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## Contrasts in Metaphysical Writing: John Donne and Emily Dickinson

### Summary

This paper starts by stating what metaphysical poetry is, what its characteristics are, and who the metaphysical poets are. Later the paper focuses on Emily Dickinson's poetry and confirms the thesis that she can be considered a metaphysical poet. The third thing the paper deals with is to what extent Donne's and Dickinson's poetry as well as Donne's Sermons correspond to the Calvinist theology, which is the common credo of the Churches to which they belong. A further issue the paper debates about is rhetorical devices in the metaphysical service.

The last aspect of Donne's and Dickinson's writing that the essay explores is their attitude towards truth.

**Key words:** metaphysical poetry, Calvinism, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, rhetorical devices

## Kotrasti metafizične pisave: John Donne in Emily Dickinson

### Povzetek

Članek v svojem začetku pojasni, kaj je metafizična poezija, katere so njene značilnosti in kdo so bili metafizični pesniki. Nato se članek osredotoči na poezijo Emily Dickinson in potrdi tezo, da je ona tudi metafizična pesnica. Tretja stvar, ki jo esej obravnava je, do katere meje poezija Johna Donna in Emily Dickinson odraža kalvinistično teologijo, ki predstavlja skupno veroizpoved Cerkev, ki jima oba avtorja pripadata. Naslednja zadeva, ki se je članek loteva, so retorične oz. pesniške figure v službi metafizične književnosti.

Zadnji vidik, ki je predmet razprave, pa je odnos obeh avtorjev do resnice.

**Ključne besede:** metafizična poezija, Calvinizem, John Donne, Emily Dickinson, retorične figure

# Contrasts in Metaphysical Writing: John Donne and Emily Dickinson

## 1. Introduction

As T.S. Eliot (1934, 281–2) acknowledges in his essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” the revival of study of the group of writers now called the metaphysical poets began with Grierson’s anthology of 17th century English poems. Eliot finds it difficult not only to define the term “metaphysical poetry,” but also to enumerate the poems which show the quality of such writing. It is no easier to single out the poets of the school. He, however, finds a potentially common characteristic of this kind of poetry, saying: “Donne, and often Cowley, employ a device which is sometimes considered characteristically ‘metaphysical’; the elaboration . . . of a figure of speech to the furthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it” (ibid., 282).

To enumerate more characteristics of metaphysical poets and their poetry it is wise to turn to authors writing less favourably of them, since the features of their writing can be extracted from a negative critique too. Johnson writes in his *The Life of Cowley* that “the metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour” (Hammond 1974, 50). He detects the poets’ use of wit too, but in an undesirable way. “The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art ransacked for illustrations, comparison and allusions; their learning instructs . . .” (ibid., 51). Because, according to Johnson, their poetry was all about the rational, they failed to convey a genuine sentiment to the readership. They were observers of, not partakers in the themes they explored; the poetry was didactic (ibid., 51–2). Johnson is therefore offended by the ingenuity of bringing incompatible subjects together. He has a classical sensibility and looks for decorum. The metaphysicals, however, appeal to a modern reader precisely because they are not classical. The surprise of near-paradox pleases the postmodern palate (Gadpaille 1999–2006). The four most widely-known metaphysicals were John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Richard Crashaw and Andrew Marvell.

If, so far, I have talked about the features of the poetry and poets influenced by Donne, it is now time to supply a definition of metaphysical poetry, i.e. the poetry of 17th century England. Simple in form, yet extremely rounded is the definition of Grierson. As we are about to see, Grierson formed his definition by putting it into the context of the European corpus of literary history and history of thought. Grierson (1921, 1) saw metaphysical poetry as poetry that “has been inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence”.

Moving to more modern critical approaches, let us consider some lucid remarks by another scholar in the field. In the introduction to *Four Metaphysical Poets*, Joan Bennett (1953, 2) states that “the word ‘metaphysical’ refers to style, rather than subject matter,” and she adds “but style reflects an attitude of experience”. Bennett agrees with other critics of metaphysical poetry that these poets reshaped the experience in an intellectual way. The poets “looked for a connection between their emotion and mental concepts.” These relations were more often logical rather

than sensuous. They connected the abstract with the concrete, the remote with the near, and the sublime with the ordinary (ibid., 3).

The last aspect of the definition of metaphysical is given by John Donne himself in his April 20, 1630 sermon, where he speaks about a Christian person thus: “In regenerate man, all is Metaphysicall, supernaturall” (BYU, 18). By regenerate, he means a person rejuvenated in his spirit, who has experienced a Resurrection and thus has Easter every day (BYU).

## 2. Dickinson as metaphysical poet

Emily Dickinson can be classified as a metaphysical poet for reasons of style and subject explained by Bennet (see above). Style is crucial to the definition of metaphysical, because method and epistemology cohere (Gadpaille 2006). In 1961 Judith Banzer published an essay entitled ‘Compound Manner’: Emily Dickinson and the Metaphysical Poets. The author spots the similarity in matter and style between the verses of Donne and Herbert, on the one hand, and Emily Dickinson’s, on the other (418).

Having been brought up in the strict religious atmosphere of her home in Amherst, Dickinson’s meditations included topics such as mortality, the temporal presence of God, i.e. God’s effects on the material world, and the relationship between a person and God and his creation (417). Let us take an example of Dickinson’s poetry to establish initially that her poems deserve to be called metaphysical:

The daisy follows soft the Sun,  
 And when his golden walk is done,  
 Sits shyly at his feet.  
 He, waking, finds the flower near.  
 “Wherefore, marauder, art thou here?”  
 “Because, sir, love is sweet!”

We are the Flower, Thou the Sun!  
 Forgive us, if as days decline,  
 We nearer steal to Thee, –  
 Enamored of the parting West,  
 The peace, the flight, the amethyst,  
 Night’s possibility! (Dickinson 2003, 204)

Read metaphysically, this daisy is an ordinary person with the pious desire to follow God till the end of his days. The figure of speech used in this case is a conceit; it changes a common man into a daisy and the Sun into God and by the means of analogy shows what their relationship is like. What is more, there is an allusion made to pagan rituals of Sun worship which then, in the second stanza, is transformed into the Christian speaker’s everyday practice. The faithful are equated with a “Marauder,” which only adds to the ingenuity of the conceit in the sense that this is an extraordinary comparison. It sets up an atmosphere of slight annoyance from the Sun’s – that is, God’s – point of view. Surprisingly for a common person, the daisy speaker of the

second stanza is not repelled by being called this name. The need to stay in the presence of the Sun is so strong that it entails enduring even less favourable remarks. In reading the poem this way, one is also able to detect that it is about mortality: “as days decline,” “parting West,” as well as about the universal order according to the Christian theology and Pagan practice.

Banzer states that Dickinson shares with the seventeenth century poets their “passionate interest in the microcosm of the self, whose ‘polar privacy’ was peopled with thoughts and emotions which supplied data of existence and stuff of art.” The emphasis is on “polar.” It signifies her showing two opposite states of mind, two poles, when writing poetry. The school-of-Donne scholars were similarly divided, between “scepticism and faith, desire and renunciation, optimism and despair...” The outcome of contradictory emotions and ideas was the “poetry of paradox, argument, and unifying conceits” (417). Dickinson uses the very same elements in her poetry. For instance, in the poem “I went to heaven” Dickinson uses an idea that challenges the notion of Paradise being a place of eternal bliss:

Almost contented  
I could be  
‘Mong such unique  
Society. (Dickinson 2003, 215–6)

The adverb “almost” expresses the author’s scepticism about heavenly life. It reflects a discrepancy between one’s self and the common Christian theological conception of the afterlife.

Doubt and argument were also themes expressed by Donne. In the “Holy Sonnet IX”, the persona questions God’s judgement: “If lecherous goats, if serpents envious/ Cannot be damn’d; alas, why should I bee” (lines 3–4). Goats and serpents stand for the Goat and the Serpent, i.e. the Devil, as well for the animals which possess the characteristics named above. The speaker, meditating on the subject of sinfulness, comes at this stage to a comparison of the ultimate evil (Devil), moderate evil (animalistic foulness) and themselves. In the first eight lines the author argues that their being sinful is not the reason for their condemnation. There is a possible allusion here to Genesis and God’s instruction to the two original people: “rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth” (Gen 1:28), and to Jesus’ speech on trust: “Behold the birds of the air, for they neither sow, nor do they reap, nor gather into barns: and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not you of much more value than they?” (Mt 6:26). It is therefore illogical for humans to be damned if they are masters of all animals, and more worthy than them, as Jesus openly says. No matter how strong the persona’s rational argument might be, they soon sober up and retreat to a position that Cefalu calls “filial fear” (2003, 72).

According to Banzer, Dickinson and Donne are alike in their insights and techniques. They both take delight in the divided joys of earth and non-material phenomena; they both seek to fuse these (1961, 418). A typical example from Donne is the final couplet of the “Holy Sonnet XIII”. “To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign’d/ This Beauteous forme assumes a piteous mind” (13–4). In this case a body and a spirit compose an interconnected unit. Or better said, one’s mind (or spirit) affects the body. Paraphrasing the statement, this means that people who do good things are also beautiful, and the ones who are evil are of “horrid” looks. If we take the original meaning of the

Greek word *psyche*, soul, the cited example shows psychosomatics in its literal sense. The process might be reversed as well, as is done in “Holy Sonnet II”, where the persona addresses God and explains what they are in the relationship to him: “I am . . . /Thy sheepe, thine Image, and till I betray’d/My selfe, a temple of thy Spirit divine (5, 7–8). Here the body is poisoned by sin, and therefore the Holy Spirit cannot live in it anymore. The body, with its attribute of mortality and its inclination towards sin, has affected the immortal component. This fusion of the components of a person, and the relationship between a human being and God are common characteristics of metaphysical poetry. Microcosm and macrocosm mutually affect each other; God as creator controls them both, and a microcosm’s relationship towards its creator is, in works of literature, artistically ambivalent. In other words: Dickinson and Donne “addressed God familiarly with petulance, awe, and passion as a divine lover”, as Banzer states (1961, 418).

### 3. Two carriers of the Calvinist flag

Although these two authors come from different eras, their writing expresses strikingly similar ideas concerning religious belief. After all, they are both Calvinists. One of the key beliefs in the life of Calvinists is the conviction that God made a decision at one’s birth as to whether or not he would be glorified. This phenomenon is called predestination. A term that also refers to the predestinate status of a person is “election” (Cefalu 2003, 76–7).

Let us consider two examples of this credo in Donne’s writing: “first I was made/By thee, and for thee” (Donne, 434, “Holy Sonnet I”, 3–4) and “God . . . hath deign’d to chuse thee by adoption . . .” (Donne, “Holy Sonnet XV”, 3, 7). Note the key phrases: “for thee”, “chuse” and “adoption”. They denote the security of being elected. I shall consider them more closely in order to prove this. Firstly, if someone is made “for” God, they had to be chosen or elected, otherwise “the order” for that person’s creation would not have been placed at all. Secondly, being chosen is the result of God’s choosing – no further debate needed; and thirdly, being adopted here means elected, and since adoption is, as well as election, an act of one’s own volition, God’s will was done by God himself, and the person is therefore surely predestined to go to heaven.

Even clearer evidence of Donne’s belief in our having a place in heaven, and thus evidently having been elected, is in the sermon preached on Whitsunday, a holiday, when the arrival of the Holy Spirit is celebrated, from 1630:

By this will [he means Christ’s final will, promise] then, . . . having given them [i.e. his Apostles] so great a Legacy, as a place in the kingdom of heaven, . . . he gives more, he gives them evidence by which they should maintain their right to that kingdom, that is, the testimony of . . . the Holy Ghost . . .” (BYU, 1)

From this excerpt we are able to see that the motifs of election recur in the prose, being stated there even more clearly, as prose is usually less metaphorical than poetry. We have here then Christ’s promise that we have a place in heaven and that the constant presence of the Holy Spirit who will not let us lose our faith and consequently make our booking in heaven invalid.

Dickinson is confident about the reality of election as well:

Far from love the Heavenly Father  
Leads the chosen child,  
Oftener through realm of briar  
Than the meadow mild.

Oftener by the claw of dragon  
Than the hand of friend  
Guides the little one predestined  
To the native land. (Dickinson 2003, 285)

In this case a human being is “chosen” and “predestined”. The meaning of the adjectives above is interchangeable. The person is by all means meant to be glorified.

However, election is not a guarantee of glorification; it is only the first step. To reach it one has to go through these interdependent, yet discrete stages: first, election, then calling, justification, adoption, sanctification, and last comes glorification. Election is explained above. Calling means God’s awakening in a person, perhaps by means of feeling desperately sinful. Justification refers to God’s assigning one the attribute of righteousness. Adoption is the penitent’s being aware that they are a child of God. Sanctification is a gradual repairing of the damaged image of God in the soul, and glorification means the total restoration of the image of God in a person (Cefalu 2003, 76–7).

With these stages – perhaps all were not known to Dickinson since she was not ordained – comes the fear of not being able to pass them all. Donne especially in his Holy Sonnets is concerned about his soul being saved, while Dickinson expresses more optimistic, sometimes even loving attitude towards death and eternity. However, they both scrupulously meditate upon these two subjects. Donne’s Holy Sonnets are even called Divine Meditations. Fear is one of the emotions that the persona in Donne’s as well as Dickinson’s poetry expresses. Cefalu speaks about the two types of fear: servile and filial fear. ‘Servile’ fear is “the fear of reprobation that predominates in unredeemed sinners but may also be experienced by the saints,” while “reverential or ‘filial’ fear [is] the elects’ fear of backsliding during sanctification” (72). While there can be traces of servile fear found in the Holy Sonnets, Dickinson lacks these. The passages below illustrate the type of Calvinistic fear and its intensity:

I read my sentence steadily,  
Reviewed with my eyes,  
To see that I made no mistake  
In its extremest clause, –  
  
The date, and manner of the shame,  
And then the pious form  
That “God have mercy” on the soul  
The jury voted him.

I made my soul familiar  
With her extremity,  
That at last it should not be  
A novel agony . . . (Dickinson 2003, 211)

This example illustrates filial fear. Dickinson puts her persona in a court of law, where they are in the position of the defendant. They read the sentence and want to check whether they understand its most severe provisions. The provision we can interpret as the strictest penalty for their sins. Later, the persona meditates upon their sins to become fully aware of them, in order not to suffer the new pains when death comes. In the *Holy Sonnets* meditation upon one's own sins is practised all the time; it is essential to one's forgiveness, since Protestants do not have a confessor to go to and tell him their sins. These meditations also occur in Protestant journals, as evident in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which has the form of one such journal.

Whatever offences Dickinson's persona has made, the soul does not worry about suffering from imminent death. Yet there is anticipation mixed with the fear, since the last stanza begins with the anxiety-relieving conjunction "but," which juxtaposes the whole procedure preceding it:

But she and Death, acquainted,  
Meet tranquilly as friends,  
Salute and pass without a hint –  
And there the matter ends. (Dickinson 2003, 211)

There is relief felt when the transition passes without any problems, and Death does not question or punish the soul at all. But this relief speaks for a low degree of filial fear. Cefalu's servile fear is not present. Why is the filial fear so low? Because of self-knowledge. It is this knowledge that overrides the fear. In this aspect Dickinson differs from Donne, since he, although aware of his defects in the sight of God, is unable to overcome, or lessen the fear and desperation by himself; he always asks for divine help, like in this "Holy Sonnet IV":

Oh my black soul! Now thou art summoned  
By sickness, death's herald, and champion;  
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done  
Treason, and durst not turn to whence hee is fled,  
Or like a thief, which till death's doome be read,  
Wisheth himself delivered from prison;  
But damn'd and hal'd to execution,  
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned;  
Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;  
But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?  
Oh make thyself with holy mourning blacke,  
And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;  
Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might  
That being red, it dyes red soules to white. (Donne 1991, 436)

Here Donne is aware of two facts: that his soul is black, i.e. burdened with sin, and that he is about to die. He elaborates much more than Dickinson on his soul's feelings. They are embodied in a metaphysical conceit, which is in this case expressed through similes. The soul is compared to a pilgrim and a thief. As the pilgrim is afraid to return abroad, because he committed some crime there, and the thief wants to stay imprisoned rather than be executed, so is 'our' soul afraid to see and meet God, and wants to stay as long as possible in a body to avoid the final judgement.

Then comes the turn, which is in Donne's case the result of the Holy Sonnets' being Italian sonnets; it is the turn in theme and tone after the octave. While the octave is descriptive and relatively objective, the sestet changes into a modest plea for forgiveness and divine intervention. Dickinson, however, does not use any such poetic form that would by itself induce thematic and tonal switches, yet such switches occur in the second part of her poems, as shown in the example cited above.

The filial fear and despair are visible only in the octave, and they gain in intensity by means of the extended metaphor. The two anti-heroes, a pilgrim and a thief, as well as their stories, make the woe of the soul twofold, when compared with Dickinson's legal process, since the soul, in the former case, identifies with them. The legal process is, indeed, a metaphor too; however, it stands for a single occasion, which is reading one's sentence. What Dickinson's poem lacks in intensity of feeling conveyed, it gains in the ingenious ambivalence of chosen vocabulary, and thus makes "I read my sentence steadily" (1) one of the best examples of wit. What I have in mind is that words "sentence", "mistake" and "clause" can be understood in the judicial as well as in the grammatical context. Each context gives the poem a certain tone, the former a serious one, the latter a slightly comic one – as if God additionally punished somebody for making grammar or elocution mistakes. On the other hand, punctuation and vocabulary mistakes can indeed alter 'both' sentences and here for the persona the situation becomes serious again. One wishes not to be dishonest towards themselves and especially not Death, which is in this case personified and consequently made an animate creature with even such a response.

#### **4. Rhetorical and other devices in the metaphysical service**

The works of Dickinson and Donne should be viewed in a literary context. Basically, literary language is metaphorical language. At least two notions are combined in it: the one which conveys sincere and personal emotions of authors and personae, and the one, the purpose of which is to create literature. The position of both notions is combined in the phrase "sincere insincerity". The phrase is borrowed from Venko Taufer's lecture given in 2000 at the University of Ljubljana's (Slovenia) Theological Faculty in Maribor. The thought that Taufer wanted to present is that, although an author incorporates his/her genuine emotions and thoughts into a work of art, the work is insincere because of the nature of such work. It is artificial, because it is meant to be such. A thing cannot be natural and art (cultural) at the same time; and since the work of art is altered for the sake of artistic values, it cannot be completely sincere. By alteration, I mean mainly rhetorical devices, i.e. figures of speech. There are also stylistic devices present in literature, such as the care for sublime in the poems, as well as the struggle towards the refinement of poetry, for instance *Carmen Figuratum* poems. Figures of speech can be studied, but their sensible application requires a craftsman. The refinement of poetry, on the other hand, calls for abilities such as wit, and the sense of decorum; in this case there is an artist needed. The section that follows will try to throw more light on the poetic mechanism spoken of above.

It can be said, with reference to "Holy Sonnet IV" and "I read my sentence steadily", that where Dickinson stops using wit is the place where Donne takes it to the utmost sphere. After

“but”, Dickinson’s play on words ceases, whereas Donne uses the turning point after the octave to bring about a conglomerate of colour imagery and parallelism. Let us dissect this rhetorical block. In the sestet we are let known that the persona’s soul is black. In the octave this colour imagery recurs. This speaks for a parallelism and anacalasis: on the one hand, we have a black, i.e. sinful soul and on the other, black as the colour of mourning, since black has a different meaning in the repetition in the second case, this is a figure of speech called anacalasis. It occurs as well in the cases of “red with blushing” and “[red] as thou art with sin” (12), where red in the first example stands for embarrassment, while in the second it suggests serious crime against God and/or a human being with a possible association with the phrase “red handed” in its literal or metaphorical meaning. Certainly ‘red’ in the latter sense implies some connection to blood, the blood of wrongdoing. All these contrasting instances of colour imagery create the feeling of the illogicality of Christian faith, the climax being the paradox: “That being red, it dyes red soules to white” (14). To a secular eye, blood is something unpleasant to look at, and it cannot dye a red thing white; on the contrary, to the faithful it represents the remembrance of Christ’s last supper, and his suffering on the cross, and it is drunk symbolically as wine by the Catholics, or at least by the priest, during every Holy Communion. In this sense it is a soul’s remedy.

Indeed, the above quotation comes very close to that of Tertullian, the African Church Father, who stated: “Credo quia absurdum est”, meaning: “I believe because it is absurd”, and thus promoted the irrationalistic approach to religious truths (Counterbalance Interactive Library). The couplets of the *Holy Sonnets* often follow this pattern by singling out the paradoxes: “And burne me o Lord, with fiery zeale/Of thee and thy house, which in eating heale” (V, 13–4), “One short sleep past, wee wake eternally/And death shall be no more, death, thou shalt die” (X, 13–4), “. . . for I/Except you’ enthrall mee, never shall be free/Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee” (XIV, 13–4), and, referring to Church, “Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then/When she’is embrac’d and open to most men” (XVIII, 13–4). All these refer to the Bible or to generally accepted Christian religious truths.

Dickinson’s paradoxes are not as clear and dense as Donne’s; hence they are more difficult to recognize. They can flow through her poems like a *fil rouge* as in the poems: “Going to heaven!”, “A death-blow is a life-blow to some” and “I think just how my shape will rise” (Dickinson 2003, 208–9, 210–11, 231, ll. 1,1,1).

The citations of the couplets from the “Holy Sonnets V, X, XIV and XVIII”, which can be paraphrased respectively as: the healing power of burning fire, which at the same time destroys; the death of the inanimate being “death”, or to kill him, who is undead; to be enslaved and free simultaneously, as well as to be violated and to preserve chastity; a bride who is shared with several men and is still faithful to the holiest man who has ever lived, are aesthetic dictions of religious contemplation. Their language is formal, elevated, a register from which they rarely digress. Just the opposite is true of the poem “Going to heaven!” Its language is simple, colloquial, for such suits its purpose, i.e. conversation with a friend. The addressee, therefore, is no divine being but a person of flesh and blood. It can be said that in the religious poetry of Donne and Dickinson the language is addressee-conditioned. Donne in those Holy Sonnets, the couplets of which are

cited above, speaks to God, death, God again, and Christ respectively. These elements are by their nature such that they demand elevated speech, or at least dictate its appropriateness. It is an unwritten poetic decorum. Dickinson's elocution is supposed to be intimate, private and silent, since it is a part of her own experience of death. What is more, she also questions her faith in going to heaven, which her strict religious community would not accept. Something like this should be discussed tête-à-tête. The faith in going to heaven is first acknowledged – although with awe then denied, and at the end of the poem acknowledged again when the application is made to the faith of the deceased she knew; correspondingly: “And yet it will be done”, “I'm glad I don't believe it”, “I am glad they did believe it” (8, 20, 24). It seems that the persona makes no real effort to maintain the faith in immortality. They will rather enjoy their life on Earth for a while. On the other hand, Donne's persona does not dare to think about letting any of their 'faiths' go. They “labour to'admit [him], but Oh, to no end” (XIV, 6); they are desperate, cry for help, try desperately to stay in the union with God, but with no success. The words of the sonnet are actually a prayer to God to fight for their soul, a battle that cannot be won by their own reasoning, because the mind proves to be “weake and untrue” (8). Here the reference can be made to one of his sermons elaborating on the story of Job's being abandoned by people, and, as it seems, by God himself: “. . . God is greater than the heart . . . If he be . . . a Witsnesse for me, . . . he is thousands of thousands, millions of millions of witnesses in my behalfe, for there is so no condemnation . . . to them that are in him” (April 20, 1630, 17). Here the self-knowledge and judicial reasoning of one's own sins, of “I read my sentence steadily”, bring no salvation or peace to the persona. Action from outside must take place, since the persona is trapped inside their own microcosm, which is ruled by God's archfiend. It is obvious, then, that only God, to whom Satan was once subdued, can untie the unholy knot. The persona is therefore in Lucifer's unlawful possession, so the speaker here wants to be delivered by their spouse, God, in a strict, authoritative manner. “Take mee to you, imprison mee . . .” (XIV, 12), they cry, for they consider themselves God' property.

Strikingly similar to the “Holy Sonnet XIV” in its vocabulary and theme is Dickinson's “Given in marriage unto thee”. As Donne's persona in the above-mentioned sonnet is treated as a bride-to-be, so is Dickinson's. In both cases there have been betrothals and marriages made before the forthcoming divine marriage and which have to be made invalid in order for this holy marriage to take place: “Other betrothal shall dissolve/Wedlock of will, decay –”, says Dickinson (Dickinson 2003, 235,); Donne speaks: “But [I] am betroth'd unto your enemy/Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe . . .” (Donne 1991, 443). A distinction between these two relationships is that in the former example the persona used her own will to get into the previous marriage, in the latter case the persona was usurped and forced into engagement; it is the question of free will that makes the difference in this argument. However, the bridegroom is the same in both poems: “the father and the Son/ . . . [and] the Holy Ghost” in Dickinson (3–4) and “three person'd God . . .” in Donne (1), where the three persons stands for the ones Dickinson mentions. Another difference between these two poems is shown in the preparations for each of the relationships. The fiancée from Donne's sonnet asks for severe measures to be applied in order to make the bride-to-be new. They want from God to “breake, blowe, burn . . .” them. There are no such methods expected to be used in Dickinson's persona remake pattern.

Another paradox from Dickinson's poetry, one that does not require much mental strength to detect, is one which at the same time celebrates the afterlife, even as it points to the people who lack animate force in their lives. "A death blow is a life blow to some/Who, till they died, did not alive become" (1–2). The next two lines repeat the message of the first two: "Who, had they lived, had died, but when/They died, vitality begun" (Dickinson 2003, 210–11). It can be noticed that the poem takes its inspiration from the joys of the life after earthly life. Dwelling in eternity is a hope for those that were in any way prevented from living fully here, on Earth. For them, death stands for a new life.

## 5. Conclusion

The last significant aspect of the religious metaphysical poetry of Donne and Dickinson I would like to mention is their attitude towards the notion of truth, whether with reference to a wider population or to the speakers themselves.

One of the gems in professing faith in Christ's true Church in whatsoever form is Donne's "Holy Sonnet XVIII". In addition to being a meditation on which Christian Church is the right one, it is also, and this is a quite surprising fact, a love poem. The first evidence in favour of the statement above is as follows. Donne asks a question about the Church as institution: "Dwells she with us, or like adventuring knights/First travel we to seek, and then make love?" (9–10). First, he addresses it with "she", the personal pronoun assigned to the feminine gender. The Church is then treated like a lady of medieval romances whom knights wooed, and whom they loved and made love to. So here is our first love and sexual insinuation, and there are more of both to come:

Betray, kind husband, thy spouse to our sights,  
And let mine amorous soul court thy mild dove,  
Who is most true and pleasing to thee then  
When she is embraced and open to most men. (Donne 1991, ll. 11–4)

In the last four lines of the sonnet the persona, who has a multiple voice – it represents several people – asks Christ to "betray", i.e. reveal, his Church – wife – to the faithful. In Christian, Catholic in particular, tradition the Church is considered to be His bride, or, in this case, wife. Then the second love suggestion comes, in which the persona, this time as a singular being, courts the lady. The love suggestion is actually the repetition of the one from lines 9–10. The climax, the revelation of the sonnet is given in the final couplet. If we take it in the religious sense, it makes a perfect sense: the right Church, and the one with which Christ agrees, is the Church which accepts and is accepted by the majority of believers. In this sense, the couplet contains a truth which stands even today; or especially today, when Christianity seeks a dialogue among various branches of Christianity through the ecumenical movement, and there is not only one true Church.

On the other hand, the couplet can also be understood as a paradox; it is ambivalent in its sense, and this gives it its freshness, originality of metaphor. Let us take the literal sense of the final two lines: they suggest something that today would be called swinging or offering sexual services. In

Donne's era this would have been called adultery with the husband's consent, and therefore a sin. The paradox, however, lies in the fact that adultery and being "true and pleasing" to one's husband cannot coincide. In spite of all the sexual implications, the sonnet remains morally unstained if we consider the notion that faith is paradoxical, and what is even more important, it is, or should be, people's greatest love towards one another. The notion of truth from this sonnet, and the fact that Church can also stand for the community of believers, effectively coincides with the message of the Apostle Peter, who says: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Therefore, although the Church might err, love diminishes those errors.

The poem by Dickinson that deals with truth and alludes to Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is "I died for beauty, but was scarce".

I died for beauty, but was scarce  
Adjusted in the tomb,  
When one who died for truth was lain  
In an adjoining room.

He questioned softly why I failed?  
"For beauty," I replied.  
"And I for truth, – the two are one;  
We brethren are," he said. (Dickinson 2003, 191)

This poem delivers the message that beauty and truth are interconnected. When one dies, so does the other. The persona "died for beauty", and immediately after death another human being, a man, is buried in a room next to theirs. The compatibility of their souls, since they are soul-mates, is reflected even in a physical sense. If we presume that the persona is a woman, and we already know that the neighbour is a man, they both make an original match – the Genesis Adam-and-Eve, man-and-woman match. Why are they soul-mates? It is because the qualities of beauty and truth are actually spiritual qualities, and "brethren" stands for spiritual brotherhood, as is typical of monks. The same or similar relationship between them recurs in the third stanza, when they are called "kinsmen" (line 9).

It is appropriate to end this paper with the sonnet that most holistically captures the title of this section. This is the "Holy Sonnet III", where Donne asks woe to return to him, because in the past he suffered in vain. Although this seems to be a method of self-torture, he has a plausible argument to support his wish. Here is the octave, in which the persona lays out the reason why they should redo the whole sufferance. The reason is, as we are about to see, in the light of repentance:

O! might those sighs and tears return again  
Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,  
That I might in this holy discontent  
Mourn with some fruit, as I have mourn'd in vain.  
In mine idolatry what showers of rain

Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?  
 That sufferance was my sin, I now repent;  
 'Cause I did suffer, I must suffer pain. (Donne 1991, ll. 1–8)

The persona therefore cries and is miserable because of “idolatry”, that is, profane love. “That sufferance was my sin” is the contemporary recognition of theirs. This is, however, an enigmatic remark, since sufferance is in most cases understood as paying the debt which resides in the sins committed. Since the persona suffered “in the wrong way”, they must, according to their conscience, pay for this by suffering “on the right way”. The right way is godly way. Young sees the sonnet as a sonnet about the wrong kind of love and the wrong object of that love.

Erotic ardor is misplaced love: passion (i.e. suffering) with the wrong motivation and goal. Even more than most sins, it is ultimately its own punishment . . . The very term “passion” suggests what the Petrarchan tradition exhibits, that sinful or disordered love is a form of suffering, a self-deluded pursuit of suffering for its own sake. The simple recognition of this contrast between the willful, defiant suffering of profane love and suffering with and for Christ in His Passion is an unmistakable indication that the speaker has already begun to “Mourne with some fruit.” (Young 2000, 181–2)

The sestet confirms the mission of the octave, i.e. that the persona cannot seek comfort in the “past joys”, since they were no joys at all. What is more, if the speaker sought some comfort there, their present penance would make no sense for their plea for God’s forgiveness would not be sincere.

Both Donne and Dickinson cherish truth above all; for each, it is the only thing worth dying and crying for. The poem “My cocoon tightens, colors tease” discusses the process of seeking truth. The process runs parallel to the desire to be free, free as a butterfly which is the vehicle in the metaphor. Nevertheless, freedom requires a certain procedure in order to be achieved and so does truth. The third and final stanza explains the way to obtain some knowledge, truth, freedom:

So I must baffle at the hint  
 And cipher at the sign,  
 And make much blunder, if at last  
 I take the clew divine. (Dickinson 2003, 190)

As one can conclude, the path is not an easy one. Whoever undertakes it accepts the job of a code-breaker. They sometimes just cannot understand what someone is saying to them, this someone presumably being God; they must solve many problems; of course, they err too; it is something that accompanies problem solving, and at the end illumination comes. The one who starts the path and finishes it, can be indeed be called a scientist of life.

In spite of differences that originate in Donne’s and Dickinson’s being of different gender, regardless of their religious standpoint, the diction in their writing, and, what is crucial to understanding of all the above enumerated, the time in which they created their literature, we can conclude that they were both poets of profound style and wit, great knowledge of arts and science, and persistent explorers of the world beyond the one they lived in. On the other hand,

both authors share common characteristics which are embodied in the so called metaphysical style, and common lyric themes as well. Their individuality in creativity as such, and their being placed among other authors who created literature as well, establishes their true value, i.e. being the masters of the craft they practiced in the field of metaphysical poetry.

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