

John Donne's Poetry between the Petrarchan Tradition and Postmodern Philosophy: A Case Study- "The Canonization"

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the way John Donne's poetry (1572-1631) deconstructs the familiar notions and foreshadows a literary area of postmodern contemplation and meditation. It may be true that Donne was influenced by the medieval ideas, but in his mature years he was persuaded that literature and poetry should submit to deep changes. In fact, the centrality of love and religion in Donne's poetry seduces him to explore and discover the tenor of the universe theoretically and practically. The journey of discovery and exploration provides him with efforts to decode the inner spirituality by accepting the subversive, ambiguous, unfamiliar, and rebellious poetic concepts. Bearing all this in mind, this article yearns to scrutinize the fact that Donne seeks to devise a poetic platform to liberate literature and poetry from conventional modes of versification. The explanation of this attitude seems to be simple and easy understandable, but also rather surprising and complicated. The analysis will show that Donne's poetry resorts to the sacred and profane in order to criticize social perspectives, and undermine established rules of poetry. The illustration of this attitude requires a deep analysis of his love and religious poems.

1. Introduction

No one can deny that John Donne is considered to be the representative of metaphysical poetry. Donne belongs to a Catholic family, and he converted to Anglicanism when England was extremely tyrannical to Catholics. Donne experiences terror and this situation influenced the way he composed poetry, in form and content. Poetically speaking, Donne decides to ironize the dominant styles of versification. Donne endeavors to dismantle classical literary scenes and devise a different worldview based on a new poetic sensibility. This intention incites the speaker to adopt a diatribe attack against the well-established rules of poetry of his time. Thus, the modern establishment of Donne's poetic status dates back to T.S. Eliot essays comprising the "Metaphysical Poetry."

At an early age, Donne started weaving his poetic universe. From the beginning, he faced his contemporary Sir Philip Sidney, who strongly believes that poetry is a sort of imitation. In this sense, writing against the grain of this motivation was not a relaxed task. This uneasiness was owing to the fact that Donne seeks to detach his contemplative realm from the rules of decorum. Donne's newness lies in "I sing not, siren-like, to tempt, for I / Am harsh" (9-10) (Donne and Robbins 50). The speaker's Poems appear to have affinity with the Augustan Age. In fact, the Neo-classical period witnessed the appearance of famous poets such as Alexander Pope and John Dryden. It was a philosophical movement that yearns to voice the following declaration:

Those rules of old discover'd, not devis'd,
Are Nature still, but Nature methodis'd;
Nature, like liberty, is but restrain'd
By the same laws which first herself ordain'd. (Pope, 88-91)

As far as Donne's poems are concerned, metaphysical poetry pursues the meanings of love, life and existence. These verses hint the senses of literary creation and poetic motivation. They reflect an intention to subvert the conventional and explore the inner spiritual meaning by reconciling opposite poetic realms. In this regard, this new poetic orientation seems to be inspired by a philosophical recognition of the traumatized universe. This metaphysical representation is obvious through the use of literary elements of smiles, metaphors, paradoxes and conceits. These images prepare the ground for a vast imaginary space and profound interpretation.

It is apparent that Donne's modern conceptualization ends with the medieval period. It may be true that Donne was tied to the dogma of Renaissance, but in his mature years he was keen to conceive the necessity of constructing a new poetic discourse capable of engendering literary influence around the doctrine of metaphysical poetry. This orientation seems to be a poetic philosophy that looks for achieving a balance between the body and soul. In order to fathom Donne's metaphysical poetic universe, a closer affinity must be established with his religious conceptions.

The impact of Donne on the literary meditation of England appears to be particular and deep. His influence and literariness prepare the ground for a surge of new poets with original poetic skills. The generation's commitment to Donne is based on the fact that he breaks the shackles of conventions. This urge leaves room for creation, re-creation, sublimation and pristine perception of a postmodern poetic universe independent of the classical literary power. Donne's peculiarity lies in his recurrence to past images with a new fragmented artistic decoration.

2. Ihab Hassan and Donne's Poetics

No doubt that the time in which Donne lived and wrote his poems was a shifting intellectual moment. There are, however, a couple of significant questions associated with Hassan's postmodern philosophy, and its relationship to Donne's poetic world. The first one concerns the poetic intentions of the classical speakers. The question seems to be whether Donne's love poems present sexual lessons, or a transcendental endeavor to lay bare the ancients' hypocritical consideration of moral values? The second question is related to Donne's use of parodic technique. Does he expose parodic imageries in order to highlight the deceitful lovely relationship, or does he satirically debunk classical moral purposes? Moreover, what contribution does this inspirational literary step append to Donne's poetic texture?

Hassan is not a metaphysical poet of eroticism, but rather a philosophical critic who philosophized about literature and postmodern philosophy. The question, thus, arises as to the linkage between the metaphysical realm of the philosophy of fragmentation, chaos, loss and disorder. Indeed, in this paper I will attempt to answer this question by decoding the hidden secrets within Donne's love poems. The tenor lies in finding moment of affinity between the speaker's sacred hums, and the philosopher's profane conceptualization. Obviously, applying such postmodern perspective is meant to put the light on Donne's formal and meaningful paradoxicality.

It is perhaps plausible to highlight that Hassan's critical view of Donne's work surges from a shattering background. In fact, the American theorist deems that the postmodern text seeks for suppressing and surpassing the classical and romantic ideas. The reflection evokes partial and discontinuous commitment to historical conjunctions. This suspicious thinking of the classical poetic vicinity leaves room for a problem of historicity. In this sense, the American critic foreshadows theories of change, innovation, re-appropriation, creation, deconstruction and difference. Significantly, Hassan's satire of the previous mode of writing generates new modes to the foreground. The earliest definitions become devoid of aura as well as signification. In broader terms, postmodern critic appears to devise a pristine literary philosophy against the grain of the mainstream world imposed by established literature.

The above postmodern characteristics are not necessarily shared by Donne's poetics. These traits are meant to expose the postmodern aesthetic mentality. However, no one can deny the fact that Donne's poems include moments of subversion as well as assertion. This literary movement insinuates a possible linkage between the revolutionary speaker and postmodern thought. In this particular sense, Donne's love poetry appears to be fertile with such postmodern literary premises. In other words, Donne's poems seem to establish the basis for the intimate connection between the classical sacredness and modern profanity. What this might underline is that the metaphysical poet is not a closed signifier, but an open mind with endless poetic intentions.

3. Postmodern Interpretation of Donne's "The Canonization"

In his poem "*The Canonization*" (1633), John Donne seems to exhibit postmodern traits than classical ones. The first remarkable thing in this poem would perhaps be the inconsistency of the poetic form. The speaker provides fragmented sequences of thoughts with endless closure. The poet does not weave a literary piece of work with specific implication. The poem includes moments of poetic subversion, which appear to end with Petrarchan Tradition. It is this aspect that distinguishes Donne's poem as profound and meaningful.

The first stanza begins the story by the poet of his beloved to provide him with moment of joy, pleasure and serenity. This lovely request is associated with religious appeal to seduce the receiver, the perceiver and the reader. A seduction seeks to overcome the social barriers and establishes a path for emancipation and contemplation. The speaker cannot hide the hidden feelings. The tenor lies in making the sacred profane and the profane sacred. The poet looks for a harmonious meeting with a dead corpse and fresh spirit. It is obvious that the writer plunges into the depth of lover's quest for immortalization and perpetuity.

In this particular, Donne looks for foregrounding "his honor, or his grace" in order to attract the reader's attention. The attraction is meant to persuade the social eye and endeavor to transcend the classical dogma of love and affection. Donne's doctrine pays lip service to hold the tongue of his darling and endorse her lips. This moment seems to be artistic and controversial for the fact that the speaker's love becomes devoid of shackles. It establishes "the king's real" instead of "ruined fortune." Love becomes virtuous with a sort of canonization. The poet's lovely feelings surpass the classical and the modern real world. The "stamped face" is no longer interested in life and existence. His main preoccupation is associated with contemplating the ambiguous and the fragmented heart. The contemplation appears to be the only weapon to fight the prejudices and to build a shelter of love and enjoyment away from the established barriers. Thus, Donne's perception and solitude "will let" him "love."

The direct interaction where Donne intersects with postmodernism can be examined in the light of **Ambiguity**. In fact, the speaker addresses to an unknown listener, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love." The addressee is known, but the receiver seems to be vague, uncertain as well as absurd. The indeterminacy of the auditor appears to be a postmodern intention. Donne neglects the world and gives free rein to the word. He wants to love and be loved without constraints. He looks for transcending the accepted creed of love and launching a new universe wherein vagueness and obscurity are manifestations of love. In this sense, Donne seeks to establish a new understanding of love and adoration. The ambiguous love includes beauty and charm. It is a philosophy that undermines the accustomed ideologies and paves the way for emancipatory thought. Hassan and Donne undermine the social complexity of dealing with love and poetry. This intricacy is tantamount to Hassan's questioning about postmodern: "What was postmodernism? What was postmodernism, and what is it still? I believe it is a revenant, the return of their repressible; every time we are rid of it, its ghost rises back. Like a ghost, it eludes definition (*"From Postmodernism to Postmodernity"* p, 1). Postmodern literature abnegates silence and fixity. It devises re-interpretation, re-appropriation and re-creation of the placid and fixed notions. Therefore, the Petrarchan traditions seem to lose its classical position and power. What comes is the power of questioning, criticism and doubt.

In the first stanza, ambiguity does not lie in the strangeness of love. However, it stands for the ambiguous correspondence between the holy and blasphemous values. The poem's title "*The Canonization*" gives a sacred aura to Donne's poetic universe. The first impression is tantamount to holy prayer. It is a moment of meditation that transcends the extensional world. The speaker wants to practice lovely religious contemplation with a divine spirit. He yearns to solitude and loneliness. He seems to prepare the ground for talking with the saints, and angels. However, the poet's first proclamation, "For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love" deconstructs the sacredness of the holy, and engenders a profane discourse based on irreligiosity. Plainly, this mixture deeply deepens the sense of ambiguity and obscurity. The reader seems to be in a very critical situation. He adheres to the discourse of virtue and serenity, but he finds an opposite and fragmented language. Therefore, it is a situation of loss, defeat, conspiracy, misinterpretation as well as misunderstanding.

Donne's poetic movement, in the first stanza, appears to be logical and argumentative. In fact, he starts with the grammatical preposition, "For" and ends with the coordinating conjunction, "So." On the first hand, the speaker appeals the listener to keep him silent and alone. He believes that loneliness reinforces his spiritual meeting with his darling. He provides the reader with arguments in order to convince of his lovely and private choice. Likewise, he cannot stop proposing some suggestions such as, "Or chide my palsy, or my gout," "or take you a course, get you a place." On the other hand, he closes with "So you will let me love". The poet's drive explains the general intention of lovers. Yet, what makes the initiative absurd and incongruous is the confirmed loss of "love," "gout", "grace" and "honor." The speaker lives in the jail of ambiguity. He begs an escaping from the classical patriarchy believing that beauty and joy reside in leaving away from society. Nevertheless, he falls in love with ambiguity. This is a critical attitude towards the classical, modern, and postmodern philosophy. Donne's first stanza explains the inexplicable and foregrounds the hidden.

Thus, the logical grammatical construction of the poem does not hide the absurd signification within the system of words. Indeed, Donne's words are replete with mystery, questioning, suspicion and bitterness. The poet wants to hide his loss with linguistic decoration. He follows the rules of grammar, but he fails to recognize and decode the main rules of love. Donne's problem lies in the wish to overcome the conventions and establish a private universe with particular rules. The wish seems to be appealing and encouraging. However, the failure and cold face of society hinder the wish to become a reality. Donne seems to be the prototype of the postmodern poet. He finds himself lost in the middle of a fragmented world. The rescue lies in accepting the unacceptable, writing the magical and reading the philosophical.

Another intersection with postmodern thought lies in the recurrence to parody. In the second stanza, the poet hilariously manipulates the Petrarchan moral values. In fact, Donne parodizes the Petrarchan conventions. He voices for the fact that these classical bonds are devoid of poetic energy, and they become humorous. Belittling these conventions, Donne uses the stanza to create his imaginative metaphors for love. The second stanza, "Significantly, mocking a particular mode of writing would inevitably entail pushing it to the background and bringing new modes to the foreground, initiating "a new and modified epic tradition" (Klarer 11). The poet adopts a ridiculous literary technique. He seeks to render the classical funny and the postmodern absurd. For Donne "

A parody imitates the serious manner and characteristic features of a particular literary work, or the distinctive style of a particular author, or the typical stylistic and other features of a serious literary genre, and deflates the original by applying the imitation to a lowly or comically inappropriate subject. (Abrams and Harpham, p 38)

In other words, **Parody** includes the foregrounding of the peripheral texts to the poetic center. It is a technique which opens up more possibilities and empowers more hybrid voices. This means parody seems to play a central role in condemning literary standards. Hence, Donne attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal styles. The comic element is not the gist of the matter. What matters seems to be the generation of new perspectives able to exist and resist within the modern literary poetic corpse. The process of imitation appears to be serious in aping and debunking the tradition. The target is to reduce the sacredness of the untouched tower and establish a poetic background of plurality, tolerance and difference. Therefore, it is a process that pays lip service to marginalized speakers.

In his poem "*The Canonization*," Donne adopts an obvious use of parodic images in order to highlight and evaluate the degree of manipulation espoused by conventional speakers. Doing so, Donne appeals to defamiliarize the poem's form and content. This intention is meant to devise new poetic texture and seduce the reader's critical mind. In addition, the poet endeavors to bypass preceding poetic forms to create literary newness capable of offering alternative artistic style. The metaphysical poet is no longer interested in copying from the original copy. He yearns for revisiting past images and structures to make clear its shortage and re-appropriate it in contemporary time. In this sense, this aesthetic device does not ignore past representations, but makes use of irony to admit the fact that we are unavoidably detached from the past.

Therefore, the concept of parody is better understood by referring to Hutcheon's explanation of the vehicle as "not nostalgic; it is always critical and ironic. Postmodern parody is both deconstructively critical and constructively creative, paradoxically making us aware of both the limits and the powers of representations in any medium" (Hutcheon 94). Parody does not imply a blind imitation of past epitome but rather a critical approach concerning tradition. It endeavours to destabilize some structures and forms of the past and reveal them both enthusiastically and satirically. In fact, Donne's revisiting of past images and structures do not emerge from a nostalgic returning. It is activated by the challenge of delving into the customs of the past and bringing to light its workings, in order to make re-generate it in present time.

In "*The Canonization*" parody plays a significant role in clarifying the absurd portrayal of love. Donne's parodic strategy adopts a stance of affinity with conventional features and pictures inscribed in the common memory and customs. This adaptation seeks to reinvigorate these images, in so doing identifying not likeness, however, a sense of distinction and difference. For instance, the language used by the courtly sonneteer when describing the sufferings of unrequited love and the frustrations of failed love appears to be ironic as well as satirical. The poet asserts that his love does not hurt others. It is harmless and romantically intentional.

The theme here is plainly mocking. The speaker takes the opportunity to adopt a satirical attitude in stanza two towards the classical consideration of love. The poet wants to imply that love is priceless and powerless. The speaker's irony shows itself in his adoption of a resigned tone about this materialistic tendency in considering love. Donne criticizes existential use of lovely agreement. For him, "What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned? Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?" These inquiries reveal the extent of worldly trauma about love's dealing. The merchants cannot understand the lover's sighs. They can only buy or sell merchandizes. Love is not a sort of goods. It is a pure manifestation of goodness. The ships are responsible for exportation and importation. However, they can neither recognize nor bear the degree of love. Romantic love does not materially interfere with social artificiality. The irony seems to be obvious and heavy. Plainly, the familiar courtly love tradition: sighs, tears, colds and heats are ironically set in contrast to the realities of an exploitative universe.

By the end of the second stanza, Donne develops a diatribe attack against the materialistic world that deprives him of his romantic love. This Petrarchan society hinders the speaker's lovely realm. Love becomes tainted with greedy targets. However, the poet longs for a divine proclamation about such spiritual power. The following, inquiry "Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?" prepares the ground for a full ironic subversion of the conventional conceptualization of love. The poet elaborates the exclusion of all worldly pursuits from the lovers' existence. The argument seems to be highlighted by Rosamond Tuve:

Donne piles up questions using the conventional 'things adjoined' to the lover - his sighs, his tears, his coldness, his heats. But since he wishes to use the figure to argue mockingly against love's unprofitableness, addressing those dolts who would rather improve their worldly position than be love's saints, he attaches to each adjunct another subject which literally is accompanied by strong winds, floods of water, low temperatures and fever . . . such an image cannot remain simple. It has too much to do (*Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, p 45)

So here, at least in part, the values of later investigators rub up against the values of the poet. To put it another way, the speaker wants to imply that the system of value is questionable. Thus, Donne uses simple images rather than conventional ones to demystify common features of courtly love. The poet's parody pokes fun of the standards of poetry of his time by revealing the fragility of the fundamental rules. Donne looks for exposing to his readers the artificiality of the parodied text and the fact that both the text and the world it delineates can be altered.

In this light, some critics deem that Donne is a parodist poet. He satirizes ancient considerations of valued notions such as courteous love. He engages in dialogue with patriarchal discourse. This conversation is not meant to re-appropriate classicism in the poetic universe. However, Donne wants to voice a poetic reform based on foregrounding and highlighting the silenced marginalized speakers as well as images. In his parodic poetic verses, Donne main purpose lies in devising a new literariness in fashioning the poetic world. This stands for the fact that the poetic text becomes multiple and disruptive in form and content. The form does not longer stick to what previous poets espoused. Donne seems to disrupt any poetic hierarchy. The content leaves room for myriad interpretations and provides the reader with anti-canonical themes.

Obviously, reading "*The Canonization*" can be an evidence to lay bare the gist of Donne's poetic argument against patriarchal system. In this sense, the poet is exposed as an innocent and revolutionary lover. He wants to inculcate the idea that love does not require much aura to be respected. Donne comes to terms with the postmodern technique providing that parody includes a diatribe against the classical consideration of love. The speaker preaches a pristine dealing with these high moral values. The process remains in deconstructing the dominance over women. In this sense, the poet's the anxiety lies blindly following what was established and considered as tower. The speaker's artistic pleasure lies in questioning the traditional power and building a poetic shelter able to fight and protect the specificity of man and woman while talking about love.

The third interaction where Donne seems to be in keeping with postmodernism can be highlighted in the use of Extended Metaphors. In fact, the sense of mystery and irresolution reigns over "*The Canonization*." The motivation lies in recognizing how such an ambiguity can be deciphered. This decoding will be through metaphor. In this sense, to declare that something is metaphoric is to reveal that it is not accurate but a literary fancy. However, Donne's metaphor absurdly reflects upon the literal and the metaphoric at the same time. In order to reveal this metaphoric movement, it is compulsory to examine George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's argument of metaphor that is both concrete and abstract. For instance, they refer to the fact that "argument is war" (*Of Metaphors We Live By*, p 3-6). In this sense, war functions as the principal metaphor; argument is structured as an action that has winners and losers. This argument is whether condemned or reinforced. Such metaphoric dichotomy engenders a conceptual structure that affects how we accept an argument, and how do we actually disagree. Therefore, Donne's metaphor appears to hide some aspects at the same time that it creates others.

This type of metaphor seems to be unusual and challenging. In fact, in the final stanzas, the speaker exposes a metaphor resembling himself and his lover to a phoenix. The poet believes that the lovers are able to share the same destiny in this form. They can live, Love, die in a blaze of passion, and then resurrect again even more attractively. This is a double reference in that "death" can refer to a climax in a sexual relationship. In this sense, Meaning, in usual metaphors, moves in a single direction. It starts from the concrete to the abstract. The physical part constitutes the abstract side. Nevertheless, creative metaphors go beyond the channel of accustomed usage and foreshadow limitless interpretations. In Donne's poem, the metaphoric creativity is visible in shifting from the concrete to the abstract, and from the abstract to the concrete. The expansive metaphorical drive is equalized by a reductive movement, wherein "the phoenix," "dies and rises" "by this love."

In "*The Canonization*," the postmodern thought is obvious in the interaction between these expansive and reductive movements of metaphor. On the one hand, the reductive movement constitutes the phoenix as a representation of life. The expansive one, on the other hand, builds it as a manifestation of death as well as isolation. The mystery lies in the fact that each movement could overturn its entity and become the other. For instance, Thomas Pynchon deems that these metaphoric transformations liberate the poetic texture from the suspicious situation of either/or and release a space, "where ideas of the opposite have come together, and lost their oppositeness" (*Gravity's Rainbow*, p 50). In fact, such artistic movements, at once metaphoric and literal, manifest the linkage between the metaphysical style and postmodern one. In this respect, meaning, in usual metaphors, moves in a particular direction. It starts from the concrete to abstract. The physical part constitutes the abstract side. Yet, creative metaphors transcend the channel of accustomed usage and prepare the ground for diverse as well as contradictory meanings

In this light, conceit is considered as an extended metaphor in literature. It includes a complex logic that reigns supreme over metaphysical poetry. In this sense, there are other instances of John's use of metaphors via poetic imagery. Following this, Donne continues to make a poetic contrast between business and love. Donne declares, "Take you a course, get you a place, /Observe His Honor, or His Grace." In fact, the comparison of money to love is an obvious manifestation of metaphysical conceit wherein the speaker delivers, "ruined fortune.../With wealth your state.../Or the King's real, or his stamped face." John Donne seeks to reconcile between the logic and absurd. The very attempt opens the poetic mind to unlimited significations. The poet makes use of extended metaphor to widen the scope of imagination as well as interpretation.

In the third stanza, love is paralleled with the dove as well as eagle and phoenix. In this sense, metaphysical conceit connotes fear and peace. The metaphoric contradiction explains the postmodern intention of the speaker. He wants to fashion a new path out from the Petrarchan tradition. In the final two stanzas, Donne's comparison speaks and exposes religious commitment. The conceit turns to ashes and tombs. Then, the poet and his darling are akin to religious saints. In "The Canonization", the poet moves from the ideal picture and the pristine meaning to the real and existential ones. The poet wants to demolish the common use of metaphor. He wants to avoid using indirect metaphoric images. That is to say, he looks for transcending the traditional metaphoric construction based on "such as, like, similar to" and delineating the love by contradictory images. Plainly, crossing the distinctions between life and art, Donne's love is neither a historical fact nor a political movement. However, the poetic language seems to be so disruptive that it may absurdly represent the love rather than sticks to its reductive reality. Therefore, the reality of love can only be designated.

Obviously, what are Donne's metaphors? Do they stand for truth or lie? In fact, to suppose that metaphors as a lie is to reject the quest for love. To admit that they can be a "thrust at truth" is to allow the pursuit for spiritual lovely commitment. On the one hand, metaphors represent a driving force at truth. On the other hand, metaphors stand for a lie because they resemble a human hypocrisy. This movement implies the impossibility of Donne's representation and makes due allowance to the stylistic absurdity of the speaker's poetic texture. Thus, Donne's metaphorical style is no longer coherent; but equivocal. Each poetic metaphor has its percentages for happiness and hopelessness, sorrow and deliverance. Perhaps the only extraordinary poetic alternative is not to question, to remain isolated within an absurd representation. Absurdity, in this case, conveys Donne's distrust towards a pre-established metaphorical design as well as the creation of an unusual pattern of signification.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Donne's "Canonization" destroys the Petrarchan sacredness of love and God. The classical patriarchy as a privileged core starts to lose its creative power. By introducing the postmodern thought, the poet devises a literary background in which it is impossible to conceive of authoritarian texts without asserting the poetic repressed voices. Indeed, the new conceptualization destabilizes the patriarchal conviction and leaves room for postmodern poetic practices that do away with the conventional stereotypes. The speaker recognizes that the challenge to totalizing concepts is essentially a deconstruction of the assumed authority of the conventional poetic ideas. This necessitates revisiting the historical context of the classical theory. Doing so, John Donne brings new styles to poetry. Ambiguity, parody and extended metaphor empower emerging poetic sensibility. Donne's tenor lies in a future where the restrictive rules disappear and poetic reflection ensures artistic dignity. Therefore, Donne's poetic universe crosses the borders between the physical and metaphysical. The artistic cohesion establishes an open space of creation and re-creation.

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