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John Donne and the Traditional Love Poetry

Dr. Bipin Chandra Pandey, Associate Professor of English, M M P G College, Modinagar UP

Abstract:

Donne does not confine the universal emotion of love within a fixed pattern as some poets do; rather he presents its variety as it exists in the actual life. The most remarkable quality of Donne lies in his unique and realistic treatment of the theme. In Donne, we perceive a reaction against most of the established literary fashions. He clearly does away with the long cherished classical concept of creating a utopia. Poetry, for Donne, is not a utopian idealistic paradigm; rather it is portrayal of life as it really exists. Hence, he presents in his love poems, variety as it exists in the actual life. Donne's realistic treatment of love reflects his radical revolutionary zeal as we study him vis-à-vis the prevalent romantic Petrarchan trend of the period. Donne rejects the "stock conceits" of the Petrarchan poetry as Shakespeare is reported to have done.

Keywords: Petrarchanism, realistic treatment, romanticism, idealism, allegorical figures, frigid abstraction, parody.

The essential quality of Metaphysical Poetry is the element of novelty, be it in theme, style or technique. It was this ingenuity and experimentation which was frowned at by celebrated critics and writers like Dryden and Dr Johnson. After a long neglect of almost two centuries, it was as late as in 20th century that with the efforts of critics like Eliot, Grierson, Leishman, Milgate, Empson, Helen Gardener, John Carey etc., to name a few, that the fashion for metaphysical poetry was revived.

Donne, the leader of the Metaphysical School of poetry, gave a new direction to love poetry. He was a celebrated love poet with some difference. He does not follow the beaten track of the dominant school of Elizabethan and Petrarchan love poetry; rather he adopts a realistic attitude abandoning the idealistic and imaginative situations in the contemporary love poetry. He dramatizes different moods and situations in love quite objectively. As a realist, he refrains from confining the universal emotion of love within a fixed pattern as many of his predecessors and contemporaries have done. Life is full of variety and in different situations people act and react in different way. Not to talk about different persons, even the same person behaves differently depending on the mood and mental state. Poetry, for Donne, is not a utopian idealistic paradigm; rather it is portrayal of life as it really exists. Hence, he presents in his love poems, variety as it exists in the actual life.

When we study the love poems, particularly sonnet sequences of the period, we find that in almost all the cases the whole sonnet sequence centers on the love relationship between the same persons. Neither the lovers, not the relationship has any variety as such, particularly in Petrarchan poetry. The case with Metaphysical love poetry in general and Donne in particular, is different as we find different situations and moods in love, even the characters change. One should not consider the speaker in Donne's love poems as the poet himself, except a few of them, in most of the cases; the poet is not the speaker. Hence, one cannot relate the

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situation or the mood in the poem with any particular person or anecdote. The poems parent a variety of situations as we find in real life. Similarly, any attempt to find out any development or particular philosophy in his love poetry is very difficult because “dubieties of tone make them resistant to summaries of any kind” (Carey 191). No doubt, some critics have attempted to find his representative voice. William Zunder, for example, opines that as Viola’s love is at the centre of all the love stories in *Twelfth Night* and others at the periphery, so in the love poems of Donne it is in the poems like “The Canonization” and “Aire and Angeles” that the “centre to the love poetry is to be found” (Zunder 31). Another celebrated Donne Scholar, Masood-Ul-Hasan concludes that there are three stages in Donne’s love poetry viz. the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive (Hasan 4). However, these categories are cannot change the fact that Donne’s poems go beyond any such generalization as the most remarkable quality of the poet lies in his individual unique treatment of the theme. It is his urge for realistic attitude that causes the “dubieties of tone”. He has to portray the wide range of experiences, at times, almost diametrically opposite because human nature itself being so varied and complex cannot be classified in any stereotype pattern. As stated earlier, unlike other poets Donne does not want to create any ideal utopian imaginative world of love. That’s why he admits in one of his verse letters: “I sing not, Siren like, to tempt, for I/Am harsh” (*Donne: Poetical Works* 187). Thus, Donne poetry is a strong reaction against most of the established literary fashions, particularly in live poetry. Donne’s realistic treatment of love reflects his radical revolutionary zeal. If we study him vis-à-vis the prevalent Petrarchan trend of the period, we find him carving a new trend. A traditional love poet like Spenser envies the happy lot of his paper

being touched by the “lily hands” of the lady in the starry light of her “lamping eyes” as the lady governs his life; but when the lover in a Donne poem loses his mistress’s bracelet he regrets the loss, not because its colour was like that of her hair, or because it often embraced and kissed her hand, or even because it was symbolic of their deep love but, quite realistically, only because it was too costly and it would need a lot of money to buy another one:

Not that in colour it was like thy haire,
For Armlets of that thou maist let me
weare;
Nor that thy hand it oft embrac’d and
kisst,
For so it had that good, which oft I mist:
Nor for that silly old moralitie,
That as these links were knit, our love
should bee: Mourne I that I thy sevenfold chaine
have lost;
Nor for the luck sake, but the bitter cost.
(PW 85 f.)

Further, the speaker exploits the situation for arguing that woman is worth good money – money often can purchase even relationships. This instance demonstrates how Donne violates the traditional practice of romanticizing and idealizing love by the contemporaries, particularly Petrarchan poets. Actually in Elizabethan age Petrarch had become a role model for love poets which was strongly reacted against by many poets and Donne was one of the most representative voices against such slavish imitation. He very successfully exploits such images for the poetic purpose, and such images are often used with satirical undertones. Mario Praz opines that though Donne “led the reaction against Petrarchist in English”, yet “he still remained a

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Petrarchist to some extent” (Praz 71). Truly speaking, Donne did not completely do away with the tradition but it was not imitation of the trend but a clever move to mock at the tradition. He refers to the “sighs” “treasures”, “heats” and “colds” of the lovers, which are, in the Petrarchan tradition, “love’s meat and drink”, (Smith 404) and are to be collected and used, as in “Twickenham Garden”, to judge the sincerity of the beloved:

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with
teares,
Hither I come to seek the spring,
And at mine eyes, and mine eares,
Receive such blames, as else cure very
thing, (PW 26)

The beloved is addressed, in one of his verse letters to Mr. I.L., as the “beautiful sun”, a “paradise” whose breasts are “nests” of love. The exaggeration goes to such an extent that the very presence of the beloved makes the world of his friend I.L. full of happiness and divine blessing: “And since thou art in Paradise and need’s crave/No joys addition, helps thy friend to save” (PW 189). In another poem again, he compares the beloved to the sun and the lover to the moon-both enjoying light from her, and their union is so perfect that it can find its parallel only in Phoenix, a mythological bird:

Here lays a shee Sunne, and a hee
Moone here,
She gives the best light to his Spheare,
Or each is both, and all and so
They unto one another nothings owe,
And yet they doe, but are...
And by this act of these two Phenixes
Nature againe restored is,
For since these two are two no more,

Their’s but one Phoenix still, as was
before. (PW 116)

The Petrarchan trend of exaggeration makes the speaker to claim that the beloved is not only like an angel but she can be compared to Christ and only a blessed lover can share the secrets of her beauties. In another of his poems, viz. “A Feaver”, he takes up the world without a sun and thus destroyed the whole world. The idea is developed into a conceit to prove that the very existence of the world depends on the existence of his beloved’s “Carkse”, the fairest woman her “ghost” and the worthiest men “corrupt wormes”:

But yet thou canst not die, I know;
To leave this world behind, is death,
But when thou from this world wilt goe,
The whole world vapors with thy breath.
Or if, when thou, the worlds soule,
goest,
It stays, tis but thy carkasse then,
The fairest women, but thy ghost,
But corrupt wormes, the worthiest men.
(PW 20)

Many more examples of Petrarchan influence on Donne can be cited, yet what is unique and remarkable about Donne is not his imitation of Petrarch but his revolt against him. Donne, after his clandestine marriage with Anne, had been fired by his master which followed a long period of failure and financial crisis. He tried unsuccessfully to restore his hopes of administrative career for which he left on stones unturned. He tried to win favour of various influential persons by writing eulogistic verses. The Petrarchan and idealistic images used in these verses are not of serious nature as these eulogistic verses were written merely to impress them and win their favour. As this

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exercise was done only in order to gain monetary gains, the eulogistic verses which contain exaggerated descriptions are not at all serious in nature. It is interesting to note that Petrarchan images are used frequently only in his epistolary verses and eulogistic poems and very rarely in his love poem, the fact which differentiate him from the popular Petrarchan tradition. In one of his verse letters to the Countess of Bedford, for example, he glorifies the Countess with Petrarchan metaphors. Even “saints” crave for her blessings as she is the “First good Angell” and “Gods masterpiece”. Her “deeds, assesses and restraints” and worth studying the eulogy crosses all limits when the poet tells her that she can ensure heaven for him:

Since you are then gods masterpieces,
and so

His Factor for our loves; do as you doe,
Make your return home gracious; and
bestow

This life on that; so make one life of
two.

For so God help mee, ‘I would not
misse you there

For all the good which you can do me
here. (PW 168)

It is clear enough that the poet is not literal in the use of the term “heaven” rather he is suggesting that she can ensure him progress and prosperity. “The First Anniversary” is Petrarchan as is “A Fever” (Bewley 64). Precisely, the main argument of the two “Anniversaries” is that the death of Elizabeth Drury, who was an embodiment of perfect beauty and virtue, as disrupted the order of this world and has left it to decay. With her death the world’s body has lost its soul and the separation of the soul from the body has caused death of the whole world: “Seeke world yea, dead, yea

putrefies, since shee/ Thy intrinsique balme, and thy preservative/Can never be renew’d thou never live,” (PW 209). The eulogy places the girl in such a superhuman -- almost divine – stature that Ben Jonson declared it “full of Blasphemies” (Conversation with Drummond 133). The purpose of Donne in the poem is not to highlight any supernatural quality in the girl but just to flatter her father as to win his favour for material gains. Though, thus, apparently the poem seems to have limited appeal, yet, a close where the girl is being talked about, the rest of the poem contemplates on the general decay of the world and the girl is almost out of the mind. On the whole, the poet contemplates on the universal aspect of death and decay on this earth which was a burning issue for the Elizabethans. “The second Anniversary”, thus, ends with an obliteration of “all traces of Petrarchan compliment” (Martz 245). The poet contemplates:

Thinke thee laid on thy on thy death-
bed, loose and slacke;

And thinke that, but unbinding of a
packe,

To take one precious thing, thy soule
from thence.

Anger thine argue more, by calling it

Thy Physicke; chide the slackness of the
fit. (PW 229 f.)

No doubt, the speaker in some of Donne’s poems speak the language of tears and sighs, flatters his beloved and expresses himself in hyperbolic language to show his undivided and unflinching devotion to her. However, these should not always be taken seriously because the eulogy and clever play of words in his verse letters and eulogistic poems had a specific purpose. Despite of being a great scholar, Donne could not materialize his dream of becoming a

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bureaucrat. He started quite successfully, no doubt, by getting Sir Thomas Egerton's secretary ship but his clandestine marriage with his niece Anne undid it and brought him abject poverty all long suffering as dowry. Once derailed, he could not reset his engine on the right track. The verse letters are records of his repeated attempts of winning the royal favour through the aristocrats.

Donne, thus, uses Petrarchan images in his love poems parodically. In "Elegie VIII", for example, he employs both Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan image. "Elegie XVIII: is a parody on Petrarchan euphemistic Petrarchan metaphors to describe the beauty of the beloved. Her beauty is a "Paradise, because her eyes are "two suns", her cheeks "rosie Hemisphere", her chin is "Promontory" and:

..... the straight Hellespont between
The Sestos and Abydos of her breasts,
(Not of two Lovers, but two Loves the
nests)
Succeeds a boundless sea, (PW 105)

But the whole Petrarchan atmosphere created through such images collapses and becomes a parody by the end of the poem when he brings vulgar inclinations through the metaphor of "Two purses": "Rich Nature hath in women wishes made/Two purses, and their mouth aversely laid" (PW 106). Donne uses the Petrarchan treasures of love- "sigh", "teares", and oaths, not to win or woo her heart but to "purchase" the beloved, for example, in "Lovers infiniteness". In another poem viz. "The Apparition", which is a "pungent attack upon the conventions of romantic love", (Winny 128) the lover contemplates his death so that is apparition may frighten the beloved who has been cruel to him. The Petrarchan lover, on the other hand,

would have shown self pitying attitude accepting all buffets from his beloved. But, for Donne, love is not one sided, it is reciprocal:

It cannot bee
Love, till I love her, that loves me.
...it could not bee
I should love her, who loves not mee.
(PW 48 f.)

Unlike Petrarch, Donne's beloved is not a deity. She is attainable with the riches of this world. The lover and the beloved in Donne are men and women, not allegorical figures or frigid abstraction. If the beloved is beautiful like a flower, grows and blossoms like it, she also shares its transience. In one of his poems with some autographical bearings, viz. "A Valediction: forbidding mourning", he requests his beloved not to cause any "tear floods" and "sight tempests" at the time of parting, as their love, which has transcended the physical and become spiritual, is pure and cares "lesses, eyes lips, and hands to misse" (PW45). His approach towards love being realistic he does not enjoy the glorification of female beauty. Hence his sole emphasis is on inner virtues and not on external beauty:

So able men, blest with a virtuous Love,
Remote or nearer, or hawser they move;
Their virtue breaks all clouds that might
annoy,
There is no Emptiness, but all is Joy.
(PW 198)

On the whole, Donne rejects the "stock conceits" of the Petrarchan poetry as Shakespeare is reported to have done (Katherine M Wilson passim). This attitude towards Petrarchan poetry is also a reply to the charges of cynicism. The cynicism in some of his poems

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is more of a reaction against the traditional poetical trend, than his own sincere voice.

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