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Spider Love : A Sensuous Metaphor in Donne's "Twicknam Garden"

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At first glance, John Donne's poetry seems a kaleidoscope of life. Having "the capacity to live in divided and distinguished worlds, and to pass freely to and fro between one and another, to be capable of many and varied responses to experience" (Willey 45), Donne fuses various kinds of ingredients into poetry, as a result of which every work of Donne produces a great variety of images. The reader is at first mesmerized by such a kaleidoscoping imagery as follows in "The Canonization":

Call her one, me another flye,
We're Tapers too, and at our own cost die,
And wee in us find the 'Eagle and the dove,
The Phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us, we two being one, are it. (20-24)¹

Nevertheless, what he does in poetry is not only mesmerizing the reader by the phantasmal imagery but also awakening him or her by the opposite. In his poetry every ingredient of the kaleidoscope bears diverse appearances. Once we find that "die" in the twenty first line also means "experience a sexual orgasm" (*OED* v. 7. d.), the kaleidoscope of this poem turns out to be just a disguising beauty which leads us to a voluptuous scene. "Twicknam Garden", one of precursors of the long tradition of garden poetry, but most extraneous to it, is typical of seemingly beautiful poems of Donne. Under the surface, it carries obscene meanings so cunningly that the reader can hardly

recognize them.

Roughly speaking, there are two approaches to "Twicknam Garden". It has been criticized either in terms of the poet's envy or in terms of the relationship between the poet and the patroness to whom it is supposed to be given. Murray Roston emphasizes Donne's struggle expressed in the poem, the struggle between two worlds, physical and spiritual. Admitting Donne's "commitment to the world of the spirit" (18), he concludes that "'Twicknam Garden' is typical of Donne's reaching through the sharply visualized reality of the phenomenal world to the world of the spirit beyond" (141). Unlike Roston, Sallye Sheppard, focusing the physical side of the poem, insists that the theme of the poem is "the speaker's suffering and his desire to mitigate it" (68).

Although, as John Carey argues, "there is nothing in this poem which suggests that it relates to the Countess of Bedford, except its title" (Life 79), Arthur Marotti attempts to read "Twicknam Garden" in relation to Lucy Bedford, one of the influential patrons in Donne's time. Twicknam garden, which was owned by the patroness those days, must have been an important locus for Donne, for it gives Donne a sufficient excuse to compliment the patroness. Marotti, using the new historical and psychological approach, locates this poem in the Renaissance patronage system, and argues that in this encomiastic poem, Donne "destabilized the decorum of the poet-patronage relationship through his use of a sexuality that is more disturbingly specific than Petrarch's generalized desire" (217).

The aim of this paper is to lead you to a grotesque landscape of "Twicknam Garden" and to trace Donne's plight embodied there, analyzing particularly his use of sensuous metaphor as technique for superimposition. "My verse, the

strict Map of my misery", Donne says in his verse epistle.² I would rather take his statement at face value, although the post modern critics would say that "misery is not misery". I am not sure with what success I could trace the map of his plight, yet I hope you could feel Donne's pains in "Twicknam Garden" from this paper. In doing so, I also pay attention to the biographical background of the poem, the relationship between Donne and the Countess of Bedford, because it presents great complexity in this poem.

Donne retains a double attitude toward the worlds: when he faces the worlds, he shows a paranoiac tendency to shrink up into private space, what we call an "agoraphobia"; in the private space, however, he shows another contradictory tendency to self-aggrandize, what is called a "claustrophobia". To put it in another way, Donne shrinks centripetally and turns into a dwarf, fearing to be engaged in the worlds; and at the same time he swells centrifugally and turns into a giant, fearing to be disengaged from the worlds and suffocated there. In Donne's own words, he is always "[p]regnant... with th'old twins Hope and Feare". Now, just in front of Twicknam garden which offers him a golden opportunity of promotion at the court, his hope (self-aggrandizement) is almost bursting. What we have to notice here is that as soon as he enters into the hopeful garden, he begins regretting that the place is not appropriate for his "spider love": that is, an agoraphobic mode sets in. Just like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Donne creeps into Twicknam garden with hope and fear, where he brings the "spider love (6)" and the "serpent (9)" to make the garden "True Paradise":

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,
Hither I come to seeke the spring,
And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,

Receive such balmes, as else cure every thing,
 But O, selfe traytor, I do bring
 The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
 And can convert Manna to gall,
 And that this place may thoroughly be thought
 True Paradise, I have the serpent brought. (1-9)

As many critics have argued, the opening lines contain typical Petrarchan cliché; the lover sighing and shedding tears for his beloved's cruelty. Donne's passion is, however, boiling so vigorously (literally overflowed with water of tears and blasted with fire of sighs) that all he can do is to talk about his plight, forgetting the most important thing in the complimentary poetry, that is, to address himself to the beloved (patroness). Donne, filled with tears of passion and boiled with fire, comes here to seek the vent of strong emotions, "spring" (2)³.

The interpretation of the preposterous poem, however, does not end in such a simple way. The poem begins to take on a different meaning when you look at it from a different angle. Wyly Sypher, almost forty years ago, attempted to introduce a comparative approach between literature and the other genres of art. He analyzed particularly how much in common the literature and the visual arts in Mannerism have. Defining the Mannerist style as "a tension (*Spannung*) and an elasticity of forms (*Streckung*) seen under fleeting, shimmering light (*gleitendes Licht*)" (117), he pointed out several features characteristic of Mannerism: disturbed balance, techniques of accommodation, the dramatic artifice, the revolving view, unresolved tensions and shifting planes of reality. Then he discussed both the literature and the visual arts in terms of the common features. Examining the revolving view in Mannerism, Sypher juxtaposed that of Donne's "Anniversary"

whose course is "tentative, circulating, shuttling" (159) to that of Cellini's bronze statue of Perseus whose *figura serpentinata* needs to be seen from any angle. He argued that "[t]he mannerist artist is always experimenting with points of view and approaches" (156). Yet, we have to say that his way of comparison is arbitrary, since he compared the "logic" in poetry with the "shape" in sculpture. The ground of comparison should be more stable. I would like to compare Donne's Mannerist poem with Cellini's Mannerist work on the ground that both need the revolving view to "read" them. This approach will reveal their undeniable affinity on the level of structure and formation of original metaphor.

As James V. Mirollo argues, "[t]here is a danger in reacting to the *Saltcellar of Francis I*: one may be tempted to take it either too seriously or not seriously enough" (87). For example, John Shearman who overstresses the morbid beauty in Mannerism regards the work as a product of high maniera. His *Mannerism* has an illustration of the saltcellar (Fig. a.) and this camera angle would enhance his view on this metalwork. Furthermore, Cellini's own account on the work in his autobiography would validate how luxuriously it is wrought:

... I had represented the sea and the earth both in a sitting posture the legs of one placed between those of the other, as certain arms of the sea enter the land, and certain necks of the land jut out into the sea. Thus I had appropriately given them that graceful attitude. I put a trident into the right hand of the figure that represented the sea, and in the left a bark of exquisite workmanship, which was to hold the salt... The earth I represented by a beautiful female figure holding a cornucopia in her hand, entirely naked, like the male figure; in her left hand she held a little temple, the architecture of the Ionic order, and the workmanship very nice; this was intended to put the

pepper in. (Cellini 375)

We are almost persuaded by Shearman's appreciation and think how gracefully Cellini makes the tiny work. This angle, however, hides the serious anguish or surprising effect of the metalwork. Cellini also remarks that the saltcellar is to be used on a table and turned around, that is to say, it requires a revolving view to appreciate the work comprehensively.

Mirollo's book also includes an illustration of the saltcellar, but its camera angle is different from Shearman's (Fig b.). The female figure representing the land sits with her hand on the breast in front of the male figure representing the sea. The sensual posture leads us to find the trident Neptune has in the hand is located just on the position of penis. We cannot help being surprised to find that the very angle reveals an obscene sight where the man masturbates in front of the woman. Besides, there is another conceit hidden in the work. We know that this is the saltcellar from which we take out white salt⁵. White salt is produced at the beach where the land and the sea meet. The image of white foam of a breaking wave is superimposed on that of white salt. The whiteness also implies white sperm spilling out of Neptune's trident.

Keeping in mind the effect Cellini achieves in the ultimately detailed and conceitful saltcellar, we have to return to the poem in question, and then we will find no less grotesque imagery hidden in the same way. At first sight, "Twickenham Garden" shows his fine workmanship whose designs are cited from the masterpieces, i.e. from Petrarchan imagery; and on the whole it is woven as skillfully as the saltcellar: we soon acknowledge a chiasmic structure of the first line and the third line ("sighs" ➡ "eares" / "teares" ➡ "eyes"). Yet we will not realize a deeper analogy between two works until we encounter an enigmatic phrase in the fifth line.

But O, selfe traytor, I do bring
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,
And can convert Manna to gall, (5-7)

What is "the spider love"? Many commentators find trouble in this textual crux and give various interpretations respectively. Roughly speaking the diverse interpretations of the line can be divided into three categories: the first group thinks the phrase in the light of the popular belief about the spider; Theodore Redpath points out that the phrase alludes "to the popular belief that spiders were full of poison" (245), and, in A. J. Smith's account, "spiders were supposed to turn everything they eat into poison" (403): The second considers "the spider love, which transubstantiates all" in relation to Donne's offense against the Catholic church; Smith continues, "'transubstantiates' and 'manna' evoke the eucharistic transformation of bread into body of Christ. The poet's love works a kind of countermiracle, transforming into deadly bitterness what ought to sustain and save" (403); Theresa M. DiPasquale seems to go far by saying the spider love is "a priest performing poisonous magic" (85): finally the other critics discuss the phrase in the light of Petrarchan tradition; "his envy and his unfulfilled desire" (Sheppheard 67); Marotti, admitting "the Petrarchan lover's conflict of conscience and desire", argues that there lies the stronger sensation behind the poem, intensified with "a tone of urgency implicit here" (215). Yet, most of the critics seem to be satisfied with regarding it as "a poisonous love". These readings leave some obscurity. They have missed a crucial point of the phrase's effect.

My reading with the help of a revolving view throws light on the different aspect of the poem's meanings. In order to see the poem revolvingly, first we have to read it through and then come back to the problematical phrase. Again, at the end

of the first stanza, we face an uncanny serpent, which is another crux of the poem:

And that this place may thoroughly be thought
True Paradise, I have the serpent brought. (8-9)

Marjory Lange takes "the serpent" broadly: in Donne's time, the term signified the general name for any kind of creeping creatures—reptiles, amphibians and insects. Lange argues that "[t]he poet names it [the spider love] serpent for its destruction of his paradise" (231). On the other hand, most critics distinguish the serpent from the spider, and usually regard it as "a satanic envy" in Eden.

Moreover, the serpent has a sexual connotation. DiPasquale explains "the serpent" as follows: "As both a phallic symbol and an emblem of primal envy, the snake image establishes an alarming affinity between ruthless *invidia* and frustrated masculine desire" (85). The reading of the serpent as a phallic symbol reminds us of Cellini's trident turning out to be penis. Just like the trident, the serpent here gives the impression of penis to the reader. His body filled and disturbed with tears in the first line gets concentrated on the swollen penis at the end of the stanza. The speaker comes to the garden to seek "the spring" (outlet for his excessive water). More particularly in this case, he comes to satisfy his frustrated desire through ejaculation. His body, his penis or his passion, is pampered and flooded enough to burst into tears, or should I say, sperms. Nonetheless, since there is no spring in this garden, he finds no outlet for his desire in the first stanza yet. What happens in the next stanza?

'Twere wholsomer for mee, that winter did
Benight the glory of this place,
And that a grave frost did forbid

There trees to laugh, and mocke mee to my face;
 But that I may not this disgrace
 Indure, nor yet leave loving, Love let mee
 Some senseless peece of this place bee;
 Make me a mandrake, so I may grow here,
 Or a stone fountaine weeping out my yeare. (10-18)

As Donald L. Guss argues, Donne develops a typical Petrarchan theme of metamorphosis here. The problem lies in what he chooses to transform himself into. The speaker attempts to become "senseless" lest he should ejaculate in front of the mistress. Yet he cannot refrain from ejaculating so that he chooses to become desperate things, "a mandrake" (a common symbol of phallus) and finally "a stone fountaine" to vomit out his stagnated desire, i.e. sperms. Putting it in another way, since he finds no spring in the garden, he has to become a fountain to satisfy his physical frustration. Now that we find why he comes to seek the spring in the first stanza and metamorphoses into a fountain in the second, we can realize the real meaning of "the spider love". Given that the serpent is penis, the meaning of "the spider love" which transubstantiates all will be clear. Besides meaning a "poisonous love", the "spider love" still maintains an image it invokes; "the spider spinning out a white web" which resembles undeniably the image of semen spilt out of the pampered penis. As is often the case with Donne's poetry, the conceit embodied in the enigmatic phrase goes down to a semantic level with its grotesque imagery sustained.

The final stanza develops the idea of what post modern critics would call a dissemination. There come lovers to collect his tears shed out of his fountain:

Hither with christall vyals, lovers come,
 And take my teares, which are loves wine,

And try your mistresse Teares at home,
For all are false, that tast not just like mine; (19-22)

Although the poet does not mention the tears as seeds, it is obvious that the salty tear alludes to his semen. Then for the first time, we can hear his address to the patroness, although it is contaminated with his criticism on women's falseness.

Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine,
Nor can you more judge womans thoughts by teares,
Then by her shadow, what she weares.
O perverse sexe, where none is true but shee,
Who's therefore true, because her truth kills mee.
(23-27)

It is true that Donne shows compliment on her (she is the only true woman in the world) but I do not think that he succeeds in pleasing his patroness, because his way of complimenting seems too rough for her to accept. It goes without saying, "kill" in the last line also has a sexual connotation: "consume".

The spermous love (the most sexual love) is called the "spider love" by virtue of not only functional analogy (both the spider and penis sting and prick) but also by sensuous analogy (both the sperm and spider's web are white). Such a sensuous metaphor as the spider love is often used by metaphysical poets. Reuven Tsur, a pioneer of the "cognitive poetics", argues that "sensuous metaphor may, then, be regarded as another literary device to delay the smooth cognitive process consisting in the contact with some unevaluated image; the device's function is thus to prolong to state of disorientation and so generate an aesthetic quality of surprise, startling, perplexity, astounding, or the like" (370). Furthermore, the image sensuous metaphor makes us linger on

is grotesque. Sometimes poets produce such a grotesque image by the "realization of the idiom, the unexpected use of the idiomatic expression in its literal sense" (371). Donne employs the same technique in the spider love: he takes "the spider love", an obvious Petrarchan cliché, to mean literally and shock the reader.

We have the tendency to read poetry in relation to human significance and take metaphor or symbol by virtue of what it does to our human meanings.⁶ As Tsur argues, functional metaphor automatizes the reader's response to poetry, therefore, it is smooth to our perception. On the other hand, sensuous metaphor, as suggested above, stagnates our reading and makes us linger on the image level, prevents us from going down to the semantic level, and makes us feel uneasy. Sensuous metaphor is destructive to our ordinary perception of the world, therefore, it is a useful device for people living in a conflict or in a chaotic situation to express their disoriented feelings. Through regression of the systematic perception into a childish disorientation, poets could obtain the efficient device to see the world idiosyncratically. Donne was one of such agonists both on the social level (the epistemological confusion due to new philosophy) and on the individual level (the failure to promote in the court due to his elopement).

Finally let me summarize the story I have read in "Twicknam Garden" with a little more biographical background on him. Donne has made his way through the maze of Mitcham days (days of despair) toward the beautiful garden of the patroness who arouses a great hope in his soul: in fact, Lucy Bedford "was able to take 'her' poets, Jonson and Daniel, with her into the Court of James I" (Palmer 16). Then, "surrounded with tears" and swollen with desire, envy and self pride, the poet succeeds in sneaking into Twicknam

garden, yet he cannot behave himself as a courtier there: he cannot control his fluid overflowing emotion. With his inability to handle the vehement passion, he brings the serpent, his phallic symbol, into this paradise against his will. Finally his body disgorges his excessive water in the act of ejaculation.

To read "Twicknam Garden" in such a way, we can say at least, gives light on its unknown aspect and makes us feel Donne's complicated attitude to the worlds, although we cannot say that it is completely true. My reading is a part of the poem, however farfetched it may seem. Having known the possibility of the interpretation, we cannot help being aware of it in reading. Yes, Donne's poetry is a kaleidoscope.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. a. Benvenuto Cellini. *Saltcellar of Francis I*, about 1540. Vienna, *Kunsthistorisches Museum*.



Fig. b. *Saltcellar*, from a different angle.

NOTES

1. All citations from Donne's poetry are taken from *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. A. C. Patrides (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1985).
2. "To Mr T. W.: Pregnat again with th'old twins Hope and Feare" (1).
3. "To Mr T. W.: At once, from hence, my lines and I depart" (8).
4. The "spring" has been exclusively regarded as "spring as season". Yet Sheppard discusses the possibility of reading the word as "healing waters" (66). I want to read "spring" to mean "a flow of water rising or issuing naturally out of the earth; a similar flow

- obtained by boring or other artificial means" (*OED* sb. 2. a.). What he seeks is an outlet of his excessive passion.
5. You may cast doubt on whiteness of salt in the sixteenth century. To be sure the color of salt was usually brown those days, yet according to Chambers, white sea salt of Normandy was very famous and "[t]he commerce of White Salt brings an immense Profit to France", especially to the king of France. It is King Francis I that Cellini dedicated the work to.
 6. For example, Lakoff and Turner obviously emphasize on functional metaphors, what they call *Metaphors We Live By*. They find sensuous metaphors — image metaphors in their words — not conventional and highly idiosyncratic, and underestimate them as resistant to their theory. On the contrary, I find attractive sensuous metaphors which "break our expectations about the image correspondence and disturb what we think we know about the target domain" (Lakoff and Turner 92).

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