



The Traces of Hermeticism in John Donne's *An Anatomy of the World*

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Abstract

The highlighted purpose of the present study lies on the traces of Hermeticism in John Donne's celebrated poem, *An Anatomy of the World*. Since Donne was one of the seventeenth-century poets and a highly significant poet in the metaphysical school of poetry, his poems explore the realms of philosophy, theology, popular science, and also the idea of Platonic love in his love poetry. Hermeticism is an ancient idea which focuses on spiritual, philosophical, and magical tradition. This school of thought concentrates on the path of spiritual growth. It believes that human beings return to a state of unity by the spiritual journey. With reference to this idea, this study explores the elements of Hermeticism in the lines of *An Anatomy of the World* in order to grasp the idea of spiritual journey and unification in that Donne in this poem centers on a profound quest and spiritual journey of the soul that goes to heaven.

Keywords

Donne, Hermeticism, *An Anatomy of the World*, Spiritual journey, Unification

1. Introduction

John Donne (1572 – 1631) was an English poet and cleric in the Church of England. He was the leader of the metaphysical school of poetry in the seventeenth century. The doctrines and framework of thought of this school of poetry fully represent the period in which Donne lived. With reference to this idea Donne's poetry indicates

In a time of scientific exploration and discovery, his experimentation with content and style reflects an interest in the new rather than the traditional. He treats poetic subjects such as love and religion in an unconventional way: his poems are full of original ideas and often revolve around a central paradox in which he challenges conventional morality. In a time that values the individual, his poems



clearly establish an idiosyncratic voice speaking about personal experiences and attitudes. (Thorne 144)

Since Donne was the founder an appealing school of thought, his poetry brings some characteristic features to this group. The first premise of this school is that they concentrate on a rather startling argument. Furthermore, they tend to employ brief and closely woven doctrines. Also, they are in fond of using conceits (i.e. far-fetched comparison to define and prove the point) in the idea of philosophy, theology and popular science. In this regard their tone is paradoxical and the treatment is argumentative and dialectic.

Metaphysical poets include John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, John Cleveland, Henry Vaughan, and Abraham Cowley. As a matter of fact, all these groups of poets were a priest, doctor of the church, and courtier. All of them were influenced by the Catholic church and St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas Aquino (1225 – 1274), whom the Catholic Church honored as a saint, was regarded as the model teacher for those studying for the priesthood, philosophy and theology. Furthermore, St. Thomas Aquinas addressed relevant social behavior toward God. He was the founding thinker of Thomism, which was a school that concentrated on the essence of God. St. Aquinas was strongly influenced by Hermes Trismegistos, the great Egyptian god of wisdom and Magic. Herms's idea concentrates on knowledge and the way through which knowledge leads to a firm faith. Hermeticism takes its name from Hermes. The followers of this school center on the unification of human beings by the spiritual journey. In fact, they tried to find the proper connections between things that appear far apart, that is why metaphysical poets use metaphors to find connections (Ijhammond).

As Samuel Johnson in *The Life of the Poets* claimed, these poets were men of learning, and depicted their learning and idea in their poetry; that is why Donne's poetry represents his idea and beliefs in his poetry. For elaborating this idea Mackenzi's belief is the best example "Donne's religious poetry is notably varied in quality and informs" (Mackenzie 75). Hence, this research tries to find the traces of Hermeticism school in his mentioned poem. Although An Anatomy of the World is one the occasional poems which focuses on Elizabeth Drury's death, one can find in this poem the elements of Hermeticism.



2. Hermeticism

Hermeticism is a primaevael spiritual and magical belief. It is a way of the spiritual journey. This school takes the name from the god Hermes (Egyptian god of Wisdom and Magic). One of the principles of this school is that the world is one, and all parts of the world are connected to each other. Hence there is a relationship between macrocosm and microcosm and human beings find their true existence in beyond this world. In addition to, all earthly things are connected to heavenly things. As regards Hermeticism is not separated science, in fact:

Hermeticism is not a science which differs from other science or which even opposes itself to them. No more is it a religion. It is a uniting – in the inner forum of personal and intimate consciousness – of revealed truth with truth acquired through human endeavour. Being a synthesis- intimate and personal for each person – of religion and science, it cannot rival either the one or the other. (Meditation *on the Tarot*, 198)

Hermeticism is not a dogmatic school of thought and spiritual system. It is a diversity of all knowledge in order to take unification from all parts of the world. With reference to this idea, this study considers some of the principles of this school to investigate the idea. Above all Hermeticism:

- Considers humanity to be on a spiritual journey to return to a state of unity
 - With the Divine; this is the great work of humankind.
 - Holds that if we would attain to the Divine, we must aspire to the Divine;
 - Spiritual growth cannot be achieved without human effort
 - Holds that the Divine is both immanent and transcendent
 - Holds that the universe is Divine and basically good
 - Urge those who seek the divine to also seek balance in embracing all things.
- (Forrest 1-2)

In Hermetism, the Divine is the entire thing in that it is the cause behind the interconnection between below and above (i.e. the earth and heaven). Therefore, all things and spirit, heaven and earth, day and night, as a matter of fact, all polarities have the balance to grow. Consequently, Hermeticism school has an optimistic view toward



the world and Divine, because they believe that both of them are in an interactional relationship to all creatures reach unification with other parts. It argues that human beings has fallen from heaven to more bless, because of it necessary for the spiritual journey, in fact, this world prepare humankind for spiritual growth. This spiritual journey hence embraces balance.

3. Textual Analysis

An Anatomy of the World is the title of a poem by John Donne. It is an occasional poem which centres on the death of Elizabeth Drury (1596- 1610), the lady who was beautiful and heiress. Drury, Sir Robert Drury's daughter, is dead because of maternal roles. In fact, Donne in this poem depicts the idea of Hermeticism. From the very beginning part of the poem Donne focuses on a collection of unsuccessful birth. Although he concentrates on unsuccessful birth, to him death is a fresh start for the spiritual journey. Since death is, to Donne, a metamorphosis or transcend to another position, Drury's death is thus a conceit for a world where prepare human beings for another world. To him, this world is as a womb to birth a soul and the birth depending on death.

From the beginning part of the poem Donne emphasizes on the death and spiritual journey. Two principles of Hermeticis, including first the centre of the universe is divine and basically good, and, secondly, spiritual growth cannot be achieved without human effort, could be clearly observed in the first lines of the poem:

When that rich soul which to her heaven is gone,
Whom all do celebrate, who know they have one
(For who is sure he hath a soul, unless
It see, and judge, and follow worthiness,
And by deeds praise it? He who doth not this,
May lodge an inmate soul, but 'tis not his)
When that queen ended here her progress time,
And, as t' her standing house, to heaven did climb. (1-8)

Although in these lines Donne describes his feeling to Elizabeth's death, he factually focuses on this idea that she goes to heaven to the high position. In fact, she moves from below to above. To him, Elizabeth's virtue is enough to spiritual journey when he points out to her deeds. It appears as if he wants to take the attention to her actions which help



her for this journey and her new birth in heaven. In the other lines of the poem he indicates that soul directly knows the way of heaven, because the soul tries to reach unification as Hermeticism school illustrates spiritual journey leads the soul to a state of unity with the Divine to seek balance in embracing all things:

So spacious and large, that every soul
Did a fair kingdom, and large, that every soul
Did a fair kingdom, and large realm control;
And when the very stature, thus erect,
Did that soul a good way toward heaven direct. (123-126)

Throughout the whole poem, Donne is involved with the conception of death. One can find the traces of death in all parts, which is the reason for journey. He wants to say this world not only a preparation for another world, but also is a cage that our soul is into it, and human beings should open the door to arrive in another world to unity in that he believes human beings belong to a realm beyond the concrete world. As a matter of fact, Donne's poem is not only a consolation for himself and other to sedation their grief, but also to confirm his idea of Hermeticism. He also gives an example of Nature cycling in order to obtain unity.

Donne reflects on the similarity between what happens to the spring and summer and what happens to sons of women after fifty. Indeed, in these lines, he indicates that microcosm and macrocosm are based on the rule of unification which in this line the traces of Hermeticism is clearly tangible in the idea of desire to seek the divine in order to attain balance. Furthermore, in the last lines of the poem Donne depicts that:

She to whom this world must itself refer,
As suburbs or the microcosm of her,
She, she is dead; she's dead: when thou know'st this,
Thou know'st how lame a cripple this world is.

He concentrates on this fact that she should leave the sublunary world in order to arrive at the superlunary world in that this is the rule of life which is based on the coming and going. To him this world is a preliminary life to eternity. The microcosm is a womb which the human beings are born into macrocosm. As a matter of fact, to him, mankind



is surprisingly dead when s/he is born; s/he is really born when s/he is dead, which is the core idea of a spiritual journey to return to a state of unity.

4. Conclusion

This study claims that *An Anatomy of the World* carries the traces of Hermeticism in that Donne in this poem directs that this world is nothing and it is the pre-step for another world. Hence, it is a way for arriving at transcendent step. In all lines of the poems, he centres on this idea that we should come to this world to obtain experience and some virtues to prepare for spiritual journey, also we should die because we do not belong to the microcosm; in fact, we belong to the macrocosm where the human beings obtain unification with other creatures because of the divine aspect of the Nature of human beings. He wants to contend that human beings should do not sorrow for the death of your darlings and other creatures because their death is a kind of rebirth in heaven where mankind attains eternity. He not only tries to list Elizabeth Drury's virtues but also to convey his idea to this temporary world. Last of all death is a necessary part for human beings in the microcosm in order to reach unification.



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