

The Internal Conflict
of
John Donne

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ID 499
May 20, 1983

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To read the poetry of John Donne, it seems that there must have been two men writing under the same name. It is as though the youthful, sensuous Donne ceased to exist and was replaced by a sober, devout double. The contrast between these two John Donnes is striking as can be seen in Donne's poetry as well as his biography. This contrast is the source of much speculation as to the source and reasons for Donne's seemingly sudden metamorphosis. It seems that the change came from a combination of Donne's character, his background, and the events of his life. It was determined by factors both within and beyond his control. This study of the intense struggle within Donne and his resulting change will discuss the various reasons behind the conflict as well as the effect of Donne's internal struggle upon his poetry.

To begin with, it may be helpful to discuss some relevant aspects of Donne's life and family background. John Donne was born in London in 1571. He was the son of John and Elizabeth Donne. His family background is important to this study since the Donnes and Heywoods (his mothers's family) were devout Catholics living in Anglican London. At that time, Roman Catholics were subject to considerable restrictions and biases. In fact, Donne related his own family's martyrdom in the preface to Pseudo-Martyr in which he said that "No family (which is not of far larger extent and greater branches) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes for obeying the teachers of Roman doctrine."¹

Because of the restrictions placed upon Roman Catholics, Donne was sent to Oxford at age twelve. It was fairly common for young Catholics to be sent to the universities at an early age because a professing Catholic was not allowed to hold a university degree, and since the Oath of Supremacy, which stated that the king was the rightful head

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of the church, did not have to be taken until the age of sixteen, many Catholic youngsters were able to obtain degrees before being forced to profess their religious beliefs. However, Donne was not given a degree after four years at Oxford, and in 1588, he left Hart Hall.²

The next three years of Donne's life are the subject of some scholarly controversy. However, that is of little importance to this study. It is generally agreed that Donne travelled some in the years between his leaving Oxford and his acceptance at Thavies Inn to study law in 1591. In 1592 he transferred to Lincoln's Inn where he remained until 1596.³ Here he resumed his study of the law until, as Izaak Walton states in his biography of Donne, "he, being then unresolved what religion to adhere to, and considering how much it concerned his soul to choose the most orthodox, did therefore...presently lay aside all study of the law...and began seriously to survey the body of Divinity."⁴ This is the first evidence of Donne's shift from Roman allegiance. The progression of this shift is unclear, but it ended with Donne being ordained as an Anglican priest.

This serious consideration of theological matters may also have been the beginning of the internal conflict of Donne. For, although he devoted much time to study and contemplation, he was devoted as strongly to the sensual pleasures available to a young man in London. He was said to spend much of his non-scholastic time "writing verses, going to plays, falling in and out of love."⁵ This shows that at an early age Donne was able to deal with religious and secular matters.

Donne's ability to deal with both the spiritual and the sensual world almost simultaneously seems to arise from the way in which Donne viewed and approached matters of interest to him. Leishman points this out when he

speaks of Donne leading a "very intense and varied life, and throwing himself with characteristic energy and wholeness into whatever part he chose to play."⁶ Donne was a man unable to take things lightly. Whatever he "threw himself into"- his studies, his art, theology, or his search for sensual pleasure- he did it whole-heartedly. And, amazingly, he was able to continue in this fashion until his marriage in 1601.⁷

Donne enjoyed great fortune during his days at Lincoln's Inn. Besides being a social success, he had inherited a large sum of money and was rising rapidly in courtly society. He had been employed as the secretary to Lord Egerton which was considered a stepping stone to higher jobs in the government.⁸ However, Donne's immoderate heart proved to be his demise as he fell helplessly in love with Anne More, who was staying in the Egerton household. Donne and Anne were secretly married in 1601 when Donne was twenty-nine and Anne was only seventeen.⁹

When Anne's father, Sir George More, discovered his daughter's marriage, he had Donne fired and jailed for marrying a minor without parental consent.¹⁰ Leishman sums up the consequences of Donne's marriage when he writes, "seldom, perhaps, has a single action so completely altered the course and direction of a life."¹¹ However, Donne himself summed his plight up best in an epigram to a letter that he sent to his wife which said simply, "John Donne, Anne Donne, undone."¹²

Though this tragic episode did not prove to be the depth of Donne's despair, he soon received a brief rest from hardship. Sir Thomas More forgave his new son and desparately tried to make amends by having Donne reinstated as Egerton's secretary. Anne and John Donne were reunited. It seemed as though their shared hardship might prove to strengthen their relationship and that their bad fortune had ended. But it was not to be.¹³

Sickness invaded the Donne household. It took two of Donne's children and broke Anne's spirit. The children that survived strained Donne's resources. Earlier in his life, opportunistic practicality had caused Donne to accept the Anglican church.¹⁴ Faced with financial and domestic problems, his practicality dominated again, as Helen White explains:

It was that practical common sense... that made him realize at last that he must soon have some firm ground under his feet if he were going to fulfill his duty to his wife and children....When in 1614 James I... made clear that there was advancement for Donne in the Church but nowhere else, Donne bowed to the inevitable.¹⁵

In January of 1616, John Donne was ordained as an Anglican priest. Even though he may have entered the priesthood for practical, not spiritual, reasons, he, nevertheless, approached his new profession with the same energy that he had spent on sensual searches as a young man. Finally, Donne had seemed to reach a stable security in his life. He had a comfortable income and a secure financial future.

However, there were several ironies concerning Donne's ordination that may have had some effect upon Donne's ever-raging internal conflict. Helen White points out that it must have been "galling to a man of any sensitivity or honesty of spirit...to be thus forced to transform an opportunistic compromise into a life-work."¹⁶ Donne had accepted the Anglican church because he knew that as a Roman Catholic he would have no chance of the courtly advancement that he desired. But because of his unbridled passions and romantic nature, he was compelled to make his living as a religious leader.

It is also ironic that while Donne was beginning his life as a priest, many of his early, passionate love poems were being circulated around London.¹⁷ This was a problem

that he had to deal with. White says that "with his customary frankness he faced the undoubted liability of his youthful reputation."¹⁸ These ironies, this new life, only added fuel to the burning conflict within him. Though it may appear that the hardships that Donne endured may have calmed his youthful zeal, John Hayward, in his introduction to the Penguin Poets edition of Donne says that:

Donne did not sober down when he took Holy Orders at the age of forty-three. The passion with which he had courted those whom he called his 'profane mistresses' became sublimated in a fearful longing for union with God. In his later years the lust of the spirit demanded satisfaction no less than the lust of the flesh had done in the heyday of his blood.¹⁹

Donne's later years, though less turbulent, did not hold much more joy or good fortune. His wife died two years after he had taken Holy Orders.²⁰ And even though he achieved advancement as a clergyman (he was appointed Dean of St. Paul's in 1621), the remainder of his life was spent without the joy and passion of his earlier years. He devoted all energy to his job. Donne found his only real pleasure in writing and presenting sermons. "The hour sermon was the funnel into which he poured all the treasures of his life."²¹

In the winter of 1623, Donne became very ill with what he thought was his fatal illness. It was during this illness that he wrote Devotions, a discussion of life and death and an apology to God. In Devotions he condemned his passionate, lustful youth and strove for "union with God". We can only guess that he achieved this goal, years later, at his death in 1631.

Though much of Donne's character has been revealed by this brief biography, it may be helpful to discuss his character to better illustrate the source of Donne's internal conflict. Hayward speaks of Donne's desire "to achieve reconcilliation of opposites, resolution

of doubts, and integration of the world of reality with the world of the imagination." He goes on to say that for Donne, this meant the "reconciliation of the medieval with the modern conceptions of the universe; the resolution of personal doubts...; the resolution of an inner conflict of carnal and spiritual longing - the incessant warring or at least sparring in his members of the 'Jack' Donne of the early love poems and the 'Doctor' Donne of the tremendous self-questioning cast in the form of sermons."²³ These things - Donne's immoderate, passionate devotion to both spiritual and sensual needs, his family background, his varied experiences, and his desire to reconcile many opposing factors that he perceived in the world - combined to create the Donne of both sonnets and sermons. The conflict within Donne is reflected in much of his work. The contrast between his subject matter and tone of his early love poems and that of his later religious poems is striking, to say the least.

Donne's love poetry is a good reflection of the great quantity of emotion contained in Donne. The energy and passion are imbedded in nearly every line of Donne's Songs and Sonnets.

Herbert J. C. Grierson says in a critical essay that the "finest note in Donne's love-poetry is the note of joy, the joy of mutual and contented passion."²⁴ This note of joy runs throughout most of Donne's love poetry.

"My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
And true plaine hearts do in the faces rest"²⁵

Whether he was writing a poem for his wife or one of his "obscene mistresses", Donne found a great joy in love - a depth of feeling unrivaled by anything except, as it seems, religious devotion.

Donne's poem "Lovers Infiniteness", by the title alone, suggests the depth of feeling that so attracted Donne.

The first stanza of this poem reveals this depth of emotion.

"If yet I have not all thy love,
 Deare I shall never have it all,
 I cannot breath one other sigh, to move,
 Nor can entreat one other tear to fall"²⁶

Donne, of great emotion, intellect, and energy needed a great vessel, or vessels, to contain his passion. He found that love was capable of satisfying his need for infinite expression. His love poetry was a tangent to this. Though not as satisfying as love itself, it allowed near infinite expression of infinite emotion.

From evidence in biography and poems, it is certain that Donne led an amorous, if not promiscuous, youth. Hayward writes that Donne's poems are "largely the uninhibited and curiously annotated record...of many love-affairs before marriage and many life-long friendships."²⁷ It cannot help but be wondered why Donne had so many love affairs. Was he searching for the ideal woman? Did he need the security of many women? Or was he simply driven by lust? It seems that the explanation of Donne's many affairs is summed up in one of Donne's early poems.

"Let me love none, no, but the sport".²⁸

Donne was attracted to love because of its potential for infinite expression, but it seems that the "sport" was both intellectually and, we can suppose, sexually stimulating. Before his marriage, Donne pursued many women to fulfill his desire for "sport".

As Leishman pointed out, Donne's love poetry falls into several different categories. According to these categories, the love poems differ in tone, seriousness, and energy.²⁹ The later poems, such as "Negative Love", present "serious analyses of love."³⁰ In "Negative Love" Donne speaks of his search for a more meaningful love.

"I never stooped so low, as they
 Which on an eye, cheeke, lip, can prey,
 Seldom to them, which soare no higher
 Then vertue on the minde to admire"³¹

Though the exact date that "Negative Love" was written is unknown, it seems possible that this serious analyses of love may have served as a bridge between the early love poems and the religious poems. "Negative Love" deals with the subject matter of the love poems in the manner of the divine poems.

Of course, the internal conflict of Donne becomes most evident in his religious poems. In his youth, Donne could recognize and accept his duality of mind. But as a clergyman, and in an attempt to achieve union with God, he was forced to deny his sensual longings and his amorous past. The conflict that had been brewing in Donne for a quarter century came threateningly to the surface of Donne's conscience when he devoted his life to religious services.

Though Donne's practical reasons for taking Holy Orders have already been discussed, it should be understood that Donne would not have devoted his life to the church without conviction. It seems that the contemplation of man's relation to God was the other vessel capable of containing Donne's passion and energy. Religious devotion and contemplation are infinite expressions. The vastness of this subject must have fascinated an intellect such as Donne's. Both the fascination and the conflict caused by his new vocation are revealed in Donne's religious poems.

Evidence of Donne's internal conflict appears in several forms in his religious poetry. In his first Holy Sonnet, Donne speaks of the conflict in terms of temptation. In this poem, he refers to the devil as "our old subtle foe" which suggests a long acquaintance. Also, in this poem,

Donne credits God's grace for saving him from temptation.

"But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,
That not one houre my self I can sustain;
Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart."³²

In other poems, Donne condemns his past. In the fifth of his Holy Sonnets, he writes,

"But black sinne hath betraid to endless night
My worlds both parts, and oh both parts must die."³³

This mood is repeated in Holy Sonnet XI.

"They killed once an inglorious man, but I
crucifie him daily."³⁴

Donne's mood varied greatly, and so did his feelings concerning his conflict. From one sonnet to the next, he might go from harsh self-condemnation to confident affirmation to abundant thanksgiving. For example, in Holy Sonnet VI, the self-condemning Donne of Sonnets V and XI is confident of heaven.

"So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
To where they are bred, and would press me, to hell.
Impute me righteous, thus purged of evill,
For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devill."³⁵

However, it seems that Donne's internal conflict is most evident in the hymns written during Donne's serious illness and before his death. In these poems, Donne senses eminent death and attempts to rid himself of the sins of his youth. The tone of these poems is not harsh and condemning, not is it desperate and pleading. The tone is one of true apology for his past.

"Wilt thou forgive those sinnes, through which I runne,
And do still run, though still I do deplore?"³⁶

And later in the same poem, "A Hymne to God the Father", Donne states his fear and his hope.

"I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne
 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
 Swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy sonne
 Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
 And, having done that, Thou hast done,
 I fear no more"³⁷

This poem was written during Donne's sickness during the winter of 1623.³⁸ About this poem, Walton writes that "he caused it to be set to a most grave tune, and to be often sung...in his own hearing."³⁹ Walton also quotes Donne as saying about the hymn, "the words of this hymn have restored to me the same thoughts of joy that possessed my soul in my sickness, when I composed it."⁴⁰ This hymn may have brought him such joy because in it he seems to become reconciled in his own mind (which, probably, is the only place in which he was not reconciled) with God. He states his many sins, asks forgiveness, and in the end states "I fear no more." This idea of reconciliation is supported by Donne's statement that the hymn gave him "a willingness to leave the world."⁴¹

Donne's final work, "Hymne to God My God, in my Sicknesse", composed eight days before his death, states also that, though the conflict still remains, it is no longer a source of great despair for Donne. He suggests his reconciliation with God and his readiness, not just willingness, to leave this world with the lines:

"I tune my instrument here at the door,
 And, what I must do then, think here before."⁴²

This hymn is a proper concluding work, for it relates well the concluding chapter of Donne's life. In the hymn written during his earlier illness, Donne asked forgiveness for his sins and hoped for salvation. In his last hymn, Donne is much more confident.

"Since I am coming to that Holy roome"⁴³

And there is no fear, no uncertainty. Donne is as sure of his place in heaven as he is of his approaching death.

"I joy, that in these straits, I see my West"⁴⁴

John Donne, as has been discussed, was a man of great passion and energy. The reader of Donne sees in his art a mere pale reflection of his energy. His passions could not be contained by the daily concerns of common man. His search for something with the capacity to contain his energy, something with the capacity for infinite expression, led Donne to the pursuit of romantic love and the contemplation of religion. A conflict was inevitable. And the conflict doubtlessly brought Donne considerable spiritual, intellectual, and personal despair. But all of these things - the ancestry, the loves, the hardships, the conflict, the devotion, the decay - comprised the man. And it is the man who has left us this legacy of art, this legacy of "almost infinite expression of infinite emotion". Perhaps this realization may help us reconcile the apparent contradictions in Donne's poetry. Perhaps Donne foresaw the things that have been discussed here at the early age of eighteen when he quoted his motto as:

"How much shall I be changed
Before I am changed!"⁴⁵

FOOTNOTES

- ¹J. B. Leishman, The Monarch of Wit (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1965), p. 29.
- ²Leishman, p. 29.
- ³James Winny, A Preface to Donne (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 12.
- ⁴John Donne, Devotions (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. vii.
- ⁵Leishman, p. 30.
- ⁶Leishman, p. 30.
- ⁷Winny, p. 21.
- ⁸Donne, p. ix.
- ⁹Winny, p. 21.
- ¹⁰Winny, p. 22.
- ¹¹Leishman, p. 34.
- ¹²Winny, p. 22..
- ¹³Winny, pp. 21-22.
- ¹⁴Helen C. White, The Metaphysical Poets (New York: Collier Books, 1960), pp. 96-97.
- ¹⁵White, p. 105.
- ¹⁶White, p. 95.
- ¹⁷John Hayward, ed., John Donne (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1960), p. 7
- ¹⁸White, p. 106.
- ¹⁹Hayward, p. 9.
- ²⁰Helen Gardner, ed., John Donne (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 180.
- ²¹White, p. 109.
- ²²White, p. 111.
- ²³Hayward, p. 7.

FOOTNOTES(cont)

²⁴ Herbert J.C. Grierson, "Donne's Love Poetry", in John Donne, ed. Helen Gardner (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 29.

²⁵ Hayward, p. 23.

²⁶ Hayward, p. 31.

²⁷ Hayward, p. 8.

²⁸ Hayward, p. 8.

²⁹ Leishman, p. 179.

³⁰ Leishman, p. 179.

³¹ Leishman, p. 213.

³² Hayward, p. 166.

³³ Hayward, p. 168.

³⁴ Hayward, p. 171.

³⁵ Hayward, p. 168.

³⁶ Hayward, p. 176.

³⁷ Hayward, p. 177.

³⁸ Donne, p. xxix.

³⁹ Donne, p. xxix.

⁴⁰ Donne, p. xxix.

⁴¹ Donne, p. xxix.

⁴² Donne, p. xxxiii.

⁴³ Hayward, p. 177.

⁴⁴ Hayward, p. 177.

⁴⁵ Donne, p. xlvi.

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