

# POEMS



JOHN DONNE

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Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,  
In thy most need to go by thy side.

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POETRY & THE DRAMA

POEMS BY JOHN DONNE  
EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY HUGH I'ANSON FAUSSET

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JOHN DONNE, born in 1573. Entered Hart Hall, Oxford. Admitted to Lincoln's Inn, 1592. Accompanied Essex's expedition to Cadiz, 1596. Ordained in 1615 and chaplain to James I in the same year. Dean of St. Paul's from 1621 until death in 1631.

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# INTRODUCTION

## I

THE remarkable revival of interest, during the last twenty years, in the writings and personality of Donne is due to something more than an accidental fashion in taste. It is, in fact, closely connected with the reaction against the Victorian compromise.

The most noticeable characteristic of the Victorian age as a whole was the success with which it evaded facing the stark antagonisms that underlay the polite and smooth appearances of civilized life. This evasion resulted in a blurred association of sentiment and thought, in which a vague high-mindedness was the inevitable issue of a recoil from physical fact, and purity was confused with respectability. But even before the war had definitely displayed the reality under the moral professions of the nineteenth century, the reaction had already gone far. And we can see now, that despite many perversities, the primary aim, no less than the primary necessity, of the new century has been to break through the stifling embrace of thought and sentiment, to recover, even at the cost of a ruthless violation of conventional sanctities, a sense of vitality and of truth.

In this attempt many have been driven to concentrate upon life on its elementary physical level. Others, in their reasonable suspicion of emotion and of subjective impurities, have cultivated a destructive cynicism, an ingenious wit, or a barren objectivity; while a few, whom I believe to be the vanguard of many, are seeking to define the conditions of a new creative consciousness, in which heart and head, instinct and spirituality, are no longer confused and falsified, but significantly reconciled.

And the explanation of the renewed interest in Donne,

which underlies the appeal of a style, at once so passionately stark and extravagantly ingenious, is that each and all of these can find in him at some stage of his career, an intensely concentrated expression of their own efforts and dilemmas.

He, too, as a young man and a rebel against the Petrarchan convention, was in violent reaction against a mannered age. With a virile, if at times brutal, sincerity he spurned the dainty elegance of Elizabethan song-writers, the drowsy enchantments of Spenser, the courtly appeals of Sidney, the attenuated sweetness of Lodge and Peele, the pastoral plaintiveness of Greene. A candid and ruthless realist himself, he challenged alike the idyllic and the affected, with the words:

I sing not, siren-like, to tempt, for I  
Am harsh.

And to those of his contemporaries who, in their love poetry, made of every woman either a goddess or an unreal personification of chastity he curtly announced out of his own crude experience:

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

Donne had, throughout his life, little, if any, sympathy with Renaissance humanism. He was a medievalist by nature and training, in his preoccupation with the esoteric and his attachment to scholasticism. And this, too, explains his appeal to an age which has begun to question the whole Renaissance tradition.

But his medievalism would not make this appeal, if it had not been combined with a quality which we recognize as distinctively modern and which was also typical of the Renaissance—I mean his restless and audacious curiosity for knowledge of all kinds, the “sacred hunger of science,” as he called it, in one of his poems. And this “hydroptique immoderate desire” was not merely for “humane learning,” although his knowledge, particularly of medieval literature, metaphysical, theological, and legal, was both vast and minute. It was a hunger for vital experience on all the planes of being from the carnal to the spiritually ecstatic.

In this he did reflect the "universal man" of the Renaissance, but with a very significant difference. He was haunted by a sense of sin. This, again, was a medieval inheritance, but it was something more. Donne was a moralist in a sense almost unknown to the Middle Ages, because he was an extravagant individualist. The ideas of Augustine and Aquinas may have been the groundwork of his thought, but he never submitted to their authority. Even in the days of his later sanctity he twisted them to his own uses, transforming them at the demands of his own convulsed, tortured, and casuistical being into strange and fantastic shapes. He was, in short, a Protestant in the deepest and most stringent sense of the word, a man who claimed the rights and responsibilities of discovering truth and of ordering his life in relation to divine and demoniacal forces for himself. And his position was complicated by the fact that he was reared as a Catholic, and so expressed his own unique and eccentric problems in terms of the Fathers, the schoolmen, and the medieval jurists.

He was thus both more medieval and more modern than the Renaissance, sharing with the Middle Ages their *macabre* preoccupation with the loathsome aspects of the physical, and their conviction of the reality of sin, but forestalling modern psychology in his analytical rationalism. His peculiar significance, indeed, for us to-day lies in the fact that he was one of the first men of genius to express, with frenzied penetration, that state of discord and disintegration into which every man falls as he advances through critical self-consciousness from an instinctive towards a spiritual harmony. Few, if any, indeed, have left such an intimate record of all the stages of that self-martyrdom which lies between a state of nature and a state of grace.

Behind all the apparent vacillations and contradictions, then, of his life lies a single, doubtless largely unconscious, but determining purpose, which was to bring the physical, intellectual, and spiritual elements in his nature into harmony. It cannot be said that he ever fully succeeded; his physical instincts were too strong, his mind too self-destructive. But it is these very qualities which ensure



the vividness and veracity of his record, as he passes through the valley of carnal avidity and mental cynicism up the tortuous hill of intellectual and moral questioning, and thence has glimpses of an ecstatic delivery, which he can never securely achieve.

As a lover he is in turn the sensualist and the cynic, passion's slave and passion's critic, the mystical Platonist and the devoted husband. In religion he escapes from Catholicism to agnosticism, becomes the paid casuist and the learned theologian; embraces at last, to satisfy his own inner and outer needs, the ministry of the English Church, and in the anguish of his self-enslavement, converts a profession into a spiritual vocation, which, for convulsive intensity of expression, has never been surpassed.

Intensity is the keynote of his career. All his days he is on fire. His experience deepens, his body decays, but the flame of life within him does not languish. Rather it burns brighter and more lurid as emaciation heralds dissolution. For his life is one long battle with Death, with the death of physical grossness and mental conceit, of worldly ambition, and spiritual complacency. And this life-and-death struggle is only comparable, as Walton, his first and tenderest biographer, suggests, with that recorded of some of the early Fathers, that of a St. Austin, a St. Ambrose, or a St. Augustine.

## II

Donne is best known as a poet for his "Songs and Sonnets," but, in fact, every stage in his development, from the piratical Jack Donne to the penitent John Donne, is registered in his poetry. He was born in London in 1573, the son of a prosperous tradesman, but on his mother's side of a family distinguished both in literature and law, and one which had suffered much for its staunch Catholicism. His father died in 1575, and his early education was entrusted to tutors who were particularly urged to instil into him the principles of the Romish Church, which, however, they could only profess themselves in secret.

Thus his "first breeding and conversation" was "with men of a suppressed and afflicted religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin'd Martyrdome." And this early impression of a world of persecution and intrigue may well have aggravated his innate tendency both to morbidity and independence. At the age of eleven he was sent to Hart Hall, Oxford, where he stayed for three years before being transferred for a similar period to Trinity College, Cambridge. At Oxford he is said to have studied Spanish, and particularly such Spanish mystics as St. Teresa or Luis de Granada, in whom he took a precocious, but wholly characteristic, pleasure.

But if Oxford ministered to his innate mysticism, Cambridge strengthened the faculty for close and ingenious logic which his early Jesuitical training had developed. But it also strengthened his inclination to break with the Faith of his "dear and pious parents." Soon, in fact, after being admitted in 1592 to Lincoln's Inn his wilful, inquiring nature had cast off the "custom of credulity."

The years immediately subsequent to his admission to Lincoln's Inn were a period of violent and varied experiment, of which his "Satires," many of his "Songs and Sonnets," and the more sensually cynical of his "Elegies" are the fruit in verse, while in the mazes of law and theology he began to take that tense mental exercise which an irritated brain, fermenting with energy, demanded. His "Satires" are certainly the most awkwardly constructed of his poems, but although the earliest of them were little more than conscious experiments in a new kind of versification, calculated affronts to the stylistic graces which he despised as false, they are valuable as the first manifestation of his attitude towards life. In them he lampooned the hypocrisy and arrogance of priests, lawyers, and popinjays, as he was shortly to lampoon the love of women.

And even in the earliest of them his cynicism had its roots in certain deep personal cravings of which it was an inversion, a craving, for example, which was to prove life-long, for the Court life which he assailed as vain and witless, and for the religious faith which he caricatured in the theological quibblings of combative sectarians. Moreover

the satirist gave place, at times, to the preacher, who foretold his own destiny as he acclaimed Truth, standing "on a huge hill, cragged and steep,

. . . and he that will  
Reach her, about must and about must go  
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so;  
Yet strive so, that before age, death's twilight,  
Thy soul rest, for none can work in that night."

Not only, then, in the knots and compressions of his prosody, the complicated casuistry of his thought, and the extravagance of his imagery, are Donne's satires, despite their youthful superficiality, characteristic, but in the avid appetite for life which underlay their scorn, and the half-animal, half-moral, disgust of death, which gathering intensity with every year was to subject his personality to a continual crisis of battle.

His cravings, however, for sensation which led him to spend nights in the London streets in the company of "fighting and untrussed gallants," involved him increasingly in erotic experiences. The record of these experiences, and the convulsive advance from frank sensuality, spiced with an arrogant cynicism, through self-disgust and self-arraignment, to a mystical apprehension of the potential spirituality of physical love, is to be found in his "Songs and Sonnets" and "Elegies." They belong, for the most part, to the years between 1590 and 1601, but the year 1598, in which he first met the girl whom he was secretly to marry, marked a decisive change in his attitude to women and to love, as it did in his worldly prospects. But this event only confirmed and completed a process of inward growth through licence and disillusionment which had already gone far.

His earliest lyrics reveal him sowing the wild oats of promiscuous passion, and scoffing at those "poor heretics in love, which think to stablish dangerous constancy." He lets his "body range," loves and hates together with a savage glee and exalts audacity above fear, shame, and honour as the only real principle of purity. The purely predatory phase, however, is short-lived. For as his senses taste satiety, his mind begins to detach itself from

the physical impulses which it had previously subserved and exploited. He lashes with a savage self-satisfaction the inconstancy of his victims. He gloats over Love's deformity as previously over its allurements, expanding all his virtuosity on the delighted imaging of rank physical ugliness. Or he is sufficiently liberated from lust to indulge the fantastical vein in his nature, to extemporize upon the theme of desire in far-fetched allusions and conceits, and even to hint at pathos.

And as the virus of consciousness spreads and deepens, and with it the fever of disillusionment, he begins to plead with, and for, the passion and the constancy which he had previously outraged. And his prayer would seem to have been answered. He who had been passion's cynic was transformed into passion's slave by a woman, the wife of a rich man and a cripple, whom he met at some society function. His liaison with her was interrupted in 1596 by service abroad, in which he was attached to the Earl of Essex, one of the leaders of a naval expedition against Spain. He was present at the battle of Cadiz, in which the Spanish fleet was defeated, and in the next year he took part in another expedition to intercept the Spanish plate-ships off the Azores. To this voyage we owe the two verse-letters to Christopher Brooke, *The Storm* and *The Calm*, in the latter of which he described one of his motives for volunteering for this expedition as being the desire to escape from "the queasy pain of being belov'd and loving."

Whether, in fact, his latest liaison had run its violent course between the two expeditions to the conclusion of almost demented hate expressed in *The Apparition* is doubtful. But that it brought Donne's career to an end as a piratical lover is certain. His disillusionment of merely physical passion was complete. He had discovered in it the principle of death, and all his efforts were henceforth bent upon discovering a principle of life which would raise love above the tortured ebb and flow of desire. Sensuality, uninformed by spiritual value, was now

The spider love, which transubstantiates all,  
And can convert Manna to gall.

Yet he was far too physically possessed and far too

potentially real a mystic to react from sensuality into Platonic abstractions. As he wrote in *The Ecstasy*, which of all his shorter poems perhaps reveals best his power to expose the quivering nerves of love and the communion of souls through bodies:

So must pure lovers' souls descend  
T' affections, and to faculties  
Which sense may reach and apprehend,  
Else a great Prince in prison lies.  
To our bodies turn we then, that so  
Weak men on love reveal'd may look;  
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,  
But yet the body is his book.

He found the solution he sought in marriage. In 1598 he had become secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, at whose house Ann More, a favourite niece, was a frequent visitor. On Lady Egerton's death in 1600 she kept house for her uncle, although only a girl of sixteen. And in the following year, Donne, casting discretion to the winds, married her secretly. This so infuriated her father, Sir George More, that he had Donne arrested and thrown into prison, and also induced Egerton to dismiss him from his service. After some months, however, of which *The Canonization* is essentially the splendid memorial, the marriage was confirmed, and Ann was allowed to join her husband.

From the material point of view, Donne was, indeed, "Undone." His rash action destroyed the promise of a distinguished secular career, and for fifteen years tied him to poverty and the humiliations of the mendicant. Yet, as both the tenderest and the most spiritually ecstatic of the "Songs and Sonnets" prove, his marriage resolved for him on the plane of sex the conflict between thought and instinct which had for so long convulsed him. Henceforth the struggle was more and more transferred to the plane of religion, in which the mystic in him had to oppose equally his earthly desires and his worldly ambitions.

*The Progress of the Soul*, which he composed in the year of his marriage, is at once the most ambitiously planned and least read of his poems. It was based on the Pythagorean theory of "Metempsychosis," a theory which itself

derived, as Donne may well have known, from the ancient and esoteric doctrine which proclaimed an obligatory pilgrimage for every soul through a cycle of incarnation, that included every elemental form of the phenomenal world. It was never completed, and has generally been dismissed as an extreme example of Donne's worst defects. Yet De Quincey praised, with some reason, the "many diamonds" which compose its very substance, and fanciful and even satirically frivolous as it often is, there is a pregnant force and dark sublimity in parts of it, because the "soul" of the poem, plunged from one natural process into another, with no control over the humiliating experiences to which it is subjected, but obeying a mysterious force which is gradually driving it upward to the plane of human individuality, is essentially the convulsed soul of Donne himself.

The majority of the "Verse Letters" belong to the years between his marriage and his taking of Orders in 1615. During this time his circumstances were, at worst, very straitened, at best, very insecure. He was, to a great extent, dependent on the charity of friends and patrons, and with a family rapidly and regularly increasing, his means were often insufficient. For some years he rented a small house at Mitcham, and divided his time between it and rooms in the Strand, where he collected material from Canon Law for the use of Thomas Morton, later Bishop of Durham, who employed him in the war of pamphlets against the Catholics. In 1607 Morton, on becoming Dean of Gloucester, offered his assistant a comfortable benefice, if he would take Orders. Donne, however, refused, and probably his refusal was equally dictated by a sense of personal unworthiness, by intellectual doubt, and by the hopes he still cherished of promotion in a secular sphere.

Meanwhile his outlook remained gloomy; isolation intensified his morbidity, and owing to the damp conditions of the Mitcham house he and his family were so frequently sick that he headed some of his letters, "From my hospital at Mitcham." The depressed and disordered state of mind which such conditions engendered are evident in many of his "Verse Letters." They are often flat and elaborately

laboured, like the controversial works in prose upon which he was professionally employed, and from which he turned with cramped hand to the medium of verse.

During 1608, indeed, he seems to have fallen into so acute a state of depression as to have even contemplated the idea of suicide.

In the previous year, however, he had become acquainted with Magdalen Herbert, the widowed mother of George Herbert, the poet. And in her he found one, who by her sanity, piety, and sympathy was, for the rest of his days, to reinforce his higher self and to strengthen him in hours of perplexity. Nevertheless, in 1608 he described himself as "rather a sickness or a disease of the world, than any part of it," and early in 1609 he experienced the first of those physical crises which were to prove milestones in his emancipation from the vanities of the world and the flesh. During this illness he wrote the first of what have been called his "Divine Poems"—*The Litany*, and also, probably, *The Cross*. His religious, like his erotic, verse, images the gradual absorption of the casuist in the would-be convert, and in these two poems each is apparent, lines woven by ingenious wit alternating with others that express a passionate contrition and longing for spiritual release. "Who will deliver me from the burden of this Death?" is the essence of his appeal and his lament, and in his relation to God, as earlier in his relation to women, death meant to him both mental arrogance and physical enslavement. As he wrote in *The Cross*:

. . . Cross thy senses, else, both they, and thou  
Must perish soon, and to destruction bow.

And again:

So when thy brain works, ere thou utter it,  
Cross and correct concupiscence of wit.

This tense struggle to subdue a mental and carnal egotism was to dictate for the rest of his life all his spiritual activity. As health returned, however, and his fortunes improved, he relaxed the struggle, and only when sickness had attacked him again with more severity and his secular ambitions seemed finally frustrated, did he devote himself to it with all his heart.

For, late in 1608, the burden of immediate poverty was lifted. Sir George More was persuaded to grant his son-in-law a small regular allowance, while Donne acquired himself a generous patroness in the Countess of Bedford, who gathered about her at Twickenham some of the most gifted and cultivated men of the day. Donne attached himself to her informal court, and "a new world rose from her light." With his talent for spinning allegorical imagery about a theme he found it easy to decorate the nuptials or obsequies of his patroness's relatives with complimentary verses. Moreover, in the excitement of versification the poet often transcended the laureate. Nor was his adulation in this case degrading, as his prostration before rank and influence was often later to be. For the Countess of Bedford he cherished a sincere devotion. She stood to him in the position of a secular Mrs. Herbert. Each personified for him one of the two ambitions which were to dispute his allegiance — the world's charm and the Church's peace. And despite his father-in-law's bounty and his London diversions, he was still at heart unhappy and ill-adjusted. His great gifts were being wasted on trivial activities, his wife's energies were overtaxed by a steadily increasing family, and he was haunted by the thought that he had "transplanted her into a wretched fortune." Consequently, even in the years 1609 and 1610, his preoccupation with religion was quite as insistent as with society, but in 1610 an event occurred which, in delivering him from his "hospital" at Mitcham, arrested his growing inclination to enter the Church.

Sir Robert Drury of Hawstead, in Suffolk, lost his only surviving daughter, Elizabeth, a girl of fourteen, upon whom he had lavished his affections and, according to rumour, centred exorbitant ambitions. The facts and fictions of this "sad history" reached Donne's ears, and he composed a short funeral elegy, which he sent to the stricken father. Doubtless his main motive was to attract the notice of one of the wealthiest men of the time, and in this he was completely successful. Sir Robert offered him and his family a set of chambers in his own large house in Drury Lane, and Donne, wishing to make the only return he could



to his benefactor, composed successively the *Anatomy of the World*, to celebrate the first anniversary of Elizabeth's death, and *Of the Progress of the Soul*, to celebrate the second. His intention was to continue his tributes yearly, but after these two he wisely desisted.

The circumstances, indeed, of their origin, and the extravagant homage which he offered to a young girl whom he had never known, had already excited some derision, and Ben Jonson's remark that "the Anniversarie was profane and full of blasphemies . . . that if it had been written of the Virgin Marie it had been something," reflected doubtless a very general opinion. Yet although Donne may deserve censure for exploiting to some extent both his muse and a tragic occasion, the poems themselves, despite their artificial excesses, are his sufficient justification. Moreover, the original *Elegy* and *The First Anniversary*, against which the charge of artificiality can most justly be sustained, were written without any idea of publication, as a private, if interested, offering to a distracted father. And even these contain passages of ecstatic divination.

We do not need the example of other great elegists to inform us that the actual subject of an elegy is of secondary importance. And Donne sufficiently defended himself against Jonson's strictures by saying that it was "the Idea of a Woman and not as she was," that haunted his imagination as he wrote. And in his *Idea of Woman* he embodied also his *Idea of the Divine* as pure spirit inviolable by death. Indeed, in *The Second Anniversary* he came nearer, perhaps, expressing that mystical triumph over the dead-weight of mortality, for which his whole life was a battle, than in any other of his poems. The professional elegist, extravagant eulogist, and quibbling dialectician were, in fact, with each tribute increasingly superseded by a poet possessed of a hunger for "that radiance, which the world sullies, that form which the world fumbles or distorts," and for whom Elizabeth Drury had become nothing less than a symbol of pure spirit, of immortal beauty, harmony, and innocence. And, as in the sermons of his latter years, this ecstatic intuition of the