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Participating Wisely in *Satyre III*

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The dichotomy between Jack Donne the libertine rake and Dr. Donne the Anglican divine has been replaced in recent criticism by an equally polarized and equally misleading contrast between a skeptical, fiercely independent young intellectual and a middle-aged sycophant toadying to ecclesiastical and political power. John Carey, for example, sympathizes with readers "who value the rebelliousness of the younger Donne" and are pained by his transformation into "a conservative of the most splenetic and authoritarian stamp."[1] This Jerry Rubin, radical-turned-fat-cat account of Donne has not, of course, gone uncontested. Scholars like Paul Sellin and Jeanne Shami have been presenting compelling evidence that Dr. Donne of St. Paul's was far more critical of the Stuart establishment than Carey observed and not nearly so much James I's creature as Jonathan Goldberg would have him be. I want to suggest that the "Look-here-upon-this-picture-and-on-this" (*Hamlet*, 3.4.53) approach to the critical representation of Donne is flawed also in its picture of the young Donne. I don't question Donne's youthful irreverence and intellectual daring, but I think that he was less isolated and alienated than the before-and-after account of his life implies.

In the revisionist version of Donne's career, "Satyre III" becomes less a defense of the individual conscience than a report of a liminal stage in a young man's development when he is rebelliously rejecting the persecuted religion of his family yet unwilling to submit to the religion of the broader society. According to Carey, "Satyre III" shows that Donne is "no longer a convinced Catholic—though not yet a convinced Protestant either" (xxii). From this perspective, Donne's satiric voice is alternatively praised for an intellectual and emotional detachment that anticipates twentieth-century religious tolerance and condemned for a stance of smug moral superiority. Against this view, I want to argue instead that "Satyre III" shows us very little about its author's religious beliefs and nothing at all about his allegiance to any institutionalized church, but that it offers as a model of correct behavior conscious engagement with contemporary social practices and institutions.

The tendency to interpret "Satyre III" in terms of Donne's biography raises the question of genre. If the problem of finding true religion grew out of Donne's intensely personal religious struggle, why did he treat this problem in a satire, a genre associated with social criticism, not with personal spiritual experience? Why, that is, did he write "Satyre III" as well as the sonnet beginning "Show me deare Christ, thy spouse so bright and clear"? One plausible answer, I think, is that Donne saw religious faith as unavoidably involved in the social, the political, and the economic as well as in the narrowly spiritual—and that he wanted to show the problem of religious allegiance at least in part as a question of how to relate to the existing social order. "Satyre III" doesn't raise questions of religious doctrine—it doesn't consider the nature of the sacrament, the efficacy of faith and works, or theories of grace. Instead, it is concerned with the reciprocal relationship between religion and other human activities—the place of religious allegiance in daily life and the impact of social life on individual faith.

The poem avoids doctrinal controversies, but, of course, it does presuppose certain basic beliefs: the existence of the Christian God and personal immortality with ultimate salvation or damnation. In the first section the satirist isn't trying to persuade the young man who is his implied auditor that there is a heaven that is his ultimate goal, but to remind him of what he already knows. This auditor has been taught that devoting himself to the world, the flesh, and the devil is to court damnation and that he must seek salvation through the church God has instituted. The satirist's rhetorical questions aren't meant to provide a startlingly new system of values or to condemn the life of a soldier and courtly gallant as inherently sinful, but to jolt his auditor from apathy. He challenges the young man to recognize the discrepancy between his religion and the activities and attitudes that actually make up his life.

Lines 5-42, then, situate religion logically and chronologically within a social context, identifying it as the communal, traditional faith of the Christian and establishing its supreme importance over other objects of devotion offered by contemporary society. The next section particularizes various forms of religion geographically and historically—the church "here" (44) and at Geneva, at Rome now and a thousand years ago.[2] In the first section, the challenge to the auditor's courage consisted of the high stakes involved in his religious commitment. The challenge in the second section lies in the difficulty of the task. The Christian who has learned "easie wayes and neare / To follow" (14-15) from birth has an advantage over the pre-revelation pagan, but when he determines not to leave "th'appointed field" (32) and to "Seeke true religion" (43), the path facing the warfaring, wayfaring Christian in contemporary society is rough. By exposing the inadequate criteria by which Mirreus, Crants, Graius, Phrygius, and Gracchus try to identify the true church, the satirist ridicules their intellectual laziness, but he also acknowledges that serving "our Mistresse faire religion" (5) is a real problem if you can't find her.

From the analogies in the second section that explain various forms of inadequate reasoning Donne aims barbs at political, economic, and ecclesiastical sins and stupidities—at men who "obey / The statecloth where the Prince sate yesterday" (47-48), at the institution of wardship, and at preachers who are "vile ambitious bauds" (56). These satiric thrusts at contemporary social ills don't imply that the tawdry circumstances of ordinary life are irrelevant to true religion. On the contrary, their force is to show that the search for religious truth necessarily is conducted with the same imperfect mental processes that people use in their amatory and domestic lives. Similarly, characterizing the church at Rome by her age and her rags, the church at Geneva as "Contemptuous, yet unhansome" (52), and the church in England as established by "lawes / Still new like fashions" (56-57) neither condemns nor endorses any existing church, but does imply that the objects of religious allegiance are firmly embedded in mundane reality, subject to the same changing pressures and constraints as the rest of society. Still, that people reason imperfectly and that the visible church changes and is fragmented doesn't cancel the need to choose a church. The welfare of "thy faire goodly soul" (41), the satirist insists, depends on it: "thou / Of force must one, and forc'd but one allow" (69-70). Withdrawal from history and politics into internal spiritual experience isn't an option. "Of force" (70) refers to the logical necessity of seeking salvation through the church, the means God has provided; "forc'd" acknowledges the inescapable ecclesiastical divisions of actual historical conditions that limit choice to only one.

Searching for "true religion" (43) in these bewildering conditions is a strenuous task that the speaker shares with his audience. He doesn't sneer contemptuously at others from the isolated splendor of certainty. He doesn't claim to have made it to the top of the high hill where truth stands. The only superiority he claims is that of knowing how to go about looking for truth. His mastery of "the mindes indeavours" (87) is procedural rather than substantive; that is, human rationality consists not of getting it right, in the sense of coming out with the correct answer, but in thinking correctly. The statement "To'adore, or scorne an image, or protest, / May all be bad" (76-77) says less about images than about adoring, scorning, and protesting. As Charles Taylor observes, the procedural model of rationality is "radically and intransigently exclusive of authority."[3] The procedure Donne's speaker recommends is to "doubt wisely" (77), a formulation in which "wisely" is as important as "doubt." As Joseph Hall puts it: "God loveth adverbs."[4]

When I wrote about "Satyre III" several years ago, I stressed its endorsement of the authority of the individual conscience.[5] I'm not recanting anything I said then, but now I want to acknowledge that in "Satyre III" doubting wisely is, if not quite a communal process, at least an interpersonal one. Donne doesn't offer a complete epistemology laying out the grounds of assent, but he does recommend as a method of inquiry the circuitous route of human discourse. While the Cartesian version of procedural rationality proceeds to certainty through a chain

of clear and distinct perceptions, Donne proposes a series of unanswered questions. The first step is to "aske thy father" (71), and the next is "Let him aske his" (72). The model Donne proposes doesn't depict a lonely seeker after truth alienated from the crass world about him. He looks for guidance from and interrogates others in personal relationships and in written texts. As Donne says in *Pseudo-Martyr*, "the Fathers which must governe in these points, must be . . . Fathers which have Fathers; that is, whose words are propagated from the Apostles."[6] Donne's truth-seeker also ventures into new territory, and when he finds himself in a "strange way" (77), stops and asks directions. Inquiring the right way *is* the right way, the way to seek rightly. "Satyre III" allows no shortcuts to truth, either by conforming to an external authority or by looking within the self for innate knowledge that would compel immediate assent. Instead, it recommends the dialectical process of participating in human debate, a process the poem enacts by considering the question of religious truth in terms specific to the legitimation crisis of early modern Europe through a speaker who questions, argues, chastises, and exhorts his fictive auditor and the reader.

The poem ends by warning that failure to resist the coercion of conscience by political or ecclesiastical authority is the soul-destroying idolatry of preferring man's law to God's. But while the poem advocates the supremacy of the individual conscience, it also recognizes that the conscience is constructed through human discourse, and it assumes the individual's involvement in social institutions and processes. It is because "the principall foundation, and preservation of all States that are to continue is *power*," as Donne says in a sermon, and because those "not incorporated into the body of the world" are "nothing," as he says in a personal letter, that it is essential to know the bounds of human power.[7] The warning against the risk of corruption is firmly grounded in the necessity of participation.

What I have been arguing implicitly, then, is that "Satyre III" is most interesting and significant when seen in the context of Donne's other verse satires, which as a group explore the problem of how to participate in human society without compromising personal integrity. And finally I have tried to show that, in its insistence that we must know the bounds of human power in order to "rightly obey power," "Satyre III" complicates and disrupts any attempt to see in Donne a dramatic conversion from alienation and moral isolation to absorption within an absolutist power structure.

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Notes

[1] John Carey, ed., *The Oxford Authors: John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. xxx.

[2] I quote "Satyre III" from *John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

[3] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 168.

[4] As quoted by Taylor, p. 224.

[5] *The Casuistical Tradition in Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, and Milton* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 160-67.

[6] John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (London: W. Stansby for W. Burre, 1610), p. 115.

[7] John Donne, *Sermons*, 10 vols., eds. Evelyn Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), 5: 114; *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London: J. Flesher for Richard Marriot, 1651), p. 51.