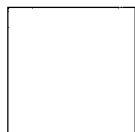


Love Three

A Study of a Poem by George Herbert



Aaron Kunin

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First Edition

This book is a few different things:

a study of George Herbert's seventeenth-century
devotional poem "Love" (3);

an essay on eroticizing power;

and a memory palace of sexual experiences,
fantasies, preferences, and limits, with Herbert's
poem as the key.

Each numbered section is a restatement of
Herbert's poem. First I paraphrased the poem,
then I tried to see what my paraphrase missed,
then I studied what other critics had written, and
finally I wrote about the poem through my sexual
history.

I tried to avoid references to outside sources.
Interested readers will find a complete
bibliography and notes with page citations
at the end of the book.

This book is for Michael Clune.

LG

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

What makes Love so attractive?

What powers does Love have and what powers do I give?

Love is not the kind of god who is everywhere and doing everything. I witness Love's power only as power over me, knowledge of me, presence in my company.

Love forces me to eat the food that is served.

Love knows what I am thinking.

Love answers my objections. Always has the last word.

Do I know anything about Love's other powers? Love's history? I seem to have heard something about Love "bearing the blame" for my faults. I confirm a report of creation that says: Love made

me. Nothing about creating the rest of the world. Do I think all this trouble is for me?

Mainly Love dominates me verbally.

"Sweetly questioning." Love is a sweet voice. Love is a questioning voice.

The speech tag partly obscures the exact wording of the question. You are asking me if I lack anything. It's a merchant's question. "What do you lack?" "What will you buy?"

Does the sweet tone modify the aggressive nature of the question?

What would be a less sweet way of asking the question?

"Do you have a problem?" The kind of emphatic question used to start a fight.

"I said is there a fucking problem?"

"You must sit down and taste my meat." I don't think there could be a less polite way of saying that.

What Love says could be written in a toilet stall. It could be a line in rap. It could be dirty talk. It could be assault.

Why doesn't it sound like any of these things?

Herbert writes with a consistency of style that can accommodate basically any material.

A consistency of which I as a writer am incapable.

And which I value somewhat grudgingly.

I like too many effects made possible by inconsistency.

Herbert's style covers the aggression of the penultimate line so that many otherwise careful readers hear only the sweet tone. Sweetness that overpowers every other suggestion.

You could underline the message by adding a rude word. "Bitch, you must sit down and taste my meat." "You must sit down and taste my meat, shithead." The expletive would intensify the harsh language that you were already using.

Is sweetness the same as politeness?

When I put it like that, my way of thinking about sweetness seems obviously incomplete.

Politeness could mean a set of conventions. Formulas that you memorize and apply for no reason other than your training. "Sir, you do me honor." "No, sir, the honor is mine." Because that is what your people say.

Or politeness could mean devices that you invent in new situations to make people feel comfortable. You investigate the cause of their unease and you try to fix the problem.

The second kind of politeness is more aggressive. One thing sweetness has in common with politeness is that both can be done aggressively.

Or politeness could mean an attitude. You try to divine what people are feeling. This is the ethical

meaning that empathy has unfortunately acquired. The idea seems to be that empathy is a solid foundation for decent behavior. That you would be incapable of harming a person whose feelings you could imagine as your own. (As though successful military operations did not depend on the tool of empathy. As though "Know your enemy" were not a motto of empathy.)

Like Socrates, Love makes unanswerable arguments in the form of questions that I try to answer until there's nothing left to say.

With all three kinds of politeness, the most effective device is often just the visible fact that you are making an effort to be polite.

What other attributes does Love have? What do I love about Love?

It's clear enough that Love is masculine. A lord.

Is a lord always a man? Pretty much. Later I will try to flesh out an alternative.

What kind of man? Lord is a feudal title. Someone who has property and vassals. Which is sort of what I am: a vassal.

What does Love's voice sound like? This I know. It's sweet. It has a sweet sound. It takes the bitterness out of asking questions. Or maybe the pleasant tone of voice reminds you that the questions are kind of unpleasant.

What does Love's face look like? All I know are the eyes. Having "quick eyes" could be a visual characteristic. A feeling of life, strength, and energy in your look. Or your eyes darting back and forth. Shining.

Or "quick-ey'd" could be your temperament. You are curious. Always investigating. You see things that would be invisible to most people. Something I don't show in my face, something I don't say, something that comes and goes in the blink of an eye: you see all of it and respond.

Love also has meat. The meat could be an alienable property, a piece of meat on a plate, or it could be Love's body. Or meat can be an unmentionable part of Love's body. Love's genitals.

I sort of want to take the modifier sweet and move it here. Love's meat may be sweet. "Sweetly questioning" may be a transferred epithet that properly refers to meat, because sweet is a taste word, not a sound word.

Also they rhyme. Meat, sweet, eat.

What am I like?

I am brutally honest.

I think I am brutally honest.

I think I know what I deserve.

Earlier I said that I was your vassal. That isn't the exact relationship between me and you. My status is probably equivalent to that of your vassals. (Assuming you have vassals in an ordinary sense. They are not evident in the poem.) But it seems I am not part of the local hierarchy. I am "a guest," an unworthy guest. A place I inadequately occupy. You and I are strangers of unequal status.

Do I lack anything?

I'm supposed to say no. A worthy guest would say no. Would profess to be completely satisfied. I'm supposed to say, in the words of the psalm, "I shall

not want," which means that I am declaring my intention not to want anything. I'm supposed to say that there is nothing I can imagine wanting.

Or "I shall not want" could mean rejection. I might want something, but you are the wrong agent to supply my wants.

I doubt my worth. I doubt that you could want me. I am certain (I do not doubt) that I can't see you, that my vision is flawed due to my own sad choice.

Do I exaggerate my faults? Are my doubts reasonable?

Am I a clever person? I don't know the answer to this question.

Am I making some good points?

I can't get past the sense that you have done all this work for me. A feeling overwhelms me that I don't deserve your excellent work.

Only sometimes I get the feeling that you are playing to please yourself. Then an adjustment takes place. I want to be part of the experience you're having. I want to contribute to it. Serve it. At least I don't want to get in the way of what you are feeling.

Then I resolve to meet you at the level at which you address me. To be as skilled at submitting as you are at dominating.

The transition involves a token action. Kneeling. Kissing a ring or the hem of your garment. Swearing an oath. Following a simple command. Sit down and taste.

What happens is that you are making the rest of the world fall away.

The mistake of paganism is to think of gods as kinds of people. Special people. Fascinating but dangerous. Look but don't touch. To be on the safe side maybe you shouldn't look. Unless this god is going to be offended by your not looking.

To be sexual with a god is not safe. But, really, what are you supposed to do with a god whose unspoken name is Love? How is that not a come-on? A god called Love might as well say, "I am McLovin."

A lot of people do have a sexual relationship with the Christian god. Mary is a complicated example. Saint Teresa is a less complicated one. Donne is an interesting example. Let me try to remember what I think about Donne.

Most religious poets want to be God. Milton tries to imitate God. Which means that he is sometimes competing with God. He receives instructions from God and sometimes follows them and sometimes questions them.

Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?

Sometimes he turns the relationship around and issues new instructions for God.

Why was the sight

To such a tender ball as th' eye confin'd?

So obvious and so easy to be quench't,

And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd,

That she might look at will through every pore?

Donne seems different. He wants to be passive before God. He wants to be overwhelmed by God. He will never be free until God captures him. He will never be chaste until God rapes him.

Carew wrote that Donne's poetry "commits holy rapes upon the will." Rape means nonconsent.

Will means consent. (If it happens in accordance with my will, there's no room left for me to withhold consent.) Holy means that playing with nonconsent happens in a ritual frame.

In his very sexual relationship with God, Donne tops from the bottom. Which means that Donne feels comfortable telling God what to do.

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.

A do-me princess, he worships God by lying back and making God do all of the work. He tells God how to dominate him.

You aren't doing it right.

This is how to make me submit.

This is the *right* way to surprise me.

Herbert wants something different. He wants to serve Love. "My deare, then I will serve."

After several tries at being rejected, he is finally reduced to offering his services.

He isn't competing for the divine position. He wants to be in the other position. Which is what? The creature. The servant.

Why do I say that Herbert isn't competitive? Isn't he speaking on behalf of Love? Doesn't that mean that he is competing for the position of Love?

Do you want me? You're wrong.

I preemptively reject myself. I anticipate your rejection of me. I speak on behalf of your rejection.

Here's another reason why you might not want me.

My way of loving by preferring humiliation is always menaced by the shadow of my possible narcissism.

I want to be humiliated by someone superior to me. I become greater when someone even greater makes me lesser.

I doubt your superiority because you indulge my wants.

If you are a superior being, why are you wasting effort on me?

I suspect that you might not be truly superior.

I examine you for small signs of inferiority.

Your humiliation of me, by gratifying my fantasy, confirms my sense that you are closer to me than a real superior being should be.

But if you do not acknowledge my inadequacy, then you must be inadequate too.

If you were true Love, you would know that I was unworthy.

Your wanting me proves my worth, but you must not be worth much if you want me, so I must not be worth anything at all.

"If you don't believe I love you, look what a fool I've been."

That's the suspicion.

"You don't believe."

I believe you only when you lower yourself.

"What a fool."

"So I did sit and eat." A minor refusal in the last line.

LOVE: "Sit and taste."

ME: "Sit and eat."

Instead of replying I follow the command. I am almost surprised. "I did!" The helping verb "did" is not redundant. Yes, I did what you said. But I didn't lose sight of the difference between us. What you said is what I did but what you said is not quite the same as what I said. I used a different word.

I "draw back" without showing it, in my soul.
Outwardly I am moving forward.

You "draw nearer," closing the distance.

The word "draw" looks to be significant. Drawing back and drawing near. A track connecting me and you. Maybe our movements are symmetrical after all.

Maybe I'm slowing down. "Growing slack." Maybe my body has used up its energy. Maybe I lost my loving look. Maybe I was turned on and I'm now turned off.

Detumescent. A vulgar interpretation of slack. The phrase is "grow slack" but it doesn't mean grow; it means shrink.

If that's what softness looks like, what does hardness look like?

Love's quick eyes. Lively, sharp, penetrating.
Amazing how you catch me drawing invisibly back.
Observant enough to see my very soul.

(Whereas I can't even look at you.)

What is Love? Attention and sweetness. Your two positive qualities. (Technically "sweetly" modifies an action and "quick-ey'd" modifies the actor.)

Quick attention not slow attention. Quickness could entail: impatient, impetuous, fickle. Quick to form attachments and quick to dissolve them. You don't reflect. You see, judge, and act immediately.

In the fullness of divine presence, "Thou shalt look us out of pain." Your look is powerful enough!

Powerful enough to see what I want even when I don't know that I want it. Even when I say that I don't want it.

Possibly Love's smile is a sign of arousal. I never smile. I submit willingly (I think) but not cheerfully. "I will serve" expresses a preference but it doesn't express satisfaction.

You never make me confess my satisfaction.
Maybe that is a kind of sacrifice you make for
me. You express desire but allow me to remain
untainted by desire. You indulge my fear of
rejection. You express desire so that I don't
have to.

I don't have to risk anything.

In *Paradise Lost*, Heaven and Hell are densely
populated by angels and devils. The density of
their population is not a problem. Their numbers
are vast but there is no inconvenient crowding
because their bodies can be any size.

Meanwhile the human population is just one, then
two.

For the poet Milton, living in modern London, the
proportions seem to be reversed: densely
populated human world, one god, one devil.

Is that true? The angels and minor devils never
went away. "Thousands at his bidding speed." Like
Adam and Eve, Milton sees armies of angels and is
threatened by legions of devils.

It's not a question of populations but of relations
between worlds. At the center of *Paradise Lost* is
a strange scene that goes on for several thousand
lines where Adam and Eve share a meal with an

angel, Raphael, "the sociable Spirit," "the affable Arch-angel." The angel who likes conversation. Someone who, like Gutman in *The Maltese Falcon*, likes talking to someone who likes to talk.

The angel and the people eat the same food. Seated at the same place. (Not quite a table. Not indoors. Not movable. A primitive kind of furnishing. Maybe produced by human ingenuity, maybe not. Nonetheless a kind of table.)

Adam and Eve have opportunities to host representatives of other levels of reality. There are plenty of links between their world and other worlds.

In the seventeenth century, communication between Heaven and London has a single attenuated channel, from God through the Holy Spirit to Milton.

In "Love" (3), you are my host. The relationship between human and divine has been reduced to one-on-one. A private affair. There are no other guests.

No one is technically "worthy to be here." You will have to make do with me.

There is a kind of communication between worlds, but not the companionship or condescension of eating the same food in the same place. Our communication is called service.

"First entrance." How many times do I enter?

Maybe we have been through the same process before.

Maybe it happens every day.

Maybe it has to happen every time I sit down to eat.

Crucifixion is missing from "Love" (3). No suffering Christ.

Only this: "my meat." Christ's body treated as meat.

Note that it isn't grain, vegetable, or dairy. The food group is meat. Love isn't commanding me to taste bread that becomes flesh or wine that becomes blood. Divinity is present. We are already communicating. Transubstantiation would be a less impressive miracle.

And I'm tasting, not eating. Not gratifying an appetite. Maybe not fully consuming and digesting. Just a taste. For reasons of curiosity, to see what it tastes like. Or a ritual kind of eating where I eat just enough to represent eating.

I am eating, and you are with me, but we are not eating together. I am eating your food, that is to say, I am eating you. Only you're supposed to be

the dominant one. You make the decisions and control the experience. Which makes sense if I'm eating without feeling hungry. My eating feeds your appetite, not mine.

Vulnerability is strength. A Christian paradox. What did Anne Boyer say? "I thought that being brave was mostly just being vulnerable."

In dominating me, you aren't objectifying me. You are turning yourself into an object. I, in tasting you, which you force me to do, am dominated by the object you become. Meat.

Tasting your meat is how I choose you. I express my preference. This seat, this meat.

(Not Herbert's rhyme. Herbert rhymes meat with eat.)

Can I say that "sweetly" is Herbert's rhyme?

"Taste" your meat because the point isn't digestion but flavor. The sweet taste, the spoonful of sugar, is the most compelling argument. You are my god, you are my love, because you taste right.

Or think of it as an obscene remark. "My meat." Something you might say about someone whose body you desire. Or something you might say about your own genitals.

"You must sit down and taste my meat."

Get it while it's hot.

"You must sit down and" eat my dinner before it cools.

"You must" eat my dinner now because it's fresh and it won't keep.

"My meat" will spoil if you don't taste it right away.

We don't have the technology to refrigerate "my meat."

Come and get it or we'll give it to the dogs!

Everything that happens without being said.

"My soul drew back."

"Love drew nearer."

"Love took my hand and smiled."

"I did sit and eat."

The rest is talk.

Would it make a difference if Love were a woman?

This isn't a crazy idea. It's an old idea. Classical mythology represents Love as a woman. Alma Venus. Her son, Cupid, is subordinate to her and represents an aspect of love.

Herbert is unclear about the gender of Love. This is true in all three "Love" poems. Apart from the title "Lord," there are no remarkable indications of masculinity. If I am anxious for Love to be either a man or a woman, I am reduced to emphasizing vague associations of personal traits with gender.

Such as the following:

Love's voice has a sweet sound, and sweetness is feminine? Begging the question.

Love has power, and power is masculine? Begging exactly the question that interests me: giving power to a woman.

Love is at home, doing a kind of work that women do, wielding a kind of power that women have, because domesticity is feminine? Begging the question.

Love is like a mother, a feminine role? Begging the question.

None of this is convincing. I don't believe Herbert had any such notions.

Here's something Herbert might have been thinking about. Magdalen Herbert, his mother, was a powerful woman. Both at home and in the public world.

Everyone who knew her was impressed by her authority. People wrote poems about it. Donne wrote that she was "a mother which delights to heare / Her early child mis-speake." He saw her dominating her children verbally, and enjoying it.

The anecdote that most strikes me is that she moved the entire family to Oxford when Edward Herbert, the first son, was a student there. That is the kind of presence she was in the lives and careers of her children.

George Herbert's longest poem, *Memoriae Matris Sacrum*, an elegy in Latin and Greek, says this about Magdalen Herbert's rhetorical force:

No occasion could unnerve her,
And from the start she had it in her grip.
Ah, this very storm, this very grace of speech,
Stern winsomeness, wit
And wisdom mixed! She holds a discourse
On hunting and the care of cattle; or if her duties
Take her for an hour, she eases through
Their twists and labyrinths, better than
Very Catos with her wise maxims.

Is power interesting to me only when a woman has it?

Does Love need to be a woman in order for the poem to be sexually exciting?

I'm not sure. The answer seems to be no. I find rhetorical power interesting, and even sexually exciting, no matter where it appears. When, at age sixteen, I first read the debate in Hell in Book II of *Paradise Lost*, I was so turned on by the idea of rhetorical manipulation that I had to bring myself to climax before reading to the end of the book. Just the idea that Satan and Beelzebub had shaped the debate to produce the result they wanted. Although, truthfully, in my fantasy, I combined this idea with thoughts of women.

Maybe finishing the book and encountering the sick family romance of Satan, Sin, and Death would have changed the development of my sexual interests, or maybe I would have been turned off by scenes of rape, incest, and mutilation.

But, yeah, the idea of rhetorical manipulation always suggests to me the more attractive idea of a rhetorically powerful woman. My fantasy easily makes the translation. A man's eloquence makes me think about a woman's eloquence. I don't do the same thing with other kinds of power. A violent man doesn't suggest to me a violent woman. Although I can be excited by the idea of a violent woman.

Am I trying to tell you no?

How do I say no to my god?

Maybe I am trying to set a limit. But, again, how do I set limits on my god?

I can't say: "This isn't for me. I've made a mistake."

I don't want to offend you.

I want to be polite.

If I don't believe that I deserve you, does that mean I prefer the other thing?

If I have a clear sense of what I deserve, does that mean I am choosing?

Love says, "You shall be he." There is maybe a residual sense of merit. I am not worthy, but through contact with you, I will be. That is your choice.

Love is not a relationship between equals. Silvan Tomkins wrote that "if you like to bite and I like to be bitten, then we may enjoy each other." We "enjoy each other" because we have different things and want different things.

Someone "worthy to be here," someone worthy of you, would be another you. As smart, funny, beautiful, powerful, and sweet as you. Why would you want that? You already have those gifts. You don't need them from me.

I can still give you something. My submission.

Simone Weil treated "Love" (3) like something different from a poem. More like an aspirin. Later like a prayer. She was rewarded as though she had been praying; she was converted. Only she wasn't converted to Herbert's religion.

The poem isn't like a prayer. Unless playing hard to get is a form of prayer. Asking *not* to receive grace.

If I were praying, I might be talking to Love, but I'm not. I only talk to Love in the dialogue folded into the poem (which is most of the poem). I'm repeating the dialogue to a third person.

Who is the listener?

Who could it be? Another god? A different love god? Another kind of god?

Doesn't Elijah tease the priests of Baal when they can't cook their meat by divine intervention?

The Jewish god fed me, what are you going to do for me?

Idea for poem. Write a list of my sexual preferences, interests, fantasies, and limits.

What if "Love" (3) were such a list?

One interest is humiliation.

Some of the humiliation has to come from me. I announce my guilt; I specify its contents. ("Guilty of dust and sinne." Guilt is specified although sin is vague.) I announce my shame. (Which is not specified. Unless it's the marring of my eyes.)

Here's what I don't say. I don't say that I desire humiliation. My confession of guilt remains innocent of wanting to be guilty. I confess guilt and shame but you leave me the alibi of not getting off on my humiliation.

Nor do I ever express my desire for you. The only one who talks about enjoying this scene is you. Thus you leave me the protection of not wanting you.

Now I understand the worst cliché of dirty talk:
"You like that don't you." I see why that's
important. A lame attempt to break down the last
protection.

Other kinks in "Love" (3)?

Sight restrictions. "I cannot look on thee."

Speech restrictions. My voice taken away, argued
away, suppressed, stopped, gagged. Finally I don't
answer.

Bondage? "Love took my hand." Bondage is a
strange kind of holding. I learn that my body is
not mine. And that I am not only a body.

Height restrictions? "You must sit down."
Unconvincing. This isn't exactly human furniture,
is it? If there's a chair, I have to sit in it. The chair
isn't myself.

Pain? I don't think so. Pain and its virtues are
topics for other poems by Herbert.

Playing with power often seems to involve a lot of
expensive equipment. A throne, a crown, collars,
cuffs, gags, hoods, frames, cages, devices, pieces
of furniture, costumes, leather, metal. Equipment
for experiencing or illustrating power.

There's nothing like that here. You and I make
power together. Out of ourselves alone. I give you
my power and you give me more power to give to
you.

There isn't another one of me and there isn't
another one of you.

Not simply monotheism and monoculture. One god
for one human soul.

We don't need a lot of equipment. Only your body,
my body, your imagination, and my fantasy.

We almost don't need bodies. Just eyes, hands, a
bit of food, somewhere to enter, and a place to sit
down. Otherwise it's just my soul, your voice, and
my voice.

What about the phrase “my deare”? One of a number of “my” phrases: my soul, my first entrance, my dear, my hand, my shame, my dear, my meat.

All of these possessions still don’t add much to the catalogue of equipment. Nothing costly, nothing rare, nothing too complicated. Everything on this list is part of you or part of me.

Or it’s all of you—which I address as my most cherished possession, “my deare”—not just part of you.

No capital D in dear.

“Dear” by itself can be a pet name. Like baby, sweetie, honey. A title for a pet who is also a god.

“My deare” isn’t a name or a title. I think “dear,” when used as a substantive, retains a trace of having been a modifier. My dear friend, dear one, dear ma’am.

There is something subjective too in this form of address. There is a value I see in you that others might not see. Everyone calls you Lord; I alone call you dear.

Is “my deare” shocking because it’s intimate?

Or because it conjoins intimacy with subordination? “My deare, then I will serve.”

Service can be intimate. You are mine and I serve you. I possess you and give you power to command me.

“My deare” initiates a turn both times. These are the moments when I turn toward you. In other words, the only times when I’m not talking about myself.

One of the fictional characters I most strongly identify with is Monsieur de Bargeton in Balzac's novel *Lost Illusions*. He never opens his mouth to speak because he is a simpleton. His head is empty; he has no words. Only because he is married to a brilliant woman, he is reputed to be wise.

In my favorite episode in the novel, Madame de Bargeton, in a complicated maneuver to protect her reputation, carefully instructs her husband to challenge another man to a duel. (The other man is spreading a rumor that Madame de Bargeton has been unfaithful to her husband, which is basically true. It hasn't happened but it is going to happen.)

Monsieur de Bargeton does exactly what his wife tells him to do. He practices the two sentences of his challenge so many times that he is able to say them flawlessly. His antagonist ends up looking cowardly and weak, while everyone credits Monsieur de Bargeton with resourcefulness, bravery, and wisdom.

I especially like the dialogue between the de Bargetons when Madame informs Monsieur that he is to fight a duel:

"I am going," replied Monsieur de Bargeton, taking up his hat and cane.

"Very good, my friend," his wife said with emotion. "That is how I like men to be. You are a gentleman."

I read this book more than twenty years ago and compared this character to myself and thought about my relationship with my girlfriend at the time. I felt a little disturbed because de Bargeton is not the most appealing character. Why would I want to be like him?

Mostly I felt strange, blissful recognition. I wanted to be like him. I was like de Bargeton in the way that I tended to experience the social world through my girlfriend. Maybe, I thought, that wasn't entirely bad. Maybe I could acquire a kind of secondary intelligence by associating with brilliant people.