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More Signs of Donne

Signs, voiceprints, echoes. . . . Donne persists, turning up sometimes as bidden guest in direct address or as a character in a fiction, sometimes as line or phrase in poem or prose. Whether as quotation or provocation, as iconic figure signifying soul stress or more carnal matters, Donne remains an ongoing presence in the literary imagination. We hope to highlight such sightings and soundings—like those discussed in the following essays—in future volumes of *John Donne Journal*.

[Editor]

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*Conceit*ed Donne

Margaret Maurer

The word *conceit* has several meanings, all, to some extent, applicable to this book. I use it here in what I think is its primary sense, fanciful notion: a telling conceit of Mary Novik's novel of that name[1] is that as a child Margaret Donne, the fifth of John Donne's six daughters (one is dead by the time Margaret is born) develops a crush on the man who would become Donne's first biographer, Izaak Walton.

Margaret Donne (Pegge in Novik's book) would have been about six when Izaak Walton (Izzy), twenty-two years older than Margaret (Novik reduces this to ten) and almost as much younger than her father, could have first heard Donne preach at St. Paul's. By the time Margaret was nine, Donne was also installed in the rectorship of St. Dunstan's-in-the-

[1]Novik, *Conceit* (Scarbourgh, Ontario: Doubleday Canada, 2007).

West, Walton's parish. At that age, Pegge is nurturing caterpillars and collecting horsehairs for Izzy to fashion into fishing lures, he being devoted to the sport from an earlier age than the author of *The Compleat Angler* probably was. And Izzy's is not the contemplative hobby of the *Angler*. At fourteen, in the course of showing him a secret river, Pegge persuades him to partially undress her and use the red bodice she is wearing to angle for fish:

> She rolled onto her stomach . . . then tipped on her side to make room for him. As he inched forward, first her leg, then her arm crossed over him to hold him steady. His hair brushed her face, and his lips curved an inch away from hers, as if to ask *what next*? Then he turned away, dropping his beautiful white arm over the edge towards the moving shapes beneath.
>
> "The fish are throbbing! Do you feel that, Pegge?" . . .
>
> She could feel everything, and nothing would ever be the same. Her belly was trembling, as it had done when she was little and her father blew on it to tease her.
>
> (p. 66)

As Pegge matures, she comes to scorn Izzy's hopeless passion for her elder sister Constance (Con); his settling on a first wife, Rachel Floud, who can set him up in a draper's shop; and, most of all, his fawning attentions to her father whose sermons, let alone poetry, Izzy (unlike his prototype, who may have deliberately misconstrued Donne's writing), cannot begin to understand:

> "You painted him with a white brush, you know you did," Pegge scolded. "You made a plaster saint of him. You're an old fool, Izzy. My father used you just as surely as Con used you with her kisses in Paul's walk. He might as well have kissed you on the mouth himself."
>
> (p. 312)

Nonetheless, Pegge and Izzy come together near the end of the story in a scene that is actually the novel's opening sequence to rescue Donne's marble effigy from the burning St. Paul's.

The novel's preoccupation (its tenor, as distinguished from this vehicle, to which I will return) is love, or more accurately, the social

inhibitions to fulfilled desire in the early modern England of the narrative. The young Pegge storms inwardly as she watches her father planning with businesslike dispatch to marry off his daughters. She broods on how their fate contrasts to their mother's, which was to have the passion that lured her to an imprudent and paternally unsanctioned match betrayed by the enforced circumstance of her husband's calling to the church. Sections of *Conceit* narrated by Donne's deceased wife Ann as Donne lies dying portray her as a martyr to her husband's religious and sexual needs. Ann reveals that once he was ordained (the year Pegge was born), Donne maintained that he risked damnation if he bedded her with any other motive but to beget a child on her; and he chose forbidden sex with her pregnant body over what he claimed was the still more mortal sin of onanism. (In a "valediction" to her readers, Novik describes the research she did to create the novel's world, manifest enough without the assertion, but also claims the right to be indulged in some inventions, noting that Donne once wrote that he, too, "did best when [he] had least truth for [his] subjects." Fair enough. So let us just say that "least truth" is an apt euphemism for the suggestion that Donne would try perplexing Ann's mind with such far-fetched doctrinal niceties.)

Pegge's sympathy for her mother compounded by the envy she feels for her parents' romance feeds her disinclination to the prudent marriage her father wishes on her. The novel represents the scene of Donne's death twice, each time as an intimate episode with Pegge. In the first, a sixteen year-old Pegge, quotes the end of Elegy 8, "To his mistress going to bed," as she washes his emaciated body:

> Then, pushing his knees towards his chest, she soaped right up into the crack between his buttocks with the sponge.
>
> "Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee," she sang out. "As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be to taste whole joys."
>
> She could recite what she wished, for he could no longer object to his own erotic verse. . . .
>
> She thrust her scented hand between his thighs, right up to the shrunken old plums and asked tormentingly, "What is love?"
>
> (pp. 243–244)

In the final pages of the novel, as a fifty-year-old Pegge considers making a life of mutual affection with William Bowles after all (he married for love though she did not), she either goes deeper into the memory of the final moments of her father's life or hallucinates them differently:

> On the table was what I had come for, one of [the More family servant] Bess's remedy jars. It was a salve for Con to use on [her second husband] Mr. Harvey. . . . *To bring him round . . . when nought else will do it.*
>
> . . . I worked the ointment deep into your skin. . . . As my fingers sank into your flesh, your pulse quickened and your skin warmed under my hand, its female cunning startling both of us. I scarcely needed to move my thumb to see its fruit. I licenced my roving hands. . . .
>
> All at once the ligatures around your heart broke open in a glorious haemorraging flood and you were rampant with remembered love. . . . My mother drove me forward, but oh! I was willing.
>
> (pp. 395–396)

The novel concludes with her resolving to lay her anger and her envy to rest: "William is right. I must stop sleeping in his bed" (p. 397).

While it is Pegge's attempt to resolve her feelings about her father that generate the events of the novel, it is the conceit I identified at the start, particularly Pegge's and Izzy's adventure with Donne's effigy, that figures the curious effect of Novik's enterprise. The novel imagines a smoking, drinking, posturing, self-involved, ruthlessly pragmatic sensualist as the person behind Donne's witty, often profoundly brilliant writing. In effect, Novik's image of Donne is the blackened, decapitated statue Pegge and Izzy drag from the burning cathedral (Pegge carrying the head: it is not for nothing that Novik's Donne names Pegge after Thomas More's daughter Margaret). Installing the thing in her garden at Clewer, Pegge soothes the objections of her husband by promising to "train bindweed to grow around it" (p. 318). Her treatment of the effigy is an analogue to what she does with her father's words. She not only appropriates them by quoting them wickedly out of context; she also, under her mother's name, blots and overwrites in cipher the dead dean's books and papers. Thus she talks back (to use that old-fashioned twentieth-century feminist term) to the patriarch, who, as her brother

George is fond of saying, often maddeningly expressed himself "in a kind of code" (p. 30). The distraught William, when he discovers Pegge's scribblings, enlists the help of Samuel Pepys to read them. (Yes, Pepys puts in a cameo appearance in *Conceit*, as does Christopher Wren. Novik's seventeenth-century London is a small world.)

But just as Pegge is assisted by Izzy in the rescue of her father's image that ultimately enables Wren to install the cleaned and polished effigy in the new St. Paul's, so Novik's novel collaborates with some of the sentimentality and enforced cohesiveness of Walton's *Life*—qualities of it that, to be sure, most actual biographers of Donne find too compelling to be given over entirely as well. Following Walton, who did it much less frequently and generally not without qualification, Novik connects Donne's secular poetry to the narrative she constructs of Donne's courtship and marriage to Ann. She also follows Walton in the judgment that Donne's marriage was "the remarkable error of his life," radically changing its import, however, by having Donne himself subscribe to a version of it. Novik is at her best when she, like Pegge, goes beyond Walton in her sensitivity to Donne's wit. My favorite touch is a trivial one: the Donne family dog (and a bitch at that) is named Sadducee, a delightful reflection of Donnean musings on the question of whether animals, or women for that matter, have souls. Other snatches of and allusions to Donne's writing are less sure-fire in their effect, but many cannot be quite subdued to the new uses to which Novik would have them put. At such moments, readers who admire a Donne very different from this *Conceit*ed one, can spy him through the caricature and may take pleasure in the double effect.

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