The Reputation of John Donne in the Twentieth Century

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THE REPUTATION OF JOHN DONNE

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY

MARIE L. BURKE

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INTRODUCTION

John Donne's poetry has been the subject of a body of recent criticism impressive both in extent and in quality, the combined effect of which has resulted in Donne's entrenchment as the basis of a new aesthetic of poetry. It is not contended that this aesthetic is universally acknowledged, or that it will not admit of modification, but it is dominant. An investigation of critical commentaries reveals the fact that with some less prudent writers Donne's work is not measured according to predetermined norms, but is itself accepted as a standard.

Since the unsympathetic judgment of Johnson, perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction; in making Donne a touchstone we may have lost our sense of perspective, and Bush is not expressing an isolated opinion when he contends that "If Donne inhabits the inmost mansions of poetry, nearly all the Greeks and Romans and many great modern poets must be cast into outer darkness."

The significant point is that Donne's interest for this century is more than historical; it is very much alive. And Courthope's criticism now has the tone of an epitaph a little premature: "To those who see in poetry a mirror of the national life and who desire to amplify and enrich

their own imaginations by a sympathetic study of the spiritual existence of their ancestors, the work of Donne will always be profoundly interesting."

In the last forty years Donne has been thought of much less as an ancestor than as a contemporary. Upon this fact the problem of his reputation hinges, since our admiration has been rooted in the recognition, or supposed recognition, of a close affinity between his age and ours, demanding a similar density and complexity in the poet's response. The validity of Donne's method and technique is not, of course, dependent upon the truth or falsity of this relationship.

"The full rehabilitation of a poet," writes Austin Warren, "becomes possible only when, by oscillation or revolution, something like his own intellectual climate returns. And not till our own day has this occurred."

But the nature of the rehabilitation is determined by the more articulate of the interpreters of the intellectual climate. In the case of Donne the essays of T. S. Eliot have largely set the pattern: Matthiessen, Williamson and others have done little more than enlarge upon his hints. It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of his contribution to Donne scholarship. Equally significant in lending impetus is Sir Herbert Grierson's 1912 edition of Donne's poems.


It is not the purpose of this paper to attempt an absolute evaluation of Donne's merit, but rather to present an outline of major trends in recent criticism, to indicate some of the general questions to which that criticism has given rise, and as far as possible to account for the force and purposefulness of contemporary interest in Donne's poetry.
CHAPTER I
METAPHYSICAL POETRY DEFINED

Because of the limited scope of this paper, it is neither desirable nor necessary to dwell at length upon the fluctuations that may be noted in Donne's reputation before the beginning of this century. But there would be no justification for leaving a gap of more than three hundred years unbridged.

Donne's influence is very marked in the poetry of the seventeenth-century religious poets, Crashaw, Vaughan and Herbert. It dominated also the lightly cynical love lyrics of Herrick, Lovelace and Suckling. These were not conscious imitators and we cannot speak accurately of a "school of Donne;" for, as Williamson observes, it was not until the time of Dryden that the line of the metaphysicals attained a critical consciousness.

"Donne's critical reputation begins," he continues, "with Ben Jonson's conversations with Drummond of Hawthornden in 1618, when Jonson declared that Donne was 'the first poet in the world for some things'; that 'Done, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging'; and that 'Done, . . . for not being understood, would perish.'"

For several years after his death in 1631 Donne maintained his position as a poet of great wit and learning. Cowley, the last representative in whom the strain may be traced, continued to employ the manner of

Donne but lacked his spirit of sincerity. Sharp might well have been speaking of him when he wrote: "Superficial virtuosity replaced real feeling and served to conceal the lack of genuine inventive power." In the Preface to the Fables Dryden says of Cowley: "One of our late great poets is sunk in his reputation, because he could never forgive any conceit which came in his way but swept like a drag-net great and small."

The possibilities of Donne's style had been exhausted; its freshness and vigor had been lost. Furthermore, the growth of the scientific spirit in the seventeenth century brought about a rejection of theological and philosophical study and fostered a taste for directness, precision and clarity, demanding inevitably the exclusion of all that was obscure and unrefined. The subtleties of Donne, no longer admired, came to be regarded as ambiguous and vague. The appeal of metaphysical poetry diminished steadily after the Restoration, and Williamson concludes that judging from the editions Donne's reputation never came nearer eclipse than between the Restoration and the end of the century.

The term "metaphysical" was first used by Dryden who said in speaking of Donne: "He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires but in his amorous verses where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds

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2 Robert L. Sharp, From Donne to Dryden: The Revolt Against the Metaphysicals (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 36.


5 George Williamson, op. cit., 78.
of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he would engage their hearts and entertain them with the softnesses of love." Except in satires, where the display of wit contributed to irony and sharpness, Dryden strove for two essentials of classical poetry, balance and dignity of expression, and strict conformance to a metrical pattern. He construed the word "metaphysical" to mean, simply, "philosophical." Ransom, however, states that the meaning of "metaphysical" which was common in Dryden's time, having come down from the middle ages through Shakespeare, was "supernatural" or "miraculous." The distinction is of some interest in so far as it indicates that even at that early date the word was used loosely. The epithet, as Dryden applied it, was transmitted through the eighteenth century; Johnson merely echoed his pronouncement and broadened the term to mean "learned."

Johnson's Life of Cowley contains the condemnatory judgment that remained unrefuted through the nineteenth century. Modern critics generally imply that Johnson's viewpoint was narrow or short-sighted, and pointing to his essay on Cowley, tend to agree with Williamson that Johnson tried to describe Donne's poetry by its defects. It is no less accurate to say that he judged it by the excellencies of the Neo-Classic tradition. If we read the essay together with Chapter Ten of Rasselas, wherein his critical theory

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6 Ker, op. cit., 19.


8 Williamson, op. cit., 21.
is presented positively, Johnson's position seems less open to recrimination.

"The Metaphysical poets," he said, "were men of learning, and to
show their learning was their whole endeavor." Their poetry, he thought,
was rough and unmeterical; their comparisons were neither "just" nor "natural,"
and might be considered "a kind of discordia concors, a combination of dis-
similar images, or discoveries of occult resemblances in things apparently
unlike. . . The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." 9

Johnson was out of sympathy with the analytical, believing that poetry
should be concerned with generalities. It was not the learning of the meta-
physical poets to which he objected, but the fact that that learning seemed
an end in itself and was not utilized for moral instruction and the realiza-
tion of universal truths. "The business of a poet," he observes through
the person of Imlac in Rasselas, "is to examine not the individual, but the
species; to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not
number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the
verdure of the forest." In his portraits of nature the poet must bring out
prominent and striking features in order to "recall the original to every
mind," rather than to use images that cause the reader to wonder "by what
perverseness of industry they were ever found." The "imperfect modulation"
which Johnson asperses in his life of Cowley is to be contrasted with the

9 The Works of the English Poets from Chaucer to Cowper including the
series edited by Samuel Johnson and the additional lives by Alexander
Chalmers, (London: Deighton & Son at Cambridge, 1810), 7, 12.

10 R. W. Chapman, ed., The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia

11 Life of Cowley, op. cit., 12.
smoothness of the poet who may "by incessant practice familiarize to himself 12 [sic] every delicacy of speech and grace of harmony." Johnson's opinions, then, are based upon definite critical beliefs.

With the coming of the Romanticists Donne's reputation was revived. It rose slightly with DeQuincy and Coleridge who admired him but did not popularize him. However, the distaste for exaggerated wit and monstrous conceits remained. It was, notes one authority, "the piquancy of obsolete terms and the magic of a forgotten phraseology and an antiquated construction" that satisfied the Romantic taste for what was unusual and out of the ordinary. They recognized beyond the ruggedness of the metaphysicals a more varied rhythm than the old arithmetical smoothness, and acknowledged a higher goal than mere metrical perfection. And he summarizes the effect of Romantic and pre-Romantic criticism as a reaffirmation of the "genuine lyric power of the Metaphysical poets." This criticism, Nethercot concludes, is the best possible illustration of the break from the authority of Pope and 13 Johnson.

Brooks does not recognize such a break. The opposition between the Neo-Classic and Romantic writers, he says, is not fundamental, and is based upon a misconception, since the line of reasoning used by Wordsworth and Coleridge can be traced back into eighteenth-century criticism. Johnson and his Romantic successors alike, outlawed radical ingenuity and prosaic diction as impairing the sublimity of true poetry. Both held the intellect

12 Chapman, *op. cit.*, 51.

to be opposed to the emotions, and considered certain words and objects intrinsically poetic. Wordsworth would have felt that "materials which are technical, sharply realistic, definite in their details are materials to be shunned in serious poetry. They have too much stubborn angularity to be absorbed readily into the fabric of the poem." The Romanticists' appreciation of the Metaphysicals emphasized the lesser qualities of their verse: quaintness, originality of expression, experimentation in form; but paid little heed to what we now consider its essential aspects: philosophic depth, the functional role of the metaphor, the resolution of mental conflicts.

As the nineteenth century progressed interest grew in scholarly circles, but the Victorians were not provoked to enthusiasm. They studied Donne from the historical angle; if they accepted him, it was as a literary curiosity not related in any way to their own poetic practices. With later critics the indictment of the Victorian lack of creative talent is inversely proportional to their praise of Donne. Leavis speaks of "the mischievousness of the nineteenth-century conventions of the poetical," mischievous, because they involved a prejudice against recognizing as poetry anything that was not in the most obvious sense of Milton's formula "simple, sensuous, and passionate."

Nor was there room later for an appreciation of Donne in the Georgian verse which looked toward stability, traditionalism, certainty.


Their poetry carried no wide implications. "The attitude was just sufficient to cover the subject matter." What did not conform to stereotyped emotional patterns was thought to be difficult, and difficult poetry cannot be passively enjoyed.

The late nineteenth century, nevertheless, saw the first important editions of Donne's poems since a volume printed by J. Tonson in 1719. Grosart's work appeared in 1872. James Russell Lowell and Charles Eliot Norton edited Donne's poems for the Grolier Club of New York in 1895. This was followed in 1896 by Sir E. K. Chambers' edition. In 1912 Sir H. J. C. Grierson's scholarly edition superseded all of these, and it is almost certain to remain the definitive text.

In biography, also, important works appeared, although Walton's Life is still the foundation despite its strong bias in the poet's favor. Jessopp's John Donne, published in 1897, was followed in 1899 by Edmund Gosse's Life and Letters which is standard. Countless corrections and amendments, however, have been made throughout.

Grierson's work may be said to have inaugurated a new era in Donne criticism, although it would be rash to contend that any single factor could account for his popularity in our day. Brooke's statement was prophetic: "Of all the great English poets, his name is least known beyond 'literary' "


circles; but he is certainly 'getting there.'" In considering his rise to eminence account should be taken of current preoccupation with man's mental processes, an interest that is dominant in Donne's poetry, and a quality that above all others establishes his contemporaneity. The influence of the psychologist has left its mark in criticism also; and the ingenuity that Johnson decried as evidence of a perverse wit has become, with Brooks' approbation, a laudible "freedom from negative inhibitions."

But most important in our relation to Donne is the fact that his work has been widely interpreted as a poetry of disillusionment, and we also fancied ourselves disillusioned during the period following the First World War. "The years 1912 to 1929," Bush says, "witnessed the final bankruptcy of Baconian optimism, the scientific pride and self-sufficiency which had been the dominant creed of the modern world."

Yet, if this investigation supports any conclusion, it contends that from our present vantage point the claim of mental kinship as the basis of Donne's "modernism" is no longer tenable.

If a "metaphysical school" was unknown to Donne's contemporaries, the term "metaphysical poetry" has a very real existence in present-day criticism, and we cannot consider the reputation of its principle exponent without pausing to define its limits. Here at the outset we encounter a

18 Rupert Brooke, "John Donne, the Elizabethan," The Nation (February 15, 1913), 12, 825.

19 Cleanth Brooks, op. cit., ll.

twofold difficulty. The first arises from the fact that with modern theorists it has no limits distinguishable from those of the general term "poetry." These enthusiasts consider whatever cannot be included in its extension through conformance with their measuring-rod formulae, as outside the realm of poetry entirely. And this fact has provoked the ire of more than a few "conservative" scholars, one of whom refers acidly to "the intolerance and want of perspective in much of the criticism now proceeding from our various literary groups." It is a common error, in his opinion, to submit all poets to the same aesthetic theory; we should be able to enjoy Chaucer, or Shakespeare, or Milton or Pope as our mood or the occasion changes. But his condemnation of the "frantically frontal," namely Leavis and Read, poorly disguises a current of perturbation underlying a possibly unconscious smugness.

The second problem is that although it would be desirable to differentiate between definitions of metaphysical poetry and criticism concerning the type, the critical faculty, perhaps never separable from the definitive, is more than usually apparent here, and the subjective element must be recognized if the picture is to escape hopeless distortion. Nevertheless, by considering a variety of definitions we can determine what views critics hold in common, and in what respects they differ.

"Most men," Warren remarks, "take their religion and their poetry on faith. They have not the leisure for critical examination or feel


22 Ibid., 30.
unqualified for it." We may accept his conclusion, at least as far as poetry is concerned, admitting that the appeal to authority is as strong to-day as in the time of Dryden or Wordsworth. That is the significance of T. S. Eliot whose definitions of metaphysical poetry are, in Hughes' opinion, "likely to rank with Dr. Johnson's, or even to outrank Johnson's by their power to arouse poetic purpose."

One reason for Eliot's prominence in this area of criticism is undoubtedly his objectivity. Less discerning writers are prone to dwell upon their personal reactions to poetry. Virginia Woolf, for example, observes that in reading Donne "we feel ourselves compelled to a particular attitude of mind." Eliot's approach is analytical and detached and led him to the formulation of a theory that may be described as resting upon two main principles. He insists to begin with upon Donne's faithfulness to the complexity of experience, together with a simultaneous observance of unity of expression. Secondly, and the thought is not original with him, he states in several places that Donne successfully fused intellect with passion, thought with feeling. Grierson attributes to De Quincy the recognition of Donne's peculiarity--"the combination of dialectical subtlety with weight and force of passion."


To return to the first principle, Eliot sees Donne as a poet of the world's literature because he so often expresses "his genuine whole of tangled feelings," in which a change of mood means a shift of emphasis rather than the substitution of one feeling for an entirely different one. Donne was "altogether present in every thought and every feeling." Metaphysical wit, he says, involves "a recognition in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible."

The second condition, the union of thought and feeling, is present whenever there is a sensuous apprehension of thought. Donne does not feel and then think about his feelings: "A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experiences." Similarly, Read defines metaphysical poetry as "the emotional apprehension of thought." This line of criticism is based upon the perception of a peculiar synthetic property through which the poet succeeded in setting forth a state of mind with its complexities and contradictions and varying shades of feeling, creating an effect not unlike that produced by the stream-of-consciousness novelists.

It is obvious at this point that there is a direct opposition


between the type of poetry thus described and so-called "lyric" poetry that we commonly identify with the Romantic poets. The metaphysicals placed greater emphasis upon the intellectual element. They sought to comprehend the whole of experience, to represent a wide range of feelings within a single poem; and the feeling and the thought producing it were indivisible. Or so, at least, have their efforts been reevaluated. The Romanticists, on the other hand, sought to express a simple emotion, unique in its isolation, and almost always a reaction to sensible objects in their environment. The feeling was experienced first; the thought followed. Wordsworth's phrase, "emotion recollected in tranquillity," recalls poems such as those beginning, "My heart leaps up," or "I wandered lonely as a cloud." Less familiar and, therefore, preferable for illustrative purposes is the poem *Lines Written in Early Spring*:

```
I heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sat reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

* * * * *

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature's holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament 31
What man has made of man?
```

This is a poetry of reflection in which the writer meditates upon his feelings; the original emotion is simply a starting point from which lines of suggestion radiate; the feeling itself is exploited for its moral value. It differs specifically from the representative work of the metaphysicals in so far as the poet creates his verse in an ecstatic state wherein he seems to surrender a part of his mental faculties, identifying himself with nature almost pantheistically. Donne’s poetry is induced not by trance-like raptures but by the operation of a coruscating intelligence that acts to control feeling rather than to be swept away by it.

We may place Shelley’s *To a Skylark* in the same category, noting here another point of difference between metaphysical and Romantic poetry. In the former the metaphor contributes to the unity of feeling mentioned above; in contrast to the merely decorative or fortuitous, it actively supports the thought and is, in fact, the manner in which that thought is expressed. A figure once introduced is carried through to the end and is never left undeveloped. Shelley employs a series of unrelated comparisons; the skylark is spoken of successively as "a cloud of fire," "a poet hidden," "a high-born maiden," and "a glow-worm golden." This bead-stringing technique is far removed from the tightly woven almost syllogistic method of Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*, notably "The Ecstasy," "The Prohibition," and "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." More important is the fact that Shelley’s analogies are inapt and blurred. For example, the stanza:
Keen as are the arrows
Of that silver sphere,
Whose intense lamp narrows
In the white dawn clear
Until we hardly see - we feel that it is there.

does not stand up under examination. The words "keen," "arrows" and "intense" certainly do violence to the diffuseness of moonlight. If the poet is speaking of the dawn of a particular day, the lamp does not accurately "narrow," it merely fades. If he is referring to a period of several days covering the phases of the moon, the word "dawn" is ambiguous in its singular form.

It has often been noted, on the other hand, that in the best of Donne's love poems repeated scrutiny reveals no disparities. The statement is precise, clear-cut and unified. Not all of them approach the level of the Song.

Goe, and catche a falling starre,
Get with child a mandrake rootte,
Tell me, where all past yeares are,
Or who cleft the Devils foot,
Teach me to heare Mermaides singing,
Or to keep off envies stinging,
And finde
What winde
Serves to advance an honest minde.

If thou beest borne to strange sights,
Things invisible to see,
Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
Till age snow white hairs on thee,
Thou, when thou retorn'st, wilt tell mee
All strange wonders that befell thee,
And sweare
No where
Lives a woman true, and faire.

If thou findst one, let mee know,
Such a Pilgrimage were sweet;
Yet doe not, I would not goe,
Though at next doore wee might meet,
Though shee were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet shee
Will bee
False, ere I come, to two, or three.

Such successes prompted Grierson to observe that in his lyrics
Donne "has achieved his most felicitous effects; and succeeded in making
the stanza, long or short, simple or elaborate, the harmonious echo of the
intimate wedding of passion and argument which is the essential quality of
the metaphysical lyric."

There has never been any question as to the presence of wit in meta-
physical poetry, but it has been variously understood at different periods. It is recognized as a quality peculiar to the type and, therefore, relative
to its definition. Among his contemporaries Donne's wit was identical with
his poetry. It gave him a supremacy among poets equal to that which learn-
ing and humor and art earned for Jonson among dramatists. To Johnson it
meant an undesirable erudition and ingenuity inimical to the truly poetic;
it was, in fact, the quality that outlawed Donne in Johnson's estimation.
But his opinion remained unchallenged by the Romantic poets; and in compara-
tively recent times it has been observed that "for the purposes of great and

University Press, 1933), 8.

34 Grierson, Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge University
Press, 1909), 4, 213.

true art the flight of metaphysical wit soon reveals the limitations of its
powers... Donne's sole aim as a poet was to associate the isolated details
of his accumulation of learning, with paradoxes and conceits which are of no
36
permanent value." Courthope echoes Johnson in his conviction of the de-
structive force of wit, but his interpretation of the term differs very
slightly from that of later and more sympathetic critics who regard Donne's
wit as wholly compatible with, if not essential to his poetry:

The essence of Donne's wit is abstraction... His method lies in separating the perceptions
of the soul from the entanglements of sense, and after isolating a thought, a passion, or
a quality in the world of pure ideas, to make it visible to the fancy by means of metaphorical
images and scholastic allusions.37

Today the most frequently cited definition of Metaphysical wit is 38
Eliot's "tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace." It is, he
says, a quality of sophisticated literature which the Elizabethans and the
Jacobins possessed, but which was lost with the dissociation of sensibility
clearly exemplified in Gray and Collins. Others have devoted considerable
zeal to the expansion of his hint that a salient feature of this sort of
wit is an alliance of levity and seriousness through which the seriousness
39
is intensified. The final phrase deserves emphasis. It carries broad

Company, Ltd., 1903), 3. 162.
37 Ibid., 160.
39 Ibid., 38.
implications and although Eliot refers specifically to Marvell's "Coy Mistress," innumerable instances of the quality he notes may be found in Donne. Occasionally he is witty in our sense of the word, that is, laughable or amusing, but this is of much less importance than the slightly ironic levity balanced with seriousness that plays so prominent a part in Donne's poetry. The Will affords one example of the wit Eliot attempts to define and it possesses also the "bright hard precision" upon which the effect in part depends. The concluding stanzas are:

To him for whom the passing bell next tolls,
I give my physick booke; my written rowles
Of Morall counsels, I to Bedlam give;
My brazen medals, unto them which live
In want of bread; To them which passe among
All forrainers, mine English tongue.
Thou, Love, by making mee love one
Who thinks her friendship a fit portion
For yonger lovers, dost my gifts thus disproportion.

Therefore I'll give no more; But I'll undoe
The world by dying; because love dies too.
Then all your beauties will bee no more worth
Than gold in Mines, where none doth draw it forth;
And all your graces no more use shall have
Than a Sun dyall in a grave.
Thou Love taughtst mee, by making mee
Love her, who doth neglect both mee and thee,
To'invent, and practise this one way, to'annihilate all three.

Whereas Eliot thinks of Donne's wit as contributing definitely to the force and toughness of his verse, and something that establishes his superiority over other writers of equal ability, Grierson, while expressing sincere admiration for Donne's verse, adopts a conciliatory viewpoint, a defensive attitude in this regard. He implies that Donne's wit interfered

40 Grierson, 1933 edition, 52.
at times with his artistic sincerity, but the effect though startling and disconcerting was "not entirely fantastic and erudite." The incorporation into his poetry of images drawn from theology, scholastic learning, medicine, science, and astrology, often justified by the intensity of the poetic emotion, nevertheless, produced a general effect that was bizarre and harsh, and imposed a limitation that true genius could have transcended. Paradoxically, the wit which historical criticism has indicated as the most formidable barrier to Donne's acceptance, is, Eliot believes, "something precious, and needed and apparently extinct; it is what should preserve the reputation of Marvell." By the same token Donne should remain in favor.

Cleanth Brooks, Jr. is a staunch ally of Eliot in supporting Donne's employment of the conceit as a vehicle of his wit, and rashly, perhaps, maintains that this method is always to be preferred to the more common type of metaphor based upon likenesses rather than upon incongruities. To consider the relation of the conceit to metaphysical poetry would be a digression at this point, but Brooks' essay is cited here because he does attempt to cast some light upon the definition of the term. Following Richards' theories of the synthetic imagination, based in turn upon the criticism of Coleridge, he states that the metaphysical is a poetry in which the heterogeneity of the materials and the opposition of the impulse united is extreme. Or if one prefers to base himself directly upon Coleridge: it is a poetry in which the poet attempts the reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.


43 Cleanth Brooks, Jr., *op. cit.*, 570.
This critic leans rather heavily upon Coleridge, as does Richards and it is doubtful whether the unanimity inferred is actual, or whether they simply utilize Coleridge's theories to reinforce their own. Brooks continues:

The metaphysical poet is a desperate poet... He is constantly remaking his world by relating into an organic whole the amorphous and heterogeneous and contradictory. He is not content to call attention to likeness with like; he is not satisfied with feeble and colorless metaphor.

The implication appears to be that no metaphor except that which Donne's verse typifies has poetic value. We must return, he says, to the structure of Elizabethan poetry and discard in its entirety the eighteenth century conception of the poetic, shaken but slightly by the Romantic revolt. Brooks' opinions give evidence of the intolerance mentioned previously in Professor Gordon's lecture, and his elevation of Donne to a position parallel to Shakespeare's confirms whatever doubt we may have entertained as to the inordinateness of his judgment.

Williamson enumerates three distinctive marks of Donne's wit: its rational basis, the range of materials from which he drew analogies, and the imaginative distance between the things united. This analysis is actually a regrouping of ideas already advanced and follows logically from Eliot's study, stressing the importance of a unified sensibility and the fusion of thought and feeling. Williamson places a similar degree of emphasis upon Donne's intellectuality and intensity in affirming that:

44 Loc. cit.
45 Cleanth Brooks, Jr., op. cit., 577.
46 George Williamson, op. cit., 34.
Metaphysical poetry springs from the effort to resolve an emotional tension by means of intellectual equivalents which terminate in the senses or possess the quality of sensation.

Or, as Read expresses it, there is in all good metaphysical poetry "an opacity or 'charged' effect, ... as though behind each word lurked considerable process of thought."

What then are the constituents of metaphysical poetry as contrasted with other types of poetry? Obviously we cannot differentiate absolutely, and the dividing line may at times be so fine as to be almost non-existent. It is understood, further, that we are not identifying the poetry of Donne with metaphysical poetry in a broader, truer sense, a poetry "inspired by a philosophical conception of the universe and the role assigned to the human spirit in the great drama of existence." Because Donne employed a philosophical method and was preoccupied with the processes of thought, this distinction is not always rigidly observed, and although he lacked a unified, consistent philosophy, his name is repeatedly linked with that of Dante even by the most eminent authorities.

There is, however, a fairly clear-cut opposition between the verse of the metaphysicals and that which is commonly regarded as "poetic." On one hand is the sentimental, the conventional, the indefinite; on the other,


48 Herbert Read, op. cit., 78.

49 Grierson, Metaphysical Poems and Lyrics, xiii.
the intellectual, the ingenious, the precise. This is a perilous position and the case is admittedly overdrawn; there are exceptions on both sides that cannot be adequately encompassed. But surely there is no question that the traditional idea of what poetry should be is less evident in Donne's

Our two soules therefore, which are one,
Though I must goe, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to ayery thinnesse beate.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the first foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if the other doe.

than in Swinburne's

There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things;
Dead dreams of days forsaken,
Blind buds that snows have shaken,
Wild leaves that winds have taken,
Red strays of ruined springs.

In The Garden of Proserpine Swinburne gives voice to a mood of utter dejection and despondency. He strives to communicate his feeling of sympathy with the evidences of death and decay in nature. But there is an evident straining for effect, and the poem bogs down under an accumulation of confused images. Donne expresses a similar hopelessness in an immeasurably superior manner in A Nocturnal upon Saint Lucy's Day:

50 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 1933 edition, 45.

Tis the year's midnight, and it is the dayes, 
Lacies, who scarce seaven hours herself unmaskes, 
The Sunne is spent, and now his flasks 
Send forth light squibs, no constant rayes; 
The world's whole sap is sunke; 
The generall balme th'hydroptique earth hath drunk, 
Wither, as to the beds-feet, life is shrunke, 
Dead and enterr'd; yet all these seeme to laugh, 
Compared with mee, who am their Epitaph.

The poetry of Donne may be described as resulting from an intellectual stress or tension making the sensitivity of the poet extremely acute. It is introspective and discordant and has a rational basis; that is, reason as the tool of analysis achieves poetic synthesis. Two distinguishing marks are generally agreed upon—intellectuality and emotional intensity. But it is assumed that since Donne reputedly accomplished this feat all poets must be judged by the same standard; and by comparison many writers of commanding stature are cast into oblivion. Read's essay is enlightening and constructive. His distinction, for example, between metaphysical poetry, which he calls abstract since its emotional quality comes with the triumph of the reason, and other poetry that is concrete because it is based upon sense perceptions, is valid and workable. The objection may be raised that the material of all art must lie in the concrete, that we cannot dispense with sense perceptions. But it is possible to convert sense perceptions into concepts which are apprehended emotionally. The crux of the matter is contained in the remark that it is essential "not to confuse this mental process in which emotion is the product of thought, with that other vaguer,

easier process which is the emotionalization of thought or thought as the product of emotion." Nevertheless, Read's partisanship is undeniable, and we have the sensation of looking through the large lens of a telescope when we are told that

Milton. . . perhaps did more to destroy the true tradition of metaphysical poetry than any other agent. His thought was a system apart from his poetic feeling, and in the violence wrought by his too forceful fashion he almost crushed the life out of an only too subtle advance of human consciousness. He did not think poetically, but merely expounded thought in verse: psychologically he was conscious all the time of a dualism—on the one side the thought to be expounded, on the other side the poetic mould into which his thought had to be smelted. The true metaphysical poet is conscious of no such dualism; the thought is in its very process poetical. Italics

Granted that the dualism does exist in Milton, can it be denied that in all poetic composition it must be present in some degree? Undoubtedly there are poems wherein so much attention has been paid to the mold, and the beat of the rhythm is so pronounced, that the meaning persistently evades us. We concede further that in the most effective poetry the sense and the verse form are evenly balanced, and the reader is not conscious of a dualism; but that is evidence of the poet's ability to reconcile the two, it is, in fact, the capacity which makes him a poet; it is not evidence that the dualism did not attend the poetic process. To assert that it did not would be to

53 Herbert Read, op. cit., 86.
54 Ibid., 84.
claim that poetry could be purely inspirational and produced without effort, and it would ascribe greater efficacy to words than they possess as mere symbols.

Read's position cannot be defended without abolishing all distinctions between form and content. But Donne criticism follows these lines rather closely. One voice raised in dissension protests that he knows of "no description of poetry which would regard it as a single unified experience." He adds: "Having worked to the best of my ability to find the thing Eliot refers to in the seventeenth century poets, and failed, I incline to think there was nothing of the kind there. . . . We do not quite know how to feel a thought." And Legouis expresses a genuine appreciation for Donne's poetry, recommending at the same time that it be studied not alone for the sake of intellectual abstractions and depth of feeling, but "as the work of a gifted, restless, unequal, yet highly conscious craftsman."

Legouis' work serves to counter-balance Brooks' assertion that "Donne. . . did not fetter his imagination with external codes of taste, all material and all diction were potentially poetic. There were no criteria external to the poetry itself--no preliminary and arbitrary tests of meter or of seriousness, or of beauty which the material had first to pass."

Similar declarations encountered all too often give strong support to those who would agree with Lucas that we have reached a state of chaos in which


57 Cleanth Brooks, Jr., op. cit., 578.
critical standards are no longer standards at all. This critic states:

Twenty-three centuries after the Father of Criticism, Aristotle, is there a single law of literature, a single principle for writing poetry, a single canon for criticising it, about which a congress of our critics would agree? For it is no longer agreed that poetry should be beautiful or noble, or civilized or well constructed or musical, or intelligent. If criticism be a science, only contrast its progress with that of any other. We know nothing. 58

If it is true as charged that modern criticism has grown doctrinaire and dogmatic, it has become so largely in the interests of metaphysical poetry, inextricably bound up, as we have seen, with general poetic theory. And the partisanship of literary critics is nowhere more evident than in their attempts to explain the nature of metaphysical poetry. Wilson's observation concerning Eliot might apply equally well to his more ardent disciples:

With all gratitude, therefore, for the salutary effects of Eliot's earlier criticism in curbing the carelessness and gush of the aftermath of Romanticism, it seems plain that anti-Romantic reaction is leading finally into pedantry and into a futile aestheticism. 59

But this thought carries us far afield. Our attention turns now to Donne's place in the intellectual life of this day.


CHAPTER II

JOHN DONNE’S THOUGHT IN RELATION TO HIS POETRY

When we approach Donne’s poetry critically through the eyes of some modern theorists we may form the impression that in his rebellion against Petrarchan artifice and convention Donne was an innovator divorced from tradition. The exaggerated emphasis that has been placed at times upon the conceit as though it were an entirely new technique, is one evidence of this. The same tendency is also apparent with regard to Donne’s philosophy. It is a commonplace to represent him as rejecting the medieval synthesis as antiquated and outworn, and pondering with deep concern new advances in scientific thought. Miss Ramsay has striven to indicate the weight of Donne’s debt to scholastic philosophy as the basis of his thinking; but her book is viewed more often than not as an overstatement. It seems that Donne will be "the first of the moderns" whether he will or no. The more completely we can cut him off from his predecessors the more completely may we claim him for our own age.

It is a comparatively simple matter to clarify prevalent misconceptions as to the degree of Donne’s originality in poetic practice. Little more is involved than a comparison of the body of his poetry with the work of his predecessors for the purpose of noting similarities and determining the importance of influence as a factor in producing them.

1 Mary Paton Ramsay, Les Doctrines Médiévales Chez Donne (Oxford University Press, 1917)
The outstanding editor of Donne's poems has, with diligence and judgment, travelled far along this path.

Grierson traces the strain of dialectic, the subtle play of argument and wit, to the Middle Ages in the dialectic of the Schools which had strongly influenced medieval Italian poetry. Through the agency of Wyatt and Surrey the Latin style enriched English poetry, infusing into it a more serious and more thoughtful color. Donne was not a conscious reviver of the metaphysics of Dante, "but to the game of elaborating fantastic conceits and hyperboles which was the fashion throughout Europe, he brought not only a full-bodied temperament and acute mind, but a vast and growing store of the same scholastic learning, the same Catholic theology, as controlled Dante's thought, jostling already with the new learning of Copernicus and Paracelsus." Yet, although he employs the argumentative style of the medieval love poets, it is directed toward a very different end, and their lofty idealism and chivalrous gallantry is replaced by a sharp satire and cynicism which was less a unique individual expression than a poetic convention of the time.

In Donne's poetry the slow meditative movement of the sonnet was quickened and the feeling intensified by passionate ratiocination and paradoxical argument. And whereas late Elizabethan poetry is characterized by highly rhetorical diction and verse, the verse of Donne illustrates the

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effect of rhetorical wit combined with simple and direct diction.

The strain of courtly love-poetry carried into England lost its freshness and vitality and became artificial and conventional, but not before it had begun to acquire a classical caste and a new temper. Grierson says: "The courtly idealistic strain was crossed by an Epicurean and sensuous one that tends to treat with scorn the worship of woman and echoes again and again the Pagan cry, never heard in Dante or Petrarch, of the fleetingness of beauty and love." This tone of contempt is undeniable in Donne but since it is at the same time a convention of the period, it lacks the force of absolute sincerity.

Metaphysical wit is related more immediately to similar developments in Spain and Italy—Gongorism and Marinism; and with them may be considered symptomatic of the decadence of Renaissance poetry which "with all its beauty and freshness, carried seeds of decay in its bosom from the beginning." Therefore, Donne's apparent originality of style and attitude must not be allowed to obscure his place in the main stream of English literature. In this connection Sharp draws attention to the common tendency of late Elizabethan and Jacobean literature to be erudite, introspective and obscure, and speaks of Donne as imposing his individuality upon a

4 Grierson, Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, xxxv.


poetry that had reached the peak of its development. Unable to express himself in the superficial and conventional Petrarchan forms of Spenser and Sidney, Donne "intensified experience by cutting under what had been said previously [rather than] increasing the surface variety of conceits."

In the same vein Williamson defines Donne's influence upon the bent of Jacobean poetry as one of emphasis, and he concludes that the poet "went further in certain directions than Chapman and Jonson; in other directions he added possibilities that they either neglected or did not see. 8 ... His genius augmented the inclination of the age." Williamson seeks to enhance Donne's prestige, showing that "he belongs in the direct current of English poetry and not in one of its eccentric eddies," by outlining the temper of the period and indicating his conformance with it. At the same time, however, he is engaged in proving the existence of a "Donne tradition" which he refuses to admit as a digression; and his position becomes somewhat equivocal. No one would disagree that Donne stands apart from his contemporaries by reason of the greater force of his reaction against facility and ease, and a stronger inclination toward "original and fresh imagery, towards almost colloquial directness of language, towards the intellectual evolution of the poem, towards wit as part of the texture of the poetry,

7 Robert Lathrop Sharp, From Donne to Dryden, the Revolt Against the Metaphysicals (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 19.
9 Ibid., 21.
and towards the necessity of wide interests for the poet." However reactionary or revolutionary Donne may be, it is clear that his poetry reveals an incorporation of elements already present in English verse, and it is but one step from the heightened imagery of the Elizabethans to his extravagant conceits.

Undoubtedly the place of Donne's verse in the English literary tradition is of major importance in the study of his reputation today. The tendency to exaggerate his merits at the expense of recognized masters has been noted above. His "resurrection," as it has often been called, would probably not have occurred at all had we maintained a balanced historical perspective. We preferred to erect a top-heavy superstructure of adulation upon the unsteady foundation of mental kinship. The modern man is supposed to share with Donne a sense of anxiety and unrest, a cynicism and skepticism in the face of crumbling worlds; one a blasting of nineteenth-century optimism and complacency, the other an alarming disintegration of medieval institutions, religious and political. Donne is pictured as dismayed and perplexed at scientific advances that served, it is said, to upset completely his religious convictions and produced a skepticism from which he could not escape. Thus, with truth and certainty banished, he was "thrown back upon the one constant fact of self," a phrase that is indeed revealing. The modern man, similarly, struggles against chaos, against the pressure of a mechanized civilization devoid of culture, and spiritually

10 Ibid., 234.
impoverished turns finally to individual experience as the solution to all his problems.

"That note of fear," writes Sampson, "which Donne struck so courageously in his poem to Christ has been in and out of poetry ever since—a taste of it here and a taste of it there; but only in the present age has it broadened into a symphony." Donne apparently would be quite at home in our wasteland suffering "a heavy-eyed disillusionment" like "the same world-weary melancholy of today." Fear is not in fact the dominant note in the religious poems; and while the disillusionment this critic notes is often evident, as for example, in the letter To Sir Henry Wotton:

Be thou thine owne home, and in thy selfe dwell;
Inne any where, continuance maketh hell.
And seeing the snaile, which every where doth rome,
Carrying his owne house still, still is at home,
Follow (for he is easie pac'd) this snaile,
Bee thine owne Palace, or the world's thy galle.

it explains the poet's temperament inadequately and incompletely. A preoccupation with this side of Donne's nature is representative not of the best, but of a typical vein of criticism.

Donne's spiritual life is intimately linked with his artistic career, and failure fairly to interpret the first must do violence to an impartial evaluation of the latter. We have lost, or perhaps have never possessed the historical reality. Hughes goes so far as to claim that a

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true picture of Donne would prove his outlook closer to that of Duns Scotus than to ours, and he reminds us that, "Because we are out of sight of Kab-balism and Scholasticism, and because Donne is a fiery beacon on our horizon, we cannot imagine that his sky was constellated differently from ours."

The entire Donne problem is contained in that observation.

Living in the last quarter of the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth, he stands on the threshold of the modern era. Acutely sensitive, as we may assume that he was, his poetry reflects the conflicts of his personal life and the forces at work in the world around him. He was born in 1571 or 1572, the son of a prosperous London ironmonger. His mother was the daughter of the dramatist, John Heywood, and granddaughter of Sir Thomas More's sister, Elizabeth Rastell. Donne's was a devout Catholic family and he was educated in that religion. His brother, Henry, died in 1595 at Newgate Prison where he had been confined for harboring a priest. Donne studied at Oxford and Cambridge, and in 1592 entered Lincoln's Inn. There he proceeded to combine omnivorous study with the life of a young man about town. Authorities disagree as to the exact dates of his travels in Spain and Italy, but indicate roughly the early 1590's. The Satyres, some of the Elegies, and the Songs and Sonets belong to this period.

Of this period also Grierson says that Donne "awoke to the allurements of pleasure and ambition," and describes the poet as a "fashionable, 

brilliant young law-student, avid of pleasure and worldly advancement."
His friends thought of him as one who was "not dissolute but very neat; a
great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays, a great writer of
conceited verses." And up to this point, Walton tells us, Donne "had be-
trothed himself to no religion that might give him any other denomination
than a Christian."

Donne sailed with Essex to Cadiz in 1596 in the company of a friend, Thomas Egerton, probably through whose influence he was appointed in the following year, secretary to the elder Sir Thomas Egerton, Keeper of the Great Seal. It is unlikely that Donne would have secured this position which was indeed a promising one, had he not become by this time at least a nominal anglican. But his hopes for a brilliant career were shattered through his own rashness when in 1601 he secretly married his employer's niece, Ann More. Dismissal and imprisonment followed.

The next decade found Donne and his large family humiliatingly dependent upon various patrons and the charity of friends. Among his benefactors Sir Robert Drury is the first in importance; the Anniversaries, written to commemorate the death of his daughter, Elizabeth, won Donne his friendship and substantial aid. Biathanatos was composed at about this time, as well as a controversial prose work, Pseudo-Martyr (1610). Ignatius His Conclave (1611), and verse letters to various individuals.

16 Ibid., (attributed to Sir Richard Baker).
When all secular doors seemed closed Donne entered the ministry of the Anglican Church in 1615. Between this date and his death in 1631 he composed many of the Divine Poems, prose works and numerous sermons. In 1621 he was appointed Dean of St. Paul's. The death of his wife in 1617. and his own failing health following a serious illness in 1623 played a part in the change in the temper of his writings which in his later years became heavier, more serious and devout; but to call him a mystic as some critics have done is hardly justifiable. There is no need to recount here the morbid circumstances surrounding the poet's last sickness, or his direction to paint his portrait in a winding-sheet in order that it might be constantly before him until death. Sufficient attention has been paid elsewhere to Donne and his shroud.

Aside from his poetry, Donne's biography itself has held a certain fascination for many of his admirers; the contradictions of his nature, the witty sensualist turned divine, the Pagan turned Christian, accounted for a degree of interest, superficial though it may be. For Fausset, Donne represents the problem of human life; he pictures him struggling against carnality and triumphing, as a ship rides out a gale to come safely home to port. But this writer's lack of sound scholarship, and oversimplification of the case at hand restrict his book to a popular audience.

18 Biographical facts are based upon Williamson's Donne Tradition, but they are not taken from that source exclusively.

19 Hugh I'Anson Fausset, John Donne, A Study in Discord (London: Jonathan Cape, Ltd., 1924).
Though the discord Fausset points out was there in fact, others do not accept his facile explanation of it. The conflict of Donne's life was never resolved. The Holy Sonnets written after his ordination reveal no peace, but torment and uncertainty; these lines leave little question as to his state of mind:

Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear.  
What? is it She, which on the other shore  
Goes richly painted? or which rob'd and tore  
Laments and mournes in Germany and here?  
Sleepes she a thousand, then peepes up one yeare,  
Is she selfe truth and errrs? now new, now outwore?  
Doth she, and did she, and shall she evermore  
On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?  

Had Donne lived at some other period or at an earlier date, when the realization of his worldly ambitions would not have demanded conformance with Anglicanism, there would be no enigmatical personality for later ages to probe. But he could not hope for preferment in national life is he professed his Catholic faith. Confronted with the necessity for a choice he renounced the church many of his countrymen were dying to preserve, not because of doctrinal disagreement, but, it would appear, purely as a matter of expediency. And he entered the ministry following his dismissal from Lord Egerton's service only after an interval of fourteen years, during which time attempts to obtain secular positions were unavailing. It was not a course he would have followed had any other avenue been open to him. Donne was not insincere but neither was he devout and ascetic by nature. His religious wavering and indecision with regard to the Reformed Church.

20 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, Sonnet XVIII, 301.
are even more fundamental than may appear at first glance. In Moloney's opinion Donne's implied defense of Anglicanism was "already a defense of the Via Media." He continues:

It represents a secession from the traditional faith inspired not be the fiery insistence that Rome had been false to her trust, but simply by the wishful feeling that perhaps a less intransigent faith would serve. I call attention to this fact here as another step in the procedure whereby the Renaissance humanist in Donne overcame the medievalist never completely or satisfactorily but in such an imperfect fashion as to leave his mind fatally divided against itself; that division of his artistic allegiance between two worlds, one not dead but receding, and the other born, but still inadequately shaped, is the key to the right understanding of the poetry of Donne.

This critic's study of Donne follows a middle path equally removed from Miss Ransay's view that the poet was consistently medieval and unmoved by the "new learning," and Coffin's assertion that Donne was preoccupied with the new astronomy and disturbed by its implication of confusion. The issue is vital because it involves a great deal more than the intellectual experience of a single individual in the distant past; the struggle for assimilation that went on in the mind of Donne is a small-scale reenactment of the problem of the Renaissance, and the interpretation that critics place upon Donne's art and personality is invariably related to their understanding of that "event." All are agreed that the last vestiges of the unity of thought and purpose that had characterized the Middle Ages were lost entirely after Donne; but a twentieth-century materialistic and

21 Michael Francis Moloney, John Donne, His Flight From Medievalism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), 41.
scientific consciousness disposes most writers to feel assured that the
gain far outweighed the loss.

Bredvold adopts what he calls the modern orthodox conception of the
Renaissance; it signifies for him as for many of his fellow critics the lib-
eration of men's minds from the shackles of authority. Thus, for him,
Donne's outstanding quality is his "critical independence" and "reference
to his own experience." And he tells us that it is "a great error to repre-
sent Donne's mind as always preoccupied with the subtleties of medieval
thought. He was really preoccupied with the subtleties of his own soul. .
. No one has had his vision of reality less impeded by tradition than

Coffin's line of thought is similarly colored by contemporary pagan-
ism; he appears as firmly convinced of the autonomy of the individual, and
would read into Donne's poetry a modern mind. He is intrigued by the skep-
tical tone of the poet's earlier work, although that skepticism is often no
more than a pose; but he is not impressed by the divine poems wherein Donne
most sincerely expresses his consciousness of sin, his hope for mercy, his
complete dependence upon God. The first Holy Sonnet closes upon a note
typical of the later Donne:

22 Louis I. Bredvold, "The Religious Thought of Donne in Relation to
Medieval and Later Traditions," Studies in Shakespeare, Wilton and
Donne (University of Michigan Publications in Language and Literature,
1925), 208.

23 Ibid., 229.
But our old subtle foe so tempteth me,  
That not one hour my selfe I can sustaine;  
Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art,  
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart. 24

And his awareness of a personal God is explicit in Sonnet XIV which begins:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, 'and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new. 25

It is difficult to reconcile this Donne with the one that Coffin describes:

Donne ... is in the modern world, for it is in his own soul, the bundles of complexities compounded by the fact of sense and spirit, that the drama of his response to the new philosophy is acted. For him it means that the self comes to life, not through an appreciation of laws such as science derives from an observation of the natural world, nor deductions such as the scholastic philosopher elaborates from his traditionally accredited premises, but from a realization of its own fullest potentialities through contact with stimuli which awaken these potentialities. What these stimuli are is determined by this self, not by a philosophical system or by scientific method, and the primary stimulus will be that which the self conceives to be essentially true. 26

Repeated re-reading does little to clarify this hodge-podge of non-sense in which the human being seems to have lost his identity. All that remains is an organism responding endlessly to stimuli; but "self," "stimuli," and "potentialities" are all vague and unexplained. And "soul" as used here suggests something vast, fluid and vaporous, without exact definition.

24 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 293.
25 Ibid., 299.
26 Charles Monroe Coffin, op. cit., 287.
If the stimuli are determined by the self without reference to anything outside of self, what has become of the intellect and by what standards can anything be regarded as "essentially true" or otherwise?

Current criticism offers slight opposition to Courthope's judgment that "No more lively or characteristic representative can be found of the thought of an age when the traditions of the ancient faith met in full encounter with the forces of the new philosophy." The discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo are assumed to have produced a skeptical spirit in Donne sufficiently strong to have shaken his fundamental beliefs. The collisions in human thought that accompanied the formation of a new concept of life are said to have brought about an uneasiness and uncertainty in Donne's mind as to man's relation to the universe.

The period was one of crisis; undoubtedly the temper of the age fostered a critical attitude and sharpened the poet's sensitivity, reacting against idealism and simplicity. But the Renaissance inherited medieval beliefs and ideals, and the new emphasis that humanism placed upon man's potentialities in the temporal realm did not necessarily imply the total exclusion of the thought of the Middle Ages. Miss Ramsay observes: "Mais l'étude de la mentalité de Donne nous montre que si la Renaissance a stimulé la vie intellectuelle, elle n'a pourtant pas tout transformé. Il subsiste en Angleterre, à l'époque de Donne, une pensée philosophique, or mieux théologique, et une érudition qui sont foncièrement médiévales." The


28 Mary Paton Ramsay, op. cit., 4.
framework remained.

Moloney contends that "the mortal enmity of medieval thought toward science and the enquiring mind is a myth born in post-medieval times;" and he cites Miss Ramsay's remark to the effect that scholastic philosophy after all is less a specific system than a method of thought. The validity of the scholastic synthesis was not dependent upon the truth of a particular astronomical theory. The universe might be helio-centric or geo-centric; but it was in any event theo-centric. "The modern reader," Bush admonishes, "who would understand seventeenth-century literature must shake off his habit of believing only what he sees and must try to realize a world in which man's every thought and act are of vital concern to God and to his own eternal state."

Those who see in Donne's poetry "the disquieting effect of Copernicanism" invariably call attention to these lines from the Second Anniversary:

Have not all soules thought
For many ages, that our body is wrought
Of Ayre, and Fire, and other Elements?
And now they thinke of new ingredients,
And one soule thinkes one, and another way
Another thinkes, and 'tis an even lay.

and particularly to the following passage from the First Anniversary:

29 Michael Francis Moloney, op. cit., 51.


31 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 234.
And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
Can well direct him where to looke for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent,
When in the Planets, and the Firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out-again to his Atomies.
'Tis all in pieces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:

It is in such passages that Donne may appear singularly modern in
attitude and "to have been looking down the future with some grand Baconian
surmise." But a salient feature of Donne's artistry was his ability to
draw indiscriminately upon various fields of knowledge for poetic effect.
Pseudo-science and fable stand side by side within the same poem, together
with references to medicine and law. "Il est vrai. . . .," writes Miss
Ramsay, "qu'il ne s'est servi de la nouvelle physique que pour y puiser des
images literaires. . . Mais ce n'est pas pour cela qu'on peut lui donner
le nom de 'sceptique'."

His intellectual curiosity was all-embracing, but his faith in the
efficacy of scientific progress was limited. "In this low forme, poore
soule, what wilt thou doe?" is a brief statement of what we may accept as
his true position. Man's very nature prohibits a complete realization of
truth; the poem continues:

32 Ibid., 214.

33 Merritt Y. Hughes, "Kidnapping Donne," Essays in Criticism, Second

34 Mary Paton Ramsay, op. cit., 18.
When wilt thou shake off this Pedantery, 
Of being taught by sense, and Fantasie? 
Thou look'st through spectacles; small things seem great 
Below; But up into the watch-towre get, 
And see all things despoyl'd of fallacies: 
Thou shalt not peespe through lattices of eyes, 
Now heare through Labyrinths of eares, nor learne 
By circuit, or collections to discerne. 
In heaven thou straight know'st all, concerning it, 
And what concerns it not, shalt straight forget. 35

In view of Donne's background and education, to picture him as dis-
traught and perturbed by the evidences of mutability in nature must be 
erroneous. Bredvold says that his sense of sadness at the transitoriness 
of life "was the more acute because of the new scientific knowledge." 
Actually, his sadness would have been just as acute had there been no new 
science. Mutability did not have to be demonstrated by the scientist; he 
must have recognized it as inherent in the nature of all created things. 
and it is true that, "Only in the light of subsequent events does he seem to have been skeptically suspicious of ancient falsehoods and receptive of 
dawning truth." While it may be true that Donne say in the intellectual 
currents of his day "a cleavage between the realms of the physical and meta-
physical as formerly understood," and the divorce of the natural and super-
natural, he could not accept the idea without qualms; it served but to 
depen the discord of his mind.

35 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 235.
36 Bredvold, op. cit., 203.
37 Hughes, op. cit., 70.
38 Coffin, op. cit., 285
Donne would have deemed it sheer madness to adopt the short-sighted viewpoint that Coffin attributes to him:

Moreover if the poet would extend his imagination to consider the place of man in the whole universe, he must needs accept the work of the man of science, for it is upon the accumulation of the labors of the scientist that a picture of the cosmic situation is based. This world picture is the organized system of facts which exhibits the fundamental relationships existing amidst the confusion of the multifarious aspects of the physical universe.

But only in modern times has the physical universe been conceived of as chaotic and confused; certainly it was not so to the Elizabethans, Bacon and Copernicus, notwithstanding. The idea of a sacramental, ordered creation, assumed by many to be a relic of the past and a fragment of a ruined philosophy, has not in fact been lost even today. As expressed by a recent poet it would not be unfamiliar to Donne:

O nothing, in this corporeal earth of man,
That to the imminent heaven of his high soul
Responds with color and with shadow, can
Lack correlated greatness. If the scroll
Where thoughts lie fast in spell of hieroglyph
Be mighty through its mighty; inhabitants;
If God be in His Name; grave potency if
The sounds unbind of hieratic chants;
All's vast that vastness means. Nay, I affirm
Nature is whole in her least things express,
Nor know we with what scope God builds the worm.
Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.


The philosophy thus formulated may often be unrecognized and misunderstood, as is evident for example in Grierson's comment that a salient feature of the Renaissance

is the movement, thrown into sharp relief by the peculiar character of Donne's upbringing from conceptions of life and morality which made the joys of another world the goal of life and the measure of man's conduct to conceptions in which the world and man's sensible nature are at least constituent elements in the good for which he strives. 41

[Italics not in the original.]

Obviously this authority does not understand Christian asceticism, nor do many of his fellow critics who believe that it implies a repulsion for everything physical amounting to a hatred of the world. But Gilson probably comes closer to the truth:

When therefore the Renaissance is held up to our admiration for its discovery of nature and its worth, and opposed to the Middle Ages as the day of its unjust depreciation, we must carefully scrutinize the meaning of this assertion. In so far as it has any it can only be this: that the Renaissance marks the opening of an era in which man will profess to be satisfied with the state of fallen nature. . . . It would be altogether unjust to conclude against the Middle Ages that having unfavourably compared the state of fallen nature with another and a better, it had no feeling left for it at all. If anyone showed such a lack of feeling, it was Luther and Calvin.

Donne did, it is true, react against the ascetic ideal but it was a deliberate reaction and it was partial. It has frequently been noted that

41 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, xxiv.

he very nearly eliminated sensorily perceived beauty from his poetry; various explanations have been advanced. Moloney is convinced that he did so "not because of super-intellectualism which scorned the poets' normal materials and methods, but because of a diseased and distorted aesthetic perspective to which all things corporeal took on the aspect of evil." Whether or not a haunting sense of guilt may validly be inferred is open to question. Donné's enthusiastic admirers interpret his lack of interest in sensible nature as evidence of the precise thing that Moloney says it is not--"a super-intellectualism which scorned the poets' normal materials and methods." But as this critic states, Donne may have outwardly rejected the idea of the sacramental nature of the universe; yet he could never forget it--it was one factor in the "fatal division of his mind." Certainly he never went so far as to dispute the fact of creation, nor did he look to the scientist to reorder the world.

Because the test tube and the microscope loom large on our horizon, and the achievements of the scientist have a direct and immediate effect upon the life of the modern man it is difficult to realize that the early seventeenth century interest in science was predominantly speculative and abstract; the hypotheses of the scientist had not forced themselves upon man's consciousness through practical application. For this reason we can recognize the possibility that the laws of Copernicus may have been viewed by many with a lively but detached interest. And Miss Nicolson's comment

43 Moloney, op. cit., 155.
that a poet may affirm an idea intellectually but remain unmoved imaginatively is plausible. The Copernican theory in itself, she says, "led in few cases to either optimism or pessimism, but rather... to a judicial weighing of hypotheses without too much concern as to which should finally be proved true." The relative position of earth and sun seemed less important than an awareness of the immensity of the universe and the proportionate minuteness of the earth.

To follow the lead of Courthope, as countless critics have done, and affirm that the discoveries of Copernicus produced a skeptical spirit in Donne which in turn is reflected in his poetry, is, in Moloney's opinion, to translate his poetry into the idiom of Tennyson and dissect it with "the scalpel of nineteenth century rationalism." It is a common error, he says, to speak as though the Donne era were "permeated with the atmosphere of religious panic which prevailed in Victorian England after materialistic science had launched its frontal attack on Christian faith."

Hughes is in agreement believing that our approach to Donne's poetry lacks objectivity: "Because skepticism rather than faith is the basis of modern thought, Donne's singularly intellectual imagination seems to us skeptical." As a matter of historical fact Donne was unmoved by Copernicus in the depths of his imagination and "in his heart felt himself so


45 Moloney, op. cit., 48.

46 Hughes, op. cit., 67.
secure in God's earth-centered universe that the core of his religious
faith never suffered."

Crofts side-steps the problem of intellectual content in Donne's
verse by all but denying its existence, and a little lightly, perhaps, dis-
poses of his poetry as a tour de force. He does not look to the poet's
environment to explain the tension and bitterness of his writing, but is
repulsed by the deficiencies of his personality, his extreme self-conscious-
ness, his preoccupation with the morbid and ugly. It is his self-interest,
Crofts says, that accounts in part "for the powerful fascination which his
writings exert." Because he is so aware of himself we are aware of him.
And he speaks of Donne's thought as a "convoluted growth of intellectual
whim-whams." But while this critic condemns Donne unsparingly for pro-
jecting his personality too forcefully into his poetry, he is himself
guilty of a similar error with regard to his commentary. There is very
little difference between explaining an inordinate admiration in terms of
the attraction of personality, and sweeping aside a body of poetry because
the writer's personality is distasteful. There may be no justification
for placing Donne on a plane with Dante and Shakespeare; yet if he is no
more than a psychological misfit, a great deal of critical effort has been
expended in vain.

Crofts is concerned particularly with Donne's cynicism toward
women, but he interprets the cutting irony of the love poems as an attitude

47 Ibid., 73.
48 J. E. V. Crofts, "John Donne," Essays and Studies of the English Assoc-
peculiar to Donne as an individual. His skepticism, he says, runs through the poems like spilt acid producing an odd effect of corrosion and distortion. The whole body of his love poetry "is held together by this implicit drama of . . . the man who is impelled to adore what he would fain despise, and who, when the truth of his feelings is extorted from him, gives rein to hyperbole and grotesque exaggeration as a kind of sneering commentary on his own seriousness."

This authority appears to be attaching more weight and earnestness to the love poems as expressions of the poet's individual and personal experience than they deserve. They were rather indications of ideas widely current in Donne's time. Courthope believed that to Donne "love in its infinite variety and inconsistency, represented the principle of perpetual flux in Nature." Not satisfied with this explanation, Bredvold has striven to place Donne in relation to the thought of his own time in order to establish the thesis that he was a typical Renaissance skeptic. In contrast to Crofts he insists upon the doctrinal nature of Donne's revolutionary verse and he calls his appeal to the law of Nature a reversal of "the fundamental and central doctrine of political thought and social ethics in Europe from the Stoics and Cicero through the Renaissance." The Law of Nature, as commonly understood, was based upon the Stoic philosophy recognizing an innate ethical sense, eternal and immutable, the bulwark against moral anarchy and the justification for the laws of men. On the other hand

49 Ibid., 132.
50 Courthope, op. cit., 154.
the Sceptics denied moral judgment in man, contending that the aim and value of life cannot be determined. The social code, they taught, was based upon custom and habit; and law was an institution having the sanction not of nature but of opinion.

The Stoic Law of Nature was elaborated and extended and became in time an integral part of Christian Philosophy. At the Renaissance it was understood to be "the one philosophical defense of the worthiest and most ideal elements in civilization," the barrier against excessive individualism whether in the form of tyranny on one hand or of absolute anarchy on the other. But the Sceptical opposition had persisted also. Two camps were formed, one adhering to the Law of Nature, the other Sceptical and leaning toward anarchic individualism. When Donne wrote:

Ther's nothing simply good, nor ill alone,
Of every quality Comparison
The onely measure is, and judge, Opinion.

his terms had definite connotations that were well understood by his audience.

Bredvold points out that the Law of Nature was also opposed to a degraded conception of the Golden Age, which crops up here and there in Donne's love poetry. Therein, the early age of man is presented not as a period of perfection and natural goodness, but one in which restraint and moral law were lacking and family ties were unknown. The latter idea of

52 Ibid., 480.

the Golden Age was employed in the *Romance of the Rose* by Jean de Meung with whom it became "the dream of ease and unlimited freedom and indulgence." His naturalistic theories were widely disseminated in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and Rabelais and Montaigne promoted the "libertine" worship of nature which became a commonplace and is notable in the poetry of Donne's youth. This note is dominant in many of the *Songs and Sonets* and particularly in the *Elegies*. In one of these Donne writes:

How happy were our Syres in ancient times,  
Who held plurality of loves no crime;  
* * * * *  
Our weake credulity hath been abus'd;  
The golden laws of nature are repeald,  
Which our first Fathers in such reverence held;  
Our liberty's reveral'd, our Charter's gone,  
And we're made servants to opinion,  
A monster in no certain shape attir'd,  
And whose original is much desir'd,  
Formless at first, but growing on it fashions,  
And doth prescribe manners and laws to nations.

Montaigne before Donne had brought together the two philosophies, Scepticism and Naturalism, that characterized the "Libertine" tradition. Bredvold concludes that the originality of Donne's singularly modern ideas is only apparent: "they were in fact the current thought of a definite Renaissance school of Scepticism and Naturalism."

Donne is popularly spoken to today as a "revolutionary" particularly in connection with his love poems which are considered extremely audacious. Miss Drew, for example, expresses a prevalent opinion when she refers

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to Donne as a "deliberate rebel from the social consciousness of his age."

But as Hughes, Bredvold and others have indicated he did not stray far, in
substance at least, from the traditional and familiar; and Legouis is thinking along the same lines when he warns "that biographers should fight shy of interpreting the Songs and Sonets as a record of Donne's love affairs, except in the most general terms." It would not be wise to regard his affirmations of libertinism as spontaneous expressions of his personality; he is too often deliberate and laborious, and at other times self-conscious as though not wholly free of moral scruples. Furthermore, Donne's youthful interest in philosophical skepticism was passing, and the amatory verses which are known to have been occasioned by incidents in his life are singularly free from bitterness. The simple lyricism of his poem at parting beginning "Sweetest love, I do not goe for weariness of thee," is unsurpassed. Were his scathing attitude not an affectation, he could hardly have written with the sincere feeling of the Anniversarie:

All Kings, and all their favorites,
All glory of honors, beauties, wits,
The Sun it selfe, which makes time, as they passe,
Is elder by a yeare, now, then it was
When thou and I first one another saw:
    Only our love hath no decay;
This, no to morrow hath, nor yesterday,
Running it never runs from us away,
    But truly keepes his first, last, everlasting day.

57 Elizabeth Drew, Directions in Modern Poetry (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1940), 25.


59 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 22.
In summary, Donne's adherence in youth to libertine naturalism, and later to scientific skepticism, can easily be pressed too far. Even in his most dejected moments life was not an insoluble riddle. He was, however, capable of incorporating in his poetry various and divergent ideas, and he reflects the intense intellectual activity that characterizes a period of transition from one state of life to another. The unity and harmony of the middle ages were in the process of dissolution; all human values were being called into question. The collision between the old ideals and the new humanism became a determining factor in Donne's thought and consequently in his poetry. He could not, therefore, write with assurance and serenity as a poet might, living in an age of stasis. Lacking a consistent philosophy, it became impossible for him to compose his work with reference to a unified and integrated set of values, and as a result his poetry was not affirmative and selective but comprehensive and synthetic.

Placing Donne in juxtaposition with the modern world may seem to reveal obvious similarities in mental attitude between his age and ours. The confidence and self-sufficiency of the final years of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century rudely broken by the advent of World War One, the economic collapse of the late twenties, the spiritual aridity of a machine civilization, the exaggerated nationalism that rose from the ruins, all played a part in the evolution of our hollow men. Yet the elaboration of analogies painstakingly constructed, has been carried beyond reasonable limits. The disillusionment of our recent defeatist literature with its bitterness, its despair of finding certainty, can be identified only in its superficial aspects with the spirit of Donne. Truth
for him was a reality ultimately attainable:

On a huge hill,
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
And what the hills suddennes resists, winne so;
Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight. 60
Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night.

And whatever his doubts and indecisions his faith in divine providence was radical. His pessimism was not a contemporary brand. It arose from the need for a choice of beliefs, not from a complete lack of all belief. He never doubted that life had a purpose or man a free will; or fancied himself a cork bobbing about on the sea without aim or direction; or felt himself victimized by hostile forces in his environment or his own inner drives.

They are legion who hear in Eliot and Donne alike the beat of doom, and believe uncritically that Donne's spirit "broods over the spirit of the age and moves in it." The vehemence of that assertion is the measure of their misunderstanding of Donne.

60 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, op. cit., 139.
61 Ashley Sampson, op. cit., 314.
CHAPTER III

DONNE'S STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

IN MODERN CRITICISM

However far we may pursue the problem of the degree of temperamental affinity between Donne and the twentieth-century mind, the issue will not be pinned down; it retreats as we advance and while we consider it, changes. Even when partly successful the effort is poorly rewarded. Ultimately the importance of the connection, whether it was well founded or not, lies in the practical consequences the question produced, consequences in the form of actual stylistic innovations in contemporary poetry. The dominant interest that literary criticism evinces in the work of any poet, if it is to be justified, must be directed toward the technical and artistic qualities of the work in question, and to the writer's political, philosophical or religious attitudes secondarily.

Donne's importance to his immediate successors, particularly the devotional poets, extended to fundamental ways of thought, but for the present or the recent past his influence has been purely technical. That is one reason why present-day criticism has been concerned principally with the love poems, satires and religious poems, in spite of the fact that in the last stages of his elevation considerable attention was devoted to the religious prose works and the sermons. Curiously enough the religious poetry may be grouped quite effortlessly with the secular verse because it
possesses the same intense personal quality that overshadows if it does not
eclipse the didactic element. Donne's divine poems are never the poetic
formation of dogma or doctrine, but rather a concentrated and agonized ex-
pression of an immediately experienced spiritual dissonance. The reader in
fact receives the impression that his efforts to realize the supernatural
are impeded by his absorption in his own ego.

In a limited and not easily defined measure the modern period is
indebted to the metaphysical sensibility, but to indicate this indebtedness
by tracing the influence of the school of Donne upon specific present-day
poets would be an extremely ambitious and hazardous undertaking for any but
the most astute critic. That is what Williamson attempted to do in The
Donne Tradition by building up a direct line of descent from Donne's own
day to ours. He has been censured at least once for ascribing to Donne's
example certain poetic qualities that had their origin in some other source.

Such a task would be further complicated by the fact that the term
"metaphysical" has been employed so loosely that it possesses no clear-cut
denotation. Almost any poet can be so classified. In the words of one
writer: "What had once been 'mystical' or 'pantheistic' or 'transcendental'
had suddenly become 'metaphysical' in the minds of critics, and it seemed
as though all the world were metaphysical to those who had presumably read
2 John Donne or Andrew Marvell."

1 Merritt Y. Hughes, "Kidnapping Donne," Essays in Criticism, Second
Series, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), 4, 66.

2 Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska, A History of American Poetry
Nevertheless, it is true that the word has lost the odium it once possessed, and there is a sense in which seventeenth century and modern poetry, or at any rate modern criticism, are in agreement as to general canons of taste and broad critical principles. There is a fundamental sympathy concerning the subject matter of poetry, metrics, language and imagery. This chapter will deal with contemporary criticism of Donne's verse from the standpoint of style or technique.

The conceptions of poetry that came down to us from the last century sprang up in the time of the great Romantic writers. And outside of scholarly circles those conceptions are still prevalent; the one-volume history of English literature, Brooks says, "still conceives of the Romantic period as the one far-off divine event toward which the whole course of English poetry moves." The efforts of modern critics have been directed toward the overthrow of that idea. There are of course dissenting voices, but they are so faint as to be almost inaudible. Lucas laments that we have lost the gift of Romantic ecstasy: "The wild impulses that once sprang or soared like wild things in a wilderness grow shy with the sense now of another self always upon them."

The idealistic, the sentimental, the dream-like, have been excluded in favor of a new "realism." The rapturous flights into the realm of the sublime have acquired an unwholesome coloring in the light of psychological


analysis. Ransom's viewpoint is representative. He disparages the "heart's desire poetry" which denies the real world by idealizing it, as the act of a sick mind. "It indicates in the subject," he writes, "a poor adaptation to reality; a sub-normal equipment in animal courage, flight and escapism, furtive libido." The assumption is that the poet of today must somehow reconcile his verse with the material civilization in which he lives. He will have no feeling for rusticity but will find his inspiration in the steel and stone of bloodless cities, his ears attuned not to sounds of rural life, but to the clangor of street cars, the din of the riveter, the blare of the radio.

Simplicity, once considered a necessary constituent of worthy poetry, gives way to complexity. The poet is expected to express various and contradictory feelings simultaneously rather than a simple, isolated emotion; his subject matter is unlimited; all experience is his province. He is, in the words of Leavis, "at the most conscious point of the race in his time." No longer is he thought of as exercising a selective and judicial faculty determining the words, the objects and the attitudes that may be termed "poetic." He is pictured rather as possessing such an acute and sensitive mind that he is able to comprehend all the forces at work in his environment, all the conflicting currents of opinion and the intellectual activity of the age. It follows that nothing need be barred from his...


poetry, nor is anything poetic of necessity. Thus defined, the assimilative
powers of the poet tax our credulity and propose claims not unlike the sug-
gestion that he could be physically everywhere at once. The outstanding
feature is the determining part played by the intellect in contrast to the
"romantically" poetic in which the emotion and the intellect are mutually
opposed. Modern criticism insists upon brain work affirming that we should
not read poetry to be moved according to an accepted pattern, but for the
emotion that accompanies understanding.

The challenge to the nineteenth century poetic tradition and Donne's
rise to prominence went hand in hand; and the restoration of the seventeenth
century in English literature was an integral part of the new development in
taste which has been termed a "critical revolution in the order of the Roman-
tic Revolt." The metaphysicals were all that the Romanticists were not—
precise, argumentative, direct and individual. The thought and imagery of
love poetry need not be simple and obviously beautiful, according to Donne's
editor, nor is dialectical subtlety necessarily fatal to the impression of
sincerity. If beauty is lost in Donne's poetry, it is compensated for by

8 dramatic vividness.

Here and there we encounter a lingering prejudice refusing to admit
the intellectual quality of Donne because it is considered inimical to emo-
tional expression. "Just as his intricate verse-patterns are like the wards

7 Brooks, op. cit., ix.

8 Sir H. J. C. Grierson, Donne's Poetical Works (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
1912), 2, xxxii.
menacing the free movement of his language, so these figments of his intellect are used as obstacles endangering and making more arduous his heart's right-of-way." And Lewis upholds the cause of emotion recollected in tranquillity charging that Donne writes in a chaos of rapidly shifting and violent passion. "He is perpetually excited and therefore perpetually cut off from the deeper and more permanent springs of his own excitement." But this critic feels that it is possible to be sincerely appreciative of Donne without condemning poetry that is mellifluous, diffuse and ornamental, and ought not to be judged by the same standards. To call him a liberator, in Lewis' opinion, begs the question because there is no intrinsic superiority in his method. He concludes that an interest in Donne's poetry "save for a mind specially predisposed in its favour, must be short-lived and superficial though intense." Such a middle-of-the-road position has been ruled out by Donne's militant followers; he must, they say, be accepted wholly, or rejected wholly since there is no common ground that will admit both his work and that of the nineteenth century tradition.

Objections to the favorable acceptance of Donne's verse since the time of Johnson have been centered around his unique manner of expression, connected at some points with his use of conceits, but by no means limited to them. That manner involves a fundamental obscurity of meaning which

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11 Loc. cit.
almost inevitably accompanies the consistent and sustained compression of language. The word "obscurity" is used here with hesitation. Ordinarily it imposes an implicit limitation upon the poetry to which it is applied; but as critics employ the term in analyzing Donne's style the note of censure has in many cases disappeared. It indicates the opposite of obvious, but it is not vagueness or logical indecision. It suggests rather, a variety of possible meanings each reinforcing or intensifying the other, and it is an outward manifestation of the complexity of the poetic process. The reader of course experiences a difficulty in comprehending poetry of this sort that does not present itself in the poetry of simple statement. And Donne's involved syntax and unfamiliar grammatical constructions are an added complication.

When Grierson's 1912 edition appeared the vast majority of those who read Donne at all felt that he was "too bare and direct, . . . too obscure and abstruse." Grierson himself was believed to be displaying an understandable partisanship in stating:

If we allow for corruptions of the text one might say that Donne is never obscure. His wit is a succession of disconcerting surprises; his thought original and often profound; his expression, though condensed and harsh, is always perfectly precise. His out-of-the-way learning, too, . . . is used with a pedantic precision even when fantastically applied to which his editors have not always done justice.

But it required rare discernment and sagacity to arrive at this conclusion; to the average reader the barrier remained and remains today, multiplied one


hundred fold in the equally condensed and involved verse of our own time. John Livingston Lowes valiantly defended the old order, insisting upon the poet's responsibility to his audience, and affirmed that intelligibility must not be sacrificed for the sake of originality. Individuality, up to a point, might be desirable but "as individuality approaches singularity, it retreats from its lines of communication, and isolates itself."

At the very crest of the wave of popularity, an anonymous reviewer, while admitting that publishers had ceased to regard Donne as a poet of limited appeal, nevertheless, felt that the reader's reasoning powers were sorely taxed and states: "There comes a point beyond which only a specialist can pass with freedom and confidence." Tillyard calls for a balance between direct and oblique statement in poetry as partly determining the poetic health of a given epoch. Donne, he believes, placed the entire weight on one side of the scales and in so doing cut himself off from the "cool argumentative excellence, the perfection of simple statement." The Augustan reaction approaching the other extreme, was inevitable.

But there is another and more articulate group of critics who agree that careful reading of Donne's poems does not justify the charge of obscurity; the difficulty, they say, arises rather from too much light than from a lack of light. And when Eliot remarked that poets in our civilization

15 "The Oxford Donne," Times Literary Supplement (February 6, 1930).
could not avoid being difficult since "our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results" the cry was eagerly taken up by many who proceeded to demonstrate in their own work the fact that "the poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate, if necessary, language into his meaning." Yet, poetry produced in this manner is thought to possess a desirable coherence and continuity, since all the intellect is active in it, and "imagination contemplation and sensibility become fused within the perfect limits of a human mind."

We may agree that poetry need not be immediately apprehensible to reason; we may even accept Read's contention that obscurity is not a negative quality—a failure to obtain perfect clarity, but a positive value. It is difficult, however, to support his theory in its entirety. The poet, he says, works outward from an emotional unity or an "inner language form." There is no necessary correspondence between this form and the language of everyday expression. The poet must stretch and mishandle the meaning of words in faithfulness to his emotion, and he is not restricted by the instruments of reason. The poem "has a necessary and eternal existence; it is impervious to reason, and if it has no discoverable meaning, it has immeasurable


20 Herbert Read, "Obscurity in Poetry," Ibid., 100.
power." These observations result from what Read terms "a reconsideration of the function of language," but he appears to have robbed language of any function at all. If the "immeasurable power" he attributes to poetry does not rest upon meaning, it must lie in the force of sound alone or of sound together with the visual properties of words. The reader might as profitably turn his attention to poetry of nonsense syllables or a foreign language.

Empson, Ransom, and Tate emphasize knowledge and understanding as essential to complete appreciation of significant poetry, and conversely, poetry that possesses value and importance invariably demands an intellectual effort on the part of the reader. Donne of course fits into the picture neatly. Ransom objects to the definition of metaphysical poetry as the combination of intellect and passion, on the grounds that the theorist should concern himself with what is objective and cognitive in poetry, taking the feelings more or less for granted. The poet begins with feelings and objectifies them into external actions, that is, into acts of knowledge in which the reader participates. Ransom does not deny feeling or emotion, but is not content to halt there as in a pleasant "associationist" poetry. He insists upon following through, as in Donne, to the extinction of feelings in a poetic action that "possesses the firmest of all varieties of objectivity, that of a close cognitive process."

Tate is in agreement considering the supposed difficulty and obscurity of certain types of poetry, among them modern and metaphysical, as

21 Loc. cit.

evidence of a deficiency on the part of the reader who "because he has been pampered by bad education, expects to lie down and be passive when he is reading poetry." He is incapable of direct and active participation and the full cooperation of his intellectual resources because he has grown accustomed to poetry of simple sensibility to which he may respond automatically according to an established pattern. Could this problem be overcome, it would become readily apparent to all that logical progression rather than hyperbole is the chief characteristic of Donne's lyrics, and that there are few of the Songs and Sonnets wherein, as Legouis reminds us, "an almost syllogistic concatenation of thought does not appear, if not at once, to him who takes sufficient pains." The Dissolution affords one example:

Shee'is dead; And all which die
To their first Elements resolve;
And wee were mutuall Elements to us,
And made of one another.
My body then doth hers involve,
And those things whereof I consist, hereby
In me abundant grow, and burdensous,
And nourish not, but smother.
My fire of Passion, sighes of Ayre,
Water of teares, and earthly sad despaire,
Which my materialls bee,
But neere worene out by loves securitie,
Shee, to my losse, doth by her death repaire,
And I might live long wretched so
But that my fire doth with my fuell grow.

23 Allen Tate, Reason in Madness (G. P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1941), 92.
Now as those Active Kings
Whose foraine conquest treasure brings,
Receive more, and spend more, and soonest breake;
This (which I am amaz'd that I can speake)
This death, hath with my store
My use increased.
And so my soule more earnestly releas'd,
Will outstrip hers; As bullets flownen before
A latter bullet may o'rtake, the pouder being more.

Each line supports the meaning of the poem as a whole. The source of its strength lies in its cumulative effect.

It is not possible to state dogmatically that Donne is or is not obscure, since obviously the question rests in every case with the individual reader. Probably his poetry is thus indicted much more frequently than that of other poets in whom the intellectual content is equally weighty, though not dominant, because if comprehension fail there is nothing to compensate for its lack—no descriptive embellishments, no moving appeal to the senses. Understanding and appreciation are very closely linked. It has been noted that what the reader calls clearness in a poem often means no more than the suppression of everything in the poem beyond the comprehension of the average person, of everything "likely to disturb normal ease." Donne may be almost as obscure to the ordinary reader today as he has been in the past, but critical theory at least looks upon obscurity, or if we prefer, complexity, as a necessary attribute of the superior intelligence.

A poem that is potentially superior to the average standard of comprehension and which disregarding it, fulfills all its potentialities, makes its real meaning clearer and

clearer as it retreats from the average i. e. as it becomes more and more obscure to the average reader.

When opinions such as the above are widely current it is not surprising that the obscurity of Donne's poems, far from incurring censure, has become something of an attraction.

We cannot leave the subject without reference to Empson's ingenious study. Therein the word "ambiguity" is substituted for "obscurity" without any appreciable change in meaning. The quality in a poem that is often attacked as obscurity may, he feels, be subject to a careful analysis that discloses a wide range of possible interpretations which interact to produce an effect of depth and penetration. To seek in poetry no more than mood or atmosphere or an undifferentiated mode of being, and to avoid all grammatical analysis is equivalent to admiring it "for the taste it leaves in the head." Ambiguity is to be respected, Empson says, in so far as it "sustains intricacy, delicacy, or compression of thought, or is an opportunism devoted to saying quickly what the reader already understands;" but it is not to be respected "if it is due to weakness or thinness of thought" or results in incoherence. Donne is the outstanding example of what he labels the fourth type: "when two or more meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves, butcombine to make clear a more complicated state of mind in the author." Several pages are devoted to the study of A Valediction: of Weeping. It may be advisable

27 Ibid., 137.
29 Ibid., 168.
to pause long enough to cite one instance of the kind of ambiguity which he regards as admissible and which, when recognized by the reader, invests the poem with added power. The final stanza of *A Valediction* is:

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O more then Moone,
Draw not up seas to drowne me in thy sphære,
Wepe me not dead, in thine armes, but forbear
To teach the sea, what it may doe too soone;
Let not the winde
Example finde,
To doe me more harme, then it purposeth;
Since thou and I sigh one anothers breath,
Who e'r sighes most, is cruellerst, and hast the others death.
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Empson suggests four possible meanings for the phrase "Wepe me not dead;" it might be one way of saying "do not make me cry myself to death; do not kill me with the sight of your tears; do not cry for me, as for a man already dead;" or keeping in mind the properties of the moon "do not exert your power over the sea so as to make it drown me by sympathetic magic." Similarly "may" in "what it may doe too soone," could mean either the simple possibility of drowning or a defiant lack of concern; "it may drown him for all he cares when he has lost her."

An awareness of these variations need not and should not destroy either unity of feeling or the dominant mood of the poem. This critic attributes Donne's ambiguity to the fact that his feelings were highly distraught and undifferentiated in his mind. In this respect he is in accord with innumerable other writers who consider irregularities of meaning or meter, and wrenching of sense or accent as a necessary consequence of intense

30 Ibid., 162.
and discordant emotions expressed in verse. As Sharp phrases it, not a little of Donne's obscurity is "directly traceable to the subtlety of a mind which constantly qualified, ramified, repeated with shifting emphasis, and at the same time denied and controverted statements just made." He draws attention also to the poet's genius for multiple association through which one word or one figure was made to do the work of several.

A second quality of metaphysical poetry that may profitably be examined in connection with that of obscurity is harshness or ruggedness. It is closely related to obscurity, since the latter can be thought of as opposed to the use of rhythm. "An interest in rhythm," says Empson, "makes the poet long-winded, and ambiguity is a phenomenon of compression."

A concensus of critical opinion establishes the fact that there is general agreement concerning certain aspects of Donne's ruggedness. It is assumed, first of all, that it was consciously and intentionally employed for rhetorical effect; thus "discordance acts as an irritant to the nerves."

Further, it does not signify an inability to compose within the strictures of a metrical pattern. That affirmation is well supported since we cannot deny that some of his verses are musical and harmonious although they may be few in number. There is no unevenness, for example, in the Song:

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32 Empson, op. cit., 41.

33 Robert Lathrop Sharp, From Donne to Dryden: The Revolt Against the Metaphysicals (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), 30.
Sweetest love, I do not goe,  
   For wearinesse of thee,  
Nor in hope the world can show  
   A fitter love for mee;  
   But since that I  
Must dye at last, 'tis best,  
To use my selfe in jest  
   Thus by fain'd deaths to dye:

* * * * *
Let not thy divining heart  
   Forethinke me any ill,  
Destiny may take thy part,  
   And may thy feares fulfill;  
   But thinke that wee  
Are but turn'd aside to sleepe;  
They who one another keepe  
   Alive, ne'r parted bee.

or in many of the Holy Sonnets:

O might those sighes and teares returne againe  
into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,  
That I might in this holy discontent  
Mourne with some fruit, as I have mourn'd in vaine;

Legouis, whose convictions are weighted by a careful and detailed study of the problem, feels that Donne's metrical variety "parades its freedom from tradition up to a certain point chiefly to enhance the value of its strict subjection afterwards to its own new-made laws. When it seems to have given itself most rope, it proves to have tied itself tightest...  
Donne paid no less attention to the mold than to the matter." This critic's work stresses Donne's interest in technique and his full control over the language medium, minimizing his role as an impassioned thinker.

Donne's skill and artistry are more readily apparent if we consider the poems as units, placing less emphasis upon the irregular accent and

34 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 17.
35 Poems of John Donne, 294.
36 Legouis, op. cit., 34.
more upon the total rhythmical effect. As Mario Praz says, "The unit is not the line or the stanza but the entire poem, the sense is rounded off at the end of the poem." Sharp, too, points out that the question extends beyond the simple consideration of meter. We must take into account abrupt, compressed phrases and internal pauses which "illustrate how far beyond mere accentual negligence the metaphysicals strayed as they went over the line into the region of cacaphony. Compressed phrases led to a jumbling of consonants from which only harshness resulted."

The conscious intent on the part of the poet seems self-evident in the many instances where a regular rhythm is suddenly broken producing an effect of surprise and shock. In the Expiration, for example, the smoothness of the first two lines:

So, so, break off this last lamenting kisse,
Which sucks two soules, and vapors Both away,

leaves the reader unprepared for the jarring prose-like line three:

Turne thou ghost that way, and let mee turne this.

A second point upon which there is unanimity of feeling and which explains why Donne's irregular verse is so well tolerated is related to the function of meaning in poetry. It is felt that if perfect symmetry cannot be secured without compromising the sense, then form must be sacrificed in the interest of sense; what can be stated succinctly need not be elaborated.


because a line is in need of a few more words to fulfill the metrical or stanzaic requirements. "The packed vigorous line," Sharp says, "which was their [metaphysicals] objective remained on the intellectual level above what they thought the lower level of clarity and harmony." Williamson voices almost the same idea: "Since verse places its accents on the sounds and not on the sense, and since intellect places its accent on the sense and not on the sounds; we need not be surprised that his Donne's poetry serves two masters with less than the usual chance of reconciliation."

And Empson is even more emphatic in pleading his case for meaning as a governing factor taking precedence over rhythm in composing poetry:

The foot, . . . the line, . . . the stanza, . . . and the whole canto or subject-heading, are all rhythmical units; the total rhythmical line which results from them must be regarded as an immense complexity entirely defined by the meaning; and even then it is the meaning which must imply how it is to be interpreted.

Thirdly, critics look upon Donne's discordance as they do upon his obscurity, as something explainable in terms of his temperament. The exigencies of the honest expression of passion, as it were, absolve him from the necessity of complying with formal rules that guide inferior artists. This clearly is the view to which Legouis takes exception because he believes that it denies recognition of technical artistic qualities that


41 Williamson, The Donne Tradition, op. cit., 42.

42 Empson, op. cit., 40.
reveal themselves to the careful analyst of Donne's verse. He would undoubt-
edly wish to qualify Doud's statement:

With its union of disparate suggestions dissonance is a most serviceable instru-
ment—in fact a prime necessity—for ex-
pressing Donne's multiple sensibility, his complex moods, and the discords of 
his temperament. In short, the disson-
ance of style reflects a dissonance in-
wardly experienced.

Sharp regards the question in the same manner, speaking of Donne's harshness as more than stylistic. It included "a habit of looking at experi-
ience, a way of seeing things;" and it tells us something about the mind that created it. We cannot "separate the way a poet thinks from what he 
thinks." And Matthiessen perceives an equally close connection between ruggedness of verse and mental and spiritual unrest. In discussing the impact made upon Eliot by the qualities of metaphysical poetry he alludes to "the jagged brokenness of Donne's thought," which has "struck a respon-
sive chord in our age." What the poet sought to devise was "a medium of 
expression that would correspond to the felt intricacy of his existence, 
that would suggest by sudden contrasts, by harsh dissonances as well as by 
harmonies, the actual sensation of life as he had himself experienced it."

Characteristically Grierson tempers his remarks with a grain of 
cautions. Sincerity and strength help to compensate, he says, for the lack

43 John Boal Doud, "Donne's Technique of Dissonance," Publications of the 
Modern Language Association (December, 1937), 52, 1061.

44 Sharp, From Donne to Dryden. op. cit., 55.

of "the harmonious simplicity of perfect beauty." In rime-couplets
swiftness of movement and fullness of thought "were not attained at once
without some harshness of transition and displacement of accent." Such
is often the case. A particularly apt example occurs in The Storme, prob-
ably composed while Donne sailed with Essex's fleet; here again we can
regard the disruption of the regular metrical pattern as intentional:

Then like two mighty Kings, which dwelling farre
Asunder, meet against a third to warre,
The South and West winds joyn'd, and, as they blew,
Waves like a roiling trench before them threw.
Sooner than you read this line, did the gale,
Like shot, not fear'd till felt, our sailes assaile;
And what at first was call'd a gust, the same
Hath now a storms, and a tempests name. 47

The sudden shift of accent in lines four and five above suggests the actual
swelling and churning of the sea; the device is unquestionably effective.

Dissonance in Donne's poetry, Doud observes, produces an artistic
effect analogous "to the clouded resonance of a Chinese gong." The elements
which enter into it occur successively in time but fuse to form a single
impression in the reader's mind and are apprehended simultaneously. These
elements of course are not concerned exclusively with metrics; they involve
the incongruity resulting from the use of diction seemingly out of keeping
with the character of the speaker or with the occasion, the blend of learned
figures with the homely and familiar, or the deliberate shattering of

46 Grierson, Cambridge History of English Literature, op. cit., 213.
47 Poems of John Donne, op. cit., 156.
48 Doud, op. cit., 1051.
conventional Petrarchanisms. Those to whom this theory is acceptable would doubtless agree with Grierson’s concise summation of the problem when he observes that Donne’s verse “may be rugged at times in form but never really unmusical.”

In logical progression the subject of harshness leads to the question of dramatic effect; for it is frequently in quest of the latter that Donne employs run-on-lines, internal pauses and a masterful control of inflection. In the Satyres particularly we are reminded both of the Elizabethan dramatists and the monologues of Browning. Although written in decasyllabic couplets Donne does not hesitate to use occasional lines of eleven or even twelve syllables when the sense demands such a departure.

The opening passage of Satyre III affords an example of Donne’s ability to express himself with vehemence and power:

Kinde pitty chokes my spleene; brave scorn forbids
Those teares to issue which swell my eye-lids;
I must not laugh, nor weep siennes, and be wise,
Can railing then cure these worne maladies?
Is not our Mistresse faire Religion,
As worthy of all our Soules devotion,
As vertue was to the first blinded age,
Are not heavens joyes as valiant to asswage Lusts, as earths honoure was to them? Alas,
As we do them in meane, shall they surpass Us in the end, and shall thy fathers spirit
Meete blinde Philosophers in heaven, whose merit
Of strict life may be imputed faith, and heare Thee, whom hee taught so easie wayes and neare To follow, damn’d? O if thou dar’st, feare this: 50
This feare great courage, and high valour is.

49 Grierson, Poetical Works (Vol. 2), xxx.
50 Grierson, Poems of John Donne, 136.
The low pitch of the first two couplets is succeeded in the following lines by a gradual crescendo betraying the increased volume of the speaker's voice and the deeper agitation of his feelings. The movement is greatly accelerated in lines 10 to 15, where his pent-up emotions pour forth without a major pause until suddenly broken off with the explosive "damn'd."

Here, as in most of the Songs and Sonnets, we are conscious of the presence of a second person whom the poet addresses, usually in an argumentative manner; and we can hardly avoid placing ourselves in the hearer's position. This is probably what one critic has in mind when he speaks of the exacting quality, "the urgency and pressure of the poet upon the reader in every line," which, he feels, is the root of Donne's weakness and his strength because when it succeeds it produces a rare enjoyment, and when it fails, "we feel in the grip of the worst kind of bore, the hot-eyed inescapable kind."

The dramatic intensity of Donne's lyrics results in part from a quality that might be called psychological realism. Love as herein depicted is not always a noble and ideal passion; it is often debased and mingled with scorn and helpless rage. In Williamson's words, "Donne's mixture of logic and paradox, of the ugly and the beautiful, compels our belief in the veracity with which he presented the coil and recoil of his emotions as he brought himself to look on horror, to face the absurd and revolting aspects of life, to know the deepest anguish and the highest ecstasy."

51 Lewis, op. cit., 69.

In the opinion of one reviewer Donne, apart from Chaucer, was the first English writer to grasp the full importance of the realistic and intellectual elements in poetry, and to use verse as "a brilliant mirror of actual life." But since Donne and Chaucer are at opposite poles, the comparison seems ill-advised; though true no doubt to his poetic emotions, Donne's portrayal of life is a sad and sordid thing. In this connection Turnell's observations are of interest. Most effectively this critic contrasts the opening of The Waste Land (which he feels coincides at some points with the spirit of Donne) with the opening of Chaucer's Prologue. One is a poetry of acceptance possessing harmony and stability and representing the medieval outlook; the other is a poetry of refusal, or uncertainty and unrest representing the state of mind of the modern world. Donne and Chaucer may both be realistic but not precisely in the same sense. The realism of one is distorted and perverted; the other reveals balance and proportion. It is not surprising however that Donne should be enthusiastically acclaimed in an age which professes that "true poetry has no great interest in improving or idealizing the world, which does well enough," and in an age which objects to the heroic and sublime.

Donne is less interested in the world about him than in the world of his own mind; his experience begins and ends within his individual consciousness. Eliot remarks that ethics have been eclipsed by psychology;

55 Ransom, The World's Body, op. cit., x.
we think of states of mind as complexities constantly changing under the pressure of desire and fear. Donne attracts us because he expresses emotional states truthfully without falsification or suppression. In his introspection and his absorption in sensation the poet takes on a dramatic character; he presents a performance in which he himself plays all the parts. His searching self-analysis pervades everything he wrote; he could not forget his own ego. Crofts phrases it neatly: "Throughout his life he was a man self- haunted, unable to find any window that would not give him back the image of himself."

The psychological method has obvious disadvantages. The subject matter of the *Songs and Sonnets* has little significance in itself because Donne is not interested in an external body of truth; therefore it cannot be important to the reader either except in so far as it casts light upon the operations of the human mind. In Turnell's words:

He has burrowed so far into himself that he has got beyond all the traditional categories. Instead of trying to relate his particular experience to something outside it, he decomposes it into its component parts. It is whittled down to a balancing of the sensations of love and hate, or attraction and repulsion against one another. . . Thus Donne appears as the father of modern psychological poetry, of the unrelated experience which becomes indistinguishable from a cult of sensation.

Donne was not interested in ideas for the truth that was in them; they were merely things to play with—object that his mind might juggle

57 *Loc. cit.*
58 Crofts, *op. cit.*, 133.
this way and that; and his scholastic logic often covered up flagrant sophistries. When he had no active interest in the subject of his poetry, Brooks says, "he was free to follow his deepest desire, to use that subject like a scalpel to cut deeper into his own mind." But Donne's emotion, he feels, was generated by thought. This critic's idea, and that of other critics who see eye to eye with him, of what metaphysical poetry is and of the manner in which it is produced appears in the book which is virtually a manifesto of a contemporary school of criticism:

When Donne, then, writes a lyric like Aire and Angels, in which he applies scholastic reasoning concerning the nature of angels to his relations with his mistress, the motive power behind the poetry is a passion for that reasoning concerning the angels, quite as much as it is his passion for the lady or his conclusion that he loves her more than she loves him. And the warmth of passion which Donne feels for his metaphysical concept is so closely akin to the warmth of his sexual passions that in his verse the two coalesce with no artificiality or strain-ing for effect.

We have travelled far since Symons studied Donne only to discover in his verse "the heresy of the realist." There is no place in poetry, he says, for the real thing; the reason is that art should not concern itself with actuality. The human or personal reality must be interfused with the imaginative or divine reality or the poem will fail.

60 Brooks, op. cit., 9.
61 Ibid., 7.
Poetry, it is true, has been removed from the heavenly and exalted sphere and is no longer expected to be a shining reflection of what is noblest and best in man's nature. But if the realism of today and that of Donne's poetry also, can be secured only at the sacrifice of beauty, there is nevertheless something to be gained on the side of diction. In Donne's poetry the fullest resources of the English language are developed. His idiom is natural and conversational and not distinguishable from every-day speech; it is free from the flowery extravagances and musical cadences of Spenser and Milton. The elaborate preliminaries, the slow unfolding of a theme, the ponderous allegorical structure replete with mythological allusions are all absent. "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I did, till we lov'd?" one poem begins, and another-- "Busie old foole, unruly Sunne, Why dost thou thus...?" Nor are his more serious verses less direct and forthright in diction. Goodfriday: Riding Westward, for example, is highly intricate in thought but unadorned in expression. As Leavis points out, "utterance, movement and intonation are those of the talking voice" the subtleties of which are inexhaustible under Donne's manipulation. He is to be contrasted to Milton who exploited language as a musical medium outside of himself and used a poetic idiom which was remote from his own speech and had little substance or "muscular quality." Elsewhere he speaks of the "spirit in which the sinew and living nerve of English are used."

63 F. R. Leavis, Revaluation (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936), 11.
64 F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 82.
Eliot, too, recognizes Donne as a great reformer of the English language and of English verse who enlarged the possibilities of the lyric as no other poet had done. He summarizes his accomplishment:

Donne introduced the natural or conversational style, which the Elizabethans at their best had excelled in producing in a highly sophisticated metric of blank verse, into the lyric; he first made it possible to think in lyric verse, and in a variety of rhythms and stanza schemes... and at the same time retained a quality of song and the suggestion of the instrumental accompaniment of the earlier lyric. No poet has excelled him in this particular combination of qualities.

We may conclude that as leading modern critics evaluate Donne's style, the qualities which were once regarded as eccentric and peculiar—roughness of meter, obscurity of meaning, bareness or poverty of diction—are now accepted as manifestations of the poet's fidelity to emotion and to experience; and the attitudes which met with repulsion in the past as evidence of an arrogant egoism—extreme introspection, preoccupation with the sordid and ugly—today are wholly free from reprehension. That is not to say that no other views exist; complete unanimity is never possible; but the picture assumes these proportions in broad outline.

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CHAPTER IV.

METAPHOR AS A STRUCTURE:

THE METAPHYSICAL CONCEIT

It would not be rash to say that the completeness of our acceptance of Donne can be more clearly demonstrated in contemporary studies concerned with his use of poetical figures, than in any other phase of scholarship. For that reason the metaphysical conceit deserves attention here. Imagery is not, of course, the prime consideration in the criticism of metaphysical poetry, although an exaggerated amount of emphasis has at times been centered upon that subject, probably because upon cursory examination incongruous comparisons are the most obvious distinguishing mark of this type of verse. One writer remarks with some truth that Donne "has long stood in literature as a mere juggler with the ludicrous, a clown dancing with infinite cleverness upon the tightrope of conceits."

Critics today have been moved by a deeper and broader interest to extend their study of metaphysical poetry beyond the narrow limits of the conceit, and in so doing have become aware of more fundamental factors in Donne's artistry of which the conceits are merely indicative. Most important are the dialectical inclination of the poet's mind and the fact that when successful, the poem is virtually contained within the figure. The latter

belief has been formulated in recent fructifying theories dealing with
Donne's employment of metaphor, but it was not thought to be self-evident
even as late as 1920 when Alden, though entirely sympathetic and striving to
further the cause of metaphysical poetry, nevertheless felt that the conceit
involved "the interruption or elaboration of the normal poetic process by a
special intellectual process."

Later writers see the intellectual process and the poetic process as
one and the same, and the role of the metaphor not as ancillary and decorat-
tive, but as structural and organic. There is only one sense, Brooks affirms,
in which objects can ever be legitimately poetic--they must function integ-
3
rally in the poem. Briefly stated, that is the argument which is consistently
set forth as the justification of the extraordinary figures which the
metaphysical poets made the vehicle of their emotions. This is what Daiches
means when he says: "For Eliot, the image is not important merely as the con-
crete expression of something seen; its quality is also determined by the
requirements of the poem as a whole and it combines with the other images in
the poem to produce a complex and dynamic unity." And Praz describes Donne's
technique as one which "stands in the same relation to the average technique
of Renaissance poetry as that of baroque to Renaissance painting. His sole

4 David Daiches, Poetry and the Modern World (University of Chicago Press, 1940, 100.
preoccupation is with the whole effect."

In direct contrast is the work of many of the poets of the early Renaissance in England, characterized by elaborate descriptive detail and profuse imagery. "They skimmed over Italian poetry," Miss Lea reminds us, "and borrowed the phrases and ideas which attracted, without more reference to the context." Although they rose to peaks of superb achievement, their "besetting sin... was the over-emphasis of the simile, the tendency to digress upon the comparison." The truth of her statement is undeniable if we look back to such a figure, for example, as the highly imitative and representative Michael Drayton, and consider his voluminous productions, his experiments in pastoral extravagances, ponderous historical narrative, epics, classical love poems, chronicle plays, and light lyrics.

Modern critics consider over-elaboration and digression a flaw in the poetry of any period, Romantic and Victorian as well as Elizabethan, and for the same reason—it is not compatible with unity of effect. Every line and every image must support the structural framework. To put it another way the poet must always know where he is going and not wander off along a side-truck; his eyes must be constantly focused upon an objective. Or we might say that the technique of decorative embellished poetry was centrifugal and

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7 Ibid., 398.
that of metaphysical poetry was centripetal.

If we accept Brooks' premise, there is no valid reason for objecting to the use of compasses or geometrical figures or the motion of the spheres as poetic symbols, provided that they do support the meaning, and there is every reason for deprecating as banal and effete the obviously "poetic" images to which we are accustomed if they do not contribute to the meaning but serve merely as variations upon a theme. The singular aptness of many of the metaphysical figures is striking. The following lines from King's Exequy, for example, afford an excellent illustration of an image which functions integrally within the poem:

But heark! My Pulse like a soft Drum
Beats my approach, tells Thee I come;
And slow howere my marches be, 8
I shall at last sit down by Thee.

The figure and the thought it conveys are so closely linked that substitution of some other symbol would result in the complete destruction of the idea.

But the kind of figure which has provoked the most vehement adverse criticism, and the type which is repeated over and over in Donne seems to have less emotion behind it and is weighted with an almost fatal abstruse reasoning. One of the elegies which we might reasonably expect to express a degree of sentiment even in its conventionality, begins:

Looke to mee faith, and looke to my faith, God;
For both my centers feele this period.
Of waight one center, one of greatnesse is;
And Reason is that center, Faith is this;
For into'our reason flow, and there do end
All, that this naturall world doth comprehend;

Quotidian things, and equidistant hence,
Shut in, for man, in one circumference.
But for th'enormous greatnesses, which are
So disproportion'd, and so angulare,
As is Gods essence, place and providence,
Where, how, when, what soules do, departed hence,
These things (eccentrique else) on faith do strike;
Yet neither all, nor upon all, alike.
For reason, put to her best extension,
Almost meetes faith, and makes both centers one.

Here the symbolism does actually function organically in the poem;
the idea is contained in the image and to that extent is justified according
to the theories of Brooks and many of his followers. Yet we cannot be cer-
tain that the satisfaction that we gain by solving the puzzle is the sort of
satisfaction that poetry should provide. Brooks believes that it is. He
draws attention to a considerably simpler example in Marvell:

As Lines so Loves oblique may well
Themselves in every angle greet:
But ours so truly Parallel
Though infinite can never meet.

His defense is sufficiently forceful to be cited in full:

It is possible to argue with the Romantics, that
in this case, even if we allow that the poet has
succeeded in finding a figure which will state
his rather complex idea with a certain accuracy,
yet he has lost his grasp on the connotations in
question; . . . they support the tone of the poem
hardly at all being dry, logical, and precise,
whereas the poem ostensibly sets out to give an
intensely passionate experience. This argument
would then go on to question quite logically,
whether the poet had not won a Pyrrhic victory
if accuracy of complex statement had been gained
only at the sacrifice of every quality demanded
of simile.

9 H. J. C. Grierson, editor; Poems of John Donne (London: Oxford University
Press, 1933), 243.
Such criticism is short-sighted, however. It neglects to consider the figure in relation to the total context and fails to consider that a figure may be used for contrast as well as comparison. ... The geometrical figure gives a sense of logical inevitability and finality to a relationship which is usually considered irrational—a sense of even mathematical order to a relationship usually considered chaotic. The diverse associations of lovers and mathematics enforce the paradox. ... The obvious clash between the association of lovers and mathematics is calculated and justified.

It is interesting to note that the same logical inevitability that Brooks perceives in many of the metaphysical images has been pressed into service by present-day critics in their analysis of the conceit. The dissimilarity and heterogeneity existing between the terms of the figure is conceded because the fact could not possibly be controverted. That much at least is held in common with the eighteenth century. But whereas Johnson saw in the practices of the metaphysicals an unpardonable violence in the yoking of disparate ideas, modern theory interprets the same fact in a wholly different manner. When critic after critic graphically presents to the imagination the picture of the conceit as a conical figure wherein the lines of comparison widely divergent in origin meet at a point, the terms of the comparison appear to fuse or unite not through the perversity of the poet but as a matter of necessity.

Wells uses the phrase "Radical imagery" to describe that in which "The minor term in itself is of little imaginative value, but the metaphorical relation is powerful." The mind of an introspective poet, he notes,

in his expression of complex emotional states is likely to create highly 
analytical figures which are as a rule radical. The greater the 
imaginative 
distance between the terms, the greater must be the intellectual effort of 
the reader. Doud proposes to call an image conical when there is only one 
point of likeness between the two terms; a typical example, he says, occurs 
in Donne's *Twicknam Garden*:

Blasted with sighs, and surrounded with teares,  
Hither I come to seeke the spring,  
And at mine eyes, and at mine eares,  
Receive such balmes, as else cure everything;  
But O, selfe trytore, I do bring  
The spider love, which transubstantiates all,  
And can convert Manna to gall,  
And that this place may thoroughly be thought  
True Paradise, I have the serpent brought.

Here the comparison of love to a spider is incongruous, but there is one 
point of likeness between the two and only one—the power to "transubstan-
tiate", a physical process with the spider and a psychological process with 
love. In every other way they are unlike, in fact "the associatative pat-
terns which they call up are in violent and positive opposition—a shudder 
and a glow." The effect of which Doud speaks here bears a close resemblance 
to the quality Williamson labels the "Metaphysical shudder." Brief shock-
ing phrases communicate a feeling of terror—" Sun dyall in a grave," "A 
bracelet of bright hair about the bone," "Feathers and dust, today and yes-
terday." The images possess a bifocal quality, according to Williamson's

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12 John Boal Doud, "Donne’s Technique of Dissonance," *Publications of the 
Modern Language Association* (December, 1937), 1054.

Press, 1930), 90 et. seq.
analysis, which may be represented as a double cone contracted at a point, one signifying the real world and the other the metaphysical world. "Thus the images and the meanings give the sense of looking two ways... The real world of two people is thus contracted, only to open suddenly upon the world beyond death;... The world of metaphysical concept and the world of sensuous fact meet and exchange significance; the metaphysical world is made flesh."

Sharp, too, recognizes the forcefulness of Donne's abrupt surprising comparisons when he observes that the metaphysical poets forced imagery to do more work than it had previously, since they worked to "raise the voltage of its suggestive power." And their imagery reached the peak of its suggestive power when, as Doud points out, they succeeded in contrasting "the abstract and the concrete, the physical and the spiritual planes of the imagination." If we were to seek the one poem to which this observation would most closely apply, undoubtedly it would be The Extasie. Heated controversy has not determined whether Donne's concern with the subject of this work arose from a scientific and philosophical interest in the problem of body and soul, flesh and spirit; or whether his dialectical development of the idea was merely the background for intense personal emotion. The question is of little importance anyway as far as the merit of the poem is concerned;

16 Doud, op. cit., 1054.
it will in any event retain its outstanding position.

In evaluating the merit of metaphysical imagery Sharp recommends that we keep in mind the difficulty which confronted poets writing after the flood-tide hour of the Elizabethans. The language of poetry had been exhausted; its symbols and associations were outworn and lifeless and no longer possessed the power to kindle the imagination. Thus the Elizabethan imagery, "already completely flowered, was as far beyond prose as poetry usually goes; . . . with the imagination of Marlowe and Shakespeare behind him Donne the figures were keyed taut and resonant . . . By 1603 the boldest metaphors were accepted as a matter of course." The metaphysicals therefore were forced to sensitize their perceptions and to become increasingly articulate and inventive.

Perhaps the principal reason why metaphysical poetry is so often considered difficult and intractable is that the incongruities of its imagery are disturbing and unexpected, at times even preposterous. Sharp goes so far as to state that "the question of what is 'natural' in figurative language is practically all that is at the root of the distaste of most people for metaphysical poetry." In this connection he calls attention to the fact that we automatically accept figurative language in our everyday speech. Eliot points out also that "a degree of heterogeniety of material compelled into unity by the operation of the poet's mind is omnipresent in poetry."

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17 Sharp, op. cit., 468.
18 Ibid., 469.
Brooks develops the question in some detail concluding that the exploitation of incongruities is justified because when successful it renders the poem invulnerable to irony. There is an essential incongruity in any comparison however trite and although we may stress likenesses, the disparities will become apparent upon rereading, thus weakening the poetic effect. The metaphysical conceit on the other hand is fresh and original and "has resisted with rare success the rust of time and imitation."

Lewis does not agree that this is the case. Once the poem is understood, he says, nothing more can come out of it. The ideas advanced have accomplished all that they are capable of accomplishing as soon as the reader apprehends them. On the other hand, he believes that "some seemingly banal comparison of a woman to a flower or God's anger to flame can touch us at innumerable levels and renew its virginity at every reading. Of all literary virtues 'originality'... has for this reason the shortest life."

Lewis of course is voicing here the attitude which although general enough, has lost its foothold under the barrage of Eliot and Read and Leavis and Tate. What he expects to find in poetry is sentiment, picturesqueness and facility, and he is in effect defending the often ridiculed "associationist" verse, pleasant but indecisive. Other critics emphatically deny that "When


21 Milton Rugoff, Donne's Imagery (New York: Corporate Press Inc., 1939), 244.

we have once mastered a poem by Donne there is nothing more to do with it."

On the contrary they are more or less unified in the belief that metaphysical poetry is "intellectually perhaps the most seasoned that we know in our literature." In Brooks' words:

The poet who is too scientific is apt to depend too much on the likenesses between the objects which he compares. He lets no recognition of . . . disparities appear in the poem. Consequently, the fault of most poetic metaphor is that it 'wears out.' . . . The metaphysical conceit represents a complete reversal of this. The disparities are . . . gathered up within the context of the poem. Since the destructive elements are contained within the comparison, the conceit if unsuccessful, rather than wearing out, explodes from within. If it does not explode with the first reading it is extremely durable.

When it is unsuccessful the failure of the metaphysical conceit is completely ruinous and the poem approaches caricature or burlesque. The outstanding example in Donne is The Flea wherein the union of a man and woman is symbolized by the figure of an insect which having bitten them both has mingled their blood. The importance of Ransom's comment lies in its timeliness, for it serves to temper admiration with discretion: "The formula of the metaphysical conceit is dangerously close to that of satire; where the general behavior of the victim is so particularized, or identified with some well-known analogous behavior so exclusively, as to become ridiculous. The poetry

23 Ibid., 82.
25 Cleanth Brooks, Jr., op. cit., 572.
runs a great risk."

The conceit is not a thing that can be produced in a reflective mood; it implies "the gusto and excitement of creation; it is a novelty, an experiment." The word "experiment" is particularly apt because it suggests the unpredictability of the outcome and the possibility of failure. There are countless instances in Donne of bathetical contrasts; all of his figures are not happy ones. The Flea is merely the most notorious member of a very large family. The following lines selected at random provide another example:

Though far removed Northerne fleets scarce finde
The Sunnes comfort; others thinke him too kinde.
There is an equal distance from her eye. 28
Men perish too far off, and burn too nigh.

It would be unjust to judge the metaphysical poets by their shortcomings, especially when the same faults may be found in the work of every period; yet an awareness of them is essential to a fair evaluation.

Many people still cannot accept the metaphysical conceit because they agree that "ideas which essentially belong asunder cannot even at the hands of genius, be permanently joined together." Critics today would answer that we have no right to demand that the relationships which the poet forms as the expression of his emotions conform to scientific truth; it follows that no ideas "essentially belong asunder," and objective truth has no necessary

27 Lea, op. cit., 406.
28 Grierson, Donne's Poetical Works, 198.
place in poetic composition.

"An image," Read quotes Reverdy, "is not striking because it is brutal or fantastic—but because the association of ideas is remote and exact. . . .

No image is produced by comparing (always inadequately) two disproportionate realities. A striking image, on the contrary, one new to the mind, is produced by bringing into relation without comparison two distant realities whose relations the mind alone has seized." Such precisely is Donne's compass figure. Rugoff labels the effect produced by thus substituting objects free of emotional overtones for the ordinary poetic images, "the transmutation of feeling into objective symbols." In Donne this practice ultimately meant the elimination of sensuous imagery from his poetry; his emotion was not a reaction to sensible objects in his environment and he did not conceive of beauty as existing inherently in things outside of himself. His passion was the product of thought; his interest lay not in things but in ideas, and in ideas only in so far as they might serve his ends as a poet; their truth meant little. Many of his poems communicate a moving intensity of feeling with hardly a single sensuous image from first to last. For this reason it has often been remarked that Donne was a poet who "felt his thought;" he was interested in an idea Eliot says, "almost as if it were something he could touch and stroke."

30 Herbert Read, "Obscurity in Poetry," Collected Essays (London: Faber and
31 Rugoff, op. cit., 240.
Normally we think of the poet as seeking the material for his art in the world around him; we think of Wordsworth's sonnets of Keats' Ode to a Grecian Urn, and we believe that in some manner poetry is related to ideals of truth or beauty or goodness. Twentieth-century criticism has upset these assumptions. The theory expounded today is that all objects and all material are indifferent in themselves as far as poetry is concerned; it lies with the poet to transform them into art. There is a certain relevance in Crofts' comparison of Donne with Dryden and his followers to whom a lyric was "an object almost as impersonal as a china bowl, and the skill of its craftsman was shown not in subjecting the material to the needs of his individual expression but rather in subjecting his individual desires and purposes to an idea conceived of as existing already in the material." In this respect the present-day expression of individuality has much in common with Donne.

But why was it that Donne turned inward to personal sensation as the center of consciousness? A concensus of opinion supports the belief that he lacked a consistent unified philosophy to which experience might be related, hence his poetry reveals an absence of organization and integration, and an exaggerated concern with states of mind and feeling. Although we should not take him as a contemporary, it is pertinent to the study of his recent vogue to notice that in our own day "The heroic and sublime, banished as reality, we take back as myth; Mr. Bloom in Ulysses." According to Donne's admirers the superiority of the psychological method of which the conceit is a tool


34 T. S. Eliot, "John Donne," The Nation and the Athenaeum (June 9, 1923), 332.
lies in its faithfulness to the complexity of experience. Against the background of modern psychology the characters of Donne's poems with their conflicting emotions and varying shades of feeling, and their analytical probing of motives appear to belong to the present. Donne as a personality has been projected into our age on the strength of what has been thought to be a common mental outlook reflecting a similar sense of disillusion and disintegration. But there is a large measure of subjectivism in the criticism of the metaphysical poets. The more cautious the writer the more likely he is to recognize it. Too few realize that although Donne was not a constructive philosopher he was thoroughly grounded in medieval thought, and despite his confusion and uncertainty his mind was not a thing of shreds and tatters. Eliot is anxious to clarify any misunderstanding that might hinge upon the assertion that the unity of medieval thought was not present in Donne; he was aware of its meaning even though he could not reconcile it with conflicting views and that "is not to say that he knew doubt as the modern world has known it... it was still possible for Donne to be, and I am sure that he was genuinely devout... his kind of religious belief was sincere but represents a period of transition."

As for the value of Donne's poetry as poetry without reference to his life or experience, it is probably too soon to make any predictions. Tate suggests that even now the "unrelatedness of things" has become something of an emotional convention, and he wonders "whether the local excitement of

sensation will indefinitely obscure the formal qualities of the Spenserian-Miltonic kind of verse." But it is fairly certain that Donne will always hold a more prominent position than he has in the past; he will never again be considered merely eccentric.

36 Allen Tate, "A Note on John Donne," Reactionary Essays (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 68.
CONCLUSION

Donne's outstanding position in present-day criticism compels our attention not alone because the history of his reputation is unique in literary annals but more significantly because the revaluation of his work has involved the critical examination of well-established poetic theory; it has called into question traditional assumptions concerning both the materials and the methods of poetic composition. In this phase of Donne scholarship the essays of T. S. Eliot are of greatest importance because together with his poetry they created the initial impetus that led to the exhaustive study of the metaphysical poets. Had it not been for their influence there might have been no occasion to observe: "It is as much as one's life is worth nowadays among young people to say an approving word for Shelley or a dubious one about Donne."

The efforts of Donne's supporters have been directed toward the overthrow of nineteenth-century critical standards and the rejection of preconceived ideas as to what may be considered poetic in subject matter or diction. These writers regard the content of a poem and the vocabulary in which it is set forth as indifferent in themselves and not relevant either for good or ill to the success of the verse. Nor are sublimity and idealism essential; they are in fact likely to be antithetical to sincere poetic

1 Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 17.
expression which demands that the writer remain faithful to the complexity of experience, incorporating in his verse various contradictory and divergent emotions rather than selecting those which seem best suited to exalted flights of the imagination. In metrics, in subject matter, and in vocabulary the poet need not conform to an established pattern, but is guided solely by his own artistic impulses without reference to the stereotyped mold that his audience, through custom and habit, has come to expect.

The critical standards of the last century are of course not compatible with such a poetic theory, and wherever it has been accepted as valid those standards have been undermined. The conception of the poet as a public figure and as a prophet has disappeared and the gulf between the artist and those for whom he writes was never wider than today. Certainly the prestige of the Romantic and Victorian eras has been appreciably weakened and that of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries bolstered in inverse proportion.

It is probably too early to determine whether or not Donne will continue to enjoy the esteem so recently acquired. There is undoubtedly a large measure of subjectivism in the critical commentaries of his enthusiastic admirers, and the crusading spirit and active partisanship of many of these writers has led others to believe that they lack perspective. The unqualified acceptance of the metaphysicals is contingent upon the abandonment of poets long thought to be preeminent, and it is unlikely that Milton and Spenser will be left permanently in the shadows. There is a notable exception in Sir Herbert Grierson whose careful scholarship in editing
Donne's poems has made the work of the poet more readily accessible both to students and to the average reader. His appreciation of the metaphysical poets is indeed keen, but his remarks are tempered with caution, and because he has not lost sight of the relative element in literary criticism his opinions promise to be extremely durable.

Donne's importance for our day would be considerable were it confined to the field of criticism, but it carries added weight when we recognize the influence of seventeenth-century metaphysical poets upon the work of modern poets. Great stress has been placed upon the similarity between the intellectual positions of the two ages, both reflecting disintegration and change and a questioning of human values. The Renaissance repudiation of the medieval outlook resulting in part from the need for assimilating a new body of learning has been indicated as a counterpart of the skeptical spirit of the first decades of the twentieth century, fostered by scientific materialism and the stress of war, and reacting against the idealism and relative stability of the preceding age. Poetry produced in such an environment possesses qualities of compression, precision, and an urgency in the interplay of moods that is absent in an age which recognizes a universally acknowledged body of truth making possible a poetry of affirmation. But although Donne's style and his use of language, imagery, and metaphor may strike a sympathetic chord in modern poets, we cannot accurately attribute that fact to a common mental outlook of doubt and pessimism. A careful study of the philosophical backgrounds of the two periods would prove such parallelisms without foundation and Donne's attitudes and beliefs less revolutionary and independent
than is popularly assumed. It is wise, therefore, while admitting certain similarities between Donne's age and ours, not to place too much stress upon that affinity, but rather to study his poetry with detachment. Unfortunately the less astute among Donne's critics have eschewed the objective approach, and in projecting the poet into our age have given support to a literary fad or fashion. That fashion has gained sustenance also from a widespread interest in psychoanalysis that carries over into Donne's highly introspective and analytical verse.

Yet the revival of interest in the metaphysical poets cannot be dismissed lightly as no more than the expression of a whimsical and capricious taste; a significant body of serious, thoughtful criticism precludes such a possibility. No wholly satisfactory explanation has been advanced, nor can we predict what Donne's position will be in the future. There are indications that having reached the peak of his popularity he faces a gradual decline in favor. If such be the case, the reputations of many modern poets will suffer relatively, and indeed there is a more far-reaching question involved relating to the role of the poet and the function of poetry in the contemporary scene. It would appear that today little interest is shown in the artist or his work except on the part of a dwindling minority. That problem, however, is not properly within the province of this paper.
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