<https://doi.org/10.25623/conn027-anderson-1>

Connotations
Vol. 27 (2018)

Literature, Culture, and Other Redundancies: Close Reading Donne*

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My title for this article—"Literature, Culture, and Other Redundancies"—results from a common advertisement of jobs by literature departments in America, at least when there were jobs to advertise. These advertisements in the literature and culture of a certain area or historical period bear on the current validity, or not, of the practice of close reading Donne, the topic Heather Dubrow proposed for current discussion.[1] They do so, first, because Donne was surely the poster boy for close reading in decades gone by, and, second, because the close reading of literature became ideologically distinguished from cultural studies toward the end of the last century. In this ideological perspective, literature likewise became, if not simply close reading, at least text-centered, and culture often became its putative opposite. I am frankly puzzled by the ideological opposition of close reading to culture and also by the larger opposition of literature to matter, or rather, to material culture's conceptualization of itself. The reason is that I am interested in language, which is the basic building block of human culture, whether as philosophy, as politics, as literature, or as something else. Again, *building* block, not just deconstructor: although I certainly see that some buildings need to be taken down to enable renewal, I also resist deconstruction of the whole city. I shall add that I am further interested in matter, especially historical constructions of matter and substance, as anyone engaged in the study of the language, rhetoric, and the ideas of Donne and his contemporaries ought

*Reference: Theresa M. DiPasquale, "Ways of Reading Donne's St. Paul's Epitaph: Close, Comparative, Contextu[r]al, Concrete," *Connotations* 27 (2018): 167-89. For contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at https://www.connotations.de/debate/close-reading-donne/

to be. These constructions—matter and substance—were unstable in Donne's time and arguably continue to be so.

Language itself is a material expression, as Erasmus and his early modern contemporaries, Donne included, conspicuously recognized, although this claim is qualified by other beliefs about the human intellect and about religion, especially a religion of the book, in this case the Bible.[2] Language is a basic, historically informed shaper of thought, belief, doctrine, and institutions, ranging from courts and parliaments to ritual and rhetoric—to the *Institutio Oratoria*, as Quintilian termed the *institution* of rhetoric. Poetic, or imaginative, literature, whether formally in verse or prose, is a distinctively heightened form of this mutual shaping of and by a particular culture—witness Donne's poems and prose. Once, I described major literary writings as landmarks and distinctive outcroppings of culture, simultaneously attached to, and apart from, the main.[3] If verbal language is a system of signs used by the people of a time and place, there is no way that the close reading of it can be isolated from this people's culture—the main in my figure. Such reading is immersed in culture, influenced by and contributing to it. Of course, language, including imaginatively heightened literary language, is only one domain or, better, one "mode of existence," to borrow anthropologically oriented phrasing from Bruno Latour. Yet language is a basic, cross-disciplinary mode, as any observer of recent institutional instability, such as Trumpian politics in America, can hardly ignore. And even Latour might underestimate the importance of the bridging function of language, although he takes the grammatical preposition, a signal of discursive positionality, to afford—in my view, metaphorically to figure—an interpretive key at what he terms a crossing, or traversing of modes and categories (57-58).[4] Yet the exaggerated claims about language in the later decades of the twentieth century, then the predictable reaction, the subsequent and inevitable refusal of centrality to language, might well have given Latour pause, as also have simultaneous claims for a host of materialist conceptualizations. Latour provocatively

characterizes the familiar, cultural concept of matter itself in our own time as an idealist fiction (98, 106, 118).

During the Enlightenment, Samuel Johnson famously kicked a stone to prove, against Bishop Berkeley's idealism, that the stone was really there.[5] Johnson's point still carries its punch, or kick. But so does Jonathan Swift's satire of extreme linguistic materialism, in which participants in a conversation limit themselves to the material objects they carry around with them to brandish wordlessly as needed: in short, *show and tell* taken to an absolute extreme in which *tell* disappears into *show*, word into thing.[6]

But my immediate subject is Donne, or rather the close reading of Donne, which I do not equate with readings isolated from history and culture. I also do not equate the close reading of Donne (or of any other writer) simply with what some call the Old New Criticism—the dominant practice of literary criticism around the middle of the twentieth century. In 2005, Harry Berger, Jr.—himself belonging to a generation educated in New Critical practices—listed the tenets of Old New Criticism in his book *Situated Utterances* and aligned them with numerous *isms* influential in the 1990s and early 2000s (30-31). Berger found New Critical tenets within these newer *isms*—flourishing, if often unrecognized—and he carefully preceded his list of New Critical tenets by acknowledging differences among the many practitioners of the Old New Criticism—differences that were numerous and significant.[7] Still, the conceptual model he discovers consists of six neat postulates: the structural postulate of the work's organic unity; the aesthetic postulate of its self-sufficiency; the deictic postulate of its dissociation from the author; the rhetorical postulate of its complexity, irony, ambiguity, and the like; the cosmological postulate of the work as a "world," paired with the epistemological postulate of its fictiveness. There is certainly some truth in Berger's model, as well as redundancy and reinforcement among his postulates, as he recognizes, attributing these to the New Critical practices themselves and implicitly acknowledging their lack of theorized rigor. Berger's postulates effectually analyze the work of art as a self-sufficient, cognitive object,

one cut off from the writer, the reader, and the socio-cultural, historical world somehow outside it.

Yet the retrospective positing of such an object is perhaps a better barometer of cultural change than of a massive delusion that once reigned supreme, which is too often the current view of the Old New Criticism. Abstractive models of this Criticism can resemble Procrustean beds, which eliminate excess, exception, and real difference. Arguably, Old New Criticism, or at least its close reading, was really more of a practice than a theory. As practiced, it differed substantially among its practitioners, the best of whom had an impressive knowledge of history, or rather, histories: linguistic, intellectual, textual, political, and so on. Be that as it may, it is certainly possible to resist some of Berger's postulates and to readily find in others the roots of more recent developments, as Berger himself does. The deictic postulate of separation from the author, the aim of which was to prioritize the text, is the obvious example of one such root. We can readily see in this root the death of the author that was to come later and that it ironically turned out, coincided first with the rise and persistence of feminism, then of race studies and other identitarian projects—an awkward coincidence at best. Perceptively, Berger also finds later "theories of the text and of the subject" to be less a challenge to the deictic postulate of the Old New Criticism than a radical extension of it: for example, to the Derridaean belief that there is nothing outside (except or beyond) the text and to the broadly Marxist or psychoanalytic assertion of the unwitting (seemingly witless) subject of political, economic, and/or psychic subjection (31).[8] There is likely a still further connection of this postulate to the total displacement of the individual and then of the category of the human. The postulate of organic unity invites additional resistance: while it conjures up Donne's "well-wrought urn" in "The Canonization," famously the titular source of Cleanth Brooks's New Critical manifesto, it brings with it recognition of the funereal urn's association with death and dissolution, which mock unity and self-sufficiency. If this mockery is just an example of the rhetorical postulate—complexity, irony, ambi-

guity, and the like—or even of self-reflexive fictiveness, another postulate, how are these postulates peculiar to the Old New Criticism?

My question shifts emphasis back to the postulates that encompass a fictive, self-sufficient, unified "world" that is necessarily apart from, or opposed to, the existence of the real one of history and politics, as well as apart from writers, textual editors, and readers. But in Donne's instance, evident in any reasonably informed reading of "The Canonization," this real world includes the Tudor-Stuart court, the Reformation, Donne's coterie readers, and his own biography, all concerns with which his poetry is infused and which close reading discovers. And these are only a start, as Theresa M. DiPasquale's personalized essay on Donne's epitaph in St. Paul's Cathedral relevantly and effectively demonstrates.[9] As my term "reasonably informed," together with DiPasquale's personalization, assumes, much depends on who is doing the reading and under what circumstances, for example, whether a Donne scholar or an undergraduate in a sophomore survey of English literature. In America, veterans of the Second World War and the Korean War, who flooded into colleges and universities on the GI bill, had much to do with the popularization and methodological defining of close reading within the academy that followed. For this population, close reading offered access to increasingly discriminating literacy, together with the sense of nuance and complexity that it fed, and, be it acknowledged, access to world views, ideally a range of them. Moreover, to a considerable extent, such reading could be hands-on from the outset, not simply passive. It could suit the greater experience of such relatively older readers. I would add that the discriminating literacy nourished by close reading is something much missed in the age of Trump.

Interpretation of Donne in the Old New Criticism also included central attention to what was often, inclusively called "tone." This concern, a sonic metaphor for the human voice, assumed a social or personal situation, including a speaker and an addressee, and the various devices of diction, syntax, genre (or subgenre, type, mode), rhythm, and rhetoric that credibly could account for the tone a reader

heard in a voiced reading or "saw," that is, imagined, in a silent one. This situated and sonic concern encompassed thought and feeling, thus connecting with Matthew Zarnowiecki's concern with affect, as well as specifically with sound in his talk on Donne's "Musical Poetry." Tone in close reading was hardly apart from readers and hearers, whether contemporary, historicized, or a combination of both. A current interest in "resonance" embraces another such sonic term, now extending to audio-engineering.[10] In some lyrics, the established term "tone" posited and reflected a specifically musical setting, in others a markedly dramatic one, in still others a contemplative one, and so on. A memorable example of emphasis on the elements of tone can be found in *The Fields of Light*, an interpretive manual by Reuben A. Brower, first published in 1951 and reissued as recently as 2013.[11]

To emphasize the postulates of a world apart from a historical and social one is also to return to the problem with which I started, namely, the separation of literature and culture, presumably in the interest of protecting legitimate literary and cultural concerns from one another. These twinned concerns are, on the one hand, that literature will have left no room of its own, becoming at best a subordinate illustration of a larger cultural entity, and, on the other hand, that cultural concerns will be suppressed or abandoned by literary ones. This is one reading. Another, more negative reading sees not twinned concerns but false binaries, too simply opposed, even while mutually dependent.

Returning again to the Old New Criticism of Donne, I think it may be helpful to look, at least summarily, at the contents of two collections of essays on Donne that might fairly be considered to have been representative once. Both date from the first half of the 1970s, about fifty years ago, although their editors had still older roots. By the early 1970s, any New Critical orthodoxy in America was already under immense pressure from events outside the academy: the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and two Kennedys, the resignation of Richard Nixon, the continuing Cold War, and on and on. The Iran hostage crisis and the

attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan were still on the horizon.[12] Looking back, I find it hard to conceive that changes and excesses in the academy would *not* have occurred. Certainly any delusions about self-sufficient poetic objects had to go. By then, "relevance" was the watchword—relevance to what was happening immediately. The innovative energy that close reading had once brought to the study of Donne was largely spent as well, and the low-hanging fruit readily published in a journal entirely on *Explication*(s) had been picked, or for the time appeared to have been so.

One of the collections of essays I found to explore is titled *Essential Articles for the Study of John Donne's Poetry*, edited by John R. Roberts, a visible, American Donne scholar, himself entering middle age in the 1970s. What I notice first is that the volume only concerns Donne's poetry, lacking a section on his sermons and tracts. Although their absence reveals less about editorial prerogative than about the focus of the series at once on poetry and on *earlier* essays of importance, it is nonetheless a notable bias. A companion volume in the same series, published contemporaneously on Spenser, lacks essays about Spenser's treatise on the colonizing of Ireland, for example. Spenser, it should be noted, was never close to being the poster boy for close reading that Donne was; in fact, quite the opposite.

Taken together, these two retrospective volumes in the same series—the one on Spenser, the other on Donne—show the privileging of poetry, but in Donne's instance not solely of lyrics, as might have been expected. Sections in Roberts's volume first cover "Donne's Reputation" and his place in the "Development of English Poetry." Next, a section on "Donne's Uses of Tradition" offers essays on Classical allusions, Renaissance medicine, Paracelsus, emblems, Montaigne and natural law, Petrarchism, and meditation. The next section includes essays on prosody and rhetorical tradition, including one on Ramism. Then come sections on the love poetry, the religious poetry, the *Anniversaries*, and the miscellaneous poems, this last with sample essays on the satires, elegies, epistles, an epithalamion, and "Metempsychosis." Close reading is evident in the sections on poetry, but

they also include a miscellany of topics, such as Anglican doctrine, paradox, the persona, dating, and interpretive cruxes. It would be hard to extract a single critical orthodoxy of doctrine or even of practice from the volume, although the focus on poetry is salient and a topical emphasis on politics, science, and theology is missing, along with Donne's prose writings. In contrast to the volumes on Spenser and Donne in the *Essential Articles* series, there have been times recently when publications on their prose writings have outnumbered those on their poetry. Their prose is seen to be more engaged in politics and probably also in religion, although both impressions are too simple. To limit questions of form, of aesthetics, or, indeed, of poetics to the generically defined poems of these writers is equally so.

But I want to look at the other collection on Donne from the 1970s, more exactly from 1972, the three-hundredth anniversary of Donne's birth. Aptly titled *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, this volume is edited by A. J. Smith, at the time a professor of English in the UK and editor of a volume of *Donne's Complete English Poems* the year before. Whereas Roberts collected essays that were published earlier, Smith's essays are new, and a difference in emphasis is quickly evident. Smith's collection includes essays on "The Circulation of Donne's Poems in Manuscript," on "Courtiers," on "the Poetry of Patronage," on Machiavellianism in Donne's *Ignatius his Conclave*, on his *Devotions*, and on a sermon by Donne to the Virginia Company. Another essay on "Thinking and Feeling in the Songs and Sonnets" advertises affect, and still another treats hyperbole instead of the more predictable rhetorical devices of paradox or irony. Hints of skepticism are further noticeable in essays on Donne's "Dismissal of Love" and even "Donne and the Limits of Lyric." One notable titular absence is the topic of sex and gender. It was still early days for the flourishing of this topic, as it was for the topics of colonialism and race, not to mention the current emphases on religion and on law. Roughly twenty to twenty-five percent of the essays in Smith's volume are by women; roughly ten percent in Roberts' volume. With the possible exception of hermeticism, science is also missing from Smith's as well as from

Roberts' volume, although by the 1970s this absence is surprising (e.g., Marjorie Hope Nicholson and Charles Monroe Coffin). Out of a total of sixteen essays in Smith's volume, eleven treat Donne's poetry focally, although the focal emphasis of most is not close reading as such. Limited as is this sampling, Smith's collection begins to suggest the shift from technique to topic and from poetry to prose that will become far more pronounced in succeeding decades. It also signals a bridging of literary and cultural concerns rather than their opposition, which comes later.

This opposition, less often examined than accepted, fundamentally relates not only to the symptomatic job-advertisements with which I began but also to the purpose of English departments. To my mind, the special, transferrable skill that English departments offer to society at large resides in a comprehension of English that heightens awareness and enables its effective use. Of course, this awareness includes culture and otherness, past and present, as it does in other humanities departments. But in an English department, it also includes—or should include—a focal interest in the use of the English language. The place of poetry—whether in verse or prose—in heightening verbal awareness and expressive capacity rests in the fact that every word matters in a finely honed poem, as do a variety of connections among these words. Students of creative writing practice their craft by writing tight forms like sonnets and composing paragraph-length stories in monosyllables—all in the interest of heightening their awareness of language. Law, social work, and medicine, for example, value applicants with concentrations in English precisely because of their training in the hearing and use of language—sensitivity, nuance, discernment, insight, and awareness, not just precision or even just correctness, welcome as these may also be.

The special place and significance of Donne, the writer of numerous kinds of prose and verse, lie in his extraordinary awareness and skillful deployment of meaningful language. His sermons and devotional writing are highly poetic, if we abide by Sidney's view that it is imagination (100-01), not rhyming and versing (103), that distinguishes a

true poet. Even a single lyric by Donne, moreover, simultaneously entails a dip into historical otherness and a further enlarging of verbal and cultural awareness. To return to "The Canonization," Donne's canonical lyric for close reading, the radiating subjects and contexts I recently found extended from puns, metaphors, affect, structure, voice and address, to sex and gender, religion, politics, philosophy, intertextuality, architecture and Euclidean space, emblematics, biography, textual variants, circulation, and reception.[13] "The Canonization" is a *situated* utterance that is saturated in its culture, and a close reading of this poem opens up a wider, deeper awareness of its situatedness in real time.

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NOTES

[1]This article began life as a talk in the John Donne Society session at the MLA Convention in 2018. My particular role was to consider the close reading of Donne from a historical point of view. While the other two essays on the program—by Theresa M. DiPasquale and Matthew Zarnowiecki—make telling points about the close reading of Donne, I am inclined to see their arguments about its limitations as differences in emphasis from mine—that is, not as differences in kind.

[2]On the materiality of language in Erasmus, see Anderson, *Words That Matter*, chap. 1, e.g., 17, 20, 25; specifically on linguistic materiality in Donne, see ch. 6, esp. 189-230.

[3]"Once" refers to my *Reading the Allegorical Intertext* 2. On the complexity of conceptions of matter in the Renaissance and of the materiality of language, see the indexical entry for "matter" in my *Words That Matter*; also Harris, introduction.

[4]Latour's "traversing" aligns with a traditional word for metaphor, namely "translation," or the carrying of a thing across from one place to another (from Latin *translatio/-nis*).

[5]Boswell's anecdote about Johnson concerns Bishop Berkeley's "ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal." Johnson's refutation is to strike "his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it" (333).

[6]In the Grand Academy of Lagado, Swift's professors propose to abolish words, since they are "only names for things," anyway, and instead to have "all men [...] carry about them such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on": picture a Santa-Claus pack on the back (210-11).

[7]One telling example of difference is the wide-ranging volume by René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*. That this volume is explicitly theoretical rather than practical in focus is significant.

[8]Berger's Old New Critical category of deixis, or textual isolation, is not the same as Heather Dubrow's in her recent study of deixis as the locator of immediacy and historico-cultural situation.

[9]My essay "Working Imagination in the Early Modern Period: Donne's Secular and Religious Lyrics and Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth, and Leontes" compactly affords a recent discussion of Donne's "Canonization," together with extensive notes, including attributions (206-12).

[10]For example, see Dimock 1060-71; and for a more technical discussion that refuses to oppose the aural to the visual, Erlmann 9-27, esp. 12, 14-15.

[11]Brower, who was trained in the classics, was in his time a guru of close reading at Harvard University. In connection with "holy attention," Marno's recent study calls on the Stoic and Pythagorean notions of tone (*tonos*) as a principle of resonance connecting human beings to their environments (100).

[12]Writing this list actually made me feel more hopeful about the present.

[13]My description of the many subjects and contexts of Donne's "Canonization" is exemplified by the essay I cite in n9 above.

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