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John Donne

The Reformed Soul

John Stubbs

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1572–1602

1. The Den

His mistress lived with her parents, and access was a problem. Donne had to devise a way of walking that kept his silk suit from 'whistling' as he skulked through the creaky mansion. The family's grim, eight-foot-high, iron-bound serving man was always on the lookout, and the lady of the house, who lay buried in her bed while the young couple shook the floor by night, looked carefully for signs of 'paleness, blushing, sighs and sweats' by day. The matron had her suspicions. She would take her daughter aside and try extracting a confession by revealing 'The sinnes of her owne youths rank lustinesse'.[1] She used her younger children as spies. The girl's little brothers, 'like Faiery Sprights Oft skipt into our chamber', Donne complained, knowing the boys faced close interrogation the next day on their father's knee.[2] Yet still the lovers evaded their persecutors, and Donne kept his swishing 'silkes' quiet. These are events from a poem he wrote as a young man. It was classed as an 'elegy', and became known as 'The Perfume'. It might be a lusty account of an actual adventure; it might be all made up. The story, anyway, ends in frustration. After all their efforts, the girl's father smelt Donne out. He caught a whiff of the pungent fragrance the young man was wearing. 'Had it beene some bad smell,' Donne observed, the old man 'would have thought / That his own feet, or breath, that smell had wrought.'[3]

After the violent interview that ensued, 'Catechiz'd, painfully, Donne berated his mistress. He had been caught 'Once, and but once' in her company, yet had received the blame for all the previous sexual escapades the anguished father now imagined her enjoying.[4] Yet the bitter, sardonic tone soon fades from the poem. The girl about whom 'The Perfume' was written may never have read it, may never have even existed, but Donne still reassured her that she and he were rare and special: it was merely their bad luck

to be on an 'Isle emprisoned / Where cattle onely, and diverse dogs are bred.' They were tender, magical creatures, exceptions to the ruling ugliness. It wasn't their fault if the morons around them could only 'call the pretious Unicornes, strange monsters'.[5]

After a night out, Donne would pass back through the legal district in the heart of London and return to Lincoln's Inn, an exclusive college for legal studies. If entry via the main entrance, the imposing gothic gatehouse on Chancery Lane, proved impossible, a manoeuvre around the perimeter was required to sneak in through a side way to the serene, expansive precincts of the Inn of Court.

His college lodgings were tiny: he described his study as a 'standing woodden chest', a trunk turned on its side.[6] He would retire to it and shut the door-lid. Very often, however, he didn't get much sleep. Isaak Walton, Donne's first biographer and foremost apologist, some twenty years his junior, asserted that 'in the most unsetled days of his youth, his bed was not able to detain him beyond the hour of four in a morning: and it was no common business that drew him out of his chamber till past ten.'[7] All this time, Walton claimed, was spent in study. Walton's clockwork scholar cannot, of course, be taken at face value: he only knew (and deeply revered) the older, conservative and ascetic man of the 1620s, in Donne's days as Dean of St Paul's. Forty years earlier, before Walton had even been born, there were presumably many 'unsetled days' that fell out of routine for Donne; nights when he stumbled in during the small hours and knew no more until early afternoon. But it is obvious that frequently, when his head was clear, he wanted to do nothing but read and think. His 'worst voluptuousnes', Donne himself later said, 'was an immoderate desire of humane learning and languages'.[8] He came to feel that these interests were his worst excess because they distracted him from studies that might have brought him a steady job. But as the statement implies, he had other kinds of voluptuousness, each of which had to be allotted its own strict compartment of time. He liked structure, and demanded much of it. He moulded his experiences and imaginings into fabulously complex verse

schemes, and also tried to give a regular shape to the varying activities of his days.

At Lincoln's Inn Donne was supposed, as he himself put it, to 'toughly chew, and sturdily digest / The immense vast volumes of our common law'.[9] But he had little taste for mere vocational concerns. 'Humane learning and languages', history and poetry were far more appealing; though in the summer of 1593, at the age of twenty-one, he was preoccupied with matters of divinity. He was concerned with Truth. He wanted to discover for himself which form of Christianity was the right one. He said later on that he refused to come to any decision which the fate of his immortal soul might rest upon, 'till I had, to the measure of my poore wit and iudgement, suruayed and digested the whole body of Diuinity'.[10] From the crack of dawn, he read solidly. By ten in the morning, according to Walton, the young scholar had completed over five hours of personal study.

However, 'he took great liberty after it'.[11] For, as though with a change in the light, something switched inside: his mind re-oriented itself. The 'woodden chest' suddenly seemed like a prison, a child's coffin of a room. Donne wanted out, and help was at hand to ensure his release. He had friends who knew his habits well, and one of them, some 'fondling motley humorist', would barge in, rub his shoulder and urge him to come out. Donne recorded the moment in the first of his satires. 'Shall I leave all this constant company,' he asked, probably with a gesture to the books heaped up around him, 'And follow headlong, wild, uncertain thee?'[12] Usually, after a show of reluctance, it seems that the answer was yes. As he later observed, 'it were not hard to assigne many examples of men that have stolne great measure of learning, and yet lived open and conversable lives'.[13]

Beyond the calm college enclosure lay Lincoln's Inn Fields: a large, open, rather dowdy space, yet an arena for a bit of everything in Elizabethan London. It was the rubbish-strewn site of public executions and discontinued building projects, a venue for all kinds of exercise, haggling, get-togethers and theatricals. Horses were taken there for a runabout, clopping perilously close at times to

passers-by. Cripples and beggars assembled at their stations. Some of the city's pricier brothels and gambling dens were located in the lanes around the Fields, and prostitutes would come to take some air and loiter for early trade. The district grew livelier as the day wore on. Mountebanks would arrive with their cures and aphrodisiacs, set up their stalls, and crowds would assemble to heckle them. Puppet shows would open and throttled bears would dance on chains. By compressing his study into several airtight early hours, Donne could emerge into the jostling world beyond his mind, and his books, just as life was warming up again.

His scholarly habits were drummed into him early. Just under ten years before, in the autumn of 1584, he and his younger brother Henry were sent to study in Oxford. John was perhaps twelve, and Henry was only eleven, a good four or five years younger than the majority of the other students. Bright boys often went up to university early, however, and this might seem to demonstrate that the Donne brothers were precocious enough to cope with the work; but there was also an imperative working above and beyond their intellectual merit. It was necessary for them to complete their university education early if they were to avoid the persecution they would attract as Papists later on. As we shall see, a trap had been carefully set by Oxford's governing body to test the loyalty of scholars when they turned sixteen.

Oxford was dominated by the colleges that together made up the university. Each one of these colleges, or 'halls' (as those without full collegiate status were called), provided for the teaching of undergraduates. A busy market town thrived in the gaps left by the academic cluster, but the students were distanced from it by physical and mental layers of separation. The teaching regime was tough and mind-numbing. Day upon day, the boys had maxims and exempla, and the elaborate means of expressing them eloquently, kneaded into their brains. This training served Donne's poetry well, of course: he learnt how to focus the whole universe on the smallest of subjects. Once a flea, for example, had bitten both him and his mistress, mixing and marrying their bloods in its gut, it could assume cosmic, sacramental significance. It became a

temple, a marriage bed, an agent of communion. The flourishes of such poems as 'The Flea' owe a lot to the countless rhetorical exercises he performed as a boy at Oxford. A certain alienation from everyday life was integral to the curriculum.

John and Henry attended Hart Hall, one of the few university institutions to offer unofficial refuge for Catholics. The principal, Philip Rondell, ruled the Hall with an iron fist for half a century, instilling moral orthodoxy and the fear of God into generations of boys. But he too was an outsider: 'though in his heart,' said Antony à Wood, the Oxford antiquarian, Rondell 'was a Papist, he durst not show it.'[14] The Hall's master of divinity, a Spaniard called Antonio Corrano, was a Protestant, but had esoteric ideas of his own on the ways Christianity should develop. So besides putting up with xenophobic jokes against the Spanish, he faced continual rebukes for the heretical contents of his lectures from the Puritans who controlled Oxford in the 1580s and monitored its intellectual currents closely. The walls of Hart Hall provided a haven to serious, rather lonely characters, united by mutual oddity – and an understated tendency towards independent thinking.

John and Henry were lucky enough to have an alternative sanctuary. Their uncle, Robert Dawson, ran the Blue Boar Inn, a four-storey establishment just off St Aldates, one of Oxford's broad main thoroughfares. This place was awash with different registers. The Blue Boar was in the middle of the university district, and served its share of students; but was right beside the Guildhall, and so brought in craftsmen and traders, telling very different jokes, grumbling with concerns quite alien to most undergraduates. There were also those who fell between the factions of town and gown. One regular was Robert Dawson's cousin John, the butler of Christ Church College, with a reputation among college servants as a sharer and consumer of the institution's supplies. When he died in 1622, Donne's friend Richard Corbett, another senior cleric, wrote an elegy that cried 'Weepe, o ye barrells! Lett your drippings fall / In trickling streams!' Corbet envisaged the old servant being borne through Hades on rivers of beer, his ferry buoyed by 'wholesome waves'.[15]