John Donne Journal
Vol. 17 (1998)

Desiring Ideology

Paul J. Voss

Ronald Corthell. *Ideology and Desire in Renaissance Poetry: The Subject of Donne.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.

Donne scholars will find much in Ronald Corthell's new book. They will encounter, for example, various definitions of ideology and desire; they will see how this ideology may play out in the poetry of Donne. Moreover, they will find a great deal of recent critical work on Donne's verse. They will, in short, see how Corthell reads Donne, how he reads critics reading Donne, and how he places his readings alongside those of Arthur Marotti, Richard Strier, Thomas Docherty and others.

Corthell presents his argument early in the first chapter, introducing a John Donne "as the site of an ideological struggle to represent a Renaissance literary subjectivity that continues to influence the practice of teachers and scholars of Renaissance literature" (17). Using the tool-box approach to critical theory (i.e., if you need a hammer, use a hammer; if you need Freud, use Freud), Corthell defines a specific theory (new historicism, psychoanalysis, feminism, cultural studies, *et alia*) and then argues that Donne's writings, in many cases, anticipate or exemplify that theory. From this perspective Donne's Satires "are among the fullest performances of this equivocal process in English Renaissance literature; they produce a style of critique that rehearses the dilemma that has come to characterize new historicism" (23).

Chapter two investigates the relationship between erotic love and power in Donne's verse. This discussion of "the pornographic Donne" is both lively and informative. Corthell's treatment of "The Indifferent"

("a perplexed and unhappy poem"), "Love's Progress" ("Donne's elegy to the vulva"), and "Sapho to Philaenis" ("somewhat like a lesbian episode in conventional pornography") combine Freud and popular culture in imaginative ways. Chapter three also focuses on love—mutual love—and how the poet Donne constructs the notion of poetic authority through his re-examination of love, finally suggesting how the poems actually contribute to the emerging notion of individual privacy in early modern England.

Chapter four focuses upon Elizabeth Drury and "the obscure object of desire." Beginning with the famous remarks of Ben Jonson, the Anniversaries have generated much discussion and disagreement. Corthell concentrates his analysis on this critical phenomenon. According to Corthell, the very problem Donne faced in representing Elizabeth Drury (a young girl Donne admits he never saw) parallels many contemporary critical challenges. Corthell sees the various debates as a barometer of our profession and he enters into the debate cautiously, believing "it more important to try and understand this controversy than try to end it" (114). This careful critical position plays out frequently in the book.

The concluding chapter treats the subject of devotion. Most Donne scholars know the complex history of the poet's religious background. While Corthell is not the first to employ the "divided subject" paradigm to explain apparent conflicts in individual behavior, the notion works nicely with Donne for various reasons. Corthell examines sixteenth-century recusant discourse and argues that equivocation and a divided subject were the conditions under which persecuted Catholics operated. These same characteristics, Corthell argues, can be located in Donne's verse. While a compelling point of departure, using Lacan for clarification and/or demonstration of this discourse, leads, predictably, more often to confusion than to understanding. The Lacanian theory of fantasy, for example, is less than edifying when applied to Holy Sonnet XIV: "The subject—the Donne of 'Batter my heart'—looks for some cause with which to identify in the Other and is trapped by this desire or rather this search for the object-cause of desire which is assumed to be hidden in the Other" (155-56).

While well-written and intelligent (perhaps, in fact, because it is well-written and intelligent), the book raises a number of important issues. Corthell begins the book with an intriguing proposition: "What interests me is why this subject of Donne might matter to me and my students" (18). Unfortunately, the book offers few specific answers. Many undergraduates love Donne; fewer read, understand, or need contemporary criticism for this pleasure. Other issues also deserve mention. Corthell seems to believe that any individual reading of a given poem must also consider the previous readings of that poem as well. As a result, Corthell presents a series of readings from a host of well-known scholars (Marotti, it seems, is cited nearly as often as Donne) for each poem. Corthell then proceeds to place himself within that critical history, showing how his arguments both complement and differ from previous readings. This variation of metacriticism (commonly defined as the critical examination of terms, premises, and principals of criticism itself) does not seek to correct or expose critical shortcomings in order to arrive at the most persuasive responses, but rather seeks to enhance, augment, differentiate, or complement existing critical approaches. Ultimately, the subject of the book is less about appreciating (in both senses of the word) Donne's verse and more on the current critical landscape and finding a place to dwell in that landscape.

This methodology, it seems, has significant implications. Instead of using primary evidence to construct an argument or using a secondary critic of note, this method, like the one proposed by T. S. Eliot in his now-famous "Tradition and the Individual Talent," periodically requires a complete re-evaluation of the critical canon. Eliot argued that the appearance of a new poet actually changed the history of English literature. Corthell's method suggests a tacit agreement. Literary research of this kind, "Tradition and the Individual Critic," resembles a never-ending game of chess. Poet A writes a poem; critic B reads the poem and moves; critic C reads critic B and makes a counter move, until the critical discourse actually becomes part of the poetic discourse.

Yet the net effect of such a system is quite the opposite of what one would expect. Corthell covers a wide-array of material; he cites dozens

and dozens of scholars and critics while freely moving from one school of criticism to another. The study is, as the dusk-jacket proclaims, a "deeply engaged book." This description gives the impression of breadth and coverage, yet the arguments about any given poem become narrower and narrower, the distance between critical readings shorter and shorter. Instead of missing the forest for looking at the trees, this approach ends with finding a single, unoccupied branch upon which to perch. Writing, at length, about other critics may or may not be a prudent critical stance (some critical writing has gained, in fact, a canonical status). Yet with a fascinating and complex subject like Donne, such a concerted emphasis on secondary material both adds and detracts from the investigation. Undergraduates, and a few professors, love Donne first and foremost for his poetry. Donne specialists may find the critical component, and this book, equally rewarding.

Georgia State University