John Donne Journal,
Vol. 2, No. 2 (1983)

A Sense of the Future: Projected Audiences of Donne and Jonson

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Readers of seventeenth-century English literature soon discover that writers of this period establish various, often complex relationships with their contemporary audiences. Sometimes there is, as in Dryden, a sense of kinship with the present audience, a sense of shared values and assumptions; sometimes, as in Bunyan, a sense of opposition, in which case a writer may be fired by the desire to convert recalcitrant readers. Several writers, however, seem to have believed that they were speaking not simply to the present but to the future. In this paper, I will focus on two very different poets—Donne and Jonson—who project in their work an awareness of a potential relationship between their poems and readers of some future age, readers who may be affected, even transformed by the surviving poems, or who themselves may have a creative, regenerative effect on the poetry.

We might expect that Donne, with his overwhelming sense of history as a process of universal decay, would not put much trust in the future. If things are always getting worse, succeeding generations presumably will be even more degenerate than the present. Moreover, the apocalyptic feeling that the world will soon end—particularly evident in Donne's *First Anniversary*—would seem to discourage a writer from placing his hopes in future readers. As Sir Thomas Browne wrote in *Hydriotaphia*, "the remaining particle of futurity" is so small that it is "too late to be ambitious" of having our names remembered and praised by future generations.[1] Donne shared Browne's belief that time was running out, that it was foolish to trust to any earthly fame; and yet several poems betray a concern with having a future audience.

Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* have long been admired for their immediacy, their special blend of the lyric and dramatic. The

speakers typically address a present, immediate audience, often the mistress. But some of the *Songs and Sonnets* move out from their concern with the private, immediate audience to imagine a future, more public one. "Valediction of the booke" asks his mistress to write a book from the love letters that have passed between them. Epitomizing all learning, this book would be "as long-liv'd as the elements" and would allow him to speak to "posterity."[2] It would survive to teach all sciences and arts, were there to be another barbarian invasion. Though Donne is poking fun at the so-called "learning" of his day, this poem also reveals his fascination with the possibility of writing to the future.

In the "Valediction," the book he imagines surviving would be written by his mistress. But in other poems, Donne shows a speculative interest in the effect that his own poems might have on the future. "The Relique" is perhaps concerned less with the present moment and audience than with some indeterminate future time "when my grave is broke up againe" (1). Donne speculates that his poem may survive, like the "bracelet of bright haire" (6), to instruct the future:

> I would have that age by this paper taught
> What miracles we harmless lovers wrought. (21-22)

In describing their transcendent, faithful, exceptional love, the poem will embody perfection and transmit it to some future age, much as the book in the "Valediction" will preserve all that is valuable. Though in the fictional present of the poem he addresses his mistress, then he will speak to the entire "age." His appreciative audience will be larger: "All women shall adore us, and some men" (19). Indeed, by the end of the poem, Donne has moved so far away from his present, immediate audience that he speaks as it were to these projected future readers, referring now to the mistress not simply in the third person but in the past tense:

> These miracles wee did; but now alas,
> All measure, and all language, I should passe,
> Should I tell what a miracle she was. (31-33)

Given the *Songs and Sonnets*' satiric denigration of the public and court worlds, and the implication that the lovers stand in opposition to the values of the external world, it seems fitting that Donne would turn away from the public audience of the present. He circulated his poems in manuscript among a select few; and usually he intimately addressed a single person within the fiction

of the poem. But the approval of the few and the attractions of the private world of love, which could make him feel that "Nothing else is"—these were not always enough. Those poems that project a future audience suggest that Donne at times wanted an influence greater than the circle of the present could afford. So he prophetically looked towards the future for his largest audience, hoping to find there the satisfaction of more public acclaim.

"The Canonization" is a case in point. Here Donne separates himself and his love from what he sees as the common, materialistic concerns of his time, and he defines himself as at odds with, misunderstood by his present world. Defying it, he looks not simply to the private world of love but to the future:

> We'll build in sonnets pretty roomes,
> As well a well-wrought urne becomes
> The greatest ashes, as half-acre tombes,
> And by these hymnes, all shall approve
> Us *Canoniz'd* for Love. (32-36)

The lovers will live in these poems, which will speak to a more admiring and sympathetic audience: "all" then will approve. The projected future audience is generalized, universal, not simply a few kindred souls, or the rare person refined by love such as Donne allows to overhear the lovers' "dialogue of one" in "The Extasie." The future audience will consist of all lovers, perhaps even all people. His verses will have a power that they do not possess in the present. "The Canonization" appropriately ends with Donne imaginatively presenting his future readers, moved by "these hymnes," invoking the lovers to "Beg from above / A patterne of [their] love."

In these three poems, Donne envisions a large future audience that will be taught, even transformed by his poems. Particularly in "The Canonization" the transformation takes on religious overtones, as the lovers are moved to prayer by his "hymnes." But it is the two *Anniversaries* on the death of Elizabeth Drury that most fully reveal Donne's interest in the redemptive effect his poetry might have on the future.

The *First Anniversary* addresses a contemporary audience—most generally the "sicke world" (23) that he antomizes, and, more narrowly, the few remaining people who love and practice virtue.[3] But even here Donne speaks to these regenerate few with an eye to the future, hoping to save them from future harms and temptations by telling them "the dangers and diseases of the old" world (88).

Such a concern with preserving the future might seem odd in a poem so overwhelmed by a sense that universal decay must surely mean the apocalypse is near. But I would suggest that there is throughout this poem a tension between the apocalyptic feeling of an imminent end to time and Donne's desire to insure the future through poetry. Such a tension is sharply felt at the end of the *First Anniversary* where Donne suggests that the world will not last long enough to allow him to complete his anatomy (436-40), and yet promises that he will "yearely celebrate" Elizabeth's "second birth" (450). Moreover, he insists on the lasting power of his poem to speak to the future. He compares his "song" to the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), which was to be a warning to future generations of Israelites. Donne's poem, too, preserves a lesson for those who will come after, reminding them of the lost perfection, and warning them of divine punishment for their sins. Like Moses, he has chosen poetry because of its superior power to stay in the hearer's memory and thus to have the most "lasting" effect:

> . . . God did make
> A last, and lastingst peece, a song. He spake
> To *Moses* to deliver unto all,
> That song: because hee knew they would let fall
> The Law, the Prophets, and the History,
> But keepe the song still in their memory. (461-66)

Donne's view of memory is essentially religious: he believed memory was the faculty most capable of leading man to God and thus aiding salvation.[4] But his praise in the *First Anniversary* of the mnemonic power of song suggests that perhaps Donne also had in mind Sir Philip Sidney's remark in the *Defence of Poesie* that "verse far exceedeth prose in the knitting up of memory":

> the words (besides their delight, which hath a great affinity to memory) being so set as one cannot be lost but the whole work fails; which, accusing itself, calleth the remembrance back to itself, and so most strongly confirmeth it. Besides, one word so, as it were, begetting another as, be it in rhyme or measured verse, by the former a man shall have a near guess to the follower.[5]

Within the *First Anniversary* as in the "Valediction of the booke," "The Relique," and "The Canonization," Donne moves

to a sense of an expansive future audience—the "song" is to be delivered to "all" not just the few. The final lines claim that his poem will "enroule" Elizabeth's "fame." Though such an assertion of the classical and Renaissance belief in the poet's ability to immortalize the people he praises is admittedly rare in Donne, it is conventionally appropriate for epideictic poetry,[6] and we have already seen in several *Songs and Sonnets* that Donne was attracted to the possibility that his poems might survive to affect a future age. For all the differences between Donne, the private poet, and Sidney and Spenser, it would seem that Donne did not wholly abandon their interest in public poetic fame and influence.

Earthly immortality would seem to require a future of significant scope. So it is appropriate that the opening of the *Second Anniversary* suggests that the Apocalypse is further off than Donne had thought:

> Nothing could make me sooner to confesse
> That this world had an everlastingnesse,
> Than to consider, that a yeare is runne. (1-3)

With this sense of a larger future, Donne turns more sharply away from the present audience of his contemporaries. In contrast to the *First Anniversary*, Donne now finds he is alone in a corrupt world, with no one in the present to speak to:

> . . . a new Deluge, and of Lethe a flood,
> Hath drown'd us all, All have forgot all good. (27-28)

Isolated from his present world, Donne turns inward to his own soul and outward to the future, hoping that, though unappreciated (unremembered? perhaps even unheard?) by his contemporaries, he may be "hereafter prais'd" (32) for praising Elizabeth. He looks to find not just divine approval but an earthly fame for himself in the generations to come, and he envisions his poems actually having a generative effect on future poets:

> These Hymnes may work on future wits, and so
> May great Grand-children of thy praises grow. (37-38)

Despite Donne's insistence in this poem on the need for turning away from the world and "thirsting" for the Second Coming, these lines suggest a strong desire for poetic fame. And if the middle of the poem seems determinedly to condemn the world, the conclusion, where he presents Elizabeth "to posteritee" as a "patterne"

(523-24) for life and death, reminds us of Donne's persistent longing to have his poetry affect, even redeem the future.

Writers who hope to find immortality through their art would seem most likely to project a future audience for their poetry. After all, immortal fame would seem to require having a long succession of readers to praise one's poems. Though this belief in the poet's immortalizing power occasionally attracted Donne, it was of course most enthusiastically embraced in the seventeenth century by Jonson and Herrick.[7] I would like now to focus on Jonson's concern with immortal verse, for he raises some particularly intriguing ideas about the relationship between literary texts and future readers.

Jonson's faith in the immortality of verse entails a clear recognition of the importance not just of the poet but of the reader in making that verse immortal. As he claims in his poem "To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare,"[8] Shakespeare is

> . . . alive still, while thy Booke doth live,
> And we have wits to read, and praise to give. (23-24)

Shakespeare's book perpetuates his memory, but the book alone is insufficient to ensure his immortality. Unless he has proper readers (like Jonson) who have the wit to understand his work and can praise it, Shakespeare cannot live. Without diminishing his praise of Shakespeare, whose work, Jonson admits, is monumental, Jonson confers a tremendous power on the audience—they share responsibility for a poet's immortality, infusing life into his works which otherwise might die. It is clear here that Jonson recognized that the immortality of poetry depends upon a future audience of readers who appreciate and praise the literary works of the past, thus keeping them alive.

Of course, Jonson is not the only writer to acknowledge the importance of a future audience in securing immortal fame. Ovid at the end of *Metamorphoses* proclaims that he will be read through all centuries and that his name will be remembered wherever Roman power spreads. Horace in his *Odes* also looks towards the future: he will be studied by the Spaniards and those who live on the Rhone, and will be famed by posterity. Even Milton, for all his ambivalence about fame ("the last infirmity of the Noble mind"), recognizes the active role of the future audience when he speaks of his early hope that he "might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die."[9]

We should note, however, that not every writer who hoped for immortality through verse believed posterity's praise was essential. In Herrick the importance of the future audience is much diminished. It is true that Herrick's numerous poems distinguishing ideal readers from mere critics or detractors (for example, H-4, H-5, H-6, H-95) suggest that he shares Jonson's sense of the need for a fit audience, and his poem "To live merrily, and to trust to Good Verses" (H-201) implies that Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus live on in part because there are those like Herrick to read their poetry.[10] But at times, Herrick seems to despair that in the future there may not be an audience of true lovers of poetry to keep his verse alive. Though his lyrics are "legacies" to posterity (H-218), he sometimes suggests that it is more their magical quality than the approval of future readers that will enable his verses to endure. And thus we find that Herrick's poems on his hopes for poetic immortality often exclude any mention of a future audience, instead insisting on the power of his verse itself. His book is "a plant sprung up to wither never, / But like a Laurell, to grow green for ever" (H-240). Or it is a pillar of fame, impervious to all external influence: "*Fames* pillar here, at last, we set, / Out-during *Marble*, *Brasse*, or *Jet*" (H-1129).

Interestingly, it is perhaps Shakespeare's Sonnet 81 that comes closest to Jonson in its balancing of the poet's immortalizing power with an awareness of the vital importance of the future readers in granting that immortality. As Shakespeare promises immortality to the young man, he vividly projects a sense of a future audience:

> Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
> Which eyes not yet created shall o'erread;
> And tongues to be your being shall rehearse
> When all the breathes of this world are dead.
> You still shall live (such virtue hath my pen)
> Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.[11]

Jonson presents himself in his poem on Shakespeare not just as powerful poet–apotheosizing Shakespeare, resurrecting him–but as ideal reader of Shakespeare's work, the kind of reader who can keep Shakespeare alive. This insistence on the ideal reader points to an important difference between Jonson's sense of the future audience and Shakespeare's. Shakespeare envisions a universal audience–the "eyes" and "tongues" of "men." But Jonson discriminates more narrowly. For Jonson, the only readers who can perpetuate the poet are the few who possess true judgment.

Jonson has an unusually strong sense of the reader's ability to affect the literary text. As he suggests in Epigramme 58, an ignorant person can injure a good poet's verses "disjoynt[ing]" his "sharpnesse" and his "sense" (5-6). But if the bad reader mars the text, the good reader—the person of judgment—also affects it. In Epigramme 96, Jonson praises fellow-poet John Donne as the ideal reader of his poems, and hopes that he'll find even "one / Mark'd by [Donne's] hand" (7-8). The good reader leaves his mark on the text as he confers his stamp of approval. Readers thus have either a creative or destructive effect on the literary text. Despite its claims to permanence, the poem itself is not something fixed and unalterable (like Herrick's pillar of fame, resistant to external influence).

As Jonson's poems to Shakespeare and Donne suggest, Jonson believed that a writer's true audience is actually other writers. Not looking for "broad" fame (Epigramme 96), the poet writes for other poets who can properly appreciate him.[12] Indeed, poets seem an unusually ideal audience because they possess a special talent for keeping great writers alive—through the art of imitation and translation.

As Jonson insisted in *Timber; or Discoveries*, the good writer imitates the best authors of the past. In imitating them, he assimilates and "digests" them, converting their riches to his own use."[13] Since language is the "Image" of a man's mind, a poem is the image of its author, and another writer who imitates or translates that poem is, in an important sense, preserving or perpetuating the image of the original author. Imitation thus becomes one of the highest forms of praise. It allows a poet to remain alive, indeed to be repeatedly reborn, long after his physical death. (We should recall Donne's hope that his *Second Anniversary* might generate still other poems in "future wits.")

Jonson's interest in writers' being kept alive by writers in later generations appears clearly in two poems he wrote to translators (and we should remember that translation was, for Jonson, close kin to imitation). In Epigramme 95, he praises Sir Henry Savile for translating Tacitus:

> If, my religion safe, I durst embrace
> That stranger doctrine of *Pythagoras*,
> I should beleeve, the soule of *Tacitus*
> In thee, most weighty *Savile*, liv'd to us:
> So hast thou rendred him in all his bounds,
> And all his numbers, both of sense, and sounds.
> (1-6)

Tacitus' soul is contained in his writings; it lives on and is revived when a reader like Savile truly understands him and perpetuates him in translation. In Epigramme 110, "To Clement Edmonds, on his Caesar's *Commentaries observ'd and translated*," Jonson suggests, as he did in the Shakespeare poem, that simply for a person to have written an important work is not enough: one needs other writers in the future to "re-make" him. Edmonds is a man who has truly "read" and "understood" Caesar (16). His "learned hand" and true "*Promethean* art"

> T'all future time, not onely doth restore
> His [Caesar's] life, but makes, that he can dye
> no more. (21-22)

Jonson's poetry itself translates and imitates the great classical writers, perhaps most especially Horace.[14] This is a large part of what it meant for Jonson to be a poet: to perpetuate the best of the past, while making one's own distinctive contribution.

The relationship Jonson saw between himself (or Edmonds or Savile) and the great writers of the classical past suggests the analogous relationship he projected between himself and his future audience. Just as he is the true reader of Horace, so he hopes that his verses too will live, that they will be worthy of praise and imitation by writers who come after him. If, as Richard Peterson has suggested, Jonson saw himself as "a link in a venerable chain of writers stretching back to classical times,"[15] Jonson also seems to have hoped that there would be poets to follow who would creatively perpetuate his image, keeping his thoughts and words alive. Clearly he did not expect the lineage, the literary tradition of which he saw himself the inheritor, to end with himself. Indeed, his playful yet serious claim to be "father" of the "Tribe of Ben" bespeaks his hope for perpetuation in the future through his poetic "sons."

The fear, of course, is that one's work will not live, that like the people who had no Muse to celebrate their name, the text will lie forgotten.[16] Jonson suggests in his poem on Shakespeare that those writers whose concerns are too closely tied to the present, who address only a contemporary audience, will become outmoded. They cannot speak to the future:

> The merry *Greeke*, tart *Aristophanes*,
> Neat *Terence*, witty *Plautus*, now not please;
> But antiquated, and deserted lye. . . .
> ("To the Memory of . . . Shakespeare," 51-57)

Jonson's sense of the need for universality is intertwined with his sense of the poet's need to write, not just for the present, with a sense of past tradition, but for the future as well.

I would like to end with a quotation from Sir Francis Bacon which sums up eloquently what Donne and Jonson in their admittedly different ways had in mind—a dynamic, generative (or even regenerative) relationship that can exist between a literary text and its future audience. Towards the end of the first book of the *Advancement of Learning*, Bacon praises the remarkable, indeed singular ability of books to endure:

> the images of men's wits and knowledges remain in books, exempted from the wrong of time and capable of perpetual renovation. Neither are they fitly to be called images, because they generate still, and cast their seed in the minds of others, provoking and causing infinite actions and opinions in succeeding ages. So that if the invention of the ship was thought so noble . . . how much more are letters to be magnified, which as ships pass through the vast seas of time, and make ages so distant to participate of the wisdom, illuminations, and inventions, the one of the other?[17]

As living, potent things, books "generate" ideas and actions in future readers, who in their turn keep alive the writers of the past.

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NOTES

1 Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia*, Ch. V, in *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), II, 166.

2 "Valediction of the booke," ll. 19 and 4, in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1968). All quotations of Donne's poetry are from this edition.

3 See Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's identification of Donne's double audience—the sick world and the new world of the regenerate—in *Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 242-43.

4 See Achsah Guibbory, "John Donne and Memory as 'The Art of Salvation,'" *HLQ*, 43 (1980), 261-74.

5 Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. K. Duncan-Jones and J. van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), p. 101.

6 Cf. Donne's poem of praise, "To the Countess of Bedford at New-yeares Day":

> . . . I would show future times
> What you were, and, teach them to urge towards such.

Verse embalmes vertue; and Tombs, or Thrones of rimes,
Preserve fraile transitory fame, as much
As spice doth bodies from corrupt aire's touch.

Barbara K. Lewalski has argued that Donne's *Anniversaries* belong in this tradition of epideictic poetry (*Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise*), though she does not discuss Donne's concern with the immortalizing function of poetry.

7 On the Renaissance concern with the poet's immortalizing power, see J. W. Lever, *The Elizabethan Love Sonnet* (London: Methuen, 1956); O. B. Hardison, *The Enduring Monument* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1962); and Earl Miner, *The Cavalier Mode* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 143-48. See also Anne Ferry, *All in War with Time* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), for a discussion of the "eternizing conceit" in Shakespeare, Jonson, and Donne. Her emphasis is, however, quite different than mine.

8 *The Complete Poetry of Ben Jonson*, ed. William B. Hunter, Jr. (New York: Norton, 1963). Subsequent quotations of Jonson's poetry are from this edition.

9 See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XV, The Epilogue; Horace, *Odes* II.20 and III.30; John Milton, *Lycidas*, l. 71, and *The Reason of Church Government*, Book II, both in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1975), pp. 122 and 668.

10 For the text of Herrick's poems, see *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. J. Max Patrick (New York: Norton, 1968). Though Ovid and Horace insist on the importance of posterity's praise for poetic immortality, they also at times suggest that there is a magical quality in good verse—the poems, products of the soul, contain and are animated by the poet's spirit, and thus they last.

11 Shakespeare, *The Sonnets*, ed. Douglas Bush and Alfred Harbage (New York: Penguin, 1970).

12 See *Timber; or Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1947), VIII, 639, 635. See also his comment (p. 642): "To judge of Poets is only the facultie of Poets; and not of all Poets, but the best."

13 Cf. Milton's famous, impassioned comment in *Areopagitica* that a book is the progeny of a writer's soul: "For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them" (Hughes, p. 720).

14 See Richard S. Peterson, *Imitation and Praise in the Poems of Ben Jonson* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981), for an excellent discussion of Jonson's creative imitation.

15 Peterson, p. xviii.

16 See Jonson's "Epistle to Elizabeth Countess of Rutland" (*Forest* XII).

17 *Francis Bacon: A Selection of His Works*, ed. Sidney Warhaft (New York: Odyssey, 1965), p. 261.