NOTE ON THE SECOND IMPRESSION

In the above-mentioned letter Mr Sparrow also urges that the
canon of the Songs and Sonets should include Elegy X: The Dream.
He rightly indicates that this poem has a quite different rhyme-
scheme from all the other Elegies, which are in rhymed couplets.
He also points out that the transfer would have the authority of one
group of MSS. Mr Sparrow's case seems to me strong; and had I
not to restrict changes to a minimum I should have printed the
poem with notes. This would, however, have involved many con-
sequential changes, and I must therefore postpone doing so.

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INTRODUCTION

1. THE STATUS OF THE 'SONGS AND SONETS' IN ENGLISH POETRY

Donne's Songs and Sonnets are among the three or four finest collections of love-lyrics in the English language. Such a high valuation still requires emphasis, despite the fact that these poems are read and appreciated far more than they were, say, fifty years ago. Too many readers of poetry, even in England, would still omit Donne's name from a list of the supreme love-lyrists of England, while readily including the names of Herrick, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne. This is probably partly because the Songs and Sonnets still remain comparatively little known:1 but there are other reasons. One reason is the lingering prejudice that love-lyrics should be expressions of feeling unalloyed with any marked degree of cerebration. Donne's love-lyrics spring partly from a strong and ingenious head. They are therefore liable to give the impression of being merely brain-spun. In fact, that is very seldom the case, since they also come from a passionate heart. Another reason is that many people are put off by the sheer difficulty of the sense of many passages. Ben Jonson prophesied that the poetry of Donne would perish for lack of being understood. It has not yet perished, but though it is read now perhaps much more than at any time since the seventeenth century, it offers much difficulty, and it is doubtful how far even the bare sense of some of the poems is really understood. In the case of the Songs and Sonnets, however, trouble taken in trying to understand the sense is almost always amply rewarded. A further obstacle to the just evaluation of the poems is the fairly widespread conception of Donne as a merely flippant, cynical love poet. Among the causes of the spread of this

1. In a widely circulated anthology (The Oxford Book of English Verse) only 7 pages are allotted to Donne (as compared with 21 to Herrick, 19 to Shelley, 23 to Tennyson, 20 to Browning, and 12 to Swinburne). Moreover, of the seven poems ascribed to Donne, one is probably not by him at all; and only four of the Songs and Sonnets are given. Again, in the last edition of Palgrave's Golden Treasury (1941, reprinted 1954), not a single poem by Donne is included.