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“Batter my Heart”: Violence and the Sublime in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 14*

Sonia KOTIAH
University of Mauritius

Abstract

In examining the sublime as recurring literary motif, this article proposes a philosophical reading of John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 14*. This metaphysical poem posits a subjective persona whose spiritual dilemma is reflected by a violent desire to preserve individual autonomy and defy divine authority followed by eventual recognition of and submission to God’s will. Acknowledging that the notion of sublime is multi-faceted, the paper discusses how the sublime is mediated by violence in *Holy Sonnet 14*. The study is divided into three sections. While the first part provides a broad assessment of violence in Donne’s sonnets, the second part focuses on the creative and destructive characteristics of the sublime in *Holy Sonnet 14*. The third part then connects the sublime to Derridean *aporia*. Finally, the conclusion sums up the main aspects of the study.

Keywords: Donne, metaphysical poetry, sublime, violence

Introduction

John Donne’s nineteen *Holy Sonnets*, originally published as *Divine Meditations*, represent violent conflict as a necessary aspect of any struggle towards self, societal or religious definition. Given that he observes both the Petrarchan octave/sestet and the English couplet, Donne’s commitment to the sonnet style remains largely conventional. The *Holy Sonnets* are nevertheless paradoxical poems which reflect a ritualistic confrontation with God and spiritual understanding. Moving beyond their traditional layout, these metaphysical poems are powerful in their imagery and marked by deep emotional bonds. They are poems of intimate and fertile violence, of internal wounds which are involved in the making of the “man of flesh as well as of spirit” (Baumlin 2004: 393).

Focusing closely on *Holy Sonnet 14*, the article argues that Donne’s characteristic mixture of anguish, despair and hope reinstates a form of violence which culminates in sublime experience. As stated by Thomas Huhn, “the achievement of the sublime is that it makes domination pleasurable and violence beautiful or rather: sublime” (1995: 269). Donne’s poetic evocations of conflict in the relationship between the individual and religion are often ambiguous and lead to sublime enunciations. His depictions of violence both in terms of the relationship with God and in one’s relationship with oneself are therefore usually sublime ones – that is they are creative as well as destructive. In a similar context, Jahan Ramazani discusses the fact that “the sublime transforms the painful spectacle of destruction and death into a joyful assertion of human freedom and transcendence” (1989: 163).

According to Kenneth Holmqvist and Jaroslaw Płuciennik, the fact that the sublime can be organized under a wide repertoire enhances meanings ranging from the aesthetic, the ethical, philosophical, psychological, political, linguistic and rhetorical (2002: 718). Given that *Holy Sonnet 14* engages with violence in the guise of defiance, fear, awe and wonder, this paper chooses to

focus on the sublime as a literary motif. After all, the recurring violence in Donne's *Holy Sonnets* ascertains a latent discomfort vis-à-vis religion. Set in the metaphysical discourse characteristic of the seventeenth century British literary scene, these poems incorporate specific religious references which establish and affirm the existence of spiritual dilemmas.

The agitated nature of the I-persona's utterances in most of the sonnets clearly indicates a leaning towards brutality and instability. "I run to death," states the speaker in *Holy Sonnet 1* (611 L3). The violence follows a distinct pattern in *Holy Sonnet 5* where a particularly aggressive speaker invokes divinity, "And burn me, O Lord, with a fiery zeal" (612 L13). The "scattered bodies" (612 L4) mingling with "Thy blood" (612 L14) in *Holy Sonnet 7* evoke a further example of the problematic relationship between pain/death and transcendence/joy. *Holy Sonnet 10* pushes the notion of sublime to more ambitious ends by conversing with and defying Death, "Death, thou shalt die" (612 L14). Basically, Donne's *Holy Sonnets* involve an active I-persona seeking to evade and at times confront a divine centre, an authority. The result is one of implicit violence towards the assumed "centre", the "three-personed God" (613 L1) evoked in *Holy Sonnet 14*.

The Sublime: Creative and Destructive

Jeanne Shami's discussion of "the uneasy relationship between Donne's conformity and his conscience, illuminating both the historical "conversion" of the Church of England at the Reformation and the personal consequences of that conversion for Donne's faith, his poetics, and his life" (2001: 82) is suggestive of the source for much of the violence prevailing in his poems. The ambivalent vision in *Holy Sonnet 14* is delineated by interwoven sublime patterns cutting across each other. The effect is one of circularity, as the poet persona's faith morphs into a series of knotted paradoxes involving coercion and submission. What prevails in this poem's concern with spiritual journey is a general sense of stasis and repetition.

Donne's ability to "locate images mentally, within the individual, rather than in an actual church" (Anderson 2002: 24) is an immanent aspect of the sublime in *Holy Sonnet 14*. The speaker's violent emergence right at the beginning of the poem itself is motivated by a staunch refusal to accept the conventional hierarchy of body and soul. "Batter my heart" (613 L1) indicates a physical and artistic violence against which the poet persona defines his relationship towards God and examines his spiritual awareness. The spiritual contention here is reminiscent of Burke's representation of the sublime, in which some elements are felt either as painful or as threatening. In this poem, the excess of violence is reinstated as a recurring aesthetic motif through which the poet persona responds to God's authority or power.

In terms of the sublime, the destructive and creative relationship between violence and the self takes on very specific importance as regards any notion of stability in the subject. For Burke (1958), it is a matter of the delightful feeling of self-preservation that follows a terrifying experience of the sublime. To have survived the experience is the ultimate test of the self's stability and power. Therefore, the sadomasochistic union of subject and object in *Holy Sonnet 14* can make violence acquire both creative and destructive dimensions.

This poem documents a particular state of mind in which the poet persona's tensions, hopes and fears course through violence. Attitudes towards the addressee, God, are clearly paradoxical since they range from conventional religious reverence to controversial metaphysical disbelief:

Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,

But am bethrothed unto Your enemy. (L9-10)

Holy Sonnet 14 is the realisation of Donne's poetic identity and an important statement of the relationship between the sublime and violence. The utterance in this poem, which involves a violent reaction towards God, is personal as well as aesthetic and provides a means by which the speaker's spiritual contention can define itself against the sublime. In the guise of his anonymous persona, the I-figure, Donne's discomfort towards holy images (Freidman 1996) is clearly manifest:

I, like a usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit You, but O, to no end; (L5-6)

Since the vision of a world free of divine authority is ultimately aestheticized, a traditional alliterative sequence – "bend" (L3), "break, blow, burn" (L4 emphasis mine) – translates the poet persona's violent defiance of God.

Donne's sonnets are about metaphysical journeys, but instead of describing a conventional trajectory of achieving unity with God, *Holy Sonnet 14* thwarts all such possibilities. In the first instance, the speaker's characteristic restlessness which deciphers the sublime experience of a metaphysical mind forming under the conditions of violence is both spiritual and literal. The sonnet's controlled Petrarchan style also lies in stark contrast with the energetic enunciation of the speaker, who experiences a type of ecstasy, a sublime frenzy. The poet persona's brutal bartering of God's authority in favour of his personal freedom is channelled through the discourse of slavery and its resulting oppressive images. 'Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,' he states (L11). Violence, which propels the I-figure at the centre of *Holy Sonnet 14*, emphasizes the combination of desire and nostalgia that also characterizes sublime experience. The I-figure, who posits the "weak or untrue" (L8) as his dilemma, is unable to come to terms with the sense of wholeness, authenticity and self-presence associated with God. Donne's poem seeks an alternative form of salvation in violent contrast to the popular submissive commitment to God. Through a storehouse of nurturing images which indicate a new creative lease of life – "knock, breathe, shine" (L2) – the I-figure expresses a wilder, less constrained context in which the sublime thrives freely.

Holy Sonnet 14 is a power-hunt, on the verge of or over the verge of spiritual realization. The poet persona's violent aspiration towards rebirth, "make me new" (L4), is definitely an indication of sublime possibilities. At this point, supreme religious, emotional and poetic emotions emerge. The poet persona is aware of his emotions, of the sublime turning point which gradually marks his spiritual realization and converts his wrath towards God into a more creative process. Possibilities of rebirth, after all, indicate an apocalyptic vision in which creation necessitates destruction first. Donne's speaker clearly believes in a radical, positive sublimity which can only be found after a hazardous metaphysical journey, on the threshold of negative sublimity.

Accordingly, physical bodies form the basis of Donne's most intense sublime moments and represent a range of human emotions and experiences. The surrender of the physical body in favour of spiritual autonomy in *Holy Sonnet 14* is worth the violence because it aims towards the definition of natural and individual identity. The I-figure's active foraging is also an indicator of freedom being sought after as much as possible from the cyclical rhythm of the sonnet. "I may rise and stand" (L3) therefore describes the necessary violence of self-discovery in the natural course of spiritual maturation. For Blaine Greteman, Donne's bodies are typically "sublimed, vapoured,

crushed, or beaten into new forms” (2010: 27). Both literal and diffuse, the I-figure’s identity is problematized across the poem and moves towards an irresolvable dilemma.

Holy Sonnet 14 is a meditation in favour of the sublime. At the centre of the sublime experience is the personal and intimately mortal aspect of the self which is represented by the poet persona who bears witness to his own contention. He is the one who, being so moved by the detached immortal stance of God, ultimately relents and surrenders to God’s authority, “Take me to You, imprison me” (L12). Yet he also remains sympathetic to his own cause and creates an image of suffering wrathful humanity caught in the violent throes of his own ecstatic self-wounding meditation; that is he remains connected to the pathos of his self-sacrifice.

The Sublime as *Aporia*

The poet persona’s surrender, which complements the cyclical movement of the traditional sonnet, reflects the pulse of life which fades and dies while giving birth to another. In surrendering, he reflects the perpetual cycle of decay and rebirth implicit in both violence and sexuality:

Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me. (L13-14)

Thus we see how the ultimate insight offered in the ecstatic sublime is always eclipsed by a sense of surrender, loss and finally a Derridean form of *aporia*. The eventual sexualized longing for unity with the divine is in stark contrast with the wrath that prevails in the initial lines of *Holy Sonnet 14*. Violence, which appears to be born out of sexual despair, requires ritual reanimation. The ultimate significance of the poem’s violent imagery can be related to both benevolent love for and apocalyptic fury towards the divine, eventually leading to psychological impasse or *aporia*.

Jacques Derrida’s argument, that the “centre” which is used to represent a “point of presence, a fixed origin” (1978: 278), also imposes a limit on the play of the structure in which it is found or placed. Following Derrida then, much of the violent energy in *Holy Sonnet 14* is directed towards freeing structures from the tyranny of whatever “centre” or “centres” to which they are seen to be subject. These centres can be traced to the formal “You”, repeated six times across the sonnet (L1, 6, 9, 12, 13, 14). In addressing God directly and intimately, the poet persona’s quest towards the divine nucleus or point of concentration that holds together his passions acquires problematic angles. He is in a state of contention, yet the formal movement of the Petrarchan sonnet does not give him a chance to escape. Though he searches for freedom, his spiritual trajectory is marked by an uneasy, ambivalent solidarity towards and a feeling of difference from God. The spiralling descent into *aporia* thus complements the encounter with the sublime.

By concentrating on divine *telos*, Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 14* gives a sense of coherence, a semblance of order at least to what would otherwise appear to be a random, meaningless sequence of violent passions. The I-figure’s wrathful repartee with God occasions “centring” (Derrida 1978) in the poem. Here, “centring” operates both precursively and recursively, that is the centre can condition or determine the meaning of that which precedes and also that which follows the centre (Crapanzano 1992: 28). The contemplative subject, in quest of meaning, is primarily denied a unity which is underwritten and orchestrated by a controlling centre which apparently brings the whole system into synchrony with and through its all-pervasive presence and discipline.

Barricaded by the strictly defined rhythm of the sonnet, the speaker encounters psychological impasse as a sublime experience. When this blockage occurs, his feelings of guilt and betrayal in relation to what he perceives as the dominant ethos and culture suit Donne’s existential quandaries. Therefore, his ideological purpose is to plunge his latent feelings of violence into the alternative subterranean world of dreams and meditation since they offer temporary respite and the pseudo-pleasure of debunking supposedly dominant religious myths. The simile – “I, like a usurped town” (L5) – translates the willing submission of the poet persona as a state of perpetual psychological deferral and spiritual travel. This particular undertaking of spiritual travel in *Holy Sonnet 14* is finally a variation of the creative-destructive sublime. Anthony Parr argues that “travel, as metaphor and as idea, pervades Donne’s writing, and despite his lack of interest in the relatively inchoate or mundane travel “relation” of his day, he uses many of its standard ingredients in literary structures where meaning and implication can be creatively controlled” (2007: 63).

The latent *aporia* in *Holy Sonnet 14* is occasioned by an ambivalent vision, contained within a metaphysical framework. Clearly divided between God’s will and his own aspiration towards autonomy, the poet persona experiences indecision as both exhilarating and alienating. Alienation, which is already indicated by the intimate and subjective utterance of a sole speaker, derives from the persistence of psychological impasse and its unusual ability to co-exist with violence. Riddled with commas and semi-colons, most of the verses blur physical and metaphysical boundaries, which is a concomitant of the speaker’s “conversation” with God.

The sublime, in this sense, is motivated by the realization of an essence or truth which acts as the foundation of the speaker’s faith. In the course of his emotional rant, there seems to be a disposition, a longing for a “transcendental signifier” which would directly relate or correspond to a secure stable “transcendental signified”, that is, a logos (Derrida 1981: 65). If, on the formal level, divinity is the locus of the speaker’s address, the preoccupation with the sublime is what produces the subjective perspective in the poem. The speaker’s concern with his own subjective experience, for example, wraps obsessively around the possessive pronoun – “Your viceroy in *me*, *me* should defend” (L7, emphasis mine). For Christopher Soufas, “the sublime [...] corroborates a desire for enhanced subjectivity” (1995: 306). In its chaos, excitement, terror and eventual submission, the sublime can only be successful when rendered subjectively.

The sublime, which intensifies the imaginative processes and the subjectivity of the perceiver (Mitchell 1986: 125-29), becomes the privileged mode of experience in Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 14*. The poet persona, who acknowledges that he “never shall be free” (L13), confronts his spiritual impasse by adopting a mock-sermon stance throughout. At the same time, the overpowering jargon of oppression clearly expands onto the sexual, where expressions such as “chaste” and “ravish” (L14) present a direct bearing onto the problematic nature of the sublime. The dissolution of his autonomous identity in favour of *aporia* also complements the role of poetic language in this traditional sonnet.

Conclusion

Because Donne’s poetic style and language possess violence, *Holy Sonnet 14* is emblematic of the poet persona’s unresolved spiritual contention and resulting *aporia*. Final submission to God is ultimately a disturbing symptom of the violence that marks the poet persona’s sublime experience. The dualism of violence and the sublime translates the state of unease of an overtly spiritual consciousness which reaches out for autonomy but does not succeed. However much

definitions may vary, the sublime in this poem reflects a recurring concern with awe, fear and terror as well as the subversive pleasure that violence may arouse, at least from the subjective perspective of the speaker.

Donne's *Holy Sonnet 14* can therefore be viewed as a reflection on the sublime possibilities latent in spiritual dilemmas. If the poet persona's agony and eventual submission indicate a troubling and controversial response to violence, the sonnet's traditional aesthetic framework can only emphasize violence as a recurring and cyclical motif. In examining the causes and consequences of this fascination with violent emotions, the spiritual journey elaborated by Donne remains committed to the ambiguous concept of the sublime.

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Sonia Kotiah is Lecturer in English at the University of Mauritius (www.uom.ac.mu) where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses. Her interests lie in canonical, postmodern and world literatures. She has also published articles on Latin American and contemporary British fiction.
