

## Essays in supplement to 'Family Histories' issue of *Agenda*

David Cooke on Louis de Paor  
Arthur Broomfield on Samuel Beckett's Letters  
Shanta Acharya on Lance Lee  
Hossein Moradi on John Donne  
Patricia McCarthy on Peripatetic Women Poets (coming soon)

**David Cooke's** retrospective collection, *In the Distance*, was published in 2011 by Night Publishing. A new collection, *Work Horses*, was published by Ward Wood in 2012. His poems and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Agenda*, *The Bow Wow Shop*, *The Interpreter's House*, *The Irish Press*, *The London Magazine*, *Magma*, *The Morning Star*, *New Walk*, *The North*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *The Reader*, *The SHOP* and *Stand*. He has two very recent collections: *A Murmuration* (Two Rivers Press, 2015) and *After Hours* (Cultured Llama Pres 2017).

### A GRAFTED TONGUE

Louis de Paor: *The Brindled Cat and the Nightingale's Tongue* (Bloodaxe Books, 2014),

In his poem, 'A Grafted Tongue', John Montague depicts the ruthless efficiency with which Irish children were forced to acquire the English language and the devastating effect this had on Gaelic culture: 'An Irish / child weeps at school / repeating its English... // To grow / a second tongue, as / harsh a humiliation / as twice to be born'.

Ironically, however, in the poem's concluding stanza we are presented with a mirror image and see how everything has come full circle: 'Decades later / that child's grandchild's / speech stumbles over lost / syllables of an old order'. Seamus Heaney, also, has evoked the decline of the Irish language. In 'A Shooting Script', he looks back with a cold eye to the idealism of *Conradh na Gaeilge*, (The Gaelic League) and its determination in a newly independent Ireland to re-establish Irish as the means of everyday communication:

They are riding away from whatever might have been  
Towards what will never be, in a held shot:  
Teachers on bicycles, saluting native speakers ...

Then voices over, in different Irishes,  
Discussing translation jobs and rates per line.

By the beginning of the Twentieth Century there were virtually no monoglot speakers of Irish left. In 2006 an Irish Government survey concluded that Irish was the main community and household language of 3% of the population.

A monolingual poet who writes in English, French or Spanish, say, can take his or her language as a given in a way that the poet who opts to write in Irish or Welsh, Provencal or Catalan cannot. The audience for poetry is at best limited, so to further restrict oneself by using a minority language might seem a gesture bordering on the quixotic. R.S. Thomas, who learned to speak Welsh, but wrote his poetry in English, became one of the most widely admired poets in these islands. Bobi Jones, who also learned Welsh as a second language and

is considered by some to be the greatest living poet in it, is virtually unknown outside the Welsh-speaking community. The Catalan poet, Joan Margarit, now writes in Catalan, having started out in Spanish, but still publishes bilingual editions containing his own Spanish versions; while Carlos Ruiz Zafón, whose novel, *La Sombra Del Viento* (*The Shadow of the Wind*), is an international bestseller, was criticised by some at home for writing it in Spanish and not in Catalan, his first language; but who can blame him, when these days on the streets of Barcelona you can scarcely hear it spoken?

And yet, in spite of everything, poetry in Catalan, Welsh, Irish, and, no doubt, other minority languages, continues to be written and thrive. Born in Cork in 1961, Louis de Paor is a significant voice in modern Irish poetry. Although his first language is English, he has always written his poetry in Irish. In ‘Gaeilgeoirí’, translated somewhat inelegantly as ‘Irishians’, he seems to accept the futility of trying to stem the tide of English:

We didn't tilt the world  
one degree off its axis  
or jolt this country  
of genial stutterers  
from its West British rut.

However, in his brief, but cogent Introduction to *The Brindled Cat and the Nightingale's Tongue*, a bilingual selection of fifty three of his poems, he speaks up convincingly for ‘the marvellous diversity of languages other than our own’ before going on to address the vexed subject of ‘translation and its discontents.’ Given that the Irish-speaking audience is marginal and that many of those who have learned the language at school have, to varying degrees, merely a working knowledge of it, it seems inevitable that Irish poetry will frequently need to be published in bilingual versions. This edition of de Paor's poems from a mainstream UK publisher makes them available to those who may have little or no Irish, but have previously had some access to the work of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Cathal Ó Searchaigh. More recently, long overdue bilingual editions of pioneering figures like Seán Ó Ríordáin and Máire Mhac an tSaoi have made their work, too, more widely available.

For his part, de Paor has preferred not to publish his work bilingually in Ireland and worries that translation into English may increase its dominance and runs the risk of sidelining the originals. Asserting the primacy of the original poem, he is at pains to emphasise the need for translations that are self-effacing and faithful, and is dismissive of ‘versions’ by those who have no real grasp of Irish and have to rely on ‘cribs’. Biddy Jenkinson, a fine poet in her own right and one of de Paor's three collaborators in this project, has refused to allow her own poems to be translated into English as ‘a small rude gesture on behalf of linguistic diversity.’ By contrast, *Pharaoh's Daughter*, a selection from the work of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, published in 1990 by The Gallery Press, contained English language versions from some of the biggest ‘names’ in modern Irish poetry: Montague, Heaney, Mahon, Longley, Muldoon, Carson, McGuckian, Ní Chuilleanáin. Two of these, Longley and Mahon have no Irish at all; while some of the ‘versions’ included might be considered Lowellian in the distance they have travelled from the original. Frank Sewell's otherwise excellent edition of *Selected Poems* by Seán O'Riordáin (Yale University Press, 2014) boasts a *Foreword* by Paul Muldoon, which proves, in fact, to be no more than a rather self-indulgent version of Ó Ríordáin's poem ‘Saoirse/Freedom’. When the poet's own English version is buried in the body of the text, it is hard to see Muldoon's name on the front cover as anything other than a blatant, if understandable, sales ploy.

Turning now to de Paor's poems, one sees that he is an accessible and even populist poet. For the best part of a decade, from 1987 – 1996, he worked for local radio in Australia.

Unsurprisingly then, the theme of exile looms large. However, for a poet who writes in Irish exile is more than separation from home and family. Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who lived for some years in Turkey, has spoken of the unsustainability of her role as a Gaelic poet in a country where she had no access to the living language. De Paor's opening poem 'Adharca Fada' / 'Long Horns' is short enough to be quoted in its entirety:

The treebones creek

when I open the back door

light in short pants  
runs barefoot in the garden

The sun spills from a bottle  
that harvested heat  
on hillsides tangled in vines

In dark glasses, February strolls past  
a tennis racket under her arm

By de Paor's standard, this antipodean vignette seems modest enough – if it is read only in its translated version. However, a close reading of the Irish reveals a richly textured patterning of sounds that is scarcely hinted at in the English. 'Treebones' is a reasonable enough attempt to convey 'géaga' which can mean both 'branches' and 'limbs', but the opening line of the English makes no attempt to capture the original's use of alliteration and the way it emphasises the music of 'gíoscán géaga na gcrann', where the vowels move along a scale from closed to open: 'ee – ay – aw' (or 'ow' in De Paor's Munster dialect). From here on, until the end of the poem, consonantal and vocalic harmonies increase in richness:

nuair a osclaím doras mo thí

ritheann solas I mbríste gearr  
cosnocht sa ghairdín

Here the long 'í' in 'osclaím' and 'thí' is echoed in 'mbríste' and the closing syllable of 'ghairdín', while the 'g', 'r' and long 'a' of 'gcrann' are repeated in 'gearr' and 'ghairdín' and, subsequently, in 'scairdeann grian' ('the sun spills') before the poem is driven on by new harmonies: the flat 'a' and 's' of 'teas ar shleasa', the echoing plosives of 'chnoic/ breac', and other effects that there is perhaps no further need to highlight. Although such detailed analysis of a poem's harmonics can quickly become laborious – all the more so when the effects delineated are arrived at unconsciously – it does, however, go some way towards validating de Paor's insistence that each poem should be allowed to 'resonate within the acoustic of the language in which is written'.

The theme of exile is continued in 'Báisteach' / 'Rain', a Proustian piece, in which the poet is haunted by the perfume of a girl he remembers from the 1970s and which takes him back to the smells of 'sea, grass and fuchsia.' Again, the original has a music which does not survive translation: 'farráige, féar is fiúise'. In 'Glaoch Gutháin / Phonecall' a familiar voice draws the poet away from the warmth and colourful birdlife of Australia to the damper clime of his birth. Early on in the poem he cunningly reworks a line by Seán Ó Riordáin, his literary

master: ‘bhí crainn límóin ar chúl an tí’ / ‘[there were] lemon trees behind the house’, where the *locus classicus* has ‘Tá Tír na nÓg ar chúl an tí’ / ‘At the back of the house is the Land of Youth’. In de Paor’s final stanza there are some typically impressive sound effects. Here it is, first of all, in English to give an idea of the sense:

In the swelter of Melbourne  
pipemusic drenched the room  
as reels of rain  
and winter tunes were played  
by quick fingers  
on ancient instruments  
in the city of the goldy fish.

And now in Irish:

I lár an mheirfin  
i gcathair Melbourne  
bhí frascheol píbe  
ag clagarnach sa tseomra  
mar bhí ríleanna báistí  
is geantraí geimhridh á seinm  
ag méara meara  
ar uirlisí ársa  
i gcathair an eisc órga.

‘Clagarnach’ captures brilliantly the foot stomping joy of a ‘seisiún’, while the musicality of the last five lines, based on shifting vowels and the repetition of ‘g’, ‘r’, and ‘m’ is masterly. The theme of music is again put to good use in ‘Didjeridu’, where it symbolizes another culture which is under threat, and in ‘Rory’, an elegy for the Irish blues guitarist, Rory Gallagher.

Celtic literature has frequently been associated with ‘the backward look’, and it is true that Máirtín Ó Direáin and Seán Ó Riordáin, the founding fathers of modern Irish poetry, had a tendency to idealize rural life in the Gaeltacht. However, de Paor, like others of his generation, is a poet who is rooted in the realities of urban life in contemporary Ireland. In ‘O’Donoghue’s Welcome’ we are presented with the image of a Romanian immigrant begging ‘On the holy streets / of the City of the Tribes.’ ‘Conspiracy of Eyes’ depicts a world where a young girl is abducted and one in which the poet does his best to convince himself that his own children are safe: ‘She looks nothing at all / like any of my daughters.’ When he does cast his gaze backwards, as in ‘A long Day’, he evokes the stultifying atmosphere of institutionalized Catholicism: ‘The morning was tedious as Sunday Mass. / We couldn’t wait for the priest to go.’ In ‘Believing’ he describes an old woman close to death for whom religion and superstition become, in the end, almost indistinguishable.

Geographically wide-ranging, *The Brindled Cat and the Nightingale’s Tongue* is also stylistically and thematically varied. However, at its heart there are poems that explore family relationships and love in its various forms. It is in these poems, perhaps, that de Paor is at his most directly affecting and memorable. In ‘Dead House’ the tone is elegiac: ‘We swept and scrubbed and scraped / the last dust from the house / with Vim and holy water.’ In ‘Gaul Cross’ he revisits the theme of exile, but seen through the eyes of an earlier generation: ‘It was threatening rain all morning the day my father left his father’s house.’ ‘Rituals’ is a

beautifully poised elegy in which he evokes ‘that cold forsaken kitchen / where I drank porter until morning / with my Granddad.’

The elegiac mode is of course well-established in Irish literature, as is the theme of love between a man and a woman. However, de Paor’s handling of this theme has a candour and a freshness that is quite his own. ‘The Creator’ is a domestic idyll which captures the quiet devotion of a wife for her husband who is lying in his bed ill. ‘On Being Left’ is a witty and affectionate poem in which he addresses his own wife: ‘When you’re not here / milk turns sour in the fridge.’ Finally, mention should be made of those pieces in which de Paor celebrates his love for his children. These are well judged poems in which he manages to avoid the trap of sentimentality by a deft mixture of humour and honesty. In ‘Grammar’ the tone is playful: ‘The Imperative Mood / is the funniest thing you’ve ever heard. / Wake up. Go to sleep. Do. Don’t. Be’; while in ‘Changeling’ a father, who is getting his daughter ready for her bath, has an unsettling insight into her vulnerability:

In the blink of an eye,  
the changeling took on  
my daughter’s beloved form,  
running from me  
into eternity  
on an unending road  
in South Vietnam...

Lively, impassioned and lyrical, *The Brindled Cat and the Nightingale’s Tongue* is a big-hearted collection from one of Ireland’s most popular Irish language poets. It may well be, as de Paor suggests in his Introduction, ‘that translation is as impossible as it is necessary’, yet in this selection he has been well served by Kevin Anderson, Biddy Jenkinson and Mary O’Donoghue, who have produced English language versions that read well and capture admirably the sense, tone and movement of the originals. The English reader can scarcely ask for more. For those of us with some knowledge of the language, but who would struggle with a monolingual text, these scrupulously faithful versions also fulfil admirably de Paor’s requirement that readers should be able to use them as ‘a temporary construction’ that allows them ‘to make the journey across the page from English into Irish’.

**Arthur Broomfield** is a poet and Beckett scholar from County Laois, Ireland. His study on the works of Samuel Beckett, *The Empty Too : language and philosophy in the works of Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge Scholars' Publishing 2014) is available from the publishers and through Amazon.co.uk. Dr Broomfield has published numerous essays on Beckett's works and has delivered papers and talks on the author throughout Ireland and the U.K.

### **The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1957-1967**

*The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1957 – 1965* (Cambridge, 2014) is the third volume in the series of his published letters. The letters are selected from the post-Nobel prize, *Waiting for Godot* years, when his stature as a playwright was soaring. This is the period when *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days* and *All That Fall* were written. Significantly it is the time when his fiction, taking a major turn, breaks new ground through *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing* and *How It Is*. It is also the era of Catholic Church dominance in Ireland. Beckett's letters to his favoured directors, Donald McWhinnie of the BBC and the American, Alan Schneider, apart from occasional asides deprecating his propensity to over socialize, are concerned, often to the minutiae, with the staging of the particular production in question. 'Beckett is a poor guide to his own work', George Craig tells us in his French translator's introduction. Yet the real significance of the collection lies in the insightful clues Beckett offers – mostly in letters to Bray – to the workings of the process, thought and creative, out of which his works emerged. These are gems to be studied beside his major texts, 'letters to shine light on the work only' as Dan Gunn's concluding essay to the book advises.

Beckett's detailed explanations of the stage props for *Happy Days*, in a reply to Alan Schneider, insist that the texture of the mounds should be 'a kind of brown canvas with something to suggest scorched grass, but smooth...nothing to break the monotony of symmetry', and to Mc Whinnie we see examples of the painstaking revision of texts for which he is noted e.g. in a letter on Patrick Magee's reading of *Malone Dies*. Through it all though he never loses touch with the dark humour that permeates his dramatic works, 'your letter would encourage a corpse', to Barbara Bray and 'we'll drink champagne on a terrace and laugh at unhappiness', to Judith Schmidt of the Grove Press. The emerging Harold Pinter confesses to the actor, Roger Blin, prior to his first meeting with Beckett, to being awe struck: 'It was almost too much for me – the thought of such a thing'.

Despite Gunn's warning we get an insight into the spirit of Beckett, the man, in his letters round the Dublin Theatre Festival controversy of 1958. The festival director, Brendan Smith, had succumbed to pressure from the Roman Catholic archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, to alter the programme which was intended to showcase works from the Irish writers, Joyce and O'Casey, and Beckett. Beckett's play for radio, *All That Fall*, had been scheduled for performance in the Pike theatre. In a letter to the Pike director, Alan Simpson, Beckett makes his feelings clear, 'After the revolting boycott of Joyce and O'Casey I don't want to have anything to do with the Dublin Theatre Festival and am withdrawing both mimes, and *All That Fall*'. Later to Barney Rossiter, 'The Roman Catholic bastards in Ireland have yelled Joyce and O'Casey out of their festival' (O'Casey had also withdrawn *The Drums of Father Ned* after repeated requests to alter the text).

If we get an insight into Beckett's vision of the existential world, the 'whole scene, sky and earth, is a pathetically unsuccessful realism', in a letter to Schneider, it is from letters to his confidant, Barbara Bray, that we can begin to acquire a deeper understanding of the vision that drives his art. He 'gets' Maurice Blanchot's reading of his works in the, arguably, still to be surpassed *Le Livre a Venir* (*The Book to Come*), 'I think he's onto something very important'. The importance can be gauged from his hesitancy to read *Le livre a Venir*, 'I

won't read it now, it would only get in my way'. Ironically Beckett's reference to Blanchot recalls one made by the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, to Beckett's works, 'This is an author to whom I feel very close; but also too close...I have perhaps avoided him a bit because of this identification' ( in an interview with Derek Attridge in *Acts of Literature* p 60, Routledge, 1992 ). Beckett's readers will recognize the confluence of the philosopher and the artist in his reference to the disintegrating subject in the introspective 'how little there remains now of the being and the writer' in another letter to Barbara Bray.

Students of *How It Is* will be aware of the unique challenges presented by that complex text, challenges that confronted its author too, as we see from its many references in letters to Bray. 'Relief to fly from this Pimm hell' (Pimm is its central figure) but will be 'fidgeting to get back to it.' Such are the difficulties experienced in approaching the text that Matthew Galey writes in his review 'Precisely what would be needed, in order to talk about it, is to invent a new qualifier, a different aesthetic, a different vocabulary'. Beckett is disturbed to discover some unintended full stops in the proofs of the (almost) punctuation-free work. The indecipherable mysteries of the creative process haunt him when he admits to eventually understanding the significance of the central pronoun in *How It Is*, 'I saw "it" very clearly, for the first time'. This some way into writing the work, and having completed his *magnum opus*, *The Unnamable* of 'It say it, not knowing what'!

For those who may be interested we do get views of Beckett the man. We are warmed by his encouragement and kindness to emerging writers. His hands on but invariably courteous involvement with his directors and his fastidious application to translation is evidence of the patient perfectionist that we know Beckett to have been. His obvious and admirable contempt for the organisers of the Dublin Theatre Festival of 1958 points to one of unusual courage for that, indeed for any time. For this reviewer though, the memorable part of *Letters* is the light he shines on his art through his cryptic references in his letters to Barbara Bray. To those who don't try to understand the 'it' in *How It Is* he may have 'nothing to say' but those who do, we could assume, are 'the lovable' to whom he gives the love, in these rare gems, that will enlighten his work only.

## Shanta Acharya

An internationally published poet, critic, reviewer and scholar, Shanta Acharya is the author of ten books. Her *New and Selected Poems* is due for publication in 2016. Educated at Oxford and Harvard, her work has been featured in major publications, including *Poetry Review*, *PN Review*, *The Spectator*, *The Guardian Poem of the Week*, *Edinburgh Review*, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Asia Literary Review*, *The Little Magazine*, *The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry*, *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia & Beyond* (Norton, 2008). In 1996, she founded Poetry in the House, and has been responsible for hosting monthly readings at Lauderdale House, in London. She has twice served on the board of trustees of The Poetry Society, UK. [www.shantaacharya.com](http://www.shantaacharya.com)

## Lance Lee: *Homecomings*

Birch Brook Press, USA. 2015

A poet, playwright, novelist, and writer on drama and screenwriting, Lance Lee is the author of thirteen books. A past Creative Writing Fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts, his fourth collection of poetry, *Seasons of Defiance*, was a finalist in the 2010 National Best Books Awards. *Homecomings*, his sixth collection, reinforces his considerable achievement as a poet. In *Seasons of Defiance*, he wrote: 'There is nothing left for me to do but go/ deeper, ever deeper, into my meaning.' ('Dreaming The End of Going West'). That is what he does in *Homecomings*, his passion and compassion in engaging with a panoramic range of experiences deepening. He writes with conviction: 'I see all there is, and all a man may see.'

In each poem he explores the human predicament, enriching our understanding of it. In 'What Am I?' he reminds us that 'by blood and bone / atom and star / we make what meaning we can / with our longing, / with our dance with desire,' reaffirming what it is to be human. Examining the link between character and fate continues to shape his exploration as it did in *Seasons of Defiance*. He takes his exploration further by writing about the vulnerability and resilience of life, including his desire to be *wholly one with nature* (as expressed in 'Pendant' in *Seasons of Defiance*). In 'Weston Woods', in *Homecomings*, he carries on with the conversation: 'if you look for me here in after years / I will not be haunted, or haunting, / but imbued in a seam of bark or a rustle / of leaves or the heft of a stone from a long, / low wall...'

*Homecomings* reflects not only the greater complexity of our world, but also the poet's increasing awareness of human limitations, sometimes making him rage with an intensity one cannot miss: 'My anger soars in the squealing air, / for I desire all you desire more intensely / you who can never age can know.' ('Mrs Robinson') or 'Stop asking me about love: all I know / is betrayal, injustice, rejection, dreaming.' Adding 'Don't think fame consoles / a love never gained, a love that then / cannot be lost.' The truth is we die and love with us ('Dante To An Admirer Obsessed With Love And Fame'). He talks of art – the enamelled bird that no longer sings on his ivory bough, 'but whose beauty, once heard, must destroy us all.' He also writes wittily about old men wearing 'young women like bangles,' ('Contra Ravenna').

The poems in *Homecomings*, presented in five sections, reflect on Life's harsh truths as much as the enduring and redeeming aspects of Nature, Love, Self, Illusion, Art. These poems are meditations, conversations, awakenings that become luminescent, almost catching fire in the

readers' mind. In the opening poem, 'Clichés', woken from our 'lifelong nightmare // we cry out surprised we are alive, / borne on a surge of power / out of ourselves to find the world / pure marvel...' This awakening is Nature's gift, 'for nature is not jaded – / there are only cruel or worn out men. / The sun rises out of a tight-fisted dark / a violent rose of fiery petals... // Clouds of thorns with shining tips / drive wedges between sky and earth / and like nails driven into our flesh / wake us from lifelong nightmare.' The unexpected image of the crucifixion transforms us with the poem.

In a homage to Camus, 'A Wasp In The Subway', dreaming 'of another life...in brightly lit places' is 'woken / to poverty, to myself, alone. / That safety I once held, / a life known, is gone.' Smashing against surfaces it cannot pierce; it is 'surprised by a wave of joy... / To lose all illusions, even hope, / and have only my will/ to go on: to make what I can / of my flight despite / those crowded here, who raise/ their hands against all / they fear: what freedom!' The ability to transform suffering into joy provides a reason for living, to make what we can of our lives. The metaphors of dreaming-waking, darkness-light, illusion-reality appear in several poems. There is an additional dimension to the dialectic as we, 'all enraptured know for one moment / that what is real is rare, that our lives are / entangled, endlessly new and strange' ('A Hula Girl Weaves Death And Memory and Life Into Her Dance'), raising the question of the dancer and dance. Like Yeats, Lee argues for one, united view of life and death.

Thus, the knowledge of loneliness and nothingness is also part of being human. In 'The Day Moon', the poet is aware how 'in the cold hours before dawn/ when the soul is naked' it feels its loneliness. The sense of waste in both nature and life is delivered with mastery in 'Waste Fruit' where on observing fruit rotting on the ground he writes: 'All is wasted as those lives ruined / by violence, or by living with one / indifferent to what each has / uniquely to give, wasted as those / with only themselves in their hearts, impenetrable, impoverished. / Tonight I wake from bad dreams / as fear slips its leash to loom over my bed.' It leads him to the moving and sombre realisation that all he has to offer will be spurned as well, and 'illusion be all I have / to make life bearable to its end, that the truth is harsh and not my friend, / our lives too often wounds to endure / in silent despair as our ripeness / withers.'

The book includes a section, 'An Incendiary Ground – Encounters with Greece', which contains six drawings of vases. The cover and interior art was created especially for this publication by Ron Sanford, reminding us of Lee's previous collection, *Transformations*, where, 'the collision between sensibilities' enhanced the overall impact of the poems as they cascade down the page carrying their emotions, anguish, disappointment, ecstasy, the discovery of the self through the other. In 'The Cypresses of Athens', he writes: 'One day a descendant of mine wandering here/ may name some cypress in turn: 'Ah! there's Lance! He always wanted / to balance passion with reason,/ desire with desire's loss,/ his life with his death in a tense balance// like one of these cypresses/ who thrust out green shoots against their withering,/ defiant to the end.' 'Know Thyself'. 'That command/ still lives in my blood,'" Lee writes in 'My Father's Shade At Delphi At The World's Center Amid The Ruins Above The Olive-Swaddled Valleys'.

Much of Lee's observations also arise from experiences linked to nature. In 'Lucretius Looks North And Throws Himself Into The Arms of Love From A Cliff in Big Sur, Joyously', the poem begins with a powerful description of a wide bay in Big Sur surging with life – with 'cormorant and pelican, otter, seal and/porpoise plunged in the green waves...' Our spirit is 'absorbed' into this primal force, this 'all-encompassing surge of life/ certain that however

we maim and murder/ with gun and poison,' what remains grows greater. In case we get complacent, we are swiftly reminded of the fragility of the human condition: 'Against that we are/ the flash of a meteor on the edge of sight/ we only think we see, men walled in to/ brief narrow lives to preserve what we can/ from accident and time.' There is no defence against our 'common fate' (death) except love, 'the joyous knowledge/ of all I am/ and that I am/ and that I am where I should be.' What follows is a reaffirmation of the redeeming power of love – 'that brutal, unrelenting, tender power/ that life by life lifts us toward knowledge/ and beauty.' One is reminded of Philip Larkin's: 'What will survive of us is love.' ('An Arundel Tomb'). The collection ends with 'Ars Poetica', where he talks about what it means to be a man: 'to give love, and receive, to hold those loved firmly, / to protect, to respect, to live, to die / on earth, in earth, of earth. // My hackles rise, and the short hairs on my arms / as words flow that give each their true name, / as the poem wells from my throat // speaking me.' The transmutation of life and love is indeed what all art, including poetry, is.

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### **The nature of love in John Donne: A Derridian Reading**

#### **Abstract**

Lots of commentaries already made on the nature of love in Donne have remained in silence, though they supposed to speak about it; they have lost what they have uncovered. Could we think of the nature of love really in itself and for itself in John Donne's love poems? By thinking of Jacques Derrida through reading two poems of Donne 'The Paradox' and 'Negative Love,' I argue that Donne is trying to experience love 'as it is' not to speak as a spokesman for love and lovers. These two poems illustrate that love is not a concept made by human consciousness but an Other which should only be experienced in the act of recalling it.

**Key Words:** love; paradox; negativity; experience; other;

Overviewing the previous studies about John Donne's love poetry, Ilona Bell discusses that 'for this and other more theoretical or ideological reasons, twenty century critics generally assume that the women in Donne's poems is a shadowy figure, the object or reflection of male desire, a pretext for self-fashioning, a metaphor for the poet's professional aspirations, a sex subject to be circulated for the titillation and amusement of Donne's male coterie.'<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, love is perceived from a male point of view. Achsah Guiborry who reads Donne's erotic poems writes: 'Whereas Petrarchan poetry idealized women and spiritualized desire, Donne's Ovidian *Elegies* flaunt the speaker's sexuality as he describes his escapades.'<sup>2</sup> Guiborry elucidates that Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* includes varieties of personas or 'voices' who present a self whose identity is fluid. 'Donne tries on various roles, expressing the mutability of the world and the instability of desire even as he seeks permanence and stability.'<sup>3</sup> Ilona Bell maintains that 'Donne has been termed many things: a misogynist who loathed women's bodies and scorned their minds; a metaphysician less interested in emotions than intellection; an egotist and careerist who used women for his own advantage; a wit willing to say anything for the sake of the poem or a rhetorician undone by his own verbal power; and a poet/lover who was supremely attentive to the woman's point of view.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 'Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems,' *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, edited by Achsha Guiborry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> In 'Erotic Poetry,' *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, edited by Achsha Guiborry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> In 'Gender matters: the women in Donne's poems,' p. 201.

In what condition does Donne elaborate the nature of love? Robert Ellrodt argues that Donne's poetry reflects the workings of his self-knowledge. An excessive self-consciousness and a search for his own identity characterize his encouragement. Donne's egotism, obvious in his lyrics and elegies, permeates almost all his writings. When he turned to divine love, the orientation of Donne's mind did not change. In his sermons, Donne is nearly always dramatically present. He was also obsessed with the idea of suicide, just as he was obsessed with his own disease and fate throughout the *Devotions*. Donne's quest for self-knowledge brings into play his egotism; it is ultimately directed to an achievement of personal identity which apparently becomes an end in itself. Donne's self-dramatization was probably part of his desire to define himself. The consequences of self-consciousness are traceable in Donne's attitude toward love and death and in his religious feelings.

Two critics extensively argued that Donne feared a personal annihilation at the moment of death in the *Devotions*. Mark Allinson alleges that '[a] central worry for Donne was that God himself, through Christ, had passively surrendered to death, to rise no more.'<sup>5</sup> Allinson's argument is that this fear of annihilation gave rise to a heroic self-image in Donne's prose work that permitted Donne to contest the abyss of death even when he strongly suspected the fight was futile. Besides Allinson, Robert N. Watson argues that 'Donne's fundamental concern about [the] Last Judgment is not whether God will forgive our sins, but instead whether He will restore our existence' and that Donne constructed 'a broadly consistent mythology [. . .] in order to reassure himself that the embrace of his body and mind was unbreakable.'<sup>6</sup> Watson's thesis is that critics 'have long mistaken failing to see that these secular love poems 'pursue immortality by an inventive system of substitution [of] love replacing death in the manageable universe of poetic creation.'<sup>7</sup> Matthew Horn also reads Donne's *Devotions* to argue that Donne is looking for permanency rather than encouragement and sublimation.<sup>8</sup>

The question I discuss would be: in his attempt for self-awareness, how does Donne, a male dominant viewer with varieties of approaches striving after selfhood, acknowledge love? Would it be divinely, earthly or psychoanalytically understood? Regardless the different notions about the nature love proposed in Donne's poems, they remain in the supplementary chain of interpretation of interpretation, since Donne as a self-centered person only defines love as it is interpreted in his consciousness not 'love as such, i.e. as it is.'

Derrida based on his critique of western logocentrism that determines the meaning of being by presence by means of reason writes his reading of Foucault on madness. The reason, for Derrida, gives presence and forms 'substance/essence/existence, the self-presence of cogito, consciousness, and subjectivity.'<sup>9</sup> The reason considered as the 'absolute logos,' for Derrida,

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<sup>5</sup> In 'Re-visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide,' *Mosaic*, No. 24 winter, 1991, pp. 31-46. p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> In *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the Early Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 157- 159.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the Early Renaissance*, p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> In 'John Donne, Godly Inscription, and Permanency of Self in Devotions upon Emergent Occasions,' *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2010, p. 367.

<sup>9</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University, 1976) p. 12.

is an infinite creative subjectivity. In his *Of Grammatology* and other works, Derrida makes a sensible argument that the work of logos is not the act of unveiling or giving presence to everything but it makes them absent or silent because the logos creates everything out of nothing and produces an illusory origin. The logos which also means 'word' puts silence on everything outside the human subjectivity. Derrida in 'Cogito and the History of Madness' argues that how we can allow the madness to speak while Foucault speaks on behalf of the madness. Foucault in his book on madness has tried to give a historical review that how the madness has been excluded and silenced by the discourse of the reason. According to Derrida, Foucault's history of madness has arrested the madness in the silence of discourse: 'The language of psychiatry, which is a monologue of reason on madness, could be established only on the basis of such a silence.'<sup>10</sup> The silence of the discourse is the work of the monologue of reason that speaks on the madness. Foucault believes that throughout his book he has run the theme linking the madness to the silence and has given voice to the silence of the madness. Derrida's critique of logocentrism, here, is applied on Foucault's archeology of this silence. The reason has excluded and forbidden the madness and any language giving voice to this silence is in the monologue of the reason: 'is not an archaeology, even of silence, a logic, that is, an organized language, a project, an order, a sentence, a syntax, a work?'<sup>11</sup> The silence of madness cannot be said in the logos of this book. Derrida proposes his resolution in this way that we should follow the madman down the road of his exile. We should reach an origin that precedes the split of the reason and the madness, a 'zero point determined by Descartes as Cogito.'<sup>12</sup> From this point of view, Derrida considers the madness as an inseparable part of Cogito. Hence, Cogito cannot be communicated or made to appear to another self.

Foucault in his reply to Derrida pronounces his objection that Derrida by revealing the limits and the contradictions of rational discourse as the foundation of philosophy rejects all knowledge within it. It is not enough by finding a defect in the founding relationship to philosophy to leave analyzing the historical material and criticizing all that is said within it. Foucault in his another objection defends himself and writes that Derrida supposes philosophy is the repetition of an illusory origin. The philosophical discourse disregards any event that happens in the order of the formation of knowledge, of institutions, of societies, etc.: 'He does not know the category of the singular events; it is therefore pointless for him to read that which occupies the essential part, if not the totality of my book: the analysis of an event.'<sup>13</sup> All these events, for Derrida, are a perpetual reduplication of that origin which is not originary at all and made by the reason or the logos. Foucault believes that he himself analyses the historical events that has constituted the history of madness and any event in its singularity is not the repetition of what the reason has made by illusion. In fact, the historical events constituting the madness are the same as the madness not something outside it, near or far from it. In this way, analyzing the historical material of the madness is not exterior to the madness but the madness itself. Unlike the way Derrida thinks the history of the madness is spoken by the reason, the historical events are the madness itself and it is the madness that reveals itself. In this sense, Foucault objects that Derrida limits everything to text and claims that there is nothing outside the text. For Foucault, Derrida neglects any relation to any exteriority: 'There are conditions and rules for the formation of knowledge to which

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<sup>10</sup> In *Writing and Difference* (translated by Alan Bass. London: Routledge, 1978), p. 40.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> In *History of Madness*, edited by Jean Khalifa, translated by Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 577.

philosophical discourse is subject, in any given period, in the same manner of any other form of discourse with rational pretention.<sup>14</sup>

Having this critical debate in mind, we are stimulated to think of 'love as it is' in one of Donne's poem 'The Paradox' in one of his major volume of work *Songs and Sonnets*. Positively, Donne as a poet of extraordinary variety – sensuality and spirituality, worldliness and godliness, coarseness and refinement – fails to have a poetic completeness. We should not lose the sudden flash which opens for us new treasures. This irregularity of genius reveals the depths of nature and life which we have never suspected before. Such personal strong intellectuality takes Donne to the point of undecidability in the poem 'The Paradox' which perplexes him – as its name suggests – so much that he confirms paradoxically what he has said in his other love poems. Of course, it does not seem to be paradoxical, since delving in to the stream of personal emotions intellectually and passionately results in the indecisiveness which illustrates the inability to say a thing as it is. Borrowing from Derrida's expression, the work of reason remains in silence as Donne has remained in this poem.

Beginning in a negative strategy, the poem 'The paradox' claims that no one can say that he is a lover. This is a decree coming in the first line of the poem which avows the main paradox, that is, when you speak of the presence of something, you are making it absent:

No lover saith, I love, nor any other  
Can judge a perfect lover ;  
He thinks that else none can or will agree,  
That any loves but he ;  
I cannot say I loved, for who can say  
He was kill'd yesterday.  
Love with excess of heat, more young than old,  
Death kills with too much cold ;  
We die but once, and who loved last did die,  
He that saith, twice, doth lie ;  
For though he seem to move, and stir a while,  
It doth the sense beguile.  
Such life is like the light which bideth yet  
When the life's light is set,  
Or like the heat which fire in solid matter  
Leaves behind, two hours after.  
Once I loved and died ; and am now become  
Mine epitaph and tomb ;  
Here dead men speak their last, and so do I ;  
Love-slain, lo ! here I die.

(*Poems of John Donne, 'The Paradox'*)

Neither a lover nor anyone else can say what the love is. Both the love and others are in a neither/nor condition while speaking about the love. Donne used the word 'say' for the lover and the word 'judge' for those who are not the lover. These two words seems different in the sense that the lover is expressing what he is experiencing as an original source and the one outside is judging because he is not experiencing. However, both are judging, as the judgment would be the act of speaking about something whether one is speaking about himself or others. The word 'judgment' in its Greek root means *Krit*. All people whether

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<sup>14</sup> In *History of Madness*, p. 578.

inside or outside the love criticize it; they never illustrate thatness of love. Rather, they deal with whatness, that is, the work of reason. There is still another point clear for Donne when he distinguishes saying from judging: he is aware of the primacy of the original experience. This is because in the whole poem he is disappointed of accessing any original experience. Moreover, the one who loves never thinks of the extent of perfection of his love, but this is the judge thinking idealistically or metaphysically. An original experience is as it is; it is not evaluated to be perfect or imperfect. There is no predicate for the original experience. But believing in inside/outside opposition makes the judgment possible. Even the lover cannot say because he is also speaking with himself about the love. Thinking of line five and six reveals that Donne is accepting the original experience as true: 'I cannot say I loved, for who can say/He was kill'd yesterday.' The one who say I love is not alive. The lover who is conscious of his love does not love. Here, thinking of Derrida would clarify the point. Derrida attempts to express that when someone is speaking with himself, he is not hearing himself speaking. In Derrida's expression: auto-affection would be hetero-affection; the experience of the same, that is, I am thinking about myself, is the experience of the other: insofar as I think about myself I am thinking of someone or something else at the same time.<sup>15</sup> The lover at the time of speaking about his own love which is apparently inseparable from him is actually speaking about something else. To put another way, the lover has distanced himself from the love, is now judging the whatness of love and killing its thatness, that is, the love in itself, as it is. The lover is not experiencing anything, since he is left behind dead in the past as lines seven and eight say: 'Love with excess of heat, more young than old/Death kills with too much cold.' The original experience belongs to the present not the past. The lover is living with a delay. He is not able to cross over this delay. It is clear for Donne, since he is using the past tense 'loved' and 'yesterday.' Therefore, to be conscious to be able to speak about something means death signifying the absence of being entirely.

Following the absence of being because of speaking about the love, the poem in lines nine and ten says: 'We die but once, and who loved last did die/He that saith, twice, doth lie.' The second paradox begins from these lines and continues to the end of the poem. To be a lover, you should not be conscious; you must die to have the original experience of the love. In other words, the lover is no longer conscious to be able to express his love, since he is already dead. Hence, there is only one death; once you love, you are dead and cannot express that you love. Love is the experience of death of consciousness. Here, we may think of Derrida's argument about the nature of concept, i.e., the act of conceptualization which is made by self-consciousness. Derrida writes: 'so if forgiveness happens, *if* it happens, it should exceed the order of presence, the order of being, the order of consciousness.'<sup>16</sup> Though Derrida writes on the concept of forgiveness, he is claiming the impossibility for any concept to be in itself. Reading Hegel from Derrida's view, being is conceived as giving presence to what the human's consciousness produces. The consciousness constitutes being by the process of making concepts: '(spirit) is in itself the movement which is cognition - the transformation of that in-itself into that which is for itself, of Substance into subject, of the object of *consciousness* into an object of self-consciousness, i.e. into an object that is just as much superseded, or into the *Concept*.'<sup>17</sup> The human's cognition transforms anything outside

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<sup>15</sup> In *The Animal that Therefore I am*, edited by Marie-Louise Mallet, translated by David Wills

(New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>16</sup> In *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 53.

<sup>17</sup> In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 488.

himself into a concept for his own interest. He deprives the substantiality of everything exterior in order to acquire self-consciousness. Once a concept is formed for something, it would not be the same as it is. Derrida criticizes this notion of being conceived as consciousness. The concepts made by the human's consciousness are problematic, since they are produced for the sake of self-interestedness: 'Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not to dissociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other'<sup>18</sup> Having this in mind, the 'I' cannot present the love as it is because he is subject to 'interest.' Thus, if the love is presented as such, the human must exceed being. In the last four lines, Donne writes that once I loved and died, I become my own epitaph and tomb. Then, I, a lover and a dead man, speak my last words that I am killed by the love! Here, I die. The lover is not alive to love another person or himself, if we are thinking of Freud's narcissism. In other words, Freudian speaking, human lives by attaching himself to an object of love. Whereas the lover does not need the narcissistic love. Rather, the love in itself and for itself occurs. Freud sees narcissism as the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation.<sup>19</sup> Freud asks: 'what makes it necessary at all for our mental life to pass beyond the limits of narcissism and to attach the libido to object?'<sup>20</sup> He answers: 'This necessity arises when the cathexis of the ego with libido exceeds a certain amount. A strong egoism is a protection against falling ill, but in the last resort we must begin to love in order not to fall ill, and we are bound to fall ill if we are unable to love.'<sup>21</sup> This illness equals death as Freud later considers the narcissistic system as the immortality of the ego. In more modern terminology, as Nikolaas Treurniet expresses, this relationship between the ego and the object would be self-object relationship.<sup>22</sup> Nikolaas explains that the object is a source of pleasure and he [the self] is dependent on the object for the fulfillment of his needs. In other words, the self-interest is at the heart of the self's immortality. John Donne goes away from this narcissistic immortality. Love kills the narcissistic immortality: 'Here dead men speak their last, and so do I; Love-slain, lo ! here I die.' This non-narcissistic love kills egoism.

Donne is thinking of the love in itself in some other poems in *Songs and Sonnets* such as 'Negative Love', a poem whose title predicts absence or non-being from the onset. This poem circles around a void center. The first six lines flourish the utterer's contempt for those who ignobly yield to the beauty of a fair body because entombed in a narcissistic self-object of love relationship. The speaker, then, sketches his own 'perfectest' original 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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<sup>18</sup> In *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, edited by John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> In 'On Narcissism: An Introduction,' in *On Metapsychology: the Theory of Psychoanalysis*, translated by James Strachey, Vol. 11 (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

If I know yet what I would have.  
If that be simply perfectest  
Which can by no way be expressed  
But negatives, my love is so.  
To all, which all love, I say no.  
If any who decipher best,  
What we know not, ourselves, can know,  
Let him teach me that nothing; this  
As yet my ease, and comfort is,  
Though I speed not, I cannot miss.

(*Poems of John Donne*, 'Negative Love')

What comes in lines 7 to 9 echoes the utterer's assertion in the first line, a silliness that is a nobler love which paradoxically is marked and strengthened by ignorance and impaired vision.<sup>23</sup> Unlike those who plainly know what they love, the speaker cannot recognize what he is experiencing but feeling only pleasure ('For may I miss'), not any frustration by having or not having his ill-defined 'craving' satisfied. Cleverly planned, he makes his love pass off as superior through a rhetorical twist, and in any case as genuine and full, paradoxically because of its absence of name and being clear of any definite object. He states merely that there can be such thing as love, free of content, deprived of a center giving it a place, shape and substance. Love without an object is no longer a concept and turns out to be nothing. Thus, the true nature the utterer discusses for his love is in fact a negative and hence non-existent substitute of love. He addresses a too hollowed out and absent center, an omnipresent negativity. He is experiencing an unrecognizable abyss. The pervasive negativity does not qualify nothingness at all.

The speaker invites any enlightened and hypothetical scholar of love ('any who decipher') to teach him this nothingness. He does not position himself as a wonderer seeking what others know, rather is sure already of the nothingness of the experience of love. This further is conjured up in lines 14 to 16 only for his insightful perceptions to be degraded. The utterer continues this point by postulating that love is not to be known ('what we know not'), be theorized on. Thus, any clarifying teaching on it simply amounts to thin air, to void or to 'nothing: 'Let him teach me that nothing.' True nature of love, the speaker states, cannot be confined to the human consciousness and nullifies any speech about it. In lines 11 and 12, he suggests that the only way to speak about it is to express it negatively. It cannot be illustrated as it is. In line 15, the phrase 'what we know not' refers to line 16 where 'nothing' definitely connotes the void, imposturous knowledge of love, that is, love in itself and for itself. While the utterer is aware that others are in the trap as he carefully established in lines 7 to 9, he ends up confirming the nothingness of his love and that of such ignorant lovers ('we' in line 15). What is hardly covered as the reality of the utterer's love in lines 7 to 9 is confirmed as non-being in lines 14 to 16, because it evades the boundaries of knowledge. It should be experienced only as it is.

Totally unworthy any love in lines 1 to 6 describes its object in full terms, whether it be physical or moral. The utterer even more radically opposes those whose all-embracing desires are likely to be satisfied by all women. Such longings, which all think that can potentially

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<sup>23</sup> Elaine Perez Zickler writes about lines 7-9: 'There is an admitted silliness or ignorance in the speaker's reasoning; but the original sense of silly, as happy or blessed, is present as well.' See 'Nor in nothing, nor in things': The Case of Love and Desire in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*, No.2, 1993, pp. 17-39.

fulfill them, are in fact put aside as inappropriate: ‘To all, which all love, I say no.’ If all speaking about love identifying its object positively fall short of being effective, there succeeds that the only acceptable way speaking about ‘[his] simply perfectest’ love and its object can only be phrased indirectly, with reference to what they are not. The utterer asserts this in lines 11-12, demanding that his love ‘can by no way be expressed / But negatives’. With their emphasis on the impossible direct phrasing of perfection, these two lines are suggestive of the ‘negative theology’ developed by Christian and non-Christian philosophers, whose efforts at characterizing absolute divinity ended up listing its negative attributes. They said only what it was not. However, in the poem such a negative theology contributes to further challenge the very existence of the utterer’s love. Guillaume Fourcade argues that ‘supposedly perfect, it cannot name its object so that, in an additional twist, it turns out to be ‘nothing’, since love cannot be a mere centre-free essence but requires an identified object.’<sup>24</sup> By quoting Sean Ford, Fourcade claims that Donne by tripping over his own scholastic arguments ‘pushes negative definition to its extremes to argue that denying all positive attributes ultimately leads to nothingness.’<sup>25</sup> But this nothingness does not deny the existence of love: ‘Let him teach me *that nothing* [my italic].’ Rather, it ‘speaks of love’ not ‘speaks about’ it. The former does not attempt to name love and its subject. The act of ‘speaking of’ avoids speaking about something in order that it could experience it. This act is opposite of the negative theology. Ironically, ‘that nothing’ implies that love cannot be spoken about but it must be experienced as it is. It means that love exists only in experience not in speech which refers to the act of consciousness. The negativity makes love absent instead of presenting it. In other words, Donne brushes aside this negatively speaking about love to open his way to present love as it is. What is love as it is? Derrida criticizes that Christian negative theology seemed to reserve beyond all positive predication and beyond all negation, even beyond being, some hyper-essentiality, a Being beyond being.<sup>26</sup> To the extent that it privileged some indestructible unity or presence, according to Derrida, it must be subject to deconstruction. In other words, the negative theology presumes some reality as existing behind all negations – a reality that the negations reveal. That reality for Derrida is the call of the Other that precedes all speech:

Even if one speaks and says nothing, even if an apophatic discourse deprives itself from meaning or of an object, it takes place. That which committed or rendered it possible *has taken place*. The possible absence of a referent still beckons, if not toward the thing of which one speaks (such is God, who is nothing because He takes place, *without place, beyond Being*), at least toward the other (other than Being) who calls or to whom this speech is addressed – even if it speaks only in order to speak, or to say nothing. This call of the other, having always already preceded the speech to which it has never been present a first time, announces itself in advance as a *recall*. Such a reference to the other will always have taken place. Prior to any proposition and even before all

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<sup>24</sup> In ‘Traces of Nothing: self-reflecting acts of writing in John Donne’s love poems,’ *Études Épistémè*, No. 21, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. For a detailed study of Augustine’s, Pseudo-Dionysius’ and Nicholas of Cusa’s contributions to ‘negative theology’ along with a contextual analysis of Donne’s use of the word ‘nothing’ in relation to the *via negativa*, see Sean Ford, ‘Nothing’s Paradox in Donne’s ‘Negative Love’ and ‘A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy’s Day,’ *Quidditas*, No. 22, 2001, pp. 99-113.

<sup>26</sup> In *Derrida and Negative Theology*, edited by Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 77.

discourse in general – whether a promise, prayer, praise, celebration.<sup>27</sup>

Any referent in Derrida's thinking never begins in a first time before any speech. Any referent is beginningless. The beginningless referent is other than a being, non-locatable which is not to be presented or represented in any discourse. It is an event occurring through calling and never becomes a being. In the traditional philosophy, we always speak of a kind of first principle or an origin that is always conceived as self-identical (again something like a Garden of Eden principle). Yet, here we see that the origin is immediately divided as if it falls into division, accidents, and empirical events or experiences. It has always already taken place. In *Of Spirit*, Derrida calls this kind of origin 'origin-heterogeneous': the origin is heterogeneous immediately.<sup>28</sup> 'Such is God, who is nothing,' since He is the Other prior to any proposition. Love in Donne's poem is addressed to as a beginningless referent, a 'nothing,' the Other. It is immemorial, unknowable, untouchable and unreachable. These are characterizing the Other prior to any signification. In this condition, love as it is would not be a concept or notion that could be made by the human consciousness.

## Conclusion

Donne's 'The Paradox' and 'Negative love' are confessions of a poet who in his other love poems has consumed all his poetical thinking to represent love. These confessions lay Donne's mind for a reader open to see the otherness of any referent represented by the human conception. Donne tired of extending knowledge about love challenges any knowledge acquired. The paradox within any knowledge (and within Donne's mind) reveals that it is nothing but a lie imposed on anything the human intended to study.

The last step before ending up with the paradox for Donne is the negative theology through which one thinks as if he is able to present something as it is. Through this negativity, Donne confesses the impossibility of saying unsayable, i.e. love as such. For him, the language of unsayable avoids speaking. This language as the only way for him tries to negate the negations of the negative theology (which states what love is not) in order to confirm the presence of love as the Other, a heterogeneous origin. The language of unsayable de-negates the negations.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>28</sup> In *Of Spirit*, translated by Rachel Bowlby, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), pp. 107-108.

<sup>29</sup> This de-negation is different from what Derrida argues in his essay 'How to Avoid Speaking.' There Derrida discusses the negative theology by means of the idea of 'dénégation,' 'denegation' or 'denial.' The French word 'dénégation' translates Freud's term 'Verneinung.' Both words' prefixes imply an emphasis of negation (although the French prefix also implies a negation of a negation). Yet, within psychoanalysis and in particular in Freud, the term, 'Verneinung' implies that when the patient denies a desire or wish, he or she has indicated to the analyst precisely what he or she unconsciously desires or wishes. The denial then functions as a sort of disguised confirmation of the analyst's interpretation of the patient's symptoms or problem. In short, and this is what Derrida is most interested in, psychoanalysis has isolated a negation which is in fact an affirmation. The fundamental question then for negative theology, but also for psychoanalysis, and for Derrida is how to deny and yet also *not* deny. This duality between not telling and telling is why Derrida takes up the idea of the secret. See Lawlor, Leonard, "Jacques Derrida", *The Stanford*

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*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL =  
<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/derrida/>>.

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