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The Politics of John Donne's Silences

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Thomas Docherty opens his recent book *John Donne, Undone* noting:

> Much of what passes for contemporary criticism of Donne contrives to ignore the historical culture which informed his writings, and the ideology which conditioned the act of writing or "authority" itself. . . . "Criticism" has been presented as the rehearsal of older evaluations of "the dramatic voice," "witty invention," "originality," "masculine persuasive force" in "strong lines," the "libertine" versus the "divine" or Jack versus the Doctor. Scant attention has been paid to the problematic of Donne as a *writer* . . . in the specific historical moment of the later European Renaissance.[1]

In 1986, the very year of Docherty's book, however, half a dozen scholars sought to reread Donne's poetry, attentive to its historical context. Like Docherty some considered the obstacle to be the persistence of the New Critics' ahistoricism.[2] But I see the barrier to recontextualizing Donne's poetry, not the formalism of Eliot, Brooks, Warren or Wimsatt so much as Donne's own silences on topics that, if plainly addressed, would yield an ideology from historico-political evidence. The problem with reading Donne's poetry politically is that it is so silent on politics, a problem quite unlike that with Milton, who was silent on nothing.

Where open political speech from Donne would settle so much, ought not Donne's silence itself to be construed as a rhetorical decision? To test the political significance of some of the reticences of a poet whose reputation still rests on his unconventionality, free inquiry, openness to arguing a case from both sides, and intellectual range,[3] I will

concentrate on four silences—Donne's silence about England's colonization of America, about her pacification of Ireland, about the socio-political role of exceptional women, and in English about other poets. They are silences where speech would be political. Though the silences respond to interrelated topics, they are not all of the same order and one monocausal explanatory model probably could not read them all. Many new interpretative paradigms for the Renaissance are available: self-fashioning, the illusion of power, self-consuming artifacts, voices of melancholy, the experience of defeat.[4] I have chosen among newer models what I take to be the single most apposite for each silence: the effect of coterie expounded by Arthur Marotti, of censorship by Annabel Patterson, of class by David Aers and Gunther Kress, and of what he calls "the literary system" by Richard Helgerson.[5]

To begin, I will briefly explain the various kinds of Donne's silence and my attitude towards silence itself. I find no justification for *filling* Donne's silences with my own retrospective socio-political interpretation, but will treat the silences as *themselves* socio-political. However various my four silences are, I shall read them all as actions, not omissions, as shaped rhetorical spaces or gestures, not accidental vacancies. It is the *silence* itself that is politically instructive or interpretable to me, not what I might presume it to conceal. Here I part company, as others might not, with two totalizing literary models: first, with some Marxist criticism that reads reticence as evasion and false consciousness; second, with some psychoanalytical criticism that reads it as anxiety or repression.

Donne's silence about American colonization is virtual not complete; he broke it once as a Lincoln's Inn poet and once as a priest: I seek to read the interstitial silence. The second, silence about the conquest of Ireland, follows an elegy and then an epistle to his friend Henry Wotton fighting in Ireland, both early poems closing a subject Donne does not reopen; I seek to read the subsequent silence. The third, silence about a role for able women, resounds within a series of panegyrics addressed to such a woman and answers with silence the question what she might be good for; I seek to read the mute reply. The fourth, silence in English about any other poet, another profound silence,[6] opens itself to a close reading as rhetorical silence because Donne did speak of the *vers de societe* of a "poetess." Where some part of the Renaissance poetic cadre filled each of these reticences, Donne exercised the right to remain silent.[7] None of the authors of my chosen interpretative models examines Donne's aporia in this way; any might reject my applications.

The first case is Donne's silence about English expansionism into America. On that theme, the *poet* Donne was not wholly mute. In the elegy "On his Mistris Going to Bed" written in the 1590s,[8] he wrote:

> Licence my roving hands, and let them goe
> Behind, before, above, between, below.
> Oh my America, my new found lande,
> My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd
> My myne of precious stones, my Empiree,
> How blest am I in this discovering thee.[9]
>
> (15, lines 25-30)

The *priest* Donne revisited the subject before the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation, in a sermon dated November 13, 1622, which retracts the witty logic of the elegy:

> Beloved in him . . . you seeke to advance, in this Plantation, our *Lord* and *Saviour Christ Iesus*, if you seeke to establish a temporall kingdome there, you are not rectified, if you seeke to bee *Kings* in either acceptation of the word; to be a *King* signifies *Libertie* and *independency*, and *Supremacie*, to bee under no man, and to be a *King* signifies *Abundance*, and *Omnisufficiencie*, to neede no man. If those that governe there, would establish such a government, as should not depend upon this, or if those that goe thither, propose to themselves an exemption from Lawes, to live at their libertie, this is to be *Kings*, to devest *Allegeance*, to bee under no man: and if those that adventure thither, propose to themselves present benefit, and profit, a sodaine way to bee rich, . . . this is to bee sufficient of themselves, and to need no man: and to be under no man and to need no man, are the two acceptations of being *Kings*. Whom liberty drawes to goe, or present profit drawes to adventure, are not yet in the right way. O, if you could once bring a *Catechisme* to bee as good ware amongst them as . . . a hatchet: O, if you would be as ready to hearken at the returne of a *Ship*, how many *Indians* were converted to *Christ Iesus*, as what Trees . . . that Ship had brought, then you were in your right way.[10] (4:269)

The elegy revises one of Ovid's *Amores* where Corinna secretly visits her lover's chamber at midday; she disrobes and they make love.[11] Donne focuses on the disrobing as the lover urges his mistress to remove one garment after the other, his final argument being:

> To teach thee, I am naked first: Why than
> What need'st thou have more covering than a man.
> (Gardner 16, lines 47-48)

The *elegy* relies for its metaphysical wit upon several exploitations of the pun—both in these lines and earlier when addressing his "America, his new found land." To end his poem, Donne takes advantage of the double meaning of *covering*—that is, *clothing* and *mating with*—and the two prepositions used with it, covering *of* a man and covering *by* a man to say "if you take off your clothes you'll be well covered." In the America passage Donne puns on the double meaning of *license*—*legal or duly constituted authority*, and *untoward freedom*.

That pun alludes to the license Queen Elizabeth gave first to Sir Humphrey Gilbert and then, when Gilbert drowned, to his half-brother Sir Walter Raleigh: a six-year patent to travel to America at their own expense to exploit its resources for their personal profit. After various failures in Virginia, Raleigh tried to reassign his license to a private company, and to help with their incorporation under a new license.[12] He failed here too, but a different incorporated company of private stock holders was in fact licensed by James I in the famous Virginia charter of 1606. In the new patent James retained general control through a royal governing body.

Donne's sermon to that private company explicitly bans the personal imperialism by which a man is king of the new-found demense of his explored land or lady, exempt from law or allegiance. He offers instead a religious justification for American plantation, converting the explorer or planter into an imperial agent both of God the king and James the king. Between these two references, Donne was silent on the subject of the English in America—neither endorsing colonial enterprise nor problematizing it.[13] Not every English writer was silent. Recent studies of *The Tempest*, notably that by Paul Brown,[14] have shown Shakespeare both finding cosmic justification for the imposition of English order on native savages and uninhabited land, and at the same time exposing the role of the settler in making the native into a savage by taking his land. Shakespeare, not himself silent, shows Prospero manipulating silence. Pros-

pero's marriage mask, read by Brown as a mythological model of social control,[15] begins with the on-stage regulation of the audience: "No tongue! All eyes! be silent." Shakespeare's treatment of Prospero's silences and words registers his own two contrary impulses: to justify and to question colonization.

To interpret Donne's silence on colonialism, Marotti's coterie model is useful. Marotti argues that all Donne's elegies make London in the 1590s the scene of amorous adventuring and substitute sexual realism for idealization, critical argument for sentiment, and aggressive masculine self-assertion for polite self-effacement. The lover is portrayed as independent and successful, despite the actual constraints and frustrations experienced by Inns-of-Court gentlemen hungry for status and seeking preferment;[16] the poems are grounded in attitudes and circumstances within a specific socioliterary environment. Referring to the America passage, Marotti writes: "Phallic narcissism and economic ambition are joined in the speaker's exclamations.... Sexual, economic, and legal/political power [are] wittily confused ... as Donne portrays ... the clever young man's triumph in a familiar if fictionalized, social world."[17] Without actually noting Donne's interstitial silence, Marotti writes that unlike the elegies which circulated in manuscript, the Virginian company sermon was published the year it was preached. He comments that when Donne began to preach, he moved out of the coterie into a state church: "No longer regarded as a 'stigma,' then, print became for Dean Donne an extension of the public authority he exercised before King, Court, and [his] larger congregations. The coterie character of ... his earlier work had suited the conditions of his relative powerlessness. As a sanctioned religio-political spokesman, however, Dean Donne could freely publish his words in printed form."[18] That interpretation prompts the inference that Donne's sermon is euphemistic writing for an absolutist state. Self-interest within the coterie fuelled the narcissistic exploitativeness of the elegy; status as cleric led to sermon whitewash of colonial expansionism; unemployed, Donne was silent. Marotti's model usefully relates elegy and sermon: the spokesmanship conferred by the lectern *is* the precondition for breaking silence. Yet Donne does not preach a monolithic authoritarianism. He cautions the settlers to be wary of what they bring the natives. To be sure, he whitewashes a good deal in reverting to the king's license as a patent to exploit. He tells the company: "Many cases may be put, when not onely *Commerce*, and *Trade*, but *Plantations* in lands, not formerly our owne, may be lawfull. And for that ..., you have your *Commission*, your *Patents*" (4:274). Yet he also warns the company not to become the

problem for America, but to go as its religious solution: "as apostles to America, you [make] this *Iland*, the *Suburbs* of the old world, a Bridge, a Gallery to the new; to joyne all to that world that shall never grow old, the Kingdome of heaven" (4:280-81).

This bounded silence is the simplest of the four as historical space sheltering an undatable shift from self-promotion in Donne, who by 1609 himself wished a secretarial appointment the Virginia Company,[19] into a later state-promotion streaked with missionary piety. Even here, understanding the politics of silence does not consist in filling up the reticences of an historical figure but in marking a significant hiatus.

The second case, Donne's silence about the pacification of Ireland, is a silence after two poems, both of which use a form of metaphysical wit close to the pun—the lexical device of ironized bureaucratic speech. Donne's theme, England in Ireland, differs politically from the American topic in that the Irish sufferings are nearby and visible; the Irish were already Christian when Donne's fathers worshipped stocks and stones, and they govern themselves legally under Brehon law. These conditions made it hard to justify an English presence on the usual imperial grounds of the conquest of unsettled territory and the civilizing of savages.[20] Donne's silence is unbroken after the last of two poems written about five years apart; the subsequent, not the intervening, silence is interesting, and the two poems can be contextualized externally by a letter from Donne's friend Henry Wotton, to whom he wrote the second poem.

In the elegy "Loves Warre" [1593-94],[21] Donne, addressing a lady—"Till I have peace with thee, warre other men, / And when I have peace, can I leave thee then?"—trivializes current wars:

> Sick Ireland is with a strange warre possest
> Like to'an Ague; now rageinge, now at rest,
> Which time will cure; yet it must do her good
> If she were purg'd, and her heade-veine let blood.
> (13, lines 13-16)

In the epistle "To Sir Henry Wotton fighting in Ireland" [with Essex in 1599],[22] rebuking Wotton for not writing him, Donne treats Ireland first as the prize and then the cause of war. The epistle opens,

> Went you to conquer? and have so much lost
> Yourself, that what in you was best and most,
> Respective friendship, should so quickly dye?

> In publique gaine my share'is not such that I
> Would loose your love for Ireland. . . .
>
> (74, lines 1-5)

Donne continues, rebukingly:

> Lett not your soule (at first with graces fill'd,
> And since, and thorough crooked lymbecks, still'd
> In many schools and courts, which quicken it,)
> It self unto the Irish negligence submit.
>
> (74-75, lines 13-16)

In the first poem, de-romanticizing warfare by stressing the follies and frustrations of military adventuring,[23] Donne interprets the disturbances in Ireland just before the rebellion led by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone,[24] as a disease best treated by purging the country of her patriots and bleeding her of her hotheads. In the second poem he warns Wotton not to sink into an Irish fecklessness. In the first, Donne uses the familiar political doublespeak that calls interference with a sovereign state medicine to cure its sickness, and then ironizes a cliche, "time will cure"; in the second, he ironizes the bureautic slogan "our aim is peace not conquest." To interpret those words rehistoricizes Donne's subsequent silence.

Donne's assurance that time will solve the Irish rebellion ironically alludes to Burghley's moderate expression of long-range policy:

> The best is to seek the reformation of Ireland as well by force as by order of justice, so that the English may obey laws and the Irishry be kept from rebellion. And so *by success of time* the Irish to be brought to be governed either by the law of England or by some constitutions to be compounded partly of their own customs and Brehon laws, that are agreeable to reason, and partly of the English laws.[25]

Donne posing as soldier of Venus belittles the occupations of the soldiers of Mars by claiming that official policy will prevail whatever the military does. Sir Henry Sidney, Philip Sidney's father, then Lord Deputy Governor of Ireland, explained how it would prevail: "I presumed that no man's wit could hardly find out any other course to overcome them but by famine."[26] Burghley's mixing Irish and English law with force to

make "the cure of time" is what Donne's contemporary at the Inns of Court, Sir John Davies, considers the source of the trouble—too few soldiers are sent, and Brehon law itself discourages absolutism. As Davies put it, "In a word, if the English would neither in peace govern them by law, nor could in war root them out by the sword, must they not needs be . . . thorns in their sides till the world's end?—and so the *Conquest* never be brought to perfection?"[27] In the few years between the writing of the elegy and the epistle, Donne's belittling of the Irish war was changed by Wotton's having joined Essex on a mission to end the war. [That the belittlement was no more than a pose and was certainly not an attack on England Irish policy is suggested by Donne's willingness later to angle for an Irish bureaucratic post himself.[28]] Meanwhile a second statement of official policy was made in the proclamation sending Essex to Ireland. That proclamation refers to "wicked and barbarous rebels [who have alleged] that we intend an utter extirpation . . . of that nation and Conquest of the country. The very name of Conquest in this case seemeth absurd to us. . . . [Where we seek only] to root out the capital heads of the most notorious traitors . . . [there is not] need [of] any such title of Conquest."[29] Donne's question, "went you to conquer," ironizes the official euphemistic disclaimer; but he, a pro-Essex sympathizer, does not ironize it to commiserate with Ireland but with the Essex mission. A letter to Donne from Henry Wotton contextualizes the poems for us by alluding to the favored anti-Essex faction at Court and its denigration of any accomplishment on the Irish expedition and by speaking of his fear of speech. Wotton writes:

> Whatsoever we have done, or mean to do, we know what will become of it, when it comes amongst our worse enemies, which are interpreters. I would there were more O'Neales and Macguiers and O'Donnells and Macmahons, and fewer of *them*. It is true that this kingdom hath ill affections and ill corruptions; but they where you are have a stronger disease, you diminish all that is here done. . . . I will say no more, and yet peradventure I have said a great deal unto you.[30]

Wotton likes to fight real Irish enemies; he does not like to have to protect his flanks in the court.

The model that interprets the seventeenth-century political lexicon is Annabel Patterson's study of censorship. Wotton's criticism and fear of his own openness as well as Donne's exposure of bureaucratic

doublespeak may be illuminated by her model. She argues that because of the extreme alertness of the Tudor and Stuart courts to party and faction, writers grew adept at discovering forms, devices and language in which they might unexceptionably disguise tendentious subjects.[31] She sees signs in Donne's satires of scars made by his repressive culture and argues that for him state censorship produced not "the heroic individual whose outspokenness deserves written memorial, but the deeply divided and half-felonious self."[32] When Donne spoke to his coterie what he dared not or would not say to the world, he urged Wotton not to let his writings out of his sight: "To my satires there belongs some fear, and to some elegies. . . . I am desirous to hide them."[33] Donne's Irish poems encode a growing opposition to Court moves to control Essex. Donne's use of politically charged language is coldly witty; with respect to the horror story of Ireland, he is silent. That unobjecting silence is replicated all over England, while the Irishry are dying of famine, helped by invasion. The unbroken silence on the sufferings of the Irish people was broken by Swift in *A Modest Proposal* one hundred thirty years after the epistle to Wotton, Swift, too, then speaking with the ironic aid of bureaucratic euphemism.

Donne's third silence blanks out part of a scene he frequently visited, a circle of women of elevated social standing, and consists of reticence about any conceivable socio-political role for the able among them. The women are highborn and have scope to act; they are numerous and talented. Lucy, Countess of Bedford, received the bulk of Donne's verse epistles; they will suffice to explore a silence lodged inside encomnia, the psycho-sexual flattery of an able woman who *did* play a significant role as a courtier and the manager of patronage.[34]

Donne wrote a number of letters to Lucy, seeking her patronage by posing as her amusing social near-equal not "her artistic client, a role professional poets like Jonson, Daniel and Drayton readily accepted in order to benefit from her economic favors."[35] In the first few, he established the paradoxical and unexpected terms in which she was to be praised, terms recently called "grossly hyperbolical" and of "conspicuous impropriety."[36] For example in "Reason is our Soules left hand, Faith her right," Donne claimed that he was able to grasp Lucy's divinity by his higher faculty, faith, not by his lefthanded reason, a compliment a lady would have to be intelligent to like, very intelligent to dislike, and perhaps most intelligent to like, after all.[37] Since the implication throughout all the verse letters is always that Lucy's consent must be sought, her reason may well be most flattered by its controlling a collaboration with his outrageously rational willfulness. [Before we too

quickly rush to fill this silence with an ideology of sexism, we should recall that Donne also sought his mistress's permission to explore in "To his Mistris Going to Bed"; that she *licenced* the exploration of her own bodily empire is not noticed by those who comment on Donne's phallic triumphalism.] Once on a witty footing with Lucy, Donne was allowed to play at intimacy, either the poet and the countess sharing a gratification by the same game, or the poet writing to gratify her known taste.[38]

The opening stanzas of the epistle "You have refin'd mee" both illustrate Donne's bravado and treat the socio-political role of an able woman in high place so as to substitute silence for a serious consideration of it. Donne begins this epistle:

> MADAME,
> You have refin'd mee, and to worthyest things
> (Vertue, Art, Beauty, Fortune,) now I see
> Rareness, or use, not nature value brings;
> And such, as they are circumstanc'd, they bee.
> Two ills can ne're perplexe us, sinne to'excuse:
> But of two good things, we may leave and chuse.
>
> Therefore at Court, which is not vertues clime,
> (Where a transcendent height, (as, lownesse mee)
> Makes her not be, or not show) all my rime
> Your vertues challenge, which there rareest bee;
> For, as darke texts need notes: there some must bee
> To usher vertue, and say, *This is shee.*
> (Milgate, 91-92, lines 1-12)

In the first stanza, Donne gives the virtuous Lucy the alchemical role of refining the poet so that he can perceive the true values of things. Once she has refined him, he sees that value does not inhere in the nature of a thing itself, but in its relationship to rarity or use, that is, in its market value. Value is relative to scarcity, even with respect to the highest things—virtue, art, beauty, fortune. Donne's readers infer that Lucy at court is not inherently valuable or valuable by her nature, but is valuable as a rare commodity. Donne is silent about whether Lucy does or does not make that displeasing inference, in limiting her role to enabling his insight. He either means to please but confuse Lucy by knotty logic or knows she finds it exciting to reason with subversive relativisms.[39]

The second stanza is even more equivocal. Lucy's role in court, her high sphere, calls for a rare action: to show up the court by virtues that do

not show up there. As Donne is too low to be seen at court, her virtues are too high—they are a dark text for which he must supply the notes. Of the possible enabling or useful socio-political role of a favored Countess in James's court, Donne has closed off all discussion by usurping to himself her function as the usher of claimants to the King's patronage. Transferring to himself her actual public relations role in courtly circles, Donne makes Lucy the silent signifier of his significance. As puns and ironized bureaucratese edged the earlier silences, equivocation and knotty logic marks this third aporia.

David Aers and Gunther Kress invoke class identity to explain Donne's equivocal flattery of Lucy as a function of the need to establish his own role and the difficulty of doing so.[40] Donne participates in the market economy he discovers; his lowness of birth makes him as out of place in court as Lucy's high virtue. Donne is a "dark text" to himself as a man who cannot claim inherent value, whose class status at court is that of nonentity. To be "somebody" having some membership of the court, to achieve status, he requires an usher to promote his social accreditation, his admission to the circle. Yet no sooner has Donne stressed the social fashioning of identity than he claims an essentialist identity. Aers and Kress mark the contrast in another poem to Lucy, where Donne writes:

> . . . *Nothings*, as I am, may
> Pay all they have, and yet have all to pay.
> Such borrow in their payments, and owe more
> By having leave to write to, then before.
> Yet since rich mines in barren grounds are showne,
> May not I yeeld (not gold) but coale or stone?

Here self-abasing Donne first defines his social creation but then declares that his true credentials are the rich mine of his native coal-producing wit, in an ironic rejection of the current social order and the processes maintaining it. Aers and Kress find in Donne's discovery of the rating of human beings by market values—"And such, as they are circumstanc'd, they bee"—a bitter reflection on his own futile attempts to change his circumstances and value.[41] As an intellectual seeking court employment, Donne was doubly excluded—a Roman Catholic by birth, a social outcast by a secret marriage above his station. Although he defines his role as sycophant, he also writes like a critic of the status quo.[42] His refusal to Lucy of a role guaranteed either by birth or brains mimics his own exclusion.

Lucy's presence carries over into Donne's final silence, just as the American silence carried over into the Irish. Donne notoriously wrote nothing in English of the poetry of Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, or Jonson, his great poetical forbears and contemporaries. But he did write to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, a letter requesting a copy of her verses:

> *(Happiest and worthiest Lady,)* I do not remember that ever I have seen a petition in verse, I would not therefore be singular.... I have yet adventured so near as to make a petition for verse, it is for those your Ladiship did me the honour to see in *Twicknam* garden, except you repent your making; and having mended your judgement by thinking worse, that is, better, because juster, of their subject. They must needs be an excellent exercise of your wit, which speaks so well of so ill: I humbly beg them of your Ladiship, with two such promises, as to any other of your compositions were threatenings: that I will not shew them, and that I will not beleeve them; and nothing should be so used that comes from your brain or heart.[43]

Donne, silent about other poets, breaks that silence in prose to ask a dilettante for some of her verse of which he is the subject, making rather a point of his asking in prose and promising to preserve her privacy as a writer.

Richard Helgerson's study of the emergence of a "literary system" in Renaissance England differentiates the amateur poet from the professional; he argues that both amateur and professional used poetry as a form of self-representation. The professional's poems sought to make of a gentleman's toy a profitable enterprise, to rescue the medium from poetasters and hacks, to rehabilitate the usurped name of poet or wit from signifying a ribald near-extemporizer speaking things only suitable for private chambers. As the professional's self-definition deconstructs the amateur's, so the amateur's self-definition deconstructs the professional's. To write in a certain genre or to speak of one's work in a certain way, or to establish a certain relationship with booksellers, stagemanagers or patrons is to associate oneself with one group and dissociate oneself from another. The amateurs [such men as Gascoigne, Sidney, Donne] define themselves in non-literary terms, by a code calling on the

well-born and well-educated to be of service to the state. That educated governing class should admire and privately write verse; but its genre preferences and its emphasis on lightness, playfulness, passion, and private delight reject the self-as-poet in favor of the self-as-civil-servant.[44]

Helgerson makes clear his distinction between amateur and professional by reaffirming but regrounding Joseph Summers' characterization of Donne's and Jonson's "opposed ideals and practices." Summers wrote:

> Besides the private and the public, the amateur and the professional, the individual and the general, one thinks of extravagance and sobriety, excess and measure, spontaneity and deliberation, immediacy and distance, daring and propriety, roughness and elegance, tension and balance, ability and weight. And one can go on to expression and function, ecstasy and ethics, experience and thought, energy and order, the genius and the craftsman—ending with those inevitable seventeenth century pairs, passion and reason, wit and judgment, nature and art.[45]

These differences, Helgerson argues, are not only "instances of dissimilar temperments." Representing himself as extravagant, excessive and spontaneous, Donne enacts the gentleman poet with the very qualities that are objects of satire in Jonson's epigrams. Members of the same literary generation, Jonson and Donne both reject the pictorial fluidity, decoration and half-medieval idealism of the preceding generation; both produce a new realism of style, sharp, condensed, for the new critical realism of their thought. But as opposing poetical selfhoods, one chooses amateur, one professional status.[46] In this model, Donne's silence about Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, or Jonson represents his rejection of the profession of poet in favor of a court-sponsored public life. His letter to Lucy confirms the poetic silence about public poets by which Donne disavows them to play the role of useful public person, who may write poetry, but not print it.

The time has come to generalize Donne's silences and the models used to read each. I have been arguing that Donne by four differing kinds of silences responds to four socio-political problems and that, since no monocausal explanatory model reads the political implications of all the

problems, the proper paradigms are those aligned to each silence and now before you. My enterprise is to so rehistoricize the conditions of Donne's silence as to make it readable. The totalizing paradigms of psychoanalysis and marxism being inimical to historical explanations, I will first offer syntheses of the silences and their interpretative paradigms, again without the consent of their authors, and I will then comment on how one's sense of Donne as a poet might be altered by the treatment of rhetorical silences as political decisions with poetical intentions.

While, in order to contribute to the process of recontextualizing his poetry, I have identified four of Donne's silences as forms of political response and drawn on four models of historico-political interpretation, the four political reticences converge towards two. Donne's attitudes towards American and Irish adventurism before he falls silent are each similarly individualistic and nationalistic; and his attitudes towards roles for able highborn women and towards poetry as amateur self-recommendation are also similarly related to questions of patronage and identity. The first two raise the spectre, that is, of Donne's possible ethnocentrism or racism; the second two equally of possible sexism or classism. Given that convergence, can it be argued that Donne falls silent before otherness in race, gender or class, so that his silence suppresses or rejects otherness in favor of whatever dominance he can thereby secure within the status quo?

My four interpreters also tend to some methodological convergence. All are revisionist literary historians, making use of new historicist arguments; David Aers and Gunther Kress employ demographical historicism, Annabel Patterson offers a new historicist explanation of the conditions making for censorship-enforced linguistic encryption, and Marotti and Helgerson focus on the interactions of social institutions, audience, and writer. Taken together they draw the portrait of a poet in a pre-revolutionary period marked by state control of publication, whose poems were offered to a few, whose membership in an over-numerous clerisy of the talented, critical, educated, underemployed was a recipe for alienation and whose very role-definition precluded open political speech in public poetry. The invocation of historical insights in literary criticism seeks to remove the critic's anachronisms from his or her scrutiny of works of art so as to sharpen the description and interpretation of those works; the goal is to free criticism from an uncritical repetition of the critic's own assumptions and preferences. Docherty's worries about New Criticism's relentless pose of self-satisfied atemporality make an important point: to read a work of art in its own historical

moment is to open it to criticism, by protecting it from the hermeneutic circlings of critical anachronism. The models I have chosen converge methodologically in their willingness to use history to enable normative criticism not to avoid it. It is altogether possible, however, for a dominant mode of historicism always to throw the same strong light in the same dark corner; and in the end that too begs questions and begets critical anachronism.

Where, however, reticence is what historical contextualization reveals, then evaluation I think must proceed with silence as a datum, too. Donne's silence is marked not just by our modern awareness of it as historical, but by a necessary discovery of it as silence where other Renaissance writers chose to speak. Donne's silences ensue after speech about prominent historical inducements to think new social thoughts or to change his political mind. The inducements to think the new include Donne's responses to new world, to nationalist expansion, to the extension of power to new classes including women, and to the increase of literacy and of access to the printed word. Donne's signifying silence can be perceived only by means of what in fact he was able to say before he ceased to speak and in rhetorical response to political problems. The rhetorical response of silence in these cases follows after three forms of speech which give his reader access to a cross-current of secondary meanings—the pun, the ironization of bureaucratic speech, and equivocation or the problematic of knotty logic.[47] When those tropes stop at the edge of literary silence, they urge me to read the silence as a further trope.

The tropes, then, at the margin and into silence, are tropes that mime thought and that suffuse the poetry they contain with a powerful sense of mind. Their presence throws doubt on one explanation of silence that clearly would expose Donne to the criticism of ideological escapism—into ethnocentrism, sexism, or classism. Donne is not silent as the poet of an unquestioning endorsement of the socio-political status quo. The silence of pure consent is ruled out in each of the four instances. In every case Donne uses the option of not saying anything more where he has asked a question not where he unquestioningly assents to orthodoxies of his own day. The conservative or skeptical implications of having discontinued to speak are perhaps stronger than I have been urging, in my determination not to put words in Donne's mouth. Probably some of Donne's silence answers his own advice in the third satire: "in strange way / To stand inquiring right is not to stray." Nonetheless, to charge Donne with sexism in falling silent before woman's otherness, for example, disregards his invariant treatment of woman as free, just as to charge

him with classism disregards his ambivalence about sycophancy itself and his bureaucratic ironies.

Finally from the case of Donne, ought one to urge the investigation of silence as part of a general theory of historicist criticism? Here I would repeat that the only silence I myself feel justified in treating rhetorically as a political act is the silence of intention, a silence made in cognizance of an actual historical audience, no matter how limited, and in response to an actual social issue. A non-writer's unconscious aporia may be politically readable, but they are not political. Doubtless my examples are too few to prove the hypothesis of silence as question not consent everywhere in Donne's work or to demonstrate beyond a doubt that his poetry, let alone all poetry, stands in an interrogatory stance *vis-a-vis* its dominant culture or tradition, though that is what I believe in the main to be true. To use or to read Donne's silence, it is necessary to rehistoricize it, by recovering a clear sense of the significance of his language and his tropes, and by isolating the silence within or after speech.

Of the vain wish to butt into Donne's chosen silence to fill it, a famous silence of his great-grand-uncle, Sir Thomas More, may make my last word by reminding us how acknowledged the action of falling silent was in Donne's race. After his trial and conviction, More declined an invitation to defend himself: "More have I not to say, my Lords, but that like as the Blessed Apostle, Saint Paul . . . was present and consented to the death of Saint Stephen . . . and yet be they now both twain, holy saints in heaven and shall continue there friends for ever—so I verily trust . . . that though your Lordships have now here in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet heareafter in heaven merrily all meet together, to our everlasting salvation!"[48]

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Notes

[1] *John Donne, Undone* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 5.

[2] For the formalist charge, see David Bromwich, "Parody, Pastiche, and Allusion," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond the New Criticism*, Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), p. 340; see also Jonathan Culler, "Changes in the Study of the Lyric," in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond the New Criticism*, pp. 38-39.

[3] For recent arguments that his intellectual challenge remains Donne's most salient pleasure, see Thomas O. Sloane, *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), pp. 145-207; A. J. Smith, *The Metaphysics of Love: Studies in Renaissance love poetry from Dante to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 213-20; and Harold Toliver, *Lyric Provinces in the English Renaissance* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 95-121.

[4] See Jonathan Crewe, *Hidden Designs: The Critical Profession and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1988), pp. 14-15. I have slightly amended his selection of paradigms to suit my slightly later historical period.

[5] See Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986) to whom I am indebted for a good deal more than an interpretative model; Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984); David Aers and Gunther Kress, "'Darke Texts Need Notes': Versions of Self in Donne's Verse Epistles," in *Literature, Language and Society in England 1580-1680*, David Aers, Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress, eds. (Totowa: Barnes, 1981); and Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983). For Helgerson's sense of common cause with Marotti and Patterson, see his review article "Recent Studies in Renaissance Literature," *SEL* 26 (1986), 145-93.

[6] Donne wrote to and of George Herbert in Latin, praised the Psalm translations of Philip Sidney's sister in Latin and made an epigram for the publication of Jonson's plays. These exceptions leave his English silence about poetry itself just as profound.

[7] For accounts of political responses to some of these themes by members of the Renaissance cadre other than those I shall mention, see, for example: Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1983); Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980); David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaisance* (London: Routledge, 1984); Graham Parry, *The Gold Age Restor'd: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1981); Hans S. Pawlisch, *Sir John Davies and the Conquest of Ireland: A study in legal imperialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); and Alan Sinfield, "Power and Ideology: An Outline Theory and Sidney's *Arcadia*," *ELH* 52 (1985), 259-78.

[8] For the dating of this elegy see John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 104; see also Helen Gardner, "Introduction," *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. xxxiii. For further discussion of the question of elegy dates, see David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), p. 208; and I. A. Shapiro, "The Date of A Donne Elegy, and Its Implications," in *English Renaissance Studies Presented to Dame Helen Gardner in honour of her seventieth birthday*, John Carey, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), pp. 141-50.

[9] All quotations of Donne's elegies are taken from *The Elegies and the Songs and Sonnets*, edited with Introduction and Commentary by Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) and pagination is given in the text. I have also consulted both *The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, edited by C. A. Patrides (London: Everyman-Dent, 1985) and *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, edited by John T. Shawcross, Stuart Editions (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1968).

[10] All quotations of Donne's sermons are taken from *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols., edited by Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 1953-62 (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984), pagination given in the text.

[11] See Stella P. Revard, "Donne and Propertius: Love and Death in London and Rome," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, Claude Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth, eds. (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 69-79, for an assessment of both the Ovidian and Propertian contributions to this elegy.

[12] See Charles M. Andrews, *Our Earliest Colonial Settlements*, (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 1-35.

[13] Donne was not similarly silent on the cruelty of the Spanish in the New World, however.

[14] "'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine': *The Tempest* and the discourse of colonialism," in *Political Shakespeare: New essays in cultural materialism*, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 48-71.

[15] Brown, pp. 66-67.

[16] On Donne as an Inns of Court author, see Marotti, pp. 21-34; see also Wilfred R. Prest, *The Inns of Court under Elizabeth I and the Early Stuarts 1590-1640* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman, 1972) and Louis A. Knafla, "The Law Studies of an Elizabethan Student," *Huntington Library Quarterly* (1977), pp. 221-40, for an account of the legal library and training of Thomas Egerton, the son of Donne's first patron.

[17] Marotti, p. 45, pp. 54-55.

[18] Marotti, p. 287.

[19] Carey, p. 87.

[20] The political and historical parallel between America and Ireland as subjects of English expansion is well drawn by Brown, pp. 53-58, and has become something of a new historical commonplace.

[21] Gardner, p. xxxiii.

[22] All quotations of Donne's verse letters will be taken from *Donne: The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, edited by W. Milgate (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pagination and lineation given in the text. Milgate, discussing the date and attribution of the letter "H. W. in Hiber. Belligeranti" notes that Wotton was fighting in Ireland with his patron, the Earl of Essex, from mid April to late September 1599.

[23] Marotti, p. 55.

[24] See Anne Chambers, *Eleanor, Countess of Desmond c. 1544-1638* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1986), pp. 199-215. The more general history of the English-Irish Elizabethan wars is well examined by Richard Berleth, *The Twilight Lords, An Irish Chronicle* (New York: Knopf, 1978) and Cyril Falls, *Elizabeth's Irish Wars* (London: Methuen, 1950).

[25] Quoted in David Beers Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish*, Folger Monographs on Tudor and Stuart Civilization (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, for the Folger Shakespeare Library, 1966), p. 125.

[26] Also quoted by Quinn, p. 141.

[27] Quoted in James P. Myers, Jr., ed., *Elizabethan Ireland: A Selection of Writings by Elizabethan Writers on Ireland* (Hamden: Archon, 1983), p. 153. On Davies in Ireland, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, A Reissue with a Retrospect (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 263-76.

[28] Marotti, p. 186.

[29] Quinn, p. 137.

[30] The letter is reprinted both in *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, edited by Charles Edmund Merrill, Jr. (New York: Sturgis, 1910) and in *The Life and Letters of Sir Henry Wotton*, by Logan Pearsall Smith, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1907). It is quoted and discussed by Marotti on p. 124 and by Milgate on p. 232.

[31] Patterson, p. 44.

[32] Patterson, p. 32.

[33] Carey, p. 70.

[34] See Barbara Lewalski, "Lucy, Countess of Bedford: Images of a Jacobean Courtier and Patroness," *Politics of Discourse*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), pp. 76-77.

[35] Marotti, p. 202.

[36] See Margaret Maurer, "The Real Presence of Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, and the Terms of John Donne's 'Honour is so sublime perfection,'" *ELH* 47 (1980), 205-34, 205.

[37] See Maurer, pp. 211-14; see also Patricia Thompson, "Donne and the Poetry of Patronage: *The Verse Letters*," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, A. J. Smith, ed. (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 317.

[38] Marotti, p. 209. See also Lauro Martines, *Society and History in English Renaisance Verse* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), pp. 56-61. John Carey implies that Lucy was stupid and self-satisfied enough to deserve whatever she got (p. 78, "But it is difficult, when one considers her stomach for flattery, to take a very generous view of her intelligence."). Docherty believes that Donne would have given her ironical and ill-logical logic whatever her desserts (p. 165). Marotti reminds us that Donne answered his own Problem No. 7 of *Paradoxes and Problems* "Why hath the common opinion affoorded woemen Soules?" with the further question: "Doe wee somwhat, in this dignifying them, flatter Princes and greate Personages that are so much governd by them?" (p. 335), suggesting that Donne flatters Lucy with veiled near-insults so as to flatter too those of his own sex near her. All these scholars repeat the same evidence in arriving at these different conclusions.

[39] Aers and Kress, pp. 23-29.

[40] I have chosen the Aers and Kress analysis of Donne's epistle as well as their interpretative model because they, I think correctly, prefer the ideology of class as here explanatory to the ideology of gender.

[41] Aers and Kress, pp. 31-34.

[42] Aers and Kress, pp. 35-38, who draw evidence from Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (London: Weidenfeld, 1966) and from Mark Curtis, "The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England," *Past and Present* 23 (1962), 25-41, and acknowledge interpetative debts to Walzer.

[43] Merrill, p. 78.

[44] Helgerson, pp. 21-30.

[45] Quoted in Helgerson, pp. 32-33.

[46] Helgerson, pp. 33-34.

[47] For a useful reminder of the boundaries of the pun in Donne's poetry, see David Novarr, "AMOR VINCIT OMNIA: Donne and the Limits of Ambiguity," *Modern Language Review* 82 (1987), 286-92.

[48] William Roper, *The Lyfe of Sir Thomas Moore, Knighte*, edited by James Mason Cline (New York: Morrow, 1950), p. 79.