METAPHYSICAL RED HERRING

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Abstract: American poet Adrienne Rich borrows the title of British metaphysical poet John Donne's famous poem, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," not because her poetry is also "metaphysical" or because the two poems are similar one way or another (they are not), but just because this title suited the occasion of her poem, i.e. the death of her husband. So our incursions into the metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth-century England and the work of John Donne (and the specific poem of that title) can simply be viewed as the result of a red herring pulled across the innocent reader's tracks by the fiercely feminist (mildly put) author.

Keywords: conceit, Donne, Rich, feminism, metaphysical

When you read a poem titled "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" (one cannot help mentioning a possible young reader's "translation" as "Good-bye and Stay Cool") by an American poet in the twentieth-century, you do not need much familiarity with poetry in English to think of John Donne (1572-1631)—i.e. over four centuries of literary history in-between—and his famous poem titled "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" (written in 1611 or 1612, i.e. four hundred and sixty years earlier). So any reader's expectations—even when he/she is not an Anglo-American poetry scholar—are to naturally see the American poem as an echo, prolongation, imitation, parody, spin-off, parallel or commentary of/on the seventeenth-century one; or to view Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) as an American heir of the metaphysical poets that Donne was the most remarkable representative of (alongside such other contemporary or later poets from the New World as Anne Bradstreet—c.1612-1672, Edward Taylor—c.1642-1719, Emily Dickinson—1830-1886, T. S. Eliot—1888-1965, John Crowe Ransom—1888-1974, Allen Tate—1899-1979…, who, in some/much of their writing are more or less recognizable continuators); or even to consider identifying a "metaphysical" tradition in British and American poetry from John Donne to Adrienne Rich…

The way to go in any of these hypotheses is to start from the Metaphysical Poets proper—and John Donne, plus a careful reading of the 1611 poem—and come down to Adrienne Rich and her 1970 poem; and whatever the conclusion, the exploration may prove to have been worth the effort.

"Metaphysical" is, of course, "of the nature of metaphysics," i.e. "after the physics" (as Aristotle's writings were arranged), or "dealing with the ultimate nature of existence, reality and experience" (Random House Dictionary…, 1968), as in some more abstruse self-contained conceptual systems; this would induce the idea of something recondite, esoteric, hidden or hard to understand, and, from this point of view, "metaphysical poets" may seem to be somewhat of misnomer.

However , the label gets its real meaning when applied to the poets described in his Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (six volumes, 1779-1781) by Samuel Johnson, better known as Dr. Johnson (1709-1784); and Dr. Johnson (also the author of the famous Dictionary of the English Language—1755, The Plays of William Shakespeare, eight volumes, 1765 and many, many others) is arguably "the most distinguished man of letters in English history"(Pat Rogers) or is "unmatched by any critic in any nation before or after him"(Harold Bloom, p.239); so one might just take his word/s for granted as he informs his readers (eighteenth-century and later) that at the beginning of the seventeenth-century "there

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appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets" (in his "Life of Abraham Cowley"). Before him, writing about one of these—John Donne, incidentally--, John Dryden(1631-1700) wrote that "he affects the metaphysics…/i.e./ nice speculations of philosophy" (see Gardner), while Drummond of Hawthornden (1585-1649) had also mentioned their "metaphysical ideas and scholastic quiddities" (also in Gardner).

In his turn, Johnson goes on to describe this "race of writers" as "men of learning," in whose poems heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together…; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtilty surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased." Their wit—Johnson continues—is "a kind of Discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike."

Though not formally affiliated (they may not even have known or heard of each other, so we are not looking at any kind of school or movement), the central figures grouped together here are those of John Donne, George Herbert (1593-1633)—both, to some extent, contemporaries of William Shakespeare's—Thomas Carew (?1595-?1639), Richard Crashaw (c.1613-1649), Abraham Cowley (1618-1667), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), Henry Vaughn (1621/2-1695), Thomas Traherne (c.1636-1674)… From Johnson to Eliot (his 1921 "The Metaphysical Poets") all these (and others) were praised (or criticized) for the union of thought and feeling in their poems (fusing reason with passion and "devouring all kinds of experience" in Eliot, who will move from here to his well-known "dissociation of sensibility"), originality, inventiveness, realistic violence and meditative refinement, psychological analysis, incongruity and confusion, the startlingly esoteric and the shockingly commonplace, extravagance and absurdity, grotesqueness, elaborate, energetic and uneven stylistic maneuvers…, and some other features that both Dryden and Johnson mostly condemned for their "unnaturalness." We might be interested to see how many of these characteristics can be found in Adrienne Rich and her poetry.

But most of all they are remembered for their "invention" and use of the conceit. Conceit in general refers either to (etymologically) an idea or cognition as such or, closer to our meanings here, an ingenious and fanciful notion or conception; in this particular case, a conceit refers to an extended metaphor or comparison/simile with a complex logic; as Johnson had suggested, it may consist of Juxtaposing ("yoking together") images and ideas in surprising ways ("by violence"). So, basically, the metaphysical conceits are complex, startling and highly intellectual analogies; they are expansive metaphors marked by wit, paradox, symbolism, double meaning, analytical tone and logical reasoning (again we are looking forward to seeing anything like these in Adrienne Rich). Two examples for now: Donne's flea (in "The Flea," naturally) is a conceit for the lovers' intimate union—so it touches on the hilarious and absurdly far-fetched—after biting both and sucking their blood; and, in Marvell, the soul is similar to a drop of dew.

But we can also see what more recent critics can tell us about these unusual figures:

"…a metaphysical conceit strikes from our minds the same spark of recognition which the poet had, so that it gives us a perception of the real but previously unsuspected…/originality, therefore/…similarity that is enlightening…"; "…it speaks to both our minds and our emotions with force…" (Holman, p.266)

And Helen Gardner:

"…a conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking that its justness…, " and "a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness/paradox?." ("Introduction," p.XXIII)

The pre-eminent representative of the metaphysical poets is, once again, John Donne (whose presentation here might possibly reveal to what extent Adrienne Rich found

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him congenial, though we know she didn't), poet, satirist, lawyer and cleric in the Church of England (Dean of St Paul's Cathedral from 1621 to 1631), and member of the British Parliament (in 1601 and 1614). His mother (who survived Donne by one year) was Elizabeth Heywood, daughter of playwright John Heywood(c.1497-c.1580) and a great niece of Roman Catholic martyrs Thomas More(1478-1536). His father, who died in 1576, was a successful ironmonger. Donne was a student at Oxford and Cambridge (honorary doctorate in divinity in 1615), travelled throughout Europe and was the chief secretary of the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Eggerton, whose niece Anne More he secretly married in 1601 (when she was seventeen), against the wishes of both her father and her uncle; for violating canon law he had to go to Fleet Prison for a short period; the Donnes had twelve children, of whom only ten survived and of whom three died before being ten; Anne died in 1617 at the age of 33 (see Donne's 17th "Holy Sonnet").

Donne wrote sonnets, love poems, religious poems (he converted from Roman Catholicism to the Anglican Church), epigrams, elegies, songs, satires, sermons (160 in number), translations from Latin. One of England's greatest and most innovative poets had most of his poems published posthumously, in 1633, as Songs and Sonnets. His themes have often been identified as those of love, death, religion, on such subjects as the corruption of the legal system, the presence of mediocre poets and pompous courtiers, with frequent concentrated images of plague, vomit, manure, and sickness, in poems with abrupt openings marked by paradoxes, ironies, dislocations and cynical statements; their development is almost always based upon dramatic contrast and urgent arguments built from a subtle and outrageous logic, with actual speech, jagged rhythms and colloquial vigour as the sources of his language and style. Memorable statements are those in his "Holy Sonnet X" ("Death be not proud…"), "Meditation XVII" ("No man is an island…"—1955 book by Trappist monk Thomas Merton and 1962 American war film—and "Never send to know from whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee…"—Hemingway 1940 novel) or his famous conceits, especially the ones in "A Valediction…"

As will be seen, the occasion for both "valedictions" (Lat. valedicere=to bid farewell) is rather important; Donne's was most likely written in 1611, just before Sir Robert Drury decided to take the poet on a mission with him to France and other European countries. The thirty-six lines of the poem are grouped in nine quatrains in iambic tetrameter with an ABAB rhyme scheme. The forbidden "mourning" in the title may look like too strong a term for a longer or shorter separation from his wife Anne, but it may have been required by the first extended metaphor or conceit of the poem, where the parting lovers (well, husband and wife) are compared to the separation of body and soul in death; the first sentence in the poem extends over two stanzas:

> As virtuous men pass mildly away,
> And whisper to their souls to go,
> Whilst some of their friends do say,
> "Now his breath goes," and some say, "No,"/"The breath goes now…"/
> So let us melt, and make no noise,
> No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;
> 'Twere profanation of our joys
> To tell the laity our love.

The second conceit has the same separation of the lovers compared to the cracks in the earth after a quake, and the poet continues his imaginative exercise by next having this separation seen as the spreading thin of gold by hammering, when it widens and lengthens:

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Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to aery thinness beat.

So, the highly charged progress from death to earthquake to alchemical gold and, finally, to the two legs of a compass which operate in unison in the last three stanzas:

If they be two /our souls/, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th'other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th'other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun.

Thus the non-metaphysical reader has to strain his imagination and see the lovers like the legs of a compass—joined at the top, with her perfectly grounded at the centre point (in London) and him roaming about Europe; love is this way described as balanced, symmetrical, intellectual, serious, and beautiful in its polished simplicity. It is also not difficult to se the conceit (this and the other ones above) as a mockery of idealized, sentimental love poetry (of the Renaissance --mostly Wyatt, Spenser, Sidney, Southwell…). The poem easily belongs in the category of other "valediction" Donne poems, like "A Valediction: of my Name in the Window," "A Valediction: of Weeping," and "Meditation III."

And here is the new "version" of "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning":

My swirling wants. Your frozen lips.
The grammar turned and attacked me.
Themes, written under duress,
emptiness of the notations.

They gave me a drug that slowed the healing of wounds.

I want to see this before I leave:
the experience of repetition as death
the failure of criticism to locate the pain
the poster in the bus that said:
my bleeding is under control.

A red plant in a cemetery of plastic wreaths.

A last attempt: the language is a dialect called metaphor.
These images go unglossed: hair, glacier, flashlight.
When I think of a landscape I am thinking of a time.
When I talk of taking a trip I mean forever.

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I could say: those mountains have a meaning
but further than that I could not say.

To do something very common, in my own way.

Written in 1970 (and published in The Will to Change of 1971) Rich's poem shares in all or most of the characteristics of (her) modernist poetry: loose and casual open forms (the influence of William Carlos Williams and Robert Lowell), lapidary precision, the use of sentence fragments and lines and stanzas of varying lengths, irregular spacing, notebook-like fragmentation…

Author of twenty-five poetry collections (between 1951 and 2010) and seven non-fiction books (1976-2009), Adrienne Rich—a radical feminist, had married economist Alfred Haskell Conrad (1924-1970) in 1953 and had three children. For reasons that literary historians hesitate to mention or simply ignore, one fine autumn morning Alfred Conrad drove into the woods and shot himself in 1970, at 46 (happily married distinguished Harvard professor), so his wife writes "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" ("frozen lips," "duress," "emptiness," "drug that slowed the healing wounds," departure as in Donne—"before I leave" and "taking a trip," "the experience of repetition and death," "the failure… to locate the pain," "bleeding under control," "a cemetery of plastic wreaths"…). With Michelle Cliff, she edited the art journal Sinister Wisdom (good title!); Rich also took a direct treatment of feminism in such volumes of poetry as Twenty-One Love Poems of 1977, Dream of a Common Language (1978), A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far (1981) and The Fact of a Doorframe (2001), or the essays in On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978 of 1979. In her controversial 1976 Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution she explained her suppressed instincts.

So there is bitter (if not sinister) realism in her title, which she borrowed from Donne only because it suited the occasion—the death of her husband--, as there is nothing really "metaphysical" about her poem: no conceit, no meditative refinement, no logical argument, no parody or pastiche, no echo or influence, no parallel, no spin-off…, but only, probably, an echo of Donne's paradox in the fourth stanza:

Dull sublunary lovers' love
--Whose soul is sense—cannot admit
Of absence, 'cause it doth remove
The thing which elemented it.

But the way we see it now, her poem—her title, in fact—may have only been a professor's strategy (lecturer at Swarthmore and the City College of New York, teacher at Columbia University School of the Arts, adjunct professor of writing, professor of creative writing at Brandeis University…) to make her students read John Donne and Metaphysical Poets and also send later readers (like ourselves) on a wild goose chase (well worth the while)—and thus, a red herring of a title.

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