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Donne's (Spiral) Stairway to Heaven

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Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, one of the few works John Donne published immediately after its completion, is certainly not a "hot item" on bookshelves. Though Kate Frost deems it "the masterpiece of Donne's last years," she admits the work "is to be found rather on the shelves of rare book rooms than those of Barnes & Noble," mostly because of its inaccessibility and inappropriateness for fragmentary anthologizing.[1] The work is also rather long—630 pages in the pocket-sized duodecimo edition; 160 pages in the 1923 John Sparrow edition—so difficult to read in one sitting as opposed to his other prose works like the individual *Sermons*.

Though the work had five editions printed in the seventeenth century (two in 1624, and one in 1626-1627, 1634, and 1638), no editions were printed for 200 years, then three in the nineteenth century and four in the twentieth, though only two remain in print.[2] Yet the work not only serves as a testament to Donne's extensive learning and a window into his spiritual life but also reveals a process by which Donne explores the movement from one state to another—from health and security through the uncertain state of sin and sickness to the hope of regeneration and salvation. The work details this rite of passage and evidences the terror and the glory of the liminal state, both a static condition and a movement between structured states so brilliantly

[1] Kate Frost, "Introduction" to *Colloquium: Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 363. Many thanks to Frances M. Malpezzi for her astute comments and suggestions on an early draft of this essay.

[2] Brooke Conti, "*The Devotions:* Popular and Critical Reception," *Colloquium: Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 366 and 368; Frost, "Introduction," p. 364.

outlined by anthropologists Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep.[3] Donne's *Devotions* is not simply a record of a difficult set experience in Donne's life but a dynamic exploration of a *rite de passage* in which Donne experiences the three steps detailed in van Gennep's theory—separation, transition, and incorporation—and uses that progression of physical illness as a method of reaching salvation. Each of the twenty-three devotions is itself a separate three-part movement circling upon itself, so that the typical linear progression of the rite of passage detailed in *Devotions* becomes not a straight bridge between earthly sufferings and spiritual salvation but a repeating spiral—a spiral stairway to heaven.[4]

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[3] Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1969); Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967); and Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Chaffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

[4] This interpretation of structure does not assume an intentional choice by Donne but another lens through which to view the work. Critics have suggested other influences on the structure of *Devotions*, which may have influenced his composition more directly. John Peter Kooistra argues that the *Devotions* were intended to be arranged in groups of three, in a "three-six-six-three-three-two" pattern: "This progression is based on the analogy of a Christian's life with the seven days that are outlined in Expostulation 14." See John Peter Kooistra. *The Structure of John Donne's* Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. September 1977. McMaster University M.A. Thesis. https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/11375/9685/1/fulltext.pdf. Kate Gartner Frost identifies the work as fitting into the tradition of devotional literature, *ars moriendi,* and meditation, specifically "a link in the chain of spiritual autobiography" stretching back into antiquity in her *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's* Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. xii. Joan Webber further analyzes the significance of autobiography in prose in *The Eloquent 'I': Style and Self in Renaissance Prose.* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), esp. pp. 28-31. More specifically on a meditation interpretation, in *The Poetry of Meditation*, Louis Martz analyzes the Catholic, and specifically Ignatian influence on Donne's works, though not specifically the *Devotions*; however, others have built on his work to connect *Devotions* to Ignatian meditation, including Thomas Van Laan and Thomas J. Morrissey. See Martz, *The Poetry of*

A serious illness confining Donne to his bed from late November 1623 to at least 6 December 1623 prompted his composing of *Devotions*.[5] The illness, identified as "relapsing fever" or "spotted fever" and more recently as typhus fever,[6] is characterized by insomnia, prostration, and danger of relapse.[7] Though he was not allowed to read during the illness or even during his convalescence, Donne apparently used those sleepless nights to "read" and interpret the text of his declining body,

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Meditation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954); Van Laan, "John Donne's *Devotions* and the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises," *Studies in Philology* 60 (1963); and Morrissey, "The Self and the Meditative Tradition in Donne's *Devotions*," *Notre Dame English Journal* 13.1 (1980): 29-49. Still in the meditative interpretation, Katherine Narveson, argues that *Devotions* is not based on Catholic practices but places Donne in a "confession-centered" type of conformist piety, supporting Barbara K. Lewalski's view. See Narveson, "Piety and the Genre of Donne's *Devotions,*" *John Donne Journal* 17 (1998): 107-136, especially p. 109, and Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton University Press, 1979). Mary Arshagouni Papazian explores what she sees as the strong influence of Puritan literature on the *Devotions* in two articles: "Donne, Election, and the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*," *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 55.4 (1992): 603-619, and "Literary 'Things Indifferent:' The Shared Augustinianism of Donne's *Devotions* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*" in *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway, AK, UCA Press, 1995), pp. 324-49.

[5] John Chamberlain, *The Letters of John Chamberlain.* Ed. N. E. McClure. 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1939), II.531, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001632436, accessed 19 June 2018.

[6] I. A. Shapiro, "Walton and the Occasion of Donne's *Devotions*," *RES*, N.S. ix (1958): 20-21; Frost, p. xi; and Kate Narveson, "The Devotion" *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne,* ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and Tom Hester (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press), p. 311. Stephen Pender offers a few other possibilities of the nature of Donne's disease, including one of the so-called "combined fevers," *febres confusae*. See Pender, "Essaying the Body: Donne, Affliction, and Medicine" in *John Donne's Professional Lives*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003, p. 217, n. 6.

[7] R. C. Bald, *John Donne, A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 450. For a complete description of the disease and its treatment during the 17th century, see Kate Gartner Frost, "Donne's *Devotions*: An Early Record of Epidemic Typhus," *Journal of the History of Medicine and the Allied Sciences* 31.4 (1976): 421-30.

making mental and eventually physical notes that he organized and published soon after in 1624 as *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and severall steps in my Sicknes*.[8] He was able to describe in a letter to Sir Robert Ker his process of composition:

> Though I have left my bed, I have not left my bed-side; I sit there still, and as a Prisoner discharged, sits at the Prison doore, to beg Fees, so sit I here, to gather crummes. I have used this leisure, to put the meditations had in my sicknesse, into some such order, as may minister some holly delight.[9]

Donne's *Devotions* was entered in the Stationers' Register by Thomas Jones on 9 January 1623/24, already having been seen not only by friends but also by Dr. Wilson, the official licenser. Bald marvels at the uniqueness of this work: "They were written within less than a month, being first jotted down during a fever which nearly cost the writer his life, and were then put into shape during a convalescence that left the patient so weak that the book was almost in print before he was able to leave his bedroom."[10]

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[8] That Donne carefully scrutinizes his weakening body as evidence of the state of his soul is not surprising—devotional writers and theologians generally conceived of sickness as an emblem of sin, spurring the sufferer "to probe and evaluate his or her sick body as evidence of the soul" (Pender 219). Forbidden to read himself, Donne cuts up his own "*Anatomy*" and "dissect[s]" himself for his physicians "to *read* upon" him, taking their diagnosis as indications of spiritual malaise (Meditation. 9, p. 48). All quotations from *Devotions* will be taken from John Sparrow's edition (Cambridge University Press, 1923; republished by Forgotten Books, 2012).

[9] John Donne, Doctor of the Civil Law, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* written by John Donne (London: J. Fletcher for William Marriot, 1651), p. 249, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A36298.0001.001/1:4.90?rgn=div2;view=toc>, accessed 19 June 2018. Pender notes that for Donne, "reading the symptoms of his body is a textual, rhetorical process" so that *Devotions* uses the text of his body as *exemplum* to others, as he describes in a sermon: "He that desires to *Print* a book should much more desire *to be* a book; to do some examplar things as men might read, and relate, and profit by." See Pender, p. 243; *Sermons* VIII, p.410.

[10] Bald, p. 451.

The biographical linear plot of *Devotions* can clearly be mapped, with the stages of the sickness prompting each step, clarified by the Latin "occasions" prefacing each Devotion:

- The disease attacks suddenly.
- His body is soon out of control.
- He is forced to take to his bed and send for the physician.
- King James hears of his illness and sends his own physician
- The doctors prescribe cordials and even place dead pigeons to his feet "*to draw the vapors from the Head*" (Meditation 12, p. 67).
- Critical days occur, during which Donne breaks out in a rash of spots, is plagued by sleeplessness and haunted by the incessant tolling of bells for those who died of the disease. Three meditations recalling the bells indicate three meanings:
    - They remind him of his mortality.
    - They remind him that he must die.
    - They make him question whether he is already dead.
- The crisis passes and he hopes to recover yet is plagued by the fear of relapse.

Each of these steps serves as a tread in the spiral staircase between Donne and his physical health, between Donne and his God. This impetus to document the steps of his illness and the subsequent analysis of the events, leading to petitions to God, illustrates a tendency seen in other works that are the products of fear and anxiety. In his introduction to his edition of *Devotions*, Andrew Motion comments that when Donne "felt most gravely threatened he also felt compelled to produce his most defiantly lively writing," including *Devotions* and "Hymn to God my God in my Sickness."[11] Several poems illustrate a similar spiral movement of certainty, uncertainty, and hope/assurance. In "Hymn to God the Father," Donne indicates confidence in his requests for forgiveness, yet immediately presents skepticism and more challenges to God: "When thou hast done, thou hast not done, / For I have more" (lines 5-6, 11-12, 17-18). In the Holy Sonnet "At the round earth's," he welcomes the Last Judgment, then falls back into doubt:

[11] Andrew Motion, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and *Death's Duel* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. xii.

"But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space" (line 9).[12]

It is not surprising that Donne would be prompted to record his physical trials, his analysis of their significance, and his calls to God for help and patience. This period of ostracism in-between wellness and recuperation posited Donne in the liminal position of illness. As in other *rites de passage*, Donne's illness placed him on the margins, physically as well as spiritually in-between his previous state of existence. In their groundbreaking work in ethnography and anthropology, Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner identify events now recognized as essential parts of life: rites of passage. In *Rites de Passage* (1909), van Gennep systematically compares those rituals and processes that celebrate an individual's passage from one status to another in a given society. In common events like births, deaths, pregnancies, weddings, funerals, and in rituals like circumcision and other puberty rites, he identifies three distinct stages in the transitional process: separation, transition, and incorporation.[13] In building upon van Gennep's concept, Victor Turner concludes that the most significant experiences in a person's or a culture's life occur during that transition stage, during which the subject belongs to neither stage yet to both, an existence he describes as "betwixt and between," or liminal, from the Latin *limen* or threshold. Employing evidence from his years living with and studying the circumcision and girls' puberty rites of the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia, Turner theorizes that because rules and expectations governing the previous stage no longer pertain, and those governing the subsequent stage do not yet apply, this liminal period is characterized by creativity and freedom of restraint—it is a site of "becoming," of possibility, of play.[14]

Turner's definition of freedom within liminal spaces offers a promising way into Donne's definitional circumstances in *Devotions*. Turner presents the liminal phase as positive and active, since this interface between established cultural subsystems is an "instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance," frequently generating myths, symbols, rituals, philosophical systems,

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[12] All quotations of poems will be from John T. Shawcross's *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967).

[13] van Gennep, pp. vii-ix.

[14] Turner, *Forest*, pp. 93-111.

and works of art as a culture attempts to reclassify reality and the individual's relationship to society, nature, and culture.[15] However, as even Turner admits, the stage can also be interpreted negatively, since individuals are no longer in the positive past nor the positive future but in an undefined area of existence, or identity, or place: "Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon."[16] Both of these positive and negative extremes are characteristic of the liminal state and of Donne's experience of sickness.

Donne underwent *rites de passage* several times in his life before the illness documented in *Devotions*. Donne's life began in the negative aspect of liminal existence in his Catholic upbringing, a religion in post-Reformation England that certainly existed between the boundaries. A statute of 1585 deemed it high treason for any Jesuit or seminary priest to be within the Queen's dominions and a felony for any lay person to relieve or receive him, effectively forbidding the religion in general.[17] Donne was caught between professing his Catholic faith and practicing it. The decision to convert to Anglicism for Donne was truly a "rite of passage" beginning in the separation from his Roman faith, then a rather extended liminal period of "searching" for true religion, examining his own opinions and options for several years. He admits in *Pseudo-Martyr* that his strong Catholic connections were difficult to break, but he refused to decide "till I had, to the measure of my poor wit and judgement, surveyed and digested the whole body of Divinity, controverted between ours and the Roman church."[18]

Donne's agonized introspection is characteristic of one experiencing the liminal state, as Turner explains:

> During the liminal period, neophytes are alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them. Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection. In it those

[15] Turner, *From Ritual*, pp. 40-41 and 44.

[16] Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 95.

[17] John Carey, *Life, Mind, Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 15-16.

[18] John Donne, "The Preface," *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 13.

> ideas, sentiments, and facts that had been hitherto for the neophytes bound up in configurations and accepted unthinkingly are, as it were, resolved into their con–stituents.[19]

In his writings, Donne seems in no hurry to exit this reflective state. "Satire III" stresses the process of seeking true religion, not the goal: ". . .doubt wisely, in strange way / To stand inquiring right, is not to stray; / To sleepe, or runne wrong, is" (lines 77-79). In a letter to Goodyer, Donne seems to indicate pride in not committing to a religion quickly: "You know I have never fettered nor imprisoned the word Religion . . . nor immuring it in a *Rome*, or a *Wittemberg* or a *Geneva*; they are all virtuall beams of one Sun. . . ."[20]

Besides his search for true religion, Donne also searched for secular success, another liminal time in his life. In May, 1592, he entered Lincoln's Inn, a definite avenue for ambitious intellectuals hoping for a place in government and described by Bald as "a gateway to the great world."[21] More than gateway, though, Lincoln's Inn was a liminal area of becoming. The "bright sparks" at the Inns of Court were not in a profession but striving for one, and though this in-between existence prompted anxiety and insecurity, it also encouraged camaraderie, as Maule describes: "Like all group friendships, [the coterie of the Inns] is built on exclusion, and ragged at the edges," symbolized by the limited circulation of manuscripts of their work.[22] Donne calls these Inns men, who exist between study and play, "strange Herma–phrodits," in-between professional and non-professional.[23] Donne's life at the Inns can be seen as the positive, creative side of liminality. Like other liminars, those sharing a common liminal experience, the young men at Lincoln's Inn formed their own social group referred to in cultural anthropology as *communitas*, a term first used by Victor Turner in 1969 referring to "[a] relationship between concrete, historical idiosyncratic individuals" who experience "a strong sense of solidarity

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[19] Turner, *Forest*, p. 105.

[20] Donne, *Letters*, p. 29.

[21] Bald, p. 53.

[22] Jeremy Maule, "Donne and the Word of the Law," *John Donne's Professional Lives*, ed. David Colclough (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), p. 20.

[23] "Epithalamium made at Lincolne's Inne," line 30.

and bonding" because of their common experience of "a ritual, rite of passage, or other transitional state."[24] As Turner explains, those undergoing a liminal existence undergo a leveling process that strengthens the bond of communitas. In primitive tribes like the Ndembu, initiates "are often allowed, even encouraged, to form small groups of friends in the seclusion camp—and such ties of friendship often endure, whether institutionalized or not, throughout life."[25]

But by 1623, at the time of his illness, Donne had passed the limen and experienced acceptance and success as Dean of St. Paul's, that is, until the sickness. The experience once again placed Donne in the terrifying realm of in-between, which only exacerbated his continual fear of his relationship with God and the distance between sin and salvation, a distance he tries to bridge, although circuitously, with *Devotions*. Donne introduces the components of the spiral in his very first Prayer, noting to God, "considered in thy selfe, [thou] art a *Circle*, first and last, and altogether; but considered in thy working upon us, art a *direct line*, thou leadest us from our *beginning*, through all our ways, to our end" (Prayer 1, p. 4). Donne notes the linear uprightness of man who stands upright, closer to heaven than other beasts, "carried to the contemplation of that place which is his *home, Heaven*!" The connection between humankind and God would be a straight line if humankind were not fallen; thus the direction of that line is uncertain and takes effort: 'My *body* falls downe without pushing, my *Soule* does not go up without pulling. . ." (Meditation 2, p. 6). Even angels, he notes, "whose home is *Heaven*, and who are winged too, yet had a *Ladder* to goe to *Heaven*, by steps" (Ibid.). Man cannot accomplish a straight line to heaven without falling back through weakness, imaging a spiral ascent.[26]

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[24] Turner, *Ritual Process*, p. 131; "communitas" *OED* 2.

[25] Victor Turner, "Variations on a Theme of Liminality," in *Secular Ritual*, ed. Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (Amsterdam: Van Gorcun and Company, 1977), p. 47.

[26] Frost and others acknowledge that *Devotions* pictures movement—"a spiritual progress of the soul toward reconciliation with God," according to Frost ("Typhus," p. 422). What form the movement takes is more disputed. Helen Wilcox notes that "one of the difficulties of the *Devotions* for student readers is the sense that, even as they progress through the work, they (and it) are going in circles." But, she adds, this is exactly the correct impression, since "[t]he characteristic movement of the *Devotions*. . . is both linear and circular

Victor Turner agrees with Donne's concept of the circle and the line, since human historical processes are also circular and linear: "Yesterday's liminal becomes today's stabilized, today's peripheral becomes tomorrow's centered." However, "At the other extreme we may find history regarded as a succession of unique, unrepeated phases in which all forward movement is the result of inspirations owing nothing to the past."[27] Turner sees arts and sciences as more lineal, but ritual and myth as cyclical. How fitting, then, that *Devotions* combines the two movements by recounting both historical event and spiritual significance of event in a spiral of progress.

The spiral image has been recognized throughout antiquity both as a figure and a movement imaging mankind. Plato used a geometric analogy for the three "motions" of the soul: circular (divine), spiral (human), and rectinlinear (animal), as John Freccero explains:

> According to the pseudo-Dionysius, . . . the three 'conversions' were characteristic not only of the heavens and of the human soul, but also of the angels. The highest order of angels moves circularly around God, and the lowest order moves directly toward man. Between these, the middle order rotates around God while at the same time pursuing its terrestrial missions.[28]

Only a few people can turn directly to God through divine intuition: "[M]ost must proceed to God with a combination of those two

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simultaneously." See "Was I not made to *thinke*? Teaching the *Devotions* and Donne's Literary Practice," *Colloquium: Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 395. Maria Salenius acknowledges Donne's fluctuating images of circle and line and sees *Devotions* as a "mental journey, a circle starting from God and ending with God" yet does not connect the two images to form a spiral. See Maria Salenius, "The Circle and the Line: Two Metaphors for God and His Works in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 102.2 (2001): 208. Ramie Targoff adds, ". . . although Donne moves through the days of illness chronologically, the narrative lacks an obvious forward thrust." See her *John Donne, Body and Soul* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 131.

[27] Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors; Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 16.

[28] John Freccero, "Donne's 'Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,'" *ELH* 30.4 (Dec., 1963): 345.

movements." This last movement, the spiral, is emblematic of the soul incarnate, of the soul whose inner life is a continual contemplation of God in spite of worldly vicissitudes."[29] Dante images this method of reaching God in his spiral "terraces" of punishment on the hill of *Purgatorio* tracing the literal journey of the repentant to heaven. Donne himself describes the necessary circuitous effort to reach Truth, which stands "on a huge hill, / Cragged, and steep": "hee that will / Reach her, about must, and about must goe; / and what the'hills suddenness resists, winne so" ("Satyre III," ll. 80-83).

The *Devotions* itself is an in-between genre. Critics have long attempted to classify it—is it a spiritual autobiography? An example of the *ars moriendi*? A formal meditation? And if so, in the Ignatian or Protestant vein? Kate Frost admits, ". . . the book seems to fit, comfortably or uncomfortably, no easily recognized category of con–temporary devotional literature. . . ."[30] Donne's title page indicates the focus is "*upon our Humane Condition*" but that he will relate "severall steps in my Sicknes" and signs his name, identifying himself as "Deane of *S. Pauls*." Helen Wilcox sees the *Devotions* in its straddling "the borderline between the general and the particular, as a truly transitional work."[31] Considering the dedication to Prince Charles and the dedicatory letter to the Queen of Bohemia, Margret Fetzer even links them to the verse letters as attempts to gain patronage (both earthly and heavenly) and sees the three-part structure of each Devotion as a dynamic process: "In both Donne's letters and *Devotions*, communications with the addressee, with God as an Other, gradually gives way to communion."[32]

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[29] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Di div. nom. IV,* 8-9, *PG*, III, 703-5, cited Freccero, p. 345.

[30] Frost, *Holy Delight*, p. 5. Targoff admits, ". . . most of the critical literature has dwelled on how we can best classify the *Devotions* generically" (p. 131).

[31] Wilcox, p. 388.

[32] Margret Fetzer, *John Donne's Performances: Sermons, Poems, Letters, and Devotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 259. For other book-length critical discussions that include *Devotions* in the past 50-60 years, see Joan Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John* Donne, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963); Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1964); Sister Elizabeth Savage, S.S.J., *John Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions: A Critical*

In her explanation of *Devotions* as spiritual autobiography, Kate Frost thinks the work illustrates a physical and spiritual escalation from the love of creatures to love of God:

> At its heart is the movement from prostration, often the literal prostration of illness, to an ascendancy of divine love, where death to carnal affection is followed by a putting-on of Christ. The movement of the whole reflects the downward path of love from God to man and the upward path of love from man to God—a Jacob's ladder complete with rocky pillow.[33]

That Donne understood the liminal area between earth and heaven is evident in Exposition 3: ". . . God suspends mee betweene *Heaven* and *Earth*, as a *Meteor*; and I am not in Heaven, because an earthly bodie

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Edition (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975); Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979); John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981); Terry Sherwood, *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of Donne's Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Kate Frost, *Holy Delight*; Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi, eds., *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross* (Conway, Arkansas: UCA Press, 1995); Donna B. Hamilton and Richard Strier, *Religion and Politics in Reformation England, 1540-1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); R.V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, England: Boydell and Brewer, 2000); Mary Arshagouni Papazian, ed. *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation: New Perspectives* (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Achsah Guibbory, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006); Francesca Bugliani Knox, *The Eye of the Eagle: John Donne and the Legacy of Ignatius Loyola* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011); Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and Tom Hester, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*; and Brooke Conti, *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014.

[33] Frost, *Holy Delight*, p. 36. Targoff recognizes the in-between direction of *Devotions*: "It neither exclusively looks forward toward death and salvation, nor does it solely attend to the patient's daily medical treatments. Instead, Donne moves *between* earthly and heavenly concerns, alternating watchfulness over the health of the body with anxiety over the fate of the soul" (p. 137; italics mine).

clogges me, and I am not in the Earth, because a Heavenly *Soule* sustaines mee" (p. 13).

Donne begins his *Devotions* with an expression of the terror of liminality, acknowledging that sickness is in-between health and death: ". . .we doe not only die, but die upon the Rack, die by the torment of sicknnesse . . . we die an cannot enjoy death, because wee die in this torment of sickness"; however, he suffers a further liminal stage in not knowing if he is actually ill but only suspects so suffers from "preafflictions," "with these jelousies and suspitions, and apprehensions of *Sicknes*, before we can cal it a sicknes; we are not sure we are ill. . . .we are tormented with sicknes, and cannot stay till the 'torment' come, but pre-apprehensions and presages, prophesy those torments" (Meditation 1, p. 1). And perhaps more frustrating for Donne, he realizes he produces his own anxieties: Man is a "little world," not only with the power to destroy himself but also "to presage that execution upon himself; to assist the sickness, to antidate the sicknes, to make the sicknes the more irremediable, by sad apprehensions. . ." (Meditation 1, p. 2).

As the sickness progresses, Donne demonstrates an uncertainty of time, also characteristic of the liminal state since it is an area set off from the structured activities of active life. He describes "Tyme" as "but the *Measure of Motion*, and howsoever it may seeme to have three *stations*, *past*, *present*, and *future*, yet the *first* and *last* of these *are* not (one is not, now, and the other is not yet) and that which you call *present*, is not *now* the same that it was, when you began to call it so in this *Line*, (before you sound that word, *present*, or that *Monosyllable*, *now*, the present, and the *Now* is past)" (Meditation 14, p. 79). Yet Donne marks off time by his occasions that record particular incidents of specific days, almost like tally marks a prisoner makes on his prison walls: the day he takes his bed (Devotion 3), the day the physician is sent for (Devotion 4), the day he comes (Devotion 5), the day the physician reveals his fears (Devotion 6), the day he asks for other physicians for help (Devotion 7), the day the King sends his physician (Devotion 8), the day they prescribe (Devotion 9), the day they use cordials (Devotion 11), the day they apply pigeons (Devotion 12), the day spots appear (Devotion 13), the endless days and nights of bell-ringing and insomnia (Devotions 15-18), the day they begin purging (Devotion 20), the first

day he can get out of bed (Devotion 21), and the day they warn Donne of relapsing (Devotion 23).

Donne experiences both the positive and the negative traits of the liminal state outlined by Turner and van Gennep. He notes the connection of liminality with death throughout *Devotions.* He calls his sick bed "the doore of the grave" and his illness "the borders of this bodily death" (Exposition 3, p. 13; Prayer 9, p. 53): "A sicke bed, is a grave; and all the patient saies there, is but a varying of his owne *Epitaph*" (Med. 3 p. 11). Because of its in-between state, sickness, Donne judges, is worse than death because it necessitates solitude, "when the infectiousness of the disease deters them who should assist, from comming; even the *Phisician* dares scarce come. *Solitude* is a torment which is not threatened in *hell* it selfe" (Meditation 5, p. 22). This imposed solitude "makes an infectious bed, equall, nay worse then a *grave*: and this too, that though in both I be equally alone, in my bed I *know* it, and *feele* it, and shall not in my grave: and this to, that in my bedd, my soule is still in an invectious body, and shall not in my grave bee so" (Meditation 5, p. 24).

In his seclusion, Donne enters the first phase of van Gennep's three distinct stages of a rite of passage: separation. The separation phase demarcates for the participant a sacred space and time which is apart and, in a sense, "out of time," in a realm outside the temporal concerns and routines of society. Turner includes in this phase "symbolic behavior—especially symbols of reversal or inversions of things, relationships and processes secular—which represents the detachment of the ritual subjects (novices, candidates, neophytes or 'initiands') from their previous social statuses."[34] Since these liminands cannot be definitively classified, they are also considered unclean or polluting, so are hidden away or at least separated from the rest of society during the liminal phase. The liminands thus undergo a "leveling" process, "in which signs of their preliminal status are destroyed and signs of their liminal non-status applied." They endure "ritual humiliation, stripping of signs and insignia of preliminal status, ritual leveling, and ordeals and tests of various kinds, intended to show that 'man thou art dust!'"[35]

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[34] van Gennep, p. 21; Turner, *From Ritual*, pp. 24 and 82.

[35] Turner, *Forest of Symbols*, p. 98; Turner, *From Ritual*, p. 26; and *Dramas,* p. 53.

Confined to his sickbed, Donne intensely feels the separation from his family, friends, and congregation. Since traditional structures are gone, this period allows for re-interpretation of reality, looking at things differently, with "incompatible elements. . . paradoxically juxtaposed and recombined." We see Donne describing the topsy-turvy aspects of his sickbed in Expostulation 3: ". . . when I am cast into this bedd, my slacke sinews are yron fetters, and those thin sheets, yron dores upon me" (pp. 12-13). In Meditation 12, when the physicians resort to applying "Pidgeons, to draw the vapors from the Head," Donne expresses the paradoxical wonder that "that which is but a *vapor*, and a *vapor* not forced, but breathed, should kill" (pp. 67-68). All structure is destroyed.

By Meditation 15, Donne suffers the additional sequestration of insomnia. Sleep, he reasons, "is a *refreshing* of the body in this life" and can be enjoyed by even the most miserable of prisoners who, "under heavie fetters, yet at this *houre* are *asleep*" (pp. 86, 87). The isolation from this common human nightly ritual frustrates Donne, who tries to re-connect with others in Expostulation 15 by noting Biblical verses and characters who have benefited by being awake or suffered by sleeping: Samson would have been captured in Gaza had he slept, but when he did sleep with Delilah, he was taken; in Jesus's parable of the kingdom of God, enemies sowed weeds in the good man's field while all slept; and during the Agony in the Garden, Jesus "rebuked his Disciples for *sleeping*" (p. 89). Satisfied with these precedents, Donne can turn from his bodily unrest and instead focus on the state of his soul: "My body is in a sicke wearinesse, but my soule in a peacefull rest with thee" (p. 90).

However, though Donne experienced the suffering of physical solitude in his sickroom, he did also undergo two positive experiences Turner identifies in the transition or liminal state: both the leveling process and the strong sense of *communitas* created by this leveling. Because sickness and death are universal experiences, all the seriously ill are equalized. Donne recognizes that this process occurs at the liminal periods of both birth and death: even the first man Adam was "flat on the ground" when God breathed life into him; at death, "when he comes to withdraw that breath from him againe, hee prepares him to it, by laying him flat upon his bed." Though Man's upright stature sets him closer to heaven than brute beasts, even kings share the fate of the

sick: ". . . a fever can bring that head, which yesterday carried a *crown* of gold, five foot towards a *crown* of glory, as low as his own foot, today. . . . Here the head lies as low as the foot; the *Head* of the people, as lowe as they, whome those feete trod upon" (Meditation 3, pp. 10, 11). From his respected position as Dean of St. Paul's, Donne is reduced to a total dependence upon the physician for any cure, more helpless than even animals who have the instinct to cure themselves: "We *have* the *Phisician*, but we *are not* the *Phisician*. Heere we shrinke in our proportion, sink in our dignitie, in respect of verie meane creatures, who are *Phisicians* to themselves" (Meditation, 4, p. 17).

Not only did the illness equalize Donne with all of humanity, but also it placed Donne in the *communitas* of sufferers in London, throughout the world, and throughout time—past, present, and future. As Donne feels affinity with typological precedents in torment like Job, Hezekiah, David, Christ, and Paul, he hopes future sufferers can draw comfort and strength, as he wrote, some "holly delight," from his own ordeal. Like the relationship with his fellows at the Inns of Court, this common experience of dangerous illness gives Donne an ironic sense of "belonging" and a new concern for his fellow sufferers. The most obvious indication of *communitas* is in Devotions 16-18, which record the incessant tolling of bells for sick and dying parishioners and Donne's realization of their relationship to him: "Here the *Bells* can scarce solemnize the funerall of any person, but that I knew him, or knew that he was my *Neighbour*. . . but now hee is gone into that house, into which I must follow him" (Meditation 16, p. 92); ". . . any mans *death* dimishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*; And therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*" (Meditation 17, p. 98); "Thy *Sonne Christ Jesus* is the *first begotten of the dead*; he rises first, and the *eldest brother*, and I am a *younger brother* too, to this *Man*, who died now, and all they are *ushers* to mee in this *Schoole* of *Death*" (Exposition 18, p. 107); ". . . I heare this dead brother of ours, who is now carried out to his *buriall*, to speake to mee, and to preach my *Funerall Sermon*, in the voice of these *Bells*" (Prayer 18, p. 96).

Thus, the three-part movement of the rite of passage can be seen in the *Devotions* as a whole, with Donne's sickroom sequestration illustrating the "separation" stage, the recounting of the progress of disease as the "transition" or liminal stage, and his slow recovery the "incorporation" stage; however each individual Devotion records the

same three-part process on a smaller scale: a Meditation, in which Donne presents man (or himself) in a state of isolation and disconnection; an Expostulation, in which he attempts to break that isolation by engaging God in a dialogue through His words in scripture; and a Prayer, in which he expresses his newfound incorporation with God and offers praise, singularly and as a member of the Body of Christ. The occasions that prompt the work are "emergent," not completed, so show a continuing process of consideration, analysis, and invocation, indicating suffering on earth as a permanent rite of passage.

Devotion 7, for example, illustrates the three-part spiral. As with the other Meditations, Mediation 7 describes, often minutely, the course of illness in the structured world of Donne's London but with much creative association with the world outside to rationalize the experience. Here Donne recounts his physician calling for others to consult on the case, which causes him consternation that the illness is beyond his doctor's capability. But, as he reasons, "Howsoever, his desiring of others, argues his *candor*, and his *engenuitie*; if the danger be *great*, he *justifies* his proceedings, and he *disguises* nothing, that calls in *witnesses*" (Meditation 7, p. 35). Then, rationalizing the event in the structured world outside, Donne acknowledges the astuteness of seeking help: the Romans divided rule between two consuls ("the *Soveraigntie* is the same," p. 35); even diseases "hold *Consultations*, and conspire how they may multiply, and joyn with one another, and *exalt* one anothers force" (p. 35). As in Devotions 16-18, Donne recognizes the *communitas* of his fellow sufferers and turns his self-concern to concern for others: "O my *soule*, when thou art not enough awake, to blesse thy *God* enough for his plentifull mercy, in affording thee many *Helpers*, remember how many lacke them, and helpe them to them, or to those other things, which they lacke as much as them" (Meditation 7, p. 37).

In Expostulation 7, Donne attempts to bridge the gap between the earthly experience and its spiritual significance by turning to scripture, the divinely-inspired written connection between God and mankind, and the words of the Fathers of the Church, to help him understand and accept the occasion of the Meditation. Here Donne surveys the times that the prophets and apostles sought help in numbers. St. Paul lamented that he had only St. Luke to assist him, though St. Luke was well-qualified; Moses was prompted by God to divide the "burden of

Government, and Judicature, with others, and take others to his assistance," though Moses was fully capable of governing alone; though one angel is capable of performing any task He imposes, God employs legions of angels to do the same; any one Evangelist can show us the power of salvation, yet God gave us four (p. 39). Thus, Donne asserts, God fully intended "*multiplication*" of His helps, so it would be "*ingratitude*, not to accept this mercy of affording" Donne multiple physicians in treating his illness. He transitions easily from the need for multiplicity in his physical life to the same need in his spiritual life: rather than approaching God "from *corners*, nor *Conventicles*, nor *schismatical singularities*," he will seek "the assotiation, and communion of thy *Catholique Church*, and those persons, whom thou has alwayes furnished that *Church* withal" (p. 40).

Through the Exposition, then, Donne rationalizes his own view of the topics brought forth by the meditation and juxtaposes them in new ways in an attempt to transition them to the Word of God so that he might bridge the gap between his own reasoning and God's plan. In his integration, Donne is able to offer petitions to God in the Prayer of each Devotion. In Prayer 7, then, Donne asks God to "correct" him, to have his desires conform to God's will, to help him to see that even though the physician asks for assistance, his fate is in God's hands: "no vehemence of sicknes, no tentation of Satan, no guiltiness of sin, no prison of death, not this first, this *sicke bed*, not the other prison, the close and dark *grave*, can remove me from the determined, and good purpose, which thou has sealed concerning mee." And finally, Donne prays that, whether his present suffering is "thy *Mercy*, or thy *Correction*," he may ultimately, in death, "bee united to him, who died for me" (p. 41).

By 6 December 1623, Donne was apparently out of immediate danger, anxious to re-integrate, but his state continued to image a spiral movement.[36] When Donne attempts to get up from his bed after the crisis of his illness has passed, his dizziness literally spins him around: "I am readier to fall to the *Earth*, now I am up, than I was when I *lay* in my bed: O *perverse way, irregular motion of Man*; even *rising* it selfe is the way to *Ruine*"; "I am *up*, and I seeme to *stand*, and I goe *round*. . . I seeme to *stand* to my *Company*, and yet am carried, in a giddy, and *circular motion*,

[36] Chamberlain, II.531.

as I stand. . . . How so little soever [Man] bee *raised*, he *moves*, and moves in a circle, giddily. . .” (Meditation 21 pp. 127, 128). His slow recuperation perhaps lessened his sense of *communitas*, but it did not remove him from the liminal state. The end of the *Devotions* joins the beginning both in occasion and rhetoric. As the beginning of *Devotions* laments the in-between stage of “pre–afflictions” and suspicions of sickness, the final Devotion 23 expresses the fear of relapse, so that he remains in-between sickness and health. Donne demonstrates the continuation of the spiral movement rhetorically with his use of *epanalepsis*. [37] Here, Donne expands the concept from sentence to entire work with repetition of “this minute,” beginning Meditation 1 with “. . . this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute” (p. 1) and ending the Prayer of Devotion 23 with “. . . I durst deliver my selfe over to thee this *minute*, if this *minute* thou would accept my *dissolution*. . .” (Prayer 23, p. 147). Both express dread—of an approaching sickness, and of a possible relapse—and indicate a joining of the beginning and the end, not as a perfect, closed circle since Donne has traversed much area in between, but as a continuing spiral.[38] His stress of “minute” indicating linear time contrasts with the uncertainty of time in the liminal state, an uncertainty Donne reveals in the final prayer, which mingles past, present, and future. His plea that God help him if he does relapse into the sins that he has already repented and that God has already forgiven expresses a type of future-perfect tense: he prays that God’s “*long-livd*, thy *everlasting Mercy*, will visit me, though *that*, which I have *truely repented*, and thou has *fully pardoned*” (p. 147). In his discussion of liminality as the source of creativity, Mihai Spariosu identifies the world created by literature as a “subjunctive mood” indicating a “future-

[37] Sharon Cadman Seelig, “In Sickness and in Health: Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *John Donne Journal* 8.1-2 (1989): 113.

[38] Both Salenius and Rissanen acknowledge that the illness changed Donne as a person. Salenius sees *Devotions* as a “declaration of spiritual change” and that change is “nothing less than Donne’s final conversion from Catholicism to Protestantism” (p. 202), while Paavo Rissanen argues that the 1623 illness served as a turning point in his relationship with God. See *John Donne’s Doctrine of the Church* (Helsinki: Missiologian Ja Ekumeniika Seura R.Y. The Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, 1983), p. 51. This “turning point” was a result of slow, steady, spiraling advancement.

perfect" picture of society, what society "will have been."[39] Thus, Donne ends with the concept that he "will have been forgiven" for relapsing sins in the future.

The critical experience of this illness had a lasting effect on Donne, already pre-occupied with death as seen in several of his writings and best illustrated in his careful preparations for actual death on 31 March 1631.[40] His arranging of a place of burial in St. Paul's Cathedral, his preaching is own funeral sermon in *Death's Duell* on 25 February 1631, and his posing for his death effigy in sketch and stone evidence a fascination with the transition from life to death to life. Thus his body's regaining (uncertain) health at the end of Devotion 23 actually increases the distance to heaven, requiring continuing efforts to bridge that gap. *Devotions* crystallizes earlier evidence of this fascination with bodily and spiritual transition, as he struggles through long weeks to construct a stairway—a spiral stairway—to heaven.[41]

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[39] Mihai Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality,and the Study of Literature* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 46.

[40] Besides numerous references in the sermons and his obvious defense of suicide in *Bianthanatos,* poems that reference to literal or metaphorical death include "The Apparition," "The Legacy," "A Fever," "The Anniversary," "The Autumnall," "The Flea," "The Will," The Funerall," "The Relique," "The Dampe," The Dissolution," "The Expiration," The Paradox," "The Computation," "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day," Holy Sonnets "Oh my blacke Soul," "This is my playes last scene," "Death be not proud," "Since she whome I lovd," "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," and, of course, his *Epicedes and Obsequies.*

[41] For excellent details about the last days of Donne, see Donald Ramsay Roberts, "The Death Wish of John Donne," *PMLA* 62.4 (Dec., 1947), p. 960.