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Doubt wisely

by [Paul Dean](#)

The continued existence of the Longman Annotated English Poets series, begun in the more expansive publishing climate of the 1960s, is a miracle, although the cost of these volumes puts them beyond the reach of many who would benefit from them most. The aim of the series remains fullness of annotation, and in this Robin Robbins proves himself a worthy addition to a line of editors of Donne going back almost a century to Sir Herbert Grierson. He even achieves the commentator's Holy Grail, a page filled entirely by notes with no text at all. Now that editing is so often a collaborative enterprise, as in the Variorum edition of Donne which is still in progress—part of which I reviewed in *The New Criterion* of March 2001—it is good to have the whole of a poet's output scrutinized by a single mind.

Robbins's is the best edition of Donne by an individual scholar since A. J. Smith's, back in 1971. Like Smith, and unlike some other previous editors, who took the earliest printed texts as their starting-point and collated them with manuscripts, Robbins starts from the manuscripts, the most important of which was copied, possibly direct from Donne's own written version, by his close friend Rowland Woodward. The justifications for his choice of base text are carefully argued and, as far as I can judge, generally convincing. The dating of Donne's poems is notoriously vague—only the two "Anniversaries" in memory of Elizabeth Drury, his patron's daughter, were printed in his lifetime—but Robbins does his best, citing parallels with other works whose dating is more secure, such as Donne's prose letters and sermons or assigning topical allusions with proper caution.

Given the impossibility of a chronological arrangement, the edition is organized by genre. Volume One includes epigrams, verse-epistles to friends, love lyrics, love elegies, and satires; Volume Two, the awkwardly named "religion poems," epithalamia (wedding-poems), verse-epistles to patronesses, commemorations, and the Anniversaries.

Most people know Donne only through a score of anthology pieces, usually lyrics and a few religious poems. Such an acquaintance slights the formal variety of his work and gives too much weight to his poetry as urgent personal utterance. To read through all the poems is to become aware how often his motive in writing was practical, whether to flatter a patron, please a friend, or simply practice a convention—and to realize the problem of taking sincerity as a criterion of success. For example, two of Donne's most moving love poems, "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day" and "Twickenham Garden," are probably written with Lucy, Countess of Bedford (to whom Donne also addressed seven verse-epistles), in mind. The "Nocturnal" may date from 1612, when she was seriously ill. Donne's hopes of advancement, Robbins points out, might have died with her, but it does not follow that the poems are simply further exercises in flattery. Their tone is apparently more personal and engaged than in the rather stiff epistles. Yet tone is in the ear of the hearer, and gauging

the speaker's stance is tricky; Donne often had an almost Wildean sense of the protean nature of the self and, again like Wilde, resorted to paradox to do justice to the complexity of his insights:

O, to vex me contraries meet in one:
Inconstancy unnaturally hath begot
A constant habit, that when I would not
I change in vows and in devotion.
As humorous is my contrition
As my profane love, and as soon forgot.

That is not to say, however, that no coherent personality is detectable behind the poems. Donne himself could be misleading. He liked to emphasize the division between his licentious youth and his pious maturity, as in the poem just quoted, which has encouraged a facile polarization of his poetry into "early" love poems and "late" religious ones. A more helpful approach comes from a sermon he preached in 1617, in which he argued that anyone turning from a worldly life to a religious one will retain something of his former cast of mind: a covetous person will be eager for the riches of Heaven, a voluptuary will ardently desire God, and so on. Thus Solomon, "whose disposition was amorous, and excessive in the love of women," redirected his metaphors in the *Song of Solomon*, "having put a new, and a spiritual tincture, and form and habit in all his thoughts, and words," and wrote love poetry to God.

Perhaps we should take this hint and look in Donne's poetry for its unity and continuity, rather than insisting upon an artificial divide. It is, after all, one of the so-called Holy Sonnets which ends with this startling apostrophe to the Almighty:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

What connects the amorous and religious poems is their concern with the difficulty of keeping faith. There are some routine exercises in misogyny such as "The Curse" or "Go and catch a falling star" (which appears in forty-six manuscripts, making it one of Donne's most popular poems among contemporaries), but the poems which present love as a kind of religion display an exquisite balance of playfulness and wonder, as in "The Relic" where Donne imagines the disinterment of his and his mistress's bodies, which shall be received as relics of saints, and accordingly outlines the miracles they performed, beginning with "First, we loved well and faithfully," and concluding:

These miracles we did; but now, alas,
All measure and all language I should pass,
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

The sudden tenderness of the last line, with its more colloquial use of "miracle," is a world away from the earlier smart ingenuity.

Among other poems, this love-religion also occurs in "The Canonization," which begins with rueful expostulation—"For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love!" but moves to a higher plane altogether:

The phoenix riddle hath more wit
By us: we two, being one, are it.

So to one neutral thing both sexes fit,
We die and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

I think Robbins mistakes the tone here in speaking of the poem's "religious parody." As he points out, the phoenix's rising from its ashes was a traditional symbol of the resurrection of Christ. Donne's lines remind me rather of Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle," published in 1601; Robbins tentatively dates "The Canonization" 1604. I am not insisting that Donne read Shakespeare's poem, although he does seem to remember some of the plays in his poems, as Robbins notes (the elegy "To his Mistress on Going Abroad" is an example); the image was common enough. What links them is their depth of feeling. The total oneness of the lovers is more than just a bright idea.

My reservation about the tone Robbins hears in "The Canonization" is a reminder that it is almost impossible for an annotator to attend purely to textual matters, without becoming a literary critic. To choose among variants is to change the color of the poem. In Holy Sonnet VII ("Spit in my face"), did Donne write "For I have sinned and sinned, and only he/ Who could do no iniquity hath died," or "and humbly he"? Woodward's manuscript says "humbly"; this, Robbins comments, "may preserve D.'s own thought" and "is unlikely to have been invented by a scribe." Quite so: but the note continues, "The whole poem is about the amazing reversal of roles in the Christian legend." (It was not a "legend" to Donne: this tendentious word exceeds an editor's brief.)

Did Donne, in the elegy "To his Mistress Going to Bed," write "cast all, yea, this white linen, hence:/ There is no penance, much less innocence!" or "There is no penance due to innocence"? The late William Empson argued tirelessly for the latter. Robbins's note simply asserts that the manuscript evidence "is overwhelmingly in favour of 'much less,' whatever readers may prefer to read." The refusal ever to mention Empson by name is a baffling feature of the edition. I can't believe Robbins hasn't read the first volume of Empson's *Essays on Renaissance Literature* (1993), which is devoted almost entirely to Donne (yet it is not in his bibliography); if he rejects its arguments, as he clearly does, he ought to give his reasons.

As a matter of courtesy, so major a figure cannot simply be ignored. Moreover, Robbins's Donne is quite different from Empson's. The modern-minded radical, interested in contemporary science and astronomy and embracing heretical theological views, is transformed into a markedly old-fashioned, even purblind, character, happy to cling to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Galen; too ignorant of mathematics to understand Kepler or Galileo; and "not seriously affected by astronomical theories or observations." Robbins's notes (too many to cite) convince me that there is a case to answer here: that, whatever cognizance Donne took from contemporary learning, he remained in many ways medieval in outlook.

In keeping with this, Donne's theological views in the poems oscillate fascinatingly between Catholicism and Protestantism. The scholarly consensus is that he had rejected the Catholicism of his upbringing once and for all by the time he entered the service of Sir Thomas Egerton in 1598 (that is, when he was in his late twenties). His satires, written in the years leading up to this, record some of his struggles of conscience; they were admired by Pope, who rewrote two of them, and deserve to be much better known than they are. Satire 3 responds to the admonition to "Seek true religion" with "Oh where?" and dramatizes the unappealing choice between Rome, where the truth may have been located "a thousand years ago" but now only shows its "rags," and Geneva, where religion is "plain, simple, sullen, young,/ Contemptuous."

Donne rejects various compromise positions—passive acceptance of the status quo or the lazy view that all brands of Christianity are equally true. It will be no good on Judgment Day to say "a Harry [Henry VIII] or a Martin [Luther] taught thee this." The conclusion is as strenuous as it is subtle:

Be busy to seek her [Truth]; believe me this;
He's not of none, nor worst, that seeks the best.
T'adore or scorn an image, or protest,
May be all bad: doubt wisely.

At about this time, Robbins suggests, Donne wrote the sonnet beginning, somewhat ironically, "Show me, dear Christ, thy Spouse so bright and clear," which also wavers between Rome, Geneva, and England and asks, of the true church, "Sleeps she a thousand, and then peeps up one year?/ Is she self truth, and errs?" Yet even in his spiritual perplexity Donne cannot resist a daring final couplet: Christ's spouse, the Church, "is most true and pleasing to thee then/ When she's embraced and open to most men"!

Some will see blasphemy there, but it is a consequence of Donne's inability to see one side of a question. Like Montaigne, he had such an acute sense of the contradictory nature of everyday experience that he could always imagine another possibility, another way of looking at things. His sense of mutability was abnormally acute. In the elegy called "Change," he begins by denouncing the fickleness of women, then performs a change himself, leading to the dazzling conclusion, "Change's the nursery/ Of music, joy, life, and eternity." To illustrate Robbins's clarity and conciseness I will quote his note here:

Change is the nursery of music, whose melody passes from one note to another; of joy because it is known by its contrary, and monotony is joyless; of life, which is continually coming to be and passing away; and even of eternity, because that shall be ushered in when "we shall be changed, for this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality (*1 Corinthians 15: 52-3*).

Without doubt the greatest of Donne's poems to meditate upon change are the two "Anniversaries" already mentioned. Ben Jonson was shocked by such extravagant sentiments—which he *did* feel were blasphemous—expressed about the death of a fourteen-year-old girl and told Donne that "if it had been written of the Virgin Mary, it had been something," to which Donne retorted that "he described the idea of a woman and not as she was." It is a quick-witted rejoinder, and it is true that Elizabeth Drury's death is the occasion for the poems rather than their sole subject, but they do not bear out this suggestion of Platonic idealism. They are vast and somber works, of about five hundred lines each, lamenting the instability and evanescence of all earthly things with sonorous verbal music:

She, she is dead; she's dead: when thou know'st this,
Thou know'st how poor a trifling thing man is,
And learn'st thus much by our anatomy:
The heart being perished, no part can be free.

Again, I am doubtful about some of Robbins's judgments on tone — including his own. In the famous lines beginning "And new philosophy calls all in doubt," he can hear only "flippancy and superficiality." When he comes to "The Sun is lost, and th'Earth, and no man's wit/ Can well direct him where to look for it," his comment, "not D.'s, with his ignorance of the mathematics which solved the problems of the inaccuracies of prediction and increasingly complex makeshifts of medieval astronomy," is dangerously close to a sneer. Even if we grant that Donne had not kept up with the Jacobean equivalent of the *New Scientist*, he might still genuinely feel that the world was "all in pieces, all coherence gone." By a characteristic paradox, these poems of fragmentation are designed on the grand scale: the first argues for the decay of the universe, the second for the

consequent need to fix one's hopes upon God.

Donne's skepticism about the "new philosophy" is startlingly underscored when, in the "Second Anniversary," he refers to "unconcerning [irrelevant] things, matters of fact," and denounces "this pedantry/ Of being taught by sense and fantasy." To say that our mind and senses are not always reliable is quite different from saying that they are so untrustworthy that they can teach us nothing. But is Donne saying that? Theologically, he would not set reason above revelation, and Robbins's notes quote sermons in which he warns against excessive intellectual curiosity as a kind of pride and against the delusions of mystics who think they can have immediate access to the Beatific Vision in this world. Carefully read, the lines simply warn us against thinking that knowledge for its own sake is all the truth we need. The world is God's text, and we are like editors faced with the diversity and inconsistency of its variants. Despite my reservations, I have to say that not many of us would make as good a job of interpretation as Robin Robbins does, in nearly a thousand pages.

Paul Dean is Head of English at Summer Fields School, Oxford.

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