Ben Jonson 1572-1637

Ben Jonson, friend, admirer, and almost exact contemporary of John Donne, was unlike him as a man and as a poet. The stepson of a bricklayer, to whom he was for a while apprenticed, Jonson entered the military service for money rather than for adventure. In 1591-92 he fought the Spanish on land in Flanders whereas Donne later, under the Earl of Essex, raided them by sea at Cadiz and the Azores. In 1598 Jonson converted to (rather than, like Donne, from) Catholicism. By nature self-important and quarrelsome, Jonson was frequently embroiled in controversy. He was imprisoned twice (1597, 1604-5) for acting in plays offensive to the government. During the year of his conversion to Catholicism, Jonson killed a fellow actor in a duel. He escaped hanging only by claiming benefit of clergy, an ancient immunity to civil punishment granted to the accused who could show an ability to read and write Latin. Though Jonson’s reading his “neck verse” merely enabled him to be tried in a more lenient court, the effect was the same as in earlier times.

Also in 1598 the Lord Chamberlain’s Men performed Jonson’s first play, Everyman in His Humour, with Shakespeare in the cast. The burly actor-playwright became, along with Shakespeare and John Fletcher, a mainstay of the company. He wrote his greatest plays, comedies ridiculing eccentricities and greed, between about 1605 and 1614, when Donne’s fortunes were at low ebb. In 1616, a year after Donne had given up hope for worldly promotion and had entered the Anglican priesthood, Jonson became the first English author to publish his own complete works—in large, impressive volumes normally reserved for editions of famous classical authors. The same year, Jonson was made poet laureate and pensioned by the king.

From this time until the king’s death in 1625, Jonson ruled despotically his own kingdom, literary London. As poet, critic, playwright, and primary court entertainer, he was the complete man of letters of his day. Skilled in all the minor classical genres as well as the drama, Jonson led a group of young poets with common political, religious, and poetic affinities, Royalist, Catholic or High Anglican, and classicist, they consorted with prominent figures at court and also with rationalist theologians patronized by Lord Falkland. Their poetry shows an inclination to locate the good life on earth and to define it in purely secular terms. Death, if mentioned at all, is an unrelieved tragedy. Self-styled the “tribe of Ben,” they formed the nucleus of what came to be known as the Cavalier poets. After the accession of Charles I, Jonson’s achievement and influence declined while Donne’s continued to rise.

Though Jonson’s poetry is most certainly not without wit and intellectual strength, its goal is the concealed artistry and naturalness of classical style rather than the flouted ingenuities and contortions of the metaphysical manner. Jonsonian meter and syntax are smooth, unlike those of Donne, who, said Jonson, “for not keeping of accent deserved hanging.” Metaphors are few and inconspicuous. Al-
lusions are undisturbing. Poetic effects are governed by decorum: a concern for harmony and propriety.

Jonsonian neoclassical style and themes, promoting rational moderation, became dominant in English poetry around 1688 in an age eager for stability after civil turmoil. Thereafter, Jonson’s reputation rose while Donne’s entered an eclipse lasting more than two hundred years.