John Donne and the New Philosophy

John Donne (1572-1631) is a Metaphysical Poet: he speaks about feelings, love, religion but chooses metaphors taken from all sectors of knowledge: astronomy, medicine, technology, geography, alchemy (the future chemistry).... He is a master of conceits, long metaphors which find similarities between objects or situations which apparently have nothing in common (1).

His style is sometimes colloquial, sometimes complicated, but never sentimental or languid. He has a rational approach to feelings. He shows an astounding ability in playing with words and in combining them unexpectedly. This is what we know as “wit”.

Donne lives during the very beginning of the scientific revolution, an age witnessing far-reaching transformations in the up-till-then universally accepted world picture.

John Donne, who was born a Catholic, is conservative down deep inside: he feels the innovative power of the new science, but he knows that it is going to destroy a vision of the world which he finds reassuring: the old, harmonious, coherent world picture.
Astronomy

John Donne refers to both the Ptolemaic and the Copernican astronomical system, but his approval goes to the medieval cosmological order, because the new one is still too unclear, confused and confusing, while the medieval world enjoyed a perfect symmetry and order, giving every element its proper place in a universe made by God’s supreme mind.

Donne believes in the motion of the spheres (2).

He believes in their immaterial nature, their being inhabited by Intelligences (3).

He also states their ability to influence human personality according to the astrological/astronomical tradition (4).

He often refers to the difference between the sublunary world, subject to material change, and the incorruptible Heavens (5).
On the other hand, Donne has a very up-to-date knowledge of scientific discoveries. He refers to
the disappearance of the sphere of Fire;
the upheaval of the cosmological order;
the discovery of new celestial bodies (the Novae);
but he always does so by giving a very negative opinion about them (6).
When Donne refers to the Copernican Revolution, his attitude is definitely sceptical: New Philosophy is whimsical, excessively daring, but brings about disastrous consequences in transforming the world picture for the worse (“The world’s proportion disfigured is”). (7).

In one passage the major breakthrough of the age is, quite astonishingly, equated with mental torpor (8).

In conclusion, let us not consider John Donne as an obscurantist. His era witnessed the collapse of a system that had been universally accepted for centuries. The old Ptolemaic world mirrored a perfect order designed by God, where everything and everyone could find its/his appointed place in “The Great Chain of Being”, where a thick network of correspondences united reality in one great masterpiece.

Now the old system is crumbling down; the New Philosophy is still incomplete, still labouring to emerge from the fragments gathered by the new scientists in the seventeenth century. It is the moment when, as Donne himself says, “'Tis all in pieces”. How can a cultivated man of his time be enthusiastic about it?