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John Donne's Monuments

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JOHN DONNE'S MONUMENTS

In 1630, John Donne was Dean of St. Paul's, racked by sickness, losing body weight as he approached what he, and those around him, knew to be the end. The cordial his doctors forced on him, he said, was so unpleasant that "he would not drink it two dayes longer" though it might add twenty years to his life. He had long since overcome his fear of death, and in this mood, a heat returned to Donne's old body. Not a fleshy heat, writes his biographer Isaac Walton, but something much more fundamental: Donne was fired with the "natural," "radical heat" for inscribing his memory onto posterity. The Dean, who had lately expressed a wish for "dissolution," was at once "resolved" and strengthened. He called in an artist, and he kindled several blazing fires in his massive study. He stripped himself naked, tied himself inside his winding-sheet, and stood there in the firelight as the artist committed his form to paper, turning his head East to anticipate where Christ would come again in earth's last sunrise.

We all, writes Walton, have this longing, this "desire of having memory out-live our lives." In Donne's case, the painter's studies grew into the sculptor's prototypes in clay, and then in marble, and John Donne became designer of own quiet, predawn afterlife. Like the skeletons in his erotic poem "The Relic," he sleeps in a slow, dreamy contentment, a faint smile on his face. When it was installed in St. Paul's after Donne's death, his friend Henry Wotton remarked that "it seem[ed] to breath[e] faintly" as it slumbered. Londoners saved the monument from the Great Fire, and Donne still stands in the rebuilt St. Paul's today. The periodic sound of bells ensconces him; the centuries of waiting blend together; churchgoers in outlandish clothes consider him, admire him, and walk on down the choirs. Visitors are not supposed to touch the sculpture, but if you do, it is smooth, soft, and warmish, like the pages of a book.

Donne's creation of his monument culminates Walton's *Life of Dr. John Donne*, a tome I keep in its own shroud of bubble wrap and paper bags. It's a 1670 reprint, gifted to me by my mother, browning and incensial. Since I've learned more about the keeping of rare books, I've become less afraid of touching it. A quiet and intimate conversation happens when you hold a book that old; the act of contact goes both ways. It invites you to participate in its author's world: in Walton's case, that world is the Old St. Paul's, recently destroyed by the 1670 edition. Walton, Donne's contemporary, already casts the Dean's life in a gauzy light of nostalgia, walking with young Donne through the debonair, artistic circles, through the bygone reigns of Elizabeth and James, dying with him as one of the last men who could recall the Renaissance.

The capacity of John Donne – or the idea of him – to inspire posthumous stories and artificial memories of the 16th and 17th centuries, informs why I collect books, scholarly and fictional, about him. As a historian and writer, I enjoy studying how different parties have depicted him, how they translate his vast, ink-speckled body of sermons, meditations, and poetry into tangible details and immersive mental worlds. How do we, as writers, turn a writer – with ideas (especially of women and religions) antithetical to modern sensibilities – into a way of being? Part of my interest derives from learning a skill: it takes a focused mind and an engaging voice to do what Walton does, put us in the study with Donne, immerse us in the winding-sheet. Another motivation, which I did not discover until much later, is to teach myself caution. When, for example, John Stubbs opens his award-winning *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* with an episode from Donne's erotic elegies, complete with creeping into mistress' windows and concealing hushing silks, but *presented as fact*, should we be taken in?

Some of the fiction books I have play fast and loose with history: in Brian Crockett's *Love's Alchemy*, Donne roves England as James I's elite spy, getting imprisoned in a dungeon and spending three months performing calisthenics to build up his body to escape; he communes telepathically with his great-uncle, Thomas More's skull, and ends up thwarting the Gunpowder Plot. He is a dashing adulterer in Christie Dickason's romantic thriller *The Noble Assassin*, about his patroness (and in this book, lover) the Countess of Bedford. In Mary Novik's hallucinogenic drama *Conceit*, he is tormented by the erotic specter of his dead wife, Ann More, and the object of an Electral fascination by his daughter, Pegge. These books are frothy, lush, escapist. The real Donne lurks sullenly at their proximities, buffeted by the plot and the sensationalism, despite the often-gushing honor such books offer him in authors' afterwards.

It's the more realistic ones that unnerve me, and challenge my own writing as a historian, because they attract me with their accuracy, because they come so close to history. They cast profound doubts on the professed aims of biographers like Walton and Stubbs to give us Real Donne with an exclusive claim to accuracy. Is there much difference, for example, between passages like this from *John Donne: The Reformed Soul* -

[Donne's friend Thomas Egerton] became one of the very few on the expedition to receive a knighthood, which Essex conferred on him for reasons that aren't particularly clear – perhaps for services to beach sports. The Earl in any case recognized Egerton as one of his own... [Donne] now felt entitled to follow a career better suited to his intellectual abilities.... (89)

- and ones like this, in Elizabeth Gray Vining's midcentury ladies' romance, *Take Heed of Loving Me*:

The thought of Essex pricked him with discomfort. Twice he had sailed with him, one of the small, envied band of gilded young men attached to her person, last year to Cadiz, this year to the Azores, and still he was no nearer to the secretaryship he wanted than he had been....the Earl of Essex has knighted sixty-six of his followers, and John Donne was not among them (12).

As historical fiction readers, we long for facts perceived keenly by our characters. As readers of nonfiction, we want much the same, but with an unspoken understanding that we can escape the gravity of an immersive story. But in the genetic makeup of modern scholarly works like Stubbs', I cannot help but see the legacy of "biography" as it was pioneered by men like Isaac Walton: as a source of information, but a highly-charged, extremely personal and edifying information. The fascination remains not just with regards to what Donne did, but what it must have been like to *be* Donne, to sneak into the window of a mistress, to endure courtly disappointment, to curl one's toes around an urn.

My senior thesis treats Donne's period, assessing his contemporary Shakespeare in the context of social environments like Donne's own Inns of Court. So it is pleasantly ironic that my habit of collecting and assessing different Donne "experiences" (fictional, nonfictional, and both) prepared me for this work. It has primed me to be aware of the shortcomings of immersive writing, and at the same time has infected me with the proclivity. When a mentor compared my thesis to historical fiction, it was at once the highest praise and sharpest criticism. The best, I think, that I can do is embrace what I am and what these books have made me, and understand myself as a storyteller in the same way I understand Donne novelists, biographers like Walton, and even Donne himself as storytellers – storytellers making history.

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