

The Bawdy Electric: J. P. Donleavy Keeps It Up

Original in VLS, Village Voice Literary Supplement, October 23, 1988

"Lilly."

"I mean it."

"Come here."

"But I've made an oath not to, again. Please. No."

"There is no harm."

"Mind, you'll knock everything over. Don't."

"Come lay beside me then. This little kiss on your ear will never hurt. Just the one. Lilly, you're wearing perfume."

Breaking glass, flying teacups, egg stains on the carpet. That persuasive voice belongs to Sebastian Dangerfield, hound dog of the Western world, bog-trotter extraordinaire. Watch him operate, hear his rap as he slides out of the above-rogered Miss Frost's bedroom wearing her spinsterish blouse on his way to a couple of quick beers. So what if he's married, the whole Catholic neighborhood is talking, and nobody will have her, ever, after this? He will, won't he, make it up to her? *Right*. Meanwhile, thanks for the hot meal, the toss during which he dreams oaths of pure love and means them, and the clean clothes. She's crying, he's out the door, slam, goodbye.

Dangerfield is acquainted with the facts, of which none may be more important than he knows what a prick he is. "Jesus and I have been through a good deal together. And I tell you, Lilly, he would roar with laughter and say, why my dear child you laid with the ginger man? Great. Don't worry about it. What's a piece of arse between friends so long's you both get a good chunk." What is this good woman going to say at confession? That she believed him when he said hell's for the poor? Welcome to J.P. Donleavy's world of sex, cheating, and failure. And funny punctuation. And beauty, with her toasty privates and cold, cold heart.

Donleavy, nicknamed Mike by friends and family, master of exaltation of breakfast food, barnyard smells, and three-day underwear, has had a rabid fan club in this country for 20 years. The devotion is such that he's gotten phone calls from as far away as Hawaii, where the caller probably screwed up his courage after a couple of Jamesons and could only manage to say, when Donleavy picked up the phone in Co. Westmeath, "You don't sound like God."

In July, the Atlantic Monthly Press reprinted Donleavy's first novel, The Ginger Man, in all its horny glory, as well as The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B. The publisher has wrapped these gifts for the fashionable-lit crowd. Jay McInerney's laudatory back-cover copy on The Ginger Man seems inappropriate, like Debbie Gibson appraising Amelia Galli-Curci. I plan to spraypaint the covers of my new

copies with black Rustoleum. I have a less useful fate in mind for my copy of his latest book, Are You Listening Rabbi Löw, in which Donleavy has given us a mercenary Jewish hero, Schultz. The cheapskate, garment-industry type of kvetching, peeping-tom, horny-fucker characterization, humorous interludes notwithstanding, makes it seem that Donleavy thinks anti-Semitic jokesterism is a kind of Irish folksong. Skip it.

Instead, go back to his earlier obnoxious works of bloodshot-eyed sauciness. The Ginger Man is a hilarious, cruel, compassionate book. And Balthazar B is the best tear-jerking, lost, fanged lamb in modern fiction. Mike's technical innovations are still fresh. The way he loves messed-up Ireland is an inspiration. There are a lot of steps to heaven, Sebastian Dangerfield has said, but Ireland is the closest of all, even if the Irish lie all the time, especially to tourists.

Seeing swans on a lake, with the emerald grass all around, is what made Donleavy fall in love with Ireland—that strange place, as Elmore Leonard has said, where it might be considered a noble deed to blow someone's legs off for the right reason, but it's a mortal sin to spread your own. Donleavy was born in the Bronx, of Irish immigrant parents, went to Trinity in Dublin and never graduated, but stayed. In his books, America's premature decline foreshadows its asphyxiation from too much sex and commercialism. Too many billboards, too many memories of lipsticked women dancing on Cadillacs. The rake's progress needs a counterbalance of history and gentility to give it resonance. The person who writes about the Ireland that *is* must be willing to go head to head with Catholic tradition, and get down on the floor and cover himself with beer.

In Dangerfield, Donleavy created his prototypical diver into Irish society. Like his hero, the author has a history of Olympic pub-crawling—right down there under the rug with Flann O'Brien. He can make you weep for the flossy blond college boys who've never even missed a meal. He tweaks back the bedsheet corner and shows the act of love with the fractured beauty it sometimes really has. He roots around fine ladies' personas as if they were larders. And you can almost forgive him.

Donleavy's men are always distracted: by the weather, peckishness, the stirring in their trousers that tells them they're still alive. They desperately need lots of money to exist, but most of them can't seem to fathom working for it. Their idea of an occupation is dressing up and going to the racetrack. No objective views here, no lessons learned in these pages. The writing is wordy, hysterical. Sentence fragments, snatches of poetry at the end of chapters, and more words for dick than you've ever seen in one place outside a slang dictionary. Donleavy has grabbed the world by the perpendicular. And a little too firmly by the balls—his own included. The loneliness that Donleavy's male characters feel erases them, makes them living ghosts. To satisfy their craving for true love and prove their corporeality, they boff whoever's handy. But when a woman meets their appetites with like desire, they clutch. Sex may armor the bruised heart, but it leaves the cods dangling. Dangerfield absolutely can't handle it when his good-time gal, Mary, goes after his perpendicular like a terrier after a rabbit. He fights back. Pants down, dukes up: there's no room for compassion towards women. Especially from a man who saves none for himself.

The Ginger Man's sexual excesses are legend; the stage version was the only play in Irish history to be closed by an archbishop for obscenity; and its notoriety, while frustrating to the author, earned him thousands of pounds. Donleavy wasn't just aiming for the sheer slime factor, but he might just as well have been, according to the rest of the world back in 1955. *Forty-five* publishing houses rejected the book. "Most people thought it was a dirty book— scatological, unreadable," recalled Donleavy in an interview. The only place that would publish it was the Olympia Press in Paris, which included The Ginger Man in its pornographic *Traveler's Companion* series. They published Genet and Lolita, and some not-so-deathless classics like *Until She Screams*. Indignant at being slotted as a smutmongerer, J.P. fired up a lawsuit against the publisher that's only just now over, even though he bought the Olympia Press at its own bankruptcy auction. Which means of course that he was suing himself, demonstrating the tail-biting that Sebastian Dangerfield and Balthazar B can't get enough of.

Spicy is the word for The Ginger Man. School librarians might have a thing or two to say about this: "I must roll Mary over on her back because lumps of coal are pressing into my spine. Whee. Like turning turtle. Over you go...Wow what a wench and puffing heavily. Do my most penetrating thinking just slopping around with someone else's body, penetrating to the root. How many more interesting things can be done with thirty pounds than keeping it in the bank." This inclusion of the disconnected ramblings of the wandering mind makes the sexual encounter paradoxically connected, although not often spiritually uplifting.

Dangerfield can't be satisfied with a plain old conquest. He's trying to dodge extinction, taunting as he goes. "Run, run, run/as fast as you can/You can't catch me/I'm the Gingerbread Man" goes the children's fable of the cookie that jumps out of the oven and escapes with its life. He has everyone at the farmyard (read: Ireland, the primal farmyard) hot on his heels and swearing revenge, not so much because his wanting to live is a crime, but because he thumbs his nose at them while he does it.

"Every Irishman is a king," says Dangerfield, "but not all kings are Irishmen." Most of The Ginger Man takes place in Dublin, the world of dreams, populated by gullible shopkeepers, screaming kids, crooked priests, affectionate laundrywomen with time on their hands, and a pub on every corner with a weird name like "The Bleeding Horse." This is the place where Dangerfield can almost lose himself while he dreams of a cushy job at Lloyd's of London. He nimbly dances from one scene to another, preserving his love for Dublin—but never ceasing to slag it off. Dangerfield, troublemaker and complainer, loves to stay one jump ahead of his pursuers. "God's miserable teeth!" is his curse of choice, because he dreams of the hungry jaws that will get him in the end, as the fox got the Gingerbread Man:

On a winter night I heard horses on a country road, beating sparks out of the stones. I knew they were running away and would be crossing the fields where the pounding would come up into my ears. And I said they are running out to death which is with some soul and their eyes are mad and teeth out.

God's mercy

On the Wild

Ginger Man.

The *Ginger Man* ignited a scandal that none of his other books could match. In *The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B*, Donleavy beams a little light into a whole different flock of sheep: the scared and lonely, the orphans of this world. This is a love that is easier for us to understand. It touches us more deeply. Herein lies the greatness of this book. Balthazar darts about trying to evade his loveless youth in much the same way a rabbit ineffectually tries to get out of the way of an oncoming car with the high beams on. He blunders through a series of miserable love scenes and through the sadness of his mother's death, jacklighted into a state of near-paralysis by the harshness of each dawning day. He struggles gamely to hold on to his humanity, and, unlike Dangerfield, he succeeds.

Balthazar B's more acceptable notions of what you can get away with probably account for its sublegendary status. Balthazar is a softer person than Dangerfield. The story of his life is sweetened by a grave misunderstanding and a tragic death, even though in between he manages to get friendly with almost as many prostitutes as Dangerfield. Balthazar is against such desperate measures as slapping people around and pawning their furniture. He is every inch a pure guy, well-born, a gentleman without portfolio. But like Dangerfield, he has his most intense sexual experience on the ground, like a peasant, or a teenager with nowhere else to go.

Balthazar's awkward frankness in his love for the one and only Miss Fitzdare puts his frolics into a much different realm of our consideration than the rocky one we save for s.o.b.s like Dangerfield. His love opportunity comes on a genteel picnic with Fitzdare:

Waiting all these months. I kiss her. Lips stretched hard across her teeth. Her hesitating hand on the back of my neck. My nose goes buried under hair. Nothing against a soft, tender lobe of ear with nothing I can say. Unbuckle her belt, open her coat, four horn buttons undone and feel her breasts under lamb's wool. Nipples hardening there. ...But we know we must. We must. Stay close together. While cattle go mooing by. O God Fitzdare. My pole is shivering stiff between my legs. And my breath won't stay still. How can I tell you now. O God as the sperm spurts down my leg.

The sincerity of this clumsy grope, the fragrant cows snuffling past, and Balthazar's frantic restraint, make this realistic scene deliriously tender.

This first sighting of a theory of love is certainly at odds with good sense, but it winds the clock precisely right. In a letter, Keats says he's "certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affection and the truth of imagination." Add "...and follow your perpendicular" and you might have Donleavy's love thing in a nutshell. From time to time one catches a glimpse of characters who by some bizarre twist of fate are happily married, children and everything, but their peace seems remotely fragile. Others have a more mercenary attitude toward getting what they want, and they don't know how unhappy and even evil they are. But the would-be lovers—the people swamped by the impossibility of ever finding the words to convince another

to help them end their loneliness—are the ones who are truly alive, who really matter. Donleavy sometimes seems to be telling us that there are more of them than we think. So if you're going to love somebody, love somebody who needs it, for God's sake, because you can ever be sure of your lover's purity, and saints are nothing but trouble.

Even the sainted Fitzdare has plans for the Bedouin tent pitching itself in Balthazar's trousers. This virgin flower starts plotting to get Balthazar in the hay while slyly eyeing over the Bunsen burners in chemistry class. And she actually slides out of a secret passageway into Balthazar's bedroom in the middle of the night for a grunting, growling initiation, all of her own accord. Of course, as betokens a true Donleavy love scene, she squeezes his balls too hard. (Sometimes it seems as though passion in these books always warrants an apology from the woman involved.) Still, Fitzdare is the embodiment of the beloved, with her long Celtic hair, her instinctual communication with animals, and the strange innocence she shares, unbeknownst to her, with Breda, a Baldoyle hooker who once sheltered Balthazar in a night of feverish despair.

Life-affirming happiness comes in the form of someone who will give you what you want, and who wants it too, even if you have to flip 'em a couple of quid when the two of you are finished. The true love, though, is the one who rules your waking imagination, whose every zipper and button are fascinations because from inside the clothing they fasten will someday emerge a world of delight. But sadly, nobody in Donleavy's world can hang onto anything less ephemeral than a handful of bonds. And they all have holes in their pockets as well. There is some promise of salvation for the wretched: if we wrangle, and ceaselessly seek, then we can wear God's garters for a while. And yes. Anything for a good blowjob. Though come to think of it, there may be no such thing as a bad one.

Graham Greene's Aunt Augusta in Travels With My Aunt couldn't love a man who needed her. "A need is a claim...Life can be bearable when it's only one who suffers." A character with that attitude would be an insurance underwriter in a Donleavy book, not a lover. Nobody in his world would calmly opt for the chance of avoiding a huge mistake. You'd never have to hide two prostitutes in the woodbox when the college provost came sneaking around your dorm. You'd never end up stark raving drunk tangled up in a clothesline in the middle of the night. You would never find your Fitzdare—or lose her.

Balthazar's purely accidental misbehavior, the hilarious clothesline incident in particular, gets him quite a lot of publicity for the average college student. He can't make a single move without it ending up splattered all over the evening papers. It seems that when one does anything too out of the ordinary in Ireland, the country is a very small place. Those who suffer the isolation of a Dangerfield, Balthazar, or even Darcy Dancer find it smaller still.

Tiny worlds teetering on the brink of disaster, glued precariously into place by a shellac of propriety, are made tragically real in Donleavy's subsequent books. They are corseted in long titles with an anapestic beat that echoes the sound of galloping horses he seems to hate so much. And he moves out of seamy Dublin into a county of rich, fat, red-faced farmers. The Saddest Summer of Samuel S; The

Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B; The Destinies, of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman. And more succinctly (but not much), Fairy Tales of New York and The Unexpurgated Code. De Alfonse Tennis, subtitled The Superlative Game of Eccentric Champions—Its History, Accoutrements, Rules, Conduct, and Regimen, goes a little too boldly into the territory of the la-di-da for even this former foxhunting enthusiast. He ventures deeper with The Unexpurgated Code, subtitled A Complete Manual of Survival and Manners, in which we get the queasy feeling that Mike means everything he says about the importance of behaving in the pukka social circles he claims, in interviews, to inhabit. He describes himself in a recent Canadian TV interview as “a comfortably burnt-out volcano,” and his harlotry and drinking are things of the past, which may come as a disappointment to readers who imagine his life is like his writing.

In reality, Donleavy moved from Dublin to the country, where there would seem to be fewer opportunities for the kind of misbehaving that goes down in the city. But the cruelty of The Ginger Man lurks even in the most secure of Irish estates. Leila, a sequel to The Destinies of Darcy Dancer, Gentleman shows family life at its most twisted. Here is Darcy Dancer, a small boy who has the meanest sisters on the planet. They stuff into their toy pram, smother and torture him, and when he’s good and hysterical, take him out into the parlor and exhibit him to guests. Their favorite device is to tell him that his mother, very much alive, has died suddenly and repeat over and over again that she’s gone away and left him, alone, all alone. And then they say, O no, she’s just come back from hunting, we just heard her out in the hall. And *then* they say, O no, she’s really gone. And he cries so hard he has to press his body against the wall, and hear the wind whistling up the chimney. “But the pain of this was never as searing as it had been when my mother still lived. . . .And when it finally did happen that my mother came through the door to die I imagined for the longest time that it was a dream, even to watching her coffin placed away. Down slowly in the ground. And so strange then that I shed not a single tear.”

It seems all the more twisted that so much grief should be spooned out so elegantly. What, besides the rotting beams, falling drainpipes, and poachers in the woods, could this countryside shelter that engenders so much tormented behavior? The beauty of the lakes and loughs can drive sadness deeper in the soul. But this is the place we can’t identify, this world of fluttering lace curtains and endless manicured lawns. In Donleavy’s later work, priggish niceties start to become preconditions for being human. This can make a reader feel a bit indignantly shut out. It also has the benefit of sharpening Donleavy’s humor.

Here, for instance, is the proper way to ice oneself, according to The Unexpurgated Code. “Be neat when ending it all. It is exceedingly perverse to leave one’s remains in an unlovely condition or where your corpse is likely to cause a distressing nuisance. . . .Crushing and squashing, in spite of erasing one’s expression, should also be avoided as they leave a diabolically shocking flatness to be scratched up. Dying, in general, is not to be taken as some kind of liberating spiritual exercise. “When father time leaves his calling card and puts his big rough hand hauntingly up your rear end, you don’t know the meaning of contentment I’m telling you.”

Snappy advice on how not to live races through Donleavy's short works. Meet My Maker the Mad Molecule is a collection of tiny short stories about making things, protecting your faith in your own ideas even as they humiliate you in front of the people you most need to impress, succumbing to loneliness, being gullible toward those who might trick you because you want to love them. Donleavy has said, after all, that writing is taking life's worst experiences and turning them into money. In "At Longitude and Latitude," a little man buys an island, tells his lowbrow friends to kiss off, and is on his way out there in a boat to set up his hammock, crack a beer, and get good and lonely. All the geographic coordinates are right, it's getting dark, dinnertime. He checks positions and it hits him. "My God. I'm here. It's gone." Just when you think everything is all right; in other words, something extremely beastly is going to get you.

Donleavy knows where the cruelty in life is, but he refuses to respect it. The Irish have their own way of dealing with hardship. "Kicking the shit out of the goose that laid the golden egg is a great Irish custom," says Mike in Schultz. Donleavy's love for Ireland certainly never stopped him from giving her a good swift Wellington in the giblets. (Dangerfield has been heard to say that he wished the north would take over the bloody south—at least then you'd be able to buy contraceptives.) But he is also the man who looks down very ordinary Dublin streets and prickles with pride. As one of his characters says, "All the houses they brighten up to sell and coffee shops with yellow stripes of richness. In there they smile, smoke and laugh. I love them all."

It takes some boldness, even belligerence and vulgarity, to show this love. Balthazar's rich uncle Edouard's casual remark that one mustn't be too shy, for "it is nice sometimes to weep in the face of beauty," puts our author and his characters on the spot. When you're eyeball to eyeball with that face, if you can't make some sound, you have to turn and run. The face that is Ireland's may make Donleavy stammer and quake. In this sense, it could be that none of these books is really a heroic gesture, nor was meant to me. The man is talking to himself. There are a million disparate voices inside his characters' heads when they need to speak. They aren't communicating, they're remembering, breathing in the weather, listening to the accelerated beat of their own terrified hearts. They go plowing about this world, spurning fertilizer wherever it's accepted, hoping a little garden will grow.

Dangerfield has this earthy little dream about the despoiled Miss Frost laying down the seed: "Especially the spuds. Some think it a dumb vegetable. Not me. Like the lion, king of them all. I would have helped Lilly sow the potatoes although I don't like to use my hands much." Funny that a person should grow so agile from running and hiding without ever getting good at anything besides drinking and pursuing the high life. And how strange that anyone with Balthazar's privilege, or Dangerfield's opportunity, should wind up forever stuck behind God's back without so much as a candle. They are the nasty neglected of this world. But they hopefully say hello to neglected people everywhere. And with such a way of getting the shyest of them to talk back.

"Lilly, why do you want me to do it this way?"

"O Mr. Dangerfield, it's so much less of a sin."

*And
Fun
Too.*