

sentiments must have been written at a different time from those that express a cynical view of man's love and woman's virtue' (p. xxi). So far, then, the stress has fallen firmly on the impossibility, and the irrelevance, of dating the Songs and Sonnets.

But by the time we reach p. xxiii, we find a very different emphasis creeping into the argument. We learn that to value Donne's love-poetry as poetry is 'not inconsistent with valuing the poems as a whole, as expressive of a single poetic personality, and with the desire to trace in them a coherent imaginative, intellectual and artistic development that we can relate to the course of Donne's life and to the totality of his work in verse and prose'. That innocent litotes, 'not inconsistent', turns out to hide a wealth of significance; and the term 'desire' suggests the motive force behind much that follows. *If one desires to trace a development, one will tend to look for evidence that confirms development rather than impartially examining such evidence as there is. Still, granted the desire, what evidence should we seek?* Dr. Gardner categorically rejects attempts to date the poems by 'biographical inferences', since the method is *unsound and anyway applies to only a few of them*. But she argues that 'we can, on objective grounds, distinguish groups of poems and that we can assign these to certain periods of Donne's life. Having done so we are presented with a coherent development' (p. xxiii).

For the rest of section I, Dr. Gardner, after referring us to section III for the proof of dating, goes on to discuss the Songs and Sonnets as though their dates had already been established. Thus, although we have been asked to examine the proofs, the very terms in which the poems' literary qualities are discussed presupposes the proof to have been made, so that we come away from section I with a not altogether conscious bias in favour of whatever evidence may be presented. The impression is further strengthened by the use of the word 'objective' in the last quotation above, for we know that a scholar of Dr. Gardner's reputation would not use such a term lightly.

Section III (pp. xlvii ff.) starts with a brief discussion of the canon; then we have a couple of pages devoted to the

question why there are no early references to the Songs and Sonnets. These pages (xlix-li) are extremely confusing, and leave me utterly unsure whether Dr. Gardner thinks that the poems were, or were not, widely circulated at an early date. Neither am I sure how, in these pages, her attempt to *date* the poems by early references turns into an attempt to *link* them. But in any case she rejects the whole *procédé* as *unsound—and this is the point*. We see the editor meticulously weighing up evidence and then scrupulously dismissing an entire method because 'the evidence is inconclusive and the conclusions . . . too speculative to be employed in argument'. We therefore suppose that in what follows—the nub of Dr. Gardner's argument—she will be equally careful. Hence we are less inclined to protest when she goes on to describe the 'objective criteria' by which the Songs and Sonnets can be classified and dated.

There are two objective criteria, she says: we can group the poems 'on the basis of the kind of relation between a man and a woman that they assume', or, secondly, we can group them 'by metrical form' (p. li). But surely the human relations assumed by a poem depends on one's reading of it, and is thus a critical question. It is a matter of common observation that in this respect well-equipped critics in fact differ enormously. How then can the criterion be called 'objective'? Dr. Gardner's own reading of 'The Good Morrow', for instance, seems to me perverse: on p. liii she classifies it as a 'celebration of union', but to me it looks more like a desperate attempt on the poet's part to persuade himself that such a union has been achieved. I make this point only in order to suggest that *nobody's* view of what a poem is about can ever be 'objective' in the same way as an account of metrical form is objective. To *imply* that it can is to do violence to both language and common sense.

Dr. Gardner, however, proceeds on her way. She divides the Songs and Sonnets into three main groups. The first consists of poems untouched by any idealisation of the lady; the second, of poems of unrequited love; and the third of poems of mutual love (see pp. li-liv—I am compressing, of course). About this classification—apart from its not being 'objective'—I observe two things. To start with, I note how