

# FAREWELL, JOHN...

It was life itself, John. A face sculpted in rock, cut in such a way it could ride storms and stand the sun. A dense and stocky body, always about to hop on a plane, a train, a cab, so full of libido that even in the last years of his life, a magnetic force was still emanating from him. He who was made to lay in ancient prince's mausoleums had actually started to decrease as if he was willing to fit in today's small graves.

Before being such a knowledgeable man, John was a force of nature – an exception, in a world where intelligence often rhymes with “neglecting your body”. John very much liked to feed his, to make it dance and grant it all the pleasures he asked for. One could not suspect in him any useless neuroses, and therefore he had no inner enemy. I would bet that had Nietzsche known him, he would have perceived in him the perfect balance of existence he was dreaming for himself: John was more-than-alive.

He possessed two qualities I still hold very high, generosity and curiosity. They allowed him to welcome the most gifted and most amusing subjects, whether they came from Paris, from London or from across the United-States. He would invite them into endless conversations where “mots d'esprits”, anecdotes, and a little nastiness, were necessary steps towards greater ideas. This is how a form of civilization, born within the walls of the Ducal Palace of Urbino, Italy, where conversation was invented in the XV century, lived on between 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Union Square. Only for John, this art of conversation was no less contemporary than a Tarantino movie. John died young, and surprisingly more modern than he was born.

Faithful to the essential freedom of his character, John was always natural. No posturing in his behavior, honesty was to him the best policy. No tricks either in the way he wrote. But this obvious healthiness, more American than British I believe, was balanced by something Latin, a Parisian form of negligence and a roman sense of pleasure : If John reminded me of someone, it was Burt Lancaster in *The Leopard*, prince of the Salina Island, like John was prince of your island, Manhattan. Similar to the New York actor in Visconti's Sicily, the European concentrate that John was, had found a home with you.

I have only known him long after Picasso's death, but I would bet that he was with the painter the same he was with us, without complex. Every page of his extraordinary biography proves it. John was not afraid. And who can say the same when it comes to meeting Picasso? He admired the incredible courage of this constantly reborn genius of creation, without ignoring anything of his cruelty, lies and cowardice. He loves Picasso but doesn't idolize him. He keeps a wariness that only great biographers can take advantage of.

Another royal quality John could claim was his psychological intelligence, as powerful as his aesthetic comprehension: he could "read through" a painting as easily as he could a romantic relationship. Everything turned out clear under his pen. The capacity he had to synthesize would break down the toughest mental barriers. And he could thus forge most of the keys that unlock every door in the Minotaur's palace.

The incredible number of encounters he had, both in the Old World and the New, made it obvious for John to write his life, one we all would have loved to live. But his name will forever remain attached to Picasso's life, printed on the volumes he devoted to him. Little by little this series of books became his existence as much as the Spaniard's. This is a very unique case in Intellectual History, he was moving through Time almost at the same rhythm as his subject - 40 years to tell the first 60 years of Picasso! Time proved to be more merciful in the XVIII century when death caught us at a younger age, allowing Boswell's and Johnson's encounter to be separated by "only" 30 years from the moment the first one published the biography of the second one.

As I saw him, past 90 years old, flying off to France or Spain, in quest of new sources and documents, John made me think of this cartographer in a Borges story, so obsessed with exactitude that only a map of the same scale as the country itself will suffice.

John knew he would not have enough years to bring this gigantic enterprise to its term. He would have needed two or three more decades. He was worried about it of course, but here again, his trust in life pushed him to gamble on his assistant's capacity to continue his work. And as a writer who penned two biographies myself, I do not know of anything similar in this field. Only back in the painter's workshops during the Renaissance do we see such a practice...

This extraordinary book precipitated our friendship, as I was writing my biography of Cocteau. John allowed me to view Picasso with a more human eye, and I hope I helped him to shape a less cruel image of Cocteau, at the same time official poet and preferred victim of the Spaniard. I needed John to understand the forces of the perverse friendship that united them for 50 years, and I believe I was able to show him how profound Cocteau actually was, sometimes desperately, for John had solely understood, sometimes too well, the masochism he was demonstrating in King Pablo's court.

John was not identifying himself to Picasso. His personality was too strong for him to trade it, even for one belonging to a genius, but he understood Picasso from *inside*. He reconstructed his psyche as brilliantly as Cuvier the skeleton of the Pterodactyls, just off of a few bones. True creators are rare within the realm of fiction, and re-creators are equally rare within biography. John was one of the greatest.

Farewell John, we will miss you, we already do.  
You know how much Geneviève, present here today, loved you.  
You were the most incredibly seductive man we could meet.

Claude ARNAUD

(Text translated by Thomas BRUNOT and Brittany  
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