John Donne Journal
Vol. 34 (2015)

Essayes in Divinity and Donne's Reading of Genesis

P. G. Stanwood

Of John Donne's *Essayes in Divinity* little is certain about its occasion or purpose. The publication history is brief and quickly summarized. It was published in 1651/52, twenty years after the author's death, by John Donne the Younger, with a dedication to Sir Henry Vane the Younger; then in the same year it was reissued with that dedication withdrawn, now dedicated to Francis Lord Newport, and accompanied by the *Paradoxes and Problems.* The book did not appear again until 1855 in an edition by Augustus Jessopp, with his commentary and annotations. Evelyn M. Simpson edited the work for the Clarendon Press in 1952, with introduction and notes, reprinting some of Jessopp's edition. The most recent edition is by Anthony Raspa (2001), with a full introduction and an extensive commentary. Excerpts have occasionally appeared, the most substantial by Evelyn Simpson.[1]

In the 1651 edition, Donne the Younger asserts in a prefatory note addressed to the reader that

[1]See *Selected Prose,* chosen by Evelyn Simpson, ed. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 69–85. Excerpts appear in a number of collections, such as *The Later Renaissance in England,* ed. Herschel Baker (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. 544–48. See Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of Dr. John Donne,* 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 125–29. Anthony Raspa gives a detailed description of the early editions in the textual introduction of his edition of *Essayes in Divinity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), pp. lii–lxxix.

> these *Essayes* were printed from an exact Copy, under the Authors own hand: and, that they were the voluntary sacrifices of severall hours, when he had many debates betwixt God and himself, whether he were worthy, and competently learned to enter into Holy Orders. They are now publish'd, both to testifie his modest Valuation of himself, and to shew his great abilities; and, they may serve to inform thee in many Holy Curiosities."[2]

We have no other account of this work—its title, its date, its occasion. The full title is very likely the younger Donne's invention: *Essayes in Divinity; By the late Dr Donne, Dean of St Paul's. Being Several Disquisitions, Interwoven with Meditations and Prayers: Before he entred into Holy Orders.* Although Donne was ordained in 1615, the composition might have been much earlier, for its occasion is rather vague and undefined. Surely Donne, vastly learned even in an age of great learning, was "competently learned to enter Holy Orders" long before 1615. He had already demonstrated his capacity in managing and exploring a variety of arguments and commentaries in *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), its weight and trenchancy reflected by much favorable reception.[3] While Donne's son certainly preserved and published many of his father's sermons and manuscripts, he was a notoriously unreliable editor, and his account of the *Essayes in Divinity* is of doubtful accuracy.[4]

1.

The so-called *Essayes* do not appear to belong to the genre that their title implies; this title seems the adventitious invention of their

---

[2]See *Essayes in Divinity*, ed. Raspa, p. 5. Subsequent page references in the text refer to this edition.

[3]See Johann P. Sommerville, "John Donne the Controversialist: The Poet as Political Thinker" in *John Donne's Professional Lives*, ed. David Colclough (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), p. 94: "His *Pseudo-Martyr* began the work of establishing his reputation as a divine, as well as winning him the king's patronage."

[4]Raspa, p. xxvii, indicates that "Donne's close working with his biblical texts reveals him fusing the diction and phrasing of both the Vulgate and Geneva Bibles, and of the latter and the Authorized Version [1611]." The *Essayes*, therefore, could not have been written before 1611. Raspa believes that Donne wrote the *Essayes* in 1614 as a single and coherent work.

initial editor who might perhaps have been recalling the new kind of prose composition, initiated by Montaigne's *Essais* (1580). Through Montaigne's example (yet borrowing little more than his title), Francis Bacon published his first book of *Essays* in 1597, with further expanded editions in 1612 and 1625. John Florio published his immensely popular translation of Montaigne in 1603, but already William Cornwallis had set forth his *Essays*, modeled on those of Montaigne; and other English writers soon followed: Robert Johnson's *Essaies, or Rather Imperfect Offers* (1601); Daniel Tuvill's collections, *Essaies Politicke, and Morall* (1608) and *Essayes Moral and Theologicall* (1609), and perhaps also Nicholas Breton's *Characters upon Essaies: Morall, and Divine* (1615).

There has been little scholarly comment on the *Essayes*, much of it beginning with response to Edmund Gosse's judgment that Donne wrote with "a total absence of unction, even of spiritual enthusiasm; the essays are scholastic exercises and no more." Gosse oddly suggests that Donne wrote "these short homilies" in order to show the soundness of his theological views and the breadth of his learning to Archbishop Abbot, though there is no reason to suppose that the Archbishop had any concern for Donne's orthodoxy.[5] Some commentators have struggled to uncover a broad organizing principle in the *Essayes*, seeing them as unfinished sermons or sketches that might easily begin with the first verses of Genesis and Exodus. Thus Simpson's introduction to her edition is warmly appreciative but unhelpful:

> This book is like the 'treasure trove' which a child brings back from a day on the sea-shore. Some of it is worthless, some ugly, some trivial, but here and there we find an exquisitely fashioned sea-shell, some brightly coloured sea-weed, or even a piece of precious amber or cornelian.

Her principal aim is to define "these crude *Essays*" by linking them with the sermons, Donne's greater work.[6]

---

[5]See *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, ed. Edmund Gosse, 2 vols. (1899; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 2:63.

[6]See Simpson, ed., *Essay[e]s in Divinity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. xxiii.

The most extended study of the *Essayes* is by Richard Widmayer who urges that there is a spiritual progression from Book 1 (on Genesis) to Book 2 (on Exodus), that the work is not homiletic but has a single unifying theme and structure. With such a plan, Donne demonstrates the relationship between God and man—culminating in the prayers that conclude each part. Moreover, the prayer that ends Book 1 not only summarizes that first discourse but also adumbrates the concluding prayers of Book 2: "Faith, heaven and earth, nothing, creation, the beginning: all these are now realized and emotionally understood in relation to the self."[7] These are conclusions that one might wish to feel when confronted by a text that seems to look in divergent ways; yet this effort to discover psychological unity must be at best tentative. While Widmayer does not see the *Essayes* as sermons, Joan Webber believes that they are in fact "closet-sermons," with the text, on Genesis 1:1, divided in traditional fashion, each word of the text forming a "head" of the discourse that follows. Yet she does not adequately demonstrate how such a plan actually works, nor fully appreciate the arrangement of its divisions. The *Essayes* may have a putative plan, but development is elusive, and overall purpose is unclear.

Much of the scholarly attention given to the *Essayes* focuses on an effort to identify their genre. In his thoughtful analysis, Michael Hall describes the *Essayes in Divinity* not in the same sense as Montaigne and the early English essayists, but as "essays" in a more generic understanding of the word:

> Part sermon, part private meditation, they bear little superficial resemblance in structure, content, or intention to better-known examples of their kind. . . . Most importantly, like the essays of Montaigne and Bacon, Donne's essays often subvert their own argument and call into question the familiar forms of human reason.

---

[7]See Richard Allen Widmayer, "A Critical Study of John Donne's *Essays in Divinity*," PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1972, 86 (*DAI*, 33, 2349A); and see Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 13–20, esp. 16–17.

Donne is seen as defining the essay in his own way, for "[his] purpose is to confront himself and his readers with complexities, to introduce contradiction and paradox rather than artificial clarity—like Montaigne and Bacon." Donne is uniting the *Essayes* into a rhetorical mode, in a fashion that reflects his own "thoughtful inquiry into fundamental questions of faith and doctrine, of secular authority and Scriptural exegesis, a mode which draws the reader into the experience of Donne's own private meditative journey." Hall thus erases any easy sense that the *Essayes* belong to the popularly emerging genre.[8]

We may see a further kind of generic analysis in Jeffrey Johnson's thoughtful study. He is reluctant to place Donne in the prose essay tradition; for Donne, he believes, is really writing against that tradition, or at the least challenging it. Indeed, Donne is producing "a work of biblical hermeneutics, and this exegetical intention affects the subjectivity of the work."[9] To see the *Essayes* primarily as an expression of the "new" genre misses Donne's essential purpose which is to gather notes and offer reflections on the first verses of Genesis and Exodus. Anthony Raspa remains open to the question of genre, title, style and the state of the manuscript that lies behind the first edition; he may be right to claim that "the work belongs clearly to the literary genre of commentaries on Genesis and Exodus in the current of exegetical works from roughly Erasmus onwards at the beginning of the sixteenth century."[10] Finally, these judgments are subsumed—and avoided—in Katrin Ettenhuber's careful statement that "Donne's

[8]See Michael L. Hall, "Searching and Not Finding: the Experience of Donne's *Essays in Divinity*," *Genre* 14 (Winter 1981): 423–40, citations at 425, 436, 439.

[9]See Jeffrey Johnson, "The Essay," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, ed. Jeanne Shami et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chap. 19, p. 268.

[10]Raspa, p. xxii. "*Essayes* must be considered in the light of the body of exegetical philosophy that constituted a current of Christian humanist civilization flowering in England as on the Continent when Donne wrote it" (p. xxiii). But of course Donne was not himself writing commentary but rather responding to what was abundantly available to him.

Essayes are best identified as a series of prose meditations," a cautious description that largely avoids generic classification altogether.[11]

While Donne surely knew Montaigne's *Essais*, and certainly Florio's translation, his *Essayes* have nothing in common with Montaigne or the English essayists of the earlier seventeenth century. They do have most in common with the sermons, yet only a few extended passages might form some part of a homiletic discourse. Donne declares that he himself is his own audience, that his present composition has no auditory, that "I shall be content that Okes and Beeches be my schollers, and witnesses of my solitary Meditations" (p. 48). Bald quotes from Donne's letter to Goodere, undated and fragmentary, the kind of occasion that suggests the method of composition appropriate to the *Essayes:*

> I can scarce doe any more this week then send you word why I writ not last. I had then seposed [set aside] a few daies for my preparation to the Communion of our B. Saviours body; and in that solitarinesse and arraignment of my self, digested some meditations of mine, and apparelled them (as I use) in the form of a Sermon: for since I have not yet utterly delivered my self from this intemperance of scribling (though I thank God my accesses are lesse and lesse vehement) I make account that to spend all my little stock of knowledge upon matter of delight, were the same error, as to spend a fortune upon Masks and Banqueting houses: I chose rather to build in this poor fashion, some Spittles, and Hospitals, where the poor and impotent sinner may finde some relief, or at least understanding of his

[11]See Katrin Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. chap. 3, pp. 105–35, "'Ascending Humility': Augustinian Hermeneutics in the *Essayes in Divinity*." The quotation appears at the opening of the chapter, on p. 105. Ettenhuber gives an evocative and sensitive reading of the *Essayes* by urging a hermeneutic that demonstrates Donne's profound indebtedness to Augustine: "The generic complexities of Donne's *Essayes* . . . are fully appreciated (and partly resolved) when we view the text as a form of private scriptural meditation in the Augustinian tradition" (p. 109).

> infirmity. And if they be too weak to serve posterity, yet for the present by contemplation of them, &c.[12]

Such preparation or exercise by Donne would have been appropriate at any time during his preaching career, or even well before it began. The *Essayes in Divinity* might, indeed, include meditations that Donne recorded some years before his taking Holy Orders, or, perhaps with some credibility, in one of the following years.

2.

That Donne informally began, or else anticipated his homiletic career with discursive meditations on Genesis and Exodus admits of no certain conclusion; but that he desired to review his theological reading and to register his response upon it must be self-evident. Donne marks a beginning whether he is writing early or late in his career; for if he wrote the *Essayes* before 1615, they are the first of his works to engage in biblical exegesis, and if later, then they still demonstrate the kind of sensibility that ever characterizes his study and attention. But let us treat the *Essayes* as if an early composition; for in any case, this work offers shadow or practise sermons or sermon notes in which Donne has very generous recourse to the hexameral tradition, that is, commentaries on the six days of creation, or by extension, on the nature and meaning of the creation itself. These commentaries also frequently embrace the whole of the Pentateuch, or the five Books of Moses. By recognizing that Donne is relying heavily on this familiar tradition, we have the essential key to the plan

---

[12]See R.C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 299, quoting *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), p. 228. Donne the Younger's preface to his father's work obviously points to a time of composition before 1615, that is, the year of Donne's ordination. Critics have therefore tried to locate a date based on a variety of internal evidence. Evelyn Simpson was inclined to date the *Essayes* around 1611, linking it with the two *Anniversaries* (1611/1612) because of certain supposedly similar phrases and concepts. See Simpson's introduction to her edition, esp. pp. xiii–xix. But see Helen Gardner's note in Simpson's *Selected Prose*, p. 69: "It is possible that the *Essays* contain material of different dates. Biographical references in the prayers [at the conclusion of each part] seem more appropriate to Donne's time at Pyrford [1601] or to the early years of his stay at Mitcham [1606]."

and purpose of his work, and an explanation of why he turned explicitly to the opening of Genesis and Exodus—the *locus classicus* of biblical exegetes, preachers, and commentators over many centuries. Donne cites many of these authors, often giving his own reflections on them, as we would certainly expect of him or of any learned person of his time. The general interest in the hexameron is clearly reflected, in one well known example, by Sir Walter Ralegh in his famous *History of the World* (1614, 1618), which opens at the beginning, that is, at the beginning of the world, with an account

> Of the meaning of *In principio, Genesis 1:1*: This visible world of which *Moses* writeth, God created in the beginning, or first of all: in which (saith *Tertullian*) things beganne to bee. . . . For before that beginning, there was neither primary matter to bee informed, nor forme to informe, nor any being, but the eternall.

Moreover, the hexameral epic developed in this time, famously represented by Du Bartas' *La Semaine* (1578) in Joshua Sylvester's translation, *Devine Weekes and Workes* (1605), and notably culminating in Milton's account of creation in book 7 of *Paradise Lost*. The general interest in the hexameron extends so widely, indeed, that we find concern for it in the capacious and sympathetic thought of Sir Thomas Browne, writing in *Religio Medici*. He is fascinated by the "problem" of Moses. Of course, Browne is often accustomed to throw up his arms wherever he finds mystery; and of Moses, he says, "truly for the first chapters of *Genesis*, I must confess a great deale of obscurity, though Divines have to the power of humane reason endeavoured to make all goe in a literall meaning, yet those allegoricall interpretations are also probable, and perhaps the mysticall method of *Moses* bred up in the Hieroglyphicall Schooles of the Egyptians." Although obviously not intending to write a universal history like Ralegh, nor an epic poem, Donne did aim to record theological reflections that necessarily begin with the first words of Moses.[13]

---

[13]For Ralegh, see the edition by C. A. Patrides (London: Macmillan, 1971), p. 88; see Browne, *Religio Medici* (1642), ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), sect. 3, pp. 33–34.

In the Beginning God created Heaven and Earth. After giving this verse, Donne writes, "I do not therefore sit at the door, and meditate upon the threshold, because I may not enter further." But he is able to enter, to search those secrets of God, which are accessible, if he might learn humility: "And the holy Scriptures . . . as they have these properties of a well provided Castle, that they are easily defensible, and safely defend others. So they have also this, that to strangers they open but a little wicket, and he that will enter, must stoop and humble himselfe" (p. 7). Donne names the five stones of this castle's threshold: "1. The *time, In the beginning*: 2. The *person*, *God*: 3. The *Action*, *He created*: And 4. the *Work*, *Heaven and Earth*; we will speak of two or three other things. . . . Of the *Whole Book*; Of the *Author* of those first 5 Books; And of this *first book*" (p. 8). Now he is ready to consider this five-fold structure of the threshold with the help of numerous scriptural references and commentators.

Having prepared the entrance with these preliminary considerations, Donne turns once more, "upon the *threshold* it self, *In the beginning*" (p. 18). He has summoned the witness already of many commentators on this first book by Moses, traditionally regarded as the original author, "the principal Secretary to the Holy Ghost" (p. 14). Donne now recollects Augustine by paraphrasing and summarizing the first four chapters of the *Confessions* and quoting (in his own translation) that extraordinary passage of an imagined but impossible conversation with Moses (chap. 11.3.5). When Augustine first confronts the opening words of Genesis, he is perplexed and passionate. Like Augustine, Donne prays that he might understand Moses's meaning. Following Augustine, Donne writes:

> In the Beginning whereof, O onely Eternall God, of whose being, beginning, or lasting, this beginning is no period nor measure; which art no Circle, for thou hast no ends to close up. . . . Let me in thy beloved Servant *Augustine's* own words, when with an humble boldnesse he begg'd the understanding of this passage, say, *Moses writ this, but is gone from me to thee; if he were here, I would hold him, and beseech him for thy sake, to tell me what he meant. If he spake Hebrew, he would frustrate my hope, but if Latine, I should comprehend him. But from whence should I know that he said true? Or when I knew it, came that knowledge from him? No, for within me here is a truth, not Hebrew,*

> *nor Greek, nor Latin, nor barbarous; which without organs, without noyse of Syllables, tels me true, and would enable me to say confidently to Moses, "Thou say'st true."*[14]

Augustine is Donne's favorite of the Latin Fathers, the patristic authority whom he most frequently cites throughout his prose. We might, therefore, expect Donne to call on Augustine as he studies Genesis; and indeed, his recollection of Augustine in this place—and of this remarkable instance in the *Confessions*—has a very special significance. Augustine is approaching the scripture in a near conversation with Moses, and if one has followed the *Confessions* sympathetically to this point, observes Mark Vessey, "the susceptible reader is implicated in a narrative that virtually requires him or her to stand in for the author, or at least accompany him, as he enters the biblical text."[15] Assuming the *Essayes in Divinity* is an early work, Vessey concludes "that Donne entered on his career as a public interpreter of scripture clinging to Augustine's coat-tails." Donne obviously knew,

---

[14]p. 19. The full passage reads: "Audiam et intellegam quomodo in principio fecisti caelum et terram, scripsit hoc Moyses, scripsit et abiit, transiit hinc a te ad te neque nunc ante me est, nam si esset, tenerem eum et rogarem eum et per te obsecrarem ut mihi ista panderet, et praeberem aures corporis mei sonis erumpentibus ex ore ejus, et si hebraea voce loqueretur frustra pulsaret sensum meum nec inde mentem meam quicquam tangeret; si autem latine, scirem quid diceret. sed unde scirem at verum diceret? quod si et hoc scirem, num ab illo scirem? intus utique mihi, intus in domicilio cogitationis, nec hebraea nec graeca nec latina nec barbara, veritas sine oris et linguae organis, sine strepitum syllabarum diceret, 'verum dicit', et ego statim certus confidenter illi homini tuo dicerem, 'verum dicis.' cum ergo illum interrogare non possim, te, quo plenus vera dixit, veritas, rogo te, deus meus, rogo, parce peccatis meis, et qui illi servo tuo dedisti haec dicere, da et mihi haec intellegere." Ed. James J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I:149–50. Augustine, of course, left two commentaries on Genesis, *De Genesi ad literam* and *De Genesi contra Manichaeos.*

[15]See Vessey, "John Donne (1572–1631) in the Company of Augustine: Patristic Culture and Literary Profession in the English Renaissance," *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes*, 39 (1993), 173–201, esp. 194–95. See also Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine*: "[Donne] calls upon Augustine not just as a patristic authority but as a spiritual mediator here, a tutelary presence whose faith can revive his own" (p. 125).

meditated, and responded to the *Confessions* as he undertook his own study of divinity. Indeed, he alludes to Augustine in the *Essayes*—in about twelve instances—more than to any other authority.

While this striking passage above all others stirred his reflections, Donne had anticipated the scene in the opening sentences of the *Essayes*, "before my Entrance" into the castle. He exclaims, "Let me with *Lazarus* lie at the threshold, and beg their crums. *Discite à me*, sayes our blessed Saviour [Matt. 11: 29], *Learn of me*, as Saint *Augustine* enlarges it well, not to do Miracles, nor works exceeding humanity; but, *quia mitis sum*; learn to be humble" (*Confessions*, 7.9.14, Raspa, p. 7). Moreover, at the conclusion of this long first section of the *Essayes* (Book 1, Part 1), Donne again cites Augustine. On the question of what existed *before* the beginning, Donne answers with Augustine, who

> says religiously and exemplarily; *If one ask me what God did before this beginning, I will not answer, as another did merrily, He made Hell for such busie inquirers: But I will sooner say, I know not, when I know not, then answer that, by which he shall be deluded which asked too high a Mystery, and he be praysed, which answered a lie*.[16]

Donne's indebtedness to Augustine was great, even in an age that especially honored him, and he helps to remind us of Augustine's vast reputation in the Renaissance.[17] In his seminal study of the commentaries on Genesis during the Renaissance, Arnold Williams recalls not only the popularity of Augustine but the host of further patristic commentators on Genesis and the hexameron: Origen, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzen, and especially St. John Chrysostom of the Greek fathers; Tertullian, Ambrose, Gregory the

---

[16]11.12.14; p. 23. Ettenhuber, in *Donne's Augustine*, argues that "these three passages [*Confessions*, 7.9.14, 11.3.5, and 11.12.14] form a discursive and moral frame for Donne's own—curiously selective—reflections on the Bible in the *Essayes in Divinity*. . . . Hermeneutics, in the *Confessions* and in the *Essayes*, is deeply implicated in a broader ontology of revelation and spiritual rectification" (p.110). This argument, while subtly and cogently expressed, seems perhaps larger than the *Essayes* can admit.

[17]See Clemens Weidmann, "Augustine's Works in Circulation," in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 431–64.

Great, among the Latin; and later figures such as St. Thomas Aquinas (*ca.*1225–1274), Nicholas de Lyra (1270–1340), and most especially Benedictus Pererius (1535–1610), whose enormous commentary on Genesis Donne frequently invokes throughout the *Essayes*.[18] The way to the early modern period is long and crowded with scholarly knowledge, yet Donne, as we know, was a lively and learned student not only of Augustine, but of all divinity, especially in the years immediately before his ordination in 1615, the period to which the *Essayes in Divinity* seem most likely to belong. Augustine is at the font of hexameral commentary, and the principal conscience and study for Donne. Inspired by God (or with hope for His inspiration)—that God, "which art no Circle," lacking ends to close up—Donne resides in a ring of unending perplexity.

3.

Donne is often associated with his older contemporary Lancelot Andrewes (1555–1626), especially for his sermon style. Andrewes, and Donne after him, employed classical rhetorical forms emboldened by elaborate images and witty conceits. Much of this style was a conscious recollection of such patristic exemplars as Chrysostom and Ambrose, tempered by the more self-analytical mode of Augustine. The indebtedness of Andrewes and Donne to the fathers of the early church and to the host of hexameral commentators in the centuries that followed is palpable and generous. We have seen Donne steadying himself against a prospective preaching career by examining this knowledge in the *Essayes.* Years earlier we discover Andrewes, also at the beginning of his career, focussing his study on the recovery of a similar heritage. His first living, or clerical appointment, was St. Giles's Cripplegate in London, where, in the 1590s, he preached his

[18]See Arnold Williams, *The Common Expositor: An Account of the Commentaries on Genesis 1572–1633* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), esp. chap. 1: "Of all the commentaries on Genesis written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the *Commentarium et disputationem in Genesin* of the Spanish Jesuit, Benedictus Pererius, was undoubtedly the most popular" (p. 8). For a corroborative comment, see Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine:* "Despite radical differences in doctrinal conviction and methodological emphasis, most of the Scripture commentaries cited by Donne share a reliance on Augustine as a doctrinal and exegetical authority" (p. 106).

earliest sermons, on the much glossed first chapters of Genesis.[19] Many of these sermons—or really a series of connected lectures—were not published until 1657, some thirty years after his death. I have discussed elsewhere a manuscript of these sermons, dating from the 1590s, which suggests that they were known to contemporaries and circulated amongst them.[20] The printed version, which varies in many details from this one surviving manuscript, appeared as *Apospasmatia SACRA: or A Collection of posthumous and orphan lectures.*[21] These lecture-sermons, which in many respects appear unfinished, are certainly authentic examples of Andrewes's work, but composed long before his great court sermons. Most of this large volume of "orphan lectures" provides a systematic study of the first four chapters of Genesis, verse by verse—Andrewes's exegesis of the hexameron.[22]

---

[19]Donne and Andrewes had many opportunities to meet. One significant occasion was in March 1615, only two months after Donne's ordination, and his recent appointment as a royal chaplain. Andrewes, now Bishop of Ely, with a distinguished company, including also the more modest Donne, was charged to accompany the King on a royal visitation to Cambridge. During the visit, the King conferred on Donne the degree of Doctor of Divinity. These events are summarized by Bald, *John Donne: A Life* , pp. 307–09.

[20]See "Lancelot Andrewes's 'Orphan Lectures': The Exeter Manuscript," *English Manuscript Studies 1100–1700*, ed. Peter Beal, 13 (London: British Library, 2007), 35–46, reprinted and supplemented in *Early Modern Literary Studies* Text Series 2 (2011) <URL: extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/andrewes/andrewe4>. The Exeter Manuscript now resides at Pembroke College, Cambridge.

[21]London, Printed by R. Hodgkinsonne, for H. Moseley et al., 1657. Quotations are from this, the only edition.

[22]Andrewes delivered these "lectures" on each verse of Gen. 1 to 3: 13 at St. Paul's Cathedral between 13 October 1590 and 12 February 1591/2. The series continues on the remaining verses of Genesis 3 and all of 4 at St. Giles's, between 18 June 1598 and 17 February 1599. See Peter McCullough, ed., *Lancelot Andrewes: Selected Sermons and Lectures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 348; and see also McCullough's Introduction, esp. pp. xvii–xx. He notes, incidentally, that "it . . . seems urgent for Milton scholars to add the lectures on Gen. 1–3 to the body of hexameral literature that should be considered as a source for *Paradise Lost*," advice surely appropriate for students of Donne's *Essayes in Divinity* (p. xix, n. 19).

Andrewes begins, as we should expect, with Genesis 1:1:

> Wee have heard of the undoubted credit and unquestionable Authority of *Moses* the writer: Now touching his hand-writing, hee hath left five Bookes, as five fingers of his hand, to point at the knowledg of God and heavenly things, that so hee might shew them unto us. In all which Bookes, wee may observe two principall parts of its intent and purpose: The one was to deliver to Gods Church the Law and Word of God: The other is to write the History of Gods Works." (sig. A1r)

Andrewes continues, noting that the work of creation that is "set downe in the first verse" contains four principal matters; and these he considers in turn: four parts, as if adumbrating those four parts that Donne expounds in his *Essayes*. In his characteristically systematic and orderly fashion, Andrewes proceeds with his analysis:

> Touching the first part of the Creation, it is set downe in the first verse; in which are foure workes of great weight and importance.
>
> The first, *In principio;* Second, *Deus;* Third, *creavit;* Fourth, *Caelum et Terram*:. . .
>
> First, *That this World and the things wee see, were not so ever, but had a beginning at a certain time.*
>
> Secondly, *At the beginning, these things had not their being of themselves, but of another.*
>
> Thirdly, *That the Creation and working of them was only of God, and of that God which is in unity of essence and trinity of persons.*
>
> Fourthly, *That Heaven and Earth are God's, and they were made and preserved by him.* (A1v)

Andrewes comments at some length on each of these "branches" of the principal "head" topic, that is, the first verse of Genesis, describing the possibilities that each one holds. After discoursing on verse 1, he moves on to the next and to each subsequent verse, over many folios, steadily and carefully. Neither the manuscript nor printed text give more than cursory marginal references, usually only notes to mark sections or leading themes. Andrewes's indebtedness to the hexameral tradition is clear from numerous references to Augustine,

Basil, Chrysostom, or to other familiar authorities—but he usually encloses their words into his own. Donne's method in the *Essayes* is, of course, quite different, for he is gathering material that he might make into a sermon, whereas Andrewes has advanced beyond this stage of composition. Yet Donne has set out topic headings essentially like those of Andrewes in preparation for the same kind of discursive study based on the hexameron.

Thus the *Essayes* broadly discuss Genesis in four parts. The theme of Part 1, "In the Beginning," is recalled at the opening of Part 2: "Now we have ended our Consideration of this beginning, we will begin with that, which was before it, and was Author of it, *God* himself; and bend our thoughts first upon *himself*, then upon his *Name*, and then upon the particular Name here used, *Elohim*" (p. 24). Now Part 3 generously and associatively searches the sense of *creavit*, troubling over the definition of creation: Is there Nothing before Creation, and what is that Nothing? What was there before the beginning? "*Nothing* being no creature, is more incomprehensible then all the rest: but we will proceed to that which is *All, Heaven and Earth*" (p. 32); and so begins Part 4, with loosely connected citations and reflections, ending with personal resignation and desire: "to me belong those words, *Subdue the Earth, and rule over all Creatures* [Gen. 1:28]; and as God is proprietary, I am *usufructuarius*[23] of this Heaven and Earth which God created in the beginning" (p. 42). Perhaps Donne may be indebted to Andrewes; however, it is more likely that the similarity of their exposition has a common source in the hexameral commentary. Andrewes speaks objectively out of his hexameral sources and brings this assimilated knowledge to his St. Giles' auditory, while Donne writes more subjectively, weighing the merits of the various contributors to the tradition. The first organizing principle of the *Essayes*, as of Andrewes's lectures depends upon the hexameron, but Donne's response is often speculative, personal and inquisitive—features generally common to his style.

Both Donne and Andrewes are at the beginning of a homiletic career, both reflecting on *In principio Deus creavit caelum et terram*. So that he might faithfully speak, Donne invokes the company of

[23] *Usufructuarius:* One who has the use and profit, but not the ownership. (Simpson's note)

Augustine, while Andrewes writes confidently, having sufficiently attempted to interpret mostly concealed meaning. Of this first verse of Genesis, he declares:

> *Moses* meaning is, That the Earth alone was made by God, but also the Heavens, that is, both of them, and all in both, were his worke, not the Earth only, but also the Heavens; against the Philosophers, which thinke therfore that the Heavens were not made, because none can assigne the point where the Heavens began, nor in what part God began to make them, nor where the Heavens first began to move; by which reason they might hold that the heart of man was not made, because none can tell how it began its motion to pant and beat, whether by *sustole* or *distole*, but as the heart was made, though unknown where the first motion of it is, so were the Heavens." (A3r–v)

Andrewes continues this sermon in his customarily analytic manner, while Donne without such logical movement calls on a variety of authorities, many like Pererius notably in the hexameral tradition. But the vividly imagined scene with Moses remains a central image in Donne's imagination, recalled in the different circumstances of a new context. In *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,* Donne writes of the progress of his dangerous illness. At an early stage of the illness, the physician comes; he is fearful; he desires to have others join him for consultation. Donne questions the value of his physician's wish:

> My God, my God, thy blessed servant Augustine begged of thee that Moses might come and tell him what he meant by some places of Genesis: may I have leave to ask of that Spirit that writ that book, why, when David expected news from Joab's army [2 Sam. 18: 25], and that the watchman told him that he saw a man running alone, David concluded out of that circumstance, that if he came alone, he brought good news?

How can "good news" be brought by "a greater company"—of physicians? Donne needs an expositor like Moses, yet no answer is possible.[24]

Donne introduces this scene again, paraphrasing or quoting *Confessions*, in two late sermons. The first was preached at St. Paul's on the Sunday after the Conversion of St. Paul, 1625, on the text from Acts 9:4, "And he fell to the earth, and heard a voyce, saying, Saul, Saul, Why persecutest thou me?" St. Paul is able to hear the voice of Christ while others in his company could not (thus declares the later verse at Acts 22:9). Now Donne recalls the scene related in *Confessions* 11.3.5, for it helps to elucidate the text:

> If *Moses* should speake Hebrew to mee, mine eares might heare the sound, but my minde would not heare the voyce; I might heare him, but I should not heare what he said. This was that that distinguished betweene S. Paul, and those who were in his company at this time."[25]

The second sermon, preached at St. Paul's in 1629, on Gen. 1:2, makes reference again to this famous passage. Donne would wish to understand the scriptures, and like Augustine to be conversant in them:

> Thus that blessed Father meditates upon the word of God; he speakes of this beginning of the Book of Genesis; and he speakes lamenting, *Scripsit Moses et abiit*, a little *Moses* hath said, and alas he is gone; *Si hic esset, tenerem eum, et per te rogarem*, if *Moses* were here, I would hold him here, and begge of him, for thy sake to tell me thy meaning in his words, of this Creation."[26]

These late occurrences of Augustine's "conversation" underscore its importance to Donne.

---

[24]See *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), Expostulation VII, p. 46. The illness occurred in November 1623, and publication of the *Devotions* in 1624.

[25]See *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 6 (1953), 218.

[26]*Sermons*, ed. Potter and Simpson, 9 (1958), 94.

This conversation of course can never happen; but, like his predecessor Andrewes, Donne has opened the hexameron, the first action of a sound exegete. The hexameral tradition thus defines the *Essayes in Divinity* by giving to this work its shape and tentative coherence. Any discussion of the *Essayes* must begin with this premise, for it governs further interpretation. Writing with obvious familiarity out of a vast fund of theological and philosophical knowledge, Donne reveals features of his exegetical method, his mind, and his creativity. Katrin Ettenhuber sets the case for interpretation:

> In the *Essayes*, Donne prepares the ground for a spiritual and hermeneutic discipline that stayed with him throughout his career. He finds a new beginning in the very first words of Genesis, the biblical text that inaugurates Augustine's eschatological journey back to God in Book 11 of the *Confessions*.[27]

But the occasion and the opportunity for analysis has begun with the hexameron.

University of British Columbia

[27]Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine*, pp. 134–35.