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John Donne's Sermons: Paradox as a Fundamental Structural Device

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In his writings both secular and devotional, John Donne often employed paradox, which is regarded as his great achievement. There is a tendency to consider him one of the first major English authors in discovering the possibilities of paradox as a fundamental structural device. The paradoxical quality of his writing is in accordance both with Christian theology and his poetical gifts. The poet-preacher imposes on the reader/listener an intellectual thrust in order to achieve a sudden loss of mental sight but only to have it revived. As a result, the meaning is not lost but gained as more intense and valued on the Metaphysical level. Donne's sermons reveal the appropriateness of the paradoxical structure for the theopoetic and homiletic function. He invents highly individual paradoxes while wrestling with the unavoidable paradoxes of human history. Donne's bold paradoxes encourage the pursuit of perfection in the hope of salvation, thus serving as a dramatic embodiment of highest spiritual aspirations.

In his writings, both secular and devotional, John Donne, the English Metaphysical poet-preacher, often employed paradox, which is, actually, regarded as his great achievement. There is a tendency among the literary critics to consider him one of the first major English authors in discovering the possibilities of paradox as a fundamental structural device. However, at the beginning of his career as a prose writer, Donne used to construct short literary pieces modelled on the Italian type of *paradox* (Malloch 1956: 202). This flippant genre born in Italy is a peculiarly Renaissance product that, according to A. E. Malloch, in popularity "rivalled the epigram, perhaps even the sonnet" at the time (Malloch 1956: 191). As a rule, such individual exercises in casuistry have the most extravagant titles, e. g. *A Paradoxe Proving That Baldnesse Is Much Better Than Bushie Haire; That Only Cowards Dare Dye; That Old Men Are More Fantastique Than Yonge; A Defence of Women's Inconstancy*, etc.

Here is one of the most challenging cases:

Of our Powers, remembering kills our Memory. Of affections, lusting our Lust. Of Vertues, giving kills Liberality. And if these things kill themselves, they do it in their best and supreme perfection: for after perfection immediately follows excess: which changes the natures and the names, and makes them not the same things. If then the best things kill themselves soonest (for no perfection endures) and all things labour to this perfection, all travaile to their owne Death: Yea the frame of the whole World (if it were possible for God to be idle) yet because it begun must dye: Then in this idleness imagined in God, what could kill the world but it selfe, since out of it nothing is. (Donne 1987: 37)

In one of his letters, Donne, still a young poet, makes the following observations concerning the function of these belying compositions:

Only in obedience I send you some of my Paradoxes. I love you and myself and them too well to send them willingly, *for they carry with them a confession of their lightness* and your trouble and my shame. But indeed *they were made rather to deceive time than her daughter Truth-* although they have been written in an age when anything is strong enough to overthrow her. If *they make you to find better reasons against them, they do their office:* for they are but swaggerers, quiet enough if you resist them. If perchance they be pretty gilt, that is their best, for they are not hatched. *They are rather alarms, to truth to arm her than enemies, and they have only this advantage to scape from being called ill things, that they are nothings.* Therefore take heed of allowing any of them, lest you make another. (*A Letter possibly to Sir Henry Wotton* (1600), in: Donne 1992: 64-65)

Donne specifies them as light things, more than that, nothings, since the arguments that are at their core come out to be but distortions of arguments. Paradoxes have no argumentative substance as such; nonetheless, they retain the nature of statements of arguments. The method lying behind is that of the deconstruction of the generally accepted opinions or truths. Furthermore, though the paradox misrepresents truth, it escapes communicating (or depicting) a lie. However, this is possible only by resisting truth that ought to be done by the reader as a participant in the offered game: if the paradoxes provoke “better reasons against them, they do their office.” In fact, the paradox is a challenge of scandalous quality (*an alarm*, as Donne puts it) that evokes the vitality of the mind in its attempt to reconstruct the conceptual framework of truth. In one of his sermons, when speaking of the nature of women (whether a woman was created according to God’s image or “to man’s was made” (Donne 1992: 350)), Donne stresses the “extravagancy of Paradoxes”. He calls them “singularities” produced “out of a petulancy and wantonnesse of wit” always causing a doubt, “almost an assurance in the negative [or opposite]” (Donne 1987: 305). It should be emphasized that the paradoxical discourse lacks conceptual foundation, the focus being laid on mere verbalism. According to Malloch’s insight, in the paradox, “the argument lives only in the particular words of the author. Remove or change those words and the argument vanishes” (Malloch 1956: 194). On the other hand, it requires careful attention of the author to the proper formulation of the discrete statements to gain the equivocal effect. Equivocation here goes hand in hand with mockery and teasing thus allowing the reader no neutrality, either intellectual or emotional. As Donne claims in his letter, the goal of a paradoxer is not to deceive the truth but pretend the deceptiveness in order to force the audience into awareness of new qualities in things or hitherto unseen relationships between things. The ludic tone of the paradox creates the

detachment from the personal, as the author does not actually believe in what he says. Rather, his aim is to employ "falsehood as the cause of knowledge" (Malloch 1956: 196). However, the Renaissance paradoxes frequently display an inflection of irony, which shows that "the genre of paradox [...] is closely connected with the literature of scepticism" (Malloch 1956: 202). This idea may be well illustrated by Donne's paradox *That Good is More Common than Evill*:

I have not beene so pitifully tired with any vanity as with silly old men exclaiming against our times and extolling their owne. Alas they betray themselves. For if the times be chang'd their manners have chang'd them [...] For indeed no new thing is done in the world. All things are what and as they were; and good is as ever it was, most plenteous, and must of necessity be more common than evill, because it hath this for Nature [...] to be common [...] For evill manners are parents of good Lawes. And in every evill there is an excellence, which in common speech we call good. (Donne 1987: 45)

The sceptic Renaissance mind finds this method self-destructed. Consider Michel de Montaigne:

This fencer's trick [i.e., the paradox] should not be employed except as a last resource. It is a desperate thrust, in which you have to abandon your weapon in order to disarm your adversary, and a secret ruse which should be practiced seldom and with reserve. It is a very foolhardy thing to lose your life in order to kill another. (Montaigne, *Apology for Raimond Sebond*, cited in: Screech 2000: 103)

In the Renaissance genre, the paradoxical mode is an instrument of melancholy; therefore, irony prevails in it. However, the final effect obtained in the homiletic discourse rests on awed wonder and startling revelation, though, in the course, wonder is mixed with irony. Donne's style and manner in creating paradoxes, the death paradox in particular are eccentrically individual. They also betray the imagination emancipated by scepticism (Carey 1985: 253). Obviously, the preacher was enjoyed by the audience whose taste and wit were extravagant.

Originally *para doxa* was merely a view that contradicted an accepted opinion. Its etymology refers to an utterance that is beyond belief, i. e. against what one should normally expect (*The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* 1994: 328). Nonetheless, it provokes closer inspection, which leads to the final reconciliation of the conflicting opposites. Such a mode of understanding, surprisingly self-contradictory in its character, is traced in Donne's sermonic theopoetics: the homilies reveal the preacher's intellectual engagement through paradox. Here spiritual devotion is allied with intellectual ingenuity.

By use of the paradox, the devotional author strives to bring belief and religious emotion into the realm of the expressible. Donne's Metaphysical wit enables him to reveal great paradoxes of Christian faith. The paradoxical mode of his writing keeps in step with Christian theology, which recognizes the paradoxical character of human life and his poetical gifts. Donne relishes a profound intellectual pleasure by challenging the reader's/listener's habits of thought.

Sometimes the purpose of the Donnean paradox is merely to exhibit a cleverly falsified argument, whether in verse or in prose. On the whole, discord for him had a special charm, to say more, in it, the poet-preacher discovered the mysterious dynamism of creative energy. One of his *paradoxi* says:

[...] because [of] the contrary repugnances and adverse fightings of the Elements in my body, my body increaseth; and whilst I differ from common opinions, by this discord the number of my Paradoxes increaseth. [...] Discord is never so barren that it affords no fruit, for the fall of one State is at worst the increase of another; because it is as impossible to find a discommodity without any advantage as corruption without generation. (Donne 1987: 46)

Obviously, the paradox reinforces the text. At first sight or hearing, it evokes a sense of absolute absurdity. Consider: “all forms, uniform deformity / Doth cover” (*The Storm*, lines 69-70)¹. The reader is forced to cope with the material that is clearly self-contradictory. Moreover, in the given case, one comes across the paradoxical knot that is tied by the technique of a pun. Pointed antithesis, in its turn, is achieved by use of the antonymous prefixes *uni-* and *de-*.

The paradox creates logical tension by unsettling the mind through the startling sense of incongruity and disproportion. Paradoxical discourse never promises an ordinary gentle knocking on ear-gate, but rather, an intrusion, a thrust. Since the aim of each paradox is to arouse wonder by “violent imputation” (Brooks 1981: 261), the meaning is uncovered by rolling down over one’s head. Still, the paradoxer manipulates a chaotic material that is potentially fraught with a code of order. Consider:

This, as an amber drop enwraps a bee,
Covering discovers your quick soul; that we
May in your through- shine front your heart’s thoughts see.
(*To the Countess of Bedford*, lines 25-27)

The paradoxical mode of writing could have tempted Donne as a challenge of making something out of nothing, giving utterance to an argument that is not there. Indeed, his admiration for the divine creativity based on the principle *ex nihilo* is well known.

Though the reader’s first reaction is that of rejection, however, an element of play, which in its essence is dramatic, does not allow an escape. He gets involved and is, to quote de Montaigne, “disarmed” (Montaigne, *Apology for Raimond Sebond*, cited in: Screech 2000: 203). The audience being disarmed, the truth is armed (“they [paradoxes] are alarms to truth to arm her” (Donne 1992: 65)). Thus, the process of reading turns into wrestling for sense in spite of nonsense. Consider: “[...] the poor do not so much need the rich, as the rich need the poor [...]” (Donne 1992: 396).

Mental pleasure is achieved by the recognition that seeming absurdity may signify truth. According to George Santayana, “contradiction means only variety, and variety means spontaneity, wealth of resource and a nearer approach to total adequacy” (Santayana 1981: 196). Hence logical inconsistency grows into emotional consistency. Another aspect of importance here is a sudden loss of mental sight when encountered with the paradoxical text but only to have it revived: blindness is necessary for evoking an insight. In other words, it initiates viewing one’s life in a blinding light. Neat paradoxical statements are always valid. They are invented to overcome the banal contents of life by reshaping a traditional mode of thinking and, to put it in Northrop Frye’s wording, “forc[ing] out of the normal channels of meaning” (Frye 1992: 228). Since the paradox is the method of translation of the transcendental into human, the paradoxical language demonstrates the Metaphysical leap, as in the case of Donne’s oxymoronic explanation: “O miserable abundance, O beggarly riches” (Donne 1992: 337).

Donne’s paradox of time is closely related to the paradox of death: “we come into a world that lasts, but we last not” (Donne 1992: 404). Time imposes physical bounds and

limited space on man. Instead of an evolution towards fullness of perfection it offers loss and decay. Hence truth and beauty are both circumscribed by time and death:

I need not call in new philosophy to prove That nothing upon earth is permanent; The assertion will stand of itself till some man assign me something that a man may rely upon, and find permanent. Consider the greatest bodies upon earth, The monarchies; Objects, which one would think, destiny would not observe or could not discern; And yet destiny (to speak to a natural man) and God (to speak to a Christian) is no more troubled to make monarchy ruinous, than to make a hair grey. Nay, nothing needs to be done to either by God, or destiny; a monarchy will ruin as a hair will go grey, of itself. It is so in the conditions of men too; a merchant condensed, kneaded and packed up in a great estate becomes a Lord; And a merchant rarefied, blown up by a perfidious factor, or by a riotous son, evaporates into air, into nothing, and is not seen. And if there were anything permanent and durable in this world, yet we got nothing by it, because howsoever that might last in itself, yet we could not last to enjoy it; If our goods were not amongst movables, yet we ourselves are; if they could stay with us, yet we cannot stay with them. (Donne 1992: 374)

The seventeenth-century sensibility displays obsession with time as an “emulous” (Donne 1992: 50) destructor of perfection, thus, “the ruin, a sign of the transient character of human endeavour was a primary allegory of the melancholic mentality” (Buci-Glucksmann 1994: 69). The main principles ruling in time are those of divisibility, discontinuity, and divorce; here the balance between the body and the spirit is destroyed, and “division” is “thy happiest harmony” (*The Progress of the Soul*, line 92). Life is irony, and time is a kind of betrayal, since one never receives things at the proper moment:

Honours, pleasures, possessions, presented to us out of time in our decrepit and distasted and inapprehensive age, lose their office, and lose their name. They are not honours to us that shall never appear nor come abroad into the eyes of the people to receive honour from them who give it; nor pleasures to us who have lost our sense to taste them, nor possessions to us, who are departing from the possession of them. Youth is their critical day; that judges them, that denominates them, that inanimates and informs them, and makes them honours, and pleasures, and possessions; and when they come in an inapprehensive age, they come as a cordial when the bell rings out, as a pardon when the head is off. (Donne 1992: 341)

Limited are the objects of ordinary mundane experience and painfully fragmented are the glimpses of joy:

Those false happinesses which he hath in this world, have their times, and their seasons, and their critical days; and they are judged and denominated according to the times when they befall us. What poor elements are our happinesses made of, if time, time which we can scarce consider to be any thing, be an essential part of our happiness! If this imaginary half-nothing, time, be of the essence of our happiness, how can they be thought durable? Time is not so; how can they be thought to be? Time is not so; not so considered in any of the parts thereof [...] How busy and perplexed a cobweb is the happiness of man here, that must be made up with a watchfulness to lay hold upon occasion, which is but a little piece of that which is nothing, time! (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, Meditation IV*, in: Donne 1992: 340- 341)

One cannot escape it even in the context of love where “any man [...] come[s] in that loves us not, [and] go[es] from us that does” (Donne 1987: 142). Nothing is materially permanent and spiritually perfect – impermanence is found in the social body and imperfection in faith:

But when we consider with a religious seriousness the manifold weakness of the strongest devotions, it is a sad consideration. [In the time of prayer] I throw myself down in my chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his angels, thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his angels, for the noise of the fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door. I talk on, in the same posture of praying; as though I prayed to God. Sometimes I find that I had forgot what I was about. A straw under my knee, a noise in my ear, a light in my eye, an anything, a nothing, a fancy, a chimera in my brain, troubles me [...] So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spiritual things, perfect in this world. (Donne 1992: 373- 374)

Donne also points to the paradoxality of the present by stressing the unbearable tension between *not now* and *not yet*:

All things are done in time [...] it may seem to have three stations, past, present, and future, yet the first and the last of these are not (one is *not now*, and the other is *not yet*). (Donne 1992: 340)

In the present, one has but “a memory of yesterday’s pleasures” and experiences “a fear of tomorrow’s dangers” (Donne 1992: 373- 374), a horror of turning into nothing:

Of nothing he made us and we strive too,
To bring ourselves to nothing back.
(*An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary*, lines 156- 157)

Time brings both perfection and corruption, which give dramatic emphasis to ever-moving, ever-changing hostile flow of life that ends in “the most deadly and peremptory nullification of man” (Donne 1992: 409). Time is strong, and a human being is weak. Handicapped by the spatio-temporal frame man experiences desperate inability to achieve a harmonious sense of belonging. Thereby his earthly reality is marked by the fatal division of his selfhood in every situation:

I am not all here, I am here now preaching upon this text, and I am at home in my library considering whether St Gregory, or St Jerome, have said best of this text before. I am here speaking to you, and yet I consider by the way, in the same instant, what it is likely you will say to one another, when I have done. You are not here neither, you are here now, hearing me, and yet you think you could have heard some other doctrine of downright predestination, and reprobation roundly delivered somewhere else with more edification to you; [...] you are here, and you remember your selves that now ye think of it, this had been the fittest time [...] to have made such and such a private visit; and because you would be there, you are there. I cannot say, you cannot say so perfectly, so entirely now, as at the Resurrection, *Ego*, I am here. (Donne 1992: 294)

On the other hand, in Donne’s Metaphysical philosophy, paradoxically, it is man who degenerates time: “we cry out upon the illness of the times, and we make the times ill” (381).

Time is neutral without the participation of man and offers just "a bare being" (386). However, sinful human nature ("how poor, and inconsiderable a rag of this world is man" (393)) makes things get worse:

There is a sensible decay and age in the whole frame of the world. The seasons of the year irregular and distempered; the sun fainter and languishing; men less in Stature [...] Every year, new sorts, new species of worms and flies, and sicknesses, which argue more and more putrefaction of which they are engendered. (Donne 1992: 363)

Both poetry and homiletic prose yield exasperation at the failure to escape from time: "Mankind decays too soon/ We are scarcely our Fathers' shadows cast at noon" (*First Anniversary*, lines 143-144). Though one cannot survive in time, it is exclusively in it that man is redeemed as well as damned. Hence time carries a double function: it leads both to death and to eternal life. Thus, the audience is presented with the paradoxical statement that claims – the last minute is eternity: "This minute that is left, is that eternities which we speak of" (Donne 1987: 272). Donne's paradoxical assertion that time is "sealed with an everlastingness" (368), since the joy of life will not be interrupted or discontinued by death, embraces another Christian paradox, that of weakness of power and power of weakness. The preacher argues that "God's servants lose nothing by dying" (379). Moreover, in time and not beyond it, evil itself undergoes a paradoxical metamorphosis: it is transformed into an instrument for good, and "rude incongruity" (324) is finally reconciled.

For Donne, life in the sinful world is imprisonment, and death is liberty: "Death delivers every man from his prison, from the encumbrances of his body" (266). The paradox is designed for emphasizing man's encirclement in time (*from – to*), thus, actually, life cannot be associated with spiritual freedom. It is death that offers an entrance into eternity: "But think that death hath now enfranchised thee, / Thou hast thy [...] liberty" (*Of the Progress of the Soul*, lines 179-180).

Though in one of his sermons the Dean of St. Paul's insists that "contradictions have falsehood, and so imply impotency" (Donne 1992: 375), still his most enjoyed method of argumentation is based, to use Malloch's phrasing, on "drawing truth from error" (Malloch 1956: 196). A similar (to some extent) technique, in the critic's suggestion, could be found by Donne in Scholastic *quaestio disputata*, especially in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, in medieval *sic et non* teaching and John of Salisbury whom the poet-preacher associated directly with the paradoxical mode of thinking. Traditionally, the disputed problem-article offers a title in a form of the question *whether this is that*, and the like. First come the objections to the statement in doubt which evoke uncertainty and then the *sic* arguments proceed. Finally, the article is crowned with the *I answer* section. Malloch suggests the idea that the Renaissance paradoxical scheme could have developed from the negation mode of *quaestio disputata*. The main difference, however, between the paradox and the disputed question lies in the stimulation of the recipient consciousness: "the reader of the disputed question participates as audience while the reader of the paradox as actor" (Malloch 1956: 196).

Intricate though Donne's paradoxes are yet never degenerate into, to put it into Ramsey's wording, "merely rhetorical extravaganzas" (Ramsey 1974: 145). In his poetico-religious and homiletic writings, the paradoxical mode encourages intellectual endeavour and thus is an active process leading to reconciliation of reason and faith. Moreover, the paradoxical text deprives the listener/reader of the possibility to guess a further progress of the narrative.

In its movement from meaning to significance, Donne's sermonic theopoetics incorporates the modes of extravagance and challenge. Here reconciliation and relief are

offered by having unsettled the mind of the listener/reader. Since the divine word is concealed in the word of man, the task of the preacher is to penetrate the boundaries of experience, which are formed by the refractory and impatient nature of human beings. Thus, Donne's homiletic attempts are both thrustings at the narrow gate of verbal expression and, to quote Thomas Carew, "holy Rapes [committed] upon our Will" (*An Elegy upon the Death of the Deane of Pauls Dr John Donne*, line 17).

Endnote

- ¹ This and other poem quotations are taken from: Donne, John (1996 [1994]) *John Donne. The Complete English Poems*, Patrides C. A. (ed.), London: Everyman.

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