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Donne, imperfect

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At the risk of sounding impolitic and thus of being misinterpreted, there is, nevertheless, an apt sense of John Donne being neither here nor there. This statement is not a dismissive pronouncement that Donne is of no consequence, although he often enough asks his readers to consider himself, his writings, and the enterprises in this life as nothings. Instead, the purpose for stating that Donne is neither here nor there is to draw attention to the fact that we so often discover him in-between.

In the Satyres we find him dallying between the Inns of Court and the Royal Court through a persona who cannot remain in his "standing woodden chest" (*Sat1*, 2) and one who is more than a little troubled by the enticements "most richly / For service paid, authoriz'd" (*Sat5*, 33–34).[1] We spy him along the winding path of the "huge hill, / Cragged and steep" (*Sat3*, 79–80), that is, in the space of doubting wisely between the summit on which "Truth stands" (80) and the plain below full of divisive sectarianism where so many divines "write for Religion, without

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This essay is a somewhat altered version of the Presidential Address that I delivered at the Twenty-Third Annual John Donne Society Conference, Baton Rouge, 23 February 2008.

[1]All references to Donne's poetry are cited in the text by line numbers, and the poems are quoted from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1967), with the exception of the Elegies and the Holy Sonnets, which are quoted from *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer, vols. 2 and 7.1, respectively (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000 and 2005). The short form references for Donne's works used throughout are those established by the Donne Variorum.

it" (p. 160).[2] In the Elegies, we perceive Donne's persona fixed, and provocatively fixated, upon "the Centrique part" (*ElProg*, 36), while another speaker demands that his hands be licensed to rove "Behind, before, above, between, below" (*ElBed*, 26). In the Songs and Sonets we puzzle over Donne's philosophical musing of "Just such disparitie / As is twixt Aire and Angells puritie" (*Air*, 26–27). We catch him skipping out of Goodfriday services for "Pleasure or businesse" (*Goodf*, 7), riding westward and remembering eastward. In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* we determine that while Donne is not dead yet, he is never fully restored to health and fears a relapse. And even in the sculpted image left to us in St. Paul's, we contemplate his shrouded figure rising, though with knees bent and eyes unopened, still awaiting resurrection.

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. Thus, being in-between for Donne is a reflection of the human condition, though his response to such a condition is not either/or, but both/and. In her recent article, Kirsten Stirling argues that in the octave of *HSWhat* "the face of Christ is doubled" as the doom image of "Christ in Judgment" conflicts with the merciful "picture of Christ crucified" (66) so that the crucifix in the poem is "poised between image and iconoclasm, between material object and memory."[3] The disequilibrium in the sonnet further extends, Stirling notes, to the sestet, in which Donne unsettles the sacred by alluding to the beauty of "profane mistresses" (10),[4] an insertion that in turn "contributes to the dynamic of idolatry and iconoclasm which animates the octave" (70). Donne thus multiplies the complexities of this troublesome sonnet by suspending the reader in uncompromising tension between, on the one hand, the divided countenances of Christ, and, on the other, the sacred images in the octave and the profane remembrances in the sestet.

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[2]All references to Donne's letters are from *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (New York: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1977) and are cited in the text by page number.

[3]Stirling, "Lutheran Imagery and Donne's 'Picture of Christ crucified,'" *John Donne Journal* 26 (2007): 57.

[4]All references to the Holy Sonnets are from the "Revised Sequence" of the Donne Variorum.

It is, no doubt, the in-between in Donne's writings that attracts some scholars to his middle years, that period between his secret marriage and his taking of holy orders (or, some might justly argue, the death of Anne). Annabel Patterson calls particular attention to "those five or six transitional years" during this middle period which served as Donne's "threshold between lives" and which "mark his passage from outsider to one of the most notable spokesmen for the establishment."[5] In a letter from this period, Donne describes his friend Henry Goodyere, who "living at Court without ambition" resides "in the Sun, not in the fire," in contrast to himself, whose life "in the Country" situates him "not in darknesse, but in shadow, which is not no light, but a pallid, waterish, and diluted one" (pp. 62–63). Throughout Donne's weekly letters to Goodyere, we learn of "the sallads and onions of *Micham*" (p. 63) and, among them, the bitter herbs of his inactivity.

While this middle period was an extraordinarily prolific one for Donne, he still complains, in another letter to Goodyere, of wasting his time and energies. He explains that if he says he passed the time "without hurting any, so may the Spider in [his] window," and he conjectures further that even if he had spent all of his time in meditation, such an endeavor would be as "unnaturall" as an Eagle that perches "a whole day upon a tree, staring in contemplation of the majestie and glory of the Sun" while "her young Eglets starve in the nest" (pp. 48–49). He continues by noting that he does not want death to just take him in his sleep, but to "win" him and "overcome" him (p. 50). Employing a nautical image, Donne elaborates further: "When I must shipwrack, I would do it in a Sea, where mine impotencie might have some excuse; not in a sullen weedy lake, where I could not have so much as exercise for my swimming" (p. 50). "Therefore," he adds, "I would fain do something," for "to be no part of any body, is to be nothing" (pp. 50–51). He then reasserts his disdain for the contemplative life, that "worst voluptuousnes, which is an Hydroptique immoderate desire of humane learning and languages: beautifull ornaments to great fortunes," and affirms his need for "an occupation" (p. 51).

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[5]Patterson, "All Donne," in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 44.

Though some may quibble, the sentiments in this letter can certainly be read as those of an idealist seeking his place in the world. And if this is the case, then one is compelled to ask, what does an idealist do when confronted with the corruption of the Elizabethan Court, when the realities of his secret love and private marriage become public, and when his abiding concern for ecclesiastical unity collides with his Catholic heritage? What occupation becomes such a citizen, how can such a person express himself, and, perhaps more importantly, how does such a writer hope to be read and not misunderstood?[6]

In order to begin addressing these questions, it will prove helpful to cite two critical responses to Donne's writings, one by Stanley Fish and the other by William Empson. In the former of these, although the latter in time by some thirty years, Fish asserts, "Donne is sick and his poetry is sick," and the "diagnosis" Fish offers is that "Donne is bulimic, someone who gorges himself to a point beyond satiety, and then sticks his finger down his throat and throws up . . . not food, but words, and more specifically, the power words can exert."[7] The passage from Empson appears in his essay "Donne the space man,"[8] in which he writes that "Donne's mind is rather hard to make sense of, because it is so invincibly balanced, or simply legal; it cannot help seeing all the alternatives as if in a chess-game; but that inherently made it demand a fair amount of latitude."[9] As such, Empson adds that, "however tiresome," Donne's

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[6]See Patterson, "Quod oportet *versus* quod convenit: *John Donne Kingsman*?," in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, ed. Arthur F. Marotti (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994), in which she states that "the fear of misinterpretatioin was one of Donne's most frequently expressed anxieties; and while it undoubtedly spoke to an age of official censorship, it also authorizes us to read his writings as *capable* of misinterpretation, deliberately so" (p. 159).

[7]Fish, "Masculine Persuasive Force: Donne and Verbal Power," in *Soliciting Interpretation*, p. 223.

[8]It is my impression that this is a decidedly underrated piece. While I acknowledge that Empson's argument takes some very odd turns, his overall point about the plurality of worlds is a substantive one, and I am even more impressed that he makes it without reference to Thomas Harriot.

[9]Quoted from *Essays on Renaissance Literature, I: Donne and the New Philosophy*, ed. John Haffenden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 111. "Donne the Space Man" was originally published in *Kenyon Review* 19 (1957): 337–399.

prose style "has the merit that every side of a question keeps getting hinted at."[10] And with that we come to *Essayes in Divinity*, a work composed toward the end of Donne's middle years that is certainly an important, if not a crucial, text for Donne studies.

Essayes in Divinity is a work that seems, at first blush, to illustrate Fish's complaint (though, admittedly, Fish speaks of Donne's poetry rather than his prose) that after gorging "beyond satiety," Donne induces himself to vomit up words and "the power words can exert." There is no question that the text itself at times gives the impression stylistically of being what the English refer to as "a dog's breakfast." By way of example, the essay "Of Moses" is the leading contender for the most dense and purposefully confusing piece in *Essayes*. It begins innocently enough with a simple, declarative sentence: "The Author of these first five books is *Moses*" (p. 12).[11] Donne, however, cannot leave well enough alone but proceeds for an additional three pages to entangle the question of who authored the Pentateuch in prose that is certainly strained, if not tortured, as he refers to and quotes from Pererius, Pico, Paracelsus, Archangelus of Burgo Nuova, Maimonides, Johann Drusius, Francesco Giorgio, Zoroaster, St. Epiphanius, Eusebius Pamphilius, Francesco Patrizzi, Otto Heurne, Hermes Trismegistus, Aquinas, and Jerome. With regard, then, to its learning and style, the essay "Of Moses" reads like an exaggerated and ill-formed microcosm of *Essayes in Divinity* in which Donne seems less intent on clarity than he is with making sure that "every side of a question keeps getting hinted at."

In their unique ways, both Fish and Empson seem to be reacting to a similar imperfection in Donne, namely, his habit toward proliferation and inclusion. Yet, rather than the "bulimic" Donne presented by Fish, or the "simply legal," chess-playing Donne offered by Empson, I wish to explain Donne's imperfection in another way. Donne wrote *Essayes*, if we are to believe his son, as "the voluntary sacrifices of severall hours, when he had many debates betwixt God and himself, whether he were worthy, and competently learned to enter into Holy Orders" ("*To the Reader*," p. 5). As such, the purpose of *Essayes* is to exegete the opening verse of each

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[10]Empson, p. 114.

[11]All references to *Essayes in Divinity* are cited in the text by page number and are quoted from the edition by Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

of the first two books of scripture, Genesis and Exodus, in order for Donne to demonstrate his fitness for ministry. The purpose stated by Donne's son, however, is an incomplete one. What seems evident in reading *Essayes* is that Donne's idiosyncratic biblical exegesis reflects his ecclesiology. In other words, Donne wishes to balance his expansive and inclusive hermeneutic method "invincibly" with his vision of the Church as a whole, neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant alone.

This point is evident in a passage from a section in the Exodus portion of the text, "Diversity in Names," in which Donne argues for the unity of the Church, stating that Christ, "as it is in the *Canticle*, lies between the brests of his Church, and gives suck on both sides" (p. 57). Donne's marginal note makes reference, mistakenly, to Canticles 1:12, for he surely intends verse 13 of this first chapter, which reads: "A bundle of myrrh is my well-beloved unto me: he shall lie all night betwixt my breasts." Donne's image here is an unsettling one. The point to note is that Donne is *not* saying that Christ is receiving the sustenance. Donne is instead asserting the more orthodox position that Christ, reclining as he is between the breasts of his Church (east and west, and Protestant and Catholic), feeds and sustains the Church. Beyond the question of its orthodoxy, however, the image in *Essayes* of Christ positioned between the breasts of the Church in order to give "suck on both sides" is an intriguing one, primarily because it is rather difficult to picture. In particular, how is it that Christ can give suck to the Church, the various creeds of which are themselves described as breasts? There appear to be too many sources of nourishment and not any mouths to receive it. And as quickly as Donne introduces the image, he moves on to others by quoting from Canticles 8:8–9: "*We have a little sister, and she hath no brests; if she be a wall, we will build upon her a silver palace*" (p. 57). Donne then explains that "if therefore she be a wall, That is, *Because* she is a wall, . . . So shall we best conserve the integrity of our own body, of which she is a member, if we laboriously build upon her, and not tempestuously and ruinously demolish and annull her" (p. 57). While there is far more in this passage than will be addressed here, it should not go unnoticed that Donne shifts abruptly from too many breasts to none at all, from the churches being suckled by Christ to a call for Christians to rebuild the Church, and from a concern for sustaining the Church to one for conserving its integrity. This alacrity of thought is the type of imperfection that Donne consistently presents to us, including in the two

poems which terminate with the Latin tag "*Desunt cætera*," "Resurrection, imperfect" (*Res*) and the verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, "Though I be *dead*" (*BedfDead*).

The initial point to make is that they are both Easter poems. In the opening lines of *Res* Donne writes that the Sun should sleep in and attend to the wound it "took'st on friday last" (2) since the "better Sun" (4) rose before it today, that is, Easter morning. In line 7 of the verse letter "*Begun in France*," Donne identifies the "season" in which he writes to the Countess as "Easter" and "spring," and because we know that "Donne was in France with Sir Robert Drury from late November 1611 until April 1612,"[12] the poem is dated circa 22 April 1612, the day on which Easter fell that year.[13] By extension then both poems are also concerned with resurrection. The heading of "Resurrection, imperfect" indicates as much, as do lines 17–22, in which the speaker imagines someone of "credulous pietie" observing Christ's resurrection and trying to make sense of it. Likewise, lines 3–4 of *BedfDead* state that as often as Donne thinks of himself at Court (presumably the Countess of Bedford's residence at Twickenham), he is awakened with "So many resurrections." In fact, the occasion for the verse letter is that Donne's *Anniversaries* had appeared in print, and he learned that the Countess of Bedford was less than pleased that the poet to whom she had extended her patronage had used for Elizabeth Drury the type of praise that should have been reserved for the Countess herself. So, Donne needs resurrecting.[14]

Yet resurrection in *BedfDead* is plural. The implication here is that the "many resurrections" (4) engendered by Donne's thoughts will, in the writing of this poem, lead to the singular resurrection of being forgiven by the Countess, as Theresa DiPasquale states, "for having gone a-whoring."[15] And in a complementary way, that is, complementary in

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[12]W. Milgate, ed., *The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 273.

[13]Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, p. 239 n.

[14]See Theresa DiPasquale, *Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), who conjectures that Donne's "A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mrs. Essex Riche, from Amyens," which was also written during Donne's travels to France, "could just as easily have provided the occasion for Donne's incomplete apology to Lucy," the Countess of Bedford (p. 239).

[15]DiPasquale, p. 238.

terms of the one and the many, the single resurrection in the closing lines of "Resurrection, imperfect" can be "justly" understood, "If not of any man, yet of the whole" (22).

Next, both poems play on the words and concepts related to "mine," "mineral," and "gold." In lines 12–14 of *Res*, Donne introduces the idea, within a specifically alchemical context, of Christ becoming "a minerall" that in the limbeck of his sepulcher is transformed from "all gold" to "All tincture." So, too, in *BedfDead* Donne identifies the Countess in line 16 as the "Mine" in which all virtue and beauty are found, and the associations of this word with gold are implied by the rhyme word in line 15, "shine."

These shared contexts of Easter, resurrection, and mine/mineral frame a pattern in both poems of *decensus/ascensus*, the paradoxical double motion of descent and ascent that Donne so often uses for realizing the concepts of completion and union. Thus, in her article on "Resurrection, imperfect," Kate Frost characterizes her analysis as "a kind of word stew" she has cooked up, in which she details the mythographical, cosmological, and alchemical associations related to, among a myriad of other examples, Christ's descent to hell (5–7) and his "Hasting to Heaven" (10) and the contrasting inclinations of sleep/rest (1–3) and "issuing" (20).[16]

Similar patterns of descent and ascent are also at play in *BedfDead*, such as in the opening lines when Donne describes himself as "*dead*, and buried" (1), yet his thoughts awaken "many resurrections" (4), and also in his confessions in lines 11–25, by which Donne lowers himself in humility so that he may be once more raised in the Countess's favor. In fact, Donne's action toward his patron here is precisely the means, according to Margaret Maurer, that Donne employs in establishing the terms of discretion in his relationship with Lucy Russell.[17] Within her analysis of another verse letter to the Countess of Bedford, "Honour is so

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[16]Frost, "*Magnus Pan Mortus Est*: A Subtextual and Contextual Reading of Donne's 'Resurrection, imperfect,'" in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 249, and see esp. pp. 233–243.

[17]See Maurer, "John Donne's Verse Letters," *Modern Language Quarterly* 37 (1976): 234–259, esp. pp. 250ff.

Sublime Perfection," Maurer clarifies that "Donne's style is not to disguise but to exaggerate the bow," for "the lower he postures, the higher and brighter becomes the Lady's honor."[18]

Donne also introduces the pattern of *decensus/ascensus* in the opening pages of *Essayes in Divinity*, in which he situates himself as one sitting "at the door" and meditating "upon the threshold" of the "well provided Castle," that is, of the Holy Scriptures (7). Donne assumes this liminal position, and remains in it throughout the work, not only because he lacks the authority of those "reverend Divines" who, because of their office, may engage in biblical interpretation without apology, but also because he is learning to be humble in imitation of Christ, whose "humility, to be like us," Donne writes, "was a Dejection" (a descent), but our humility, Donne continues, "to be like him, is our chiefest exaltation" (7). In this pattern, then, the human and divine are joined.[19]

Finally, and most importantly for this argument, both *Res* and *BedfDead* share the same Latin tag. In her article on "Resurrection, imperfect," Frost argues convincingly that this piece is "a finished poem concerned with unfinished time."[20] As such, Frost reads the Latin tag as "a final turn of wit" by which the "whole" of human time that Donne incapsulates in the 22 lines of the poem, as well as in its final word, is not extended to eternity. Thus, Frost concludes, "*Desunt cætera* indeed: the rest, eternal rest, is lacking."[21] But it seems that it is not only eternal rest that is lacking, but rest itself. In "Resurrection, imperfect," in the verse letter to the Countess of Bedford that shares the same Latin tag, and throughout Donne's writings, the rest is wanting. In fact, what this argument has been leading up to is that 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.

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[18]Maurer, "The Real Presence of Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford, and the Terms of John Donne's 'Honour is So Sublime Perfection,'" *ELH* 47 (1980): 224–225.

[19]For a further, and extended, example of *descensus/ascensus* in *Essayes*, see pp. 82–84, and the passage that begins, "Go one step lower, that is higher, and nearer to God, O my soul, in this Meditation."

[20]Frost, p. 231.

[21]Frost, p. 251.

Donne's habit of rest-lessness thereby necessitates a closer examination of these two poems. Donne opens "Resurrection, imperfect" by addressing the Sun, telling it to sleep because "A better Sun" (4) outshines it as the sun's beams make the light of "our fires grow pale" (8), so that as Raymond-Jean Frontain rightly argues, "the two 'suns' seem to compete, and the poem works to contrast both them and the orders which they incarnate."[22] But all of this seems left behind, or nearly so, in lines 17–22 as Donne interjects not simply an image of the resurrection, but a hypothetical one at that. "Had one of those," Donne writes, imagining someone with such "credulous pietie" as to believe that it were possible to "discerne and see" the soul "Goe from a body" (18–19). So, Donne imagines, if such a person who thinks such things would have hypothetically been present on that first Easter to witness Christ's body "issuing from the sheet" (20), then this hypothetical person, having this particular credulousness, would be regarded as "just" for thinking "this body'a soule" (21). What a great deal of qualification in so few lines. But then we run up against this sort of thing in Donne all of the time, such as when he writes in "A Valediction: forbidding Mourning," "Our two soules therefore, which are one," and then only four lines later conjectures, "If they be two" (21, 25). The convoluted, hypothetical situation Donne articulates at the end of "Resurrection, imperfect" is there to make his larger point about the relation of body and soul. As stated above, the matter for Donne is never either/or, but both/and, and therefore all. Donne wants the full person accounted for in resurrection, body *and* soul, though not in a synthesis that diminishes the uniqueness of each, but instead in a union that maintains the integrity of the two, even as they are joined to one another. Thus, the hypothetical situation in *Res* not only demands that the reader clarify the distinctions of body and soul even in Donne's paradoxical "just" confusions of them, but it also shows Donne's mind, which—never at rest—always pushes us to consider, what else? And this habit of Donne's is the very sign of his wit and his intelligence.

Donne's restlessness shows itself differently in the verse letter "Though I be *dead*." Theresa DiPasquale may certainly be right that the poem is "deliberately unfinished" in that the verse letter demonstrates

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[22]Frontain, "Donne's Imperfect Resurrection," *Papers on Language and Literature* 22 (1990): 540.

that it would be impossible for Donne "to make an account of all his transgressions" against the Countess.[23] Yet, whether or not Donne left the poem purposefully unfinished, it is a poem never perfected. In the twenty-five lines of this verse letter, which ends in mid-couplet without completing the rhyme, Donne imagines and portrays Lucy Russell as a person of Court (2), as his patron (5), perhaps as Mary Magdalene (if we read her in lines 6 and 7 as one who comes to a gravesite on Easter bringing embalming spices—see Mark 16:1), as the spring Sun whose astral "influence" spurs the growth of Donne's verses and confessions (8–10), as God or a priest (depending on whether Donne is confessing as a Protestant or a Catholic), as the prodigal Donne's father (12–13), as the "Mine" for all virtue and beauty (13–16), as an emblem of modesty (18–20), and as an original manuscript (22–25). The list is unquestionably too long. Donne identifies the Countess in such quantity and with such hyperbole that he exposes the root problem of having written poems praising others, and thereby of him having made "copies" (25) of the Countess. Donne's is the sin of *copia*. His is the error of multiplying and reproducing "Originals," which is the final word of the poem, so that Donne's abundance, and perhaps his overabundance, exists even within the poem's incompletion.

Copiousness, and the restless, "nimble spaniel" of Donne's imagination that produces it,[24] takes on a wide array of forms in Donne's writings. In fact, Donne's habit toward multiplying the conditions, and for expressing himself in conditionals, is the heuristic principle governing the Holy Sonnets. For example, the sestet of "At the round Earths imagin'd corners" is developed through two conditionals. At the volta, lines 9–12, Donne turns from the imperatives at the sonnet's opening. After urging the "nomberless infinities / Of Soules" to "arise" (twice it should be noted) and go to their "scattred Bodies" (3–4), the persona asks the Lord to permit them to sleep longer, for if the persona's sins abound "beyond" these "nomberless infinities," then it is "late to aske aboundance" of grace when in the presence of the divine judge. In lines

[23]DiPasquale, pp. 239 and 243.

[24]From John Dryden's "An Account of the Ensuing Poem, in a Letter to the Honourable Sir Robert Howard" that prefaces his poem *Annus Mirabilis*, in *Selected Poetry and Prose of John Dryden*, ed. Earl Miner (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 112.

12–14, the persona then asks to be taught "on this lowly ground" how to repent, "for thats as good / As if thou'hadst seal'd my Pardon with thy bloud."

These two conditionals meet at the caesura of line 12—at the "there" on judgment day (the future) and at the "here" on this earth (the present). In addition, Donne posits in these conditionals the relation between grace (granted from above) and repentance (issuing from below) so that the conditionals present yet another example of *descensus/ascensus*, by which the reader is held in tension between God's action and the human (re)action. Further, the concluding conditional unsettles the reader (and thus destabilizes the poem) because it is presented as if it were a counterfactual of what *would* be the case, which undoubtedly prompts Roger Rollin's comment that "the conditional mood used here is shocking if not heretical."[25] Thus, readers ask, did not Christ in fact seal our pardon with his blood?, and if this is true, then what is Donne saying, especially with regard to being taught to repent? In other words, Donne's statement, written as a counterfactual, urges readers to rethink what it is they know; Donne seems intent here on deliberately creating the conditions for mis-interpretation. The conditional is, therefore, an example of doubting wisely, the effect of which is to move beyond what is known and to accept, or at least to entertain and contend with, what is possible (even as Donne at times seems to challenge the decorum of what is permissible).[26]

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[25]Rollin, "'Fantastic Ague': The Holy Sonnets and Religious Melancholy," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), p. 138.

[26]In the broader context, see Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), who argues that in sixteenth-century logical and rhetorical treatises in England "anxiety about the authenticity of language can be traced to two separate but related problems: the problem of having nothing to say, and the inability to control one's language, or (and this is closely related) to control others with that language" (13). She goes on to explain that the "operation of gathering," which is "deeply involved" with *copia*, "is essentially a response to the first," while "framing," or the decorum related to "arrangement," "responds to the second" (13). My thanks to Gregory Kneidel for drawing my attention to this work.

This same destabilizing use of conditionals is also at play in the opening two poems of the Revised Sequence, *HSDue* and *HSBlack*, and the crucial moments in these poems are conditionals that also appear in their respective sestets. In the final lines of "As due by many titles" (11–14), Donne writes, "Except thou rise, and for thine owne worke fight" (that is, unless God rises and fights, or, by implication, if God will not rise and fight), then the persona "shall soone despaire," especially when he sees that God "lou'st Mankind well, yet wilt not chuse" him, "And Satan hates" him, "yet is loath to loose" him. While Donne appears to be raising the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, he also seems to offer a response to this doctrine in the second sonnet, "Oh my blacke Soule." After bewailing the desperate condition of his soul, the persona states at the volta (9), "Yet Grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke" before he shifts abruptly to ask who will give him "that Grace to beginne?" In yet another shift, the final four lines draw upon the colors signaling alchemical transformation (namely, black, red, and white) and establish the mysterious relation between grace and repentance.

John Stachniewski argues that throughout the Holy Sonnets, including in these two poems, Donne "presents himself as a victim of Calvinist tenets which he appears voluntarily to have espoused," and further that the Holy Sonnets embody a process "of despositing feelings in the poems which belie the ostensible argument, or of actually saying something which contradicts" that which Donne "appears to intend to say."[27] Taking up this line of thought, Richard Strier conjectures further that "the pain and confusion in many of the 'Holy Sonnets' is not that of the convinced Calvinist but rather that of a person who would like to be a convinced Calvinist but who is both unable to be so and unable to admit that he is unable to be so."[28] As such, Strier reads the last three lines of *HSDue* as "something like a threat" in which "there is a sense of injured merit," and in *HSBlack* Strier is troubled by the word "or" in line 13, which according to him seems to present "two ways to salvation, personal penitence or washing in Christ's blood."[29] These two critics are

[27]Stachniewski, "John Donne: The Despair of the 'Holy Sonnets,'" *ELH* 48 (1981): 702 and 690.

[28]Strier, "John Donne Awry and Squint: The 'Holy Sonnets,' 1608–10," *Modern Philology* 86 (1989): 361.

[29]Strier, p. 371.

responding to the imperfections they perceive in the Holy Sonnets. However, they both begin with the premise that the Holy Sonnets are to be read biographically as Donne's declarations of his sectarian allegiance. Their arguments thus depend upon an assumption of poetry as polemic.

However, in *HSDue* the multiplicity of the titles that the persona cites in resigning himself to God are, in typically Donnean fashion, far more numerous than seems necessary. Thus, Donne's protesting too much in the octave serves as a playful preparation for the sestet. Strier partially senses as much when he notes that while the opening word of the poem may be read as "Being due," it is, he states, "hard not to hear the lingering possibility of a hypothetical ('As if')."[30] Rather than an expression of sectarian allegiance, this sonnet uses its over-enumerated titles and the conditionality (possibly of those titles, but certainly of its closing lines) to destabilize the poem intentionally so that the reader has the opportunity to imagine (or to question) what else might be the case.

And as a complement to *HSDue*, "Oh my blacke Soule" includes a rather straightforward conditional in line 9 ("Yet Grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack") that Donne immediately complicates with the rhetorical question in line 10 ("But whoe shall giue thee that Grace to beginne?"). Stachniewski simply ignores the conditional in his discussion of the sonnet, focusing instead on Donne's endorsement of the doctrine of prevenient grace in line 10. Strier, however, notes that the conditional indicates a Roman Catholic position, one "stated in Erasmian or nonsacramental terms," and he then comments that while the obvious answer to the rhetorical question in line 10 is "God," he adds that "what must follow does not" (that is, the petitioning of God that Strier expects does not occur).[31] But again, Donne's purpose in the sonnet is not polemical, for in fact the conditional in line 9, the rhetorical question in line 10, the "or" in line 13, and the alchemical analogy in lines 11–14 point in another direction, a more playful and deliberately exploratory one. The sestet of the sonnet is witty in its combination of these elements that unsettle readers, and Donne hopes unsettles them enough to contemplate the varied, and even contradictory, positions expressed both here and in the previous sonnet.

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[30]Strier, p. 368.

[31]Strier, p. 371.

Stachniewski complains that Donne's use of argument in the Holy Sonnets "is no more than a sport," one that while "strenuous enough" is nevertheless "risible as an instrument for arriving at truth."[32] However, multiplicity and abundance in Donne's writing are never a matter of plethora for plethora's sake. On the contrary, the copiousness informing Donne's use of argument in the Holy Sonnets, and indeed throughout his canon, constitutes his epistemology and is illustrated in the concept of "dilatation," a word that (along with its cognate "dilate") appears frequently in the Sermons as a nuanced means for Donne to articulate relations and relationships.

For example, then, in a christening sermon on Galatians 3:27: "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ," Donne explains:

> we are poore and beggerly creatures, we have nothing to put on; Christ is that garment; and then Christ is the very life, by which we stretch out our armes and our legs, to put on that garment; yea he puts it on upon us, he doth the whole worke: but yet he doth not thrust it on: He makes us *able* to put it on: but if we be not *willing*, then he puts *no necessity upon our will*: but we remaine naked still.
>
> (5:155)[33]

This word "*Induere*, then, to put on," Donne adds, "is an extension, a dilatation over all" (5:155). Donne imagines God's grace being extended to the Church as an act of clothing it, but clothing it in such a way that it requires the co-operation of the Church, as it willingly dilates its limbs to be clothed. Thus, God's extension, of dressing the "poore and beggerly creatures" with the garment that is Christ, is completed in the reciprocal extension of the Church straightening its limbs to be covered.

As a logical consequence then, Donne describes Christian practice and piety (that is, works) in terms of this divinely sanctioned, and reciprocating, expansion, specifically in his Candlemas sermon on

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[32]Stachniewski, p. 691.

[33]All references to the Sermons are from *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–1962) and are cited in the text by volume and page numbers.

Matthew 5:16: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." Early in the sermon Donne dilates this text to encompass and reveal four lights: the light of nature, the light of baptism, the light of faith, and the light of works. And of this last, Donne writes:

> So, this light is in all those lights; we are created, we are baptized, we are adopted for good works; and [works] is beyond them all, even that of faith; for, though faith have a preheminence, because works grow out of it, and so faith (as the root) is first, yet works have the preheminence thus, both that they include faith in them, and that they dilate, and diffuse, and spread themselves more declaratorily, then faith doth.
>
> (10:87)

Many critics will no doubt find it irresistible to sift this passage for a sectarian label to affix to Donne. Can a Calvinist, even a moderate one, say such things? To what extent do these words show Donne to be an Arminian? Does this passage confirm Donne's latent Catholicism? Such questions matter, for the devil (and pardon the cliché) is in the details, and with Donne there are so many, so very many demanding, intriguing, provoking details. But while the devil is indeed in these details, the truth for Donne is revealed in the aggregate, as a final passage from the Sermons illustrates.

Preaching an evening prayer service at St. Paul's on 23 November 1628, Donne analyzes the Hebrew word "*Cabad*":

> The word does properly signifie *Augere, ampliare*, To enlarge God, to amplifie, to dilate God; to make infinite God, shall I dare say, more God? Certainely, *God to more*, then he was before. O who can expresse this abundant, this superabundant largenesse of Gods goodnesse to man, that there is a power put into mans hands, to enlarge God, to dilate, to propagate, to amplifie God himselfe! *I will multiply this people*, says God, *and they shall not be few, I will glorifie them, and they shall not be small*; there's the word of our text. God enables me to glorifie him, to amplifie him, to encrease him, by my mercy, my almes. . . . [and] When the meditations of my heart, digested into writing, or preaching, or any other declaration of Gods

> glory, carry, or advance the knowledge of God, in other men, then *My soule doth magnifie the Lord*, enlarge, dilate, amplifie God. But when I relieve any poor wretch, of the houshold of the faithfull, with mine almes, then my *mercy magnifies the Lord*, occasions him that receives, to magnifie the Lord by this thanksgiving, and them that see it to magnifie the Lord by their imitation, in the like works of mercy.
>
> (8:288–289)

Here indeed is dilatation. Donne begins the passage by noting that *Cabad* signifies in this case the act of enlarging the God who is already infinite to become "more God." Donne then explains that humankind, through the "superabundant largenesse of Gods goodnesse," possesses such "power" as to be able to amplify the infinite. The biblical quotation (from Jeremiah 30:19), highlighting primarily Donne's inclusion of the word "propagate" near the end of the previous sentence, focuses on *divine* action. Yet, Donne immediately shifts the context to the *human* acts of mercy and alms-giving that are enabled by God, who in turn is further amplified by such works. Donne goes on to elaborate that while his private meditations "enlarge, dilate, amplifie" God when they are publicly declared, it is the relief he provides through his alms that doubles and trebles the dilation of God, as Donne's act of mercy "occasions him that receives, to magnifie the Lord" as well as "them that see it to magnifie the Lord" by imitating "the like works of mercy."

In these passages from the Sermons Donne's primary intent is not to define a polemic, nor is it to work out a systematic theology. For Donne dilatation is not, on the one hand, a simple expansion that runs freely to the limits of logical absurdity in order to satisfy an indulgent wit. Nor is it, on the other hand, a dialectic that entertains divergences in order to achieve some manner of compromise or synthesis. Donne conceives of dilatation in the commerce of relations and relationships.[34] Thus, it is the exchange, the inter-course that holds discrete, even oppositional, ideas,

[34]As such, this concept is distinct from the view of David Aers and Gunther Kress, "'Darke texts need notes': Versions of Self in Donne's Verse Epistles," in *Critical Essays on John Donne*, who believe that Donne operates according to "the principle of commodification" (p. 120–121), which he uses for the express purpose of satisfying his desperate efforts "towards inclusion in the traditional established group" (113).

concepts, persons, and entitites in unyielding tension in order to amplify, to enlarge, to propagate them.

By way of a conclusion, I call to your remembrance a series of three letters Donne wrote to Goodyere in the summer of 1609. "You know," Donne confesses to his friend, "I never fettered nor imprisoned the word Religion; not straightening it Frierly, . . . nor immuring it in a *Rome*, or a *Wittenberg*, or a *Geneva*," for "they are all virtuall beams of one Sun" (p. 29). The contrast Donne insists on here is that between constraining Religion (fettering, imprisoning, straightening, and immuring it) and permitting it to roam, as with his restless imagination, as unbounded as sunbeams. He then adds, with an image that is cartographic and geometric, that these various beams of the sun/church "are not so contrary as the North and South Poles," for "they are connaturall pieces of one circle" (p. 29). In short, by stating that the various confessions share an innate and native characteristic, Donne implies in this image 1) that he genuinely believes that the disparate confessions are of the same metaphysical nature; 2) that he is searching, idealistic as it is, for a way to work through and overcome the sectarian divides in order to re-unite the Church; and 3) that he finds in this image a mathematical continuum by which the fragmentary pieces of the finite world can attain the infinite.[35]

In the second letter to Goodyere from this same year, Donne writes, "a Mathematique point, which is the most indivisible and unique thing which art can present, flowes into every line which is derived from the Center," and further, "God himself, who only is one, seems to have been eternally delighted, with a disunion of persons." As such, he continues, "they whose active function it is, must endevour this unity in Religion: and we at our lay Altars (which are our tables, or bedside, or stools, wheresoever we dare prostrate our selves to God in prayer) must beg it of him: but we must take heed of making misconclusions upon the want of it" (pp. 163–164). Even as Donne directs us to the "Mathematique point," he posits the infinite number of lines which derive "from the Center." Even as he calls for "unity in Religion," he recognizes that God delights in "a disunion of persons." Even as he urges us to beg at "our lay

[35]For a discussion of this concept in *Essayes in Divinity* and the connections it may have with the thought of Thomas Harriot, see my "'One, four, and infinite': John Donne, Thomas Harriot, and *Essayes in Divinity*," *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 109–143.

Altars," he warns us "of making misconclusions." By means of piling up such paradoxical expressions, Donne demonstrates that by unity he never means singularity, and union never obviates, and certainly never obliterates, the uniquely particular. While the center and circumference of a circle are one in the sense that they form a whole, the two do not collapse into one another to form some hybrid third entity. There is still a center and still a circumference, but Donne uses the language of a geometrical continuum in order to imagine the commerce between them, the dilation that joins them.

The passage from the third letter is the most familiar of all. Donne writes, "You shall seldome see a Coyne, upon which the stamp were removed, though to imprint it better, but it looks awry and squint. And so, for the most part, do mindes which have received divers impressions" (pp. 101–102). This passage is often mis-applied to Donne, such as by Richard Strier, who asserts that "the image of re-imprinting a coin seems to have had special meaning" to Donne "as a figure for incomplete transformation," an image that Strier believes provides an "obvious application to Donne's own biography."[36] Yet Donne did not take holy orders "to imprint it better." He is not talking about himself in the letter to Goodyere, nor should this passage be applied to him, for in becoming a priest in the Church of England, he was not attempting to remove one pressing to replace it with another. Donne wants all of the beams of the sun, both breasts of the Church, and the circumference as well as the center. The fact that Donne imagines the differing confessions as various rays of the same sun and as the breasts of one woman shows us the mind of one who wishes to communicate the relation of differences. Donne neither diminishes (or otherwise glosses over) the controversies and divides, nor is he capable of ignoring the essential truths that unite them. To that end, his mind is free-ranging in the rhetorical and epistemological explorations of possible worlds.

These finely nuanced and often paradoxical distinctions are what Donne insists on and obsesses about, and he realizes that they open him to mis-interpretation, including the mis-interpretation that he at times purposes. Thus, Donne's imperfection, his restless penchant for dilatation and the commerce of relations and relationships exposed by

[36]Strier, p. 357.

such expansion, catches us, both pulling us toward him and tripping us up. It is the flaw by which we know him.

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