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A Man is to Himself a Dioclesian: Donne's Rectified Litany

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John Donne's *A Litany* is an absurdly neglected poem. We know more about when it was written and why than is the case for any other poem in his canon. It contains more information about his theology in the years after his conversion but before his decision to take orders than any other document. It is one of the most carefully planned, most intellectual exercises in the history of early modern devotional poetry, and almost every stanza demands thoughtful scrutiny. It contains, if we look closely, more personal revelations than do the Holy Sonnets or *La Corona,* and it is more daring an adaptation than are they of established cultural or devotional forms. And yet it has been relegated to the back burner of Donne studies, if not altogether ignored. Of course there are exceptions to this blanket statement, and Dayton Haskin's paper[1] will speak to them. There have been Protestant and Jesuit claimants; but it is really remarkable that Louis Martz, the inspiration for so much work on devotional poetry, and our honoree, paid it no attention,[2] despite the fact that Donne himself calls the poem, as we shall see, a "meditation in verse." Nor did John Carey give it more than a passing glance, despite the fact that it is a primary source of information about what Carey calls Donne's apostasy.[3] Theresa DiPasquale gives it half a page, compared to 30 for

[1]Our two papers, both presented in the final panel at the John Donne Conference 2002, have really been written in collaboration. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dayton for all his generous assistance.

[2]In his pioneering work, *The Poetry of Meditation*, (New Haven, 1954).

[3]John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, (London, 1981).

La Corona,[4] and Arthur Marotti subordinates its powerful devotional activity to his category of social, self-promoting coterie poetry.[5] One could speculate why this happened, in terms of the history of Donne studies in the twentieth century, with its preference for the love poems; in terms of pedagogic practice (the poem is too long to be taught successfully in a single session, whereas the Holy Sonnets are undergraduate fodder); and in terms of taste (*The Litany* is too liturgical for social comfort, too cerebral—Donne himself would call it "slippery"—for easy exegetical satisfaction), and completely devoid of sex.

Let me now expand on the above challenges. First, we know more about when the *Litany* was written and why than is the case for any other poem in Donne's canon. Sometime in 1608 (three years after the Gunpowder Plot and two before the writing of *Pseudo-Martyr*), Donne wrote to his good friend Sir Henry Goodyer about what he had been doing in his recent and extremely painful illness:

> Since my imprisonment in my bed, I have made a meditation in verse, which I call a a Litany; the word you know imports no other than supplication, but all Churches have one forme of supplication, by that name.

Donne then mentions two medieval precedents written by monks, which were approved by Pope Nicholas V, and authorized for public use. But his, he says, is intended for a different audience:

> mine is for lesser Chappels, which are my friends . . . . That by which it will deserve best acceptation, is, That neither the Roman Church need call it defective, because it abhors not the particular mention of the blessed Triumphers in heaven; nor the Reformed can discreetly accuse it, of attributing more than a rectified devotion ought to doe.

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[4]Theresa DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh, 1999).

[5]Arthur Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison, 1986), pp.248-50.

This is all of the letter that is quoted by Helen Gardner, in her edition of the *Divine Poems*,[6] and by Barbara Lewalski, in her argument that this is an exercise in Protestant poetics.[7]

But there is a good deal more in the letter to which we must now pay attention. In the first place, it opens up a textual mystery. Donne says that he has not the energy to copy out the poem for Goodyer at this moment, because it consists of "some 30 staves of 9 lines," figures we might suspect of numerological significance. In fact, the poem that has come down to us has merely 28 stanzas, raising the extremely interesting question of what supplications Donne had originally included that he decided later to omit. Second, the letter proceeds to lament the case of Hugh Broughton, "who is gone to the Roman side." He had been under pressure from an agent of Cardinal Baronius to "accept a stipend, onely to serve the Christian Churches in controversies with the Jews," and Donne hopes that that is all that the rumor implies. "I hope he is not otherwise departed from us," he writes,

> because, though he be a man of many distempers, yet when he shall come to eat assured bread, and to be removed from partialities, to which want drove him . . . you shall see that in the course of opposing the Jews, he will produce worthy things: and our Church will perchance blush to have lost a Souldier fit for that great battell; and to cherish onely those single Duellisms, between Rome and England, or that more single, and almost self-homicide, between the unconformed Ministers and Bishops.[8]

To explicate this rather difficult passage, we must recognize that Donne is distinguishing between the "great battell" between Christians and non-Christians, and the various layers of disagreement between the different Christian sects and churches. The use of the phrase "our Church" is therefore somewhat ambiguous. It could be the Anglican church of Jacobean England; or it could be some new

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[6]Helen Gardner, *The Divine Poems of John Donne* (Oxford, 1978), p. 81.

[7]Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, 1979), p. 260.

[8]Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (London, 1651), pp. 32-34.

compound which would match the litany he has just composed, one in which both the Roman Church and the Reformed could find common beliefs and interests. I would be prepared to argue that that was his position in 1608/9, and became so again in the late 1620s. After fifteen years in the service of King James, a service which entailed anti-Catholic polemic in support of the king's own, Donne would have to adapt his views once again, to accommodate a king who had married a Catholic princess. There were certainly moments when the problem of where *he* was going to eat "assured bread" would involve him in "partialities."

Moreover, nowhere in this letter (pace Lewalski) does Donne specify that the poem is intended for private devotion only. The idea of a group audience—not potential patrons, but rather Donne and those of his friends who, like Goodyer, have been experiencing confessional tension and uncertainty—is itself something of a middle ground between the public and the private. We thus learn from Donne himself his motives for attempting to adapt and appropriate a form, a litany, so well known that the changes he made in it would be immediately of significance. Donne's own formula, of not "abhorring" "particular mention" of the "blessed Triumphers in Heaven," while at the same time not offending anyone's ideas of what a "rectified devotion" might attend to, is an important clue to his strategy; but a clue is all that it is. In order to understand the brilliance of his strategy, we need to be clear what the two alternatives were he was mediating between.

Broadly speaking, a litany is a form of responsive petition used in public liturgical services. As a mode of public prayer, the litany first entered Christendom in Syria during the fourth century. After the persecutions of the early Christian church, public devotions became common, and processions called "litaniae" were frequently held. They were sometimes particularly invoked in the case of calamities. The "Litania Minor" was introduced in 477 by St. Mamertus, Bishop of Vienne, on account of the earthquakes then prevalent. In 590, when a pestilence caused by an overflow of the Tiber was ravaging Rome, Gregory the Great commanded the "Septiformis" litany. So many special forms of litany developed during the Middle Ages that in 1601, by decree of the Inquisition, Pope Clement VIII forbade the publication of any litany except that of all Saints and that of Loreto.

As the Sarum litany for Rogation Monday, the litany of the Saints is now the standard form for Roman Catholic use. Its most striking feature, not surprisingly, is the long list of saints mentioned by name, precisely that which Donne would in 1612 identify as "mis-devotion" at the end of the *Second Anniversary*. As he put it in that poem, from his vantage point in France, "mis-devotion frames/A thousand praiers to saints, whose very names/The ancient Church knew not, Heaven knowes not yet" (ll.511-13). The prayers for deliverance, which form a central section of a litany, derived from the contexts of disasters for which the form was invented, but the disasters appealed against gradually became regulated and, we might almost say, became norms. But also essential to the *form*, the liturgical model, were the following: the mere invocation or naming of those in heaven; the communal aspect of the ritual; the antiphonal structure of each appeal; the use of Latin (of course); and the consequent passivity and mindlessness of the ritual in so far as the congregation was concerned. In order to follow the proceedings, not a jot of intellectual activity was required.

With the coming of the English Reformation, even under Henry VIII, a new form of litany was deemed a necessity. In 1544 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer composed a hybrid form suitable to a church whose head was not the pope, but the king. Cranmer consulted a variety of sources, including Sarum, a medieval litany from Germany revised by Luther, a German litany drawn up in 1543 by Melanchthon and Martin Bucer, the litany in Marshall's Primer of 1535, and even certain Greek Orthodox litanies. What is most striking about Cranmer's litany is how closely it hewed to the old church's model. Latin, of course, was discarded in favor of the vernacular. But Cranmer retained the traditional structure of four (some say five) sections: Invocations, or addresses to the three persons of the Trinity, each followed by a prayer for mercy (originally *miserere nobis*) and invocations addressed to all those who, being already in heaven, might act as mediators, asking them to intercede on our behalf (originally *ora pro nobis*); Deprecations, prayers for deliverance from various kinds of evil, each followed by the response, "Good Lord, deliver us," (originally *libera nos, Domine*); Suffrages, or intercessory prayers for all sorts and conditions of men, each followed by the response "We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord," (originally *te rogamus, audi nos*), and closing with the *Agnus Dei*, the *Kyrie Eleison* and other prayers. Cranmer, however,

replaced all the specifically named saints and worthies of the church with general categories, naming only the Virgin Mary; grouped the deprecations into clusters with a single response; and greatly expanded the list of secular persons (the king, his family, the government) for whom, in a now national church, intercession was needed. On 18 October, 1544, according to William Harrison's *Chronologie*, the new litany was introduced:

> Upon the 18 of October, the Letany in thenglish toung is, by the kinges commaundement, song openly in Pawles at London; & commaundement geven that it should be song in the same toung thorow out all England. it was used in London, in some parish church, even sithens June in the yere expired; & the children of Pawles schole, whereof I was one at that time, inforced to buy those bookes, wherewith we went in generall procession, as it was then appointed, before the king went to Bullen [Boulogne].[9]

The comparative conservativism of Cranmer's Litany can be shown by the fact that its brusque reduction of "the blessed Triumphers in Heaven" into a short list: "All holy patriarkes, and Prophetes, Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors, & Virgins, and all the blessed company of heaven," was removed in the Edwardian prayerbook, and never replaced.

Donne based his own *Litany*, not, as was stated by James Wellington, on this Protestant and Erastian litany devised by Cranmer in 1544,[10] and absorbed into the books of common prayer under Edward and Elizabeth. Instead he began with the Catholic litany of the saints and its authorized list of petitions. He proceeded to work towards something unique—by a mixture of numerical omission and conceptual expansion. After invoking Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and, very cleverly, the Virgin Mary, he dropped every patriarch, saint, father of the church, martyr, confessor, virgin, etc. mentioned therein by name, and invoked them only under their general category. But for

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[9]For Cranmer's litany, see James E. Wellington, "The Litany in Cranmer and Donne," *Studies in Philology* 68 (1971) 177-99.

[10]Wellington, "The Litany in Cranmer and Donne," *Studies in Philology* 68 (1971), 177-99.

everything that he retained, he wrote a stanza *explaining* its devotional importance. This was his major personal contribution. Hence his claim that *his* Litany "abhors not the particular mention of the blessed Triumphers in heaven," "particular" referring to the definition he provides of these groups, and why we should remember them. When he writes stanzas on the Patriarchs, the Prophets, the Apostles, the Martyrs, the Confessors, the Virgins, and the Doctors, (whom Cranmer omitted) he goes back behind Cranmer to the Catholic Litany itself. He does not, however, include stanzas on the Holy Innocents, the Priests and Levites, the Monks and Hermits, or St.Mary Magdalen; unless (and here is a tempting suggestion), the last had originally received one of the two now missing stanzas.[11]

The stanza on the Virgin Mary must have given him pause. Her status in Protestant thought was not so diminished that he *could* not include her, but her efficacy as a mediator had been challenged. In *La Corona*, Donne had reduced the fifteen mysteries associated with the Virgin to seven focused on the life of Christ, in which she of course had to play her part, and have her own stanza. In the *Litany*, however, Donne actually gives the Virgin more agency than he did in the (presumed) earlier poem. In *La Corona*, the mystery is occluded by paradoxes ("Yea thou art now/Thy maker's maker, and thy father's mother") and the agency is Christ's, who "yields himself to lie/In prison, in thy womb." In the *Litany*, it is the "fair blessed Mother-maid,/Whose flesh redeem'd us," "unlock'd Paradise" "and disseiz'd sinne." These are strong claims; and Donne nails them down before the stanza is over by addressing directly the question of the Virgin's mediator status: "Nor can she sue/In vaine, who hath such titles unto you."

[11]There is no hard evidence for this hypothesis. As Donne would have known, however, poems about Mary Magdalene were already typical of English Catholic devotional verse, thanks to the influence of Robert Southwell. Donne had already evinced a provocative interest in Mary Magdalen in *The Relique* ("Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I / A something else thereby," and had written a sonnet *To the Lady Magdalen Herbert: of St. Mary Magdalen.*

Cranmer had omitted from his line-up the Doctors, the learned Fathers of the Church. Of course, Donne would include them.[12] In the Catholic hierarchy, they would have *preceded* the Virgins, but Donne makes them the last category of those deserving petition. This is not, as Gardner suggested, getting them in the wrong place, but rather in the right place, closer in ontological status to himself. They were his predecessors in the realm of scriptural exegesis, as distinct from saintly practice:

> Thy sacred Academie above
> Of Doctors, whose paines have unclasp'd, and taught
> Both bookes of life to us (for love
> To know thy Scriptures tells us, we are wrote
> In thy other booke) pray for us there
> That what they have misdone
> Or mis-said, wee to that may not adhere;
> Their zeale may be our sinne. Lord let us runne
> Meane waies, and call them stars, but not the Sunne. (Stanza 13)

The stanza is pure Donne, in its emphasis on the academic status of the Fathers in the great scheme of things, and in his acknowledgment of the Reformation debates about their reliability. "What they have misdone / Or mis-said" had been the subject of much Reformation scholarship. Donne himself wrote in a 1629 sermon that the Magdeburg Centuries, that huge ecclesiastical history, had devoted a chapter in every section *De naevis Patrum*, "to note the mistakings of the Fathers in every age,"[13] and defended that practice against

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[12]At least, he would include them here; in 1612, however, when he replicates the heavenly hierarchy in the *Second Anniversary* as the stages by which Elizabeth Drury will ascend to heaven, he omits the Doctors, along with the Confessors, so that the sequence will begin with the Virgin Mary, pass through Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs, and culminate, appropriately for *this* poem, in the Virgins.

[13]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley, 1953-62), 9:158-59. The passage is worth citing, since it illustrates how Donne later bent his thought to anti-Catholic polemic:

> Hence appeares the vanity and impertinency of that calumny, with which our adversaries of the Roman perswasion labour to oppresse us, That those points in

Catholic charges of irreverence. And instead of appealing to the Doctors to pray for their scholarly descendants, in the *ora pro nobis* formula, Donne suggests that the fathers of the Church themselves will move that "what they have misdone / Or mis-said" be not repeated, not adhered to. It is a more subtle formulation of how prayers work, in a state of better hindsight, connecting the past life of the church with the present. It consists with Donne's lifelong devotional emphasis on trying to get it right, rather than assuming certainty. But the most telling phrase in the stanza is the final appeal: "Lord, let us runne / Mean waies, and call them stars, but not the Sunne." Don't disregard the smaller light they shed, but don't depend on it either. Indeed, "Mean waies" could as it were be a subtitle for the *Litany*, another, more advanced version of the *via media*, which not only mediates between far right and far left on the confessional spectrum, but extends the idea of the mean into most aspects of ethical and religious conduct.

Thus when the formula changes from *ora pro nobis*[14] to *libera nos*, deliver us, Donne asks for delivery both "from thirst, or scorn, of

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> which we depart from them, cannot be well established, because therein we depart from the Fathers; As though there were no condemnation to them, that pretended a perpetuall adhering to the Fathers, nor salvation to them, who suspected any Father of any mistaking. And they have thought that one thing enough, to discredit, and blast, and annihilate that great and usefull labour, which the Centuriators, the Magdeburgenses, took in compiling the Ecclesiasticall Story, that in every age as they passe, those Authors have laid out a particular section, a particular Chapter *De naevis Patrum*, to note the mistakings of the Fathers in every age; This they thinke a criminall and a hainous thing, inough to discredit the whole worke; As though there were ever in any age, any Father, that mistook nothing, or that it were blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, to note such a mistaking.

[14]I must say I am at a loss to understand how Barbara Lewalski could write that Donne keeps to the "major structural divisions of the Litany of the Saints . . . but with Protestant care to avoid the *ora pro nobis* formula," (p. 260), though she does seem to acknowledge that he follows the "petitions for deliverance and for God's hearing, *Libera nos, Domine, Audi nos, Domine.*"

fame," (l. 153) and, more profoundly, "from being anxious, or secure,/Dead clods of sadnesse, or light squibs of mirth,/From thinking, that great courts immure/All, or no happinesse" (ll. 127-28). In stanza 18 the incarnation itself is conceived of as a compromise: "Deliver us for thy descent/Into the Virgin,whose wombe was a place/Of middle kind." And the story of the Nativity is a compromise between unworldliness and its opposite:

> . . . . through thy poore birth, where first thou
> Glorifiedest Povertie.
> And yet soone after riches did allow,
> By accepting Kings gifts in the Epiphanie,
> Deliver, and make us, to both waies free. (Stanza 18)

We can hear the ache of autobiography here, as also an echo of Donne's sympathy for Henry Broughton's state of "want," the condition that sent him over to Rome.

There are ten *ora pro nobis* stanzas, followed by nine "*libera nos*" stanzas, with stanza fourteen operating as a transition from one to the other, and a warning that prayers offered up on our behalf by those who have gone before may not be efficacious. The universal Quire "prayes ceaslesly," but the last two lines read:

> Heare this prayer Lord: O Lord deliver us
> From trusting in those prayers, though powr'd out thus.
> (ll. 125-26)

This is exquisitely rebarbative. The appeal of this last appeal is that appellation itself may be discounted, itself made not a certain basis for salvation, but merely an articulate sign of the wish to be saved.

Furthermore, if we look back through the "deliver us" section of Donne's *Litany*, we can see that he has so constructed it as to interrogate the very category of deliverance. The deliverances listed in the traditional litanies are from God's wrath, from sudden death, from the snares of the devil, from anger and hatred, from fornication, from lightning and tempest, from earthquakes, from plague, famine and war, and from everlasting death. But Donne's desired deliverances are almost all psychological or career-oriented. "From needing danger, to be good" (l. 136) is a much subtler appeal than from danger itself.

"From tempting Satan to tempt us" (l. 145) is more complicated than from the snares of the devil. "From being spies, to spies pervious," the conclusion of this same stanza (17) could take five minutes to understand. Stanza 21 begins conventionally enough with an appeal against the revolt of the senses, but it ends, famously, "When we are mov'd to seeme religious/Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us." It is true that stanza 22 includes an appeal for deliverance from plague, war, and heresy, "thy second deluge." But it begins, more memorably, with two dangers of far more local application:

> In Churches, when the'infirmity
> Of him which speakes, diminishes the Word,
> When Magistrates doe mis-apply
> To us, as we judge, lay or ghostly sword.

These are disasters we have to think about, and think about even whether we are correct in thinking we experience them. Did we judge correctly the misapplication of the civil and canon law in our case? And when the stanza ends by asking, "Deliver us from the sinister way," how would "sinister" apply back to the first two dangers?

After the "libera nos" section, which consists of nine stanzas, there follow six stanzas based on the "audi nos, Domine" formula. These proportions, ten, nine, six,[15] are Donne's own. They contrast significantly both with the Catholic litany, which is top heavy with its lists of saints, and with Cranmer's litany, which is weighted down at the end with the responsibilities of a national, Erastian church. Cranmer included petitions on behalf of the king, the queen, the prince, the privy council and the magistrates, a political instrumentalism which Donne's Christ-centred conclusion explicitly forgoes. Donne also omits all the specific requests that the traditional litany asks God to hear—requests for the peace and unity of the church, for preservation of the fruits of the earth, for the help for travellers or women in childbirth—and replaces them with, again, a more local set of problems, which are not quite, as Marotti suggested, the politics of the Jacobean state. Actually, Donne groups together, if

[15]Of course, it is possible that the original poem had eight stanzas in this section, thus producing the proportions, 10, 9, 8, while bringing the total to 30.

not a mismatched set of secular issues, at least a set of last thoughts, whose connections are not immediately obvious. Rather than appealing to be heard by the divine, as in a traditional litany, Donne focuses on the dangers of *human* hearing, on the dangers that come in by the ears. The appeal that we may "rectifie those Labyrinths aright" takes us back to that important phrase in the letter to Goodyer, "a rectified devotion." He prays that we be not rendered so cynical by hearing "bold wits jest at king's excess" (l. 223) as to imagine that one could equally lampoon God. He prays that we may learn to respond positively, constructively, when magistrates and preachers are clearly over-rigorous. He prays that learning and wit, the two forces that have made his litany what it is, are not and have not been misapplied. Thus his penultimate stanza contains, in very little, a negative poetics of devotional poetry. But there is perhaps a sense of relief, both on his part and the readers, when, in the very last stanza, he returns to the familiar formula, "Sonne of God heare us," and the wonderful phrase "O lambe of God," which is all that survives of the traditional *Agnus Dei* and the *Kyrie Eleison.*

Evidently, I have been speaking simultaneously to the third and fourth points with which I began, that the *Litany* is one of the most cerebral exercises in devotional poetry of the period, and that it also contains more personal revelations about Donne himself than any other poem. But the strain of personal revelation is *en passant,* in parenthesis, as it were. It is partly concealed by the play of personal pronouns. To be precise, the first-person singular, the voice that we associate with the holy sonnets and the late great hymns, appears in stanzas 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 9; this early cluster is intersected by the plural first person in Stanza 5, the most Catholic stanza, the invocation of the Virgin Mary, and then in 10, 11, and 13 to the end. In three stanzas only, 6, 7 and 12, singular and plural, the person and the group, intermingle. And who is the group? Not the nation, surely, as in Cranmer's litany; not a coterie of people bound together by the patron-client relationship; but the anxious community of Donne and his friends, wracked by, yet energized by, indecision about confessional choice.

But beyond this, and expressed in formal terms, lies Donne's most daring innovation in the sphere of litany-rewriting. What he has done, by writing stanzas in which the "I" and the "we" enter and depart, is

to challenge the basic distinction between clergy and laity, between minister and congregation, that is so emphatically displayed in the antiphonal structure of the Catholic litany, and preserved in the Protestant one. As Cranmer himself described the early sixteenth century practice, it was scarcely more democratic than Catholic usage:

> It is to be remembred, that that whiche is printed in blacke letters, is to be sayde or sunge of the priest with an audible voyce, that is to saye, so loude and playnely, that it be well be understand of the hearers, and that which is in the redde, is to be aunswered of the quere soberly and devoutly.

Thus it was the choir who were constrained to the passive and repetitive mode, if not to the *ora pro nobis, libera nos* and *audi nos* formulae, then in English to "pray for us," "deliver us," and "we beseech thee to hear us, good Lord." In Donne's *Litany*, on the other hand, the petition and the choral response to it have been merged, in a series of complex sentences. The mindlessness of simple repetition has been exchanged for thoughtful interrogation of all the different types of prayer, and the predicaments from which prayer might be thought to extricate us, as well as the predicaments it, and thought, themselves create.

I want to end this brief essay, however, by returning to my claim that *A Litany* tells us more about Donne himself, and especially about the compromises he made with himself about leaving the old religion, which were not exclusively, though they may have included them, compromises between belief and want. Consider the stanza on the Martyrs, easily passed over, perhaps, as a vestige of Catholic worship. But Donne included the Martyrs knowingly. A year or two later he would publish an extremely ferocious attack on current Catholic theories of martyrdom. The two acts are not incompatible. In *Pseudo-Martyr*, written for James I and published in 1610, Donne included an "Advertisement to the Reader" which begins to explain his predicament:

> And for my selfe, (because I have already received some light, that some of the Romane profession, having onely seene the Heads and Grounds handled in this Booke, have traduced me, as an impious and profane under-valuer of

> Martyrdome,) I most humbly beseech him, (till the reading of the Booke, may guide his Reason) to beleeve, that I have a just and Christianly estimation, and reverence, of that devout and acceptable Sacrifice of our lifes, for the glory of our blessed Saviour. For, as my fortune hath never beene so flattering nor abundant, as should make this present life sweet and precious to me, as I am a Moral man: so, as I am a Christian, I have been ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stocke and race, as, I beleeve, 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 Romane Doctrine, then it hath done.[16]

This piece of parenthetical autobiography, itself clogged by parentheses, admits to the reader Donne's descent from the family of Sir Thomas More, as a way of explaining the subtle distinctions his book would attempt to make between true and false martyrdoms. His stanza on the Martyrs is equally evasive, and equally revealing. Donne makes Christ himself the quintessential martyr, whose longing for death, both before and after his life on earth, produced a crowd of martyrs, from Abel onward, who constitute his "scattered mystic body." But having thus bracketed the question as to who the martyrs have been (could Abel be a martyr before there was a Christianity to die for? Can there, as John Foxe had monumentally asserted, have been Protestant martyrs?), Donne suddenly descends to the personal:

> .....Let their blood come
> To beg for us, a discreet patience
> Of death, or of worse life: for oh, to some
> Not to be martyrs, is a martyrdom.

This paradox (and that "oh") tells us as much about Donne's psychic condition in this decade as does the entire text of *Biathanatos.*

In conclusion, then, as we continue our communal struggle to understand John Donne and his endlessly shifting middle position, we cannot afford to ignore *A Litany.* In this intermediate period between *Satire III* and taking orders, Donne did not see the idea of the middle

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[16] *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and Kingston, 1993), p.8.

as the search for a quiet space of clarity between excesses and extremes. It was more like trying to walk on logs in water. Characteristically, between stanzas on the nativity and the passion, he focuses on the Agony in the Garden, "which is still th'agonie of pious wits,/Disputing what distorted thee,/And interrupted evennesse, with fits." The words can well be transferred to his own disposition, and his own project at this moment.

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