TO HAVE read Donne was once evidence of a curious taste; now (though the vogue may be fading) it is a minimum requirement of civilized literary talk. We have seen the history of English poetry rewritten by critics convinced of his cardinal importance. This change was partly the effect of the reception into England of French symbolist thought and its assimilation to the native doctrines of Blake, Coleridge, and Pater. Poets and critics were struck by the way Donne exhibits the play of an agile mind within the sensuous body of poetry, so that even his most passionate poems work by wit, abounding in argument and analogy; the poetry and the argument cannot be abstracted from each other. And this was interesting because the new aesthetic was founded on a hatred for the disembodied intellect, for abstract argument, for what the French called littérature. A series of poets, culminating in T. S. Eliot, proclaimed their affinity with Donne. They also searched the past in order to discover the moment when the blend of thought and passion that came so naturally to Donne, and with such difficulty to themselves, developed its modern inaccessibility. One answer was that this occurred during the lifetime of Milton, who helped to create the difficulties under which modern poetry labors. This very characteristic symbolist historical myth is usually called by the name that Eliot gave it, the "dissociation of sensibility." Eliot altered his views on Donne and Milton, but his later opinions have been less successful in the world than his earlier
ones; and it remains true that to write of the fortunes of Donne in the past seventy years is, in effect, to write less about him than about the aesthetic preoccupations of that epoch.

Donne has been distorted to serve this myth; but it is true that earlier criticism had treated him harshly. As Ben Jonson suggested, his kind of poetry runs the risk of neglect, especially in periods that value perspicuity. Dryden thought of him as a great wit, rather than as a poet, and a normal late seventeenth-century view of Donne was that this "eminent poet . . . became a much more eminent preacher." Dr. Johnson's brilliant critique occurs more or less accidentally in his Life of Cowley. Coleridge and Lamb, Browning and George Eliot admired him · indeed he enjoyed a minor vogue in the middle of the last century · but Edmund Gosse, in what was, until the publication in 1970 of R. C. Bald's Life, the standard biography, is patronizing about the poetry and calls Donne's influence "almost entirely malign." The revaluation of Donne has certainly been radical. The present is probably a favorable moment for a just estimate. The past half-century has provided the essential apparatus, and though the time for partisan extravagance has gone, so has the time for patronage.

LIFE

DONNE was born early in 1572, in the parish of St. Olave, Bread Street, in the City of London, of Roman Catholic parents. His mother was of good family; and since she numbered among her kinsmen Mores, Heywoods, and Rastells, Donne could well claim, in his apologia at the beginning of the anti-Jesuit Pseudo-Martyr, that his family had endured much for the Roman Catholic doctrine. His own brother was arrested for concealing a priest and died in prison. His father, a prosperous City tradesman, died when Donne was not yet four, leaving him a portion of about (pounds) 750. A more enduring legacy was his early indoctrination by Jesuits. To his intimate acquaintance with their persecution under Queen Elizabeth he attributes his interest in suicide (Biathanatos) and his right to characterize as mistaken the Jesuit thirst for martyrdom by the hostile civil power (Pseudo-Martyr). In fact, his whole life and work were strongly
affected by this circumstance of his childhood. He suffered materially; for example, as a Roman Catholic he was disabled from taking a degree at Oxford. But, more important, his mind was cast in the mold of learned religion. We know that during his years at the Inns of Court, in the early 1590's, he read much besides law; that he explored many fields and many languages; and though described as a great visitor of ladies rose at four every morning and rarely left his chamber before ten. Much, if not most, of this reading must have been theological in character.

Donne traveled in Italy and Spain, and in 1596 and 1597 took part in naval expeditions. In 1598 he became secretary to the influential Sir Thomas Egerton; but his secret marriage to Lady Egerton's niece, Ann More, in December 1601, put an end to his hopes of worldly success. Her father had Donne imprisoned and dismissed from his post; he even tried to have the marriage annulled. Donne's dignified apologies prevailed, but he did not achieve reinstatement, and for some years lived somewhat grimly and inconveniently in what he called "my hospital at Mitcham," burdened and distracted by illness, poverty, and a growing family. A letter describes him writing "in the noise of three gamesome children; and by the side of her, whom . . . I have transplanted into a wretched fortune." He complained, in dark and memorable phrases, of his hated inactivity. He sought patronage, and had it of the countess of Bedford, of the king's favorite, Carr, and of Sir Robert Drury. He worked as assistant to Morton, later bishop of Durham, in anti-Romanist polemic, but refused to take orders when Morton requested it. The belated payment of his wife's dowry gave him a period of relief, in which he wrote more and published for the first time Pseudo-Martyr in 1610, Ignatius His Conclave in 1611, and the two poems for Elizabeth Drury's death in 1611 and 1612. Biathanatos, which he forbade "both the press and the fire", belongs to this time, and the Essays in Divinity were written in 1614.

When James I had made it plain that he would advance Donne only within the Church, the poet finally took orders (January 1615). In 1616 he was appointed reader in divinity at Lincoln's Inn, where, over the years, he both gave and received great satisfaction. A learned audience suited Donne, although this one must have been well informed about
those youthful indiscretions concerning which the lack of evidence has never impeded warm speculation; he was accepted as the penitent he claimed to be, and the audience would remember St. Augustine. Donne had found his true genre.

His wife died in 1617, her memory celebrated by a fine sonnet and a great sermon; Donne was left with seven children. He was made dean of St. Paul's in 1621 and became the most famous of preachers, invested with a somber sanctity and happy in the rejection of "the mistress of my youth, Poetry" for "the wife of mine age, Divinity." In 1623 he was seriously ill, and during his illness wrote Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, a series of religious meditations on the course of his disease that is striking evidence of his continuing ability to be witty on all topics; with all its solemnity it has a macabre playfulness and hospital wit.

His sermons are often surprisingly personal; we learn of his family anxieties (the death of a daughter, a son missing in action, his own departure abroad in 1619) and his remorse for past sins. In the end he brought his own death (on March 31, 1631) into the pulpit (having wished to die there) and preached the appalling sermon called Death's Duel before Charles I in Lent, 1631. His ordering of the monument which survived the Fire and is still in St. Paul's, and his almost histrionic composure on his deathbed, Walton has made famous. This aspect of Donne has perhaps been overstressed; he and death are a little too closely associated. This can be corrected only by prolonged reading in the sermons, or perhaps by reminding oneself of his marked interest in life: his desire for success, which made him the dependent of the dubious Carr, or his rich and varied friendships · with Goodyere, with the scientist earl of Northumberland, with Lady Danvers and her sons, George and Edward Herbert, with Jonson and Wotton · many of them central to the intellectual life of their time. But it is still true that he was a somber man, a melancholic even, at a time when this quality was associated with the highest kind of wit.

CONCEPTS AS "CONCEITS"
WIT is a quality allowed Donne by all critics, of all parties. In his own time people admired his "strong lines," and perhaps the best way of giving a general account of his wit is to try to explain what this expression meant. Donne is notoriously an obscure poet · in fact his obscurity is often overestimated, but he is never easy · and this is often because his manner is tortuous and, in his own word, "harsh." Thomas Carew's famous tribute emphasizes the strain he put on language: "to the awe of thy imperious wit Our stubborn language bends." Carew speaks of his "masculine expression"; Donne himself of his "masculine persuasive force." There was a contemporary taste for this kind of thing, related probably to an old tradition that it was right for some kinds of poetry to be obscure. And Donne was not writing for the many. He expected his readers to enjoy difficulty, not only in the scholastic ingenuity of his arguments, but in the combination of complicated verse forms and apparently spontaneous thought · thought that doubled back, corrected itself, broke off in passionate interjections. This kind of writing belongs to a rhetorical tradition ignored by much Elizabethan poetry, which argued that language could directly represent the immediate play of mind · style as the instantaneous expression of thinking. And this is why Donne · if I may translate from Mario Praz what I take to be the best thing ever said about Donne's style · will always appeal to readers "whom the rhythm of thought itself attracts by virtue of its own peculiar convolutions."

Obviously this is a limited appeal. Ben Jonson, himself not a stranger to the strong line, was only the first to accuse Donne of overdoing it. He recommended a middle course between jejune smoothness and a manner conscientiously rough. But for a while "strong lines" · applied to prose as well as verse · was a eulogistic term; so Fuller could praise those of Cleveland, saying that "his Epithetes were pregnant with metaphors, carrying in them a difficult plainness, difficult at the hearing, plain at the considering thereof." But there was opposition to what Walton called "the strong lines now in fashion"; witness, for example, Corbet's good nonsense poem Epilogus Incerti Authoris, a heap of paradoxes beginning "Like to the mowing tone of unspoke speeches" and ending

Even such is man who died, and yet did laugh
To read these strong lines for his epitaph.

which not only parodies Donne, but foretells the fate of the strong line: it degenerated into a joke and until recently recurred only in comic poetry. Hobbes, legislating for a new poetry in the 1650's, called strong lines "no better than riddles." The taste for them is not universal, nor are the powers they require of poets.

As strong lines directly record mental activity, they contain concepts, or, in the contemporary form of the word, "conceits." The meaning we now attach to this word is a specialization directly due to the vogue for strong lines. The value of such lines obviously depends on the value (and that is almost the same thing as the strangeness) of the concepts they express, and these were usually metaphors. A high valuation was placed on metaphor, on the power of making what Dr. Johnson, who understood without approving, called the discordia concors. The world was regarded as a vast divine system of metaphors, and the mind was at its fullest stretch when observing them. Peculiar ability in this respect was called acutezza by the Italians and, by the English, wit. But although the movement was European in scope, it is unnecessary to suppose that Donne owed much to its Spanish and Italian exponents; they were known in England, but they conspicuously lack Donne's colloquial convolution, and his argumentativeness. Johnson's mistake in reporting Marino as a source has often been repeated. Marino has strength but not harshness, not the masculine persuasive force. We cannot think of Donne without thinking of relentless argument. He depends heavily upon dialectical sleight of hand, arriving at the point of wit by subtle syllogistic misdirections, inviting admiration by slight but significant perversities of analogue, which reroute every argument to paradox. Still, in view of the lack of contemporary English criticism on these points, it is wise to learn what we can from Continental critics of witty poetry; and the most important lesson, brilliantly suggested by S. L. Bethell, is that they regarded the conceit of argument · making a new and striking point by a syllogism concealing a logical error · as the highest and rarest kind of conceit. This is Donne's commonest device. Of course we are aware that we are being cleverly teased, but
many of the love poems, like *The Ecstasy* or *The Flea*, depend on our wonder outlasting our critical attitude to argument. Consider the progression of ideas in *The Flea*:

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be;
Confess it, this cannot be said
A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it woo,
And pampered swells with one blood made of
two,
And this, alas, is more than we would do.
Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
Though use make you apt to kill me,
Let not to this, self murder added be,
And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.
Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
In what could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself, nor me the weaker now;
'Tis true, then learn how false, fears be;
Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
Will waste, as this flea's death took life from
This poem, which was enormously admired by Donne's contemporaries, is cited here merely as an example of his original way of wooing by false syllogisms. So in The Ecstasy: the argument, a tissue of fallacies, sounds solemnly convincing and consecutive, so that it is surprising to find it ending with an immodest proposal. The highest powers of the mind are put to base use but are enchantingly demonstrated in the process.

Part of Donne's originality lies precisely in the use of such methods for amorous poetry. Properly they belong to the sphere of religion (of course there is always much commerce between the two). This human wit suggests the large design of God's wit in the creation. It is immemorially associated with biblical exegesis and preaching, sanctioned and practiced by St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, and blended in the patristic tradition with the harshness of Tertullian, as well as with the enormous eloquence of Chrysostom. The Europe of Donne's time had enthusiastically taken up witty preaching; but the gusto espagnol, as it was called, though associated with the Counter-Reformation, is essentially a revival of what Professor Curtius would call the "mannerism" of the patristic tradition. Now this tradition was venerated by the Church of England, a learned Church that rejected the Puritan aphorism "so much Latin, so much Flesh." And the Fathers could provide not only doctrine but examples of ingenium, that acuity of observation by which the preacher could best illustrate and explicate the Word. Donne's youthful examination of "the whole body of divinity controverted between the churches of England and Rome" provided him not only with a religion but with a style. Some aspects of his Jesuit training would help him in the business of analogy; but primarily the conceit of his secular poetry is derived from his later religious studies. It is, in fact, a new, paradoxical use, for amorous purposes, of the concetto predicabile, the preacher's conceit. As usual, we see him all of a piece, yet all paradox; Donne the poet, with all his "naturalist" passion, knowingness, obscenity indeed, is anima naturaliter theolologica. What made him a poet also made him an Anglican: the revaluation of a tradition.
IT is for this reason that the old emphasis on the "medieval" quality of Donne's thought, though in need of qualification, is more to the point than the more recent stress on his modernity. A great deal has been made of his interest in the "new philosophy," and the disturbance supposed to have been caused him by such astronomical discoveries as the elliptical movement of planets, the impossibility of a sphere of fire, the corruptibility of the heavens, the movement of the earth, and so on. Certainly, as we know from Ignatius and elsewhere, Donne was aware of such developments, aware that it was no longer humanly satisfactory to look at the heavens through the spectacles of Ptolemy. But it is the greatest possible misunderstanding of Donne to suppose that he took this as any more than another proof, where none was needed, of the imperfection of human intellect. Mutability reached higher toward heaven than one had thought; but this only shows how unreliable human knowledge must always be. In Ignatius, Donne does not recount the new discoveries for their own sakes, but only as part of the sneering. "Kepler . . . (as himself testifies of himself) ever since Tycho Brahe's death, hath received into his care, that no new thing should be done in heaven without his knowledge." Kepler himself called this "impudent," not "flattering." When the devil sees that he can find no worthy place in hell for Ignatius, he decides to get Galileo to draw down the moon (an easy matter for one who had already got close enough to see its imperfections) so that the Jesuits can get on to it · they will "easily unite and reconcile the Lunatic Church to the Roman Church," and a hell will grow in the moon, for Ignatius to rule over. At times Donne uses "new philosophy" more seriously, to illustrate some moral or theological assertion. The new astronomy, for example, is "applicable well" because it is right that we should move toward God, not He to us. Or, the Roman church is like Copernicanism · it "hath carried earth farther up from the stupid Center" but carried heaven far higher. When he wants, for the sake of some argument, to disprove the sphere of fire, he does not use the new scientific argument from optics, but the old-fashioned opinion of Cardan (God would not make an element in which nothing could live). In a serious mood he often forgets that the earth moves: "the Earth is not the more constant because it lies still continually" (Devotions); or, it is a wonderful thing that
"so vast and immense a body as the Sun should run so many miles in a minute"
(sermon of 1627). The famous passage in *The First Anniversary*:

And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it,

is merely part of the demonstration of "the frailty and decay of this whole World"
mentioned in the title of the poem · a theme enforced by many illustrations taken from a
wide variety of subjects, including the "old" philosophy. And this is Donne's way with
new or old knowledge. It would be very unlike him to be much affected by the new
philosophy; "if there be any addition to knowledge", he says in a sermon of 1626, "it is
rather new knowledge, than a greater knowledge." For, if you know as much as
Socrates, you know nothing, and "S. Paul found that to be all knowledge, to know
Christ." There is always an antithesis, in Donne, between natural and divine knowledge,
the first shadowy and inexact, the second clear and sure. New philosophy belongs to
the first class. What we really know is what is revealed; later we shall know in full:

up unto the watch-tower get,
And see all things despoiled of fallacies:
Thou shalt not peep through lattices of eyes,
Nor hear through labyrinths of ears, nor learn
By circuit, or collections to discern.
In heaven thou straight know'st all, concerning it,
And what concerns it not, shalt straight forget.

**THE AMOROUS POEMS**

A mind habituated to such discriminations between the light of nature and "light from
above, from the fountain of light," as Milton calls it, may, in some spheres of knowledge,
earn the epithet "skeptical." Donne deserted a church that, as he and Hooker agreed,
had mistaken mere custom for law. Liberated from the tyranny of custom, he turns, in his erotic poetry, a professionally disenchanted eye on conventional human behavior. We may speak confidently of a "libertine," or "naturalist" Donne only if we use the terms as applying to literature and thought rather than to life; but it remains true that the Songs and Sonnets are often (though without his shocking coolness) akin to the franker pronouncements of Montaigne. Consider, for example, his essay Upon Some Verses of Virgil, where he professes his contempt for "artised" love; he prefers the thing itself and, in accordance with his preference, argues that amorous poetry also should be "natural," colloquial, "not so much innovating as filling language with more forcible and divers services, wrestling, straining, and enfolding it . . . teaching it unwonted motions." This is Donne to the life:

Who ever loves, if he do not propose
The right true end of love, he's one who goes
To sea for nothing but to make him sick.

Donne openly depises the ritual and indirection of Platonic love; he will follow nature and pluck his rose (or roses; for love's sweetest part is variety). The enemies of nature are such fictions as honor; in the good old times, before custom dominated humanity, things were very different: see Love's Deity and Elegy xvii:

How happy were our sires in ancient time,
Who held plurality of loves no crime!

But since this title honour hath been used,
Our weak credulity hath been abused;
The golden laws of nature are repealed,

This is the sense in which Donne often celebrates the passion of love · as immediate and natural, but constricted by social absurdities:

Love's not so pure and abstract, as they use
To say, which have no mistress but their muse.

But of course we must allow for an element of formal paradox. **Donne** found this very congenial · it is in a way a theological, a liturgical, device · and his *Juvenilia* contain such joke paradoxes as a defense of woman's inconstancy, an argument that it is possible to find some virtue in women, and so on, worked out with the same half-serious, half-ribald ingenuity that we find in some of the *Songs and Sonnets*:

Go, and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me, where all past years are,
Or who cleft the Devil's foot,
Teach me to hear mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind.
If thou be'est born to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand days and nights,
Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And swear
No where
Lives a woman true, and fair.
If thou find'st one, let me know,
Such a pilgrimage were sweet;
Yet do not, I would not go,
Though at next door we might meet,
Though she were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter, 
Yet she 
Will be 
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

To take these poems too seriously, as moral or autobiographical pronouncements, is to spoil them; though some are clearly more serious than others.

**THE SECULAR POEMS**

THIS may suggest the possibility of dividing the secular poems into groups other than their obvious genres; but it is a highly conjectural undertaking. There is a similar difficulty about their chronology; attempts to determine this depend on hypothetical links with events (and women) in **Donne**'s life. We can say that the *Satires* were written in the 1590's; we can place many verse letters over a twenty-year period; epithalamia and obsequies are datable; one or two references in the love poems hint at dates. But in these last the evidence is scanty. Jonson's testimony, that **Donne** did his best work before he was twenty-five, depends on what he thought good · all we know is that he admired *The Calm* and *The Storm* (verse letters) and *Elegy xi*, a frantically witty poem but not among the most admired today. Only exceptionally can we say with certainty that this poem is addressed to his wife, that to another woman; this is witty with a stock situation (*The Flea*, for example, or *The Dream*), while that is drawn from life. Gosse actually invented a disastrous affair to explain some poems and absurdly supposed *Elegy xvi* to be addressed to **Donne**'s wife; another critic has argued passionately that *The Ecstasy* is a husband's address to his wife. Even Herbert Grierson supposes that the *Nocturnal* must be connected with the countess of Bedford, whose name was Lucy; and a whole set of poems, some of them full of racy double entendre, has been associated with Lady Danvers, ten years **Donne**'s senior and the mother of his friends the Herberts. All we may be sure of is that **Donne**, with varying intensity, passion, and intellectual conviction, exercised his wit on the theme of sexual love, and that he was
inclined to do this in a "naturalist" way. We need not concern ourselves with dates or with identities of mistresses celebrated, cursed, or mourned.

The *Songs and Sonnets* were read only in manuscript in Donne's lifetime, and by a small and sophisticated circle. They certainly exhibit what Donne, in the little squib called *The Courtier's Library*, calls "itchy outbreaks of far-fetched wit"; and the wit is of the kind that depends both upon a harsh strangeness of expression and upon great acuity of illustration and argument. We are asked to admire, and that is why the poet creates difficulties for himself, choosing arbitrary and complex stanza forms, of which the main point often seems to be that they put tremendous obstacles in his way. Without underestimating the variety of tone in these poems, one may say that they all offer this kind of pleasure · delight in a dazzling conjuring trick. Even the smoothest, simplest song, like "Sweetest love, I do not go", is full of mind. Donne would have despised Dryden's distinction between poets and wits. True, some of these poems deserve the censure that when we have once understood them they are exhausted: *The Indifferent*, *The Triple Fool*, and a dozen others fall into this class. Others, like *The Flea* and "A Valediction: of my name, in the window," are admired primarily as incredibly perverse and subtle feats of wit; yet others, like *The Apparition*, as examples of how Donne could clothe a passion, in this case hatred, in a clever colloquial fury. This is the inimitable Donne; sometimes, as in *The Broken Heart*, we might be reading Cowley's sexless exercises.

One should here dwell at rather more length on one or two poems. I almost chose *The Damp*, a fine example of Donne's dialectical wit (the main argument is attended by a ghost argument, supported by slang double meanings); and *Farewell to Love*, which would have pleased Montaigne by its grave obscenity; and, for its wide-ranging metaphor and brilliant farfetched conclusion, *Love's Alchemy*. *Lovers, Infiniteness* has the characteristic swerving argument, its stanzas beginning "If . . . Or . . . Yet . . ."; compare *The Fever*, with its "But yet . . . Or if . . . And yet . . . Yet . . .". For his best use of "the nice speculations of philosophy", *Air and Angels* and *The Ecstasy* commend themselves:
Where, like a pillow on a bed,
A pregnant bank swelled up, to rest
The violet's reclining head,
Sat we two, one another's best;
Our hands were firmly cemented
With a fast balm, which thence did spring,
Our eye-beams twisted, and did thread
Our eyes, upon one double string;
So to intergraft our hands, as yet
Was all the means to make us one,
And pictures in our eyes to get
Was all our propagation.

. . .

But O alas, so long, so far
Our bodies why do we forbear?

. . .

As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtle knot, which makes us man:
So must pure lovers' souls descend
T'afflections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.
To our bodies turn we then, that so
Weak men on love revealed may look;
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,
But yet the body is his book.

But *The Curse* is both characteristic and neglected, and *A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day* is *Donne*'s finest poem; so there follow some scanty remarks on these.
The Curse has the usual complex rhyme scheme and rather more than the usual energy in that Irish ingenuity of malediction which reminds us that Donne was one of the early satirists:

Whoever guesses, thinks, or dreams he knows
Who is my mistress, wither by this curse;
His only, and only his purse
May some dull heart to love dispose,
And she yield then to all that are his foes;
May he be scorned by one, whom all else scorn,
Forswear to others, what to her he hath sworn,
With fear of missing, shame of getting,
torn:

The syntactical conciseness of lines 3-5 is remarkable: "May he win only a mercenary love, yet may he have to spend all he has to get her (and may she be dull in the bargain). Then, wretched mistress though she be, let her betray him · and do so with everybody who dislikes him (presumably a large number of people)." This only begins the cursing. "May he suffer remorse, not of conscience because he has sinned (too noble a passion for him), but because the reputation of the only woman he was able to get makes him everybody's butt" · · · and so on. The poem ends with an inventory of hatred and poison, provisions for further additions to the curse as they may occur to the poet, and finally · as often in Donne · a light, epigrammatic couplet to place the poem on the witty side of passion: you can't curse a woman more than she is naturally "cursed" (forward, fickle, uncertain of temper) already:

The venom of all stepdames, gamesters' gall,
What tyrants, and their subjects interwish,
What plants, mines, beasts, fowl, fish,
Can contribute, all ill which all
Prophets, or poets spake; and all which shall
Be annexed in schedules unto this by me,
Fall on that man; for if it be a she
Nature before hand hath out-cursed me.
(lines 25-32)

So much of the effect depends on the control of syntactical and rhythmic emphasis, on
devices like the repeated "all" (28-29), on the impressive catalog, the compression of
meaning in line 26 that calls forth the neologism "interwish," the formal streak of legal
diction, and the minatory solemnity of "Fall on that man" · that paraphrase breaks down
into inoffensive jesting a poem that gets its effect by an impression of qualified but
dangerous loathing. This is pure Donne; as a matter of opinion good, as a matter of fact
unique.

This last is true, a fortiori, of the Nocturnal, which has the additional interest of involving
some of his known intellectual problems and convictions. The imagery is predominantly
alchemical; the argument goes in search of a definition of absolute nothingness; yet the
cause of the poem is grief at the death of a mistress. This is the most solemn and
difficult of Donne's poems, superficially slow in movement, but with a contrapuntal
velocity of thought. It begins as a meditation on the vigil of his saint; St. Lucy's day is
chosen because it is the dead day of the year, as midnight is the dead hour of the day:

'Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's,
Lucy's, who scarce seven hours herself unmasks,
The sun is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rays;
The world's whole sap in sunk:
The general balm th'hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed's-feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and interred; yet all these seem to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their epitaph.

That which preserves life, the "general balm," is shrunk into the frozen earth. Darkness, which is Nothing to light's All, and death, which is Nothing to life's All, reign in the great world; yet the little world, the poet, is far dearer and darker, an abstract of death, an epitaph. The world will be reborn in spring, and there will be lovers; but he is "every dead thing." His deadness is enforced by a remarkable alchemical figure, based on the idea that the alchemist deals in the quintessence of all things, "ruining" (abstracting form from) metals in order to reconstitute them as gold, by means of the quintessence. But this "new" alchemy, on the contrary, works with a quintessence of nothing, privation, and imposes on the poet's "ruined" matter the "form" of absolute nothingness - absence, darkness, death." Alchemical and theological figures come as it were naturally to Donne; he uses alchemy to push the notion of absolute privation beyond human understanding. The poet has less being than the primordial Nothing that preceded Chaos, which preceded Creation; he is a quintessence of Nothing: "I am none." The internal rhyme with "sun" (meaning light, and All, as well as the woman responsible for his state of nonbeing) brings us back, at the end, to the commonplace lovers whose activity will be restored in spring, when the commonplace sun returns:

But I am none; nor will my sun renew.
You lovers, for whose sake, the lesser sun
At this time to the Goat is run
To fetch new lust, and give it you,
Enjoy your summer all;
Since she enjoys her long night's festival,
Let me prepare towards her, and let me call
This hour her vigil, and her eve, since this
Both the year's, and the day's deep midnight is.
The witty sneer about the object of the sun's journey to the Tropic of Capricorn helps to distance these inferior loves; and we return to darkness, the perpetual sleep of the other sun, and the propriety of this saint's day as the type of darkness and lifelessness.

This is a very inadequate account of a marvelous poem. My main object is to make a point about Donne's use, in poetry, of ideas that he clearly regarded as important. The general balm, the alchemical ruin, the violent paradoxes on All and Nothing, belong to Donne's mental habit. There is, for instance, a fine examination of the All-Nothing paradox in the exegetical passages on Genesis in Essays in Divinity, and it occurs in the sermons. As he extracted the notion of absolute privation in alchemical terms, Donne must have been thinking of the cabalistic description of God as the nothing, the quintessence of nothing; here a keen and prejudiced ear might discover one of his blasphemies. But it is more interesting, I think, that Donne the poet is claiming what Donne the theologian calls impossible; he constantly recurs to the point that the man cannot desire annihilation. So the wit of the poem (using the word in its full sense) really derives from its making, by plausible argument, the impossible seem true. And he does it by the use of figures from alchemy, an art traditionally associated with the resurrection of the body, the escape from annihilation. He spoke in his own last illness of his physical decay as the alchemical ruining of his body before resurrection; here, with vertiginous wit, he uses the same analogy to prove the contrary. It is not inappropriate that the finest of the Songs and Sonnets should also be the most somberly witty and the most difficult.

Of Donne's twenty Elegies I have room to say little. They are love poems in loose iambic pentameter couplets, owing a general debt, for tone and situation, to the Amores of Ovid; the Roman poet loses no wit but acquires harshness, masculinity. These poems are full of sexual energy, whether it comes out in frank libertinism or in the wit of some more serious attachment. The Anagram (ii) is an example of the wit that proved all too imitable, all too ready to degenerate into fooling; it is a series of paradoxes on somebody's foul mistress, a theme current at the time. Elegy viii is a similar poem, comparing one's own and another's mistress, with plenty of unpleasant detail. But the
Elegies have a considerable variety of tone, ranging from the set pieces on change and 
variety (iii and xvii) which are paralleled by several of the Songs and Sonnets, to the 
passionate xvi and the somber xii, on the theme of parting:

Nor praise, nor dispraise me, nor bless nor curse 
Openly love's force, nor in bed fright thy nurse 
With midnight's startings, crying out, "Oh, oh 
Nurse, O my love is slain, I saw him go 
O'er the white Alps alone;

The Elegies have always had a reputation for indecency, and they certainly exploit the 
sexual puns so much enjoyed by Elizabethan readers. Among the poems excluded from 
the first edition is the magnificently erotic Elegy xix, Going to Bed: too curious a 
consideration of some of the metaphors in this poem (such as the passage about 
"imputed grace") has led critics to charge it with blasphemy, a risk Donne often runs by 
the very nature of his method. Montaigne might have complained that Donne here 
substitutes a new mythology and metaphysics of love for those he had abandoned, new 
presbyter for old priest. But it is impossible not to admire the translation of sexual into 
mental activity. Elegy xix was later regarded as the poet's own epithalamion, a fancy as 
harmless as it is improbable, except that it has perhaps resulted in the acceptance of a 
very inferior reading in line 46. ² One beautiful and exceptional poem is Elegy ix, The 
Autumnal to lady Danvers; but even this would not, I think, quite escape Herbert 
Grierson's criticism, that Donne (especially in the Elegies) shows "a radical want of 
delicacy"; for it has the wit and fantastic range of reference that mark the erotic Elegies.

The Satires belong to the same phase of Donne's talent as the work I have been 
discussing. They are, as Elizabethan satire was supposed to be, rough and harsh, 
written in that low style that Donne so often used, though here it is conventional. Satire 
iii I shall discuss later; of the others we may say that they have the usual energy, a 
richness of contemporary observation rather splenetic, of course, in character. Pope 
thought them worth much trouble; but it is doubtful if, except for iii, they play much part
in anybody's thinking about Donne. The same may be said of the epicedes and obsequies, funeral poems that in this period were often, when they were not pastoral elegies, poems of fantastically tormented wit. So Donne proves, in the elegy on Prince Henry, that "we May safelier say, that we are dead, then he." The form suited him only too well. The same cannot be said of the epithalamion; Spenser is the poet to thrive here. Yet there are fine things in Donne's poem for the marriage of the Princess Elizabeth in 1613:

Up, up, fair Bride, and call,
Thy stars, from out their several boxes, take
Thy rubies, pearls, and diamonds forth, and make
Thyself a constellation, of them all,
And by their blazing signify,
That a great Princess falls, but doth not die;

Donne could not speak without wit; it is this naturalness that often redeems him.

Of the occasional verse included under the title Letters to Several Personages a word must suffice. There is a mistaken view that they are negligible because they occasionally flatter. They were written over many years, and not all for profit; notice the little-known verses to Goodyere (Grierson, I,183), which have the strong Jonsonian ring; and the charming "Mad paper, stay" to Lady Herbert before her remarriage. The best, probably, are to the countess of Bedford, dependant though Donne may have been; and the poem beginning "You have refined me" is a great poem, certainly no more "blasphemous" in its compliment than Elegy xix in its persuasions.

This matter of blasphemous allusion comes to a head in the two Anniversaries, written for Sir Robert Drury on the death of his daughter Elizabeth, and published in 1611 and 1612. These are amazingly elaborate laments for a girl Donne had never seen. The first he called An Anatomy of the World, announcing in his full title that the death of Elizabeth Drury is the occasion for observations on the frailty and decay of the whole world, and representing the dead girl as Astraea, as the world's soul, as the
preservative balm, and so on; her departure has left it lifeless, and he dissects it. The second, describing "the Progress of the Soul" after death, is similar: "By occasion of the religious death of Mistress Elizabeth Drury, the incommodities of the soul in this life, and her exaltation in the next, are contemplated." From Jonson forward, critics have complained of the faulty taste of such hyperbolical praise of a young girl, and Donne defended himself more than once, though without much vigor; he would have little patience with this kind of misunderstanding. All we may say here is that these poems now known to be planned in a highly original way as a series of formal religious meditations are essential to the understanding of Donne; they come near to giving us a map of the dark side of his wit. The deathbed meditation in the second poem is comparable with the Holy Sonnets on the same topic:

Think thyself laboring now with broken breath,  
And think those broken and soft notes to be  
Division,  
and thy happiest harmony.  
Think thee laid on thy death-bed, loose and slack;  
And think that, but unbinding of a pack,  
To take one precious thing, thy soul, from thence.  
The Anniversaries lead us into a consideration of Donne's religious life. But we shall find that the poet and the religious were the same man.

**ACCEPTANCE OF A ANGLICANISM**

DONNE'S acceptance of the established church is the most important single event of his life, because it involved all the powers of his mind and personality. His youthful sympathies must have been with the persecuted Romanists, and his Satires contain bitter allusions to "pursuivants," tormentors of Jesuits; the odious Topcliffe is mentioned by name in some manuscripts. But he was familiar with the fanaticism as well as with the learning of Jesuits; and he later decided that the first of these was the hardest
affliction of Christendom, though the second was to serve him well. No one can say exactly when he left one church for the other; it was a gradual process. According to Walton, he was about nineteen when, "being unresolv'd what religion to adhere to, and, considering how much it concern'd his soul to choose the most Orthodox," he abandoned all studies for divinity. Donne himself, in *Pseudo-Martyr*, claims to have done this with "an indifferent affection to both parties." Particularly, he consulted Bellarmine, "the best defender of the Roman cause" (Walton), and Hooker, whose *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* appeared in 1593, when Donne was twenty-one · though his famous sermon *Of Justification*, which must have appealed to all moderate Romanists, had long been available. Hooker triumphed; but as late as 1601 the unfinished satirical extravaganza, *The Progress of the Soul*, treats the queen as the last of a line of archheretics, and more dubious references suggest that Donne's recusancy persisted in some form up to the time of *Pseudo-Martyr*. When Walton says he treated the problem as urgent, he is paraphrasing the remarkable Satire iii, which must belong to the 1590's. What makes this poem odd is the brisk impatience of its manner, an exasperated harshness proper to satire but strange in a deliberative poem about religion. It has often been misunderstood. The main theme is simply the importance of having a religion; without it, one is worse off than "blind [pagan] philosophers":

shall thy father's spirit
Meet blind philosophers in heaven, whose merit
Of strict life may be imputed faith, and hear
Thee, whom he taught so easy ways and near
To follow, damned?

But which religion? Rome is loved because true religion was once to be found there; Geneva out of a perverse love for the coarse and plain; the English church from inertia. Such divisions encourage on the one hand abstinence from all, and on the other a mistaken belief that they are all true. It is necessary to choose one; and the best course is to "Ask thy father which is she, Let him ask his." Above all, do not rest; no business is as important as this. This is a tentative assertion of the Catholic tradition invoked by all
Anglicans · the true, not the Roman, Catholicism. **Donne** had in fact to choose only between these two churches; though he was to develop a great respect for Calvin, he was never concerned with extreme Protestantism. Of the two communions · "sister teats of his graces" he called them, "yet both diseased and infected, but not both alike" · he was to choose the one truer to the Catholic tradition as he understood it. Like his learned contemporary Casaubon, he found this to be the Church of England · episcopal and sacramental, but divested of the Romanist accretions. *Satire iii* is a poem about his search, not about its end. He still had much to do before he could think of "binding his conscience to a local religion."

One consequence of this deliberation was that **Donne** was unusually moderate in later allusions to Rome. In *Pseudo-Martyr* he speaks frankly of its long hold over him and is charitable to "all professors of Christian Religion, if they shake not the Foundation." All his animus is against the Jesuits, for a false doctrine of martyrdom and inculcating for opening up, by their intransigence, deplorable breaches in the church. He attacks and satirizes them as enemies of tolerance: "that Church," he says in *Essays in Divinity*, "which despises another Church, is itself no other than that of which the Psalm speaks, *Ecclesia Malignantium*." Here we are at the heart of his religious position. **Donne** had convinced himself that reform had made the English church more truly Catholic than any other. It was not only a middle way but the ground on which, he hoped, the longed-for reunion of the churches might be accomplished. Given tolerance, given an abatement of "that severe and unrectified zeal of many, who should impose necessity upon indifferent things, and oblige all the world to one precise form of exterior worship, and ecclesiastic policy," **Donne** saw a chance of ending the division of the church.

In this aspiration he was at one with James I, though the prospect of success was much smaller than it had been when the Gallican party in France hoped for something from the Council of Trent. With the king, and his friend Wotton, **Donne** had expected much of the dispute between Venice and the papacy in 1606; Wotton, as English ambassador in Venice, had played an active part, and for a while there was excited speculation about the chance of Venice turning to a sort of Anglicanism. Wotton was acquainted with
Paolo Sarpi, the canonist who conducted the Venetian case; and Sarpi's History of the Council of Trent was published first in London. In it he decries the rigidity and extremism of that council and, as Frances Yates has said, "indirectly suggests that if the right course had been pursued at Trent, the Church as a whole would have been reformed somewhat on the model of the Anglican reform." Wotton sent home several portraits of Sarpi for his English admirers; and it was presumably one of these that hung, as Donne's will testifies, in his study. It was an emblem of his hopes, and Donne completely accepted Sarpi's view of Trent. Preaching before Charles I in April 1626, on the text "In my Father's house are many mansions," he deplores its intolerance, its coming "to a final resolution in so many particulars"; as a result the Scriptures themselves are slighted and reduced in authority, and men are the readier to call each other heretics, "which is a word that cuts deep, and should not be passionately used." Both these consequences are disastrous. The priest is ordained to preach the Word. Donne's favorite quotation is St. Paul's vae mihi si non, "woe unto me if I do not so."

"Nothing," he says in 1618, "is to be obtruded to our faith as necessary to salvation, except it be rooted in the Word," and he constantly complains that Rome "detorts" the Word, as the Puritans do. As for the frequent charges of heresy, he warns his own congregation to "be not apt to call opinion false, or heretical, or damnable, the contrarywhereof cannot be evidently proved." Early and late, Donne the preacher insists upon the prime importance of the Word and on the great need for tolerance; only thus may the church in England be the matrix of a new universal church. So, in an early sermon: "For all this separation, Christ Jesus is amongst us all, and in his time will break down this wall too, these differences among Christians, and make us all glad of that name."

And in 1627 he prays that God "in his time bring our adversaries to such moderation as becomes them, who do truly desire, that the Church may be truly Catholic, one flock in the fold, under one Shepherd, though not all of one color, of one practice in all outward and disciplinary points." This last was after the setback to the cause in 1626, when the defeat of the elector of Bohemia elicited from Donne the sonnet "Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse."
Donne, then, accepted the Church of England because it was truly Catholic. He rejoiced to discover a Reformed church that cultivated the Fathers and was slow to come "to a final resolution" in "particulars." He wanted tradition but without its errors: Aquinas, but not the Scholastic nonsense; the Fathers, but not their mistakes. The Catholic heritage was enormously more important to him than any "new" knowledge, theological or physical, and he has little distinction as a speculative theologian, though his age is one of dogmatic controversy. He detested, for instance, the Calvinist teaching on predestination, which had the intellectual presumption to dishonor God by suggesting that He could "make us to damn us"; when it was necessary to pronounce on the matter he fell back on Aquinas ("God has appointed all future things to be, but so as they are, that is necessary things necessarily, and contingent things contingently") but he disliked the whole argument: "Resistibility, and Irresistibility, of grace, which is every Artificers wearing now, was a stuff that our Fathers wore not, a language that pure antiquity spake not." "The best men," he says, "are but Problematical, only the Holy Ghost is Dogmatical." Though by no means a complete skeptic, he knew the limits of reason and often defined its relation to faith (in Essays in Divinity, Biathanatos, a verse letter to the countess of Bedford, the Christmas sermon for 1621). His position is not dissimilar from Hooker's (e.g. Laws I, 8). The limitations of human learning he sets forth in the famous Valediction Sermon of 1619, and the contrast between natural and heavenly knowledge (see the passage quoted earlier from Anniversaries) is developed in a splendid passage of the 1622 Easter sermon: "God shall create us all Doctors in a minute." Obviously the fierce certainties of some contemporaries were not for Donne. "It is the text that saves us," he says. "The interlinear glosses, and the marginal notes, and the variae lectiones, controversies, and perplexities, undo us." He was content with his church’s restoration of a good, lost tradition, just as, in his capacity as poet, he had used a traditional but neglected style that had its roots in the same great body of learning, the teaching of the Fathers.

THE SERMONS
No one, then, will read Donne for theological novelties; even in the Essays, which are full of curious applications, Donne's regard for authority puts him at the opposite pole from the radically speculative Milton. And whatever may be offered by the vast array of sermons, it is not that kind of excitement.

It is not easy to give a general account of the sermons. They were preached on all manner of occasions, over fifteen years, and they take their color from the audience, and from Donne's mood, as well as from the text and from the ecclesiastical occasion. Some were for a great audience, some for a small; some for lawyers, some for the court; some for Lent and some for Easter; some were preached when the preacher had private reason for joy, some when he was miserable. The tone varies widely. There is truth in the often repeated charge that Donne was preoccupied with sin and death; he confesses his melancholy temperament (calling it "a disease of the times") and constantly quotes St. Paul's cupio dissolvi (Phil. 1:23), "having a desire to depart and be with Christ." "If there were any other way to be saved and to get to Heaven," he says, "than by being born into this life, I would not wish to have come into this world." There are terrible sermons on death, full of the poetry of charnel house and worm. There are lamentations for the sins of youth: "I preach the sense of Gods indignation upon mine own soul." There are even rather grim sermons on apparently joyous occasions; a wedding sermon for personal friends is a forbidding, though orthodox, account of the church's teaching on marriage, with many gloomy strictures on women. But one can overdo this aspect of the sermons. Death and sin are fully presented, but perhaps not inordinately. And, to balance them, there is a massive insistence on the theme of resurrection and far more humanity than one is led to expect; see, for example, the moving passages on the death of Augustine's son, and that of his own daughter, in the superb Easter sermon for 1627:

He was but a heathen that said, if God love a man, 
_iuvenis tollitur_, He takes him young out of this world;

and they were but heathens that bestowed that custom,
to put on mourning when their sons were born,
and to feast and triumph when they died. But thus
much we may learn from these heathens, that if the
dead, and we, be not upon one floor, nor under one
story, yet we are under one roof. We think not a
friend lost, because he is gone into another room, nor
because he is gone into another land; and into
another world, no man is gone; for that heaven,
which God created, and this world, is all one world.
If I had fixed a son in court, or married a daughter
into a plentiful fortune, I were satisfied for that son
and that daughter. Shall I not be so, when the King of
heaven hath taken that son to himself, and married
himself to that daughter, for ever? I spend none of my
faith. I exercise none of my hope, in this, that I shall
have my dead raised to life again.
This is the faith that sustains me, when I lose by
the death of others, or when I suffer by living in misery
myself, that the dead, and we, are now all in one
Church, and at the resurrection, shall be all in one
choir.

It could be well argued that the sermon suited Donne's talents perfectly. That patristic
learning which had settled his Anglican convictions and given him his style as a poet
equipped him also with the matter and the manner of his preaching; and for the style
that he adopted he needed all his mastery of the techniques of wit. The preacher's basic
duty was simply, as Augustine said, "to teach what is right and refute what is wrong, and
in the performance of this task to conciliate the hostile, and rouse the careless." This
was to be done according to a general scheme that both preacher and congregation
took for granted. But within this scheme there could be enormous variation. Donne was
of the party that cultivated "the learned manner of preaching"; not for him the doctrinal
plainness of the Puritan. He was, as hostile witnesses put it, "a strong-lin'd man" and "a bad edifier."

How did "strong lines" go with the preaching of the Word? First, their cultivation did not mean that the Word was neglected. It was stated, divided, illuminated, fantastically explicated. For example, Donne makes much of the expression "let us make man" (Gen. 1:26): no other act of creation involved a conference; therefore, the Trinity was concerned in this one alone. Secondly, the Word itself gives warrant for all the devices of the learned preacher. The style of the Scriptures is "artificial"; indeed the Psalms are poems. "There are not in the World so eloquent Books as the Scriptures . . . they mistake it much, that think, that the Holy Ghost hath rather chosen a low, and barbarous, and homely style, than an eloquent, and powerfull manner of expressing himself." The Scriptures use metaphor of "infinite sweetness, and infinite latitude," though they have, when necessary, concision as well as eloquence, simplicity as well as highly wrought wit. All these qualities are found in the Fathers whom the Reformed church revived. Ambrose and Augustine · to whom Donne owed most · are ancestors of mannerist wit; Tertullian Christianized the Latin strong lines of Seneca . Nearer in time to Donne was the Continental revival of witty preaching, which, as I have said, had much to do with the new poetic wit; but ultimately all depended on the Fathers and on the wit and eloquence of the Holy Ghost in Scripture.

One famous and passionate page must serve to illustrate Donne's habitual eloquence:

Let me wither and wear out mine age in a discomfortable, in an unwholesome, in a penurious prison, and so pay my debts with my bones, and recompense the wastefulness of my youth, with the beggary of mine age; let me wither in a spittle under sharp, and foul, and infamous diseases, and so recompense the wantonness of my youth, with that loathsomeness in mine age; yet if God withdraw not his spiritual blessings,
his grace, his patience, if I can call my suffering
his doing, my passion his action, all this that is
temporal, is but a caterpillar got into one corner of
my garden, but a mildew fallen upon one acre of my
corn; the body of all, the substance of all is safe, as
long as the soul is safe. But when I shall trust to that,
which we call a good spirit, and God shall deject, and
impoverish, and evacuate that spirit, when I shall
rely upon a moral constancy, and God shall shake,
and enfeeble, and enervate, destroy and demolish
that constancy; when I shall think to refresh myself in
the serenity and sweet air of a good conscience and
God shall call up the damps and vapours of hell itself,
and spread a cloud of diffidence, and an impenetrable
crust of desperation upon my conscience; when
health shall fly from me, and I shall lay hold upon
riches to succour me, and comfort me in my sickness,
and riches shall fly from me, and I shall snatch after
favour, and good opinion, to comfort me in my poverty;
when even this good opinion shall leave me,
and calumnies and misinformations shall prevail
against me; when I shall need peace, because there is
none but thou, O Lord, that should stand for me, and
then shall find that all the wounds that I have come
from thy hand, all the arrows that stick in me, from
thy quiver; when I shall see that because I have
given myself to my corrupt nature, thou hast changed
thine; and because I am all evil towards thee, therefore
thou hast given over being good towards me;
when it comes to this height, that the fever is not in
the humours, but in the spirits, that mine enemy is not an imaginary enemy, fortune, nor a transitory enemy, malice in great persons, but a real, and an irresistible, and an inexorable, and an everlasting enemy, The Lord of Hosts himself, the Almighty God himself, the Almighty God himself only knows the weight of this affliction, and except he put in that pondus gloriae, that exceeding weight of an eternal glory, with his own hand, into the other scale, we are weighted down, we are swallowed up, irreparably, irrevocably, irrecoverably, irremediably.

But in addition to such tremendous sentences we find a hopping Latin wit, as of Tertullian: "He came, and venit in mundum, He came into the world; it is not in mundam, into so clean a woman as had no sin at all, none contracted from her parents, no original sin . . . yet per mundam in mundum, by a clean woman into an unclean world." And we find startling conceits and paradoxes. Can man be the enemy of God, even as the mouse is of the elephant? Man is nearly nothing, but God is "not only a multiplied elephant, millions of elephants multiplied into one, but a multiplied World, a multiplied All. . . . Man cannot be allowed so high a sin, as enmity with God." But Donne can also be simple, like the parables. So on irresistibility of grace: "Christ beats his drum, but he does not press men; Christ is served with voluntaries." For "no metaphor, no comparison is too high, none too low, too trivial, to imprint in you a sense of God's everlasting goodness towards you." To such a preacher the "metaphysical conceit" was a natural mode of thought. Laud, addressing from the scaffold a hostile crowd, spoke of "going apace . . . towards the Red Sea . . . an argument, I hope, that God is bringing me into the land of promise." Here, at such a moment · though the conceit has a long history · we have precisely those qualities of deliberate false argument essential to the wit of Donne's poems.
As a preacher Donne is guilty, by modern standards, of pedantry. His style is artificial; he would have been angry to have been told otherwise. The pedantry was partly a matter of fashion, but also a token of his confidence in a truly Catholic tradition. The sermons are inconceivable without it; so is Donne himself. And if he makes our flesh creep, that was still part of his duty; if he almost ignores the ecstatic religion that flourished in his day, that was a defect of his central merit. If we want Donne as a modern poet we may find it tiresome that he was capable of so much archaic quibbling, so much jargon and flattery. But, while it is perfectly proper to read the Songs and Sonnets and ignore the sermons, it is improper to construct an image of Donne without looking at them; and many such caricatures still circulate.

**THE DIVINE POEMS**

It was Donne's habit, in later life, to speak slightingly of his poetry; and although he considered, for a brief moment before his ordination, the possibility of publishing his poems, it seems he did not even possess copies of them. There are signs that it was regarded as slightly improper, after his ordination, for "a man of his years and place" to be versifying, and indeed Donne wrote little verse as a priest. The Elegies on his death often allude to the exercise of his great wit in both secular and religious spheres · "Wit He did not banish, but transplanted it" · but Chudleigh, in these lines, has in mind not verse but sermons:

Long since, o poets, he did die to you,
Or left you dead, when wit and he took flight
On divine wings, and soared out of your sight.
Preachers, 'tis you must weep.

In fact it now appears that the bulk of the divine poems belongs to 1607-1615. These years produced the Corona sequence, most of the Holy Sonnets, the Litany, Upon the Annunciation and Passion, Good Friday, 1613, and probably The Cross. The poem addressed to Tilman, the Lamentations of Jeremy, the lines on Sidney's Psalms, the three great Hymns, three Sonnets, and An hymn to the Saints, and to Marquess
*Hamyilton*, which *Donne* wrote reluctantly in 1625, make up the extant poetical work of the priest. Most of the religious poetry, therefore, belongs to the period of many of the verse letters, and the *Anniversaries*.

It is verse of remarkable originality. *Satire iii* shows that even in his youth *Donne* considered the language of passionate exploration and rebuke appropriate to religious themes; and even when he is working in strict forms like the sonnet, and on devotional topics, we recognize at once that turbulent diction which spontaneously records the pressure of fervent and excited thought. But though he rejected some of the formalities in his secular poetry, *Donne* was habituated in matters of devotion to certain schematic disciplines. He had been taught to pray; and when his poems are prayers they are formed by this early training. When he undertook "a serious meditation of God," he tended to do so by employing these meditative techniques.

Here a learned man committed to the reformed religion occupies himself with papist devotion; but we should not exaggerate the paradox. *Donne*'s church did not reject what it found good in the tradition; many devotional practices were retained, and some were revived. *Donne*'s *Corona* sonnets are an ingenious adaptation of an old Dominican system of meditation, based on an obsolete type of rosary called the *corona*. A Puritan might condemn this, but to *Donne* it was, theologically, an indifferent matter and good in that it concentrated the devotional powers of a man easily distracted from prayer. More remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that some of the *Holy Sonnets*, and the *Anniversaries*, are indebted to meditative techniques defined and propagated by Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits; yet these were so widely disseminated, and apparently so fruitful, that it was by no means exceptional for enemies of the order to adopt them.

The *Corona*, with its linked sonnets and carefully balanced ingenuity, may strike us as "mixt wit"; the Ignatian method is more interesting. The purpose of the technique is to concentrate all the powers of the soul, including the sensual, in the act of prayer. So a man might present as vividly as possible to himself the scene of the Nativity or the Crucifixion, or his own deathbed. There is no doubt that this technique, the most
considerable contribution of Jesuit piety to European art, affects the *Holy Sonnets*; Helen Gardner presents twelve of them as a sequence, the first six being a formal meditative series on the Last Things. The method is to achieve a vivid image, enforce it with appropriate similitudes, and then to pray accordingly. So, in "O my black Soul! now thou art summoned," Donne imagines his deathbed in the octave and compares the sinful soul to an exile afraid to return to his country, or a prisoner afraid to be freed; then in the sestet he prays for grace to repent, so that death may not, after all, be like such miseries. The meditation is here forcefully assimilated to the sonnet form, which Donne uses with virtuosity; and the complexities of the form coexist with that sense of immediate and poignant spiritual effort, that tormented natural diction, which was his great, and sometimes abused, discovery. The sonnets are not reports of spiritual exercises; they are the exercises themselves. There is little sense of contrivance, "artificial" though the form is; Donne reconciles the prescribed form with the true word, just as he reconciles ecclesiastical tradition with the supremacy of Scripture. It is true that the wit of these poems occasionally ventures where we are reluctant to follow, as in "Show me, dear Christ, thy spouse." This last complaint for the division of the church is couched in terms of a traditional image carried to the point where we feel uneasy about its taste:

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.

Perhaps we dislike this metaphor (Christ as *mari complaisant*) because the image of the church as the Bride is no longer absolutely commonplace; but having accepted the image we are still unwilling to accept its development, even though we see that the main point is the *glorious* difference of this from a merely human marriage. Something is asked of us that we can no longer easily give. Many of the *Holy Sonnets* have this perilous balance; their wit is always likely to seem indelicate as well as passionate. So in one of the greatest, "Batter my heart, three-personed God":

...
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,
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,
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.

This is a great poem, certainly; but what, we wonder, has "three-personed" to do with the passion of the opening? Yet the poem is another of Donne's exercises in the paradoxes of his religion, and the Trinity is one of the greatest of them. The epithet is obliquely justified by the intensity of the rhythmical conflicts throughout; in the opposition between the heavy "Batter" and the weak, cadential "knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend"; in the divine absurdity of heaven troubling to take the sinner by storm, laying him low that he may stand; finally, by the imagery of rape. Love is figured as lust because it is to be rough and irresistible; God is a monster of mercy (but the Scripture compares him to a thief). The powerful paradoxes of the last couplet suggest an infinite series of such: God as infant, God as malefactor, justice as mercy, death as life, and so forth. We respond crudely to this kind of challenge, and such a reading as this is clumsy and overly explicit. Similarly we are inclined to think of a poem that celebrates the coincidence of Lady Day and Good Friday as a toy; but for Donne it was a motive to reverence, a piece of calendar wit that challenged a Christian poet to prayer. We are usually content to be more clever about the love of women than the love of God; therefore the Songs and Sonnets keep better. But Donne was clever about both, and
sometimes in much the same way; our awkwardness here leads us to charge *Elegy xix* with blasphemy, and "Show me, dear Christ" with indelicacy. **Donne** himself was not blind to some of the dangers of his method; in the *Litany* he writes, "When we are moved to seem religious Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us."

The finest of the other preordination poems is *Good Friday, 1613*. Here too **Donne** starts from a paradox; on this day of all days he is turned away from the east. This plunges him into that paradoxical series where he moves with such assurance; and his wit binds up the paradoxes, with just the neatness and passion of the love poems, in a fine conclusion:

I turn my back to thee, but to receive  
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.  
O think me worth thine anger, punish me,  
Burn off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou mayst know me, and I'll turn my face.

Of the poems written after ordination, only the sonnets of the Westmoreland manuscript and the three *Hymns* are of the best of **Donne**. The little group of sonnets includes the moving poem about the death of his wife, and "Show me, dear Christ." The *Hymns* are justly admired. "A Hymn to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany" records a moment of intense personal feeling and is a companion to the beautiful *Valediction Sermon* of 1619. The other two belong to the period of **Donne's** serious illness in 1623, when he also wrote *Devotions*. "Thou art a metaphysical God," he says in that work, "full of comparisons." And although these poems abjure harshness in favor of the solemnity proper to hymns, they nevertheless live by their wit. "A Hymn to God, my God, in my sickness" is founded on a favorite conceit; the poet is a map over which the physicians pore.

As west and east  
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.

The "Hymn to God the Father" contains the famous play on the poet's name (but so does the inscription on the portrait of the author in his shroud, prefixed to *Death's Duel*); what in our time would be only a puerile joke is thrice repeated in this solemn masterpiece.

Donne's wit, of course, depends on the assumption that a joke can be a serious matter. Wit, as he understood it, was born of the preaching of the Word, whether employed in profane or in religious expression. "His fancy," as Walton says, "was unimitably high, equalled only by his great wit. . . . He was by nature highly passionate." It will never be regretted that the twentieth century, from whatever motive, restored him to his place among the English poets, and wit to its place in poetry.

Selected Bibliography

I. BIBLIOGRAPHY


II. COLLECTED AND SELECTED EDITIONS

III. LETTERS


IV. BIOGRAPHICAL AND CRITICAL STUDIES

Notes and References


2. "There is no penance due to innocence," the reading of 1669, is represented in most manuscripts by "There is no penance, much less innocence." The received reading makes the poem slightly more appropriate if the woman is a bride. But clearly she is no more innocent than she is penitent, and ought not to be wearing the white linen that signifies either innocence or penitence.

3. A musical term, meaning a variation on a melody, made by dividing each of its notes into shorter ones.

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