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"Mourne with some fruit": John Donne and the Redemptive Power of Religious Melancholy

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In a 1629 sermon to his congregation at St. Paul's Cross, John Donne observed that

> *worldly* and *carnall* men . . . were offended in Christ, that he induced an inglorious, a contemptible Religion, a Religion that opposed the *Honours* of this world; and a sooty, and *Melancholique* Religion, a Religion that opposed the *Pleasures*, and delights of this world; and a sordid, and beggerly Religion, a Religion that opposed the *Gaine*, and the Profit of this world.[1]

Donne recognized that witnesses to his religion might mistake his "fear of God" for a "childishness and pusilanimity," and his "present zeal to [God's] service" for "an infatuation and a melancholy" (*Sermons*, 8:182). Donne probably would not be surprised, then, to learn that critics would be making similar accusations against his religion and his spiritual poems centuries after his death. Modern critics have regarded Donne's Holy Sonnets as tokens of Donne's depressing and anxiety-prone religion, and have tried to diagnose Donne with various mental illnesses or religious delusions. John Stachniewski, for example, considers Donne's particular

[1]Donne, *Sermons*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953–1962), 9:115. All future citations from Donne's *Sermons* are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically by volume and page numbers.

brand of Christianity to be degrading, deluded, and depressing: he asserts that in the Holy Sonnets Donne subscribes to "a theology which brutalized self-esteem."[2] According to Stachniewski, Donne's desire for punishment from God is a "masochistic striving," and he places Donne among the "morbid-minded religious people" who lament their sinful humanity.[3] He describes Donne as "susceptible to Calvinism," and counts him in the number of the "dire casualties of Calvinist theology" who suffered under the "despair-inducing rigors of Puritan theology."[4] In his reading of the Holy Sonnets, Roger Rollin rightly identifies Donne's (or his "speaker's") spiritual suffering as "religious melancholy." However, he equates Donne's experiences of religious grief with "what modern psychiatry understands as a form of 'affective disorder.'"[5] This disorder is marked by bipolar mood swings, "inverse narcissism," and "masochistic fantasy," among other things.[6] Rollin therefore considers Donne's devotion to God, and the resultant grief and fear, a disturbing disease of the mind which should ideally be treated with modern chemical techniques.[7] He argues that Donne "is too full of self-pity . . . to recognize that he has fallen prey to religious melancholy," and that he is unlikely to be cured of his mental disorder.[8] These and other scholars, like the worldly men that Donne spoke of, are "offended" by what seems to them to be a "contemptible," "melancholique," and "sordid" religion.

Both Stachniewski and Rollin read Donne's melancholy from outside his religious context. From the outside looking in, Donne seems to have willingly imprisoned himself within a self-destructive worldview. Rollin sees Donne as psychologically unhealthy, embracing a state of mind that is emotionally destructive. Stachniewski too regards Donne as spiritually unhealthy, embracing a spiritually destructive theology (although his use

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[2]Stachniewski, "John Donne: The Despair of the 'Holy Sonnets,'" *ELH* 48 (1981): 677–705, quotation from p. 690.

[3]Stachniewski, pp. 688, 694.

[4]Stachniewski, pp. 698, 694.

[5]Rollin, "'Fantastique Ague': The Holy Sonnets and Religious Melancholy," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 131–146, quotation from 131.

[6]Rollin, pp. 142, 144.

[7]Rollin, p. 145.

[8]Rollin, p. 144.

of words like "masochistic" hints at a psychological diagnosis as well). However, even those who read Donne from *within* his religious context mistake his melancholy. Helen Gardner, for example, accepts Donne's religious standpoint as valid and refrains from critiquing his outlook in general. However, Gardner also misinterprets Donne's melancholy. Akin to Stachniewski and Rollin, Gardner believes that Donne is "deeply infected with melancholy, which . . . he regarded as a sin."[9] She also uses the language of sickness: she asserts that Donne's choices of subject matter and method in the sonnets are "symptoms" of a particular "condition of mind."[10] Whether they observe Donne's melancholy from within or without his religious context, all three critics understand Donne's melancholy as an entirely negative experience—either sickness or sin.

Stachniewski, Rollin, and Gardner are certainly right in observing that Donne is chronically unhappy, especially in his Holy Sonnets. Donne's biographer, Izaak Walton, writes that Donne's "constant infirmity" was "vapours of the spleen," which was an indication of melancholy.[11] Donne's frequent references to melancholy and sadness in his letters and devotional writing confirm that he agrees with Walton's assessment. "I languish, prest with melancholy," he says in a letter to Thomas Woodward (quoted by Walton, p. 7).[12] Stachniewski and Rollin, furthermore, are correct in suggesting that his religion is in part responsible for—and even encourages—his feelings of fear and sorrow. Donne often associates his fear and sorrow with his religious devotion. However, in response to these critics' assessments of Donne's religious melancholy, I shall argue, first, that in Donne's eyes it is potentially

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[9]Gardner, "General Introduction," in *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. xv–lv, quotation from xliii.

[10]Gardner, p. xxxi.

[11]Walton, *The Lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert* (London, 1670), *Early English Books Online* [*EEBO*], Henry E. Huntington Library, 17 December 2008 <http://gateway.proquest.com/>, p. 53. Future citations from Walton's *Lives* are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically by page number.

[12]See also the copy of this letter included in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert Grierson, 2 vols. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1912), 1:206. Citations from Donne's poetry (except for the Holy Sonnets) will be to this edition and will be noted parenthetically by line number.

redemptive—it is not the crippling, unhealthy disease that critics describe—and, second, that rather than being a purely unhappy experience, his melancholy is mixed with joy and hope.

Stachniewski's and Rollin's misreading of Donne's religious melancholy is understandable. As we saw, Donne anticipated such misreadings. Christianity—particularly Protestantism—does encourage sorrow for one's sins and desperation over salvation, and Donne participates wholeheartedly in this religious despair. Donne's critics are not entirely mistaken when they judge Christianity to be a "Melancholique Religion." They are simply wrong in concluding that this melancholy is devastating for Donne.

Gardner's misunderstanding of Donne's response to his own melancholy is likewise understandable. Melancholy is a highly ambiguous and slippery concept in the early modern period. As Lawrence Babb notes, in "Elizabethan usage melancholy suggests so many and such diverse mental phenomena that generalizations might seem impossible."[13] In fact, melancholy suggests more than only mental phenomena. As many scholars have acknowledged, the term "melancholy" in the period embraces a wide range of meaning, from a temperament to a physical illness to a passing emotion of gloomy pensiveness. Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy,* notes that melancholy "hath several Descriptions, Notations, and Definitions."[14] Timothy Bright too points out that "it shall be necessarie to lay forth diverse manners of taking the name of melancholie, and whereto the name being one, is applied diverselie."[15]

Generally speaking, melancholy was described as chronic feelings of fear and sorrow which resulted from no apparent external circumstances. Yet, the term was frequently applied to even well-founded fear and sadness. Burton described the melancholic condition as "a kinde of

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[13]Babb, *The Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1951), p. 175.

[14]Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 1.1.3.1, pp. 45–46. Future citations from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically by partition, section, member, and subsection numbers and by page numbers.

[15]Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (London, 1586; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), p. 1. Future citations from Bright's *Treatise of Melancholie* are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically by page numbers.

dotage, without any feaver, having for his ordinary companions, feare and sadnesse, without any apparent occasion" (1.1.3.1, p. 46), but he uses the word in an overwhelmingly vast number of ways throughout the book. In his section devoted to "religious melancholy" specifically, he uses "melancholy," "desperation" and "despair" interchangeably (cf. 3.4.2.2, p. 771). Melancholy was generally understood as a physical ailment, resulting from an excess of black bile, but could also be understood in emotional and spiritual terms. Babb argues that although generalization is difficult, there are two main distinct conceptions of melancholy in the early modern period. According to one, "melancholy is a degrading mental abnormality associated with fear and sorrow." According to the other, "melancholy is a condition which endows one with intellectual acumen and profundity, with artistic ability sometimes with divine inspiration."[16] While this distinction is accurate, Babb spends little time discussing the spiritual dimension of melancholy. Angus Gowland, on the other hand, recognizes that in early modern Europe "the melancholic emotions of fear and sadness became spiritually loaded, and incorporated within schemes of redemption as well as medical therapy."[17] Donne's contemporaries—and often Donne himself—also occasionally saw melancholy as a source of sin, as Gardner is aware. Thus modern critics may struggle to understand early modern melancholy, because of its flexibility in meaning and variety in usage. As Margery E. Lange points out, "[a]lthough [Donne] employs the word 'melancholy' fewer than 40 times in his entire corpus of sermons, those applications range" across the broad canvas of meanings available to him.[18] Many times Donne uses it in a positive sense, writing, for example, that Christ himself was a "melancholick man" (*Sermons*, 3:286); and other times he writes of melancholy as a sin or a sickness. Despite melancholy's ability to capture both redemptive and damning, healthy and unhealthy qualities, critics have focused largely on the negative aspects of this ambiguous phenomenon. Even Lange, who is careful to catalogue the

[16]Babb, p. 175.

[17]Gowland, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy: Robert Burton in Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 174.

[18]Lange, "Humourous Grief: Donne and Burton Read Melancholy," in *Speaking of Grief in English Literary Culture: Shakespeare to Milton*, ed. Margo Swiss and David A. Kent (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002), pp. 69–97, quotation from p. 70.

broad spectrum of melancholy's flexibility, concludes that Donne interprets melancholy only "as a danger, even a threat."[19] Like other critics, she ignores a very important side of religious melancholy.

Because melancholy covered such a vast range of meaning, many early modern physicians, philosophers and divines felt it useful to distinguish between different types of melancholy. Within the Christian tradition, early modern thinkers could look back to the example of Paul, who writes that there are two kinds of sorrow: "godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but sorrow of the world worketh death."[20] In his discussion of religious melancholy, Burton distinguishes between unholy and holy desperation, or "final" and "temporal": "Finall is incurable which befalleth reprobates; temporall is a rejection of hope and comfort for a time, which may befall the best of God's children" (3.4.2.2, p. 771). Early modern writers often distinguished between good and bad sorrow.

Other early modern writers distinguished between melancholy proper as a merely physical malady, and other spiritual afflictions which might be mistaken for melancholy. Bright, for example, in his 1586 *Treatise of Melancholie*, spends a significant amount of time distinguishing between melancholy, which he identifies as a physical illness, and the "afflicted conscience" which is a spiritual apprehension of one's sins: he writes that "the affliction of the soule through conscience of sinne is quite another thing then melancholy" (p. 187). The most important difference between the two, Bright explains, is that the afflicted conscience has a reason and a cause for mental torment, whereas melancholy is constituted by "meere fancy & hath no ground of true and just object, but is only raised upon disorder of humour in the fancy" (p. 188). The afflicted conscience "proceedeth from the mindes apprehension" while melancholy proceeds "from the humour" (p. 189). The two afflictions are further discernible because in cases of afflicted conscience, the body and the imagination are both sound, but in cases of melancholy the body and mind are enfeebled: "the complexion is depraved . . . the blood is over grosse, thick, & impure, & nature so disordered, that diverse melancholicke persons have

[19]Lange, p. 71.

[20]2 Corinthians 7:10, King James Version. All future citations from the Bible are also to the King James Version and will be noted parenthetically by book, chapter, and verse.

judged themselves some earthie pitchers" (p. 188). The treatment of these two afflictions are thus distinct: only medicine and purgation can heal the melancholic sufferer, whereas reconciliation with God is the only effective treatment for the afflicted conscience (p. 189).

The distictions between physical illness and spiritual suffering, however, are still complicated in Bright's *Treatise*. He discusses at length the complex relationship between body, spirit, and soul, noting that we can often become confused as to whether the soul or the body is at fault for our suffering (p. 36). The spirit, which mediates between the body and soul, is "the chief instrument . . . whereby the soule bestoweth the exercises of her facultie in her bodie;" but the spirit can be depraved by occasions "rising from the bodie," and thereby "becometh it an instrument unhandsome for performance of such actions" (pp. 35–36). Thus problems in the body create problems in the soul. The vexed relationship between body and soul are particularly prominent in people with melancholy dispositions. Bright diagnoses the addressee of the book, the ailing "M," as being "mixed of the melancholick humour and that terror of God" (p. 196). His spiritual suffering is exacerbated by his melancholic temperament: for "[a]lthough no man is by nature freed from this affliction [of conscience], in so much as all men are sinners, . . . yet is the melancholicke person more then any subject thereunto" (p. 198). According to Bright, the melancholic man is more "curious and distrusfull then other complexions": he is thus more prone to contemplating the hard doctrines of election and reprobation than other men, to fix upon the "oughlinesse of [his] sinnes," and to doubt his own salvation (pp. 205, 201). As a result he feels the terror and anguish of his sins more deeply than other sinners. Bright therefore declares, "upon you the crosse falleth more heavily, in so much as you are under the disadvantage of the melancholie complexion: whose opportunity Sathan embraceth to urge all terror against you to the fall" (p. 192). Although he sees melancholy and afflicted conscience as two distinct infirmities, the two interact in complex ways.

Burton, writing about three decades later, and contemporaneously with Donne, is less certain that there is such a distinction between spiritual and physical suffering. The final section of his book is devoted to "Religious Melancholy," which he admits is a subdivision of melancholy that has not been definitively established among physicians (3.4.1.1, p. 706). He argues that although melancholy and religious

despair often do not "concurre," yet "Melancholy alone againe may be sometimes a sufficient cause of this terror of conscience" (3.4.2.3, p. 773). Burton often regards religious despair, in fact, as a symptom or a subcategory of melancholy: he says, for example, that "of these melancholy Symptomes, these of despaire are most violent, tragicall and grievous" (3.4.2.3, p. 779). The complexity of physical and spiritual interactions can be observed with a glance at Burton's table of contents: we see that melancholy can be caused by God, angels, and magicians, as much as it can be caused by genetics, diet, bad air, solitariness, "perturbations of the mind," and loss of liberty (sect. 2).

Regardless of whether melancholy is a physical ailment distinct from the suffering of the "afflicted conscience," Burton maintains that some forms of fear and sorrow are redemptive while others are harmful. As noted above, Burton claims that "there be many kinds of desperation, whereof some bee holy, some unholy" (3.4.2.2, p. 770). He later explains that "some kind of Despaire be not amisse, when . . . we Despaire of our owne meanes, and relye wholly upon God," although he intends to focus on the "pernitious kind" throughout the remaining sections (3.4.2.2, p. 771).

Donne often used a similar distinction between holy and unholy melancholy in his own writing. In one of his sermons, he suggests, like Bright, that the spiritual affliction and the physical malady are not the same: "to weep for sin is not a damp of melancholy, to sigh for sin, not a vapour of the spleen" (4:343). However, Donne usually does not distinguish simply between physical and spiritual melancholy. In most cases, the bodily and the spiritual overlap and blur to produce sadness and despair that are at times crippling, but can also bend the soul towards goodness and salvation. In his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,* for example, Donne struggles to understand the soul-body interaction in his melancholy. Writing of his emotional turmoil, he asks, "But what have I done, either to breed, or to breathe these vapours? They tell me it is my Melancholy; Did I infuse it, did I drink in Melancholy into myself? It is my thoughtfulness; was I not made to think? It is my study; doth not my calling call for that?"[21] Donne is unable to determine

[21]Donne, Meditation 12, in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), ed. Anthony Raspa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 63. All future

whether his melancholy is a result of bodily functions—"breathing in vapours"—or something more spiritual, like his calling to be a preacher. It seems to come from a combination of both. Instead of distinguishing between physical and spiritual melancholy, then, Donne more often distinguishes between a productive, potentially redemptive melancholy, and a negative, corrupting melancholy. They are not as easy to distinguish as simply "physical versus spiritual." They interact and mingle in mysterious and ambiguous ways. The task of determining whether his melancholy is redemptive or destructive is generally quite vexing.

Perhaps the most important example of Donne's distinction between productive and destructive melancholy is found in his Holy Sonnet 3. He writes of a sinful, profane melancholy:

> . . . I have mourn'd in vaine;
> In mine Idolatry what showres of raine
> Mine eyes did waste? what griefs my heart did rent?
> That sufferance was my sinne. . . .[22]

Here, his grief is clearly sinful. Yet Donne asserts that there is a productive, redemptive form of sadness, for he invokes his "sighes and teares" to

> . . . returne againe
> Into my breast and eyes, which I have spent,
> That I might in this *holy discontent*
> Mourne with some fruit. . . .
> (1–4, italics added)

When his melancholy is focused on "idolatry," he sins; but when his grief issues from a repentant heart his melancholy becomes fruitful. Thus, as

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citations from Donne's Devotions are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically by meditation or expostulation numbers and by page numbers.

[22]Donne, Holy Sonnet 3 (1635 Sequence), in Appendix 1 of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 1: The Holy Sonnets*, ed. Gary A. Stringer et al. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), lines 4–7. All future quotations from the Holy Sonnets are to this edition, and to this sequence (except for Holy Sonnet 19, which is quoted from the Westmoreland Sequence), and will be cited parenthetically by line number.

Donne argues in *Biathanatos*, "all desperation is not hainous."[23] In a sermon preached to the king, Donne again distinguishes between forms of sadness:

> To sigh, and turne backward, to repent, and relapse, is a wofull Condition: But to sigh, and turne forward, to turne upon God, and pursue this sorrow for our sins, then, in such sighes, *The Spirit of man returnes to God that gave it*; . . . [it is] an acceptable sacrifice, when he sighes for his sins.
>
> (8:197)

Just as Donne's "sighs and tears" were profane in Sonnet 3 when spent on idols, he argues in this sermon that "these sighs are too spirituall a substance, to be bestowed upon worldly matters" (8:198). There are productive and destructive uses of grief, depending on what it is spent. Modern critics, however, have found it easier to understand all of Donne's melancholy as unequivocally destructive and to overlook its productive capacities. We should recognize the redemptive possibilities offered by and through melancholy, as Donne and his contemporaries understood them.

Babb, in discussing the "dignity of melancholy," points out that although some psychological and moralist writers of the early modern period felt that religious melancholy was demonic in nature, "[y]et the idea that the deepest and most genuine piety dwells in melancholy minds occurs with some frequency in early seventeenth-century literature."[24] He catalogues a number of early modern writers, including John Donne, who hail melancholy as a sign or source of holiness. He cites James Day, who, in a 1637 poem called "The Melancholicke Soules Comfort," writes that "sobs and cries" are the most acceptable music to God.[25] Babb also refers to a volume of religious verse by Humphrey Mill which is entitled *Poems Occasioned by a Melancholy Vision, or A Melancholy Vision upon*

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[23]Donne, *Biathanatos: A Declaration of That Paradoxe, or Thesis, That Self-Homicide is Not So Naturally Sin, That it May Never Be Otherwise* (London, 1644) *Early English Books Online* [*EEBO*], Cambridge University Library, 17 December 2008 <http:// gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:13137688>, p. 27.

[24]Babb, p. 177.

[25]Babb, p. 178.

Divers Theames Enlarged, published in 1639.[26] These texts demonstrate, as Jeremy Schmidt argues, that "English Protestants were willing to see despair not simply as a spiritual danger and, except in a few cases, not at all as a sin, but as an act of grace and a sign of saintliness."[27]

In his recent book *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul*, Schmidt discusses the reasons behind the early modern tendency to think of melancholy as potentially redemptive. "What needs to be appreciated above all else," he argues, "is the extent to which early modern English Protestants (and Catholics) thought of moments of despair as both common occurring features of Christian life and as spiritually healthy or at least health-bringing."[28] He notes that this fact has been generally obscured by the common assumption that the literature on the consolation of despair in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was strictly meant to deal with "the terrifying consequences of Calvinist predestinarian theology."[29] However, he argues that the "culture of despair" which characterized this time period was not only a result of extreme Calvinist theology.[30] To suggest that predestinarian belief was the only source of religious anxiety ignores the long history of despair and sorrow encouraged by Christian theology, and its prevalence throughout early modern churches. The view that spiritual suffering was potentially salubrious was "informed by a long theological and spiritual tradition going back to the letters of Paul that stressed the need for sorrow for sin, even desperation over salvation, as crucial in the turn away from reliance on self towards acceptance of God's grace."[31] Recall Paul's oft-quoted appeal to the Philippian church to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phillippians 2:12). All types of English ministers encouraged self-examination and repentance of sin, which, as Schmidt points out, "was precisely the kind of spiritual exercise which tended to generate despair in the soul, as it reminded the sinner of the enormous and properly unforgivable burden of his sins."[32] For

[26]Babb, p. 178.

[27]Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 55.

[28]Schmidt, p. 52.

[29]Schmidt, p. 52.

[30]Schmidt, p. 54.

[31]Schmidt, p. 50.

[32]Schmidt, p. 52.

Protestants especially, fear, sorrow, and despair over one's sinfulness was necessary to bring the soul to repentance, and to lead the repentant soul to an understanding that he or she must turn to God and depend wholly on his grace. Thus Donne writes of David, in a sermon to the king, "He comes to sigh, to groane, to an outward declaration of a sense of Gods indignation upon him, till he had perfected his repentance" (8:197). Furthermore, acknowledging one's moral worthlessness prevented pride and presumptuousness, which were spiritually dangerous. Since the melancholic man was most inclined to acknowledge his moral inadequacy and to see his own sin; as Bright points out to the addressee of his *Treatise*, melancholy could in fact lead to salvation. The "Puritan" preacher Robert Bolton, for example, argues that melancholy persons have a "passive advantage . . . by reason of their sad dispositions, and fearefull spirits, to be sooner affrighted, and dejected by comminations of judgments against sinne; more feelingly to take to heart the miseries, and dangers of their naturall state."[33] As a result, they are "wont to taste deeplier of legall contrition, and remorse, and so proportionably to feel and acknowledge a greater necessity of *Jesus Christ*; to thirst after him more greedily, to prize him more highly, and at length to throw their trembling soules into his blessed bosom with more eagernesse, and importunitie" (p. 211). The melancholic sufferer, therefore, is more likely to seek and accept salvation.

Since the physical and the spiritual aspects of melancholy were so closely linked in early modern thought, it is not unusual for writers to suggest that bodily distempers can contribute to holy contrition and consequently lead to repentance and salvation. Although some religious thinkers distinguished between melancholy and spiritual affliction, "[m]any ministers recognized that certain genuine cases of conscience were mixed with melancholic disease, and some went so far as to argue that the influence of melancholy in cases of the afflicted conscience were common."[34] The melancholy temperament, which resulted from a

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[33]Bolton, *Instructions for a Right Comforting Afflicted Consciences* (London, 1640), *Early English Books Online* [*EEBO*], British Library, 17 December 2008 <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:99842188>, p. 211. Future citations from Bolton's *Instructions* are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically by page numbers.

[34]Schmidt, p. 51.

particular humoural constitutions, was therefore often productive in spiritual matters. Schmidt cites the example of William Perkins, who wrote that melancholy was often found "mixed together" with "terror of Conscience . . . For the distraction of the mind will often breede a distemper in the body, and the distemper of the body likewise will sometimes cause distraction of the mind."[35] As we have seen, "terror of the conscience" was useful in leading the soul to repentance, and therefore a bodily distemper could have a productive influence on the sinner's redemption. Schmidt adds that "Perkins' formulation of the interaction of body and soul drew on a commonplace of Galenic medical theory and was entirely uncontroversial."[36] Donne's contemporary readers and auditors, therefore, would not have been surprised to find him suggesting at times that holy thoughts produce melancholy, while at other times that melancholy produces holy thoughts. He writes in *Satyre 3*, for example, that "[k]ind pity chokes [his] spleen" (1)—pious emotions stimulate the secretion of black bile. In the opening poem of "La Corona," Donne claims that his poems of "prayer and praise" are "weav'd in my devout melancholy" (1–2)—melancholy stimulates devotional poetry. His humoural balance and his spiritual state interact with one another, mutually influencing one another in complex ways.

When we reject the assumption that all melancholy is dangerous or sinful, we can more accurately assess Donne's complex religious experience, particularly in the Holy Sonnets, which have often been misread. Indeed, the Holy Sonnets are filled with gloom and anxiety. In Holy Sonnet 1 he describes his dark state: "I dare not move my dimme eyes any way, / Despaire behind, and death before doth cast / Such terrour" (5–7). He exclaims in Holy Sonnet 2, "Oh I shall soone despaire," because God does not seem inclined to save him (12). In Holy Sonnet 3, he claims that "To (poore) me is allowe'd / No ease" for his "long, yet vehement griefe" (12–13). In Holy Sonnet 19, Donne says that he "quake[s] with true feare of [God's] rod" (11). Amidst all of this terror and sadness, redemption is difficult to discern.

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[35]Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of Cases of Consience* (Cambridge, 1642), *Early English Books Online* [*EEBO*], Cambridge University Library, 17 December 2008 <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:citation:13489207>, p. 116.

[36]Schmidt, p. 52.

But Donne also suggests that his melancholy comes from God. In Holy Sonnet 8, he writes, "Then turne / O pensive soule, to God, for he knowes best / Thy griefe, for he put it into my breast" (12–14). Donne suggests that his grief is actually a gift. If God has given Donne his feelings of sadness, that grief can hardly be considered a sin. This idea of God-given grief is echoed in his later *Devotions*, when he suggests that perhaps his melancholy is a result of his calling to be a minister: when trying to locate his melancholy, he asks, "It is my study; doth not my calling call for that?" (Med. 12, p. 63). He implies that God's calling for him is the source of his emotional distemper, placing the responsibility on God rather than on himself. He adds, "I have don nothing willfully, perversely toward it, yet must I suffer in it, die by it," further demonstrating that he is not to be blamed for his melancholy (Med. 12, p. 63). His melancholy, as Douglas Trevor puts it, is "inevitably interwoven with his responsibilities as a preacher," which is the profession that God has selected for him.[37]

In spite of his suffering, which God has already given to him, Donne asks God for more sadness: in Holy Sonnet 5 he entreats God to "Powre new seas in mine eyes, that so I might / Drowne my world with weeping earnestly, / Or wash it if it must be drown'd no more" (7–9). Donne's world has already been drowned with weeping, and yet he asks for "new seas"—he seeks additional suffering, superadded to the seas of tears he has already wept. Donne also actively promotes his soul's own misery. He encourage his "blacke Soule," in Holy Sonnet 4, to "make thy selfe with holy mourning black, / And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne" (11–12). And in Holy Sonnet 19, Donne declares, "Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare" (14). He recognizes the ultimate value of his emotional suffering and extols its worth.

Many critics interpret Donne's desire for suffering as masochism. However, Donne's decision to seek out suffering is much more complex. First, Donne's desire for suffering follows a tradition of anguish that goes back to the Church Fathers and even Christ himself. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, tells his readers, "I say the truth in Christ, . . . that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart" (Romans 9:1–2). Donne says in one of his sermons, furthermore, that because Saint Paul

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[37]Trevor, "John Donne and Scholarly Melancholy," *SEL* 40.1 (2000): 81–98, quotation from p. 85.

knew that death in Christ resulted in an eternal reward, as a result he was not "afraid of melancholique apprehensions, by drawing his death into contemplation, and into discourse" (8:169). If Paul was not afraid to contemplate melancholy things, then surely Donne does not sin when he thinks dark and gloomy thoughts. In a slightly earlier sermon, Donne also notes that "even Christ himself had a sad soule towards his death, and a *Quare dereliquisti*, some apprehension, that God, though his God, had forsaken him. And . . . therefore, no man, how righteous soever, may presume, or passe away without feare and trembling" (8:45).

Christ's fear of death and apprehension of God's abandonment are important models for Donne's Holy Sonnets. In these poems, Donne is often aware of death's nearness, and he worries that God will not take action. But his fear is neither unique to him nor sinful: even Christ struggled with anxiety over God's faithfulness to him. Donne even refers to Christ, in another sermon, as "that melancholick man, who was never seen to laugh in all his life, and *whose soul was heavy unto death*" (3:286). If even Christ was often sad and fearful, even unto despair, Donne can be reassured that his anxiety-ridden soul is not unfit for heaven. Thus Donne's melancholy in the Holy Sonnets simply follows the pattern set out by Christ and those who first preached his message. Furthermore, Paul often urges his readers to "share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" (Romans 8:17). Paul's exhortation to actively participate in Christ's suffering is a Christian commonplace.

The second reason that Donne seeks emotional suffering, as Schmidt demonstrates, is that fear and sadness are useful for leading the sinner to repentance. Like Bolton's melancholy man, Donne hopes that his sorrow will lead to repentance and eventually redemption. In Holy Sonnet 4 where he encourages his already-black soul to mourn, he tells his soul that "if thou repent, thou canst not lack [grace]" (9). Donne associates mourning with repentance, and repentance results directly in grace. Donne also argues in his *Devotions* that fear is useful in guiding the Christian safely through life. In the Sixth Expostulation, Donne writes to the Almighty: "Oh my God, thou givest us fear for ballast to carry us steadily in all weathers" (p. 32). This fear is the "fear of the Lord," and, "as thy servant David had said, . . . the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisedome" (p. 33). The proper weight of the fear of God helps the anxious Christian to recognize his proper relationship to God, and to be constantly aware of his sinful nature and tenuous grasp on righteousness.

In the Eleventh Expostulation, Donne also explains that God welcomes a sad, repentant heart. He writes, "There is a middle kinde of *Hearts*, not so perfit, as to bee given, but that the very giving, mends them: . . . This is a *melting* heart, and a *troubled* heart; a *broken* heart, and a *contrite* heart. . . . Such a *Heart* I have" (p. 59). He is echoing the psalmist in Psalm 51:17, who writes, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart thou wilt not despise." George Herbert makes a similar suggestion in "The Altar," when he writes, "A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy servant rears, / Made of a heart, and cemented by tears."[38] The broken heart is an appropriate offering for God.

The charge of masochism which Stachniewski and Rollin level against Donne also ignores an even more important element in early modern theology. Throughout his sermons and his *Devotions*, Donne insists that the fear and sorrow induced by his religion are "mixed with joy." As Schmidt notes, early modern English divines were not seeking to instill unmitigated terror and misery into their readers and listeners. Instead, they were "arguing for a dialectic of sorrow and joy in the Christian life, a fruitful tension curbing presumption through despair and despair through grace, ultimately centering the soul in a posture of humble hope."[39] The ultimate goal was to balance despair over sin with hope in God's grace. Thus Donne advocates nothing unusual when he urges his congregation to "conceive no such feare as excludes spirituall joy, [and] conceive no such assurance, as excludes an humble and reverentiall feare [of God]" (*Sermons*, 3:279). He argues for a balance between the two—a healthy tension between fear and joy. Donne stresses the importance of searching for joy in misery, for "[t]hey that finde not joy in their sorrowes, glory in their dejections in this worlde, are in fearefull danger of missing both in the next" (*Devotions,* Exp. 17*,* p. 89). In fact, he writes in his *Devotions* that "[godly] *feare* and *joy* consist together; nay, constitute one another" (Exp. 6, p. 33). He gives the biblical example of the women who first discovered that Christ's tomb was empty: they "went away from the *sepulchre*, with *feare* and *joy*; they

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[38]Herbert, "The Altar," in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (Cambridge, 1633), *Early English Books Online* [*EEBO*], British Library, 17 December 2008 <http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&es_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:23248>, lines 1–2.

[39]Schmidt, p. 59.

ran, sayes the text, and they ran upon those two legs, *feare* and *joy*; & both was the right legg; they *joy* in thee O *Lord*, that *feare* thee" (p. 33). He adds that "thy *feare* and thy *love*, are inseparable," and "Hee doeth neither that doth not both" (p. 33). Thus fear and joy are inextricably intertwined; if one cultivates a healthy amount of either, one cannot lack the other.

Donne also explains, in one of his sermons, that suffering itself is not the aim and goal in his religious devotion; rather, he seeks what *emerges from* the suffering. As Trevor argues, "sadness is not Donne's 'sole object.'"[40] Meditating on one of the Beatitudes, Donne explains:

> *Blessed are they that mourne*, says Christ: But the blessednesse is not in the mourning, but because *they shall be comforted*. Blessed am I in the sense of my sins, and in the sorrow for them, but blessed therefore, because this sorrow leads me to my reconciliation to God, and the consolation of his Spirit.
>
> (*Sermons*, 3:270)

Donne does not seek misery simply out of a revelry in pain; he seeks misery because Christ promises blessedness which comes out of suffering. He is not interested in melancholy for melancholy's sake, but for the comfort that Christ brings to those who mourne. As Donne explains, sorrow leads him to reconciliation. The sadness that we read in the Holy Sonnets is only the first step in his progression to blessedness.

In the sermon with which I began, Donne is concerned that critics will think his religion is contemptible because it opposes the "Honours," "Pleasures" and "Gaine" of this world. He encourages his auditors to consider whether this were "enough to condemne the Christian Religion, if it did oppose worldly honour, or pleasure, or profit? *Or does our Religion doe that*?" (9:115). He argues that the Christian religion does not in fact oppose any of these things, but welcomes them, even in this life. However, he adds that even "if my religion did enwrap me in a continuall cloud, damp me in a continuall vapour, smoke me in a continuall sourenesse, and joylesnesse in this life, yet I have an abundant recompense in that Reversion, which the Lord . . . hath laid up for me, That I shall drink . . . *of the Rivers of his pleasures*" (9:116). Many of

[40]Trevor, p. 82.

Donne's readers may find that the "hypothetical" worldly life that he indicates here does indeed describe his actual experience—he seems, in most of his writing, to indeed be "enwrapped in a continual cloude," "damped in a continual vapour," and "smoked in a continual sourness." In his *Devotions*, for example, he insists frequently that man's primary experience in life is misery (cf. Med. 8, Med. 14, Med. 21). However, Donne argues that even so, he finds hope in the promise that he will enjoy endless pleasure in the next life. Therefore "if my Religion denied me pleasure here, I would not deny my Religion, nor be displeased with my Religion for that" (*Sermons*, 9:116). Donne's argument here is an apt response to his modern critics as well: on the one hand, his religion does not deny joy in this world; but even if it did, it promises an abundance of everlasting joy and glory in the next. Donne is willing to endure temporary fear and sorrow in this life because it leads to something greater in the next.

I must concede that the Holy Sonnets show little evidence of the earthly comfort and joy to which Donne refers in his sermons and *Devotions*, and they express little hope for happiness in the next life. Donne claims, in Holy Sonnet 6, that the fear of seeing God's face "already shakes my every joynt" (8), but there is no sign of the joy in any of the sonnets which is supposed to "consist together" with that fear. One might ask, then, why Donne's Holy Sonnets are so full of grief and devoid of contentment, when his sermons and devotional writing so often tell us that sadness and joy dwell together? First, we must keep in mind that the Holy Sonnets were written before any of his sermons or his *Devotions*. One possibility is that he does obtain peace and happiness later, in the time after writing the Holy Sonnets. Another is that his views on melancholy and joy change with time. Second, the Holy Sonnets do not represent a completed struggle or a finished story. They represent a moment—or a short series of moments—in Donne's progression to salvation. The Holy Sonnets present a portrait of a passionate lover of God who is struggling to understand his relationship to the Ineffable. The struggle, however, is not resolved within the Holy Sonnets. They only chart the beginning. Yet, a note of hope reverberates throughout the Holy Sonnets. As Richard Strier points out, Donne knows in the Holy Sonnets that he will be saved; he is just unsure of how it will happen. As Strier puts it, "there is a difference between being in doubt about your own salvation and being in doubt about the very means

or method of salvation," and "the latter sort of doubt is present in many of the 'Holy Sonnets.'"[41] Thus Donne is not sure how much responsibility is his own, and how much is God's; but he knows that the appropriate attitude with which to begin is that of a contrite heart. In Holy Sonnet 4, he is not sure how to repent ("who shall give thee that grace to begin?" [10]), but he knows that the right place to start is to recognize his own sins and lament them ("Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke, / . . . as thou art with sinne" [11–12]). Contained within the poems is a continuous (though tenuous) promise of future comfort and redemption: he imagines his soul taking flight to heaven in Holy Sonnet 6, with his sins falling to the earth (9–11), and also imagines himself "valiantly" striding over "hels wide mouth" in Holy Sonnet 8 (4). The details of his salvation are confused, but a general sense of strained hope pervades the Holy Sonnets. In addition, although at times he seems close to despair, Donne never totally gives in to doubt: he only claims, in Holy Sonnet 2, that he "shall *soone* despaire" if God does not soon take action (12, italics added). His despair imitates Christ's, as when he called out to his father on the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Despite his occasional propensity to doubt, Donne is generally convinced of his salvation. He counsels his soul, in Holy Sonnet 15, confidently telling it that God "doth make his Temple in thy brest" (4) and that God "Hath deign'd to chuse thee by adoption" (7). Again, he is confused about the exact mechanics of his salvation, but believes that he has somehow been secured in his redemption. Though he feels little comfort now, salvation promises future relief from anxiety.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Donne never stops loving God. Despite his fear and anxiety, he bursts out (quite unexpectedly) in Holy Sonnet 14, "Yet dearly'I love you" (9). This love for God impels Donne to continue to "labour" for God's admittance into his heart, regardless of the troubles he must face (6). We must note that in the Sixth Expostulation of his *Devotions*, in which he meditates on the fear of God, Donne uses the terms "joy" and "love" interchangeably: he writes in one moment that "feare, and joy consist together," and in the next, without notice, that "thy feare and thy love are inseperable" (p. 33).

[41]Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–1610," *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 357–384, quotation from p. 364.

Donne's critics may think that Donne is not joyful, but his love for God constitutes his joy, and his love in the "Sonnets" is undeniable.

To conclude, Holy Sonnet 19 most accurately illustrates my main argument—that Donne's propensity for grief and fear is conducive to his religious devotion, and is thereby redemptive. The poem is marked with signs of Donne's melancholy. He writes that "Inconstancy vnnaturally hath begott / A constant habit" in his devotional life, and he describes his contrition as "humorous" (2, 5). In his discussion of the symptoms of melancholy, Burton says that melancholy individuals are "[*i*]*nconstant* . . . in all their actions," and "*Humourous* they are beyond all measure" (1.3.1.2, pp. 238, 239). Donne writes that "when I would not / I change in vowes, and in devotione" (3–4). According to Burton, this is typical of melancholics: they are "in most things wavering, unable to deliberat through feare" (1.3.1.2, p. 238). Black bile is considered the most volatile humour; likewise, Donne describes himself as "ridlingly distemperd" (7). Most important to his melancholic constitution, of course, is his fear: he "quake[s] with true feare" (11) of God's wrath. Donne is clearly melancholic in this Holy Sonnet. This poem also suggests that Donne's temperament encourages holy devotion. His good days, he tells us, are merely moments of "prophane love," when he presumptuously "courts" God with "flattering Speaches" (6, 10). At these times, he is insincere and impertinent. His dark, melancholy days, in contrast, are marked with "true" (*genuine*) fear. Thus he concludes, "Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare" (14). Even though it makes him inconsistent in his devotion and often quite miserable, Donne recognizes that his melancholy encourages sincerity, reverence, and humility before God, which is the appropriate stance to take before the one who made him. His melancholy gives him a humble and repentant spirit, which God accepts in exchange for salvation.

I must note that Donne often points out that sadness alone does not secure salvation. He tells his auditors in one of his sermons, "Be not apt to think heaven is an *Ermitage*, or a *Monastery*, or the way to heaven a sullen *melancholy*" (3:121). He adds in a later sermon that since "Salvation it selfe being so often presented to us in the names of Glory, and of Joy, we cannot think that the way to that glory is a sordid life affected here, . . . Neither can men thinke, that the way to the joyes of Heaven, is a joylesse severenesse, a rigid austerity; for as God loves a cheerefull giver, so he loves a cheereful taker" (3:270). The path to glory

is not a continual sadness; but unhappiness can lead the soul to an awareness that he needs God's grace. Grief is only the first step in a long journey towards heaven—towards emotional comfort, glory, joy, and peace. The "Holy Sonnets" represent that first step. Donne's religious melancholy in these poems in neither a sin, as Gardner believes, nor a sickness, and Stachniewski and Rollin suggest, but rather a sign and symptom of sin which prompts him to turn to the Physician who can cure all diseases of the soul and wounds of the spirit.

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