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Donne, Salvation, and the Biblical Basis of Poetic Action

Raymond-Jean Frontain

> I have decided that the trouble with print is, it never changes its mind.
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> —Ursula K. Le Guin[1]

Concluding his description of Christ's passion in the Lenten sermon known as "Deaths Duell," John Donne asks his auditors to exercise their meditative power and imagine the Savior's final moments.

> There now hangs that *sacred Body* upon the *Crosse*, *rebaptized* in his own *teares*, and *sweat*, and *embalmed* in his *owne blood alive*. There are those *bowells of compassion* which are so conspicuous, so manifested, as that you may *see them through his wounds*. There those *glorious eyes* grew faint in their light: so as the *Sun ashamed* to survive them, *departed with his light too*.[2]

This essay was delivered as the Presidential Address at the twenty-sixth annual meeting of the John Donne Society in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on 19 February 2011.

[1]Quoted in Martha Nell Smith, *Rowing in Eden: Reading Emily Dickinson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), p. xiv.

[2]Donne, "Deaths Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body. Delivered in a Sermon at White Hall, before the Kings Majesty, in the beginning of Lent, 1630," in *Sermons*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California

The emphatic repetition of "there" leads the auditor through an intense composition of time and place, encouraging the devout believer to recreate in his or her own mind's eye the specifics of Christ's final agony.

The moment was made the more dramatic, I suspect, by Donne's visually directing the auditor's attention to a crucifix in Whitehall's Chapel Royal, those long, tapering, elegant fingers so prominently featured in the Lothian portrait used to gesture emphatically with each "there" to the conspicuous manifestation of salvation that most likely hung above the chapel's altar. Or, as he closed the sermon, might the preacher have extended both his arms and re-formed himself as a cross, as Donne exhorts readers to do in line 18 of the poem titled "The Crosse"?[3]

> There wee leave you in that *blessed dependancy*, to *hang* upon *him* that *hangs* upon the *Crosse*, there *bath* in his t*eares*, there *suck* at his *woundes*, and *lye downe in peace* in his *grave*, till hee vouchsafe you a *resurrection*, and an *ascension* into that *Kingdome*, which hee *hath purchas'd for you,* with the *inestimable price* of his *incorruptible blood*.
>
> (10:248)

The conceit is of a dependent child whose arms, outstretched to cling to its mother both for sustenance and support, mirrors Christ's posture on the cross. The child-like person of faith is bathed (here, in Christ's tears) and nourished by sucking at its mother's teats (Christ's wounds) before being laid in its cradle (Christ's tomb).[4]

I find it deeply moving that in the final moment of what is arguably Donne's final work the actor should remain perfectly frozen in time, the sermon concluding with as inconclusive a gesture as any to be found in

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Press, 1953–1962), 10:229–248, quotation on pp. 247–248. Further quotation from "Deaths Duell" will be from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

[3]"The Crosse," in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1967), pp. 351–353. Unless otherwise noted, further quotation of Donne's poetry will be from this edition; line numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[4]For an alternate reading of this passage in "Deaths Duell," see Judith H. Anderson, *Words That Matter: Linguistic Perception in Renaissance English* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 226–229.

his canon. For the speaker pauses to see if the auditor will take what is imaged as an actual leap of faith by daring to throw himself on the outstretched arms of the crucified Christ and risk hanging there "in that blessed dependancy." Or whether the auditor, uncertain that Christ will receive and support the terrified sinner in his embrace, will lack the faith to make that leap and seize hold of the Savior's neck, and thus risk sliding into the painful oblivion that awaits her below (an action, it bears noting, that inverts Dante's clinging to his guide Virgil as the latter rappels down Satan's back while the two hurry to escape Hell on Holy Saturday night at the close of *Inferno*). The sermon's auditor finds himself in a situation analogous to that of the speaker of "A Hymne to God the Father," who, having exhausted himself making his way across land to the shore, anxiously waits to see if the Son will now transport him across the sea—or who, in an alternate reading of that ambivalent image, having exhausted himself swimming to shore, now hopes that God will not allow him to perish there. Significantly, the final stanza of the "Hymne" is constructed in an implicitly conditional mode in which the speaker, confessing his fear that "when I'have spunne / My last thred, I shall perish on the shore" (13–14), attempts to secure the Father's promise that the speaker will indeed be accorded deliverance *if* he engages in an effort that he knows beforehand he cannot successfully sustain. Will God assist the hymn's speaker across the water if he begins to swim? And will those blessed arms reach out and hold the sermon's auditor securely in their embrace if she makes that leap of faith?

"Deaths Duell" proves the final instance of Donne's lifelong attempt to negotiate the anxiety that comes of perpetual anticipation. ("Perpetual anticipation is / Good for the soul / But it's bad for the heart," sings the chorus of Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*.[5]) Agents in Donne repeatedly set out on journeys in the hope of arriving at a state of fulfillment, but never complete them. "For though through many streights, and lands I roame, / I launche at paradise, and I saile towards home," says the speaker of *Metempsychosis* (56–57) as he undertakes to follow the progress of the soul to a body that he ambivalently promises the reader "you shall finde in the end of this booke" (310), a book that some readers are uncertain even has an end. Like the speakers of the other great hymns

[5]Stephen Sondheim, "Perpetual Anticipation," *A Little Night Music* (New York: Applause Theatre Books, 1991), p. 154.

who tune an instrument in the antechamber immediately before "comming to that Holy roome" ("Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," 1) or who "sacrifice this Iland" and set out in a "torne ship" across the sea ("A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany," 8, 1), the speaker of "Elegie: Going to Bed" positions himself in a liminal space and at a liminal moment by requesting "license" to rove "Behind, before, above, between, below" (25–26)—a license that is never finally issued within the poem. Even when the speaker of "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward" attempts to redefine the nature of his journey after recognizing that he has been riding in the wrong direction, the poem leaves him suspended mid-journey, *anticipating* divine correction. And "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day" closes with the speaker "preparing" towards the mysterious "her," the poem concluding not with an action taken, but with the anticipation of a resolution. It is the act of preparing, riding, roving, roaming, launching, or sailing that engages Donne's imagination—the anticipation, and never the actual achievement, of fulfillment—and that renders him, as Jeffrey Johnson memorably phrased it at this podium several years ago, "Donne, imperfect."[6]

One can find a myriad more examples that reinforce—and, no doubt, some that challenge—this representation of a Donne speaker's anxiety concerning fulfillment. The point that I wish to make is that the speaker of a Donne text characteristically *anticipates* and never actually experiences the delivery of either sexual satisfaction or the assurance of religious salvation—not even in a poem provocatively titled "The Extasie," in which the souls of the speaker and his beloved, seeking "to advance their state" (15), sit suspended outside their bodies, poised on the verge of "descend[ing] / T'affections, and to faculties" (65–66). A Donne speaker, knowing painfully well both the potential bliss that is available to him and the inadequacy of his own power to reach or achieve it, seeks a way to negotiate his passage from the one state to the other.

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[6]Johnson, "Donne, imperfect," *John Donne Journal* 27 (2008):1–20. "The experience of this life for Donne is one of incompletion, an imperfect, because imbalanced and unrefined, mixture of desires and circumstances, fears and possibilities," Johnson writes (p. 2). As a result, "Donne's work is characterized by a pervasive and a profound rest-lessness, and this, in part, is the distinguishing imperfection found in Donne, and a quality of his mind that draws us to him" (p. 9).

The poem always pauses on the verge of the speaker's hoped-for deliverance: "To'our bodies turne wee then" (69), "turne" proving to be the beginning, not the completion, of an action.

And the first point that I will argue today is that it is Donne's pained need for a sign of his election—for the woman to drop that final piece of clothing in "Going to Bed" and accord him the eroto-spiritual revelation that he seeks, or for the "three-person'd God" to "breake, blowe, [and] burn" the speaker's heart in the *Holy Sonnets* in order to make him new—that accounts for his characteristic orality. Following the example of biblical petitioners who, when approaching God, dare to use the imperative with apparent impunity—"Judge me, O Lord . . . Examine me" (Psalm 26:1–2), "Deliver my soul from the sword . . . Save me from the lion's mouth" (Psalm 22:20–21), "Speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed" (Matthew 8:8)[7]—Donne habitually creates an aural zone in which language possesses the potential to accord the speaker the deliverance that he so anxiously seeks. The only way of breaking the petitioner's impasse—of enlisting those arms to reach out and securely clasp the sermon auditor who is willing to make the leap of faith, of eliciting from God the Father the assurance that He will indeed see the exhausted swimmer of the hymn safely to shore, of provoking the woman in "Going to Bed" to drop that final piece of clothing and thereby provide the aroused speaker with the prevenient grace required for his sexual salvation—is through a verbal maneuver ordained by that "*figurative*, . . . *metaphorical* God" of the *Devotions*, a maneuver that Donne discovered in the Bible—that is, by the speaker's approaching "*with holy importunity, with a pious impudencie*" either God or the woman who dispenses grace.[8]

And the second point that I will advance today is that it is this search for oral deliverance through the biblical dynamic of *dabar* (that is, the word as action) that accounts for the most provocative and, I believe, characteristic feature of closure in Donne's poems. Donne's canon offers us a family of agents who, like the speaker of Matthew Arnold's "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," wander "between two worlds, one dead, /

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[7]Quotation of the Bible throughout is from the Authorized (King James) Version.

[8]Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (1975; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 99, 52.

the other powerless to be born."[9] In a perverse reversal of Arnold's conundrum, this theological underpinning to, or biblical model for, Donne's literary dynamic reveals him to have been caught between what he denounced in a letter to the countess of Montgomery as the "dead carkasses [that] things written are, in respect of things spoken,"[10] and a powerful orality that he seems to have felt could only be sustained in formal—maybe, even, formulaic—ways in the early modern world. Instead—in poems that are spoken discourse directed to an unseen interlocutor whose preceding comment provokes the speaker's outburst ("For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love"); or to a similarly unseen interlocutor whose hoped-for reply or reaction presumably occurs following the poem's close ("Lest thou thy love and hate and mee undoe, / To let mee live, Oh love and hate mee too" ["The Prohibition," 23–24])—Donne spends the better part of his literary life attempting to negotiate between the extremes of speech and print through what he terms in *A Litanie* "a place / Of midle kind" (155–156)—in this case, writing. That is to say, in the attempt to sustain an oral dynamic in an age increasingly identified with print, Donne values and images writing as a substitute for speech, proving (to recast Donne's terms) his best way of avoiding the fate of those "dead carkasses" of print.[11] Only in the final

[9]Arnold, "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse," in *Poetry and Prose*, ed. John Bryson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 201–206, lines 85–86.

[10]Donne, *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1977), p. 25.

[11]The movement from speech to print in the early modern period was far more gradual and, even, confused than modern categories presume. Quoting Jack Goody, historians Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf point out that "writing does not supplant oral communication; instead it provides it with another channel, 'substituting for the oral only in certain contexts but at the same time developing new ones'" ("Introduction," in *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain, 1500–1850*, ed. Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf [Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2002], pp. 1–51, quotation on p. 11). Similarly, as David McKitterick demonstrates, "the continued intermingling of print and manuscript" in the seventeenth century suggests that the shift from manuscript to print was far more gradual process than is generally assumed (*Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], p. 13). I am interested in the manner in which Donne strove to adapt oral habits to the written word.

stage of his career did Donne discover in the sermon the opportunity for unmediated oral engagement.[12] The performance of a sermon allowed him to address a non-hypothetical auditor directly and, as we have seen in the example of the closing lines of "Deaths Duell," provoke that auditor's spiritual transformation.

The most telling poetic text in this regard is *A Litanie*, whose dynamic of a "change to evennesse" (208) marks the boundary between orality and print. Examination of *A Litanie* demonstrates that the critical moment in a Donne poem occurs when the speaker pauses in hopes of having elicited a reply from his interlocutor and, in effect—like the biblical petitioners whose deliverance is secured within the biblical text—making salvation happen.

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Donne's lyrics are more often than not paradoxical "dialogue[s] of one" ("The Extasie," 74) inasmuch as they record a speaker's engagement with an invariably unseen and silent interlocutor. Even among Donne's more libertine love poems are found no witty, self-mocking exchanges like John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester's "To the Postboy," in which the speaker asks a minion "the readiest way to Hell," only to be told that "The readiest way, my Lord, 's by Rochester," or the song by Rochester in which the duchess of Cleveland asks another royal mistress where to secure "a prick," and receives explicit instructions.[13] The closest that one comes in Donne to such libertine dialogue is "The Flea," but even here the woman's counter-arguments are suggested by her actions, and even those actions are implied only by the speaker's expostulation against her

[12]Margaret Downs-Gamble, "John Donne's 'Outward Creatures': Texts Built of 'Thought and Breath,'" unpublished paper presented at the Twenty-third Annual John Donne Society Conference, Baton Rouge, Louisiana (23 February 2008). I am grateful to Dr. Downs-Gamble for supplying me with a copy of her paper.

[13]"To the Postboy" and "Song: Quoth the Duchess of Cleveland to counselor Knight," in *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. David M. Vieth (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 130–131, lines 2 and 16, and p. 48, lines 5–8, respectively.

at the start of each stanza; the poem remains a "dialogue of one." Even in the so-called poems of *mutual* love like "The good-morrow," "The Extasie," and "A Valediction forbidding mourning," Donne's audience hears only one voice, that of the male speaker, which provides the only, and by no means reliable, evidence of the female interlocutor's concurrence.

Likewise, among Donne's religious poems, there is nothing that approaches Andrew Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body" in which two voices complain aloud about, even if not directly to, each other; still, more than one voice sounds in Marvell's poem.[14] As Jeffrey G. Sobosan pointed out a generation ago, there is no possibility in Donne's divine poems that the speaker might be answered after he calls out to God, as the speaker of George Herbert's "The Collar" is gently chastised by a voice from above ("*Child!*").[15] This difference is all the more provocative because, whereas Herbert's speaker receives an answer even though he was previously unaware of God's presence, Donne oftentimes addresses God directly without ever receiving the grace of a reply. Even "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," which seems to begin as a soliloquy ("Let mans Soule be a Spheare" [1]), is revealed only at the end to have had a silent interlocutor ("O Saviour" [36]). The poem proves to have been—in A. D. Nuttall's provocative phrase—"overheard by God,"[16] although God's response is not recorded within the poem, if such a response was ever made.

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[14]Marvell, "A Dialogue between the Soul and Body," in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith, Longman Annotated English Poets, revised ed. (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), pp. 61–64. As Smith notes, Marvell's poem is "unusual in that each speaker appears to be talking to a third party rather than to each other, although a dramatic element is sustained by each speaker showing an awareness of the presence of the other" (p. 62).

[15]Sobosan, "Call and Response—The Vision of God in John Donne and George Herbert," *Religious Studies* 13 (December 1977): 395–407; George Herbert, "The Collar," in *The Oxford Authors: George Herbert and Henry Vaughan*, ed. Louis L. Martz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 138–139, lines 34–37.

[16]"[F]or much of our older literature one may suppose the presence of an extra (inhuman) reader: that which is written for man is always and necessarily read also by God" (Nuttall, *Overheard by God: Fiction and Prayer in Herbert, Milton, Dante and St. John* [London: Methuen, 1980], p. ix.)

Yet, not withstanding this absence of a verbalizing interlocutor, the majority of Donne's poems are aural events. It bears recalling that Donne came into the modernist canon, in Rudyard Kipling's telling formulation, as "Browning's great-grandfather"—that is, as the author of dramatic monologues;[17] and that one of the issues that mid-century Donne criticism addressed in detail was dramatic persona.[18] I will not revisit here the work done by earlier generations of scholars, but suffice it to say that critical preoccupations have been so radically different in the past twenty or more years that, apart from Margret Fetzer's recent book-length study of Donne in the context of speech act theory, Donne studies today seem almost to take for granted the highly colloquial diction and raw urgency of Donne's dramatic situations.[19] Yet by my rough count more than half of Donne's lyrics depend upon a speaker's engagement by an unseen, rarely (or barely) identified interlocutor. If in his *Sonnets* William Shakespeare is concerned with readers who possess "eyes [that] can see" in order to be able to read his poems,[20] then, conversely, John Donne is most often concerned with auditors who possess ears that can or cannot hear his. "[B]ut my words none drawes / Within the vast reach of th'huge statue lawes," the speaker of *Satyre II* agonizes (111–112),

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[17]Kipling, Letter to Edward White dated in 1893, quoted in Harry Ricketts, *Rudyard Kipling: A Life* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2000), p. 200. See also W. David Shaw's chapter, "Browning and Donne: Unconscious Deceptions," in his *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 167–172.

[18]For example, a special double issue of *Southern Quarterly* (14.2–3 [1976]), containing essays by George T. Wright, Helen S. Thomas, and Barbara K. Lewalski, along with responses by Lynn Taylor Novak, Gary Stringer, and Michael Smalling, was dedicated to the topic of "John Donne and the Concept of the *Persona*." But in recent years critical interest in this question seems to have waned. Perhaps the last works to treat it seriously are Patricia Garland Pinka, *This Dialogue of One: The "Songs and Sonnets" of John Donne* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1982), and George Klawitter, *The Enigmatic Narrator: The Voicing of Same-Sex Love in the Poetry of John Donne* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

[19]Margret Fetzer, *John Donne's Performances* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[20]Sonnet 18, in William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Martin Seymour-Smith (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 49, line 13.

establishing a curious relationship between the satirist's verbal expostulation and the written statues. Likewise, the speaker of *The Anniversaries*—those companion poems in which, to his regret, Donne most prominently descended into print—posits an oral dynamic to his relationship with Elizabeth Drury: "Thou art the Proclamation; and I ame / The Trumpet, at whose voice the people came" (*The Second Anniversary*, 527–528). Even in his verse epistles, which are by generic definition written texts, Donne invests writing with an oral dimension. "Sir, more then kisses, letters mingle Soules," Donne writes to Sir Henry Wotton, "For, thus friends absent *speake*" ("To Sr. Henry Wotton," 1–2, emphasis added).

If we accept that one of the most striking features of Donne's poems is that, although they regularly posit the presence of two people, their "dialogue" is perversely limited to just one speaker, then the question that we must consider is: Why does Donne seem constitutionally incapable of imagining a genuine "dialogue of two"? The importance of the question is highlighted by the accusation of misogyny that continues to linger at the edge of discussions of Donne's *Elegies* and *Songs and Sonets*. Why doesn't the woman ever speak in a Donne poem? I suspect that the answer lies less in the male speaker's misogyny than in his attempt to compensate for a feeling of helplessness through a patently empty bravado. The bravado that the speaker exhibits in poems like "Going to Bed," "Song: Goe, and catche a falling starre," and "Loves Usury"—the "masculine persuasive force" to which Stanley Fish attaches such importance[21]—is the "holy importunity" or "pious impudencie" of a speaker who variously hangs "in that blessed dependancy" upon a grace-dispensing woman who possesses the power to save or make him whole, much as he does elsewhere upon patronage-dispensing friends and upon the God of redemption.[22]

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[21]Stanley Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power" (1990), reprinted in *John Donne: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Andrew Mousley (Houndmills, England: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 157–181.

[22]The apparent cynicism of poems like "Loves Alchymie," "Loves Usury," and "Communitie" seems to me to be the self-protective stance taken by a speaker who is frustrated by the lack of mutuality in love. For example, "Song: Go and catch a falling star" expresses the speaker's refusal to pursue one of the world's very few beautiful yet virtuous women because he fully expects to be disappointed. Still, he speaks of his search for her in religious terms, such as

Consider the conclusion of one of Donne's most famous "dialogue[s] of one," "The good-morrow":

> What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
> If our two loves be one, or thou and I
> Love so alike, that none doe slacken, [then] none can die.
> (19–21)

In what seems an act of extraordinary sexual bravado, the speaker promises the silent female interlocutor that his lack of phallic slackening will keep both of them perpetually on the verge of orgasm: they will enjoy eternal "quickness" because neither of them will ever "die" sexually. Like a pair of seventeenth-century Energizer bunnies, the speaker and his partner will be sustaining the same act of coitus for years and years and years to come. Long before his fellow British imperialists allowed themselves to be outraged by the sexually explicit mysteries of Khajuraho, Donne was imagining the possibility of tantric sex. ("Perpetual anticipation is / Good for the soul / But it's bad for the heart," indeed.)

But the speaker's apparent sexual bravado is exposed as something else entirely when the reader questions why the final couplet is constructed as an if/then clause. The speaker and his partner will not "die," he tells her, *if* they love each other equally. And here the sexually braggadocious speaker seems to me extraordinarily, even desperately vulnerable. For although success depends upon the equal mixing of their loves, the speaker apparently has as yet had no clear indication of what his partner feels. The poem's twenty-one lines prove to be the speaker's attempt to draw from her an affirmation that she does indeed love him as much he loves her. "The good-morrow" resists closure in that the single-most important line of the poem—the female interlocutor's response to the speaker's implied question—can come only *after* the speaker stops speaking. Rather than denying his female interlocutor the opportunity to speak, the speaker is actually attempting to provoke her to do just that, but preferably as a verbal affirmation or reaffirmation of her love. Imagine his dismay if, after awakening her with an impassioned outburst

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"wonders" and "Pilgrimage." Such poems convey a speaker's sense of being hopelessly mired in a profane world. Sacrilege is the other face of the coin of sacrament: a frustrated launch towards the sacred can only leave one feeling profaned.

in which he describes the new state he feels that he has achieved after their night of lovemaking, she replies distantly, as she gathers her discarded items of clothing and beats a hasty retreat to the bathroom to dress, that "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all." "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"? More "The Love Song of J. Donne, Esq." Whatever its seeming bravado ("For love, all love of other sights controules, / And makes one little roome, an every where" [10–11]), "The good-morrow" is an appeal: please tell me that you love me as much as I love you. It is not simply the speaker's phallus that is vulnerably exposed in the poem, like his brother-speaker's in "Going to Bed"; it is his heart.[23]

Donne's "dialogue[s] of one" are the conditional mode rendered dramatic. Consider how many other poems are built upon this same, oftentimes only implicit, if/then clause, or that project the conclusion of the poem's action to some unspecified future time period. In "The Extasie," the speaker and his beloved's transcendent state depends upon the presence of a hypothetical witness (stanza 6). This witness never enters the poem and, thus, can never actually "unperplex" the lovers as to the balance between carnal and spiritual affection in their relationship and, finally, "marke" whether there really is "Small change, when we [the lovers]'re to bodies gone" (75–76).[24] Likewise, the final two stanzas of

[23]Am I alone in hearing a similar nervousness in another of Donne's poems of mutual love, "The Anniversarie"? On its face, the poem seems an emphatic celebration of the speaker's relationship with his silent, unseen mistress: "All other things, to their destruction draw, / Only our love hath no decay" (6–7). But an anxiety similar to that of the speaker in "The good-morrow" creeps through in the final stanza: "Who is so safe as wee? where none can doe / Treason to us, except one of us two" (25–26). It is the speaker's recognition of that exception—as carefully embedded grammatically as presumably the speaker attempts emotionally to mask his concern from his interlocutor—that suggests that rather than an exuberant celebration of undying love, "The Anniversarie" is an attempt on the speaker's part to elicit a similar profession of loyalty from his beloved or to subtly reinforce in her a recognition of the importance of mutual devotion. Like "The good-morrow," "The Anniversarie" is as much an attempt to ensure the outcome of the speaker's relationship with his mistress as it is a celebration of an extraordinarily gratifying present moment.

[24]Little wonder that debate continues over whether "The Extasie" is a seduction poem. Readers who are moved by the poem's skillful appropriation of religious imagery to describe the speaker's state of mind are offended by the

"The Canonization" depend upon the two-fold hypothetical situation that the speaker and his beloved "can dye by it, if not live by love" (28), and that "if unfit for tombes and hearse / Our legend bee, it will be fit for verse" (29–30)—that is, the speaker's present miserable circumstances can be resolved only by projecting himself and his mistress into a hypothetical future that lies outside the "real" time of the poem. The "if/then" construction that makes up the final two lines of "Farewell to Love," notes Donne's most recent editor, Robin Robbins, suggests that Donne "may be implying that the preceding resolutions are as useless" as a remedy for lust as "applying worm-seed to the tail,"[25] thus leaving the speaker in the ambivalent position of renouncing what he knows cannot be renounced.

How many of Donne's poems either pause in anticipation of the interlocutor's response, or defer the conclusion of the speaker's action for one reason or another? Is "The Apparition" a cynical dismissal of a hypocritical Petrarchan mistress who has tormented the sexually frustrated speaker with the assurance that she is "made of truth" while freely, but discreetly, lavishing her favors upon other men? Or is it a last-ditch attempt on the part of the speaker to engage her in discourse, an extreme attempt to elicit from her even a curt declaration that she is or is not interested in him? "What I will say" when he comes to haunt her after his hypothetical death that has resulted from her disdain, "I will not tell thee now, / Lest that preserve thee" (15–16). Rather, the poem concludes inconclusively with the promise of ongoing discourse, as though the speaker is still leaving open the door to a relationship with the woman who at the moment spurns him. And just as the speaker of

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crass suggestion that he is simply trying to get into his girlfriend's pants. I suspect, rather, that the speaker is attempting to ensure his interlocutor's acquiescence *because* he understands the extent of his ecstatic mood's "blessed dependancy" upon her sharing his feelings. The speaker attempts to ensure her response to his "dialogue of one" *because* he understands only too painfully that "Else a great Prince in prison lies" (68)—not simply his phallus that longs to be freed of the restraint of the speaker's cod piece, but the soul that is tired of mute immateriality and longs to be able to express itself in action.

[25]Robin Robbins, ed., *The Poems of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2008), 1:185.

"Elegie: His Picture" goes so far as to describe in explicit terms the response that he would like to receive from his interlocutor upon his return from a dangerous voyage,[26] the speaker of "The Dreame" expresses his hope that the woman who has interrupted his dream will allow him the same degree of erotic fulfillment that he enjoyed while dreaming about her (a problem, a recent University of Kansas study indicates, shared by college-aged men who spend too much time looking at pornography online[27]). The speaker of "The Flea" anticipates the moment "when thou yeeld'st to mee" (26), positing a moment of fulfillment that is outside the poem. Yet the poem pauses just before the woman either acquiesces or, possibly, laughs in his face at the outrageousness of his conceit. A significant portion of Donne's love poems suspend closure in the hope of eliciting a specific response from their interlocutor.

Analyzing Donne's lyrics as performative speech acts, Margret Fetzer distinguishes between the strategies employed in poems that are erotic seductions and those that implore salvation from God.

> Deliberate calculation, which encourages a speaker to act in a certain way in order to trigger the desired reaction, is highly problematic when the addressee is God: he will neither be tricked nor taken in as easily as the various mistresses for whom Donne's erotic speakers perform . . . , nor would he, once he discovers the speaker's motives in performing Christ, be impressed by the speaker's ingenuity in doing so.[28]

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[26]As John Carey notes, in *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), "it is part of the poem's guile that it paints, in rugged strokes, quite another picture than the one it is supposed to be about. It depicts Donne as he wants to imagine himself in the future, after battle or captivity, with a smashed, stained body. And the look of that sturdy veteran is infinitely more compelling, we are made to feel, than the dainty keepsake he is actually handing over, and which the poem does not even deign to describe. Like its author, Donne's elegy is hardily intent on the future" (pp. 65–66.)

[27]According to the study, by spending so much time viewing pornography online, young men are conditioning their libidos to respond to such specific triggers that they have difficulty engaging with a real partner (see Davy Rothbat, "He's Just Not That into You," *New York* [7 February 2011]: 39–41, 88).

[28]Fetzer, p. 159.

While logical and holding true for almost any other seventeenth-century devotional poet, Fetzer's distinction fails to take into account the "holy importunity" and the "pious impudencie" of a man who is ever painfully conscious of his combined condition of "perpetual anticipation" and "blessed dependancy."[29] That is, because even more is at stake in the *Holy Sonnets* than in the *Songs and Sonets*—eternal salvation versus momentary or, possibly even, lasting sexual and emotional bliss—Donne's devotional speakers seek all the more earnestly to direct the response of the interlocutor in their "dialogue[s] of one" and, thus, ensure the outcome of their salvation drama. "*If* in thy little booke my name thou'enroule," the speaker of the "Resurrection" sonnet in *La Corona* (78, emphasis added) recognizes, he will be allowed a resurrection after the disintegration of the body and spared eternal death. But how does he persuade God to take that step? Likewise, in "Holy Sonnet: Thou hast made me," the speaker understands only too well that "Onely [if] thou art above, and when towards thee / By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe" (9–10). Like "Resurrection," the majority of the *Holy Sonnets* variously invite, beseech, or frantically implore God's intervention on the speaker's behalf.[30]

Admittedly, we are dealing with just one part of Donne's poetic canon in which the lyrics postpone closure or defer action because the speaker, understanding how much rests upon the interlocutor's response,

[29]A significant difference that Fetzer does not consider is that in the love poems, if the speaker discovers in the course of his performance that the woman *cannot* (as opposed to *will not yet*) grant him the salvation that he desires, he is free to fall back upon a cynical pose to salve his disappointment and/or hurt pride. Misogyny is the last resort of the phallus that is all dressed up with nowhere to go; it is the hasty retreat made by male desire that has exposed itself so honestly to a woman, only to hear her say, "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all," or to a woman who proves unable to supply the man with the grace that he so ardently craves.

[30]Although the textual editors of the Variorum Edition of the *Holy Sonnets* persuasively argue that Donne's ultimate ordering of the poems bespeaks a sequence in which the speaker's salvation drama is successfully resolved (Gary A. Stringer et al., eds., *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part I: The Holy Sonnets* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005]), I am interested primarily in the actions of the sonnets as individual lyrics.

attempts to control what God or the woman will say.[31] But it is, in terms of the sheer number of titles, the single-most substantial part of his poetic canon and makes for a poetic mode that wreaks havoc with generic distinctions. For example, while poles apart both generically and tonally, "Going to Bed" and "Goodfriday" are remarkably alike in that in neither is the speaker's prayer answered.[32] Although the woman in "Going to Bed" has apparently complied each step of the way with her partner's desire that she remove various items of apparel, it is not clear if she does indeed remove her final piece of clothing and join him naked in bed, thus imparting to him the salvific message of which she is both the guardian and the incarnation. Similarly, in "Goodfriday" there is no indication whether the speaker's turning his back for correction actually induces God to punish him as he so earnestly implores. The action of each poem is suspended, leaving the reader without a clue as to the final outcome. Likewise, in both *Satyre III* and "Holy Sonnet: Show me deare Christ" the speaker anxiously awaits a sign that will indicate which church is the one that merits his allegiance, and in the verse letters the speaker repeatedly insists that he can be completed only by his correspondent's response. The greater part of his poetic canon reveals the need of "Donne, imperfect" to be rendered complete, finished, whole; consequently, the greater portion of his poems involve his attempting to engage a superior force to speak or act on his behalf.

The depth of any speaker's anxiety is suggested by the frequency with which he must resort to employing the imperative mode in the half-hearted attempt to engineer the response that he would like to receive. "Come, Madam, come," the speaker of "Going to Bed" commands imperiously (1), and continues in the same vein for another forty-seven lines: "Unpin that spangled breastplate" (7), "Unlace your self" (9), "Off

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[31]Conversely, in poems like "Upon Annunciation and Passion falling on the same day," *La Corona*, and the Latin verse epistle to George Herbert, the speaker meditates upon the fullness of God's action in time and accepts the rightness of his own condition. Exhibiting almost circular thought processes, these poems—like a serpent swallowing its tail—end where they begin.

[32]Raymond-Jean Frontain, "Donne, Spenser, and the Performative Mode of Renaissance Poetry," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 32.1 (Summer 2006): 76–102.

with that happy busk" (11), "Now off with those shooes, and then softly tread" (17), "License my roaving hands" (25) and, finally, "shew / Thy selfe" (44–45). In a similar vein, the "Goodfriday" speaker implores, "O thinke me worth thine anger, punish mee, / Burne off my rusts, and my deformity, / Restore thine Image" (39–41). Likewise, Donne's audacity in commanding the deity is one of the most striking aspects of his *Holy Sonnets*, where God is simultaneously entreated and instructed to "Powre new seas in mine eyes . . . / Or wash . . . / And burne me" ("I am a little world"); "Show me deare Christ, thy spouse" and "Betray . . . thy spouse" ("Show me deare Christ"); "Teach mee how to repent" ("At the round earths"); "Impute me righteous" ("This is my playes last scene"); and, most powerfully, "Batter my heart," "o'erthrow mee," "Divorce mee," "Take mee to you, imprison me" ("Batter my heart').[33] Needless to say, the imperative in each case is more a plea than a command, expressing the speaker's desperate desire that the Other will act on his behalf, electing him, or providing him with the prevenient grace necessary for his sexual and/or spiritual salvation. The imperative is the speaker's attempt to transform a dialogue of one into a dialogue of two.

The dramatic circumstances of Donne's lyrics, of course, have been often commented upon. For example, Ilona Bell cautions that "even when Donne seems to be exploring his own thoughts as a poem unfolds, he is usually engaged in a dialogue with the person whom the poem addresses: a male friend, a female patron, a lover, God, posterity. . . . Reading the poems today in an anthology or a collection of Donne's poetry, we may forget that we are eavesdropping on one side of a conversation."[34] But I would go further and say that Donne's poetry manifests an aural universe in which a speaker has room verbally to negotiate an interlocutor's response, thereby initiating an ongoing

[33]Frontain, "Redemption Typology in John Donne's 'Batter My Heart,'" *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 8 (1987): 163–176, and "'With Holy Importunitie, with a Pious Impudencie': John Donne's Attempts to Provoke Election," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 13 (1992): 85–102.

[34]Bell, "Gender Matters: The Women in Donne's Poems," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 201–216, quotation on p. 202.

exchange that is simply not possible in print. (Emily Dickinson similarly postpones closure in her poems, using the dash to suspend meaning and to keep open the exchange with an interlocutor whose response never occurs within the poem.) Speech allows for the possibility that the speaker may be sexually and emotionally accommodated, or spiritually redeemed. The end stop signified in print by a period is just too final an admission of defeat for Donne to make.

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Justifying his obsession from an early age with collecting opera recordings, Wayne Kostenbaum notes that "to hear is metaphorically to be impregnated—with thought, tone, and sensation . . . . Listen to Rosa Ponselle. Her tones are rounded, median, warm; but then they renounce plum-thickness and become sabers. Moments of being pierced, being surrounded by sound, being called, are worth collecting."[35] Walter J. Ong makes the same point, albeit less impressionistically: "Sound situates man in the middle of actuality and in simultaneity, whereas vision [as used to read print] situates man in front of things and in sequentiality."[36] In early cultures, including early modern culture, the spoken word is more "real" than the written word precisely because the former possesses a power to elicit an immediate and reciprocal response.

> Sound binds interiors to one another as interiors. Even in the physical world this is so; sounds echo and resonate, provided that reciprocating physical interiors are at hand. Sights may reflect, from surfaces. [But] strumming on a bass viol will make a nearby one sound, by virtue of outside impact of energy but in such a way as to reveal its interior structures.[37]

As Kostenbaum concludes, "in Western metaphysics, the spoken or sung voice has more authority than the written word. Voice accords

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[35]Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (1993; rpt. New York: DaCapo Press, 2001), p. 16.

[36]Ong, *Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (1967; rpt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 128.

[37]Ong, p. 125.

presence."[38] "Deep calleth unto deep," says the psalmist (Psalm 42:7), interior structure answers the interior structure of a neighboring instrument, presence reveals itself in response to presence. Speech is not only an attempt at engagement; rather, as bats map their environment by emitting sound waves to learn from whom or what those waves bounce back, speech is a human being's most powerful means of existential validation—even moreso (and I suspect that Donne would finally agree) than sex.[39]

It is exactly this potential for reciprocity in oral discourse that Donne hoped to rely on in his closure-lacking "dialogue[s] of one." If, as W. H. Auden laments in his elegy for William Butler Yeats, "poetry makes nothing happen" in the print-driven twentieth century,[40] Donne might hope amidst the seventeenth-century transition from oral to written, and yet again from written to print, dissemination of texts that the ability to make something happen still inheres in verse. And his primary reason for hoping this is that the Bible told him so.

Biblically, speech or sound is the primary way by which God manifests Himself and by which He can be engaged by humankind. "Both in her most ordinary and in her sublimest statements, in magic, and in the deepest insights of theology or prophecy alike, Israel took as her starting point her conviction that the word possessed creative

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[38]Kostenbaum, p. 155.

[39]The two most influential studies of speech acts in a non-religious context, on both of which I rely heavily, are J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). Likewise, I am indebted throughout to Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), particularly to his chapter on the relation of speech to selfhood (pp. 246–284). As Smith demonstrates, "the structure of early modern conversation would seem to involve a conflicted combination of attraction, blockage, resistance, and diversion. Amid it all stands the speaking, listening subject. Acoustically, socially, psychologically, he maintains a strong sense of his own centrality and calculates carefully his interjections into the world of sound around him" (p. 261).

[40]Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 197–198, line 36.

power."[41] Gerhard von Rad summarizes the "dynamistic" conception of language held by the ancient Israelites in which a word "is thought to possess a power which extends beyond the realm of the mind and may be effective in the spatial and material world also":

> At the early mythical level of thought, man's apperception of the world about him is of it as a unified entity. He makes no distinction between spiritual and material—the two are intertwined in the closest possible way; and in consequence he is also unable properly to differentiate between word and object, idea and actuality. Such thought is thus characterized by an inherent absence of differentiation between the ideal and the real, or between word and object; these coalesce as if both stood on one plane of being. In a way which defines precise rational clarification, every word contains something of the object itself. Thus, in a very realistic sense, what happens in language is that the world is given material expression. Objects are only given form and differentiation in the word that names them.[42]

In the Bible Yahweh speaks the world into existence (Genesis 1), and Adam shares in the divine act of creation by naming the animals (Genesis 2:20).

Nowhere is the biblical presumption of the creative power of language more evident than in the Hebrew concept of *dabar*, which means not simply "word" but also "deed" or "event," the latter being the natural consequence of the word that is spoken.[43] In biblical culture, language

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[41]Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1967), p. 65.

[42]Von Rad, p. 61.

[43]Harold Stahmer, *"Speak That I May See Thee!": The Religious Significance of Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 18. Language possesses a similar performative function in Hinduism, where "*brahman* refers to a 'formulation' (*Formulierung*), the capturing of words of a signficant and non-self evident truth. The ability to formulate such truths gives the formulator (*brahman*) special powers, which can be exercised even on cosmic forces." This both accounts for the superiority of the brahman or priestly caste, and for the importance of freely composed poetry, as opposed to the rote recitation of texts in liturgies: "its influence is still to be discerned in the great stress laid on correct

manifestly makes things happen. The word becomes alive in its speaking, a thought becoming actualized only when it is articulated as speech. The *dabar* contains "the will and intention of the speaker."[44] In its most primitive manifestation, the divine word is a natural phenomenon of extraordinary power, Yahweh speaking to Job from out of a whirlwind (Job 38–41), and the psalmist understanding thunder to be the voice of God (Psalms 18:13; 29; and 77:18). But the Word of God possesses the creative power of a deed as well: "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded and it stood fast" (Psalm 33:9). And the centurion knows that Jesus—who is the "Word . . . made flesh" (John 1:14)—need "speak the word only, and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8).[45]

Consider how the Psalms depend upon such an understanding of language. The Psalms, as Harold Fisch points out, "are not monologues but insistently and at all times dialogue-poems, poems of the self but of the self in the mutuality of relationship with others."[46] In fact, says Fisch, the speaker of the Psalms does not betray an autonomous ego at all, despite the lyrics' overwhelming use of the first person: "The 'I' of the poem is in a real sense constituted by the dialogue with the 'Thou.' There is no 'person' behind the 'I' whose existence can be separated from the

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pronunciation of the ancient verses and especially on correct knowledge. 'He who knows thus' (*ya evam veda*) about the hidden meanings of the ritual or the homologies it encodes has access to greater power and greater success than one who simply has the ritual performed without this knowledge" (see Stephanie W. Jamison and Michael Witzel, "Vedic Hinduism," in *The Study of Hinduism*, ed. Arvind Sharma [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003], pp. 65–113, quotations on pp. 95 and 96).

[44]James Muilenberg, *The Way of Israel: Biblical Faith and Ethics* (New York: Harper Torchbacks, 1965), pp. 31–32. See also Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 65.

[45]I have explored at greater length some of the ramifications that the biblical understanding of language had for Donne in "'The Name of Shee': The Biblical Logocentrism of Donne's *Anniversaries*," *PMPA: Publications of the Missouri Philological Association* 22 (1997): 28–39.

[46]Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 107–108.

relationship."[47] The Psalms, rather, narrate the process of the self in search of a partner.

Take, for example, Psalm 6. The poem opens dramatically *in medias res*, as it were, without any explanation of the nature or cause of the speaker's suffering.

> 1. O lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot dispute.
> 2. Have mercy upon me, O Lord; for I am weak: O Lord, heal me; for my bones are vexed.
> 3. My soul is also sore vexed: but thou, O Lord, how long?
> 4. Return, O Lord, deliver my soul: oh save me for thy mercies' sake.
> 5. For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks?

These first five verses are addressed to God, plaintive questioning alternating with agonized pleading for enlightenment. The Psalmist's question in verse 5 attempts a sort of rhetorical blackmail by suggesting that God needs the speaker as much as the speaker needs God. But a shift in tone as well as address occurs in verse 6. The speaker, apparently tired of assaulting God's seemingly deaf ear, is on the verge of capitulating before his enemies; he seems to be talking to himself rather than to God.

> 6. I am weary with my groaning; all the night I make my bed to swim; I water my couch with tears.
> 7. Mine eye is consumed because of grief; it waxeth old because of all mine enemies.

But in a second, even more sudden shift, the speaker turns in verse 8 to taunt his enemies that his prayer has been heard and is about to be answered.

> 8. Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity; for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping.

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[47]Fisch, p. 109.

> 9. The Lord hath heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer.
> 10. Let all mine enemies be ashamed and sore vexed: let them return and be ashamed suddenly.

The reversal in the speaker's situation in the course of the psalm from besieged victim to exulting victor is mirrored in the strange precision of tenses in the psalm's last lines: the Lord *has* heard the speaker's prayer (past), so the evildoers had best retreat *now* (present), because the Lord is *about* to wreak vengeance upon them (future).

Curiously, the Lord's response to the speaker's entreaty does not occur within the psalm. Is the Psalmist's boast in verses 8–10 for his enemies' benefit only, a bluff to scare them into dispersing? Or is it actually aimed at drawing the Lord into the fray on the speaker's side, his announcement of the Lord's imminent intervention an attempt at provoking just such action? Or possibly does the Psalmist's use of impassioned questioning, of shifts in tone and address, and of the plaintive imperative achieve its effect in the course of the poem, the success of the speaker's entreaty occurring even as he speaks? The Psalms, Fisch argues, refute Auden's claim that poetry makes nothing happen. "This is not true of the Psalms. In nearly every psalm something does happen. The encounter between the 'I' and the 'Thou' is the signal for a change not merely in the inner realm of consciousness but in the realm of outer events."[48] The "Thou" invariably answers the call of the beleaguered speaker as part of the action of the lyric because biblical Hebrew understands speech to be performance or action, and presumes language to be a creating agent. Language in the Psalms is humanity's means of breaching an imprisoning subjectivity: to speak one's desire for God to answer is necessarily to engage the all-powerful Thou in the accomplishment of that desire. Theoretically, the covenant of faith that allows one to call upon God enjoins God to answer.[49] In the Hebrew Bible, a seeming "dialogue of one" proves in reality to be a one-sided dialogue of two.

Von Rad's description of the power of naming in primitive rites anticipates T. S. Eliot's famous description of Donne's ability to feel his

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[48]Fisch, p. 109.
[49]Fisch, pp. 109–110.

"thought as immediately as the odour of a rose."[50] Of greater significance is the extent to which Donne seems to have based his own stance of "holy importunity" and "pious impudencie" upon the biblical belief in the power of language. As the speaker of the *Devotions* notes, "I have not the *righteousnesse* of *Job*, but I have the desire of *Job*, *I would speake to the Almighty, and I would reason with God*."[51] Donne appropriates in writing the dynamic of oral discourse in his hope that, like Job and the Psalmist, he can make salvation happen.

On the most basic level, the speaker of Donne's devotional poems implores God to "know" him in the biblical meaning of the word—that is, to be sexually penetrated with such force that he is subsumed into the identity of his Creator/Redeemer much as Kostenbaum describes "being pierced, being surrounded by sound, being called" as he listens to opera recordings.[52] What is more, Donne's willingness to await a response from his interlocutor, whether from God or from the sexually all-powerful Woman, bespeaks the hope that he will be personally completed by their response. And, in the case of poems like "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" and *The Anniversaries* the speaker hopes that his word will resonate outwards as it is answered or echoed by his coterie readers, marshaling a cacophony of voices into an ever-expanding choir singing a hymn of praise. Like the Bible's, Donne's is an oral world in which praise aims at harmony.[53]

Thus, in those lyrics that seek to "perform" salvation, Donne leaves the poem open, poised at the moment that the interlocutor will reply. In such poems, closure is actually the anticipated moment of translation to another state of knowing and being known; the speaker's hoped-for beginning lies in the poem's end. Donne's resistance to print is actually a

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[50]Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in Arthur L. Clements, ed., *John Donne's Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 158–165, quotation on p. 162.

[51]Donne, *Devotions*, p. 21.

[52]On Donne's engagement with the Hebraic concept of *yada* (that is, to know, to ascertain by seeing, and to have sexual intercourse with), see Frontain, "'since that I may know': Donne and the Biblical Basis of Sexual Knowledge," in this volume of *John Donne Journal*, pp. 157–171.

[53]On Donne's attempt to create a circle of praise, see Frontain, "Translating Heavenwards: 'Upon the translation of the Psalms' and John Donne's Poetics of Praise," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 22 (1996): 103–125.

resistance to closure, for print forestalls the possibility of the interlocutor's reply or of the community's spontaneous ejaculation, which is exactly the kind of response that he hoped would be generated by *A Litanie*.

* * * *

Donne's cover letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, under which he transmitted a manuscript copy of his poem, *A Litanie*, employs what may seem a gross contradiction in terms. Donne has chosen a liturgical form traditionally recited in public by the communion of believers, yet he writes that his litany is intended "for lesser chapels, which are my friends," presumably to be read silently by them. Part of the evidence of his regard for Goodyer is that he has copied the poem out in his own hand.[54] That is, Donne's *A Litanie* is intended for non-public, non-liturgical use, even as it elevates friendship to a religion by inviting his friends to join him in a "circle of praise" such as Donne celebrates in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" and attempted to initiate in *The Anniversaries*. By joining with his intimates—as opposed to a public church congregation—in the recitation of his litany, Donne hoped to elicit from them some form of reciprocation: thus friends absent speak . . . and, he might add, pray. The poem invites the viols of other devout souls to resonate in response to the litany of Donne's own, thus making for a re-tuning or harmonizing of the community. As such, *A Litanie* proves to be the most extraordinary of Donne's performative speech acts.

The poem is also Donne's most assured attempt to use the oral dimension of poetry in order to make something happen. For the very nature of a litany is that the congregation joins together orally to implore God, Mary, and the saints to act on their behalf. As historian of religions Jan Assmann notes,

> When the right words are spoken at the right time and in the right place by the right speaker in accordance with the rules, these words do not refer to a meaning, they create it. . . . Thus the sacred text becomes associated with the idea not simply of

[54] The letter is reproduced in Robbins, 2:36–37.

> pointing to what is sacred, but, in a sense, of producing it ("theurgically").[55]

Each stanza of *A Litanie* delivers in writing Donne's oral petition to a religious figure in the hope of eliciting a salvific response, a petition that relies throughout upon the same use of the imperative that we have noted in numerous other Donne poems, as well as in the psalms. "[C]ome / And re-create mee, now growne ruinous" (3–4), the speaker implores the Father in the opening stanza. The essential dynamic of *A Litanie* is that the speaker seeks to ensure that more powerful figures respond to his voice of importunity by acting on his behalf:

> From this red earth, O Father, purge away
> All vicious tinctures, that new fashioned
> I may rise up from death, before I'am dead.
> (7–9)

Recognizing that sin lies in excess, he seeks what he terms a "change to evennesse" (208).

But ultimately the speaker is attempting to provoke a responsive action. In the pivotal Stanza 23, the speaker implores,

> Heare us, O heare us Lord; to thee
> A sinner is more musique, when he prayes,
> Then spheares, or Angels praises bee,
> In Panegyriques Alleujaes,
> Heare us, for till thou heare us, Lord
> We know not what to say.

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[55]Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 110. In "Donne's Transcendent Imagination: The Divine Poems as Hierophantic Experience," Frances Malpezzi analyzes Donne's divine poems as "hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred, their very time and space transformed to the eternal and cosmic" (*John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances Malpezzi [Conway, AR: UCA Press, 1995], pp. 141–161, quotation on p. 143).

> Thine eare to'our sighes, teares, thoughts gives voice and word.
> O thou who Satan hear'st in Jobs sicke day,
> Heare thy selfe now, for thou in us dost pray.
>
> (199–207)

As in the case of the prose letter to the countess of Montgomery, a complex reciprocity is at stake here. The speaker does not know what to say until his voice has been heard by God. He speaks, not in the hope of efficiently arguing his case before the Lord, but of striking a responsive chord in God. And once God sounds His musical note, the speaker will be able to tune himself more effectively, playing the note that it will please God to hear. *A Litanie*'s dialogue of one becomes a way of eliciting a dialogue of two or more and, consequently, of tuning the world.

Did Donne believe that if he but speaks the word, God will respond sympathetically and Donne's soul will be healed? I suspect not, for Donne's religious verse—however great his desire to "change to evennesse"—makes too strong an effort to engage the speaker's interlocutor. A different dynamic operates in *A Litanie*. As Assmann notes, "writing conferred permanence on political decrees and acts. In early written cultures, then, writing develops in the two realms of archiving and representation. Cultural texts, in contrast, maintain their place in the memory."[56] *A Litanie* is intended "for lesser chapels, which are my friends"—that is, it is Donne's attempt to inscribe himself in living memory, so that members of his coterie might be moved to respond to him in a reassuring manner, and he might be remembered by "friends absent." Writing, I suspect, was the best negotiation that Donne might effect between the extremes of a vanishing oral tradition and the "dead carkasses" of print. In *A Litanie* he models what he hopes may happen by striking a chord to which a neighboring viol responds harmoniously.

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[56]Assman, p. 110.

"*Language* most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee," Ben Jonson writes in *Timber: or, Discoveries*.[57] Jonson's assertion sounds almost biblical. "Speake that I might see thee" might be what Moses said to the Burning Bush, or what Isaiah spoke when in the throes of the vision that descends upon him like an all-consuming sand storm that comes suddenly out of the desert (Isaiah 21:1–4). And Jonson's assumption that visual perception depends upon aural experience, that speech is more revelatory than corporeal immediacy, surely has a biblical dimension. The priest Eli instructs the boy Samuel to answer the Lord, when he calls his name in the night, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth" (1 Samuel 3:9). Likewise, in The Book of Revelation, John of Patmos records that "I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks" (Revelation 1:12). John's visionary experience is predicated upon his first hearing the voice that directs his vision. Voice, rather than sight, proves the most reliable indication of the reality of the person with whom one is dealing. As John Milton makes clear in *A Mask*, hearing is a matter of (eternal) life and death.[58]

Have you ever wondered what Donne's voice sounded like? It's the aspect of him that I would be most curious to recover. He is the first English author for whom we have multiple images, allowing us an appreciation of his appearance as it evolved from cocky, posturing youth all the way to death's door. Yet no anecdote survives of his entertaining others during "a winter-seeming summers night" at the Inns of Court, of his reciting a poem at the Mermaid Tavern, of his performing on demand for Lucy in "Twicknam garden." Well may Jesse M. Lander argue that "the notion of a print-phobic Donne . . . needs to be abandoned in light of his foray into print in the years 1610–12" with *Pseudo-Martyr* and *An Anatomy of the World*.[59] But I would turn the

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[57]Jonson, *Timber: or, Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925–1952), 8:625.

[58]"This way the noise was, if mine ear be true," says the Lady upon entering, thereby initiating a thematic pattern in which the ear proves more reliable than the eye (Milton, *A Mask Presented at Ludlow-Castle*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998], p. 131, line 170).

[59]Lander, *Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 178.

question back on Professor Lander and ask why, on the eve of his ordination, Donne failed to carry through on his plan to publish his collected verse. Donne was a man caught between two worlds—between orality and print—and found manuscript circulation the next best thing to his preferred medium, speech. On the communication continuum, speech trumps writing, but even writing remains superior to print insofar as a personal voice has a much greater chance of sounding in a handwritten text than in the cold formality of print where every period looks like a nail driven into the coffin for "dead carkasses."

Let's return for our final moment to "Deaths Duell." David Novarr raised the question of why Donne wrote a limited number of poems following his ordination.[60] I suspect that he remained reluctant to take orders until he saw that the *Anniversaries*—his one great attempt to disseminate poetry through print—did not have their anticipated effect. He became a preacher, that is, possibly in part due to economic default, but largely because it was the oral medium best available in his day. (Donne was not likely to go on the stage, and the scandal of his marriage preempted a career as a speaker in Parliament or as a diplomat.) As John Wall writes, "a sermon—even if the version we have of it is one revised knowingly for publication—is, conceptually and practically, like a play, a script intended for performance, intended to be interpreted in performance, whether that performance takes place in a cathedral, a chapel, a church, or Paul's cross, or in the theater of the mind."[61] We may not have any evidence of Donne's oral delivery of his poems, but we do have Izaak Walton's testimony concerning his preaching. The preacher's word awakens, quickens, and engages his auditor in an immediate way. Like the interlocutors implied by the majority of Donne's poems, a preacher's auditors are silent. But he can gauge from the look in their eyes whether those viol strings are sounding in response to the preacher's own instrument being played. He can see which members of his congregation are on the verge of making that leap of faith and hanging in

[60]Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 103.

[61]Wall, "Situating Donne's Dedication Sermon at Lincoln's Inn, 22 May 1623," *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 159–239, quotation on p. 160.

blessed dependency on the outstretched arms of their crucified lord. And he knows that it is his word, his voice, that has led them there.[62]

University of Central Arkansas

[62]In 1998, the New York Public Library created a "Library Walk" by setting into neighboring sidewalks a series of bronze plaques containing quotations about books. One of the plaques, set on East Forty-First Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues, contains the following poem by Emily Dickinson: "A word is dead, / When it is said, / Some say. / I say it just / Begins to live / that day" (*Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson [Boston: Little, Brown, 1960], pp. 534–535). The poem suggests a temperamental affinity shared by Dickinson, Donne and, one might add, Gerard Manley Hopkins, all of whom published little in their lifetimes but preferred to circulate manuscript copies of their poems among friends, and all of whose poems demand to be read aloud rather than silently, as printed poems are most likely to be read. Although Martha Huff Overhouse has explored Dickinson's employment of the Metaphysical poets' meditative technique (*Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method and Meaning* [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995], especially pp. 1–37), she concentrates primarily upon Dickinson's affinity for Herbert. Likewise, although Hopkins's so-called "Terrible Sonnets" betray significant parallels dramatically, theologically, and metrically with Donne's Holy Sonnets (compare, for example, Donne's "Holy Sonnet: Batter my heart" with Hopkins's "Carrion Comfort"), little consideration has been paid in Hopkins studies to the Jesuit's temperamental affinities with Donne. A significant study remains to be conducted of the innovative metrical schemes of Donne, Dickinson, and Hopkins in terms of their attempts to create an oral dynamic in their poems that hopes to provoke a silent interlocutor to offer a salvific response. For Donne and Hopkins, as well as for Dickinson, the word is enlivened by being delivered orally because it leaves open the possibility of an interlocutor's response. When confined to print, it is dead.