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Herbert Grierson and the Making of the Modernist Critical Canon

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I

In 1939 Cleanth Brooks published *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, a book which was to shape critical thinking about poetry for a generation. Its impact was the result, at least in part, of the fact that it was a summation of critical discussions dating back to before the First World War, building, as Brooks admits in his 'Preface', on the work of 'Eliot, Yeats, Ransom, Blackmur, Richards and other critics'.[1] Indeed, the key term in his title had been a commonplace of critical discussion since at least as early as W. B. Yeats's essay on 'Poetry and Tradition' in 1907, and had been made foundational to contemporary discussions of poetry by T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' of 1919. What was significant about *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, however, was not the terms of its argument but its method of analysing poetry: *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* was literary history built on the new style of 'close reading' which had been pioneered by I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* (1929), and which had been developed by Brooks and his co-author Robert Penn Warren in their *Understanding Poetry* (1938), a work that remained a key textbook on both sides of the Atlantic until the 1970s. This mode of literary analysis was identified in the United States with what is often taken to be the first theoretically motivated mode of literary criticism in the movement that came to be known as 'the New Criticism': it was a style of criticism self-consciously aligned as the critical continuation of the 'modernist' innovations in poetry that had emerged during and after the First World War. Brooks's work of 1939 was directed at a public which still found the modernist poetry of the previous decades difficult and obscure, and Brooks's aim in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* was to explain why modern poetry *should* be difficult and why it *should* be obscure – and to reveal how the ordinary reader could nonetheless respond to it productively.

The central issue confronting contemporary readers was, for Brooks, a radical change in the way that modern poets use imagery, deriving from an equally radical change in what they believed were their ambitions for poetry in

[1] Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill, 1939), x.

the modern age. Most contemporary readers, Brooks suggested, continue to operate with a nineteenth-century conception of poetry, one largely defined by Wordsworth and Coleridge and in which it was assumed that true poetry is the vehicle of 'the wisdom of the heart and the grandeur of the imagination'. The consequence is that emotion is elevated over intellect: the true end of poetry is an intense emotional experience, whereas poetry in which the intellect is dominant produces only the 'subtlety of the mind and the ingenuity of fancy'.[2] 'Fancy', as Coleridge defines it, is 'a species of *wit*, a pure work of the *will*', rather than the 'presentation of impressive or delightful forms to the inward vision'; what fancy offers is 'the excitement of surprise by the juxtaposition and *apparent* reconciliation of widely different or incompatible things'.[3] The value judgments emanating from such a conception of poetry will assume that 'the play of intellect is inimical to deep emotion',[4] and therefore harmful to poetic achievement: according to Brooks, this negation of the relevance of the intellect narrows the potential of poetry to engage with the true complexity of experience, and it assumes that the poet's job is to imitate and, if necessary, to ornament beauty as it already exists in the world, to present, as Alexander Pope phrased it, 'What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'; it treats the resources of poetry – and, primarily, the resources of metaphor – as though they existed only 'to illustrate' some proposition that could 'could be made without recourse to the illustration'.[5] Against this version of poetry, Brooks argues for poetry as the creation of new meanings, meanings that are brought into existence 'by the metaphor, *and only by the metaphor*'.[6] It is because such metaphors produce previously unknown meanings that modern poetry is difficult, but it is precisely because of this difficulty that it is of greater value than poetry that simply reflects what we already know.

For Brooks, the failure to acknowledge the fundamental role of metaphor in poetic *thinking* has produced a maimed conception of 'the tradition' of English poetry, because it has led to the exclusion of the poets who most fully exemplify the power both of metaphor and of intellect – the 'Metaphysicals' and, in particular, John Donne. The Metaphysicals share with the moderns 'a common conception of the use of metaphor' which is based on their common awareness that 'things are not poetic *per se*, and conversely that nothing can be

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[2] Ibid., 17.
[3] Ibid., 18.
[4] Ibid., 18.
[5] Ibid., 26.
[6] Ibid., 26.

said to be intrinsically unpoetic',[7] and that the apparently 'unpoetic' can be crucial to an overall poetic effect when we 'consider the figure in relation to the total context', and when we realise that 'there are complex attitudes in which there is an interplay – even a swift interplay – of intellect and emotion'.[8] Instead of deciding in advance what can and cannot be poetic, 'the figure must in all cases be referred to its function in the context in which it occurs', and must be allowed to 'serve irony as well as ennoblement';[9] what will then be discovered is that the 'unpoetic' image can provide 'increased psychological subtlety' or 'dramatic concentration' and, most importantly, the doubling tension of 'the ironical function'.[10] The 'wit' displayed by a poetry that is alert to its construction of new meanings, rather than the exposition of pre-existing meanings, works 'not merely [by] an acute perception of analogies: it is a lively awareness of the fact that the obvious attitude toward a given situation is not the only possible attitude'.[11] Precisely because they wrote poetry with the intellect as well as the heart, and used to maximum effect the power of metaphor to produce complex and ironic effects, the influence of Donne and the Metaphysicals has been repressed generation after generation by poets who feared the consequences of allowing poetry to be informed by the complexities of intellect and irony:

> The characteristic fault of Shelley's poetry is that it excludes on principle all but the primary impulses – that it cannot bear an ironical contemplation. What Shelley's regenerated work of *Prometheus Unbound* really has to fear is not the possible resurrection of Jupiter but the resurrection of John Donne. Grant that, and chaos comes again.[12]

Indeed, Donne is not simply to be reintegrated into the tradition of English poetry as a stepping stone that provides continuity between Shakespeare and Dryden – he is to be understood as providing the modern critic with the model of the most complete kind of poetry:

> It may be well to point out that we shall hardly be able to avoid giving a definition of *poetry* rather than merely a definition of metaphysical

[7] Ibid., 22.
[8] Ibid., 24–5.
[9] Ibid., 25.
[10] Ibid., 37.
[11] Ibid., 46.
[12] Ibid., 58.

> poetry…If we are interested in getting at the core of metaphysical poetry, we should not be surprised if we find that we are dealing with something basic in all poetry, poetry being essential. Our definition of metaphysical poetry, then, will have to treat of the difference between metaphysical poetry and other poetry as a difference of degree, not of kind.[13]

Metaphysical poetry defines a style of poetry to which all poets ought to aspire.

In his influential development of 'practical criticism' in the 1920s, I. A. Richards had argued that the quality of poetry depended on its capacity for 'synthesis', for the unification of apparent opposites, and for Brooks, the 'alliance of levity and seriousness' in the poetry of the Metaphysicals is an exemplary version of Richards' 'unification of opposed impulses'; 'it is a poetry in which the opposition of the impulses which are united is extreme'.[14] This is a poetry at the other end of the scale from one celebrating pre-existing values:

> Such a definition of poetry places the emphasis directly on the poet as a *maker*. It is his making, his imagination that gives the poem its poetic quality, not some intrinsic quality (beauty or truth) of the material with which he builds his poem. The metaphysical poet has confidence in the power of the imagination. He is constantly remaking his world by relating into an organic whole the amorphous and heterogeneous and contradictory.[15]

From having been an eccentric irrelevance to the canon of English poetry, Donne and the Metaphysicals come to define the true tradition not just of seventeenth-century poetry but of modern poetry, which is nothing less than the true tradition of poetry itself. Brooks would have agreed with F.R. Leavis who, after reading through Donne's predecessors, decided that when we reach Donne we adopt an entirely different attitude because we cease to read 'as students . . . and read on as we read the living'.[16] Donne is the poet who steps out of history to become both a classic and a modern.

[13] Ibid., 48.

[14] Ibid., 51.

[15] Ibid., 51.

[16] Quoted Larson, *John Donne and Twentieth-Century Criticism*, 119, from 'English Poetry in the Seventeenth Century', *Scrutiny* 4 (1935) 236–56. Reprinted in F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry*, 10–41 (London, 1936).

II

Given how central John Donne's poetry is to Brooks's argument, it is a strange elision of the history of Donne's reception that Brooks makes no mention of the work which made possible this elevation of Donne to the position of model poet – Herbert J. C. Grierson's two volume edition of Donne's works, 'edited from the old editions and numerous manuscripts with introductions & commentary', and published by Oxford University Press in 1912. Nor is any mention given to Grierson's groundbreaking account of Donne's work some four years earlier in his contribution to the *Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, in which he argued that

> For evil or for good, Donne is the most shaping and determining influence that meets us in passing from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. In certain aspects of mind and training the most medieval, in temper the most modern, of his contemporaries, he is, with the radically more pedantic and neo-classical Jonson, at once the chief inspirer of younger contemporaries and successors, and the most potent herald and pioneer of the school of poetic argument and eloquence.[17]

The idea of Donne as the 'shaping and determining influence that meets us in passing from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century' represented a radical revision of his place within the canon; the notion that he is 'in temper the most modern' of his contemporaries placed him at the very origin of modernity in poetry. In a work which was, in many ways, the first concerted effort to provide a critical overview of the territory occupied by the new discipline of English Literature, Grierson, then Professor of English Literature at the University of Aberdeen – established Donne as the key link between the medieval world and the modern, the poet who maintained a deeper, European tradition by his disruption of the ways in which that tradition had been reduced to a series of commonplaces in the English interpretation of the Petrarchan version of love poetry and of sonneteering: 'Donne can adopt the Petrarchan pose; but the tone and temper, the imagery and rhythm, the texture and colour, of the bulk of his love songs and love elegies are altogether different from those of the fashionable love poetry of the sixteenth century'.[18] The range of his poetry

[17] H. J. C. Grierson, 'John Donne', *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* (1907–21), Vol. IV, *Prose and Poetry: Sir Thomas North to Michael Drayton* (Cambridge, 1909), sect. 1, 198.

[18] Ibid., 197.

shaped the work of his successors as no other poet did:

> The spirit of his best love poetry passed into the most interesting of his elegies and his religious verses, the influence of which was not less, in the earlier seventeenth century perhaps even greater, than that of his songs. Of our regular, classically inspired satirists, he is, whether actually the first in time or not, the first who deserves attention, the first whose work is in the line of later development, the only one of the sixteenth century satirists whose influence is still traceable in Dryden and Pope.[19]

Grierson promoted Donne as a poet who was at one and the same time in rebellion against current poetic styles in England and yet, at a deeper level, in continuity with European traditions whose values would be passed on to his successors.

To establish the true importance of Donne, however, required a trustworthy text, for it was clear to Grierson that the mode of the transmission of Donne's poetry through different manuscript versions and from manuscript to print had left the modern reader with texts whose obscurities were, in many cases, the accidents of editorial revision or of printers' misunderstandings. Between the first printed edition of 1633, already a posthumous edition in which the 'poems were arranged in a rather chaotic sequence',[20] and the more orderly edition of 1635 and its subsequent printings, new poems were steadily added to the oeuvre. Grierson's conclusion was that 'The canon of Donne's poems is far from being settled. Modern editions contain poems which are demonstrably not his, while there are genuine poems still unpublished. The text of many of his finest poems is disfigured by errors and misprints'.[21] The understanding of the poems was also disfigured by lack of awareness of Donne's knowledge of scholastic philosophy, so that many passages which played with the terms of that philosophy had become indecipherable to later generations of readers.

Grierson's annotations to his versions of Donne's poems not only gave clear accounts of how he had come to his decisions about textual alternatives – he tells us that he has 'recorded every change' and that therefore 'a reader should be able to gather from the text and notes combined exactly

[19] Ibid., 197.

[20] Ibid., sect. 3, 205.

[21] Ibid.

what was the text of the first edition of each poem'[22] – but set those decisions in a detailed explication of the logic of the poem, often focusing on Donne's use of punctuation and capitalization to enhance his meaning. For instance, in 'Epithalamion made at Lincolnes Inn', the earlier editions read

> You which are Angels, yet ſtill bring with you
> Thousands of Angels on your marriage daies,
> Help with your presence, and deviſe to praiſe
> Theſe rites, which alſo unto you gro due;
> Conceitedly dreſſe her, and be aſſign'd,
> By you, fit place for every flower and jewell

Grierson notes that in his edition (I, 141) he has dropped the comma after 'presence' in the third line above, 'because it suggests to us, though it did not necessarily do so to seventeenth-century readers, that "devise" here is a verb – both Dr. Grosart and Mr. Chambers have taken it as such – whereas it is the noun "device" – fancy, invention. Their fancy and invention is to be shown in the attiring of the bride' (II, 98). Creating a punctuation which adequately fulfils the meaning of the poem in its seventeenth-century context is more important than simply replicating seventeenth-century conventions. In 'Satyre II', for instance, there is a particularly convoluted and dense passage which Grierson renders as follows:

> Now like an owlelike watchman, hee muſt walke
> His hand still at a bill, now he must talke
> Idly, like priſoners, which whole months will ſweare
> That only ſuretiſhip hath brought them there,
> And to every ſuitor lye in every thing,
> Like a King's favourite, yea like a King;
> Like a wedge in a blocke, wring to the barre,
> Bearing-like Aſſes; and more ſhameleſſ farre
> Then carted whores, lye, to the grave Judge; (I, 152)

Grierson notes that 'These lines are printed as in 1633, except that the comma after 'Asses' is raised to a semicolon, and that I have put a hyphen between 'Bearing' and 'like'. The problem that this intervention is designed to meet

[22] Herbert J. C. Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne* (Oxford, 1912), Vol II, cxxiv; hereafter cited in the text as I (the poems), or II (the commentary).

is that previous modern editions have rendered the complex final lines in a fashion which makes them syntactically ambiguous:

> Like a wedge in a block, wring to the bar,
> Bearing like asses, and more shameless far
> Than carted whores; lie to the grave judge . . .

Of such versions, Grierson notes,

> By retaining the comma after 'bar' in the modernised text with modern punctuation these editors leave it doubtful whether they do or do not consider that 'asses' is the object to 'wring'. Further, they connect 'and more shameless than carted whores' closely with 'asses', separating it by a semicolon from 'lie to the grave judge'. I take it that 'more shameless far' is regarded by these editors as a qualifying adjunct to 'asses'. This is surely wrong. The subject of the long sentence is 'He' (l. 65), and the infinitives throughout are complements to 'must': 'He must walk… he must talk… [he must] lie… [he must] wring to the bar bearing-like asses; [he must], more shameless than carted whores, lie to the grave judge, &c.' This is the only method in which I can construe the passage, and it carries with it the assumption that 'bearing like' should be connected by a hyphen to form an adjective similar to 'Relique-like, which is the MS. form of 'Relique-ly' at l. 84. Certainly it is 'he', Coscus, who is 'more shameless, &c.,' and not his victims. These are the 'bearing-like asses', the patient Catholics or suspected Catholics whom he wrings to the bar and forces to disgorge fines. (II, 111–12)

The minor but certainly intrusive solution that Grierson adopted in this case is indicative of his determination that Donne's poetry should never simply lapse into obscurity; however apparently convoluted in structure, it is, nonetheless, syntactically coherent and logical in its development. If 'bearing-like asses' seems a far-fetched adjective, Grierson is able to show that 'bearing' is 'the regular epithet for asses in Elizabethan literature' by quoting from *Taming of the Shrew*: 'Asses are made to bear and so are you' (II, 112). Such interventions are important because for Grierson not only the sense but 'the rhetoric and rhythm' of Donne's poetry 'depend a good deal on getting the right punctuation and a clear view of what are the periods' (II, 217).

If unpicking the apparent obscurities of Donne's syntax is the first step in making his poems more readable, the second is coming to terms with the philosophical context which informs the poetry's argumentative structures. In the introduction to his *Commentary*, Grierson notes the general indebtedness of the poets of the Renaissance to Platonism but finds that

> Donne was steeped in Scholastic Philosophy and Theology. Often under his most playful conceits lurk Scholastic definitions and distinctions. The question of the influence of Plato on the poets of the Renaissance has been discussed of recent years, but generally without a sufficient preliminary inquiry as to the Scholastic inheritance of these poets. Doctrines that derive ultimately, it may be, from Plato and Aristotle were familiar to Donne and others in the first place from Aquinas and the theology of the Schools, and, as Professor Picavet has insisted (*Esquisse d'une histoire générale et comparée des philosophies médiévales*. Paris, 1907), they entered the Scholastic Philosophy through Plotinus and were modified in the passage. (II, 5)

In accounting for Donne's imagery Grierson acknowledges that he has 'made constant use of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas' (II, 6), as well as 'Zeller's *Philosophie der Griechen*, on Plotinus, and Harnack's *History of Dogma*' (II, 6). Thus the concluding lines of 'The Good-morrow' –

> What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
> If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
> Love ſo alike, that none doe ſlacken, none can die. (I, 8)

– are explained in terms of Scholastic theories of unity and difference:

> If our two loves are one, dissolution is impossible; and the same is true if, though two, they are always alike. What is simple – as God or the soul – cannot be dissolved; nor compounds, e.g. the Heavenly bodies, between whose elements there is no contrariety. . . . The body, being composed of contrary elements, has not this essential immortality: 'In Heaven we doe not say, that our bodies shall devest their mortality, so, as that naturally they could not dye; for they shall have a composition still; and every compounded thing may perish; but they shall be so assured, and with such a preservation, as they shall alwaies know they

> shall never dye.' *Sermons* 80.19.189. (II, 11)

Donne's imperishable unity is, of course, a witty conceit – the application to earthly lovers of what can be true only of immaterial souls – but draws on the logic of Aquinas in order to render earthly love rhetorically eternal. Similarly, in 'The Second Anniversary', Elizabeth Drury is attributed with being a creature

> Who could not lacke, whate'er this world could give,
> Because she was the forme, that made it live; (I, 253, l. 72–3)

The notion of 'forme' Grierson traces to Aristotle through Aquinas, who 'accepts the Aristotelian view that the soul is united to the body as its form, that in virtue of which the body lives and function' (II, 196–7). That Elizabeth Drury should be the 'forme' of the world is, of course, a rhetorical exaggeration of the kind that led Ben Jonson to insist to Drummond 'That Donnes Anniversaries were profane and full of blasphemies; that he told Mr Done [*sic*] if it had been written of the Virgin Marie it had been something' (II, 187). Grierson, however, supports Donne in his defence that 'he described the Idea of Woman, and not as she was', because he 'interwove with a rapt and extravagantly conceited laudation of an ideal woman two topics familiar to his catholic and mediaeval learning, and developed each in a characteristically subtle and ingenious strain'; these two topics are 'common enough in mediaeval devotional literature – a *Contemptu Mundi*, and a contemplation of the Glories of Paradise' (II, 187–8). What makes Donne more than simply a belated medieval poet, however, is that all this scholastic learning is juxtaposed with a profound awareness of how the medieval cosmogony has been disrupted by the discoveries of explorers and scientists:

> One of the most interesting strands of thought common to the twin poems is the reflection on the disintegrating effect of the New Learning. Copernicus' displacement of the earth, and the consequent disturbance of the accepted mediaeval cosmology with its concentric arrangement of elements and heavenly bodies, arrests and disturbs Donne's imagination much as the later geology with its revelation of vanished species and first suggestion of a doctrine of evolution absorbed and perturbed Tennyson when he wrote *In Memoriam* . . . No other poet of the seventeenth century known to me shows the same sensitiveness to the consequences of the new discoveries of traveller,

> astronomer, physiologist and physician as Donne. (II, 188–9)

The rhetorical and logical structure of a Scholastic philosophy which provided an ordered hierarchy culminating in the perfection of God is deployed in the context of new forms of knowledge that at once undermine it and, yet, make it even more attractive:

> Thou art too narrow, wretch, to comprehend
> Even thy ſelf: yea though thou wouldſt but bend
> To know thy body. Have not all ſoules thought
> For many ages, that our body'is wrought
> Of Ayre, and Fire, and other Elements?
> And now they thinke of new ingredients,
> And one Soule thinkes one, and another way
> Another thinkes, and 'tis an even lay.
> Knowſt thou but how the ſtone doth enter in
> The bladders cave, and never breake the skinne?
> Know'ſt thou how blood, which to the heart doth flow,
> Doth from one ventricle to th'other goe? (I, 258–9, ll. 261–72)

From this flux of uncertainty and controversy – 'We ſee in Authors, too ſtiffe to recant/A hundred controverſies of an Ant' (I, 259, ll. 281–2) – we rebound to the certainties offered by Aquinas, of a heaven where

> Thou ſhalt not peepe through lattices of eyes,
> Nor heare through Labyrinths of eares, nor learne
> By circuit, or collections to diſcerne.
> In heaven though ſtraight know'ſt all, concerning it,
> And what concernes it not, ſhalt ſtraight forget.
> (I, 259–60, ll. 296–300)

In Grierson's view, 'it was not of religion [Donne] doubted but of science, of human knowledge with its uncertainties, its shifting theories' (II, xxviii). The vision of heaven in such an intellectual context can only underline the fluidities of our ordinary life:

> And what eſſentiall joy can'ſt thou expect
> Here upon earth? What permanent effect

Of tranſitory cauſes? Doſt thou love
Beauty? (And beauty worthy'ſt is to move)
Poor couſened couſenor, *that* ſhe, and *that* thou,
Which did begin to live, are neither now;
You are both fluid, chang'd ſince teſterday;
Next day repaires, (but ill) laſt dayes decay.
Nor are, (although the river keepe the name)
Yeſsterdaies waters, and to daies the ſame.
So flowes her face, and thine eyes, neither now
That Saint, nor Pilgrime, which your loving vow
Concern'd, remaines; but whil'ſt you thinke you bee
Constant, you'are hourely in inconstancie.
(I, 262, ll. 387–400)

And it is precisely the ability to capture this *fluidity* by the rapid transitions of his imagery, the rapid shifts of social and intellectual contexts, that makes Donne's work at once so striking and so difficult: 'The spiritual sense in Donne was as real a thing as the restless and unruly wit, or the sensual, passionate temperament' (II, xxx), and all of them – whether in the satires, the songs and sonnets, or the religious poetry – are in constant interchange, so that Donne's poetry is 'a record of intense, rapid thinking' (II, xxxiii), which requires the same speed of transition from his readers if they are to comprehend – and appreciate – his work.

One of the most anthologised of Donne's poems, as reinterpreted by Grierson, is 'The Extaſie' (I, 51), a title which might be taken to refer simply to the intensity of the pleasure of the lovers in the poem who are so suspended in their mutual attraction that

Wee like ſepulchral statues lay;
All day, the ſame our poſtures were,
And we ſaid nothing, all the day (I, 52, ll. 18–20).

but in which Grierson unveils Donne's use of Neo-Platonic philosophy:

> In a letter to Sir Thomas Lucy, Donne writes: 'Sir I make account that this writing of letters, when it is with any seriousness, is a kind of extasie, and a departing, and secession, and suspension of the soul, which doth then communicate itself to two bodies'. Ecstasy in Neo-

> Platonic philosophy was the state of mind in which the soul, escaping from the body, attained to the vision of God, the One, the Absolute. (II, 42)

As evidence of this intellectual context, Grierson quotes Plotinus's definition of ecstasy as 'a simplification, an abandonment of self, a perfect quietude... a desire of contact, in short a wish to merge oneself in that which one contemplates in the Sanctuary' (II, 42). This, which Grierson translates from the French of Bouilet (1857–8), accounts for the structure of the poem: 'the exodus of the souls (ll. 15–16), the perfect quiet (ll. 18–20), the new insight (11. 29–33), the contact and union of the souls (l. 35)'. Grierson speculates that 'Donne had probably read Ficino's translation of Plotinus' (1492), but that the same concept could be derived from the Christian tradition, since 'the doctrine of ecstasy passed into Christian thought, connecting itself especially with the experience of St Paul, (2 Cor. xii 2)' (II, 42). Similarly, various linguistic issues have to be resolved before the speaker's request that his lover should return to the pleasures of the body are comprehensible:

> But O alas, ſo long, ſo farre
> Our bodies why doe wee forbeare?
> They are ours, though they are not wee, Wee are
> The intelligences, they the ſpheare.
> We owe them thankes, becauſe they thus,
> Did us, to us, at firſt convay,
> Yeelded their forces, ſense, to us,
> Nor are droſſe to us, but allay.
> On man heavens influence workes not ſo,
> But that it firſt imprints the ayre,
> Soe ſoule into the ſoule may flow,
> Though it to body firſt repair. (I, 53, ll. 49–60)

The third line above had been given in the previously printed versions as 'They'are ours, though not we, wee are'; Grierson adopts his version from the MSS. which, he believes, is 'metrically, in the rhetorically effective position of the stresses, superior' (II, 43). In the seventh line, 'forces, sense' is 'senses force' in the previous editions, but Grierson thinks 'forces, sense' is 'more characteristic of Donne's thought' because it distinguishes 'with his usual scholastic precision' the functions of soul and body', where perception is the

function of the soul (for which he offers an example from *Satyre III*) but,

> The body has its function also, without which the soul could not fulfil its; and that function is 'sense'. It is through this medium that human souls must operate to obtain knowledge of each other. The bodies must yield their forces or faculties ('sense' in all its forms, especially sight and touch – hands and eyes) to us before our souls can become one. (II, 42)

Equally, the notion that 'heavens influence… firſt imprints the ayre' is illustrated by a quotation from Du Bartas's *La Sepmaine, &c.* (1581) which explains how some of the ancients believed that the air was able to allow the secrets of the stars and planets to be conveyed to the earth. Finally, 'Soe ſoule into the ſoule may flow' is a replacement for 'For ſoule into the ſoule may flow' because it fits better with the repeated 'So' in the later lines, 'So muſt pure lovers ſoules deſcend/T'affections and to faculties' (ll. 65–6). To justify his decision, Grierson gives a detailed account of two contrasting theories – 'which have become unfamiliar to us (II, 44) – about the nature of heavenly bodies and how they might influence human behaviour:

> Now if 'Soe' be the right reading here then Donne is thinking of the heavenly bodies without distinguishing in them between soul and intelligence… If 'For' be the right reading, then Donne is giving as an example of soul operating on soul through the medium of the body the influence of the heavenly intelligences on our souls. But this is not the orthodox view of their interaction. I feel sure that 'Soe' is the right reading. (II, 45)

Such explications and revisions allow Grierson to claim 'The Extasie' as 'one of the most important of the lyrics as a statement of Donne's metaphysic of love, of the interconnexion and mutual dependence of body and soul' (II, 41).

In addition to providing this interpretive context, however, Grierson makes two very significant changes to Donne's text. The first is at line 9 which, in previous editions, had read, 'So to engraft our hands' but which Grierson revises as 'So to entergraft our hands', because, he argues, 'entergraft' gives the reciprocal force correctly, which 'engraft' does not: 'Donne's precision is as marked as his subtlety' (II, 42). The second is at l. 42, where previous editors had printed the word 'Interanimates' but which Grierson reads from the MSS. as 'Interinanimates' because it is the form of the word 'which the

metre requires', as well as linking to Donne's later usage in the sermons: 'That universall power which sustaines, and inanimates the whole world' (*Sermons* 80, 29. 289). Both of these word choices emphasise the mutuality of influence between the lovers and between the universal forces of which they are types. No previous editor of Donne had seen these possibilities but they help fulfil what, in his 'Introduction', Grierson had argued to be a key element in Donne's work – his challenge to the mediaeval conception of love as it had developed in the 'the dialectic of the mediaeval love-poets, the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*, Guinicelli, Cavalcanti, Dante, and their successors' (II, xxxv), a poetry in which, 'On the one hand the love of woman is the great ennobler of the human heart', but 'on the other hand, love is a passion which in the end is to be repented of in sackcloth and ashes' (II, xxxv–xxxvi). This dualism could only be transcended by 'making love identical with religion, by emptying it of earthly passion, making woman an Angel, a pure Intelligence, love of whom is the first awakening of the love of God' (II, xxxvi). The consequence is that earthly love can only be a 'long and weary aberration of the soul from her true goal, which is the love of God' (II, xxxvi). In opposition to this tradition, Donne's conception of love is 'less transcendental than that of Dante, rests on a juster, because less dualistic and ascetic, conception of the nature of the love of man and woman' (II, xxxv); it has 'a clearer consciousness of the eternal significance of love, not the love that aspires after the unattainable, but the love that unites contented hearts' (II, xlv), the love which 'in which body and soul alike have their part, and of which there is no reason to repent' (II, xlvi), the love which is 'a natural passion in the human heart the meaning and end of which is marriage' (II, xlv). Donne's poetry is thus a 'justification of natural love as fullness of joy and life' (II, xlvi), and 'The Extasie' is the metaphysical elaboration of that 'new philosophy of love' (II, xxxv) and of the value it attributes to the body. To give expression to this new philosophy of love Donne had to develop a new poetic, one which involves a 'vivid realism' (II, xxxiv); one that revealed 'a passion which is not ideal nor conventional, neither recollected in tranquillity nor a pure product of literary fashion, but of love as an actual, immediate experience in all its moods' (II, xxxiv). It is this combination of subject matter and style – both its 'record of intense, rapid thinking, expressed in the simplest, most appropriate language' (II, xxxiii) and its expression 'in abstract and subtle thought' (II, xxxiv) – which makes Donne so radically different from other poets of his times.

Grierson's detailed readings of Donne's poetry produced its own version of a new poetic, one in which poetry should be judged by its psychological

realism rather than traditional conceptions of 'beauty': indeed, it is failure to recognise the poetic purposes of his poetry that have led critics to deny that he 'is a great poet', 'because with rare exceptions, exceptions rather of occasional lines and phrases than of whole poems, his songs and elegies lack beauty' (II, xxxi). The issue which Donne's work poses is,

> Can poetry be at once passionate and ingenious, sincere in feeling and witty,—packed with thought, and that subtle and abstract thought, Scholastic dialectic? Can love-poetry speak a language which is impassioned and expressive but lacks beauty, is quite different from the language of Dante and Petrarch, the loveliest language that lovers ever spoke, or the picturesque hyperboles of Romeo and Juliet? Must not the imagery and the cadences of love poetry reflect 'l'infinita, ineffabile bellezza' which is its inspiration? (II, xxxi)

The Wordsworthian expectation that 'Beauty is the quality of poetry which records an ideal passion recollected in tranquillity' is displaced by a dramatic poetry, attempting to capture 'the very movement and moment of passion itself' (II, xxxiv). The consequence is that 'Donne's interest is his theme, love and woman, and he uses words not for their own sake but to communicate his consciousness of these surprising phenomena in all their varying and conflicting aspects' (II, xlii). Donne's poetry is not simply, however, the expression of immediate emotion, precisely because

> It is metaphysical, not only in the sense of being erudite and witty, but in the proper sense of being reflective and philosophical. Donne is always conscious of the import of his moods, and so it is that there emerges from his poems a philosophy or a suggested philosophy of love to take the place of the idealism which he rejects. (II, xliv)

The realism that explores the consciousness of the lover is also in the service of the 'new philosophy of love', so that, like the lovers of 'The Extasie', style and theme are united in a poetic of the soul *and* the body to which mere beauty is irrelevant:

> …Alchemy and Astrology, legal contracts and *non obstantes*, 'late schoolboys and sour prentices,' 'the king's real and his stamped face' – these are the kind of images, erudite, fanciful, and homely, which give

> to Donne's poetry a texture so different at a first glance from the florid and diffuse Elizabethan poetry. (II, xxxviii–xxxix)

Donne's is a 'poetry of an extraordinarily arresting and haunting quality, passionate, thoughtful, and with a deep melody of its own' (II, lv), and only in Burns will one find an equivalent 'intensity of feeling and directness of expression', only in Browning 'the same simplicity of feeling combined with a like swift and subtle dialectic' (II, xliii).

In his exposition of the aesthetic virtues of Donne's poetry, Grierson effectively challenged the relevance romantic conceptions of 'beauty' both to the content and to the form of poetry: poetry should not strive after beauty but should seek to do justice to the complexity of human experience:

> A great poem is not simply the expression in verse of a poet's articulate thought. It is something much more complex. It is the reflection, the embodiment in a form adequate to communicate it with delight to himself and to his audience, of the interaction of thought and feeling, the whole complex web of a personality. (*C*, 236)

This is from *Cross Currents in English Literature of the Seventeenth Century,* published in 1929, and summarises the new aesthetic criterion for all poetry that Grierson had derived from his study of Donne. It represented a radical challenge not only to previous evaluations of Donne but to the whole trajectory of the history of literature in English. Donne becomes the measure by which all other poetry in English should be judged because Donne's is a poetry which, though apparently expressing a

> hot-blooded sincerity of feeling [. . .] reveals on a closer study a greater complexity of moods, a wider dramatic range, than the first impression suggests, so much so that one comes at moments to the conviction that his poetry is a more complete mirror than any other one can recall of love as a complex passion in which sense and soul are inextricably blended. (*C*, 143–4)

Donne, it appears, was the last poet to achieve such a combination, and, therefore, the model for any modern poet seeking to recover the integration of mind and body, of intellect and art that was to become central to Brooks's account of modernism. Grierson's reading of Donne had not

only transformed Donne's reputation: it had shown how criticism could, by historical contextualisation and by detailed linguistic explication, demonstrate the true qualities of a poem.

III

In 1921 Grierson published an anthology of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poetry of the Seventeenth Century*, with an extensive introduction which sought to justify the continued use of the term 'metaphysical' in relation to Donne and his followers, despite the fact that none of them aspired to the kind of exposition of a philosophical conception of the universe that characterises Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* or Dante's *Divina Commedia.* Nonetheless, Grierson argues, Donne 'is metaphysical not only in virtue of his scholasticism, but by his deep reflective interest in the experiences of which his poetry is the expression, the new psychological curiosity with which he writes of love and religion.'[23] The anthology was reviewed by T. S. Eliot in an essay which declared that 'Mr Grierson's book is in itself a piece of criticism, and a provocation to criticism',[24] and the provocation in Eliot's case was to develop Grierson's analysis of the qualities of Donne's poetry – its combination of intellect and passion – into a historical account of the change in 'the mind of England'[25] between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries –

> Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility.[26]

– and into an account of how the poet's mind differs from that of the ordinary person:

> When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the poet's mind

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[23] H. J. C. Grierson (ed.), *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poetry of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler* (Oxford, 1921), 2.

[24] T. S. Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays* (London, 1951), 281.

[25] Ibid., 287.

[26] Ibid.

> these experiences are always forming new wholes.[27]

Seventeenth-century poets had sensibilities that 'could devour any kind of experience'[28] but their successors in the eighteenth century 'revolted against the ratiocinative',[29] a revolt which meant that though 'the language became more refined, the feeling became more crude'.[30] Eliot's efforts to come to terms with Grierson's definition of 'the metaphysical' were to dominate the Clark lectures he was invited to give in Cambridge in 1926 and the Turnbull lectures presented at John Hopkins in 1933. Following Grierson's suggestion about the originality of the psychological realism of Donne's poetry, Eliot declared that Donne's work was indeed the turning point of 'modern' thought and that Donne was the first writer to adopt a properly psychological perspective on human experience.

> Often it had been remarked, the state of mind appropriate to a particular science comes into existence before the science itself. Diderot in this sense 'anticipated' Darwin: Dostevski, it is often said, though the evidence is less satisfactory, anticipated Freud; . . . But in Donne we are concerned with a connection closer and less interrupted; though I cannot tell you in detail how it came about. But certainly Donne is in a sense a psychologist. You find it in his verse compared to earlier verse, in his sermons compared to earlier sermons . . .[31]

In effect, Eliot's Clark Lectures of 1926 were an attempt to provide a detailed explanation of Grierson's judgment that Donne was 'in certain aspects of mind and training the most medieval, in temper the most modern, of his contemporaries',[32] and to explain how twentieth-century readers have come to

> a consciousness or a belief that this [seventeenth-century] poetry and this age have some peculiar affinity with our own poetry and our own

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid., 288.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ronald Schuchard (ed.), *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry by T.S.Eliot* (London, 1993), 79–80.

[32] H.J.C.Grierson, 'John Donne', *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*,Vol. IV, sect. 1, 198.

> age, a belief that our own mentality and feelings are better expressed by the seventeenth century than by the nineteenth or even the eighteenth.[33]

It is from this sense of affinity that 'Donne is more frequently used as a critical measure than ever before'.[34] And it is Grierson's account of Donne's new philosophy of love and, in particular, the lyric 'The Extasie', to which Eliot points as the central feature of Donne's 'modernity':

> One of the capital ideas of Donne, the one which is perhaps his peculiar gift to humanity, is that of the union, the fusion and identification of *souls* in sexual love. To state it, to deposit it gnomically or analyse it is nothing; to express it, to evoke it, is everything . . . how many centuries of intellectual labour were necessary, how much dogma, how much speculation, how many systems had to be elaborated, shattered and taken up into other systems, before such an idea was possible! The soul itself had to be constructed first: and since the soul has disappeared we have many other things, the analysis of Stendhal, the madness of Dostoevski, but not this. . . . [35]

And, like Grierson, Eliot finds the 'metaphysical' nature of Donne's poetry in its ability to combine the abstract – the ratiocinative – and the sensuous: 'it elevates sense for a moment to regions ordinarily attainable only by abstract thought, or on the other hand clothes the abstract, for a moment, with all the painful delight of flesh'.[36] For Eliot, of course, the modern world is a world in decay, and while Donne, as compared with Milton or Dryden or Tennyson, reveals the later loss of that mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience',[37] by comparison with earlier writers such as Dante, Donne's poetry reflects a religious and intellectual *dis*order, 'capable of experiencing and setting down many super-sensuous feelings, only these feelings are of a mind in chaos, not of a mind in order'.[38] Nonetheless, Grierson's exposition of Donne's relationship to Dante –'Donne had read Dante. He refers to him in the fourth *Satyre* (II, 106) – and his knowledge of medieval scholasticism as well as his familiarity with classical literature –

[33] Schuchard, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 43.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 54.

[36] Ibid., 55.

[37] Eliot, 'The Metaphysical Poets', *Selected Essays*, 287.

[38] Schuchard, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 133.

Satyre IIII [*sic*], Grierson tells us, 'is based on Horace's *Ibam forte Sacra* (*Sat.* i. 9)' (II, 117) – is affirmation of the continuities of Donne's poetry with the European tradition. This, for Grierson, was part of Donne's importance: his was a poetry which it is impossible to read in its fullness without a knowledge of poetic tradition stretching back to the Greeks, a knowledge which was part of the shared consciousness of poet and audience. A poet, Grierson argued in his *The Backgound of English Literature* of 1915,

> is connected with his audience by other links as well as that of a common language, – by a body of common knowledge and feeling to which he may make direct or indirect allusion, confident that he will be understood, and not only this, but more or less accurately of the effect the allusion will produce. He knows roughly what his audience knows, and what are their prejudices. A people is made one, less by community of blood than by a common tradition.[39]

The loss of that common tradition in the modern world poses poets with new problems:

> Can any writer of to-day feel confident that a classical allusion will be understood by any wide circle of readers, and not only understood but will awaken certain definite emotions of respect and admiration?[40]

The answer is that no 'common tradition of knowledge and feeling'[41] now unites the poet with his audience, and 'knowing no traditional, commonly accepted background, our poets have grown curious of strange new vistas, Celtic or Indian or Chinese, and their poetry has become exotic in character'.[42] It was an outcome that Eliot aimed to confront four years later in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', by insisting that poetry is necessarily founded on a 'historical sense' which 'involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not only with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole literature of his own

[39] H. J. C. Grierson, *The Background of English Literature, Classical and Romantic* (London, 1922), 3.

[40] Ibid., 31–2.

[41] Ibid., 32.

[42] Ibid., 34.

country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'.[43] Eliot makes the tradition of which Grierson despairs the necessary foundation of the creation – and presumably the consumption – of poetry, and tradition, in this sense, 'cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour'[44] – the kind of labour by which readers of Grierson's edition of Donne were confronted in the 275 pages of his notes on the poetry.

By 1943 the distinguished American critic of English Renaissance literature, Rosemond Tuve, could rhetorically enquire whether 'any introduction to a scholarly edition of an early English poet ever had a more marked influence upon contemporary criticism of contemporaries than Grierson's of Donne (1912) had on ours',[45] but Grierson's influence was not only on the 'criticism of contemporaries' – it was on the whole methodology of the 'New Criticism' that taught the acquisition of 'tradition' as central to the understanding of poetry, an acquisition which required 'great labour' and therefore many university courses for students. The influence of Grierson's work on the methods of 'close reading' which were central to New Criticism can be traced in the work of I. A. Richards and his reiterated use of Grierson's discovery – or invention – of 'interinanimation', a word unknown till it appeared in Grierson's version of 'The Extasie' in 1912. In an essay of 1957 on Donne, Richards glossed *interinanimates* as being 'like two logs each of which makes the other flame the better',[46] and then used that image as the definition of what poetry, and, therefore, all art strives to achieve, because two minds, the mind of the artist and the mind of reader or observer, are united by the artwork in an experience which *interinanimates* both. Indeed, in an essay he retitled as 'The Interinanimations of Words', Richards compared Donne with Dryden to show how different is a poetry in which words are 'in routine conventional relations', where 'they do not induce revolutions in one another',[47] as compared with a poetry like Donne's, in which

> there is prodigious activity between the words as we read them. Following, exploring, realizing, BECOMING that activity is, I suggest, the essential thing in reading the poem. Understanding it is not a

[43] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Selected Essays,* 14.

[44] Ibid., 14.

[45] Rosemond Tuve, 'A Critical Survey of Scholarship in the Field of English Literature of the Renaissance', *Studies in Philology* 40:2 (April 1943), 204–55, 250.

[46] I. A. Richards, *Poetries: Their Media and Ends: A Collection of essays by I. A. Richards published to celebrate his 80th birthday*, ed. Trevor Eaton (The Hague, 1974), 90.

[47] Ibid., 77.

> preparation for reading the poem. It is itself the poem. And it is a constructive, hazardous, free creative process, a process of conception through which a new being is growing in the mind.[48]

'Interinanimation' represents for Richards the highest achievement of poetry, the creation of a communication in which all of its words interact with one another to create a new potential of meaning:

> I conceive then a word, as poetry is concerned with it, and as separated from the mere physical or sensory occasion, to be a component of an act of the mind so subtly dependent on the other components of this act and of other acts that it can be distinguished from these interinanimations only as a convenience of discourse. It sounds nonsense to say that a word is its interinanimations with other words; but that is a short way of saying what Poetics is always in danger of overlooking. Words only work together. We understand no word except in and through its interinanimations with other words.[49]

As John Paul Russo notes, 'interinanimation', for Richards, 'stands above and includes the "equilibrium of opposed impulses" for mental integration and poetic wholeness', producing that 'multiplicity, the limitless variety, of the linkages among phrases, and likewise among thoughts'[50] that characterises the highest forms of literature. Richards's insistent use of Grierson's 'found' term in Donne – it appears in almost every book that Richards wrote – echoes into modern accounts of the New Criticism, such as Peter Childs and Roger Fowler's *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*, where they contrast 'Romantic organicist' accounts of the literary work with the linguistically-based theories of the early twentieth century:

> the revolutions in philosophy of Frege and Wittgenstein, and in linguistics of Saussure, substituted for the 'referential' or 'representational' model of language an idea of meaning as a result of complex interaction. Criticism took the point that if the meaning of a word is everything it does in a particular CONTEXT, then analysis of the words of a poem, of their total interinanimation, would be nothing less than an account of

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[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid., 76.

[50] John Paul Russo, *I. A. Richards: His Life and Work* (Baltimore, 1989), 265–6.

> the poem itself. The metaphysical abstractions which Romantic theory identified as the form of poetry could now be located as linguistic realities, and since language has a public existence, independent of the psychologies of poet or reader, they were open to analysis.[51]

No context is given for the use of the term 'interinanimation': it is the word by which, retrospectively, the 'New Criticism' is defined, as though its meaning, for a modern audience, can be taken for granted.

What came 'before theory', and shaped both the theoretical perspectives and the critical practice of the New Criticism, was a new kind of textual criticism, of which Grierson's *Donne* was the defining example, making Donne's poetry relevant to a contemporary audience by the detailed explication of its historical meanings and the world-view which they expressed. Critical theory as it emerged in Britain and the United States was *interinanimated* by the textual analyses of Grierson's *The Poems of John Donne*, and it was on the researches and analyses of a Scottish professor, inheritor of the philosophical traditions of Scottish rhetoric, that twentieth-century Anglophone 'theory' was built.

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[51] Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London, 2006; 1973), 21.