Love of God in the Age of the Philosophers:
Mary Astell, Occasionalism, and the Metaphysicals

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I

John Norris of Bremerton, the Malebranchian philosopher with whom Astell initiated the correspondence which would transform into the published Letters Concerning the Love of God of 1695, lamented that in what he calls ‘this cold frozen Age of ours’, the ‘Flame of divine Love seems not only to burn with a blue expiring Light, but to hang loose and hovering, just ready to fly away and be extinct’.1 In Norris’s representation, his own age was characterized by a loss of spirituality, which as I will argue below, his own philosophical proclivities in some sense conspired to produce. Astell’s contributions to the Letters represent an attempt to rekindle the ‘Flame of divine Love’ through an emphasis on the pleasures of divine service. In so doing she resorts to strategies – despite her own allegiance to the very philosophical worldview which Norris espouses – which can be associated with an earlier sensibility of metaphysical poetry. In the pre-philosophical vocabularies of the metaphysicals, a Christian spirituality could resonate in a secular and material love (like, for example, Donne’s ‘Canonization’ or Crashaw’s ‘Hymn’ to St Theresa, or the Bernini sculpture upon which the latter is based). Yet the paradox of Astell’s work would be to associate physical and material pleasures with the exclusive and unembodied pleasures of the Divine. In her attempt to rescue desire in the age of Enlightenment, Astell had to qualify her affinities to the occasionalist philosophy associated with Norris (and his French predecessor Nicholas Malebranche). Indeed, her version of Norris’s philosophical commitments, though faithful to the strictures of

philosophical occasionalism, nonetheless would pursue ‘the ravishing Delights’ of the ‘enamoured soul’ (L 98). Astell’s contributions to the Letters, I will argue, negotiate between two extremes: the chaste dictates of Malebranchian philosophy on the one hand and the material pleasures offered by metaphysicals on the other. In her conviction of the impossibility of the mediation of the spiritual within the physical, so much part of the world-view of the metaphysical poets, she shows herself to be a Malebranchian occasionalist, but in her celebration of the physical pleasures of divine worship, she shows herself indebted to that earlier poetic sensibility. Finally, in her appropriation and transformation of the hermetic languages of the alchemist (a crucial underpinning of the sensibility of the metaphysicals), Astell reveals her own complex conception of love in the age of philosophy.

II

In T. S. Eliot’s now canonical formulations, the contours of the metaphysical sensibility were described in relation to the poetry of Donne which was meant to amalgamate disparate experiences, such that thought and feeling were seen to be intrinsically and inextricably related. Indeed, the crisis in poetry represented in the works of Tennyson and Browning parallels the diagnosis offered by Norris of his own age, where thought and feeling, spiritual and physical, are, to paraphrase Eliot, dissociated. The earlier integrative sensibility of Donne by contrast was, Eliot writes, able to ‘devour any kind of experience’.2 Hugo von Hoffmanshtal, in his historiographical musings on the seventeenth century, his fictitious autobiographical account of ‘Lord Chandos’, also locates a pre-modern and pre-scientific sensibility in the seventeenth century where, as he writes, ‘the spiritual and physical world seemed to form no contrast’. So Hoffmanshtal’s persona Chandos writes before his own fall into ‘dissociation’:

… when in my hunting lodge I drank the warm foaming milk which an unkempt wench had drained into a wooden pail from the udder of a beautiful gentle-eyed cow, the sensation was no different from that which I experienced when, seated on a bench

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built into the window of my study, my mind absorbed the sweet and foaming nourishment from a book.\(^3\)

In the accounts of both Eliot and Hoffmanshtal, physical and spiritual sensations are inter-dependent and mutually defining – for Hoffmanshtal, not only do the worlds of man and animals seem to collapse, but so do the physical and spiritual. As Adam Nicolson writes in his recent work on the King James Bible, the lives and works of the metaphysicals (he mentions Donne, Vaughan, Herbert, and Traherne) were ‘largely motivated by a religious sensibility in which emotion, intellect, spirituality do not exist in isolated compartments but feed and nourish each other’.\(^4\)

As Nicolson rightly emphasizes, the metaphysical sensibility was ‘religious’ and, even in the age of Baconian method, decidedly unphilosophical. Sir Thomas Browne, for example, in his *Religio Medici*, noted, how, the ‘wingy mysteries of Divinity, and ayery subtleties in Religion’ had ‘unhindg’d the braines of better heads’. Unlike his contemporaries, unhinged by the new science, Browne himself asserts that ‘there be not impossibilities enough in Religion for an active faith’. Further, he shows himself willing to embrace unabashedly those very mysteries by teaching his ‘haggard and unreclaimed reason to stoope unto the lure of faith’.\(^5\) While Bacon’s precedent emphasis on method and the emergent philosophical languages of Descartes and Hobbes would make Browne’s proclamation – ‘I love to lose my selfe in a mystery to pursue my reason to an oh altitudu’ – look either quaint or naïve, Browne’s assumption about the relationship between physical and spiritual were based upon sets of commitments which, though written in the empirical age of Bacon, were decidedly unphilosophical (*RM* 14).

To argue for the possibility of the physical mediation of the spiritual, Browne (whose prose work provides a more elaborated gloss to the

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presuppositions underlying the poetry of many of his earlier contemporaries) would certainly invoke the Biblical notion of Man in God’s Image, or zelem Elokim. ‘That we are the breath and similitude of God, it is indisputable, and upon recorde of holy Scripture’ (RM 41). For Browne, the verse in Genesis, as well as the ‘mysticall union’ enacted in the person of the Son, foreground man as the mediator ‘wherein two so become one’ (RM 75). But the notion that man is what he calls a ‘Microcosme’ (not only the privileged mediation of the Son), whose nature is disposed to live in ‘divided and distinguished worlds … one visible, the other invisible’, has a provenance for Browne in another set of languages: those of the corpus hermeticum (RM 42).

Browne would turn to the ‘doctrine of signatures’ (or what he calls the ‘Hieroglyphicall Schooles of the Egyptians’), ‘traditional Magicke’ (or a ‘philosophy’ derived from ‘witchrafte’), as well as the well known practice of ‘Hermetical Philosophers’, the alchemical arts (RM 41, 38, 39). The philosopher’s stone, Browne writes, invoking one of the primary instruments of the alchemical trade, is ‘something more than the perfect exaltation of gold’ (RM 47). Browne’s alchemical principle, not the vulgar conception parodied in Ben Jonson’s Alchemist, is a means of guaranteeing the connection between the ‘rude masse’ and ‘mysterious nature’ of the universe (RM 41). The philosopher’s stone, the quintessence or transforming medium employed by the alchemist, Browne confesses, ‘hath taught me a great deale of Divinity’, instructing him how ‘that immortal spirit and incorruptible substance’ of the soul ‘may lye obscure, and sleep a while within this house of flesh’. Browne acknowledges that the idea of imbuing of the ‘common Spirit’ in the physical confounds rational categories. Yet he nonetheless affirms that there is something ‘in these works of nature, which seeme to puzle reason, something Divine’ (RM 47).

The alchemical references in Browne’s works, as in the poetry of Donne, are not extrinsic to their arguments, merely employed for the purpose of poetic ornamentation; the alchemical conceits, in fact, make possible the assertion of the relationship between physical and material so common to poetry of the period. As Yaakov Mascetti writes of the

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sensibility of Donne in particular, and the early modern period in
general, alchemy was a means of providing a ‘true revelation of an
ontological continuum between the intelligible and the sensible’. Early
modern natural philosophers, theologians and poets believed in the
Timaeic notion of *spiritus mundi*; for them, ‘the presence of a permeating
soul in the world’s matter, the ethereal substance keeping the cosmos
together, was an empirical fact.’ The translation of Joseph Du Chesne’s
*The Practice of Chymicall and Hermetical Physicke* in 1605, bringing
continental traditions of alchemical discourse into the English context,
emphasized, as would Browne some forty years later, the connection
between spiritual and material. The ‘operation of the spirit’ of ‘Divine
Halchamyie’, Du Chesne writes, is the guarantor that the there is ‘no
part of that great body’ of the ‘lower Elements’ which is not ‘inlyned,
quickened, and sustained’ by the universal soul. The synechdocal
temperament of the metaphysicals is in some sense made possible by
an alchemical conception which, as Du Chesne writes, all the ‘parts …
derive their life from the whole’. So Browne’s hermetic temperament
is one that acknowledges that there might be a ‘universall and common
Spirit’ which serves to unite the ‘whole world’ (RM 38).

Not only Eliot’s implicit notion of pre-modern integration, but
Lovejoy’s ‘Great Chain of Being’, as well as Foucault’s *episteme* of
resemblance are based in some sense on the hermetic, and pre-
philosophical traditions, that tied spirit to matter, part to whole. What
Foucault calls the search for ‘secret kinship’, or ‘buried similitudes’,
was partially underwritten by a hermetic tradition in which the
alchemical quintessence was assumed to be imbued within the material
world.” Earlier, Dr. Johnson, who looked back (mostly with

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7 Y. Mascetti, “‘A True Religious Alchimy’: Performative Semantics and
Bar-Ilan University (2002), pp. 139, 127. For more general discussions of alchemy
in the European context, see F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*,

1605, Epistle Dedicator.

the doctrine of signatures or the ‘hieroglyphics’ which turn the world into a
‘vast open book’ inhabited by ‘immediate resemblances’ (p. 27). For Browne’s
notion of the divine ‘inscription upon all his works’, see above, n. 5, p. 69.
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philosophical miscomprehension of an earlier era) understood, in a moment of hermeneutic empathy with the metaphysicals, that Donne and his school did not simply yoke together ‘by violence’ the ‘most heterogeneous ideas’, but they rather discovered ‘occult resemblances’ in things only ‘apparently unlike’.10 Buried similitudes or ‘occult resemblances’ were part of a culture where man as microcosm, could be the privileged mediator – Browne’s ‘great and true Amphibium’ – between physical and spiritual worlds. By mid century, however, as Keith Thomas has written, Cartesian philosophers and scientists ‘were moving away from an animistic universe to a mechanistic one’, abandoning that hermetic philosophy which uncovered those ‘occult virtues and correspondences’ implicit in the material world.11 That is to say, magic, alchemy, and the medieval doctrine of signatures which helped underwrite a culture of resemblance would be undermined by the new languages of philosophical enlightenment. As Erica Harth has observed, the ‘discursive shift from resemblance to objective analysis’ enacted by early modern philosophers eliminated the ‘mediation of resemblance’ which characterized the ‘metaphorical and analogical thinking of their poetic predecessors’.12 Adorno and Horkheimer in their historiographical musings would blame Baconian methodology for the ‘disenchantment of the world’; Foucault the principles of philosophical discrimination (typified in Locke’s conception of wit as judgment) in which ‘the world of resemblance now finds itself dissociated and, as it were, split down the middle’.13 Foucault, with the Frankfurt School theorists, acknowledges that with the passing of magical discourses and hermetical traditions, the material world could no longer be the repository of the spiritual.

Astell and Norris also may have looked with anxiety towards the works of Locke, but for them the primary culprit in precipitating the ‘cold frozen age’ of Enlightenment was Descartes, the philosophical innovator who would be paradoxically invoked to help solve the very problems that his systems helped to create. Astell’s predecessor, the

Cambridge Platonist, Henry More, had first welcomed the innovations of Cartesian philosophy, only to later reject them for their heretical implications. As Rosalie Colie writes, the philosophical and theological systems of the Cambridge Platonists were largely ‘defined to reanimate the machine universe bequeathed by Descartes’. Although, as Colie suggests, for the Cambridge Platonists, ‘the immanent God in all places at all times’ was a ‘basic principle of philosophy’, materialist assumptions about the gap between spirit and matter, erupting as a result of Cartesian philosophy, underlie an anxiety at the very foundations of their thought.14 Ralph Cudworth, another of the Platonists, accepted the Cartesian revolution in philosophy, endorsing Cartesian ontology as he writes: ‘There is nothing in body or matter, but magnitude, figure, site and motion or rest’, and ‘the whole corporeal world is nothing else but a heap of dust’.15 Cudworth thus accepted as his philosophical point of departure a sharp distinction between spirit and matter, emptying out the world of any residue of the spiritus mundi.

To mediate between this ontological chasm and to infuse Cartesian mechanism with divine spirit, Cudworth relies not on the earlier pre-philosophical hermetic lexicons, but rather his quasi-philosophical notion of the ‘plastick power’. This plastic power, tying, as More was to write, ‘Soul and ... Matter together’, negotiates between the poles of the heresies – ‘Atomick atheism’ and ‘Hylozoist atheism’ – that Cudworth himself was to document in his massively obsessive True Intellectual System. Where the ‘Atomick’ atheist ‘supposes the notion or idea of body to be nothing but extended resisting bulk, and consequently to include no matter of life and cogitation in it’, the ‘Hylozoick atheist’ ‘makes all body ... to have life essentially belonging to it’. In the ‘Atomick atheism’ associated with Descartes and the ‘modern atheistical pretender’ Hobbes, the physical is conceived as independent from spirit, having ‘no matter of life and cogitation in it’. By contrast, the ‘Hylozoick atheist’ (Spinoza or later his English alter-ego John Toland16), attributes ‘a certain natural or plastic life’ to matter,

16 See, for example, Toland’s Pantheisticon, London 1720.
though admitting ‘no other substance in the world besides it’. ‘Unless’, therefore, writes Cudworth, ‘there be such a thing admitted as a Plastick Nature’ at once immanent in nature but ‘subordinate to the Deity’, one or other of these ‘Two Things must be concluded’: the dualist separation of God from the created world as in Descartes and Hobbes or the assertion of their absolute identity in what Cudworth called the Hylozoist ‘nature’ or ‘Deity ... a very Mysterious piece of Non-sense’.17 To escape these extremes, themselves a function of the emergent philosophical innovations of Descartes, Cudworth, like More, turned to the ‘plastic power’ – a quasi-philosophical means of allowing for the mediation between physical and spiritual without invoking the suspect languages of alchemists and magicians. Indeed, the very notion of the plastic power shows the way in which the Cambridge Platonists were torn between their commitment to the languages of Cartesian philosophy and the perspective embodied in the works of Milton, Browne and Donne.18 The pre-philosophical languages of the metaphysicals may have generated paradox (eliciting the ‘o altitudu’ of Browne), but not the contradictions which the Cartesian languages of philosophy had introduced. Once the Cartesian genie of philosophy was out of the bottle, it was hard to put back. Descartes himself, not unaware of the possible heretical implications of his own work, famously argues that mind-body interaction takes place in the pineal gland by means of a ‘corporeal wind’. Where hermetic notions had licensed a view of the cosmos where an ethereal substance penetrated the whole of the world, in the philosophical writings of Descartes the locus for the relations between spiritual and physical would be circumscribed to the pineal gland. Descartes thus bequeaths a worldview in which what had once been a cosmological continuum between spirit and matter is sundered – in Foucault’s words, ‘split down the middle’.

III

The philosophical backdrop for the Letters, however, is not only that

of Descartes, but the philosophical works of Nicholas Malebranche which Norris had imported from the continent (Norris would later become known as the English Malebranche). Though Norris has often been grouped with the Cambridge Platonists, he categorically rejects the means by which they were able to sustain a connection between mind and body (and spirit and matter), explicitly rejecting their conception of the plastic power, and the possibility of an experience of the divine mediated through the physical. Norris’s vaunted philosophical ‘occasionalism’ provides the metaphysical foundations for Astell and Norris’s joint rejection, in *Letters Concerning the Love of God*, of love of the creature. Not only because occasionalism directs the creature to the understanding that God is the cause of all things, but because occasionalist metaphysics bequeaths a world which is itself emptied of any remnant of spirituality. As matter is merely an efficient cause or ‘occasion’, sense experience has no independent efficacy or function. As Norris wrote in *Practical Discourses*, seeming to paraphrase Cudworth, ‘the whole matter of the Creation’ is ‘an idle, dead, unactive thing’.19 Norris vehemently rejected the solution proposed by More and Cudworth – any sense of spirituality, ‘stamped’, as Cudworth put it on matter – would lead to an unnecessary idolatry of the material (he would also, like Astell, reject the Socinian position attributed to Locke in which it might be possible to imagine ‘thinking matter’). Cudworth had identified Spinozan materialism as hylozoism; Norris would implicitly place Cudworth for his spiritualization, albeit mediate, of matter in a similar category. In Norris’s metaphysics, the world remained an empty cipher, a mere occasion for divine causality.

Astell in *Letters* accepts Malebranchian metaphysics as represented by Norris, leading to her own categorical rejection of the material world. Where, for the earlier poetic sensibility, the continuum between spiritual and physical allowed for the embodied pleasures of the spiritual (as in the metaphysical poets and Browne), for Astell, the dictates of occasionalism determine that any connection to the world entails both philosophical and theological error. Nowhere is that rejection more

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obvious than in her rejection, in *Letters*, of friendship.\textsuperscript{20} As a useful contrast, we remember that for Browne, man is considered to be the primary mediator between physical and divine. Man is, Browne writes, that amphibious piece between a corporall and spiritual essence, that middle form that lines those two together, and makes good the method of God and nature, that jumps not from extreames, but unites the incompatible distances by some middle and participating natures. (*RW* 41)

Such a conception allows Browne to celebrate the union of friends in almost eucharistic (or alchemical) terms where ‘a body of Aenigmaes’ allows for a friendship leading to the ideal of ‘united souls’ (*RW* 75; not unlike that achieved by Donne in his ‘Valediction: Forbidding Mourning’). Astell’s commitment to occasionalism and her rejection of the principle of man as mediator manifests itself in an attack on human friendship. Astell does concede that ‘the Soul of our Neighbor has the most plausible Pretence to our Love, as being the most Godlike of all the Creatures’; nonetheless, she affirms that it cannot supply ‘our Wants’ or ‘be the proper Object of Desires’ (*L* 133). Man may be the most Godlike of creatures, but in the metaphysics inherited from Norris, there is no resemblance between the divine and human to countenance the love of the creature. Astell, in her later work, *Bart’lem’y Fair*, following both Norris (and, on this point, Locke as well) shows in her a rejection of friendship a more global rejection of the earlier metaphysics based upon what Locke called ‘resemblance and congruity’.\textsuperscript{21} Astell, probably troubled by the biblical conception of man created in the image of God (the biblical precedent invoked by Browne to license a notion of correspondence between the divine and human), turns to that scriptural notion, and nonetheless affirms that those ‘that bear the nearest Resemblance to our Maker’ are simply ‘dearest Idols’ (*L* 213). One should not seek solace in such idols –


dubbed elsewhere in the exchange ‘dirty little creatures’ (L 207). The occasionalism of the Letters thus undermines what Harth described as an earlier cultural sensibility informed by the ‘mediation of resemblance’ characterized by ‘metaphorical and analogical thinking’, and licensed by the conviction of the link between spiritual and material realms. In the occasionalist metaphysics of the Letters, the principle of resemblance, so characteristic of the earlier metaphysical sensibility, has been completely undermined. That is, in pursuing the occasionalist agenda inherited from Norris, Astell seeks to cultivate the ‘greatest indifference imaginable towards the World and all things therein’, such that ‘all those Tyes are broke that glewed us to it’, and ‘we are no longer moved or affected by it’ (L 265). Her own advice, advocating exclusive love of the divine, ungles the ties between man and the world, re-directing all energies and attention to God.

In the face of occasionalist principles, Astell confronts the question of the possibility of retaining a meaningful notion of theological desire while staying faithful to her philosophical principles. Unlike Norris, Astell herself articulates a perspective allowing for the persistence of desire, which begins, paradoxically, in the very materiality of the imagination. Rather than banish imaginative pleasures, one must, Astell writes, seek not those pleasures associated with the creature, but only those offered by the Creator (not the embodied physical pleasures more conventionally offered in the Son, but the Creator himself). That is, divine love also has its delights – figured by Astell in surprisingly material fashion. Indeed, for Astell, the satisfactions of this world remain only a ‘Shadow’ of the real ‘substance’ of pleasures offered by the divine (L 203).

Astell re-instates older metaphysical conceptions of correspondence, not, however, between the divine and the material world, but rather between the divine and the imagination of her ‘Divine Amorist’ (L 268). Such an amorist feels ‘the silken Bands of Love, these odiferous Perfumes drawing after him, uniting them to him by the most potent Charms!’ (L 262). When the ‘tyes’ that had glued man to the material world are broken, the ‘silken Bands of Love’ between the amorist and God are strengthened. If the ties – correspondences and hierarchies – had guaranteed the relationship and similitude between physical and spiritual for an earlier poetic sensibility, Astell knowingly invokes
such a language to elaborate a connection not through the mediate world of the material, but directly to the divine. That is, for Astell, those ‘ties’ are the ‘silken Bands of Love’ between her and God, which bypass the mediate links of the material world, but are, however, no less physical in the pleasures which they afford. ‘Blessed is the man’, Astell writes, who is ‘so overcome’ by such authentically divine Charms:

He never lived till now, nor knew what Pleasure meant; some Shews of it might tantalize and abuse him, but now he is delivered from that Enchantment, and has free Access to the Ocean of Delight, he may now take full Draughts of Bliss without fear of want or Danger of Satiety! (L 263)

The creature offers mere ‘Shews and Enchantment’, while the creator offers ‘full Draughts of Bliss’. In the world of Donne’s poetic, the spiritual could be embodied in the physical, so that as Eliot wrote, thought could be felt; in Browne’s prose, incorruptible substance lay redolent in the ‘house of flesh’; in the world of the Cambridge Platonists, by a philosophical sleight of hand, the divine could be ‘plunged and immersed into matter’. For Astell, such material pleasures do not originate in the world, but are rather re-located in the individual soul, fully immersed in the pleasures of the divine:

For thou must know that the Soul contains in her self all the Beauties and Finesses that thou seest in the World, and which thou art wont to attribute to the Objects that environ thee. Those Colours, those Odours, those Savours, with an Infinity of other Sentiments with which thou has not yet been touched, are no other than Modifications of thy own Substance. (L 114)

While our Souls, Astell continues, ‘are inebriated with its Pleasures, our very Bodies partake of its sweetness’, causing ‘an aggreable Movement of the Passions as comprehends all Delight, abstracted from the Uneasiness which other Objects are opt to occasion’ (L 129). Astell thus accedes to Cartesian – and even more extreme Malebranchian – philosophical conceptions (in her abstraction from ‘Objects’). Yet she retains physical desire as a theological category, re-locating the physical pleasure embodied for the metaphysicals in the material world (‘colours’,
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‘odours’ and ‘savours’) within first God, and then the soul.

Astell, like the Donnean persona who seeks to be ravished by his ‘three person’d God’, finds herself exited by the ‘highly ravishing and entertaining’ pleasures of the divine. Those pleasures are conveyed not through the material world, but emerge from a direct philosophical love for the divine. The soul of Astell’s amorist is filled with ‘unspeakable Delight’, ‘enamoured’ by ‘every Approach to her Divine Lover’, and the ‘lapid pleasures … tasted’ (L 98). Indeed, Astell’s language verges on the kind of terminology employed in metaphysical conceits where spiritual service is rendered in physical terms, as she finds the ‘Taste and Relish of the Soul’ in ‘the Divine Nature’ – that ‘Field’ where ‘our grateful Passions may freely take their Range’ (L 131). Thus, in Astell’s contributions to *Letters*, Norris’s ‘cold frozen age’ is transformed through the ‘Charming and Ravishing’ pleasures of a divine service (L 256).

IV

With the idiosyncratic appropriation of alchemical tropes, Astell further articulates the contours of her particular conception of philosophical love of God. In her representation, for example, of the temptations inherent in the physical world, she writes, ‘Tis our misfortune that we live an animal before we live a rational Life; the good we enjoy is mostly transmitted to us through Bodily Mediums’. In Astell’s anatomy of love, the pleasure elicited through those ‘Bodily Mediums’ leads not to love for God, but desire for the Creature. The ‘occasional good’, Astell writes, as she turns to the older lexicon of the alchemist, ‘contracts such a tincture of Conveyance through which it passes, that forgetting the true Cause and Source of all our good’, ‘we suck in false Principles and Tendencies’ and are taught ‘to close with those visible Objects that surround us, to rest and stay in them’ (L 210). The ‘tincture’ was conventionally the immaterial substance (alternatively the elixir or quintessence) infused into the materiality of the cosmos. John Ellistone’s 1649 translation of *The Epistles of Jacob Behmen* referred to it as that ‘whereby the different secretqualities, and virtues, that are hid in visible and corporeall things may be drawn forth’.22 For Astell, however,

22 *The Epistles of Jacob Behmen*, J. Ellistone, trans. London 1649, p. 10. See also
the tincture, rather than an agent leading to the attainment of the universal and immaterial substance, conveys the merely bodily or material. It does not, from her perspective, allow for the spiritualization of the material, the revelation of what Donne called in the *First Anniversary* the ‘intrinsique balme’, part of the process, described in the ‘Canonization’ which leads to the ‘whole world’s soul’ contracting in the alchemical ‘glasses’ of his lover’s eyes. Astell’s conception of the tincture, however, only distills, in a perverse reversal of the conventional processes of alchemy, the ‘Grossness’ of the physical, leading the divine amorist away from his proper divine object of affection to the impoverished realm of the physical.

In her invocation and transformation of the tropes associated with alchemy, Astell again shows her simultaneous indebtedness to and distance from the worldview of the metaphysicals. ‘The Love of God’, she writes,

> is indeed the general seisin, the universal ingredient of all a good Man’s Actions; ‘Tis the precious Tincture, that Chymical Spirit that runs through all, and that Noble Divine Elixir which gives Worth and Value to all, and converts even our meanest and most indiffident actions into Religion and Devotion. (*L* 125)

Though Astell seems to be employing the alchemical metaphor in its conventional sense, the ‘chymical spirit’ to which she refers runs not through the physical world, but is that which characterizes ‘a good Man’s Actions’. The noble spiritual elixir which had once, in the older hermetic conception, mediated between the physical and the material, is now only the means through which man’s actions are ennobled in the pursuit of the divine.

John Milton anticipated, in *Paradise Lost*, the time when God would be ‘all in all’, in which spiritual and material become fully and finally united in messianic days. Though even before the ‘golden days’ of God’s absolute imminence, the physical, in Milton’s metaphysical epic,

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adumbrates the divine. Astell’s ‘all’, thrice repeated, gestures back towards that older sensibility but affirms finally, that if there are ties, cords, or correspondences, they exist only between the divine amorist and God. In her transformation of the conventional tropes of alchemy, Astell alludes to an older world view of similitude; but true to her philosophical principles, she shows the connection to divinity must be direct, unmediated by the physical. In this strange hybrid of the chaste strictures of philosophical occasionalism and a precedent metaphysical sensibility, the soul experiences pleasures only through immersion in the ‘potent Charms’ of the Deity. For the metaphysicals, the ‘physical and bodily dimensions of existence’ are, as Nicolson writes, ‘markers of the divine’.\footnote{Nicolson (above, n. 4), p. 232.} In Astell’s idiosyncratic conception of love in the age of philosophy, however, it is only the divine, not the physical, which is the ‘vast Repository of solid and substantial Joy’ (L 128). The metaphysical sensibility of Browne, Donne and Milton had spiritualized the material; in Astell’s conceptions of love in the age of philosophy, it would be the spiritual realm which would be the true and only realm of ‘bliss’.