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"A Place of Honor": Dennis Flynn's Biography of Donne

Maureen Sabine

Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp.264, 4 photos, illus., chart, appendix.

"Is not our Mistresse faire Religion, / As worthy'of all our Soules devotion / As vertue was to the first blinded age?" In his long-awaited biography, Dennis Flynn answers this pivotal question of "Satyre III" by proposing that what lies behind the 1591 portrait of Donne at eighteen is a chivalrous vision of honor. This vision was the passing legacy of a recusant community called to sacrifice itself for "Mistresse faire Religion," a community which taught Donne the meaning of spirit. It included not only his own family, the descendants of Sir Thomas More, but the ancient Catholic nobility. If "Satyre III" evokes the quixotic spirit of those who had an early or fateful influence over Donne, it also captures the enquiring spirit of this biographer. Flynn's meticulous scholarship is a reminder that there are no short cuts to distinguished academic work. For "on a huge hill, / Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will / Reach her, about must, and about must goe," as Flynn has done, continuing the painstaking archival search to discover the obscure details of Donne's early life and Catholic family background begun in the nineteenth century by Louise Imogen Guiney and Augustus Jessopp. Flynn is the first to acknowledge that this knowledge came "hard" and that his "book is the product of more than thirty-five years' reflection on the life of John Donne." "Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,/Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in

that night," for as Flynn is mindful, neither Jessopp nor Bald completed their life's work on Donne.

I can still remember the sense of arriving at one of the summits of cragged and steep truth when I stumbled upon Flynn's probing essays on "Donne's Catholicism" in the 1975-76 issues of *Recusant History*. Flynn was the only contemporary critic I had come across to collaborate D. W. Harding and Marius Bewley's intimations in the *Kenyon Review* of 1951-52 that Catholicism exerted a much more profound hold over Donne's imagination than either Walton or Bald had appreciated. Carey's so-called psychobiography of Donne's *Life, Mind and Art* would appear five years after "Donne's Catholicism" in 1981. While Flynn was steadily mounting his sociohistorical case for Donne's Catholicism, Carey, in effect, made a sprint for the top and planted his standard, arguing that "the first thing to remember about Donne is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed his Faith" (15). Not surprisingly, Flynn has little time for *Life, Mind and Art* in this present study. "Carey takes us little beyond Bald" (11). Flynn is kinder to Carey in the excellent 1986 essay "Donne the Survivor" in *The Eagle and the Dove* where he acknowledges "the radical tenor of Carey's book" (15) in its insistence that Donne's Catholic ancestry, upbringing, and all too real childhood terror of religious persecution marked him more indelibly than the sign of his later priesthood. Yet Flynn feared that Carey's depiction of Donne as an apostate and modern, secular depreciation of apostasy as an old-world cultural neurosis could close off further historical investigation of the evasive action that Donne took, along with other Englishmen, in order to survive Elizabethan inclemency to Catholics and disestablishment of their old religion.

Irrespective of whether the gravity of Donne's apostasy was unreal to Carey, his book made it impossible for subsequent critics to ignore the politics of Donne's Catholicism or to presume, as Walton did, that family religion was extraneous to the social and psychological formation of Donne's character. Even Oliver Stone's recent film *Nixon* exhibits this "new" historical awareness of the way in which Nixon's Quaker upbringing, like Donne's grounding in Catholicism, feature in

what Annabel Patterson calls "the continuous social construction of a self, in which group identity and personal identity are interdependent constructs" ("All Donne," *Soliciting Interpretation*, 39).

John Carey's psychobiography endeavored to trace the images and ideas which ruled Donne's imagination. Flynn's history of Donne's ancestry, parentage and early life comes nearly fifteen years later and is noteworthy for shedding new light on those formative years which the earlier biographer R.C. Bald addressed in only two terse chapters and which Carey alluded to in his opening theory on the poet. Flynn begins by inviting his readers to examine Donne's earliest known portrait at eighteen and decode its private symbolic allegiances. The idea of using the portraits as orientation points is not only inspired but topical. Only recently the British newspapers have been taken with the hypothesis of the historian Derek Wilson who argues that the Tudor court painter Hans Holbein secreted a visual sign of his loyalty to his doomed patron in the memento mori which strangely decomposes his famous painting *The Ambassadors*. That patron was, of course, Sir Thomas More, Donne's illustrious forefather, first of his family and first rank at Henry's court to fall defending the Catholic faith.

I was therefore surprised that Flynn did not consciously build on the work he first presented in "Donne the Survivor" and begin with an overview of the five known portraits of John Donne which trace his life from 1591 through to his death in 1631. *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* is the first of five intended volumes which will employ the portraits as "an ever-fixed mark"; and admirers of Flynn's work should know there is more to come, especially since Donne never emerges full-blown from the historical background of this first volume. If Bald and Carey did not say enough about Donne's early life, this is, in part, because a biographer has little direct evidence to go on until Donne is well into his teens. Flynn fills the enormous gaps in our knowledge by giving a fascinating account of the community into which Donne was born and the social circles in which he began to move. However, Donne remains a shadowy figure on the periphery of Flynn's social narrative which leaves off in 1585-87, an historical lacuna in Donne's life, where he disappears without trace. Flynn

conjectures that the young Donne may have embarked on an extended tour of Spain and Italy with William Stanley, second son of the Earl of Derby, Donne's first patron and another English ambassador who, like Holbein, remembered More and proved it by looking out for his kin. However, Flynn concludes that "Donne's travels from 1585 to 1587 and his subsequent service in the Stanley household are material for future study" (172), whether in his next intended volume or the reconnaissance work of scholars to come is not altogether clear.

In "To adore, or scorn an image," an essay which ironically took its title from Donne's "Satyre III," Ernest Gilman argued that "the surviving portraits offer a series of shifting, carefully contrived poses that reflect the several different selves Donne would fashion for himself," including "the resolute 'gentleman volunteer' at eighteen" in the Marshall frontispiece engraving of 1591 (*JDJ* 5, 1986, 68). Gilman's reading of Donne's portraits validates the new historicist interpretations of Greenblatt and Marotti who see self-fashioning as the craft of ambitious courtiers. New historicist sensitivity to the divisive play of power at Renaissance court has given rise to renewed suspicions that the self is shifting and shifty and these suspicions have been legitimized by poststructuralist and postmodern theories of subjectivity as artful, unstable and contradictory. What theory of subjectivity underlies Flynn's biographical study of Donne? To begin with, he faults Walton for not conceiving of "Donne's character as a development to be explained by the past, by circumstances of family life, social connection, and psychological growth" (6) and seems to be suggesting that there is an evolving pattern of self-definition to Donne's life which his own biographical narrative will unfold. Soon after he cites Annabel Patterson (11, 15) as a contemporary critic who proposes new directions for the biographical evaluation of Donne. Yet in *Soliciting Interpretation,* Patterson, for one, rejects "the ideal of coherence," declines to see Donne "whole" and instead regards "the whole Donne . . . as a mass of contradictions" (42), while another contributor, David Norbrook, depicts Donne as decentered, a man in search of a secure standpoint, a quirky but also quixotic figure. The Flynn who invites us to read the Spanish motto above Donne's self-

portrait of 1591—"Rather dead than changed"—as a "cynical premonition of inconstancy" (2), obviously finds such critical readings of Donne's character as Patterson and Norbrook's congenial. Yet the Flynn who proceeds to develop the tradition of Roman stoicism and aristocratic selfhood which was transmitted to Donne via the ill-fated Catholic humanism of Sir Thomas More's lineage and the dying honor of the ancient Catholic nobility is, I suspect, a biographer who has not altogether abandoned the humanist belief that there are characteristic values which the subject will hold on to throughout life which make him the person he is. Donne's insistent poetic play on his own name as well as his wife's maiden name More, which was also the name of his family's primal father, suggests the secret amusement, fear and wonder of a man who felt formed as a Catholic in secret, who remembered and husbanded this secret identity, and yet who could not keep his identity a secret from the God of Psalm 139. "Remember me," he seems to cry like Hamlet's father, for "I continue to remember More," as did Holbein and as would any good husband and son. Perhaps the way to negotiate a course between this older Christian-humanist understanding of God-given subjectivity which Donne, his family and circle of allies respected and the more precarious and mobile theory of the subject which has produced the new historicist revision of literary studies would be to take the divine paradox in *La Corona*, "All changing unchang'd," as one which points to the contradictions and falsehoods yet essential truth of selfhood. It is a paradox which also articulates the impossible striving for Catholic communal identity in the Elizabethan era and this community's vacillating history of continuity and discontinuity—"rather dead than changed" or changed than dead.

Flynn's central thesis is that Donne's kinship with the family of the martyr Sir Thomas More was a proud birthright which gave him entry into the company of the ancient Catholic nobility. "This link to the ancient Catholic nobility was a matter of honor that remained a presence throughout his life" (5). Norbrook perceived Donne as "the son of an ironmonger and... thus... always... slightly distanced from the sons of county gentry" (9). Bald saw him as an arriviste quick to

learn the ingratiating manner of the courtier under Egerton (125). Carey shows Flynn's respect for Donne's eminent family heritage but nevertheless follows Bald in depicting Donne as predominantly driven by ambition for worldly honors. Flynn now delivers a direct challenge to Carey's representation of Donne as a thrusting careerist and proceeds to question the critical orthodoxy of the last decade which has been preoccupied with "Donne's lust for power and domination" (Norbrook, 20). Flynn reminds us at the start of his study that the original of Donne's 1591 engraved frontispiece portrait was the work of either Nicholas Hilliard or Isaac Oliver. They painted recognized Tudor courtiers, which means that "Donne is already, at eighteen, someone with access to the highest levels of English society" (5). Flynn shifts the biographical perception that Donne is pursuing worldly honors by reading in his stiff swordsman's pose a more intangible and tragic code of honor. This honor code derived from his kinship with "adversity's noblemen" (39), the More humanist circle and the ancient Catholic aristocratic houses of Northumberland, Derby and Arundel, who flourished their blades and sharpened their wits to circumvent Tudor reforms.

As Flynn recounts it, this Catholic community showed remarkable grace under pressure, and certain individuals or events have a particular claim upon our attention in his history. Feminist critics will be interested to see Elizabeth Donne begin to emerge from the obscurity of Walton's *Life* as a staunch and resourceful mother who left the strong imprint of her Catholicism on her son. Her brother, Jasper Heywood, a brilliant but rash and headstrong Jesuit, showed his sister's audacity in the extreme, perhaps because, unlike her, he had no children to lose as hostages to fortune. Flynn provides dramatic evidence which may help to account for the lifelong friendship of honor that existed between Donne and Henry Percy, the ninth earl of Northumberland. Northumberland's father was poisoned, as Hamlet's was, and as Donne's may have been. Roger Manwood, possibly responsible for the death of John Donne the elder, was a commissioner for the Privy Council at the time of the ironmonger's death; he was Chief Baron of the Exchequer at the time of the murky "suicide" of the

eighth Earl in the Tower in 1585. Finally, Flynn accounts convincingly for "the mystery of Donne's formative years, the six-year period between the ages of twelve and eighteen" (176) which has puzzled his biographers. He suggests that as a Catholic evading persecution and the Oath of Supremacy in England, Donne joined the entourage of Henry Stanley, Earl of Derby, on his ambassadorial mission to Paris, and during this hiatus on the continent earned the spurs of honor and learned the code of stoical silence which would characterize his later life. The portrait of Donne which is brought to light by this social history is singular among recent biographies for being a noble one. Perhaps it is true as John Haffenden recently argued in "What the *Life* leaves out" (*TLS* February 23, 1996, 14-16) that biographers write not only about their private heroes but about themselves.

Haffenden is concerned above all about the space of honor that poetry should occupy in life-writing and this is an issue that Flynn must now consider as he approaches the creative period of Donne's life. Haffenden feels that "too often, biographers do not love and seek to serve the literature, they only make use of it, subordinating the writing to the externals of personality, event and experience" (14). Flynn reminds us in his introduction that earlier nineteenth-century biographers were perhaps even more inclined to the intentional fallacy. Edmund Gosse too uncritically assumed that the poetry gave him access to Donne. But in contrast, the scrupulous biographical scholar Jessopp, whom Flynn commemorates as "the best archival researcher in Donne studies" (15), was fatally hampered by his "inability to appreciate Donne's poetry" (14). There is scant poetry to whet the reader's appetite in this first volume, and those works which are included will inspire no love for Donne's verse. The few critiques present here of John Heywood's satiric poem *The Spider and the Flie,* Jasper Heywood's translations of Senecan tragedy, and Jasper Mayne's reputed translations of Donne's Latin epigrams serve the biography but do not demonstrate the intrinsic literary merit of these works. In the case of Donne's Latin epigrams, Flynn does a disservice to his own biography. His discussion of Donne's earliest likely poetic compositions is relegated to an Appendix, despite the fact that he suggests some

of the Latin epigrams do corroborate biographical findings put forward in the main body of his text. This has the effect of making the whole book trail off rather inconclusively.

Reading poems which are imaginative works of literature can bring the writer to life in a way that factual biography cannot. The Booker prize-winning novelist and poet Ben Okri has argued that the enemies of poets are those who have no religious imagination, no susceptibility to the divine mysteries which lie within and beyond us. For the poet is the awakener of soul or a downward, deepening factor in personality. In its systematic dismantling of Christian humanism, its decrial of essentialism, and its deconstruction of subjectivity, contemporary theory sounds confident that it has dispatched the ancient belief in the soul to outer darkness. What would Donne make of new historicist readings of his life, mind and art with their poststructuralist and postmodern inflections? The man who invites us to distinguish Jack Donne from Dr. Donne, the profane writer of the *Songs and Sonets* from the divine writer of the *Sermons*, could recognize in himself the self-division, mutability, improvisation, and fluency that characterize current critiques of subjectivity. However, the poet of the *Holy Sonnets* who pleaded: "Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,/The picture of Christ crucified" (170), did not mistake this "poor Jackself" for his "Soule" or believe that the psyche could be reduced and put down to ego. Contemporary criticism should respect the spiritual beliefs of earlier historical cultures, as Flynn does in this biographical study of Donne's Catholic heritage and loyalties. If it claims to be genuinely interdisciplinary in its study of literature, it should also consider the ways in which feminism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and theology are rethinking the meaning and the relationship of self, person and soul. Catherine Keller, for example, offers a theory of the person as "radically spontaneous and deeply continuous" which is both old and new, postmodern and early modern. She endorses the dynamic definition of self as process notable in the current work of new historicism but she argues that the soul or person is "something else," something "more," a little society composed of successive self-events stretching from childhood through to death

(*From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*, 194-97). Donne's portraits freeze key instants of self-composition and self-composure but a poem like "A Valediction forbidding mourning" suggests that the soul is "the fixt foot" which centers the oblique moves and projections of the self. Donne's writings also suggest that the soul is only as good as the company it keeps. Soul is formed through relationship, found in community, implicated in the politics of everyday society, and must be accorded a place in the social history of Donne's close-knit world of family, guardians, intimates, and enemies whom Flynn presents to us in his book.

University of Hong Kong