

Religious Struggle in John Donne and Ausiàs March

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Although Ausiàs March (1397-1459) was born almost two centuries before John Donne (1572-1631) their most accomplished religious poems March's *Cant Espiritual* (poem CV),¹ and Donne's *Holy Sonnet XIV* bear astonishing resemblances. So far we cannot speak of a direct influence of one poet into the other.² But within their own time both stand ahead of the poetic movements of their day. For,

¹ There are numerous instances of the importance of this poem, not only within Catalan poetry, but also within the frame of universal literature. Navarro (1934: 13-14), for example, says: "El *Cantic Espiritual* (y) la *Oració a la Verge* (...) de Roiç de Corella son les dues poesies millors de la nostra literatura"; Bohigas (1959: 15) affirms that poem CV is "la obra más grande de la poesía catalana". As regards its position in universal literature, Piera (1978: 18) considers it "un dels poemes més importants de la literatura universal", in a similar way to Montoliu (1959: 119), who says it constitutes "un dels moments lírics de més gran elevació que ens ofereix la literatura de tots els països i de tots els temps".

² Nevertheless, the possibility is open to a knowledge on Donne's side of Montemayor's poem. "Devota exposición del psalmo 'Miserere mei, Deus'" contained in his *Cancionero* which was published in Ambers [Antwerp], 1554. It is most probably inspired in March's poem CV, which had already appeared in different editions of March's poems (Romani's 1539, –containing 46 poems– and Carles Amorós', 1543 and 1545 –122 poems–). There is written evidence of the influence exerted by March's poems on both Boscán and Garcilaso, the *editio princeps* of whose Works was published by the same editor (Carles Amorós) the same year (1543) as the revised edition of March's poems. March's influence would also be important in the work of Gutierre de Cetina (d. in 1557) and Diego Hurtado de Mendoza (d. in 1575). The influence of Montemayor's works –particularly his *Diana*– in England (Sidney, Shakespeare, among others) makes it likely that Donne read the work of this poet –either in the original, for he could read Spanish – or in any of the translations published in this country. So, although Montemayor never translated March's *Cant Espiritual*, this poem could have indirectly influenced Donne through Montemayor's "Devota Exposición". It is regretful that the *Cant Espiritual* is not included in the 97 poems by March which Montemayor translated, but he has left clear evidence that he had already worked on it. We have a study in progress on this aspect which will hopefully throw more light on it. At the same time, we must bear in mind that Spanish religious prose was well received in Elizabethan and Jacobean England both by Catholics and Protestants. See Martz (1954: 6), as well as Elton (1977: 55-56). Underhill (1971: 226-227) mentions the existence of ten translations of Fray Luis de Granada's Works into English between 1582 and 1602. The first translation of his *Libro de la oración y meditación* was made in Paris by an English Catholic, Richard Hopkins, in 1582, and it went through six different editions in London. Wardropper (1958: 296-297) also points to the influence of the English Jesuit and poet Robert Southwell upon Metaphysical poets. His employment of continental techniques, such as sacred conceits, was perfected by

in the same way as March doesn't follow the traditional moralistic and didactic techniques which were common in Medieval religious poetry, and lets us hear an intensely personal voice which conditions the original organization of his poem, Donne also makes constant use of poetic resources which would be characteristic not of the Renaissance, but of the Baroque. His poetry, far from quiet and confident or laudatory, is full of anguish and contradictions. His voice is as personal as it can possibly be, and the poetic resources he employs are more in consonance with the new times. Instead of similes he uses striking metaphors and difficult conceits; instead of a fluent syntax, he gives us highly condensed lines.

At the same time, although on the surface they accommodate their lines to the religious creed which they profess –Catholicism in the case of March; Calvinism in the case of Donne– both of them deal with religious concepts in a somewhat rebellious or at least ambiguous way, which is the outcome of their strong individualism.

Even though both poets crave God's help, conscious of the weight of their sins, they often surpass the line of what is theologically allowed to them. March dares ask God what He has in store for him, going against the general advice given in moral treatises which recommended the acceptance of His decree without ever questioning what it was to be, and, even less, why so. March goes as far as to utter what he considers a contradiction of predestination, which he thinks is contrary to God's universal saving wish, although he doesn't surpass the limits of what authorized voices explained (his ideas often echo the medieval versions of St. Augustine's opinion on this subject, as well as the positions maintained by the leading Franciscans.).

Nevertheless, the lack of confidence in his own strength to behave according to the decree of God makes him wish not to have ever been created, since this would have avoided his damnation.

Although March's attitude along the poem fluctuates, and it seems to end in a humble and orthodox tone, demanding attrition as the means to achieve contrition, if analyzed in detail, we realize that Scholasticism didn't envisage this possibility of achieving salvation.

Donne, on his part, subtly alludes to reason, as a faculty which could have enabled him to achieve his higher end. This, which would be in line with Catholicism, goes against Calvinism, where human faculties are of no help to a soul which can only be saved by an omnipotent God that has already decided that the majority are going to be damned, no matter how hard they try to avoid it by means of their good works. In the same way, those souls He has decided to save, will be so, even though they have never asked for it. When God chose someone, He seized him by force and made him follow His path.

The intensity which Donne employs to present that violence he craves for himself –as the only means of avoiding damnation– indirectly depicts Him as a terrifying God who makes Donne suffer to the extreme, particularly –as in the case of March– because of His silence.

Both poems succeed in portraying the anguish felt by a man who considers himself feeble and wicked, who is horrified at the idea of eternal damnation and who, therefore, craves God's help.

Donne. McCann (1961: 16-17) has also established a relationship between the use of a conceptist language by Spanish mystics and the poetry of English metaphysical poets like Donne, Crashaw or Vaughan. As regards the use of a direct and colloquial language, which is characteristic of Donne, it is worth mentioning the connection which Wilson (1958: 53) established between this aspect, which is characteristic of Spanish religious lyrics in the Renaissance and its influence upon English poetry of the same period. Finally, Warnke (1972: 55-56) relates the most outstanding characteristics of metaphysical poetry to the techniques of meditation explained in the Spanish religious treatises which had reached England by the time Donne wrote his poems: "Concreteness of imagery, colloquial immediacy of tone, and the tendency toward intellectual conceit are all perhaps implicit in the 'composition' which is the first stage of a meditation, and even more significant, the 'fusion of thought and feeling' which our century has found central to Metaphysical poetry seems undoubtedly connected to the aim and method of meditation".

March's longer poem (224 lines) expresses his obsessive fear of damnation by means of accumulation and insistence,³ whereas Donne writes a highly condensed poem (14 lines). In spite of this difference, both authors deal with the function of Reason, Will, the fear of eternal damnation, as well as the kind and degree of affection they may experience towards God.

Both poems arise from the anguish felt at the idea of the soul's almost certain damnation which elicits the poet's reaction. They start by admitting that only God's quick and effective intervention may put an end to their desperate situation. This is the reason why they start asking for God's violence:

Puy que sens Tu algú a Tu no basta
dónam la mà o *pels cabells me lleva*;
si no estench la mia envers la tua,
quasi forçat a Tu mateix me tira. 5
(ll. 1-5; Bohigas 1955: 4, 120-132)

[Sith without you there's none to you can reach,
Give me your hand, else drag me by the hair;
If towards yours I hold not out my own, 5
Even by force, pray draw me to yourself.]
(Ribes and Keown, trans. 1989: 2, 122-138)

Batter my heart, three personed God
for you as yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to men.
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me,
and bend your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.
(ll. 1-5; Smith 1971: 314-315)

March tells God that he can only achieve salvation if He helps him,⁴ which he asks by means of imperatives.⁵ In the second line he offers God two possibilities: "dónam la mà o pels cabells me tira"

³ The modernity of March's poem CV has been variously stressed. It is the strength of his personal voice, of the 'poetic I', which brings it apart from medieval lyrics. Arnau (1989: 81) says: "Y este rasgo de modernidad radica, si se quiere buscar su razón última, en haber incorporado a la obra poética el 'yo' personal. Porque ésta constituye una de las notas diferenciales entre la poesía medieval y la moderna". Sobré (1974: 116) also reflects on this aspect: "És un poema a tota llum modern: el monòleg tremolós d'una consciència individual, esqueixada, amargada. Un medieval no hauria pas escrit un poema d'aquesta llargària sense una organització externa, imposada, fins i tot arbitraria". And later on (Sobré 1974: 117) he adds: "[March] no vol aprofitar cap model organitzatiu previ". Moreover, the fact that he doesn't write a didactic poem makes him an original poet who, instead, reflects upon his own situation. And, in order to make it more vivid, he doesn't follow a clear line of thought, but constantly moves from one point to another. As Archer (1996: 17) notes, this poem is unique in this sense and has no precedent or contemporary in Spain: "Això no sembla haver-ho fet cap altre poeta de les tradicions anteriors o vigents a la península ibèrica".

⁴ This is supported by the Bible, where it is variously stated that God grants his grace as a gift to those who obtain salvation. In Rom. 8:28-29, we read: "scimus autem quoniam diligentibus Deum omnia cooperantur in bonum, iis qui secundum propositum vocati sunt sancti". And in Eph. 2:8: "gratia enim estis salvati per fidem, et hoc non ex vobis: Dei enim donum est".

⁵ In this March, again, follows the advice given in the Bible, both in Luke 11:9-10 and in Matt. 7:7-8: "Ego ego dico vobis: Petite et dabitur vobis, quaerite et invenietis; pulsate, et aperietur vobis. Omnis enim qui petit, accipit; et qui quaerit, invenit; et pulsanti aperietur". Moreover, the use of imperatives is all pervading in the *Miserere*, Penitential Psalm 50 of the *Vulgata*, which, as Fabrega i Escatllar (1994: 357) has noted, bears certain resemblances with poem CV particularly in the sinner's self-accusation in hope for God's pardon. The fact that March's library included a volume containing *Les Exposicions dels Salms* (Bohigas 1952: I, 47) makes it probable that he was acquainted with this kind of religious texts. Finally, it must be noted that Francesc Eiximenis in his treatise *Vita Christi*, which, according to Hauf (1990: 182), must have been accessible not only

In the first quatrain of March's *Cant Espiritual* a similar frustration is expressed by the poet who wishes to approach God: "Yo vull anar envers Tu al encontre; / no ssé per què no faç lo que volrría / puy sòn cert haver voluntat franca" (ll. 5-8) [In truth I had as lief go out to meet you, / I know not why I act not as I would / Sith I am fully sure my will is free].

March, like Donne, has been endowed by God with the necessary elements for his personal salvation. Donne recalls that he is a rational being, and, therefore, resembles God (Reason, your viceroy in me). March, on his part, speaks of his free will (sòn cert haver voluntat franca), which can help him obtain eternal bliss.

However, March, already at the beginning of the second stanza, stresses again the contrast between his wish to abandon a life of sin and the difficulties he encounters: "Levar mi vull e prou no m'esforçe: / ço fa lo pes de mes terribles colpes" (ll. 9-10) [I'd fain rise up yet I strive not enough: / It is the weight of my most grievous faults].⁷

Both March and Donne explain how the weight of their sins ("lo pes de mes terribles colpes") (l. 10), the Enemy (to another due) constitute obstacles that prevent them from rising (Levar mi vull [I'd fain rise up / That I may rise and stand]) and starting a new life.

Moreover, both March and Donne wish to belong to God. March says: "teu vull ser" [I'd be yours] (l. 12), and Donne: "Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain". Both of them recognize that they cannot achieve it by themselves. March mentions the hardness of his heart: "mon cor dur" (l. 13) [my hard heart], whereas Donne speaks of his engagement to the Enemy: "am betrothed unto your enemy" (l. 11). The logical consequence is in both cases similar: they insistently ask for a change, which may entail the use of radical methods.⁸ Donne immediately mentions them by means of a succession of imperatives addressed to God. He tells Him: "Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again, / Take me to you, imprison me" (ll. 12-13). His engagement to the Enemy must be broken and the town must return to its previous lord.

In the final couplet he explains that he will never achieve freedom or purity unless violent means are employed. The paradox that, in order to live it is necessary to die, is maintained to the end of the poem: "... for I / Except you enthral me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except your ravish me" (ll. 13-15).

The emphasis that Donne places on his absolute dependence of God's intervention if he wishes to abandon the situation in which he finds himself is also present in March's *Cant Espiritual*: "Ajuda'm Déu, que sens Tu no'm puch moure" (l. 49) [God succour me! Without you I can't move].⁹

The image he chooses of a paralytic ("l meu cors és més que paralítich" (l. 50) [My heart is more than paralysed] to illustrate the absolute control which bad habits¹⁰ exert upon him ("Tant sòn en mi

⁷ St. Augustine in *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* (II, IV, 4) stresses the importance of sin in man's final destiny. It is not the nature he has received from God, but the weight of sin what constitutes an obstacle for his own salvation. This idea closely follows Rom. 7:14-20: "Quod enim operor, non intellego: non enim quod volo bonum, hoc ago: sed quod odi malum, illud facio. Si autem quod nolo, illud facio... Nunc autem iam non ego operor illud, sed quod habitat in me peccatum".

⁸ Donne, in *Holy Sonnets XIX* reflects upon his inconstancy. His good wishes last less than he would desire, that is why he –like March– thinks fear is the most efficient way to make a sinner like him persevere in the right path: "Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot / A constant habit; that when I would not / I change in vows, and in devotion. / As humorous is my contrition / As my prophane love, and as soon forgot. / (...) / I durst not view heaven yesterday; and today / In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God. / Tomorrow I quake with the fear of his rod. / So my devout fits come and go away / (...) / Those are my best days, when I shake with fear".

⁹ In this poem March asks God's help four times: ll. 19-24; 53; 99-100; 150.

¹⁰ Scholasticism, and, particularly St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (I-II, q. 49-54), pays special attention to the influence of habits upon one's life, whose freedom they progressively reduce. It is an idea which A. March often deals with in his poems: poem 88, ll. 13-16; 118, ll. 39-40; 121, l. 7.

envellits los mals hàbits / que la virtut al gustar m'ès amarga" (l. 51-52) [So old in me have grown my evil habits / That I find virtue bitter to the taste] is as effective as Donne's comparison between his soul and a conquered town or a woman engaged to his enemy.

March, like Donne, asks God to enter his heart: "(per què) .t suplich que dins lo cor Tu m'entres" (l. 183) [Therefore, I beg you, enter now my heart].

And, like him, although without developing the amorous image, he asks God to make him His own. Donne's words: "Take me to you" resemble March's: "Plàcia.t, Déu, puys teu vull ser, que.u vullés" (l. 12) [An't please you God, since I'd be yours, so have it!].¹¹

Although, as we have seen, there are considerable similarities in both poems, we cannot ignore the existence of important differences as regards religious experience. Whereas Donne expresses in a concise and emotive way the intensity of his religious feelings, of his love for God (Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain), March expresses with identical sincerity how difficult it is for him to love God. He is aware of the fact that divine love can bring about good works, but he admits that he has never felt it: "delectació alta / Yo no la sent, per no d'spost sentir-la" (l. 157) [The highest delectation / I do not feel; thereto I'm not disposed].

As a matter of fact, March is convinced that fear of God's rage, of eternal damnation, is more effective than love if he is to accept the Will of God ('sí que.l voler ab ta voluntat .ligue' (So my own will enmesheth with your own) (l. 42): "Yo tem a Tu més que no.t só amable" (l. 57) [My fear of you is greater than my love]. And, although he wishes to obtain it: "Esforçam que yo.t ame¹² / Vença l'amor a la por que yo.t porte" (ll. 135-136) [grant me the strength to love you. / Let love defeat the fear I have of you], he adds: "E si amor tanta com vull no.m entra, / Créixme la por, sí que, tement, no peque" (ll. 137-138) [And should Love fill me not as I would wish, / Increase my fear, so I, affright, sin not].

Although Donne's *Holy Sonnet XIV* doesn't explain what causes the poet's anguish that leads him to crave violent actions from God, March's poem repeatedly affirms that his reaction is due to a fear of hell. In the case of Donne we know that the contemplation of his own sin is the origin of his desperate petitions, and, although it is not stated whether the feeling of fear is more or less intense than the feeling of love, one tends to suspect that both are present. He asserts that he loves God and that he wishes to obtain grace. But, although he never shows his anguish at the idea of eternal damnation, I suspect it is inherent in the violence with which he reacts. Moreover, the violence he expects from God would be characteristic of an act of election on His part (and it would indicate that the soul had been saved). When this happened, Calvinism spoke of conversion in terms of violent election, which the individual could not reject. This is exactly what Donne asks from God when he speaks of "enthraling" and "ravishing" as the means to liberate his mind (reason) and his affections (betrothed woman).

If Donne's poem asks for a violent and immediate reaction on God's part, March's further emphasizes his inner violence, which ensues from the conflict between what his reason dictates and what his affections lead him to. Whereas the first one shows what is correct, the second are habitually contrary to it. His direct and reiterative allusion to this conflict portrays March as a person full of humanity and vitality who is strongly attracted by worldly pleasures. This makes it specially hard for him to renounce to them. He thus tries to find the best way of achieving it, which is by bringing to

¹¹This line is clearly Augustinian in its content. In it, as in Augustine's *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (XVII, 33), March is aware of the need the soul has of God's help in order to behave in a right way. For, even if a human being takes the decision of following the right path, he can do nothing without the aid of God.

¹²St. Augustine in *Enchiridion* (c. CXVII: 628) says the sinner must insistently ask from God's mercifulness the gift of love: "sibi petenti donari possit ut amet". This idea became commonplace within medieval religious thought.

March's despair leads him to try every possible solution:²⁰ he rebels against God's plans; he humiliates himself to the extreme, he fervently asks for help, even though it may entail the use of drastic methods, including the loss of his life. This poem, whose length could lead us to think that it is more relaxed than Donne's *Batter my heart* repeatedly transmits a similar state of anguish before the possibility of eternal damnation. Although Donne's conflict seems more intellectual than March's who is constantly regretting the tyranny of the flesh, the attraction he feels for the world, his horror before suffering, we may nevertheless read between the lines of Donne's poem the existence of a rebelliousness and horror which otherwise could not explain such an intense suffering.

If March's rebelliousness was openly uttered, Donne's, although more covert, is also present in the poem. Even his allusion to Reason as an element which can help the individual frame his own destiny (reason your viceroy in me, me should defend) shows that this Calvinist who had changed his creed late in life did not renounce what he valued most: the independence of his thought.²¹ It looks as though it wished to escape the control of the omnipotent and all powerful God of Calvinism, who had decreed the damnation of the majority.

Donne, although well aware of the arbitrariness of this God, whose grace could not be resisted if He wished to grant it, follows an intermediate path between Catholicism in which he had been brought up and Calvinism, which he had accepted before the composition of this poem. As a Catholic, he dares claim a certain degree of freedom for the individual, who is a rational being. In consonance with his ability to reason, he presents in all its crudity the radical methods which God employs to save those He chooses. He speaks of battering, burning, overthrowing, enthralling, or ravishing, as the only means to save the elected. God's violence is so great that the soul cannot resist it. It is the idea of the "divine rape" (Stachniewski 1981: 690). Although Donne fervently craves it as the only means of salvation that his creed leaves open to him, he is nevertheless indirectly showing his rebelliousness when he describes the violence of the traumatic methods which are the only possible signs of God's election.

The rebelliousness, whether open or covert, that both March and Donne share when approaching the mystery of salvation constitutes another important element of union between these two great poets.

²⁰In fact, this attitude on March's part is often present in the religious poems of the later period. His fear of hell is repeatedly uttered (97, ll. 29-30; 107, ll. 11, 31-32) as is the lack of confidence in his own strength to change his fallen nature: "Tant son en mi envetllits los mals hàbits" (105, l. 51). "(...) perdut dolç hàbit / del bé vinent no em trop certa fiança" (98, ll. 15-16). This wish to achieve the most spiritual and subtle pleasures which accompanies the gift of the love for God is repeatedly expressed: "E lo delit que el bon hom de tu gusta, / fes me'n sentir una poca sentilla" (105, ll. 45-46). (See also 98, l. 19; 113, l. 252). The feeling that God turns his back on him is also expressed: "a nostres prec's Ell ou d'orella sorda" (104, l. 31). The result of that silence is a state of inner disorder: "aquell dolç tast que ab si l'acordant tasta / no és en mi, mas dolor del discorde" (98, ll. 41-42). March, having spent all his energy in attempting to escape his estate of sin and evade eternal pain imagines God as an omnipotent being who laughs at the miseries of his creatures: "Ja veig estar a Déu ple de rialles / veent com som a nós mateix contraris" (113, ll. 171-172). (See Fàbrega i Escatllar 1994: 352-37 and Sobré 1974: 116).

²¹Although Donne seems to have abandoned Catholicism by 1596, he didn't take holy orders until the year 1615, even though Morton had made him an offer by 1607. Everything seems to indicate that he resorted to a career in the Church after numerous and fruitless attempts to obtain a civil post. There is written evidence of the care he took to do so by means of different patrons (the Countess of Bedford, Magdalen Herbert, and the Countess of Huntington, between 1601 and 1608, followed by Sir Robert Drury and the Earl of Somerset). Although the prose (especially his *Sermons*, which Donne wrote after his ordination in 1615) depicts him as a persuasive Calvinist preacher, some texts written by him a few years earlier (particularly his *Essays in Divinity*) manifest Donne's theological difficulties. If we take into account that their date of composition runs parallel to that of his *Holy Sonnets* (written between 1609-1611) it is easy to understand why Donne sometimes adopts an ambivalent attitude towards certain religious concepts, such as the function of reason. See Flynn (1995) and Hughes (1968).

Appendix

DONNE'S *HOLY SONNET XIV*

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due, 5
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue;
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto your enemy; 10
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

AUSIÀS MARCH'S *CANT ESPRITUAL CV* (FIRST STANZAS)

I. Puys que sens Tu algú a Tu no basta,
dónam la mà o pels cabells me lleva;
si no estench la mia envers la tua,
quasi forçat a Tu mateix me tira. 5
Yo vull anar envers Tu al encontre;
no ssé per què no faç lo que volrria,
puys yo són cert haver voluntat francha
e no ssé què aquest voler m'empacha.

II. Levar mi vull e prou no m'i esforce:
ço fa lo pes de mes terribles colpes; 10
ans que la mort lo procès a mi cloga,
plàcia't, Déu, puys teu vull ser, que.u vulles;
fes que ta sanch mon cor dur amollesca:
de semblant mal guarí ella mots altres. 15
Ja lo tardar ta ira.m denuncia;
ta pietat no troba.n mi què obre.

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