



BODY OF DEATH VERSUS GODHEAD: ALCHEMICAL IMAGERY AND THE EMBLEMATIC STRUCTURE OF JOHN DONNE'S DEATH'S DUELL

Piotr Plichta

Politechnika Krakowska, Poland

Death's Duell is one of the most unusual sermons penned by John Donne. It has a highly refined structure and contains a vast number of alchemical terms which seems to be carefully arranged within the body of text. The paper reveals the interpretative link between the above mentioned features. On the other hand, it sheds some light on the issue of the relationship between the text of *Death's Duell* and some other monuments Donne commissioned shortly before his death to assert his hope for salvation.

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Death's Duell is perhaps the most puzzling sermon ever written by John Donne, a famous metaphysical poet and one of the best English prose writers of the first half of the seventeenth century. As such, it raises many questions in regard of interpretation and biographical matters which have been hardly answered and which are worth closer examination.

The circumstances of writing and publishing *Death's Duell* were unusual. Approximately since August 1630 Donne had suffered from debilitating stomach cancer (Donne 1987, xv). Facing inevitable death, he strove for giving it a symbolic significance. We know that Donne made his departure from the temporary world an unforgettable theatre of dying by means of three carefully chosen monuments. First of all, he gave his close friends golden rings with the image of Christ stretched on the anchor engraved in semi-precious stone called heliotrope (Shell, 654-655). Then, on the 25th of February 1631, he personally preached his last sermon despite the fact of being very mutilated by the sickness. The poet intended that sermon to be published soon after his burial as a commemorative monographic work and therefore, before he actually died on the 31st of March 1631, he had prepared the text for the printing press. Unlike other Donne's sermons *Death's Duell* was provided with the separate title which is, however, non authorial — the stationer Roger Michell stole it from the book of a minor poet Walter Colman committed him to print at about the same time (Bevan, 191-192). Additionally, several months earlier Donne had commissioned his famous portrait in which he is dressed in a shroud. That engraving by Martin Droeshout was put in the frontispiece of the posthumous edition and used as a base for the poet's monument in St. Paul's cathedral. (Bevan, 189-190; see Gardner 29-44). One should ask then if there is a link — not only biographical but also interpretative — between the rings with heliotrope, the bizarre portrait and the text of Donne's last sermon. I think such link exists, but is nowadays obscure because it refers to the hermetic language of alchemy.

Death's Duell contains a significant number of alchemical terms, images and sophisticated wordplays for a printed sermon. Moreover, they seem not to be put at random but carefully chosen and arranged within the body of text. That poses a question to what extent the structure of Donne's last work reflects the principles of the hermetic philosophy and how exactly it is connected with the reminiscence of the course of the Christian salvific process which must have been incorporated into funeral sermon. As far as I know, there is only one profound scholarly study on the alchemical imagery in *Death's Duell* — by J.R. Keller (Keller, 486-493). Keller correctly claimed that the structure of Donne's final sermon follows the traditional stages of the alchemical transmutation with its dramatic transition from death and putrefaction through the purification to the final rebirth, but he focused almost exclusively on proving that Donne had depicted the Christ's passion as the ultimate stage of the alchemical opus magnum resulting in the burst of the divine Eucharistic blood being the philosopher's stone or the red elixir of immortality. Therefore, Keller's study explains the most important hermetic notions present in *Death's Duell*, yet it hardly elucidates the structural intricacy of the analysed work.

Among the studies which take into account the issue of structural refinement of *Death's Duell* one should mention the detailed paper by Stanley Fish who paid close attention to the syntactic features of Donne's last sermon (Fish, 43-77). On the other hand, Brent Nelson (Nelson, 223-254) meticulously described its rhetorical structure and rhetoric devices. However, the most important and useful of all is the paper by Jonquil Bevan (Bevan, 185-203). Bevan noticed the presence of a strange paragraphing pattern in the 1632 edition of *Death's Duell*. According to that pattern — marred in the contemporary critical edition by Potter-Simpson because of its oddity — John Donne's funeral sermon consists of seven paragraphs. The first one is introductory. The remaining six differ in length in too regular manner to be incidental and that feature is, of course, visible only in print. The paragraphs in *Death's Duell* are all arranged in the following order: introductory – one of average length – very long – very short – very short – one of average length – very long. In other words, apart from the first paragraph Donne's last work comprises two large blocks of text split with two extremely short paragraphs (the fourth and the fifth) being hardly more than the repetition of the scriptural verse chosen to be the lesson (Bevan, 201).

In her paper Bevan tried to explain the function of the above-mentioned paragraphing pattern. She was right that the entire structure of Donne's final sermon is tripartite as a clever reference to the Trinitarian dogma. Strictly speaking, in the opening paragraph of *Death's Duell* the author provides his readers with the main concept of the building of salvation based on foundations, buttresses and contignations which, respectively, prevent that building from sinking, swerving and cleaving. He presents also three separate interpretations of the lection. Later on, it turns out that each of those construction elements and interpretations pertains to the particular person of the Holy Trinity and that the paragraphs number 2–7 refer to the specific persons of the Holy Trinity according to the numerological concept borrowed from St. Augustine and based on the number six. Paragraphs number two, three and four are therefore connected with God the Father, paragraphs number five and six with the Holy Spirit, and the final paragraph with the Christ the Saviour whose passion consists of nine steps (thrice three). For Bevan the number of seven paragraphs represents the course of human life seen by Donne as the *hebdomada mortium*, a week spent on dying, where two most important days — represented by the very long paragraphs — are Sunday/Monday and Friday/Saturday standing for the first day of the Creation and the first day of the Christian Salvation (Bevan, 201-203) And that finds some justification in the original text, but does not sufficiently explain the function of the paragraphs of average length and the presence of two unusually short paragraphs in the middle of Donne's sermon. I think in order to solve that riddle one must take account of the structural arrangement of the alchemical content in *Death's Duell*.

At first sight, the paragraphs 2-3 and 6-7 are just two massive and contrastive blocks of text depicting the course of human life as a double successive immersion in eternity. In Donne's vision a man is first physically born to inhabit the temporary world which itself is eternal but does not prevent living creatures from sin, premature death and decomposition. Afterwards, the same man enters the truly eternal life in the paradise opened to the faithful with the Christ's passion. The length of the second and the sixth paragraphs of *Death's Duell* is average because those paragraphs refer to two prenatal stages of human existence: whereas the former describes the development of a foetus in mother's womb preceding few

decades of human temporary life, the latter regards the agony of an adult man as a process of immediate preparation for the birth to the timeless existence. On the contrary, paragraphs number three and seven are exceptionally long because they represent the temporal world and the eternity *post mortem*.

We must, nonetheless, remember that for his last work Donne chose the following verse from the Psalm 68: “He that is our God is a God of salvation; and unto God the Lord be long the issues of death (i.e. from death)”. In other words, the main topic of *Death's Duell* is an ambitious task of revealing a Christian soteriological mechanism standing behind the hope for the escape from the misery of bodily death and posthumous decay. In his funeral sermon Donne explicitly claims that Jesus had a privilege to be free from posthumous corruption and that privilege will be extended to the whole redeemed humanity in the Judgement Day. In the opening sentence he wrote that “Bvildings stand by the benefit of their foundations that susteine and support them, & of their butteresses that comprehend and embrace them, and of their contignations that knit and vnite them” (l. 46-48). The word ‘benefit’ in that context is an obsolete legal term which means an exemption of a noble man from the jurisdiction of the ordinary courts of law. As a reason for the exemption of the Christ from posthumous putrefaction Donne uses another crucial term, this time the alchemical one — the embalment. The word ‘balm’ or ‘balsamum’ in the alchemical context is a synonym of the philosopher’s stone particularly pertaining to its healing and resurrecting power (Abraham, 16; Keller 487-488). In the third paragraph of *Death's Duell* Donne contrast two types of embalment: the gums and spices applied to Christ’s body by Joseph of Arimathaea (l. 231-232) and the divine nature of Jesus acting as a elixir of immortality for himself and which after his resurrection will be granted to all of the saved (l.244-246). I think, that for Donne the word ‘salvation’ is then a very important wordplay. The pun is that in English, apart from the well-known Latin root, there exists also word ‘salve’ of Germanic origin which means ‘a healing balsam’. Therefore the poet associates the redemption with the process of alchemical embalment for eternity. It is also probable that Donne’s portrait in a shroud refers to the image of dead Christ wrapped in his winding sheet but preserved from rotting thanks to the magical features of his blood transmuted into red elixir of life.

Now, if we put all the paragraphs in *Death's Duell* together (except the introductory one) and arrange them in accordance with their place in the printed version of Donne’s sermon, we could notice that they resemble an hourglass-like vessel in which the longer paragraphs (2-3 and 6-7) stand for two chambers whereas the paragraphs number four and five are surprisingly short because they make up a narrow neck. An hourglass is, of course, a common symbol of the transience of human life which would perfectly match a funeral sermon and be similar in construction to the graphical-textual poems from *The Temple* by George Herbert. The main difference lies in the pervasive alchemical content of Donne’s last sermon. There is strong textual evidence in *Death's Duell* that for its author the above-mentioned vessel was not an hourglass but a closed retort called alembic or limbeck in which an alchemist conducts the process of transmutation in order to obtain the philosopher’s stone. The strange paragraphing pattern in Donne’s last work is therefore a graphical wing of a very intricate emblem whose textual part is the Christian salvific process depicted by means of the precise and smartly used alchemical terms, symbols and puns. One of those puns is almost surely a reference to the image of alembic. In the second paragraph the preacher quotes Rom.7.24: “wretched man that he is, who shall deliuer him from this body of death?” (l.134). In the third paragraph Donne contrasts it with Christ’s divine nature purposefully rendered as ‘Godhead’ (less known word for a deity). As in the hermetic language of alchemy both ‘body’ and ‘head’ are common synonyms of a limbeck (Abraham, 5-6), such a juxtaposition bears all the signs of a significant wordplay: for Donne salvation not only means reuniting the head and the body, Christ and his Church, but results from the collaboration of the two consecutive stages of the same alchemical process.

The structure of the graphical-textual alembic in Donne’s last sermon hinges on two alchemical transmutations. The second one is the passion of the Christ from the seventh paragraph. But in the second paragraph the poet portrays the prenatal life in very dark colours and speaks about the danger of miscarriage. That passage might be treated as a dark autobiographic reminiscence of the premature death of Ann Donne who passed away in her puerperium. But apart from that, miscarriage is an important alchemical symbol of unsuccessful transmutation — unsuccessful because the alchemist conducted the process too fast (Abraham, 2). In *Death's Duell* the goal of both alchemical transmutations is, in

accordance with the lesson, to find the issue from death and their position in the text makes them structural brackets standing in the very beginning and in the very end of the graphical-textual alembic. The description of the foetal life from the second paragraph and the death of Christ on the cross in Donne's last sermon not accidentally contain almost the same elements which are, however, exactly reversed in their tone and symbolism. Hence, a foetus in the womb is fed with mother's blood and so taught cruelty. Deprived of light, it is prepared for the works of evil. It must hastily escape death only to fall into sinful and short temporal existence (l.112-116). The Christ dies voluntarily, at noon, and the redeemed are openly advised to suck the Eucharistic blood from his wounds in timeless adoration, in the manner of newborn children (l. 601-618).

It would be advisable now to briefly describe the opus magnum or the transmutation of the soul of metal and its symbolism. Being the most crucial and complex hermetic metaphor, it is in fact a specific representation of the archetypal story of death and rebirth, in many respects resembling the traditional Christian soteriological pattern of fall and redemption. In the seventeenth century alchemical treatises the opus magnum typically consisted of three stages named after Latin words for colours (Abraham, 44-45). In the first stage — known as the nigredo or the black stage — the soul of metal (a mortal man) is subjected to death and repeatedly dissolved and coagulated in a mysterious substance known as *prima materia* (the pure essence from which all things and were created), in order to be cleansed (Abraham, 135-136). Hence, in hermetic works the nigredo is depicted either by means of various images connected with decay or by virtue of aquatic symbolism because water simultaneously devours and dissolves and wash out the stains. At the very end of the nigredo, the soul of metal is finally liberated from the bonds of mortal matter and become ready to ascend. Two immediately following stages — the albedo (Abraham, 4-5 and rubedo (Abraham, 174-175), the white and red stage — mean a dawn and zenith of its spiritual rebirth, respectively. They traditionally take place in the garden (Abraham, 84) or on two mountains symbolizing the mystical union of the female and male element within the *prima materia* (Abraham, 131-132).

The structure of *Death's Duell* ensues the above-mentioned order of metaphorical events and two chambers of its graphical-textual limbeck reflect the very characteristic split in alchemical symbolism. In the second and third paragraphs, dedicated to the temporary existence, Donne evokes vast and powerful imagery connected with the nigredo: he refers to death and putrefaction, prison, grave, stillbirth, decay and vermiculation i.e., the state of being eaten by worms. Apart from that, he makes an extensive use of the aquatic symbols and biblical events connected with water. His attention focuses particularly on Noah and Moses who both avoided death owing to the journey in the ark — in his infancy Moses was put into a basket and let free to the Nile to avoid persecution from the pharaoh and Donne calls that basket 'arke' (l.139) Noah and Moses were also considered first alchemists and Noah was even told to save the hermetic text of the Emerald Table, a knowledge from before the Deluge (Abraham, 136) The sixth paragraph pertains to the agony which corresponds to the brief moment when the soul of metal abandons the fetters of mortal matter. Here, the most intriguing is Donne's reference to the biblical Samson who destroyed the pillars of a house and caused the building to collapse killing himself and many Philistines. Despite committing suicide Samson was surprisingly put in the catalogue of the witnesses of faith (Heb. 11:32). However, according to the Bible Samson committed suicide in the building which was a pagan temple of Dagon (Jud. 16:23). Having fallen in love with Delilah, he betrayed God. Subsequently, he was deprived of his supernatural power, imprisoned by the enemies and blinded. In *Death's Duell* a dying man also liberates himself from the spiritual blindness caused by the 'body of death' and destroys the pagan temple of his mortal nature in order to ascend. On the other hand, in the seventh paragraph the dominant symbolism is typical of the albedo and rubedo. Donne evokes the biblical events taking place on the mountains (the Transfiguration, the Calvary) or in the Garden (Olive Garden). But he also deliberately uses some aquatic symbols typically associated with the nigredo. This time they are provided with new salvific overtones referring to the Christ's redeeming mission. Such is the vision of Jesus as a second Moses who leads his people to the paradise through the Red Sea of his divine blood (l.509-512), and all the images of his tears and sweat shed during the passion. Here, the most significant are the final passages of *Death's Duell* in which Jesus on the cross transforms his bodily fluids, especially the divine blood, into

the red elixir of life: ‘There now hangs that sacred Body vpon the Crosse, rebaptized in his owne teares and sweat, and embalmed in his owne blood aliue’ (l. 601-602). Therefore, the persons of the Trinitarian dogma presented in the first paragraph of *Death’s Duell* pertain not only to the three interpretations of the lesson (liberatio a morte, liberatio in morte, liberatio per mortem) but also to the three stages of the alchemical transmutation: God the Father is the nigredo, Holy Spirit stands for the brief moment of the liberation from mortal matter and The Son of God is a successful alchemist connected with the spiritual rebirth of albedo and rubedo. Thus, when in the third paragraph Donne calls the resurrection ‘a redintegration, a recompacting of body and soul’ (l.301-302) he purposefully uses the older form instead of more common ‘reintegration’ because it seems to contain an embedded reference to the red colour associated with the last phase of the alchemical opus magnum and with the Eucharistic blood.

Strong alchemical traces in *Death’s Duell* seem to shed more light on the hidden meaning of the golden farewell rings with heliotrope Donne gave his friends as well as on the issue of non-authorial title of his last sermon. Here, more obvious is the case of heliotrope. Etymologically, heliotrope means ‘turning to light’ and therefore that semi-precious gem was thought to signify the turning of the soul towards the spiritual enlightenment typical of the Christian salvation. On the other hand, it was frequently called bloodstone because put into water it causes the refraction of light giving the illusion of crimson red colour (Shell, 654-655). As we see, for alchemists red colour has always been associated with the *rubedo* or the final stage of the transmutation of the soul of metal, which means the obtainment of the ultimate alchemical goal — the philosopher’s stone also known as the spiritual gold (Abraham, 86-88). Donne was very much preoccupied with the association between the hermetic symbolism and the Christian salvation. Hence, he had the symbolic representation made joining both together.

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