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John Donne's Changing Attitudes to Time

G. F. WALLER

Studies of Donne continue to increase—in 1972 at least two volumes celebrated his birth—but in recent years fewer attempts are being made to present an overview of his intellectual development. Most recent studies have been primarily concerned with specific areas of his work, or with detailed elucidation of poems, and the older tradition of a more general approach has become less fashionable.¹ In many ways, such a development marks a welcome maturity in Donne studies, but there may be a danger that the vital importance of Donne's overall intellectual development may be ignored. In 1931 Theodore Spencer wrote that Donne's thought "reflects more completely than the thought of any of his contemporaries, the varying states of mind which England, from 1590 to 1620, experienced with such bewildering rapidity."² This is a view that obviously needed some qualification; above all, it implicitly ignores the great widening of the intellectual spectrum that was occurring in early seventeenth-century England; but it is a useful starting point for the present paper, which will attempt to define Donne's intellectual development from the 1590's until his death, taking as its central concern Donne's attitudes to time.

The nature and meaning of time was not only a matter of fascination to Donne throughout his life, but also a touchstone for determining the intellectual allegiances of many Renaissance writers. Time and mutability haunt the literature of the period. While the traditional medieval interpretation of time as dependent upon God's Providence is reasserted or reinterpreted, many writers, like Montaigne or Bruno, are confusedly or explicitly seeking an alternative to it. The most sensitive minds were caught up in the debate, and Donne's responses and contributions to it are singularly revealing.³

¹See e.g. N. J. C. Andreassen, *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* (Princeton, 1967); Donald C. Guss, *John Donne: Petrarchist* (Detroit, 1966); Arnold Stein, *John Donne's Lyrics* (Minneapolis, 1962); P. A. Fiore (ed.), *Just So Much Honor* (University Park, 1972); cf. such older studies as Theodore Spencer *et al.*, *A Garland for John Donne* (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), and C. M. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (London, 1937).

²Spencer, p. 180.

³See my forthcoming book, *The Strong Necessity of Time* (Mouton, The Hague); cf. Ricardo Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), and my review article of the work, *Dalhousie Review*, 52, (1972), 469-478.

II

As seventeenth-century science matured, the nature and meaning of time gradually became a matter for purely empirical investigation. For Newton, "absolute, true, and mathematical time, of itself, and from its own nature, flows equably without relations to anything external." But earlier in the century, during Donne's lifetime, time is still treated primarily as a theological matter.⁴ Donne was obviously fascinated by the most technical questions of theology from early in his career, and the nature of time, a matter bristling with metaphysical niceties, is one that underlies many of his earliest works.

There is, however, an initial problem to deal with before Donne's early poems can be opened to an adequate reading. Collectively, and frequently within a single poem, Donne's poetry presents such a variety of tones and moods that it is often difficult to pin down any center of serious commitment behind it. It seems wrong to construct a systematic metaphysic of love out of the totality of Donne's poems: each grows out of or evokes a different, often isolated, mood in the vast and contradictory range of human love experience. What is impressive about this variety of moods is Donne's fidelity to individual moments of experience and to the importance of crucial points of time. His best lyrics give the impression of a sudden awareness of limitless significance and it is only in a mood of cynicism that the significance is exhausted. "The good-morrow," for instance, suggests how the sudden realization of the uniqueness of certain moments can remake the lovers' apprehension of their pasts: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I/ Did, till we lov'd?"⁵ The insistent "did" stresses the sudden revelatory quality of the moment of waking.

It is important to note how the assertion of this kind of significance is typically set in the context of a noticeable agnosticism towards any systematizations of love—except that defined by the lovers themselves. For a medieval poet, or even a contemporary of Donne's like Spenser, even though time might destroy men's temporal enjoyments, the orthodox Christian contemplation of an atemporal eternity could be naturally invoked as compensation. Donne certain-

⁴Isaac Newton, *Mathematical Principles*, trans. Florian Cajori (Berkeley, 1934), p. 6; cf. Richard Hooker, *Ecclesiastical Polity*, V.lxix.1-3, and Gervase Babington, *Works* (1637), p. 4, for statements on the necessary dependence on a consideration of eternity for any philosophy of time.

⁵*The Collected Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (London, 1912), I, 7, cited henceforth as *Poems*.

ly draws heavily on many medieval traditions, but his independence of any systematic metaphysical implications is a marked feature of his most serious love poems. In his later works, his solution to the problems raised by time and mutability becomes the traditional Christian one. Earlier, although the problems posed by time appear no less pressing, he rejects any particular metaphysical context as equal to encompassing the complexity of human experience.

Many of Donne's poems evoke a lack of fixity as the necessary medium in which all human relationships must exist:

Wilt thou then Antedate some new made vow?
Or say that now
We are not just those persons, which we were?⁶

An urgent preoccupation that lies behind many of the love poems is a search for a fixed source of permanence within this flux to give ultimate meaning to the mutability of life. The quest takes two main forms. The first is a search within concrete human experience for significant moments within the passing of time which, even though time passes, may capture a *stasis*, an eternal moment within time. D. W. Harding has argued that rather than facing up to change and disillusion, some of Donne's poems are "fantasies of permanence," attempts to escape the pressures of mutability on human life by anticipation or artificial prolongation of the event.⁷ Harding, however, seems to assume an over-simple relationship between expression and psychology. "Fantasy" is an inappropriate term for the kind of imaginative elaboration of the experienced moment evoked in a poem like "The good-morrow," where the tone may be one of anticipation, but the dwelling on future fulfilment returns to its very concrete source—the woman beside him. Oddly enough, there is little of the *carpe diem* theme in Donne: the awareness of time and death may be all-important in, say, "The Anniversary," but there is no hint of a melancholy seizing of fleeting joys, only the joyous affirmation of the moment that fulfils time while time's passing is admitted and faced. This aspect of the poems, seemingly overlooked by Harding, leads on to the second means by which Donne attempts to face time, which requires more detailed examination.

Time and mutability are admitted to be categories bound up with man's essential nature:

⁶"Womens constancy," *Poems*, I, 9.

⁷D. W. Harding, *Experience into Words* (London, 1963), pp. 11-13.

O how feeble is mans power,
 That if good fortune fall,
 Cannot adde another houre,
 Nor a lost houre recall!⁸

But time—and death, which is inextricably bound up with time—may be negated by the sheer quality of living: “For I had rather owner bee/ Of thee one houre, then all else ever.”⁹ It is noticeable that the source of this kind of reality is found not in the individual lovers themselves, but in their explored and growing relationship. Indeed, it is precisely because of time’s passing that love exists and grows. The real fears that transitoriness, loss and death can bring are faced clearly and then calmly set aside. There is no sense of escapism in the conclusion:

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.¹⁰

There is a similar note of serenity at the end of “The Sunne Rising,” a dismissal of time’s passing, and an awareness that such moments provide a realization of something beyond time’s grasp, even while time’s presence is accepted: “Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clyme,/ Nor houres, dayes, moneths, which are the rags of time.”¹¹

The dismissal of time as irrelevant because of the eternal importance of certain moments, and the acceptance of time as the essential medium of this kind of importance—these are the two solutions Donne offers in his early poetry to the demands time makes upon man. They are epitomized by a line from “Loves growth,” that “Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.”¹² Using these two terms from traditional mystical theology, Donne explores two means of facing time: one centered on being, contemplation, *stasis*, and the other on doing, activity, changing. Donne vacillates between one solution and the other. He wants to express a belief in the highest possible significance for certain human, timebound experiences, and is searching for both a vocabulary and a style of life in which to do so. On the one hand, he asserts that the world of the lovers involves a deeper reality than other activities in the changing world. Love, the most fundamental expression of “being,” is ultimately not to be sub-

⁸“Song,” *Poems*, I, 19.

⁹“A Feaver,” *Poems*, I, 21.

¹⁰*Poems*, I, 25.

¹¹*Poems*, I, 11.

¹²*Poems*, I, 33.

ject to that of "doing," to ambition, wealth, or politics, which are ruled by time. On the other hand, love—and other human values—have to be validated in action through time's passing. Part of the perplexing tone of "The Canonization"—a poem which varies in mood from sulkiness to flippant exaltation—arises from a frustrated desire to justify the qualitative activity.

Two attitudes to time therefore conflict in Donne: either time is redeemable from outside, by values that lie beyond time's grasp, or else time is something that must be used or exploited from within. Donne was searching for a fixed point in and yet out of time, and yet also for the fulfilling variety of experience that could come only through the acceptance that "Change' is the nursery/ Of musick, joy, life, and eternity."¹³ In the most satisfying poems, the tension created between the two ways of meeting time is fruitfully explored. The lovers' seemingly self-sufficient world can be complete only by accepting the need for time's passing. In the triumphant note at the end of "The Anniversarie," the life of "doing" harmoniously complements that of "being." "Loves growth" further suggests that the fullest experience of life involves the acceptance of change: "Me thinkes I lyed all winter, when I swore,/ My love was infinite, if spring make' it more." Love is "elemented" and must "endure/ Vicissitude, and season, as the grasse."¹⁴ And yet, by the very intensity of their love, the growth and decay of the rest of Nature can be triumphantly transcended as their love grows through and yet in defiance of temporal change. Such a poem, I believe, points to the core of an answer to charges like Harding's, that Donne's love poetry lacks a serious center of commitment which does not flinch before the inadequacies and losses of temporal experience.

III

Donne's intellectual development between 1605 and 1615-1617 marks off a distinct period in his life and writings. It was a decade dominated by the pressure of personal and family matters: poverty, illness, death, lack of advancement, and personal melancholy. A typical emphasis is his inability to "husband all [his] time"; in a letter of 1608, he wrote: "Every Tuesday I make account that I turn a great hour-glass, and consider that a week's life is run out since I went. But if I ask myself what I have done in the last watch, or would do in the next, I can say nothing."¹⁵ As Helen Gardner has shown, most of

¹³"Elegie III. Change," *Poems*, I, 83.

¹⁴*Poems*, I, 33.

¹⁵*The Life and Letters of John Donne*, ed. Edmund Gosse (1899), I, 190.

Donne's Holy Sonnets belong to this middle period of frustrations:¹⁶ their fervent wrestling with God's eternity and his own instability and sinfulness reflect not the impassioned divine but the doubt and turmoil of a soul in transition.

Perhaps the most revealing evidence for the intellectual transition Donne was undergoing in this decade is to be found in the discussion of time and mutability in the *Anniversaries*. The poems do not, as an older generation of scholars believed, provide evidence of his eager embracing of advanced philosophical and scientific ideas. Donne's reaction to new stars and multiple worlds, for instance, is significant for the surprisingly commonplace context into which this new knowledge is put—that such changes in the heavens are signs of the universe's mutability, that the only permanence men are offered is in an eternity beyond the vicissitudes of time, and that the world's evident decay and man's consequently urgent need to repent are directed by God's Providence. Donne's discussions of the issues here, in 1611-1612, are substantially the same as in later sermons and essays.¹⁷

More importantly, the emotional reverberations that arise from many lines of the *Anniversaries* reveal Donne as a man fleeing the deepest source of inspiration in his early poems, the trust in the value of his own restless aspiration to find eternity through the intensity of human experience. Love is now seen as deceptive; the inevitable changes of time as tragic, destructive, and bewildering:

Poore cousened cousenor, *that* she, and *that* thou,
Which did begin to love, are neither now;
You are both fluid, chang'd since yesterday;
Next day repaires, (but ill) last dayes decay.¹⁸

In his early poems, Donne welcomed mutability and change as the medium of life's variety; here they are evidence of its fragmentariness. Time is now conceived of as a dreadful and inevitable rush towards death, a vehicle of impermanence.

¹⁶*The Divine Poems of John Donne* (1952), pp. xlix-l; cf. e.g. Loys Le Roy, *Of the Interchangeable Course, or Variety of Things*, trans. R. A. (1594), fols. 2^v.3^r; Sir Walter Raleigh, *The History of the World* (1614), I.I.5.v; Henry Cuffe, *The Differences of the Ages of Mans Life* (1607), pp. 58, 86-87. The last reference is especially interesting because Donne owned and presumably read the work in question. See Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne* (Cambridge, 1957), entry no. L.56.

¹⁷Cf. *Essays in Divinity*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson (Oxford, 1952), p. 25; *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley, 1953-1962), VI, 323.

¹⁸*Poems*, I, 262; cf. Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. John Florio, ed. A. R. Waller (1910), III, 369.

And what essentiall joy can'st thou expect
 Here upon earth? what permanent effect
 Of transitory causes?¹⁹

Love, friendship, sexual delight, are rendered ineffective by the implications of such questions. Donne's fascination with time is slowly becoming a deep despair in the face of unbearable tensions, necessitating a search for less fragile certainties. While the sheer bulk of his sermons alone makes generalization difficult, it is nevertheless crucial to analyze the peculiar consistency of his treatment of time in his later writings, and it is to these that I shall now turn.

A constant note of Donne's sermons and devotions is the way he interiorizes the commonplace observation on the brevity of time in comparison with eternity. He writes that "if we consider eternity, into that time never entered; eternity is not an everlasting flux of time, but time is a short parenthesis in a long period; and eternity had been the same as it is, though time has never been."²⁰ Donne constantly interiorizes time, stressing man's subjective awareness of its irretrievability and unreality. Time is especially felt not as an objective measurable entity, but as an inner pressure, a sense of life experienced as isolated or fragmented experiences gaining meaning only from contact with eternity. The constant yearning for the future, the embracing of change in human life that are so noticeable in Donne's early poems have become in his religious works a quest for the permanent beyond time. The source of this permanence is God's eternity, not man's temporal achievements. Donne's changed attitude to time is an indication of a whole reshaping of a personal world-view, a gradual but definite conversion. "Believe me," he wrote just before his ordination, "I do not cast into the account of my years, these last five which I have lived otherwise than as nights slept out, which indeed are a part of *time* . . . rather than a part of life."²¹ Henceforth, only the eternity of God was able to give transience of time any real meaning since "not one houre my selfe I can sustaine."²²

Donne, then, progressively comes to accept the traditional Christian antithesis of time and eternity. For Donne, the difference has become a radical one of quality: eternity "hath . . . no limits, no periods, no seasons, no moneths, no yeares, no dayes . . . Creation and . . . Judgement are not a minute asunder in respect of eternity, which hath no minutes."²³ Time is now seen as important not for its

¹⁹*Poems*, I, 262.

²⁰*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor, 1959), p. 89.

²¹Quoted by Augustus Jessup, *John Donne* (1897), p. 86.

²²*Poems*, I, 322.

²³*Sermons*, VI, 331; cf. V, 283; *Devotions*, p. 89; *Sermons*, IV, 240.

providing the challenging and creative medium in which lovers may grow towards self-fulfilment, but for its leading towards death and judgment. Life leads towards "my minutes latest point,"²⁴ which looks forward to the fearful possibility of damnation.

Now it is important to admit that in both poems and sermons there are admirably serene moods in which death is seen to have no ultimate reality: "One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,/ And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die."²⁵ Many of the sermons look forward eagerly to the resurrection, which can be welcomed as providing a culmination to earthly life essentially in continuity with it. There are occasions when the restless, aspiring young intellectual reasserts himself, as when he writes of man's "Undeterminable desire of more, then this life can minister unto him . . . Creatures of an inferiour nature are possest with the *present*; *Man* is a *future Creature*. In a holy and usefull sense, wee may say, *God is a future God*."²⁶ Nothing here is irreconcilable with his Christian orthodoxy, but the spirit is that of his younger self. However, the difficulty of generalization notwithstanding, the more typical note is of the horrific reality of judgment which interposes itself between time and eternity, and consequently the unknown possibility either of salvation or damnation obsesses him as he envisages "the day of Judgement, when . . . all Time shall cease . . . The joy, and the sorrow that shall be then, shall be eternall, no end, and infinite, no measure, no limitation. . . ."²⁷ In such passages it seems that Donne no longer feels that time can be redeemed from within; as time passes there is only "Despaire behind, and death before": "Onely thou art above, and when towards thee/ By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe."²⁸

For Donne it is not even God's gradual maturing of his purposes through time that is stressed so much as His plucking him out of the nothingness of time. He frequently quotes Calvin approvingly and his frequent emphasis that "not one houre my selfe I can sustaine"²⁹ is similar in spirit to Calvin's description of man's inability to effect anything but what is determined by God's will, or his assertion that "every yere, moneth and day, is governed by a new and speciall Providence of God."³⁰ Consistently it seems that for Donne the relationship between one moment of time and eternity is a closer and

²⁴*Poems*, I, 324.

²⁵*Poems*, I, 326.

²⁶*Sermons*, VIII, 75.

²⁷*Sermons*, V, 294.

²⁸*Poems*, I, 322.

²⁹*Poems*, I, 322.

³⁰*Institutes*, I.xvi.2.

more real one than between one moment of time and the next. Time is a series of radically discontinuous instants, linked rather to eternity than to each other. For a divine of a different temperament, Lancelot Andrewes, time is typically the harmonious expression of the gradual unfolding of God's Providence, reflected in the natural world of seasonal change and the pattern of the Church's year. But for Donne, time is merely a means of entering eternity. In his Christmas sermon of 1625, he stresses that eternity "hath . . . no limits, no periods, no seasons, no moneths, no yeares, no dayes."³¹ Preaching on the same text, Galatians 4.4, Andrewes' concern is rather with the unfolding of time as redemptive history. For Andrewes, time overflows into eternity; it is of value in itself.³² For Donne, time is of value only as it can be negated or transformed from without.

Donne's insistence—one might say, his psychological need—for time to be negated by eternity leads him to dwell on the paradoxes in Christianity that reverse time's order. Individual men, reborn as Christians, participate in a paradoxical reversal of time: "I was built up scarce 50. years ago, in my Mothers womb, and I was cast down, almost 6000. years agoe, in Adams loynes; I was *borne* in the last *Age* of the world, and *died* in the first."³³ Similarly the occasion in 1608 of the Annunciation and Passion falling upon one day obviously caught his fancy as an emblem of the paradoxical nature of the Christian transformation of time.³⁴

Donne continually stresses the infinite importance of every moment of life, since, as one of the sonnets asks, "What if this present were the worlds last night?" Man is continually poised on the threshold of eternity, "my minutes latest point," and the importance of the present moment is that in it God offers man salvation, possibly for the last time: "If there be a minute of sand left, (There is not)," he importunes his congregation near the end of a sermon, "this minute that is left, is that eternitie which we speake of; upon this minute dependeth that eternity . . . this minute makes up . . . your eternity, because it may be your last minute."³⁵

The word "now" has a fascination for him.³⁶ God eternally offers all men a continual string of "nows"; every instant becomes another "now": "That *Now*, that I named then, that minute is past; but God affords thee another *Now* . . . and if thy conscience tell thee that he

³¹*Sermons*, VI, 311.

³²Andrewes, *Ninety Six Sermons*, (London, 1841), I, 47-48, 56.

³³*Sermons*, VII, 78.

³⁴*Poems*, I, 335.

³⁵*Poems*, I, 328, 324; *Sermons*, VII, 368-369; cf. II, 59, 139; III, 288; VIII, 190; *Devotions*, p. 7.

³⁶*Sermons*, II, 250; *Devotions*, p. 91.

speaks to thee, now is that time.”³⁷ What can be seen here are the main constituent parts of Donne’s highly charged preoccupation with time: his own inability to stop time’s flow, to pin down each “now” as it passes, his despair and consequent relief as he grasps the recurring series of “nows” that God offers him. Time is merely a series of disconnected fragments, each, unless taken immediately, a lost opportunity never to return.

Donne’s sense of time’s fragmentariness and his psychological need for a belief in God’s providential upholding and directing of time are seen particularly vividly in his much-discussed attitude towards death. Donne embraced death in his imagination as eagerly as he embraced life; what is repellent is that he should so often have mistaken one for the other. What is striking about his obsession with time and death is, on one hand, the degree of personal involvement that he brings to such stock motifs; but on the other, it is significant that the man who now puts such an emphasis on the ultimate unreality of time, the putrefaction of the body, and the petition that God will “*have a care of us in the houre of death*”³⁸ should have once been the man who wrote “Loves growth,” and “The Anniversarie.”

IV

I have displayed what I believe to be the radical contrast in Donne’s treatment of time between his early and later writings. Given Donne’s background, ambitions, and the pressures of his age, it might be argued that his development contains much that is predictable. On the other hand, the very strength of many of his early commitments, both in his marriage and poetry, might have suggested something other than a slow capitulation to orthodoxy. A glance back at his love poetry may help here. The basic tension in Donne’s apprehension of love, I argued, was that between a drive towards a fixed timeless metaphysic of love and an acceptance of the limitations of time upon it. The urge to find or create a metaphysical framework beyond the grasp of time eventually triumphed. Many of his love poems celebrate the moment—but the moment never lasts. It is the problem of the isolation of the moment of revelation and of the lovers in that moment that Donne never adequately, or permanently, solves until his later religious writings. However magnificent as poetic statements, the serene acceptance of “The Anniversarie” or “Loves growth” represents a rare mood in Donne’s love poems: as he grows older, he seems unable to accept the challenge of finding the way of fulfillment

³⁷*Sermons*, IX, 327; cf. *Devotions*, p. 89.

³⁸*Sermons*, III, 92, 105; X, 231.

through, not despite, time's passing. Donne's apprehension of time and mutability in his love poems is, however striking and powerful, oddly limited by its very intensity; and his later intellectual development and his surrender to religious orthodoxy may paradoxically have their roots in the very strengths of independence and isolation that his love poems demonstrate.

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