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The Poetics of Space in Donne's Love Poetry

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Donne's concern with matter is extraordinary and pervades all his writings. From ludicrous elegy to solemn sermon, from passionate love poem to learned speculation on divinity, nothing escapes his ability to bring disparate elements together and endow images with a powerful plasticity. I will try to analyse in this essay those things, those objects, which attract Donne's attention as enclosed, self-contained spaces representing a reality he seeks to perpetuate.[1]

I have attempted a simplified arrangement of Donne's treatment of matter as a process that moves toward opposite poles: on the one hand we have that of expansion or fission; that is, defined and dense elements undergo a process of fragmentation, enlargement and expansion.[2] The other direction is that of concentration or fusion, the microcosmic dimension, and is exemplified in some of his devotional writings and his amatory poems.[3] This process of fusion also involves a definition of physical spaces in terms of self-contained objects, with defined boundaries, as safe territories. This essay explores some of the manifestations of this latter tendency towards minimization.

I will concentrate on some images taken from some of his most popular poems. The one that first comes to mind as a significant representation of Donne's plastic imagination is "The Flea." In the dialectics of seduction, a flea becomes the central object of the subject's "persuasive force." It has sucked both his blood and his beloved's, and its rounded body becomes the site of their union:

> It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
> And in this flea our two bloods mingled bee.[4]

Even though this poem has been traditionally regarded as an example of Donne's rhetoric of persuasion,[5] our interest obviously lies in his use of such a powerful material image. The experience of the lovers is resolved within the swelling body of the insect, and that is what strikes the reader first: Donne's anxiety to compact to a physical space what could only be apprehended through imagination. The kind of sensual images and vivid colours that are at work in this poem (notice the contrast between the red blood—"And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two" [l.8] and the black walls of the flea's body—". . . these living walls of Jet" [l.15]) seem to be much closer to a scientific description of biological functions than to a persuasive discourse aimed at seducing a lady:

> This flea is you and I, and this
> Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is. (13-14)

With this, the speaker is not only challenging the distance the lady has established between them, but is also materializing an experience that might remain unfulfilled. He is thus rendering a transcendent dimension to this material, living space through the reduction of his potential erotic experience to it. Here the flea becomes the bounded confinement of a room, something that one immediately associates with a feeling of shelter, and at the same time it also works as the synecdoche, the microcosmic expression in which physical fusion takes place. The spatial trick played in the poem speaks not only for his persuasiveness, but also for an urgent need to reduce to a self-contained space what otherwise would be unattainable: "we're met, / And cloysterd in these living walls of jet"(14-15). The experience takes place within a safe territory, bounded by the insect's "living walls of Jet." In this situation, almost nothing could disturb the lovers' delight, almost nothing but the lady's criminal fingernail; hence the speaker's interest in persuading her with his clever conceptual argument. The subject seeks to get enclosed as a means of preserving something that otherwise would evanesce.[6]

This desire to dwell in well-defined, cloistered spaces, this variety of *claustrophilia*, pervades many of Donne's love poems. Take, for

instance, his liking for poeticizing graves and tombs. If the flea's body works as the physical evidence of the lovers' finite experience, the grave will preserve this very passion from annihilation. That's the kind of phantasy elaborated in "The Relique":

> When my grave is broke up againe
> Some second guest to entertaine,
> . . . . . .
> And he that digs it, spies
> A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,
> Will he not let'us alone,
> And think that there a loving couple lies. (1-2, 5-8)

Here, as in "The Flea," the lovers are not represented in their full extent but through a synecdoche built on an utterly material image; the lovers are turned into blood in the former, into bones and hair in the latter, substances that defy both the laws of space and time. But also in both of these poems, as well as in others, there is a tension between this carefully wrought poetical space and the outer world. In the case of "The Flea" the menacing fingernail of the lady is the external evidence against which the enclosed territory acquires its full significance. In "The Relique," there's also a third element which comes to disturb the perfect reality within the physical boundaries of the grave. The speaker eagerly seeks to reaffirm his reality before the eyes of a witness who creates a dramatic tension within the poem. The poetics of space in Donne's love poems always contemplates this outer presence as the force against which the creation of this redoubt struggles in a centripetal dynamic toward a physical core. This external reference somehow justifies the movement towards a nucleus:

> . . . every universe is concentrated in a nucleus, a spore, a dynamized center . . . The miniature deploys to the dimensions of a universe. Once more, large is contained in small.[7]

That is how Gaston Bachelard, in his *Poetics of Space,* expressed this dynamic that projects the large within the small. Bachelard's words

evoke those of Donne's contemporaries who, following the Paracelsian notion of man as *microcosm,* saw in man the "epitome," the perfect correspondence of the world, and firmly believed, as Donne himself, that the large was contained within the small.[8] The physical space seems to be created as a kind of fortress, refuge, or shelter, whose existence is justified by the threatening reality outside. Hence the recurrent presence of circles as perfect spaces for the preservation of love, as is the case of the compasses in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and the concentric circles representing love in "Love's Growth."[9]

The creation of space as refuge or shelter is also illustrated in "The Sun Rising." As in the poems mentioned above, the physical extension of a room and a bed is the only reality that exists for the speaker, who in this case defies the presence of the morning sun as it announces the separation of the lovers:

> . . . and since thy duties bee
> To warme the world, that's done in warming us.
> Shine here to us, and thou art every where;
> This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare. (27-30)

Here is a spatial core in which the whole experience is condensed. A process of concentration within the limits of the room takes place and, again, we can perceive that anxiety of defining the territory, of preserving its integrity and giving it that transcendental dimension pointed out above. "Nothing else is" (22):[10] the lovers are depicted as dwellers in a space in which they will succeed in perpetuating their love. We are facing the concept of the house, of the room as "a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability . . . space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy" (Bachelard 17, 48).

We find a powerful contrast to these images in "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day" where the cheer and intimacy of the communion of lovers in "The Sun Rising" turns into the absolute desolation of absence

and death. The intensity of the descriptions of nothingness makes of this poem a counterpart to "The Sun Rising":

> I, by loves limbecke, am the grave
> Of all, that's nothing. . . . (ll.21-22)

The lyric "I" becomes the space invaded by that huge void left behind his beloved's parting in a perfect negative of the triumphant fullness of "Nothing else is."[11] The world without is defied by the world within in "The Sun Rising." In "A Nocturnall," on the contrary, the world within becomes "A quintesence even from nothingnesse" (15). Matter is devastated, annihilated, and spaces are but empty carcasses, in such a way that to the poetics of space of Donne's physicality one may add "the poetics of the full and the empty":

> . . . and often absences
> Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses. (26-27)

The utter physicality of the image, of the word "carcass" —a recurrent term in Donne's repertoire—is characterized by its total deprivation of substance— "A quintessence even from nothingnesse" (15); its hollowness— "I . . . am the grave / Of all, that's nothing . . ." (21-22)—and contrasts with the lecherous swollen body of the flea and the fleshy, self-sufficing plenitude of the bed.

Bachelard's ideas on space are particularly fruitful when approaching Donne's treatment of space. In his allusive prose, Bachelard explores the poetical possibilities of the house and the corner, of the miniature and the universe, and sees man's deepest longings in the poet's choice of a place, of a territory to be inhabited by his poetic imagination. In the case of Donne, this dwelling on physical spaces, on enclosed territories, seems to result from an anxiety in search of stability and safety. Sometimes, it also reveals a desire to perpetuate within a physical reality (namely the flea's body), to materialize what cannot last in thought or in memory. That's what occurs in the valedictory poems,

where the texts are strategies to overcome the hazards of absence and distance.

Again, Donne relies completely on the possiblilities of material images, of microcosmic entities, to express his desire for perpetuation (Isn't it odd and defiant that he eagerly seeks to perpetuate an experience in the perishable, transitory reality of matter?) Take, for instance, the image of the tear/coin in "A Valediction: of Weeping":

> Let me powre forth
> My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here,
> For thy face coines them, and thy stampe they beare,
> And by this Mintage they are something worth,
> For thus they bee
> Pregnant of thee. (1-6)

The association of tear and coin is clever and striking. The tear epitomizes the whole world as his beloved's face is in it, and it therefore bestows value on the tear as a stamp confers value on a piece of metal. We are thus on the level of representation that is carried further when a parallelism is established between the stamped tear and the globe:

> On a round ball
> A workeman that hath copies by, can lay
> An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,
> And quickly make that, which was nothing, All,
> So doth each teare
> Which thee doth weare,
> A globe, yea world by that impression grow. (10-16)

Here the microcosmic/macrocosmic imagery meets, and maps, coins and tears are physical entities that are brought together in a process of concentration, a reduction of reality to a comprehensive, self-contained space. Again, the concepts of "nothing" and "all" are brought together in correspondence with fullness and emptiness. Both maps and tears are here playing a spatial trick, like the one we have seen in the analogy between the flea's body and the room. The space is used poetically and

acquires a living presence. External reality has been mocked and wrought in an enclosed space. Within its boundaries, in the rounded volume of the flea, the coin, and the globe, there dwells the only existent reality for the imagination of the poet. Reality outside is unstable and changing, and so the speaker of these poems needs a physical, apprehensible basis in which to affirm his own reality, one that is stable and reliable. He not only creates spaces, he occupies them.[12]

What strikes us in Donne's poems is not only his preference for these enclosed, tiny spaces, but his anxiety for transcendence and permanence through them. In this regard, Bachelard's words are eloquent enough of the kind of connections that underlie Donne's creation and recreation of physical spaces:

> Thus the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness. (155)

All the universe concentrated in one nucleus, the great contained within the small. Donne's recurrent use of rhetorical devices (particularly, of synecdoche and metonymy) allow such correspondences as the projection of the large within the small, or the general within the particular. In this regard Donne is dwelling at length upon the Renaissance tradition of establishing correspondences between the large and the small, the cosmos and the human body—something that critics have discussed as the immediate effect of the new science on early seventeenth-century verse.[13] Yet, Donne's treatment of this issue moves far beyond a witty exercise upon a literary cliché and shows a more pervading and problematic quality.

This is evidenced in another valedictory poem: "Of the book," in which this object works as the material reference, the only reference, of their love:

> This Booke, as long-liv'd as the elements,
> Or as the worlds forme, this all-graved tome

> In cypher writ, or new made Idiome;
> When this booke is made thus
> . . . . . .
> Learning were safe; in this our Universe
> Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels, Verse.
> ("A Valediction: of the Booke" 19-21, 23, 26-27)

Here the image of protection aligns with that of teaching. All learning will be contained in it, as the book works as a metonymy of their love and therefore their universe—everything that matters. Within this process of concentration and reduction two aims are accomplished. On the one hand it is the immediate objective of preventing their love from annihilation. The material existence of the book demonstrates that within it their love can survive the contingencies of time and distance. It has been carefully fenced and thus the fears and anxieties of the speaker find solace within it (once again we come across that idea of safety that pervades all other poems). On the other hand, since all is contained within it, it becomes a principle of authority for "love's clergy." Unlike the flea's body, the bed, or the tear, the object is not filled with matter but with words; it is through language that the speaker anxiously seeks to endure.

When at the end of the *First Anniversarie*, "An Anatomie of the World," Donne brings together the image of the grave and that of the poem, he is expressing an anxiety similar to the one revealed in the valedictions and is creating a space against the power of time:

> . . . trying to emprison her.
> . . . when I saw that a strict grave could do,
> I saw not why verse might not doe so too.
> Verse hath a middle nature: heaven keepes soules,
> The grave keeps bodies, verse the fame enroules. (470-474)

The feminine figure is not only preserved by language but "emprisoned" by the very form of the poem. The image immediately recalls the opening of one of his verse letters to the Countess of Bedford:

> Madame, That I may make your cabinet my tombe
> and for my fame . . .
> . . . provide the happiest roome. (1-3)

As in the amatory lyrics, the text works as an artifice, a fortress against oblivion and annihilation. Like bodies without soul, as the body of the lover in "A Nocturnall," verses can also be carcasses if they are not inhabited by Elizabeth: ". . . aborted bee /Those Carkas verses, whose soul is not shee" (ll 13-14). The metaphor of the elegy as physical site, as dwelling, acquires full significance in "A Funerall Elegie":

> And can she . . .
> . . . stoope to bee
> In paper wrap't, Or, when she would not lie
> In such a house, dwell in an Elegie? (15-19)

It is this anxiety of permanence that makes the lyric "I" preserve the memory of young Elizabeth Drury and, of course, affirm himself as artificer and keeper.[14] Once again we face the contrast of the empty and the full, all and nothing, in another of Donne's hyperbolic expressions of praise. The image of "carkas verses" is certainly very compelling. Tombs and poems run parallel in their common end of enclosing, preserving, and confining the identity of the woman. And here we come to the last aspect of our analysis: the poetics of the physical spaces through the spatial dimension of the poem. If the book constitutes a token of permanence and stability in this text, the sonnet acquires an extraordinary physical dimension in "The Canonization." Here Donne moves a step beyond in affirming the materiality of the poem:

> And if unfit for tombes and hearse
> Our legends bee, it will be fit for verse;
> And if no peece of Chronicle we prove,
> We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes. (29-32)

The physical space, the redoubt that protects the speaker from external contingencies, from that threatening "otherness" that lurks outside, is

that of the sonnet. Lovers no longer dwell in tears, fleas, or books, but in the imaginary territory of sonnets, making of them pretty rooms. Here we also draw a circle and we are back where we began, at the idea of the room. The sonnet is turned into a room (the polysemic word "stanza" may well provide the link between these poetic spaces) as the world is also summarized in a room in "The Sun Rising," as the flea too becomes a room, all expressions of the poet's endeavour to make real and permanent what is liable to vanish beyond the boundaries of these physical representations. At this point, language becomes physical thanks to the analogy, as physicality turns into language—a trick that is central to another valedictory poem ("Of my name, in the window") in the image of the scratched name on the pane: "... thinke this ragged bony name to bee / My ruinous Anatomie" (23-24).[15]

The image of inhabited sonnets is extraordinarily beautiful and also thought-provoking: sonnets become private rooms, *stanzas,* private spaces but also sites in which language can shape the experience; they are the perfectly fenced territory, the "well wrought urn," the most perfect and safest of places, the evocative site for perpetuating an experience against that "irksome memory" that, Donne says, grieves equally to keep and lose: "Dwells with me still mine irksome M*emory,* / Which both to keepe, and lose, grieves equally" ("Sapho to Philaenis" 13-14). Bachelard was right when he claimed that it was in space, not in time, that our memory dwells:

> At times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being's stability .... In its countless alveoli, space contains compressed time. That is what space is for. (8)

If we assume Bachelard's personal interpretation of spaces associated to our memory and therefore shaping our experiences and identity, Donne's utter concern with physicality, with the material dimension of experience, could be explained under analogous terms. Defined, self-contained spaces are vital for Donne; whether rooms or graves, sonnets, tears, or books, they are all primary elements of his poetic imagination.

Bodies and maps are meeting points of the material and the immaterial, of the imagined world and the real one, "countless alveoli" in which memory is preserved, and time and experiences compressed. They resolve the tension between microcosmic/macrocosmic realities through the creation of these atmospheres, these spaces of transcendental materiality. The dynamics of enlargement and reduction, of expansion and concentration converge under the eye of the poet, for, as Bachelard points out, "if a poet looks through a microscope or a telescope, he always sees the same thing" (172).

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Notes

1. This is a revised and enlarged version of a paper published in *Sederi* 9 (1998). I wish to thank Ilona Bell for her insightful comments and suggestions on Donne's treatment of space, and George Bilgere for his sensitive remarks and his help with the final version of this paper.

2. Think of works such as the *Anniversaries*, where the body of Elizabeth Drury acquires macrocosmic dimensions, some of his verse letters to his patrons, or his learned sermons on the destiny of the body after death.

3. Among his devotional lyrics, see "I am a little world made cunningly," "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," and "Annunciation." *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* are also superb exercises on the treatment of the human body as a vulnerable territory.

4. *The Complete Poetry Of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967). All references to Donne's poetry are from this edition and are cited in this paper by line numbers.

5. For the rhetorical devices at work in this poem and its connection with classical poetics see, for example, R. Roussel, "Women and Fleas: The Argument of Seduction," in *The Conversation of the Sexes,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), and H. David Brumble, "John Donne's 'The Flea': Some Implications of the Encyclopedic and Poetic Flea Traditions," *Critical Quarterly* 15 (1973): 147-154.

6. See Lisa Gorton, 1998, "John Donne's Use of Space," *Early Modern Literary Studies* 9 (September, 1998): 1-27. Gorton has already shown this singular treatment of space in Donne's poetry and interprets it as a defensive device against the passage of time. Her reading of space, though, differs substantially from mine, as she bases her discussion upon the analysis of the circle as essential to Donne's imagery, and the conflict between the old and the new science (cosmography vs. cartography).

7. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 157; French original version, *La poetique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957). All subsequent references are cited in the text by page numbers of the edition in English.

8. In *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,* Meditation IV, Donne himself speculates upon these ideas: "It is too little to call a *Man a little World*; Except God, Man is a *diminutive* to nothing. Man consistes of more pieces, more parts, than the world . . . And if those pieces were extended, and stretched out in Man, as they are in the world, Man would be the *Gyant*, and the world the *Dwarfe*, the world but the *Map*, and the man the *World*" (*Donne: Selected Prose,* ed. Neil Rhodes, NY: Penguin, 1987) 104.

9. Gorton argues that it is against that external world that the "rooms of love" are built. In this way, the concept of space for Donne would be "material, forceful, meaningful and arranged into concentric circles" (1-2).

10. In *La Corona*, there is a compelling image that aligns with that of "The Sun

Rising": "... and shutst in little roome, / Immensity cloystered in thy deare wombe" (27-28). Here Donne departs from the cliché of the womb as the prison of humankind ("... yeelds himselfe to lye / in prison, in thy wombe ...") (19-20), but makes that space, by the divine presence, the site of light (God) and immensity in a paradox that equals the hyperbolic treatment of the lovers' experience in the love lyrics.

11. Robert N. Watson, *The Rest is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 225-228, points out the polar uses of the concept of "nothingness" in these two compositions and the opposite significance of an everlasting night.

12. Here I move away from Gorton's assumption that it is on circles that Donne bases his notion of space. The circle is just one of the configurations of space. More than shape what is essential to Donne's treatment of space is matter, the possibility of representing experiences through physical entities, whether they are rounded (tears, fleas), squared (beds, graves, rooms and books), or linear (words).

13. Marjorie H. Nicolson, *The Breaking of the Circle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), points out the proliferation of publications, both serious and light, around the concept of *microcosm* between the 1590s and the 1630s.

14. Elizabeth M. A. Hodgson, *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999) and Heather Meakin, *John Donne's Articulations of the Feminine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998) formulate the idea of Donne's appropriation of Elizabeth's energy and his anxiety for permanence through he text.

15. See, among others, Elizabeth Scarry, *Literature and the Body* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981).