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Registering Donne's Voiceprint: Additional Reverberations

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A voiceprint is a richly amorphous artefact. It is not like a fingerprint, which can be isolated and its recurrence identified with a relatively high degree of certainty. Nor can it, like a footprint, serve to map physical presence, like the one discovered at Agamemnon's tomb that permits Aeschylus's Electra to ascertain immediately the clandestine return of a brother whom she has not seen since infancy, ocular proof of the sort that Othello values so highly. Rather, a voiceprint is insubstantial, composed of sound waves subject to time and pulsating across that most nebulous of elements, air. Yet, as Walter Ong observes, sound is the most sympathetic of the sensual media, largely because of its ability to

> bind . . . interiors to one another as interiors. Even in the physical world this is so; sounds echo and resonate, provided that reciprocating physical interiors are at hand. Sights may reflect, from surfaces. [But] strumming on a bass viol will make a nearby one sound, by virtue of outside impact of energy but in such a way as to reveal its interior structures.[1]

A cultural tradition evolves—not through an anxiety of influence, as Harold Bloom would have it, strong poets competing to prove themselves against other strong poets[2]—but through a sympathetic call

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[1] *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 125.

[2] In *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), Bloom argues that "strong poets" create literary traditions or history "by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for

and response, a system of "reciprocating physical interiors," one poetic voice reverberating in reply to a voice that sounded earlier, the nature of that response revealing something about the "interior structure" of the instrument from which the new voice emerges.

And this, I believe, is how Donne hoped that his own poetry would operate. Donne responds—sympathetically, playfully, satirically, but respond he does—to notes previously sounded by Ovid, Propertius, Petrarch, Ronsard, Marlowe, the biblical psalmist, and Jeremiah, among others—interpreting and recasting them as elements of his own highly distinctive vocal dramas which invariably retain something of his predecessors' voiceprints. Nearly all of his poems exist in a sound continuum that anticipates a vocal response from his audience: his *Elegies* and *Songs and Sonets* are dramatic monologues that seek to elicit a sympathetic response from a silent interlocutor; his verse letters are kisses mingling souls, for "thus friends absent speake"[3]; and certain divine poems, aptly titled "A Litanie" or "hymns," invite others in the congregation to join the speaker in concert. "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister" provides a model for the resonant social and cultural milieu in which Donne looked to participate. In this poem Donne praises the Sidneys for learning from David how to praise God, taking part in the same kind of expanding circle of praise for which the *Anniversaries*—in which Joseph Hall praises Donne as the praiser of the praiser, Elizabeth Drury—offers Donne's best example. In short, Donne's poetry bears witness to a world of commingling voices that transcend time and space, ultimately bespeaking the urgency of the poet's need to make disparate parts or experiences cohere.

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themselves" (p. 5). John T. Shawcross offers an alternative model in *Intentionality and the New Traditionalism: Some Liminal Means to Literary Revisionism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), which I find more helpful and draw upon in this essay.

[3]"To Sr. Henry Wotton," in John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967), pp. 195–197, lines 1–2. Quotation of Donne's verse throughout this essay will be from Shawcross's edition.

Thus, although initially celebrated in the twentieth century for his originality of perspective and idiosyncracy of voice,[4] Donne perhaps better warrants study as a poet of "influence": that is, in terms of the vocal force of earlier poets that "flows into" Donne's own verse, as well as of how Donne's auditory *enargeia* "flows into" and verbally colors the work of later writers. When Donne's presence is mapped in the sound continuum of English-language poetry, his voiceprint is found to register in the works of such diverse writers as Rudyard Kipling, Tennessee Williams, and Allen Ginsberg—three poets rarely understood to have been influenced by Donne—and as far afield as Rabindranath Tagore's India. Indeed, Donne's influence upon modernist sensibility, often assumed to have been mediated by the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot, may descend additionally along a parallel track in which writers explore what Ginsberg provocatively terms the "torture of equilibrium." The study of Donne's influence upon these writers raises the question of how precisely influence can be determined or how accurately a voiceprint can be mapped.

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In 1893, Rudyard Kipling complained in a letter to his friend Edward White that he had been "scandalously neglecting" the writing of poetry while preoccupied with building a new house for his growing family in what would prove the Kiplings' ill-fated American sojourn. However, after rereading the poetry of John Donne, whom he thinks of as "Browning's great-grandfather," he found himself once again "experimenting with diverse metres [sic] and various rymes [sic]," Donne having provided him with the stimulation that he needed to return to writing poetry.[5] Elsewhere he advises Arthur Baldwin, the younger son

[4]J. B. Leishman's analysis of Donne's "defiantly and resolutely colloquial" language, and of his poetry as "the dialectical expression of personal drama," is perhaps the best example of this approach; see his *The Monarch of Wit: An Analytical and Comparative Study of the Poetry of John Donne*, 6th ed. (repr., New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 22, 20.

[5]The letter is quoted in Harry Ricketts, *Rudyard Kipling: A Life* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2000), p. 200. Kipling seems to have discovered the poetry of Donne as a schoolboy when he was allowed the run of his English master's personal library. "[T]he language and concern for death of Donne and Crashaw

of Kipling's cousin, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, to read Hazlitt, Crashaw ("for words and emotion"), Swift ("purely for style"), Coleridge, Marcus Aurelius, and Donne. Donne, he cautions the Eton schoolboy, "may or may not catch hold of you. Anyhow, keep him for a bit and see if he doesn't affect you later. Anyway, he will teach you words and tropes and such things. . . ."[6]

In my admittedly cursory reading of Kipling, I have found no evidence of his having learned any "words and tropes and such things" from Donne other than his borrowing from Donne's "The Undertaking" for the epigraph to a short story, "William the Conqueror."[7] Kipling's identification of Donne as Browning's progenitor, however, raises the question of the extent to which modernist poets relied upon Donne, and perhaps saw themselves as imitating Donne, in their attempt to use the dramatic monologue to escape the Romantic prison of the self. As Carol T. Christ has demonstrated, the dramatic monologue was important to the late Victorians and early modernists as a vehicle for expressing passion without being encumbered by the oppressive ego and stultifying solipsism of the Wordsworthian sublime.[8] Christ might have additionally considered the evolution of the dramatic monologue in terms of the response of early twentieth century poets to Freud's theory of the

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never left him," observes Angus Wilson in *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Works* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), p. 47.

[6]Likewise, quoted in Ricketts, *Rudyard Kipling*, p. 358.

[7]The borrowing is noted in Ricketts, *Rudyard Kipling*, p. 215. Martin Seymour-Smith analyzes Kipling's "The Explanation" as a metaphysical poem influenced by Kipling's reading of Donne; see his *Rudyard Kipling: A Biography*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), pp. 137–138.

[8]*Victorian and Modern Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), chap. 2. Christ draws upon and extends the work of Robert Langbaum (*The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* [1957; repr., New York: Norton, 1963]), concluding that "The Romantic poet, for the most part, had confidence in the range and resonance of his personal voice. But post-Romantic poets from Tennyson and Browning through the followers of Pound and Eliot sought the escape that the dramatic monologue offered from the restrictions of voice imposed by the mere personality of the poet" (p. 30). For a study of the dramatic monologue that recognizes Donne's place in the evolution of the genre, see W. David Shaw, *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

unconscious, the genre allowing the poet to explore what a speaker would suppress or is him/herself imperfectly conscious of. Donne's affinities with his "great-grandson," Robert Browning, have been noted in this regard, most recently by N. H. Keeble:

> This is why Donne is so mercurial, chameleon-like, untroubled by contradiction. For all the persuasiveness of their speaking voice, the "Songs and Sonets" anticipate not the subjectivity which was to become the lyrical standard of the romantics but the monologues of Browning, which Browning himself designated dramatic rather than lyrical. They are, like Browning's poems, "so many utterances of so many imaginary persons," and so, of course, in the line to Eliot—who, with a generic appropriateness to equal the titling of Donne's love poems "Songs and Sonets," accorded J. Alfred Prufrock a love *song*.[9]

Curiously, Kipling is rarely considered in studies of the dramatic monologue (he is mentioned only in passing, when at all, in influential books on the subject by Christ, Robert Langbaum, and W. David Shaw), yet he did more than Wordsworth to introduce into poetry the language that common people actually use. And, as the most popular poet of his day, he wielded an influence, for better or worse, upon early twentieth century poets, so dissimilar a poet as T. S. Eliot editing a selection of Kipling's verse well after it had gone out of fashion. Kipling's letter to Edward White begs further examination of how early twentieth-century poets came to practice the dramatic monologue and understood the genre to have evolved—from Browning through Pound, as criticism

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[9]"To 'build in sonnets pretty roomes?': Donne and the Renaissance Love Lyric," in *Donne and the Resources of Kind*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Damian Grade (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), pp. 71–86, 82. For a provocative comparison of Donne and Browning, see Shaw, *Origins*, pp. 167–172.

Other readers have sensed Browning's kinship with Donne but, like Keeble, allege only a general relationship. See, for example, John Hollander's observation that Samuel Taylor Coleridge's comments on Donne's metrics and syntax "might just as well be about Browning" ("Donne and the Limits of Lyric," repr. in *John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Metaphysical Poets: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1986], p. 28).

oftentimes assumes, or in the line descending from Donne through Browning and Kipling in the latter's ongoing experiments with a natural voice speaking under the pressure of an emotionally conflicted moment. The modernist dramatic monologue is an area of study where the voiceprint of John Donne registers only faintly, but in such a way as to invite closer examination than it has thus far received.[10]

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On 30 December 1940—the night that Tennessee Williams's first commercially produced play, *Battle of Angels*, premiered in Boston—sulphurous clouds of smoke from the disastrously under-rehearsed concluding conflagration of Myrna Torrance's confectionary sent audience members (already indignant with the play's unabashed celebration of sexual "wildness") scurrying up the aisles of the theater as Miriam Hopkins and the other members of the cast struggled to make their curtain bows. William Jay Smith, a close friend of Williams's from the latter's stint as a late-blooming undergraduate at Washington University in St. Louis, reports that following this debacle, he and Williams retreated to the playwright's hotel room where Williams "went to his suitcase and took out an anthology of poetry and asked me to read aloud to him the poems of John Donne, which I did for the next few hours."[11]

Smith does not specify with which anthology Williams traveled, or which Donne poems the friends comforted themselves by reading that night of enormous personal and professional disappointment; nor have I found any direct allusion to Donne in any of Williams's plays, fiction or among those letters thus far published.[12] But should one be surprised to

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[10]Donne is associated with Kipling in the mind of at least one writer who acknowledged being influenced by both. When asked to name his literary forebears, novelist Ernest Hemingway included Donne and Andrew Marvell with "the good Kipling." Hemingway's statement was made in an interview with George Plimpton that is quoted in Elliott L. Gilbert, *The Good Kipling: Studies in the Short Story* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1970), p. 4.

[11]Quoted in Lyle Leverich, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York: Crown, 1995), p. 392.

[12]Scholars may, however, plausibly speculate upon who introduced Williams to Donne's poetry. In 1937, the 26-year old academically underachieving

find Donne's spirit subtly infusing a play which depends upon the conflict between dull sublunary lovers' love and those whose love makes them as rare as the phoenix? "They've passed a law against passion," Sandra warns embattled lovers Myra and Val at the climax of the play, echoing what might be seen as well as the conflict between the exasperated speaker and his unnamed interlocutor at the opening of Donne's "The Canonization." "Our license has been revoked. We have to give it up or else be ostracized. . . . Whoever has too much passion, we're going to be burned like witches because we know too much."[13] Williams would make a career developing characters whose hunger for fulfillment is expressed in terms of intense sexual need yet informed by a spiritual aspiration that is alien to their more complacent neighbors (I think of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Alma in both *Summer and Smoke* and *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, Sebastian in *Suddenly, Last Summer*, Hannah Jelkes and Shannon in *Night of the Iguana*, and August in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*). Should any reader wonder, then, that he would turn to John Donne for comfort and reaffirmation at a time of enormous personal and professional trauma? And would Williams scholars be discomforted to recognize that the poetic voice and "reciprocating physical interior" to which Williams appears to have vibrated most sympathetically as he worked on a play that he later described as touching "upon human longings, about the sometimes conflicting desires of the flesh and the spirit" should be, not Anton

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Williams was once again living with his parents in St. Louis while taking night classes at Washington University where he socialized with a graduate student working on a master's degree in English named Antoinette Louise Krause. Their joint friend, William Jay Smith, identifies John Donne as the subject of Krause's thesis. Donne was also, Smith says, the primary influence upon "the metaphysical poems [written by Krause] that impressed Tom and me" (quoted in Tennessee Williams, *Notebooks*, ed. Margaret Bradham Thornton [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006], p. 100 n. 181.) Krause's name does not appear in the three annotated bibliographies of Donne criticism edited by John R. Roberts, and thus far I have not been able to ascertain whether she published on Donne under a married name.

[13] *Battle of Angels*, in *Plays 1937–55*, ed. Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holdi[t]ch (New York: Library of America, 2000), p. 258.

Chekhov's, Hart Crane's, or D. H. Lawrence's (Tennessee's three most often cited early influences), but John Donne's?[14]

Donne's difficult-to-measure influence upon Tennessee Williams raises the question of how Donne scholarship can calibrate the poet's impact on modern writers who, daring to look beyond social proscriptions upon human sexual behavior, explore the ways in which human sexuality and spirituality cohere. For example, at the Eighth D. H. Lawrence International Symposium in Naples, Italy, in 2001, Prof. Kirpal Singh of the Univ of Singapore delivered a paper titled "Lawrence as Progenitor: Confessional Poetry, Literary Genre" in which he provocatively asserted that the English language poet with whom Lawrence has the most in common is John Donne, Lawrence sharing with his metaphysical forebear the impulse to see human sexuality in sacramental terms and to push towards an "erotic spirituality."[15] Williams's indebtedness to Lawrence is easily documented by his extensive comments upon the latter in his notebooks and letters, by his visit to and subsequent correspondence with Lawrence's widow Freida in Taos, New Mexico, and by his unsuccessful collaboration with Donald Windham on the dramatization of a short story by Lawrence (*You Touched Me!*, 1945). Conversely, despite the fact that Lawrence regularly commented upon his reading in his correspondence with friends, there is not a single reference to Donne in the eight-volume Cambridge University Press edition of Lawrence's *Collected Letters*. And the only mention of Donne in Lawrence's other writing is a dismissive sentence in the essay "Introduction to These Paintings" in which Donne's decision to take orders "after the exacerbated revulsion-attraction excitement of his early poetry" is associated with Hamlet's being "overpowered by horrible revulsion from his physical connexion [sic]" with his mother and Ophelia as illustrations of the way in which, according to Lawrence, a "terror,

[14]"The History of a Play," in *Plays 1937–55*, pp. 275–286; quotation on p. 281.

[15]The term is T. Anthony Perry's, which he develops in *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Ebreo to Donne* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

almost a horror of sexual life" gripped English consciousness in the Elizabethan age.[16]

Still, can anyone already familiar with Donne not hear a resonating "interior structure" in Rupert Birkin's attempt in Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920) to reconcile the mind's and the body's differing kinds of knowledge, as well as to balance between the desire for communion and the need to protect one's individuality? Mark Spilka has analyzed Lawrence's concern within that novel with the paradox that while "the individual can only be fulfilled through contact and communion with his fellow men and women," such contact threatens to obliterate "the intrinsic 'otherness' of each participant."[17] The model that Birkin proposes to Ursula for how they can satisfy each other without either of them sacrificing his or her autonomy is termed "star equilibrium"—that is, "a pure balance of two single beings:—as the stars balance each other."[18] Lawrence's image derives from modern astral physics but is also quintessentially Donnean (consider the twin poles that keep a planet in orbit in the opening conceit of "Goodfriday, 1613"). Lawrence entered London literary circles in 1912–1913 with the publication of *Sons and Lovers* and *Love Poems*—that is, just as Sir Herbert J. C. Grierson's important edition of Donne's poetry appeared, followed by T. S. Eliot's influential review. Thus, if Donne was not a direct influence on Lawrence, Grierson's recovery and Eliot's promotion of Donne's work formed part of a very specific cultural moment in which boundaries

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[16]"Introduction to These Paintings" was collected among Lawrence's posthumously published papers in *Phoenix* (1936; repr., London: William Heinemann, 1961), pp. 551–584; the passage quoted appears on pp. 551–552. Even if Lawrence never quotes directly from, or alludes to, a Donne poem, we do know that Lawrence was first exposed to the poet in a course on metaphysical poetry that he took at Nottingham University College in 1906 while preparing for his teaching certificate. (See Rose Marie Burrell, "A Checklist of Lawrence's Reading," in Keith Sagar, ed., *A D. H. Lawrence Handbook* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1982], pp. 59–125, the documentation concerning Lawrence's course work appearing on p. 68.) Lawrence's dismissive attitude towards Donne may stem from the carefully conservative way in which his instructor would most likely have been forced to present the poet to future school teachers.

[17]*The Love Ethic of D. H. Lawrence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), p. 127.

[18]*Women in Love* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), pp. 167–168.

between the erotic and the religious were being reset, and when the exploration of sexual psychology engaged the talents of so many writers, Lawrence foremost among them.

Donne may well be the English language poet with whom Lawrence has the most in common, as Professor Singh argues, but the puzzling absence of any verifiable connection between the two other than a dismissive comment in a little-read essay (which bespeaks, rather, Lawrence's failure to understand Donne's sexual ethos) raises the question of how measurable a print an individual poetic voice can leave after it has become part of a larger cultural moment. If Lawrence was not exploring Donne with the regularity that, for example, Rose Marie Burrell's exhaustive checklist of Lawrence's reading shows him to have been engaged with the poetry of Dante or the novels and biography of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Donne's voice may still have been carried so forcefully on the cultural airwaves of London in the 1910s and 1920s that it was absorbed so completely into the ethos of Lawrence's work that no readily recognizable print of Donne's voice survives.

Ironically, even when a modern poet alludes directly to Donne, her readers may be uncertain how to map his voiceprint—as has occurred in recent scholarship on Edna St. Vincent Millay. In a letter to her lover, George Dillon, Millay quotes Donne's "I am two fooles, I know, / For loving, and for saying so."[19] The quotation allows Millay to express the exuberance of her love even while wittily acknowledging her foolishness in loving a man who was both homosexual and fourteen years her junior.

More significantly, Millay takes the title of her most famous collection of love sonnets, *Fatal Interview* (1931), from the opening lines of Donne's "Elegie: On his Mistris": "By our first strange and fatall interview, / By all desires which thereof did ensue . . . ."[20] Curiously, Millay scholar Judith Farr concludes that while "a few lines" in the collection "are mildly metaphysical," *Fatal Interview* "owes as much to the 'songs and sonets' of *Englands Helicon* . . . as to the great sonneteers

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[19]Millay's letter is quoted by Nancy Mitford in *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 305. Donne, "The triple Foole," in Shawcross, pp. 98–99, lines 1–2.

[20]Millay explains the significance of the title in a letter to her sister Norma that is quoted in Mitford, *Savage Beauty*, p. 320. Donne, "Elegie: On his Mistris," in Shawcross, pp. 62–64, lines 1–2.

and little or nothing to Donne."[21] Ironically, Farr recognizes that Millay's volume of fifty-two sonnets is an extended meditation upon an ill-fated relationship whose disintegration is accepted by the female speaker as inevitable. And she points out that Millay's female speaker poignantly compares parting with her lover to death (as, for example, in Sonnet 14: "Since of no creature living"), while struggling to learn "to outlive [the] anguish of parting."[22] Yet Farr fails to associate the central impulse of Millay's collection with Donne's valedictions, where the source of Donne's voiceprint upon Millay is most clearly to be found. I suspect that what Millay most responded to in Donne—and wished to focus her reader's attention upon in her own collection by quoting him in her title—is his passionate voicing of the paradoxes of desire. By calling attention in the title of her collection to Donne's influence, Millay reveals the primary way in which she intended the collection to be read—that is, as a woman's voicing of Donne's celebration of the ways in which separation paradoxically proves the strength of love. Her volume asks to be considered—not as a collection of "songs and sonets," as Farr would have it—but as an extended Donnean valediction.

Like Donne's "great-grandfathering" of the modernist dramatic monologue, Donne's influence upon the representation of passion by twentieth-century poets remains a subject to be explored.[23] His spirit

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[21]"Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and the Elizabethan Sonnet Tradition," in *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, ed. Maynard Mack and George DeForest Lord (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 287–305; quotation, p. 293.

[22]Farr, "Elinor Wylie," p. 293.

[23]Offering an excellent analysis of William Butler Yeats's ongoing engagement with the poetry of Donne, for example, Wayne R. Chapman summarizes recent critical responses to Yeats's "Chosen" that are illustrative in this regard: "Wilson and Melchiori cite its ingenuity as a philosophical counterpoint to Donne's 'Nocturnall'—as intentional 'counter-truth to [Donne's] catalogue of love's "privations"' and as Yeats's affirmation that 'sexual consummation could be the most effective expression of the achievement . . . of final unity . . . on the human and on the cosmic plane.' In emphasizing the similarity between Yeats and his Renaissance precursor, Keane stresses the Irish poet's Donnean 'laicizing' of the spiritual world, Yeats's reversal of the Neoplatonic theory of transcendence by 'identifying occult perfection with the post-coital stillness of very human lovers'" (*Yeats and English Renaissance Literature* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991], pp. 180–181).

materializes provocatively in unexpected places only, maddeningly, to fade into airy thinness, making him the Cheshire Cat of modern letters. What remains clear is that Donne's attempt to integrate the erotic and the spiritual struck a chord that set writers like Tennessee Williams, D. H. Lawrence, and Edna St. Vincent Millay reverberating sympathetically, in the process revealing something of their "reciprocating interior structures."

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The 21 January 1947 entry in Allen Ginsberg's undergraduate diaries reveals the twenty-year-old poet agonizing over his on-again, off-again love affair with the sexually rambunctious, unsettlingly promiscuous, and maddeningly unreliable Neal Cassady.

> Strangely (one hr later) I read Donne and understand him for the first time tonite. Why is Donne so good? He is not the ascetic poet, in his examinings of passion. He is not the frightful romantic glorying in the agony. He has a subtle, balanced mind—which "subtle to plague itself" is expressing in controlled form, stark, sharp imagery, passionately, and with clean intelligence, the confusion in his emotions. He catches the point where he knows what is perverse about his desire, analyzes it, purges himself not of desire but of confused and contradictory desire. He is a tragic poet, his muse is tragic; because in his poetry is the free will and the objective intelligence opposing the inevitable emotions which are fate.[24]

Clearly, the passage says more about the "confusion in his emotions" of a still-sexually-awkward college student than about Donne. But four months earlier, in September 1946, Ginsberg had included both Theodore Spencer's essay collection, *A Garland for John Donne*, and the Donne poems anthologized in Roberta Brinkley's *English Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* on the list of books that he had recently completed

[24] *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems, 1937–1952*, ed. Juanita Liebermann-Plimpton and Bill Morgan (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), p. 171.

reading.[25] And, significantly, he records in his journal revisiting Donne's lyrics in the Brinkley anthology in January 1947, Donne's poetry proving a guide of some kind to him as, tormented by his sexuality and conflicted over the affair with Cassady, he struggled with what he feared was the "sordidness" of his desire.[26] Three months later, on April 30, he records that when he met W. H. Auden for the first time, he chose to "read [my] seventeenth century style poems before him."[27]

The "seventeenth century style poems" in question are most likely the four lyrics—"Verses," "As I shall come to trust myself," "Sonnet: Now I have loved thee," and "Sonnet: My true love hath my heart"—that are dated during that tumultuous month of January 1947, that Ginsberg chose not to publish in his lifetime, and that only recently became available in Juanita Liebermann-Plimpton and Bill Morgan's edition of Ginsberg's early poems and journals. Taken together, the four poems suggest the start of an Elizabethan sonnet sequence dramatizing the "torture of equilibrium" ("Verses" 6) suffered by two lovers who initially allow the expression of their feelings to be circumscribed by concern for "honor," only, in the fourth poem, to recognize that their relationship has been characterized by alternating states of unequal affection:

> I had a heart, was hot, and now I freeze,
> I got an icebox for a kitchen range.
> And he, who has my heart, is amorous,
> As I loved him, he loves me now, and more.
> ("Sonnet: My true love hath my heart," 3–6)

Whereas Cassady already possessed a wealth of sexual experience and was never interested in a monogamous relationship with Ginsberg, the latter was overwhelmed by his first serious sexual and romantic liaison. Ginsberg was tormented by Cassady's sudden disappearances and returns, by the other man's alternating sexual indifference (as he blithely pursued other relationships) and ardor (Cassady was happy to "ball" with

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[25]Ginsberg, *Book of Martyrdom and Artifice*, p. 150.

[26]Ginsberg, *Book of Martyrdom and Artifice*, pp. 174 (Ginsberg's rereading Donne), 176 and 183–184 (Ginsberg's sexual torment relating to Cassidy), and 187 ("sordidness").

[27]Ginsberg, *Book of Martyrdom and Artifice*, p. 187.

anyone, and was genuinely fond of Ginsberg, if frustrated by the latter's possessiveness).

Writing the poems seems to have had a therapeutic effect upon Ginsberg. In the first poem an unidentified third person comments upon the "predicament" of two lovers whose gender is left unspecified, some self-censure mechanism (perhaps the notion of "Honor" mentioned in line 3) preventing Ginsberg from acknowledging his homosexuality, much less admitting how unhappy his feelings for Cassady sometimes left him. Yet in the fourth poem a first-person speaker openly addresses the charge that it is his own "excess of love" (10) that alienates his beloved, whom he casually acknowledges is a man ("My true love hath my heart, and I have *his*," 1, emphasis added). The poems document a pivotal moment in Ginsberg's emotional development as he sought a partner with whom he might create a "covenant" that joined two men both sexually and emotionally. The poems also mark a stage in Ginsberg's poetic experimentation as he struggled to make his verse as emotionally honest as possible.

Significantly, Donne's voiceprint is recognizable in all four poems. "Verses" offers a wry and somewhat bitter comment upon the ways in which two lovers allow their concern for "Honor" to circumscribe their desire, reducing the heat of passion to a "grey world . . . cold as steel" (4). While relying upon Donnean phallic double entendre (the lovers who will not allow themselves to enjoy sexual satisfaction are "as rigid as two painful stars," 9), the poem inverts Donne's "The Flea" in that a concern for "Honor" is allowed to keep the lovers apart. More importantly, the poem reverses the final effect of Donne's "The Extasie," the speaker of Ginsberg's "Verses" being the descendent of the witness hypothesized in Donne's last stanza who is asked to mark what change occurs in two lovers' mutual ecstasy when their souls are "to bodies gone" ("Extasie," 73–76). In Ginsberg's case, however, Donne's "great Prince" is allowed to languish "in prison" (compare "Extasie," 68, and "Verses," 10) because Ginsberg's "pure lovers" are unable to allow their "soules [to] descend / T'affections" ("Extasie," 65–66). The epitaph provided Ginsberg's doomed lovers parodies the physical union that Donne's lovers continue to enjoy after death in "The Relique" and "The Funerall":

> Equilibrists lie here; stranger, tread light.
> Close, but untouching in each other's sight,

> Moldered the lips and asking the tall skull,
> Let them lie perilous and beautiful.
> ("Verses," 17–20)

The sonnet, "As I shall come to trust myself," addresses the Donnean issue of mutuality in love. Just as the speaker of Donne's "The good-morrow" delights to see himself reflected in his beloved's eyes—"And true plaine hearts doe in the faces rest" (16)—Ginsberg's speaker wonders at the way that lovers, by "possess[ing] each other's image," are able "in each other to perfection bring / Our intellectual imagining" ("As I shall," 12–14). Likewise, in "Sonnet: Now I have loved thee," a speaker adopts the playfully cynical tone employed in poems like Donne's "Womans constancy" and "The Legacie" when addressing the changeableness of love. In making an ironic "valediction" (4) to his lover, however, Ginsberg's speaker betrays much of the same anxiety that colors Donne's own "Farewell to love": "I would that love were long, and love were wise, / That lovers loved themselves as well as pain, / I would this love might last eternities—" (9–11).

Ginsberg's fourth poem, "Sonnet: My true love hath my heart," echoes Donne's concern that "What ever dyes, was not mixt equally" ("The good-morrow," 19). Well might the speaker of Ginsberg's "Now I have loved thee" hope for a love that might last eternities—that is, a love like the one celebrated in Donne's "Loves growth" and "The Anniversarie." But more often the reality is that the exchange of hearts is "not fair exchange" ("My true love," 2), as the speaker of Donne's "Loves exchange" likewise comments, albeit far more caustically than Ginsberg. In its parody of the conventional Petrarchan oxymoron that the lover is simultaneously feverish with passion and chilled by his mistress's inaccessibility, the final poem in Ginsberg's mini-sequence wittily adapts Donne's conceited manner by appropriating the most unromantic vehicles to talk about love: "I had a heart, was hot, and now I freeze, / I got an icebox for a kitchen range" (3–4). However, in his acceptance of the impasse at which he and his lover find themselves, Ginsberg's "Sonnet: My true love hath my heart" comes closer to Shakespeare's sonnets on the Dark Lady than to Donne's *Songs and Sonets*: resignation is not a stance taken by Donne's lovers.

Knowing now how deeply engaged Ginsberg was by Donne early in his poetic development, can one discover a sustained voiceprint through

the Ginsberg canon? Apparently not, Ginsberg falling under the influence of Jack Kerouac, among other models. Ironically, Ginsberg scholarship is replete with analyses of the poet's indebtedness to the mysticism of William Blake and the democratic impulses of Walt Whitman. Bill Morgan, Ginsberg's most recent biographer, credits William Carlos Williams as Ginsberg's model for "poetry as an extension of spoken language" and Neal Cassady as having taught Ginsberg how to "capture the spontaneity of . . . pure speech."[28] But the poet who left one of the earliest voiceprints on the patron saint of post-war alternative culture in his search for a poetic line that approaches common speech and that allows a frank discussion of human sexuality, both abject and ecstatic, seems to have been John Donne.

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A voiceprint can be traced through time, but can one trace it from one language to another? Consider the case of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who arrived in London on 16 June 1912 on an extended stay that would put him in contact with the leading literary figures of the day. He brought with him his own translation from Bengali into English of his *Gitanjali*, a lyric collection that was widely read and enthusiastically promoted by such new-found colleagues as Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats.[29] His stay would conclude with the

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[28]*I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Viking, 2006), pp. 132, 133.

[29]In 1912, Yeats supplied an introduction to the English-language translation that Tagore had prepared of his own *Gitanjali*, in which he explained why Tagore's poems "have stirred my blood as nothing has for years" ("*Gitanjali*," repr. in W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* [New York: Macmillan, 1961], pp. 387–395; quotation on p. 387). Praising the poems as evidence of "a tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing" (p. 390), Yeats argues that Tagore's lyrics possess an intensity in which "the cry of the flesh and the cry of the soul seem one" (p. 393). Yeats's assertion that the reader "understands at every moment that he [Tagore] is so abundant, so spontaneous, so daring in his passion, so full of surprise, because he is doing something which has never seemed strange, unnatural, or in need of defense" (p. 391) might, but for the last part, just as accurately have been written to describe Donne. Although Yeats would include Tagore in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), he eventually

announcement made on 13 November 1913, of his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, largely at the instigation of Pound and Yeats, making him the first non-Anglo-European to be so honored.

Like Lawrence, then, Tagore was in London when Grierson's monumental two-volume edition of *The Poems of John Donne* appeared in 1912. In a movement that has yet to be documented by Donne scholarship, Donne's voiceprint appears throughout Tagore's subsequent canon, and continues through Tagore's mediation into modern Indian culture.[30] For example, in Tagore's novel, *Sesher Kavita* ("The Last Poem," which has yet to be translated from Bengali into English), Amit—who begins the novel as an irresponsible philanderer—metamorphoses into the devoted lover of Labanya. "For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love!" he says in a witty exchange with his beloved. Tagore's novel, an Indian colleague tells me, is distinguished by its language: "scintillating prose interwoven with exquisite poetry and sparkling with quick wit and chirpy humor," manifesting "an amazing economy of words."[31] The novel—and Tagore's use of Donne's language—continues to be widely quoted by young lovers in India.

Tagore did not discover in Donne an original model for the mix of eroticism and spirituality that he celebrated in his *Gitanjali*, for clearly this was already a well-established element of Indian culture (witness the temple carvings at Khajuraho). Rather, Donne proved a congenial poetic spirit whose lyrics set Tagore's own strings to vibrating sympathetically. And through Tagore—a Renaissance man who (in addition to being a novelist, poet, playwright, painter, spiritual leader, social reformer, and

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distanced himself from the Bengali poet's work, arguing late in life that "I am for the intellect. Tagore is vague but in my poetry I have arrived at clear, logical expression" (quoted in R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life, Volume 2: The Arch-Poet, 1915–1939* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], p. 585). Significantly, it is Donne's ability to combine intellectual clarity with strong emotion that Yeats found so appealing, as he repeatedly emphasized in his correspondence with Sir Herbert J. C. Grierson; see Chapman, *Yeats and English Renaissance Literature*, chap. 5.

[30]The observations that follow are indebted to my conversations and correspondence with Tagore scholar Basudeb Chakraborti, and with his colleagues at the University of Kalyani in West Bengal, India, where I spent an engaging week in fall 2006.

[31]Basudeb Chakraborti, private communication, 23 January 2007.

educational and agricultural theorist) was also the prolific author of some 3000 songs, many of which continue to be widely played on Indian radio and used in South Asian film—Donne's influence has extended into many quarters of twentieth century Indian culture. At a Fall 2006 international symposium on metaphysical poetry hosted by the University of Kalyani, papers analyzed Donne's voiceprint in the work of a dozen or more Indian poets.[32] Ignorant of Bengali and Hindi, I could not myself hear the echoes that my Indian colleagues applauded so warmly, leaving me to puzzle how the voiceprint of Donne can be mapped when translated into another language and mediated by a spirit as powerful as Tagore's.

"What ever dyes, was not mixt equally," observes the speaker of Donne's "The good-morrow" (19). Is it possible to isolate the original note struck by Donne in the symphony of sympathetic reverberations that flow from seventeenth-century London to modern Calcutta? Can an English-language reader hope to identify Donne's voiceprint when it is carried by a bilingual poet like Tagore into Bengali, a language whose sounds, emotional colors, and thought structures are, finally, so alien to Donne's own? There is both wonder and comfort to be found in the paradox that as long as the strings of Tagore's sitar do not slacken, the original strains of Donne's music cannot die, however far across the oceans of space and time they are carried.

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[32]"Re-Evaluations: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Metaphysical Poetry," an international seminar that was organized by Professors Sarbani Chaudhury and Niladri Chatterjee, was held at the University of Kalyani on 21 November 2006. In particular I am indebted to Dr. Debiprasad Bhattacharya, who read a valuable paper on "Metaphysical Poetry and Bengali Poets," and Dr. P. K. Mitra, who conducted a spirited poetry reading in which selections from twentieth-century Indian poets were juxtaposed with the Donne lyrics that they echo. I regret that my ignorance of both Bengali and Hindi left me a passive participant during these sessions, and that I have thus far not been able to secure either a copy of Dr. Bhattacharya's paper or a list of the Indian poems that were read by Dr. Mitra.