

John Donne the Divine and Mundane*

Yoshiko Fujito**

Introduction

This paper is a study of John Donne (1572–1631), a poet and preacher living, working and writing in the personal, political, cultural and historical contexts of the later North Renaissance.¹⁾

“Perhaps it would be a mistake to describe Donne as either a medievalist or a typical man of the Renaissance,” writes E.M.Simpson.²⁾ It may be true that Donne was inculcated with the dogmas of medieval scholasticism and the Ptolemaic theory of the Universe by his Catholic tutors, but in his mature years he was quick to perceive the importance of the changes which the new science was bringing about:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
The Element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th’ earth, and no man’s wit
Can well direct him, where to look for it.
And freely men confess, that this world’s spent,
When in the Planets, and the Firmament
They seek so many new; they see that this
Is crumbled out again to his Atomies.
’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation. . . .³⁾

Although Simpson was hesitant in 1924 to call Donne a typical man of the Renaissance, Annabel Patterson in 1993 has no qualms about placing him squarely in the Renaissance context with its aesthetic assumptions and literary or intellectual milieu, saying:

Perhaps more than any other Renaissance poet Donne challenges us to conceive of subjectivity in environmental terms, to see how socio-economic and political circumstances interact with a particular temperament to produce the historical person, who is both partly conscious of the rules by which he must play and partly the director of all his roles.⁴⁾

The modern establishment of Donne’s poetic reputation is considered to date back to T.S.Eliot’s essays including the “Metaphysical Poets”.⁵⁾ The phrase “metaphysical poetry”, Eliot states, “has long done duty as a term of abuse or as the label of a quaint and pleas-

*Key words: Donne, James I, recusant

**Professor at School of Sociology, Kwansei Gakuin University

ant taste,” apparently referring to Johnson and Dryden in particular, who were far from appreciative of the so-called metaphysicals. It is indisputable that Eliot has done much toward reviving interest in Donne’s poetry, the reputation of which eclipsed considerably in the nineteenth century culminating in the notorious omission of Donne’s poems from the most popular and influential of Victorian anthologies, Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of Songs and Lyrics* (1861).⁶⁾

The omission of Donne’s work from Palgrave’s anthology may be attributed to the Victorian attitude to love and sex which interpreted Donne’s love poems only superficially and failed to recognize Donne as an explorer of the soul rather than a pursuer of the sensuality of love. In fact, some of the Victorian poets were more sensual than Donne, for instance, Robert Browning:

There you stand,
Warm too, and white too: would this wine
Had washed all over that body of yours
Ere I drank it.⁷⁾

Early Life

Compared with other important English writers contemporary, or roughly contemporary, with Donne, biographical information about him is fairly abundant thanks to his own large correspondence in verse and prose and to the contemporary *Life* by Izaak Walton. With the possible exception of John Milton, Donne’s life is probably best documented of his day. Think of the lives of Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare that are full of shadowy spots and unclarified events

He was socially handicapped from the very start of his life in Anglican England. He was born into a very illustrious Catholic family. He was a contemporary of Francis Bacon, William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. He was far better placed than they. But that status was a fairly big, though not insurmountable, handicap in the world of Church-of-Englandism. His father hired Catholic tutors to educate him as a Catholic. He matriculated at Hart Hall, Oxford (now Hertford College) at the age of 13 with his younger brother but did not graduate, apparently because he was a recusant. About when he was 17, he is said to have moved to Cambridge. This was, then and now, an elitist course of education in England as can be seen:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the universities of Oxford and Cambridge trained parsons, and gave a superficial cultural polish to a number of gentlemen. The Inns of Court trained lawyers and likewise acted as a finishing school for gentlemen who had no intention of taking up legal career. Both the universities and the Inns of Court were attracting the gentry in ever increasing numbers, at least until 1640. Between 1427 and 1540, total admissions to Gray’s Inn, the Inner Temple, Lincoln’s Inn, and the Middle Temple rose by less than 20 per cent. In the next seventy years they nearly quintupled, and remained at a high level until 1640. The overwhelming majority of those who were thus anxious to avail themselves of an Inns of Court education were members of the landed ruling class. James I’s order restricting entry to the Inns to gentlemen by descent was indeed ignored, because in the mobile society of early seventeenth-century England *nouveau riches* could not be kept out. But the cost of a

sojourn at an Inn (c. £40 a year minimum) effectively ensured that the privilege was restricted to the well-to-do. Dr Prest's figures demonstrate this social exclusiveness very clearly. Of 12,163 non-honorific entrants to the Inns between 1590 and 1639, 10,761 (88 percent) were sons of peers, esquires, or gentlemen. Dr Prest, with agreeable modesty and good sense, points out that "the use of quantitative evidence from a prestatistical age is always a risky undertaking"; but when all allowances have been made, there can be no doubt about the significance of these figures. The Inns of Court were much more socially exclusive than Oxford and Cambridge.⁸⁾

Donne's father, a rich ironmonger in London and a devout Catholic of Welsh extraction, died when Donne was five years old. His mother, a daughter of dramatist John Heywood and a descendant of Thomas More's sister, married a Catholic physician about half a year later. His stepfather died when Donne was 17 years old. His mother remarried another Catholic two years later. This married life of his mother recalls *Hamlet* and we can well surmise why he wrote poems in his later life that cast doubt on women's constancy. A conjecture may be offered as to why he is said to have moved to Cambridge and why he travelled around Europe about this time. He must have desperately needed to distract himself from thinking about his mother's remarriage.

Elitist Course and Naval Expeditions

It is apparent that he intended to pursue an elitist course to worldly success, as is evidenced by his matriculation at Oxford and Cambridge and entrance to Lincoln's Inn. When he was 25 years old, he joined a naval expedition to Cadiz in Spain under the direction of Sir Walter Raleigh and the Earl of Essex and witnessed the sinking of Spain's flagship and wrote an epigram about it. The following year he again joined a naval expedition to the Azores and experienced a storm and a calm, about which he wrote poems. These naval expeditions may seem a departure from the elitist course, but in reality it was an extension and continuation of the course, for he had been hoping for good connections that would recommend him to the Court.

These expeditions enabled him to set up good connections with upper-class society. He got a position of private secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, in 1598, and through his efforts Donne became a Member of Parliament in 1601. His secret marriage with a niece of Sir Thomas was his undoing, marking the beginning of his period of hardships, poverty and continual efforts to get a proper government sinecure. It lasted a decade, during which he wrote a number of elegies and poems (privately circulated) dedicated to his patrons.

Divine Preacher

John Donne is remembered, 370 years after his death, for his poetry marked with apparently erotic sensualism such as 'To his Mistress Going to Bed', 'Jealousy', 'Love's War', 'Love's Progress' and 'Woman's Constancy'. Some people, however, remember him as a preacher of inspired and devotional sermons, one of which contains 'for whom the bell tolls', made famous by Ernest Hemingway's adoption for the title of one of his novels.

It may be discerned, therefore, that sensuality and spirituality are Donne's dual aspects. Donne's ambivalences, a mixture of the divine and mundane, may be seen in his

personality as well as in his work.

We die every day, and we die all the day long; and because we are not absolutely dead, we call that an eternity, an eternity of dying; And is there comfort in that state? Why, that is the state of hell itself, Eternal dying and not dead.⁹⁾

This is a piece of prose exquisite in rhythm, resonance and construction, reminiscent of the style and rhetorical devices of the Bible. The above is a portion of a sermon, delivered by Donne before King James I in 1621, four years before James' and 10 years before his own death, as Dean of St. Paul's and Royal chaplain. He seems preoccupied with Death. This portion is notable by the absence of Latinate words, probably because it was preached before the King and the nobility. One of the features of Donne's sermons preached before public congregations is that they are usually clogged with Latin words and phrases. Kenneth Hudson offers an explanation:

But, as Bishop Smith remarked in a sermon preached in 1668, those who were “the fondest of high-flown metaphors and allegories, attended and set off with scraps of Greek and Latin” were ignorant and illiterate country people, who were equally pleased by the wonderful strings of exotic names to be found in the books of the Old Testament. These simple people found a great deal of enjoyment and education in their church services. The Bible and the Prayer Book always and the sermons, one hopes, fairly frequently, showed them what could be done with English by men who were skilled in speaking and writing it.¹⁰⁾

Mundane Preacher

Donne was one of the most popular preachers of his day, and one of the reasons for his popularity may be traced to his excessive use of Latin words and phrases. This may be verified when Donne's sermons are compared with another popular preacher, Henry King, Bishop of Chichester and friend of Donne's, whose style is compared with Donne's:

King's vocabulary, like his sentence structure, generally is direct and natural, even in moments of heightened rhythm and majesty. In satirical passages, however, in keeping with literary tradition, he uses forceful, homely words such as “rove and bangle,” or speaks colloquially, for instance, of those whose wealth persuades them to “shake hands with religion.” Unlike Donne, who produces neologisms frequently, King's Latinate words are used chiefly for satire—the Pope's “timpanous¹¹⁾ and excrescent titles,” or the “triturations” of the learned—though he occasionally anglicises Latin or Greek theological or philosophical terms when expounding scholastic theories in *The Lord's Prayer*.¹²⁾

The excessive use of Latin words and phrases may be thus counted as one example of Donne's mundanity. Another instance of his mundanity, or his frankness, is revealed in “a letter announcing the birth of yet another child”, in which “Donne conveys pretty frankly that, though he would wish his wife no harm, he's glad to be rid of her company for a while: ‘I have now two of the best happinesses which could befall me upon me, which are

to be a widower and my wife alive.”¹³) He did not dislike his wife. He just wanted to be free. As in other matters, he was honest, and as far as the sentiments about one’s spouse are concerned, he was very much modern, as this recalls a much publicized Japanese TV commercial of some time ago, which included the statement, “It is best that my husband is alive but not at home.”

Though rooted in his theology, Donne’s violent dislike of beggars and vagabonds is well known, and may be counted as yet another example of his mundanity. His eyes were always directed toward the upper stratum of society, nobility and Court. Conversely he violently disliked beggars and vagabonds who roamed the countryside as well as the urban areas. This attitude may appear to clash with Christian teachings, but shows his absorption in himself, pitilessly dejecting others who did not help advance his career.

It is noteworthy that in England a national poor-law system came into being in 1531 to deal with problems arising from poverty, such as begging and vagrancy. Some commentators were “anxious to impress upon their fellows the numbers of sturdy beggars, rogues and vagabonds on England’s roads. It was claimed in 1569 that there were 13,000 rogues and masterless men in the country. In 1577 William Harrison put the figure of vagrants at 10,000, and a Jacobean ex-highwayman suggested 80,000.”¹⁴)

In one of his sermons, Donne emphasizes that Christians are not duty bound to relieve the sufferings of these unfortunates because, “Among those herds of vagabonds, and incorrigible rogues, that fill porches, and barnes in the Countrey . . . a very great part of them was never baptized.”¹⁵)

In a sermon preached on 8 May 1625, Donne condemns street-beggary. “It is not meet, that this vermin should devour any of that, which belongs to them who are truly poor. Neither is there any measure, any proportion of riches, that exposes man naturally to so much sin, as this kind of beggary doth. Rich men forget, or neglect the duties of their baptism; but of these, how many are there, that were never baptized? Rich men sleep out sermons, but these never come to church. . . .”¹⁶)

Donne had no qualms about getting richer. In a sermon preached at The Hague on 19 December 1619, he stated:

. . . there is a law . . . to enlarge ourselves, and spread, even in worldly things. . . . God . . . forbade man nothing, but enlarged him with that *Crescite, et multiplicamini*, Increase and multiply, which is not only in the multiplication of children, but in the enlargement of possessions too. . . .¹⁷)

This sermon was delivered before a noble and wealthy audience of bourgeois Hollanders while he was on a tour of the Netherlands. According to Paul R. Sellin, “To one’s surprise . . . Donne seems to have gone out of his way to approve the shrewd merchandising driven by some of the well-to-do burghers before him and their energetic efforts at colonial expansion.” Sellin continues, “Donne was also an enthusiastic supporter of colonial enterprises like the Virginia Company,¹⁸) and that Donne’s encouragement and admiration of the Dutch in their mercantile enterprises were hard-core capitalist, not to say plainly indulgent of greed.”¹⁹) Not only serving the Establishment in his own country, Donne was not averse to paying lip service to the ruling class of a foreign country.

Full of Contradictions

His sermons are sometimes blatantly political as the Hague sermon demonstrates. Besides being a poet in his early years and a preacher in his later years, he was a man who perpetually and strenuously strove to get on in the world. If one is allowed to use a somewhat unsavory term, he was a careerist. This is neither to belittle nor to shame him, but he seems to have been born to engage in restless activity. He was also born with an ambitious nature, which contained, according to Carey, seeds of self-assertion and self-negation.

These contradictory elements are not at all peculiar to Donne. In some people the elements of self-assertion are overwhelming, and in others, the reverse is true. The problem is when either one is uppermost, and which one propelled and which one retarded one's career.

This may explain the fact that Donne is full of contradictions and ambivalences; critics have called him sinner and saint, philosopher and buffoon, "the most passionate of lovers, the most cynical of sensualists," "a man with God and the Devil within him always striving for mastery." One critic has subtitled his book on Donne, "Conservative Revolutionary".²⁰⁾

In some quarters, in particular in learned circles, Donne's reputation was far from enviable.

James also promised to make Donne a Doctor of Divinity at Cambridge. The University was furious at this piece of royal high-handedness, and refused to confer the degree on Donne. He was regarded, it is clear, as a blatant careerist, who had no right to be in holy orders at all. However, Donne's friends in high places brought pressure to bear, and the Vice-Chancellor was commanded to confer the degree by royal mandate. So Donne got his honour, but amid general bitterness. The Vice-Chancellor and some heads of houses were heard referring to him openly, at the ceremony, as 'a son of night and of darkness'.²¹⁾

It is sometimes assumed that the early Donne who wrote a series of love poems is a different person from the later Donne who delivered devotional sermons. It is true that Donne underwent changes in lifestyles and opinions, but he remained essentially the same person throughout his life, which is to say that the poems and sermons were produced by a mind imbued with the same structure of imagination and ambition.

Love and Woman

Donne writes in 'To His Mistress Going to Bed,'

Full nakedness! All joys are due to thee
As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be,
To taste whole joys.

He seems fascinated by Love as well as by Death and then with God. Donne's literary talent is universally recognized, so much so that Terry Eagleton writes, "Nobody will pe-

nalize me heavily if I dislike a particular Donne poem, but if I argue that Donne is not literature at all then in certain circumstances I might risk losing my job."²²⁾

Donne is not a love poet in the ordinary sense of the word but a literary sensualist. Donne is an explorer of the soul, unconcerned with the sensual aspects of love as well as with the physical characteristics of women. He does not mention physical beauty when referring to women:

Hope not for mind in women; at their best
Sweetness and wit, they are but mummy, possessed.²³⁾

It is noteworthy that Donne's views on God, Death and Eternity never changed, but those on Love, sexual love in particular, and woman's constancy did.

In some of his early poems Donne writes:

And swear
Nowhere
Lives a woman true, and fair. . . .
Though she were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet she
Will be
False, ere I come, to two, or three.
(‘Go and catch a Falling Star’)

Vain lunatic, against these 'scapes I could
Dispute, and conquer, if I would,
Which I abstain to do,
For by tomorrow, I may think so too.
(‘Woman's Constancy’)

In later years Donne preached a sermon at Paul's Cross on 24 March 1617 in which he referred to women:

The poets afford us but one man, that in his love flew so high as the moon; Endymion loved the moon. The sphere of our loves is sublunary, upon things naturally inferior to our selves.

Let none of this be so mistaken, as though women were thought improper for divine, or for civil conversation: For, they have the same soul; and of their good using the faculties of that soul, the ecclesiastic story, and the martyologies, give us abundant examples of great things done, and suffered by women for the advancement of God's glory. . . .²⁴⁾

And again in a sermon preached on Easter Day 1630 Donne declared:

Woman, as well as man, was made after the image of God, in the Creation; and in the Resurrection, when we shall rise as we were here, her sex shall not diminish her glory. . . .²⁵⁾

Is this a reversal of judgment on woman, or merely a difference of judgment on woman as mistress and on woman as a devout church-goer?

In his “Love as a Spectator Sport in John Donne’s Poetry,” William Shullenberger points out, “Donne inserts an erotic spectator in so many of the love poems . . . a reminder to the reader that the pleasure of the text is a voyeuristic pleasure.”²⁶⁾ The love poems thus specified are ‘The Flea,’ ‘The Ecstasy,’ ‘The Sun Rising,’ ‘The Canonization,’ ‘A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,’ and ‘The Apparition.’

In Donne’s times and those preceding, privacy in family life was almost impossible:

The most striking change in the life-style of the upper classes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the increasing stress laid upon personal privacy. The great houses of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been constructed of interlocking suites of rooms without corridors, so that the only way of moving about was by passing through other people’s chambers. In the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, however, house plans allocated space to corridors, which now allowed access without intruding upon privacy. . . . Most bedrooms were transferred upstairs, leaving the ground floor for living-quarters. . . . The motive was partly to obtain privacy for individual members of the family, but more especially to provide the family itself with some escape from the prying eyes and ears of the ubiquitous domestic servants, who were a necessary evil in every middle- and upper-class household.²⁷⁾

This was a social fact that finds expression in Donne’s poems such as ‘The Perfume’ and ‘Jealousy’:

A loud perfume, which at my entrance cried
Even at thy father’s nose, so we were spied.
When, like a tyrant king, that in his bed
Smelt gunpowder, the pale wretch shivered.
‘The Perfume’ 41–44

Fond woman, which wouldst have the husband die
And yet complain’st of his great jealousy. . . .
We play in another house, what should we fear?
There we will scorn his household policies,
His silly plots, and pensionary spies. . . .
‘Jealousy’ 1–2, 30–32

A more traditional way of categorizing Donne’s love poems was made by N.J.C. Andreasen.²⁸⁾ He classifies Donne’s love poems into three categories: the Ovidian Strand; the Petrarchan Strand and the Platonic Strand. As is well known, Ovid is the Roman author of *Amores*, narrative and dramatic, *Ars Amatoria*, expository and *Remedia Amoris*, didactic. To the Ovidian Strand belong such poems as ‘The Indifferent,’ ‘Communitie,’ ‘The Sun Rising,’ ‘Elegies XVIII and XIX,’ ‘Elegy III,’ ‘Love’s Exchange,’ and ‘Farewell to Love’.

Many of the *Songs and Sonnets* and *Elegies*, Andreasen insists, “preach promiscuity on the basis of a single central doctrine: inconstancy in love is justified by the laws of the natural universe. Whether preaching to the world or to a reluctant mistress, the lovers in

these poems support their arguments by appealing to nature and logic.”

Not a Plagiarist

Andreasen states, “Donne’s indebtedness to Ovid is considerable; sometimes he borrows lines, sometimes situations. Sometimes themes.” In this connection it may not be amiss to point out that Donne was adept at creating masterpieces out of almost “airy nothing”, that is almost or at the smallest hint:

Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove
Of golden sands, and crystal brooks,
With silken lines, and silver hooks.
“The Bait”, c. 1593–1601

This is undoubtedly an echo of Christopher Marlowe’s ‘The Passionate Shepherd to His Love,’ written around 1589:

Come live with me, and be my love;
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods or sleepy mountain yields.

Later in 1600 Sir Walter Raleigh wrote in ‘The Nymph’s Reply to the Passionate Shepherd’:

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd’s tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee, and be thy love.

Donne’s famous ‘Holy Sonnets No. 10’ (c. 1615–17):

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,
For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.²⁹⁾

This must be an echo of *Hamlet* V, ii, 373:

O proud death!
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell?

Francis Bacon wrote in his *Essays* (1597):

If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent

that joins to them.

Donne wrote in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* No. 17 in 1623:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Commenting on this, John Carey states, "Yet even here, it has been shrewdly noted, there is in fact no thought about the man for whom the bell might be tolling, nor any inclination, in the entire meditation, to imagine sympathetically his life and death. On the contrary, the tone and advice are entirely self-regarding: 'any man's death diminishes *me* . . . *never send to know* for whom the bell tolls."³⁰⁾

From these examples we should not accuse Donne of plagiarism. We should applaud his craftsmanship as he invariably improves upon the originals. But it is undeniable that Donne is mundane, intent only on himself. Nevertheless, a single-dimensional characterization does not do justice to him.

Donne's duality is well summarized by Arthur Marotti:

Donne was simply neither the social and intellectual rebel nor the flattering importunate courtier: he contradictorily assumed both roles and his complex behavior changed according to circumstances. To characterize him accurately, one need not accept either the hagiographical pattern laid down by Walton . . . or the model of Donne as the intellectual skeptic-hero who refused to compromise himself for crass worldly ends. The fact is that he was both jauntily, if not self-destructively, *subversive* as well as contritely *deferential toward* the Establishment.³¹⁾

Annabel Patterson, recognizing the complex character of Donne, stresses:

I too wish to promote a more nuanced account of his work, or, putting it in human terms, to achieve better justice for Donne by demonstrating that he was never so simply the king's man, never so simply careerist absorptive of absolutist monarchism as twentieth-century literary critics (with the exception of Marotti) have been led or chosen to believe.³²⁾

James I

Although Donne is only eight years junior to Shakespeare, it is quite rare to call him Elizabethan; he is usually known to belong to the Jacobean period, though James VI of Scotland became James I when Donne was 32 years old. From around that date until James I died in 1625 when Donne was 54 years old, Donne's life was connected inextricably with James I.³³⁾

Particularly from 1621, when Donne was made Dean of St. Paul's, they were on extremely good terms. Although Izaak Walton's *Life of Dr. John Donne* is often criticised for inaccuracy, it is nevertheless interesting to read Walton's description of King James' "ver-

batim” appeal to Donne to accept the Deanery:

When his Majesty was sate down, before he had eat any meat, he said after his pleasant manner, Dr. *Donne*, *I have invited you to Dinner; and, though you sit not down with me, yet I will carve to you of a dish that I know you love well; for knowing you love London, I do therefore make you Dean of Pauls; and when I have dined, then do you take your beloved dish home to your study; say grace there to your self, and much good may it do you.*³⁴⁾

As Walton was not present at the scene, the truth of the matter cannot be vouched for. Nevertheless, the King’s utterances are interesting because of its colloquial nature and homely content. Following this paragraph, Walton writes, “Immediately after he came to his Deanery, he employed work-men to repair and beautifie the Chapel; suffering, as holy David once vowed, his eyes and temples to take no rest, till he had first beautified the house of God.” However, P.M. Oliver asserts, “The state of his private chapel is something which Donne is unlikely to have been overly anxious about: he seems to have shown little interest in the restoration of his notoriously dilapidated cathedral.”³⁵⁾

Annabel Patterson termed Donne “Kingsman,” and quotes Lauro Martines, “All the great eulogists—Spencer, Donne, Jonson, Dryden—were profoundly conservative in their politics.”³⁶⁾ She construes that Martines means monarchical in terms of constitutional theory and elitist in terms of class. At the end of the nineteenth century, Edmund Gosse, assessing Donne as a preacher, stated:

He belonged to an age in which the aristocratic element exercised a domination which was apparently unquestioned. Although of middle-class birth, the temperament, manners, and society of Donne were of the most distinguished order. The religious power of democracy had been discovered. . . . The Rebellion, and still more the success of the Rebellion, driving men and women of incongruous classes close to one another in the instinct of self-protection against the results of common catastrophe, began the democratization of the pulpit. But of Donne we must think as untouched by a least warning of such a political upheaval. He belonged, through and through, to the old order; was, indeed, in some ways, its most magnificent and minatory clerical embodiment. . . . This unity of purpose, this exaltation of a sovereign individuality, made to command in any sphere, gave to the sermons of Donne their extraordinary vital power; and if this particular charm has evaporated . . . it is that the elements in ourselves are lacking, that we no longer breathe the aristocratic Jacobean atmosphere.³⁷⁾

King James was known for his support of the Act of Supremacy and the Divine Right of Kings, and in 1610 Donne presented to the king *Pseudo-Martyr*, stressing that Catholics should make an oath of allegiance to the king, which exactly suited the king’s intentions. The contemporary reputation of King James was not all favourable, just as it is not now. For example, a current popular dictionary of English and European history regards James I as, “. . . fluent in English, Latin and French, and competent in Italian, with an insatiable thirst for theology, a dreary penchant for pedantry, and a number of character defects which were fatal in a ruler.”³⁸⁾ And another one, “Still, James was neither as foolish as his son nor as unprincipled as his grandsons. It was probably his lack of tact and alien ways rather than more serious defects that did most to embitter politics in his

reign.”³⁹⁾

There is a book on James published as recently as 1995 that is fairly favourable to the king, which may explain why a recusant like Donne was accepted at Court. It was not until 1615 when Donne was 44 years old that Donne finally abandoned Catholicism and became ordained as an Anglican priest. In the meantime, while still a Catholic, Donne was accepted at Court because,

The King’s attitude to Catholicism itself was undogmatic. He was prepared to accept it as ‘our mother church, although clogged with many infirmities and corruptions.’ . . . The King’s command that his *Book of Sports*, encouraging Sunday games, be read in churches, deeply offended the godly. His reluctance to enforce the recusancy laws was also condemned. Nevertheless, all things considered, the King’s ecclesiastical policy was outstandingly successful. He had effectively stifled puritan and catholic dissent. . . .⁴⁰⁾

It is interesting to have a glimpse at how relations between monarch and subjects were conceived in the earlier seventeenth century:⁴¹⁾

James and Charles both spoke of themselves as fathers of their people. This conception of the relation between king and subjects as analogous to the relation between father and children found its fullest exposition in Sir Robert Filmer’s *Patriarcha*. . . . during the Stuart period the patriarchal family became a central, consciously recognized category in English political thought.⁴²⁾

Death and Eternity

In pre-war Japan and in the Yedo period it was generally and proverbially believed that the duration of life was at best 50 years long and it was unfortunately true. In England in the seventeenth century life expectancy was even lower. “The expectation of life at birth in England in the 1640s was only thirty-two years.”⁴³⁾

So Death was the constant companion of life. There were many deaths in the Donne family itself. Up until he was 20, during his formative years, there had been many deaths in his family. In 1576 his father died, then his sister Elizabeth. In 1581 his sisters Mary and Catherine died. In 1588 his stepfather died. In 1591 his sister Anne’s husband died. In 1593 his brother Henry died. These events could not but have a profound influence on the young man’s view on life and death.

The most striking feature which distinguished the Early Modern family from that of today does not concern either marriage or birth; it was the constant presence of death. Death was at the centre of life, as the cemetery was at the centre of the village. Death was a normal occurrence in persons of all ages, and was not something that happened mainly to the old.⁴⁴⁾

So Donne’s preoccupation was quite natural; it was everyone’s preoccupation in his time. Viewed in this light “Death be not proud . . .” was not necessarily a metaphysical conceit, but an earnest supplication.

In his sermons Donne very often refers to Death:

How much worse a death than death, is this life, which so good men would so often change for death! But if my case bee as Saint *Paules* case, *quotidiè morior*, that I die daily, that something heavier than death falls upon me every day; If my case be *Dauids* case, *tota die mortificamur; all the day long wee are killed*, that not onely every day, but every houre of the day some thing heavier than death falls upon me, though that bee true of me, *Conceptus in peccatis, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sinne did my mother conceive me*, (there I dyed one death). . . . [‘Death’s Duell,’ 1630]⁴⁵⁾

There must have been many among the congregation who heard Donne’s sermons who had had experienced deaths in their families, and so Donne’s sermons must have had a very strong emotional appeal:

But we are now in the work of an houre, and no more. If there be a minute of sand left, (There is not) If there be a minute of patience left, heare me say, This minute that is left, is that eternitie which we speake of; upon this minute dependeth that eternity: And this minute, God is in this Congregation, and puts his eare to every one of your hearts, and hearkens what you will bid him say to yourselves: whether he shall blesse you for your acceptation, or curse you for your refusall of him this minute: for this minute makes up your *Century*, your hundred yeares, your eternity, because it may be your last minute. [*Fifty Sermons* (26), 1649]⁴⁶⁾

Sometimes Donne becomes didactic and scholarly in his sermon:

For, *death*, in the *old Testament* was a *Commination*; but in the *new Testament*, *death* is a *Promise*; When there was a *Superdying*, a *death* upon the *death*, a *Morte* upon the *Mortoris*, a *Spiritual* death after the *bodily*, then wee died *according to Gods threatning*; Now, when by the *Gospell*, that *second death* is taken off, though we die still, yet we die *according to his Promise*; That’s a part of his *mercy*, and his *Promise*. . . . [A Sermon of Commemoration of the Lady Danvars, 1627]⁴⁷⁾

In speaking of the immortality of the soul, he coolly reasons, and is not at all passionate. So many scholars regard most of Donne’s sermons as banal and tiresome.

There are so many evidences of the immortality of the soule, even to a naturall mans *reason*, that it required not an Article of the Creed, to fix this notion of the Immortality of the soule. But the Resurrection of the *Body* is discernible by no other light, but that of *Faith*, nor could be fixed by any lesse assurance than an *Article* of the *Creed*. [*Fifty Sermons* (1), 1640]⁴⁸⁾

Poore intricated soule! Riddling, perplexed, labyrinthicall soule! Thou couldest not say, that thou beleevest not in God, if there were no God. . . . If there were no God, thou couldest not speake, thou couldest not think, not a word, not a thought, no not against God; Thou couldest not blaspheme the Name of God, thou couldest not sweare, if there were no God; For, all thy faculties, how ever depraved, and perverted by thee, are from him; and except thou canst seriously beleeve, that thou art nothing, thou canst not beleeve that there is no God. [*LXXX Sermons* (48), 1640]⁴⁹⁾

Conclusion

John Donne always had a sense of change, fluidity and inconstancy of the world, and expressed it in his poems and sermons.

You are both fluid, changed since yesterday;
 Next day repairs, (but ill) last day's decay.
 Nor are, (although the river keep the name)
 Yesterday's waters, and today's the same.
 So flows her face, and thine eyes, neither now
 That saint, nor pilgrim, which your loving vow
 Concerned, remains; but whilst you think you be
 Constant, you're hourly in inconstancy.
'The Second Anniversary'⁵⁰⁾

Though Danuby into the sea must flow,
 The sea receives the Rhine, Volga, and Po. . . .
 But when they kiss one bank, and leaving this
 Never look back, but the next bank do kiss,
 Then are they purest; change is the nursery
 Of music, joy, life and eternity.
'Elegy 5: Change'⁵¹⁾

John Donne is fascinated by the flow of rivers symbolic of the progress of human life and the mutability of this world. Often called saintly, but he was always ambitious and never forsook worldly desire.

I need not call in new philosophy, that denies a settledness, an acquiescence in the very body of the earth, but makes the earth move in that place, where we thought the sun had moved . . . That nothing upon earth is permanent. . . Consider, the greatest bodies upon earth, The monarchies . . . Consider the smallest bodies upon earth, the hairs of our head. . . . And yet destiny . . . is no more troubled to make a monarchy ruinous, than to make a hair gray.⁵²⁾

Monarchies in those days were, it seems, equivalent to global organizations and states in the twentieth century. John Donne was intellectual enough not to believe in the permanence of monarchies. We wonder, therefore, why an intellectual like Donne believed in the Divine Right of the King, or did he just pretend to believe? Looking back over his career, we are led to think that he acted as occasion demanded, to get his own gains—an opportunist.

Assessing the character of some of the luminaries of English literature, Terry Eagleton writes in 'The Ballad of English Literature':

Chaucer was a class traitor
 Shakespeare hated the mob
 Donne sold out a bit later

Sidney was a nob

Marlowe was an elitist
Ben Jonson was much the same
Bunyan was a defeatist
Dryden played the game. . . .⁵³⁾

From the excerpt above, we can guess how Eagleton looked at Donne as a human being, although he highly regarded Donne's literary genius.

Donne enumerated various reasons, theological and otherwise, for his apostasy in *Pseudo-Martyr*,⁵⁴⁾ which are not convincing. As a man of religion, we cannot find him great. But as a man of letters, we find him superb. We find great literature in his sermons, just as we find great literature in his poems. As a man of religion, he was mundane. As a man of letters, he was divine.

NOTES

- 1) Docherty, 1
- 2) Simpson, 118
- 3) The First Anniversary lines 205–214. Coffin, 191
- 4) Patterson, 166
- 5) T.S.Eliot, reprinted in *Kermode*, pp. 42–7
- 6) Tillotson, 279
- 7) Robert Browning, 'Too Late', lines 141–4
- 8) Hill, 149
- 9) Preached in 1621. Quoted from Nonesuch ed. of Donne's works (1932) p. 602
- 10) Hudson, 23
- 11) spelling variant of "tympanous," which according to OED, means, "swollen as with a tympany; usually fig. inflated, puffed up; turgid, bombastic; hollow, empty, vain."
- 12) Hobbs, 44–5
- 13) Carey 1990, 61
- 14) Sharpe, 225–6
- 15) Carey 1990, 82
- 16) Carey 1992, 363
- 17) Carey 1992, 285
- 18) Sermon preached to the Virginia Company, Carey, 321
- 19) Sellin, 127–8
- 20) *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary* by N.J.C. Andreasen
- 21) Carey 1990, 75
- 22) Eagleton 1985, 14
- 23) 'Love's Alchemy', lines 23–4
- 24) Carey 1992, 268
- 25) Carey 1992, 400
- 26) William Shullenberger 'Love as a Spectator Sport in John Donne's Poetry' in Summers and

- Pebworth, eds. *Renaissance Discourse of Desire*, p. 61
- 27) Stone, 169
- 28) Andreasen, 31–77
- 29) Oliver writes: The only holy sonnet Leigh Hunt felt comfortable with was ‘Death, be not proud’, the one religious poem of Donne’s which makes no mention of God at all and could have been written by anyone with a vague belief in a serene after-life. Better to leave God out altogether, Leigh Hunt implies, than risk an unfavourable presentation. (Oliver, 9)
- 30) Carey 1990, 48
- 31) Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet*, referred to by Patterson, 164–5
- 32) Patterson, 165
- 33) Kusunose, 156–7
- 34) Walton, 55
- 35) Oliver, 4
- 36) Lauro Martines, *Society and History in English Renaissance Verse* quoted by Patterson, 160
- 37) Quoted by Patterson, 160–1
- 38) Penguin Dictionary, 235
- 39) Roberts, 467
- 40) Houston, 66
- 41) This conception recalls relations between emperor and subjects under the emperor system in pre-war Japan in the twentieth century.
- 42) Guibory, A. ‘Sexual Politics/Political Sex: Seventeenth Century Love Poetry’ in Summers and Pebworth, eds., 210
- 43) Stone, 55
- 44) Stone, 54
- 45) Coffin, 581
- 46) Coffin, 535
- 47) Coffin, 550
- 48) Coffin, 552
- 49) Coffin, 563
- 50) ‘Of the Progress of the Soul. The Second Anniversary’, lines 393–400. Carey 1992, 228
- 51) ‘Elegy 5: Change’ lines 19–20, 33–6. Carey 1992, 19
- 52) Sermon preached on 12 December 1626; Carey 1992, 374
- 53) Eagleton 1986, 185
- 54) Carey 1990, 19

WORKS CITED

- Andreasen, N.J.C. *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1967.
- Carey, John, ed. *John Donne*. The Oxford Authors. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992.
- . *John Donne, Life, Mind and Art*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.
- Coffin, Charles M., ed. *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne*. The Modern Library. New York: Random House, 1952.
- Docherty, Thomas. *John Donne, Undone*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.
- . *Against the Grain*. London: Verso, 1986.
- Eliot, T.S. *Selected Essays 1917–1932*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. 1932.
- Grierson, H.J.C. *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*. New ed. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1995.

- Hill, Christopher. *Change and Continuity in 17th-Century England*. New Haven & London: Yale U. P., 1991.
- Hobbs, Mary. *The Sermons of Henry King (1592–1669), Bishop of Chichester*. Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1992.
- Houston, S.J. *James I*. London: Longman, 1995.
- Hudson, Kenneth. *The Jargon of the Professions*. London: Macmillan, 1978.
- Kermode, Frank. *Discussions of John Donne*. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1962.
- Kusunose, Toshihiko. *John Donne no Sekkyo—Henreki to Fukkatsu—*. Kyoto: Apollon sha, 1990.
- Oliver, P.M. *Donne's Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion*. London: Longman, 1997.
- Patterson, Annabel. *Reading between the Lines*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Roberts, J. M. *History of the World*. New York: Oxford U.P., 1993.
- Sellin, Paul R. *So Doth, So Is Religion*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988.
- Sharpe, J.A. *Early Modern England*. 2nd ed. London: Arnold, 1997.
- Simpson, E.M. *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1948.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*. London: Penguin Books, 1979.
- Summers, Claude J. and Peabworth, Ted-Larry. eds. *Renaissance Discourses of Desire*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1993.
- Tillotson, Geoffrey and Kathleen. *Mid-Victorian Studies*. Athlone Press, University of London, 1965.
- Williams, E.N. ed. *The Penguin Dictionary of English and European History 1485–1789*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980.
- Walton, Izaak. *Life of Dr. John Donne*. The World's Classics. London: Oxford U.P., 1927.

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to evaluate John Donne (1572–1631), foremost among the Metaphysical Poets and one of the greatest preachers in Britain, as a historical person working and writing in the later Renaissance. Born into a Catholic family, he received an elitist education, and his poetic genius flowered in his twenties and his social career seemed set on smooth sailing when he was employed as secretary to a high-ranking politician and courtier. His secret marriage to a niece of that dignitary was his undoing, marking the beginning of his period of hardships. It lasted a decade, during which he wrote a number of elegies and poems (privately circulated) dedicated to his patrons.

In 1610 he won the favour of James I with *Pseudo-Martyr*, and recanted his Catholic faith. He took Anglican holy orders and then was made dean of St. Paul's.

There seem to be four preoccupations with him, one with Woman and Love, one with Death and Eternity and one with God, but foremost, was one with getting on in the world. He seems always in two minds, wavering between divineness and mundanity, which are reflected on his character and work. He was divine as a poet but mundane as a man of religion.