

John Donne: Holy Sonnet XIV or the Plenitude of Metaphor

Purificación Ribes

UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA

The aim of the present paper is to offer a new interpretation of John Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV: *Batter my Heart*. It is by no means the first attempt at shedding light on this complex and enthralling poem. In fact, we have read interesting and varied contributions to its understanding. J. C. Levenson (1953, 1954), G. Herman (1953), G. Knox (1956), A. L. Clements (1961), J. E. Parish (1963), E. Schwartz (1965), D. Cornelius (1967), R. D. Bedford (1982) and T. Romein (1984) have attempted to offer a coherent reading of *Batter my heart*.

Before we proceed further in its analysis, it may be convenient to read it once more.

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end;
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue;
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

For some critics (Levenson, Schwartz and Cornelius) three images may be identified in the poem, each corresponding to each of the three quatrains. In their opinion, these images are metalurgical, military and amorous, respectively.

R. D. Bedford also interprets the poem in terms of three images, although for him the first is related to pottery.

T. Romein, finally, sees a glass-blowing image in the first quatrain, while the interpretation of the other two remains military and amorous.

For other critics, however (Herman, Knox, Clements, Parish) only these last two images exist in the poem, starting at the first line.

Although some analyses are easier to sustain than others, there is not a single article which gives a thorough explanation of the poem. There is always some verb which doesn't suit their proposal, and which is systematically ignored.

This is also the case with the symbolic connection between different quatrains and images, where those words which might be problematic are often omitted.

In our opinion, there are not two, but three images in this poem, which are intimately connected from the first line to the last one.

The first quatrain is undoubtedly the most challenging, which is amply proved by the variety of interpretations we have gathered.

All critics admit the existence of the military and amorous images in the second and third quatrains, though not all of them see the same kind of connections between the two.

In our opinion, T. Romein's discovery of a glass-blowing image in the first quatrain poses serious difficulties both from a theological and from a strictly symbolic point of view. He portrays a ridiculous image of God as a fallible entity who is unable to mend a crystal vessel, and who attempts to do so by "lightly striking its surface -in order to see if it rings truly- "and by later "breathing on it to fog it with his breath so that he can shine it with a cloth" (1984: 14)

He later describes God's behaviour in the following terms: "To make the piece perfect he (God) must rather break it into pieces and then blow the glass into a new form as he burns it to keep the glass molten", where the order in which the verbs are explained doesn't correspond to the order of the original sequence of verbs in the poem. There (break, blow, burn) "blow" precedes "burn", whereas their order is reversed by Romein to suit his explanation.

R. D. Bedford's proposal is not too coherent either. Looking for Biblical sources which may justify his reading of the quatrain, he selects two passages by Jeremiah which either cannot be applied to God or which work in a direction contrary to that of the poem.

In Jer. 18.4, a potter is mentioned who must make a new vessel because the first one has been "marred in the hands of the potter". Theologically, this cannot be applied to an infallible God.

In Jer. 19.10-11, which is also mentioned by Bedford (1982: 19), God's attitude while destroying his people is contrary to the one Donne develops in this sonnet, where man has to be destroyed by God in order to be completely renewed. In the passage by Jeremiah, however, we hear the following: "So I will break this people and this city as one breaketh a potter's vessel, *that cannot be made again*"

Technically, Bedford's analysis is equally deficient. Verbs such as 'breathe (on it)' and 'shine (it up)' cannot be applied to a potter's vessel. The verb 'to blow', which is central to Romein's interpretation, is simply omitted by Bedford, who would undoubtedly have serious difficulties to make it suit his image. Lastly, the activity denoted by the verb 'to burn' cannot be repeated if the potter's vessel which has to be destroyed and re-made has already been exposed to the action of the fire.

This leads us to previous interpretations of the quatrain, which, in our opinion, are easier to sustain, although they need to be completed.

J. C. Levenson (1953: 246) was the first critic to find out a metallurgical image in the quatrain although he wisely modified his first interpretation, which was too restricted. In 1953 he thought of God as a 'tinker' and of the poet as a 'pewter vessel'.

G. Herman's ironic commentaries on the image that same year made Levenson extend its scope. Herman (1953: 248), realizing the difficulty of suiting verbs like 'shine' to this image, said: "Incidentally, wouldn't it be rather futile to attempt to shine pewter?", which made Levenson (1954: 248) apply the image to other metals, while keeping the same explanatory principle: "that God should cease to 'tinker' (seek to mend) the damaged object, but demolish it, melt it down and make it new" .

This new proposal was followed both by E. Schwartz and by D. Cornelius, and serves as a point of departure for our own interpretation of the quatrain, in which an alchemical image is at its centre.

According to our reading of the quatrain, the poet sees himself as an utterly corrupt person, whose soul can only be saved if its present condition is deeply transformed. This can only be achieved by violent means, since all gentle attempts to make him follow the right path are doomed to failure.

The poet compares his heart -the traditional seat of the soul- to a metallic vessel, whose imperfections have been externally mended by God. He has *knocked* -that is, hammered - it (OED 2 trans.) to rectify its form. He has then *breathed* on it -that is to say, tarnished (as if with breath) (OED 9 fig.) in order to *shine* (it up) (OED 11, 'to cause to shine').

This process would have been perfect if the poet's condition were not completely corrupt, as Donne's calvinistic creed made him believe. Being such the case, if the soul wishes to be chosen for salvation, the self must go through a thorough process of change, both external and internal. In order to achieve it, the metallic vessel must not be merely knocked upon, but *broken* (OED I 'to sever into distinct parts by sudden application of force') as a result of God's battering. God must then *blow*, that is, "direct a current of air into (a fire) in order to make it burn more brightly", and the sinner's heart / self is not to be merely polished but placed in that purifying fire which may transform it inwardly as well as outwardly ('*burn*' OED 13 "to alter in chemical composition (by oxidation, volatilization of a constituent etc) or in appearance, physical structure or properties, by intense heat").

Only after such a violent and profound process of purification may the soul be transformed into a new being (make me new).

The action of the fire doesn't limit itself to the outward melting of the metallic pieces before they are given a new form, but also affects the constituent essence of that metal, which, through an alchemical process, is liberated of its dross and thus purified.

It was a common belief among alchemists that lead could be transformed into gold through a prolonged process of heating. And a parallelism between this phenomenon in the Natural World and the purification of the human soul was frequently drawn among astrologers.

Donne uses this image several times in his religious poetry. In some cases there can be found examples of close similitude to the lines in this poem. In *Good Friday, 1613* (ll.39-40), for instance, Donne asks God to punish him, so that the metal he is made of may be purified. Here are his words:

O think me worth thine anger, *punish me,*
Burn off my rusts, and my deformity.

In *Resurrection imperfect* (ll. 141-147) Donne alludes to Christ's alchemical power, which he has obtained through extreme suffering, and which enables him to transform the sinful soul's iron and lead into gold:

He was all *gold* when he lay down, but rose
All *tincture*, and doth not alone dispose
Leaden and iron wills to good, but is
Of power to make even sinful flesh like his.

In another passage: *The Lamentations of Jeremy, for the most part according to Tremellius* (4, 73-75), Donne expressly mentions gold as the ideal which the Sons of Sion must aim at:

The precious sons of Sion, which should be
Valued as pure gold, how do we see
Low rated now.

Thus, the interpretation of the first quatrain in alchemical terms would not be alien to Donne's conception of man's ideal and God's ways with men.

This would be our first contribution to the understanding of the poem. The second would have to do with the interrelation of the different images within the poem, which is deeper than has usually been acknowledged.

In our opinion, the opening imperative of the sonnet: '*batter*', and its object: '*heart*' might be read in terms of the three images. The coexistence of all of them is strengthened by the fact that the paradox of this quatrain (*that I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me*) applies equally and simultaneously to the objects (city and town) of the second and third quatrains.

Here once more a similar co-occurrence of these three images can be traced outside the poem. In Isaiah (I.21-27) we find what could have easily been a source for *Batter my heart* since their similarities extend beyond the simultaneous appearance of the three images. Not only does the metal become purified through God's stern ways with it, but the town/woman image interchanges its qualities, so that the city, which has become a prostitute, later regains its original faithfulness:

How the faithful city
has become a prostitute
(...) your silver has become dross
(...) I will turn my hand against you,
And thoroughly purge away your dross,
And take away all your alloy
(...) Afterwards you shall be called the city
of righteousness, the faithful city.

The opening verb of the first quatrain, '*batter*', aptly suggests the violent reaction which is needed to purify the metal of the heart (OED 1. trans. 'to strike with repeated blows of an instrument or weapon (...) to beat continuously and violently so as to bruise or shatter'). This is exactly the use which God has to make of the hammer in order to break the imperfect metallic vessel.

This same verb has a second military meaning (OED 2 'to operate against walls, fortifications etc. with artillery, or in ancient times with a battering ram, with the purpose (and result) of breaking down or demolishing them). This is exactly what the heart/town of the poet needs in order to be liberated from its usurper.

It finally has a third figurative meaning which could refer to the third image of the poem. Its violent action (3 trans. and fig. 'to subject (persons, opinions, etc.) to heavy crushing or persistent attack') could denote the procedure which may bring about the end of a relationship between the woman and her enemy (break that knot).

The *heart*, which is the object of the verb "to batter" may simultaneously symbolize:

- a) the seat of the soul which has to be purified and turned to gold.
- b) the door of access to the woman/town, which has been made captive.
- c) the place which is traditionally associated with affections.

The two lists of verbs present in this quatrain (*knock, breathe, shine; break, blow, burn*), which have already been commented upon in regard to the metallurgical image, may at the same time be read in connection with the woman/town image

As we have already seen, there exists a close relationship between both lists, both syntactically and semantically. They occupy the same position within the line, and in all three cases the verbs of the second list imply a greater degree of force.

The first enumeration would be addressed to the woman/town as a whole. God so far has been '*knocking*' at her door in order to gain admittance to it (OED 1 intr. to rap upon a door or gate in order to gain admittance). He has also '*breathed*' (OED II.trans. 'to exhale, to emit by expiration(out). fig. to send or infuse into, communicate by breathing') his grace and '*shined*' (OED 9 'to cause (light) to shine, emit (rays). Also fig. (ex. God ... shines forth his wisdom ... upon the world), that is, illuminates her.

The stronger actions which the poet claims in the second list of verbs would apply the town image as follows: God is asked to '*break*', that is (OED IV) 'to make a way through the town. He is then to '*blow*' it, that is to say (OED 24 trans.' to shatter, destroy, or otherwise act upon by means of explosion', and finally '*burn*' what is left of it, so as to destroy it completely.

The same verbs could perhaps be read in sexual terms which anticipate the third image of the poem. God would be asked to '*break*', that is (OED IV) 'to make a way through; to penetrate' the woman, and '*blow*' her in a metaphorical sense which recalls a possible use of the verb which can be applied to horses. (OED 8 (causal of n.) to cause to pant, or put out of breath'). Given the phallic symbolism of horses, this meaning could be transferred to the erotic image. The third verb

‘to *burn*’ would refer to the resulting fire of passion (‘burn’ OED 1b fig. of persons, of the heart etc. ‘to be on fire (with desire, lust, passion, wrath); to glow, pant. To desire ardently’).

The paradox of line 3 (‘That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me’) affects the town/woman image, since the verb ‘o’erthrow’, which is to bring about her renewal, can allude both to the woman (1. trans. ‘to throw(a person or thing) over upon its side or upper surface) and the town (1. trans ‘to knock (a structure) down and so demolish it).

Its outcome (‘*rise and stand*’) brings to mind the New Jerusalem after God’s fury had purified it:

Awake, awake,
Stand up, O Jerusalem,
You who have drunk at the hand of the Lord
The cup of his fury.
You have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling,
and drained it out (...) (Isaiah, 51, 17)

Shake yourself from the dust, *arise*,
And sit down, *O Jerusalem*;
Loose yourself from the bonds of your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion. (Isaiah, 52, 2)

The idea expressed in this paradox doesn’t limit its appearance to the third line of Donne’s *Batter my heart*. We can find it also in *A Litany, I. The Father*:

and *re-create* me, now grown *ruinous* (l. 4)

And later:

O Father, *purge away*
All vicious tinctures, that *new fashioned*
I may *rise up* from death, before I am dead.

This general paradox anticipates the double paradox expressed in the final couplet of *Batter my heart*, where the second and third images of the poem come together.

Although the first line of the couplet gives the solution to the town image (*except you enthrall me, never shall be free*) and the second line expresses the paradoxical solution to the amorous image (*Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me*), the polysemy of ‘*enthrall*’, ‘*free*’, ‘*chaste*’ and ‘*ravish*’ tightens the relationship between both images.

The verb ‘to *enthrall*’ can be applied to both images. In the town image, it would be used with the meaning of ‘enslaving, bringing into bondage’ (OED 1 trans.), which would be the only way of setting the town free from its enemy. At the same time, the verb can be used figuratively, and it would then suit the woman image. She could only obtain her liberty if God ‘enslaved her mentally or morally; if he captivated her’ (OED 2 fig.). This meaning of the verb ‘to *enthrall*’ would naturally lead to a possible interpretation of the verb ‘to *ravish*’, in the second line of the couplet.

The woman can only be chaste if God ravishes her. Although the verb ‘to *ravish*’ has a primary sexual meaning (OED 2 ‘to carry away (a woman) by force (sometimes implying subsequent violation)’), which could suit the amorous image, and the need of God’s “bending his force” to “make the soul new”, there is still another possible meaning of a more spiritual nature which would be intimately connected with the verb ‘to *enthrall*’. In this line, (OED 3c) ‘to transport with the strength of some feeling; to carry away with rapture; to fill with ecstasy or delight; to entrance; would describe the soul’s spiritual seduction. This image, besides, falls within the calvinistic central belief that the soul is unable to gain its own salvation unless God ‘rapes’ her, so that she cannot resist His divine grace. (Stachniewski, 1981: 690).

In line 2 of the couplet the central verb can also be read in terms of the town image, in the same way as the main verb of the first line could be applied to the second image. ‘To *ravish*’, then,

could be read as (OED 4) 'To seize and take away as plunder or spoil; to seize upon (a thing) by force or violence'. The town, then, would be chastened, i.e., subdued (*chaste* OED 8) after being ravished.

This idea of chastening brings us back to the beginning of the sonnet, where the poet asked God to overthrow him and bend his force, so that he could rise and stand, and be renewed. It brings to mind the *Book of Revelation* (3, 13-20), where God chastens those he loves, and asks the soul to let him in when he knocks at her door:

As many as I love I rebuke and chasten.
Therefore be zealous and repent.
Behold, I stand at the door and knock.
If anyone hears my voice and opens the door
I will come in to him and dine with him,
and he with me.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bedford, R. D. 1982: Donne's Holy Sonnet Batter my Heart. *Notes and Queries* 29: 1. 15-19.
- Clements, A. L. 1961: Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV. *Modern Language Notes* LXXVI, June: 484-489. (Repr. Clements, A. L. ed. 1966: *A Norton Critical Anthology*. New York, Norton: 251-255.)
- Cornelius, K. 1965: Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV. *Explicator*, XXIV, November 25.
- Craik, T. W. ed. 1986: *John Donne: Selected Poetry and Prose*. London, Methuen.
- Herman, G. 1953: Donne's Holy Sonnet, XIV. *Explicator* XII, December, Item 18. (Repr. Clements, A. L. ed. 1966: *A Norton Critical Anthology*. New York, Norton: 247-248.)
- Knox, G. 1956: Donne's Holy Sonnets, XIV. *Explicator*, XV, October, Item 2. (Repr. Clements, A. L. ed. 1966: *A Norton Critical Anthology*. New York, Norton: 249-251.)
- Levenson, J. C. 1953: Donne's Holy Sonnets, XIV. *Explicator*, XI, March, Item 31. (Repr. Clements, A. L. ed. 1966: *A Norton Critical Anthology*. New York, Norton: 248-249)
- Parish, J. E., 1963: No. 14 of Donne's Holy Sonnets. *College English*, January. (Repr. Clements, A. L. ed. 1966: *A Norton Critical Anthology*. New York, Norton: 255-259.)
- Romein, T. 1984: Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV. *Explicator*, Summer 42: 4. 12-14.
- Schwartz, E. 1967: Donne's Holy Sonnet XIV. *Explicator*, XXVI, November 25.
- Smith, A. J. ed. 1971: *John Donne: Complete English Poems*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Stachniewski, J. 1981: John Donne: The Despair of the Holy Sonnets. *ELH*, Winter, 48: 4. 677-705.

* * *