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Edited by Achsah Guibbory

Excerpt

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I

JONATHAN F. S. POST

Donne's life: a sketch

“The first poet in the world in some things,” as Jonson said of Donne,¹ was also the first poet in English whose life was regarded as both sufficiently extraordinary and usefully emblematic to be made into a biography. It was not a writer's life in the modern sense, in which materials are excavated and analyzed in order to illuminate the specific circumstances that went into the creation of the art. Of this kind of literary biography, the early modern period is lacking, but a celebrated “life,” nonetheless, was written by the first of English biographers, the pious Izaak Walton, initially for the posthumous edition of Donne's *Sermons* (1640).

Walton was a generation younger than his subject, and at times as much given to fiction as fact but, thanks to his work (constructed from notes gathered by Donne's friend, Henry Wotton), and to the emendations and additions it has received at the hands of modern scholars, Donne's life, if disputable in the particular, remains, in the aggregate, more vividly imaginable than that of almost any other writer in early modern England.² Although gaps in the record exist, often where we most want illumination – of the *Songs and Sonets*, for instance – a thumbnail sketch of Donne might see his life falling into four phases. The first extends from his birth in 1572 to about 1591, when, after studying at home and university and traveling abroad, Donne resettled in London in search of a career. Although our knowledge of Donne's activities and whereabouts for this early period is least reliable, the current thinking continues to underscore Donne's precarious status as a Catholic “aristocrat.” His namesake father was a prosperous but short-lived ironmonger (he would die when the poet-preacher was only four), descended from the Dwms of Kidwelly, Wales. Their own aristocratic circumstance is made visually explicit in the “donor” triptych of the family painted by Hans Memling (“Virgin and Child,” c. 1475, now in the National Gallery in London). More significantly, Donne's eventually thrice-married mother, Elizabeth, was descended from Sir Thomas More and the wide circle of Catholic sympathizers associated with the martyred Lord Chancellor. More

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had been executed in 1534 for refusing to subscribe to the Act of Supremacy declaring Henry VIII to be the true spiritual head of the Church of England. That Donne identified deeply with this family history of persecution is made clear from an often-quoted remark of his from the “Advertisement to the Reader” to *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610): “as I am a Christian, I have beene ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stocke and race, as, I believe, no family (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches,) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, then it hath done” (p. 8).

“As I am a Christian” – but in the 1580s, the decade of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Donne was also a Catholic living under a Protestant queen. As such, he was educated at home by tutors, probably Catholic priests, and perhaps his learned Jesuit uncle Jasper Heywood, whose literary accomplishments included translating three of Seneca’s ten tragedies in the early 1560s. Much later again, this time in a preface to *Biathanatos*, his unpublished pamphlet on suicide, thought to be written around 1607–08, Donne would speak about his early schooling with an aura of mystery and intrigue savored by his biographers: “I had my first breeding, and conversation with Men of a suppressed and afflicted Religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin’d Martyrdome” (p. 29). Just possibly, the famous “metaphysical shudder” was born amid this “breeding and conversation.”

One further consequence of Donne’s Catholicism involved his early matriculation at Oxford (with his younger brother, Henry) at age twelve. The records give Donne’s age as eleven, probably in order to avoid the requirement of having to subscribe to the Act of Supremacy and the Thirty-Nine Articles, imposed on all students at age sixteen by a 1581 Oxford Matriculation Statute. For reasons of conscience, Walton tells us, Donne did not stay for the degree, whereupon he would have had to subscribe to the Oath. But whether he went to Cambridge, as both Walton and Bald suggest, or whether he left Oxford much earlier, as Dennis Flynn has recently argued, and set out for Paris in the company of other noble Catholics, and then began a tour of the continent that included participating in the siege of Antwerp, remains a matter of considerable debate, much enabled by the paucity of factual information relating to these early years (Flynn, pp. 134–46, 170–72; Bald, pp. 46–52).

Two related points about Donne’s time at university are worth making. First, notwithstanding Donne’s evident brilliance – Walton reports the contemporary remark “*that this age had brought forth another Picus Mirandula; of whom Story says, That he was rather born, than made wise by study*” (p. 23) – schooling was less important than the social connections it enabled. Second, while at Oxford, Donne developed a habit of making lifelong friends

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with people as notably different from one another as Henry Wotton, future ambassador to Venice and Provost of Eton College, and Richard Martin, who would emerge in Parliament under James VI and I as a leading spokesman for the opposition party against royal absolutism (Bald, p. 43).³ The latter point bears emphasizing, not just because Donne's epistles in verse and prose constitute a significant part of his writing, but because the centrifugal pull of diverse friendships, which would soon include aristocrats like Henry Percy, fellow amateur poets and budding connoisseurs of art, like Christopher Brooke, and court hopefuls like the generous spendthrift Sir Henry Goodyer, helped to offset the centripetal pull of a family often bent on exile and martyrdom.

A second phase, beginning in 1591 and continuing into 1602, might be said to coincide with the final anxious years of Elizabeth's rule when matters of succession, mixed with patriotic fervor, became especially prominent. It is marked, at one temporal extreme, by our first look at Donne, aged eighteen, in the (lost) miniature, probably by Nicholas Hilliard, that underlies the engraving produced by William Marshall for the 1635 publication of Donne's *Poems*, and, at the other, by his clandestine marriage to Anne More in December, 1601, which soon led to their financially-imposed exile from London shortly thereafter. On the basis of the engraving, one should not conclude too much about how Donne actually looked (figure 1). Nor should one put too much interpretive weight on either the translation Walton provided for the motto *Antes muerto que mudado* ("Sooner dead than changed"), which the hagiographically minded biographer rendered as "*How much shall I be chang'd, / Before I am chang'd*" (Walton, p. 79), or the accompanying poem he produced for the occasion, which sets the "golden Age" of Donne's elder years against the "dross" of his youth. But the engraving does indicate a truculent Donne, more soldier than scholar, broad shouldered, hand on sword, sporting a cruciform earring, the dangling icon of his residual Catholicism: an emerging someone about to make a mark in an emerging city.

The London Donne re-entered was itself undergoing rapid change and expansion. From the accession of Henry VIII in 1509 to the restoration of Charles II in 1660, the population increased ten-fold in number: from about 50,000 people to half a million.⁴ Parish steeples might remain the city's most visually conspicuous connection to its medieval past, but the streets were becoming as crowded as those of ancient Rome, a point Donne vividly captures in the first, and probably earliest of his satires (when the bookish recluse is lured out of his study to observe London's seamy underside) and then further develops in the remarkable, nightmarishly congested fourth satire.

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*This was for youth, Strength, Mirth, and wit that Time
 Most count their golden Age; but t'was not thine.
 Thine was thy later yeares, so much refine
 From youths Droſſe, Mirth, & wit; as thy pure mind
 Thought (like the Angels) nothing but the Praise
 Of thy Creator, in thoſe laſt, beſt Dayes.
 Witnes this Booke, (thy Embleme) which begins
 With Love; but endes, with Sighes, & Teares for ſinns.
 Will: Marshall ſculpſit. IZ:WA:*

Figure 1 Donne in 1591; from an engraving by William Marshall, prefixed to *Poems*, 1635.

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Nor could it be said that London, and by extension England, was any longer an island entire of itself. During Elizabeth's reign, the nation began to utilize the navigational technologies associated with exploration and to compete against Portugal and Spain for new world booty. By 1580, Francis Drake had girdled the globe, as Magellan had done a half-century earlier. A few years later, in 1583, Humphrey Gilbert, accompanied by Walter Raleigh, laid claim to Newfoundland – "O my America! my new-found-land," as Donne would eagerly exclaim about the female body in his most sexually charged elegy beginning "Come, Madam, come" – and shortly thereafter Raleigh sought to establish colonies in both South America (Guiana) and Roanoke Island, off the North Carolina coast. The post-Gutenberg explosion of print, moreover, allowed readers to stay current with these events, whether through the burgeoning travel literature of the day or the ever-increasing production of sophisticated maps by continental cartographers like Gerard Mercator and Abraham Ortelius. The great sixteenth-century Antwerp publisher, Christopher Plantin, in fact, chose a compass as his insignia, and by the 1660s, the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer had rendered, with exquisite concentration, not just "The Geographer," compass in hand, deep in thought, but his near twin, "The Astronomer" – the latter reminding us of the astronomical discoveries associated with Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo. Mapmindedness, writes a recent historian of cartography, had become a contemporary phenomenon.⁵

Donne, at whatever stage, was pre-eminently worldly in his thinking. Compasses would have as much a place in his poetry as the Straits of Magellan. Dante, not Spenser, was part of his upbringing; Durer as well as Hilliard were at his finger tips. But the London he re-entered in the 1590s – to return to the immediate – was still a small world, geographically and socially. Although few buildings from Donne's time survive, most of the places associated with his name are within easy walking distance of one another. From Bread Street, where he was born, to Lincoln's Inn, where he studied law and later preached, takes little more than fifteen minutes. Even less time is necessary to walk from the Inns of Court to York House, at the bottom of Drury Lane, in which he would serve as Egerton's secretary; and from here to St. Clement Danes Church, where his wife, Anne (More) Donne would be buried in 1617, requires only about five minutes, and about the same again to St. Dunstan's West, one of several parish churches that Donne would hold. And from St. Dunstan's to St. Paul's, where Donne would be installed as Dean in 1621, is another ten minutes. Lining the Thames River near Drury Lane, as well, were the great houses belonging to Essex (Robert Devereux) and Somerset (Sir Robert Ker) – two of his patrons – and, of course, on the other side of the river, in Southwark, were brothels, bear

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gardens, and the large out-door amphitheatres, including, as of 1599, the Globe. What separated people was not so much distance as class – a rigid social hierarchy, narrow at the top, and presided over by the monarch, attended by court favorites – and, of course, religious difference. When in disgrace Donne eventually found housing in Mitcham, a suburb of London, in the early 1600s, he sounded, at times, as if he might well be living in the Antipodes.

The 1590s were, however, remarkably full for Donne: a decade given to poetry, entertainment, theological inquiry, family stress, military adventure, and career advancement. Having come into his inheritance of about 750 pounds from the early death of his father, he was reported by his Oxford acquaintance, Sir Richard Baker, to be living, at this point, at the “*Innes of Court*, not dissolute, but very neat; a great visiter of Ladies, a great frequenter of Playes, a great writer of conceited Verses” (Bald, p. 72). Conceited verses, in conjunction with visiting ladies, sounds more appropriate to the amatory lyrics in the *Songs and Sonets* and some of the *Elegies* than to the *Satires*, with their harsh judgments of the times. Experimenting with politically edgy satire and the Ovidian erotic poem – and its potentially pornographic matter – was in vogue at the Inns of Court in the waning days of Elizabeth’s reign and in step with “a new and aggressively sexualized form of distinctly English literature . . . emerging into definition in the 1590s,”⁶ an emergence that would be perceived by the authorities as politically disruptive and lead to works being banned at the end of the decade. (Not being printed, Donne’s poems escaped the pyre, which consumed books by Thomas Nashe, John Marston, and John Davies.) As for his being “a great frequenter of Playes,” the best record of his visits to the theater – his writings are bereft of references to specific plays, although not incidents – is the utter originality of his lyrics conceived as dramatic monologues.

A second portrait of Donne, thought to date from the middle of the decade, speaks to the process of refinement he was undergoing in the 1590s as Inns-of-Court man-about-town – and to his habitual fascination with his own changing identity. In the “Lothian” portrait, as it is called, Donne now appears in the suave posture of a melancholy lover, indicated in the crossed arms and wide-brimmed hat, the portions of the picture most in shadow (figure 2). No longer apparent are traces of books and a quill, visible when the portrait was discovered in 1959, and an appropriately subtle indicator of Donne’s authorial activities at this stage. Most striking, of course, are the illuminated features in the picture: first the elongated fingers, then the piercing eyes and sensuous mouth, as they draw a mannerist attention to the sitter’s elegant sexuality confirmed on a more explicitly irreverent level in the Latin motto, transposed from the third collect for Evensong, and arching

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Figure 2 Donne in the pose of a Melancholy Lover.

over Donne's head like a rainbow: "*Illumina tenebr[as] nostras Domina*" – "lighten our darkness, Lady."⁷ We might even imagine the absorption of the earlier cruciform earring into the image of the lover's crossed arms.⁸

Donne would later be haunted by recollections of his amatory exploits during these years, but the unsettled subject of religion – and persecution – was also never far from his thoughts. Sharply telescoping the chronology during his time at the Inns of Court, Walton reports that Donne did "presently lay aside all study of the Law . . . and [began] seriously to survey, and

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consider the Body of Divinity as it was then controverted betwixt the *Reformed* and the *Roman Church*" (p. 25). But Walton omits mentioning the event that perhaps prompted this urgent inquiry, in favor of underscoring the deliberative nature of Donne's quest for the true church, including his extended observations on the writings of Cardinal Bellarmine. In early 1594, Donne's brother, Henry, died from the plague in prison, where he had been committed for harboring a Yorkshire priest, William Harrington, in his chambers in May 1593. Henry's death saved him from witnessing the grisly scene of Harrington "drawne from Newgate to Tyborne; and there hanged, cut downe alive, struggled with the hang-man, but was bowelled, and quartered" (Bald, p. 58).

Donne is silent on the matter of Henry's death, but at issue here in the reporting is a biographical conundrum centering on the problem of evaluating Donne's theological leanings. When did Donne "convert" to Anglicanism? And at what psychological cost, to borrow the darker terminology put into use by John Carey, who prefers to characterize Donne's "conversion" as his "apostasy" from Catholicism? And here one is concerned not just with determining dates involving matters of outward conformity – Donne could not have been in Egerton's service by the end of the decade if he was not, in some sense, subscribing to the Church of England – but with assessing the inward consequences accompanying such a shift in belief, a shift that Walton, for one, saw occupying Donne's mind well into James's reign. In the absence of personal testimony from Donne during these years, much can only be hypothesized about his state of mind in the 1590s. But most scholars agree that one of the keys to understanding Donne's habits of thought can be found in "Satyre III," his strenuous and brilliantly skeptical inquiry into "true religion," often assumed to have been written in the mid-to-late 1590s.

As for Donne's military adventures to Cadiz and the Azores, from June 1596 to September 1597, we are on firmer footing with regard to dates. We might also observe, à propos the two portraits, that while the sword still remained within Donne's reach, the pen produced the more lasting results. Donne's participation in these separate attacks against Spain, led by Essex, is a well-documented, small, but fascinating chapter in his life, and can only be touched on here.⁹ We do not know precisely how and in what capacity he came to be part of these expeditions, which, militarily speaking, were small fires in the much larger pan-European conflagration between Catholics and Protestants. But they put Donne in some exciting company (Sir Walter Raleigh, for one), perhaps secured a connection, begun at the Inns of Court, with Thomas Egerton, the son of his future employer, who would die a hero's death in Ireland in 1599 (Donne would bear the sword at his funeral), and

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they indicate as well his attachment to England's anti-Spanish policy, whatever his precise theological leanings at the moment.

But patriotism is not the pronounced theme in the poetry dealing with these adventures. The point is the more surprising – and interesting – if one recalls the jingoism frequently associated with the theaters in the 1590s, in which characters like the Mariner from *Edward III* stand and deliver set pieces describing English valor, even in defeat.¹⁰ Donne's epigrams from these ventures are more like brief snapshots capturing the ironic mix of violence and pathos of battle ("A burnt ship," "Sir John Wingfield") – the kind of thing a modern poet like Wilfred Owen might write; and the most ambitious of his attempts at scene painting, the pair of *fin-de-siècle* verse epistles to his Inns of Court friend Christopher Brooke, "The Storme" and "The Calme," speak as much to Donne's divided and restless state of mind at this point in his career as they do of nature's disabling effects on the ship and its crew.

Back on land by October 1597, Donne was in Egerton's employment within a year. The route to preferment often has been charted from the Inns of Court, through a circle of friends, to the position of Egerton's secretary. But the most interesting event is not Donne's manner of arrival, or even his daily activities as Egerton's factotum that enabled his "whistle-blowing" fifth satire,¹¹ but the means of his sudden departure from York house: eloping with Egerton's sixteen-year-old niece, Anne More (no relation to Sir Thomas More), sometime in December 1601, and thereby earning both his father-in-law's and his employer's wrath in one fell swoop. Sir George More had the twenty-nine-year-old Donne and his friends, Christopher and Samuel Brooke, thrown in jail. He also attempted, unsuccessfully, to have the marriage annulled. (Then, as now, civil ceremonies were legally binding.) The episode is fully documented in a series of letters Donne wrote to both Sir George and his employer, in one suggesting to the bride's father that it was in his and therefore his daughter's, and of course Donne's, best interest for Sir George to look kindly upon an event that had been "irremediably done."¹²

What is remarkable is the apparent impulsiveness of Donne's actions, and the inability of later critics to supply a satisfactory explanation other than the obvious romantic one. Over-reaching might be seen to have played a part but for the devotion Donne always showed his wife, in letters to friends, and in both the highly personal sonnet he wrote on the occasion of her death in 1617 and the plaque he raised to her memory in St. Clement Danes church. Of course, we know about Anne Donne only from John Donne's point of view. Like many other women of the times, she left no spoken or written record of her thoughts, but Walton does describe her as having been "curiously and plentifully educated" (p. 31). It sounds as if she could have

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followed her husband's thinking – and understood his poetry too, as readers have often felt.¹³ “So much company, therefore, as I am, she shall not want,” Donne wrote to her brother in 1614, three years before Anne would die at age thirty-three after giving birth to their twelfth child, “and we had not one another at so cheap a rate as that we should ever be so weary of one another” (Oliver, p. 76).

Donne was eventually forgiven by both his father-in-law and his employer, but Egerton's sense of office would not permit Donne to be reinstated. Egerton was among the few Elizabethan officials apparently above reproach, which was one of the reasons why he was chosen Lord Keeper – that, and the part the former recusant played in the 1580s prosecuting important Catholics like the Jesuit Edmund Campion and Elizabeth's half-sister, Mary Queen of Scots. Whatever his personal feelings for Donne, Egerton was not about to relent on an employment matter that had sparked so much scandal in the small world of London. The punning phrase “*John Donne – Anne Donne – Undone*” began immediately to circulate, in variant form, and, as the century wore on, it became a well-known jest, reported even among “The Royal Apothegms of King Charles” (1669), where its elevated currency probably prompted Walton finally to include the quip in his 1675 edition of Donne's life.¹⁴

With wife in hand, children on the way, and no visible means of income, Donne began a long, frustrating search for employment that would last until January 23, 1615, when he would be ordained deacon and priest. There are no portraits of him in this third phase. But an increasing number of letters survive, and these depict, among other things, the highly awkward position of dependency in which Donne now found himself as he tried, again and again, to climb the slippery slope of preferment. Here is one sentence from a (1608?) letter to James Hay, whose own successful career was launched when he came south from Scotland with the King and was thereupon appointed a gentleman of the bedchamber: “I have been told that when your Lordship did me that extreme favour of presenting my name, his Majesty remembered me by the worst part of my history, which was my disorderly proceedings several years since in my nonage” (Oliver, p. 41). To help him sustain his family, Donne occasionally did receive favors from friends and patrons – most notably Sir Henry Goodyer, Magdalen Herbert, and Lucy Harrington, Countess of Bedford. But the letter to Hay, who would become another lifelong friend, suggests how hard it was, given the king's disposition, for Donne ever to pry open the door to courtly preferment.

During these years of exile – their first child would be called, appropriately enough, “Constance” – the Donne family moved often: initially to Pyrford, near Loseley House, the More family estate in Surrey, until 1606, when they