John Donne Journal
Vol. 31 (2012)

Book Reviews

John Donne, St. Augustine, and Charity

R. V. Young

Katrin Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xii + 268 pp.

In *Donne's Augustine* Katrin Ettenhuber displays an admirable knowledge of Donne's religious prose, of many of the works of St. Augustine, and of the relationship between the two authors. She marshals her learning with the aim not only of showing Augustine's pervasive and profound influence on Donne, but also of investigating, "in the broadest possible sense, the influence of one author's philosophy of reading and interpretation upon another" (p. 10). The latter goal is evidently undertaken in order to make the book more than just a detailed and comprehensive demonstration of Augustine's intellectual and spiritual impact on Donne—a point that is already widely accepted. Ettenhuber offers a thorough—not to say exhaustive—account of Donne's allusions to and borrowings from the Augustinian *œuvre* and also specifies that he "encountered patristic texts directly, as well as drawing on anthologies, indices, and notes" (p. 27). The scholarship is impressive and will doubtless prove quite useful to others with an interest in how Donne (and other writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) acquired and deployed Patristic learning. It is doubtful, however, whether it successfully identifies either Donne's or Augustine's "philosophy of reading and interpretation" or even their "philosophy of quotation" (see pp. 43–64).

Donne's Augustine is divided into two principal parts. After a twenty-two-page introduction, Ettenhuber offers two chapters that "aim to demonstrate the breadth and range of Donne's Augustinian reading." In tracking down the sources of Donne's quotations—original texts or various kinds of intermediary scholarly aids?—she attempts to establish "what underlying scholarly and philosophical principles inform Donne's citational procedures" (p. 21). In these two chapters Ettenhuber compares Donne's deployment of material from St. Augustine's works to the practices of other religious writers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. A crucial aspect of the uses to which St. Augustine is put during this period, as she observes, is the pervasive religious controversy occasioned by the Protestant Reformation, not only between Catholics and Protestants, but also within Church of England. Chapters 3 through 7 apply the principles established in the preliminary chapters to several of Donne's religious treatises and sermons.

What may be called a "hermeneutic of suspicion" is a factor throughout this study, although it seems to lack the passion of an earlier generation of academic feminists—as if severe skepticism had become a convention or a routine. The suspicion is applied to Augustine and the Church Fathers as well as to Donne and his contemporaries, and Ettenhuber discovers in Donne himself reservations about the ingenuousness of the Fathers, including the much admired Bishop of Hippo: "But above all, they [the Fathers] are professional polemicists who manipulate language in the service of a political and doctrinal agenda" (p. 18). The passage cited from one of the sermons to attribute this view to Donne hardly seems to do the job, but the negative perspective is pervasive in *Donne's Augustine*. After taking note of Donne's attack on Catholic scriptural interpretation in *Pseudo-martyr*, Ettenhuber observes, "Donne's approach to contextual reading is itself subject to variations in context and often he is found using precisely the strategies of excerption and compilation he excoriates in his Roman rivals" (p. 53).

Ettenhuber is of course correct to observe that Christian divines, both of the Patristic and Reformation periods, were often engaged in controversy and tailored their arguments and use of sources to enhance their eristic goal. She does not, however, provide much explanation for why this ought to be treated as a startling revelation: a polemicist can still be a pastor, and an argument that questions an opponent's grasp or

appreciation of the doctrine of charity does not necessarily undermine the importance of charity or the controversialist's Christian commitment. A more fruitful procedure would be to assess in more detail the extent to which Donne (and Augustine) succeeds in refuting his opponent while remaining faithful to his Christian belief. Ettenhuber's tone appears to imply that controversy and charity are necessarily incompatible.

Ettenhuber spends far too much time in the initial chapters providing a minute account of Donne's recourse either to indices and digests or complete, original sources for his quotations and allusions to Augustine. At times she seems to worry that the use of secondary compilations is somehow unworthy of a scholar and is at pains, in discussing Donne's borrowing quotations of Augustine from Aquinas, to exonerate Donne from a charge that (to my knowledge at least) has rarely been made: "It is clear, then, that Donne was not simply taking short cuts here, and that he saw Augustine and Aquinas as mutually complementary sources upon which further productive elaborations could be built" (p. 84). "Early modern preachers" as a group are allowed to see "primary and secondary sources as complementary," and we are invited to "appreciate the interplay between primary and secondary sources as a profoundly enabling rhetorical process, rather than as a corruption of the source text" (p. 95). All perfectly true—but hardly a radical notion in view of the methods and protocols of modern academic scholarship, which in many ways derive from the scholarly and religious controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Like most of us, Ettenhuber is at her best focusing on specific works. Chapter 3, "Ascending Humility," is an extended treatment of the influence of Augustine, especially the *Confessions*, on Donne's *Essayes in Divinity*. She cites three passages from the eleventh book of Augustine's spiritual autobiography as especially important for Donne's introspective meditation based on scriptural interpretation:

> Together, these three passages form a discursive and moral frame for Donne's own—curiously selective—reflections on the Bible in *Essayes in Divinity*. Donne's focus on a single verse from Genesis and Exodus suggests that his exegesis is designed to be representative rather than comprehensive; furthermore, his explications invariably proceed from, and return to, discussions of more universal principles of interpretation. Hermeneutics, in the *Confessions* and in the

> *Essayes*, is deeply implicated in a broader ontology of revelation and spiritual rectification.
>
> (p. 110)

Ettenhuber's development of this point offers a number of fine insights into the relationship between Donne and his Patristic mentor that goes beyond merely noting quotations and other borrowings.

Her treatment of *Biathanatos* in chapter 4, "The Bad Physician," is considerably less effective. Donne's somewhat half-hearted argument defending—not exactly suicide—but the proposition that it is perhaps not so bad as it is usually regarded has always been a problematic work. His earliest written book, *Biathanatos* shows us Donne at one of the lower ebbs of his life trying to combine the sardonic wit and fantastic learning that reach their apogee in *Metempsychosis* with the serious moral reflection of a married man with growing (and probably alarming) family responsibilities. The result is, unsurprisingly, not altogether felicitous; and it is probably not a good idea to read it too earnestly, neglecting Donne's later wry reference to it as the work of "Jack Donne" rather than the Dean. Ettenhuber reads it as a work of casuistry marked by "the rhetoric of Jesuitical equivocation" (p. 161) and accuses Donne of refuting Augustine with a "breathtaking . . . lack of charity, empathy, and sympathy" (p. 149). Since Donne never published the work, the critic perhaps ought to question her own adherence to these ideal qualities.

In fact, it may have been worth her while to have devoted some pages not only to Donne's reasons for withholding not only *Biathanatos* but also *Essayes in Divinity*. Ettenhuber is keen "for gauging the orthodoxy of Donne's Protestant reading framework" in the *Essayes* (p. 108) without ever really specifying the distinctive features of "Protestant reading." But she might have considered, following the suggestion of Evelyn M. Simpson in her edition of the work, that Donne may have feared that the *Essayes* would not have seemed sufficiently Protestant to George Abbott and other authorities in the Church of England. Similarly, she asserts, "Even a cursory glance at Donne's comments on Aquinas indicates that he had no special affection for the Angelic Doctor" (p. 101). In addition to negative comments about St. Thomas (some of which are not so severely negative), her evidence is Donne's habit of suppressing references to his use of Thomas's works. Again, she might have entertained the possibility that Donne, with his notoriously recusant

family, may have just been exercising caution in not wanting to seem a Catholic backslider.

The final chapters take up the influence of Augustine on various sermons by Donne. Chapter 5 examines the Lincoln's Inn Sermons, and chapters 6 and 7 discuss the relationship of a number of Donne's late sermons to the tensions between Charles I's court and Parliament over various political and religious issues especially involving the King's invocation of juridical principle of equity and his prerogative to apply it over against the judgments of the Common Law. Donne's preaching on the theological virtue of charity—a favorite theme that he shares with St. Augustine—is regarded as analogous to the King's promotion of equity. Equity and charity thus represent the political and religious prongs of the Stuart Monarchy's attempt, abetted by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, to repress Parliament's bias towards both the rights of merchants and Puritanism, with its stress on faith rather than charity.

Ettenhuber's approach is typical of much recent discussion of Donne: he is regarded as "intensely engaged in matters of politics and governance" (p. 182), but he regrettably seems to have retreated from this admirable engagement over the last few years of his life and conformed with the Laudian ecclesiastical regime. Donne's treatment of charity is not as corrupt as "the Laudian philosophy of charity," since "Laud's rhetoric of loving forbearance masked a rather more oppressive register of political compliance" (p. 202). Still, it may be "a test of our own charity" "to read the external compliance with Laudian policies as surface phenomenon, as a preliminary stage in the journey towards the depths and heights of God's providential love" (p. 203).

It is probable that Donne (as all Christians) was somewhat more concerned about Christ's judgment of his charity and candor than about the judgment of twenty-first-century academics, and he might well ask whether we should really prefer William Prynne to William Laud as a pastor. In a contrarian essay in the much-cited collection, *John Donne's Professional Lives*, Johan P. Sommerville shrewdly questions why the King's Parliamentary opponents are necessarily to be preferred by contemporary academics of progressive inclinations:

> Those opponents were staunch defenders of individual property rights and reduced taxation, while James wanted to subordinate individual rights to the welfare of the community.

> Many of those opponents were Christian fundamentalists, of rigidly puritanical moral views. Why it is pessimistic to suppose that Donne sided against them is mysterious.[1]

Of course the entire argument is anachronistic, and, worse still, he leads us away from what is important in Donne and any great writer. "Grievances are a form of impatience," Robert Frost remarks in his introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson's *King Jasper*. "Griefs are a form of patience."[2] Katrin Ettenhuber has provided a valuable survey of Donne's debt to and interest in St. Augustine, but the luster of her book is somewhat diminished by her imposition on Donne of current political preoccupations. Nevertheless, it is more worthwhile than many recent publications in Donne scholarship, because it is better written and organized and offers more real learning.

North Carolina State University

[1]Sommerville, "John Donne the Controversialist: The Poet as Political Thinker," in *John Donne's Professional Lives*, ed. David Colclough (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 87.

[2]Frost, ". . . content with the old-fashioned way to be new," Introduction to Robinson's *King Jasper*, in *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrance Thompson (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 348.