

JOHN DONNE — AN UN-METAPHYSICAL PERSPECTIVE

D. M. De Silva

To H. J. C. Grierson and T. S. Eliot the general reader of English poetry today owes a tremendous debt: they were the first authoritatively to retrieve for him the poetry of Donne and the Metaphysicals from the strictures of Dr. Johnson. But between Dr. Johnson on the one hand and the two modern critics on the other exists a certain similarity of approach: they equally evince a preoccupation with the *style* of Metaphysical poetry; with such of its characteristics as the addiction to erudite and ingenious conceit, or the proneness to syllogistic argumentation. With Dr. Johnson these characteristics, as much as the baroque extravagance of their later abuse, encounter a hostile prejudice and invoke a weighty disapproval of the poets exhibiting them; with Grierson and Eliot these same characteristics are interpreted as evidence of a peculiar quality of sensibility by which—and this particularly for the latter critic—its possessors are separated from the rest of English poetry, become as it were unique, and in the last analysis incontestably superior.

In his anthology *Metaphysical Poetry - Donne to Butler* (1921) Professor Grierson had noted among other qualities of the Metaphysicals 'their learned imagery; the argumentative subtle evolution of their lyrics; (and) above all the peculiar blend of passion and thought, feeling and ratiocination which (was) their greatest achievement.' All this Eliot repeated in his rather obviously enthusiastic essays of 1921 - *Andrew Marvell* and *The Metaphysical Poets*; but advanced Grierson's claim of a peculiar great achievement by adding to it his celebrated theory of dissociation and a tendency to oblique disparagement of post-metaphysical poetry. Particularly invidious allusion was made to those poets of the Romantic tradition who, it seemed to Eliot, could neither think nor feel in quite the metaphysical way. For instance:

'The feeling, the sensibility, expressed in the Country Churchyard (to say nothing of Tennyson and Browning) is cruder than that in the Coy Mistress'¹

(D. M. De Silva is a lecturer in the Department of English, University of Ceylon, Peradeniya Campus)

¹ T. S. Eliot - *The Metaphysical Poets*. See *Collected Essays 1917-1932*. Faber 1932. P.274.

Or

'Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility'¹ Eliot's own precisely formulated definition of the poetry of the undissociated or 'metaphysical' sensibility was offered in his Clark Lectures: 'I take as metaphysical poetry that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling, or that in which what is ordinarily only felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling'²

It must be stated that much of all that is extravagant in this was retracted in this reasoned and moderate essay *Donne in Our Time* (1931). In such a passage as the following, for instance, there is evident an implicit withdrawal of all claim for Donne of an undissociated sensibility or any singular syzygy of thought and feeling:

'In Donne there is a manifest fissure between thought and sensibility, a chasm which in his poetry he bridged in his own way, which was not the way of mediaeval poetry. His learning is just information suffused with emotion, or combined with emotion not essentially relevant to it.'

It is to be regretted that the recantation in general failed of wide or deep effect. The charm of Eliot's youthful indiscretions, it seems, was more influential, as it was more attractive, than the sober judgement of his maturity.

Hence followed a number of critics deeply convinced of the uniqueness of Metaphysical poetry particularly with regard to its palmary characteristic of "sensuous thought". As it was against the exclusive culture of (coarse) feeling which the Romantic tradition was held to represent, that this quality came to be asserted, it was perhaps as inevitable as it was unfortunate that the emphasis tended more towards the intellectual than the sensuous. This was particularly the case in the evaluation of Donne. Mary Paton Ramsay who tended rather less happily to follow Eliot's practice of invidious allusion to Tennyson saw Donne as a metaphysical

¹ Ibid p. 273.

² Quoted in Mario Praz: *Donne's Relation to the Poetry of his Time*. See Spencer: *A Garland for John Donne* 1931.

thinker striving towards synthesis, while James Smith in a brilliant *Scrutiny* essay compared him, not very brilliantly, to St. Thomas Aquinas.

And yet the modifications must be insisted on. Donne no more possessed 'a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience'¹ than did Tennyson or Browning. For his sensibility is after all a limited one - as definitely limited as that of the Augustans or the Romantics or the Victorians or the poets of our own time. It was limited by his insensitivity to beauty of most kinds; it was even more limited by his insensitivity to ugliness of all kinds. To put it quite crudely, he could not write as did another 'metaphysical' - Marvell - of the mind.

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade;

he could not write, as did a very minor Victorian poet, Frederick Tennyson, of the skylark:

Is it a bird or star
That shines and sings?

Landscape and all its Wordsworthian delights had no place in the mechanism of Donne's sensibility. His poetic world is occupied almost entirely by himself and his mistresses, and his God; its physical boundaries are, too often those of the bedroom. The quotidian world and its various, vital activities are shut out:

She's all States, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is.²

His insensitivity to ugliness stood him sometimes in good stead. He could successfully absorb into his poetry quite unconscious of their repulsiveness, details of experience which might have revolted another poet even at the outset. In "The Flea" for instance, the murder of the flea under the fingernail of an unsqueamish mistress is so absorbed into the dramatic structure of the poem, that squeamish is just what we forget to feel. But the success of

¹ See Eliot: *Collected Essays* p. 273.

² *The Sunne Rising*. All quotations from Donne's poetry are from the Oxford Edition of Grierson, 1933.

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?

precludes the possibility of a far more important kind of success which includes as part of its effect the disgust natural to a matter unpleasant and makes poetry of it, as in these lines of an African poem

The poor man has no manners; he comes along
With the blood of lice under his nails.

Further, even the limited kind of success Donne is capable of achieving in his vein is infrequent. Too often the details of ugliness piled up without the least evidence of common distaste for them only bring the poet under the suspicion of perversity. This is very apparently the case in the notorious instance of Elegie VIII but the instance is only one among others. In Holy Sonnet XVIII we encounter the licentious conceit which makes of Christian faith a more than usually repulsive species of adultery with the Church in the role of profligate wife and Christ as decadent wittol. The conceit adds neither intensity nor complexity to the emotion the poem develops, but, on the contrary stands outside it and insults it. And though this may or may not be interpreted as evidence of a radical depravity in the "sacred" poet, it certainly points to a very grave defect in poetic sensibility: to the frequent, lamentable lack in Donne of that fine and wise discrimination which need not be identified with fastidiousness.

As regards Donne's 'direct sensuous apprehension of thought' and 'recreation of thought into feeling'¹ which separate him from subsequent English poetry, a rejection of them need not merely appeal for justification to Eliot's recantation. Eliot's definition of metaphysical poetry begs the question whether, indeed, in so far as concerns the *stuff* of human experience there might be things 'ordinarily apprehensible only by thought' or 'ordinarily only felt.' A theorem in mathematics might be apprehended only by thought; but this belongs with the laws and propositions of the exact sciences in a special realm apart from human experience. For while in human experience everything is personal, particular, concrete; in this special realm everything is impersonal, general and abstract. Such things as these Donne was no more able than either his predecessors or his successors to bring 'within the grasp

¹ Eliot: *The Metaphysical Poets*. See *Collected Essays* p. 272

of feeling'. He might have drawn on them for illustrations in his poetry; he might (as indeed he did) have had recourse to learned or 'scientific' imagery; but in this he did nothing radically different from Tennyson who drew (mistakenly, as he admitted) on recent developments in locomotion in his time, when he wrote with youthful enthusiasm of human progress:

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward
let us range.

Let the great world spin forever down the ringing
grooves of change.

In this one evidence of the peculiar 'metaphysical' sensibility¹ then, is nothing uniquely superior; that other, 'the argumentative, subtle evolution of the lyric', requires more detailed consideration. But it would be convenient first to settle what we might consider the only really significant relationship of thought and feeling, or better, of intelligence and emotion in the poetry we discuss. Donne's poetry I would say, is primarily emotional, springing from the basic emotional need of self-expression, and addressing itself, unlike a mathematical or a philosophical treatise, primarily to our emotions rather than to our intellect. This, I might add, is the case with all great poetry. To say this of Donne, and to make it the basis of a critical appreciation of his poetry, is not to take away his peculiar distinction or superiority; it is rather to emphasise the basic validity of his poetry as poetry. A poet's emotion may in itself be distinctive and superior in proportion as it is allied with a distinctive and superior intellect; and the emotion evident in the poetry of Donne is certainly allied to no mean or common one. His emotion is not the emotion of an hysterical or a silly man; it is an adult emotion; the emotion of a sensible, a responsible, often of an earnest man; and however limited its spectrum might be, or however restricted the area of its interest, it is characteristically an intelligent emotion. And just as the quality of the intelligence influences the quality of the emotion, it influences its expression; is active in the choice of words, symbols, forms; of all those devices in fact, in whose use we look for

¹ As such it is adduced by Praz: "The other metaphysical characteristic, 'the peculiar blend of passion, and thought feeling and ratiocination' of which 'learned imagery' is the consequence."
Donne's Relation to the Poetry of his Time.

appropriateness, inevitability, and the various evidence of a presiding artistic tact.

The poem "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies day," with its grave, passionate and unhysterical response to bereavement, supremely exemplifies I think the quality of an intelligent emotion. One observes how perfectly and with what power of poetic suggestion the basic situation is conceived:

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

Alone at the coincidence of two midnights, in a world darkened by loss the desolated lover keeps his vigil. One responds to the diction, to the imagery of a dying exhausted creation; to the sense of a diseased nature in the reference to a 'hydroptique earth'; one responds intensely to the emotion in the slow, brooding movement of the stanza, its rhythm falling heavily in the despondent stresses of 'the world's whole sap is sunke'.

Or in another verse we are powerfully impressed with the strange, true and distinctively personal quality of the poet's emotion. The lover's recollection dwells, not on the usual lost delights but on the griefs and stresses of the relationship, which in the magnitude they have for the lovers make movingly concrete the suggestion that they were the world to each other. In the tragic mood of the poem these recollections not only adumbrate and intensify its moment of final loss but testify with positive force to the invincible strength of a passion which is so great and has endured so much.

Oft a flood

Have wee two wept, and so
Drownd the whole world, us two; oft did we grow
To be two Chaosses, when we did show
Care to ought else; and often absences
Withdrew our soules, and made us carcasses.

In these lines possessing the freedom of great blank verse, we hear the accents of passion just as we hear them in the great moments of Jacobean drama. One is conscious of no hyperbolic extravagance in the assertions; they are so inevitable they seem not conceit but truth.

Undoubtedly there is evidence in the same poem of what has been called 'the dialectical slant' of Donne's mind; evidence, that is, of that phenomenon of ratiocination, of technical and often syllogistic argumentation generally observed in Metaphysical poetry. But if Donne's poetry has often the appearance of disciplined, purposive argument we need not be deluded into accepting it as such. Neither is the poetry deserving of any particular veneration on that account. For with Donne the emotion is not integral to the formal argument, the formal argument is ancillary or subsidiary to the emotion. Whatever the mood or feeling of the poem, whether light-hearted, passionate or sombre, argument or the appearance of arguments is only one poetical device among others contributing to the total effect. In these lines of passionate self-communing, for instance, the argument is present giving strength and structure to the emotion:

But I am by her death, (which word wrongs her)
Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown;

Were I a man, that I were one,
I needs must know; I should preferre,

If I were any beast,

Some ends, some means; Yea plants, yea stones detest,

And love; All, all some properties invest;

If I an ordinary nothing were,

As shadow, a light, and body must be here.

What we have here is not genuine ratiocination leading to a philosophically valid conclusion which by its logical finality precludes all rational objection. Rather, we have a manner of presentation; what is presented being an individual's personal experience of the tragic paradoxes which have at various times puzzled and embittered human consciousness. Keats shews an equal awareness of paradox but expresses it by means of a different device in contradictory collocations and oxymoronic fusions. Tennyson likewise expresses his disturbed awareness itself paradoxically in the superb

formal perfection of his ironies. Why Donne's apparent arguments have any interest at all is not because of their validity in logic but because of that emotional truth they serve to stress, which we might as well discover in Wordsworth or in Milton as in Donne.

The argument is in general apparent. J. B. Leishman¹ has pointed out the numerous humorous sophistries of Donne's syllogistic arguments with their 'undistributed middles', and has related his paradoxical 'evaporations' to the *paradossi* and *conceitti* of their continental origin. But even in poetry of unquestionable seriousness, not of course with the same hilarious obviousness, we find the same illusory logic regnant. "A Valediction: forbidding mourning" is developed very reasonably:

Dull sublunary lovers love
 (Whose soule is sense) cannot admit
Absence, because it doth remove
 Those things which elemented it.
Bnt we by a love, so much refin'd,
 That our selves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
 Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.
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.

Only when we return to examine the line 'Our two soules therefore, which are one', do we realise that the 'therefore' is not the Q. E. D of any logical demonstration; what has been previously asserted is inter-assurance of the mind, but that is not the same thing as oneness. Yet, the 'therefore' is not a deceit, it proceeds from the private and previous conviction of the lover, and communicates that conviction with all the persuasive force of logical demonstration. One realises that the 'expository tone and manner' of Wordsworth's philosophic verse is similar in effect.

"Goodfriday 1613. Riding Westward" offers an instance of a similar kind of reasoning. It begins deliberately:

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
The intelligence that moves, devotion is.

¹ *vide* The Monarch of Wit. Hutchinson 1951.

The initial hypothesis by no means justifies the deduction presented with so much appearance of logical consequence. What we encounter is the certain assertion of the interior conviction of faith; it is the religious emotion that is primary. The paradoxes

There I should see a Sunne by rising set,
And by that setting endlesse day beget

belong with the paradoxes at the heart of the Christian mystery of faith: that Christ by dying destroyed our death; that he that findeth his life shall lose it, and he that loseth his life for Christ's sake shall find it. We witness more than the acrobatics of an agile wit in the ingenious use of the physical situation:

I turne my backe to thee but to receive
Corrections

A religious mind is here moved by a religious emotion to invest all things with a relevant religious significance, or properly, to perceive such a significance as inherent in them.

Donne's dialectical manner is thus only a manner and does not imply an intellectual quality in his poetry; but his attachment to it is evidence of a peculiar quality of sensibility: a sensibility influenced by the literary fashions of his epoch and its characteristic intellectual climate. We say, a peculiar quality of sensibility; not a superior one. Donne exhibits himself as a man of his time in the obvious fascination the modes of scholastic reasoning had for him; but if he makes playthings of them, it is because they are passing into disrepute: we see the signs of the changing times. The latter half of the eighteenth century and the whole of the nineteenth century, for instance, had no use for them; they had also a different quality of sensibility. That sensibility was influenced by conditions then prevailing in the cultural climate of Europe. Behind it is the decay of scholastic metaphysics and the decay of Enlightenment rationalism; it inherits Hume's denigration of inductive science, the philosophic irrationalism of Hamann, the idealism of Kant and the intuitionism of romantic philosophy. For the new sensibility to express itself a new mode of expression was required; and for this it would seem it developed particularly the significant image. Sequacious logic was too slow and too abstract to express its intense intuitions. These intuitions were of their very nature swift, subtle and vast; they could only be expressed in terms of a metaphor which was immediate, simultaneous and

inclusive. Thus the poetry of the romantic and post-romantic tradition is poetry of the double vision; it abounds in mystical illuminations and regrettably sometimes in dim adumbrations of obscurity. Its landscape is a symbolic landscape; and through its actualities we gain an insight into a wider, deeper reality. We see this symbolic quality inform Tennyson's vision of the 'dark strait of barren land':

On one side lay the Ocean, and on one
Lay a great water, and the moon was full

Such poetry as this needs no justification before the metaphysical or any other sensibility. Nor is it the poorer for dispensing with the dialectical manner.

The sensibility of the romantic as of the metaphysical has its distinctive quality as well as its characteristic weakness. Johnson noted the strained ingenuity which with Donne is an occasional lapse and with his imitators a chronic aberration; with the romantics one notices the tendency to mistiness and the degradation of the poetic image into ornament. But whatever the distinctive sensibility or characteristic weakness, in the best poetry of both we look for - and find - the same cooperate activity of emotion and intelligence which is basic to great poetry. Where we do not find it, however distinctly the poetry might bear the impress of a peculiar sensibility, we are entitled to deny it all claim to greatness.

A comparison of two in many respects dissimilar poems would serve to illustrate this point. We have already alluded to that very successful poem "The Flea"; let us quote it in full:

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea. our two bloods mingled bee;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sinne, nor shame, nor losse of maidenhead,
Yet this enjoys before it wooe,
And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two,
And this, also, is more then wee would doe.

Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where wee almost, yea more then maryed are
This flea is you and I, and this

Our mariage bed, and mariage temple is;
Though parents grudge, and you, w'are met,
And cloysterd in these living walls of Jet.
Though use make you apt to kill mee,
Let not to that, selfe murder added bee,
And sacrilege, three sinnes in killing three.

Cruell and sodaine, hast thou since,
Purpled thy naile, in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty bee,
Except in that drop which it suckt from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and saist that thou
Find'st not thy selfe, nor mæ the weaker now;
'Tis true, then learne how false, feares bee;
Just so much honor, when thou yeeld'st to mee,
Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.

Here we have what is primarily a brilliant exercise in the traditional dialectic of seduction, impressing with its comic absurdity and audacious cleverness.

Beside it I would set a poem entirely different in manner and effect; one of Oscar Wilde's lyrical phantasies:

SYMPHONY IN YELLOW

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly,
And here and there a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge.

Big barges full of yellow hay
Are moored against the shadowy wharf,
And like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs along the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
And flutter from the Temple elms
And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

The poem would suffer by comparison with the first only in the eyes of those who perceive more intelligence at work in the pseudo-dialectic of that poem. But it has its own distinction, its own witty sophistication, and is, I think, the work of an equal intelligence. Both poems are

mutually exclusive: Donne could no more have written the "Symphony" than Wilde could have written "The Flea"; but that is because for both poets the area of interest or of poetic delight is different. If "The Flea" appeals more to us it is probably because of a similarity of mentality or a sympathy of cultural epochs; but I do not see that either poem is intrinsically superior to the other. Both agree in representing a literary fashion current in their day; both agree in isolating, elaborating and elevating a selection of poetical devices (chiefly witty argument in the one and decorative image in the other) to the total exclusion of others; and both poems are equally distant in the end from that earnest emotion which constitutes the truth of poetry.

Had all of Donne's poetry been in the vein of "The Flea" whatever intrinsic regard we might have for the mechanics of intellectual operations could not have sufficed to elevate him to the rank of a great poet. He would have remained the accomplished, representative and very definitely minor poet of his particular literary epoch. But he had enough intelligence and sensibility, to be capable of earnest or significant emotion and to be able to express it with lasting force and truth. It is for this reason he is great. We might admire the strange, ingenious dialectic, the learned imagery, but this not because they are of any intrinsic value. We admire them because they are the brilliantly *effective* instruments of a very persuasive rhetoric. And the rhetoric as with genuine poetry of any period is an emotional rhetoric.