

DONNE: A LONDON POET

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DONNE'S most recent biographer calls him 'a Londoner born and bred'.¹ Donne was born a few streets east of St. Paul's, and it was in the environs of St. Paul's and as its Dean that he died sixty years later. It is there too that his funeral effigy still stands, one of the very few to survive the Great Fire. The epitaph on it speaks of Donne looking eastward, towards 'eum cuius nomen est Oriens'. But Donne spent his youth and his prime looking westward—west towards the Court and towards those centres of power which had in his own lifetime finally established themselves in the capital. Donne was an ambitious man: he desired to be better than he was; and he did not lose his worldliness when he entered the Church—that Church whose Bishops had on the King's orders defended the depraved Countess of Essex the year before they ordained the poet. For Donne's life spans a period during which it was not possible, certainly not wise, to think with much simplicity about 'worldliness'; if it had been so, Shakespeare could not have written *Hamlet*. Or, to put the matter in terms of place rather than time, Donne was—despite the abstract habits of thought which might appear to dissociate him from place—a Londoner by nature as well as by birth and breeding, a man who (as Walton put it) 'could not leave his beloved London, to which place he had a natural inclination'. And he was a Londoner at that crucial phase in the city's history when it took on the character by which we recognize it now. For in Donne's lifetime London became a metropolis.

The emergence of London as a metropolis at the end of the sixteenth century—as one of the world's great cities, with a quarter of a million souls in it—is a fact on which historians of the period have recently much insisted, partly because the inordinate growth of London created such a crisis of awareness in Londoners themselves. When Donne was a boy of eight, London's Lord Mayor and Aldermen were already appealing to the Privy Council for legislation whereby the alarming expansion and overcrowding of 'this great metropolis' might be

¹ R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (1970), p. 19.

contained.¹ And the Proclamation that answered this appeal was only the first move in four centuries of struggle to meet the human problem posed by the growth of the city. In the forty or so years since Henry VIII had died, London had become a new Rome (and it was, apparently, actually called 'Romeville' in the thieves' jargon of the time). The sense of size is a relative thing: Donne's City and suburbs were small in extent compared with Greater London today, but his contemporaries had a notion of their city not by any means unlike our own. 'Rome was a *Metropolis*', wrote Thomas Heywood in 1612, 'a place whither all the nations knowne under the Sunne, resorted: so is *London*.'² Or, to quote Professor Jordan, the distinguished historian of London's charities: 'The London of 1600 was . . . a great urban complex. It was a metropolis in every sense of the word, with an immense wealth and a size which comparatively made cities of the next rank seem no more than large provincial towns.'³ Some sense of what was happening to London may be painlessly acquired if one contemplates for a few minutes three of those map-pictures or long views of the City which have survived from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the 1540s Wyngaerde came to London and drew with economy and delicacy the outline of an airy Tudor river-town that clustered round the curve of the Thames. In about 1600 Visscher sent his traders' and travellers' Thames in a straight line across seven feet of wall space, and banked up behind it an incredible density of houses and towers and spires and shops. The viewer stands in Southwark and looks through the masts of great trading vessels into the City of 'profit and loss' itself. When in the 1640s Wenceslas Hollar came, he drew from above the grand prospect of a city that one now sees as almost Restoration before the Fire and before Wren, so purely and widely urban is the London he surveyed.

It was this astonishingly developing city, the 'national centre for risk capital' as Jordan calls it, that produced John Donne; the son of one of those rich London merchants who were as munificently and independently philanthropic as they were mercenary, and who played so large a part in giving their city its standing and its character. Many of London's inhabitants came, made their fortune (or lost it), and went home again. Donne was born there, lived there, and died there. To appreciate

¹ See Norman G. Brett-James, *The Growth of Stuart London* (1935), pp. 67-8.

² *An Apologie for Actors* (1612), sig. C².

³ W. K. Jordan, *The Charities of London 1480-1660* (1960), p. 16.

this fact adds, I think, something to our understanding of him as a writer. That there is some obvious and simple sense in which Donne was a London poet may be perceived by opening the *Songs and Sonnets* in the format of its first edition and reflecting on the chaotic and formidable variety of available experience that assails the reader there, as it might a country visitor to the capital. The voices of the poems constitute a crowd; and in this milieu to think, to discriminate, or to *be* at all with any individuality it was necessary (so the poems seem to say) to withdraw to that characteristic Donne place, the enclosed bedroom of lovers overlooking a street from which arises all the perpetual noise of life. The restless vitality of these poems, their arrogant expertise and quick boredom, their amusement and anxiety and fatigue—these are recognizably metropolitan qualities. But I should like to go on from this superficial impression to explore some further senses in which Donne might be called a London poet. Some of my definitions are far removed from any literal or topographical meaning. Yet Donne's own sense of London admits of the metaphorical: for him as for anyone a familiar place was pre-eminently a fact of consciousness. As he himself wrote: 'I do not make account that I am come to *London*, when I get within the wall: that which makes it *London* is the meeting of friends.'¹ Necessarily I am concerned here less with the London of history than with 'that which made it London' to Donne.

I

We can none the less meet in Donne a city evoked with that vitality of social observation that was to characterize Donne's coeval Jonson nearly a decade later. For Donne's most vivid evocation of London comes in the first of his Satires, which must be the product of his early twenties when he was still a student at Lincoln's Inn. This brilliant, original poem is mainly a monologue spoken by a young scholar. He meditates on London—for he is being tempted to forsake his bookish isolation and 'go on the town'. The tempter is the poem's second voice, from whom we hear snatches, and of whose person we catch glimpses, in its second half. He is the antithesis of the scholar—Zany to his Pedant (if we think in terms of the Zanni and Dottore of the *commedia dell'arte*):² a 'fondling motley humorist'

¹ *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour: written by John Donne Sometime Deane of St. Pauls London* (1651), p. 285.

² The pair recur a decade later as Morose and Truewit in Jonson's first London comedy *Epicoene* (1609).

whose hunger to wander equals the other's loyalty to a life that is for all its narrowness secure and sanctioned by the wisdom of those dead philosophers, historians, and poets who line the shelves of his grave-sized study: 'Let me lye / In prison, and here be coffin'd, when I dye.' The dazzlingly animated opening fifty lines disclose a prospect of crowded London streets from which sharp details stand out: here the 'Captaine . . . / Bright parcell gilt, with forty dead mens pay', there the silhouetted gesture of salute by which the errant friend prices the passers-by: 'and to that rate / So high or low, dost raise thy formall hat.' What Donne is doing here, however, is very characteristic of him. This animated scene is not (as we soon learn) the real thing—it is only the young scholar's half-appalled and half-enchanted fantasy: for this prospect of the London streets is only a reverie, entertained in anticipation, and we have still to descend into the London of actuality. The point at which we do so (hard to discern otherwise) is signalled by an abrupt change of style. The addressed friend ceases to be *thou* and becomes *he*; the reader ceases to stand in for that friend and becomes an onlooker. The pair move into visible action before us: we immerse in activity and are surrounded by crowd-like voices in an acoustic effect almost stereophonic. And now the voices of the two friends intertwine to the point at which their identities are confused, despite the fact that their roles are in theory so far apart:

Now leaps he upright, jogs me, 'and cries, 'Do 'you see
Yonder well favour'd youth?' 'Which?' 'Oh, 'tis hee
That dances so divinely.' 'Oh', said I,
'Stand still, must you dance here for company?'
Hee droop't, wee went . . .

'But Oh, God strengthen thee, why stoop'st thou so?'
'Why? He hath travail'd.' 'Long?' 'No, but to me'
(Which understand none,) 'he doth seeme to be
Perfect French, and Italian.' I reply'd,
'So is the Poxe.'¹

And then, the two young voices still casually running on, a third change of style occurs, this time into rapid narrative, to record with a negligent detachment the fate of the zany friend:

¹ Quotations from Donne's *Satires and Verse Letters* are from the edition by W. Milgate (Oxford, 1967); from the *Elegies and Songs and Sonnets*, that by Dame Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1967); from the *Divine Poems*, that by Dame Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1952); from *The Anniversaries*, that by Sir Herbert Grierson (Oxford, 1912).

At last his Love he in a window spies,
And like light dew exhal'd, he flings from mee
Violently ravish'd to his lechery.
Many were there, he could command no more;
He quarrell'd, fought, bled; and turn'd out of dore
Directly came to mee hanging the head,
And constantly a while must keepe his bed.

So the poem ends.

This First Satire appears to drift aimlessly. Indeed its easy rambling movement, as of a liberated self-abandonment to whatever happens, is one of its chief charms. It flaunts a lordly *sprezzatura*, as if its author isn't really trying. But in the modern world a sense of the fortuitous may be a main route to the sense of the real. Moreover the poem's structural peculiarity of vagrant progress is reinforced by the topicality of reference: one can learn things from it about the London of the early and mid-fifteen-nineties as from a newspaper—the rich heiresses, the thinking horse, the vogue for black feathers. It seems clear that Donne has been taught by those Roman satirists to whom he went to school, that satire must be, if not urbane, at least urban; that it must focus itself on some central civilized community. He borrows Horace's device of a saunter through a peopled city in which there is much to entertain and much to provoke derision; he takes over too the sophisticated complication of Horace's dialogue formula. From Juvenal Donne perhaps learned that a personal relation to a great city both loved and detested was worth the expressing. In his third Satire (used again by the Augustan Johnson in *his London*) Juvenal had created one of the most brilliant crowd scenes in literature, and its powerful rendering of the feeling of physical immersion may have lingered in Donne's memory. Both these poets of Rome, Horace and Juvenal, helped Donne towards the half-casual re-creation of London in the image of Rome nearly a century before the English Augustans were to do it again. For it was in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, when London became a metropolis, that English poets were first able to make full imaginative use of the most metropolitan of the Roman poets.

There is a third debt to Roman poetry which must be accounted for. The dialogue between the young men which I have quoted takes its conventions neither from Horace's nor from Juvenal's more straightforward exchanges but from the mannered and knotted burst of conversation that opens the first

Satire of Horace's younger imitator, Persius. Later in this satire Persius explains the principles of his dialogue: the second voice is, he says, merely an 'imaginary opponent'. I think it possible that Donne took a hint from Persius here in that his poem is as much an internalized debate as it is a piece of reporting. Of Donne's two young men, who are so closely involved with each other as to be at moments indistinguishable, one is a dominant, detached, and talkative scholar (the 'Pedant'), who loves the stability of theory, even though it may resemble the security of the prison and the grave. The other (the 'Zany') is an impulsive and susceptible clown, who wanders as the appetite for mere experience leads him—and it leads him finally to the 'stability' of the lecher's and brawler's sick-bed. It is not difficult to recognize the younger Donne in the learned and fanciful scholar. And though the 'grinning, smacking, shrugging' friend may seem a less familiar *persona*, it is relevant to recall that in an early verse letter romantically addressed to a young friend Donne refers to himself as 'Thy debtor, thy echo, thy foil, thy zany'—and there is much of the 'zany' that emerges in his poetry. Both young men, scholar and clown, may be twin aspects of the personality of which Walton was later to say: 'The melancholy and pleasant humour were in him so contempered, that each gave advantage to the other, and made his company one of the delights of mankind' (*pleasant* here meaning of course 'humorous' or 'amusing'). The zany friend of the First Satire, at any rate, is foolish mainly through his desire to be at the centre of things, a desire close to an impulse recurrent in Donne's writings and derisively captured in one of his Elegies:

Although wee see celestiall bodies move
Above the earth, the earth we till and love:
So we her ayres contemplate, words and hart
And vertues; But we love the Centrique part.

We can in fact speak of the First Satire as less externalized commentary than internalized debate, a 'dialogue of one' in which London—though loved and hated as was Juvenal's Rome—becomes a setting more figurative than the Roman capital was to Juvenal. In Donne's scenic poems, 'The Storm' and 'The Calm', he was to portray a world of natural phenomena gone almost out of the mind's control. The London of the Satire has something of the chaotic violence of the Nature of these two poems—and the two young men are arguing about its value. Yet to say so much may have the effect of obscuring the poem's

form, which expresses not debate but event. The two voices which become confused in the course of the dialogue suggest that what is happening concerns not two persons but change in one person. For all its realism therefore the anecdote is a fable suggestive of that natural and necessary passage, incessantly repeated in an individual's life, by which the mind's quietness gives way to the confusions of existence, and is exhilarated, and learns, and suffers loss. The movement here, that is to say, is closely related to that 'launching out' which Donne contemplates with a melancholy and humorous reluctance in *The Progresse of the Soule*:

O let me not launch out, but let mee save
Th'expense of braine and spirit; that my grave
His right and due, a whole unwasted man may have.

This movement finds also a curious echo in the sentence with which Walton was reflectively to summarize Donne's situation some years after the writing of this satire, at the marriage that might have helped his rising fortunes but in fact ruined them:

Mr. Donne's estate was the greatest part spent in many and chargeable travels, books, and dear-bought experience: he out of all employment that might yield a support for himself and wife, who had been curiously and plentifully educated; both their natures generous, and accustomed to confer, and not to receive, courtesies.

The First Satire, one might say finally, is a poem about 'chargeable travels' and 'dear-bought experience', a subject that goes deep into what moved Donne as a poet throughout his career. There is an implicit acceptance in Donne's writing that a man must go on his travels and that one must make for the centre, the metropolis of experience; it also accepts that the trip is likely to be dear-bought. The scholar in the First Satire is without any real hesitation as he descends into the streets, foretelling precisely what will happen—'Come, let's go.' The lover of the Elegies never questions his sad departures, but briskly 'bids farewell'. Among the *Songs and Sonnets*, all Donne's tenderest poems are valedictions. And the speaker in the magnificent, and magnificently worldly, late Hymn to Christ sets out without illusion on a journey that he knows will wreck him:

To see God only, I goe out of sight:
And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse
An Everlasting night.

II

Donne's Ovidian Elegies seem to have been written more or less contemporaneously with the Satires, during the early and middle years of the fifteen-nineties. The heroines of these love-poems (if one can call them heroines, and if one can call it love) belong with those 'Daughters of London . . . / As gay as Flora, and as rich as Inde' whom Donne salutes elsewhere. The sociological interest of these Elegies, the sense in them of the historical London, does not extend much further than that. These poems are uneven, perhaps only intermittently focused, and not at all easy to be dogmatic about, yet parts of them have power as well as wit. I would suggest that they are most lively where we feel the friction of divided tones. For in these Elegies Donne's creativity seems often to be a matter of discovering situations and tones which reflect an ambiguous response to experience—of giving voice once more to the Pedant and the Zany, who find themselves this time in a more simply amorous context. It is in this fashion that Donne is a London poet.

By means of this development of dramatically divided tones, Donne re-works Ovid as radically and as originally as he re-worked Horace, Persius, and Juvenal in his figurative narrative. He seems to be learning something both from the early comic Shakespeare and from the brilliant Marlowe of the poems, as he creates here and there an almost purely comical relation between the sober and judicious voice of the narrator and the foolish presence of his own zany desires, or of his mistress's body, or of any of the other ludicrous appurtenances of a love intrigue:

I taught my silkes, their whistling to forbear,
Even my opprest shoes, dumbe and speechlesse were.

So says the hero of the Fourth Elegy, 'The Perfume', who tells how a secret affair was wrecked by his hapless choice of too pungent a scent. The young lovers struggle to achieve the Roman pleasures of an illicit *amour* while plunged up to the neck in the confusions of English family life: threatening father, tired mother, hordes of younger children making their way in and out of the bedroom all night, and with all this the intimate betrayal by *things*—clothes, shoes, the wrong perfume. The hero is in theory an ambitious, even rather nasty, Ovidian seducer, but he finds himself committed to the whole confounding and chaotic world of practical existence: things, bodies, families,

smells, London. And so, between intention and performance, he stumbles, an exasperated, affectionate, and would-be brutish dandy. In the Seventh Elegy, 'Tutelage' ('Nature's lay Ideot, I taught thee to love'), we meet again this exasperated dandy, patiently teaching 'the Alphabet of flowers' to one who is clearly the dumbest of girls. Amusing as the image is, and fabricated though it may be, it helps to offset that more prevalent image of Donne as the lewd seducer that takes support from the more apparently simply sensual of the Elegies. For even 'Love's Progress' and 'Going to Bed' share the cool and amused element that one finds in Shakespeare's comic-erotic Mannerist poem *Venus and Adonis* or in Marlowe's more classical—but still funny—*Hero and Leander*. Donne's two Elegies are surprisingly abstract pieces that play theme and variations on what passes for a concrete procedure. 'Love's Progress' wanders round the 'Centric part' with a movement as erratic as that of the two young men in the First Satire; and the more the lines speak of the 'right true end' of love, the more the vagrancy tells that the lover is both lunatic and poet, his desire indistinguishable from his fantasy. Similarly few first readers of 'Going to Bed' have not, I imagine, been surprised to realize when the poem ends that the proposed event has yet to begin, and that the speaker has so far managed to undress no one but himself.

So much must be said of the ambiguous tone of the Elegies, the metropolitan wariness and humour with which they embark on erotic adventures. But these poems are far from satires, and it would be misleading to overstress their critical tone. To do so, we would have to ignore their 'zany' side, their capacity for total immersion in an experience, so that the most critical of readers is convinced so long as he reads. Even to call the Elegies anything as clear-cut as comedies would be a mistake, from another point of view. A comparison with the early Shakespeare would bring out how relatively unfocused mood and attitude are in these poems. Shakespeare has from the beginning a far firmer grip on his comic subject, the humour and pathos of man's dual nature in love; he achieves early and with little strain an almost classical generality of comic wisdom. But it is perhaps easier for a man to know what he thinks about love in Arcadia (or Navarre, or Athens) than in the City of London.

If one bears in mind such reservations as these, one may be in a better position to appreciate the degree and nature of Donne's success in the most striking of the Elegies, the sixteenth, 'On his Mistris'. He has in this poem invented a situation which,

however odd it may seem, serves his needs perfectly. Much of the poem's power lies in the truthfulness of its mixed feelings. From the famous first line—'By our first strange and fatall interview'—a voice speaks with tenderness, exasperation, pain, urgency, and humour. The curiously angular realism of the situation, by which a man persuades a woman *not* to accompany him in the disguise of a page, has been explained in terms of pure autobiography, but the poem's human warmth and poignancy have also prompted comparisons with *Romeo and Juliet*. Neither of these appeals to fact or fiction seems to me to get quite close enough to the actual substance of the Elegy. On the fictional side, Donne's sense of pain is not Shakespeare's; he lacks Shakespeare's *gravitas*, the tranquillity arising from a deep sense of the natural. Donne is much nearer in this Elegy to a work more internationally famous in the period than anything by Shakespeare: the Spanish prose classic *Celestina*. Rojas's long narrative presents the tragic fall of two young lovers and their nurse-bawd in a way that blends a piercing romanticism with a startlingly modern realism and harsh humour. One of the peculiarities of Rojas's powerful story is that though it contains great psychological accuracy in the telling, its tragedy is ultimately unexplained. The lovers take it for granted that they cannot marry and must meet furtively; but no reason is given why they cannot. This absence of primary motivation in no way impairs the work. Indeed its refusal to explain throws all the greater stress on the 'explanation' the reader makes for himself: he responds in terms of that profound fatalism of true romance that believes love to be unlucky and that expects a *liebestod*. The strangeness of Donne's story—of a girl who wants to assume disguise—works, I suggest, in precisely the same way as *Celestina*. The element of the random, the chancy, projects us forward immediately into an excited anxiety whose cause is purely psychological. So too with the urgent repetitions of the Elegy's opening lines: they take us back by rhetoric to the plangent desolation of true romanticism, the authentic and brooding Petrarchan distress in which nothing lies ahead but *Laura in morte*.

If the Sixteenth Elegy relates in any way to real life, to 'fact',—and its anecdotal allusiveness awakes a sense of the real—then its facts are not biographical but psychological. The poem has a movement, circuitous but purposive, which is remarkably like that of the First Satire. Donne even uses the same device of a violently syncopated rhythm to give his sense of immersion in the world of the debauched Europeans—

Men of France, changeable Camelions,
Spittles of diseases, shops of fashions

—as he used when he described the London crowds. And the friend's rough fate in a brothel brawl ('quarrell'd, fought, bled') has its parallel—even a verbal echo ('taken, stabb'd, bleede')—in the imagined death of the lover. But in the Elegy the act of violence is given a finer form, in keeping with its more complex function: it here becomes—odd though the notion may seem—the climax of a nightmare which the lover warns his mistress *not* to give way to. The violence is thus deeply inset in a fiction within a fiction: fear (faced with sufficient bravado) becomes a controlled fantasy—is even, with luck, exorcized. The poem ends with the lover telling his mistress to

walk in expectation, till from thence
Our greate King call thee into his presence.
When I am gone, dreame mee some happinesse,
Nor let thy lookes our long hid love confesse,
Nor praise, nor dispraise mee, blesse, nor curse
Openly loves force; nor in bed fright thy nurse
With midnights startings, crying out, oh, oh
Nurse, oh my love is slaine; I saw him goe
Ore the white Alpes, alone; I saw him, I,
Assayld, fight, taken, stabb'd, bleede, fall, and dye.
Augure mee better chance, unless dreade Jove
Think it enough for mee, to 'have had thy love.

In its psychological insight and its exquisite poise the close of the Sixteenth Elegy looks beyond anything in the First Satire.

At the end of this Elegy we hear for the first time a note that gives power to some of the best of the *Songs and Sonnets*. The poet's response blends longing and fear, attraction and recoil: from the tension between the two comes the nervous charge so characteristic of Donne's poetry—that almost electrical quality that energizes the reader and yet makes its harassing demands upon him. It is by virtue of this power that Donne earns the right to be called our first (perhaps our only) real master of the poetry of urban anxiety, the love poet of the 'national centre for risk capital'. In their ability to convert anxiety into an empowering force—to live on their nerves—any of Donne's lovers might ask

what other way have wee,
But to marke when, and where the darke eclipses bee?

One might take as representative of this conversion of apprehension into boldness and balance the archetypal hero and

heroine of the 'Lecture upon the Shadow', pacing under the glare of the noonday sun and reflecting upon their condition:

These three houres that we have spent,
Walking here, two shadowes went
Along with us, which we our selves produc'd;
But, now the Sunne is just above our head,
We doe those shadowes tread;
And to brave cleareness all things are reduc'd.

These instructive lovers, moving with the upright steadiness the level rhythm suggests, take with them a shadow ahead and a shadow behind, one in space and one in time, one the suspicion of others and the other the doubt of themselves. Their very uprightness derives from the tension of being between shadow and shadow, and knowing it. And their dignity derives also from the dangerousness of the situation, in which love is defined only as some completely central noonday moment of feeling at which all is always crisis: 'And his first minute, after noone, is night.' The poem's sharp-edged brilliance consists in this exclusiveness. Indeed one of the most impressive things about it (as with so many of Donne's poems, but here to an extreme degree) is the amount of the natural which the poem finds expendable. It contains nothing but sun, shadow, lovers, nerves, and rhetoric. The tension that results is quite alien to that natural or pastoral wisdom which might teach its persons how to 'abide the change of time', as do the couples of Shakespearian romance. Donne's lovers belong to the great city, and they are powered by an anxiety as acute as it could be without sacrificing their lucidity. Their balance, and the 'brave cleareness' of this whole abrupt and nervous poem, is a poise of alternatives reckoned with, an art of balancing upright on shadows.

III

Comparatively little has been said about Donne as a conscious stylist; not surprisingly, because a marked naturalism is so much a feature of his style. I now want to argue that he is in fact a London artist in another sense: a man who writes out of an extreme consciousness of himself as an artist and an equal consciousness of the 'understanders', that sophisticated audience for whom he writes, men and women likely to miss nothing. The naturalism of the style, that is to say, is in itself—like the apparently random structure of the First Satire and the Sixteenth Elegy—an effect of art. In the verse letters we meet, in place of

the flawless *cantabile* of some of the *Songs and Sonnets*, a poet making himself master of that essentially English mode, the off-hand style. For Donne writes here as angularly to his friends as to those great ladies he was obliged to flatter. He likes to seem to be involved in a stumbling, stammering battle with language from which a cadence or a tenderness will suddenly float free, as though friendship or civility or writing at all were a matter of working against the grain of things until the miraculous happens:

For 'twere in us ambition to write
Soe, that because wee two, you two unite,
Our letter should as you, bee infinite.

And at times he does this also, though more sweetly, in the lyrics of the *Songs and Sonnets*:

These burning fits but meteors bee,
Whose matter in thee is soone spent.
Thy beauty, 'and all parts, which are thee,
Are unchangeable firmament.

Donne distrusts the conventionally aesthetic, and often devotes his large verbal mastery to writing like an amateur: sometimes, as in the echoic and parodic Fourth Satire, with an effect of virtuoso clowning. There is possibly a clue here to two of his most famous stylisms, his rhythmic syncopation, and his use of conceits. He will with deliberation destroy the harmony of a blank-verse line; or withdraw from an emotional effect, by interposing a conceit that forces upon us the coolest intellectuality. He is a master of certain kinds of aesthetic or emotional spell, but like many artists of his time will repeatedly break that spell in order to assert the claims of life and reason.

The later sixteenth century was of course a great age of applied rhetoric; all the major arts of the time were public arts, arts for an audience. It is no accident that Donne, who was trained in the law, was in youth 'a great frequenter of plays', and later became a famous preacher. It throws some light on the peculiar artistry of the *Songs and Sonnets*, to recall that place in the letters where Donne speaks of the blessings and delights of good company, of family and friends, and then adds that he tends to be 'not the lesse alone, for being in the midst of them'.¹ Similarly, in his poems there is often a perfect equilibrium between their exact truth to mood and feeling and their acute

¹ *Letters*, p. 45.

awareness of an audience. Like an actor, he can give to any attitude, however complex and difficult, a splendidly full consciousness; he brings it, one might say, into full daylight. The reader of such poems finds a pleasure of concentration, of commitment, wittily involved with the pleasure of freedom: one thinks this because one chooses, not because one is compelled; and having thought it one may go on to think something else. This is the side of Donne that he himself described as a 'vertiginous giddiness', a ceaseless awareness of the mind's and will's alternatives. And in the libertine poems especially he shows himself to be (to quote him once again, this time from *Pseudo-Martyr*) a man who needed 'freedome and libertie, as in all other indifferent things, so in my studies also, not to betroth or enthrall my self, to any one science, which should possesse or denominate me'.¹ So he writes

Thus I reclaim'd my buzard love, to flye
At what, and when, and how, and where I chuse;
Now negligent of sport I lye,
And now as other Fawknrs use,
I spring a mistresse, sweare, write, sigh and weepe;
And the game kill'd, or lost, goe talke, and sleepe.

Many of the slighter of the *Songs and Sonnets*—and libertine poems like 'Loves Diet', which I have just quoted, are among them—have this special virtue of their own: their splendid surface lucidity gives pleasure in itself, but it also rides, or controls, considerable inward complexity, tonal or psychological or referential. If we look back at 'Loves Diet' we see that the man who speaks with such careless savagery of the 'game' does so in a tone whose chief effect is one of controlled purity. And it is clear from the rest of 'Loves Diet' that the speaker's libertinism has a good deal to do with failed or reluctant devotion, is an idealism *manqué*. Some of these libertine poems are complex in a different way. The title of 'The Indifferent', the phrase 'things indifferent' in 'Communitie', and possibly 'indifferent things' in the sentence I have just quoted from *Pseudo-Martyr* all (I would suggest) make glancing allusion to the important Reformation doctrine (associated mainly with rationalism and with the radical or Lutheran left-wing) of adiaphorism, or indifferentism—some things only are necessary to salvation, the rest are indifferent to it.² To meet such allusions is to be alerted to the breadth of

¹ *Pseudo-Martyr* (Preface, sig. B 2), London, 1610.

² See, for example, the brief discussions of adiaphorism in A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (1964), pp. 78–9, 180.

range in which Donne's libertine poetry operates. It is focused on erotic experience but it resonates in a wider area that is moral, intellectual, and theological.¹ This is very much poetry of the Elizabethan university graduate, setting to work his large but otherwise underemployed talents. We should not at any rate underestimate the degree of tonal complexity in even the lightest of these poems. 'Marke but this flea' opens a seduction poem with the prosy gravity of a sermonizing parson, a tone supported by theological allusion throughout; and the comparison throws an odd light on both preacher and seducer. The limpid directness of the moralist of 'Communitie'—

Good wee must love, and must hate ill,
For ill is ill, and good good still

—leads, as it happens, straight into sexual anarchy. And the man who discovers, in 'The Indifferent', an uproarious promiscuity—

I can love both faire and browne,
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betraies

—is given by the liturgical rhythms of the piece all the modest pride of some well-brought-up lad just awarded the prize for universal charity. The presence of these bright tones is always a danger signal in Donne. Later in life, and hoping to make his way in the world, he preferred these worldly but provocative poems not to pass around too freely. They are not 'safe' poems: they have all the dangerousness of 'brave cleareness', the capacity to hold on to the logic of an idea until it emerges into an alarming daylight. Their 'free speech' has sometimes even a self-destructiveness in it, the power to undermine its own apparent premises. The preposterous comminator in 'The Curse' gets so involved in the artistry of his hatred as finally to lose interest in hating; the deserted lover in 'The Apparition' hates so hard that he finds out that he must be in love after all. This sharp paradoxicality occurs even in such things as the beautiful, pellucid opening of 'A Feaver':

Oh doe not die, for I shall hate
All women so, when thou art gone,
That thee I shall not celebrate,
When I remember, thou wast one

—where Donne comes very close to suggesting that for this beneficent lady to give up the ghost just then would be a foolish, or

¹ William Empson discusses the theological bearing of some of Donne's love poems in 'Donne the Space Man', *Kenyon Review* (1957).

even a fatal, mistake as far as he is concerned. In all these poems conventional surfaces are both brilliantly displayed and yet dangerously undermined. This elusive 'dangerousness' makes one want to demur somewhat over that epithet most often applied to Donne: 'passionate'. The word is not unjust, since it takes account of what is most there to be noticed, the strange strength of the author's personality as it issues in a voice almost unnervingly close to the ear, and the candour and generosity with which that voice speaks. But in ordinary human and social terms, what one meets as often is not so much 'passion' as that amiable rancour, that wary civility, that distinguishes the tone of English social communication, but most particularly in the social centre, London itself. The real motto of the City that was already in Donne's day a great trade centre ought to be *Caveat Emptor*; and one of the most candid and generous sayings of the 'passionate' Donne is 'Take heed of loving me'.

It is not only in his slighter, merely libertine or complimentary poems that Donne works this kind of effect. One of the most haunting and tender of the *Songs and Sonnets*, the 'Valediction: forbidding Mourning', moves and convinces by the way it sets up an attitude or tone which is strongly threatened but which does not finally give way. In terms of subject the poem is a kind of perfect abstraction of that original experience so vividly present at the close of Elegy 16, but here refined almost out of sight. The situation of the 'Valediction', the parting of lovers, is introduced with an abruptness that gives it the raw immediacy of a street accident. Yet Donne handles it throughout with an extraordinarily sophisticated obliquity, almost with evasiveness, with secrecy. The poem opens with the removed conceit of the death of good men:

As virtuous men passe mildly 'away,
And whisper to their soules, to goe,
Whilst some of their sad friends doe say,
The breath goes now, and some say, no:

So let us melt . . .

And it closes with the famous, even more abstract, three-stanza conceit of parting and re-joining compasses. Both images are at a remarkable distance from the world of 'yonge fressche folkes, he or she', and in that distance resides both the austerity and the reassurance of the poem. The tone of the 'Valediction' is less that of mere kindness than of a bracingly high style shared: we

are involved in something halfway between the lightness of a courtier's *Coraggio!* and such cheerfully distracting games as might be played with a child in the face of a danger both great and imminent.

Moving of th'earth brings harmes and feares,
Men reckon what it did and meant,
But trepidation of the spheares,
Though greater farre, is innocent.

In the ambiguities of the word *innocent* here lies much of the power of the poem. The 'Valediction' has a note of experience, of the adult need to play games, deep enough to discount much belief in innocence; and yet the games themselves are innocent. Given all the freedom therefore of being necessarily half-ironical, or only half-believed, the whole poem carries a quality of light numinousness that comes to rest in its last conceit, that of the compasses, a suspended and spiralling image that never finally proves quite what it seems to.

In the 'Valediction', courage is a tone of voice, tenderness a high style. This tacit artistry, and a suggestion of the milieu it arises from, reappears at the climax of Ford's tragedy *The Broken Heart*, when the princess Calantha hears the news of the death of all those closest to her but continues impassively her formal dance, allowing herself to prepare to die of grief only when the music has ceased and the dance is over. Donne, who longed to break into the court circle but never succeeded, despite himself retained the independent humanity and undermining intelligence that could authenticate such marvellous gestures. Without these qualities we are left, as we are perhaps in Ford's case, with an art of surface, that second-generation art by which the radical revolution of Marlowe, Donne, and Jonson—their invention of an intellectual élitist culture—has quietly changed its terms and become a social élitism: the gentleman's art that governs seventeenth-century letters.¹

IV

The obliquity of the 'Valediction: forbidding Mourning' is a part of its own special wit. Not many of the *Songs and Sonnets* work in this way, by an explicit art of indirection. They have

¹ Cf. Grierson: 'There are no poets . . . whose style is so entirely that of an English gentleman of the best type' (*Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems* (1921), p. xxxi).

that 'brave cleareness' which gives the 'Lecture upon the Shadow' its strength and which is an essential characteristic of Donne's mind. Yet almost invariably the movement of feeling in these poems is subject to an opposing current: there are few statements which do not find the implied pressure of opposing counter-statements. To take one brief example of this: the poem in which most would agree that Donne's affirmation of the sense of security in love is at its height, 'The Anniversarie', magnificently celebrates a timeless love in lines whose movement is like that of a ship riding in deep water:

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

But the whole of the rest of the poem is about 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow'; the deep water is, so to speak, fresh and flowing, a current that animates the poem. To make association between love and what must be (judging by the imagery that fills the last stanza of the poem) the Accession Day ceremonies of either an ageing Queen or an unageless King is to understand why those 'true and false feares' enter the poem. The monumental quality of 'The Anniversarie' lies in its affirmativeness; but its power to move derives from that truthful detachment that places Donne always outside the event, able to see a thing in its frailty as well as in its strength. The end of the poem converts a Catullan assertion into something far more touchingly English: an honest anticlimax, that in its precision takes the scale of the endeavour:

Let us love nobly, 'and live, and adde againe
Yeares and yeares unto yeares, till we attaine
To write threescore: this is the second of our raigne.

It does not seem to me helpful to see this mixture of commitment and withdrawal as symptoms of some personal neurosis. The terms of 'The Anniversarie' (with its 'honors, beauties, wits') allow us to say that Donne is placing his love fairly and squarely in a capital city. And this placing of love makes his language of feeling perpetually vulnerable, arousing always, directly or by association, echoes of the primary love-language of his time, that of courtly Petrarchism—a language that had become open to corruption and hence made the man who used it subject to considerable stresses. The nature and uses of the Petrarchan love-language in the sixteenth century is a large

subject which, even if I had the competence, I do not have time to explore. It can summarily be said, however, that the formality of the courtly love-speech of the period gave it always some qualities of a game. But it was a game that could be played with intense seriousness and in various contexts, some of them well outside the area of private feeling. A literary scholar has recently reminded us of the 'Machiavellian' uses made of the Petrarchan love-code by Queen Elizabeth, particularly in the last decade of her reign when the waning of her personal power made even greater political demands on the myth.¹ Similarly a political historian has written of the fall of Essex in terms that perhaps throw light on Donne's ambiguous relation to this love-code—for whether or not he was in fact of the Essex party Donne seems to have felt some degree of involvement with Essex's fate when he spoke of himself as having died in that grey year when the courtier fell and he himself married.² Professor Hurstfield says of Elizabeth's court in the last years of her reign:

Everything was in fact conducted on two levels: in the adorned language of amorous devotion, and beneath it in the sharp cut-and-thrust for office and power, in which the queen held the unbreached authority to decide . . . Essex made the fatal mistake of treating the façade as though it were the reality . . . He hoped that in gaining a peculiar place in the queen's affections, he would win a dominant voice in the queen's government. He broke the rules of the game.³

Any man who was of the world, or who hoped to be, played this game. We can observe Donne playing it by looking at the first letter in the volume which his son published after Donne's death. Unlike the reticent though often warmly friendly letters to men that fill so much of the volume this one, with all its exquisite hyperboles, is glacially cold:

Madame, I could make some guesse whether souls that go to heaven, retain any memory of us that stay behinde, if I knew whether you ever thought of us, since you enjoyed your heaven, which is your self, at

¹ Leonard Forster, *The Icy Fire* (1962). See chapter 4, 'The political petrarchism of the Virgin Queen'.

² 'If at last, I must confess, that I dyed ten yeares ago, yet as the Primitive Church admitted some of the *Jews* Ceremonies, not for perpetuall use, but because they would bury the Synagogue honourably, though I dyed at a blow then when my courses were diverted, yet it wil please me a little to have had a long funerall, and to have kept myself so long above ground without putrefaction.' *Letters*, p. 122.

³ Joel Hurstfield, *Elizabeth I and the Unity of England* (1963), p. 187.

home. Your going away hath made *London* a dead carcase. A Tearn, and a Court do a little spice and embalm it, and keep it from putrefaction, but the soul went away in you: and I think the onely reason why the plague is somewhat slackened, is, because the place is dead already, and nobody left worth the killing. Wheresoever you are, there is *London* enough.¹

It scarcely needs arguing that this courtly medium has its place in the *Songs and Sonnets*, whether directly or in the commoner anti-Petrarchan forms. But it would be a mistake to go on from there and assume that Donne is too simply conditioned by this social and Petrarchan medium, that his poems are mere 'social gestures'.² True, Donne was a master of the urbane love-game, as of many games. But he was also a man—as all his writings surely make plain—for whom the notions of truth and sincerity were important.

It is relevant here that there are some lyrics in the *Songs and Sonnets* which leave us uncertain whether they were addressed to a beloved mistress (or wife) or to a patroness who was expected to pay the poet for the tributes he addressed to her. The great age of English love poetry was also, significantly enough, the time of the literary patroness—and Donne pursued the Countess of Bedford manfully. It was in fact in the relationship of poet to patroness that the problem of sincerity, of purity of motive in love and in art, confronted him in one of its most searching and explicit forms. Donne has been compared unfavourably with Samuel Daniel, on the ground that as a patronized poet he was over-subject to anxiety.³ Yet there was clearly good cause for anxiety in his situation, as there was for the many hopeless suitors who peopled Elizabeth's court. Moreover, the patronized poet—if honest and intelligent enough—might find in his situation anxieties other than the simply material: namely the more abstract doubts and complexities of any thoroughly worldly love. A man can tell a truth when he writes of love for a person by whom he hopes to profit, and he can tell a truth too when he considers how fruitless his love has been; and to discover and express these truths without cynicism or self-pity demands

¹ *Letters*, p. 1.

² Cf. 'His lyrics . . . do not define private sensations. Instead, they make public gestures, and produce social effects . . . Donne's Petrarchism shows his poems to be gestures made from social situations.' See Donald L. Guss, *John Donne, Petrarchist* (Detroit, 1966), pp. 108–11.

³ In 'The Literature of Patronage 1580–1630' by Patricia Thomson, *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 2 (1952).

a peculiar steadiness and clarity in the poet. This situation and these qualities unite two men otherwise so different, Donne and Raleigh. In Raleigh's splendid line, 'Twelve yeares intire I wasted in this warr', the courtly poet is love's fool but no other man's and certainly not his own; and this is the note—as of mere digested experience—that is heard in Donne's writing. Where Raleigh is tragic and retrospective, the more lucid (although more fantastic) Donne will present the game of worldly love as a wild farce in a strict form:

Till then, Love, let my body raigne, and let
Mee travell, sojourne, snatch, plot, have, forget,
Resume my last yeares relict: thinke that yet
We 'had never met.

The same lucidity shows itself as Donne reflects in his Letters on his relation to his patroness. One kind of honesty appears in that letter in which he states his flat disappointment at the small sum at last paid to him by the Countess and regrets writing the elegy which had moved her compassionate interest (and so aroused his hopes).¹ Another kind of honesty, more anxious but not therefore inferior, appears in the letter in which he actually speaks of the problem of sincerity and truth, and of past and present experience, as it affects the relation with a patroness; and the language he uses carries a regretful and complicated echo of the Petrarchan sentiment itself:

I should be loath that in any thing of mine, composed of her, she should not appear much better then some of those of whom I have written. And yet I cannot hope for better expressings then I have given of them. So you see how much I should wrong her, by making her but equall to others. I would I could be beleaved, when I say that all that is written of them, is but prophecy of her.²

A confusion of categories, or a heroic or merely brutish will to unify them, broke the courtier Essex. Donne too 'broke' his fortunes in the year of his disastrous and devoted marriage. But in his poems the effort to unify, the note of 'I would I could be beleaved', continues. This need to master and shape the disparities of experience, and to write truthfully of a London love, takes one of its simpler (even cruder) forms in 'The Blossome', a gay courtly poem presumably addressed to a patroness but seeming to commune with the poet's own 'naked thinking heart'. The 'heart' is behaving somewhat over-romantically, and so, as

¹ *Letters*, p. 219.

² *Letters*, p. 260.

a tart corrective, Donne allows it a short spell longer with the *donna* before returning to its proper place:

Meet mee at London, then . . .
 I would give you
 There, to another friend, whom wee shall finde
 As glad to have my body, as my minde.

The London of 'other friends', other times, other experiences, always forms a ground of actuality even to the most high-flying of Donne's poems, so that assertion is always a personal, sometimes paradoxical, sometimes heroic, will to believe. It is only safe to treat 'The Good-morrow', for instance, as confident assertion if one notes that it opens with 'I wonder' and closes with an 'If'—that the 'good morrow to our waking soules' takes place in a moment of present time enclosed in a questionable past and a conditional future, a London always outside the window. No poem is more firmly located in the courtly London world than that exquisite and remarkably cold romance 'Aire and Angels', which should perhaps make its readers wonder more than they appear to whether its nominal addressee was a mistress or a patroness—and wonder too about the exact mode of the 'passionate' poet about whom this can be said. It opens with the headiest of angelic compliments—

Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee,
 Before I knew thy face or name;
 So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame,
Angells affect us oft, and worship'd bee . . .

—and it closes with a flatly depressed statement of the incompatibility of men and women. But the distance between beginning and end is not as great as it may at first seem; in one of his sermons Donne surprisingly refers to 'Angels and Arch Angels' in the same breath and with the same scepticism as he does to the 'Giants, Witches, Spirits, Wild Beasts' in the maps of the 'Old Cosmographers':¹ Angels are hypothetical creations. Love for an angelic mistress (or patroness) is an 'I would I could be beleev'd' that suffers a certain attrition—or at least change of state—from the passage of time, and we are made to feel that passage in the poem's uncharacteristically loose, flaccid, paratactic narrative structure. As we read through the poem, from

¹ 'A Sermon of the Commemoration of the Lady Danvers'; in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, vol. viii, pp. 81–2.

line to line, we seem to pass through a stylized accelerated version of real time, an effect reinforced by the odd but purposeful variations of tense. And much of the beautiful and slightly melancholy character of 'Aire and Angels' resides in the disjunction between this precise actuality and the soaring abstraction which is also its mode.

This whole aspect of Donne's mind is crystallized in 'The Canonization'. It is a poem that manages to define a heroic solitariness of love in terms of the city it excludes; and that takes much of its power and life from the life of that excluded city. It is important, I think, that the first two stanzas of this poem are based on Ovid's *Defence of Poetry*.¹ For 'The Canonization' is a formal *Defence of Love* in five stanzas, but its strategy is so paradoxical that its formal nature may not be recognized at once.² In stanzas one and two Donne rebuts the opposing claims of the busy world on the underminingly modest ground that his love is at least harmless; but his wit does little to diminish the real energy of the world he rebuts. In stanza three he races through the conventional claims *for* love with a reductive airiness that displays taper and phoenix, eagle and dove as what they are in terms of real experience: emblems, no more. The point of rest for the poem, the fulcrum on which 'love's whole world doth wheel' in poetic terms, is the tired, terse line that opens the fourth stanza and that seems to proceed as by a peculiar inward logic from the incompatibilities of the first three:

We can dye by it, if not live by love.

The claim that follows in the fourth stanza is technically a paradox of self-reference: 'it will be fit for verse', said in verse. Thus Donne's last soaring stanza, the fifth, is something allied to a legal fiction; it has the lightness of pure levity, for nothing rational keeps it up, beyond the sheer self-referent wish that has driven the poem itself into being. The poem is a paradox, a worldly *Contra Mundum*, that defends love and poetry by 'ringing the bell backward'. It is entirely characteristic of 'The Canonization' that Donne's lovers in the 'hermitage' of the last stanza should speak with the tongues of 'Countries, towns', and 'courts';

¹ i.e. the fifteenth and last Elegy of the First Book of *Amores*—apparently a favourite poem with Elizabethan poets, translated by both Marlowe and Jonson, and the poem from which Shakespeare took his epigraph for *Venus and Adonis*.

² Though the device of opening and closing every stanza with the rhyme-word *love* neatly expresses Donne's firm but finite involvement with his subject: 'Love, love, nothing but love'.

and that the most lucid and moving definition of love Donne ever made, 'You to whom love was peace that now is rage', is here a notion about the past locked up in a mind imagined in the future by a poet existing in an all too paradoxical present.

V

I have been arguing that these poems, like so many in the *Songs and Sonnets*, are London poems in a double sense: first, because of their hold on the dense medium of actual experience, which qualifies all romantic abstracts; second, because of their author's selfconsciousness as an artist, his extreme awareness of himself in relation to a surrounding audience. I want to close by suggesting that this understanding of Donne as a metropolitan writer may be used to throw light on one of his more difficult and least apparently metropolitan poems, 'The Exstasie'. The difficulty of 'The Exstasie' does not, I think, lie in the abstruseness of its subject; it lies, rather, in the elusiveness of its treatment. The eloquence and power of the poem are undeniable, but its intention and even its tone are so disputable as to cause the sharpest disagreement as to its final meaning.

One way to approach 'The Exstasie' is to recall that there is a great deal of late Renaissance European art, in both its Mannerist and Baroque phases, in which the relation of the spectator to the art-work becomes a large part of the artist's subject. Many of such works demand a sceptical approach to their subject if one is not to ascend a staircase that ends in mid-air. Donne's relationship with this kind of work is suggested in 'The Exstasie' by a detachment which is, even for him (and considering the nature of the overt subject) unusually marked. Three features make this plain. The first is that, from the very beginning of the poem, the experience of the lovers is uncompromisingly set back in the past:

Where, like a pillow on a bed,
A Pregnant banke swel'd up, to rest
The violets reclining head,
Sat we two, one anothers best.

A man who can write (as Donne did in his *Devotions*) 'This minute I was well, and am ill, this minute', does not use a past tense unguardedly. And the problematical valuation of past experience is, as I have hoped to show, a subject to which Donne recurs. Indeed, one of the period's most constant themes is

Poore cousened cousenor, *that* she, and *that* thou,
Which did begin to love, are neither now;
You are both fluid, chang'd since yesterday.

From the first stanza until the point—wherever it occurs—at which we are so possessed by the lovers' experience that it becomes our 'now', 'The Exstasie' is set in 'yesterday'.

Secondly, this peculiarity of time is reinforced by a peculiarity of place, which is manifested in terms of style. The opening is very oddly written, with a turgid, knotted abstractness that one would guess was meant to sound old-fashioned but which is hard to explain with any certainty: the twisted eye-beams and cemented hands, the reclining violet and sepulchral statues are presumably there by design and for a purpose. The lovers appear to be not merely in the past but in a semi-symbolic past: one might guess, in a state of nature. Wherever they are, they are clearly (at least at the opening) not where *we* are.

Hence Donne's third device of detachment: the invention of at least one intermediary (there may be more) in the middle distance between us and them:

If any, so by love refin'd,
That he soules language understood,
And by good love were grown all minde,
Within convenient distance stood . . .

If it were not that the lovers are so very emblematic, a state of being in a state of nature, it is true that one might be worried by these intermediaries or lookers-on at a love-scene; and there are readers of the poem who resent, and are even repelled by, their presence. But few of those who visit the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome to see the most famous of Baroque sculptural groups can fail to be startled by the fact that the on-stage ecstasy of Bernini's St. Teresa is being watched by modest stone cardinals in side-boxes. They are there because the thing has, so to speak, to be seen to be believed; they are sceptical reason embodied and sanctified, 'by good love grown all minde'.

These devices of detachment establish themselves strongly at the start of the poem; they dominate it much as Donne's authorial voice does in other poems. When we arrive at the ecstatic lovers, therefore, we meet them with a certain preserved equilibrium. It is not irony, of which there are only faint traces in the poem, and even less is it a satirical impulse. What works on us in the opening of the poem is something inherent in the mere movement of the verse and the tone of voice we seem to hear

through it. It is a sophisticated mind which sees a grassy bank as 'pregnant' and two young lovers as 'two equal armies', and it is an intelligent and knowledgeable mind which places us so securely in possession of the past. In the scepticism of this tone there is the essentially metropolitan awareness that other experiences are always also true.¹ As a result of this, when the lovers begin to talk—and by definition they are persons for whom no other experience is as true as this—they sound like elevated infants. For Donne invents for them a reedy limpidity of diction such as the 'dead birds' of Shakespeare's 'Phoenix and Turtle' might have used:

This Exstasie doth unperplex
(We said) and tell us what we love,
Wee see by this, it was not sexe,
Wee see, we saw not what did move.

Ben Jonson's Young Shepherd was to use just such a diction some years later:

Though I am young and cannot tell
Either what death or love is, well . . .

and Marvell's Nymph Complaining, after him:

The wanton troupers riding by
Have shot my faun and it will die . . .

Donne is the earliest of these three sophisticated poets to register innocence by means of a child-like syntax and rhythm and a monosyllabic simplicity of diction. The impulse, however, is an impulse to register, not to deride. We may feel from outside the poem that the lovers' sentiments are, if scrutinized, turgid and even a little silly. But no poem is read from the outside: its truth must be read to be believed, for the reading is in itself a species of 'ecstasy'. It is important that Donne himself is quite as much interested in this kind of ecstasy as in any other. An ecstasy is to him a passion of human communication, outgoing the self, and the literary may well be more authentic than the amatory. So he will write to a friend, 'this writing of letters . . . is a kind

¹ Cf.: 'The effect of London is apparent; the author has become a critic of men, surveying them from a consistent and developed point of view; he is more formidable and disconcerting; in short, much more mature.' T. S. Eliot on Pound in (the anonymous) *Ezra Pound* (New York, 1917), pp. 16–17.

of extasie',¹ and again, 'Sir, more then kisses, letters mingle Soules'. It is this 'ecstasy' of literary sympathy on the part of both poet and reader that makes our poem, where it succeeds, as elated as it is aloof. For when the lovers speak, all Donne's poetic energy gets inside these leaden quatrains and by sheer force of sympathy lifts them up until they float. The detached man falls silent, and the inset lovers give voice to a sense of glory.

But Donne cannot simply maintain these divided voices; for he is not a dramatist who can leave his persons unreconciled, but a poet thinking, and to some conclusion. The substance of the poem tempts us always to suppose that his 'thought' is a matter of the arguments produced. But the young people's intellectual contortions, like all the arguments in Donne's poems, remain that—mere arguments: a gesture towards, rather than the real substance of that tough and thorough intellectuality which characterized the poet. His lovers here are troubled by the relation of soul and sense. But Donne has already introduced into the poem a person (that one 'grown all mind' who is his own and the reader's surrogate) who from his 'convenient distance' sees the lovers as souls talking sense; and 'mind' has the right to assume therefore that the essential mark of the love-ecstasy is the happy inability of soul and sense to be distinct. So much for the lovers' arguments. The poet's thinking (as apart from the lovers') goes into the shaping that obtains this effect; and, more, into the penumbra of intonations and associations that surrounds all that the lovers say. They talk about a timeless love for twelve steady stanzas, which comes to seem a remarkably long time; and while they talk, things begin to happen to them; or if not to them, then at least to that more time-bound mind which listens to them. For while he overhears with sympathy and even some awe their single-minded discourse, he has time to regain what he perhaps never lost, that scepticism with which he met them first. As a result, the arguments of innocence take on more and more of the complex and touching intonations of an imputed experience; and we begin to hear the familiar sound of 'I would I could be beleaved':

But O alas, so long, so farre
Our bodies why do wee forbear?

'So long, so farre' is not the cadence of a child; and the listener

¹ *Letters*, p. 11. 'I make account that this writing of letters, when it is with any seriousness, is a kind of extasie, and a departure and secession and suspension of the soul, w^{ch} doth then communicate it self to two bodies.'

hearing it may well echo with the beginnings of irony, 'O alas . . . our bodies'. And this note in the poem, as of a life lived, deepens with the categorical imperative of the stanza with which 'The Exstasie' begins to close:

So must pure lovers soules descend
T'affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.¹

The resonances here move right outside the soul-sense debate, and it does not matter that the lovers' sentiments are at this point somewhat confused—indeed, it may be a necessary part of the effect that they are so. What we hear is the word *must*, and talk of a *descent* and of a *prison*; and the reader who—like the poet—has not the freedom to argue that fictive lovers enjoy but inhabits a prison of 'musts' thinks of the other descents which await the rapt speakers: from innocence into experience, from thought into action, from the past into the present and out of the poem. These last stanzas are involved in a curious, always perceptible melancholy, but also in a quickening of rhythm into a brisk decisiveness. Both moods meet in the magnificent image of the prince in prison, who seems so much greater than his immediate context needs him to be, and who brings into a knotted and self-analytical love-poem all the clarity and strength that Renaissance humanism could sometimes achieve. There are princes in prison in Sidney, Shakespeare, and Calderón, but the one most important to Donne here can be met in his own *Biathanatos*, where he writes of

the search and discovery of truth, who else being the greatest Prince in the world, should have no progresse, but be straightned in a wretched corner.²

It may be said that 'The Exstasie' is in itself a 'progresse of truth'. What gives the poem its weight, in fact, is less the conclusion that the arguing lovers come to, than the conclusion they bring poet and readers to. And that conclusion is an ending, not a thing that can be stated as any theory of soul and sense in love. For the poet, and for the reader after him, poetic love in this otherwise curiously loveless though luminous poem is a raising up of a highly personal truth out of some 'wretched

¹ I do not adopt here Professor Gardner's controversial new reading of 'That' for 'Which'.

² *Biathanatos* (1609), p. 84.

corner' of the mind into the daylight of a nobly common reason, where human confusions and contradictions exist in a clearer, more truthful equilibrium. And this is the daylight that poet and reader share, and where they may be said to meet in a rational ecstasy peculiarly their own. So Donne mingles the amatory and the literary in the last stanza of this highly self-conscious poem:

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

Using the *we* and *us* of lovers, Donne writes from within the now receding fictive love-situation.¹ But his authorial plural is directed at the poet's non-amatory partner, the reader—that person who is in the end his only audience. Donne is, I think, taking a hint here from Ovid's elegy in defence of poetry (which I earlier proposed as a 'source' for 'The Canonization'). Ovid ended his elegy by saying that he could endure contumely and unsuccess in this world in the thought of his posthumous fame: 'I will', he says, 'always be read by the careworn lover', 'I shall live, and the great part of me survive'.² Donne's last stanza, which has often been found difficult, holds perhaps an oblique echo of Ovid's resonant close. Like the Roman poet, the English poet and his lovers will surely survive their bodies. But these lines also contain a phrase—'this dialogue of one'—that is wholly Donne's, and it serves to epitomize all the poem's different kinds of communication: those between lover and lover, between lover and poet, between poet and reader. For even here, in a poem as apparently private and self-communing as 'The Exstasie', Donne appeals to some human metropolis of letters, a London which is 'the meeting of friends'.

¹ The Renaissance device of breaking a convention before the close in order to establish another more apparently realistic takes various forms: e.g. the endings of Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Tempest*, Donne's own 'The Indifferent', and Milton's *Lycidas*.

² 'atque ita sollicito multus amante legar . . . vivam, parsque mei multa superstes erit.' Ovid, *Amores* 1. 15, ll. 38–42.