D. W. Harding

Experience into Words

Essays on poetry

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To
R. McArthur

Foreword

THE essays brought together here deal with the relation between the writer's words and some other, non-literary experience, whether his or his readers'. It is a dangerous area of interest, which comes and goes in fashion according as one of two errors becomes more evident: the first, forgetting that the understanding of a poem (by the author or his readers) is an experience quite distinct from any other experiences on which its creation and understanding may depend; the second, neglecting the requirement that the poem should be anchored closely enough in comprehended sense for the writer and the reader to be relating it to the same kind of other experiences. The first error leads to an undue preoccupation with the poem's paraphrasable meaning (with a grossly oversimplified view of the way poems work), and perhaps to irrelevant biographical assumptions about the author's experience. The opposite error tempts poets to trade in sham incantation and gestures of profundity and encourages their readers to rest content with idiosyncratic interpretation or the elementary pleasures of the higher babble.

Between these two errors we all want, naturally, to keep a perfect balance—but who can? I lean towards the first, without, I hope, falling. To me it seems that criticism has still not benefited enough from I. A. Richards' striking demonstration, years ago, of the ease with which intelligent people misconstrue or fail to grasp the 'sense' of poems. Several of these essays, therefore, are attempts to understand what the poet is talking about. That sometimes means examining themes that can be seen only in a broad survey (as in the discussion of Donne's poems and Eliot's plays), and it sometimes calls for a closer study of the way the poet is using his words and statements. The

task presents special difficulty and interest if the poetry is the kind that gains much of its effect from overtones of meaning and hinted symbolism without explicit allegory. It is when poets are working in this way that we can see most clearly the influence on their thought of the language and imagery in which it takes form. This is the theme of the last essay, 'The Hinterland of Thought'; it sets in a more general context the broad problem of which various aspects have appeared in the studies of particular writers.

Most of these essays have appeared before and I am grateful to publishers and editors for permission to reprint them: to Kenyon College and the Editors of *The Kenyon Review* for 'Donne's Anticipation of Experience' and 'Progression of Theme in Eliot's Modern Plays'; to Penguin Books and Professor Boris Ford, General Editor of *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, for 'Experience and Symbol in Blake'; to the Editors of *Scrutiny* for 'The Theme of The Ancient Mariner', 'Aspects of the Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg', 'Words and Meanings: A Note on Eliot's Poetry', and 'The Changed Outlook in Eliot's Later Poems'; to the Colston Research Society, Butterworths, and Professor L. C. Knights and Dr Basil Cottle, Editors of *Metaphor and Symbol* (Vol. XII of the Colston Papers) for 'The Hinterland of Thought'. The passage from Salvador de Madariaga, *Don Quixote*, in 'Reader and Author' is quoted by kind permission of The Clarendon Press, Oxford.

My greatest debt is to Dr F. R. Leavis, who encouraged my early work; *Scrutiny*, which he kept going in face of great difficulties and intense hostility, gave me for many years the only opportunity I had of publishing what I wrote.

1

Donne's Anticipation of Experience

HARDY has a poem, 'The Self-Unseeing', in which he records a scene that appears in retrospect as one of the moments of value in life but was not at the time experienced vividly at its worth—'Yet we were looking away!' In Donne's work there occurs curiously often, in several different forms, an attempted insurance against some such failure of experience. In one of its forms it shows as a prolonged effort of anticipation, as though to ensure full responsiveness to the event when it did come. In the early work, of course, the long-drawn-out anticipation is of sexual experience; and this gives the broad pattern of the zestfully sensual poems, 'To his Mistris going to bed' and 'Whoever loves, if he do not propose The right true end of love'. The Epithalamions also served him well (apart from their social and pecuniary value) because they invited this process of leading up to the experience with an 'impatient' anticipation that allows him to dwell longer and more vividly on the idea of sexual union, and because they justified by the conventions of the occasion the onlooker's rather mental preoccupation with sexuality that goes with such anticipation. But in later poems, as I must come to consider, the same anticipation is applied to the act of dying.

Another form of insurance against failing of full response to the significant event is seen in Donne's fantasy that the moment of experience can be immensely protracted:

> All day, the same our postures were,
> And wee said nothing, all the day.

'The Computation' uses a similar exaggeration more light-heartedly:

> For the first twenty yeares, since yesterday,
> I scarce beleev'd, thou could'st be gone away,
> For forty more, I fed on favours past,
> And forty'on hopes, that thou would'st, they might last.
> Teares drown'd one hundred, and sighes blew out two . . .

and so on through several thousand years.

Donne's affirmation in 'The Extasie' that 'no change can invade' the materials of the lovers' united soul illustrates his turning to love as a further means of counteracting his sense of the transience of satisfying experience. The long build-up to an awaited event was one means; the notion of an immensely protracted moment of time was another. And now a third, more directly aimed at a denial of the fact, was this fantasy of time arrested through love and the process of decay interdicted. 'The Anniversarie' states it:

> Only our love hath no decay;
> This, no to morrow hath, nor yesterday,
> Running it never runs from us away,
> But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.

In 'Loves Growth', again, although the ordinary process of growth in nature is used at first as an analogy with the increase of his love in spring, the equally inevitable decay is denied:

> And though each spring doe adde to love new heate,
> . . . . .
> No winter shall abate the springs encrease.

This fantasy brings him nearest to convinced comfort and is associated with his rare spells of belief in complete security of affection, as in 'The Anniversarie':

> Who is so safe as wee? where none can doe
> Treason to us, except one of us two.

Yet the quick glance even here at the possibility that treason *might* come, from 'one of us two', is characteristic. So too, in 'A Lecture upon the Shadow', Donne gives a warning even while he tries to convey his conviction of their security in love:

> Except our loves at this noone stay,
> We shall new shadowes make the other way.
> As the first were made to blinde
> Others; these which come behinde
> Will worke upon our selves, and blind our eyes.
> If our loves faint, and westwardly decline;
> To me thou, falsly, thine,
> And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.

The fear of betrayal, and possibly mutual betrayal, creeps in, and instead of affirming the permanence of love he can only demand it:

> The morning shadowes weare away,
> But these grow longer all the day,
> But oh, loves day is short, if love decay.
>
> Love is a growing, or full constant light;
> And his first minute, after noone, is night.

Fantasies of permanence and demands for it are alike the occasional denials of what he was chiefly aware of, the impossibility of seizing the satisfying state of experience and keeping it. He develops the theme in 'The Second Anniversary':

> And what essentiall joy can'st thou expect
> Here upon earth? what permanent effect
> Of transitory causes? Doest thou love
> Beauty? (And beauty worthy'st is to move)
> Poore cousened cousenor, *that* she, and *that* thou,
> Which did begin to love, are neither now;
> You are both fluid, chang'd since yesterday;

Next day repaires, (but ill) last dayes decay.
Nor are, (although the river keepe the name)
Yesterdaies waters, and to daies the same.
So flowes her face, and thine eyes . . .

The poems of permanence in love provide a brief contrast with both earlier and later expressions of protest at the transience of what he values. Elegy X, 'The Dreame', gives an early statement of the theme:

But dearest heart, and dearer image stay;
Alas, true joyes at best are *dreame* enough;
Though you stay here you passe too fast away:
For even at first lifes *Taper* is a snuffe.

And much later in life, in Holy Sonnet VI, contemplating the short time still before him—'this last pace'—he brings together both the brevity of life and his conviction of having failed to use it worthily in the concise words

. . . my race
Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace.

Not only is the longed for experience transient, it is disappointing too. Elegy XV, 'The Expostulation', states explicitly the use to which he puts postponement:

Now have I curst, let us our love revive;
In mee the flame was never more alive;
I could beginne againe to court and praise,
And in that pleasure lengthen the short dayes
Of my lifes lease; like Painters that do take
Delight, not in made worke, but whiles they make.

The idea of lengthening life by the delays and anticipations of courtship provides a complete contrast with Marvell's attitude in the poem 'To His Coy Mistress'. There, the brevity of life is a reason for contracting the courtship and pressing on to the final experience; here, with Donne, the brevity of life is felt most in the transience of

the moment of experience, and life is therefore lengthened by delay and anticipation. But Donne goes even further by suggesting that the anticipation is more rewarding than the event:

> . . . like Painters that do take
> Delight, not in made worke, but whiles they make.

It comes then as no surprise to meet such poems as 'Farewell to Love', with its theme of disappointment in sexual experience, or 'Loves Alchymie', in which the disillusionment seems to be still more strongly felt:

> Some that have deeper digg'd loves Myne than I,
> Say, where his centrique happinesse doth lie:
> I have lov'd, and got, and told,
> But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,
> I should not finde that hidden mysterie;
> Oh, 'tis imposture all:
> And as no chymique yet th'Elixar got,
> But glorifies his pregnant pot,
> If by the way to him befall
> Some odoriferous thing, or medicinall,
> So, lovers dreame a rich and long delight,
> But get a winter-seeming summers night.

* * * * *

It seems reasonable to think that Donne's elaborate building up towards an experience was associated with some anxiety about the worth of the event when it actually came or about the adequacy of his own response to it. This may seem an odd suspicion to harbour of Donne, if we accept too simple an idea of the early poems as expressing an immense zest and gusto in sexual enjoyment. In fact the gusto turns out to be mainly in the anticipation. And there is not so complete a contrast of mood as a first glance might suggest between the early writing and the later

religious poems. It is true that in 'The Litanie' (III) he speaks of himself, on rather conventional lines, as being

> Halfe wasted with youths fires, of pride and lust,

and says in Holy Sonnet V of the 'little world' which is himself that

> . . . the fire
> Of lust and envie have burnt it heretofore.

This confirms the simplest impression of the early poems. But a far fuller and carefully introspective account of his early troubles is given in Holy Sonnet III; and here, perhaps to our surprise, we find that the early sins he accuses himself of are grief and despair:

> In mine Idolatry what showres of raine
> Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?
> That sufferance was my sinne; now I repent;
> 'Cause I did suffer I must suffer paine.
> Th'hydroptique drunkard, and night-scouting thiefe,
> The itchy Lecher, and selfe tickling proud
> Have the remembrance of past joyes, for reliefe
> Of comming ills. To (poore) me is allow'd
> No ease; for, long, yet vehement griefe hath beene
> Th'effect and cause, the punishment and sinne.

This is a clear and considered statement that the pride and lust, of which he accuses himself in other poems, gave him none of the expected gratifications even at the time, and that he now blames himself for the protests and grief of his early life. There can be no reason for ignoring this reflective and explicit account. Taken seriously, it heightens the significance of the early poems of disillusionment.

I want to ask why the experiences of living failed to give Donne what they had seemed to promise and why he felt that the satisfying states of experience slipped away before he was ready to let them go. He himself gives the answer