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“I’ll Sing of Time, of Space”: Observation and Vastness between 1608-1648 in the Works of Donne, Herbert, and More

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Summary of Theses

The Goals of the Dissertation

My research has been prompted by John Milton’s Chaos in *Paradise Lost*, however, instead of the “vast vacuitie” of the realm of Satan’s journeys (2.932) I examine how the new-found vastness mediated by the telescope influenced three earlier poets. The speakers of John Donne, George Herbert, and Henry More each had their distinctive ideas, respectively, ranging from zealous to affirming to desperate, about a communion with God, yet they possess one shared trait: facing the uncertainty of “new space,” they chose to seek a solution in verse. In the axis of uneasiness about divine and material space, knowledge acquisition, and the reliability of the eye and the telescope, a man-made tool for observation, this dissertation aims at assessing a mode of “making science”.

My chosen set of texts include John Donne’s *The First Anniversary*, George Herbert’s “Astronomer-poems,” and Henry More’s *Democritus Platonissans*. The selected poems demonstrate a reference to, or at least a reflection on the telescope disseminated throughout Europe in 1610, defining and redefining the natural limits of human sensoria. A recurring question in all of the works above is whether these investigations of the fabric of space lead one closer or, on the contrary, away from seeing the whole as God sees: as they truly, entirely are.

When one “makes science”, or produces knowledge about their surroundings, it results in a shift (however subtle) in mentality: how one looks at the world, how phenomena relate to each other, how these phenomena are explained, the constituents of their inner workings. All these signify a shift in the physical, chemical, biological, etc. constitution of the examined phenomenon, object, or living being. The current analysis asserts that the emotions of any human interpreter cannot be disregarded even in “proper” scientific discourses in a time when the idea of the separation between secular and religious science had only started to emerge. However, secondary literature and most modern readers traditionally separate matters of the natural sciences from matters of literature. Instead of “reading” science and literature together, most papers on the “new science” (regardless of the work(s) they are concerned with) lead to an image of literature illustrating, or being in other ways inferior to science.
The dissertation aims to question, and to ultimately undermine this hierarchy; meanwhile
the fulcrum of investigations remains the intersection of the vastness of space proposed by the
users of the telescope and its immediate effect on human understanding of God, examined through
three influential thinkers and arguably popular writers of the first half of the 17th century.

Methodology

The chosen framework for the research is the emerging interdisciplinary onlook of the “literature
and science” movement. The analysis consciously applies the tenet of this framework which states
that the understanding of an era or a text commences truly when one inspects the “coevolutionary
dependencies among literature, science, technology, mathematics, and medicine” (Clarke and
Rossini). These connections are brought to the surface through the literary texts in question.

I assert that even without proposing a universal theory of language, rhetoric, emotional
responses, and empirical science, the formal logic received both by educated poets and educated
natural philosophers stems from the same humanist framework, which inherently enables scientific
texts of the period to be literary, and literary discourses to postulate scientific hypotheses.

Structure

My analysis follows a chronological order for reasons of convenience. I do not wish to claim any
linear “development” whatsoever: the only temporal consideration is the amount of time between
the dissemination of the telescope and the publication of the poem in question.

The First Chapter provides a brief historical overview of the “literature and science”
movement from the 1930s, when George Williamson’s study entitled “Mutability, Decay, and
Seventeenth-Century Melancholy” was published, which was among the first to establish the
methodology and theoretical framework of considering literature and science together. In contrast
to this approach, our contemporaries Marchitello and Spiller, for example, argue against the
seemingly hierarchical reading of the previous decades. The Introduction proceeds to give a brief
survey of the state of “natural philosophy” in the first half of the 1600, and some ideas which are
taken as underlying predispositions during my analysis. Finally, the specific theoretical and
philosophical context of the infinity or immensity of space is considered in relation to the telescope.

The Second Chapter examines John Donne’s *The First Anniversary*, an often-analysed poem among scholars of literature and science. My focus in the analysis is to read the poem as an immediate response to the appearance of Galileo’s telescope less than a year prior. The observer is solely confronted by confusion resulting from vastness: he anatomizes Elizabeth’s body the same way an astronomer dissects the night sky, however, neither of them arrive at a satisfying conclusion due to the immensity of their task and the ephemeral nature of the human observer. The poem’s ultimate conclusion is that sheer immensity of our surroundings, the inner workings of the body and the celestial motions also cannot be discerned by mere human sight. What is ultimately striking is that the speaker-anatomist uses the same methodology the new astronomers employ to show its limitations. Hence, true sight only comes after death in *The Second Anniversary*, the companion poem to the *First*.

The enumeration of the physical and spiritual effects of the instrument will be continued with George Herbert’s “astronomer-poems” in the Third Chapter. Although Herbert is not conventionally considered among the poets answering to the status quo of natural philosophy in the 17th century, his poems showcase a keen awareness of the changing perception of the world. The main concern of his poems is whether human perception intrinsically alters all observed phenomena. The true “church”, the structure that the poems strive to build (which serve as its bricks and cornerstones), is God’s love. In contrast to this, the astronomers wish to build a new “church” in the sky, a construct which engulfs and occupies the imagination and energies of the observers. Herbert’s texts have iconoclastic tendencies, disregarding not the icons of the church, but the icons of the mind. The method presented in these texts is, similarly to *The First Anniversary*’s, akin to the one behind general empirical enquiries in that the speaker constantly questions his own assertions.

In the final chapter, Henry More’s *Democritus Platonissans* will be read in the light of atomic theory, including, as in the case of the previous two chapters, the influence of the telescope on one’s relationship with God. The More-Descartes correspondence, which took place between 1648 and 1649, is also considered in connection with the question of infinite space presented in the poem. The speaker of the *Democritus* uses the concept of an inspired epic to enable himself to
freely express his thoughts and doubts; in lieu of objective verification, all ideas expressed in the poem remain on the level of “proposals,” which, albeit possibly right, are still not to be displayed as irrefutable, divinely inspired statements. The conclusion of the poem is that the mind cannot be the measure, nor can it be the verifying tool of absolute truths. Contrary to the previous texts, however, both eyesight and augmented sight bring their objects of observation closer; the two conclusions the speaker draws are that, on the one hand, the distant celestial objects are not mere products of illusion, and, on the other hand, that their study aids rather than undermines an image of the universe filled with divine energy: a space where the transcendental and the corporeal merge, but whose paradoxes the human mind cannot ever comprehend in its entirety.

Results

Similarly to the great “science makers” of the age, these poets also aimed at producing knowledge by universalizing their non-reproducible, personal experiences, as well as by evaluating established methodology and knowledge through questioning them. Each of these speakers faced the threat of disintegration through the images shown by the telescope which became a corundrum to be explained, which was attempted in a verse form poetically and aesthetically to a differing degree. This is sometimes a literal dissolution, or it might be a loss of meaning and coordinates.

The anthropocentric teleologies of the speakers diminish when there are empirically confronted by their own minuteness. Still, the speakers seek God through the vastness of space. The initial question of the dissertation was whether “the outer space encountered visually after the dissemination of the telescope is potent, filled with life and generative energy, or barren, testifying of destruction and dissolution – and most importantly, whether these investigations of the fabric of space lead one closer or, on the contrary, away from seeing the whole as God sees: as they truly, entirely are.” The focus in all of these texts ultimately shifts from the loss of divine order to the idea that this order could not have been perceived at all: there is a vast disparity between human and divine understanding which inherently falsifies each attempt at explaining natural phenomena.

Poetry and what later evolved into the basis for scientific thinking we know today both had the same high personal stake in understanding the world, and they parallely, often together and using the same or at least similar methodologies attempted to make sense of the world. I claim that
science, at least in the period this dissertation concerns, was as personal as poetry – and simultaneously, as public as any literary text.
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