

2003

Donne, Doubt and the Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions

Brooke Conti

Cleveland State University, b.conti@csuohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Publisher's Statement

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in the John Donne Journal following peer review. The version of record "Donne, Doubt and the Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, John Donne Journal 22 (2003), 145-164 is available online at:

<http://english.chass.ncsu.edu/jdj/vol22.html> .

Recommended Citation

Conti, Brooke, "Donne, Doubt and the Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions" (2003). *English Faculty Publications*. 81.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/81

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Donne, Doubt, and the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

Brooke Conti

The *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* may be Donne's most sustained work of autobiography, but actually classifying it as "autobiography" has long struck many readers as problematic. On the one hand, Donne published the *Devotions* immediately after his nearly fatal illness of late 1623, and the work appears to follow the actual course of his sickness: the Latin and English headings of each devotion signal discrete stages such as "The Patient takes his bed," "the Physician is sent for," and "I sleepe not day nor night," while the devotions themselves, which are usually in the first person singular, seem to give Donne's personal reflections on the deeper meaning of his physical and spiritual decline and recovery. On the other hand, apart from the specifics of his illness (which are not, in fact, very specific), Donne says little that seems unequivocally autobiographical, and he often seems to be speaking more as a Christian Everyman; although his own sickness may have inspired the work, the *Devotions* itself, with its highly artificial structure (twenty-three devotions, themselves each divided into Meditation, Expostulation, and Prayer), can appear so generalized as to make it impossible to recover either the exact circumstances or the personal significance of Donne's illness.

Faced with such an elusive autobiographical persona, scholars have tended to sidestep the issue: either they merely observe that

the work is somewhat autobiographical, and then drop the subject,¹ or they see the form of the *Devotions* as just one more piece of evidence in the on-going search for Donne's religious sympathies.²

¹See, for example, G. A. Starr, *Defoe & Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 34; Roger B. Rollin, "John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*—The Sequel: *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*," *John Donne Journal* 13: 1-2 (1994): 52; Joan Webber, *The Eloquent I: Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), esp. 28-31. Kate Gartner Frost's excellent chapter on the *Devotions* and autobiography in *Holy Delight* is an exception, offering a detailed consideration of what autobiography consisted of in the early modern period and how this tradition relates to the *Devotions*. However, although I agree with most of Frost's arguments, I believe that a complete understanding of Donne's use of autobiography requires further investigation into the specifics of his self-presentation. See *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 15-38.

²In *The Poetry of Meditation* Louis Martz argues for the Catholic, and specifically Ignatian influence on Donne's works; although Martz does not actually discuss the *Devotions*, his arguments have been extended to that work by Thomas Van Laan and Thomas J. Morrissey. See Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); Van Laan, "John Donne's *Devotions* and the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises," *Studies in Philology* 60 (1963); and Morrissey, "The Self and the Meditative Tradition in Donne's *Devotions*," *Notre Dame English Journal* 13:1 (1980). Katherine Narveson, on the other hand, argues that Donne is a "contented conformist" within the Church of England (see "Piety and the Genre of Donne's *Devotions*," *John Donne Journal* 17 [1998], as well as her unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, *The Soul's Society: Genre, Community, and Identity in Early Stuart Devotional Literature* [University of Chicago, 1996]), while Mary Arshagouni Papazian discusses what she sees as the strong influence of Puritan literature on the *Devotions* in her own unpublished dissertation and several articles. See Mary Arshagouni, *John Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions: A Puritan Reading* (UCLA, 1988); Mary Arshagouni Papazian, "Donne, Election, and the

What critics have *not* done, by and large, is actually investigate the autobiographical aspects of the *Devotions*. Why, for example, did Donne turn to autobiography in this particular work? And what does his autobiographical method tell us about him and his motivations? Readers have long noted that Donne seems to delight in placing himself in confessional postures while actually revealing very little, but I would like to argue that Donne's reticence is in fact the most important part of his self-disclosure. Although Donne continually forces us to read between the lines, he does so, I believe, less because of any temperamental or cultural aversion to self-display than because what he wants most to talk about is precisely what he feels he must keep hidden.

Apart from the specifics of his illness, nearly the only life event that Donne mentions in the *Devotions* is his ordination, and Donne's relationship with both the royal family and the Church of England are constant preoccupations of the work.¹ Donne emphasizes his identity as a minister by frequently addressing his readership as though speaking to his usual audience at St. Paul's, and, even when he is engaged in seemingly private colloquies with God, his outpourings more often than not involve his working through and then staunchly reaffirming his church's position on controversial issues and practices. In other words, Donne appears anxious to present himself as an unfailingly orthodox member of the English Church. Although one might think that this gesture would hardly be necessary for the Dean of St. Paul's, the evidence suggests that Donne feels otherwise. As I shall demonstrate, I believe that Donne constantly reasserts his orthodoxy in order to

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 55: 4 (1992) and "Literary 'Things Indifferent': The Shared Augustinianism of Donne's *Devotions* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995).

¹For references to Donne's ordination, see the work's dedicatory epistle (discussed later in this essay) and Expostulation 8.

counter the religious doubts that appear to have assailed him on what he expected would be his deathbed.

The closest Donne comes to articulating such sentiments is at the very end of his work. In the twenty-third devotion, having apparently weathered his life-threatening illness, Donne is warned by his doctors of the danger of relapsing. He meditates on the various meanings of "relapse," moving, in typical fashion, from considering the term in relation to his sickness to considering its spiritual implications. At first Donne appears to be concerned with human sinfulness in general, but it soon becomes clear that he has a specific sin on his mind. "[S]hall *I alone*," he asks the holy trinity,

bee able to overthrow the worke of *all you*, and *relapse* into those *spirituall sicknesses*, from which your infinite *mercies* have withdrawne me? Though thou, O my *God*, have filled my *measure* with *mercie*, yet my *measure* was not so *large*, as that of thy *whole people*, the *Nation*, the *numerous* and *glorious nation of Israel*; and yet how often, how often did they fall into *relapses*? And then, where is my *assurance*? how easily thou passedst over many other sinnes in them, and how vehemently thou insistedst in those, into which they so often *relapsed*; Those were their *murmurings* against thee, in thine *Instruments*, and *Ministers*, and their turnings upon other *gods*, and embracing the *Idolatries* of their *neighbours*.⁴

Although the "spiritual sicknesses" Donne speaks of have frequently been interpreted as simple doubts about God's mercy,⁵

⁴John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), p. 123. All subsequent citations refer to this edition and its pagination.

⁵Roger Rollin, Frank Warnke, and Sharon Cadman Seclig are among the many who have argued that Donne's spiritual condition is the focus of the *Devotions*, not his sickness. Warnke sees the theme of the work as "human sinfulness, as symbolized by proneness to physical diseases," and

his reference to the Israelites points in another direction. In Donne's account, the nation of Israel did not simply complain about God's ways, they complained, specifically, about his religious institutions. "The *Magistrate* is the *garment* in which thou [God] apparellest *thy selfe*," Donne will write a few lines later, adding, "when they would have *other officers*, they would have *other gods*" (123). While the Israelites' sin of doubting God through their doubts in his "instruments and ministers" seems an unusually specific crime, Donne's interleaving his discussions of their sins with allusions to his own (which he does throughout this section) makes it difficult to argue that he does not see an explicit connection between the two; a moment later he will assert, "I have *had*, I have *multiplied Relapses* already" (124) and for a good thirty lines after that he will meditate upon the awfulness of the Israelites' relapses—which are, always, relapses into idolatry.

Given that "idolatry" in seventeenth-century England was virtually synonymous with "Roman Catholicism," this may be Donne's oblique way of admitting that, when faced with death, he experienced grave doubts about his conversion to the Church of England—and may even have been tempted to return to the Catholic faith. Certainly the rest of the *Expostulation* supports the argument that Donne is motivated by something more than ordinary uneasiness about his salvation, and anxiety about having had such a close call would answer the perpetually vexing question of what prompted Donne to rush his work into print while still under doctor's orders neither to read nor write.⁶ Several critics have

Rollin as "the effects upon a susceptible Christian of what might be called 'spiritual malaise.'" Warnke, *John Donne* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 101, quoted in Rollin, 51; Seelig, "In Sickness and in Health: Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*," *John Donne Journal* 8: 1-2 (1989): 104-05.

⁶See R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 451; Neil Rhodes, ed., *Selected Prose* (New York: Penguin,

speculated that Donne's references to idolatry are meant as an encoded warning to Prince Charles about the danger of leading England back to Roman Catholicism, but while some such political advice may well be embedded here, the *Devotions* is so obsessively self-focused that I find it difficult to believe that Donne's anxieties are other than personal, or that any sustained political agenda is being advanced.⁷ In my reading, then, the *Devotions* is a simultaneously public and private profession of faith. Donne's demonstration of his allegiance to the Church of England and his confession of his sins are done publicly, on the printed page, but the reasons for these declarations are buried deep within the text, probably intended to be fully legible only to Donne and his God.

The three parts of each devotion, Meditation, Expostulation, and Prayer, perform distinct but interrelated functions in Donne's

1987), p. 13. The *Devotions* was entered in the Stationers' Register on January 9, 1623/4.

Robert Cooper, Kate Frost, and Dave Grey and Jeanne Shami have all argued that the *Devotions* was intended, at least in part, to administer political advice to Charles. See Robert M. Cooper, "The Political Implications of Donne's *Devotions*," *New Essays on Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer, (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1977); Frost, pp. 42-56; and David Gray and Jeanne Shami, "Political Advice in Donne's *Devotions*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 50:4 (1989). A different reading is advanced by Elena Levy-Navarro, who, in examining Donne's obsession with rumors in the *Devotions*, has argued that he wrote the work to pre-empt Catholic polemicists of the sort who claimed that John King, Bishop of London, had converted to Catholicism on his deathbed in 1621. Although it seems plausible that Donne might have worried about a similar scandal if he were himself to die, the urgency of the work seems out of all proportion to such an anxiety unless there were some good grounds for it. See "John Donne's Fear of Rumours in the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and the Death of John King," *Notes and Queries* 47: 4 (December 2000): 481-83.

self-presentation. It is therefore worth considering these parts separately, while remembering that the work itself continually cycles through all three. In the *Meditations* Donne reflects in a general way on the brevity and vanity of human life, usually using his situation only as an example of a general principle and making few references to God. Nevertheless, although the *Meditations* are commonly described as the *Devotions*' most "secular" sections and may initially seem the least personal,⁸ in them Donne proves himself to be extremely aware of his audience, even at times employing the second-person "you" in ways that indicate that he is addressing his readership directly. In Meditation 2, for example, Donne describes how even "*Man . . . the noblest part of the Earth, melts so away, as if he were a statue, not of Earth, but of Snowe*" (11). Then, as if anticipating an interjection, he adds, "And how quickly? Sooner then thou canst receive an answer, sooner then thou canst conceive the question" (11). Similarly, in Meditation 14, Donne also appears to envision his audience as thoroughly engaged. Musing upon the futility of assigning dates and hours to events, he writes:

[H]owsoever [*Tyme*] may seeme to have three *stations*, *past*, *present*, and *future*, yet the *first* and *last* of these *are* not (one is not, now, & the other is not yet) And that which you call *present*, is not *now* the same that it was, when you began to call it so in this *Line*, (before you sound that word, *present*, or that *Monosyllable*, *now*, the present, & the *Now* is past). (71)

Donne seems to be imagining his audience reading his words aloud or speaking them along with him. Mary Arshagouni Papazian has suggested that perhaps Donne did not intend for his devotions to

⁸See, for example, Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p. 185, and A. C. Partridge, *John Donne: Language and Style* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1978), p. 202.

be read as purely private prayers,⁹ and I believe that this is true; nowhere is it more obvious than in the Meditations, where Donne not only seeks out an audience but encourages its active participation.

Although the Expostulations and the Prayers also depend upon an audience, they are considerably more performative than the Meditations. In these two sections Donne directs his words explicitly and seemingly exclusively to God; but, as it would be absurd to suggest that Donne has suddenly “forgotten” about the audience he was only so recently addressing, his readers’ silent presence must be an important element of his colloquies with God. The Expostulations have often been described as the *Devotions*’ emotional center, and they are full of seemingly heartfelt exclamations such as the *cri de coeur* “My God, my God” that opens nearly every one of them.¹⁰ But although Donne’s outcries to God may reflect at least some of his actual sentiments during his illness, his expressions of what Joan Webber has called his “questioning, rebellious love” are only partly about his personal relationship with the divine.¹¹ To a surprising degree, the concerns that Donne raises have to do with the shape of the Church of England itself, and in nearly half of the Expostulations his laments include an evaluation of beliefs and practices on the fault line between the Churches of England and Rome. Donne questions God about the logic behind, among other points, a Christian’s duty to his king (Ex. 8); the observance of holy days (Ex. 14); the appropriateness of funeral

⁹See Arshagouni, *John Donne’s Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, pp. 10, 18-21, and “The Latin ‘Stationes’ in John Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *Modern Philology* 89 (1991): 204. In emphasizing the sermonic aspects of the *Devotions*, Janel M. Mueller also gestures in this direction in “The Exegesis of Experience: Dean Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67 (1968).

¹⁰See, for example, Narveson, “Piety,” pp. 126-29; Mueller, p. 4.

¹¹Webber, *Contrary Music*, p. 184.

bells (Ex. 16); the respects due to the dead (Ex. 18); the relative importance of faith and works (Ex. 20); and confession (Ex. 10, e.g.). Other issues raised more obliquely are the place of Scripture and its right interpretation (as allegory, metaphor, or literal truth) (Ex. 19), religious images (Ex. 16), and, of course, idolatry (Ex. 23).

Donne does not present all of these issues in the same way. Sometimes he raises a concern only immediately to solve it, as he does in *Expostulation* 8. Having spent the preceding *Meditation* discussing the mortality of kings, Donne begins the *Expostulation* with an apology for his presumption in speaking so boldly of his monarch (who, after all, has just sent his own physician to Donne's bedside). However, within a few lines Donne has satisfied himself that he is not being disrespectful in God's eyes, and shifts the focus to those who *do* speak "negligently, or irreverently" of God by criticizing their king: "Though *Kings* deface in themselves thy [God's] first *image*, in their owne *soule*, thou givest no man leave to deface thy second *Image*, imprinted indelibly in their *power*" (42). There is really no issue to debate here: Donne asserts that kings are to be obeyed at all times, regardless of their behavior or the nature of their rule.

At other times, as in *Expostulations* 16 and 18, where Donne deals with funeral bells and the respects due to the dead, he seems more conflicted, resolving his perplexity only by concluding that the issues are *adiaphora* (things indifferent to salvation), and thus not to be fretted over. He begins *Expostulation* 16 by saying, "My *God*, my *God*, I doe not expostulate with *thee*, but with *them*, who dare doe that: Who dare expostulate with *thee*, when in the voice of thy *Church*, thou givest allowance, to this *Ceremony* of *Bells* at *funeralls*" (83). Donne criticizes those reform-minded members of his church who would do away with ceremonies such as bell-ringing on the grounds that they are Popish or pagan relics. He admits that the funeral bell may occasionally have been the subject of superstition, but since God has given "allowance" to the practice it should not be fussed over.

Even when Donne cannot arrive at an entirely satisfactory answer from God—as in Expostulation 18 he never satisfies himself as to why God forbade priests to officiate at funerals in Leviticus—he always (and often rather ostentatiously) submits himself to the dictates of the Church. As he declares in Expostulation 7, Donne seeks God's "great *Helpe*, thy *Word*...not from *corners*, nor *Convenventicles*, nor *schismatical singularities*, but from the assotiation, & communion of thy *Catholique Church*, and those persons, whom thou hast alwayes furnished that *Church* withall" (39). Nevertheless, the work makes clear that Donne's personal preferences lie with a more rather than less ceremonial church.¹² In Expostulation 16, for example, he follows his criticisms of the anti-bell faction with his impassioned support not only of bell-ringing, but also of religious images—on the grounds that "wee cannot, O my *God*, take in too many *helps* for religious *duties*" (84). Donne soon draws back from this position, but only at length and with some show of effort: "I know I cannot have any better *Image* of *thee*, than thy *Sonne*," he writes,

nor any better *Image* of *him*, than his *Gospell*: yet must not I, with thanks confesse to thee, that some *historicall pictures* of his, have sometimes put mee upon better *Meditations* than otherwise I should have fallen upon? I know thy *Church* needed not to have taken in from *Jew* or *Gentile*, any supplies for the exaltation of thy *glory*, or our *devotion*; of *absolute necessitie* I know shee needed

¹²Richard Strier has argued, in fact, that Donne's tone toward those who would abolish bell-ringing is "militant," and that he "is as unaccommodating as he can be to those whom he sees as 'schismatical.'" Although I think Strier's language is a bit extreme, he is quite right that Donne does no more than pay lip service to the idea that bell-ringing is a matter of indifference. See "Donne and the Politics of Devotion," *Religion, Literature, and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540-1688*, ed. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 106-07.

not; But yet wee owe thee our thanks, that thou hast
given her leave to doe so. (84)

It is as if Donne does not quite trust his own sympathies, for he seems to be struggling to justify his fondness for both images and church bells—and justifying them to himself as much as to his audience. As often as he declares that images are not necessary adjuncts to worship, just as often he turns around and reasserts their devotional value; though not *necessary*, they are still permissible. If Donne were merely speaking as a high-churchman, it seem unlikely that his discussion of these issues (which he himself claims are *adiaphora*) would manifest such anxiety. However, if he were troubled by the potentially Catholic associations of funeral bells and religious images—and what his attraction to these things implied—he might well move nervously back and forth between embracing images and holding them at arm's length.

In other *Expostulations* Donne manages to resolve the conflict between his own proclivities and his sense of his church's position only by changing the terms of the question. *Expostulation 14* finds Donne preoccupied with the appropriateness of feast days and their observance. It begins,

My God, my God wouldest thou cal thy selfe the *Ancient of dayes*, if we were not to call our selves to an account for our *dayes*? When thou reprehendest the *Galatians* by thy Message to them, *That they observed dayes, and Moneths, and Tymes, and Yeares*, when thou sendest by the same Messenger, to forbid the *Colossians* all *Criticall dayes, Indicatory dayes, Let no Man Judge you, in respect of a holy-day, or of a new Moone, or of a Saboth*, doest thou take away all Consideration, all destinction of *dayes*? Though thou remove them from being of the *Essence* of our *Salvation*, thou leavest them for *assistances*, and for the *Exaltation* of our *Devotion*, to fix our selves, at

certaine *periodicall*, & *stationary times*, upon the
consideration of those things, which thou hast done for
us. (72-73)

His debate with God over this matter of church observance goes on for quite a while, as Donne produces scriptural text after scriptural text arguing for the importance of holy days. However, by the end of the Expostulation Donne has essentially abandoned the argument. He converts the issue of holy days into a metaphor for the stages of his life—and, especially, of his illness: “thou [hast], O my *God*, made this *sicknes*, in which I am not able to receive meate, my *fasting day*, my *Eve*, to this great *festival*, my *dissolution*” (75-76). After his resurrection and final judgment, Donne will celebrate “my *Seventh day*, my *Everlasting Saboth*...where I shall live as long, without reckning any more *Dayes* after, as thy *Sonne*, and thy *Holy Spirit* lived with thee, before you three made any *Dayes* in the *Creation*” (76). By celebrating the signs that God sends him of each discrete stage in his life and salvation, Donne does several things at once: he sidesteps the issue of institutionalized holy days by focusing on his own particular “critical days”; he implicitly upholds the logic behind the church’s holy days by showing that God operates in the same way in his own life; and he suggests that all such observances are temporary—and thus presumably not worth quarreling over—as they will last only until the second coming and the end of chronological time.

If the Meditations indicate that Donne is performing for the benefit of an audience, and the Expostulations reveal that performance to be an enactment of English Church orthodoxy, in the Prayers Donne hints at the motivation behind the performance. Although the Prayers, unlike the Expostulations, do not show Donne challenging God on points of religious practice, they are still deeply involved in at least one of the touchy issues raised in the earlier section: confession. Confession is the only controversial topic that Donne considers more than once, doing so in five separate Expostulations (numbers 4, 9, 10, 13, and 20) and

adopting an unmistakably confessional pose in at least two Prayers (numbers 10 and 15). Donne frets over the subject, unable definitively to assert the necessity of confession (perhaps because the Church of England does not recognize it as a sacrament), but seemingly equally unable to get past it. In Expostulation 20 he writes,

If it were meere *problematicall*, left meere indifferent, whether we should take this *Physicke*, use this *confession*, or no, a great *Physitian* acknowledges this to have beene his *practise*, *To minister many things, which hee was not sure would doe good, but never any other thing, but such as hee was sure would doe no harme*. The use of this spirituall *Physicke* can certainly doe no *harme*; and the *Church* hath alwaies thought that it might, and doubtlesse, many humble *soules* have found, that it hath done them *good*.

(108)

The “if” that begins the passage suggests that confession is *not* “left meere indifferent” by the church, but by the end of the quotation Donne has drawn back to the assertion that confession only “might” do the individual some good. This kind of equivocation is familiar from Donne’s other Expostulations, but the insistent way in which Donne continually returns to the subject is unusual. He claims repeatedly that confession is a sort of “Physicke” for spiritual ills, describing its healing effects in Expostulation 13 in an address to God: “Till wee tell thee in our sicknes, wee think our selves whole, till we shew our *spotts*, thou appliest no *medicine*” (69); in Expostulation 10 he uses similar language: “As *Physicke* works so, it [confession] drawes the *peccant humour* to it selfe, that when it is gathered together, the weight of it selfe may carry that humour away” (54).

Although Donne has related other matters of church doctrine or practice to his illness, the relationship has never been this immediate. To take holy days as a representative example, Donne begins in Meditation 14 with a discussion of the critical days of his

sickness, which leads him to reflect on the futility of dividing time into particular units. Then, in the Expostulation, his thoughts turn to the church's feast days and fast days. In other words, the primary function of the subject seems to be as a metaphor for Donne's illness—and a somewhat awkward one at that. By contrast, Donne seems to imagine confession not just as a metaphor for the medical remedies used by his doctors, but as itself a treatment for what ails him. In his notes to the passage in Expostulation 20, Anthony Raspa observes that the analogy between confession and medical purgation goes back at least to Galen, who recommended purgation as a cure for spiritual ills.¹³ Donne, however, seems to be doing the opposite: envisioning confession as a cure for *physical* sickness. Although Donne appears to believe that his spiritual and physical states are interrelated, the nature of that relationship is not made totally clear: does Donne think that his sinfulness brought on his illness? Is his spiritual anguish a sin occasioned by his physical pain? Or has Donne's bodily ill-health simply reminded him, forcibly, of his spiritual weakness?¹⁴

An answer is not forthcoming from the Prayers. While one might expect Donne's confessional passages to be among the most personal moments in the *Devotions* (what, after all, can the Dean feel so strongly the need to confess?), Donne instead continues to make feints in the direction of autobiography while withholding almost all autobiographical specifics. Prayer 10 provides a representative example. Donne begins his confession confident that he is doing what God wishes: "though thou knowest all my sins, yet thou knowest them not to my *comfort*, except thou know them by my telling them to thee" (54-55). But then he continues, with mounting concern, "how shall I bring to thy knowledg by that way, those sinns, which I my selfe know not? ... If I confesse to thee the *sinnes* of my *youth*, wilt thou aske me, if I know what those

¹³*Devotions*, p. 182.

¹⁴See note 5, above.

sins were? I know them not so well, as to name them all, nor am sure to live houres enough to name them al" (55). As Donne attempts to confess he is continually brought up short by the impossibility of enumerating his sins except under very general names—sins of his youth, sins of omission, sins against his neighbor—and he lists every conceivable category up to and including "sins against the laws of that *Church*, & sinnes against the lawes of that *State*, in which thou hast given mee my station" (55). Finally, as if exhausted, he concludes,

If the naming of these *sinnes* reach not home to all mine,
I know what will; *O Lord* pardon me, me, all those
sinnes, which thy *Sonne Christ Jesus* suffered for, who
suffered for all the sinnes of all the world; for there is no
sinne amongst all those which had not been my sinne, if
thou hadst not beene my *God*, and *antidated* me a pardon
in thy *preventing grace*. (55)

With this final statement Donne undoes the entire work of his confession. Not only has he managed to accuse himself of every known sin without actually specifying any, but he has effectually rendered the whole idea of confession beside the point. If a person is fundamentally guilty of all sins—including those he has not actually committed and those he is not aware of (and especially if God has already pardoned him ahead of time)—confession would seem to serve no purpose.

But as Prayer 10 is far from the last time Donne will argue for or engage in confession, he clearly has more at stake than simply showing the act to be a matter of personal discretion. Although each confession ends with the claim that confession has been rendered irrelevant by Christ's crucifixion, nevertheless, Donne returns, almost obsessively, to a confessional posture. Moreover, while Donne never gets particularly detailed about his sins in these Prayers, in some places there are hints that he is thinking of his youthful recusancy. In Prayer 10 there is that otherwise puzzling

claim to have sinned against the laws of church and state; in Prayer 15 Donne will cite the "wilfull absteining from thy *Congregations*, and omitting thy *service*" as another grave transgression(81); and in Prayer 23 he will speak of his "*Spirituell Fornications*" (126)—a phrase that the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "idolatry," and for which it is difficult to come up with an explanation other than Donne's dalliances with Catholicism, whether in young adulthood or more recently.

Donne's treatment of confession is not exactly unorthodox, for the English Church did retain confession as a part of the prayer book and as a prologue to the sacrament of Communion, even though by the seventeenth century it had become a decidedly collective act.¹⁵ However, Donne's focus on the practice emphasizes the long shadow cast by his early Catholicism. Donne still seems drawn to a sacramental understanding of confession (which he abandons only, and with noticeable effort, midway through each confessional passage), and, given that the sin he wants most to confess may well be his temptation to return to the Catholic church, his confessional impulse becomes doubly suspect as a manifestation of that very sin.

By the end of the *Devotions* Donne appears to have moved away from this impulse, for his final Prayer, although it alludes to his transgressions, is not a confession: Donne *begins* it with the conviction that his has been forgiven. However, the work does not leave Donne at peace, but worried about the possibility of again relapsing into his spiritual fornications, and in the end it is unclear whether his belief in his forgiveness stems from certitude in his election—or rather from the belief that, with the publication of the *Devotions*, he has made a thorough confession.

Whatever actual heterodoxies still exist in Donne's religious

¹⁵See, for example, Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 33-35.

thought (and the Expostulations and the Prayers suggest that there may be a few), the *Devotions* presents him as a conforming member of the Church of England, and Donne seems convinced of this himself. His dedicatory epistle to Prince Charles further underscores his loyalty to the state church, as well as providing an autobiographical frame for the work as a whole. "I *Have had three Births*," he writes, "*One, Naturall, when I came into the World; One Supernatural, when I entred into the Ministry; and now, a preternaturall Birth, in returning to Life, from this Sicknes*" (3). From the very start Donne seems to be rewriting his own history: each of these births represents a potential starting point, and taken together the three could form a rough narrative of one version of his life. However, as it develops, the history Donne provides grows decidedly strange. He continues:

In my second Birth, your Highnesse Royall Father vouchsafed mee his Hand, not onely to sustaine mee in it, but to lead mee to it. In this last Birth, I my selfe am borne a Father: This Child of mine, this Booke, comes into the world, from mee, and with mee. And therefore, I presume (as I did the Father to the Father) to present the Sonne to the Sonne; This Image of my Humiliation, to the lively Image of his Majesty, your Highnesse. (3)

Presumably at his first birth, which he does not describe, Donne was a child, but at his second birth he portrays himself as the woman in labor, with King James assuming the role of either midwife or father: he holds Donne's hand in childbed after having first led him to it. Even the exact issue of this birth is unclear. Although the epistle's first sentence leads us to believe that it will be Donne himself, reborn as a minister, the actual description of this birth never presents Donne in that role.¹⁶ Indeed, the only

¹⁶Compare this with the strikingly similar language Donne uses in a sermon from 1627: "I date my life from my Ministry; for I received mercy, as I received the ministry, as the *Apostle* speaks." George R. Potter and

individual specifically assigned a family identity is King James, whom Donne refers to as “your”—that is, Charles’—father. The apparent absence of father and child in Donne’s second birth and their ready presence in the relationship between James and Charles confuses the connections among all three men. If it is in fact Donne who was (re)born with the aid of James, are he and Charles brothers? Or is Charles somehow the son of James and the feminized Donne? Both possibilities are suggested by the passage, but they are only suggested; to do more would be as presumptuous as it is clearly ridiculous. Nevertheless, by blurring genders and genealogies Donne succeeds in intimating a relationship between himself and the royal family that is deeper than one of mere patronage.

In Donne’s third birth he mysteriously changes sex and family position yet again: not child, not mother, but father. Although in the first line of the epistle Donne explained his third birth as a “*returning to Life, from this Sicknes,*” here his interest is in the birth of his book; it is only as a by-product of *this* birth that Donne himself is born into a new role, that of father, or author, of the *Devotions*. With this final familial shift Donne moves into a position of agency: there is no one holding his hand and he seems to give birth to his book entirely by himself. Donne and his work form a complete family unit, and it is one which may be in competition with the father-son unit of James and Charles. By making Donne a father—and a self-regenerating father at that—Donne’s third birth implies an alteration in his relationship with Charles and James, and potentially quite a radical one. Donne’s language of fathers and sons suggests not only James and Prince Charles and Donne and his book, but also the heavenly father and *his* son. Like God the Father and God the Son, Donne and his book are coeternal: as he describes it, the *Devotions* comes “*into the*

Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., *Complete Sermons*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), 7: 403.

world, from mee, and with mee."¹⁷ Although Donne surely is not claiming an equivalency between himself and the Almighty, his language does suggest that, as an artist and a man of God, he is both independent from and in some ways more privileged than the king himself.

But while Donne's description of this third birth may reveal that he has conflicted feelings about his dependence upon the royal family, by the end of the epistle he has arrived at a happy reconciliation: intermarriage. Donne expresses to Charles the wish that he might "*see the happinesses of the times of your Highnesse,*" but he claims that this can only come to pass "*if this Child of mine, inanimated by your gracious Acceptation, may so long preserve alive the Memory of...JOHN DONNE*" (3). In asking Charles to "inanimate" his child, Donne is, on the literal level, simply asking that Charles' patronage of him and his book will lead to its public success and thus keep alive Donne's memory. However, Donne's choice of the word "inanimate"—synonyms for which include "quicken" and "infuse with life"—suggests that he is imagining Charles' own participation in a fourth birth. Perhaps Donne is casting Charles as a co-parent of this formerly spontaneously-generated book, or perhaps he envisions him as the father of some new issue, born of him *and* the book (whose figurative womb he, Charles, will inanimate). In either case, whether Donne's child or grandchild, the resulting offspring will be a coheir of both the Donne and Stuart lines—a genuine merging of Donne's identity with that of the royal family and their church.

By multiplying the numbers of fathers and sons (which eventually come to include Hezekiah and Manasseh, as Kate Frost has argued¹⁸) and continually changing his own role within these

¹⁷The language of the Nicene Creed in describing the second person of the Trinity is similar: "the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father."

¹⁸Hezekiah is mentioned in the line following the last one I cited, as well as at three other points in the *Devotions* proper. Although

pairs, Donne suggests an extreme instability in the parent-child relationship. Indeed, the most striking thing about the epistle's abundance of family members may be that, among all those possible relatives, Donne's own biological family is entirely absent. In contrast with the autobiographical prefatory matter to *Pseudo-Martyr*, in which Donne's Catholic family makes such a prominent appearance, neither in the dedicatory epistle nor anywhere else does the *Devotions* so much as hint that Donne might have parents or children of his own.¹⁹ Donne is signaling the replacement of his biological family with the Stuart family, and his allegiance to the Catholic church with allegiance to James. No matter what residual emotional attachment Donne may have to Catholic practices, his devotion to his king—a recurring theme of the *Devotions*—is also a demonstration of loyalty to the English Church. Whatever other readers might think of this evidence of his conformity, it appears to have been a powerful consolation to Donne.

Yale University

Hezekiah's son Manasseh is not mentioned by name, Frost argues—I think rightly—that, as a bad king to Hezekiah's good king, his counter-example is an implied warning to Charles about the sort of ruler he should *not* be. Frost, pp. 44-48.

¹⁹As Frost has pointed out, there are significant details of Donne's life during his illness—such as the marriage that Donne hastened for his daughter Constance in the belief that he would otherwise die before seeing her settled—that he omits from the *Devotions* (Frost, 17). It is also worth remembering that Donne's mother, who remained a Roman Catholic all her life, died only two months before Donne and lived for an unspecified number of her declining years in her son's home. See Bald, p. 427.