

## Donne's Nocturnal

In Donne's poem, *A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day*,<sup>1</sup> the word *nocturnal* is understood in the first place as 'night-piece' – the meaning given in the Oxford English Dictionary directly referring to this locus. 'Night-piece', applied to a poem, is transferred from visual art: Ben Jonson uses the word to describe the cloudy back-cloth of his *Masque of Blackness*,<sup>2</sup> and Webster, in the closing scene of *The White Devil*, makes Lodovico acknowledge his part in the tragedy as having 'limn'd this night-piece'.<sup>3</sup> Herrick and Vaughan use the word in its transferred sense.<sup>4</sup> *Nocturnal*, however, also carries a religious overtone as *officium nocturnale*, and may be found in this sense denoting the last service of the day. By analogy with such words as *diurnal*, *ordinal* – and even Herrick's *trentall*<sup>5</sup> – used in a religious context, *nocturnal* takes on a solemn, ceremonious quality appropriate to the commemoration of St Lucy's Day, here marked – old style – as the shortest day of the year, the winter solstice. As St Lucy's name indicates, the saint, in the words applied to her by St Agatha, is 'indeed a light', but this is the day that contains the fewest daylight hours, and so must be considered the darkest of the year; the irony of what has been celebrated as a festival of light as the year reaches its nadir adds to the poignancy of the poem, Lucy its only light. Donne further emphasises the darkness of his spiritual annihilation by using the language of alchemy; the process of *nigredo* is a total reduction, marked by the repeated 'nothing' that particularises his desolate state.

So far the language is richly layered, but there is a further dimension. In *A Valediction, of Weeping*, he had envisaged the world map, as it might be by Mercator's projection, as marvellously figuring the creation itself:

On a round ball  
A workeman that hath copies by, can lay  
An Europe, Afrique and an Asia,  
And quickly make that, which was nothing, All.<sup>6</sup>

It is a commonplace that the new discoveries of science inset in what had hitherto been the common stock of literate knowledge augmented poetic

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vocabularies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and Donne was able to draw upon the cabinet of curiosities opened up by new explorations and new philosophies. In a figure based on the effect of the moon on ocean tides, when the gravitational pull was observed but not understood, he develops his imagery out of the supposition (noted by Roger Bacon in his *Opus Maius*) that the moon's rays drew up vapours from the bottom of the sea, causing the ocean to swell. His hyperbolic image takes in legends of the Flood, whose limit was believed to touch the sphere of the moon; the attractions of the lady he addresses are deemed far in excess of the lunar powers:

O more than Moone  
Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy Spheare<sup>7</sup>

In a similar fashion, in the *Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse* Donne exploits the new cartography by depicting the sick body as a cosmic map superimposed on a world map such as actual explorers might have used. The body-map marks out the journey of the soul towards the west, by tradition the place of death into which the sun nightly disappeared, but as the flat map curves round to follow the shape of the real world when pasted on a globe, the farthest west becomes the east, the Orient, from which the sun rises. The Orient is further identified with Christ, the dayspring, so that the journey towards death is a journey towards eternal life. The merging of east and west is similarly recorded in *Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward*:

There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,  
And by that setting endless Day beget.<sup>8</sup>

The language of Donne's *Nocturnall* relies heavily on the technical vocabulary of alchemy. But as Donne had used the physical imagery of the map to chart his spiritual journey towards death, cross-referencing the microcosm, man, with the macrocosm, the universe, so that the body of the dying man itself becomes the map, in this poem the state of the bereaved lover makes him the *instrument* by which the lowest point in the year is marked, the field shifted from earth to sky. The title puns on the multiple meanings of *nocturnal*, including now its significance as navigational device. By means of an appropriation of images drawn from current science, Donne extends his poetic range to include the significance a sailor would have read into the use of the word. The nocturnal, or nocturnlabe, was a star-clock; a photograph of such an instrument, made by Humphrey Cole in 1580, appears in J. H. Parry's *Age of Reconnaissance*, where it is also illustrated from Lucas Wagenaer's *The Mariner's Mirroure* of 1588.<sup>9</sup> Although this device had been known for centuries in Europe as well as in Asia – Joseph Needham comments that it had been used by Chinese astronomers in ancient times<sup>10</sup> – contemporary interests in exploration gave it current prominence in the seventeenth century. (Needham elsewhere reproduces a diagram of the nocturnal from a work by Petrus Apianus, c. 1540.)<sup>11</sup>

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The nocturnal was a device for telling the time by night, and 'was a disc with a peephole in the middle for looking at the pole star and a swivelling pointer to align on one of the pole star's "guards", Kochab. A scale running round the disc showed the pointer's position for midnight on each day of the year. The pilot set it for the right date and waited till Kochab showed beyond the pointer; it was then midnight.'<sup>12</sup> The nocturnal is thus an instrument for fixing a midnight position.

The axis of the earth is aligned to the Pole Star, the North Star; as long as its light was visible, it was the lodestar providing the fixed point by which navigation by night had become possible, and this gives a vital orientation also in alchemical works. For practical purposes, however, the nocturnal had taken on a more homely form than the astrolabe-like device described above. In the words of E. G. R. Taylor, 'Sailors imagined a human figure up in the sky with the Pole Star in his breast. His head was "above" it (i.e. north), his feet "below", his arms to right and left, and the Guards were described as they stood in relation to his limbs.'<sup>13</sup>

By means of such an image, Donne's bereaved lover can equate himself with the nocturnal so that his body becomes the instrument by which the year's midnight and the day's can be objectively reckoned, just as the dying body had become a map. As a human version of the nocturnal he would be able to register the darkest, lowest point of day and year; for this to be effective the stars must be visible in the sky. But whereas the figure of the world-map led to a positive result as the west flows towards the east, here the opposite prevails – the nocturnal confirms the total negativity of the lover's condition once his light is lost and will register nothing. The figure imagined by sailors is itself an 'ordinary nothing', a figment of imagination like the 'round earth's imagin'd corners'; if this is how he sees himself, the lover is reduced to a state wherein the figure itself is annihilated by the loss of light. Donne's combination of physical apparatus, however figurative, and meta-physical implication is masterly, and typical of the way he made his learning focus sharply on the centre of his poetry.

The image of the navigational nocturnal could have been derived from a number of sources; Donne may actually have handled such an instrument. The depiction of the nocturnal as a human figure was a homely mnemonic suited to a sailor's rule of thumb, but to Donne and his fellow intellectuals, following St Augustine and 'those great doctors', the human figure had become the measure of all things. In the *First Anniversary*, Donne refers to the assumption, developed by St Augustine in the *City of God*, that human proportions had dictated the dimensions of the Ark – even Isaiah's carpenter planned his measurements after the figure of a man (Isaiah 44:13).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, many nocturnals also served astrological functions, and the complexity of the night sky had been reduced to an intelligible form by the constellations and the figures that represented them, two-dimensional transparencies that made human sense of the random profusion of the stars. By the time of Hesiod,

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the stars in the night sky had been domesticated; Orion and the Pleiades marked the beginning of the farmer's year, the Pole Star was the sailor's security in the hours of darkness. The practical uses of the star maps were easily transformed into literary tropes.

The complexity of the poem shows the various conceits, posited on the diverse meanings of *nocturnal*, leading inexorably to the same conclusion. By alchemy, the lover is reduced to nothing and has entered a spiritual darkness. As nocturnal, the lover marks the heart of darkness, and Donne takes the image further by rendering the instrument useless; with the death of his lover, the extinction of light, all is lost, and as the nocturnal is effective only when the Pole Star is visible, the ghostly image of the figure in the night sky loses even its shadowy substance.

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## Notes

- 1 John Donne, *The Elegies and the Songes and sonnets* (sic.), ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965); text, pp. 84–5, notes, pp. 216–8. There is no note glossing 'nocturnal' thus, nor have I found any other published instance of the instrument of navigation being connected with Donne's usage.
- 2 Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, *Inigo Jones, the Theatre of the Stuart Court* (London, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Sotheby's and the University of California Press, 1973), I, 90. Jonson seems to limit the meaning of 'night-piece' to the depiction of night sky.
- 3 John Webster, *The White Devil*, V. 5. 295, ed. David C. Gunby, in John Webster, *Three Plays* (London, Penguin, 1972; reprint 1995), p. 166.
- 4 As in Herrick's 'The Night-Piece, to *Julia*': Robert Herrick, *Poems*, ed. L. C. Martin (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 217.
- 5 Herrick's use of 'Trentall' is very specific: thirty masses for the repose of a soul, one of the frequent recollections of the old religion in his verses. 'The Funerall Rites of the Rose', line 10 (*ed. cit.*, p. 237).
- 6 Donne, *ed. cit.* p. 69, lines 10–12.
- 7 Donne, *ed. cit.*, p. 69, lines 19–20.
- 8 John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2nd edn, 1978), p. 31, line 11.
- 9 John H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1963), pp. 105–6. Illustrated on Plate 17, which also reproduces the title page of the English translation of Lucas Waghenaer's *The Mariners Mirrour* (1588), where the bottom left hand corner of the page has a sketch of a device corresponding to the technical components listed.
- 10 Joseph Needham, *Clerks and Craftsmen in China and the West* (Cambridge, CUP, 1970), p. 6.
- 11 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge, CUP, 1959), III, 338–9.
- 12 J. R. Hale, *Renaissance Exploration* (London, BBC, 1968), p. 96.

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- 13 E. G. R. Taylor, *The Haven-finding Art* (London, Hollis and Carter, 1956), pp.147–8. Taylor provides an illustration of the ‘sky clock’ with an inset human figure.
- 14 John Donne, *Epithalamions, Anniversaries and Epicedes*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 31, ‘An Anatomy of the World’, lines 317–19:
- Shee, who if those great Doctors truly said  
That the Arke to mans proportion[s] was made  
Had been a type for that, as that might be . . .
- Donne’s debt to Augustine is acknowledged in Milgate’s notes, pp. 146–7.

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