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RETHINKING THE LITERARY BAROQUE

James A. Knapp

John Donne and Baroque Allegory
by Hugh Grady. Cambridge:
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Hugh Grady's study of John Donne as a baroque poet takes Walter Benjamin's early work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as its theoretical jumping-off point. The decision to read Donne and Benjamin together is strategic, as Benjamin the theorist developed at the same time that literary modernists rediscovered John Donne, hailing him as a poet relevant to the uncertainty of the moment in the wake of modernity's advance in the early twentieth century. Donne's aesthetic response to the seismic cultural upheavals that defined English culture at the turn of the seventeenth century spoke to the modernist curators of literature, including, most notably T.S. Eliot, Herbert Grierson, and Helen Gardner. The fact that Benjamin, among the most important thinkers of the modernist moment, was exploring seventeenth-century German drama at the same time that the English literary world was granting Donne new life as a poet suited to modernist aesthetics has not been explored in any detail by Donne scholars. Grady's book seeks to fill that gap.

The first chapter provides a long and detailed introduction to the study with two primary goals. First, Grady offers a careful review of the concept of the baroque as a critical, periodizing term. The history is complicated, as the term has never been fully accepted by

literary scholars, including even those comfortable with periodization. Grady recounts the efforts of René Wellek and later Frank Warnke to establish the baroque as a valuable literary critical term defining the shift in poetic sensibility that occurred around the turn of the seventeenth century in England. Borrowed from art history, the baroque referred to the stylistic mode that followed the Renaissance and preceded neoclassicism. Grady admits that the effort to adopt the baroque as the defining poetic mode in early seventeenth-century English literature was never fully successful. The fortunes of the term waned significantly after the advent of deconstruction and poststructuralist theory in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Despite its loss of currency, Grady lobbies for the term's usefulness, arguing that it helps connect the shift from sixteenth- to seventeenth-century aesthetics to the advent of modernism and postmodernism in the twentieth century.

The other primary accomplishment of the first chapter is to track Donne's fortunes as a poet from the moment of his rediscovery with Eliot and the New Criticism through the era of high theory in the 1970s and 80s and up to the present. The account is lucid and concise, arguing that the New Critical championing of Donne as a poet characterized by

"a troubled but usually successful search for aesthetic unity" (14) was the source of Donne's fall from grace with critics in the aftermath of high theory, which stressed disruption and discontinuity rather than unity. Grady's argument is that Benjamin's account of modernist fragmentation not only describes Donne's aesthetics better than the New Critics' unity but that this is cause to see Donne's poetry as speaking to the postmodern moment that is currently unfolding. Like the poets associated with both modernism and postmodernism, Donne was writing at a time when potent historical and cultural changes threatened previously coherent accounts of reality and human progress. Donne's response was, in Grady's view, a form of baroque allegory described by Benjamin in the book on German tragedy. Unlike traditional allegory, in Benjamin's account, the baroque allegorical mode is defined by a difficult juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible fragments that are counterbalanced by a utopian alternative.

In the second chapter, Grady turns to the *Anniversaries* as the paradigmatic examples of Donne's deployment of baroque allegory in the Benjaminian sense. The argument stresses the fragmentation of the *First Anniversary* as its strength (a feature of the poem sometimes singled out for

criticism, especially in the era of the New Criticism). The world Donne anatomizes there is a fallen, incoherent world in which correspondence has failed. Only a glimpse of a hopeful alternative is available in the poem, though the utopian alternative is very much the subject of the *Second Anniversary*. Grady reads the two poems as inextricably linked, creating the baroque allegory, which unlike traditional allegory does not function by a series of one-to-one correspondences but an overall effect. Here, the effect is the suspension of a deferred utopian alternative to the fallen world, which is compensatory but entirely unavailable and perhaps even imaginary. The readings of the two *Anniversary* poems largely follow established criticism, as the primary goal of the chapter is to link Donne's aesthetic method to the one Benjamin identifies as baroque allegory.

Chapter 3 extends the discussion of Benjaminian Baroque allegory to the *Songs and Sonets*. Grady identifies the attitude of the libertine Donne in poems including "Farewell to Love" and "The Dissolution" with a belief in the emptiness of the fallen world described in the *First Anniversary*. In the *Songs and Sonets*, as in the *Anniversaries*, this emptiness is counterbalanced by a utopian alternative, here offered in the poems of mutual love, especially "The Good Morrow,"

"The Cannonization," and "The Relique." As in the second chapter, the readings here do not break new ground as much as they support Grady's larger argument about Donne's overall sensibility, one characterized as suspending fragmentation and utopian ideality in a kind of aesthetic stasis. The argument requires one to consider the collection as a whole, a position that sits somewhat uncomfortably with the complicated production and circulation history of Donne's poetry in the period.

In the fourth chapter, Grady explores the origin and fortunes of the concept of the "metaphysical conceit" long associated with Donne and his followers. Taking some of the best known Donne lyrics as his examples, Grady argues that the unusual metaphors traditionally associated with the metaphysical conceit are better understood in terms of the baroque emphasis on extreme and contradictory imagery that calls for but never fully accomplishes dialectical synthesis. Grady's primary examples are "The Ecstasy" and "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning." The book's final chapter returns to the question of periodization, arguing that previous claims to Donne's conservative investment in a metaphysics of correspondence threatened by the shocks of Reformation and the New Science misread the poet's aesthetic drive. Instead, Grady

argues, we should see Donne as a poet of nascent modernity, one who looked to aesthetic technique as a way to remake, or at least come to terms with, a world fragmented by a lost pre-modern coherence.

The argument presented throughout this study is intriguing and worthy of the attention of early modernists. Donne scholars may find little truly new in the readings of individual poems, though many will be convinced to revisit positions that have been presumed settled. Among Grady's aims in the study, as with much of his other scholarship, is to make as powerful a case as possible for the relevance of early modern poetry, in this case Donne in particular, for our present moment. This explains the need to disentangle Donne from his modernist champions, freeing him to speak to the postmodern present. The decision to accomplish this project by pointing out the ways in which Benjamin also speaks to the post-modern, despite his modernist origins, is extremely effective. Grady

is at his most convincing when he focuses on periodization in connection to modern commodification and scientific thought. There is a notable lack of attention here to the complexity of religious controversy in the period and in Donne's own poetry. The religious poetry is considered almost as an afterthought in the final chapter (though also addressed somewhat indirectly in the discussion of the *Second Anniversary*). While those working on Donne and religion will find this omission significant, readers interested in Donne's aesthetic response to cultural upheaval and his position in literary history will find much to learn from here.

James A. Knapp is Professor and Director of Graduate Programs in the English Department at Loyola University—Chicago. He is the author of Illustrating the Past in Early Modern England, Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser, and editor of Shakespeare and the Power of the Face. His most recent book, Immateriality and Early Modern English Literature: Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, is published by Edinburgh University Press (April 2020).