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# Afterword

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In 1995, Oxford University Press reissued Herbert Grierson's famous anthology, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century*, originally published in 1921. This event alone might provoke a retrospective and prospective essay on Donne studies in our century; but it happened nearly to coincide with a significant reassessment of Donne's career from a biographical standpoint—Dennis Flynn's *John Donne & the Ancient Catholic Nobility.* By coincidence, Grierson's original introduction begins its discussion of Donne as follows:

> Fortunately, in the case of Donne, one of the most individual of poets, it is possible to some extent to reproduce the circumstances, the inner experiences from which his intensely personal poetry flowed. He was in the first place a Catholic. Our history textbooks make so little of the English Catholics that one is apt to forget they existed and were, for themselves at any rate, not a political problem, but real and suffering individuals.[1]

For Grierson, Donne was not to be anatomized, and certainly not to be excoriated, as a man who sold his soul for a Deanship in the Anglican church. He was, rather, one whose situation gave him a sharp sense of "the problems of religion in an age of divided faiths, and of justice in a corrupt world" (p. 5), even if those concerns are only explicit in his early satires. It was a grave irony that Grierson's anthology became the basis and the mandate for T.S. Eliot's appropriation of Donne for Modernist poetics *avant la lettre*, and hence inaugurated half a century of criticism in which attention was, on principle, *diverted* from the "circumstances" which made Donne a

poet; for it was his wrestling with those circumstances that left us with so strong a sense of personality as itself an *objet*, polished by stress and made intricately tactile by the abrasion of conflicting loyalties.

This is not a review essay. It is, instead, a response to Dennis Flynn's request that I write a postscript to this issue of the *John Donne Journal*, on the grounds, alas, that my name appears rather frequently in the preceding pages. The editor's premise is that this volume represents a certain stage in the evolution of Donne studies, a stage I may have helped to precipitate. My compliance, however, preceded my actual reading of the essays. I had not foreseen I was entering a battlefield, a discovery that makes an impromptu, last-minute commentary especially foolhardy.

In fact, there are two separate wars converging here. One is the old difference of concern between textualists and contextualists, which in the case of Donne became ideological in the 1930s. Although the most famous examples of Donne criticism have always been contextualist in some sense—whether it were Rosemond Tuve's invocation of rhetoric,[2] Louis Martz's of meditation theory and practice,[3] or J.E.V. Crofts's of the iconoclastic anti-Elizabethanism of the 1590s and 1600s[4]—Donne was at first more closely associated with the New Criticism than any other poet, and his importance waxed and waned with it. When Helen Gardner published her "Twentieth Century Views" volume in 1962 she clearly regarded New Criticism as having, if not given up the field, at least released this particular poet from captivity. She wrote of "a vigorous revival of historical scholarship" in evidence at that time,[5] and as its central monument the California edition of Donne's sermons.[6] Yet she also noted (p. 6) the absence of a modern biography of Donne to replace Edmund Gosse's Victorian *Life and Letters* (1899), startling negative testimony to the success of New Critical anti-biographical dogma. It was not until 1970 that R.C. Bald's *John Donne: A Life* inaugurated, surely unintentionally, the next phase of intense interest in Donne, and the second war to which this volume bears witness: that is to say, the war over the shape and meaning of Donne's *career*.

It would be partly true to say, then, that the first war was between the New Criticism and the old historicism, whereas the second is an internecine struggle between different versions of a new historicism. Within this partial truth, New Criticism would be defined as the art of *demonstration*, the demonstrable being a set of values to be found in poetry exclusively (difficulty, irony, unity); the old historicism would be defined as the search for *explanations* of the observable features of both poetry and prose, explanations that call upon the history of persons, nations, or artistic practices; and the new historicisms would be defined against each other as *competing explanations*, competing in terms especially of the value judgments that follow from (or sometimes precede) explanation.

By competing explanations, I mean the two schools of thought that now dominate Donne studies. The first was initiated by Bald's biography, exfoliated in the work of John Carey and Jonathan Goldberg, and subsequently defended by Debora Shuger and Richard Strier. By these scholars, Donne is regarded as either a hypocritical or a deeply sincere apostate from the religion of his birth, a spokesman for the Jacobean church and its Erastianism, with a temperamental affinity for James I's version of monarchical absolutism. These characteristics are detected primarily in his poems (Carey and Goldberg) and later primarily in his sermons (Shuger) and *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Strier). Opposed to this school is another more dispersed group of scholars (in the sense that their work does not reveal so coherent a genealogy) who believe that Donne (like life) is not to be so easily detected and handcuffed. In the present volume they are represented as follows:

1. by Jeanne Shami, who believes that meticulous attention to the historical context of Donne's sermons, and, more importantly, attention to all the sermons, not just snippets, will reveal that Donne was a less complaisant servant of King James than Shuger or Strier will consider;

2. by Thomas Cain, who is interested rather in Donne's political friends in the troublesome years of decision *before* Donne took orders or became Dean of St. Pauls, friendships and connections which would

seem to argue for Donne's sympathy with the anti-absolutist group in the House of Commons at least through 1614;

3. by Peter McCullough, who believes that, far from being an apostate time-server, Donne was a sincere convert from Roman Catholicism capable of preaching to Queen Anne the dangers of a merely outward conformity; and

4. by Dennis Flynn, whose approach to Donne is almost exclusively biographical.

While his essay in this volume tackles just one corner of the larger biographical puzzle posed by Donne's widely scattered friendships, and ample but often enigmatic correspondence, Flynn's goal, it hardly needs saying, has been to instigate renewed attention to Donne's Catholicism as a commitment not easily put aside for professional advancement. Although his biography of the young Donne aims its corrections at Isaac Walton rather than at Bald, and although it ends before the Elizabethan Donne gave way to the Jacobean, it offers a challenge for the longer view:

> Donne wrote out of an experience [being brought up in a distinguished Roman Catholic family] that his contemporaries *could* not ignore, that therefore never ceased to dominate *his* outlook, and that may appear as an element in anything he wrote. We should no more separate study of Donne's life and writings from his and his family's religious persecution and exile than we would separate study of the writings of Solzhenitsyn or Wiesel from theirs.[7]

I myself have dabbled in the projects represented by Shami and Cain, and so cannot help being more sympathetic to their side of the argument than that conducted by Shuger and Strier. Particularly when Shami locks horns with Strier, I feel there is more to be said on her side of the argument, and shall shortly mention evidence that supports her position. But first we need to take account of what makes the preceding epitome of Donne studies in our century no more than a half truth—because, like most such retrospectives, it sacrifices complexity for clarity. In particular, I adopted as a temporary strategy a sharp distinction between the supposedly old and the supposedly new

historicisms; whereas in fact there are greater similarities than differences, in terms of their underlying assumptions, between the 1937 essay by Crofts already cited and Arthur Marotti's 1986 important reminder that Donne began as an Inns of Court poet;[8] and, perhaps more tellingly, greater similarities than differences, in terms of their reading practices and results, between John Carey's psychobiography and the essays by William Empson and Cleanth Brooks that Gardner includes as her New Critical exemplars.

When people cease to mention the new historicism as though it required capitalization—a consummation devoutly to be wished, since most such adversions these days are actually animadversions—they will be able to acknowledge two useful if unexciting more-than-half truths: that historical or contextual explanations for what we find in literature are not to be distinguished by their age or their place in the fashion cycle, but rather by their approach to and achievement of the historian's values: rigor of inquiry, accuracy of detail, probity in reporting counter-evidence, open-mindedness as to the possible conclusions. By such standards, the essay by Albert C. Labriola in this collection, on "Sacerdotalism and Sainthood" in one of Donne's most frequently discussed love-lyrics, "The Canonization," is as much a truly historicist essay in the Martz tradition as it is an elegant example of patient close-reading, reading for allusive nuance and the structural connections between details. My patience, at least, was fully rewarded; and all this produced from one five-stanza poem whose vein, one might have supposed, had been mined to exhaustion.

Now, back to the duel between Shami and Strier. Here Shami strikes back at Strier for attacking what he calls her "oppositionist" view of Donne. At issue between them (apart from the procedural question as to whether Strier has accurately represented the arguments of those who disagree with him) is Donne's characteristic practice of describing the activities and demands of the Christian God metaphorically, as the dealings of a secular monarch and juridical state. Strier's position is, roughly, that particular instances of this practice *either* support the view that Donne became an obedient Jacobean prelate, *or*, when they might seem instead to suggest Donne's unease with

Jacobean policies, that they are *only* metaphors, and hence have no status as evidence of Donne's political or religious opinions. Shami's position is, equally roughly, that Strier has misrepresented the problem as a choice between opposites, an absolutist Donne versus an oppositionist Donne, for his mind was more subtle and his evolution more gradual than that. She agrees that some of his sermons rebuke "libel" and "slander" or negative criticism of the regime and recommend that his hearers put the best rather than the worst interpretation on James's foreign policy, but she does not agree that this carefully modulated position rules out conflicts of loyalty in Donne's thinking or symptoms of ambivalence in the texts of his sermons. Her view of Donne is that, upon accepting the Deanship, he himself carved out a middle way that was far from identical with the Anglican *via media*, "by taking interpretive initiative in the interest of a broadly-conceived and tolerant spirituality...to make flexible discriminations sensitive to the times" (p. 11), a stance which of course had its secular or political equivalent.

Are there any prospects for mediation between them, or must one party win? In one sense, Shami has already won by recognizing that the high ground is the middle ground, and placing herself as well as her subject firmly upon it. And at least in "Preaching to a Court Papist" McCullough's strategy of reading Donne's sermons, in which he finds Catholicism "treated as a threat to the soul, not the state," seems not incompatible with her position. Yet one of the rewards of having accepted this assignment is that it sent me back to Donne's sermons, for an eccentric reason. I became fascinated by the melancholy conclusion to Thomas Cain's biographical essay on Donne's Inns of Court friend, the irrepressible Richard Martyn, who took upon himself to be the most outspoken and sauciest of Donne's friends in Parliament, and for whom, when he died prematurely in the autumn of 1618, Donne declared himself unable to write an elegy. It occurred to me to see whether Donne had, in fact, commented in some elegiac way on Martyn's death in the sermons of that or the following year. I found somewhat more than I was looking for.

The one sermon that may follow close upon Richard Martyn's death was preached before the members of Lincoln's Inn, "preparing

them to build their Chappell." Potter and Simpson observe that the content of this sermon, which they could not date with certainty, fits best with the occasion when the firm decision as to the future chapel's location was made (2:30). That decision was made on November 19, 1618. Cain points out that on November 14 John Chamberlain had reported to Dudley Carleton on Martyn's untimely death, just when he had received the Recordership of London, and that Lionel Cranfield, who had put up the money that had bought Martyn the place, was clamoring to be reimbursed for his now useless contribution. This early sermon, delivered two years before Donne accepted the position of Dean of St. Paul's, contains one of the boldest statements he would ever make from the pulpit:

> With how much scorn and reproach Saint *Cyprian* fastens the name of *Libellaticos* upon them, who in time of persecution durst not say they were Christians, but under-hand compounded with the State, that they might live unquestioned, undiscovered, for though they kept their religion in their heart, yet Christ was defrauded of his honour. And such a reproach, and scorn belongs to them, who for fear of losing worldly preferments, and titles, and dignities, and rooms at great Tables, dare not say, of what religion they are. (2:228)

We deal here with no metaphor, but a straightforward injunction to the Benchers of Lincoln's Inn to build their chapel according to their own beliefs.[9]

Etymologically but ironically related to the "libels" that Donne would begin to mention disapprovingly in his sermons from January 1620 onwards, "libellaticus" was a technical term applied to Christians who, during the persecutions, purchased false certificates from a magistrate to the effect that they had fulfilled the pagan requirements for sacrifice. But Donne has here expanded St. Cyprian's terminology to cover cases of secular or political ambition or precaution, cases that, perhaps, had recently included Richard Martyn. In this Inns of Court context, his sermon may have meant a great deal more to Donne than it meant to the Benchers, who would have heard it, as Potter and

Simpson suggest, as an appeal from the pulpit for donors to support the projected building.

If there was, as Cain argues, a dispersal and falling-away of the young oppositionists in the Commons, of which Martyn's defection or distraction was a particularly bad sign, then Donne's injunctions against time-serving may look both sadly back upon his friend's truncated career and anxiously forward to his own prospects. The mixture of secular and religious cowardice against which he warned the Benchers—a mixture produced by analogy rather than metaphorical substitution—was perfectly appropriate in view of the support that monarchical absolutism received from some of the higher clergy, when, as Martyn had put it in his 1610 speech in the Commons, "the highway to get into a double benefice...is to tread upon the neck of the common law."

Five months later, Donne preached again at Lincoln's Inn, on April 18, 1619, a valedictory sermon before leaving on his diplomatic mission to Germany in the Earl of Doncaster's embassy. In this instance we have available one of the strongest evidences of authorial intention: detailed and ideologically significant revision. I defer for the moment the question of whether the revision was authorial.

Potter and Simpson noted that this was apparently one of the most talked-about of Donne's sermons, since it appears in more manuscript copies than any other sermon, and all the manuscript copies differ widely and in exactly the same places from the Folio edition. Does this mean it was controversial? This question did not occur to Potter and Simpson, who printed the presumed original version for comparison's sake, but drew the innocuous conclusion that the revisions were *literary* in nature, performed by Donne himself and designed to prune and tighten the prose. I do not believe that this conclusion covers what we find from a comparison of the original and revised versions of what must have been the most difficult passage to write, the one that alludes fairly openly to the mission on which Doncaster and Donne were about to embark, and the royal policies behind it. Here is the revised and published version:

> Our first day is the light and love of the Gospel; for the noblest creatures of Princes, (that is, the noblest actions of Princes, war, and peace, and treaties) *frustra sunt*, they are good for nothing, they are nothing, if they be not shew'd and tried by this light, by the love and preservation of the Gospel of Christ Jesus: God made light first, that his other works might appear, and he made light first, that himself (for our example) might do all his other works in the light: that we also, as we had that light shed upon us in our baptism, so we might make all our future actions justifiable by that light, and not *Erubescere Evangelium*, not be ashamed of being too jealous in this profession of his truth. Then God saw that the light was good: the seeing implies a consideration; that so a religion be not accepted blindly, nor implicitly; and the seeing it to be good implies an election of that religion, which is simply good in itself, and not good by reason of advantage, or conveniency, or other collateral and by-respects. And when God had seen the light, and seen that it was good, then he severed light from darkness; and he severed them, *non tanquam duo positiva*, not as two essential, and positive, and equal things; not so, as that a brighter and a darker religion, (a good and a bad) should both have a beeing together, but...that a true religion should be established, and continue, and darkness utterly removed. (2:240-41)

And here is the version that circulated so widely in manuscript:

> God hath given us this light of the gospell too, that the world might see our actions by this light, for the noblest Creatures of Princes, and the noblest actions of Princes, war and peace and treaties, and all our creatures and actions, who move in lower spheres *frustra sunt*, they are good for nothing, they will come to nothing, they are nothing if they abide not this light, if there appeare not to the world a true Zeale to the preservation of the Gospell, and that we doe not in anything *erubescere evangelium*, be ashamed of making an declaring the love of the Gospell to be our principall end in all our actions. Now when God had made light and made it to these purposes, he saw that the light was good, saies Moses. This seeing implies a consideration, a deliberation, a debatement that a religion, a forme of professing the gospell be not taken and accepted blindly, or implicitely; we must see this light, and the seeing that it is good

> implies the accepting of such a religion, as is simply good in itself, not good for ease and convenience, not good for honour and profit, not good for the present and the state of other businesses, not good for any collaterall, or by-respects, but simply, absolutely, positively, and in itself good. And then when God saw this light to be good soe then he severed light from darkness, as it is in the text, our light must be severed from darknes soe, as that noe darknes be mingled with the light, noe dregs, noe rags of Idolatry and superstition mingled with the true religion. But God sever'd them otherwise then soe too, he sever'd them, as we say in the Schoole, not, *tanquam duo positiva*, that light should have a being here and darkness a being there, but *tanquam positivum and privativum*; that light should have an essentiall being and darknes be utterly abolished. And this severing must hold in the profession of the Gospell too, not soe sever'd as that here shalbe a sermon, and there a mass, but that the true religion be really professed, and corrupt religion be utterly abolished. (2:380-81)

Again, we are not dealing with a metaphorical account of things divine by way of things political, but, in the unrevised version, with a straightforward demand that "we" (England and its monarch) choose their religion after full deliberation, support it, and appear to the rest of the world to support it with "a true Zeale," a word that Donne would, having accepted the Deanship, subsequently associate with unduly eager reformers. Both the king and the Benchers are warned, more concretely and more tellingly than appears in revision, against adopting a religious position or policy "for ease or convenience,...for honour and profit,...for the present and state of other businesses," phrases that could certainly apply to James's unwillingness to interfere with Spanish affairs as much as to Donne's increasingly pressing career decisions. The idealistic skepticism of *Satire III*, with its demands that each man determine and keep his own Truth, is here expanded to the corporate and national body of believers.

More surprisingly (and here is a caveat against Dennis Flynn's conviction that Donne remained a Catholic in his heart), the demand for an uncompromised choice of religion is expressed in terms we

might more readily associate with John Milton. There are to be "noe dregs, noe rags of Idolatry and superstition mingled with the true religion," and the severing of true from untrue will not permit "that here shalbe a sermon, and there a mass, but that the true religion be really professed, and corrupt religion be utterly abolished." This is absolutist language, to be sure, but it is a very differently directed absolutism from that attributed to Donne by Carey, Goldberg, Shuger and Strier. Considering that the revised sermon was published in *XXVI Sermons* in 1661, compiled by John Donne Jr. and dedicated to Charles II, we can see rather clearly why the phrases to which I have drawn attention disappeared in revision. We can also see why I deferred the question as to who, in fact, was the reviser, the father or the son, and why its unanswerability is so germane to the present debate.

In conclusion, I will merely suggest that all the evidence, happpily, is not yet in. The renewed scholarly interest in history, in religion, in prose and in John Donne leaves plenty of room for further debate, further defining of what we mean by "context," and, best of all, further discoveries. We are all inevitabily condemned to work with "bits and pieces," but like Milton's sad friends of Truth, we should not expect them all to be found already.

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## Notes

1. *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century, Donne to Butler*, ed. Herbert J.C. Grierson, rev. Alastair Fowler (Oxford, 1995), p. 4.

2. Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago, 1947).

3. Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, 1954), pp. 220-48.

4. "John Donne," in *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, 22 (1937); reprinted in *John Donne*, ed. Helen Gardner (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962), pp. 77-89.

5. Gardner, *op.cit*, p. 10.

6. *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G.R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols., (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953-62).

7. Flynn, *John Donne & the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995), p. 176.

8. Arthur Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison, 1986).

9. This is not the place to analyse this sermon's recommendations as to what that religion might be; but it makes interesting comparison with Donne's *Litany*, and his description of it in a letter (1608?) to Sir Henry Goodyer, that whereas the litanies of Ratpertus and St. Notker were canonized by Pope Nicholas V and commanded "for publike service in their Churches," his litany "is for lesser Chappels, which are my friends." See Donne, *Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1978), p. 81. Donne goes on to explain to Goodyer the particular middle way that *The Litany* carves out: "That by which it will deserve best acceptation, is, That neither the Roman Church need call it defective, because it abhors not the particular mention of the blessed Triumphers in heaven; nor the Reformed can discreetly accuse it, of attributing more than a rectified devotion ought to doe." Donne does *not* mention the fact, reported by Gardner, that in his *Litany* he has returned to Cranmer's Litany of 1545 in its "particular meyntion" of the Virgin, the angels, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, etc., all of which had been excluded from official litanies in England since Edward VI.