AN EXEGESIS OF JOHN DONNE'S "A VALEDICTION: OF MY NAME, IN THE WINDOW"

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Dryden, in his dedication to *A Discourse concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693), assures the Earl of Dorset: "He [i.e., Donne] 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 speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love."[1] This statement is often quoted as the first instance of the use of the term "metaphysical" poetry, but it has some interesting implications.

First, Dryden thinks that a love poem ought to entertain women's minds with the softness of love. Secondly, therefore, he criticizes Donne because Donne perplexes women's minds with nice speculations of philosophy. Dryden has in mind a certain concept of love poetry as a *genre*. Preoccupied with his own concept of love poetry, he argues that Donne's love poems are not genre-oriented or not 'audience-oriented' enough as love poems, where nature only should reign. Now, does Donne's poetry belong to Dryden's type of love poetry? Dryden thinks that in order to be love poetry, it must follow his concept of love poetry. Hence, when Donne perplexes women's minds, Dryden is puzzled and condemns it. But to remove the method is to remove Donne's intention itself. This act of perplexing women's minds is what Donne is partially doing in his poems, especially in the *Songs and Sonets*. As to "nice speculations of philosophy" Joan Bennett has already made clear in her *Four Metaphysical Poets*[2] that Donne is not speculating about metaphysical matters. A close reading of any of Donne's poems will show that he is not primarily interested in science or new philosophy *per se*. He uses it to

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1. *Essays of John Donne*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1926), II, p. 19.
2. See Joan Bennett, *Four Metaphysical Poets* (New York, 1960), pp. 3–16.

express and define the state of his own soul. For example, frequent references to science in his two *Anniversaries* well indicate that Donne is telling us something else by means of analogy. Donne is not a philosophical poet. Also, in the *Songs and Sonets,* Donne often intentionally baffles women by far-fetched arguments, but these logical or pseudo-logical arguments are not in any sense speculations of philosophy. Half a century before Dryden's misreading of Donne's poetry, Ben Jonson prophesied that the poetry of Donne would perish for lack of being understood. Even today, after we have gone through the Donne revival of the 1930's and 1940's, some critics still doubt the seriousness or sincerity of Donne in some of his difficult poems. Donne still perplexes the mind of the reader.

Several attempts, of course, have been made to clarify various ambiguities in Donne's poetry. For instance, a biographical interpretation, such as that by Edmund Gosse, had to create a myth—the story of Jack Donne versus Dr. Donne of St. Paul's. Today, no one seems to believe this myth. An attempt to identify each poem with Donne's own life does not resolve the ambiguity of his poetry. The tendency to read a poem as a poet's inner confession is a fallacy into which romantic criticism is likely to lead. Donne's poetry is not a confessional type. It is true that some poems bear autobiographical traits but they do not help us understand the meanings of the poem. In my opinion, only an exegetical reading of each poem will help clarify various ambiguities in the poem. A critic's job is to analyze the synthetic process that embodies the poet's sensibility within a poem.

My purpose in this essay, therefore, is to suggest a hypothetical method for reading Donne's poetry. While reading Donne's *Songs and Sonets,* I was particularly impressed by a striking variety of relationships between man and woman in love. My hypothesis is that Donne systematically explores, if not exhausts, the possible relationship between man and woman in love. The relationship has either a negative or positive quality, or in some cases, even neutral. The poems are set in various situations which qualify the relationship, for example, love in death or parting, Platonic love, physical love, satisfied love, boredom or hatred in love, unfaithful love, and many other possibilities. Each situation often gives, by means of analogy and imagery, a multiple-level of meaning to the relationship. Death, for example, has at least these several meanings: 1) absence, 2) rupture of relation, 3) completion of sexual act, 4) end of physical existence, and 5) damnation. As the French say, " a separation is a little death." Thus, parting is always associated with death. Indeed, the combination of variety of situations and multiple-levels of meaning in each situation will make hundreds of possible relationships around the theme of love. There are a number of poems whose titles may compose almost a series on "Love's—" like "Loves Usury" or "Loves growth." There is also a group of Valediction poems. Thus, Donne is exploring every possibility with almost mathematical exactitude.

A most striking feature of the *Songs and Sonets* is that the poems of "I-Thou" relationships compose more than two thirds of the whole. There are some "I-You (plural)" poems and "I" poems. There are some purely logical or pseudo-logical poems such as "Communities" where the speaker tries to persuade the reader. But on the whole, a majority of the poems in the *Songs and Sonets* fall into the pattern where the speaker addresses his beloved by means of monologue. In some cases, the speaker is a woman addressing her lover as in "Breake of day" or in "Confined Love." In "The good-morrow" the poem begins: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I/Did, till we lov'd?"[3] The whole poem is the speaker's address to his beloved and there is no interplay between the two. His beloved is supposed to be in the poem hearing his speech. "Womans constancy" provides the same situation: that of the speaker addressing his mistress: "Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,/To morrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?" But, in lines 11 and 12 the speaker, still addressing his mistress, changes *thou* to *you*. It may be possible that a feeling of familiarity is implied in the use of *thou*, so that when the speaker changes to *you* he also changes his relation to his mistress. In "The Canonization," though the whole poem is the speaker's monologue, there is an implication that at least three different personages are present in the poem. In the first three

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3. The text consistently used here is *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford, 1958).

stanzas, the speaker is addressing his friends who do not understand his love. Beginning with the latter half of the third stanza, the speaker is no longer directly addressing his friends. He is talking about himself and his lover (*we*). In the last stanza, he is addressing all lovers in the world. In " The Relique " the speaker changes his address from *thou* to *she*. In the second stanza: " Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I / A something else thereby . . ." He uses *we* [i. e., I and thou] until the last line of the last stanza: " Should I tell what a miracle *she* was." On the other hand, in " The Funerall " the speaker talks of *she* throughout until in the last line of the poem. He changes his viewpoint and mood to a more personal one: " That since you would save none of mee, I bury some of *you*."

In order to illustrate how Donne dramatizes the relation between the speaker and the other character in a poem, here I would like to explicate " A Valediction: of my name, in the window " in full detail. This poem is addressed by the speaker to his beloved. Although this is one of a group of valediction poems, the situation and tone are different from those of, for example, " A Valediction: forbidding mourning." " A Valediction: forbidding mourning " anticipates a reunion, through the strong tie of their love, of the lovers (here probably a man and his wife) after some period of separation. In " A Valediction: of my name, in the window," however, parting is raised as a possibility to put an end to their relation. The poem is a monologue. The speaker affirms to his lady that his affection for her is a strong and lasting one, by indicating his name engraved on the window-glass of her bedroom. He also tries to convince her to be faithful to him. Its dramatic effect is somewhat similar to Eugene O'Neill's one-act play, *Before Breakfast,* though the context and situation are of course different. In O'Neill's play, only the scolding wife appears on stage, but her husband who " moons around all day writing silly poetry and stories that no one will buy " is off stage, shaving. At one time he stretches his " sensitive hand with slender fingers " into the room (that is on the stage) to get a bowl of hot water. But throughout the play the spectators can visualize the presence of this invisible hero. The relation between the husband and wife is subtly revealed. Donne's poem has the same dramatic effect. Perhaps the action on-stage in this monologue is that the speaker is, as it were, on-stage and his lady is off-stage. As the poem goes on we can visualize her and sense her attitude toward the speaker. There is one instance where we almost see her hand stretched into the scene, to use a figure of speech. The lady is apparently no longer interested in the speaker or at least she will not wait until he comes back. At the beginning of the poem she tries or at least pretends to listen to the speaker, but gradually shows her boredom openly, since, in fact, she has already lost her interest in him. This gradual shift on the part of the lady is reflected in the poem. The speaker changes his argument as she changes her attitude. Until the last stanza, however, this is rather implied in understatement.

The poem may be divided largely into four parts. Part I includes stanzas 1–3; Part II, stanzas 4–7; Part III, stanzas 8–10; and Part IV, stanzas 11. In Part I, the speaker reminds her of his name engraved on the window-glass of her bedroom. Throughout the poem his name functions as a unifying metaphor. A variety of ideas are developed and extended around this single metaphor by means of analogy and association. Let us now consider each part in relation to the meaning of the whole and see how the relationship is revealed.

Part I (stanzas 1–3):

In Part I the speaker swears his firm love toward his lady, referring to his name on the window-glass, and asks her to be faithful during his absence, because the speaker is about to leave on a journey. His love is either expressed or implied in the following lines, especially in the words that I have italicized.

1– 2. My name engrav'd herein,/Doth contribute my *firmnesse* to this glasse, . . .
3– 4. Which, . . . hath beene/As *hard*, as that which grav'd it, was 〔i. e., the diamond〕;
7– 8. . . . that Glasse should bee/As all *confessing*, and *through-shine* as I,
13–15. As no one point, nor dash,/Which are but accessaries to this name,/The showers and tempests can *outwash*, . . .

Therefore, according to logic, she ought to regard his name as representing himself and be faithful to him. The lines 5–6, "Thine eye will give it price enough, to mock/The diamonds of either rock" makes an interesting contrast to stanza 9, especially "gold" (that is, "gold" in terms of money, or hardness of diamond as against softness of gold), and also for that matter, lines 45–46 of stanza 8 "whose wit or land, /New battry to thy heart may frame." The word "I" at the end of line 8 is identified with "thine eye" by means of rhyming (pun), meaning "thine I," which anticipates the line 12 in a different phrasing, because the idea here is that his name is identified with himself. Hence his pattern is himself. Lines 13–15, "As no one point, nor dash, / . . . The showers and tempests can outwash," have a two-fold meaning: 1) he is talking about his name on the window-glass and also, 2) he is implying that he will remain the same and his travel will never change him. In each stanza the speaker develops different figures by using "his name on the window-glasse" as his starting point.

Part II (stanzas 4–7):

Throughout Part I the lady has been listening to him or at least she has been pretending to do so, but partly baffled by the speaker's logic and partly by her growing coolness toward him, she shows her boredom toward the end of stanza 3. So the speaker too has to change his speech. An alternative conjunction "or" at the beginning of stanza 4 indicates this change in his speech. He says, "Or, if too hard and deepe / This learning be, for a scratch'd name to teach . . ." Here metaphorical use of his name on the window-glass develops itself into a striking conceit, typical of Donne's technique. The speaker asks her to regard his name as his skeleton, so that his muscle, sinew and vein will be sure to come back to her as long as she is keeping the skeleton. These lines apparently refer to *Ezekiel*, 37: 1–10. In line 25, "all my soules" (i. e., the vital, sensitive, and intellectual souls, of Classical and Scholastic philosophy) are paralleled by "I understand [intellectual soul], and grow [vital soul] and see [sensitive soul]." His whole existence is only possible in her. Therefore, in stanzas 5, 6 and 7, he is assuring her that he will return.

30. . . . will come againe.
31. Till my returne, . . .
41. . . . till I returne,

In this part, the speaker is instructing her what to do:

23. Think . . .
31–32. repaire / And recompact . . .
39. No doore . . . shut.
41–42. thou shouldst, . . . daily mourne.

This obligatory or imperative mood makes a contrast to the way he has attempted to persuade in Part I.

On the part of the lady, it is possible for us to imagine that between this part and the next part she shows that she is no longer interested in him by an act. For the speaker apparently changes his tone in stanza 8. It seems to me that the lady, irritated by his imperative mood and his unconvincing rhetoric as a whole, may have opened the window, when he said "No doore 'gainst this names influence shut." The act indicates her open rebellion. So, in stanza 8, the speaker, seeing this, says; "when thy inconsiderate hand / Flinge ope this casement, with my trembling name, / To looke on one. . . ." The speaker naturally suspects that he has a rival. That the lady is not faithful is suggested in such phrase as "the vertuous powers" in line 33. Here the word "vertuous" has a double meaning: 1) virtue produces or is capable of producing (great) effect, and 2) also implies "womanly chastity." This is of course the speaker's desire, because in fact she is not virtuous. He wants the lady to be faithful.

Part III (stanzas 8–10):

When his lady opens the window, the speaker changes his attitude and the tone of his speech in Part III. Suspicious of a rival, his speech is directed to this imaginary rival. Stanza 9 includes several words which imply possible or probable betrayal by the lady after his departure. For example, "melted," "corrupted," "gold," "pillow," "tam'd," and "thaw" are indicative of possible betrayal. The whole stanza makes a striking contrast to Part I ("hart," "diamond," "all-confessing," "through-shine," and "firmness"). There are also some phrases which indicate the dramatic element (or dramatic movement) of the scene. In line 47, the word "thus" seems to indicate the act of the lady opening the window. He is saying "this very act of yours is in this manner insulting me." Also, in lines 55–56, "And if this treason goe / To an overt act . . ." seems to mean that actually there on the spot she is showing this in her attitude toward him. By this time she has put aside her pretension and openly shows her coolness to him. The tone of this part is suggested by the use of optative in stanzas 9 and 10: "for this / May my name step in, and hide his" and "[may] this name flow / Into thy fancy, . . ." This makes a contrast to Part II, where the imperative mood is predominant.

Part IV (stanza 11):

In the final part of the poem, the speaker changes his attitude again, this time completely. Syntactically, a conjunction of contrast "But" at the beginning of stanza 8 indicates this. The speaker denies the previous statements. In this stanza, there is no reference to his name on the window-glass. He finally acknowledges that their case is hopeless, as he had anticipated from the beginning. So he says, "Forget all about it. This is the silly talk of a dying man. I am about to go out for a trip. That is why I have been talking such nonsense. I know it is impossible to keep you faithful to me during my absence." It is rather ironical when he says, "No meanes *our firme* substantiall love to keepe; . . ." The use of "our" implies his wish or desire that she too would be faithful to love.

The last stanza is anticipated as the poem unfolds by the following symbols. In Part I, "charme" and "loves magique" are not explained because these are something that true lovers can understand. Only "dull sublunary lovers" need explanation. But in Part II, it becomes clear that the lady is one of those dull sublunary lovers. For her "this learning" is "too hard and deepe" to learn from a scratched name. The speaker, therefore, goes into explanation: Anatomy, stars, etc., trying to persuade her that love has such a power to influence both. But in Part III this charm is identified with his Genius [his protecting spirit], no longer a mutual charm. This anticipates the last stanza where the complete hopelessness of their relation is stated. "A Valediction: of my name, in the window" is one of the poems of John Donne where subtle shift of relation between the speaker and his beloved is dramatically revealed.