

## VIVID REALISM IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

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### **Abstract**

Donne as a poet is certainly difficult to access . He is perhaps the most singular of English poets. There is indeed a large expense of spirit in the poems of Donne. In many ways it is not unfair to summaries Donne's remarkable genius that he was an Elizabethan Browning, or placed beside Spenser. He is a man of realism. His poetry is realistic. It is right to estimate his poetry in the direction of Vivid Realism. At This Juncture, it is necessary to ask a few fundamental questions like – What is Realism? Who is a realist? Can we apply this concept to John Donne? Does his poetry deal with Realism? If he does so, how ? What aspects can we look into his poetry in the brand of Vivid Realism? These are some of the fundamental questions which come to our mind the moment we are reminded of Vivid Realism.

The Realistic and natural representation of people places, and /or things in a work of art is called 'Realism'. It is also known as Realist School, denotes a middle 19<sup>th</sup> century art movement and style in which artists discarded the formulas of Neoclassicism and the theatrical drama of Romanticism to paint familiar scenes and the events as they actually looked, Typically it involved some sort of sociopolitical or moral message , in the depiction of ugly or common place subjects.

Literary realism most often refers to the trend, beginning with certain works of 19<sup>th</sup> century, French literature, towards depictions of contemporary life and society 'as they were'. In the spirit of general "Realism", Realist authors opted for depictions of every day and banal activities and experiences, instead of a romanticized or similarly stylized presentation.

The growth of literary realism occurred simultaneously with the development of the natural sciences, history and social sciences and to the growth of industrialism and commerce.

The Realistic and natural representation of people, places and/ or things in a work of art. The apposite of idealization, one of the common themes of post modernism is that this popular notion of an unmediated presentation is not possible. This sense of realism is sometimes considered synonymous with naturalism.

Realism in the visual arts and literature is the depiction of subjects as

they in everyday life, without embellishment or interpretation. The term is also used to describe works of art which, in revealing a truth, may emphasize the ugly or sordid.

Realism also refers to a mid 19<sup>th</sup> century cultural movement with its roots in France, where it was a very popular art form around the mid to late 1800s. It came about with the introduction of photography a new visual source that created a desire for people to produce things that look “objectively real”. Realism was heavily against romanticism, a genre dominating French literature and artwork in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Realism believed in the ideology of objective reality and revolted against exaggerated emotionalism. Truth and accuracy became the goals of many Realists.

Donne was undoubtedly possessed of great poetic gifts but aiming at originally he achieved only realistic novelty. There are passages of great and grave beauty both in his love poems and in his divine poems. But usually they are imbedded in a bog of philosophical disquisition of such subtlety that the reader's head begins to reel as he follows him through the twist and turns of the argument. It was the habit of philosophizing, of leading a subject into strange, dim and unexpected vistas of thought that earned him the title of ‘Metaphysical’. A good example is the poem Ecstasy. The ecstasy of union of two souls in love is a simple enough idea, but it is tortured into such eternal shapes that only a reader gifted with a special sixth sense can grasp them.

Metaphysical poets- men of learning who enjoy showing that learning to the world. This statement was not considered a compliment at the time, but now seen as a mark of a great poet. Then seen as chaotic and eccentric because they used different words and ideas to present their poetry to the world.

Synthesis of passion and intellect, obscure expressions, philosophical and violent realism are the bounded aspects in the poetry of John Donne. Donne was a man of strong passions, in whom an appetite for life was crossed by a deep distance for it. He is satirist and elegist at the same period. The scron of the satirist invades the world of amorous elegy. His gayest poems have a note of bitterness, his most passionate lyrics are rarely free from a note of contempt, even if it is only a sardonic aside or illustration. In his love-poetry, he set the ecstasy of lovers over against the dull, foolish, sordid business of the world, or exalted one member of her sex by depreciating all the rest, or, in revulsion from the “queasie pain of being beloved and loving” turned on his partner with savagery or mockery from the beginning there is the other side to John Donne. 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 the slave of his temperament. Like Wordsworth in his middle years, he came to long for “a repose that ever is the same”. 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 for despair. In the boldest of the Holy sonnets it is in order that he may “rise and stand”. 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. That Donne had to wrestle to the end is clear. Like Dr. Johnson, with whom, in his natural melancholy and as a practical moralist, he remained burdened by the consciousness of his and sins and aware of his need for mercy at the judgement. All things are fine example for Vivid Realism.

Donne was not only one of the most supremely intelligent poets in the language. He was also the first Englishman to write verse in a way that reflected the whole complex activity of intelligence. A number of Elizabethan poets embodied the philosophical truths of their period in verse of considerable elegance and power. But Donne created a poetic language of thought, a mode of expression which so took for granted the intellectual tone and preoccupations of his time that it made of them, as it were, the stage on which the intimate give-and-take of personal poetry was played. He was, in short, the first intellectual realist in poetry.

Nowadays, ‘Realism’ usually means a certain willful harping on the facts of life, an insistence on the short, frank word and the daringly, or drearily, sordid detail. There is, of course, an element of this kind of frankness in Donne’s poetry. The realism he is referring to is, however something more diffused and its effect is distinctly not of grinding the reader’s nose into the dirt. On the contrary, the final impression is one of a peculiarly heightened dignity. This sense of personal dignity is at the centre of Donne’s work. At the simplest level, it is his perennial theme.

“She’s all states, and all princes, I.....

Nothing else is an extreme but typical way of putting it. This dignity measures his distance from the more conventional Elizabethans. Donne was a rebel in poetry. Impatient of convention he revolted against the Spenserian tradition in matter as well as in manner. He despised not only its allegory, pastoralism and romantic chivalry, but also its over rich style and smoth versification. He thought Spenser’s chivalric or platonic love a humbug and decided to treat love as a physical appetite honestly and realistically. And as he did not like Spenser’s heavily brocaded language and the monotonous music of his stanza. He deliberately adopted a colloquial language and rough and crabbed metre. He was undoubtedly possessed of great poetic gifts but aiming at originality he achieved only novelty or vivid reality. There are passages of great and grate beauty both in his poems and in his divine poems, but usually they are imbedded in a bog of philosophical disquisition of such subtlety that the reader’s head begins to reel as he follows him through the twists and turns of the argument. It was his habit of philosophizing, of leading a subject into strange, dim and unexpected vistas of thought that earned him the title of ‘Metaphysical’.

The key to Donne's poetry lies in peculiar make up of his personality. He was intensely, ever violently passionate and was at the same time given to intense and melancholy meditation. This blend of passion and thought, this integrated personality they maintain in distinguishing quality of Donne's poetry. But this sensibility is not peculiar to Donne. Poetic sensibility is a complex thing, a compound of the thought and feeling. No poet's sensibility is either emotion alone or thought alone. Thought and feeling are inextricably mixed, though their proportion may vary according to the subject or the mood of the poet. The true explanation of Donne's puzzle seems to be that when the thought element in him takes over; it carries him off his feet. This uncontrolled thought leads to rhapsody and raving. Add to this the further fact that he had something of the exhibitionist in him. This led him to disgusting realism in the portrayal of love and extravagant hyperboles and preposterous conceits in his philosophical speculations. In one of his poems, he describes with relish the details of his going to bed with his mistress. In another, he threatens to visit his disdainful mistress as a ghost after his death. This apparition will witness the shameful discomfiture of the woman trying in vain to wake up her new lover so that she may have 'more'. All these things are in bad taste and show a putrid, not a poetic mind.

The only poems in which he shows real tenderness are those addressed to his wife. In others, his attitude to woman is brutally cynical. His mandrake song, famous for its fantasticism, is a good illustration of this.

Go and catch a falling star  
Get with a child a mandrake root,  
Tell me where all past years are,  
Or who cleft the devil's foot<sup>1</sup>

Even when a man has traveled far and wide and seen all wondrous sights. He will not be able to report that there 'lives a woman true and fair', unsavoury realism, hyperboles and fantasticism do not exhaust Donne's devices to arrest attention. He employs many other abrupt transition from one extreme to the other juxtaposition of the trivial and the sublime, of the colloquial and the grandiloquent, are a few of these-A link like- 'For God sake hold your tongue and let me love' - is a stunt, not poetry.

His divine poems follow the same pattern with the difference that in them the passion is that of religious exaltation. The long poems are insufferably taxing, even of the shorter pieces only one or two like 'Death, Be not proud' 'Batter my heart, three person's God' are found in anthologies.

The harshness of his metre is also deliberate. For as some of his poems show, he was capable of melodious versification. But he did not always choose to be melodious. The harsh metre of his satire is understandable for it accentuates their coarseness. But in other poems the harshness was due either to indolence or to eccentricity. Ben Johnson who admired him for many things said that for not keeping of accent

Donne deserved hanging and that he would be forgotten because of his obscurity. He was indeed forgotten and nobody cared for him during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. But today he is again in favour and is appearing in expensive editions. Impatient of traditional poetic values, the moderns headed by T. S. Eliot have found in Donne a kindred spirit. His very defects are lauded as virtues. This is, however, a passion phase and the latest trends presage a return to establish poetic norms.

In fact, we do not like Donne as we like Shakespeare. Donne's poetry is unfamiliar to the average reader. Many people understand the work of Shakespeare. It is because his writing were frequently performed and studied. The study of Donne is different in terms of ambiguity encountered in his work. Many of his poems will logically support a vast number of interpretations. "Batter my heart", a holy sonnet by John Donne, uses a sequel imagery to describe the speaker's acceptance of God's will. To what degree should critics focus on the suggestive language used to describe God forcing the speaker to serve Him? Critics have explicated this poem by putting varying degrees of emphasis on these images. Some have totally denied the presence of sex in the "holy" sonnet while others have looked at it from a Freudian perspective and transformed the speaker into a sadomasochist with an Oedipus complex. No matter how the poem is interpreted, it is important to remember that it was not intended to be a secular poem. In a sense, Donne's use of Language often diverts the reader's attention away from its primary meaning. It looks some times a matter of forced salvation.

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and  
Seeke to mend;

That I may rise, and stand, O'erthrow mee' and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.<sup>2</sup>  
I, like an usurpt towne, to 'another due  
Labour to' admit you, but oh, to no end,

Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,  
But is Captiv'd and proves weake or untrue,

Yet dearly'Ilove you, and would be lov'd faine,  
But am bethroth'd unto your enemy,  
Divorce mee,'untie, or breake that knot againe,  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you' enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor even chart, except you ravish mee.<sup>3</sup>

The poem opens with a forceful command addressed to a "Three person's God". This phrase is typically used to describe the Trinity which is a Christian idea that God is simultaneously the father, son and holy spirit.

John Donne's Holy Sonnets have not endured because they are good

“devotional” poetry. Readers who turn to there poem expecting piety, guidance or anything like the varied spiritual perspective of George Herbert, for instance, are bound to be surprised or disappointed. Donne’s sonnets do not feature everyman expressing typically Christian problems or aspirations. A unique voice compels our attention, thrilling us even before we understand precisely what it is saying, shattering the decorous bounds of devotion with its force of expression. The immense aesthetic pleasure afforded by these poems consists in large part of hearing a vivid and original voice that rings, as it consider religious subjects, not with anything as feeble as piety, but with energy and drama.

The same voice animates the secular poems, and from the beginning, it has been identified as the voice of John Donne a perfect example from his Vivid Realism.

God, and great God, can I not think of thee,  
 But it must, straight, my melancholy bee?  
 Is it interpreted in me disease,  
 That laden, with my sinnes, I seeke for ease?  
 O, be thou witness, that the reynes dost know,  
 And heart of all, if I be sad for show,  
 And judge me after; If I dare pretend

To ought but grace, or ayme at other end.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his eclipse in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Donne was not forgotten by the literary world. The poem were being read again towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But a real vivid realism did not come until the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century. John Donne’s poetry is a different matter altogether. Throughout his poetry, Donne has the mystic’s passionate desire to be overwhelmed by God. The poet seeks images to give us a glimpse of that moment when the self is absorbed into the whole. The individual becomes an indistinguishable part of all time and creation. He wants to be burned, battered, drowned in blood, flooded, and ravished. Some of his images are grotesque. Some are of sexual union, even rape; certainly the imaginary goes beyond the bounds of good taste. Fish says, “Done is sick and his poetry is sick” In fact, this is not just right. He is using shocking imagery to convey mystic’s passionate desire to be alive in a faith that is indelicate, forceful and consuming.

Donne is credited with the honour of being the poet. He broke the Petrarchan tradition in England. He created a new mode of poetry. Donne’s poetry is a widening of the scope of the Elizabethan; in addition he implements already exiting modes in every aspect. His poems have intention, his themes are the traditional ones, yet his poetry is renewed by a new attitude, love, religious feeling, and satire and so on.

Donne envisioned three circles as representing the world’s of humanity, God and sin. Sin was in the middle, surrounded by humanity, with God on the

outside. The cross of Christ, when drawn upon these circles, represents the means by which humanity still has contact with both God's world and the world of sin. Following the cross from its middle, man's fall decay, decomposition and ultimate oneness with God can be accounted for. The interpretation of Donne's poetry offered here depends upon a vision of human love and experience fraught with tension.

In many ways it is not fair summaries Donne's remarkable genius by saying that he was an Elizabethan Browning, and place him beside Spenser. The two poets shine some what in the fashion as Tennyson and Browning did in the Victorian age. His metrical roughness his obscurities of method, his bewildering illusiveness, his ardent imagination, his taste for metaphysics, and his unexpected divergence into sweet and delightful music. All these things may remind the modern reader of the author of *sor dello*, and *Men and Women*. One of the most interesting things about him is his emphatic revolt from the smooth sweetness of most Elizabethan verse. Although he had the power to utter dulcet and harmonious sounds, he seems to have deliberately adopted a harsh and often staccato method in order to break away contemporary tradition.

Another important feature in his approach to vivid Realism is his attitude towards womanhood. Donne has often been called a cynic in his attitude towards love and woman. There is no doubt that his attitude towards woman in his early poems is one of contempt. In the poem, "Goe, and catche a falling starre", he emphasises the impossibilities of finding a faithful woman.

Goe, and catche a falling starre,  
 Get with child a mandrake roote,  
 Tell me, where all past years are,  
 Or who cleft the devil's foot,  
 Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,  
 Or to keep off envies stinging  
 And finde  
 What winde  
 Serves to advance an honest minde.<sup>7</sup>

Donne believes that it is impossible to find in this world a constant woman. This point is stressed in the petrarachan manner by giving a list of impossible tasks. It is as impossible to find a constant woman as to catch a falling star or meteor. Just as nobody can beget a child on the forked root of the mandrake plant, a plant which has human qualities, so also one can not discover a woman who is faithful to her lover. A constant woman is as great an impossibility as the telling of where the past years have gone or who clove the devil's foot, or the mermaids, fabulous creatures who have no real existence.

Lives a woman true, and faire

If thou findst one, let mee know  
 Such a pilgrimage were sweet;  
 Yet doe not , I would not goe,  
 Though at next doore we might meet,  
 Though shee were true, when you met her,  
 And last, till you write your letter,  
 Yet shee  
 Will bee  
 False, ere I come, to two, or three.<sup>8</sup>

These lines reveal Donne's satirical, cynical attitude towards woman hood. He thus breaks away from the Petrarchan tradition of woman worship. He has himself experienced woman's inconstancy, and so regards a constant woman as a rarity.

In Woman's constancy her inconstancy has been ironically brought out. He scorns them alike for yielding to his lust and for denying themselves to him.

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