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"bring men to heaven by Preaching": Donne's Use of Grammatical Voice in the Adaptation of Biblical Narratives of Death

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In his fourth Prebend Sermon, preached on Psalm 65:5[1] at St. Paul's on 28 January 1627, Dr. John Donne opens the sermon by marvelling at what a "miracle" it is, what an indication of God's greatness, "to *bring men to heaven by Preaching* in the Church" (*Sermons* 7:301, emphasis added).[2] This, according to Donne, is the ultimate testimony of God's power, to make "great things of little" (*Sermons* 7:300). Donne is first and foremost a man of God, and even more, he is a man of the *word* of God. When reaching for an argument, when in need of support and motivation, he turns to the word of God, to the Bible. The present essay will examine how Donne, in some of his sermons, cites, retells, and refers to, biblical narratives about encountering death—for example, narratives about Job from the Hebrew Bible, and from the Gospels and the Epistles.[3] The need for a

[1]"By terrible things in righteousnesse wilt thou answer us, O God of our salvation; who art the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of them that are a far off, upon the sea." When quoting biblical texts in Donne's sermon, the present paper will employ the form used by Donne and/or by the editors (Potter & Simpson, or the Oxford Edition editors).

[2]John Donne, *The Sermons,* ed. George R. Potter & Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–62). Parenthetical references to this work will be by volume and page number.

[3]Heather Dubrow has made the important point of how Donne as a preacher recognised the importance of the exemplum in his *ars praecandi* ("Reconfiguring Figuring: John Donne as Narrative Poet," in *Go Figure:*

preacher to harness the power and strength of God for his mission is never greater than when preparing man for salvation and the life hereafter. This essay will, furthermore, demonstrate how Donne chooses specific vocabulary and a distinct grammatical voice (active or passive) for specific linguistic or semantic purposes, in order to illustrate, on the one hand, the importance of God's active presence for salvation, and, on the other, the absolute destruction of man when this divine presence is denied.

In a sermon preached before King Charles in Whitehall on 18 April 1626, Donne discusses the role of the preacher and the objective of preaching, and he especially emphasizes the concept of *consolation*. He elaborates on the biblical text (John 14:2–3), which refers to the "many mansions" in God's house and to Christ's subsequent promise to "go and prepare a place" for man and then return to "receive" man into this haven. This assurance, Donne declares, is the central purpose of preaching and his own mission as a preacher. Donne continues:

> . . . the Spirit of God sayes to me in the morning, Go forth to day and preach, and preach consolation, preach peace, preach mercy, And spare my people, *spare that people whom I have redeemed* with my precious Blood.[4]

In this sermon about preaching, Donne emphasises the preacher's aim to "spare" the people who are "redeemed" by Christ. For Donne, the preacher's grasp of this immense possibility of being part of the act of salvation seems to be of utmost importance—this miracle of "bring[ing] men to heaven by Preaching" (*Sermons* 7:301). Referring to David singing "of mercy and judgment" (Psalms 101:1), Donne interprets generously that David's song "is of mercy first; and not of judgement at all" (*OESJD* 3:50). When depicting God's tangible punishment, then, Donne's primary purpose is not to threaten his audience with ultimate damnation, but rather to show the solace of

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Energies, Forms, and Institutions in the Early Modern World, ed. Judith H. Anderson and Joan Pong Linton, [New York: Fordham University Press, 2011]), pp. 62–63.

[4]John Donne, *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne: Sermons Preached at the Court of Charles I*, ed. David Colclough, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 50; emphasis added.

God's presence even in anger: God is actually someone with whom man can argue and with whom man can plead. The present essay will show that Donne illustrates the prospect of God's consolation and mercy by presenting God's wrath primarily in the active grammatical voice, not the passive.

Vir bonus: The Good Preacher

When seeking to involve the power of God to "doe great works by small meanes" (*Sermons* 7:300), specifically in the context of *preaching*, the biggest wonder for Donne lies in the way in which God, "by the foolishnesse of Preaching . . . infatuates the wisdome of the world, and by the word, in the mouth of a weake man . . . enfeebles the power of sinne, and Satan in the world" (*Sermons* 7:300). Here God places a great responsibility on the weak man and his words—but this cannot be accomplished without the help of the Holy Spirit. Later in the same sermon, Donne refers to this when he states that "for though God doe speake in the Sermon, yet hee answers, that is, *applies himself, by his Spirit*, onely to them, who have prayed to him before" (*Sermons* 7:312, emphasis added).[5] As shown already by Dennis B. Quinn,[6] Donne makes a clear link between the act of preaching and the action of the Holy Spirit. Paul G. Stanwood and Heather Ross Asals show this clearly when presenting "the eloquence of the Holy Ghost" in

[5]Also, in a Whitsunday sermon Donne quotes Augustine and attests that the words of the preacher are the "chariots of the Holy Ghost" (*Sermons* 5:37).

[6]Dennis B. Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 61.2 (1962): 313–29. For a more recent discussion on the Holy Spirit in early modern preaching, see e.g. Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. pp. 60–116. For a more general presentation on the nature of early modern preaching, see e.g., Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Logic and Rhetoric in England, 1500–1700* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956), W. F. Mitchell, *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson* (London: S.P.C.K, 1932), and, more recently, Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermons, 1558–1642* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Donne's sermons.[7] This is in line with both what Jesus states about the "Holy Ghost" coming upon the disciples in order for them to "be witnesses unto [Him] both in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8)[8] and what is stated about how "[w]ell spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers" (Acts 28:25). Likewise, this link is also implied, for example, in the Hebrew Bible in the reference to the "teachers" being heard "in a word behind thee" (Isaiah 30:20–21). For Donne, too, the workings of the Holy Spirit are a prerequisite for a good preacher. Donne's application of Quintilian's quotation of Cato's "*vir bonus dicendi peritus*"[9] shares Quintilian's expansion of thought ("*ne futurum quidem oratorem nisi virum bonum*"[10]), implying that no man can be expected to be a good preacher unless he is a man of God first.[11] When preaching to bring men to heaven, then, and especially when taking on this most precarious of tasks of preparing men for death while ensuring them of salvation hereafter, Donne wants to underline this link between the preacher and the Holy Spirit: to trust the preacher is to trust God.

Donne and Death

Brooke Conti's definition of "confessions of faith" in early modern autobiographical religious prose asks the question whether we can expect to read a straightforward confessional account at a time of a rather newly established religion and by writers (like Donne) with

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[7]*John Donne and the Theology of Language* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

[8]When citing biblical texts for the general argument, the King James version will be used.

[9]Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria*, ed. and trans. H. E. Butler (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1968), XII, p. 354.

[10]Quintilian, p. 356.

[11]Jameela Lares has made the same note about Milton's interpretation of Quintilian (*Milton and the Preaching Arts* [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, and Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2001], p. 133). Milton, however, according to Lares, makes this claim to validate his faith with his preaching; Donne, on the other hand, seems rather to validate his preaching with the Holy Spirit.

heavy hereditary baggage.[12] Conti argues that the "confession of faith may be guarded or elliptical." Perhaps, then, as is always the case when discussing Donne's language both in his poetry and in his sermons, we must find our evidence specifically in metaphor and in innuendo. Judith H. Anderson presents an important discussion on the role of the metaphor in the context of religion and faith in general (and Donne in particular), [13] especially reconsidering "the relation and distinction between metonymy and metaphor, the one referential, substitutive, coded, ideological; the other deviant, constructive, creative-codebreaking."[14] When making his arguments about the cognitive reading of Donne's (love) poetry, Michael A. Winkelman makes the imperative link between conceptual analogies and the cognitive approach by emphasizing the importance of looking at the scope and understanding of metaphor.[15] From the point of view of the present essay, when discussing, not love (like Winkelman) but rather death, the image to look for is not that of the lover or of affection but instead the image of the void of annihilation *versus* the fulfilment of salvation.

Although the fear of death is predominant in the age as a recognition of human frailty and sin, and although Donne, too, witnessed many deaths in his life, it is still relevant to look at Donne's interest in death from a more personal and specific point of view. Brooke Conti has suggested further that Donne's prose is "strikingly performative" and "downright confessional."[16] This personal approach is especially poignant when Donne is writing about death, and much of Donne's most significant preaching and most affecting poetry is

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[12]*Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), pp. 2–3.

[13]*Translating Investments: Metaphor and the Dynamic of Cultural Change in Tudor-Stuart England* (New York: Fardham University Press, 2005). For a further discussion on visual images of Hell (most notably in Spenser and Milton), see Judith H. Anderson, *Reading the Allegorical Intertext: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), esp. pp. 320–66.

[14]Anderson, *Translating*, p. 4.

[15]*A Cognitive Approach to John Donne's* Songs and Sonnets (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2013), p. 9.

[16]Conti, p. 52.

about his "near-obsession with death."[17] Logan Pearsall Smith has suggested that "Donne's mind [had a] medieval sense of death's horror."[18] Also, John Hayward claims that Donne is "in love with death, not merely acquainted with it."[19] Indeed, we know that Donne had a certain sensitivity towards, and interest in, spiritual matters; there is, for example, Walton's account of Donne's vision, when in Paris with the Drurys in 1612, of Anne with "*a dead child in her arms*," a vision that can be seen to bring greetings from the hereafter.[20] Furthermore, Donne's own near-death experience during his illness in 1623 has most certainly been instrumental to increasing his preoccupation with the theme of death. John Stubbs has suggested that Donne during this illness "had glimpsed what dying might really involve; he had been given a trial run at death, and found that he could cope."[21] In his *Devotions*,[22] written at the time of this illness, Donne states:

> If man knew the gain of death, the ease of death, he would solicit, he would provoke death to assist him, by any hand, which he might use. . . . when these hourly bells tell me of

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[17]*The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 1, The Holy Sonnets*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. civ. For more on Donne's own anxiety before death, see Maria Salenius, "Wearing Prospero's Mantle: John Donne Facing Death, Magic and the Tree of Knowledge, in a Jobian Pursuit of Power," in *Authority of Expression in Early Modern England* ed. Nely Keinänen and Maria Salenius (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 164–80 (esp. pp. 167–71).

[18]*Donne's Sermons. Selected Passages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1919/1959), p. xxvi.

[19]"A Note on Donne the Preacher," in *A Garland for John Donne*, ed. Theodore Spencer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), pp. 73–97 (see pp. 75–76).

[20]Izaak Walton, *The Life of Dr. John Donne*, ed. G. Saintsbury (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 40 (emphasis original).

[21]John Stubbs, *John Donne. The Reformed Soul* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), p. 406.

[22]John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

> so many funerals of men like me, it presents, if not a desire that it may, yet a comfort whensoever mine shall come.
> (*Devotions*, 16 Meditation, p. 83)

In addition to having confidence in divine benevolence granted by his indisputable faith, then, Donne's clear mission as a preacher is to reassure his audience of this comfort.[23] This is especially important as the prevalent image of God is very often that of an unyielding, punishing deity.

"Batter my heart"

God as a vigilant and watchful master is an image often present in the Gospels. For example, the *Parable of Sheep and Goats* states that "[b]efore him shall be gathered all nations: and *he shall separate* them . . . / And *he shall set* . . . the goats on the left" (Matthew 25:32–33; emphasis added). The judge personally does the separating and the setting, grammatically here in the active voice. Similarly, in the *Parable of the Wedding Feast* the king says to the servant: "*Bind him* hand and foot, and *take him away*, and *cast him* into outer darkness" (Matthew 22:13; emphasis added). What is more, in the *Parable of the Tares of the Field* depicting "the end of this world,"[24] which is presented grammatically in the passive voice ("the tares are gathered and burned in the fire"), the executor of the action is presented in the active voice in the immediately following verses (He "shall send," the angels "shall gather" and "shall cast"):

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[23]See e.g. Jeanne Shami, "The Sermon," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011/2016), pp. 318–47.

[24]"The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; / The enemy that sowed theme is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and *the reapers are the angels*. / As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world." (Matthew 13:38–40; emphasis added)

> *The Son of man shall send forth* his angels, and *they shall gather* out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; / And *shall cast* them into a furnace of fire.
> (Matthew 13:41–42; emphasis added)

In the Gospels Christ also literally emphasizes God's as well as his own active role of execution in damnation when talking about the fear of God: "Fear him, which after *he* hath killed *hath power to cast* into hell" (Luke 12:5; emphasis added), and "*I am come to send* fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49; emphasis added). Furthermore, the active choice made in judging is equally underlined in that God is said to have "given [the Son] authority to execute judgment also" (John 5:27). Even the violent John the Baptist says: "but *he will burn* up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12; emphasis added).

In his poetry Donne encounters his God just like this: as an active executor of the punishment. Donne asks his God to batter his heart (*HSBatter*, l. 1), to punish him and burn off his rusts (*Goodf*, ll. 39–40), and eventually to forgive him (e.g. *Father*).[25] Yet, the point seems to be that however terrifying the prospect of death and final judgment, when "[d]eath before doth cast / Such terror" (*HSMade*, ll. 5–6), the presence and sight of God can still save man's soul: "Only thou art above, and when towards thee / By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe;" (*HSMade*, ll. 8–9). Like Job, Donne wrestles with God one-on-one. It seems that as long as God is present, there is still a possibility for salvation, no matter how defeated by God's power man is; while God is present, albeit abusing (as in *HSBatter*) or even behind man's turned back (like in *GoodF*), man can still plead for mercy. Donne's hope in these poems lies in the unbroken connection between man and God.

In his sermons, too, Donne wants his audience almost physically to experience (as he himself did in his poetry when asking God to "batter" or "break" him) the power of God's authority and justice. In a sermon preached before King Charles I in April 1627, Donne states

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[25]Donne's Holy Sonnets are referred to and quoted from *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne: The Holy Sonnets*, vol. 7.1, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); Donne's other poems are quoted from John T. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). All poem title abbreviations refer to the short forms used by the *Variorum*.

that God's "Ministers are an *Earth-quake*, and shake an earthly soule; They are the *sonnes of thunder*, and scatter a cloudy conscience" (*OESJD* 3:77, emphasis original) and that "his Ordinance of preaching *batters the soule*" (*OESJD* 3:77; emphasis added). While some of Donne's most passionate preaching has rather unfortunately lately been labelled the "[r]egrettable sermons by Donne the hell-fire preacher,"[26] one can see that there is a clear rhetorical purpose in Donne's pursuit: He wants to use his verbal/linguistic power (with the help of the Holy Spirit) to bring his audience to repentance and, ultimately, to salvation. Logan Pearsall Smith states that when discussing the topic of final judgment, Donne "accepted, [and] *he expected [his audience] to accept*, the remission of sins and the wages of sin, eternity in God, and damnation in Hell."[27]

In an early sermon preached at Whitehall on 21 April 1616, Donne repeatedly stresses how God's judgment, albeit "speedie . . . after which, there is no possibility, no room left for Conversion," is "executed" upon man and that "he [i.e. God] can sink down the Stage and the Player, The bed of wantonness, and the wanton actor, into the jaws of the earth, into the mouth of hell" (*OESJD* 1:25).[28] Here, too, the executor is clearly defined and present in the event. This is how Donne desires to see his death and judgment: with God actively meting out his punishment, but more importantly, actually present as someone with whom to argue and plead.

Thus, it seems, both the prose depicting God's tangible judgment and poetry like the sonnet asking God to ravish the speaker (*HSBatter*) do not actually have the primary purpose of threatening with violence or ultimate damnation but rather of showing the solace of God's presence at the moment of judgment. In his Easter Day sermon of 1622, Donne concludes that there is "mercy in hell" (*Sermons* 4:82) in that man is *told about* (and threatened with) hell, so that "by this notification of hell, [we] escape hell" (*Sermons* 4:82). God needs to remind man of the possible consequences of errant and sinful

[26]David L. Edwards, *John Donne. Man of Flesh and Spirit* (London & New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 342.

[27]Smith, p. 77, emphasis added.

[28]John Donne, *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne, Volume I, Sermons Preached at the Jacobean Courts, 1615–1619*, ed. Peter McCullough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

living, for God "is the same Physitian, and seekes but one end, (our spirituall health) by his divers wayes" (*Sermons* 4:82). Furthermore, in a sermon at St. Paul's preached in 1629, Donne states (referring to Augustine) that God in his chastisement assures man of his presence: "I know thy meaning when thou strikest me, it is, lest I should not know thy hand" (*Sermons* 8:320). The purpose of the chastisement is that man should "not suspect Gods absence" from himself (*Sermons* 8:321). In contrast, then, it is the absolute and final absence of God that Donne presents as truly terrifying.[29]

Annihilation

This aspect of a total and final absence of God, an experience of annihilation at the moment of death, is also often discussed by Donne and elaborated upon by scholars. Robert N. Watson offers an intriguing analysis of the topic through Donne's love poetry, especially when discussing death as negation.[30] However, although Watson sees that "Christian faith in the creation *ex nihilo* recoils in horror, as the world of human meaning is systematically undone," he states that for Donne "the creation *ex nihilo* [is] a promise of resurrection, rather than a threat of annihilation."[31] For Matthew Horn, too, Donne's fear of annihilation is much a question of bodily existence and validation, and of finding a connection between man's physical demise and final resurrection.[32] Donne certainly does fear the anger where God can "attenuate and annihilate the very marrow of thy soul" (*Sermons* 2:86);

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[29]For a discussion on Donne's engagement in the theme of annihilation, especially in relation to religious violence, see e.g. Ross B. Lerner, "Donne's Annihilation," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 44.2 (2014): 407–27. Lerner, however, examines primarily self-annihilation and martyrdom, whereas the present essay focusses on the experience of annihilation as part of the moment of death.

[30]*The Rest Is Silence: Death as Annihilation in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[31]Watson, p. 227.

[32]Matthew Horn, "John Donne, godly inscription, and permanency of self in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*," *Renaissance Studies* 24.3 (2009): 365–80.

yet, it is the absence of God that is even more terrifying than the littleness of man.[33]

In a letter to Goodere (undated, but suggested to have been 1611),[34] when discussing how to deal with his poetry, Donne creates a category of damnation beyond the God-controlled and God-administered judgment. In his metaphorical description of the fate of the poems, Donne redeems some of them to salvation, albeit through the purgatory of Donne's editing hand ("*Earum nonnullae Purgatorium suum passurae, ut correctiores emanent*");[35] some he condemns to the destruction of the fires of hell ("*ad Inferos damnata esse*")[36]—and some to "*sink away and dissolve into utter annihilation* (a fate with which God

[33]Also, for example, Richard Sugg, in *John Donne (Critical Issues Series)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2007, esp. pp. 186–207) discusses Donne's "fascination with the next world" (p. 187.) in the concluding chapter of his volume, befittingly titled "Glorious Annihilation." The title's reference here, however, is to Donne's Lent sermon to King Charles in February 1629 (*OESJD* 3, sermon 12), to a passage where Donne discusses 2 Corinthians 12:11 ("I am become a fool in glorying; ye have compelled me: for I ought to have been commended of you: for in nothing am I behind the very chiefest apostles, though I be nothing"), and refers to the "glorious annihilation" and "blessed nullification" of being nothing next to a powerful God. This part of the sermon, as well as most of Sugg's chapter, indeed suggest that by the end of his life, and as also seen in *Death's Duel*, Donne was "not some lone existential hero confronting the abyss" (p. 206). Furthermore, John Carey, in *John Donne. Life, Mind and Art* (New edition; London: Faber and Faber, 1990; especially pp. 190–216), elaborates on Donne's thoughts about death and his references to annihilation, linking this especially to suicide and to Donne's *Biathanatos*, and this angle is also elaborated upon by Mark Allinson in "Revisioning the Death Wish: Donne and Suicide," *Mosaic* 24.1 (1991): 34–46. The question of the forbidden death of suicide certainly opens up the theme of the annihilation of the soul, but this aspect is not the primary topic in the present essay.

[34]Helen Gardner, "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day," in *Poetic Traditions of the English Renaissance*, ed. Maynard Mack and George deForest Lord (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 181–201), see p. 188.

[35]John Donne, *Poems, by J.D. VVith Elegies on the Authors Death (1633)* (Charleston SC: Proquest, EEBO Editions, 2010), p. 352.

[36]Donne, *Poems (1633)*, p. 352.

does not threaten even the wickedest of sinners),"[37] ("*in annihilationem (quod flagitiosissimis non minatur Deus) corruent & dilabentur*").[38] This "special category of damnation harsher than God himself allowed,"[39] which Donne here describes,[40] refers to a damnation to total annihilation, to the destruction of soul as well as of body, and it ultimately implies the total absence of God. This is a form of judgment that is not supported by the biblical text, as the Bible generally includes the *active* judgment and sentencing by God. It is, however, with this very same image of God's total absence that Donne also in the sermons ultimately evokes the most terrifying scenario of judgment, a state in which God is not at all present. Indeed, in his Easter Day sermon of 1622, referring to the verdict passed by the King in Matthew 25:41 ("Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire"), Donne concludes that "the first part of the sentence is incomparably heaviest, *the departing worse [than] the fire*" (*Sermon*s 4:86; emphasis added).

Michael Martin has shown how Donne applies a Medieval mystical *apophatic* approach to his definition of God.[41] This approach, in which God is defined through negation (*via negativa*)—through what he is not—is closely related to the concept of annihilation, of the non-presence of God. However, *apophasis* suggests that God is present, albeit hidden or remote, whereas annihilation indicates the total absence of God. When man confronts the unknown of death and the existence (or non-existence) of the hereafter, the emptiness of the negative definition becomes frightening, but it is also reassuring: at least in this approach there is a God to be defied. Furthermore, the

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[37]Translation by Helen Gardner and John Sparrow, quoted in Helen Gardner, "Nocturnal," p. 188 (emphasis added).

[38]Donne, *Poems (1633)*, p. 352.

[39]Stubbs, p. 269.

[40]Stubbs unfortunately dismisses this formulation as a "joke" by the witty poet when discussing his poetry (p. 269).

[41]Michael Martin, *Literature and the Encounter with God in Post-Reformation England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 47–84. See also e.g. Itrat Husain, *The Dogmatic and Mystical Theology of John Donne* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1938/1970), and Maria Salenius, *The Dean and his God: John Donne's Concept of the Divine* (Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki. Helsinki: Modern Language Society, 1998).

division into (hidden) presence *versus* annihilation echoes the rhetoric of the narratives of near-death experience recorded by later NDE research, where there seems to be reports both of encounters with light and/or a divine being, and of mere emptiness.[42] This semantic similarity adds a further lever of interest in the cognitive process of how the depiction of death is developed. By creating a linguistic context to illustrate the significance of a unity with God, Donne can reconcile the fear of damnation with the promise of salvation.

There are thus in Donne's preaching two distinctly different approaches to the depiction of death and final judgment: images of both God-controlled punishment and total annihilation. In addition to preaching God's wrath and judgment in the form of the *God-controlled* brimstone and hell-fire, Donne at times takes his congregation—and himself—even further, to a place seemingly beyond God's control. In a number of descriptions throughout his sermons of the soul's damnation, Donne takes this final step in which he removes the active agency of God from the concept of judgment.

This, then, is Donne's image of a fate much more terrible than God's wrath. Donne seems to have some insight into the horrors of death experienced by (especially) the infidel, and although much of Donne's oration is hopeful, introducing "comfort" (*Devotions*, 16 Meditation, p. 83, see above) and seeking to "preach consolation, preach peace, preach mercy" (*OESJD* 3:50, see above), he very often also underlines the looming despair and destruction. Much like Job in his deliberations, Donne spends most of his sacred poetry as well as much of the prose in continuous battle with God, at times defying fate (or death, as in *HSDeath*). At times, together with so many of the poets of his time, Donne seems emotionally crushed by the prospect of divine judgment[43]—like, for example, Ben Jonson pleading with God to "[u]se" His "rod" to urge him to "repent."[44] Furthermore,

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[42]See e.g. Pim van Lommel, *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

[43]Cf. Nely Keinänen and Maria Salenius, "The Pursuit of Authority," in *Authority of Expression in Early Modern England*, ed. Nely Keinänen and Maria Salenius (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 1–19), pp. 3–5.

[44]Ben Jonson, "A Hymne to God the Father," l. 4 & 14, in *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Harmondsworh: Penguin Books, 1957), p. 91.

Donne's religious verse has been seen to encompass a "fear of punishment or annihilation,"[45] and his encounters with the notion of death and judgment seem more stigmatized than for example those of Herbert, who much more often eventually finds consolation through Christ. In a sermon preached at Whitehall on 2 April 1620, Donne elaborates on the idea of solitude and desolation, and on an explicit isolation from God in the process of judgment. Donne recalls the *Parable of the Rich Fool* in Luke 12:16–21 and the subsequent reference to the "night" when man's soul shall be taken from him, and he elaborates on the image further:

> His soul must be fetch'd away; he hath not his *In manus tuas*, his willing surrender of his soul ready; It must be fetch'd in the night of ignorance, when he knows not his own spiritual state, . . . It must be fetch'd in the night of darkness, in the night of solitude, . . . in the night of *disconsolatenes*, no comfort in that seal, Absolution . . . and it must be fetched this night, the night is already upon him, before he thought of it. (*Sermons* 3:71)

It is noteworthy that the biblical passage here clearly indicates the presence of God, both with Christ as the narrator of the parable and with a direct quotation from God ("God said unto him"; Luke 12:20). Donne, however, moves this whole scene of judgment further away from the parable and presents it in the passive voice, and there is no mention of an executor for the action. The soul will be "fetch'd away," and there is no one to whom man can turn for mercy.

Similarly, in a sermon preached before King Charles in Whitehall in February 1627, in which he sets out on an elaborate appeal for forgiveness, Donne introduces the image of death as a night, as shadows "that grow greater and greater upon us" and "end in night, in everlasting night" (*Sermons* 7:360). This "night" is remarkable in that the presence of God is so evidently absent; God is not mentioned in the passage (nor in all of the opening of the paragraph) as a possible (or probable) distributor of the darkness. Although finally concluding the sermon with the assurance of God's benediction, the image is still rather disturbing, introducing a feature of death for those that "depart

[45]Stubbs, p. 424.

from [God]" (*Sermons* 7:361, cf. Jeremiah 17:13).[46] In the same way God is described to administer vengeance to the sinners in the form of "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).[47] Yet, notably in the biblical passages, the executor of the division (King, Christ) is always made clear. Donne, on the other hand, keeps the image of the actor purposefully blurred, and most of the time the image is one of total annihilation. In this way he presents the worst possible image of death, a void beyond the reach of God.

Narratives of Death

The narratives of a total annihilation at the moment of death are by no means unique to Donne as such, nor are they restricted to his time. Donne's descriptions of the abyss of the hereafter reflect the most violent images of horror depicted by other writers as well. A few decades earlier, Christopher Marlowe leads his audience along a similar path towards an absolute void and presents an image with almost equal absence of God's presence and mercy at the very end of the play *Doctor Faustus* (1588).[48] Here Faustus realises the finality of his damnation and his "eyes with horror stare / Into that vast perpetual torture-house" (sc. xix, ll. 116–17). For the rest of this scene (and the

[46]"O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters." This notion of departure is later related to a passage in the *Parable of Sheep and Goats*, where the King is to command the sinners to "depart" from him and "go away" to punishment (Matthew 25:46) as well as to the passage where God grants Christ the power of judgement and those called from the dead must themselves actively "come forth" either to life or to damnation (John 5:28–29).

[47]"the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, / In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: / Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;" (2 Thessalonians 1:7–9). Significantly, Job, too, is concerned about the absence of God's sight: "I cry unto thee, and thou dost not hear me: I stand up, and thou regardest me not" (30:20).

[48]Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. John D. Jump (London and New York: Routledge, 1965).

play) the Devil is the active executor of the judgment, with God only once, and conspicuously passively, looking "fierce on [Faustus]" (l. 187). Most of the time Faustus has his eyes turned towards "Ugly [gaping] hell" (l. 189).

Similarly, a few centuries later, we find another version of this God-less voyage towards damnation in one of the last scenes of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902).[49] Here, however, the modernist context allows the description to be even more viciously devoid of God with the subtle reference to the death of Christ only underlining this point. In the scene with Kurtz "waiting for death," the narrator (Marlow, no less) describes the expression on his face:

> Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. . . . It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, *of craven terror—of an intense and hopeless despair*
>
> (Conrad, *Heart*, p. 68; emphasis added)

This description is followed by Kurtz's final words before death, cried "in a whisper at some image, at some vision—he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath: 'The horror! The horror!'" (p. 68). The narrator deliberates whether Kurtz did "live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge?" (p. 68).[50] Yet, against the backdrop of the early modern setting, it is more likely that he did see before him the "ugly hell" of Faustus, with the realization of the absence of God's presence, a state with no judgment and thus no possibility for mercy.[51]

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[49]Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: NAL Penguin/Signet Classic, 1983).

[50]This would be what the research of near-death experience calls the "life review" phase of dying.

[51]Interestingly, in an example from the 21st century, Connie Willis, in her novel *Passage* (London: HarperCollins Publishers/Voyager, 2001), discusses death in a novel set in the context of medical and neurological research. Here near-death experiences (spontaneous or medically induced) are seen as neurochemical events, where the shutting down of the visual cortex and

Like Marlowe and later Conrad within the fictional sphere, then, Donne feels the need to introduce the aspect of total obliteration into his narrative of death, to show a place where man's soul will "sink away and dissolve into utter annihilation" (see letter quoted above). In a sermon from 1622 Donne makes this most explicit. After listing all the possible afflictions from fire and brimstone to darkness and worm, Donne states: "when all is done, the hell of hels, the torment of torments is the *everlasting absence of God*, and the *everlasting impossibility of returning to his presence*" (5:266; emphasis added). And he continues, specifically referring to, and then expanding, the words in Hebrews (10:31):

> *Horrendum est*, . . . *it is a fearefull thing to fall into the hands of the living God*. . . . *Horrendum est*, when Gods hand is bent to strike, *it is a fearefull thing, to fall into the hands of the living God*; but to fall out of the hands of the living God, is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination.[52]

The text in Hebrews refers to God's punishment and vengeance and to the explicit promise that the Lord "shall judge his people."[53] Donne, however, in his elaboration on the Epistle, sees even this

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sensory areas of the brain (basically: as the brain is dying) triggers temporal-lobe stimulation, which in turn causes experiences of encounters with the life hereafter, either traditionally Christian, with angels and light and Jesus (e.g. pp. 143–44), or more abstract scenes, sometimes filled with desperation (e.g. pp. 19–20). Although here explaining the phenomena in purely scientific terms, it is notable that in this novel, too, the scenes of staring death in the face, especially when experienced by a non-believer, tend to include the element of desperation and horror.

[52]*Sermons* 5:266. Donne's powerful rhetorical strategy in this much quoted passage has been discussed for example by Jeanne Shami (see "The Sermon," pp. 366–37).

[53]"Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? / For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. / It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:29–31).

possibility of *active* punishment less terrifying than the prospect of falling "out of the hands of the living God," of not being in contact with God at all. Job, too, in a similar situation experiences himself completely abandoned (or "turned over"; Job 16:11)[54] by God.

John Stubbs sees "a new reconciled spirit in [Donne's] preaching" after his illness in 1623, and he refers to a sermon soon after Donne's recovery, in St. Dunstan on 25 April 1624, where Donne concludes that "[t]he love of God begins in fear, and the fear of God ends in love" (*Sermons* 6:113). Indeed, in the sacred poetry, too, for Donne, those are his "best dayes" when he "shakes with feare" (*HSVex*). In a sermon in Whitehall in March 1625 Donne states further that "which we cal the anger of God, the wrath of God, the fury of God, is the goodnesse of God" (*Sermons* 6:238), and even Christ, Donne notes in an Easter sermon of 1625, had a terror of final abandonment, "as heavy a feare of Gods forsaking him in the agony of death, as we can have" (*Sermons* 6:275; cf. Matthew 27:46[55]). Even in the biblical account of Christ's death, then, there is an intimation of the fear of total annihilation.

Donne's perhaps most famous metaphorical description of death is essentially also a precautionary visual image against emptiness. This description, reported in the *Devotions* (and written after the illness, around the time of the sermons above), emphasizes death as a universal phenomenon in which one man's death effects everyone else: "No Man is an Iland" (17 Meditation, p. 87). Yet even here Donne cannot overcome the notion of the *absence of God*. The island-image still leaves man alone with equally helpless other men in a "shipwreck,"[56] as it were, or alone to "perish on the shore."[57]

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[54]"God hath delivered me to the ungodly, and turned me over into the hands of the wicked."

[55]"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

[56]Donne refers to death as "shipwreck" in a letter to Sir Henry Goodere in September 1608. John Donne, *Selected Letters*, ed. P. M. Oliver (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 35; cf. the *Titanic*-image of the NDEs in Connie Willis's *Passage* (2001).

[57]*Father*, l. 14.

Eye contact

In order to evade the emptiness and void, man must seek contact with God. In the Gospels, judgment, sin, and sight are closely related. Thus in the Gospel of John we find the following statement: "And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they who see might be made blind. / . . . If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:39, 41). Whereas Job repeatedly claims to be without sin, Donne has accepted, even embraced, his own sinfulness. In Donne's search for deliverance, therefore—which is essential for his ultimate salvation—it is crucial not to break the contact with God, of whatever character that contact may be. So, while Job wants to "hide" from God until His "wrath be past" (Job 14:13),[58] Donne, when describing in detail the nature of the anger of God in an early sermon at Lincoln's Inn, prompts man to "look that anger *in the face*" (*Sermons* 2:86, emphasis original).[59] Job only sees God at the moment of his final submission and repentance ("now mine eye seeth thee").[60] Like Job earlier, however, Donne also seeks to reason with God: Donne simulates Job almost *verbatim* in one of his Holy Sonnets (*HSMade*, quoted above); yet while Job addresses God reproachfully ("Thine hands have made me and fashioned me together round about; yet thou dost destroy me"; Job 10:8), Donne forms his statement into a more cautious question: "Thou has made me, and shall thy work decay?" It is again noteworthy that Job states God as the actor of this destruction ("*thou* dost destroy") whereas for Donne this actor is not stated (God's work "shall . . . decay").[61]

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[58]"O that thou woldest hide me in the grave, that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me!"

[59]The Atheist, on the other hand, when eventually brought before the eyes of God, will be "begging of the hills, that they would fall downe and cover [him] [and hide him (comment added)] from the fierce wrath of God" (*Sermons*, 8:332–33).

[60]"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. / Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5–6).

[61]For further aspects of Donne's use of the narratives of Job, see e.g. Alison Knight, "The 'very, very words': (Mis)quoting scripture in Lancelot

Similarly in his 1627 Candlemas sermon, Donne affirms that he can, without fear, "be glad to see [God]; see him in Judgement, and be able to stand in Judgement in his sight" (*Sermons* 7:341).[62] Later in the same sermon Donne elaborates upon the Gospel of Matthew on the *Parable of Sheep and Goats*.[63] Here, Donne relates the ability to stand in the sight of God even more closely to salvation, stating that those blessed who see God "*inherite the Kingdome prepared for you from the foundations of the world*" (*Sermon* 7:341; emphasis in the original).[64] Like

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Andrewes's and John Donne's sermons on Job 19:23–27," *Studies in Philology* 111.3 (Summer 2014): 442–69.

[62]"And first *videbunt & non contremiscent;* This is a Blessednesse, they shall see God, and be glad to see him; see him in Judgement, and be able to stand in Judgement in his sight; They shall see him, and never trouble the hils to fall upon them, nor call the mountains to cover them; upon them he shall not steal as a thiefe in the night, but because he hath used to stand at their doore, and knock, and enter, they shall look for his comming, and be glad of it" (*Sermons* 7:341). For Donne, Christ himself emphasizes the road to salvation through sight. In the *Essays in Divinity*, too, Donne discusses the relevance of sight for salvation—as well as the light necessary for this sight, this understanding:

> For it is not enough to have *objects*, and *eyes* to see, but you must have *light* too. The first book [i.e. the "book of life" mentioned in Revel. 3:5] is then impossible; the second [i.e. the Bible itself] difficult; But of the third book, the book of *Creatures*, we will say the 18th verse, *The deaf shall heare the word of this book, and the eyes of the blinde shall see out of obscurity* [cf. Isaiah 29:18]. (John Donne, *Essays in Divinity*, ed. Anthony Raspa [Montreal &c.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001], p. 9).

Cf. ". . . it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire" (Mark 9:47).

[63]"Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).

[64]Even in Revelation, where "whosoever was not found written in the book of life *was cast* into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15; emphasis added), these "dead" (only three verses earlier) are reported to "stand before God" (verse 12). In the book of Daniel, too, foreshadowing this final judgement (and

Simeon, who is granted leave to "depart in peace" after his "eyes have seen [God's] salvation" (Luke 2:29–30), so too Donne can anticipate a peaceful death *within the sight* of God.[65]

Conclusion

For Donne, illustrating the ease of hopeful dying is important early on, and in a sermon from 1619 Donne describes how when "his hand that loves thee best hangs tremblingly over thee to close thine eyes, . . . thy Saviours hand shall open thine eyes, and in his light thou shalt see light" (*Sermons* 2:267). Here Christ is notably present in the moment of death as the active agent in the description. Likewise, towards the end of another early sermon, preached at The Hague in 1619, Donne assures his audience that God cannot make himself "unmercifull, or unjust" and therefore "we shall have eternall life" (*Sermons* 2:309).[66] Towards the end of his life Donne introduces a new serenity and even more articulate acceptance into the anticipation of death. In December 1630, very close to the time of his actual death, Donne reports in a letter to his friend George Garrard that he is lately "so much the oftener at the gates of heaven,"[67] and neither this statement nor the letter as a whole indicates any terror or anxiety. What is more, in a 1627 sermon on Trinity Sunday at St. Dunstan's, Donne contends that "even in the depth of any spirituall night, in the

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perhaps therefore equally tense and poetic), those that "sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2) shall do so before "the great prince" (verse 1). Also in the book of Samuel, God is given as the active agent who "bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up" (I Samuel 2:6).

[65]For discussions on Donne and exposedness before God *vis-à-vis* salvation, and especially in relation to Donne's sermon on seeing "through a glass darkly, but then face to face" (I Corinthians 13:12), see e.g. Shami "The Sermon" (pp. 340–42), and Salenius *Dean* (pp. 128–52).

[66]Ramie Targoff has pointed out that Donne's early letter to Goodere (see Donne, *Letters*, p. 34–37, also referred to in note 56 above) refers to Donne's "desire to have an active death," thus not really fearing death as such (*John Donne. Body and Soul* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008], p. 155).

[67]Donne, *Letters*, p. 116.

shadow of death, in the midnight of afflictions and tribulations, God brings light out of darknesse, and gives his Saints occasion of glorifying him, not only in the dark, (though it be dark) but from the dark, (because it is dark)" (*Sermons* 8:53). Clearly, as can be seen here as well as in Donne's funeral sermons and in *Death's Duell*, for Donne, there is always an aspect of hope in the darkness of death; it is a darkness where the sight and presence of God is evident.

In his lifetime, Donne was certainly made aware of the imminence of "that Holy roome"[68] that leads to God's heaven. In addition to having seen death closely in the demise of friends and loved ones, however, it seems that Donne also had an even more private experience of envisioning the hereafter. It is this "personal brush with death"[69] that is relevant here. It is not possible to know whether Donne at some point in his life had a (medical) near-death experience, but during his illness in 1623, Walton reports, he was "near to the gates of death, and he saw the grave so ready to devour him."[70] Maybe being close to dying, he experienced a moment, either of the reassuring presence of God, or of emptiness and darkness, which inspired the vivid descriptions and lead him to grammatically elaborate upon the biblical narratives for his congregation. By altering the use of active and passive voice in his depictions, and by altering the narrative structure to blur or to emphasize God's active agency at the moment of man's death, Donne chooses to create either a cautionary tone of fear, or an atmosphere of consolation.

Throughout his preaching, Donne emphasizes the significance of man being the object of God's active sentencing—or the object in God's grammatically active sentence. The narratives with which Donne puts this point forward are at times very resolute in their rhetoric of total annihilation and determinedly passive grammatical structures. Donne wants to see God—and even more importantly, he wants to be *seen by* God—and to be in God's presence, even when this means being battered or judged by God. Donne is struggling to maintain eye-contact with his God in order to avoid the terror and hopeless despair of death and judgment in total annihilation beyond

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[68]*Sickness* (l. 1).
[69]Sugg, p. 198.
[70]Walton, pp. 59–60.

His presence. Instead of avoiding the wrath of God, Donne repeatedly takes himself beyond the fears and avoidance of punishment expressed in the biblical narratives of death in Job and in some of the Gospels and Epistles. Moreover, developing and elaborating further the narratives of Job and the Evangelists, by making a defined distinction between the active presence *versus* the passive absence of God in the moment of judgement, Donne shows this active involvement as an indicator of the consolation of God, and thus he creates, with linguistic and grammatical means, for scenes of death and judgement, a promise of salvation. For Donne, the ultimate purpose of his calling as a preacher is to "bring men to heaven by Preaching" the word of the Bible, so that man can remain in "the hands of the living God."

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