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Donne and the New Historicism

Anthony Low

Arthur F. Marotti. *John Donne: Coterie Poet*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986. Pp. xviii + 370.

John Donne: Coterie Poet is an important and yet, given its great promise, a disappointing book. It represents the problematic fulfillment, thus far, of two significant movements of interest to readers of this journal: the ongoing revaluation of John Donne and his writings and, more broadly, the effort to apply the New Historical principles which have appeared during recent years more closely to particular literary works by Donne and others. To be frank, the result in this case is a book that is solid, suggestive, sometimes brilliant, always competently and professionally written, yet having eventually on its reader a wearying effect. The fault, I believe, is in certain features of the method rather than in the author. If a scholar as good as Marotti can produce a mixed book like this, so suggestive in its premises and many of its ideas but so ultimately dispiriting in its working out of these same ideas in practice, then one must question whether New Historicism, as presently constituted, can ever be made to move beyond broad and brilliant generalities to come to terms with the nitty-gritty details, the vital emotions, and the lasting significance of individual works of art.

Marotti has already given us at least two articles that, in their suggestive impact, have proved more important than most scholars' books: "John Donne and the Rewards of Patronage," in *Patronage in the Renaissance*, ed. Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel (Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 207-34, and "'Love is Not Love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order," *ELH* 49 (1982), 399-426. Marotti's book incorporates many of the findings of these brilliant articles but, on the whole, adds relatively little that is really new to them. Many in our profession (or at least many of our chairmen and deans) presume that a

major scholar must eventually produce a major book in order to prove himself; yet we know that sometimes an article is worth more than a book, and we should acknowledge as much when such a one appears. Marotti's articles have been germinal and crucially suggestive, proposing whole new ways of viewing important bodies of verse and forever changing our assumptions about Sidney, Ralegh, Donne, and others they touch on. But *John Donne: Coterie Poet* attempts to be more than just suggestive: its ambition is to take a combination of New Historical and psychological methods and to apply them systematically to nearly all of Donne's poems, in their presumed chronological order, and thus to explicate them all anew as well as to give us, in the end, a new Donne. The result is a book that, like John Carey's, will certainly have to be considered seriously by all Donne scholars as well as all those interested in the unfolding development of one of our most innovative critical methods, New Historicism; yet one that, practically, adds little to the already very considerable contribution of Marotti's earlier studies.

The difficulty, perhaps also evident in recent work by other scholars, may be attributable to some uncertainties in the nature of "New Historicism." This is not an easy term to pin down, but what I think it means in a positive sense is the attempt to relate literature to its historical and cultural contexts by means of various subtle connections suggested by sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, historians of the "Annales" school, Neomarxists, and others. What it means in a negative sense is an ambivalent preoccupation—really a love-hate affair—with power and power relationships, to the exclusion of most other motives and emotions usually found on the human scene. The close resemblances between the predicament caused by an oversupply of young, capable Elizabethan gentlemen striving to find places in an inhospitable patronage system and an oversupply of young literary scholars struggling for position and tenure in our universities has not gone unnoticed by interested observers—many of whom, indeed, have suffered under similar exigencies. It is understandable that the intense psychosocial pressures generated on individuals by such circumstances should, in both periods, often have wholly suppressed all seemingly lesser considerations in the interest of competing, excelling, and thus surviving. Such pressures may distort a work of art or of criticism at the same time that they impel it toward excellence.

After the limits of orthodox New Criticism, it is refreshing to recognize that a poem as well as a personality arises from its cultural circumstances. The more thorough and subtle our understanding of the conditions of a particular culture, the better our chances of coming to terms with

the poems it produces. But there are obvious problems. One is that many "models" that pretend to describe the interrelation of culture and art—the Elizabethan "commonplace," Marxist "superstructure," the "political unconscious," Lacanian analysis, and the like—are merely speculative and at best partial. We know (in the same way that Samuel Johnson refuted Bishop Berkeley) that life and art are interrelated, and it seems only sensible to say that influence passes in both directions, but we are ignorant of the precise details of transmission.

Another problem is that with a writer like Donne we lack sufficient facts. We can, as Marotti has done, begin to understand how the patronage system worked on him in fundamental ways, permeating his life and his poetry; but we still don't know (as Dennis Flynn's recent articles and talks are beginning to show us) much about precisely who all of Donne's patrons were, whether actual or prospective, open or covert; which of them were most important to him; which he openly flattered and which he deeply relied on; or, indeed, what his most basic social, political, and religious allegiances were. Was Donne's first important sponsor Egerton, or was it Northumberland or Derby? Did he hate Burghley, as Marotti speculates, for his persecution of Essex—who was, after all, a Protestant hope—or for more sinister and personal reasons having to do with Donne's Catholic connections and upbringing? Did he initially look to a Protestant God, or to a God of Weberian prosperity and exogamous patronage, to bless his marriage to Ann More? We should not let the many familiar similarities between our own difficult "job market" and Donne's obscure the many differences. Given his family connections and youthful circumstances, Donne had good reasons to hide even from his closest friends what may have been his central loyalties, allegiances, and ambitions. We don't know, either, as is well known, when many of Donne's poems were written, whom (if anyone real) they are about, or to whom they were originally addressed.

In the end, we are often reduced to "what the poem says." Its tone or its pronouns may suggest, for example, that it is addressed to an audience of ambitious, libertine, "satellite-courtly" young males—therefore probably that it was written when Donne was at the Inns of Court. To be aware of such possibilities is, at least potentially, to be better able to understand the conditions under which Donne worked; yet, for the most part, such circular hermeneutics end up telling us little more than what the New Criticism already could postulate. That there is great potential in the methods of New Historicism, several successful books and many articles have shown; but there are also great difficulties once one moves past the exhilarating, immediately persuasive beginning

points—for example, that men in Donne's time could establish what we would call their psychological identity or sense of integrity only by assuming recognized places in the patronage network that defined their given society—to more particular considerations: how do such clearly important insights affect our reading of this particular poem or that?

John Buxton and Edwin Miller taught us the difference between "professional" and "amateur" or "courtly" poets some decades ago. Recent work has much refined their insights yet still leaves us with some vexed questions. Granted that Donne was born into a milieu that defined lyric poetry as "basically a genre for gentlemen amateurs who regarded their literary 'toys' as ephemeral works that were part of a social life that also included dancing, singing, gaming, and civilized conversation," a culture that thought of individual poems as "trifles to be transmitted in manuscript within a limited social world and not as literary monuments to be preserved in printed editions for posterity" (p. 3)—or, at best, that thought of poems as tools to be used and dropped as a minor means of career advancement; must we now accept such limitations as inevitable and definitive? Such were the social conditions, true; but there are always at least a few men and women in any age who successfully transcend or transform the conditions within which they find themselves. The argument is implicitly philosophical, even theological. Richard Helgerson, who in *Self-Crowned Laureates* has shown us several greats poets successfully redefining what it means to be a poet, nevertheless has argued recently that it is simply impossible to "transcend" one's particular historical circumstances or literary context. Poems are embedded in their times and determined by the available means and conventions of production. It seems to me, however, that such assertions, though common to New Historicism generally, are arbitrary, rather than instances of the method's genuine findings; they are hypotheses neither provable nor disprovable in themselves, but simply asserted in Helgerson's case and assumed in Marotti's.

What New Historicism has most successfully shown us is the importance of that hidden juncture of individual or personal psychology with the broad social matrix, out of which poetry arises under various intense pressures. It has been less successful in discussing individual poems or even in discriminating good poems from bad. Indeed, another principle often (though not by necessity) associated with New Historicism is that such distinctions between good and bad, like those between "literature" and ordinary writing, are simply meaningless. Yet it has long seemed to me, for example, that the exigencies of political and social patronage

produced subtle and brilliant poetry in the case of Ben Jonson but, for the most part, disastrous failure in the case of Donne. Granted that their exact circumstances differed, similar pressures were at work on both poets. Yet one was enabled by these pressures, the other disabled. I should like to be proved wrong in this respect about Donne, but I don't feel that it suffices simply to argue that his patronage poems undercut the system and therefore possess greater interest or merit than they would otherwise have had, or, in Marotti's words, that Donne "used several means to subvert the mode in which he was writing and to render the very act of poetic praise deeply problematic" (p. 207). The fact remains that when Jonson addressed the Countess of Bedford he rose to the occasion and, as a result, his poems show us grace under pressure; but when Donne addressed her he succeeded only in showing us self-conscious awkwardness struggling unsuccessfully (either in performing a transient act of useful courtesy or in creating a realized object of permanent poetic value) against an intolerable situation. Such, I would argue, is a small practical, as opposed to a theoretical, illustration of the difference between how a poet may begin to transcend or fail to transcend the particular social and historical conditions within which he is circumstanced.

If Donne transcended his cultural limitations anywhere it was in the great love lyrics of the *Songs and Sonets*. Here too one may perceive everywhere the signs of intense social pressure and psychological difficulty, intimations of treason, despair, and thwarted ambition; yet out of these pressures Donne produced great and lasting works of art: not merely occasional pieces, though they were once that, but "well-wrought urns." In a typically acute comment on "A Lecture upon the Shadow," which applies equally well to a number of Donne's other love lyrics, Marotti observes: "Donne transformed a problem having to do with the social circumstances of a love relationship into the more manageable one having to do with the personal attitudes of his lovers. The speaker of this lyric thus pretends that if he and his beloved maintain their full reciprocity of commitment and refrain from deceiving one another, their problems will be solved" (p. 147). Thus Donne fictively transforms insoluble social problems into soluble personal problems—and, essentially, Marotti appears to argue, mystifies them rather than clears them up. By means of such remarks, Marotti lays bare to a modern reader, who inhabits a social world different from Donne's, the particular conditions of production and self-definition under which Donne labored, some of the cultural restraints that bound him, and some of the

assumptions of the presumed coteries for which he wrote. These are all significant factors, about which any intelligent modern reader should wish to be well informed. But, as I have already argued, we need not accept them as inextricable limitations on our reading of the poems. Donne was simply fooling himself, his contemporary readers may have agreed, readers such as the friend to whom he addressed, perhaps vainly, "The Canonization." Yet at the same time, as we can see from our peculiar post-Romantic, post-industrial viewpoint, Donne was also adumbrating and inventing something genuinely new and real. The "truth" of the poem presumably lies somewhere between the contemporary (meaning seventeenth-century) and contemporary (meaning present) culture-bound understandings about its subject: it lies in Donne's successful use and transformation of problems that he was living through and psychosocial pressures that impinged on him in order to rise above the particular context of his historical moment and the reflexive assumptions of his fellows: to produce, in the end, something of permanent value.

What remains most tantalizing about the New Historical venture is that, as we may see in the two instances of Jonson's patronage poems and Donne's love poems—and often elsewhere—those poems that transcend the particular occasion are also, paradoxically, those that most accurately confront it. Jonson could not have been so good a poet had he not, against all odds, been so effective a courtier. Donne could not have written so universally about love had he not been entangled in apparently insoluble personal and social difficulties, had he not been the victim of assumptions and conventions, literary and cultural, that seemed to offer him no satisfactory way out. One reason for studying the past in detail, then, is that only thus can we begin to understand that some of its works, which now appear to us as universal and transcendent, are so in part precisely because they are so faithfully responsive to their exact historical occasions.

The conditions under which Donne worked dictated that, for a would-be gentleman, poems should be scorned as mere toys or tools. They were ephemeral communications to be spoken or passed about in manuscript to particular friends but assiduously kept out of print. Yet who, reading Donne's work, can doubt that he was drawn to a deeper idea of poetry than this? that half-unwillingly he damaged his career, rather than lubricated it, by writing poems that recurrently exceeded in penetration and honesty the limits that social prudence and coterie amusement, politic friendship and worldly ambition, would allow? One

cannot deny that he often, feelingly as well as fashionably, deplored his inglorious bondage to his Muse; yet, with Spenser, Sidney, and Jonson, however unwillingly or ambivalently, he too was engaged in redefining, against prevailing historical constraints and limitations, what it means to be a true poet to all ages.

New York University