

A SHORT STUDY ON THE SONGS AND SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE

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John Donne (1572-1631), who is one of the most remarkable figures of English poetry, was born and brought up a Roman Catholic. In his youthful years he appears to have been rather a worldly man leading a life of gaiety, adventure and sophistication while living at the same time in a religious world. Thus he continued to be a man of double life for about forty years. But his training as a Catholic in an age of religious polemic with the scholastic element that was still the part of the university education of his day induced him to end up his life as a man of the church : In 1615, after years of persuasion and postponement, he took holy orders at the age of forty-three, and rose rapidly to be Dean of St. Paul's in 1621 and the most famous preacher of his time. As a result of his concern for religious matters, he wrote a number of prose writings of controversy and meditation, Divine Poems, Holy Sonnets, Sermons and other religious writings along with love poems, miscellaneous and occasional poems, verse letters, satire etc.; all of these works corresponding roughly, but not exactly, to the early, middle and late periods of his career. It should be noted that in the late period following his ordination in 1615, Donne abandoned secular prose and poetry; he devoted himself completely to religious literature producing most of his religious writings including the famous Sermons in this period. It is observed that in his works he tried to combine two different worlds: the physical and the aspiritual. Thus he enriched them with elements from both worlds, and this is also true for his love poetry by which

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he is probably best known all over the world, and which comprises his twenty *elegies*¹ and *The Songs of Sonets*.²

In this study I intend to point out the outstanding characteristics of Donne's love poetry by reference particularly to several of the most interesting poems in *The Songs and Sonets*, a collection of love poems considered to represent Donne at his best as a love poet³, and also to survey briefly various critical attitudes towards this poetry throughout the centuries up to the present time.

The Songs and Sonets, according to Grierson's canon they are fifty five in number, were written at different times, in different moods and addressed to different persons. No doubt, Donne's genius, temperament and learning gave these poems certain qualities which drew attention and have given them ever since a power of fascination. In the first place, Donne wrote his love poems as a man who scorned, hated, lusted after, loved, worshipped, and this is confirmed by his biography. He seems to have had enough experience to realize love's many moods, from the most cynical to

¹ The *Elegies*, written under the strong influence of Ovid, lack the essential originality of *The Songs and Sonets*. The influence of Ovid on Donne's *Elegies* is well-treated by Mr. J. B. Leishman in *The Monarch of Wit*. London, 1951.

² *The Songs and Sonets* (in this title Donne's spelling "sonets" for "sonnets" has been followed in our study) were most probably written between 1590 and 1612, and most of them were not published during Donne's lifetime; but like many of the poems of his contemporaries they were circulated among friends. They were not published until 1633 after the poet's death, and his love poetry was not collected together as *The Songs and Sonets* until 1635, which means that we have neither Donne's approval for the collection nor any certainty as to the accuracy of the texts. The most scholarly edition of *The Songs and Sonets* with Introduction and Commentary was first made by H.J.C.Grierson: *The Poems of John Donne*. 2 vols. Oxford 1912.

For further information about the texts of *The Songs and Sonets* see: Theodore Redpath, *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*. With Introduction and Explanatory Notes. London, Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1959. Introduction, pp. xvi-xvii.

³ According to T.Redpath, with the exception of one or two of the *Elegies* and *verse-letters*, Donne created no work of art comparable in quality with *The Songs and Sonets*.

See *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*. "Introduction". p.xx.

the most idealistic⁴. For instance, *The Indifferent*, one of his early love poems, is remarkable for its cynical approach to love :

*I can love both fair and brown,
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betrays,
Her who loves loneliness best, and her who masks and
plays,
Her whom the country form'd, and whom the town,
Her who believes, and her who tries,
Her who still weeps with spongy eyes,
And her who is dry cork, and never cries;
I can love her, and her, and you, and you,
I can love any, so she be not true.*

Will no other vice content you?

Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mothers?

*Or have you all old vices spent, and now would find out
others?*

Or doth a fear, that men are true, torment you?

Oh we are not, be not you so.

Let me, and do you, twenty know.

Rob me, but bind me not, and let me go.

Must I, who came to travel through you,

Grow your fix'd subject, because you are true

⁴ A fair number of *The Songs and Sonets* dealing with the sensual rather than the spiritual aspect of love and being flippant or cynical in tone must have been written before Donne met and fell in love with Anne Moore, his future wife, in 1598. It is probable that the mature love poems expressing or implying satisfaction, sometimes predominantly physical, sometimes predominantly spiritual, were written after Donne's secret marriage with Anne Moore in 1601. Such poems as *A Valediction: Of Weeping*, *The Anniversary*, *The Sun Rising* and *Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* provide us with the depth and stability of a perfect relationship in love; the sort of relationships that can be found in a happy marriage. It is believed that Donne wrote the last of the above mentioned poems to his wife. However one or two of the poems of this period were written for other women. Donne was popular enough to compose verse-letters and poems on various occasions for some women of distinction in the society. See *Ibid.*, pp. xviii-xxii.

*Venus heard me sigh this song,
 And by love's sweetest part, variety, she swore
 She heard not this till now; and that it should be so no more.
 She went, examin'd, and return'd ere long,
 And said : Alas, some two or three
 Poor heretics in love there be,
 Which think to stabilsh dangerous constancy.
 But I have told them : "Since you will be true,
 You shall be true to them, who are false to you!"*

In this poem, the poet seems not to take love seriously. He says he can love any woman, and he regards fidelity as a vice in love. Thus he deliberately makes fun of Petrarch and his followers who placed woman on a pedestal where she was to be worshipped. In the Petrarchian tradition of poetry woman is fair and virtuous. Being superior to man, she shows no favour to her lover. So he is full of grief. He loves his lady from afar, and his life passes in sighs. There is no hope for him to reach his lady other than revealing his amorous feelings through love-lyrics and songs. It is a platonic love. Petrarch and his followers assured their readers that love was immutable, immortal, infinite; but in the above poem Donne proclaims that it is a trifling game. In the other early poems such as *Confined Love*, *Woman's Constancy*, and *The Flea*, Donne seems to be interested chiefly in sensual love, which he handled in all its aspects, from the bitterness of desire unfulfilled to the paradise of desire fulfilled.

On the other hand, *The Ecstasy*, a poem written in Donne's mature period, gives us the profound sense of spiritual union in love. When the two souls are united to form one soul they give a quickening life to each other and restrain the defects which the two separate souls had before the union. The idea is given through an unusual metaphor:

*A single violet transplant,
 The strength, the colour, and the size,*

*All which before was poor, and scant,
 Redoubles still, and multiplies,*

*When love with one another so
 Interinanimates two soules,
 That abler soul, which thence doth flow,
 Defects of lonelinesse controles.*

(Stanzas : 10, 11).

In his later poems like *The Good-Morrow*, *The Dream* and *The Sun Rising*, Donne celebrates that rarer love in which the senses are but vehicles and mating is a marriage of true minds. There is a strong feeling of security which appears as the most distinctive quality of his mature love poetry. The need for watchful jealousy passes when the fickle senses are no longer the foundation upon which love is built. To the poet this experience is like awakening from a nightmare:

*And now good morrow to our waking souls,
 Which watch not one another out of fear;
 For love, all love of other sights controles,
 And makes one little room, an every where.*

(*The Good-Morrow*. ll. 8-11)

The idea that there is one world, the world of their mutual love, and that the lovers, being two hemispheres exactly similar in all respects, are united to make a whole perfect world without the North with its bitter cold, and without the West, where the sun goes down; in other words, such an ideal love like theirs being subject neither to coldness nor to decline is expressed in the following lines of the same poem :

.....
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without Sharp North, without declining West?
Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally;
If our loves be one, or, thou and I
Love just alike in all, none of these loves can die.

(ll. 14, 17-21)

It should be noted that in the lines above Donne expresses hope that his love for his lady will live forever. However it is conditional : "If you and I love equally, and take care, our love will continue." This is what Donne says in several other poems.

That only an extraordinarily great love as the poet's can stand absence is expressed in the following lines of *A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning* :

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soule is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

But we by a love, so much refin'd
That ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

(Stanzas : 4, 5)

Thus the relation between mind and body, the security of a love in which that relation has been fully established and the unity of lovers are the themes of Donne's maturity. In these poems two lovers are self sufficient. Donne sometimes extends this idea and asserts that together they are the whole world. In this way some of the poems become more than love poems; they become glorifications of love. The idea that love is a mystery or is a

spiritual union of lovers appears particularly in *The Canonization* and *The Ecstasy*. In some of his mature love poems Donne credits his beloved with religious significance as in *The Relic*, *A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day*, and *Air and Angels*. In *The Dream*, for instance, he goes so far as to assert that his lady has some of the divine attributes. When the poet is dreaming her in his sleep, she arrives just in time to make the dream true, which is due to her having a divine insight into his heart and mind:

As lightning, or a taper's light
Thine eyes, and not thy noise, wak'd me;
Yet I thought thee

(Thou lovest truth) but an Angel, at first sight,
But when I saw thou sawest my heart,
And knew'st my thoughts, beyond an Angel's art,
When thou knew'st what I dreamt, when thou knew'st
when

Excess of joy would wake me, and cam'st then
I must confess, it could not choose but be
Profaneness, to think thee anything but thee.

(Stanzas : 1, 2).

Donne's early poems are based, for the most part, upon the belief that physical passion is a good thing. But it is noteworthy that Donne, when he has attained to a spiritual union with his lady, never denies the value of sensual love. The body is seen as a necessary and valuable element in a full and satisfying mutual attachment. For example, in *The Ecstasy* he adores his beloved, dumb and motionless, their hands and eyes meeting. The two hearts are melted into one. They feel that they have become pure spirits. At this height the poet, looking down, feels grateful for the body which has brought them together :

But oh alas, so long, so far
Our bodies why do we forbear?
They are ours, though they are not we, we are
The intelligences, they the sphere.

We owe them thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their forces, sense, to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay.

(Stanzas : 13, 14)

The idea that the lovers are related to their bodies as angels are related to the spheres they control is based upon the christianized Ptolemaic astronomy, according to which there were various orders of angels, each ruling one of the spheres from the moon's sphere to the crystalline or ninth sphere. The bodies of these two lovers are unified to make one sphere in which the lovers, elevated to the rank of Intelligences (one of the orders of Angels), meet and command.

J. Donne's love poems are also remarkable for the thought and range of feeling they express. In some of them the poet's attitude is negative. So he expresses hostility to love as in *Love's Usury*, *Love's Alchemy*, *Farewell to Love*, and *The Curse*. In some the hostility is directed towards some particular woman or relationship as in *Woman's Constancy*, *The Triple Fool*, *Twickenham Garden*, *The Message*, and *The Apparition*.

Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then antedate some new-made vow?

Or say that now

We are not just those persons which we were?
Or, that oaths made in reverential fear
Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?

Or, as true death true marriages untie,
So lovers' contracts, images of those,
Bind but still, death's image, them unloose?

Or, your own end to justify,
For having purpos'd change, and falsehood, you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
Vain lunatic, against these, scapes I could
Dispute, and conquer, if I would;
Which I abstain to do,
For by tomorrow, I may think so too.

(*Woman's Constancy*)

But the majority of them express some kind of positive attitude. Of these poems, *The Indifferent* and *Confined Love* express an attitude of inconstancy. *Lover's Infiniteness*, *The Legacy*, *Air and Angels*, *The Dream*, *The Flea*, *The Ecstasy* etc. are courting poems. Satisfaction in a love relationship is expressed in such poems as *The Good-Morrow*, *The Sun Rising*, *Canonization*, *The Anniversary*, and *The Love's Growth*. Poems of parting include *A Valediction : of Weeping*, *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, and *The Expiration*. The poems in which a satisfactory love is threatened or attacked by death are *A Fever*, *A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy's Day*, and *The Dissolution*.

Besides the overall variety of the feeling, there is also often, though not always, considerable variety of feeling within individual poems. One especially interesting type of case is where negative feelings like petulance, bitterness, cynicism, irritation or contempt arise in the course of poems which are predominantly positive. For instance, *The Sun Rising* is a happy poem of consummated love; but it is interspersed with insults and scornful references to the sun.

The opening of these poems usually shock the reader into attention:

*Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?
 Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?
 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
 Late schoolboys, and sour prentices,
 Go tell court-huntsmen that the King will ride,
 Call country ants to harvest offices;
 Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.*

(*The Sun Rising*, Stanza : 1)

*Now thou hast loved me one whole day,
 Tomorrow, when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
 Wilt thou then antedate some new made vow?
 Or say that now
 We are not just those persons which we were?*

(*Woman's Constancy*, ll. 1-5)

First the shock, then the ingenious development of the thought: This is Donne's characteristic method. The texture of his love poems is argumentative. The thought usually arises at the beginning from the situation out of which the poem itself grows and then it develops, sometimes indeed by way of argument, but at other times by way of narrative, or analogy, or extended metaphor, or through the play of fancy. For instance, *The Good-Morrow* begins with a question :

*I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
 Did, till we lov'd?*

Then we have the development of the original thought in terms of ideas derived from scholastic philosophy or from new scientific notions:

.....were we not wean'd till then?
*But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?
 Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
 'Twas so; but his, all pleasures fancies be:
 If ever any beauty I did see,
 Which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.*

*And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
 Which watch not one another out of fear;
 For love, all love of other sights controls,
 And makes one little room, an everywhere.
 Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,
 Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,
 Let us possess one world, each hath one, and in one.*

*My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
 Where can we find two better hemispheres,
 Without sharp North, without declining West?
 Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally;
 If our two loves be one, or thou and I
 Love just alike in, none of these loves can die.*

As David Daiches has remarked :

The opening, both conversational and startling, projects the reader into the poem in a way that is quite new in English poetry; once in the poem, the reader is held by the complex development of the thought which, twisted this way and that, serves to embody rather than to cool the passion.⁵

⁵ *A Critical History of English Literature*. Revised Ed. London, Secker and Warburg, 1972.
 Vol. 2. p. 364.

Of the most striking features of these poems is, no doubt, the way in which the most diverse thoughts, images and allusions are pressed into the service of love poetry. Instead of the mythological and pastoral images and allusions of classical poetry, we have references to such varied fields as astronomy, law, religion, war and military affairs, medicine, eating, drinking, the human body, time, marriage and divorce, the weather, scholastic philosophy, politics, alchemy, death, fire and heat, astrology, business, learning and everyday home-life. Thus, we should note that a firm and even a stern realism is often given to these love poems. The images and allusions are unusually striking. For instance, in *The Relic* the poet imagines himself dead and beneath the soil. His grave is opened to admit the body of another and on his wrist the gravedigger finds:

A bracelet of bright hair about the bone.
(l. 6)

It follows that both of them, because of their great love, will be remembered like saints :

All women shall adore us, and some men.
(l. 19)

Thus, a bracelet of bright hair about the bone, as an image of a spiritual marriage, is shown triumphing by a miracle over death.

In *The Will* we come upon the lines in which the poet warns his mistress that when he dies, love will die too and then her beauty will be worthless. This idea is given through the metaphor related to a sun-dial which has no use in a grave:

.....but I'll undo
The world by dying; because love dies too.
Then all your beauties will be no more worth

.....
Than a sun-dial in a grave.
(ll. 46-48, 51)

In another poem entitled *The Flea*, the poet makes an allusion to a flea that hops from biting him to suck his mistress's blood. He will not let her kill this creature in which their blood has mingled and which is therefore their bridal bed, the temple of their wedding:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
Me it suck'd first, and now suck thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are:
This flea is you, and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;

Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to that, self-murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

(ll. 1-4; 10-13; 16-18).

In *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*, a poem written upon Donne's parting from his wife, the parting of the lovers in a perfect relationship to be united again is expressed through an image based upon a pair of compasses. The idea is that the firmness of the fixed foot helps the other foot to go and draw a circle. But it is not clear whether the last line of the poem refers to the closing of the compasses or just to the completion of the circle:

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

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two:
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes me show
To move, but doth, if the other do;

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like the other foot, obliquely run:
The firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

(Stanzas: 6-9)

In some of his love poems Donne used learned images. For instance, in the following lines of the above-mentioned poem the idea that the higher nature of the lovers' relationship will lead them to avoid outward demonstrations of grief is emphasized through a contrast between the dangers of earthquakes and the harmlessness of the more important irregularities of movement among the heavenly bodies :

Moving of the earth brings harmes and feares,
Men reckon what it did and meant;
But trepidation of the spheres,
Though greater farre, is innocent.

(Stanza : 3)

'Trepidation' or trembling of the spheres was the explanation in medieval astronomy of phenomena actually caused by the slight wobble of the earth on its axis.

Then the higher nature of their love is put into comparison with earthly love by reference to the scale of beings in medieval cosmology. According to this, everything below the moon was imperfect and subject to change. Hence the poet's love, being superior to earthly love, can endure absence:

Dull sublunary lovers' love
(Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
Those things which elemented it.

(Stanza : 4)

Sometimes an image may imply more than one meaning. In that case the poem requires a more careful reading by reference to notes. Let's take *The Canonization*, under the light of what I have already remarked about Donne's love poetry, as a typical example to see what Donne says and how he says it :

In this poem John Donne daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love. The canonization is not that of a pair of holy hermits who have renounced the world and the flesh. The hermitage of each is the other's body; but they do renounce the world, and so their title to sainthood is cunningly argued. This poem is difficult to understand at first reading because the tone continually changes in the course of its five stanzas. Of these, the title fits only the last two; the first three having nothing to do with the admitting of the lovers to the calendar of saints. To discover the essential unity of the poem, we should analyse it in some detail :

The poem opens on a note of exasperation :

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,
My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout,
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,
Take you a course, get you a place,

*Observe his honour, or his grace
Or the King's real, or his stamped face
Contemplate; what you will, approve,
So you will let me love.*

The "you" whom the speaker addresses is not identified. We can imagine that it is a person, perhaps a friend, who is objecting to the speaker's love affair. At any rate, the person represents the practical world which regards love as a silly affection. Thus the friend represents the secular world which the lovers have renounced. The poet asks his friend not to worry about his palsy, his approaching old age, his ruined fortune, and recommends him to pay attention to his own welfare. The poet addresses his friend: "Cultivate the court and gaze at the King's face there, or, if you prefer, get into business and look at his face stamped on coins. But let me alone." In these lines the essentials of worldly success are neatly and contemptuously epitomized.

The conflict between the real world and the lovers' world runs through the poem. It dominates the second stanza in which the torments of love affect the real world not at all:

*Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?
What merchant's ships have my sighs drown'd?
Who says my tears have overflow'd his ground?
When did my colds a forward spring remove?
When did the heats which my veins fill
Add one man to the plaguy bill?
Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still
Litigious men, which quarrels move,
Though she and I do love.*

The cynical citation of the wind of lovers' sighs, the floods of lovers' tears etc. implies that the poet recognizes the absurdity of the Petrarchian love metaphors. Their love may appear absurd to the world, but it does no harm to the world. The practical friend

needs to have no fears; there will still be wars to fight and lawsuits to argue.

With the third stanza the tone shifts from ironic teasing into tenderness. The poet points out to his friend such absurdities which can be applied to lovers:

*Call us what you will, we are made such by love;
Call her one, me another fly,
We are tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And we in us find the Eagle and the Dove.
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us; we two being one, are it.
So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.*

Each of the lovers is a taper as well as a fly wheeling round the other. Each of them is therefore burnt by the other, but the one who kills, kills at his or her own cost because the tapers are diminishing themselves. Here there is a reference to the popular belief that the act of love shortens life. Besides, flies mating frequently bring to the mind the sensual aspect of love, and J. Donne expresses his sensual love for his mistress not only by reference to flies, but also to flaming tapers which remind us of an intense sexual desire. The lovers find in each other the Eagle and the Dove, the most violent and the gentlest of beings. So they prey on each other. The riddle or the Phoenix makes more sense because of them. The Phoenix is a legendary and sexless bird. The two lovers, being one, are like the Phoenix. Their two sexes fit together so perfectly to form a being of no sex that after the act of love they come back to life again with a sexual desire as strong as it was before, and it is something like the Phoenix rising from its own ashes. This kind of love makes a mystery worthy of reverence.

Then the poet argues:

Can die by it, if not live by love,
 And if unfit for tombs and hearse
 Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;
 And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
 We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;
 As well a well-wrought urn becomes
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,
 And by these hymns, all shall approve
 Us canoniz'd for Love :

The general meaning is : "Because our love is not worldly we can give up the world; because our love can outlast its consummation, we are a minor miracle; in other words, we are love's martyrs. A well-wrought urn or a magnificent tomb is suitable for the ashes of great men; so we can live like saints in legends or in love poems, if not in chronicles". The pretty sonnets will not merely hold their ashes as a decent earthly memorial; their legend or story will gain them canonization.

The poem ends with the following stanza:

And thus invoke us: 'You, whom reverend love
 Made one another's hermitage;
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;
 Who did the whole world's soul contract, and drove
 Into the glasses of your eyes
 (So made such mirrors, and such spies,
 That they did all to you epitomize)
 Countries, towns, courts: beg from above
 A pattern of your Love !

Lovers in the following ages will respect and envy their mysterious love: "You lived in the golden age of love, but now love is full of quarrels. You gave up the world and lost yourselves in your mutual love. While looking into the eyes of each other, you found not only the spiritual world, but also the physical world with all its

countries, towns, courts epitomized in them". The expression of "reverend love" indicates that the poet's love is far beyond physical love. It is something unique or extraordinary through which the lovers are raised to the rank of saints. So lovers in the following ages will invoke the poet and his lady: "Ask God to give us a pattern of your love so that others may love as you did." It is perhaps worth mentioning that this request conforms to the Roman catholic doctrine that men pray to saints to pray for them. Thus the poem ends with a religious note and in a tone of triumphant achievement.

Besides other characteristics, *The Canonization* exemplifies two things essential to Donne's love poetry: The first one is that an image usually suggests more than one thing. It is overlaid with a variety of implications (as in the images of flies and tapers). The second point is that, although *The Canonization* is a glorification of love, the emphasis is not placed upon the beauty of the lady, but its effects upon the poet. Thus John Donne tries, in a sincere way, to analyse and understand the nature of his love as he does in many of his poems. Donne is interested in his own feelings, not in the feelings of his mistress. This is a limited type of individualism which is usually called "Donne's centricism".

As we have seen, in *The Songs and Sonets* there are various attitudes towards love, and as far as these attitudes are concerned, the poems can be divided into two major groups: those in which the predominating attitude is negative, and those in which it is positive. In the former group, the poet expresses a general hostility to love, to women or to some particular woman. In the latter, formed by the majority of the poems, the predominating tone is light-hearted. The poet courts or praises some woman, or is happy to see the growth of love, or expresses either satisfaction with a mutual relationship or fear for uncertainties in love; e.g. the lady may forsake him, or the loved person may be lost through death. In short, in most of the Songs and Sonets the general attitude is one of love, sympathy, approval or something similar towards any one or anything.

The central belief that runs through these poems is that physical love, which appears especially in the earlier poems, is something good in itself, and sometimes it is preferable to the dangers of love. Sometimes it is seen as a necessary and valuable element in a perfect love relationship. Love is sometimes considered as a danger, and sometimes as a wonder that exalts the lovers spiritually. It is not thought of coolly as something to be treated seriously or trifled with, and is rarely regarded simply as one of the pleasures of life. Passionate feeling comes first, and sensuality is secondary; mere gallantry, which occurs in Restoration love lyrics, is completely absent.

As for the language of *The Songs and Sonets*: It shows some special features. The diction, for instance, as contrasted with thought, is generally simple. But Donne often combines the simple words in unexpected ways, forming strange compounds or odd phrases or sentences as in the following lines:

And makes one little room, an everywhere.

(*The Good-Morrow*, l. 11)

A she-sigh from my mistress' heart

(*Love's Diet*, l. 10)

Thou art so truth...

(*The Dream*, l. 7)

*Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;*

(*A Valediction : Of Weeping*, ll. 1-6)

Sometimes he puns, though punning does not appear to be frequent, and sometimes he repeats words or types of phrase. He is particularly fond of playing with pronouns and demonstrative adjectives:

*Coming and staying show'd thee, thee,
But rising makes me doubt, that now
Thou art not thou.*

(*The Dream*, ll.21-23)

*To me thou, falsely, thine
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.*

(*A Lecture upon the Shadow*, ll. 20-21)

This sort of passages gives a combined impression of artifice and intimacy.

Donne sometimes achieves a peculiar effect of some subtlety by obscuring the full meaning of a word or phrase which is really charged with intense implications. One example occurs in the first stanza of *Love's Usury*. Donne is here bargaining with love, and begging love not to ensnare him till middle-age, but meanwhile to allow him to enjoy the pleasures of sensual love:

*For every hour that thou wilt spare me now,
I will allow
Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee,
When with my brown, my gray hairs equal be;
Till then, Love, let my body reign, and let
Me travel, sojourn, snatch, plot, have, forget,
Resume my last year's relic: think that yet
We'd never met.*

Let me think any rival's letter mine,
And at next nine
Keep midnight's promise; mistake by the way
The maid, and tell the lady of that delay;

(ll. 1-12)

At first reading it is not easy to perceive that *let my body reign* means "let physical passion rule me"; *snatch* means "seize opportunities of physical gratification" *my last year's relic* means "the woman I cast off last year", and *mistake by the way the maid* means "take the maid to be the lady, seduce the maid."

The general tone of the language of *The Songs and Sonets* is colloquial. The poems have the liveliness of spoken language. The openings are often conversational in tone. This has the effect of making the poems seem to grow naturally out of definite situations in individual lives. Sentences, on the other hand, are generally somewhat longer than one would expect to find in ordinary speech.

The poems are mostly in stanzas. These stanzas present various forms and many of them are very complex. The vast majority of the poems are in stanzas of from six to eleven lines. Eight-and nine-line stanzas occur most frequently. Occasionally two or three poems have the same rhyme scheme; but where that is so, they differ in line-length. It is as if Donne proudly scorned to repeat the same stanza form. Some of the stanza forms are very attractive in themselves. Much play is made with variations of line length. Stanzas of more than six lines seem to give Donne an opportunity to develop the complex interplay of thought and feeling which is so typical of him. In some cases the stanza forms seem especially appropriate to their respective poems. For instance, the sharp changes of line length in *A Valediction: Of Weeping* accord with the turbulent passion underlying the poem while the steady form of the lines of *A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning* is in accordance with the firm love of settled confidence. The stanza

forms do not always seem so peculiarly appropriate, but they frequently delight the reader by their complexity and variety.

In short, J. Donne's *The Songs and Sonets* are mainly marked by:

- Variety of attitudes towards love
- Wide range of feelings implied or suggested, not directly stated
- Variety of images drawn from various spheres of life and employed not to adorn, but to build up the idea; hence the argumentative quality of the poems
- Complete blend of passion and thought
- Blend of flexibility and vitality of the colloquial language with appropriate metrical forms

The Songs and Sonets drew almost no attention in the 17th century. Donne made his reputation as a preacher rather than as a poet during his lifetime, which continued for years after his death. Ben Jonson was one of those few men who had a high regard for Donne's poetry. But he preferred the *Elegies* and *Satires* to *The Songs and Sonets*. There was something unusual or strange about the love sonets; Donne was thought to be perplexing the minds through his experiments with various metrical forms as well as with an unconventional poetic style which obscured the meaning of the poems. Nevertheless, it was through this quality of his love poetry that he drew, in the course of time, the attention of the critics and exerted a growing influence upon poets. However, Donne's reputation as a "bad poet" continued till the end of the 17th century. Although Isaac Walton, the biographer and essayist, was the first to write a biography of J. Donne, *Life of Donne*, which was

attached to a 1640 edition of his sermons, it was more the life of the priest than the poet.

In the Restoration period John Dryden, the first critic to stamp the term "metaphysical" on Donne and his followers, criticized Donne's love poetry bitterly for its treatment of love in an unconventional manner :

He affects the metaphysics, not only in his Satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice (over-fine) speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts and entertain them with the softnesses of love⁶

(A Discourse Concerning the Origin and Progress of Satire, 1693).

Dryden censures Donne for affecting metaphysics even in his love poems where nature should reign, and complains that Donne perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy.

Dryden's negative attitude towards the metaphysical poetry and its complexity continued in the 18th century and culminated in Samuel Johnson's *Life of Cowley* (1779):

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses... If... that be considered as wit, which is at once natural and new, that which, though not obvious, is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just; if it be that, which he that never found it, wonders how he missed; to wit of this kind the metaphysical poets have seldom risen. Their thoughts are often

⁶ It is quoted in Richard Dutton, *An Introduction To Literary Criticism*. Longman, York Press, 1984. p.88.

new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders by what perverseness of industry they were ever found. But Wit... may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as... a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough. The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together, nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement clearly bought, and though he sometimes admires is seldom pleased.⁷

S. Johnson judges the poets he calls "the metaphysical poets" by the poetic taste and standards of his own time and finds the kind of wit as possessed and employed by the metaphysical poets highly unnatural and extravagant. When referring to their exhibition of their learning, he implies that this kind of poetry which aims mainly to instruct and surprise the reader, cannot be taken seriously.

In the Romantic period, which marks a fundamental change in the taste of literature, the so-called eccentricities of Donne's love poetry were admired rather than attacked severely, and as a result of this admiration growing particularly in the late nineteenth century these poems were appreciated for their content; in other words, for their realistic or natural depiction of passion, though they were still criticized for their stylistic faults generally defined as "gross" and "palpable"⁸

The edition of *The Poems of John Donne* made by H.J. C.Grierson in 1912 is a milestone in the criticism of Donne as it is

⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸ George Sainstburg, "Introduction" to *The Poems of John Donne*. 1896. ed. E.K. Chambers. See *Ibid.*, p.90.

the first of the scholarly studies trying to provide a real appreciation of Donne's poetry in the light of the intellectual and artistic movements which influenced him. As a result of the efforts to place Donne in his own time, he became more attractive than before.

The enthusiasm for Donne reached its culmination in T.S. Eliot. As R. Dutton has put it, "If Grierson may be said to have resurrected Donne, Eliot may be said to have deified him."⁹ Donne became an exemplary model for Eliot and his followers inspiring them to use ambiguity, irony, paradox and verbal tension as the basic elements of their own poetry. In one of his essays on "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), Eliot reveals a deep admiration for Donne's poetic genius which made it possible to use far-fetched images for the expression of the poet's sensibilities:

A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking, in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes. We may express the difference by the following theory: The poets of the seventeenth century, the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were... In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.91.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" in *English Critical Texts: 16th Century to 20th century*. ed. D.J. Enright and Ernst de Chickera. Oxford University Press, 1952. pp.307-308.

The later twentieth-century criticism of Donne represents various approaches to his poetic art; e.g. some of the scholars place him in a medieval-renaissance context in order to explore his philosophy; some assert that he was truly an original and serious poet, while some underestimate the originality of his style and philosophy. The tendency of the recent criticism is to re-discover Donne as a living individual whose mind was shaped by the cultural climate of his time.¹¹

In conclusion, most modern critics would admit the "heterogeneity of ideas", but deny that "yoked by violence" was a fair description of the general effect. No doubt, J. Donne, who likened his mistress to a hemisphere or one arm of a pair of compasses, and who speaks of her tears as coins and maps, had a different conception of the function of imagery from that of the poets of the classical school. First of all, he was not interested in putting similar things into comparison. On the contrary he often escaped from easy analogies, and did not use images as the elements of decoration. In Elizabethan poetry beautiful images were used to adorn the idea. Images harmonized with images. But most of the traditional "flowers of poetry" disappear completely from Donne's poetry. For instance, in his love poems one never encounters bleeding hearts, cheeks like roses, lips like cherries, teeth like pearls or cupid shooting the arrows of love. The lady of Donne is not so white as snow, so tall as cedar. Actually there is no line describing the beauty of his lady. The tears which flow in *A Valediction : Of Weeping*, are different from, and more complex than the ordinary tears of unhappy lovers. They are ciphers or symbols of the world's emptiness without the beloved; or else, suddenly reflecting her image, they are globes, worlds; they contain sum of things.

Experience to Donne was something to be shaped by the intellect. He had a wide area of knowledge as well as experience to

¹¹ For further information about the modern criticism of Donne see: R. Dutton, *An Introduction of Literary Criticism*. Longman, 1984. pp. 91-94.; and F.R. Lewis, *Valuation in Criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1986. pp. 23-25.

draw upon. He lived in an age in which the old views were being replaced by the new. The facts that Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo were discovering about the universe affected thought. But there were many who still believed the scholastic doctrine of spheres each governed by an angel. Donne was widely read in most of the subjects that excited the minds of the intellectuals of his day, and used his knowledge indifferently for the expression of something else. In his poems he just expresses a state of mind by referring to a background of ideas, and does not discuss whether the world is round or flat, nor the validity of the new philosophy or medicine. So he is not a metaphysical in the sense that Dr. Johnson used the word. J. Donne uses these exciting speculations to express and define his emotion. For this purpose he brought not only his knowledge but also all his interests and activities into poetry. He is particularly successful in combining all these unrelated and remote objects in a surprising way and also in combining the abstract with the concrete, the remote with the near, and the sublime with the commonplace. He uses his far-fetched images in a way as to construct the idea itself. Sensation, emotion, thought and argumentation are mixed in his best poems in a way and to an extent that they never are in the poetry of the 18th and 19th centuries. Of course, this requires, on the part of the poet, an intellectual ability generally called 'wit', which was defined by T.S. Eliot as a "mechanism of sensibility that could devour any kind of experience". In Donne's love poems image and thought or emotion are not two different things; they are necessary for each other and one of them cannot be thought apart from the other. This is an emotional comprehension of thought, which has been highly appreciated by modern poets and critics.

Donne's love poetry with all these characteristics represents a sharp break with that written by his predecessors and most of his contemporaries. This accounts for the unfavourable reception of these poems in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was in the first half of the 20th century that Donne's poems were given a warm welcome and Donne's position among the English poets

quickly climbed from that of a curious to that of an acknowledged master.

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