

# Sonnets, Rooms, Tears and Books: The Poetics of Physical Spaces in Donne's Love Poetry

*María Jesús Pando Canteli*

UNIVERSIDAD DE DEUSTO

[mpando@euskalnet.es](mailto:mpando@euskalnet.es)

Donne's materialism is extraordinary and pervades all his writings. From ludicrous elegy to solemn sermon, from passionate love poem to learned speculation on divinity, nothing escapes his ability to bring disparate elements together and endow images with a powerful plasticity. I will try to analyse in this talk those things, objects, which attract Donne's attention as enclosed, self-contained spaces representing a reality he seeks to perpetuate.

I have attempted a simplified arrangement of Donne's treatment of matter as a process that moves toward opposite poles: On the one hand we have that of the expansion or fission, *i.e.*, defined and dense elements undergo a process of fragmentation, enlargement and expansion (take, for instance, the "Anniversaries", or his learned sermons on the destiny of body after death). The other direction is that of concentration or fusion, the microcosmic dimension, and is exemplified in some of his devotional writings and his amatory poems). This process of fusion also involves a definition of physical spaces in terms of self-contained objects, with defined boundaries, as safe territories. I am going to explore some of the manifestations of this latter tendency towards minimization.

I will concentrate on some images taken from some of his most popular poems. The one that first comes to our minds as a significant representation of Donne's plastic imagination is that of "The Flea". In the dialectics of seduction, a flea becomes the central object of the subject's 'persuasive force'. It has sucked both his blood and his beloved, and its rounded body becomes the site of their union: "It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee, / And in this flea our two bloods mingled bee" (ll. 3-4; Shawcross 1967: 127).<sup>1</sup>

Even though this poem has been traditionally regarded as an example of Donne's rhetoric of persuasion (Roussel 1986; Brumble 1973), my interest obviously lies in his use of such a powerful material image. The experience of the lovers is resolved within the swelling body of the insect, and that is what strikes the reader first: his anxiety to compact to a physical space what could only be apprehended through imagination. The kind of sensual images and vivid colours that are at work in this poem (see the contrast between the red blood and the black walls of the flea's body) seem to be much closer to a scientific description of biological functions than to a persuasive discourse aimed at

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<sup>1</sup> Donne's verse quotations will follow this edition unless otherwise noted.

seducing a lady: “This flea is you and I, and this / Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is” (ll. 13-14).<sup>2</sup>

With this, the speaker is not only challenging the distance the lady has established between them, but also materializing an experience that might remain unfulfilled. He is thus rendering a transcendent dimension to this material, living space through the reduction of his potential erotic experience to it. Here the flea becomes the bounded confinement of a room, something that one immediately associates with a feeling of shelter, and at the same time it also works as the synecdoche (microcosmic expression) in which physical fusion takes place. The spatial trick played in the poem speaks not only for his persuasiveness, but also for an urgent need to reduce to a self-contained space what otherwise would be unattainable: “we’re met, / And cloistered in this living walls of jet” (ll.14-15)

The experience takes place within a safe territory, bounded by the insect’s “living walls of Jet”. In this situation, almost nothing could disturb the lovers’ delight, almost nothing but the lady’s criminal fingernail, and hence the speaker’s interest in persuading her with his clever conceptual argument. The subject seeks to get enclosed as a means of preserving something that otherwise would evanesce.

This desire to dwell in well defined, cloistered spaces, this sort of claustrophilia pervades many of Donne’s love poems. Take, for instance, his liking for poeticizing graves and tombs. If the flea’s body works as the physical evidence of the lovers’ finite experience, the grave will preserve this very passion from annihilation. That’s the kind of phantasy elaborated in “The Relique”:

When my grave is broke up againe  
Some second guest to entertaine,

(...)

And he that digs it, spies  
A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,  
Will he not let’us alone,  
And think that there a loving couple lies,  
(ll.1-2, 5-8)

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Here, as in “The Flea”, the lovers are not represented in their full extent but through a synecdoche built on an utterly material image: the lovers are turned into blood in the former, into bones and hair in the latter, substances all of them that defy both the laws of space and time. But also in both poems as in the others that I will bring in this talk, there is a tension between this carefully wrought poetical space and the outer world. In the case of “The Flea” the menacing fingernail of the lady is the external evidence against which the enclosed territory acquires its full significance, as in the poem “The Relique” there’s also a third element who comes to disturb the perfect reality within the physical boundaries of the grave. The speaker eagerly seeks to reaffirm his reality before the eyes of a witness which creates a dramatic tension within the poem. The poetics of spaces in Donne’s love poems always contemplate this outer presence as the force against which the creation of this redoubt struggles in a centripetal dynamic toward a physical core. It, this external reference, somehow justifies this force towards a nucleus: “(...) every universe is concentrated in a nucleus, a spore, a

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<sup>2</sup> To this poetics of space of Donne’s materialism, we could also add the “poetics of the full and the empty”. As an example of how this works, let’s take some lines from “A Nocturnal Upon St Lucy’s Day”: “and often absences / Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses” (ll. 26-27). The phenomenon is here the reverse. The utter physicality of the image, of the word “carcasses”, is characterized by its total deprivation of substance, its hollowness, and contrasts with the lecherous swollen body of the flea.

dynamized center (...) The miniature deploys to the dimensions of a universe. Once more, large is contained in small" (Bachelard 1994:157).

That is how Gaston Bachelard expressed this dynamic which projects the large within the small. The physical space seems to be created as a kind of fortress, refuge or shelter, whose existence is justified by the threatening reality outside. This fact is also illustrated in "The Sun Rising". As in the poems mentioned above, the physical extension of a room and a bed are the only reality that exists for the speaker, who in this case defies the presence of the morning sun as it announces the separation of the lovers:

(...) and since thy duties bee  
To warme the world, that's done in warming us.  
Shine here to us, and thou art every where;  
This bed thy center is, these walls, thy spheare.  
(ll. 27-30)

We have a spatial core in which the whole experience is condensed. A process of concentration within the limits of the room takes place and, again, we can perceive that anxiety of defining the territory, of preserving its integrity and rendering it that transcendental dimension that I pointed out above; "Nothing else is", the identity of the lovers is thus construed as dwellers of a space in which they will succeed in perpetuating their love: "We are facing the concept of the house, of the room as a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability ... space for cheer and intimacy, space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy" (Bachelard 1994: 17, 48).

Bachelard's ideas on the spaces are particularly fruitful when approaching Donne's treatment of space. In his allusive prose he explores the poetical possibilities of the house and the corner, of the miniature and the universe, and he sees man's deepest longings in the poet's choice of a place, of a territory to inhabit by his poetic imagination. In the case of Donne, this dwelling of physical spaces, of enclosed territories, seems to result from an anxiety on search for stability and safety. Sometimes, it also reveals a desire to perpetuate within a physical reality, to materialize what cannot last in thought, in memory. That's what occurs in the valedictory poems. These texts are strategies in order to overcome the hazards of absence and distance.

Again, Donne relies completely on the possibilities of material images, of microcosmic entities to express his desire for perpetuation (Is it not odd that he eagerly seeks to perpetuate an experience in the perishable, transitory reality of matter?). Take for instance the image of the tear/coin in "A Valediction: Of Weeping":

Let me powre forth  
My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here,  
For thy face coines them, and thy stampe they beare,  
And by this Mintage they are something worth,  
For thus they bee  
Pregnant of thee; 5  
(ll. 1-6)

The association of tear and coin is clever and striking. The tear epitomizes the whole world as his beloved's face is in it, and it therefore bestows value on the tear as a stamp confers value to a metal piece. We are thus on the level of representations that is carried further when a parallelism is established between the stamped tear and the globe:

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On a round ball  
 A workeman that hath copies by, can lay  
 An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,  
 And quickly make that, which was nothing, All,  
     So doth each teare  
     Which thee doth weare,  
 A globe, yea world by that impression grow,  
 (ll.10-16)

Here the microcosmic/macrocosmic imagery meets, and maps, coins and tears are physical entities which are brought together in a process of concentration, of a reduction of reality to a comprehensive, self-contained space. Both maps and tears are here playing a spatial trick, like the one we have seen in the analogy between the flea's body and the room. The space is used poetically and acquires a living presence. External reality has been mocked and wrought in an enclosed space. Within its boundaries, in the rounded volume of the flea, the coin, the globe, there dwells the only existent reality for the imagination of the poet. Reality outside is unstable and changing, and so the speaker of these poems needs a physical, apprehensible basis in which to affirm his own reality, one that is stable and reliable. He not only creates spaces, he occupies them.

What strikes me in Donne's poems is not only his preference for these enclosed, tiny spaces, but his anxiety of transcendence and permanence through them. In this regard, Bachelard's words are eloquent enough of the kind of connections that underlie Donne's creation and recreation of physical spaces: "Thus the minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world. The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of refuges of greatness" (Bachelard 1994: 155). All the universe concentrated in one nucleus, the great contained within the small. This is the case of another valedictory poem, that of the book, in which this object works as the material reference, the only reference, of their love:

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This booke, as long-liv'd as the elements  
 Or as the worlds forme, this all-graved ttome  
 In cypher writ, or new made Idiome;  
 (...)  
 When this booke is made thus  
 (...)  
 Learning were safe; in this our Universe  
 Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musik, Angels Verse.  
 ("A Valediction: Of the Booke", ll.19-21, 23, 26-27)

Here the image of protection aligns with that of teaching. All learning will be contained in it, as the book works as a metonymy of their love, therefore their Universe, everything that matters. Within this process of concentration and reduction two aims are accomplished. On the one hand the immediate objective of preventing their love from annihilation. The material existence of the book demonstrates that within it their love can survive the contingencies of time and distance. It has been carefully fenced and thus the fears and anxieties of the speaker find solace within it. On the other hand, since all is contained within it, it becomes a principle of authority for "love's clergy". The object is not filled with matter but with words; it is through language that the speaker anxiously seeks to stay. And here we come to the last aspect of my analysis: the poetics of the physical spaces through the spatial dimension of the poem. If the book constitutes a token of permanence and stability in this



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