
The Art of Apostasy

The griefs of English Catholics in the late sixteenth century have passed into oblivion. By one of time's heartless tricks, practically all that students of literature glean from that communal agony are the poems of a young man who did not choose to share the suffering of his co-religionists. His apostasy no longer matters, except in the realm of art: we wonder whether it touched his poems, and listen for its tremors in their depths. How *were* they affected by his betrayal of Catholicism and the anxieties that it bred? When we approach the *Songs and Sonnets* with that question in mind, a feature that cannot fail to impress us is their perpetual worry about fidelity and falseness.

The other young poets of the 1590s generally complain, in their sonnet sequences, about the frigidity or the cruelty which they find in girls. They are fatally prone to fall for icy-breasted tigresses. Once or twice Donne adopts this popular pose himself, but mostly the torment he chooses to imagine is quite different. His difficulty lies, we gather, not so much in getting the girl into bed as in ensuring her fidelity afterwards. Sometimes he's jaunty about this, proclaiming self-defensively that he's just as false as women and doesn't want fidelity. Sometimes he's tearful and piteous, assimilating himself to a tiny, fragile object which brutal female treachery would shatter. 'She that, Oh, broke her faith, would soon breake thee', he croons protectively to the little black bauble on his finger in 'A Jeat Ring Sent'.¹ Often he reassures the girl: their love will last; their souls are one. But fear lingers, and is what makes the reassurance needful. Behind the rapture is the suspicion that nowhere 'Lives a woman true, and faire'.² Donne's entire output as a love poet could be seen as a way of surviving and surmounting this bitter knowledge. Whether he flaunts it with cynical nonchalance, or writhes in exasperation, or celebrates the blissful release from his phantom which he finds in a girl's arms, the shadow of separation and loss is the seed of his restless sexuality.

The love poems display, in this matter, a profound anxiety about the permanence of human relationships, and especially about his

own ability to attract or merit stable affection. They do so with a persistence which, even if we did not know about his apostasy, we should be tempted to ascribe to some major rift in his personal life. What seems to happen is that Donne, in the fantasy world of the poems, rids himself of his disloyalty by transferring it to women, and directing against them the execrations which he could be seen as meriting. He avails himself, in this way, of that healing distortion of the truth with which fiction always rewards its creators. It is an additional part of the manœuvre that he should, in the poems, remove the subject of treachery from the religious sphere, where in real life it belonged, and transfer it to the relatively innocuous department of sexual ethics.

There are moments in the love poems when this mask drops, and the religious preoccupation shows through. Sometimes it's so fleeting that we're not quite sure whether it has happened at all. The song 'Goe, and catche a falling starre', for instance, which rejects the possibility of a 'true, and faire' woman, catches briefly at hope:

If thou findest one, let mee know,
Such a Pilgrimage were sweet.³

There's no mistaking the poetic effect of the word 'Pilgrimage'. It floods the line with relief, like a sob of joy. And though it could be used quite neutrally in the late sixteenth century, it was also fraught with Catholic potential. Has Donne's mind relapsed, for an instant, to his childhood world of faith and certainties, and does that account for the word's emotive charge? At all events, we observe that, when Donne allows himself to imagine a state beyond betrayal, he chooses a word which relates to sanctity, not sex; and this suggests that the love poems are a veil for religious perturbations.

At times they are scarcely even a veil. We find Donne brandishing, as if in defiance, religious language which is scaldingly appropriate to his own state:

Although thy hand and faith, and good workes too,
Have seal'd thy love which nothing should undoe,
Yea though thou fall backe, that apostasie
Confirme thy love; yet much, much I feare thee.⁴

Donne's bravado, in these lines from 'Change', takes the form of defusing, by ribaldry, words which bristle with painful connotations. 'Faith' and 'good workes' were the key terms in the arguments about justification waged between Catholics and Protestants. The 'good workes' Donne refers to, however, are sexual, and the faith is

secular. His girl is prepared to 'fall backe' in the uncomplicatedly physical sense of lying down and opening her legs. Her 'apostasie' will prove her fidelity. By juggling with the word until it means its opposite, the apostate poet disarms it.

'Change' is one of the Elegies and, though our dating of Donne's poems is for the most part guesswork, we can at least be sure that these were written early: that is, they belong to the same part of his life as his decision to renounce Catholicism. It's not surprising that we should find him striving to neutralize in them unpleasantly significant words. His elegy 'The Bracelet' supplies other instances.⁵ In this poem Donne has lost a gold chain belonging to his girl, and agrees to supply twelve gold coins so that the goldsmith can melt them down for a new chain. By choosing the coins known to the Elizabethans as 'angels', Donne lets into his poem a level of punning religious allusion, unjustified by the main subject but quickly dominant. It is on this sensitive level that the poem's flippant intensities occur:

Shall these twelue innocents, by thy severe
Sentence (dread Judge) my sins great burden beare?
Shall they be damn'd, and in the furnace throwne,
And punished for offences not their owne? . . .

But thou art resolute; Thy will be done.
Yet with such anguish as her only sonne
The mother in the hungry grave doth lay,
Unto the fire these Martyrs I betray.

Damnation, hell fire, the betrayal of martyrs, and the 'great burden' of the poet's sin are not subjects we should normally expect in a love elegy. But our knowledge of Donne's predicament at the time he was writing gives them an almost confessional relevance. The feeling that he is the cause of innocent suffering, and the apparently arbitrary introduction of a mother and a dead son in the context of martyrdom, are also factors which, given Donne's family history and his brother Henry's fate, we readily recognize as appropriate. Donne's mind is running on subjects close to his conscience, and the wit of the poem may be seen not just as a dazzling excursion but as the answer to a spiritual need.

Whereas in 'The Bracelet' and in an elegy like 'Recusancy',⁶ with its joke about excommunication, the religious content is bold and obvious, we occasionally find in other elegies seemingly chance references which, against the background of Donne's apostasy, acquire heightened significance. An instance occurs in 'The

part of the Anglican propaganda machine, he was keenly aware of shortcomings in each of the existing churches. Writing to Goodyer about the Catholic and the reformed religions, he described them as 'sister teats' of God's graces, but added that both were 'diseased and infected'.⁴¹ One corollary of this critical awareness was a sense of his own isolation from the company of God's elect: he was outcast, a part of no whole.

The fear of damnation gripped Donne, though he knew it was sinful to feel it. 'A sinfull, and a rebellious melancholy', he calls it in a sermon, but adds in the next sentence that it is 'the hardest humour to be purged' from the soul.⁴² This 'sinne of feare' remained with him long after he had taken orders, as 'A Hymne to God the Father' shows.⁴³ It disrupts the 'Holy Sonnets'. The anticipation of divine judgement is a horror:

. . . my'ever-waking part shall see that face,
Whose feare already shakes my every joynt.⁴⁴

It has been suggested that, knowing this to be his besetting sin, Donne artificially stimulated it in himself in order to combat it. 'In Holy Sonnet I,' Louis Martz writes, 'we watch the speaker, in the octave of the poem, deliberately arouse sensations of "despaire" and "terroure" at the thought of sin and death and hell, and then, in the sestet, firmly repel them by confidence in God's grace.'⁴⁵ But is this what we watch? Here is the sonnet:

Thou hast made me, And shall thy worke decay?
Repaire me now, for now mine end doth haste,
I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,
And all my pleasures are like yesterday,
I dare not move my dimme eyes any way,
Despaire behind, and death before doth cast
Such terrour, and my feebled flesh doth waste
By sinne in it, which it t'wards hell doth weigh;
Onely thou art above, and when towards thee
By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe;
But our old subtile foe so tempteth me,
That not one houre I can my selfe sustaine;
Thy Grace may wing me to prevent his art
And thou like Adamant draw mine iron heart.⁴⁶

Donne declares himself unable to combat, by his own efforts, the temptation to despair. When he looks up to God, he can rise above it. But the efforts of the 'subtile foe' of mankind, Satan, ensure that this

relief is temporary. That God's grace 'may' give him power to surmount the devil's wiles, Donne is sure. He is sure, too, that God 'may', if he wishes, draw his heart to him, though it is still, when the poem ends, 'iron'—locked, unrepentant, irresponsive. God may turn himself into a magnet ('Adamant') to redeem this unpromising waste metal—but will he? The initiative must come from God: without his 'leave' Donne cannot even look up for a moment. But that God will take this initiative, Donne is not sure. His present state, as expressed in the sestet, is one of despairing inadequacy: he cannot sustain himself for a single hour. He is a drowning man, earnestly informing an inscrutable bystander on the bank that if only he tosses in the life belt all will be well. But no life belt is forthcoming, and, what is worse, the man in the water knows that he does not deserve to be saved. Martz's assurance that we watch Donne 'firmly repel' despair by confidence in God's grace hustles us over the conditional nature of the poem's ending, and so misreads doubt as confidence, drowning as rescue.

The same need for unilateral action on God's part, and the same certainty that God has not taken the necessary action yet, are expressed in 'Batter my heart'. At least, here, his heart is no longer 'iron': he loves God, but it does no good. He feels no reciprocal love from God: the devil has him:

... dearely'I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
 But am betroth'd unto your enemye,
 Divorce mee,'untie, or breake that knot againe,
 Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
 Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.⁴⁷

God's failure to make any move exasperates Donne. It is not only fear but indignation that we can hear behind the vehemence of the 'Holy Sonnets'. He flares into reproachful questions:

Why doth the devill then usurpe in mee?
 Why doth he steale, nay ravish that's thy right?
 Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,
 Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see
 That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt'not chuse me,
 And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.⁴⁸

The last three lines are a warning to God: he may go too far, may look away too long. Implicit in them is that frantic attempt to blackmail God with promises or threats which we are all tempted to