CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE BEATEN TRACK

1.00 THE BACKGROUND:

John Donne, known for his intellectualism arrived on the scene when the Elizabethan enthusiasm had ebbed away. The Petrarchan and Spenserian vision of courtly grace and love had become exhausted; Plato’s divine idea of love was no longer admired; young men had begun to savour satire and Raleigh’s School of Darkness with its atheism and cynicism had begun to grip their fancy. The new sciences and the wave of explorations had effectively ended the old world and as Donne puts it, “All coherence (was) gone”. Writers of this period reveal an astonishing depth of knowledge in a wide range of subjects. Bacon, Raleigh, Burton, Browning and others dealt with law, politics, history, philosophy, science and poetry. The humanism of the Renaissance age along with the religious spiritualism of the Reformation period united in this age. Science and reason had become a cultural revolution. Lives of people in such transitional eras are always marked with many singular characteristics. And then if he was a man of Donne’s intellect and sensibility, his position has to be unique.

1.1 THE LIFE: [1572-1631]

John Donne was born into a prominent Roman Catholic family of London in 1572. He was converted to Anglicanism in 1593. In the years 1596-97 he participated in expeditions to Cadiz and Spain. These trips left their marks on his impressionable mind. These impressions found their way into his works as a matter of course. Donne has referred to Spanish life as well as to the Persian culture in his verses. For example, he describes journeys to Spain as follows:

And Midas joyes our Spanish journeys give,
We touch all gold, but find no food to live.

[ Elegie XX; 'Loves Warre'; lines 17-18]
In another instance, while presenting arguments in favour of ‘Variety’, Donne refers to the ways of the Persian society:

With them it was accounted charity  
To stirre up race of all indifferently;  
Kindreds were not exempted from the bands:  
Which with the Persian still in usage stands.  
Women were then no sooner asked then won,  
And what they did was honest and well done.

[Elegie XVII- ‘Variety’; lines 40-45]

In 1597, he was appointed Secretary to Sir John Egerton, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal. In 1601, he lost his job, because of his runaway marriage with Ann More, the niece of Sir John Egerton. Since then he could not secure state employment and up to the year 1615 he was dependent on uncertain patronage. This early period, the youth of John Donne up to the age of 45 years is full of turmoil and perhaps experiment too. He kept his effort on to get a respectable employment and after a string of unsuccessful attempts to secure state employment, he was finally ordained priest in the Anglican Church on 23rd January 1615. In 1621, he became Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, London. He went on to become famous for his oratorial sermons. Ben Jonson, his contemporary, recognised him as first ‘in some things’. John Donne continued to preach on various occasions and simultaneously wrote many divine poems and sermons. Edmund Gosse, a Scholar on Donne in the late 19th century has pointed out that Donne wrote the sincerest and profoundest devotional poetry after the death of his wife in 1617. Donne remained active till his death inspite of occasional illnesses. He died on the 31st of March 1631 and was buried in the precincts of St. Paul’s on the 3rd of April. The clearcut division in his lifestyle is well- reflected in his writing as well.
He managed to help raise quite a few eyebrows with the contrast that existed in his life: He was a great visitor of ladies during the first half of his life and became a devout Dean of a Cathedral and led a pious life during his later years. His appetite for knowledge was insatiable and he delighted in acquiring it from everywhere. He used his knowledge in his works. In this context, he has expressed his views thus:

Leave me and in this standing wooden chest
Consorted with these few books let me lie
In prison and here be coffin'd when I die.
Here are God's conduits, grave divines; and here
Nature's Secretary, the philosopher,
And jolly statesman which teach how to tie
The sinews of a city's mystic body;
Here gathering Chroniclers, and by them stand
Giddy fantastic poets of each land.
[Bib—Grierson, H.J.C. Donne—Poetical Works; London].

His wideranging reading reflected in the use of the unique images that express his ideas in an outstanding way. Even though varied and intelligently expressed, his images attracted much criticism from people. But all of them agreed on one aspect of Donne’s imagery; that it is very peculiar, distinct and unconventional.

1.2 WORKS:

Helen Gardner, has shown that Donne and other Metaphysicals rarely printed their daring poetry. Their poems were read by like-minded people who could find in their ‘tormented obscurity’ a beauty and a meaning. Donne was read only in his manuscripts, and his poetry appeared in print only after his death. The first collected edition of Donne’s verse was printed by M.F.¹,

¹Bib—The name M.F. appears in this same form, details are not available.
for John Marriot: ‘Poems, by John Donne with Elegies on the Author’s death’ in 1633. In 1640, Walton’s life of Dr. John Donne was published. Thereafter, a number of writers have published a complete collection of his poems—H.J.C. Grierson, A.J. Smith, R.C. Bald, I.A. Shapiro, W.Milgate and above all Helen Gardner have worked extensively on John Donne’s life and his poetry. And yet, the present study tries to bring to light some aspects of Donne’s imagery which have not been touched by these critics.

The body of Donne’s work is huge and varied. His poems include the Songs and Sonnets, Epigrams, Elegies, Heroicall Epistle, Epithalamions, Verse letters, The two Anniversaries, Epicedes and Obsequies, Epitaphs, Divine poems, Holy sonnets, Latin poems and translations. The prose works include Paradoxes and Problems, Ignatius His Conclave, Miscellaneous prose, Letters, Meditations from ‘Devotions upon Emergent Occasions’ and Sermons.

1.2.1 SONGS AND SONNETS:

Hertbert J.C. Grierson, whose critical edition of the poems, published at Oxford in 1912, will always remain the editio princepsa with minor disagreements from others. He has classified the ‘Songs and Sonnets’ into three classes - though he admits that there is a great deal of overlapping. In the first class he places poems which are frankly “evaporations” of more or less cynical wit, and in which he dwells on his own inconstancy or enlarges on the weaknesses of women. These poems are - “Goe and Catche, Woman’s constancy, The Indifferent, Loves Usury, The Legacie, Communitie, Confined Love, Loves Alchymie, The Flea, The Message, Witchcraft by a picture, The Apparition, Loves Dietie, Loves Diet, The Will, A Jeat Ring Sent, Negative Love, Farewell to Love. For example the following lines from his poem “A Jeat Ring Sent”, discusses the logic of wearing marriage rings. He questions the worth of a ring which is not as precious as their love and yet is worn to represent their love. His cynical wit is amply on display in these lines:
Marriage rings are not of this stuffe;
Oh! why should ought less precious, or less tough
Figure our loves? Except in thy name thou have bid it say,
I’ am cheap, and nought but fashion, fling me’ away.

[ A Jeat Ring Sent'; lines 5-8].

In the second group are the poems wherein Donne’s wit, whether casually or passionately cynical, is subordinate to the lover, it is pure and simple, singing at times with amazing simplicity and intensity of feeling, the joys of love and the sorrows of parting. These poems are The Good-marow, The Sunne Rising, The Canonisation, Lover’s infiniteness, Sweetest love, ‘I do not goe’, A Feaver, Air and Angels (touched with cynical humour at the close), Breake of day, The Anniversarie, A Valediction : of the booke, Loves growth, The Dreame, A Valediction: of weeping, The Baite, A Valediction: forbidding mourning, The Extasie, The Prohibition, The Expiration, Lecture upon the shadow. These poems, in which Donne has elaborated on the theme of mutual love, are charged with a tone of conviction and are expressed with a naked and natural force. It is commonly assumed that they must directly reflect an actual experience of exciting discovery of a new heaven and a new earth in love. Many critics have treated the poems as the celebration of his love for Ann More and their reckless marriage. But Donne himself has warned us against making any simple equation between the truth of the imagination and the truth of experience. There has to be the aesthetic distance as has been later asserted by T.S. Eliot also in his ‘Impersonal Theory of Poetry’. He believes that there is a ‘depersonalisation’ or the submerging of the artist’s personality in the process of poetic expression. Eliot believes that, ‘a great poet’s mind is a finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations’. He states that the proper emotion of a poem is to be found in the poem itself and not in the history of the poet. In this context, Eliot stresses on the need for an ‘objective correlative’, wherein the author needs to objectify the emotion to be conveyed. This can be achieved by finding a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events,
which shall be the formula of that particular emotion. Donne's works concur with this theory and his warning is indicative of entertaining similar views centuries before the formulation of this theory, by T.S. Eliot, once again confirming his thinking ahead of his times. Possessed with a high imaginative faculty, Donne rendered some poems like The Baite, which are purely literary in origin and others present the obverse side of the passion portrayed in the first group, its happier moments. For example the following lines from his poem 'Song, Sweetest love, I do not goe ', reflect on a seemingly actual experience of parting. He persuades his beloved to believe that he shall return very soon and shall travel faster than the Sun:

Yesternight the Sunne went hence,
And yet is here to day,
He hath no desire nor sense,
Nor halfe so so short a way:
Then feare not mee,
But beleve that I shall make
Speedier journeys, since I take
More wings and spurre then hee.

[ Song-Sweetest love, I do not goe' lines 9-16]

In the third and the smallest group are the poems which include however, such fine examples of his subtler moods as: The Funerall, The Blossome, The Primrose. Donne adopts the tone of the Petrarchan lover whose mistress' coldness has slain or provoked his passionate protestations. Some of these must have been written after Donne's marriage. The titles that one or two poems bear connect them with Mrs. Herbert and the Countess of Bedford. The two most enigmatic poems in the Songs and Sonnets are 'Twicknam Garden' and 'A nocturnal upon S.Lucies day'. For example, the following lines from his poem, 'Twicknam Garden', present to the reader the Petrarchan lover in Donne. He has been provoked by his beloved's indifference, and yet helplessly admits the truth that she represents:
Hither with christall vyals, lovers come,  
And take my teares, which are loves wine,  
And try your mistresse Teares at home,  
For all are false, that tast not just like mine;  
Alas, hearts do not in eyes shine,  
Nor can you more judge womans thoughts by teares,  
Then by her shadow, what she weares.  
O perverse sexe, where none is true but shee,  
Who's therefore true, because her truth kills me.  

[ Twicknam Garden', lines 19-27].

1.2.2. ELEGIES:

Donne's elegies were mostly audacious and displayed a passionate play of wit. For example, in Elegie III, he advocates the principle of change in following witty words:

To live in one land, is captivitie,  
To runne all countries, a wild roguery;  
Waters stinke soone, if in one place they bide,  
And in the vast sea are more putrif'd:  
But when they kisse one banke, and leaving this  
Never looke backe, but the next banke doe kisse,  
Then are they purest; Change' is the nursery  
Of musicke, joy life, and eternity.  

[ Elegie III-Change' ; lines 29-36]

His elegies often dealt with themes of seduction and illicit love and were accompanied by passion and scorn. For example:

Then since that I may know;  
As liberally, as to a Midwife, shew  
Thy self: cast all, yea, this white lynnhen hence,  
There is no pennance due to innocence.  
To teach thee, I am naked first, why than
What needst thou have more covering then a man.
[ 'Elegie- XIX-Going to Bed; lines 43-48]

In the twelfth elegy, Donne relates the passionate love that a lover felt for another man's wife:

And over all, thy husband's towring eyes
That flam'd with oylie sweat of jealousie:
[ 'Elegie -XII- His parting from her'; lines 42-43]

The elegies seem to have provided Donne with ample scope to voice his views and to support them with startling and strangely interesting arguments.

1.2.3 EPIGRAMS:

Donne's epigrams were much admired and some of his elegies were classed with them as satirical ' evaporations of wit '. Drummond says " I think if he would he might easily be the best epigrammatist we have found in English ; of which I have not seen any come near the Ancients ". For example:

Thy sinnes and haires may no man equal call,
For, as thy sinnes increase, thy haires doe fall.
[Epigram- ‘A licentious person’]

Donne has written three epithalamions: Marriage songs, of which nothing surpasses the Somerset Epithalamions in glamour and colour. Here is an example from an epithalamion, where he discusses the idea of the bride going to bed:

Know that if Sun and Moone together doe
Rise in one point, they doe not set so too;
Therefore thou maist, faire Bride, to be depart
Thou art not gone, being gone; where e'r thou art,
Thou leav'st in him thy watchfull eyes, in him thy loving heart
[ Epithalamion-The Brides going to bed; lines: 199-203]
The earliest date assigned to his satyres is 1593, or more probably 1594-95. Here is an example of his satiric views of puritan men who gauge the worth of others on the basis of their clothes and jewellery. In other words, he condemns those who attach unnecessary importance to external appearance:

**Oh monstrous, superstitious puritan,**

**Of refin'd manners, yet ceremoniall man,**

**That when thou meet'st one, with enquiring eyes**

**Dost search, and like a needy broker prize**

**The silke, and gold he weares, and to that rate**

**So high or low, dost raise thy formall hat:**

[ Satyre I; lines 27-32]

Of all Donne’s poems, his Epicedes and Obsequies are the most easy to date according to scholars. “The Anatomie of the world” and “Of the Progresse of the Soule” were the first poems to be published in Donne’s lifetime. The former was issued in 1611. It is exceedingly rare. Donne’s letters generally fall into two groups- The first addressed to his fellow-students at Cambridge and the Inns of court, the Woodwards, Brookes and others; or to his mature and more fashionable companions in the quest of favour and employment at court; Wotton, Goodyere, and Lord Herbert of Cherbury. The other group consists of the complimentary and elegant epistles in which he delighted and perhaps bewildered his noble lady friends and patronesses with erudite and transcendental flattery. Donne’s Divine Poems fall into two groups: those written before and those written after he took Holy orders.

### 1.2.4 Divine Poetry:

The Divine poetry does not belong only to his last years. They date from the distressful years following his marraige and the ensuing struggle-filled years to the more stable part of his life, when he found employment with the Church. The sonnets, La Corona and the Litanie were composed in 1608-1609. On the Annunciation and Passion, The Crosse and the fragment on the Resurrection were composed in 1609. And the Goodfriday is dated 1613, two years before his ordination. But the finest of the divine poems are the
expression of his heart under the influence of the death of his wife in 1617 and
the sickness that preceded his own death. The Holy Sonnets and the three
hymns composed in 1619 and 1623, 'In what torn ship', 'Since I am coming'
and 'Wilt thou forgive', give best expression to the sense of conflict of soul, of
faith and hope snatched and held desperately, of harmony evoked from harsh
combinations. The note of these poems is similar to that of the the greatest of
the Sermons.

1.2.5. PROSE WORKS:

The chief of the prose works were his numerous Sermons, his strange
Essays on Divinity (published in 1651), the Devotions on Emergent Occasions
and Severall steps in my Sickness (1624). In his Sermons, as in the Holy
Sonnets, Donne recaptures the peculiar charm of his early love verses at their
best. He carries his wit from his love verses to his Sermons, but with a slight
difference. Here the wit is more subdued, the fancy more sustained by the
dominant mood of religious solemnity. Donne was no showy preacher on the
quest for opportunities to introduce purple passages. Some of the best of his
Sermons move on a steady level of grave and sober reflection, just happy
thoughts, happy fancies, weighty sentences, but no bursts of eloquence.

1.3 LOVE POETRY:

Donne, in his early years, wrote mainly love-poetry wherein he
glorified earthly love. For example:

She' is all states, and all Princes, I,
Nothing else is.
Princes doe but play us; compar'd to this,
All honor's mimique; All wealth alchimie.
Thou sunne art halfe as happy' as wee,
In that the world's contracted thus;
Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee
To warne the world, that's done in warming us.

['The Sunne Rising'; lines 21-28]
According to Helen Gardner, "Donne has the claim to the title of our greatest love-poet". His 'Songs and Sonnets' display the widest range of moods and experiences revealed in his love poetry. He has touched on almost every mood of a man in love with a woman. Some of these moods are discussed below:

Once he glorifies love and says:

For love, all love of other sights controules,
And makes one little roome, an every where.

['The good-morrow'; lines 10-11]

And in another instance he questions the worth of the same emotion-love:

Ah, what a trifle is a heart,
If once into loves hands it come!
All other griefes allow a part
To other griefes, and aske themselves but some;

['The broken heart'; lines 9-12]

He expresses his cynical views about a woman's constancy by saying:

Though shee were true, when you met her,
And last, till you write your letter,
Yet shee
Will bee
Falfe, ere I come, to two, or three.

['Song-Goe, and Catche a falling Stare'; lines 23-27]

And at other times he swears undying and passionate love for a woman:

We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes;
As well a well wrought urne becomes
The greatest ashes, as halfe-acre tombes,
And by these hymnes, all shall approve
Us Canoniz'd for Love:

['The Canonization'; lines 32-36]

Donne is in some instances convinced that love is very physical and embodied:
So must pure lovers souls descend
T' affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

['The Extasie'; lines 65-68]

But at other times he stresses the importance and value of inner beauty:

But he who lovelinesse within
Hath found, all outward loathes,
For he who colour loves, and skinne,
Loves but their oldest clothes.

['The Undertaking'; lines 13-16]

Donne confesses his own preference for variety in love and openly flaunts his own inconstancy thus:

I can love both faire and browne,
Her whom abundance melts, and her whom want betraies,
Her who loves lonenesse best, and her who masks and plaies
Her whom the country form'd, and whom the town,

['The Indifferent'; lines 1-4]

Donne also experienced failure in love and expressed his frustration thus:

I am two fooles, I know,
For loving, and for saying so
In whining Poetry;

['The triple Foole'; lines 1-3]

Also very successfully, he consoles his unhappy beloved that their parting is temporary and they will soon be together again: For example:

But thinke that wee
Are but turn'd aside to sleepe;
They who one another keepe
Alive, ne'r parted bee.

['Song-Sweetest love, I do not goe'; lines 37-40]
And at other times he is very shrewd. He cunningly persuades the woman to
give in to him by stating seemingly logical reasons. For example:

\[
\text{Just so much honor, when thou yeeld' st to mee,} \\
\text{Will wast, as this flea's death tooke life from thee.}
\]

[‘The Flea’; lines 26-27]

His poetry being chiefly dramatic, he carried this quality into his expression
of the rapture of fulfilment and of the bliss of the union of love. Donne used a
highly persuasive tone and pseudo-logical arguments to woo his beloved, like
in ‘The Flea’. His love-poetry had the dramatic intensity of present experience.
For example:

\[
\text{Enter these armes, for since thou thoughtst it best,} \\
\text{Not to dreame all my dreame, let's act the rest.}
\]

[‘The Dreame’; lines 9-10]

In Donne, the technique of conceits reached its height of effectiveness. Helen
Gardner believed that the Metaphysical conceit was used for arguments or for
persuasion and not as a display of learning or decoration. However, there
were others who agreed with Samuel Johnson when he described conceit as,
“the most heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together”. A conceit can be
said to be a technique which brings together seemingly unrelated ideas only
to prove a point by contradiction. This technique of an unexpected twist or
turn used to prove a point is very commonly found in the literary form
“ghazal”. At times, an unexpected twist given to a whole situation brings out
the intended meaning in a better way than the ordinary presentation. Also,
the shock treatment that the reader gets in this style is quite enjoyable as the
human intellect appreciates and prefers change and pleasant shock to routine
expression. Donne’s conceits, his imagery, as Helen Gardner points out,
helped to persuade, urge and drive his point home to the listener. Donne’s
religious poetry, which he wrote in the latter part of his life, also carried love
imagery into arguments, coupled with the same persuasive tone as was used
in his early poetry. For example:

\[
\text{As thou} \\
\text{Art jealous, Lord, so I am jealous now,}
\]
Thou lov’st not, till from loving more, thou free
My soule: Who ever gives, takes libertie:
O, if thou car’st not whom I love
Alas, thou lov’st not mee.

['A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany'; lines 19-24]

1.4 DONNE AS THE PIONEER OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY:

Although Donne’s poetry was singular and distinct, some poets of the following generation were greatly influenced by him and this was revealed in their courtly and religious poetry. George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Henry Vaughan, Robert Herrick, Thomas Carew and Andrew Marvell are some of the poets who followed Donne’s style. Since Donne and his followers picked their imagery from the vast recesses of their learning and put them to unconventional use and deviated from the conventional trend of poetry in their use of metre, rhythm, language and expression, they were classed under the ‘Metaphysical’ school. (C.F. Chapter II).

1.5 THE CONCEPT OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY:

Strictly the word ‘Metaphysical’, means ‘based on abstract general reasoning’. But Donne’s poetry reveals a depth of philosophy, a subtlety of reasoning, a fine blending of thought and devotion and it is full of variety and surprise. However, the term ‘Metaphysical’ as applied to Donne and his subsequent school of poets was originally a derogatory label used by Drummond of Hawthornden in his letter to Arthur Johnson. He wrote,

"In vain have some Men of late (Transformers of every thing) consulted upon her (Poetry’s) Reformation, and endeavoured to abstract her to Metaphysical ideas, and Scholastical Quiddities, denuding her of her own Habits, and those ornaments with which she hath amused the whole World some Thousand Years”.

This was the first English appearance of the term in connection with poetry. Here, Drummond has highlighted Donne’s (misplaced, according to Drummond) originality and his rejection of conventional poetic ornamental
style. Unlike Dr. Johnson, Drummond did not use 'Metaphysical' as a term of literary criticism; but to imply a lack of literary criteria. It was loosely known to Dryden and Pope, whose use of the term was similar to that of Drummond. Becoming fixed by Dr. Samuel Johnson's employment in his "Life of Cowley", "The Metaphysical poets", stated Dr. Johnson, very clearly, "were men of learning, and to shew (show) learning was their whole endeavour". From the Restoration until the end of the 19th century, these poets were usually dismissed as crabbed, eccentric and chaotic. However, the twentieth century has been a witness to the most serious revival of interest in Donne and his school. H.J.C. Grierson after facing a lot of problems, of having to investigate on numerous manuscript collections of Donne's poems, finally came out with an edition of the poetical works in 1912 and this gave critics, one of the first comparatively definitive texts to work with. And ever since then, it remains the editio princeps even though with minor disagreements from others. T.S. Eliot, the one critic who has been highly instrumental in reviving studies in Donne, was stimulated by Grierson's work.

1.6 REVIVAL OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY AND INTEREST IN JOHN DONNE:

1.6.1. DONNE THROUGH CENTURIES:

Eliot's reference to "a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience" is certainly at the core of Donne's works. Ever since then, admiration has been on the increase for this group, with the term "Metaphysical", as a highly complimentary label. Eventually, many critics went on to place Donne in his rightful position, next to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. Today, Donne's prose and poetic output is more popular than it was in any other age. The reason for the revival of Donne and his school owes itself to the literary climate of the 20th century. The relevance and the appreciation is due to the importance 20th century has rendered to knowledge and intellectual approach as well as to some extent the resultant cynicism which became the vogue in the literary circles. Hence, it was natural for the 20th century writers like T.S. Eliot to feel closer to the sensibility of John
Donne. This in turn owes itself to the revival of Donne which inspired an interest in his work that was never before. Donne is the only other poet apart from Shakespeare, who has stood the test of time in being popular, and is especially appreciated in the 20th century. According to Peter Amadeus Fiore, two aspects of Donne’s style make him appeal to the present age—(i) ‘the remarkable subtlety with which he achieves an effect in a poem. For example:

O how feeble is mans power,
That if good fortune fall,
Cannot adde another houre,
Nor a lost houre recall!
    But come bad chance,
And wee joyne to’ it our strength,
And wee teach it art and length,
    It selfe o’r us to’ advance.
[Song Sweetest love, I do not goe’; lines 17-24]

and (ii) the grotesque images and metaphors which he uses at the most unlikely moments. For example:

Who e’r rigg’d faire ship to lie in harbors,
And not to seeke new lands, or not to deale withall?
Or built faire houses, set trees, and arbors,
Only to lock up, or else to let them fall?
    Good is not good, unlesse
A thousand it possesse,
    But doth wast with greediness.
[‘Confined Love’; lines 15-21]

The whole approach is that of profitability and utility which is quite characteristic of the 20th century which gave rise to a materialism that amounted to consumerism. Also, the kind of individualism and human-centered approach he expresses is similar to the one brought about by the role of “knowledge” in the 20th century. Gosse, at the end of his account of Donne’s life observed that, “No one, in the history of English literature, as it
seems to me, is so difficult to realise, so impossible to measure, in the vast
curves of his extraordinary and contradictory features". He pointed out that
the intellectual quality in Donne is what gives him part of his perennial
attraction: his complex and contradictory nature. The duality clearly pointed
out was that he was a sinner and a saint, he could be sublime and profane in
the same breath, he could be a rakish contemplative and a buffoon theologian,
he was a passionate lover and a calculated cynic, in him God and the Devil
were always competing for the mastery of his soul. All of us can be seen in
him as some aspect of our own nature, all of us can empathise and
sympathise with one or the other of his moods.

Mario Praz has said that the "revaluation of the Metaphysicals has
been an earthquake in the English Parmassus, reshaping the outline of its
summit as if it were a volcano", and has noted the significance of the revival
in helping to popularise common speech rhythms and seemingly unpoetic
language. The revival of interest in Donne's poetry in the 20th century does
not exactly imply that there was no interest shown in Donne's works in the
earlier centuries. However, the interest was rather negative as can be seen
through the analysis of the earlier centuries.

1.6.2 DONNE IN THE 17TH CENTURY:

Ben Jonson, a contemporary and admirer of Donne, described his
poetry as 'witty and excellent in some ways, metrically rough, difficult to
follow and occasionally sacrilegious'. Jonson believed that Donne was at the
top in many things and that it was difficult to express in words the praise
which was due to him. William Drummond of Hawthornden, who first used
the term 'Metaphysical' which later became a permanent label for this school
of poetry, was also an admirer of Donne and a collector of his writings. Giles
Oldisworth found hidden references and allegories throughout Donne's
poetry. Constantine Huygens, a Dutch diplomat and poet admired Donne
over a period of fifty years. In his autobiographical poem, written at the end
of his life, Huygens described the impression Donne made upon him as follows:

"From your golden mouth, whether in the chamber of a friend, or in the pulpit, fell the speech of Gods, whose nectar I drank again and again with heartfelt joy".

In the latter part of the 17th century Dryden described Donne as, "... the greatest wit, though not the best poet of our Nation". Dryden said about Donne that he, "perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy when he should ingage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love". Though Donne himself had admirers even in 17th century, in general, the 17th century writers did not have much to say about Metaphysical poetry. Although they discussed the metaphor, wit and logical structure, which were regarded as typical of Donne and the Metaphysicals, the general approval was missing.

1.6.3 DONNE IN THE 18TH CENTURY:

The 18th century saw no dramatic change in the fortune of Donne. Most 18th century critics were not very familiar with Donne's writings and so could not have any proper knowledge of his poetry. Alexander Pope praised Donne for his wit, while David Hume said of Donne's satires,

"...there appear some flashes of wit and ingenuity; but these (were) totally suffocated and buried by the hardest and most uncouth expression that is anywhere to be met with",

Dr. Samuel Johnson, as a critic, caused more harm to Donne's image as a poet, than any other critic. Johnson believed that, "the Metaphysical poets were men of learning and to shew (show) their learning was their whole endeavour". According to Johnson, the Metaphysicals in their use of conceits and wit, ransacked nature and art for illustrations, comparisons and allusions. And they thus combined the most heterogeneous ideas violently together. He believed that the Metaphysicals could not represent the wholeness of life and the prospects of nature through their slender conceits and fragments of broken images. He explains this by the example of a man
who cannot exhibit the wide radiance of a summer noon by dissecting a sunbeam with a prism. Johnson believed that the Metaphysicals had a greater craving to be admired rather than be understood and thus "drew their conceits from recesses of learning not very much frequented by common readers of poetry".

The comparison of a travelling man, and his wife at home to the legs of a compass in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" is considered by Johnson as more absurd than ingenius. Johnson's criticism of Donne and his idea of him as a frigid conceit-monger influenced people for over a hundred years after him. And most of the fresh enthusiasts, students and critics of Donne had to first resist these attitudes about Donne. In general, people of the 18th century associated Donne with a decline in manners resulting in the barbarism of civil war and thus felt a strong dislike for him. But the English poets of the last years of the 18th century helped reverse the views of the older writers on Donne. They praised Donne for his warmth of soul and his conceits, which were believed to be an outcome of excess of erotic warmth and fervour. This changed attitude was a result of the reversal of established views. The climate can be said to begin changing for Donne even towards the end of the 18th century.

1.6.4 DONNE IN THE 19TH CENTURY:

Most critics of the 19th century came to his poetry with preconceived notions too. But eventually they were drawn by the sheer power of his poetry to admire it. Samuel Taylor Coleridge put Donne on par with Shakespeare for sheer opulence of creative imagination, the quintessential poetic power. For Coleridge, Donne's wit was not wanton ingenuity but a purposeful mental life and the necessary expression of thought. Coleridge has thrown light on the distinctive feature of Donne's wit:

"Wonder-exciting vigour, intensioness and peculiarity of thought, using at will the almost boundless stores of a capacious memory, and
exercised on subjects, where we have no right to expect it—this is the wit of Donne”.

Donne was known to be an avid reader and the knowledge he acquired thus was unconsciously analysed, classified and stored in his memory. And wherever he was engaged in explaining his ideas, he just tapped his memory to pick images that best exemplified his view, irrespective of the field from which the image was picked. These images were startling and possessed with a certain intensity of thought and emotion. They were distinct in their use and they managed to shock the reader, who was so far fed with only the conventional images by the preceding poets. Donne made use of highly concrete images from various aspects of life to explain very intricate emotions and feelings. This tendency elicited shock as well as awe from the audience. He compared his beloved’s tears to a globe, the love of the lovers to the two hemispheres of the earth or he even compared the woman to a shell and her love to the kernell. But a classic example of this kind of imagery is that of the compass. Any reference to Donne, brings to mind this image, which over the years has been associated with him more than any other image. In this image, Donne compares the fixed foot to a woman and the moving foot to the man and explains the intricate man-woman relationship with the functioning of the compass:

If they be two, they are two so
   As stiffe twin compasses are two,
Thy soule the fixt foot, makes no show
   To move, but doth, if the’ other doe.

And though it in the center sit,
   Yet when the other far doth rome,
It leaves and hearkens after it,
   And growes erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to mee, who must
   Like th’ other foot, obliquely runne;
Thy firmnes makes my circle just,
And makes me end, where I begunne.

['A Valediction: forbidding mourning'; lines 25-36]

In the present times one appreciates it as the most intelligent image unlike in the earlier times.

Charles Lamb was an early enthusiast and the first to defend Donne's poetry in print against Johnson's strictures. Lamb did not find Donne's poetry either unnatural or cold. William Hazlitt, who largely borrowed from the views of Johnson, lashed out bitterly at Donne and the Metaphysicals. Hazlitt agreed with Johnson, that the Metaphysicals would have been more appreciated if they concentrated less on extravagance and affectation. Thomas De Quincey, on the contrary, made a memorable comment on Donne's rhetoric:

"Few writers have shown a more extraordinary compass of powers than Donne, for he combined what no other man has ever done the last sublimation of dialectical subtlety and address with the most impassioned majesty. Massy diamonds compose the very substance of his poem on Metempsychosis . . . . whilst a diamond dust of rhetorical brilliances is strewn over the whole of his occasional verses and his prose".

Victorian critics, who were enthusiastic about Donne's writings, set themselves to prove Johnson wrong by speaking of their opposite experience of Donne's verse, to which they attributed such qualities as fervour, depth of understanding and even pure melody,(This attitude in fact, leads Twentieth Century critics to a fullfledged appreciation of Donne) which Johnson firmly believed was lacking in Donne's verse. Lowe preferred the demanding ruggedness of Donne's verse, which he considered wholesome, to the corrupt, smooth flats of modern song. He measures Donne up to Shakespeare. J.R. Lowell was denied recognition for his fine appraisal of Donne's poetry. He described Donne as a truly sublime poet:

"One of the subtlest and most self-irradiating minds that ever sought an outlet in verse". "He wrote more profound verses than anyone
else in English save Shakespeare and was capable of ‘the supreme function of poetry’- of opening “vistas” for the imagination through the blind wall of the senses”.

Robert Browning, succeeds Coleridge in becoming the leading advocate of Donne in the 19th century. He was himself often compared to Donne. Browning frequently received broad suggestions from Donne for his poetic structures, technique and imagery. He was influenced by Donne in the development of the dramatic monologue, in his experimentation with conversational metrics and idiom and also in his use of Metaphysical logic, conceits and wit. Alexander Ballock Grosart brought out a scholarly edition of Donne’s poems in 1872 for the Fuller Worthies Library, which was the first English attempt since the 17th century to re-edit all the poems from the early manuscripts. Grosart recognised the allusions and images to carry in their heart “some splendid thought altogether out of the beaten track . . . which comes with absolute surprise in the place”. Fifty years since Grosart’s edition, Donne gained importance and popularity. But throughout the 19th century Donne retained the image of a poet of puzzling self-contradictions, “mingled beauties and deformities”, who can throw off passages of unequalled imaginative grandeur then go back like a log to his wallow (as Swinburne puts it). He was viewed as a man almost equally fascinating and repellent. Since Grosart’s edition of Donne’s poems, there was a steady quickening in the tempo of the revival of the Metaphysicals. He was the first of the three G’s- Grosart, Gosse and Grierson who dominated this scenario of revival. In 1899, Gosse published a biography of Donne and there were many editions of his poems, his biography and several other articles that were published in the 1890’s. Thus, the 19th century saw a sea-change in the attitude of critics towards Donne’s poetry.

Herbert J.C. Grierson published his edition of Donne’s poems in 1912. And almost all the reviews of this edition referred to Donne’s revival as a ‘fait accompli’. E.K. Chambers remarked that Donne’s reputation “stands now higher than ever it did since a new manner of writing displaced his”, and he
gave credit to "men of letters caught by the essential poetry in Donne and literary historians, discerning his unique influence up on the fashioning of Caroline verse" for this revival. Rupert Brooke in his review expressed his joy that "Donne's glory is ever increasing". For the most part of the 19th century, admiration for Donne and the Metaphysicals was mostly individual admiration, but the preference for this kind of poetry by the general public was soon gaining momentum.

1.6.5 DONNE IN THE 20TH CENTURY:

Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Donne, and an admirer too, had once remarked that Donne would perish "for not being understood". But the Twentieth Century has disproved this remark. The revival of Metaphysical poetry and of Donne in particular has been described by many critics as a major literary event, and one which has greatly influenced contemporary taste. This owes itself to the intellectual awakening of the Twentieth Century mind.

Prof. Grierson dominated the scenario of revival, when he published his critical edition of Donne's poems in 1912. Grosart's edition of Donne's poems and Edmund Gosse's two volumes of 'The Life and Letters' published in 1899 acted as precursors. In 1921, Grierson published his 'Metaphysical lyrics and poems of the Seventeenth century' for which T.S. Eliot wrote a review. In his essay, Eliot stressed on Donne being in the direct current of English poetry and described "a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience". Although Donne's contemporaries did not regard him as a mystery, the later 19th century was fascinated by the seeming paradox between Jack Donne and John Donne. Many critics agreed with Campbell's early declaration that the life of Donne was more interesting than his poetry. The earlier critics in their attempts to dramatise the personality of Donne, were less consciously helping another important phase of the revival. All their ideas became well formulated in some of T.S. Eliot's essays of the 1920s. The ideas such as the merging of thought and feeling, psychological
realism, and the modernity of the Metaphysical poets were already pronounced in the late 19th and early 20th century criticism. But Eliot helped crystallise them in his essays, "The Metaphysical Poets", "Andrew Marvell", and "John Donne". Eliot held that much 17th century Metaphysical poetry reflected a unified sensibility that could relate disparate experience. He explained that Metaphysical poetry often expressed the truth of human experience in all its flux, complexity, ambiguity, and declared that this earlier poetry was similar to much modern poetry. A drastic change in thinking made critics agree that intellectual devices could play a significant role in the expression of sincere personal feeling. It only proved Donne to have been writing three hundred years ahead of his times. In his admiration of Metaphysical poetry, Eliot held that one of the chief aims of writing was to convert the frontiers of experiences into poetry. He thus gave an ultimate aesthetic justification to this sensibility. Eliot charted literary history by applying the new psychological theories. He thus came to regard the early 17th century as predominantly a period of unified sensibility and the latter part of the 17th century and afterward as a period of "dissociated sensibility", which was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century Milton and Dryden.

Eliot’s enthusiasm for Metaphysical poetry and for Donne in particular reached its peak by the middle of 1920s. However, Eliot’s attitude took a new turn in his later essays. His essay "Donne in Our Time", written in 1931 records the shift and it was accompanied by a change in his poetry. This goes on to suggest that Eliot’s response to a poet was in some measure influenced or modified by his current needs. The shift in his attitude became noticeable in his essay written in 1926 on “Lancelot Andrews”. Here he saw Donne as a poet who “merely picked up, like a magpie, various shining fragments of ideas as they struck his eye, and stuck them about here and there in his verse”, and Eliot goes on to claim that he found “only a vast jumble of incoherent erudition on which he drew for purely poetic effects”. One finds these ideas to be petulant when one recalls Eliot’s earlier observation: ‘
thought to Donne was an experience, it modified his sensibility.’ In his earlier essays, Eliot says of the Metaphysicals: ‘Their mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by their reading’ - Eliot’s erudition and the manner in which he carries it into his poetry shows his kinship to Donne. Eliot’s poetry had a Metaphysical quality which stems from his attitude to the material of poetry and his poetic practice. ‘The Waste Land’ marks the end of his earlier kind of poetry. The change, which is directly related to Eliot’s acceptance of the Christain faith, becomes pronounced in the rhythm and traditional imagery such as the rose, the garden, the fountain, the yew, of ‘Ash Wednesday’. Also the dramatic style of his earlier poetry faces a complete rejection. And this change is accompanied by a shift in his attitude to Donne. Helen Gardener has noted in ‘The Art of T.S. Eliot’, that in his earlier poetry, the movement was from boredom to something akin to horror. In ‘Ash Wednesday’, his latter, poetry, the movement is from horror to glimpses of glory. But Helen Gardener notes here that Eliot’s development ‘has been a growth in the understanding of his earlier experiences, not a rejection of it’. F.O. Matthiessen agrees on this point. But Eliot’s change in attitude was clearly evident in his tendency to disparge Donne and the Metaphysicals in contrasting them with his new ideal Dante. Eliot, contradicting his earlier statements, held that in Donne, there was ‘hardly any attempt at organisation; rather a puzzled and humourous shuffling of the pieces’. He saw a ‘manifest fissure between thought and sensibility’ and sometimes a conscious contradiction between thought and feeling. Within a span of ten years, Eliot’s attitude towards Donne changed to a great extent. By 1930, although there was a shift in his attitude towards Donne, Eliot asserted that the ‘two great creative acts of Donne, were his introduction of a new vocabulary and his introduction of fresh metres into Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry’.” But Eliot’s essay of 1931, in connection with the Donne tercentenary, reveals a greater shift in attitude towards Donne. Eliot, who in 1921, recommended the Metaphysical poets as a valuable new discovery, did no longer regard Donne’s poetry as a concern of the future, by 1931. He wrote that his enjoyment of Donne ‘was a fashion’. Eliot, commented on the
fissure between Donne’s thought and sensibility which characterised Donne’s learning as “just information suffused with emotion or combined with emotion not essentially relevant to it”. Eliot went back to the Johnsonian criticism. The one who once approved of the Metaphysicals as models for a generation of poets groping with modern complexities, contradicted himself by declaring in his Donne tercentenary essay, that there was none so fit a model for all poets as Dante. Within about a decade, he cast doubt on his early attitude towards Milton and his own theory of the dissociation of sensibility. And not much later, he included Milton, with Dante and Racine among the “great poets from whom we can learn negative rules” and he went on to recommend the study of their poetry to modern poets. Although Eliot has time and again contradicted his own statements and ideas, his criticism has contributed greatly to the Donne revival. And the greatest similarity between Donne and Eliot is that they taught their fellow poets what it means to be contemporary . . . . To be contemporary in the right sense means to find the peculiar emotional tension of the time and to mould language to its expression.

1.6.6. DONNE AND THE AMERICAN CRITICS:

American critics, like the English critics, were enchanted with Donne’s ‘Persona’. Chadwick, described Donne as himself being ‘the one riddle surpassing all those connected with his life’. Some others found a clouded mystery surrounding Donne. But by and large many American writers read and enjoyed Donne and the Metaphysicals. According to Edgar Allan Poe, the writings of the Metaphysicals ‘sprang immediately from the soul and partook intensely of that soul’s nature’. Emerson, the 19th century American poet was frequently compared to the 17th century Metaphysical poets. Emily Dickinson’s habit of transposing an experience into new terms in a different realm of being and her use of the witty, or mischievous tone in a serious context, liken her to the Metaphysicals. Hopkins, like Donne, found relationships between abstract thought and sensuous experience. Thompson found Donne ‘pregnant’, ‘pungent’, and ‘clever’ — but little more. But
Thoreau differed in his view of Donne and concluded, “Donne was not a poet but a man of strong sense, a sturdy English thinker full of conceits and whimsicalities, hammering away at his subject . . . . with an occasional fine distinction or poetic phrase”. Thoreau himself shared Donne’s delight in astronomical figures and his feelings for an almost mystic union in love. E.K. Chambers remarked that Donne’s reputation ‘stands now higher than ever it did, since a new manner of writing first displaced his’, and credited the revival to men of letters. Caught by the essential poetry in Donne, the literary historians, discerned his unique influence upon the fashioning of Caroline verses.

1.7 DONNE’S PRESENT POPULARITY: A SUMMARY:

Donne’s popularity in the present century can be accounted by spelling out a number of reasons. His compulsion to make explicit in language what was implicit in his deepest and most anguished experiences typifies our own present day problem of communication. In a generation, where very little is taken for granted, his reason, debate and argumentative style is highly appreciated. His use of the Socratic technique reveals his knowledge of law and scholastic philosophy. An age, wherein one is greatly concerned with world community, equality and the dream of an eventual celestial city, one is greatly impressed by the ever-recurring microcosm-macrocosm conceit in Donne’s poetry. The brilliance of his presentations is something that appeals to the 20th century mind, which has been exposed to complexity of life and has been able to absorb that experience more in an intellectual frame and intricate interaction to the environment.