

RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

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Abstract

John Donne is one of the greatest of English religious poet. The poets of the 19th century on whom his influence was most deep and lasting were religious poets. This is true because his temperament was essentially religious. A man of religious temperament is constantly aware of the underlying unity – the fundamental oneness of all phenomena. In fact, Donne's religious poetry belongs to the latter part of his career, to the period after his ordination, and the gloom, despair and frustration which resulted from the death of his wife, poverty and ill-health. The earliest of his religious poems are the sonnet sequence called 'La Corona' and 'The Litanie'. The best of his religious poetry is contained in the Holy Sonnets, the Divine Poems and the Three Hymns. The best of his career, but the nature of his imagery even

the early one, clearly indicated that his genius was religious and he was bound to take religious poetry to the pulpit.

The elements of conflict and doubt, the variety of tone and method, the introspective and Anglican note, the variety in themes, the personal elements, stress on Religion in the true sense, the parallel with love poetry and moral integrity and so on are the chief characteristics in Donne's Religious Poetry.

The La Corona and the Litanie are in accord with many aspects of contemporary thought and sensibility, besides constituting a remarkable expression of Donne's own speculation, skepticism and melancholy, no doubt Donne's chief power as a religious poet is shown in the Holy Sonnets and the last Hymns. Only in the Hymn to God the Father we find an assured faith; elsewhere we find always an element of conflict and doubt or fear. The best of the Holy Sonnets express these struggles with unparalleled forces. There is no essential change of style. He can stop to remember that he round the world's colours are imagined without destroying the power of his vision of judgment day. He treats God as a conqueror or a ravisher, or employs the kind of wooing used to his "profane mistresses".

As in the love poetry, in religious poetry, too, there is a considerable variety of tone and method, ranging from mere casuistry and debating tricks to a profound urgency and conviction. Some times both may be defined and found in the same poem. They show the characteristic wit reinforcing the emotional integrity.

Only thou art above, and when towards thee
 By the leave I can looke, I rise againe;
 But our old subtle for so tempeth me,
 That not one hour myself I can sustain;
 Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,
 And thou like Aclament draw mine on heart.¹

In fact, there is no underlying difference between Donne's religious poetry and the love poetry, Satires and Elegies of his early years. All that Donne wrote, whether in verse or prose, is of a piece; the same mind which earlier analysed the experiences of love is at work in the later religious poetry on a different experience. To be didactic is never the first intention of Donne's religious poems. He makes a sincere effort to express himself, to analyze and bare his own moods of agitation, of aspiration and of humiliation, in the quest of surrender of his soul to Him. The same erudite and surprising imagery, the same passionate, reasoning strain, meets us in both.

Donne is the first of the "Metaphysical love poets". He is like the first of the introspective Anglican, religious poets of the 17th century. Elizabethan and a good deal of Jacobean religious poetry is didactic in tone and intention, protestant and Calvinist, but not distinctly Anglican. With Donne, appears for the first time in poetry a passionate attachment to those catholic elements in Anglicanism which repressed and neglected, had never entirely disappeared from Donne. Poets like Herbert and his disciples inherited the intensely personal and introspective tone to which the didactic is subordinated, which makes a Lyric in 'The Temple', even if it be a sermon also, and primarily, a confession or a prayer.

The theme of the family and decay of this world is generally the subject of Donne's religious poems. Like many of the intellectual of his day, Donne felt that the times were out of joint, and it seemed obvious that the world was rapidly accelerating in its process of degeneration and decomposition as it approached the end of its course. The other important themes of Donne's religious poems are the insignificance of man himself, the antithesis between the world and the spirit, the transitoriness and unsatisfactoriness of all earthly enjoyments, the pangs suffered by the soul in the imprisoning body. In the Second Anniversarie, he views,

And what essential joy canst thou expect

Here vpon earth? What permanent effect
 Of transitory causes?

Dost thou loue Beauty? (And Beauty worthy'st
 is to moue)

Poore couse'ned cose'nor, that she, and that thou,
 Which did begin to liue, are neither now.

You are both fluid, chang'd since yesterday;
 Next day repaires, (but ill) last days decay.²

Like Donne's love, poetry, his religious poetry also bears an unmistakable stamp of his personality. It is not written in a conventional, didactic style, bringing home to the readers certain religious doctrines. On the other hand, it is highly individualistic and

personal as all Donne's poetry is. It gives expression to his highly complex personality. His best religious poetry is intensely personal. His poetry is not an expression and dramatic prayer to be delivered from temptations and distractions, to be made single hearted, for find in God's will his peace. There was always the other worldly element in Donne, a certain detachment from life, or non-attachment to it. He increasingly felt that the world was vanity, he could never quite liberate himself from it, and in this oscillation between this worldliness and the other worldliness, in this increasing longing to make the unworldly element in himself prevail over the worldly, lies in the drama of his religious poetry, poetry which transcends ecclesiastical difference. "If we define religion, in the widest sense, a man's effort to bring his own will into conformity with a transcendent will and purpose which he apprehends and which he believes to be divine, we may say that Donne's poetry is in this widest sense religious, but only accidentally or incidentally Christian"³

Indeed, one of the most beautiful passages in Donne's sermons and several in his letters, where he felt able to express himself more freely, are on those 'things in which all religious agree...' Donne is not concerned with subtleties of doctrine, but with the infinite subtleties of temptation from which he asks to be delivered, with the innumerable wandering by-ways and mazes that would entice him from the straight and narrow path. The religion which gives such passion to his poems is religion in its most primary and fundamental sense. What Donne asks for its purgation, purification, illumination is from the direction of his heart. We are even more aware of Donne's complex personality in his religion than in his secular poetry. But the religion of this complex personality is ultimately for all his learning and his subtly is very simple. One might almost say that what he longs for is to exchange the complexity of a personality for the singleness and simplicity of a soul.

Helen Gardner viewed that "In moral and psychological terms, Donne's problem was to come to terms with a world which alternately enthralled and disgusted him, to be the master and not the slave of his temperament. Like Wordsworth in his middle years, he came to long for, "a response that ever is the same".⁴ He did not look to religion for an ecstasy of the spirit which would efface the memory of the ecstasy of the flesh; but for an "evenness" of piety which would preserve him from despair. The struggles and conflicts which would preserve him from despair. The struggles and conflicts to which The Divine Poems witness did not lead to the secret heights and depths of the contemplative life, but to the public life of duty and charity which Walton describes. Like Dr. Johnson, he remained burdened by the consciousness of his sins and aware of his need for mercy at the judgment.

Donne's divine poems are the product of conflict between his will and his temperament. In his love poetry, he is not concerned with what he ought or ought not to feel, but with the expression of feeling itself. Passion is there its own justification, and so is disgust, or hatred or grief. In his divine poetry feeling, and thought are judged by the standard of what a Christian should feel or think. As a love poet, he seems to owe nothing to what any other man in love had ever felt or said before him. His language is his own. As a divine poet, he can't escape using the language of The Bible, and of

hymns and prayers or remembering the words of Christian writers. Christianity is a revealed religion, contained in the scriptures and the experience of Christian souls. The Christian poet can't voyage alone. The truths of Donne's love poetry are truths of the imagination, which freely transmutes personal experience. They are his own discoveries. The truths of revelation are the accepted basis of his religious poetry and imagination has here another task. It is, to some extent, fettered.

A Hymne to God father was written during the serious illness of 1623.

It expresses the inner doubts and conflicts of the poet at the sense of his own sin. But it ends on a note of hope and faith, peace and security, which is not common in Donne's religious poetry.

Donne's writing can be divided into three distinct eras; 1590 — 1601, 1601 — 1614 and 1614 until his death, the period of his religious duties and ministry. His first writings were very passionate but sometimes cynical about their subjects. Much of his early work, both poetry and prose, involved religious matter, including the previously mentioned 'Progress of the Soule'.

After his marriage in 1601, Donne's writing style changed. He became more meditative in his work. Yet his personal religious trials haunted him. Following his wife's death in 1617 after the birth of a still born child, Donne's work reflected his deep emotions and spirituality. The poetry of a moving tribute to his wife was written after her death. In fact, Donne was one of the most popular preachers of his day. One of the reasons for his popularity may be traced to his excessive use of Latin words and phrases. The excessive use of Latin words and phrases may be thus counted as one example of Donne's mundanity. Another instance of his mundanity, or his frankness is revealed in "a letter announcing the birth of yet another child", in which Donne conveys frankly that, though he would wish his wife no harm, he's glad to be rid of her company for a while. He stated, "I have now two of the best happiness which could befall upon me, which are to be a widower any my wife alive". He did not like his wife. He just wanted to be free. In other words, he was honest, and as far as the sentiments about one's spouse are concerned, he was very much modern.

Keep in view of all these things in mind, Donne's God concept is the product more of inculcation than 'holding and handling'. God plays the role of 'guide' in Donne's life journey. God is the filter through which every thought and action is passed.

In the eyes of C.S. Lewis, "... Donne is comically adroit, ... "Donne can be read as is a highly frustrated, emotionally needy and tragically self-centred individual. When I began reading Donne twenty years ago, I was drawn by default to his Holy Sonnets. I was fascinated by the tempestuous noise of his language, by the violence and anger there, and I was attracted to the very thing that turns so many of his readers off; the sense of a horrendous personal crisis and profound loss. For me, the abandonment of Catholicism was a good

thing — an opening of thought and experience. Nor for Donne, however, a sense of loss pestered him. Here is an unrequited lover in the degrading process of trying to wear down the object of his affection into a change of heart by blatant, abject pleading, but who in the bald face of rejection doesn't have the sense to — or simply won't — let up”.

John Donne's complex personality plays an important role in his religious poetry. His intellect, and as a result his work, demonstrates various opinions that at times conflict or agree with each other. These opposing views represent one of the most fascinating aspects of his poetry. Seldom is this divergence presented as clearly and frequently as in the theme of death

As with most poets of his time Donne was obsessed with death. Mesmerized by its mysteries, charmed by its allure, and convinced of the existence of an after life (as a result of Christian theology) he finds himself at times unable to settle on a particular view of the subject. While a considerable portion of Donne's opus deals with death either directly or indirectly, some poems depict death as insignificant while others present it as something he, and therefore humans, should fear. As a Christian Donne believed (although perhaps did not understand) the concept of an after life. This conviction is shown by his understanding of death as a necessary stage before reaching the glory of heaven, the promised life with God. His contradictory behavior is demonstrated by a fear of death, sometimes expressed in his search for ways in which he could triumph over it instead of becoming its victim, which fueled his interest in the practice of suicide.

One of the Holy Sonnets, 'Death Be Not Proud', presents the contradictory view of Donne. The opening lines, 'Death be not Proud, though some have called thee/Might and dreadful, for, thou art not so' demonstrate his own uncertainty on the issue, since that "some" he mentions includes him at times. However, he denies the power of death in the very next line, and proceeds to list several reasons why, The people whom death believes it kills do not "cease to live"(in order to avoid the use of the word ' death'); death does not have such powers. Death is not all- powerful, since it is part of God's creation. Further more, death is not an end of life. Rather, it is a kind of "sleep", a middle stage to cross before being reunited with the creator.

The poem's next two lines wound death's pride and diminish its power, since Donne argues death cannot act alone. An accomplice is needed to complete its mischievous deeds. A rather comprehensive list of partners is presented: fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. Deaths might must bow down to mere chance at times, and humans of such different ranks as kings and desperate beggars can obligate death to act. Thus, death is nothing special, if it can be ordered by men of such different walks of life. While poison, war, and sickness may result in death, its actual effect is as insignificant as the one resulting from mere exhaustion or drunkenness. Donne is convinced both

death and sleep are the same type of action, and as a result, he makes no distinction between them. The poem ends by remarking that after the resting period that death constitutes; humans will enter the afterlife, a period in which death itself will cease to exist. The poem ends in a paradox, as Donne concludes: "and death shall be no more, Death thou shalt Die." Donne's wife's death in 1617 was a prolific source of inspiration for Donne's poetry. Another Holy Sonnet, XII, is entirely dedicated to her loving memory. Once again he presents his belief of death as a mere transitory stage between the earthly and eternal life, and appears to be resigned to his fate. According to him, Anne has "paid her last debt" on earth. Her absence is not a cause for concern or pain, for "her soul early into heaven ravished/ wholly in heavenly is my mind set." That is, her death has been beneficial, since it has allowed her to join God in the after life while freeing him from earthly concerns. Therefore, Donne profits from her death since he is able to concentrate his thoughts and love on God. By ascending to the skies, Anne ceases to be competition against the higher being for Donne's affection, although, as the end will prove, this does not assure his or her well being.

Donne's effort to down play the death of his wife fails, however, when he exclaims " though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed/a holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet." Scholars have debated the meaning behind these lines, but they seem to express Donne's discontent with relinquishing his wife to God in order to love him more. By being unable to transfer all this love to God, the poem turns into a bitter series of complaints to the deity.

The sonnets discussed above share the common bond of death as a theme, but differ in their representation of the subject. Although the topic of death is the main focus of both, one need only read a few lines in order to comprehend the difference between the content of the poems. In *Death Be Not Proud*, Donne mounts an impressive tirade against death, culminating in a celebration of its lack of power. In *Holy Sonnet XVII*, his visions of death are not identical since an attempt to come to terms with his wife's absence forces yet another search of death's significance. One would be justified in thinking that his original idea about death is greatly influenced by his wife's decease, and Donne, unable to decide on a new opinion, embarks as a Journey to find his true feelings; although sonnet XVII gives the impression he has yet to find them.

Although the main focus of both poems is death, Donne's ego manages to steal the spot light. In '*Death Be Not Proud*', he manages to defend humankind against death, possibly because he feels he cannot be defeated by God. This claim is more explicitly shown in sonnet XVII, which commences as another attack on death but concludes as a protest against God for the taking of his wife. While he is indeed objecting to this action by God, the pain of loss of his wife over shadows his earlier beliefs and declarations against death. Carey writes that Donne's "feeling of loss is self - centered," (44) questioning the

real motives behind the poem. This trait, however, is not exclusive to these sonnets, since it can be found in most of Donne's work.

In closing, Donne's concerns about death are well documented, as a considerable amount of his work present references to the subject. As with most themes in his work, however, he often changes his opinion, leaving a perplexed reader to attempt to find his real belief on the subject. It is safe to assume he did not fear death in the conventional manner, for he believed in the concept of an after life. His faith in Christian theology calmed those fears and doubts, but at times he searched for answers to questions about death, answers that had no explanation. For this reason, his poetry is highly paradoxical, a quality that only adds to its richness and attractiveness, much to the delight of its readers

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