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"Was I not made to *thinke*?": Teaching the *Devotions* and Donne's Literary Practice

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Donne's *Devotions*, a complex work in richly rhetorical prose, composed after his near-fatal illness in 1623, may seem to be an exception in his oeuvre: an awkward text of elaborate theology and self-display, not as approachable as his poems and not as historically significant as his sermons.[1] How can we situate Donne's *Devotions*, in particular *Devotion XVII*, more comfortably in the context of his wider literary practice? As the purpose of our panel discussion of the *Devotions* is primarily pedagogical, I shall focus on how this text can be taught not only in its own right but as a key to understanding Donne's work as a whole. I take my cue from five of the questions most frequently asked by students when faced with studying Donne's *Devotions*, and I shall attempt to draw general conclusions from their specific perplexities. My aim is to turn problems into profit wherever possible—after all, like Donne himself, teachers and students invariably come closest to inspiration with the realization that we are "made to *thinke*."[2]

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[1]The *Devotions* are also unusual among Donne's works in having been published almost immediately after they were completed, rather than circulated in manuscript during Donne's lifetime. This suggests a conscious wish on Donne's part to make his personal devotions public; see Richard Strier, "Donne and the politics of devotion," in *Religion, Literature and Politics in Post-Reformation England, 1540–1688*, ed. Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 93–114.

[2]John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), *Devotion XII*,

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The first question is the most fundamental of all: what *are* the *Devotions*? The student of literature would generally expect to answer this question by confidently citing a genre, but in the case of the *Devotions* we already face a substantial difficulty. Is this work as a whole a deliberate act of spiritual meditation,[3] or does it in fact comprise an early autobiography in disguise? If the first genre—meditation—is favored, this leads us immediately into a further dilemma, since we will need to ascertain to what extent Donne's work is modelled on the continental Jesuit forms of meditative spiritual exercise as taught by Ignatius Loyola. Does the full title—*Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*—perhaps rather suggest the Protestant practice of meditation, responding more spontaneously to an "emergent occasion" or providential intervention? This can open up a major (and useful) discussion of the complexity of Donne's ecclesiastical allegiances,[4] since the *Devotions* are themselves an intriguing example of the creative tensions resulting from his mixed theological inheritance. "God suspends

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"Meditation," p. 63. All subsequent quotations from the *Devotions* will be taken from this edition, but for ease of reference in the main text I shall supply the number of the devotion followed by the sub-section "Meditation" (M), "Expostulation" (E) or "Prayer" (P). This phrase would therefore be cited as from 12M.

[3]I am using the term "meditation" here to mean a genre or mode of devotional exercise, which might be applied to the *Devotions* as a whole; it is not to be confused with the title given by Donne to the first part of each individual *Devotion* (see note 2 above, and pp. 390–392 below).

[4]See not only R. V. Young's contribution to this colloquium, but also the wide range of critical and historical discussions over the last half century, including Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954); Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981); Terry Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi, eds., *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross* (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995); and R.V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Boydell and Brewer, 2000).

mee betweene *Heaven* and *Earth*, as a *Meteor*," Donne claims (3E), but his work attests suspense of a different kind, between the sacramental and the experiential, between fear and assurance.

However, bearing in mind our first main question concerning genre, the meditative aspects of the *Devotions* still need to be weighed against their autobiographical significance. Do the *Devotions* constitute more of a spiritual and physical self-appraisal than an exercise in meditation? The work is certainly characterized by a richly dramatic rhetoric of self-representation—one of those qualities that can render the *Devotions* fascinating—and Donne's declared intent is to "cut up mine own anatomy" (9M).[5] But whose is "mine"? To what extent is the "miserable condition" (1M) discovered by this anatomy actually the condition and identity of the specific historical person, John Donne, rather than the situation of all mortal humans?[6] The *Devotions* are poised on the borderline between the general and the particular, as a truly transitional work straddling medieval self-mortification and modern self-obsession. The students' puzzlement as they begin to analyze Donne's prose in generic terms is therefore most understandable and, indeed, constructive.[7] When we inquire whether the work is meditation or autobiography, and whether the speaker should be regarded as a type or an individual, we start to focus creatively on the unique nature of the rhetorical voice to be encountered throughout Donne's work.

It could indeed be argued that the distinction between the possible generic categories to be applied to the *Devotions* is meaningless—after

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[5]Donne's use of the word "anatomy" in itself opens up possible parallels with his *First Anniversary*, a poem whose sub-title is "AN ANATOMIE of the World" (*The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al., vol. 6, *The Anniversaries and the Epicedes and Obsequies* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995], p. 7). The skill of (rational) dissection and inquiry represented by the term "anatomy" may also be discerned throughout Donne's literary practice.

[6]For example, on the title-page the "Meditations" are specified as being focused "*upon our Humane Condition*," but the work is also announced as being concerned with "*severall steps in my Sicknes*" and its authorship is claimed by "JOHN DONNE, Deane of S. *Pauls*, London" (*Devotions*, p. 1).

[7]See Mary Arshagouni Papazian, "Literary 'Things Indifferent': The Shared Augustinianism of Donne's *Devotions* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*," in Frontain and Malpezzi, pp. 324–349.

all, spiritual meditations can be implicitly autobiographical.[8] It is also especially difficult to distinguish between a representative human being and a particular individual in the work of one who believes that he is inevitably "involved in mankind" (17M). Yet these issues of the generic identity of the *Devotions* and the specific identity of their central subject force us to confront the relationship of experience to expression which is fundamental to any understanding of Donne's literary practice. It is quite legitimate for a reader of the *Holy Sonnets* to ask to what extent the poems are an aesthetic and theological analysis of the Last Things, rather than—or as well as—an exploration of the poet's personal fear of judgment. For some readers, it is almost impossible to encounter the *Songs and Sonets* without wishing to know which poems were written to whom and, in particular, which were addressed to his future or actual wife, Anne More. The intertwining of person and persona, or historical figure and literary stereotype, is of recurring importance in the impact of Donne's works. In this context, the *Devotions* as a sequence can be harnessed as one of the most intense instances of this challenge to the reader. The speaker's illness is identified, the body and soul of the subject are relentlessly in the spotlight—and yet it is not exactly a memoir or journal, and perhaps not even a meditation, but something closer to a sermon on the text of his life. Extreme individuality meets exemplary exegesis and pedagogical intent. To perceive this in the *Devotions* is to see a striking example of Donne's creative freedom with his genres—a very useful lesson for understanding this writer's peculiar brilliance.

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Having asked what the *Devotions* are, most students proceed logically to the question: why does each one have three parts? This can lead immediately into a wider exploration of Donne's love of threes, from the divine principle of the Trinity through to the "Triple Fool" who writes lyrics of love. The tripartite pattern is already prominently to be seen in the dedicatory epistle of the *Devotions*, where Donne writes of his three

[8]See the discussion of the *Devotions* as "spiritual autobiography" in the most useful study of the work, Kate Gartner Frost, *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's "Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 15–38.

births: first "Naturall"; then "Supernaturall" through ordination to the priesthood; and, thirdly, "preternaturall" by his rebirth after the illness which forms the occasion of his meditations.[9] But an awareness of this fascination with threes on Donne's part, though usefully highlighted by a reading of the *Devotions*, does not necessarily help the student to identify the distinctive tones of the three sub-sections of each *Devotion*, entitled "Meditation," "Expostulation," and "Prayer." At first sight, the actual contents of these three parts may seem to overlap, their differences blurring under the impact of Donne's overwhelming rhetorical onslaught.

If this is the case, then a generally successful exercise is to ask each of the students to write a three-part devotion, analyzing an experience of their own. For example, in the modern students' world a parallel situation to that presented in Donne's *Devotion XVII* would be hearing, not a tolling bell, but the intrusive tones of a ringing cell phone. A helpful writing assignment would thus be to produce the three parts of a devotion with the possible title "For Whom the Phone Rings." The result should make clear that each section of the devotion is actually trying to answer a different question. The "Meditation" rigorously inquires, "What did that sound signify?" while the "Expostulation" moves the focus on to "What do I think about this?" and the "Prayer" attempts to answer the question "Where do I go from here?" In the "Meditation" of *Devotion XVII*, for example, the sound of the bell signifies that "No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe" and the bell "tolls for *thee*" (17M). This leads in the "Expostulation" to a critical consideration of God's use of earthly human experience, such as the sound of the bell, as a means to "induce us to *heaven*" (17E). The "Prayer" concludes the three-part devotional process with the "*surrender*" of the speaker's spirit into God's hands, accepting divine will "whether I *live* or *die*" (17P). The students' writing assignment on a modern equivalent, while no doubt entertaining in itself, should also provide them with an insider's perception of these interlocking but distinctive characteristics of the sections of a *Devotion*, as well as helping them to appreciate (perhaps wearily) Donne's exhaustive manner of dissecting an experience.

As this assignment (or any comparable exercise) should reveal, each of the three parts of a *Devotion* is endowed with its own particular function:

[9]"To the most Excellent Prince, Prince Charles," *Devotions*, p. 3.

statement and analysis in the first, "Debatements" in the second,[10] and discovery of purpose in the third. This threesome is indeed all-encompassing. In terms of time—that "*Imaginary halfe-nothing*" (14M) with which Donne is so pre-occupied in the *Devotions*—the three parts focus in turn on the past, the present, and the future. In terms of linguistic expression, they move from the narrative mode of the "Meditation," via the largely interrogative intent of the "Expostulation," to the vocative rituals of "Prayer." Above all, they encapsulate the three characteristic modes of Donne's writing: explaining, arguing (like Job, Donne "would reason with God" [4E]), and anticipating the consequences. This combination of attitudes is to be compared, for example, with the progression of a Holy Sonnet such as "If poysonous mineralls," which opens with provisional statements about who or what cannot be damned, moves on to "dispute" the justice of God's threatening the speaker with damnation, but ends with prayerful submission to divine "mercy" (14).[11] Nor is the sequence of statement, argument, and anticipation confined to Donne's religious works—it is as easily to be found in a secular lyric such as "The Flea" with its rational demonstration ("Marke but this flea" [1]), its unyielding debate and final confident sense of the future ("when thou yield'st to mee" [26]).[12] Understanding the three-part structure of Donne's *Devotions* lays the foundation for insight into Donne's written modes across the spectrum of his work, and alerts readers to the unceasingly argumentative quality of his art.

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As we move on from puzzling over the structure of each *Devotion* to concentrating more closely on the language in which Donne conducts his

[10]Title-page (*Devotions*, p. 1).

[11]"Holy Sonnet IX" (*The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al., vol. 7.1, *The Holy Sonnets* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005]). All future references to *The Holy Sonnets* are to "The 1635 Sequence" in this edition, and will be cited parenthetically by line.

[12]*The Complete English Poems of John Donne*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Dent, 1985). All future references to *The Songs and Sonets* and to the *Divine Poems* not included in vol. 7.1 of the *Donne Variorum* are to this edition, and will be cited parenthetically by line.

spiritual contemplation, we confront another recurring question: why does Donne use so many metaphors, and how do they work? The answer to the first part is relatively straightforward: Donne uses metaphors because God does. In *Devotion XIX* Donne addresses God as a "*figurative*, a *metaphoricall God*" whose words contain "such *peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors* . . . as all *prophane Authors*, seeme of the seed of the *Serpent*, that *creepes*; thou art the *dove*, that flies" (19E). It is not only in the language of the Bible that God is seen to take metaphorical flight, but also in the way that salvation is effected. The divine principle of the incarnation is metaphoric: the word is made flesh, a process by which the Godhead is given expression in another form, in created matter itself. Thus, the physical realm always has an implicit spiritual significance in Donne's view, and life in its fullness is only to be understood in these metaphorical terms. His sick bed, for example, becomes an "*Altar*" on which the only "*Sacrifice*" to be offered is his own self (13E), while the world as a whole is Donne's "great *Hospitall*," from which complete recovery can only mean departure in death (11E). If the sacraments of the church can work on the principle that "*little things*" are able to "signifie *great*" (21P), and the "*Immensity*" (14) of the divine can be "*cloysterd*" (14) in a virgin's womb,[13] then Donne's unwavering dependence on metaphor may be interpreted as a spiritual principle, an imitation of Christ.

Devotion XVII proves to be an excellent test case of how metaphors actually work in Donne's writing. His dynamic negotiation of knowledge and imagination, which we have already seen as crucial to his literary practice,[14] is richly evident in the interplay of matter and metaphor here. The first two sections are filled with some of Donne's favorite sources of metaphor: bodies, books, languages, geography, money, and light all feature prominently. But the most famous aspect of this *Devotion*, for Hemingway as for so many other writers and artists, is the bell. Is this in fact a metaphor? Perhaps it is not, since it emerges from material circumstances rather than through the author's own choice of parallel

[13]"Annunciation," sonnet 2 of *La Corona*.

[14]See R. V. Young, pp. 373–380 above, where the interrelation of actual experience and imaginative invention, or between the historically specific individual and a representative of humanity, is considered with respect to the question of the genre of the *Devotions*.

mode of expression. However, what is most helpful about the bell in the context of our discussion is that it *functions* metaphorically. Donne takes a familiar sensual experience—hearing a bell toll—and plunders it for all its social and spiritual significances. The bell is a reminder of the communal nature of human experience, as an unknown person, who is at the same time a "*peece*" of the speaker "*himselfe*," passes out of the world. The tolling of the bell recalls us to a sense of our own transience and mortality as one small "*Clod*" of the "*Continent*" of humanity is "washed away by the *Sea*" (17M). The bell also has a vocational function in summoning the listener to the presence of God, and it is itself holy in that God's "*voice*" and "*hand*" are discerned "in this *sound*" (17E). With these multiple pedagogic applications,[15] a metaphor in Donne's hands is no passive parallel or stand-in for a concept, but a dynamic source of enlightenment and illustration. In fact, the skill and wit of the human author in writing metaphorically turns out to be the discovery or revelation of what God the divine author has already written into an ordinary everyday phenomenon such as a bell ringing. As Donne writes in the prayer which concludes this *Devotion*, "O eternall and most gracious God, . . . I humbly accept thy *voice*, in the sound of this sad and funerall *bell*" (17P). A key to understanding Donne's metaphorical manner throughout his writing is the realization that, for him and his contemporaries, this world is a divinely ordained mirror or "*glasse*" of the next (21E). If the world is read properly, then "every thing" in it, however humble, "serves to *exemplifie*" (21M) something more profound.

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If a reader of Donne's *Devotions* is beginning to understand their generic freedom, their three-part structure, and their rhetoric of exemplification, then the next question will often be: where is the volume as a whole leading? In comparison with Donne's other works, the *Devotions* follow an unusually clear narrative chronology—matching the progress of the patient's disease in all its stages—but the text does not seem to achieve a triumphant conclusion, since it ends on a note of fear

[15]In addition, Donne's focus on the bell may be seen to have political implications, since the ringing of bells was considered by Jacobean puritans as a sign of popish ceremony; see Strier, p. 106.

of a relapse. Indeed, one of the difficulties of the *Devotions* for student readers is the sense that, even as they progress through the work, they (and it) are going in circles. Here, difficulty can (as so often) become a teaching aid, since this feeling is exactly right. The characteristic movement of the *Devotions*, as of so much of Donne's wider literary practice, is both linear and circular simultaneously.[16] From the beginning, the God of the *Devotions* is "considered in thy selfe . . . a *Circle*," but in his "working upon us" he is "a *direct line*" (1P). The *Devotions* themselves work on the double principle of a circle and a straight line, just as human life is perceived to be both within the sphere of eternity and yet limited to the linear patterns of time and history. From the point of view of the ailing and anxious speaker, however, the circle does not always seem divine but can sometimes take on the appearance of the "giddy, and *circular motion*" (21M) of repeated sin. This dizzying and frustrating movement is akin to the "winding stair" of convoluted rhetoric and self-concern identified in the poems of George Herbert.[17] And yet, even a winding stair can lead upwards; circling, when modelled on God's geometry, is in the end a positive movement for Donne.

Once again, an examination of the patterns in Donne's *Devotions*—the tripartite structure of each *Devotion* and, now, the larger scheme of the whole work—can shed light on the characteristics of Donne's literary practice in general. In this case, it alerts us to the fact that processes of circling and turning are absolutely fundamental to his thought and his art. The restless mind of this writer is revealed in the constant twisting and turning of his arguments, in works both secular and sacred, in prose and verse. The opening phrases of each stanza of Donne's secular lyric, "A Feaver," for instance, ironically suggest the feverish circles of his own thoughts as he addresses his beloved in her fevered state: "Oh do not die" (1), "But yet" (5), "Or if" (9), "O wrangling schooles" (13), "And yet" (17), "These burning fits" (21). In the calmer vision of human

[16]For further discussion of this feature of the *Devotions*, see Maria Salenius, "The Circle and the Line: Two Metaphors of God and His Works in John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 102.2 (2001): 201–210.

[17]See "Jordan" (I)—"Is all good structure in a winding stair?"—and the awareness of words that "work and winde" in "Jordan" (II); *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), pp. 56, 103.

relationships expressed in "A Valediction: forbidding mourning," the lover encircles a fixed center, which "makes my circle just / And makes me end, where I begunne" (35–36).[18] Donne's relationship with God is often expressed in terms of turning, but particularly turning away—from the intensity of forgiveness as well as from the threat of judgment. In his late "Hymne to God the Father," the punning refrain "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For, I have more" (5–6, 11–12) twice returns the poem to its starting point, before the circle of sin and dread can be breached: "I feare no more" (18). The circling pattern is clearest of all in "Good Friday, 1613," which begins with the metaphor of "mans Soule" (1) as a whirling "Spheare" (1) and reconstructs the scene of the passion of Christ while the speaker continues to "turne [his] backe" (37) to this overwhelming "spectacle" (16). Only in the final phrase of the poem does the speaker promise, after the reassurance of salvation, to "turne my face"(42).

Thus, reading the *Devotions* as turnings which can lead to God—just as those climbing up to "Truth" in *Satyre III* "about must, and about must goe" (81) in order to reach her—brings us close to the basic pattern of his art. It may also have helped us to answer our first question: what is the genre of the *Devotions*? The popular early modern literary form in which repeated turning becomes the straight way to God is, after all, the conversion narrative.[19] Donne's *Devotions* indeed chart the turn from sickness to health as a transformation from sin, "*wearinesse* & *discomfort*" to grace and "*spirituall strength*" (21P). Donne's fear of "*Relapse*" in the final *Devotion* is as much a dread of renewed "spirituall coldnesse" as of bodily sickness. Like all other conversion texts of the seventeenth century, Donne's work comprises a sequence of turns towards God: a linear narrative which is repeatedly cyclical.

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[18]The same metaphor, of the pair of compasses and the "perfit *circle*" requiring a fixed "*center*," is used in the *Devotions*, 20E, where the center is not the human lover as in "A Valediction," but God.

[19]Maria Salenius suggests that not only do the *Devotions* take the form of a conversion narrative, but they represent "nothing less than Donne's final conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism" (p. 202).

We have reached the last of our five frequently asked questions about the *Devotions*, and this one is often raised with some degree of exasperation: why does Donne have to be so contradictory? At the center of the *Devotions* stands (or lies) a historical individual with an all too real diseased body, who is at the same time a type or example of humanity. As the illness and the work progress, Donne expresses peculiarly intense mixtures of belief and uncertainty, of eager spirit and "slow" flesh (20E), and he appears to move to God by straight lines and circles simultaneously. In the quintessential *Devotion XVII*, he hears a bell which gloomily signifies mortality but which also gives rise ultimately to a prayer of "*thanks*" (18P). What is the reader to make of all these apparent contradictions? The answer, of course, is that it is precisely in these paradoxes, the clashes of meaning found across the whole range of Donne's works, that understanding is formed—or, as Donne succinctly expressed it, paradoxes are "alarums, to truth."[20] This phenomenon of the positive paradox may be well known to experienced readers of Donne but is often difficult to fathom when approaching his work for the first time, particularly if the early modern period is generally unfamiliar. In these circumstances, the *Devotions* can provide an example which enables students to come to terms with Donne's entangled and challenging modes of thought.

Three crucial paradoxes stand out in the *Devotions* (and by this it becomes clear that there is ultimately no resisting Donne's trinities). First, the very situation that gives rise to the *Devotions* is a bizarre combination of the "*passive*" and "*active,*" as Donne himself observes (12M). The speaker is a victim, laid out on his bed for the physicians to map and work upon, and yet his response is a prodigious burst of mental, linguistic, and spiritual activity. Second, the speaking subject of the *Devotions* fears God, to a paralyzing extreme, while at the same time he speaks of and to him constantly. As Donne asks with perplexity in *Devotion VI*, "Dost thou command me to *speake* to thee, and commaund me to feare thee, and do these destroy one another?" (6E). In the end it is clear that, as in the *Holy Sonnets*, he must do both at all times. Fearing to speak, and yet doing so regardless, is Donne's route to spiritual understanding. The third major paradox underpinning the *Devotions* is the interlocked nature of doubt and faith, which appear to require each

[20]Burley MS, Leicestershire Record Office, fol. 308v.

other in order to survive in the turmoil of Donne's experience. As the last line of the "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" puts it, "that he may raise the Lord throws down" (30). The doubting, argumentative voice is perhaps the most characteristic tone of Donne's poetry, from the *Satyres* through the *Songs and Sonets* to the dramatic *Holy Sonnets*. He knew that he was "made to *thinke*" (12M) and the exhaustively rational "Expostulations" seem to contain the most energy in each *Devotion*—yet it is through such dynamic "*thoughtfulnesse*" (12M) in disputes with God that he arrives at faith and finds confidence in redemption.

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Addressing these five basic questions often encountered in teaching Donne's *Devotions* highlights the ways in which this text, far from being an exception to the main body of Donne's work, can be used to clarify some of the fundamental aspects of his art. The *Devotions*, fascinating in their own right, can also function inspirationally as a means of opening up discussion and appreciation of Donne's wider literary practice. His transformation of existing literary genres and devotional modes, and his patterns of thought and expression, can be made clearer to his readers through a study of the *Devotions*. The ways in which Donne read the world and understood the dualities of the temporal and eternal may be discerned—indeed, are laid out and anatomized like the patient's own body—in this startling work. The paradoxes to be discerned within the *Devotions*, forming the focal points—or perhaps flashpoints—of Donne's passionate understanding of God and humanity, place the work securely at the heart of his literary achievement.

The paradoxical vision embodied in both the structure and the expression of Donne's devotional prose, simultaneously tortured and joyous as it is, can best be summed up for me in a line from a recent poem by Rowan Williams.[21] Like Donne, Williams combines the vocations of senior churchman and writer, and contains a formidable

[21]Donne's work can very often be illuminated for students through comparison with the work, or responses, of poets from our own time. Compare Jonathan F. S. Post's initiative in *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

intellect within the firm bounds of pattern, metaphor, and paradox. In his poem "Hymn for the Mercy Seat," freely translated from the Welsh of the eighteenth-century poet Ann Griffiths, he writes movingly of the encounter with God, and the human imperative to respond: "Soul, look." The opening of the poem speaks of the "wonder" in the eyes of the angels, but the second line comes closer to the realm of the *Devotions*: "The eyes of faith, too, unbelieving in the strangeness."[22] I find it hard to imagine a better encapsulation of the *Devotions* in so few words, with the clash of "faith" and "unbelieving" across the gap in Williams's line, and the scrutinizing "eyes" which see and trust and yet cannot quite believe. The second of the two phrases, "unbelieving in the strangeness," is constructively ambiguous in meaning. Is it the "strangeness" of experience, in a profoundly negative sense, that causes unbelief, or is the implication more mystical, that faith cannot cope with what Donne called the "strange love" (9)[23] of God for humanity? Both interpretations are plausible. The tension between the capacity of faith to search for and perceive spiritual truth, and the perplexity it faces in contemplating the strangeness that challenges it, brings us close to the paradoxical energies of Donne's *Devotions* in their encounter with the mysteries of identity and belief.

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[22]Rowan Williams, "Hymn for the Mercy Seat," a free translation from the Welsh of the eighteenth-century poet Ann Griffiths, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Oxford: The Perpetua Press, 2002), p. 82.

[23]"Holy Sonnet XI ('Spit in my face you Jewes')."