

Review Articles

Helen Gardner, ed.: *The Elegies and the Songs
and Sonnets of John Donne*

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965. xcix+272 pp.

W. Milgate, ed.: *The Satires, Epigrams
and Verse Letters of John Donne*

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967. lxxvii+296 pp.

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The editorial board's interest in these two editions of John Donne's poetry is unusually belated: it is respectively five and three years since they were published, and much, perhaps too much, has been said about them, both in the West and in this country. Am I expected to write a review of reviews? Or to recant my old views of those books, which I rashly expressed in Japanese soon after their publications?

I was happy, however, for the occasion to reread those two excellent editions collectively, and in the light of the review articles which had appeared in leading journals abroad as well as in Japan. Except in a few minor points, I did not find it necessary to change my early views; I even felt them confirmed. The only new point of any significance that has arisen this time is that I have been impressed anew with the Grierson edition of 1912, which was the common starting point of the Gardner and Milgate editions. The new editions are unquestionably superior to, and much more reliable than the old edition in many respects. But the situation is somewhat like the "Moderns" on top of the "Ancient's" shoulders. And such gigantic shoulders they were!

Perhaps this is an unfair way to look at the picture. In fact, although the theory of the text (which has proved to be the only correct theory) was put forward by the senior editor, the junior editors deserve a compliment for developing what was correct, for confirming what was simply surmised, and for amplifying what was scarce. They even correct the 1912 edition in many places, for which we are grateful on most occasions. How much they have achieved with their bibliographical

scholarship amazes me. I cannot help being reminded of the sad fact that I am what Mr. F. W. Bateson calls a "desert island critic".

But here and there I should like to make small (and hesitant) reservations. Dame Helen Gardner's emendation of "The Canonization" l. 40 is one example:

Who did the whole worlds soule extract, and drove
Into the glasses of your eyes. . . .

When I reviewed the Gardner edition for *English Quarterly* (*Kikan Eibungaku*) III, no. 3, I supported the alteration of "contract" into "extract", but with a divided feeling: I had formerly been enthusiastic about Donne's poetical habit of diminution from the large to the small, from the macrocosm to the microcosm, and naturally "...did the whole worlds soule contract. . . ." was one of my favorite passages; but afterwards I came to be influenced by a new vogue, and became sensitive to any possible connection between alchemy and Metaphysical Poetry. Now the new edition, with "extract" which the MSS support, advised me to forget my old microcosm, and stick to the new alchemy. So I did, but not without regret.

Since then I have read and reread the passage, and I am afraid I have been retrogressing. That is to say, I have been less and less convinced with the alchemical connotations which the new edition advocates. It seems to me now that "extracting" the world's soul and "driving" it into an alchemical "glass" (vessel) would only confuse the image of diminution. On the other hand, the notion of "contracting" the soul, which may be too "obvious" as the editor claims (p. lxxxvi), at least makes a better sense. Moreover, I cannot see why "it is absurd to apply spatial notions to the soul" (ibid.) After all, the malleable gold image in "A Valediction: forbidding mourning" derives its beauty from a daring application of spatial notions to the soul.

It would be convenient if the microcosm and the alchemy could somehow coexist in the context. But even Professor Empson's skill of ambiguity reading (*Critical Quarterly*, VIII) does not help me in that respect. So, the only thing I can say now is, whether 1633 readings might not once in a while be preferable to MSS readings. To say this is of course to question, however hesitantly, Dame Helen Gardner's apparatus. I incidentally find Professor O. B. Hardison's review (*Modern Philology*, LXV, no. 1) to be in agreement with me.

On the other hand, I have virtually nothing to say against Mr. Milgate's canonical scholarship. His establishment of the text convinces me most of the time. I can see that, so far as the Satires are concerned, the 1633 edition is unquestionably inferior, and for a good reason which the editor exposes (pp. lxix, lxxi). His extensive commentary, furthermore, must be appreciated, even more so than the commentary in the Gardner edition, because, unlike love poetry which appeals more or less to our universal sentiments, satires and verse letters contain many local, contemporary and biographical allusions, and those must be explained by a competent commentator. Mr. Milgate's commentary is full, learned, and considerate of the average reader. It even shows the writer's sense of humor. See for example the notes on "Satire, I", ll. 80, 81-82. Amplitude, however, sometimes tends to superfluity. Even my Japanese students need not be told that Adam and Eve went naked before the Fall (p. 122).

The new order in which Mr. Milgate presents the poems strikes me as more satisfactory than Grierson's; so does his dating of them. Or is it simply his making little claim to it that really appeals to me? For, indeed, Dame Helen Gardner's proclaimed invocations did, and still do, disconcert me. I admit that her Introduction and Commentary constitute a powerful argument for her dating of Donne's love poems; and I am more than willing to accept it as a workable hypothesis. But the whole book glares at me with a stronger intention than that. The very first paragraph of the Preface is less aggressive, stating that a part of the editor's intention is "to establish if not precise dates at least rather narrower limits than had so far been proposed"; but the table of Contents which follows the Preface looks categorical with its clear-cut division between "Songs and Sonnets (i)" and "Songs and Sonnets (ii)". The editor's theory is that the poems grouped in (i) were written before 1600, while those in (ii) were after 1602, under the Italian Neoplatonists' influence.

My skepticism primarily concerns the hypothetical date of Donne's initial acquaintance with Neoplatonism. The editor claims that soon after his socially disastrous marriage to Ann More, Donne, having much time and little money, began to read Leone Ebreo, *et al.*, and this affected his love poetry radically. That is to say, the theme of "love as union" set in, the treatment became much more philosophical, and the poetical form more complex.

It is one thing to point out in Donne's love poetry diversity in theme, philosophy, mood, and form; it is quite another to conjecture about the poet's initiation into Neoplatonism, and subsequently to classify the "Songs and Sonnets" into two categories: (i) immature, jejune, and simple in form; (ii) mature, philosophical, and complex in form.

Some of Donne's love poems comprise the theme of antifeminism, which was conventional in Renaissance poetry, while some others that of the idealistic unity of the lovers, another convention of the day. Hence a variety of themes. But can we conclude with any certainty that the former has nothing to do with Neoplatonism, and so to be assigned to an earlier date? To me, such poems as "Loves Deity", "The Broken Heart", "The Flea", and "The Will", all of which, incidentally, are classified into the group (i) of the "Songs and Sonnets", contain a latent Neoplatonic theme—i.e., that of "the One *vs.* the Many". This will become clearer by a comparison between "The Indifferent" and "The Good-morrow", citing a random instance. The latter, categorized under (ii) by Dame Helen Gardner, doubtless praises the Neoplatonic One; but how shall we account for the Many which the former, categorized under (i), praises? Couldn't it be also *antithetically* Neoplatonic? Running to an extreme, I even presume that it may have been possible for Donne to compose "The Indifferent" and "The Good-morrow" in a single day as two mutually antithetical manifestations of Neoplatonic love philosophy. I believe with C. S. Lewis that cynicism and idealism about love are twin fruits on a single branch.

Outwardly, Dame Helen Gardner may appear to be in agreement with me, as she declares as follows:

Nor can we legitimately assume that poems that express idealistic sentiments must have been written at a different period from those that express a cynical view of man's love and woman's virtue. If Shakespeare's imagination could give life at the same time to a Mercutio and a Romeo, to an Iago and an Othello, why should we think it impossible for Donne to turn from the mood of "Love's Growth" to the mood of "Love's Alchemy"? (p. xxi)

But the disagreement arises apropos of: (1) the nature of the Neoplatonism which is thought to have influenced Donne; (2) the degree in which Donne's acquaintance with Neoplatonism—whatever its nature—is thought to have influenced his poetry. As for (1), Étienne Gilson's

remark on the Medieval and Renaissance Platonism and Neoplatonism provides me with a helpful analogy: "Plato was nowhere, but Platonism everywhere". To be brief, I differ from Dame Helen Gardner in being primarily concerned with a more diffuse and pervading kind of Neoplatonism, with which Donne must surely have been acquainted even when he began writing poetry. As for (2), I fail to see in Donne's poetry any trace which a biographical incident, whether his secret marriage to Ann or reading the Italian Neoplatonists, is presumed to have left. This Dame Helen Gardner must be well aware of, as she warns us against "making any simple equation between the truth of imagination and the truth of experience" (p. xviii), but she is reminiscent of Gosse who, though not forgetful of the danger of biographical speculations about Donne, could not resist the temptation to fancy in detail Donne's clandestine love affair with a married lady in society (*Life and Letters*, I, pp. 62-63, 66ff.)

All this will amount to saying that Dame Helen Gardner's argument, powerful though it is, fails to present any solid evidence for the necessity of the new arrangement of the "Songs and Sonnets". True, Grierson's arrangement follows the 1635 edition for no other purpose than mere convenience, but it is almost part of tradition now. Had I been misled in thinking that an Englishman would not change tradition unless absolutely necessary?

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This review may have sounded more grudging than I had intended with respect to the Gardner edition. If so, I should promptly attempt to redress the balance by expressing my overall admiration for this great scholar and critic. It has been customary among the students of Donne to refer to Grosart, Gosse, and Grierson as the "Three Great G's". Now after the authoritative edition of *Divine Poems* (1952) and the new *Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, I acclaim the arrival of the "fourth G". My only concern is that, in spite of Professor Manley's edition of *The Anniversaries* (1963) and Mr. Milgate's *Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters* supplementing the Gardner editions, we still have the epicedes, epithalamia and other miscellaneous poems to be re-edited. I sincerely hope that we shall not have to wait for a fifth "G", or, for that matter, a third "M", to complete the task.