

John Donne's Rhetoric of Suspension

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In the composition of his poetry, John Donne subverted the traditional rhetorical conventions which dictated the order of presentation of textual contents in both literary and non-literary discourse. Much of Donne's poetry is based on the organisation of a topic or argument by means of postponement and deception: in George Williamson's words, by a "delayed surprise [which] builds upon suspense" and "a deceptive mode of argument" (1961: 32, 39). In doing so, Donne did not only challenge the tradition; he also attempted to establish the foundations of a communicative context in which only a selected few could participate. The purpose of this paper is to explain how and why John Donne engaged in this kind of subversion. I will, however, try to leave aside as many theoretical considerations as possible, which are somewhat outside the scope of this essay, and will focus on examples that should help me illustrate my point. With this purpose in mind, I would like to start with quotations from the beginnings of two poems. The first one is a song from *Arcadia* by Philip Sidney. It starts with an assertion (in lines 1-2) that is incongruous with reality and might therefore cause some perplexity in its readers: "My true love hath my heart and I have his, / By just exchange one for the other giv'n".

That perplexity is justified only if we read the lines literally –something we would hardly ever do, because we are sufficiently familiar with the poetic context which sustains the image used in the poem–: the exchange of hearts is generally understood as the poetic representation of requited love. It is also the image that serves as the statement of the topic discussed in the poem. So what follows (in lines 3-ff.) is understood as the expansion and explanation of that central topic, where specific but topically related concepts are included:

I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss,
There was never a better bargain driv'n.

His heart in me keeps him and me in one, 5
My heart in him his thoughts and senses guides:
He loves my heart, for once it was his own;
I cherish his, because in me it bides.

His heart his wound received from my sight:
My heart was wounded with his wounded heart;
For as from me on him his hurt did light, 10
So still me thought in me his hurt did smart:

Both equal hurt, in this change sought our bliss:
My true love hath my heart and I have his.
(Sidney 1987: 643).

This poem is a good illustration of standard, non-suspenseful discourse; it is also illustrative of the pattern adopted in most Elizabethan verse for the expression of a topic.

The next beginning belongs to “Valediction: Of Weeping”, by John Donne: “Let me pour forth / My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,” (ll. 1-2). It starts with the reference to a particular situation, in which the speaker asks permission to cry (to pour forth his tears). The situation is potentially suspenseful. Unlike the poem by Sidney, this one features a request and a plurality of circumstantial conditions, and we are given no background information on the reasons why the speaker should cry, nor why he should do so before her face, nor why it should be while he stays there (apparently before the person addressed). It is only *potentially* suspenseful, because we expect a prompt explanation -and there is no suspense when we expect such a thing.

But this expectation is fulfilled only in part. The speaker does indeed introduce the next set of clauses with the conjunctions “for” and “and”:

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; 5
(ll. 1-6)

However, the explanations these clauses provide are only valid temporarily, and eventually prove insufficient. What these four lines say could be paraphrased as follows: ‘if I cry before your face, your face will be reflected on my tears, and these will be valuable for me’. If at first this might be taken as a reasonable (albeit somewhat peculiar) justification of the circumstances –*i.e.*, of the speaker’s crying before her face and at that moment– ultimately they fail to explain the central request, why he should be crying before her. Moreover, they lead into an end of the stanza which seems to contradict what has just been explained: “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” (ll. 7-9).

If his tears fall on the ground, both the tears and the images they carry will dissolve. But, if so, why should he cry at all? And why does he ask permission to do something useless? Shouldn’t he rather have tried not to cry? The final result is what may be called a suspenseful enigma. We have been led into making a number of suppositions, following the speaker’s argument, which eventually prove inappropriate; and, after the first stanza, we are at a loss as to what the poem is about. The speaker has delayed or postponed, or perhaps concealed, the information that should provide the essence of the topic presented in the poem. As a consequence, our reading of the poem is from now on determined by this postponement.

For a majority of critics of suspense, the reader who come across a suspenseful enigma merely waits in a state of anxiety (see, *e.g.*, Rabkin 1973; Carroll 1984). This state is provoked partly by the lack of certainty regarding, first, the comprehension of the message, secondly, the comprehension of the author’s purpose behind the breach of an essential maxim of communication. It is also enhanced by the reader’s concern with what may happen next. In my opinion (and in the opinion of some others as well: see Gerrig 1993; Miall 1995), readers adopt a more active role, and engage in a process of elaboration of hypotheses which give sense to what is being said and anticipate the solution to the

enigma. The place of anxiety can thus be taken by a kind of tension which is proportional to the reader's commitment with these hypotheses. We read on, in order to find out if the solution to the enigma coincides with our own hypothesis. Ultimately, however, we read on because we hope that the speaker will provide a pleasurable resolution which will justify the delay and the enigma –and our temporary disorientation.

I will leave aside this poem for a while and focus on another poem, which should help me explain the extent to which we not only depend, but above all rely on, the speaker's voice in our understanding and our evaluation of what is being said. When we read a poem, we automatically adopt the speaker's perspective. We do so in Donne's "Woman's Constancy", as he accuses his lover of being inconstant:

Now thou hast lov'd me one whole day,
Tomorrow, when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then antedate some new-made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons which we were?
Or, that oaths made in reverential fear
Of Love, and his wrath, any may forswear?
Or, as true deaths true marriages untie,
So lovers' contracts, images of those,
Bind but till sleep, death's image, them unloose?
Or, your own end to justify,
For having purposed change, and falsehood, you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?
Vain lunatic, against these 'scapes I could
Dispute, and conquer, if I would–
(ll. 1-15).

The first line provides the reference to a particular situation; the second introduces a prediction and a question; the rest is a sequence of rhetorical questions which are understood as implicit answers to the first question and as accusations against the lover's excuses. There is no impression of suspense. We merely follow the speaker's argument. What we may not be aware of is the way in which we are expected to provide answers to the rhetorical questions, hence the way in which we have been led into assuming a point of view which coincides with the speaker's own point of view: we see him as someone who can accuse his lover, because, unlike her, he is not inconstant, not a "vain lunatic", and not capable of elaborating false excuses. We also tend to assume that the speaker has the intellectual superiority which allows him to argue and persuade the lover into acknowledging her inconstancy.

Having adopted this point of view, the contents of the last two lines (16, 17) of the poem come as a surprise: "Which I abstain to do, / For by tomorrow, I may think so too" (Redpath 1983: 132).

In them, the speaker undermines and totally subverts the consistency of his argument and his moral and intellectual superiority, as he allows his accusations to turn against himself. As for the readers, surprise would lead into puzzlement, as we find ourselves incapable of sustaining a point of view which we have been led to adopt by someone with whom we sympathised. We have our own opinions to turn to; but while we read we suspend them (*i.e.* we leave them aside) in order to follow the lead of the speaker. If that lead proves inconsistent, we do not immediately turn to our own views: we remain disoriented for a good while.

The resource applied by Donne could be called argumentative deception.¹ It applies to discourse in which an addressee is deceived into adopting a point of view which ultimately proves false. It is essential to assume that the reader participates in the construction of textual meaning, therefore, since it is him/her who must suffer the deception. And John Donne applied it regularly in his poems.

Something not altogether different occurs while reading “Valediction: Of Weeping”. Here we find the same violation of the maxims of standard informative communication; the difference lies in the means: in this case, the effect sought by the poet is to delay the recognition of the topic and hinder whatever possible hypotheses the reader may build in order to anticipate such recognition. The reader’s perplexity is thus provoked from the very beginning of the communicative exchange.

So, what is this poem about? Stanza 2 reproduces the scheme of stanza 1:

On a round ball	10
A workman that hath copies by, can lay	
An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,	
And quickly make that, which was nothing, <i>All</i> ;	
So doth each tear,	
Which thee doth wear,	15
A globe, yea, world by that impression grow,	
Till thy tears mix’d with mine do overflow	
This world, by waters sent from thee, my heaven, dissolvèd so.	
(ll. 10-18)	

The paradox or perplexity remains. The speaker says that he can save his tears from becoming nothing; he can make a world out of them, because they carry her image, and her image means the world to him. But this may be undone by her tears, because they can blur her face and dissolve the image he had created.

If we are keen readers, we may have noticed that the problem lies, not in *his* crying, but in *her doing so*. And this is what is emphasised in the third and final stanza:

O more than Moon,	
Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere,	20
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 more harm than it purposeth;	25
Since thou and I sigh one another’s breath,	
Whoe’er sighs most, is cruellest, and hastes the other’s death.	
(ll. 10-27; Redpath 1983: 253)	

We can finally understand that the speaker’s original purpose was to persuade his lover not to cry, and to let him be the one who does so, because only he can benefit from shedding tears. And yet his particular strategy seems to be inconsistent, since he concludes in a way that argues against all crying and all expressions of suffering at his departure.

The confusion and delay would seem to be caused by a misinterpretation of the first two words in the poem. We should perhaps have read “let mé” instead of “let me”. But we cannot be certain as to whether this initial phrase was ambiguous by chance, or was made so on purpose. It is also possible to

¹ Deception is the main feature of suspense as viewed by Barthes (1990 [1970]) in his description of the hermeneutic code.

assume, with George Williamson, that Donne made his argument contradictory in order to heighten his emotions:

In Donne the surprise of wit may be either sudden as in point, or delayed as in poetic epigram, or pervasive as in irony. His argument is commonly employed as a mode of surprise rather than of persuasion (...); its end is to point or magnify his emotions rather than to prove them. (Williamson 1961: 32)

But the reasons of his seemingly incoherent discourse can be sought also in the wider context of his relationship with his readers. In one of his studies on John Donne, Arthur Marotti (1986) defined Donne as a “coterie poet”, that is, as a poet who wrote strictly for a group of close friends. The term “coterie” has been applied also in the definition of the poetry written by certain Elizabethan authors (the main one, Sidney), and can be helpful to understand the kind of poetry written by these authors.² In my opinion, the essence of Donne’s coterie verse is expressed exemplarily under conditions that require their oral transmission, that is, when that verse is meant to be read aloud before an audience.

This possibility has already been discussed by Ted-Larry Pebworth (1989) to justify the existence of various versions of a single poem –each one would be the result of the adaptation of the original poem to the specific conditions of the performance. It might also explain the apparent ambiguity of the initial “let me” in this poem.

The poem’s orality would also help us understand the importance of time in the process of reception, and its suspenseful qualities. Ideally, Donne’s intended readers/audience would not have a written copy of the poem with them; they would need to rely only on their ability to build up its meaning while and only while it is being read aloud by somebody else. Under less ideal conditions, the reader would have a written copy, and have therefore plenty of time to re-read and think about what the poem says; this is the way in which we normally confront Donne’s verse nowadays. But I would like to contend that Donne’s verse is best suited to oral performance, for conditions in which the time available for comprehension was limited and in which the poet’s deceptive argumentation would be most effective; and that this is the condition which Donne had in mind during the composition of his poetry.

Jasper Mayne, in his elegy on the death of Donne, said that Donne’s verse was “(...) indeed so far above its reader, good, / That we are thought wits, when ‘tis understood” (qtd. in Álvarez 1967: 27).

The qualification that follows from being able to understand Donne’s verse, to be “thought wits”, is essential if we wish to determine the nature of the communicative process which Donne intended his audience to engage in. As A. Álvarez comments, “it is as though Donne’s poetry were a test of the reader’s capabilities” (Álvarez 1967: 27); whoever proved capable of following the poem’s argument, proved his/her intellectual excellence. This excellence was somehow granted beforehand to those who belonged to the poet’s coterie; but the participation in the performance of the poem would then become a challenge to confirm the sharpness of the audience’s wit. Participation and success would ultimately serve as the means to intensify the affective and intellectual ties among the members of the coterie: “the pleasure they got from [Donne’s] and from each other’s poetry was (...) the coterie pleasure of recognising one another’s wit” (Álvarez 1967: 36-7).

As for the rest of us, ordinary mortals, we are simply excluded from this very selected circle –unless we prove that we too are wits. What we should however not do is to seek for seriousness and conceptual coherence in a kind of poetry which was not intended to be read so, but rather appealed to

² For further discussion on Donne’s coterie or “circle”, see Álvarez (1967: 33-40).

sophistry and falsification in the construction of a playful context whose main communicative purpose was the confirmation of affective ties, not the transmission of information.

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