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Author(s)	Aramaki, Chisako
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The Pilgrimage with Paradox

Chisako Aramaki

As Donne advanced in years, the theme of his poetry turned from worldly love to religious one, and then it was replaced by his concern about sermons. The dates of religious poems are not definite. The “Holy Sonnets” were once referred to as his later poems, but Helen Gardner offered her opinion that those sonnets were not so “later” products, as they had once been supposed. She set the date in 1609 or thereabouts.¹⁾ This view of hers is now widely accepted. After he took orders, his poetical activity was spasmodic, bringing forth only a small number of religious poems.

His *Divine Poems*, therefore, were not his chief concern any more, and when many literally students tried to see in them his religious thoughts and the depth of his faith, they consequently failed. Donne’s whole passion for writing was now devoted to the production of sermons, which deteriorated his poetry in this period to the sphere of by-products. Gardner rightly estimates:

If Donne’s spiritual and moral achievement are to be assessed, we must go to the sermons rather than to the *Divine Poems*.²⁾

But if we think that these poems, his literally by-products, are no more than poetical expressions of the same ideas in his sermons, we are misled in understanding in these poems. These poems written after his ordination were made when he was placed in particular circumstances, for example, “A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany” and “Hymne to God my God, in my sickness”. They were, so to speak, born in exceptional situations, and they show a different aspect from that of sermons.

This aspect shown in his later poems is akin to that which is characteristic of his religious poems written before his ordination, for example, the “Holy Sonnets”, “La Corona” and “Goodfriday, 1613. Riding

Westward". The period of production of these poems coincides with that of *the Anniversaries*, that is, 1611 and 2, some years before his ordination. *The Anniversaries* were written at the transition stage, during which Donne transformed himself, to use well-known words of his, from Jack Donne to John Donne. Once the existence of the so-called "John Donne" was regarded as suspicious, but now it is rather the existence of "Jack Donne" that is under suspicion. The transformation may not be so manifest and definite as was often said, but doubtless there was a transformation of the same sort, be it slow, gradual or repeated.

Many useful interpretations of these abstruse *Anniversaries* have been published, but they do not prove to be decisive. Donne, who excelled in shorter poems concentrated in a single point, wrote exceptionally long poems of about 500 lines. This shows us that he did not aim at mere funeral elegies. They were ambitious attempts to crystallize his religious and theological thoughts into poetical form. As a critic called them the magnificent failures, they do not succeed, though including all possibilities, in constructing a whole entirety. According to the angles in which light of interpretation is thrown on the works, a certain facet soars up in extraordinary glitter, and as the angle changes, the illuminated facet disappears, and another catches our eyes. After Donne's attempts ended in abortive failures, what impresses us most strongly is his mind at this transitional period wavering between the two extremities of the worldly and the divine.

In the *Songs and Sonnets* we can see, under the several different masks of a cynical libertine, a Petrarchist, a devotee of "love is best", and so on, the same figure. In the clownish attire, trifling with Neo-Platonic ideas and Aquinas theology, Donne tried to establish formula of the identity of all and one, of body and soul, and of inconstancy and constancy by means of constrained sophistries and paradoxes of "yoking of opposites" – to attain to the knowledge of Neo-Platonic One, that is, the truth. In the counter-Renaissance movement of the times, people regarded reason with distrustful eyes, and they resorted to paradoxes to construct logic. In this attitude, Reason had not lost all its ground, there were yet seen some struggles for Reason. Donne himself tried to give his paradoxes logical

sequence, but the conclusions are conditional, they always begin with "if". The conclusions shown in the final lines of the poems are not stable; they are in danger of turning topsyturvy, if the poems were to be continued.

Donne anatomizes in the first part of *the Anniversaries* the intellectual world divorced from the truth, the Neo-Platonic One, the world which has nothing to depend on. In the poem, he dissects the rotten world on the verge of ruin with violent sardonic language. It is the death of a girl that caused this corruption and ruin. What the world had lost by her death is the "magnetic force" which connects like "glue" or "cement" all things with unifying One. The poet laments over the loss the world suffered, the loss of the "example origin", "measure" and "type", the Platonic Idea, of which all things are reflections. This sick and ruined world, without referring to the correspondence between Macrocosm and Microcosm, represents no other than Donne's inner life. What Donne wishes to recover in himself is the relationship which can exist between isolated knowledges, the acquisition of definite core of cognition. The well-known words "New Phylosophy calls all in doubt" are general expression of the conflict between the conception of the definite and orderly world and the knowledge brought about by new learning, the conflict which the later Renaissance people had to experience. And at the same time, these words of his are the cries of the intellectual despair which Donne had experienced in going through this conflict.

The Anatomy of the world, Donn's ego, made manifest his own spiritual state and bringing with it the recognition that this world is only "a dry cinder" and all our efforts are of no avail in recovering the orderly world.

The attempts are seen in the "Songs and Sonnets". In the "Songs and Sonnets" Donne made audacious and somewhat desperate attempts to give the world a complete unity, but in *the Anniversaries* the attempts were given up. Now that he had the knowledge that the world is nothing, he concludes what is worth our toils is the "rich joyes" of which the girl has become a part.

The Second Anniversary sings the progress to the rich joys, and in this poem we are told about the nature of the "rich joyes". After describing the

progress of her soul to Heaven, Donne asks repeatedly his own soul “what wilt thou know”. Donne, driven to despair by the total impotency of the intelligence, again asks his soul;

When wilt thou shake off this Pedantry,
Of being taught by sense, and Fantasie? (11.291-2)

After this he affirms that it is only in Heaven that one can enjoy the complete knowledge. And he calls it ecstasy or essential joy to see God, who is the object of knowledge and knowledge itself. The triumphant sound of the last couplet in *the Second Anniversary* may be taken as the cry of the victory, the attainment of complete knowledge of God. But this ecstasy is momentary, his victory is not secure, and soon he slips back into earthly thoughts. The knowledge of God, like the moon, can be looked up to, but not be grasped. Therefore the trumpet in the last line of *the Second Anniversary* which is to announce the advent of God does not sound so flourishingly. As the conclusions in his love poems do not have everlasting assurance, so in *the Second Anniversary* no sooner the poem comes to end than the sound of the trumpet begins to die away.

Whatever the aim of the poems may be, *The Anniversaries* allow us to see the locus Donne’s mind traced, who lost all his hopes to find truth in this world, and to give up his intellectual struggle, and finally to rely on God. The theme of abandonment of intellectual struggle appeared often in the sermons of his later years, where he assailed insistently the human intellect.

How imperfect is all our knowledge! What one thing doe we know perfectly?³⁾

As in the *Anniversaries* he wrote that “new Philosophy calls all in doubt”, so in one of his sermons he writes “I need not call in new Philosophy.”⁴⁾ Not only the new philosophy but all sorts of learning are denied and he declares that the best knowledge a man can procure is Socrates’ cognizance that “he knows nothing but this, That he knows nothing.”

How barren a thing is Arithmetique! (and yet Arithmetique Will tell you, how many single graines of sand, will fill this hollow Vault to the

Firmament) How empty a thing is Rhetorique! (and yet Rhetorique will make absent and remote things present of your understanding) How weak a thing is poetry! (and yet Poetry is a counterfeit Creation, and makes things that are not, as though they were) How infirme, how impotent are all assistances if they be put to expresse this Eternity!⁵⁾

Donne does not completely deny reason, he attaches some worth to it, for reason can be useful in attaining the recognition of God.

Knowledge cannot save us, but we cannot be saved without Knowledge; Faith is not on this side Knowledge, but beyond it; we must necessarily come to Knowledge first, though we must not stay at it, when we are come thither.⁶⁾

Donne's mysticism denies the human intellect the possibility of attaining the knowledge of God. What the human knowledge can achieve, even if it is the most excellent and spiritual part of human faculties, is only nothing.

. . . though knowledge be of a spiritual nature, yet it is but as a terrestriall Spirit, conversant upon Earth; Spirituall things, of a more rarified nature than knowledge, even faith it selfe, and all that grows from that in us, falls within this Rule, which we have in hand, That even in spirituall things, nothing is perfect.⁷⁾

When Donne tried in the *Songs and Sonnets* to construct the logic dialectically with illogical paradoxes, it can be said that reason had been forsaken. Paradoxes leap over the fence of logic to attain at once the absolute truth which paradoxes want to be demonstrable. But after all, paradoxes cannot show that the truth is demonstrable, the human intellect with all its logic or illogic cannot attain to the absolute truth. In his sermons, although there are seen some traces of attachment to human intellect, Donne ultimately repudiates it, and he affirms what one ought to know is "to know Christ".⁸⁾

As it took so long a progress to arrive at the renunciation of intellect, so in his religious poems we see Donne who is yet to a certain degree attached to intellect, though in the poems written according to the established patterns of prayer or those treating the traditional Biblical topics, for example "La Corona" and "Litany", we see the figure of Donne who is

not disturbed by problem of the reason. The “Holy Sonnets” which are supposed to be written about the same period as *the Anniversaries* and the “Hymns”, the products from his bitter experiences show us the poet distressed with the same doubts and questions.

In the “Holy Sonnets” Donne asks himself, puts questions to his intellect according to the method of “meditation”.

If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree,
Whose fruit threw death on else immortall us,
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious
Cannot be damn'd Alas; why should I bee?

(Holy Sonnet IX, 11. 1-4)

Why are wee by all creatures waited on?

(Holy Sonnet XII, 1. 1)

To these questions his intellect cannot offer any answer. Only he wonders at God's deeds.

But wonder at a greater wonder, . . .

(Holy Sonnet XII, 1, 11)

In the “Holy Sonnets” as in his love songs he poses problems, sometimes very difficult or complicated or perverted, and to these he cannot make up clever solutions as he did in love songs. He has already known that his audacious and acrobatic attempts are in the end futile and cannot bring him any truth. A man cannot give an ultimate answer even to the question concerned about himself.

But who am I, that dare dispute with thee
O God? . . .

(Holy Sonnet IX, 11, 9-10)

But after we read the last lines of these sonnets, it looks as if the expressions yoking opposites enable him to see the mystery of God through the intellectual pseudo-logic. Sometimes his distrust in the authority of the human empirical ability, taking off its mask in the last lines, reveals his attachment to reason. He cannot resist the fascination the use of reason gives. The quotation cited above (“But who am I, that dare dispute with thee”) shows that Donne is well aware of this.

The first line of Holy Sonnet XIV gives a shock to us by dragging us forcibly into the midst of his prayer, and the expression seems to be over-emphatic. But considering his concern about the Augustinian correspondence between the three persons of God and the three human faculties (memory, will, knowledge), and moreover taking his particular estimation of Memory into account,⁹⁾ the expression ceases to be exaggerated. His soul is so far away from God that light taps of the Holy Ghost on his soul do not make it tend to God. So it is very natural that Donne implores the Holy Ghost to knock with more force: "Batter my heart". The use of the word "batter" is very appropriate when we remember the Platonic symbol that the imprisoning city represents a body in which a soul is shut up.¹⁰⁾ The force of the Holy Ghost is not enough to set free the imprisoned soul, for that purpose the strength of "three person'd God" must be added.

Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captive'd, and proves weake or untrue.

(Holy Sonnet XIV, 11. 7-8)

Murray Roston points out that here the word "untrue" has two ambivalent meanings:

'Untrue' here carries a particularly effective ambivalence. In the setting of the love image, Reason has proved untrue in the sense of 'unfaithful'; but at a more profound level, it has failed to fulfil its promise of leading the soul to the truth it seeks, and the spirit must now look elsewhere for its salvation.¹¹⁾

Reason, as the main hope of the Renaissance, was to lead people to the knowledge of God through the human intellect. But what the Renaissance reason brought us was a heap of new scientific knowledge. On this situation, Donne commented that they are rather new knowledges than greater knowledges.¹²⁾ These new knowledges caused only such a confusion as is seen in the *Anniversaries*, Reason failed to meet their expectation. When he writes "Yet dearly I love you" following the afore-quoted lines, we see Donne ready to go to God no more relying on reason. Is there any way for it except a way by reason? Except God

“ravishes” him, he would never be free from the chain of reason. Roston finds in the words of “enthrall” “ravish” the ambivalent double meanings like in the case of the word “untrue”: these two words mean also “fascinate”.¹³⁾ If we follow up the way suggested by the meaning of “fascinate”, the conclusive part at the end of the poem in the form of a sexual setting proves to be a product of consistent logic. This sonnet beginning with theological language, through a metaphor of war, ends in lines suggestive of eroticism. With the bold contrast between the two extremities and the firm consistence connecting them, this sonnet may be said to be a fine composition. But the fine word-play depends on reason which has once been renounced, in short, treacherous reason manipulates Donne behind the curtain.

“A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany” written about the time when he travelled to Germany in 1619 is said to be one of his most perfect poems both in form and content. The Elizabethans liked to make much use of emblems on which many books were published, and Donne himself scattered them everywhere in his poetry. The use of emblems Donne employed was often arbitrary, which arose from his ardent passion for the ultimate truth.

Swimme, and at every stroake, thou art thy Crosse;
 The Mast and yard make one, where seas do tosse;
 Looke downe, thou spiest out Crosses in small things;
 Looke up, thou seest birds rais'd on crossed wings;
 All the Globes frame, and speares, is nothing else
 But the Meridians crossing Parallels.

(“The Crosse”, 11. 19-24)

In his poem entitled “The Crosse”, he tries to find an emblem of the cross on every thing around him. But the emblem he finds out is surprising, but no more. It has no power to extend and expand. In this *Hymne*, he endeavours to seek God’s emblem or Biblical typology around him.

In what torne ship soever I embarke,
 That ship shall be my embleme of thy Arke;
 What sea soever swallow mee, that flood
 Shall be to mee an embleme of thy blood; (11. 1-4)

And he prays that by leaving this world his life may become like an incident in the Bible and become one with God. In the valediction sermon preceding this hymn, he is already prepared for death. In the hymn, we see such words as “winter” “everlasting night” which are very suggestive of death, and in the “winter” and the “everlasting night” he may know “the eternal root of true love”. The tone of the whole composition is tranquil, and there are no such traces of a disturbed mind as were seen in the “Holy Sonnets”. But the complicated reasoning in the third stanza is expressive of the refracted mind of the poet. God has no complete command of his worldly reason.

Nor thou nor thy religion dost controule,
The amorousnesse of an harmonious Soule, (11. 17-18)

To Donne, God is jealous One who compels him to forsake all things. But the lines from 21st to 24th reveal that, although his face turned toward God, yet he is still attracted to what he has forsaken. The expression “Seale then this bill of my Divorce to All” appeals to God by the same intensity with the expression “Batter my heart”. The placid world of renunciation in this hymn is always exposed to the threat of earthly thoughts. He says that his meditations are often disturbed by creeping footsteps of the profane world.

I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and call in, and invited God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there I neglect God and his Angels for the noise of a Flie, for the whining of a doore; I talke on, in the same posture of praying; Eyes lifted up; knees bowed downe; ... A memory of yesterdays pleasure, affeare of tomorrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spirituall things, perfect in this world.¹⁴⁾

Donne’s farewell to the empirical world cannot be achieved only by death. He writes:

To see God only, I goe out of sight:
And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse
An Everlasting night.

But his curiosity about the empirical world is so deep-rooted that it tries to resist to all the efforts to eradicate it. To despise the earthly knowledges in his sermons, he had to go through many conflicts and struggles seen in the *Divine Poems*.

Notes

- 1) Helen Gardner, ed., *The Divine Poems of John Donne* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. xxxvii ff.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
- 3) John Hayward, ed., *John Donne, Complete Verse and Selected Prose* (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1929), p. 672.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 674.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 615.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 709.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 673.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 672.
- 9) Janel Mueller, ed., *Donne's Prebend Sermons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 30–45.
- 10) Murray Roston, *The Soul of Wit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 173.
- 11) *Loc. cit.*
- 12) Hayward, *op. cit.*, p. 672.
- 13) Roston, *op. cit.*, pp. 174–75.
- 14) Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter eds., *The Sermons of John Donne* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1962), vol. vii, pp. 264–65.