

John Donne: The New Turn of Classical Tradition

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John Donne (1572-1631) “committed” a mistake that neither his contemporaries nor later critics would forgive him: being born in the age of the greatest master of English Literature, William Shakespeare. Donne himself was aware of the oddity of the situation, as well as of the totally new kind of poetry he was creating, utterly different from what had been previously made by, namely, Sidney and Spenser. His conception of poetry also differed a great deal from that of his contemporaries: he supposed that his poetry would be understood only by those friends for whom he wrote, and even in 1614, when he was thinking of publishing his poems, this was to be not for a public view, but a few copies at his own cost. Donne himself was, therefore, aware of the difficulty that his poetry conveyed; however, far from choosing a tendency towards simplification, he would continue to create poetry for an elite of educated people trained in the same tradition as his.

Any twentieth-century reader who is, for the first time, confronted with Donne’s poetry, has to be aware of the limitations to be undergone if not acquainted with the main issues of discussion in classical Rhetoric and Dialectics, Ramistic Logic, the Aristotelian distinction between body and soul, Renaissance Magic, Astrology and Alchemy, and, of course, those current issues related to Elizabethan Philosophy. Donne proves to his contemporaries to be ahead of his time: he considered his verse a suitable vehicle, in the same way Latin had been before, to use those devices borrowed from the classical tradition, those taken from the troubadour poetry and those which converged in the use of imagery drawn out from the new-born science. All this kind of poetry was, in 1600, an unexpected challenge for the English language.

To begin with, it would be accurate to say that John Donne did not conceive a work of poetry outside the rhetorical canon, which would turn out to be the one and only means to express what his conceptions of Love, God and the Universe were like.

Donne, the same as Ben Jonson or William Shakespeare, shared what modern scholars call the “Elizabethan World Picture”, which emphasized, above all, the principle of order. According to this, the world order would be appointed by God and would operate through the whole creation. In the natural world, the principle of order would be understood in terms of hierarchy, as a continuous “chain of being”, ascending in a scale from inert matter to God. The central link of the chain would be formed by man, connected by means of his mortal body to animals, vegetable and inanimate matter below him, and, on the other hand, man would be connected by his immortal soul to the various degrees of angels ranged above him. Donne makes up a whole set of imagery based on this picture of universal order. In “Air and Angels”¹, Donne makes up a whole theory of love, consciously subverting the order of the above mentioned scale to point out a difference: although both air and angels are pure, air is less pure than the angel which assumes it. Male love is associated with “angels” whereas female love is coupled with “air” and, therefore, male love is purer than its female counterpart:

Then as an Angell, face and wings

¹ All references henceforward are taken from: Smith, A.J. ed. 1986: *John Donne. The Complete English Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Of aire, not pure as it, yet pure doth weare,
 So thy love may be my loves speare;
 Just such disparitie
 As it twixt Aire and Angels puritie,
 'Twixt womens love, and mens will ever bee¹.

The influence of what came to be named as “The New Science” is much related to the previous theory. Magic, Astrology and Alchemy utterly permeated the Renaissance imagination and Donne, therefore, borrowed a large set of imagery, theories and lexicon from this field of knowledge. The three arts are closely related to man’s dream of achieving power over nature: Magic had become very popular as a result of Ficino’s work, who had translated the so-called *Hermetic Text*. Magic, or Ancient Wisdom - *Prisca Sapientiae* - would have been given to man by God in order to improve human conditions after Adam’s Fall. This is particularly clear in “Love’s Alchemy”, where Donne develops this theory and uses more specific alchemical language:

Hope not for mind in women; at their best
 Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed²

There are two senses in which, at least, the word “mummy” is used. It could refer to a medicinal preparation of the substance of mummies and, therefore, it could be an unctuous liquid, or it could be used in the jocular sense, that is, dead flesh. Donne uses the word in the sense that Paracelsus did, to mean any dead body which retains its preservative balm. According to this theory, the best mummy is the fresh corpse of a man killed suddenly, in whom the balm has not been depleted or distempered by illness. The only difference between that and a living being is that the corpse lacks mind and soul. On a deeper level, one should infer that females, and like a mummy, lack mind and soul in spite of their life-like appearance.

The fusion of logical thought and passionate feeling is also another remarkable feature in Donne’s poetry. Thus parting, he made a whole theory regarding contemporary beliefs about the universe, the scale of beings, the human soul, the malleable properties of gold and remote astronomical phenomena. Fragments of the cosmos, magnified and made more terrifying by their isolation, haunted the poets of the late Renaissance and provided them with a rich store of poetic images. Donne himself was aware that the whole traditional picture of the universe was in question:

'Tis all in pieces, coherence gone³

The whole Universe and nature itself would be conceived as a riddle given to man by God for its solution by means of the observation of its processes. The task of the Renaissance *virtuoso* was to bring about change to improve human conditions by operating with the new sciences. Again, Donne would have his own theory about the order of the Universe: the macrocosm, in many of his poems, would be reflected in the microcosm by means of little things such as, for instance, the lovers in “The Sun Rising”:

Busy old fool, unruly sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
 Must to thy motions lovers’ seasons run?⁴

Love poets had traditionally invoked the sun or dawn, and Ovid and Petrarch offer celebrated examples⁵. However, these morning songs would commonly address their subject with reverence

¹ “Air and Angels”, ll. 23-28.

² “Love’s Alchemy”, ll. 23-24.

³ *Anatomy of the World*. The work was published in 1611, and Donne was already able to analyse a dramatic change in the traditional earth-centered conception of the universe. The quote may be found in: Grierson, Herbert ed. 1967: *John Donne: Poetical Works*. London: Oxford University Press.

⁴ “The Sun Rising”, ll. 1-4.

⁵ *Amores* I, xiii, *Almo Sol, Canzonere* 188.

as a flushed young goddess or a life-giving god. Donne reverses the traditional pattern to address the sun as “busy old fool”. The lovers become the reflection of the macrocosm, represented here by the sun.

Donne’s strong religious education provided him with vast knowledge of theological theory. The Thomistic view, for instance, was supported by Petrarchism and, as a whole, by the Catholic poets of Mediaeval Italy and sixteenth-century Spain, where similar lines had been experimented upon without altogether abandoning the Neo-platonic tradition. Donne does not totally accept the interaction body - soul supported by those theoretical frames: basically he differs from Dante in not accepting the Thomistic system of ideas as ultimate truth. However, he still uses the Thomistic method as a way of disciplining his mind and developing logical arguments. In spite of his accepting new criteria, the Petrarchist tradition cannot be completely discarded of his poems: he often reacts against the set of topics which had become common place in poetry and reuses the imagery to construct mockery reversals:

Alas, alas, who’s injured by my love?
 What merchant’s ships have my sighs drowned?
 Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?¹

Drama, being one of the commonest literary resources, cannot be absent from Donne’s field of exploration and therefore he takes some elements which he was especially interested in. In this respect, the serio - comic monologue or, more plainly, the modulation of tone, is probably one of the most obvious resources drawn out from this field. Donne would experiment with tone by changing it according to the topic he would be dealing with, whether it be self-tormenting, perverse or serene. Donne’s exhilaration often springs from a challenging opening line, but rests upon the infinite variety of wit and conceptual structure of poems:

I wonder, by my troth, what thou, and I
 Did till we loved?²

One of the most striking features of the so-called “Metaphysical Poetry”³ is what came to be known as “strong lines”. This specific stylistic feature belongs to the rhetorical tradition and it allows language to represent directly the immediate play of mind. Style would be, therefore, an instantaneous expression of thinking. Strong lines epitomized the literary qualities which were most prized in this period, and involved the cultivation of the “Silver Latin” style in the late Renaissance, i.e.; *difficilia quae pulchra*. Jacobeans felt a special kinship towards silver Latin writers and, therefore, cultivated obscurity and sparsity of style which, with a wit of their own, produced strong lines. The use of conceits is very much related to this conception of poetry. A conceit is basically a comparison where the two members which are being compared share no apparent likeness:

Our two souls, therefore, which are one,
 Though I must go, endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to aery thinnes beat.

If they be two, they are two so
 As stiff twin compasses are two,
 Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show

¹ “The Canonization”, ll. 10-12.

² “The Good Morrow”, ll. 1-2.

³ The term “Metaphysical Poetry” came into being long after the poets to whom it applied (Raleigh, Donne, Jonson, Dryden, etc.) were dead. It was the scholar Samuel Johnson who coined it, and gave it to these poets as a sort of “nickname” with pejorative connotations due to the obscurity of their poetry. Metaphysical poetry is said to be inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence.

To move, but doth if the other do¹

Compasses would be in the late Renaissance a common emblem for constancy in change. However, Donne uses the imagery to compare lovers with its legs: though apart, they are just one body. Renaissance scholars, however, would consider as “violent” the analogy between such two heterogeneous terms. The Methaphysical poets, on the other hand, considered the Universe to be a network of universal correspondence which unites all the apparent dissimilar elements of experience and so, disparity of elements would be thus justifiable. The new theorists of the conceit justify the predilection of the “school of wit” for recondite and apparently strained analogies by maintaining that even more violent couplings of dissimilars were simple expressions of the underlying unity of all things. The use of conceit would allow Metaphysical poets to recreate thoughts into feelings and, therefore, they would be able to account for any kind of experience.

As we have argued above, Donne strictly followed rhetorical processes and two main steps can be drawn out of his method: systematization or lineal arrangement of the creative process into steps, in this case, from shaping to vocalizing it and, on the other hand, impersonality, a quality which was seen as most natural to the condition of thoughts. The use of *Dialectis* should be seen thus under this light. In Donne, it works above all as a motion of ideas towards ends that he would have previously determined, in such a way that a logical argument is developed in order to persuade the reader / audience. When definitions are employed in a steady way i.e.; in kinetic fashion, one may encounter the *Dialectis* of Metaphysical poetry. The motion and order of different arguments is what makes Donnian definitions so utterly different from, let us say, Petrarchan ones. In this respect, the poem “The Flea”² works within the recognition of a complicated syllogism: the flea’s enjoyment before wooing proves that the lovers enjoyment before wooing would not be sin, shame or loss of virginity:

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare
(...) and sacrilege, three sinners in killing thee³

Then a positive definition, after the negative one, comes: the flea is the lover, the beloved and their marriage bed. Therefore, to kill the flea would be to commit suicide, murder or sacrilege, since the flea has sucked the beloved’s blood and by doing so it has become a part of her. But by mingling the two different types of blood, the flea has also become a symbol of marriage. The beloved, therefore, disapproves of the lover’s argument and kills the flea in order to prove to him that by doing so she is not to destroy themselves. The lover takes the argument back to state that thus their enjoyment before wooing would not be a loss of honour. One must admit that the use of these rhetorical devices makes the poem complicated but, at the same time, incredibly rich and amusing with its various layers of meaning interacting on different levels.

As a conclusion, Donne was not probably liked at his own time for not being understood. As a most creative genius, he was by far ahead of his time, in contact with a large set of different new theories which were ignored by many of his contemporaries, and these were recreated as suitable elements for his new kind of poetry. It was not until the arrival of the French Symbolist Poetry and the attention paid by T.S. Eliot on the one hand, and the rise of the so-called New Critics, much interested in the sole study of the text, on the other hand, that John Donne was somehow rediscovered and considered as one of the great masters of the English language.

He proves throughout his work to be capable of recreating and reconciling the many different traditions in which he was brought up in order to build a new conception of poetry in which, as he himself said, “all words are measured, numbered and weighed”¹.

¹ “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”, ll. 21-28.

² The flea subject provided a popular subject matter for love poetry in the sixteenth-century Europe. The poet would envy the flea’s freedom to touch freely his mistress’ body, or its death at her hands while in the ecstasy of its contact with her. By having the flea bite both him and his mistress, Donne discovers a variation - *variatio* - of the subject.

³ “The Flea”, ll. 10, 18.

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¹ Grierson, Herbert ed. 1967: "Sermons", *John Donne. Poetical Works*. London, Oxford University Press.