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UnCalifornian.

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Sunbathing (1976)

That year it stopped snowing earlier than usual, the sun came out, and spring was atypically Californian. So I decided to get a tan and become a metaphysical poet. I sneaked away from work every morning for two or three hours and laid out in the sun reading John Donne.

I browned imperfectly, in patches and streaks, which left plenty of time to discover how much I had in common with the guy.

This was a private joke in three parts.

First, there was a similarity of intellectual attitude: not just the prelapsarian lack of dissociation of thought and sensibility,¹ but a sense of humor that was energized by the kind of allergic reaction that sets in after you have stuffed your head with too much scholarly nonsense; even if we respected the learning we were attempting to acquire, we needed to push back against it, to make fun of it, to maintain our independence of mind. — It was like a spring being compressed; at some point it went boing. — *That* was the animating force behind the metaphysical poet: he had to play with ideas, make fun of them if necessary, to keep from being crushed beneath their weight.

¹ See T. S. Eliot, review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*. Selected and edited, with an Essay, by Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon Press. London; Milford) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, October 1921. — “[Modern poets] think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. ... In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered” — Eliot’s version of the Myth of the Fall. — I never had this problem, and in fact have never been able to understand it.

Second, there is a portrait of the young Donne, rather foppishly attired, painted on the eve of the Essex expedition of 1596, and at that time, at least, he looked quite a bit like me. (For years I searched in vain for a hat that outrageous.)

Third, his career was ruined by an improvident marriage to a woman named Anne More.

Since I was trying to relive the seventeenth century anyway, trying to understand the foundations of modern science by retracing the steps that had erected them, I thought I might as well follow Quine's suggestion for the anthropologist and go completely native. — I composed imitations of Donne and Marvell, wrote sonnets, attempted plays in iambics. — As always, I took a perverse satisfaction in the knowledge that no one else could possibly understand my motivations or see what the fuck I was trying to do. — Like Wilde, I lived in perennial fear of not being misunderstood.

I still have more of the verse than I care to admit. — As for the tan, after a month of dogged effort it had nearly attained mediocrity, until I stayed up all night and it vanished, restoring my usual pallor. — History is made at night, says Pynchon. — Procul Harum wrote my theme music long ago.

I linger yet with Nature, for the Night
Hath been to me a more familiar face
Than that of man; and in her starry shade
Of dim and solitary loveliness,
I learn'd the language of another world.

[Byron: *Manfred*.]