

## *Re-reading 'Death' in Selected Poems by John Donne*

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates some of the different notions and attitudes of 'death' in selected poems by John Donne; and these poems include, but they are not restricted to, the following poems: "Holy Sonnets", "The Relic", "The Second Anniversary", "The Legacy", "The Damp", "The Will", "The Canonization", "The Indifferent", and "The Funeral". Death is one of the prominent themes highlighted in Donne's poetry and sermons, and it could be argued that he was obsessed by the nature of death. His fascination with death manifests itself in his works. Hence, the present paper attempts to tackle that obsession and reveal some of its hidden concepts.

Being so concerned with religion due to the disasters that struck his family members, which were crowned by the death of his brother, Donne made a decision that shaped the rest of his life; he converted to Anglicanism around 1592. The resultant guilt of abandoning the Catholic faith into which he was born, as Targoff discusses, explains the poetry's central preoccupation with "betrayals, infidelity, and impermanence; Donne's political and social ambition, itself responsible for his apostasy, produced both the agitation and egotism that suffuses" his poetry (Targoff, 2008: 4). Nevertheless, one should not also forget the other deaths of his son, daughter, some of his friends' children, and the most important one of his wife while giving birth to their son in 1617. This preoccupation with death led Donne, the poet and the preacher, to look for ways which could grant him superiority over, and immunity against, the horrible reality of death. Donne's imagination, his philosophy as well as his ego equipped him with the necessary tools to activate and ridicule death, and hence take his revenge on death and its ensuing decay.

## إعادة قراءة فكرة "الموت" في قصائد مختارة لـ

"جون دون"

الدكتور

علي اللحام

جامعة دمشق/ كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية

### المخلص

يعرض هذا البحث بعض المعاني والمفاهيم المميزة لفكرة "الموت" في قصائد مختارة للشاعر "جون دون". حيث إنّ فكرة "الموت" هي إحدى أهم الأفكار التي تناولها دون في شعره ومواعظه، ويمكن القول بأنه كان مهووساً بطبيعة الموت. ويظهر إعجاب جون دون بالموت بشكل جلي في معظم أعماله. لذا، تحاول الدراسة التالية أن تعرض ذلك الهوس وتظهر بعض معانيه الخفية.

يقدم البحث تتبعاً للفكرة أنفة الذكر في القصائد التي تعالج هذا الموضوع أو تشير إليه، ومن ثم يحاول سبر أعماق المعاني التي تكمن وراء فكرة الموت في محاولة لفهم الألغاز التي دفعت الشاعر إلى اعتناق بعض المفاهيم المختلفة للتعامل مع الموت ومحاولة التغلب عليه بتحويله من صيغته المعروفة إلى شكل آخر للحياة، أو من خلال مقارنته وعدم الاستسلام للخوف المسيطر الذي يفرضه. وسيقدم هذا البحث للقارئ فهماً أوسع لهذه الفكرة كما عرضت في نتاج الشاعر جون دون الأدبي.

Donne was preoccupied with the idea of death, a terrifying concept that made him afraid. He thought of death as an enemy that should be always fought. His imagination seemed winged to enable him to probe the depths of death in order to discover it. As a result of his fear, he "thought of ways in which death could be minimized" (Carey, 1981: 198). This minimization and domestication of death might eradicate some of its horrible features. The utmost expression of this could be traced in "Death be not Proud:" "Death be not proud, though some have called thee / Mighty and dreadful, for, *thou art not so*" (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 6, 1-2) This falsification of death and of its mighty features at the beginning of the sonnet is the first direct attack against that enemy whom some have wrongly thought of as a superior enemy that could never be defeated. The way Donne looks at death is commendable. He very bravely rejects its "mightiness, powerfulness, and dreadfulness. He merely considers death a slave of destiny" as Patel discusses (Patel, 2015: 262). Donne, however, seems to be disarming death of its deathly weapons. This attempt increased until the end of the poem and culminated in leaving death without value or importance. Moreover, Donne's second attack is the challenge he made for death: "For those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow, / Die not, poor death, nor *yet canst thou kill me*" (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 6, 3-4). Even if death thinks that it has achieved a kind of victory by defeating some, Donne is here letting his ego speak on his behalf; excluding himself from such a list of losers. I believe this challenge might be seen as the superiority over death he had always wished for. According to Welcker, Donne states his "confidence over death with a ring of finality that is wholly and irrevocably undeniable by the world." (Welcker, 2013: 7) Additionally, Patel rightly points out that Donne

"derides the authority of the death and brings before the readers how he himself is free from the fear and awe of death." (Patel, 2015: 262)

The progress of the sonnet also highlights the step-by-step movement towards the final aim of rendering death powerless at the end. Attributing to it the adjectives "rest and sleep" to weaken the image of death is Donne's third attack since drugs, likewise, might cause a sleep that is better than, or at least similar to, that of death. This also leaves death armless without a reason that might justify its being proud. If death is similar to 'rest' and 'sleep' which are only transitory stages of every human's life then: "Much *pleasure*, then from thee *much more must flow*." (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 6, 6) This pleasure, I believe, which is "much more" than that got out of sleep, is the activity of death. This activity is not in the action of death itself but rather, in the resurrection death leads to as its final station or its next one. The "rest" that death causes is to be followed by "soul's delivery" which is the first act of resurrection and of the last Day of Judgment where the "pleasure" would be the glory Donne is all the time seeking. This is also followed by a description of methods death uses to kill: "poison, war, sickness" all these seem to be ways of demeaning death. Moreover, the dwelling on the idea that "sleep is better than death or vice versa" remained unsolved and contradictory (Carey, 1981: 199). Yet, Donne gave up at the end of the sonnet assuring himself that it would be but a short sleep towards that eternal life where death would exist no more because death would be dead then: "One short sleep past, we *wake eternally*/ And death shall be no more, *Death thou shalt die*. (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 6, 13-14) This personification of death, as Welcker highlights, "allows Donne to attack it not as a subject of abstraction, but a subject of tangible quality." (Welcker 2013: 8) Hence, the death

of "Death" is the knockdown against that enemy. Besides, it would mean the cancellation of its fear and the change of it to an enemy that had lost the battle ultimately causing harm to none, and this would also justify the isolation of death as being not needed at all.

Donne's continuous aims at disarming death are done by his assigning activity to death in order to "negate its deathliness" (Carey, 1981: 200). He always tries to deal with death as another kind or stage of life. This also highlights the emphasis Donne laid on his belief in the "mutual necessity of body and soul, and his obsessive imagining of their parting" as this is a permanent feature of his works (Targoff, 2008: 5). This is made clear in "The Relic": the one who is to dig the grave, for burying another body at that time where more than one are put in a single grave, would be disturbing and separating two lovers doing their own business and preparing themselves for eternity on the last day of Judgment: "Will he not let us alone, /And think that there is a loving couple lies" (Donne, 1991: The Relic, 7-8). Therefore, death is but an activity. This is the hope that Donne adheres to in order to make death interesting and thus to lessen his fear. Moreover, in "The Second Anniversary" he notices that the eyes of a beheaded man will twinkle, his tongue will say something, he would grasp his hands together and walk using his feet: "His eyes will twinkle, and his tongue will roll, / He grasps his hands, and he pulls up his feet." (Donne, 1991: The Second Anniversary, 13-15) One would wonder here about the presence of death in such a lively state where one would be able to do what s/he used to do before. Such an active face of death is surely one of the many that Donne contemplated and included in his works.

The fact that death is the end of life, the cause of annihilation, is one that Donne always disbelieved in. All the attempts he made at discrediting death are just to falsify this fact and prove its invalidity. He refused to think of death in such a way and the challenge he made earlier is to accuse death of its inability to kill: "Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me." (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 6, 4) Such a challenge would defy the idea of death as complete annihilation. In such a description, Donne in his "belittling tone pokes fun at the conventional characteristics of the death." (Patel, 2015: 262) To strengthen his assurance he even went further in his argument assuming that being dead is just a continuation of life in another form. The walking of the dead and their talking imply their being alive. As Carey puts it: "Dying is something they do frequently." (Carey, 1981: 202) This concept is crystallized in "The Legacy": "When I died last, and, dear, I die/ As *often* as from thee I go." (Donne, 1991: The Legacy, 1-2). The continuous repetition of death as "often" as one wishes to is intended to mean its existence as one of the many daily routine activities of a human being. The use of "go" also suggests the vivacity of the action itself. Therefore, it enlivens death and adds activity to it. It is something one should often practice to accustom himself/herself to, Donne believed. Another justification for his making death continuous is in "Song" where he would do again that practice willingly:

But since that I

Must die at last, 'tis best

To use myself in jest

Thus by feigned deaths to die. (Donne, 1991: Song, 5-9)

It seems here as if he is making fun of death and of its power by that practice which is to be done repeatedly.

Even if dead, Donne would still refuse to think of himself as a mere past. He would like to be the centre of attention as before, "more important to the living, and more influential with them, than the living" (Carey, 1981: 202). They are to be learning from him and gathering around him as a holy being due to the connection he had made with God:

When I am dead, and doctors know not why,

And my friends' curiosity

Will have me cut up to survey each part... (Donne, 1991: The Damp, 1-3)

Subsequently, his effect on them would be disastrous for it would cause their death too. The parts of his body with the horrible smell would be the plague that brings them to Donne's company: "And work on them as me, and so prefer/ Your murder, to the name of massacre." (Donne, 1991: The Damp, 7-8) This brings forward the assumption of Donne's egotism. When he dies it will not be him; but the whole world that will die. His death would cause the end of everything because he is the centre to whom all things go back. The evidence of this is in "The Will": "I'll undo/ The world by dying" (Donne, 1991: The Will, 46-47). The undoing of the world would make him feel the importance of himself, of his personality and of his ego, and it would also relieve him at the same time.

The most important and astonishing concept of death, however, is that which connects between death and God: "For Donne to think of God is to think of death: that alone will bring him to God" (Carey,

1981: 202). God and death are for him but one thing or one entity; the presence of one requires the presence of the other. If death is the kingdom, then God is the king. Thus, a worship of one necessitates the worship of the other. The explanation of this lies deep down in Donne's fear as to whether he is saved or not. Salvation is the aim he seemed heading towards. This aim, nevertheless, embodies the course of his anxiety concerning salvation. He cannot reach that conclusion of whether saved or not until he is dead. Yet, he is not at all certain of being included:

And you whose eyes  
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe..  
For, if above all these, my sins abound,  
'tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,  
When we are there; here on this lowly ground,  
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good  
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood.  
(Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 4, 7-14)

The connection Donne had made is one of his attempts to reach that salvation. He exaggerated his sins to receive the teachings of repentance which might, or should for him, cause his salvation. Hence, this feeling emphasizes Donne's "effulgent awe at the resurrection and his desire to join the angels," Welcker argued (Welcker 2013: 6).

Another concept of death that contributed to Donne's being possessed by it is its being a crisis. The questioning mind and the selfish personality would not be satisfied until controlling the most important act in the life of every human being. The perplexity of this need to control is but an invitation to death or to life since both are

the same. The crisis of death thus includes the fear again because sin is still present there. The idea is mingled, therefore, with the invitation he has made:

Spit in my face you Jews and pierce my side,

Buffet and scoff, scourge, and crucify me,

For I have sinned, and sinned, and only he,

Who could do no iniquity, hath died. (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 7, 1-3)

Carey commented: "Death is used as an appeal for notice." (Carey, 1981: 203) We, readers, are thus involved and attracted to this notion because of Donne's assumption of his being on the last step of that ladder leading to afterlife – to eternity.

This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint

My pilgrimage's last mile; and my race,

Idly, yet quickly run, hath this last pace,

My span's last inch, my minute's latest point... (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 3, 1-4)

It is also possible here to draw a connection with salvation. The miseries of the human being in his/her life and the crisis of death should have a reward. What a magnificent a reward than salvation; which if one is certain about, s/he would join the party they had been invited to. That party would include meeting with God; and that is the glory Donne had been wishing for, I think.

One of the most important ideas of death is the one linked to suicide. The environment in which Donne was brought up was that of martyrdom because of the pressure of the difference of religion.

Those who educated him greatly influenced his thoughts about the subject because they themselves were depressed, and some of his family members as well died due to this cause. Donne's conversion and his failure, as a result, to get a university degree and public employment added some weight to his sense of isolation from the society he is living in. Thus, suicide might be the solution. In choosing suicide as the solution, though he never did it, Donne asserted his sense of individualism. In the preface to *Biathanatos*, he confesses his own temptation to suicide: "whensoever my affliction assayles me, me thinks I have the keyes of my prison in myne own hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine owne sword" (Donne, 1984: *Biathanatos* 29 & See also Targoff, 2008: 110). If death is the enemy, suicide is the trick that should be played to defeating that enemy since when committing it, one chooses his/her own way of death.

The perfect executant of suicide was Christ and this was the best model Donne wished to follow. God's execution is, therefore, an invitation to all believers to do the same. What attracted Donne here was Christ's mastery over death since he willingly gave himself to the killers and 'whispered to his soul to pass mildly away and it did' (Donne, 1991: *A Valediction*, 1). This mastery over death has again to do with Donne's ego and search for glory. He wants to take command of death and the only applicable way is but suicide. Though suicide opposes the Church's doctrine that those who commit it are "impenitent and damned", Donne depended on the "Given Christianity's promise of an afterlife freed from the inconveniences of our present existence, suicide might well seem the only reasonable course for the true believer." (Carey, 1981: 206) Likewise, it might

be seen as the demand of Donne's ego to resemble himself to Christ and God.

The sense of victory which suicide has, was enticing to Donne because the victim is the killer at the same time. Suicide, therefore, changes death from an end of life to its start; colouring it with the bright colours of victory where it would be but a life after stripping it of its deadness. The separation of Donne and his mistress in the love poem is somehow a step forward towards death showing off the self-sufficiency of lovers to accomplish the mission and to obtain that victory of suicide due to the isolation he felt. Donne contemplated a lot on this idea to prove that self-sufficiency as in "The Canonization": "Call her one, me another fly, /We are tapers too, and at our own cost die." (Donne, 1991: The Canonization, 20-21) Another example of this is in "The Relic" where the lovers meet again in the grave to set off the journey towards eternity as mentioned earlier on the description of death as an active life. "To make their souls, at the last busy day. / Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?" (Donne, 1991: The Relic, 10-11) The use of "we" throughout the whole poem is surprisingly turned into "I" in the last two lines: "I should pass, /Should I tell what a miracle she was?" (Donne, 1991: The Relic, 32-33) This insistence on the separation is, therefore, the way of assurance of that self-sufficiency.

Nevertheless, the thought of suicide as the result of the inability to attain one's own goals is typical of Donne. His goals are unattainable because they exceed the limits of human beings; they are infinite. He could not fulfill his aims either as a man seeking a career for himself or as a lover pursuing the truth of love; the love that surpasses human

limits. In "The Indifferent" he would love any one that would guide him the way being true:

I can love both fair and brown

Her who believes, and her who tries...

I can love her, and her, and you, and you

I can love any, so she might be not true. (Donne, 1991: The Indifferent, 1-3/8-9)

The inability is thus one of the motives behind the suicidal tendencies Donne had. The perfect love he seeks could neither be found nor expressed: "If that be simply perfectest/ Which can by no way be expressed." (Donne, 1991: The Indifferent, 10-11) Anyway, this might be the result of his earlier upbringing which "habituated him to seek life's aims beyond life, and so destroyed his ultimate satisfaction in anything life could furnish." (Carey, 1981: 213).

If death was not but just a step forward to that eternal life, Donne would exert the power of his imagination towards shaping that vague second life in his own way and establishing a relationship with that next world. Donne's imagination soared so high here inventing many incidents that would take place after death. That eternal life starts by the resurrection of the body which is the "pleasure" aforementioned where "the real subject of wonder lies in the prospect of bodily rebirth" as Targoff highlights (Targoff, 2008: 17). This theme took much of Donne's thinking – clear in his presenting it so often in his works. Targoff discusses that "Whether the occasion was Good Friday or a funeral, Easter Day or a wedding ceremony, Donne made his central theme again and again the subject of resurrection." (Targoff, 2008: 154) However, the glamour of resurrection yet entails

some extra labour on the part of God in returning every part of a body to its owner, Donne thought. In spite of all the difficulties God would have to face in determining whose part is this or that, Donne was fascinated by the re-integrative act of building the body again out of parts, and this is the essence of activity embodied in such an action. That body, however, would mean nothing if not inhabited by a soul because each entails the presence of the other. In other words, glory would not be complete: the soul and body part willingly when stepping towards death, and they should meet so soon after death or when resurrected because neither could exist alone and "the need for bodily existence in heaven obsessed [Donne] almost as much as the thought of physical reintegration." (Carey, 1981: 222) This has also to do with Donne's ego demanding the solid presence of himself in heaven as it was on earth. Donne was haunted with the idea of having an identical body to the one he had on earth. This could be attributed to his desire "for absolute continuity between his earthly and his heavenly self" and "to rejoin his wife, Anne" as Targoff astutely argues (Targoff, 2008: 22).

The state of the soul and the body added much to the perplexity of Donne's mind. He believed first that the soul would die with the body and be resurrected with it on the Day of Judgment, but this belief holds a contradiction to his idea of activating and enlivening death. Therefore, he directed his mind to the Orthodox belief that the soul would go before the body either to hell or to heaven waiting for their meeting again. This idea did not satisfy Donne too because the soul "would feel dissatisfied and incomplete during its temporary residence in heaven prior to the resurrection of the body." (Carey, 1981: 223) This led Donne to the new thought of 'momentary death.' Since nothing happens to the body in the interval between death and

resurrection; the simultaneity of death and resurrection is applicable: "As west and east. /In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death touch resurrection." (Donne, 1991: Hymn to God My God in My Sickness, 13-15). Such a new version of death keeps the body and soul together and disarms death of all its weapons. This idea in turn negates the presence of the soul apart from the body because Donne insisted on their presence together claiming that the soul loses much of its power when it exists alone. Targoff argues that "Donne treats the integrity of the corpse as the defining feature of our eschatological fate" (Targoff, 2008: 165). Therefore, together they do the job as he said in "The Ecstasy":

Spirits, as like souls as it can,

Because such fingers need to knit

That subtle knot, which makes us man. (Donne, 1991: The Ecstasy, 62-65)

Their knitting thus into a "knot" is the emphasis he laid on their indissoluble state.

However, the resurrection contained a real problem that Donne refrained to think about: the age at which people are resurrected. Most of the religious men at that time debated this in details arguing that thirty would be the age. This idea, nonetheless, did not comply with Donne's egocentric self because it would neglect some stages of his life that mean much to him: "He did not want one stage of his growth to be selected for preservation, and the rest discarded." (Carey, 1981: 225) In "A Hymne to God the Father", he demanded the forgiveness of all the sins he committed at all the stages of his life

and thus he would be able to meet God. This is part of the sense of fear he had about salvation:

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,  
Which is my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive those sins, through which I run,  
And do them still: though still I do deplore?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,

For, I have more. (Donne, 1991: A Hymn to God the Father, 1-6)

What matters to him then is the forgiveness of the sins and the wholeness of his self: soul and body, or body and mind as he states in "The Blossom" where the girl would have him in such a unified way: "As glad to have my body, as my mind." (Donne, 1991: The Blossom, 40) This is exactly what Donne required from God; the reshaping of him without neglecting any phase of his life or part of his body, to the degree that he, in another poem; "The Canonization", counted the hair of his beloved wrapped on his hand to cause their meeting again on the last day: "My five gray hairs..." (Donne, 1991: The Canonization, 3) The same "hairs" might as well protect his body from rotting and decomposing in the grave. He claimed so in "The Funeral": "That subtle wreath of hair, which crowns my arm; ... / And keep these limbs, her provinces, from dissolution." (Donne, 1991: The Funeral, 3-8) where he describes his mistress's "subtile wreath of haire" as a substitute soul that "keepe[s] these limbes, her Provinces, from dissolution" until God re-collects him" as Targoff discusses (Targoff, 2008: 16). Targoff convincingly argues that "His mistress's hair becomes the temporary guardian of his corpse, a makeshift solution for warding off the inevitable decay of the flesh

(Targoff, 2008: 69). This is the anti-dissolution method Donne used to keep himself fit for the glory of resurrection where he would be of the same splendor as the angles and presumably as God, he purported so in one of his sermons.

Donne was afraid of dissolution because it would mean complete extinction and annihilation in one way or another. The thought of his body producing worms and being a prey to those worms terrified him as he expressed in "Satire 5": "Are made preys? O worse than dust, or worm's meat / For they do eat you now, whose selves worms shall eat." (Donne, 1991: Satire 5, 21-22) To solve this, Donne demanded the existence of body and soul together through that peculiar momentary death and in such a way he would lessen his fear of death and dissolution and assure himself the perfect immortality through the presence of soul and body combined because one of his firm beliefs is that: "the immortality of the soul will not be complete without the immortality of the body." (Husain, 1970: 71) This again would participate in the completion of his ambitions towards achieving his imagined and hoped for victory over death.

Due to the increase in the anticipation of the end of the world and to the death of Donne's son Francis, his daughter Mary and his wife, his sense of fear about death and dissolution increased. This fear helped opening another filed for Donne's imagination: what would happen to those who would still be alive at the end of the world? Though this was a problematic matter, Donne was attracted to the belief that "those alive at the last day would not die, but would undergo some alternative processing to fit them for glory." (Carey, 1981: 227) This was a possible escape for Donne since he wished to be one of those fortunate people who would not have to die at all, and

he clutched to this hope because then he would meet death open-eyed due to death's inability to affect him but in that change. In one of the letters he writes to George Garrad, Donne admits that the reason behind not ending some of the letters is attributed to his aspiration to be alive on that day: "And as I would every day provide for my souls last convoy, though I know not when I shall die, and perchance I shall never die ...". (See Targoff, 2008: 32). Besides, by meeting death open-eyed, Donne would also escape death's abhorrent act of rotting and dispersing into body and soul: "and never taste death's woe" (Donne, 1991: Holy Sonnets 4, 8) That change would then keep the body and soul together through the previously mentioned momentary death or through the instantaneous reunion of both skipping the period of the residence of the body in the grave or of the soul in heaven.

With Donne being ill and feeling the approach of death, he felt the need to alter some of the attitudes he had adopted about death. He finally tried to convince himself of not being one of those fortunate people and of the fact that he would have to be in a grave facing the dissolution that he most detested. Yet, the questioning challenging mind he had would not take this for granted. He still has the ambition and determination to form death in his own way and according to his personal requirements. To show the courage and to prove self-control over death, he wore the shroud and stood on an urn while an artist made a portrait of him. It is no wonder to such a mind he had. His death and his preparation for it is a play about all the concepts he had about death. The play for which he hoped to be the only director to perform it in a perfect manner, and thus to convince himself of attaining "that command of death that the suicide aspires to. He made it appear that, like his "Heroique" suicidal Christ, he chose how and

when to die." (Carey, 1981: 214) In such a way he proved to himself, at least, that he had mastery over death having it in so special way. Targoff persuasively argues that "Donne loathed the idea of a passive death, and longed either to combat death as well as he could, or, should this prove impossible, to meet it with open arms" (Targoff, 2008: 111). Moreover, this would also erase one of his earlier fears; of passing away unnoticed or during a sleep, by this preparation to the welcoming of his enemy: death.

To conclude, this superiority over death is typical for Donne; the man who always wanted to activate death regarding it but a life. His abomination for death made it one's own matter to be dealt with personally and in one's own way to avenge himself/herself that personal affront of death and insult of ego. His treatment of death was therefore unique. In all the different and sometimes paradoxical conceptions he presented, one would feel the fight with that enemy; with death, trying to ensure his being immune against death and decay. His imagination overflowed the measures in inventing weapons for defeating that enemy and attaining victory. In a word, whether afraid of death or not, egocentric or not, religious or not; Donne's treatment of death was one of the most remarkable.

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