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Introduction: *The Poetry of Meditation* and the Aesthetics of Devotional Intention

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"Poetical devotion," avers Dr. Johnson in the *Life of Waller*, "cannot often please .... Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer."[1] Dr. Johnson's dismissive attitude toward devotional poetry cannot be said to have prevailed among academic literary critics in the middle of the twentieth century, but neither can it be said to have been decisively refuted. It was rather ignored; university professors studied devotional poetry and wrote about it, but there was little effort to justify it in literary terms—to show it as comparable in aesthetic interest with poetry dealing with more conventional topics. One of the great merits of Louis Martz's *The Poetry of Meditation*,[2] then, is that it provided a means of thinking about devotional poetry in the same aesthetic terms as other genres of poetry without ignoring its particular subject. If Dr. Johnson thought that religion was too high for poetry, the danger in our modern secular age was to regard it as too peculiar—as a theme to be set off in brackets apart from the ordinary life of mortals. By discovering in the formal, rational method of prayer called meditation a motive as well as a structure for the poetry of devotion, Martz was able to show that religion could be as vibrant and engaging a subject for literary representation as any other facet of human experience. Moreover, *The Poetry of Meditation* provided a model of academic

[1] *Lives of the Poets*, intro. L. Archer-Hind (London: J.M. Dent, 1925), I, 173.

[2] Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954; rev. ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1962).

literary inquiry for the next three decades. Martz's investigations into meditative handbooks of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exemplify the finest scholarship of historical criticism, and his application of his historical discoveries to the style and structure of particular poems deftly deploys the protocols of New Critical formal analysis. *The Poetry of Meditation* thus staked out a wide area for further scholarly research and discussion and furnished a demonstration of how such scholarship might best be carried out by invoking the best elements of the available critical methods.

In the preface to the second edition of *The Poetry of Meditation*, Martz acknowledges that he "placed a heavy emphasis upon the practice of meditation according to the 'three powers of the soul', because we find here the central, indispensable action of the Art of Meditation. From that center all other aspects of meditative action flow."[3] The three powers, or faculties, of the soul are crucial because they anchor meditation in concrete human experience. "Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer" is not in so high a state as to cease being a man, dependent upon human means of action and knowledge. The ancient Christian practice of meditation according to the natural attributes of the soul, especially as revitalized in the sixteenth century by the *Ejercicios Espirituales* of San Ignacio de Loyola, offers a model both for the functioning of the mind and for its way of confronting God. Notwithstanding the exemplary piety of Dr. Johnson, "poetical devotion" often treats the anger and anguish, the doubt and despair of the Christian as well as his faith and exaltation. By focusing attention on the faculties of the rational soul—on the human avenues of approaching and apprehending God—meditation opens a myriad of topics for the Christian poet.

Most surprising as well as most important, Martz's investigation of the influence of Christian meditation on the religious poetry of the Renaissance constructs a bridge not only to contemporaneous secular poetry, but also to a broadly meditative poetry of later centuries. In the concluding chapter, "The Meditative Poem," *The Poetry of Meditation* broadens the perspective on its subject as a literary form:

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[3]Ibid., p. xxiii.

> On the other hand, it is true that the term "meditation" designates a process of the mind, rather than a particular subject-matter: a full definition of the meditative poem, it seems, should be broad enough to include certain poems that are not concerned with the religious or the supernatural, in our usual sense of those words. The genre of meditative poetry should be broad enough to include some of the Odes of Keats or the later poetry of Wallace Stevens, as well as the unorthodox, though still religious, poetry of a Yeats or a Wordsworth or an Emily Dickinson. It must include "The poem of the mind in the act of finding /What will suffice."[4]

By showing a structural and generic similarity between Christian poems of the seventeenth-century and secular, or at least heterodox, poems of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Martz establishes a continuity of fundamental interest and concern among divergent ways of approaching reality. It is precisely the aesthetic attributes of the poetry—what makes it literature as such—that enables a continuing conversation across generational and what we are now pleased to call "ideological" divides.

It is of no small significance, then, that Martz is quoting here the first two lines of Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry," for what *The Poetry of Meditation* shows is that, taken as a piece of history, Stevens' poem is not altogether accurate. The poem continues:

> It has not always had
> To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
> Was in the script.
> Then the theatre was changed
> To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
>
> It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
> It has to face the men of the time and to meet
> The women of the time. It has to think about war
> And it has to find what will suffice.[5]

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[4]Ibid., p. 324.

[5]Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), pp. 218-19.

By placing what was called "Metaphysical poetry" in the context of meditation and showing that the handbooks of meditation were an important part of the lives of ordinary Englishman during the reigns of Elizabeth, James, and Charles, Martz demonstrated that poets like George Herbert and Richard Crashaw were able "to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time" in which they lived. "Of Modern Poetry" appeared in the 1942 volume *Parts of a World*, and Stevens was doubtless thinking of the challenges of writing poetry in the wake of the great Depression at the onset of World War II. But one of Martz's foundational meditative poets, Robert Southwell, was hanged, drawn, and quartered on Tyburn Hill; John Donne professed to "have beene ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stocke and raced, as I believe, no family, (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches,) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of the Romane Doctrine, then it hath done";[6] and Henry Vaughan lived through civil war and the persecution of his family and friends as well as the untimely death of his brother. In meditation, in the construction of an interior drama engaging the faculties of the human mind with the object of its bewilderment and terror, Martz discovered a common formal paradigm for poets of different outlooks and eras.

The Poetry of Meditation began according to its author's testimony "in an effort to discover precedents for the unusual construction of John Donne's *Anniversaries*,"[7] which, in addition to their novel structure, also offer an equivocal content in a curious poetic borderland with elements of praise, lamentation, devotion, and satire marshaled together for the occasion of a dead girl's remembrance. Once the nettle of ambiguity is grasped in the *Anniversaries*, it becomes easy to see it cutting across the sacred/secular divide in any number of Donne's poems. Martz was thus able to serve as a mediator in quarrels over such poems as "The Extasie," "The Funerall," and, above all, "A nocturnall upon St. Lucies day," which baffle all one-sided interpretations attempting to reduce them to profane cynicism or to

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[6] *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 8.

[7] *Poetry of Meditation*, p. xi.

elevate them to unclouded spiritual transcendence.[8] By the same token, the explicitly religious poems, the Holy Sonnets for instance, can hardly be said to have "repeated what / Was in the script" in Stevens' phrase. Although Martz points out numerous parallels between the formal structure of meditation and the argument of particular sonnets, he also notes that it is the very nature of meditation to create an intense, dramatic immediacy that challenges the boundaries of any "scene" that "was set."[9] And once the boundaries of the sacred and profane are blurred, then the transition from one historical period to another, despite conflicting visions of ultimate reality, becomes a valuable way of seeing familiar poetry in a new light. With the notion of meditative structure at one's disposal, especially of colloquy and composition of place, these lines that Martz quotes from Yeats's "The Tower" assume a new and revealing profile:

> I pace upon the battlements and stare
> On the foundations of a house, or where
> Tree, like sooty finger, starts from the earth,
> And send imagination forth
> Under the day's declining beam, and call
> Images and memories
> From ruin or from ancient trees,
> For I would ask a question of them all.[10]

In quoting this poem, Martz concedes that Yeats "renounced Christianity as he knew it," but insists on a parallel in the method of meditation. We may observe, in addition, that what Yeats asks "From ruin or from ancient trees" is what Donne or Herbert asks of God. The conversation among the poets and their readers continues down through the centuries because they are asking the same questions and even seeking, at least in some measure, the same answers—only from different sources. Hence it is precisely the form of imaginative inquiry

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[8]Ibid., pp. 212-16.

[9]E.g., ibid., pp. 50-51, for the remarks on "Spit in my face you Jewes" and "At the round earths imagin'd corners."

[10]Quoted ibid., p. 326. See *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (def. ed., New York: MacMillan, 1956), pp. 192-93.

that defines the nature of aesthetic experience, which makes possible communication between the living and the dead.

Academic scholarship finally finds its *raison d'être* in teaching. The powerful pedagogical impact of *The Poetry of Meditation* may be illustrated by considering the anthology in which it resulted: *The Meditative Poem* (1963), which later became the first volume of *The Anchor Anthology of Seventeenth Century Verse* (1969), subsequently reprinted by Norton. In the introduction to this volume, Martz offers a reading of Donne's "Hymn to God my God, in my sicknesse" as an illustration of the "convergence of the arts" of poetry and meditation. The reading offers a third art to the "convergence"—the art of literary criticism. Martz frames his analysis of Donne's "Hymn" by an exposition of Edward Dawson's "The Practical Methode of Meditation" (1614), with the text of this condensed version of Ignatian exercises provided as an appendix to the anthology. The interpretation thus begins with a reconstruction of the historical context in a twofold manner: "The Practical Methode" furnishes not only a principle of formal structure, but also, as a work aimed mainly at a persecuted recusant minority, a suggestion of the origin of Donne's poem in a setting of religious strife and controversy. Martz does not press this point: although the poet's own experience as a member of this minority who abandoned it undoubtedly contributes to the power of his devotional verse, the crucial point is the transformation of personal experience into an aesthetic experience to which an alert reader with a minimum awareness of this context may instinctively respond. The convergence of meditative and poetic technique is, then, what makes the "Hymn" more than just an historical document or an abstract verbal configuration. As Martz proceeds through his explication of the tightly constructed and wittily devised poem, he ties each logically connected part to an element of meditation that bespeaks the sufferings and aspirations of actual, historical persons. "The poem, then, reveals in miniature," he concludes, "all the essential components of a full religious meditation: preparation, composition, discourse (in the old sense of analytic reasoning), and colloquy; or, to use other terms of the time, memory, understanding, and will, the three powers of the soul which are unified in the process of meditation, forming an interior trinity that represents an image,

although defaced, of the greater Trinity."[11] The reminder of poem's provenance in a particular moment that arises out of Martz's historical scholarship makes it a portal into that time and place; the careful unfolding of style and structure that reveals its kinship to the poetic achievements of a Yeats or a Stevens establishes the dimension of aesthetic satisfaction that unites divergent ages and cultures and discloses their common humanity.

At the close of the introduction to this anthology, Martz observes that Donne actually calls one of his Holy Sonnets ("Wilt thou love God, as he thee!") "this wholesome meditation." "But, for the most part," he adds, "it is better to speak of meditative poems, that is to say, poems in which some aspects of the meditative art may be discerned."[12] In his judicious blend of historical scholarship and New Critical explication, Martz does not allow the historical context to drive the work of art. Donne's Holy Sonnets and his hymns are as much poems as the love lyrics of the *Songs & Sonets* or the elegies. When he sequestered "poetical devotion" from other forms of literature, confining religious poetry to an ironclad set of doctrinal norms, Dr. Johnson dealt with it much as cultural materialism deals with all literature: as the determined product of ideological discourse. Now it is true that most men and women will acknowledge some things as ultimately more important than literature or any other art: their political position or moral vision, their family or their friends or their faith. But this does not mean that works of literature must be sliced up to fit a personal or ideological bed of Procrustes: we must take literature, as well as life, as we find it and judge it according to such standards as compel our allegiance. Moreover, while it is true that works of literature emerge from a complex set of political, religious, cultural, economic, and social matrices—the list of adjectives could be extended—literary works of art are not mere products. Poems produce culture as much as they are produced by culture; at least this is true of those we choose to remember. Donne constructs literary critics more surely than they construct him. The great merit of *The Poetry of Meditation*, whose author we remember and celebrate in this volume of

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[11]"Introduction," *The Anchor Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse*, Vol. I, ed. Louis L. Martz (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. xxxv.

[12]Ibid., p. xliii.

the *John Donne Journal*, is the subtlety and discretion with which it maintains the crucial balance between text and context, thus highlighting the paradoxical nature of poetry, which is both the creature of its age and voice of the ages.

Although it was his watershed book, *The Poetry of Meditation* was by no means Martz's only significant scholarly publication. It was followed up by *The Paradise Within* (1964) and *The Wit of Love* (1969), which also dealt with various seventeenth-century poets. *Poet of Exile* (1980) is one of the finest comprehensive treatments of Milton's poetry, and ranging back toward the beginning of the Renaissance, Martz collaborated in the massive Yale edition of the *Works* of St. Thomas More and added an insightful monograph on the great humanist, *Thomas More: The Search for the Inner Man* (1990). *From Renaissance to Baroque* (1991) collects many—but not all—of his additional essays on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature, while *The Poem of the Mind* (1966) deals with poets from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. And of course all this was accomplished by a man whose first book (1942) was on the fiction of Tobias Smollet ("I'm a refugee from the eighteenth century," Martz once told me) and wrote his last book (1998)on modern British and American Poetry. This remarkable publication record is, however, only part of the story: there is no record of his kindness and encouragement to younger scholars, but Tom Hester and I are very glad that he was the first of the eminent scholars who endorsed the idea of the *John Donne Journal* and signed on to the editorial board in 1982.

The essays that follow pay tribute to Louis Martz not by discussing his achievement—indeed, there are few direct references to him—but rather by extending and elaborating it. Judith Anderson begins with an intricately detailed examination of the figurative language of John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Tracing his rhetoric to its theological roots in the doctrinal and polemical works of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, Anderson sets out to enhance our understanding of Donne's tropes by reminding us that we must understand them in terms of his era before we can grasp them for ourselves. Even as Martz rendered Donne's *Anniversaries* more comprehensible to modern readers by grounding them in the context of Renaissance meditative strategies, so Anderson clarifies the dense prose of the *Devotions* by

unpacking the theological complexities embedded in Donne's figures. Similarly, the next two essays by Annabel Patterson and Dayton Haskin undertake a rehabilitation of "A Litany"—"an absurdly neglected poem," in Patterson's trenchant phrase—on a basis not unlike Martz's rehabilitation of the *Anniversaries*. Both Patterson and Haskin require us to divest our minds of routine responses and unwarranted assumptions in reading "A Litany," just as *The Poetry of Meditation* forced us to consider the *Anniversaries* from a wholly new perspective. The essays by Anderson, Patterson, and Haskin were all first presented at the 2002 meeting of the John Donne Society, an organization that has striven to sustain the avid scholarly interest in seventeenth-century literature to which Louis Martz contributed so much. In the final essay on Donne, Paul Stanwood takes up the contrast between Donne's poetry and that of his younger contemporary, George Herbert, a theme that preoccupied Martz throughout his career.

Another distinctive feature of his scholarly career was the breadth of his interests, and this range is reflected in the four essays that conclude this volume. Martz held an abiding interest in modern poetry, especially, as we have noted, insofar as it recalls the intensely probing wit of seventeenth-century devotional poetry. Jonathan Post's investigation of the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop in relation to the meditative tradition, and Robert Shaw's consideration of Martz's treatment of Theodore Roethke as a meditative poet both share and extend this interest. Donald Friedman offers a subtle and far-reaching discussion of Thomas Carew's ambiguous relation to the Caroline court milieu, which brings to mind Martz's fascination with the Mannerist overtones of Carew's poetry; and A. Sidney Gottlieb calls our attention to the generally neglected poetry of An Collins, much as Louis Martz was among the first to direct our gaze to such poets as Robert Southwell and William Alabaster.

Louis L. Martz enjoyed a long life and a distinguished scholarly career of more than fifty years. As we mourn his loss, let us also rejoice in the rich legacy that he bequeathed to us. His numerous books and essays remain to instruct future generations of scholars and to furnish a model for academic scholarship at its finest. He has set a standard to which everyone engaged in the enterprise may aspire and has left us the foundation for much further investigation—as the essays

published here attest. We cannot, however, recover those personal qualities from which everyone who knew him benefited: his kindness, his wisdom, his learning, and his good cheer and good humor. It remains for those of us who were his students and colleagues to strive to practice these virtues as much as possible among our own colleagues and students. The editors of the *John Donne Journal*, along with guest editor Jonathan Post, earnestly hope that the essays published here provide a fitting monument to the memory of Louis L. Martz, and that anyone who reads them will be moved to emulation of this great scholar and teacher and "Might thence a new concoction take, / And part farre purer then he came."[13]

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[13]A shorter version of this introduction was presented at a session honoring the memory of Louis Martz at the South Central Renaissance Conference in New Orleans, 7 March 2003.