

of Metaphysical wit (see Chapter 1) and as an illustration of the eccentricity of Donne's imagination. In fact, the poem contains a series of images culminating logically in this one, and it is not original to Donne, being used by earlier Italian poets and possibly reaching him by way of a sixteenth-century madrigal.

As so often in Donne's imagery, the progression is a development of the thought, not mere decoration of the emotion. The initial image is the quiet, homely comparison of the death of a good man with the parting of the lovers. Having established that such a parting must be, by the nature of their love, unnoticed by the rest of the world, Donne proceeds by a series of illustrations to analyse why this should be so: all nature obeys the law that the most violent movement is less disturbing than the more local and ostentatious. So the movement of the spheres, by which the heavenly bodies move in concentric circles round the earth, is universal and yet unobserved by man. Donne's next comparison looks more closely at the nature of love. 'Sublunary' lovers (ruled by the inconstant moon) depend on physical contact, while those whose love is refined can be compared to gold, beaten out into gold leaf, of a fineness and delicacy which seems hardly to be made of earthly matter. Such love is described in the lovely, melodious word 'inter-assured' ('assured' is three syllables); it cares less (the words are used in their original sense rather than in the weak modern form 'careless') for physical than for spiritual union.

It is at this point of Donne's analysis that we meet the compasses image. The comparison is stated, as it had been in the past, but it is also developed logically. This love which is like fine gold also allows the souls of the lovers to follow one another's movements without physical uprooting, the moving foot being dependent for its security on the steadfastness of the stationary foot, and the stationary foot being guided in its direction by the moving foot. Again, the interdependence of the lovers is emphasised as it had been by 'inter-assured', but the thought is now more complex.

There is one more development. The compasses, assuming that both are true, will describe a circle, perfecting their movement in the symbol of infinity and eternity (the circle is the equivalent of the wedding ring). The poet has thus proved that the complete, perfect love has no need of outward show. The floods of tears and tempests of sighs which were stock in trade of earlier poets have become not merely irrelevant but a denial of the true nature of love.

The verse form of this poem echoes its theme. The rhyme is regular throughout, and the rhythm, while allowing for the variations of speech emphasis common in Donne's poetry, maintains four stresses in each line. The effect is unassuming and constant, ending indeed where it began.

The Extasie

Summary

ll. 1-20 The lovers sit together on a bank of violets. Their hands are

closely entwined, and they gaze deeply into each other's eyes. As yet this is the totality of their physical union, and the reflections in their eyes are the entire product of their love. As in a battle between equally-matched armies, the outcome is uncertain, so between the lovers the souls act as mediators, moving forward to enhance their position. During this negotiation, the lovers lie as still as effigies on tombs.

- ll. 21-8 There might be a bystander who is so purified by love that he can, as a totally rational mind, understand the very language of souls. If so, in spite of being unable to distinguish between speakers so united in thought and word, he might nevertheless take away a new, still purer refinement of love, and so depart enhanced by his experience.
- ll. 29-48 The state of ecstasy which the lovers are experiencing makes them more aware of the true nature of their love. They understand that it is not merely sexual, and also that they had not previously realised fully the complexity of its motives. Just as all separate souls contain a mixture of different, unidentified elements, so love takes these separate mixtures and mixes them again, so that their constituent parts are inseparable. A single violet, poor and weak in growth, colour and size, is strengthened and multiplied when it is transplanted. In the same way, when love interfuses two souls, it produces one stronger soul which remedies the defects of each, being separate. So the lovers, composing one new united soul, understand their own being, the constituent parts of which their love is made, and the unchanging quality of the soul.
- ll. 49-60 Why, then, do the lovers refrain from physical union? This is not the whole of their love; their souls are the controlling force, their bodies only the vehicle of their union. Nevertheless, it was through a physical meeting that they first knew each other, and for that they should be grateful. Their bodies subordinated themselves and their senses [to the union of the souls]. but cannot be considered worthless, rather like a mixture in which the inferior is made more valuable by union with the superior. As spiritual influences sometimes work through the medium of the air, so the union of souls can come about through the union of the bodies.
- ll. 60-76 As body and soul are linked by the spirits produced by the blood, agents needed to complete a human being [see Commentary], so the pure souls of lovers must condescend to ordinary faculties with which the senses are linked. If this is not so, the power of the soul is imprisoned. The lovers must now return to their bodies, so that weaker men may see a physical

manifestation of love, for while the mystery of love is in the soul, the book of learning is the body. If some lover, united in love as they are, has heard the debate which their souls have undertaken and in which they are agreed, he can continue to watch them and will find little change in the nature of their love when their souls have returned to their bodies.

Commentary

This complex, highly intellectual poem appears at first strange to modern eyes, both in its apparent logic-chopping about the nature of sexual love and in its wide variety of imagery, some of it fully justifying the term 'conceit'.

The title itself is not to be confused with the modern use of the word – it has nothing to do with a state of extreme happiness. Ecstasy was a theological term, signifying the separation of the soul from the body, and producing a highly charged spiritual intensity in which insight and awareness were given, above the normal understanding of the human mind. In this poem, the lovers enter such a state of ecstasy, and through it are able to analyse the development of their love, its motives and the balance of its physical and spiritual components; when the souls are reunited with the bodies, the lovers have gained a philosophical understanding of the nature of human love which will remain through its physical consummation.

Donne is using and analysing ideas current in intellectual debates of his time. The neo-Platonic school of philosophers saw love as pure and spiritual in essence, sullied by contamination with the physical. The Aristotelian school, on the other hand, saw soul and body as interdependent ('Soul and body . . . are not two distinct things, they are one thing presenting two distinct aspects.' R. D. Hicks, Introduction to Aristotle's *De Anima*). Donne clearly sides with Aristotle, but in 'The Extasie' he discusses the quality of that interdependence, the production of a new and strengthened soul when love 'interinanimates' (lovely word) two weaker and more fragile souls. This new soul is the dominant factor, the physical bodies being under its control, but Donne is careful not to devalue the body. It is the 'sphere', the manifestation of the abler soul, and without it that soul is imprisoned, unable to express itself fully.

The detail of the poem is often obscure to the modern reader. A heavenly body was believed to consist of a sphere (vehicle) and intelligence (controlling force): thus ll. 51–2. The influence of spiritual forces comes to man through a medium which is in itself less pure, the air (ll. 57–8). The union of body and soul makes up a man, as Donne explains in one of his sermons, but the blood produces spirits which 'are a kind of middle nature, between soul and body' (*Sermons XI*), and these spirits strive to achieve the purity of the soul in order to link the soul to the body (ll. 61–4). Such ideas are difficult, but Donne's major thesis, that the place of the physical is justified in love as it is interdependent with spiritual union, both receiving due respect, is one which seems, perhaps surprisingly, modern.

The range of imagery in the poem is also striking. The traditional pastoral setting, as used by earlier poets such as Sir Philip Sidney, has added significance. The bank of violets (flowers symbolic of faithful love) supports the lovers as would a pillow on a bed – and the sexual overtones are stressed in the adjective ‘pregnant’. Best-known of all the poem’s images is that of the lovers’ eyes twisted on a double string like beads: it is exotic and witty, but the poet moves on swiftly to military strategy and the simple ‘like sepulchral statues’ (slow because of the long vowel sounds and repeated ‘s’, and suggestive of a stillness like death, the body without its soul). The references to alchemy and to the philosophy of love give way to the pastoral image, unusual in Donne’s writing, of the violet transplanted. Astronomy, physiology, the imprisonment of a great Prince, and the book by which love is learnt, illustrate again the breadth of the poet’s intellect and the agility of his mind, and the dramatic device of the silent onlooker, learning as the reader does from the lovers’ experience, make this a poem of great skill and power. In its regular, unassuming rhythm and rhyme, it achieves the force of a philosophical debate; in its honest appraisal of the nature of human love, it is universal in theme.

The Funerall

Summary

1. Whoever comes to prepare the poet’s body for burial must not disturb or ask questions about the fine bracelet of hair which adorns his arm. It is a holy symbol, representing his outer soul which, in the absence of the inner soul which has gone to heaven, is now in charge as Viceroy of his body and will keep it from decay.
2. For if the nerves, controlled by the brain, are linked through every part of his living body and so make him one being, how much more effectively will his dead body be preserved by the bracelet of hair which grew towards heaven and was formed with strength and skill by a better brain. But perhaps she merely intended that he should [by the bracelet] be kept conscious of his pain, as prisoners are handcuffed when they are condemned to death.
3. Whatever her exact meaning, the hair must be buried with the poet, for as he is a martyr to love, it might become a relic and encourage idolatry. As his humility before her was shown by his taking her hair as a symbol of his soul, so his pride will be satisfied in that, although she would save no part of him, he can take to the grave a part of her.

Commentary

‘The Funerall’ is characterised by two outstanding features: its vitality, shown in its direct, conversational approach, and its logic, carefully built up to the final half-bitter, half-cynical jest.

Vitality seems perhaps a strange word for a poem with such a title, and yet from the first line, addressed forcefully to the reader (one is tempted

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