

I

'Combinations of confused magnificence' Donne and Dr Johnson

It often comes about that when a writer is conceded classic status he stops being read – at least in any important sense of the verb 'to read'. It happened to Milton. It happened to Wordsworth. It has, in a sense, happened to Lawrence who, though he proved intractable to assimilation by doctoral thesis, remained nevertheless so unhappily accessible to an undisciplined reading that notions of his importance tend now to derive their currency rather from vulgarising film-scripts than from what he wrote. It's the price a writer pays, I suppose, for addressing his contemporaries with that commanding degree of relevance. But the results of this peculiar combination of *pro forma* adulation and practical neglect can be seen in eighteenth-century Miltonising, in Victorian sub-Wordsworthianism, and in all the unconscious proto-Chatterleyism of the modern popular novel.

In Donne's case, the first wave of slack adulation gave us the decadent phase of metaphysical poetry; and the second wave has left us with a Donne whom every schoolboy knows is a great poet, whom many students of English Literature suspect is not, but of whose classic status, anyway, we possess no cogent contemporary account.

Not that interesting things haven't been written about Donne (my debts to them, conscious and unconscious, will be plain in what follows), nor that we haven't had some classic – and classically cryptic – criticism of him: notably from Coleridge, Eliot and Leavis. But the state of affairs upon which Eliot reported in 1921 – 'It would be a fruitful work, and one requiring a substantial book, to break up the classification of Johnson (for there has been none since)¹ – remains fundamentally unchanged. Eliot's own redefinition, in that essay, of the class, 'metaphysical poetry', in terms of 'a mechanism of

¹ 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays* (1951), p. 291.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

sensibility which could devour any kind of experience', was not in itself that fruitful work which could 'break up' the Johnsonian classification (however generally it may have supplanted it in the manuals of literary history), because at the end of the undertaking we are still left conceiving the essential metaphysicalness of the metaphysicals as a function of their *peculiarity*. The poetic faculty which 'amalgamates disparate experience', and fuses Spinoza with the smell of cooking, is proffered as the factor by which the metaphysical sensibility is marked off from 'the ordinary man's experience'. So that Johnson's case about the gratuitous oddity of the poetry is effectively conceded, while the illusion that it is being rebutted is sustained by a skilful transformation of the oddity into something more modern, and hence less recognisable as gratuitous. But the just comment upon a 'new whole' composed variously of a philosopher and a typewriter, cooking-smells and a love affair (if it wasn't merely Eliot free-associating at *his* typewriter) is surely Johnson's: 'heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together'. As an account of something one is proposing to call 'unification of sensibility', it is trivialising.

A great deal of the difficulty here stems from the determination (which Eliot inherited from Johnson) to talk about so vast a variety of poetic experiences as if they were all of a kind, explicable in terms of a single 'mechanism'. Like so many of the liberators, Eliot fell under the spell of the classification he came to break up. But that 'spell' itself is a fact of literary history that cries out for comment.

For it was not just Eliot who allowed Johnson to impose upon him a grouping of seventeenth-century poets which has the immediate critical consequence of locating in Donne an embryonic Cleveland (and once the grouping is admitted Donne must fall under some, at least, of Johnson's strictures): it was the general reading public. And if we have assented to the classification, could it not be because an impartial reading of Donne simply does communicate the conviction that the embryo is there? Perhaps Johnson has been incomparably the most influential critic Donne ever had, precisely because he laid his finger on a critical raw-spot that most readers smart under. This is so manifest a truth that I shouldn't have the banality to propose it, if it weren't that it is a truth Donne's admirers seem never to have taken seriously. Their reaction is normally a testy concession – 'Oh well, yes. Of course!' (implying that, though true, it doesn't matter) –

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

DONNE AND DR JOHNSON

followed by a thunderous 'But'. Nor, oddly enough, have Donne's detractors seen how Johnson struck at the root of the matter. Unless one counts such vivacious crankinesses as C. S. Lewis's cocking-of-a-snook at fashionable orthodoxy¹ – an operation as deeply conventional as the Donne-worship it was pleased to deride – the critical question has on neither side been pursued with the pertinacity it ought to have exacted. And as a result, the greatness of Donne, in so far as it is admitted – and how long, in this state of things, can it go on being admitted? – is more often something under which readers bow, than something in which they rejoice. One must except (as so often) Dr Leavis, who plainly is rejoicing in his Donne;² but in his mind the doubt either never gained lodgement, or it has been long since laid to rest; and the great poet he offers us, consequently, the poet who compels by a kind of 'irresistible rightness' (and that is certainly the way the case must be made), is equally present in the *Satyres* and the *Songs and Sonets*. That is not very consoling to the reader who experiences some difficulty in locating the rightness, and doesn't, when he has, find it always irresistible.

I think the case of Eliot is both more representative and depressing. For of course, there was a second essay on Donne, ominously entitled 'Donne in our Time'. It's surely noteworthy that the man who had, as it were, in 1921, given Donne in marriage to the reading public (albeit with Chapman concealed among the baggage), should, in 1931, have been faithless enough to jeer at the public for the alacrity with which it had accepted his gift:

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 medieval poetry. His learning is just information suffused with emotion, or combined with emotion not essentially relevant to it.³

The heartless thoroughness with which he casts off his misbegotten child is a striking critical portent. And however little one may warm to the tone of the recantation, or to its implied intellectual ambience – an ambience which permits him the smug certainty that Donne's

¹ 'Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century', *Seventeenth-Century Studies presented to Sir Herbert Grierson* (1938).

² 'The Line of Wit', *Revaluation* (1936); 'Imagery and Movement', *Scrutiny*, XIII (1945), 119 f.

³ T. Spencer (ed.), *A Garland for John Donne* (1931), p. 8.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

'cast of mind was such as made it impossible to be a constructive philosopher or a mystic' (those two well-known and generally accessible states of being), and one which encourages the critic to indulge an urbane suspicion that, if Donne was a rake, then he was a very conventional rake – it is unmistakably a conscientious demolition of all his old bridgeheads.

The passage goes on,

But perhaps one reason why Donne has appealed so powerfully to the recent time is that there is in his poetry hardly any attempt at organisation; rather a puzzled and humorous shuffling of the pieces; and we are inclined to read our own more conscious awareness of the apparent irrelevance and unrelatedness of things into the mind of Donne.

If this is indeed the 'inclination' in Eliot which had been satisfying itself upon Donne, he did well to deny it to himself. The advocacy Donne could have expected to win from such a source could only have had the effect of discrediting him. But equally, if there is some other, better case to be made, it will have to be made without trusting too implicitly to such uncertain allies as Eliot himself.

For there was something, surely, about the original account which lent itself to this lordly subversion. To say that a poet feels his thought as immediately as the odour of a rose, though it has the air of being rather complimentary, is to put the matter sufficiently aesthetically to facilitate the subsequent debasement, and the logical sleight that goes with it:

he was more interested in *ideas* themselves as objects than in the *truth* of ideas; and so, by a precipitate transition, we arrive at a Donne given to 'petting and teasing' his 'mental objects', a poet whose distinction, such as it is, resides primarily in *trouvailles*, 'odd and beautiful objects' dredged up from the bottom of the Ocean of the Mind. (We now see how 'feeling one's thought as the odour of a rose' might be the wrong way to feel it, and what a disabling potential lay concealed in Eliot's interest in 'bracelets of bright hair about the bone' as the type of 'Donne's most successful and characteristic effects'.) 'Thought', in the sense he finishes by attributing it to Donne, is at best a matter of curiosity – that was the critical weight of those striking comparisons with Laforgue.

I don't want to suggest that we see, in this diagnosis, merely a

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

DONNE AND DR JOHNSON

characteristic Eliot perversity – though it is that. Nor am I forgetting that the short answer to all the 1931 insinuations had been given in the 1921 essay: ‘A philosophical theory *which has entered into poetry* is established, for its truth or falsity in one sense ceases to matter, and its truth in another sense is proved’ – an affirmation the full embracing of which would have rendered impossible those specious appeals to ‘orthodoxy’ with which Eliot buttresses the argument of the later essay. But the ‘recantation’ carries enough conviction to intimate that it was, in some sense, what he meant to say; and the suspect quality in Donne it fastens upon is, significantly, the same that moved Johnson to protest: a sense that, for this kind of ‘wit’, the ideas are more important than their truth.

The question about the ‘truth’ of Donne’s poetry is plainly a central one, and not to be side-stepped. Johnson’s case for the prosecution, though it is refuted with monotonous and stupefying regularity on every campus in the Western world, still commands an attention and respect which the refutations have never secured for themselves. The question remains open, for all the tranquillising labours of the critics. And that is as it should be: if it were ever ‘closed’, the volumes of Donne’s poetry would be closed too – for the last time.

What I’m proposing, however, is beginning to sound like some fierce and remorseless conditioning of the intellectual muscles, commando-training for the assault upon Donne. There is one spectacular leap over all these thorny obstacles which we might therefore ponder, since it forms, I’m sure, a part of any generous response to the richness of Donne’s poetry. It is the leap taken by that quintessentially generous reader, Coleridge, as he enthusiastically annotates his copy of Donne:

This power of dissolving orient pearls, worth a kingdom, in a health to a whore! – this absolute right of dominion over all thoughts, that dukes are bid to clean his shoes, and are yet honoured by it!... this lordliness of opulence!... Wonder-exciting vigour, intensesness and peculiarity of thought, using at will the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory, and exercised on subjects, where we have no right to expect it – this is the wit of Donne!¹

What, viewed from one angle, is an irresponsibility of imagination, is from another an opulence of feeling. And what nettled Johnson as a

¹ R. F. Brinkley (ed.), *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century* (1955), pp. 522 and 526.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

singularity, a *peculiarity* of mind, may be just as intensely felt as boundless fertility – though to feel it as that, is to discern a peculiarity creatively transformed, purged of all in it that is merely singular and idiosyncratic.

'Intenseness and peculiarity of thought' is, I suppose, the same quality that Johnson referred to as 'combinations of confused magnificence', but it has been suffused with the warmth of a responsive and ardent mind. The difference between Coleridge and Johnson, as readers, is that Coleridge is prepared to meet the poetry with the spirited resistance Donne's outrageousness perpetually invites (thus making it not only tolerable, but 'wonder-exciting'); whereas Johnson is chiefly impressed by the preposterousness of Donne's ever expecting that of him. Coleridge, as we shall see, had his own wry reservations to register about Donne; but they did not, finally, obstruct the free flow of his admiration. That is the model of ardent impartiality that I want to keep in view throughout the following pages.

One can only responsibly address oneself to Johnson's challenge in Johnson's spirit – though it is equally the spirit of Coleridge's criticism: I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtility and the dogmatism of learning, must be decided all claim to poetical honours.¹

Every reading, if it is at all a lively one, is a fresh, though not necessarily a first, reading; and its freshness is enjoyably experienced as a part of some larger human concurrence. If, as it begins to appear, Donne's reputation, however fortified with 'subtilty' and 'learning', does *not* reflect 'the common sense of readers', his greatness will have to be winnowed out from the mere reputation before it can be fully possessed.

Greatness in art – to rehearse some necessary truisms – is something personally felt, or it is nothing. Felt first of all, perhaps, as a fulness: 'that comprehension and expanse of thought which at once fills the whole mind, and of which the first effect is sudden astonishment, and the second rational admiration'. (That is Dr Johnson on 'the sublime',²

¹ *Life of Gray*.

² *Life of Cowley*. (Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent references to Johnson are to the dozen or so pages of that *Life* where he discusses the 'metaphysical poets'.)

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

DONNE AND DR JOHNSON

a quality he found it necessary to define – and the irony is a reminder of our critical predicament here – because he detected in Donne a notable lack of it.) To receive that fulness as doctrine, is not to receive it at all; because then, instead of there being the ‘exertion of a co-operating power in the mind of the reader’,¹ which Wordsworth saw as an essential part of the poetic process, the mind of the reader sinks in inert lethargy under the dead weight of reputation. Literature becomes a mental idol. The ‘co-operating power’ atrophies. We cease to weigh what we read against the fullest sense of life we can command, and we come to lack, as a result, the mental space or the human amplitude within which we might grasp the greatness.

But greatness has its more public dimension too; because, as Wordsworth goes on to observe, ‘Of genius, in the fine arts, the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature.’ Which is not to say that one seeks out genius in order to be delighted, honoured and benefited: the effect of the kind of spaciousness Wordsworth has in mind is pretty much to dispel such self-absorbed motivation. In the presence of greatness one frets far less about one’s personal relation to the greatness, than one finds an impersonal satisfaction in the fact that it exists; and it is one of the prerogatives of greatness to have just this effect. But the being aware of its existence exacts something further. We hail a writer as a classic precisely because of his capacity to incite to the finest kind of consciousness: his very excellence is what animates and empowers the critical scrutiny of it. And as the mind finds increasing satisfaction in that task, as the conviction of the excellence grows, so the author’s capacity to sustain the scrutiny becomes a source of multiplying pleasure – criticism and appreciation become a single complex act.

This cumulative satisfaction, which simultaneously refines and enlarges our sense of the writer’s stature, is what ensures that we shall go on asking, not nigglingly and waspishly, but warmly and soberly, *why* he is a classic, and perhaps even more importantly, *where* he is a classic. Go on asking, how does Donne widen the sphere of human sensibility? What does he offer for the delight, honour and benefit of human nature? Where is the human truth to be most intensely encountered? Why great? Wherefore classic?

¹ ‘Essay, Supplementary to the Preface’ (1815).

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

There is a danger, however, that in putting these questions too baldly to the poetry one merely elicits from it confirmation of the doctrine of human nature one already, and on other grounds, espouses. And that activity, whatever general uses it may serve, is not to be confused with the activity of reading Donne. We want a foothold upon some solid human ground, but one which can also be specified in concrete observations upon the poetry Donne wrote. I think that foothold is to be found where Dr Leavis found it – in that extraordinary Donne *voice* which, in a collection of seventeenth-century verse, effortlessly transforms the kind of attention we are prompted to give it, so that (as Leavis has it) ‘we read on as we read the living’. It’s an obvious comment; most important comments are. But it isolates something about Donne which often commands respect long before one is reading with anything like full comprehension: I mean that quality of utterance which implies, indeed creates, a body of experience and a ‘life’ in a sense more important, perhaps, than the biographical. It is the *life* that one is attending to when, like a dominant presence in a room full of chatter, Donne detaches himself from the surrounding loquacity by an individual vibrancy and directness, so that one finds oneself listening with a spirited interest which is largely unconscious of the mechanisms of communication.

I start with the Donne ‘voice’, not with the Donne philosophy, or the Donne conceit, or the Donne poetic, or the Donne toughness, because all those qualities, and indeed the whole idiosyncrasy of ‘the Donne manner’, form the spearhead, as we’ve seen, of the critical assault upon him. The voice is not so easily dismissed:

Love is a growing, or full constant light;
 And his first minute, after noone, is night.
 (‘A Lecture upon the Shadow’)

It might be, at first sight, the voice of the pundit, the self-appointed sage. But the generalising weight on the word ‘love’, the grave pausing upon it, feels neither gratuitous nor arbitrary. There seems a weight of implicit experience behind it. Only when the second line is complete and the metaphor of love-as-sun is suddenly shattered, do we discover what the experience is, as we are plunged into darkness (‘...is *night*’). There’s a world of grim compression in that single plain noun. Behind the pronouncement, in a sense validating it, lie more than one of these catastrophic blackouts.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

DONNE AND DR JOHNSON

Donne is offering – perilous undertaking! – to define love. And I think we can feel more powerfully the weight and authority he gives his generalities if we put them beside Marvell's faintly quizzical 'Definition of Love'.

My Love is of a birth as rare
 As 'tis for object strange and high:
 It was begotten by despair
 Upon Impossibility.

The verse has a queer, stiff-legged, bird-like gait; and there is something comparatively flimsy about tone and sentiment ('rare... strange... high'). Where Donne takes his sun metaphor with such seriousness that he is prepared to break its back in the interests of veracity, Marvell almost plays with his personifications – especially with the conceit of the love's 'rare birth', in which the elegant appositeness of the figure is allowed to cloud the serious sense in which despair *at* the impossibility was the real engendering of the love. So that one glimpses the 'despair' only through superimposed layers of defensive irony. The perception is thwarted, one might put it this way, by a speaking voice which does not include among its range of tones Donne's kind of authority, and can only simulate it by means of wry self-depreciation. Where Donne possesses his love-experience and speaks from the centre of it, Marvell stands uneasily perched on its edge, poised for flight, or retraction, or self-mockery.

But Donne's authority is not operating to persuade us of the truth of abstract propositions. The pressure of experience felt in the voice doesn't have that kind of validating force. There is the same quality of weight about lines which very nearly contradict 'A Lecture upon a Shadow':

Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,
 Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time.
 ('The Sunne Rising')

Lovers, of course, are always making this kind of exorbitant claim, and a very foolish one it looks on the face of it – especially in a poem about 'The Sunne Rising'. But for all the superficial resemblance it bears to a familiar romantic delusion of immortality in love, it is utterly unlike it at its core. Again, it is the vibrancy of the voice that arrests the ear,

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09909-7 - John Donne's Poetry
 Wilbur Sanders
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

a vibrancy here partly of contempt (*'rags of time'*) but also of exultation. Even the low-keyed *'houres, dayes, moneths'* (overtly they are being dismissed from consideration) begin to resonate with that exultancy. Implicit in the speech movement, and given body in the voice, is a steady conviction that will not be imposed upon; one which knows exactly the extent of its exorbitance and, even more firmly, the reason for it: *'Tell me not about hours, days, months! I know what I possess.'*

If I say that this steadiness has a peculiarly masculine resonance about it, I'm not just referring to fashionable critical cliché about *'the manly Donne'* (though this cliché is old enough to have acquired some respectability – *'a line/Of masculine expression'* was what Carew saw, in 1633, as one of Donne's great contributions to English poetry). I mean that the masculinity is one of the truly notable things about the voice here. There are certain emotional *'styles'* that are not common to both sexes, and this swelling, almost boasting exultancy is one of them. I can imagine the lines in the mouth of a woman only at the cost of some stridency; and stridency, though it is the endemic disease of all affirmation, is exactly what Donne avoids here. In its place, vibrating with a low-keyed energy it can scarcely contain, we get the note of sure male triumph – *'Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme...'*

Masculine, though: not buckish. It's not the male defined in opposition to, or in defiance of, the female. That would sound like this:

Tell me not, sweet, I am unkind,
 That from the nunnery
 Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind,
 To war and arms I fly.
 True, a new mistress now I chase,
 The first foe in the field;
 And with a stronger faith embrace
 A sword, a horse, a shield.
 Yet this inconstancy is such
 As you too shall adore...

That voice – Richard Lovelace's – speaks (with some complacency) out of the exclusively male preserve, putting the woman straight on some misconceptions that she is bound (being a woman – a creature