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# Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes in Divinity* as Companion Pieces

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To consider John Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes in Divinity* as companion pieces is at once revealing of a number of truths, truths that have perhaps eluded us because of the disparate formal character of both works. *Pseudo-Martyr* was published in 1610 and is an often virulent controversialist humanist tract having relatively little to do with the defence of James I's Oath of Allegiance which it was ostensibly written to defend, and it flails at much length at the shortcomings of Roman Catholicism, Donne's ex-religion, that it perversely ends up reconciling with its vision of Protestant ecumenism.[1] For its part, *Essayes in Divinity,* which was written some time between 1611 and 1615, and which was not published until 1651, twenty years after Donne's death, is a little book that purports to conduct an exegesis of the first verse of Chapter I of Genesis, "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth," and of the first verse of Chapter I of Exodus, "These are the names of the children of Israel, that went into Egypt with Jacob they went in, every man with his household."[2] However, if at the level of appearances both works are strangers, behind them, at their basis, the role of eternity is pivotal. Neither work reveals its true sense unless Donne can be clearly perceived in each as wrestling to grasp how things in time reflect the eternal, and how the eternal gives time its significance.

Eternity is a rather large word. Pompously, it refers to everything that is not in time and to everything that is not temporal. But eternity is important here, in spite of its possible pomposity and in spite of the snares of its abstractions, because it can be considered as the idea in which Donne was philosophically cornered in that harrowingly psychological period of his life between 1609 and 1615 when (1) he wrote

and published his first, and longest ever book, *Pseudo-Martyr,* (2) he, a descendant of the family of the executed Catholic saint Thomas More, confirmed himself publicly in his new-found religion, the Church of England, and (3) he came reluctantly to the decision to become an Anglican priest. Eternity, which is abstract, otherworldly and nowhere, was the philosophical retreat open to him, a necessary escape hatch, the one comfortable place for him and the only logical conclusion, in the face of the madness of the known history of the world all of whose contradictions appeared to him to meet in the span of his own life-time.

Briefly, the play of eternity behind both works may be summed up in this fashion.

In *Pseudo-Martyr,* Donne serves his reader the history of statehood from the Ancient Jews, the Ancient Greeks, the Romans and all the major nascent nations of the emerging modern Europe, with limited forays into the history of statehood in Egypt, Persia, and China. The entirety of human political history is encapsulated in *Pseudo-Martyr* into what is a panoramic image about what has been going on in time since God conceived the idea of creating the finite and temporal universe, actually went ahead and did it, and then left humanity in charge of running it, with or without regard to the incitations of His providence. Donne's authorities who haunt his marginalia in *Pseudo-Martyr* are often contemporaries who tried to write similar kinds of history that covered everything that they thought history had to say to support their respective points of view.[3] There is the German Counter-Reformation canonist Severinus Binius' five-folio volume *Concilia Generalia* of 1606, the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine's three-folio volume *De Controversiis Christianae Fidei* of 1590 to 1593, and also, among others, the Oratorian Caesar Baronius' seven-folio volume *Annales Ecclesiastici* of 1601 to 1608, and to mention these three writers barely begins to suggest the list of Donne's world-history authorities.[4] Binius wrote his history of Christianity recording its events church council by council from the earliest synods after the Apostle Peter; Bellarmine wrote his apologetical work tenet by tenet according to all the theological statements issued by Rome since Peter; Baronius wrote the same history of Christianity according to everything that had been recorded

in all church annals on which its traditions were built since Peter ; and all three histories referred themselves to the history of the Jews from the creation of Adam onwards to explain the correctness of their procedures.

In *Essayes in Divinity,* the play of eternity that is at work in Donne's thought is much less historical. With its concern with God's creative gesture at the beginning of Genesis and with the names of His Chosen People at the beginning of Exodus, *Essayes* is less tangible and much more abstract. But both *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes in Divinity* are exegeses — *Pseudo-Martyr* is an exegesis of history, that is, of the Book of Creatures, one of the three books with the Bible and the heavenly Register of the Elect in Donne's system of theology in *Essayes* (pp. 5-6), and *Essayes* itself is an exegesis of two biblical passages; and, both works have their upper mystical level of meaning, according to the rules of typology, in the Christian other-world where Donne conceived them. As in *Pseudo-Martyr,* though in a different manner, in *Essayes in Divinity* one of the major issues that Donne grapples with is the age of the world, which was often taken to be 3,500 years, that so concerned his contemporaries at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The authorities whom Donne summons up for the age of the world are numerous; in one passage alone (p. 33) there are eight : (1) Alexander the Great's letter to his mother Olympias in the fourth century B.C.; (2) Saint Cyprian of Carthage in 247; (3) Saint Augustine in *De Civitate Dei;* (4) the tradition of the Chaldeans as recorded by Cicero in *De Divinatione*; (5) the tradition of the Egyptians particularly as described by the cabalist Johannes Reuchlin; (6) contemporary lore about the Chinese as recorded in Willis' *The History of Travayls in the West and East Indies* and in Mercator's *Atlas;* (7) contemporary theories about the birth of aborigines as found in Warner's *Albions England;* and finally (8) histories on all the kingdoms ever to have existed, such as Mercator's *Chonologia.*[5] Donne notes that all of these sources disagree about the world's age, and he concludes that their disagreement does not matter, as it is not the age of the world that counts but the eternity that informs it, unbound by the fluctuations of time, and that gives both Creation and its history their significances.

In the light of these exegeses of history and biblical passages in *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes,* an essential thought may be seen to lie behind Donne's meaning in both works. That idea may be said to be that everything that is in time passes and that the presence of anything in the universe must be measured pressingly, immediately, by the existential eternal reality of whatever time has to offer. The idea may be thought of as underlying both "Anniversary" poems to Elizabeth Drury of 1611 and 1612 that are the only works of what may be termed a major character that Donne is known with certainty to have written between *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes,* and the idea can also be considered as both medieval and modern at the same time. The two "Anniversary" poems meditate exegetically on the significance of the life and death of the daughter of Donne's patron, the first formally and the second informally.[6] Donne concludes in the poems that Elizabeth's life was a record of the passing of her earthly being into the eternity of the Register of the Elect of saved souls : "for she rather was two souls, / or like to full on both sides written Rols, / where eyes might read upon the outward skin, / as strong Records for God, as mindes within ("The second Anniversary," ll. 503-506).[7] By their referral of the immediate significance of Elizabeth's life to another world, the poems recall the medieval adherence to the four-levelled typological consideration of the existence of things that informed Aquinas' philosophy and Counter-Reformation thought deeply as well, and that stipulated that things in history found the ultimate significance of their existence in the top, or fourth anagogic mystical level of typology.[8] Inspired by the same influences in the history of ideas, in the first of his "Prayers" in *Essayes* (p. 27), Donne calls on the support of Aquinas to dismiss arguments from reason that the world is eternal on the grounds that it is evidently not so, but that it is in eternity by contradiction that the world nevertheless finds its meaning: "we are not under the insinuations and mollifyings of persuasion, and conveniency; nor under the reach and violence of Argument, or Demonstration, or Necessity; but under the Spiritual" (p. 28). But as an affair of the pure spirit, the idea of measuring things in time by their meaning in eternity is also strangely modern. Donne is not a classical Christian mystic such as Theresa of Avila and John of the

Cross attempting to lose her or his will in God's will. The picture that emerges of him in *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes in Divinity,* rather, is that of a Renaissance humanist navigating in the world of human affairs between the Scylla of altering conceptions of the spirit on the left, and the Charbydis of crumbling conceptions of temporal political state authority on the right, trying to find a point where spirit and state, as in the recently defunct medieval ladder of being, still inhabit each other. The philosophical past of the medievals is a heavy cargo in his difficult vessel, a thing worth saving above others in the philosophical orbit of his times, which he must keep secure as he travels forward. In *Essayes in Divinity* (p. 44), it must be remembered, Donne ridicules the "pretending Wit" Francis Bacon who thought, in *The Advancement of Learning,* that be could reorganize all the categories of philosophy and theology forever.[9] For Donne, the old categories still somehow held.

If Donne's idea about time, meaning and eternity in *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes in Divinity* is both medieval and modern, its literary antecedents are many and are embedded deeply in the humanist tradition that he so fully inherited. Never in considering what might be called the "serious" Donne as opposed to the morbidly sexy "Jack the poet," whose revival swept the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, can we ignore the fact that he was a Renaissance humanist, trained formally and informally in the sixteenth century, and not in the seventeenth century in which in our modern literary history he has become a milestone. His humanism is marked by that of Erasmus. For Donne, the Ancients whom the humanists came to revere are the Greeks and Romans, but also the Ancient Jews and the early and later Fathers of the Church such as Tertullian and Augustine, and all of these Ancients are accompanied somehow in Donne's two works by the sub-culture Ancients of the Zoroastrians, the Cabalists, the Hermetists and the Chaldean oracles discussed by sixteenth-century humanists on the fringes of the works of the classics.[10] All of these figures and movements in the works of Donne, as in the rest of the humanists, circulated intellectually in the world of the Mediterranean in Greece and Italy, but also strongly in the Near Eastern world of Palestine, Egypt and Persia, and in the North Africa of Carthage and Islam. The discussions in

*Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes* draw on these Ancients and on the sub-culture Ancients and on what contemporaries of the then modern Europe had to say about them in relation to the political state of God's eternity. On Donne, moreover, the influence of the Ancients and the sub-culture Ancients was two-pronged.

The first prong was the wider one in the sense that it involved generally the exegesis usually of vast parts of the Bible, and it stretched in time from the first Church Fathers roughly to the French theologian Nicholas de Lyra in the early fourteenth century.[11] The exegetes in this prong of influence, be they Tertullian, Origen, Ambrose, Jerome or Augustine, whom Donne cites repeatedly, are professional — if they may be so called — as they are generally concerned with the entire Bible in itself as the natural scope for the interpretation of the meaning of Christian thought and history. Their investigation of the levels of meaning in the Bible is oriented towards the clarification of each passage in question insofar as it throws light on the nature of present being. Here, Christian thought and history include dating the age of the world by counting the generations of humans who have existed since Adam, sometimes adnumbering them in years more precisely according to the ages of the kingdoms that were contemporaneous with them. In this way, the date of creation came to be fixed. Biblical exegesis for these exegetes was the art of conducting such Scriptural interpretation to render lucid what Christ said, did, and was in ultimate relationship to the meaning of human life. Among these exegetes, there is therefore considerable interest in the nature of Old Testament types, in the fulfillment of these types in their copies in the New Testament, and in the types of both Testaments as prefigurations of events in the present. Such exegetes might also be said to have much influence closer to Donne's own day on world-historians such as Mercator in *Chronologia* and on the German, Henry Bunting in his *Chronologia Catholica... Ab Initio Mundi Ad Nostra Usque Tempora* of 1608.[12]

In the second prong of the influence of the history of exegesis on Donne, the exegetes — if a generality about them may be dared — are more interested in God than in Christ. If such a parallel may be developed, they are more concerned with the existence of the eternal

than with the requirements of salvation. From de Lyra onwards, this other kind of exegete appears to develop side by side with the former and to concentrate on Genesis and Exodus, the two books of the Bible that may be claimed to be most concerned in the Scriptures with the nature of divine creation and with the condition of the human mind on its allegorical journey to salvation not in the face of its sins but in terms of that creation. Here, it is not so much saving one's soul, as coming into contact with the ultimate reality of eternity that counts in the short run of human life. In *Essayes in Divinity,* Donne is one of these exegetes, as are so many of his most frequent authorities whom he quotes often, among them, the Jesuit Benedict Pererius whom Simpson mistakenly described as the most frequently quoted commentator in *Essayes,*[13] the fifteenth-century Spanish theologian Alonsus Tostatus,[14] the Neo-Platonic philosopher Pico della Mirandola,[15] the early sixteenth-century Venetian Franciscus Georgius (or Georgio, George or Zorgi),[16] Franciscus Patritius, the late sixteenth-century Italian commentator on the Chaldean oracles,[17] and the cabalists Peter Galatine, Johannes Reuchlin and Sextus Senensis.[18] There is not really an "unorthodox" aspect to Donne's interest in these disparate commentators on the Bible, as has been supposed,[19] because he was in the main current of the thought of his contemporaries and of his immediate intellectual ancestors.[20] These commentators do not fit easily into the orbit of the witty "Jack the poet" but they are fundamental to our understanding of the other, the "serious" Donne. *Essayes* seems "curious" only if references to what are to us occult commentators like Georgius and della Mirandola and the Chaldean oracles appear to be esoteric in the early seventeenth century, when in fact the question of the oracles, for example, was as old as Augustine in *De Civitate Dei* X.27.21.

The task of Donne and the exegetes in this second prong of exegetical influence might be described as an effort to seek a rapprochement with the eternal. There is an attempt that makes itself felt above others to get closer in time to what informs it in infinity. Pico della Mirandola makes this attempt in *Heptaplum De Septiformi Sex Dierium Geneseos Enarratione of 1489,* by the obvious infusion of Neo-Platonism into the values that he attributes to the different levels of

meaning in the Bible.[22] Johannes Reuchlin tries to make this rapprochement by using Jewish and Christian cabalistic principles to explain the meaning of eternity and creation in the early verses of Genesis.[23] Alonsus Tostatus, whose ideas Donne shares, makes a brilliant distinction between the Jewish word "beresith" meaning the beginning of time as a dimension that contrasts with eternity, and the word's translation into the Greek word "genesis" meaning the Creation as universe.[24] It is this former thread of ideas that Donne follows. He notes Tostastus' distinction between the Jewish "beresith" as the beginning of time, and the Greek "genesis" as creation, and it is the argument of time and eternity that he follows. How much so is evident in several of the major parts into which his sections of Genesis and Exodus in *Essayes* are divided. These include "Of the Name of God" and "Elohim" in the Genesis section, and "Diversity of Names" and "Of Number" in the Exodus section. These parts of Donne's work find their meanings in his exegesis in the first verse of Genesis about the beginning of time, and of the first verse of Exodus about the names of Jacob's exiled descendants. The verses are the occasion for Donne's analysis, first, of the beginning of time, second, of the names attributable to God in the world of time insofar as they are expressions of the eternal. The eternal appears in the world of time expressed in a number of Jewish names for divinity, that is, principally as Elohim and Adonai.[25] Names are of course words, and words have meanings, and the meaning of the names and words in question are all somehow configurations of the manner in which the eternal, in the shape of one, two or three divine persons, makes itself evident in language; and, as the eternal manifests itself in language, so it disposes of itself in time. Here, *Essayes in Divinity* is related to *Pseudo-Martyr.* For, at the end of *Pseudo-Martyr,* political states themselves in Donne's argument are the temporary configurations of the more important spiritual levels of meaning that inhabit them. There can exist as many political states as there are tribes of humans who create them by mutual consent, but the purpose of each state is to aggrandize itself in no greater measure than to reflect the divine governor whom, for a brief moment of history, the state and its king represent.

As political states in *Pseudo-Martyr,* and as words and names in *Essayes in Divinity* as well, are for Donne the transparent figures of the eternal, he does not appear to be conducting a flight from medievalism in either work. Nor does he seem to be suffering from a dissociation of sensibility. These propositions are arguable only if we ignore the books that Donne read and the currents of contemporary thought that he investigated, or else only if we are trying to spell out a manifesto for poetry early in the twentieth century. Donne's Renaissance humanism is the source of his sensibility, and his own humanity, troubled and contradictory as it may be, is the vehicle of its expression.

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Notes

1. John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr,* ed. with intro. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), "Introduction," p. liii. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

2. John Donne, *Essayes in Divinity* (London, 1651), pp. 1, 81. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

3. "Introduction," *Pseudo-Martyr,* pp. xxxii, xxxiii, *passim.*

4. Severinus Binius, *Concilia Generalia et Provincialia, quaecunque reperire potuerunt: item epistolae decretales, Et Romanor. Pontific. Vitae* (Cologne, 1606); *Disputationes Roberto Bellarmini Politiani, Sociatatis Jesu, De Controversiis Christianae Fidei, adversus huius temporis haereticos,* 3 Vols. (Ingolstadt, 1590-93); and, *Annales Ecclesiastici Auctori Caesare Baronio sorano Ex Congreget. Oratorii,* 12 Vols. in 7 (Cologne, 1601-1608).

5. Alexander the Great's letter is cited in Saint Cyprian of Carthage's *De Idolorum Vanitate Liber* (247), ed. Erasmus (Basel, 1530), pp. 174-175; Saint Augustine, *De Civitate Dei, XIL 10, Opera Omnia,* 11 Vols. (Paris, 1679-1700), Vol. VII, Col. 496, or, *Fathers of the Church Series,* Vol. 14 (Washington, 1952), p. 26; Cicero, *De Divinatione, Opera,* 2 Vols. (Lyons, 1577-1578), Tome 4, Vol. II, p. 293; for both Cicero and the Chaldeans, and for the Egyptians, Johannes Reuchlin, *De Verbo Mirtfico* (Lyons, 1552), p. 130, as well as for the Chaldeans and Egyptians, Benedict Pererius, *Commentariorum et Disputationum in Genesim Continentes Historiam Mosis ab Exodio Mundi* (Cologne, 1606), Book I, Nos. 29-34, and Otto Heurnius, *Epitome Biblica, vel Summarium Operum* (Wittenberg, 1607-08), Tome 3, Vol. IV, Cols. 1396-1397; Richard Willis, *The History of Travayls in the West and East Indies* (London, 1577), p. 237, and Gerard Mercator, *Atlas Containing his Cosmographicall Description ... of the World,* trans. W.W. Generosus (London, 1535), Cols. 864-865, *passim;* William Warner, *Albions England. A Continued Historie of the same Kin gdome, from the Originals of the first Inhabitants* (London, 1602), "The Fifteenth Booke," 1.12; and Mercator's *Chronologia. Hoc est Tempororum Demonstratio Exactissima, Ab Initio mundi, usque ad annum Domini M.D.LXVIII et Observationibus astronomicis temporum, sacris quoque Bibliis* (Cologne, 1569), Sigs. *lr-*5v.

6. Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), pp. 222-223, *passim.*

7. John Donne, *The Poems,* ed. Herbert J.C. Grierson, 2 Vols. (1912). (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), Vol. I, pp. 265-266.

8. Anthony Raspa, *The Emotive Image: Jesuit Poetics in the English Renaissance* (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1983), pp. 20, 22.

9. Francis Bacon, *Of the proficience and advancement of Learning, divine and humane* (London, 1605), pp. 25-26.

10. In the late second century, Quintus Septimus Tertullian; the perhaps seventh-century B. C. Persian mystic Zoroaster and the Chaldean oracles, in the early fourth-century Eusebius of Caesarea's *Chronicorum Canonum omnimodae historiae* (Lyons, 1606), p. *57,* and in Franciscus Patritius' *Nova de Universis Philosophia, Magna Philosophia hoc est ... Summi Philosophia Zoroaster* of 1593 (Venice), p. 35; Hermes Trismegistus, in Pererius' *Commentariorum* (1606), "Prefatio," p. 2, Col. A, and Patritius' *Nova de Universis Philosophia,* p. 27; cabalism, in Archangelus of Burgonova's *Cabalistorum Dogmata* (Basel, 1587), pp. 760-762, and his *Apologia ... pro defensione doctrinae Cabalae* (Bologne, 1564) (Basel, 1600), p. 34, and in Johannes Reuchlin's *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517) (Frankfurt, 1602), *passim,* with references — among many others — in *Essayes,* on pp. 12, 17, 41; 26, 33, 147; 17, 19 59; 14-15, 21, 103, 211; 8, 18-19, 44; 33.

11. Nicholas de Lyra, *Biblia Sacra cum Glossis Interlinarii et Ordinaria,* 7 Vols. (Lyons, 1545).

12. For Mercator, see note *5;* Henry Bunting, *Chonologia Catholica* (Magdeburg, 1608).

13. John Donne, *Essays in Divinity,* ed. E.M. Simpson, "Sources" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 101.

14. Alonso Tostato, *Commentaria in Genesim, Opera Omnia,* 13 Vols. (Cologne, 1613), Vol. I.

15. Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaphus, Opera Quae Extant Omnia* (Basel, 1601).

16. Franciscus Georgius (Georgio, George, Zorgi or Giorgio), *In Scripturam Sacram, Et Philosophos, tria millia Problemata Addita sunt in calce libri Theologica correctiones* (Paris, *1575);* and *De Harmonia Mundi* (Paris, 1545).

17. Franciscus Patritius (Francesco Patrizzi), *Nova de Universis Philosophia,* in *Magna Philosophia hoc est ... Summi Philosophi Zoroaster* (Venice, 1593).

18 Peter Colonna of Galatine (Petrus Galatinus), *De Arcanis Catholicae Veritatis ...* Quibus *Pleraque Religionis Christianae Capita Contra Iudaes, Tam Ex Scripturas Veteris Testamenti authenticis, quam ex Talmudicorum commentariis conflrmare et illustrare conatus est* (1516) (Frankfurt, 1602); Johannes Reuchlin, *Liber De Verbo Mirifico* (1494) (Lyons, 1552), and *De Arte Cabalistica* (1517) (Frankfurt, 1602); and Sextus Senensis (Sixtus of Siena), *Bibliotheca Sancta* (1566) (Paris, 1610).

19. Simpson, "Introduction," Donne's *Essays in Divinity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. x.

20. Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 9-10.

21. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei, XII, Opera Omnia* (1679-1700), VII.

22. Mirandola, *Heptaplus* (1602), particularly the "Expositio Primae Dictionis, Id est in Principio" at the end; *Essayes,* pp. 14, 2 1-22.

23. Reuchlin, *De Verbo Mirifico* 1,6 (1494) (Lyons, 1552), p. 49, and *De Arte*

*Cabalistica* (1602), Col. 744; *Essayes,* pp. 47, 203.

24. Tostatus, *Commentaria in Genesim, Opera Omnia,* Vol. I, p. 64; *Essayes,* p. 21.

25. *Essayes,* pp. 49-5 1, with their references to Galatine's *De Arcanis* (1602), II. 10, Col. 76; de Lyra, *Contra Iudaeos,* in *Biblia Sacra,* III, Folio 275, Section H; John Calvin, *Upon the first booke of Moses called Genesis,* trans. Thomas Tymme (London, 1578), p. 26, and David Pareus, *Calvinus Iudaizans* (1594), *Operum* (Wittenberg, 1607), Vol. I, Tome II, Col. 639, among others.