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Left/Write/Right: Of Lock-Jaw and Literary Criticism

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Thomas Docherty. *John Donne, Undone.* London and New York: Methuen, 1986.

Wit, sheer literary cleverness, is not so common a feature of critical discourse that it should go unapplauded. Thomas Docherty's brilliant fusion of form and function challenges the reader, as does a Donne poem, not only to meet him on his own ground, but first to recognize that the ground itself may be—nay, is—other than it appears. As groundwork, Docherty offers his reader three prompts—his title, *A note on the text* on page xi, and the first sentence of his introduction. I shall take them in reverse order.

"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" (p. 1). By opening with such a sentence, Docherty would seem to be opening himself not only to the well-deserved scorn of those who hold with Dorothy L. Sayers that, within the arena of the academic debate, "a bland and deadly courtesy is much more devastating" than verbal bludgeoning, but also to the easy dismissal of those who will find the all but unavoidable bibliographical lacunae. It was, indeed, while searching his footnotes to ascertain just exactly what he found to be "passing," or rather *not* passing, for "contemporary criticism of Donne" that I began to suspect what Docherty is about in this book. For there are no "contemporary" references either in the text or in the notes; with the significant exception of John Carey's 1981 biographical exercise, the most "contemporary" of Docherty's contemporaries is Wilbur Sanders from 1971. In the gap created by his choice of the word "contemporary" and the fifteen-year terminus of the Sanders book, we find inscribed in white ink,

"as Derrida might call it" (p. 59), the author's statement of "otherness": there is no citation of or about current Donne criticism. Neither is this text of or about current Donne criticism.

Because the reader's expectations fill Docherty's Derridian gap with concrete objections and frustrations, the gap becomes a wall off of which the reader is deflected back from the page-one statement, back through the pre-textual pages, back to the book's cover. Re-entering the text, this time with less concrete expectations and a more adaptable eye, the reader pauses at the table of contents, only to find that her expectations are both acknowledged and undercut by the lone word "Contents." Docherty thus plays upon the convention of containment while freeing the text from generic forms, both summoning onto and dismissing from the page that which the reader expects to find.

After twice having had her expectations so radically displaced, the reader is prepared to read the first entry of "Contents" for what it is—a title. *A note on the text* is set in italics so that it may be read with the care one would lavish on a poem, not a mere piece of textual or bibliographical apparatus. Docherty's *note* makes, without transition or mitigation, two statements: "References to Donne's poems throughout are to Herbert J. C. Grierson" and "I have occasionally silently emended this [Grierson's?] text by collating it with other editions" (p. xi). The second statement effectively cancels out the first, and the adverb "silently" removes the emendations from the tradition of visual textual apparatus, of which there is none. The text to which Docherty is giving note on page xi—x *i*, which x's out what the eye expects—is the following 253 pages, not the poetry of John Donne. There is no text of Donne for these pages, only a text of Docherty.

Docherty presents in *A note on the text* a double crossing-out, but not a double-cross. Realizing now that the book is about neither Donne criticism nor Donne poetry, the reader is once more displaced, deflected back to the source of her original expectations, the book's cover. Recovering the significance of the cover provides the reader with a means of re-entering the text. The cover illustration is an exquisitely reproduced Annunciation by Lorenzo Lotto. Mary, in the lower left corner, has left her reading and turned away from God and Gabriel, both of whom look and gesture toward the left. Mary's right palm pushes the eye out of the scene at the same time her left palm leads the eye to the left. In the center of the painting, contrary to tradition-generated expectations, is a cat, running to the left while looking back over its left shoulder. In the upper left corner of the cover is inscribed the book's

title, *John Donne Undone*, but without the comma which appears on the title page. God's hands point directly to this space. The title has been left thus incomplete so that its text may be emended by the Annunciation for which it forms an over-lay: *John Donne [Left] Undone*. The cover now figures forth the absence of that which we initially expect to find within the text, Donne and Donne criticism. Furthermore, the cover provides us with that which we *will* find within the text, that which constitutes the text, that presence which is centered on a vertical line dividing Mary from the two heavenly figures, that which is inscribed on the *right* side of the cover thus constituting a double Annuncation, that presence which is not John Donne . . . but Thomas Docherty.

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I wish I could say I think that any of this is intended. What is true is that nothing in my willfully over-determined reading above is any more willfully over-determined than Docherty's reading of Donne and criticism. I say "and criticism" (although not *Donne* criticism) advisedly, as Docherty is more occupied with meta-critical discourse than with the poetry and prose of John Donne. What I have to say about this book will sound a lot like one of the jokes with which Woody Allen opens *Annie Hall*: two women are at a Catskill mountain resort [I'm paraphrasing] and one says to the other, "The food here is terrible!"; the second woman replies, "Yes, and such small portions!"

My first objection to Docherty's book is that he offers so little reading of Donne's work; my second objection is to the quality of that reading.

Claiming that "scant attention has been paid to the problematic of Donne as a *writer*" (p. 1), Docherty proposes to remedy this situation "with a more theoretical and critical reading drawing extensively on post-structuralist theory" (p. 1). Having thus run up his political/critical colors, he announces a three-pronged attack: "this book proposes [*sic*] three main culturally significant and historically problematical areas which bear on Donne's writings" (p. 1). These three are "scientific discourse," "the sociocultural, in which woman raises certain defenses to [*sic*] this male poet," and "the aesthetic, in which mimetic writing itself becomes fraught with difficulty" (p. 1). After all this, Docherty promises, he will give us an "interstitial chapter [which] repudiates entirely the modernist construction of Donne as poet of ethical, cultural and political Individualism" (p. 1). He will then "undo" Donne for us. I present these statements of intent in such detail because, flawed as they are, they represent Docherty's clearest remarks on Donne and his work.

Docherty fails to make his case for the influences these "three areas" have on Donne's writing, and he fails for two reasons. First, he devotes far more time and space to exhibiting his awareness of post-structuralist theory than he gives to discussions of either the historical and cultural backgrounds or the poetry of Donne. The text and notes and index all bristle with citations to deMan, Barthes, Derrida, Hartman, Ricoeur, and Foucault; indeed, one would be hard-pressed to infer a theoretical allegiance, unless through the absence of Lacan. The references to Donne critics are largely confined to the notes for the Introduction. Also lacking are references to scholars who have done ground-breaking work in the fields of Docherty's supposed endeavors. For example, in his discussion of the impact of the works of Copernicus and Kepler, Docherty informs us that "the intellectual imagination of Europe must have been in some slight consternation at these signs of decline or entropy in the condition and position of the human" (p. 19). He then goes on to the (surely) disingenuous conclusion that there "is a clear theological danger in this Copernican revolution" (p. 19). Nowhere in his thirty-page discussion of the influence of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo does he mention either Marjorie Hope Nicolson or Thomas S. Kuhn, although he does cite Barbara Johnson and Norman Mailer. This is not simply a case of old wine in new bottles, this is condensation being vaporized and spewed directly into the atmosphere—intellectual smog.

A more serious example of this technique of distillation and unauthorized re-production, one which goes beyond the bounds of putting theoretical labels on pre-existing scholarship, appears in Docherty's discussion of "The Canonization" in Chapter 5. Here he links the speaker of the poem to the speaker of Satire 4 (p. 173) with no acknowledgment of N. J. C. Andreasen's *John Donne: Conservative Revolutionary*, although he is certainly aware of it, having dismissed it as "more of the same kind" of criticism in which the "attention to voice is positively obsessive" (pp. 11-12). As with the Copernicus discussion, the notes to Chapter 5 figure forth the exclusivity and selectivity of Docherty's focus—Ong, Ricoeur, Sartre, Barthes—but here the absence of Andreasen vitiates the scholarly scope of the argument. If Docherty had been paying more attention to his knowledge of Donne and to the studies of Donne which he claims to over-go and less attention to packing in references to post-structuralist theory, I suggest that this blunder or oversight (or worse) would not have occurred.

If the first reason for Docherty's failure of achievement lies in that which he has left undone, the second lies in a sin of commission.

Returning to the Woody Allen joke, I find myself forced simultaneously to deplore the scarcity of discussions of *entire* Donne poems—as opposed to a conveniently de-contextualized line or stanza—and to object to the quality of such readings as Docherty does present. As the set-piece for his chapter on "The problem of women," Docherty presents a reading of "The Flea." Using the term "Other" as both a noun and an adjective (see p. 52) but never providing any theoretical definition of it (if we are to assume Lacan, why is there no citation?), Docherty states that in Donne's poetry "this Other is most frequently characterized as Woman" (p. 52). Presenting the somewhat contradictory claims that the "Other" is both "no more or less than an empty space, a container of sorts, into which Donne pours his 'influence'" and at the same time a "threat" to be "domesticated and converted into an aspect of the Self and thus rendered harmless, 'colonized' or appropriated and controlled" (p. 52), Docherty reads "The Flea" in the historical context of the development of the telescope which "was a vital instrument in the imaginative perversity of Donne. Distant places could be brought from their location elsewhere, in the realm of the Other, towards a position in the universe within our grasp, the universe of the Self" (p. 53).

Basing this definition of "telescopic" on a 1610 letter from Galileo to Antonio de Medici in which the Tuscan artist remarks, "It would be well if the tube could be capable of being elongated or shortened a little . . ." (p. 55), Docherty builds his reading of "The Flea" around in the metaphor of a moving—extending and retracting—telescope, leaving unasked and unanswered three important questions: (1) Did Donne write this poem after 1610? (2) Was it possible that Donne could have seen or heard of this letter? (3) Was it possible that such an adjustable telescope could have been seen by Donne before he wrote "The Flea"? I suggest that the answers to the first two questions must be (1) who knows? and (2) probably not. But the third question seems crucial, and receives, only implicitly, from Docherty no more than the casual and limited statement that it "is indeed likely that Donne, with his interest in all matters scientific, would have been aware of the telescope" (p. 56). I cannot imagine anyone disputing this claim, but Docherty's reading depends upon a knowledge of a particular model of telescope, one which did not exist, even in Italy, until 1610 or after according to the very evidence with which Docherty himself provides us.

The thrust of Docherty's reading is that "what is at issue is the fact of male control of the female, through the telescopic maneuvers of the phallus in sexual relation" (p. 56). The telescope thus becomes:

> an analogue explaining the notions of phallic potency. It is through the telescope/phallus that the world can be controlled and known. The analogue provides Donne with an important ideological aspect of imagination: knowledge of the Other is dependent upon scopophiliac and phallic control over the Other.... Moreover, the movement of the telescope, which is what the very motions in the poem enact... becomes thereby a kind of prediction of the kind of movement which the Phallus strains to attain in the text.... "Oh stay" in this context takes on a different sense as a kind of (verbal) ejaculation which prefigures, but temporarily arrests, seminal ejaculation.... Knowledge thus becomes mediated as a mode of predictability dependent upon the supposed primacy of the phallus itself, the instrument which telescopically controls its Other, the female "outer space" of the environment. (p. 56)

Arguments about Donne's knowledge of telescopes aside, I would applaud this as a witty, ingenious, and challenging reading were it not for the fact that it lacks any mention of—and, more importantly, any place for—the killing of the flea or, indeed, the poem's entire third stanza. Except for his reading of "The Sunne Rising," Docherty devotes more space and attention to "The Flea" than to any other of Donne's works; and yet even here we are presented with an argument left undone. It is thus hardly surprising to find that—although the issues of woman, dislocation, medical remedies, individuality, and representational poetry are discussed—the Donne poem which contains all of these problems and more, "The Extasie," is never mentioned.

A larger issue than the problem of what Docherty does or doesn't do with Donne in his book is the stylistic opacity of his writing, a quality of writing which is both a cause and a symptom of the blight affecting current critical discourse. In Docherty's case, his style is a symptom of his desire to be seen as theoretical with a capital "T" and his problems with reading Donne are most often caused by the intensity of that desire. Sense and syntax fall by the wayside when he, or any writer, concentrates primarily on including the largest and widest-ranging collection of buzz-words that each page can possibly hold. I, too, would like to see Donne studies move from the shadow of the 1950s onto the theoretical fast-track of contemporary critical exchange; but I do not believe that

such a move must be predicated on the adoption of jargon-studded syntactical aberrations or on the neglect or misreading of poetry.

The idea that obscurity of style is somehow to be equated with "intergriscity" (an apt non-word example) of content has become increasingly popular in the last decade. What appeared first in the exercises of PUNct/u/ation and s p a c i n g which one of my colleagues calls "early *Glyph*, now an archaic tongue," is presently being manifested by the ritual display of jargon and the invocation of names, as acknowledged by a speaker two MLAs ago who said: "That was my obligatory Lacan quote; now for the obligatory reference to Bakhtin." Trying to keep so many verbal balls in the air while still (supposedly) trying to say something about a text leads, or at least contributes to, *very bad writing*, some [sic]ening examples of which Docherty exhibits for us. A critic whose writing obscures his point is only a little less insulting than a critic who has no point.

And yet, frighteningly, some of the recent examples of this type of discourse seem to suggest that bad writing has become a goal in itself, not a mere by-product of other priorities, for Docherty, of course, is far from a lone offender. Jonathan Goldberg's *Voice Terminal Echo* (Methuen, 1986) and Joel Fineman's *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* (Berkeley, 1986) are two examples which spring to mind. The fact that the excellence of Fineman's argument is only equalled, not surpassed by, the arrogance of his mangled prose assures that the reader will at least have the sense of laboring for a purpose. But why labor thus at all? It is possible to present a theoretically complex argument in prose which is sophisticated, elegant, and therefore readable; William Kerrigan's *The Sacred Complex* (Harvard, 1983), Kenneth Gross's *Spenserian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm, and Magic* (Cornell, 1985), Patricia Parker's *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender Property* (Methuen, 1987), Ann Baynes Coiro's *Robert Herrick's 'Hesperides' and the Epigram Book Tradition* (Johns Hopkins, 1988), and Mary Nyquist's work, to name but a few examples, give ample evidence of this.

The idea that stylistic inaccessibility is a mark of the *congnoscenti* is responsible for much good criticism being badly written. But, even worse, this myth of impenetrability can also become—as in Docherty's case—a smoke screen for bad writing which makes no critical contribution at all. As teachers, readers, editors, organizers of panels, and certainly as writers, we should be endeavoring to cure, not foster, this epidemic of literary lock-jaw.

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