

Theology, Doctrine, and Genre in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

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D*evotions Upon Emergent Occasions* is both difficult and rewarding to teach. It is difficult because it is a comparatively lengthy work, which often rivals the verse in the density and unfamiliarity of its prose style, the range and relentlessness of its allusions, and the complexity of its conceits. Of course it is rewarding because of precisely these same features, which provide a memorable example of the most distinctive qualities of Donne's prose, but also because his profound devotional reflections are embedded in a fairly straightforward autobiographical narrative with a minimum of polemical divinity and political digression. The *Devotions* may thus be effectively presented to students as a series of meditations on human mortality occasioned by the author's lapsing into a grave illness, confronting the prospect that he may not survive, and finally recovering in a fashion that calls to mind spiritual regeneration, as well as resurrection from the death that remains inevitable.

Nowadays almost everyone agrees that Donne is some kind of ecclesiastical "moderate," although scholarly disagreements over what defines Jacobean moderation are often *immoderate*. In its avoidance of the more controversial religious issues of the early seventeenth century, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* provides a paradigm case of this moderation, whatever it may be, by offering almost a doctrinally generic account of the human condition of mortality—a kind of early modern "mere Christianity," to borrow C. S. Lewis's useful phrase.

A preliminary distinction is in order between theology, properly a speculative science that imposes a theoretical order on the basic data of Christian revelation, and doctrine, or dogma, that expresses the teachings of that revelation proposed to the faithful for belief and practice. In the

Middle Ages the ordinary lay Christian might "work out his salvation"—howbeit in "fear and trembling"—by adhering to the basic teachings of the Church without taking a position on recondite theological controversies. Such would seem to be the meaning of the wry aside of Chaucer's Nun's Priest, who adverts to the "greet altercacioun" among "certain clerkis" over whether "what that God forwoot moot nedes bee" by "simple necessitee" or by "necessitee condicionel." His conclusion is dismissive: "I wol nat han to do of swich mateere; / My tale is of a cok, as ye may here. . . ."¹ One result of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic response was that the "greet altercacioun" escaped the "Scole" and invaded the marketplace. If the Nun's Priest could witness our present deliberations, he might smile to find that literary scholars have taken up quarrels of the theological "clerkis" of his own day. One important manifestation of Donne's "moderation" is surely his disinclination to encourage strictly theological speculation among the readers of the *Devotions*, as well as among the congregations to whom he preached.

Another medieval work that may illuminate Donne's *Devotions* is *Everyman*. M. Thomas Hester has shown how "Oh my black Soule!" evokes the basic scenario of this venerable morality play: the personified ordinary Christian—a typical sinner, every man—is confronted with "Death"; that is, he is reminded of his own mortality and forced to assess the quality of his life as a Christian.² The "emergent occasions" of Donne's *Devotions* are precisely the stages in an illness that he fears may prove fatal. He treats himself as an "every man" very much like the central personification of the medieval play; although Donne's reflections are more subtle and seem to anticipate a more sophisticated audience, the persona he creates shares Everyman's moral obtuseness and obliviousness to spiritual reality. The substance of the *Devotions* amounts largely to "John Donne" coming to acknowledge that he is no different from other men (from every man): he is helplessly lost in sin and feverishly preoccupied with tawdry, ephemeral pleasures that only distract him by fits and starts from the unavoidable miseries of earthly life leading to the ineluctable terror of the grave. Or as the author himself puts it at the

¹ *Canterbury Tales*, 7:3234–3252, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1957).

² "The troubled wit of John Donne's 'blacke Soule,'" *Cithara* 13 (1991): 16–27.

close of the first "Meditation": "O perplex'd discomposition, O ridling distemper, O miserable condition of Man."³ This misery is, however, transfigured by the one hope of hopeless man: God's grace, his free offer of salvation and an eternity of bliss rather than torment. In Donne's words in the nineteenth Prayer, "As therefore the *morning dew*, is a *pawne* of the *evening fatnesse*, so, O Lord, let *this daies* comfort be the *earnest* of to *morrows*, so farre as may *conforme* me entirely to thee, to what *end*, and by what *way* soever thy *mercie* have appointed mee" (p. 104).

According to the original title page, Donne writes, then, a work that he calls *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, and severall steps in my Sicknes: Digested into 1. MEDITATIONS upon our Humane Condition. 2. EXPOSTULATIONS, and Debatelements with God. 3. PRAYERS, upon the severall Occasions, to him*. The work is autobiographical, but not in the generic sense an autobiography or even spiritual autobiography, such as the *Libro de la Vida* of Santa Teresa de Jesús, the dictated manuscript autobiography of San Ignacio de Loyola, the "Autobiography" of the New England Puritan, Thomas Shepard, or John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. It is, rather, a religious work that sets out not so much to expound doctrine as to exemplify the assimilation of doctrine by the soul of the *devout* Christian; that is, by the soul that has *vowed* loyalty to Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. Donne treats his own persona much as St. François de Sales treats Philothea in the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, a work published in its definitive form in 1619, just five years before the first edition of Donne's *Devotions*.

Donne begins the fourth "Meditation" with a reflection on the admirable nature of mankind as something more than a microcosm: "It is too little to call *Man a little World*; Except *God*, Man is a *diminutive* to nothing" (p. 19). Herein he seems to be encouraging his reader to the same kind of consideration as St. François, who exhorts Philothea to meditate "On our creation," "On the end for which were created," and

³*Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (1975; rpt. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 8. All quotations from the *Devotions* come from this text.

"On God's benefactions" (*Introduction*, 1.9–11).⁴ When Donne admonishes himself, "Call back thy Meditations again, and bring it [sic] downe; whats become of mans great extent and proportion. . . ?" (pp. 20–21), he is making the same point about the paradoxical greatness and nothingness of mankind that St. François makes in reminding Philothea, "God has drawn you out of that nothingness to make you what you now are and he has done it solely out of his own goodness and without need of you" (*Introduction*, 1.9). The entirety of Donne's *Devotions* dwells on the prospect of death and the spiritual benefit that may be derived from this apparent catastrophe in the seventeenth "Meditation": "The *Bell* doth toll for him that *thinkes* it doth; and though it *intermit* againe, yet from that *minute*, that that occasion wrought upon him, hee is united to *God*" (pp. 86–87). Similarly, Philothea is urged to "Imagine yourself to be lying on your deathbed, extremely ill and without any hope of recovery," and to "Consider how uncertain is the day of your death" (*Introduction*, 1.13).

It is not my intention to suggest that St. François provides a source for Donne's *Devotions* in his own *Introduction to the Devout Life*; the similarities between the two works are quite general and are paralleled in numerous other sources available to Donne, such as the *Guía de pecadores* by Fray Luis de Granada and *The Art of Divine Meditation* by his countryman and fellow clergyman in the Church of England, Joseph Hall. Donne's work, while stamped with the seal of his unique style and outlook, is not unusual in broad generic terms: it is a set of meditations designed to inspire sober reflection on the prospect of death leading to intense devotion to God. Like all Christians of his era, Donne stresses mankind's utter dependence on divine grace, but not in a way that suggests a specifically Calvinist orientation. His evocation of grace in the first Expostulation, for example, avoids the suggestion of irresistible grace, recently affirmed at the Synod of Dort, and describes God *infusing* grace, which is not language associated with enthusiastic Calvinism:

⁴St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, trans. and ed. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1950). The *Introduction* is cited from this edition, but I have also consulted Saint François de Sales, *Introduction à la vie devote*, ed. Etienne-Marie Lajeunie, O. P. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962).

But will *God* pretend to make a *Watch*, and leave out the *springe*? to make so many various wheels in the faculties of the Soule, and in the organs of the body, and leave out *Grace*, that should move them? or wil *God* make a *springe*, and not *wind* it up? Infuse his first *grace*, & not second it with more, without which, we can no more use his first *grace*, when we have it, then wee could dispose our selves by *Nature*, to have it? But alas, that is not our case; we are all *prodigall sonnes*, and not *disinherited*; wee have received our portion, and misspent it, not bin denied it.

(p. 9)

Similarly, in the ninth "Prayer," Donne suggests the capacity of a man to cooperate with grace: ". . . at this *minute*, I accept that which I have so often, so often, so rebelliously refused, thy blessed inspirations" (p. 50). When he mentions God's "*preventing grace*" in the tenth "Prayer" (p. 55), he deploys a term used by St. Thomas Aquinas and by the Council of Trent in the fifth chapter of the *Decree on Justification*.⁵

This concept of grace is also found in Catholic works of popular devotion, such as Luis de Granada's *Guía de pecadores* (1556, 1567), which went through numerous editions in French, Italian, and Latin, as well as Spanish, and was also translated into English and German. In his chapter on the "Benefit of Justification," Fray Luis maintains that the Redemption wrought by Christ's sacrifice, like medicine, must be applied to be efficacious:

This office most notably pertains to the Holy Spirit, to whom the sanctification of man is attributed; because it is He who anticipates [*previene*] the sinner with his mercy, and, having anticipated, he calls him; and having called, he justifies him; and having justified, he guides him surely through the paths of

⁵*Summa Theologiae*, 1-2.112.2 ad 2, 3rd ed. (Madrid: BAC, 1962), 2:788 ["cum homo ad gratiam se praeparare non possit nisi Deo eum praeveniente et movente ad bonum. . . ."]; *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum, et Declarationum*, ed. Henr. Denzinger et Carolus Rahner, 29th ed. (Friburg: Herder, 1953) #797 ["ipsius iustificationis exordium in adultis a Dei per Christum Iesum praeveniente gratia sumendum esse. . . ."].

justice and thus brings him even to the goal with the gift of perseverance and afterwards grants him the crown of glory.⁶

Commenting on John 6:44, "No man can come to me, except my Father . . . draw him," Fray Luis adds, "Neither the free will of man, nor all the capacity of human nature by itself alone is enough to lift a man from sin to grace, unless the arm of divine power intervenes here" (p. 291: "ni el libre albedrío del hombre, ni todo el caudal de la naturaleza humana basta por sí solo para levantar a un hombre del pecado a la gracia, si no intervinieren aquí el brazo de la potencia divina"). This is not to suggest that Donne was influenced by Fray Luis or was thinking in self-consciously Catholic terms; the point is, rather, that the fundamental doctrine of the *Devotions* is common to a wide range of religious thinkers crossing confessional boundaries.

When Donne makes a specifically doctrinal assertion, it flatly contradicts one of Calvin's most distinctive propositions, his denial that Adam sinned through his own free will rather than by God's predetermination: "The decree, I admit, is dreadful," Calvin wrote, "and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man was to be before he made him, and foreknew, because he had so ordained by his decree."⁷ It is difficult to see anything save a direct refutation of this view, when Donne asks in the fourth "Expostulation," whether God intended sickness for humanity by implanting medicinal qualities in herbs. "No more," he answers, "then thou didst meane, that we should *sinne*, when thou madest us: thou fore-sawest both, but *causedst* neither" (p. 21). Whether consciously or not, Donne is echoing the comment of St. Robert Bellarmine on precisely the same passage in the *Institutes*: "God fashioned mankind for a good and certain end, namely, for the glory of mercy and justice to be shown forth in him. For although God

⁶Fray Luis de Grananda, *Guía de Pecadores*, intro. Luis G. Alonso Getino (Madrid: Aguilar, 1962), pp. 290–291 ["El cual oficio señaladamente pertenece al Espíritu Santo, a quien se atribuye la santificación del hombre; porque El es el que previene al pecador con su misericordia, y, prevenido, le llama; y llamado, le justifica; y justificado, le guía derechamente por las sendas de la justicia y así le lleva hasta el cabo con el don de la perseverancia y después le da la corona de la gloria"].

⁷*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.23.7, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957), 2:232.

neither decreed, nor willed, that the first man would sin, nor created him to this end, that he would sin; nevertheless, he foresaw that he would sin, if he were fashioned as in fact he was fashioned; and at the same time as he foresaw that he would be able to make use of a remedy for his sin, so that thence his justice and mercy would wonderfully be revealed.”⁸ Once again, the significance is not that Donne was a crypto-Catholic, but that the Protestant doctrine to which he adhered had drawn back from a characteristic position of Calvin, which distinguished his teaching on salvation from 1500 years of Christian tradition.

When Donne addresses the ecclesiastical situation in which he found himself in the 1620s, he seems, again, bent upon assuming a moderate position. Lamenting his inability to attend worship in church in the third “Expostulation,” he makes of it an uneasy joke: “It is not a *Recusancie*, for I would come, but it is an *Excommunication*, I must not” (p. 17). When he worries in the fifth “Prayer” about “any *supplanter* that would enter to undermine me in my *Religion* to thee, in the time of my weaknesse, or to defame me, & magifie himselfe, with false rumors of such a victory, & surprisall of me, after I am dead” (p. 28), the serious concern beneath the earlier joke becomes clear. It is difficult not to agree with Brooke Conti that “Donne constantly reasserts his orthodoxy in order to counter the religious doubts that appear to have assailed him on what he expected would be his deathbed.”⁹ While Donne may well have been thinking about the rumors that John King, Bishop of London, had converted to Catholicism on his deathbed in 1621, he had been worried about this issue at least fifteen years earlier, as indicated by a remark in a 1608 letter

⁸*De Amissione Gratiae, et Statu Peccati*, II.xvii, *Roberti Bellarmini Opera* (Venice, 1721), 4:79 [“Respondeo, Deum condidisse hominem in finem bonum & certum, videlicet ad gloriam misericordiae, justitiaeque in eo manifestandam. Licet enim Deus non decreverit, neque voluerit, ut primus homo peccaret, neque ad hunc finem eum condiderit, ut peccaret: tamen praescivit eum peccaturum, si conderetur, qualis conditus est; & simul praescivit, se posse tale remedium ejus peccato adhibere, ut inde justitia, & misericordia sua mirifice patefieret”].

⁹“Donne, Doubt, and the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 147–148. See also Elena Levy-Navarro, “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): 481–483.

to Henry Goodere concerning Hugh Broughton "who is gone to the Roman side."¹⁰

Donne's determination to establish his Protestant *bona fides* is balanced, however, by attacks on separatists in his deprecation of "corners," "Conventicles," and "schismatical singularities" (p. 39) and "whispering in Conventicles" (p. 113) in the seventh and twenty-first "Expostulations," and by his reproof of the puritan wing of the Church of England in his defense of such things as "this *Ceremony of Bells* (p. 83) and "some *historicall pictures* of his [Christ's]" (p. 84) in the sixteenth "Expostulation," and by his impatience in the twentieth with "uncharitable *disputations*, which is to take place, faith or repentance, and which, when we consider *faith*, and *works*?" (p. 106). In addition, there is Donne's repeated equivocal musing over the validity of auricular confession, as Conti points out.¹¹

In summation, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* should be presented as an example of Donne's rich, restless, and searching prose; as his unique generic innovation upon the conventions of meditation; and as a manifestation of his skillful navigation among the shoals of doctrinal and ecclesiastical controversy. As a modified version of meditation, with roots in continental tradition combined with an awareness of the needs of the Church of England, the *Devotions* is an analogue of what Donne thought that Church should be: an institution that retained the strengths of Catholic humanism in an independent, local form attuned to the national aspirations of Reformation England. While Donne reveals in this work his awareness of the specific political issues of his time, even his anxiety over them, his contribution to these controversies is, finally, not very important. He is significant not as a Jacobean ecclesiastical politician, but as a writer with a powerful and deeply personal Christian vision.

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¹⁰*Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), intro. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977), p. 35.

¹¹"Donne, Doubt, and the *Devotions*," pp. 156-160.