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21L.004 Reading Poetry

Spring 2009

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21L.004.02
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A Holy Paradox

In his fourteenth Holy Sonnet, John Donne suffers acute spiritual turmoil and presents an impassioned prayer to God. The speaker's pleas express a desire for religious faith and spiritual union. The sonnet, centered on Christian faith, embodies a holy paradox, which states that although God gives us reason, reason itself is what contradicts our faith. Donne states exactly this paradox in lines seven to eight, the heart of the poem. "Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captived, and proves weak or untrue (7, 8)." A paradox is a contradiction that contains some sort of truth. By presenting a series of semantic paradoxes, Donne argues that the truth behind the paradox is that God can renew faith without reason.

Within this one powerful statement, Donne mentions God's contribution of reason as a "viceroy", a word typically associated with power, to highlight its significance. He believes that reason, as a gift from God, should provide verification of his existence. Instead, reason "proves weak or untrue" (8), and the truth behind the paradox states that in terms of faith, reason *is* weak. In order to convey the weakness of reason and the power of faith, Donne presents four paradoxes in his sonnet, all of which are *logically* contradictory, but upon further analysis, reveal some degree of truth.

These four paradoxes are clustered in pairs and manifested in ways that transform the movement of the poem. The first two are located in the opening quatrain before the speaker bemoans the weakness of reason. Donne requests God to "o'erthrow" him so that he "may rise and stand." Donne juxtaposes this obvious contradiction with the holy

paradox, which says reason, though given by God, contradicts faith. At first, the cause and effect seem contradictory. How does being overthrown help one rise and stand? However, there is a hint of renewal and re-growth in this contradiction, just as there is renewal in faith from God. Politically, person who has been overthrown can certainly fight their way back and “rise and stand” once more. Biblically, the act of rising and standing is often associated with Jesus and the resurrection, which is another reference to renewal. Because there is truth behind the contradiction that one being overthrown can rise and stand, the statement can be considered a paradox.

The intensity of the speaker’s demands increase exponentially in the second contradiction, which is located within the same sentence as the first contradiction involving being overthrown. The speaker continues to plea to God, “bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new” (5). One violent desire to be overthrown suddenly evolves into a slew of demands. Donne amplifies the amount and power of the demands by using alliteration in the words “break, blow, burn” to create a vigorously acute *bum, bum, bum* rhythm, which mimicks an actual physical beating. Once again, Donne uses the theme of renewal. The speaker wants God to “break, blow, burn” him so that he can be made new. Again, this statement is contradictory, but the theme of renewal persists as Donne implies the emergence of a transformation very similar to the resurrection of Jesus.

In the second line, the speaker declares angrily that the only thing God does is “knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend (2).” These acts refer to the three-personed God who knocks upon a person’s door for acceptance, breathes the breath of life, and shines the light of truth. Although the holy trinity links and creates parallelism between the two phrases, “knock, breathe, shine,” and “break, blow, burn,” they are strikingly different. The

words “breathe,” “shine,” and “seek to mend,” are gentle, whereas the aggressiveness of the words “break, blow, burn” foreshadow a continuation of the poem’s brutality.

The second set of contradictions is located after the speaker has revealed his struggle between reason and faith. “Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free” (12, 13). The speaker demands that God “imprison (him)” so that he “shall be free.” Much like the first contradictions where the speaker demands to be overthrown, broken, blown, and burnt, the forceful actions he desires from God still do not logically yield the results he desires. Being overthrown does not help one stand, and being broken does not make one new. Through the same logic, imprisonment does not lead to freedom. As a matter of fact, by stating that imprisonment is the exact opposite of freedom, Donne ventures more boldly than before in his statements on the clash between reason and faith.

The second contradiction in the last quatrain turns out to be even more shocking. “Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me” (14). The speaker asks God to rape him so that he may be chaste! These last contradictions surpass the standard criteria of violence and enter a new realm involving sensual innuendo. Imprisonment and rape uncover and insinuate a grossly romantic and sexual relationship between the speaker and God. In line ten, Donne alludes to marriage with the enemy to demonstrate the disconnect he feels from God. “But am betrothed unto your enemy; / Divorce me, untie or break that knot again” (10, 11). Again, the speaker is requesting God to act in a sexual manner through divorce and marriage. Whereas the first cluster of contradictions is composed of almost typical action words such as overthrow, break, blow, and burn, Donne’s second set explodes with perverseness. This intensification in both sexual content and word choice serves to

strengthen the passion of the sonnet and ultimately the contradiction within the holy paradox.

To conclude my idea that Donne uses contradictions to illustrate the holy paradox, I would like to point out that the entire sonnet in itself could be considered an extended paradox that further validates the holy paradox in question. The poem can debatably be considered an argument between the speaker and God. However, the act of fighting for religious faith contradicts the very principle of accepting God through faith. By providing numerous logical contradictions, Donne confirms his idea of the holy paradox within Christianity. Each repetition proceeds to strengthen his argument, which states that reason, given by God, contradicts our very method of accepting God.

Bibliography

Vendler, Helen. Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002.