

## The Canonization of John Donne

DAVID KELLY

### I

In 'The Canonization' John Donne, in the person of the speaker, speculates upon the prospect of his being 'canonized'. He is using the term in the religious sense, of course, but mischievously — by implying that he and his lover will be elevated to the level of saints because they love as they do he is being playful, witty, and just a shade blasphemous. From the beginning the tone is provocative:

For God's sake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
     Or chide my palsy, or my gout,  
 My five grey hairs, or ruined fortune, flout,  
     With wealth your state, your mind with arts improve,  
     Take you a course, get you a place,  
     Observe his honour, or his Grace,  
 Or the King's real, or his stamped face  
     Contemplate; what you will, approve,  
     So you will let me love.<sup>1</sup>

A poem which takes a theological term for its title — 'The Canonization' — and then begins with a blasphemy — 'For God's sake' — is clearly playing a number of ironic games with its readers. Dramatically, the speaker appears exasperated at being continually reprimanded for his amorous life and so here he responds, not by apologizing for it but rather by mischievously pleading for the social world at large to permit love to exist in some small corner of its realm, devalued and frowned upon though it be. For this is a world that values everything above love — it is a world of affairs in every sense but the romantic. Nevertheless, the speaker is able to imply that this system of value is questionable, for this world of affairs is clearly one of sycophancy, cupidity, and hypocrisy: 'With wealth your state, your mind with arts

<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from *The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

improve, / Take you a course', the speaker advises his captious friend, but for what purpose? — 'get you a place' — for the purposes of self-aggrandizement, for which one must fawn upon the great — 'Observe his Honour or his Grace' — flatter a judge, or a bishop, for these are men who can offer patronage to their sycophants. Most of all, fawn upon the monarch — 'Or the King's real, or his stamped face / Contemplate' — admire, and be seen to admire, the king, or (what you really want) gaze upon money, the king's 'stamped face', which is your real object of desire.

The theme here is plainly satirical, and it has had sufficient sting to silence the listener, since the speaker is not obliged to order him to hold his tongue again. Consequently he takes the opportunity to develop the satire in stanza two: the love of power, the love of wealth, the love of military or judicial conquest — this, he implies, is the kind of love abroad in this world. The speaker's irony shows itself in his adoption of a tone of resigned agreement about this state of affairs — as much as to say: 'Yes, I see your point, greed and envy and power for its own sake, these are extremely important things, they motivate this society and so they should be valued as you and as the society at large do value them; but at least my romantic love doesn't materially interfere with them; I love her, but greed and envy and love of gain and exploitation still thrive, so why should you complain?' The irony is heavy indeed in stanza two, where the harmless repertoire of the lover — sighs and tears and colds and heats and so on, familiar from the courtly love tradition — is sarcastically played off against the realities of a vulgar, mean and exploitative world:

Alas, alas, who's injured by my love?  
 What merchant's ships have my sighs drowned?  
 Who says my tears have overflowed his ground?  
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?  
 When did the heats which my veins fill  
 Add one more to the plaguy bill?  
 Soldiers find wars, and lawyers find out still  
 Litigious men, which quarrels move,  
 Though she and I do love.

Apart from humiliatingly silencing the implied listener who had presumed to complain about the speaker's romance in the first place, rhetorically the poem here is setting up an ironic strategy of subversion. The tactic is this: as the speaker catalogues the behaviour of the world at large an alternative value system — a system composed of all that is marginalized or suppressed in the world such as it is described here — begins to emerge, and as it does it threatens to displace the plainly mean, immoral order that has been effectively discredited by the speaker's satire. And the very centre of this new value system, indeed its central moral impulse, is romantic love, whose value is confirmed by its perdurability, its capacity to endure beyond the trivial things and the petty desires of this world.

By the end of the second stanza, then, the speaker has effectively belittled the world that had censured him for his romantic loving, and so has opened up the potential for a full ironic subversion, which he achieves in stanza three with a particularly bold and witty manoeuvre. It is both bold and witty, because the argument here turns essentially on the popular Renaissance pun on the word 'die', which carried the sense of 'orgasm'. Because the lovers 'rise' again after they 'die', the speaker claims, they endure beyond their own death, and so there is something mysterious, perhaps miraculous, about them, and this can be taken as a sign of sanctification: therefore, they are saints of love, and are canonized as such:

Call us what you will, we're made such by love;  
 Call her one, me another fly,  
 We are tapers too, and at our own cost die,  
 And we in us find the eagle and the dove.  
 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.

Significantly, the imagery effects the same kind of ironic inversion as the argument is attempting: 'you, in your valuation, might see us as flies, because you see us as small and insignificant; but in our own estimation we feel that we are the eagle and the dove, because our romantic experience of each other gives us this sense of ourselves; and looking further into the case, because 'we die and rise the same', we are like the legendary phoenix.' So the image of the fly is transfigured first into the eagle and the dove and then into the phoenix: that is, the changing imagery traces the action of transvaluation, and it is this that rhetorically propels the poem towards its blasphemous and self-celebratory conclusion.

We can die by it, if not live by love,  
 And if unfit for tombs and hearse  
 Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;  
 And if no piece of chronicle we prove  
     We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms;  
     As well a well-wrought urn becomes  
 The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombs,  
 And by these hymns, all shall approve  
 Us canonized for love:

And thus invoke us: 'You whom reverend love  
 Made one another's hermitage;  
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;  
     Who did the whole world's soul contract,  
         and drove  
         Into the glasses of your eyes  
         (So made such mirrors, and such spies,  
 That they did all to you epitomize,)  
     Countries, towns, courts: beg from above  
 A pattern of your love!'

There is a fair amount of sly and slippery irony here, since Donne is saying both that it is the character of their love that will bring about this 'canonization', their elevation to a sphere above everyone else, and he is also saying that it is the quality of his writing that will bring it about — for it is 'by these hymns' that 'all shall approve / Us canonized for love'. But the final irony is historical, not textual; because Donne

was canonized, in the secular, literary sense. And because *that* canon bears such a heavy cultural weight, and because Donne is now installed within that canon for writing this and other 'hymns', this and other poems, today Donne is perceived more as monumental than poetical; the cultural imagination pictures him in the 'half-acre tomb', rather than the 'well-wrought urn' which he compares to a sonnet, and which he imagines here as his final resting place. Why so? Because such is the image of the canonized, and such is the effect of the canon.

Here is a further irony: Donne's poem is about the displacing of one kind of canon — the elevated souls of ecclesiastical history — with another kind — a secular canon, a kind of humanist pantheon. He's not serious; I dare say such a prospect would have horrified him. This, after all, was a man who published none of the poetry for which he is best remembered, but scrupulously oversaw the publication of his sermons, which now almost no-one reads. And yet this is what came to pass — one kind of canon did displace the other; the humanist pantheon elbowed out the saints and the martyrs in the general cultural consciousness; the little sonnets, looming ever larger, were transfigured into 'monuments of unageing intellect', to use a ringing and appropriate phrase from Yeats. Donne imagines a kind of immortality being conferred upon him for his loving and his poetry-making — 'We die, and rise the same, and prove mysterious by this love' he says — but he is being ironic, blasphemous and obscene all at the same time. He's kidding; and yet that's how it turned out. Such are the vagaries of history.

There is much that is instructive in this. First, if Donne has become a kind of monument — against his own expectation and against his own valuation, since he did not appear to value his poetry as much as he valued his other works (and this was especially the case with his love poetry, for which he is now best remembered) — if Donne has become a monument that's not such a bad thing. A kind of literary archaeology then begins: the poems are received as a cultural

legacy from the past whose treasures are to be exhumed, catalogued, displayed, admired. The investigation centres on these activities because of the monumental character of the object under scrutiny; it does not busy itself with questions of whether or not it should investigate this object, nor is it directed towards establishing the significance of it, precisely because it is predicated upon that significance. And consequently by their efforts the literary archaeologists will reveal more than the body of Donne — they will reveal themselves. For the archaeologist assumes a value in the work he or she does, and by his or her labour confirms it. Such confirmations are necessary, for they implicitly articulate the motivating values of the culture itself, and every now and then — or maybe more often than that — these values need to be held up to the light and examined, they need to be exposed to a fresher analytic air. And when there's an effort to disguise those 'motivating values' — which happens when people start talking about things being 'self-evidently' the case, or things being 'naturally' so — then it's the turn of other kinds of investigators to come in and sniff around, investigators who take upon themselves the detective's, rather than the archaeologist's, role.

That is the first way in which the history of Donne and his poem 'The Canonization' can be instructive: by the kinds of ironies the poem employs we can tell that Donne didn't value the work in any significant way (certainly he didn't value it as a kind of cultural monument) and yet it is now valued at precisely the rate he mockingly puts on it in this poem. He was being ironic when he wrote of the prospect of his being canonized 'by these hymns', as he put it; we are being serious when we discuss him, and this poem in particular, as monuments of 'the canon'. So here, at least in part, the values of later investigators rub up against the values of the poet. This being the case a certain obligation falls to the investigator to justify the valuation he or she gives of this text. And this reminds us that literary canons require us to, or should require us to, articulate the values we imagine they reflect. To put it another way, the friction implicit in the election of this poem to a canon underscores the fact that

crucial choices — aesthetic, political, cultural choices — are always made when canons are formed and maintained (to maintain a canon, after all, is to *choose* to maintain it). And every choice implies an agenda, a set of motives — ultimately, a set of values. That being the case, one can either declare that such choices are being made — and why — or one can disguise the fact, knowingly or unknowingly. And if such a disguise is suspected, it's time to start sniffing around.

Here is another way in which this story is instructive: it foregrounds the vagaries of history, and in so doing it allows us to focus on the evolutionary and transformational character of culture and value. Implicit in this and the previous point is the idea that, as we look at them over time, canons display not a confirmation of, but a relativization of values, and so confirm only the relativity of values. The canon has changed through time, and indeed at the moment it is undergoing change at an accelerated rate as marginalized literatures of all kinds are being brought to the centre of investigative attention. Such as it is and was, then, the canon is a telling record of cultural consciousness, a changeable and changing archive which graphs the vicissitudes of textualities and the values they reflect. One need only glance momentarily at this history of change to understand that canons — even *'the canon'* — is a less than effective vehicle for the perpetuation and propagation of so-called 'eternal' values, truths, ideas and so forth, which is often the claim made against them by critics of canons, or *'the canon'*.

In fact, despite their current poor press, I don't think canons are such bad things — I don't think even *'the canon'* is such a bad thing, as long as it is understood to be not a closed monument but an open space, an 'agora', a marketplace of ideas; or, perhaps better, an arena, a space of contestation. Without question it is not a level playing field, but that's to be expected, as the only ones who ever claim the field is level are those privileged by it. So because canons are formed and maintained within societies that are themselves structured by ideological and institutional biases, and because they of necessity reflect fundamental aspects of those

societies, they are seen as questionable commodities. That should be acknowledged from the start: amid the competing interests of any society there will always be those with a greater purchase upon the hearts and minds of the citizenry, for any number of reasons, and with any number of more or less wretched effects. Added to this is the fact of cultural inertia, the tendency for value systems, modes of thinking, modes of apprehending and behaving, to institutionalize themselves and, by so doing, to petrify the social order they inform. Such an effect is easily visible in the formation of canons, even at the most mundane level: publishing houses keep publishing the same books — it's cheaper, it's easier, and besides they are already set on university and school courses, so they will sell; universities and schools keep setting the same books — it's easier, and the books are available, and so on. That is an example of a spiral of inertia — the inertia which accounts for the generally glacial pace of social change. And this is the acknowledged milieu in which canon-formation and the maintenance of canons takes place.

But even with all that, canons, in my view, are not such bad things. Or rather, they are a fact of cultural life, unavoidable by virtue of the necessity of our doing one thing rather than another and thus they are neither good nor bad but simply there; and they can be made to be useful, and even progressive, as long as the inertia within them is resisted, which will happen whenever we understand canons as arenas of cultural contestation. That is, canons will have a deadening effect when they monumentalize, when they seem set in stone, when they invite the archaeological admirers only; but they can have a quickening effect, a vivifying effect, whenever we come to them with an equal interest in both the body of the work (a labour of archaeology) and with how and why that body came to be there (a labour of detection). From that point critical debate may take up the issue of whether the body still shows vital signs for us, or whether it is time for it to be removed.

Having said that it is appropriate to make two points regarding the specificity of the relation between individual

texts and culture in general — both the culture out of which these texts emerge, and the cultures in which they come to be read. First, it seems necessary these days to stress the point that texts need not passively reflect the social order in which they are composed and in which they are first received. This is especially the case when we are dealing with special sub-orders of the society at large, as we are with Donne for he didn't address that larger social order; he was a coterie poet, and his coterie consisted of other poets, friends, possible patrons, would-be courtiers and so on — a kind of select band of *culturati* in which the power struggles of the the world at large were both mirrored and disfigured. The coterie background to this verse, then, complicates further the problem of the relationship that obtains between word and world, text and culture. Of course texts never fail to reflect that socio-cultural order in which they take shape in one way or another, or in various ways, but the relationship between the two is more likely to be complex than simple since with literary texts we are dealing with complex rather than simple constructions. Consequently I for one am suspicious of readings that discover fairly exact correlations between the attitudes and ideas evident in the poetry and what are presumed to be the ideological imperatives of the time. The historicist's error, inevitably, is the failure to regard literature as literary, and to read it only as chronicle (the distinction between the two was clearly seen by Donne, and indeed he made it the basis of his claim to canonical elevation: 'And if no piece of chronicle we prove,/ We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms'.) What's more, as literature is often itself a site of conscious ideological contestation, and as writing is often the place for critical reflection upon that culture out of which it emerges, it is highly likely that our own critical sense of either contemporary or past culture has been and continues to be formed by the insights which a critically reflective literature has offered.

And second, it seems fair to say that, even if canons are fundamentally conservative, even if they do enshrine a body of texts which essentially perpetuate value systems that serve to petrify social relations and institutionalize historical

injustices (and I would grant neither point), canons may then be seen as peculiarly useful points of access into the ideological articulation of social orders, and may thus be peculiarly useful points at which one might seek to disarticulate that order, to deconstruct it and, by so doing, to transform it.

'Love's Alchemy' is one poem which throws into clear relief the division between the two angles of critical approach I have just described:

Some that have deeper digged love's mine than I,  
 Say, where his centric happiness doth lie;  
     I have loved, and got, and told,  
 But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,  
 I should not find that hidden mystery;  
 Oh, 'tis imposture all:  
 And as no chemic yet the elixir got,  
     But glorifies his pregnant pot,  
     If by the way to him befall  
 Some odoriferous thing, or medicinal,  
 So, lovers dream a rich and long delight,  
 But get a winter-seeming summer's night.

Our ease, our thrift, our honour, and our day,  
 Shall we, for this vain bubble's shadow pay?  
     Ends love in this, that my man,  
 Can be as happy as I can; if he can  
 Endure the short scorn of a bridegroom's play?  
     That loving wretch that swears,  
 'Tis not the bodies marry, but the minds,  
     Which he in her angelic finds,  
     Would swear as justly, that he hears,  
 In that day's rude hoarse minstrelsy, the spheres.  
     Hope not for mind in women; at their best  
     Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed.

The first question that needs to be asked here is whether we are inclined to read this poem as a kind of historical witness, or whether we are inclined to read it as a kind of historical accusation; in the first instance we will read it fully in the light of our sense of its historical context, and in the second we will read it in the light of our sense of its capacity to

realize more and more interesting and more and more unconstrained poetical meaning. In either case we are first obliged to consult our own inclination, which strikes me as a fairly telling point, since it underscores that our own inclinations, our own biases, are somehow bound up with and implicated in our approach to canonical texts and our ways of arriving at the meaning, and therefore the value, they appear to hold for us.

Any reading of this poem will turn on the nature of its misogyny — for it is clearly a deeply misogynistic poem, as is much of the poetry of the Renaissance. Such poetry takes its point of departure from the masculinist discourse of the courtly poetry of the 1500s in which the stress fell always upon the male experience as it unfolded the narrative of courtly love, the narrative of the languishing male lover disdained by the spiritually pure mistress. The effect of such a narrative was to metaphorize the torment of male sexual desire and render it as a painful effort of sublimation: again and again the poet complains of his mistress's harsh treatment of him, which correlates with her refusal of his sexual advances; so the woman never becomes the focus of attention and ultimately is irrelevant except as the occasion for the man's effort to transcend his own physical desires. Gradually the theme of the complaining male was to develop into a general poetic cynicism about love and women, and in the less idealized and more earthy atmosphere of the late 1500s and early 1600s this cynicism came to be voiced not by a rejected lover but rather by a jaded lover, a libertine, whose sexual conquests are both boasted of and cynically dismissed at the same time. Such is the case with 'Love's Alchemy', which represents a new inflection in, or a new voicing of, the masculinist discourse of Renaissance love poetry.

But the crucial question is: what attitude is the text taking to all of this? The speaker is presented as witty, even ingenious, as he superimposes the imagery of alchemy onto the idea of romance, and certainly we get the sense that he feels shrewdly assured of his own wit and judgement as he delivers his misogynistic verdict on love: it is a fraud, women

are inferior, and the idea that romance can transform the soul and provide true spiritual union is a sham — ‘Oh, ‘tis imposture all’. But look at how he judges, and consider what this reveals of him. He compares the claims made for love to the claims made for alchemy, and so he begins with what he regards as a witty metaphor for the activity of both — digging in a mine: the alchemist does this in order to find the base metal which his art will transform into gold; but to talk of ‘love’s mine’ is to be base in another way, and it reveals that the speaker understands love merely as lust. ‘Digging in love’s mine’ is merely sex, vulgar carnality, and he has been unable to go beyond his own baseness, his own mean and narrow understanding, in order to comprehend a greater and more humanly fulfilling idea of love. He believes he is a ‘lover’ because he has ‘loved, and got, and told’ — he understands love as nothing more than acquisition and sexual exploitation. That is why he mocks what lovers say of the effects of love — being incapable of overcoming his own baseness he can only sneer at others and judge them according to his deep and abiding prejudices, prejudices which, ultimately, centre on women, as is clear from his argumentative conclusion:

Hope not for mind in women; at their best  
Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed.

That final image is particularly vile; it plays on the senses of ‘mummy’ as decaying flesh as the basis for medication — and therefore as something that provides a brief respite from physical discomfort (such as, it is implied, sexual desire) — and ‘mummy’ as a soulless body, a mindless thing to be physically possessed and then discarded. The speaker’s witty ingenuity may be initially arresting and even amusing — the way in which he manages to develop the parallel imagery of love and alchemy may be initially impressive — but ultimately it betrays him as a kind of necrophilic cynic, and the poem invites us to judge him, and all that he represents, as base stuff which, mired in its perversity and prejudice, can never be transformed into something greater, something of value.

A reading culture that canonizes a poem such as this and values it as an ingenious example of Jacobean wit — thereby implicitly accepting or glossing over the sexual politics involved — reveals certain aspects of itself. Very different aspects, perhaps opposing aspects, will be revealed by a reading culture that canonizes 'Love's Alchemy' and values it as a fascinating critical insight into the patriarchal order of Renaissance society and the masculinist discourses in which it expressed and constructed itself — which is to say, a reading culture which attends more fully to the satiric and, especially, ironic emphases of the text. Arguably the last fifty years or so have seen our own reading culture shift from the first position described towards the second. In both cases the poem is canonized, but for different reasons and with different effects; and in both cases the text 'reads' the culture just as surely as it is read by it. But let me add one further point: a reading culture — especially an English-speaking reading culture — which chooses to dismiss the poem, to leave it out of the canon, would be in danger of losing its own critical self-consciousness. For English poetry is one of the great formative facts in our cultural history; to dismiss it — as the specious contemporary doctrine of relevance threatens to do with virtually all of the literature of the past, and as advocates of narrow political rectitude of various hues seemingly threaten to do with the written word itself — is to risk losing touch with crucial aesthetic, and historical, and cultural determinants that have played and still play a part in our own thinking and speaking.

## II

One of the forces that serves to monumentalize '*the canon*', is, paradoxically, antagonism to it; at least that is the case when that antagonism comes to regard 'the canon' as an institutional phenomenon rather than as a contestational space in which values negotiated between texts and textual investigators compete for dominance. The accusation of an unchanging, unitary canon inevitably divides the textual universe in two, and condemns it to a tedious Manichaean

strife in which the only resolution possible is that of simple inversion (the fate of all simple oppositional politics). This wilfulness generally takes two forms. The first argues that the term 'canon' derives from biblical scholarship and reflects in the literary-secular sphere that original scholarly effort to identify and circumscribe the word of truth, and to fix it for all time. The second, which is an extension of the first but, by contrast, merits some consideration, proffers the view that 'the canon' as we understand it is a fairly recent invention — not much more than a hundred years old; that is, about as old as the academic discipline of literary studies, or English Departments, which came into being towards the end of the last century, and for a specific historical purpose. Implicit in this is the view that it is nonsense to talk of 'the canon' in large historical terms, or nonsense to discuss the literary canonical career of Donne before the 1890s. It is certainly the case that, for a variety of reasons, literature and its study began to assume a central importance in the intellectual and moral life of Western societies at the end of the 1800s — and doubtless the most important reasons included the decline of faith and the waning of the power of the church in the moral affairs of the citizenry. The creation of departments of literary study came, then, in response to evolutionary, and ultimately revolutionary, forces first set in train by the humanist ruptures of the Renaissance — a humanistic study (the study of the cultural products of humanity) had effectively supplanted a religious study (the study of humanity and the world as products of divine agency). In a development ironically foreshadowed in 'The Canonization' the texts of men and women displaced the 'text' of God in the intellectual and moral endeavours of societies such as ours.

What this means, however, is not that a humanistic literary canon had quickly to be cobbled together to replace a religious canon that had lost its sway over the populace; rather it means that the humanistic literary canon which had formed itself and been maintained by various means for hundreds of years now found itself maintained within and propagated by a new, institutional medium — the university

and the school system. It is precisely because of this institutional implication, and the fact that literature in the modern humanist state was seen to be doing the work of religion in the older absolutist state, that the canon is often viewed as complicit with the institutional framework which serves to maintain the social order — a framework which naturally is profoundly conservative. But a 'canon' of English literature has existed in one way or another for centuries, and in that time it has changed considerably. Indeed the vicissitudes of Donne's career in and out of (or at least to the side of) the canon may be taken as exemplary of that canon's propensity for transformation and evolution.

To be more correct, it might be better in this regard to speak of the vicissitudes of the status of metaphysical poetry in general, for the entire poetic style had fallen out of favour by the end of the century in which it originally flourished. For well over one hundred years Donne and the other metaphysical poets were not much read, if at all, as the ideological and aesthetic principles of Neo-classicism established a dominance within English socio-cultural life. And it is worth recalling in this context Dr Johnson's judgement on the metaphysical poets in *The Life of Cowley*, as he for one would have been profoundly affronted by the suggestion that it was not until the latter part of the nineteenth century that literature was recruited to the moral and spiritual service of the social body, as antagonists of 'the canon' are prone to argue. But would that have matched the sense of affront with which he dismissed metaphysical poetry?

The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour; but, unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables.

And it was, of course, with ageless disdain that he dismissed metaphysical wit as

a kind of *discordia concors*: a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike... The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises: but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and, though he sometimes admires, is seldom pleased.<sup>2</sup>

So some time after his death — certainly by the time of Johnson, but evident really by the time of Dryden — the poetry of Donne had drifted into unfashionability; indeed, even before his death it had already done so with Donne himself, as he tried to suppress his secular writings and let it be known he was embarrassed by them. By the earlier part of this century, however, Donne's canonical star rose again, due centrally to the efforts of T.S. Eliot. The essence of Eliot's renovation of Donne can be found in this passage from his famous 1921 essay, 'The Metaphysical Poets':

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. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter, or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.<sup>3</sup>

Here is Eliot's famous theory of the 'unified sensibility' — that is, the capacity to modify one's sensibility to the point where it experiences things not in a compartmentalized fashion, but rather in a unified way so that, in his words, 'experiences are always forming new wholes'. With the age of Milton and Dryden, however, something happens — Eliot refers to as a 'dissociation of sensibility' — and this capacity for wholistic experience disappears, seemingly forever. The

2 Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings* (Penguin, 1984), pp. 403-4.

3 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 287.

evidence he cites for this is the poetry itself: in Donne and the other metaphysical poets we can witness a dramatization of the poetic personality in which all areas of being — the psychological, the physical, the spiritual — and all areas of existential concern — from the most irrelevant and quotidian to the most central and universal — contribute to and play a part in that personality's sense of things.

Johnson's dismissal of, and Eliot's celebration of, the metaphysical style are well known, but I have quoted them again here for the purpose of contrasting the specific terms of their evaluation. For, despite Eliot's declared admiration for Johnson, they are fairly clearly at odds with one another not just on the matter of poetic style, but also on the matter of poetic value. I imagine they would have disagreed considerably over the merit of a poem such as 'Love's Growth', which seems to demonstrate simultaneously both the excesses deplored by the one, and the virtues prized by the other:

I scarce believe my love to be so pure  
 As I had thought it was,  
 Because it doth endure  
 Vicissitude, and season, as the grass;  
 Me thinks I lied all winter, when I swore,  
 My love was infinite, if spring make it more.  
 But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow  
 With more, not only be no quintessence,  
 But mixed of all stuffs, paining soul, or sense,  
 And of the sun his working vigour borrow,  
 Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
 To say, which have no mistress but their Muse,  
 But as all else, being elemented too,  
 Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

And yet not greater, but more eminent  
 Love by the spring is grown;  
 As, in the firmament,  
 Stars by the sun are not enlarged, but shown,  
 Gentle love deeds, as blossoms on a bough,  
 From love's awakened root do bud out now.  
 If, as in water stirred more circles be  
 Produced by one, love such additions take,

Those like so many spheres, but one heaven make,  
 For, they are all concentric unto thee,  
 And though each spring do add to love new heat,  
 As princes do in time of action get  
 New taxes, and remit them not in peace,  
 No winter shall abate the spring's increase.

Personally I can't help inclining towards the Eliot view in evaluating this poem, which brings together the abstract and the actual in a series of tight and tortuous argumentative manoeuvres yet somehow manages to remain a dramatically effective love lyric, and even becomes a kind of beguiling romantic compliment. It works, I think, because everything in it is directed towards dramatizing a personality that restlessly desires to come to some sort of understanding of an emotional experience that appears to defy comprehension. Or to put that another way — the speaker is restlessly trying to *come to terms* with this experience, but it *defies the terms* that conventional romantic discourse makes available to him. The problematic experience is the one referred to in the title — love's growth — an experience which is the central actuality for the speaker, but he is puzzled or, perhaps more correctly, he is amazed by this experience, and the poem records his movements through a maze of thought — a maze in which image piles on image in an effort of comprehension, and in which the mind turns hesitantly down one corridor of thought and then down another, in an effort to logically pursue this illogical and irrational sense of an emotional fullness which nevertheless continues to grow. That is why, when he begins to hypothesize about what the makeup of this love could possibly be at line seven, he eventually finds he is obliged to define it in negative terms — 'love is not this, and not this, although conventional romantic discourse has always told me that that's what I should expect it to be'. And those who speak this conventional romantic discourse are the poets, who apparently have little or no knowledge of the actuality of romantic love:

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

So love is, surprisingly, neither pure, nor abstract, nor immutable ('Because it doth endure / Vicissitude, and season, as the grass'). What's more, the sense of erotic desire — which he had always been taught was there to be transcended, to be sublimated into a higher form of adoration for female beauty and, through that, for God — this sense of erotic desire, he discovers, is elemental to, but not a debasing of, his love experience:

But as all else, being elemented too  
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

Made up of elements, including the element of physical passion, he finds at times his love sweeps him up into a state of rapturous adoration, but at other times it siezes him with desire. The 'growth' of love referred to in the title is not merely emotional and spiritual — with Donne it is always physical as well.

By this point the speaker is frankly baffled, and it is this sense of bafflement that informs the structure and rhythm of the verse — its hesitations, its abrupt movements from thought to thought, image to image, and so on — and that motivates the effort to make language work in a new and imaginative and illuminating manner in the second quatorzain. Here the speaker is willing to take greater metaphorical risks in order to virtually invent a poetic language that answers to this romantic experience that exceeds all conventional categories of comprehension, and that includes an emotional, a spiritual, a physical and — as we see in the making of the poem itself — an intellectual component. The speaker begins by searching for a greater exactitude of understanding, and so he returns to the idea of growth and refines it (which suggests, incidentally, that he doesn't want the image of 'growth' and 'do[ing]' to convey a sense of mere sexuality, but nor does he wish to exclude a sense of physical passion):

And yet not greater, but more eminent,  
Love by the spring is grown;  
As, in the firmament,  
Stars by the sun are not enlarged, but shown.

He is willing to use the conventional language of spring, the sun, and the idea of renewal, but only if it can be used to arrive at a new, more delicate, but also more inclusive, sense of the experience, which I think is the case when it yields the exquisite image that follows:

Gentle love deeds, as blossoms on a bough,  
From love's awakened root do bud out now.

Here, for the first time in the poem, those aspects of love which remained unexpressed in the conventional language of romance and so baffled the speaker — the sense of fullness with further growth, of purity in variousness, of being both timeless and urgently of the moment — emerge in an image that is at once erotic, abstruse, and gently lyrical.<sup>4</sup>

It is at this point that we discover, surprisingly, that this is not a kind of reflective and self-inquisitive monologue; it is rather spoken to the beloved, who is thus being treated to this abstruse disquisition on the character of love as experienced by the speaker. In the light of this we may now read the opening quatorzain not simply as meditative (although it retains a searching and reflective tone) but as part of a unique romantic address to the woman in which the speaker first surprises her by declaring his love for her *not* to be pure and immutable and infinite, but then beguiles her with his newly invented language of love, which is more extreme, more searching, and — because it is unconventional — more personalized and more deeply complimentary. So the poem is both inquiring into and reflecting on this unique experience of love as the speaker comes to understand it, and at the same time it is a charming demonstration of that

4 The image is not entirely new here -- Juliet, for one, uses it in romantic colloquy with Romeo from the balcony ("Sweet, goodnight: / This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath, / May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet" — II.i.162-4). But the point here is that Donne revivifies and extends the semantic potentialities of the image by making it work within the complexities of the rhetorical and metaphorical structures of this poem.

uniqueness. 'If', he says — and significantly even as he is about to pay the clearest and most specific compliment of the poem to the beloved the speaker nevertheless retains the same complex tone of meditation, adoration, and desire, for this compliment is framed in the language of philosophical hypothesis and delivered in astronomical and agricultural and political imagery — 'If', he says

as in water stirred more circles be  
Produced by one, love such additions take,  
Those like so many spheres, but one heaven make,  
For, they are all concentric unto thee.

This astronomical imagery permits a set of associations to be generated which will carry the poem to its conclusion: heaven suggests the sun, the sun suggests spring and regeneration, this suggests the heat of the sun but also the heat of desire, this suggests physical action, which suggests turbulence, which suggests war, which suggests taxes imposed at times of crisis that are not repealed after the crisis is over, which suggests a final image of unabated growth in which all of these ideas play off one another:

And though each spring do add to love new heat,  
As princes do in time of action get  
New taxes, and remit them not in peace,  
No winter shall abate the spring's increase.

'Love's Growth' is an excellent example of the sort of poem Eliot would have valued and the sort of poem Johnson would have derided and, perhaps, considered valueless. Consider on the one hand that it gives a striking example of a poet's mind 'constantly amalgamating disparate experience' — that creative faculty Eliot prized most of all — and then consider that its language and strategies tend towards the abstruse, the tortuous, the uncommon and the far-fetched — the points on which the Neo-classicists were most severe in their criticism. Clearly some sort of revolutionary transformation in the nature of poetic culture takes place between Donne and Johnson, and then again between Johnson and Eliot. But these evolutionary and revolutionary

transformations should hardly surprise us; they should merely alert us to the dangers of, and the intellectual arrogance of, seeing and judging everything from our own perspective — that is, they alert us to our obligations as intellectuals to imaginatively and analytically come to terms with the nature of cultural relativity and the validity — to say nothing of the fact — of cultural difference (it is sometimes forgotten these days that the past, too, is another country). For Johnson poetry is not a private thing — as it was for Donne, and as it would become again, but in a different way and for different reasons, for Eliot, and perhaps for us. For Johnson — writing in the eighteenth century to a literate mass audience unimaginable to the coterie poet John Donne — writing is a public profession and, as such, requires a shared sense of things, a shared understanding of ideas and feelings and, above all, a shared language in which these could be reasonably discussed. It is no accident that arguably Johnson's greatest work was the compilation of a dictionary — that is, the recording of the elemental discursive fabric that held his society together. Whatever is private, unique, or eccentric, is offensive to the secular and democratic and communal moral order in which bourgeois eighteenth-century cultural consciousness operated. Consider the great poetic works of Neo-classicism — *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Dunciad*, *Absalom and Achitophel*, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, *The Seasons* — not one of them is a love poem; and now consider the great poetic works of the Renaissance — *Astrophel and Stella*, *The Epithalamion*, Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* — and everywhere there is love poetry. Even the religious verse is love poetry of a kind — it clearly is in Donne, it is in Herbert, in Vaughan, and so on. Obviously the whole axis of poetry shifts between the Jacobean and Neo-classical periods, and it shifts again, a number of times, before we get to Modernism and T.S.Eliot, when metaphysical poetry is re-evaluated.

And what was it, after all, that Eliot found so attractive in this poetry? It wasn't its celebration of the amorous; it wasn't the fact that in it a new maturity and a new realism emerges in the language of love; it wasn't that the woman to whom the

poem is addressed begins to acquire a humanity equivalent to that of the male speaker precisely because of that realism and that maturity. No, it is that here 'the poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience': it is that the subjectivity of the poet himself is on display, dazzlingly so, making new poetic wholes out of fragments of experience — something that would have been very attractive and very valuable indeed to a self-obsessed poet trying to make poetic sense of a fragmented experience amid the chaos of modernity, and choosing to do so through the poetic technique of dramatic monologue wherein a peculiarly self-obsessed and dramatically isolated subjectivity is made to display itself. In saying that I don't wish to disparage Eliot — far from it. Indeed my discussion of 'Love's Growth' as well as my sense of it as an extraordinarily valuable poem are predicated upon Eliot's insights regarding metaphysical poetry; so I have effectively demonstrated how much my own sense of poetic value is dependent upon his. Nevertheless I do wish to emphasize that social and political and cultural actualities contribute to the changing systems of value through which we appraise poetry, and that poetry itself responds differently to those actualities as they change over time. It is eighteenth-century bourgeois reality that creates poetry in the public mode and the values that subtends; and it is the catastrophe of twentieth-century modernity that creates a private poetry obsessed with the effort to find some sort of subjective meaning in the midst of all the objective chaos. Each poetic order is perfectly valid; but each will throw up its own values, its own prejudices, its own canons, and in the contestational space of culture these two orders will always be antagonists.

### III

No doubt it is because we still respond to it as Eliot did that we still value the poetry of John Donne: we still read in it today the action of the sensibility itself as it draws upon all the resources of existential being. True, we may be more interested in the dramatic variety of the verse than Eliot — we

may be more likely to distinguish John Donne from the 'I' of the poem, and thus be more likely to show an interest in how that sensibility may range in amplitude from a vulgar narrowness, as in 'Love's Alchemy', to a generous and fulfilling breadth, as in 'Love's Growth'. For Donne's is a poetry of exploration which often arrives at new vistas of human personality, but just as often is interested in exploring the known shallows of his local, contemporary world. The vulgar and lustful braggart of 'Love's Alchemy' begins with a kind of challenge: 'Some that have deeper digged love's mine than I, / Say, where his centric happiness doth lie'; and in 'Love's Growth' that challenge is taken up by a personality who occupies the opposite end of the spectrum of romantic sensibility, for he declares his 'centric happiness' to be 'thee':

If, as in water stirred more circles be  
Produced by one, love such additions take,  
Those like so many spheres, but one heaven make,  
For, they are all concentric unto thee.

That the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together in this kind of verse is not, to us, a matter of great moment. Indeed, we have learned to read the peculiarly discordant and tortuous techniques of metaphysical poetry — its paradoxes and ironies and far-fetched imagery — as heuristic devices that propel this exploratory mode. We value Donne for employing these devices as he does (that is to say, relentlessly) because we see them as the means by which he is moved to think in new, fresh, imaginative ways, and as the means by which the disparate areas of social and spiritual and intellectual and moral and romantic existence are brought together into an overall unified poetic sense.

So this is one of the reasons why we do, and I think one of the reasons why we *should*, value Donne: because what he achieved within English poetry was the invention of a genuinely searching poetics, and he utterly transformed the poetic legacy bequeathed him by the poets of the Elizabethan age. For what he inherited from them was merely the stock situations and the conventional language of courtly

love — the languishing lover, the distant mistress, the oxymoronic accents of desire, the futility, the sublimation, the tedium. And courtly poetry *was* love poetry — which means not only that it was the prescribed mode of writing about love, but that it reflected the prescribed mode of thinking about, of conceiving, the love relationship and one's place in it. It determined for the romantic subject what it was to be a man, what it was to be a woman, and it provided an ideal against which the romantic experience could be tested, and against which it would always be found wanting. At its best Donne's poetry, by contrast, gives us access to a sense of romantic experience which falls outside these narrowly prescriptive roles and forms, and thus gives us access to a wholly fresh imagination of the romantic self. Indeed, Donne's poetry arguably marks that moment in English literature when modern love comes into being, and consequently it is a peculiarly bold, imaginative, and unconstrained celebration of a type of love which came to underwrite all subsequent narratives of romance. And yet it quickly fell out of favour — a fact that is of no small significance in the history of the romantic sensibility and the forms it was to take.

My own suspicion is that it is precisely the poetry's lack of constraint — and, at the same time, its willingness to explore, to open up or to discover what seem to be new regions of the human sensibility — that assisted in its being pushed towards the canonical margins. True, by the second half of the seventeenth century and for the entire Neo-classical period the function of poetry changed — it became more public, more formal, more socially engaged, which is why the satiric mode came to dominate; at the same time the Neo-classical doctrine of propriety — of things being brought together appropriately, and not improperly, as in the metaphysical conceit — meant that Donne's inventive but 'far-fetched' style would never do in the new cultural climate. But it wasn't just its outdated intimacy and its unclassical inelegance that caused it to lose favour; the point is Donne's unconstrained poetry was offensive to a wholly different ideology of romance which was in the course of being invented in the

period of bourgeois ascendancy. That is to say another romantic narrative was forming itself — one that would displace fully the old aristocratic courtly narrative even as it drew on its constituent elements and adapted them for bourgeois use; and in this narrative the poetic figuration of men, women and the experiences they share precluded the kinds of realism available to Donne in his poetry.

A clue to this development is given in Dryden's Neo-classical criticism in which he castigated Donne for 'affecting the metaphysics' and 'perplexing the minds of the fair sex' instead of 'entertaining them with the softnesses of love'. This shows that the new model of romance was based both on the bourgeois sentimental ideal *and* on the Neo-classical doctrine of propriety. Indeed, these go hand in glove: from the Neo-classical perspective the impropriety of talking to a woman as Donne does is merely the inverse of the propriety of sequestering her within her newly sentimentalized femininity, by means of which she is turned into a new kind of object — no longer sexually unattainable, as in courtly love, nor sexually active, as in Donne and the later cavalier poetry, but rather sexually available after purchase, and crucially *intact*. For in the midst of the emergent capitalism of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the woman's traditional status as masculine property acquires a new significance: ladies are no longer destined for lords in marriage arrangements which pre-date the birth of either; rather women are now valuable commodities in a general marital futures exchange in which — in a gallant gesture of democratization — all the classes (above the peasant level) may play. Again and again this state of affairs is reflected in the literature of the period: from the marriage contract scene between Millamant and Mirabell in Congreve's *The Way of the World*, to the squalid trade in bodies in Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, to the entrepreneurial commodification of 'virtue' (for which Henry Fielding, for one, read saleable virginity) in Richardson's *Pamela*, to, perhaps most telling of all, the entrepreneurial and romantic triumph of Fanny Hill in John Cleland's pornographic novel of the same name, the literature

of the Neo-classical period abounds with images of the commodification of women and the business of romance.

Against this Donne's poetry can be read as refreshingly free of both the Petrarchanism that preceded it — where the woman is spiritualized out of real existence — and the bourgeois sentimentalism that comes after — where the woman is ultimately coded as and commodified as the frail but available virgin, the delicate merchandise that cannot be shop-soiled in any way (except, ironically, as a prostitute). It was no longer birthright, aristocratic heritage, the *courtly* virtues that were the crucial components in assessing value; in the bourgeois myth woman comes to be defined as a creature of exquisite sensibility — the more rarefied, the more subject to an instinctive 'femininity' of feeling, the more valuable: and so with the fond hope of gaining a greater profit in the deregulated marriage market fathers and brothers would invest in the sensibility of the woman by subjecting her to a strict tutelage in the circumscribed repertoire of female accomplishments — accomplishments which emphasized passivity, domesticity, and depth of feeling — and by this means relations between men and women of all classes were put on a sound commercial footing. What the bourgeoisie brings into being, that is, is a conception of romance which borrows from the tradition of courtly love, but turns it from an allegory of desire into an allegory of the marketplace.

And this is clearly not the case in Donne's poetry — which is why that poetry would have been not only aesthetically but also *ideologically* offensive to the Neo-classical mind: it does not treat what Dryden called 'the fair sex' as 'the fair sex'; it does not regard women as vessels of rarefied sensibility to be approached only with 'the softnesses of love' — quite the opposite, in fact. So what I am suggesting is that the value of Donne's love poetry for us is due partly to the fact that love and the narrative of romance were in the process of disengaging themselves from one codification — that of courtly love — but had not yet been encoded in the next major form — the bourgeois sentimental myth. That is why Donne's poetry remains fresh and vivid: because the love it

celebrates — romantic love, to which, perhaps at one's peril, one abandons oneself (which, to his cost, Donne did in real life, ruining his prospects in the process) — is itself fresh and vivid, peculiarly so, because here, for this brief period in the history of the Western romantic sensibility, love is comparatively free of encumbering narratives, encumbering imagery, encumbering conventions.

In fact, in some of his best poems Donne seems aware of this freshness, aware of how boldly exploratory he is being — sometimes, that is, the poems themselves throw precisely these aspects of the verse into high relief. That is certainly the case in a poem like 'The Good Morrow' where there is no sense of an encumbering narrative of romance, and thus there is no sense of a prior male conquest of the female will; rather the lovers are depicted as being in a state of dawning freshness, puzzled, if anything, at what might have been before they awakened to their love for one another (at all times the accent is on the *mutuality* of affection that unites them):

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I  
 Did, till we loved? were we not weaned till then?  
 But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?  
 Or snorted we in the seven sleepers' den?

'Twas so,' the speaker decides, which permits him to pursue the image of sleep in such a way as to turn his own past sexual adventures — which he has already hinted at in the line 'Sucked on country pleasures' — into a compliment to his beloved, for his past, he says, was composed of dreams of passion which only now are realized in her:

'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.  
 If ever any beauty I did see,  
 Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

So the title conceit of 'the good morrow' is taken up in the poem as the metaphor for a love relationship which dawns upon the lovers — brings them out of the dreamy unreality of their separated past into the vivid reality of their united romantic present which is imaged as a new day of mutual

faith, honesty, and contentment in a previously uncharted region of the soul:

And now good morrow to our waking souls,  
 Which watch not one another out of fear;  
 For love, all love of other sights controls,  
 And makes one little room an everywhere.  
 Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
 Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,  
 Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

That sense of love as being both fulfilling and sufficient, as constituting a world in itself, is characteristic of Donne's most mature love poetry — as the speaker in 'The Sun Rising' says to the sun itself: 'Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere'. And while there is no questioning the patriarchal structure of the Jacobean social order, because the experience of love is relatively unsupervised by codifying constraints the moment is on offer here for the woman to enter into the poem on a level of humanity equivalent to that of the male speaker — not elevated above him as spiritualized essence, nor demeaned beneath him as purchasable commodity, but precisely equal to him and looking him straight in the eye. That is why the figure Donne finally arrives at to embody his sense of this intense romantic moment is that of the self mirrored in the reflecting eye of the other: that is, the 'window to the soul', the eye, for each of the lovers shows the image of the beloved. Each has become the soul of the other in a world of amorous harmony: the convexity of the eye is brilliantly taken up in the image of the hemispheres — the eyes, that is, are the hemispheres of this private, romantic world (a world that is devoid of frosty poles or western sunsets) — and the souls of each are telescoped into the other in a moment of erotic and emotional and intellectual and spiritual union, a moment that feels eternal:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
 And true plain hearts do in the faces rest,  
 Where can we find two better hemispheres  
 Without sharp north, without declining west?

Whatever dies was not mixed equally;  
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

I think nowhere else in English poetry is there an equivalent image of love triumphant — nowhere is there celebrated a sense of love that is as mature yet passionate, as thoughtful yet abandoned, as spiritual yet eroticized.<sup>5</sup>

And yet this celebration of the giving of the self to the romantic other in an intense and intensely private union clearly does not reflect the social actualities of the period — indeed it was precisely for this reason that the speaker of 'The Canonization' felt obliged to defend himself from worldly admonishment. What this suggests is that in these texts the relation of word to world is not simply reflective but is, rather, peculiarly complicated. Such a complication is not puzzling, however, it is simply intriguing and, these days perhaps, salutary, since it confirms the complexity of relations that obtain between word and world, and thereby confirms that the literary text is a very different thing from the text of culture.

I do not wish to resolve this intrigue, but I would like to muse upon one possible relation between the literary and the historical here, and so entertain an hypothesis as to why we might meet this wholly new conception of love and romance in Donne and, to a lesser extent, in some of the other metaphysical poets of the early 1600s. To begin, it is worth drawing attention again to the fact that the poetry itself seems to highlight a sense of newness, a sense of surprising existential novelty — as when Donne writes in 'The Good Morrow':

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown;  
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one

<sup>5</sup> Note, for example, the pun once more on the word 'die' in the final lines, suggesting an eternity of both sacred and profane bliss, both spiritual and sexual bliss.

Here previously unglimped regions of the romantic soul are explored with a sense of discovery equivalent to that of the navigators who were at that time revealing the new world for European eyes. And one could assume that this reiterated sense of existential novelty must be based on some new inflection within the curve of cultural experience and, consequently, some new inflection within the curve of biographical experience. Now, such an inflection — both broadly cultural and at the same time intimately personal — is locatable at the time of Donne's writing, for it is in this period that something crucial is happening to the English language: it is in the process of becoming a language of faith, a sacred language, or at least a language capable of embodying and transmitting the sacred. The great work of the period was the translation of the Bible, completed and presented to James I in 1611<sup>6</sup> and this authorized version of The Bible may be seen as the consummation of a kind of religio-linguistic movement — which was equally a profound socio-cultural movement — that began in the English Reformation under Henry VIII. This was a movement that charted the protestantization — but the specifically *English* protestantization — of the Christian faith.

What this means is that the English language is in the process of becoming the vehicle for a new comprehension of and a new articulation of particular kinds of experience. Of course the essential experience the language concerns itself with in this regard is religious experience, but that is itself in the course of turbulent transformation — the religious experience of the English soul in 1600 is utterly different from the religious experience of the English soul in 1500. The differences between the two may be understood in terms of privacy, intimacy, immediacy, and intensity — differences that mirror the protestant move towards an *immediate* rather

<sup>6</sup> That is, about the time Donne might have been writing most of the 'Holy Sonnets', although almost nine tenths of the authorized version merely reproduced Tyndale's exquisite translation, which had circulated for decades.

than a *mediated* relation between humanity and God. For the first time men and women were being forced to comprehend their religious experience in those terms: privacy, intimacy, immediacy, intensity. Consider the kind of revolutionary cultural drama implicit in this transformation — consider the degree to which whole areas of human personality, human activity, and human communion would have needed to be re-apprehended in terms of the radically new perspectives the theological and ideological changes of the Reformation produced. Consider, for example, that the whole character of private experience must have changed from one of a sense of personal seclusion to one of a sense of personal retreat shared by the intimate presence of God; or consider that the soul's experience of spiritual communion no longer makes use of hierarchical and priestly channels of communication, but now meets God nakedly. Then consider how that century-long drama might be telescoped in the traumatic experience of an individual who, born a Catholic and raised in a devout household, apostatizes in early manhood and eventually rises to a supreme position in the English Protestant church. Consider how deeply the effects of such a revolution in personal spirituality would have been etched in the sensibility of such an individual.

That, of course, was the experience of John Donne, who was born into a devout Catholic family that suffered under the Elizabethan persecutions of the Catholics, who converted to protestantism in early manhood, and who eventually became Dean of St Pauls and one of the most well known churchmen of his day.<sup>7</sup> So the biographical narrative rehearses with greater intensity the general cultural narrative, and what we see in Donne's poetry is a celebration of human romantic communion of a kind virtually unimaginable before this moment in history, unimaginable because an entire existential register of intimate experience has only just become available, and new modes of lyricism need to be

<sup>7</sup> John Carey gives a compelling account of this in his excellent critical biography *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber, rev. edn 1990).

invented — *are* invented by Donne himself — in order to comprehend and articulate that experience.

Privacy, intimacy, immediacy, intensity — these surely are the central features of Donne's love lyrics: that is to say, Donne creates an English poetics that answers to the same sorts of challenges which the language itself is facing in its transformation into a sacred language. And again and again this new, exploratory poetics draws upon the vocabulary of faith to give expression to its understanding of secular experience: it employs sacred language in an effort to comprehend the profane. More than that, it will use profane language in order to comprehend the sacred, because the division between the two — as Donne understands it — has disappeared in the shift from a *mediated* to an *immediate* relation between humanity and God, and consequently the full breadth of Donne's poetic career is distinguished by the persistence of a shared metaphoric of love and faith. Sometimes, of course, this is done for essentially witty purposes — as in 'The Canonization', for example — but the degree to which Donne is willing to improperly apply the discourse of religious faith when writing of romance and the discourse of romance when writing of religious faith suggests that he has in mind much more than a mere display of wit (and I am using the term 'improper' in a Neo-classical sense, that is this juxtaposition of subject and discourse could be seen as inappropriate and aesthetically offensive to the Neo-classical critic). In fact I would argue that this juxtaposition becomes the enabling condition for a poetic exploration of self and other, and a poetic exploration of states of selfhood, which would otherwise be closed off, compartmentalized within their typical generic discourse. Thus it is by this means that Donne can explore what I can only call the spirituality of love on the one hand, or the romance of faith on the other, in wholly new, imaginative ways.

The point, though, is that such a conjunction of ideas — of there being a spirituality of love, or of there being a romance of faith — such a conjunction of ideas did not really exist before this point in time, or certainly not with the same

compelling power as it does for Donne.<sup>8</sup> One need only look at a few lines from a poem such as 'Batter my heart' to see that Donne has come to comprehend his spiritual relationship with God as one imbued with passion and romance, as he addresses God directly in the accents of an almost manically anguished lover. The final lines suggest the kinds of oxymoronic constructions typically found in Petrarchan poetry, and of course they derive directly from that tradition, but in this context — the context of a naked individual soul in critical confrontation with God — they read as tormenting paradoxes which probe the mystery of the Christian consciousness of sin and the promise of redemption:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
 But am betrothed unto your enemy.  
 Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again;  
 Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
 Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

This is perhaps the most passionately charged religious poem in the language, and it comes about, I think, because of the tenacity with which Donne pursued in his own sensibility the full implications of that shift from a mediated to an immediate existence. For without mediation there can no longer be divisions within the self — everything is rendered immediate to everything else, every aspect of the self is invaded by and informed by every other aspect.

Little wonder that Eliot responds to Donne's 'unified sensibility', because philosophically Donne found himself in

8 Donne was hardly the first to bring the sacred and the profane together for poetic purposes -- when the church fathers accepted *The Song of Solomon* into the biblical canon they were, after all, doing much the same thing, and the history of Western art is arguably a recurrent record of this kind of creative cross-pollination between the sacred and the profane. Nevertheless the intensity and inventiveness of Donne's use of this technique, combined with its functioning across an extraordinary and constantly evolving poetic career, and combined too with the uniqueness of his historical moment (as I argue it here, in any case), distinguish him within that Western tradition.

the position of being unable to conceive of himself in any way except as unified. He comprehends himself, as he says in the fifth Holy Sonnet, as 'a little world made cunningly of elements', but every element invades or informs every other — there can be no sectioning off one from another; and because he feels this unity of self so keenly he despairs, because he knows there are aspects of himself which compromise the purity of his religious spirit:

I am a little world made cunningly  
 Of elements, and an angelic sprite,  
 But black sin hath betrayed to endless night  
 My world's both parts, and oh, both parts must die.  
 You which beyond that heaven which was most high  
 Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write,  
 Pour new seas in mine eyes, that so I might  
 Drown my world with my weeping earnestly,  
 Or wash it if it must be drowned no more:  
 But oh, it must be burnt; alas the fire  
 Of lust and envy have burnt it heretofore,  
 And made it fouler; let their flames retire,  
 And burn me O Lord, with a fiery zeal  
 Of thee and thy house, which doth in eating heal.

Again Donne concludes with a paradox — the paradox of God's consuming fires which, unlike the fires of lust and envy, heal rather than hurt: they do 'in eating heal'. That paradox derives ultimately from the Bible, but the rest of the imagery in the poem can be traced directly to Donne's love poetry — the idea of one being a world, of tears drowning that world, and so on, are to be found in the love poems (with certain crucial modifications, such as its taking *two* to make a world in the love poetry). In particular one notes here the call to the new scientists, the astronomers, to metaphorically discover in him new stellar territories of the religious soul in order that he might purify himself:

You which beyond that heaven which was most high  
 Have found new spheres, and of new lands can write,  
 Pour new seas in mine eyes, so that I might  
 Drown my world with my weeping earnestly.

One is immediately reminded of the love poetry and Donne's sense of discovering new territories of the romantic self. So the imagery of the new science appears in the religious poetry, as does the imagery of erotic love, as does the sense of oneself as a world, and so on; and these continuities should alert us to the fact that Donne apprehends both the religious experience and the romantic experience in essentially the same terms and through essentially the same modes of thought. It is particularly telling, for example, that the poetic form which was taken as the very pattern of romantic thought, the sonnet, is never used by Donne in his secular poetry, and yet he employs it to write an entire cycle of religious poems: these are love poems to God. And the reason why he apprehends both experiences in identical terms is because he cannot recognize divisions within his own sensibility — he has no 'spiritual side' which he understands as distinct from a 'romantic side', or whatever; and there is no 'intellectual side' which coolly and dispassionately assesses experience. Everything is immediate to everything else, so every aspect of the self participates equally in every experience. Inevitably such an understanding issues in a poetic style that is exploratory, boldly associative, and, though 'elemented' by a multiplicity of passions and interests, seeks out and constantly arrives at startlingly new patterns of coherence for the self and the other.

But the final implication of this self-understanding is that the totality of one's personal involvement actually threatens the sense of self. For the religious experience is as unconstrained as the love experience in Donne's writings, and in each case he *abandons* himself to it. What the poetry tends to record in the experience of love or faith is precisely this abandonment of the self: that is, it records an investment of existential being so great that, at a limit point, the self is extinguished in an act of poetic apprehension which is rendered in either one of two modes, both of which take a religious experience as their central principle — the mode of self-transcending ecstasy, and the mode of self-negating despair.

In the 'Holy Sonnets' the romance of faith is recorded, but the overwhelming tone of these poems is one of spiritual anguish verging on despair — that is the nature of Donne's protestant faith: it is drenched in the consciousness of sin, and it is profoundly imbued with a sense of personal unworthiness and spiritual emptiness. On the other hand the love lyrics treat of a welling emotional fullness which seems to overflow the bounds of individuality — as is clear from the tortuous reasoning of 'Love's Growth', and from the imagery of the lovers' united, 'global' being in 'The Good Morrow'. This theme is given its most extended and explicit treatment (although not, to my mind, its most poetically successful treatment) in 'The Ecstasy', in which the ecstatic state is represented as being inspired by love rather than faith. The two lovers are pictured in a state of self-transcending romantic communion whereby the two become one, graduating first from the inferior union of physical intimacy to a spiritual union in which their discriminated selves are left behind:

When love, with one another so  
 Interanimates two souls,  
 That abler soul, which thence doth flow,  
 Defects of loneliness controls.

Reasoning that the two of them form an 'abler soul', a greater single soul whose elements are the unchangeable souls of each, the speaker claims that their union is such that to return to bodies would not imply a separation. Their mysterious unity will persist, a mystery reflected in the paradoxical but evocative phrase which he uses to describe their romantic communion — 'a dialogue of one':

To our bodies turn we then, that so  
 Weak men on love revealed may look;  
 Love's mysteries in souls do grow,  
 But yet the body is his book.

And if some lover, such as we,  
 Heard this dialogue of one,  
 Let him still mark us; he shall see  
 Small change, when we're to bodies gone.

So the religious concept of ecstasy is used by Donne as an imaginative device to give expression to his sense of the experience of love, and specifically to his sense of that 'spirituality of love' I mentioned earlier.

What needs to be noted, however, is that Donne's existential stake in the dual experiences of love and faith is so high it risks the abyss for the sake of gaining all: for although the poet feels a plenitudinous sense of fulness in the *presence* of the romantic other, he experiences an anguished sense of meaninglessness in the *absence* of the romantic/spiritual other. His wretchedness at his sense of isolation from God issues in poetry of the deepest anguish, but that wretchedness had already been felt by him, and recorded by him, in 'A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day', which commemorates the loss and his consequent isolation from the beloved other in a mystical poem whose centre is not a meditation of human insignificance in the presence of God, but a meditation of human insignificance in the absence of the earthly other. Here all of the imagery that resonates in Donne's poems of romantic triumph returns in hideously disfigured form to describe his sense of emptiness and meaninglessness:

Study me then, you who shall lovers be  
 At the next world, that is, at the next spring;  
     For I am every dead thing,  
     In whom love wrought new alchemy.  
         For his art did express  
 A quintessence even from nothingness,  
 From dull privations, and lean emptiness  
 He ruined me, and I am re-begot  
 Of absence, darkness, death; things which are not.

This is a romantic anguish as intense and as despairing as any spiritual anguish we might find in Donne's religious poetry, and that is so because for Donne the narrative of romance is not destined to conclude in the sentimental certainties of amorous marital union, and because for him the experiences of love and faith mirror one another in the bleak nakedness of the unmediated soul.

## IV

I have tried to make the case here that the study of canonical authors and canonical texts remains and will remain valuable insofar as they force us to negotiate our own sense of values with them, and insofar as we permit the text to read us as we read it. But this can only happen if we continue to regard canons as open and contentious; and I think it can only happen, too, if the texts themselves work as literature — that is, if they are sufficiently absorbing, and sufficiently complex, for us to want to return to them again and again to try once more to make something of them. Clearly for me Donne's poetry works that way. Donne is a lyric poet, and as such he is a dramatist of the intimate self. It happens that he wrote at a time when the European consciousness, and here specifically the Protestant consciousness — propelled by the new forces of a reformist and renascent culture — was venturing into uncharted territory. Donne was a kind of pathfinder on this adventure: his poetry is a lyrical dramatization of the exploring self and the exploring soul in its moments of extreme emotional and spiritual intensity, and from the midst of this intensity it brings into view — and so brings into being — the elemental forms of our modern sensibility. And that is why it might still be valued today: because the experience it discovers is still compellingly our own.