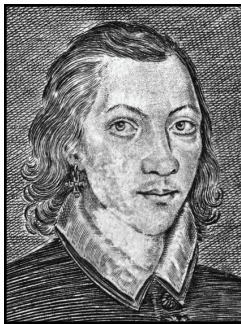


A TROUBLED LIFE

JOHN DONNE (1572-1631)



While Sir Henry Wotton is a diplomat and a minor poet, his friend John Donne is a major poet who also becomes a superb preacher and a master of eloquent prose. Among the great Elizabethan writers, Donne is the only one who leaves a large body of letters for the perusal of posterity, but the critic George Saintsbury justifiably complains that unlike Sir Thomas Browne, another master of the period's ornate prose, Donne cannot shed his learned eloquence to talk in an unbuttoned fashion to his correspondents. Whereas Wotton, whose own epistolary style is less than easy and familiar, can talk, in a letter to his brother, of "being in the lively imagination of your presence while I thus speak with you," Donne can write to his friend Sir Thomas Lucy, "I make account that this writing of letters, when it is with any seriousness, is a kind of ecstasy, and a departure and secession and suspension of the soul, which doth then communicate itself to two bodies." Several times Donne confesses that he meant to write a letter but instead has written a homily.

Despite their stateliness, the letters of Donne are more varied than Saintsbury's observation may perhaps suggest, and without the homilies they would not mirror as they do the interweaving of worldly struggle, family cares, deeply rooted friendships, bodily afflictions, and devout thought that constitute the life of this passionate man.

In his youth, during which he passes his startlingly original, often erotic poems around in manuscript, Donne moves from the Catholicism of his birth to the middle way of the Anglican Church, and after returning from a military expedition to the Azores, obtains a post as secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. At this point, passion overwhelms him, and in 1601 he torpedoes what seems like a brilliant prospect by illegally and secretly marrying a minor and a probable heiress, Lady Egerton's niece Ann More. After a short period of imprisonment

that follows, he finds himself without employment, in troubled health, and responsible for the support of a growing family. Forced to depend on his wife's relatives and on literary patrons, he shows himself to be a graceful flatterer – or eulogizer, for the objects of his attention are often worthy.

Now that Donne has the responsibility of a family, painful mentions of sickness, poverty and debt mingle in his letters with professions of friendship (his "second religion"), appeals for assistance and employment, and religious cogitations. Characteristic of his usually rather stilted manner is an address to Sir Robert Carre, later Earl of Somerset, a favourite of James I:

I amend to no purpose, nor have any use of this inchoation of health, which I find, except I preserve my room, and station in you. I begin to be past hope of dying: And I feel that a little rag of *Monte Magor* [George de Montemayor's *Shepherdess Felismena*], which I read last time I was in your Chamber, hath wrought prophetically upon me, which is, that Death came so fast towards me, that the over-joy of that recovered me.

Surprisingly, Donne seems to have a real esteem for this disreputable courtier, since in 1619, when he is about to go abroad on a mission, he entrusts to his care the manuscript of his unpublished *Biathanatos*, a daring argument that suicide is not always unlawful. "Reserve it for me," he asks, "if I live, and if I die, I only forbid it the Press, and the Fire: publish it not, but yet burn it not."

Despite his elevated, often cumbrous language, Donne sometimes gives his correspondent an image of himself, his surroundings, and his literary activity. To his close friend Sir Henry Goodyer, he writes:

This letter hath more merit, than one of more diligence, for I wrote it in my bed, and with much pain. I have occasion to sit late some nights in my study, (which your books make a pretty library) and now I find that that room hath a wholesome emblematic use: for having under it a vault, I make that promise me, that I shall die reading, since my book and a grave are so near. But it hath another unwholesomeness, that by raw vapours rising from thence, (for I can impute it to nothing else) I have contracted a sickness which I cannot name nor describe.

Later in the letter, he adds, "Since my imprisonment in my bed, I have made a meditation in verse, which I call a Litany."

The introspective religious musings in the letters of Donne, and especially his abundant thoughts on death, recall the learning and piety of Sir

Thomas More, but are free from the latter's strain of bigotry. When, after much hesitation, he finds a way out of his predicament by taking holy orders and proves to be an outstanding preacher, he holds that the Roman, Lutheran and Calvinist churches are all "virtual beams of one Sun" and "not so contrary as the North and South Poles" but "connatural pieces of one circle." Yet while he believes "that in all Christian professions there is way to salvation," he does not regard one's denomination as a matter of "indifferency," and he is critical of "the inobedient Puritans" and "the over obedient Papists": "The channels of God's mercies run through both fields; and they are sister teats of his graces, yet both diseased and infected, but not both alike." Dissuading Sir Henry Goodyer from any thoughts of conversion, he argues, "As some bodies are as wholesomely nourished as ours, with Acorns, and endure nakedness, both which would be dangerous to us, if we for them should leave our former habits, though theirs were the Primitive diet and custom: so are many souls well fed with such forms, and dressings of Religion, as would distemper and misbecome us."

Donne frequently experiences a longing for "the next life," which longing, he writes in 1608, "is not merely out of a weariness of this, because I had the same desires when I went with the tide, and enjoyed fairer hopes than now." Although he admits that "thirst and inhiation after the next life" can become excessive and "stray into a corrupt disease," he, like More, is a Renaissance man who retains a large streak of the widespread mediaeval contempt for this world. In his sometimes beautiful letters of condolence to the bereaved, his tender yet urgent pleadings that the sufferer admit the rightness of God's will are far more heartfelt than Wotton's similar counsel of resignation, which usually seems to be offered with a sigh of reluctance. Given his profound Christian commitment, his formidable learning, and his eloquence, James I appears to show good judgment when he insists that the poet become a churchman if he wants advancement. Being appointed Dean of St. Paul's in 1621, he becomes the supreme preacher of his age, and his letters make an interesting complement to his masterly sermons. While the letters include political news that overlaps with Wotton's, we cannot go to them for character sketches, reported dialogue, or concrete scenes such as we sometimes get from More; what they offer is a memorable self-portrait.