The Metaphysicals

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Meditation 17 by John Donne
Use your metaphysical handout for the following information.

“Metaphysical poetry is concerned with the whole experience of man, but the intelligence, learning and seriousness of the poets means that the poetry is about the profound areas of experience especially--about love, romantic and sensual; about man’s relationship with God--the eternal perspective, and, to a less extent about pleasure, learning and art.”
Some Bullet Points

• Lyric poems
• Brief but intense meditations, characterized by striking use of wit, irony and wordplay.
• Formal structure
• Underlying argument(s)
• Love of paradox and reason

• Metaphysical Conceit: A conceit is an elaborately sustained comparison/metaphor between two dissimilar things. A metaphysical conceit is characteristic of 17th c writers influenced by John Donne. This type of conceit draws upon a wide range of knowledge, from the commonplace to the esoteric and its comparisons are elaborately rationalized. **Example:** In “The Flea” Donne compares a flea bite to the act of love and in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” separated lovers are likened to the legs of a compass, the leg drawing the circle eventually returning home to the “fixed foot.”
Imagery

Each poet that we will study concentrates on specific types of imagery.

- **John Donne**: the most eclectic of the three (Marvell, Herbert, Donne), did not write for publication but rather showed his poems to friends he considered well-read enough to understand his imagery.

  - **Alchemy**: the mystical beliefs associated with elixir and quintessence (not so much the gold that we associate with alchemy)
  - **Sea-voyages**: (this was an era of discovery and exploration.
  - **Mythology**
  - **Religion**
  - **Cosmology** (reference to “spheres”)
  - **Kingship and rule**
Imagery continued...


- uses the everyday and the familiar (for his time period--1600s)
- Paradise: Garden where winter never comes
- Severity: a rod
- Love=God’s bow
- Suffering=a harvest of thorns or bloodletting
- basically, he uses religious imagery and metaphors
Easter Wings

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,
Though foolishly he lost the same,
Decaying more and more,
Till he became
Most poore:
With thee
Oh let me rise
As larks, harmoniously,
And sing this day thy victories:
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did beginne:
And still with sicknesses and shame
Thou didst so punish sinne,
That I became
Most thinne.
With thee
Let me combine
And feel this day thy victorie:
For, if I imp my wing on thine
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.
Peace
My Soul, there is a country
Afar beyond the stars,
Where stands a winged sentry
All skillful in the wars;
There, above noise and danger
Sweet Peace sits, crown’d with smiles,
And One born in a manger
Commands the beauteous files.
He is thy gracious friend
And (O my Soul awake!)
Did in pure love descend,
To die here for thy sake.
If thou canst get but thither,
There grows the flow’r of peace,
The rose that cannot wither,
Thy fortress, and thy ease.
Leave then thy foolish ranges,
For none can thee secure,
But One, who never changes,
Thy God, thy life, thy cure.

Henry Vaughan
Welsh physician,
a tad fanatical
Andrew Marvell: The secular metaphysical among the bunch.

“Carpe diem” themes

Imagery:
• selective and sparing
• image often more memorable and striking than the idea it expresses.

• Metaphor of “vegetable love”
• “Green thought in a green shade”
• “Deserts of vast eternity”
• More playful
Understanding the 17th century mind

Everything in the universe was part of one of two distinct worlds: that made up by the *sublunar* and that of the *heavenly* bodies. The former were made up of earth, fire, air and water, each of which had its *natural motion*: earth and water, being heavy, moved from high to low; while fire and air, being light, moved from low to high. Once something reached its natural *place* it no longer moved—much like a pendulum slowing down until it reaches an equilibrium. This meant that the sublunar world must consist in a core of earth with the other elements arranged in "shells" around it—water, air and fire. Since the Earth was mostly earth, it sat at the centre of the universe and did not move.
According to Pythagorus, The music of the spheres involved a very complicated math theory that expressed ratios of music numerically similar to the length and tightness of strings in stringed instruments. Commonly believed (in the 11-17th c) that stars were attached to crystal spheres revolving around the earth creating unique harmonious sounds.
Four Elements in Medieval Alchemy

Fire: (Hot and Dry)

Medieval thinkers believed there were four elements that made up all matter—each possessing two possible thermal states and two states of humidity.

Earth: (Cold and Dry)

These states each had an opposite—but they could combine to make all material substances.

Water: (Cold and Wet)

The substances were thought to be ranked in a chain—with fire being the highest ranked, air the next highest, followed by water, and then earth was considered the lowest and least "spiritual" of the four.

Air: (Warm and Wet)
The Quintessence: The 5th Element

Paracelsus noted: "Nothing of true value is located in the body of a substance, but in the virtue thereof, and this is the principle of the Quintessence, which reduces, say 20 lbs. of a given substance into a single Ounce, and that ounce far exceeds the 20 lbs. in potency. Hence the less there is of body, the more in proportion is the virtue thereof."

The evolutionary perfection includes within itself the essence of all celestial and terrestrial creatures." By this Quintessence or quintum esse, Paracelsus meant the nucleus of the essences and properties of all things in the universal world.
The Elixir of Life.

The transmutation of metals was only part of the alchemical quest. The other more elusive goal was the Aqua Vitae, the so called Elixir of Life.

Throughout history, particularly in the Middle Ages, there have always existed those who believe that this Elixir can be found by arcane methods of purifying substances in conjunction with the power of the Earth and the planets.

Ancient scroll depicting the creation of the Philosopher’s Stone which would allow an alchemist (experienced and worth of course) to create the 5th element and the Elixir of Life and turn lead to gold.
17th century French Globes

Sphere de Copernic
Sphere de Ptoleme
Globe Terrestre
Globe Celeste
17th century compass as per John Donne’s “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”
For each of the poems in your packet...

- annotate for rhyme, meter, and poetic devices (sound and imagery).
- Determine and record the prominent metaphysical conceit used. Highlight within poem.
- Determine and record "argument presented")
- At the bottom of the poem, write a précis that introduces the conceit and how it helps illustrate the theme.