the start of the line, and speaker taking a subordinate role. Rather, the word-sequence of "he my succour is" brings "he" and "my" into closest proximity, with "my" placing the emphasis of the relationship on what God is to the speaker; "succour" is given weight by being bracketed at the center of the line. Finally, "is" comes at maximal distance from its subject, both asserting predication and working backward in the line to give existence, continuity, to "my" and "succour" as well as "he." It is difficult to agree, then, with Fish's view that the speaker "surrenders its pretense to any independent motion and even to an independent existence" (173), or that Herbert's speakers overall "give themselves up to God, exchanging their separate identities for a share in his omnipresence" (190).

The moment of independent articulation signaled by "he my succour is," a sudden but paradigmatic deviation, survives in the poem precisely because it is unabsorbed by the catechist back into doctrine. The interlocutor—previously so
quick to revise and reject the speaker's statements—somehow ends up denying *himself* by not responding to the terms of the speaker's "confession." Having told the speaker he must confess that "nothing is our own," the interlocutor answers the unanticipated response ("he my succour is") *as if* the speaker had provided the "right" response (i.e., "Then I confesse that nothing is my own"). If such were the case, the interlocutor at line 9 would simply conform to the pattern of refuting the speaker's declarations; because the speaker has deviated, though, making his own "confession" in language *not* belonging to the other, the interlocutor seems to renounce his own command: "We must confesse, that nothing is our own / . . . / But to have nought is ours, not to confesse / That we have nought" (7–10). In a canny linguistic trick whereby affirmative constructions make "nothing" and "nought" positive, substantive, rather than privative, the other voice attempts to turn "nothing" into "something" for the speaker, forcing him towards a position where "nothing" is his share of the devotional transaction, where he must abandon calling even faith his own. Three times the voice repeats the equation—"nothing is our own," "nought is ours," "we have nought." But all the while, the speaker's powerful statement of faith simply goes unaddressed.

Many critics take the speaker's admission that he "stood amaz'd." "Much troubled" (10–11) by the interlocutor's statement that "to have nought is ours," to mean that the speaker has finally been rendered speechless by the weight of consecutive admonitions. But it seems equally possible that he is confused—not only by what the doctrine-speaking other is telling him to do, or the internal contradictions of the very language of that doctrine (what A. D. Nuttall calls the "mind-breaking awkwardness" [32] of rules by whose language we are at once required to act and rendered impotent), but also by the interlocutor's apparent
inability to take account of what he has just "confessed," that God his succour is.

The quandary faced by the speaker of "The Holdfast" is an ontological one. The poem dramatizes the self's responses to the limits theology places on its authority in such a way that it can be preserved as a discrete being, one that dictates its faith, how it will pray, even why it believes. But because that self is represented through language, learning about itself and its capacities for self-expression by maneuvering through an obstacle course of the other's language (at times bafflingly self-contradictory), the dilemma is also a linguistic one. Similarly, the impasse at line ten ("I stood amaz'd at this") is not only a religious one—whether a question of the human individual's theological "right" to action in view of the doctrine of grace, or a realization of being incapable of speaking or acting in the wake of Christ's Sacrifice (that supreme gesture by which all others are rendered inferior, even misguided)—though it is indeed that, since the precedent of a life that was both humanly lived and divinely sacrificed frustrates purely mortal imitation. Again, the amazement of the speaker has to do with linguistic contradictions in the doctrine as it is put forth, which have reached such an extent that the self is rendered momentarily speechless.

The speaker's ability to confess, to own, begins to break down, but not in a divine fluidity that drowns the human individual, nor, I believe, in what both Fish and Strier call "a new passivity" (Fish 176; Strier 73). The poem's shifting pattern of voices—they speak, are taken over, then speak anew—permits the speaker to retain control of language, while his apparent immunity to the interlocutor's catechism extracts from an erosive and censorial doctrine a more gentle, responsive relationship with God—a succour comes to one's aid. The interlocutor's decree that what is ours is to have nought, "not to confesse" to
having nought, means that to use language to convey having nothing is to make a claim in language for possessing something—which is, finally, to own something that God does not. Thus the first command, to confess, is countered by the second, simply to have nothing. What the interlocutor seems to ignore, however, is that the speaker himself never does make such a confession; his statements in the poem are all substantive, confessing to something: “I threatned,” “I trust,” “I confesse that he my succour is.”

Still, for many critics, the speaker of “The Holdfast” is definitively silenced at the point of standing “amaz’d,” disappearing in the final three lines of the poem as he is subsumed into God and the doctrinal voice and authority of the “impersonal” ending couplet. But the language in these lines asks us to delve further, to consider the possibility that the speaker, or some other vital, more manifestly human voice than has been heard so far, might close the poem. It seems important, first, that the poem continues, that the speaker’s temporary experience of amazement and trouble comes to an end with the shift indicated by the conjunction “till” in line eleven. What follows is the last intervention by another voice, but we cannot absolutely determine which of the final lines the “friend” speaks:

I stood amaz’d at this,
Much troubled, till I heard a friend expresse,
That all things were more ours by being his.
What Adam had, and forfeited for all,
Christ keepeth now, who cannot fail or fall. (10–14)
The beginning of the friend’s speech is clearly marked by “that,” but there is also a period after “his,” bringing line 12—and possibly the friend’s expression—to a
full stop. Nor can we be certain if the “friend” is the same character as “one.” If we assume, as does Fish, that “a friend” is Christ,\textsuperscript{51} and Christ says that “all things were more ours by being his [i.e., God’s],” it seems improbable that Christ would refer to himself by name two lines later. If the “friend” is presumed to be God, he is conspicuously figured in congenial, \textit{human} terms: “one” sounds vague, indefinite, impersonal; “friend” connotes affection and esteem. Wherever “one” and “friend” originate, however they enter the space of the poem, the ways they approach the speaker are significantly different. “One” interrupts, denies, corrects, deprives; “friend” enters at a moment of “much trouble” and, for the first time, gives something back to the speaker that he does not have to recoup for himself—“all things were more ours.” This leads into the end-couplet (which is indented, setting it off visually and spatially from the only line definitely ascribed to another) with a new tone of compassion.

These small points of grammar, punctuation and form create the possibility that the human self supersedes, even silences, the poem’s mysterious others, that the self maintains authority and agency through the last word of the poem. Again, the specifics of Herbert’s poetic language lend credence to this idea. The speaker is faced with the conundrum of all things being “more ours by being his.” Does this mean that all things are somehow more \textit{secure} in Christ than in our own, flawed keeping?\textsuperscript{52} Without pushing the phrase toward sacrilegious implications (i.e., a hubristic claim to ownership that disregards God’s role), its language does seem to imply that “all things” would still be ours without God, perhaps only—somehow—less ours. By another formulation, all things are still ours (though also his)—only more. In line 13 (“What Adam had, and forfeited for all”), which would seem to testify to the most profound human frailty—original sin,
and what Adam gave up—the doctrine of fortunate fall surfaces to such an extent that Adam's forfeiture, his "sacrifice," seems hardly distinguishable in the poetry from Christ's "keep[ing]," suggesting a speaker invested in preserving the human from what doctrine decrees.

Chana Bloch reads the closing couplet as an echo of Romans 5:19, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners: so by the obedience of one, shall many be made righteous" (158). But the poem places emphasis on that "one man"; with characteristic Herbertian particularity, Adam is named. "Disobedience" is rendered as "forfeited," a second revision that recuperates Adam from the ignominy of the verse in Romans. What Adam had (not only paradise/immortality/perfection but perhaps also the independent selfhood for which the poem's speaker struggles), he "forfeited for all"; the doctrinal meaning, accepted by so many critics, is that Adam denied to all the chance of having the same. But the ambiguity of "for" also connotes, first, that Adam gave something up in order to receive all—which can only be an intensely human, mortal existence; second, that Adam forfeited on behalf of all, as agent or representative; and third, that Adam's forfeiture was for the sake of all—making Adam seem less disobedient than sacrificial.

That the final couplet can be seen as the speaker's own words (or at least the human poet's, rather than a divine editor) reasserts, and reinserts, in the poem a distinctly human continuity, from Adam to "all" to the speaker himself. In the poem's eleventh hour, at the moment when the speaker should be at his most humiliated and inconspicuous, doctrine seems to step in to complete the poem with formulaic language. But the negation of the final grammatical unit ("who cannot fail or fall") signals a binary which must remind us even at the last
of those who can fail or fall—specifically, the speaker—and so reaffirms the many possibilities entangled with the state of humanity: choice and error, but also threatening, confessing, writing poems, loving God. In a poem meant to record "the importance attached to, and difficulty associated with, making a lasting appearance in the world" (Harman 54), the culminating "fall" salvages something compassionate from the kind of negativity such formulations imply.\(^{53}\) The self who can "fall" is precisely the self who needs a "succour," and boldly avows one in God.

The linguistic structure of "The Holdfast" helps to sustain the human-ness of religious belief, which the poem’s internal litigators work to reject. The link between humanity and imperfection made by the final rhyme, "all" and "fall," is reinforced by the poem’s final phrase, "fail or fall," which itself continues the human emphasis established at the start of the first quatrain with "I threatened." It is the very possibility of failing or falling that makes Christianity real, actual; in a way, the failure of humanity is what makes Christ grand, what allows him the splendor of the Sacrifice. The sense that the poem records a reciprocal love, for and from God, for and from humanity, can help us to understand the tonally distanced, aphoristic edge of the final couplet. "One," "friend," and "I" disappear behind "Adam" and "Christ," so prominently placed, and the rhythm of the language tends toward the homiletic. Yet while it is true that the human speaker, along with the specificity (and the abstraction) of "one" and "friend," drop away, these final symbolic figures are divine but also human, supreme but also fallen. If doctrine requires that the speaker give up individual agency to recompense Adam’s failure to obey, the poem simultaneously privileges Adam—and by association, the human speaker—as it holds fast to a concept of religious faith.
different from that expounded by its interlocutor, where the self is not barred from declaring anything, including God, as its own.

The title of the poem unfolds along similar avenues. The “holdfast” certainly refers to God, that global force to which the speaker, “one,” “a friend,” Adam, “all,” and Christ are firmly secured. The notion of being held fast in this way seems both safe and troubling: unwavering positions grant a certain security because they deny change and indecision, but they can also feel rigid, imprisoning. God’s believers cling to him, but in a sense he also clings to them; he is a source and space of certitude, a maker and exacter of rules.

“Holdfast” describes the speaker as well. The ironic edge, described by many critics, suggests that the speaker admits retrospectively to having held fast to his selfhood until, adequately “corrected,” he realized the futility of his pursuit. But there is also an insistence in the word, an emphatic affirmation about the speaker and what he will do, must do—indeed, what he is—in response to the doctrine that will be presented to him. The speaker holds fast to self, to speech, to the power of writing poetry—an aim that seems primarily assertive at the start of the poem, then tempers as his understanding of doctrine integrates with a sense that being “religious” is deeply related to being “human.” What the speaker holds fast to is what he exhibits in the line “He my succour is”—an articulation of faith not produced by nor co-opted by the doctrinal other in the poem, one that itself holds onto the human, the “careful.” What may be refused, then, in the idea of a holdfast, is “letting go” into a doctrine that dissolves human agency in the service of godly oneness.

It is difficult not to sense the hand of the poet at work in “The Holdfast,” the skilled manipulation of ambiguity, prosody, emotion, and tone. To the degree
that language and speech make manifest, preserve, even augment selfhood, poetry itself is a kind of holdfast. At the same time, the poet behind “The Holdfast” creates a speaker for whom he has obvious concern, and to whom he grants some kind of human—even if fallen—resourcefulness to wend his way through the manipulations, and contradictions, of homiletic discourse. Even within the all-encompassing “keeping” of Christ, who would turn over ownership of all to God, an utterly human presence, though frail and capable of failing and falling, remains to the end of the poem.

It is this facility for safeguarding from doctrinal usurpations a private realm of the possible, the affirmative, the enabling in human faith and existence, that distinguishes “The Holdfast,” but also relates it to others in The Temple.57 Interested in locating a realm of benevolence in religion, and finding that realm largely within the human self, the poem gives voice to the idea that God is not a pre-emptive force who owns all and allows only “nought” to his believers, but rather a source of aid and relief—an idea that comes entirely from within the speaker and is never appropriated by the doctrine-speaking other.

Fish’s contention that an initially aggressive, self-generating and preserving stance is followed by the loss of self in submission to God is thus difficult to support. According to Fish, the speaker defends itself as the producer of action and meaning, clutching for a way to prove his presence and affirm his love for God, until reaching a moment of epiphanical clarity in which he realizes the futility of these exhibitions of autonomy. He accepts the word of God as “all,” and in God all boundaries are dissolved; Christ is the ultimate agent, maker, and substance of all things. Speaker and poem lose autonomous existence in what Fish describes as the “supererogatory goodness of God which is so extensive
that it finally claims responsibility not only for the deeds that are done but for the impulse to do them. One cannot even take credit for the act of loving God" (176). The human writer, chastened and "in spite of himself. . .gives up" (175), as his attempt at personal power evaporates into the final triumphant image of Christ. Fish reads the speaker's amazement at line 12 similarly, as a "revelation from without . . . that the solution, and indeed all else, is beyond him, but that it is well within the capacity and inclination of another" (175).

I would argue that the definitive moment of "The Holdfast" occurs much earlier than this, just as the interlocutor's instruction seems on the verge of taking control of the speaker's expressions of faith. "[H]e my succour is" has all the force of a private revelation—it is sudden, automatic, absolute, uncatechistic. By surviving the appropriate responses of the doctrinal other, the speaker reveals that the place from which he speaks is unowned by doctrine; a sense of identity outside the limits set down by his "catechist" emerges from the speaker's process of defining his individual practice of faith. The speaker does not empty himself, finally, into those "higher" powers that would force him into passivity.

Fish holds that the "central question of the Christian life," as well as of "The Holdfast," is "What must I do to be saved?" (174), that the desire to be faithful is rewarded only with gestures one cannot understand, breaking down independent will.58 I would argue that the interchange of substitution and revision between speaker and interlocutor in "The Holdfast," as well as between self and God in poems like "Denial!" and "The Temper (I)," suggests a more complex engagement with the question, "What does Christianity do to its believer"? Again and again, Herbert creates speakers neither obliterated by the dialectic between self and God, nor convinced of a salvation that can only be supplied by God. Just
as the interlocutor of "The Holdfast" is not equipped to hear the claim that "God my succour is," Herbert's speakers do not seem prepared to accept "nothing" as their own.
NOTES

1 All references to Herbert's poetry are to the Patrides edition. Line numbers will be parenthetical and in the text.

2 The term is Barbara Harman's, and describes in her Costly Monuments a category of Herbert poems in which "speakers both protect and dismantle their own narratives" (35). I will return to Harman's argument.

3 Chana Bloch writes, "In The Temple the note of passionate or ecstatic fulfillment is rare, and usually carries with it echoes of the Song of Songs" (107).

4 The haphazard ordering of poems in my discussion gives a false sense of both the "structure" of The Temple and of the psychology of Herbert's speakers. While space does not allow for a fuller description of the controversial question of order in Herbert, I am concerned to acknowledge that such a question exists, and that it has been variously answered—The Temple is a church, a temple, a litany, a spiritual growth, a catechism, and so forth. I am more interested here in demonstrating how Herbert's relation to his "others" can shift so radically.

5 These ideas go hand-in-hand, of course, with Fish's larger theoretical interest in what he calls "Affective Stylistics" in the appendix to Self-Consuming Artifacts, a way of reading that de-emphasizes historical, cultural "artifact" in favor of a "reader," whose process of "developing responses... in time" is seen as decentering and destabilizing the literary text (387).

6 In Benet's Secretary of Praise, for instance, the many speakers of poems become a faceless, universal, "typical" Christian (see chapter 2, "The Temple and the Typical Christian"), despite Benet's contention that "though he is typical, the Christian speaker of The Temple lives and feels the Christian experience as a
particular personality involved with God in a close, developing, and individual relationship” (32). Rosemond Tuve contends, in her published debate with William Empson, that to call Herbert “unique” disregards the “hundreds of years,” the “generations” that preceded Herbert and that “Herbert’s mind makes its jumps under the very precise guidance of those who had made the jumps before him.” Thus “the word ‘unique’ pulls us up with some sharpness” (25). In Stephanie Yearwood’s words in response to Tuve, “We must give Herbert full credit for choosing that tradition and exploiting its potential within his own structure” (137).

7 As the title of Harman’s introductory chapter suggests, *The Temple* has inspired a “critical controversy”; the debate is well-documented by both Harman’s introduction and by Stanley Fish in *The Living Temple*.

8 One thinks of W. R. D. Fairbairn’s theory that the child’s greatest need is to be loved and to have its own love genuinely accepted by its parents. Here, Herbert’s speaker experiences mutuality unproblematically. In other poems, as we shall discover, the achievement of such a shared love will be hard-won, if not impossible.

9 Compare “The Flower,” in which “Grief melts away / Like snow in May” (5–6); or the sixth stanza, in which the raging storm that pounds the lowly speaker “down to hell” (15) becomes a gentle “dew and rain” by which he is rebudded, reborn:

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing: O my onely light.
It cannot be
That I am he

On whom thy tempests fell all night. (36–42)

10 Indeed, there is a kind of Freudian cathecting of the world typical of mourning.

11 Chana Bloch notes that "Grief" is "part of that 'literature of tears'" prevalent in the renaissance (33–34). The most extravagant contemporary example may come in Richard Crashaw's "Sainie Mary Magdalene or The Weeper," in which the Weeper cries "two faithfull fountains; / Two walking baths; two weeping motions; / Portale, and compendious oceans" (stanza 19). See also Louis Martz's discussion of the tradition in Poetry of Meditation.

12 Notice, though, that the speaker puts this in the past tense; has nature's productivity ended as well, because of his grief? Or does he hope his grief will end, need only what's been produced thus far?

13 The title is evocative of what Robert Hass writes in "Meditation at Lagunitas":

"Longing, we say, because desire is full / of endless distances."

14 Once again, Richard Crashaw provides the extravagant negative to Herbert's tailored intensity. In the epigram "Luke 11," Crashaw displays his wild imagination—and tendency to greedily consume the bodies of his "parents":

Suppose he had been Tabled at thy Teates,

Thy hunger feels not what he eates:

Hee'I have his Teat e're long (a bloody one)

The Mother then must suck the Son.

15 Winnicott describes the import of being "'let down'" in infancy as a perpetuation of "unthinkable or archaic anxiety." Babies who have been "significantly 'let down'... know what it is to be in a state of acute confusion or the agony of
disintegration. They know what it is like to be dropped, to fall forever, or to become split into psycho-somatic disunion" ("The Mother-Infant Experience of Mutuality" 260).

16 In "The Mother-Infant Experience of Mutuality," Winnicott writes that "the communication [between mother and infant] only becomes noisy when it fails" (259).

17 Here, as at so many moments throughout The Temple, Christ’s anguished cry to his father from the cross—"My God, my God, what hast thou forsaken me?" (Mk. 15:35)—echoes palpably.

18 9:4.9: "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear?"

19 While the poem clearly makes use of Scripture’s maternal imagery in its figuring of Christ, there are also, I think, undertones of what Murray Stein calls "the devouring father": "If at the one pole the archetypal father is guardian of his children and mighty fortress against the threats of the outer world, at the other he is devourer through his rigid insistence on conventional thought, feeling, and behavior" (64). Under such a burden, "the body suffers, the mind fails to understand" (69)—the self breaks apart.

20 "It is a matter of days or hours or minutes," writes Winnicott of the mother’s disappearance "to have a new baby." "Before the limit is reached the mother is still alive; after this limit has been overstepped she is dead. In between is a precious moment of anger, but this is quickly lost, or perhaps never experienced, always potential and carrying fear of violence" ("Transitional Objects" 22; italics added).

From another perspective, Chana Bloch discusses Herbert’s use of the
image of dust as a way of focusing on "the pathos of mortality, and the
outrageousness of God's testing, or worse, ignoring him. . . . Herbert sets the
dust in motion, visualizing its physical properties, in order to express what it feels
like to be totally dependent on God. . . yet dust can be blown about, dust can rise
. . . In the very boldness of his address [of the speaker of "Longing"] we hear the
voice of Job and the psalmist" (48).
21In "The Location of Cultural Experience," Winnicott writes that the infant
survives its mother's absence through the use of a symbolic internal imago. If she
returns before the imago fades, the separation is tolerated without distress. But if
separation extends beyond the duration of the imago, the infant becomes
traumatized, and must cope defensively via return to "the confusional state of a
disintegrating nascent ego structure" (97; italics added).
22Herbert subtitled The Temple "Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations."
23Cf. the OED, definitions 3b and 4a and b.
24Cf. the OED, definitions 1 and 6. In addition to "deserving of pity, compassion,
or sympathy," "silly" could also mean "stunned, stupefied, dazed, as by a blow,"
so that the "sillie worm" who begs not to be "bruised" is both already wounded
and calling out for that hurt to be soothed.
25Here, "caretaker" seems just the right word. The greedy child who devours its
mother's body worries that it can give nothing back—except, perhaps, through
poetic reparation.
26Herbert uses similar language, but in a very different context, in chapter 4 of
The Country Parson, "The Parson's Knowledge": "But the chief and top of his
knowledge consists in the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life
and comfort, the holy Scriptures. There he sucks, and lives” (58).

For a different perspective on eating, hunger, and appetite in Herbert’s poetry, see Heather Ross’s brief discussion of “the ‘food-hunger-appetite’ complex” (121) in The Temple: “it is through indulgence in the sense,” she argues, “that one transcends them and finds God, whereas it is through the repression and denial of our senses, our appetites, that we find ourselves” (126). In “Meating God: Herbert’s Poetry and the Discourse of Appetite.”

James Boyd White’s suggestion that each stanza’s final line constitutes a “grone” that “echoes and transforms the first, the ‘sigh,’” in a kind of duet between the “heart,” “Herbert’s image of the central self,” and the “speaking voice” (225), seems best evidenced by this fourth stanza. Yet in each stanza the second plea’s reprisal of the first (“do no use”/”do not bruise”; “do not urge”/”do not scourge,” etc.) also indicates a worsening of the speaker’s fear. So in the pair “O do not fill me”/”O do not kill me,” where the “grone” does not so much “transform” the “sigh” as it follows directly from and indicates the consequences of that former plea.

Winnicott, “The Location of Cultural Experience” (5).

Diana Benet articulates a third, more standard reading, which suggests the speaker denies his proper role vis-à-vis God. “For the wayfaring Christian, there are at least two selves—the imperfect reality and the perfect ideal . . . the past sinner and the present sanctified self . . . —in a continual struggle until he reaches his destination” (100): human self is not meant to have an impact on God, but must wait for the “granting” that comes only in the last moments of the poem for “ryme” to be put aright. But as I will argue, the turn that does occur in the last lines of “Deniall” has everything to do with a shift in the speaker’s sense of his
important participation in this relation.

31 Even "pleasure" contains, though rearranged, the letters of "eares," as if to reiterate subliminally how satisfying being heard would feel, how fracturing not being heard can feel. "Pleasure" exists in the poem only as a direct result of the speaker's inability to "pierce" the "silent eares" of the other, which sends his "thoughts" scattering to fantasy.

32 The first 3 stanzas of "The Temper (I)" record an interesting progression of personal pronouns. In the first stanza, there are both a discrete speaking "I" and the possessions of that I, "my rymes," "my soul." In the second, only "I" exists, as if speaker, rhymes, soul, believer, etc. have been conflated into one, and by the third stanza there is only "me," acted upon object.

33 From a very different perspective, Rosemond Tuve remarks that "when thy roof my soul hath hid," and "The Temper (I)" in general, describe "the soul's possession or enclosing of God . . . elaborat[ing] . . . the immemorial metaphor of the human soul as God's dwelling or church . . . The many poems like 'Temper, I' dealing with Herbert's own states of spirit, which have so interested us moderns, are not to be separated off as showing some rebellious 'real' interest in himself that overcrowded his clerically interest in the Church; they are poems about his state of mind and about anima as ecclesia" (142–43). Such statements are paradigmatic of Tuve's reading of Herbert, which subordinates the individual poet to his debt to Church tradition.

34 I am reminded of that ambiguous moment in book 1 of Paradise Lost where the speaker addresses "O Spirit" (17) as "thou [who] from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast abyss /
And made it pregnant" (19–22), in a spectacular transfiguration of gender and
time: as if incubating, hatching, and insemination occurred all at once and all
within the same entity.

35Note the presence of the three personal pronouns in this stanza—"me," "my,"
"I"—emphasizing the fantasy of generativity that produces and ensures the
wholeness of self.

36Ellen Y. Siegelman calls it a "predictable 'thereness,'" a "steadiness,
dependability, caring, benign lack of judgment," and quotes the Winnicottian
term: "going-on-being" (160).

37The language of the last line is, of course, strikingly Donnean, but it has none
of the wariness of "The good-morrow" about it.

38Chana Bloch writes that "the speaker's ambition to serve is a caricature of the
Judaic attitude toward the Law. Though he calls God 'deare,' he says nothing
about loving the Lord; he forgets about heart and soul, referring instead to his
own 'power & might,' a revealing redundancy. The bluster of 'threatned' alerts us
to what might charitably be called an excess of zeal" (156). Strier argues that the
threat to observe challenges the "counterintuitive" doctrine of justification by
faith—which denies no only an individual's "power & might" but even the very
ability to make threats at all (70). He defines "threatned" as a moment where the
speaker mocks his own "mistaken" attempt to be pious (67). Bloch also finds in
the speaker's tone at the start of the poem "an air of comedy" (156). But even
acts of confrontation made in "jest"—indeed, very much like jokes themselves—
may involve anger, reluctance, opposition.

39Respectively. Fish 174; Strier 66; Bloch 156.
Compare Deuteronomy 6:5 ("And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might") with Matthew 22:37: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (italics added). Though the opening language of "The Holdfast" would seem to echo the first, its implicit undercurrent seems to testify to the significance of the latter: the speaker's mind actively engaged in the process of figuring out how to "love."

The narrator of 'The Holdfast' . . . wants to establish his own righteousness" (Bloch 155).

Furthermore, it is syntactically and logically possible to read "it could not be" as neither a memory of conversation nor the words of "one," but as the speaker's own utterance—a kind of theatrical aside, a disbelieving exclamation ["how is it possible that I am being addressed in this way, this fills me with amazement"]. This would mean that his initial "threat to observe" is not entirely erased (it never is, no matter how this quatrain is understood), but rather added to by the allowance of trusting in God—God "suppl[ing] the want" (cf. "A true Hymne," line 18).

Simultaneously, though, a curious tense change in the second stanza complicates easy assignation of speakers. Is one line ("Nay, ev'n to trust in him, was also his") the past tense of the speaker's narration, its tone bewildered, even saddened, at another loss, while the second line ("We must confesse, that nothing is our own") is the dogmatic other breaking in?

In The Living Temple: Herbert and Catechizing (which does not revise his earlier reading of "The Holdfast" but refers the reader back to Self-Consuming
Artifacts), Fish offers an extended discussion of The Temple as catechistical in structure as well as content. "Herbert's poetry is a strategy," he suggests (27), whereby the catechist/poet ("who knows from the beginning where he is going" [166]) carefully plans questions to lead the speaker/reader/catechumen toward a self-discovery that will be both surprising and spontaneous. The "lesson" of Herbert's poetic catechism, Fish contends, "is that knowledge and salvation come from another. One kind of dialectic [Socratic] draws true opinion from the [pupil's] mind, while the other exposes the insufficiency of that mind to its task and so argues for the necessity of revelation" (44). Even the self-examination to which catechism is preliminary (Fish cites 1 Cor. 11:28) is but a codified "private catechism" (114) which should lead the pupil to a greater awareness of unworthiness and insufficiency.

In Confessions, St. Augustine legitimizes varying interpretations of the Bible: "how can it harm me that it should be possible to interpret these words in several ways, all of which may yet be true? How can it harm me if I understand the writer's meaning in a different sense from that in which another understands it? All of us who read his words do our best to discover and understand what he had in mind" (295–96).

William V. Nestrick writes that "Herbert's poetry is elemental" (115); "By rendering through human language its curious status of being in and out of this world, Herbert reasserts the value of an individual maker" (127).

Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:27–29: "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things
which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to
nought things that are."

48 As Nuttall writes of "Redemption," "we are made to sense the presence of
some unimaginable love, sweetness, splendour"; Calvin's "divine landlord" is
made, "most tenderly, to seem provisional and tentative here" (33–34).
49 Cf. the fourth and final stanza of "The Reprisall":

Yet by confession will I come
Into thy conquest: though I can do nought
Against thee, in thee I will overcome
The man, who once against thee fought.

(13–16; italics added)

50 Strier calls the couplet "hymnlike," its speaker "impossible to assign" (72). For
Harman, "Christ's voice" closes the poem; in Nuttall's reading, it seems to be
God.

51 Fish writes that "friend" is "Herbert's special word for Christ" (Self-Consuming
Artifacts 198).

52 Strier and Nuttall both suggest this idea—as if (by Nuttall's analogy) "we" were
like children who needed to entrust our "weekly fifty-pence piece" to God, the
"father," for "safe-keeping" (71).

53 What is at issue in "The Holdfast" is not institutional explanations of Protestant
doctrine or other individuals' writings (e.g., Calvin), but rather the impact of
doctrine on one particular speaker/poet. Thus while some official tenets of
Herbert's religion may be said to provide assurance of a final happiness and
comfort through God's grace, we need to read this poem in terms of its unique
dramatization of the relation between doctrine and a believer concerned to maintain a sense of agency outside of that doctrine.

54 In his edition of The Temple, Patrides cites Psalm 73.27 from the Book of Common Prayer: “it is good for me to hold me fast by God” (152).

55 Strier translates the word and its impulse as “comic.” He also claims that “Christ is the true ‘holdfast,’ the true agency by which we are held in place—as opposed to our own ‘power and might’” (72).


58 Fish has been challenged on this score by Richard Strier, who argues that the poem counters the hopelessness of “human insufficiency” with the “‘unspeakable comfort’ of the doctrine of grace (Strier, quoting the Anglican Articles in Love Known [66]). For Strier, the experience of the poem is far from Fish’s bleak self-diminishment, but is instead a celebration of faith, both “comic” and “happy.” Strier’s analysis does much to recover the poem—and the reader—from the abject “humiliation” Fish would have them subject to. But his reading of the speaker’s relationship to the interlocutor renders the speaker more accepting of doctrine than the complex revisionary moments in the poem seem to suggest.
Chapter 3
Eve and Adam: Paradise Relocated

Many of Donne’s and Herbert’s lyric poems negotiate the intertwining of self and other by courting the threshold of transitional space. As speakers shape the texture of their conflicted object relationships in encapsulated verse forms, infant conflates with man, memory with actuality, and the potential “traumas” of birth, weaning, hunger, and holding mix with adult concerns about sexuality, autonomy, and faith. In Paradise Lost, Milton, too, traces the arc from birth to adult dialectics of object relating; but in the expansive, narrative form of his epic, individual “lyric” moments are collated into an integrated whole that dramatizes the many contours of self-other dynamics. Moreover, the “infant”-to-adult progression in Paradise Lost is a specifically gendered one. Because the story involves the rich but not always unambivalent relation between Adam and Eve, a Winnicottian paradigm—in particular, his theories of mirroring and “true” and “false” self—serves to explore both Eve’s and Adam’s different habits of relating, as well as, most importantly, Milton’s unusually supple rendering of the figure of Eve.

In the common spirit, I believe, of radical pamphleteer and epic poet, Milton turns an interrogating eye in Paradise Lost not only to “the ways of God to men,”¹ but also to dense problematics of self and other within the rubrics of religion and society. Hand-in-hand with the ostensible doctrinaire purpose of the poem is a revisionary impulse that, again and again, undercuts doctrine; the same analytical nature that restlessly reinterprets the language and implications of theological and political law in De Doctrina Christiana and in his many political
tracts is brought to bear poetically on gender hierarchies, misogynistic assumptions about women and marriage, and the patriarchal structure embedded far within Christianity. Indeed, it may be precisely the poetic context that allows Milton to articulate realms of desire, emotion, admiration, grief, love, mutuality, respect—a constellation of psychological phenomena within and between Eve and Adam—that the more formal and public space of the seventeenth-century pamphlet would have strenuously prohibited. As Joan Malory Webber reminds us, Paradise Lost had to satisfy orthodoxy or be censored, and while this may overly simplify the poem’s massive textual ambiguity, it also leaves open the possibility that Milton was well aware of how much his writing complicated the doctrine it seemed to express.

To posit something like a “feminist” Milton, or a feminist reading of Paradise Lost, one must take into account opposing tacks in much feminist criticism to date. Readers such as Sandra Gilbert and Christine Froula, who sustain a traditional view of Milton, articulate a feminist critique in terms of Milton’s apparent upholding of patriarchal Christianity, and condemn him on those grounds. Froula, for example (whose essay on Paradise Lost will factor centrally in my discussion of Eve’s “birth,” and to whom I will thus return below), does much to expose masculinist biases of the Christian scaffolding of Milton’s poem, but little to explore the ways in which Milton may converse with, nuance, even flatly reject that teaching. Many Milton scholars, in a paradoxically similar way, recuperate Eve from a problematic theology whereby her subordination is “necessary,” her guilt unquestioned, her “freedom” and “happiness” contingent upon execution of her role as wife and mother.2

Diane McColley’s Milton’s Eve, for instance, which starts with a historical
account of how widely Milton diverged from literary and iconographic traditions of
the myth of the fall, derives its support of Eve from the position that Milton guides
the reader of Paradise Lost through a mock experience of fall and regeneration,
with Eve as symbol and catalyst of that regeneration. McColley finds in Milton a
"feminist" spirit because Eve takes her "calling," as gardener in Eden, as
seriously as Christ offers himself to be sacrificed for man. But even this
potentially ennobling analogy falls apart, I think, in McColley's own surprisingly
misogynistic assertions—that "in Paradise Lost subordination is not inferiority"
(35), but is instead "typologically fitting" (211), or that Eve "accepts submission to
her husband... with generosity and promptitude" (216). Far from releasing Eve
from the grip of masculinist doctrine, or Milton from rigid hierarchical
configurations, McColley finds in the poem (and seems to support) the notion that
"the man is head of the woman, in as nearly as possible the same way that Christ
is the head of the man and God is the head of Christ" (57).

Philip Gallagher, in his somewhat misnamed Milton, the Bible, and
Misogyny, covers similar territory. Asserting that Milton "plunges into biblical
commentary" (1), altering biblical text at times "beyond recognition" (3) in his
"feminist justification of the ways of God to women" (7), Gallagher offers a heroic
close reading of Milton's redaction of scripture—often confusingly elliptical or
even contradictory—with the intent to prove his "rational theodicy" and
"egalitarian theology." With a keen eye to the ways in which Milton expands,
delays, transforms his source-texts, Gallagher demonstrates a consistent,
deliberate repudiation in the poem of biblical misogyny (e.g., Eve is "yet sinless"
up to point of touching the apple; even the angel Uriel cannot see through
Satan's disguise), and does much to reveal Milton's spirit of revision. But
Gallagher's own adherence to a strictly theological framework in the poem renders Eve and Adam more static types than fully realized characters, and a curiously sexualized bias emerges: Gallagher can at once champion Milton as "profoundly feminist" and call Eve "charmingly aggressive" (63), a "fallen, guilty, and self-extenuating" woman (100), a "deceitful seductress" (102). Frequently, too, Gallagher commits the exegetical sin of equating many of the poem's narrative declarations with "Milton."

Joseph Wittreich's *Feminist Milton* may be the most sustained reading to date of *Paradise Lost* as feminist and ideologically subversive. Amassing historical evidence of the way in which Milton was read and often used politically by contemporary women, Wittreich suggests that Milton's work has been sequestered over time by a patriarchal critical community whose ends Milton is called upon to serve. Though Wittreich glosses over what he calls Milton's "ambivalence" toward women (40), and frequently refers to contemporary male writers who supported Milton for "telling women who they are" (85), and while his procedure becomes at times so heavily historical as to forego the poem as its own best witness, *Feminist Milton* nevertheless hones in on the poem's complex ambiguity as manifestation of "radical questioning" and "interrogations" (42–43). Calling it "full of breaches and fissures, dislocations, shifting interests and subversive impulses," Wittreich hopes to replace in *Paradise Lost* the "coy ambiguity, cleverly contrived narrative and shifting, competing perspectives" that centuries of masculinist criticism have "voided" from it (39; 29). Wittreich is, to my knowledge, the only critic to celebrate the fact that Eve gets the last words in *Paradise Lost*, effectively silencing Adam (103)!

My own approach to *Paradise Lost* attempts to grant full sway to the
poem's textual ambiguity—what Umberto Eco might call the "stickiness of the language" (ix)—and to its fabric of voice, dialogue, and revision, as Eve and Adam encounter themselves, one another, and the theological architecture that, at least initially, shapes their existence. My interest is less to ignore Milton's deep-seated and extensive relation to theology than to suggest that that relation is far more variegated, syncretic, even argumentative, than criticism has tended to allow. In *Paradise Lost* Milton takes up the story of the "fall" and embues it with psychological significance that extends beyond religious instruction, communicating a vast internal debate with the very doctrine that ostensibly justifies and stabilizes the epic. By placing voices side-by-side in an elaborate pattern of narrative and conversation, the poem establishes a principle of overlay, even interchangeability, that problematizes patriarchal anxieties. Eve and Adam are, in my reading of them, not emblems but characters, with active, different personalities. Beginning with a comparison of Eve's and Adam's memories of "birth," then moving to several dialogues and speeches containing internal dialogue, I will argue not simply for an egalitarian Milton, but indeed for a poetry in which Eve herself is the locus of Milton's deep abiding faith.

I

Eve's memory of awakening in Eden (and it is important that Milton has her *remember*) comes at the start of the conversation in book 4 that is our first introduction to the human couple; Adam similarly recalls his birth later, in book 8, during his extended discourse with Raphael. The two episodes of "birth" echo each other verbally and imagistically to such an extent that they are clearly
intended by Milton to be paired narrations; further still, they are paired in a way that draws one's attention to the *differences* between and within them—differences that, because they seem pronounced, deliberate, and far from simply stylistic, disclose the extent of ontological, psychological, even pre-ideological disparity between Eve and Adam from their very first moments of consciousness. Where Eve's account of her experience at the pool reveals a paradigmatic sense of calm, centered interiority, Adam's story suggests an equally precedential tendency toward anxiety about origin, debt, and inadequacy.

The conversation in book 4 begins with Adam's first long speech (his first utterance in the poem), which is intended to "praise" God and "extol" (4.436) his and Eve's positions as sovereign gardeners of Eden, and which would seem to demand Eve's consent as the only acceptable response. Agree she does, but briefly, almost formulaically—"For we to him *indeed* all praises owe, / And daily thanks" (4.444–45; italics added)—before abruptly changing the subject. Experiencing the tension between Eve's memory and her formulaic apostrophes is central to one's sense of Eve's detachment from doctrinal rules and patriarchal anxiety. The fact that Eve changes the subject so abruptly, that her lines of apostrophe seem *pro forma*, uttered quickly and then moved away from into the poetry of her own memory, suggest to me not that Eve has been indoctrinated into doctrinal thinking but rather that an independent Eve is learning how to manipulate situations linguistically, that she knows to say what is expected of her, but dispenses with such things quickly before turning to her own memories and stories. Thus her first words, to Adam, in the poem—"O thou for whom / And from whom I was form'd flesh of thy flesh, / And without whom am to no end, my guide / And head" (4.440–43)—both "speak" patriarchal discourse and turn that
discourse upside down: it is almost as if the lines contain an ironically defiant
claim that outside of the rule established by God via Adam she would be
uncontainable, unstoppable, undefinable, autonomous, threatening. Again and
again in the poem, speeches are framed by such formulaic apostrophes, the
validity of which is thrown into question by the power of what follows, and
diverges.

When Eve then turns the conversation to her memory of “nativity,” the shift
is so unexpected that one can’t help but feel the importance of this scene to Eve:
the poetry, too, seems to settle into a different, more private register:

That day I oft remember, when from sleep
I first awaked, and found myself reposed
Under a shade of flowers, much wondering where
And what I was, whence thither brought, and how. (4.449–52)

The first clause is packed with significance. “That day,” spotlighted syntactically
at the start of line, sentence, and speech at once, intimates the primacy for Eve
of the experiences of that particular day; “that” identifies the day and signals its
familiarity to Eve, before she explains which day she means with the next clause,
“when from sleep.” “Oft,” similarly, demonstrates both the accessibility of the
memory and the frequency with which it occurs to her; the memory of “that day”
can be called up easily—and so it has been, repeatedly. Fowler remarks that
“that day” “clearly implies that Adam and Eve have been created for two days at
least, so that we must reject the theory advanced in McColley . . . that this is the
very day of their creation” (221, note on 4.449). But even with a two-day interval
between her “birth” and this conversation with Adam, Eve’s claim to “oft
remember” suggests that the important events of that day, no sooner lived
through, are firmly embedded in the texture of her personality, and relived, again
and again, in memory. At the same time, the nostalgic tone of the clause—"That
day I oft remember"—hints at how definitively her first moments of self-discovery
were coterminous with, and marked by, the end of a solitude she will describe as
pleasurable as her speech unfolds.

When Eve conceptualizes her process of coming into consciousness as
"when from sleep / I first awaked," her literal, nonfigurative use of "sleep" conveys
her readiness to eschew heavenly explanations in favor of her own experiential
language. Her state prior to existence was not "like" a kind of sleep; rather, Eve
turns it into sleep in a move that works to emphasize the earthly, human, and
domestic (nor does the poem indicate that she was put to "sleep" after her
creation from Adam's rib). So unambiguous an articulation ("When from sleep")
points as well to the kind of autonomy Eve will increasingly exhibit in the poem;
she passes over any account of "who" produced the sleep-like state, or "by
whom" she was drawn out of it, as if she would distance herself from issues of
ontological priority that, as we shall see, so vex Adam. Indeed, Eve's initial
"wondering" revolves not around the problem of "who" made her or even "who"
she is, but rather "where," "what," "whence," and "how." Such questions convey
both an immediate curiosity about her physical situation and an unconcern about
the sufficiency of her selfhood—though she may have yet to understand fully the
nature of her existence (and thus wonders "what" she is), she nevertheless
already seems to know who she is, or that she is. The construction "I . . . found
myself" is thus provocative and telling: speaking in reflexive, even reflective
terms, Eve figures herself the agent of her own discovery; she seems self-
contained and unto herself, as if selfhood were there from the start for her to
awaken into. And she takes possession of that selfhood with her very first utterance in the poem.

"Reposed" is equally laden with subtextual meaning. The word evokes a state of both physical and psychical tranquillity—of composure—in which Eve lies comfortably at rest on a bed of flowers, comfortable with the self she has just "awaked" to find. But inherent in "reposed" is also the idea of positionality: to be re-posed is to be posed anew, differently, as if Eve finds her "self" in a position she somehow didn't have before. In the context of "firsts" and discoveries, this unanticipated notion of revision suggests that Eve, in her re-membering (and re-telling?) also reconfigures her position in the hierarchy according to which she has been taught that Adam is "Pre-minent" (447), her "guide / And head" (442–43), that her creation was "for" and "from" him (440–41). In the progression of just two lines, then—"That day I oft remember, when from sleep / I first awakened, and found myself reposed"—Eve intimates a tendency to remain unconnected to the doctrinal scaffolding by which she is surrounded and informed.

Curious and immediately attuned to her senses, Eve follows the sound of water to the pool, which, in her first (innocent?) equation of earth to heaven, she calls "another sky." It is the "answering looks of sympathy and love," though, that arrest our attention—as well as Eve's—in this passage:

Not distant far from thence a murmuring sound
Of waters issued from a cave and spread
Into a liquid plain, then stood unmoved
Pure as the expanse of heaven; I thither went
With unexperienced thought, and laid me down
On the green bank, to look into the clear
Smooth lake, that to me seemed another sky.
As I bent down to look, just opposite,
A shape within the watery gleam appeared,
Bending to look on me, I started back,
It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love. (4.453–65)

Fowler’s comment here may be taken as typical of a critical consensus that includes orthodox and feminist readers alike: “Alluding to Ovid’s story of the proud youth Narcissus, who was punished for his scornfulness by being made to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool, and to pine with vain desire” (222). But I would argue that the undeniable reference to Narcissus is compelling precisely for the way in which Milton so deliberately echoes and diverges from the myth at once. What Eve perceives in the lake is conspicuously neither herself nor even a reflection of self, but a “shape within the watery gleam”; her satisfaction in what she sees derives less, I think, from “desiring an ideal self” (as Fowler would suggest), than from the almost anticipatory way in which that watery shape responds to her movements. Far from static, narcissistic self-appraisal, this experience is for Eve one of delightful reciprocity: “I started back, / It started back, but pleased I soon returned, / Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks.” Like so many poems in Herbert’s Temple in which speakers long to be “heard” by the other in a way that corresponds to the strength of their feelings, this passage depicts a perfect exchange of looks, two faces answering each other and giving back just what they see. Rather than something “scornful,” vain, or insubstantial (as both classical allusion and critical tradition might
suggest), what Eve sees, and what she therefore also looks like, are looks of "sympathy and love"—an open, generous, understanding face, it seems, which exactly corresponds to her own.

While the fact that Eve does not know the face in the lake is her own seems a vital detail of Milton's rendering of this scene precisely because it works against the charge that "Eve plays the role of doomed narcissist" (Froula 327), her experience of receiving from the face what she herself gives to it also evokes, in my view, Winnicott's theory of mirroring as described in "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development." Asking the question "What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face?" Winnicott proposes that, in the context of satisfactory holding, "what the baby sees is himself or herself" (112). But this is initially deceptive; Winnicott's description of mirroring becomes characteristically, intricately dialectical. He goes on to suggest that what the infant sees in its mother's face is the simultaneity of itself and what the mother herself sees as she looks back at the infant—her mood, her defenses, her expectations. Thus "the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there" (italics in original). In a good holding situation, then, the baby will see in its mother's face a layering of its own love and its mother's love, a self-image made whole by this overlap. Winnicott calls such "seeing" apperception—introspective self-consciousness—rather than perception, to identify a kind of look whereby the self looking gets back what it gives to the other who returns the gaze. When such apperception is possible, a developmental process "which depends on being seen" can take place:

When I look I am seen, so I exist.

I can now afford to look and see.
I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive.

In fact I take care not to see what is not there to be seen. . . . (114)

Winnicott further describes the importance of this dialectic in specifically psychotherapeutic terms: the work of analysis is “a long-term giving the patient back what the patient brings,” “a complex derivative of the face that reflects what is there to be seen.” If such an exchange is handled “well enough,” Winnicott believed, “the patient will find his or her own self, and will be able to exist and to feel real,” “to have a self into which to retreat for relaxation” (117; italics added).

In the framework of Winnicott’s mirror-experience, then, what Eve receives from the “shape” in the water is a perfectly attuned look that answers her own, one that “sees” her just at the moment of her looking; this enables her to experience her own existence, to look again, to “perceive” what she sees as “sympathy and love” as well as, I think, to “appceive” her own corresponding feelings. And as I hope to demonstrate, it is the power of this initial, if brief event in Eve’s life, rather than the more dramatic interruption of her exchange of looks by God’s voice, that establishes in her the “sense of being real,” the spontaneous, centered, creative selfhood that Winnicott ascribes to the “true” self (“Ego Distortion” 149).6

No sooner has Eve absorbed the quality of the exchange with the face in the pool (its looks are “answering” and offer “sympathy and love”) than a mysterious “voice” intervenes with warning tones and explanations that don’t seem to accord with what she has only just experienced. The “voice” does not, in fact, simply explain to Eve what it is that she sees in the water (such explanation does not even seem necessary to Eve’s enjoyment of, or psychical benefit from, her exchange of looks); instead, it strenuously alters both sight and experience.
And while Eve does follow this voice that leads her, the language of the passage betrays the extent to which her behavior, her desires, her independence—her very existence in Eden—will thenceforth come up against deprivation, restriction, and monological rules:

[T]here I had fixed

Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,
Had not a voice thus warned me, What thou seest.
What there thou seest fair creature is thyself.
With thee it came and goes: but follow me,
And I will bring thee where no shadow stays
Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, he
Whose image thou art, him thou shalt enjoy
Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear
Multitudes like thyself, and thence be called
Mother of human race. (4.465–75)

Named a "fair creature" (and one wonders whether Eve registers the subtle dismissal in the phrase), she is told that what she sees "is thyself" in a gesture whose overt purpose—to explain the nature of the "image" in the water—is felt not only as a correction of "vain desire" for an apparently insubstantial reflection of herself but also as a warning prohibition against the kind of pleasure Eve experienced engaging in those "answering looks." Notice too the repetition of "What thou seest, / What there thou seest"—is this God's stammer? Or does Eve correct herself in the retelling? It is as if, in her effort to provide an accurate account, the specificity of "there" becomes important precisely because the word serves to distinguish between that sight, the one "there" in the pool, and the
imminent, more “correct” vision of Adam to which she will be led.

Even more drastically for Eve, however, than this categorizing of “what
[she] seest,” the voice effectively transforms the very essence of that sight—no
longer a “shape” that “return[s] . . . with answering looks,” nor even that which
one might anticipate, a reflection of herself, the voice turns what Eve sees into
her: “What there thou seest fair creature is thyself.” No sooner established as
herself, though, the sight is literally eradicated by the warning voice. “With thee it
came and goes,” she is told, in a curious inconsistency of tenses suggesting that
while Eve may once have had a self—the self she “came” with, first discovered
upon waking and then seen in the water—that self now “goes,” now that the voice
has entered to mediate her experience of herself. The present-tense “goes”
seems to me the most poignant augur of an ongoing loss of self Eve will struggle
to prevent throughout Paradise Lost. Moreover, the voice’s promise to bring Eve
to “where no shadow stays / Thy coming” diminishes both what she sees in the
pool (now become her “self”) as well as the immediacy, the guarantee, of the
“answering looks.” If, as Fowler notes, “stays” means “waits for,” making
“shadow” refer back to the face in the pool, then the voice has reduced to
insubstantial copy the face Eve perceived as separate, energetic, full of emotion;
and if “stays” also connotes “stops” or “delays,” the voice seems to place limits on
the conditions under which Eve would be able to “come” (lean over the water)
and see an image of herself. Even more aggressively, “He / Whose image thou
art” definitively repudiates the prior exchange of looks by denying to Eve her
ability to create, to see, to be her own image, to be. And under the burden of
“Multitudes like thyself,” anything like an autonomous, separate self disappears.

The many plays on “self” in this passage (questions of what “is” oneself,
what constitutes an image, what one sees when looking upon a watery reflection, whether one can exist in someone else’s image and still be “oneself,” whether one can be oneself if one is also “Inseparably” another’s), as well as the orbital issues of movement (where Eve initially controls her own, bending down and starting back, the “voice” quickly takes over: the image “came and goes,” Eve is told to “follow,” her coming will not be “stay[ed]”—all these set in motion a thematically important problematic of integrity and selfhood in which, paradoxically, it is Eve’s exchange of looks with a shape she does not know is herself that seems the most genuine, the most unencumbered by anxieties about authenticity.

Eve’s response to this catalog of explanations, instructions, and assurances measures its weight upon her:

... what could I do,

But follow straight, invisibly thus led?

Till I espied thee, fair indeed and tall,

Under a platan, yet methought less fair,

Less winning soft, less amiably mild,

Than that smooth watery image; back I turned... (4.475–80)

The first question—“what could I do”—does indeed sound rhetorical, as Christine Froula describes it (328); there is no sense that Eve has anything but a single option in the face of the voice’s authoritative conscription of her self and her actions. Far from a choice freely made, then, to “follow straight” seems more compulsion than independent decision, the full brunt of which is made explicit by the word “straight”: used several times and with varying connotations in the poem (see, for only two examples, 4.376 and 4.405), “straight” gathers up the many
strands threading through the passage. On the surface, at least, Eve seems to say that there was nothing for her to do but follow immediately, with alacrity—responding perhaps to the voice’s apparently intimate knowledge of her, or even her own curiosity about “he” whose image has replaced her own. As if in deference to the voice’s warning tones, “straight” also suggests a direct, unswerving obedience; or even that Eve must follow “closely” because of the invisibility of the speaker. But there is yet another meaning that presses into this moment. In his comment on the word at line 405, Fowler notes that the spelling “strait” was interchangeable with “straight”; at line 376, he offers “involving privation” as a possible “overtone” for “strait.” Rather than close off this possibility in Eve’s use of “straight,” I would argue that the notion of privation stands as a palpable overtone—following the invisible voice7 to the “him” who pre-empts her exchange of answering looks constitutes both an immediate deprivation of Eve’s enjoyment of the shape in the pool and a more long-term state of subordinated existence. Her response to seeing the actual Adam, then, is to turn away—he is not just “less” than what the voice promised, but distinctly different from the face she has already perceived as “winning soft,” “amiably mild.”8

In the last section of Eve’s speech, she once again quotes the language of another—this time, Adam’s words to her as she turns “back” from him toward the lake. That Eve reproduces Adam’s language verbatim, keeping it within quotation marks, as it were, and apart from her own language, suggests again a refusal to assimilate Adam’s anxiety about ownership, hierarchy, attachment and separation into her own language, and results in a kind of schism created between their two moods, their two ethics (a disjunction to which I will return later, in my discussion of Adam’s “birth”). What is particularly significant here to
one's sense of whether or not Eve's nativity episode overall records her
submission to patriarchy is the way in which Eve describes her final act of
returning to Adam:

Thou following criedst aloud, Return, fair Eve,
Whom flyest thou? whom thou flyest, of him thou art,
His flesh, his bone; to give thee being I lent
Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart,
Substantial life, to have thee by my side
Henceforth an individual solace dear;
Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim
My other half: with that thy gentle hand
Seized mine, I yielded, and from that time see
How beauty is excelled by manly grace,
And wisdom, which alone is truly fair. (4.481–91)

Many critics have suggested that Eve's initial refusal of Adam has not only a
dramatic but also a theological purpose: she turns away the first time so that her
subsequent act of joining him will be seen as a decision she makes "freely," of
her own volition.9 Following Janet Halley, however, I would argue that the tone of
"seized" and "yielding" strongly contradicts such claims of personal choice. From
her first question, "what could I do?"—so powerful a statement of the limitation of
choice insinuated into Eve's life with the entrance of God's voice—to these final
words of violent constraint, reluctant giving way, Eve's speech is carefully
constructed so as to set her actions against a system that provokes those
actions. Indeed, the speech is less a narrative than a pastiche, a patchwork of
side-by-side voices whereby Eve (and, importantly, Milton) allows God and Adam
to demonstrate *in their own language* the ideologies and anxieties by which they would constrain her; meanwhile, the story Eve tells about herself, in *her* own words, shows her not "freely choos[ing]" but fleeing from and then yielding to a conflictedly "gentle" hand that "seize[s]" her.

It is difficult to agree, then, with the opposing views of Christine Froula and Diane McColley. McColley is surely wrong when she declares that Eve "recalls her courtship with relief, gratitude, sobriety, amusement, gaiety, and wit"; Eve's sequence of "seized"/"yielded" is paled into an act of responding "spontaneously yet preparedly to Adam," and turning back to the lake becomes "a childish gesture since outgrown." McColley's commitment to traditional Christian hierarchy, I think, works to obscure the complexly strained and aggressive undertones of the scene in the dictum that Eve's subordination to God and man does not weaken or limit but actually ennobles her.

Froula reacts perhaps too strongly in another direction. In her essay "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy," she reads this scene of Eve's birth as "represent[ing] the conversion of Eve to orthodoxy" (326):

[Eve's] imagination is so successfully colonized by patriarchal authority that she literally becomes its voice. As her narrative shows, she has internalized the voices and values of her mentors: her speech reproduces the words of the "voice" and of Adam and concludes with an assurance that she has indeed been successfully taught to "see" for herself the superiority of Adam's virtues . . . Eve can "read" the world in only one way, by making herself the mirror of the patriarchal authority of Adam, Milton's God, Milton himself. (329)

But Froula seems to overlook the significance of Eve's "reproduction" of voices—
that she records their words in a way that lets her remain somewhat untouched by them—as well as the delicate tension between Eve’s memories and her iteration of doctrinal judgments. The last few lines of her speech, for example, revise the doctrine to which they seem to bear witness in a subtle but, I would argue, characteristic manner for Eve:

Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim
My other half: with that thy gentle hand
Seized mine, I yielded, and from that time see
How beauty is excelled by manly grace,
And wisdom, which alone is truly fair. (487–91)

By one way of reading, the colon after “half” provides so bare an indication of a change in speaker that Adam is made to take responsibility for masculinist pronouncements about “manly grace / And wisdom”; by another way of reading, the end-stop after “grace” separates one ethic (“beauty is excelled by manly grace”) belonging to God, and another (“wisdom . . . alone is truly fair”) that Eve claims for herself. (Eve has already been called “fair” by God; she takes the word and reprises it for her own purpose—her “wisdom.”)

But there is yet a third possible reading of these lines that salvages them from Froula’s notion that patriarchal discourse “speaks” Eve, as well as McCollory’s that Eve now “properly sees.” In most critics’ accounts, “see” slips unproblematically into “believe,” and “how” into “that,” rendering a pat, passive assent: I believe that beauty is excelled by manly grace, that wisdom alone is truly fair. But if “see” means something more akin to “recognize,” and “how” implies “the method by which,” then Eve, far from complying with doctrinal value judgments, radically indicates her separation from those values: from that time I
understand the system according to which I am made inferior, but I do not subordinate myself. The enjambment between “see” and “how” heightens this effect, by breaking apart the crucial grammatical construction. Thus Eve manages to “speak” doctrine, in Froula’s terms, even while subversively countering that doctrine in a way that (loudly) voices her own, very different, belief.

Read unanimously as the moment of Eve’s inscription into a patriarchal hierarchy—whether that inscription is held to be misogynistic and devaluing or “proper” and enriching—Eve’s extended account of her birth makes manifest the subtlety of the poem’s ambiguity. The scene seems deliberately managed by Milton to ensure that the very doctrine that intervenes into Eve’s moment at the pool, apparently closing off for her that realm of experience, is contested and countered by Eve herself; we diminish the richness and complexity of her presence in the poem if we dismiss the many linguistic, rhetorical, structural moves that let stories be told in parallel without superseding, or being superseded by, the other. Eve’s memory of the “answering looks of sympathy and love”—the importance of the face in the pool—continues.10

What, then, of Adam’s “birth”? His account begins in nearly the exact manner of Eve’s:11

As new waked from soundest sleep
Soft on the flowery herb I found me laid
In balmy sweat, which with his beams the sun
Soon dried, and on the reeking moisture fed. (8.253–56)

But Adam’s use of analogy and superlative ("As new waked from soundest
sleep") creates, paradoxically, an attenuated version of the kind of experience Eve recounts. Where Eve’s opening gesture seems both radical and intuitive, making of her state prior to existence something she understands ("when from sleep / I first awakened"), Adam resorts to simile ("As . . . from . . . sleep"), as if he can neither simply describe non-existence as such nor follow Eve’s more transformative impulse. His “former state” (8.290) was like sleep, but “soundest”; being “born” was “As” waking up, but not precisely. His comparisons underscore a characteristic inability to capture the essence of an experience on its own terms—so anxiously does he try to mediate between the two realms that make up his life—and implicitly acknowledge the limitations of his knowledge. Notice, too, the delay in Adam’s use of “I”: where Eve’s narrative seems very much in the control of the speaking, remembering “I” (with “I first awaked” further emphasized at the start of a line), Adam defers his “I” construction, interposing “soft on the flowery herb” between “waked from soundest sleep” and “I found me” (compare “That day I oft remember, when from sleep / I first awaked, and found myself reposed / under a shade of flowers”). Adam’s “I found me,” moreover, demonstrates a wholly different relation to self than Eve’s “I . . . found myself.” Adam describes his first experience of himself objectively, rather than reflexively. “Me” is both passive and contingent, demanding and indebted; and while the use of “me” seems to record intimacy with and knowledge of oneself, it simultaneously always implies what it is not—the “not-me.” Implicit in Adam’s self-discovery is a mediating, intervening other. The agent of neither his own discovery nor positionality, Adam literally renders himself an object “laid” upon the ground by the action of another.12

Where Eve’s first act, once “finding” herself “reposed,” was to pursue the
sound of water to the smooth lake—a gesture of curiosity unconcerned about origins and creators (and she described herself as “wondering”)—Adam relegates “wondering” to his “eyes” and “turn[s]” them “toward heaven,” though not because perception tells him that there is anything there to see:

*Straight* toward heaven my wondering eyes I turned,

And gazed a while the ample sky, till raised
By quick instinctive motion up I sprung,
As thitherward endeavouring, and upright
Stood on my feet; about me round I saw
Hill, dale, and shady woods, and sunny plains,
And liquid lapse of murmuring streams; by these,
Creatures that lived, and moved, and walked, or flew,

Birds on the branches warbling. (8.257–65; italics added)

The use of “straight” seems deliberate and pointed: just as the word coalesced a range of connotations in Eve’s speech, Adam’s use of it suggests not only that he “immediately” or “unwaveringly” (even “correctly”) looks towards heaven, but also that that looking somehow involves the same sort of privation implicated in Eve’s following the voice. Indeed, just as Eve looks into “another sky,” Adam “gaze[s] a while the ample sky”—but his upturned eyes do not see, in Froula words, “an image of [his] visible self” as Eve does (330). Adam’s initial motions are all oriented outward, as if he “instinctive[ly]” searches for something akin to “answering looks”—he springs “up,” he “thitherward endeavor[s],” he stands “upright,” he looks “about [him] round”—but finds instead of a reflecting face the expanse of the natural world, which he (anxiously, perhaps) contracts into “all things.”
As if the absence of any type of mirroring phenomenon already begins to alienate Adam from himself, his description of his initial experience of his body and his mood—his “self-state”—reveals a kind of anxiety by which Eve, in her narrative, seemed wholly untouched.

My self I then perused, and limb by limb
Surveyed, and sometimes went, and sometimes ran
With supple joints, and lively vigour led:
But who I was, or where, or from what cause,
Knew not; to speak I tried, and forthwith spake,
My tongue obeyed and readily could name
What e’er I saw. (8.267–73)

Adam “survey[s]” and “peruse[s]” his “self” almost as if the two are not one and the same; though he clearly means to refer to his body, his syntax suggests dissociation from his mental self as well. He particulates himself “limb by limb.” He moves, but makes that motion the behest of “supple joints, and lively vigour,” by which he is passively “led” (Eve is also “led” [4.476], but by the invisible voice that intrudes upon her experience of herself). Even the fact that his tongue must “obey,” though it “readily” enough names what he sees, furthers the sense of distance and disconnection between the parts of him. At the same time Adam’s gestures are both generalizing and contracting; he gathers all of creation into four lines and makes of it a tool by which to locate the more important source of his own birth (in a sweeping gesture he enlists “thou enlightened earth . . . / Ye hills and dales, ye rivers, woods, and plains, / And ye that live and move”—in short, all the “fair creatures”14—to tell him “how came I thus, how here?” [274–77]). thinking immediately in terms of “who”-ness and making of himself a result of
some prior, other "cause." These two tendencies are, I think, in fact manifestations of the same prevalent characteristic of Adam's personality—an overlapping obsessiveness about what he "know[s]" and anxiety about "all things" that exist beyond his ken. So he knows not "who" he is, and can "name" without seeming to have any particular attachment to, or interest in, those things; he breaks himself down into parts that can be evaluated but seems to require external assistance—the "cause" that will explain his existence—in order to collect them again in an integrated, experiential whole.

Adam's speech has an excited, almost frenetic quality—the piling-on of parts as he varies between cumulative and periodic sentences, the many lists, the active verbs, the frequently inverted syntax—as it winds around the problematic disjunction in his own knowledge:

how came I thus, how here?
Not of my self; by some great maker then,
In goodness and in power pre- eminent;
Tell me, how may I know him, how adore,
From whom I have that thus I move and live,
And feel that I am happier than I know.
While thus I called, and strayed I knew not whither,
From where I first drew air, and first beheld
This happy light, when answer none returned . . . (8.277–85)

Certain things he knows as if "instinctive[ly]" (how to stand, walk, run, talk, name), even while he anxiously puzzles over the source of his existence; and he seems to have arrived with certain assumptions (that he is indebted to a "great" and "pre-eminent" "maker"; what "goodness" and "power" are, and that a hierarchy
exists; that his maker is “he”), while still other details of the world he awakens into remain elusive and foreign. So the most painful gap—“who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not”—is impacted into things he can do (“sometimes went, and sometimes ran” [268] / “to speak I tried, and forthwith spake” [271]).

The reiteration of “knew not,” “how may I know,” “happier than I know” is countered by his pleading request to the “sun,” “earth,” and “fair creatures” to “tell, / Tell,” “Tell me”; the subtle shift from past to present tense (“knew not,” “how may I know”) suggests the currency of such doubts even now, when so many explanations have already been supplied by God and Raphael alike. In fact, Adam implicitly answers his own question—“Not of my self,” he asserts, “by some great maker then”—in a move that relinquishes claim to agency, divests him of his own materiality, spotlights his derivation from an “other,” and manages to suggest that he somehow does not even belong to himself (the syntax of “how came I thus” further privileges prior entities, subordinating “I” to the question of cause).

Not at all experiencing the satisfaction of careful, anticipatory holding.

Adam seems hardly able to describe his own emotional state. His most tortured articulation—“[I] feel that I am happier than I know”—communicates the extent of his confusion: bound to a hierarchical structure he doesn’t seem fully to understand, Adam nevertheless gives voice to his mood via a comparative rendered transparent by the very facts that he can access neither his own degree of happiness (I don’t know how happy I am, but I’m happier than that), nor find a way to describe that happiness without recourse to empty analogy. Indeed, Adam’s “feel” connotes something closer to “suspect” or “sense” than experience; “feel that I am happier” stops short of expressing actual, immediate emotion. And
even this muted feeling is ascribed to another ("how may I know him, how adore,
/ From whom I have that thus I . . . feel that I am happier than I know").

Preoccupied with knowledge, Adam longs to "know" his "pre-eminent," "great
maker," but in all the twists and turns of his efforts, "answer none returned."

The significance of this unreflecting landscape cannot be overstated.

Whereas Eve phrases her own curiosity in calmer terms, "much wondering where
/ And what I was . . . ," and follows the sound of water to the pool to receive
perfectly attuned "answering looks," Adam's strenuous call to the expansive
world receives "answer none." Unconcerned by her "unexperienced thought," Eve
seems content to allow her own investigations to lead her to answers, rather than
depending on her surroundings specifically to "tell" (this is not to suggest that Eve
is uninterested in the question of her origin, but that she trusts her ability to
discover on her own). Adam repeats his request to be told, and when "answer
none return[s]," feels himself "seized" (288) with a drowsiness that feels like
"passing to [his] former state insensible, and forthwith to dissolve" (290–91).

Where Eve finds a face that mirrors her spontaneous gestures and seems to her
full of understanding, its "sympathy and love" matching her own, Adam sees
nothing in the multifaceted world that either looks like him or looks back with the
response he so desires.

When the "answer" Adam seeks does at last come to him, that arrival is
complicated by what Winnicott would call God's "impingement" on Adam's
developing sense of himself. First tantalized with a "dream" 15 that reveals to him
"the garden of bliss, thy seat prepared" (299) and renders everything Adam has
seen thus far "scarce pleasant" (306), a dream that offers "fairest fruit that hung
to the eye," "tempting" him and "stirr[ing] . . . sudden appetite / To pluck and eat"
(307–9), Adam awakens to a reality immediately situated in terms of both God’s prior authority and a prohibition that promises limitation, danger, even death:

Rejoicing, but with awe

In adoration at his feet I fell

Submiss: he reared me, and Whom thou sought’st I am,

Said mildly, author of all this thou seest

Above, or round about thee or beneath.

This Paradise I give thee, count it thine

To till and keep, and of the fruit to eat:

But of the tree whose operation brings

Knowledge of good and ill, which I have set

The pledge of thy obedience and thy faith,

... shun to taste,

And shun the bitter consequence: for know,

The day thou eat’st thereof, my sole command

Transgressed, inevitably thou shalt die;

From that day mortal, and this happy state

Shalt loose, expelled from hence into a world

Of woe and sorrow. (8.314–33)

In the pleasing “dream,” God tells Adam, “called by thee I come” (298), establishing a causal connection between Adam’s desire for him and his presence on earth, granting priority to Adam and Adam’s “call.” When Adam wakes, God says instead, “Whom thou sought’st I am”; this works to reverse the
sequence, so that God's presence stands as prior and not necessarily in
response to Adam's search. All that Adam has seen around him, on earth and in
the garden, becomes attached to this powerful other; God "give[s]" it to him as if
in an act of supreme and incomparable generosity, but with one command to "till
and keep," and a second that is, counter-factually, called the "sole command." 16
The selfhood, too, that Adam so longed to "know" and understand diminishes in
the face of this other: God can declare "I am," where Adam could only ask "who
[he] was" 17; Adam's "not of my self" becomes God's "I am . . . author of all this."
Far from Winnicott's omnipotent infant creating a world there to be found, Adam's
desires are met by temptation and prohibition, omnipotence and prior claims. And
even more mindbending, in my view, are God's statements concerning
knowledge. The tree of "Knowledge of good and ill" seems to represent the very
thing Adam so wished for ("how may I know"!) yet becomes the pledge of his
"obedience and . . . faith" precisely in his refusal of its desirability; at the same
time, God exhorts him to "know" that, should he "eat st thereof," he will
transgress, die, become mortal, be expelled from happiness and learn "woe and
sorrow"—a series of threats that Adam, in his "newborn," pure state, cannot
possibly "know." 18 How to "know," and avoid knowledge, at once?

The collocation in this speech of delay, deferral—Adam has to wait to get
a response—and a withholding other whose interaction with the self is marked by
"rigid interdiction[s]" (8.334) reflects Winnicott's theory that the failure of good
mirroring constitutes an "impingement" on the infant's still-vulnerable sense of
identity, resulting in the development of a "false self" whose function is "to hide
the True Self, which it does by compliance with environmental demands" ("Ego
Distortion" 147). 19 According to Winnicott, "the mother who is not good enough is
not able to implement the infant’s omnipotence, and so she repeatedly fails to meet the infant gesture; instead she substitutes her own gesture which is to be given sense by the compliance of the infant” (145). Adaptation to the infant’s earliest needs, Winnicott proposes, allows the mother to know “how to hold her infant, so that the infant starts by existing and not by reacting” (148). When Adam “springs” up and looks around him and at himself, then—his first and perhaps only spontaneous act in this scene—he encounters, first, “answer none,” and second, not an other who “meets” this gesture in a way that acknowledges or even allows for “omnipotence,” but rather couches the titles of “First man” and “First father” in the precedent of God’s authorship; immediately, Adam must react to an alternately unresponsive and imposing environment that makes “commands” and threatens him with death. From his initially eager spontaneity, testing his body, his sight, his voice (“sensori-motor aliveness,” in Winnicott’s terminology [149]). Adam gradually becomes rigid and anxious. Over and against the energy he displays in his first moments is a sense of hopeless stasis; he says that he “strayed” in the place where he “first drew air,” as if he could somehow move without getting anywhere, and his language is often static and repetitious.

An orthodox reading of the two scenes of “birth” tends to argue that Eve’s experience is “subordinate” (McColley 88) to Adam’s because Eve, bending down to look into the pool, sees a double reflection—herself, and an inferior “sky,” mediated by water—while Adam stands up, looks up at heaven, and away from himself. As McColley writes, “Eve does not have Adam’s sureness and alacrity of recognition or his capacity for reasoning straight to first causes”; “Adam’s responses are more direct” (89). Froula, similarly, contends that Adam “leap[s] upright to apostrophize a transcendent sky while Eve, supine, gazes into
a "sky" that is to Adam's as her knowledge is to his—not the thing itself but a watery reflection" (330), and quotes Maureen Quilligan's argument that Eve's "another sky" is "secondary, mediated, reflective" (Quilligan 228). But Eve's (and Milton's) "another" seems both deliberate and portentous; hers is not a lesser heaven, but simply one more, a different, "other" sky—which is, moreover, "pure as heaven." 20 Even more crucial, I believe, is what Eve finds in her "other" sky (itself representative of what Peter Rudnytsky terms "the ambience of maternal care under good-enough conditions"): an experience of mirroring and holding that "instills a sense of genuine relatedness that can abide throughout life" (Psychoanalytic Vocation 80). Adam's exchange with a pre-emptive and prohibitive parent-figure constitutes what Rudnytsky calls an "authoritarian" interaction, as opposed to Eve's "dialectical" exchange of "answering looks" (126). 21 In Winnicott's own words, Eve's exchange of looks serves as a compacted experience of "trust and reliability [in] a potential space," in which Eve can enjoy "confidence" in the return of the face she looks for in the pool, and this space "can become an infinite area of separation, which the baby, child, adolescent, adult may creatively fill with playing." Adam, on the other hand, receives a kind of "impersonal management" ("The Place Where We Live" 108; italics in original.) Where Eve finds "maternal waters" that give her back to herself, "Adam, by contrast, is a motherless child" (Froula 330).

Returning now to Eve's "reproduction" of Adam's first words to her in her speech in book 4, we can observe the effect of this "failure" of Adam's first object-relationship when he turns to the one promised him as the "image" he sought and the companion God could never himself be:

    Return, fair Eve;
Whom flyest thou? whom thou flyest, of him thou art,
His flesh, his bone; to give thee being I lent
Out of my side to thee, nearest my heart,
Substantial life, to have thee by my side
Henceforth an individual solace dear;
Part of my soul I seek thee, and thee claim
My other half. (4.481–88)

Adam is full of tensions here—erotic, ideological, ontological. He stammers (as did God in Eve’s earlier reportage?), rearranging his syntax in his distress and disillusionment. Eve, once again, is in motion: she turns, she “flyest”; sturdy Adam does not fly. And he objectifies himself, referring to himself in the third person, so that even in this moment where his connection to, and creation of, Eve seems of paramount significance to him, his language distances her: “His flesh, his bone.” Though this biblical diction seems to set him in a smoother groove, Adam settles into first-person, he cannot negotiate the disjunction between what he anticipated from Eve’s creation—“an individual solace dear”—and the reality of her fleeing from him; the paradox of “individual” perfectly joins Adam’s anxiety: a literal “part” of him, she was to have been undividable, yet she is already so clearly individuated. Adam’s way of phrasing Eve’s existential debt to him (“of him thou art”), which sounds similar to his way of articulating his own debt to God (“Not of my self”), signals his claim of both causal and material connection to Eve, but that claim is complicated by worry about losing her even before it can be asserted. His curious verb “lent” maintains the possibility that Adam might need to re-claim the stuff of his being that was meant, in giving Eve “Substantial life,” also to provide Adam with “solace” (one thinks of Eve’s
"answering looks of sympathy"), a companion taken "Out of [his] side," but "to have . . . by [his] side." His short speech orbits around paradoxes, packed with words connoting separation and connection, substance and division, as the rib that grows to become Eve represents a missing "half" that Adam "claim[s]" even as he "Seize[s]" it.

But it is Adam's first speech of the poem, I think, that reveals the full brunt of the impinging effect of his initial experience with God. Here we see the degree to which Adam puzzles over an existence of which he has, of yet, little practical understanding, in intensely dichotomized terms that attempt to structure, contain, make safe. Throughout the passage, Adam's language conveys both his effort to settle into a dual role—created by God, protector and educator of Eve (a dilemma Eve seems wholly not to share)—and the profundity of his love for Eve.

The speech, which I will quote in full, begins with a redundancy that is simultaneously a proliferation:

Sole partner and sole part of all these joys,
Dearer thyself than all: needs must the power
That made us, and for us this ample world
Be infinitely good, and of his good
As liberal and free as infinite.
That raised us from the dust and placed us here
In all this happiness, who at his hand
Have nothing merited, nor can perform
Aught whereof he hath need, he who requires
From us no other service than to keep
This one, this easy charge, of all the trees
In Paradise that bear delicious fruit
So various, not to taste that only tree
Of knowledge, planted by the tree of life,
So near grows death to life, whate'er death is,
Some dreadful thing no doubt; for well thou know'st
God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree,
The only sign of our obedience left
Among so many signs of power and rule
Conferred upon us, and dominion given
Over all other creatures that possess
Earth, air, and sea. Then let us not think hard
One easy prohibition, who enjoy
Free leave so large to all things else, and choice
Unlimited of manifold delights:
But let us ever praise him, and extol
His bounty, following our delightful task,
To prune these growing plants, and tend these flowers,
Which were it toilsome, yet with thee were sweet. (4.411–39)

Eve is the one thing in Eden that Adam knows he has had any part in making, so that she is indeed a “part” of his “soul.” At the same time, “sole partner” suggests torn allegiances, as if he must insist on singleness—the use of “sole”—even while registering multiplicity—the repetition of “sole,” the division implicit in “partner.” It is as if he needs to recuperate something—his missing “part”—and by making “all these joys” wholly comprised by the one sole part to whom his speech is addressed, he places Eve before “all things else.”
Inherent in this move, I think, is Adam's need to contain the frightening "all"-ness of the garden, subordinating it to Eve's singularity, both in herself and in her relation to him. His speech burgeons with doctrinal edicts and paradoxical phrases, suggesting that even as Adam has internalized God's pronouncements, he has not been so successful in making sense of the rules. Thus he can call the world "ample," God "infinitely good," "liberal," and "free," but he has no point of reference by which to understand fully these implicit comparisons. The passage's many wrenched pairings—"easy charge, "easy prohibition," "delightful task"—suggest almost an unconscious protestation against his parent's "rigid" stipulations. And this language suggests as well that Adam is not at all sure of what his purpose in "Paradise" really is. There is a kind of lurking emptiness, a fear that he is unable to meet the honors placed on him. For "all this happiness," they have "nothing merited, nor can perform / Aught whereof he hath need." Happiness is a function of required merit, needed performance; the enjambment on "he who requires" seems to fill Adam's mouth with God's terrifying—if only because not entirely consistent—demands. His ending phrases, the soothing "let us not think hard," the celebratory "let us ever praise him," seem as much directed at himself as at an Eve assumed to need such instruction.

God requires of them "no other service than to keep / This one, this easy charge, of all the trees . . .," and just as in Adam's speech in book 8 God both commands him to "keep" the garden as well as to keep his pledge by avoiding the tree of knowledge, these lines, initially at least, seem to explain that the one "service" is to garden, not "not to taste." Thus what they are commanded to do seems to become dangerously connected with the thing they are not to do, and Adam must work hard to insist on how "not hard" these fine distinctions are to
decipher. He protects himself, rhetorically, by switching suddenly to second person at the end of this passage’s first section: “for well thou know’st,” he addresses Eve, “God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree . . . .” While both are implicated in the service of keeping this “easy charge,” Adam won’t let himself be seen as needing a reminder of the drastic consequences—particularly, I think, since his doctrinal role vis-à-vis Eve pushes him into an unshaken, nearly sermonic tone. The warning seems unprovoked by anything prior to it in the speech, or by Eve, and one wonders if it is the frustration of not being able to perform anything for God that produces the exhortation. And the enjambment on “let us not think hard” conveys how very hard it is indeed to “keep” in mind all that he has been instructed by God, to determine who he is, to understand his relationship to Eve (and does he wish he could just stop thinking?). The “prohibition,” flanked by the doubly contradictory “easy” and “enjoy,” looms large in Adam’s mind.

The “only” among the “all,” in the garden, in his life, in his relations to God and Eve, seems not only awkward but troubling to Adam. In “Free leave so large to all things else, and choice / Unlimited of manifold delights,” the doublings of language constructs an overwhelmed self, faced with plentiful, various delights he is free to choose, but in an unlimitation that is not only marked by the “prohibition” but also, in itself, frighteningly multiple. (Note that after “Unlimited of manifold delights,” a line that proliferates, Adam is back to his rousing rhetoric, “let us ever praise him, and extol / His bounty, following our delightful task.” Mixed in with the diction of obedience is a twisting of “delight”—it applies to the “manifold” garden, it applies to the “one” charge not to sample the garden in its entirety, which would bring him back to the death he cannot understand.)
What's more, Adam seems deeply uncertain about his own dominant position. The many words denoting status and privilege are diluted by the passive constructions in which Adam uses them. Adam receives his position; it is "given," "conferred upon" him. He speaks not of a tangible "power," but the distance of "signs," mere representations that do not convey actual control. Obedience itself becomes but a sign (notice that in the progression of "God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree, / The only sign of our obedience left," Adam seems to conflate pleasure and punishment: the sign should be not to taste of that tree). Perhaps most striking is Adam's use of "left," a zeugma that both gives rise to a sense that not eating of the forbidden tree is only the last of a series of "signs of our obedience," and pushes forward into "signs of power and rule," so that Adam seems to experience himself as having only one sign of obedience "left" among too much freedom. He's lost a kind of safety that structure produces, and seems to exhibit a confusion over the rules (I felt safer when you protected me more, I don't understand this one thing I can't do). In the face of paradox Adam's language clamps down again; he and Eve are, implicitly, creatures surrounded by "other creatures," and those other "possess / Earth, air, and sea." Where does he fit in? What does he have "power and rule" over, if "other creatures" "possess" every realm but heaven? Adam doesn't seem prepared to answer, or even to ask, such questions.

It comes as little surprise, then, that at the last Adam as much as admits he finds his one service a bore, or that his way of referring to the growth of the garden reflects his emotional distance from it (waving it off as "these growing plants," "these flowers"). He has been hedging this way throughout the speech, and the conditional syntax of his phrasing ("Which were it toilsome, yet with thee
were sweet”) does little to mitigate the declaration. But there is a true sweetness
in this world of inscrutable gods and incomprehensible threats of death: Eve is
the one thing in Eden Adam can be soothed by. Thus he frames this wrenched
speech with tributes to her.

Adam’s obsessiveness over work—or, to put it another way, over not
having enough to do—resurfaces further on in this conversation with Eve.
Comparing himself and Eve to the “other creatures [who] all day long / Rove idle
unemployed, and less need rest,” Adam proclaims that “Man hath his daily work
of body or mind / Appointed, which declares his dignity” (4.616–19). But it is not
at all certain that Adam is convinced either of his own “daily work” and “dignity,”
or that the other creatures are indeed “idle.” Obsessed with “signs,” Adam seems
to require “the hour / Of night” and the sight of “all things now retired to rest” to
“Mind” him (remind?) to go to sleep (610–12); similarly, at the “first approach of
light, [they] must be risen, / And at [their] pleasant labour” (624–25). That labor,
however, seems to elude Adam: the “branches overgrown” again each morning
“mock our scant manuring, and require / More hands than ours to lop their
wanton growth”; “Those blossoms,” and “those dropping gums . . . lie bestrewn
unsightly and unsmooth,” asking “riddance” (627–32). His language connotes a
messy, unsightly, misunderstood nature verging on uncontrollable growth, one
whose constant need to be pruned mocks his every effort. Adam, moreover, is
the only creature watched by God; he has “the regard of heaven on all his ways; / While
other animals unactive range, / And of their doings God takes no account” (620–22). Thus Adam suffers under the pressure of surveillance by God, while
the other animals paradoxically “range” unactively. What Adam disparages in
those other animals seems in fact unthinkably good: they (and also Eve?) do
exactly what they need in order to live their lives—unto themselves, un-anxious, perfectly attuned to each creature’s individual nature.

II

Nowhere are the psychical, philosophical differences between Adam and Eve more apparent than in their many conversations throughout *Paradise Lost*. In book 5, they engage in a dialogue whose striking symmetry seems to lull critics into reading over it as an instance of the pair’s mutual understanding and help: Adam calls Eve to prepare the bower for the entrance of Raphael, and Eve apparently responds with gracious hospitality. But close attention to line-by-line variations in their corresponding speeches reveals, once again, Eve’s and Adam’s very different, even incompatible, ways of perceiving themselves and their lives in Eden. This “argument” is less a conflict in angry words than a comment by Eve on Adam’s vocabulary whereby she corrects Adam linguistically as well as managing to articulate an ethic untouched by Adam’s nervous awareness of hierarchy and decree. The passage involves two short speeches, thirteen lines by Adam to ten in Eve’s reply; each speech also divides into two halves of subtly different focus, the content of the first six lines of Adam’s speech corresponding to the last five of Eve’s, and his second half to her first. Eve’s reply thus constitutes the literal and figurative inversion of Adam’s “pronouncement.”

As “the mounted sun / Shot down direct his fervid rays” with “more warmth than Adam needs,” as Adam sits accordingly “in the door . . . Of his cool bower” (5.299–302), he soon discerns the “shape” (309) of Raphael approaching through the garden. Immediately, despite being too hot to move, Adam calls out to Eve in
language marked by movement.

Haste hither Eve, and worth thy sight behold
Eastward among those trees, what glorious shape
Comes this way moving; seems another morn
Risen on mid-noon; some great behest from heaven
To us perhaps he brings, and will vouchsafe
This day to be our guest. But go with speed,
And what thy stores contain, bring forth and pour
Abundance, fit to honour and receive
Our heavenly stranger; well we may afford
Our givers their own gifts, and large bestow
From large bestowed, where nature multiplies
Her fertile growth, and by disburdening grows
More fruitful, which instructs us not to spare. (5.308–20)

The alliterative, rhyming quality of his first line—“Haste hither Eve, and worth thy sight behold”—runs the words into one other in agitation, as if the vision of the angel making his way through the vines and flowers excites in Adam awe but also apprehension, and impels him quickly to action. He directs himself at once toward Eve; she is the only other person with whom Adam can share this experience, but also, perhaps, she is the one to ground him, to contain the range of feelings elicited by the approach of Raphael. Adam’s first seven lines bristle with motion: “haste” (significantly, it seems, this is the first word he utters, even before Eve’s name) is followed by “comes,” “moving,” “risen,” “brings,” “speed.”

This first line exemplifies the kind of language to which Adam resorts whenever “heavenly” issues prey on him. Infused with the language of doctrine,
and confused by his position in the new world, he seems here particularly dependent on grandiloquent imagery, on words that assign hierarchies and fix the human couple and earth itself on a level beneath heavenly bodies. Preoccupied about his own, as well as Eve’s, value in relation both to heaven and to all the other creatures of Eden, Adam identifies what he sees in terms of its “worth,” a word that seems to suggest more a concern over their worthiness to witness this “sight” than any doubt about its value to them. Then, in the repetition of words prefixed by “be” (“behold,” “bestow,” “behest”), he compulsively maintains the chain of being by which Raphael is ostentatiously idealized as “glorious shape” and “another morn.” The authoritative command Adam imagines Raphael might bring is vaguely described as “some great behest,” which “to us” (he hopes), “perhaps” (he can hardly allow himself such hope), “he brings, and will vouchsafe / This day to be our guest”—whatever comes from heaven can only be thought of in terms of special favors, condescensions granted.

Adam’s language works into a grand scale—“what glorious shape / Comes this way moving; seems another morn / Risen on mid-noon”—that indicates his awareness of, his dependence on, cosmological spatial relations as the point of reference for his metaphors. Attached to the rhythm of dawn/gardening, nightfall/sleep, Adam likens Raphael’s brilliance to another morning rising against the rigorous landscape of daily work, and he responds with characteristic alacrity. At the same time, Adam’s perception is imprecise: as he tracks Raphael’s progress from east to west, he determines disembodied “shape[s],” light, correspondences, a near-epiphanical apparition “moving” as if by supernatural power—but he cannot seem to “see,” to conceive of, particulars. With an operatic sweep (and as if by asserting his authority over Eve he could assuage his own
anxiety over his position in relation to heaven), he commands Eve to "go with speed . . . bring forth and pour / Abundance." His own verb makes what she will "bring" the lesser earthly repetition of the "great behest" Raphael "brings" from heaven.

When Adam says "stores," the middle word at the midpoint of his speech, he seems to refer to material saved in a particular way for a specific future purpose. His assumption that Eve has a multiplicity of "stores" articulates the extent of his unfamiliarity with the true nature of the plants they tend or how best to keep them (as Eve will later show, "small store will serve . . . save what by frugal storing firmness gains / To nourish, and superfluous moist consumes"). Nor does Adam seem able to identify what "stores" would consist of (in contrast, again, Eve will go on to enumerate this very thing); as if to say, "what[ever] thy stores contain, bring forth. . . ." he divides their labor and protects himself from too-close contact with the stuff of a garden about which he feels so ambivalently. At the same time, Adam shows himself to be prone to a hoarding instinct at odds with his own assertion of "abundance." Unable to give himself over to the pleasures of nature in Eden, Adam needs "stores," wants to ensure that they've saved and spared—so that, now, they can seem generous to their heavenly visitor. Over and against Adam's proclivity elsewhere to generalize into "shapes" and "large" and "some great," he can't trust in the "store" that is everywhere around him.

Thus Adam labels the garden abstractly as "those trees," "fertile growth," "large gifts," and his choice of the word "disburdening" reflects a complicated perception of Eden's bounty (while Adam speaks in terms of burdens, of the need to relieve a heaviness, Eve will describe what "ripe for use hangs of the stalk").
The awed tone with which Adam began his speech becomes edged by an almost didactic quality. His relationship to Eden seems a nervously transactional one: at last he can put his job as master-gardener to some kind of use—and so he sees the garden’s growth in terms of how it stands up to heavenly glories: it is “fit to honour and receive,” it “instructs us not to spare.” Adam doesn’t neglect the opportunity to express the importance of teaching and learning, even in this excited moment of his new role as host to a divine lunch guest. What’s more, Adam’s economical character keeps him interested in profit—nature “by disburdening grows / More fruitful”—so that the surety of future gain establishes a rationale for “large bestow[ing].” His claim that “well we may afford / Our givers their own gifts” signals again the worry about not being able to afford (well they can afford this noon, but not yesterday? not tomorrow?). This fear carries over into the fact that Adam thinks of nature’s growth not as in any way his own, but first as Eve’s “stores,” then—finally denying “stores” to her, as well—as their givers’ “own gifts.” Nature becomes valuable to him once it can be used as a symbol of a right relationship to God. The second half of Adam’s speech turns on muscular, claustrophobic language that proceeds by repetition (“givers . . . gifts,” “large bestow / . . . large bestowed,” “growth . . . grows,”) as it reiterates its doctrinal lessons.

Eve, more interested in the texture of life in Eden than in Adam’s epistemological abstractions, takes up Adam’s contentious word “stores” in its singular form, and in so doing, she both corrects his mistaken view of what sort of storage is necessary in the garden, as well as counteracts what must seem to her his unwarranted thrift:

Adam, earth’s hallowed mould,
Of God inspired, small store will serve, where store,
All seasons, ripe for use hangs on the stalk;
Save what by frugal storing firmness gains
To nourish, and superfluous moist consumes:
But I will haste and from each bough and brake,
Each plant and juiciest gourd will pluck such choice
To entertain our angel guest, as he
Beholding shall confess that here on earth
God hath dispensed his bounties as in heaven. (5.321–30)

Eve knows not “stores” but “storing,” and the gerund connotes the continuity of her interaction with, the intimacy of her knowledge of, the garden she tends. While Adam continually directs himself outward, to “there” where sights are beheld, Eve is very much centered “here on earth.” She immediately directs attention back to earth, away from heaven and angels. While venerating Adam to “hallowed,” reverend status, she simultaneously names earth as that which makes holy, not God (Adam is first “earth’s hallowed mould,” “Of God inspired” second). Whatever can be found on earth is sacred in its own right. Her speech thus posits earthly equivalencies: where Adam calls to her to join him in witnessing the otherworldly “glorious shape” which approaches from afar, Eve addresses Adam first, in a conversation meant to call attention to the physical realities of life in Eden. Adam’s “morn” is Eve’s “all seasons,” hers implying a notion of time connected to the rhythms of growth, blossoming, and ripeness, rather than the strict schedule of the work day. Her language describes a slow particularity, a suspension in the sensing of things, in their ripeness and “stalks,” in the sight of them hanging. Where Adam expels “Haste hither Eve,” Eve speaks
methodically: "Adam" is followed by a comma, and her first line is end-stopped. The exquisite pattern of the passage even rhymes Adam’s "behold," a word whose every connotation suggests consecration, with Eve’s "mould," which cannot help but unite Adam’s shape with the very spoilage that is both the manifestation of abundant life on earth and the point of Eve’s argument.

To Adam things "seem." To Eve they have "use," substance. She ignores Adam’s focus on "some great behest from heaven" to explain the practicality of storage, and her words have tactile weight: "store," "save," "firmness," "gain." She does not need nature’s fruitfulness (or Adam) to "instruct" her of anything; she already knows. For Adam the hours are signposts by which he checks the passing of the day, and for all the hours that pass he cannot seem to move any closer to the materiality of what he performs than "what thy stores contain," or "Our givers their own gifts"—he does not even take possession of what he tends. Eve is the true greenthumb; the action contained in her language does not describe some distanced object, but derives from the actuality of having done something. Her kinetic energy is natural, not forced. Thus she can emphasize the body, citing the salutary, "nourishing" value of fruit in the garden.

The second half of Eve’s speech comes abruptly, even defiantly. Adam has said, "But go with speed," and she responds in kind: "But I will haste . . ." Adam’s conjunction means "therefore," "so," but also "nevertheless," registering a pull in two directions—the agitated immobility of realizing heaven has conceded to be their guest and his anxious attempt at largesse. Eve mimics his structure, shifting direction at "But" just as she finally agrees to "haste," some eighteen lines after Adam first called to her. If she seems to say, I’ll do this thing you ask despite myself, the detail of her subsequent description of what she will in fact
haste to do ("from each bough and brake, / Each plant and juiciest gourd will
pluck such choice") suggests more powerfully, I'll do this thing you ask my own
way, on my own terms, because I've decided to do it. She does not let him forget,
therefore, her knowledge of the singularity of earth's copious flourishing. She
refines Adam's sweeping "pour" to the more onomatopoeic "pluck." She gathers
in his "abundance" to the thoroughness of "each," as if to drive home her
closeness with the trees, the plants, the gourds of Eden (and also, perhaps, to
intimate she would like to stay away from the bower for as long as it would take
her to comb the garden's vegetation!). She draws in the biblical duo of "honour
and receive" to her own world where she is in control, where she "entertain[st]."
"Here on earth" is Eve's totem line, what "vouchsafe" or "disburden" means to
Adam. And in perhaps her most stunning transvaluation, Eve demystifies Adam's
"heavenly stranger" by her own "angel guest": his defines hierarchy ("heavenly"),
hers a difference in kind ("angel"), emphasizing substance; his is an unknown (a
stranger might be unwelcome, threatening), while "guest" focuses implicitly on
Eve's confident hospitality and an unthreatened sense of Raphael's relation to
them.

The two sections of Eve's short speech reflect the dichotomy of her life in
Eden: a self defined by her own spontaneous interests, separate from the
schema Adam seems so dependent upon, and motivated by what intrinsically
pleases her without influence from Adam, the angels, God, or even Satan; and a
self she is continually reminded she is supposed (indeed was created) to be. The
thin hem between these two realms gives rise to conflicts Eve tries to express,
and resolve in momentary but certainly significant ways, through her language.
Even in this second section, corresponding as it does to Adam's reverent call to
action, she does not bother with Raphael or heaven until the last three lines, and
even then the mention comes only in terms of what the angel will have to
"confess" about earth. It is as if by no one's intent (no one in "charge," that is)
Eve has transformed earth into a fantastic place to be experienced and enjoyed
as a thing in itself, and not because it is mimetic of heaven (the trace of "another
sky" seems potent here). "God," in her final line (and note that Eve names God
twice, Adam not at all, almost as if he devolves into his rhetoric of shapes and
behests and economical transactions to such a point that he can only speak of
"heaven"), has to do with dispensing bounties "here on earth . . . as in heaven,"
making the similitude explicit. "Bounties" is Eve's word (deliberately pluralized?),
"spare" is Adam's; Eve's "dispensed" suggests wide dispersal of those bounties,
where Adam speaks in terms of "afford," of "gifts" that must be returned to the
"givers." And Eve's final repetition of Adam, the uptake of "beholding" in the
penultimate line, completely reverses the direction of admiration—from earth to
heaven in his speech, heaven to earth in hers. Eve's form of the word, again, is
gerundival, as if she would hold the angel in a continued state of perceiving
Eden's bounties for as long as he remains on earth.

Raphael's presence this noon means to Adam that heaven has deigned to
lower itself to earth, and he offers up nature as a gesture of giving back to
heaven what he owes. Eve takes that nature and restores it to its correct
position—on earth—and herself concedes to be the host of heaven.

The theological reasons that Eve separates from Adam prior to the fall in
book 9 have been amply discussed. But religion alone does not seem fully to
illuminate the complex psychic dynamic between Eve and Adam that works to precipitate the tension of this scene. A fundamental emotional difference becomes operative in the interaction between the pair: at a basic psychic level unaddressed by ideology, Eve seems to want to garden alone in order to be alone, while Adam tries anxiously to hold her to him with all the wrong language\(^{30}\) (indeed, he appears more worried about the effect of Satan on their relationship—that his life with Eve could be disrupted—than about disobedience to God). Eve’s desire to separate provides one measure of the success of her early “mirror” experience—her “capacity to be alone.”

Proposing to Adam that they “divide our labours” (9.214), Eve appeals to the ethic of work he has already espoused, in just the sort of language we are used to from Adam:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the work under our labour grows} \\
\text{Luxurious by restraint; what we by day} \\
\text{Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind,} \\
\text{One night or two with wanton growth derides} \\
\text{Tending to wild. (9.208–12)}
\end{align*}
\]

So “Adamic” is this language (she speaks of “unearned” suppers [225]), one wonders if Eve’s relation to the garden can have altered so dramatically. It seems more likely, though, that Eve is attempting to persuade Adam to separate by rallying to her side a rhetoric he is likely to comprehend. And a more subtle purpose becomes clear as Eve proceeds. While Adam will go off “where choice / Leads” him (214–15), Eve intends to “find what to redress till noon” (219). “What” suggests, certainly, that Eve will locate another part of the garden or other plants in need of tending; but the indeterminacy of the word also hints that she may not
specifically garden at all, or at least not in the way Adam, with his more structured notions of labor, might conceive of it. "What" Eve does till noon may involve, in more psychological terms, being alone, in her way, according to her manner of communicating with a natural world to which she is so deeply attuned. It seems interesting, too, that Eve makes use of emblematic plant imagery to describe what Adam might do while gardening alone: "whether to wind / The woodbine round this arbour, or direct / The clasping ivy where to climb" (9.215–17). It is Adam who "wind[s]" and "direct[s]" these symbols of "true love," Adam who will concern himself with the entangling of marriage, "while [Eve] / in yonder spring of roses . . ." (217–18).

Adam's answer, then, though reprising (fittingly enough, it seems) the language and ethic of purpose, aim, employment that Eve initiates, fails to acknowledge the legitimacy of, even the possibility of, a more fundamental desire to be alone:

Well hast thou motioned, well thy thoughts employed
How we might best fulfil the work which here
God hath assigned us, nor of me shalt pass
Unpraised: for nothing lovelier can be found
In woman, than to study household good,
And good works in her husband to promote. (9.229–34)

Appealing to two doctrines Eve has said nothing about—Christian works and wifely duty—Adam goes too far, and makes matters worse by suggesting that because of the "foe" they've been warned about, Eve should "leave not the faithful side / That gave thee being, still shades thee and protects" (265–66). His use of "shades" seems especially vexed (and vexing?)—giving overdetermined
voice to the problematic of Adam's wish to be a loving protector of Eve and the fact that doctrinal schemas grant to Eve no clarity, light, visibility, of her own, but place her constantly in Adam's "shadow." It comes as no surprise, then, when Eve responds "As one who loves, and some unkindness meets" (though still "With sweet austere composure" [271]).

Winnicott theorizes that a "capacity to be alone" originates in the experience of having had "the chance through good-enough mothering to build up a belief in a benign environment," which, because it produces "the existence of a good object in the psychic reality of the individual," in turn allows for "relative freedom from persecutory anxiety" ("The Capacity to be Alone" 32). Eve's answer to Adam's worry that the "malicious foe," "Envyng our happiness, and of his own / Despairing, seeks to work us woe and shame / By sly assault" (9.253–56) exhibits her own ability "to feel confident about the present and the future" (32):

That such an enemy we have, who seeks
Our ruin, both by thee informed I learn,
And from the parting angel overheard.

but that thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt
To God or thee, because we have a foe
May tempt it, I expected not to hear.

His fraud is then thy fear, which plain infers
Thy equal fear that my firm faith and love
Can by his fraud be shaken or seduced;
Thoughts which how found they harbour in thy breast[?] (274–89)
Adam's answer to this accusation, by contrast, is a study in improvisation. Claiming that to be "tempted" is to be tainted (not at all what he counseled Eve after her dream\(^ {31} \)), his language pounds with repetition, as if to compensate for worry about his own ability to withstand temptation, as if uncertain of his position:

Not diffident of thee do I dissuade
Thy absence from my sight, but to avoid
The attempt it self, intended by our foe.
For he who tempts, though in vain, at least asperses
The tempted with dishonour foul, supposed
Not incorruptible of faith, not proof
Against temptation. (9.293–99; italics added)

And though he has no way of knowing the foe will not try to tempt them together, he asserts as such: "on us both at once / The enemy, though bold, will hardly dare" (303–4)—or, "daring, first on me the assault shall light" (305), which merely reinforces the ontological, moral hierarchy with which Eve must by now be tiresomely familiar; nor does Adam consider that he might be tempted alone. Next, he manages to communicate his own fear of being alone, projecting it onto Eve in the form of a desire to be seen in the act of virtue (which in itself records an anxiety that "virtue" is a performance, that it has no meaning, existence, value, without being "witnessed"\(^ {32} \): "I from the influence of thy looks receive / Access in every virtue, in thy sight / More wise, more watchful, stronger" (309–11). Finally, Adam seems to demand her love—"Why shouldst not thou like sense within thee feel / When I am present, and thy trial choose / With me, best witness of thy virtue tried" (315–17)—with a question that touchingly voices Adam's need for external approval.
Eve is at her most “Aeropagitican” in her response to this collocation—arguing for uncloistered virtue, for the need to “know” evil in order to judge and resist it, for the ability to choose (which is the foundation of reason), for not letting themselves be “sequester[ed]” (732). “How are we happy, still in fear of harm?” (9.326), she asks; “Frail is our happiness, if this is so, / And Eden were no Eden thus exposed” (9.340–1).³³ She exhibits what Milton calls in the tract “perpetuall progression” (739), a quality of both being and intellect, of keeping oneself on the move and in process, so as not to “sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.”³⁴ Not only does she insist on getting the last word in this dialogue (as she had also, in a rare instance, spoken first)—“Persisted, yet submiss, though last, replied” (9.377)—but the description of her separation from Adam unrolls with a sense of unbounded, self-directing, yet gentle and graceful movement. “[F]rom her husband’s hand her hand / Soft she withdrew” (9.385–86), the sequence of “her husband’s hand her hand” pressing them up against each other even as she seems to extract her hand, her very substance, from his. Her hand, and the withdrawing of it, are “soft,” her motion “light,” as if to signal some absence of anger, or to underline the fluidity of her transition from Adam to the natural world she so loves. Such transition is further eased by the subsequent comparisons: Eve is “like a wood-nymph light,” like an “Oread or dryad, or of Delia’s train” (386–87). But the similes do much more than emblemazte Eve’s moral condition. Embedded in the poetry here are choice and parallel, a principle of overlay and equivalence that Eve herself has embodied throughout the poem. Eve is “like a wood-nymph,” like an “oread or dryad, or of Delia’s trains”; she “surpasse[s]” (389) Delia, and seems “Likeliest” (394) “Pales, or Pomona” (393), “or to Ceres” (395; italics added throughout). What’s more, this succession of
possibilities resolves itself in a final simile that strongly reprises the impression that Eve parts from Adam not just temporarily, in order to garden more efficiently. She is “Likeliest” to “Pomona when she fled / Vertumnus, or to Ceres in her prime, / Yet virgin of Proserpina from Jove” (9.394–96; italics added). Via these images of female figures separate from male, it is as if Eve were getting away from Adam precisely in his “maleness,” or indeed from the anxious, hierarchical, restrictive, male realm that Adam, thus far, has inhabited. “In her prime” suggests that the “best” time for Ceres was when unencumbered by giving birth, a time when she was yet alone. So too for Eve.

Eve’s post-lapsarian soliloquy, so often cited as expression of her sinful, evil self-interest, articulates a more complex psychology of motive in which we re-encounter, as she grapples with the implications of having “eaten” and whether or not to divulge her secret to Adam, the many anxieties over love, knowledge, prohibition, blame, and hierarchy that life in Eden has produced. As she considers how to approach Adam, for instance, Eve makes evident a subtext that has shaded earlier conversations between the two of them:

And I perhaps am secret; heaven is high.
High and remote to see from thence distinct
Each thing on earth; and other care perhaps
May have diverted from continual watch
Our great forbider, safe with all his spies
About him. But to Adam in what sort
Shall I appear? (9.811–17)

The language of “continual watch,” “great forbider, safe with all his spies,” and
“to Adam in what sort” communicates an existence observed and constrained by male prohibitions, which come not only from the powers of heaven or from Adam’s acceptance of those powers, but also from Adam’s own psychological needs, imposed onto the Eve who is “part” of, yet often maddeningly unattached to him. But it has been Adam who worries most throughout the poem over being “watched” [35]; “I perhaps am secret” layers a present concern (to be hidden from, unseen by, God’s watchful eye) with a more epistemological possibility that Eve is herself a “secret”—no one has ever “seen” her “distinct[ly],” no one really knows her. It is as if Eve here articulates her observance of Adam’s anxiety over being exposed while simultaneously registering her own detachment from the vulnerability—as if the “continual watch” has always been on Adam, felt by Adam, reacted to by Adam. The line break in her question “But to Adam in what sort / Shall I appear?” (far from expressing the “tyranny,” “pride,” and self-congratulation C. S. Lewis claims for her in A Preface to “Paradise Lost” [121]), isolates a half-question—“Shall I appear?”—that suggests she may wonder if she should return to Adam at all, to his nervous efforts at “compliance” to God’s will. At the same time, the syntax of the question seems to push her “to Adam”; there is a sense of inevitability that she will return, and so must wonder what he will think of her now, how she will “appear” to him. A third reading leads into the second question of the passage: how she will present herself to him depends on whether she will “to him make known” (817) her change, or “keep the odds of knowledge” (820) to herself.

Eve’s language is elliptical and disjointed, as if she feels overloaded and afraid (surely the opposite of Fowler’s “trivial and inappropriate” [485])—not the smooth, fluid language of book 4—and question follows question as the
philosophical stakes of her new position appear to her in heightened intensity.\textsuperscript{36}
In the lines where Eve expresses perhaps most fully both her interest in eating the apple and the ramifications of that act, she wonders,

\begin{quote}
Shall I to him make known \\
As yet my change, and give him to partake \\
Full happiness with me, or rather not, \\
But keep the odds of knowledge in my power \\
Without copartner? (9.817–21)
\end{quote}

The punctuation here maintains giving and keeping in a steady untipped scale—nothing has yet been decided in regard to Adam and the apple.\textsuperscript{37} But the strange phrasing of “odds of knowledge” (why not simply “knowledge”? ) suggests what may be most significant to Eve about her “change.” The phrase echoes Eve’s previous use of the word in book 4, where she describes herself as “enjoying [Adam] / Pre-eminent by so much odds” (4.446–47). There, it is as if Eve would make Adam’s “superiority,” with which she is inculcated by the very language she awakens knowing how to speak, brought about by chance (and this articulated in her prelapsarian, “pure” state!). In the same way, then, knowledge as a thing-in-itself to be gained seems less important to Eve here than the leverage it will buy her, its empowerment specifically a bargaining one, rather than physical or sexual. Eve’s “copartner,” too, surely invokes Adam’s earlier contortion of “sole partner and sole part.” Adam seems to clamp down on singularity, in his hopeful attempts to find something like unity or singleness (and solidarity?) with Eve, along with his anxious awareness of both indebtedness to God and position over Eve; Eve’s language moves outward, containing within it the very doubling of partnership her new “knowledge” may help her to escape.
The forbidden tree is not the only realm of knowledge from which Eve has felt herself barred. She has already "argued" with Adam about how much she "knows" and whether she can make reasoned decisions (the quibble over "stores" in book 5, the struggle that begins book 9), and she has been told that Adam's position exceeds hers—that he was "formed . . . for God only, she for God in him" (4.297–99). Perhaps more fundamentally, though, Eve is denied continuity of memory and experience of her own nascent self, since not only was the intimacy of her pleasure at the pool invaded by the voice of God, but her memory ends in (even contains within it) Adam's attempt to meld her being with that part of himself he relinquished. A knowledge that goes beyond her intimate knowledge of the flowers and plants of Eden, therefore, may allow Eve to attain "full happiness," to close the gap that Adam, by the very strength of his need, constantly interjects between them, to have something Adam does not have. Happiness and knowledge replace giving and keeping in the scales of indecision.

The idea of being "Without copartner"—of being alone in her knowledge just as she was over "stores," but now with "power"—takes on a poignant significance as Eve's thinking proceeds: "keeping" to herself may "add what wants / In female sex, the more to draw his love, / And render me more equal" (9.821–23). Again the lines break forcefully, underscoring Eve's simultaneous want and lack: "the more to draw his love" conveys a desire less to control that love than to enjoy it as an equal (and not as a derivative "part"). At the same time the paradox of "more equal" confirms the impossibility of her position in the irrevocably hierarchical world of Eden, where Eve, man's "consort / Female for race" (4.529–30), can never be equal to Adam, "O man . . . in the image of God / Express" (4.524–28). ("More equal," too, I would argue, suggests not so much an
urge for outright domination over Adam as it does a more subtle wish to be, as it were, "less unequal.") And in her most strikingly "Aeropagitican" moment, Eve wonders whether "add[ing] what wants / In female sex" might have an even more radical impact: "and perhaps, / A thing not undesirable, sometime / Superior; for inferior who is free?" (9.823–25).38 So far from expressing egotistical concupiscence or lustful rebelliousness, Eve's language—the doubtful tone of "perhaps," the doubly negative (and thus mediated) "not undesirable," the sporadic temporality of "sometime," and the remarkable alliteration of "for inferior who is free"—approaches very cautiously, clearly hesitates around—and quickly retreats from—a possible shift in her hierarchical relationship with Adam. And it also condenses, I think, a hint that Eve's eating of the apple introduces into her life, into the garden, and into the poem, a radical possibility of freedom from heavenly, doctrinal inequivalences.

Does the poem make explicit "why" Eve follows the serpent, why she eats the fruit? Is it merely "Godhead" she thinks of? In the five lines that describe the precise moment of Eve's "fall," she is surrounded by female figures (earth and nature), and "she plucked, she ate" (9.781). The verbal construction clearly echoes Eve's dream in book 5, in which the mysterious angelic creature first ate the forbidden fruit: "he plucked, he tasted" (5.65). But yet another (male) character also plucks and eats fruit in a dream. In book 8, Adam tells Raphael:

    Each tree
    Loaden with fairest fruit that hung to the eye
    Tempting, stirred in me sudden appetite
    To pluck and eat . . . (8.306–9);

and Adam wakes to find "before [his] eyes all real" (8.310). In effect, Adam gets
to enjoy his dream. Why shouldn’t Eve? “Taste this,” Satan tells her, “and be henceforth among the gods / Thy self a goddess” (5.77–8). What seems specifically tempting to Eve is not to be worshipped as a goddess by those beneath her, but rather to be “equal,” to be a goddess among gods. Godhead, moreover (and “nor [is] godhead from her thought” [9.790]), carries certain appealing characteristics for Eve: her response to the serpent’s “seduction” ignores his appeals to her beauty and hone in instead on “Language of man pronounced” (9.553). Fowler concedes that Milton “is unusually favourable to Eve . . . in making her ask the serpent (shrewdly enough) how it came by its voice” (471). But he just as soon substitutes Milton’s “shrewd” Eve for the “Eve of Scriptural exegesis,” who is “carried away by words.” In fact, Eve speaks many times, before she eats the apple, of “reason” (9.738), “intellectual food” (9.768), and “elocution to the mute” (9.748).

In several papers written over a ten-year period, Winnicott discusses “antisocial” behavior as a liberatory expression of hope stemming from the emergence of the “true self,” as it breaks away from the “false self” ‘s despairing “compliance” to environmental pressures and impingements. Winnicott suggests that the “antisocial” act “stirs up the immediate environment,” and constitutes both an “urge to seek for a cure by new environmental provision” and a perception of “a new setting that has some elements of reliability” (“The Antisocial Tendency” 313–14). Eve’s act of eating the apple, by these terms, may be seen as both a reflection of environmental “failure” as well as a “hopeful moment” in which she imagines a world in which subordination to Adam might not obtain, in which a new kind of mutuality between them might become possible, and in which her existence might no longer be subordinated to her role
as “Mother of human race” (4.475), or mediated through Adam’s, “from whom [she] was formed” (4.441) and “Whose image” she is told she is (4.472).

Accordingly, her speech reflects the shifting quality of her experience of relatedness both to Adam and to God: first, the unsafe environment in which she feels watched by “spies” (even unfallen Adam worries over “the regard of heaven on all his ways” [4.620]), the flat articulation of her doctrinal inadequacy, and the sense of dispensability in a world where “another Eve” (828) might be created; second, her “resolve” not to be “more equal” but rather to have Adam “share with [her] in bliss or woe,” since “with him all deaths / I could endure, without him live no life” (830–33).

Many critics descend onto Eve in these lines with a particular need to portray a sexually manipulative, thoroughly evil Eve whose emotions must be attached either to theological sources or to criminal pathology—and to override the plangency of the poetry and the truth of its logic. Lewis declares that “the precise sin which Eve is now committing . . . is Murder” (121); Fowler, that Eve “is planning to kill Adam” (487); and McColley, that Eve “commits ‘parricide’” (205). But thinking about something does not mean performing the deed (Adam himself has already told Eve that thinking is not a sin, as she awakens from her restless sleep in book 5). Moreover, Adam has the choice to refuse the apple; if he does not, he effects his own death. Fowler turns Eve’s speculation about “draw[ing] more love” into “desire for sexual domination” (486) and Lewis’s Eve is the “rebel . . . already aiming at tyranny.” The language of such commentary resorts to aggressive and militaristic metaphors that seem designed both to contain “more love” (as if the potential engulfment were too threatening) and to harden the caution of “A thing not undesirable” into selfish ambition. Fowler also ignores the
philosophical implications of Eve’s question, “for inferior who is free?” If one believes this is “the first suggestion . . . that Eve feels any inadequacy” (486), one must also believe that Eve has swallowed whole a doctrine of her inferiority—which is itself a doctrinal understanding of Eve that the poem seems again and again to contest.

III

The spirit of revision evident throughout Paradise Lost becomes particularly visible in passages that juxtapose biblical or doctrinal language with Adam’s and Eve’s very individual ways of speaking, allowing the different—at times incompatible—ethics to play against one another. In addition to suggesting, once again, Milton’s own dialectical relationship with theology, Adam’s post-lapsarian “re-writing” of God’s curse on the human couple provides a powerful measure of a new sense of centered, optimistic selfhood and comfortable intimacy with which he seems to emerge from his experience of eating the apple.

The language of God’s sentence is sturdy and sure, its rhythm of repetition working to make its point quickly, to resist ambiguity and re-interpretation: “children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth,” “thou in sorrow / Shalt eat”; “Thou shalt not eat thereof,” “Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy life”; “Till thou return unto the ground, for thou / Out of the ground wast taken”; “dust thou art, and shalt to dust return.” It is a language of categories: “the woman,” “thy husband,” herb, thorns and thistles. It is language that separates judge from judged, the “I” of “I will greatly multiply,” of “I charged thee,” from a thudding line-by-line insistence on “thee,” “thou,” “thy,” “thine”: 
Thy sorrow I will greatly multiply
By thy conception; children thou shalt bring
In sorrow forth, and to thy husband's will
Thine shall submit, he over thee shall rule.

On Adam last thus judgment he pronounced.
Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife,
And eaten of the tree concerning which
I charged thee, saying: Thou shalt not eat thereof,
Cursed is the ground for thy sake, thou in sorrow
Shalt eat thereof all the days of thy life;
Thorns also and thistles it shall bring thee forth
Unbid, and thou shalt eat the herb of the field,
In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,
Till thou return unto the ground, for thou
Out of the ground wast taken, know thy birth,
For dust thou art, and shalt to dust return. (10.193–208)

In fifteen lines of speech, one stands out for containing no pronoun and for the strange enjambment that leaves syntax dangling: "And eaten of the tree concerning which." By conspicuously suspending the second-person address, the line poses the question of whether the "fall" is measured less by the actual eating of the fruit than by the accompanying failure to obey divine prohibition. The inversion of a hierarchy whereby Adam "hearken[s] to the voice of [his] wife" when he has been specifically "charged" with "Thou shalt not eat," is literally represented in the poetry by the succession of lines, as if God means to emphasize the fact that the voice (and persuasiveness) of Eve came before the
memory of God’s edict in the moment of Adam’s “mortal” decision. It will be exactly this “priority” of Eve—which God means to condemn—that Adam will acknowledge and privilege in his own, very different story of progeny, physical labor, and eventual death.41

It is difficult to imagine that the thick, dental language that closes God’s speech—“ground,” “birth,” “field,” “bread,” “sweat,” the doubling of “dust,” the pounding monosyllables—could open, or be opened, to interpretation, revision, improvisation. But interpret Adam does, in a stunning spin out and away from God’s curse that not only retrieves Eve from a fantasy of “seek[ing] death, or he not found, supply[ing] / With our own hands his office” (10.1001–2), but suggests the extent of his own evolution away from anxiety and compliance to doctrinal decree. When he invites Eve to “Remember” God’s “mild / And gracious temper” (1046–47), for instance, he has already deviated from the literal; “remember” invites inexactness (as in the way Adam and Eve themselves do not recall their first meeting just the same). Adam takes the words and rhetoric of God and applies them to his own ends, so that God’s terrible repetition of “dust” becomes Adam’s many pairings: “heard and judged” (1047), “wrath or reviling” (1048), the curiously paradoxical “mild / And gracious temper”—doublings that suggest a kind of possibility, a making of choices and priorities that becomes increasingly important for Adam as he reformulates his view of all the things in his world. He describes himself into a vision of their post-lapsarian lives whose relationship with nature is radically different from what it has been thus far; he recreates his relationship to God. For once, Adam does not sound anxious at all, but in control of both language and environment.

When Adam realizes the breach between their fearful expectation of
death—"we expected / Immediate dissolution, which we thought / Was meant by
dead at that day" (10.1048–50)—and the fact of their continued existence, he
seems to work into an even more revolutionary confidence that no
pronouncement is ever what it sounds to be. He is thus able to transform God’s
curse on Eve’s conception and childrearing into a simple matter of the local,
physical pain of childbirth, with a wonderfully exclamatory "lo" that contains the
revelatory force of memory and new thinking and measures his surprise at the
disjunction between God’s words and the “reality” he himself experiences:

[W]e expected
Immediate dissolution, which we thought
Was meant by death that day, when lo, to thee
Pains only in child-bearing were foretold,
And bringing forth, soon recompensed with joy,
Fruit of thy womb. (1048–53)

One wonders, initially, if Adam is confirming the curse on Eve. But in fact his
language divagates from God’s to such an extent that he seems to be describing
something wholly different from “children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth.”
Adam’s plural, “Pains,” suggests literal labor pains, and thus a temporary
physical condition rather than the chronic mode-of-being implicit in God’s
“sorrow.” “Pains only in child-bearing” further decreases the brunt of God’s curse,
the adjective working doubly to suggest “only pains” (not psychic or moral
despair), and “only in child-bearing” (not at any other time). “Child-bearing” itself,
in place of God’s “conception,” says openly the tactile, physical, human
experience that God avoids in his abstraction. Where God breaks apart the
motion of bringing forth with the substance of his curse, “children thou shalt bring
In sorrow forth” (italics added), Adam unifies the experience both linguistically and with the reward of joy (“bringing forth, soon recompensed”), so that pain disappears into the past-life of a remembered judgment. “Soon,” apparently acknowledging that child-bearing won’t be immediately “joy”ful, seems another gesture toward restricting “pains” to the act of giving birth; but “recompensed” goes so far as to imply that Eve deserves “joy,” that she is “owed” this reward for all the many “pains” of “bringing forth.” And, lastly, in “fruit of thy womb” both the cause and the curse of their fall are radically joined and turned toward a fantasized joyous future; where God threatens to “greatly multiply” sorrow, Adam suggests that he and Eve will have their own day to multiply and be fruitful.

One wonders why Adam seems to ignore the second half of God’s curse on Eve, that “to thy husband’s will / Thine shall submit,” as if to let stand this part of the curse. For all his implicit and explicit revisions of God’s judgment, is Adam, finally, at ease with doctrinal superiority to Eve? The sentence in fact sounds like a curious repetition of a system of order that has already been in place in Eden. It seems possible, then, that Adam makes no mention of this curse, not because he accepts it, but because he means radically to signal his total rejection of its terms.

The shift in Adam’s relation to nature and to earth is especially noticeable in his revision of the curse on himself, where he becomes even more dismissive, taking on a tone of near-nonchalance that makes punishment sound like a deliverance from the irreconcilable anxieties of a “blissful” Eden. He tells Eve that on him “the curse aslope / Glance[s] on the ground” (1053–54), as if his resistance could make the curse literally slide off of him, and accentuating a spatial logistics whereby curses are sent down from above. Subtly, almost
surreptitiously, Adam has begun to align himself with the ground: “[W]ith labour I must earn / My bread; what harm? Idleness had been worse; / My labour will sustain me” (1054–56). The syntax here gives rise to two meanings: idleness would have been the worse curse, a fact Adam knows because he has experienced the “idleness” of pruning—and it was worse. Finally, he has something to do that seems real; “labour” is now attached to the urgency of a life-sustaining goal.

As Adam begins now to improvise fully, to deviate from God’s sentencing completely, prayer too is suddenly invested with a new purpose. Just as the fact that they have lived through “this day” leads Adam to recast the implications of God’s curses, so too does God’s unexpected clothing and “pitying” of them (1059) encourage Adam to the belief that “How much more, if we pray him, will his ear / Be open, and his heart to pity incline, / And teach us further . . .” (1060–62). Sentencing, judging, punishing, are translated into teaching, with Adam the eager student. Having received a gift he thought he hardly deserved, Adam logically concludes that prayer will increase God’s willingness to “instruct” (1081). And the more embedded Adam becomes in the texture of nature, the less admonished he seems. The enjambment at the end of “teach us further by what means to shun” (1062) does not resolve in the next line with “temptation,” as one might suspect, but with “the inclement seasons, rain, ice, hail and snow / Which now the sky with various face begins / To show us in this mountain” (1063–65). Adam is now immersed in a cycle of seasons—the rain of spring, the ice of winter, the hail of autumn—and in conversations between humans and natural elements. In place of the distanced irritation of “those flowers” he once exhibited, nature here is anthropomorphized: the sky has a face, the “winds / Blow moist
and keen" (1065–66), leaves are “graceful locks” (1066). His speech includes no opprobrium for the forbidden fruit; all are collected in “these fair spreading trees” (1067) whose feminine aspect suggests that the natural world has, at last, become personalized for Adam in a particular way. Again he softens doctrinal language: God’s “unbid” thorns and thistles become Adam’s “better shroud, . . . better warmth to cherish” (1068), which they seek out at the wind’s “bid[ding]”—a palpably domestic, even cozy image that radically subverts the barren wasteland of God’s weeds and dust.

Almost as soon as he has articulated a faith that God will teach them how to keep warm and dry, though, Adam readjusts his position as student to replace God with nature. Here is an utterly new relation to the natural world—not the adversarial stance he had formerly taken, but that of an observing pupil, watching and devising ways of manipulating the landscape. As if taken up by the energy and power of the very things he describes, Adam’s language too becomes kinetic, aggressive, rich in sound:

. . . how we his gathered beams

Reflected, may with matter sere foment,
Or by collision of two bodies grind
The air attrite to fire, as late the clouds
Justling or pushed with winds rude in their shock
Tine the slant lightning, whose thwart flame driven down
Kindles the gummy bark of fir or pine,
And sends a comfortable heat from far,
Which might supply the sun. (10.1070–78)

Without intercession of any heavenly figure, Adam means to make his own
lightening, to be his own instructor, to harness lightening and create the spark that will start the fire to warm them. He describes what he has seen with the same specificity Eve has used elsewhere to name the flowers and plants of Eden. The lines vibrate with his intention, with the precision of movement ("grind," "justling"), of intensity ("rude," "thwart"), of texture ("sere," "gummy").

But Adam's relationship to nature will never be the one Eve enjoyed prior to eating the apple; nature has changed, giving way to Adam's inclinations toward mastery and tough physical labor. He seems to revel in the thought of breaking a sweat, of a nature that rains and roars and clashes (no more the "wanton" flowers of Eden swaying like embroidered cloth). All this violent action in the skies is then gathered, without any sensation of tension in Adam, into "a comfortable heat," a language of the home. As if the "evils which [their] own misdeeds have wrought" (1080) were a temporary illness, Adam means to "use" both fire "And what may else be remedy or cure" (1078–79) to "supply the sun," a supplementation that seems less a fact of fallen insufficiency than a symbol of their ability to maneuver through their environment in a boldly self-sufficient way.

From the curses that began this passage, Adam has traveled to a vision of the future in which God's curse of "sorrow" is unrecognizable:

[W]e need not fear
To pass commodiously this life, sustained
By him with many comforts, till we end
In dust, our final rest and native home. (10.1082–85)

The repetition now is on "many comforts," "comfortable heat," and the soothingly holistic promise of caretaking. Thus the expected conclusion of the enjambment on "we need not fear" is again withdrawn—misery, sorrow, and certainly death
would seem more in keeping with what the curses are designed to make them fear—as Adam promises a life spent in comfortable, convenient ease.

It is as if, in the moment of falling, Adam cleared a path for himself toward a new kind of peace. By having to work to protect himself from the forces of nature, he is suddenly connected to it in a way he never was before. The sense of a tangible goal attached to praying gives him renewed faith. And the image of growing old with Eve, joined together to face the consequences of their actions while also laboring against forces outside themselves (as opposed to his own internal obsessiveness) seems highly satisfying to Adam. God’s second-person pronouns become Adam’s “we,” “our,” “us”; his fantasy of them “In dust, our final rest and native home” is as pleasing to him as the “answering looks / Of sympathy and love” were to Eve at the pool. This is what “dying that day” has meant to Adam—his dust is not synonymous with dirt; nor is it insubstantial, liable to blow away in the wind or be thickened to mud by rain. In God’s curse, “dust” signifies human failure and insignificance: “dust thou art, and shalt to dust return.” But Adam turns “dust” into both a part of them, and what contains them, soft and welcoming—he has made it “home.”

And it is as if God has become translatable, as if God and Adam no longer speak in a language that could be called at all the same. Adam has begun to find the range of his own language, to test out the limits of interpretation and to settle himself in the kind of active, protective role for which he has often seemed to pine. He has begun to make his way through Eden.
The final test of the kinds of differences I have been exploring throughout this chapter comes at the close of Paradise Lost. The angel Michael descends from heaven in book 11 as an emissary to conduct Adam and Eve out of Paradise. Towards the end of a lengthy conversation with Adam in which the "future things" of humanity are revealed (Argument, book 11), Michael instructs Adam to waken Eve—who has been sleeping—in preparation for their expulsion from the garden. In this last twelve-line section of his speech, Michael makes doctrinal pronouncements that Eve will strip down and rebuild in her own last speech (which is also the last of the poem). Two startling facts emerge. The way in which Eve reformulates the phrasing as well as the emphases of Michael's heavenly pronouncements seems deliberately, on Milton's part, to complicate, if not directly reject, the ostensible doctrinal lesson of his epic; Eve's language constitutes a nearly point-by-point transvaluation of the theology articulated by Michael. And it is Eve's "fallen," female voice—her language and values—that carries the poem out of Eden.

Michael's discourse is founded on a structure of contrasts. Emotional states are opposed, cause is reprimanded by beneficent effects, numbers dichotomize the faithful from the fallen:

... go, waken Eve;
Her also I with gentle dreams have calmed
Portending good, and all her spirits composed
To meek submission: thou at season fit
Let her with thee partake what thou hast heard,
Chiefly what may concern her faith to know,
The great deliverance by her seed to come
(For by the woman’s seed) on all mankind.
That ye may live, which will be many days,
Both in one faith unanimous though sad,
With cause for evils past, yet much more cheered
With meditation on the happy end. (12.594–605)

Michael has just reminded Adam of “The great deliverance” promised—doctrinally—as revenge against Satan, redemption for humanity, and here, as solace for their banishment from Paradise. “Deliverance” connotes relief, exchange, and emergence: the dejected future of “mankind” will be relieved by the gift of redemption by which it will arrive in heaven, and Michael suggests that it is equally by divine gift “That [Adam and Eve] may live”—that is, they have been allowed to live. And perhaps, by a colloquial substitution of “might” for “may,” Michael intimates that their “many days” are contingent upon adherence to the edict that “to obey is best / And love with fear the only God. . .ever to observe / His providence” (12.561–64). Hence an ostensibly uplifting force shares Michael’s last words with a more theologically constricted intent. Everything is oriented toward the “end” that itself finishes his speech, the final “reunion” in heaven.

Michael’s language pushes separateness and particularity into unity and finality. The moment of ascension into heaven marks an end, rather than a middle (or even a beginning), despite the inexpressible length of eternity stretching beyond the brevity of human time on earth—which itself becomes reduced to the single “meditation” through which they will focus their attention on an end Michael deems unquestionably “happy.” Differences are smoothed over in the glorious unity of “Both in one.” Unanimity dispenses with division, particularly
dangerous separations (calling to mind that Eve eats the apple alone). So “evils” is pluralized, as if to maximize Adam’s memory of that repeated sin, while “faith” is “one” and “unanimous,” encompassing in its effect. So too are the “days” that they will live “many,” since many people, as Adam has been shown, will commit multiple sins before deliverance by the “great” one and unity with God in heaven. If the danger of “evils” resides in “many days,” the “one faith unanimous” triumphs in the “happy end.” Explicit here is a temporal polarization between past and future, as if Adam and Eve are to have no present—any cheer they might experience “now” through faith is only implied by the “much more cheered” they will be by living in a strange suspended moment of anticipation for the end.

What precedes this embracing faith as most definitively divided are woman and mankind. “Eve” quickly subsides into the anonymity of “her,” then “the woman.” Michael tells Adam, “Let her with thee partake what thou hast heard / Chiefly what may concern her faith to know.” He thus encloses the range of her knowledge in its single application to that faith that will redeem her from her sin. Michael seems to say that Eve needs “chiefly” to know those things that will help her to be faithful, but the construction of the line also intimates that it is Eve’s faith that will know of deliverance, life, and faith. Her consciousness is reduced to the only act that can save her, and her physical presence to a medium through which the Son of God will pass. The prepositional phrasing of “The great deliverance by her seed to come” is repeated parenthetically—“(For by the woman’s seed)”—separating woman in her role as a vehicle for “seed” from the descent of humanity. While the repetition evokes God’s curse on Eve’s bringing forth of children and underscores her participation in the Son’s redemptive act. Michael’s language allows “woman” possession only of the seed, not the act.
The "end" of Michael's summation is followed in the next line by "He ended," a usage here so quiet, so expressive of the rhythms of conversation, and so embedded in the narrative movement down the hill that that portentous vision of a glorious and ideologically triumphant end is immediately reined back into the fabric of a human story. The religious "end" becomes a poetic and almost anecdotal one. Then, once Michael and Adam "descend" from the hill, the narrative motion reclaims the verb and rushes over itself with confused syntax in Adam's hurry to get to Eve to tell her, as it were, the good news: "Descended, Adam to the bower where Eve / Lay sleeping ran before, but found her waked." The image of a grand celestial body conducting a believing Adam down from "this top / Of speculation," to hasten him toward their "parting" from Eden, is lowered onto the "subjected plain" and becomes the resilient, resounding adjective that seems to state more than Adam's bodily location—"Descended" functions appositively as if to show that being on the ground impels Adam to excited action. He is "to the bower" and to Eve even before the words that describe his motion; not at all the stately educator assumed by Michael when he tells Adam, "thou at season fit / Let her with thee partake," Adam tumbles over Eve in his stride.

Eve is no less energetic; she begins to take command before any intrusion of angelic discourse via Adam, by being already "waked" when Adam arrives at the bower—so defying Michael's imperative that Adam waken her:

- He ended, and they both descend the hill;
- Descended, Adam to the bower where Eve
- Lay sleeping ran before, but found her waked;
- And thus with words not sad she him received. (12.606–9)

Michael's "though sad" is negated by the "words not sad" with which she greets
Adam. Her tone seems upbeat—as uplifted as Michael might have wished—and her rhythm quick, with a long sentence of parts piling phrase upon clause as if, ever more subtly, Eve means to contradict the angel’s unifying principle:

Whence thou return’st, and whither went’st, I know:
For God is also in sleep, and dreams advise,
Which he hath sent propitious, some great good
Presaging, since with sorrow and heart’s distress
Wearied I fell asleep: but now lead on;
In me is no delay; with thee to go.
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay.
Is to go hence unwilling; thou to me
Art all things under heaven, all places thou,
Who for my wilful crime art banished hence.
This further consolation yet secure
I carry hence; though all by me is lost,
Such favour I unworthy am vouchsafed,
By me the promised seed shall restore. (12.594–623)

And there is something intensely torsional about her language. The effect of so many place-words in her fourteen lines is less cartographical, grounding us in a paradisal landscape with clearly defined boundaries, as it is motional, forcing us to the edges and back of a more psychic space.

The length and movement of the first line is paradigmatic. The heightened sense of locality in “whence” and “whither” rolls away from Eve as she speaks, the sequence of the words pulling our attention away from the foreground (“whence . . . return’st”) and onto our memory of where we (as well as Adam)
have just been ("whither . . . went'st"). At the same time, this motion may be felt
as initially undirected ("whence" and "whither" contain motion unspecifically; they
point to places we understand by context but which are not in fact named). At the
end of the line, then, Eve's unexpected "I know" swings us suddenly back to her,
to her prior awareness of events of which Adam was to have informed her. Thus
the energy of the line is dictated not only by the explicit forward/back of Adam's
physical return to Eve, but by Eve herself, who linguistically culminates his action
in her own words and locates that action within the bounds of her own mental
space (not "whither thou went'st," I saw, or I was told, but I know).

Eve's "know" is pre-emptive; she stops Adam in his eagerness to "partake"
with her what wisdom Michael has imparted. Adam not only does not get to
waken Eve (she truncates the extent of his authority over her), but she already
knows what he wants to tell her (she anticipates his desire). For once, Adam
doesn't have to, can't, teach Eve. He approaches, she knows from where; he had
been, she enters that space too, taking over his motions, his whereabouts, even
his psychic space. Where Adam has needed Michael's lengthy disposition, a
reeling forth of vision and narrative, to understand (see for instance 12.274 and
470), we do not witness such a process of gradual realization in Eve—she simply
wakes up knowing; the declaration is simple, but somehow total. The sinfulness
of the "knowledge" Eve gains by eating the apple is clearly being revised here,
with this emphatic assertion of "I know" at so morally loaded a moment (Michael
has just finished showing Adam the result of the "fall" through history)—an
assertion that seems both an index of her separateness from the realm of
doctrine as well as the poem's own questioning of that realm.

The preponderance of words denoting movement and place throughout
the passage ("to go," "to stay"; "here," "hence"; "with thee," "without thee"; "all
places," "under heaven") continues rather than diminishes the sensation of being
whirled through the ground of Eve's imagination. Her own language, a vocabulary
as if of torque, is set against a stability, a sense of at-oneness, of being at peace,
that Eve herself makes manifest. Adam went, he returns, he may "lead on"; but
these comings and goings occur while Eve is "here," drawn into herself in sleep.
Her knowing results directly from that sleep. God is in sleep,44 but it is her sleep;
she isn't "told," she dreams; dreams "advise." It seems to me significant that we
do not know exactly of what Eve dreams—does she have a vision of Michael, or
God, foreseeing future events? It is enough to her, here, that she wakens with a
sense of readiness, sufficiency, understanding. The implicit omnipresence of God
(God is in sleep, as in heaven) is muted by the line's final declaration: "dreams"
advise, not God nor any other divine being.45 Further, the "great good" presaged
in the dream (not "by" the dream; the dream is not cause, but rather space,
location, realm where good things happen or are indicated) is abstracted by
"some"; the full importance of what Eve awakens knowing she will tell, not Adam,
at the end of the passage.

Eve's words connote alacrity, willingness, anticipation, as if she awakens
revived: "now lead on; / In me is no delay." But in the central lines of the speech
(615–19), where linguistic motion is at its height, Eve is not moving at all. While
her vocabulary encodes her ability to extend and shorten distances, to
manipulate space ("with thee to go, / Is to stay here"; "without thee here to stay, /
Is to go hence unwilling"; "thou to me / Art all things under heaven, all places
thou"), the boundaries she defines and measures emerge only to dissolve,
insisting on separation but then receding into the overlay of "me" and "thee" these
equivalencies dramatize. In the midst of a language by which Adam is whipped around, Eve stays still, a kind of fulcrum. She tells Adam to “lead on,” and yet they stay; they are “banished hence,” and yet while Eve speaks they do not move. We can imagine Adam bristling to go, but Eve’s continued speech holds him to her, in a reversal of book 9’s separation scene. “All places thou” seems to sound a conclusive note—where can Eve, the poetry itself, go, after all the world has been gathered into Adam? “Banished hence” is still more utterly final. Yet her speech carries on for four more lines, lines in which Adam disappears (as Michael “disappears” at line 640), and Eve becomes the locus of action, agency, consolation.

But at the same time Eve is also in a motion of a very particular kind. She is far from immobilized by the kind of unmitigated eschatology Michael voices, where the angel’s final words to Adam (indeed, the entire concatenation of vision/narration of book 12) as well as sententious words of doctrinaire consolation revolve around a singleness of intent and effect. Far from experiencing or even acknowledging being “ended,” Eve is still in a process of falling (“Wearied I fell asleep”) and arising, of carrying, of restoring. Falling is likened to sleeping, which is linked to God and knowing. Knowing offers assurance, calm, resolution. Eve’s motion is thus primarily internal; she can send Adam off and receive him back without anxiety because she has become centered within herself, on “this further consolation yet secure” she carries within her (and notice that “further” suggests “this” is only one more—there have been or could be other consolations—and contrasts with Michael’s “much more cheered,” which is centered on something external, on Christ and the end). Just as Adam is moved and located in terms of Eve (“here” is where Eve is; Adam is
"all things, all places," to Eve) consolation and restoration are embodied by Eve. In the last four lines of her speech Eve is in possession of what “is lost” (“by me”) as well as what “by me . . . shall all restore.” She will “carry hence” Michael’s “great deliverance”; she is now the “restorer.” (Notice how “unworthy” is impacted into the line as if to bury it; the spondaic beat of “am vouchsafed” carries the weight of the line.) Eve’s coherence is not Michael’s strenuous unity.

Against this we must also contrast the fact of expulsion, the sense of violent ejection. Eve’s motion is not forced upon her; the statement (somewhat matter-of-fact) “who for my wilful crime art banished hence” is revised two lines later in “I carry hence”: the geography of “hence,” its valence, alters with the repetition. Banishment hence places the onus of sin upon her, and the focus of nostalgia and longing on Eden; carrying hence looks both outward toward a future full of consolation and recovery and inward to a source of joy Eve contains within herself. The enjambment after “secure” makes Eve’s assertion of her importance to what will be restored all the more emphatic. The presence, the currency of “I carry” further underscores not Eve’s “function” as progenetrix of Jesus (“by the seed”), but as a locus of comfort in her own right (“by me the seed”).

The collocation of Eve’s speech brings into focus flux, motion, progress, future, as well as continuity—a continuity Michael’s insistence on endings would foreshorten, but which the subtle implication of pregnancy in Eve’s “I carry” works to assure.⁴⁶ At the same time the future is significant only because of the present. Eve’s language seems deliberately to resist endings (when will her speech stop?), to resist conclusions and other-worldly salvations (she says nothing of heaven; “restore” suggests renewal). Motion suggests change,
uncertainty, even corruption—all that Michael struggles to gloss over—but is, for Eve, freeing. The motion of this passage is one Eve allows to herself and to Adam, and which she makes safe by the certainty, the joy, the security and “consolation” she carries. Note the echo of “will” in “unwilling” and “wilful”—where Adam plays obedient student, Eve controls her own decisions.

Her assurance that “with thee to go, / Is to stay here” recalls, with a sense of both circularity and continuity, that first meeting in Eden where Eve did not at first follow Adam’s lead, but turned and ran away. Her readiness now, not to follow, but to accompany him, measures the distance they have come toward defining a way of life together by which they are equally empowered and soothed. To be with Adam is to retain something of “here,” to be “here” alone is to be forced away. But where is “here”?

Because Eve knows only Eden, “here” would seem to bring together the actual, external garden with an inner paradise in the manner of Michael’s “a paradise within.” But Eve does, elsewhere, name Paradise directly. The indeterminacy of “here” suggests, I think, an emotional and psychic place that has less to do with the quality of life in Eden than with a post-“fall” transformation of Adam’s, and her own, capacities to understand each other and speak a similar language. If Eden is the realm of anxiety, argument, and tension many of their conversations have indicated, and if one effect of the “fall” is that a more ontologically whole Adam eschews the marital hierarchy commanded by God for his own version of unity—specifically, a “commodious” life with Eve spent tackling the forces of nature until their “final rest” in dust—then Paradise does not seem an altogether paradisal place to be.

Eve casts the light of consolation onto the fact of banishment from Eden.
this place, this time, this source of all their previous conflicts—and her quick reiteration of "hence" with its more manifestly positive associations, the seed she "carries hence," produces yet another moment of fusion between those worlds that doctrine means to keep apart. And Michael's ambiguous "may live" becomes Eve's certitude: the seed "shall restore."

There is even the enclosure of a faint rhyme in "secure" and "restore," a resonance whose note of safety, linguistic control, and psychological ease is heightened only by the solidity inherent in the words themselves. Thus "restore," already connected to Eve syntactically and, more crucially, emotionally, reaches back to the unwavering deliberateness and confidence with which she speaks and moves. "Unworthy," positioned centrally in the line as formidable as "disobedience" or "deliverance," is also undermined by its neighbors: Eve feels as "vouchsafed" by "favour" as Adam did by Raphael's presence in the garden all those hours ago (recall book 5). But Eve does not name any angel, and God is at a far remove from that moment in this passage where poetic, creative, and ideological energy reach an "alternate" apex.

So the "natural tears . . . dropped" by Adam and Eve as they leave Paradise do not so much seem "expected," as if this moment of expulsion were so profoundly tragic that no other response could be imagined—but human, of this world; and "hand in hand with wandering steps and slow / Through Eden [they take] their solitary way," as once "hand in hand alone they passed / On to their blissful bower" (4.689–90). And their solitariness appears to be less a punishment than a relief: no one is looking—or listening—over their shoulders as they move toward that "place of rest," which itself has been transformed by Adam's revision of God's curses in book 10 into the hope of a "native home" and
passing actively through life "with many comforts" (10.1084–85)—all of which is recalled in the operative verb, "to choose." Besides, the sum of their future together has been recalculated by them both; in Eve's last speech, a language of equivalencies sends herself to Adam while bringing him back to her: "In me . . . with thee to go," "thou to me." And Adam "answer[s] not," a welcome—indeed, a profound and metabolic—silence from one whose nervous talking has so often before seemed deliberately vexatious. Finally, he lets Eve have the last word—and so does Paradise Lost.
NOTES

1 Paradise Lost, book 1, line 26. Further line references will be parenthetical and in the text.

2 See, for example, Marcia Landy, “Kinship and the Role of Women in Paradise Lost”; Ricki Heller, “Opposites of Wifehood: Eve and Dallia”; and Barbara Lewakski, “Milton on Women—Yet Once More.”

3 Fowler notes that in the 1667 edition the two episodes were indeed structurally symmetrical, with Adam’s account of “birth” followed by three books, and Eve’s preceded by three (410, note on 8.249).

4 Adam’s first speech in the poem revolves around his effort to understand his role as “first man” vis-à-vis God, a role that includes the conundrum of “one easy prohibition” (4.433). The contrast between the outward-directedness of Adam’s impulse and Eve’s more inward one establishes an essential difference between them to which I will return.

5 In his discussion of Winnicott and Lacan in The Psychoanalytic Vocation, Peter Rudnytsky writes that “the divergence between the models ofmirroring proposed by Lacan and Winnicott epitomizes the contrast between a solipsistic and a relational conception of human experience. Like the pool of Narcissus, Lacan’s mirror is inanimate and gives back to the infant only an estranged reflection of his or her image.” Winnicott’s mirror, conversely, “is the face of the living mother” (79).

6 Indeed, as Winnicott proposes, “the True Self does not become a living reality except as a result of the mother’s repeated success in meeting the infant’s spontaneous gesture or sensory hallucination” (145) just as Eve’s looking into the
pool is met with "answering looks" that match hers.

7 I borrow the emphasis on the voice's invisibility from Christine Froula, who "links this imagery to the church fathers' mystified history of the Resurrection, that invisible past invoked to justify their claims to privilege spiritual authority. The invisible voice that guides Eve away from the visible image of herself in the world to him whose image she is allegorizes what is literally the secret not only of spiritual and literary authority in Milton's poem but of cultural authority as such" (330). But it is in fact this "invisibility," I would argue, that seems to allow Eve to dissociate herself so successfully.

8 Notice that it is only here, after the voice has "instructed" her both about what she saw in the pool and Adam's priority to that shape, that Eve describes the face in the water as "smooth watery image." Her own prior wording was "shape within the watery gleam."

9 See, for example, Fowler's note on lines 4.478-80, in which he cites Dennis Burden's The Logical Epic: "Burden . . . suggests that the point of the incident lies in Eve's freedom to choose. She goes with Adam not because there is no one else but because at l. 489 she freely chooses to love him rather than her own image. Similarly, her initial reluctance emphasises her freedom to have rejected him" (223). Fowler's own emphasis on "freely" and "freedom" is strongly contravened by Eve's own language: "What could I do," "seized," and "yielded." See also Diane McColley, who writes that Eve is called twice because she must be shown to make a "free and deliberate choice" (82) after knowing whose face is in the lake. Her "remark, 'What could I do / But follow strait' raises the question of the woman's consent in the marriage that is to be the pattern of all marriages.
Her moment of hesitation marks her discovery that her will is free."

10. While there are many deflected, hidden, suspected, and remembered gazes in the poem, Eve’s is one we share in its occurrence, which would seem to make the normative gaze of the poem *female*; when Adam looks at Eve he sees not so much his own image or even his own desire as what he has “lent” to her to give her being, as well as her divergence from his expectations.

11. Though where Eve seems interested in *changing* the subject Adam has initiated, Adam’s stated concern to Raphael is that “Desire with thee *still longer* to converse / Induced me” (8.252–53; italics added).

12. In her speech, Eve says that she went to the pool of water “and *laid me down* / On the green bank” (4.457–58; italics added), in just one more reconfiguration of Adam’s ethos.

13. Note that Adam’s “liquid lapse of murmuring streams” clearly echoes Eve’s “murmuring sound / Of waters . . . spread / Into a liquid plain.” But where Eve follows her sound to its source, thereby enabling her “mirror” experience, Adam seems to glance over the streams as fast as he can name them.

14. Eve, too, was called “fair creature” by God.

15. God apparently puts Adam to sleep to relocate him to Eden.

16. Adam comes away from this with a confusion about what in fact constitutes a “gift,” which becomes evident in his dialogue with Eve over “stores” in book 5. I will return to this important passage.

17. According to Fowler’s gloss, the statement echoes scripture: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you” (Exod. 3:14–15).
Earlier, in book 4, Adam registers his confusion over this passage when he says to Eve, "what e'er death is, / Some dreadful thing no doubt" (4.425–26). It is a poignant admission, from one whose only admonition is not to provoke the incidence of death.

Greenberg and Mitchell describe the consequence of "prolonged impingement" as "fragmentation of the infant's experience. Out of necessity he becomes prematurely and compulsively attuned to the claims and requests of others. He cannot allow himself the experience of formless quiescence, since he must be prepared to respond to what is asked of and provided for him. He loses touch with his own spontaneous needs and gestures" (194).

Eve's analogies, in contrast to Adam's, establish equivalencies rather than hierarchies: the lake is "Pure as . . . heaven," and "seem[s] another"—though neither a better nor a worse—sky.

As Winnicott notes, "what the environment is like has significance because it is a part of the baby" ("Mother-Infant Experience" 253).

Cf. Gen. 2:23: "And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh."

See Peter Stallybrass's ample description of the dual nature of "individual" in the seventeenth century, along with the various implication of using the word, in his essay "Shakespeare, the Individual, and the Text."

Yet another implication of Eve's "parting" from Adam is her "part" in the "fall," immediately preceded by her separation from him to garden alone. Whether their shared "parting" from Eden will ultimately be a "happy" one Adam does not yet know, but there is something in these first lines that leaves him doubtful of his
connection to his "sole partner"; it lies in a word that presses itself on the inner ear as one reads: "Sole partner and sole part of all these joys. / Dearest [to] thy self than all . . ."

In one of the poem's most exquisite passages, Eve shows how differently one can talk about the natural world of the garden. In her familiar sonnet to "night" further on in this long conversation in book 4, Eve lovingly describes how "on this delightful land [the sun] spreads

His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower,
Glistening with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful evening mild, then silent night
With this her solemn bird and this fair moon,
And these the gems of heaven, her starry train. (4.643–49)

Adam is prone to hierarchical configurations. Earlier in book 5, for instance, he responds to Eve's dream with an explanation of the mind in which "Reason" is "chief"; next "fancy," represented by the five senses; then "mimic fancy," which in imitating fancy can produce such "wild work" as bad dreams (5.102–12). The cosmos is similarly structured, with "the sun's more potent ray" placed above the moon and stars.

Commentators not only of Paradise Lost but also of Genesis have raised the question of Hebrew naming, which involves deep understanding of the essence of the thing named, as "evidence" of Adam's superior intellect or to reinforce the hierarchy of Adam's naming of the animals over Eve's naming of the flowers.
Here, Adam's misunderstanding about what needs to be stored in Eden, and for
how long, supports the idea that he does not have an intimate and sympathetic understanding of nature in the garden, as does Eve.

Is there also a pun on “dispensation,” so that Eve ironically turns the notion of what’s good on earth on its head—not Christ’s future arrival, but the bounty already there?

See, for instance, Diane McColley.

Winnicott writes that “the threat [of separation] is maximally or minimally traumatic according to the experience of the first separations” (“The Place Where We Live” 108).

Adam says, “Evil into the mind of god or man / May come and go, so unapproved, and leave / No spot or blame behind” (5.117–19).

As he says to Eve further on of the question of her “constancy”: “who can know, / Not seeing thee attempted, who attest?” (9.367–69).

See also 9.654, “our reason is our law”; and her defense of free knowledge at 9.756–60:

For good unknown, sure is not had, or had
And yet unknown, is as not had at all.
In plain then, what forbids he but to know,
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?
Such prohibitions bind not.

From his position within the orthodoxy, Fowler remarks in a later gloss on this episode that “Eve, already in the grip of temptation, has put Adam in an impossible position, transmitting to him the pressure, the excessive motion, put on her by Satan” (458).
As he expresses in his "justification" of work in book 4.

The calculating, criminal mind-in-formation suggested by C. S.. Lewis and Fowler’s self-interested, self-deceiving Eve are belied by her doubt and indecision up to the moment she sets off back toward the bower.

Lewis paraphrases these lines as, "Next she decides that she will not tell Adam about the fruit. She will exploit her secret to become his equal—or no, better still, his superior" (121). He not only misreads the punctuation, but misses the repetition of "odds."

In a kind of critical frenzy, Fowler wrenches "A thing not undesirable" into a bold declaration that "Eve really thinks it very desirable indeed that she should be almost always superior" (486). In Adam, claims of superiority are merely natural, divinely ordained, and unquestioned; in Eve, even a cautious wish can only be seen as despicable.

See "The Antisocial Tendency," "Delinquency as a Sign of Hope," and "Morals and Education."

And as Empson certainly does suggest in Milton's God: "She thinks: 'The reason why all the males keep on saying I mustn't eat the apple, in this nerve-wracking way, is obviously that they are longing for me to do it; this is the kind of thing they need a queen to have the nerve to do'; so she does it" (163). Eve is "a medieval great lady," "staggeringly grand."

Behind this passage, of course, lies Adam's own act of eating the apple. In my judgment, clear prefiguration of his decision to eat can be found in Adam's beautiful tribute to Eve in book 8, in which he confesses to Raphael, 

... when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtuosest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded, wisdom in discourse with her
Looses discountenanced, and like folly shows;
Authority and reason on her wait,
As one intended first, not aftermade
Occasionally; and to consummate all,
Greatness of mind and nobleness their seat
Build in her loveliest, and create an awe
About her, as a guard angelic placed. (8.546–59)

At the start of the separation scene, he tells her, "The wife, where danger or
dishonour lurks, / Safest and seemliest by her husband stays, / Who guards her,
or with her the worst endures" (9.267–69; italics added). Later, after hearing only
Eve's first description of the serpent, the apple, and her experience after eating,
Adam says to himself, "Certain my resolution is to die; / How can I live without
thee..." (9.907–8); and further on, "Our state cannot be severed, we are one, /
One flesh; to lose thee were to lose my self" (9.958–59). It is difficult not to feel
the force of Adam's devotion to Eve in these statements. His decision to eat
seems predetermined—but not for the purpose God outlines, and in fact not even
by God at all.

42In "The Capacity for Concern," Winnicott describes as "concern" what Melanie
Klein had termed the "depressive position"—a development as well as psychical orientation towards the other in which the other is perceived as a whole object and in which the self's ambivalence toward the object can be tolerated, and in which reparation of the other—compensating for the self's destructive tendencies toward it—can be made. Winnicott thinks of "concern" as part of "normal, healthy living," "at the back of all constructive play and work," which "relates in a positive way to the individual's sense of responsibility" (73). One might say that Adam's extensive revisions are a kind of play exhibiting a new "concern" for Eve, now perceived not so much as a subjective "part" of himself, but an objective other who has, importantly, "continue[d] to be herself" (76) despite Adam's anxious behavior towards her indebtedness to him. Moreover, his different attitude towards "work" and the post-lapsarian labor required of him reflects an eagerness to "contribute," which Winnicott thought would "enable" concern (77). Adam's own destructive tendencies—eating the apple? anger at Eve?—in turn produce this new "constructive effort," "constructive work," and his capacity to feel concerned about Eve's well-being (80–81).

Notice too that Michael's grim "portending good" (12.596) becomes Eve's "propitious, some great good / Presaging" (611–12), which describes not only a different, less doctrinaire "good," but also maintains Eve as producer of this premonition: "presage" includes internal intuition and feeling as much as external omen or sign.

As Satan had also been "in" Eve's sleep.

There is a progression from book 12's Argument, which assigns the dreams to no one individual, and whose syntax works to describe the "gentle dreams" as
much as Eve as “composed to quietness of mind and submission”; to Michael’s arrogant assertion that “Her also I with gentle dreams have calmed . . . and all her spirits composed / To meek submission” (595–97), where “meek” is the angel’s addition; to Eve’s own account of her dream and its effect on her. Eve intimates God (“God is also in sleep, and dreams advise, / Which he hath sent propitious, some great good / Presaging”), but does not actually ascribe her dreams to God, since the grammar suggests it is also “sleep” that God sends.

46 Note the poem’s curious description of the fall itself: as the apple is eaten, earth seems to give birth to herself (“Earth trembled from her entrails, as again / In pangs, and nature gave a second groan” [9.1000–1]); it is here that mortality originates (“mortal sin / Original” [1003–4]). Nowhere does the poem itself use the phrase “Original Sin.”
Epilogue:
“Something Understood”

The notion of threshold experience has become centrally important to my reading of the three poets included here. This was a gradual discovery, to some extent, precipitating out of the process of writing. I had already been drawn to Donne, Milton, and Herbert for their textual density, their emphasis on conversation and psychic motion, their lyrical strains of grief and longing, and their spirit of ambiguity and revision. When I began to read object-relations theory, in a way almost unconnected with my reading of the poetry, its attention to the labyrinthine matrix of relationships out of which the “self” evolves immediately suggested to me a provocative set of ideas and metaphors with which to understand the complexity of relatedness being poetically described. Reading Winnicott further helped to concentrate the link between theory and poetry on the threshold experiences that so pervade the work of these three writers—the unfolding psychological negotiations of pleasure and risk that take place in the potential space between, and of, self and other, interior and exterior, reality and fantasy.

Winnicott’s interest in paradox and in transitional phenomena that he insisted remain ambiguous and unresolved led, I believe, to a particular analytic technique. His success as a psychotherapist seems linked to his willingness to hold back. Winnicott often makes the point that analysis is not “about” making good interpretations; but neither was he dogmatically silent. As Peter Rudnytsky describes it, “A hallmark of Winnicott’s style is his readiness to admit his own uncertainty as part of the analytic discourse while remaining exceptionally attuned to the anxieties of his patient” (Psychoanalytic Vocation 129). To patients
as different from one another as the three-year-old Gabrielle (knicknamed "the Piggle") and Harry Guntrip (himself a psychoanalyst who had already undergone an unsatisfying analysis with W. R. D. Fairbairn), Winnicott held forth a promise akin to Herbert's "something understood"—that of having one's early trauma seen and known, and repaired through that recognition. But his technique was fundamentally dialectical; in the holding space of analysis, the patient could be free to discover him- or herself for him- or herself. As Gabrielle said of her experience with Winnicott years after the end of their work together, "He used to write and I used to play" (The Piggle 201). Margaret Little, also an analyst, writes of her analysis with Winnicott that "He gave very few interpretations, and these only when I had reached the point where the matter could become conscious... [He] spoke tentatively, or speculated... This let me taste or feel what he said, and be free to accept or reject it" (quoted in Rudnytsky, Psychoanalytic Vocation 130). In this process of mutual understanding—through it—the self arrives at what Christopher Bollas calls the "unthought known": a "known" part of the self that has "yet to be thought" (Bollas 230). The poems included in this dissertation seem to record a series of attempts to discover the self in the threshold space of recognition by the other.

The notion of a prevailing dialectic in which a "third" term is always created and always implicated has meaning for the "self" reading poetry as well as for the selves within poems. While the connection between artistic production and Winnicott's theory of the transitional object is firmly established in object-relations, I want here not to claim any single "purpose" or "effect" for poetry but rather to acknowledge the "threshold" nature of my own dissertation—a dissertation that, in examining each poet's idiosyncratic "working through" the
complexity of object-relating, has also been a personal act of working-through. The way in which the writing of literary criticism tends to be a "refracted" autobiographical act seems evident not only in my choice of a psychoanalytic frame (my father is a psychologist; my mother, later in her life, an analyst), but also in the themes of relating that make this body of poetry so evocative for me. A study of object-relations theory both personal and scholarly has illuminated what one critic calls the "brooding presence of certain texts" in my life (Sprengnether 95)—Paradise Lost and Milton's Eve; Herbert's extremes of sadness and joy, pushing against the controlled frames of his prosody; Donne's restless seeking-out and many expressions of ambivalence; and the place in each poet's work for a sense of identity that allows selves to be independent and generous, intimate and resistant at once.

The preoccupations of the poets included here, as well as my desire to write about such texts, have taken on sharper focus for coinciding with intensive "self-readings," and the process of writing about this poetry has become not unlike the process of analysis, with its willingness to question, its habit of dwelling on particular concerns, its faith in the possibility of "something understood." The peculiar kind of closure that is the end of this dissertation feels imbued with special meaning—for it marks the completion of an object that is, almost by definition, a threshold.
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APPROVAL OF CANDIDACY FOR AN ADVANCED DEGREE

DATE: August 25, 1995

The candidacy of Susannah B. Mintz, Dept. of English, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree, is hereby approved. This approval is valid for four years.

The Thesis Committee hereby appointed is:

(a) Edward Snow (Chair)
(b) Meredith Skura
(c) Edith Wyschogrod (RELI)
(d) Deborah Harter (FREN)
(e) 

The student’s responsibilities related to the oral defense are to:

1. Schedule the examination (but not during final exams).
2. Provide for an announcement of the date, time, and place of the oral in the university calendar at least one week prior to the examination. A copy should be posted on the department bulletin board.
3. Provide the Graduate Office with a signed copy of this form immediately after the oral examination. DOO STATUS WILL NOT BE CONFERRED UNTIL THIS COPY IS RECEIVED.

Additional responsibilities of the candidate are outlined in the thesis instructions.

REPORT OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

The oral defense of thesis was held on (date) July 10, 1996. 

Thesis Title (Typed) Negotiating the Threshold: Self-Other Dynamics in Milton, Herbert, and Donne

The committee hereby certifies that the candidate passed.

(a) 
(b) Meredith Skura
(c) 
(d) 
(e) 

Remarks:

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