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HOUSING THE REMAINS OF CULTURE: ABSOLUTE MONUMENTS TO ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE

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[See table of contents](#)

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

"RETHINKING CULTURE"

**HOUSING THE REMAINS OF CULTURE: ABSOLUTE MONUMENTS
TO ABSOLUTE KNOWLEDGE**

Marshall Grossman

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ABSTRACT

A study of the dialectic of desire and commemoration as they constitute the discourse of cultural nostalgia in the poetry of John Donne.

RÉSUMÉ

Une étude de la dialectique du désir et de la commémoration, constituifs du discours de la nostalgie culturelle dans la poésie de John Donne.

Shee, shee is gone; shee is gone; when thou knowest this, / What fragmentary rubbidge this world is / Thou knowest, and that it is not worth a thought.

John Donne

Things must expect to come in front of us

A many times -- I don't say just how many --

That varies with the things -- before we see them.

One of the lies would make it out that nothing

Ever presents itself before us twice.

Where would we be at last if that were so?

Our very life depends on everything's

Recurring til we answer from within.

Robert Frost

Life goes on long after the thrill of living is gone.

John Mellancamp

"What remains?" This is perhaps an historical question: At least insofar as it poses a something -- tradition, culture -- that was and that has changed. To say what remains it is necessary to discover a timely mediation of identity and difference, to articulate -- with more or less attention to the dynamics of the transition -- the before and after of two temporally divided states of culture. To specify the task more strictly there is also, in the literature announcing this symposium, a second question: What remains for us -- practitioners of the humanities and social sciences -- to do? In my case: what remains for a literary historian? I want, as a way of meeting this second charge, to try a literary historical approach to questioning the remains, which is to say, that the remains I interrogate and the method of my inquiry will be in some identifiable sense both literary and historical.

My three epigraphs are intended to suggest roughly, a transit across three connected moments, or three remainders in a highly compressed history of a literary tradition, broadly characterized by an implied or explicit epistemology, in which experience is posited as a determined relationship between a subject and his or her knowledge. There will be time to discuss only the first of these moments in detail, but I think is be some value in setting the issue in terms of a literary historical event and setting that event within the narrative chain suggested by the three moments here represented; the substance of my argument will be to understand how this first moment exemplifies both of historical method and the epistemological-subjective tradition around which History is formed.

In speaking of a literary historical event I have in mind something quite specific around which we can pose classical historical questions: when? why? how? Literature answers both to its own linguistic and rhetorical constraints and to the historical conditions in which it is produced. Its content and structures -- generic and architectural -- are conditioned by both contingent experience and the conventions of rhetoric and language in force at given time. Moreover the literary product in circulation at a given time is a historical fact with demonstrably historical results. I take it to be the goal of literary history to specify the relationship of text to exigent experience and explain how change in one affects (and represents) change in the other.

I understand a literary historical event to have occurred when a particular accommodation of experience and textuality is consolidated, in such a way

that the text produced is subsequently thought of as referring to a prior extra-textual "reality." The literary historical event marks the successful making of experience conventional and the consequent invisibility of the effectuating conventions. My epigraphs may be presumed each to exemplify, in brief, such a consolidation.[\[1\]](#)

In 1611, John Donne was living through a number of social, economic, and religious developments that taken together mediate an event in intellectual history -- an epistemological cusp.[\[2\]](#) That year, in response to a commission from the wealthy father of a recently deceased fourteen-year-old girl, Donne produced an enduringly anomalous poem: "The Anatomy of the World," which comes to be known as *The First Anniversary*. Asked to commemorate the death of an entirely undistinguished young girl, whom he had never met, Donne presents himself with our question. Adopting the conceit that a certain world could not survive the death of the girl, whom he figured, generically, as "shee," he works over its remains, paradoxically asserting the value of a dissection that no one will remain alive to study:

For there's a kind of world remaining still,

Though shee which did inanimate and fill

The world, be gone, yet in this last long night,

Her Ghost doth walke; that is, a glimmering light,

A faint weake love of vertue and of good

Reflects from her. (67-72)[\[3\]](#)

Two things intrigue me in this passage: 1) The experience -- the feeling -- of a world that has become inanimate and yet persists, and 2) The persistent reflection in this world -- as a ghost or spirit -- of that which had made it live: its persistence as a *reflection of that which is no longer there*. The first of these interests arises simply: Is there some useful analogy between Donne's experience and conditions and the experiences and conditions that lead us to ask "What remains of culture and tradition"? The second is more historical or, perhaps, literary historical: Is the "wan ghost" that persists in a dead world, the (Romantic) spirit that goes on to become the elusive Spirit of modernity, animating the tradition whose remainder we now seek? I pose these questions to provide some warrant for settling the following discussion in the seventeenth-century; I do not know the answers to them, but I think we may begin to approach the ways in which they are raised by the juxtaposition of our postmodern question and Donne's early modern text.

So what happened in 1611? Donne's hyperbolic lamentations elicit a familiar anecdote, recorded by Drummond of Hawthorden in his *Conversations* with Ben Jonson. As the story goes: when Jonson complained that such an extravagant poem about a teenage girl was profane and that "if it had been written of the Virgin Mary it had been something," Donne replied that "he described the idea of a Woman, and not as she was."^[4] I think Donne meant by this that the "shee" of his poem is neither Elizabeth Drury, the girl he was paid to memorialize, nor the virgin Mary, but rather, generically, the chaste and unattainable female cynosure of the neoplatonic tradition that had informed European, epideictic verse from *La Vita Nuova* onward. To see "her" in this way is to realize the inanity of Jonson's response: the poem marks the impossibility, in 1611, of effectively writing either the Virgin Mary, or her iterative surrogate, whom we may call generically, "Laura."

Within the tradition of neoplatonic epideixis epitomized by Petrarch's praise of an unattainable woman whose name means praise, a fantasy of female perfection serves as a visible form that conducts its lover to the contemplation of a disembodied virtue, from which, like Plato's philosophical soul, he "catches sight of the immortal."^[5] In this transaction the praiser, the praised and the praise are to each become the mirror of the other and thus become one.

In *The Anatomy of the World*, Donne traces the symptoms following from the loss of this figural woman -- the idea of whose physical and moral beauty stands in for the Idea itself. He anatomizes specifically the world as it had been organized -- in and before the renaissance -- by a certain cultural aspiration put into play through what Slavoj Zizek calls the "sublime object" of ideology; that is, a mute desire mediated by a fantasy that retrospectively structures reality itself.^[6] Donne asks what remains because, for him, or more broadly, for his time, the sublimation of this object is failing. As the literary conventions of neoplatonic epideixis become increasingly visible as such, the experience they had mediated fades from view. The visible letter kills, and the spirit flees.^[7] Intuiting that "shee," not Elizabeth Drury, but her letter in the text of the world, our generic "Laura," is a fetish that "conceals the lack ('castration') around which the symbolic network is articulated" (Zizek, p. 49), Donne is momentarily in a position to name the constituent elements in that network, to see them as mere things rather than signifiers. Writing from a time when one sublimation has been -- so to speak -- put under erasure and another has not yet taken hold, he encounters the repressed -- returning, as Zizek puts it, from the future (Zizek, pp. 55-8). It is this future that we share.

The corpse in *The Anatomy of the World* is a universe in which intelligible truth could be *embodied* in poetic sublimations of *things* because the natural world was given to the senses in forms *immediately* available for

appropriation as signifiers. To put this another way, we might say that an Imaginary intellectual universe, structured by idealized but ultimately embodied forms, passed into a universe in which *signifiante* was irreparably disjoined from substance: In this "world remaining still" things signify only through a double mediation in which they are subjected to (and disembodied by) the Other of a virtual symbolic order. To be accepted into this order they must cease to be also things. Elizabeth Drury has died -- as, indeed, Beatrice and Laura had before her, but her death decisively structures these previous deaths as autonomous repetitions. Whereas the deaths of Beatrice and Laura are decisive in the literary texts of Dante and Petrarch -- textual events which become metonymically formative in their authorial personae -- the death of Drury precisely resists such eventuality. Because her death does not signify and cannot be made to mean, it retrospectively hollows out and empties these previous literary sacrifices, marking the persistent excess of the Real over both the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

In short, Donne lived in and complained about a world in which a developing technology was *de-signing* a 'natural' world that had seemed to have been, from time immemorial, designed. With the "infictable" death of Elizabeth Drury, "Laura" suddenly stops supporting the desire for design and marks instead the materialization of the Real, which exceeds it -- which, if I may use the Lacanian term, *ex-sists*.

An exemplary moment from *The Anatomy of the World* will serve to illustrate this eventual ex-sistence. When, among other material disruptions, the mediation of Galileo's optics deprive humankind of the Idols of the Cave and Mind, Donne catches the systemic character of the ensuing disruptions:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,

The Element of fire is quite put out;

The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and *no mans wit*

Can well direct him, where to looke for it.

And freely men confesse, that this world's spent,

When in the Planets, and the Firmament

They seeke so many new; they see that this

Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.

'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone;

All just supply, and all Relation:

Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot.

(205-15, my ital.)

When the Ptolemaic universe offered the "eye" a cosmos of concentric spheres, the book of nature was a relatively easy read. The journey from the visible circle to the infinite God whose nature it signified was a short one: The intervention of the telescope did not simply extend the range of the human eye; it displaced and disembodied that eye so that with vision isolated from the person and given over to a measuring thing, incapable of intellect or desire, man found himself no longer to be "the measure of all things."

"Her" disappearance is thus identified with the inviability, in 1611, of a cosmology which organized vision around "natural" forms which offered themselves *immediately* as also symbolic representations. The circular orbits of the Ptolemaic planets traced real lines in real space to outline the abstract conceptual being of a God whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. This visual world organized *relation*, made the world cohere. "Shee" then, as the conventional and visual embodiment of a sublimed and subjected desire is also this sign of significance: "She that was best and first originall / Of all faire copies; and the generall / Steward to Fate. . . / . . . / She to whom this world must itselife refer, / As Suburbs, or the Microcosme of her" (222-36).

Donne thus diagnoses "Laura's" signifying function as that of the object beyond, the object -- missing in its perfection -- around which the relation of self and world are organized, and he diagnoses the malady that afflicts her: The natural world beginning to be seen in its denatured complexity, does not signify, or signifies precisely that it lacks immediate meaning. Henceforth this lack will be supplied not -- as in neoplatonic epideixis -- by the pictura poesis of the blazon but by the speaking subject's newly constituted memory of loss, the "wan ghost" of full meaning understood as presence. Anticipating a certain analytic tradition, Donne's "anatomy" sets out to trace the persistence of this Imaginary in a Symbolic order that is constituted elsewhere and otherwise, and that remains eccentric to it.

Persisting in the best neoplatonic tradition, the memory which defines this subject seeks and achieves an identity with the world it has introjected. In a strategic and preserving reversal of Petrarch's *laurete Laura*, Donne anatomizes a world that has itself become the cite of a disembodied and lacking spirit: "Shee, shee is dead, she's dead: when thou know'st this, / Thou know'st how wan a ghost this our world is" (369-70).

What, then remains of "the world remaining still"? A mediating voice, of indeterminate origin, comprising a remembered spirit and an always already archaic form. The poem's final lines are a commonplace, made mordant by the renewed precision with which they are now employed: "Verse hath a middle nature: heaven keeps souls, / The grave keeps bodies, verse the fame enrolls" (473-4). If in the modernity to come of "the world remaining still," the embodied Word is lost; words remain: Words that are the monuments of things which -- by becoming visible -- have disappeared.

In approaching the question of "what remains -- today, for us -- of culture and tradition?" I take this detour through, Donne's 1611 monument to the passing of *La Vita Nuova*, because just as the wan ghost of a lost object then remained, in some obscurely crippled way, modernism, which marked the tomb from which that ghost escapes, now remains, soliciting us from that most Romantic of monuments: a ruined tomb. What remains at the site of this ruin? Is it still haunted? Will it remain so?

In 1611, Donne's world was, post-epideictic, but it did not remain so. Early modern people, as those who lived in the Renaissance are now properly called, were evidently and indisputably aware of their modernity, but they do not seem for very long to have conceived of themselves and their works as *post-medieval* or even *post-dark ages*. On the contrary they often worked hard to obscure their ruptures with the immediate past and to represent them as pervasive continuities; as in, for example, the Reformation's ambition to *restore* the primitive church. Moments such as Donne's are transitory and transitional in the early modern period; however, we see in the enlightenment, the career of a new fetish: reason and the individual consciousness, which emerges to replace the de-sublimed fetish of a macrocosmic perfection *embodied* in microcosmic form. The differences between these two signifying systems are great; the worlds they support dissimilar.

Semantically housed, as it is, in a neologism bordering on oxymoron, "post-modernism" indicates not the othering of the modern, in the way that the Renaissance achieved the othering of the middle ages, but rather a moment after the modern during which we seem to be bound in a present that is

present as the presence of a present that is lost, that is belated, and that remains. We find ourselves *after* the modern only in the sense that the modern lives on into its own impossibility, simultaneously asserting and denying what is qualitative in the passage of time. Like Donne's "wan ghost" modernity continues to inhabit a corpse tradition: the privilege it had accorded to the individual consciousness as the experiencing pole of a dialectical ex-sistence becomes visible, theorized, but no new sublimation, no new enlightenment, yet replaces it. There are reasons, moreover, to admit the possibility that none will.

In our own de-sublimated moment, then, what remains for us, for whom tradition is the object of a profession? We need to be modest in our aims: Perhaps we can resist (delay) the erasure of experience to the degree that we are careful to articulate the experience of its erasure? And perhaps we can articulate the dim outlines of a self apart from fetishistic mediation?

In seeking to look beyond our arrested present we meet ourselves and the image becomes speculative. For the sake of discussion, however, I will end with two brief speculations. The first is that in the "administered society," past, present and future are reified in the "now," of a reified memory in which tradition becomes, sardonically, immemorial. I have indicated some of the obvious ways in which Kepler's elliptical orbits did not support neoplatonic epideixis so well as Ptolemy's circular orbits had. Similarly, electronic communication does not support historical causality nearly so well as steam power had. One cannot see the moving parts in the contemporary locomotive. One cannot see movement at the speed of light, and yet the static traces of such of movement render the interval between thought and expression perceptible, not just metaphorically, but physically. What is present is present as always already past, reminding us of its own reflexive-monumentality.^[8] If the fetish of presence remained for Donne (and after) a monument -- literally, a memorial; what remains for us is absolutely monumental; remembering only itself, it incorporates the past without *recycling* it, retaining it as an out-of-phase aspect of the present, as a memory -- or what amounts to the same thing, an allusion.

Thus the hyphen, invisible or expressed, that joins post to modern would seem to mark a second introjection of the world, so that experience may be retained, in its loss, as a property of consciousness. Marking not the persistence of continuity but the insistence of discontinuity, this memory of memory marks the ghost's failure to appear, and this failure -- since it is a failure of memory -- erases also her earlier appearances. Insofar as a monument marks the place, localized in time and space, at which something has been transferred from space and time to memory, the absolute monument memorializes the monumental itself: the mode of its remembering is oblivion and the extent of its reach limitless. It encumbers the future by turning back to a past that it preserves only as what is lost.

This peculiar temporality can be seen, for example, when Elizabeth Drew, writing in *The New Yorker* in 1989, gives us this post-modern moment in politics: "Republican strategists believe," she writes, "that Reagan's popularity stemmed in part from the fact that by last fall he had become a nostalgic figure; by the time he left, he had in effect been gone for some time."[\[9\]](#) This is the popularity of the absolutely monumental, standing in to mark its own effaced memory.

What remains, then, is a tale of timely action from which time -- understood as the medium in which a human *ethos* is written on the world -- has been expunged. Approaching modernity, Hegel saw work -- in the dialectic of lordship and bondage -- as an *activity* mediating the negativity of Desire on the one side and the recalcitrance of Nature on the other:

Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence. Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its *form* and something *permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence. This *negative* middle term or the formative *activity* is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence. It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, qua worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its *own* independence.
[\[10\]](#)

But in the disjunct saturation of postmodernity, Desire, Work and Permanence elude dialectical mediation because of a perpetual temporal displacement that enfolds the *activity* of work in an anticipation of its memory. Never quite "com[ing] to see" to see its own independence "in the independent being of the object," the "worker" and "object" are always already seen as anachronistic, as sharing the evanescence of conceptual art, which exists only as the documentation of its having (once) been performed. History is thus transposed from a story whose proper ending is at all times anticipated to the compulsive recapitulation of a terminal event.

So, what remains -- for us -- to do? It may be the case that a closer attention to the history of technology and particularly to the development of instrumental mathesis and its impact on natural language may offer more help in holding onto and historicizing the phenomenal nature of the experiences I have been describing than a continued reliance on the totalizing categories of modes of production and class struggle into which technological development have tended to be subsumed.

My second speculation specifies a particular direction for the study of the assimilation of technology in language. I suggested earlier that the renaissance marked a desublimated moment that passed into the enlightenment. One of the things that occurred during this period to enable the age of reason, was the bringing of the post-copernican universe into natural language. New pictures in the sky were met by new metaphors: poetic trajectories could modulate from the circular to the parabolic. Our present situation is more resistant to natural language because, in some, significant way, mathesis has become para-linguistic. How does one put unified field theory or quantum mechanics into words? What is the status of history in a world that cannot be reduced to words? Perhaps this difficulty accounts in part for the time lag, the resistance, we have named postmodernity? And perhaps, it signals a new and less central role for language in the mediation of desire? Having historicized history, can we follow the (algebraic) letter in its step outside the impasse of our ex-centricity -- and be otherwise?

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[Surface Page d'Accueil/Home Page](#)

[1]For a fuller defense of this understanding of the literary historical event, see my "Historical Consciousness and Late Renaissance Literature," *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 247-64. On the placement of history within literature, see Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in *The New Historicism*, ed. Harold Veesser (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1989) 49-76; This essay is reprinted along with Fineman's other important essays on the "subjectivity effect" in Joel Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in*

Western Literary Tradition: Essays Toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will, An October Book (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991).

[2] On Donne's personal and social situation as the impoverished son of one of England's pre-eminent recusant families, see John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London, 1981). On his place as a gentleman amateur within the system in which courtly literature was produced and distributed, see Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) and Arthur Marotti, Jr. *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

[3] *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: J. Dent & Sons, 1985).

[4] *Ben Jonson*, ed. Ian Donaldson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 596.

[5] See, for example, Socrates' account of the teachings of Diotima in the *Symposium*:

And remember, [Diotima] said, that it is only when he discerns beauty itself though what makes it visible that a man will be quickened with the true, and not the seeming, virtue -- for it is virtue's self that quickens him, not virtues semblance. And when he has brought forth and reared this perfect virtue, he shall be called the friend of god, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him."

(Trans. Michael Joyce in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1961)).

[6] Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 45, 71.

[7] By way of filling out the narrative of a proposed trajectory from Pauline *Spiritus* to Hegelian *Geist* and beyond, we may consider Lacan's remarks on an analogous desublimation set more or less in the time of my second epigraph:

Certes la lettre tue, dit-on, quand l'esprit vivifie. . . mais nous nous demandons aussi comment sans la lettre l'esprit vivrait. Les prétentions de l'esprit, pourtant, demeureraient irréductibles si la lettre n'avait fait la preuve qu'elle produit ses effets de vérité dans l'homme, sans que l'esprit ait le moins du monde à s'en mêler.

Cette révélation, c'est à Freud qu'elle s'est faite, et sa découverte, il l'a appelée l'inconscient. "L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud," in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966) 509.

[8] Fredric Jameson eloquently remarks the lack of a "capacity for representation" in "the technology of our moment" in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press,

1991) 36-7, but Jameson, rather willfully (albeit hopefully), goes on to recuperate Marxist modernity by making that lack itself a representation: "Rather I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself" (37-8).

[9]"Letter From Washington," February 27, 1989: 77.

[10]*Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 118.