

John Donne The Monarch of Wit

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Abstract

The fundamental meaning of the word "wit" is the mind. But in literature it is supposed to be a mental capacity which can bring together two dissimilar notions to the surprise and delight of the readers. The notions would not, at first sight, be expected to have any connection with each other. Their bringing together makes for a surprise and a delightful smile or laugh. Obviously wit springs primarily from real life and belongs to it. Donne's wit is a rare example of its kind. He possesses wonderful capacity to perceive fundamental relationships between dissimilar things. He explains them in unexpected analogies and represents a subtle thought as a feeling or a sensuous thought. In the following passage, For example, he tells his to decay. He starts with the presumption that his soul and principle of life lives in her heart. The he writes :

When thou sigh'st, thou sigh'st not winde
But sigh'st my soule away:
When thou weep'st unkindly kinde,
My life's blood doth decay.

(Song: Sweetest Love, I Do Not Go)

Donne' wit springs from his great intellect and bases itself upon his great learning. Then it represents a startling idea through a simile, metaphor, or a hyperbole of a wondrous kind. It lies rather in a subtle elaboration of a passionate hyperbole or paradox. Its effect is a blend of passion and thought through a process of reasoning. In his poems the products of his wit are numerous.

Keywords: Notions, Presumption, Monarch, Hyperbolic, Twickenham, Peculiarity, Heterogeneous Ideas, Apparition, Wit Flashes, Valediction, Hyperbolic, Ingenious.

Introduction

Wit is the main characteristic of John Donne's poetry. Although the metaphysical poets were men of learning, yet their endeavour was not to show their learning and to display their wit. Wit rather than philosophy was the poetic originality which was sponsored by John Donne. Because of his wit, Dr. Johnson considered him as " the first poet in the world in some things. " The modern critic, Leishman regarded him the monarch of wit. He remarks in his book, *The Monarch of Wit* : " Chief qualities of Donne's Elegies, Satires, and Letters to Several Personages are Language such as men do use : deliberate rejection of traditional ornaments, images, diction, and of the conventionally beautiful : drama, occasionally – two qualities, these which Donne shares with Ben Jonson—a vivid realism of imagery and in often satirical description, and a grave and weighty, though often witty, treatment of major ideals, but, above all, wit : often deliberately outrageous and impudent and coat-trailing, often breath-taking ingenious in the discovery of comparisons analogies, but nearly always in one way or another, argumentative, whether in defence of preposterous paradoxes or in the mock serious devising of hyperbolic compliments Certainly not, except accidentally, and in so far as he often employs philosophic or theological concepts, a primarily philosophic or metaphysical poet, but, as I have insisted, sometimes, a dramatic, though more often an argumentative, a wittily argumentative or dialectical one".

Being a great wit, Donne's poetry is completely pervaded with conceits. Conceit is an instrument by which a metaphysical poet reveals his wit. Conceit is a literary term which means a strained or far-fetched comparison or literary figure. It was considered a term of reproach by the eighteenth century critics like Dryden and Dr. Johnson. Conceits were also employed by Elizabethan poets and dramatists but those were commonly in the nature of ornamentation. The metaphysical conceit arose from the intellectual process of thinking in figures. We can easily multiply these conceits from Donne's poetry. In the poem *Autumnal*, Donne compares Mrs Herbert wrinkles to Love' grave, for Love sits there like an anchorite in a trench. He is of opinion that Love is not there digging a grave but building

a tomb because when she dies Love will die consequently . Again, his poem, The Sun Rising is full of metaphysical conceits. In expressing his contempt for the Sun, the poet displays all his learning and metaphysical wit, and extravagant conceits are employed in glorifying his beloved. He remarks about his wife, " both the Indias of spice and mine." His wife is to him these two Indias in one. This conceit was supplied by the geographical discoveries made in this age. In those days India and the West Indies were discovered. In his poem, Twickenham Garden, the lover's tears are the wine of love which is very strange idea. He invites the lovers to come with phials and collect his tears. His tears are the standard by which lovers can judge his fidelity. In the Song, he employs a fantastic conceit :

"Ride ten thousand days and nights
Till age snow white hairs on thee."

John Donne in his poetry is always witty, and we know that this term 'wit' often applied to him has created a history of its own through successive generations. We have very little to suggest that Donne's poetry was at all widely known before 1620. The few references made in the meantime are to the Satires and The Storm and The Calm.

A few of his lyrics were sung and intoned by the musicians, but they were hardly quoted or imitated. His *Metempsychosis* (dated August, 1601) and the two Anniversaries (published in 1611 and 1612 respectively) did yield good results. After Donne's death his poems got into print in 1633. The famous epitaph by Thomas Carew on Donne is given below to acquaint the reader with the poet's fame them:

Here lies a king that ruled as he thought fit
The universal monarchy of wit :

Here lies two flamens, and both those the best,
Apollo's first, at last the true God's priest.

One thing becomes clear from this stanza that it was the 'wit' of Donne, not his music or his passion, or his dramatic force, that the Caroline poets tried to emulate.

Donne's reputation as a poet has passed through many vicissitudes in the course of the last three and a half centuries. Prof. Grierson writes in this regard, "With regard to his {Donne's} 'wit', its range and character, erudition and ingenuity, all generations of critics have been at one. It is as to the relation of this 'wit' to and its effects on, his poetry that they have been at variance." To Donne's contemporaries, the 'wit' was identical with the poetry. Donne's 'wit' gave him the same supremacy among poets that learning and humour and art gave to Jonson among dramatists. To some of his Dutch admirers, the wit of *The Flea* seemed superhuman. Milton never made direct mention of Donne. And Dryden calls him, "The greatest wit, though not the greatest poet of our nation." What he wanted for a poet were just the two essentials of 'classical' poetry- smoothness of verse and dignity of expression. This statement of Dryden in the Preface to *Eleonora* is a modification of his view expressed in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), where he compared Donne with his disciple, Cleveland, as a satirist. There he praised Donne for

giving us "deep thoughts in common language." But added the reservation "thought rough cadence."

After Dryden, Alexander Pope re-wrote Donne's Satires with his remark that "Donne had no imagination, but as much wit, I think, as any writer can possibly have". Thus, up to the 17th century, Donne's distinctive quality was supposed to be 'wt' and he was regarded primarily as a satirist. In the 18th century, Donne lost his standing as a 'Great Wit' when wit was regarded, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, "from strength of thought to happiness of language". Dr. Johnson in his *Life of Cowley* (1781) almost protested against the tame conception of 'wit', embodied in Pope's oft-quoted definition.

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd.

What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd.

Wit now came to be seen in a new perspective,- "a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblance in things apparently unlike." Thus the Donne revival begins with Dr. Johnson, who defined 'wit' and 'metaphysical' poetry in a way that is acceptable to the twentieth-century Critics.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is to present Donne's witty thought in his poetry. As we know that Donne's poetry is that of wit which uses the intellect to build up complex unities of thought out of materials which are conventionally non-poetic. Donne's wit is not divorced from feeling. In his best pieces there is a successful fusion of thought and feeling. The *Sunne Rising* is a fine example of a remarkable fusion of thought and feeling. Wit emphasizes not only by the manner of its statement but also by the import of its statement. Wit fashions Donne's thought and feeling and it is inseparable from his poetry.

Review of Literature

"Donne monarch of wit ", says Leishman, was not a trick or fashion but one of the greatest achievements of the poetic intelligence." Eliot has rightly pointer out that 'wit' is a tricky term and can yield divers meanings. The writers of the Restoration age and those of the eighteenth century had a narrow conception of wit and when Dryden said, " would not Donne's satires which abound with so much wit, be more charming, if he had taken care of his words and of his Numbers .. if we are not so great wits as Donne ' yet certainly we are better poets", he failed to understand the real nature of Donne's wi . Dryden thought wit and poetry to be different from each other but Donne's wit is inseparable from his poetry. Dryden's claim that the poets of his own generation were greater than Donne in poetic achievement, was based on his conception of poetry. Coleridge was right when he distinguished Donne's wit from that of other poets, and dwelt on the characteristic features of the wit of Donne, "The wit of Donne, the wit of Butler, the wit of Pope, the wit of Congreve, the wit of Sheridan how many desperate things are here expressed by one and the same word, wit ! -wonder-exciting vigour, intenseness and peculiarity of thought, using at with the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory and exercised on subjects where we have no right to - this is the wit of Donne !"

The wit of Donne has been praised by critics of several centuries ever since he died in 1631. To Donne's contemporaries 'wit' was the poet's intellectual quality which gave brilliance to his poetry. But as such it was a vague term, and it was used of Donne vaguely. Thomas Carew called him "a king of the universal monarchy of wit." Dryden called him "the greatest wit, though not the greatest poet of our nation." According to Pope, Donne had as much wit "as any writer can possibly have." With reference to the function of "wit", Pope defined it as the poetic faculty which can express as ordinary thought in a most impressive manner. To use his own words:

"True wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,
What oft was thought but n'er so well express'd.

Evidently to Pope "wit" was only poetic power consisting of poetic fancy and poetic rhetoric.

Dr. Samuel Johnson's Criticism

In Samuel Johnson's criticism, Pope's definition of "wit" was rejected.

He writes as follows:

"Pope's account of 'wit' is undoubtedly erroneous: he depresses it below its natural dignity, and reduces it from strength of thought to happiness of language." (Life of Cowley, 1778)

Then Dr. Johnson himself defines "wit" as follows-

"But 'wit', abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of Discordia concors: a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike....."

Coleridge then tried to define Donne's 'wit' with reference to its effects. He wrote: "wonder-exciting vigour, intenseness and peculiarity of thought, used with the almost boundless stores of a spacious memory, and exercised on subjects where we have no right to,--this is the wit of Donne." Thus, according to Coleridge, the elements of Donne's wit are wonder-exciting vigour, intenseness, and love of the bizarre which gave rise to peculiarity of thought. And its four element is bright intellect which could exploit Donne's almost boundless stores of spacious memory" and knowledge of different subjects, in order to represent his poetic emotion and illustrate its nature.

It can be evident that Coleridge has not only given us some elements of Donne's wit but he has also magnified part of Dr. Johnson's definition. For with reference to the work of the metaphysical wit, Johnson further writes:

"The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions: their learning instructs and their subtlety surprises..."

Grierson, Smith, and Joseph on Donne's Wit

In modern criticism Grierson and Smith have defined Donne's 'wit' as follows—

"Donne's wit followed no fashion; it was the natural working of a mind abnormally quick to apprehend likeness in things divergent: from his multifarious learning analogies came into his head thick and fast, and were flung upon the paper."

Recently B. L. Joseph has defined Donne's 'wit' as the mental ability to perceive fundamental relationships among different things, to represent his special insight in compressed but startling analogies, and to develop complex things in a few words, maintaining a colloquial air in complex versification.

J.B. Leishman and A.J. Smith have separately examined Donne's wit in a number of poems. One of them considers Donne's poem 'The Apparition' a superb example to illustrate the functions of Donne's wit. Calling his beloved a "murderess", the poet tells her that when he dies of her scorn, he will become a ghost and come to her bed. Now, as soon as the idea of becoming a ghost occurs to him, the thought immediately turns into an experience of actuality. And the poet feels, that he has actually become a ghost and has entered her bedroom. Her taper begins to quiver. He finds her in the arms of a worse lover, and asleep with him. She is filled with fear to see the ghost, and tries to wake up her lover. He, too, pretends to be asleep because of fear.

"And then poor Aspen wretch, neglected, thou
Bathed in a cold quicksilver sweet wilt lie

A verier ghost than I.

(The Apparition)

The poet then says that he will tell her something then. So

I had rather thou should'st painfully repent
Than thy my threatening rest still innocent."

The poem clearly shows how Donne's wit transmutes a thought into an experience.

Research Methodology

Donne's wit was one of the greatest achievements of the poetic intelligence; Coleridge described the real nature of Donne's wit. Donne's poetry is that of wit which uses the intellect to build up complex unities of thought out of materials which are conventionally non-poetic. Modern view of wit is more sound than Mr. Johnson's description of wit; R.L. Sharp has given an essentially modern view of wit. Ingenious comparisons, analogies, and arguments are the means through which wit expresses itself. Eleventh Elegy is the most astonishing successful exercise in sheer wit. Donne's wit is not divorced from feeling. In his best pieces there is a successful fusion of thought and feeling. The Sunne Rising is a fine example of a remarkable fusion of thought and feeling. Wit emphasizes not only by the manner of its statement but also by the import of its statement. Wit fashions Donne's thought and feeling and it is inseparable from his poetry. Donne's wit depends on the assumption that a joke can be a serious matter. Wit, as he understood it was born of the preaching of the word. Walton says: "His fancy was inimitably passionate." It will never be placed among the English poets, and wit to its place in poetry.

Research Design

The research methodology in the present investigation will be exploratory, interpretative, evaluative and analytical. Diverse theme in the selected books are contemplated.

Sampling Design

To evaluate the result we will use judgmental or purposive random sampling method which will represent perfect argument on the topic of research.

Data Collection; Primary Data; Secondary Data

The primary data will be collected with the assistance of the selected books. It will be additionally collected with the assistance of dialogue with policy makers, administrators and adolescents.

Secondary Data

The secondary data will be collected from numerous resources like visiting to various libraries, books, Research Journals, internet, magazines and literary columns in newspapers and others various speeches delivered by John Donne and other eminent philosophers.

Planning and Analysis of Data

The main data techniques utilized in this research contemplate were semi-structured meeting, member perception, gather discussion, optional source analysis and perfect argument on the topic. Individual meetings established a stand out amongst the most remarkable method and significant well springs of data. The analysis of information right of the bat managed the portrayal of each case dependent on the information collected by means of the distinctive patterns in each case contemplate. It is the creator's contention that the depictions of the case contemplates enable one to pick up insights into the specific information. At last, considering that this research think about is made out of three distinctive cases, it was important to scan for patterns in every one of the cases. The empowered researcher to build up a solid assemblage of evidence from the case.

Hypothesis

Donne's poetry acts as a probe with in human frame. As the probe goes deep to the wound and not only withdraw the total stink fluid which is harmful to the body but also make it enable for new healthy growth. Like wise we can say that his poems are similar to the pestisize that save a rotten development timely. We have to seem on reading an individual's personal love, and not just a poet contribution to a long standing tradition of poetic love. Finally we have to consider whether Donne's poetry express real love at all and he was merely a talented poet using his wit and ingenuity to create didactic atmosphere.

Objectives of the Study

To explain the uses of wit by John Donne in his love and others poems. As Donne's wit flashes like lightning in his poems. It springs from his intellect, draws on his deep and wide learning, and produces conceits to prove or represent his emotional experiences. His manner is sometimes satirical or ironical, and sometimes plain. But it is always witty and serious. His conceits are sometimes brief and sometimes elaborated. But they are always pointed and striking and constitute his monarchy of wit.

1. Wit emphasizes not only by the manner of its statement but also by the import of its statement.
2. Wit fashions Donne's thought and feeling and it is inseparable from his poetry.

3. Wit is not merely an acute perception of analogies: it is a lively awareness of the fact that the obvious attitude towards a given situation is not the only possible attitude.

Concepts of Wit

It is difficult to give a satisfactory definition of wit. The dictionary definition mentions a keen perception and cleverly apt expression of amusing words or ideas or of those connections between ideas which awaken amusement and pleasure. Wit is revealed in the unusual or ingenious use of words rather than in the subject-matter. Inferior wit lies in the use of paradox, pun, oxymoron and word-play. Higher wit is the discovery of conceits and the assembly and synthesis of ideas which appear dissimilar or incongruous.

In a true piece of wit, all things must be

Yet all these things agree

As in the Ark join'd without force or strife

All creatures dwelt, all creatures that had life

(Cowley)

Donne is remarkable as much for his metaphysical element as for his wit. Hartley Coleridge, however, pokes fun at Donne's wit:

Twist iron pokers into true love knots
Coiming hard words not found in polyglots.

Modern View of Wit is More Sound Than Dr. Johnson's Description

Modern critics have succeeded remarkably in understanding and explaining the real quality of Donne's poetry. According to modern critical view. "He represents 'the poetry of wit', that is to say the poetry which uses the intellect to build up complex unities of thought out of materials which are conventionally non-poetic. By the juxtaposition of ideas which seem at first sight unrelated and even violently discordant and by their reconciliation in the white heat of the poet's imagination, a more coherent and organic body of truth is achieved than is attainable by the use of familiar comparisons." The modern view of Donne's wit that, it reconciled with the poet's white heart of imagination represents a more coherent and organic body of truth than is possible by familiar comparisons is in sharp contrast with Dr. Johnson's evaluation of the metaphysical wit in these words, "But wit, abstracted from its effects upon the hearer, may be more rigorously and philosophically considered as a kind of Discordia concors; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike. Of wit, thus defined, they have more than enough.

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together, nature and art are ransacked for illusions; their learning, instincts, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought and though he sometimes admires is seldom pleased. "R. L. Sharp has expressed an essentially modern view of the metaphysical wit in these words, "It is an easy step from the conception of poetic faculty to the Discordia concors in which Dr. Johnson found the essence of metaphysical wit. The theory as well as the practice of the seventeenth century justifies his perception. T.S. Eliot on the other hand, finds most significant not

yoking of dissimilar things but the "sensuous apprehension, of thought", a tendency to feel metaphysical thought or to turn thought into feeling, a poetic process best indicated, perhaps by its opposite the tendency of the seventeenth-century romantics to turn feeling into thought. But while Mr. Eliot's phrase is true of the other metaphysical who were not nearly so much concerned with feelings, wit as an intellectual faculty became of more importance to them, and poetry less a matter of experience than a "knack of dexterity."

Wit Expresses Itself in Ingenious Comparisons, Analogies and Arguments

In some of Donne's elegies his wit is the most important thing and it expresses itself in ingenious comparisons, analogies and arguments and in his faculty for dwelling on the subjects that one might have supposed very rapidly exhaustible. In such elegies it is not the subjects that matters, what matters is the manner in which the poet wants to say it. In the Second Elegy, entitled 'The Anagram' the poet defends by means of series of ingenious analogies the preposterous proposition that an old and ugly woman will make a better wife than a young and handsome one. Leishman thinks the Eleventh Elegy is most astotingly successful exercise in sheer wit and it is replete with pun and play on words. In the Sixth Elegy, we have large number of ingenious comparisons is a very long and elaborate one. Sometimes the habit of giving comparisons and finding similarities crosses the limits and the poet's love for exaggeration is clearly in evidence. In the Eight Elegy the comparison, consists of a series of ingenious and rather nauseous comparisons between Donne's mistress and someone else's " My mistress's sweat, he declares, is like [among many other nice things] altar of rose; your mistress's sweat is like [among many other nasty things] the scun which Saucerra's starving citizens extracted from parboiled boots. My mistress's head is as round as the apple which Paris awarded to Venus, or the apple which Eve tasted; your mistress's head is like that of a rough-hewn jet statue.

Donne's wit is not always divorced from feeling

Though the tendency to exaggerate verbal wit is quite frequent in Donne, it would be wrong to think that in Donne's poetry it is dissociated from feeling. In his best poems there is a successful fusion of thought and feeling and the finest example of this fusion can be found from the following lines of 'The Sunne Rising'.

Busie old foole unruly Sunne;
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtaines call on us ?
Most to thy motions lover seasons run?
Sway podantique wretch goe chide
Late schoole boyes, and sowre prentices
Goe tell Court huntsmen, that the King will ride,
Call country ants to harvest offices;
Love all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
Nor hour, days, monthes which are the rages of time.

A stanza from 'The Sunne Rising' shows Donne's Observation of Life

Though Donne's wit is high-flown and extravagant, it is not something cut-off from real life. The passage just quoted from 'The Sunne Rising' is a vivid and realistic picture of early morning, of life in fact and it would be difficult to find a more brilliant picture than the present one. Percy Marshall's comment on the passage is illuminating. There the poet catches the sun, and addressing him as man to man, is playfully angry at his intrusion. He pictures the day's first activities of the boys who pass his windows on their way to school or to work, and of the Court which was the focal point and symbol of sixteenth Century English life; he strips down the religious of a time-table: and he centres his attention on the thought of love. In the whole stanza there is not one word which one would at once think of as 'poetic' but many that are apparently not 'fool'. Pedantique, 'offices', 'rags. Yet the effect is exhilarating, for the accumulation of sounds, running over a bouncing rhythm, gives a kind of onomatopoeia. We hear the morning by a change of the familiar and disconnected noises belonging to the scene into a musical analogy.

Wit Recognizes A Diversity of Experiences

According to Client Brooks, "Wit is not merely an acute perception of analogies; it is a lively awareness of the fact that the obvious attitude towards a given situation is not the only possible attitude. Brooks' Contribution in emphasizing the wittiness of Donne's poetry is to suggest that it is characterized not only by the manner of its statement but also by the import of its statement (i.e., the thought ultimately represented by the words of a passage or poem) . Brooks considers Donne to be a witty poet because of his use of metaphor and because "he converges his lines from the farthest possible distances" - the Discordia concors- and the same wit he credits for the irony and complexity of attitudes to be observed in the statement of the poem. T.S .Eliot said about the metaphysical wit that it involves a recognition, implicit in other kinds of experience which are possible. The special quality of the metaphysical mind that Basil Willy has spoken about, owed its origin to wit, "the metaphysical mind holds all experience in a loose synthesis together and has a passion of detecting analogies and correspondences between them."

Wit fashions Donne's thought and feeling

The discussion of Donne's wit, it can be said that a proper understanding of the real nature of the wit of Donne is necessary to enjoy his poetry in particular and the metaphysical poetry in general. To regard wit as something entirely separable from the poetic sensibility would be a serious mistake in the case of Donne and it is improper to describe Donne's wit as his genius that fashions his feelings and thought.

Functions of Donne's Wit

Evidently Donne's 'wit' consists of his great intellect, super-sensibility, and poetic art. In his poetry, the following, functions of his wit have been recognized:

1. Turning a thought into an experience.

2. Using metaphysical imagery to represent the experience or its part or both.
3. Discovering, by means of the imagery of 'Occult resemblances in things apparently unlike.
4. Using special figures, such as paradoxes, hyperboles, oxymoron, word-play, pun, etc to produce effects.
5. Using dialectical reasoning to afford intellectual pleasure.
6. Compression of thought and imagery.
7. Production of speech rhythms in complex versification.

In brief, the main purpose of Donne's wit is to represent, in terms of reasoning, a feeling or emotion by means of a river of metaphysical figures, rhetorical speech-rhythms, and complex versification.

Other Functions of His wit

Brevity is the soul of his wit. So he effects great compression of his poetic experience, imagery, etc, and develops complex themes in a few words. His compression also aims at speech-rhythms and sweet-sounding versification. According to T.S. Eliot, "he first made it possible to think in lyric verse, and in a variety of rhythms and stanza-schemes, and at the same time retained a quality of song and the suggestion of the instrumental accompaniment of the earlier lyric.

Imagery in Relation to His Wit Image of the Flea

In one poem, the poet and his beloved sit side by side. A flea comes and first bites the poet and then his sweet-heart. She gets angry with it and says she will kill it. The poet requests her not to kill it because the flea, having sucked the blood of each of them, is first there "marriage temple" and second, their "marriage bed", -

"This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is."

(The Flea)

The poet's blood or that of his beloved is present in the flea's body and represents the person of each of them, in the capacity respectful of the bridegroom and the bride. Since the flea's body unites the one to the other, it is first a marriage temple and then their marriage bed.

Image of Compasses

In another poem he gives us the impression that his soul loves his sweet-heart's soul and vice versa. In other words, their two souls are united with each other by virtue of their spiritual love-

"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".

(A Valediction: Forbidding mourning)

Here their two souls united by love have been compared to the fixed legs of a pair of compasses jointed at the top. Here is a simile, which also reflects the fact that the poet is not satisfied with the comparison. But in perceiving the flea as their "marriage temple" and "marriage bed", the poet employs a Metaphor, a sign of his poetic confidence. The image of the twin compasses is a symbol to represent the unity of two souls which are abstract

things. Evidently Donne's images are instruments of his wit to represent his poetic perception, his special insight, as it is. He believed that in the universe all things stood in fundamental relation to one another. So he compared the unity of two loving souls to the two legs of a pair of compasses. Such a comparison was "literal" to him. But to 'modern' mind it is fantastic, and to an unpoetic mind, not obvious immediately.

Qualities of Wit and Proper Uses of It By Donne

As Donne's poetry is 'witty', startling and audacious. It is passionately intellectual:-and it must have been so at all times. It is a characteristic of his poems which all critics have noted, and which really forms one of his claims to uniqueness, that feeling and intellect are never for long separated: that the language. Donne employs is "simple and pure", but the 'structure' of the sentences is not simple because of his "fidelity to thought and felt; but it is declared that they did not "feel their thought." Whereas "a thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility." And nobody would dare gainsay the foregoing verdict of T.S. Eliot, the literary giant of the present age.

Donne Never Lacks Intellect

Though he may lack emotion at places. His poetry becomes tedious where feeling is absent and the writing is merely clever. No doubt, cleverness for its own sake was admired by Donne's contemporaries. But in Donne's poems at their best, intellect never gets out of hand: there is throughout the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" Intellect and emotion are inseparably woven; they exist in harmony, not in opposition.

Donne Displays A Peculiar Leaning Towards 'Wit' In His Verse

His poetry is full of wit-gymnastics, remarkable for quaint images, bizarre notions, unexpected comparisons, amazing and miraculous turns of thoughts and expression, far-fetched references, allusions and similarities discovered between dissimilar things. The effect of such poetry is baffling and startling. Donne's Songs and Sonnets, Epigrams, Elegies, Satires and Verse-Letters are all exercises in sheer wit and ingenuity. His Epigram on Hero and Leader is a very good example of wit. His Elegies fall into three distinct categories:

1. Discourses on a broomstick,
2. Defences of wild propositions,
3. Dramatic situations in which wit and paradox abound.

One Quality of Donne's Verse is Wit in Our Sense Of The Word

Wit like the wit of Swift and Sheridan. The habit in which this wit masquerades is certainly old – fashioned. But it is not always the worse for that, for the wit of the Elizabethans is delightfully blended with fancy and feeling.

According to Bacon

"Yet there be some that think their wits have been asleep, except they dart out somewhat that is piquant and to the quick."

— Bacon, "Of Discourse"

Conclusion

To conclude, Donne's wit flashes like lightning in his poems. It springs from intellect, draws on deep and wide learning, and produces conceits to prove or represent his emotional experiences. His manner is sometimes satirical or ironical, and sometimes plain.

But it is always witty and serious. His conceits are sometimes brief and sometimes elaborated. But they are always pointed and striking and constitute his monarchy of wit. Donne the poet is probably the greatest wit the English poets. His wit is not pedantic or foppish as his early critics remarking flashes emanate from it naturally and in appropriate places. So Leishman remarks:

"Donne's monarchy of wit was not a trick or fashion but one of the greatest achievements of poetic intelligence."

And Legouis aptly remarks:-

"In Donne wit 'is everywhere'. It is his very genius, and fashions his feelings and his thought."

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Endnotes

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