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"Oh my black soule": Donne's Biblical Metaphors for Sin

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The Bible provides a series of graphic images for sin. In Scripture, sin is a "heavy *burden*" under which the Psalmist is crushed (Psalms 38:4).[1] Sin is also the *bondage* of self-imposed slavery: the wicked "shall be holden with the cords of his sins" (Proverbs 5:22). Sin is *wandering*: the Psalmist prays that he "not stray" from the commandments (Psalms 119:10). And sin is a *stain*, particularly the stain of blood: "your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity" (Isaiah 59:3). For early modern readers, these scriptural metaphors held metaphysical purchase. The sinful person was—in some true if mysterious sense—burdened, bound, lost, and stained.

Donne finds in scriptural images of sin the invisible truth of his inner self. It is not only that Donne consistently experiences his own sin in the lyrical or confessional first person. More strikingly still, Donne consistently experiences the biblical imagery for sin *in his own body*. In an earlier article, I argued that Donne felt an Augustinian lack

[1]Biblical quotations are to the *Authorized King James Version*, ed. Stephen Prickett and Robert P. Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Although Donne was a polyglot biblical scholar (making critical use of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, as well as Arabic, Syriac and Chaldaic Bibles) the Folio edition of Donne's *Sermons* "almost but not quite always" follows the *KJV* as his favored English translation (*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–62], vol. 1, p. 107; vol. 10, pp. 295–328).

of will in his own body.[2] I extend that argument here, proposing that Donne imagines sin in phenomenological rather than conceptual terms. Donne quite often *thinks* of sin through external and social metaphors—sin as a financial debt or legal obligation. But he *feels* sin most vitally as an internal illness, almost a physiological sensation—sin as a wound, laceration, or bruise at the root of his being.[3]

For Donne, sin is personal before it is social. Accordingly, this essay begins with the poetic "I" of the *Holy Sonnets* and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* before turning to the communal address of the *Sermons*.[4] Sin is personal for Donne, furthermore, because it is fundamentally somatic. Donne feels sin as a burden that weighs down or as a bondage that constricts his own individual body. Yet more persistently, Donne feels sin as a stain that pollutes the interior of his body, particularly the mysterious stain of blood on the soul.[5] This

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[2]Luke Taylor, "Donne's Unwilled Body," *John Donne Journal* 30 (2011): 99–121.

[3]This essay like "Donne's Unwilled Body" is indebted to Ramie Targoff's *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), one of the landmark continuations of T. S. Eliot's seminal insight into the proximity of thought and feeling in Donne (review of *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century: Donne to Butler*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921], first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 1921).

[4]Quotations from the *Holy Sonnets* will follow *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al., volume 7, part 1 (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005). Parenthetical citations will be noted as *Variorum* 7.1: page number. Citations of the sermons follow *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–1962). Parenthetical citations will be noted as *Sermons*: volume and page number. This essay cites as well from *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). This essay only mentions poems outside the *Holy Sonnets* briefly, but I there refer to *John Donne's Poetry*, ed. Donald Dickson (New York: Norton, 2007).

[5]Notable studies in historical phenomenology have recovered the felt experience of the early modern body. Although it does not treat Donne directly, Michael C. Schoenfeldt's *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England:*

essay argues for the unique importance to Donne of the metaphor of sin as stain, a motif that Donne draws from a web of priestly imagery in the Bible, and elaborates with all the energy of his dual vocation as poet and as priest.

In the first part of this essay, I offer an extended treatment of sin as stain in *HSBlack* ("Oh my black soule"), whilst demonstrating the ubiquity of this figure throughout Donne's oeuvre. In the second part, I continue to demonstrate Donne's preference for the image of sin as stain amongst the various alternative sin images offered by theologians. In the third and final part, I examine Donne's idea of how the public liturgy of the Church blots out the stain of sin. Since sin is a bodily contamination, its cure must also be bodily. In the sacramental application of Christ's blood through baptism and eucharist, Donne finds the fulfillment of a scriptural trope: in the Scripture and in sacrament, blood not only symbolizes sin but also effaces sin, not only signifies guilt but also clears guilt.[6]

Sin, then, is for Donne an intensely personal, somatic and visceral concern. For this very reason, Donne interrogates the biblical images of sin with passionate precision. He probes sin's various literal meanings in Scripture through a philological training that takes account of Hebrew as well as Greek.[7] He reads Scripture's various typological and figurative meanings through and beyond patristic commentaries, particularly that of Augustine.[8] Yet these philological

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Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) influences the approach of this essay.

[6]For an overview of blood as a biblical symbol of guilt see Chanita Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010), pp. 40–46.

[7]Goodblatt, *The Christian Hebraism of John Donne*, pp. 111–38. For Donne's use of the Bible generally see Jeanne Shami's chapter in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*, ed. R. Lemon, E. Mason, J. Roberts and C. Rowland (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 239–53. For seventeenth-century biblical scholarship generally, see Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 11–88.

[8]For Donne's biblical sources and patristic commentary in the sermons see *Sermons*, vol. 10, pp. 295–401. For Augustine's influence on Donne see Katrin

and typological readings of the biblical text find their ultimate verification in Donne's own feeling body, the locus where verbal and conceptual descriptions of sin take on flesh and blood.

1. "Oh my Black Soul" and the Colors of Sin

The imagined occasion of *HSBlack* ("O my blacke soul") is the same as that of the *Devotions*, a sickness from which the poet fears that he may die.[9] The sickness of the body prompts the poet to address the sickness of his soul. In the first two quatrains, the poet rouses his own guiltily "black Soule" to the gravity of his situation, compared to a treasonous pilgrim unable to return home, to a thief on the way to execution. In the sestet he urges himself to repentance, "holy mourning" and "blushinge." Finally, the sonnet closes with a Shakespearean couplet in which the poet turns to the remedy of Christ's blood.

> Oh my black Soule, now thou art summoned
> By Sicknes, Deaths Harold and Champion;
> Thou'art like a Pilgrim, which abroad had don
> Treason, and darst not turne to whence he'is fled,
> Or as a thiefe which till death's doome be red
> Wisheth himself deliuered from prison
> But damn'd and haled to execution
> Wisheth that still he might be'imprisoned.
> Yet grace, if thou repent thou canst not lacke.
> But who shall giue thee that grace to begin?
> Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
> And red with blushinge as thou art with Sin.

Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[9]Louis Martz considers that the occasion may have been real illness. *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study of English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press; London: Oxford University Press; rev. ed. 1962), p. 140. For sin as sickness in the sermons see Winfried Schleiner, *The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1970), pp. 68–85.

> Or washe thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
> That beeing red, it dyes red Soules to whight.[10]

It should be noted at once that the "turn" to the sestet does not amount to a completed conversion from sin to grace, from self to God. Till its close, the poem remains suspended between the horns of the Calvinist-Arminian dilemma over prevenient grace. Repentance will always meet with God's grace, but repentance itself is an unmerited grace, and "who shall giue thee that grace to begin?"[11] The poem implicitly separates the black soul of the poet from the speaker who demands reform, yet that desired reform is not enacted within the poem.[12] Nevertheless, a tentative movement does become apparent: without moving beyond the injunctions to penance and mortification, the speaker ends by gesturing toward the more satisfactory cure of "Christ's blood."

Here as elsewhere in the *Holy Sonnets* we need to guard against neat resolutions. Helen Gardner proposed that the *Holy Sonnets* showed a movement from fearful meditation on the last things to consoling meditations on God's love, and others have suggested similarly

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[10]*Variorum* 7.1:13. I follow the Westmoreland sequence (NY3) for all citations from the Holy Sonnets. Written in the hand of Donne's friend Rowland Woodward, this sequence is unique among sixteenth-century artifacts in containing all nineteen sonnets (*Variorum* 7.1:lxii). The accuracy of its transcription, demonstrated in its preference for "dearth" over "death" in *HSRound* 6, grants it "great authority" (*Variorum* 7.1:lxvii).

[11]R. V. Young's *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000) offers a nuanced treatment of the theology of grace in Donne that mediates and so supersedes Barbara Lewalski's *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) and Louis Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954). Young's view that "the persona of the Holy Sonnets seems to be trying out different versions of grace in order to arrive at a theologically moderate position" (8) is apposite to *HSBlack*.

[12]Mary Ann Radzinowicz points out the Psalms as the model for this kind of split between speaker and soul in "'Anima Mea' Psalms and John Donne's Religious Poetry," in *"Bright Shootes of Everlastingnesse": The Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987), pp. 40–58.

teleological orders. The careful *Variorum* commentary, however, conclusively demonstrates the fragility of such patterns (*Variorum* 7.1:lx–ciii, 133–57).[13] In my own view, no particular ordering of the *Holy Sonnets* offers therapeutic resolution to the problem of sin. Indeed, the textual order of the biblical canon itself cannot purge sin. Instead, the speaker of the Holy Sonnets ultimately refers both himself and his reader outwards to the performed word of liturgy. It is in sacramental practice, rather than writing poetry or reading Scripture, that he hopes for the effective removal of sin's stain.

HSBlack concludes with a startling image of sin's removal: "Or washe thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might, / That beeing red, it dyes red Soules to whight." This variegated image is clearly saturated with biblical reference. The leading text is Revelation 7:14: "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and haue washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lambe." Prominent also is Isaiah 1:18: "though your sinnes be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." The transformation of red into white, common to both allusions, feeds into a larger biblical pattern that fascinated Donne: the replaying of an image *in bono* and *in malo*, in a good and a bad sense.[14]

The black garb of the pilgrim and the imprisoned thief are associated with guilt, but blackness is also the clothing of repentance. The redness of the poet's blush signifies guilt, but the redness of Christ's blood is a tincture capable of clearing that guilt. Donne here offers a thumbnail adumbration of a scriptural pattern that he elsewhere enlarges upon at length. In the *Devotions*, Donne notes that Scripture portrays the Devil and Christ, the origin of sin and sin's remedy, through visually indistinguishable images. Since sin "is a *Serpent*, insensibly insinuating it selfe, into my *Soule*," he writes, "let thy brazen Serpent, (the contemplation of thy *Sonne* crucified for me) be evermore present to me." Adopting an ancient homeopathic

[13]See also R. V. Young, "The Religious Sonnet," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and Thomas Hester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 218–32.

[14]For an excellent study of the trope in relation to Spenser, see Carol Kaske, *Spenser and Biblical Poetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 18–64.

principle, Donne places "a *Lyon* against a *Lyon*, *The Lyon of the Tribe of Judah*, against the *Lyon*, *that seekes whom hee may devoure*."[15]

Using the same technique, Donne's sermons frequently depict blood *in bono* and *in malo*. Blood is both pollutant and detergent, both stain and stain remover. In a sermon preached to the king on April 20, 1630 on Job 16:17, 18, 19 ("O earth cover not my blood"), Donne points out that blood in the Bible is a symbol of guilt, "the blood of the soule, exhausted by many, and heinous sins."[16] In a sermon preached on Psalm 51:7 ("Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be cleane; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow"), Donne notes contrariwise that blood is precisely what removes sin. He alludes to the use of blood in the celebration of the Passover: "*Take a bunch of Hyssop, and dip it in blood* [Exodus 12:22]"; blood which when applied to doorposts and lintels saved the Israelites from the destruction visited upon the Egyptian firstborn. Again, Donne notes that in "the cleansing of the Leper, there was to be the blood of a sparrow [Leviticus 14:4]" (*Sermons* 5:309); here, too, blood is the mysterious agent of healing, of salvation.

Donne is not original in highlighting saving blood in both Testaments. The New Testament writers already assume the figural reading of the sacrifices of the Aaronic priesthood in relation to the sacrifice of Christ.[17] Patristic writers elaborate the same trope. Donne follows, for example, Augustine's description of *Christus medicus*, the doctor who heals with the medicine of his own blood: "*medici sanguinem fundunt, ille de ipso sanguine medicamenta facit*: other Physitians draw our blood, He makes physik of blood, and of his own blood" (*Sermons*

[15]John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), p. 55. Parenthetical citations will be noted as *Devotions* and page number.

[16]Donne also alludes to biblical usages of blood as sin: "Deliuer mee from blood-guiltinesse" (Psalms 51:14); "the land is full of bloody crimes" (Ezekiel 7:23); "blood toucheth blood" (Hosea 4:2). *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), pp. 217–18.

[17]1 Peter 1:2 addresses the "elect, according to . . . sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ." The writer of Hebrews views the "blood of Goats and Calues" as a prefiguring of Christ's "owne blood" (Hebrews 9:12).

1:313).[18] Donne *is* original, however, in the vehemence with which he applies this commonplace trope to himself. In *HSMin* ("If poisonous minerals"), Donne wishes not merely to be sprinkled or washed, but to *drown* his sins in Christ's blood (*Variorum* 7.1:15). In a later sermon he wishes to be hauled bodily from the ocean of his own guilty blood and tossed headlong into the cleansing sea of Christ's blood.[19] The point to notice here is the force with which Donne registers the scriptural metaphor within his vertiginous self, literally "incorporating" biblical thought into his own feeling body.[20] This visceral reading of Scripture climaxes in Donne's perception of the blood of Christ as sacramentally present to the body of the believer through the water of baptism and the wine of the Eucharist.

Donne further innovates within the scriptural tradition by using not only visual images but also verbal puns to express the transformation of contaminating blood into healing blood. The extended visual metaphors of *HSBlack* turn the black of sin into the black of mourning, the red of a sinner's blush into the red of Christ's blood. In "till death's doome be red" (line 5), however, Donne puns between the color *red* and the past participle of reading (*read*), suggesting a blood that speaks or declares a message. The pun between *dyes/dies* in the final line, moreover, suggests the moment of death as the definitive transition between guilt and innocence. What

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[18]Preached April 19th 1618 at Whitehall on 1 Timothy 1:15 ("This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of which I am the chiefest"). *Christus medicus* references appear throughout Augustine's oeuvre: see, for example, On 1 John 8:13; *Confessions* 10.3.4, 10.28; Exposition on Psalm 103:4. For a summary see R. Arbesmann, "The Concept of 'Christus Medicus' in St Augustine," *Traditio* 10 (1954): 1–28.

[19]"Me drawne out of one Sea of blood, the blood of mine owne soule, and cast into another Sea, the bottomelesse Sea of the blood of Christ Jesus" (*Sermons* 9:224).

[20]Donne thus performs a poetically inventive form of what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (London: Basic Books, 1999) have termed "embodied cognition." A "root metaphor," in this case the scriptural root metaphor of blood as paradoxically both stain and detergent, is felt in and through the body rather than remaining sealed in some realm of pure ideas.

emerges from all this is a multifaceted rebus: images refer to words while vice versa words refer to images, rhetorical "colors" flicker into literal colors and back again. We hear, as well as see, the transformation of bad into good blood.

Not every critic appreciates this visual-verbal fluency, which has been described as merely "facile paradox,"[21] "verbal games with colour-symbolism" and "the antics of a moral chameleon."[22] These dismissals, however, fail to note the serious play behind Donne's imagery of sin. The rebus visual-verbal punning does indeed point up the artificiality, the powerful peculiarity, of Donne's imagery. Yet his images and puns are essentially glosses on one particular transformation, of bad blood into good blood, that for Donne lies at the very heart of Scripture. The importance of this transformation could hardly be exaggerated: it condenses into a single and potent image both the anxiety caused by sin and the hope of salvation from sin.

Donne's positioning of himself in the first two quatrains of *HSBlack* perhaps derives from the *compositio loci* of Ignatian meditation. The poet's imagination of himself as pilgrim and thief, in particular, possibly reflects the "Second Addition of the *First Week*" of the *Spiritual Exercises* in which the exercitant imagines himself in "various situations."[23] More generally, Donne's blood imagery draws upon the

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[21]Julie Yen, "'What doth Physicke profit thee?': The Pharmakon of Praise in *Ignatius His Conclave* and the Holy Sonnets," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: University of Central Arkansas Press), pp. 214–30, 227.

[22]Wilbur Sanders, *John Donne's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 128: "the verbal games with colour-symbolism turn the drama of redemption into the antics of a moral chameleon."

[23]Peter Milward, *A Commentary on the Holy Sonnets of John Donne* (Tokyo: The Renaissance Institute, Sophia University, 1988), pp. 46–48. For the role of Ignatian meditation in Donne's work more generally see T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry: The Clark Lectures at Trinity College, Cambridge, 1926, and the Turnbull Lectures at Johns Hopkins University, 1933*, ed. Ronald Suchard (1933; London: Harcourt Brace, 1993), pp. 67–92; Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne, The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954). The recent

iconographic tradition. One might call to mind depictions of Christ's blood dripping rejuvenation from the cross onto the Golgotha skull of old Adam, or into the eyes of the centurion.[24] At the same time, Donne's rebus principle allows him to outline a verbal narrative of justification from sin. The alarmed poet of the first two quatrains awaits an aural proclamation of divine condemnation, "till death's doome be red," but turns in the sestet to the hope of Christ's interposed blood: "which hath this might" (strength, but also with the sense of "possibility"), "that being red" (the color, but punning on an alternative, saving proclamation) "it dyes red souls to white" (gesturing toward the Lutheran "great exchange," in which Christ's death is accepted instead of that of the sinner).[25]

2. Donne's Images of Sin in Theological History

In a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn in spring or summer of 1618 on Psalm 38:3 ("There is no soundnesse in my flesh, because of thine anger, neither is there any rest in my bones, because of my sinne"), Donne speaks of the "wofull riddle" of sin: "sin is but a privation, and yet there is not such another positive possession: sin is nothing, and yet there is nothing else" (*Sermons* 2:88). This paradoxical idea of an ontological zero that nevertheless defines humankind owes heavily to St. Augustine, the Father who fashioned the western Church's understanding of original sin.[26] Donne chooses, however, with Augustine and the theologians who followed him, to imagine the

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study of Francesca Bugliani Knox, *The Eye of the Eagle: John Donne and the Legacy of Ignatius Loyola* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), reaffirms the importance of Ignatian spirituality in Donne's work.

[24]Albert C. Labriola, "Iconographic Perspectives on Seventeenth-Century Religious Poetry," in *Approaches to Teaching the Metaphysical Poets*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990), pp. 61–67.

[25]See M. Thomas Hester, "'Impute this idle talke': The 'Leaven' Body of Donne's 'Holy Sonnet III,'" in *Praise Disjoined: Changing Patterns of Salvation in 17th-Century English Literature*, ed. William P. Shaw (New York: Lang, 1991), pp. 175–90.

[26]Gillian R. Evans, "John Donne and the Augustinian Paradox of Sin," *Review of English Studies* 33.129 (1982): 1–22.

nothing of sin as a mysterious something: as a legal obligation (Luther), or a debt (Anselm), but most of all as a stain (Aquinas).

Sin as defilement, as dirt or stain, is arguably the most ancient image of human faultiness. As Paul Ricoeur points out, the pre-rational sense of ritual uncleanness comes before the narrative theological sense of a violated covenant, and much before the philosophically rationalized meaning of willful vice. "What resists reflection," Ricoeur writes, "is the idea of a quasi-material something that infects as a sort of filth, that harms by invisible properties, and that nevertheless works in the manner of a force in the field of our undividedly psychic and corporeal existence."[27] Confused and repugnant as these metaphors of defilement are, they provide the indispensable base upon which rationalized theologies were subsequently built.

Sin as stain finds a sophisticated late medieval Scholastic analysis in Aquinas. While the soul lives in contact with God, Aquinas contends, it remains illumined and beautiful. When, however, it cleaves instead to created things, the soul stains itself with something like a shadow. Aquinas concedes that this loss of beauty is only "*metaphorically* called a stain on the soul" (emphasis added, *ST* 2.1.86).[28] Yet the stain of sin signifies something stubbornly real: the mysterious residue that clings to the soul even after the completion of the sinful act itself (*ST* 2.1.86.2). The stain of sin is thus in Aquinas's view an indispensable metaphor for a mysterious, metaphysical fact.

Donne, like Aquinas, imagines sin as a quasi-bodily reality. While the *Holy Sonnets* frequently describe sin as the breaking of law, the speaker in these poems does not describe justification as a purely legal acquittal. When Donne adopts the language of legal imputation in *HSScene* ("This is my Playes last Scene") he slurs immediately into an evocation of bodily purgation: "Impute me righteous," he writes, and continues without a pause, "thus purg'd of euill" (*Variorum* 7.1:13). The *Holy Sonnets* redound with the terror of the divine tribunal, and Donne's time at the Inns of Court shows up in the precise legal

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[27]Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper, 1967), pp. 25–26. See the entire section on "Defilement," pp. 25–46.

[28]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, second and rev. ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1990). <dhspriory.org>, accessed 29th December 2016.

terminology scattered through the *Holy Sonnets*.[29] Yet legal conceptions, whilst theologically correct, remain external to the feeling body. Donne therefore consistently turns from these terms to his favored conception of sin and redemption as bodily stain and washing, dirt and cleansing.

And yet, is the sinner ever purged? Or does his inner and invisible stain remain indissoluble? The aporia of the *Holy Sonnets* here reflects a painful theological dilemma. Tridentine Catholicism held that baptism washes out original sin entirely.[30] Luther, however, described the Christian as paradoxically *simul iustus et peccator*, at once just and a sinner. As a former Catholic ordained in the established Church, Donne worked his way toward a hybrid view. Baptism "cleansed" and "weakened" original sin, yet sin remains within a Christian as a real if diluted "venom" (*Devotions* 119). The question of whether the speaker of the Holy Sonnets is white or black, red with his sins or washed in the blood of the Lamb, remains unresolved.

Even when not elaborating the imagery of sin as stain, Donne characteristically feels sin corporeally. He stoops literally, for example, under the weight of sin. Thus in a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn in 1618 on Psalm 38:4 ("For mine iniquities are gone over my head, as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me"), Donne says that "a burden *sinkes* a man, *declines* him, *crookens* him, makes him *stoop* . . . So does sin" (*Sermons* 2:132). The heaviness of sin also appears in *HSMade* ("Thou hast made me") where the poet laments that his "feebled flesh doth waste / By sin in it, which towards hell doth weigh" (7–8). Sin's gravity is, furthermore, repeated in *HSScene* ("This

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[29]In *HSDue* ("As due by many titles") the speaker urges God's claim to ownership of him against the Devil's spurious seizure of divine goods (*Variorum* 7.1:11). In *HSPart* ("Father, part of his double interest") the speaker rings the changes upon a complex vocabulary of "joynture," "Wills," and "Legacee," arguing his legal right to a part in Christ's inheritance (*Variorum* 7.1:12).

[30]The Fifth Session of the Council of Trent "On Original Sin," chapter five, declares the regenerate "innocent, immaculate, pure, guiltless." The concupiscence remaining in the baptized is "of sin and inclines to sin" but—contrary to reformed beliefs—is not itself sin. H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, English Translation* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 1978), p. 23.

is my play's last scene"), in which the poet imagines his soul ascending heavenward as his sins drop toward earth: "So fall my sins, that all may have their right, / To where they're bred, and would press me, to hell" (11–12). Donne here gives startlingly fresh lyrical expression to the ancient weighing of the soul in judgment, a notion found not only in the Hebrew Scriptures but also in the religions of Egypt and of Babylon.[31]

Donne's sensation of sin as burden, like Donne's imagery of sin as stain, are in the best sense of the word primitive. They reach back to ancient senses of sin obscured by concepts developed in later and more complex economies. As Gary Anderson has shown, by the time of the late second temple period, in Judaism the metaphors of stain and burden were increasingly displaced by the metaphor of sin as debt. The financial metaphor appears in Jesus's teaching that the debt of unsettled offences must be paid to the "vttermost farthing" (Matthew 5:26), and that true wealth consists in "treasure in heaven" (Matthew 6:19). Later, it found its way into the medieval theology of indulgences drawn from the Church's treasury of merit. Finally, with Anselm's theology of redemption, literally a buying back, the metaphor of sin as debt became so accepted as to be scarcely recognizable as a metaphor at all.[32]

Like everyone else, Donne sometimes talks of sin as debt. Thus in a sermon preached at Greenwich on April 30th 1615 on Isaiah 52:3 ("Ye have sold your selves for nought, and ye shall be redeemed without money"), Donne draws naturally and extensively upon the financial metaphor (*Sermons* 1:151–67). Nevertheless, even in this context, Donne is careful to insist that the real currency is not coins but Christ's blood. Donne alludes to 1 Peter 1:18–19: "we were not redeemed with corruptable things, as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (166). He points out, furthermore, that the "blood of Christ Iesus was not within the Compass of this word, which

[31]Frances M. Malpezzi, "The Weight/lessness of Sin: Donne's 'Thou Hast Made Me' and the Psychostatic Tradition," *South Central Review* 4.2 (1987): 70–77. The most powerful Renaissance expression of sin's weight is Michelangelo's last judgment, where the damned are syphoned downward by the same mysterious spiritual gravity by which the elect spiral upward.

[32]This narrative is outlined in Gary Anderson's *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

is here translated Money" (166), and goes on to quote Isaiah 55:1: "He redeemed us then without money" (167). Christ's blood is thus the real currency of which money is only a figure. Christ's blood is not for Donne another metaphor amongst various interchangeable metaphors. It is a bodily if mysterious reality, experienced through the sacraments.

3. Bible Reading and Sacramental Practice

For Donne, the Church's liturgy offers a bodily enactment of Scripture's somatic metaphors for sin. For the speaker of the *Holy Sonnets*, tormented by doubts over whether he is dirty or clean, the sacraments hold out a reassuringly objective remedy. For the dean of St. Paul's, baptism and eucharist, the two sacraments retained by the established Church, offer his flock the definitive means of contact with Christ's blood. More than private reading or writing, the shared speech and actions of the liturgy promise to remove the stubborn stain of sin.

The Church's liturgy, like Donne's own poetry, collapses the large sweep of biblical narrative into a little space and time. In *HSLittle* ("I am a little World"), Donne uses Petrarchan conceits to focus salvation history within his own body. The primeval deluge becomes a baptismal washing of sin through repentant tears: "Powre newe seas into mine eyes, that so I might / Drowne my world with my weepinge earnestly" (*Variorum* 7.1:8). And the poet anticipates that his body world will be burnt in the future apocalypse: "But, oh it must be burnt" (*Variorum* 7.1:10). Donne's imagery here displays the same dependence, noted throughout this essay, upon the submerged image of sin as stain. The spots of sin must be washed or burnt out of the body, through water or fire, flood or apocalypse.[33]

[33]Donne also mentions the division of history into two worlds, the antediluvian world ended by water, the present world to end in fire, in *HSRound* ("At the round earth's imagined corners"): "All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow" (5). The notion is scriptural: "the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: but the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire" (2 Peter 3:5–7). It was also something of a Renaissance commonplace. It lies

If patristic thought develops the notion that history was recapitulated in Christ, Donne takes the further step of recapitulating history in himself. Nor is this for Donne a purely individualistic notion. Every Christian, Donne insists, participates in a biblical memory at once individual and communal.[34] Thus in a sermon preached at Lincolns Inn in spring or summer of 1618 on Psalm 38:3 ("There is no soundnesse in my flesh, because of thine anger, neither is there any rest in my bones, because of my sinne"), Donne preaches that the Bible and the life of the Christian reader form a single and seamless whole:

> He hath a Genesis in his memory; he cannot forget his Creation; he hath an Exodus in his memory; he cannot forget that God hath delivered him, from some kind of Egypt, from some oppression; He hath a Leviticus in his memory; hee cannot forget that God hath proposed to him some Law, some rules to be observed. He hath all in his memory, even to the Revelation. (*Sermons* 2:74)

The traditional fourfold method of biblical interpretation places the individual Christian's life within the continuum of a larger narrative whole: the literal history of the Bible looks forward allegorically to Christ's life, morally to the life of the individual Christian, and through both to the anagogical hereafter. Donne's vision, however, posits a more symbiotic relationship between history and autobiography. The Bible glosses the narrative of an individual life, but vice versa spiritual autobiography also glosses the Bible.[35] In particular, the scriptural word and the body of the believer interpret and interpenetrate one another.

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behind the bipartite structure of Adam's vision of history, for example, in the eleventh and twelfth books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

[34]See Achsah Guibbory, "John Donne: The Idea of Decay," in *The Map of Time: Seventeenth-Century English Literature and Ideas of Pattern in History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), pp. 88–95.

[35]For a sense of the lay and particularly lay female appropriation of the Bible see Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Donne affirms that the literal meaning of the Bible provides the only legitimate basis for subsequent figurative readings (*Sermons* 3:353). Yet he also points out that in the symbolic books of Scripture, especially the supremely symbolic book of Revelation, the literal meaning is itself figurative. For sometimes the Holy Ghost wishes "to expresse things by allegories, by figures; so that in many places of Scripture, a figurative sense is the literall sense, and more so in this book then in any other" (*Sermons* 6:62). But if the literal sense is sometimes also figurative, and if one figure constantly refers to another figure through a membrane of interwoven meanings, where does salvation history become truly enfleshed, concrete, bodily? Donne's answer lies, finally, in blood. Words remain double, ambiguous, full of multiple meanings, until they became incarnate.

Donne's reading of Scripture is finally more incarnational than allegorical. His characteristic move is not from one biblical text to another biblical text but from the biblical text to his own body. Take, for example, the sermon preached upon the Penitentiall Psalms 6:8, 9, 10: "Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquitie; for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord hath heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer. Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed: Let them returne and be ashamed suddenly" (*Sermons* 6:39–61). Donne here unpacks the black sin, red contrition, and white innocence I remarked upon in *HSBlack*. Hidden within the deceptively brief word *Erubescam* [*I blushed with shame*], he discovers myriad emotional and spiritual connotations. "There are complexions that cannot blush; there growes a blacknese, a sootinesse upon the soul, by custome in sin," he explains (*Sermons* 6:57). And conversely, there is a spotless whiteness that flees temptation with such vigor that the soul remains completely unspotted and white: to these refer the words, "*Thou art all faire my Love, and there is no spot in thee* [Song of Songs 4:7]" (*Sermons* 6:57). Between these extremes lie those souls that blush at the approach of sin. Of them, Donne ingeniously concludes, it is said: "*My Beloved is white and ruddy* [Song of Songs 5:10)]" (*Sermons* 6:58).

So far, so allegorical. Yet Donne unexpectedly intrudes an unwieldy medical symptom into his sparkling exposition. Besides the white of spotless innocence, he notices, there is a counterfeit white of terror: "a pale soule, a soule possest with a horror, affrighted with a diffidence,

and distrusting his [God's] mercy" (*Sermons* 6:57). Physical and external symptoms, it now appears, must after all remain ambiguous, unable to infallibly declare the state of the sufferer. Indeed, Donne knows this from painful, personal experience. During the 1623 illness that occasioned *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, spots appear on his own body, spots which Donne cannot read (*Devotions* 67–70). Initially hoping that they provide a hopeful sign that the illness had run its course, Donne eventually concludes that the spots in fact provide no objective correlative to his hidden, internal state.

Donne therefore compares his spots to confession extracted through judicial torture, not the voluntary confession offered to Roman priests, but the forced confession "upon the rack" of "intestine conspiracies" in which "nature herself confesses and cries out." For just as forced confessions do not amount to repentance ("we are sure of his treason, but not of his repentance"), the spots of his illness provide no true indication of his internal state (*Devotions* 68). The palpable anxiety in this passage can be biographically explained as Donne's traumatic memory of family members executed as Catholic martyrs, the death of his brother after imprisonment for sheltering a priest. Yet despite settling to his own satisfaction the disputed points of religion, Donne's hermeneutic worry remains unalloyed: if even one's own body does not speak the truth about physical illness, how can any spiritual doctor authoritatively diagnosis the ills of the soul?

Albeit in a more upbeat mood, *HSSouls* ("If faithful souls"; *Variorum* 7.1:9) repeats the same difficulty, the conundrum of discerning innocence or guilt from merely outward signs. Donne wonders whether his Father will be able to see from heaven the "white truth" (line 8) of Donne's mind with the immediate and intuitive vision of an angel, or will only surmise its contents through the process of discursive reason, by "Circumstances, and by Signes" (line 6). The sonnet ends by setting aside the scholastic distinction between angelic and human modes of knowing in favor of the conclusion that "God . . . knowes best" (line 13). The poem's power derives, however, not from this pat theological certainty but from the vivid hermeneutical aporia that precedes it, the difficulty of seeing into another's mind and soul. Not only the torturing inquisitor, but also patron saints, and most of all one's own self, prove unable to peer deep

enough inside the soul to discover whatever reality it is that lies beneath the metaphors for sin.

The inscrutability of sin is no merely piquant puzzle for the poet. Donne returns again and again to its edgy, personal nub: does the stain of sin remain within his body, or has it already been washed out? Donne never appears entirely resolved, and often seems to want it both ways. In a remarkable passage from the *Devotions*, Donne doubts not only that his own flesh is spotted despite being indwelt by the Son (a conventional position), but also that the Church is at once immaculate and spotted, since "every particular soul in that church, is full of spots and stains." Yet more daringly, Donne suggests that the Son himself might be, in a sense, sinful and not sinful at once: "Or has thy Son himself no spots, who hath all our stains and deformities in him?" (*Devotions* 69).

The same paradox of sin as both present and absent appears in the famously provocative image of the Church as virgin whore in *HSShow* (*Variorum* 7.1:19). The poet begins by addressing Christ's spouse as a spotless Una, "bright and cleare" (line 1), but concludes that she is never more so than as a prostitute, "open to most Men" (line 14). Much could be said on the implicit comparison in these lines between virginity and purity, on the one hand, and dirt and sexual contact, on the other. It might also be noted that Donne had wittily debunked precisely these troubling connections in "The Flea," where the mixed blood of poet and beloved replays a sexual covenant that does no harm to either party.[36] "And in this flea our two bloods mingled be, / Thou know'st that this cannot be said / A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead" (4–6).[37] For our present purposes, however, I simply want to note Donne's oppressive sense of sin as a universal contagion that paradoxically could never quite be located anywhere.

Sin remains for Donne as common and yet as ungraspable as air, everywhere and yet nowhere, a something and nothing. In his lyric, the ubiquity of this strange quality admits of only one exception—or

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[36]See Theresa M. DiPasquale, "Receiving a Sexual Sacrament: 'The Flea' as Profane Eucharist," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AR: University of Central Arkansas Press), pp. 81–95.

[37]Dickson, ed., *John Donne's Poetry*, p. 98.

perhaps two. In the interwoven sonnet round of *La Corona*, the fifth poem, "Crucifying," unambiguously identifies Christ as "th'immaculate" (6), the one human without any spot of sin.[38] In the same sequence, however, we find a buried indication that Donne may also consider Mary to be without the stain of original sin. Addressing the Virgin in "Annunciation," Donne says that in the "prison" of her womb Christ "can take no sin, *nor thou give*" (emphasis added, line 7). A sonnet sequence designed to adapt the rosary to reformed belief thus betrays a germinal belief, though tantalizingly undeveloped, in the (as yet undefined) Catholic belief in Mary immaculate.

Donne ultimately turns to Christ's body, blood that not only does not give sin but that takes it away. In his sermon on Psalm 51:7 ("Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be cleane; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow") we find a powerful summation of the themes developed in these pages: the paradoxical trope of blood as both sin and sin's cure, a poetics drawn from Scripture, when read in both typological and philological keys, which finds its final culmination in sacramental practice (*Sermons* 5:296–317). Chanita Goodblatt has ably explored the sermon's interpretation of Scripture in light of Jewish and patristic commentary, and in line with the emphases of reformed theology.[39] My aim here will be very briefly to highlight its treatment of the stain of sin.

Donne begins by dissecting David's sin. Notably, he exculpates Bathsheba from almost any blame. Not only was she not, according to Donne, bathing in provocative view of the king, but her ablutions may have been in lawful accordance with those prescribed for women after the ritual uncleanness of menstruation.[40] Donne's sympathetic reading of Bathsheba's actions discloses a surprisingly keen knowledge of what he terms the "ceremonial" (as distinct from moral) law, a category in which in which Donne counts "at least fifty kinds of uncleannesses"

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[38]Dickson, ed., *John Donne's Poetry*, p. 135.

[39]Chanita Goodblatt, "An Intertextual Discourse on Sin and Salvation: John Donne's Sermon on Psalm 51," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 20.3 (1996): 23–40.

[40]"And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days: and whosoever toucheth her shall be unclean until the even" (Leviticus 15:19).

(*Sermons* 5:311).[41] In part, this can be explained by the continuing relevance of some of the Levitical prescriptions to his parishioners. Donne himself preached several sermons for the postpartum "churching" of women.[42] More generally, however, it highlights Donne's fascination with sin as ritual uncleanness, a mysterious kind of dirt or stain, the same metaphor that this essay has remarked upon throughout.

Moving from David's sin to that of his auditors, Donne observes that Adam's name means both "red" and "from the earth." With this gory flourish of philological bravura, Donne takes the opportunity of reminding his audience that they are constituted at the root of their being by sin: "that rednesse, which is the earth of which wee are made," "that guiltinesse, which is by our natural derivation from our Parents imprinted in us"(*Sermons* 5:313).[43] The rhetorical payoff to this abasement comes when Donne urges its ecclesial and sacramental resolution: the baptism of the Church, and only that baptism, will wash out the red of original sin. "Our first colour was white; God made man righteous. Our rednesse is from Adam, and the more that rednesse is washed off, the more we returne to our first whitenesse" (*Sermons* 5:313).

Donne offers a further, erudite philological excursus on "hyssop" ("Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean").[44] The Hebrew *Ezob*

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[41]For an introduction see David Damrosch, "Leviticus," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 66–77.

[42]For example, sermon no. 9 in 50 Sermons, "Preached at the Churching of the Countess of Bridgewater," on Micah 2:10 ("Arise and depart, for this is not your rest"), perhaps in 1621 or 1623. *Sermons*, vol. 5, pp. 185–97. See Jeffrey Johnson, "Recovering the Curse of Eve: John Donne's Churching Sermons," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 23.2 (Spring, 1999): 61–71. The practice, not specifically required in the Prayer Book, was based upon the requirements of forty days of purification after the birth of a male child and eighty after the birth of a female child prescribed in Leviticus 12:1–8.

[43]Adam's redness appears elsewhere in Donne's oeuvre too: "Adam (by which God calls him, and Eve too) signifies but Redness, but a Blushing" (*Sermons* 2:78).

[44]For Donne's philological tracing of "hyssop" see Goodblatt, pp. 27–36.

translated as "hyssop," he notes, is etymologically unclear. We only know that it was a type of plant used to sprinkle blood in confirmation of the Exodus. Scanning patristic glosses, Donne notes that Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome consider hyssop to expel pride (figuratively) from the lungs. Characteristically, however, Donne prefers to say that the sprinkling of hyssop purifies not the lungs but the liver, "the seate of blood, the seat of concupiscence" (*Sermons* 5:309). Here as elsewhere, Donne comes to rest upon his root notion, the paradoxical metaphor of blood *in bono* and *in malo*, the purification of blood by blood.

The philological investigation of the meaning of "hyssop" in its original context is eclipsed by Donne's typological sense of animal sacrifices' fulfillment in Christ. David "looked for no sanctification, but in the blood of Christ Jesus," he asserts allegorically. Donne's larger concern in making this statement is to stress the continuity of Israel and the Church as communities necessary to the penitent. Private inspirations of grace, Donne emphasizes, cannot replace "the publike Ordinance of the Church" (*Sermons* 5:310). For only in the Church does Ezekiel's promise, "I will poure cleane water upon you, and you shall be cleane" (Ezekiel 36:25), come true in Christian baptism.[45] "Nothing in this world can send me home in such a whitenesse," Donne further insists, "as Gods Absolution by his Minister, as the profitable hearing of a Sermon, the worthy receiving of the Sacrament do" (*Sermons* 5:314).

For Donne, the eucharist puts a sinner into real contact with Christ's purifying blood. In "the worthy receiving of the Sacrament" the biblical poetics of blood as solvent to sin's stain become effectual, enacting in the present a scriptural and historical memory. Donne pairs this mainly non-verbal ritual of eating, furthermore, with the verbal ritual of confession, "Gods Absolution by his minister." This sounds an unexpected note. Confession had, after all, been officially

[45]Donne here collapses the typological reading of Christ as the paschal lamb with philological examination of individual words: "Some grammarians have noted, the word *Washing* here, to be derived from a word, that signifies a Lambe" (*Sermons* 5:313).

demoted from sacramental status in the established Church.[46] Yet in a sense Donne's entire consideration of the biblical metaphors for sin take place under the rubric of confession.

Of the scriptural metaphors for sin, as I have argued, Donne took with particular seriousness the metaphor of sin as a stain lurking at the base of his body and soul. Donne's sense of sin is thus deeply personal, expressed naturally in the introspective address of self in the *Holy Sonnets*. Yet in the end Donne's consideration of sin is not merely private, but turns naturally outward to the public address of the sermons. For Donne, the scriptural metaphors for sin take on flesh in Donne's own spotted body. Precisely for this very reason, however, they demand a corporeal, a physically enacted cure. In bringing his own spotted body into contact with the spotted and yet pure body of the Church, Donne hopes that his body will be finally cleansed through contact with the unspotted body of Christ.

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[46]For an introduction to the Reformation's restructuring of Catholic confession see Sarah Beckwith, *The Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 34–56.