

Chapter Two

The Prophet, the Mystic, the Poet

The following night found Donne bending over the parchment, visibly entranced by the flowing river of Greek letters and verses, with an insatiate zeal to enter into its arcane, prophetic, poetic world, and with a leap of gentle and joyful trembling at this prospect of visiting the region of unfailing knowledge.

He assumes that the experience of the Last Things is in store mainly for a prophet and a mystic in their spiritual trajectory. ‘Obviously, I am neither a prophet nor a mystic,’ Donne thinks. A poet, though, does have a share in their world. Ultimately, poetry is more than just the overflow of powerful feelings; it commences with a world that can be known only by contemplation, the great realities that emanate from God.

‘A prophet is initiated into divine wisdom,’ the melodist said back. ‘You, understandably, deny the title for yourself. But when you wrote, “Thou art the Proclamation; and I am / The trumpet, at whose voice the people came”, you were conscious of your prophetic and mediatorial vocation. Indeed, according to the early Christian treatise “The Teaching of the twelve Apostles”, a priest is expected to perform the service of the prophet. However, the prophet’s role is not restricted to standing between God and the people. He or she symbolically represents the people, their past, present and future.’

This is prophetic poetry. Ascending from the depths of this world’s anguish, the trumpet of the Lord instructs and guides the people out of the present misery to the vision of the next world. Donne is reminded by Romanos that he often claims for himself the gift of reading the signs and being both a receiver and maker of salvific beauty.

Donne only feels he is a person placed upon a watchtower. He wants to stand before God, be ready to listen to God's word, transmit it and follow it to the end. He begs God to grant him insight into the depths of reality so that he might bring to light what is hidden and obscure in the eyes of the rest.

'In every thunder, in every harshness and affliction and trial, I pray to hear that which makes all sounds music, and all music perfect, a whole concert,' he said.

Beyond appearances, he tries to hear the 'excellent song' of divine governance and providence in all parts of nature. When a sinner prays, he is transformed into music more lovely than the music of the spheres and the angels; for it is God that prays, the Holy Spirit itself that prays inside us. It suggests in this way the boundless divine compassion.

'It is the infinite beauty and compassion of God that reasserts unity and redemption,' Romanos added, 'and so the whole heart must be given to melody. Accordingly, the minister's voice is God's music. Yes, we are invited to share in and transmit God's music. The Greek language has a single term for both poet and maker, for beauty and truth is activity. God is the source of poetry, and at His touch everyone is made a poet, and every word, work, wish and fear becomes poetry.'

'After all, the highest matter must be sung in the noblest form,' Donne concurred.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that the word of the prophet and the mystic is imbued with poetic spirit. It is no wonder that what has been said about the Last Things is rendered in poetry and poetic language. Both this world and the next begin with a song; and God's prophets are akin to musical instruments, because of their harmonious resonance, because they see and harmonise things in the divine beauty and providence.¹⁰

Harmonious sound, rhythm and music were still considered by Donne to be the best human vehicle of divine things, even after he abandoned poetry. It should come as no surprise that the greatest mystery of our religion, indeed the whole body of our religion, the coming, and the kingdom of Christ, is conveyed in a song, in the third chapter of Habakkuk the prophet. Whenever Donne's head, along with his heart, is bent over the book, he realises that God's word is poetry, piercing with its sweetness and 'the vehement operation of fire'. An artistic creation can be a reflection of divine beauty and, as such, a harbinger of divine reassurance.

Of course, it is not the beauty of words that matters. Donne clarified that there is a flipside in poetry, the risk of the arbitrary identification of art with divinity. There can be an excess in seeking either secrets or 'poetiqueness' and this excess makes a false prophet and a bogus poet. It is not poetry that matters. 'What matters most is that our mouth be opened by God; except the Lord open our lips, they would be better luted with the clay of the grave,' the dean added in his typical baroque manner. This referred to preaching, but it also manifests the seriousness with which he approaches language, art, life itself, and the world as a work of art. Donne brings to mind Saint Gregory Nazianzen, and reminds us that he was a poet, as well as a Father, as most of the Fathers were. For 'the Holy Ghost is figurative', and the Fathers imitate the 'harmonious, and melodious and mellifluous cadences of these waters of life'. Music is not separated from meaning, and a really great poet is a messenger, an 'angel', and a substitute for humanity. This is why holiness is intrinsically poetic.

Romanos has dived with his pen into both the poetry's brilliant ink and the bright blood of the heart. Now he reveals to Donne the miraculous event that changed his own life and, to a certain degree, the world of Greek literature.

'There was a time that I was as voiceless as a fish, with no inspiration, yet with much longing to serve the Lord,' said he with the tender voice of an Aeolian harp. 'On a Christmas eve, I saw the Mother of God in a vivid dream, presenting me with a volume, and commanding me to swallow it. And I did swallow the book, and I woke up with, so to speak, a new voice, and then I wrote my first hymn on the Nativity, which is still sung in the churches. With hindsight, I clearly see that, in a way, I had swallowed the Word – both the literary and the uncreated Word. And from that moment on, the ink flowed like a stream from my mind and heart, drawing from the language around and within me, the language of my people. I composed a sweet song for the people, a new song that helped them to contemplate the glorious dispensation, both fulfilled and expected.'

After a pause, the melodist added that another strange thing had occurred to him. When he had consumed the Word, then the past, the present and the future had become the living memory of the moment. 'Indeed,' Donne commented in wonder, 'the memory of a poet moving towards apocalyptic revelation makes his composition a hierophantic progress.'

Indeed, in praise and prayer, Romanos offered his whole existence to 'melody', urging believers to do the same in order to weave hymns to the Creator. Such a response to God's song through poetry sanctifies all the participants. It transforms the audience, and everyone separately, into participants in the divine monodrama. That was his role: to recall in the collective consciousness and bring before the spiritual eyes of each particular member the coming end-time, the passing away of the transitory things, the full meaning of history, the revelation of the glory of God, and the final judgement of each conscience. The duty and experience of a genuine poet is the meeting of Beauty and Truth, so that his composition, or rather his witness, is not false and counterfeit but, rather, valuable, reliable and unswerving, as the beating out of gold.

Drawing from this treasure of prophecy and poetry, our poets in the world's night utter the holy, testifying to the fertility of the deep and painting what is not visible, witnessing and imitating transcendental beauty. Then again, the wit of their compositions does not make them disconnected from common experience; on the contrary, it unearths a metaphysical presence in our everyday lives.¹¹

True, the Church Fathers were also poets. A person who encounters the numinous cannot but be a poet, for only poetic language can communicate, as far as possible, what is essentially ineffable. A poet is bound to trace what is hidden in the inner and outer world. He espouses the contemplative ideal; he even opens himself to otherworldly encounters. Here, the poet's flight intersects with the mystic's trajectory.

'However, we find ourselves in deep and perilous waters here,' Donne reflected. No doubt, the witness of the Fathers is reliable. Yet he confesses his reluctance to accept an individual's subjective experiences as trustworthy evidence of a genuine encounter. He is suspicious of revelations, apparitions and transportations because, more often than not, such experiences are just interpretations of the private spirit; they 'arise from the earth, from ourselves, often from our own melancholy, or even pride'.

The state of contemplation is handled by Donne with extreme caution. No records whatsoever of mystical or numinous encounters are to be found in his poetic or homiletic work. Nor in Romanos' verse. There have been no reports of visions or other extraordinary experiences and, of course, no claim to a charismatic gift and authority. One reason is that in neither of our poets is the 'I' singular, that is, they do not intend to describe their personal journey to God. Romanos gives a

voice to the congregation, even in his staged soliloquies. Likewise, in Donne's intimate musings, the 'I' is not the solitary protagonist, let alone the post-modern self-referential subject; it includes the reader, who shares the same experience and follows the same path; for both the author and the reader participate in the common treasury of truth. However highly personal was his verse, the man of early modernity knew that truth is objective and participatory.

Truly, such suspicion of either introversive or extroversive mystical experiences is not unwitnessed in the writings of the Fathers. The Desert Fathers, although formidable Christian mystics themselves in their own right, discouraged their disciples and readers from pursuing and focussing on private supernatural experiences. The reason behind this was not a rational approach to spiritual life, but rather the fact that the state of contemplation was taken very seriously by them and handled with caution; for they knew that true contemplation is not generated by the contemplative – it is not just an inner state. It is the breaking through of divine presence into our existence. And there are moments when this does in fact occur.

Donne himself has ruminated over essential texts of the contemplative tradition, including those of Augustine, Dionysius the Areopagite, Bernard and, presumably, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which was widely read in Elizabethan England. Such works are built upon mystical encounters, and yet, they do not emphasise or encourage visions. He lives within this tradition, but he recuses himself from any kind of preternatural experience of God. He even wonders why one should need the spectacular and extraordinary since our ordinary life carries a heavenly message. In some way, every moment is extraordinary.

On the other hand, even this extraordinary normality can be shattered by real, divine, unspeakable encounters. Perhaps this is why some of Donne's divine poems are vibrant with mystical fervour, where an appealing note of direct communion and unusual intimacy is present. He has known the divine hissing – off the ordinary track – the unveiling of things in the dark, the low voices, the holy whisperings and half-silences, as God's Spirit bears witness with our own spirit, insinuating Itself into our souls through intimate motions. Now he remembered his 'Hymn to Christ, at the Author's Last Going into Germany'. The moment may bring sudden convictions, inspiration, correction, enlightenment, a deeper understanding, a long-desired answer, the infusion of some unfamiliar knowledge, a sudden fullness, a penetrating insight with flashes of an unknown or uncharted

truth. Donne sees his entire life as a sign and a progression inside the *mysterium tremendum* of the numinous presence. And so, standing there in a state of profound humility, in fear and trembling, engulfed in and imbued with God's grandeur, he is prepared to offer his entire being to the vision of God. Besides, his themes of indwelling, clothing, rupture, marriage, or even rape, are links to the mystic and contemplative way.

However, it is not the unusual and extraordinary that gets under Donne's skin and kindles his consciousness. His ordinary life and whatever the day brings convey a profound meaning, even as he is immersed in (but not overwhelmed by) worldly duties and complexities. Every moment has a revelatory value. Every single moment is permeated with a providential and vibrant presence. It is because of this that Donne's spiritual life exhibits certain 'mystical' features: an affinity for introspective meditation, a yearning for intimacy with God in an uncompromising relationship, also a sense of freedom from the phenomenal, 'empirical' ego and its desires through a total surrender to God, a state of blissful nothingness and, ultimately, death to oneself. His passionate, dynamic relationship with the wholly Other is coupled with his introversive experience of internal unity. Intellectual mysticism is the crimson blood that runs through the literary veins of Donne. It is conveyed through metaphysical concepts, with their double visions and multiple echoes, with representations of one thing within and through another, with connections between the inner and the outer world, or with shifts in perspective and dimension.

Still, he recalled 'that night's communication'; he cannot betray his experience, thus he has spoken publicly about the significance of intimate divine encounters. It's only natural, as God's presence cannot but be, in some way, sensible. 'God gives us eyes to see that His eyes are with us,' he said. He added that he was eager to 'plunge into darkness to see God in prayer, into everlasting night to escape the storms of earthly days'. And that he preferred the dark places for prayer, despite his preaching being driven by light. You become a mystic of light after you have passed through the dark. Though sacred history begins with darkness, it ends in a revelation, in clearness. 'Mystery and manifestation make the Text' and the subject of this mystery is the essential Word Himself.¹²

However, what of the ancient Mediterranean cellar that was still off-limits to the English poet due to language barriers? What was secret, what was arcane and beyond the reach of human power,

was treasured within Romanos' hymns. Donne wanted to drink from his scarlet wine.

'Although I never refer to mystical encounters,' said the melodist, 'I was born and bred in the mystical tradition of the Cappadocian Fathers and the Syrian monastic desert. I sought solace in healing contemplation, I pondered and wondered at the mystical activities of God in history, I burned for the mystical supper, which is much more than a sacramental rite, I saw and I see clearer now the invisible. And I left my hymns as entries for engaging in an intimate dialogue with God. All my sacred and cherished heroes – heroes not in myth but rather in history – start with wonder and continue to live within it until the very end.'

What else but wonder is the window to the territory of the divine. Donne had once told his audience, 'I shall be short, and rather leave you to walk with God in the cool of the evening, to meditate on the sufferings of Christ, when you are gone, than pretend to express them here.' He knows that our relationship with God is more of an ecstasy than an instruction. Wonder before the divine dispensation precedes and exceeds speculative thinking and articulation. It is not sentimental, just as Saint Paul's ecstasy was not an emotional state but a vision of a veritable truth. When the poet's soul enters into the territory of divine mysteries, reaching the peaks of poetic inspiration, then he becomes a mystic and a prophet or, better, a prophet *qua* mystic.

When Donne talks about ecstasy, do not imagine the kind of escape that the Neoplatonic philosophers envisioned – an escape from the world and its allegedly unredeemable tragedy. He employs the term to describe the ineffable encounter with God, as shown in Saint Paul's two liminal encounters. The experience Paul encountered on the way to Damascus was not a flight from the drama of history and the throbbing of creation to the starry firmament. Quite the contrary; it was the vision of the principle and meaning of history and creation, along with the actual engagement in their dramatic course.

This is also evident in the Greek contemplative tradition. Donne detected and spelled the verbal form of the word 'ecstasy' in one of Romanos' hymns. In this verse, the melodist addresses heaven: draw back in terror, heavens, sink into chaos, earth. He explained that he uses the word ecstasy and its derivatives sparingly in order to express the extreme wonder and great bewilderment of humans and other creatures before the divine dispensation. It was an ecstasy for

the earth to shudder and groan at Christ's suffering. And Mary's awareness that her son's birth was supernatural made her tremble and shudder. It is an ecstasy of our human nature when we act – or suffer – beyond her usual limits. Yet, being captivated and stunned in awe or even rising above sensible things does not imply getting out of our own senses, nor does it provide us with permission to go beyond the compass of right faith.

'This is why I am afraid of the private spirit and private language,' said Donne; 'It breaks the circle, it can damage life itself. As St Peter implied in his second epistle, all private interpretation springs from the will of man rather than the Spirit of God.'

Mystical experience is not always prior to, nor does it stand above, the articles of faith. Doctrine is the power of the Word that sustains the world. It is catholic and circular, as it walks the round, and goes the compass of our whole lives. The authentic personal relationship with God is the life that the doctrine of faith defends. 'Indeed, the right belief is not articles but holy wine within us,' replied Romanos. 'If you mingle the wine with water, if you water down the doctrine, you damage your relationship with God, life itself.' Indeed, the prophetic zeal and the mystical vigour show that doctrine is much more (or much less?) than a metaphysical system. The Creed, which contains the common faith, is the rock from which living waters flow. Life is the core of doctrine and the doctrine lies at the foundations of life; it encircles and compounds life.¹³

'The Word is holy wine, rich, robust and savoury,' Donne mused. He had laboriously attempted to describe the Word's richness, or rather portray His beauty with words, in verses, on linen rags, or in long sermons, by applying genres, forms and modes and all devices he had learned from the ancient wisdom. Not merely to impress and invoke emotions but to discover ways that consort with the unique character of the subject. Poetry must flesh out, or more accurately, extract and articulate the beauty of theology, the beauty of speaking about God and to God.

'But the very nature of the mystery provides us with the most fitting device,' Donne added. 'This device is the paradox.' He explained that the paradox makes reason transcend itself. The mystery of God's economy has outwitted human intelligence and superseded human libraries, by shining in our hearts with the knowledge of the Gospel. The Trinity – God as One and Three – is the first and foremost paradox. Paradox springs up directly from theology's foundations; for there is

nothing so dark, so clear, so remote, so near, as God. Do you need a resolution? No. The most extreme contraries are unified in God.

Romanos strongly confirmed: 'The divine being, its revelation, and its mysterious union with creation *is* the ultimate paradox.' He went on to remark that the nature of the new creation that sprang from this union is paradoxical, combining elements that are hostile or incompatible with one another. Thus, in Christ, the viper brings forth sweet honey instead of its own venom. And even a lie speaks the truth. Death itself has become a paradox, if the seed must die in order to be clothed in incorruption. Likewise, in doctrinal matters, Romanos has defended the other paradox, the perfect distinction in God's perfect unity. His use of paradox is at times multivalent and even perplexing; for the divine paradox inspires, and even necessitates extreme and contradictory imagery and metaphors, in which the regular order is reversed and everything becomes new. Hence, the Rock-Christ is on the pillar, and the Church is hewn for the people.

Donne's muse moves and composes within this paradoxical mystery. He thrives on paradox, the pun and double vision, he thinks in terms of interconnected contradictions. And he is enthralled, rather than vexed, when contraries meet in one. Romanos lets him know that one day he shall be criticised for violently yoking heterogeneous elements together; and that his metaphorical strings shall be a stumbling block for classicists.

'However, the Holy Ghost communicates to man through metaphor and figurative language,' Donne replied. 'Is not the light of His arrows a strange yoking? We have a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles; so harmonious elocutions, so retired and so reserved expressions, so commanding persuasions.'

He continued by stating that God is figurative and metaphorical not only in His words, but in His works too. The style of His works and the phrase of His actions are metaphorical. Types and figures overspread the worship in the old law, and figures flowed into figures, and poured themselves out into farther figures. For instance, circumcision carried a figure of baptism, and baptism figures our perfection in the New Jerusalem. The whole divine economy, from the prophets to the coming of the Word flows that way. He is a way, and a light, and a gate, and a vine, and the heavenly bread. Often, we have