

Helen Hackett

Katherine Rundell, *Super-infinite: The Transformations of John Donne*

Should we use Donne's life to read his works? For Cleanth Brooks, proponent of American New Criticism, the answer was 'No'. Taking the title of his 1947 work *The Well Wrought Urn* from Donne's 'The Canonisation', and using this poem as his prime example, he defined the critic's task as 'making the closest possible examination of what the poem says as a poem', free of historical or biographical contexts. This approach largely held sway until the arrival in 1981 of John Carey's exhilarating *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, which demonstrated how Donne's singular imagination could be illuminated by integrating close reading with knowledge of his life. Now Katherine Rundell, an acclaimed author of children's books who is also a Donne scholar, has taken up the task of connecting us to Donne's extraordinary mind through his eventful biography, and leaves one wondering how it could ever have been left aside. It's a tempestuous tale, encompassing growing up with a family heritage of Catholic martyrdom, apostasy, clandestine marriage to a girl of sixteen, suicidal periods, and final stardom as a preacher of visceral sermons on sin and death to crowds of thousands at Paul's Cross.

Much recent Donne scholarship has focused on this later stage of Donne's career, with a new multi-volume Oxford edition of the sermons in progress. Rundell is up-to-date with recent Donne scholarship; but her earlier chapters give us back sexy Donne, recapturing the thrill of first encountering his love-poetry as a teenager. She is also on a mission to win new recruits to his fan-club: her book is, she tells us, 'an act of evangelism'. It eloquently conveys the 'excessive, hungry, longing' qualities of the erotic poems, as well as their capacity to be 'defiantly odd', as in his best-known poem, 'The Flea'.

Yet readers may be divided by Rundell's prose style. It's amusing to describe Donne's hat, in his flamboyant portrait as a young man, as 'big enough to sail a cat in'; but

the larkiness arguably becomes slightly strained when Rundell describes the Lord Keeper as carrying the Great Seal ‘in an elaborately gold-beaded purse of the kind coveted by high school girls at prom’. There are many such unexpected images, presumably emulating Donne’s own metaphysical conceits, famously described by Samuel Johnson as devices whereby ‘the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together’. Rundell also peppers her text with fun anecdotes about life in Donne’s time: handshaking practices, swimming styles, banquets where live birds flew out of pies, and so on. She believes in grabbing and gripping the reader’s attention, asserting that Donne ‘understood that flair is its own kind of truth: if you want to make your point, make it so vivid and strange that it cuts straight through your interlocutor’s complacent inattention.’ Not all readers are inattentive, though, and while some will enjoy the efforts to sparkle and charm, others may find them a little relentless.

There are quieter moments to relish, however, as when Rundell assesses the many possible reasons for Donne’s conversion to Protestantism: ‘His priorities shifted, realigned, took on new shapes. You, too, have experienced time.’ She writes movingly of Donne’s battles with dissatisfaction, physical pain, grief, and despair, and his obsession with his own mortality. Quotations from letters and prose-works as well as the poems give us a vivid sense of his distinctive voice and his intellectual intensity, restlessness, and wit; while the book is by no means lacking in serious and thought-provoking ideas. One of Carey’s most penetrating insights into Donne’s mind was the poet’s fascination with ‘meeting places for opposites’ which are ‘simultaneously single and double’, including angels (hovering between materiality and immateriality), coins (physical objects with abstract value), and maps (containing both east and west). Rundell takes this point towards current preoccupations, noting Donne’s love of the *trans-* prefix, as in ‘transpose’, ‘translate’, and ‘transport’, and that his frequent merging of body and soul sometimes includes blurring male and female: he tells his lover in ‘The Relic’ that ‘diff’rence of sex no more we knew / Than our guardian

angels do'. She finds that he also favours the *super-* prefix, expressing a mind constantly reaching beyond the possible, as in his coinage 'super-infinite' which she takes as her title. There were many different Donnes, as Rundell strives to show us; but above all, she urgently and admirably wants us to appreciate that he understood the extremities of human experience and the transformative powers of language like no-one else before or since.

Biographical note:

Helen Hackett is a Professor of English Literature at University College London. Her most recent book is *The Elizabethan Mind*, published in May 2022 by Yale University Press.