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John Donne, Never Done: A Reassessment of Modern Criticism

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The following address was given at the plenary session of the 20th annual John Donne Society Conference held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on 23 February 2005.

At the MLA Convention in Houston in 1980, I gave a paper with the engaging and extraordinarily evocative title of "John Donne's Poetry: An Assessment of Modern Criticism." After about twenty minutes of my giving what I thought was a spellbinding account of the state of Donne criticism as well as some awesome prophecies about the future direction of Donne studies, I recall that the chairman of the session, Ted-Larry Pebworth, nervously passed me a note several times that read something like "cut it short" or "wind it up—immediately." I promise that I shall try not to vex the chairman this evening or you by exceeding my time limit. The paper I presented in 1980 was later published, with the same engaging title, in the first issue of the *John Donne Journal* in 1982. In preparing for this paper, I revisited that essay in an attempt to discern whether or not what I said about the state of Donne studies a quarter of a century ago is still valid today. After much deep reflection, I have arrived at a very definitive answer: yes—and no.

During the past twenty-five years several important developments have occurred in Donne scholarship and criticism

that I could not have foretold in 1980, developments which I believe have had a significant impact on Donne studies. I shall mention only three—even though all of them are well-known to the members of John Donne Society.

First, in the autumn of 1980, while I was a visiting professor at the University of Manchester in England, I received a letter from a then young, blond, and slim young man at the University of Southern Mississippi whom I had met once some years earlier at a regional MMLA conference in Tulsa, asking me if I thought it would be a good idea to undertake a variorum edition of Donne's poetry and, if so, would I be interested in meeting with John Shawcross and him in Houston at the upcoming MLA Convention. I responded very positively to Gary Stringer's suggestion and invitation, not realizing, of course, that I was committing a good part of my future academic career to the proposed project. From that meeting and one that followed in Gulfport, Mississippi, the next fall, initial steps in organizing the Donne variorum project were begun. The influence on Donne studies of the variorum project and spin-off undertakings from it I need not tell you have played a major role in the growth and development of Donne criticism and scholarship during the past two decades. Let me mention only a few examples to support my claim.

As a result of the work of the textual editors of the edition, most Donne scholars and critics have become much more aware of the importance of textual studies in evaluating and understanding Donne's poetry—and I might add his prose as well. Many have even developed a new respect for and appreciation of textual critics, who in the not-too-distant past were considered to be only one rung above bibliographers on the ladder of literary drudgery. For instance, as a result of the work of textual critics, we have become aware of the fact that Donne, as a coterie poet, apparently wrote multiple versions of a single poem, each of which has some claim to authenticity. Ted-Larry Pebworth, to cite only one example, has shown convincingly that there are three distinct versions of the

poem most often referred to as "Hymn to the Father"—"two similar, but substantively different versions, both addressed to Christ, in the manuscripts that circulated during Donne's lifetime and just afterwards" and "a third, quite different text, addressed to God the Father, in the posthumously printed 1633 edition."[1] Ted explains how modern editors, in fact, have created an eclectic version of the poem, selecting lines from one source, other lines from another, and thereby have created texts that "never existed before their appearance in modern editions."[2] In other words, most of us have become convinced that the first step in our attempts to understand Donne poems must be to know, as best we can, what he actually wrote. John Shawcross and others have shown that how editors resolve conflicting and/or different texts in various manuscripts and early editions, how they order the poems within a generic category, and how they resolve the question of classification by genre of certain poems will obviously affect criticism of the poems.[3] As a result of the efforts of the variorum textual editors, new manuscripts and unrecorded editions of Donne's poems have been discovered and collated; new computer programs have been developed that allow for more reliable resolutions to various textual difficulties; the implications and ramifications of the manuscript culture in which Donne participated have been increasingly taken into account in interpreting his poems; and the transcribing and studying of seventeenth-century poetical miscellanies in which his poems appear have led to a better understanding of Donne's early reputation and to an unraveling of certain textual complexities in his poems.

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[1]Ted-Larry Pebworth, "The Editor, the Critic, and the Multiple Texts of Donne's 'A Hymne to God the Father'," *South Central Review* 4.2 (1987): 19-20.

[2]Pebworth, p. 24.

[3]John T. Shawcross, "A Text of John Donne's Poems: Unsatisfactory Compromise." *John Donne Journal* 2.1 (1983): 1-19.

The publication of the first three volumes of the variorum edition (with a fourth in press) constitutes one of the most important developments in Donne scholarship not only in the past twenty years but also in the past century. These volumes are invaluable for the textual information they provide for the Anniversaries, Epicedes, Obsequies, Epigrams, Epithalamia, Epitaphs, Inscriptions, Miscellaneous Poems, and Elegies and also for the presentation of a detailed, organized, synoptic history of the vast amount of critical writing on these poems that allows critics to discover how individual genres, poems, lines, and words have been interpreted throughout the centuries, thereby assisting critics in avoiding the needless repetition that has afflicted Donne criticism in the past and assisting them also in seeing exactly how their contributions fit into the on-going critical discussion of Donne's poems.

A second happening that I did not foresee in 1980 was the creation of the John Donne Society, which is only one of the many spin-off developments from the variorum project. After the editors of the edition had met several times at the Gulfport campus of the University of Southern Mississippi to organize the edition—and had enjoyed some memorable and very jolly dinner parties at Mary Mahoney's Restaurant in Biloxi—Eugene Cunnar proposed the creation of the John Donne Society; and those present loudly applauded his suggestion and, of course, following a long-standing academic tradition, wholeheartedly entrusted him with the job of organizing and promoting the society. I might mention, as an aside, that during one of those dinners in Biloxi, Mary Mahoney herself, dressed elegantly as usual in a side-split long skirt and wearing incredibly large butterfly glasses, greeted us and asked us what "we boys were doin' down here in Mississippi." She thought we perhaps worked for the railroad. Somewhat sheepishly we told her we did not work for the railroad but that we were meeting to plan an edition of an English poet named John Donne. Her response is memorable: "Oh," she said, "so you boys are going to try to find out what he meant." Fortunately, we did not point out

to Mary that her critical terminology was quite outdated—that poems do not MEAN ANYTHING but just ARE. At one point, there was some discussion of dedicating the first volume of the edition to Mary. We thought it would be interesting to ask our learned colleagues, once they read the dedication, if they knew Mary Mahoney, expecting that some would likely reply that they didn't actually know HER but they DID know her work. Mary aside, the John Donne Society has played an important role in the history of Donne criticism since its foundation in 1985. Any number of critics and scholars can trace the inception of their books and/or essays to ideas stimulated by the many good papers (and a few less memorable ones) given at the annual conferences and to the spirited discussions following the formal sessions—either in the large room on the third floor of Hardy Hall or in the little bungalow where members congregated in the evenings—solely for the purpose of intellectual stimulation.

The third development that I did not foresee in 1980 was the creation of the *John Donne Journal*, co-edited by Thomas Hester and Robert Young, the first issue of which appeared in 1982. The consistently high quality of the essays accepted for publication by the editorial board of the journal is well-known to this audience. Essays of many of the most influential Donne scholars of our time have appeared in its pages, and I notice that a number of those contributors are seated here this evening.

But now, back to my 1980 paper, and to my question of whether or not what I pointed out then remains true today. I began that essay by noting that in recent history Donne's influence on practicing poets had been minimal, unlike in the 1930s and 1940s, for instance, when Donne was a major catalyst in the work of such important poets as Elinor Wylie, Wallace Stevens, Herbert Read, William Empson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Archibald MacLeish, Yvor Winters, and later the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky. Occasionally today a minor poet will write a short poem in honor or in imitation of Donne or allusions will be made to his poetry, such as Margaret Edson's use (or misuse) of the Holy

Sonnets in her play *W;t* or Ed O'Connor's and Edward Docx's use (or misuse) of the Songs and Sonets in their recent novels;[4] but among major contemporary poets, who would one cite as having been greatly influenced by Donne? So, nothing has changed as far as Donne's influence on practicing poets. I might add, however, again as an aside, that Donne's works, especially the *Devotions*, have survived rather extensively in the popular imagination, a fact brought home to me some years ago by Robert Collmer, who published a humorous essay entitled "Donne Redonne: A Literary Descent into the Vernacular," in which he cited numerous examples "ranging from outright citations to parodies to dim echoes" of Donne's poetry and prose in twentieth-century book-titles, movies, newspapers and popular magazines; in the titles of Baptist sermons; in cartoons, comic books, and advertisements; and even on a bumper sticker on a truck in Texas that read "For whom the bulls toil." Collmer argues that "the final test of a literary work's greatness rests with its durability, not with the judgment of a few *cognoscenti.*"[5] Perhaps it is a thought worth pondering.

But, Baptist sermons, bumper stickers, and even contemporary poets aside, Donne continues to engage and fascinate an ever-increasing number of scholars and critics and is very much alive in academic criticism. In his 1931 essay entitled "Donne in Our Time," T. S. Eliot announced that "Donne's poetry is a concern of the present and the recent past rather than of the future."[6] If, by his

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[4]Margaret Edson, *W;t* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999); Ed O'Connor, *The Yeare's Midnight* (London: Constable, 2002); Edward Docx, *The Calligrapher* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

[5]Robert G. Collmer, "Donne Redone: A Literary Descent into the Vernacular," *Texas Humanist* 6.6 (1984): 37-38.

[6]T. S. Eliot, "Donne in Our Time," in *A Garland for John Donne, 1631-1931*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 5.

prophetic utterance of doom, Eliot intended to predict Donne's demise among scholars and critics, or if he thought that critical interest in Donne had reached its apex in 1931, then history has proven him quite wrong. Since 1931 no fewer than 3,500 books, monographs, essays, and notes on Donne have appeared; and, as far as I can tell, there are no signs of diminishing interest in his poetry and prose among scholars and academic critics. Let me cite some figures in support of my claim; but before doing so, let me say, in all fairness to Eliot, that I think that very likely he did not have in mind academic criticism but rather recognized the dwindling influence that Donne would have on his poetry and on future practicing poets; so, if that was his intention, then he was not mistaken after all. But now, some figures. In my first Donne bibliography, covering the fifty-five-year period from 1912-1967,[7] I listed 1,280 books, essays, and notes published on Donne, excluding references, book reviews, and doctoral dissertations. In my second bibliography, covering only eleven years—from 1968 to 1978,[8] I annotated 1,044 entries; and in my recently published third bibliography, covering seventeen years, from 1979 to 1995,[9] I included 1,572 items. (Now I should like for you to think that these bibliographies include everything written on Donne in all languages for the years covered; but I know this audience is too savvy to accept that claim. In fact, I wake up at times wondering if there is not some obscure Croatian monk in a secluded monastery who has published a short essay on Donne that has slipped through my bibliographical net.) So today it is fair to say that more

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[7]John R. Roberts, *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1912-1967* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973).

[8]John R. Roberts, *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1968-1978* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1982).

[9]John R. Roberts, *John Donne: An Annotated Bibliography of Modern Criticism, 1979-1995* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2004).

essays and books are being written on Donne than at any period in the past. For instance, in 1931, which was a major year for Donne studies since it was the tercentenary anniversary of his death—and major practicing poets were still turning to him for inspiration—only about 50 items on Donne were published, whereas, fifty years later, in 1981, not a particularly celebratory year, over 100 studies on Donne appeared. A quick check of the seventeenth-century section of the MLA Bibliography (which is notoriously incomplete) for the year 1997, which I picked out at random, reveals that only Milton, as in the past, exceeds Donne in the number of entries, that four times as many items were published on Donne that year as on Dryden or on Marvell, and more than twice as many were published on Donne as on Herbert. However, as I remarked in my 1980 essay, and I agree with the comment today, just quantity alone is finally rather meaningless. I would be the first to admit—from painful first-hand knowledge—that any number of books and essays that have appeared in recent years are minor efforts at best and that not a few are repetitive, derivative, poorly conceived and even more poorly written, and some are downright misleading and silly. But as I read and annotated the thousands of items that appear in the bibliographies, I was impressed over and over by the fact that Donne has engaged and still engages some of the best minds of the scholarly world and that Donne studies produced during the past twenty-five years have made major contributions to our understanding and knowledge not only of Donne but of the seventeenth century, of metaphysical poets and poetry as a whole, and even of the very nature of poetry itself.

Because Donne is recognized as a major poet and because of the complexity and enigmatic quality of his poetry, it is not surprising that his work has been run through all the various critical sieves devised by recent critics and has been explored and exploited in the light of each new literary fad that has emerged in the academic world. His poetry has been examined linguistically, stylistically, biographically, psychoanalytically, bibliographically, textually,

formalistically, generically, socially, politically, theologically, historically, and rhetorically. It has been scrutinized closely by feminists and gender critics, and it has been deconstructed. But in spite of all these efforts, critics simply cannot make Donne's poetry lie down quietly on their prefabricated Procrustean beds; and so the stream of criticism surges on year after year.

Eighty years ago Merritt Hughes warned his generation of the dangers of "kidnapping" Donne for its own purposes. Hughes, I think, was primarily concerned that such critics as T. S. Eliot and his admirers and the so-called "New Critics" in their attempts to present Donne as irresistibly modern and theologically and politically relevant to their time, were dangerously distorting Donne's genuine originality and achievement. Hughes, of course, wanted to see Donne restored to a seventeenth-century context. "As a matter of fact, we might surmise," he wrote, "that Donne's outlook would be closer to that of Duns Scotus than to ours."[10] Well, Donne is still being "kidnapped" by modern critics who "use" his poems to support their own personal theses, favorite critical theories, and pet social or political agenda, and sometimes one comes away feeling he has learned much more about the critic and his thinking than about Donne and his. Likewise, in recent criticism, not only Donne's poetry but also his prose has been "kidnapped." Jeanne Shami, for instance, has pointed out the misuse of the sermons by some modern critics, especially the use of them "as means to other ends, rather than as the end of legitimate scholarly inquiry" and the practice of quoting from them in a fragmentary way and/or out of context. She observes,

> [C]ontext is all. But rarely are the sermons seen as issuing from any specific context—generic, historical, theological, political, or cultural. Too often they become a Scripture which any poor devil looking for a

[10]Merritt Hughes, "Kidnapping Donne," *University of California Publications in English* 4 (1934): 88.

> publication can quote to her own purposes—usually by lifting passages, at will, from anywhere, with the aid of the *Index*—and using them to create a collage of comments that supposedly represents Donne's "mature" views.

She adds, "[R]eaders pillage the sermons for a quotation that will confirm their view."[11]

I still believe as I did in 1980 that Donne critics can be divided into two major groups—the recoverers and the discoverers. The first, the recoverers, believe that in order to understand Donne's poetry and prose one must study the historical, cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions that inform them, such as the complexities of Renaissance rhetoric, the emblem tradition, various modes of religious meditation, the Christian liturgy and seventeenth-century devotional practices, and the implications of Donne having lived in a manuscript culture. The discoverers, on the other hand, seek to find new things about the workings of the poet's mind and art by applying terms and investigative techniques that would have been completely alien to Donne's own thinking and unknown during his lifetime, such as psychoanalysis and much so-called "modern theory." The recoverers still regard with suspicion the discoverers as simply clever, highly imaginative, unscholarly dilettantes, while the discoverers still dismiss with some contempt the recoverers as pedantic, literal-minded, harmless antiquarians who have nothing new to contribute to the on-going critical debate on Donne's poetry or prose. Proponents in either camp, of course, are not likely to experience a sudden and profound conversion experience, renounce their sins of the past, and promise to sin no more; and I can think of no good reason why they should. I think that Donne criticism is richer—and sometimes much more comical—because

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[11]Jeanne Shami, "Donne's Sermons and the Absolutist Politics of Quotation," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995), pp. 383-84.

of the variety of approaches that are available, although I must confess my allegiance primarily to the recoverers. One thing I have noticed, however, is that much of the best recent work on Donne's prose, especially on the sermons, has been primarily historical and textual as scholars attempt to locate these works more solidly in their cultural and historical contexts.

A somewhat unpleasant observation that I feel compelled to make is that too much of the recent criticism on Donne's poetry—and the charge could be extended to criticism across the board—is very poorly written, frustratingly opaque, and not infrequently totally incomprehensible. While preparing the annotations for my various bibliographies and in attempting to synthesize the critical commentary on the Elegies for the variorum edition, I found myself at times completely baffled by incredibly bad writing. I tried—sometimes without success—to parse sentences, hoping that I might find a subject and predicate or would be able to figure out which modifying clause and/or phrase belonged to which preceding words. When all failed, I turned to my wife Lorraine, who was occasionally more successful than I in unweaving knotted syntax. Instead of quoting several choice passages I had picked out that could possibly embarrass members in this audience, I shall exercise charitable restraint; besides each of you, I am sure, has experienced the same frustration that I have. Julia Walker, in a review some years ago, had some very interesting observations to make on this issue. She wrote that the style of the author of the book that she was reviewing was "a symptom of his desire to be seen as theoretical with a capital 'T' and his problems with reading Donne [were] most often caused by the intensity of that desire." "Sense and syntax," she observed, "fall by the wayside when he, or any writer, concentrates primarily on including the largest and widest-ranging collection of buzz-words that each page can possibly hold." She continues, "The idea that obscurity of style is somehow to be equated with 'intergriscity' (an apt non-word example) of content has become increasingly popular in the last decade," and she notes that "[a] critic whose writing obscures his

point is only a little less insulting than a critic who has no point." She concludes, "The idea that stylistic inaccessibility is a mark of the *cognoscenti* is responsible for much good criticism being badly written." I agree with Walker, that "[a]s teachers, readers, editors, organizers of panels, and certainly as writers, we should be endeavoring to cure, not foster, this epidemic of literary lock-jaw."[12] My objection, as Julia Walker also makes clear, is not with contemporary theoretical criticism but with poor and/or pretentious writing.

As in 1980, it still concerns me that Donne scholars and critics are increasingly talking only to themselves and to each other, not to a wider audience. Over the years scholars have weighted down Donne's poems with such a burden of historical and philosophical speculation that even the most educated reader is often made to feel inadequately prepared to cope with this scattered, staggering body of often irrelevant and esoteric information, while many critics, as I have mentioned, for their part, often speak a language that is unintelligible even to their professional colleagues and seem primarily concerned with dazzling their very few readers with the range and complexity of their critical sophistication. Too often Donne is simply an occasion for a critical debate, but the center of attention is frequently not Donne really but rather abstract, highly theoretical issues that are of little interest to anyone but their exponents. So, in a word, in recent years, the critics, once more, have "kidnapped" Donne and have turned Donne studies into a self-perpetuating industry that nearly rivals the Milton industry. In many cases, Donne has been so successfully returned to his niche in the seventeenth century that many readers, especially students, are quite content to leave him there, while they pay lip service to his greatness from a comfortable distance. In other instances, Donne has been explained in such complicated terms that even highly educated readers feel intimidated and put off. I would never

[12]Julia M. Walker, "Left/Write/Right: Lock-Jaw and Literary Criticism." *John Donne Journal* 7 (1988): 138.

argue, of course, that we abandon intellectually demanding and sophisticated literary approaches to Donne, when those approaches truly help us to understand and appreciate better his poetry. No one has ever thought that Donne was a simple poet. His poems, however, were intended to communicate his particularly brilliant sense of reality to his readers; and I think it is therefore the responsibility of critics to make clear—in understandable language—what Donne is communicating. So many of the books and articles that I have read on Donne during the past two decades are much more difficult to understand than are the poems and prose works about which they were supposedly written. For this reason, as for others that I have mentioned, I believe that the commentaries in the variorum edition will greatly help to clear a path through the tangled critical jungle created by modern scholars and critics.

In my 1980 evaluation of Donne criticism, I suggested also that a disturbing fact about modern Donne criticism was that it concerned itself primarily with less than half of Donne's canon, confining itself rather narrowly to his love poems—in fact, to about a dozen or less poems from the Songs and Sonets (and to a much lesser extent to several of the Elegies), to the Holy Sonnets and two or three of the hymns, and to the Anniversaries. I pointed out, as an example, that a check of the items for 1968-1978 in my second bibliography showed that criticism specifically on the verse epistles accounted for only about one percent of the total entries, even though the verse epistles represent nearly a sixth of Donne's poetic canon—approximately the same as the religious poems. I further observed that the number of items on *Metempsychosis*, the epigrams, the epithalamia, the obsequies and epicedes, and even most of the religious poems was even more miniscule. I concluded that the unfortunate result of centering attention almost exclusively on half of Donne's canon was that we have developed what could be called a "synecdochical" understanding of and appreciation for Donne's total achievement as a poet. We have, in other words, substituted the part for the whole; and then proceeded as if the

part were, in fact, the whole. Thus, literary historians, critics, and teachers, I claimed, continue to repeat generalizations about Donne's poetry that, although incomplete, partial, misleading, and sometimes manifestly incorrect, have achieved the strength of established fact and the sacredness of a hallowed tradition. For the most part, in the past and in the present, "Donne's poetry" has often meant the Songs and Sonets; and since these poems are characteristically dramatic, colloquial, metrically rough, syntactically concentrated, highly witty, rhetorically ingenious, psychologically complex, and subtle in argument, Donne's other poems have often been slighted because they do not have any or all of these so-called Donnean qualities or because they do not fit neatly into pre-conceived definitions of metaphysical poetry, meditative poetry, or baroque poetry. In the past, even the Holy Sonnets, which, on the whole, have fared rather well, were often said to be lacking because they do not exploit to the fullest the possibilities inherent in the Songs and Sonets; and the Elegies were often treated only because they showed in an undeveloped and less sophisticated way some of the major features of what we considered to be "Donne's poetry."

So, has the critical scene changed much in the past quarter century? Are we now taking into account Donne's whole canon in our estimation of his poetry or are we still being "synedochical" and focusing primarily on only a handful of poems? A rough count of the entries in my third bibliography covering the years 1979 to 1995 leads me to believe that there have been a few changes; but that, on the whole, not much has changed. Although critics continue to focus their attention primarily on the Holy Sonnets, a few of the hymns, The Anniversaries, and, of course, overwhelmingly on the Songs and Sonets, I should like to point out that a number of first-rate individual studies on the generally neglected genres, though not numerous, have appeared in recent years. I would point out, as some examples, the studies of Thomas Hester and Dennis Flynn on the epigrams as well as Hester's essays on the epitaphs, Heather Dubrow's discussions of the

epithalamia, the essays of Margaret Maurer on the verse epistles, the studies of John Klause and Graham Roebuck on "The Lamentations of Jeremy," and the work of Ted-Larry Pebworth and Claude Summers on both the verse letters and the obsequies and epicedes. (I should make clear that the figures here and elsewhere that I am going to mention come from a count of entries as listed in the indices of my second and third bibliographies (affectionately called by my friends "Roberts 2" and "Roberts 3"); and I must stress that, in some instances, an entry may appear both in a generic category (such as the Divine Poems or Elegies) and again as a single poem (such as "Hymn to the Father" or "The Anagram"). But since I have used the same imperfect counting system when tallying up entries from Roberts 2 and Roberts 3, I think the conclusions I draw are valid.

In my count, I noted approximately 43 entries in my third bibliography on the Divine Poems as a general category—with 3 entries on "Upon the Annunciation and Passion," 7 on "The Lamentations of Jeremy" and on "Upon the Translation of the Psalms," 9 on "To Mr. Tilman," 17 on "The Cross" and on "A Litany," 22 on "A Hymn to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany," 27 on "Hymn to the Father," 37 on "A Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness," 40 on "La Corona," 50 on "Goodfriday, 1613"—and 309 on the Holy Sonnets. And of the Holy Sonnets, "Batter my heart" with 50 entries and "Death be not proud" with 35 far outnumbered any of the others, with such sonnets as "I am a little world," "If poisonous minerals," "Father part of his double interest," "O might these sighs," "If faithful souls," "Why are we by all creatures," "and "Wilt thou love God" each having only two or three entries. Comparing these numbers with a count of entries in my second bibliography covering the years 1968 to 1978, I found that little has changed; recent critics continue to neglect most of the Divine Poems and focus primarily on a few of the Holy Sonnets and a few of the hymns.

Based on a comparison of entries in Roberts 2 and Roberts 3 and taking into account that the first covered only eleven years

while the second covered seventeen years, I found that critical interest in the Anniversaries, the Satyres, *Metempsychosis*, and the epithalamia has remained about the same in recent years as it was in the past—with entries on the Anniversaries and the Satyres (*Satyre III* being the most cited of the satires) far outranking those on *Metempsychosis* and the epithalamia. On the other hand, there has been an increased interest in the epicedes and obsequies, the verse epistles, and the epigrams, which, I think, is perhaps a result of recent new historical studies, renewed interest in textual criticism, and a recent interest in and focus on certain aspects of Donne's life, especially the attention given to his being a coterie poet who was writing in a manuscript and patronage culture. I must point out, however, that often critics cite these poems, as well as others I have mentioned or shall mention, only by way of illustrating or supporting a point or thesis and do not necessarily engage in detailed critical discussions of the poems themselves. In other words, they frequently "use" the poems in the same way that Jeanne Shami accuses critics of using the sermons.

One significant change in the history of recent Donne criticism is the greater attention paid the Elegies than in the past. In my second bibliography there are 142 entries for the Elegies, but in my third there are 232. However, as in the case of the Divine Poems, only a limited number of the Elegies has been given detailed critical attention. Thus, as in the past, the 70 entries on "Going to Bed" still far outnumber entries on the other poems, with only three others having 15 or 16 entries and all the rest having fewer than 10. I believe that one reason for the increased attention given the Elegies is the emergence of feminist and gender criticism, a conclusion confirmed, I would suggest, by the number of entries on that once-upon-a-time almost ignored poem, "Sappho to Philaenis," which numbered only 4 entries in my second bibliography but which numbers 16 in the most recent one. I am assuming, of course, that one accepts "Sappho to Philaenis" as one of the Elegies. (As you know, the debate continues about whether or not the poem should be classified as an elegy and also about

whether or not it was actually written by Donne. As late as 1986, Arthur Marotti[13] for one, agreed with Helen Gardner, who in 1965[14] argued that the poem should be placed in the dubia category. But however one decides these issues, "Sappho to Philaenis" has definitely attracted considerably more critical attention than it did in the past.) I would also add that increased interest in the Elegies has resulted from studies that have discovered interesting (one may be inclined to say "amazing") political, religious, and biographical subtexts in these poems, especially studies by Thomas Hester, Robert Young, and Achsah Guibbory. As a result, the Elegies more recently have been studied not simply as examples of early Donne but rather have come to be regarded, quite rightly I think, as highly sophisticated, subtle, and interesting poems in their own right.

But, not surprising, for most critics, the Songs and Sonets continue to be the most popular of Donne's poems. In my third bibliography, there are 1,282 entries on the Songs and Sonets, which is approximately twice the number of entries for the Divine Poems, 6 times the number for entries on the Elegies, 8 times more than for the Satyres and the Anniversaries, 10 times more than for the verse epistles, and 20 times more than for the Obsequies and Epicedes. But again, as in the case of the Divine Poems and the Elegies, recent critics tend not to focus on all of the Songs and Sonets but only on a limited number of the poems—in fact, those very poems that received the most attention in the past. In a rough count of entries in Roberts 3, I found that 46 of the poems in the Songs and Sonets had fewer than 20 entries—with only 3 entries each for "The Computation" and "The Paradox" and only 1 for "Self Love." The most frequently cited and/or discussed were "Air and Angels" (41), "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day"

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[13]Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 18.

[14]Helen Gardner, ed. *John Donne: The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p. xlvi.

(49), "The Flea" (56), "The Sunne Rising" (59), "The Goodmorrow" (59), "The Extasie" (76), "The Canonization" (80), and, of course, "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" with 84. Thus, what I pointed out in 1980, that critics have focused their attention on fewer than a dozen of the Songs and Sonets, seems still to be the case.

Having examined the titles of papers that will be given at this conference, it seems to me that the works and topics that will be discussed are both atypical of Donne criticism as a whole in some respects and yet very typical in others. (I am fully aware, of course, that titles often do not necessarily reflect the actual contents of papers and essays.) But, if the titles do not lie, then I notice there will be papers given on the epigrams, *Metempsychosis*, the Elegies, the Satyres, and even on "The Lamentations of Jeremy" and that only one paper apparently will be on the Songs and Sonets, although I would be surprised if the love poems do not show up in others. However, in spite of my detailed (and somewhat boring) numerical roll call above, I am not particularly surprised since I have noticed that there have been relatively few papers given on the love poems at recent John Donne Society conferences. A good percentage of the papers in the last few years have focused on Donne's prose, especially on the sermons and the *Devotions*, and on the Divine Poems. I notice that this year there are five papers on the sermons and five on different aspects of Donne's biography; those figures do reflect two trends that I notice in recent Donne scholarship.

Many reasons could be suggested as to why there has been a renewed interest in Donne's life and in the sermons, but one that stands out to me is that critics are giving much more critical attention these days to "what Donne thought" and perhaps less attention than in the past to "how Donne said it." In the past, many critics, especially formalists, were principally interested in the art of Donne's poetry, in how a Donne poem as a poem works—its ambiguity, structure, verbal play, dramatic elements, rhetorical strategies, wit, etc. They often did not regard Donne as a

particularly original thinker but rather saw him as a poetic craftsman of genius. What Donne thought about love, secular or divine, or about politics and theological issues they found interesting, though fairly typical of a man of his time; but his thought *per se* was often treated as secondary to how he expressed it. Therefore, many critics regarded Donne's prose—the sermons, the *Essays in Divinity*, *Pseudo-Martyr*, *Biathanatos*, *Ignatius His Conclave*, and even to some extent the *Devotions*—primarily as worthwhile background reading that may or may not help one understand the poems and/or the man who wrote them. They neglected more than half of Donne's canon as somehow not central to an understanding and appreciation of Donne's major poems. More recently, perhaps in part as a result of a renewed focus on the historical, political, theological, and social issues embedded in seventeenth-century poetry and prose, scholars are re-examining Donne's prose for its content and for what it tells us about Donne the man and his thought.

As a result of these recent efforts, many of the old assumptions about Donne have been challenged and, in many instances, discredited. For instance, in 1981, John Carey in *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* argued that Donne's life and works could be best understood by Donne's "self-advancing, anxious, unsatisfied personality"[15] and by his pervading sense of anxiety and guilt for his desertion of the Catholic Church—in other words, by his self-centered ambition and his apostasy. However, recent studies of the sermons by Jeanne Shami and others have discredited this overly simplistic notion that Donne was a sycophantic, ecclesiastical politician who threw all scruples to the wind in a neurotic struggle for self-advancement and self-aggrandizement and have shown how Donne's "political casuistry allowed him to develop a language of obedience" that "served as a model of the kind of counsel available to one trying to adjust the law of conscience to the laws of

[15]John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 94.

political authority."[16] Likewise, the biographical studies of Dennis Flynn and others have shown that Donne's relationship with the English Catholic nobility and with the faith of his ancestors was much more complex than Carey and others have suggested.

Because some people (a very small number indeed) know that I have read nearly everything written on Donne during the past eighty plus years and since they assume incorrectly that I have a profound understanding of all that I have read, I am sometimes asked to name a few works that I think have made the most significant impact on Donne criticism during the past quarter century. That request always makes me extremely nervous—but never more so than at this very moment—as I stand here before some of today's most knowledgeable Donne critics. The request is somewhat like asking me, if I were on a sinking ship, which of my six children would I try to save. Of course, in that case, I would want to save them all. Time, fortunately, comes to my aid this evening, since I notice a certain restlessness already in the audience as the dinner hour rapidly approaches. Therefore, I shall mention only three books—all three highly controversial—although I should like to name many more—and not only critical books, but also any number of individual essays and collections of essays, scholarly editions of the poems and prose works, and the many bibliographical and biographical studies that have made important contributions to Donne scholarship and criticism in the past quarter century. These would include, in addition to those I have already mentioned, work on the Songs and Songs by Ilona Bell, Anthony Low, and Robert Ellrodt; studies of the Satyres by Thomas Hester and James Baumlin; essays on the prose letters by Margaret Maurer, Annabel Patterson, and Ernest Sullivan; studies of the *Devotions* by Kate Frost and Mary Papazian; the bibliographical work of Peter Beal, Ernest Sullivan, and John Shawcross; studies on the critical tradition by A. J. Smith, Deborah Larson, John Shawcross, and Dayton Haskin; the edition

[16]Shami, p. 404.

of T. S. Eliot's Clark Lectures by Ronald Schuchard; and the feminist and gender studies by Janel Mueller, Achsah Guibbory, Elizabeth Harvey, Janet Halley, and Richard Rambuss. And the list could go on and on and would include a number of first-rate essays on Donne's religious poems by such critics as Raymond-Jean Frontain, Frances Malpezzi, Paul Stanwood, Robert Young, and Theresa DiPasquale.

But back to the three books that I would say have had the greatest impact on Donne criticism in the past twenty-five years. Let me stress that I am *not* suggesting, by any means, that these books are the best studies that have been written on Donne, only that they have significantly influenced later studies of Donne.

John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, which I mentioned before, is just such a work. It has spawned numerous responses, some positive and many negative, from a wide range of quite diverse critics and scholars. But, after 1981, whether agreeing or disagreeing with Carey, very few commentators on Donne's religious and political life and thought have failed to take into account his claims. In a review in *The Cambridge Quarterly* on the occasion of the re-issuing of Carey's book in 1993, T. L. Langley sums up accurately, I think, the majority opinion of the work. He calls it "a sensational book, red-blooded, full of vigorous observations, bold in its endeavours to flesh out art with biography"; but he, like many, finds its perspectives "frequently, deliberately, and damagingly partial" and states that Carey's treatment of Donne's prose "is often more pornographically eclectic than it is seriously expository; more intent on fabricating an image, evoking a frisson, than following an argument."[17] But, whatever one's evaluation of Carey's book, its impact on Donne studies cannot be denied.

Although published in 1979, one year before my present survey, Barbara Lewalski's *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century*

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[17]T. R. Langley, "Having Donne." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 22 (1993): 207.

Religious Lyric is another example of a book that has greatly influenced Donne criticism during the past quarter century. As you all know, Lewalski argued that Donne and other major religious poets of the seventeenth century were more indebted to contemporary English Protestant meditation, emblematics, and sermon theory than to medieval Catholic and Continental sources, as had been proposed by Louis Martz in his very influential study, *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954). Lewalski claimed that Donne is "the first major English poet in the devotional mode whose lyrics are influenced by a distinctive Protestant poetics."[18] Martz in a review of Lewalski's book in *Modern Philology* in 1982, said that he thought that the truth probably "lies somewhere between" her position and his, but he added, "closer to my own, I hope."[19] Critics remain divided on the thesis as well as on many of the details of Lewalski's study, but no one can dismiss the enormous influence it has had on critics writing on Donne's religious poetry since its publication. I recall that at one of the MLA Conventions in the early 1980s there was a special symposium held on the book and that interest in it was so great that the session had to be moved to an enormous ballroom in the hotel in order to accommodate the large number of those wishing to attend.

Lastly, I would cite Arthur Marotti's *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (1986), in which Marotti analyzes Donne's poems as "coterie literature, as texts originally involved with both their biographical and social contexts" and discusses them "chronologically and according to audience, paying particular attention to the rhetorical enactment of the author's relationship to peers and superiors through the conflicting styles of egalitarian assertion, social iconoclasm, and deferential politeness." Marotti further relates Donne's poetry to his prose and deals with "his choice of different

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[18]Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 282.

[19]Louis L. Martz, "Meditation as Poetic Strategy," *Modern Philology* 80 (1982): 174.

literary forms in terms of both his changing sociopolitical circumstances and the shift in Elizabethan and Jacobean rule that brought about a realignment of genres within the culture's literary system."[20] Marotti's book is shaped by formalist criticism, literary and intellectual history, revisionist history, psychoanalytic theory, and post-structural criticism; and unlike many previous critics, he discusses virtually all the poems. This study, like the other two I have mentioned, has stirred up a great deal of critical debate, which, I think, makes Donne studies quite stimulating and lively. Some critics, for instance, have argued that new historicists, Marotti in particular, "simply do not have sufficient facts about Donne's life and his relationship with his patrons nor about the date of composition and specific audience of individual poems to go beyond mere 'hypotheses'" that are "neither provable nor disprovable in themselves"[21] and would argue that his poems "both transcend and confront Donne's cultural limitations."[22] But very few studies of Donne's poems since 1986 fail to respond in some manner to Marotti's study. Well, so much for going out on a shaky limb!

And, what about the future of Donne studies? Since I am painfully aware that prophecy in literary criticism is a dangerous business at best, I shall resist any wild or astounding speculations. I do think it safe to say that, because of its complexity and subtlety, Donne's poetry is not likely ever to generate a highly harmonious chorus of uniformly held conclusions about the meaning of his poems and his ways of achieving that meaning. It is the very nature of literary criticism to shift its perspectives from time to time and to invent new methods (which sometimes are simply old methods refurbished) of exploring and understanding literary texts, which seems to me one guarantee we have that critics will not likely

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[20]Marotti, pp. xi-xii.

[21]Anthony Low, "Donne and the New Historicists," *John Donne Journal* 7 (1988): 128.

[22]Low, p. 131.

conclude in the near future that they have exhausted Donne's poetry. Each new generation of critics, with its own insights, concerns, sensitivities, newly acquired and unrecognized biases and prejudices, will continue to encounter Donne, more or less, on its own terms and will continue to provide us with fresh, controversial, and perhaps even profound insights. John Donne—Never Done.

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