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John Carey and John Donne

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John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind & Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press; London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 303 pp., $22.50.

"Could it be," a colleague of mine recently remarked, "that Carey meant his title to be a send-up of Bald?" Not a wholly unlikely conjecture, when one thinks of it; after all, any author looking for a title for a just-completed work is bound to consider how to differentiate it from similar books by his predecessors. Conservative design by Oxford University Press and its Clarendon affiliate has given both books black dust jackets and nearly identical type, and by a happy onomastic coincidence the two volumes sit next to each other on the shelf:

Bald, R. C., *John Donne: A Life*;

Carey, John, *John Donne: Life, Mind & Art.*

There is justice in these titles; as I once complained in an earlier review, the painstaking and scholarly Bald has gotten all of the dustiest facts into his book, but inadvertently left out Donne's lively mind and most of his poetry; now Carey has supplied some of the deficiencies. Yet, radically different as they are from most points of view, one is conscious of an important similarity between Bald and Carey: both are second- or third-generation Donne scholars, working in a field that was dominated by strong predecessors, and therefore, to borrow terms sometimes applied to Donne as a love-poet, both may appropriately be called "secondary" or "reactive." Bald was reacting pedantically to the popular myth of a rakish Jack Donne and a holy Dr. Donne and to the naive habit of reading the biography out of the posturing of

Donne's lovers and his penitents; Carey is reacting combatively to nearly every critic who has preceded him in the field.

One unfortunate characteristic of this reactive criticism is that neither writer refers more than occasionally to any of Donne's deservedly best-known poems. Bald's procedure reduces him to constructing the life strictly from prose letters, legal instruments, and a scattering of other accidentally surviving documents; Carey's to adducing Donne's poetic development from the evidence of such lesser works as "Loves Progresse" and "The Progresse of the Soule." The perverse obligation to say something new about the former poem has provided hostile reviewers with much of their most effective ammunition. Having tied one hand behind its back in this manner, Carey's lively and provocative book still very nearly brings off a Donnean tour de force; yet, in the end, such a gleaning of "rifled fields" is self-destructive and was bound to result in a book best suited not to fresh and inquiring minds, but to readers who are already thoroughly familiar with all of Donne's poetry as well as most of the prior criticism. That is to say, the book is better suited to scholars and teachers than to their students, or to that currently endangered species, common readers of Donne's poetry. Carey's brilliance, his highly readable style, and his admirable energy deserve wider currency; yet those of us condemned by our profession to sift through large quantities of critical dross may be more grateful for such unexpected blessings.

The accidental circumstance that the first issue of *John Donne Journal* appeared about two years after Carey's book offers the present reviewer a greater than usual opportunity for expansive and it may be digressive speculation, and the birth of the new journal urges that now is an appropriate time for informal consideration of the present state of Donne studies. Most readers of these words, I am assuming, have read Carey's book as well as some of the early reactions to it, so they already know that it is brilliant, provocative, outrageous, either a stimulating or an infuriating accomplishment, which (even should one disapprove) is bound to stand for some time as a monumental landmark or roadblock in the path of Donne studies. Several reviewers have thought they perceived in Carey's manner and his method of procedure more than a little resemblance to Donne himself—perhaps, as some have hinted, because Carey is as ambitious as he would make Donne out to be; perhaps, as I have suggested, because Carey found himself as a

writer in much the same difficult position as Donne, and because he attempted to escape from the confines of the critical tradition by the same sort of imperious yet deliberately self-limiting means.

I am not old enough to have experienced personally all of the remarkable evolution that Donne's poetry has undergone in our century since the appearance of the great Grierson edition; yet as it happens, my particular ontogeny recapitulated the philogeny rather closely. I was captivated by literature in school, specifically by the poetry of Donne and Eliot, whom I then took to be two of a kind. In college I learned New Criticism, attended (as one would a religious ceremony) a performance by I. A. Richards on "The Extasie," and put off reading Milton until graduate school. I wrote my senior honors thesis on Donne and paradox and was one with an era (already past if I had known it) when Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane could quote from the *Songs and Sonets* on their honeymoon without seeming in the least old-fashioned or pedantic. Since all this happened in the 1950s, it will be obvious to the scholar that only my naiveté and the happy imperviousness of my teachers to some recent critical trends preserved me in a state of innocence belonging more properly to the 1930s.

I mention these personal matters because I believe they raise some important critical issues: in those days, or in that state, one could revel in Donne's poetry, read it for pleasure and intellectual stimulation, regard it as living and genuinely contemporary. Alas, the excitement generated by reading Donne under the tutelage of such critics as Grierson, Eliot, Leavis (always more credible in what he liked than what he censured), Williamson, Blackmur, Richards, Empson, and Brooks, was already being undermined by new generations of critics. The voice of C. S. Lewis, complaining that in reading Donne "we feel in the grip of the worst kind of bore —the hot-eyed, unescapable kind," might be safely ensconced in casebooks, to play an exciting counterpoint to the majority view. The gradual re-enthronement of Milton, too, could proceed without harm, for there was really no reason why one could not admire both poets (I heard Bush lecture on Donne with no damage to my illusions). Not even Eliot's hedging observation—as early as 1931—that there was a "manifest fissure" in Donne's sensibility could slow the forward momentum of Donne and the Metaphysicals, which Eliot had done so much earlier to set in motion. But what was one to make of J. B. Leishman's *The Monarch of Wit*, which not only

revealed that few of Donne's vaunted "conceits" were wholly new, but persuasively argued that Donne was as much working in a literary tradition as speaking from direct experience, and that many of the poems that one had taken as shockingly self-revelatory were but instances of undergraduate "coat trailing"?

One often hears or utters complaints about the proliferation of trivial and wrong-headed scholarship, yet bad criticism can at least be dismissed or in time will probably fade away. Quite different is the effect of books like Leishman's, which are so obviously well-written, intelligent, and *right*. One cannot ignore such books; their findings will get into the air whether one likes it or not. The same is true of biography. For me, the most satisfactory life of Donne is still Walton's: it is human, consistent, and splendidly written, a work of art worth reading in itself. But David Novarr has forever shown how little it can be relied on. Or there is Edward Le Comte's *Grace to a Witty Sinner*, which portrays a double Donne like Walton's but corrects the dates and rather prefers the sinner. This is precisely the sort of life that is needed to make enthusiastic young converts to the poetry, yet it is something of a novelization, a celebration of that very Donne myth that more recent scholars have repudiated. Bald is safer, but I would think discouraging in anything but small doses. That brings us to Carey. Is one justified in sending an impressionable undergraduate, who has time only to read one book, to Carey's *Life, Mind & Art*? For the present, at least, my instinctive reaction is negative; Carey is too strong, too persuasive, without the prior antidote (or mithridate) of two or three of his predecessors. The Donne he portrays is too dauntingly unpleasant for a first meeting. Yet it is obvious that the teachers of Donne will have to read Carey, and that there is too much of the truth in what he has to say for his views not to get into the air, and to color the view of Donne we are likely to hold during the next decade or two.

Let us consider one of the more basic and controversial issues that Carey raises: religion. Toward the close of his book, Carey slips gradually into a kind of familiar, relativistic agnosticism that one need not trouble to take too seriously—the view that the mature Donne was surely too intelligent to have taken Christian theology with anything but a grain of salt. Christopher Ricks has spoken well to this particular point in *The London Review of Books* (18 June-1 July 1981). What deserves much more serious

attention, however, is the issue that Carey raises in the first part of his book, and that he announces with characteristic bravura at the outset: "The first thing to remember about Donne is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed his faith" (p. 15). The point is an uncomfortable one, because as a rule we want to make poets whom we like to conform as closely as may be to our own view of things. Agnostics, therefore, may like to make Donne into a modernist, while Anglicans may prefer to think that his conversion was sincere. T. S. Eliot naturally thought of Donne as a troubled High-Churchman of his own kidney; Dame Helen Gardner views him as an upholder of the *via media*. To cite a somewhat more curious example, Bald argued that the death of Donne's brother in prison and his kinship with two Jesuit uncles were trivial facts, which deserved less attention from a biographer than Donne's signature as a witness to somebody's will. So it goes.

Of course, recent criticism has emphasized that Donne was a Protestant poet, and that his religious thinking may at times have a Calvinist tinge. Obviously I cannot argue that case here; yet it would be naive to think that Donne's involvement with Protestant patterns of thought or theology should necessarily be incompatible with the grim point that Carey is making. A useful analogy is that of James Joyce. In one sense, Joyce was not an Irish Catholic at the same time that he was a writer; in another sense, he never escaped the nets of family, country, and religion. Those were his subjects; those were his obsessive preoccupations; those were the powers that kept him a perpetual exile. Just so, Donne's constant preoccupation with death, disintegration, disloyalty, and betrayal have an obvious source in his youthful upbringing and his necessarily painful repudiation of everything he had once valued and that had nurtured him while his psyche was being formed. Such feelings are deep and ineradicable, and they are unlikely to be expunged by acts of faith, however sincere, taken on a conscious level. Thus, to take one instance, Douglas Peterson throws considerable light on the Holy Sonnets by his observation that they trace the efforts of a protagonist to achieve perfect inward contrition, as that term is defined by one of the more Calvinist of the Thirty-Nine Articles. That is the theological pattern that Donne is working with; yet it may be that much of the stress and strain, and even possibly the failure, of the sequence is owing to a contradiction between the theology of the protagonist—the beliefs he has

determined to live by—and his deeper instincts. The Donne of these sonnets cannot go to a priest, confess, and receive absolution, yet he cannot quite perform that interior act by which English Protestants had replaced the institutionalized sacrament. To return to the earlier analogy, he is like a Stephen Dedalus who still feels the scruples of guilt but who has repudiated the only means of combatting them that his unconscious mind will accept. The result, as Carey suggests, may well be great but uneasy art.

Such speculations are unprovable, and they are disturbing too. It is unlikely that there is a natural constituency, among those of us who admire Donne, for the view that he was, at some profound level of his being, a lapsed Catholic. Therefore it is not surprising that Carey has been attacked with unusual energy by most of his reviewers. In such areas of critical and biographical investigation, where the evidence, such as it is, may be turned first this way and then that, we are likely to believe what we want to believe. So long as one sticks to the verifiable—for example, that Donne was in London on the date that he witnessed a will—he is on safe ground yet will understand little or nothing about Donne as a poet. The question is, how probable, how persuasive, is Carey's approach to Donne's life, mind, and art? How much of what he raises will adhere to our future readings of the poems over a long period? My own view is that Carey has been handicapped by his acceptance of the reactive role thrust on him by the critical and biographical traditions, by his unwillingness to discuss the most familiar poems and passages yet once more, and therefore by his neglect of much of what is best in Donne and his work. He overemphasizes the disagreeable side of his subject; yet most of what he has to say is only too probable for it to vanish at the insistence of his reviewers.

I have always thought it a primary duty of the critic and the biographer to tell the truth, so far as he or she perceives it: to solve puzzles, to elucidate obscure references and allusions, to propose new readings, to put readers into something resembling the context in which a particular work or works were first written and read. Sometimes, such critical acts are obviously helpful and enlivening. Yet, after a certain point, the secondary literature begins to grow preoccupied with itself, to argue about certain texts or cruxes because others have argued about them previously, or, after a certain

further point, to ignore issues because they begin to seem tiresome. The professional scholar almost certainly is able now to read Donne with greater accuracy than his predecessors. Much that excited earlier generations of critics has proved illusory, or was simply read into the poetry because the circumstances, literary and historical, in which Donne wrote were less well known than they are now. Much that those earlier critics had to say was true, yet has been said so many times that it will hardly bear repeating. Can a critic now afford to spend much time demonstrating that Donne's poetry both thinks and feels, without wearying his readers? Can he once more hold up the "bracelet of bright haire about the bone" for his readers' admiration? Yet can he simply drop these old chestnuts without doing Donne an injustice and new readers a disservice? Some people have claimed that modern criticism is the most creative form of writing that our century has produced. Without venturing to reassert this possibly self-serving boast, one may nevertheless point out, with Carey's book as a striking instance, that the critic may find himself in the same predicament as the primary writer: torn between acknowledgment of an unavoidable tradition and the need to do something fresh and vital. Some comfort may be found in remembering that many of our greatest writers have turned the challenge into a source of creative energy. When one mode of admiration, subversion, and revision has played itself out, others are engendered. Carey's book reveals that the process is alive and well among Donne studies.

New York University

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News & Announcements

Erratum

The full title of Anthony Low's essay in *John Donne Journal*, I (1982), 69-80, was incorrectly printed. The correct title is "The 'Turning Wheele': Carew, Jonson, Donne and the First Law of Motion." Our apologies to Professor Low.

MLA Convention

The three panels sponsored by the Division on Seventeenth-Century English Literature at the 1983 MLA Convention will be:

The Neoplatonic Imagination in Seventeenth-Century Literature
William Kerrigan, Univ. of Virginia, presiding

"Structure in Sonnet Sequences: Shakespeare and Neoplatonism," Raymond Waddington, Univ. of California-Davis
"Marvell and Vaughan: Neoplatonic Groves and the Recovery of Lost Institutions," Leah Marcus, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison
"Donne's Idea," Edward W. Tayler, Columbia University.

Seventeenth-Century Poetries: Literature in its Social Context
Arthur Marotti, Wayne State Univ., presiding

"Beneath the 'Surface' of Jonson's Poetry: Social Determinants of Structure and Voice in *The Forrest*," Don Wayne, Univ. of California-San Diego
"Love's Labour's Legitimated: The Popularity of the Epithalamium in Stuart England," Heather Dubrow, Carleton College
"'We feast in our defence': Herrick and the Politics of Rural Festivity," Peter Stallybrass, Univ. of Sussex.

Sexuality in the Seventeenth-Century Lyric
Thomas Clayton, Univ. of Minnesota, presiding

"Love and Fame," Gordon Braden, Univ. of Virginia
"Sexual Imperatives in the Seventeenth-Century Lyric," Janis Lull, Case Western Reserve Univ.
"Prelapsarian Eroticism: *Paradise Lost* IV.634-58," Stephen Booth, Univ. of California-Berkeley.

"Pickering" 1633 Poems

The unique "Pickering" 1633 *Poems* of John Donne (STC 7045) has been added to the rare book collection at the Nagoya University of Commerce, Japan.

Le Moyne Forum

The Departments of English and Religion announce that the sixth annual Le Moyne Forum on Religion and Literature will concentrate on "Theology and the Poetry of Seventeenth-Century England." This year's conference, "A Symposium in Honor of Joseph H. Summers," will be held October 21-23, 1983, on the campus of Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York. Inquiries should be directed to Mary A. Maleski, Chairman, Forum on Religion and Literature, Le Moyne Heights, Syracuse, New York 13214.

George Herbert Journal

Under the guest editorship of Jonathan F. S. Post, Volume VII of the *George Herbert Journal* is devoting a special issue to Henry Vaughan and seeks submissions on any aspect of the author's work. Inquiries and manuscripts (accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope) should be sent c/o English Department, UCLA, Los Angeles, California 90024. Deadline for submissions is November 15, 1983.

Southeastern Renaissance Conference

The 41st annual meeting of the Southeastern Renaissance Conference will take place on April 6 through 7, 1984, at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Members wishing to submit a paper for consideration should send two copies and an abstract to the following no later than *January 15, 1984*: Professor Theodore Huguelet, President, The Southeastern Renaissance Conference, Post Office Box 201, Cullowhee, North Carolina 28723. Papers should be limited to twenty minutes reading time and contain all documentation.

Submission of papers for reading at the meeting and inclusion in *Renaissance Papers* is limited to members of the conference. Membership is $7.00 per year, a fee that also covers registration at

the annual meeting and a subscription to *Renaissance Papers*. Membership fees or inquiries should be addressed to Professor Henry E. Jacobs, Secretary-Treasurer, Southeastern Renaissance Conference, Box AL, University, Alabama 35486.

Special Issue of John Donne Journal

Submissions are invited for a special issue of the *John Donne Journal* entitled "The Metaphysical Poets in the Nineteenth Century." Please send contributions in duplicate to Antony H. Harrison, Special Editor, *The John Donne Journal*, Department of English, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina 27650. Deadline for submissions is December 1, 1984.

Donne at Kalamazoo

John Donne is joining Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Sidney as presences at the International Medieval Congress to be held May 10-13, 1984, at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan. Next year's inaugural session will be on "John Donne and Medieval Ways of Knowing." Deadline for papers (12-15 pages) is September 15, 1983; one copy should be sent to each of the session organizers: Janet L. Knedlik, Department of English, Seattle Pacific University, Seattle, Washington 98119; and Julia M. Walker, Department of English, Illinois State University-Normal, Bloomington, Illinois 61761.

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