

## A CRITICAL READING OF JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

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There was an increase in skepticism, introspection, self consciousness, and self-criticism in the early years of seventeenth century. This increase had paved a way to develop a new style of writing. The new style of writing had replaced the older rhetorical method in verse with its copiousness and formal elaboration to a more concentrated manner, and it had followed more closely the diction and rhythms of speech what became known later as metaphysical wit. The word "wit" had acquired a number of accretions in meaning since the Middle Ages, and in critical and general usage has changed a good deal. Wit formerly meant "sense" or "the five senses" thus the common sense. During the Renaissance period it meant "intelligence" or "wisdom." Even wit now suggests intellectual brilliance and ingenuity. According to T. S. Eliot, Donne and Marvell are witty poets because they were able to combine wit with seriousness.

John Donne, one of the greatest of metaphysical poets was born in 1572. Division between the two periods of John Donne's life also divides his poetical works. His early poetry which includes *Songs and Sonnets*, mainly deals with love. He has also written "Holy Sonnets" when he has been ordained as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral. But in his works, we find no change of rhythm, tone or style only the subject matter was changed. His poems are marked by intellectual power, deep learning, and intense emotion. His imagery is powerful and striking, drawn from scholastic philosophy, the science of the day, trades and profession, and the simple, commonplace things of everyday life ignored by the Elizabethan lyric poets. His meter is irregular and dramatic, censured by conservative critics but praised by others. As I have mentioned earlier, his sermons also show similar characteristics to his love poetry.

In the *Songs and Sonnets*<sup>1</sup> and the *Elegies* of Donne, we find two distinguishing features. In the first place his poetry is in one respect less classical than the Elizabethans. Elizabethan poetry generally bounds with pastoral and mythological imagery. The texture of Donne's poetry is more medieval than the Elizabethan poetry. The imagery in metaphysical poetry is less picaresque, more scientific, philosophic, realistic, and homely. Images drawn from all the sciences of the day, from the definitions and distinctions of the school man from the travels and speculations of the new age, appeared in poetry.

Though written quite early, Donne's poems were published in 1633 and were very popular during the next generation. In some poems, as in "The Indifferent" he celebrated variety in love and in song "Go and Catch a Falling Star" he insisted that no woman remained faithful. There are serious love poems also in which he is seen to have absolved and surpassed it. The element of hyperbole in these poems is central. "The Good Morrow" begins:

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<sup>1</sup> All the quotes of the poems are taken from Patrides, C.A. *The Complete Works of John Donne*. London: Dent, 1985. Print.

“I wonder, by my truth, what thou and I  
Did, till we lov’d? were we not wean’d  
till then ?

and continues :

“For love, all love of other sights controules”  
And makes one little roome, an everywhere”

At first Donne’s images amazes rather than delight. However, they communicate effectively the idea through which the emotion is conveyed.

The finest note is Donne’s love poetry is the note of joy, the joy of mutual and contended passion. One will find the sheer joy of loving and being loved expressed in the direct and simple languages as mentioned in the above lines.

According to C. S. Lewis, the majority of the Donne’s love poetry rings the changes on five themes, all of them grim ones – one the sorrow of parting, the miseries of secrecy, the falseness of the Mistress, the fickleness of Donne’s and finally on contempt for love itself. The faithfulness of woman is sometimes treated playfully as we find in song “Goe and Catche a Falling Starre.”

Donne’s treatment of love is both sensuous and realistic. He completely rejects the pleasures of the body even in poems where love is treated at the highest spiritual passion. This emphasis on the on the claims of the body is another feature which distinguishes Donne from the poets both of the Petrarchan and Platonic schools. Love, merely of the body is not love but lust; but he is realistic enough to realize that it cannot also be of the soul alone; it must partake both of the soul and the body. It is the body which brings the souls together, and so the claims of the body must not be ignored. In “The canonization” the lovers unite body and soul to form a ‘neutral sex’.

“We two being one, are it,  
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit.”

But in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” the poet does not consider physical contact as necessary for the continuation of spiritual love. In this poem Donne relates parting to body and soul, first as in the parting of death. The movement which begins in death leads into the movements of heaven and earth, and these serve to defined earthly and heavenly levels. Subliminal love depends wholly upon body, and so cannot endure separation; but love of the soul can, because it conquers the physical disabilities. Both similes admit the physical element – which is crucial to the other love – and conquer it. First on the basis of their unity as lovers and then as the basis of their duality as person:

“If they be two, they are two so  
As stiffe twin compasses are two  
Thy soule, the first foot, maker no show  
To move but, doth, if the other doe.”

There is no separation in either case. The compass figure reduces to concrete form, the earlier claim, ‘Inter assured of the mind’. Thus, the movement of parting, like death, extends to heaven and earth, and is defined by body and soul. In “A Valediction: for biding mourning”, the central idea is that love is not destroyed by death.

In “The Relique” physical contact is spoken of an essential. Such contradiction forces us to conclude that in the love poetry of Donne there is an antithesis between opposite claims of the body and the soul, and that this antithesis is never satisfactorily resolved. He writes exclusively about the emotion of love and not about its cause.

The above mentioned lines of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” one can easily see the juxtaposition of images and comparison between very dissimilar objects.

In Donne the surprise of wit may be either sudden as in point, or depend as in poetic epigram or pervasive as in irony. His argument is commonly employed as a mode of surprise rather than of persuasion. He uses logic as a means of developing or exploiting the paradoxes of thought and feeling. Even in a subtle argument like that of “The Extasie” there is a surprising reversal of direction and means in discovery of love - from seen to unseen to seen. The rhetoric of his emotions constantly takes unexpected forms and develops unexpected but not incoherent consequences. Dissimilar ideas suddenly associated can produce both wit and insight or convey the ironies of feeling.

Donne’s use of wit is admired by all critics. In his time people admired his “Strong lines”, and perhaps the best way of giving a general account of his wit is to try to explain what this expression meant. As strong lines directly record mental activity, they contain concepts, or in the contemporary form of the word, “conceits”. The meaning we attach to this word is a specialization directly due to the vogue for strong lines. The values of such lines obviously depends on the value of the concepts they express, and these were usually metaphors; the sometimes simile hyperbole or oxymoron and which is intended to surprise and delight by its wit and ingenuity.

Donne’s wit, of course, depends on the assumption that a joke can be a serious matter. Wit, as he understood it, was born of the preaching of the word, whether employed in profane or in religious expression.

Although Donne spoke lightly of evaporating his wit and more seriously of venting his wit, it was for him a way of resolving tension as well as paradoxes, and included the argumentative element in his poetry. These arguments are no less subjective or witty than any other element in his poetry, but they can explore and define more variable, complicated, or conflicting emotions. The delayed surprise of his arguments builds upon suspense, which gives them a dramatic quality. Their development is often punctuated by the sudden surprise which discovers novel perceptions, but their main purpose is to amplify both the subtlety and the energy of his emotions.

In ‘Air and Angles’ body and soul are used to define love positively in conjunction with the idea that air provides body for angels. The first stanza moves from soul to body in describing his love, or from ‘some lovely glorious nothing’ to an embodiment in her physical charms. The second stanza discovers the disability of both extremes: neither in pure soul nor in pure body can love inhere or be fixed. His dilemma is stated with wonderful precision:

“For not in nothing, nor in things  
Extreme and scattering bright, can love inhere”.

Only her love can be his love’s sphere, and only by assuming the angelic body or sphere which manifests an angel to man. Between an angel and man air is a necessary corporeal medium; such a medium is required likewise in the love of man and woman, and it does not defile woman.

In “The Sun rising” the sun, ruler of time and space, is only the subject of lovers, and may benefit by changing his world for theirs. Incidentally, this poem illustrates the fallacy of confusing lyric poetry and history on the part of annotators who try to date such poems by pseudo – allusions. The rhythm of Donne’s poetry is as varied and accurate in conveying the sense as the imagery he employs. Its texture is sinewy and often irregular. The speech cadences

of the verse are heard in the mind and are essentially dramatic. It is not smooth verse, but it is exact and musical. The opening of “The Sunne Rising” is illustrative of his quick, tense quality:

“Bussie old foole, unrully sunne,

Why dost thou thus

Through windows, and through curtaines call on us ?

If one compares these lines with the tranquility and seriousness of the closing lines:

“Shine here to us, and thou art every where;

This bed by center is; these walls, thy sphere.”

“The Canonization” expands its concept as it might apply to love. Canonization necessitates the rejection of worldly values, explains the opposition between the worldly and unworldly, and becomes the idealizing metaphor of the poem. The idea links naturally with the use of a circle imagery and his concept of microcosm and macrocosm. Here he compares his little world of love as a center round which the sun will revolve and the four walls of his room would mark the limits.

In sonnets such as “The Good Morrow” and “The Sun Rising”, the lover’s sexual bond is substituted for all human intercourse.

Increasing knowledge of the world’s surface was causing as much excitement as increasing knowledge of the cosmos in Donne’s lifetime, which reflects in his use of geographical imagery which is also repeatedly used by him. In “The Good Morrow”, “The Sun Rising”, “Hymn to God, My God, in my sickness”, we can find geographical images.

“Where can we find two better hemispheres,

Without sharp North, without declining west ?

(“The Good Morrow”)

In 1615, Donne was ordained an Anglican priest and became dean of St. Paul’s cathedral in London. The poetry that Donne wrote after his ordination was as passionate, as intellectual inquiring and often as tormented as his love poetry. He spoke of God and the church in the same terms as he spoke of secular love. He discussed the difficulty of finding true religion in his poetry and was apparently almost overwhelmed by the knowledge of his sinfulness. The “Holy Sonnets” are vibrant and impassioned cries, infused with the knowledge of the need for grace. In many of the “Holy Sonnets”, the wit is always likely to seem indelicate as well as passionate. So in one of the greatest, “Batter my heart, three personed God” we find Donne’s exercises in the paradoxes of his religion, and the trinity is one of the greatest of them.

Sometimes the paradoxes in the religious poetry are superb and convincing, but occasionally the ideas are pursued to the point of tedium and a seeming detail is over-elaborated. One of Donne’s most successful devotional poems is “A Hymne to God the Father”, on sin, fear and forgiveness which, with its repeated phrase “will thou forgive”, have a simplicity and humility which is equaled only by the poetry of George Herbert.

According to Frank Kermode,

Donne depends heavily upon dialectical sleight of hand, arriving at the point of wit by subtle syllogistic misdirections, inviting admiration by slight but significant perversion of analogue, which reroute every argument to paradox. Continental critics (like S.L. Bethell), regarded the conceit of argument-- making a new and striking point by a syllogism concealing a logical error-- as the highest and rarest kind of conceit. In “The Flea” or “The Ecstasy” the argument, a tissue of fallacies, sound solemnly convincing and consecutive, so that it is surprising to find it

ending with an immodest proposal. The highest powers of the mind are put to base use but are enchantingly demonstrated in the process.

In her essay “Donne: The Imaging of the Logical Conceit” Frank Kermode had rightly pointed out

In his amorous poetry, certain images make claim for their own meaning by representing an exclusion of all other relations. Sensual experience is imaged as itself and as the sum of all experience; the lovers’ isolation is propounded in metaphor to be the world. These metaphors and hyperbole carry the criteria of the poem’s own internal coherency, along with our conception of the subject it figures, to purposeful excess as the totality of visible phenomena is forcefully equated with imaged erotic realm. The problem of possible inconsistencies of meaning is eclipsed by a circumscription of all possible meanings within an emphatically specified, logical, as well as literal, “Place”.

It is through the use of various imagery and conceits that Donne achieves that unification of sensibility ‘that fusion of thought and feeling – for which T. S. Eliot praised him so highly. Donne’s imagery contributes a great deal of difficulty which readers today experience in reading his poems. It is complex and intricate, for as J. C. Grierson points out, “it brings together the opposites of life body, soul; earth, heaven; the bed of the lovers, the universe; life, death; microcosm, macrocosm – in one breath.”

“Donne’s love poetry is a very complex phenomenon. In his essay “Donne’s love poetry” J.C. Grierson has pointed out two strains in Donne’s poetry.

The two dominant strains are : the strain of dialectic, subtle play of argument and wit, erudite and fantastic; and the strain of vivid realism, the record of a passion which is not ideal nor conventional, neither recollected in tranquility nor a product of literary fashion, but love as an actual, immediate experience is all its moods, gay and angry, scornful and rapturous with fly, touched with tenderness and darkened with sorrow though these carry two moods, the comment in love poetry are with Donne the rarest.

Thus, from the above discussion, one may say that Donne was the greatest of the metaphysical poets. In some of his love poems he was equaled by Michael Vaughan and Andrew Marvell and in religious poetry of by George Herbert. But the body of his work is poetry of a quality which compared with that of any other of these poets is unsurpassed. When his images are understood in their function of communicating a state of mind, and his ideas in their power to give expression to emotions, Donne’s poetry is appreciated for its wit, beauty, and perception.

### Works Cited

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