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Wrong Turns in "Goodfriday, 1613"

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John Donne's "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" is indisputably one of the great devotional poems in English. It has attracted considerable critical attention in the last fifty years, and in a 1995 collection, the poem insinuated itself into the arguments of five essays out of eighteen.[1] William Halewood lists some of the central critical issues in the poem's recent history:

> . . . if the rider's error is a particular and identifiable sin (if so, what sin?); whether it is sin at all, or merely failure in meditation; whether the rider goes his way under compulsion or by choice; whether his rebellion ceases or continues; and whether the poem arrives at closure.[2]

To this list one might add whether the speaker's (and of course Donne's) theology is fundamentally Protestant or Catholic; the figural history and implications of the celebrated spherical/orbital analogy with which the poem begins; the devotional relationship of imagination, passion, and reason; and so forth.

These are all good, important questions, brought forth by a poem that provokes them in rich and complex ways. But a questionable sort of consensus seems to pervade the critical history of "Goodfriday," and that often-unspoken agreement assumes that the poem is a devotional

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[1]See *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances Malpezzi (Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995).

[2]Halewood, "The Predicament of the Westward Rider," *Studies in Philology* 93.2 (Spring 1996): 218–228, quotation from p. 218.

triumph. Whether the poem's essential dynamic is held to be bound up in Ignatian meditation, a more Protestant mode of memory, poetic projection, cosmological reimagining, unmerited grace, Catholic penitentiality, or a recognition of the speaker's sheer depravity, most readers see the end result to be a spiritual success—a healthy and necessary act of radical submission to the will and grace of God, and an announcement of total dependence on His purifying correction. As Helen Brooks has put it, in this poem "the will is slowly but surely brought into alignment with the will of God,"[3] and this claim would fit comfortably into many, perhaps most, readings of "Goodfriday."

Perhaps this sort of reading is right; it certainly seems to affirm a sense of devotional purpose for the poem, and it has at any rate generated a good deal of truly interesting and illuminating scholarship. But I think that there are at least two reasons to reexamine the prevalent assumption of devotional success (i. e., genuine reorientation and submission to Christ) in "Goodfriday." The first is that it often seems to lead critics away from the poem, using sermons, traditions, or perhaps personal beliefs—whether about God or Donne or poetry I won't presume to guess—to assert things about the poem that simply don't appear to be there, not supplementing or corroborating careful reading but distorting and displacing it. Paul Harland, for example, in an often-interesting essay, claims toward the end that

> the speaker takes up his own cross and mirrors Christ by being willing, through God's grace, to accept the suffering inherent in loving the world compassionately for God's sake. . . . By giving the soul of devotion a body, and thus making it active, he witnesses his own resurrection, reflects God's image, and becomes Christ in the world. . . . this conversion reveals to the speaker the divine purpose underlying of [*sic*] the westward journey, which until now, he had failed to see.[4]

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[3]Brooks, "Donne's 'Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward' and Augustine's Psychology of Time," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, pp. 284–305, quotation from p. 299.

[4]Harland, "'A true Transubstantiation': Donne, Self-love, and the Passion," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, pp. 162–180, quotation from pp. 175–176.

On this I'll simply say that almost none of these claims has any clear basis in the text of the poem; rather, they seem to be derived from snippets of sermons and then forced quite puzzlingly—in some cases, indeed, inexplicably—upon it.[5] But far from being an aberration, this instance is symptomatic of a fairly widespread critical tendency to draw homiletic conclusions from the poem as if they were there, and while these conclusions might well be morally or theologically laudable, and perhaps even true of other Donnean texts, it is a serious interpretive problem to impose them on a text which doesn't apparently contain or suggest them.

The second reason to at least question the assumption of devotional closure in this poem is that it seems to me to run counter to what makes Donne so fascinating as a devotional writer: the profound and perpetual tension between acquiescence and resistance, submission and assertion, gratitude and resentment, humility and egotism, which gives his religious poems such an aching, compelling force. This is, after all, the poet who imperiously commands God to overwhelm his agency in "Batter my heart," and who both castigates and apologizes to God in "If poisonous minerals"—only to preserve some hostility in the pronominal ambiguity of the closing couplet. The agonizingly conflicted depth and complexity of Donne's poetry often arise from its frank focus on the dark side of

[5]It's true that the speaker asks that Christ's image be restored in him. But this devotion doesn't really require a body, as Harland asserts, and certainly not because the physicality of riding somehow enables a strictly corporeal mode of correction; nor does the speaker "become" Christ; nor is the suffering supposedly taken on by him analogous to Christ's in the ways Harland suggests; nor would any of this necessarily entail that the westward riding is an act of divine providence and not of sinful waywardness. What Harland describes as a presently observable fait accompli ("mirrors Christ. . . . reflects God's image") is in the poem simply a request ("Restore thine image"), and the last request at that, the fulfillment of which is indeterminate, and most likely still pending, and at any rate dependent on the agency of God. What I think Harland, and many others, end up doing is missing a basic, and recognized, devotional problem ("the soul's unhealthy habit, even in the midst of supposed acts of remorse and contrition, to turn inward instead of outward") in the poem, and thus falling interpretively, and precisely, into a trap he sees Donne as warning against (elsewhere): "the human inclination to misconstrue the deformed species of self-interest as true humility" (p. 163).

faith, and on the struggles and failures and even loathings that result from his (frequently unresolved) resistance to the divine. Perhaps "Goodfriday" is not exempt from this characteristic and crucial dynamic; perhaps the conflict with which the poem begins is a real one, and not a misrecognition of providence for sinful waywardness; perhaps, in the poem's directional and devotional logic, west is not, as several critics have contended, really east after all;[6] perhaps the movement of the poem is not, as Patrick O'Connell has argued, one of "letting go of [the speaker's] self-centered individualism," nor as Carol M. Sicherman has suggested, from "intellectual jugglery" to honest humility, but precisely the opposite of both.[7]

As he surveys some of these critics, Halewood observes that "what kind of hinge we find in the apostrophe . . . depends to a large extent on how we understand 'but'" in line 37.[8] He rightly critiques theologically-

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[6]One of the most remarkable features of this poem's critical history is the amount of (sometimes prestidigitative) critical energy that has been invested, sometimes by very good critics, in reconciling its east and west. But why do this? Why try to negate a conflict that Donne insists is fundamentally important? And why assume that it gets resolved, despite the speaker's continuing westwardness? The fact that Donne, in "Hymn to God My God, In My Sickness," renders planar geography into three dimensions, and asserts that West and East are one, does *not* justify the imposition of this principle onto this very different poem (as done, for instance, by David M. Sullivan, "Riders to the West: 'Goodfriday, 1613,'" *John Donne Journal* 6.1 [1987]: 1–8)—one which proclaims and depends upon the absolute difference between the two.

[7]O'Connell, "'Restore Thine Image': Structure and Theme in Donne's 'Goodfriday,'" *John Donne Journal* 4.1 (1985): 13-28, quotation from p. 26; Sicherman, "Donne's Discoveries," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 11.1 (Winter 1971): 69-88, quotation from p. 69. Donald Friedman makes a similar point in a well-regarded essay that juxtaposes rationality and memory, seeing the former as a mechanism of evasion and the latter as the poem's means to the true apprehension of Christ ("Memory and the Art of Salvation in Donne's Good Friday Poem," *ELR* 3 (1973): 418–442). And so does Helen Gardner, in seeing the poem moving toward "penitent prayer" and "passionate humility"—though she also suggestively discerns a "silent figure whose eyes the poet feels watching him as he rides away to the west," and who will reappear, in a different form, later in this essay (*The Divine Poems* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1978], pp. xxxiii–xxxiv).

[8]Halewood, pp. 219–221.

problematic readings of this word which see the westward riding as itself a path to God (and thus a good thing), and reads *but* in a more straightforward sense, arguing that such a reading creates no insurmountable obstacles to theological coherence and devotional closure. The result is a reading of the poem as "a radically Protestant meditation on sin and salvation" in which the problems of sinful resistance are fully rectified by a divine presence that "puts an end to question and debate."[9] Halewood's *but* simplifies some critical overcomplications, and clears up some theological problems, but it also, like other readings, produces—in fact seems to require—a conclusion of decisive spiritual closure.[10] Clearly, though, neither the poem nor Halewood's reading of it have "put an end to question and debate," and there are reasons for this. I want to suggest that this closure may not be there; that the radical submission may not be there either; that the entire poem does indeed turn on a single word in line 37, heretofore little-noted; and that that word turns out to be not *but*, but *turn*. There are significant interpretive and theological ramifications to this.

But Halewood is not the only one to get tripped up around line 37. In a recent article, Richard Strier gives what is in some ways an even better critique of this poem's critical history, but there too are problems. On two matters I think Strier is exactly right. First, he observes and attacks what he calls "the importation of scholarly baggage," and contends that "the application of scholarly knowledge to poems needs to be controlled by a very strict sense of contextual relevance and by a non-totalizing sense of what a 'tradition' or an 'episteme' is."[11] As my previous remarks indicate, I agree with this, and would amplify it to include unjustified impositions of ideas even from an author's other works, which has played its own role in this poem's muddled critical history. It will also be apparent by this point (and if it isn't, it soon will be) that I agree wholly

[9]Halewood, pp. 218, 228.

[10]"Submission, also, is restored as we recognize a character wondering and thankful in the presence of his seventeenth-century Protestant God and counting his blessings. . . . [S]urely, closure is as complete as the nature of poems will allow when Christ presents himself to be spoken to" (Halewood, p. 221). I'll argue below that none of this may actually happen in the poem.

[11]Strier, "Going in the Wrong Direction: Lyric Criticism and Donne's 'Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward,'" *George Herbert Journal* 29.1–2 (Fall 2005/Spring 2006): 13–27, quotation from p. 14.

with Strier's critique of what he calls the dogmatic "'error-correction' view of the structure and progression of the poem"[12]—that is, the view that the poem begins with a counterdevotional state of error which is successfully rectified by the poem's end.

On two other matters, however, Strier's argument is less convincing. The first is his condemnation of what he calls "overmuch talk about *personae*,"[13] and his evident (and longstanding)[14] desire to connect the poem's sentiments to John Donne himself and not some fictional intermediary. Now I have no particularly passionate feelings either way on this matter—though I do generally believe that Donne the man is more reliably perceptible in his religious poetry than in the nonreligious—but in Strier's argument it is a distraction from the real question of how we make sense of this poem. His insistent return to it at the end of his essay does little to resolve the central critical problem (i. e., triumphalism) he has so accurately identified, and makes for a perplexing and indeterminate conclusion. But by that point the other, even larger, issue has also arisen, for his heretofore-convincing reading becomes itself unstable and unsatisfying as something that might effectively resolve this longstanding critical difficulty; it becomes at once less original (in its reading, along the lines of Theresa M. DiPasquale, Michael Schoenfeldt, and Ernest B. Gilman, of the poem's end as pushy and conditional[15]) and less coherent (in its confusing account of the object of gratification, and its unclarity as to how his conclusion fixes or even addresses the critical problem), and the essay's three remaining paragraphs are its least purposeful and most muddled. Interestingly, the point in the poem at which Strier's account falters is precisely where Halewood misses his opportunity: line 37, a line that Strier, remarkably and

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[12]Strier, "Lyric Criticism," p. 16.

[13]Strier, "Lyric Criticism," p. 14.

[14]See Strier's "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–1610," *Modern Philology* 86.4 (May 1989): 357–384, especially p. 358.

[15]See DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), pp. 119–133, especially pp. 127–129; Schoenfeldt, "'That Spectacle of Too Much Weight': The Poetics of Sacrifice in Donne, Herbert, and Milton," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.3 (Fall 2001): 561-584, especially pp. 569–570; and Gilman, *Iconoclasm and Poetry in the English Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 141–147.

uncharacteristically, twice misquotes as "I turne my back *on* thee."[16] (He also describes what happens in it almost correctly—"Donne refuses, again, to change his direction"—before redescribing it, incorrectly and contradictorily, as a "gesture."[17])

One might, therefore, see "Goodfriday," and in particular its thirty-seventh line, as a sort of critical tarpit into which many very good critics have fallen—in some cases while in the act of recognizing the errors of their predecessors. The title of Strier's article asserts, correctly, that much of the criticism is "going in the wrong direction," but when he hits line 37, his own argument loses its way. I will argue in the remainder of this essay that one reason for this history of confusion has to do with a missed direction in that line, a turn that is not, and cannot be, what it seems. Attending closely to this turn can lead us out of the "contract of error," and resolve a number of the seemingly unshakeable critical problems that have bedeviled Donne's great poem.

To fully understand the importance of the turn, however, we must begin at the beginning. The first ten lines of "Goodfriday" clearly set up the fundamental importance of movement and directional orientation.

> Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
> The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
> And as the other Spheares, by being growne
> Subject to forraigne motions, lose their owne,
> And being by others hurried every day,
> Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:
> Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit
> For their first mover, and are whirld by it.
> Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West
> This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.[18]

Here, in lines 9–10, is the poem's central metaphor: the division of body and soul, west and east, distraction and devotion. The speaker laments that while his soul harkens toward the devotional east of Christ's crucifixion, it is dragged toward the nondevotional—that is, worldly or,

[16]Strier, "Lyric Criticism," pp. 22–23.

[17]Strier, "Lyric Criticism," pp. 22, 23.

[18]Donne, "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," in *The Divine Poems*, lines 1–10. All quotations from Donne's verse are taken from this edition.

in its pull away from Christ, sinful—west of "pleasure or business" toward which he moves physically (and which, not coincidentally, is also the direction in which one would usually exit a traditionally east-oriented church building, walking away from the altar and toward the nonsacral temporal world).[19]

But there's something slightly fraudulent about this lament. Though the speaker attempts to defuse his own responsibility by suggesting that he is passively "carried" westward, his problem really can't be blamed on his horse, and in fact he has already quite candidly revealed to us a starker truth: he is culpable for his own devotional failure. Born, apparently, with a devout soul (an essential inclination that I take to be the point of the reference to the spheres' "naturall forme"), he has not simply lost this orientation; he has abandoned it. His response to the temptation of "foreign motions" and quotidian distractions has been to embrace them ("Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules *admit* / For their first mover"), and he is hence liable for his own spiritual corruption and the westerly movement that is a symptom of it; if he is being "carried," it is by a force of his own choosing. This is perhaps the poem's most spiritually honest moment.

Having acknowledged his fundamental problem, the question for the speaker then becomes what to do about it—and as the saying goes, you are what you do. We should first note what he does not do: he doesn't simply turn his horse around to bring his physical and spiritual selves into alignment, and he thus perpetuates his complicity in what he himself has clearly identified as a serious spiritual problem. The spheres may turn (or tune) in Christ's hands, but the westward rider does not. What he does do is begin to amplify his claim of devotional easterliness.

> There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,
> And by that setting endlesse day beget;
> But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,
> Sinne had eternally benighted all.
>
> (10–14)

[19]Conventional usage, at least in Britain, employs "east end" to describe that part of the church in which the altar is located, and thus the end toward which the congregation faces to worship—regardless of the church's precise geographical orientation (cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "east," C.b).

Were he in fact facing east, he "should see" (meaning, presumably, "would see," though a sense of implied—and ignored—obligation certainly fits with the speaker's own previous self-analysis[20]) Christ on the cross. Not literally, of course, but devotionally, and this is precisely what he apparently proceeds to do.

> Yet dare I'almost be glad, I do not see
> That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
> Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
> What a death were it then to see God dye?
> It made his owne Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
> It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.
> Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
> And tune all spheares at once, peirc'd with those holes?
> Could I behold that endlesse height which is
> Zenith to us, and to'our Antipodes,
> Humbled below us? or that blood which is
> The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
> Make durt of dust, or that flesh which was worne
> By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?
> If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
> Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
> Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus
> Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?
>
> (15–32)

The paradox of this central passage is of course that he does not do what he appears to be doing. He does not see; he does not dare; he does not behold; he does not even look. He simply wonders if he could, and in this way he makes the Crucifixion quite vividly present for us while scrupulously avoiding it himself. The speaker's response to his own recognition that he "should see" Christ is to continue his refusal to do so.

Since Louis L. Martz, critics typically read this strange dynamic of seeing by way of not-seeing as some more or less successful combination of Ignatian "composition" (a devotional version of memorial reconstruction)—or perhaps some analogous but more Protestant mode of imaginative memory—and the sense of devotional humility and

[20]As Strier correctly observes, "The modal form of 'should' is clearly the intended sense, but the moral sense bulks large" ("Lyric Criticism," p. 20).

empathy that it was designed to provoke. But it is worth considering whether this sort of reading might rather be an interpretive effect of a masterful poetic trick perpetrated on us (and some very distinguished company) in the final ten lines.

> Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
> They'are present yet unto my memory,
> For that looks towards them; and thou look'st towards mee,
> O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;
> I turne my backe to thee, but to receive
> Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
> O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
> Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
> Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
> That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.
>
> (33–42)

Here we have the encouraging suggestion that the speaker's predicament may admit of resolution: though he can't—won't—see the Crucifixion physically, his eyes of faith have made its every detail "present" through their devotionally steady gaze. But even this gloriously complex claim is problematic: remember that he has taken great care to ensure that this does *not* happen, that the scene is, for whatever reason, held at arm's length and just offstage. Halewood is mistaken, I think, when he speaks of "God's rectifying presence" at the poem's end;[21] when Donne does allow an addressable Christ to enter the poem, it is on the speaker's terms—silence, beneficent watching, concerned listening, raising no questions or objections about the speaker's version of events—and a projection of his egoism, so skillfully rendered that we may mistake it for an objective presence.

This may appear to be an instance of how Donne characteristically reworks a classically Catholic form into a more Protestant version: in refusing the presence-adoring meditative gaze, yet generating an imaginary projection of the scene, he parallels the Reformed sacramental insistence on figural, memorial apprehension of the divine—and, of course, the same primal scene ultimately underwrites and serves as the referent of both the Eucharist and this poem. But surely things are not so

[21]Halewood, p. 228.

simple: memory and imagination are important parts of the Ignatian model, and thus can't be exclusively associated with either Catholic or Protestant devotion. Furthermore, is the speaker's present-making "memory" really a mode of devotional intimacy at all, or is it a further evasion, a way for him to constitute and address a savior of his own making (and whose reciprocating gaze will conveniently affirm the speaker's own sense of self)? If the latter, then the apparent submission that ends the poem may not be what it seems, but rather a roundabout validation of the speaker's own desires.

Nevertheless, at first glance, this dynamic appears to be quite effective. The speaker's imaginative regard of the Crucifixion makes Christ sufficiently present to be directly addressed for the remainder of the poem. And there does seem to be a reciprocal sort of dynamic, in which a crisscrossing, remembering gaze simultaneously constitutes both the Crucifixion and the devotional speaker; perhaps this address is a consequence not of the speaker's regard of Christ, but of Christ's regard for him ("thou look'st towards mee"). Once this mutual regard is established, the poem heads toward its great penitential conclusion (37–42), which begins with the pivotal claim that "I turne my backe to thee, but to receive / Corrections," and proceeds to articulate what appears to be a radical humility and desire for punitive purification. The vast majority of critics writing on this poem, regardless of their overall theological perspective, tend to see the ending this way, as a conclusion of devotionally constructive reorientation.

But that first phrase is pivotal indeed; the entire poem depends on it, and the phrase itself depends on a single word. As I suggested earlier, that word is not *but*, but *turn*, and thus it is now time to turn to *turn*. We should note first that this only appears to be a simple word; its history and usage encompass enormous complexity, ambivalence, and contradiction. Among the scores of definitions catalogued in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one is struck—perhaps unnecessarily so, given that the very notion of turning implies multiple, different, deviant, contradictory directions—by the many that indicate change, conflict, misdirection, antipathy. To turn can mean to pervert or misapply (14a), to beguile or cheat (14b), to adopt or reject a particular religious belief (29a), to revolt or desert (30c), to attack or oppose (33), to transmute or substitute (35), to translate or paraphrase or render (44a), or to leave or abandon (48). Heather Dubrow applies these sorts of complications to

literary form, and argues that lyric verse is itself deeply structured by the oppositionality of *versus* and the turning and conflict inscribed within it.[22]

But despite these built-in difficulties of turning, and despite what I will argue is its highly problematic nature in "Goodfriday," most critics skate right past this word without noting either its inherent complexity or its specific and crucial oddness.[23] Some, though, have paused to explicate it. Helen Brooks spends a paragraph discussing the historical importance of "turning" as a central Christian metaphor for repentance and conversion (the etymology of *convert*, from the Latin *convertere*, means essentially "to turn around, or with, or together").[24] Quite

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[22]In her book *The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008)—my thanks to her for allowing me to read a draft version after hearing an early version of this essay—Dubrow writes, "lyric, like other forms of poetry, is frequently figured and configured in the early modern period through the etymological root of verse, *versus,* whose principal meanings include 'turning.' The term is applied in that era to many types of poetry, but readers were surely especially aware of its relevance to lyric: whether or not stanzas structure a particular text, in the instance of lyric the resonances of *versus* are intensified because the strophe, a word based on the Greek for 'turning,' is often seen as a fundamental unit of lyric. The etymological link between lyric and that turning thus carries with it a range of important consequences. . . . In short, the paradoxical resonances of turning gloss lyric as both an achievement that may generate respect and delight and as a trick that may generate fear and guilt" (pp. 27, 31).

[23]DiPasquale has very skeptically and smartly read the proffered "turn" of line 42 as a pushily conditional one which is indicative of a stubborn sort of egotism: I'll do A if, and only if, you do B first (pp. 126–129). The poem's force, she suggests, "arises from [its] status as the sacrament of its author's perilous spiritual state. It . . . is the outward and visible sign of a poet's unsuccessful struggle to turn away from Petrarchan subjectivity, self-referentiality, and ambition" (pp. 128–129). This is a good reading, and one of very few that seriously questions the idea of devotional progress, but surprisingly (given DiPasquale's recognition that it calls the entire poem into question), she doesn't fully develop the implications of her reading for the turn in line 37, and appears to assent to much of Terry Sherwood's misreading of it—even though she implicitly observes that it's a false volta. (Along these lines, see also Schoenfeldt, pp. 561–584; Strier, "Lyric Criticism," 22–24; and Gilman, pp. 146–147.)

[24]Brooks, p. 297.

understandably, many readers proceed on the (not unreasonable) assumption that if conversion is a turning, then this turning must be, as it so often has been in the history of Christian idiom, a conversionary reorientation. Terry Sherwood spends an entire chapter digging out the theological subtleties and implications of this turning, tracing the notion of bentness and straightening through Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Calvin to argue that Donne's poem presents this turning, this conversion, as a lifelong process of aligning the will with that of God by means of penitential affliction.[25]

These treatments are often learned and fascinating, and it's good to see at least a few scholars attending to this pivotal word. They seem to both buttress and deepen the traditional reading, and perhaps they're right. But perhaps they're not; in Donne's hands, ever ready to exploit conflict and ambivalence, the turn may be a slipperier and more complex maneuver than it seems. Sherwood comes tantalizingly close to recognizing this when he observes that

> *Donne's statement that he will 'turne' his back* plays with the notion of turning, since he is not actually proposing to turn away from Christ, but to accept willingly his penitential correction. . . . Donne offers his back to receive the rod of God's wrath and corrective affliction as a continuing impetus to repentance.[26]

But we can begin to glimpse the problems in this critical approach by paying careful attention to this passage, and to the poem. It is clear, for instance, that the speaker is not "proposing to turn" his back for any reason,[27] and never does, though he does of course offer to turn his face

[25]Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 158–172.

[26]Sherwood, p. 159; italics added.

[27]See also Brooks's puzzling contention that "the speaker finds it necessary to turn his back *eastward* toward Christ to receive corrections, reflecting both his physical and spiritual reorientation" (p. 293; italics in original). I'm arguing that none of these reorientations actually occurs. Similarly, Sherwood may be right in general that Donne's Augustinian notion of repentance involves both *aversio* and *conversio*, a turning away from one's sin and a re-turning toward God—but that doesn't mean that these things are occurring in this line, or in this poem (p.

in line 42. The "I turne" in line 37 is neither future nor subjunctive nor optative; it can only be a narration of a present act or perhaps a retrospective explanation of a state of affairs (i. e., not, *contra* Sherwood, "I will turn [because]," or "I would like to turn [because]," but "I am turning my back to you right now [because]" or "I have turned my back to you [because]"). Sherwood's misreading of tense generates a chapter of analysis and explication which is very interesting but I think almost entirely misdirected. But surprisingly, this problem would not be solved by working with the two possibly correct senses of *turn*, because—and this is the crucial point—neither of them makes sense either.

Although this may seem baffling, it is not only possible but rather easily demonstrated. The present tense ("I am turning my back to you right now") cannot work simply because his back is already turned to Christ, and has been all along (and thus cannot be re-turned that way without some intermediary action); this is precisely the speaker's problem from line 9, where it is already an existing predicament that the opening eight lines have tried to explain. It is also the foundation of the poem's central conceit, and without it the logic of the poem would simply fall apart. If there is no directional/spiritual conflict, there is no "Goodfriday," and this conflict does not and cannot originate at the end of a poem in which there is no moment at which the speaker's back is not turned to Christ.

But we also cannot read this turn as a useful or indeed even valid retrospective explanation of the speaker's back-turnedness ("I have turned my back to you [because]"). Why not? Because if we do, we implicitly accept his claim that his back is and has been turned for penitential reasons, in a gesture of utter submission which is also a call for the infliction of suffering, by means of which Christ will restore him to worthiness. Only once this painful, punitive, purifying grace has done its work, he suggests, will he be and feel sufficiently worthy to turn around and look Christ in the eye. It is one of the greatest and most

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159). I don't necessarily see either, and I think that the terms Donne sets up makes it difficult to do so. He's simply not turning, though he has tricked many into thinking that he is. In a further instance of tense trouble, Schoenfeldt, on one page, both tantalizingly observes that "Donne . . . never turns around in the poem" and speaks of the way Donne "turns away from his God" in it (p. 569). The only thing the speaker actually even "proposes to turn" in this poem is his face—and that only after certain conditions are met.

powerful moments of humility and anticipated grace in English poetry. The only problem with this orthodox and near-universal reading—and perhaps you were swept along by my account of it in spite of my prior warnings—is that it is demonstrably untrue. We know this because the speaker himself has already told us quite clearly the real reasons his back is turned: distraction, turpitude, a conscious and culpable relegation of devotion to a lower tier of priority.

So this crucial turn cannot be a promise or an offer, a narration or an explanation (not an accurate and truthful one, at any rate); then what is it? A few critics, implicitly noting its apparent impossibility, have suggestively described it as a devotional "reinterpretation" of the speaker's back-turnedness, a regenerative change in perspective that redeems his failure and remakes it into devout submission (i. e., "As a result of my meditation, I am now thinking of my turned back in terms of submission rather than contempt, and would like you to do the same"). Textual evidence for interpreting, rather than assuming, this moment to be a shift in perspective is quite slight, but some critics go even further and contend that every line of the poem is thereby redeemed, that west was in fact east, and distraction was in fact devotion, all along.[28] But surely this is a lot to ask of such a dubious (and factually nonexistent!) turning. It is the overdetermined answer to prayer, an act of indomitable backreading, and a fulfillment of desires provoked in readers from the very beginning of the poem because it appears to rectify the poem's central conflict. But if, as I've argued, this directional conflict has not been in the process of correction; if what looks like progress has been illusory; and if the speaker has been working hard to obscure and avoid (and thus perpetuate) the problem rather than fix it; then we might well want to examine this near-miraculous turning more skeptically, and be more alert to its potential disjunction and misrepresentation.

So, once again, what is this nonnarrative, nonreferential, nonexplicative turn? The only answer left to us, I think, is that it is a trope; the turn is not a turn but a trope (a word which, to complicate things even further, derives from the Greek *tropos, trepein* or "turn," and so it is a kind of literal trope, a tropical contortion which plays with the

[28]Sicherman, for instance, following Chambers, refers to the speaker's "final, correct interpretation of his riding westward, sustaining the usual understanding of westward motion as good" (p. 74).

buried letter of its own turning, hinting at its own diversion from straightforwardness). This is more likely interesting coincidence than authorial intent, but the etymological circularity and reflexivity of turn=trope=turn is nonetheless instructive, as it subtly indicates the spiritual narcissism of the turning: it is a devotional ruse, a verbal sleight-of-hand, a poetic tour-de-force. It appears to be designed to trick its audience—which in this case means not only the poem's readers but Christ himself and perhaps the speaker as well—into perceiving at least the beginning of a radical spiritual regeneration in the speaker. But this essay has been arguing that there are reasons to suspect that this apparent devotional success may not actually be occurring in the poem. Perhaps the last six lines are not decisive evidence of spiritual submission and renewal, but rather just the speaker saying what he thinks we, and Christ, want to hear.

There are reasons one might resist (and some have resisted!) this argument, and some of these are worth addressing.[29] One descends from Martz's influential contention that the form of "Goodfriday" closely and perhaps incontestably follows the form of classical Ignatian meditation, which is designed to culminate in spiritual colloquy with God.[30] But even conceding the central formal claim of Martz's analysis, which I'm willing to do, has little effect on my reading, for the simple reason that in both poetry and devotion, form provides no guarantee of content, resolution, or success (just ask Claudius, or Angelo, or any writer of bad sonnets).[31] As my argument has implied, this principle and this distinction may be at the poem's perverse heart: one may go through various devotional motions quite convincingly and even beautifully without sincerely meaning them. And to invoke form as a guarantee of outcome, as some have done, is an odd way to interpret a poem that begins by insisting on

[29]I will not here address some of the weaker objections this argument has provoked, such as merely pointing out that it runs counter to the majority of criticism on the poem (I am, obviously, aware of this), or simply asserting that the true meaning of "turn" in the poem is straightforward and unproblematic, which, I hope I have demonstrated, it is emphatically not.

[30]I in fact will not contest this—not because I necessarily must agree with it (though as a formal proposition I tend to), but because it is unnecessary that I disagree with it. What I reject is the false conclusion that therefore genuine colloquy *must* be what happens at the end of this poem.

[31]*Hamlet*, 3.2; *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.

not only the corruptibility, but also the already-corruptedness, of devotional "forme." So whether Donne is rehearsing a Catholic or Protestant meditative sequence (or just something that sounds good), one should be suspicious of assuming a necessary outcome[32]—particularly in light of the fact that "deformity" persists through the poem's end, as something yet to be dealt with.

There is another, even deeper source of resistance, one which I encountered myself as this reading developed: this is simply one of Donne's most beloved religious poems, treasured by many readers. To see this turning and thus this poem as a self-justifying rationalization of the speaker's devotional failure, as a bill of goods palmed off on the crucified Christ himself (and/or perhaps the speaker himself as well), would appear to radically undermine the status of "Goodfriday" as one of the great Christian poems in English. But this is not necessarily so. Such a reading would obviously disqualify the poem as a paradigmatic instance of successful devotional narration or submission. But, as I argued earlier, successful resolution seems to me to not be the quintessentially Donnean approach to the struggles of faith; ending a poem in the authentic peace of quiet, if hard-won, submission to God is much more typical of Herbert. Can we really imagine Donne sitting and tasting love's meat without some trace of a slyly triumphant smile, or a skeptical sniffing of the food, or wondering how much this off-menu special is going to cost him?

No; in Donne's version of religious experience, devotion is perpetually fraught with reservations, resistance, sometimes even resentment toward God's intentions and the steep price (namely, the renunciation of autonomy and desire) with which they come. Consequently, the attitudes and actions of Donne's poetic personae are often intensely problematized: witness the Holy Sonnets and their speakers' profound doubt, fear, and sometimes hostility toward God, to which I alluded earlier. And to this list we might add outright fraud, as in "Oh, to vex

[32]Martz says that "these parts [composition, analysis, colloquy] of a given exercise will, *when properly performed*, flow into one inseparable, inevitable sequence" (*The Poetry of Meditation* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954], p. 37; italics added). His qualification, as well as the connection between colloquy and will, indicates pretty clearly that something more than mere form—devotional sincerity, say, or emotional investment—is required for the desired outcome to be possible, let alone inevitable.

me"—a poem entirely about devotional inconstancy and failure—wherein the speaker candidly admits to "courting" God with "flattering speeches" (10). Part of the Christian life, that is, inescapably involves the impulses of selfishness and sin, and Donne insists that one aspect of this is our constant misrepresentations to God of ourselves as devout, submissive disciples; one needn't be a Pharisee[33] for even their prayers to be empty, deceptive, self-aggrandizing performances.[34] His speakers sometimes perpetrate, and sometimes explicitly acknowledge, this desperate, impossible swindle as something that emerges equally from devotional desire and sinful failure. It appears to be an inevitable part of the deep love/hate ambivalence that even the elect, still sinful, feel toward God, grace, and all that is good.

Donne does not shy away from this appalling truth elsewhere; rather, he acknowledges it with a candor that still has the power to provoke discomfort—even, and obviously, in himself. But it also provides a sort of comfort, in that even devotional failure can provide an occasion for grace.[35] In the twenty-third of his *Devotions*, on the mend but warned by his doctors of the danger of relapse (a word that itself etymologically indicates a medically and/or morally significant change of direction), Donne prays about the inevitability of failure on the road of recovery and sanctification.

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[33]In Holy Sonnet 16 ("If faithful souls"), Donne observes that "vile blasphemous conjurors . . . call / On Jesus' name, and Pharisaical / Dissemblers feign devotion" (10–12). The issue here is a fundamentally interpretive one: since form and devotion are falsifiable and misusable, how can we know when they're genuine, in others or even in ourselves? This problem of empty or even blasphemous devotional form is short-circuited in that poem, interestingly enough, by a "turn" directly to God (who "knows best"), which makes an authentic and "true" devotional connection that presumably cannot be falsified. But the poem has denied us certainty on this, since both the turn and the poem are circumstantial "signs" of the sort that are under suspicion—and "Goodfriday," I'm suggesting, is perhaps testing this principle to its very limit.

[34]In Station 15 of the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (New York: Vintage, 1995), Donne confesses that "I have sinned before thy face, in my hypocrisies in prayer, in my ostentation, and the mingling a respect of myself in preaching thy word" (p. 95). All quotations from Donne's *Devotions* are taken from this edition.

[35]As Halewood insists, this needs to be clearly distinguished from any notion of sin as a deliberate or even acceptable strategy to provoke grace (pp. 220, 222).

> But because, by too lamentable experience, I know how slippery my customs of sin have made my ways of sin, I presume to add this petition too, that if my infirmity overtake me, thou forsake me not. Say to my soul, *My son, thou hast sinned, do so no more*, but say also, that though I do, thy spirit of remorse and compunction shall never depart from me. Thy holy apostle, St. Paul, was shipwrecked thrice, and yet still saved. Though the rocks and the sands, the heights and the shallows, the prosperity and the adversity of this world, do diversely threaten me, though mine own leaks endanger me, yet, O God, let me never put myself aboard with Hymenaeus, nor *make shipwreck of faith and a good conscience*, and then thy long-lived, thy everlasting mercy, will visit me, though that which I most earnestly pray against, should fall upon me, a relapse into those sins which I have truly repented, and thou hast fully pardoned.
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> (pp. 151–152)

Although "Goodfriday" so fundamentally demonstrates the power of "the prosperity of this world" and its deleterious effect on proper devotion, as well as the tenuousness and extinctability of "remorse and compunction," perhaps the prospect of desertless grace still hovers over it, beyond its margins. The self-serving speaker of "Goodfriday" is so skillful in his sleight-of-hand that he may fool most of his fellow-travelers (and possibly even himself), and he turns a turn into a trope so subtly that we may not even notice the self-gratification taking place at this apparently devotional moment, but God is presumably not so easily fooled (though one may try); the speaker may have generated an imaginary, staring Christ for his own purposes, but this does not eliminate the possibility, the necessity, the desperate and furtive hope of the real Christ watching him from outside the poem, ready to forgive his obliquely confessed failures and patch up his contaminated fraud with the bloody mud of grace.

And thus this reading does not destroy, nor perhaps even diminish, the astounding greatness of this poem, though it certainly reconceives it in a much darker tone. After hearing an early version of this argument, a knowledgeable audience member quite brusquely asked, "Then why write the poem?" But as I have tried to demonstrate, not only is this not a knockdown question, it's one that indicates various uninterrogated (and,

I'm suggesting, unsustainable) assumptions about what the poem *must* be about, what it *must* be doing. When we do interrogate these assumptions, though, and when this turn—as perhaps the only, if exceedingly subtle, major faultline in an otherwise flawless poetic and rhetorical performance[36]—is carefully examined, "Goodfriday" becomes, if anything, more complex, more interesting, and more resonant with Donne's other poems. Perhaps Donne was less interested in depicting an ideal act of devotion than in showing how easily and indeed almost imperceptibly those acts can run off course, and how subtly but deeply they can be tainted by our very involvement in them. And if this reading "ruins" the poem as an exemplary exercise of poetic devotion, it might nonetheless resurrect it as an equally remarkable act of confession—a poetic demonstration, not only of all the resistances in Donne's religious poetry, nor only of the self-assertion that underlies those resistances, but also of the shrewd sinner's extraordinary and perhaps limitless ability to carry these out under the guise of submissive piety. Although west is not east in this poem, and sin is not good (it may in fact be even worse than it initially seems), in this way even a false turn can instructively point us toward the conflicted and perilous nature of the devotional life.

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[36]Strier observes that "there are moments in his poetry when Donne deliberately presents fallacious arguments or ones that, as he says in the *Metempsychosis*, are stretched 'to so nice a thinnes[s] . . . That they themselves breake.' The question is how we are to recognize such moments. . . . I think that moments of deliberate sophistry or absurdity are generally signaled in Renaissance texts, often explicitly" ("Awry and Squint," p. 381). The subtlety of this moment in "Goodfriday" would appear to deny us explicitness, but, unless our disinclination to see it is simply too powerful, it surely is a signal that something is awry.