

## Death as Poetic Device in John Donne's *The Dampe*

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### Abstract

John Donne's theological as well as secular creations are impregnated with images and ideas dealing with death: murders, ghosts, corpses, epitaphs and deaths inhabit a great number of his work. Nevertheless, death in the poetry of John Donne not only is a thematic focus, but also plays the part of a poetic device that adds sensual liveliness to the poem. Thus, in this essay I propose to go beyond the thematic boundaries of the concept of "death" in John Donne's poetry and analyze in depth its operation within poetic discourse, specifically focusing on its metaphorical nature and its ability to create sensual liveliness in the poem. With this purpose in mind, I have approached John Donne's poem "The Dampe", in which death does not appear only as a thematic concern, but also emerges as a poetic device in its own right, one able to create vivid imagery in the verse. My analysis shows that in "The Dampe", death, which always displays its gruesome primary meaning regardless of discursive contextualization, rules the process of the suspension of primary predicates and determines the way new semantic relevance is created. These new connotations, which arise from semantic irrelevance on the denominative level, introduce ambiguity into the poetic discourse and offer numerous interpretative possibilities – in other words, they deepen the meaning of the poem and intensify the aesthetic experience of its readers.

*Keywords:* death, metaphor, conceit, metaphysical poetry

## Introduction

“In all its branches, [Renaissance literature] is not a particularly joyful or happy literature. It is on the whole rather grim and sad; even at its most intense moments there is something defeated in it. Something in the nature of its subject, one may reflect, dictates this prevailing tone” (Toulalan, 2007, p. 196). This is how Sarah Toulalan, the author of *Imagining Sex. Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth-Century England*, refers to the Renaissance written tradition. Indeed, the overwhelming sensual vividness of images of death in poetry and drama of the above-mentioned period upsets the conception of the Renaissance epoch as a reign of the vigorous affirmation of life. I argue that more than a kingdom ruled by skepticism and mundane pleasures, the Renaissance should be considered as an epoch of transition between medieval and modern times, when the syncretism of the foulness of death and the celebration of life was part of theological and secular thought.

In particular, the work of John Donne represents a clear example of this cultural tendency: his theological as well as his secular creations are impregnated with images and ideas dealing with death. The concept of death disturbed and, at the same time, fascinated the author: numerous letters to his friends as well as many of his sermons and poems demonstrate that the end of our terrestrial existence and the damage this concept brings about dominated Donne’s thought.

Indeed, the thorough investigation of John Donne’s correspondence, theological work as well as his poetry undertaken by Donald Roberts bears witness to the fact that death not only governed the poet’s thought, it even embodied life itself (Roberts, 1947, p. 960). For instance, the funeral sermon *Death’s Duell, or, a consolation to the soul against the dying life and the living death of the body* reveals that, in Donne’s judgement, existence and earthly pleasures symbolize continuous annihilation:

And all our periods and transitions in this life are so many passages from death to death; our very birth and entrance into this life is *exitus a morte*, an issue from death, for in our mother[’s] womb we are dead, so as that we do not know we live, not so much as we do in our sleep [...] this issue, this deliverance, from that death of the womb, is an entrance, a delivering over to another death, the manifold deaths of this world; we have a winding-sheet in our mother’s womb which grows with us from our conception, and we come forth into the world up in that winding-sheet, for we come to seek a grave (Donne, 2001, pp. 575–578).

Here Donne declares that human existence is ruled by the destructive principle that everything tends to its end; in other words, he abolishes every distinction between life and death, a tendency that was very common to the medieval and even the Renaissance psyche (White, 1974, p. 26).

In this context it is no surprise that thirty-two of the fifty-five erotic poems of John Donne’s treat the concept of death in one way or another: murders, ghosts, corpses, epitaphs and deaths inhabit a great number of his verses. Nevertheless, death in the poetry of John Donne not only is a thematic focus, but also plays the part of a poetic device that adds sensual liveliness to the poem. As David Reid puts it: “[In Donne’s poetry] death is his regular figure for screwing experience up to a pitch of infinite intensity” (Reid, 2000, p. 35).

Without a doubt, the word “death” in itself has an undeniable rhetorical effectiveness: when it is pronounced, it releases a chain of reactions in the human body, from a slight shudder, to the

pains of love. In the language of poetry, “death” amplifies meaning, that is, it intensifies and deepens the message of the poem, magnifying its content. The rhetorical efficacy of the word “death” is increased if one adds to it the strength of its eloquence, whose power derives from the linking of two apparently incomparable, in effect, opposing ideas: life and its end. This ability of the word “death” to link semantically distant concepts is a metaphorical part of its nature that is fundamental to the creation of a metaphysical conceit that, according to Dr. Johnson, yokes the most heterogeneous ideas in a violent way (Huntley, 1969, p. 103).

Thus, in this essay I propose to go beyond the thematic boundaries of the concept of “death” in John Donne’s poetry and analyze in depth its operation within poetic discourse, specifically focusing on its metaphorical nature and its ability to create sensual liveliness in the poem. With this purpose in mind, I have approached John Donne’s poem “The Dampne”, in which death does not appear only as a thematic concern, but also emerges as a poetic device in its own right, one able to create vivid imagery in the verse.

### Methodology

In order to examine the word “death” and its metaphorical nature, I will make use of the concepts Paul Ricoeur puts forth in *The Rule of Metaphor. The creation of meaning in language* and those that Herman Parret suggests in his book *Epiphanies de la presence. Essais semio-esthetiques*.<sup>1</sup> Since I argue that the union of discursive and emotional aspects of language is what produces sensual liveliness in a poem, I think that the approaches of these two scholars are accurate because they allow us the opportunity to observe the development of the nominal and referential function of the metaphor within the discourse. This is of great importance in the analysis of poetry since the construction of meanings in a poem takes place at all of these levels.

The essential postulate of Paul Ricoeur that I use in my paper states that one of the principal aspects of the creation of a verbal image is the tension inherent in its meaning, produced by the coming together of ideas that are semantically distant from one another. According to Ricoeur, the function of distance plays a crucial part in the mutation of meaning that makes a self-contradictory and self-destructive statement another expression of a significant self-contradictory nature. Thus, two ideas are superimposed, creating a verbal image. The other concept of Ricoeur that I incorporate into my textual analysis of the macabre metaphor refers to the referential function of this trope in the construction of the sensual liveliness of the poetic discourse. This is due to the ability of the metaphor to connect fiction and reality by means of emotions projected by the work. This converts the emotions of the poetic language into another tool fundamental to the construction of meaning and the creation of the verbal image. In particular, Ricoeur comments: “When I speak, I know that something is brought to language. This knowledge is no longer intra-linguistic but extra-linguistic; it moves from being to being-said, at the very time that language itself moves from sense to reference” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 360).

From Parret’s study *Epiphanies de la presence. Essais semio-esthetiques* I have adopted the term “sensual vividness”, which refers to the creation of imagery by means of perceptions and

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<sup>1</sup> In my essay I approach Spanish edition of Parret’s book, published by the University of Lima in 2008. Parret, H. (2008). *Epifanias de la presencia. Ensayos semio-estéticos*. (D. Blanco, Trans.). Lima: Universidad de Lima. (Original work published in 2006).

mental images. Nevertheless, I have paid special attention to the role of extra-linguistic elements such as memories, icons, signs, cultural constructions and experiences in the creation of sensual vividness in verse, since, for Parret, the extra-linguistic references constitute the essential condition for poetry to create the world by means of the sentiments and memories that the author expresses. In the end, it will be up to the reader to reconstruct the world of the work based on the descriptive references. This is how the didactic function of language is put on hold in order to create sensual vividness through the use of fiction and emotions. Parret's proposition seems to me to be especially pertinent in the particular case of Donne since for this poet not only "a thought [...] was an experience" (Eliot, 1951, p. 287), but the experience itself was the source of his inspiration.

Given that the poetry of Donne is highly connotative, in which secondary denotations are always given preference, it is necessary to take into account the tension between the world of his work and reality. That is why I consider it crucial to have a clear idea of the different forms of expression related to death in Western culture that the author uses. This is essential to gain access to the meaning of his poetry, through an understanding of the reality and emotional atmosphere of the period in which Donne lived and wrote.

### **Death in Renaissance Literature and Art**

Thus, I wish to begin the analysis of *The Dampe* with a brief study of the pervasive presence of a syncretic relationship between life and its end in Renaissance literature and art. The transitory nature of worldly pleasures, a reflexion on mortality known as *memento mori*, was a frequent concern during medieval times. However, in the course of the sixteenth century, the idea that life was nothing other than the path leading to one's tomb gradually lost its didactic power until becoming converted into a new and disturbing association of *Eros* and *Thanatos*. Renaissance paintings, better than any other form of art, unveil this fascination with macabre eroticism. The work of the unknown author of *Dead Lovers* (c. 1480-1528), which portrays rotting corpses clinging together in the grave, is one of the first pictorial representations that embodies this syncretism between dust and sexual pleasures. According to Jacques Le Goff, the author of *A History of the Body in the Middle Ages*, the snakes emerging from body orifices and the frog biting the female reproductive organs are symbols of lust and, likewise, the conventional punishment awaiting adulterers in hell (Le Goff & Truong, 2003). In light of this observation, the painting *Dead Lovers*, whose erotic context is clearly implicit, suggests more than one interpretation.

James Clark suggests that at the end of the fifteenth century, this macabre representation of eroticism attained new shades of meaning and became the theme of *Death and the maiden*, whose female nudity symbolized that dark bond between sexuality and death (Clark, 1986). From this moment on, the female figure was not involved in a final dance, but rather in intercourse with the decaying corpse, an image that grew increasingly daring over time. These paintings did not include didactic verses, and thus their instructive power lost a great deal of intensity. Instead, the main focus shifted to female nakedness and the heroine's sexual interaction with the male figure of Death. The skeleton – the dreadful seducer – became a conventional motif of Renaissance pictorial representation, especially celebrated in the German pictorial tradition.

According to Clark, one of the most famous paintings of this nature is Hans Baldung Grien's work *Eve, the Serpent and Death* (1510-1515), in which death and lust embody essential parts of its composition. Eve, with an apple in her hand, holds the serpent's tail while flirting with

Death. The image of the nude female body is enthralling, the striking pallor of her skin becoming the visual focus of this artwork. Death, in its turn, hidden in the background, appears as a hideous lover whose coquettish look contributes an unsettling tone to the painting. Without any doubt, Eve shows no passive submission, helplessness or horror; on the contrary, her image displays a sexual attraction to Death (Clark, 1986). During the Renaissance, this shift in aesthetic judgement toward macabre eroticism is considered by Philippe Ariès as the origin of necrophilia, which reached the highest point of its expression in the nineteenth century (Ariès, 1974).

### **Death in John Donne's Poetry**

Jonathan Dollimore, the author of *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, affirms that the enjoyment of corpses was also found quite often in Renaissance literature (Dollimore, 2001). John Donne, for instance, frequently plays with this strange fusion of life and death, with cadavers and *post mortem* putrefaction used as recurrent themes in the author's secular and theological thought (Targoff, 2008). If we consider his 160 existent sermons, we can see how persistent is his fear about decay in the grave and how often the author tries to find the ways to decrease the length of this posthumous phase. *Death's Duel, or, a consolation to the soul against the dying life and living death of the body* is one of the most celebrated sermons in which the author expresses this concern:

We must all pass this posthume death, this death after death, nay, this death after burial, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and putrefaction, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the grave, when these bodies that have been the children of royal parents, and the parents of royal children, must say with Job, "Corruption, thou art my father, and to the worm, Thou art my mother and my sister" (Donne, 2001, p. 581).

Here we see that Donne reveals his anxiety by sharing the horrors of bodily corruption and disintegration in the tomb with his readers. However, the sermon he preached on one of his favorite biblical verses - "And though, after my skin, wormes destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:26) – depicts physical decay in even more gruesome terms:

Painters have presented to us with some horreur the *skeleton*, the frame of the bones of a mans body; but the state of a body, in the dissolution of the grave, no pencil can present to us. Between that excrementall jelly that thy body is made of at first, and that jelly which thy body dissolves to at last; there is not so noysome, so putrid a thing in nature (Targoff, 2006, p. 222).

These lines show that the dissolved corpse along with "excrementall jelly" and "putrid" smells are the images that Donne dreads the most. The author just cannot deal with the idea of the posthumous decomposition and destruction of his earthly being. Still, the reference to painters who portrayed dead bodies in a post-mortem state suggests that Donne was familiar with the artistic movement of macabre realism and that in his mind bodily decay after death was not only a source of anxiety, but also constituted the origin of his perverse fascination with it.

### ***The Dampe and its Macabre Seductive Discourse***

A rotten corpse is also a frequent guest in Donne's erotic poetry. This baffling link between existence and its end creates striking images that surpass such Renaissance conventions as

“dying of a broken heart” or “being love-sick” and transcend patterns of mere poetic comparison. Such is the case of the poem “The Dampe”, in which the seductive discourse delivered by the deceased dissolves all the distinctions between decay and voluptuousness and turns rotten cadavers into an essential part of the erotic conquest and the construction of its meaning.

When I am dead, and Doctors know not why,  
 And my friends' curiositie  
 Will have me cut up to survay each part,  
 When they shall find your Picture in my heart,  
 You think a sodaine dampe of love  
 Will thorough all their senses move,  
 And worke on them as mee, and so preferre  
 Your murder to the name of Massacre.

Poore victories! But if you dare be brave,  
 And pleasure in your conquest have,  
 First kill th' enormous Gyant, your Disdaine;  
 And let th' enchantresse Honor, next be slaine;  
 And like a Goth and Vandall rise,  
 Deface Records and Histories  
 Of your owne arts and triumphs over men,  
 And without such advantage kill me then.

For I could muster up, as well as you,  
 My Gyants, and my Witches too,  
 Which are vast Constancy and Secretnesse;  
 But these I neyther looke for nor professe;  
 Kill mee as woman, let me die  
 As a meere man; do you but try  
 Your passive valor, and you shall finde then,  
 Naked you' have odds enough of any man.

“The Dampe” is precisely the poem where the cadaver, besides being granted a voice, emerges as an essential poetic device, a conceit that embraces semantic, emotional and extra-linguistic levels of poetic discourse and transforms the commonplace of the game of seduction into a source of powerful imagery. Diana Fuss entitles this body of literary works, in which the cadaver refuses to remain silent, as “corpse poem”. According to the author, this kind of poetic writing creates extremely powerful imagery through the use of incompatible images that tend to annul each other:

Corpse poem is a curious paradox. A dead body and poetic discourse are mutually incompatible, two formal states each precluding the other. A poem implies subjective depth while a corpse negates interiority. A poem signals sensual vividness of voice while a corpse testifies to its absence. A poem quickens language while a corpse stills it. The fantastical coupling of corpse and poem denotes an extravagant rhetorical conceit, an impossible literary utterance (Fuss, 2003, p. 1).

Clearly, then, in the case of John Donne's poem “The Dampe”, this unimaginable conceit, in which sexual fantasies are interwoven to create an epitaph is, without any doubt, the source of

one of the poet's most striking images as well as the origin of an unsparing conceptual discrepancy that produces extreme levels of sensual vividness in the discourse.

Indeed, to give voice to human remains is to turn the corpse into a figure of speech, since such a metamorphosis evokes different levels of real life experience in the minds of the readers, and, consequently, increases the emotional intensity of the verse. Diana Fuss in her essay "Corpse Poem" substantiates this point:

Speaking cadaver [creates] that improbable body of literature one might more properly identify as *ars essendi morti*, the art of being dead. *Ars essendi morti* names a powerful oxymoron, since "being dead" annihilates the very possibility of "being" as such. Stretching the limits of ontology beyond the point of reason, the corpse poem poses a series of difficult questions about death, survival, and the animating power of language (Fuss, 2003, p. 2).

This conjecture allows us to understand that the speaking corpse in "The Damp" does not only represent the irresolvable paradox of life and death, a thematic concern and source of inspiration for John Donne, but it also embodies a powerful rhetorical device in its own right.

As we have seen earlier, in poetic discourse macabre conceits of any type turn commonplace events into exceptional episodes that demand an immediate response on the part of the readers. Macabre conceits intensify and deepen the meaning, functioning as rhetorical tools of amplification (Tuve, 1947), since even the bare mention of eternal rest induces a wide range of adverse reactions in the human body. Still, the major source of the eloquent power of these grim images resides in the ability of death to knot together dissimilar ideas (life and its end, corruption and erotic desire), as well as to create semantic tension in poetic discourse, in other words, to produce metaphors.

A close look at the meaning of the construction of macabre conceits reveals that it is a binary process, in which the interaction of linguistic elements and sensory perceptions related to poetic language is of great concern. On the one hand, the merging of dissimilar notions, such as sexual desire and death, represents a crucial moment in the production of verbal images, as during this process, primary semantic categories are destroyed and new logical connections are created. This mutation of meaning that occurs as a result of the dismantling of semantic networks turns an eloquent, self-contradictory statement, which arises from a self-destructive utterance, into an image. Thus, this verbal image is the result of the superimposition of two dissimilar ideas, which produces an apparently new connection, a semantic proximity, between the two terms, despite the distance in their meanings. The key concept of this process is the extreme conceptual heterogeneity of the combined denominations, since only through the shock of contradiction, it is possible to achieve the interaction of multiple semantic fields that opens unlimited possibilities for interpretation and turns connotations into primary meanings.

On the other hand, it is important to take into consideration the affective aspect of the construction of verbal images, since it determines the way the conceptual perception is delivered. That is to say, rather than being completely dependent on the linguistic elements of a written work, the interpretation also integrates the readers' cultural backgrounds and their emotional responses, since it is precisely these factors that dictate which semantic categories are brought together and which new logical connections are established. The above-mentioned peculiarity is quite significant in relation to the construction of the meaning of a macabre

conceit, as the loss of life is a totally personal experience, it can neither be taken on by others, nor communicated by the person experiencing it.

Indeed, no clear register exists that refers to the act of dying; the only thing we can count on are near-death experiences. To put it another way, death belongs to the flow of lived experiences; nevertheless, it is quite different from that which we sense and perceive. It is not possible to establish a link between this concept and personal experience, which is how a phantasmatic presence is created, which, according to Parret, is always determined by the cultural context (Parret, 2008).

Roughly speaking, death is a culturally-constructed notion, due to the fact that the conception of passing away differs widely among societies. Namely, the macabre Western tradition and the Mexican celebration set out different approaches to this existential question: while for the Western world death represents mourning, Mexican culture celebrates death, while also mocking it. Therefore, the interpretation of the macabre conceit in great part depends on the extra-linguistic aspects of the work, given that in great part the cultural context is what transforms the imaginary experience into a gloomy modality, which, together with the emotions, neutralized the concept of “death”.

Hence, this macabre metaphor merges visual and verbal aspects of poetic discourse. The visualization of thoughts related to death is an intuitive process that cannot be taught or governed by any rules, since the emergence of the stream of images escapes voluntary control. Still, the verbal aspect of this macabre metaphor is attached to its meaning and the readers’ ability to create pictorial reflections. The associative richness of the concept of “death” enables the creation of a large number of vivid metaphors: although the arc of resemblance is bent to the limit, the arrow of meaning will always follow a predetermined direction. This multiplicity of associative possibilities is what grants death the potential to establish bonds between the missing parts of each context, to display the unlimited stream of meaning through extra-linguistic references related to the readers’ cultural backgrounds. The synthesis of all of these processes creates the iconic moment of the emergence of the metaphor, which embraces a fragment of reality shaped by the readers’ imagination as well as by the functioning of poetic language.

This is exactly how new meanings are created in “The Dampe”. Right from the first stanza, the semantic link between opposite notions discloses the stream of connotative meanings within the very functioning of the language and not just in its figurative use:

When I am dead, and Doctors know not why,  
 And my friend’s curiositie  
 Will have me cut up to survay each part,  
 When they shall find your Picture in my heart,  
 You think a sodaine dampe of love  
 Will through all their senses move,  
 And worke on them as mee, and so preferre  
 Your murder to the name of Massacre.



Indeed, the language of this stanza is simple and pure. There is not one word in these lines (with the exception of “dampe”<sup>2</sup>) that could possibly complicate the process of the construction of meaning. The morbid conceit that manifests the deadly nature of love is created by “the richness of association” (Eliot, 1951, p. 244) that the terms “dead”, “murder”, and “Massacre” bring to the poem. The work of resemblance that nourishes this metaphor evolves from a symbolic notion (the concept of love) to a concrete one, in which the image of the autopsy represents the bond between the abstract idea and reality. The metaphorical process of the first stanza, therefore, merely provides a rational solution to the oxymoronic expression “the living dead”, which produces this juxtaposition. This new figurative meaning is not only the result of the semantic clash but is also a consequence of the new relevance created on the denominative level. It is worth mentioning that this new and purely lexical relevance is not mediated by the context, quite to the contrary. The associative richness of the terms employed in the poem is what produces connotative meanings, an unlimited stream of images, a brief discourse in itself. Along with the concepts that evoke a contemporary cultural context and arouse an emotional response in the reader, the connotative plurality of this stanza leads the metaphorical process to a discursive level, where new meanings are constructed.

The image of the corpse in love creates new connotative relevance that reveals the interconnection between the horror that death induces in the Western mind and the anguish that sexual desire has come to represent in this culture. Bataille, in his study *Erotism. Death and Sensuality*, makes evident the prevalent nature of this macabre erotic drive:

I can link my revulsion at the decay (my imagination suggests it, not my memory, so profoundly is it a forbidden object for me) with the feelings that obscenity arouses in me. I can tell myself that repugnance and horror are the mainsprings of my desire, that such desire is only aroused as long as its object causes a chasm no less deep than death to yawn within me, and that this desire originates in its opposite, horror (Bataille, 1986, p. 58).

Capitalizing on Bataille’s approach in the context of this analysis, it becomes clear that the associative richness of the conceit of the first stanza not only embodies the moment of dramatic intensity. It also represents the definitive extra-linguistic reference that consolidates the conception of sexual desire as fatal and governs the way that the new meanings are constructed. Besides, it establishes the tension between metaphorical truth and materiality while nourishing and intensifying emotions. Paul Ricoeur denotes this capacity of the metaphor to create a new reality as the function of poetry:

If metaphor adds nothing to the description of the world, at least it adds to the ways in which we perceive; and this is the poetic function of metaphor. This still rests upon resemblance, but at the level of feelings. In symbolizing one situation by means of another, metaphor ‘infuses’ the feelings attached to the symbolizing situation into the heart of the situation that is symbolized. In this ‘transference of feelings,’ the similarity between feelings is induced by the resemblance of situations. In its poetic function, therefore, metaphor extends the power of double meaning from the cognitive realm to the affective (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 224).

This statement demonstrates that the metaphor is precisely the medium by which language

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<sup>2</sup> Although the meaning of “dampe” in a contemporary context is linked to moisture, in the Renaissance it signified a noxious vapour of some kind. See Nutt, J. (1999). *John Donne: The Poems*. Palgrave.

reaches the symbolic level, where a new reality is constructed.

Yet, perhaps, in the case of the macabre conceit of the first stanza. the extreme discrepancy between the compared concepts constitutes the most important aspect in the construction of sensual vividness in the verse. Indeed, the terms “dead”, “murder”, and “Massacre” do not only testify to the destructive nature of love, but also determine the degree of sensual vividness – it grows as the intensity of the meanings increases. In other words, “Massacre”, the ultimate expression of savage killing, produces a supreme moment of dramatic tension, stemming from the enormous semantic disparity of the terms compared.

Thus, there are several factors that contribute to the construction of sensual vividness in the first stanza. Nevertheless, the macabre image of the deceased body entranced by the “sodaine Dame of love” is the main source of this rhetorical efficacy. The capacity of this macabre representation of sexual desire to link the multiplicity of points of disparity between death and passion, as well as its ability to decrease the extreme conceptual rupture between these opposed notions, greatly expands the interpretative field of the poem by the transformation of connotative meanings into primary ones. In other words, the metaphorical process of “The Dampé” is not manifest unless all of the literal meanings are destroyed, giving rise to a new conceptual category, which creates a new meaning. It is this innovation in the creation of meaning that constitutes a living metaphor and produces the sensual vividness of the poem.

Regarding the importance of the construction of new meanings on the ruins of the original ones, it is worth mentioning that this issue becomes clearly evident in the second stanza, where new semantic relevance is created mainly on the nominative level of the poetic discourse:

Poore victories! But if you dare be brave,  
 And pleasure in your conquest have,  
 First kill th’ enormous Gyant, your Disdaine;  
 And let th’ enchantresse Honor, next be slaine;  
 And like a Goth and Vandall rise,  
 Deface Records and Histories  
 Of your owne arts and triumphs over men,  
 And without such advantage kill me then.

Perhaps, in comparison to the first stanza of “The Dampé”, the second one is somehow more obvious in terms of its poetic functioning. For instance, the fact that the term “kill” belongs to the semantic field of erotic discourse is quite evident and even anticipated. Along with the unostentatious language of the fragment that facilitates the perception of its meaning and reveals the message of the verse almost in its entirety, this point lessens the intensity of the sensual vividness of “The Dampé” to some extent. Moreover, the exclamation “Poore victories!” establishes the link between the content of the first and the second stanzas as well as revealing the goal of this poetic temptation that lies within the boundaries of carnal satisfaction. The reference to fantastic creatures such as “Gyant” and “enchantresse” (Renaissance commonplaces proper to seductive discourse) (Marotti, 2008) expresses the cynicism of the erotic conquest undertaken by the poetic voice. Thus, the ambiguity that should arise from the interaction of the passionate and macabre semantic fields disappears, and the artifice of this seductive endeavor emerges on the surface of the text, diminishing somewhat the rhetorical power of this composition.

However, the grandiloquence of the second stanza rests on the highly connotative nature of its

extra-linguistic references, in particular, of the term “deface”. As Valentín Groebner suggests in his study *Defaced. The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*, this term could refer to disfigurement (*denasatio*,<sup>3</sup> to be more precise), a quite conventional punishment for excessive promiscuity during the Late Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> Taking into consideration that executions were quite common spectacles at the time, this conjecture does not sound that implausible, allowing us to consider “deface” both as a conventional representation and as a direct reference to the concept of empirical reality.

It is worth mentioning that the sensual vividness of this verse, constructed by means of the above-mentioned extra-linguistic reference, is the result of the activation of the fixed experiences, perceptions, and feelings that have accumulated in the readers’ subconsciousness. This process condenses the sensual and visual aspects of the verse and converts these general and unquestionable truths stored in the memory into reality. Language usage, powers of recall, personal censorship, affection and desire, as well as social control – everything that allows readers to immediately enhance and convert the connotative references of the given text into past events – determine the way fixed experiences are built up in literary discourse. In other words, the readers’ perception of these realities and their socio-cultural context is what matters in the construction of meaning. However, it is worth bearing in mind that this sensual vividness does not come into being unless these accumulated experiences undergo linguistic and emotional transformation.

Hence, in the context of the present discussion, to “deface” is precisely one of those patterns of behavior that form part of the Western cultural legacy, one able to be mentally accessed, though not consciously present in the readers’ minds. This means that in the case of the word “deface”, even the smallest allusion to it is enough for readers to start establishing semantic associations between eroticism and the violence implied in this word, and the images related to this denotative discrepancy begin to unfold in their minds. This evolution of interwoven images modulates the perception of fixed experiences, since it does not only reveal extra-linguistic information hidden in the text, but also transmits sentiments expressed by the poetic voice.

Therefore, the intensity of sensual vividness is even greater in the case of fixed experiences due to the subjective nature of this process that evokes deeply familiar and even intimate images in the minds of the audience. This is by far the most efficient way to create sensual vividness in verse, since the perception of the world is based on the accumulation of verbal and non-verbal allusions, which represents the innate experience of every human being. In a broader context, these references modify our comprehension of reality, as innate images are what we think and what governs our interpretation of the world.

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<sup>3</sup> *Denasatio* is the amputation of the nose. The face was considered the noblest part of all of the human body due to its apparent resemblance to the divine image. Therefore, the disfigurement of the face was a procedure that absolutely dishonoured the person subject to it.

<sup>4</sup> Prostitutes, adulterers of both sexes, and homosexuals were punished by the amputation of the nose. The Augsburg books of punishment, for example, mention among the delinquents exiled from the city a “noseless Anna” and a “noseless whore from Ulm”. In 1462 two young men who had engaged in a homosexual act were sentenced to this form of mutilation. In the same fashion, popular culture shows interest in the above-mentioned form of penance. Marie de France in one of her *Lais* narrates the story of the virtuous werewolf Bisclavret, whose unfaithful wife deceitfully condemned him to remain forever in his animal form. Bisclavret’s revenge was ferocious: he bit off his wife’s nose. See Groebner, V. (2008). *Defaced. The Visual Culture of Violence in the Late Middle Ages*. (P. Selwyn, Trans.). New York: Zone Book.

The term “deface”, then, does not only introduce a verbal reference to public punishment into the poem. It also allows the establishment of clear links between immediate reality and a determined intrinsic experience. Again, the importance of the irrational side of the human mind in the construction of meaning can hardly be overestimated. Valentin Groebner is one of the authors who has brought to light the relevance of this aspect of the construction of meaning. “When we speak of violence”, observes the author, “we are always speaking of imagination: the images of mutilated and disfigured bodies in the media function as visual stimuli, as effectively orchestrated exoticism” (Groebner, 2008, p. 28). Taking into consideration Groebner’s viewpoint, it is quite plausible to suggest that the visual imagery of the second stanza is, on the whole, the result of internal processes working in the mind of the audience, where the unfolding of connotative multiplicity is predetermined by the array of signs that the text reveals. So, in this way emotional fiction is rewarded with meaning, since it joins the world of the work and the real world, turning sensations and mental images into reality.

Hence, it becomes quite evident that the associative extravagance of extra-linguistic references is an important component of the process forcing the readers to search for metaphorical truth within the logical absurdity that arises as a result of the use of terms with antithetic literal meanings. This process of combination and selection plays an important part within this stage, as it defines the logical boundaries of newly created predicates. Although “deface” establishes the link between two different semantic fields (those of sexual interaction and of punishment), the process of metaphor creation does not begin until the disparity of meanings is replaced by the reduction of this conceptual distance. Indeed, the figurative meaning cannot be conceived of prior to the instant when the new semantic relevance is produced. This is true in the case of the term “deface”, where the verbal image is created by the associative richness of the extra-linguistic reference as well as by the semantic detachment of literal meanings from the original context. Even though at first violence and the feeling of shame (the primary meaning of “deface”) rule the construction of the message, the final stage of image production is still based on an erotic context.

Thus, there are certain differences in how sensual vividness is constructed in the first and the second stanzas. Even though in both cases, the importance of primary semantic categories in the creation of meaning is undeniable, the first stanza mostly relies on the associative richness of terms, while the subsequent verse emphasizes the key role of the readers’ emotional responses induced by the extra-linguistic references. As for the last stanza, it is worth mentioning that the associative richness of the terms employed here loses its strength, and its sensual vividness is essentially constructed through the superposition, overloading and thickening of the series of images that had already emerged earlier in the poem:

For I could muster up, as well as you,  
                   My Gyants, and my Witches too,  
 Which are vast Constancy and Secretnesse;  
 But these I neyther looke for nor professe;  
                   Kill mee as Woman, let mee die  
                   As a meere man; doe you but try  
 Your passive valor, and you shall finde then,  
 Naked you’ have odds enough of any man.

The connection between passion and death that nourishes the third stanza lines “Kill Woman as mee, let mee die / As a meere man” does not produce any feeling of amazement, quite the opposite. Although the climax of sexual intercourse is introduced by semantically unrelated

concepts such as “kill” and “die”, in the context of this verse, the figurative character of this representation loses its dramatic power and evolves into a mere commonplace. Therefore, the conceit of this passage lacks ambiguity and implies nothing but the statement of the fact that the erotic conquest reaches its predetermined outcome.

However, the third stanza of “The Dampne” is not entirely lacking in sensual vividness, since its imagery embodies the sum of the images found throughout the poem. Namely, the sensual vividness of the third stanza essentially rests on the ability of metaphor to erect and to extend parallel structures, as well as on its capacity to continually disclose new meanings. Even though the juxtaposition of love and death no longer brings about astonishment on a semantic level, the iconic nature of this unusual bond keeps manifesting itself through the net of recurrent images that interconnect both the voluptuous and the macabre aspects of sexual intercourse. The sensual vividness of the third stanza, therefore, is the result of the interaction of various metaphors that emerge at the nominative level and evolve within the discourse. On the one hand, the macabre images offset the semantic discrepancy; on the other hand, they erect a network of intertwined concepts that create indefinite connotative possibilities and open up an unlimited field of interpretation.

## **Conclusion**

John Donne’s poem “The Dampne” is a work where death does not only appear as a thematic concern, but also emerges as a poetic device in its own right. It possesses extraordinary dramatic force, since even a brief reference to this inevitability demands an immediate emotional, intellectual and even physical response on the part of the readers. Even a slight allusion to the extra-linguistic references that represent death within the Occidental cultural legacy turns the subjectivity of the poetic voice into the subjectivity of the readers and links empirical as well as imaginative aspects of the poetic discourse – that is to say, it creates sensual vividness. Associative richness and the ability of death to establish links between opposing ideas is another way the rhetorical power of this grim concept emerges in the poetry of Donne. In “The Dampne”, death, which always displays its gruesome primary meaning regardless of discursive contextualization, rules the process of the suspension of primary predicates and determines the way new semantic relevance is created. These new connotations, which arise from semantic irrelevance on the denominative level, introduce ambiguity into the poetic discourse and offer numerous interpretative possibilities – in other words, they deepen the meaning of the poem and intensify the aesthetic experience of its readers.

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