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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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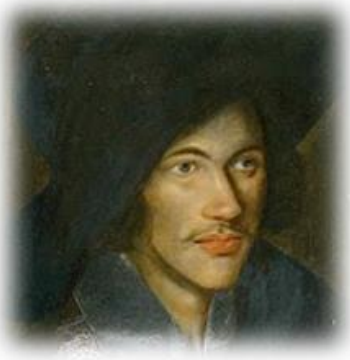
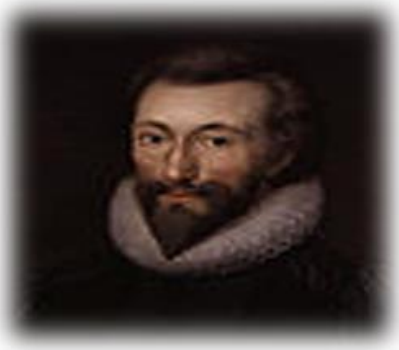
The Seeker Seeking





From Left: "Jack" Donne and the Reverend "John" Donne

In these superheated, politically correct times, dare I ask who penned "To His Mistress Going to Bed"?

from Elegie XV: Going to Bed

Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime

Tells me from you that now 'tis your bed-time!
Off with that happy busk,* whom I envy *busk: front piece of a corset
That still can be and still can stand so nigh!
Your gown's going off such beauteous state reveals
As when from flow'ry meads th'hill's shadow steals.
Off with your wiry coronet,* and show *coronet: crown, tiara
The hairy diadem which on you doth grow!
Now off with those shoes and then safely tread
In this – Love's hallowed temple – this soft bed![1]

That poem, if read in its entirety, as Anahid Nersessian says in her ***The New York Review of Books*** review of Katherine Rundell's ***Super-Infinite …*** is "a blisteringly hot hymn to the precoital striptease …"? [2]

That poet also composed some of the greatest religious poems and sermons in the English language, such as his *Holy Sonnet* that begins:

from Holy Sonnet #14

Batter my heart, three person'd God, for you
As yet but knock breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. [3]

That poet's most famous image comes not from his poetry but from his sermons and writings on religious themes, as this from his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions?*

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. [4]

As a recent ***New Yorker*** cartoon snarkishly asks, "Are you familiar with the poetry of John Donne?" it's clear that John Donne, the early-modern English poet, is having his moment. Actually, he's having yet another moment. Donne, who never quite goes away, who comes in and out of fashion, is now the subject of Katherine Rundell's brilliant biography ***Super-Infinite: The Transformation of John Donne.***

It's hard for 21st century readers to realize, but once upon a time poets were the rock stars of their age. Maybe not so hard, for what in in the age of poetry slams and an internet deluged with verse are rappers and rockers but amplified poets? Betraying a generational myopia, if Joni Mitchell, John Lennon, Neil Young, and Bob Dylan aren't poets, who might earn that title? The young "Jack" Donne would have riffed on being compared to Jim Morrison. Younger readers of these ***Notes*** will have their own examples.

Though Donne was never formally published in his lifetime, a devoted coterie of admirers passed around manuscript copies of Donne's verse. Living on the margins of the royal court, Donne and other "wits" such as George Herbert, Henry Vaughn, and Andrew Marvell (he of the mistress whose coyness would be no crime if they had but time enough) sought to bedazzle one another with their verbal agility and the complexity and depth of their metaphors and conceits.

They deployed intensely intellectual arguments to explore emotional states. They were particularly – *hmm*, 'obsessed' seems a harsh word, but in this instance apt – obsessed with the paradoxical triangle of life's earthiness (read sexuality), death, and the desire for transcendence. They became known as the metaphysical poets. By the middle of the 17th century, Donne was acknowledged as the greatest of their circle. Ben Jonson recognized Donne's primacy when he wrote "To John Donne":

from To John Donne

Donne …
Whose every work of thy most early wit
Came forth example, and remains so yet;
Longer a-knowing than most wits do live;
And which no affection praise enough can give! [5]

Why?

It might be an antique observation, but it is still true that Donne's verbal mastery places him in the company of only Milton and Shakespeare as the English language's greatest poets. Whereas Milton, and to a lesser extent, Shakespeare almost always placed some distance between themselves and those to whom they gave poetic voice, Donne spoke clearly in his own voice about his own experience, as he paradoxically (or perhaps not) wrote some of the English language's greatest erotic love poems ***and*** religious sonnets and sermons. The contrast between the young rake "Jack" Donne and the elder priest and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral "John" Donne continues to beguile readers, enchanting some with the erotic charge of his youthful verse, inspiring others with the spiritual depth of his mature religious sermons and sonnets.

Donne's life was so cinematic it's startling to realize no one has ever made a quality film about it. Simon Schama tried 13 years ago in a BBC2 television production ***Simon Schama's John Donne***. As Tim Dowling said in a review in **The Guradian**, "(Donne) was born in London to members of a persecuted religious minority. A couple of his uncles were of a militant bent, and he was brought up, it was said, 'with an expectation of martrydom.' His life's aim, however, was to insinuate himself into the heart of the establishment. And he succeeded." [6]

The son of a wealthy merchant, Donne was born Catholic, which was illegal and exceedingly dangerous in Elizabethan England. His mother was the martyred Thomas More's great-niece. Educated first at Oxford, then Cambridge, Donne studied law at the Inns of Court, where his poetic satires first brought him fame. At the Inns of Court in addition to the law he independently did a comparative study of Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. While Donne was at the Inns of Court, his brother Henry died in Newgate prison for hiding a Jesuit priest. Donne sailed with the Earl of Essex and Sir Walter Raleigh in privateering excursions, during one of which he saw Spanish soldiers burned alive during a sea battle at Cadiz – an image of death seared into his memory. When he returned to London, he secured a positon with Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper of the Seal.

At Egerton's home, he met Anne More, daughter of Sir George More. She was 16. He was 25. They secretly married. When they were discovered, Donne was sent to prison. He finally persuaded Egerton to intercede on his behalf. Anne's father's anger consigned the newlyweds to years in exile, during which Anne gave birth to 12 children. To survive, the impoverished couple depended upon the generosity of friends. All the while Donne, chasing a permanent position to support his family, wrote and wrote and wrote. He produced prose works on theology, canon law, anti-Catholic polemics – he had converted to Anglicanism – love lyrics, and religious poetry.

In an era when professional writers were unknown, Donne wrote poems praising his patrons to flatter their vanity and to elicit gifts. During this period he also wrote arguably the greatest funeral poems in the language for a woman whom he did not know. His "Anniversaries," two elegies written on commission for Sir Robert Drury's 15-year-old daughter Elizabeth, not only began to heal his finances, but as Harold Bloom says they were also so astonishing that Ben Jonson said to Donne "if it had been written about the Virgin Mary it had been something" to which Donne replied "he described the idea of a Woman, and not as she was." [7]

Anne died in 1617 at 33 after delivering a stillborn child leaving Donne with seven surviving children to raise. Donne, who had been steadfastly loyal to her, was devastated. As Katherine Rundell noted, "It was for Donne an irreversible end. He would not take another lover: she was his last. He wrote in a poem: 'my good is dead.'" [8]

Throughout all of this Donne sought spiritual peace. He was a seeker seeking that which unified, that which reconciled human's yearning for the ineffable with their all too fallible flesh. At first he sought that transcendence in sexual pleasure, but as he matured he found it in his love for Anne:

from The Good Morrow

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?
But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?
… What ever dies, was not mix't equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none doe slacken, none can die. [9]

Although encouraged to do so, he declined to take holy orders. His conversion from Roman Catholicism to Anglicanism might have had a tinge of socio-political necessity to it, but the sincerity of his Christian faith can never be doubted. He was a seeker of transcendence, but also a person of the world. When he realized he would never find a place at court, still questioning his spiritual "worthiness," he finally accepted King James I's advice to become an Anglican priest. Ordained a deacon and a priest in 1615, he became a royal chaplain. In 1621 he was installed as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

He was now ***of*** "the establishment."

He turned his great creative energies towards his new vocation. He became a sort of Jacobean "rock star," for his sermons were thought the most powerful and eloquent in the land. As Katherine Rundell recounts, preaching a sermon at Lincoln's Inn in the spring of 1623,

> John Donne's words nearly killed a man … his preaching was famous across the whole of London. His congregation – merchants, aristocrats, actors in elaborate muffs, the whole sweep of the city – came to his sermon carrying paper and ink, wrote down his finest passages and took them home to dissect and relish and pontificate and argue over. He often wept in the pulpit, in joy and sorrow, and his audience would weep with him. His words, they said, could 'charm the soul … wherever he was, people came flocking … that morning, too many people flocked … men in the crowd were shoved to the ground and trampled … two or three were endangered and taken up dead for the time." [10]

There is no record that Donne either noticed or stopped his sermon. In his defense, the crowd was large and jostling. He probably did not see, but as Rundell says in a ***New York Times*** article about Donne, "A certain amount of ease around death would have been in character. John Donne was honest about death and its place in the task of living, just as he insisted on joy. Both his life and his work tell us the same thing: It is only by keeping death nearby that one can truly live." [11]

I have said many times in these ***Book Notes*** that the greatest poetry, actually the greatest works in any artistic medium, make us more ***present-to-the-present***. They bring us to *attention* – they enable us, to borrow a phrase, to ***be here now***. They cut through the clutter of shopworn images and sentimental triteness to ***awaken*** us to the present. Donne's awareness of death, like centuries later Camus' the only valid philosophical question is "to be or not to be," reminds us of a deeper truth – we only become fully alive when we realize that we die.

As Rundell continues, "Death – the looming fact of it, its finality and clarifying power – calls us to attention and wakes us up to life. Donne spoke of it from the pulpit, in a passage from a sermon he gave in his late 40s: 'Now was there ever any man seen to sleep in the cart, between Newgate and Tyburn? Between the prison, and the place of execution, does any man sleep? And we sleep all the way; from the womb to the grave we are never thoroughly awake.'" [12]

Donne's creative mission sought to awaken us – to be awake – *to tune in*, to use a shopworn phrase – to see and experience life, love, and death as it actually is and so seeing transcend it by fusing soul and body with the divine infinite – *the super-infinite*.

It is not a unique mission.

Passing through the erotic to discover the infinite is, if not a common one, a nonetheless well-trod human path. Tantric sexuality in both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions follows that path. Closer to home in the western tradition,

St. Augustine, in his ***Confessions*****,** tells a similar tale. Susan Sontag once observed in a quote whose source I cannot find, but I think it was in her ***Against Interpretation***, that sexual orgasm was as close to mystical transcendence as a non-mystic was likely to experience.

The path "Jack" Donne took to becoming "John" Donne traveled a similar route as he sought to reconcile the body's base desires with the soul's yearning for the sublime, for reunification with the divine super-infinite.

He recounted his journey in language so subtle, in images so idiosyncratic and original that critics coined a new term to describe them. He wrote in metaphors and extended metaphors that transcended metaphor to become "conceits" – images that compared some things so unlike that it takes a second, sometimes a third or more looks to capture the image, but once one does the image becomes unforgettable. In fancy language, a "conceit" is a *discordia concors* which by showing the similarity between apparently dissimilar things opens a new and deeper path into reality by showing that reality in an utterly new and original fashion. Donne, in his pre-psilocybin age, used language and imagination to transcend ordinary reality to experience transcendence. For completely different reasons, first the Romantic poets, then T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and the moderns adopted Donne as a guide.

But Donne was first.

In a short note, let's review Donne's journey in three or four poems from the youthful college-boy arguing with his soul who rebukes him for his base yearnings to the mature lover seeing in his beloved the unity that approaches the divine to the mature churchman who seeks union with God.

In his satires, written during his time at the Inns of Court, the young "Jack" Donne upbraids his conscience/soul for imputing guilt to sexual longing when humans by their very nature are sexual beings. In the following extract the poem's speaker (Donne) argues with his soul – God's stand-in – for the double-bind binding humans.

from Satire #1

Why should'st thou that dost onely approve,
But in ranke itchie lust, desire and love
The nakednesse and barenesse to enjoy,
Of thy plump muddy whore…
Hate virtue, though shee be naked, and bare:
At birth, and death, our bodies naked are;
And till our Soules be unapparrelled
Of bodies, they from bliss are banished. [13]

"Jack" Donne talks unabashedly about sex – no sighing turtledoves, no oblique metaphors likening sexual frolicking to the merging of two clouds. In "To His Mistress Going to Bed" cited at the beginning, Donne continues the image by exhorting his lover to:

from Elegie #15 Going to Bed

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Behind, before, above, between, below. [14]

In a stunning metaphor, later the more mature but still "Jack" Donne *sees* his union with a reluctant lover in a flea – it was the Elizabethan Age and things were not ***Masterpiece Theater*** clean – who abed has bitten each:

from The Flea

Marke but this flea, and marke in this,
How little that which thou deny'st me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea, our two bloods mingled bee;
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sinne, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead … [15]

Donne, who in his youth was a "rake," a polite and obsolete word for what we would call a "hound," a seducer, once married to Anne remained steadfast describing his loyalty to his love in multiple poems. In "The Sunne Rising," abed with Anne, Donne chides the sun to go away, let them be all-in-all with one another for together they a world make.

from The Sunne Rising

Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows, and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers seasons run?
… Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
Nor hours, dayes, months, which are the rags of time.
… and since thy duties bee
To warme the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy center is, these walls thy spheare. [16]

Having matured past simple sensual pleasure, Donne now finds transcendence in loyalty, in the steadfast maintenance of a love discovered. From simple erotic pleasure, Donne through Anne moves towards a sense of the sublime in the

Oneness of their abiding love that fuses selfish sensual pleasure seeking with the pleasure of selflessly caring for another.

Among his greatest poems, he expresses that thought in a conceit at first strange but once apprehended impossible to forget. Since Donne's poems were never dated and they were published after his death, when and to whom they were written has been debated. It is generally conceded, however, that his "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" was written for Anne as he prepared to depart for Europe on a mission that he hoped would secure him a royal appointment.

Aside: I doubt anyone ever compared John Donne to Billy Collins, or vice versa, but I think Donne would agree with Collins and me that explication can kill a poem. Still, I'll risk a bit of explication so that when you read "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" a second or third time you'll see the brilliance of Donne's vision.

Who but "Jack" now maturing into "John" Donne ever had the imagination to compare two lovers enduring a separation to the legs of a draftsman's compass?

<u>A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning</u>	
As virtuous men pass mildly away, And whisper to their souls to go, Whilst some of their sad friends do say The breath goes now, and some say, No:	As they prepare to separate as Donne departs for Europe, he counsels Anne that they should be calm and not betray their deep love for one another for all the world to see, for to do so would be to cheapen it.
So let us melt, and make no noise, No tear-floods, nor sigh-tempests move; 'Twere profanation of our joys To tell the laity our love.	
Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears, Men reckon what it did, and meant; But trepidation of the spheres, Though greater far, is innocent.	Travel often brings fear that in parting the lovers will not reunite is a thought only dull, earthbound lovers think for they do not realize absence cements love, i.e. "absence makes the heart grow fonder."
Dull sublunary lovers' love (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit Absence, because it doth remove Those things which elemented it.	
But we by a love so much refined, That our selves know not what it is, Inter-assured of the mind, Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.	Some lovers love only one another's bodies, but our love is much finer for our love unites our souls.
Our two souls therefore, which are one, Though I must go, endure not yet A breach, but an expansion,	

Like gold to airy thinness beat. If they be two, they are two so As stiff twin compasses are two; Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show To move, but doth, if the other do. And though it in the center sit, Yet when the other far doth roam, It leans and hearkens after it, And grows erect, as that comes home. Such wilt thou be to me, who must, Like th' other foot, obliquely run; Thy firmness makes my circle just, And makes me end where I begun. [17]	Even though we part, our love will grow and grow like a sheet of goldleaf beaten/stretched to an ever-larger sheet. We two are joined like the legs of a draftsman's compass. You at home the fixed foot, I abroad the other moving at first away and then home again. Even when I am not with you, I lean toward you – yearning to be with you and as I near you grow "erect" – the erotic undertone. So, if we are true to our roles, your firmness – constancy, steadfastness, draws me home and I end where I began.

Being mere earthbound mortals, Donne knew that those "sublunary lovers" only experienced love as erotic attraction, which Donne also knew to be fleeting and dishonest:

from Song

Go, and catch a falling star,
Get with child a mandrake root,
Tell me, where all past years are,
Or who cleft the Devil's foot,
Teach me to hear Mermaids singing,
Or to keep off envy's stinging,
And find
What wind
Serves to advance an honest mind. [18]

Donne knew that one only knows honest love through constancy; through 'firmness that makes my circle just'; through faithfulness to an *Other*. Which, ironically, transparently manifests itself to the *attentive* only when the *Other* dies. Speaking of the death of his beloved wife Anne, Donne expresses it clearly in his "Holy Sonnet XVII":

from Holy Sonnet XVII

Since she whom I loved, hath paid her last debt
To Nature, and to hers, and my good is dead
And her Soul early into heaven ravished,
Wholly in heavenly things my mind is set … [19]

Donne knew that as mere mortals we die. Donne was *awake* to death, which, ironically, made him more *awake* to life – more ***present-to-the-present***, which is a form of *attention*. One is only, finally, alive, if one pays *attention*. Transcendence begins with realizing that one must transcend one's ***Self*** and *attend* to ***Others,*** for it is only in union with others that we are most fully alive.

And, in so *attending* to an *Other* or to *Others*, one transcends death and becomes most fully alive:

from Holy Sonnet X

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,
For, those whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me … [20]

Attention – attending to *Others*, to one another, is Donne's path to transcendence. Donne knew we are all interconnected. As Katherine Rundell says, "'*Awake,*' is Donne's cry. *Attention* for Donne was everything: *attention* paid to our mortality, and to the precise ways in which beauty cuts through us, *attention* to the softness of skin and the majesty of hands and feet and mouths. *Attention* to *attention* itself … Most of all, for Donne, our *attention* is owed to one another." (Emphasis added) [21]

For, as Donne, wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself … any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. …" [22]

Or, since the contemporary American culture wars are a frequent topic of these ***Notes***, more banally put, Donne knew what we forget at both our national and moral peril – we are all in this together.

Or, perhaps a bit more elevated, Donne knew that while the lone mystic might point the path to transcendence, lovers abed know that path goes through community, from two becoming One by subsuming their Self in one another; from the many subsuming their Selves in others becoming One – *e pluribus unum*.

All we need to do is to pay *attention*; sounds easy.

As Donne shows us, it isn't.

It's the work of a lifetime.

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"John Donne as the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral" This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-SA
"John Donne cartoon" from **The New Yorker** can be found here accessed November 22, 2022.

End Notes

1. Donne, John. *"Elegie XV: Going to Bed"* in **The Complete Poetry of John Donne**, Ed. John T. Shawcross. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1967), pp. 57-58.
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13. *"Satyre 1"* in **The Complete Poetry of John Donne**, cited above, p. 16.

14. Ibid., *"Elegie #15 Going to Bed," p. 58.*
15. Ibid., *"The Flea,"* p. 127.
16. Ibid., *"The Sunne Rising,"* pp. 93-94.
17. Ibid., *"A Valediction Forbidding Mourning,"* pp. 87-88.
18. "Song" in **The Complete Poetry of John Donne**, cited above, p. 90.
19. Ibid., *"Holy Sonnet XVII,"* p. 349.
20. Ibid., *"Holy Sonnet X,"* p. 342.
21. Rundell, **cited above**, p. 296.
22. Ibid.

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