

## An Approach to Death Problem in John Donne's Poetry

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### I

Death be not proved, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not soe,  
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,  
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill mee.  
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,  
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,  
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,  
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.  
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, Kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poyson, warr, and sicknesse dwell,  
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,  
And better than thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?  
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.<sup>1)</sup>

Actually death is a creative exercise which no one escapes, except infants who die before they can talk or think, like animals. For John Donne death was an interesting object, so he was notoriously, along with Webster and other Jacobean, much possessed by death,<sup>2)</sup> but its tastes in death were specialized, and many of the more popular deaths available in his day made little or no appeal to him.

W.B. Yeats, in his poem, expresses man only think the death dreadful like this,

Nor dread nor hope attend  
A dying animal;  
A man awaits his end  
Dreading and hoping all...  
Man has created death.<sup>3)</sup>

1) *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*, ed. Charles M. Coffin (New York Modern Library, 1952), pp.250-51.

2) T.S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality', lines 1-16.

3) W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (2nd Edn., 1950) p.264.

Opinions to death is very various, being man-made. Each individual can find his own idea of it, and the various shapes he can invest it in, reveal the scope and structure of his own imagination. Sir Walter Raleigh celebrated Death in a famous passage from the History of the World:

O eloquent, just and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou has done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised: thou hast drawn together all the far stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty and ambition of man, and covered it over with these two narrow words, *Hic iacet*.<sup>4)</sup>

But Donne preferred to think of the ways in which death could be minimized compared with Raleigh's attitude. The above Holy Sonnet of Donne's might almost be a reply to him. In the poem, at first, he says, death must be better than sleep; then he decides that sleep is better than death. Though the lines seem to disregard death problem, it gives us an inkling of the anxiety. In other poem, 'A Hymne to God the Father' he voices it directly:

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne  
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore;  
Sweare by thy selfe, that at my death thy sonne  
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;  
And, having done that, Thou haste done,  
I feare no more.<sup>5)</sup>

The gentle idea that the dead are sleeping appealed widely to his contemporaries. In Hamlet,

To be, or not to be: that is the question  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die; to sleep;  
No more; and, by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wishes. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: oerchance to dream: aye, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
Must give us pause.<sup>6)</sup>

Then the Bible says that the souls of the dead do not stay in the grave but do go in-

4) Raleigh, works(Oxford, 1829), viii, 900.

5) C.P.S.P. p.270.

6) Famous Scenes from Shakespeare, compiled by Van H. Cartmell,(New York, 1950), Hamlet, Act III, p.121.

stally to receive their eternal punishment or reward like Christ's parable of Dives and Lazarus.<sup>7)</sup> So there is no repose in Death, and Christian poets could pretend to be only wilful amnesia. But such an idea gave no charms for Donne. He did not desire a general anaesthesia. His mind shied away from the idea of sleeping peacefully into oblivion. He once told his friend Sir Henry Goodyer in a letterlike this:

I would not that death should take me asleep. I would not have him merely seize me, and only declare me to be dead, but win me, and overcome me. When I must shipwreck, I would do it in a sea, where mine impotency might have some excuse; not in a sullen weedy lake, where I could not have so much as exercise for my swimming.<sup>8)</sup>

## II

In Donne's love poems death intrudes to an extent which would seem debilitating with any other poets. Of the fifty four Songs and Sonets, thirty-two-over-half find some means of death. We often find Donne himself dies, or the girl dies, or they both die in the poems. When he says farewell to her, he feels the seas of death waiting to engulf him. This is not simply because he is a Christian poet and believes in immortality; because, as we have seen, other Christian poets who believed in immortality could write about death as if it were as peaceful as sleeping. On the other hand, the dead walk around and talk with Donne. Dying is something they do frequently, as "The Legacy" tells us:

When I died last (and, dear, I die  
 As often as from thee I go),  
 Though it be but an hour ago,  
 And lovers' hours be full eternity,  
 I can remember yet, that I  
 Something did say, and something did bestow;  
 Though I be dead, which sent me, I should be  
 Mine own executor and legacy.<sup>9)</sup>

Donne imagines himself still the centre of attention even if death is not impacted into life. In 'The Damp':

When I am dead, and doctors know not why,  
 And my friends' curiosity  
 Will have me cut up to survey each part,  
 When they shall find your picture in my heart,  
 You think a sudden damp of love  
 Will through all their senses move,  
 And work on them as me, and so prefer

7) The Holy Bible, Oxford Univ. Press, p.967. Luke 16:19-1.

8) Edmund Gosse, The life and Letters of John Donne, 2 vols(1899) i, p.191.

9) Theodore Redpath, The Songs and Sonets of John Donne(London, 1956), p.26.

Your murder, to the name of massacre.<sup>10)</sup>

His dissected corpse will spread noxious influence among them, and wipe them out like an epidemic. Here he tried to treat death as a form of life, or to vivify it by giving it an active role in Poems which are passionately concerned with living. What we sense, in each poems, is dread of yielding to the idea that after death one will simply be forgotten, and that the life of people will go on exactly as before. That renunciation is unacceptable because it is self-obliterating, whereas Donne nurses the egocentric delusion that when he dies it will be the world, not he, that will perish. 'Therefore I'll give no more; but I'll undo/ The world by dying; because love dies too' as he put it in the last stanza of the 'The Will'.<sup>11)</sup>

It seems to me that death preponderates in Donne's religious poems even more markedly than in his love poems. For Donne, to think of God is to think of death: that alone will bring him to God. To remain sensitive to God as a companion through life, as George Herbert does, is foreign to Donne. His God lives and moves in death's kingdom, and his worship of God entails worship that of Death. One reason for his death-craving is that death will put an end to suspense. Dead, he will at last know whether or not he is saved. Though terrified by the Last Judgement, he has also a craving for it:

At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow  
Your trumpets, Angells...<sup>12)</sup>

Death is definite; life is perplexed. So death also attracts because it is a crisis. By putting death in his poems, secular or devine, he wants to help make them urgent and momentous as the self-dramatizing Donne needs them to be. We are gripped because Donne is poised on the brink of eternity:

O my blacke Soule! now thou art summoned  
By sicknesse, deaths herald, and champion...<sup>13)</sup>

It seems to me that Donne's suicidal tendencies were of long standing, because he read and argued keenly about the sociology of suicide, inspecting both case histories and theoretical works. For example, his 'fifth Paradox' puts forward the contention 'That all things kills themaelves', and he composed, probably in 1608, the first English defence of suicide to be published, called *Biathanatos*. A declaration of that paradox, or thesis, that Self-homicide is not so Naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise. So Donne thinks that the most active death is self-inflicted. It allows its victim the glamour and triumph of being a killer.

Donne's erudite and meticulous survey covers suicide in the animal world as well as in pre and post Christian societies. He concludes that its appeal is universal: 'in all ages, in

10) Ibid., p.112.

11) Ibid., p.100

12) J. Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner, (Oxford, 1952), p.8.

13) Ibid., p.7.

all places, upon all occasion, men of all conditions have affected it, and inclined to it.<sup>14)</sup>

To illustrate the trivial occasions men will use as an excuse for suicide, and also the elevated personages who have attempted it, he cites, in his Preface, the case of the famous contemporary theologian Theodore Beza, and leads up from that, to his own confession:

Beza, a man as eminent and illustrious, in the full glory and Noone of Learning, as others were in the dawning, and Morning, when any, the least sparkle was notorious, confesseth of himself, that only for the anguish of a Scurffe, which over-ranne his head, he had once drown'd himself from the Millers bridge in Paris, if his uncle by chance had not then come that way; I have often such a sickly inclination. And, whether it be, because I had my first breeding and conversation with men of a suppressed and afflicted Religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of imagin'd Martyrdome; Or that the common Enemie find that doore worst locked against him in mee, Or that there be a perplexitie and flexibility in the doctrine it selfe; Or because my Conscience ever assures me, that no rebellious grudging at Gods gifts, nor other sinful concurrence accompanies these thoughts in me, or that a brave scorn, or that a faint cowardliness beget it, whensoever any affliction assailes me, mee thinkes I have the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine own sword.<sup>15)</sup>

John Donne's treatise was a sign of the times like Hamlet. Men were starting to question the outright condemnation of suicide, which traditionalists had for centuries upheld. The right to cut your throat may not seem a particularly liberating goal to contend for, but it was correctly seen as part of the struggle between authoritarianism and the individual reason which was to convulse the seventeenth century.

The most extreme claim in *Biathanatos* must have been its insistence that Christ himself committed suicide, and the twentieth-century critic, Jorge Luis Borges takes this to be the 'Underlying aim' of the whole work. Donne argues Christ's death was 'an Heroique Act of Fortitude', because he gave himself up willingly to his killers. He made his suicidal intention clear in statements like 'I [lay down] my life for my sheep'; and on the cross he died with a rapidity which suggests that his death was an act of will—'many Martyres', Donne observes, had hanged upon crosses many days alive: And the theeves were yet alive.' Both Augustine and Aquinas had agreed that Christ's will was the only cause of his dying, though they did not, of course, call it suicide. For Donne the attractions of the theory were considerable. God, it appeared, did not only incite morals to suicide, but had committed suicide himself. More, Christ's suicide was of a specially grand and controlled kind, as befitted a God. He died with superhuman ease. No more was required 'but that he should wil that his soule should goe out.'<sup>16)</sup>

Donne's thoughts of suicide happen that the class work on suicide by the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim offers some exceptionally close analogies to Donne's state of

14) John Garey, *John Donne Life, Mind and Art*, (Faber and Faber 1981) p.205.

15) C.P.S.P. pp.303-4.

16) *Biathanatos*, 189-91.

mind, in so far as we can determine it.<sup>17)</sup>

Of course, Durkheim is concerned to present suicide as a phenomenon explicable by reference to the social structure rather than to the individual psyche. So he negates doctrines which ascribe suicide to extra social causes, and seeks by the collection and comparison of statistics from various countries and cultural groups to isolate social factors, such as Protestantism or the legalization of divorce, which can be infallibly shown to generate suicide at a relatively high rate.

Of the three types of suicide which Durkheim distinguishes, two—egoistic suicide and anomic suicide—seem relevant to Donne's case. Egoistic suicide results from a lack of integration of the individual into society or the family group. The bond attaching man to life relaxes, because that attaching him to society is not tight. The egoistic suicide is self-absorbed:

in revulsion from its surroundings his consciousness becomes self-preoccupied, takes as its proper and unique study, and undertakes as its main task self-observation and self-analysis.... If he loves, it is not to give himself, to blend in a fecund union with another being, but to meditate on his love.<sup>18)</sup>

To apply the above theory to Donne's love poetry, and to his insistence that the noblest act of the soul is 'that which reflects upon the soul itself, and considers and meditates it'<sup>19)</sup> will need not to demonstrate. Equally obvious is Donne's abiding sense of ostracism. His apostasy cut him off from the supportive Catholic community in which he had been reared. The letter to Goodyer, in which he confesses his suicidal tendency, passes immediately, and as if the connection were plain, to his lack of employment and the sense of annihilation it induces: 'I would fain do something; but that I cannot tell what, is no wonder. For to choose, is to do: but to be no part of any body, is to be nothing.'<sup>20)</sup> This ties in uncannily with Durkheim's remarks about the suicidal effects of excessive individualism:

When we have no other object than ourselves we cannot avoid the thought that our efforts will finally end in nothingness, since we ourselves disappear. But annihilation terrifies us. Under these conditions one would lose courage to live.<sup>21)</sup>

In Songs and Sonets the separation of Donne himself and the girl from the busy, official world, his recurrent need to boast their self-sufficiency, and the tendency of his mind, as he broods on this self-sufficiency, to stray towards death, as in 'The Canonization' or 'The Relique', may all be seen as ways of coping with the suicidal isolation Durkheim describes.

Durkheim's suicidal solitary is deprived of social goals because of deprivation of a niche in society. So his achievements have no reality to anyone but himself, and his activities

17) Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, trans. J.A. Spaulding and George Simpson, (New York, 1951), p.279.

18) *Ibid.*, p.279.

19) Gosse i, 174.

20) Gosse i, 191.

21) Durkheim, *op. cit.*, p.210.

start to feel not just pointless but illusory. He lives in a dreaming world. This shadowy consciousness is unmistakable in Donne's writing. The joys of life, he maintains, don't merely not satisfy, they don't exist. Honor and pleasure, the Essays in Divinity pronounce, 'are nothing'<sup>22)</sup>

Donne sings in *The Canonization*:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
Or chide my palsy, or my gout,  
My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout,  
With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,  
Take you a course, get you a place,  
Observe his honour, or his grace,  
Or the King's real, or his stamped face  
Contemplate; what you will, approve,  
So you will let me love.<sup>23)</sup>

In the *Devotions* Donne argues that place and time have no being. What we regard as an object's place is 'no more but the next hollow superficies of the air'. There is only fluid and immeasurable space, in which we absurdly try to stick fixed points. As for time, we divide it into past, present and future, but past and future do not exist, and 'that which you call present, is not now the same that it was when you began to call it so.' So time, like place is 'an imaginary half-nothing', and since these are the measures of our happiness, it follows, Donne argues, that our happiness does not exist either.<sup>24)</sup> This doubt about the reality of his experience is a source of Donne's despair in the religious poetry. It must have combined frustratingly with his ambitious nature. A passionate desire to succeed in life had to coexist with the realization that even success had no meaning. Under these conditions the hunger for success becomes both greedy and futile. Suicide, or madness, may be the answers. So Donne's case, was poetry, because of being receptive enough to embrace both attitudes. The ardour of some of the *Songs and Sonets* is matched, in others, by disbelief in life's possibilities. In shadowy side, Donne sings, even love is not worth the effort:

He is stark mad, who ever says  
That he hath been in love an hour;  
Yet not that love so soon decays,  
But that it can ten in less space devour:  
Who will believe me, if I swear  
That I have had the plague a year?  
Who would not laugh at me, if I should say  
I saw a flask of power burn a day?(*The Broken Heart*)<sup>25)</sup>

22) *Essays in Divinity*, p.30.

23) T. Redpath, *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*(Methuen, 1956) p.16.

24) *Devotions*, 88-9(Meditation XIV).

25) T. Redpath, op. cit., p.80.

or,

For every hour that thou wilt spare me now,  
 I will allow,  
 Usurious God of Love, twenty to thee,  
 When with my brown, my gray hairs equal be;  
 Till then, Love, let my body reign, and let  
 My travel, sojourn, smatch, plot, have, forget,  
 Resume my lost year's relict: think that yet  
 We'd never met. (Love's Usury)<sup>26)</sup>

The presence in Donne's poetry of this type of disappointment links with another suicidal category, called Durkheim the anomic suicide. Suicides of the anomic class are individuals for whom the regulative effect which social organization brings to bear on human goals and aspirations has, for one reason or another, ceased to operate. A simple example is the man who has been overtaken by sudden poverty or sudden wealth, and for whom the normal aims and rewards of life have accordingly disappeared. Another common form of anomic suicide takes place among divorced people. What characterizes all anomic suicide is a loss of known and limited goals, and consequently a 'morbid desire for the infinite'. It often, Durkheim observes, assumes a sexual form. The anomic lover, arguing that he has a right to form attachments wherever inclination leads him, aspires to everything and is satisfied with nothing. The closeness of this suicidal type to the state of mind portrayed in, say, 'The Indifferent' or in 'Negative Love', where Donne proclaims that the object of his desire eludes formulation, and is thus endlessly unattainable, will be apparent. In 'the Indifferent',

Will no other vice content you?  
 Will it not serve your turn to do as did your mothers?  
 Or have you all old voices spent, and now would find and others?  
 Or doth a fear, that men are true, torment you?  
 Oh we are not, be not you so.  
 Let me, and do you, twenty know.<sup>27)</sup>

or, in the 'Negative Love',

I never stoop'd so low, as they  
 Which on an eye, cheek, lip, can prey;  
 Seldom to them, which soar no higher  
 Than virtue or the mind to admire:  
 For sense, and understanding, may  
 Know what gives fuel to their fire.  
 My love, though silly, is more brave,  
 For may I miss, whene'er I crave,

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26) Ibid., p.14.

27) Ibid., p.12.



If I know yet, what I would have.<sup>28)</sup>

As we have seen, the aspiration to infinity is a feature of John Donne's thought traceable not only in the love poems but also through all his proses. He exhibits the symptoms of anomic suicide as Durkheim formulates them: 'Beyond experienced pleasures one senses and desires others: if one happens almost to have exhausted the range of what is possible, one dreams of the impossible; one thirsts for the non-existent.'<sup>29)</sup>

It concerned with what we have observed about the art of ambition in John Donne, and it is attempting to ascribe the malady to some particular conditioning feature of his education. A mind that questions everything risks questioning itself and being engulfed in doubt, that is why suicide is far commoner among the educated and cultured than the illiterate as E. Durkheim found.

In Donne's work from early poems on which we have noticed, the frequent unease about martyrdom would seem to justify us in ascribing this importance in the generation of his neurosis to it. He was a martyr manqué himself, and had to live with a set of basic psychic configurations which had been oriented to death by his educators. This, as much as any other single factor, should help us to understand the relentless deaths in Donne's love poems. It should also help us to understand his affection for the theory of universal flux which made life a perpetual dying by its constant destruction of human personality.

The Stoic philosophy, popularised among young men of Donne's generation by Seneca, stresses this aspect of self-slaughter. When Donne, in the Preface to *Biathanatos*, speaks of his response to misfortune—'no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine own sword'<sup>30)</sup>—it might well be Seneca talking.

We can persue the same self-determining attitude toward death in the love poem of 'A Valediction: forbidding Mourning':

As virtuous men pass mildly away,  
And whisper to their souls, to go,  
Whilst some of their sad friends do say:  
'The breath goes now', and some say: 'No':  
So let us melt, and make no noise,  
No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move;  
'Twere profanation of our joys  
To tell the laity our love.<sup>31)</sup>

In the above poem. Donne accentuates that even virtuous men should part voluntarily in last moment, that is to say, they should exert power over their own fate, and be their own executioners. Instead of making noise they should cancel their happiness with dignity like Jesus Christ. Likewise, the self-reliance of the suicide given moral strength to 'The Expir-

28) *Ibid.*, p.118.

29) Durkheim, *op. cit.*, p.210.

30) C.P.S.P. p.304.

31) T. Redpath, *op. cit.*, p.82.

ation', and makes it entail more than just saying goodbye:

So, so, breake off this last lamenting kisse,  
Which sucks two souls, and vapors Both away,  
Turne thou ghost that way, and let mee turn this,  
And let our selves benight our happiest day,  
We ask'd none leave to love; nor will we owe  
Any, so cheape a death, as saying, Goe;<sup>32)</sup>

The above lines remind us of Romeo and Juliet, in the tombscene, scrambling joyously into death's clutches. Donne uses the moment as the word 'Goe like a bullet.'

In 'Sweetest Love' we can see that Donne is quite explicit about the need to practise dying:

Sweetest love, I do not go for weariness of thee,  
Nor in hope the world can show a fitter love for me;  
But since that I  
Must die at last, 'tis best  
To use myself in jest,  
Thus be feign'd to die;<sup>33)</sup>

The above poem opens as an excuse for leaving the girl no pressing engagement but simply the expressing that Donne wishes to accustom himself to death. His departure is a joke; though a practical one. They will have to part when they die, so it is 'best' to get used to it. His partings from the girl are miniature suicides, and as the poem goes on, he urges her to take them in the calm, noble manner that befits a suicide. This is a good Stoic lore, and Donne could have found it in Seneca, who similarly advises his correspondent to rehearse death:

"To say this is simply to tell a person to rehearse his freedom. A person who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave."<sup>34)</sup>

There are so many poems in the Songs and Sonets concerned with death. Each death in them aims not to end life but to have a transformed beingforever. In the Anniversary, we can find the true love should not be impaired by the strong force of death:

Two graves must hide thine and my corpse;  
If one might, death were no divorce:  
Alas, as well as other Princes, we  
(Who Prince enough in one another be)  
Must leave at last in death, these eyes, and ears,  
Oft fed with true oaths, and with sweet salt tears;

32) C.P.S.P. p.51.

33) T. Redpath, op. cit., p.24.

34) Seneca, Epistulate Morals, quoted from J. Donne, Life, Mind and Art by John Carey (Faber, 1981), p.216.

But souls where nothing dwells but love  
 (All other thoughts being inmates) then shall prove  
 This, or a love increased there above,  
 When bodies to their graves, souls from their graves remove.<sup>35)</sup>

Or, Donne links the true love with new alchemy from the dark death in the poem 'A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day Being the shortest Day':

Study me then, you who shall lovers be  
 At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:  
 For I am every dead thing,  
 In whom love wrought new alchemy.  
 For his art did express  
 A quintessence even from nothingness,  
 From dull privations, and lean emptiness:  
 He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot  
 Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.<sup>36)</sup>

Again Donne expresses in the Funeral that the true love will control his body after death forever in the heaven:

Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm  
 Nor question much  
 That subtle wreath of hair, which crowns my arm;  
 The mystery, the sign, you must not touch,  
 For 'tis my outward Soul,  
 Viceroy to that, which then to heaven being gone,  
 Will leave this to control,  
 And keep these limbs, her provinces, from dissolution.  
 For if the sinewy thread my brain lets fall  
 Through every part,  
 Can tie those parts, and make me one of all;  
 These hairs which upward grew, and strength and art  
 Have from a better brain,  
 Can better do it; except she meant that I  
 By this should know my pain,  
 As prisoners then are manacled, when they're condemn'd to die.  
 Whate'er she meant by it, bury it with me,  
 For since I am  
 Love's martyr, it might breed idolatry,

35) T. Redpath, op. cit., p.70.

36) Ibid., p.102.

If into others' hands these relics came;  
 As 'twas humility  
 To afford to it all that a soul can do,  
 So, 'tis some bravery;  
 That since you would save none of me, I bury some of you.<sup>37)</sup>



Finally we must turn to the way Donne as a serious theologian faced the death problem. We have thought that his poetic imagination was towards [lively and singular renderings of death such as suicide, or endlessly survivable fatalities of the Songs and Sonets. The aim of this was to deny the death by removing its deathliness and turning into a self-active or self-aggrandizing act. As a matter of fact, [death, for Donne, meant activity, and the day of resurrection as he sings it in 'The Relique':

When my grave is broke up again  
 Some second guest to entertain  
 (For graves have learn'd that woman-head,  
 To be to more than one a bed),  
 And he that digs it spies  
 A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,  
 Will he not let us alone,  
 And think that there a loving couple lies,  
 Who thought that this device might be some way  
 To make their souls, at the last busy day,  
 Meet at this grave, and make a little stay?<sup>38)</sup>

Of course 'The last busie day' would be unprecedentedly active. But what interests Donne are the practical problems, The bodies which have to be reconstructed may have been 'dissolved and liquefied in the Sea, purified in the Earth, resolv'd to ashes in the fire, macerated in the ayre':

Where be all the Atoms of that a Corrasive hath eaten away, or a Consumption hath breath'd, and exhal'd away from our arms, and other Limbs? In what wrinkle, in what furrow, in what bowel of the earth, lies all the graines of the ashes of a body burnt a thousand years since? In what corner, in what ventricle of the sea, lies all the jelly of a Body drowneudin the generall flood?... One humour of our dead body produces worms, and those worms suck and exhaust all other humour, and then all dies, and all dries, and molders into dust, and that dust is blown into the River, and that puddled water tumbled into the sea, and that ebs and flows in infinite revolutions, and still God knows in what Cabinet every seedPearle lies, in what part of the world every grain of every mans dust lies; and sibilat populum suum, (as this Prophet speaks in another case) he whispers, he beckens for

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37) Ibid., p.102.

38) Ibid., 108.

the bodies of his Saints, and in the twinkling of an eye, that body that was scattered over all the elements, is sate down at the right hand of God, in a glorious resurrection.<sup>39)</sup>

The above passage makes it clear that Donne's interest in bodily resurrection is not religious in any distinctive sense. It is a corollary of his preoccupation with changing states of matter. As we have seen, he was obsessively worried about being scattered and fragmentary. He felt that he was disconnected from the body, and [that his mind was hopelessly diffuse. 'I finde my self scattered, melted', as he remarked of his attempts at prayer.<sup>40)</sup> God, in the resurrection would put that right, and fit everything together. The magic idea was heightened, for Donne, by consideration of the difficulties God would have to combat. Then how will sort out the first man from the second?:

The body to be reconstituted might have lost an Arme in the East, and a leg in the West; an arm in Europe, and a leg in Afrique or Asia, scores of years between. It might have lost some blood in the North and some bones in the South.<sup>41)</sup>

And there will be some intricate difficulties which arise whenever one creature eats another. For example, supposing a man is eaten by a fish, and so changes into a fish's body, and then the fish is eaten by a second man. Such problem as the resurrection attracts my attention but I think I will deal it next chance along with the subjeet on "change" of Donne's poetry.

I think that Donne was not more paradoxical than his preoccupation with death problem. On one hand, he felt drawn to suicide, and such a morbid inclination shows itself in a number of his love-poems. On the other hand, he was so repelled by death and its nothingness, that he persistently animates it in his art, and loves to talk in his sermons as if he will be one of the few mortals exempt from dying. These two tendencies might be opposed, but they are not, because they both constitute ways of surmounting and defusing death. The suicide converts death into a part of active life. He enlivens death, like the artist who portrays death in lurid or dramatic forms, but he does so more nicely because he is dealing with the real thing of the death and not with imitations. For Donne, the outstanding performer among suicides was Jesus Christ. The dreadful death was a curious thing to John Donne as he sang like this:

One short sleepe past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.<sup>42)</sup>

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39) Sermons viii, 98.

40) Sermons v, 249.

41) Sermons iii, 109.

42) Churles M. Coffin, op. cit., p.251.

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