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The Lothian Portrait: A New Description

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That painting of John Donne known as the Lothian portrait is second in order of the five extant portraits of Donne made during his lifetime.[1] These generally follow conventions of the time: the first, of which only an engraved copy is extant, depicts the eighteen-year-old Donne in the posture of a swordsman.[2] The third, an oval miniature of 1616 by Isaac Oliver, depicts the mature Donne, ruffed and bearded. It hangs today in the Queen's collection at Windsor Castle. The fourth, which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, is likely derived from the Oliver miniature. The fifth portrait hangs in the dining-room at the Deanery of St. Paul's; here Donne is presented in full-face bust, his neck bare and his shoulders cloaked. It is inscribed AETATIS SUAE 49 1620. The artist is unknown. With the exception of the Lothian portrait, these depictions generally follow the iconographic conventions of the era, although upon viewing their range it is evident that they are self-conscious icons. The Marshall engraving, for example, which has been studied by Dennis Flynn, shows great attention to iconographic detail.[3] The St. Paul's portrait possibly commemorates the poet's entering his fiftieth year. Finally, the stone effigy in the Cathedral itself, certainly derived from the lost portrait made in his dying days (an engraved version decorates the frontispiece of *Death's Duell*, 1632), presents the poet as an emblem of death itself. Viewed as a whole, Donne's portraits seem to present a progress through his life, a kind of self-conscious ages of man scheme. And if they do comprise a deliberate program, reflecting the data of self-presentation, one can with justification examine the Lothian portrait in the light of similar criteria. The present essay, which confronts the portrait as physical object, is the first of a series.[4] Future essays will examine the problem of the unknown artist and date of composition, iconography, and political and biographical ramifications.[5]

For some three hundred years the Lothian portrait was deemed lost until its discovery in 1959 at Newbattle Abbey, seat of the present Marquess of

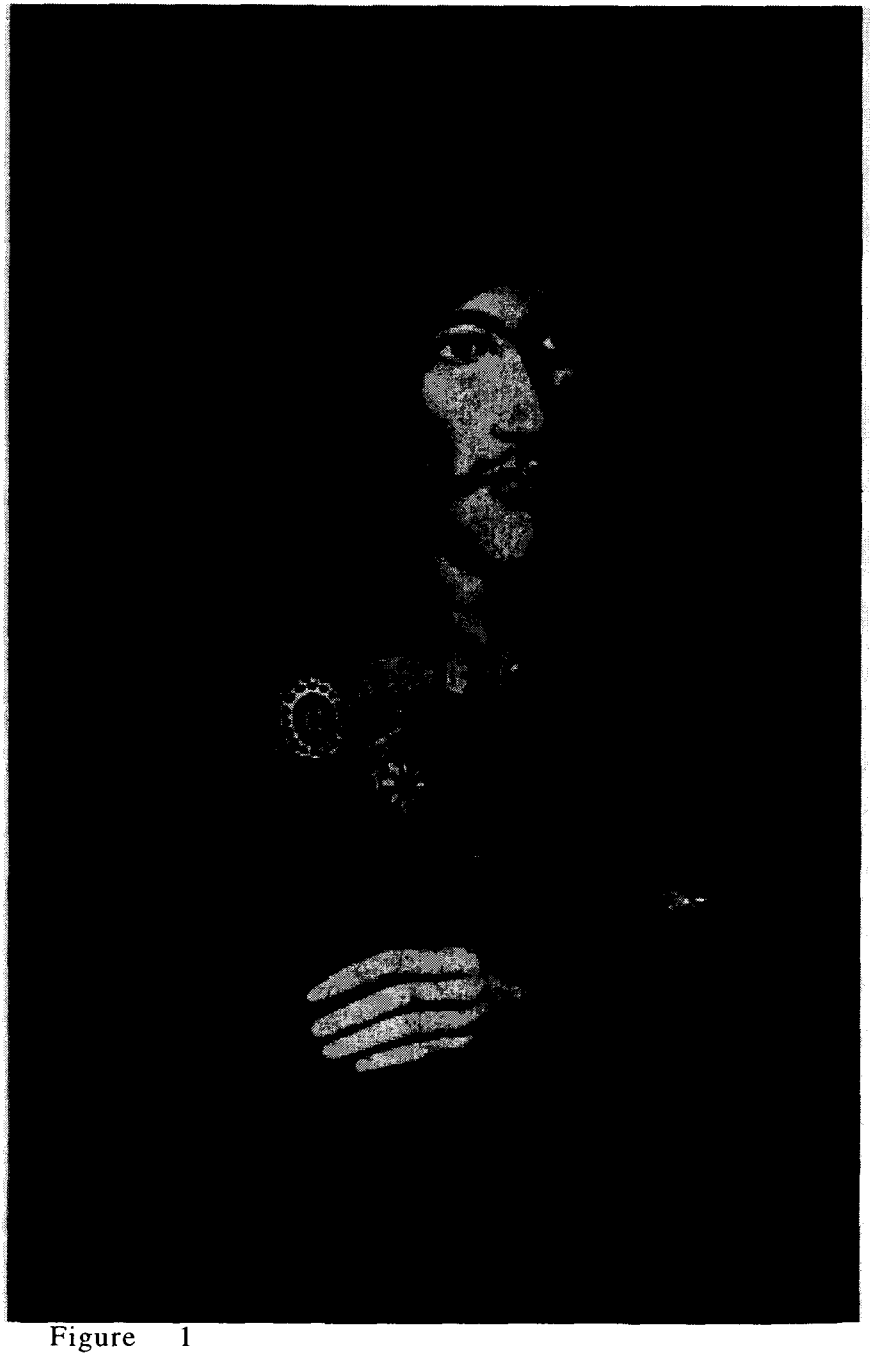

Figure 1

Lothian, who is descended from Donne's close friend, Sir Robert Kerr. [Fig. 1] On bequesting it to Kerr Donne had described the portrait as "That Picture of myne which is taken in Shaddowes".[6] It has been dated ca. 1595, which places it at about Donne's twenty-third year, although this date remains to be verified.[7] The artist is unknown.

The portrait presents Donne in three-quarter profile on an oval oak panel measuring 30 1/2 by 24 1/2 inches. The inscription reads "ILLUMINA TENEBR[AE] NOSTRAS DOMINA." Sir Geoffrey Keynes's description is worth quoting in full:

> He is wearing a huge black hat turned up from his face and is posed in three-quarter profile to the right with folded arms. His left hand with long thin fingers is bare; his right wears a fur-lined glove and is holding a book, the rough edges of which suggest that it is a manuscript (of his poems?) rather than a printed book. The lower edge of the volume rests on a pewter standish with an inkpot and a quill pen. His open-necked doublet is dark with an embroidered collar and underlying lace. A thin cord hangs from beneath the collar.[8]

In late September 1993, through the kind offices of the Marquess of Lothian, I was able to view the portrait at first hand out of its frame and in full daylight. It has remained in the care of the Kerr family since the bequest to their ancestor and has recently been moved from Newbattle Abbey to Monteviot, residence of Michael Kerr, present Earl of Ancrum. On the occasion of my visit, the painting was undergoing minor restoration and I was able to view it with the assistance of Mr. John Dick, Keeper of Conservation at the Scottish National Galleries. It is in good, if fragile condition. However, my viewing, while confirming generally most past description of the portrait, indicated that Keynes's description is lacking in at least three major areas and that certain of his points are in serious error.

In the past questions have been raised to the extent of the portrait's cleaning and restoration. In answer: the painting has been cleaned and some gross overpainting removed. Over the years it has been restored, especially along the two vertical joining lines of the oak base. Most of this restoration occurs on the hat, the face, the collar, and the lower right quadrant area of the mantle. There is no evidence of overpainting that may conceal a hidden motto (as, for example, "*in suo aetatis*"), date, or an artist's signature. Neither does

Figure 3

rounds the figure is painted, like the hat, in amorphous daublike fashion. It touches and slightly wraps the figure on the right side, on the left rises high behind the neck, almost touching the hair, and wraps *around* the left arm. Hence the figure is presented with completely presented folded arms, surrounded, not covered, by the cloak. [Fig. 3] Finally, the lower right quadrant of the painting presents a great surprise: nowhere, under strong light and the closest examination, were Mr. Dick and I able to discern the slightest sign of the manuscript book, writing stand, inkpot, and quill that feature so prominently in Keynes's description. Rather, dimly visible, but visible all the same, is the pommel of a gentleman's sword—a far more conventional accessory for the day and for Donne's position at the time he sat for the portrait—that is, if the 1595 date is correct. [Fig. 3]

Before I begin to examine the new information regarding the portrait's face, I must comment on the general quality of its painting, which, frankly, is not of the first order. The hat and costume, as I have shown, are not much more than mere daubs. But seen close and in good light, it is the drawing of the anatomy which is the real disappointment. In relation to the size and presentation of the head, the body, particularly the head and the left forearm are poorly drawn, even dwarfed, a feature which would be revealed even better by more extensive examination by technological means, especially by revelation of possible underdrawing. In the light of this generally poor drawing, the real sensation about the portrait is all the more startling. Given the general clumsiness of background and costume and the conventional representation of the left hand, the face, even in photographic reproduction, is a wonder of naturalistic representation, unlike any of its British contemporaries that I have examined. Viewed at first hand, it is even more real and alive. This may point to a non-British artist, perhaps Netherlandish or Flemish.

But there remains an aspect of the painted face which cannot be apprehended in presently available reproductions. Examining the latter, one is able to attribute the painted hand and the countenance to the same artistic presentation. However, eyewitness provides a differing perception: the hand is the conventional representation: pale, long-fingered, manicured, and never used in physical exertion, it is one of hundreds such featured in sixteenth and seventeenth-century British portraits. The face, however, is a different case altogether. It has been subject to some repainting: particularly in the forehead, nose, and upper cheek areas. So thin is the painting, however, that the original grain of the underlying oak-panel is visible. The eyes are a dark slate blue, and the lips rather more coral than the robust persimmon of the currently available

similar portraits, at least one of which is also a coming-of-age commemoration. On the other hand, the Donne of the Lothian appears rather older than twenty-three, although this may be a matter of personal perception. Since dates as advanced as 1610 have been proposed for the painting, an older sitter may indicate a later date. This is an important consideration in terms of Donne's self-presentation and more so if the Netherlandish provenance is favored, as it necessitates new consideration of Donne's activities during the period.[10] Since there is at present no new evidence in these areas, the establishment of date and the identification of the artist must be a matter of further investigation.

In the light of this revised description, the portrait's iconographical programme, hitherto envisioned as that of the melancholy poet,[11] must undergo new investigation, and its possible connection with the Marshall engraving should be further explored. However, until more information warranting a deeper technological investigation of the portrait is revealed, Donne scholars must be content with the present level of its physical evidence.

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Notes

[1] A more detailed description of the portraits can be found in Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), pp. 372-76.

[2] The miniature painted by Hilliard in 1591, now lost, was engraved by William Marshall and served as fortispiece to the 1635 *Poems*. This identification, first made by Laurence Binyon, was first accepted by Grierson in his 1912 edition of the *Poems*.

[3] "Donne's First Portrait. Some Biographical Clues?" *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* (Spring 1979), pp. 7-17.

[4] The first, "A Prologomena for Study of the Donne Lothian Portrait," will be found in the forthcoming volume *Ut Pictura Poesis*, ed. Renee Ramsay.

[5] Ann Hurley explores the political ramifications of the portrait's iconography in an essay "More Foolery From More?: John Donne's Lothian Portrait as a Clue to His Politics," in *So Rich A Tapestry: The Sister Arts and Cultural Studies*, ed. Ann Hurley and Kate Greenspan (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1994). My response to her argument will appear in a future essay.

[6] Bald, R. C. *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 567.

[7] John Bryson, "Lost Portrait of John Donne," *The Times* (London), 13 October 1959, p. 13.

[8] Keynes, pp. 373-74.

[9] Reference is to the edition of *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967).

[10] Flynn, p. 13, makes the point that "there is not a period to be measured in years during which Donne could have been abroad in the 1590s, except for the years just prior to his entering Thavies Inn."

[11] Sir Roy Strong, "The Elizabethan Malady: Melancholy in Elizabethan and Jacobean Painting," *Apollo* 79 (1964), pp. 264-69.