

## John Donne's A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning: A Deconstructive Reading

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### ABSTRACT

This article attempts to re-read John Donne's 'A Valediction Forbidding Mourning' from a deconstructive perspective. The purpose of re-reading the poem is to question its coherence and its organic unity. This is done through a close reading of the poem. The objective is to unmask internal contradictions and inconsistencies in order to show the incoherence that underlies its apparent unity. The effect of witty analogies, comparisons, images and even words is examined. In this process the implications associated with the situations involved in the analogies are to be taken into consideration. The way certain associations, implications and undercurrents contradict or undermine the apparently consistent argument of the poem is to be foregrounded. Through this deconstructive reading, the article finds that the poem could be read as a fine specimen of rhetoric but it clearly lacks in logicity and consistency.

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'deconstruction' refers to a way of reading texts practiced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Derrida's deconstructive method of reading selected aspects of western philosophers' works has been borrowed by literary critics and used in the reading of literary texts. Though he avoids tying deconstruction down to a single meaning, Derrida says that his early work of the 1960s was an attempt to formulate a strategic device:

[F]rom about 1963 to 1968, I tried to work out - in particular in the three works published in 1967 [*La Voix et le phénomène, De la grammatologie, L'Écriture et la différence, trans. as Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs, Of Grammatology, Writing and Difference*] - what was in no way meant to be a system but rather a sort of strategic device, opening its own abyss, an unclosed, unenclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading, interpretation and writing. (Qtd. in Wolfreys 38)

Deconstruction as a critical approach is not a complete break from the New Critical approach. Deconstructive reading is a method of close reading and textual analysis. Both the New Critic and the deconstructionist focus on the literary

text; neither is likely to interpret the text by relating it to events in the author's life, historical period or even culture. New Critics believe that a complete understanding of a literary work is possible and that it has organic unity. Deconstructive criticism, however, aims to show that any text inevitably undermines its own claim to have a determinate meaning. It does not accept that a text has a fixed or univocal meaning. According to deconstruction, there are certain unresolvable contradictions within a text which can be interpreted to show that the text has no coherence as such. The illogicality and incoherence of the text can be brought to the fore through a deconstructive reading. In the words of Barbara Johnson, one of the major proponents of deconstruction:

Deconstruction is not a form of textual vandalism or generalized skepticism designed to prove that meaning is impossible. In fact, the word "deconstruction" is closely related not to the word "destruction" but to the word "analysis," which etymologically means "to undo"—a virtual synonym for "to de-construct." The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or generalized skepticism, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification *within the text itself*. If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the meaning but the claim to unequivocal

domination of one mode of signifying over another (Change 118-119).

According to the traditional interpretation of Donne's poem 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' the speaker's main concern is to persuade his beloved not to mourn his absence as their love is extraordinary and spiritual. According to Izaak Walton, one of the earliest critics and biographers of Donne, the poem was "written as a consolation for Anne More (then Mrs Donne) by her devoted husband when he was about to depart on a diplomatic mission to France with one of his patrons... the lines were characterized by chaste devotion and spiritual communion, forming a poem replete with Neoplatonic allusion, a celebration of spiritual love and the unceasing union of spouses even over distance" (Qtd. in Lappin 7). In one of the important critical works on the poem, John Freccero says that:

Thematically, the "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" resembles the medieval *conge d'amour*, wherein a lover takes leave of his lady and consoles her by claiming that they are not really two individuals, but rather affirms that they are one, or that he has left with her his heart (353).

According to Rami Targoff 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,' is a poem about "a love that needs no substantial embodiment, a love that can survive on a purely spiritual plane" (71) in which Donne "attempts to persuade his beloved, who is, we might imagine, on the verge of tears that the obstacles normally posed by absence do not pertain to them because they can imagine their love differently" (73).

The poem seems to provide the poet with an occasion to explore the nature of their love. The speaker says that their love is of a unique type in which physical proximity and bodily separation are of no consequence. Parting from his beloved, the speaker tells her that their separation should cause no sorrow or grief. As illustration of the quiet separation he wishes to have, he suggests the imperceptible death of "virtuous men". In order to explain this type of love, the speaker draws a comparison between two types of love: "dull sublunary lovers' love" which cannot admit physical separation and their love which does not care for physicality. The speaker says that he and his beloved share a single soul. Their unity is not affected by physical separation. Rather, their soul shall experience an expansion as the gap between their bodies widens. If they do not have one soul, the speaker argues, then their individual souls are firmly connected together like the legs of a pair of compasses. Like the leg which draws the circle, he must trace out his course while she, the fixed leg, remains in one place. After his journey the speaker has to come back to his starting point just like the outer leg of the compass when it completes its circle.

This article attempts to re-read the poem from a deconstructive perspective. The purpose of re-reading the poem is to question its coherence and its organic unity. This is done by a close reading of the poem. The objective is to unmask internal contradictions and inconsistencies in order to show the incoherence that underlies its apparent unity. The effect of witty analogies, comparisons, images and even words is examined. In this process the implications associated with the situations involved in the analogies, comparisons and

imagery are to be taken into consideration. The way certain associations, implications and undercurrents contradict or undermine the apparently consistent argument of the poem is to be foregrounded and given the light they deserve.

## DISCUSSION

Right from the beginning and throughout the entire poem, the speaker's main concern is to establish that the love he and his beloved enjoy is not like that of ordinary mortals. Their love attaches no importance to sensual pleasure. In fact, Donne tries to show their love as surrounded by a spiritual halo. Consider the following lines in stanza II:

T'were prophanation of our joyes  
To tell the layetie our love.

Since the speaker believes that grief in public would profane their love, the implication is that their love is holy and sacred. In stanza IV, the speaker talks about "dull sublunary lovers' love whose soule is sense." Contrasting this type of love with his own also suggests the sacred halo the speaker believes to envelop his love. As this love is extraordinary and spiritual, their parting should be of no importance to them. The speaker appears to be convinced of this and he is just trying to convince his beloved of the extraordinariness of their love. He urges her not to treat their love as ordinary and earthly. The speaker tells his beloved that their parting should be quiet and marked by no grief or sorrow as physical separation means nothing in the dictionary of their love. In order to illustrate how their parting should be, the speaker draws an analogy between the situation of their parting and that of death. Though there is some validity in the gentle death "virtuous men" die, this analogy betrays the speaker's fear of physical separation. It also reflects the speaker's obsession with the physical aspect of love. The use of 'as' in the first stanza and 'so' in the second stanza shows that for the speaker death and physical separation are closely associated. That death is described as that of "virtuous men" does not mitigate the implications associated with death. Death of any human being can never be divorced from the association of grief and sorrow. This is corroborated by the word 'sad' in the first stanza: "whilst some of their sad friends do say..." The poet picks up just one aspect of a comparison which has many aspects and associations; some of them are even closer to the reader's mind than the one singled out by the poet. Thus, the comparison shows that the speaker who wants to impart the idea of the insignificance of separation reveals unconsciously that love and physical proximity are one and the same. This is a characteristic of ordinary and earthly love. It does not even appear to serve the poet's immediate purpose of persuading his woman to refrain from showing sorrow and shedding tears. How can reminding a woman of death help persuade her not to show grief or shed tears?

Examining the first analogy further, one notices that in the first situation involved in this analogy the speaker is suggesting that the example of the quiet separation between the soul of a virtuous man and his body must be followed in their parting situation. As the soul parts gently from the virtuous man's body, the speaker must part quietly from his beloved. Here the relationship between the speaker and the

beloved is seen as a relationship between soul and body. This means that the speaker, just like the soul, will join another world whereas the beloved will remain lifeless so long as he is away; this is just the opposite of what the speaker intends to say. Thus, though the speaker sets out to argue with his beloved in order to console her and prevent her from mourning, the effect is entirely different from his avowed purpose. The death imagery certainly intensifies the grief and sorrow of the beloved.

In the last two lines of stanza II the speaker seems to be providing another reason why grief and tears should not mark their parting. He argues that it will profane their love. This can be dismissed on two grounds. First, there is nothing holy or sacred to be profaned. Their love is, as already shown, as mundane and earthly as that of ordinary mortals. Secondly, composing a poem in itself is an act of public mourning.

In stanza III the speaker goes on to draw a scientific parallel between their parting and the movement of the spheres. This parallel suggests that though their parting is far more momentous it must attract less attention. Here we see again that their love "cannot admit" physical separation. Physical separation causes profound grief to the lovers who should only suppress and resist it. Comparing separation to situations as great as death and the movement of the spheres shows that the speaker treats separation as a great occurrence. It also shows the great importance the speaker attaches to physical proximity. The lovers can be seen now to be very far from the type of love which does not care for physicality. The fact that he keeps repeating that he does not care for physical attractions in love and that he urges his beloved and himself not to show grief shows that he himself is laboring to present a facade to show people that their love is of a different type. The repetition becomes an act of remembrance – a wistful remembrance of what he is going to miss.

In stanza IV, when the speaker talks about "sublunary lover's love whose soul is sense," he euphemistically refers to "those things which elemented it." But when he talks about his unique love, his words seem to be dictated by an obsession with sensuality. This obsession is manifested in the various parts of the body which find direct mention in line XX: "eyes, lips and hands." Though the speaker tries to show us the superiority of his love to that of ordinary mortals through contrast, this device fails to support his attempt. On the contrary, it reflects his obsessive preoccupation with the physical parts of his beloved. This is also demonstrated in his use of the word "less". He is not in a position to deny completely his concern with physicality so he uses the word "less" rather than 'never'.

While reading the poem one feels that, on one hand, the speaker seems to hold a firm belief that his love is refined and transcends physicality. On the other hand, this feeling is subverted by the undercurrents of the speaker's arguments. In stanza VI the speaker argues that his beloved and he share a single soul which, due to their separation, extends itself. This extension is compared to that of a gold sheet when beaten by a goldsmith. Here, at first sight, one may be impressed by this analogy due to the beautiful associations

which have been traditionally associated with gold. However, taking into consideration the main concern of the poem, one finds that these 'gold' associations are irrelevant. Rather, if one examines the analogy, one will find that separation is depicted as a powerful aggressive force which compels their soul or souls to take a weaker form just like the gold that expands and takes a weaker form under the goldsmith's powerful hammering. This image also suggests the insubstantial nature of their souls and love through the evocative phrase "avery thinnesse." Thus the imagery in the analogy contradicts the poem's main concern: to establish the insignificance of separation for the speaker and his beloved.

The way the speaker urges his beloved and himself not to give in to grief and sorrow caused by parting contradicts what seems to be his firm belief that they have only one soul. If they had only one soul then what would be the need to keep urging his beloved not to mourn his absence? In fact, the speaker is not quite sure whether he and his beloved have one soul or two. This uncertainty is reflected in his use of the words "two" and "one." In stanza VI, he says "our two souls... which are one", while in stanza VII, he says "If they be two they are two so." This in turn reflects the fluctuation in his belief about the nature of their love.

What the speaker has tried to do is to show that physical absence is inconsequential to them. But the conceit extended throughout the last three stanzas betrays his anxiety about separation. In this conceit the speaker admits that separation will take place and influence their life but he assures himself and his beloved that it will be temporary. The analogy developed in this conceit is between a pair of compasses and the souls of the lovers. The lover, like the leg which describes the circle, must trace out his course while the beloved remains in one place just like the fixed leg. The "lean[ing] and hearken[ing]" of the fixed leg suggests the anxiety and strain the beloved experiences while the lover is away from her. Furthermore, the analogy is not exact, for when the outer leg of the compasses completes its circle it is at the same distance from the center as during its movement.

## CONCLUSION

Thus the deconstructive analysis of the poem shows how a text subverts the traditional critics' notion of coherence and determinate meaning. Donne was a great 'wit' and through the use of analogies he tries to convince the beloved and himself about the uniqueness of their love which makes their separation inconsequential. This poem could be read as a fine specimen of rhetoric though lacking in substance and logical consistency. Donne uses analogies over which he does not have full control. In other words, he compares a situation to one aspect of another situation which has various aspects and associations. Some aspects or associations, which cannot be overlooked by the reader, go against the avowed purpose of introducing the analogy. This is the case in his first analogy and in the one in stanza VI. He compares parting to the gentle death but he neglects the associations linked with a death situation. He also fails to see that if the analogy is pursued in all directions it will certainly lead the reader to

a contradictory meaning. Other contradictions emerge from the use of words which give rise to contradictory implications. There is a great ambiguity in the conceit developed in the last three stanzas. The poet seems to have fallen in love with the pair of compasses so much that he develops the analogy without considering its bearing upon his argument. All these work towards subverting the argument of the poem. They also undermine the apparent unity and coherence of the poem. The poet's effort is to prevent grief and sorrow but the whole effect is to intensify these emotions. His effort to describe love as of a unique type which is surrounded by a spiritual halo results in establishing its ordinariness and earthiness as well as its sensuality. The writing of the poem in itself is an act of mourning. Though the speaker says that parting will be a momentary phase, he has made it permanent by composing a poem on it. With this it becomes clear that the deconstructive process comes not from the reader but from the text itself; it is already there, it is the tension "between what [the text] manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean" (Norris 19).

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