John Donne Journal
Vol. 20 (2001)

Impudently Donne

Dayton Haskin

My starting point is Anthony Low's proposal that in the seventeenth century the poetry of Donne and Milton began to represent conjugal love as "a new kind of intense, private, mutual relationship, which excluded the social and institutional worlds." Donne and Milton, he argues, "established a little world of privacy and magical transcendence," separating "married love from its classical connections with civic virtue and from its Christian connections with the church . . . and society."[1] This proposal does not describe what the poetry of Donne and Milton accomplished long ago and once and for all. Rather Low's is a retrospective insight constructed on the basis of what this poetry had a potential to do and was then asked by readers to do, above all during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Donne's status as a poet was on a meteoric rise from which it has now fallen. In fact, Low's insight helps us locate the workings of a synergistic energy that, while it helped to bring about the interest in Donne that had a notorious impact on modernist poetry and on New Critical theory, seems now largely to have run its course, so that the kinds of claims made in "The Sun Rising"—

> She'is all States, and all Princes, I,
> Nothing else is.
> Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,
> All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie

[1] *The Reinvention of Love: Poetry. Politics, and Culture from Sidney to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), pp. 195, 205.

—are no longer likely to sound like the enunciation of a transcendent marital ideal.[2] To make a way forward in reading Donne's poetry, it may help to look back to some principal features of the cultural project that sought to turn an uncouth writer whose numbers were harsh and sensibilities coarse into an oracular poet fit to keep company with Shakespeare and Milton. Like all projects, it had its blind spots, and for various reasons its legacy continues to impede understanding how Donne's love poems do their best work.

The poems to which "The Sun Rising" has most often been compared—"The Anniversary," "The Canonization," and "The Good Morrow"—have been invoked in just the ways that Low's thesis would lead us to suspect. It is curious, therefore, that at a key moment in the historic process of promoting Donne as a major love poet, "The Sun Rising" was denied a place in their company. When in 1905 the *Songs and Sonnets* were for the first time published as a volume in its own right, Charles Eliot Norton omitted about a dozen of them from *The Love Poems of John Donne* on the grounds that they were early productions and belonged to the class of "loosely . . . scattered" verses that Walton had claimed Donne himself "wish't . . . had been abortive, or so short liv'd that he had witnessed their funerals."[3] It is not surprising that the missing poems include "Farewell to Love," "The Curse," "Confined Love," "Community," "The Indifferent," "Love's Usury," and "The Flea," all of which have a history of being thought rather nasty. The omission of "The Sun Rising" is curious, however, and not simply because its reference to hunting with the king shows that it was not an early production. Ten years earlier, when Norton brought out the Grolier Club edition, he had numbered it among

---

[2]Quotations are from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1968). Titles of Donne's poems are given in accordance with the listings in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995-).

[3]*The Love Poems of John Donne*, selected and edited by Charles Eliot Norton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905); cf. Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne*, etc. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1927), p. 61.

Donne's finest verses and praised its "audacious, picturesque fancy" as a source of delight.[4]

It was Norton who at the end of the last century set out the agenda for Donne Studies, when no one had as yet given sufficient attention to the manuscripts to understand the dimensions of the textual problem. "The main perplexity in the reading of Donne arises, indeed," Norton urged, "from no difficulty of the text, but from uncertainty how far the poems are the expression of genuine feeling, or dramatic utterances of feigned emotion and fictitious sentiment."[5] *The Love Poems of John Donne* was his attempt to speak to this difficulty, or rather to silence it. He made his selection of poems in a period when, for people in the circle in which he moved, the authority of the Bible had waned and young gentlemen at Harvard and elsewhere were being encouraged to find in "serious" Literature the key to mature ethical behavior. To Norton's mind, an unexpurgated Donne would not serve the purpose. He advised his own son to be rid of his copy of the Grolier Club edition, a book impossible to place in the hands of "any woman, or any man but a pure scholar."[6] Grierson's edition of 1912, for all its achievement in presenting a superior text, also participated in the project of dressing Donne in robes of respectability. Unable to abide introducing Donne with "The Flea," Grierson gave pride of place to "The Good Morrow," a move that has had enduring influence. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* has always printed "The Good Morrow" at the head of Donne's poems; and in the fifth edition (1986) the editors, evidently having failed to examine the seventeenth-century artifacts, urged the 1635 edition as justification. Even scholars who have not explicitly claimed that this poem registers Donne's unique love for Anne More have been prone to see in it the articulation of a high ideal. Popular acceptance of this

---

[4]Charles Eliot Norton, Introduction, *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. James Russell Lowell, 2 vols. (New York: Grolier Club, 1895), 1: xxix.

[5]"The Text of Donne's Poems," *Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature, Vol. V: Child Memorial Volume* (Boston: Ginn, 1896), p. 18.

[6]Both Norton's letter of 27 November 1895 to his son quoted here and his letter of 8 August 1907 to William James (quoted below) are cited by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University: shelf marks, bMS Am 1088.13 and bMS Am 1092 (626-634).

line of interpretation is attested by the fact that it has often been read at weddings.

The prominence that has been accorded "The Good Morrow" helps to explain, I think, what Norton had in mind when he omitted "The Sun Rising." There are conspicuous thematic links between these two variations on the traditional aubade, and Norton also suppressed "Break of Day." The impertinence of the one suppressed poem with its woman speaker and the impudent playfulness of the other threatened to compromise the kind of authority as a spokesman for married love that Norton and others wanted to ascribe to a poet who had written "The Good Morrow," "The Anniversary," and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" for his wife. The fact that "The Sun Rising" carries through its impudence to the very end—instead of containing it within a larger, more respectable frame, as, say, "The Canonization" is often thought to do—made it an uneasy fit for the dominant biographical narrative in relation to which Donne's erotic poetry was to be read.

***

It's important for us as teachers to acknowledge what the first volumes of the Variorum have already begun to show: that the history of reading Donne's poems is in large part a history of weaker imaginations attempting to accommodate a bold one. For well over a century now the principal strategy for domesticating the love poetry in particular has been to locate it within the poet's own household, and Donne's editors have often led the way. Grosart sought to do this in 1872-73 when he proposed that Donne's real conversion took place not when he went into the church, as Walton would have it, but when he married Anne More and was saved by the love of a good woman; and of course Helen Gardner's Oxford edition presented the *Songs and Sonnets* as divisible into two groups, those written before and those after the poet met his wife. At present it is less likely that new readers will be so readily taken in by this editorial fiction. Students encountering "The Sun Rising" for the first time—and by contrast with a century ago new readers coming to Donne are mostly students—will frequently remark on the male domination they assume to be implied in "She'is all States, and all Princes, I." Armed

with feminist and new historicist perspectives, they are susceptible to interpretations that hear underneath a brash tone the desperate exaggerations of someone eager to secure a place in a man's world.

Whereas a century ago the word "Donne" still referred to a famous preacher who, when you looked into his poetry, turned out not to be so stuffy, today the word broadly signifies a Canonical Author, whose work is difficult and probably boring. Take Nancy Franklin's *New Yorker* review of Margaret Edson's "Wit." At the outset she frankly acknowledges that when she learned the play concerns "the life and death of a John Donne scholar," she approached it warily, fearing she'd be assigned "homework."[7] What's telling here are the assumptions she draws upon to render her audience benevolent. For my part, I want to propose that in this particular climate and in order to encourage readings that begin to match the poet's imaginative boldness, "The Sun Rising" might be deployed, along with, say, "The Flea" and "The Apparition," to facilitate entrance into Donne's poetry. These are poems written on topics that continue to provide standard fare for entertainers, and they can be appreciated, I submit, by exploring their analogy with stand-up comedy. These poems offer a useful antidote to the attempts by Norton and others to make Donne a spokesman for a secular variation on the religious transcendence in which they had ceased to believe, and to induct his poetry into an ill-advised project that is now too routinely associated with the name of Matthew Arnold and against which Low's thesis is roguishly directed.

"The Sun Rising" can serve in introducing Donne's poetry today because, at the same time that it makes Donne's characteristic demands upon readers, it is a kind of comic routine, done in good fun. It involves achieving and then sustaining and varying a tone of impudence in the face of a necessity that is universally encountered though individually experienced. To watch the poet attempting to maintain through three intricately wrought stanzas an otherwise inappropriate and superfluous attitude is to glimpse how Donne transforms a human into a poetic problem and then risks getting his audience to go along with him. And perhaps only a reader willing to go

[7]Nancy Franklin, "Wit and Wisdom," *The New Yorker* 74, no. 42 (January 18, 1999): 86.

along with the task of not letting down is likely to appreciate that what seems like so manifest a tonal shift in the last lines—

> Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee
> To warme the world, that's done in warming us.
> Shine here to us, and thou art every where;
> This bed they center is, these walls, thy spheare

—by its very condescension not only varies but also sustains the speaker's impudence. These lines continue to deny the impotence that a reasonable account of the "real" state of affairs would induce.

As teachers we can help students appreciate that in Donne's love poems generally each tone that the speaking voice adopts (including those earnest ones that infiltrate the last lines of the first and third stanzas of "The Sun Rising" and on which the domesticators who made him an authority on married love would rely) is consciously created and performed. Sincerity is measured in the lengths to which Donne goes to entertain. Playfulness and earnestness, far from being opposed in the ways that Norton's question of a hundred years ago presupposed, are frequently made by Donne to act as partners. It's on these grounds that we might actually credit Walton's speculation that "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" was written for someone who, knowing Donne in the biblical sense, would know how to read it. Similarly, it seems entirely possible that a person who recognized that in the one poem the claim to "Care lesse eyes, lips, and hands to misse" voices an oblique acknowledgment of what the words seem bravely to deny would, in reading the other, at once laugh at the preposterousness of the lines—

> Love, all alike, no season knowes, nor clyme,
> Nor houres, dayes, monthes, which are the rags of time

—and appreciate that they memorably articulate and thus deepen love and commitment.[8]

---

[8]In the discussion at Gulfport, Judith Herz made a striking intervention to point out how these lines lift up the poem to a memorable and extraordinary height.

Finally, let me confess that I have not been an especial admirer of "The Sun Rising" for very long. For years it seemed to me a poem that does not go anywhere, in fact, one of the more conspicuous examples of what many readers have noticed about Donne's poems, that the onsets seem more inspired than the conclusions. Norton, writing to William James in August 1907, instanced Donne as a consistent offender when it comes to writing poems that "begin with a splendid gush of vigorous expression" that "gives out before [the] middle is reached" and "end with a trickle of feebleness." But much as Coleridge discovered greater delight in Donne's poems when he gave up looking for "grand lines" and "fine stanzas" and sought, by merging himself with the author, to trace "the leading Thought thro'out the whole,"[9] so I came to find pleasure in "The Sun Rising" once I abandoned the assumption that it ought to take me somewhere (else) and accepted that the poet's fantasy of stopping time precludes the sort of movement we find in, say, "The Canonization." Here, merging oneself with the author entails something of a Copernican revolution for merely casual readers: keeping up what he started rather than expecting him to deliver the earth-shaking climax that would occur if, instead of making our sun to run, we actually got it to stand still.

Boston College

[9]*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. XII: Marginalia II: Camden to Hutton*, ed. George Whalley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), p. 220.