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THE SONGS AND SONNETS OF JOHN DONNE

I.

It was a pretty fancy which induced Lowell to declare in one of his memorable sentences that the great poet inevitably reduces contemporary literature and history to a mere commentary upon his work; and the fancy is the prettier because of its suggestiveness. Dante was the poet of whom the critic was speaking, and the reader of the *Divine Comedy* appreciates the remark almost visibly. The age of Dante, the poets who sang with the "dolce stil nuovo," the figures who made the period about thirteen hundred picturesque and vital, are present to the eye of the student in the form of foot-notes, so easy is it to think of them embodied in solid, fine-printed prose appended to a half dozen lines of verse. And again, he is impressed by the wonderful way in which Dante has kept, as it were, his world in hand. His triple rhymes are always surrounded, clothed in that contemporary life and learning, most appropriately carrying on mediæval tradition in which gloss often completely encircles poem or precious prose. The *Divine Comedy* is inevitably, from the nature of the work itself and from mere typographical tradition, married to its time, which is helpmeet and handmaid, too.

In similar way Shakespeare stands forth as the absolute monarch of his time, the feudal overlord to whom all men and things owe fealty; and yet that poet of the age of great Elizabeth is far less visibly the tyrant. The reader of Shakespeare does not, presumably, think of *Hamlet* or *The Tempest* as weighted down with square notes heavy with history and philosophy. His age is relegated to the back of the volume for the curious who have interest, or patience, or subtle sense of dissatisfaction in interpreting the lines in the light of present facts rather than in that of contemporary conditions. Shakespeare does not keep his age in hand, does not walk down the centuries clothed in his own time, but to the ordinary reader is indefinitely up to date, is, as it were, eternally contemporary. The form of Dante texts is that imposed by monastic study, that of Shake-

speare by worldly enjoyment; and whereas in reading Dante one can hardly escape knowing of Guido Cavalcante, of Brunetto Latini, of Corso Donati, of Oderisi d'Agobbio, none but scholars need know in reading Shakespeare of Fulke Greville, or Samuel Daniel, of Lord Buckhurst, or Sir Thomas Egerton.

So it is, that the lesser poets are lost in the greater, with the consequent result that to the ordinary reader the sweet singers and noble imaginers of the period round about the accession of James the First are mere names, if so much as that. Yet there are many men of those days worth knowing for their own sake, and even more worth knowing for the company they kept. If, as might be contended with some truth, we are the poorer for the unmeasured richness of Shakespeare, we have compensation in our loss. The little men may be, and are, from time to time rediscovered; so that the ages have a constant opportunity for enjoying freshly the unspoiled bypaths of literature, the more delightful in that the ways are partly grown up and difficult, sure sign of few frequenters; and there is in literature a delight in privacy. The great men we must love perforce; in the little men we find our freedom for individual taste and character.

Among the most striking poets of this Elizabethan age so fertile in poets and yet, curiously, so blotted by the blinding brilliancy of Shakespeare, is a figure of extraordinary variety—a scholar of civil and canon law, a wit, a poet, a preacher. There is but one man who answers to all the names upon this list—John Donne; and scholars have learned to appreciate the impressiveness of his name. It required powerful attainments to give Donne a reputation for incomparable legal learning, for unmatched pulpit eloquence; to make Ben Jonson, the competent critic, tell Drummond that John Donne was “the first poet in the world in some things.” Nor was his character less striking and wonderful. Of all the men in those rich days, we know most, perhaps, of Donne; and yet that fullness of knowledge merely means greater ignorance, such contrasts, antitheses, appear in him—sensuality and spirituality, worldliness and godliness, coarseness and refinement; characteristics which dwell together in society, but rarely in the individual. His

nature and his attainments, all in their great variety, tax our imaginations to unify, to make alive.

This has been made clear by discussions and recent attempts at biographical composition: that, fascinating as his elusive character is from the psychological standpoint, valuable as it is from the literary and historical in giving a comment upon the time, interesting as are the prose works, devotional and legal, for the antiquarian and the lover of quaint and outworn forms of expression and learning—fascinating and interesting as Donne is from every approach, the real value of the man for us lies in his poetry. Careful reading will convince us, when the ear is alert for strange and beautiful melody, and the mind for pregnant turn, and the heart for sincere and tender feeling. But patience must be with us to sustain through arid wastes of quibble, conceit, and ludicrous uncouthness. The strange man has written strange verse; in that, as in his attainments and his character, the antipodes sit together. His verse is the expression of his time, sincere, extravagant, wild and wonderful.

We have much verse of Donne preserved to us, almost miraculously one might think, since only after his death were the floating fragments of his youth gathered together and put forth in print, all claiming attention for some reason, illustrative or poetic. The admirer of Donne will find discrimination invidious, yet one must admit that the *Songs and Sonnets* carry heaviest freight of poetic value. They are as a body the love poems, if not the only poems dealing with love: and on them must hang the importance of Donne for these changed times, whatever varied notability was his three centuries ago. Donne was infinitely more than a lover and a poet in this world when he trod the old streets of London. His contemporaries thought of him primarily as the great scholar and divine; but his life work has been abraded by the slow wash of time until it has diminished to almost pure lyric proportions. In spite of all the heavy books of sermon and the rest, John Donne remains a figure in English literature because of these fifty odd little poems labelled since 1635 "Songs and Sonnets." So has our later age shifted the judgment of earlier days, so do the lesser often prove the greater against the touchstone of time.

II.

The central quality in a poet invariably appears to the mind with full certainty only after one has read, and the particular facts and lines and melodies have become a bit blurred and dim. Memory, if not the surest discoverer of central principles, is the surest tester. This faculty dwelling upon constant re-reading of the *Songs and Sonnets* brings out with tangible distinctness the quality of sincerity as the very essence of the lyrics—passionate sincerity or earnestness, even in his lightest moods. The quality is no passive thing, but vigorous. It is the quality which to some extent pervades all Elizabethan literature, speaking most broadly—for there were flaccid singers then as always—and gives us so lively a sense of manly enterprise and indefatigable curiosity. The whole age is alive to the finger tips. It is what we should expect then in a man of original power, this energy and fullness of life. But what makes these songs unprecedentedly nervous is their almost exaggerated energy and vitality. Donne was, indeed, in these poems Elizabethan, but more, one cannot help feeling it, he was hyperbolically Elizabethan.

He had the sincere self-confidence, the fine self-assertion which held him from weak imitation. He was no follower; hardly a leader, for he struck out at too fast a pace; but a party unto himself. He said his say, sang his song, with no imitative thought; but rather, one imagines, abhorring even precedent as hampering the full expression of personality. His thought or his mood at the moment was his interest, and only that. One thinks of him as seized by a desire to write his lyric, expressive not of remembered, but of present mood; and unhappy, or incapacitated from any other thought or occupation, until he has obeyed the inner tyrannous impulse. His lyrics have the reality which, one feels, could come only from necessity, as if written for no one's pleasure, perhaps not even for his own, but because they had to be, before he could turn with easy mind to the next intense moment. We do not need to know the facts of his biography to be sure that life each day to him was as absorbing as only genius can know it. The songs glow with the heat of compressed energy, glitter with feverish eagerness to note the

emotion which must have utterance, and almost ring with the triumph of mood caught or thought suggested.

The poems are pure lyric—lyric with the true spirit of lyric poetry, the sincere expression of personal emotion. In an age when dramatic literature and attitude claimed chief attention, it is notable to find in Donne a spirit distinctly undramatic. Outside of the satires where the dramatic element was imitative and experimental, there is hardly a trace in his work of this instinct. One imagines that he felt in such expression a certain indirection which seemed to him half insincerity. Or, perhaps, rather, this attitude even in lyric poetry did not interest him. The dramatic form must always—certainly the dramatic mood—appeal from inception through all stages of execution to an audience. The dramatic is, to be sure, the attitude of the greatest poets, but it was foreign to Donne's whole nature. Mindful of his own soul, he was more completely than any other of the minor poets the laureate of his own emotions.

If the poets of the spontaneous or intimate class be few and rare, they have a charm all their own. The listener may overhear, as it were, their most secret thoughts, and if, as is certainly the case, he is not completely an intruder, he is rather tolerated than invited. They are lovable for their rich nature and their full experience, if not admirable for finished art and sustained levels of poetic expression. It is indeed a fault of Donne, as of his fellow singers,—this imperfection of the art of which he is the exponent. Donne at least gives one, in the light of treatise and large sermon, the impression of being a poet by the way. Not art but matter was the end of his creed of life. He said what he must as he must. For him the moment produced and the moment obliterated. Was the mood fervent enough to flash forth in perfect word or line, the better; did it miss complete expression, the worse. But the moment of inspiration past, to try to recall it was vain. Such is the impression hardly detachable from these varied and uneven lyrics; such is the art of Donne,—a thing of necessity, or if you will, of accident, with all its inherent unevenness of result.

It is only fair, then, mindful of this irregularity of inspiration, to come to Donne prepared to rejoice at the fine moments, and

to pass lightly over the lines which fail of poetic completeness. He does not demand toleration; he was not writing for us who read; and yet we may well be aware that were he a greater artist or more even singer we should lose the sudden flash which opens for us new treasures, perhaps reveals depths of nature or of life which we never before suspected. So does irregularity of genius become in these poems a thing of interest in itself, as always holding in reserve a possible reward beyond all reckoning.

The very unevenness of these pieces has too a curious result upon the reader. The perfect poet, say Tennyson or Keats, guiding his genius with firm hand, impresses us in wholes—the mind feels and recalls the whole of a poem, in which every phrase is final in itself, in its harmony, and its relation to others. So that until the poem has become by actual study the reader's own for always, the single word or turn fails to become easily a part of the mental possession. In the case of Donne it is not so. We are constantly taken by surprise, by a happy phrase, a mere adjective, by a line of startling suggestiveness. Such pregnant phrases may not be thinly strewn, and yet, forced apart by obscure or ugly passages, they stand as unconnected units in separately memorable form. To read Donne carefully is to go away with a hundred such phrases and thoughts, whereas in reading much greater poets one has an impression, finer and nobler in its integrity and kind perhaps, but hardly more satisfactory.

Yet even though one harks back to Donne in one's memory as a poet of lines and phrases, he is more than that. Many of his pieces have a unity of form, a vigor of outline, which makes them far from things of shreds and patches. When the divine mood was on, it did not allow him to stop short of artistic unity. One could name twenty poems with real perfection of composition, rugged but balanced and developed with full rhythmic sense of lyric poetry. One hardly finds here, nor should one think to find, the chaste and perfect beauty of a Greek vase, but rather the beauty which comes from the infinite vitality of invention, of vigorous design, of, say, a goblet of Benvenuto Cellini.

But after all qualifications are made, Donne's inspiration

rarely lasts long enough to result in wholes. Even where the design of the lyric has beautiful balance the execution within the design is uneven; like a hasty sketch in the open, which is in many a place left unfinished for retouching, except that Donne probably had no intention to stipple later the rough washes of the moment. The reader thus returns to the poem for a few lines, a happy word, or an awakening thought. It is not so much "Love's Alchemy" which makes the impression upon one as the fine beginning,—

"Some that have deeper digg'd love's mine than I";—

it is not so much "The Good Morrow" as the lovely lines,—

"If ever any beauty I did see
Which I desired and got, 'twas but a dream of thee."

Nor can one wonder; for thoughts, expressions, and music of the verse cling to one like salt of the sea breeze.

Like every man of profound nature and originality, Donne is full of fresh and illuminating thought. Often a poetic phrase comes like a revelation. The poet looks into himself and thinks with eyes as free from dead visions of the past as Adam in the garden of Eden. To him the world is transparent, opening up to his super-sensual sight essential meanings, even though his vision like his art is irregular and unsustained. The very passionate intensity of the man blinds him now and again where a calmer nature would have "seen life steadily and seen it whole." His character conditioned him and his work too. His uneven temper and art were as likely to chase the *ignis fatuus* of some far-fetched conceit or fantastic thought with all his intensity, as to pursue a worthier object. The very originality which gives him power when at his best, makes him doubly, nay trebly, liable to these divagations which leave these fatal marks upon his verse, to dim if not destroy the pure light of his truer and happier moments. The eyes which now and again could pierce the wrappings of life, could see what was not there and think to find beauty and poetic truth in wild unlikeness and grotesque paradox. He was too brilliant, too innately witty. The man of passionate intensity is almost certain, it seems, to be entirely, or almost entirely, devoid of all sense of humor. He

lacks the requisite detachment from things of the moment. It is at least certain that nowhere in Donne's poems does one find evidence to contradict this generalization. But of wit Donne was the living embodiment, if wit is the keen play of mind upon ideas, delighting to find likeness in unlikeness and strange, unexpected relationships. Sermon and hymn and love-lyric are full of consequent paradox and conceit, far-fetched simile and metaphor; so full, indeed, that Donne's fame as poet has been blurred by this unhappier quality of his genius; and he has long stood in literature as a mere juggler with the ludicrous, a clown dancing with infinite cleverness upon the tight-rope of conceit. What is more, he has been held the laborious constructor of enigmas, as if the constant presence of the same fine-spun ingenuity even in his letters and sermons were not convincing evidence that he was spontaneously witty, from nature and from long training in subtle distinction of scholastic argument and learning. In this again he was merely going his age one better, and tossed off, we may believe, his involved lyrics with all the ready carelessness their spirit seems to show. They are still, with all their elaborate wit, the personal expression of a spontaneous poet.

The witticisms of the *Songs and Sonnets* certainly are the product of the worse side of Donne's genius. They are the sediment polluting "the sacred well that from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring." Yet so completely are the faults and virtues bound up in him, that one can even be thankful for extravagances—as if in Donne all poetic canons were broken, and his strange genius had the power to validate the most obvious vices. The wonder is not that with his nature and training he should use forced and extraordinary metaphors, but that he should be able to endow them with such spiritual meaning that they occasionally take on a beauty of their own. None but an extravagant wit could think of making so poetically ludicrous a comparison as that between parting lovers and the legs of a draughtsman's compass; but clothed upon with the deep feeling and tender love of the "Valediction Forbidding Mourning" the figure becomes a thing of haunting suggestiveness and piquancy.

“If they [our souls] be two, they are two so
 As stiff twin compasses are two ;
 Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show
 To move, but doth, if th’ other do.

“And though it in the centre sit,
 Yet, when the other far doth roam,
 It leans and hearkens after it,
 And grows erect, as that comes home.

“Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th’ other foot, obliquely run ;
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end where I begun.”

Such is the power of complete honesty in phrasing thought and feeling—the strangest matter transmuted to gold by the white heat of sincerity.

It is the prerogative of the poet to speak a new language and create, as it were, a new æsthetic, not by theory, but by happy practice. And the *Songs and Sonnets* are full of examples, even if they are not themselves examples, of this fact. No verse but bears the hall-mark of John Donne. There is the splendid condensation of meaning in a single word, sign of the true poet, as in the full line,—

“Without sharp north, without declining west,”—

a line which, like many more, gives endless joy, so alive with meaning is it, so alert. And then there are the lines with not less illuminating and vital music of rhythm, which sing, and speak, too, and speak in singing. Indeed, it seems almost as if there were in Elizabethan air a something which forced words in lyric measure to sing, so full are the song-books of the music of the spheres. Those were the days when songs were songs ; and no one could write without catching, it would appear, some echoes of this all-pervasive music. Donne’s verses are distinctly Elizabethan in this as in other respects, and in spite of their traditional ruggedness are full of rich harmonies. So instinct are they with rhythm that long after reading the poems, it is possible to hear ringing in the head measures of which one has lost the words.

Yet the poems are rugged ; oftentimes are difficult to read with the lilt and flow that we expect to find in songs of this cast

and size. They certainly have not the luscious quality of, say, the charming pieces of *England's Helicon*. In measure as in other things Donne stands alone. So individual is he that critics have wished to settle upon him conscious theories of metrical structure and attempted reforms of Elizabethan prosody. However this may be in the satires, where there is small doubt that Donne, like his contemporary imitative satirists, tried the rough metres of Persius and Juvenal, it is hardly justifiable to assume the same consistent purpose in the songs, where all characteristics seem emphatically to point away from steadily conscious artistic effort. It seems more likely, although it might be difficult to prove, that Donne was actually without keen ear for music, but that driven by his time and his own overpowering poetic instincts he wrote more or less unconsciously the gloriously melodious lines—a supposition not so impossible it would seem when one remembers the occasional melody of Emerson's verse, albeit his ear was notably unmusical. Perhaps, too, it might be added as a possible corollary, that Donne, unimpressionable to the melody which is presumably always present consciously or unconsciously in the mind of a poet writing lyrics musically conceived, attuned his verse not to sung rhythm but to spoken, and that thus conceived, his verse took on break in line and shift in accent, violent when read with an assumed singing melody in mind, but poetically justified when the poems are considered not as songs for music in any sense, but as pieces for rhythmic speech. This is no place to elaborate so involved a possibility, but it must be lightly suggested as offering an explanation which accords with the spontaneity of the poems themselves. But whatever the explanation of the haunting rhythms and melodies of the *Songs and Sonnets*, there are repeatedly splendid bursts of music, soft and low, or swelling into impressive grandeur—to use a word of Donne's own, into "organic" tones—as in these lines from "The Anniversary":—

“Only our love hath no decay ;
This no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday ;
Running it never runs from us away,
But truly keeps his first, last, everlasting day.”

However the music comes, studied or unstudied, it is here and there, and yonder,—the poems rise and fall with it, and now and again, like Wordsworth's vale, are "overflowing with the sound."

It is indeed a point to be insisted upon even out of due proportion, considering the unfair judgment of Donne's verse,—the just beauty of his finest lines. Everyone knows the metallic glint of—

"A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,"—

even though it is hardly more wonderful in its perfect service of sound to sense than others less strikingly brilliant. There is the sweet surprise which trembles in—

"I wonder by my troth what thou and I
Did till we loved?";—

the ecstasy in—

"Some lovely glorious nothing did I see";—

the passionate devotion in—

"Thou art so true, that dreams of thee suffice
To make dreams truths, and fables histories."

These have a suggestiveness of verse music so absolutely in harmony with the thought and mood beneath, that they take rank among the final lines in our rich lyric literature. But these are samples merely of many so subtly beautiful that they seem sometimes hid by pure perfection. Donne is no poet to read once, but a hundred times, and at each new reading new harmonies strike the ear, new meanings and suggestions appear in what one thinks to be familiar passages. So that one is constantly surprised by the exquisite ways in which Donne's genius has "knit that subtle knot" between thought and expression which makes verse poetry.

So easy is it to forget in thinking of the splendid passages in the *Songs and Sonnets*, that one has often to shake oneself to the realization of the limitations of his work. Unevenness of inspiration, ruggedness of verse, incompleteness of expression, all make his poetry a thing to be read with pencil in hand,—especially since many a passage which seems obscure upon reading and re-reading, flashes suddenly forth as a passage to be

marked after all hope has been given up. For Donne is like all intimate poets, and far more than most, difficult. His art is casual; he writes for himself; and his writings become at times a sort of short-hand for his own reading. One feels that Leonardo da Vinci is a type of the whole school—illustrated by his notebooks written for himself from right to left. The same holds for this our most exacting of poets, difficult from carelessness and unacquired art. A crisp morning, untired mind, and perfect leisure in fact and feeling, these are the requisites for enjoying and understanding these lyrics. One must love them with full energy of being, for it is the reader who must do half the work in lifting the thoughts into the light. Donne had neither the time nor the inclination to make clear, he merely noted down with greatest conciseness what was surging within him for utterance. If this attitude of mind and its consequent lack of perfect workmanship keep him forever from the higher company of poets and from the greater public which he never sought, they add a charm to those who love stern exercise with its intellectual and emotional glow. His poems may be oftentimes—too often are, let us grant—strange and forbidden puzzles, taxing strength and patience; but they are, past peradventure, for those who know, puzzles with endlessly rich and rewarding answers.

III.

Underneath the form and color of poetry lies the reality of thought and passion which gives substantial value to the verse—the great depths of living waters of which the swinging toss of waves is but the superficial play. And underneath these songs of Donne, dazzling, playful, cruel as the sea waves themselves, lie also depths of emotional life which sustain the lyrical expression as the chance winds of occasion and impulse stir. The *Songs and Sonnets* are one and all the love poems of a man profound beyond sounding, Protean in change.

“The recreations of his youth were poetry,” says Walton in his beautiful life of Donne, “and . . . those pieces . . . were facetiously composed and carelessly scattered (most of them being written before the twentieth year of his age).” Again he

writes, "About the seventeenth year of his age, he was removed to London, and there admitted into Lincoln's Inn, with an intent to study law"; and adds, a little later, "His father died before his admission into the society, and being a merchant left him his portion in money. (It was £3,000)." Then once more, "Mr. Donne's estate was the greatest part spent in many chargeable travels, books, and dear bought experiences." These phrases are not too precise, but are none the less burdened with significance for the understanding of the poems. The two facts, however, which stand out dominantly are that the pieces are for the most part the product of his early youth, and that his character was built of "dear bought experience"—facts which work together in unity to explain much, and to palliate.

A young man of seventeen, fresh from the monastic restraints of Oxford, his own master, with a sudden and not inconsiderable patrimony in his pocket, John Donne came to London ready to pay high for experience. He entered upon his new life with a reputation following from the university of extraordinary learning and capacity—perhaps with the very judgment so quaintly handed down to us "that his age had brought forth another Picus Mirandula, of whom story says, that he was rather born than made wise by study." What was more, however, for the gay circle in which he moved, he was not only reputed but proven to have extraordinary wit—capable as his work and his later life show of sallies as original, as spontaneous, as germane to the taste of Elizabethan youth as if Donne had really been, as he was in figurative sense, the embodiment of the spirit of the age. The strange, the startling, the unexpected—such sallies of word and act were native to him, albeit the company he kept in life and books must have sharpened and confirmed what was his by birthright.

But not alone in wit and brilliancy was he unlike other men; not least was he unusual in breadth of sensibility. He was extraordinarily awake to impressions. Through a delicate and nervous body he was capable of the intensest pleasures of sense; through a vigorous and curious mind he was open to the keenest intellectual and spiritual joys; through both he was constantly guided or driven by overpowering impulse. He was high-strung

in his desires and his enjoyments, whole-souled in his surrender to the moment, whether it brought gaiety or desperation, cynicism or unquestioning devotion. Inapt in his longing for pleasure to restrain impelling passion or whim, he ran the full circle of life in that London of the alert nineties; and if he leaned long hours over the tomes with which he became so intimate, it was among men and women that he was most alive, a gallant in striking doublet and bright hose, we can imagine, extravagant of health and fortune, a man of the world in the heyday of youth with all its ups and downs, its longings and its disappointments.

In such a youth, richly endowed in body and in mind, each capable of much, and each attracted in different ways towards pleasures compelling as the songs of sirens, there was, as might be expected, hot division. From the mere strength of forces, without common aim for self-forgetful consecration, there was bound to be a house divided against itself. As yet the great objects of his life, love and religion, had not taken command. The realities were merely interesting as problems to be played with by his intellectual curiosity, acutely, intensely; but not to be lived and felt. The world was to be tried and enjoyed, not grappled with and won. And yet to the immature student, those early days were not merely "full of sound and fury signifying nothing," but pregnant with later dignity of character and splendid strength. Indeed this time of flux and change, pictured so vividly in the *Songs and Sonnets*, was a great battle-ground, or rather a scene of war, across which, with wavering fortunes, the body and the soul, not less really than in some mediæval allegory, waged a prolonged strife. Now one side gained advantage, now the other, and again the struggle hung undecided, so evenly balanced were the powers; and only after the hurly-burly of adolescence and young manhood was past was the victory of his nobler nature finally and entirely won by aid of the devoted love which his future wife, Anne Moore, called up in him. And, to carry a suggestive figure still further, the poems which were the outcome of this struggle were the trophies set up by the contending hosts to mark their victories—the sensual and cynical lyrics the trophies of the body, those full of mystic

fervor and sweet tenderness the trophies of the spirit. So was commemorated in fine poetic way this contest of vast moment for the life and character of Donne.

Unfortunately the songs are so disordered that we can never hope to trace the progress of the struggle, to know the right succession of elevation and abasement. As we have the pieces they are thrown together as carelessly as the toys of a child picked up at the end of a long tired day. There is no sequence that we have a right to subscribe to; we can only accept the collection as it stands as perhaps no untrue if vague symbol of the confusion in the mind and heart of Donne. For the poems are mostly due to the shifts and vagaries of mood of a young and ardent nature, untouched by the love that fires and holds unshakably, yet momentarily seized upon by deep if transient passions. In their waywardness they are the eddies of a stream fiercely or idly playing among rocks, before it gathers itself in unity of purpose for a steep plunge in powerfully sweeping rapids.

As youthful poems the *Songs and Sonnets* take on a certain regularity. Even the "unpleasant" poems themselves, as the work of adolescence and young manhood, become records instead of mere blots, as they have long been considered, upon a fascinating group. They become actually significant when we recognize, though unwillingly,—since they must still shock our finer sensibilities,—the fact that they are the genuine expression of a universal mood. Unfettered license and endless change in love, the demand of the more physical poems, is the voice of the natural man unbound from convention, always heard more or less loud in adolescence, however civilization may bind tighter the elemental instincts and purer spoken ages may deny it utterance. And Donne with his strong animal impulses, living in that free time of renaissance exuberance when every form of human experience and enjoyment was sought with unashamed and unrestrained vigor, gave himself up to his baser nature with the unmoral sense that such was life.

"Woman is made for man,—not him nor me," is the doctrine of his unfettered license, phrased conversely in "Love's Usury,"—

“ For every hour that thou wilt spare me now,
I will allow,
Usurious god of love, twenty to thee,
When with my brown my gray hairs equal be,
Till then, Love, let my body range, and let
Me travel, sojourn, snatch, plot, have, forget,
Resume my last year’s relict ; think that yet
We’d never met.”

It is the complete eager surrender to the passion of the moment, exaggerated in its contrast with to-morrow’s deceptive voluntary self-renunciation. And these poems are the trophies which commemorate the surrender of the soul to the body, the victory of the untamed animal in man.

If in the *Songs and Sonnets* Donne never but once or twice strikes the note of entire sensuality, he is saved, one may think, by the fact that in his basest moods he finds easier expression in the *Elegies*—pieces heavier, longer, more frankly indecent—imitative, one may hope, as if that might palliate, Ovidian *Amores*. In the songs there is a certain lightness of mood, a flitting gaiety of mind which saves him from brutal surrender to sense. The satisfaction of desire here is not an end, but an amusement by the way, an attitude hardly less ugly, except that it holds within itself the possibility of being outgrown, that it is the attitude of a man of potential loftiness astray. It is indeed a sort of light cynicism imposed by the very conditions of thoughtlessness and gay submission to the drifting desires of the flesh,—a submission certain to carry with it in a man who is above the brute, certain conscious or unconscious corollaries. Donne was merely young and passionate, not really heartless, and needed to postulate, at least to feel, that if he longed to “travel, sojourn, snatch, plot, have, forget,” his mistresses were not less fickle and shifting in desires. Even he in headlong licentiousness would have found a better taste in such pleasures if he felt that woman’s constancy were a reality. We may at least trace this attitude in the gay lyric, cynical at bottom :—

“ I can love both fair and brown,
Her whom abundance melts and her whom want betrays,
Her who loves loneness best, and her who masks and plays,
Her whom the country formed and whom the town,
I can love her, and her, and you, and you,
I can love any, so she be not true.”

This assumption of the essential inconstancy of woman finds emphasis in songs as light-hearted and tripping as the well-known, "Go and catch a falling star," and in pieces part tender, part quizzical, such as "Woman's Constancy":—

"Now thou hast loved me one whole day.
To-morrow when thou leavest, what wilt thou say?
Wilt thou then ante-date some new-made vow?
Or your own end to justify,
For having purposed change and falsehood, you
Can have no way but falsehood to be true?"

Such is the gay and easy recklessness which plays upon the surface of the undiscovered depths—undiscovered not least to himself—of his great nature. It is a tone that pervades a dozen of the pieces, fascinating in brilliant expression, in unexpected play of wit and imaginative fancy, running through many shades and half-shades of emotional doubt and cynicism. In all these is the proud swinging step of the young gallant, conscious of unknown powers, half-insolent in self-centred independence, given up in gay hours—whatever may have been his labor in his study—to the free enjoyment of the untrammelled life of an untrammelled time. Not flippancy nor shallowness was in these moods, but rather in the very lightness a paradoxical proof of depth. A shallow nature would have responded more readily to influences, as the shallow pool among rocks is warmed by the noon-day sun, when the deeper lies cool and unresponsive.

But it is impossible to suppose that all the poems reflecting this gaiety, stand together and apart, a group of unified experience and feeling. In the midst of them sprang intense if fleeting passions, which cried out with joy or pain in convincing phrase and rhythm. The deeper nature finds at least momentary victory to reassure that the power of feeling lies beneath, if in large measure dormant and ineffective.

Momentary the passions might be, but not for that less deep or true, nor less adequate in expression. For Donne through the power of these emotions, complete in that they struck into the very centre of human nature, though not lasting, was made clairvoyant and wise, singing as the poet does from intensive rather than extensive feeling. Here in these better moments

was no doubting of the reality of love, of the constancy of woman ; nor was there possible in one of Donne's essential loftiness of nature, sensuality. We catch in the finer verses the harmonies that live and make live.

“ If yet I have not all thy love,
Dear, I shall never have it all ;
I cannot breathe one other sigh, to move,
Nor can intreat one other tear to fall ;
And all my treasure which should purchase thee,
Sighs, tears, and oaths, and letters I have spent ;
Yet no more can be due to me,
Than at the bargain made was meant.
If then thy gift of love were partial,
That some to me, some should to others fall,
Dear, I shall never have thee all.”

Here is unrivalled tenderness of sincere devotion, and whether the love that conceived was permanent or not, it produced imperishable beauty for all noble lovers. Here is a trophy, indeed, of a victory of soul.

This group of poems of the clearer moods is notable not less than those of the darker, for subtle variations in attitude and perception. Not only does Donne record faithfully the shifts of love, but also points of nicer observation, arguing delicacy of feeling and, what is perhaps rarer in a passion so absorbing, keenness of analysis. The words are weighted with original interpretation and insight, not only expressing but illuminating the universal passion. Thus he notes with charming precision in his “Lecture upon the Shadow”—

“ That love has not attained the highest degree,
Which is still diligent lest others see ” ;—

while on the other hand he discriminates —

“ If our loves faint and westwardly decline
To me thou, falsely thine,
And I to thee mine actions shall disguise.”

Again, he catches the lover's truth that love which was infinite before yet increases ; and that love, however constant and devoted, varies with time and seasons. Only close reading and an understanding heart can appreciate this rare subtlety of touch — a touch which is, one must feel, instinctive rather than consciously analytic ; for conscious analysis must chill deft fingers

in such exquisite tasks. Nor is it possible to conceive of the young Donne sitting coldly introspective; one must think of him as seizing instinctively his facts with the clear sight of genius, proof again of the spontaneity of the poet who declares of himself, "Whatever love would dictate, I writ that." If he wrote variously and subtly, he felt even more variously and subtly, was more awake than others to life in all its fullness.

Perhaps, however, the most striking quality in this group of poems—most striking in its penetration and its loftiness of vision—is pervasive mysticism. Love is a strange paradox; it is the union of souls, a combination whence "an abler soul . . . does flow." And the mind of Donne plays endlessly about this conception, turning it and finding in it always new lights, new thoughts. It seems as if Donne were first perceiving here in this conception of love his religious emotions, and were, so to speak, making preliminary trial of his devotional wings. This emphasis of mystery, in fact, gives a certain religious solemnity to the moods, and makes the love of these pieces in their fine reach the eloquent speech of all lovers worthy of the name.

"Call's what you will, we are made such by love;
 Call her one, me another fly,
 We're tapers too, and at our own cost die,
 And we in us find th' eagle and the dove.
 The phoenix riddle hath more wit
 By us; we two being one, are it;
 So to one neutral thing both sexes fit.
 We die and rise the same, and prove
 Mysterious by this love."

This mystic paradox appears and reappears in phrase and figure, scattered up and down the collection, in lines which one keeps by one to ponder, they strike so deep and far; as if too in such phrases one had the spirit of the nobler poems in portable form.

"And we were mutual elements to us,
 And made of one another."

So, again,—

"Our two souls, therefore, which are one,
 Though I must go, endure not yet
 A breach, but an expansion,
 Like gold to airy thinness beat."

Then in fine shifts we have the variation of love negating space—
love which “makes one little space an everywhere”; and transcending time,—

“Only our love hath no decay,
This no to-morrow hath, nor yesterday.”

So through and under all this group runs the mystic attitude of spiritual devotion and union.

Love thus potent transubstantiates in its religious fervor flesh to very spirit. The highest qualities, the passion itself, become symbolized in flesh, as if the world of the lover were but the concrete poetic phrasing, so to say, of glorious ideas and ideals. The beloved is but the beautiful made perfect in special manifestation.

“Twice or thrice had I loved thee,
Before I knew thy face or name,”—

he sings in that rarely diaphanous and delicate poem “Air and Angels,”—a thought elaborated in succeeding lines of difficult subtlety. In even finer phrasing he writes in “The Good Morrow,” lines already quoted,—

“If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired and got, ’twas but a dream of thee.”

Even from the lower standpoint of body, of the physical in love, we find the same spiritualizing imagination. In that strange poem, “The Ecstasy,” glowing incandescent with the heat of mystic love passion, we find its typical expression. After long ecstasy of the two souls in union, the poet and lover cries—

“We owe them [our bodies] thanks, because they thus
Did us, to us, at first convey,
Yielded their senses’ force to us,
Nor are dross to us, but allay. . . .

“So must pure lovers’ souls descend
To affections and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.”

This attitude, not the transcendental dream of the poets who forget the body or despise, is one of splendid balance, in which we have the sensuous always present but beautified. It is the

love of a complete man, not of an angel. And there in this brave facing of the realities of human love, and finding beauty in the realities, we have to be thankful, not indeed for the ugly sensual poems which hurt his literary name, but for the nature in him which, though too often escaping the guidance of his better self, was present to make his love poems manly and lofty too. The very feeling that here is one who through bitter experience knows the lowest and the highest, and that, so knowing, he cleaves unqualifiedly to the highest in the end—this feeling gives to the poems authority and to the poet a right to lead and to assure. The noble victory of the spirit is the result of hard conflict, and so the more worth winning.

And yet, we must remind ourselves, we cannot assume the easy grouping of the low together and of the high together. From the peaks we fall to ravine and valley; in the long run, however, approaching the summit towards which his nature was impelling him, even in the descents. The passions of the man, flashing now and then white light from pure intensity, burned red and dim. The purer moments revealed him to himself, and so to us; but whether it was his fault in being strangely fickle, or his misfortune to be tricked by unfaithful mistresses, bitter cynicism presses between and follows some at least of the truer pieces. One can measure by the very intensity of bitterness of these poems the height from which he had fallen. So can one certainly trace in the vigorous and terrible poem, "The Apparition," not only power, the result of sad awakening, but a maturity of mind, the outgrowth of trial and failure. It is a poem unpleasant in its nature, in its very might; but is no longer the expression of immature youth, superabounding in gay wit and light love; it betrays the man suffering and aware. The emotions are deepening and lifting.

Among these pieces of Donne's early years there are a few of later date, emanating from the period when the love that knew no change or lessening had gained the final victory. Of these we are reasonably certain of two—two of the finest in the collection—"The Valediction Forbidding Mourning," and the song, "Sweetest love, I do not go"—both probably from 1611, Donne's thirty-eighth year. In these, restless passion has visibly given

way to repose, to a mature, a rich, a lasting devotion, not less fervent than his wildest outbursts of earlier days, if, perhaps, less spontaneously expressive. The mood is not so tyrannous in impelling song, but the poems are "full of ripeness to the core." They possess the very essence of his qualities toned, as it were, by age, as one feels the calm maturity of Shakespeare in his later plays. Tenderness, devotion, the best in the man are there, singing the song of married love with the same authority and sureness with which he had sung the younger lover's love.

"Sweetest love, I do not go,
For weariness of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
A fitter love for me ;
But since that I
At the last must part, 'tis best,
Thus to use myself in jest
By feignèd deaths to die.

"Yesternight the sun went hence,
And yet is here to-day ;
He hath no desire nor sense,
Nor half so short a way ;
Then fear not me,
But believe that I shall make
Speedier journeys, since I take
More wings and spurs than he. . . .

"Let not thy divining heart
Forethink me any ill ;
Destiny may take thy part,
And may thy fears fulfil.
But think that we
Are but turned aside to sleep.
They who one another keep
Alive, ne'er parted be."

These two poems are the culmination of all the *Songs*, not trophies of conflict, but rather memorials of the war past and over, as if to declare the victory won for always. They are, we may consider them, the final word of Donne upon the great reality of love, the conclusions of a man wise through bitter and dear-bought experience, the final word of singular sweetness of one who had found in the love of man for woman, next to his religion, the most sustaining thing in the whole world.

The *Songs and Sonnets* are, then, the records of the struggles

and visions of youth, imperfect because of the very unconsciousness of the age in which brooding introspection was unknown. Pervaded by the spirit of spontaneity, these lyrics possess amidst consequent irregularity of verse, a sincere and intimate quality. They lie, indeed, too close to intense emotions for perfect expression, but in that gain splendor of momentary effects. As a spontaneous poet Donne is in part explicable; as a young poet he becomes still more so. Controlled by fierce adolescent passions of body and soul, he wrote songs variously compounded—sensual, they are saved by a touch of higher feeling; mystic, they are kept human by the man in him. The final result is noble elevation of a spiritual devotion phrased in glorious flashes of deepest enduring significance. The lyrics are, indeed, irregular, but not chaotic. They have order, in that they all tend towards the heights,—are, as it were, a sort of rugged alpine country, difficult and broken, but affording from ascending crag and peak glimpses that reward for all toil of climbing, and impress the lover with the beauty of the world he lives in.

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