COMBINING EROTIC DESIRE WITH RELIGION-DONNE'S POETRY
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Introduction to the Author:

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We think of Donne as a ‘modern’ poet today just because he wrote about things like we feel about them and we appreciate him more because he does not wrap his ‘songs and sonnets’, like his contemporaries did, in smooth and superficial garb of poetic sweetness, but, breaks free of conventional norms and uses verse as a medium for dialectic, for monologue, and for the psychological analysis. This intellectual aggressiveness and emotional extravagance is uniquely ‘modern’. It is this intellectual quality, above all, which bridges great gaps between Donne’s world and ours and formulates a relationship between them. His sense of the use of words and a love for enigma, in a harsh and rigid world, of personal relationships brings him closer to even the post modern reader. He is one of the greatest and most spectacular English love-poets but he is also magnificent, and perhaps unrivalled in his Divine Poems where he examines or anatomizes man’s ‘intimate’ relationship with God.

Donne’s Divine poetry during the years that led to his ordination can be read as continuously contemplating a space between his commitment to a secular career and his decision to be ordained in the Anglican Church. Described by George Parfitt as a ‘rite of passage’ the poems retain continuities of language and in that sense offer no simple binary between the religious Donne and the Secular Donne- Dr. Donne/ John Donne.

Perhaps, Donne himself was aware of the continuities as evident in the following sonnet:
“Oh to vex me, contraries meet in one:

Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot

A constant habit; that when I would not

I change in vowes, and in devotion.

As humorous is my contribution

As my prophane Love, and as soon forgot:

As ridling distemper’d, cold and hot,

As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.

I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today

In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:

To morrow I quake with true fear of his rod.

So my devout fits come and go away

Like a fantastic Ague: Save that here

Those are my best days, when I shake with fear.”

The reason for shifting to Divine poetry was not an abrupt one. It came with the thought of an incentive in Donne’s mind. Starting in 1610, Donne published *Pseudo Martyr* and *Ignatius his Conclave* in quick succession hoping to win the appreciation of the then King, James I, who in

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Sidney, Spenser and Donne: A Critical Introduction
return for the favor of providing him with a platform, asked Donne to join the Anglican Church. After a few more years of unaccomplished ambition and broken hopes, he finally succumbed to his fate and was ordained in January of 1615 and religion then became his life for as long as he lived. In 1616, he was appointed Divinity Reader at Lincoln’s Inn and in 1621 he attained the coveted distinction of being elected Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

We see a long ‘silsila’ of divine poems written by him around this time and they overshadowed the much loved love poems of his that had thrived during the Elizabethan reign. Today of course both kinds of his poems are equally appreciated.

However there is no rigid binary that we see in Donne’s Love poetry and Divine poetry. Erotic love images often seep into his divine poems and vice-versa. As an example, we see the mistress’s body and clothes, in his “Elegy: ‘To His Mistress Going to Bed’”, being described as heavenly not because perhaps she is a heavenly soul but simply because the speaker seems irrevocably obsessed with her beautiful body and the physical pleasure it holds in store for him.

He says, “Off with that girdle like heaven’s zone glistening,”

Later on in the poem, the mistress is also compared to angels that descend from heaven and give men a bodily high. He says,

“In such white robes heaven’s angels used to be

Received by men; thou, Angel, bring’st with thee

A heaven like Mahomet’s Paradise; and though

Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know

By this these from an evil sprite:

\[ ^2 \text{Sidney, Spenser and Donne: A Critical Introduction} \]
Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.”

He even calls the bed that he shares with his mistress a “hallowed temple”.

By all these comparisons Donne takes away a certain divine, angelic mysticism that surrounds love and he makes love largely only of the physical presence in his Elegy. He takes some from both Petrarch and Ovid but we see the bend towards Ovid more often than not. And in a poem so ‘Ovidian’ there was no space for religious metaphors and that space is exactly what Donne makes for us with artistic brilliance because for Ovid love is sensual and for Petrarch it is spiritual. The very fact that Donne uses both traditions simultaneously in almost each poem of his is a mark of his genius.

In a letter to Henry Wotton, Donne says, “you and I are much of one set in the philosophy of Love which though it be directed upon the mind, doth endear in the body and find piety and entertainment there.”

The love relationship in almost all his love poems is sacred to an extent where the idea of union with the beloved becomes a union with God for the speaker. The idea of the supremacy of love over all else and the belief that love itself takes lovers one step closer to God and makes them better acquainted with the Divine in a sense is seen best in his two love poems “The Sun Rising” and “The Canonisation”. In “The Sun Rising” Donne says,

“Nothing else is.

Princes doe but play us; compared to this,

All honor’s mimique; All wealth alchemy,”

What Donne is trying to say here is that there is nothing above or below the lovers. They are archetypal just like God is. Everything else compared to love is inferior just like a comparison
with God only reminds us that he is the only supreme. Donne gives that Godly stature to love that one would accord only to God himself. He explains to us how all other things are but a reflection or imitation of what the lovers are. His statement reminds the reader of Plato’s *Theory of Forms* where he talks of the idea of ‘mimesis’. Everything else is fraudulent; pseudoscience just like alchemy is considered too, when compared to God and this relationship is accorded that very stature by Donne.

In “The Canonisation” Donne goes one step ahead and openly asks for the canonization of the lovers. He brings together the two warring worlds of Religion and Secularism. He breaks the binary and talks of loving mortals as people who are just as immortal in their act of loving each other as God is and so they should be accorded that very stature among other mortals by their canonization.

There is a self-referentiality of love in the language of the world. Donne says that the lovers are outside of the world of religion but they should be canonized nonetheless. This idea in itself is strange. He speaks of the microcosm of the lovers against the macrocosm that is the world. He clearly states that the lovers are above all else but still demands a ritual that is very much ‘worldly’ to give legitimacy to his words. The world of the lovers occupies an autonomous realm and yet demands a legalization and legitimization by the larger gamut around them.

There is an attempt to overcome temporality by placing mutability against immutability. The logic behind this is to prove that the lovers are above flux of changes of time and so they are above mortals and hence should be canonized. The lovers according to Donne hold within themselves the very essence of the world. Their love for each other has made their bodies the hermitage of love. They have acquired sainthood by being in deep love according to Donne. He explains this in the line-
“And thus invoke us: You, whom reverend love
Made one another's hermitage;”

This strange quality of Donne the egoist who shuns the world one moment and demands authorization of his acts the very next from the same world is pretty amazing too. This shunning of the macrocosm can be attributed to his fraught relations with the court and the protestant world due to his marriage with Anne More who was a minor at seventeen. Donne’s imprisonment and the long period of penury that followed made him despise the world and its insensitivity to an extent where he refused to call himself a part of it and made a tiny parallel world of the lovers in his poems and in his life as well- this was his microcosm. A space, that had nothing to offer but fulfillment.

But thematically assigning the love poems to the period of fulfillment experienced in his early marriage years would be like confining them into narrow biographical construction. For though the marriage provided consolations: sexual fulfillment, emotional reciprocity, children, companionship, it simultaneously also brought disaster: loss of employment and chances of future advancement, along with the financial strain of looking after a growing family.³

Many voices in his poems are part of the idea of self-fashioning. Witty satirist was what Donne played in the beginning to get noticed by the court and then in his years of marriage he plays with the idea of idealized, archetypal love. Donne introduces philosophical and to a large extent, revolutionary ideas in almost all of his poems. One such is the idea of love leading to the Divine. For thinkers of the time he wrote in, this idea was unacceptable. Love was simply about sensual pleasure, untouched by reason and highly irrational. It had nothing to do with God whatsoever.

³ Sidney, Spenser and Donne: A Critical Introduction
The movement from secular to religious for Donne requires refocusing. It is not an abrupt break for Donne. It is about the idea of the love between Man and God and sometimes he uses the beloved as God or Man. Hence the idea of eroticism comes in even in religion. This analogy of sexual love and religious love is best seen in Donne’s “Batter My Heart, Three-Person’d God”. It is a poem that uses immense amount of force. Donne, the sinner asks God to rescue him from a sinful relationship with Satan. In the biblical context, Christ is referred to as the bridegroom and the soul of human beings as the bride. The strange idea we come across is that sin is always seen as feminine. The speaker here is someone who is betrothed to Satan but loves God. We see complete spiritual surrendering to God where the idea of being made anew comes in. When Donne says in the poem “make me new” he makes an invocational demand to God.

Donne or the speaker wants God to replace “knock, breath, shine” with “breake, blowe, burn”. There is a rejection of the benign influence of God. He (Donne) wants a forceful intervention. The severity of the words used is worth notice where he writes,

“But an betrothed unto Your enemy,
Divorce me, untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.”

Through its rhetorical aggressiveness, it also calls attention to the sadistic undercurrent in the poet-reader relationship expressed through the masochistic formulations of the verse. The indecorous sexualization of the individual’s relationship to God is only one way in which the
rhetorical sadomasochism of the Divine poems operates, the extreme communicative circumstances in which Donne again enacts his conflict of assertion and submission in the poems.4

Slavery has to take place at any cost but the speaker wants God to enslave him and not Satan. He wants freedom from the forced betrothal to Satan and wants imprisonment by God instead. The speaker as the beloved says that his defenses are strong but God should force his way in like a lover does and batter his heart. Heart, again was slang for a woman’s vagina in the Elizabethan context so the very title holds a sexual connotation in that sense. Donne’s idea of Calvinism says that to be saved is not just to be elect but there is another way to be saved and that is by being ravished by God. Donne brings up a metaphysical idea when he says that by ravishing (an invocation of rape imagery) the beloved God will actually render him chaste, pure.

The longing for God’s decisive intervention and an intensely intimate relationship with him can also be very well seen in a sermon preached by Donne to His Majesty at White Hall in 1625, “For as long as God punishes me, he gives me physic… if God breaks my bones it is but to set them straighter… I had rather God frowned upon me than not look upon me, I had rather God pursued than left me to myself.”

In “Hymn to God, My God, in my Sickness” life and death are merged together through the act of Resurrection by Donne. The binary that separates life and death collapses. Suffering becomes a benediction in the poem. ‘Dying’ or ‘to die’ was a common slang in those times used to refer to what we call today a sexual orgasm. And life as we know it was seen and experienced best by those who were in love. When Donne talks of life and death as almost the

4 John Donne, (The Penguin Poets, 1958)
same thing and tries to convince people that death should not be feared, he does so by making both seem equally full of ‘pleasure’.

The suffering that seems like benediction could be compared to the pain one experiences during intercourse and yet the fulfillment it brings with it makes it as desirable as resurrection which is every mortal’s wish. When Donne says in the very last line of the poem, ‘Therefore that He may raise, the Lord throws down,’ he means sickness becomes a route to union with God.

The pain that one has to bear to gain resurrection, which usually comes in the form of sickness is welcome because that takes us one step closer to God and the pain that a woman bears during intercourse makes it seem worthwhile because of the fulfilling ‘end’ that will follow. The way he makes the binary between life and death collapse is also the way in which he makes binaries between east and west collapse completely and he tells us that whether we go one way or the other the result will be just as satisfying. East as we know is where the Sun rises and West is where the Son (Christ) rises (from death) in the biblical context. So when Donne says in the poem that,

“I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;”

He means that travelling to the West is actually a travel to the East because there lays Resurrection. And the fact that ‘West’ also symbolizes death tells us that the “straits” of suffering that lead to that west could again be seen as the other suffering mentioned above and west could refer to the ‘dying’ that was commonly used as a slang as well.

Another line, which shows the collapsing of all binaries is where he writes,

“What shall my West hurt me? As West and East
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,

So death doth touch the resurrection.”

The binary between the spiritual and the physical is so flexible in Donne’s poems that a certain line could be seen as having two different meanings of either kind. We see a clear shift from the physical to the spiritual when Donne says,

“As the first Adam’s sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam’s blood my soul embrace.”

Donne feels the sweat on his face marks physicality and the blood of Christ in his soul brings in spirituality.

We see a blend of the physical and the spiritual in much of Donne’s poetry and that is one unique quality of his that makes a reading of his works immensely enjoyable and open to critique even today.
Works Cited


Bibliography


