

The History of the Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project

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Henry Donne, who died in prison after harboring a priest, might well have been pleased that the Donne and Contemporary Poetry project originated at and was frequently co-organized by that Jesuit institution, Fordham University. On the other hand, Henry Donne's brother, the author of *Ignatius his Conclave*, is likely to have considered this link to the Society of Jesus applying wormwood to the otherwise happy tale of how later poets responded to his work. In any event, whatever its origins, the project blossomed into a national one—or, rather, as the contributions of the Canadian who edited this volume and the English musicians and scholars who set Donne poems for one of its events indicate, an international one. It came to encompass three distinctive but related poetry readings in New York City, events at the 2014 annual meeting of the John Donne Society in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and now culminates in this collection. In thus expanding, the series has involved a range of institutions, organizations, and perspectives.

The first of the readings, held at the New York Public Library on June 20, 2013 and entitled “John Donne, Re-done,” featured three poets, Timothy Donnelly, Phillis Levin, and me. In addition, the actress Helen Cespedes, whose resume features major roles in many off-Broadway plays, regional productions, and television and film work, as well as

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understudy in a Broadway play, performed several Donne poems. On November 21, 2013, Barnard College broadened the project to explore how poets of our own era have responded to the impact of early modern poetry in general, as well as that of Donne in particular. Kimberly Johnson and Carl Phillips presented their work, and the Barnard event also honored the distinguished Renaissance scholar Anne Prescott, a past president of the John Donne Society. Postponed because of snow in February 2014, the contribution to the series organized by Fordham's Poets Out Loud was rescheduled for October 22 of that year. Having read in the New York Public Library version of *Donne and Contemporary Poetry*, Timothy Donnelly participated at Fordham as well. The evening also featured Nigel Smith's musical performances of two of Donne's poems, which had been set by Smith and the composer Andrew Lovett. Smith is a distinguished scholar of early modern literature, notably the writings of Andrew Marvell, and also a cofounder with the poet Paul Muldoon of the rock band Rackett and its successor, Wayside Shrines.

The 29th Annual John Donne Society Conference, held in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on February 20–22, 2014, opened on Linda Gregerson's address, "Feeling Thinking: Donne and the Contemporary Lyric." A distinguished contemporary poet who draws on a range of models, Gregerson has also published influential scholarly work on early modern poetry. The poetry reading at the conference that evening included three poets who had participated in previous events—Linda Gregerson, Kimberly Johnson, and me—as well as Joseph Campana and Katie Ford. In the final session of the conference, "Closing the Frame: John Donne and Contemporary Poetry," the poets joined together in a panel discussion.

Most of the writers at these events wear two hats, poet and critic, engaging with Donne when donning both types of headgear. Levin, for example, represents him extensively in the important anthology she edited, *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet*. And many of the participants are in dialogue with Donne's contemporaries as well, sometimes making it tricky to distinguish, for example, the influence of Donne's and Herbert's characteristic reversals. Indeed, in his recent poetry collection, *The Book of Faces*, Campana riffs on the usual acknowledgments page by following the familiar "For making this book possible, special thanks to" with a list that enumerates not only his colleagues and members of his

biological family but also an extended family of Herbert, Spenser, Surrey, and Wyatt. Some of the most familiar Donnean characteristics do recur frequently in poetry by the participants in the series alerting us to questions that Judith Herz has explored in her essays. Disparates are indeed by violence yoked together. Thus in the title of one of Donnelly's collections, *Cloud Corporation*, "cloud" suggests the ethereal, the numinous, the floating, while "corporation" invokes the all-too-subterranean world of business chicanery, of politics in many guises. And in the work of these poets we repeatedly encounter abrupt shifts and reversals—in language, in subject matter, in tone, in sound effects, in apparently clear and closural judgments—that in numerous instances recall Donne. Yet, to be sure, the Donnean genes in the DNA represented in this project manifest themselves in distinctive ways. Gregerson, for example, achieves her unmistakable conversational voice in part through direct address and inclusion of the names of "real" people, including her immediate family, and in part through line length. Similarly, the wry humor that recurs in many of these poems takes idiosyncratic forms. Witness, for example, Ford's word play in her title *Deposition* and elsewhere; Johnson's own title, "A Nocturnall upon Saint Chuck Yaeger's Day," and her poem on her appendectomy; and Levin's splendid evocations of parable, fable, and fantasy. And Phillips astutely observes in George Herbert "a degree of earnestness that I find in the work of no other seventeenth-century poet"; certainly neither the playfulness that has sometimes been described as a *sine qua non* of poetry nor the impact of that master and slave of play John Donne is absent from Phillips' own work, and yet it leans towards that degree of earnestness.¹

Even this brief overview of the events in the Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project (perhaps "projects" more aptly expresses the variety) demonstrates a range of potentialities, some already realized, for dovetailing early modern poetry and contemporary poetry and criticism, thus aptly introducing the essays in this volume that do so as well. As my brief references to participants in the project have indicated, many poets today, including leaders in the field, speak to, with, and against early modern poetry in general and often Donne in particular. In fact, the focus of the Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project was partly anticipated by a volume edited by Jonathan F.S. Post back in 2002 entitled *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*. Academics often stage similar conversations in their classrooms; I have, for example, taught "Good Friday, 1613.

Riding Westward” in conjunction with twenty-first century versions of it. Widespread reservations about periodization and the survey courses it facilitates may well further encourage such pedagogy.

The links between early modern poetry and today’s writings, then, have hardly been neglected. But if that glass is half full, it is half empty as well—and suffering new cracks and new leaks in the academy today. Although my delight in both the work of Donne and current developments in poetry encouraged me to initiate the Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project, doing so was also a response to certain unremitting and as yet unresolved problems—an attempt to bridge divides that, like the crack in that half-empty glass, may well be widening. These issues assume distinctive forms in different institutions, and some problems may be more intense in the USA today than elsewhere in the Anglo-American academy, but recurrent patterns do emerge. First, witness the separation between those engaged with more contemporary texts and those studying the centuries tellingly coagulated into “early literature” by our students. Increasing specialization in graduate programs, impelled in part by a partly justified distrust of the “coverage” model and in part by an understandable agenda of limiting time to degree, means that those studying twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts are less likely than in earlier decades to know or care about what was written earlier. Symmetrically, students of the medieval and early modern periods may well be less informed about and less interested in modernist, postmodernist, and contemporary literature, perhaps partly from resentment of the increasingly central role of the later periods in many departments.

Similarly, too many faculty members in creative writing programs replicate the dismissal or ignorance of the literature of previous centuries, encouraging their students to read mainly or only what is hot off the presses. The uncritical celebration of innovation can have these and other destructive consequences. Rowan Ricardo Phillips, another contributor to this volume (“[Bird of Fire; The Double Death of Orpheus: Poems from *The Ground*](#)”), firmly advises his fellow poets:

Innovation is the red herring of poetic ambition. If innovation happens and holds up, the poets of the future will know it. But as you can’t anticipate the poets who will come after you, you shouldn’t ignore the poets who came before you. In their own way, they have already written what you want to write. And in your own way, you are presently the poet of the future. Therefore, treat the past as you would want the poets of the future to treat your poetry when it is the past.²

The price exacted by the self-serving blinders that block our vision of connections between Donne and later writers is typically a sorry loss of critical judgment. Studies of recent sonnets often say in virtually so many words that the sonnet was a static, rigid form until the modern period. Similarly, a recent article on pastoral declared that until very recently it celebrated uncomplicated bucolic bliss; more somber views of the pastoral world, its author maintains, are the product and preserve of very recent writers, whose work he terms “post-pastoral.” The noise you heard as you read that summary was such post-pastoral poets as Virgil and Spenser turning over in their graves.

Also troubling, though more longstanding, is the divide in the cultures of many departments between creative writers and literature professors. Admittedly, in the past decade or two the career path of combining work as a creative writer and scholar, exemplified, as I have already indicated, by many participants in the Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project, seems to have become more common—as well as more acceptable—in many quarters. And the increasing demand for writers with Ph.D.s (a tendency that raises many issues outside the scope of this essay) may prove both cause and effect of that increasing acceptability. But mutual distrust and disdain are still common in the cultures of many departments and are likely to remain so. The financial stringencies that so many universities face may well exacerbate this like so many other problems: throughout the academy, competition for scarce resources fuels other types of professional competition and the backbiting that typically accompanies it.

But many *either/or* schemas (studying and teaching earlier or contemporary literature, publishing scholarly articles or poems, adopting models of periodization or undermining them, etc.) can be transformed into *both/and*. The John Donne and Contemporary Poetry Project in general and this book in particular address and aim to give legs to that transformation. And, speaking of those appendages, in so doing we also hope to ensure that these pairs of apparent alternatives come to resemble, yes, the legs of stiff twin compasses.

NOTES

1. Carl Phillips, “Anomaly, Conundrum, *Thy-Will-Be-Done*: On the Poetry of George Herbert,” *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*, Jonathan F.S. Post (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 137.

2. Rowan Ricardo Phillips, “On the Notions of Innovation and Influence,” <http://www.fsgworkingprogress.com/2016/04/on-the-notions-of-innovation-and-influence/>.

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