

The *Devotions*: Popular and Critical Reception

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It is unlikely that any single phrase ever written by John Donne is more familiar to the general public than his statement, in “Meditation XVII” of the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, that “No Man is an *Iland*.” Almost as well known is the conclusion of this same passage: “therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.”¹ This portion of the *Devotions* has so thoroughly entered the public consciousness that a quick Google search using modernized spelling turns up more than 400,000 hits for “no man is an island,” most appearing in distinctly non-literary contexts and usually without attribution. (Those that do attribute the passage, more often than not, claim that it comes from “a poem by John Donne.”) However, unlike other popular catchphrases with literary origins, such as “To be or not to be,” “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” or “April is the cruellest month,” “No man is an island” comes from a work that is far from widely read and is rarely taught even in courses on Renaissance literature.

And yet, the phrase—and the sentiment behind it—appear to have a powerful appeal. An eighth-grade teacher in North Carolina, for example, has devised a lesson plan entitled, “*Is no man an island?*” in which her students memorize the passage from “Meditation XVII,” compare it with Paul Simon’s apparent rejoinder (“I am a rock, I am an island”), and try to apply Donne’s statement to a variety of contemporary

¹John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1975), p. 87. For the remainder of this essay, I will quote this passage using the modernized spelling and typography familiar to the general reader whose reactions I am examining.

events.² “No Man Is an Island” is also the title of a song by Joan Baez, a book of essays by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and a WWII movie that depicts the adventures of the last U.S. serviceman left alive on Guam after the Japanese invasion.³ And finally, of course, there is Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which may well have been the single most important reason for the passage’s popularization in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the question remains: what exactly makes “Meditation XVII” so resonant for so many people—and what has prevented the *Devotions* as a whole from achieving the same level of popularity? For that matter, is the common interpretation of “Meditation XVII” even an accurate reflection of either that passage or the work as a whole? Most readers seem to understand the passage beginning “No man is an island” as an assertion of the inter- or mutual dependence of all human beings; in the words of one critic, Donne’s declaration that he is “involved in mankind” is a statement of “transcendent health,” marking Donne’s realization that he is not alone, and is thus the work’s turning point.⁴ But is this how a seventeenth-century reader would have read the *Devotions*?

The work appears to have been popular in its day, going through five editions in the seventeenth century—three during Donne’s lifetime and the other two shortly after his death.⁵ Although the number of editions suggests that Donne’s work initially met with a receptive audience, there is very little contemporary commentary on the *Devotions*. In 1624, the year of its first publication, Edward Chamberlain mentions the work

²Jewell Kendrick, lesson plan: “Is No Man an Island?” Learn NC: K–12 Teaching and Learning Through the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Education <<http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/JewellKendrick6182002047>>.

³Baez, “No Man Is an Island,” *Baptism* (Vanguard, 1968)—according to a Google search, the phrase “No man is an island” also features prominently in songs by, among others, Jefferson Airplane, the reggae group the Mighty Diamonds, and former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell; Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955); *No Man Is an Island*, dir. Richard Goldstone (Universal Studios, 1962).

⁴Roger B. Rollin, “John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*—The Sequel: *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *John Donne Journal* 13 (1994): 57.

⁵The first two editions were published in 1624, with the other three seventeenth-century editions appearing in 1626–1627, 1634, and 1638.

briefly in a letter to Sir Dudley Carleton. The *Devotions*, Chamberlain writes, contains “many curious . . . conceits, not for common capacities, but surely full of pietie and much true feeling,” while in 1640 the less reservedly enthusiastic Isaak Walton describes it as a book “In which the Reader may see, the most secret thoughts that then possesse [Donne’s] Soul, Paraphrased and made publick: a book, that may not unfitly be called a *Sacred picture of Spiritual Extasies*.”⁶

Other hints as to how the first readers of the *Devotions* read it may be found in some of the early editions themselves. The first three editions were all published in duodecimo, their small, pocket-ready size suggesting that the *Devotions* was understood as a private devotional work—as much an aid to the spiritual development of others as a record of Donne’s own. There are also signs that early readers understood the work as falling within the tradition of the *ars moriendi*. One copy of the second edition, for instance, is bound in an apparently seventeenth-century leather cover that bears an interesting device: a skull, surmounted by a winged hourglass, beneath which a scythe and shovel are intercrossed with the usual pair of bones.⁷ This particular copy is also bound up with Donne’s 1627 sermon on the death of Lady Danvers (the former Magdalen Herbert), which contains an account of that woman’s holy life and holy death (a tradition continued by several much later editions of the *Devotions*, which present the *Devotions* in one volume with “Death’s Duell” and/or Danvers’ funeral sermon). Moreover, the two editions of the *Devotions* published after Donne’s death both bear on their title pages the famous engraving of Donne in his burial shroud.

Although none of this tells us anything *precisely* about how seventeenth-century readers would have interpreted “Meditation XVII,” it seems reasonable to assume that if they read Donne’s sickness as a reminder of their own spiritual sicknesses, they would have read that

⁶ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, of the Reign of James I*, ed. M. A. E. Green (London: Longman, 1859), 11:168, quoted in Mary Arshagouni [Papazian], “Politics of John Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*: or, New Questions on the New Historicism, *Renaissance and Reformation* 15.3 (1991): 241. Walton, “Life of Donne,” *The Lives of John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Richard Hooker, George Herbert, and Robert Sanderson* (London: Oxford World’s Classics, 1966), p. 59.

⁷ Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, call number 1978 567.

passage in "Meditation XVII" similarly: in the death of another man, Donne, like his readers, is reminded of his inevitable end. When that bell tolls—or when readers see that engraving of Donne in all his burial-shrouded glory—they know that the bell tolls for them because they too are sinful, and mortal, and dying more each day.

After the last seventeenth-century edition of the *Devotions* was published in 1638, there were no further editions for 200 years. Presumably the work was not entirely unknown in the eighteenth century, but there are no extant critical commentaries. Perhaps the *Devotions*, with the many "curious conceits" that Chamberlain noted, was regarded much as was the poetry of the so-called "metaphysical" writers by Samuel Johnson, or perhaps its style of religious meditation was simply not fashionable to readers of the succeeding century.⁸ The nineteenth century, however, appears to have found the *Devotions* more appealing, for editions by three different editors were published in 1839, 1840, and 1841.⁹ Just what prompted so much attention is unclear. The nineteenth century did see a general revival of interest in Donne's poetry—and, to a lesser degree, in prose works such as his sermons—but despite this fact and despite those three editions, the critical silence on the *Devotions* remains; even such admirers of Donne as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Charles Lamb, in England, and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, in the United States, appear to have had little to say about the *Devotions*, if indeed they read it at all.

Thomas Hardy apparently did read it, and James Dorrell has argued convincingly that Hardy's poem, "Drawing Details in an Old Church," contains an explicit allusion to "Meditation XVII." The narrator of Hardy's poem is sketching the interior of a Gothic church, when its bell begins to toll. Says the narrator,

I ask not whom it tolls for,
Incurious who he be;
So, some morrow, when those knolls for
One unguessed, sound out for me,

⁸"Life of Cowley," in *Lives of the English Poets* (London: Oxford World's Classics, 1964), 1:12–28.

⁹Henry Alford, ed., *Dr. Donne's Works*, vol. 3 (London: J. W. Parker, 1839); *Devotions, by John Donne, with Two Sermons* (London: W. Pickering, 1840); D. A. Talboys, ed., *Donne's Devotions* (Oxford: 1841).

A stranger, loitering under
 In nave or choir,
 May think, too, "Whose, I wonder?"
 But care not to inquire. (9–16)

As Dorrill argues, Hardy's narrator does not inquire for whom the bell tolls, because he doesn't really care, just as he does not expect anyone to inquire about the bell that will eventually toll for his own death. Although the sounding of someone else's funeral bell does cause the narrator to think briefly of his own end, the only thing the two men seem to have in common is their shared inconsequence.¹⁰ Hardy's speaker is as unaffected by the deaths and lives of others as Donne is stirred by them.

Another revival of interest in the *Devotions* occurred in the 1920s. John Sparrow's edited edition appeared in 1923, William Draper's in 1926, and in 1929 John Hayward's *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* pioneered the tradition, alive and well today, of parceling out Donne's prose in pithy, reader-friendly, and often contextless soundbites.¹¹ It is likely through one of these early twentieth-century editions that Hemingway knew the work. Based upon the content of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, in which Hemingway's American idealist, Robert Jordan, runs off to join the Spanish resistance in the Civil War, we can infer that Hemingway interpreted the passage beginning "no man is an island" as a call to action. When Donne writes, "any man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind," Hemingway apparently understood this as an admonition to recognize the interconnectedness of all human beings, and the obligations that each has to the other. At the end of the novel, as Jordan lies alone and wounded, he reflects on the fact that, in the few days he has spent with the guerrillas, he has for the first time lived a full and, in Hemingway's words, "completely integrated" life.

Minus the socialist elements, this is essentially the same interpretation of the passage that prevails to this day. The eighth-grade

¹⁰"Hardy, Donne, and the Tolling Bell," *John Donne Journal* 4 (1985): 331–335, esp. 333–334.

¹¹Sparrow, ed., *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923); Draper, ed., *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Together with Death's Duell* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, & Co., 1926); Hayward, ed., *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (London: Nonesuch Press, 1929).

lesson plan that I mentioned earlier clearly takes for granted that "Meditation XVII" is an assertion of human interdependence. As a conclusion to the unit, the instructor asks that her students "write a well-developed, persuasive essay defending or refuting John Donne's philosophy" and that they do so by considering either contemporary events, such as "random deaths from natural disasters," or historical ones, such as "U.S. isolationism prior to WWII."¹²

While the general public may be convinced that John Donne is not an island, twentieth-century critical opinion has not always been so sure. Scholars in the early and middle part of the century were largely baffled by the form of the *Devotions*, which many regarded as puzzlingly unique. In his introduction to the edition of 1923, John Sparrow claims that the work "pretends to be nothing but a collection of musings, divided up into a series of 'Meditations,' 'Expostulations,' and 'Prayers,' without any singleness of plan or idea."¹³ Evelyn Simpson similarly found the work lacking in coherent design—according to her, this "curious book" is "too introspective, too metaphysical, too much overloaded by learning of different kinds" to serve as a useful aid to devotion (she compares it unfavorably to the works of Jeremy Taylor and Lancelot Andrewes); and Helen White goes so far as to assert that "it is the author that draws us to Donne's *Devotions*, not the content."¹⁴

If these earlier critics were inclined to find Donne isolated by his choice of form, scholarship since then has been deeply invested in proving that Donne's *Devotions* is *not* an island, but rather very much part of the main—that is to say, a part of a recognizable literary tradition. Beginning with Louis Martz, later twentieth-century critics have sought—and usually found—various formal precursors to the *Devotions*. Martz and others have emphasized the work's debt to a Catholic, and specifically Ignatian, meditative tradition, while others, including Mary Papazian and Katherine Narveson, have argued that the work has a

¹²Kendrick, <<http://www.learnnc.org/lessons/JewellKendrick6182002047>>.

¹³Sparrow, p. 118.

¹⁴Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 251; White, *English Devotional Prose 1600-1640* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1931), p. 253, quoted in David Sullivan, "The Structure of Self-Revelation in Donne's *Devotions*," *Prose Studies* 11 (1988): 49.

distinctly Protestant literary heritage.¹⁵ All are agreed, however, as are most other contemporary critics, that the *Devotions* is very much a unified whole, with a structure elaborately designed and executed with the utmost care. The most thorough appraisal of its structure, of course, is Kate Gartner Frost's *Holy Delight*—itself a work of great intricacy and detail.¹⁶

Other scholarly debates have arisen in the last few decades over the political content and context of the *Devotions*, as well as over the degree to which the work should or should not be considered autobiographical.¹⁷ In these debates, too—as perhaps in all areas of Donne criticism—it is, I hope, not too fanciful to say that there is usually an “island” side and a “main” side. There will always be those who prefer to see the work primarily as something stunningly unique, personal, and disconnected as much as possible from any vulgar over involvement in political issues or religious debates: it is a work for all time and rises above such things. On

¹⁵Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954); Thomas Van Laan, “John Donne’s *Devotions* and the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises,” *Studies in Philology* 60 (1963): 191–202; Thomas John Morrissey, “The Self and the Meditative Tradition in Donne’s *Devotions*,” *Notre Dame English Journal* 13.1 (1980): 29–49; Papazian, “Donne, Election, and the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 55.4 (1992): 603–619, 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), pp. 324–349; Narveson, “Piety and the Genre of Donne’s *Devotions*,” *John Donne Journal* 17 (1998): 107–136.

¹⁶*Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne’s “Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹⁷Robert Cooper, Kate Frost, and Dave Gray and Jeanne Shami have argued that the *Devotions* was intended, at least in part, to administer political advice to Charles: Cooper, “The Political Implications of Donne’s *Devotions*,” in *New Essays on Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 57 (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1977), pp. 192–210; Frost, *Holy Delight*, pp. 42–56; and Gray and Shami, “Political Advice in Donne’s *Devotions*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 50.4 (1989): 337–356. Papazian, on the other hand, has challenged the reading of Cooper (and, by implication, at least aspects of Gray and Shami’s reading) in “Politics of John Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*: or, New Questions for the New Historicism,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 15.3 (1991): 233–248.

the other hand, there are those who want to locate the *Devotions*—for all the work's seemingly personal nature—within some larger and purportedly more important political context: Donne arose from his sickbed, and his first thought was to give the world—in deeply encoded form, of course—his thoughts on ceremonialism or the Spanish Match. The reality, of course, is that the *Devotions*, like all works of literature, is neither island nor main, but somewhere in between—a peninsula, let us say: off there at a distance, taking a while to get to, but neither inaccessible nor disconnected from the circumstances that (surely) surrounded its creation. With any luck, the twenty-first century will bring us further exploration of the territory.

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