

**"... and often Absences / Withdrew our Soules and
made us Carcasses".
The destructive power of the female figure
in Donne's *Nocturnall* and Quevedo's love poetry**

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the destructive power of a female figure *in absentiae* in the landscape of the lyric I's physical identity. Two love sonnets by Francisco de Quevedo (B485 and B486), and John Donne's "A Nocturnall Upon St Lucies Day" are the texts in which this particular destructive force of the feminine is explored. In this light, their love poetry shows interesting affinities with their religious and occasional poetry: Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and *Anniversaries* and Quevedo's *Heráclito Cristiano*. The singular treatment of the subject's body and its vulnerable stability in both Donne's and Quevedo's texts may work as a point of departure to discuss the problematic concept of subjectivity in early seventeenth-century poetry, and the role of the female figure in the construction of such an identity. It may also lead to reassess the significance of Petrarchan conventions in the formation of the poetic experience.

This paper is part of a larger comparative research on the presence of literary traditions in the poetry of Donne and Quevedo. Here I argue that Donne's and Quevedo's poetry come together neither under the powerful presence of the metaphysical wit, nor due to their concern with love and death. They converge in the unavoidable presence in their poetry of a powerful poetic subject, pervading all themes and all poetic sub-genres, from the religious and the moral, to the erotic and the satirical, which is invariably expressed through strikingly powerful material, bodily images. This self-centred concern is, I believe, partly rooted in the long life Petrarchan tradition, from which Donne and Quevedo somehow recover but also discover this "subjective" quality, intensifying and purifying it.

Needless to say, the poems I am going to discuss now are but a very limited sample, and I use them somehow as synecdoches of their literary

production. In them, the destructive power of the female figure reveals this subject's struggle for permanence.

Quevedo's *Poem to Lisi* is a collection of poems written in the shape of a Petrarchan *canzoniere* or love cycle. In these poems Lisi – the poet's beloved – invariably appears as a distant, cruel and elusive figure or does not appear at all. Thus the whole cycle dwells at length upon the effects this feminine absence or contempt produces within the lover. Donne's love poetry, on the contrary, although gathered under the title *Songs and Sonets*, keeps no apparent resemblance with a Petrarchan cycle and is far from being a homogeneous collection. Both, however, contain poems which resist easy categorisation and could rather be aligned with religious or funeral poetry, than with conventional love-lyrics. Departing from the orthodox motif of the cruel lady and her unattainable quality in some cases, or from the evidence of the lady's absence in some others, they evolve toward a thorough purgation of elements associated with the female identity, who has simply become a destructive principle. In this light, the Elizabeth Drury of the *Anniversaries* would not be far from the female identity present in "A Nocturnall" or "A Feaver", for example, nor from Quevedo's Lisi; all work as *logos*, as a motive power which produces not only the subject's physical destruction but also the disintegration of the whole poetic universe. Some critics point out Donne's wise combination of funeral and erotic formulas in some of these poems, but the truth is that rhetorical disposition in a funeral elegy and a Petrarchan love song keeps a similar pattern of lament and praise (Hardison 1962).

One of Quevedo's most impressive texts about this transit from the love experience of the unrequited lover toward a cosmic vision of destruction and vulnerability is this sonnet from *Canta Sola a Lisi*:

En los claustros de l'alma la herida
yace callada; mas consume hambrienta,
la vida, que en mis venas alimenta
llama por las medulas extendida.

Bebe el ardor, hidrópica, mi vida,
que ya, ceniza amante y macilenta,
cadáver del incendio hermoso, ostenta
su luz en humo y noche fallecida.

La gente esquivo y me es horror el día;
dilato en largas voces negro llanto,
que a sordo mar mi ardiente pena envía.

A los suspiros di la voz del canto;
la confusión inunda el alma mía;
mi corazón es reino del espanto. (B485)¹

This poem has received much critical attention (maybe the most celebrated reading would be that of Gonzalo Sobejano) and has been regarded as a text that moves beyond literary conventions into a deep metaphysical mood. And yet, Petrarchan motifs are pervading each stanza: take, for instance, the lover's complaint through bitter sighs and tears, and the loving fire resulting in that internal hell. Love suffering is presented as an experience which takes place in the subject's innermost extension, in the cloisters of the soul, expression of full resonance which recalls Santa Teresa's *morada interior*. Nevertheless, poetic language is built upon powerful physical images: soul, love and suffering are all materialised in cloister, wound and fire. The wound of love progressively consumes the lover's body until it becomes "...ceniza amante y macilenta, /cadáver del incendio hermoso..." (B485:6-7) powerful image which echoes the most celebrated "polvo enamorado" of sonnet 472.² This devastating experience has a powerful subjective quality, as the lover's body becomes a microcosm, the only space in which the experience can be expressed.

There is no other reality but that of the subject's interior realm. The only reference to the external world is that of the first tercet: "sordo mar", in reference to the lady's extreme disdain, but also to the unavoidable presence of death. We are, thus, facing a plurisemic expression which brings together two juxtaposed concepts: the Petrarchan complaint of the unrequited lover, whose "negro llanto" leads him irrevocably to that sea of the end of life – the unavoidable destiny of his loving ashes –, and the deaf sea of Lisi's distance, indifference, and aloofness. This ambiguity is far from coincidental, as the audience was perfectly acquainted with the implications of these metaphors, so common in early seventeenth-century love poetry. The female representation enjoys a great destructive power, which brings her close to the power of death. Robert Watson has observed this kinship in representations of perfect wives as silent, passive and cold, and their "striking resemblance to the traits of the dead as conceived by annihilationism" (1994:31). Hence the emphasis that criticism has thrown upon the metaphysical quality of Quevedo's love poetry. What Quevedo does nothing but to intensify the use of these elements already present in the literary tradition and contemporary

¹ Quevedo's quotations follow Blecua's edition (1981). Poems will be subsequently cited by the initial B (Blecua's) and their number in this edition.

² One must highlight the basic difference in that the latter triumphantly overcomes the boundaries of death, whereas this former shows the remains of an individual consumed by love.

poetry so as to achieve a striking effect which was of much pleasure for his contemporaries and which results in an unorthodox and apparently “modern” exercise for today’s reader.³

Quevedo’s sonnet B486 “Amor me ocupa el seso y los sentidos” can also be read in this light. The image that closes the above sonnet “mi corazón es reino del espanto” has its counterpart in this other quatrain:

Explayóse el raudal de mis gemidos
por el grande distrito y doloroso
del corazón, en su penar dichoso,
y mis memorias anegó en olvido (B486:5-8)

The visualisation and materialisation of the lyric I’s inner landscape are again the result of a displacement of interest from the external phenomena toward the subject’s intimate realm. In this quatrain, the heart acquires a macrocosmic dimension, in accordance with the subject’s suffering. This destructive suffering is materialised through these images of overwhelming physicality. The tercet that follows shows how this devastating love experience is expressed through the lover’s body remains:

Todo soy ruinas, todo soy destrozos,
escándalo funesto a los amantes,
que fabrican de lágrimas sus gozos (B486:9-11)

The subject seems to be invaded and finally annihilated by the power of passion. One has to go back to Petrarch to find such an expression of a desolate inner universe. Petrarch speaks of a destroyed self where the beloved’s image dwells, and in fact, very few Petrarchists after Petrarch really achieved his depth and self-concern. But Petrarch’s poetry humbly accepts the ephemeral quality of the loving body. And this assumption that the perishable body can no longer shelter a loving spirit is precisely what Quevedo’s sonnet strives to avoid. The very self-identity is firmly rooted in its physical final redoubts.

In this light, maybe the most revealing poem in showing such unique, extreme and annihilating individual experience is Donne’s extraordinary “A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day, being the shortest day.” Unlike the sonnets discussed above, this poem begins with powerful imagery showing the

³ Dámaso Alonso’s seminal article on Quevedo’s love poetry (Alonso 1950) was partly responsible for the general approach in the 60’s, 70’s and early 80’s to Quevedo as a “modern” author. Studies such as Paul Julian Smith’s (1987) contributed to reassess Quevedo’s literary practice in the light of early seventeenth-century rhetoric and aesthetic conventions.

correspondence between an agonising macrocosm and a subject/microcosm who stands as the epitaph of a universe in a process of destruction:

Tis the yeares midnight, and it is the dayes,
Lucies, who scarce seaven houres herself unmaskes,
The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes;
The Worlde whole sap in sunke:
The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunke,
Dead and enterr'd; yet all these seeme to laugh,
Compar'd with mee, who am their Epitaph (1-9)⁴

The celebration of Saint Lucy's Day, considered as the shortest day, contributes to create a crepuscular atmosphere in which the world seems to collapse at the lack of light and life. It is a hymn of absence for a beloved woman⁵, whose elusive presence keeps, in my opinion, a striking resemblance with the Elizabeth Drury of the *Anniversaries*. It is thus a poetic representation of the feminine that moves beyond concrete expressions of particular women. If in this first stanza the lyric "I" shares a desolate landscape of darkness and death, in the following lines the scope will shift from this external world to the microcosm embodied in the poetic subject:

Study me then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom Love wrought new Alchemie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingness:
He ruin'd mee, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not. (10-18)

As in the Quevedo's poem, here the "I" offers himself as *exemplum* to future lovers. The poetic images contribute to intensify notably the lover's annihilation, as though it were not possible to express his real state through physical evidence, and therefore he must turn to metaphors of negation, of nothingness, of what is not: "quintessence from nothingness ... absence,

⁴ Quotations from Donne's poetry follow Shawcross' edition (1967).

⁵ The identity of this woman is still subject to discussion for Donne's scholars, who identify her with Lucy, Countess of Bedford (Grierson 1912, Gardner 1965), with his wife Anne More (Carey 1990, Shawcross 1967) or with an imaginary construction of the feminine (Marotti 1986).

darknesse, death; things which are not" (16,18). The presence of the winter's solstice helps understand the cyclical quality of these images, and this changing process intensifies the feeling of non-existence for the lyric "I": its reduction to "nothingnesse" no doubt overcomes the hyperbolic ruins and destruction of Quevedo's sonnet (and Petrarch's dust and shadows). It is through love and through those alchemy processes – so dear to Donne's poetic imagination – that the subject becomes the essence of nothingness, it becomes all that cannot be nor will ever be:

All others, from all things, draw all that's good,
Life, soule, form, spirit, whence they beeing have;
I, by loves limbecke, am the grave
Of all, that's nothing ... (19-22)

Love as a transubstantiating element transforms the lover's nature. But it is not only love that eventually destroys the subject; it is the experience of absence and the ultimate death of the woman that provokes such a devastating effect:

... and often absences
Withdrew our soules and made us carcasses.
But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown; (26-29)

He is not even a "nothing" resulting from the presence of a "something". This insistence upon his non-existence, his annihilation in hardly credible terms places this poem closer to the *Anniversaries* than to other love poems.

The absolute negation of existence, embodied in the identity of the lyric "I" is not an isolated motif in Donne's poetry. As it is often the case, now and then in Donne's works we perceive this oscillation between the microcosmic realm of the lyric I's body and the macrocosmic expression of a space subject to similar processes of generation and destruction. The lady no longer exists and Love turns into torment and inner struggle, in an experience that does not move beyond the geographical boundaries of the subject's body (Pando 2000).

The significance of the feminine figure thus transcends her merely physical presence or absence, as the emotion expressed is invariably that of the subject, and the only reality is its material destruction. Whether this is provoked by a beautiful lady's cold disdain (Lisi) or by other lady's death (whose relation with the subject cannot be established) proves how elusive this feminine presence may be, and how irrelevant her relationship with the "persona" in the poem can be in order to understand the rhetoric of the text. We could speak, at this point, of a feminine destructive power which often

aligns with the conventional Petrarchan representation, and which is present in most Petrarchan compositions. Yet it is also present in texts other than conventional Petrarchan cycles, such as funeral elegies, or compositions like "A Nocturnall", which resists easy categorisation. The representation of the female destructive force offers a powerful contrast with the subject's deep humanity and extreme suffering in his non-requited expression of love. This contributes to create a very effective tension within the poetic space by which both elements (the absent lady and the mournful lover) occupy incompatible realms.

All the spatial metaphors noted above also reveal an inner struggle as they endow the poetic expression with a physical and subjective dimension. It is at this point that some critics cannot help qualifying this poetry as "modern"; and it is at this point that, in my opinion, Donne's and Quevedo's poetry move toward a solipsistic stance which comes from Petrarch. This solipsistic shift operates as the intensification of an inward displacement and the materialisation in spatial metaphors of this expression of inwardness, which is always conditioned by the powerful, overwhelming voice of the lyric I. In this light, I believe that the different poetic "personae" of their texts reveal an ontological conflict by which any theme or motif (in the examples explored, that of the feminine representation) suffers a process of appropriation and subjectivisation.⁶

Raimundo Lida, in a classical article on Quevedo's prose, summarises Quevedo's work with a powerful and revealing metaphor that, I think, acquires full meaning here: "Aquel yo gigantesco de Quevedo que en la dedicatoria de los Sueños firma precisamente así, YO ... con esa Y de brazos descomunales..." (1981:39-40). The plasticity of Lida's expression could also be extended to Donne's literature. Any attempt to approach Donne's and Quevedo's work, their treatment of literary traditions, their expression of the idea of God, love, or death, their representation of the feminine, any of those, is invariably filtered by their superb solipsistic expression, which is, I think, post-Petrarchan in its quality. Very much unlike sixteenth-century Petrarchists, they rewrite Petrarchan subjectivism

⁶ In this sense it is interesting to highlight the work of Anthony Low who sees in the creation of this inner space what he calls an "internal migration", a means of expressing the "private" vs the "public": "Donne was among the earliest and most powerful proponents of love as a shelter and defense against the world, which is an idea or an assumption about love that, over succeeding centuries, has come to dominate our thinking and behavior" (Low 1993:49). What Low regards as communal spaces in Donne's popular love lyrics is for me the expression of a solipsistic shift. At the core of these arguments lies the problematic conceptualisation of the "subject" in early seventeenth-century literature. Needless to say, this fascinating question deserves further analysis.

and take it further towards this solipsistic shift. Their self-concern would be, in this light, the triumphant epilogue of a long and lasting literary tradition, rather than the anachronistic announcement of a “modern”, “romantic” or existential individualism.

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