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Devotional writing

To John Donne, devotion and writing were inseparable. His belief in God was so profoundly word-centred that, in both his theology and his experience, the practice of religious contemplation and spiritual communion with God always and inevitably involved language. The very principle of creation, according to St. John's Gospel, is the divine "Word,"[1] and Donne discerned this "Logos" writ large in every aspect of God. As one of the late sermons explains, God the Father created the world by a spoken word: "God spake, and all things were made." God the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, is the Word "made flesh" (John 1:14), the expression of God's sacred text in human form. God the Holy Ghost, completing the Trinity, is the spirit that "enables us to apprehend, and apply to our selves, the promises of God in him" (*Sermons*, vol. VIII, no. 1, p. 52). The actions of the three persons of the Christian God are here understood entirely in terms of linguistic processes: speech, symbolic expression, and interpretation. In this logocentric universe, Donne conceived of the role of human beings in relation to God in an equally and mutually verbal way: "God made us with his word, and with our words we make God" (*Sermons*, vol. III, no. 12, p. 259). This was not a post-structuralist statement before its time – Donne is not implying that God only exists because he is spoken about by us – but it does indicate just how vital *words* are in Donne's sense of the human relationship with God.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Donne felt called to use his own prodigious linguistic gifts for the purposes of religious devotion and instruction. To do so, in his view, was an honor and a responsibility: "Blesse, praise, speake; there is the duty" (*Sermons*, vol. III, no. 12, p. 260). In his poem "To Mr *Tilman* after he had taken orders," Donne advises his newly ordained friend that it is the "prerogative" of preachers to "convey" Christ to others in words (41–42). Nor was it only preachers who were charged to use language in this intensely spiritual way; the ordinary believer, too, was urged by Donne to "delight" in speaking "of God, and with God, and for God" (*Sermons*, vol. VIII, no. 4, p. 119). Donne's devotional writing may in fact be summed up

by means of these three prepositions: his religious works in prose and verse all speak "*of* God"; his divine poems and his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* are prayerful dialogues "*with* God"; and his sermons take on the awe-inspiring task of speaking "*for* God" (my italics). Any use of language with respect to God, in Donne's view, constitutes a daunting linguistic challenge. As he wrote in his poem "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister," those writers who "dare" (a revealing choice of verb) to "Seeke new expressions" for God face the inappropriate task of thrusting a "cornerlesse and infinite" God into "strait corners of poore wit" (1, 3). The devotional poet knows that God, who is the eternal Word, is more complex than even the most beautiful and profound, yet finite and fallen, human words can express. But the duty to converse "of God, and with God, and for God" does not go away just because it is difficult. How did Donne, whose not-so-poor wit was said by Carew to have won him the highest position in its "universall Monarchy,"[2] respond to the spiritual and linguistic vocation to express the divine? This chapter will pay particular attention to Donne's devotional sonnets, his occasional meditations in verse, his prose *Devotions* and his three Hymns, examining the relationship of writing and devotion in these deservedly renowned works. To what extent, for example, was Donne able to resist the temptation to "seeme religious / Only to vent wit" ("The Litanie," 88–89)? And how did the poet, laboring in what Coleridge called "Wit's Maze" and "Thought's Forge,"[3] find the imaginative way and discover the rhetorical heat sufficient to convey in language the experience of God?

Devotional sonnets

The best known of Donne's divine poems are his sonnets, which fall into two groups: "La Corona," an interlinked set of seven sonnets forming a "*crown of prayer and praise*" (1:1), and the nineteen *Holy Sonnets* (entitled "Divine Meditations" in some manuscripts). It is a sign of the profound interconnection of secular and sacred experience in Donne's work that, while his love poems in the *Songs and Sonets* include no formal sonnets, his devotional poetry embraces this poetic form most closely associated with the Petrarchan tradition of earthly love. In some sense, then, Donne's religious sonnets may be seen as love poems to God: as he writes in "Batter my heart," "dearely 'I love you,' and would be loved faine, / But am betroth'd unto your enemie" (9–10). The sonnets struggle to contain the contraries of desire and despair, passion and preoccupation, trials and triumphs: loving God, Donne's devotional writing suggests, can be as troubled and varied an experience as that depicted in his secular love poetry.

The sonnets in "La Corona" follow the sequence of events in Christ's life from the Annunciation to the Ascension, and this doctrinal focus makes them less intense than the *Holy Sonnets*, which are driven by the urgent concerns of the speaker. However, two key features of "La Corona" introduce us unmistakeably to the world of Donne's divine poems. First, despite the unusually celebratory tone of this short sonnet sequence, the opening sonnet confesses that the poems were woven together "in my low devout melancholie" (2), which is indeed the starting-point and prevailing mood of most of his religious verse. The inseparable partnership of deep devotion and intense anxiety marks Donne's devotional writing; as he writes in "O might those sighes," his religious experience is a "holy discontent" (3). His devotion (or that of his uneasy persona) is driven by the fear of death and ultimate judgment: the *Holy Sonnets* ask, with a deep sense of dread, "What if this present were the worlds last night?" and attempt to discover reassurance for his "blacke Soule" ("Oh my blacke Soule") in the answers produced by his "muses white sincerity" ("La Corona," 1:6). It is utterly in keeping with this perplexed melancholy that the only biblical paraphrase known to have been made by Donne is his poetic rendering of the Lamentations of Jeremiah. However, the lamentational mode of his devotional writing as a whole does not result in a numbing depression; on the contrary, it is the very source of the poems' rational and emotional energy. One holy sonnet, "This is my playes last scene," for example, vividly imagines the drama of "my spans last inch" as death approaches (4); another, "Death be not proud," confronts this "Mighty and dreadfull" force head-on (2); a third, "Spit in my face," sets the sinful speaker on the cross, asking the onlookers to "Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie" him in place of the sinless Christ (2). Such extreme audacity of penitential humility is the hallmark of Donne's devotional tone.

This leads us to the second key aspect of Donne's devotional writing of which "La Corona" immediately makes the reader aware: the centrality of paradoxes in Donne's religious language and thought. The first sonnet addresses God as the "All changing unchang'd" (4), and the second envisages Christ as "That All ... Which cannot die, yet cannot chuse but die" (2, 4). At the heart of the Christian faith, and of Donne's fascination with it, are impossible possibilities. The Crucifixion, for instance (when the Son of God was raised up on the cross to die, thereby destroying the power of death) is punningly described by Donne as the moment when, paradoxically, the "Sunne" will "by rising set, / And by that setting endlesse day beget" ("Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," 11–12). In his holy sonnet, "I am a little world," the speaker desires to be burnt up with a destructive yet life-giving "fiery zeale" which "doth in eating heale" (13–14); in "Oh, to vex me," devotional "Inconstancy" gives rise to "A constant habit" and, in a succinct

definition of a paradox, "contraryes meet in one" (1–2). The most famous of all Donne's holy paradoxes, the conclusion to his sonnet "Batter my heart," recalls a liturgical text which declares that the "service" of God is "perfect freedom":[4]

> Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
> Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
> Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee. (12–14)

Inspired by the paradoxes in the existing language of the Church, Donne's radical imagination takes him further, into the daring clashes of spiritual and physical, masculine and feminine, active and passive, sacred and profane impulses that characterize his devotional writing.

If there is one major biblical precedent for the *Holy Sonnets*, it is surely the figure of Jacob, who "wrestled" all night with God and would not let God go until he received a blessing (Genesis 32: 24–30).[5] The speaker in the sonnets has a similar determination, both emotional and rhetorical; in these poems Jacob's wrestling has become an intense verbal tussle, but the purpose – salvation – remains the same. The persona in "If poysonous minerals" may well say, "But who am I, that dare dispute with thee / O God?" (9–10), but the consciousness of his impudence certainly does not stop his restless questioning. The sonnets are shot through with a desire for debate, however futile such argument may ultimately be,[6] producing intellectually boisterous and passionately argued, often noisy, poems. As Donne aptly comments in one of his last sermons,

> Man is but a voice, but a sound, but a noise ... A melancholique man, is but a groaning; a sportfull man, but a song; an active man, but a Trumpet; a mighty man, but a thunderclap. (*Sermons*, vol. IX, no. 1, pp. 61–2)

Although each of the speakers in the *Holy Sonnets* is "but a voice," they combine to command, inquire, threaten, rationalize, imagine, and expostulate their way into God's attention, whether by groans or trumpet blasts. There is critical debate about the extent to which Donne speaks autobiographically or dramatically in these poems, as well as a continuing uncertainty concerning their dates and possible clustering at stages of Donne's life; but there is no doubting the poems' brilliant capacity to sound the authentic notes of the human voice on the edge of wonder and despair. As C. A. Patrides wrote, the *Holy Sonnets* represent "the summit" of Donne's art.[7]

The brevity and containment of the individual holy sonnets are important aspects of their cumulative impact. The secular lover in "The triple Foole" needs "Rimes vexation" to purge away his tears, and in a similar way the speakers in the *Holy Sonnets* follow the pattern of the sonnet form that

channels and "fetters" (9, 11) the religious emotions they express. As Louis Martz suggested more than fifty years ago, the two quatrains and the sestet of each sonnet can give shape to the three stages of spiritual meditation recommended by Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits.[8] Donne's sonnet on the Last Judgment, for example, begins with four lines which compose the scene before the mind's eye:

> At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
> Your trumpets, Angells, and arise, arise
> From death, you numberlesse infinities
> Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe ... (1–4)

The almost unimaginable bustle of the "last busie day" ("The Relique," 10) is conjured up in words that simultaneously stimulate the senses ("round earths," "blow / Your trumpets") and stretch the mind ("imagin'd corners," "numberlesse infinities"). With this compact and lively composition of place, the deliberate process of meditation has begun. The logical sequel to this, an analysis of what has been envisaged, follows in the second quatrain:

> All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
> All whom warre, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
> Despaire, law, chance, hath slaine, and you whose eyes
> Shall behold God, and never tast deaths woe. (5–8)

With exhaustive thoroughness, the causes of death of those "numberlesse infinities / Of soules" are rehearsed: these four lines manage to contain the deaths that have occurred (or will occur) in the whole of biblical history, from Noah's flood to the fires at the end of the world. It is revealing of the penitential mood of the *Holy Sonnets* that water and flames, symbolic of repentance and chastisement, are invoked here; they are also the favored elements in "I am a little world." It is also typical of Donne's radical insecurity that one of the forces at work in slaying human beings, named prominently at the beginning of a line, should be "Despaire."

In the sestet of the sonnet, with a sudden change of direction characteristic of this tightly packed poetic form, the speaker turns to look inwards, responding to the imagined scene and contemplating its consequences at an individual level. As is so often the case in Donne's devotional works, the effect of this final stage of the meditation is to awaken fear, and specifically the dreadful thought that the speaker's sins will be too great to be forgiven:

> But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space,
> For, if above all these, my sinnes abound,

'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,
When wee are there; here on this lowly ground,
Teach mee how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood. (9–14)

The paradoxical confidence of this self-doubt is fascinating. The speaker commands God to leave the dead sleeping – indeed, to postpone the Last Judgment – and to concentrate instead on him, in an extremity of self-focus intensified by the alliteration of "mee mourne." There is also a startling assumption in the last lines that the very idea of redemption by the blood of Christ shed on the cross is an optional alternative ("that's as good / As if . . .") to the personal attention demanded by the speaker from God. Thus the poem does not end as it began, looking to the future in those far-flung "imagin'd corners" of the earth, but in present and local circumstances, "here on this lowly ground," in the corners of a fearful heart.

What the speaker of this sonnet seeks is the assurance of an "abundance" of grace, but how can that be achieved without the initial inspiration to repent? In his sonnet "Oh my blacke Soule!," Donne highlights what we might call this "Catch-22" of redemption: "Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke; / But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?" (9–10). These lines reflect the dilemma of much of Donne's devotional writing and the agonizing complexity of his particular doctrinal circumstances, caught as he was between the active vocation of Catholicism and the predestination of Calvinism. Could the speakers of the *Holy Sonnets* do anything to influence God's final judgment – and if so, what? The implied answer given by the sonnets – their response to these profound personal and doctrinal difficulties – is prayer. The sonnets are themselves a form of dialogue, and their meditations often lead, as in "If faithful soules," to a resolution to pray:

Then turne
O pensive soule, to God, for he knowes best
Thy true griefe, for he put it in my breast. (12–14)

The "pensive" melancholy expressed in these poems is seen as a gift of God, "put . . . in my breast" as a source of grace. The *Holy Sonnets*, with their grief-ridden drama and dynamic debates, are a means of confronting fears, examining both conscience and doctrine, and in these processes they resume dialogue with God. As Donne wrote in a sermon preached before the king in 1628, "to turne upon God, and to pursue this sorrow for our sins" is not a negative action but a means of transforming sorrowful human "sighes" into the breath of God. In this way, the circle is completed: "*the Spirit of man returnes to God that gave it*" (*Sermons*, vol. VIII, no. 8, p. 197).

Occasional meditations and *Devotions*

Donne's religious poetry draws the reader into its passionate dialogues with God by means of outspoken wit, dynamic questioning, and an almost tangible sense of "Despaire behind, and death before" ("Thou hast made me," 6). It also intrigues us with the continuing puzzle of Donne's ecclesiastical allegiances. As the sonnet "Show me deare Christ" demonstrates, his devotional poetry concerns, at least in part, a search for the true Church, Christ's "spouse, so bright and clear" (1). Is she the "richly painted" Catholic Church, or the Calvinist faith that "Laments and mournes" (3, 4)? Ironically, even from these short phrases it is clear that both traditions are present in Donne's devotional poems. There is a "richly painted" quality to his work – dramatic, sensual, sacramental – yet it undoubtedly also "Laments and mournes." This doctrinal, functional, and stylistic range may also be found in the variety of religious meditation present in the poems. While the *Holy Sonnets* accommodate the Ignatian practice of "wholsome meditation" ("Wilt thou love God," 2) in their rigorous concentration on the Last Things, Donne's longer devotional poems work largely in the protestant tradition of meditation on specific occasions.[9] These works, at least in their initial inspiration, are more worldly than the sonnets, often set in a specific social or personal context. Donne's extended contemplation of worship and religious language, for example, emerges from his praise of the Sidney Psalm translation, while his poem "To Mr Tilman" becomes a meditation on the nature of the priesthood.

Fundamental to these poems is a view of the world which sees it as always potentially emblematic: events, sights, or experiences, however ordinary or apparently unspiritual, are bearers of the Word if rightly interpreted. As Donne writes in "The Crosse,"

> Who can deny mee power, and liberty
> To stretch mine armes, and mine owne Crosse to be?
> Swimme, and at every stroake, thou art thy Crosse;
> The Mast and yard make one, where seas do tosse;
> Looke downe, thou spiest out Crosses in small things;
> Looke up, thou seest birds rais'd on crossed wings;
> All the Globes frame, and spheares, is nothing else
> But the Meridians crossing Parallels. (332)

In this list of examples expressive of the poet's range of interests, the reader is reminded that the human body, sea travel, the natural world, and cartography all afford "Materiall Crosses" which serve as images of "spirituall" truths (26). In this sense, to practice divine meditation is to live in the world with an alert awareness of the spiritual dimension of each detail of the creation.

Throughout his writing, Donne is intensely conscious of the dimensions of time and space within which human life takes place. Among his secular poems, for instance, "The Sunne Rising" insists that the sun must cease to define "the rags of time" and simply stand still to "warme the world" contained within the lovers' bedroom (10, 28). Donne is fascinated by the temporal and spatial framework of human existence, yet strives to get the better of them with his witty logic and creative vision. In his religious verse, conjunctions of history and oppositions of geography challenge Donne to produce dazzling meditations on the fundamentals of Christian faith. In "The Annuntiation and Passion," for example, he contemplates the fact that the feast of the Annunciation (March 25) happened to fall on Good Friday in the spring of 1609. This coincidence of the calendar is strange and troublesome to Donne – he does not know whether to "feast or fast" – but it allows him to tell an "Abridgement of Christs story" (6, 20). The doubly holy day demonstrates that the two moments of biblical history, when the angel announces to Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God, and later when Christ dies on Good Friday, can be collapsed into one as a statement of God's saving love:

> All this, and all betweene, this day hath showne,
> Th'Abridgement of Christs story, which makes one
> (As in plaine Maps, the furthest West is East)
> Of the'Angels *Ave*,'and *Consummatum est*. (19–22)[10]

Fascinatingly, Donne resorts to the dimension of space to explain an apparent impossibility in time: Christ can begin and end his incarnation on the same day, and Mary can be at the same time "almost fiftie" and "scarce fifteene" (14), by the same logic that west and east can meet on a map. Time and space, like God, are circular in Donne's imagining: as "The Annunciation and Passion" states, their emblem is "a circle . . . / Whose first and last concurre" (4–5).

Donne's experience on the same day in the Church's calendar four years later led to his greatest occasional poetic meditation, "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," which is again based on strange relationships of time and space. He is riding to the west, from London to Ludlow, on the very day that the events of the Passion of Christ in Jerusalem, the east, are commemorated liturgically. This geographical contradiction inspires Donne to devise a witty theorem of the relationship of the soul to the body, or rather the mismatch between devotional intentions and actual achievement:

> Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
> The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
> And as the other Spheares, by being growne

> Subject to forraigne motions, lose their owne,
> And being by others hurried every day,
> Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:
> Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit
> For their first mover, and are whirld by it.
> Hence is't, that I am carried towards the West
> This day, when my Soules forme bends towards the East. (1–10)

Donne's circumstances on Good Friday in 1613 are thus fertile ground for his playfully serious intellect. Conscious of the importance of devotion on this day, he nevertheless excuses his failure by means of an elaborate parallel with the heavenly bodies which from time to time are moved by forces beyond their control. Like Donne himself, the "Spheares" are led astray from their steady easterly movement towards God into "forraigne motions" which whirl them towards the west. A particular occasion has thus led to a brilliant meditation on the direction that a human life should really be taking.

This, however, is only the beginning of an extended poem on the events of Good Friday, and the reader soon discovers that Donne will seek further devotional profit from the contrary movement of his soul and body. He argues that it is, in fact, better that he has his back turned towards the east, since to look at Calvary would be too much for him:

> Yet dare I'almost be glad, I do not see
> That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
> Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
> What a death were it then to see God dye?
> It made his own Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
> It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.
> Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
> And turne all spheares at once, peirc'd with those holes? (15–22)

The rhetorical trick played by Donne here is very successful. He claims to be "glad" that he cannot see that overwhelming sight, Christ's death on the cross, which on the first Good Friday led to a violent earthquake and an eclipse of the sun; yet, while his back is turned on Calvary, he describes its details with intense devotion, seeing them with his "memory" – the faculty required for the meditative composition of a scene – if not with his "eye" (33–34). Until the very last line of the poem, the narrator does not look at God, the "Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree" (36). However, this situation is ultimately to the sinner's advantage, since it enables him to be punished, purged and made ready, in the last words of the poem, to "turne my face" to see Christ (42). This is, therefore, a meditation not only on the redemption but also on conversion, the process of turning again to God.

In the course of the poem the spheres turn, and the narrator and his horse turn away from Christ, whose hands meanwhile "turne" the created universe. At the end, once he is assured that he will be saved, the narrator makes that last vital "turne" back to God.

"Goodfriday, 1613" makes clear how meditative writing could function for Donne as a way of converting secular circumstances into a source of spiritual refreshment, as well as of overcoming what he called "the manifold weaknesses of the strongest devotions" (*Sermons*, vol. VII, no. 10, p. 264). Human beings, Donne knows, are vulnerable to distraction, even when – or perhaps especially when – they try to pray:

> I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore ...
>
> (*Sermons*, vol. VII, no. 10, pp. 264–65)

The engaging honesty of this passage is akin to that which Donne displays in his devotional writing, especially his works produced during periods of illness where the self-examination is particularly rigorous and unflattering. He confesses that he wrote "The Litanie," for example, while enduring "imprisonment in my bed," and although he calls the poem "a meditation in verse," he adds that the liturgical title he chose "imports no other then supplication" (*Letters*, p. 32). These poetic prayers are addressed to the Trinity, but he also asks for the intercession of the saints and that "universall Quire" of the "Church in triumph" ("The Litanie," 118–19) in order to be delivered from a long list of potential errors and temptations to which he, as mere "mudde walls and condensed dust," is prone (20). The specified sins again confirm the tenor of his devotional verse: he worries about "needing danger, to bee good" (136), a succinct assessment of his *Holy Sonnets* with their productive terror of death and judgment, and he is aware of the danger of being excessive in "seeking secrets, or Poëtiquenesse" (72), recalling his predominant fascination with complexity, paradox, and wit. Perhaps most interestingly, in addressing the martyrs of the church, he admits that "to some / Not to be Martyrs, is a martyrdome" (89–90). Donne's devotional writings leave the strong impression that it would have been a "martyrdome" for Donne himself, had he *not* found himself stretched as a martyr on the rack of uncertainty, contradiction, and fear.

Like "The Litanie," Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, his prose meditations on mortality, were written as a result of a period of illness. He took his own seriously diseased body as the text of the "miserable condition of Man" (*Devotions*, p. 7) on which to practice his meditative exegesis; he called the resulting work an "Image of my Humiliation" (p. 3).

As in his occasional religious verse, the mixture of elaborate rhetoric, painstaking argument, and the frank details of his melancholic "ridling distemper" (p. 8) creates a peculiarly powerful impact. Each stage of his sickness warrants a "Meditation," "Expostulation," and "Prayer," a three-part spiritual exploration inspired by a change in circumstances such as the visit of Donne's physicians, their decision to purge the patient, or the application of "Pidgeons, to draw the vapors from the Head" (p. 62). At the height of his suffering, recorded in the seventeenth Devotion, Donne hears a bell "tolling softly for another" (p. 86) and turns this coincidental external event into an unforgettable emblem of human transience. In a justly famous passage, Meditation 17 asserts the interconnected nature of individual lives, using another of Donne's powerful geographical metaphors:

> No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it self; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, A part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* be washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse . . . Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*. (p. 87)

This understanding of the interdependence of human existence asserts the communal nature of the *Devotions*. While rooted in the particularity of Donne's own condition, his text speaks for and is "involved in *Mankinde*." The *Devotions* may be intensely self-focused but their ultimate concern is to analyze the wider human condition and read the relationship of humanity to divinity.

Each of Donne's devotions is carefully structured, moving from contemplation through questioning to prayerful acceptance. Meditation 17 analyzes the symbolic significance of an ordinary sound – a funeral bell tolling – in order to demonstrate that no life is separate from any other. Drawing on another favorite source of metaphor, Donne writes that "All *mankinde* is of one *Author*, and is one *volume*" (p. 86), and death does not lead to removal of that volume but simply translation "into a better *language*" (p. 86). The second stage of the devotion, the Expostulation, lives up to its name by entering into an agonized debate with the God whose "*voice*" – indeed, whose "*whole Consort*" (p. 88) – may be heard in the sound of the tolling bell. If "translation" to heaven means transferral to a place of "*glory* and *joy*," why, asks Donne, are we not induced there by "*glorious* and *joyfull* things?" (p. 88). In one of his most outspoken challenges to God, Donne rails against sorrow, death, and mortification, the "*miserable ends*, and *miserable anticipations* of those miseries" (p. 88) which form the way to everlasting life: "Is the *joy* of *heaven* no perfecter in it selfe, but that it needs the *sourenesse* of this *life* to give it a *taste*?" (p. 89). The final section, Prayer, of the seventeenth devotion

struggles to recover equilibrium after what Donne calls the "unthankfull rashnesse" (p. 89) of these questions. Serenity is achieved, aptly, through the echoing of words spoken by Jesus on the cross as he, too, faced death. The despair of the suffering Donne is given voice in the biblical cry, "*My God, my God, Why hast thou forsaken me*?" (p. 90), but he also expresses his acceptance that the funeral bell is tolling his own death, by using Christ's last words, "*into thy hands, O my God, I commend my spirit*" (p. 89). This intensely creative juxtaposition of personal experience, rigorous enquiry, and theological resourcefulness is the motor driving Donne's *Devotions*.

The detailed attention paid to his decrepit physical state in the *Devotions* is typical of the boldness of Donne's religious works, in which audacity and humility so often and so strangely overlap. Who but Donne could have turned the spots on his skin into a source of contemplation and, ultimately, comfort? Aware in Meditation 13 that his spots signify a "malignant, and pestilentiall disease" (p. 674), Donne transforms his autobiographical material into a meditation on human imperfection:

> My *God, my God*, thou hast made this sick bed thine *Altar*, and I have no other *Sacrifice* to offer, but my self; and wilt thou accept *no spotted sacrifice*? (p. 75)

In contrast to the unblemished sacrifice of Christ, who offered himself to God "without spot" (Hebrews 9:14), Donne is all too conscious of the inescapable "spottedness" of the human soul. But his wiry wit refuses to accept defeat even on this point. He argues that sins, "the *spotts* that we hide," are a greater danger in the long run than the superficial blemishes of his disease, and therefore accepts his physical spots as a timely reminder of those within. By the end of the Expostulation, he has turned both into a celebration of the redemption:

> these *spotts* upon my *Breast*, and upon my *Soule*, shal appear to me as the *Constellations* of the *Firmament*, to direct my contemplation to that place, where thy *Son* is, they *right hand*. (p. 70)

A diseased body has been imaginatively transformed into a devotional aid: Donne's spots have become stars in the heavens. Or, as Donne puts it in the Prayer which completes this stage of his *Devotions*, "these spotts are but the letters, in which thou hast written thine own name, and conveyed thyself to me" (p. 70).

Once again we are reminded of the centrality of writing in Donne's religious experience. Not only do his *Devotions* use language with enormous inventiveness to redeem the miserable personal experience of his sickness; they also envisage that illness itself as a text written by God and anticipate

death as a process of translation. Words, both literal and metaphorical, lie at the heart of Donne's encounter with the divine. Indeed, in one of the richest passages of the *Devotions*, Expostulation 19, Donne honors God for the variety of his language:

> My *God, my God*, Thou art a *direct* God, may I not say, a *literall God* . . . But thou art also . . . a *figurative*, a *metaphoricall God too*: A *God* in whose words there is such a height of *figures*, such *voyages*, such *peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors*, such *extentions*, such *spreadings*, such *Curtaines* of *Allegories*, such *third Heavens* of *Hyperboles* . . . (p. 113)

This exuberant celebration of the divine word as found both in the Bible and in God's "*workes*" (p. 114) is notable for the way in which Donne himself attempts to imitate the grandeur of God's language. Divine metaphors are praised by means of Donne's own metaphors ("*peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors*," "*Curtaines* of *Allegories*") and God's hyperboles are evoked by Donne's exaggeratedly high "*third Heavens*." The poet succeeds splendidly in representing what he calls "the *majesty* of the Word" as well as its "*reverent simplicity*" (p. 113) – so much so that one might think he is attempting to outdo God with his linguistic brilliance. As in the holy sonnet, "Spit in my face," the intensity of Donne's sense of God's greatness leads the human speaker to take center stage with dramatic panache. However, this displacement of the divine is always only temporary, as a means to greater devotion. The sonnet culminates in admiration of the crucified Christ, who took on "vile mans flesh" in order to be "weake enough to suffer woe" (p. 327). Similarly, Expostulation 19 comes to recognize the inadequacy of human expression – including Donne's – to encompass divine language: "O, what words but thine, can expresse the inexpressible *texture*, and *composition* of thy *word*" (p. 113). Witty though he is, even here in submission, Donne has met his linguistic match in God.

Hymns

Donne's spiritual experience, as we have seen, found expression in the extended meditations of his occasional verse and the prose *Devotions*, as well as in the vehement brief dramas of his sonnets. However, another devotional mode was available to Donne, who knew full well that the calling of a Christian is to "sing our part" ("Upon the translation of the Psalmes . . .," 56). Indeed, as he comments in a sermon, "The greatest mystery of our Religion . . . is conveyed in a Song" (*Sermons*, vol. II, no. 7, p. 171), and this was a challenge that Donne could not resist. His three hymns allow us to see (or hear) the devotional Donne at his most lyrical, exploring religious mysteries

in relatively simple stanza forms that could be set to music.[11] Each hymn also finely reveals something of the mystery of Donne's own distinctive nature as a devotional poet.

"A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany," probably written in 1619 when Donne went abroad as chaplain to a diplomatic mission, approaches his imminent sea voyage from the emblematic perspective that we have already noted in "The Crosse." Donne's journey, however stormy, is invested in advance with a spiritual significance:

> In what torne ship soever I embarke,
> That ship shall be an embleme of thy Arke;
> What sea soever swallow mee, that flood
> Shall be to mee an embleme of thy bloode;
> Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise
> Thy face; yet through that maske I know those eyes ... (1–6)

These opening lines employ a typological mode of double vision, by which the early seventeenth-century ship is, simultaneously, the ark of Noah. Biblical images and events (the flood, the blood of Christ's passion, the pillar of cloud in Exodus) are all understood to foreshadow Donne's own experience, just as Old Testament figures such as Jonah or David may be seen as anticipatory "types" of Christ. Thus "A Hymne to Christ" not only makes flamboyant use of this scriptural reading of experience, but also draws to our attention the fundamentally biblical nature of Donne's devotional writing. His thinking, praying, meditating, writing, and preaching are steeped in knowledge and exegesis of the biblical "word"; indeed, he produced prose commentaries on parts of Genesis and Exodus in his *Essays in Divinity*, and the *Holy Sonnets* are clearly in the tradition of the penitential Psalms and the Lamentations of Jeremiah. However idiosyncratic we may consider his divine poems to be, they are at the same time profoundly influenced by scripture. "Batter my heart," possibly the most startling and distinctive of all Donne's devotional sonnets, takes its sexual metaphors from the Song of Songs, and its language of destruction and renewal – "breake, blowe, burn" (4) – from Deuteronomy, the Psalms, and the Book of Revelation.[12] To acknowledge Donne's biblical sources is not to diminish his originality; it is to place him properly in the historical and religious context from which he forged his distinctly individual voice.

"A Hymne to Christ," like "Goodfriday, 1613," takes the occasion of an actual journey not only as a source of emblems but also as the spur to devotion. In the same way as in the "Valedictions" of Donne's secular verse, departure – heralding separation or danger – serves (paradoxically) to intensify a relationship. In the case of the hymn, however, it is his spiritual

marriage to God that is strengthened, while his worldly partnerships are given up in favor of this superior, "Eternall" (15) love:

> I sacrifice this Iland unto thee,
> And all whom I lov'd there, and who lov'd mee;
> When I have put our seas twixt them and mee,
> Put thou thy sea betwixt my sinnes and thee. (9–12)

The speaker has a wayward soul whose "amorousnesse" (18) has been out of control and must be freed from loving "false mistresses" such as "Fame, Wit, Hopes" (28). As in the holy sonnets, particularly "Batter my heart," the soul must be forced to renounce all other relationships, explicitly referred to as marital agreements: "Seale then this bill of my Divorce to All" (25). The hymn is a major attempt at renunciation: of physical safety (for the seas may well "swallow" him, 3), of home ("this Iland," 9), of past loves, and even of light itself. The concluding lines interpret this in positive terms, since

> Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light:
> To see God only, I goe out of sight:
> And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse
> An Everlasting night. (29–32)

We may wonder, however, to what extent this rejection of the world is a fair conclusion to the hymn. After all, earlier in the poem those "stormy dayes" have been seen as signs of divine immanence, not something to run away from; and the idea of escaping temptations by going "out of sight" still presupposes the world whose "sight" of the speaker is implied. Making himself invisible is not a skill that comes easily to Donne.

In his "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," Donne himself is very much in view – in fact, his ailing body is the central focus of a meditation on mortality and redemption, just as it was in his *Devotions*. Lying "Flat on this bed," he is a "Mapp" of salvation on which (as in the imaginative cartography seen in "The Annuntiation and Passion") the normal principles of place and time are superseded by the dimensions of eternity. All the "straits" on the world map become newly discovered routes to heaven, where west and east meet, and he prays that "the first *Adams* sweat" will be wiped away by the sacrifice of the second Adam, Christ (24–25) as the Old and New Testaments meet in his own feverish face. In addition to its powerful immediacy, this hymn is typical of Donne's devotional writing in its anticipatory stance; once again, the certainty of salvation is deferred. This is most clearly stated in the magnificent opening stanza:

> Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
> Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,

I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
And what I must doe then, thinke here before. (1–5)

Donne's devotional writing is, throughout, a tuning of the instrument at the door: a warming up in the anteroom of heaven. In "At the round earths imagin'd corners," it is suggested that God should "let [the dead] sleepe" a little longer (9) in order to allow the speaker time to get ready for the Last Judgment. In "Goodfriday, 1613," he even defers his conversion and promises to turn his face towards God only in the poem's last half line. Donne's characteristic postponement of judgment and mercy has been excellently summed up by Raymond-Jean Frontain as a "drama of suspended activity."[13]

"A Hymne to God the Father" is perhaps the best known of Donne's poems of deferred certainty. It is a confession of overwhelming sinfulness (the word "sinne" is used eight times within the space of thirteen lines), and the refrain in the first two stanzas sets the poet himself, through the pun on his own name, at the heart of this recurring principle of incompleteness: "When thou hast done, thou hast not done" (5, 11).[14] Even in the final stanza, "Thou hast done" is deceptive, since it depends on God's previously "having done" something (assured the speaker of Christ's saving presence at his own death) which is, at least grammatically, provisional. The poem is a rhetorical tour de force, in which the repeated "sinne" is displaced in the end by its punning close relative, the shining "sonne." By compressing the effects of the redemption into the change of one vowel-sound, the poem's language "*cloyster*[s]" an "*Immensity*" in "little roome" ("La Corona" 2:14, 13). But despite this apparent celebration of salvation, what drives the hymn is fear, not love. The speaker's "sinne of feare" (13) is the last and most dominant sin, and the closing words, "I feare no more," are a promise rather than a statement of present achievement. Indeed, without fear, there would have been very little devotional writing by Donne. Fear of death – or, more accurately, of its consequences – is the impulse behind most of his *Holy Sonnets*, occasional meditations, *Devotions*, and hymns, and it inspires him to religious writing of unprecedented intensity and brilliance. He wrote with great perception, in the sonnet "Oh, to vex me," when he admitted that "Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare" (14).

"A Hymn to God the Father," poised on a pun before the moment "when I have spunne / My last thred" (13–14), is an appropriate poem with which to conclude this study of Donne's word-centred, fear-focused devotional writing. It reminds us that, though he longs for God's "all-healing grace" ("Father, part of his double interest," 11), Donne prefers to pray for it in

places "that have least light" ("A Hymne to Christ," 29), where perhaps the sound of a bell tolling (*Devotions*, p. 87) or the affront of imminent death's swelling pride ("Death be not proud") will goad him into devotion. Even then, his response is not adoration or ecstasy but, rather, a puzzled admiration of God's "strange love" ("Spit in my face," 9) or a consuming "holy thirst" ("Since she whom I lov'd," 8) for greater understanding and reassurance. He knows, in a rational way, the logic of redemption: God has made him and will not want to let his "worke decay" but will "rise" and "fight" for it ("Thou has made me," "As due by many titles," 11). However, this knowledge is not enough; his "devout fitts" are unsteady, unpredictable, coming and going "Like a fantastique Ague" ("Oh, to vex me," 12–13). This association of devotion with temporary illness, metaphoric or actual, is an important clue to the nature of Donne's representation of spiritual experience. It is characterized by shifting moods and contexts, and yet manifests a prevailing discontent; it is full of anxious energy – emotional, linguistic, dramatic, sexual – that nevertheless gives way to passivity as God is asked to "chuse" or even "ravish" the speaker ("As due by many titles," 13; "Batter my heart," 14). These paradoxical and unstable qualities of Donne's devotional writing are, ultimately, the key to its rhetorical power and its implicit hopefulness. For the security of redemption is its promise of – indeed, the necessity of – change; this paradox underlies all those divine riddles of which Donne is so fond. "Inconstancy" may be, perversely, the troubled Christian's "constant habit" ("Oh, to vex me," 2–3), but it is also necessary to salvation, by which the mortal becomes immortal. Donne envisaged this shape-shifting in his *Devotions*: "O my God, my God, what thunder is not a well-tun'd Cymball, what hoarseness, what harshness is not a clear organ, if thou be pleased to set thy voice to it?" (p. 88). The triumph of Donne's sometimes thunderous devotional writing is that it anticipates this transformation – if not into conventionally sweet heavenly music, then into a uniquely "well-tun'd Cymball" sounding through eternity.

NOTES

1 See John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word." The Greek ('logos') and Latin ('verbum') are also used by Donne in his sermons to refer to this principle of the originating word. See P. G. Stanwood and Heather R. Asals (eds.), *John Donne and the Theology of Language* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

2 Thomas Carew, "An Elegie upon the death of the Deane of Pauls," in Grierson's edition of Donne's *Poems*, p. 378.

3 S. T. Coleridge on Donne's poetry, reworked in "Fragments of an Epistle to Thomas Poole" in J. C. C. Mays (ed.), *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Poetical Works I: Poems*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), part 1, p. 246.

4 The Collect for Peace from Morning Prayer, in John E. Booty (ed.), *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976, for the Folger Shakespeare Library), p. 59.
5 See Jeffrey Johnson, "Wrestling with God: John Donne at Prayer," in Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (eds.), *John Donne's Religious Imagination* (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995), pp. 316–17.
6 As Helen Gardner wisely observed, "Over the argument and the wit of the divine poems hangs the knowledge of the futility of argument" (John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952], p. xvi).
7 C. A. Patrides (ed.), *The Complete Poems of John Donne* (London: Dent, 1985), p. 44.
8 Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954).
9 See Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
10 "*Ave*," "Hail," is the angel Gabriel's greeting to Mary (Luke 1:28); "*Consummatum Est*," "It is finished," are the last words of Christ on the cross (John 19:30).
11 "A Hymne to God the Father" was turned into an anthem within Donne's lifetime, by John Hilton, and has been set by several other composers from Pelham Humfrey to Benjamin Britten.
12 See Catherine Cresswell, "Reading the Face of God in Donne's Holy Sonnets," *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, p. 190.
13 Raymond-Jean Frontain, "Introduction," *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, p. 16.
14 It is likely that Donne also puns on his wife's surname, More, in the subsequent phrase: "I have more."

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