

John Donne's «A Valediction: of weeping»

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The poetry of John Donne (1572–1631) is rarely easily accessible – Ben Jonson actually claimed that Donne's poems would «perish for lack of being understood». And T. S. Eliot, in his famous article on the metaphysical poets, says of the poem at hand: «A Valediction: of weeping», that it «requires considerable agility on the part of the reader».¹ Whether or not this particular reading shows «considerable agility» remains to be seen. It is, of course, not a comprehensive analysis of the poem, nor an exhaustive presentation of Donne, but an attempt at looking at the rhetorical figure of conceit in the poem.

Donne has been called the greatest non-dramatic Renaissance poet in England, and his poetry, commonly associated with the so-called metaphysical poetry, is among the most well-known from the period. The term metaphysical was not originally employed to suggest something philosophical or profound, but rather the academic or pedantic. The term was first used by John Dryden in his *Discourse Concerning Satire* from 1693, in which he describes Donne's poetry in a rather unkind manner:

He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign: and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations

¹ T.S. Eliot: «The Metaphysical Poets», originally in the *TLS* 1921, reprinted in the Norton Anthology I, 2177–2183.

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of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love.

«A valediction: of weeping» is found in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* – a collection of secular poetry published as late as 1633, but the majority of the poems are probably written in the 1590s. As the title implies, the poem is a farewell (cf. the Italian *valedicere*, to say farewell), and it is one of four «Valediction» poems.

Theodore Redpath, in his edition of Donnes *Songs and Sonnets*, has a note on the title of the poem: «Not 'A farewell to weeping', but 'A farewell: on weeping'» (Redpath: 253). The title, then, should imply a farewell prompted by weeping, or, more specifically, by tears falling from the poet's eyes, and not a poem where the speaker bids his tears farewell. We will return to the title and discuss its implications later on, but there can be little doubt that the poet's tears are what constitute one of the elaborate conceits of the poem.

The term conceit has taken on several layers of meaning over the centuries. While the conceit's original meaning was merely «concept» or «image» (cf. the older spelling concept), it came to be the term for figures of speech which establish a striking parallel between two very dissimilar objects or situations.¹ It is a rhetorical figure which is very prominent in Renaissance poetry, both in the Petrarchan love poetry (confer the Italian *conchetto*), and in Metaphysical poetry. One often speaks of Petrarchan and metaphysical conceits as two different realizations of the figure. The conceit has been both admired and scorned, but both the admirers and the critics of the conceit seem to agree that that conceits are «far-fetched metaphors». Ben Jonson, in his *Timber, or Discoveries* (1641),

¹ This discussion is based on several reference books and other discussions of the term, e.g. Abram's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, Donker and Muldrow: *Dictionary of Literary-rhetorical Conventions of the English Renaissance*, Ruthven: *The Conceit* (Critical Idiom-series).

calls them just this: «metaphors far-fet», in a derogatory sense, while in 1675, John Cleveland was regarded the greatest English poet by Edward Phillips because «his conceits were out of the common road, and wittily far-fetched» (*Theatrum Poetarum*). Perhaps the most well-known derogatory view of the metaphysical conceit is found in Samuel Johnson, who in his essay on Cowley and metaphysical wit from 1779 described the metaphysical conceit, or «wit», as

a kind of *discordia concors* (harmonious discord), a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. [...] The most heterogenous ideas are yoked by violence together.

And T.S. Eliot, in his famous essay vindicating the metaphysical poets, says of Donne that he employ[s] a device which is sometimes considered characteristically “metaphysical”; the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which the ingenuity can carry it.

The metaphysical conceit, then, is characterized by its *discordia concors*, and also by an expanding and contracting movement in the figure. Let us now try to approach what thematically distinguishes the metaphysical conceits, and hence, Donne’s, from the ones found in previous poetry. Conceit, after all, is not a new figure, but is found frequently in the Petrarchan Elizabethan poetry before Donne.

Rosemond Tuve defines the metaphysical conceit as a logically complex rhetorical figure:

I would suggest that an image based simultaneously on a number of predicaments or common places in logic has a particular character which is formally distinguishable, is naturally allied to certain types of function [...], and is stylistically very striking. I would suggest that a «metaphysical conceit» is just such a figure, framed with especial subtlety. Indeed the formal defining element in any conceit [...] seems to me to be this use of *multible*

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logical bases, upon all of which the comparison obtains.
(Tuve: 264)

And the difference between the Elizabethan and the metaphysical poetry, according to Tuve, lies in the degree of logical complexity:

Puzzling differences of effect between «Elizabethan» and «Metaphysical» conceits are often explicable as differences between extended pursuit of a simple logical parallel and extended pursuit of a likeness by basing it on several logical parallels. (Tuve: 294)

We can see this difference if we compare the metaphysical poetry to Petrarchan. To put it crudely, in Petrarchan poetry, physical qualities are described in terms of physical objects, for instance in the praising of the poet's lady's beauty as found in the *blazon*, or catalogue, where the poet lists the beauty of his mistress' different physical features: forehead, eyes, mouth, teeth, and so on. Here, the hyperbolic comparison is often taken to its extreme,¹ but the elements all remain physical – physical beauty is compared to physical objects. In contrast, according to Donker and Muldrow's *Dictionary of Literary-rhetorical Conventions of the English Renaissance*:

[...] the conceits of the metaphysical poets utilize knowledge and experience from many areas – the highly learned and esoteric as well as the surprisingly mundane. Typically, the metaphysical conceit avoids images with established poetic association, such as those of classical mythology and of the Petrarchan tradition; but when it does make use of such imagery, the metaphysical conceit tends to stress a startling resemblance.

¹ Cf. for instance Thomas Campion's «There Is a Garden in Her Face», and the parody of the love poetry *blazon* in Shakespeare's Sonnet 130: «My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing like the Sun»

In metaphysical poetry, then, the poems bring together elements from very dissimilar spheres in a way that is new. To describe love, elements from the abstract, or «metaphysical» world is utilized, and the conceits of for instance Donne therefore often seem harder to grasp, or require more thought, than previous love poetry. If we return for a moment to Dryden's critique of Donne's poetry, we remember that one of his objections is that Donne «affects the metaphysics» – he uses abstract and «learned» comparisons – in *amorous* poetry. This is a novel aspect – Donne writes of love in terms of astrology, astronomy, alchemy, mathematics and logic.

Let us now turn to «A Valediction: of weeping», and try to follow the movements of the poet's tears in the poem. They start out as a conventional sign of grief triggered by the imminent separation of two lovers: «Let me pour forth/my tears before thy face, while I stay here [= while I am still here]». These tears are then transformed into mirrors: In them, the poet actually sees the face of his beloved. In turn, this image transforms the tears into coins, the image of the mistress being their stamp. As critics have pointed out, this transformation is in itself a very elaborate one: «Such an extravagant conceit would have been a stopping point for most readers, but for Donne it is only the occasion for extending the metaphor [...]» (Ruoff:117)

What has been said to generally characterize conceit, is that the slightest resemblance between two elements is enough to develop an elaborate comparison. What seems to trigger the development of the tear in this poem, is its physical shape: Its *roundness* is what makes it take on new meaning. The round tear is made into a round coin and given value by its impression. The next stanza opens with another similar shape: the globe. And here, the very shape is actually emphasized: «On a round ball...».

The globe is nothing but an empty ball until the workman (the artificer, or map-maker) pastes maps on it («lays copies»).

But when the workman has laid the maps, or copies, on the ball, it suddenly becomes the whole world: «that which was nothing is made all». In the same way, the poet's tears are made all. For they bear his mistress' portrait, and his mistress is everything to him. So when his tears contain her portrait, they contain the whole world, thus each tear, too, becomes «a globe, yea world». This image is by no means limited to this particular poem, it is found frequently in Donne's poetry. The beloved, or rather, the *unity* of two lovers, the glory of *requited* love, is equalled with the entire world – and the whole world is made as small as the two lovers.¹

Stanza three also transforms the poet's mistress. She is not just his world, she is his heaven (last line). So when she too bursts into tears and her tears mix with the poet's, it follows that her tears wash away his – they «overflow» the entire world that has been (to some extent physically) created by her own image. This transformation is an ingenuous one, for it also allows the poem to go even further in its description of the mistress. What has the power to «draw waters» on earth, what controls ebb and flow, is the moon. And his mistress is even more than the moon, because she not only controls the water already in the world, as does the moon, but has the power to «draw up» new seas.

We see, then, how one single tear is transformed into a coin, then into the globe, and finally into the world, and how the mistress' tears are given the power to physically destroy the poet's whole world. The mistress thus becomes both creator

¹ In his images of the lovers as the world, Donne frequently employs the newly discovered world, the Americas. But this new world is often deprived of its newness in Donne: It then turns out that everything new is found in the old world, and especially within the microcosmos that the two lovers constitute. Thus everything is the same, and everything is different. There *is* a new world, but it is the same as the old, everything new is already seen in the old. This contradictory development seems to characterize Donne's poetry (see for instance «The Sunne Rising», «The Good-Morrow»).

and destroyer, as love in the poem is both life, when the lovers are together, and death, when they are apart.

Let us now return to the title of the poem: it is a farewell. And from line two, we may safely deduct that it is the poet who is going away, not the mistress («whilst I stay here»). In stanza three, the poem reestablishes the initial valediction situation by drawing attention to what lies ahead, namely a voyage. In stanza three we learn that the poet is leaving his mistress to go to sea:

Weep me not dead, in thine arms, but forbear
To teach the sea, what it may do too soon;
Let not the wind
Example find
To do me more harm than it purposeth;

Perhaps this stanza questions Redpath's claim that the title «A Farewell: of Weeping» is unambiguously to be read as a farewell *on* weeping. For what starts out as a request to be allowed to weep («Let me pour forth/My tears»), is via a wonderfully constructed conceit transformed into the conclusion that this weeping does more harm than good – that this should, indeed, be a farewell *to* weeping as well.

And this highly conceited poem, I would argue, is also a poem that draws attention to itself as conceited. It is a poem that seems to be aware of its own elaborateness, and thus undermines much of the critique of this conceited style. If we turn to stanza two, we find that something very interesting happens at the centre of the poem. The artificer, when pasting maps unto a globe,

make[s] that, which was nothing, all,
So doth each tear,
Which thee doth wear,
A globe, yea world by that impression grow
[my italics]

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What is the poem actually saying here? This is, of course, a praise of the mistress, who has the power to make whole worlds, but could we not also read this as a comment on the poem itself? If the central conceit of the poem is the tear transformed, is not the lines telling us that this tear is transformed from nothing into everything a possible ironic comment (conscious or not) on the efforts made in order to create this conceit and follow it through? In having as its very centre its own far-fetchedness, in actually telling the reader that it is now making nothing into everything, the poem seems to draw attention to the conceit as a rhetorical figure, and as such a purely literary construct. And in doing so, the poem perhaps also draws attention to its own status as a literary and rhetorical construct.

A Valediction: of Weeping

Let me pour forth
My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;
Fruits of much grief they are, emblems of more,
When a tear falls, that thou falls which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a diverse shore.

On a round ball
A workman that has copies by, can lay
An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing, All,
So doth each tear,
Which thee doth wear,
A globe, yea world by that impression grow,
Till thy tears mixed with mine do overflow
This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven dissolved
so.

O more than Moon,
Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere,
Weep me not dead, in thine arms, but forbear
To teach the sea, what it may do too soon;
Let not the wind
example find
To do me more harm, than it purposeth;
Since thou and I sigh one another's breath,
Whoe'er sighs most, is cruellest, and hastes the other's
death.

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