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John Donne, godly inscription, and permanency of self in Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

MATTHEW HORN

In late November and early December of 1623, in his eighth year as an Anglican minister, John Donne suffered a major illness that brought him close to death. The illness may have been typhoid fever, but recent research suggests relapsing fever in combination with another illness.¹ Donne was bedridden for over two weeks, during which he was examined by three doctors. Probably due to the natural course of Donne's disease rather than to these doctors' dubious skill (one of their treatments was to cut pigeons in half and to hold the bleeding halves to the soles of Donne's feet), Donne survived.²

In the following weeks of convalescence, he penned his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, and Severall Steps in My Sickness* (henceforth, *Devotions*). The book is a collection of twenty-three devotions. Each devotion contains a meditation, an expostulation, and a prayer. The meditation is a soliloquy of sorts, using no scriptural texts and focusing on observations of natural phenomena and the flux of physical being. The expostulation and the prayer address God directly, weave Scripture into their texts, and express an attitudinal stance (deliberative in the expostulations and subordinate in the prayers). The narrative course of the book takes the reader from the inception of Donne's illness through the medical examinations and finally to the point where recovery is imminent. Metaphysical conceits and correspondences abound; aside from some of Donne's sermons, the *Devotions* is one of Donne's most poetical prose works.

It is also one of his most troubling. It is troubling because one gets the sense that the book is not really what it seems. As an alleged piece of early modern devotional literature, it is much too individualized to be a solid representation of the genre.³ In fact, it is quite the anomaly: 'the book seems to fit,

I want to thank Susanna Fein for reading and commenting upon this essay.

¹ John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. by Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), xii–xiv.

² He lived another eight years, dying 31 March 1631, probably from stomach cancer. He was either 59 or 60 years old (his birth month is not known).

³ Kate Gartner Frost, *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4–5. For more on the uniqueness of Donne's *Devotions* in light of the English devotional tradition, see A. C. Partridge, *John Donne: Language and Style* (London: Andre

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comfortably or uncomfortably, no easily recognized category of contemporary devotional literature, whether one examines prayer books, spiritual conduct books, manuals for the sick or dying, or even popular meditative forms.⁴ Beyond this, it is troubling for its unusually dark tone and imagery of decay and degeneration. After reading animadversions like 'O *perverse way, irregular motion of Man*; even *rising* it selfe [out of bed] is the way to *Ruine*' (Meditation 21; 110),⁵ or 'Man hath no *center*, but *misery*; *there* and only *there*, hee is *fixt*, and sure to find himself' (Meditation 21; 111), or 'as long as I remaine in this great *Hospitall*, this sicke, this deseasedfull world, as long as I remaine in this leproous house, this flesh of mine, this Heart [. . .] will still be subject by the invasion of maligne and pestilent vapours' (Expostulation 11; 60), one cannot but wonder what exactly is fueling the invective.⁶

An event concurrent with the sickness and the writing of the *Devotions* may offer a clue. Sometime during this sickness Donne wrote the poem 'A Hymn to God the Father', in which he expresses a certain fear of death: 'I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne/ My last thred, I shall perish on the shore' (ll.17–8; 270).⁷ To counter this fear, Donne asks God for a promise. Donne wants God to swear 'that at my death thy sonne/ Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore' (ll.19–20; 270). What Donne is afraid of is either some sort of rude, postmortem awakening that would reveal the afterlife to be inimical to Donne's soul (Donne awakes from death to find out that he is a non-elect, damned forever) or no awakening at all (Christianity's promise of resurrection is a lie). Enough has been written to show that toward the end of his life Donne never really doubted his election.⁸ So perhaps in this poem

Deutsch, 1978), 200; Margaret Bottrall, *Every Man a Phoenix: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1958), 23–6; N. J. C. Andreasen, 'Donne's "Devotions" and the Psychology of Assent', *Modern Philology*, 62 (1965), 207–8; Helen White, *English Devotional Literature 1600–1640* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1931), 253, and Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963) 188–9. There are those who would disagree with Frost. Some of these have argued for the influence of certain Catholic models (some even for Protestant ones) to the *Devotions*. See Mary Arshagouni Papazian, 'Donne, Election, and the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, 55 (1992), 616, n. 1, for a cataloguing of these arguments.

⁴ Frost, *Holy Delight*, 5.

⁵ For all references to the *Devotions*, page numbers after the semicolons refer to Anthony Raspa's McGill-Queen's edition (v.s. note 1).

⁶ Other similar ejaculations are 'Wee say, the *Elements* of man are *misery*, and *happinesse*, as though he had an equal proportion of both [. . .]. But it is far from that; hee *drinks misery*, & he *tastes happinesse*; he *moves misery*, and hee *gleanes happinesse*; hee *journeys in misery*, he does but *walks in happinesse*' (Meditation 13; 67) and 'I would not make *Man* worse then hee is, Nor his Condition more miserable then it is. But could I though I would? As a Man cannot *flatter God*, nor over prayse him, so a Man cannot *injure Man*, nor undervalue him' (Meditation 14; 71).

⁷ All quotations of Donne's poetry are from Charles M. Coffin's edition of Donne's poetry, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose of John Donne* (New York: The Modern Library, 1952). As I do with Raspa's text, I will list Coffin's page numbers after the verse numbers henceforth.

⁸ In the first prayer of the *Devotions*, Donne petitions God to help him 'to looke forward to mine end, and to looke backward to, to the considerations of thy mercies afforded mee from the beginning; that so by that practise of considering thy mercy, in my beginning in this world, when thou plantedst me in the *Christian Church*, and thy mercy in the beginning in the other world, when thou writest me in the *Booke of Life*, in my

Donne was expressing a fear of annihilation. If so, the diatribe in the *Devotions* may well have been a reaction to this fear.

That Donne feared a personal annihilation at the moment of death has been argued extensively by at least two critics. Mark Allinson alleges that '[a] central worry for Donne was that God himself, through Christ, had passively surrendered to death', to rise no more.⁹ Allinson's thesis is that this fear of annihilation gave rise to a heroic self-image (think Jung) in Donne's prose work that enabled Donne to fight the abyss of death even when he strongly suspected the fight was futile (33). Besides Allinson, Robert N. Watson argues that 'Donne's fundamental concern about [the] Last Judgment is not whether God will forgive our sins, but instead whether He will restore our existence' (157) and that Donne constructed 'a broadly consistent mythology [. . .] in order to reassure himself that the embrace of his body and mind was unbreakable'.¹⁰ (159). Watson's thesis is that critics 'have long mistaken (as lust and, later, zeal) the disease of annihilationist doubt that ate away at Donne's heart, and spoke at one remove through his secular lyrics', failing to see that these secular love poems 'pursue immortality by an inventive system of substitution [of] love replacing death in the manageable universe of poetic creation'.¹¹

What both Allinson and Watson have in common is this idea that Donne engaged in the act of writing per se in order to counter the threat of being annihilated by death. In this essay I will use this same notion but with some differences. Whereas Allinson and Watson both suppose that Donne feared a permanent annihilation, I will argue that Donne feared the space between the physical death of his body and the physical resurrection of the same – a temporary annihilation, so to speak. And whereas Allinson suggests that Donne wrote for courage and Watson that Donne wrote for sublimation, I will suggest that Donne wrote for permanency.

Election, I may come to a holy consideration of thy *mercy*, in the beginning of all my actions here' (Prayer 1; 10). Papazian has taken pains to show that the verb *writest* here is in past tense, signalling an act already done ('Donne', 609–10). Furthermore, according to Izaak Walton's testimony, Donne expressed this same hope even a few weeks before his death. In response to a friend's query concerning his concentrated demeanor, Donne replied that he had been meditating upon his life and upcoming death, noting the blessings of God upon his activity and enjoying the sense that 'though of myself I have nothing to present to him but sins and misery, yet I know he looks not upon me now as I am of myself but as I am in my Saviour and hath given me even at this present time some testimonies by his holy Spirit that I am of the number of his elect. I am therefore full of inexpressible joy and shall die in peace' ('Life of Dr. John Donne', *Seventeenth-Century Prose and Poetry*, eds. Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke, 2nd ed., (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 268). See also Jonathan Goldberg, 'The Understanding of Sickness in Donne's *Devotions*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 24 (1971), 511, and Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 142, on how Donne turned his bouts with sickness into platforms for displaying the signs of election.

⁹ 'Re-visioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide', *Mosaic*, 24 (1991), 38.

¹⁰ *The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the Early Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 157, 159.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

This achievement of a permanency of self occurs through a process of relocation. Donne was keenly aware of the natural course of generation and degeneration. The evidence suggests that Donne viewed his own body as part of an atomic ebb and flow governed by biological humours. Because of certain implications arising from a humoural understanding of the body, Donne may have seen his soul complicit with his body in this physical movement toward non-being. In contrast, Donne would have perceived God as exactly the opposite of the physical cycle. Donne's God is the ground for all permanence, the centre of changelessness. Donne's first step in the process of achieving permanency of being, then, was for him to step out of his body, as it were, in order to commence the process of establishing the stability of his identity in the nature of God.

The spectatorial stance Donne assumes in the *Devotions* allows him to distance himself from his body. He distances himself from the body in order to gaze upon its deficiencies. His recordings of these deficiencies are an essential part of the *Devotions*, which becomes for Donne almost a substitute body. The *Devotions* provides him a partial solution to the problem of the degenerating self: the book's textual content – its meaning – is captured in the semantic form that Donne chooses to give it (in this case, a particularly material one) and remains crystallized in this order through publication. God, as the divine Logos who publishes himself in all created things, is the ultimate grounds for this alleged stability and materiality of the word. Donne's final project, then, would have been to situate himself completely in God. This is not to say that Donne spiritualizes himself in a mystical dissolving of the individual self into the Divine Self. Rather, the process culminates in Donne's turning his body into a collage of signs, turning the collage into a text, and storing the text in the unchanging mind of God.

To fill out this sketch of my argument, I will begin with Donne's view of the human body as atomic and humoural. Passages in sermons written when Donne had achieved a certain theological maturity indicate he believed in the atomic fluctuation and eventual dissolution of the body. 'For us that die now and sleep in the state of the dead,' Donne claims, 'we must all pass this posthumous death, this death after death, nay this death after burial, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and purification, of vermiculation and incineration, of dissolution and dispersion in and from the grave.'¹² In speaking of his belief that God can resurrect various parts of a scattered body, Donne describes the extent of the dispersal, saying, 'Where be all the splinters of that Bone, which a shot hath shivered and scattered in the Ayre? Where be all the Atoms of that flesh, which a *Corrasive* hath eat away, or a *Consumption* hath breath'd, and exhal'd away from our arms, and other

¹² John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 10.238.

Limbs?'¹³ This mixing applies to the atoms of matter, the elements experiencing 'vicissitudinary transmutation into one another',¹⁴ and it applies to the dust of man: 'That private and retired man, that through himself his own for ever, and never came forth, must in his dust of the grave be published' to combine 'with the dust of every highway and every dunghill.'¹⁵

The first seven words of the devotions set the same theme – 'Variable, and therefore miserable condition of Man' (Meditation 1; 7). The extent of this variableness as it relates to the elements themselves is illustrated by the body in death, which, according to Donne

is making haste to lose the name of a *body*, and dissolve to *putrefaction*. Who would not bee affected, to see a cleere & sweet *River* in the *Morning*, grow a *kennell* of muddy land water by *noone*, and condemned to the saltness of the Sea by *night*? And how lame a *Picture*, how faint a *representation*, is that, of the precipitation of mans body to *dissolution*? *Now* all the parts built up, and knit by a lovely *soule*, *now* but a *statue* of *clay*, and *now*, these limbs melted off, as if that *clay* were but *snow*; and now, the whole *house* is but a *handfull of sand*, so much dust, and but a *pecke* of *Rubbidge*. (Devotion 18; 92–3)

The human body oscillates between water and dirt, giving up one form to take up another, all forms undercut by the melting action of dissolution.

In addition to this atomic view of the dead body, Donne espouses a humoural physiology governing the living body. Galen's basic analysis and the various permutations it underwent as it made its way through the medieval world into the early modern do not need to be revisited here. What does need to be mentioned are a few notions of this theory that are particularly pertinent to Donne's predicament. The theory that the four humours (phlegm, blood, and yellow and black bile) in balance created perfect health in the body rests upon a commitment to materialistic determinism that undercuts the possibility of a stable self. According to Nancy Selleck, the humoural body is 'ever newly made up of its physical context, which it takes in and converts to itself', engaging in an 'ongoing process of being remade by what it consumes and digests', and in this process 'the boundaries between this rather porous body and its environment never stabilize'.¹⁶ Thus, holding to a humoural view of the body, one cannot really be sure of the true boundaries of the physical body or, if one could be sure of this, whether the body within those boundaries was the same body one had, say, a year ago. Selleck summarizes the predicament when

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.271. Suggesting that in this atomistic view Augustine influenced Donne, David A. Hirsch points out that in *The City of God* Augustine says that the bodily disintegration is complete, 'part going into dust, part into air, part into fire, part into the entrails of beasts and birds, part being drowned and dissolved into water' ('Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory', *SEL*, 31 [1991], 93, n. 39).

¹⁵ Donne, *Sermons*, 10.239.

¹⁶ 'Donne's Body', *SEL*, 41 (2001), 150–1.

she notes, 'Humoural theory can thus suggest a field-based identity: who you are is determined by your physical context as well as by the unstable context of your body, and changes as a result of that involvement with context.'¹⁷

Another important tenet inherent in humoural theory is that the existence of the apparently non-material soul is actually dependent upon the physical dynamics of the humours. Edward W. Tayler, who in his work on Donne's *Anniversary* poems examines briefly this issue of humoural function, writes that 'the humours begin their work in the liver as natural spirits, are refined in the heart to become vital spirits', and in moving to the brain, are 'transmuted into intellectual or *animal* (*anima*, "soul") *spirits*', some of which remain in the brain 'to support the operations of the *sensus communis*, the imagination, the memory, and the intellect'.¹⁸ This suggests that the nature of the soul itself, not just its activity, is somehow caused by these refined vapours, these '*animal spirits*.' If so, the existence of the soul would be due in part to the existence of the humoural vapours. Accordingly, since the humours themselves exist insofar as the human body exists, the deterioration of the body leads to the deterioration of the soul.

In light of Donne's beliefs, it is possible that Donne thought the soul would dissolve with the body. Donne's writings suggest he believed the humoural vapors of the body somehow caused the soul's existence, or at least greatly influenced its nature. This notion partially underlies the tenor of his early *Metempsychosis* poem 'The Progresse of the Soule' as well as his Second Anniversary poem 'Of the Progresse of the Soule,' but the usefulness of these early poems to a study attempting to understand Donne's basic position on the soul's genesis is compromised by the poems' irony and relatively early position in Donne's corpus. His later work is a more reliable index to Donne's settled convictions, and in this later work, most notably his sermons, Donne gives credence to the idea of the body causing the vegetative soul, which, in turn, causes the sensitive soul. Both 'arise out of the temperament, and good disposition of which that man is made, they arise out of man himself'.¹⁹ Richard Suggs has noted that when Donne preached

that 'an idle soul, is a monster in a man . . .' and that, 'that soul that does not think, not consider, cannot be said to actuate (which is the proper operation of the soul) but to evaporate; not to work in the body, but to breathe, and smoke through the body', he certainly appears to indicate a porous boundary between moral force and physical vitality.²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸ *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in the Anniversaries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 55.

¹⁹ Donne, *Sermons*, 3.85.

²⁰ *John Donne* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 152.

Besides the *Sermons*, in the *Devotions* Donne claimed that 'the foure *Elements*' hold 'a *Soveraigntie* equally shed upon them all' over man's 'very *being*' (Meditation 11; 56, emphasis Donne's) and that his heart (read soul) could be affected by vapours: 'this Heart, though thus prepared *for thee*, prepared *by thee*, will still be subject to the invasion of maligne and pestilent vapours' (Expostulation 11; 60). In the complete triad of Devotion 12, he openly confessed the idea of vapours affecting the body and the soul (62–67).

It makes sense to think that if the soul is this involved with the physical make-up of the body, it would not survive the body's decomposition. This issue of what exactly would happen to the soul at the point of death was certainly a live one for Donne. Commenting on then-current theories of the origin of the soul, Donne said: '*I care the lesse, how darke the entrance of my soule, into my body, bee to my reason.* It is the *going out*, more than the *coming in*, that concerns us. This *soule*, this *Bell* tells me is *gone out*; *Whither?* Who shall tell mee that?' (Meditation 18; 92). Without doubt, Donne believed in an ultimate resurrection, a final union of the purified soul with a regenerated body:

And yet, *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis, unto God the Lord belongs the issues of death*, and by *recompacting* this *dust* into the *same body*, and *reanimating* the *same body* with the *same soule*, hee shall in a blessed and glorious *resurrection* give mee such an *issue from this death*, as shal never passe into any other death, but establish me into a life that shall last as long as the Lord of life himself.²¹

Because of this belief, the death of the soul that Donne is concerned about in the *Devotions* is not a permanent annihilation but instead must be that of a temporal blackout taking place between a person's physical death and a resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. In a sermon, Donne asserted, 'In the constitution and making of a natural man, the body is not the man, nor the soul is not the man, but the union of these two makes up the man.'²² Therefore, regardless of whether the soul dies with the body or flies immediately to God, the person – if a person is the union of the body and soul, not just the body itself or the soul itself – is rubbed out until the soul reunites with the body. At death, then, Donne's body would be dissolving in the grave and his soul rejoicing in heaven, but Donne himself would be nowhere. If this is the case, then although the soul may survive the body after death, the man Donne does not.²³ To Donne

²¹ Donne, *Sermons*, 10. 239–40.

²² *Ibid.*, 2.261.

²³ At times, Donne professes vigorously that he, the real Donne, is his soul – 'But I am more then *dust & ashes*; I am my best part, I am my *soule*' (Expostulation 1; 8, emphasis Donne's) – and that this soul upon the body's death would immediately transfer itself from the body to heaven. Thus Donne's assertion in 'Holy Sonnet VI' that when

this erasure would have been a definite and insufferable loss of self,²⁴ and this is what Donne feared.

In contrast to his view of the devastating mutability of the human body and the instability of the self, Donne sees God's nature as completely constant, the exemplar of permanence. 'There is nothing more contrary to God, and his proceedings' Donne writes, 'than annihilation, to Bee nothing.'²⁵ In the *Devotions*, the opposition is emphasized at the very beginning, where mankind is described as variable and God as immortal. It is repeated at the end, where Donne explicitly admits his dissolution and confesses God's constancy (Prayer 23; 126). This is the last prayer of the *Devotions*, but every prayer of the twenty-three devotions except four (the second, third, fourth, and sixth) starts by openly mentioning the eternal nature of God. Moreover, throughout the treatise, Donne associates sickness with death. Because he would have his God be immortal, he never depicts God as sick – 'God is presented to us under many human affections, as far as *infirmities*; God is called *angry*, and *sorry*, and *weary*, and *heavy*; but never a *sicke* God: for then hee might *die* like men, as our *gods* [kings] do' (Meditation 8; 41). It is not that God is simply beyond death. Rather, God has power over death, controls it, uses it for his glory (Prayer 15; 83). And it is not that God simply *possesses* eternal life as one would possess an object that can be dispossessed; instead, God *is* life (Prayer 4; 23). Thus Donne develops an equation between God and Being itself, saying, 'If we bee compar'd with *God*, our *Being* with his *Being*, we have no *Being* at all, wee are *Nothing*. For *Being* is the *peculiar* and *proper* name of *God*.'²⁶

If Donne wants to achieve self-permanency, he would have to move the locus of his being from his own body of decay and into the eternally stable

gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt
My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space,
But my ever-waking part shall see that face,
Whose feare already shakes my every joynt;
Then, as my soule, to'heaven her first seate, takes flight,
And earth-borne body, in the earth shall dwell,
So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
To where they are bred, and would presse me, to hell. (ll.5–12; 249)

At other times he undercut this position. In the very next sonnet, 'Holy Sonnet VII,' where he described the final resurrection, he commands,

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. (ll.1–4; 249)

Regardless of the slippage of these poems, I take Donne's position to be that which he expresses in the *Sermons*: the combination of the body and the soul produces a new entity, the self, which is larger than its components (2.261). Although in Donne's scheme apparently the soul can survive without the body, neither the body nor one's awareness of selfhood survives when the soul departs the body.

²⁴ Sugg, *John Donne*, 194.

²⁵ Donne, *Sermons*, 4.85.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.76.

being of God. By this I mean that Donne's defence against death as annihilation is his attempt to see his existence as continually and presently grounded not in his body but in God's mind. This process of relocation begins with holy imitation on two levels – imitation of nature and imitation of activity. The more Donne imitates God's characteristics of being and doing, the less he would have to follow the pattern of human variance. The starting place would have to be God's nature, and from there, since it is governed by God's nature, God's activity.

For Donne, God's nature is logocentric. God himself is *Verbum*,²⁷ and his being rests upon the principles of *Logos* – words and reason.²⁸ As such, God codes himself as a system of divine propositions that are eternally fixed in divine truth. This propositional nature of God is perfectly stable, expressing itself in the creative act but not dependent upon creation or the act of creation for its existence.²⁹ Thus, the ideational centre of God is not so much a steady fountain of words issuing forth as it is a set of written words secure in their arrangement because of their inscription upon a divine page that is God's mind. God has revealed these truth in Scripture. Therefore, when one reads the Scriptures in the correct way, he or she will, according to Donne, actually see God through his or her understanding of the words themselves.³⁰

Donne insists on language as the foundational register of God's selfhood and his revelation thereof:

My God, my God, Thou art a *direct God*, may I not say, a *literall God*, a *God* that wouldest bee understood *literally*, and according to the *plaine sense* of all that thou saiest? 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 *extensions*, such *spreadings*, such *Curtains of Allegories*, such *third Heavens of Hyperboles*, so *harmonious eloquitions* [. . .]. Neither art thou thus a *figurative*, a *Metaphoricall God*, in thy *word* only, but in thy *workes* too. The *stile* of thy *works*, the *phrase* of thine *Actions*, is *metaphoricall*. The *institution* of thy whole *worship* in the *old Law*, was a continuall *Allegory*; *types* & *figures* overspread all; and *figures* flowed into *figures* [. . .]. Neither didst thou *speake*, and *worke* in this *language*, onely in the time of thy *Prophets*; but since thou spokest in thy *Son*, it is so too. How often, how much more often doth they *Sonne* call himsele a *way*, and a *light*, and a *gate*, and a *Vine*, and *bread*, than the *Sonne of God*, or of *Man*? How much oftner doth he exhibit a *Metaphoricall Christ*, than a *reall*, a *literall*? (Expostulation 19; 99–100)³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.119; 5.103.

²⁹ Judith H. Anderson, *Words That Matter: Linguistic Perception in Renaissance English* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 190–1, 200–05.

³⁰ Donne, *Sermons*, 9.355.

³¹ Elsewhere Donne insisted that God intended 'to express things by allegories, by figures; so that in many places in Scripture, a figurative sense is the literall sense' (*Sermons*, 4.2).

If one wants to understand God's essence in itself (the plain sense, the letters [*literae*] of God), then one must receive God as a word, as Scripture ('all that thou saiest'). But if one wants to *see* God in the physical world that continually comes into and goes out of being, then one must recognize the manifestation of God through these transient physical figures. There is only one Scripture that is read (the Bible), but there is a plurality of figural manifestations that are exhibited through the physical language of nature. In this material expression, God displays the creative copiousness of his mind.

Donne's escape from his fear of his material body's precipitous course toward apparent annihilation would have depended on his imitative ability to position himself in relation to his sickness as God had positioned himself in relation to the created (yet dying) world. The physical world is meant to be a collection of dispensable signs that serve to allow an audience to 'read' God; it does not exist in its own right for its own propagation. These physical signs wear out and are replaced, but what they refer to – God – never changes. The cycle of generation and degeneration is in place to manifest God's creative copiousness. In the same way, and particularly for the reason that it is materially involved in this cycle, Donne's body is designed to eventually waste away in order that it may be replaced with a new body, a new sign. Donne's present body serves to figure the eternal qualities of a redeemed self to an audience. It does not exist to be an eternal entity in itself.

Donne begins this godly imitation by learning how to observe his body as a sign. To do this, Donne assumes the role of an anatomist in order to move his self-consciousness away from his materially decaying body. Without a doubt, in the *Devotions*, Donne appropriates the anatomist's activity: 'They have seene me, and heard mee, arraign'd mee in these fetters, and receiv'd the *evidence*, I have cut up mine own *Anatomy*, dissected myself, and they are gon to *read* upon me' (Meditation 9; 45–6). Here Donne took possession of the dissection; he represented himself as the one performing the cutting, the opening, the *publishing* of his body. This emphasis on Donne as the anatomist is repeated: 'They who have received my *Anatomy* of my selfe, *consult*, and end their *consultation* in *prescribing*' (Meditation 9; 47), and 'I open my infirmities, I anatomise my *body* to them' (Expostulation 9; 48).

When he reflects upon his body, Donne the spectator positions it as an object distanced from himself, distanced in order to be viewed. This distance necessitates a separation, and this separation necessitates a distinction in identities. When Donne views his body, then, he himself – the observer – becomes something else than the body, which is now at a remove from the observer in order to be viewed. As a result of his insistence on viewing his own body, Donne is able to hypothesize a dimension where the real self can remove to that itself is beyond physical representation. The anatomist, working within a visual register of bodily terms, cannot glance away from the body and toward pure self-consciousness without losing the very tools of the

anatomist. This is not to say that knowledge of the self cannot be had. Donne wrote that 'no *Anatomist* can say, in dissecting a *body*, here lay the *coale*, the *fuell*, the *occasion* of all *bodily diseases*, but yet a *man* may have such a knowledge of his owne constitution, and bodily inclination to *diseases*, as that he may *prevent* his *danger* in a great part' (Expostulation 22; 119). A person can have a sense, then, of one's 'owne constitution, and bodily inclination', but this sense must come via means other than a bodily dissection, for the anatomist can never point out the physical matrix for the aberrations of the body. What can be seen by the eye of the body must consequently be limited in its ability to reveal the self to the world. Therefore, when a body – living or dead – is presented for viewing (as a person would present himself or herself before friends in order to 'see' them, visit with them), what one consequently sees is a limited presentation of the person's real self. In this way Donne begins to depreciate the value of the physical and to privilege the value of the ideational.

The physical exists only to codify the nonphysical. Donne writes, 'O my *God*, I presse thee not, with *thine owne text*, without *thine owne comment*; I know that in the state of my *body*, which is more *discernible*, than that of my *soule*, thou dost *effigiate* my *Soule* to me' (Expostulation 22; 119). The body is an effigy for the soul. It is not a presentation for the real self but a representation, a sign. In short, the parts of his body become signs of Donne to Donne, a representation of his being and not its primary locus. As a sign, the body is to be viewed, interpreted, read not for what it can reveal about itself but for what it can reveal about something that lies beyond it. What lies beyond the body in this case is an apprehending agent that can actively engage in the process of reading the body in order to apply what is read to itself. According to Donne, this reflection is the marker of the genuine self, the self that can stand beyond physical deterioration: 'But if my *soule* were no more than the *soule* of a *beast*, I could not thinke so; that *soule* that can *reflect* upon it selfe, *consider* it selfe, is *more* than so' (Meditation 18; 91).

As the soul's effigy, the body can give its viewers an analogical but incomplete knowledge of the soul. It can never display the core of Donne's self that suffers under the condition of original sin. The only thing that can display this core is language, especially the language of God, who discerns all things. It follows that for Donne, information about Donne's real self comes only from the inscribed language that makes up the pages of Scripture. Elsewhere in the *Devotions* Donne reiterated this dependence on God's written language for self-knowledge:

O God of all light, I know thou knowest all; and it is *Thou*, that declarest unto man, what is his *Heart*. Without thee, *O Sovereigne goodnesse*, I could not know, how ill my *heart* were. [. . .] And I can gather out of thy *Word*, so good testimony of the *hearts* of men, as to finde *single hearts*, *docile*, and *apprehensive hearts* [. . .]; such hearts I can find in thy *Word* (Expostulation 11; 58–9).

If God's nature is logocentric, and if Donne finds his own nature revealed in the set of propositions sanctioned by canonization as divine truth, then a conclusion he may have reached is that his own nature was logocentric. After all, as a devout Anglican he would have believed himself to have been made in the image of God, per the Genesis account (Gen. 1:7). Thus Donne has a way opened unto him to imitate God by creating a text that, in his perspective, could serve not only as an expression of Donne's nonphysical agency and intention and also as a substitute corpus in lieu of Donne's degenerating body. That Donne's writing seeks to copy a quasi-materiality that mimics Donne's temporal body has been critically established. His description of the humoural vapour that coursed through his body also shares in the material dynamic, suggesting that 'the rhetorical pattern of the station [Expostulation 12] is designed to re-create the refining transmutation of bodily spirits as they were theorized by Galenic medicine, making the text itself an instance or image of the body.'³² In his fragmented, ejaculatory phrasings Donne figured the breaking apart of the natural body.³³ In his title page to the first edition of the *Devotions*, Donne wrote that the individual devotions were '[d]igested into' three sections – the meditation, the expostulation, and the prayer. Of this Selleck claims, 'That language is no accident: "digestion" is a crucial metaphor for this text, which not only recounts in detail his body's daily condition and its (humoural) medical treatment, but in its repetitive structure [. . .] also keeps re-enacting a kind of digestive process.'³⁴ And in his discussion of the heart, Donne uses the word *I* rhythmically, imitating the pulse of a heart.³⁵

In moving his core self from a decayed body into a pseudo-corporeal scripture, Donne finds a permanent locale from which his existence could be (in his eyes) properly figured via a balance between its material component (the bodily register) and the nonmaterial one (the semantic meaning). In that Donne sought to position that text in God, this textual configuring is a strategy to achieve permanence of self. An important part of this interpolation is a petition designed to secure God as an audience to Donne's text. In one of his sermons, Donne affirms that

all comes from Gods hand; and from his hand, by way of handwriting, by way of letter, and instruction to us. And therefore to ascribe things wholly to nature, to fortune, to power, to second causes, this is to mistake the hand, not to know Gods hand; [. . .] I will take knowledge that it is Gods hand to me, and I will study the will of God to me in that letter; and I will write back again to my God and return him an answer, in the amendment of my life.³⁶

³² Gary Kuchar, *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 171.

³³ Partridge, *John Donne*, 201, 208.

³⁴ Nancy Selleck, 'Donne's Body', *SEL*, 41 (2001), 164.

³⁵ Webber, *Contrary Music*, 183.

³⁶ Donne, *Sermons*, 8:305–6.

In this passage Donne highlights two things: one, that the reading of external things can be a misreading, and two, that one's life can be figured in writing. When God is the reader, however, the reading of the text of the inner man can never miscommunicate insofar as God is infallible and omniscient. As a result, the most nearly complete revelation of the core self would take place in the form of a book addressed to God. Once God reads the book, his never-failing memory would ensure that the content of the book would remain scripted forever as a system of propositions on the pages of God's mind. If Donne is in the text and if God reads the text, then Donne as a self would achieve an immutable permanence. In light of these conclusions, it is interesting to note that over two-thirds of the *Devotions* (every expostulation and prayer) is addressed specifically to God.

Once the text is addressed to God, the final part of the positioning process can follow: a blurring of the boundaries between Donne's inscribed self and God. Donne's articulation of this blurring is striking. Sometimes the ground for the union is the spirit of God. To God Donne says, '[H]eare thy *Spirit* saying in my *Soule*, Heale mee, O *Lord*, for I would bee healed' (Prayer 4; 23). Donne envisions the Holy Spirit uttering the first-person *mee* and *I*, yet these pronouns clearly also refer to Donne. Most times, however, Donne joins with God by joining himself with Christ, a mediator between Donne and God the Father by virtue of Christ's work on the cross but also a plenary replication of God's self by virtue of the doctrine of the Trinity.³⁷ Donne highlighted his bodily digestion of Christ via the eating of the communion bread (Expostulation 7; 39). He highlighted a bodily exchange between the two persons of Donne and Christ: 'Even my *spotts* belong to thy *Sonnes* body, and are part of that, which he came down to this earth, to fetch, and challenge, and assume to himselfe. When I open my *spotts*, I doe but present him with that which is *His*' (Expostulation 13; 69–70).

It is possible that Donne not only identifies with Christ in this central part of the treatise but also intends the centre parts of the book to identify with Christ, illustrating again his (Donne's) blindness to any barriers between himself, his text, and God. The central part of the *Devotions* displays Donne's suffering in his sickness. This middle section stands between Donne's description of the oncoming sickness and the last part, where Donne described the beginning of the remission. The middle mediates Donne through the critical period. It is also where most of the imagery of Donne's identifying with Christ is placed. Within these two ends, the expostulations, beginning with Expostulation 6 and carrying through to Expostulation 22, each start with either 'My

³⁷ Donne's identifying Christ with God is seen clearly in the opening of Expostulation 3: 'My *God*, and my *Jesus*, my *Lord*, and my *Christ*, my *Strength*, and my *Salvation*, I heare thee, and I hearken to thee, when thou rebukest thy *Disciples*, for rebuking them, who brought children to thee' (16). A clearer expression of Trinitarian standing is found in Donne's opening line of his Expostulation 23: 'My *God*, my *God*, my *God*, thou mightie *Father*, who hast beene my *Physician*, Thou glorious *Sonne*, who hast beene my *physicke*, Thou blessed *Spirit*, who hast *prepared* and *applied* all to mee' (122).

God, my God’ or a variant of the phrase.³⁸ This address imitates verbatim the address Christ used in his prayer to God during his own suffering (‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me’ (Matt. 27:46)). Furthermore, as Christ in his death advocated the Christian’s forgiveness before God the Father, the expostulations similarly advocate to God the justness of the preceding meditations. The debates of the expostulations are then settled in the proceeding prayers and some sort of closure is reached, imitating the favourable judicial closure the mediation of Christ has brought about between Donne and God the Father.

If Donne joins bodily with Christ in the central text of the *Devotions*, he joins ideationally with God toward the end of the treatise, when one might suppose the process of self-relocation away from the physical and into the mental would be nearing completion. An intriguing scenario is laid out in Expostulation 20. Donne says to God:

I was whipped by thy *rod*, before I came to *consultation*, to consider my state; and shall I go no farther? As hee that would describe a *circle* in paper, if hee have brought that *circle* within one *inch* of finishing, yet if he remove his *compasse*, he cannot make it up a perfit *circle*, except he fall to worke againe, to finde out the same *center*, so, though setting that *foot* of my *compasse* upon *thee*, I have gone so farre, as to the *consideration* of my selfe, yet if I depart from *thee*, my *center*, all is unperfit. (107–8)

Donne can be seen here as a self inscribed on paper. In Expostulation 20 he is close – ‘within one *inch*’ – to finishing the *Devotions*, the recording of God’s redeeming ways with Donne’s body. The centre around which his inscription moves and from which it is anchored is a dot, a non-dimensional, non-physical entity definable only in terms of the abstract. Clearly, the circle here is Donne. Yet in Donne’s opening devotion, he addresses God by writing, ‘O eternall, and most gracious *God*, who considered in thy selfe, art a *Circle*, first and last, and altogether’ (Prayer 1; 9). As God is a circle, Donne had begun to view himself as a circle, a symbol of eternity, definable only in abstraction. And inasmuch as in this analogy God is a point, part of Donne is being firmly anchored in that point. The connection between a circle and its centre point is a permanent one and an analytic one, since if a circle is defined as a line the collected points of which are all equidistant from a single point outside the line, then no circle can be drawn that, once drawn, does not reveal the exact location of the centre dot or point. A necessary part of the drawn circle, this point is nevertheless not pencilled in if one’s purpose is to draw a circle: the compass (in Donne’s case, the pen he used to write the *Devotions*) leaves the

³⁸ As shown in the preceding note, the last expostulation opens in an apparently similar way. However, the threefold address makes it clear that in this expostulation Donne addresses the Trinity, wherein Christ himself is addressed. Donne is not figuring himself as Christ here, as I will argue he does in the preceding expostulations.

centre point blank. But it is there, grounding the circle, just as God exists invisible to the physical world yet grounding it nonetheless, just as Donne was postulating a personal existence invisible to his body but grounding it (the body) nonetheless. In his book, Donne is attempting to move write himself as a circle anchored to an impenetrable, indivisible point. This inscription gives rise 'to such a *participation of thy selfe*' which 'cannot bee *parted*' (Prayer 23; 126). Like a point, God cannot be parted, but he can be participated in if he is used as a foundation for one's understanding of the eternal nature of the redeemed self.

As he lay on the bed of his sickness during that winter of 1623, Donne feared that his soul would die with the body, even if for only a temporary period. At its heart, this is a loss of identity. Kuchar puts it one way: 'It is thus not the purely physical dissolution of the body that Donne fears most, but the loss of the symbolic function the body performs in the constitution of identity' and thus 'when Donne imagines his corpse, he sees not merely a dead body but a crisis in the power of naming.'³⁹ To counter this crisis Donne turns to writing, to creating words. Equating life with breath and breath with speech, Donne himself points out that one's speech is a sign that God is working to redeem the soul.⁴⁰ He struggles with fear of annihilation, and he admits that '*feare* is a stifling spirit, a spirit of *suffocation*' (Expostulation 6; 30). If one is afraid, one will not speak; to speak, then, is to not be afraid. During his encounter with death, Donne imitated the copiousness of the creativity of the Divine Speaker that is Donne's God and spoke voluminously – he wrote the *Devotions*. In it, Donne translates his physical body into a logocentric one, inscribes it in the eternal present, and, in having God as his principle reader, embeds the texted self into the memory of God. Held in the mind of God, Donne's duplicate self, distanced from his dying body, can never 'perish on the shore' as he feared it would in 'A Hymn to God the Father'. Instead, it is 'done': Donne is done, finished, complete in the sense that the perfect circle is *pe-fectus* (from *facere*) – a completed circle.

Eight days before his actual death in 1631, Donne wrote 'Hymne to God My God, in My Sickness'. The first stanza is a famous one:

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. (ll.1–5)

The image seems straightforward enough: Donne will sing God's praises with the choir of the saints in heaven, so he wants to set his mind on the task now, as he stands at the door leading from this world to the next. One may extend

³⁹ *Divine Subjection*, 175.

⁴⁰ Donne, *Sermons*, 4.252.

this reading. Donne writes that he will ‘thinke here before’ what ‘I must doe then’. What Donne is thinking about ‘here before’ when he pens the poem is the lines of verse themselves. And because of the lines’ present tense, when Donne writes ‘I tune the Instrument here’ he revealed that the tuning process was the writing process. His ‘Musique’, then, would be his musings, his contemplations, his poetry. More importantly, as the text makes clear, the music here is God’s music (‘thy Musique’). Appealing to the well-known etymology of the word *music*, I want to suggest this word can be taken as referring to God’s musings, his stable, propositional thoughts. The ‘Quire of Saints’ is a singing choir, no doubt. But Donne would have associated the word *quire* with not only a chorus of voices but a gathering of pages. This sort of quire could be ‘a small book or pamphlet, [especially] one consisting of a set of four sheets of parchment or paper folded in two so as to form eight leaves’ or ‘a short poem, treatise, etc., which is or could be contained in such a book’, or even ‘any book (containing literary work)’ (*OED*). Donne would have been familiar with this meaning, not only because of his familiarity with literary things but also because of the fluid spelling of his day. The seventeenth-century *Book of Common Prayer* consistently spelled *choir* as *quire*, and it also contained this colophon: ‘The Imprinter to sell this Booke in Queres for two shillynges and sixe pence’ (*OED*). Donne knew this little book well, for he used in his services at St Pauls. With both meanings of the word *quire* at play, Donne might have been thinking about not just practicing his singing for God’s glory but practicing his word-making. He was about to enter God’s book as every saint before him passing through the door had entered – as an eternal word.

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