APPROACHES TO SPECIFIC POETS

Teaching Donne through Performance

Nicholas Jones

A novice reader of Donne faces many blocks in reading a newly encountered poem: distant historical and social contexts, unfamiliar literary conventions, and severe perplexities of language. I am concerned here not with mastering context and convention but with helping the student get a grasp on Donne's wonderful and idiosyncratic language. To do so, I borrow a method used widely by teachers of Shakespeare: classroom performance. By performing Donne's poems, with or without extensive preparation, a student can learn to overcome the initial difficulties of syntax, meter, and semantics; can explore their rich poetic structure, discovering possibilities for otherwise-ignored turns of phrase and changes of tone; and can present to the class a finished reading that vividly plants the words of the poem in the ears and the minds of all in the class.

Some of us may have less than pleasant memories of classroom performance methods in our ninth-grade encounters with Shakespeare: having sat through twenty-six reluctant renditions of "The quality of mercy is not strained" is not likely to encourage us to use class recitation as a teaching method. In recent years, however, in college and high school, close performance-oriented studies of Shakespeare have gained widespread interest and validity. In large part, that interest is due to the combination of the text-as-script emphasis in Shakespeare studies, particularly in the work of

John Russell Brown and J. L. Styan, and the concurrent influence of the Royal Shakespeare Company on Shakespeare pedagogy. Royal Shakespeare actors have regularly trained and rehearsed with close attention to the nuances of rhetoric, figure, and versification, treating them as cues for attitude, position, movement, and voice treatment. Although the Royal Shakespeare techniques are ultimately geared toward the production and the understanding of full-length plays, the actors often work extensively with lyric poems, especially with Shakespeare's sonnets. Through visits to college campuses and a widely marketed series of videotapes, the Royal Shakespeare method and its derivatives have become part of many Shakespeare classes.

Donne's lyrics have even more dramatic elements than Shakespeare's sonnets, giving the performer strong—if ambiguous—implications for characterized voice, action, interchange, and situation; as Heather Dubrow points out, the sonnets of Shakespeare do not meet those criteria. With the obvious literary differences between the metaphysical lyric and the Elizabethan theater and the equally obvious structural and functional differences between the academic classroom and the repertory theater company, I am far from claiming performance as the only or even the main activity of a section on Donne. But I believe that, within reasonable limits, performance is an appropriate and effective introduction to Donne.

One of the first blocks to understanding a Donne lyric is the strong line—mystifying texture, ragged diction, strange syntax, and emphatic meter. In introducing a Donne lyric, I assume that the students have done some preparatory work on the poems outside class, but I find that, in fact, the language is so strange that their out-of-class work doesn't bear much fruit. Reading "Love's Growth," for example, many students lack the patience and the skill to sort out on their own the syntax of the first stanza:

> I scarce believe my love to be so pure
> As I had thought it was,
> Because it doth endure
> Vicissitude, and season, as the grass;
> Methinks I lied all winter, when I swore
> My love was infinite, if spring make it more.

It is tempting and wrong to read line 3 alone, as if it meant that love simply endures. The temptation to focus on separable phrases like "it doth endure" gives a feeling of easy conquest, leading the student to ignore any element, even the essential context of syntax, that may lead to a richer and more complex reading. In this case, we must read "Vicissitude" and "season" as compound direct objects of the verb "endure," forcing us to find another meaning for the verb.

An unrehearsed in-class performance of the stanza brings to the surface the basic problems of reading the poems. Teacher and students can hear immediately whether the performer understands the syntax. If the reader handles the syntax well, other students have benefited from hearing a decent reading from one of their peers. If the reading works, I ask the rest of the class to imitate or modify the reading, to get the texture deeper into their bones. If the reader bungles it, we stop and analyze the problem; a second, more successful reading usually follows quite soon.

The first in-class performance can do more than patch up misreadings. Some students, with prompting and encouragement, are ready to develop the subtle clues of verse and tone; if so, I use performance to begin a group analysis of the rhetoric and the technique. If I have a reader who can handle the syntax of a whole stanza, I ask the class to listen to the reading with their books shut; then we probe for what they remember of the stanza: What are the most powerful words in the stanza? What does the reading stress or clarify? Introductory students can almost always recognize alliteration, but with eyes alone they may miss the alliteration in line 4: *c* does not look like *s* or *ss*. However, with voice and ears, they can't miss it. A simple beginning, to be sure; but the advantage for a teacher of Donne's complex lyrics is that the students learn to move from familiarity to strangeness, incorporating into their knowledge of the poem more and more of the intricacy of language. So, in a performance and discussion of the above stanza from "Love's Growth," the polysyllable "vicissitude," likely in a preclass reading to be passed over or only glossed (replaced, perhaps, by the footnote equivalent "change") suddenly leaps to attention, highlighted by the line break just before it, the syntactic ambiguity we've discussed earlier, and the surrounding syllabic context—practically monosyllabic for two lines, disyllabically inclined in line 3, peaking at four syllables, and quickly tapering off to the simple monosyllable "grass," the first concrete image in the poem.

In the Royal Shakespeare model, performance workshops deal extensively with meter. With Shakespeare the meter creates an almost constant framework of iambic pentameter with variants (trochaic and spondaic feet, run-on lines, half-lines finished by a second speaker). With Donne, similar metrical variants (with the exception of the half-lines) occur within a framework that itself includes variation: the invented stanza forms of the hymns and *Songs and Sonnets*. Treating metrics not as wearisome prescriptions but as the practical tools of a poet giving clues to the future readers and performers of the poem liberates metrics from its pedantic, hair-splitting reputation. In "Love's Growth," for example, appears the run-on line:

> But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow
With more, not only be no quintessence (7–8)

The performer who knows the possibility of pausing after "sorrow" to mark the completed line and who also knows the necessity of spilling over to the first foot of the second line ("With more") will understand the underlying paradox of the love that both cures and adds to sorrow.

Scansion of Donne's lyrics is notoriously difficult. It is worthwhile to apply the simplest possible scansion—a strict metrical reading—in performance workshops. Such a reading may have to be abandoned, of course: no one is likely to profit by reading

— / — /
Batter my heart. . . .

But strict metrics often reveal workable and unexpected readings: students need not invert the first foot of

/ — — / — / —
Love's not so pure, and abstract (11)

When read iambically, it has a powerful ring of negation:

— / — / — / —
Love's not so pure, and abstract.

Many students tend to read with prose rhythms, emphasizing, for example, the contrast in line 14 of "Love's Growth":

/ / — — / — — / — /
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

It's a serviceable but not at all metrical rhythm. To get students to experiment with going beyond such familiar patterns, I insist that they try to fit the actual words to the formal metrical context:

— / — / — / — / — /
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

The verbs are now more subtly contrasted, the longer phrase of more abstract intention, with its stressed auxiliary "would," against the abrupt phrase of action, "do." When a real inversion or substitution occurs, I encourage the students to make the most of it. In the same stanza, they encounter a crucial spondee:

> But if this medicine, love, which cures all sorrow
> With more, not only be no quintessence,
> — / — / / / — / — /
> But mixed of all stuffs paining soul or sense (7–9)

"Stuffs," with its heavy consonant clusters alliterating with the other /s/ sounds in the context and with its powerful image of materiality, must be elevated to a stress. The best performers deal with that stress, and the students begin to note how often the spondees of the poem refer to the qualities of growth, here ascribed to the mixture of

> / / / / / / — / / / / —
> "all stuffs": "love deeds," "more circles," "new heat," "new taxes"
> (9, 19, 21, 25, 27)

and even the title,

> / /
> "Love's Growth."

Students in performance workshops can learn not just to translate images and figurative language but to use their full potential of expression. One technique is simple and of local application and is especially useful in the introductory workshop: a slight pause, a lift, before a figure gives the impression that the speaker is coining or inventing the figure. The resulting vocal punctuation makes the metaphor stand out from the surrounding texture; and the illusion of invention emphasizes the purposeful and rhetorical aspects of metaphysical imagery, which we later discuss in Rosemond Tuve's terms. In "The Sun Rising," for example, the reader encounters:

> Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
> Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time. (9–10)

A slight pause separates the catalog ("hours, days, months") from the metaphor and brings out the power of the metaphor to encapsulate the values and the attitudes of the speaker.

The coining effect can easily seem mannered if overdone, so, when we start to work on the poem as a whole, I encourage the students to see the image less as a separate invented unit and more as part of a series, with attention to the connections and the flow of the images. The performer studying "Love's Growth" must go beyond the familiar, almost Hallmark-like ease of a single image—"Gentle love deeds, as blossoms on the bough" (19)—to discover the sequence of natural images in the poem—grass, winter, spring, sun, spring again, stars, sun again, blossoms on a bough, root, water, spring, heat, winter, and, finally, spring again. Noting the pattern, the performer sees a large rhythm in the poem. The context of familiarity is broadened; the performer concentrates not just on the easy images but also on the contexts of logic and tone in which they are embedded.

In the performance workshop we stop often to isolate techniques and to try alternative readings. At some point those interruptions become self-defeating; students need to be encouraged to deal with whole poems. At that point I assign memorized, stand-up performances of whole lyrics. I stress that the reader's job is now to deal with local matters of technique—meter, figure, and so forth—as they contribute to a reading of the poem as a whole. An excellent tool for introducing that level of reading is the Royal Shakespeare Company's videotaped sequence in "Speaking Shakespearean Verse" (*Playing Shakespeare* FFH 731F) in which David Suchet is coached to enact a dramatic situation for Shakespeare's sonnet 138 ("When my love swears that she is made of truth"). In the situation that director Trevor Nunn prescribes, a middle-aged philosophy lecturer is trying to explain relativism to his students, and he invents that example of his own not-so-truthful relationship with his lover. The resulting performance takes an already enjoyable poem and makes it unforgettably witty.

With Donne, a reading of the whole poem involves studying and imagining the gaps in the poem. "The Flea" is an obvious example: the student preparing to perform it has to envision the woman's responses in the empty places between stanzas. Similarly, the changes in tone as one moves from stanza to stanza in "The Good-Morrow" or "The Canonization" demand that the student imagine a hidden situation and let it inform the performance. "For God's sake, hold your tongue, and let me love" ("Canonization" 1) is an easy enough beginning, tonally and dramatically, but the challenge in reading the whole poem is to modulate believably from the petulant beginning into the mellow and transcendent ending. The student who has not worked out the implied counterarguments flounders for ways to present each new stanza and is embarrassed by the monotony of the repeated rhyme word *love*.

A performance in my class a few years ago brought "The Relic" to life unforgettably as the student created a specific dramatic situation without props, set, or lights and using only a page of his spiral notebook as the "paper" of the second stanza. The speaker walks through a church, contemplating the tombs; he turns to his imagined lover to explain with playful tenderness his thoughts about his own grave; he shows her the imagined "bracelet of bright hair" (6) about his wrist. The playfulness becomes more serious as the speaker produces the paper itself: "I would have that age by this paper taught / What miracles we harmless lovers wrought" (21–22). The

lover, we realize, has thought it out, has prepared the testimony that will prove the relics, has a premeditated purpose. What is it? He reads the paper to his imagined lover in the language of the poem's third stanza with its remarkable distancing—its past-tense description ("we loved"), its vast temporal and ontological perspectives ("nature," "law," "angels," "seals," "miracles"), and its language of negated action ("knew not," "no more we knew," "not between those meals," "ne'er touched"). As he reads, he remains focused on the paper he has written. But at the end, the solemnity of the scenario of desire held in ultimate restraint breaks suddenly as he raises his eyes from the paper to the lover, first summarizing and then abandoning the attempt to bear witness to future ages:

> These miracles we did; but now, alas,
> All measure, and all language, I should pass,
> Should I tell what a miracle she was. (31–33)

The performer plays the abandonment of language with a half-smile as he reveals that the whole scenario has been an elaborate framework for the most powerful delivery of the simplest of compliments to his lover; in effect, all leads to "you are a miracle."

Of course, that performance excludes alternative readings: perhaps the inarticulateness at the end would be better read as a spontaneous upsurge of desire; perhaps a reading with more satirical elements would be truer to the text. In a discussion or a paper, I expect students to deal with alternatives even while advocating their own theses. After a performance, as students are encouraged to report and discuss what they saw and heard, multiplicity of interpretation is crucial. But in the performance itself we encourage a singleness of intent, a willingness to give up indeterminacy for a moment. To me and to my students, that is the excitement of the technique. We have lived most of our lives with the sense that we can never pin the meaning down. To be sure, we always return to that sense of indeterminacy beyond the limits of the performance. But during a good performance we feel that we are at the single meaning, the momentarily secure core of the poem. As students return to the confusion of new poems and new readings, that confidence remains, enabling them to go on climbing over the blocks to understanding.

Songs and Sonnets Go to Church: Teaching George Herbert

Richard Strier

A course or unit on metaphysical poetry inevitably approaches George Herbert after studying John Donne. That sequence is proper as well as inevitable. Donne's lyrics are the major and defining examples of metaphysical poetry. To study Herbert's poetry in the context of Donne's provides a number of pedagogical opportunities, although it also presents a number of dangers. One such danger is to try to demonstrate that Herbert is metaphysical in the same way that Donne is. That attempt is not likely to be fruitful. Although one may succeed in finding some bits of scholastic terminology and doctrine here and there in Herbert ("The Quidditie" as a title; sin, in "Sinne" (1), as lacking "the good . . . of being" [5]), they are minor, peripheral, or—as in "The Quidditie," in which the *quidditas* of verse is never conceptually defined—humorously ironic moments. Nowhere in Herbert does a metaphysical assertion like "What ever dyes, was not mixt equally" (Donne, "The Good-Morrow," line 19) have a central or culminating function in the emotional arc of a poem. Herbert is not interested in metaphysics in the way that Donne is. Instead of "affecting" the metaphysics, as Dryden said Donne did, Herbert is fundamentally anti-metaphysical. He is a functionalist, rather than an essentialist. It is no accident that the quiddity of verse for him turns out to be an activity and a personal relationship, rather than a metaphysically defined "thing," just as, for Herbert, the alchemical "elixir" turns out to be an attitude, rather than an essence.

The search for elaborate images or conceits is only slightly more fruitful in approaching Herbert's poetry. Such conceits do exist in significant places in the poems—in the descriptions of the astronomer and the chemist in "Vanitie" (1); in the description of the processes of intellectual and verbal invention in "Sinnes Round" and "Jordan" (2); in the paradoxically strong "rope of sands" in which the speaker of "The Collar" is tempted to see himself imprisoned. Those are all striking moments of verbal and imagistic ingenuity, but they all dramatize or exemplify processes of which Herbert is at least deeply suspicious, if not downright disapproving. The presence of ingenuity in the poetry must not lead us to a false valuation of the status of ingenuity in the poetry. That caution may be true for Donne's poetry as well, but Donne was perhaps more committed than Herbert to the positive functions of ingenuity and ratiocination. However, that ingenuity and ratiocination are present in Herbert's poetry as in Donne's, is beyond dispute.

Thus far, it looks as though Herbert is a metaphysical poet mainly by virtue of the positions and the strategies his poetry shows to be misguided. That is not a bad place to leave the issue, but the relations between Herbert's poetry and Donne's can be more positively exploited. One may