

Out of Place: Looking for Donne in London— A Response to Theresa M. DiPasquale

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For further contributions on the debate on “Close Reading Donne” (<https://www.connotations.de/debate/close-reading-donne/>) see DiPasquale, Theresa M. “Ways of Reading Donne’s St. Paul’s Epitaph: Close, Comparative, Contextu[r]al, Concrete.” *Connotations* 27 (2018): 167-89. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de

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Abstract

What does the literary pilgrim seek when visiting Donne’s funeral monument in Saint Paul’s Cathedral? How do spatial practices affect the traveler’s experience of sites in Donnean memory? A poetics of place that accounts for the attraction of “truth-spots” must consider commercial and political interests as well as aesthetic and sensory factors.

In “[Ways of Reading Donne’s St. Paul’s Epitaph: Close, Comparative, Contextu\[r\]al, Concrete](#),” Theresa M. DiPasquale revisits Richard S. Peterson’s magisterial article on Donne’s epitaph in the context of her own visit to Donne’s monument in St. Paul’s Cathedral. DiPasquale’s “situated close reading” of the nineteenth-century plaque above Donne’s statue becomes an occasion for a case-study in the “poetics of place” as understood by the humanistic geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan. Tuan believes that students of both the natural and built environment need to prioritize the affective experience of places, appreciating the many ways sensory perceptions both mediate and complicate our impressions of the world around us.¹ DiPasquale thus starts small, with the flawed replica

of Donne's epitaph, but then widens her view to take in the location of Donne's effigy within the larger space of St. Paul's Cathedral. She not only confirms Peterson's findings—chiefly, that the plaque is an inaccurate facsimile of the original—but also recounts her own affective experience of this last of Donne's five commissioned portraits (see 168). After describing the inhospitable commercialization of St. Paul's with its high admission fees and her melancholy realization that it would be impossible to access the Benjaminian "'aura' of the monument as it was experienced by those who viewed it in 1633" (170), DiPasquale nevertheless is moved and shaken by her encounter with the shrouded and beatific Donne emerging from his urn and yearning for resurrection. "Tears sprang into my eyes without warning," she writes. "I felt them and noticed the blurring of my vision even before I was able to detect the heart-swell of which they were the outward sign. Aura, indeed" (178). DiPasquale then sits in front of the statue, pondering the poetics of place and observing the reactions of other visitors tuned to their audioguides.

In response to DiPasquale's critique that intertextual studies of Donne's epitaph have failed to deal with "the affective impact" of Nicholas Stone's funerary ensemble, I decided to follow her lead and "set [...] foot" in St. Paul's, as she advises (177). My experience suggests that Tuan's poetics of place is a highly subjective endeavor reliant on the problematic value of self-reporting and anecdotes. In the two years since DiPasquale's visit in July 2017, a few things have changed at St. Paul's. Now, before one enters the cathedral, on the steps leading up to it, one must wait in line and pass through a security checkpoint. Once inside, there is a 20£ fee, two pounds more than she paid. DiPasquale implies that in 2017 only "part of the cathedral" was cordoned off, specifically including the area of Donne's monument (169). Now the ticket booth bars entry to the central nave and thus to the church itself. While Anglican services occur upwards of three times a day, according to the website, few worshippers are in evidence. The institution's energy seems focused on managing long queues of tourists and relieving their pocketbooks.

As Yi-Fu Tuan observes in his meditations on space and place, a person's experience of an architectural locale depends on a multitude of intangible factors, among them mood (see *Space and Place* 4, 33). I was clearly not in a receptive mood on 18 May 2019. Wren's cathedral is a mausoleum glorifying the military, especially the leaders of Britain's misconceived imperial projects. It is perhaps the least spiritual religious building I have ever walked in, its alignment with state power everywhere evident.² Above, it may be clear and airy, the clerestory windows letting in shafts of daylight even as the vaulting recedes into cavernous distances, but below it is a cluttered and greying obstacle course of free-standing tombs to Britain's warrior class. Yes, there is a little corner in the crypt devoted to artists (e. g. Lawrence Alma-Tedema, William Blake, John Everett Millais, Joshua Reynolds, J. M. W. Turner) and a colossal statue of Samuel Johnson in a toga in the northeast corner of the transept (J. Bacon, 1796). Yes, many nineteenth-century divines also lie in sepulchral state, mixed in with the admirals and generals. Nearest to Donne one finds the reclining effigies of James Bloomfield, Bishop of London, died 1828, and Marshall Creighton, a later Bishop of London, died 1901. All commemorate establishment authority.

By comparison with these pompous and frigid structures, Donne's statue seems modest, naïve and forlorn, as if dropped from another world. Granted, Donne became a figure of religious authority as Dean of the cathedral. Nor was he averse to colonial or proto-imperial adventures. He applied, after all, for a secretaryship in Ireland in 1608 and for a secretaryship in the Virginia Company in 1609. He also joined the Earl of Essex's marauding expeditions to Cadiz and the Azores in 1596 and 1597. Yet, poems like "The Calme" and epigrams like "A Burnt Ship" and "Fall of a Wall" offer an eloquent testimonial to Donne's disillusion with Essex's war-mongering, so that for me the statue of the divine Doctor Donne dreaming of his salvation feels out of place in Wren's mausoleum. Does this mean that I have revised my earlier view that "[i]t literally stands alone in its eccentricity, radiating emotion" (184)? Not really. The divine Donne still looks heaven-sent, caught in mid-motion, his bent knees about to straighten out into the upward swoon

of the rapture, his unseeing gaze willing the angelic hosts and forgiving Savior into being. Yet his surroundings do him no favors. In evaluating those surroundings, it may be inevitable that one will be selective, yet one ought to try to be more comprehensive. For example, by setting foot in St. Paul's I learned that Donne's statue is not the sole mortuary ensemble to have survived the Great Fire of 1666 that destroyed the old St. Paul's. Disposed along the north and south aisles of the crypt, one finds the blackened remains of six other funerary monuments, including the fragmentary tomb of Sir William Cokain, knight and London alderman, at whose death Donne preached one of his greatest sermons (12 December 1626). The monument to Sir Thomas Heneage, Vice-Chamberlain to Queen Elizabeth, and his wife, Lady Anna Heneage, still has the power to move. The married couple lies side by side, their little heads reposing on stone cushions, their chins reposing on stiff ruffs. These remnants from an earlier time also struck me as lost in the current cathedral.

A poetics of place depends on vantage point—a "situatedness" that is inevitably partial. Thus, DiPasquale leaves out all the discordant funerary tributes that surround Donne. Instead, thanks to its relative proximity to Donne's effigy, DiPasquale gives a detailed description of Bill Viola's permanent video installation, "Martyrs" (2015), in the south quire aisle. Her generous interpretation finds apt synergies between the two artworks. "The Donnean viewer," she imagines, will find Viola's representation of the "inner" life of martyrs "deeply" resonant (181). DiPasquale, however, fails to mention that Viola's "Martyrs," which is "[m]ounted on the west-facing wall at the extreme east end of the south choir" (180), is paired and matched symmetrically with another of his installations at the east end of the north choir, titled "Mary" (2016). This video triptych, more than 13 minutes long (almost twice the duration of "Martyrs"), interprets stages of Mary's life through a montage of modern images ranging from shots of Yosemite and sunsets to a weeping fawn and a modern reenactment of the Pietà sans stigmata. Like the actors featured in "Martyrs," Viola's people in "Mary" are blessedly serene, unacquainted with pain. The spectacles that Viola films are so

aestheticized that all anguish has been airbrushed out. Nothing could be further from my sense of Donne's religious struggles.

Seeking to test a poetics of place against my own experience, as DiPasquale advises, I decided to extend my pilgrimage to other sites of Donnean memory. St. Dunstan-in-the-West, for example, proved far more evocative and "auratic." St. Dunstan is octagonal and intimate in scale. Although the neo-Gothic church was rebuilt in the 1830s, "much of the internal fabric pre-dates" this, their website assures; "[t]he high altar and the reredos are Flemish woodwork dating from the seventeenth century." It is almost possible to imagine Donne—who held the benefice of St. Dunstan from 1624 to 1631 while he was Dean of St. Paul's—preaching from the lovely old pulpit. "It is time to end," he might be saying, "but as long as the glasse hath a gaspe, as long as I have one, I would breathe in this ayre, in this perfume, in this breath of heaven, the contemplation of this Joy" (10:10.227).³ A choir was practicing in one of the side chapels and later that afternoon a wedding was being rehearsed. The church emanated "spiritual authority and religious gravitas" in keeping with "cult value" versus "exhibition value" (171)—a distinction DiPasquale borrows from Walter Benjamin. Needless to say, it charges no entry fees although voluntary donations are encouraged. It also helped that I visited on the feast of St. Dunstan. To celebrate the patronal festival, the Dean of Westminster was scheduled to preach and Haydn's *Little Organ Mass* would be performed. Flowers bedecked various spaces. Thanks to rituals in action, I felt closer to Donne at St. Dunstan than at St. Paul's.

My visit to the National Portrait Gallery on May 13 was the high point of my Donne pilgrimage. Clearly, I was in a more receptive mood while viewing the Lothian portrait of Donne as well as Isaac Oliver's miniature of Donne.⁴ There was something exhilarating about seeing these oft-reproduced images in the flesh, as it were. While one cannot touch them, of course, one can discern the different textures of the brushstrokes and one can almost sniff them. However, in keeping with DiPasquale's reference to "contexture" (a term coined by Neal Fraistat),

it may be wiser to dial back these affective responses and instead examine how these artworks are positioned vis-à-vis neighboring artworks.⁵ As students of museum display know, cultural and political biases influence the presentation of artifacts.⁶ Not surprisingly, in the National Portrait Gallery's case, respect for chronology, historicism, the role of cultural heritage in nation-building, and a notion of social networks loom large in determining the shape and order of the displays. How fitting that the 1595 Lothian portrait of Donne should form part of a pair, matched on the right by Abraham von Blyenberch's 1617 portrait of Ben Jonson! These boon companions share pride of place.⁷ The viewer stands in the dusky blue elegance of room 4 devoted to Early Stuart Britain, surrounded on one side by full length portraits of King James by Daniel Mytens (1621) and of his queen, Anne of Denmark by John De Critz the Elder (ca. 1604-10), and on the other side of Lodowick Stuart by Paul von Somer (1620) and by Sir Nathaniel Bacon's self-portrait.⁸ These monumental canvases are grandiose and overwhelming, compared to the intimate portraits of the two poets hanging on either side of the opening into the next gallery. But I was in a good mood so the extravagant, luxurious finery of the full-length sitters seemed semiotically significant, rather than off-putting. It was easy to turn away from them and instead concentrate on my poets. The portrait of Donne posing dreamily as a melancholy lover hangs on the left panel while that of Jonson's mobile face, his brow furrowed with indignation, hangs on the right panel. Contemplating their expressive gazes felt like a welcome reunion with old friends.⁹

I also had the good fortune of touring the National Portrait Gallery's special exhibition devoted to the miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver (21 February - 19 May 2019). Magnifying glasses were made available at the entrance, although in certain restricted areas it was forbidden to use them, as the effect of the concentrated rays of light might damage the pigments. Visitors craned over display cases like versions of a sleuthing Sherlock Holmes—so many aquiline-nosed faces peering down and into the instrument.¹⁰ One of the tilted glass cases held Oliver's miniature of Donne (1616) in an elaborate gold frame, on

loan from the Queen's personal collection.¹¹ Again, Donne was positioned in the vicinity of Lodowick Stuart, second Duke of Lennox and first Duke of Richmond. And again he was also placed near friends and patrons, in this instance two images of an aging Lucy Harington, Duchess of Bedford, baring her décolleté amid lace and embroidery, her bejeweled regalia and swirling veil glistening with silvery allure. A portrait of the glamorous Venetia Digby, her hair loose over a red-spangled mantle, lay close by. As in the main gallery, Donne's pictorial neighbors helped to recreate a semblance of Donne's social world. Somehow John Donne seemed less orphaned in the museum than in the cathedral.

Recently, the sociologist, Thomas Gieryn has written about "truth-spots," places that "lend credibility and legitimacy to beliefs and claims" (1). Gieryn's chapter on the oracle at Delphos, for example, exposes the complex ways the commercial and political interests behind truth-spots converge with the "will to believe" cultivated by pilgrims and cultural tourists. Truth-spots, in other words, deliver authenticity-effects and thereby help people believe. When going on a literary pilgrimage to an authorial site of memory, isn't one not-so-secretly hoping for a truth-spot? Gieryn's demystifying approach to the political, economic and social forces at play in the creation of truth-spots strikes me as a useful supplement to Tuan's subjective and aestheticized poetics of place.¹² It is not enough to be attentive to sounds and smells and textures, developing the right amount of psychological distance to perfect one's aesthetic sensibilities.¹³ Waxing lyrical about one's private ecstasies needs to be supplemented with an unblinkered assessment of structural forces, together with a fine and ironic appreciation for the chanciness of what survives, both archaeologically and environmentally. Donne's monument in St. Paul's may well be a truth-spot for Donne devotees, but its aura, as DiPasquale rightly observes, is imperiled by its commodified and incongruous surroundings.

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NOTES

¹Tuan writes of “*multisensory reality*,” saying “our proximate environment is experienced multimodally” (*Passing Strange and Wonderful*, 165-66). He adds, “we experience the world in terms of feeling-tones” (169).

²Yi-Fu Tuan comments that “[a]rchitectural space continues to articulate the social order [...]. Architecture continues to exert a direct impact on the senses and feeling. The body responds, as it has always done, to such basic features of design as enclosure and exposure, verticality and horizontality, mass, volume, interior spaciousness, and light” (*Space and Place*, 116).

³Simpson and Potter speculate that the sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5.16, “Rejoyce evermore,” was preached, not at St. Dunstan’s as the Folio says, but at St. Paul’s, in part because in it Donne addresses listeners in the “Quire.” At St. Dunstan, they point out, “the congregation would not sit in the choir, but in the nave and aisles” (31).

⁴See Sarah Howe’s recent essay on Donne’s portraits; it brings their complicated stories and provenances up to date. For the Lothian portrait, see: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitConservation/mw111844/John-Donne>.

⁵DiPasquale writes of “place-based contexture,” noting that “the restored plaque is now the only *concrete* (as opposed to printed, drawn, or engraved) instantiation of the text that one can experience, and today’s cathedral is the contextual frame within which that experience takes place. Only within that frame can one be in the presence of the monument as one reads the epitaph” (178).

⁶See Macdonald who asks: “Who is empowered or disempowered by certain modes of display? [...] How is the audience imagined? [...] And how do certain exhibitionary forms or techniques enable certain kinds of readings?” (4). She adds that the “capacity of exhibitionary representation to render the world as visible and ordered was part of the instantiation of wider senses of scientific and political certainty” (11).

⁷For Jonson’s portrait, see: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitConservation/mw03528/Benjamin-Ben-Jonson>.

⁸Bacon’s self-portrait is the “only full-length self-portrait of a British artist from the seventeenth century,” the website tells us. See: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw278735>.

For the Mytens portrait of King James, see: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw03419>.

For the De Critz portrait of Queen Anne, see: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw202589>.

For the van Somer portrait of Ludovic Stuart, see: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw07831>.

⁹Since I visited in May 2019, the Lothian portrait of Donne has been moved from room 4 to room 35 and replaced by a portrait of the playwright John Fletcher. There

may be more changes leading up to and following the National Portrait Gallery's closure for renovations between 29 June 2020 and spring 2023.

¹⁰In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard discusses the man with the magnifying glass, theorizing that "he situates us at a sensitive point of objectivity, at the moment when we have to accept unnoticed detail, and dominate it. The magnifying glass in this experience conditions an entry into the world. [...] The details of a thing can be the sign of a new world which, like all worlds, contains the attributes of greatness. Miniature is one of the refuges of greatness" (155).

¹¹For Oliver's miniature of Donne, see: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/420026/john-donne-1573-1631>.

¹²Like Yi-Fu Tuan, Michel de Certeau also understands "spatial practices" as embracing subjective experience: "Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body. 'I feel good here': the well-being under-expressed in the language it appears in like a fleeting glimmer is a spatial practice" (108).

¹³Yi-Fu Tuan discusses "the psychological distancing necessary to aesthetic experience" (*Passing Strange and Wonderful*, 183).

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