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The Desire of the Critic

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Ben Saunders, *Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006. xii + 248 pp.

Ben Saunders tells us in his introduction that the aim of his book is to understand—or perhaps to linger over, expatiate upon, exploit, or play postmodernist word games with—"my central concept of 'interpretive desire'" (p. 2). His title, "Desiring Donne," oscillates between two not unrelated meanings: the desire of the critic or critics for Donne, or for whatever Donne represents to them personally or ideologically; and Donne's unquenchable desire, immoderate yet seemingly constant, although it directs itself by turns toward different objects, such as career, wife, poetry, philosophical or theological truth, the saving of souls, God, and death. One might even say, or at least Saunders suggests (p. 195), that Donne's desire was directed toward what Donne might have called *objet petit a*, if only he had had the anachronistic privilege of reading Lacan.

On its face, this is an ambitious project, which could have large implications for literary scholarship generally, and not just for Donne. It has often appeared to me in the course of my reading in the secondary literature that many or most critics have agendas of various kinds, and sometimes these agendas are uncomfortably obvious. Usually the best of critics do what they do because they love literature, or because they feel drawn toward particular authors and want to share the experience and explain to others why this should be so. Others, especially in recent times, have a political agenda, and want to use their chosen author or authors to make predictable political points about race, class, or gender. Still others are ambitious for power in the academy, and play games with their authors with that end in mind. Less ambitious, others write because

they must, to gain tenure, and often these critics cease writing once that is achieved. Others write for their friends, within the discourse of a scholarly community. Or, it may be, most often, there is some mixture of these and still other motives.

My own interest concerning the agendas and motives of other scholars has usually been to notice and discount them. I want to learn what they can genuinely tell me about the author and works in question, and sometimes the most egregiously ideological writers can produce useful insights or new facts, but I do not agree to be converted to whatever their particular cause might be. If I happen to agree or partly agree with their agendas, it will be based on my own understanding of the matter, not their covert or, in the recent postmodernist fashion, not so covert efforts at persuasion. In other words, one usually looks for the motives of critics in order to discount them.

In the case of literary criticism—and to some degree even of scientific investigations—a scholar is rightly motivated by feelings as well as intellect. To employ some old but well tested terms, critics should engage poetry with their hearts and their reins as well as their heads. So it is certainly not wrong to desire Donne in certain ways, or to consider closely the nature of Donne's desires. Nevertheless, although a critic should certainly ask, What do I feel about this poem? What does it make me feel? What, perhaps, did the poet feel?, he is also under some obligation to stand back and make an effort to disentangle his own feelings from the probable feelings of the poet, or what he judges the poet intends his reader to feel, and to separate what is purely personal from what other readers of the poem might reasonably be expected to feel about it. Almost at the beginning of modern criticism, I. A. Richards conducted some famous experiments with his Cambridge students, which revealed that all of them came up with different, often inconsistent, sometimes bizarre readings of the poems he gave them, depending on their backgrounds and prior life experiences. That could teach us, as reader response theorists have since argued, that there is no such thing as an objective poem or a well wrought urn, but only different readers or communities of readers. Everyone has his own personal reading, and is entitled to it. Every community, or at least every right-minded community, has a right and duty to construct its own version of reality. (Wrong minded communities should be rebuked and suppressed.) Or obversely it could teach us, as Richards thought earlier,

that we need to dig deeper and work harder to eliminate private, accidental, and cultural biases, in order to move closer toward or arrive in the vicinity of something like objective truth. The aim is not to eliminate heart and reins, but to discipline and refine them, and thus to deepen them.

Thus it could be most profitable and basic to the critical project to understand more clearly the desire of criticism and the criticism of desire. But, as I have probably already revealed, I agree with Richards's view that the critic's job is to understand these matters in order to rise above them, to eliminate accidental particularities in order to move toward a more objective and universal understanding. Certainly not to eliminate one's own desire, which would be undesirable and is in fact impossible, but to understand it and so far as possible to refine or redirect it. And perhaps to introduce another term beyond desire, which is generally unfamiliar in postmodernist discourse: namely, love. Heart, mind, and reins; love, understanding, and desire; not just understanding and desire alone. Surely Donne is a poet of love as well as desire.

I have expatiated at such length because I find Saunders's book, though highly intelligent, also to be constantly self-reflexive, like someone looking at himself in a mirror, perhaps with some of his postmodernist friends and teachers standing in the background. Its project certainly is not to look at desire as something to understand and come to terms with, but as something to be bowed down to and worshipped, and never really to be questioned. At least, that is my take on the book. Sometimes the postmodernist wordplay seems to be indulged in for its own sake and muddies the message. Yet that is ultimately what I come away with. Perhaps the crux of what Saunders is getting at is suggested by a typical passage in his introduction:

> To conceive of literary interpretation as an expression of desire is to open a large can of bookworms. . . . Of course, in recent years, the various methodologies of historicism, poststructuralism, political criticism, psychoanalysis, and reader-response criticism, in their differently inflected ways, have made us wary of saying that the text "speaks for itself." But the profession has been more reluctant to consider some corollary positions. For if the text does not speak for itself, it follows that at some level we must make it speak for us, of our desires, and not only our desires as individuals but also the

> collective desires that percolate and bubble within the osmotic boundaries of interpretive communities, desires that we sometimes call "ideological."
>
> (p. 4)

Removing wordplay and jargon, what I think this boils down to is that since there is no such thing as a speaking poem out there, "we must *make* it speak for *us*" (italics added). The critic's job is to impose his own desires on the poem, not to put his own particular quirks aside and try to see what the poem has to say for itself—since postmodernists agree that that is an impossibility anyway. So we make it or force it to say what we want it to say.

What does Saunders mean by "we"? Partly, he means "I," the writer who shapes the book and imposes his views and desires on the poems he treats and the readers he envisages. Partly, he means the interpretive community—a right thinking community, of course, properly educated in "historicism, poststructuralism, political criticism, [Lacanian] psychoanalysis, and reader-response criticism"—all the various postmodernist schools designed by critics to manipulate the poem and the reader's view of it. And the desired end is, basically, political or "ideological," what we might call the ideology of desire. Desire fades seamlessly into theory and ideology in this way of thinking. As Saunders writes on the following page:

> Perhaps more provocatively, it might allow us to name different interpretive desires not according to chilly institutional and professional categories (such as "formalist," "deconstructivist," "humanist," "feminist," or "historicist") but as fundamentally emotional and affective responses (acts of identification, admiration, mourning, nostalgia, lust, disgust, and so on.
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> (p. 5)

In other words, our desires shape and mold and underlie our ideologies and theories, and the desire of the critic is to force the poem into a particular mold ("we must make it speak for us") and to impose that particular ideology, which he desires, upon his readers. The object is not to understand or to feel with the poem, the poet, or the common reader, but to impose an ideological construct upon all three.

At least I think that is the message I read through the obfuscatory language. But perhaps I should let Saunders have the last word, illustrative of his method, from his explication of Donne's poem, "The Triple Foole":

> The short story of desire in the first five lines of this poem, then, runs as follows: Desire divides the self from itself through the agency of language but is also imagined as that which can reintegrate the self through the possession of a desired object, even as it throws into relief the constitutively social character of subjectivization. This conception of desire as the equivatory fiend that lies like truth, at once the false ground of the univocal self and the true origin of the split subject, is one that I will test, explicate, and elaborate, through and against Donne's own meditations on the relation between desire and selfhood.
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> (p. 9)

Or one might take a typical aside from his chapter provocatively entitled "Donne's 'Fore-Skinne,'" concerning one of "the many masochistic fantasies scattered throughout his Holy Sonnets." About the sonnet "Spit in my face, yee Jewes," he writes: "The libidinal investment of this doubled act of identification and repudiation is fairly obvious and no less obviously rooted in what may now seem almost banally familiar psychic economies of prohibition, transgression, abjection, and othering . . . it's apparently one of those 'you do me, and then I'll do you' situations" (p. 49). The problem that I find with this kind of interpretive method, or at least one of the problems, is that it imposes the interpreting self on the poem, and effectively obliterates whatever objective meaning or message its author might have intended it to have. Of course, this is only to be expected, since, in the postmodernist view, it is illusory to think that a poem might succeed in speaking for itself. Or, even supposing that it managed to do so, that it should be permitted such dangerous freedom.

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