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HEALING THE SELF WITH CATHARTIC PRAXIS OF POETRY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF  
JOHN DONNE'S RELIGIOUS VERSE

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ABSTRACT

The Classics had their own reasons to justify their self realized ideas and philosophy. Ancient Greece produced around seven hundred tragedies pioneered by Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus. When Aristotle made a thorough inspection of it, he pointed out cathartic effect of it. Tragedy was then a therapeutic exercise for the people of ancient Greece. John Donne was also carrying the same legacy in England in his religious poetry. Donne, who metamorphosed himself from a womanizer to spiritualist, preferred religious verse as his most chosen niche to fix the therapeutic effect of poetry on its regular visitors. The most innocuous zone that Donne endeared to continue was a quittance from the inimical operation of time, and architect one's soul in a place from where it would breath bliss and fullness. Donne believed poetry as hermitage where time-clock never strikes, and soul enjoys uninterrupted bliss and spiritual healing. Donne had very cleverly prepared an escape route from the labyrinth like operation of the time that William Shakespeare engineered and philosophized in his sonnets addressed to friend Mr. W.H. some 30 years ago. This essay would exclusively dwell on the religious verse of John Donne to ascertain the therapeutic effect of verse on human soul that can heal the self and the mind.

Keywords: Donne, Religious Verse, Cathartic Praxis, Healing the Self

"The melancholy and pleasant humour were in him so contemplated, that each gave advantage to the other, and made his company one of the delights of mankind. His fancy was inimitably high, equalled only by his great wit; both being made useful by a commanding judgment. His aspect was cheerful, and such as gave a silent testimony of a clear knowing soul, and of a conscience at peace with itself."

—Izaak Walton, The Life of Dr. John Donne, 1639

Donne and Metaphysical Poetry:

Owing its origin to the Jacobean Age, John Donne moved times ahead in his delineation of the themes of cherishing love and adopting spirituality. It was Dr. Johnson who christened Donne and his followers 'The Metaphysical Poets.' The title was borrowed by Dr. Johnson from Dryden, who expresses of Donne as: "He effects the metaphysics not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign, and perplexes

*the mind of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy.*" The title was not by way of communication to the fantastic conceits which the Metaphysical poets displayed in their poetry. They were influenced by the subtlety, the ingenuity and what Dr. Johnson calls the "*watch for novelty*" which distinguishes Donne, for instance, from the straightforward sentiments and lucid imagery of the Elizabethans. Metaphysical poetry is sometimes used to describe philosophical poetry.† It deals with the nature of being the reality, or the origin and structure of the universe. The poetry is intellectual, analytical, psychological often disillusioning and bold; it is absorbed in thoughts of death, physical love and imagery is elaborate and ingenious, making the set of poetries classify into two broad division of amorous and religious poetry. Metaphysical poetry was a path breaker. The Metaphysical poets desired to say what they hoped had never been said before. The endeavoured to be singular in their thoughts and were careless of their diction. They wanted to get rid of the worn out and traditional ideas and forms bequeathed to the generations of poets by Petrarch.

#### **Donne's Transpose from Amorousness to Spirituality:**

The precise tracing of Donne's lifespan shows its acute passion in human. Born to a rich merchant in London, in the interim, when England's merchants were busy trying to create new class of people. His father's side associated themselves to a reputed Welsh family. While Thomas More's family and Heywoods family mannered a linearity to his mother's side. Both of the families believed in Catholicism. Two incidents of Donne's life made him shift his views towards the standards and ambiguity of religious life. First was the death of his brother in the prison, and second was the incompleteness in his initial endeavour to complete his education in Oxford and Cambridge, which was a result of his religion. At this point of time Donne began investigating the philosophy binding faith, while he was studying in Lincon's Inn. This made him leave the church recognizing his birth, renouncing all cults and very modestly appraised himself 'A Christian'. All these while, he composed poetry and religiously contributed his monetary resources with the catholic relatives in need. He took sea expeditions and wrote 'The Storm' and 'The Calm'. The next three years were spent in travelling to Europe, studying and composing poetry. Soon after he returned, he was appointed as the secretary to Lord Egerton. This phase was momentous, since he fell in love with Egerton's niece, Anne More, married her secretly, and was penalized with solitary captivity in prison. Strangely enough, the poetical presentment of Donne, evoked no more songs of youthful, innocent romance, but of '*The Progress of the Soul*', the most desired *metempsychosis*. The following years were preoccupied with poverty and Donne was left to wander until Sir George More forgave the couple and acknowledged the marriage. But, the phase Donne agonized solitarily, made him contemplate and grow more intellectual and aesthetic in his taste. Having grown a distinctive set of mind, Donne disavowed the remunerative offer of the Church of England and maintains a comfortable '*living*'. He authors '*Pseudo Martyr*' which enticed James I and ordained him. Unfortunately, even this left him without an employment. The next cataclysm was marked by the demise of his wife. His wife's allowance was ceased, leaving Donne with the burden of seven children and uttermost poverty. These consecutive crises made him to draw more contiguous to the religious arena and became a preacher. Within four years, he managed to leap to the denomination being the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London:

*"On a huge hill  
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will  
Reach her, about must and about must go,  
And that the hill's suddenness resists, win so;  
Yet strive so, that before age, death's twilight  
Thy soul rest, for none can work in that night."*

There he "*carried some to heaven in holy raptures and lead others to amend their lives*", Izzak Walton expresses his utter joy to estimate the earnestness of Donne to "*an angel leaning from a cloud.*" There is a sense of utter misery clouding Donne throughout a major part of his life and very aptly impressions in his works. This woe is deep and governing, which the world would hardly be acquainted with if the circumstances are unexplored.

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**Religious Poetry: Appealing To the Self and Not Universal:**

Religion implies faith and belief in a personal God and the possibility and approach of relating to the Almighty. It also involves some kind of faith in the dogmas which have been laid down by tradition to help the aspiring soul to reach God. These dogmas are only formulations or ways of dealing with the recalcitrant element of a man's being and helping him to control and discipline his being. They however become rigid in course of time. Thereafter, religious poetry might give the readers a limited satisfaction. All readers may not share the same belief, while the others might feel them to be fantastic. It is not like human love where there is always something common in the experiences of the reader and that of the poet. Unless the poet himself rises above the belief and transforms his wholly personal relationship into something universal, his poetry would fail to produce the intended effect. Thereafter, religious poetries are most often very much individual, appealing to the personal self and not universal. Donne's religious poetry is heavily informed by his Anglican faith and often provides evidence of his internal struggles, as autobiographical elements as he considers pursuing the priesthood. A.J. Smith quotes, "*the sinner to God, imploring God's forceful intervention by the sinner's willing acknowledgement of the need for drastic onslaught upon his present hardened state...*" and that "*self recognition is a necessary means to grace.*"

**Catharsis: A Therapeutic Effect:**

Poetry is that genre of literary practice which reflects the voice of the soul. Writing poetry can have the chance to unleash the unconscious mind, while the conscious mind takes a positive leave. Poetry allows us to trap into our authentic voices. The numbness of the conscious mind, makes an individual aware of the sins and flaws committed during one's course in this mortal world. Donne's religious poetry becomes a vent of his unconscious mind, which he had kept long suppressed within himself. The events taking place in Donne's life, had a parallel existence in his unconscious mind. Thereafter it is quite evident that the possible outcomes were thematically cast on mortality, judgment, divine love, humble penance while reflecting deeply on personal anxieties. Metaphysical, in true sense, transcends the boundaries of mortality, earthly desires and unconscious distress. All these commit towards a tragic self. Tragedy is a very different genre (originally used for dramas), here, takes poetry as a crutch, to vent out the unconscious of the poet's mind. According to Aristotle in his *Poetics*; "*Tragedy through pity and fear effects a purgation of such emotions.*" - (Chapter VI) The presence of tragedy is therefore more appealing to the human mind or the readers. Aristotle defines tragedy as "*the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself,*" in the medium of poetic language and in the manner of dramatic rather than narrative presentation, "*with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.*" Precisely how to interpret Aristotle's '*catharsis*', or '*purgation*' of pity and fear, has been under much dispute, but two very things are evident. Aristotle essentially points to the irrefutable fact, that many tragic representations of suffering and defeat leave an audience feeling not depressed but '*relieved and most elated.*' While the in the second place, he uses this distinctive effect of the '*tragic pleasure of pity and fear*' as the fundamental way to distinguish tragic from the comic, and as the aim which above all determines the selections treatment, and ordering of the component parts of a tragedy. Thus, *Catharsis* provides a therapeutic effect to the audience/readers.

With Donne's poetry the therapy begins with the poet's unconscious mind, wrapping his consciousness and triggering purgation and self healing. But, this healing effect is not limited to the poet's world. Its aura is felt and experienced by the readers with similar purgatory treatment, evoking 'pity and fear.' Donne's religious poetry are not only appealing and purgatory, but also extremely personal in nature. Ramie Targoff writes in his *John Donne: Body and Soul*;

*"The personal nature of the poems reflect their author's struggles to come to terms with his own history of sinfulness, his inconstant and unreliable faith, his anxiety about salvation."*-(p. 108)

**Donne's Religious Poetry:****The Holy Sonnets**

Also known as *Divine Meditations* were initially published in 1633, after Donne's demise. Written essentially in the form and style indoctrinated by Petrarch, consists of two quatrains and a sestet. *The Holy Sonnets* constitutes of nineteen poems, were not published during Donne's lifetime. Although there was a circulation in the form of manuscripts. Critics believe that most of the poems were written between 1609 and 1610. This phase calls attention to bethink of the period of enormous personal malaise and discomfort experienced by Donne. The poet suffered a unified conflict of emotional, physical and financial trial during this time. This phase also marked the psychological and religious turmoil engaging Donne, since he was in the mechanism of conversion to Anglicanism from Roman Catholicism. Donne would further go on to take the holy orders in 1615, even though he possessed extensive reluctance and compelling self-doubt of becoming a priest. *Sonnet 14- 'Batter My Heart, Three- Personed God'* is impregnated with self-purgation. Written just after taking the orders from the Anglican Church, he professes his sense of guilt to the 'three-personed God', referring to God, Jesus and The Holy Ghost. There is a sense of despair and thoughtful remorse of indulging the self with Satan, a symbolical identity of sin. He confesses to God that he has espoused sin. Repeating the Holy Trinity of soliciting verbs, 'divorce', 'untie', 'break', he craves for an eternal aid, pleading to disentangle from his covenant with the Devil. The poet utters in penance; "But I am betrothed to your enemy." The force used in the opening line is thoroughly maintained all over the poem, till the last line stating "you ravish mee". A paradox of faith is marvelously applied with the contrasting words 'imprison' and 'ravish'. While the poet urges for an imprisonment of the sinful soul, at the same time urges for purgation and liberation of an enlightened and refined soul. *Sonnet 10- 'Death Be Not Proud'* is stocked with arguments against the potential of 'death'. Death is personified in the poem by Donne and given the attributes of a menacing individual. Death is warned by the poet to curb his pride. Such power is a mere illusion. Death causes to bring men and women from world of weariness and ensures a state of rest for its asserted "victims." Donne here evokes criticism, trying a compelling altercation to testify Death as a serf to other forces like 'fate, chance, kings and desperate men'. He asserts that Death is uncontrollable, for various discrete powers, exercising their transgression in exterminating lives. In the concluding lines the speaker anticipates the end of Death itself, stating "Death, thou shalt die." Here Donne echoes the sentiments of the Apostle Paul I in *Corinthians 15:26*, where Paul writes, "The final enemy to be destroyed is death." *Death, Be Not Proud* has a political and religious background and was written during the 17th Century England. It was the time of British expansion over the world and a time of great religious turmoil. England bore a life of violence, uncertainty and instability. Donne lived during a period of the anti-Catholic movement. Donne witnessed how people were punished and imprisoned for their religion. Being anti-catholic was inviting death.

Donne was propelled to convert to Anglicanism from Catholicism. Donne excavates into his religious beliefs, to vent the anguish he noticed and repents his sheer helplessness in protecting life ravaged by death. The two different Christianity enacted a dominant stint in Donne's conscience. The same conflicting beliefs are mirrored in *Death, be not Proud*. The poem shows that he is determined to choose the fitting path, which grants access to the life after death. The contradictory nature of the poem or the poet's belief rests on the fact he hints that people who do not merge their self with the Christian beliefs would definitely face eternal damnation. While on the other side, he acknowledges the fact that believers of sincere faith are not fearful of God and death. Donne's *Sonnet 17* was written just following the death of his wife, Anne. Donne seems to imply that God took away his wife from him in order to have a monopoly of his love. Every line portrays Donne's remorse of losing a loved one. The first two quatrains enumerates having loved his wife, endeavours to find the divine love of God only after her demise. The opening lines contain a strong metaphor that of death is a debt which is to be paid; "Since she whom I lov'd hath paid her last debt/ To nature and to hers..." There is mourning throughout, at the same time experiences purgation and attempts closeness to the Divine.

The cutting of the worldly relationships simultaneously ties relationship to God as a certainty; "But though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed". The last line may also suggest that Donne saw his wife as a probable

temptation to deadly sin. "My love to saints and angels, things divine,/ But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt / Lest the world, flesh, yea devil put thee out." Sonnet 18 of Donne's celebrated collection of religious poetry *The Holy Sonnets* expresses his lifelong distress about the fragmentation of the church, and refers the church as 'the bride of Christ'. Donne went through a psychological crunch when his religious belief was shattered. He was distressed with the vain ritualistic pleasures derived from religion, the fate of the people who chose Anglicanism and most eminently, his belief of 'the Church' as an institution of moral and religious protector was crucified. He refers to 'the painted woman' as the church of Rome; "What! is it she which on the other shore/ Goes richly painted?..." Donne draws the reference of 'ravished virgin' to illustrate a picture of the Protestant Church. Neither of these seemed to be like an 'ideal bride' of which he had been searching quite long. He elaborates the historical events when the German Protestants suffered military defeat in 1620. It seems that every event did play a vital role in shaping and deviating his soul towards a concept of a Church which would embrace only positive, secular, unbiased, peaceful and welcoming faiths. The final lines give an immense sense of consideration to the *Songs of Solomon, 5:2*, which was often interpreted as the *Song of Love* between Christ and the Church; "Sleep, but my heart is awake. A sound! My beloved is knocking: "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, my flawless one. My head is drenched with dew, my hair with the dampness of the night." Sonnet 2 shows Donne's deep thrust to devote himself earnestly to God. It also displays the arduous endeavour running in his mind conflicting the ideas of desire and temptation, offered by sin. Donne is attentively mindful of his liability to God. He believes in his creation by God and his further association to Sin. "Why doth the Devil then usurp in me/ why doth he steal, nay ravish that's thy right?" Donne harbours a very Christian belief actualizing him as the son of God. He further clarifies himself to be God's servant and God's sheep the image of God, is represented with 'a temple' harbouring God's 'Divine Spirit'. He poses a question then to how the Devil could then drill such a robust hold on him? Donne urges the Divine to exercise all his influence to restore him- "Teach me how to respect". The poet feels that it is such a pity that even when God bestows all his love for mankind, he does nothing to release the poet from the clutches of the Devil. On the other hand the Devil abhors the poet but does not possess a desire to lose him- "Satan hates me, yet is loathe to lose me." Donne does not want to cover up his guilts and sinfulness, neither he wants to display a semblance of piety. The lines derives an internal meaning of the poet giving God an ultimatum, "Except thou rise and for thine own work fight/ oh shall soon despair." This sonnet procures a far-fetched contemplation of Donne's internal struggle to achieve freedom from sin, purgation within and an ardent desire of self-manifestation, to earn the purity of soul.

#### La Corona:

*La Corona* can be traced as one of the earliest Divine poems composed by Donne. *La Corona* is composed of seven linked sonnets, but is considered a single poem. Each sonnet is unique and celebrates events of Christ's life. Donne remarks them as mysteries wrapped with faith. People can identify this with views of different traditions which might arouse questions to why Donne might have devoted his consciousness to the Finding in the Temple, and ignore other references of the Ministry. "tis good,/With the Sun to begin His business,/He in His age's morning thus began,/by miracles exceeding power to man." The poem was governed by the will to serve with simplicity, which is a very Christian scheme of the redemption of man. Like many other traditional habits, habits of offering prayer, can establish alteration of a being's intellectual bearings. There is a tinge of doubt whether the poet felt about something distinctly Catholic while his concentration was drawn on the *Mysteries of the Faith*, or even during his address to the Blessed Virgin in second and third sonnets, or in his fourth, accosting St. Joseph, "Lo! faithful Virgin, yields Himself to lie/in prison, in thy womb, " at the same time it is also questionable whether a Protestant would have actually done so.

*La Corona* has been an undervalued poem if compared with the *Holy Sonnets*, since there has been no proper difference of intention diagnosed behind the two sonnets. *La Corona* sonnets are inspiring and are energized by ritualistic praises and prayers. They reverberate the diction of traditional office hymns, which explicate the Catholic Faith and its doctrines; "For at our ends begins our endless rest." Simultaneously, he recalls the episodes from which the doctrines are borrowed, but did not attempt to characterize them in detail. A theological paradox is been employed to the scene where the maiden rests lonely in her chamber at Nazareth: "Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother." The defamation of the Cross is conferred not by a dramatic

portrayal of its definite sordidness and woe, but possessing the reflection that the Lord of Fate endured a fate through the medium of His creatures. The suit ending with the last three poems, are affirmations which any being might ask for. Each of them is a suitable response to the enigma proposed. It is not astonishing to observe that the *Sonnet 1* of the set is a deliberate weaving together of expressions collected from the Advent Offices in the Breviary while the Hours of the Blessed Virgin is drawn on the second. Donne has a habit of losing his interest on the sources as he proceeds further. But the passion shown in the beginning of *La Corona* is undoubtedly visible in his first two sonnets. "But what Thy thorny crown gain'd, that give me,/A crown of glory, which doth flower always." It is probable that Donne chooses to employ the sonnet as a form which he had used only for epistles before, might be because he desired to pen down literary pieces impersonally yet formally. "Salute the last and everlasting day,/ Joy at th' uprising of this Sun, and Son,/ Ye whose true tears, or tribulation/ Have purely wash'd, or burnt your drossy clay." He might have also desired to create a contribution of dignity and beauty. *La Corona* thus becomes not only a religious exercise, but also an accomplished one. The sonnets are decked with meaning elaborating Christian belief, accompanying memorable and striking verbalization. The last line is repeated as the foremost line of the immediate next, adorns both as a fine climax and a masterly opening.

#### A Litany:

*A Litany* is aptly the next influential divine poem by Donne but received less cordiality than *La Corona*. On a contrary, critics call *A Litany* more interesting and engaging. It is very often remarked as Donne's casting of 'meditation in verse' encasing into a polished mould of recital ritual, a litany. Donne has also put into use a stanza recollecting his personal creativeness. The ambiguity lies in the juxtaposition of two varied aspects of simple, traditional framework of the poem, with the intricacies employed in an independent stanza. Though apparently appearing impersonal, it is actually highly personal. The poetry is much about, though indirectly, speaks of Donne's mental state at the time of its composition. The poetry is also very uncharacteristic of him. "They know, and pray that we may know,/ In every Christian/ Hourly tempestuous persecutions grow;/ Temptations martyr us alive; a man/ Is to himself a Diocletian." These set of religious poems are aptly special since they are composed during a period of transition, a phase of reshaping and reconstructing a personality with elements stressing exclusion of others, "And re-create me,/ now grown ruinous:/ My heart is by dejection, clay,/ And by self-murder, red." The literary piece is noteworthy for a trait, rarely found in Donne's poetry. This kind of quality is often observed in his letters and sermons: sobriety. *A Litany* is the wittiest of the Divine Poems, astonishing in paradox, decisive in antithesis, and stuffed with allusions. The poem's intellectual brilliance and verbal boldness are put to use to demonstrate an ideal of moderation in every possible thing. Sir Herbert Grierson speaks of it as "wire-drawn and tormented." 'Wire-drawn' might be rightly called with authority. It inspects temptations with meticulousness, and displays a suspicious sense of the contrasts which isolates the contaminated from the innocent motive or act. But the term 'tormented' seems to be very less apt, even if we limit the word to a particular style. The ideal here talked about is to yearn to be simplicity and innocence of motive and smoothness of piety. Similar view of this ideal can already be realized, experiencing the deliberate concern with which the desire is communicated. Initially, the poem might appear over resourceful or witty. But on further considerations, the exhalation is minimized and accustomed. "O let it not return to us again;/ But patient and physician being free,/ As sin is nothing, let it nowhere be."

#### Conclusion

From a youth of passionate worldliness, through middle years of prudent concern for one's place in the world to a final rejection of worldly varieties- this might accurately chronicle the literary career of Donne. He is primarily an intellectual and so in spite of his essentially religious sensibility, he showed keen interest in the new philosophy which called all in doubt and he was concerned with the problem of the one and many 'the relatedness of things'. His poetry thereafter can be particularly be defined ambiguously as both 'religious' and 'secular'. Donne's poetry makes a two-faced challenge, the first being the purification of the poet's soul, leading to chastity; while the second appeal is to the readers, with the same effect of purgatory emphasis. He wanted both his self and his religion to be chaste. Donne made sure realization is a means of purgation, only which could find an 'ideal' life, morality, spirituality and religion. The search for the 'ideal' makes him continuously speculative, investigative and inclined towards arguments. The continuous episodes of his life shape and reshape

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his spirituality and temperament. He becomes more focused on the worldly sins and that shedding them off is the only way to be closer to the Divine, which is again secular for him. Donne, who not only disciplined his whole being to respond to the call of Christ and the Catholic doctrine, but could evoke a light response in the most skeptical reader by making the very doctrine and dogma living metaphors of a life lived in absolute self surrender. David Daiches comments; "...expressing his own sense of the conflict between the claim of worldly wit and sophistication and those of true Christian devotion, and also exploring, with a combination of colloquial ease and emblematic cunning, the significance of the main symbols and beliefs of Protestant Christianity."

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