

Contributions to the Conceptualization of Love in John Donne's Poems: From Physical to Metaphysical.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze three representative poems of his early period before his marriage regarding his personal notion of love. These poems are “The Ecstasy”, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “The Good Morrow”. These poems will be analyzed in terms of style and in terms of meaning. I will emphasize his witty and direct style in contrast with the Petrarchan way of writing love poetry. Even in those first love poems the relationship between physical and metaphysical love are central to his conception of human love. I will underline the originality of this conception that continues to be a universal matter regardless of the years. The way in which Donne uses conceits to represent his ideas are still stunning and groundbreaking nowadays. Firstly, I conclude that Donne was able to combine spirituality and sexuality in his writing in such a way that one reinforces the other. Secondly, that his elaborate manner of writing, talking and reflecting his ideas made him a great poet. And thirdly that his imaginative way of widening minds is still innovative.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth century was not known for its permissiveness; in this period, writing about sex and the pleasures of the body explicitly was often difficult. The poet John Donne analyzed love as a concept and wrote about it from so many different perspectives as he could; by studying, exploring and analyzing the concept of love, this author came up with some of the most passionate poems of his time. Donne astonished his contemporaries with a new way of approaching this subject in poetry, but, most importantly, he did it in a very personal way, which combined the physical with the metaphysical. The present paper will consider the way in which body and soul are joined together, as concepts, in some of his late Elizabethan works.

Donne used many conceits and metaphors in his verse, a technique that was very extended among his contemporaries. Poets such as Spenser and Sydney were much more concerned in idealizing the mistress than in representing her from a direct and realistic point of view; in contrast to them, the love poetry of Donne seems far more direct. He also seems to have integrated his personal experiences in his writing (up to the moment of his marriage). But, at the same time, this does not imply a weakening of spirituality; on the contrary, in his works it seems as if sexual union and spiritual connection are different but complementary ways in which love can unfold and manifest itself.

The aim of this paper will be to explore the way in which John Donne combines these different aspects of love in his poems; I will try to prove that his writing deliberately cover the erotic and sensual but also the spiritual and metaphysical, in such a way that one aspect balances or complements the other. My aim is not to offer an extensive study but to concentrate on a few representative examples that will allow us to understand Donne's originality in treating these subjects. I will also consider the

cultural context (specifically, the late Elizabethan era) in order to evaluate the originality of his approach. In this way, I hope to prove that, as a poet, Donne was particularly able to move between the physical and the metaphysical.

2. JOHN DONNE AND HIS SINGULAR APPROACH TO POETRY

John Donne (1572-1631) was a major English poet of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In his own days he was highly prized among his small circle of admirers; however, throughout the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth centuries his work was scarcely read or appreciated. Some authors from the eighteenth century, such as Samuel Johnson, regarded him only as an ingenious, clever and intelligent poet, but nothing more than that; in spite of this, some important authors of the twentieth century such as T.S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats not only admired his work, but, more importantly, came to take him as a model in some particular aspects of their own poetry. In the mid-twentieth century Donne had become again a major name in the tradition and canon of English poetry, widely read both in academic and extra-academic contexts.

John Donne's style was radically innovative in his period, because to some extent he departed from the Petrarchan and courtly models of writing poetry. His work often seemed to entail a shift from a classical or impersonal level towards the personal; one of the reasons for this was his capacity to generate a sense of a direct, expressive style. Sometimes his poems resemble direct conversations, especially in their opening lines: the sense of intimacy and confidence that he achieves in this way are highly representative of his writing. In some occasions, Donne makes use, as we will see, of several Neo-platonic concepts, that enrich the intellectual content of the poems, yet he does not sustain a full Neo-Platonic doctrine throughout his works, as Ramie Targoff has stated: "There is little doubt that Donne learned from Neo-Platonism, and that he deployed it for his own purposes in the poems...Donne was not a Ne-Platonist at heart, however" (Targoff 2008: 59). As we shall see later in this paper, Donne integrates Neo-

Platonism at specific moments, but that does not stop him at all from developing his own approach to the relationship between mind and body.

Donne is widely known by the use of conceits; he excelled in the use of complex metaphors that combined two different ideas, or that compared apparently unconnected objects. Unlike the Petrarchan imagery, which involved fixed comparisons between two objects that had been long associated with each other in the previous literary tradition, Donne compares two unlikely objects and gives them an extended and often unexpected signification. As Carey puts it, “the metaphysical conceit is usually thought of as a device for establishing similarity between incongruous objects. But Donne is not ultimately interested in similarity. He uses the conceit, rather, as a means of generating change, in both the materials and the structure of his poems” (Carey, 1990: xxv). One clear example of metaphysical conceit is “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” in which a comparison between human love and the arms of a compass is made; at first glance these two objects have nothing to do with one another, but Donne manages to show the connection between them to the reader. Moreover, the poet enlarges the notion of love, analyzing it from every possible angle he can imagine: in this way, he is able to expand the perception of his readers and their sensibility, through a clever use of imagery.

Before going on to the analysis of specific poems, it is necessary to contextualize them in their period and, more specifically, within the trajectory of his life. Most of the poems that concentrate on love and eroticism correspond to the earlier period of his poetry that was shaped by his experiences in life. John Donne was the third of six children, his father died when he was 4 years old, and his mother remarried twice. He studied at the University of Cambridge but didn't obtain the degree because his Catholicism compelled him not to take the compulsory Oath of Supremacy; however,

the torture and death of his brother Henry, because of harboring a Catholic priest, made him question his Catholic allegiance. He was appointed chief secretary of Sir Thomas Egerton, the uncle of Anne More, who would become Donne's wife for the rest of his life. He secretly married her, who was younger than him, in 1601, and at that moment both Anne's uncle and her father raised legal objections to the unannounced wedding, and put the poet in prison. He was released shortly after, when the marriage was legally accepted, but he did not have regular work for thirteen years. He had to survive his wife's death as well as the death of his daughter at the age of eighteen, and this might be the reason why he wrote some of his famous metaphysical poems about death, including some of the *Holy Sonnets*.

As Carey clearly states, John Donne's vital experiences influenced several of his earlier poems:

“For Donne, the young Catholic, the isolation and antagonism of the elegies and satires expressed his reaction to the Protestant community which had victimized him. The sexual defiance of the elegies may seem more explicable as a mode of socio-religious protest when we recall that the State's suppression of Catholicism made public emasculation of Catholics a feature of the terrorist executions which we know, from Donne's own account, he had witnessed in his impressionable adolescence. The frequent obscurity of the poems also enforces the rift between Donne and society. Obscurity protected his work from inferior minds, and flattered the intelligence of the chosen few he admitted to his confidence.” (Carey, 1990: xxi)

Even though most of his secular poems cannot be dated exactly, some critics think that the more innovative ones were written in the 1590s; unfortunately, there is no evidence to support this. In all cases the depth of the poems often makes them difficult, the language he uses, though witty, is accessible. The freshness of his writing comes, at least in part, from the adventurous and contradictory nature of the poet himself; as a result of this, his analysis of universal aspects of human experience is extraordinarily original.

Some of the poets of the seventeenth century were influenced by him, including Thomas Carew, Richard Lovelace and John Suckling. Carew even once praised “Donne as the monarch of wit who purg’d “The Muses garden”, threw away the lazie seeds/ Of Servile Imitation...And Fresh invention planted”. (Margoliouth cited in Corns, 2004: 123). But, as I have mentioned earlier, his work went into relative obscurity for nearly two centuries, until it was rediscovered and appreciated again in the twentieth century.

3. THREE REPRESENTATIVE PIECES OF JOHN DONNE'S STYLE

In this part of the paper I have analyzed three representative texts belonging to Donne's earliest period, poems that were written before his marriage: "Ecstasy", "A Valediction" and "Good Morrow". These are all poems that belong to his initial, but already very original, development as a stylist. I have selected these poems primarily because in them the use of metaphysical conceits is plain to see; and secondly, because their theme is mutual love. The connection of souls through the contact of bodies, and the conciliation between the physical and the metaphysical, is made evident in these three texts.

3.1. The Ecstasy

The origin of the title comes from the Greek word (ἔκστασις: *Ek stasis*). The word comes from the Greek *ek* meaning "outside" and *stasis* meaning "stand". According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* its meaning corresponds to a feeling or state of great happiness. In this state of rapture the soul leaves the body; it is a state of trance, in which the person who experiences it is transported outside himself or herself. Making love is no longer a bodily experience, but becomes a spiritual one:

"This ecstasy doth unperplex
(We said) and tell us what we love,
We see by this, it was not sex,
We see, we saw not what did move:"
(Donne, 1990: 122)

This state of ecstasy leaves the person who experiences it "unperplexed". The body is a necessary part in the process of transcending; sex is essential in this process, but it is not only sex, because it directly leads to something greater. The souls of the lovers seem to emerge from the bodies and go to meet each other, holding an encounter, or a negotiation, while their bodies lay calmly, almost in funereal silence:

“Our souls, (which to advance their state,
Were gone out), hung ‘twixt her, and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day, the same our postures were,
And we said nothing, all day”

(Donne, 1990: 121)

Body and soul seem to have separated from each other. While the bodies of the lovers lie side by side, their souls interweave, communicate and get closer to each other. Because of this imaginative projection of consciousness into the souls, following a Neo-Platonic model, a poem that apparently had begun in an erotic encounter becomes something more sophisticated. Far from representing the mere act of having sex, the interaction between these bodies becomes the indispensable in-between stage towards a divine experience. Again, in strict Neo-Platonic fashion, the encounter of two bodies loving each other opens a further level of experience, and it is on that spiritual level that different souls can meet and negotiate, and eventually become one. The separation of the lovers’ souls will take place only when the consciousness returns to their bodies:

“To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look;
Love’s mysteries in souls do grow
But yet the body is his book.
And if some lover, such as we,
Have heard this dialogue of one,
Let him still mark us, he shall see
Small change, when we’re to bodies gone.”

(Donne, 1990: 123)

Thus their bodies become a “book” of love: there the lovers can interact physically, both before and after their sexual encounters, and their sexual intercourse permits the melding of their souls. Similarly, in a book one writes sentences, one letter united to another letter uninterruptedly, until they finally become a story with a message. The comparison between the “book of love” and their bodies is a sustained metaphor for the effects of love, and it represents very creatively a form of union that (potentially) everybody can achieve. However, in the following lines (“And if some

lover, such as we...”) Donne’s tone becomes far more arrogant. He assumes that he and his lover have turned into a paradigmatic example of what love should be, thus implying that they are superior to all the other lovers, and that others should take them as example and try to emulate their manner of loving, which has become purer than the rest. This insolence, which allows him to present himself as a particular example, almost an icon or a model to be imitated, certainly sounds quite presumptuous.

Margaret Fetzer makes the following point about the poem: “The transference from soul to body, and of the love mystery to the book progresses smoothly: any potential bystander can observe the lovers as they move to their bodies, or to the writing of the book, or indeed to the poem of their love’s mystery” (Fetzer 201: 38). The act of loving is regarded here as a means of connecting two different souls, two different essences becoming something greater: only one being. Making love can be regarded as an experience of getting to feel all the things that, though existing, are incomprehensible for the body. This experience –only to be enacted by those who have the capacity and the sensibility to reach it- is made possible because body and soul are connected. One could not go through such an experience without the body as means of departure towards the blending of souls.

“On man heaven’s influence works not so,
But that it first imprints the air,
So soul into soul may flow,
Though it to body first repair”
(Donne, 1990: 123)

At first sight the poem may seem to be talking about opposite dimensions: the physical and the spiritual, but in fact both appear to be complementary. Along the same lines Fetzer suggests the following about the poem: “*The Extasie* debates the pros and the cons of spiritual against physical love and here, too, the speaker insists that the two are intrinsically linked” (Fetzer, 2010:18). This is also comparable to what Achsach Guibbory states in Thomas Corn’s book “*English Poetry: Donne to Marvell*”:

“Transcendence of the physical world and morality is accomplished not by denial of the body, but through its fulfillment (...) Donne’s poems sometimes insist that transcendence, spiritual love is also sexual indeed, that lovers transcend the physical through embracing the body. (...) Bodies make spiritual love more lasting. They are also the only means whereby two souls can fully unite. Souls can only “flow” into each other through the body, that is, through sexual love”

(Guibbory cited in Corns, 2004: 137).

Leaving Donne’s pretentiousness apart, the most important aspect in this poem is the bond between the physical and the spiritual; this is enhanced by the revelation that these two levels are not two different realities, but rather are complementary to each other, and may come to work together at their best. The individuality of his experience makes Donne sound as if he were on an “ego-trip”, but nevertheless he is enriching the concept of love, expanding its span and adding meaning to it. Taking into account that in his era the topics of sexuality and pleasure were often understood in very narrow terms, it is remarkably brilliant that the poet manages to consider them in an original and subtle manner.

3.2. A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning

This is a well-known piece, but it is also one that directly touches upon the subject I am exploring in this paper; hence, it deserves a detailed exploration here. The whole poem is constructed around a single idea: the firm union that true lovers maintain over the notion of separation. Death, farewell or a temporary separation are not a threat, since they do not bring fear to those few couples who are fully convinced of their love. From the beginning of the poem, it is clear that this union is a private affair, which only concerns the speaker and his beloved, who do not even make external demonstrations of pain (such as tears or sighs):

“So let us melt, and make no noise,
No tear-floods, nor sigh tempests move,
‘Twere profanation of our joys
To tell the laity our love”
(Donne, 1990: 120)

The lover tells the beloved not to cry or sigh, since their bond is so unique that physical separation cannot separate them spiritually. This separation must be silent and “make no noise” for it is something that concerns only their private lives. There is a sense of uniqueness and pride about this complicity; their love is more refined than that of others who have to give external proof of it:

“But we by a love, so much refined,
That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eye, lips, and hands to miss”
(Donne, 1990: 120)

Again Donne introduces the concept of a metaphysical love. Love is much more than just a physical experience; it is spiritual and, as such, eternal. A separation does not make it “thin”, but allows it to expand. Here Donne introduces, for a moment, the notion of the refinement of gold that was practiced by alchemists; and we must remember that gold was considered the purest of all metals (as Eduardo Cirlot has stated “el oro es la imagen de la luz solar, y por consiguiente de la inteligencia divina”, Cirlot 1997: 350).

“Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet,
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinness beat”
(Donne, 1990: 120)

The lovers not only know but, most strongly, feel that they are connected for eternity. They do not regard separation as an end, but as an expansion of their common soul, which will become even holier, close to the purity of gold. In relation to this idea, Achsach Guibbory states the following: “With its spiritual powers, love seems enduring, constant, and capable of transcending the physical, mutable world. The poems of mutual

love suggest that love may counter the process of change and decay that characterizes the universe.” (Guibbory in Corns, 2004: 136). When lovers achieve this communion, a separation is never an end, but a continuation that actually strengthens their connection. And in this way we reach the central conceit of the poem, the comparison between the two lovers who separate and the two legs of a compass:

“If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other do.
And though it in the center sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home”
(Donne, 1990: 121)

The most surprising aspect here is that the female lover, by being compared with the firm foot of the compass, acquires several characteristics which would normally be associated with masculine sexuality. In this way, she “leans”, “hearkens” and “grows erect”: the development of the conceit, therefore, is surprising, but at the same time it is very coherent with the idea that has been expressed earlier: that the two lovers are, in fact, one single being, and one can acquire the characteristics of the other. And in this way, the union that they have achieved in spiritual terms can communicate itself to their bodies: these two bodies are one, just like their souls are one as well. As Ramie Targoff has put it, “the lovers are part of a single being, they are connected with each other whether they are near or far, they lean and hearken in response to one another’s movements” (Targoff 2008:74).

In this way, the physical and the metaphysical dimensions do not only overlap, but strengthen one another. Love is something constant that allows the two lovers to become one, both at the sexual and the spiritual level. Once their spiritual connection has been accomplished, physical separation is no longer an obstacle: love can persist in

spite of it. The conceit that compares both of them to the legs of a compass manages to emphasize this union of the two levels of experience: the physical and the metaphysical.

3.3. The Good Morrow

This is one of Donne's best-known poems, and therefore I am not going to comment it in as much detail as the other two, but it nevertheless deserves a place in this paper, since it directly touches upon my central subject. The fact that it is so popular testifies, precisely, to the centrality of the body/soul interaction as a major and representative theme in Donne's poetry.

The first stanza of the poem makes reference to the awakening of lovers' souls when they find out what true love means: "I wonder by my troth, what, thou and I,/ Did till we loved? Were we not wean'd till then?" This opening is very characteristic of the spontaneity and strength that Donne tries to give to a great number of his erotic poems: it is a very colloquial beginning, almost conversational. Donne opens this poem in this direct way in order to get the attention of the reader, and he then proceeds to elaborate his conceits. At the end of the first stanza, the speaker already introduces Platonic (and, therefore, spiritual) connotations, when he states that "if ever any beauty I did see/ Which I desired and got, 'twas but a dream of thee": the beloved already appears here as the materialization of the dreams, or imaginary constructions, he has had about the concept of beauty. And then comes the moment of the full awakening:

"And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love, all love of their sights controls,
And makes one little room an everywhere"
(Donne, 1990: 90)

Here we can see how the speaker is combining the physical experience with the metaphysical level. He speaks of "waking souls", which suggests that the spiritual parts

of the protagonists are experiencing a new awakening, just like their bodies. The erotic encounter has brought not only a new awareness of their physical nature, but of their spirituality as well: the souls watch “one another” just as their eyes are doing, and this implies a continuity of the physical and the spiritual. Love works as an absolute ideal on the two levels of reality, and these two levels are in total continuity with each other.

By the same token, the world of the lovers is simultaneously reduced and expanded. On the one hand, the little room in which they have had their sexual encounter becomes the only place that is necessary for them, the only place they need to know; on the other, that room seems to widen out into everywhere. Their being together is sufficient because this is the only world they need; the discovery of each other is, at the same time, the discovery of everything that is worthy in humanity. Each of them, in the union of body and soul, constitutes a complete little world.

“Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.”
(Donne, 1990: 90)

Here the image of navigation is used in order to join together, on the one hand, the idea of sexual discovery and, on the other, the idea of the exploration of a new world. The personal perspective is joined with the universal one, so that the speaker can also be considered a navigator or an explorer in his own way.

“What ever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.”
(Donne, 1990: 90)

For one moment, the language of alchemy reappears: the “mixing” that Donne refers to here is the correct combination of elements that, according to alchemical processes, could guarantee stability to a body, whether organic or inorganic. At this point the two lovers are aware of having become just one entity because their attachment has created a harmonious union, that makes them one inseparable being.

Immortality is a gift given by the creation of such a strong bond between them: if the juncture of bodies and minds is made with pure love, if the things that are mixed are equal, then love can endure and never die.

It is important to observe that, in the final lines, the speaker does not distinguish between the physical and the spiritual: the notion of immortality could apply equally to both levels. The body has been spiritualized, just as the souls have been able to communicate through the senses, their sight, feel, taste and touch. Eduardo Cirlot, in his canonical *Diccionario de los Símbolos*, states that for the gnostics and radical Christian sects “el mundo físico es, en cierto modo, un sepulcro...pero pero no deja de contener todas las imágenes del mundo espiritual, que en él se condensan” (Cirlot 1997: 323). Donne certainly puts the emphasis on the life of that spiritual world, on the images of infinity that he extracts from it, and on the sense of plenitude that the sexual experience has granted to the bodies and souls of the lovers. Not only have they discovered each other, they have also discovered, through a sincere and heartfelt encounter in spiritual and in physical terms, the best that they can achieve as human beings: a sense of connection with the entire universe.

4. CONCLUSION

As we have seen in the previous pages, Donne's poetry was able to break with the previous traditions of love poetry, and very especially with the Petrarchan tradition. Donne style was direct, lucid and witty, and managed to give a sense of personal involvement in his poetry. I think that I have been able to show, in the previous pages, that he was able to combine spirituality and sexuality in his writing, in such a way the one reinforced the other. These two elements, for him, were essential aspects of human experience, and the writer (or any other person, for that matter) need not renounce the one in order to embrace the other. On the contrary, for Donne, at least in his early poetry, the two elements can sustain each other.

One way in which Donne changes the literary styles of the period is by using his original conceits, through which he relates two objects, or two concepts, that are absolutely disparate and different from one another. Language shapes the world, and therefore Donne's particular way of reflecting reality also comes to modify the way in which other people come into contact with these ideas or concepts. In his case the dominant concept in his early poetry is that of mutual love. His elaborate manner and his unique style make him a truly great poet.

He changes it by employing resemblances between unlike objects, thus materializing a new style. Not only does he manage to change the style but also he manages to change the way in which the content is gathered. His particular way of using language so as to relate the poetical voice with his experiences made it possible to have a reinvention of the content of poems about love. The use of imagery inevitably changes the way in which those realities are understood in the society. Language shapes the world therefore Donne's particular way of perceiving and reflecting reality in his poetry

also modifies the way in which people come in contact with that idea or concept. In

Donne's case: Mutual love.

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