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Allen D. Breck Award Winner: Nothing's Paradox in Donne's "Negative Love" and "A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day"

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JOHN DONNE'S COMPLICATED USE OF PARADOX is nowhere more inviting than in the grammatical and conceptual use of the word "nothing," especially when Donne chooses to give this noun the quality of substance and presence, rather than using it to denote the absence of anything.[1] Two poems in particular, from the *Songs and Sonets*, give affirmative existence to a nothing in order to make distinct arguments regarding the status of an existing thing. Both "Negative Love" and "A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day" rely on this paradox to give a precise definition of the word nothing. The definition arises from two overlapping and intersecting discourses called paradox and negative theology.

The modern meaning of paradox, it seems, was being solidified in the period of the English Renaissance. Rosalie Colie's *Paradoxia Epidemica* is the most extensive treatment of the subject to date. Colie displays the various conceptions and uses of paradox in Donne's age. Its originary use names a statement that goes against received opinion.[2] Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, which circulated widely in the Renaissance, gives proofs for statements such as "The life of virtue is the completely happy life" (Paradox 2) and "Only the wise man is rich" (Paradox 6).[3] His paradoxes show both the effectiveness of the use of this figure and its close relationship to irony. These Stoic paradoxes accomplish two things: by defending the creeds of the Stoics, they *claim* to go against prevailing opinion; yet by presenting the statements in ways that would likely accord with "common belief," they expose, and go against, common practice. Undoubtedly the revival of these paradoxes had the same effect in the Renaissance as they had upon their original readers.

Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* (1511) makes use of this primary sense of paradox, while also delighting in rhetorical paradox, both praising an

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[2]Rosalie L.Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox,* 9 (Princeton University Press, 1966). I owe some of the following examples to Colie's study.

[3]Cicero, *Cicero: On Stoic Good and Evil,* trans. & ed. M. R. Wright (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1991), 83, 101.

"indefensible" topic as well as supporting "publicly disapproved propositions."[4] Folly's analysis of the theologians (more than the last third of the text) gives many instances of these moves: "O marvelous prerogative of theologians, if to speak incorrectly is reserved to them alone!"; "To work miracles is primitive and old-fashioned, hardly suited to our times"; "Who has not learned that in proportion as a good is more widespread it is greater?"; "The Christian religion on the whole seems to have a kinship with some sort of folly, while it has no alliance whatever with wisdom"; "Peter received the keys, received them from One who did not commit them to an unworthy person, and yet I doubt that he ever understood— for Peter never did attain to subtlety—that a person who did not have knowledge could have the key to knowledge."[5]

These last two examples are selected because, in addition to functioning as rhetorical paradoxes, they are both a form of semantic and logical paradox, and thus are more recognizably paradoxical today. Furthermore, each borrows from and participates in the second discourse with which this paper is concerned. The "folly" of religion argued in an *encomium to* folly and the proposition that ignorance can hold the "key" to "knowledge" are distillations from a negative theology.[6] John Donne (who wrote his own prose paradoxes) would, in the *Songs and Sonets*, make extensive use of "paradox" in all these forms—rhetorical, semantic, logical, and religio-mystico-metaphysical.

Felicitously, the origins in Western thought of both "paradox" (in all senses of the word) and of "negative theology" (as it would come to be called) can be situated in Plato's dialogue, *Parmenides*.[7] In this dialogue of the one and the many, Parmenides inaugurates a method founded upon the category being/non-being: "you must not only hypothesize, if each thing is, and examine the consequences of that hypothesis; you must also hypothesize, if that same thing is not."[8] The argument regarding the "one," which is investigated from both sides of the hypothesis, holds up on both sides, thus forcing Parmenides to ascribe a kind of being to not-being. The unworkable either/or effects a collapse of the binary being/not-being, and a paradoxical conclusion that helps pave the way for a negative theology:

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[4]Colie, *Paradoxia,* 3, 4.

[5]Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly,* trans. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson (New York: The Modern Library, 1941) 85, 99, 105, 118, 80.

[6]These statements are especially reminiscent of the "Learned Ignorance" espoused by Nicholas of Cusa (see below on ignorance and on "knowledge" and "understanding").

[7]I owe this lead to Rosalie L. Colie, "The Rhetoric of Transcendence," *Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (1964): 145–70.

[8]Plato, *Plato: Complete Works,* ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 370.

> So if one is not, none of the others is conceived to be one or many, since, without oneness, it is impossible to conceive of many…. Therefore, if one is not, the others neither are nor are conceived to be one or many…. Then if we were to say, to sum up, "if one is not, nothing is," wouldn't we speak correctly?…Let us then say this—and also that, as it seems, *whether one is or is not, it and the others both are and are not, and both appear and do not appear all things in all ways, both in relation to themselves and in relation to each other* (my emphasis).[9]

The indefinitely definite conclusions of *Parmenides* display paradox *par excellence* while showing also a way to respond to paradox, that is, by *not* resolving it.

The "Negative Theology," or *via negativa*, takes various forms in writings of religious philosophers from the early Christian period, through the Middle Ages, and into the Renaissance, yet it pervades many non-religious discourses (philosophical, literary, etc.). Frederick Copleston describes the doctrine thus: It "rejects any real *positive* knowledge of God: we know in truth only what God is not, for example, that He is not a genus, not a species, that He is beyond anything of which we have had experience or which we can conceive. We are justified in predicating perfections of God, but at the same time we must remember that all names we apply to God are inadequate—and so, in another sense, inapplicable."[10]

I will focus on two of the major historical figures in this discourse in an effort to lay out certain logical propositions incorporated into their works that will give insight into John Donne's paradoxical use of "nothing." From the texts and letters of the Pseudo-Dionysius (ca. 500), I extract from only *The Mystical Theology,* in which the author offers a way of praising "the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings." Denial becomes affirmation. Dionysius gives an analogy: "We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden."[11] The statue, in this case, impossible to be conceived of as an object, properly existing, may perhaps be thought of as a kind of "transcendent" knowledge or access to a non-being, and thus *as* that non-being itself.

The final chapter of *The Mystical Theology* offers a presentation of denials that serves to define God. The author concludes: The "supreme Cause [God] falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being.

[9]Plato, *Complete Works,* 397.

[10]Frederick Copleston, S.J., *The History of Philsophy,* vol. 2, *Mediaeval Philosophy: Augustine to Scotus* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1950), 26–27.

[11]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: Complete Works,* trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 138.

Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond every assertion and denial…."[12]

These statements of the Pseudo-Dionysius prefigure the *De docta ignorantia* of fifteenth-century thinker, Nicholas of Cusa, who cites Dionysius frequently. His doctrine "Of Learned Ignorance" (the title of one work) governs the writer's entire *corpus*. His writing is performative exercise, a striving to attain an ignorance that is greater than learning, thus to gain access to an incomprehensible deity. His metaphysical speculations into the nature of God rely on a logic of paradox, *coincidentia oppositorum*, the co-incidence of opposites. The fundamental category, maximum/minimum, extends (or includes) the category of being: "Existence and non-existence can be equally predicated of all that which is conceived to exist; and non-existence cannot to any greater degree than existence be affirmed of all that is conceived not to exist. But the absolute maximum, in consequence, is all things and, whilst being all, it is none of them; in other words, it is at once the maximum and minimum of being."[13] The greatest maximum approaches "all" to the same degree that the greatest minimum approaches "none." Stretching these categories until they "coincide" (today we might say deconstruct) necessitates canceling-out the opposition being/not-being. The greatest maximum equals the greatest minimum, and therefore each negates the other, negating with them the metaphysical oppositions maximum/minimum, being/non-being, all/none.

The central and oft-repeated paradox in Cusa's work (which is also methodological) predicates these linguistic and ontological paradoxes. Citing Dionysius, he says of God that He is "known but that no mind or intelligence comprehends Him."[14] The rift between "knowledge," on the one hand, and "understanding" or "comprehension," on the other, is a paradox, in every sense of the word. It also yields a prescriptive formula that delimits (or expands) one's reaction to, and relationship with, paradox. In other words, there are (at least) three ways to respond to a paradox: 1) run away; 2) seek to resolve it; 3) *embrace it*. Like Plato's *Parmenides*, Cusa chooses the third response. It is also the course we are taking in this investigation.

The ubiquitous Saint Augustine investigates the nominative status of the word "nothing" in the dialogue, "Concerning the Teacher." In the opening pages of the dialogue, Augustine rejects his son Adeotatus's claim that *nihil* (nothing) signifies "that which is not": "Perhaps you are right.

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[12]Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works,* 141.
[13]Nicolas Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance,* trans. Fr. Germain Heron (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), 13.
[14]Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance,* 35.

But I cannot agree with you because of your recent admission, namely, that a sign is not a sign unless it signifies something. And that which is not cannot in any way be something."[15] Augustine concisely exposes the fundamental grammatical paradox of nothing, on the level of the word, thus acknowledging his awareness of and complicity in a kind of negative theology. In his classic treatise on language and reading, *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine acknowledges and then overcomes the inherent limitations of language: "Yet although nothing can be spoken in a way worthy of God, he has sanctioned the homage of the human voice, and chosen that we should derive pleasure from our words in praise of him."[16]

It is worth noting that Donne's position on this issue, in his sermons, always immensely sensitive to the complications and limitations of language, is virtually identical to Augustine's statement. He fully realizes the inherent problems with language, but, guided by the Gospel of John, he takes refuge in The Word, entering into knowledge of God thereby.[17] It may be surmised that Donne's brilliant logical gymnastics in the *Songs and Sonets*, especially with regard to the paradox of nothing, his clever and rigorous use of a negative theology, are not necessarily consistent with the studious and serious theological metaphysics found in the sermons. While Donne the profane poet may cheerfully embrace the nothingness of language and existence, Donne the sermonizer must strive to overcome it.[18]

Thus we return to the word nothing, the *locus in quo* and *sub verba* of negative theology, for which Jacques Derrida, refusing to call it a "discourse" and refraining from defining the phrase, offers a "provisional hypothesis" that is appropriate here. He suggests that negative theology:

> consists of considering that every predicative language is inadequate to the essence, in truth to the hyperessentiality (the being beyond Being) of God; consequently, only a negative ("apophatic") attribution can claim to approach God, and to prepare us for a silent intuition of God. By a more or less tenable analogy, one would thus recognize some traits, the family resemblance of

[15]Augustine, *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine,* ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), 1:363.

[16]Augustine, *On Christian Teaching,* trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 11.

[17]See especially the following sermons in George R. Potter & Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., *The Sermons of John Donne,* 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), vol. 3 (1957), n. 9, 211–13; vol. 5 (1959) n. 16, 322–24; vol. 7 (1954), n. 13, 344–48.

[18]Frank Kermode, in discussing Donne's "Nocturnal," says, "As he extracted the notion of absolute privation in alchemical terms, Donne must have been thinking of the Cabalistic description of God as the nothing, the quintessence of nothing; here a keen and prejudiced ear might discover one of his blasphemies. But it is more interesting, I think, that Donne the poet is claiming what Donne the theologian calls impossible…." Frank Kermode, "John Donne," in *British Writers and Their Works No. 4,* ed. Bonamy Dobrée (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 23.

negative theology, in every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determination....[19]

John Donne makes this "return in a regular and insistent manner." In many places in the *Songs and Sonets* Donne's rhetoric centers upon the grammatical paradox of the word nothing.[20] Lines 25–26 of "The Broken Heart" provide one basic formulation of the word's inherent paradox: "Yet nothing can to nothing fall / Nor any place be empty quite." These two clauses form an implicit neither-nor relationship that can be read as "Neither can anything fall to nothing, nor can any place be quite empty." This literal reading preserves the sense of the poem, because the "place" referred to is that in which the speaker's heart should reside, and the poem concludes that the missing heart is not ultimately absent, but merely transformed: "Therefore I think my breast hath all / Those pieces still, though they be not unite" (27–28). Nevertheless, the inherent semantic play on the word yields an affirmative statement arising from a double negative: Whether nothing *can* or *cannot* fall to nothing, nothing is, nevertheless, granted a specific affirmative existence. Though "The Broken Heart" reveals the paradox of nothing through a buried play on words, the two poems dealt with in this essay rely upon precisely this affirmative use of the noun for their meaning. "Nothing" is a noun that is a thing that is no thing.

The intersecting discourses of paradox and negative theology provide an accurate framework for Donne's poem, "Negative Love." This poem gives a description of the speaker's love by, first, distinguishing the speaker's love from other love (stanza 1), and then attempting to define that love (stanza 2). The definition of stanza 2 concerns us here. It relies on both grammatical affirmation of the word nothing and on a philosophical proposition which asserts that perfection can at best be articulated in negatives. The negative love in this poem represents Donne's compact expression of the *via negativa*. The "hidden statue" of the Pseudo-Dionysius finds its parallel in the love described in the poem, which pushes negative definition to its extremes to argue that denying all positive attributes

[19]Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in *Derrida and Negative Theology,* ed. Harold Coward & Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 74. In addition to this essay, Derrida has recently given explicit attention to the negative theology. See also the essays collected in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name,* trans. Ian Mcleod, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford University Press, 1995) and Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death,* trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[20]In the fifty-five poems that comprise the *Songs and Sonets,* fourteen contain at least one use of the word "nothing," twelve contain the word "none," and thirty-four use the word "all" one or more times. All quotations from Donne's poetry will be cited in the text, by line number in accordance with the Penguin text. John Donne, *John Donne: The Complete English Poems,* ed. A.J. Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1971).

ultimately leads to nothingness. In doing so, it explicitly accepts Cusa's model paradox response by explicitly embracing (*not* resolving) the paradox of nothing. The second stanza of "Negative Love" makes its argument elliptically. It uses non-specific pronouns, making affirmative statements of negative things. The stanza follows:

> If that be simply perfectest
> Which can by no way be expressed
> But negatives, my love is so.
> To all, which all love, I say no.
> If any who decipher best,
> What we know not, ourselves, can know,
> Let him teach me that nothing; this
> As yet my ease, and comfort is,
> Though I speed not, I cannot miss. (10–18)

The stanza is comprised of two if-then statements, between which lies a specific rejection that joins them together. They are followed by a mysterious final consequent. The first statement (10–12) contains both a conditional syllogism concerning the perfect love, and a declarative statement defining the speaker's love. The speaker's love is that which "can by no way be expressed / But negatives." The "if" declares that the perfection of the speaker's love be contingent upon an abstract and hypothetical designation of perfect love.

The fourth line complicates, not the conditionally perfect love, but the stated love: "To all, which all love, I say no." Though the precise referent for "all" in both uses is ambiguous, the line is definitely a negation of something called "all," suggesting that the speaker embraces its opposite, which is, in fact, what happens.

In the second if-then statement (14–16), the speaker asks to be taught a "nothing." The request offers a hypothetical challenge to anyone who can decipher the unknown nothing and then teach it. This knowledge, if possible, would be knowledge of a nothing: "Let him teach me that nothing." In Donne's *via negativa*, "that nothing" *is* "that" "perfectest love" hypothesized in the initial conditional. The "perfectest love" (here, love between two people) stands in the position held by God in a negative theology. (The title of this poem in several manuscripts is "The Nothing.") The relationships in this poem among "deciphering," "knowing," and "teaching" are reminiscent of, though not identical with, Cusa's paradoxical distinction between "knowing" and "understanding."

The final lines of the poem (17–18) present an affirmation of negative love, and a requisite acceptance of the impossibility of "teaching" "that nothing": "this / As yet my ease, and comfort is, / Though I speed not, I cannot miss." "This" refers to the speaker's assertion, "Though I speed

not, I cannot miss." "This" *is* "my ease, and comfort" because the accep-
tance of "negative love" includes a buried premise: if one fundamentally
cannot *miss* something, neither can one fundamentally *make* ("express,"
"know," "be taught," "understand") that thing (that love, "that noth-
ing"), and *vice versa*. This premise yields four logical possibilities: 1) If one
can (may) make something, one cannot (may not) miss it; 2) If one cannot
(may not) make something, one can (may) miss it; 3) If one can (may)
make something, one can (may) miss it; 4) If one cannot make something,
one cannot miss it. The fourth proposition (the double negative) is
affirmed by the argument in "Negative Love." Thus the speaker resolves
the conditional and hypothetical propositions by *not* resolving the para-
dox: "Nothing," here = perfect love, which would come into existence, as
"nothing," only if it could be deciphered and taught.[21]

"The Nothing" in "Negative Love" names the poem, in so far as its
argument gives a definition of the speaker's love as nothing. Donne's
"Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day" is a more complicated treatment of
nothing, because the word "nothing" refers to and defines the speaker.
The speaker deserves our attention, for the poem's argument is presented
as a gradual, persistent self-identification and self-definition. Frank Ker-
mode says of this poem, "the argument goes in search of a definition of
absolute nothingness; yet the *cause* of the poem is grief at the death of a
mistress."[22] If one "goes in search" of its definition by approaching the
speaker's self-referential claims through a consideration of the conditions
outlined so far, an identity emerges (for speaker and poem), a "nothing,"
with more clarity than is generally supposed.

In recent decades of Donne scholarship, it has become increasingly
apparent that Donne's speakers should not always be confused with
Donne the man or the poet. Biographical readings have given way to com-
parisons, for instance, between the speakers of the *Songs and Sonets* and the
traditional Petrarchan lover, variously represented in the sonnet sequences
of Sidney and Spenser. Helen Gardner's note that "Break of Day" seems
spoken from a woman's perspective has resulted in some interpretations
that complicate the identity of other speakers. However, the biographical
assumptions about the speaker of the "Nocturnal" have not been con-
tested. It is unanimously considered to be, if not Donne himself, at least
the persona of a grieving lover who has been ruined by love and then
somehow "re-begot" out of that ruin. Tilottama Rajan, for instance, in a
"deconstructive" analysis of Donne's general employment of the word

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[21]See Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance,* 17, regarding Cusa's exhaustive propositions
concerning "the maximum truth on the absolute maximum itself: it is or it is not; it is and it
is not; it neither is nor is it not."

[22]Kermode, "John Donne," 21. Considering Donne's larger work, while speaking of
the "Nocturnal," Kermode also suggests that "the violent paradoxes on All and Noth-
ing...belong to Donne's mental habit," 23.

"nothing," concludes that Donne uses the word to project an assessment of himself as well as of his poetry. Rajan claims (for reasons unclear to me) that "[f]or the Metaphysicals the words in a poem are not things, except when the wit of a poem is (as it is for Herbert) the wit of God."[23] Roy Booth's essay on "nothing" in Donne's poetry focuses on Donne's own "obsessive" "self-identification with nothing," and he cites John Carey in naming Donne "the extraordinary nothing of the 'Nocturnal.'"[24]

Neither the object of the poem ("her") nor the speaker ("I") are clearly determined through these pronouns. Only the addressees, "you, who shall lovers be," are explicitly named. I see no cause for giving the speaker an autobiographical, or even an animate, identity. Fixing the speaker as a person creates some serious problems, while depersonalizing the speaker opens the way for an impressive demonstration of the logic of a negative theology. If one defers ascribing animate existence to the speaker, another option becomes available: The speaker of the poem *is* the poem itself. Further, the "I" of the "Nocturnal" *is* the paradox of the being of nothing, not to be riddled, but to be embraced. The poem is the paradox, speaking in the first person, defining itself. To explore how this is possible and what it may mean requires some basic preliminary claims. However the poem may be defined (nocturnal, vigil, lesson in alchemy), the "Nocturnal" is organized according to a gradual definition of the identity of the speaker, developed systematically, and without contradiction, in the poem's five stanzas. That is, the speaker's claims should not be interpreted as random associations, but may be held to a strict developmental progression. Three sets of oppositions contribute to the formation of this identity: contrasts between the speaker and other things, present tense statements set against the past and the future, and affirmative and negative declarations about the present.

Each stanza gives a dominant statement of the speaker, in the first person singular, using the copulate "to be": I am an "epitaph," "I am every dead thing," "I…am the grave / Of all, that's nothing," "I am… / Of the first nothing," and "I am none." These are contrasted, in each stanza, with a dominant other: "all these," "you who shall lovers be," "all others," "all," and "You lovers." The set of contrasts opposes some "nothing" (the speaker) to some "all" outside of the speaker. The careful use of tenses allows for delineation of a prior existence or form of existence that is in direct contrast to present identity. It is referred to in stanza two and described in stanza three. The descriptions of stanza three, of weeping, of souls, of bodies, suggest the speaker to have been a living human lover, ruined by love. Yet previous human existence can do no more in determining present identity then to affirm what the speaker *is not*. This structural

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[23]Tilottama Rajan, "'Nothing Sooner Broke': Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* as Self-Consuming Artifact," *ELH* 49 (1982): 808.

[24]Roy Booth, "John Donne: Ideating Nothing," *English* 37 (1988): 205, 206.

approach is an exercise in *via negativa*, where the speaker gains present identity to the extent with which it is contrasted both to the "other" in each stanza and to the attributes it once had.

Future tense also reveals the contrast between the speaker and "you who shall lovers be," fixing the moment of the poem—"the year's midnight, and…the day's"; "this hour"—as a perpetual now. This perpetual now, in addition to drawing attention to the metalinguistic exercise of reading poetry, gives the poem a temporal definition that mirrors theological systems of the negative way. In Nicholas of Cusa's general metaphysics (non-separable from the divine), "all time is comprised in the present or 'now.'"[25] Augustine, in the *Confessions*, asks,

> What, then, is time? If no one ask me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not. Yet I say with confidence, that I know that if nothing passed away, there would not be past time; and if nothing were coming, there would not be future time; and if nothing were, there would not be present time. Those two times, therefore, past and future, how are they, when even the past now is not, and the future is not as yet?[26]

The present "I am" statements of the "Nocturnal" provide another kind of "negative identity," either by explicitly stating what the speaker *is not* (negation), or by stating that what the speaker *is* is a kind of nothing (negative affirmation). These give a forceful definition of the speaker's current status, and should be placed together, not as various stages or types of existence, but as a comprehensive statement of existence in the perpetual now. The poem's affirmative and negative statements follow:

Affirmative:

I am the "epitaph" for the spent sun and the dry, lifeless, buried world (3–9)

I am a thing that can be studied (10)

"I am every dead thing, / In whom love wrought new alchemy" (12–13)

"I…am the grave / Of all, that's nothing" (21–22)

"I am… / Of the first nothing, the elixir grown" (28–29)

"…I am none" (37)

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[25]See Cusanus, *Of Learned Ignorance,* 77.
[26]See Augustine, *Writings,* 76.

Negative:

I am not a man (30)

I am not a beast, a plant, a stone (32–33)

I am not "an ordinary nothing" (35)

It is difficult to apply any of these self-definitions to animate, human, existence. The first two affirmative statements are explicitly textual: I am an epitaph, and I am a thing to be studied. These point to the poem itself, and thus contribute to two buried claims: I am a nocturnal, I am a poem: "I am a text." The four subsequent affirmative statements do not make specific claims to a textual identity. Instead, each defines the speaker according to increasing stages towards, and culminating in, nothingness. The first two of these assert a nothingness that is directly connected to, but specifically lacking, animate existence. The third is a genitive that states the speaker's existence to be *of* (is born from, comes from) "the first nothing." The final affirmation unequivocally states, "I am none." These stages toward nothingness follow a negative logic in keeping with the Pseudo-Dionysius's (as well as Cusa's) metaphysics of denying. The denials, Dionysius says, "climb" up towards transcendent knowledge, that is, non-being: "But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable."[27]

The meaning of the poem's final affirmation, which may seem ambiguous, receives its definitiveness from the three negations offered in stanza four. The first two negations deny animate existence, and the third, "I am not an ordinary nothing," proves to be a buried affirmation, both by the logic of the poem and by the paradoxical logic of the word nothing. The presence of the adjective "ordinary" forces, by grammatical necessity, that the statement mean "I am a non-ordinary or extra-ordinary nothing." The speaker's grammatical existence emerges as a proposition with a three-stage consequent: "I am not an ordinary nothing," therefore, "I am a non-ordinary nothing," therefore I am a "nothing that is something." The final affirmation, "I am none," can be taken to mean "I am none of these things" (man, beast, ordinary nothing); but it also states, simply and more plausibly within the logic of the poem, "I am nothing."

The speaker's identity, then, depends upon an acceptance of the grammatical necessity that nothing, a noun, signifies something. It remains to be understood how "nothing" can signify a literary text. However, this double assertion, this knowledge, avoids a host of confusing interpreta-

[27]See Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works,* 139.

tions made regarding the speaker of Donne's poem. For an example I turn to an article called "Donne's Riddles," which seeks to "balance the identification of the grieving lover or husband against another central concern of the poem—the spiritual deprivation of the speaker, a condition defined by his apparent physical illness and recovery."[28] The author, Alison Rieke, later offers this reading: "In stanza four, he cannot determine whether he is man or beast because he cannot see his own 'properties.' He thinks his 'body must be here,' but his own shadows, light, and body are not sensible to him. Finally, he repeats 'I am None; nor will my Sunne renew,' feeling again the despair of his exclusion from seasonal renewal and the sun's light."[29]

According to the logic proposed in this essay, these lines can be interpreted quite literally, without contradiction, and without an appeal to biography. I paraphrase lines 30–37 as follows: If I were a man, I would know that I was one; If I were a beast, a plant, or a stone, I would have some ends or some means, or would be invested with some "properties"; If I were an ordinary nothing, as a shadow is (an example and not a reference to the self of the speaker), "a light, and body must be here"; But I am nothing, and my sun will not renew (literally, because "I am a Nocturnal").

If the speaker is a "nothing," and at the same time a poem, what *meaning* results? Go back to the first line of stanza two: "Study me then, you who shall lovers be / At the next world, that is, at the next Spring" (10–11). Stanza two provides both the cause and the method of the speaker's coming into existence as an object of study; it is described as a rebirth. Love is named as the cause of "ruin." Rebirth is an increasingly articulate description of nothingness that gains pragmatic value as the object to be studied by "you who shall lovers be." Addressed to future lovers, the poem is an image of the nothing they are destined to become after love has ruined and "rebegot" them.[30] Kathleen Dolan, in an interesting analysis of what she calls a "paradoxical meditation on 'nothingness,'" uses the alchemical figures of the poem to suggest that the poet, as the "first nothing," "prepares for the soul's ascent."[31] Though Dolan is not alone in foreseeing the speaker's future resurrection, it seems clear to me that the rebirth has already occurred—"I am rebegot" (17)—and that the future, for the speaker as well as the poem, is non-existent: "nor will my sun renew" (37).

[28]Alison Rieke, "Donne's Riddles," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 83 (1984): 14.
[29]Rieke, "Donne's Riddles," 19.
[30]As a visible warning to lovers who "read" this object, the "Nocturnal" has a parallel with several other *Songs and Sonets*. Both "Valediction: Of the Book" and "The Relic" present themselves as documents to be studied.
[31]Kathleen H. Dolan, "*Materia in Potentia*: The Paradox of the Quintessence in Donne's 'A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucies Day,'" *Renascence* 32 (1979): 13–20.

Stanza three, the poem's middle stanza, highlights the speaker's noth-ingness in two ways: it contrasts the speaker to "All others, [who] from all things, draw all that's good" (19), and contrasts the speaker's present existence to a past one. The speaker is "the grave, / Of all, that's nothing" (21–22). The contrast depends upon two extreme associations, a collapse of oppositions hinging upon the unstable meaning of "all": the "all" that is everything is contrasted with the "all, that's nothing," the speaker. The tense change occurring in the second half of the stanza reveals a past state of existence that is similarly contrasted with whatever else may exist. The speaker uses first-person plural, connecting some "I" with some "you" to indicate a joint existence that distinguishes itself from "ought else," and participates in a mutual destruction of self and world. The past existence, mortal and destructive, leads to a more concentrated description of the origins of the present nothing.

The beginning of stanza four denotes this you as a "her," whose death is, in some combination with love, responsible for the ruin and rebirth of the speaker. But the speaker actually originates "Of the first nothing, the elixir grown." This statement of origins posits a creation that, not only is "nothing," but also has come from nothing. The creation from nothing replicates the paradox of the first Chapter of Genesis, namely that God's initial act of creation arose from nothing.[32] The "Nocturnal" twists this paradox, describing a something that is a nothing that has been created from nothing; it thus asserts that "nothing arises from nothing." These paradoxical origins adhere to the logic of the *via negativa*, and the argu-ment arrives at the proposition fully stated in the first line of the final stanza, "I am none" (37). Nothing comes of the first nothing—nothing (affirmative) is created out of nothing (affirmative).

I will forego investigating the precise past relationship between "I" and "she," or assessing the precise role love plays in the creation of the nothing which is the poem. The logic of negative theology is never simple, even though it be manifest. However, it does disentangle much of what is perplexing in the poem, creating new meaning for it. The poem itself is not a riddle. It is a paradox that may not be resolved. If you come to the poem comfortably embracing the paradox that "nothing" is grammatically substantive as well as affirmative, and if you accept that "nothing," as an affirmative category of existence, can neither be "made" nor "missed," then you can read the poem literally. Like the love in "Negative Love," this nothing remains infinitely determinate and infinitely indeterminate.

The temporal setting of "A Nocturnal," contained in lines 1–2 and lines 42–45, shows the *maximum* and *minimum* limitations of this "noth-ing": perpetual now in perpetual motion. The opening lines, "'Tis the

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[32]This paradox, widely debated in Donne's own time (See Booth, "Ideating Nothing," 203), is discussed and embraced by both Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa.

year's midnight, and it is the day's / Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmasks," utilize the dummy pronoun "it" and the verb "is" to situate the poem in a particular and permanent temporal location. The final four lines locate the poem more specifically as a perpetual hour, midnight, at which time the poem is in perpetual preparation by way of a vigil: "Since she enjoys her long night's festival, / Let me prepare towards her, and call / This hour her vigil, and her eve, since this / Both the year's, and the day's deep midnight is." "This," both as modifier and pronoun, does the business of naming. First, it names the hyper-present ("This hour"), permanently fixing its time as both infinitely determinate (now) and infinitely indeterminate (eternity). "This," in pronoun form, renames nothing specifically: It names both the poem (a nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day) and its speaker (the nothing "preparing towards"), merging the two, now and always, nothing and all, via the copulate verb "is."

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