



## INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY RAMIE TARGOFF

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When I first arrived this fall, I anticipated the year would be divided between pursuing my work at the Wissenschaftskolleg and reaping the benefits of Berlin. In many respects, this has been true and has created a type of double life: the weekdays spent in my Grunewald office and in the colloquium room, the evenings and weekends in museums and restaurants, at operas or concerts. Because my husband and I decided to live off-campus, in a flat on Ludwigkirchplatz in Wilmersdorf, this division between work and play was in some sense intensified and concentrated the experience of both.

This is all true: but in ways that I could never have anticipated, the two spheres of my life in Berlin have had a tremendous continuity. I have been writing a book on the seventeenth-century English poet, John Donne, who is generally regarded as the inventor of “metaphysical” poetry. My interests in Donne focus on his metaphysics of body and soul, and in particular, on his aversion to separating the two parts of himself. Having died a few

years before the publication of the *Discourse on Method*, Donne was one of the seventeenth-century's last pre-Cartesian resisters of dualism. As it turns out, although I was not officially a member of a working group, a number of my colleagues at the Kolleg have done work on subtly but strikingly related subjects, and the resonances have clearly made their mark in the pages of my own writing. My discussions with Christoph Horn about Aristotle and Plotinus; Susan James about Descartes; Robert Pippin about Kant and Hegel; Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus about Tesauro and Gracian; Christof Rapp about Aristotle and Aquinas; Beate Rössler about Heidegger; Nono Raz-Krakotzkin about early modern Jewish mysticism; and Quentin Skinner about Hobbes and seventeenth-century materialism have helped me simultaneously contextualize and particularize my project on Donne. In a seminar I organized for a small number of Fellows on Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* that met every three or four weeks this spring, I learned a great deal about ancient atomism and natural philosophy and came to understand the classical underpinnings of Donne's occasional materialism. And from Stefan Wild's colloquium on Muslim paradise, I became aware just how peculiar Donne's imaginings of heaven really were. Despite his virtual obsession with being resurrected, Donne offers almost no description whatever of what might await him on the other side.

In addition to these serendipitous connections between my interests and those of my colleagues, I have also found the cultural institutions of Berlin to be uncannily cooperative. Among the many performances I have seen, two have lingered with me as especially significant. In January, I attended – not once, but twice, in five days no less – Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Nearly everything about this opera was thrilling for me, and hearing it on the same day that I gave my Tuesday colloquium on the subject of Donne's resurrection made me particularly sensitive to the rhymes, as it were, between these two formidable seventeenth-century artists. Monteverdi and Donne shared a powerful desire to represent the sheer beauty of being alive and of being in love; both heightened the beauty of such representations by shadowing it with death. Donne ends one of his lyrics with the lines: "They who one another keep / Alive, ne'er parted be." For Orfeo and Eurydice, these words have a chilling echo. Given the extraordinary second chance to retrieve his beloved from the underworld – and hence once again, in Donne's idiom, to keep her alive – Orfeo loses Eurydice forever with a single gesture of his body backwards. "Ohime", he moans again and again: "Ohime", a gorgeous trisyllabic sigh of loss and regret, somehow diminished in the two-syllable "Alas," or the monosyllabic "Weh" given to us by the translators. At the end of the opera, Orfeo submits to his father Apollo's assess-

ment that no earthly delight is lasting, and he agrees to pursue immortal life in the heavenly skies. But in the brilliantly conceived Staatsoper production, the opera does not end with Orfeo's ascension. Instead, we find Orfeo alone on the dark stage as his body parts are hurled from above and litter the ground around him. The curtain falls as he grasps longingly to retrieve the arms, legs, torso, and head that have been ripped from his body, a powerful reminder of the original myth in which Orfeo meets his death when Dionysian maenads tear him to pieces.

Orfeo's profound ambivalence in the face of immortal bliss is something Monteverdi himself might not have dared to represent, but Donne, in his own way, did. One of the features of Donne's writing that I have been most interested in understanding, and which this opera helped me to articulate, was the way it balances an overwhelming desire for the afterlife with an equally strong attachment to the flesh. When Donne expresses pity for the bodiless angels, or reassures himself and his congregation that even the smallest limbs of their bodies will be returned in identical form in heaven, these impulses, I now recognize, derive from the same set of feelings that Orfeo expressed at the *Unter den Linden* this winter.

In June I heard for the first time Janacek's *The Makropoulos Case*, and I once again was surprised to confront on stage questions so deeply related to Donne. Donne's longing for immortality pervades his writing, and his interest in preserving the mortal body for as long as possible manifests itself above all in his fascination with the German physician and alchemist Paracelsus, who maintained that all living creatures contained their own balsam or balm that would protect them from decay. As I learned at the Deutsche Oper, Elina Makropoulous was given such an elixir by her father, the court physician to Rudolf I, in 1601 – Donne himself turned 30 in that year – and lived well beyond average demographic expectations for the seventeenth century: she died a voluntary death in 1922 at the age of 337.

But what Elina says about her earthly immortality speaks both to Donne's concerns about prolonging his mortal life and, finally, to my own feelings about this year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Life loses its meaning, Elina explains, when one lives too long; the value of each day depends entirely upon the finite number of days that each of us will have. Donne reconciles himself to this reality by relishing the prospect of eternal life in heaven, something that seems entirely outside the frame of Elina Makropoulous's more secular metaphysics. And although – or perhaps because – I have no reassurance that heavenly life will actually bear any resemblance to the exalted charms of the Wissenschaftskolleg, I will simply conclude by suggesting that the preciousness of our time here could withstand a slight extension – I would happily settle for another year.