

John Donne's Art of Conceit

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John Donne's poetry is noted for its use of conceit. The reason why his poems have special charm is not only that he is able to master this rhetorical device skillfully, but also that he has made conceit into a mode of thinking. Therefore, conceit carries his philosophical speculation, love oath and religious piety, and this unique expression produces novel effect of defamiliarization and strengthens the emotional tension of his poetry.

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Introduction

Conceit, which has attracted the attention of many critics, is the most prominent artistic feature of John Donne (1572-1631). T.S. Eliot regarded conceit as a figure of speech. According to him, conceit was the refinement and deepening of a figure of speech which could only be realized by creative thinking (Li, 2001, pp. 24-25). Conceit, being novel, aims to attract readers as a mixture of similes, metaphors, analogies and other rhetorical methods with unique imagery and mysterious thinking.

Donne's conceit is an innovation. He abandoned the traditional rhetorical methods and boldly introduced philosophical reasoning and unique images into metaphor and analogy, thus forming his own unique rhetorical art. The special charm of Donne's poetry lies not only in his mastery of this rhetorical device, but also in his elevation of conceits to a mode of thinking. Therefore, conceit is an effective way to make analytic reasoning, to express his idea of love and his faith to God, and this unique expression makes the reader feel strange to the familiar things, thus increasing the length of perception. It creates an effect of defamiliarization and strengthens the emotional tension of the poem.

Conceit: Donne's Way of Viewing the World

For Donne, conceit is not only a rhetorical method, but also a cognitive means, which helps him to explain everything. It is the way for Donne to view the world.

Philosophical speculation is an effective embodiment of Donne's deep understanding of the world. Donne's poetry is full of speculative thinking compared with his contemporaries. His poems are rich in philosophical thinking and intellectual argumentation. Intelligence and passion blend together; conceit and paradox exist at the

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same time. The feelings in his poems are not expressed through lyrical language, but through analysis. It is conceit with his deep insight, analysis and reasoning that produce a shocking effect.

A typical example is Donne's famous love poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning". The emotion in the poem is not expressed in the way of fanaticism, but in the way of gradual reasoning. As a parting poem, it not only does not mention separation, but even compares their love to the soft and invisible gold leaf, which means that their love is extended by separation.

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. (Donne, 2008, p. 120)

Then the poet does not admit the separation of souls between lovers. For he and his wife are like two feet of the compass: one sitting firmly in the center of the circle, the other running around it; one foot (fixed foot) tilted her body and listened as if calling for the distant traveler to return soon, and the other foot traveled far away aims to return home.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two;
Thy soul, the fixed 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' (Donne, 2008, p. 121)

When the distant traveler returns, they can merge again. The love between them became the basis of their separation. The husband travelled far away and returned to where he started. The woman sits in the center as the fixed foot, and the man rotates around it as the circumference foot. Both sides are unswerving, constructing the firm love together. In this way, the poet infuses rich emotions into the seemingly unemotional conceit.

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. (Donne, 2008, p. 121)

Donne's way of understanding the world is also reflected in his application of the unique images. Frank Varnco (Franke Warnke) put forward the idea that conceit itself is an image, he said:

The unique image in Donne's poetry is a metaphor, and it is also a metaphor that produces surprising results by analogy between things that are not similar in appearance. But Donne's simile seems to have a broader meaning: although it is surprising and even absurd at first reading, it is perfectly reasonable for a wise man to appreciate the functional or essential similarities... (Li, 2001, p. 30)

It can be seen that the magical effect of Donne's poems cannot be separated from its application of unique imagery. Donne has a rich knowledge about astronomy, geography, theology, and mathematics, so he can freely absorb a large number of images from various fields. It is these novel images that made Donne's metaphors

wonderful and formed Donne's cognitive system. Here is an example of the cosmic celestial image from Donne's poem. The traditional image of sun was an authority, center and sacred image, but Donne gives the sun a new meaning. In "Song (Sweetest Love, I do not go)", the sun is compared to a hasty passerby who has neither desire nor consciousness:

Yesternight the sun went hence,
And yet is here to-day;
He hath no desire nor sense,
Nor half so short a way;
Then fear not me,
But believe that I shall make
Speedier journeys, since I take
More wings and spurs than he. (Donne, 2008, p. 98)

The protagonist compares himself with the sun, and in a sense he just comes and goes like the sun. This comparison clearly highlights the disadvantages of the sun and the advantages of the protagonist. The sun, has neither lust nor consciousness. The sun does nothing but finishes its routine: it rises at dawn and sets at dusk. But the protagonist, by comparing with the sun, assures his wife that he loves her and will return quickly, because he has more wings and spurs than the sun. In other words, the speaker's love and desire for his wife add wings and spurs to help him return as soon as possible. The protagonist seems to have more power than the sun as a passer-by. The poet here highlights the passion and intensity of the protagonist's love through the sharp contrast between the protagonist and the sun which lacks vitality, desire and perception.

The skillful use of digital numerology (numerology) and geometric (geometry) images is another remarkable feature of Donne's poetry. In "The Sun Rising", as the sun rises, the introduction of the image of the sun forms a triangular world including the protagonist, his lover and the sun. Here the sun is used to elicit the dominant power of love, which makes the sun work and drives the sun around the bed where lovers enjoy love all night. In the morning, lovers are disturbed by the sun, and the sun is a bit like a couple's "snooper". The bed here is the center of the universe, like the earth around which the sun rotates, and the wall marks the limits of the sun's movement. This room is the whole universe. The sun image is important in this poem mainly because it forms a triangle image with the couple. Thus the protagonist can use the sun as his audience to listen to his thoughts.

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains, call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
Late school-boys and sour prentices,
Go tell court-huntsmen that the king will ride,
Call country ants to harvest offices;
Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time. (Donne, 2008, p. 92)

As a special figure of speech, dehumanization is an important part of Donne's poetic art. In Donne's poems, humans are sometimes animalized, sometimes materialized, sometimes worm-like, and sometimes transformed into senseless objects. A speaker is willing to become a plant or a clear spring on a stone in Twickenham Garden:

'Twere wholesomer for me that winter did
 Benight the glory of this place,
 And that a grave frost did forbid
 These trees to laugh and mock me to my face;
 But that I may not this disgrace
 Indure, nor yet leave loving, Love, let me
 Some senseless piece of this place be;
 Make me a mandrake, so I may grow here,
 Or a stone fountain weeping out my year. (Donne, 2008, p. 105)

The protagonist regards the garden as a real paradise, in which he hopes to find eternal spring and long-term happiness. But he only finds that he brought in spider love and viper:

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with tears,
 Hither I come to seek the spring,
 And at mine eyes, and at mine ears,
 Receive such balms as else cure every thing.
 But O, self-traitor, I do bring
 The spider Love, which transubstantiates all,
 And can convert manna to gall;
 And that this place may thoroughly be thought
 True Paradise, I have the serpent brought. (Donne, 2008, p. 105)

The poet was sad and he hoped that winter would darken the bright garden so that the frost would ban trees from laughing at his desire for love. All he could do was to ask the god of love to turn him into a senseless thing: a mandrake or a stone fountain. In this way he dehumanized himself to reveal his inner grief. In essence, this dehumanization is the defamiliarization of human image. He will experience life from the perspective of depersonalized people. This technique fully expresses the protagonist's painful state of mind. The technique of "dehumanization" helps Donne find the medium to convey his cognition, express his unique life feeling and complex world outlook vividly.

Donne's conceit is profound and mysterious because he combines this rhetorical device with his extensive knowledge and special cognition. The philosophical speculation, unique images and the technique of dehumanization are all used to convey the poet's unique thought and life experience.

Conceit: Donne's Mode of Thinking

In a sense, conceit has become Donne's mode of thinking. Dante and Petrarch had used conceit long before Donne, but in Donne's poems, conceit became a habitual pattern of thinking. Donne wanted to attract readers in a special way of reasoning. Donne's mode of thinking determines the choice of the poetic terms. The poet gets rid of the usual mode of thinking and causes readers to think hard about the profound connotation of the wonderful metaphor. In this way, Donne's ingenious metaphor is conducive to expressing the thoughts and feelings of poetry in an indirect, analytical way rather than direct and lyrical way. Therefore, there is no doubt that Donne's mode of thinking together with the novel and unique images made him rise from the traditional poetry and became the leader of the new poetry.

This is Williamson's summary of Donne's model of thinking and he clarifies the relationship between conceit and Donne's thoughts:

The integration of thought and rhetoric can create a successful extended metaphor, and the image becoming the embodiment of thought can produce a successful compressed metaphor. So we can see that there is a close connection between conceit and Donne's sensory thinking that I have discussed. It is like a shuttle between thought and the outside world, connected with the context of the poet's thought, and provides a creative model for the poet to integrate the most unrelated knowledge and experience in his mind into an image which is illusory and far-fetched, but completely reasonable. It often contains amazing ideas and breathtaking beauty. In short, the conceit is very clever, shocking, and focuses on the process of deductive reasoning. It is unified with Donne's thoughts, broad interests and poetic characteristics. (Li, 2001, p. 25)

To explain metaphor, Li Guonan once mentioned that "the choice of metaphorical objects is influenced by psychological culture, which includes thinking mode, aesthetic taste, values and so on. It is the deepest culture and has the deepest influence on language, because language itself is a psychological phenomenon" (Li, 2001, p. 59). It can be seen that metaphor and thinking are inseparable.

The special social and cultural background of the Renaissance was the source of the formation of Donne's mode of thinking. Donne's age is an era of great changes in social thought. People's world view changed greatly. The theory of heliocentrism began to be accepted widely. The sun, not the earth, became the center of the universe. The development of navigation and geographical discovery confirmed the existence of many new places. All these changes affect people's ideology in different ways.

Donne's attitude to these new ideas and discoveries was complex. The supernatural knowledge of the new science aroused his curiosity and prompted him to form various ideas. However, the old scientific ideas formed in the mind were deeply rooted in his thinking. The integration of scientific thought and conceit makes Donne's thought a kaleidoscope with both broken old knowledge and new knowledge. This new and old thought integrated with each other and closely united with his intuition.

The compasses, maps, globe and celestial images in Donne's poems all help to show the poet's scientific knowledge in the field of navigation exploration or geographical discovery, or at least reflect the poet's interest in the progress of geographical exploration. Some new knowledge may even change the concept of cosmic geography which had been deeply rooted in people's mind for centuries. The geographical image in "To His Mistress Going To Bed" and the use of map image in "Hymn To God, My God, in My Sickness" reflect Donne's interest in geographical exploration.

Licence my roving hands, and let them go
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O, my America, my Newfoundland,
My kingdom, safest when with one man mann'd,
My mine of precious stones, my empery;
How am I blest in thus discovering thee!
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
Then, where my hand is set, my soul shall be. (ll 25-32) (Donne, 2008, p. 12)

Hymn To God, My God, in My Sickness (stanzas I and II)

SINCE I am coming to that Holy room,
Where, with Thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made Thy music; as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think here before;

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
 Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
 Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
 That this is my south-west discovery,
 Per fretum febris, by these straits to die. (Donne, 2008, p. 332)

As Donne's unique mode of thinking, which is automatic and habitual, conceit becomes a special way to express his thoughts, especially the way of love expression. In "The Good-Morrow", love has the purification power of alchemy. As the protagonist himself said, all the happiness of the past is just like a dream, like the joy of the village which is childish and vulgar. Their true love now purifies their hearts: they despise the means of pursuing worldly material interests through exploitation and colonization. With their noble hearts, lovers each find a world in each other: "Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one" (Donne, 2008, p. 89).

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
 Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
 But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
 Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
 'Twas so; but this, all pleasures' fancies be;
 If ever any beauty I did see,
 Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

And now good-morrow to our waking souls,
 Which watch not one another out of fear;
 For love all love of other sights controls,
 And makes one little room an everywhere.
 Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone;
 Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown;
 Let us possess one world; each hath one, and is one. (Donne, 2008, p. 89)

This world composed of lovers is the best one because they can find such noble love of the soul nowhere. In this world, they are "better two hemispheres" (Hu, 2001, p. 88), and no longer mixed with earthly discordant impurities. The two couples want their love to merge ("If our two loves be one",) (ibid., p. 88) so that "Love so alike that none can slacken, none can die" (ibid., pp. 88-89). Their love led them through the worldly world into the eternal world that only God could enter. The acquisition of this understanding has gone through the process of soul sublimation, in which the true pure love of lovers makes them sublimate to the pursuit of spiritual love beyond the enjoyment of sensuous pleasure in the past. Whether it is the use of geographical images or the analogy of alchemy principles, the poem is to express the pure love of the speaker and the one he loves, so conceit here becomes Donne's unique way of expressing love.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
 Where can we find two better hemispheres
 Without sharp north, without declining west?
 Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
 If our two loves be one, or thou and I
 Love so alike that none can slacken, none can die. (Donne, 2008, p. 89)

As a mode of thinking, Donne's conceit shows his ingenious and unique creative style and conveys the speaker's unique thinking about love.

As Donne's special mode of thinking, conceit has also become the carrier of the combination of Donne's divine and secular thought. Most of Donne's poems have the dual nature of secular and divine. It is with the help of the cross thinking of conceit that Donne can express this thought incisively and vividly.

The poem "The Relique" embodies the characteristics of combination of secular and divine thought. In this poem, the speaker imagines himself lying in the grave. He hoped that the gravedigger would not disturb him and the "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" (Donne, 2008, p. 130). The speaker introduces the idea that all the dead will be awakened to the "last busie day" which adds sacred elements to the poetry. He may take this opportunity to recover his soul and meet his lover's soul in the tomb, hoping that the two souls will be reunited here.

When my grave is broken up againe
Some second ghest to enttaine,
(For graves have learn'd that woman-head
To be to more then one a Bed)
And he that digs it, spies
A bracelet of bright haire about the bone,
Will he not let's alone,
And thinke that there a loving couple lies,
Who thought that this device might be some way
To make their soules, at the last busie day,
Meet at this grave, and make a little stay? (Donne, 2008, p. 130)

The bracelet made of beautiful hair is a testament to the love of the lovers, and grave diggers give it to the bishops and the king as a miracle and a relic of the saints. The speaker thinks that people should not pray to him and the lovers, because people are said to only pray to God. In fact, although he refuses to accept the prayer, the speaker may inadvertently equate his and his lover's status with God. The remains of him and his lover became sacred objects (relics) worthy of worship. Donne raised the speaker's sacred love by using this sacred metaphor.

The "The Relique" begins with worldly love buried in the grave. In a sense, the grave digger opened the prelude to the love story between them. Once opened, the tomb showed a great love treasure—a bracelet made of hair that was sanctified by later generations. Disturbance of the dead is like calling the resurrection and regeneration of the spirit of all the dead at the end of the world. After the soul awoke, the two lovers analyzed the nature of their love and found that their harmless love had created miracles.

More importantly, they finally realized that their love is a spiritual love without sex. Their love is as holy as an angel. The sacred concept here represents both Catholic and Puritan views on the sacred, and it sublimates the essence of love. Donne never claimed how great the speaker's love was, not to mention any oath, but he could always think rationally about the speaker's love in a calm and speculative way, so that he could be worshiped by later generations. In the process of analyzing the essence of the speaker's love, the sacred conceit can always be the most powerful means to help convey profound and subtle emotions.

The Defamiliarization Effect of Conceit

As a typical emotional expression of Donne, conceit defamiliarizes the familiar things and increases the difficulty and length of the reader's perception, thus producing the defamiliarization effect. This enables the reader to have an emotional experience while understanding the poetry, making poetry as the true aesthetic art.

Because Donne defamiliarizes the traditional love poetry through a large number of conceits, it is difficult for readers to understand the mysterious thoughts in the poem, and it also needs to go through a difficult process of perception to understand the poet's intention. Since Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard introduced Petrarch's love poems into England, they have been popular and many poets imitated their poems, thus their love poems often follow the Petrarchan way of thinking. In poetry at that time, women were described with the words such as blond hair, chastity and elegance, cruel and ruthless. The speaker in the poetry, even if he knew the effort would be futile, still pursued the female all the year round. The poets' description of women was always too idealistic, not realistic.

Donne did not seem to be interested in such poetry. His conceit made poetry difficult. When Petrarch's followers poured out love with passion, Donne talked about love with rational speculation. Donne's integrated thought with emotion and intelligence determined that he would violate the prevailing poetic tradition at that time. He must have known that the process of analysis can add more wonderful elements to poetry, so he defamiliarized the traditional simple poetry by deductive reasoning.

He never compared women to flowers or other such things in poetry, and always tried to avoid such Petrarchan descriptions. His fancy for love completely replaced the traditional image of Cupid's love arrow. Flea became the symbol of love and marriage, and the feet of compasses were the embodiment of mutual admiration and loyalty. It can be seen that without Donne's such thinking, there would never be such a chic, novel and fascinating image.

The defamiliarization effect of conceit makes readers naturally associate with the profound cultural background of the poet's age when they tried to understand the poem. The interpretation of Donne's poetry is a cultural trip with the poet, and the profound cultural accumulation of the whole era will be presented to the reader.

LA CORONA is a series of poems composed of seven sonnets. This group of poems consists of a sonnet in the center or center axis, while the other six are balanced and echo each other. A sentence in the poem "Weaved in my lone devout melancholy" (Donne, 2008, p. 171), is not only the first sentence of the first sonnet, but also the end of the seventh sonnet, so the whole group of poems ends at its beginning and forms a complete circle. Not only that, one of the seven sonnets has no title, but the other six all have clear titles. This is a precise record of the cycle of Christ's life.

In the first untitled poem, the speaker proclaims to sing the crown for prayer and praise.

The second poem, entitled "ANNUNCIATION" tells of Christ's acquisition of the flesh. The speaker declares that "Salvation to all that will is nigh" (Donne, 2008, p. 171).

The third poem tells of the birth of Christ, who comes to earth through the womb of his mother Mary.

In the fourth poem, Temple, Jesus preaches "those sparks of wit" (Donne, 2008, p. 172) and teaches it to the doctors and he could also suddenly tell miracles. He can not only "With the sun to begin His business" (Donne, 2008, p. 172), but also work with "miracles exceeding power of man" (p. 172). From the position of this poem,

the fourth poem is in the center of the whole group of poems, and there are three poems before and after it. This central position symbolizes Christ's happiest and most glorious life period on earth.

The fifth poem is called CRUCIFYING. With extraordinary power, Christ is worshiped by some people and hated by others until he is crucified to give people a generous gift. The speaker eagerly begs: "Moist with one drop of Thy blood my dry soul" (Donne, 2008, p. 172).

The sixth poem is called Resurrection. The blood of Christ frees the dry soul of the speaker from hunger. Death will return the body to dust and eternal immortality. Therefore, the body can only get glory through death and not in any other way.

The seventh poem, the last poem in the series, is called Ascension. The sun, the son of man, rises like a bright torch that guides people along the way. The last poem ends with the line "And if Thy Holy Spirit my Muse did raise" (Donne, 2008, p. 172), bringing the reader back to the beginning line of the first poem.

The poem subtly describes the cycle of Christ's life: Christ lived with God before he was reincarnated into man; after coming to earth, he preached, suffered, died, rose to heaven, and finally returned to his father. This poetic structure fully embodies Christ's journey of life. The importance of circular image is that it embodies the symbolic meaning of moral perfection. The whole poem includes not only the religious culture of Jesus' resurrection, but also the knowledge of geometric numerology prevailing at that time, such as circular image, number image based on three and seven. Finally, the whole poem also embodies the perfect unity thought of moral perfection, sacred trinity and resurrection, which conveys the culture of the time.

The defamiliarization effect of conceit creates an artistic space or poetic tension for readers to imagine, which makes readers integrate personal emotional experience and aesthetic ideal while appreciating the charm of the poetry. Reasoning with the poet's mysterious thoughts, the reader will learn some universal philosophy applicable to human beings, which helps them understand the poetry deeper and strengthens the emotional tension of the poetry.

In the poem "The Good-Morrow", The central metaphor is a new understanding of new life. The religious metaphor in the poem convincingly expresses the speaker's past view of his love with his lover. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker realized that his love with earlier lovers was false, and they used to spend time on the joy of the village like a simple child. The imagery of voyage exploration and geographical discovery expands the range of knowledge and emotion contained in the room-world imagery. It deepens the central theme of the poetry in the room-world image. That is, they would rather abandon the whole world for their true love: the lover's room turned into a boundless universe.

In this sense, they lose a real world. But because each couple has a whole world, he or she gets a whole world because he or she has a lover. In Donne's time, the most exciting event was sailing adventure and geographical discovery, but in the speaker's eyes, even the most exciting world adventure was insignificant compared with the true love between lovers. From this point of view, the world is divided into two parts, and one belongs to navigators and explorers, while the other belongs to the lovers.

Lovers stare at each other, and their faces are reflected in each others' eyes. The eyeball image is an extension of the symbolic meaning of the microcosm, but it changes slightly: the best two hemispheres now form a perfect ball together. The speaker restates his relationship with his lover by using the image of his eyeball, implying that the two hearts are integrated from two independent worlds. When the two form a world together,

because they get rid of the defects of the geographical hemisphere: "sharp north" and "declining west", they are two better hemispheres.

Readers are always aware of the potential differences between the secular world and the spiritual world. The navigators and map observers are insatiably seeking the material world, while the two lovers pursue the spiritual world that gives maximum psychological satisfaction. If the changeable physical love is described as the secular world, the love of the soul symbolizing purity and eternity is described as the celestial world. So their spiritual love is divine.

The love world without "sharp north" and "declining west" implies the celestial world which gets rid of the material characteristics of the earth. The celestial world is immortal, with neither seasonal change ("sharp north") nor decay and death ("declining west"). It is this strange mixture of passion and thought, emotion and reasoning, constitutes a strong emotional tension of his poetry, which attracts the readers to interpret it from different angles.

Conclusion

Donne's conceit has unique charm because of its profound cultural connotation and extensive knowledge. For Donne, conceit is not only a rhetorical device, but also a unique way to understand the world and think about problems. It is a medium for him to express his sincere feelings and life experience. His conceit seems to be absurd from the surface but contains extensive information which can only be understood and explained after deep study. Therefore, conceit is not only Donne's way to view the world, but also a sophisticated and complex poetic skill which increases the difficulty of the readers' perception of poetry, and brings a fresh and unique feeling.

Donne's conceit is difficult to understand and it can delay the process of perception, stimulate the readers to think and bring them to a mental state of excitement, which is the defamiliarization effect of art. When the readers perceive the defamiliarization effect, they will integrate their personal emotional experience into it, thus adding poetic tension to poetry and promoting the diversified interpretation of the poetry. Therefore, conceit forms the unique rhetorical art of Donne's poetry, which makes his poetry show the immortal charm in the history of British literature, and also opens a new way for future poets.

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