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## RIDDLING SOUL

### **John Donne, Theatrical Performer of His Various Selves and Maker of an oddly modern music.**

ROBERT FRASER

A short tally might be taken of English poets who witnessed with their own eyes a hanging, drawing and quartering. Among them would certainly be John Donne, a Roman Catholic by upbringing closely related to some of the leading Catholic families in England. In his *Pseudo-Martyr* of 1610 Donne remarks that he has observed devout bystanders at the execution of a certain foreign Jesuit priest: 'pray to him whose body lay there dead; as if hee had more respect, and better accession to heaven because he was a stranger, than those which were familiar had'. Five years after the book's publication, Donne was ordained priest of the Church of England and almost immediately made a Royal Chaplain, rising in 1621 to the Deanship of St Paul's Cathedral, in which capacities he delivered some of the most eloquent sermons ever to grace an Anglican pulpit. The most quoted is the Lenten address of 1630/1 known as 'Deaths Duell', preached before Charles I at Whitehall. In it he waxes amorous about the worm, through whose ecumenical digestion one is incestuously joined with one's mother, sister or brother. London vermin had already feasted on Donne's brother Henry, who in 1593 had expired in Newgate gaol after harbouring a Jesuit priest; they had just got to work on their mother - industrious go-between for the Jesuits in her time - who had recently died in the deanery, a recusant to the very end. Her brothers Ellis and Jasper, Jesuits and exiles, fattened continental worms.

All this makes it odder that Herbert Grierson, in the Introduction to *Donne's Poetical Works* (1933), observed of *Pseudo-Martyr* that it is 'not a work of interest to the student of Donne's character'. Another son of an unrepentant Catholic mother was the book's dedicatee James I, whose Catholic subjects it had attempted to persuade, against papal decree and the advice of the Society of Jesus, to take an Oath of Allegiance to their theologically conflicted monarch. 'The first thing to understand about Donne', declared John Carey acerbically at the beginning of *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (1981), 'is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed that faith.' Rather than point a finger at historical individuals, however, it might be more realistic to describe early seventeenth century England and Scotland as apostate nations. Without an appreciation of the deep Catholic underlay to the Protestant mind of the time, we

will never appreciate Donne's work and career, or the varying fortunes of the House of Stuart. Nor – to broaden the point – will we fathom the masses composed by the Anglican musician and clandestine Catholic, William Byrd, or, later in the century, the Latin anthems of Purcell, an Organist at Westminster Abbey whose family had as close connections to the Roman church as had Donne's.

In the *Oxford Handbook of John Donne* the church historian Patrick Collinson is adamant about the resilience of such religious DNA, remarking of Donne that 'his Catholic genes and inheritance are not in doubt'. In 1959 the family's background was the subject of *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* by Dennis Flynn, whose essay here examines the hidden network of connections sustaining Elizabethan and Jacobean Catholicism. Take the poet's maternal grandfather, John Heywood. Reprieved on the scaffold in 1543 after a fearful journey to the block, he had - on the ninth anniversary of the death of Donne's great-great-uncle Thomas More - publicly to read a recantation of his faith at St Paul's Cross, a location at which his grandson would later frequently preach. Afterwards he penned an allegorical spoof *The Spider and the Flie* in which insects of several species torment one another to no purpose, though at no time does its author disclose which insect represents which sect. Ambiguity of this kind was to be a trademark of Doctor Donne of St Paul's. As Arnold Hunt remarks in his fine chapter on the sermons, Donne's were so finely tuned that, following his death in 1631, Calvinists felt able to quote them in support of Predestination, whilst Catholics cited them in endorsement of the re-establishment of the papal hierarchy in England.

It is hard to think of a compilation of fifty original essays containing more concentrated scholarship, though as its editors insist in their General Introduction, much of it is provisional, attendant on three continuing exercises: the Variorum Edition of the poetry, to which several of those gathered here have contributed, and Oxford editions of the sermons and the essays. As a result, this book resembles at times less a work of reference than a debating chamber. Donne changes as you look at him: across genres (the epigram; the verse satire; the love lyric, the religious sonnet; the epithalamium; the sermon), and across roles (student of law; soldier; secretary to my Lord Egerton; husband; diplomat; theologian; cleric; living *memento mori*). The contributors pursue him into corners, and argue as to his motives. Why, for example, did he enter holy orders, driven by ambition or faith? As Jeanne Shami illustrates, the process involved almost every layer of his being. If with Carey we are to castigate him for 'apostacy'; or naked 'ambition', we have - as Achsah Guibbory argues in

the first instance, and Hugh Adlington in the second – to be very sure, in early seventeenth century terms, just what these terms imply. At the end of the day Jack Donne of the ‘Songs and Sonets’ and Doctor Donne of the Holy Sonnets will not look the same again. Nor, as Judith Scherer Herz makes plain in her essay around ‘the story of two (or more) Donnes’, will the straightforward distinction, first put about by Izaak Walton in 1640, between these two successive creatures inhabiting the same skin survive in recognizable shape.

The biggest undecided question when it comes to the verse is exactly what Donne wrote. As Gary A. Stringer observes, editing Donne’s poetry has always been a challenge because he published so little of it himself, and early collections were put together from manuscript sources that sometimes differed widely. Generations of adolescent readers have envied those roving hands in ‘On Going to Bed’ as they grope ‘Before, behind, above, between, belowe’, but they would have grown even more excited had they followed the variorum foreplay of ‘Behind, before, above, between, belowe’, and occasionally ‘Between, before, beneath, above, below.’ In *The Complete Poems of John Donne* Robin Robbins – who died last April - dryly notes these itineraries, and his edition provides an informed guide to what the Variorum editors will set out at greater length. He has also re-thought questions of classification and ordering, arranging sections chronologically apart from the ‘Songs and Sonets’, which he re-styles ‘Love-lyrics’ - though some of them are not quite that - and places alphabetically, since their dating is uncertain. The Divine Poems are headed ‘religious’, disguising the fact that the pious poems are often erotically charged, whilst the poems depicting human relations shimmer with sensuous veneration.

The collection is a rewarding, but sometimes a frustrating, read. The format of the Longman series commits an editor to modernised spelling and punctuation, as well as to employing footnotes that in this case lead to some inconvenience. Robbins has brought to his task all the variegated and sometimes quaint learning of one who had earlier edited Sir Thomas Browne. Textual observations are piled on top of the explanatory notes, so that wads of editorial apparatus visually disturb the poems, interrupting stanzas and even sentences in ways that Christopher Ricks was careful to avoid in his equivalent Longman edition of Tennyson (1969). The Variorum evades this embarrassment by offering us good clean texts to read before presenting the notes in appendices. Here, after reading in ‘The Extasie’ that ‘our blood labours to beget/ Spirits as like souls as it can’, we must wait for two pages to learn that this is ‘Because such fingers need to knit/ That subtle knot which makes us man.’ In ‘The Sun

Rising', solar erudition disturbs readers' pleasure so exquisitely that some may well exclaim 'Sawcie pedantique wretch!' Scholars will enjoy this one man show of arcana, but general readers or undergraduates are better off with a slender volume in which the poems are laid out more sympathetically, such as – for 'The Songs and Sonets' – Theo Redpath's 'Editio Minor', first issued in 1956 and still in print.

Sometimes, in searching out the strange, Robbins neglects the obvious. Usefully, for example, he prints some verses from Donne's anti-Jesuitical Menippean Satire of 1611 *Conclave ignati* in which Ignatius Loyola is expelled from Hell to set up a 'glunatique church' on the moon. One of them is a version of the Hadrian's death-bed address to his departing spirit, 'Animula, vagula, blandula/Hospes comesque corporis', rendered – probably by Donne himself – in an English translation of the same year as 'My little wandering, sportful soul,/ Guest and companion of my body'. Robbins dutifully directs us to Hadrian, but refrains from pointing out that the fragment is echoed elsewhere several times by Donne, as in his 1629 sermon on the Day of St Paul's Conversion: 'Poor intricated soul! Riddling, perplexed, labyrinthical soul!' Manifestly, such wavering struck a chord.

With such meanderings of soul and hands, it is little wonder that recognition of Donne's debt to his native Catholicism was long in coming. Writing in the Civil War period, Walton played it down, and nineteenth-century readers and editors were almost equally resistant. But, in the early spring of 1926, T. S. Eliot delivered the Clark Lectures on Donne, Crashaw and Cowley in the Hall of Trinity College, Cambridge. They were eventually published in 1993 with a sketch showing in which part of the hall Eliot was speaking: the bayed recess from which you collect your cold venison for lunch. Behind a lectern stands Eliot, looking not unlike cold venison himself as he slowly takes 'The Extasie' apart. The two non-tactile lovers in this poem are all very well, but why is the bank on which they lie pregnant *already*? And if the bank is supporting a 'violets reclining head' it must be shorter than the violet, so how high was it before it started swelling? Then Eliot starts on the Jesuits, particularly on Loyola whom he calls romantic with a small 'r', meaning that he was imaginative, and encouraged imagination in others. However, Loyola was without mysticism or seriousness, being much more interested in tilting at his foes. Besides he was Spanish, and altogether too much like Don Quixote. Donne learned from him, which explains why Donne was not serious or mystical either.

The lectures were not published at the time, mainly because in re-reading them, as he admitted to a friend, Eliot found them egregiously opinionated, even for Eliot. The authors of *The Handbook* do not even mention them. But the mystical cat was out of the metaphysical bag and in the early 1950s Louis Martz, that refined and affable Yalie, spent several years researching the devotional roots of Donne and other Metaphysicals. The result in 1954 was his book *The Poetry of Meditation*, serenely unaware that Donne's cradle Catholicism constituted a political problem – hanging, drawing and quartering: what hanging, drawing and quartering? But it was Martz who did what nobody had thought of doing for 300 years: read Donne's poetry and Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* side by side. Imagine, Loyola instructed his votaries, Christ in the Garden; imagine Hell; imagine the uncertainty of death. 'Thinke thee on thy death-bed', beseeches Donne in his 'Second Anniversary', 'loose and slack.'

Francesca Bugliani Knox, an Italian scholar related through marriage to Monsignor Ronald Knox, is steeped this background, which her serious and scrupulous monograph rehearses superbly. The shape of Ignatian meditation - visualisation, meditation and resolve- consorts as she demonstrates well with the form of the Divine Sonnets (she does not say *which* form: Donne preferred the 'Shakespearean' to the Petrarchan kind). She illustrates such affinities across the religious poetry, though not all of them, to be honest, are exclusively Ignatian or Catholic. Nobody, for example, has ever proposed that Isaac Watts, son of a non-conformist school master, possessed Roman affinities, yet his hymn 'When I survey the wondrous cross' obeys this three-fold logic of as well as anything in Donne. Clearly traditions of imaginative contemplation in the seventeenth century transcended religious divides, even if in Donne's case they possessed Roman roots. Knox also disregards the secular poetry: a pity, since Donne's Jesuitical subconscious sometimes surges starkly in his amorous or celebratory verse. Take for example the passage in his 'Epithalamium Made at Lincolnes Inn' in which a bride on her marriage bed appears 'Like an appointed lambe, when tenderly/ The priest comes 'embowell her'. Priest has turned executioner, though 'tenderness' is not a quality one might have expected on the block. (The picture of woman as passive paschal victim, of sex as gentle torture, has long disquieted scholars, giving rise to a theory - considered by two contributors to the Oxford volume - that this poem may be a parody).

Knox is excellent on the modes of transmission through which Elizabethan and Jacobean Catholic literature disseminated itself. While in the *Handbook* Lynne Magnusson sets out the

network of subterranean contacts through which a persecuted minority sustained itself, *The Eagle's Eye* describes with a verve worthy of a Robert Darnton the network of small presses that kept in clandestine circulation the works of Loyola and disciples such as Southwell or Persons. She then turns to the fraught area of belief. The great divides *chez Donne* are here taken as the Counter-Reformation (of which Loyola formed part) and the Council of Trent, the full consequences of which did not become apparent in England until the crisis caused by the Gunpowder Plot. Donne's deepest convictions concerning the universal Church preceded that crisis: 'Like the Fathers, Donne used "Catholic" in a non-parochial, non-sectarian way.' The corollary, therefore, is this: it was not Donne who shifted ground, but the Church.

Accordingly, in reaction to Carey, Knox takes Donne's absolute sincerity and consistency for granted. To my mind, though, she neglects the strand of theatricality in his character. Witness the account of his death given in the *Handbook* by Alison Shell: the shroud, still kept at St Paul's, in which he had himself sketched while alive, propping the picture beside his sick bed. Much of Donne's life and work seems to have been conducted on an 'as if' principle. In the love poems, several of them re-workings of Ovid, it is as if he is enamoured; when preaching he seems to be playing the Dean, even as he is one; on his death bed he acts the dying man even as he slowly expires. On other occasions, he can hardly have believed what he is saying: as when in the 'First Anniversary' he describes the cosmos plunged into irreversible decline by the death of fourteen year old Elizabeth Drury, whom he had never met. In this sustained piece of mood music, as Knox notes, Donne is extolling the neo-Platonic 'Idea' of a woman. In the 'Second Anniversary', indeed, her figure seems to blend with that of the Virgin Mary. Yet, as Robert Bald explained in his *Donne and the Drurys* (1959), both poems are also graceful compliments to her wealthy parents, with whom Donne promptly went on tour. This tendency to fit in with his advantages is something that sets Donne apart from the younger George Herbert, whom he may have consorted in 1625 when, holed up by the plague, he stayed for several months with Herbert's mother Lady Danvers in Chelsea, spending his time writing up his sermons and translating the 'Lamentations of Jeremiah' from the Latin Old Testament of the Ferrara-born Jew Immanuel Tremellius, a Calvinist convert whose work - much trusted for its fidelity to Hebrew - Robbins discusses, though Knox does not.

Bearing in mind the differences of theme and temperament between these poets, maybe it is time we cut the epithet 'Metaphysical' dangling round their collective necks since Dryden,

followed by Dr Johnson, fixed it there. 'It is possible,' drawled Eliot in 1926, 'that the designation might be a complete misnomer'. Certainly, it was originally intended as a slight. 'Mannerist Poets' seems a shrewder indication of their intellectual excesses, their *discordia concors*, the worms and deflowerings, and the affinities between, say, Donne's lachrymose poems for Lucy, Duchess of Bedford and the madrigals of his almost contemporary Gesualdo. Donne is nothing if not musical and European, and his stylistic abruptness appeals to the modern age in much the same way as Gesualdo's unprepared modulations attracted Stravinsky. Few recent interpretations have brought out his aspect of Donne's legacy so well as John Adams's 2007 opera *Doctor Atomic*, in which J. Robert Oppenheimer, confronted in 1945 by the A bomb's imminent destructiveness, delivers in soliloquizing baritone a setting of the sonnet 'Batter my heart, three-person'd God.' It is the sort of triumphant anachronism that discloses a running truth. Dean Donne of St Paul's and the doyen of the nuclear age seem both to stand before us, *animulae vagulae* appalled by their several acts of cowardice or daring.

Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn and M. Thomas Hester editors, *THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF JOHN DONNE*, 845 pp., Oxford University Press £85.00. 978 0 19 921860 8

Robin Robbins editor, *THE COMPLETE POEMS OF JOHN DONNE*, 989 pp. Longman £19.99. 978 1 4082 3124

Francesca Bugliani Knox, *THE EYE OF THE EAGLE: JOHN DONNE AND THE LEGACY OF IGNATIUS LOYOLA*, 342 pp., Peter Lang £44.00. 978 3 0343 0225 8

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