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DONNE'S DIVINITY

THE SECULAR side of Donne's genius has been brilliantly handled in our time. We have done less well with his concern for the religious, and I mean the Christian, subject, though the recent Oxford publication of the *Essays In Divinity* and of the *Divine Poems* is a timely reminder of the work to be done here. Nothing, however, by any means so impressive has occurred to identify the scope and distinction of Donne's "divinity," and at the same time to enlist us in its study, as the current publication of his Sermons.[1] In fact, nothing quite so important for Donne's readers as this event has taken place since Grierson's edition of the poems came out some forty years ago.

Generally, Dean Alford's edition of 1839 has been the text at hand, but it is incomplete and often inaccurate—hardly an "edition" at all as we commonly use the word—and, presently, if one does not already own a set, almost as unavailable as the folios themselves. Certainly, if we were to know Donne as preacher and proseman as well as poet, a fresh printing of the Sermons was in order. What is now issuing from the University of California Press, and we may judge from the two volumes which so far have appeared, is considerably more than just that. It is a full edition—all of the 160 sermons known to exist—with the very best scholarly recommendations of George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, and so handsomely presented according to the "design" of the eminent typographer, Ward Ritchie, that the similar products of our University Presses, like the Columbia *Milton* and the Johns Hopkins *Spenser*, are not likely to be thought superior. And when, if ever, has an English or American divine been accorded such editorial reverence? The texts have been submitted only after a scrupulous examination of all of the available "sources"; and for the first time they

1. THE SERMONS OF JOHN DONNE. Edited, with Introductions and Critical Apparatus, by *George R. Potter* and *Evelyn M. Simpson*. In Ten Volumes. University of California Press. (Published simultaneously in England by the Cambridge University Press.) Vols. I, IV.

are given in chronological order. The "Introductions," in the main, are distinguished. Only two features of the edition, in my judgment, are out of line. The Sermons are not numbered serially from first to last, as would be convenient; and the essay on "The Literary Value" of the Sermons, in the first volume, though informative, does not place Donne among his contemporaries, as an historical essay might have done, nor quite comprehend his performance as a whole, nor critically, in its detail, and the reader is likely to take it as somewhat unsatisfactory in a work otherwise of such final and objective character.

What are we to make of it? I mean of Donne's "divinity" itself, not the marvel of its publication. The Sermons, of course, have not been neglected altogether. Grierson cited them freely to gloss the poems; and many scholars have found them, and the other prose, a rich source of documentation for Donne's "thought." Then there is the record of general comment—and, interestingly, it is not sustained encomium. Mr. Eliot, for example, using Donne a little bit like a whipping-boy to promote Lancelot Andrewes—and no one will quarrel with the cause—thinks that "about Donne there hangs the shadow of the impure motive," that he was "not perfectly controlled and that he lacked spiritual discipline"—in fact, that he was "a little of the religious spellbinder, the Reverend Billy Sunday of his time." Donne is also Professor Bush's "glistering foil." Milton, however, substitutes for Bishop Andrewes (Donne's orthodoxy, etc., "ought to appear less respectable than Milton's independent creed, though it is Milton who attracts all the missiles"); General Booth appears instead of Billy Sunday (Donne's "central faith is not much more complex than General Booth's"); and "in the pulpit he was by nature something of a theatrical spellbinder." There is also something in Professor Bush's tone intimating a touch of satisfaction in the delinquencies of the Church which has not "commonly counted" Donne a "major figure" among its fathers.

Something can be said, I think, about the quality of Donne's imagination working when he is fully responsible to the "art" which his dedication required. We may begin by acknowledging his special skill in the "divine oration." The two volumes of the Sermons at hand, representing the "apprentice" work and Donne's preaching in mid-career, do suggest an expected command of occasion and the power to sustain the period and modulate the tone; but there is not, I believe, the marked development which our editors tend to emphasize. After all, Donne was a mature literary man when he began his ministry, disciplined to a fine poetic line and

stanza, and schooled in the tough prose of controversy. If the prose is not so brilliant as we might wish, it was thorough-going, massively learned, often trenchant and subtle, and, judging by contemporary standards, no worse and often much better than its purposes demanded. In fact, it was "fit for a king," if we accept James's evident sense of its merit. Moreover, Donne like every collegian of his time had learned more about the strict formalities of putting a discourse together, which with some management of its texture might be suited to the pulpit, than many of our specialists in homiletics are likely to know today.

Consequently, if Donne had something to learn after his ordination, it was, I should say, less likely to be the *ars concionandi* than the *what* to preach. Such a matter was not for Donne something learned in a moment of illumination—at least there is nothing like this in the record. Donne had been long in the world and of it when he entered the priesthood, and he took the world with him there. If so, it was his peculiar genius as a preacher to transform the earlier secular concern for the world into a proper and constant spiritual concern for it. Expectedly, the process required enlargement of the secular terms. While the person and the local human drama which we associate with the poems remain central—in fact, become a new, intense center—their environment expands under the pressures of what faith and the Scriptural revelation were teaching him. The neglected *Essays in Divinity* shows us precisely how he was laboring to review experience under these powerful influences.

I select for quotation a representative passage from the "first part" of the sermon "preached to the Earl of Exeter and his company" in 1624 (Vol. VI). This exhibits, I believe, the process which I have just noted, and at the same time describes a considerable arc in the full figure of Donne's "divinity." He is occupied with the "sociableness" of the Creator and his creatures.

> . . . first, we shall consider the *sociableness*, the *communicableness* of God himself, who gives us the *earth*, and offers us *heaven*, and desires to have his kingdom well peopled; he would have *many*, he would have *all*, he would have *everyone* of them have *all*. . . .
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> Our first step then in this first part, is, the *sociableness*, the *communicableness* of God; He loves holy meetings; he loves the *communion of Saints*, the *household of the faithful*: *Deliciae ejus*, says Solomon, *his delight is to be with the Sons of men*, and that the Sons of men should be with him: Religion is not a *melancholy*; the Spirit of God is not a *damp*; the Church is not a *grave*: it is a *fold*, it is an *Ark*, it is a *net*, it is a *city*, it is a *kingdom*, not only a house, but a house that hath *many mansions* in it: still it is a *plural* thing, consisting of *many*: and very good

grammarians amongst the *Hebrews*, have thought, and said, that that *name*, by which God notifies himself to the world, in the very beginning of *Genesis*, which is *Elohim*, as it is a *plural* word there, so it hath no *singular*: they say we cannot name God, but *plurally*: so sociable, so communicable, so extensive, so derivative of himself, is God, and so manifold are the beams, and the emanations that flow out from him. . . .

There is but one God; but yet was that one God ever *alone*? There were more *generations* (infinitely infinite) before the world was made, than there have been *minutes*, since it was made: all that while, there were no *creatures*; but yet was God alone, any one minute of all this? was there not always a *Father* and a *Son*, and a *holy Ghost*? And had not they, always an acquiescence in one another, an exercise of *Affection*, . . . a love, a delight, and a complacency towards one another? So, as that the Father could not be without the *Son* and the *holy Ghost*, so as neither *Son*, nor *holy Ghost* could be without the *Father*, nor without one another; God was from all eternity collected into *one God*, yet from all eternity he derived himself into *three persons*: God could not be so alone, but that there have been three persons, as long as there hath been one God.

Had God company enough of himself; was he satisfied in the *three Persons*? We see he proceeded further; he came to a *Creation*; And as soon as he had made *light*, (which was his first Creature) he took a pleasure in it; he said *it was good*; he was glad of it; glad of the *Sea*, glad of the *Earth*, glad of the *Sun*, and *Moon*, and *Stars*, and he said of every one, *It is good*; But when he had made *All*, peopled the whole world, brought all creatures together, then he was *very glad*, and then he said, not only, that *it was good*, but that *it was very good*: God was so far from being *alone*, as that he found not the fulness of being well, till *all* was made, till all Creatures met together . . . then the *good* was extended into *very good*.

Did God satisfy himself with this *visible* and discernible world; with all on earth, and all between that, and him? were those *four Monarchies*, the *four Elements*, and all the subjects of those four Monarchies . . . company enough for God? was that *Heptarchy*, the *seven kingdoms* of the *seven Planets*, conversation enough for him? Let every Star in the firmament, be . . . a several world, was all this enough? we see, God drew persons nearer to him, than Sun, or Moon, or Stars, or any thing, which is *visible*, and discernible to us, he created *Angels*; How many, how great? Arithmetic lacks *number* to express them, proportion lacks *Dimensions* to figure them; so far was God from being *alone*.

And yet God had not shed himself far enough; he had the *Leviathan*, the Whale in the Sea, and *Behemoth* and the *Elephant* upon the land; and all these great *heavenly bodies* in the way, and *Angels* in their infinite numbers, and manifold offices, in heaven; But, because *Angels* could not propagate, nor make more *Angels*, he enlarged his love, in making *man*, that so he might enjoy all natures at once, and have the nature of *Angels*, and the nature of *earthly Creatures*, in one Person. God would not be without man, nor he would not come single, not alone to the making of man; but it is *Faciamus hominem*, *Let us, us, make man*; God, in his whole council, in his whole College, in his whole society, in the whole Trinity, makes man, in whom the whole nature of all the world should meet.

And still our large, and our Communicable God, affected this association so, as that having *three Persons* in himself, and having *Creatures* of divers natures, and having collected all natures in *man*, who consisted of a spiritual nature, as well as a bodily, he would have one liker himself, than man was; And therefore he made *Christ*, God and Man, in one person, Creature and Creator together. . . .

> Beyond all this, God having thus married soul and body in one man, and man and God, in one Christ, he marries this Christ to the Church. . . . So much does God delight in man, so much does God desire to unite and associate man unto him. . . .

This is Donne's habit. It bears comparison with Bishop Andrewes' style, but it is Andrewes "filled out": his dramatic hiatus is closed and the staccato softened. There is also the larger distinction. Donne's eye is less upon the ineffable, uncomprehensible object than upon the process of the divine-working within nature and history, enlisting the full human sensibility to apprehend it as the quality of existence. The Incarnation itself occurs climactically as *the* brilliant instant in the process of the Love creating, a view which immensely lights up its office in the economy of salvation. In short, there is more emphasis in Donne upon the Immanent than upon the Transcendental. The language takes hold of fact and situation felt to be peculiarly human and personal. There is an analogy to be drawn, I have no doubt, between the sense he expresses here of the pressure which the Divine exerts upon the *fact* and the metaphysics of the lyrics, where the good love "comes down," so to speak, into the affectional life rather than remain platonically aloof, as if the "earthly creature" somehow were needed for its full realization.

There is something to be made of the sermons taken all together: they do build into a structure of nearly epical status. Its fable is the story of Being, made from Nothing (for Donne holds firmly to his orthodoxy here), and running its troubled course through the multiplicity and "dapple" of its particular manifestations—to the end, which is either a second annihilation, the "greatest privation," or the final realization in what Donne often calls an "assimilation of God."

A theme fit to be assigned to this large configuration of action might be called that of Separation and Connection. The original act of making (though it is a making *ex nihilo*) is a kind of separation of the creatures from the Creator inasmuch as they are released from the Maker's hand into the hazardous stream of history. Yet, they are not quite cut loose; the bond still holds, and paradoxically for man. He is the last product of creation, and, although, so to speak, the farthest from God in that his special freedom and endowment make him capable of "independence," he is, nevertheless, by the same condition almost "equal to [God] himself," the unique creature whom God has "joined in Commission with himself, upon his creation." Nor, in truth, does man spurn his "commission," for he desires the "sociableness" of his Creator, though, ironically, he may choose the love of self

above all other loves, and this is the election of his own destruction.

Meanwhile, the Creator, loath "to lose us," persisting in the love which moved creation, directs His "noble, operative affection" upon all things, but nowhere so dramatically, nor so meaningfully, as in His commission of the Son to the obstinate, substantial world. Donne's acceptance of the event is quite orthodox. But, as we have seen, the terms of his rendering of the event places it intimately in the total human situation. Thus provision is made for the effort of man to complement the Divine activity, so that the physical and metaphysical are not disjunctive, and their operations become one continuing process.

In a crude outline of what seems to be Donne's "divinity," inevitably most of what would give it point and authority is missing. It is conveniently available, however, in the *Essays in Divinity*, written presumably before he took Holy Orders. There is no sermon, I believe, in the new volume which does not permit some kind of important reference to the earlier work. However, some readers may prefer to locate the ideas I have touched upon in Donne's learned authors—and he names many of them—or in some strain of earlier speculation. St. Augustine and the Neoplatonic philosophers are patently influential, but there is also the dash of Aristotle, which, I trust, I may have implied. Whatever elucidation "sources" may give, however, they will hardly account for the actual structure which the preacher seems always to be building, nor for the sense one has, as he inspects the animating language which envelops it, that he is experiencing a re-creation of the "myth" and its application to all the conditions, the public, natural, and personal, of Donne's own history.

The public history is the social and political, the moral and the psychic life of the preacher and his hearers. It is the world of the court and the street, of the man of professions and of business, of the home, the palace, and the theater—in short, of the totality of Donne's London, with all of its hard and tender facts. The natural history is more complex, but it is felt no less to be contemporary and truthfully discerned. "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." We have commonly called it the breaking up of the old world order, or the dissolution of the hierarchy in which the political and religious institutions were secured as well as nature's foundations; and few, as Donne has shown us in his *Anniversaries*, apprehended more correctly his own profound engagement in his period's changes and revolutions. But, interestingly, "anarchy is not loosed upon the world"—because the *person*, who moves toward the center in the "myth" which I have

sketched, "knows" what the occasion requires. Here Donne shows himself to belong to the Reformation as well as to the Renaissance, for he shares intimately what has been called Luther's sense of the "immense new task" for private man, that "Union with the Infinite must now be accomplished in himself without the aid of any assistance in material means." In this, of course, Luther no more than Donne intended the abolition of the Church and its sacramental aids; but within that institution, the "union" must be personally realized, actually *felt* to be accomplished.

But what in the "personal history" authorizes the assumption of such large responsibilities? "Never presume upon any other disposition in God," Donne says, following Augustine, "then such as thou findest in thine own heart, that thou art bound to have in thy self; for we find in our hearts, a band of conformity, and assimilation to God . . ." The note is persistent: "Religion in general is natural to us; the natural man hath naturally some sense of God," for *Primus actus voluntatis est Amor,* and until "it love something, prefer and choose something, till it would have something, it is not a Will; neither can it turn upon any object before God." This is a brave stand, I know, for us to let Donne take; but he really could take it, for he was remembering a far worse time, and greater predicament, than his own, when, in fact, "God was aliened from man" and yet had then to "prefer and choose something," had actually, "[to] become man, to recover him." Perhaps the only other Englishman who made so much of the same situation, and in a grander manner, was John Milton.

His manner and his expression are touched by the eccentricity which must be permitted to the preacher as a particular human being; and it is this which Professor Bush and Mr. Eliot have wished to emphasize. If, however, we listen to the sermons with Donne's feeling about the sacramental quality of language in mind, we shall hear, I believe, a nearly catholic if not anonymous voice speaking. "No garment is so near God, as his word," he remarks of the Scripture in the *Essays*, and it is "not so much his, as it is *he*." First written in the heart, then on the Tables of the Law, in the Scriptures, and finally put upon the "Preacher's lips," the word spoken is a kind of "incarnation," or, to recall a figure from one of the poems, is like a "sinewy thread" "let fall" through the frame of being to make even a subtler knot than the one which "makes us man." The employment of language to such effect is not unworthy of the poet-preacher.