John Donne’s “A Valediction: Of Weeping”

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“A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “A Valediction: Of Weeping” belong to the four farewell poems of John Donne, besides “A Valediction: of the Book” and “A Valediction: of My Name in the Window.” All of them express the speaker’s feelings over parting, but the former are reflections on the act of leaving the beloved lady. My analysis will focus on the rhetorical features of farewell poems and the main conceit in “A Valediction: Of Weeping.”

Metaphysical poets were interested in science, theology and philosophy, and applied their extended knowledge in literary works as well. Making use of their wide intellectual horizon their poetry addressed the fullness of the universe, and since “it is impossible to take a single step in any direction without brushing against metaphysics,” their topics are quite diverse (Smith 162). In their works the Metaphysicals managed to show that much content can be expressed through one figure of speech, and the associations evoked by poetic means can lead the reader’s imagination outside the frame of the poem. The reader’s memories, experiences and background knowledge of the physical universe are essential to understanding these works because they unite “the pleasures of poetry with the pleasures of puzzles” (Gardner 17). The complexity of metaphysical poems can be ascribed to their concentrated structure, which means that they contain a strict line of argument expressed as briefly as possible, but dense with meaning. The reader is required to concentrate through the whole poem and to think about its contents without

The Quadrant 2.1 (Spring 2010)
taking a break. The carefully structured poem focuses on one central topic which, in the case of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “A Valediction: Of Weeping,” is the act of saying goodbye.

Like most farewell poems, both works are connected to a turning point in life when the speaker leaves behind a place or misses something (his love, an age, a situation, a person or an object) that used to be important to him. Samuel Johnson defines the term in his Dictionary and states that “valediction” is another term for “farewell” (Johnson 919). It is a derivational form of the Latin expression “vale dicere” which means to say or bid farewell. “Vale” is an imperative of “valere,” the meaning of which is “be well.” It signifies that the person leaving wishes the other person well while saying goodbye to him or her. The expression can refer to the actual act of parting, or to the words spoken or the speech made when somebody leaves. A valediction can be either a long or a brief discourse, some words or a whole passage, but in every form or genre it expresses the feeling of leaving something well-known or beloved behind, and turning to something new. A farewell, the act of saying goodbye, unites the end with the beginning and constitutes an essential transition between the two extremes and, at the same time, marks the turning point of the author’s life.

John Donne’s life was rich in such turning points because of his frequent travels. He took various journeys across Europe, but there is no record detailing his destinations. There are sources about his travels to Spain. Two poems, The Storm and The Calm were inspired by these journeys, and he also traveled to France. “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” was written before this voyage to his wife, Ann More, and it is probable that “A Valediction: Of Weeping” is the earlier text as we can find it in the sequence of the poems in Donne’s first published collection. Because of the unexpected dangers of travelling the poet left his beloved lady at
home. The necessity of leaving, missing his loved ones and saying goodbye inspired the two “Valedictions.”

Leave-taking, in contrast with elegies or poems of lost love, is considered to be natural in farewell poems. The poet cannot do anything against leaving, it is inevitable, but at the same time parting can be made more bearable if the two persons who say goodbye do not mourn or cry. The poet considers crying to be unsuitable to their perfect love that is strong and can survive any quandaries such as, for example, his departure. This feeling can cover a long distance without breach, as does a thin leaf gilding on a wall. This is depicted by the means of metaphor in which the technique of beating gold is connected with love:

Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to airy thinnes beat. (lines 22-24)

Metaphors, like the above mentioned examples, are common features of farewell poems. By “having a pictorial meaning” they make the reader think of the connection of two elements which can only be established by association (Steenburgh 678). With their help the feelings and thoughts expressed become easier to imagine, and they make the poem easily visualized by the reader. But they also help the poet by providing him with a good means for self-discovery while “he moves through the poem into a final discovery of the fullness of his feeling” (Sicherman 79).

The use of metaphors is so frequent and emphasized in John Donne’s poems that the reader has the impression that the poet cannot express “what he feels until he finds the precisely appropriate metaphor” (Sicherman 80). This figure of speech not only opens the gate to self-
expression, but also has an effect on the person addressed: it makes the farewell more emotional and memorable. By speaking to his love’s heart he can evoke powerful, lasting feelings in her soul which make the moment of their parting unforgettable. At the same time the memory of their relationship becomes immortal, and in the poem it will be preserved for the succeeding generations, for eternity.

Donne used this poetic means in a unique manner and “his innovations of style were the result of a conscious effort” (Lederer 184). He consciously built metaphors into a greater unit, the conceit, which is an important characteristic feature of metaphysical poems, and also the core of the argument. Although conceits are based on metaphors and similes they are not at all simple because they “include some further form of mystery, contrariety, correspondence, improportion” and a piece of “the ordered art of nature” (Bethell 137). The poet forms conceits by coupling images of well-known objects into the tenor-vehicle relationship. The grounds on which he combines the two elements—their connection—is as hard to investigate as it is to understand his way of thinking because “the greater the confusion in his mind, the more tangible and exact were the metaphors; and the more abstract the matter discussed, the more realistic was his imagery” (Lederer 185). For this reason we can conclude that if we manage to discover the meaning of a conceit we also succeed in seeing the world through the poet’s eyes.

In the case of conceits there is much more behind the simple words: this poetic device combines the beauty and harmony of nature with wit, which the reader can reach only with the help of imagination and understanding. In this way understanding becomes “the first and chief faculty” which is “delighted with the highest form of artifice, with the extreme of precision, in all the differences of objects” (Bethell 135). This capacity facilitates the investigation of the complex logic of the extended metaphor, which combines dissimilar elements into a powerful
image, and the sophisticated connection between the tenor and the vehicle. The confusion caused by the extraordinary simile evokes our interest and makes us think “in imagery” (Bethell 129). While encountering a conceit we are aware of the dissimilarity of the two objects compared, but the poet finally convinces the reader of the opposite. He helps us seek an emotion or experience behind the image by establishing one common feature or aspect on the basis of which we can draw a conclusion of the likeness. However, at the same time it is still difficult to discover the relationship between the two elements compared and it requires imagination, understanding, and background knowledge to reveal the underlying meaning of the extended metaphor.

The conceit of the tear in “A Valediction: Of Weeping” is a good example of this fine, complicated figure of speech. “The entire poem is constructed around the image of a tear” (Wilson 119), that is, the tear of the poet who has to leave his beloved lady. The role of reflections is emphasized because each tear mirrors the lady’s beautiful face, and this gives those tears great value. In this conceit the poet binds together the heavenly feeling of love with simple, ordinary, natural objects, the tears of the poet with the lady’s portraits in miniature:

My tears before thy face whilst I stay here,
For thy face coins them, and thy stamp they bear,
And by this mintage they are something worth. (2-4)

The image of the tears shows a special kind of unity: the two lovers mingle in a small object and, together, they construct a new whole. This thought also emerges in another poem by Donne, *The Flea*, in which the lovers unite in the blood sucked out by an ordinary flea. It was common belief of Donne’s time that during sexual intercourse the two persons’ blood mingles.
This way, the small creature becomes the equivalent of the two lovers, and it also serves as an erotic symbol for a marriage bed. At the same time the body of the flea is the poet’s argument for satisfying his desire for the physical fulfillment of his relationship with the beloved lady. In this conceit an apparently insignificant piece of nature gains spiritual importance. We can also observe this effect in the case of the image of tears in “A Valediction: Of Weeping” which, by the end of the poem, becomes the symbol of the whole world, then of the entire universe (Bethell 155):

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by can lay
An Europe, Afric, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing, all;
So doth each tear
Which thee doth wear [. ] (10-15)

A tiny tear not only embodies a whole universe but becomes the centre of that universe as well. This metaphor shows the unity of “macrocosm and microcosm” in the teardrop which bears the spatial form of the perfect circle, reminiscent of the roundness of the compass in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” (Wilson 120). Generally, the objects referring to astronomy and astrology are common inspiring elements in John Donne’s poetry. Many of the figures of speech in his poems focus on geometric shapes that play an essential role. The circle, which is one of Donne’s typical metaphors, also proves its importance. The poet mentions this shape in the last lines of “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” too:

*The Quadrant* 2.1 (Spring 2010)
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun. (35-36)

When drawing a parallel between “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” and “A Valediction: Of Weeping” the reader can have the impression that the poet’s attitude towards weeping has turned into its perfect opposite in the second poem. While crying and mourning is definitely prohibited in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” because it is not suitable for a pair of lovers as sublime as Donne and his wife, in “A Valediction: Of Weeping” tears become the means of expressing feelings, and they depict the eternal unity of the lovers. In this case the poet also gets involved in the act of mourning, he cries together with his beloved lady, and feels sorry for leaving her by herself. On the other hand, in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” he considers the leave-taking more serious; he wants to bid farewell in a dignified way and not to be affected by strong, sad feelings so that he would be able to remember the moment of leaving more clearly. The contrast between the two poems can offer the impression that “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” was written before the poet took a long-term journey to a remote country. In this process, the metaphors and the conceits in his poems helped him find the best words for expressing his feelings at the moment of saying goodbye.

Because of his conceits and the sophisticated metaphors, the works of John Donne are difficult to analyze. To understand his poetic means in their entire profoundness the reader has to possess visual imagination and some background knowledge about the poet’s life is also helpful. For all that, the complex images applied in his works contributed to the uniqueness of John Donne’s poetry. The poet successfully proved that poetic images are not just verbal tricks but

*The Quadrant* 2.1 (Spring 2010)
that with their help, objects surrounding us can be made into works of art. Finally, Donne managed to introduce witty complexity to the genre of farewell poems and to poetry in general.

**Works Cited**


*The Quadrant* 2.1 (Spring 2010)