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Is There a Future for Donne's "Litany"?

Dayton Haskin

Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead.
—Blake, *Proverbs of Hell*

In 1997, just after Wallace Shawn's play, *The Designated Mourner*, began prodding audiences to contemplate a future in which "everyone on earth who could read John Donne was now dead,"[1] there appeared in print the longest, most detailed treatment of "A Litany" ever published. Its author, P. M. Oliver, urged that when Donne composed this poem he was engaging in a "bold . . . enterprise" and was "playing with fire." Hardly anyone else who has written about "A Litany" would encourage us to think any such thing. Even Oliver himself, instead of probing the dimensions of this assertion, managed to domesticate what should have been his own best point. Seeking to lay bare fatal contradictions in Donne's "eirenicist aspirations," he called attention to many points in the poem where some reader or other might take offense. Then, having heaped up examples of awkwardness and ambivalence to show how far the discourse exceeds the unwitting poet's control, he announced that because of the long-standing "critical neglect" of the poem he was able to produce his reading "independently of any interpretative orthodoxy."[2] My aim here—without disputing Annabel Patterson's provocative opening

[1]Wallace Shawn, *The Designated Mourner* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 53.

[2]P. M. Oliver, *Donne's Religious Writing: A Discourse of Feigned Devotion* (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 85, 84, 110.

line, that "*A Litany* is an absurdly neglected poem"—is to examine the contours of the tradition in which nearly all interpretations have been lodged. My sense is that, while the poem has begun to garner an unprecedented amount of attention, it cannot have much of a future unless a more thoroughgoing discontinuity with its critical history can be wrought.

It is worth attempting to define the sorts of "critical neglect" from which "A Litany" has suffered.[3] To a great extent they are related to a refusal of the open and generous example that Louis Martz began offering more than fifty years ago, when he sought to read English devotional poetry of the early modern period in contexts that acknowledge and respect "eirenicist aspirations." Martz wrote sympathetically about both Catholic and Protestant devotional practices. He encouraged appreciation of diverse imaginative structures (theologies) and respected competing social theories (ecclesiologies). He explored how apparently incompatible styles of piety had been made, in an era of vociferous polemics, to nourish one another. He showed how this cross-fertilization helped to foster the writing of poetry. What is more surprising than Martz's having written very little about "A Litany" is the grudging resistance to developing a sympathetic understanding of the poem that runs through the history of the commentary.[4]

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[3]Although the poem was headed "The Litanie" in all the seventeenth-century editions, it seems preferable on three grounds to follow those manuscripts in which it is headed with the indefinite article: (1) Donne himself refers to the poem in his letter to Goodyer as "a litanie"; (2) use of the definite article in titles for poems from this period often bespeaks editorial intervention; and (3) as the *OED* makes plain ("litany," sense 1.b), "The Litany" was a technical term in early modern English for the authorized liturgical text found in the *Book of Common Prayer*. To employ the definite article in naming Donne's poem tends to prejudge questions of its relation to the officially established English prayer.

[4]In *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1954), Louis L. Martz quoted only Stanza V (p. 99). He also made brief mention of the poem in connection with Donne's use of the word "meditation" (p. 218) and in illustration of his practice, in respect of public prayers, of dwelling meditatively on particular words (p. 220).

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"Howling is the noyse of hell," Donne remarked in his second Prebend sermon, "singing the voyce of heaven."[5] Yet in the body of materials published on "A Litany" very few writers consider it as anything other than accidentally versified prose. There is, nonetheless, some helpful work on the litany as a genre. Roman Dubinski has provided a wealth of information about the theology, the devotional practice, and the controversies in the background of Donne's poem. His research covers the period from 1475 to 1610 and enables us to know that Donne's is the earliest example of a versified litany.[6] Robert Silhol, James Wellington, and Scott Pilarz have shown that the poem follows a traditional structure: invocations in stanzas I-XIII, deprecations and obsecrations (that is, prayers for deliverance and prayers entreating Christ) in stanzas XV-XXII, and supplications and intercessions in stanzas XXIII-XXVIII.[7] (Stanza XIV, where the poet ceases to provide headings and begins to use the words "deliver" and "hear" to generate the petitions, serves as a transition.) The essay titled "A Man is to Himself a Dioclesian" makes it clear that the principal model with which, and against which, Donne went to work was the Catholic Litany of the Saints.[8]

There is little evidence that before Annabel Patterson called attention to how Donne merges "the petition and choral response . . . in a series of complex sentences" readers had given much thought to the possibility that Donne's stanza form is integral to his attempt to

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[5]*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-62), 7 (1954): 70.

[6]Roman R. Dubinski, "Donne's 'A Litanie' and the Saints," *Christianity and Literature* 41.1 (1991): 24n. (5-26).

[7]See Robert Silhol, "Réflexions sur les Sources et la Structure de *A Litanie* de John Donne," *Etudes Anglaises* 15.4 (1962): 329-46; James E. Wellington, "The Litany in Cranmer and Donne," *Studies in Philology* 68.2 (1971): 177-99; Scott R. Pilarz, S.J., "'Expressing a Quintessence Even from Nothingness': Contextualizing John Donne's 'A Litanie,'" *Christianity and Literature* 48.4 (1999): 399-424.

[8]See also Dennis Flynn, "Donne's Catholicism: II," *Recusant History* 13.3 (April, 1976): 189 (178-95).

compose a litany. Yet drawing on information made available by those who have written on the genre, it is possible to notice some distinctive features of what Donne, who seems to have coined the term, calls his "Poëtiquenesse" (line 72).[9] In the Latin Litany of the Saints, the congregation generally responds to the invocations addressed to God with *miserere nobis* and to those addressed to the saints with *ora(te) pro nobis*, then to the deprecations with *libera nos, Domine*, and to the intercessions with *te rogamus, audi nos*. In Donne's repeated use of "deliver" and "hear" as main verbs in his stanzas, he rescues two traditional locutions from their position as predictable responses and makes them govern the deprecations and suffrages. In place of the oral give-and-take between minister and congregation, he substitutes mental reciprocity between writer and reader. The poem makes syntactic and conceptual demands as a means of inviting participation. It also makes music. More elaborate than the Spenserian stanza, which employs but three rhymes, Donne's nine-line stanza regularly interlaces into a sequence of three tetrameters and three pentameters a trimeter in the sixth line; here a "d" rhyme is introduced. As in the Spenserian stanza, this rhyme is rounded out in a final couplet. There is, however, no final alexandrine. Instead a pair of tetrameter lines, in which the main verb generally makes its appearance, belatedly clarifies the syntax and creates a brief resting place. In this way something of the traditional feel of a litany's repeated going-out and coming-back is preserved. Yet the precise location of the main verb within the couplet varies.[10] Often a demanding idea or a surprising twist requires us to reinterpret what the earlier lines of the stanza had led us to suppose we were praying for. Only a tiny fraction of writing on Donne's poem has reckoned with these formal features—or for that matter with patterns of diction, syntax, and imagery. There have been some potentially notable exceptions.

One of the earliest notices of "A Litany" is a paragraph in Jakob Schipper's massive compendium of the 1880s, *Englische Metrik*, in

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[9]All quotations from the poem are from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (1967; reprinted, New York: New York University Press, 1968).

[10]In the concluding stave (XXVIII), it migrates to the first line of the stanza.

which he catalogues every variation of verse form that his *Sitzfleisch* turned up while surveying thousands of poems. Simply by describing the pattern of meter and rhyme of "A Litany" in relation to a typology of forms, Schipper demonstrated that Donne's stanza was unique in the history of English poetry.[11] By placing his description of the cross-rhyming lines of unequal length just before his treatment of the nine-line stanza in the April Eclogue of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, he might have set someone a productive exercise; for the relevant part of Spenser's poem involves an invocation of the muses as Virgins, and in ways that might be thought to entail a displaced invocation of saints. In 1972 Robert Nye observed that the stanza-form was Donne's "own invention" and remarked that its formal intricacy sorts oddly with "the simplicity of the general outline." In the same decade A. C. Partridge proposed that the stanza-form enabled Donne to indulge his penchant for employing elaborate syntax, and he praised Donne's resonant use of polysyllables of foreign origin for their musical effect. Anthony Low, who has been more attentive to the musical imagery than any other critic, pinpointed the telling performative difference between Donne's litany and all the others with which it has been compared: although "conceived as a vocal prayer," Donne's poem "is to be recited not antiphonally but in the single voices of his private friends." Recently, in her study of *Common Prayer*, Ramie Targoff has concluded that we cannot imagine any congregation reading Donne's litany aloud, or even a private individual using it silently as a vehicle for worship. In her argument, it stands as one more example of Donne's failure to create a "devotional verse" that fuses "a simultaneously individual and collective voice." That sort of voice, she argues, emerged only with Herbert in the poems of *The Temple*.[12]

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[11]J[akob] Schipper, *Neuenglishe Metrik*, vol. 2 of *Englishe Metrik in historischer und systematischer Entwicklung dargestellt*, 2 vols. (Bonn: Emil Strauss), 2 (1888-89): 682-83.

[12]Robert Nye, "The body is his book: the poetry of John Donne," *Critical Quarterly* 14 (1972): 357 (345-60); A. C. Partridge, *John Donne: Language and Style* (London: André Deutsch, 1978), p. 140; Anthony Low, *Love's Architecture: Devotional Modes in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 56 (see also pp. 25-26, 51-57); Ramie Targoff, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 92-94. Among various

One sign of the attention that "A Litany" has begun to attract is that in February, 2002, at the annual conference of the John Donne Society, the poem was given a group oral reading, with different members of the audience each taking a single stanza. Whether any of the participants discovered evidence to counter the claim that "A Litany" cannot serve the purposes of common prayer, I do not know. In any event, the group attempted to gauge its aptness for performance as a poem; and the experiment elicited an engaged response. As a prelude to the reading Richard Todd gave an account of the textual history of the poem; and brief versions of the two essays found here were delivered as a means of initiating discussion about whether the poem could be taught in the classroom. "A Litany" has routinely been omitted from teaching anthologies,[13] and nothing that turned up during the conference invalidated the assumption that the poem has rarely been a focus for pedagogical endeavors.

The discussion that preceded the group reading revealed that, in addition to the (shall we say?) litany of reasons adduced by Annabel Patterson for why this poem has been relegated to the back burner, we might add at least one other: there is a good deal about it that baffles readers. Take, for instance, the slippery stanza on "The Trinity" (IV), which resists syntactic disentanglement and has rarely been examined in anything like precise detail:

> O Blessed glorious Trinity,
> Bones to Philosophy, but milke to faith,
> Which, as wise serpents, diversly
> Most slipperinesse, yet most entanglings hath,
> As you distinguish'd undistinct
> By power, love, knowledge bee,
> Give mee a such selfe different instinct,

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anticipations of Targoff's critique, see David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 141-42.

[13]A rule-proving exception is *The Major Metaphysical Poets of the Seventeenth Century: John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Andrew Marvell*, ed. Edwin Honig and Oscar Williams (New York: Washington Square Press, 1968), pp. 290-97. This specialized anthology prints nearly all Donne's poetry.

> Of these let all mee elemented bee,
> Of power, to love, to know, you'unnumbred three.

Recently, Heather McHugh, paying tribute to "the literary and spiritual audacity" here that by addressing God as a "wise serpent" generates "a hell of a celestial oxymoron," has gone where editors and commentators seem never to have ventured. She teases out of a stanza that joins a plural addressee to a singular verb a series of "ramifying questions," many of them raised by Donne's counting on a "countless" God and by his daring to pray that he be "elemented" in ways altogether unamenable to "the usual laws of scale and separation." Putting her finger on how the syntax enacts some aspects of this picture of God, McHugh shows that the poet employs grammatical precision to make "the Word . . . move in ways mysterious": "It's not clear (ultimately, in this poem's course) whether 'unnumbered' doesn't shift from adjective to verb (just as 'distinguished' seemed to shift from verb to adjective). No parser may lord it over what passeth understanding."[14]

By itself verbal and conceptual complexity is hardly an explanation for neglect of "A Litany" in the classroom, where so many difficult poems by Donne have provided puzzlement and pleasure. The long-standing practice of devoting a panel at the Donne Conference to poems that have been widely taught shows this. The colloquia on "Aire and Angels," Satire III, "Farewell to Love," and other poems

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[14]Heather McHugh, "Naked Numbers: A Curve from Wyatt to Rochester," in *Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 75 -77 (59-85). The grounds for Donne's oxymoron are to be found in Matthew 10:16, where Jesus is depicted as advising his disciples how to conduct themselves in the presence of "wolves." By Donne's logic, which (as McHugh insists) refuses to behave according to merely rational categories, what's good for bearers of the Word is likely characteristic of the Word itself. As the interpretative tradition that Milton would exploit already recognized, the serpent, as the creature "more subtile than any beast of the field" (Genesis 3:1), may bespeak a divine language as "undistinct" from the Creator's knowledge, love, and power as that other "son of God" whom the author of the Book of Job dared to place within the heavenly court. Cf. Evelyn M. Simpson, "Two Notes on Donne: (1) Donne and the Serpent," *Review of English Studies* ns 16 (1965): 140-43.

that have appeared in earlier volumes of this journal confirm that difficulty alone has not made Donne scholars shy about arguing for interpretations that they may have been urging upon neophytes for years. No comparable investment in "A Litany" has been made by teachers—or by scholars.

Interpretative difficulties identified long ago by editors and commentators have not given way either to an interpretative consensus or to clear alternatives of the sort that in the *Variorum* are being gathered under the heading Notes and Glosses for many other poems.[15] Take for example the antepenultimate stanza (XXVI). As with so many difficult passages in Donne's poetry, it first elicited comment from the indefatigable Grosart, who was unable to make sense of it. The stanza is part of the section in which Donne plays variations on the traditional *audi nos* supplications. It follows two others in which the speaker has begun with the word "That" and offered a list of outcomes for which he invites prayer to the Lord. In stanza XXVI, Donne adds another list, this one composed in a spirit reminiscent of his satires:

> That living law, the Magistrate,
> Which to give us, and make us physicke, doth
> Our vices often aggravate,
> That Preachers taxing sinne, before her growth,
> That Satan, and invenom'd men
> Which well, if we starve, dine,
> When they doe most accuse us, may see then
> Us, to amendment, heare them; thee decline;
> That we may open our eares, Lord lock thine.

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[15]See *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995-). At the time of this writing, three of a projected eight volumes have appeared. The volume that is to be given to the *Divine Poems*, including therefore "A Litany," is not yet complete. I should like to thank Raymond-Jean Frontain, who is at work on the history of this poem, for graciously making available his working bibliography. My thanks also to my research assistant, Jean Vrola, for help in expanding the bibliographical reach and scope of this study, and to Annabel Patterson, for having pushed forward my understanding of this poem by leaps and bounds.

This passage contributed mightily to Grosart's puzzlement. In the Memorial-Introduction to his edition of the *Poems* (1873) he reported that he found it "unimaginable" that a Protestant Donne could have made such a prayer. Uneasy with what he took to be impertinent aspersions cast upon the magistrate and the clergy (see also stanza XXII), he found evidence here that at the time Donne composed the poem he had been but imperfectly converted.[16] (More on this presently.)

The difficult syntax of the last three lines of the stanza has evoked commentary from some of Donne's modern editors, and the word "decline" (which has been employed in different senses in lines 80 and 222) has caused particular trouble. Grosart offered two alternate paraphrases, both of which take the suppliants as the subject of "decline" and involve supplying the word "from," making them *decline from the Lord.* Donne's next editor, Charles Eliot Norton (1895), glossed the passage in a manner that, while it still required him to supply "from" in order to make "decline" govern "thee," construed the subject of the verb differently:

> The last three verses of this stanza are obscure. The meaning seems to be: When these men wrongfully accuse us, and, in doing so, decline from thee, may they see us, notwithstanding, listen to them to our own amendment, and do thou, Lord, lock thine ears to the injustice.[17]

Among subsequent editors, E. K. Chambers (1896) and Herbert Grierson (1912) did not provide a gloss on the stanza. Helen Gardner, who managed to eliminate the preachers from consideration, proposed an altogether different construction, which would make the Lord the subject of the verb "decline": "may they see us listen and amend our lives: but may they see thee Lord decline to listen."[18] This seems now

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[16]Alexander B. Grosart, ed., *The Complete Poems of John Donne, D.D., Dean of St. Paul's*, 2 vols. ([printed privately], 1872-73), 2 (1873): xiii-xiv.

[17]Charles Eliot Norton, in *The Poems of John Donne from the Text of the Edition of 1633*, revised by James Russell Lowell, 2 vols. (New York: Grolier Club, 1895), 2: 276.

[18]Helen Gardner, ed., *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 91. A. J. Smith adopted this construction and recast it,

to be the most common construction of the passage. Yet it skirts an awkwardness about taking "Us to amendment" and "thee decline" as twin objects of the verb "see": while "Us" and "thee" are parallel, the phrase "to amendment" and the verb "decline" are not. No one seems to have reckoned with an oddity of Donne's having made the Lord the subject of the verb "decline": while the word can bear many different senses, it is never predicated of God or Christ in English Bible versions of the period. A full exploration of this crux would require a disproportionate amount of space here. Suffice it to say that difficulties of syntax are but one feature of the poem that make it too complex to be taught in a single class-session.

Turning to the principal concerns in the criticism, it is fitting to report first that many commentators connect Donne's poem with the undated letter to Goodyer in which he announces that he has composed "a meditation in verse, which I call a Litany." The first to point out the connection was Alford, in 1839. Grierson followed Norton and Chambers in proposing 1609 or 1610 as the date of the letter, and reasons for preferring the last months of 1608 have since been proposed. In 1975 Dominic Baker-Smith identified the *Antiquae Lectiones* of Henricius Canisius, the relevant part published at Ingolstat late in 1608, as the likely source of Donne's knowledge of litanies by Ratpertus and Notker to which his letter refers.[19] The striking thing about the *de rigeur* rehearsals of the fact that Donne mentions the poem in his letter is that critics generally proceed as if this settles something rather than opens up opportunities for historical investigation. There is one notable exception to the standard dating of "A Litany" between 1608 and 1610: Grosart observes that this is one of several *Divine Poems* "permeated with Roman-Catholic doctrine" and

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removing the second person: "may these exaggerating accusers see us listen to them only so as to amend ourselves, and God decline to hear them"; see *John Donne: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 645.

[19]Henry Alford, ed., *The Works of John Donne, D.D., Dean of Saint Paul's, 1621-1631. With a Memoir of His Life*, 6 vols. (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 6: 311-12n.; Dominic Baker-Smith, "Donne's 'Litanie,'" *Review of English Studies* 26 (1975): 171-73; "'Th' old broad way in applying': John Donne and his 'Litanie,'" in *A Day Festivall: Essays ... in honour of Helena Mennie Shire*, ed. Alisoun Gardner-Medwin and Janet Hadley Williams (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1990), pp. 50-51 (48-58).

proposes that Donne must have written most of his religious poetry early, not only before he converted to Protestantism but before he plunged into the gross immoralities of which his licentious poems prove him to have been guilty.[20] Grosart's eagerness to frame "A Litany" within an evangelical adaptation of Izaak Walton's *Life and Death of Dr. Donne* signaled what has since been a recurring feature of almost every treatment of the poem: the assumption that it has little significance or value as a poem or a prayer in its own right and is of virtually no interest apart from its connection with its author's life. Another of the earliest published comments is Edward Dowden's proposal that this poem offers "perhaps, a clearer insight into Donne's character than . . . any other" that he ever wrote. Dowden read the speaker's claim to have been wasted by "youth's fires of pride and lust" as directly referable to Donne's own life, and urged that the poem records "veritable sighs of desire from his inmost heart."[21] Dowden aimed to show that self-revelation modulates, however, into a general ecclesiastical strategy, so that one person's experience illustrates the *via media* of Anglican spirituality.[22] Several writers, including Gardner, Wellington, and Dubinski have concluded that "A Litany" may been seen as Donne's "most Anglican" poem. They have done so, however, without reference to the political circumstances teased out in Annabel Patterson's earlier essay, "All Donne," which helps us to contemplate the possibility that Donne's "mean ways" belong to the witty practices by which he and his friends were

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[20]Grosart, 2: xvi-xvii.

[21]Edward Dowden, "The Poetry of John Donne," *Fortnightly Review* ns 47 (1890): 795 (791-808).

[22]Among approving treatments of the poem for its espousal of the *via media*, the following may be singled out: A. S. P. Woodhouse, *The Poet and His Faith: Religion and Poetry in England from Spenser to Eliot and Auden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 56-58; Frank J. Warnke, *John Donne* (Boston: Twayne, 1987), pp. 85-86. By contrast, in *John Donne's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), Wilbur Sanders proposed that Donne's poem is ineffective and "unconvincing" because Donne's personal situation cannot be generalized (p. 122). For praise of the second half of the poem precisely on the grounds that it *avoids* Christian doctrine, see J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit: An Analytical and Comparative Study of the Poetry of John Donne* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 260.

expressing their resistance to James's pretensions to unlimited monarchical power.[23] Grosart, who voiced his puzzlement at how "a member of the Church of England" could speak of the magistrate aggravating our vices and of preachers taxing sin, remains one of the few persons who has taken seriously that the poem entails a substantial critique of the government, the legal system, and the church. Pilarz, the first to emphasize that, historically, litanies have been performed at moments of public crisis, nonetheless prescinds from considering a political context for "A Litany," fixing instead on how the poem illustrates that Donne's embrace of Protestant theology aggravated his *personal* crisis during the Mitcham years. Others before him—M. M. Mahood, Richard Hughes, and influentially R. C. Bald—made commonplace the idea that the Mitcham period was for Donne a time of great inner turmoil.[24] Not a few critics have implied that a good deal should be made of the fact that Donne wrote the poem in the same period that he was working on his treatise concerning self-murder.

The tendency to value "A Litany" for what it can tell us about the life, the theology, and the psychic history of John Donne is not illegitimate, of course. The point is that it has been utterly pervasive. So far, it has tended to curtail, rather than to stimulate, rigorous historical study of the social and political contexts in which the poem was conceived and first disseminated. With few exceptions, every attempt to extract biographical information has been entangled in assumptions about a larger, more complex life-narrative organized around the trope of conversion. There is no consensus, however, about when the really decisive change in Donne's life happened or what precisely it entailed: some depict it as occurring when Donne first read through the body of controverted divinity; others, after his brother's arrest and demise; still others, when he met, and by virtue of

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[23]Annabel Patterson, "All Donne," in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 37-67.

[24]M. M. Mahood, *Poetry and Humanism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), pp. 108-12; Richard E. Hughes, *The Progress of the Soul: The Interior Career of John Donne* (New York: William Morrow, 1968), chap. III ("The Middle Years, 1605-1609"); R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 156 ff.

his marrying, a good woman; others, when he emerged from the spiritual crisis of the Mitcham years, or when he began preaching, or still later, after his wife's death. This astonishing disagreement about the time, the cause, and the nature of some supposedly decisive event that took place somewhere between, say, 1590 and 1618 has not inhibited interpreters from proceeding as if "A Litany" ought to be fitted into their respective visions of how a coherent course of Donne's life is to be charted. Moreover, few have confronted the argument that "A Litany" shows Donne resisting the category of "conversion" for explaining the remarkable course of events by which he would become a public representative of the establishment that had persecuted members of his own family. Baker-Smith offered this argument in 1972 and is apparently the only interpreter of the poem who has suggested the relevance of the letter to Sir Robert Ker (1627) in which Donne claimed that "My Tenets are always, for the preservation of the Religion I was born in."[25] Both this claim and the poem Donne wrote as "a Litany" might be probed in relation to broader contexts than the merely biographical.

The orthodox line has been that "A Litany" ought to be interpreted primarily in relation to a narrative about Donne's personal life, and biographical interpretations have repeatedly sought to protect readers from discerning productive religious and political claims on our energy in Donne's eirenicist exercise of wit. A salient feature of the tradition is that interpreters, invariably and perhaps inevitably, judge the Promethean project articulated in the letter to Goodyer and espoused in the poem from some narrower, more sectarian perspective than Donne's, whether Anglican or Catholic, skeptical or evangelical. Even in the 1960s, when the winds of ecumenism were relatively strong, the fact that denominational divisions had been entrenched for another three and a half centuries inhibited readers from contemplating the audaciousness of Donne's project. In those years, while the promise of cultural anthropology seemed to offer a broader base on which to pursue the business of criticism, it also tended to downplay the significance of differences. Hughes, attempting to build

[25]See Dominic Baker-Smith, "John Donne's *Critique of True Religion*," in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed. A. J. Smith (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 407 (404-32).

on Martz's thesis about meditative poetry, proposed that in "A Litany" and in the *Anniversaries* Donne was drawing on Augustine's appropriation of Neoplatonic myth to project a process of reintegration whereby the image of the Trinity, though clouded in the lone speaker and fractured in the community, might be recoverable through an Ignatian exercise of the imagination.[26] If readings from more recent decades that subordinate the poem to a thesis about Protestant poetics or coterie verse have become flat and stale, they seem nonetheless of a piece with John Carey's more entertaining biographical speculations in that they all take the edge off Donne's prophetic vision from one or other deadening position of hindsight.[27] There is a history of interpreting "A Litany," after all. Like many good histories, it is neither pretty nor edifying. Nor will the writing of this history be liberating unless we use our knowledge of it to overcome the limitations under which our imaginations generally operate.

Users of set prayers and good readers of lyric poems always have to negotiate the fact that we read at some remove, personally and historically, from written discourse. The question is whether and to what extent we are willing to look for what can challenge us in Donne's poem and whether we can find pleasure in recognizing in and through our differences from the "I" who speaks and from one another a productive vision of shared human experience. If, as several critics have asserted, "A Litany" is to be judged a failure as a set prayer (which it seems never to have been meant to be), the question remains whether as a poem it amounts to more than a foil for appreciating Herbert's achievement in devotional verse. Might this poem have been, or might it be, a propaedeutic for articulating longings for a more efficacious and global vision of human solidarity across time as well as space, and across religions as well as cultures?

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[26]Hughes, pp. 159-62.

[27]See especially Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 259-63; Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 245-50. In *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), John Carey has little to say specifically about "A Litany" (see pp. 51, 243) but much about Donne's rejection of Catholicism.

II

If even in the mid-twentieth century when Donne's prestige as a writer was at its apex "A Litany" was neglected, how is it that this 252-line religious poem has begun to attract more attention than ever before? An answer to this question ought to begin with an acknowledgment that the intensified interest is not general. It belongs to those who have made some kind of investment in Donne, so that sustained discussion of the poem is likely to take place at a Donne Society conference and essays such as this are addressed to readers who peruse the *John Donne Journal.* That is, the poem appeals to readers who recognize, if only inchoately, that it fits uneasily with the dominant schemes in which Donne was framed during the late twentieth century, frameworks that have mostly dampened down interest in his writing. Readers friendly to Donne are likely to think "A Litany" more complex and accomplished than an "independent" exposition of its ambivalent contradictions would allow. It lacks, after all, the iconic stature that accrued around a handful of Songs and Sonnets and Holy Sonnets in the era when the New Criticism specially cultivated Donne and that, once Cleanth Brooks conferred iconicity upon "The Canonization," made that poem seem the ripest of English lyrics for deconstruction when the reaction set in.[28] "A Litany" resists, moreover, easy incorporation into theories that would make Donne's poems yield up evidence of his apostasy, or of his having written under the spell of a biblical poetics unique to Protestants, or out of desperate ambition to secure a place.

It is true that the poem gives evidence of having been written at a time of crisis. However personally resonant the crisis may have been for its author and his friends, it was not merely personal. As Walton intimated when he reported that while Donne was at Mitcham, he "destined some days to a constant study of some points of Controversie betwixt the *English* and *Roman Church*; and especially those of *Supremacy* and *Allegiance*,"[29] the fracturing of Western

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[28]See Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 200-205.

[29]Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne, Henry Wotton*, etc. (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 38.

Christendom into opposed camps makes issues of authority and loyalty pressing. Donne was already exploring these issues poetically in Satire III, a poem that exposes the irresponsibility of Mirreus, Crants, and the others who conceive the central question in a self-serving manner. There the satirist points out that ultimately it will do no one any good before God to have handed over responsibility to "a Philip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin." By a similar token, in "A Litany" Donne urges that the saints' prayers cannot do for us what we must take care to do ourselves. Donne studied and wrote about issues of authority and loyalty not only because they had had a thoroughgoing impact upon his family but because he was a learned person, with that sense of urgency in the present that a rich knowledge of the past inspires, and because he was a passionate person, with brave scorn for hypocrisy and kind pity for the plight of the self-deceiving. Satire III and "A Litany" are autobiographically revealing, but less in the manner of modern confessional poetry than by virtue of their author's having written them in the first place. "A Litany" entails an embrace of a traditional and impersonal form of prayer and shows Donne transforming it into a vehicle that helped to carry him through all his ambivalence about "*be[ing] or do[ing] something.*"[30] In composing the poem (and *La Corona*), he began cultivating the more public voice that he would employ in works that he designed for publication, the *Anniversaries*, the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, and ultimately the *Sermons*, which he carefully prepared for posthumous appearance.[31] As the history of reading "A Litany" makes clear, Donne's departure in this direction multiplied the likelihood that he would suffer misinterpretations.

An open disposition to read Donne's poem sympathetically is greatly inhibited by some prevailing assumptions about litanies. We need to reckon with the modern history of the word "litany" and with the negative connotations that have become encrusted around it.

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[30]The quoted phrase comes from the most often quoted of Donne's letters. The quoting began with Walton's *Life*; see p. 37.

[31]For a treatment of how stanza XXIII of "A Litany" epitomizes Donne's cultivation in his liturgical poetry of "a representative public voice to utter what is in all hearts," see Anne Ferry, *The "Inward" Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 226-27.

Donne himself was already participating in this history when he wrote the second of his Satires. In a passage that was censored in 1633 he deploys the word in the phrase "to'out-sweare the Letanie" (line 33) and lodges it in a verbal environment populated by references to regurgitation and excrement, dildoes and usury. Like the word "Letanie," "dildoes" was suppressed in the first edition of Donne's *Poems*; yet it was restored in 1635 and the subsequent editions. By contrast, not until 1669 did the word "Letanie" make its way into print. Half a century later Pope, in versifying the poem, suppressed it again, substituting a dig against foul-mouthed Irishmen. The likely grounds for Pope's deletion were explained by Warburton: "Dr. Donne's is a low allusion to a licentious quibble used at that time by the enemies of the English Liturgy: who, disliking the frequent invocations in the *Letanie*, called them the *taking God's Name in vain*, which is the Scripture periphrasis for *swearing*."[32] This was to acknowledge that the objection to invoking saints in prayer was that it entails a blasphemous violation of the first commandment, compromising the worship of the one true God. Ben Jonson's famous remark "that Dones Anniversarie was profane and full of Blasphemies" and Drummond of Hawthornden's addition "that he told Mr Donne, if it had been written of ye Virgin Marie it had been something" show that Jonson was unimpressed by Donne's resolution, articulated near the end of the *Second Anniversary*, to avoid actual invocation of Elizabeth Drury, since in any event the poem goes to extraordinary lengths to depict her as one of "the blessed Triumphers in heaven."[33] Donne's answer to Jonson, "that he described the Idea of a Woman and not as she was," tallies with the more playful fantasies of "mis-devotion" that he indulged in "The Relique," where dead lovers' remaining body parts may be mistaken for those of Mary Magdalen and of "a something else," and especially in "The Canonization," which incorporates an invocation of lovers as saints. Although in "A

[32]*The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.... Containing the Principal Notes of Drs. Warburton and Warton*, ed. William Lisle Bowles, 10 vols. (London: J. Jonson, 1806), 4: 268. Cf. Herbert J. C. Grierson, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 2: 110.

[33]See "Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden," in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925), 1: 133. Donne's response is also reported by Drummond.

Litany" Donne eschewed actual invocation, he retained the notion that the blessed Triumphers, while they cannot substitute for Christ as intermediaries or intercessors, conducted their lives in accord with a Christlike "pattern" and therefore can have influence upon the living as Ideas, perhaps even as patrons. This helps to make sense of his retention of categories (Ideas) of saints in Stanzas V-XIII, where the headings name various subgenres available to hagiographers. It also confirms the argument that he placed the Doctors last as the most pertinent model in relation to which he was thinking about his own situation: by writing the poem he immediately involved himself in the possibility of misdoing or mis-saying out of "zeale."

While scornful references to "litanies" were already current when Donne wrote his poem, they have multiplied exponentially since the later seventeenth century, when the term began to denote "The form of a parody of the Litany ... often ... employed as a vehicle for scurrilous political satire" (*OED*, sense 2). Virtually all the modern citations added in 1997 to the *OED* entry for the word confirm that it is now routinely used in derogatory senses: "the usual litany of excuses," "a litany of troubles," "a litany of disasters." Given that this displaced use has become the dominant sense, it seems readily plausible that disapproving references to the thing itself should be credited. One relevant implication of the adage by which we acknowledge that history is written by the victors is the ease with which we accept the idea that litanies are boring and mindless. As a form of prayer, litanies supposedly produce torpor and reduce people to passivity. They are assumed to exalt the clergy and commonly said to disempower the congregation, requiring merely formu-*laic* responses. In the transferred sense traced by the *OED* at least as far back as Donne's time, litanies are laundry lists, as irrelevant to present interests as an epic catalogue of ships, or biblical genealogies, as banal as entries in a phone book from a city we would no more dream of visiting than of spending eternity in a heaven where the principal activity was mouthing endless prayers of praise and thanksgiving.

One conspicuous risk, then, that Donne took in making his poem was starting with a unpromising genre. But one of the boldest was to reconceive the genre to accommodate the prohibition of invoking dead saints and to embrace the reformers' summons to the living to behave as "visible saints." Donne's removal of particular names exacted a

telling cost, even as accepting communion with the established national church entailed certain gains. For centuries, devout Christians participating in the traditional Litany, insofar as they were familiar with the stories that had grown up around individual saints, may well have found stimulating, even perhaps dizzying at times, the evocation of these narratives when the saints were addressed serially. To listen to the names may sometimes have been analogous with our experience of watching a camera create a panorama, moving through a crowd, lingering now on one face, now on another, briefly and teasingly inviting interest in other persons and their stories, and occasionally eliciting the surprise and pleasure that come from recognizing someone with whom one feels connected (e.g., the patron of the parish, or the saint after whom one was named). Forbearing to mention St. Michael and St. Peter and St. Mary Magdalen required of Donne abstemious behavior, a knuckling under to the closers of canons, who, for all the theological correctness of their insistence upon the sole mediation of Christ, were seeking to displace and suppress outgrowths of popular culture that can nourish faith and imagination.

Consider the readiest example to hand: Mary Magdalen. Given Donne's foundational decision to foster reconciliation between the Roman and Reformed churches in his litany, it seems unlikely, alas, that one of the two suppressed staves (to which Annabel Patterson is the first to have called attention) concerned this or any other saint. Yet we know that Donne was fascinated with this woman—and in the very period of his life when he went to work on "A Litany." The Oxford Authors edition of Donne's writings, which seeks to arrange them according to a putative chronology of composition, prints the poem immediately after the verse letter to Magdalen Herbert ("Mad paper stay. . .") and—along with the letter to Goodyer in which Donne tells of having written "a meditation in verse"—immediately before the sonnet "To Mrs. Magdalen Herbert, of St Mary Magdalen."[34] In the last of these poems Donne refers to a practice, descended from the church fathers and medieval exegetes, of conflating various gospel stories about "two or three" different women to forge a rudimentary saint's life. This exegetical extravagance was of course just the sort of

[34]John Carey, ed. *John Donne* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 159-70.

fanciful creativity that inspired painters and to which the leading sixteenth-century reformers objected; and it featured prominently as a grounds for discrediting apocryphal materials such as the *Legenda Aurea*. Donne's sonnet treats this interpretative history as playful "mis-devotion." He cheekily encourages the Lady Herbert to "Increase" the "number" of Magdalens "and their fame" and to add her "*Innocence*" to the "*Devotion*" given by others to the saint. The poem culminates in an entrusting to her of "Hymns," often taken to be the seven sonnets of *La Corona*. If Magdalen Herbert was one of the friends with whom Donne shared "A Litany," he might have counted on her knowledge and resourcefulness to pour back into the poem, in imitation of the examples cited in the sonnet, remembrance of stories like that of the "sinful woman" who washed Jesus's feet with her tears (Luke 7: 36-50), which had been attached to Mary Magdalen. It is plausible to suppose that "A Litany" alludes to such stories when the poet prays, in stanza XII, that he and the church itself, having lost "our first integrity," be restored to innocence with an imputed righteousness whereby "chast widowhead" may be called "Virginitie."

While it is true that Robert Southwell had already made the figure of Mary Magdalen available for treatment within English poetry, a still richer body of materials for appreciating how much Donne had to give up (or at least rein in) takes us beyond England, to the continental contexts that Louis Martz brought to bear on the poetry of Southwell and others. These contexts are epitomized in the painting of the penitent Magdalen by Georges de la Tour of Lorraine that appears prominently at the outset of *The Poetry of Meditation*, where it sits in happy company with a passage from Yeats about a mind "wandering" in "meditation" till it reaches a place occupied by both the "damned" and the "blessed." Mary Magdalen had been invoked in prayers at least since the ninth or tenth century, as sacramentaries from that era testify.[35] On the basis of chapter 20 in John's Gospel, where she is the first witness of the resurrection and carries the news to other disciples, she emerged in late medieval Christianity as *apostola apostolorum*.

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[35]See Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), p. 111. I am indebted to this book for several points deployed in this paragraph.

Increasingly, however, it was as the penitent model for every sinner that Mary Magdalen came to rival the Blessed Virgin herself as the favorite woman saint of pre-Reformation Christianity. Typologically, she was a still better "second Eve" than the sinless Queen of Heaven, who was often represented in story and in artwork as so sexless as to remove her from human imitation. Mary Magdalen, the herald of new life after death, came to be regarded as an honorary virgin, the redeemed antitype of the fallen mother of mankind. Her name was listed in the Litany of the Saints before all the virgins; and as an index of her prominence the creed was recited at the mass celebrated on her feast day (22 July). By Donne's time, with the reformers' denigration of penitential practices and of pious prayers directed toward the saints, she had become almost exclusively the property of Catholics. She was "the favourite saint of the Counter-Reformation,"[36] the principal symbol of the Church Triumphant. In the years when Donne was growing up artists were producing more images of her than of any other saint.[37] If early on Donne crafted a stave that concerned the Penitents or one that actually named the Magdalen, although he and some of the readers he had in mind may have been devoted to her as a sinner redeemed by Christ because she had "loved much" (cf. Luke 7: 47), he must have found that it tipped the center of gravity in a poem that gains so much of its force and energy from what it respectfully forbears to justify.

For reading the first half of "A Litany," it is helpful to have to hand the principle whereby "for everything [in the traditional litany that Donne] retained, he wrote a stanza *explaining* its devotional importance."[38] For reading the second half, we should perhaps add that, for what Donne had conspicuously omitted, viz., reference to particular members of the Church Triumphant, he substituted an unprecedented focus on the supplicants. He also highlighted the process by which intercessions and suffrages come to be formulated. His petitions grow out of a sustained and mostly communal

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[36]See H. J. C. Grierson, *Cross Currents in English Literature of the XVIIth Century, or The World, The Flesh, and the Spirit, their Actions and Reactions* (1929; reprinted, London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 181.

[37]See Haskins, p. 255.

[38]See above, Patterson, p. 40-41.

examination of conscience, which has its springs in saintly models: explicitly in the Doctors, implicitly in the Penitents, those belatedly arrived members of the heavenly community who, because their life-narratives were modeled on the story of St. Paul, might have made an even better model for Protestants than for Catholics.

When Protestant translators of Jesus's foundational saying in Matthew 4: 17 rendered the Greek *metanoia* with the word "Repent," rather than translating the Vulgate's *Paenitentiam agite* with the phrase "Do penance,"[39] they emphasized the idea of turning one's life around that was to become the principal trope of evangelical conversion narratives. This move bolstered a growing tendency in early Protestantism to make the story of Saul-turned-into-Paul, rather than the story of Christ's passion and death (which "A Litany" highlights in stanzas XIX-XX), the principal model for the Christian life. This trope manifestly informs the conception of Donne's life-story as narrated by Walton, who depicted his entrance into holy orders as the "turning" point, the action by which he became the Doctor Donne whom Walton had known. While many have disputed the accuracy of Walton's account, the assumption that at some point Donne "converted" has been almost pervasive. The fact that no consensus has emerged about the moment of conversion, however, prompts us to acknowledge that none of Donne's own writings enables us definitively to locate such a moment. This opens us to recalling the considerable evidence he left behind that in later life he often conducted his own prayer life within the *memento mori* tradition and privately "did penance." One feature of the "mean wayes" that are advocated in "A Litany," then, involved Donne's steering between the extreme represented in conversion narratives, which came routinely to rehearse past sins as a prelude to a dramatic moment of conversion, and the extreme represented by doing public penance, as if to pay reparations for one's sins. Donne's litany, like his life (such as we can know it), envisages the need for continuing changes of heart. Through the complex syntax of its sentences, it invites "experimental" knowledge of repeated "turning" to God, since until one reaches the end of any given sentence it is generally impossible to know just what

[39]The Rheims New Testament employed the English "do penance" to preserve the contested translation from the Vulgate.

one is being expected to pray for. Moreover, as Annabel Patterson has noted with respect to stanza XVII, even after a sentence has been concluded, it is frequently difficult to discern all that a petition entails. This difficulty culminates in stanza XXVI, in the surprise that Donne's ironic prayer envisages for the rigid accusers. He invites us to pray that insofar as their accusations have validity, the accusers "see" (that is, "escort," *OED*, sense 7.b) "Us, to amendment." At the same time, requiring us to understand "see" in a different sense (*OED* 1.e, where the verb takes a pronoun and an infinitive as its compound object), he invites us to pray that insofar as their accusations are made in a presumptuous spirit of self-righteousness, the accusers witness a dramatic reversal of what they are expecting: the divine judge "turn[ing] away" from them (*OED*, "decline," sense 1.a), as Jesus did when he pointedly deviated from Simon the Pharisee's expectation that he would condemn the "sinful woman."[40]

The syntactic and conceptual complexity of this climactic petition in stanza XXVI epitomizes the way Donne's litany requires praying with and beyond the words that are set. To make this petition one's own requires not only radical mental readjustment as the words come forth, but suspension of one's preconceptions and suspicion of the very forms that we use to articulate our needs and desires.

In the long-standing devotional tradition the work of breaking through presumptuous preconceptions and of avoiding desperate self-accusation is often undertaken by meditating on the core of human vulnerability, the inevitability of suffering and of death. The skull in Georges de la Tour's portrait of the Magdalen is a staple motif in paintings of the most cerebral of church Fathers, St. Jerome. From the opening stanza of his litany Donne adopts and adapts this mode of praying:

> re-create mee, now growne ruinous:
> My heart is by dejection, clay,

[40]According to the *OED* ("decline," 13.b), the sense of the word that entails a "refusal" to listen (the gloss proposed by Gardner) did not become current until late in the seventeenth century. While it is possible that Donne was anticipating this sense and contributing to its emergence, the idea that the Lord would "turn away" (see sense 13.a) is in keeping with his satirical critique of self-righteous behavior.

> And by selfe-murder, red.
> From this red earth, O Father, purge away
> All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned
> I may rise up from death, before I'am dead.

In stanzas VII-XIII the speaker initiates the very action that he has asked God to perform on him: these stanzas treat the Patriarchs and Prophets, the Apostles, Martyrs, and Confessors, the Virgins and Doctors, precisely as dead people, whose lives are finished. This section of the poem incorporates skepticism about whether the saints enjoy any continuing agency with respect to the living. At the same time, it envisages the possibility that as Ideas or "patterns" (to borrow the word deployed prominently in the *Second Anniversary*) their bones may be given new flesh in the imaginations of the living—not so that we may passively conform to pre-existent models but with a view to challenging us productively to explore our differences from them:

> Oh, to some
> Not to be Martyrs, is a martyrdome. [89-90]

> A man
> Is to himselfe a Dioclesian. [98-99]

> Divorce thou sinne in us, or bid it die,
> And call chast widowhead Virginitie. [107-08]

> That what they have misdone
> Or mis-said, wee to that may not adhere. [114-15]

The placement of the Doctors last in the series proves appropriate therefore not only because they provide the readiest model in relation to which Donne sought to examine his practices as a teacher but because, by virtue of the fact that they are in heaven precisely with a continuing awareness that their past errors could do enduring damage to the living, their example offers an astonishing hope that the harm we do to others can be effectively forgiven. Their precedent suggests that risks such as those Donne takes in writing and disseminating a prayer that can easily be misunderstood may ultimately be worth having taken. As the stanza on the Prophets makes clear, these risks include writing public religious poetry, even for "lesser Chappels":

> That I by them excuse not my excesse
> In seeking secrets, or Poëtiquenesse. [71-72]

Seen in relation to Donne's life as a whole these lines are predictive of his writing the *Anniversaries*, especially the *Second*, where he negotiates the risk of "mis-devotion" when he figures himself as a prophetic trumpet for a holy "pattern."

> Here in a place, where mis-devotion frames
> A thousand praiers to saints, whose very names
> The ancient Church knew not, Heaven knowes not yet,
> And where, what lawes of poetry admit,
> Lawes of religion have at least the same,
> Immortall Maid, I might invoque thy name. [lines 511-16]

In "A Litany" as a prophet already making music, though in a quieter, penitential mood, Donne sought to redeem by "Poëtiquenesse" a form that others were trying to kill off. He drew attention to the living supplicants, rather than to dead saints, as representative of the general situation of humanity. This feature of his poem helps to explain why in the history of interpreting it the chief supplicant has repeatedly been made the principal object of attention: the poem puts the workings of his imagination on display. In this sense "A Litany" can never have a life of its own independent of the fictions by which readers reconstitute knowledge of its maker.

Although many biographical readings of "A Litany" have been more or less misguided in their assumptions, in their methods, and in the findings that they purport to deliver, the pervasiveness of biographical interpretations does not constitute a collective mistake. Rather, it points to the religious and cultural work that Donne was about, crafting a contemporary prayer that models the tuning of the instrument in preparation for a heavenly symphony. His litany displaces the dead (not only the saints, but also the souls in purgatory) with the living, whose stories are inevitably incomplete and whose names are therefore "not yet" known in heaven. From the point of view memorably deployed by Walton to produce a rounded narrative of his life, Donne's willingness in "A Litany" to depict himself as a representative was a prelude both to his taking of holy orders and to the culminating autobiographical acts by which, in later life, he

reconstructed his own story. While much might be written about the ways in which the poem anticipates features of the *Sermons*, the essential point perhaps comes clearest in the famous seventeenth meditation of the *Devotions*. The passage that Hemingway made famous points to human solidarity by prompting us to think about our lives globally, in spatial terms: "No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the maine." Another passage in the same meditation offers a still more breathtaking expansiveness along a temporal axis that intersects the spatial one. Donne posits a thoroughgoing and more nurturing basis for connecting "all" human beings in a shared destiny that we are composing through each moment that we live. He provokes us to dream that our own lives and memoirs are but "*peeces*." They await an aesthetic intervention, an ultimate editing and redacting and publication that can occur only after the death of the author:

> All *mankinde* is of one *Author*, and is one *volume*; when one Man dies, one *Chapter* is not *torne* out of the *booke*, but *translated* into a better *language*; and every *Chapter* must be so *translated*; God emploies severall *translators*; some peeces are translated by *Age*, some by *sicknesse*, some by *warre*, some by *justice*; but *Gods* hand is in every *translation*; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that *Librarie* where every *booke* shall lie open to one another.[41] [Meditation 17].

This passage invites us to imagine a state of utter openness to one another, and dares us to long to enjoy an integrity by which we may walk in paradise naked and unashamed. In this way it shows what Donne curtailed in his litany, where he manifestly acknowledges that in an imperfect state of knowing and loving we are by no means prepared to process the dazzling mystery at the core of anyone's life. It also suggests that Walton, who knew perfectly well that he did not know and understand everything about Donne's life, also knew what

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[41]John Donne, Meditation 17, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), pp. 86-87.

he was doing when he avoided composing a narrative that would bind up his subject's "loosely scattered" poems.

This passage from the *Devotions* also shows how Donne, even as he readmits saints' lives into Christian devotion by the back door, contributed to the hagiographical imperative that Walton accepted. Walton's narrative, while it nowhere suggests that one ought to pray to John Donne, holds up a pattern for imitation; and it begets desire to know more about a life that among the living can be written and read only in a language that is foreign to its meaning and calls out to be translated. Even in the *Devotions* Donne's fantasy of a heavenly community requires him to refrain, as he had in "A Litany," from naming names. Yet he makes the mode of reticence contribute to the feel of populous superabundance, the sense of universality that, if an explicit enumeration were begun, would be compromised by the chance of forgetting someone, and by the necessity of leaving many out.

In Meditation XVII Donne manages also to prescind from invoking the apocalyptic doctrine that so frequently pervades his Holy Sonnets, whereby a forbidding final judgment will seal forever a fissure between the blessed and the damned. Instead he would give us "all mankinde" in the image of the Author who in "A Litany" the poet had addressed as "Bones to Philosophy, but milke to faith" (stanza IV). The "distinguish'd undistinct" nature of this God offers a slipperier, more entangled, and more diverse model for imagining the range, and scope, and variety of the heavenly community than the genres available for telling Christian saints' lives can comprehend. The Scriptures alone may lead Christians to believe that they "are wrought / In [God's] other booke" (stanza XIII). But the Story that encompasses every human story is still being composed; and fully to participate in it Donne prays for "a such selfe different instinct" as the Trinity embodies (line 33).

At the conclusion of that second Prebend sermon in which Donne starkly contrasts heavenly "singing" with hellish "noyse," he urges that the joys of heaven are continuous with the joys of this life and have therefore already begun. In the stanza about the Angels (VI) in his litany, inviting us to think about creatures who differ from all of us, he summons us to believe that access to "heavens faire Palaces" begins with our respect for and delight in "faire diversitie." Beyond all the

genres that have been used to tell human stories, the poet holds out the possibility that, as one "never knowes which course [the Sun's] light doth run," so each person's life may turn out to be intriguingly *sui generis*.

Boston College

A Litanie.

I.

The Father.

Father of Heaven, and him, by whom
It, and us for it, and all else, for us
Thou madest, and govern'st ever, come
And re-create mee, now growne ruinous:
My heart is by dejection, clay,
And by selfe-murder, red.
From this red earth, O Father, purge away
All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned
I may rise up from death, before I'am dead.

II.

The Sonne.

O Sonne of God, who seeing two things,
Sinne, and death crept in, which were never made,
By bearing one, tryed'st with what stings
The other could thine heritage invade;
O be thou nail'd unto my heart,
And crucified againe,
Part not from it, though it from thee would part,
But let it be by'applying so thy paine,
Drown'd in thy blood, and in thy passion slaine.

III.

The Holy Ghost.

O Holy Ghost, whose temple I
Am, but of mudde walls, and condensed dust,
And being sacrilegiously
Halfe wasted with youths fires, of pride and lust,

Must with new stormes be weatherbeat;
Double'in my heart thy flame,
Which let devout sad teares intend; and let
(Though this glasse lanthorne, flesh, do suffer maime)
Fire, Sacrifice, Priest, Altar be the same.

IV.

The Trinity.

O Blessed glorious Trinity,
Bones to Philosophy, but milke to faith,
Which, as wise serpents, diversly
Most slipperinesse, yet most entanglings hath,
As you distinguish'd undistinct
By power, love, knowledge bee,
Give me a such selfe different instinct,
Of these let all mee elemented bee,
Of power, to love, to know, you'unnumbred three.

V.

The Virgin Mary.

For that faire blessed Mother-maid,
Whose flesh redeem'd us; That she-Cherubin,
Which unlock'd Paradise, and made
One claime for innocence, and disseiz'd sinne,
Whose wombe was a strange heav'n, for there
God cloath'd himselfe, and grew,
Our zealous thankes wee poure. As her deeds were
Our helpes, so are her prayers; nor can she sue
In vaine, who hath such titles unto you.

VI.

The Angels.

And since this life our nonage is,
And wee in Wardship to thine Angels be,
Native in heavens faire Palaces
Where we shall be but denizen'd by thee,
As th'earth conceiving by the Sunne,
Yeelds faire diversitie,
Yet never knows which course that light doth run,
So let mee study, that mine actions bee
Worthy their sight, though blinde in how they see.

VII.

The Patriarches.

And let thy Patriarches Desire
(Those great Grandfathers of thy Church, which saw
More in the cloud, then wee in fire,
Whom Nature clear'd more, then us grace and law,
And now in Heaven still pray, that wee
May use our new helpes right,)
Be satisfied, and fructifie in mee;
Let not my minde be blinder by more light
Nor Faith by Reason added, lose her sight.

VIII.

The Prophets.

Thy Eagle-sighted Prophets too,
Which were thy Churches Organs, and did sound
That harmony, which made of two
One law, and did unite, but not confound;
Those heavenly Poëts which did see
Thy will, and it expresse
In rythmique feet, in common pray for mee,

That I by them excuse not my excesse
In seeking secrets, or Poëtiquenesse.

IX.

The Apostles.

And thy illustrious Zodiacke
Of twelve Apostles, which ingirt this All,
From whom whosoever do not take
Their light, to darke deep pits, throw downe, and fall,
As through their prayers, thou'hast let mee know
That their bookes are divine;
May they pray still, and be heard, that I goe
Th'old broad way in applying; O decline
Mee, when my comment would make thy word mine.

X.

The Martyrs.

And since thou so desirously
Did'st long to die, that long before thou could'st,
And long since thou no more couldst dye,
Thou in thy scatter'd mystique body wouldst
In Abel dye, and ever since
In thine, let their blood come
To begge for us, a discreet patience
Of death, or of worse life: for Oh, to some
Not to be Martyrs, is a martyrdome.

XI.

The Confessors.

Therefore with thee triumpheth there
A Virgin Squadron of white Confessors,
Whose bloods betroth'd, not marryed were;

Tender'd, not taken by those Ravishers:
They know, and pray, that wee may know,
In every Christian
Hourly tempestuous persecutions grow,
Tentations martyr us alive; A man
Is to himself a Dioclesian.

XII.

The Virgins.

Thy cold white snowie Nunnery,
Which, as thy mother, their high Abbesse, sent
Their bodies backe againe to thee,
As thou hadst lent them, cleane and innocent,
Though they have not obtain'd of thee,
That or thy Church, or I,
Should keep, as they, our first integrity;
Divorce thou sinne in us, or bid it die,
And call chast widowhead Virginitie.

XIII.

The Doctors.

Thy sacred Academ 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 wrought
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.

XIV.

And whil'st this universall Quire,
That Church in triumph, this is warfare here,
Warm'd with one all-partaking fire
Of love, that none be lost, which cost thee deare,
Pray ceaslesly, and thou hearken too,
(Since to be gratious
Our taske is treble, to pray, beare, and doe)
Heare this prayer Lord, O Lord deliver us
From trusting in those prayers, though powr'd out thus.

XV.

From being anxious, or secure,
Dead clods of sadnesse, or light squibs of mirth,
From thinking, that great courts immure
All, or no happinesse, or that this earth
Is only for our prison fram'd,
Or that thou art covetous
To them whom thou lovest, or that they are maim'd
From reaching this worlds sweet, who seek thee thus,
With all their might, Good Lord deliver us.

XVI.

From needing danger, to bee good,
From owing thee yesterdaies teares to day,
From trusting so much to thy blood,
That in that hope, wee wound our soule away,
From bribing thee with Almes, to'excuse
Some sinne more burdenous,
From light affecting, in religion, newes,
From thinking us all soule, neglecting thus
Our mutuall duties, Lord deliver us.

XVII.

From tempting Satan to tempt us,
By our connivence, or slack companie,
From measuring ill by vitious,
Neglecting to choake sins spawne, Vanitie,
From indiscreet humilitie,
Which might be scandalous,
And cast reproach on Christianitie,
From being spies, or to spies pervious,
From thirst, or scorne of fame, deliver us.

XVIII.

Deliver us for thy descent
Into the Virgin, whose wombe was a place
Of midle kind; and thou being sent
To'ungratious us, staid'st at her full of grace,
And through thy poore birth, where first thou
Glorifiedst Povertie,
And yet soone after riches didst allow,
By'accepting Kings gifts in the'Epiphanie,
Deliver, and make us, to both waies free.

XIX.

And through that bitter agonie,
Which is still the'agonie of pious wits,
Disputing what distorted thee,
And interrupted evennesse, with fits,
And through thy free confession
Though thereby they were then
Made blind, so that thou might'st from them have gone,
Good Lord deliver us, and teach us when
Wee may not, and we may blinde unjust men.

XX.

Through thy submitting all, to blowes
Thy face, thy clothes to spoile; thy fame to scorne,
All waies, which rage, or Justice knowes,
And by which thou could'st shew, that thou wast born,
And through thy gallant humblenesse
Which thou in death did'st shew,
Dying before thy soule they could expresse,
Deliver us from death, by dying so,
To this world, ere this world doe bid us goe.

XXI.

When senses, which thy souldiers are,
Wee arme against thee, and they fight for sinne,
When want, sent but to tame, doth warre
And worke despaire a breach to enter in,
When plenty, Gods image, and seale
Makes us Idolatrous,
And love it, not him, whom it should reveale,
When wee are mov'd to seeme religious
Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us.

XXII.

In Churches, when the'infirmitie
Of him which speakes, diminishes the Word,
When Magistrates doe mis-apply
To us, as we judge, lay or ghostly sword,
When plague, which is thine Angell, raignes,
Or wars, thy Champions, swaie,
When Heresie, thy second deluge, gaines;
In th'houre of death, th'Eve of last judgement day,
Deliver us from the sinister way.

XXIII.

Heare us, O heare us Lord; to thee
A sinner is more musique, when he prayes,
Then spheares, or Angels praises bee,
In Panegyrique Allelujaes,
Heare us, for till thou heare us, Lord
We know not what to say.
Thine eare to'our sighes, teares, thoughts gives voice and word.
O Thou who Satan heard'st in Jobs sicke day,
Heare thy selfe now, for thou in us dost pray.

XXIV.

That wee may change to evennesse
This intermitting aguish Pietie,
That snatching cramps of wickednesse
And Apoplexies of fast sin, may die;
That musique of thy promises,
Not threats in Thunder may
Awaken us to our just offices;
What in thy booke, thou dost, or creatures say,
That we may heare, Lord heare us, when wee pray.

XXV.

That our eares sicknesse wee may cure,
And rectifie those Labyrinths aright,
That wee by harkning, not procure
Our praise, nor others dispraise so invite,
That wee get not a slipperinesse,
And senslesly decline,
From hearing bold wits jeast at Kings excesse,
To'admit the like of majestie divine,
That we may locke our eares, Lord open thine.

XXVI.

That living law, the Magistrate,
Which to give us, and make us physicke, doth
Our vices often aggravate,
That Preachers taxing sinne, before her growth,
That Satan, and invenom'd men
Which well, if we starve, dine,
When they doe most accuse us, may see then
Us, to amendment, heare them; thee decline;
That we may open our eares, Lord lock thine.

XXVII.

That learning, thine Ambassador,
From thine allegeance wee never tempt,
That beauty, paradises flower
For physicke made, from poyson be exempt,
That wit, borne apt, high good to doe,
By dwelling lazily
On Natures nothing, be not nothing too,
That our affections kill us not, nor dye,
Heare us, weake ecchoes, O thou eare, and cry.

XXVIII.

Sonne of God heare us, and since thou
By taking our blood, owest it us againe,
Gaine to thy selfe, or us allow;
And let not both us and thy selfe be slaine;
O lambe of God, which took'st our sinne
Which could not stick to thee,
O let it not returne to us againe,
But Patient and Physition being free.
As sinne is nothing, let it no where be.