

## The Logic of Excess

### Religious Paradox and Poetical Truth in Donne's Love Poetry

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**Abstract** This paper investigates John Donne's rhetorical strategies and lyrical outcomes in the light of the increasing scepticism, following the crisis of the century-old epistemological and religious framework undermined by the Reform and the *new science*. It focuses, in particular, on the recurring use of paradox in the profane context of *Songs and Sonnets*, which shows how Donne draws upon the religious discourse preserving its 'sacred' form but adapting it to secular contents and persuasive purposes, devoid of any orthodox transcendence. Moreover, the analysis of Donne's religious paradoxes reveals the poet's will to compete with the religious authority by mimicking its argumentative style and its limit-expressions (according to Ricoeur's definition), in order to build and defend his own 'poetical truth'. Finally, the paper underlines how Donne's poetry anticipates one of the main features of modern secularization: the role of the arts (poetry included) as the only possible fictional shelter able to compensate for the loss of religious faith.

As a part of his broader concern for the philosophy of language, Paul Ricoeur has devoted two essays to the specificity of religious language and its correlation with poetical language, providing a useful frame of reference to reread the rhetorical procedures which characterise John Donne's poetry and his paradoxical use of religious models and theological squabbles.

In the first essay (Ricoeur 1975), the French philosopher underlines the massive indebtedness of religious language to poetical language, founded upon a common rhetoric able to strike the readers and force them to reorganise through the imagination rather than the will thoughts and beliefs beyond received opinion. «[...] it is precisely on the basis of poetics that religious language reveals its specific character to the extent that the poetic function can appear, in an inverse sense, as the medium or the *organum* of religious language»: poetical language is the *organum* which gives voice to religious language «by various procedures such as intensification, transgression, and going to the limit, which make it [...] an 'odd' language» (Ricoeur 1975, p. 107) full of 'limit expressions' apt to describe «what we might correlatively call the 'limit-experiences' of man» (p. 108). A few years later, Ricoeur provides another insight into this 'specific character', claiming the difference between human logic, which is based upon equal-

ity and equivalence (as in the correspondence between crime and punishment which characterises human justice), and the logic of Jesus and Paul which is instead one of «excess, of superabundance», as Christ's parables collected in the Gospels exemplify (Ricoeur 1980, pp. 37-41). Reading the New Testament we can easily recognise the 'logic of excess' permeating religious language ('turning the other cheek' is a famous example), but it is also possible to recognise paradox as one of the figures of intensification, transgression and «going to the limit» mentioned by Ricoeur. His philosophical reading coincides indeed with the taxonomic description of the paradox as a figure of thought and as a 'metalogism', that is to say, as a figure which modifies the logic value of a sentence in order to deny reality (Groupe  $\mu$  1970, p. 125) and stimulate a mode of understanding which challenges our habits of thought. Both these philosophical and taxonomical references to the relationship between religious language and paradox offer an extraordinary starting point for approaching the complexities of John Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, a collection of poems whose success owes much to a paradoxical mixture of religious speculations with the conversational contexts of love affairs. Moreover, Ricoeur's logic of excess also allows to review the debate about metaphysical poetry, recognising wit as the rhetorical device capable of linking religious language, in its poetical expression, and the great variety of Donne's metalinguistic features which reveal the seventeenth-century increasing awareness of the arbitrariness of language and the unreliability of any discourse.

It is well known that Dryden introduced the word 'metaphysic' with the worst intentions in 1693 (Kinsley 1958, p. 604), and that Johnson followed him, criticising metaphysical poets for their metrical experiments and for having transgressed the Aristotelian principle of the mimetic nature of art. More than a century after their great success, in an age that had completely changed its taste, Johnson could mercilessly sentence: «They cannot be said to have imitated anything» (Napier [1779-1781] 1890, p. 23). Rather than poets, he adds, they are «wits» using a surprising but unnatural logic which combines «the most heterogeneous ideas» (pp. 24-25) in a way significantly different from that more orthodox wit which can be «rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of *discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike» (p. 24). Still, Donne's going beyond the limits of nature, and establishing unexpected relationships among things adhered to the idea of poetry suggested by his contemporary Francis Bacon, who wrote «poesy is a part of learning [...] which being not tied to the laws of matter, may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined, and so make unlawful matches and divorces of things» (Alexander 2004, p. 289).

Donne's poetical wit goes beyond the referential use of language cre-

ating «unlawful matches» and also beyond *decorum*<sup>1</sup> through the use of paradoxes which join and sever in puzzling ways things belonging to different cultural and linguistic worlds: medieval and Protestant theology, legal and political rhetoric, cartographic imagination, neo-Platonic philosophy, Petrarchan conventions, libertine tradition, among many others. This procedure pervades almost every single poem in *Songs and Sonnets*, but the excess, the ‘superabundance’ of Donne’s figurality is particularly evident in those texts in which the poetic voice mimics the rhetoric of religious and theological debates within erotic contexts in order to persuade his beloved’s imagination (if not her will) to abandon social and moral restrictions and accept his (physical) love. Here the use of a rhetoric of controversy with a profane teleology largely surpasses the model of Petrarch: Donne does not merely display the sacralisation of profane love but uses the intricate reasoning of theological debates for sexual aims. Patently, this corrosive use of wit goes beyond Bacon’s idea of poetry as the art always thought to have «some participation in divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind, where reason doth buckle and bow the mind unto the nature of things» (Alexander 2004, p. 290) and discloses instead a sceptical vision of the world we already find in Donne’s *Satyres*, especially in *Satyre III* with its suggestion to «doubt wisely» in choosing one’s own religion among the many become available (l. 77). Also in the early *Paradoxes and Problems*, the third paradox *That by Discord things increase* paradoxically exalts the benefits of Discord from which we can expect new advantages, against the Concord of Nature which only points to the conservation of things. More interestingly, Donne also hints at the ‘formal’ disputation of religious controversies as example of dissembled Discord:

The number of *good* men, the onely charitable nourishers of *Concord*, wee see is thinne, and daily melts and waines; but of *bad* *discording* it is infinite, & growes hourelly. Wee are ascertained of all *Disputable* doubts onely by arguing and differing in *Opinion*, and if formall *disputation* (which is but a painted, counterfeit, and dissembled *discord*) can worke vs this benefit, what shall not a full and maine *discord* accomplish? (Peters 1980, p. 19)

The rhetorical strategies and lyrical outcomes (often paradoxical to the verge of blasphemy) displayed in *The Flea*, *The Funerall*, *The Relique*,

1 About wit and *decorum*, see Ong 1947, pp. 310-341. Ong’s article deals with medieval poets, but also develops an interesting comparison with metaphysical poets, suggesting the influence of the theological debates which affected both: «This fact [the use of wit in religious contexts] is intimately connected with the dominance of theological speculation in the milieu in which these men moved», p. 339.

*Twicknam Garden*, and *The Canonization*, reveal themselves to have been affected, in a more profound and less explicit way, by religious controversies but also by the increasing scepticism towards the century-old religious framework undermined by the issues of the Reform or *Reforms* (Haigh 1993), with their endless squabbles, as well as by the epistemological scientific and ‘anatomical’ patterns of the ‘new philosophy’ (Coffin 1937, Andreassen 1982). The unstable transition from Catholicism to Reformed Church in England as well as the influence of Classic thinkers on religious, political and philosophical controversies contributed to the «rising tide of doubt» (Bertram 2004, p. 18; Popkin 1979, pp. 1-17), whose most quoted examples are Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, on the one side, and these verses in Donne’s *Anatomy of the World* (1611), on the other:

And new Philosophy cald all in doubt,  
 The Element of fire is quite put out;  
 The Sunne is lost, and th’earth, and no mans wit  
 Can well direct him where to looke for it.  
 And freely men confesse, that this world’s spent,  
 When in the Planets, and the Firmament  
 They seeke so many new; they see that this  
 Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.  
 Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
 All just supply, and all Relation:  
 Prince, Subiect, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,  
 For euery man alone thinkes he hath got  
 To be a Phoenix, and that then can be  
 None of that kinde, of which he is, but he.  
 (ll. 205-218)<sup>2</sup>

This famous allusion to the epistemological crisis of his time is one of Donne’s arguments in support of the disappearance of divine harmony and the omnipresence of sin in the world. According to Bertram, here Donne «dramatizes or perhaps overdramatizes the confusion of his society by linking the collapse of cosmic harmony to the death of what he nostalgically believes was once social harmony» (Bertram 2004, p. 19). More generally, the *Anatomy* is also a striking example of the supposed and much criticised excess of Donne (see Drummond’s report of Jonson in Milgate 1978, p. 221), as he transfigures the untimely death of the young Elizabeth Drury and her funeral elegy into an mourning lamentation over the end of the divine correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, man and the world, both corrupted since the Fall (Martz 1954, pp. 221-235).

2 All quotations from Donne’s works are from Coffin 2001.

If *An Anatomy of the World* denounces the crisis of his time in an extraordinary hyperbole, in his collection of *Songs and Sonnets* Donne does not merely record the terrible changes occurring in those years, but elaborates, within erotic settings, an original and incredibly modern reaction to, or compensation for, the uncertainties surrounding his world. The recurring use of religious paradoxes in the profane context of *Songs and Sonnets* effectively reveals the weakening of the religious faith due to the multiplying of the theological authorities. Nonetheless, it also shows the poetical subject's increasing awareness of the verbal fallacy of the religious authority and his will to mimic its argumentative and paradoxical procedures in order to build and defend – as in a debate or trial – his own 'poetical truth'. The verbal strategy is to stimulate the imagination of the beloved, to oppose common sense and the *doxa* prevailing in the fields of love and morality. To this end, the poet puzzles his interlocutors (and readers) about the consistency of his reasoning in a way that recalls the language of Christ in the Gospels, even though his language ultimately appears devoid of an orthodox Christian religious sense, and even of any religious sense.

One of the religious paradoxes on which Donne often builds his audacious imagery and reasoning is that of the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The mystery of the Gospel words «This is my body», whose interpretation had to be literal for Catholics and was only figural for Reformers who read them as 'this stands for, represents my body', played a key role in the controversial battles between Catholics and Reformers, but even earlier, in Christian medieval thought since the ninth-century (Davies 1975, pp. 103-104; Rubin 1991, pp. 12-49; Duffy 1992, pp. 91-130). This exegetical issue had soon led, in the Reformed England, to an unceasing religious war against the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, that is to say, against the idea, in Thomistic terms, of the transfiguration of the *substantia* of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, during which the bread and the wine still retain their outward form, *accidens*. At the same time, the very complex and fascinating matter of the Eucharist became a recurring theme in the literature of seventeenth-century England, as is now widely recognised (Ross 1954; DiPasquale 1999; Gallagher, Greenblatt 2000; Young 2000; Whalen 2002; Schwartz 2008), providing an underlying paradigm to some of Donne's most semantically multi-layered poems. It is the case of *The Flea*, one of Donne's most famous poems, which draws on the conventional erotic image of the flea (Gardner 1965, p. 174; Serpieri, Bigliuzzi 2009, pp. 108-109) and renovates it using a 'sacramental wit'. Against the sacred and witty subtext woven by the poet we hear a man trying to convince, casuistically, a woman to accept his erotic proposal of uniting their bodies. Since the very beginning of the poem, the mistress and the reader are invited to consider the flea, introduced in the title and pointed at by the deictic «this» (l. 1), occurring twice in the first line:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,  
 How little that which thou deny'st me is;  
 Mee it suck'd first, and now sucks thee,  
 And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;  
 Confesse it, this cannot be said  
 A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;  
 Yet this enjoys before it woove,  
 And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;  
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.  
 (ll. 1-9)

The starting point of the persuasive strategy is the idea that the poet and the woman are already «mingled» in the flea that has sucked both, and more precisely they are mingled in the blood of the flea which, according to Theresa DiPasquale, can be considered a «quasi Eucharistic sign, telling her that, in essence, "Hoc est corpus nostrum"» (DiPasquale 1999, p. 175). The body of the flea is a sacralised-reified metonym of the conjectural union of the lovers whose «real presence» is strengthened by the reiteration of the theologically allusive «this» throughout the poem (Hester 1990, p. 377). The use of sacramental allusions in a text belonging to the anti-Petrarchan libertine tradition of a woman wooed for explicitly sexual aims reveals Donne's sceptical resolution to use religious dogma and theological debates as a form of persuasion whose original content has completely lost its sacred power and allure of self-evident truth, but is still thought to have a gripping sophistic ability. The blasphemous subtext becomes even more evident in the second stanza:

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,  
 Where we almost, nay more than marryed are:  
 This flea is you and I, and this  
 Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;  
 Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,  
 And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.  
 Though use make you apt to kill mee,  
 Let not to this, selfe murder added bee,  
 And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.  
 (ll. 10-18)

The stanza opens dramatically with the poetic voice praying the woman to refrain from killing the flea that represents their marriage (one of the sacraments abolished by the Reform) and particularly their «mariage bed» and «mariage temple» (v. 13): two sacred spaces where, if performed, the sacrifice of the flea would represent a «sacrilege», that is, a double murder (the flea and the poet) plus a self-murder (of the woman contained in the

flea). In the final stanza, the sacrifice has already occurred outside the poem, and the poetic voice tries to interpret the decision of the woman to commit that supposedly impious crime:

Cruel and sodaine, hast thou since  
 Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?  
 Wherein could this flea guilty be,  
 Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?  
 Yet thou triumph'st, and saist that thou  
 Find'st not thy self, nor me the weaker now.  
 'Tis true; then learne how false, feares be;  
 Just so much honour, when thou yeeld'st to me,  
 Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.  
 (ll. 19-27)

The «blood of innocence» at l. 19 insinuates the identification of the flea with Christ, reinforced by the word «purpled» that suggests the colour of the Eucharistic blood as well as the traditional colour of kingly power. In fact the killing of the flea appears in this light as an iconoclastic attempt to cancel the outward sign of the paradoxical communion, both erotic and sacramental, of the blasphemous lovers. In the last verse the serpentine argumentation makes explicit the syllogism on which it was built: just as the death of the flea - which had undergone a divine conversion (or transubstantiation) in this poetical excursus - did no harm to the lovers, so the waste of honour - overrated by society and Christian morality (especially Protestant) - will not do any harm to the woman if she decides to yield to the poet's reshaped proposal that «cannot be said | A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead» (l. 6).

Donne's rhetorical strategy is here particularly manifest: to draw persuasive and puzzling forms from religious discourse and convert them to secular or erotic contents devoid of any orthodox transcendence. The poet does not show any vanishing point within the frame of persuasion and sophistic statements to which the poetical language is compelled. He exploits the convergence of divine logic and poetical wit only to ensure the sexual surrender of the woman, but nonetheless «his sacramental profanities are witness to the rhetorical power of a religious idea» (Whalen 2002, p. 59).

The same sceptical horizon relying on religious paradoxes can be discovered in poems like *The Relique*, which belongs with *The Funerall*, *The Damp* and *The Apparition* to a groups of texts where the after-life is represented or imagined as a mundane space for further speculations, revenges, sexual encounters or promises of eternal love. In *The Relique*, as the title suggests, the religious, and namely Catholic framework refers to the supposed miraculous quality of the objects and parts of the body belonging to

saints; a quality fiercely abolished by Reformers as ‘popish’ superstition.<sup>3</sup> The setting of the poem is a grave, and immediately postulates a continuity between the worlds of the living and the dead: the poet imagines himself and his beloved lying buried, and disturbed by the ill-timed arrival of a ‘second guest’ (or ghost):

When my grave is broke up againe  
 Some second ghest to entertaine,  
 (For graves have learn’d that woman-head  
 to be more then one a Bed)  
 And he that digs it, spies  
 A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,  
 Will he not let’us alone,  
 And thinke that there a loving couple lies,  
 Who thought that this device might be some way  
 To make their soules, at the last busie day,  
 Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?  
 If this fall in a time, or land,  
 Where mis-devotion doth command,  
 Then, he that digges us up, will bring  
 Us, to the Bishop, and the King,  
 To make us Reliques; then  
 Thou shalt be’a Mary Magdalen, and I  
 A something else there by;  
 All women shall adore us, and some men;  
 And since at such times, miracles are sought,  
 I would that age were by this paper taught  
 What miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought.  
 (ll. 1-22)

The bracelet – the ‘sign’ to which many scholars have paid attention since T.S. Eliot<sup>4</sup> – is here a private device of recognition and a sign of the promise made by the lovers to wait for the Last Judgement Day and take advan-

3 The word ‘popish’ was widely employed in treatises and pamphlets of the time. In the *OED*, its use is recorded since 1528, with the meaning: «Of or pertaining to popery; of or belonging to the Church of Rome; papistical (In hostile use)».

4 T.S. Eliot highlighted that here «the most powerful effect is produced by the sudden contrast of associations of ‘bright hair’ and of ‘bone’»: Eliot [1921] 1932, p. 243; Serpieri too stressed the surprising semic collision of life (bright hair) and death (bone), of elegance (bracelet) and total spoliation (bone) (Serpieri 1975, p. 284). Similarly, according to Carey «the line startles us by its suggestion of death and life coiled together. The hair is dead, but its unnaturally prolonged brightness seems to vouch for some persistent, subterranean vitality»: Carey 1981, p. 126. Finally, Pagnini underlined the strength of its alliterative structure [br][br][b][b]: 1970, p. 100.



tage of the resurrection of the bodies to «make a little stay» (l. 11). In the second stanza, the poetic conjecture leads the speaker to further, and paradoxical, speculation about a possible future where «mis-devotion», perhaps the Catholic adoration of relics, «doth command» (l. 13) and the corpses-lovers, found by the second guest, will be taken to the religious and political authorities («the Bishop, and the King», l. 15) to be publicly declared relics.

This is the premise for the audacious and blasphemous identification that takes place in the centre of the poem: if the woman will be a Mary Magdalene (l. 17) – the Baroque profane-and-sacred female figure *par excellence* –, the poet will be «something else there by» (l. 18), that is Christ, as the thirty-three lines of the text seem to corroborate (Redpath 1967; for numerological implications, see Rufini 1992, p. 83). The poet evokes a land or time of mis-devotion where orthodox faith has been forgotten to the point that it allows the lovers to become the deities of this conjectural world where traditional religion, whether Catholic or Protestant, has been replaced with a religion of Love. The second stanza closes with two lines devoted to a meta-poetical reference to «this paper» (l. 21) intended to teach «what miracles wee harmlesse lovers wrought» (l. 22). Following the poet's identification with Christ, «this paper» narrating miracles (the poem itself) appears as a sort of apocryphal Gospel, legitimately 'excessive' in its language and hyperboles, as we find out in the final stanza, where the miracle of lovers turns out to be ironically enough their chastity:<sup>5</sup>

First we loved well and faithfully,  
 Yet knew not what we loved, nor why;  
 Difference of sex we never knew,  
 No more than guardian angels do;  
 Coming and going we  
 Perchance might kiss, but not between those meals;  
 Our hands ne'er touch'd the seals,  
 Which nature, injured by late law, sets free.  
 These miracles we did; but now alas!  
 All measure, and all language, I should pass,  
 Should I tell what a miracle she was.  
 (ll. 23-32)

In this poetical space, parallel to the ordinary word, chastity can paradoxically exist only as the most unnatural of events, a «miracle». This final line adds support to the interpretation of the religious subtext as a blasphemous parody, where the figure of Christ (and his Word) is substituted

5 As for the possible interpretations of the last two lines, see Serpieri 1975, pp. 286-287.

by the poet (and his poem) only to display an unconvincing ‘address by counsel’ about an asexual angelic relationship (except for kisses) similar to that between Christ and Mary Magdalene.

It is worth underlining how this poem, contextualised in the seventeenth-century age of anxiety in which religious persecutions were under way and Catholicism was even punished with death, appears remarkably puzzling in its representation of the Catholic devotion to relics and at the same time more generally reveals Donne’s scepticism in exploiting and emptying orthodox Christian issues (first of all, the innocent relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene, one of the few saint recognised by the English Church) irrespective of their Catholic or Protestant source.

This is most evident in *The Canonization*, a poem in which a new love religion replaces the vacillating old religion thanks to a sacralisation celebrated by the poet-priest and performed in the text (about the poet-priest, see McNees 1992, p. 18). Thanks to the power of the poetical language that is the *medium* of a religious and also verbal transfiguration, here the lovers are shown in their alchemical sublimation from the sublunary world to (a parallel) Heaven. Like the flea, the lovers undergo a substantial transformation in the space of the poem, but the use of paradox and the competition between religious and poetical truth is far more articulated. The formal aspects of the text immediately inscribe it in the genre of the epithalamion, or as Rufini has suggested, of a crypto-epithalamion alluding to the distress caused by Donne’s own marriage to Ann More (Rufini 1992, p. 89). The reiteration of the word *Love* at the end of the first and last line of each stanza, and the number 5 that recurs in the number of stanzas (5 being the numerological nuptial union of 2 and 3, respectively symbols of the female and male quintessence) point to the theme of love and (the sacrament) of marriage as the *fil rouge* of the text. In the first stanza, the reader of the poem finds himself *in medias res* of a quarrel between an off-stage interlocutor and the poet:

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
 Or chide my palsie, or my gout,  
 My five gray hairees, or ruin’d fortune flout,  
 With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,  
 Take you a course, get you a place,  
 Observe his honour, or his grace,  
 Or the King’s reall, or his stamped face  
 Contemplate, what you will, approve,  
 So you will let me love.  
 Alas, alas, who is injur’d by my love?  
 What merchants ships have my sighs drown’d?  
 Who saies my teares have overflow’d his ground?

When did my colds a forward spring remove?  
 When did the heats which my veins fill  
 Adde one more to the plague Bill?  
 Soldiers finde warres, and Lawyers finde out still  
 Litigious men, which quarrels move,  
 Though she and I do Love.  
 (ll. 1-18)

The poet's voice seems to burst into the text against an interlocutor represented through a verbal metonymy, «your tongue» (l. 1), to defend his right to love and to reaffirm the importance of love against common people who prefer the favour of the King or money, «the King's reall, or his stamped face» (l. 7). In the second stanza, instead, the verbal structure completely relies on rhetorical questions, that is to say, on questions which do not expect any answer, and the aim of the poet is to sneer at all the hyperbolic conventions and stereotypes of the Petrarchan tradition in order to declare the innocence and 'harmless' nature of love.

In these first two stanzas, special attention must be paid to the pronominal aspect of the discourse of the poet, who adopts the first person singular (eight times in nine lines) and distinguishes between 'she' and 'I', located in a specular-opposite position in the final «Though she and I do love» (l. 18). Since the third stanza, a pronominal union discloses the 'union' of the lovers that will be shortly celebrated:

Call us what you will, wee are made such by love;  
 Call her one, mee another flye,  
 We'are Tapers too, and at our owne cost die,  
 And wee in us finde the Eagle and the Dove;  
 The Phoenix riddle hath more wit  
 By us, we two being one, are it,  
 So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,  
 Wee dye and rise the same, and prove  
 Mysterious by this love.  
 Wee can dye by it, if not live by love,  
 And if unfit for tombes and hearse  
 Our legend bee, it will bee fit for verse;  
 And if no peece of Chronicle wee prove,  
 We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;  
 As well a well wrought urne becomes  
 The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,  
 And by these hymnes, all shall approve  
 Us *Canoniz'd* for Love.  
 (ll. 19-35)

The third stanza, which is central in the whole stanzaic pattern, opens with plural forms of the first person, 'us'/'we', in which 'she' and 'I' are now «mingled». It is only the beginning of the alchemical climax culminating in the transformation of the lovers in the figure of the Phoenix that occupies the centre of the poem (see again Rufini 1992, p. 90). Interestingly, the intermediate figures of this process are «flies» and «tapers» (ll. 20, 21), both Renaissance symbols of lust, and the Eagle and the Dove, respectively Pagan symbols of Male and Female Virtues, but also, in the Christian tradition, of Christ (once again) and the Peace following the Flood. The three figures of the Eagle, the Dove and the Phoenix – considered by A.L. Clements as «advancing steps in the alchemical process (“flying eagle” and “Diana doves”) leading to the philosophers’ stone (“phoenix”)» (Clements 1990, p. 49) – contribute to suggesting the theme of the Resurrection as a pivotal question of the poem, even though once again it reveals itself to be a paradoxical mixture, a «riddle» (l. 23) of lustful and religious allusions. If the eagle was believed to periodically renew its plumage and was then adopted as symbol of the Resurrected Christ, and the dove is a symbol of the rebirth of the earth after the Flood, the image of the mythological bird able to rise from its own ashes also suggests the complete mystical sexual fusion of the sacralised lovers in the hermaphroditism usually associated with it. «By us, we two being one, are it, | So, to one neutrall thing both sexes fit» (ll. 24-25): the syntactical and pronominal patterns of these verses strengthen this interpretation: us/we become one/it, a singular entity whose paradoxical nature or riddle lies in its celebrating a sort of communion of the singular and plural, sexual and neutral, mystical and physical, religious and profane. The physical aspect of this communion emerges from the striking ambiguity we find in the lines «Wee dye and rise the same, and prove | Mysterious by this love» (ll. 26-27). It is well known that the use of the verb 'die' had a strong sexual connotation in the use of the time, alluding to orgasm, but its association with the verb 'rise', though alluding to resurrection, sheds an erotic and even obscene light on that «mystery» hinted at in the end of the stanza (on the sacramental connotation of «mysterious» associated to *mysterion*, see also Schwartz 2008).

In the fourth stanza, the poem celebrates the mysterious sacralisation of the lovers after their death and resurrection enabled by the religious and erotic imagery displayed by the poet. The paradoxical answer of the poet to the interdiction of (physical) love we read in the first two stanzas is the legitimate canonization of love in the fictional and unorthodox space of the poem: «if unfit for tombes or hearse | Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse» (ll. 29-30). Poetry will preserve and transmit their 'legend' (their 'life of saints'): not history or chronicles, but the pretty rooms of the sonnets (like the one we are reading) will be the hymns accompanying this rite of love sanctification. According to Brooks: «The poem is an instance of the

doctrine which it asserts; it is both the assertion and the realisation of the assertion. The poet has actually before our eyes built within the song the 'pretty rooms' with which he says the lovers can be content. The poem itself is the well-wrought urn which hold the lovers' ashes and which will not suffer in comparison with prince's 'halfe-acre tomb» (Brooks 1947, p. 17). Later, in opposition to Brooks' new critical approach, Jonathan Culler has proposed a deconstructionist interpretation of the poem as a «chain of discourses and representations» very different from Brooks' self-enclosed poem-urn (Culler 1982, pp. 201-205). As for our discourse, it is important to underline that these rooms are also the place where the lovers can build an eternal poetical 'truth' whose form reminds the religious ones, having these provided the rhetoric possibilities and cultural patterns to imagine a parallel world (the after-life) where lovers can be free.

Finally, in the last stanza the poet goes even further in his challenge to traditional religion and mimicking of its divine rhetoric, dramatising the invocation of the brand new saints:

And thus invoke us; You whom reverend love  
 Made one anothers hermitage;  
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage,  
 Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove  
 Into the glasses of your eyes,  
 (So made such mirrors, and such spies,  
 That they did all to you epitomize)  
 Countries, Townes, Courts: beg from above  
 A patterne of your love!  
 (ll. 37-45)

The poem ends with this absurd but still plausible conclusion - the canonization - made more likely thanks to the mise-en-scene of the invocation of the saints by a believer speaking in the poem. The shifting of the voice from the plural first person to an external voice paradoxically contributes to the objective 'poetical truth' of the situation and strengthens the blasphemous mimesis towards traditional religion: since the sacrifice of saints is an act of love, the deaths of the lovers are a copy of that sacrifice to be re-performed by the believers.

In the sceptical world of Donne, also saints' religious model has been discredited to the point of being erotically re-written. The traditional procedure of sanctification is emptied, and the orthodox figures are substituted by a 'representation' ('This stands for'), a fictional and puzzling copy of lost models. Even the world is reduced to a mere 'image' in the lovers' eyes at ll. 40-41.

This procedure is similar to the sacramental allusions in *The Flea*, and to the mimesis of Christ in *The Relique*: to use a religious form/model/pat-

tern and show its emptiness and abuse, and at the same time to express a nostalgia for that lost world of correspondences between words and things that the poet tries to restore through his own *organum*, poetry, and through a rhetorical figure, paradox, which is able to cancel reality and draw attention on that same cancelling. As Young well summarises, «what emerges is a view of poetry striving to capture in the spell of verbal form a sense of the mystery that was rapidly banished from the world» (Young 2000, p. 2).

By the end of the sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, Donne anticipates one of the main and enduring outcomes of the pervasive feeling of scepticism affecting the interpretation and representation of the world. As in *The Relique* and *The Canonization*, so increasingly in modern poetry, art becomes the only fictional shelter where the loss of religious faith can be provisionally compensated. This secularised shelter can only be built through an awareness of the coeval (and since then unsolved) epistemological crisis affecting the process of communication (Serpieri 1975). Following Kenneth Burke's suggestion that speaking about God (He being *Logos*) is always a metalinguistic reflection about language itself (Burke 1970), it is essential to consider the seventeenth-century religious crisis as namely a crisis of the Word, and of its power to tell and preserve truth. This accounts for the great emphasis on the witty unreliability and logic frailties of language in Donne's love poems, but also of the corrosive use of paradox in the literature of his time: the rising scepticism towards the old religion finds its best ally in this figure of thought and 'excess' which cancels the delusive religious content and reduces it to a mere persuasive form suitable to shift what Ricoeur called the 'limit-experiences' from the reign of God to the field of worldly experience.

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