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The Meditative Path and Personal Poetry

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The use of meditation and the way of the mystic in Renaissance literature has been well known, and Spanish and English poets have frequently been discussed in those terms. Contemplation of the teachings of the Bible led some, first, to conviction of sinfulness—for the Calvinist, man was born depraved, we know—and it was hoped that the means to purification could be achieved through the threefold meditative path. One path was to achieve purity of soul (the Purgative way); one, to attain enlightenment (the Illuminative way); and one to effect union with God (the Unitive way). Analysis makes such thinking sound involved, but it defines a basically simple and natural series of steps for the believer in God who believes he has sinned in God's eyes and who, believing in an afterlife, wishes to attain it. The meditator would contemplate his sinfulness, his death, the Judgment upon him, and the possibility of Hell. Next, one contemplated the kingdom of Christ, service to God, and rejection of forces of opposition in order to avoid the Hell to which one's sinfulness should have led. Inflamed with love of God, the "new" soul, having been illuminated, could contemplate union with God. That union, particularly observable in the language of the work of St. Teresa of Avila, played with sexual imagery and coition, and ultimately employed the concept of the wise virgin awaiting the Bridegroom and their marital bliss (Matthew xxv), as well as The Song of Solomon and Revelation xxi:9: "Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the lamb's wife."

Two of John Donne's Holy Sonnets that have very often been analyzed offer examples that can be viewed as showing the meditative

or mystical path; yet despite pertinent discussion, they have not been treated meditatively as some of his other sonnets have been. I suspect that this is so because they are frequently read biographically only. Despite investigations of language and text, emphasis has been on what these sonnets tell us about Donne's wrestling with his religious precepts, a Catholic in a Calvinistic world. What is provocative to me, however, is that recognition of this substruct of meditation can raise, first, doubts as to what has been argued about "sincerity" in poetry and, second, questions as to the significance of these two sonnets in mapping Donne's alleged personal religious struggles around 1609, which has been suggested as their possible date of composition. In 1609 Donne was working with Thomas Morton and, it is reported, he may have received a benefice had he taken orders in the State Church at that time. Certainly that situation can be viewed as creating personal religious struggles that Donne may have expressed in poetry, and so these two sonnets may do just that. But a meditative substruct also implies a greater attention to the act of writing than only an expression of soul-searching thought.

Stanley Archer has argued that the trifold structure of the holy sonnets is also observable in the "secular" poems and thus that meditative influence is unlikely.[1] Further he doubts that the complexities of formal meditation would have entered Donne's early education. As Arnold Stein notes, however, Archer seems to be attempting "to counter the rigor of Louis Martz's argument in *The Poetry of Meditation,*"[2]—and we should stress that word "rigor"—and Stein adds that "Ternary form seems . . . the larger source, and spiritual exercises only one specialized adaptation." In that remark, I think, lies an important point that applies not only to Donne's holy sonnets but to numerous poems by various Renaissance authors: a meditative occasion—its psychological impulse, its pondering of the constant questions of who we are and what happens after death, what is good and what is evil—may exist behind a poem even though it does not reflect the complexities of meditation that Martz details. That is, the meditative or mystic path that Martz or Evelyn Underhill[3] has delineated may emerge in a poem while congruencies of poetic structure may arise from other

sources, and the author need not have specifically set out to imitate that meditative path. Donne's holy sonnets may follow tripartite structure because of various nonsacred influences, but they may still reflect the psychological impulse of meditation on humankind's life.

Between the struggle that has preceded a poem and the expression that has described it seems to be much attention to writing, poetic writing that has been honed for its literariness rather than its heartfelt and immediate anxieties. Lurking behind that thought is the question of audience, of course. There is also strong sexual content at times, not unlike some poems by St. Teresa, yet content that, when related to God, sounds blasphemous, its metaphoric status not fully negating the outrageousness of making God a graphically sexual being. The spiritual rapture of faith became the bodily ravishment of passion. The mystic imagery is often graphic, masochistic, and sexually rhythmic. It is difficult for me not to construe this metaphoric drama as evidence of the poet writing rather than only working through some catharsis. That argues that the poem should be treated critically as a poem. Paradoxically all beings become female to the maleness of the Bridegroom. Only through zeal (or passion) for God could one become illuminated with the light of God; the presence of God had to be felt bodily before it could be felt spiritually. Such a similitude surely smacks more of a fictive poem than an angst-driven confessional.

I raise the point and present remarks on these two sonnets to iterate my belief that we, as literary critics, are invalid when we require that a poem be personal only, or public only, or literal and not metaphoric at the same time, or metaphoric and not also with some biographical reality.[4] For specific biographical interpretations, rather than general experience behind the perception, we might look at some readings of "The good Morrow" or "The Autumnal." Or look at "A Fever" for a poem that has often not been related to possible biographical import. Archer's argument, ultimately, aimed at rescuing them from only biographical interpretation and stressed the poet as literary artist. A similar aim lies behind Sean McDowell's essay, "Edification and the Reader of John Donne's Divine Poems."[5] Some of Donne's religious "poems' apparent seriousness argues for a purpose different from the

witty exercises of the love poems, which is why some modern critics prefer to read them as spiritually autobiographical" (2), McDowell writes, and proceeds to indicate how "edification" of his readers lies in Donne's "investment in rhetorical theory" and specifically in the "imitation of reality" (10). Donne, he posits, "portrays the practical, one might say, 'realistic,' experience of grappling with spiritual inadequacies . . . not . . . to repulse readers with prudish sensibilities; rather it aimed to evoke a sympathy with readers by breaking down the sense of isolation that so often surrounds states of deep feeling" (11).

The two sonnets I choose may be personal expressions of the struggle that Donne underwent around 1609 in terms of religious belief, but they are also very much literary works that should be evaluated as literary works with an audience beyond the writer only, an audience to be edified. Although Kate Frost has refuted a totally personal kind of domination for *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, one still finds criticism that views the "Devotions" as a fairly literal transcription of a kind of journal of Donne's severe illness in 1623. Their intentionality which involves the reader's reading and understanding of them—if we do not want to talk about Donne's intentionality—is much more than just reportage, much more than just Donne's means to fight psychologically through the illness. For example, "Devotion" Number VI, entitled, "Metuit: The physician is afraid." In the Meditation Donne dwells on fear: "I know not what fear, nor I know not what it is that I fear now." His conclusion is that "but as my physician's fear puts not him from his practice, neither doth mine put me from receiving from God, and man, and myself, spiritual and civil and moral assistances and consolations." In the Expostulation he comes to accept fear as good, for "A wise man will fear in everything"; and in the Prayer he begs the Lord to give him a fear, "of which I may not be afraid" or ashamed. (We recognize the variant of the mystic path in this trifold order.) The main line of argument which convinces that fear is good is biblical citation: it may be an exemplum like the women who departed from the sepulchre with fear and joy, realizing that "thy fear, and thy love are inseparable," or an exhortation like "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," delivered by the Psalmist and repeated in Proverbs. Donne

moves through his own reaction to impending death toward a resolution of faith by recalling texts of the Bible which depict similar lessons—the judge who finally achieves justice (Luke xvii:1), the fear of Joseph as disciple of Jesus (John xix:38), Noah who was moved by fear to prepare an ark (Hebrews xi:7), and others. Once he accepts that all things flow from the hand of God, he sees his illness as God's "immediate correction, and not merely a natural accident," and thus what fear there is (from the infirmity of nature) must be good.

All of this is contrived, in the best sense of that word; all of it is elicited from his memory, probably not all at once (perhaps even with corroborative checking of things like biblical citations); and all of it has an intentionality beyond assurance to the nearly dying Donne: "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time," he says in the Expostulation with reference to 1 Peter v:6. The "Devotions" have their personal fountainhead and importance; but they are also the words of the minister counselling his parishioners and attempting to alter their minds and attitudes about the tribulations and sorrows in their lives. The structures that Frost has observed in these twenty-three segments define a creative, not just a psychological, act.

The two sonnets I will discuss are the very well-known and much written about "Death, be not proud" and "Batter my heart, three person'd God." The first meditates upon death: What is this thing called death which besets man? What are its attributes? its achievements? its relationship with man? Only through an understanding of death can one hope to conquer it and thus proceed along the mystic path. Death is supposed to be "mighty" and "dreadfull," and since it can "kill," it is "proud." But it does not "kill," for it, like its types, rest and sleep, gives pleasure by yielding "Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie." The thesis of the octave thus becomes the temporality and ineffectuality of death; only through the intense reflection of the meditative formula would the concentrated vision needed arise. Death's dependence upon fate and chance occurrences, upon the whims of kings and the passion of despairing men, shows it to be slave to these masters, "killing" only where and how and whom they demand. Death operates through

external agents; it cannot be master of man whose internal agent, soul, is infinite. Poppy (opiates) and charms, which are only types of death's external agents, cause sleep from which one awakens; so thus does death cause sleep, from which the soul will awaken eternally. And hence death can no longer exist once that sleep is past. The contemplation of death leads up to the consideration of the kingdom of Christ; we have reached the Illuminative way. The subject of the sonnet and its treatment result from the need for purification from such earthly concepts of death as it cites.

When Donne affirms, "nor yet canst thou kill mee," he has reached purity of soul through meditation on the nature of death (lines 1-4). When he expostulates, "why swell'st thou then?" he has attained enlightenment through analogies with death's types (lines 5-12). Generally the central portion of the meditation involved a questioning, and God, the source of all answers, accommodates himself to man's inadequate comprehension through "images" or "shadows." When Donne has conceived of being able to waken eternally, he has become united with God (lines 13-14). The sonnet thus acts on two levels, consciously or not: one as a meditation constituting what St. Loyola called a first week, and one as passage over the threefold mystic path. This double view of meditation in the poem may suggest that the "rigor" of Loyolan meditation is not a driving force in it, but it also suggests that the meditative moment is the backbone of the poem. Loyola's meditative procedure may have been dissipated for Donne and the age in which he wrote, but its effective influence persisted.

Yet once more am I dismayed by John Carey's reading of a Donne poem, for of this sonnet he writes, "Its ill-sorted reasons tumble out in no recognizable order, reflecting inner disarray. The speaker is plainly trying to convince himself, and failing so badly that he cannot even decide whether he wants to say sleep is better than death or vice versa."[6] For him this sonnet springs from Donne's anxiety. I daresay the meditative substruct that can be observed, and that seems to be there consciously, should remove words like "ill-sorted" and "no recognizable order" and "disarray," and at the same time make clear that the poet

is not simply trying to convince himself but is setting up a means of edification for those who profess to believe in God and an afterlife.

We cannot speculate as to what form the sonnet would have taken had there been no meditative or mystic pattern for it to employ, but an awareness of the tradition points up the reason for the theme, the use of types, the intense sincerity of the conclusion (as opposed to mere rationalization), and the implied perseverance against tristitia (despair), one of the greatest sins for the medieval world, through fortitude. Who is the audience for the sonnet? Donne, yes, but it pushes through to an audience intended by Donne that is outside himself. "Private" is a style contrasting with "public" (and thus has significance for genres), but in this case at least, it is not a subject delimited to self. The meditational level that emerges points to a poet honing his craft as Archer would view the poem, not just to one recording his personal thought while in meditation to solve his problems and tensions. It is not a case history. The sonnet has set up both means and ends of edification for the wayfarer in life.

"Batter my heart" is a shocking poem for some. The "three person'd God" of line 1 is the Father, the Holy Spirit, and the Son. The Father, who is power (mind), now knocks upon the poet's heart which must break through its isolation to feel the power of love. The Holy Spirit, who is animation (soul), now breathes upon the poet's heart but is asked to blow upon it. Gentleness and externality are to be replaced by panting infusion. The Son, who is the sun (body) and thus corporeal light, now shines upon the poet's heart but is asked to burn it. Heat without tangency does not consume. The entire Trinity thus seeks to mend the poet's sinfulness by potentially destructive forces but should make him new by total destruction. (One might compare alchemical ideas on this point.) Until he is ravished, as the last line paradoxically says, he remains in a sinful state. The present treatment of the poet by God is an analogue of a seduction to sexual activity which is only love-playing, which is not sincerely loving and which is nonessential; he wishes for a ravishment, as the poem ends, which will not merely play at love, which will infuse love, which will generate essence. "Ravish-

ment" evidences the power of the sexual performer and completes the destructive forces that begin the poem. The way in which this is expressed in the poem makes it seem that the supine object of the hoped-for infusion is requesting "rape" as the only means to unite bodily with him who is worthy, since the "victim" has been joined in the past with only him who is not. The recent article by Arthur Lindley, "John Donne, 'Batter my heart,' and English Rape Law," attests to the interpretation of rape and argues that this metaphor sets up recognition of feminine love and the subjugation of the female to unsought possession as a normative social state. Here, thus, in the sonnet the female poetic voice seeks that normative social state as captive soul. The ironies set up evidence Gary Stringer's reading of the poet's abjectness and sincere motives.[7]

The poet/"victim" is incapable of breaking the liaison with him who is not worthy, Satan; and violence is seen as necessary to alter his usual path. Up to this point, God has been trying to mend the cracks of sin on the poet's mortal heart: they will break asunder again, for he will not be a different person. God must make him new in order that he not again succumb to sin whose ways he now knows: and this must be done by destruction (a type of dying). Echoing in the text is Revelation xxi:5: "And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful."

Behind the poem is the theological belief that man is born depraved, not innocent, and it laments this aspect of the human condition, pleading that God should step in and change a person's condition rather than leaving it only to the human to correct. The first quatrain pleads for the annihilation of his sinful heart (or soul) so that he may rise to Heaven and stand firm in faith. It is the Purgative Way.

But man is a little world, or town, and he, the poet, has been usurped by Satan. Reason, God's viceroy in man's little universe (as Milton called the mind), has been captured, and cannot resist temptation or remain faithful to its true master. Like a woman awaiting her lover's penetration, he, as town, labors to allow God to enter within the walls. Rather, it is implied, he would be defended of body from all others except God, remaining faithful to his one Bridegroom, and being taken

in labor of God. The second quatrain pleads for the release of the mind from its earthly delights. He has moved down the Illuminative path.

He is betrothed to Satan, betrothal being a relationship not unlike marriage in those days (and ours) as far as intercourse was concerned. He wishes to be divorced from Satan, untied from those acts which bind them, made free again as he was by the Son's Incarnation. This can be achieved only by his being taken and imprisoned by God; only by God's forceful separation of him from his lover Satan and God's assumption of his body will it be free—ironically the subjugation that Lindley talks of. As the sonnet ends, the metaphysical paradoxic opposites, cast in a mystic aura, iterate the passion which will bring the presence of God, the physical superiority which will bring chastity, and the enthralling trance which will bring separation from sin and unity with God. The Unitive end is now in sight: union will occur with ravishment. It is not only the audacity of the imagery that moves this sonnet out of the only personal, or that defines its author as writer rather than recorder; it is also the meditative underpinnings that have not been critically emphasized before that proclaim it a poetic performance.

It is clear that the imagery throughout is graphic (particularly in some of the double meanings which such a reading as this suggests) and, in its emphasis on "batter" and "break" and "burn," that it has a masochistic strain. Indeed the Unitive end, seen as the poet and God in coition, has been simulated in the verse rhythm of the sonnet. The first four lines are slowed down noticeably by the six accents each in lines 2 and 4, and the phraseology creates pauses (seven) after "heart," "God," "stand," "mee," "force," and lines 2 and 4. The two run-on lines (1 and 3) try to speed up the movement, but they cannot. In contrast lines 5 through 8 contain pauses (ten) after "I," "you," "Oh," "Reason," "mee," "captiv'd," and each line—not much faster, but a bit so; besides, the latter portion of line 8 permits no stoppage. Lines 9 and 10 seem to allow pauses only at the ends of the lines, the reading pushing through each line without rest. Pauses in the last four lines, on the other hand, break them into short spurts or breaths, picking up momentum and driving on toward the final line. The last three feet of the sonnet do not contain a pause, but the high accent is "rav-" and the last word, though

technically stressed, is pyrrhic. In all, the rhythm approaches the emotional and physical pulsating of sexual stimulation, drive, and climax.

The incorporation of the meditative and mystical traditions into Donne's poetry (and in the *Devotions*) can be understood because of their appropriateness to the methods and substance of so-called "metaphysical" writing: the intensity of a double vision (as in "The Annuntiation and Passion") and discordia concors (like the organ and choirs of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister") provided the means to unite the mundane with the etherous. Donne more than any other served as influence to such meditative authors as Edward Taylor years later (in lyrics like "Upon the Flood," which is not Herbertian) and such "mystic" versifiers as Edward Benlowes. The "secular" adaptation in such poems as Andrew Marvell's "Dialogue between the Soul and the Body" and Edward Herbert, Lord Cherbury's "An Ode upon a Question moved, Whether Love should continue for ever?" is, however, seldom realized.

What I have argued is that a meditative strategy underlies these two holy sonnets; that it points to a creative act rather than an experiential one; and that such a creative act presents a poem that is not "personal" in substance and thus not "biographical" in a literal way. While an inner struggle concerning self and the self's relation to God and vocation probably did give rise to their content, and we may thus infer that Donne was considering his career around 1609 as well as his theological position, we should pay attention to the sonnets' artistic ploys, rhetorical stances and tropes, rhythms and reader-effects, just as we would for "Send home my long strayd eyes to mee." Like many poems, these sonnets may reveal Donne's emotions and personal thoughts, his fears and his sublimation of such fears, his uncertainties of what life is and who humankind is. But as McDowell argues, there is also an audience intended to be edified in such matters, if through no other means, through the means of having the questions brought to the fore. The sonnets are not just "private," though their style and genre are; they are not only "personal" as that word might generally be defined, but they

are also the vehicles for a reading public to ponder and for literary critics to evaluate as literature.

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Notes

1. Stanley Archer, "Meditation and the Structure of Donne's 'Holy Sonnets'," *ELH* 28 (1961): 137-47.

2. Arnold Stein, *John Donne's Lyrics: The Eloquence of Action* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), 231-32, n27.

3. Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954, 1960), and Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism; a Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 1930).

4. See also my "Poetry, Personal and Impersonal: The Case of Donne," 53-66, in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

5. Sean McDowell, "Edification and the Reader of John Donne's Divine Poems," *Discoveries*, South-Central Renaissance Conference News and Notes, 17 (1999): 1-2, 10-12.

6. John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind & Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 199.

7. See *John Donne Journal* 17 (1998): 75-88, for Lindley's article, and "Some Sacred and Profane Con-Texts of John Donne's 'Batter my Heart'" in *Sacred and Profane: Secular and Devotional Interplay in Early Modern British Literature*, ed. Helen Wilcox, Richard Todd, and Alasdair MacDonald (Amsterdam: VU Press, 1996), 179, for Stringer's discussion.

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Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadfull, for, thou art not soe,
For, those, whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee;
From rest and sleepe, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
Thou'art slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poyson, warre, and sicknesse dwell,
And poppie,'or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
And better then thy stroake; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue,
Yet dearely'I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
But am betroth'd unto your enemie,
Divorce mee,'untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.