Colliding Discourses: John Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” and the New Historicism

Summary: This essay seeks to develop new critical procedures to better serve works like John Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington.” It argues that Donne’s “Obsequies” is more profitably approached by readings which de-emphasize the valorization of personality and presence which have so dominated Donne studies in the past. For example, by focusing on a variety of discourses, rather than a single personalized “voice,” one discovers in this poem a richly complex fabric of cultural, economic and social ideologies. The poem is thus restored to readability and its cultural contexts recaptured for future discussion.

John Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” has received the kind of critical attention usually reserved for final performances of aging ball players of the Bull Durham leagues — neither hostile nor penetrating but, at best, rather condescendingly dismissive. Wesley Milgate, editor of the Epithalamions, Anniversaries and Epicedes, comments, for example, that Donne’s epicleses (among them the lines to Harington) are “patchy performances, including areas of flat and somewhat clumsy versifying.”1 Samuel Johnson in his “Life of Cowley” asked (in reference to some of the dominant imagery of the poem), “Who but Donne would have thought that a good man is a telescope?” More recently, Ernest Gilman has described the verse for Harington as “a kind of inferior third ‘Anniversary’”,2 and Arthur Marotti, looking at the poem in the context of patronage literature, labels it an exercise in “sterile ingenuity” and implies that its lack of success in that context was probably deserved.3

Those critics who do give the poem fuller discussion — and they are not
many — explore the lines to Harington for the handling of trope and image in pursuit of Donne’s sources or in amplification of his manipulation of theme and structure (Kolin, Lebans, Milgate). Neither approach has succeeded in generating much enthusiasm for this poem, and thus it still remains relatively unexamined, turning up only as an obligatory coda to discussions of Donne’s work as a whole.

Yet it may be that the difficulties in our appreciation of this, Donne’s last secular poem, are less a consequence of the failure of the poem itself and more due to critical procedures which have, in this particular instance, diminished into a series of rather perfunctory interpretive moves. Readings of Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” have not profited from some of the new directions in criticism, neither from the new historicism nor from the suggestions of post-structuralist approaches, both of which de-emphasize the valorization of personality and presence which has so dominated Donne criticism in both the distant and recent past. As a consequence, these resources have been neglected, and poems like the lines for Harington, which might most usefully benefit from them, have been correspondingly downplayed. What I would like to investigate in this essay, then, is whether by asking a different set of questions about the poem — questions which do not situate its value in complexity of theme and image or in the dramatic voice of its speaker — we might thus recover Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington,” and poems like it, for future interest and discussion.

Donne’s poem could profitably be resituated, not only in the usual context of the Renaissance literature of patronage but also in what might be its twentieth-century equivalent, a critical methodology designed to reflect the literary, social and political goals of its practitioners, the new historicism. I am thus making an initial claim that Donne’s poem needs a new context, and a second claim that the new context needs poems like Donne’s, because there are, as I see it, as yet undeveloped possibilities in this particular critical approach.

Given its claim to return literature to the social and cultural circumstances of its production, the new historicism seems specifically suited to the refutation of some assumptions about Renaissance occasional poetry in general and the poetry of patronage in particular. Specifically, because of its productive awareness of the ways in which subjectivity and literary stance both shape and are shaped by cultural, economic and social ideologies, the new historicism provides an approach which allows us to assess Donne’s poem not as a personal statement by its author but to assess that “author” as a personal embodiment of the various discourses which both constitute and challenge its authorness.
Moreover, such an approach can be used to restore to readability and discussion poems like Donne’s which may have been marginalized for a variety of cultural reasons, including the cultural cultivation of a reader’s preference for the highly individualized dramatic voice. Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” does not give us that voice, but it does give us a richness and complexity of voices which a new historicist approach can uncover and identify as a source of value in the poem. Such a restoration to readability through the establishment of new values in a given text is among the advantages which a new historicist approach can offer. Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington,” then, is a case in point.

II

Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” was apparently composed in 1614 sometime after the death of the second Lord Harington of smallpox shortly before his twenty-second birthday. Donne had several good reasons to compose the poem, not the least of which was probably a sense of personal loss as he had been on friendly terms with Harington and his sister, the Countess of Bedford, for several years.⁵ The young Lord Harington, probably the most intimate friend of the recently deceased Prince Henry, was already an idealized figure whose death prompted both other eulogies and at least one posthumous engraving. Described as “the most compleat yong gentleman of his age that this kingdom could afford for religion, learning and courteous behaviour,”⁶ Harington was thus the obvious choice for an occasional poem. Additionally, as the brother of Donne’s patroness, Lady Bedford, Harington in death offered Donne the opportunity to make an appeal through the poem to his patroness for badly needed funds to pay off his debts before taking orders. On the latter point Donne was disappointed. Although Lady Bedford responded warmly to the poem (Donne reports, in a letter to Goodyere, that it “move[d] her to . . . much compassion”⁷), she sent the poet only 30£. His acute disappointment at this turn of events has been the focus of much commentary. Both the begging letter,⁸ which Donne sent with the poem to Lady Bedford and the letter to Goodyere in which he records his disappointment have led critics to conclude that Donne used the praise of the deceased young brother of his patroness as an occasion for personal advancement.⁹

Such emphasis on the historical Donne has, however, distorted our reading of the poem. The privileging of individuality, whether in the form of assertions about authorial intention or in its guise as a preference for the highly
dramatic voice, obscures the complex fashion in which both subjectivity and subject unfold here. The historical Donne does function in the poem as does the historical Lord Harington, but both do so not conventionally (that is, as we have been taught to read them), but rather as sites against which the ideology of individualism can be projected and traced. Given that ideology inevitably polarizes, one of the first observations we can make is that if the historical poet and subject are the sites of the ideological play of the poem, discourses which operate through them will inevitably collide and polarize. Thus Donne’s poem, insofar as it invokes the variety of historical discourse involved in its production, situates that variety of discourse in both speaker and subject as sites of collision between certainty and doubt, truth and lies, authority and its subversion, even poetic license and liberty. Moreover, the poem does so specifically because the role of the individual poet, particularly in the poetry of patronage, as both producer and produced is highly ambivalent in relation to his celebrated subject. On the one hand, the poet ostensibly wields the immortalizing power of verse; on the other, his subject, through the powerful figures it represents, offers the potential to advance the poet’s fortunes, and thus sustain that verse for posterity, or deny them, thereby marginalizing those lines.

A central feature of the problem for the historical Donne was that circumstances in providing the young Lord Harington as the subject for his poem had positioned the poet at the center of conflict between two powerful ideologies, that of the crown and that of its challengers, not the least of which was the court of the young Prince of Wales, or what that court had recently represented. Moreover, that rivalry, as each side manifested itself in specific self-selected imagery, is inevitably reflected in the poem as a collision of discourses. Finally, a further complicating factor is the historical Donne’s position with respect to his own career. As Donne’s last secular poem, written just before his decision to take orders and in effect enter the service of both God and King James, the eulogy to Harington is also conditioned by a transition from a social world in which, as Arthur Marotti has taught us, the writing of poetry was essentially self-advertising, deliberately part of the social performance of the individual, to an ostensibly spiritual career where the individual became the instrument not of his own secular power and advancement but of God and the church whose interests both idealized and practical he was to serve. A central question of the poem then has to do with the problem of appropriation: does the poet use the subject and occasion as instruments to advance his own career, or does he become the instrument for the powerful interests he might serve? The historical Donne’s nervous awareness of the
movement from the known world of the coterie poet to the new world of power and authority where his voice would be at the service of powerful interests, some internalized, some not, also marks the poem.

Regarded thus from the perspective of its mode of existence as a site of colliding discourses, Donne’s “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” is neither “sterile ingenuity” nor an “inferior third ‘Anniversary’” but rather an intriguing instance of discourse at a crisis of transition, and the basic features of Donne’s lines to Harington are thus related to its situation as a poem which not only accommodates a variety of competing discourses but which also marks the transition from one dominant mode of discourse to another. Some of these features include the curious imagery which provoked Dr. Johnson’s scorn, the unusual omission of reference to the historical situation of Donne’s lines to Harington which ironically, perhaps even perversely, appear to say as little as possible about that individual and, most interestingly, the rather odd handling of the poet’s speaking voice. In fact, what is of particular note is the way in which these specific features combine in such a fashion that the poem asserts but then absorbs and aggressively, and even violently, effaces both its subject and the subjectivity which previous generations of critics have identified as the particularly “literary” properties of a given word, those which in the past have constituted its value.

The poem begins, as is proper to a funeral elegy, with the conventionally serious rhetoric of lamentation and encomium. While we have no way of knowing whether the title, with its emphasis on the unusual selection of the word “obsequies,” is Donne’s title or not, that choice of word is reflective of the careful attention to the conventions of funeral elegy which the poem displays. As Milgate points out, Donne quickly moved away from the exactly balanced sequencing of lamentation, consolation and panegyric found in the 1609 poem to the Lady Markham to a more fluid handling of funeral elegy.\(^{10}\) The address to Harington, for example, begins with panegyric (“Faire soule, which wast, not onely, ‘as all soules bee, / Then when thou wast infused, harmony,/But dids’t continue so . . .’” II, 1-3), then modulates into lamentation (“But where can I affirme, or where arrest /My thoughts on his deeds? II, 41-43), yet carefully avoids an indecorous descent into grief by confining that lamentation to the loss of an exemplary figure (the dominant theme of the poem) rather than permitting its expression as personal desolation. By speaking directly to Harington, Donne gives his lines an immediacy that his other elegies lack, but by restricting that address to the universal and timeless “soule” of the young nobleman, Donne also sustains emotional distance. By
aligning himself with Harington ("See, and with joy, mee to that good degree /Of goodnesse growne, that I can studie thee" II, 9-10), he risks an indecorous obliteration of status and rank, but by subtly reminding the Countess, his most important reader, of his own parallel but more earthly transition between careers which suggests a similar, though lesser, translation from one mode of being to another, he implies possession of the credentials which serve to justify that alignment. If, as Milgate asserts, the conventional complement of elegy is not hyperbole but rather a "dilution" of the theological truth that the goodness of a good man is "literally the Christ within [him],," then it is the elegy to Harington which, among Donne’s elegies, most fully exploits the belief which Donne himself inscribed in the autograph book of Michael Corvinas: "what is spoken of Christ may be said of each and every Christian."

The lines of the Harington poem do this, however, through imagery that on one level of discourse reinforces that conventional theology while at the same time, insofar as the handling of that imagery emerges from another area of discourse, challenges and undermines it. The imagery which dominates the poem is, specifically, the imagery of measurement — of map, telescope, magnifying glass, compass, scale and pocket clock — long associated with questions of spiritual and psychic location. The Pauline mirror (I Cor. 13.9-12), for example, is the locus classicus for the Biblical statement of the theme of assessment of one’s spiritual condition through divine refraction, and Milgate’s edition of the poem underscores Donne’s conventional use of this and similar Biblical passages through proleptic reference to his sermons, sketching out the various ways in which the exemplary individual, insofar as he images the divine, provides both reflection (as "mirror" or "glasse") and standard by which others might gauge their own spiritual growth. The following passage from the first section of the elegy offers a clear instance of such conventional use:

Through God be truly’our glass, through which we see
All, since the beeing of all things is hee,
Yet are the trunkes which doe to us derive
Things, in proportion fit, by perspective,
Deeds of good men, for by their living here,
Vertues, indeed remote, seeme to be nere.

(II, 35-40)

Also using the imagery of measurement, Donne’s contemporary, Joseph Hall, contemplates in like fashion the way in which Christian virtues such as those Harington possessed affect the average individual.
Charity and Faith make up one perfect pair of compasses, that can take the true latitude of a Christian heart. Faith is the one foot, pitch’t in the centre unmoved, whiles Charity walks about, in a perfect circle of beneficence; these two never did, never go asunder.¹²

Moreover, the ostensibly hyperbolic compliment to an individual who, like the Harington of Donne’s poem, demonstrates a moral potency commensurate with the potency of Christ himself, is justified by passages from the Bible summarized by Donne, again in one of his sermons where he asserts that even lesser individuals than Harington can “grow to bee Filii Dei, The sonnes of God; And by that title, Cohaeredes Christi, Joint-heires with Christ [Rom viii:17]; And so to bee Christi ipse, Christs our selves, as God calls all his faithfull, his Anointed [Ps.cv.15], his Christs (Sermons, viii, 70).¹³

Biblical authority is not the only authority behind the imagery of measurement, however. This language was very much the self-selected discourse of the Stuart Court. For example, in one passage, Donne comments on what appears to have been a direct command from King Charles to publish a sermon that would make the king himself:

as a Glasse, (When the Sun it selfe is the Gospell of Christ Jesus) to reflect, and cast them upon your Subjects. It was a Metaphor in which, your Majesties Blessed Father seemd to delight, for in the name of a Mirroir, a Looking Glasse he sometimes presented Himselfe,

(Sermons, vii, 72)

It would seem given such passages that, as Milgate observes, Donne’s use of the imagery of measurement, since it is drawn from the discourse of royalty and of the Bible, both secular and spiritual authorities, implied a decorous readiness “to accept the symbols in which James I’s Court imagined itself.” As Milgate concludes, “there is no doubt about [Donne’s] feeling for the rituals in which the ideal patterns of royalty and of ordered society were expressed.”¹⁴

Such passages, however, viewed not as expressions of the inferred feelings of a particular historical figure but as, in Foucault’s phrase, “authorless discourse,”¹⁵ are hardly non-problematical as Milgate assumes. First, the imagery of measurement, while clearly more concerned with problems of psychic and spiritual assessment than with literal physical location, is also consistent in that many of the instruments of measurement cited in the poem are associated with new explorations in the world of optics, cartography, and astronomy, suggestive of the new world which Donne could enter by taking orders. Thus the historical Donne functions in the poem not as an individual
situated in a particular time period, but rather as a link between two areas of discourse, the socially-sanctioned, ecclesiastical rhetoric of Bible, king and court, and the daring radical world of exploration and risk. Not the least complicating feature of the poem, moreover, is the point that the new world which Donne is entering — that of allegedly stable power and authority — is presented here in the discourse of its radical challenger. Thus one could easily infer in the historical Donne not only “feeling for ritual” but also attitudes of nervousness attendant on the movement from the known world of the coterie poet to the unknown world of power and authority in which he, selected by King James I for his new ecclesiastical role, would surely be himself an instrument. The nervousness is redoubled in the poem particularly because the instruments of measurement, specifically the telescope which dominates much of the first section of the poem, were initially regarded not as powerful vehicles, reliable in use for matters of serious import, but as toys, sold in market places and at religious fairs as objects of curiosity. Thus, while the imagery of the poem suggests a psychic nexus of venture and risk, it also undercuts that venture, reducing it to the mock-serious level of child’s play. Set against the conventionally serious discourse of lamentation and encomium, then, is a cross-current of doubt that fails to take even that doubt seriously, perhaps with good reason. As Donne enters an area where sacred vows and holy word, supposedly untainted, predominate, the poem could also be said to display his tense awareness that the secular motives which propel him and the political objectives of those who have chosen him are inappropriate, even scandalous.

Thus one does not need to rest assumptions about the motives of the poem on inferences about the historical Donne to justify an awareness of conflict within the poem. While references to mirrors and glasses throughout are drawn from a Biblical and royal authority which depended in part for its potency on assumptions of the timelessness of divine order, this second area of discourse, more suggestive of the frailties of temporality and human variability, also conditions our reactions to the poem. This area of discourse is most easily distinguished in passages where the conventional Biblical imagery of the Pauline mirror, itself already appropriated by the Stuart court, is modulated by the world of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century science in which that “glasse” is recast into the contemporary idiom of clocks and telescopes, objects from the world of secular conquest and military engagement. Critics who have discussed this imagery to date have generally emphasized its use as consistent with others of Donne’s elegies and anniversaries, stressing its handling here as simply another exercise in previously rehearsed themes on inadequacies of
human language when faced with the incomprehensible nature of the divine. Ernest Gilman, for example, argues that the oblique references to the Pauline mirror as that glass which reflects darkly as an image of our imperfect understanding provides the governing metaphor of the poem. Whenever that imagery appears in Renaissance literature, he observes, it carries with it “a concern with the limits of language and a dynamics of the mind striving for illumination against its own darkness.”

But to situate Donne’s imagery solely in the tradition of Christian meditation from Augustine through Bonaventure to Ignatius is to evade acknowledging what the poem actually does: that is, it places the trope of the Pauline mirror within the dilemma of proper imaging of the divine to be sure but crossed with the ambiguous nature of that “glasse” as it has migrated from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians into the secular world of telescopes and clocks, of exploration, military engagement, heretical challenge and even colonial exploitation. Thus, while part of the poem insists that the proper perspective on life and death as seen in the light of eternity is the traditional contemptus mundi

Now I grow sure, that if a man would have
Good companie, his entry is a grave.
Mee thinkes all Cities, now, but Anthills bee,
Where, when the severall labourers I see,
For children, house, provision, taking paine,
They’are all but Ants, carrying eggs, straw and grain;
And Church-yards are but cities, unto which
The most repaire, that are in goodnesse rich.

(II. 165-72)

other elements challenge the luxury of such isolation and focus instead on the hand which holds the glass. One set of images, for example, insists on that hand’s palsy and general unreliability as telescopic images of spatial measurement are recast into that image of temporal measurement, the clock:

If these clockes be not wound, or be wound still,
Or be not set, or set at every will;
So, youth is easiest to destruction

(II. 139-141)

Another set of images traces that general uneasiness to its source, the ambiguous nature of power that in the secular world resides in “laws” which tie up the reputation of the “good” man but which are matter-of-factly suspended when applied to “the Senate” or the decision-making bodies of the
absolutist state. Thus while the poem does recuperate this latter set of images (framed by the safely distancing device of the Roman triumph) by translating them into the kingdom of “that great soveraignty,” whose “prerogative” is “absolute” (II. 240-241), the very fact that the Pauline mirror has been recast into the contemporary idiom of clocks and telescopes, of secular conquest and military engagement, raises questions about how successfully that recuperation might be sustained.

It would be a mistake, however, to describe this new area of contemporary idiom as discourse emanating from the world of science unless we are quick to qualify twentieth-century associations of rationality and empirical validity with Renaissance associations of necromancy and fear of manipulation, specifically as associated with astronomy and its instruments. It comes as no surprise, of course, to be reminded that astronomers were distrusted; more interesting, however, is some slight evidence of an alignment of that distrust with a distrust of the power of literature. Additionally, while much of this distrust arises, as is well-known, out of the potential challenge to authority of church and state (best evidenced by Pope Urban VIII’s reversal of his initial enthusiasm for Galileo’s findings to support for the Inquisition), much of it also had to do with the notorious defectiveness of the “perspective” glasses which were developed before Galileo perfected the instrument he used for the discoveries detailed in *Sidereus Nuncius* as well as with the feared alliance between astronomy and necromancy. Thus Donne’s poem, insofar as it invokes the world of Renaissance science and specifically a discourse associated with the instruments of that science, makes suggestive use of the language of distrust and doubt, particularly as it ironically shadows Donne’s newly chosen profession. Moreover, inasmuch as this discourse is frequently situated at the point of collision between certainty and doubt, truth and lies, poetic licence and liberty, authority and its challengers, even ideology and subversion, it also plays an important role in Donne’s poem to Harington insofar as the latter might be considered as a figure for some areas of contention within the Stuart family and court. To sketch out this discourse and its relevance to Harington more fully, it might be helpful to turn to specific passages of Renaissance commentary on both the profession of astronomy and its instruments.

That such instruments were distrusted can be demonstrated in numerous responses to their initial use. While the telescope as we know it does not really come into existence or become fully associated with astronomy until Galileo’s publication of *Sidereus Nuncius* in 1610, the use of convex lenses for spectacles had begun in the thirteenth century, and the properties of both
Convex and concave lenses were well known by the late 1500s. Combinations of convex and concave lenses could produce effects that roughly anticipated the development of the telescope, and thus fears of optical illusion and the more sinister dangers of black magic are evident in some of the earliest references to the instrument. Robert Recorde, for example, in 1551, discussing Roger Bacon’s thirteenth-century experiment with optics, notes:

... many thinges seem impossible to bee doen, which by arte maie verie well bee wrought. And when thei bee wrought, and the reason thereof not understade, then saie the vulgare people, that those thynges are dooen by Negromancie. And hereof came it that Frier Bacon was accompted so greate a Negromancier, whiche never used that arte (by any coniecture that I can finde) but was in Geomtrie, and other mathematicall sciences so experete, that he could doe by them suche thynges, as were wonderfull in the sight of moste people. Greate talke there is of a glasse that he made in Oxforde, in whiche men might see thinges that wer doen in other places, and that was iudged to bee doen by power of evill spirites. But I knowe the reason of it to bee good and naturall, and to be wrought by Geomtrie (sith perspective is a parte of it) and to stande as well with reason, as to see your face in common glasse.

A similar reference to the dangerous potential of perspective glasses to invade “private places” is recorded by Thomas Digges in 1571. Describing the work of his father, Leonard Digges, he states:

My father by his continual paynfull practices, assisted with demonstrations Mathematicall, was able, and sudrie times hath, by proportionall Glasses suly situate in convenient angles, not onely discovered things farre off, read letters, numbred peeces with the very coyne and superscription thereof, cast by some of his friends of purpose uppon Downes in the open fields, but also seven myles off declared what has been doen at that instant in private places.

And, as is well known, many of Galileo’s academic colleagues rejected his claims in Sidereus Nuncius as either optical illusions or as academic hoaxes. “The ranking philosophers at his two universities, Pisa and Padua, refused even to look through his telescope,” and the scholar Clavius joked about the discovery of Jupiter’s satellites that “you must construct a telescope which would first make them and then show them.”

The associations of this instrument with magic, fear, intrusion and illusion are further complicated by an intriguing instance of the same rhetoric of distrust which appears in Sir John Harrington’s “Preface” to his 1591 transla-
tion of *Orlando Furioso* when, following Cornelius Agrippa, he links astronomers, poets, and the art of lying:

And first for lying, I might if I list excuse it by the rule of *Poetica licentia*, and claim a priviledge given Poet[s], whose art is but an imitation (as Aristotle calleth it), & therefore are allowed to faine what they list, according to that old verse,

Iuridicus, Erebo, fisco, fas vivera [r]apto;
Militibus, medicis, tortori, occidere ludo est;
Mentire astronomis, pictoribus atque poetis,

which, because I count it with reason, I will Englishe without rime. Lawyers, Hell and the Chequer are allowed to live on spoile; Souldiers, Phisicians, and Hangmen make sport of murther; Astronomers, Painters, and Poets may lye by authoritie.  

This last reference thus associates the imagery of Donne’s poem not only with the radical discourse of Renaissance astronomy but also with assertions against authority in the literary sphere, specifically in the context of poetic licence, the topic of Harrington’s passage and an issue soon to be redefined for Donne, the poet turning preacher. As Jacqueline Miller points out, Harrington’s observation that poets and astronomers can “lye by authoritie” implies both autonomy and regulation. More subtly, poetic licence can also suggest a third category of excessive privilege or wholly uncontrollable freedom, most notably caught in Milton’s rebuke to the readers of his divorce tracts, “License they mean when they cry liberty” (sonnet 12), and Harrington’s association of poets and astronomers with the anarchic excesses of lawyers who “live on spoile” and physicians and hangmen who “make sport of murther” certainly reinforces this aspect.

Since the leap from imagery of measurement as expressed through the rhetoric of distrust to the topic of poetic license may initially seem somewhat strained, it is pertinent to note that Samuel Johnson’s censure of Donne’s linkage of the good man with the telescope takes place in exactly that context. Johnson is accusing Donne of a rhetorical excess which had a long history. As Miller points out, such instances of excess were initially concerned with matters of diction and involved efforts to determine the extent to which a poet was at liberty to alter word choice. For the medieval rhetorician, the figure of speech labeled “metaplasm” was invoked to justify departures from normal usage. Insofar as metaplasm was defined as an acceptable modification of a word, particularly in adjusting it to accommodate the strictures of poetic meter,
its existence marked off a category of discourse within relatively easily determined limits. Quintilian, for example, states that "poets are usually the servants of their metres, and are allowed such license that faults are given other names when they occur in poetry: for we style them metaplasm, schematism and schemata... and make a virtue of necessity."^24

Over time, notions of poetic license began to extend beyond matters of diction to more subtle matters of taste and propriety and even risk, where the point of demarcation between permission and censure becomes more hazy and thus exerts greater tension. John of Salisbury, for instance, uses a charged vocabulary in defining metaplasm as a "sort of 'transformation' or 'deformation', because, as though on its authority, it modifies or disfigures the form of words."^25 The somatic threat of "deformation" and "disfigure[ment]" makes emphatic the point that poetic license is bounded by authority that may only masquerade as autonomy. Thus, while passages like the following may appear to imply a self-certified authority,

License to use figures is reserved for authors and for those like them, namely the very learned. Such have understood why [and how] to use certain expressions and not use others. According to Cicero, 'by their great and divine good writings they have merited this privilege', which they still enjoy. The authority of such persons is by no means slight, and if they have said or done something, this suffices to win praise for it, or [at least] to absolve it from stigma.^26

comments such as Gabriel Harvey's "a Poets or Painters Licence, is a poore security"^27 remind us that in the era of the Star Chamber and various licensing acts such freedom was indeed precarious. Thus while Johnson's challenge to Donne's selection of the good man as the telescope may seem wryly comic, in its seventeenth-century context, it evokes suggestions of what authorities might have seen as dangerous assertions of poetic autonomy and subversive challenge had the full implications of Donne's act in situating his praise of Harington in the imagery of contemporary technical and political challenge been apparent.

In a recent essay, valuable for its reconstruction of the seventeenth-century political context of Donne's poem, Ted-Larry Pebworth sketches out the background of the "Obsequies" through contrasts with the other elegies written on the occasion of Harington's death.^28 Pebworth notes that among these elegies, Donne's is unusual in its omission of the details of Harington's political and religious allegiances, and he suggests that this omission may have been a consequence of the conflict between Donne's new patron, Robert Carr,
the Earl of Somerset and favorite of King James, and the strictly Calvinist, anti-
Spanish court of the young Prince Henry with which Harington as the intimate
associate of the recently deceased Prince of Wales had been identified. That
Lucy, Countess of Bedford and sister of Harington, for whom Donne appar-
ently wrote the poem, had at this time come under the influence of Dr. John
Burgess, a rigidly Puritan divine, offered a further complication for Donne.
Thus the poet was caught between two patrons of decidedly antagonistic
religious and political affiliations, and, as Pebworth asserts, the only viable
solution for him with respect to references to the details of Harington’s short
life was silence.

One can fill out Pebworth’s observations with additional historical
references. Indeed, there is some contemporary evidence that Robert Carr,
who had facilitated Donne’s access to King James, was in fact the divisive
instrument exacerbating the rift between the father’s court and that of the son.
Arthur Wilson’s 1653 History of Great Britain, being the Life and Reign of
King James I emphasizes that Carr and the prince were rivals both for the
King’s affection and for the attentions of the notorious Lady Essex whose
choice of Carr over the prince, Wilson implies, was as much strategic as
amatory for her, “grounding more hope upon him, than the uncertain and
hopeless love of the Prince,” evidently rejected Henry in favor of Carr. More
pertinently, Carr also seems to have supplanted Prince Henry in a more
valuable sphere of influence, the Privy Council. In the years immediately
preceding the deaths of Henry and Harington, when Robert Cecil, Lord
Salisbury, the formidable Secretary, fell ill, his place on the Council was filled
temporarily by James with Carr. After Salisbury’s death, in May of 1613, Carr
was appointed Acting Secretary, to the considerable fury of the young Prince
who had earlier requested his father to appoint him to preside. The vehemence
of the Prince’s anger at Carr is recorded in at least two temporary references.
Arthur Wilson remarks that “Sir James Elphington, who (observing the Prince
one day to be discontented with the Viscount [Carr]) offered to kill him, but the
Prince reprieved him with a gallant Spirit, saying If there were cause he would
do it himself.” And Arthur Wilson reports that Henry had said at one time of
Carr that “if ever he were King, he would not leave one of that family to piss
against the wall.”

With the death of Salisbury, who had been active in keeping the young
Prince informed on both local and international events, as Roy C. Strong
remarks, the court of the Prince of Wales “became a real ‘opposition’ court to
the one at Whitehall, and Rochester [Carr] would inevitably have been viewed
as the one who had contrived this new order of things in which the Prince found himself, for the first time, left in total isolation from the affairs of government.”

Increasingly, the language of challenge, risk, and doubt seems appropriate to the conflicting loyalties, both personal and national, within which Donne’s poem, written on the occasion of the death of an intimate friend of Prince Henry’s court, by an individual newly arrived under the patronage of the favorite of the court of King James, with the objective of pleasing a former patroness now under the influence of a Puritan preacher whose views were hostile to both, exists. And the rhetorical figure of metaplasmon, extracted from the area of diction to which it was originally confined, to areas of taste and propriety, themselves figured in the suggestively somatic discourse of the dismemberment usually associated with punishments for treason, becomes even more appropriate when one realizes that it was in the contemporary language of technological experiment, exploration and military engagement that the court of the Prince of Wales, in overt contrast to the court of King James, presented itself.

Roy Strong, summarizing the Prince’s interest in contemporary science, details the way in which Henry “emerges as a focal point for this movement which indeed he was seen directly to personify. W.H. [W.H. The True Picture and Relation of Prince Henry, Leiden, 1634] tells us this when he writes: ‘He admired great and rare Spirits, yea even those of mechanicall and meane persons, retaining diverse of that sort, and went sometimes to see them work in their trades.’” And Christopher Hill, whom Strong cites, had pointed out even earlier the fashion in which Henry’s court was a center for an important movement, radical Protestant in its theological bias, to popularize to the classes of society defined as ‘a meaner sort of men’ every aspect of the applied sciences. Centered on London and Gresham College, this was to be the work of merchants and craftsmen and not of dons cloistered away in the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. It was to be written in the vernacular and aimed at every day use by artisans.

The Prince’s visits to craftsmen in shipyards, his collection of the instruments of science, particularly optics, his requests for the “plans of Michelangelo’s staircase in the Laurenziana Library, a magnet that had been invented on Elba, the latest book by Galileo [and] a recipe for the cement that joined terracotta piping,” so that water could be carried uphill, all testify to Henry’s centrality in what Hill labels this scientific Renaissance, as do many books written in the vernacular on these topics and dedicated to him. That a poem as richly allusive
in its medium could be written off as essentially “sterile” and “patchy” by some of its most competent readers should then raise some questions about the extent to which approaches to a given text can serve to promote or, by contrast, marginalize, a specific work.

III

The historical contexts of the varying discourses of Donne’s poem, which I have been summarizing, do not, of course, appear in the form of explicit reference. Nonetheless, that presence can be traced through the re-emergence of the historical background in the form of imagery which still carries ideological thrust and through which that ideology leaves its literary traces in the poem, as imagery associated with one political affiliation collides with and is modified by another.

More importantly, I have been hypothesizing that as ideology operates through literary refraction in the poetry of patronage, these sites of collision occur in those areas of the poem where one (tutored by conventions of reading that stress established properties of individualism) might “naturally” expect both subject and speaker to appear. A special feature of the poetry of patronage, and perhaps of occasional poetry in general is, however, the role of both subject and speaker insofar as issues of appropriation are concerned, and thus it is patronage poetry that seems especially sensitive to the interaction of speaker and subject within the poem and to the roles of poet and patron as these condition both selection and suppression of detail from outside it. In Donne’s poem, particularly, given the historical location of the poet between two areas of great sensitivity to issues of appropriation, the secular world of the coterie poet and the spiritual world of the powerful preacher, the problem of appropriation is heightened and thus more than usually accessible to scrutiny. Insofar as new historicist procedures have been particularly instructive in directing our attention away from what is coming to be seen as a cultural privileging of subjectivity towards a greater sensitivity to the conditions of production and reception, that particular approach to the reading of Donne’s poem permits a focus on discourse as an area of equal interest in the poem. It also allows us to see why the features which usually attract our attention have been suppressed and, with that suppression, why our readings of the poem have suffered. It is, in short, a new historicist reading which can restore poems like Donne’s to literary engagement. Such an approach, for example, allows us to understand, and be engaged by, rather than simply dismiss, some of the
unusual features of this poem, including the paucity of allusion to its ostensible subject, the historical Lord Harington, and the dominance of clock, map and telescope imagery which so offended Johnson.

The most interesting feature of the poem remains to be discussed, however, and that is the odd evolution, or better, regression, of the speaking voice. If the poem’s ostensible subject, Lord Harington, evokes tensions more by pointing to what is suppressed than by conventionally revealing what is accentuated, the subjectivity of the poem, at least in the form of its narrative voice, is equally curious, particularly in the way in which it reveals itself as conditioned more by the secular world from which it issues than by the spiritual world toward which it is presumably directed.

The sociopolitical origins of that speaking voice are straightforwardly invoked and harshly criticized in lines 123-128 where, as Marotti points out, the speaker forcefully rejects the course which the historical Donne had been following to date:

Yet, since we must be old, and age endures
His Torrid Zone at Court, and calentures
Of hot ambitions, irreligions ice,
Zeales agues, and hydroptique avarice,
Infirmities which need the scale of truth,
As well, as lust and ignorance of youth . . .

Yet a counterpart to this fierce rejection, and perhaps equivalent to its overdetermined rhetoric, is a subtle erosion of self-confidence as the I of the poem migrates from the unqualified (and unearned) assertive address to Harington (“See, and with joy, mee to that good degree / Of goodnesse growne, that I can studie thee” II, 9-10), to the considerably less confident reflection on the instability of both self and virtue in lines 45-51 (“As bodies change, and as I do not weare / Those spirits, humors, blood I did last yeare, / And, as if on a streame I fixe mine eye, /That drop, which I look’d on, is presently / Puasht with more waters from my sight, and gone”), to a concluding highly unstable gesture in which the risky self of secular poetry is “interre[d]” with Harington in his grave. In fact, to some degree, one might conclude that this latter discourse of secular values, of increasingly nervous adjustment between suitor and patron, has triumphed over the conventional elegiac rhetoric of grief to consolation, given that the poem ends, unconventionally, on that note of personal grief, in subtle conflict with the public consolation it has achieved.

What this collision of discourses points to as both a rhetorical and a
sociopolitical issue is, in summary, the problem of appropriation. Just as the ostensible theme of the “Obsequies to the Lord Harington” has to do with the problem of Harington’s brief life and how that has to be assessed and used, so too the problem of language and authority, of speech and authorship, has to do with assessment and use. The world of the coterie poet, concerned with social advancement and secular goals, was nonetheless one which authorized a mutually-shared discourse. The world of public speech, of a named voice (“John Donne, Dean of St. Paul’s”) and acknowledged authorship is one, as Foucault reminds us, in which “discourse [becomes an] object of appropriation.”36 Given the circumstances of Donne’s decision to take orders, namely the refusal of King James to permit his advancement by any secular means, it was quite clear that sacred rhetoric, and Donne’s rhetoric in particular, was viewed by some as political instrument. Foucault’s comment that authored discourse is “essentially an act — an act placed in the bipolar field of the sacred and profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous” seems specifically appropriate both to Donne’s changing circumstances and to the poem which marks them.

The irony implicit in this crossing, however, as issues of appropriation become clearer, is that the sacred world will be as subject to the forces which condition the secular world as was the coterie setting which the poet is leaving. The fact that these forces are potentially violent, with the specific potential for eradication of the subjective self, is thus figured in the poem both through the manner in which the poem first forcefully exaggerates and then quietly erases the speaker’s voice and as underscored by the implications of the title. An “obsequy,” it will be recalled, refers to the funeral rites delivered at the site of a grave.37 Given that the collective features of the poem, from its subtler elements like the rhetorical figure of metaplasm through its more startling elisions of subject and subjectivity, call attention to a discourse grounded in somatic disappearance, the interred body alluded to in the title seems perversely appropriate.

However fanciful such concluding suggestions might be, what the poem does insist on, nonetheless, is that the experience of vulnerability to appropriation in the secular world of the coterie poet may not translate easily into the equally vulnerable (but differently so) sacred world which the poet is entering. And the discourse appropriate to the coterie poet who fashions an I for self-advertisement and self-advancement will clearly be inappropriate as is the self-abasing rhetoric of the conventional lament for the death of a socially superior. What is needed, perhaps, is an authored discourse, shifting in range
and perspective, wary of moral and spiritual distortion, while directed toward and capable of achieving extended vision and insight. Perhaps the telescope was not as inappropriate to Donne’s “Obsequies” as Dr. Johnson supposed.

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**Notes**


10. Wesley Milgate, p. xxv.


Phaidon, 1959), 90-105, as well as such references as the apology advanced by Galileo’s contemporary, Giambattista Porta, who, initially describing the telescope as a “toy,” later regretted that he had not taken that instrument seriously [cited in Stillman Drake. Galileo Studies (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 156].


18. Donne refers to the publication of Sidereus Nuncius and to the properties of telescopes in Ignatius His Conclave [see Ignatius His Conclave: An Edition of the Latin and English Texts, T. S. Healy, S.J. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 7, 81], as well as in his Sermons (Potter and Simpson, III, 210) and in lines 45-46 of “To Mr. Tilman after he had taken orders.”


27. Foure Letters and certaine Sonnets, cited in J. T. Miller, p. 28.


31. The Court and Character of King James, cited by Strong, p. 57.

32. R. C. Strong, pp. 56-57.


34. R. C. Strong, p. 212.

35. R. C. Strong, p. 211.


37. The O.E.D., for example, cites a specific request: “I will that my executors . . . shall mark one obsequi yerely in the place where I am buried” (1558).