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## Alchemical Imagery in Three of Donne's Eschatological Poems: *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, *Holy Sonnet IV*, and *Resurrection, Imperfect*

As in the Bible some can find out alchemy.  
John Donne, *Valediction to his Book*

### 1. Introduction

The incorporation of alchemical images into the language of Donne's eschatological poetry can be considered within the discourse of what has traditionally come to pass as spiritual alchemy. This syncretic doctrine of Christianised Hermetism finds its source in the cultural institutionalisation of religious knowledge in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Three aspects of this process are especially significant: the patristic theory of knowledge, the Protestant Reformation, and the expansion of print. What forms the intellectual background of spiritual alchemy is the notion of the unity of knowledge, an idea both assumed in the mythically constructed alchemical system and espoused in patristic hermeneutics. The theoretical precepts of this notion substantiate the Augustinian practise of applying the exegetical method of prefiguration to pre-Christian Hermetic texts. In the eighth book of *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine reads the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, the father of alchemy, in terms of biblical typology, thus locating the source of both occult and Christian knowledge in God:

But when Hermes predicts these things, he speaks as one who is a friend to these same mockeries of demons, and does not clearly express the name of Christ. On the contrary, he deplores, as if it had already taken place, the future abolition of those things by the observance of which there was maintained in Egypt a resemblance of heaven, – **he bears witness to Christianity by a kind of mournful prophecy**... For Hermes makes many such statements agreeable to the truth concerning the one true God who fashioned this world. (8: 23)

The deployment of the figure of *praefiguratio* in this analysis of Hermetic philosophy attests to Augustine's reliance on the assumption that intellectual cognition originates in and ascends to God. The basis of this assumption is constituted by two Augustinian theories: the concept of divine illumination being a prerequisite for understanding, and the (Neo) platonic doctrine of reminiscence,<sup>1</sup> according to which learning is the soul's recollection of eternal truths. The following citation from Augustine demonstrates this supposition: "It is a great thing, and quite exquisite, by sheer effort of mind to go beyond the created universe, both corporeal and incorporeal, and, having examined it and found it mutable, to arrive at the immutable being of God" (*De Civitate Dei* 11.2). In this sense, Augustinian hermeneutics, from which Kiefer-Lewalski (1979) derives Protestant poetics, yields a rationalization for the coexistence of Christian and alchemical images in Donne's religious poetry.

On the opposite pole of this universalising theological-mythical contextualization of alchemical poetic imagery stand the polarising historical conditions of the Reformation connected with the cultural consequences of printing. It could be hypothesised that alchemical doctrines partook of what Habermas described as the decentralising effect of the Protestant movement on the status of religious experience (1990: 11). In the midst of the 16<sup>th</sup> century pluralisation of religious stances strengthened by the expanding institution of print, which contributed to the disempowering of the interpretative authority of the church, alchemy possibly distinguished itself as a contingent exegesis of the Scripture and a textual participant in religious strife. Indeed, some Renaissance alchemical theories resembled, in their philosophical heterogeneity, privately compiled religious doctrines. For example, Paracelsus, to whom Donne's imagery was heavily indebted, created an entire morally organised cosmological system based upon his idiosyncratic, literal interpretations of the Bible. Philip Ball writes that Paracelsus "often asserted the independence of religious thought insisting that it is the duty of the true Christian to reject all schools, all leaders, all doctrines...: 'If we seek God, we must go forth, for in the Church we find him not'" (Paracelsus qtd in Ball 2006: 118). Paracelsus' subversive creed (in which he was not isolated among 16<sup>th</sup> century spiritual alchemists) bore the traces of Protestant reformativism: while relying on the broadening utilisation of print and on the accessibility of vernacular language to popularise his beliefs, he endeavoured to unsettle the exclusiveness of ecclesiastic doctrinism, in which, nevertheless, his speculative philosophy was saturated. Hence, the Renaissance process of privatisation of religious meaning at once typifies and legitimises the juxtaposition of Christian rhetoric and occult esotericisms in Donne's 'devout' poems, all the more so because the polarization of Christian faith during the Reformation overlapped with the metaphysical turmoil brought about by the Hermetic and natural philosophy of alchemy.

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<sup>1</sup> This doctrine was, however, rejected in Augustine's later writings.

## 2. *Valediction, Forbidding Mourning*

*Valediction, Forbidding Mourning* is a Renaissance variant of the medieval *conge d'amour* (Freccero 1975: 291) in which, typically, the physical separation of lovers is contrasted with the transcendental closeness of their souls. The canonical interpretations of the poem (listed below) acknowledge the subsistence of alchemical imagery in the lyric, without recognizing, however, the centrality of such metaphors in the overall organization of the text. I would like to approach Donne's *Valediction* focusing my attention on the departure-as-death motif, which, in my view, is adopted from the tradition of the iconographic symbolism of the 'chemical wedding.' Such an analysis, though bringing to the fore the submerged alchemical conceit, still sanctions the previously mentioned classical interpretations according to which the poem inhabits the Plotinian theory of ecstasy (cf. Hughes 1960: 509–518), the Christian dogma of the glorified bodies (cf. Chambers 1982: 1–3), Aristotelian theory of motion (cf. Tate 1968: 247–249) or astronomical imagery (cf. Freccero 1975: *passim*).

Chemical wedding, a crucial concept in alchemy, is controlled by the presumption that the philosophical stone reconciles the archetypal opposites of sulphur and mercury, male and female, spirit and matter. In a cycle of dissolutions and coagulations adepts strove to annihilate qualitative differences between the elements to produce a perfect form of being, in which the opposing energies would coexist in harmony. The first stage of the chemical wedding is represented, e.g., in the emblem *Animae Extractio* from *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550), which depicts the joined bodies of two lovers lying on a sarcophagus, from which departs a winged soul. The motto attached to the picture reads: "Here, king and queen lie dead/the soul departs in great haste/Here the four elements separate." Similarly, *Solutio Perfecta* from *Donum Dei* (15<sup>th</sup> century) shows an angel flying over a copulating couple in the alembic with an inscription reading: "to return to nature means making corpses into spirits in our mastery." The next stage of the chemical wedding entailed the sublimation of the lovers' bodies usually by their conversion into a single hermaphrodite *corpus* and by rejoining it with the soul already coalesced with the heavenly spirit. This process gradually abolished the duality of male and female and that of the soul and the flesh, the opposites being reunited in the refined body of the androgynous figure, symbolic of the stone. The product of such a transformation is presented, for example, in a woodcut from *Symbola aurea* (1617) or an engraving from *Philosophia Reformata* (1622). Both pictures allegorise the chemical wedding of sulphur and mercury through an image of a two-headed hermaphrodite.

The theme of the chemical wedding is announced already in the first stanza of the *Valediction* which dramatises the deathbed scene of a 'virtuous man':

As virtuous men pass mildly away,  
And whisper to their souls to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends do say,  
'Now his breath goes,' and some say, 'No.' (1–4)

Similarly to the aforementioned woodcuts from the *Rosarium* series, these lines try to capture the moment of the separation of the soul (breath) from the dying body. Though easily credited with a religious status, this poetic image also recalls the alchemical valorisation of breath, as a universal bonding principle. Generally, *pneuma* was believed to be a volatile spirit liberated from corruptible substances while they were cleansed of their impurities in the process of distillation. Nicholl sheds light on the physical, laboratory basis for this idea: “When vapours rose from a heated liquid or corroded solid, the alchemist saw a spirit arising from the embrace, the dark prison, of matter” (1997: 4). The extraction of the soul from a mineral is portrayed for example in Donne’s *Bracelet*: “Almighty Chymiques from each mineral/Having by subtle fire a soule out-pull’d” (44–45) or in *A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day*: “often absences/Withdrew our souls, and made us car-casses” (26–27). The notion of *pneuma* is essential to spiritual alchemy because it assumes a unity between subject and object: as the spirit in the form of a vapour is neither material nor spiritual, it occupies an intermediate position between the body and the soul.

The alchemical conception of the soul of matter informs the narrative unfolding in the *Valediction*. In the following stanzas, the parting of lovers becomes re-coded as a series of alchemical processes: liquefaction, putrefaction, evaporation and coagulation, which lead to the extraction of the soul from the lovers’ impure flesh and to the consequent integration of the female and male principles into the hermaphroditic body of Mercurius, or the vital spirit of the universe, also known as *pneuma*. Let us trace the phases of this experiment. Liquefaction is described at the beginning of the second stanza: “So let us melt, and make no noise/No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move” (5–6). This entreaty to part without a tearful farewell is a meta-poetic renouncement of Petrarchan sentimentalism as much as it is an alchemical image of the dissolution of matter in the *nigredo* stage. The line “melt and make no noise” (5) probably pertains to a laboratory observation of impure metals such as lead which produce a spluttering sound when liquefied (cf. Freccero 1975: 290). Other words from the quoted verse, though carrying emotional significance, are also embedded in the material conditions of laboratory experiments. In alchemical terminology, ‘tears’ designated dewdrops condensing on the glass of the alembic (cf. Abraham 1998: 78), ‘flood’ was another term for dissolution. Moreover, as Abraham explains, it was believed that during distillation the dead bodies of the two lovers exuded tears which rinsed the blackened corpses of the dross (198). Perhaps the warning against unwarranted weeping that Donne issues in *Valediction* is a reference to the danger of spoiling the experiment with an intemperate use of water, which in the *The Golden Tract* received a metaphor of the story about a woman, who dissolved her husband, closed in the alembic, with her tears: “she wept for him, and, as it were, covered him with overflowing tears, until he was quite flooded and concealed from view” (HM 1: 47).

After the lovers partaking in the chemical wedding die to become cleansed of their impurities, they are reborn in a more spiritual form. The allusion to this stage (purification) is manifested in the phrase "by a love so much refined" (16), the word 'refined' signifying a raising of metal to a purer state of being through its purification in fire. Moreover, the fourth stanza of the poem overtly speaks of 'removing' the soul from the body to contrast the spiritual union of lovers with their purely sensual connection:

Dull sublunary lovers' love  
 – Whose **soul** is sense – cannot admit  
 Of absence, 'cause it doth **remove**  
 The thing which elemented it. [my emphasis] (13–16)

The image of the 'refined' body which is ontologically located on the boundary between soul and flesh is reinforced by the allusion to the practise of beating gold with a hammer in the line "gold to aery thinness beat" (24), in which the expanding metal becomes suspended between the element of earth and air: the solid and the volatile elements.

In the final stage of the chemical wedding, fixation, the soul was again rigidified into a solid body or reunited with it. In alchemical engravings, fixation was represented as the capturing of the flying spirit (Mercurius) by cutting off his feet with a scythe to 'fix' them to the ground. Perhaps the phrase, "Thy soul, the fix'd foot" (27), though principally relating to the image of the compasses also has secondary references to the alchemical process of fixation. Lastly, the ultimate goal of the chemical wedding was to obtain the hermaphrodite body of the philosopher's stone, whose supreme substance evinced the characteristics of *prima materia*, the undifferentiated mass composed of the fifth essence, irreducible to the fundamental elements, yet containing the proto-ontological forms of the material essence of existence. This triumphant return to the sexually undivided prime matter is perhaps signalled in the last couplet: "Thy firmness makes my circle just/And makes me end where I begun" (35–36). The past participle of begin, 'begun,' recalls the regression to the primeval substance from which the universe was created, while the inversion of male and female symbols – suggested by Mansour (2005) – ('thy firmness' and 'my circle') remains in accord with the idea of the hermaphroditic unity of the quintessence.

This chronological succession of laboratory operations contained within the paradigm of the chemical wedding culminates in the closing conceit of the compasses, whose construction and movement symbolise the unity of the lovers' souls as traditionally acknowledged in criticism. I would like to argue that the image of this geometrical instrument is derived from the alchemical discourse. Firstly, it is needful to bear in mind what becomes self-evident for a careful viewer of alchemical engravings – that the compasses were an alchemical instrument and a symbol of Hermetic science. In Dürer's *Melancholia* (1514) – the title summon-

ing the state of mind that accompanies the *nigredo* stage – an angel, surrounded with alchemical symbols such as scales, a seven-rung ladder, a pair of bellows, and the magic square is holding a pair of compasses in his hands (cf. Fabricious, 149). In the four corners of the title page from Albertus Magnus' *Philosophia Naturalis* (1524), to give another example, we find four alchemical tools: the scales, the ruler, the Hermetic vase, and the compasses. The following quotation from Klossowski de Rola casts light on the significance of compasses in alchemy: "The compasses whose points not only measure and compare distances but trace the perfect circumference of the hermetic circle – act as an invaluable teaching aid, indicating the proportions of Weights in the Arts" (1997: 100).

Crucial in Donne's *Valediction* is the symbolism of the geometrical figure that the compasses are drawing. As Freccero noticed, the compasses in *Valediction* execute a twofold movement: along the radius of the circle and around the circumference (1975: 280), so they run 'obliquely.' He reads the geometric conceit in reference to the spiral – oblique – paths of planets. To divorce the poem's interpretation from the astronomical background proposed by Freccero I would like to analyse it within the domain of alchemy. It seems that the combination of the circular and linear movement indicates that the compasses in Donne simultaneously sketch two figures: a square and a circle, so they construct the quadrature of the circle. The lemma of the squaring of the circle harks back to the Apollonian current in the history of geometry which had found its continuation e.g. in the medieval works of Albert of Saxony and of pseudo-Bradwardine (cf. Knorr 1990: 617–689). The core of this unsolvable problem is the transformation – with the use of compasses – of a square into a circle with exactly the same area. Being an essential hieroglyph in alchemical symbolism, squaring the circle designates the conversion of the four elements into the fifth essence, as evidenced in George Ripley's treatise (first published in 1591): "Of water, fire, and winde of earth make blive/and of the quadrangle make a figure round" (qtd in Linden 2003: 145). In Robert Fludd's *Utriusque Cosmi* (1621), the "fixed and the drawing legs of the compass" (qtd in Roob 2006: 507) stand for "the oneness of God [with] ... the visible, elemental world" (*ibid.*). More significantly for this analysis, the symbolism of the quadrature also embraces the reconciliation of the terrestrial and the celestial opposites, and, predominantly, of male and female qualities in the primal matter of the stone. Emblem XXI preserved in the 1618 edition of Maier's *Atlanta Fugiens* shows a figure of an alchemist, who sketches with a pair of compasses a circle circumscribed on a square and on a triangle enclosing a picture of a man and a woman. The motto attached to the woodcut reads: "**Make a circle out of a man and woman** [my emphasis], derive it from a square... make a circle and thou will have the philosophers stone." The alchemical symbolism of the compasses as the spiritual marriage of dual principles: the physical and the intangible, the masculine and the feminine, forestalls the reading of Donne's *Valediction*, whose central theme, recapitulated in the line: "Our two souls therefore, which are one"



(21), revolves around the blending of sexual opposites into spiritual oneness along with the alchemical convention of the chemical wedding.

### 3. *Holy Sonnet IV*

Alchemical references in *Oh, my blacke soul* are far more indirect than in the previously discussed poem. *The Holy Sonnet IV*, an address to the soul liberated from the body at the moment of death, is usually interpreted as an Ignatian meditation on the Last Things (cf. Peterson 1975: 316). Upon closer inspection, however, the poem's imagery transcends the typical categories of devotional poetics as formulated by Martz (1956), with the contemplation of the fear of punishment and the necessity of repentance being presented through the prism of alchemical conceptuality. The juxtaposition of the two perspectives, scientific and eschatological, is visible in the language of the sonnet's last sestet, wherein the I-speaker directs his soul to acknowledge atonement through a submission to the operations of grace:

Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;  
But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?  
O, make thyself with holy mourning black,  
And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;  
Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might,  
That being red, it dyes red souls to white. (9–14)

In these lines the image of the purgation of the soul is modelled on the structure of a three-phase alchemical experiment: the transmutation of base metal to gold. The *opus* begins with the stage described as *nigredo* ('blackness') in which lead or iron dissolves to prime matter, the primordial formless substance from which life had derived. The second stage, consisting in the vaporisation of the corrupted metal and its condensation in a vessel, is called *albedo* ('whiteness'), a term which symbolises the ablution of metals. The final stage of the alchemical *opus*, termed *rubedo* ('redness' from the colour of mercury), leads to the conjunction of spirit and matter in the putrefied metal through its ultimate refinement. This hierarchy of colours that betokens the progression of alchemical work is in Donne's text transferred onto a Christian symbol of the path that a soul must travel after death. The stages of this eschatological journey are marked by the changing colour of the soul, which seems to exhibit the chemical behaviour of distilled metal, altering its hue from black to red and thereafter to white: "with holy mourning black," (11) "and red with blushing," (12) "it dyes red souls to white" (14).

Let us focus on the last verse of the poem: "[Christ's blood]... dyes red soul to white" (14). The line contains a paradox which, overtly refuting the scientific theories of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, seems to reverse the whole structure of the formerly employed alchemical analogy. Contrary to Renaissance beliefs, in the quoted passage, *albedo* is assumed to be the final stage of the distillation process, *rubedo*

as its the middle stage: the saved soul is coloured white, not red. Moreover, the idea of dying a fabric from red to white with red pigment undoubtedly violates the recipes of domestic alchemy used by many 16<sup>th</sup> century dyers. It should be noticed, however, that, as the accord between alchemical imagery and liturgical symbolism of colours is brought into question in the ending of the text (gravitating towards establishing the primacy of biblical metaphors over the secular rhetoric of poetry), the final conceit does not cease to rely on alchemical similes; quite the reverse, scientific references are still employed at this point to buttress soteriological concepts implicit in the Protestant doctrine.

In particular, both the emphasis on the purgatorial stages of *albedo* and *rubedo* and the allusion to the vernacular incarnation of alchemy used in artisanship to dye cloth or, most expressly, to remove stains expose Donne's articulation of the Calvinist notion of contrition, as a requisite for cleansing the soul from sin. Also rendering Christ's blood as a chemical concoction essential to whiten the soul – an analogy that mirrors the Calvinist insistence on the mediation of God's grace in the scheme of salvation – is immersed in the theories of alchemical science. The word 'grace' itself (used twice in the poem [lines 9, 10]) operates in alchemical terminology as a designation for the Adamic purity of the soul that an adept must attain in order for his work to come to fruition. As Crashaw contends, the alchemist "had already to be in state of grace if he were to achieve anything in the laboratory" (1972: 333, cf. Albrecht 2005: 65). So, spiritual illumination was a necessary condition for undertaking successful chemical experiments: a man corrupted by sin could not have recompensed his moral decline even with life-long scholarship. This is what Sir Edward Kelly enunciated when he wrote in 1652 that "the Stone is to be obtained by grace, rather than reading" (qtd in Roberts 1995: 79).

Both quoted passages cast light on two lines from the poem. Firstly "who shall give thee that grace to begin?" (10) raises, in a sense, the question about the source of transcendental knowledge. The double meaning of 'grace' entails a confrontation between the alchemical doctrine endowed with the authority to confer eternal life and the History of Salvation placing this authority in the hands of God. The interrogative pronoun 'who' beginning the question challenges the metaphysical dimension of alchemy: it is God who conducts the experiment described in the poem. Secondly, the pun on red/read in "death's doom be read" (5) and "Christ's blood... being red" (14) develops an antithesis between the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture. Sustaining the reference to alchemy, in the last line Donne re-conceptualises the argument in biblical terms. Just as an alchemist must acquire laborious learning to carry out research, so a sinner may rectify his moral lapse to attain salvation by an assiduous study of the Word of God (in both instances, however, the intercession of grace is indispensable for the full accomplishment of the undertaken enterprise). The Protestant postulate of *sola scriptura* finds its condensed expression in the homophonic form 'red' which equivocates the authority of the Scripture (read) sanctified by Christ's death (shown in its



physiological dimension ['red blood']) with the almost tangible act of deliverance from sin.

In a circular manner this conclusion brings us back to the scientific background of the poem. Emphasising both the redemptive power and the red hue of Eucharistic blood, the poem's ending aligns the chemical or medicinal ideas about the composition of blood and the alchemical formulas for the *elixir vitae* with the Christian Church's dogma of eternal life. First of all, blood functioned in alchemy as an image of mercury, the arcanum of transformation (cf. Albrecht 2005: 28). "No solution ought to be made without blood," instructed *Rosarium Philosophorum*, utilizing the meaning of blood as an agent of *solve et coagulation*. In the light of some alchemical outlooks, blood itself was the material of the elixir of life. Such was, for example, the theory of Roger Bacon, who claimed that prime matter, the chemical origin of the potion ensuring longevity, can be extracted from human blood by means of distillation (Moran 2005: 22). In the English Renaissance, organic alchemy developing in the Baconian tradition prompted a strictly religious interpretation of that supposition. The alchemical theorem propounded in the Christianised *Ordinall of Alchemy*, (15<sup>th</sup> century) provided a corpuscular rationale for the theological mystery of salvation: Thomas Norton literally deemed the elixir of immortality a chemical counterpart of the blood of Christ (Szulakowska 2006: 51). A literal treatment of this theme also appeared in an alchemical engraving from *Hermetische Schriften*, in which a monk catches in a cup the tinctural blood of the mercurial Christ nailed to the alchemical tree of seven metals (Roob 2006: 423).

The significance that alchemy bestowed on blood was also connected with its colour. It should be remembered that the ultimate matter, the goal of the alchemical opus, was said to have been blood-red. Basil Valentine, for example, seemed to have equated the stone with blood, at least terminologically, on the basis of their identical colour: "tincture... the Rose of our Masters, of purple hue, [is] called also red blood" (HM 1: 330). Donne's identification of Christ's blood with a powerful transmuting agent could have been anchored in the conjectures concerning the colour of the *lapis philosophorum*, as was the rhetoric of many alchemists who compared the process of *rubedo* with the art of dying fabrics. The material and economic practices of the burgeoning Renaissance dye industry provide an important historical background for the use of the word 'dye' in Donne's sonnet. Abraham writes that a rare colour named 'Tyrian purple,' whose ingredients were almost unobtainable for dyers, came to signify in alchemy the elixir or the stone which was as scarce in nature as the red pigment was in trade (1998: 63). For example, Theophrastus compared the reddening of the white *Mercurius* in its own blood to the dying of white garment in Tyrian purple (Lindsay 1970: 277). If we take these remarks into consideration, Donne's 'dye,' however powerfully reverberating with the Christian 'die,' occurs to be firmly steeped in artisan connotations. Thus, as we have seen, the final paradox in the poem folds back upon itself

in its simultaneous rejection and dependence on alchemical knowledge: even in the subversive last verse, the patterns and idioms of the alchemical lore serve to allegorise the Protestant theology of The Last Things.

#### 4. *Resurrection, imperfect*

The analogy between the process of distillation and the Christian perception of death sustains the central argument of Donne's *Resurrection, imperfect*, a poem that narrates the story of Christ's death and resurrection, expressed through the vehicle of alchemy. In the text, the crucified Redeemer's descent to hell is voiced in terms of metallurgic conversion: Christ's dead body is compared to a mineral which, after lying in the earth for three days, transforms into 'tincture', the elixir of eternal life or the philosopher's stone (both words were often used interchangeably in alchemy), "For these three days become a mineral./He was all gold when He lay down, but rose/All tincture" (12–14). The motif of Christ as the philosopher's stone had been already recorded in the iconographic tradition of alchemical engravings. For example, in the *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550), the final work of alchemy was envisaged as Christ rising from his sepulchre; similarly, in a woodcut from *Lacinius Pretiosa Margarita* (1546) the *lapis philosophorum* was represented as the resurrected 'spiritual king.' Donne emphasises the regenerative force of the 'tincture': as we learn in the poem, the resurrected body of Christ "doth not alone dispose leaden and iron wills to good, but is/Of power to make e'en sinful flesh like his," (14–16) so it has the properties of the philosopher's stone, which, in the words of Arnold of Villanova, "converts to itself all imperfect bodies that it touches" (qtd in Read 1947: 119). In *Resurrection, imperfect*, the alchemical idea of the restorative potency of the stone interweaves with the Paulinian dogma of the glorified bodies (I. Cor. 1.15–51), invoked in the line "make e'en sinful flesh" (16). Hence, the conceit developed in the poem imagines Christ, who in the manner of a powerful transmuting agent operating on man's flesh, will after Judgement Day rid the resurrected bodies of their gross qualities in accordance with St. Paul's assertion that the human flesh "is sown a physical body,...[and] raised a spiritual body" (I. Cor. 1:44).

Another alchemical belief underlying the poem is that of the ethereal matter from which the stone is composed. In the last lines, Donne describes Christ's body as almost invisible in accordance with the convention of representing the lapis as "hard and transparent, clear as crystal of ruby hue,... glassy" (Fabricious 1976:185):

Had one of those, whose credulous piety  
Thought that a soul one might discern and see  
Go from a body, at this sepulchre been,  
And, issuing from the sheet, this body seen,  
He would have justly thought this body a soul,  
If not of any man, yet of the whole. (18–22)

The translucency of Christ's body resulted from its sublimation through death, during which it acquired the qualities of the empyrean matter of which the soul of the universe consists: "would have justly thought this body a soul" (21). As Bernard of Trevisan wrote in his *Treatise of the Philosopher's Stone*, the stone itself was believed to have been "compounded of a Body and Spirit, of a volatile and fixed substance... of Male and Female" (qtd in Linden 2003: 137). In Donne's poem, this paradox of the corporeal spirit is inscribed into the poetic framework of Christian soteriology, which posits the reconciliation of spirit and matter in the incarnate Son of God. An explanation of the last words in the quoted fragment 'of a whole' (22), suggesting that Christ became, as it were, the macrocosmic body of the universe, can be found in Szulakowska's research into the philosophical background of spiritual alchemy. Szulakowska traces back the Christ-the Stone parallelism to the Hermetic theosophy of the cosmic body of Anthropos (Son of Man), who according to pre-Christian myths united with nature through his sacrificial death. This conception was later appropriated by medieval alchemy, equating the Son of Man with the universal prime matter or the *anima mundi* (2006: 15 ff.) Drawing upon this mythical philosophy, Donne's alchemical metaphor of the all-encompassing spiritual body of mercurial Christ unites the doctrine of Salvation with the mystical belief in the *pleroma*: the fullness of the body of Christ as the head of the Church or the centre of the cosmological system, so rendered, for example, in a manuscript illustration from 1340 *Opinicus de Canitris*.

One more problem remains unresolved. The final product of alchemical conversion should be perfect, incorruptible matter; Donne, however, in the title speaks of 'imperfect' resurrection of the body. As Frontain (1990) proves, there is no consensus among Donne's critics on the meaning of the title. Does the poet blasphemously assert that the resurrection of Christ was imperfect or does the epithet 'imperfect' define the presumably unfinished text itself? This question would be clarified if we relocated the reading of the title from the context of the Protestant poetics to the scientific context of Lullian and pseudo-Lullian alchemy. According to Moran, Lullian alchemists proclaimed that the philosopher's stone or the elixir could be manufactured only from an already perfect ore, such as gold or silver (2005: 21). Thus, only Christ, whose body is incorruptible in nature, has the capacity to develop into the fifth essence. In the text, Christ – who was 'all gold' before his death – is said to have risen from his tomb as 'tincture', a term probably designating potable gold (a variant of the elixir), which was considered in the 16<sup>th</sup> century a medicinal panacea ensuring eternal life and curing the body of all diseases. However, while the golden body of the Saviour changes into an elixir through the act of redemption, the resurrected human flesh most probably remains impure in its substance. Donne, in a formulation characteristic of Calvinist rhetoric resorting to the Augustinian tradition, emphasises the corruptibility of the body ('sinful flesh' [16]). To express the eschatological implications of this supposition in Lullian terms: no alchemical process will fully refine the debased human flesh of terrestrial impurities, therefore its resurrection will always be imperfect.

## 5. Conclusion

All of the discussed poems analogise the idea of death with the alchemical *nigredo*: the decomposition of metal into the primeval black mass of *prima materia*. The 'blackest' soul from *Holy Sonnet IV*, the melting bodies of lovers from *Valediction*, the putrefied 'sinful flesh' from *Resurrection, imperfect* undergo this regression to originary matter. The parallelism between death and *nigredo* is supported in alchemy by the principle of putrefaction, which evolves from the mythologisation of the cyclical death and renewal of nature. In the words of Abraham, "[In alchemy] the conception of new life is seen as death which is then followed by rebirth or resurrection" (160). Another chemical process evoked in Donne's poems is transmutation, that is, a metamorphosis of a substance into a higher mode of being, a process accelerated in the laboratory by means of the catalysing arcanum. In *Resurrection, imperfect*, the body of Christ becomes such a universal transmuting agent, purging the corruptible bodies of sin. *Holy Sonnet IV* represents this restorative potency of the philosopher's stone as the efficacious grace of God, indispensable for the soul to attain eternal life. Interestingly, during the process of its conversion, the 'black soule' changes colours, thus displaying the chemical behaviour of metals reacting to heat. Into this chemical hierarchy of colours become written the tenets of Christian eschatology: the prerequisite of contrition in the scheme of salvation, the belief in Redemption through Christ's blood, and the symbolism of colours in liturgy.

Equally significant in all the poems analysed in this article are the chemical realities of the processes of vaporization and fixation. The former designates changing a solid substance to a volatile vapour, a process alluded to above all in *Valediction* and *Oh my blackest soul*. In these poems the reference to water evaporating from heated metals interpreted as the extraction of the disembodied spirit echoes the conventional Christian symbolism of the soul's ascent to heaven and the religious confidence in the soul's transcendence of the phenomenal world. The latter process, fixation, signifies the type of experiment in which a vapour is solidified, foregrounding the alchemical belief that the spirit released from matter can re-enter ennobled metal. In *Resurrection, imperfect* and possibly in *Valediction*, the idea that the soul will ultimately re-join with the purified matter conjures up the Paulinian dogma of the glorified body, according to which the flesh of men will be resurrected after death in a more spiritual state of existence. Connected with this dogma are also two alchemical notions: that of undifferentiated *prima materia*, from which the four elements originate and that of the *pneuma*: the vital spirit that resides in all material creation. These concepts appear in *Valediction* and *Resurrection, imperfect*, poems that thematise the overcoming of the dichotomy between spiritual and physical elements (and also between male and female qualities) in the homogenous substance of the philosopher's stone. The last lines of *Resurrection, imperfect* describe the sacramental participation in the tinctural

Christ's hierophant body, which, as formalised in the doctrine of Incarnation, conquers ontological difference between spirit and matter.

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