John Donne Journal
Vol. 33 (2014)

Complicated Confessions

Kate Narveson

Brooke Conti, *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 240 pp.

In *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England*, Brooke Conti offers a fascinating exploration of how complicated it was for thoughtful people to give an account of their religious beliefs in a period that we more often think of as an age of clear confessional divisions. Conti places canonical literary figures (John Donne, John Milton, Thomas Browne, and John Bunyan) alongside two public figures (James I and II) to show the kinds of strain that characterize "confessions of faith" throughout the seventeenth century.

"Confession of faith" is Conti's coinage to denote an autobiographical account of one's faith produced in the service of religious argument, an account attempting to present a self who stands aright with God in the face of sometimes messy biographical fact. Conti argues that these confessions are neither simply autobiographical nor simply confessional but a hybrid product of pressures distinctive to the religious and political climate in early modern England. They are "motivated by the essentially creedal impulse to give a coherent public account of their authors' beliefs" but veer "off into the idiosyncratic and the particular" (p. 3).

Conti's argument is that such "confessions of faith" are products of a "polemical culture," in which authors have difficulty fitting their beliefs into "the either/or world of religious controversy" (p. 3). Where sixteenth-century polemical writing rarely includes autobiographical moments, from the early years of the seventeenth century, authors offer "a unique *kind* of self-scrutiny" that registers the "unusual

pressures of religious life in Stuart England" to define one's allegiances in a culture that tended to offer binary alternatives inadequate to people's actual, complicated affiliations. The writers Conti considers write "autobiographical declarations" that are "longer and less straightforward than polemical engagement would seem to demand, toggling between professions of corporate identity and digressions of a far more idiosyncratic sort" (p. 4). Taking religion as "a category of identity both as central and as unstable as race" (p. 8), and pointing out that creedal statements entail a tension between corporate declaration and personal belief, Conti argues that "autobiography seems to function for these writers as a forensic device" in declaring the truth of their cause, but "the truth tends to be more complicated than the terms available for its expression" (p. 4). She traces the way that writers "turn to autobiography from a sense of external pressure . . . to prove their orthodoxy, their salvation, or simply their belief that God is on their side" (p. 12), and suggests that this pressure disappears by the end of the century because "the belief that the religion of the average man or woman was a matter of public concern steadily waned" (p. 16). Conti thus bookends her study with chapters on James I and II.

Confessions of Faith opens with paired chapters on James I and John Donne, men with Catholic parents and a Protestant public life. She argues that James I struggled to give a coherent narrative of his religion because he was "in an extraordinary double bind," caught between appearing a loyal son (and thus legitimate heir) and reliably Protestant (and thus fit to succeed Elizabeth). Consequently, James "tries to have it both ways, implying that his beliefs are simultaneously Protestant *and* identical to those of his parents," and putting "those tensions on display again and again" (p. 23), as he stressed that his upbringing from infancy was Protestant, while promoting an image of his mother as a moderate and declaring that he professed the same faith as his father (p. 45). Conti acknowledges that James may have offered a "narrative of continuity" from a genuine belief that his shifts in religion were not significant, but argues that the repeated "confessions of faith" in his writings reflect a deep, "semi-conscious" uneasiness with his actual religious history (p. 48).

Leaving for the moment discussion of Conti's chapter on Donne and turning to the middle section, we find paired chapters on four

autobiographical sections from Milton's political tracts and Browne's *Religio Medici*, considered as two sorts of "personal credo." Where James I and Donne attempted to make "messy lives" conform to a normative religious identity, Milton and Browne are less interested in denominational than personal creed, but their accounts are still "provoked by and dependent on a public audience" (p. 78). Conti argues that Milton used autobiography forensically, yet his accounts are "nervous and evasive," reflecting anxiety about whether he is in favor with God. Through careful close reading, Conti makes the case that Milton's self-presentations indicate "a man deeply anxious about both present and future, hoping for great things but half convinced they will pass him by" (p. 79). Conti finds Browne deeply anxious as well, nervous about his orthodoxy. Although he claims to adhere to the English church from reasoned choice, in his consideration of particular doctrines, he regularly abandons reason for faith. Through a comparison of the 1635 manuscript to the 1643 print version of the *Religio Medici*, Conti shows that initially, Browne compulsively discussed his attraction to heretical ideas and his melancholic contemplation of suicide. In the printed version, Browne plays down those elements and "seems intent on demonstrating his submission to the Church of England" (p. 135), but the traces of stress remain.

The final section considers Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, with a brief concluding chapter on James II. While most accounts see Bunyan's work as a narrative intended to prove that imprisonment is a temporal affliction made nugatory by the knowledge of his elect status, Conti argues that "the division Bunyan attempts to impose between the two narratives [conversion and imprisonment] is not wholly successful" (p. 151), because the fear that imprisonment signifies a fall from grace takes over the narrative. Conti sees the dominance of despair in such details as the contrast between avowed readiness to suffer for Christ and the agony he expresses at separation from wife and family. At the same time, Bunyan feels no need to establish his identity in relation to the established Church, indicating that it "had a less complete imaginative hold over English Christians" (p. 165) than for earlier figures. James II's autobiographical statements respond to political exigencies by treating the personal faith of the monarch as irrelevant to his role in upholding the established church. The "confession of faith" disappears as a literary phenomenon once

this distinction is established between personal religion, now seen as private, and public role. The genre, Conti concludes, "is the result of a particular cultural moment in which religious identity could not easily be walled off from one's public role" (p. 167).

Conti is interested in the impact of historical circumstances on a writer's psyche, finding the Stuart age productive of religious anxiety registered in contradictions, unnecessary prolixity, and over-emphatic protestations. She has a keen eye for these features, though in a few cases, she jumps quickly to a psychological explanation for positions that could be explained as an author's effort to adequately map particular circumstances according to general doctrinal propositions. Occasionally, Conti exaggerates contradictions in identifying places where an author's control lapses: for instance, she finds Browne self-contradictory in first claiming to have outgrown his heresies and then claiming that they were not even heresies. In the passage in question, Browne notes that he never maintained those errors with "pertenacity" nor endeavored to convince others, and therefore those opinions "were not heresies *in mee* but bare errours" (p. 122, emphasis mine). Browne here draws on a standard distinction between error and heresy; he is not inconsistently claiming that those ideas were not errors after all, but that he did not hold them in a way that rose to heresy. Similarly, Conti finds Bunyan self-contradictory in establishing "stoicism" at his impending arrest and then "erupting" into fears for his family (p. 140). But puritans did not aim for stoicism: they had faith that God would give them strength sufficient to their trials, but they also responded to affliction with emotions incident to the fallen nature that persisted. Still, Conti is careful to qualify with a "perhaps" or "may have" those moments when she offers particularly speculative ideas about psychological causes or "semi-conscious" tensions.

In her chapter on John Donne, Conti similarly sees psychological conflict as a key shaping force in *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, contending that both works declare allegiance to the established church but at the same time reveal Donne's "difficulty coming to terms with his conversion" (p. 50). I found this chapter stimulating if not completely persuasive for two related reasons: Conti often finds traces of a conflicted mind by taking statements as evidence of lingering attraction to Rome that a fuller contextualization in conformist debates would recognize as typical of conformist

positions, and she does not explore as fully as they deserve how Donne's statements can be seen as the product of long and careful struggle rather than of unresolved conflict. For instance, in Donne's statement in *Pseudo-Martyr* that no family has suffered more than his, Conti finds a family pride in unconscious conflict with Donne's support of the church that persecuted them. Yet the statement is carefully hedged, subtly critical of his family. Donne's main point is that "as a Christian," he is not an "over-indulgent favourer of this life" but has a "devout and acceptable" appreciation of those who sacrifice their lives for the "glory of our blessed Saviour," a key qualification. The source of this appreciation Donne locates in his derivation from a family who suffered in person and fortune. That attribution could be seen as favorable to his family—they taught him to appreciate martyrdom—but it could also be seen as drily critical—they suffered "for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine," which comes short of saying that they suffered for Christ. Such a complex passage calls for more detailed discussion if it is to support an assertion that Donne has not come to terms with his conversion rather than that he has a finely tuned sense of the strengths and limitations of his family's faith. To take one more instance, Donne does not say that his early Catholic teachers rectified his understanding (p. 58) but that they had a just claim to an interest in rectifying it and thus lay some "anticipations" on his conscience, a careful formulation that shows both proper deference to authority figures and the limited nature of an adolescent religious education. From this perspective, his sense of family is not "at odds" with his polemical purpose, as Conti argues (p. 56). Conti is certainly not alone in her perception of a conflicted Donne, and her work usefully focuses the question of whether we should take such places as evidence of Donne's conflicted feelings about his conversion or evidence that his struggles to work out his religious commitments led to a complex but coherent relationship with his past.

Fuller contextualization in conformist discourse would qualify other claims about *Pseudo-Martyr*. Conti takes the term "locall Religion" to express ambivalence, arguing that "as a merely local religion . . . the English Church seems to receive only lukewarm approbation from Donne" (p. 57). However, that phrase appears in the context of the standard conformist argument that one must distinguish "between Articles of faith and jurisdiction," recognizing

that the government of "local" churches (i.e. of a particular place) will vary in the "super-edifications and furnitures" which "God hath afforded to his Church for exteriour government" (p. 13). "Local," then, is a neutral term.

Conti similarly argues that "anxiety about his spiritual fidelity and the permanence of his conversion are what account for Donne's dramatic performance of religious orthodoxy throughout the *Devotions*" (p. 64). While I found her reading observant and thought-provoking, here too I often wish for fuller contextualization. Conti notes that Donne's fear of relapse in the final devotion is framed in terms of Israel's back-sliding into idolatry. She takes idolatry as "virtually synonymous" with Roman Catholicism and proposes that "this could be his oblique way of admitting that . . . he experienced doubts about his conversion to the Church of England" (p. 63). However, in his sermons Donne regularly broadens the definition of idolatry to mean any bosom sin, as when he preaches in 1618 at Lincoln's Inn that not only is the love of money but "so is all other inordinate love of any [creature] Idolatry" (*Sermons* 2:133). Donne fears relapse into the multifarious sins that, as much as his physical illness, can be seen as the malady afflicting him. And while Conti finds Donne's longing for the "stability of the institutional church" and focus on confession to be signs of his fear of relapsing into Catholicism, it was standard in English Calvinism to advise believers to turn to the "ordinances"—the word and sacraments as seals or "ordinary means of grace"—as a source of assurance when beset with fear of one's sins, and, as Alec Ryrie shows, daily confession of sins to God was central to English Protestant piety (*Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, pp. 55–59). Conti usefully lays out how frequently the expostulations, in particular, take up debated practices, but fuller contextualization would show that Donne's positions do not necessarily reflect an on-going attraction to Rome. To take one more instance that Conti discusses, Donne's support for holy days was shared by Daniel Featley, a Calvinist conformist who argued for the usefulness of holy days in his *Ancilla pietatis* (1626), like Donne stating that they are not necessary but valuable if rightly used. In short, by 1623 there was a range of arguments surrounding the issues that Donne covers, discussion of which was the daily bread of engaged believers, with both contented conformists and conformable puritans parsing the issues in myriad

ways. Donne's positions on things indifferent mark him as an irenic apologist for conformity; I would argue that they witness nothing about any residual appeal of Rome to the Dean of St. Paul's.

That said, in noting my reservations I have not done justice to Conti's full argument. She is surely right that "the *Devotions* is as much a work of controversial as of devotional prose" and that the autobiographical elements "are intertwined with the process of defining and distinguishing between Christian denominations" so that the work joins James I's as "public performances of religious identity whose autobiography is more declarative than narrative" (p. 68). Donne's choice to speak in his proper person is unusual, and Conti's way of accounting for that choice is immensely useful. Equally useful is her concluding observation that Donne's devotion to the king and Prince Charles suggest the "replacement of his biological family with the Stuart family," his devotion "also a demonstration of loyalty to the English Church" so that "declarations of fidelity can substitute for other narratives that are simply too complicated to tell" (p. 73). Even if I am not persuaded that the work registers Donne's Roman Catholic past, I am quite struck by Conti's insight into its hybrid nature and the reasons such a hybrid emerged in a period when religious affiliations were political, and yet personal narratives were too complicated to be stated adequately in political forms.

Throughout this observant and significant work, Conti's analysis of the complicated problem of giving an account of one's faith is carefully grounded in both the general historical moment of a text and the particulars of its occasion, both biographical and rhetorical. As a new way of seeing the shifting place of religion in cultural and personal identity, her work will be of interest to historians of religion, while literary scholars will find it a model of historically situated close reading.

Luther College