Pazhuhesh-e Zabanha-ye Khareji, No. 27, Special Issue, English, 2006, pp 71-82

Violation of Petrarchism in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*

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Abstract

In the study of sonnet sequence as a genre, invented by Italian Renaissance sonneteers and practiced up to the seventeenth century, we find out that Petrarch has not only been the most influential figure who established the elements of the convention but he also seems to have become an integral part of the sonnet convention. Petrarchan elements such as the idealized images of the beloved, the theme of sublimation, and the tone of lamentation receive a totally different treatment in *Donne's Songs and Sonnets* that is far from the spirit of Petrarch's poetry. As a metaphysical poet, Donne uses these elements either in a mocking tone to question the purity of love or with a serious attitude to reflect the paradoxical nature of love. The objective of this paper is to elaborate briefly on the Petrarchan elements and then discuss Donne's violation of such a convention.

Key Words: Petrarchism, sonnet sequence, Donne, sublimation, idealization, love poetry.

In discussing various factors that constitute the tradition of love poetry, Petrarchism is given an important role. The significance of the role becomes more obvious when we notice how Italian poets revived the classical heritage through imitation or poetic experiments. Such inspiration, profound in the fifteenth century Italy, encouraged English Renaissance poets who were obsessed with medieval conventions to receive Petrarchism with great enthusiasm. However, it is noticeable that such a mode goes through a drastic change in the hands of metaphysical poets and particularly John Donne. To give more elaboration on Petrarchism as an influential movement, The writer of this article would briefly trace the diversions it has taken from the thirteenth century up to the time of John Donne. In defining its nature, the convertion can be categorized by the following elements: the images of idealization and courtly descriptions, the theme of sublimation, and the tone of lamentation. The last part of the argument, shall concentrate on Donne's violation of Petrarchism in relation to the themes he conveys either seriously or in a mocking manner.

Petrarchism

As any other movement, Petrarchism has endured contradictory judgments and has caused different influences during the time of its revival. Fifteenth-century poetry followed Petrarch based on the medieval conception of courtly love. People like Boccaccio, Ronsard, Ariosto, especially Cardinal Bembo "set up the Petrarchan and neoplatonic doctrines of love as the great archetypes to be followed" (Preminger, 1965: 613). During this period, the movement became established while still keeping the originality of Petrarch with depth of idealization and courtship.

In the sixteenth century, the imitation took a new dimension. The intense emotional conflicts of Petrarch's poetry that ensured the medieval reader with a consolation suddenly shifted to a new cultural frame:

"[T]emperamentally the English were uncomfortable with the role of disconsolate weeper bewailing his lot and in fact responded more readily ... to the Stoic philosophy with its demand for equanimity in the face of misfortune" (Roston, 1982: 44). Leishman finds in Elizabethan poetry a sort of association that elevated the visual beauty under the light of Christian and Platonic idealism. He thinks the demand that love poetry made in the Renaissance has nothing to do with the poet's emotions. Rather it explains that the poet's object is merely to follow a convention (Leishman, 1965: 210-11). Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the convention became derogatory, extreme in cliche physical descriptions. As a result, a tone of reaction appeared in the style of metaphysical poetry. Indeed the beautiful images yielded neither a sensual nor an emotional response in the reader. Instead the images served as means to argue and analyze the concept of beauty. The poet's feelings are not *dissociated of sensibility*, in T. S. Eliot's words. Beauty itself has become a poetic concept that 'affects the metaphysics' so to speak. That is why we rarely come across metaphors based on images of nature in metaphysical poetry. Even one may go further and take the image of the sun in Donne's poems not as nature's artifice but as whispers of classical tradition, in which the sun is cruel for its "contracted duties" (Redpath, 1967: 11) and hurries near as a 'winged chariot' to separate the lovers.

This brief history of the convention reveals how the spiritual quality of beauty alongside the other elements of Petrarchism changed in the course of time and how it received a different treatment by later poets. The most important and essential element of Petrarchism is the high exploitation of beautiful images and descriptions of the beloved. In Petrarch, the descriptions are enriched by classical motifs and often religious sources: "thy words have sped on zephyr's wing / I see her in third celestial sphere" (Richardson, 1936: 549). Petrarch's love imagery deviates in many ways

from Ovidian harsh and exaggerated adoration by referring more to the moral features of beauty: "A spirit heavenly pure, a living sun, / was what I" (Richardson, 1936: 551). In Petrarch's poetry, the beloved is the embodiment of perfection. She is elevated into an ideal picture in order to transform the lover-poet. The presentation of the feminine beauty in the hands of the poet becomes a means for an end other than what it seems. Therefore, Petrarch's eulogy always creates a balance between the physical and moral beauty of his beloved. However, these so called Petrarchan features such as "wavy tresses gleaming like gold, white skin compared to marble, alabaster, or lilies and roses, eyes outshining the sun or stars, whose gentle gaze nevertheless wounds the lover like arrows, and ruby lips, pearly teeth, and ivory hands" (Rogers, 1986: 291) were later turned into a standardized poetic eulogy of the beloved. What is particularly significant in such imagery is the exploitation of nature by Petrarch. Nature is there to objectify the poet's subjectivity either in its joyful feelings or in solitude. In Donne's Sonnets, however, the beloved's beauty is not objectified; her physical beauty is ridiculed in an exaggerated manner. This is because, as will be explained later in the article, Donne's beloved is not distanced from the lover. In fact, she participates in the labyrinth of desire within the limits of the sonnet sequence.

The portrayal of such images that connote spirituality and purity of love accompanied by whispers of nature leads us to the second element: the theme of sublimation. Love becomes so sacred that only death unites the lovers as was the state of love before the Fall. What actually reinforces sublimation is the fact that Petrarch's earlier poems and distinct platonic tone of his later poems are similar, "even if it seems possible in an earlier phase to redirect it towards Apollonian poetry, and at a later stage towards prayer" (Hainsworth, 1988: 118). It is only in such a state that we can talk about the temple of love. The lover is portrayed as a spirit whose sighs and tears are

prone to adoration as well as idealization of the beloved who responds to all his sufferings by her purity. However, in Petrarch's poetry, as Cilve Hart argues, usually the fulfillment of physical desire and the consequent feeling of sin are expressed in horizontal imagery; therefore, both the vertical and horizontal modes of eroticism become essential to his poetry (Hart, 1995: 3-4). By the term 'horizontal', Hart refers to the kind of movement that is initiated by the subject himself while 'vertical' movement has spiritual implications brought about by external powers.

Third is the tone of lamentation that is a distinct characteristic of the convention. In Petrarchan poetry, a tone of despair dominates adoration of the beloved. The conceits, too, convey the lover's anguish and sufferings through his mourning; they are not depicted with a harsh and cruel language. The tone is imported from the courtly tradition of love "where lover adopts a refined suppliant and mournful tone, pleading for mercy . . . warning the world of the pain inherent in love's bondage . . . for all his complaints" (Roston, 1982: 42). The importance of the tone and its change in later poetry is due to two historical factors: the first being that cultural 'equanimity' mentioned before. The second is the treatment of love in medieval poetry that was "either allegorically or with a lusty forthrightness far removed from the sensitivity of the Petrarchan"(Ibid). The result was a detachment, and some kind of humour mixed with cynicism as is observable in Donne's sonnets.

Such a tone is not observable in later poetry neither is it associated with the beloved and this is because time as an integral element of lyric poetry goes through a change. In the poetry of Petrarch, time reveals some shades of subjectivity quite the opposite of time as the enemy in Ovid. The emotional tensions of love in Petrarch enables him to analyze his 'self' in the course of time. Accordingly, time becomes as essential to the poet as the source of love; it elevates the poet's/ lover's emotions. Heather Dubrow in

her articulate analysis of English Petrarchism recognizes atemporality and subjectivity as two distinct characteristics of the lyric. Lyric poetry, she maintains, is timeless, as the poet does not ponder upon an event or the narration of its sequence. The lyric poet, rather, pursues his thoughts and emotions. Accordingly, the poetry of Petrarch introduces a mode of time which alludes to the future; a time that signifies uncertainty, fear, and helplessness. The speaker is in constant state of 'futuristic wish' but on the other side of the clash hopelessness proceeds. As Dubrow explains, presence is repeatedly promised, and then denied (Dubrow, 1995: 21).

The feature of atemporality in Petrarch's poetry gives him the freedom in narration to speak first of his beloved, next of his emotions, and later of sublimation. These shifts of time that mingle subjectivity with atemporality imply a spatial movement:

narrativity both describes and enables the movement from earthly to heavenly love. It is precisely the ability to contrast *then* and *now* that permits him to contrast *here*, the world of secular love that at its best encourages him to seek the divine, and *there*, the world of heavenly love. And it is the ability to tell a story that synecdochically represents the possibility of spiritual change and growth. (Ibid: 31)

Although the element of movement and narrativity explains the spiritual change and the process of sublimation in the lover, his constant struggles to overcome the state of uncertainty cause a linearity in the pattern of now and then. It is exactly this mode of uncertainty that dominates his poetry and directs it toward lamentation. The temporal mode in Petrarch establishes the then/now pattern that is essential to his poetry. However, as Roland Greene maintains, "that pattern is blurred by the admission that in the psyche of the speaker, *then* and *now* collide and elide" (Greene, 1991: 33). Therefore we can presume a spatial movement (that is a potential part of narrativity) that directs the speaker towards God. Such a linear pattern of time is dismissed in

Donne's poetry. The speaker of the sonnets by an active participation of his beloved in the movement of his desire shifts to the present mode of time. Therefore Donne analyzes the concept of love by involving both his lover and beloved whether in fulfillment or in its failure.

Donne and Petrarchism

Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, almost written during the period of twenty years, is a collection of diverse and profound sets of feelings and expressions of love ranging from simple manifestations of desire for unity to sophisticated portrayals of a cursed love locked up in deceit. With great skill, Donne has invented different situations of love varying from "stolen or strayed [to] ... exchanged, fused, unified heart" (Smith, 1966: 58). Considering Donne's treatment of Petrarchism in such vast experiences, we may distinguish two different tones in the sonnets. First are those sonnets with an idealistic tone where Donne uses Petrarchan motifs to subvert and violate the traditional mode of desire. Second are the sonnets with a pessimistic tone in which Donne by mocking Petrarchan motifs disrupt their effect in the poems.

Themes such as unity of the souls and purity or eternity of love can be traced in a large number of poems that challenge the original theme of sublimation. In 'Sun Rising', Donne adores his mistress by obliterating the positive role that the sun plays in Petrarch's poetry. While in Petrarch, the sun is an integral part of metaphoric language whereby the beloved is elevated and relates her physical beauty to its divine sources, Donne reduces the sun to a "saucy pedantic wretch" and later blinds it by the power of his beloved's eyes. The lady is "all States" and he "all Princes". Through such descriptions, Donne elevates her to the level of a goddess not by comparing her to the sun but by juxtaposing her. The contrast of tone to the sun and the beloved, therefore, magnifies the theme of union in which nature (the sun)

fulfills the role of servitude.

An extreme example of idealization can be seen in 'Air and Angel' in which the lover admires the physical beauty of the beloved such as her lips, eyes and eyebrows and compares them to the glory of angels. Yet the poet concludes that neither flesh nor soul can be pure by themselves just as the angel may not be embodied without the air. Thus by uniting the lovers' souls through their flesh, Donne has provided a tight metaphor that is different from Petrarchan notion of sublimation. Donne's lovers search for a sphere free from the wanderings of pleasure rejecting the fancies and "childish country pleasure" as in 'Good-morrow'.

Donne also treats spiritual beauty and the 'dream' of love in some of his sonnets with a tone of lamentation. In 'The Relic' all the external and "elemented" phenomena are bounded to the faithful lovers: they "fall in a time or land" where "All women shall adore us, and some men". The image of the relic itself is treated paradoxically by the speaker: on the one hand he guarantees the spirituality of the lovers by turning them into relics and on the other he questions the authenticity of relics as a catholic practice. Yet he ends the sonnet complaining that, "All measure and all language I shall pass, / Should I tell what a miracle she was". In 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning', too, the poet finds "moving of the earth" harmful. Yet the absence of senses do not matter: "Care less eyes, lips, and hands to miss" because lovers are moving around the circle of union. Coining the beloved's tears is another image that idealizes the eternal state of love ('A Valediction: of Weeping').

Donne's whole concern is to elevate love pictured in his beloved through a legacy between the souls for whom everything becomes harmonious: "We can die by it, if not live by love" ('The Canonization'). The lovers, thus, canonize themselves by the contract of the souls. Such a unique way of describing love as a form of religion formed by two people, rather than

Renaissance emblematic expressions of love mixed with worshiping passion, shows Donne's treatment of Petrarchan motifs. Such a treatment seems to dismiss feminist readings of Renaissance as well as early seventeenth century poetry that are motivated by sexual politics. As Catherine Belsey argues, by placing the man (as the predator) and woman (as he silent) in opposition, we risk ignoring the relation that binds them together at the level of text:

In a love poem this relation consists not only in the differential meanings of man and woman, but also in the desire which assigns the woman who is its object a textual place for the male voice that declares it. Desire ... is in this sense prior to gender difference, and the condition of its imagined fixing. (Belsey, 1994: 134)

Conversely, Donne has utilized Petrarchism to expound the theme of deceit with a mocking tone. He shows the lover's desire, hopes, fears and anguish in order to question in a realistic manner the paradox of love. And it is in this state of questioning that Petrarch's tone of lamentation serves as a good vehicle for Donne mocking his lover's despair. A very strong example where the poet mocks all traditions of virginity and codes of morality is 'The Flea'. He addresses the beloved as vain lunatic, murd'ress: "hast, thou since / purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?" The blood is substituted by the image of a flea for the union of souls. Here Petrarchan ideals of courtship and adoration of the beloved are mocked by rejecting the "sin, shame or maidenhood" to be "false fears" ('The Flea'). Donne is even using a special diction to magnify that effect: "[t]he word 'cloysterd' brings monastic piety to the event and the metaphorical use of 'Jet', a glossy black stone, to describe the flea's hard, shiny carapace is stunningly original and apt" (Nutt, 1999: 56).

In 'The Triple Fool', Donne exaggerates the sense of humor by ridiculing his lover's feelings. In majority of these poems, love is presented

as the overt expression of deceit. The lover rationalizes his painful experiences of love and then executes himself for belief in a "cornered heart" ('The Triple Fool'). 'Woman's Constancy' is another satire on the tradition of coy mistresses and "oaths made in reverential fear". Donne crudely asserts love in "one whole day" and by a delicate paradox concludes that "no way but falsehood to be true". Poems like 'The Indifferent', 'The Damp', and 'The Broken Heart' make a bitter, disillusioned picture of the lover's idealized moments of suffering, his anguish and his desperate need for a sense of unity. Very scornfully the lover says, "My rags of heart can like, wish, and adore, / But after one such love, can love no more" ('The Broken Heart'), or even "Since you will be true, / You shall be true to them, who are false to you!" ('The Indifferent'). Such scandalous attitudes reflect his contempt for the tradition of love with its conventions of angelic promises and its exhausting humiliations, in one word Petrarchan tradition.

The power of contempt is so strong that most critics consider the tone of the majority of Donne's sonnets cynic and contemptuous toward women as the continuation of medieval sense of physical love. Of course it would be fair to say that the dominant tone of the sonnets is more reactionary than contemptuous. In fact, Donne's cynicism is even more than a reaction against a conventional picture of the beloved; his cynicism presents a pessimistic attitude toward love that Donne reflects in his other poems as well, i.e. 'The First Anniversary'. 'Love's Deity' is an overt manifestation of love as a curse, for which lovers become bounded victims. It is a tyranny since "Falsehood is worse than hate; and that must be, / If she whom I love, should love me" ('Love's Deity'). And this is exactly what he says in 'Twicknam Garden'; Donne defines love as a power that can transubstantiate. In the beginning of the poem, it is a spider love as it converted "Manna to gall" but later at the end of the poem transubstantiation takes the form of the lover's tears turning into wine and purified. Rich in its

religious overtones, the poem investigates the nature of love in terms of a metaphor where love is neither paradise nor hell; it brought him sufferings and ended in tears yet tears that have transformed him.

Conclusion

It is observable, then, how variously Petrarchism was challenged by poets for over two centuries and how intricately Donne used or rather misused it for his own purposes. Thus by categorizing a number of sonnets as Petrarchan, I did not intend to reflect on the lover's wailing; in fact, such a tone is mocked by Donne. Petrarchism is merely a mode of poetry that follows the conventions set by Petrarch. It reached its height during the Renaissance as a vehicle for cultivating imagery and enriching idealized themes but Donne totally violated it in the spirit of metaphysical poetry. He adores or sanctifies his beloved with a defamiliarized language in order to satirize the objectification of beauty. Donne elevates his beloved only through her own presence where she participates in the representation of desire. Donne sanctifies the state of love through the most outrageous secular conceits. Altogether Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* is indebted to Petrarchan convention as it enables him to reveal the paradoxical nature of love while questioning its traditional conceptions. To Donne, love is a power that can transubstantiate and it is in this light that his sonnets are a reflection of his divine poetry.

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