

**The 'Metaphysical' Canon :  
John Donne**

**by**

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## The 'Metaphysical' Canon : John Donne

This paper starts from the centrality of John Donne's poetry to the Metaphysical and proposes to illustrate its canonicity in terms positive and critical of Harold Bloom's criteria.<sup>(1)</sup> It reads Donne's poetry as a "creative misreading"<sup>(2)</sup> of its predecessor — the Elizabethan — and as a precursor to the Modern, while seeking to isolate and highlight the qualities that make Donne canonical. Before the revival of interest in Metaphysical poetry in the first half of the present century, an interest relatively centred around the figure of John Donne at once as its progenitor and as a 'contemporary' voice (albeit a rather belated resurrection and confirmation of longevity if we were to apply Harold Bloom's criterion that "canonical prophecy needs to be tested about two generations after a writer dies"<sup>(3)</sup>), the terms of definition of the Metaphysical were predominantly negative. The catalogue of liabilities, which was largely responsible for an indifference of three centuries to the Metaphysical and to the poetic endeavour and achievement of Donne, included : the pursuit in the love lyric of speculations of philosophy that puzzle where the poem should entertain (Dryden)<sup>(4)</sup>, the employment of 'unpoetical' imagery (of what one might call scientific equations for human emotions) or of an apparently over-ingenious troping that hammers out likenesses between such disparate as physical objects and metaphysical concepts (Johnson's "*discordia concors*; a combination of dissimilar images, or discovery of occult

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(1) In *The Western Canon : The Books and School of the Ages* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994). The criteria appear on p. 2 of the present paper.

(2) Bloom (op.cit., p. 9) uses this phrase to mean 'departure from prior configuration / the dwarfing of a precursor'.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 522.

(4) Writing in 1693, Dryden said of Donne : "He affects the metaphysics, not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softness of love ..."; quoted by Helen Gardner in an introduction to her anthology *The Metaphysical Poets* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin Books Ltd., 1957), p. 15.

resemblances in things apparently unlike"<sup>(5)</sup>), and the use of a rugged and a sharp-angled style that disregards scansion and the requirements of the theoretical metre (Ben Jonson's verdict that "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging"<sup>(6)</sup>). Despite the early twentieth century rehabilitation of the Metaphysical, a fuller reappraisal of Donne's poetic endeavour is still needed. Such an undertaking will show that those aspects which were counted as liabilities are, when examined in the full context of the Donnian canon, in fact assets that account for his originality and the relevance of his work to our age.

To adapt a simile used by D.J. Rees in "Italian and Italianate Poetry" in which he describes Shakespeare's "disrupting of the conventionally patterned presentations of experience" of his day, we can say that to come to the love poetry and devotional sonnets of John Donne is "like arriving at some crucial point in the development of painting when some revolutionary change takes place, like the discovery of perspective. The flat surface becomes three dimensional and new relations and associations appear".<sup>(7)</sup> Comparing the Shakespearean and Donnian 'creative misreadings' of their precursors, Rees says that while 'Shakespeare's sonnets invalidate the convention simply by sublime disregard of its dimensions, the imposition of an infinitely vaster view' and annihilate that convention 'not by direct polemic, but by oversight', Donne's 'reaction is more direct and deliberate, in that he confronts the convention both in content and in idiom on its own level, and point by point rejects it'.<sup>(8)</sup> It would be interesting, and it is central to our concern in this paper, to hold in a single act of vision the 'flatness' that prevailed and which Donne invalidates, and the 'perspective' that he creates. The values and qualities that emerge from the 'perspective' thus created and which we encounter in Donne's poetry are : audacity, strangeness, ambivalence and inventive troping as marks of originality and a means of departure

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(5) *Lives of the Poets – Abraham Cowley (1779)*; in *The Metaphysical Poets (A Casebook)*, ed. by Gerald Hammond (London : The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1974), p. 51.

(6) Quoted by John Hayward in an Introduction to his anthology *John Donne : A Selection of His Poetry* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin Books Ltd., 1950), p. 11.

(7) In *Elizabethan Poetry* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies I), ed. by John Russel Brown and Bertrand Harris (London : Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1960), p. 66.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 67.

from prior configuration, and all these together with heretical intensity as a method of alteration of the scheme of salvation. I have named qualities Bloom enumerates as marks of canonical writing.<sup>(9)</sup>

For the remote and shy idiom of the Elizabethans, Donne substitutes colloquial daring and a sexual directness which a dramatic stance integrates in what Robin Skelton calls "a construction of involvement"<sup>(10)</sup> : one rôle has the "I" shout : "For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love" ("The Canonization"); another has him engage in a sexual procedure, "unashamed of desires he shares with everyman"<sup>(11)</sup> : "Licence my roaving hands, and let them go, / Before, behind, between, above, below" (ELEGIE XIX, "Going to Bed"), for "Who ever loves, if he do not propose / The true end of love, he's one that goes / To sea for nothing but to make him sick" (ELEGIE XVIII, "Love Progress"). Along with this daring that ridicules the indirect sensuous descriptions of the lyricists and the 'rear-floods and sigh-tempests' (Donne, "A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning") of the Petrarchan sonneteers, there are in Donne's poetry at least two other major original contributions to the poetry of human love. One is to be found in poems where 'Thou' and 'I' are merged into 'We', poems where love is returned; and, in this respect, it is not possible to find models for such poems as "The Good Morrow", "The Anniversarie" and "The Canonization".<sup>(12)</sup> The other is to be found in poems where the psychological attitudes of the lovers, male *and* female, are explored : in "The Indifferent", the argument of the frivolous male is that constancy is a heresy and that 'love's sweetest part' is variety ("I can love her, and her, and you and you, / I can love any, so she be not true"); in "Confined Love", the female protesting against the male's commandment that enforces the lady to 'one man know' reminds us that 'Beasts do not joyntures lose / Though they new lovers choose, / But we are made worse than those'.

For the melodiousness, harmony and the smooth technique that Johnson expounded and which governed Elizabethan verse, Donne substitutes a rugged style that, in mirroring the subtle nuances of the

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(9) In *The Western Canon : The Books and School of the Ages*.

(10) "The Poetry of John Donne", in *Elizabethan Poetry*; op.cit., p. 213.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 210.

(12) Quoted with minor rephrasing from Helen Gardner's Introduction to her anthology *The metaphysical Poets*; op.cit., p. 25.

spoken voice, seeking to evoke the subtleties and dramatic postures of a multi-selved personality and charting the movement of the mind, defies the orderly rhythms of theoretical metre and requires not less than 'a retraining of the ear in the opposite direction',<sup>(13)</sup> since "Griefe [or. for that matter, any genuine emotion and impassionate thinking] brought to numbers cannot be so fierce, / For, he tames it, that fetters it in verse" ("The Triple Foole"). The roughness and brusqueness of the verse are required by the many-layered experience of strong emotion and / or complex thought processes of a multi-selved personality. In 'the lyrics of the Elizabethans, and later in the lyrics of the Romantics, there was almost always a coincidence between the syntactical units and the metrical'; in the lyrics of Donne, the "stanzas are often crossed against an intricate syntactical structure"<sup>(14)</sup> and sense comes first; so much so that "to read Donne you must measure *Time* 'not just count syllables', and discover the time of each word by the sense of *Passion*", that to read poems "where the Author *thinks*, and expects the Readers to do so, the sense must be understood in order to ascertain the metre"<sup>(15)</sup> and that "to harmonize syntax with stanza" becomes "the whole secret of reading Donne's lyrics".<sup>(16)</sup> Donne's disregard of the governing principle of theoretical metre, his breaking the old contract with the composer and his submitting to no obligation but that of sense go some way, perhaps even all the way, towards explaining why he was disregarded himself as an eccentric who wrote a poetry marked by its dissonance and harshness and who, 'for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging'. This eccentricity in terms of rhythm and rhyme was anti-canonical in that it was a dethroning of smooth and polished versification in favour of an angular, sharp and deliberately irregular verse which wrestled with the 'undisciplined squads'<sup>(17)</sup> of thought and emotion of a strong internal drama and "battered at the constraints of the theoretical metre".<sup>(18)</sup> Thus, if in

(13) Cf. Patrick Cruttwell, "The Love Poetry of John Donne : Pedantique Weeds or Fresh Invention ?"; in *Metaphysical Poetry* (Stratford-upon-Avon, Studies II), ed. by D J. Palmer and Malcolm Bradbury (London : Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., 1970), p. 14.

(14) Patrick Cruttwell, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

(15) Coleridge: quoted by John Hayward in an Introduction to his anthology *John Donne : A Selection of His Poetry*, *op.cit.*, p. 12.

(16) Patrick Cruttwell, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

(17) T.S. Eliot, "East Coker" (*Four Quartets*).

(18) Cedric Watts, "The Conceit of the Conceit"; in *The Metaphysical Poets* (Longman Critical Essays), ed. by Linda Cookson and Bryan Loughrey (Longman n.d.) p. 14.

Dull sublunary lovers love  
(Whose soule is sense) cannot admit  
Absence, because it doth remove  
Those things which elemented it

(from "A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning") the veil of the 'poetical' is removed and the rhythm is conversational, in "Batter my heart three person'd God; for you" (Holy Sonnet XIV in Hayward's anthology), the only rhymes slipping the pattern are "enemie" and "I" which, significantly enough, are presented within the internal logic of the sonnet as standing for the foe and the lover of the "three person'd God",<sup>(19)</sup> respectively.

For the polished, and often flat, conceits of the Elizabethan lyricists and Petrarchan sonneteers, Donne substitutes his strange but controlled conceits which a "construction of involvement" based on an "associative leap"<sup>(20)</sup> saves from becoming mere quibbles. The situation, the personae involved and the strong emotion the latter grapple with as human beings make up the environment and condition in which the conceit is integrated. The main difference between Elizabethan and Donnian conceits can be said to be a matter of absence or presence of an emotional excitement, of a genuine urgency that calls for and triggers an "associative leap". It seems that while with the Elizabethans, the mind at leisure pursues an extended parallel, with Donne, the mind in trance 'strikes two stones together'<sup>(21)</sup> and the

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(19) I am tempted to read the "-mie" in "enemie" as the "me" of the speaker who, the poem tells us, is "usurp'd" by the devil. The only two odd rhymes in the sonnet are thus brought together as the "me" in bondage with the enemy, aspiring to become the "I" who is free only when bound to God.

(20) In "The Poetry of John Donne", Robin Skelton writes : "The conceit itself contains the possibility of communicating strong emotion, in that it is based upon an apparently sudden associative 'leap', and those associative 'leaps' occur to people only when they are emotionally excited; thus we may find ourselves intuiting the presence of emotional excitement simply because of the 'irrational' quality of the imagery"; *op.cit.*, p. 211.

(21) In an Introduction to her anthology *The Metaphysical Poets*, Helen Gardner explains that "a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness. A brief comparison can be a conceit if two things patently unlike, or which we should never think of together, are shown to be alike in a single point in such a way, or in such a context, that we feel their incongruity. Here a conceit is like a spark made by striking two stones together. After the flash the stones are just two stones". *op.cit.*, p. 19. While the second type of conceit may be said to apply to Donne's most successfully and characteristic uses =

spark resulting therefrom flashes 'to the fathest stage to which ingenuity can carry it'.<sup>(22)</sup> A construction of involvement based on a dramatization of the "I" and the creation of a situation or a condition, as in "A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning" and "The Good-Morrow", in the devotional poetry and even in the Sermons, secures a commerce between the intellectual and the emotional, and "a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling"<sup>(23)</sup> is achieved.

For the religious poetry of messages of his predecessors and most of his contemporaries (especially Vaughan and Herbert)<sup>(24)</sup>, Donne substitutes a poetry of dramatic situations that investigates the parts of Love, the lover and 'our old subtle foe' (Holy Sonnets, I). The Holy Sonnets, like most of the Sermons, read like dramatic pieces that voice an internal drama, draw upon the experiences of the physical love of the secular poetry and 'borrow from sex the raw material of psycho-physical sensitivity with which to welcome, on a higher plane, but still in one's body as well as in one's soul, the invasion of the divine'.<sup>(25)</sup> Thus speaks the lover in "Going to Bed" :

Licence my roaving hands, and let them go,  
 Before, behind, between, above, below.  
 .....  
 To enter in these bonds, is to be free;  
 Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.

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= of this figure of speech, it is important to point out that in such instances the "stones" are no longer "just two stones" or a mere vehicle and a tenor; a new mutual relation is set up between the two in which and by which they are both freshly altered. In "A Valediction : Forbidding Mourning", for instance, the harmony is as much a quality of the lovers' love that the compasses illustrates as it is a property of the compasses that the harmony of the lovers' love makes us apprehend experientially. After the conceit, the harmony of the one becomes part of the definition of the other.

(22) T.S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921); in *Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot* (N.Y.: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1960 (New Edition), p. 242.

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 246.

(24) Except, perhaps, for Herbert's "The Collar" which — to borrow a phrase from Bloom-manifests, significantly enough, an 'anxiety of influence' in regard to Donne's passionate poetry of conflict and in which, as in many of Donne's Holy Sonnets, the speaker verges on the blasphemous ("He that forbears / To suit and serve his need, / Deserves his load").

(25) Leo Spitzer, "The Extasie" (1949); in *The Metaphysical Poets* (A Casebook), *op.cit.*, p. 125.



And this is how the speaker, assuming the role of the bride, addresses the suitor she is in love with in "Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you", appealing to Him to take full possession of her and rescue her from a forced 'betrothal unto His enemy'.

Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you 'enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

The necessity of the physical is so pervasive that it makes itself felt even in the period of the Sermons : In a Sermon given on 8 March 1621, three months or so after he was made Dean of St. Paul's, Donne preaches that, to complete 'a not so perfect glory, the Trinity made a world, a material world, a corporeall world, they would have bodies'; in a Sermon at St. Paul's, Whitsunday, 1625, six years before his death, Donne speaks of his "death-bed" as a "marriage-bed", of his "Passing-Bell" as an "Epithalamion".

Donne's originality in his devotional poetry lies in a) his recognition that man is both body and soul and that, consequently, it is impossible for the lover to experience a relationship with anything that is not at least partly of sense, b) his investigating the responsibility of all parties in the scheme of salvation, including that of Love; and c) that pride that makes the Holy Sonnets and the Sermons prefer themselves to the Bible.<sup>(26)</sup> The temptation to quote al-Hallaj<sup>(27)</sup> is irresistible, and I can but succumb to it; after all, both al-Hallaj and Donne were looked upon by many of their contemporaries as heretics and, at least, one major critic, Leo Spitzer, refers to 'religious mysticism' in dealing with Donne.<sup>(28)</sup> Al-Hallak is reported to have had this dialogue with the sycophant :

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(26) Bloom says of Dante's *Comedy* that it is a "poem that prefers itself to the Bible"; "for a neo-Christian poet like T.S. Eliot", Bloom adds approvingly, "the *Comedy* becomes another Scripture, a Newer Testament that supplements the canonical Christian Bible" (*op.cit.*, pp. 84 and 77). Also relevant and applicable to Donne's devotional writing is Bloom's remark on Dante's major poem : "The *Comedy*", he says, "like all the canonical works, destroys the distinction between sacred and secular writing" (*op.cit.*, p. 81).

(27) al-Husain ibn Mansur al-Hallaj al-Baidhawi al-Baghdadi (b. 866 A.D. / d. 931 A.D.), a major figure of Islamic Sufism, tortured and executed on a charge of heresy.

(28) in "The Extasie", *op.cit.*, p. 125.

- By being sinful, man gives the Lord a unique opportunity to exercise His grace.
- What need is there for repentance, then ?
- There *is* need for repentance, but a repentance that is a kind of reconciliation with the lover (Love); for the genuine tears of the sinner have more effect on the heart of the beloved than the smile of the innocent. Repentance for me is 'to see you daring to provoke the Lord and to see His patient with you', so you love Him more.<sup>(29)</sup>

In his book entitled *al-Hallak 'au Wudhu' – Ddammm*, M.F. Ghrrayyib speaks of al-Hallaj's daring and provocativeness in terms that apply perfectly to Donne's most characteristic attitude in his Holy Sonnets :

If the origin of heresy is a teasing of God to get Him to take off His cloak and to unmask Him; if its foremost impulse is a sort of conceited curiosity and cunning fondness for questing in forbidden territory, or a perilous pleasure sought in the uncovering of the hidden and the ripping of veils, then al-Hallaj is no doubt a heretic.<sup>(30)</sup>

Like al-Hallaj, Donne could not bring himself to an apprehension of his relationship with God but experientially, and the language of intimacy and the amatory, often blatantly sexual, diction and conceits are the poet's means to voice the lover's "devout fitts" (Sonnet XIX in hayward's anthology) in the manner of a *carpe diem* plea, as in

Show me deare Christ, thy Spouse, so bright and clear.

.....  
Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights,  
And let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove,  
Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then  
When she' is embrac'd and open to most men.<sup>(31)</sup>

Sonnet XVIII in Hayward's anthology)

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(29) Michel Farid Ghrrayyib, *al-Hallaj 'au Wudhu'-Ddammm : Qissah Sufiyyah Tarikhiyyah (al-Hallaj or the Blood Ablution : A Historical Sufi Story)* (Beirut : Ghayib Publishers, n.d.), p. 49 (my translation).

(30) *al-Hallaj 'au-Wudhu'-Ddammm, op.cit.*, p. 40 (my translation).

(31) Notice how the diction maintains a perfect balance between the spiritual, associated with "Spouse", and the erotic, associated with "spouse".

The canon of messages or of showing the ways of God to men is here challenged and transcended by the book of the religion of the self, the book of individual, unmediated, untutored perception. The direct, incisive, erotic idiom of the lover addressing Love in a mode that recalls that of his addresses to "her, and her" is in keeping with the intimate 'embrace' he seeks. Thus, while such fellow-poets as Carew, Crashaw, Cowley, Vaughan and — to a lesser extent — Herbert strove to ascend to the temple<sup>(32)</sup> and would be satisfied with a grin of recognition granted at the door, Donne chats up Love and would not be satisfied with less than an act of 'ravishment' in Love's bed-chamber ("for I/Except you' enthral mee, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee". Sonnet XIV). The book of the religion of the self 'disturbs orthodoxy by seeking truth creatively'.<sup>(33)</sup> No wonder then that, for failing to gain any pious converts, it sank in the opinion of a critical orthodoxy that canonized a poetry of messages of wholesale religiosity.

It took the shock of newness and radical, fresh invention some three hundred years to subside; then, with the revival of interest in Metaphysical poetry in the early twentieth century, a more sober and fairer estimate of Donne's poetic endeavour and achievement was made possible mainly by the critical essays of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Both Leavis (in *Revaluation*) and Eliot (in "The Metaphysical Poets") read Donne as a contemporary, a living poet. Among the qualities of his verse that appealed to the Modernists, and which the latter uncovered and recovered from his poetic practice, we find : a dramatic stance that throws the nerves (the shifts and turns of the mind) on the page;<sup>(34)</sup> a sensibility that devours any kind of experience, amalgamates the disparate experience, transmutes ideas into sensations and transforms

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(32) Herbert and Crashaw chose *The Temple and Steps to the Temple* as titles for their poetry collections, respectively; and Henry Vaughan, in his own preface to his volume of sacred verse (*Silex Scintillans* (1654)), spoke of 'Mr. George Herbert, whose holy life and verse gained many pious converts (of whom I am the least) ...' (The latter statement on Vaughan is quoted from Introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets* (A Casebook), *op.cit.*, p. 15).

(33) Cf. Robert B. Hinman's "The Apotheosis of Faust : Poetry and New Philosophy in the Seventeenth Century", in *Metaphysical Poetry* (Stratford upon-Avon Studies II), *op.cit.*, p. 167.

(34) The reader will recognize an echo of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in the phrase "throws the nerves".

an observation into a state of mind,<sup>(35)</sup> and a complex sentence structure that charts thought and emotion with the fidelity of a seismography, 'a fidelity that induces variety of music'.<sup>(36)</sup> And implicit in this, there went a revision of such reprehensions as those of Johnson which accounted to a large extent for Donne's repudiation. Thus, to rebut Johnson's condemnation of the Metaphysicals' conceits as a method by which "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together". Eliot undertakes to show through examples from Donne, among others, that the ideas are united, not just yoked.<sup>(37)</sup> Against Johnson's observation that one of the Metaphysicals' faults is that "their attempts were always analytic". Eliot states that after the dissociation, they put the material together again in a new unity.<sup>(38)</sup> As to Johnson's failure to appreciate the "massive music of Donne", Eliot reminds us that in his criticism of the Metaphysicals' versification, in general, we must remember in what a narrow discipline he was trained, but also how well trained.<sup>(39)</sup>

The major shortcoming of the revaluation of Donne is that it came in the context of an approach that confronted generalizations about the faults of the Metaphysicals with generalizations about their merits — punctuated with examples more often quoted than analysed and commented — and that it, consequently, fell short of a discrimination of individual minds and talent, which would have required the sustained analysis of intrinsic features of singularity and originality that would have rendered Donne the canonical status that is his due. Whether or not there is any truth in later contentions that Donne was used by the Modernists to justify their own complexity and allusiveness, or as "a

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(35) Eliot's statements in "The Metaphysical Poets" (slightly paraphrased to fit in the enumeration), *op.cit.*, pp. 247-249.

(36) *Ibid.*, p. 245.

(37) *Ibid.*, pp. 243-245.

(38) *Ibid.*, p. 245.

(39) *Ibid.*, p. 250. (Eliot also reminds us that "we must not reject the criticism of Johnson (a dangerous person to disagree with) without having mastered it, without having assimilated the Johnsonian canons of taste". He adds, however, that "It would be a fruitful work, and one requiring a substantial book, to break up the classification of Johnson (for there has been none since) and exhibit these poets in all their difference of kind and degree, from the massive music of Donne to the taint, pleasing tinkle of Aurelian Townshend ..."; *ibid.*).

stick with which to beat Romantic and Victorian poets",<sup>(40)</sup> one should think it more rewarding in trying to elucidate why Donne was resurrected in the early twentieth century to proceed by resisting all speculation of a merely utilitarian nature and "all criticism which tries to impose 'extra-literary' values and methods"<sup>(41)</sup> on the literary work, as one undertakes a close analysis of the literary work *per se* that would account for its intrinsic merits and longevity, as well as for the relevance of such qualities to literary needs felt at later times in literary contexts. Having undertaken in the preceding paragraphs an analysis of the intrinsic merits of Donne's work and shown how the latter represents a 'creative misreading' of its precursors, we may now attempt an appraisal of its longevity and lasting relevance.

Donne's intellectual and aesthetic dissent no doubt recommended him to the Modernists; and it is in terms of stance and style that the points of contact between Donne and the Modernists and Donne's relevance to their enterprise can be established. His dissatisfaction with the idiom of his day, his two fold awareness of the import of his questionings and the impotence of the language available to him — ("To know and feel all this, and not to have / Words to expresse it, makes a man a grave / Of his owne thoughts ..." ("Ecclogue 1613, December 26")) — and his seeking to purge the poetry garden of its pedantic weeds<sup>(42)</sup> by coining a fresh idiom are all marks of a 'modern' sensibility. Also recognizably 'modern' is his endeavour to create visual, concrete, sensuous images as 'emotional equivalents'<sup>(43)</sup> for states of mind and 'intellectual gropings'<sup>(44)</sup> about the physical and spiritual world and man's experiences of it and in it; the method encompasses and integrates in a comprehensive act of vision and sensuous enactment the world of 'cities', 'kingdoms', the 'sun' and the 'spheres'; that of 'learning', 'science' and 'discoveries'; as well as that of 'man as *Mundum Magnum*, a world to which the rest of the world is

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(40) Ronald Draper, "The Intellectual Ingenuity of John Donne" in *The Metaphysical Poets* (Longman Critical Essay), *op.cit.*, p. 33.

(41) A. Walton Litz, "Literary Criticism" in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. by Daniel Hoffman (Harvard University Press (The Belknap Press), 1979), p. 62.

(42) The latter phrase is borrowed from the title of an article by Patrick Cruttwell in *Metaphysical Poetry* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies II), *op.cit.*, p. 11.

(43) John Hayward, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

(44) *Ibid.*

but subordinate'.<sup>(45)</sup> In this, the Modernists recognized an endeavour to grapple with, assuage and give form and significance to anxieties and fears not unlike their own endeavour to find "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".<sup>(46)</sup> Donne's use of verse as a medium for debate, soliloquy and the anatomizing of human experience is relevant to those Modernists — namely, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence and the middle and later Yeats — whose poetry of crises and conflict involved dialectic, monologue and psychological analysis. Finally, the arid and harsh verse of Donne which broke with conventional polish and smoothness has its counterpart in the stark and angular verse of the Modernists which parted with the embroidered and the mellifluous poetry of the Victorian and Georgian poets.

Those are qualities that recommended him to the Modernists. They are also qualities that recommend him to any lover of poetry and any unconditioned intellectual today. His poetry of dissent which disregarded "the orthodox poetical proprieties of his age"<sup>(47)</sup> and his restlessness of spirit and freedom of mind which scoffed at and undermined the fixities of set attitudes to morality and religiosity make him at once contemporary with anyone whose 'sin' and 'salvation' is singularity of voice and intellectual aliveness in the present Orwellian times. In his "Elegiac Conclusion" to *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom lists "what I have read and think worthy of rereading, which," he says, "may be the only pragmatic test for the canonical".<sup>(48)</sup> Since, according to him, "canonical prophecy needs to be tested about two generations after a writer dies",<sup>(49)</sup> the fact that Donne is denied the privilege to figure on his list implies one of two things : either that he has failed Bloom's canonicity test; or, perhaps, that Bloom did not read him in the first place to possibly think he is worthy of rereading. Whatever the case may be, this state of affairs remains enlightening as

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(45) From a Sermon by Donne (Milgate, pp. 241-42); quoted by D.J. Palmer in "The Verse Epistle", an article appearing in *Metaphysical Poetry* (Stratford-upon-Avon Studies II), *op.cit.*, p. 91.

(46) T.S. Eliot, "Review of *Ulysses*", *Dial* (November, 1923); quoted by Gertrude Patterson in *T.S. Eliot : Poems in the Making* (Manchester University Press, 1973), p. 163.

(47) John Hayward, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

(48) *op.cit.*, p. 518.

(49) *op.cit.*, p. 522.

to the idiosyncrasies of the critic and the limits of a one man's endeavour, a one man's canon.

One senses throughout Bloom's *Canon* the presence and weight of an underlying master criterion which, though never openly stated, still informs the critic's choice of the canonical : this requirement may be called, for lack of a better term, a condition of settlement. By this, I mean a condition that a major writer's work reaches when supposedly all its features of originality and its energies have been pinned and penned, a condition which entitles it to the status symbol of critical immunity. It is that criterion of settlement which accounts for Bloom's choice in the *Canon* and motivates his sustained, almost obsessive, attacks in the book on what he calls the "School of Resentment".<sup>(50)</sup> And it is by virtue of that same conservative criterion of settlement that the work thus canonized is assigned a final resting place, a life-tenure in the "School of the Ages", which invests it with an unquestionable authority. Since for Bloom, canonical is synonymous with 'authoritative in our culture',<sup>(51)</sup> any subversive reading of the canonical, authoritative writer or book is assimilated to an attack on the writer or book, or, to coin a new term, an act of 'canonicide'. Donne's work does not seem to have reached that condition of settlement, and would not, for that reason, qualify for admission to and a rest in Bloom's "School of the Ages". Its troubling, and at once liberating, energies have not been quite subdued yet: and, in addition to the qualities we highlighted and illustrated in this paper, its canonicity is a matter of its hospitability to new and fresh readings. In this respect, we may meditate this statement by Logan Pearsall Smith who, "after 'trying to explain Donne's sermons and account for them in a satisfactory manner', observes :

And yet in these, as in his poems, there remains something baffling and enigmatic which still eludes our last analysis. Reading these old hortatory and dogmatic pages, the thought

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(50) *Ibid.*, p. 4. By this, he means "the academic-journalistic network ... who wish to overthrow the Canon in order to advance their supposed (and nonexistent) programs for social change". The "network" in fact includes the proponents of cultural materialism, multiculturalism and other ways of contextualizing literature in the fields of race and gender.

(51) *The Western Canon*, p. 1.

suggests itself that Donne is saying something else, something poignant and personal, and yet, in the end, incommunicable to us”<sup>(52)</sup>

or again this prophecy by Genevieve Taggard that “the greatest metaphysical poetry had yet to be written :

‘For the metaphysical poet, Science is the freedom of the universe — and in the future our greatest poets may well be poets of this mind. Some Moses striking a rock on the desert Mr. Eliot describes as the wasteland and with his touch liberating a vast unused mentality; the excitement of enormous sweeps, the dizziness of looking in all directions at the surrounding fact’.<sup>(53)</sup>

Taggard’s anthology *Circumference* (1929), which ‘saw in metaphysical poetry a state of mind common to the best poetry of all ages’, came to include, in addition to the seventeenth-century poets, poems by Dunbar, Emily Dickinson, E.E. Cummings, T.S. Eliot and others as examples of metaphysical verse.<sup>(54)</sup> Donne’s science of poetry, a practice in which the poetic heritage is filtered, the virtues of the Metaphysical are crystallized, and the perspectives of the Modernist practice are anticipated, will continue to invite the seminal minds of poets and critics of all ages to draw on or harness its liberating and troubling energies, a condition of hospitality which — notwithstanding Harold Bloom’s implied immunity or untouchability condition — is *the* test for canonicity.

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(52) Quoted by T.S. Eliot in “Lancelot Andrewes” (*Selected Essays of T.S. Eliot*), *op.cit.*, p. 302. Although dating back to the early twentieth century, this statement is not less relevant now than it was then. In the context of his article, however, Eliot comments on whether the ‘incommunicable’ should not be taken to mean the “vague and unformed”: significantly enough, he adds, “the statement is essentially right”.

(53) From her anthology *Circumference* (1929); quoted in Introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets (A Casebook)*, *op.cit.*, p. 30.

(54) Cf. Gerald Hammond’s Introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets (A Casebook)*, *op.cit.*, p. 30.



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