John Donne's Poetry: An Assessment of Modern Criticism

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In 1931, the tercentenary anniversary of Donne's death, T. S. Eliot announced in his essay "Donne in Our Time" that "Donne's poetry is a concern of the present and the recent past rather than of the future."[1] If, by his prophetic utterance of doom, Eliot intended to predict Donne's impending demise among scholars and critics, or if he thought that critical interest in Donne had reached its apex in 1931, then history has proved him quite mistaken. For during the past fifty years no fewer than 2,000 books, monographs, essays, and notes on Donne have appeared, and, as far as I can tell, there are no signs of diminishing interest in his poetry and prose among scholars and academic critics.

But, in all fairness, Eliot should not be judged too harshly for what may seem at first like a most unfortunate comment; for what he meant to express, I think, was that his own personal interest in Donne had faded by 1931 and that he had found new and more exciting models for his own poetry; he had found Dante. Thus, for Eliot himself, at least, his comment was completely accurate; for, although he refers to Donne occasionally in his later critical writings, the essay I have mentioned is his last sustained piece of Donne criticism. In fact, the longest and most detailed essay Eliot ever wrote on a single metaphysical poet was not on Donne at all but on George Herbert for the British Council's Writers and Their Works Series in 1962. And, although his interest in Donne waned, Eliot's appreciation for Herbert never did. In a short interview, entitled "Memories of T. S. Eliot" that appeared in *Esquire* in 1965, Igor Stravinsky reported that Eliot once told him that "Herbert is a great poet . . . and one of a few I can read again and again."[2]

But in addition to having lost interest in Donne as a major inspiration for his own poetry, by 1931 Eliot had other reasons as

well for predicting the end of the popular revival of interest in Donne that he had been so instrumental in generating both among critics and among practicing poets; for he was beginning to sense that his critical comments about Donne and the enthusiasm they had sparked were, perhaps, founded upon some rather important misconceptions or at least flawed concepts about Donne's art. Later, in the 1931 essay, Eliot confides: "It is impossible for us or for anyone else ever to disentangle how much [of Donne's modern popularity] was genuine affinity, genuine appreciation, and how much was just a *reading into* poets like Donne our own sensibilities, how much was 'subjective.'"[3] And years later, Eliot expressed his utter astonishment that his short review of Sir Herbert Grierson's *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, which appeared in *TLS* in October of 1921, had caused such a critical stir; he had dropped the term "dissociation of sensibility," but he had no idea that literary history of the next twenty years or so would be rewritten to accommodate his suggestion. Thus, could it be that by 1931 Eliot himself recognized that if the success of the Donne revival depended upon what he had said about metaphysical poetry, then perhaps its days were indeed numbered?

Of course, it is possible that Eliot was not thinking of academic criticism and scholarship at all in his 1931 essay; he may have had a much more important audience in mind—the practicing poets of the day. Hence, if he meant to suggest that Donne's influence on poets was "a concern of the present and the recent past rather than of the future," then perhaps he was not entirely incorrect. In the 1930s and 1940s Donne was still a major catalyst in the poetry of several important poets: Elinor Wylie, Wallace Stevens, Herbert Read, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Hart Crane, Edith Sitwell, Archibald MacLeish, and Yvor Winters, to name only a few. But I think I would be forced to agree with Denis Donoghue, who recently noted that "it would be hard to name any substantial poets now flourishing to whom Donne's poems speak with unusual force."[4] Certainly they do not seem to have the influence on practicing poets that they had in the not too distant past. And perhaps it is also worth noting that the truly exciting and most original periods of Donne criticism have been those in which major practicing poets, or at least creative writers, were numbered among his principal champions or even adversaries. The litany would begin with Ben Jonson, Thomas Carew, Dryden, and Pope; would perhaps include Dr. Johnson; would certainly include Coleridge, Hazlitt, DeQuincey, and Browning;

and might conclude with Yeats and Eliot, in addition to the modern poets I have just enumerated. But who among the poets of the 1970s and 1980s would one choose to include? Therefore, although Donne continues to thrive and flourish in the halls of ivy and in library stacks from Texas to Tokyo and from Berkeley to Oxford, perhaps Eliot was not so terribly mistaken after all when he predicted nearly fifty years ago that Donne's reputation in the years ahead would be something quite different from what it was in 1931.

If Donne's poetry no longer commands the kind of attention and respect from practicing poets it once did, it continues, however, to engage and fascinate an ever-increasing number of scholars and critics. Even a most cursory glance at the seventeenth-century section of the annual MLA bibliography, which is, of course, far from comprehensive, will reveal that only Milton exceeds Donne in the number of yearly entries; that typically more items on Donne appear each year than on Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan combined; and that Donne entries far exceed those for Dryden and are roughly twice in number those listed in the Renaissance section for Sidney. In my efforts to update *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1912-1967* for the eleven-year period, 1968-78, I found that, generally speaking, approximately one hundred books, essays, and notes on Donne were published annually, excluding references, book reviews, and doctoral dissertations. In 1931, admittedly a big year for Donne studies since it was the tercentenary anniversary of his death, only about fifty items were published, whereas in 1972, the 400th anniversary of Donne's birth, approximately 120 studies appeared. Quantity alone, of course, is finally rather meaningless, and I would be the first to admit that any number of books and essays that appear are minor efforts at best and that many are often repetitive, derivative, ill-conceived, and misleading. However, as I read and annotated the nearly 1300 entries in my bibliography for the years 1912-1967 and the more than 1,000 items that appear in my update for the years 1968-1978 I was struck again and again by the fact that Donne has engaged and continues to engage the interest of some of the best minds of the scholarly world and that any number of the studies produced during the past fifty years represent the major contributions to our understanding and knowledge not only of Donne but of the seventeenth century, of metaphysical poets as a whole, and even of the very nature of poetry itself. And I think it cannot be denied that nearly all serious students

of literature now agree that Donne occupies a significant and permanent position in our understanding of the development of English poetry and that he is, in his own right, a major poet of continuing and lively interest.

Such a comment may seem painfully obvious, and it may be especially difficult for students, in particular, to recognize that this consensus did not always exist. At the beginning of this century, many critics were by no means willing to offer Donne a seat among the great poets of our language. In 1900, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* represented Donne with only eight pieces, two of which were actually not his and one of which was the first twenty lines of "The Extasie." A number of critics were, in fact, not only hostile to Donne's poetry but were quite scornful of those far from numerous admirers of his art. Edward Bliss Reed, for example, in his *Elizabethan Lyrical Poetry from Its Origins to the Present Time* (1912) not only openly condemned Donne's poetry for its "unmusical moments," its "imperfect utterance," and its "morbid strain," but concluded his evaluation by remarking that "today Donne's poems are never imitated; they are not even widely read, for though he has a circle of devoted admirers, their number is small."[5] And, as late as 1917, five years after the publication of Sir Herbert Grierson's monumental two-volume edition of the poems and only four years before Eliot's endorsement, George Jackson announced in the *Expository Times*, apparently without fear of serious contradiction or general disagreement, that "it must be freely admitted that neither as poet, preacher, nor letter-writer is Donne ever likely to gain the suffrage of more than a few" and proceeded to characterize most of Donne's love poems as "fit only for the dunghill."[6] Fifty-five years later, in his preface to *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, A. J. Smith observed that "As far as records tell this is the first time a centenary of his [Donne's] birth has been celebrated or as much as remarked" but assured his readers that "one can't conceive now that a time will come again when the names of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats are known but the name of Donne is not."[7] Prophecy in literary criticism is a dangerous business at best, as we have seen, but Smith would seem to be on very solid ground in making his prediction.

Although we may be inclined to smile at the utter naiveté of some of our predecessors and may feel even comfortably liberated from their seemingly quaint moral and quixotic literary judgments, perhaps we should resist congratulating ourselves too uncritically and too hastily; for, although often rich and indeed exciting, the

enormous body of scholarship and criticism that has been produced on Donne during the past fifty years has not necessarily moved us toward a general consensus about the precise qualities and merits of his poetry. Although we tend to agree that Donne is a major poet, we tend to disagree on exactly what accounts for his greatness or wherein his greatness lies. Therefore, what we have is a mass of criticism that continues to grow but often seems bewildering and even contradictory. Perhaps one example will illustrate my point.

Several years ago, Rosalie Colie, reviewing recent critical discussions of Donne's *Anniversaries*, observed that, although the poems have been interpreted by a number of highly respected scholars, "the various interpretations have seemed especially selective and difficult to modulate into a general understanding of the works."[8] After surveying the criticism of such eminent scholars as Marjorie Nicolson, Louis Martz, George Williamson, O. B. Hardison, Frank Manley, Northrop Frye, Earl Miner, and others, all of whom, Colie points out, assist the reader by explaining aspects of the argument, imagery, philosophical doctrines, and structure of the poems, she then contends that all of these readings "conspicuously do not mesh with one another in mutually valuable contributions to interpretation."[9] Confronted by this array of bewildering and contradictory criticism, Colie finally concludes that perhaps the only way out of the labyrinth of critical confusion is to assume that "the poems' hospitality to multiple readings is not a function of the author's sloppiness so much as his rigorous inclusiveness"and then proceeds by attempting to show that in fact "the poems consciously exploit playfully and seriously a great many literary genres available to the Renaissance poet"[10] and that Donne simply fused together styles and themes that were normally held apart in separate poems. It would seem that the only way Colie can reconcile the strains of discordant criticism is to suggest that Donne "exploited various pieces of the Renaissance literary repertory" and "forced them beyond their own limits, towards a new coherence unspecified in the textbooks of mankind."[11] Colie goes so far as to conclude that it is precisely "this shiftiness that makes the *Anniversary Poems* so difficult for us to read, trained as we are to find unity of thought, structure, pattern, and tone in the 'good' poems we read."[12] Although this is not the occasion to explore in detail and perhaps to challenge certain of Colie's conclusions about the poems, it seems to me unfortunate that such an intelligent and sensitive critic as Rosalie Colie should be led to

conclude from the existing conflicting criticism that the difficulty readers and critics experience in appreciating the *Anniversaries* stems from their unnatural expectation of finding unity in a work of art and that the only way around the mountain of contradictory criticism on the poems (especially when that criticism issues forth from such highly respected experts) is to conclude that Donne simply meant to accommodate all their differing points of view.

I should not want to be misunderstood on this point. I would not argue that the complexity and subtlety of Donne's poetry is ever likely to generate a highly harmonious chorus of uniformly held conclusions about the meaning of his poetry and about his way of achieving that meaning. Donne himself told us that "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more," and he urges us in *Satyre III* to "doubt wisely." But still, I think it is not unreasonable for us to expect to find some generally acceptable, overall conclusions and more dominating patterns emerging from the volume of critical writing that has been produced in recent years. Evaluations of the *Anniversaries*, however, as a case in point, do not seem to be moving in that direction, unless, of course, one wishes to endorse Rosalie Colie's thesis, which, I assume, most of us would agree perhaps "too much light breeds." In fact, I often feel that many books and essays on Donne tell me a great deal more about the critics writing them than they do about Donne's poetry. It is the very nature of literary criticism, of course, to shift its perspectives from time to time and to invent new methods (which are frequently old methods refurbished) of exploring and understanding literary texts, which, it seems to me, is one guarantee we have that critics will not likely conclude soon that they have exhausted Donne's poetry. Each new generation of critics, with its own insights, concerns, sensitivity, newly acquired critical methodologies, and even its recognized and unrecognized biases, will continue to encounter Donne, more or less, on its own terms and will continue to provide us with fresh insights into his poetry. You will understand, then, that I am not advocating that we attempt to stifle critical debate, even if that were possible, nor am I recommending that we develop a set of rigid conclusions about Donne's poetry that we could carefully chisel into marble and preserve for all time.

On the other hand, with the vast accumulation of Donne criticism we have at our disposal, the time seems right to re-evaluate and reassess our notions about Donne, and perhaps about metaphysical poetry in general, to synthesize and then

enunciate as best we can the major and even important minor discoveries and insights we have made about Donne and perhaps even to chart some possible new directions Donne scholarship might take in the future so that it will not only continue to proliferate but will thrive in such a way as to provide us with some genuinely new and fresh perspectives on his poetry. If you assume that in the remainder of this brief paper I am prepared to perform that desirable task magically by enunciating with clarity, elegance, economy, and admirable erudition all the major conflicting issues critics have raised during the past half century and then offer satisfactory resolutions to them, I regret to disappoint you. Clearly such an undertaking is far beyond the scope of this brief report and certainly beyond my own limited abilities. I shall, however, devote the remainder of my paper to a series of general observations about the present state of Donne scholarship that have become apparent to me as I have prepared my annotated bibliographies. My remarks are intended to create more questions than they provide answers for, and, if I am totally successful, they will spark a great deal of disagreement.

Before I proceed, however, I should like to call attention to and applaud the efforts of those who are currently engaged in preparing a detailed, scholarly variorum commentary on Donne's poems, a project which, when completed, will significantly contribute to the advancement of Donne scholarship and criticism. Having read through the vast amount of work produced on Donne in this century alone, I am painfully aware that the most important criticism is so hopelessly scattered throughout numerous journals and books, many of which are in foreign languages, that not even the more diligent and persistent scholar is ever likely to locate it all. Even though I should hope that recent annotated bibliographies have greatly assisted critics in this respect, I am convinced, nonetheless, that they do not perform adequately and fully the service that is needed. A variorum commentary will not only make Donne scholarship more readily accessible, but, in addition, it will allow us to make a general assessment of Donne criticism by synthesizing the most significant insights of critics and scholars during the past four centuries and will also perhaps serve as a solid guide for future research. But since we shall not have a variorum commentary for several years to come, we are left with nothing more satisfactory than general surveys of and general observations on Donne criticism, such as I propose to offer.

Surely the most disturbing fact about modern Donne criticism is that it concerns itself primarily with less than half of Donne's canon, confining itself narrowly to his secular love poems (a dozen or less of the poems in the *Songs and Sonets* and to a much lesser extent the *Elegies*), to his specifically religious poems (almost exclusively the *Holy Sonnets*, "Goodfriday, 1613," and the hymns), and more recently, to the *Anniversaries*. A recent check of items for 1968-1978 showed that criticism specifically on the verse epistles, for example, accounts for only approximately one percent of the total entries, even though the verse epistles themselves represent nearly a sixth of Donne's poetic canon—approximately the same as the religious poems. One possible conclusion, of course, is that the verse epistles are artistic failures and deserve no more attention than they have received. But if this conclusion is correct, and I, for one, would argue against it, then one would expect that that point would be made, defended, and demonstrated, but all one gets, in fact, is silent neglect. Perhaps it is even more surprising that Donne's *Satyres*, which are generally regarded as sophisticated examples of that important Renaissance genre, received only about three percent of the attention from critics during the 1968-1978 period. When we have two major critics, C. S. Lewis and Alvin Kernan, coming to almost diametrically opposed conclusions about the artistry of the *Satyres*, one would have expected a little more critical heat, if not light, to have been generated. Lewis condemned the *Satyres*, as you will recall, as shaggy and savage, unmetrical in versification, disgusting in diction, and obscure in thought, whereas Kernan, obviously reading the same poems, praised them precisely for being the least savage of the satires and for being, among other things, consistent and well-ordered. I do not mean to suggest that no serious work has been done on the epistles or on the satires (one has only to think of Milgate, for example), but the amount of attention given them is unquestionably slight in comparison to certain of Donne's love poems. And, as we might expect, the number of items on *The Progresse of the Soule*, the epigrams, the epithalamia, the funeral elegies, and even the religious poems, excluding the *Holy Sonnets*, "Goodfriday, 1613," and the hymns, is even more miniscule.

The most unfortunate result of centering attention almost exclusively on less than half of Donne's canon is that we have developed over the years what might be called a synecdochical understanding of and appreciation for Donne's total achievement as a poet: we have, in other words, substituted the part for the whole

and then proceeded as if the part were, in fact, the whole. As a result, literary historians, critics, and teachers continue to repeat generalizations about Donne's poetry that although incomplete, partial, misleading, and sometimes incorrect, have about them almost the strength of established fact and the sacredness of a hallowed tradition. Admittedly the highly dramatic poems of the *Songs and Sonets* are characteristically colloquial, metrically rough and syntactically concentrated, witty and rhetorically ingenious, and psychologically complex and subtle in argument; but unfortunately Donne's other poems are often judged, and often slighted, because they do not have any or all of these so-called Donnean qualities. Even the *Holy Sonnets*, which on the whole have fared rather well, are often said to be lacking because they do not fully exploit the possibilities inherent in the *Songs and Sonets*, and the *Elegies* are praised because they show in an undeveloped and unsophisticated way some of the major features of Donne's poetry that will emerge clearly and emphatically in the *Songs and Sonets*.

Any number of fairly plausible speculations could be advanced, no doubt, that would at least partly account for the critics' neglect of a very sizeable part of Donne's canon, but I should like to restrict myself to only one that seems to me especially significant and from which we may learn an important lesson. It is well known that in the 1930s and 1940s the so-called "new critics" contributed more than their fair share to the revival of interest in Donne's poetry; for they discovered to their delight that in his love poems, in the *Holy Sonnets*, and in the hymns Donne had obligingly included all those very elements that for them constituted genuine poetry: ambiguity, paradox, tension, and so on. In other words, Donne's dramatic lyrics not only seemed to support and illustrate their own theories about the nature of good poetry, but, perhaps more importantly, the analytical methods and approaches that evolved from their theories were especially effective in interpreting Donne's dramatic lyrics. By the 1940s and 1950s and perhaps well into the 1960s the disciples of the "new critics" were teaching Donne in hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country, and when they taught Donne they chose those poems that best lent themselves to close textual analysis: thus they were much more likely to choose "The Flea," "The Canonization," "The Extasie," or even "Batter my heart" or the "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" than they were to select for intensive study and discussion, let us say, the verse epistles, *The Progresse of the Soule*, or even *La Corona* sequence. Thus, an implicit and often

explicit notion of Donne's poetry was passed on to a later generation of critics, who, when confronted with the neglected half of Donne's canon, were predisposed to dismiss as inferior those poems that did not readily conform to the received notion of Donne's poetry. Also, since the neglected poems often did not fit neatly into established and well-wrought definitions of metaphysical poetry, or meditative poetry, or baroque poetry, they were simply passed over as being somehow not essential to an understanding of Donne's art.

Nearly a half-century ago Merritt Hughes warned his generation of the dangers of "kidnapping" Donne for its own purposes. In 1934, Hughes was primarily concerned that the efforts of critics such as Eliot and his followers to make Donne irresistibly modern and relevant not only were dangerously distorting historical reality but also were to a large degree distorting Donne's genuine originality and achievements. Hughes concluded that "As a matter of historical probability, we might surmise that Donne's outlook would be closer to that of Duns Scotus than to ours."[13] Hughes, of course, wanted to see Donne restored to his seventeenth-century context, but he recognized that any such attempts would be met with firm resistance. "To try to see him as he was," Hughes remarked, "is like removing fourteenth-century gilding from a Russian icon of the tenth century."[14] And he concludes, "Every audience makes its own experience of an artist's work, and when the artist is removed from his public by three hundred years, and when the modern conception of him has been interlaced with original and fructifying theories of poetry by at least one great poet, the recovery of the historic reality is an ungrateful task."[15]

Kenneth Burke, in an essay unfortunately entitled "On Covery, Re- and Dis-" that appeared in *Accent* in 1953, puts the case succinctly. Discussing modern approaches to Herbert in this instance, Burke comments on the position of Rosemond Tuve in her scholarly little book, *A Reading of George Herbert*, which had appeared the year before. Tuve claimed that in order to understand Herbert's poetry the reader must study and understand the cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions Herbert's poems reflect, especially the liturgical and iconographical contexts. Burke, while admiring much of Tuve's study, contrasts this emphasis on "re-covery" of the past, an approach Hughes would have applauded, with the tendency of many modern critics to engage in what he termed "dis-covery," that is, an attempt to find new things about the workings of a poet's mind and art by applying modern

terms and techniques that would perhaps have been completely alien to the poet's own thinking, such as Empson delighted in doing by applying his particular brand of Freudian analysis to Herbert's "The Sacrifice," the poem which led in some ways to Tuve's book. In a response to Tuve's criticism, Empson, while agreeing with some of her conclusions, says that he could not feel "that the mass of erudition she brings down like a steam hammer really cracks any nuts"; and Tuve, while less blunt, makes it unmistakably clear that she holds in utter contempt Empson's kind of discovery. Empson and Tuve, I think, are fair representatives of the major split that continues to divide critics on Donne; the recoverers still regard with suspicion the discoverers as dangerously clever, overly imaginative, unscholarly dilettantes, while the discoverers still dismiss with some contempt the recoverers as pedantic, literal-minded, harmless antiquarians who have nothing significant to contribute to the central, important issues of modern criticism. If forced to do so, I rather imagine I could divide the 1000 items in my updated bibliography roughly according to the two major approaches—re-covery and dis-covery.

In fact, one could probably obtain a reasonably good overview of the whole development of modern Donne criticism by simply following out, year by year and step by step, the debate that has been raging over the meaning of "The Extasie," a debate begun a half-century ago by Pierre Legouis, who, in *Donne the Craftsman*, challenged critical orthodoxy and argued that, for all its veneer of Platonism and scholastic erudition, the poem is fundamentally nothing more than a witty seduction poem, a kind of flea poem in a major key. Since then, every image, conceit, and allusion has been traced, discussed, and analyzed from any number of differing critical perspectives; and it has been suggested that Donne was influenced in his choice of theme, argument, and language by an ever-expanding circle of sources, including Giordano Bruno's *Candelaio*, Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'Amore*, Antoine Héroët's *La Parfaict Amye*, possibly Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, as well as the poetry and love philosophy of Dante, Guinizelli, Cavalcanti, Cino, and Benedetto Varchi, to say nothing of the works of Thomas Aquinas, Plotinus, Ficino, and others. Surely no other Donne poem has been so relentlessly run through various critical and scholarly sieves, and yet, try as they might, the critics simply cannot make the poem lie down quietly on their prefabricated Procrustean beds. And, if one were to follow out the critical debate on the poem, one might possibly conclude by agreeing, at least in part, with Empson,

who, in 1972, reviewing Helen Gardner's edition of the love poems, argued that Donne desperately needs to be rescued (not kidnapped this time) from what he calls "the habitual mean mindedness of modern academic criticism, its moral emptiness combined with incessant moral nagging, and its scrubbed prison-like isolation."[16]

Although Empson's charge is characteristically too broad and too undiscriminating, I find his rescue plea attractive and perhaps even imperative if Donne criticism is to have much life in the future. No doubt Donne studies will continue to proliferate in the immediate years ahead. Critics will carry on, finding even more ingenious ways of testing their highly theoretical concepts on Donne's poems; and scholars, a hardy and not easily discouraged lot, will likely find even more wonderful and exotic sources for "The Extasie." But what concerns me most is that critics and scholars are increasingly talking only to themselves and to each other, not to a wider reading audience. The scholars have weighted down Donne's poems with such a burden of historical and philosophical speculation that even the sophisticated reader is made to feel inadequately prepared to cope with this staggering body of often irrelevant and esoteric information, while the critics, for their part, often speaking in a language that is unintelligible even to their professional colleagues, seem too exclusively concerned with demonstrating the range and complexity of their own critical sophistication or with dazzling their few readers with tricks of critical prestidigitation. Donne is often an occasion for critical debate, but the center of attention is frequently not Donne really but rather abstract, highly theoretical issues that are of little interest to anyone but their exponents. In a word, the critics this time, not the poets, have kidnapped Donne and have turned Donne studies into a self-perpetuating industry that nearly rivals the Milton industry. And in doing so, they have killed genuine interest in Donne's poetry. In many cases, Donne has been so successfully returned to his niche in the seventeenth century that many readers are quite content to leave him there, while they pay lip service to his greatness from a comfortable distance. In other instances, Donne has been explained in such complicated terms that even highly educated readers feel intimidated and put off. I am not suggesting, of course, that we abandon intellectually demanding and highly sophisticated literary approaches to Donne when those approaches are truly helpful in allowing us to appreciate and to understand better and more deeply his poetry, but I would argue for less specialized studies and for more comprehensive studies of

his poetry that would enunciate in understandable English the major achievements of Donne's poetry. Donne is not a simple poet, nor is his art simple; but his poems were intended to communicate his particularly brilliant sense of reality to his readers, and I think that it is, therefore, the primary responsibility of critics to make clear, as best they can, what Donne is communicating. Often the books and articles I read on Donne are much more difficult to understand than are the poems about which they are supposedly written. For this reason as well as for others I have mentioned, I think a variorum commentary on Donne's poetry will be an important first step in sorting out, evaluating and enunciating the important discoveries and recoveries that have been made by any number of excellent critics and scholars. And perhaps, once a path has been cleared through the critical jungle, I should hope that more critics will give attention to the primary task of making Donne's poetry more, not less accessible to an even wider reading audience than he enjoys at the present time.

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NOTES

1 T. S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," in *A Garland for John Donne, 1631-1931*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1931), p. 5.

2 Igor Stravinsky, "Memories of T. S. Eliot," *Esquire* (August 1965), p. 92.

3 Eliot, p. 6.

4 Denis Donoghue, "Denis Donoghue Celebrates the Quatercentenary of John Donne," *Spectator*, 229 (November 18, 1972), 795.

5 Edward Bliss Reed, *Elizabethan Lyrical Poetry from Its Origin to the Present Time* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1912), p. 233.

6 George Jackson, "The Bookshelf by the Fire: V. John Donne," *Expository Times*, 28 (1917), 217, 218.

7 A. J. Smith, Preface to *John Donne: Essays in Celebration* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. vii.

8 Rosalie Colie, "'All in Peeces': Problems of Interpretation in Donne's Anniversary Poems," in *Just So Much Honor: Essays Commemorating the Four-Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of John Donne*, ed. Peter Amadeus Fiore (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 189.

9 P. 192.

10 P. 193.

11 P. 214.

12 P. 193.

13 Merritt Hughes, "Kidnapping Donne," *University of California Publications in English*, 4 (1934), 88.

14 P. 87.

15 P. 87.

16 William Empson, "Rescuing Donne," in *Just So Much Honor*, p. 95.