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The Parallax View: Donne's Second, "inticing" Letter to Sir George More

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In his 11 February second letter to his father-in-law after his clandestine early 1601 marriage to Anne More (L.b. 527), John Donne assumes "a much more abject and penitential tone"[1] than what Donne himself called the "boldnes" of his first letter to Sir George More. In that earlier 3 February letter, Donne had asserted, in eloquent-sounding but largely oblique terms, the meritorious character of Anne's and his marriage as an "equal adventur[e]" that was "irremediably donne." Even his failure for months to "foreacquaint" and subsequently to inform Sir George of the "limits of our fault" in the couple's early December violation of Canon and Common Law "should be pardoned," Donne had urged—especially since, he "humbly" asserted, that "fault" was more Sir George's than Donne's and his marital co-conspirators. "I knew, (yet I knew not why) that I stood not right in your Opinion," explained this 29-year-old heir of an adamant Catholic family now married to the 17-year-old daughter of the Sheriff in charge of controlling recusancy in Surrey. But "I knew that to have given any intimation of [our] promise and Contract built upon yt, as withowt

[1]R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 135. Letters are cited from the holgraphs reproduced in *John Donne's Marriage Letters in the Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. with an introduction by M. Thomas Hester, Robert Parker Sorlien, and Dennis Flynn (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 2005). An annotated transcription of L.b. 527 is appended below. See also Margaret Maurer, "The Prose Letter," in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 348–361.

violence to Conscience might not be shaken, . . . had been to impossibilitate the whole Matter. And then having those honest purposes in our harts, and those fetters in our Consciences, me thinks we should be pardoned, if our fault be but that, this wee did not by fore-revealinge of yt, consent to our hindrance and torment." This astoundingly stubborn display of "coolly insolent"[2] casuistry (and the sort of begrudgingly veiled arrogance that recalls the pose of the first two Donne portraits and the "prickly"[3] quips of his "conceited Verse"), however appealing it had proven to be to the connoisseurs of his anti-Establishment epigrams, elegies, and satires, only served to insure that the couple would, as Donne predicted, "feele the terror of [Sir George's] sodaine anger [and] passion" and to solidify his firmly unfavorable "Opinion" of Lord Keeper Egerton's "Secretarye" (L.b. 533). Donne—probably to his shock—was "undone": dismissed from his position with Egerton at the urging of Anne's enraged father and thrown into Fleet Prison, from where he writes his second letter to Sir George, apparently chastened by the rigorous response to his first epistolary "Error" of judgment.[4]

What Sir George did not know, however, and what Bald misconstrues, is that in January—a few weeks after the elopement (*c.* 5 December 1601) and before the first letter to Sir George delivered by the "Wizard" Earl of Northumberland on 2 February 1601/2—Donne had carefully prepared and brought suit in the ecclesiastical Court of Audience, where lawyers representing him and Anne had argued before a judge, Dr. Richard Swale, concerning the validity of the marriage. Having heard the case, Swale was to decide whether John and Anne were bound by any other marital contracts or arrangements, and whether John and Anne were lawfully man and wife. This was a key part of Donne's plan and must have been prepared with both expert legal advice and some cunning. When Donne wrote those two letters to Sir George on 3 and 11 February, that is, he not only knew that this case was under

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[2]Flynn, "Donne's Catholicism, I," *Recusant History* 13 (1976–1977): 10.

[3]Judith Scherer Herz, "'An Excellent Exercise of Wit That Speaks So Well of Ill,'" in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 5.

[4]Bald, p. 135.

consideration by the court but also probably expected judgment in his favor, although he did not mention this (unless implicitly, in the suggestive—and downright sassy—assertion of the first letter that "yt is irremediably donne"). Here, I want to consider another way this second letter is composed by the same "bold" and far from "chastened" Donne who had eloped with the Sheriff's young daughter, and who, though perhaps surprised by the severity of the responses of his father-in-law and his employer, was not "changed" by his new circumstances.

As with the reading of a Donne poem, so our response to his letters should not be misled by its tone or apparent tone. Epistles too have personae, and personae in letters are framed in the terms or style of their inventor, as Justus Lipsius pointed out when he observed that "*Sola res quae homines absentes, praesentes facit*" ("This is the one thing which makes the absent present")[5] and, as Margaret Maurer has shown, are "finely calibrated accommodations of a complex situation."[6] The best of them, I believe, are prose emblems of their author. (After all, eleven of Donne's letters appear in the 1633 *Poems* as illustrations of his art.) This is not to suggest, of course, that Donne was not sorry to be in the Fleet, to have been fired from whatever private position it was he held in the Egerton household, and certainly that he was not literally sickened by separation from his beloved wife. But, as the sassy motto of his first portrait asserts—he was not *changed*. He tries in this second letter, that is, to assuage Sir George's infamous (and, in this case, justified) anger, but Donne is still "irremediably donne," and he only *could* or (more likely) *chose to* clothe his regret (or dismay) at his altered circumstances in the same baroque, equivocal, elaborately "conceited" style—what Dryden aptly called Donne's "scholastic diligence"—he chose for those first two portraits and his poetry. By way of analogy, as Father Thomas Wright (whom Donne would have known from York House) pointed out about pre-Tridentine, Erasmian Catholics such as Donne, "he which once is thorowly grounded in the Catholique religion . . . may varie his affection,

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[5]Lipsius, *Principals of Letter-Writing*: *A Bilingual Text of "Justi Lipsi Epistolica Institutio,"* ed. and trans. R. V. Young and M. Thomas Hester (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), pp. 8–9.

[6]Maurer, "Poetry and Scandal: John Donne's 'A Hymne to the Saynts and to the Marquesse Hamilton,'" *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 3.

but his iudgement [and] his conceit . . . hardly wil he change or neuer":[7] *Antes muerto que mudado.*[8] This is not to argue that Donne's is a "Catholic" style, even though his father-in-law may have seen it as such; indeed, as Dennis Flynn has pointed out, the issue of what Donne himself called "loving a Corrupt Religion" (L.b. 529) is central to his early letters to Sir George but in letters written to Egerton during the same crisis (often on the same day) is mentioned only in Donne's admission that it is too "late now for [him]" to consider religious exile.[9]

Indeed, Donne's second letter to Sir George is framed by an elaborate religious conceit. The physically sick husband with the healthy conscience of the first letter is now ill in conscience as well as body. He is "force[d]" to write, "owt of an humble and afflicted hart, "just, he confesses, as a depraved sinner (or this deprived husband) has no recourse but to pray. Employing the standard analogical language of Protestant soteriology by which Calvin's God *imputes* or "allows" to "Entertain" fallen man's moral illness "as" if it were good, Donne's wit in the first three sentences invents a complex conceit in which the "inward"-stricken petitioner whose (unnamed) "fault" renders him "very ungracious to yow" now admits (before "Allmighty God") that "in this [unspecified] manner" he has offended both Sir George—*and God*, whom he now "beseech[es] that Sir George imitate by allowing that Donne's "penitence" "may" be believed and "pittie[d]." The dense intellectual complexity of this long opening trope may well aim to convey the depth

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[7]Wright, "The Præface to the christian Reader," in *A Treatise, Shewing the possibilitie, and conueniencie of the reall presence of our Sauiour in the blessed Sacrament* (Antwerp [i.e., London]: Imprinted by Ioachim Trognesius [i.e., the English secret press], 1596), [p. 7]. In the same vein is Samuel Johnson's comment that "A man who is converted from Protestantism to Popery, may be sincere: he parts with nothing: he is only superadding to what he already has. But a convert from Popery to Protestantism gives up so much of what he had held as sacred as any thing that he retains; there is so much laceration of mind in such a conversion that it can hardly be sincere and lasting" (James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1969], p. 426, cited in Flynn, "Donne the Survivor," in *The Eagle and the Dove*, p. 16 n. 5).

[8]This is from the 1591 portrait of Donne bearing the Spanish motto of Montemayor's *Diana*. The motto can be translated as "Sooner dead than changed."

[9]See Flynn, "Donne's Catholicism," p. 4.

and intensity of the speaker's "penitence"; maybe Donne even intended its conceited metaphysical difficulty to prove "so good Entertainment" to its addressee. It might even seek to "witnesse" verbally to a rigorous "inward" turmoil that merits "pittie." In fact, the opening analogy might well be a challenge to Sir George: a challenge to the author of a book that claimed to offer *A Demonstration of God* in his workes. *Against all such as eyther in word or life deny there is a God* (my emphasis)—a challenge for Sir George to demonstrate God's existence in his *own* response to Donne's *own* "[in]ability of redeeming" himself in Sir George's "Opinion."

However, after this apparently "penitent" opening, Donne momentarily drops the *divine More* trope and turns to the major subject of the letter, which, it turns out, is *not* the "inward accusacions in [his] Conscience" after all, but the rumors that he has had a "contemtuous and despightfull purpose towards [Sir George]" and that he has been less than "dutifull" to "my late lady, my Religion, and . . . my lyfe"—claims of which Donne asserts (in another of his "imperious" neologisms) he can simply "disculpe" himself.[10] But after this curt, adamant dismissal of disrespect, Donne suddenly—like the rapid reversals in Donne's enjambed epigrams, elegies, and lyrics—returns to the *divine More* with a vengeance, so to speak, as he turns to a (somewhat) condescending warning to Sir George about the hazards to "wisdome and Religion" of imitating a *just* instead of a *merciful* Father before he turns the letter one final time, reversing the vehicle and tenor of the controlling motif of the letter in order "to hope" that Sir George's god-like authority over the future bliss or "Destruction" of John and Anne will not lead his father-in-law to the sort of "feeling of my lords heavy displeasure" that Donne now suffers—which, Donne ironically submits, would "force" Sir George (like the "humble and afflicted" author of this letter) to "repent" such a "fault." And—apparently not having learned from the response to his previous letter—Donne introduces these two final parallax turns of his

[10]Thomas Carew in his "Elegie upon the death of Doctor Donne, Deane of Pauls" points to how Donne "to the awe of his imperious wit / Our troublesome language bends" (*Poems* [London: Printed by I. D. for Thomas Walkley, 1640], lines 49–50). The first *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for *discuple* is 1738; for *disculpate*, 1693.

trope with another (wittily "insolent" and "fleering"[11]) pun on his own name when he "beseeches" Sir George to remove the "weighty" rumors about Donne's conduct so as to see what or who "was donne, withowt the addicon of these yll reports."

Such turns are typical to Donne, of course; that most relevant to a reading of this letter occurs in his meditative counsel in the exordium of his *Satyre III*, where he urges (in his usual "sophistrie . . . too subtile") that our greatest "fear" is that our "fathers spirit" might

> Meete blinde Philosophers in heaven, whose merit
> Of strict life may be'imputed faith, and heare
> Thee, whom hee taught so easie wayes and neare
> To follow, damn'd. . . .
> This feare great courage, and high valour is.[12]

Typical of Donne's provocative use of enjambment, here the transformation of "merit" into the object of "imput[ation]" offers a witty parallax view of two of the central terms of Reformation soteriology, sardonically inverting the Calvinist doctrine of imputation by which faith is imputed merit while yet maintaining the Scholastic provisionality of "may be" (like the 14 infinitives in this letter—5 in the first sentence) in the face of current Calvinian assurance. The back-handed humor of the association of the ancient pagans with English reformation Calvinists, however, is qualified at the same time by the "fear" of not being able (despite the lessons of one's Christian [Catholic?] "fathers") to "merit" salvation. As R. V. Young adds,

> In raising the theme of the virtuous heathen, Donne simply stands Calvinism on its head: instead of Christ's righteousness imputed to man on the basis of his faith, Donne speculates that faith might be imputed to virtuous pagans on the basis of their righteousness. . . . Thus a severe Calvinist version of grace is subverted by a witty turn growing out of a moderate

[11]Flynn, "Donne the Survivor," p. 22.

[12]Donne, *Saytre III*, in *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967), lines 11–16. Future quotations of Donne's verse are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically.

> Erasmian attitude amidst the horrors of sixteenth-century religious strife.[13]

Such witty and yet troubling juxtapositions of the lexicon of late Renaissance theology are typical also of those perplexing poems of "wise doubt" probably composed in the decade after *Satyre III*—the Holy Sonnets. In Holy Sonnet 12 ("Wilt thou loue God"), for instance, Donne returns to the fearful crisis of his meditative satirical *sermo*, and adroitly pleads "the legal case for inheritance of the kingdom of heaven to God figured as a divine judge";[14] that poem too relies on a sort of "scholastic diligence" that renders the "true religion" of its author difficult to ascertain. However, at the same time, in this second letter to Sir George More the Calvinist who wrote a treatise to "Demonstrat[e]" that the existence of God and the foundation of "religion" is one's recognition of God's "Good workes"—a somewhat "Pedantique" treatise framed in the sort of formal, copious display of learning and Latin exempla that Donne "purg'd" from his own style—that man is now being told that it is *his* "Good workes" that will confirm his own "wisdom and religion"—the God-*like* "pardon" of his "humble," penitent son-in-law.

Choosing to deny himself the "short . . . comfort and pleasure of [wreaking] utter Destruction" on Donne (however "just" such "punishment" would be, and however unnecessary upon one already so "yll" as "soone [to] be at bottome"), Donne patronizingly dares to warn Sir George what would in fact fulfill Donne's fervent "hope" for him—that he "wyll not" have to endure the misery of having to "repent" his "yll" treatment of Donne and his having "much wounded and violencd [the] peace of Conscience, and quiet" of his own daughter. Sir George's "Mercy," that is, can spare him that same "inward accusacions in [his] Conscience," the same fear of being "beyond any ability of redeeming [himself]" that would make Sir George, as Donne is presently, "very ungracious to yow." The Sheriff's choice is simple: listen to what "ys surmised against me" or "take off these weights" and "make a charitable

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[13]Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in 17th-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), p. 20.

[14]David Colclough, "Donne, John (1572–1631)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online ed., <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/7819>, accessed 20 August 2012.

use and Construction" of "my submission, my repentance, and my harty desire to do any thing satisfactory to your just displeasure" at our marriage. Though "my fault . . . alone [still] will be too heavy for me, yet then it will *less grieve you*"—exactly "as your wisdom and religion informs you."

Thus, what starts off as the conscience-stricken meditative confessional plea/defense of an outcast soul imprisoned by his own "fawlt" who is beyond redeeming *turns* into an attack on those who have rumored Donne's "loving a Corrupt Religion" and his having malice and contempt for his "divine father," which then *turns* again into a warning that the speaker shall surely perish if the addressee does not impute in Donne the virtue of penitence, which is *then* described as the conduct that "may" assure the addressee's not suffering the misery and sickness that have led the speaker to his present state of penitence. The letter is framed stylistically, that is, by the same sort of complexly obscure analogies and sophistic rhetorical turns of casuistry that characterize Donne's most difficult (most sassy and impudently presumptuous) poems such as *Satyre III,* "The Relique," "As due by many titles," "Father, part of thy double interest," and "*Christo Salvatore*." As a dazzling display of that "purposeful mental resource" and "vitality of mind"[15] that characterize Donne's most complexly designed "conceited Verses," Donne's second letter to Sir George might confirm (in a different sense, of course) Walton's observation that Donne's "behaviour, (which when it would intice, had had a *strange kind of elegant irresistible art*)."[16] Indeed, this attempt to convince Sir George to take the "easie wayes and neare" in order to "redeem" his unfortunate, sick, penitent new son-in-law (*and* himself and his daughter)—by "divinely" imputing Donne virtuous—displays how "strange[ly]" Donne could frame an attempt at seductive persuasion in order to get his case resolved favorably.

The response to the letter, *however*, was uncomplex, succinct, and direct: "Sir George, upon receipt of this, refused all communication with

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[15]A. J. Smith, "The Poetry of John Donne," in *English Poetry and Prose, 1540–1674*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1970), p. 139.

[16]Walton, *The Life of John Donne, Dr. in Divinity and Late Dean of Saint Pauls Church London*, the second impression corrected and enlarged (London: Printed by J. G. for R. Marriot, 1658), pp. 20–21, emphasis added.

his son-in-law, and referred him to the Lord Keeper."[17] Why? Because in this second letter to Sir George, although Donne *may* have altered and softened his tone, he has not changed his *attitude*. This letter (as even the placement of its signature indicates) is in its own way even more an affront to his Calvinian father-in-law than the first; which, as Flynn phrases it, "seems to have driven More to extremes almost deliberately, as if [he was] confident of his own immunity."[18] The sassy hyperbole of its central conceit of Sir George as God, the possible inference that Donne believed George would succumb to this conceit, the sheer borderline blasphemy of the epistle alone would/could/should have engendered a cryptic and "coldly"[19] harsh response. But it is not just what the letter says that would have offended—it is as much or more the style of the letter: that same conceited, overly elaborate, baroque extravagance. Donne must have known how such a display would grate, much less the near absence of any sign of the conscience-stricken repentance claimed in the opening thrust. This was not the style, the persona, the language, the clarity and forthrightness that would have appealed to George's Calvinian faith and sensibility. Donne did know his man—he may well have framed his central conceit on the basis of his knowledge of More's 1597 treatise on Protestant "*Good workes*."[20] But however much his addressee may have been "charmed" by the "strange" soteriology and the "humble" conceit (or even the suggestive illness/sin motif) adopted by Donne in the letter, he would yet have been repulsed by its style—in both senses of the word, by the style of its "conceited" character.

As for Donne's motives and his consistent over-confidence, even as he writes *from the Fleet*: he could only write as he wrote—*Stylus virum*

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[17]Edmund Gosse, ed., *The Life and Letters of John Donne*, 2 vols. (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1959), 1:105.

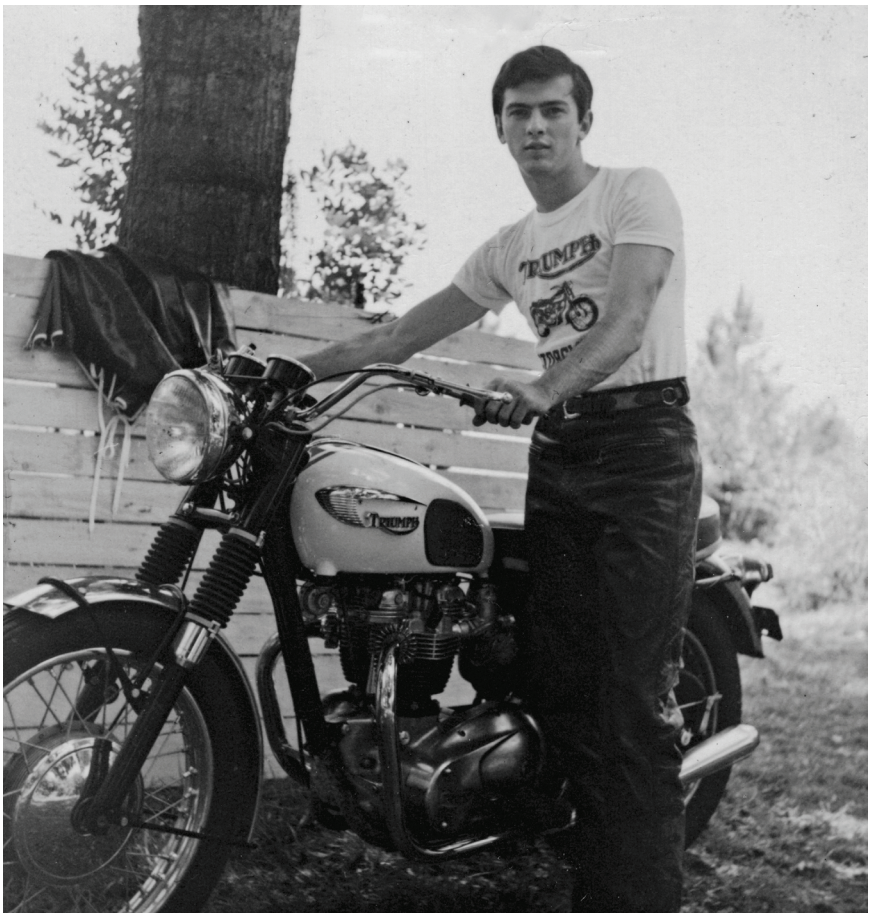
[18]Flynn, "Donne's Catholicism," p. 17 n. 38.

[19]Bald, p. 135: "Sir George apparently returned a message coldly that Donne's fate was now in the Lord Keeper's hands. . . ."

[20]At the end of his attack on lawyers such as those who brought about the death in prison of his young brother, Donne's "Papist" satirist—"disarm'd [and] not worth hate" (*Satyre II*, 10)—sarcastically quipped that in Protestant England "we'allow / Good workes as good, but out of fashion now" (109–110)—a sardonic remark that could easily apply to More's own treatise (two years later) on Good Works as "signs" of God's grace rather than "substantial" examples of man's faith and penitence.

arguit (Lipsius: "Style determines the man"). Of course, his hope for *or*, more likely, his certainty about a favorable response to his suit before the Court of Audience by Dr. Swale, *or* his confidence in Egerton's support and his authority over Sir George, *or* even his conviction that all that separated him from happiness in loving Anne was his convincing or "inticing" her father to believe that he was no longer in love with a "Corrupt Religion": any or all of these would only have strengthened his "boldnes" and his stylistic resolve. Of course, on 25 April Dr. Swale would show that Donne was right about the legal validation of his marriage (an outcome he may, in fact, have already known even before the 3 February letter). But Egerton's refusal to do more than get Donne's release from Fleet Prison—but not back into his employ—may tell us something about that relationship that Donne had not calculated correctly—perhaps that Donne was always, despite what Walton claims, granted a place in Egerton's legal studio because of the wishes of his son, not necessarily those of the Lord Keeper. As for the relationship of Sir George and John Donne which this letter only further estranged—that would take years to repair, a construction that may have begun to take shape only by Donne's actual conforming to the "locall Religion" and that perhaps was not finished even when the Dean of St Paul's became the benefactor rather than the scandal of that family of Protestant Surrey sheriffs who resided at Loseley Park.

In conclusion, I hope I myself will not "offend . . . beyond any ability of redeeming" if I conjecture, in the "new-found Idiom" of a twenty-first century conceit, that Sir George's response to Donne's letters suggests that he may well have shared that experience many a post-postmodern father has had: that moment when that young man with tattoos from his wrists to his shoulders arrives at his front door to pick up his daughter—that moment my own father-in-law may have experienced many years ago when I arrived on my 650 cc Triumph-TT with racing mufflers (i.e., none) to pick up his daughter (who became my wife two years later). Add to such an "odious comparison" the apparent lack of concern that Sir George may well have had about the happiness of his daughter, whom he had left in the care of her grandparents when she was six, and the sheer embarrassment and assault on his pride of her elopement with this 29-year-old recusant roustabout and impudent versifier, potential protégé of the scandalous Wizard Earl, and older brother of the very sort



of recusant, pre-Tridentine troublemaker that he as county Sheriff was authorized to watch and control—and to that simply add the new anti-Establishment, anti-Elizabethan style of "*fresh* invention" of which Donne was the witty monarch. Look again at that Lothian portrait of Donne as the daring melancholic lover: that was what Sir George saw "at his front door"—and what he was being asked to see across the dinner table on every feast day. And that's what he very well may have seen "tattooed" in the strangely "conceited" design of these letters from his daughter's new husband. But what Sir George could not and did not see in Donne's letter is that, once granted the "refuge of Mercy" by the Swale decree (the *vehicle of triumph* that Donne was astride in February 1602),

Donne would remain *unchanged* also in his unequivocal vow in lines 31–33 of this letter that "all my Endevors, and the whole course / of my lyfe shalbe bent, to make my selfe worthy / of your favour, and her love." Look closely at this line in the holograph: Donne originally wrote that his "lyfe shalbe bent" not to "*your*"—that is, Sir George's—"favour, and her love," but to "*her* favour, and her love." For John Donne, as he said in "The Sunne Rising," "the world [would always be] *contracted* thus" (26, emphasis added)—"Nothing else is" (22).[21]

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[21]See also the affirmation of this attitude in his epitaph for "Annae" (L.b. 541), in *Donne's Marriage Letters*, where he calls himself "Joh*anne*s Donne"; my "'*miserrimum dictu*': Donne's Epitaph for His Wife," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 94 (1995): 513–529; and my "'Fæminæ lectissimæ': Reading Anne Donne," in my *John Donne's "desire of more": The Subject of Anne More Donne in His Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1996), pp. 17–34.

Appendix

[L.b. 527: To Sir George More]

S$_{R}$

The inward accusacions in my Conscience, that I have offended
yow, beyond any ability of redeeming yt by me, and the feeling
of my lords heavy displeasure, following yt, forceth me to wright
though I know my fault make my letters very ungracious to yow.
Allmighty God whom I call to witnesse, that all my greife
ys, that I have in this manner offended yow, and him, direct
yow to beleeve, that which owt of an humble and afflicted hart
I now wright to yow. And since we have no meanes to move
God, when ~~we~~ he wyll not hear our prayers, to hear them, but by
prayeng, I humbly beseech yow, to allow, by his gracious exam-
ple, my penitence so good Entertainment, as yt may have a bee-
leife, and a pittie. Of nothinge in this one fault, that I
hear layd to me, can I disculpe my selfe, but of the contem-
tuous and despigbtfiill purpose towards yow, which I hear ys sur-
mised against me. But for my dutifull regard to my late
lady, for my Religion, and for my lyfe, I refer my selfe
to them, that may have observd them. I humbly beseeche
yow, to take of these waytes, and to put my fault into the
balance alone, as yt was donne, withowt the addicon of these
yll reports: And though then yt wyll be to heavy for

Description: L.b. 527. Bifolium; address leaf contains unidentifiable seal fragment. 201 x 294–296 mm. **Watermark:** snake on post. **Countermark:** "G3." Blank verso of address leaf not reproduced.

lines 15–16*: my late lady]* Elizabeth Lady Egerton, Anne More's aunt, widow of Sir John Wolley and mother of Francis Wolley, had married Lord Keeper Egerton in October 1597. Distracted by her affliction with smallpox in the winter of 1598–1599, she had died on 20 January 1600. Since the death of Anne's mother in 1590, she had taken some responsibility for Anne's education.

line 16: ***my Religion]*** Sir George regarded Donne as a Catholic, which Donne here all but denies.

me, yett then yt wyll less greive yow to pardon yt. How
litle and how short the comfort and pleasure of Destroy-
eng ys, I know your wisdome and Religion informs yow. And
though perchance yow intend not utter Destruction, yett
the way through which I fall towards yt, ys so headlong,
that beeing thus pushd, I shall soone be at bottome. For
yt pleaseth God, from whom I acknowledge the punishment
to be just, to accompany my other ylls, with so much sicknes
as I have noe refuge, but that of Mercy, which I beg, of
him, my lord, and yow. Which I hope yow wyll not repent
to have afforded me, since all my Endevors, and the whole
course of my lyfe shalbe bent, to make my selfe worthy
of ~~her~~ ^your favour, and her love, whose peace of Conscience,
and quiett, I know must be much wounded and violencd,
if your displeasure sever us. I can present nothing to your
thoughts, which yow knew not before, but my submission, my
repentance, and my harty desire, to do any thing satis-
factory to your just displeasure: of which I beseech yow to
make a charitable use and Construction. From the
fleete: 11 February 1601/2

Yours in all faythfull duty
and obedience.

Jo:DONNE

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lines 39–40: ***the fleete]*** The London prison, near the Inns of Court, where Donne was confined after his wedding.