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Exegesis before Eisegesis

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Edward W. Tayler, *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in "The Anniversaries."* New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. xiii. 190.

Edward W. Tayler's students (to whom he has dedicated his book on Donne's Anniversaries) may recognize his wry dissatisfaction with the way the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word "idea." One of Tayler's main purposes in this book, in line with concerns implied by its title, is to restore an archaic meaning of the word as used by Donne in his famous answer to early criticism of the Anniversaries; for this purpose Tayler inserts in the critical discourse about the Anniversaries some meanings of "idea" that cannot be found in the *O.E.D.* The trappings and the suits of scholarship have never satisfied Tayler.

In approaching the study of Donne's Anniversaries, Tayler's point of departure is the notion that there is an old, straight, and right (if not ready and easy) way to understand the meaning of poems (not only the Anniversaries but other poems by other poets of other times) in their own terms—a way that does not deploy the jargon of revisionisms devised by English teachers. The basic precept Tayler recommends is that we ought to distinguish what we read of old from what we ourselves think, a precept running athwart the bias of much recent criticism, including new historicist and other "literary theory," whose automatic equipment pays little mind to the differences between cultures, heedlessly slotting Jacobean England into preferred modern categories alien to the old poets if unfortunately enticing to their young readers, our students. Tayler offers as a corrective motto for English teachers: "Exegesis before eisegesis."

While he is at it, he pauses to give the old teachers a break along with the old poets--teachers such as his forerunner at Columbia, Marjorie H. Nicolson. Like it or not, he tells us, our teachers' work lives on in us. They taught us

the text, the gloss on the text, the commentary, the bibliography, and the background of the English writers, in return for which we ought not to "dismiss their labors as the mistaken legacy of late nineteenth-century positivism" but ought at least to follow their example and listen to the old poets as carefully as they did.

The regrettable alternative tendency has been to apply "semantic engines" to old poems, without really listening to them. In criticism on the Anniversaries, for example, critics first have tended to invent a suspiciously modern-sounding biographical context (Bald, Carey, and Marotti) to supply the need of all literary criticism for a story of what actually happened. Then through this template they have extruded interpretations of the poems, extending assumptions about biography to assumptions about what Donne meant by words like "idea." In particular it is wrong to suppose that for Donne "idea" meant what we have come to mean by "symbol"—and yet this has been a fundamental error of twentieth-century critics.

Donne knew in advance that his poems would provoke misinterpretation. Anticipating suspicion that for doubtful purposes he was praising a girl he never knew, in the opening lines of the First Anniversary itself Donne drew (Tayler says) "an invidious contrast between two kinds of readers": those who will see, and judge, and follow the sense of his praise; and less knowing readers who will predictably misinterpret. Depending on whether or not one can understand and join in Donne's praise, one may or may not credit the sincerity of grief assimilating the death of Elizabeth Drury to the death of the world. Despite never having seen the girl, says Tayler, Donne praised her as one embodying "that form" of womanly virtue which is not only unchangeably true but can be known only by a human mind that truly knows itself.

Marking off himself and his favored readers in this way, Donne left his critics (including recent ones, especially ones concerned with literature and gender) "in an extremely vulnerable position." But Donne was certainly not thinking of readers with semantic engines yet unconceived. He meant suspicious Protestants like Ben Jonson, who told William Drummond the poems were "full of blasphemies." In a couple of letters to other friends, Donne chided himself for his own imprudence in having published the poems; but he "sought to justify" them with the remark that "he described the Idea of a Woman and not as she was." According to Tayler, Jonson never understood what Donne meant by "Idea."

Tayler argues that Donne's word "Idea" (despite *O.E.D.*) is not simply to be taken in its modern, "developed Platonic sense" but, long before Donne's

time, had undergone a "historical interaction" with the classical and scholastic Latin word "species." Syncretic medieval writers working through Latin or Arabic translations had by the sixteenth century so muddled the Plato of Augustine with the Aristotle of Aquinas that the word "idea" became interchangeable with "species," both gaining currency in diverse technical areas such as theology and optics, where they served as mediating terms or concepts to account for the interactions of matter and spirit or sense and intellect. By Donne's time, Tayler argues, "ideas" or "species" were thought of as the immaterial, intelligible essences that enable the human mind to comprehend material things otherwise unintelligible. Donne told the uncomprehending Jonson, in effect, that he described "the intelligible species" of a woman.

Jonson's suspicion of blasphemy in the Anniversaries was among the earliest of misinterpretations. In recent years the controversy over the poems has been less suspicious though equally peremptory, and quite as incommensurate to a right, true reading. Ever since Louis Martz in 1947 correctly called attention to the structure of the Anniversaries as a source of their meaning, a new wave of misinterpretations has engulfed them. While interpretations of structure have dominated recent criticism, generally the meanings attributed to structure have been imported or imposed from outside the poems. W. M. Lebans, for example, brought the topic of funeral elegy to explain the Anniversaries' structure; O. B. Hardison brought the topic of epideictic praise; and Barbara K. Lewalski a Protestant poetic. All such interpretations, including Martz's own importation of Jesuit meditative *topos*, identify structural features of the poems only in order to fasten on them meanings that Tayler finds alien to their nature. Lewalski he thinks the worst only because most widely influential offender.

The first book-length explanation of the Anniversaries was Lewalski's *Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (1973). In Tayler's view, this book since its publication has been the main obstacle to study of the poems, because it forces so imposingly on their structure an arbitrary and external meaning for a purpose Lewalski herself terms "revisionist." The book thus typifies, Tayler asserts, a widespread but mistaken procedure that had become endemic in Donne criticism, but not only in Donne criticism, long before Lewalski wrote. Such reasoning is circular and essentially irresponsible, though it is a kind of reasoning about poems that has succeeded in misleading both scholars and their students. Tayler therefore presents the situation of criticism on the

Anniversaries as "a microcosm of the profession of literary studies"—a market of misinterpretations.

Common to self-styled revisionist critics (themselves often completely at odds) has been a failure to recognize those assumptions about the human self and its relation to others that Donne built into his writings. One critic who did attend to this crucial feature of the Anniversaries is Frank Manley. Manley correctly identified *in the poems* a trinitarian structure connected to the three functions of the soul: intellect, memory, and will. Repeatedly in the poem's structure, intellect anatomizes the world; memory recalls us clearly to a recollection of what we have lost; and will resolves to act accordingly toward spiritual ends. Expanding on Manley's insight, Tayler gives us a reading grounded not only in Donne's use of Augustinian psychology, but also of other classical and medieval Aristotelian psychological traditions.

In *De Trinitate*, Augustine presented memory, understanding, and will as the triune image of God in mankind. In the First Anniversary Donne states that true readers of his poem can see this image in themselves. Tayler, seconding Donne, argues that critics who don't credit these terms, eliding them away through the use of "semantic engines," are blind to the point of the poems, stuck in what Donne calls the "incomprehensiblenesse" of their material individuality.

Tayler further cites from *De Trinitate* a passage which he offers as "the rationale for Donne's praise of Elizabeth Drury." At least on the surface it seems a fairly simple rationale, especially in view of criticism's interminable complaint and dispute about the basis of the poems. According to Tayler, in response to reports of the death of Sir Robert Drury's daughter the Anniversaries do the same sort of thing Augustine says he would do in response to anyone's defense of "the beauty and strength of faith." He would respond with a "chaste and genuine love." If, Augustine says, he later learned that this person was not himself virtuous, he would withdraw his love but still could feel it (and presumably still could have expressed it) "in that form according to which I loved him when I believed him to be such." Donne's "Idea of a Woman" is thus partly rooted in Augustine's perception of the image of God in mankind, and has been misinterpreted by readers who have not recognized or appreciated this rationale.

By the sixteenth century these notions about the image of God had been thoroughly integrated with Aristotelian psychology in *De Anima*. The theory was not exactly commonplace but was for example available in a courtier's how-to-do-it manual of the early 1600s. Roger Bacon and other

"perspectivists" had constructed a psychological epistemology Donne evidently used here. Their theories of vision were analogous to theological doctrines in explaining how the mind interacts with the material world. Donne's psychological epistemology then derives from the medieval understanding of Aristotle against a background of Christian Platonism—a syncretic tradition establishing a scholastic vocabulary of cognition. The process requires "a kind of inner striving" (intention) beginning in the mind and urging toward the material world. Forms of external objects impressed on our sense organs produce expressed forms that are in turn impressed on the imagination and thus become accessible to the intellectual soul. This process is central to the Anniversaries and accounts for the witty truth of Donne's "Idea of a Woman," which is thus more than hyperbole.

Tayler observes that Donne's scholastic esthetics are largely foreign to the twentieth century, except as they perdured in Joyce. Our idea of poetry tends to be associative rather than logical, working more by metonymy than by synechdoche. But in Donne's time beauty was a function of design and structure rather than in the eye of the beholder. Structure could express not only this kind of beauty but also meaning; not deep unintended meaning but meaning on purpose. Donne's meaning is plain and simple; but it is implemented in poetry by techniques we have tended to reject or ignore: logical and rhetorical techniques taught by the *grammaticus*—syllogisms, for example, and repetends.

While in the First Anniversary Donne uses "logical structure and rhetorical symmetry" to establish a "pattern of expectations," in the Second Anniversary he first repeats and then diverges from this pattern, "making structure speak the unspeakable." Tayler insists, contradicting Lewalski, on Martz's structural scheme of the First Anniversary and on a related structure and variation in the Second Anniversary. But Donne took a trinitarian notion of the soul drawn from Augustine and turned it to original use rather than a use imitating the meditational scheme of Ignatius, or any other external topic. Tayler's reading of the Second Anniversary is too subtle and complex to summarize here. But it consistently attempts to find meaning mainly within the poem's structure rather than meaning imposed from without. This is a stylish, painstaking argument marked by clarity and wit. Donne scholars will have to reckon with it.

As Tayler argues early in his book, critical importations of meaning into Donne's Anniversaries have depended on biographical assumption, more fundamentally than on anything else. It has been as if various points of

Donne's biography are so settled as not to need mention when used as the basis for critical judgments. Not only have critics used this often unwarranted assurance about the facts of Donne's life; they have also seemed to be arguing interpretations on structural grounds, when in fact their real grounds have been biographical assumptions, and dubious ones at that. Before we postulate, for example, that Jesuit meditation or a Protestant poetic constitutes the structure of Donne's Anniversaries, we need to see more clearly how Donne actually received such real or imagined sources of poetic stimulus. It can never be accurately asserted that, whatever the facts of Donne's life, his poems have this or that structure and must mean this or that.