

THIS ALL-GRAVED TOME.
A READING OF JOHN DONNE'S *A VALEDICTION: OF THE BOOKE*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a close reading of John Donne's poem *A Valediction: of the Booke*. Often neglected by scholarship, this complex composition centres around the ambiguous symbolism of the book which gives the title to the poem, cherished both as token of material presence and as a lasting written document of the lovers' passion. The volume, a joint collaboration of male design and female ghost-writing, is put before the eyes of all future generations as a universal, sacred text, as a rule book aimed to govern every domain of human existence. This analysis of the seven stanzas emphasizes Donne's subtle use of classical learning and the multiplicity of meanings evoked by the book metaphor, in particular the contradictory processes of memory and forgetting.

1. INTRODUCTION

A Valediction: of the Booke is not generally regarded as one of the greatest poetic achievements of John Donne, who is perhaps the most influential among the English poets of the early seventeenth century. Seldom is this valediction mentioned in critical assessments of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* and in the few exceptional instances, the reference is either dismissive or parenthetical (a notable exception being Marotti 1986: 169-172), with even Helen Gardner designating the poem's language «strained» (in Donne 1965: 196n). In a recent and compelling reading of Donne's work, Ramie Targoff mentions this poem briefly, suggesting that it is «arguably the least successful of the four Valedictions» (2008: 66). It is indeed difficult to disagree

with her judgement, or with that of Silvia Bigliuzzi, who lists the poem among Donne's most complex compositions (Serpieri-Bigliuzzi, in *Donne* 2007: 228). Its obscurity of expression, the *recherché* allusiveness of its classical and medieval sources – Marotti speaks of «learned foolishness» (1986: 171) – and ultimately the overall complexity of its seven-stanza-long reasoning certainly do not encourage a thorough appreciation of *A Valediction: of the Booke*, especially for the modern reader untrained in such scholarship. It is ironic that the four-century gap dividing Donne's text from our own sensibility presents such an alienating barrier to readers when we consider that much of the poem's argumentation relies on the immortalizing power of language.

The central image of the valediction is the “Booke” of the title¹, which the speaker impels his beloved to write: the poem in its whole may be conceived as the sketchy outline of that vaster project he commissions the lady to set down in writing. Her main sources will be the «manuscripts, those Myriades / Of letters, which have past twixt thee and mee» (ll. 10-11)². The book, an object which by way of its materiality resists the passing of time, represents therefore not merely a token of eternal presence, but a document for posterity:

I'll tell thee now (deare Love) what thou shalt doe
To anger destiny, as she doth us,
How I shall stay, though she esloygne me thus
And how posterity shall know it too.
(ll. 1-4)

Ovid's *Heroides*, a collection of imaginary love letters written by heroines of classical mythology, is probably the model *par excellence*

¹ The title of the poem varies according to the edition. This article follows Helen Gardner's, where the text appears under the title *A Valediction: of the Booke*. *Valediction to his booke* is the variant chosen by C.A. Patrides (in *Donne* 1985). With both the colon and the noun capitalization, the former title better emphasizes the centrality of the book as a symbol.

² Cited from Helen Gardner's edition (*Donne* 1965). Unless specified, all further in-text references to Donne's poetry are to this edition.

of Donne's "Booke"; Ovid constantly relies on the immortalizing power of poetry in his works³. Until the disquieting doubt is disclosed in the final stanza of the valediction, which puts into question the efficacy of the whole 'book-writing' conceit as a means of overcoming absence, the lyrical voice revels in his bold expectation that the lines of the poem will provide a written, public, permanent record of his individual and ephemeral love. The wish is that a capital-L "Love" will endure for all future time through the words of the valediction: «how Love this grace to us affords, / To make, to keep, to use, to be these his Records» (ll. 17-18), where here the demonstrative pronoun *these* indicates both the «Annals» of their love (l. 12) and the lines of the poem itself.

In contrast with the other three valedictions collected in *Songs and Sonnets*, the theme of separation does not seem to be the central concern here. As the term 'valédiction' itself leads us to expect, the poem ought to revolve around a situation of 'leave-taking'. Hans-Heinrich Freitag (1975: 146) has suggested that the recurrent motif of absence traceable in so many poems of the collection is in *A Valediction: of the Booke* nothing more than a pretext. Far from expressing his anxiety at the thought of bidding farewell to his beloved, the speaker seems more obsessed by the mysterious need to imagine the response which her book will elicit in different future circles of readership – "Loves Divines", "Lawyers", and "Statesmen" in the fourth, fifth, and sixth stanzas respectively. Yet, upon closer inspection, it *is* indeed a poem about anxiety, albeit one of a different type. This anxiety is an uneasiness deriving from the speaker's reliance on the symbolism of the book, a most ambiguous object and particularly so for a poet whose literary output was constantly

³ One of the most famous formulations in this respect is in *Tristia* IV, 10, 1-2: *Ille ego qui fuerim, tenerorum lusor amorum, / quem legis, ut noris, accipe posteritas* ("That thou mayst know who I was, I that playful poet of tender love whom thou readest, hear my words, thou of the after time", transl. by A.L. Wheeler). All translations of the classical texts included in this article are based on the Loeb editions.

influenced by the simultaneous coexistence and mutual influence of manuscript and print culture⁴. The aim of these pages is to read *A Valediction: of the Booke* by shedding light on the multifaceted significance of its central metaphor.

2. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE BOOK

“The Book as Symbol” in the early modern period was famously discussed by E.R. Curtius in the sixteenth chapter of *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1990 [1948]). The German scholar emphasized the centrality of book imagery in medieval and Renaissance literature, tracing its roots to the historical transition from a religious to a secularized culture, a process which accelerated by the explosive growth of the recently created European book market (Pettegree 2010: 65-90).

Like many other love tokens in *Songs and Sonnets*, the “Booke” of Donne’s valediction embraces both the religious and the secular domain. It is a universal book, a book about love, religion, history, law, politics, art, alchemy. The “Booke” in the Renaissance is an ambiguous symbol because not only could stand for the indisputable orthodoxy of religious truth, but also provide the ultimate icon of cultural relativism. The art historian Jan Białostocki highlights the ambiguity of the book in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture: «A book may be the book of religious truth – the Bible, or a book of human learning, valued for the erudition and culture in it but also looked down on because the human learning it conveys has no really lasting value but passes away in time» (1988: 46)⁵. All these contrasting and contradictory meanings are at play in *A Valediction: of the Booke*, so that the woman’s book is as unreliable as the mirror-like tear of *A Valediction: of Weeping* or as the name written on the glass

⁴ For a thorough analysis of this cultural context, see Wollman (1993).

⁵ See also the discussion in Aleida Assmann’s *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011: 178).

of the window-pane in *A Valediction: of my Name in the Window*. The ensuing close reading of the poem's seven stanzas aims to show how Donne constructs a forceful metaphor of the book as culturally transmissible microcosm, where Love becomes the organizing principle of every field of knowledge, the 'grand unified theory' of the lovers' universe. The volume is described as an all-encompassing alchemical book, an «all-graved tome»⁶ (l. 20), mysterious and secretive, sacred and profane, granting both eternal life *and* oblivion.

In Cesare Ripa's emblem book *Iconologia*, "memory" (*memoria*) is described as a woman dressed all in black, holding a pen in her right hand and a book in her left (Ripa 1992 [1603]: 271). The book is also an important symbol in the emblem "study" (*studio*), wherein a young man attentively reads an open book which he holds in his left hand, illustrating that steady application of the mind reveals the soul's disposition to the cognition of things. With his right hand he holds a pen, symbolizing his intention of leaving – through the act of writing – a memory of himself behind (Ripa 1992 [1603]: 429). Ripa quotes here Persius's first satire: *scire tuum nihil est, nisi te scire hoc sciat alter?* ("Is all your knowledge to go so utterly for nothing unless other people know that you possess it?", *Pers. Sat. I, 27*)⁷.

The two emblems *memoria* and *studio* are somehow mirror-like: the images they represent, whether Donne was acquainted with Ripa's work or not, are to be found again in the structure of *A Valediction: of the Booke*, the first part of which revolves around the idea of the woman as writer (*memoria*), whereas the second focuses on the male poet as careful reader (*studio*). Indeed one's utmost heedfulness is required to enter into the textual world of the valediction itself, to keep Donne's mannerist rhetoric at bay; to make sense of the satirical vein of many of his lines; to appreciate the bafflingly inconclusive

⁶ «[T]otally engraved, i.e., not expressible in ordinary print» (Robbins, in Donne 2010: 270). Cf. also *OED* 'engrave': "2. b. To mark by incisions; to inscribe with incised characters; to ornament with incised marks./ 3. c. To impress deeply; to fix indelibly".

⁷ Transl. by G.G. Ramsay.

book metaphor he has been so scrupulously trying to construct. In this respect, John Donne might be regarded as belonging, like Persius, to the tradition of the *poeta obscurus*: the aesthetics of obscurity crucially occupying, as Jan M. Ziolkowski (1996: 101) has suggested, «a central point on the dividing-line between the poetic and the prosaic, between poetry and prose, between the ordinary and the extraordinary».

3. *AND OBSCURE HER.*

LOVE, FAME AND OBLIVION. DONNE'S *MULIERES DOCTAE*

The first stanza of *A Valediction: of the Booke* reconciles immortal poetic glory with the inevitability of cultural forgetting. The speaker explains to his mistress how she can flout the laws of a troublesome destiny, thus achieving a more enduring fame than that of her illustrious – and unnamed – predecessors:

I'll tell thee now (deare Love) what thou shalt doe
 To anger destiny, as she doth us,
 How I shall stay, though she esloygne me thus,
 And how posterity shall know it too:
 How thine may out-endure
 Sybills glory, and obscure
 Her who from *Pindar* could allure,
 And her, through whose helpe *Lucan* is not lame,
 And her, whose booke (they say) *Homer* did find, and name.
 (ll. 1-9)

Through the anaphoric construction of the three concluding lines of the stanza, the speaker situates his beloved at the end of a list of four women of the classical tradition, whose names, however, are left unsaid. They are Corinna, the Greek poetess who allegedly defeated Pindar in a poetic competition; Polla Argentaria, who helped her husband Lucan complete his poem *Bellum Civile*; and the legendary Egyptian priestess Phantasia, who is said to have written the first draft

of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*⁸. The only explicitly named woman is the first one on the list, presumably the Cumaean Sibyl of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Apollo's mouthpiece, known for the obscure ambiguity of her responses⁹. The word 'obscure' itself (l. 6) is a key term of the stanza, since it hints at the threat of forgetting and oblivion which the poet so cunningly seeks to prevent.

The three unnamed women form a group of their own in the stanza – since they are all connected through the use of the polysyndeton *And her...*, thus creating the impression that this list of forgotten women is not exhaustive, but rather samples an unknowably longer one. Corinna, Polla, and Phantasia are probably ordered in accordance with their degree of fame, from the most famous to the most forgotten.

⁸ Cf. Gardner (in Donne 1965: 193) and Robbins (in Donne 2010: 269-270) for a thorough account of the classical sources to which Donne alludes in this stanza. The story of the competition between Pindar and Corinna, poetess of Thebes, is narrated by Aelian (*Var. Hist.* XIII, 25). A letter by Sidonius Apollinaris (*Epist.* II, 10, 6) is the main source for the tradition according to which Polla Argentaria, Lucan's wife, had an essential role in the completion of the *Pharsalia*. The legend of Phantasia is reported by two sources: Photius's *Bibliotheca* (Augsburg 1601; Latin translation: Augsburg 1606), from Ptolemy Ephaestion or 'Chennos', and the preface by Eustathius of Thessalonica to his commentary on the *Odyssey* (Rome 1542-50; reprint Basel 1559-60; not translated into Latin). The story of Phantasia was also mentioned by the Flemish humanist Justus Lipsius (*De Bibliothecis Syntagma* 1, Antwerp 1602, p. 10), from Eustathius.

⁹ Verg. *Aen.* VI, 9-12; 42-53; 98-101. But it is in Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* that the Cumaean Sibyl is most clearly described as a writer, as the author of a poem announcing a new Golden Age: *Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas; / magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo* (Verg. *Ecl.* IV, 4-5. "Now is come the last age of the song of Cumae; / the great line of the centuries begins anew", transl. by H. Rushton Fairclough). The Sibyl is a prophetic poetess also in Horace's *Carmen saeculare: tempore sacro / quo Sibyllini monuere versus* (ll. 4-5. "at the holy season / when the verses of the Sibyl have commanded", transl. by C.E. Bennett). The Cumaean Sibyl was often portrayed in Renaissance art as a woman holding a book in her hand (for example by Andrea del Castagno, Michelangelo, Raphael, Domenichino). For a preliminary, though thorough, account of medieval depictions of Virgil and the Sibyl as prophets see Joyner (2008: 453-457).

Moreover, the syntactic parallel between the latter pair (polysyndeton + genitive + name of the male author + verb) elicits a deeper commonality: both Polla and Phantasia saw their work fall into the shadow of the name of a male poet. The Sibyl has perhaps been consigned to the same fate; since Constantine and Lactantius interpreted Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* as a prophecy of Christianity, the subsequent medieval commentators «included Virgil among those who foresaw the birth of Christ [...]. Yet other authorities, such as Augustine, regarded the Cumaean Sibyl [...] as being the true prophet» (Joyner 2008: 453).

The value of the first stanza lies exactly in this original reflection on the workings of fame for *women*; these extremely erudite lines seem to ask what is *their* place in what Aleida Assmann (2011: 45) defines as «[t]he dialectics of rejection and acceptance, forgetting and remembering [that] is at the heart of what we understand by 'Renaissance'». With the exception of Phantasia, who was probably a very obscure reference even during Donne's lifetime, these women were often featured in the catalogues of *mulieres doctae* ("learned women") included in many a learned compendium by humanist antiquarians, such as Baptiste Fulgose's *Factorum Dictorumque Memorabilium Libri IX* (Venice, 1483), Ravisius Textor's *Theatrum poeticum atque historicum, sive Officina* (Paris, 1520) and Barthélemy de Chasseneuz's *Catalogus gloriae mundi* (Lyons, 1529), each of which was repeatedly reprinted. Donne might have been familiar with one or more of these catalogues, whose tradition and legacy has been explored by Jean Céard (1999). If these lists of women made accessible to a wider audience the notion of *mulier docta* in the Renaissance, these representations were complicated by issues of male gaze and consequently rendered quite ambivalent¹⁰.

¹⁰ Cf. Céard (1999) and, for a general discussion, Assmann (2011: 52): «As long as entry into the cultural memory is conditioned by heroism or canonization, women systematically disappear into cultural oblivion. It is a classic case of structural amnesia».

This same situation was brilliantly exposed in the ensuing decades by another English poet, Abraham Cowley (1618-1667):

Of Female Poets, who had Names of old,
Nothing is shown, but only Told,
And all we hear of them perhaps may be
Male-Flatt'ry only, and Male-Poetry¹¹.

In this respect, it is somewhat ironic that the speaker of Donne's valediction tempts his lady with promises of a fame modelled after that of women about whom the readers know so little¹². Through the use of allusion in (un)naming three learned women of antiquity, the speaker makes the reader question the very concept of 'fame'. He does so by underlining the subtle difference between living, immortal glory and mere presence in the cultural 'archive'¹³. Although the Renaissance successfully revalued the role of fame, cherishing «the hope of immortality through cultural achievements» (Assmann 2011: 36), Donne appears to cast doubt on this optimistic view as soon as he embraces it.

Moreover, a distinctive feature of *Songs and Sonnets* is that Donne never names the lady of his love poems; there is no Cynthia, Laura, Astrea, Elizabeth, or Stella to venerate and immortalize, no name to

¹¹ Abraham Cowley, *On the Death of Mrs Katherine Philips* (1667), quoted in Stevenson (2005: 7).

¹² Cf. also Elizabeth D. Harvey's observations about this first stanza (1996: 79-80). For Harvey, Donne's rhetoric restores the woman «on the margins of discourse, where she is confined as the nameless, faceless handmaiden to poetic accomplishment» (1996: 80). It is important to point out that the reader of Donne's valediction might well have been a *mulier docta* of his time: in a richly detailed study, Jane Stevenson (2005) has explored the fascinating history of women Latinists in Europe, cf. in particular Chapter 10 on sixteenth-century England.

¹³ I follow here Assmann's definition of "archive" as a place of memory: «In contrast to the sensually concrete memory linked to bodies and places, the archive exists independently of both, and so remains abstract and general. A precondition for its existence as a collective store of knowledge is a material data-carrier that must function as a support, above all, for the written word» (Assmann 2011: 12).

remember¹⁴. As Targoff suggests, Donne is much more inclined to describe the immediacy, precariousness, and mutuality of the love relationship, rather than the timelessness of love or the perfect, goddess-like qualities of his mistress¹⁵.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the object of *A Valediction: of the Booke* is not at all the speaker's passionate love for his woman, but the *written* proof of their affectionate liaison. In this regard, it is also highly significant that the task of writing is a work appointed to the woman, though the extent of the latter's autonomy in the project is far from clear: is she an independent author or just a subordinate copyist? Given that «the unconventional brilliance of Donne's love poems arises (at least in part) from his unprecedented capacity to elicit and articulate and respond to the woman's point of view» (Bell 1983: 116), the latent ambiguity of the conceited themes displayed in *A Valediction: of the Booke* does not give us sufficient evidence to determine *whose* perspective is being presented here.

4. *THENCE WRITE OUR ANNALS.*

THE BOOK AS A LASTING TOKEN OF LOVE

In the second stanza the speaker proceeds to give his beloved some general instructions on the task she is to fulfil; the starting point for her research is their collection of love letters, which will provide the primary source of what seems to be an unassailable, indisputable, and entirely reliable historiographical project:

¹⁴ However, as Robbins (in Donne 2010: 270) points out, the noun *Annals* could be interpreted as a «submerged pun on Ann», the name of Donne's wife. If the pun were intended, the noun *Annals* would almost appear as the fitting title for a 'love epic'.

¹⁵ «What distinguishes Donne as a love poet is not his joyful assurance that his love will endure. What distinguishes him is at once the intensity of the pleasure he conveys in the moment of mutual love, and the ferocity with which he attempts to prolong that moment for as long as he can, knowing full well that its end may be near» (Targoff 2008: 49).

Study our manuscripts, those Myriades
 Of letters, which have past twixt thee and mee,
 Thence write our Annals, and in them will bee,
 To all whom loves subliming fire invades,
 Rule and example found;
 There, the faith of any ground
 No schismatique will dare to wound,
 That sees, how Love this grace to us affords,
 To make, to keep, to use, to be these his Records.
 (ll. 10-18)

As the second stanza makes it clear, the real commissioner of the book is Love personified, whose powerful agency allows the transitory, individual experience of the lovers to become a universal metaphor for future generations to come. The personification of love occurs also in another celebrated poem of *Songs and Sonnets*, *The Canonization*, in which we find it set in the same collaborative partnership with the immortalizing power of the written text, able to transform private love into a religious idol to be devoutly worshipped once the lovers leave this world behind:

Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,
 And if unfit for tombes or hearse
 Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse;
 And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
 As well a well wrought urne becomes
 The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,
 And by these hymnes, all shall approve
 Us *Canoniz'd* for Love.
 (*The Canonization*, ll. 28-36)

The «pretty roomes» of the above-quoted poem appear to have the same function as a funerary urn¹⁶, forever containing the two lovers's mortal remains. The «Booke» of the valediction, thanks to the pun on

¹⁶ A similar image occurs in the poem *The Extasie*, where the lovers are compared to *sepulchrall statues* (l. 18).

the word “tome” (l. 20), does also play a similar ‘tomb-like’ role, as will be shown in the next section. In both poems, the construction of a private world which could eventually overcome the defined limits of human existence is described as a mutual undertaking of lover and beloved. The “Myriades of letters” which the lady must attentively peruse represent the final product of the lovers’ affection. The act of letter-writing was of paramount importance for John Donne throughout his whole life (for a thorough account, see Targoff 2008, chapter II). The letter was for Donne a token of material presence, a means to communicate his thoughts and feelings to absent friends – see, for example, one of the two fascinating verse epistles «To Sir *Henry Wotton*», starting with the lines «Sir, more then kisses, letters mingle Soules; / For, thus friends absent speake» (ll. 1-2). Since, as Ilona Bell underlines (1986: 25), «[d]espite the multitude of Donne letters, scholars lament the complete absence of any correspondence with Ann More»¹⁷, we must hesitate to interpret the lines of the second stanza of *A Valediction: of the Booke* with too close a reference to the poet’s biographical details. Nonetheless, the importance Donne placed on his personal correspondence more generally is crucial for a thorough appreciation of the valediction’s second stanza: it is the profound intimacy and the loving reciprocity of the epistolary exchange which makes the resultant book so valuable and precious for the future reader, who will have the privilege of handling a sacred text whose orthodoxy cannot be easily contested: «There, the faith of any ground / No schismatique will dare to wound» (ll. 15-16). Not only does the metaphor draw from the contemporary time of religious turmoil, but, by introducing in the text such an unpoetical term as *schismatique* – used also in another poem of the collection, *The Will* (l. 20) – Donne conflates the troubling macrocosm of historical time with the untouchable and unchangeable microcosm of the lovers’ experience. The “Booke” ensures that this ‘little world’ will outlive

¹⁷ Bell (1986), however, identifies three letters included in Evelyn Simpson’s *Study of the Prose Works of John Donne* (1924) in which Anne More is the most probable addressee.

their earthly life, in the indelible “Records” of a written and hence (re)readable volume.

Yet, for the text to live, the Author(s) must die. What really counts in *A Valediction: of the Booke* is not the expression of a subjective passion, but rather the creation of «a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred» (Barthes 1984: 147). By referring to the four women of the classical world in the first stanza, moreover, the speaker of Donne’s poem inscribes the text in that «multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash» (Barthes 1984: 146). The fantasy of numbering the beloved’s work among those of the learned women of antiquity, of her overwriting the achievements of her illustrious predecessors, might be thought of in terms of Assman’s palimpsest metaphor in which the superposition of writings in the human mind «makes the new the grave of the old» (2011: 143).

In the third stanza, the “Booke” is described as a secret text, written in ciphers, but also as a sepulchre: the death of the lover-authors allows the opening up of endless interpretative possibilities for the “Booke”, the product of their creative passion, upon which no definitive meaning can be bestowed; yet it is the endless striving for this ultimate meaning which grants the “Booke” its immortality.

5. *THIS ALL-GRAVED TOME, / IN CYPHER WRITE*

THE BOOK AS A SECRET TEXT WORLD OF IMMORTALITY

The third stanza of *A Valediction: of the Booke* is the most important of the whole poem, both structurally and thematically. The speaker describes the book as a mysterious volume inscrutable to all but those capable of understanding the new language devised by the lovers¹⁸. It

¹⁸ A similar concept of love’s secrecy is expressed by the speaker of *A Valediction forbidding Mourning*: «‘Twere prophanation of our joyes / To tell the layetie our love» (ll. 7-8).

is a highly inaccessible text that may, if properly read, open up the doors of universal knowledge:

This Booke, as long-liv'd as the elements,
Or as the worlds forme, this all-graved tome,
In cypher write, or new made Idiome;
Wee for loves clergie only' are instruments.

When this booke is made thus,
Should againe the ravenous
Vandals and Goths inundate us,
Learning were safe; in this our Universe
Schooles might learn Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels Verse.
(ll. 19-27)

The coexistence of different disciplines within the book can be read along the lines of Neoplatonic philosophy, as Donald L. Guss remarks (1966: 144-5). One of the Neoplatonic texts mentioned by Guss is Guido Casoni's *Della magia d'amore* (1596), the frontispiece of which lists a long series of arts and professions in which Love manifests itself: «Nella quale si dimostra come Amore sia Metafisico, Fisico, Astrologo, Musico, Geometra, Aritmetico, Grammatico, Dialetico, Rettore, Poeta, Historiografo, Iurisconsulto, Politico»¹⁹. Casoni's catalogue is much longer, including some twenty-seven professions in all. Love's all-encompassing influence over the other human activities is a distinctive motif of *A Valediction: of the Booke*. Building on this theme, the ensuing three stanzas set out to demonstrate with a satirical touch how the lovers' book of love might be *the* invaluable source of knowledge for the followers of different professions, from "Loves Divines" (l. 28) to "Lawyers" (l. 37) to "Statesmen" (l. 46): they will all be provided with their ultimate 'rule book'.

¹⁹ «The book demonstrates how Love is a Metaphysician, a Physicist, an Astrologist, a Musician, a Surveyor, an Arithmetician, a Grammarian, a Dialectician, a Rector, a Poet, a Historiographer, a Jurisconsult, a Politician [...]» (Translation mine).

The “Booke” seems to contain both text and images («this all-graved tome, in cypher write²⁰, or new made Idiome» ll. 20-21). The language ought to be secretive, or at least unfamiliar to the untrained readers: the brief description of the «all-graved tome» resembles that of an alchemical book²¹, drawing heavily from the rich tradition of the Renaissance emblems, mixing the visual with the textual dimension to become «a repository for secret wisdom» whose «resulting obscurity [often] precludes intelligibility without the assistance of all the components, as well as of highly specialized knowledge» (Linden 1995: 19-20; see also Holmyard 1957). The emblem was considered to be the most perfect and complete artistic form in the Renaissance for its conflation of the two sister arts, *pictura* and *poësis*, representing respectively the ‘corporeal’ and the ‘spiritual’ essence of human creativity²². The emblem is consequently Donne’s ideal way of expressing «the fantasy of being fully present» (Targoff 2008: 21), even after the inevitable dissolution that death brings about. With their overt, primary focus on separation and absence, all the four valedictions of the *Songs and Sonnets* foreshadow the ‘last parting’ in their choice of words and images. In *A Valediction: Of the Booke*, the juxtaposition of the adjective ‘all-graved’ with the noun ‘tome’ is extremely cunning in this respect, both words hinting simultaneously at the extended metaphor of the book and at the afterlife imagery so recurrent in the *Songs and Sonnets*. The same coexistence of emblem, book, and burial images can be found in Shakespeare’s sonnet 77, which Assmann (2011: 176-179) discusses as an example of the «optimistic faith in the conservational powers of writing» in the Renaissance. With «a very tutorial frame of mind» (Rowse, in

²⁰ The verb *write* is a disputed variant. In other editions (see Patrides, in Donne 1985) the past participle *writ* is preferred to the imperative *write*: «this all-graved tome / In cypher writ» (ll. 20-21).

²¹ Cf. Donne’s elegy XIX, *To His Mistress Going to Bed*, where women are compared to «mystick books» for «lay-men» (ll. 40-41).

²² For a thorough discussion of the relationship between word and image in the Renaissance, see Innocenti (1983; 1996).

Shakespeare 1964: 157), the speaker of this sonnet recommends the 'fair youth' to fill a blank book with the thoughts which arise from his contemplation of *vanitas* objects, such as the glass and the dial:

Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear,
 Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste;
 The vacant leaves thy mind's imprint will bear,
 And of this book this learning mayst thou taste:
 The wrinkles which thy glass will truly show
 Of mouthèd graves will give thee memory;
 Thou by thy dial's shady stealth mayst know
 Time's thievish progress to eternity.
 (Sonnet 77, ll. 1-8)

In Shakespeare's sonnet, the book, filled with *memento mori* reflections, has the exclusively private function of making the young man aware of the passage of time. It is a volume bound to be read by the 'fair youth' alone, so that he may develop a more mature stand in the face of the transience of the human mortal condition

Look, what thy memory cannot contain
 Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
 Those children nursed, delivered from thy brain,
 To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.
 These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
 Shall profit thee and much enrich thy book.
 (Sonnet 77, ll. 9-14)

While for Shakespeare the book functions as a reminder of human mortality, the «all-graved tome» of Donne's valediction plays defiantly with death images in order to reassert with rhetorical strength and persuasion the immortality of the lovers' passion. In Donne's conceited argumentation, the book becomes an engraved tome/tomb which will last as long as the elements and the "worlds forme". This is an undoubtedly powerful formulation, of ambiguous and baffling complexity, probably referring to the perfect, universal harmony between the macrocosm and the human microcosm, on whose principles of exact correspondence much Neoplatonic

philosophy and alchemical theories are founded. It is not by chance that the speaker stresses the fact that the book enables the construction of a “Universe”, the centre of a new cultural power capable of resisting the ferocious invasions of future barbarians. Ultimately, however, the elusive expression “worlds forme” resists any attempt of definition: as Angela Leighton (2007: 3) suggests, the success of the word ‘form’ in literary and critical texts derives precisely from its subtle, Protean attributes: «Although it looks like a fixed shape, a permanent configuration or ideal, whether in eternity, in the mind, or on the page, in fact form is versatile. It remains open to distant senses, distortions, to the push-and-pull of opposites or cognates».

The “Booke” the poet envisages is a universal project of world formation: the scope of this enterprise is so vast and all-embracing that the textual world thus created is ruled by the paradox that ‘everything’ and ‘nothing’ come to signify the same ‘thing’, i.e. ‘nothing’ at all. Jonathan Culler (1982: 98) suggests that «[t]he value and force of a text may depend to a considerable extent on the way it deconstructs the philosophy that subtends it». The structure of *A Valediction: of the Booke*, ending with the apparent sceptical recantation of the whole preceding reasoning, similarly contains the seeds of its own undoing. Everything that can be created and expressed by language – love, life, death – may easily amount to ‘nothing’ as soon as the bound between soul and body, lover and beloved, is being menaced.

6. NOTHING BUT A “BOOKE”.

BEYOND MATERIAL AND IMMATERIAL

The fourth, fifth, and sixth stanza of *A Valediction: of the Book* form a single unit within the poem: each of them is marked by a satirical vein, typical of the early Donne; the language of these stanzas is a mixture of poetic and prosaic elements which, besides being a salient feature of rhetorical obscurity, expresses a critical stance on religious,

bureaucratic and political power. The love poet does not ignore the real social forces but brings them into the picture by questioning their effective power.

The speaker pungently describes the response that his mistress's book ought to generate in three main groups of future readers: "Loves Divines", "Lawyers", and "Statesman", most probably ranked in a decreasing order of abstractness (the Neoplatonic *degradatio*)²³. One of the distinctive features of *Songs and Sonnets* is the impossibility of tracking down one single, constantly identifiable speaker: as Virginia Woolf observes, «we cannot see how so many different qualities meet together in one man» (2009: 361). The voice of *A Valediction: of the Booke* shows all this chameleon-like potential in the short space of twenty-seven lines: from the Neoplatonic perspective of the fourth stanza, in which the speaker explains the advantages and disadvantages of embodied love, moving on to the misogynistic stance of the fifth, which condemns the vainness and unreliability of fickle women, eventually ending with the almost nihilistic remarks of the sixth, where lovers and statesmen seem to face the same meaningless 'nothing'. All three stanzas are introduced by the adverb of place *Here*, transforming the book into a 'locus' of universal learning:

Here Loves Divines, (since all Divinity
Is love or wonder) may finde all they seeke,

²³ This catalogue brings to mind the first monologue of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (Scene I), another Renaissance text where the symbolism of the book is paramount (Cf. Matalene III 1973; Budra 1991). Upon first entering the scene, Faustus seems to be glancing through his books so as to decide in which area of knowledge to «settle his studies». One after another he discards all the possible options: logician, physician, jurist, divine, statesman; building up such a climax, he finally decides to become a magician («These metaphysics of magicians / And necromantic books are heavenly»; «A sound magician is a demi-god; / Here tire, my brains, to get a deity» Scene I, 48-49 and 61-62). Mephostophilis will give him the book of the new art (Scene V), a compendium of universal knowledge, where Faustus will find everything that he wishes to know, thus it is a volume resembling the one described in *A Valediction: of the Booke*.

Whether abstract spirituall love they like,
 Their Soules exhal'd with what they do not see,
 Or, loth so to amuze
 Faiths infirmitie, they chuse
 Something which they may see and use;
 For, though minde be the heaven, where love doth sit,
 Beauty'a convenient type may be to figure it.
 (ll. 28-36)

This stanza might be viewed as a compendium of the theories of love described in other poems of *Songs and Sonnets*, like *Aire and Angels* and *The Extasie*, both revolving around the necessity of uniting carnal and spiritual love: the former expressible in a visible dimension, the latter only imaginable in a metaphysical realm.

The fifth stanza is marked by the inclusion of many un-poetic words drawn from the specialist vocabulary of legal language²⁴: “prerogative”, “states”, “subsidies”. In the face of the increasing specialization of human knowledge, the “Booke” appears to reclaim that alien terminology for the lovers’ own use and so make legal language dependent on the language of love:

Here more then in their bookes may Lawyers finde,
 Both by what titles Mistresses are ours,
 And how prerogative those states devours,
 Transferr'd from Love himselfe, to womankind,
 Who though from heart, and eyes,
 They exact great subsidies,
 Forsake him who on them relies,
 And for the cause, honour, or conscience give,
 Chimeraes, vaine as they, or their prerogative.
 (ll. 37-45)

²⁴ Donne plays with legal language from the outset by using the term *esloygne* (l. 3), with the meaning “To convey or remove out of the jurisdiction of the court or of the sheriff” (OED, II. 2). As Robbins observes (in Donne 2010: 269), «this is one of the French legal terms used by Sir John Davies, *Gulling Sonnets* 8. 12 (1594-6), his parody of the jargon-laden anonymous sonnet-sequence *Zepheria* (1594)».

The sixth stanza brings together love and politics: what the two ‘disciplines’ have in common is the elusiveness of their subject matter («Love and their art [statesmanship] alike it deadly wounds, / If to consider what ‘tis, one proceed», ll. 48-49). The changes in language brought about by the scientific progress of the period are most evident in the final word of the stanza, “Alchimy”, used here as «a stock example of trickery» (Robbins, in Donne 2010: 272). This negative connotation of the term clashes with the positive alchemical imagery of the preceding stanzas, consistent with the coexistence of the old and the new which always characterises a transitional period of crisis and revolution. In such an uncertain age, excellent lovers and politicians appear to be those «who the present governe well» (l. 51):

Here Statesmen, (or of them, they which can reade,)
 May of their occupation finde the grounds.
 Love and their art alike it deadly wounds,
 If to consider what ‘tis, one proceed:
 In both they doe excell
 Who the present governe well,
 Whose weaknesse none doth, or dares tell;
 In this thy booke, such will their nothing see,
 As in the Bible some can finde out Alchimy.
 (ll. 46-54)

The symbolism of the book is not the central preoccupation of the three stanzas just quoted: in this part of the poem, the “Booke” serves the purpose of identifying three categories of readership that act as ‘foils’ of the passionate lovers. The speaker defines love, the main topic of their “Booke”, by contrasting its essence with the sterile spirituality of the “Loves Divines”, the labyrinthine, shrewd rhetoric of “Lawyers” which resembles the vows of unfaithful mistresses, and the short-sightedness and ignorance of rulers, whose ‘nothingness’ make them paradoxically equal to the two lovers. Both categories have to cope with the insignificance of their status when faced with the overwhelming power of love that the book, as established in the first three stanzas, so clearly ought to express. As Marotti puts it

(1986: 171), «this poem [...] was a fictional counterpoise to a disturbing actuality». With this valediction, the speaker takes leave from the world, from this troubling ‘actuality’. Every act of writing is after all, Hélène Cixous suggests, «an act that suppresses the world. We annihilate the world with a book» (Cixous 1993: 19).

In her lecture on *The School of the Dead*, Cixous talks about the authors she loves, whom she describes as «writers of *extremity*, those who take themselves to the extremes of experience, thought, life»: they all share a «desire to die», which is «the desire to know; [...] the desire to enjoy» (Cixous 1993: 34). Donne may be equally described as a poet «of *extremity*»: the ‘nothing’ revealed by the book of the valediction can be understood as «The thing that is both known and unknown, the most unknown and the best unknown, this is what we are looking for when we write» (Cixous 1993: 38). This moment of ambiguous revelation comes often, in Donne’s poetry, at the moment of dying²⁵: it is the same kind of negative knowledge that we find, for example, at the beginning of *A Valediction: forbidding Mourning* – with its memorable image of the “virtuous men” (l. 1) on their deathbed – or at the end of *A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day, being the shortest day*²⁶. The valediction, as a poetic form itself, has the pragmatic function of taking leave, of bidding farewell to one’s beloved: the separation is a metaphoric preparation to death and, hence, an act engendering the greatest anxiety imaginable, a real condition of suffering which cannot possibly be placated by the powerful, soothing images which language evokes. From time to time I like to think of this valediction as a visual poem, since the typographical arrangement of each stanza vaguely recalls the shape of an open book.

²⁵ It is important to recall that, as stated in the *OED* (I. 7. d.), the verb *to die* was “[m]ost common as a poetical metaphor in the late 16th and 17th cent”, with the meaning “To experience a sexual orgasm”.

²⁶ For a close reading of *A Nocturnall* along these lines, see Nichols (2011), whose article revolves around the possible influence of Dionysian negative theology on Donne’s poem.

7. *BUT ABSENCE TRYES HOW LONG THIS LOVE WILL BEE.*

CONCLUSION.

The concluding stanza seems to test the significance of the extended book metaphor: once absence threatens the solidity of the lover's union, the "all-graved tome" is the only means to keep the relationship intact: the act of reading re-establishes the bond that the act of separation unmade. Although the tone of the last lines is far from optimistic, it manages to convey the sense of existential doubt induced by the speaker's coming to terms with the death-like 'nothing' of the penultimate stanza, the dimension of endless meaning-making, where no 'forms' can be ever perceived. In this domain of absence, of shapeless possibilities, the bearing cannot be given by luminous stars and it is thus the "darke eclipses" that provide the speaker with the essential point of reference:

Thus vent thy thoughts; abroad I'll studie thee,
As he removes farre off, that great heights takes;
How great love is, presence best tryall makes,
But absence tryes how long this love will bee;
 To take a latitude
 Sun, or stares, are fitliest view'd
 At their brightest, but to conclude
 Of longitudes, what other way have wee,
But to marke when, and where the darke eclipses bee?
(ll. 55-63)

Through the act of reading, the incorporeal text of the absent female writer is invested with a new body – that of the male reader's – thus recreating the union jeopardized by the latter's departure. Donne's argumentation is rendered even more innovative by his overturning of the traditional sexual connotations of the writing metaphor held by many cultures, whereby «[t]he writing instrument itself denotes masculinity (pen = penis), whereas the writing surface is the 'matrix', and the white paper is virgin – therefore, feminine» (Assmann 2011: 141).

The real fascination of the poem, however, arises from the scepticism cast upon the whole conceit. The speaker is not fully confident that the disquieting void created by absence can be really overcome. Moving towards death, bringing oneself to the extremes of the human condition is a life-threatening enterprise. Yet, the «point where blindness and light meet» (Cixous 1993: 38), the «lovely glorious nothing» of Donne's *Aire and Angels* (l. 6), is precisely 'somewhere else', in that uncharted territory which we try to access every time we write or read. It is a step towards death *and* ultimate love, both, until the very end, unattainable. The "Booke" keeps record of this endless quest, instilling in both writers and readers the possibility of immortality. As stated succinctly by Drew Leder (1990: 123), «Language, as concretized in the text, leaves behind its voice of origin, is able to live on through the centuries, to be instantiated unchanged in an indefinite number of locales».

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