Misinterpretable Donne: The Testimony of the Letters

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> *To S^r^ Robert Carre now Earle of Ankerum, with my Book Biathanatos at my going into Germany.* not burnt:
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> . . . It was written by me many years since; and because it is upon a misinterpretable subject, I have always gone so near suppressing it, as that it is onely not burnt: no hand hath passed upon it to copy it, nor many eyes to read it: onely to some particular friends in both Universities, then when I writ it, I did communicate it: And I remember, I had this answer, That certainly, there was a false thread in it, but not easily found: Keep it, I pray, with the same jealousie; let any that your discretion admits to the sight of it, know the date of it; and that it is a Book written by *Jack Donne*, and not by *D. Donne*: Reserve it for me, if I live, and if I die, I only forbid it the Presse, and the Fire: publish it not, but yet burn it not; and between those, do what you will with it.[1]

The time is ripe for another revaluation of Donne, heralded by the recent onslaught by John Carey on his character and reputation.[2] The monarchy of wit is in decline, and even the second, more subtle stage of his hagiography is in question.[3] In place of the two personae identified in Donne's letter to Carr, the witty sinner and the pillar of the established church, each of which has attracted different schools of criticism, we have been offered a unified but repellent view of his whole career, as dominated from first to last by a devouring ego and a prevailing sense of expediency. In Carey's view of Donne, the intellectual and psychological complexity that has fascinated twentieth-century readers is to be explained by the linked imperatives of "apostasy" and "ambition," each with its matching "arts."[4]

A frank look at Donne's relationship to the power structures of his society is certainly overdue; but there are aspects of Carey's study, apart from his apparent distaste for his subject, that seem to demand immediate qualification. It is odd, to begin with, that a claim to present the whole Donne, warts and all, should be supported by close critical attention only to the *Songs and Sonets*, the poems that first brought Donne into the canon of modernism. While uncanonized works, like *Biathanatos* so scrupulously entrusted to Carr, or the personal letters themselves, are used by Carey to set up his biographical and historical context, they never become the texts of his inquiry.

Secondly, the account of Donne's time-serving—changes of principle or realignment, excessive subservience to patrons—is insufficiently historicized. While it is certainly a salutary experience to learn the details of his jockeying for an appointment with the unsavory Carr, getting Sir Thomas Overbury's job, in fact, we need to remember that not only Donne but also that sober Neo-platonist George Chapman wrote a poem celebrating Carr's insupportable marriage to Frances Howard.[5] Among writers who changed positions, sides, or religions, in Donne's era, we have to include at least Jonson, Milton, Dryden, Cowley, Waller, May; and we have begun to perceive the fine distinctions between real political necessity and mere expediency, selfish time-serving and strategic temporizing, loyalty to principle, as opposed to party or person, not to mention the unmistakable evidence of thoughtful mediation *between* conflicting opinions and principled confusion among them.[6] When Halifax wrote his *Character of a Trimmer* in 1684, he drew upon the perspective of a century in which ideological stability had been demonstrably unattainable, and to which Emerson's dictum about consistency as the property only of small minds is especially germane.

In the case of Donne, we also need to be particularly careful, when tracking his political career, still more when drawing conclusions from it about his work, that we do not leave out part of the evidence. In any such project, the primary documents ought to include his personal letters, as text as well as context; and we also need to understand, when we read the letters, in what sense they combine the status of text and document.

It is one of the paradoxes of language that in the personal letter the spontaneity of self-expression meets certain conventions of privatisation; and never more so than in the seventeenth century. On the one hand there was, given the need of the intellectual to

survive in a culture far more repressive than our own, a real need to communicate privately; on the other there was a well-defined, if small, body of epistolary theory, with models to follow. Donne, writing to Sir Henry Goodyere in 1604, listed and characterized those that interested him:

> What treasures of Morall knowledge are in Senecaes Letters to onely one Lucilius? and what of Naturall in Plinies? how much of the storie of the time, is in Ciceroes Letters? . . . where can we find so perfect a Character of Phalaris, as in his own Letters . . . Or of Brutus? . . . The Evangiles and Acts, teach us what to beleeve, but the Epistles of the Apostles what to do. (pp. 105-06)

Of the precedents he names, however, his own personal letters most closely resemble those of Cicero, especially in the *Letters to Atticus*. It is worth remembering that Cicero was the first great articulate trimmer. "We should move with the times," he had written to Lentulus, in a personal letter, in 54 B.C.,

> For never have the distinguished men who steer the ship of state been praised for an undeviating persistence in one opinion. But just as in sailing it takes one kind of skill to run before the storm, even if you fail to make the port, when you could certainly get there by trimming your sails, and as it is downright stupid to keep your original course with all its dangers rather than change it and still arrive at your destination, so in state administration, while we should all aim at . . . peace with honour, that vision need not always be expressed in the same way.[7]

Day after day Cicero wrote to Atticus of his own shifting position in the struggle for power in Rome. Continually he asked for advice and for psychological support. The primary content of his letters was news, personal and political news inextricably mingled, so that his letters became, as Donne himself noted, documents in the "[his] torie of the time." This was a commonplace of epistolary theory. For Erasmus, Cicero's letters, unlike Seneca's, were "of that genuine kind which represent . . . the character, fortune and feelings of the writer, and at the same time the public and private condition of the time."[8] And Donne, writing to Sir Henry Wootton in 1612, precedes a long account of French court politics with a similar manifesto:

> When Letters have a convenient handsome body of news, they are Letters; but when they are spun out of nothing, they are nothing, or but apparitions, and ghosts, with such hollow sounds, as he that hears them, knows not what they said. (p. 121)

As Thomas Hester has pointed out, Donne's own letters, as a collection, do indeed contain the "handsome body of news," both national and international, he demanded of the genre.[9] In fact, if we compare them to the *Letters to Atticus*, and if we exclude, as not comparable, the sometimes oppressive, sometimes touching accounts of his ill health, Donne's letters show rather less egocentricity than Cicero's, less introspection than one would suppose from the most frequently quoted exhibits. A letter of September 1608 to Sir Henry Goodyere begins, obviously out of a deep depression, with self:

> Every tuesday I make account that I turn a great hour-glass, and consider that a weeks life is run out since I writ. But if I aske my self what I have done in the last watch, or would do in the next, I can say nothing: if I say that I have passed it without hurting any, so may the Spider in my window. (p. 48)

But by his own standards (surfacing in this letter's language) this is "spun out of nothing." In August 1622 a letter from abroad to Sir Thomas Lucy, full of speculations about the approaching continental war, has an anti-subjectivist conclusion:

> Sir, you see what unconcerning things I am fain to write of, lest I should write of my self, who am so little a history or tale, that I should not hold out to make a Letter long enough to send over a Sea to you. (p. 190)

What Donne's letters do reveal, however, are the political pressures and inhibitions that he experienced throughout his career, and for which his personal correspondence offered some release. Among the conventions of privatisation inherent in the familiar letter as a genre is the hope of confidentiality. In writing to a trusted friend one may speak out as nowhere else, a situation simultaneously safe and dangerous, as letters (Donne frequently reminded his correspondents) may "miscarry."[10] The result, in Donne, is a curious mixture of candor and circumspection, an

equivocal stance frequently expressed as ambivalence, often accompanied by the fear of being misunderstood. If we look back at the letter to Carr with which we began here, we find him commending the book to his patron's discretion "because it is upon a misinterpretable subject"; but being unable still, after several years, to decide what its value is to him:

> I have always gone so near suppressing it, as that it is onely not burnt; onely to some particular friends . . . I did communicate it. . . . Publish it not, but yet burn it not; and between those, do what you will with it.

For Donne, the space between publication and self-imposed censorship is an important one, a territory inhabited also by letters, never intended by him for publication.

Another letter, to Sir Henry Goodyere in the fall of 1608, describes the composition of Donne's *Litany*. The letter explains both the immediate cause of the poem's production—"imprisonment in my bed"—and its objective—to mediate church controversies:

> That by which it will deserve best acceptation, is, That neither the Roman Church need call it defective, because it abhors not the particular mention of the blessed Triumphers in heaven: nor the Reformed can discreetly accuse it, of attributing more than a rectified devotion ought to doe (p. 34)

but Donne makes it clear that he has no intention of publishing the poem. Whereas the only two known precedents for a litany in verse were approved by Pope Nicholas V "for public service," his is intended only for private persuasion:

> mine is for lesser Chapels, which are my friends.

In 1609, the year in which he published *Pseudo-Martyr*, denying his origins, supporting the Oath of Allegiance, Donne wrote to Goodyere a critique of another, unidentified book written to the same purpose. While on the main issue, whether Roman Catholics should be forced to take the oath, there was, he felt, "a perplexity (as farre as I see yet) and both sides may be in justice, and innocence," that particular controversialist had broken the conventions of discourse, by "miscitings, or misinterpretings" of other men's words. "I looked for more prudence, and humane wisdom in him,"

Donne explained, "because at this time the watch is set, and every bodies hammer is upon that anvill" (p. 161). The very indeterminancy of the issue, he felt, required a hermeneutical delicacy or integrity, an attention to authorial intention that prohibited the wresting of texts to one's own purpose. Another, roughly contemporaneous letter to Goodyere also addresses the question of doctrinal certainty, in similar terms: "And when we are sure we are in the right way . . . it concerns us as much what our companions be, but very much what our friends. In which, *I know I speak not dangerously nor misappliably to you*, as though I averted you from any of those friends, who are of other impressions then you or I in some great circumstances of Religion" (pp. 28-29; italics added).

These special conditions, of trust and intimacy, of cognitive short cuts and certain understandings, are involved again in May 1612, in a letter to George Garrard. The occasion of the letter was the recent death of the Lord Treasurer, Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, an event followed by a spate of satires. Donne took the occasion to meditate, not only on the nature, function and sanctions of satire, but on its peculiar status as prohibited, usually anonymous discourse. His first whimsical suggestion was that the recent "libels" have been so "tastelesse and flat" that they must have been written by Salisbury's supporters:

> It is not the first time that our age hath seen that art practised, That when there are witty and sharp libels made which not onely for the liberty of speaking, but for the elegancie, and composition, would take deep root, . . . no other way hath been thought so fit to suppresse them, as to divulge some course, and railing one. (pp. 89-90)

Poor satire, in other words, drives out or censors good or effective criticism.

Donne then pursued the question of whether all satires ought to be prohibited. "I dare say to you," he continued, "where I am not easily misinterpreted, that there may be cases, where one may do his Countrey goode service, by libelling against a live man." The distinction he wished to draw was between satire that intends to reform its subject, and hence must be published in his life-time, and that which, appearing only after his death, is malign to no purpose. Posthumous satire of a powerful statesman is also, of course, cowardly, since it has avoided his wrath by delay. The point is well taken; yet Donne's language is more informative than, perhaps he

knew. "I dare say," which momentarily invokes the satirist's own audacity, is quickly counteracted by the now characteristic note of caution, "*where I am not easily misinterpreted.*" With his own satires of the 1590s behind him, Donne was not quite ready, yet, to abandon the genre: but his language continued to show the effects of a repressive culture.

In the last part of the letter, Donne recalled that some of the Church Fathers had written "libellous books against the Emperours of their times" (p. 79), but *not* during their lives. "I am glad," Donne commented drily, "for that must have occasioned tumult, and contempt, against so high and Soveraign persons." Remembering also that those libels were atypical, because not anonymous, he added: "which excuse [atypicality] would not have served in the Star-chamber, where sealed Letters have been judged Libels." This sudden, and certain, and threatening topicality closes the gap between the letter-writer and his subject, as letters themselves become potentially libellous, or prohibited discourse. The idea of genre, then, is shifted from intention (satire is a critique of the powerful, intended to improve them) to reception (satire is literally the *product* of censorship, that which the powerful interpret as offensive to themselves).

The death of Cecil might have been seen as an opportunity for James' government to relax, to abandon the spy systems of the king's first decade for a more genuinely pacific cultural climate. But more tensions were brewing, in the affairs of the Palatinate. Donne, who had expressed high hopes for the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to the Elector,[11] was appointed by James to accompany the Earl of Doncaster on his 1619 mission "to compose the discords of that discomposed State" as Walton put it.[12] Donne's consistent devotion to the Queen of Bohemia and her cause is well-documented, and needs to be remembered when reading, in a letter to Sir Henry Goodyere, "The Palatinate is absolutely lost" (p. 230). But the military details that follow are no more shocking than his account of the political climate at home:

> Mr. Gage is returning to Rome, but of his Negotiation I dare say nothing by a Letter of adventure. The direction which his Maty gave for Preachers, had scandalized many; therefore he descended to pursue them with certain reasons of his proceedings therein; and I had commandment to publish them in a Sermon at the Crosse . . . where they

> received comfortable assurance of his Maties constancy in Religion, and of his desire that all men should be bred in the knowledge of such things, as might preserve them from the superstition of Rome. (pp. 231-32)

The sermon to which this letter refers was preached on September 15, 1622. James' *Directions to Preachers* had just been issued, via the Archbishop of Canterbury; and their ostensibly theological thrust had, as Donne's excerpt makes clear, political correlatives. Preachers were forbidden

> to soare in poynts too deepe, To muster up their own Reading, to display their own Wit, or ignorance in medling with Civill matters or (as his Majestie addes) in rude and undecent reviling of persons.[13]

Donne's task in the sermon was to defend both James' foreign policy and the repression of criticism it necessitated. He cited precedents for restraint of the pulpit under previous monarchs, including Elizabeth. He argued that the king's own learning required the best possible construction of his intentions in the *Directions*; only a "Libeller" could believe them meant to encourage "Ignorance, or Superstition" among the people. And he suggested that James' apparent inactivity on behalf of his daughter might conceal an effective strategy:

> as God sits in Heaven, and yet goes into the field, so they of whom God hath said, Yee are Gods, the Kings of the Earth, may stay at home, and yet goe too. They goe in their assistance to the Warre; They goe in their Mediation for Peace; They goe in their Example, when from their sweetnesse, and moderation in their Government at home, there flowes out an instruction, a perswasion to Princes abroad. Kings goe many times, and are not thanked, because their wayes are not seene. (p. 187)

James was pleased with the sermon, which was promptly published on his order in three separate issues. Yet there is contemporary evidence that others heard the sermon in a sense less helpful to James. John Chamberlain wrote to Dudley Carleton that Donne preached "to certifie the Kings good intention . . . but he gave no great satisfaction, or as some say spoke as if himself were not so well satisfied."[14] And Donne's own letter to Goodyere suggests

a tension between the authorized message of the sermon and its author's actual feelings. On the one hand are impersonal, passive, conditional constructs: "*they* received comfortable assurance . . . ; *his* desire that all men *should* be bred in the knowledge of such things, as *might* preserve them"). On the other, we hear of personal constraint: "I dare say nothing by a letter of adventure. . . ; I had commandment to publish"—speaking and not speaking equally under duress. Required to justify from the pulpit the pulpit's repression, Donne could not have been unaware of a painful contradiction. He solved it, in part, by explaining himself to his friend.

There is, finally, evidence in the letters that Donne himself became a near-victim of this intimidating cultural climate, in which all kinds of public communication, spoken or printed, were subject to scrutiny. In 1627, after more than a decade of service to the crown, the king's preacher *almost* got into serious trouble with Charles and Archbishop Laud. On April 1, 1627, in the context of Buckingham's disastrous conduct of the war with France, Donne preached on Mark 4:24: "Take heed what you hear" and developed his text into an appeal for loyalty to the crown, an attack on seditious "whispering." His language, as before, overtly disenfranchised the king's critics, making them the villains in a Senecan tragedy of State:

> This whisperer wounds thee, and with a stilleta of gold, he strangles thee with scarfes of silk, he smothers thee with the down of Phoenixes, he destroyes thee by praising thee, and undoes thee by trusting thee with those secrets that bring thee into a desperate perplexity, *Aut alium accusare in subsidium tui* (as the Patriarch, and Oracle of States-men, Tacitus, says). (VII, 406)

On the one hand, the passage undermines the premises of the familiar letter in times like these—friendship, trust, confidentiality, the discreet expression of doubts or criticisms that it would be both dangerous and disloyal to publish. On the other, by its introduction of Tacitus as an authority or "Oracle," it casts doubts on the sermon's premise of loyalty to the crown. By the 1590s Tacitus had become a handbook for English political thinkers of a certain type, restless and libertarian, if not actually republican.[15] Ben Jonson used the *Annals* in 1605 as the source of *Sejanus*, suggesting in the Roman historian's attacks on Tiberius an attitude to Jacobean censorship and spy-systems.[16] Nowhere is Tacitus

more bitter than in his perception that a repressive regime encourages friends to turn accusers, to betray each other. The passage, then, pulls in two directions at once, one supportive of Charles, one by implication, darkly critical.

That Donne *was* suspected of equivocation is known—recorded, in fact, by himself, in another of those revealing personal letters. To his patron, Sir Robert Carr, Donne sent a frantic appeal for assistance, explaining that Laud had demanded a text of his sermon for close reading. The context, as he further explained, was the dispute between Charles and Laud on one hand, and Archbishop Abbot on the other, a dispute begun in 1625 over Richard Montague's *Appello Caesarem*[17] but that had recently been refocused by Abbot, using the pulpit as a medium of political criticism. To Carr, Donne explained that, since *his* sermon had been written two months previously, it should not be read as supportive of Abbot, whose provocative sermon he had not read; and therefore, "exceptions being taken, and displeasure kindled at this, I am afraid, it was rather brought thither, then met there" (p. 306). The disclaimer, the complaint about over-determination, the reference to "exceptions being taken," are all familiar locutions in the hermeneutics of censorship; but what is truly remarkable is the *private* admission to Carr that changes the nature of the disclaimer completely: "Freely to you I say, I would I were a little more guilty" (p. 305).

Donne's editors, reading the sermon in the light of this letter, concluded that its genuinely loyalist intentions had been misunderstood; certain tactless allusions to royal wives "might have been interpreted as . . . somewhat lacking in respect to Henrietta Maria" (VII, 41). In both instances, the issue was the role of the wife in assisting or subverting the national religion. One was particularly striking in view of the scandal, in June of the previous year, over the queen's "pilgrimage" to Tyburn, site of the execution of Roman Catholics, martyrs or traitors, depending on one's point of view. The result, on July 31, had been the dismissal of all of her French household, who were ignominiously sent back to their own country as a bad influence. Donne wrote:

> Very religious Kings may have had wives, that may have retained some tincture, some impressions of errour, which they may have sucked in their infancy, from another Church, and yet would be loth, those wives should be publicly traduced to

> be Heretickes, or passionately proclaimed to be Idolaters for all that. (VII, 409)

It is hard to conceive that this was *unintentional* tactlessness, or even that it was tactlessness at all. It seems far more likely that Donne, whose responsibility and desire it was to define the *via media* in religion, was cautiously, and with the utmost precision, mediating a compromise between Charles and his Puritan critics, one that he meant to be intelligible to both sides. The queen was not to be "publicly traduced," but she ought to be (and had been) privately disciplined.

But there are other signs of even-handedness in the sermon, moments, hard to miss, one would think, where Donne moves from intimation to affirmation, if not to provocation. One of the most peculiar is a passage in the sermon's center, a moment marked by Donne himself as unique in his career:

> I enter with such a protestation, as perchance may not become me: That this is the first time in all my life . . . this is the first time, that in the exercise of my Ministry, I wished the King away; That ever I had any kinde of loathnesse that the King should hear that I sayd. (VII, 403)

This is no mere gesture of self-depreciation. It introduces the cause of his anxiety, his determination to strike a balance perhaps ungrateful to the king's ears,"to speak of the Duties of subjects before the King, *or of the duties of Kings*" (italics added). The note of controlled and muscular fear is both nicely calculated and (to me) upsetting. That it was calculated is made clear by a passage only at first sight less subjective where, at the beginning of the sermon, Donne opened up his text, "Take heed what you hear," and applied it to the preacher's mission. Preachers were thereby enjoined neither to delete from nor to add to the Word they received from Christ:

> Be not over-timorous so to prevaricate and forbear to preach that, which you have truely heard from me; But be not over-venturous neither, to pretend a Commission when you have none, and to preach that for my word, which is your own passion, *or their purpose that set you up*. (VII, 294; italics added)

Be bold, be bold, but not too bold. On the indeterminate edge between cowardice and courage the preacher's stance is uneasy, like Britomart in Busyrane's castle, or Milton's Christ on the pinnacle; yet in this context, "their purpose that set you up" is overtly political. The Church must not become a tool of the State. The State, in turn, must allow its preachers to say what they ought. "It is better to hear the Rebuke of the wise, then to heare the songs of fools, says the wise king" (p. 411). So wrote Donne, reminding Charles of his father in more ways than one.

It is interesting to hear this sermon of 1627, written when he was fifty-five, taking him in some ways back to the imperatives of *Satyre III* and his twenties; fascinating to find that once again the problematics of political discourse remind him of satire, and its mixed motives:

> We make Satyrs; and we looke that the world should call that wit; when God knowes, that that is a great part self-guiltinesse, and we doe but reprehend those things, which we our selves have done, we cry out upon the illnesse of the times, and we make the times ill. (VII, 408)

For Donne, the connection between satire and political outspokenness was a psychological knot that he was still, in his fifties, trying to disentangle.

Having "faithfully exscribed" his sermon, Donne provided Laud with a copy, and then wrote another extraordinary letter to Carr:

> Sir,
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> I Was this morning at your door, somewhat early; and I am put into such a distaste of my last Sermon, as that I dare not practise any part of it, and therefore though I said then, that we are bound to speake aloud, though we awaken men, . . . yet after two or three modest knocks at the door, I went away. (pp. 307-08)

He proceeds to argue that Charles must have approached the offending sermon with some preconceived bias, so carefully had it been prepared to serve his interests, as Donne understood them:

> I have cribrated, and re-cribrated, and post-cribrated the Sermon, and must necessarily say, the King who hath let fall his eye upon some of my Poems, never saw, of mine, a hand, or an eye, or an affection,

> set down with so much study, and diligence, and labour of syllables, as in this Sermon I expressed those two points, which I take so much to conduce to his service, the imprinting of persuasibility and obedience in the subject, And the breaking of the bed of whisperers. (pp. 308-09)

Apart from the intriguing suggestion that Charles had been reading some of Donne's love poetry, the emphasis on artfulness in the sermon is suspicious; and equally disingenuous, I suspect, is the interpretation to which the letter directs Carr, who was presumably to pass it on:

> So, the best of my hope is, that some over bold allusions, or expressions in the way, might divert his Majesty, from vouchsafing to observe the frame, and purpose of the Sermon. When he sees the generall scope, I hope his goodnesse will pardon collaterall escapes. (p. 309)

This defence is typical of the hermeneutics of censorship, in its emphasis on the importance of authorial intention in controlling meaning, its disavowal of allusion, its appeal against selective reading. Yet this can be no simple and trustworthy disclaimer. The letter began, after all, by quoting the sermon on the preacher's duty to "speake aloud," while admitting that he went away "after two or three modest knocks on the door." This is a witty metaphor for the style of courtiership, not only at the anxious moment but over the long career. With Donne, wit and "self guiltinesse" reciprocally excited each other; and these late documents invite a trusted reader (not ourselves) to ask how often he had chosen, as the style appropriate to a repressive culture, the modest knock that would *not* awaken his audience. Donne's letter to Carr suggests a line of defence; but it simultaneously reminds him of the sermon's central issue—the problem of combining obedience with outspokenness, of offering the king palatable advice while avoiding "the bed of whisperers."

I see no evidence from these documents/texts of his old age that Donne had found a solution to these problems; but none either, that he had sold out in the crudely ambitious way suggested by Carey. As Petrarch wept on discovering Cicero's character displayed, in all its human nakedness, in the *Letters to Atticus*, so we may blush to hear the great churchman appealing, through Carr, to the upstart Laud; but the texts that record this episode excuse

him of mere rapacity. This is not the voice of a man who simplified "issues which he knew to be complex," or who "grew repressive, as people generally do with age and success," or who led altogether a "thwarted, grasping, parasitic life."[18] We may not approve Donne's disingenuity, but understand it we must; and real familiarity with his letters should have saved him from such contempt.

Let us, finally, take note of two other letters in which Donne refers to his own fears of being misunderstood. In one, written to Sir Thomas Lucy in October 1621, in the heat of the Palatinate crisis, Donne wondered whether the newsbearing function of the letter as a genre were not currently being undermined by the confusion, the indeterminacy, of the political moment:

> I would write you news; but your love to me, may make you apt to over-beleeve news for my sake. And truly all things that are upon the stage of the world now, are full of such uncertainties, as may justly make any man loth to passe a conjecture upon them; not only because it is hard to see how they will end, but because it is *misinterpretable* and dangerous to conjecture otherwise, then some men would have the event to be. (p. 199; italics added)

In the other, a much longer and much earlier letter to Sir Henry Wooton, dated conjecturally January 1612, Donne expressed a more ritualistic fear of exploiting the letter by the frequency of his correspondence. The danger is not from outside but from within, the possibility of being thought either an importunate dependent or an empty formalist, if not both:

> my often writing might be subject to such *misinterpretation*, if it were not to you. (p. 120; italics added)

Given the current state of our profession, which has neither financial independence nor critical certainty, our sympathy for "misinterpretable" Donne ought, if anything, to be greater now than it was in the twenties and thirties. Never intended for us, his letters need not, nevertheless, miscarry.

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NOTES

1 John Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, N.Y.: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), pp. 21-22.

2 John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981).

3 The simple (and unreliable) hagiography of Isaac Walton's *Life* was replaced in the 1950s and thereafter by scholarly attention to Donne's religious poetry and prose. Most notably G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, eds., *The Sermons* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1953-62); Helen Gardner, ed., *The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952, rev. 1978), and Barbara Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), countered the New Critical or "Metaphysical" focus on wit with a Donne who was himself deeply learned, theologically sound, and eminently respectable.

4 I refer to the titles of four of Carey's chapters.

5 George Chapman, *Andromeda Liberata* (1613). See Millar Maclure, *George Chapman: A Critical Study* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1966), pp. 24-28.

6 See, for example, on Waller, Warren Chernaik, *The Poetry of Limitation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968); George McFadden, *Dryden The Public Writer 1660-1685* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978); John M. Wallace, *Destiny his Choice: The Loyalism of Andrew Marvell* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1968); and David Trotter, *The Poetry of Abraham Cowley* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan & Littlefield, 1979).

7 Cicero, *Epistulae ad Familiares*, I, ix, 21 (my translation).

8 Letter to Beatus Rhenanus, May 1520, *The Epistles of Erasmus from his Earliest Letters to His Fifty-first Year Arranged in the Order of Time*, trans. F. M. Nichols (London: Longmans, Green, 1901-18), I, lxxx.

9 Hester, ed., *Letters*, p. xiv.

10 On the unreliabilityof mail delivery, see *Letters*, pp. 3, 5, 38, 60, 73-74, 132-33, 148, 226, 262-63. Donne also complained to Sir Henry Goodyere that his letters have been "too confident to be lost" (p. 148) and on another occasion provided a key name "in a schedule to burn, lest this Letter should be mislaid" (p. 185).

11 *Letters*, p. 76.

12 Isaac Walton, *The Lives of John Donne*, etc., ed. G. Saintsbury (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1927), p. 53.

13 *Sermons*, IV, 202.

14 *Sermons*, IV, 34.

15 For the connection between Tacitus and the Essex circle, see F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1967), pp. 251, 261-62. See also M. F. Tenney, "Tacitus in the Politics of Early Stuart England," *CJ*, 37 (1941), 151-63.

16 See my "'Roman-cast similitude'; Ben Jonson and the English Use of Roman History," in *Rome in the Renaissance*, ed. P. A. Ramsey (Binghamton: Mediaeval & Renaissance Text & Studies, 1982), pp. 381-94.

17 Richard Montague, Canon of Windsor and later Bishop of Chichester, published *Appello Caesarem* as an expression of his own high church principles. Parliament protested the book's licensing, and tried to engage Abbot on their side.

18 Carey, pp. 33, 11, 90.