

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will

Holy Sonnets (1633)
A Valediction forbidding Mourning (1633)
Taking up Death as Philosophical Challenge

John Donne. (1572-1631)

Background

John Donne was born into a family of six, accustoming himself to a superfluidity of small voices and excited footsteps. (Thirty years later, as a father of twelve, three of whom died in childbirth, Donne was to eat fully at the tree of loss, and no doubt the powerful depressions, which brought him close to suicide, played into his own deep and private experience of loss.) Things had started off well. At the age of 11, it seems, Donne began his studies at Hertford College in Oxford University; then three years later went to Cambridge University where he studied for three more years, (He was unable to complete his degrees, for as a Catholic student he was thus restricted. He was not to forget this limitation, which was in the future to play into his decision to become an Anglican priest.) In 1592, at the age of twenty, he was admitted to the bar.

All the evidence we have, of Donne's work habits, indicate that in the following years he was studious, indeed scholarly; and during the period after graduation, when he had continued to study Law at the Inns of Court, he was already writing essays and quasi theological tractates. (To which it should probably be added, in the interest of completeness, that the John Donne before us was also at this stage a charmer and a charmed, a fastidious appreciator of good cuisine, fine clothing, and attractive women. We are talking of no more than a 'brilliant young man in his prime, ' and yet there are unmistakable signs in his mature work, that he had deep remorse for the levity of what he would have considered his golden years. This was a man whose deep sense of sinfulness and loss blended throughout life with his style, fine taste, and love for life.)

Brilliant young man

It was hardly a surprise that, as his rich sensibilities grew, Donne would give way to his romantic sensibilities, or that he would make moves, in that direction, which would darken his gradual passage into early midlife. Much was happening in this life of which we know little, in the years he studied law. We know that he travelled widely in Europe with one of his patrons, that he saw military action against the Spanish., that his contacts with the great and refined of his own culture were growing closer, though at the same time he, like many of his fellow Catholics, was feeling the pinch of being a Catholic recusant, having come afoul of Queen Elizabeth's recent proscription of Catholics in public office.

Personal struggle

Times of great personal difficulty were about to unleash their powers against Donne. He was about to discover the love of his life, Anne Moore, whom he married in 1601. The consequences of their secret love and wedding were grave for Donne. His influential father in law brought his full power against his new son in law. Donne was condemned to a stint in prison, effectively stopped short in his career, and left virtually penniless, doing small scale barrister casework in the Surrey countryside. With twelve children, three of them stillborn, Donne was to spend the next fifteen years in obscurity and poverty.

The Writer and Preacher John Donne

John Donne had been an aspiring writer since the early days of life, and by the time of his twenties he had proven his ability as a poet in every genre, as well as an expert elocutionist. His aptitude in this

plurality of genres and skills was to assist him, in the years following the crushing death of his wife, the enduring blows of poverty, and a serious consideration of suicide, to build a personal following among those familiar with his works and sermons. That distinction was to elevate him ultimately to the top of the clerical power structure, at which point King James granted to Donne an honorary D,Div. degree to be conferred by Cambridge University. By this time it was appropriate for John Donne to be appointed, as he was, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, the single most eminent clerical position in Britain's Anglican Church

This account, of the national attention Donne was acquiring, will seem to have been improbably abbreviated. From poverty to the Dean of Saint Paul's in twenty years? Among the factors to consider, in this matter, are the influential circuit of friends, who had been close to Donne since his youth. He was connected at many points to the elite of English culture of his time. A second factor was the glory of the work Donne was creating in the arts of language and in his widely attended sermons. We can sample a couple of his most enduring poems--each as it turns out is in defiance of death--and each is representative of the formal masteries prominent in the best days of Elizabethan poetry.

Donne and Samuel Daniel

In an earlier entry, on Samuel Daniel, we met a sonnet writer on a par with Shakespeare himself, and concentrated on a single renowned piece, Daniel's *Dedicatory Sonnet to the Countess of Pembroke*. In order to parse that sonnet's structure. We found ourselves inquiring into the popularity of such a form-- in this Daniel instance it was a Petrarchan sonnet--a form with a century of use on its back. Eventually we were asking ourselves what kind of vitality such a sonnet-form could exercise for creative work in its own or for that matter our time. (Our intention, you see, was to observe the operations of the sonnet as a work tool, not as a thing of beauty, which it could also be. You might say that the question we are asking, here, is philosophical, despite the regular adage that poetry and philosophy do different kinds of work--or should we say solve different kinds of problems? We were genuinely interested in the mind process by which an English user, employing his native English line, could play his role in our common enmity to death.)

We found that both in plasticity, frame form, and textural richness the sonnet (as in the Daniel example) has much to say for itself as a living genus. Shortage of time precluded more than these generalities, but we readied ourselves for trial of a wilder and more intense foray into the sonnet's possibilities. We prepared ourselves to march head forward into Donne's *Holy Sonnet ## 10*, one of his most revered efforts to abolish death by *language, and the kind of achievement, on the base of which we can understand the growth of Donne's swelling reputation*.

Holy Sonnet. 10. 1633. (Addressed to Death)

*Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not so
For those thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
Die not poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me,
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure then from thee, much more must flow. And soonest our best men with thee do go .Rest of
their bones and soul's delivery.*

*Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men. And dost with poison, war and sickness dwell.
And poppy, or charms, can make us sleep as well. And better than my stroake, why swells't thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; death thou shalt die.*

To ready ourselves for such intimate formality we would need to fill multiple intensity-gaps, in which Donne was building the soul he was thrashing to make. We would require to return to those formal and scholarly tracts he was absorbed in writing in the years after he left Oxford. He had brought with him a tradition of philosophical argumentation. Death, by the tradition of mediaeval Catholic philosophy, is

nothing, rather is privation, and cannot simultaneously engage in the act of killing. Donne was learning how to master the formulation of this ancient perspective, for an increasingly 'modern' audience.

Poetic music, of this power, soars from many of the poems Donne was addressing to an elite audience ready to share the sense of urgency to the end. The same kind of passionate artifice called through a brilliant love poem on the sense of joy's defeat of dour death--a love poem exemplifying that blend of intricacy with joy, that was coming to typify the so-called Metaphysicals.

A valediction forbidding mourning. 1611

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:

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.

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.

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.

We collocate these two poems, as we near a conclusion in which we are eager to characterize Donne's inherent greatness of mind. We put much emphasis, here, on Donne's protestation against loss, whether in an affair of love, as in the present poem, or in matters of life and death, as in *Holy Sonnet 10*.

We noted, earlier, that already in the years after graduation from University, Donne was involving himself in theological essays, based in his personal quest for meaning, and in his unceasingly deep familiarity with the charged theological issues of his time. His own early essays, as well as his later, and equally acclaimed, sermons, were permeated with preoccupation with repentance, sin, redemption, repentance, Christianized issues which met him where he was most gravely worried about his own moral welfare. (Mustn't we think of the young Kierkegaard, whose earliest theological awareness was charged with Platonic reading?)

We are touching a period of growth, self-challenge and self-development, in Donne, which followed years of multiple difficulties. (On the positive side Donne was approaching the decision to become an Anglican priest, a deeply welcome decision for him, due to rescue him, in the England of his moment, from the burden of being Catholic in a Protestant nation.) On the negative side, however, there was Donne's secretive marriage, to a woman he loved deeply, with whom he was to father twelve children. His fault, as his distinguished father in law was to see it, was precisely his secrecy, which netted him heavy disapproval, a stint in prison, and a forthcoming couple of decades of abject poverty, changing diapers and practicing low paying legal jobs in the Surrey countryside. It wasn't until later in life, after having earned an honorable reputation as a divine, having been elected Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, that Donne passed into his full honor, both as a poet, a consummate preacher, and as a divine.