



‘False Spectacles’ and ‘Passion’s Mist’: Distorting Tears in the Poetry of John Donne

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'FALSE SPECTACLES' AND 'PASSION'S MIST' DISTORTING TEARS IN THE POETRY OF JOHN DONNE

HARVEY WILTSHIRE

Language thou art too narrow, and too weake
To ease us now; great sorrow cannot speak;
If we could sigh out accents, and weep words,
Grief wears and lessens, that tears breath affords.

John Donne, *Elegy upon the Death of Mistress Bulstrode*¹

Throughout John Donne's secular and devotional poetry, encounters with liquescent, transparent and transforming media disclose latent anxieties concerning the efficacy of poetic representation. As such, metaphors of forming and falling tears convey a sense of unease towards the ephemerality of poetic expression, as the distorting effect of tears make one thing—even if only for a fleeting moment—look like another: refracting, reflecting, colouring, and altering perceptions. In the image of the tear, Donne scrutinises textual tensions between presence and absence, difference and similitude, substance and immateriality. At the same time, however, the seemingly falsifying substance of tears offers the possibility of clarifying and overcoming the limitations of language. Indeed, whilst Donne's 'tears breath' in *Elegy Upon the Death of Mistress Bulstrode* communicates a sense of the transience and semiotic instability of tears—'breath' denoting something 'unsubstantial, volatile, or fleeting' (*OED* 3.d), as in Shakespeare's '[a] dreame, a *breath*, a froth of fleeting joy' (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 212)—his opening lamentation at the 'narrow[ness]' of language prompts the mondegreen-like slip from 'tears breath' to "tears *breadth*", drawing our attention to what might be encapsulated and signified within the watery diameter of the teardrop.

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida responds to the enigmatic symptomology of tears by asking:

¹ John Donne, *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. by Robin Robbins (London: Pearson, 2008) p.755, hereafter referred to as *Poems*.

What makes us cry [...] what is it a metaphor or figure for? What does the body mean to say by trembling or crying, presuming one can speak here of the body, or of saying, of meaning and of rhetoric?²

Derrida's direct interrogation of tears as 'metaphor or figure' invites weeping into the realm of readable language, as a decipherable dialect of the body with its own unique meaning and rhetoric. Describing language as 'too narrow' and 'too weak', the speaker in *Elegy upon the Death of Mistress Bulstrode* turns to this lachrymose language of the body as an alternative means of expression, in the hope that it might succeed where language has failed. Where Derrida questions the emblematic semiology of the 'trembling or crying' body, attempting to decode the embodied language of emotion, Donne's poem expresses the hope that 'sigh[s]' and 'tears' might literally overcome the inadequacies of spoken 'accents' and 'words'. However, where Donne continues by writing that 'guiltiest men stand mutest' (6) because 'extreme sense hath made them desperate' (8), the extreme emotion and desperation of sorrow quickly regresses into the inarticulacy of silence. At once expressive and potentially articulate, and yet also prone to the inarticulacy of silence, the depiction of tears in the poetry of John Donne comes to represent the displacement of language, alongside the unsurpassed expression of emotion. Just as Derrida's response to the problematic interpretation of tears looks to the dissymmetry that exists between the divine and human, reading Donne's tears as a part of a poetic dissymmetry reveals them to be an intermediary between, rather than manifestation of, disparate images and discourses.

As Marjory Lange asserts, 'in literature, tears have always appeared as an attribute of an abundant variety of mental, physical, and spiritual states.'³ Indeed the Renaissance physician Timothie Bright writes that 'of all the diverse actions of melancholie [...] none

² Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Willis (London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.55.

³ Marjory E. Lange, *Telling Tears in the English Renaissance* (New York: E.J.Brill, 1996), p.1.

is so manifolde and diverse in partes, as that of weeping'.⁴ Abundant, diverse and equivocal, the depiction of and attitude towards tears in early modern literature undermines the possibility of singular interpretation. In *Walton's Lives*, Izaak Walton writes that Donne:

Preach[ed] the word so as showed his own heart was possessed with those very thoughts and joys that he laboured to distil in others: A preacher in earnest, weeping sometimes for his auditory, sometimes with them.⁵

However, whilst Donne himself preached that 'it is a common place I know to speak of teares: I would you knew it as well, it were a common practice, to shed them', he also frequently spoke of a need for moderation and self-discipline when showing emotion publically.⁶ As all studies of his work are forced to recognise, contradictions, paradoxes and binaries abound in Donne's poetry and prose, and whilst there is always the temptation to reconcile such inconsistencies in order to account for their resistance to synthesis, inviting these oppositions to lead rather than challenge our readings of Donne illuminates a fundamental aspect of his work. Where 'contemporary preferences leaned towards a Stoic dismissal of tears' it is important to recognise that both 'traditional penitential practice and Jesus' own tears legitimised weeping.'⁷

In the *Elegy Upon the Death of Lady Markham*, Donne describes tears as 'false spectacles' (15).⁸ Likening tears to spectacles, this depiction figures tears as an altering medium through which reason is negatively distorted. The speaker's admission that 'we cannot see, / Through passion's mist, what we are or what she' (15-16) emphasises this falsifying quality of tears. In contrast, Donne returned to the image of the tear as an optic lens whilst preaching on the subject of Christ's tears, at Whitehall, during Lent 1622 :

⁴ Timothie Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie...* (London: Thomas Vautrollier, 1586), p.135.

⁵ Izaak Walton, *Lives of John Donne, Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert, & C.*, ed. by Thomas Zouch, 2nd edn (York: T. Wilson & R. Spence, 1807), p.51.

⁶ John Donne, 'Sermon XII, Preached at Whitehall, The First Day in Lent, 1622', *The Works of John Donne*, Vol.1, ed. by Henry Alford (London: John W. Parker, 1839), p.251, hereafter referred to as *Sermons*.

⁷ Lange, p.157.

⁸ *Poems*, p.738.

We shall looke upon those lovely, those heavenly eyes, through
this *glasse* of his owne tears⁹ (emphasis added)

In this instance, Christ's tears become refractive prisms through which humanity see in a positive and truthful way. Presented as optic lenses in both cases, tears come to represent opposing ways of seeing, conversely false and yet truthful too. As Joan Hartwig asserts, 'distortion through tears is a valid way of seeing, and that, if we could but put aside given ways of seeing, of perceiving reality, we might find that all is one – dualities are only apparent.'¹⁰ As such, through the distorting medium of tears, the distinction and separation between self and other collapses; in the context of Donne's secular poetry, this deconstruction takes place between lover and beloved, whereas in Donne's devotional poetry and sermons the difference to be overcome is that between heaven and earth, human and divine. Consequently, the distorting, anamorphic form of the tear registers the poet's—and the preacher's—desire for continuity between self and other. As will become clear, however, the difficulty encountered with Donne's depictions of tears is that for as many that discourage weeping, an equal measure encourage tears as an essential and (most significantly) human mode of expression. Accordingly, and against Donne's own charge of falsity in *An Elegy upon the Death of Lady Markham*, this study intends to suggest that, rather than being associated with deception, tears embody a crisis of representation and interpretation that pervades the poetry of John Donne.

The tradition of English Renaissance tear poetry often finds itself discussing issues of interpretational perspective. Whilst Donne describes tears as 'false spectacles', for his near contemporary and fellow metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell tears take on a positive, corrective quality. Writing on Marvell's *Eyes and Tears*, Gary Kuchar contends that Marvell challenges the conventions of tear poetry inaugurated by Robert Southwell's *Saint Peter's Complaint*, and by doing so 'revises the Catholic literature of tears tradition by

⁹ *Sermons*, p.253.

¹⁰ Joan Hartwig, 'Tears as a Way of Seeing,' in *On the Celebrated and Neglected Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. by Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), p.82.

putting verbal adaptations of anamorphic forms of representation' into the service of an alternative ontotheological vision.¹¹ Set against an understanding of sight as 'self-deluding', Marvell depicts tears as the 'better measure':

And, since the self-deluding sight
In a false angle takes each height,
These tears, which better measure all,
Like watery lines and plummets fall.

(5-8)¹²

Whilst initially tears are imagined as a corrective prism through which the world and human sin can be perceived, however, the clarity offered by these tears provides a 'measure' rather than a perception. Echoing Southwell's depiction of tears as 'dew[s] of devotion [that] never fayleth, but the sunne of justice draweth up', Marvell's falling tears measure the upward rise of devotion and prayer.¹³ Tears measure and quantify, and are not 'a function of perceiving 'all'', as the later reference to 'the scales of either eye' (10) compounds.¹⁴ Poised between repentance and sin, these falling tears gauge the distance between the grace of heaven and earthly immorality. As such, the tears of *Eyes and Tears* mediate the gap between the binary conception of divinity and iniquity, affording the speaker with a re-aligned perspective on human finitude and sin. Joan Hartwig's gloss of *Eyes and Tears* as an affirmation of 'the wisdom of nature in decreeing that the same organ should "weep and see"' alerts readers to Marvell's depiction of tears as a wholly natural and honest response to the vanity of earthly life.¹⁵ Marvell's opening lines, 'How wisely Nature did decree, / With the same eyes to weep and see!' (1-2), conceive tears as part of an authentic relationship between the visual perception of earthly life and emotional responses to vanity and sin. Without a need to resort to another instrument of perception or, as Hartwig suggests, not 'requiring an intermediary function', the weeping response of

¹¹ Gary Kuchar, 'Marvell's Anamorphic Tears', *Studies in Philology*, 103.3 (2006), p.346.

¹² Andrew Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Story Donno (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.52

¹³ Robert Southwell, *St. Peters Complaint and Saint Marie Magdalen's Funeral Tears 1616*, ed. by D. M. Rogers (Menston: English Scholars' Press, 1971), p.138.

¹⁴ Kuchar, p.361.

¹⁵ Hartwig, p.73.

the eyes is immediate and unmitigated.¹⁶ Where Clayton indicates that the object of the tear and subject of repentance become ‘syntactically as well as naturally one’ in *Eyes and Tears*, it becomes clear that, by coalescing sin and repentance in the image of the unified eye and tear, Marvell propagates a distinctly non-dualistic theology of tears.¹⁷ Marvell’s *Eyes and Tears* expresses concerns towards onto-theological understandings of the division between heaven and earth, and tries to account for difference and separation within the metaphorical image of the tear. Indeed, Kuchar suggests that Marvell’s poetry, especially his deployment of tears, sustains the paradoxical approach of incarnationist theology by ‘asserting that the breach separating material and spiritual orders constitutes the space by which the two are conjoined.’¹⁸

Described by Lange as the ‘apex of the Renaissance hermeneutic discussion of tears’, Donne’s sermon on the tears of Christ, preached during Lent 1622, presents not only the most eloquent Renaissance response to Christ’s tears, but is perhaps the most expressive literary response to the wider subject of tears and weeping during the early modern period.¹⁹ As such, it requires particular attention for the light that it can shed on Donne’s poetic depictions of tears and weeping. On the subject of John 11.35 ‘And Jesus Wept’, Donne presents weeping as a fundamentally human quality and a necessary means of human expression. Donne structures this sermon around the three biblical occasions on which Christ shed tears: over the death of Lazarus, upon entering into Jerusalem and finally during his crucifixion:

The first were Humane teares, the second were Prophetically, the third were Pontifically, appertaining to the Sacrifice. The first were shed in Condolency of a humane and naturall calamity fallen upon one family; *Lazarus* was dead: The second were shed in contemplation of future calamities upon a Nation; Jerusalem was to be destroyed: The third, in Contemplation of sin, and the everlasting

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.73.

¹⁷ Thomas Clayton, “‘It is Marvell He Outdwells His Hour’: Some Perspectives on Marvell’s Medium,” in *Tercentenary Essays in Honour of Andrew Marvell*, ed. by Kenneth Friedenreich (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977), p.66.

¹⁸ Kuchar, p.347.

¹⁹ Lange, p.173.

punishments due to sin, and to such sinners, as would make no benefit of that Sacrifice, which he offered in offering himselfe.²⁰

Depicted as ‘Humane’, ‘Propheticall’ and ‘Pontificall’ tears, Donne closely relates the instances of Christ’s weeping in order to illustrate his inherent humanity. Whilst Gail Kern Paster suggests that ‘Christ embodies temperance, not by avoiding emotions altogether but by keeping his emotions within the bounds of moderation’, Donne conversely writes that:²¹

Inordinatenesse of affections may sometimes make some men like some beasts;
but indolencie, absence, emptinesse, privation of affections, makes any man at all
times, like stones, like dirt

(330)

Here, Donne echoes Bishop Edward Reynolds’ explication of Christ’s emotions as that ‘never proceeded beyond their due measure, nor transported the mind, to undecencie or excesse; but had both their rising and origin all from reason, and also their measure, bounds, continuance limited by reason.’²² In Donne’s reckoning, ‘inordinatenesse of affections’ is to be encouraged over ‘indolencie’ and the ‘privation of affections’. Accordingly, Donne’s exegesis pays particular attention to Christ weeping over the death of Lazarus, his ‘humane teares’, by which he ‘elevates tears and weeping as quintessentially humane expressions to an unprecedentedly positive degree’.²³ In this regard, the case that Donne makes for emotional moderation, examining the efficacy of weeping in this scriptural context, aligns his understanding of the hazards of emotion with the emergence of Neostoicism, which advocated the rejection of the passions. Repeatedly describing Christ’s weeping as his compassion, Donne juxtaposes the tears voluntarily shed for Lazarus with the involuntary, forced shedding of his blood upon the cross, his passion.

²⁰ John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. by Simpson and Potter, Vol. IV (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1962), p.58, hereafter referred to as *Sermons*.

²¹ Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p.1.

²² Edward Reynolds, *Treatise of the Passions and Faculties of the Soule of Man*, ed. by Margaret Lee Wiley (Gainesville FL: Scholars Facsimiles and Prints, 1971), p.47.

²³ Lange, p.173.

Even here, however, Donne conflates Christ's divinity and humanity within the image of a tear, stating that Christ 'wept because [lazarus] was dead [...] and he wept though he meant to raise him again' (336). Contrasting Donne's assertion that 'e'en those tears which should wash sin are sin' (*Markham* 11), Christ's tears are figured as a '*trina immersio*' (725), a threefold baptism as 'the soule bathed in these teares cannot perish: for this is *trina immersio*' (724-5).

Speaking specifically of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, Tilottama Rajan suggests that:

Donne deliberately randomised the arrangement of his poems in order to the challenge conventional assumptions of the reading process as a linear movement in which a 'truth' is progressively explored and consolidated.²⁴

Here, Rajan challenges attempts to fix and derive conclusive interpretations of Donne's poetry, by asserting Donne's own measures against diachronic analysis. However, whilst elucidating the function of tears in Donne's poetry does require individual poems to be encountered as dialectical in their own right, it is the relationship between contradicting and corresponding depictions of tears that elevates their importance. Accordingly, such groups as the Valedictions can and should be read as a sub-sequence of related poems, and within that sequence, *A Valediction: forbidding mourning* and *A Valediction: of Weeping* stand out as two that specifically concern the role and significance of tears.

Utilising the image of a tear, *A Valediction: of Weeping* struggles to account for the insubstantiality of poetic language, against the substantial power that the beloved wields over the speaker:

Let me power forth
My teares before thy face, whil'st I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stampe they beare,
And by this mintage they are something worth,
For thus they be
Pregnant of thee;
Fruits of much griefe they are, emblemes of more,
When a teare fals, that thou falls which it bore,
So thou and I are nothing then, when on a divers shore. (1-9)

²⁴ Tilottama Rajan, "Nothing Sooner Broke": Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* as Self-Consuming Artifacts', *ELH*, 49 (1982), p.823.

Initially absent, the beloved is afforded textual presence within the small, enclosed ‘coin’ (3) of a tear, as the speakers tears are impregnated with her minute effigy. Transformed from empty vessels into the beloved’s material body in miniature, these tears challenge the ability of language to meaningfully capture the lady’s visual presence. Having been minted with her image, his tears obtain their own value and become ‘of something worth’ (4), however this value is fleeting, for as the falling tear descends it becomes ‘nothing’ (9). Evoking the separated lovers on ‘diverse shores’ (9), the plummeting tear returns to its empty, meaningless form without the reflected presence of the lady. Ultimately, Donne’s tears are ephemeral, for even when they seem to hold value and meaning, their worth rapidly disappears. The juxtaposition of ‘fruits’ and ‘emblemes’ highlight this concern, for whilst as Baumlin asserts ‘as “fruits,” the tears literally “bore” her soul, as if her image animated them’, as ‘emblemes’ the tears are reduced to *simulacra*, refusing the beloved anything more than a superficial aesthetic presence.²⁵ Even within the already precarious metaphysics of the tear, the beloved can only be conjured in fleeting moments of signification, in a coin, a fruit or an emblem; repeatedly disappearing into the textual past, the lady’s presence fades and disappears with each failed attempt to materialise her in language. Even when the lover’s tear poetically transforms into a cartographic globe, the lady’s own tears threaten to flood and ‘overflow/ this world’ (17-8). As ‘workeman that hath copies by, can lay / An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia’ (11-2), the Lady’s presence is only imprinted on the lover’s lachrymose globes. Consequently, the role of tears changes from ‘beare[ing]’ (3) to merely ‘wear[ing]’ (15) the beloved’s image, as not only is it the case that tears require meaning to be inscribed on them, but as simulacra, mere images, their representative value is transitory. Expressing the fragility of poetic language to embody the poet’s world, the economic image of the tear in *A Valediction: of weeping*

²⁵ James S. Baumlin, *John Donne and the Rhetorics of Renaissance Discourse* (Columbia MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p.194.

divulges Donne's concerns towards the efficacy of language, as 'the poet and the lady are [...] reduced to the traces or effects of language – to emblems, coins, "copies", and maps'.²⁶

However, where Donne overtly cautions against tears and crying in *of Weeping*, in *A Valediction: forbidding Mourning* his warning against 'teare-floods' (6) is employed for a very specific reason:

So let us melt and make no noise,
 No teare-floods, nor sigh-tempests move,
 'Twere prophanation of our joys
 To tell the laity our love.²⁷
 (5-8)

Summoned as love's ministry, the tears of the lover's are a 'prophanation', a violation of their spiritual love. Shedding tears risks 'tell[ing] the laity' (8) and returning their transcendent love to the earthly matter of sighs and tears. In contrast to 'Dull sublunary lovers' (13) the beloved's tears pose no threat to their love, because where tears rise from the 'elemented' (16) body, they are 'so much refined' by love that their souls are not bound to the same elemental matter as tears. The lover's have been removed from physical existence. However, counterpoised against the non-material lovers, the 'elemented' tears threaten to return their 'aery' (24) forms to the 'harms and fears' (9) of earthly life. Echoing *The Dissolution*, in which Donne relates bodily passions to the elemental, humoral body – 'My fire of passion, sighs of air, / Water of tears, and earthly sad despair' (9-10) – tears draw the ethereal paramours back to their watery bodies.²⁸ At once, these tears are both threatening to the lovers, and yet natural and earthly, for whilst they risk divulging their union to the base 'laity', without humoral expressions their love is intangible and frail 'like gold to aery thinness beat' (24). So whilst Donne's speaker pleas

²⁶ Baumlín, p.196.

²⁷ *Poems*, p.258.

²⁸ *Poems*, p.165.

for ‘no teare-floods’, without them his existence, and that of his lady, becomes insubstantial.

Encountering similar oppositions in her readings of Donne’s poetry, Rajan suggests that where ‘individual poems are themselves binary [...] they are incipiently self-questioning, and point to the need for other poems to overturn their conclusions’.²⁹ However, wholly relying on subsequent poems to overcome moments of opposition and contradiction, unconvincingly and incorrectly negates the importance of paradox as a determining structure of Donne’s poetry. In both the Valedictions discussed, Donne’s writing is charged with a concern over the ability of language to give substance to his poetic forms, where tears play a central role in the poem’s oscillation between substantiality and insubstantiality. Whilst Baumlin posits that *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* ‘asserts the power of language to preserve love in the physical absence of the beloved’, the degree to which tear imagery educes concerns over the fragility of poetic representation and the stability of language, raises questions over his conclusion.³⁰ When, like a tear fleetingly impregnated and coined with the lover’s reflection, Donne’s poems only manage to ephemerally capture the essence of his thoughts, how can we account for Baumlin’s faith in the ‘power of language to preserve’? In reality, language is only able to provide Donne’s thoughts with form and substance for a brief, transitory moment, before moving on.

Whilst we may well consider Donne’s depictions of tears to be a recurring motif of mutuality, shed and shared in love, in *Witchcraft by a Picture*, ‘they are relational only to the speaker and his interests’.³¹

I fixe mine eye on thine, and there
 Pitty my picture burning in thine eye,
 My Picture drown’d in a transparent teare,
 When I look lower I espie;

²⁹ Rajan, p.822

³⁰ Baumlin, p.17.

³¹ Lange, p.192.

Hadst thou the wicked skill
By pictures made and mard, to kill³²
(1-6)

Witnessing his ‘picture burning in thine eye,’ the lover does not look through his beloved’s tears, but upon his own reflected image. Quoting Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Eric Langley’s assertion that ‘the beloved’s eye is a mirror in which the lover beholds himself, [...] a subtle acceptance of a discordant narcissism underlying erotic exchange’ proposes that the glassy surface of the beloved’s eye, or in the case of *Witchcraft by a Picture*, the mirror-surface of a tear, become a *locus* of narcissistic self-reflection.³³ As Robert Southwell asserts:

Much sorrowe [...] is eyther the childe of selfe-love, or of rash judgement: if we should shead our tears for others death, as a meane to our contentment, wee shewe but our owne wound perfit louers of our selves.³⁴

Whether caught in the self-reflection of his beloved’s tear, or the ‘selfe-love’ occasioned by his own, as is the case with Southwell’s self-contenting weeper, the subject appears to be caught within the sphere of his own narcissistic gaze. Where Donne’s speaker, in *Witchcraft by a Picture*, claims ‘I fixe mine eye on thine’, in reality he fixes his gaze upon his own reflection, transforming his beloved’s eyes and tears into an image of self-contentment. Echoing the beloved’s miniature, tear bound form in ‘of Weeping’, here the lover finds his own image ‘drown’d’ (3). The Lady’s ‘wicked skill’ (5) in both conjuring the speaker’s reflection and drowning it in her tears reminds us that Donne is writing during a period when the tears of women were openly associated with not only original sin, but specifically the deception of Adam and the ‘ruine of man’. Only by drinking her ‘sweet salt teares’ can the lover safeguard his image, and although she threatens to capture and kill his image again with more weeping, he departs and escapes the witchcraft of her

³² *Poems*, p.281.

³³ Eric Langley, *Narcissism & Suicide in Shakespeare & His Conetmporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press , 2009), p.82.

³⁴ Robert Southwell, *The Triumphs over Death: or, A Consolaterie Epistle, for Afflicted Minds in the Affects of Dying Friends* (London: Valentine Simmes, 1595), B2.

reflective tears. The poem ends with the resolution that only ‘one picture more [...] being in thine own heart’ can be ‘from all malice free’, further envisaging the beloved’s tears as wicked in contrast with the malice free heart. In *Twickenam Garden*, likely written a few years after *of Weeping*, Donne’s declaration that you can no ‘more judge a woman’s thoughts by tears’ (24) conclusively declares the deceptive nature of women’s tears. Indeed, Recalling *Love’s Diet* in which tears are ‘counterfeit’ (17) because ‘eyes which roll t’wards all, weep not, but sweat’ (18), women’s tears are presented as fundamentally deceitful.³⁵ In *Love’s Diet*, Donne appears to suggest that what seem like sincere tears are in fact the false, sweaty product of the labour of indiscriminate desire, of eyes ‘roll[ing] t’wards all’. In *Twickenam Garden*, however, the speaker’s tears, which are described as ‘lover’s wine’, evoke Christ’s transubstantiated blood captured in ‘crystal vials’ (19); nevertheless, whilst the suggestion of the sacramental significance of tears momentarily affirms their authenticity, the speaker declares ‘all are false [...] hearts do not in eyes shine | No can you more judge women’s thoughts by tears, | Than by her shadow, what she wears’ (22-25).

Although it must be agreed that ‘Donne stands out among seventeenth-century preachers for the degree to which he countenances and celebrates affective expression’, it must also be recognised that Donne’s poetry articulates its own concerns towards that which confounds normative expressions, that which is unreadable and accordingly disruptive to the poet’s desire for direct linguistic expression.³⁶ Rather than simply being associated with falsity, tears are paradoxically the closest to and yet furthest away from the meaningful expression of emotion. Thus rather than asking how we can account for, or overcome these oppositions and complexities, we should try to understand what these contradictions say about Donne’s work, even as he fervently attempts to capture a sense of stability that he never achieves. At the same time as Donne’s seemingly paradoxical

³⁵ *Poems*, p.214.

³⁶ Lange, p.173.

presentation of tears (as both distorting and yet also a correcting) registers anxieties relating to the efficacy of language, the recurrent image of the tear also offers a crucial metaphor through which he is able to interrogate this efficacy and the insubstantiality of language. Where there is always the temptation to view Donne's poems as endlessly paradoxical and ultimately self-negating, and to look towards Donne's religious writing as his conclusive, theologically supported, outlook, rescuing Donne's work from the inevitable drive towards linearity and truth, by reading his poetry and prose synchronically, we see that Donne's work represents an anxiety towards the effectiveness of language as a means of representing human emotions. That Donne's secular scepticism towards the efficacy of language and representation exists alongside his more dogmatic religious stance towards language and meaning only adds to the paradoxical nature of Donne's work.

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