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# "No Man [and Nothing] is an *Iland*": Contexts for Donne's "Meditation XVII"

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The following pages examine the contexts for "Meditation XVII" in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, the work that, arguably, contains Donne's most famous, memorable, and oft-quoted lines, "No man is an *Iland*" and "For whom the *bell* tolls." Because of these powerful lines, this *Devotion* often has been read and anthologized by Donne scholars, students, and readers of all sorts apart from the larger work from which it comes. But because the seventeenth *Devotion* is an integral part of the larger work, it is limiting to speak only of contexts for an individual *Devotion*. Thus, the comments below reconsider the personal, historical, and political contexts of the *Devotions* as a whole, with the understanding that the particular Meditation/Expostulation/Prayer under consideration must be read within this larger context. As I have argued elsewhere, the *Devotions* must be read as an integrated whole, one in which Donne creates a clear narrative structure with twists and turns that suggest that each of the twenty-three individual *Devotions* that constitute the larger work represents a particular moment in a memorable cycle of illness, affliction, recovery, and fear of relapsing. When considering the question of contexts for such a work, it is important to review both the personal and historical events that might have influenced or concerned Donne in late 1623, early 1624. Thus, these comments begin with an overview of Donne's personal and professional situation at the time he suffered the illness that occasioned the *Devotions* and moved those reflections on this experience into print. What follows is a consideration of the larger political and historical

events, both national and international, that served as a powerful and important backdrop for Donne's writing and publishing the *Devotions.*

As most readers of Donne well know, Donne's *Devotions* was occasioned by a serious illness he suffered in late November, early December 1623. The onset of the illness that struck him two years after he became Dean of St. Paul's (November 1621) was sudden and brought him to the brink of death. *Devotion XVII,* in particular, marks the moment in the work when Donne is lying on what he fears is his deathbed, listening to the knell of the bell in the nearby church, imagining that it soon will be ringing for him. This *Devotion* represents part of a group that presents Donne in an act of reflection on what he presumed—and, if his words within the text can be believed, may even have hoped—was his own imminent death. It is not until *Devotion XIX* that Donne begins to see signs of recovery and to realize that he would not die—had not in fact died. Recovery, however tentative, followed, and when he was out of danger, though probably still under threat of physical (and spiritual) relapse into sickness and sin, he quickly wrote the *Devotions* and rushed it into print, a process unusual for him at this point in his life (we see this only with a few of the sermons—the 1622 sermon on the *Directions for Preachers,* for example, which he had printed at the behest of King James). Donne managed to accomplish this feat of composing and publishing the *Devotions* expeditiously, despite not fully recovering his strength for another few months.

Donne's personal circumstances at the time of his illness and subsequent publication of the *Devotions* were not bad. In fact, one could argue that by late 1623, Donne finally had achieved the stability, fame, and respect that he had for so long desired and so long sought. Although he had lost his wife Anne in childbirth in 1617, he had found comfort in the Church, achieved a long-desired promotion as Dean of St. Paul's in November 1621 (after having been overlooked for other vacant posts), had become well known as a preacher, and was made an honorary member of the Virginia Company in 1622, the same year in which he was appointed as a judge in the Court of Delegates and as Justice of the Peace for Kent and Bedford. By early 1624, Donne saw the improvement of his financial circumstances; he reached an economic stability that he had never before experienced when he was instituted as rector of Blunham, Bedfordshire (1622), and appointed vicar of St. Dunstan's (1624) in the month following publication of his *Devotions.* Finally, just

prior to the onset of his illness, Donne successfully orchestrated the marriage of his daughter, Constance, to Edward Alleyn. The marriage was arranged on 21 October 1623 and celebrated on 3 December, despite the uncertainly surrounding Donne's own recovery. Arguably, then, Donne was in the strongest position of his life—a successful servant of the Church of England who was respected in his community and financially secure. On a personal level at least, the context for the *Devotions* seems at odds with the suffering, anxiety, and doubt revealed throughout the work.

Perhaps an understanding of Donne's anxious questioning of God in the *Devotions* at a time when he finally is personally secure can be achieved by recollection of the political and historical contexts, both in England and abroad, just prior to Donne's experience of affliction and to the publication of that experience as the *Devotions,* which served as a backdrop for his contemporaries' response to that affliction, especially if focused on why Donne published this work so quickly, contrary to his usual habit, while he was still in the process of regaining his full strength.

First we should consider and acknowledge the rising tension in England in the early 1620s as a result of fears of a Spanish Match for Prince Charles and concern for King James's support of Catholicism. Both of these issues led to the disappointment felt and expressed by many in England, including Donne, as a consequence of King James's failure to respond to the events facing the Protestant cause in Bohemia at the outset of the Thirty Years' War. Concomitant to this were the tensions caused by the rise of Laudianism which certainly were brewing in the early 1620s. The Synod of Dort took place in 1618. Donne accompanied James Hay, Viscount Doncaster, who served as King James's ambassador extraordinaire for this purpose, to Bohemia in 1619 in hopes of averting trouble. War nevertheless broke out in Bohemia, and Heidelberg fell to the Hapsburg armies in 1622. King James issued his *Directions for Preachers,* forbidding preachers from discussing controversial issues of politics and theology from the pulpit, in September 1622, in part in response to strong criticism by preachers of James's failure to act in support of the Bohemian cause. Concomitantly, Prince Charles, accompanied by Buckingham, made a secret visit to Spain to visit the Infanta, in preparation, it was feared, for marriage; when he returned to England in October 1623 without her, it became

clear that a Spanish Match that would return the country to the influence of Rome was not in fact going to happen.

Through it all, King James never acted on behalf of Protestantism in Europe despite immense pressure at home to do so. Indeed, shortly after his return from the Palatinate and the Netherlands with Doncaster, Donne explicitly revealed throughout his letters of the early 1620s that he continued to follow events in Bohemia closely. From 1619 onward, John Chamberlain's letters to Dudley Carleton, English ambassador to the Netherlands at this time, as well as the Venetian Ambassador's letters to Venice, describe England's deep interest in the Palatinate as well as the tragic exile of the Queen and King of Bohemia, King James's own daughter and son-in-law. The vast majority of Englishmen and women, including Donne, viewed this disaster as a consequence of the indifference shown by England's own king.

This turn of events is particularly important when we consider Donne's own personal connections to Bohemia through Princess Elizabeth, for Donne's connection to the Queen of Bohemia reached back to his 1612 travels with Robert Drury to Amiens, there to negotiate the details of her forthcoming marriage to Frederick, the Elector Palatine. Indeed, Donne had celebrated in a 1613 epithalamion this Protestant dynastic union, a bond that spoke to him for many years. He was connected to Princess Elizabeth as well through his patron and friend Lucy, Countess of Bedford, whose parents John and Ann Harrington traveled with Elizabeth as her guardians and companions to Bohemia and remained with her in exile in the Netherlands after the fall of Heidelberg. Moreover, in this context—and this is part of why I stress this particular context—we must remember that Donne actually sent a copy of his *Devotions* to Elizabeth, in exile in the Netherlands, shortly after it was published, one of the very few presentation copies that he sent. Clearly, his connection to the exiled Elizabeth mattered to him, and he saw his *Devotions* as a work that might bring her comfort in her present suffering just as he had found comfort from God in his recent affliction. The change in perception of Charles by his countrymen and women for the better as a result of Charles's efforts on behalf of his suffering sister may have some importance for why Donne dedicated the *Devotions* to Prince Charles.

In looking at the political situation in England at the time Donne composed and published his *Devotions,* then, it is impossible to ignore

the situation in the Palatinate. At this time, as in our own, international affairs very much governed and shaped domestic affairs, which in turn, as I have suggested, were characterized by the rise of Laudianism and the tensions and controversies associated with Archbishop William Laud's growing influence. Indeed, a review of contemporary documents and correspondence reveals that from 1619 onward the plight of James's daughter and son-in-law consumed the minds and hearts of England, including Donne's. Moreover, fear of a Spanish Match for King Charles had waned by late 1623, at the time Donne fell ill, for it became clear that Charles had made the return of the Palatinate a condition for such a marriage. Donne's real political concern in late 1623 was not that James might return the country to the influence of Popery, but rather that he had failed to act aggressively in support and defense of the Palatinate.

The political issues with which Donne was concerned at the time he composed and published the *Devotions* do not, of course, indicate that the *Devotions* is an overtly political work, despite numerous political references sprinkled throughout the text; but awareness of these political and historical situations allows us to see that Donne's *Devotions* offers a striking and profound turning away from the world of politics as he realizes the suffering that this world inevitably brings and laments his failure to escape from its miseries into the eternal comfort of heaven.

Thus, I would argue, the political context intimates why Donne would have been distressed at the time he fell into sickness, despite his own personal success and relative security, and why he seems so ready to turn away from politics in this work. It is not a lasting lack of interest in the political moment (he regains such interest on the death of James and ascension of Charles to the throne), but rather a poignant and all too human response to the turn of events that had consumed his mind and imagination since 1619. From this perspective, it is useful to note that in the *Devotions* Donne never actually prays for physical recovery, as most readers would expect and quite a few have argued. Rather, he reveals his readiness to turn away from the active, earthly, political life as he longs not for physical recovery and further engagement in the world, but rather for the triumphant moment when his soul can join Christ in heaven, never so powerfully expressed as in the seventeenth and eighteenth "Meditations."

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