

Donne's Re-formed *La Corona*

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In Volume 21 of *John Donne Journal* I argued that Donne's *Litany* is a far more important, far cleverer poem than we have usually thought, especially in what it contributes to the theory of devotional poetry—that is, how poetry can serve as an effective, because affective, vehicle to interrogate and explain Christian doctrine.¹ Donne set out his intentions to make this poem serve the devotional needs of people like him—people uncertain where to position themselves among the various post-Reformation confessions, people whom he calls “lesser Chapells”—in a letter to his friend Sir Henry Goodyer that appears to have been written in 1608. I argued in that earlier essay that Donne's achievement in the *Litany* was to carve out a “middle way,” but not one likely to be adopted by the Elizabethan or Jacobean church. Donne's rationale for his experiment, written on his sickbed, was that “neither the Roman Church need call it defective, because it abhors not the particular mention of the blessed Triumphers in heaven; nor the Reformed can discreetly accuse it, of attributing more than a rectified devotion ought to doe.” Donne's middle was a highly intellectual compromise between Catholic litanies of the saints, with their long catalogues of saints' names and their routinized petitions, and the Protestant litany devised for England by Thomas Cranmer in the early 1540s, with its Erastian petitions for the

¹“A Man is to Himself a Dioclesian: Donne's Rectified Litany,” *John Donne Journal* 21 (2002): 35–49.

king, his family, and members of his government. It was also, avowedly, not intended for public use, but only for circulation among his friends.

I now want to argue a similar case for Donne's *La Corona*, a poem also composed before he was persuaded to take orders in the Jacobean church.² Lacking something as useful as the 1608 letter to Goodyer about the *Litany*, in the case of *La Corona* we have to infer a date and an intention. Also, we have to face the disputes among Donne's editors, Grosart, Grierson and Gardner, as to whether Donne sent six of the *La Corona* sonnets to the "E of D" in 1609, with an accompanying sonnet explaining that the seventh was not quite ready to send, or whether he sent them to Lady Magdalen Herbert in July 1607, with an accompanying sonnet that focuses on the "Magdalen" aspect of his patroness. It is possible, as Grierson thought, that he sent the same six to both; but in any case we can place *La Corona* between 1607 and 1609, which renders its affinity to the *Litany* visible and significant.³ As for the question of intention, what Donne designed *La Corona* to be, what purposes he hoped it would serve, this has become debatable again. Long ago, Louis Martz proposed that we should understand its purposes in the light of Catholic traditions of saying the rosary and the

²Although attempts to date *La Corona* precisely have proven unsuccessful, we can infer Donne's intentions from the poem's design and contexts.

³For some of the disputes about dating, see David Novarr, "The Dating of Donne's *La Corona*," *PQ* 26 (1957): 259-65; Dennis Flynn, "Awry and Squint': Dating Donne's Holy Sonnets," *John Donne Journal* 7.1 (1988): 35-46; and Gary A. Stringer, "General Textual Introduction," *The Holy Sonnets*, Vol. 7.1 of *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2005), pp. xxix-xlii.

corona, the corona being the name for the Bridgettine Rosary.⁴ That is to say, in this sequence Donne was situating himself in the meditative or *private* devotional tradition of the Catholic church. One did not go to church to say one's beads. More recently, Theresa M. DiPasquale, while crediting Martz for his important discovery, has argued that we should really see *La Corona* as a liturgical prayer focused on the Eucharist, and thus essentially *public* in its ambitions.⁵ I prefer the older proposition, but for reasons which, as will appear, are not exactly the same as those of Martz, in part because he compared Donne's practice to the rosary handbook of Sabin Chambers, which was not published until 1619, too late, we think, to have influenced Donne in any direction, especially as he was, by then, already an ordained priest in the Anglican church.

My argument opens with the claim that rosaries and coronas were devotional forms, or formulae, that immediately implied not only Catholicism, but some of the features of Catholicism most

⁴*The Poetry of Meditation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954). Martz also drew on the work of Herbert Thurston, "Our Popular Devotions...The So-called Bridgettine Rosary," *The Month* 100 (1902): 189-203.

⁵*Literature and Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), pp. 58-110. DiPasquale also prefers the notion that the *La Corona* sonnets were sent to Magdalen Herbert because Mary Magdalene has been seen as a type of the Church; and cites a sermon in which Donne observed that "a congregation that compasses the Preacher, was ordinarily called a Crown, *Corona*." Thus *La Corona* is spoken in his "ecclesiastically empowered voice." She does not mention the later sermon delivered over the body of James I at Denmark House, which focused on Canticles 3:11: "Goe forth ye daughters of Sion, and behold King Solomon, with the crown, wherewith his mother crowned him...." *The Sermons of John Donne*, edited by Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-62); 6: 280ff. This sermon contains a riff on all the possible kinds of crowns, marked with the marginal note: "Corona."

abhorrent to radical Protestants, especially mindless repetition and Mariolotry. John Foxe would inveigh against them, and the state would legislate against their production, importation or use. In his account of the reign of Mary Tudor, Foxe quotes contemptuously from the new primers written for the reign, and threatens to display also "our Lady's Psalter," which, he suspects, may not be known by most of his readers. He explains that it was compiled by St. Bonaventure in the late thirteenth century, who "to show himself a devout servant to his Lady, hath taken every psalm of David's Psalter (which he peculiarly made and referred to Almighty God) and hath in divers of the said psalms and verses put out the name of the Lord, and placed the name of our Lady":

Is not here good catholic stuff, christian reader, trow you? Confer, I beseech you, this doctrine with the doctrine of the apostles, who teach us that we are fully complete in Christ, and I will refer me to no better judge than to your own conscience. And now therefore, if any man have been in doubt in times past of the doctrine and proceedings of the church of Rome, whether it be rightly charged with blind errors, with blasphemy intolerable, and idolatry abominable, or not, here now may be fully certified and resolved. For where was ever idolatry or blasphemy to be found, if it be not here in this Matins and Psalter of our Lady? If idolatry be to make an idol to be worshipped as God, which is no god, what do we here but make an idol of our Lady (as we call her), to be worshipped with no less dignity, glory, authority, reverence, and service, than is the Lord God himself.... To her we pray, we cry, we creep, we sigh, we groan, we knock and kneel, to her we trust; and we believe not also in our Lady, we be heretics *ipso facto*.⁶

⁶*The Acts and Monuments*, ed. Stephen Cattley, 8 vols. (London, 1837-41; reprinted AMS Press, New York, 1965), 7: 123-37. Because

In the 1571 Injunctions of Elizabeth's archbishop, Edmund Grindal, the sixteenth injunction declared that "no person or persons whatsoever shall wear beads, or pray, either in Latin or in English, upon beads, or knots, or any other like superstitious thing; nor shall pray upon any popish Latin or English Primer, or other like book, nor shall burn any candles in the church superstitiously upon the feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary, commonly called Candlemas day."⁷

The early reign of James was no improvement. In 1611, in response to the increased severity of the penal laws against Catholics, there appeared a remarkably clever document, whose author signed himself in the preface B.D. de Clerimond, but who was in fact the Jesuit Joseph Cresswell (1557-1623), who had earlier been rector of the English college at Rome. The document had a polemical purpose. It reprinted the king's recent proclamation of 2 June 1610, requiring subscription to the Oath of Allegiance, and commanding all Catholic priests and Jesuits to leave England by 4 July. And it provided a list of the laws that James had *added* to those of Elizabeth in attempting to control the circulation of Catholic devotional literature, among them the following: [The phrases in brackets are Cresswell's ironic marginalia.]

Item. No person, or persons shall bring from beyond the seas, nor shall print, sell, or buy *any Popish primers, Ladies Psalters, Manuals, Missals, Legends, or Lives of Saints*, [You may see what friends these Law-makers are to Saints, and sanctity.] upon paine of forfeiture of

Foxe's work was constantly evolving through the different sixteenth-century editions, Cattley's scholarly collation, with its necessarily modernized spelling, now seems preferable to any of the Elizabethan editions.

⁷*Injunctions Given by the most reverende father in Christ, Edmonde...in his Metropolitall visitation of the Province of York* (London, 1571).

fourty shillings for every such booke. And it shalbe lawfull for any two Iustices of the Peace within the limites of their iurisdiction, & for all other chiefe Officers from time to time, *to search the houses* [By this you may easily imagine what rule they keep under this cloake & colour.] & lodgings of every Recusant, or of any person, whose wife is a Recusant, for Popish booke and Reliques of Popery. And if any *Altar, Pixe, Beades, Picture, &c.* [A generall licence to robbe.] shalbe found, it shalbe defaced, and burned.

Such bans, ironically, provoked Catholics to sustain the use and understanding of rosaries, coronas and “psalters of our Lady.” One important step in this process was made by the Jesuit, Thomas Worthington, who in 1600 published a prose rosary for distribution in England, with an accompanying description or definition of the form and its uses. Its title was *The Rosarie of our Ladie. Otherwise called our Ladies Psalter*, thus blending the rosary tradition, which supposedly derived from St. Benedict, with the Lady’s Psalter tradition invented by St. Bonaventure. Worthington explains in his preface that the book is intended to take the place of the physical rosary, or beads, which were now forbidden objects. Worthington’s book would, of course, have itself immediately become a forbidden object, not least because of the delicate little illustrations it contained, a source of immense visual pleasure for those languishing under the dictates of Protestant iconoclasm. (See Figures appended to this essay, pp. 89-93.)

Member of an ancient and wealthy Lancashire family, Worthington studied at Brasenose College, Oxford. In 1573 he went to Douai, where he was ordained in 1577. In 1580 he began a mission in England until July 1584, when he was betrayed, arrested, and committed to the Tower, where he was held in the

“pit” for over two months.⁸ In January 1585, along with 20 other priests (including John Donne’s uncle Jasper Heywood), he was put aboard ship under the royal warrant of perpetual banishment, and sent to Normandy. His *Rosarie of our Ladie, Otherwise called our Ladies Psalter* was published in Antwerp, with an important preface, dated 15 March 1590, and it implies that it was written, either by him or another priest, when he was in the Tower in 1585, and prepared for publication when he was sent back to the continent. Here is the gist of the preface:

For so much (benigne Catholike reader) as everie thing is better understood, by the explication of his proper, or usual name, it is first of al to be noted, that the name of ROSARIE (which properly signifieth the place where roses doe growe, or be reserved) is here used for the forme of praier, which the renowned religious father S. Dominicke, about the yeare of our Lord 1200 (or as some thinke, a Religious Priest called Peter of Amiens in Picardie, above an hundred yeares before) instituted, of certaine *Pater nosters*, *Aves* and *Credes*, together with certaine principal mysteries to be meditated, in honour of our blessed Ladie, the virgin MARIE, framed by the number of five, like to a Rose, that hath five leaves: Whereof it is called the ROSARIE OF OUR LADIE.

...in the great Rosarie (or Ladie Psalter) be contained three particular Rosaries. And these three are resembled to three sortes of Roses, white, read, and damaske. For as these three colours doe signifie, ioye, payne, and glorie: so these three Rosaries do containe three sortes of Mysteries to be meditated, ioyful, sorowful and glorious.

⁸For Worthington’s life, see Godfrey Anstruther, *The Seminary Priests: A Dictionary of the Secular Clergy of England and Wales 1558-1850* (Ware: St. Edmund’s College, 1969-), 1:387-88.

This forme of praying, the first institution of the Rosarie, did so accommodate to the use of al faithfull persons, as it might be both a necessarie helpe to unlearned people, and also a most profitable exercise to the most lerned in the world: as wel for the better avoiding of idle, and hurtful distractions in the often repetition of the same prayers, as also for the more fruitful elevating of the mind, meditating upon the chieftest Mysteries of our faith, which concerne our Lord and Redemer his coming into this world, and his going out of the same, and the happie effects of both.

For touching his coming into this world (which was so long and earnestly desired and expected) in the first Rosarie are to be meditated these five ioyful Mysteries. First, how the Archangel Gabriel declared to the immaculate virgin Marie, that she should conceive and beare the Sonne of God. Secondly, how the same sacred virgin visited her cosine Elizabeth. Thirdly, the Nativitie of our Lord, with his Circumcision, and adoration by the Sages. Fourthly, the Purification of the unspotted virgin mother, and Presentation of our Lord in the Temple. Fifthly, the finding of our Lord in the same Temple, when at the age of twelve yeares, he had bene lost three dayes. Lykewise in the second Rosarie, are to be meditated five sorrowful Mysteries pertaining to our Saviours going forth of this world, by his most painful Passion, and death, which are these. First, his great agonie, and pensive prayer in the garden. Secondly, his cruel whippng, with other manie extreme and vile iniuries. Thirdly, his crowning with thornes, and condemnation to death. Fourthly, his caryng of his owne Crosse. Fifthly, his crucifying, and death thereupon. Finally concerning the effects of his coming into this world, and of his going forth of it againe, in the third Rosarie are to be meditated these five glorious Mysteries. First, the Resurrection of our Lord. Secondly, his Ascension into heaven. Thirdly, the coming of the

Holy Ghost. Fourthly, the blessed death and Assumption of our Sovereigne Ladie in soul and bodie. And fiftly, her Coronation and singular dignitie, above al other Saints and servants of God.

I have quoted this definition of the fifteen mysteries of the rosary proper in full in order to show the logic of its structure, whereby the life of Christ is framed within that of the Virgin, as the infant Christ took shape in her womb, and the honors due to her are to be understood in terms of that necessary carnal enclosure.

As Worthington declares, for the last four or five hundred years Catholics have used this devotional practice as an orderly basis for meditation, and a way of remembering the chief points of life of Christ and his mother, but instructions for its use being “not commonly extant, and the use of Beads also inhibited, and made dangerous to Catholikes, living amongst Heretikes in this age; for remedie of both these defects, a certaine Catholike Priest, and prisoner for the Catholike Religion, in the towre of London and there also deprived both of bookes and Beades, framed for him self a forme of meditation in saying the Rosarie [that is, the book in question].” So many people found “this privat exercise” (4r) useful, Worthington explains, that it was first published in an unauthorized edition, and then reissued, in a more correct form, with illustrations. But, Worthington continues, for the sake of those who have demonstrated their need of the rosary proper, the editor of the volume “hath also added hereunto, the Corone of the same most sacred virgin, first instituted by the aforesaid religious father S. Dominike, or by some of his followers, and lately reduced into the like forme, by the same author, and now first printed with the like pictures” (4v). The *Corona for the Virgin*, unsurprisingly, focuses solely on *her* life:

In the first part are proposed those things to be meditated, that belong to the Preparation made for her

coming, before she was borne. In the second, such as pertaine to her birth and education. In the third, how she cooperated with the B. Trinitie, in Christs incarnation and nativitie. In the fourth, her participation with him, both in joyes and afflictions, most part of his life in this world. In the fifth her singular compassion in the time of his Passion, and death. In the sixth, the rest of her life, with her death and assumption. And in the seventh and last part, her most glorious Coronation, and exaltation above all Saincts and Angels, next to her sonne above al created persons. (5r)

Worthington adds, however, that his book also contains a "Corone of our Lord," a later exercise created in 1515, and approved by Pope Leo X. It is pretty much of an afterthought in the book, and is not given the privilege of illustration.

The stimulus given to Catholic *poetics* from this precious little volume seems to have been immediate. The very next year (1601) Richard Verstegan published a volume of devotional poems that included *The Fifteen Mysteries of the Rosarie, of our Blessed Lady*, which exactly follow the traditional structure as defined by Worthington. And Verstegan was probably influenced not only by Worthington, but by the huge success of the recently published poems of the Catholic martyr, Robert Southwell, which had already given devotional poetry a brand new impetus, driven in part by the emotional effect of Southwell's execution. In one of Southwell's two posthumous volumes of 1595, *Moeoniae*, were a series of poems on the Virgin Mary, which can be recognized, and Martz almost did so, as an idiosyncratic version of the Corona for the Virgin. Southwell's 14 poems, however, focus almost exclusively on the Virgin, beginning the sequence with three of the topics from the Corona, "The Virgin Maries conception," "Her Nativity" and "Her Spousals," expanding the topics of Christ's birth and childhood to seven poems, omitting completely (and this is really extraordinary) the five dolorous mysteries of Christ's passion, and closing, as in the standard Rosary, with "The death of

our Ladie" and "The Assumption of our Lady." When John Busby published the Sequence in *Moeoniae* in October 1595, he omitted these last two poems, as well as two that had appeared in *Saint Peters Complaint*, "The Nativitie of Christ" and "Christ's Childhood." The design of Southwell's rosary, in which the work of redemption was rhetorically transferred to the Virgin, was therefore rendered invisible.

Southwell's rosary was written in his characteristic, pedestrian, six-line stanza. The meter Verstegan chose, however, might be seen as a step on the way to full sonnet form, a ten-line stanza for each "mystery," rhyming *abab cd cdefef*. Neither is much of a poet, but Southwell set up the premise that the "mysteries" could best be grasped as a series of paradoxes, driven home by the pentameter line. Here is a stanza from his *Nativitie*, also quoted by Martz in a footnote (p. 111), but not connected by him to the zest for paradox we will find in Donne's *La Corona*:

Beholde the father, is his daughters sonne:
The bird that built the nest, is hatched therein:
The olde of yeares, an houre hath not out runne:
Eternall life, to live doth now beginne.
The word is dumme: the mirth of heaven doth weepe:
Might feeble is: and force doth faintly creepe.

If Catholic poets could be motivated to produce a verse rosary or corona, "protestant" poets might be motivated to "reform" or appropriate both the devotional exercise and the additional power it gained (including, perhaps, mnemonic power) from being translated into verse. We can now see that Donne's *La Corona* is a contribution to this competition. I shall argue below that what he was engaged in was indeed "reform" of the form, so that it might survive the bans and the stigmas that had been laid upon it. Donne, I believe, was engaged in a work of salvage, as well as salvation. Something old and revered deserves to be revived, rather than reviled.

It is highly likely that Donne had met Worthington at that “consultation of Jesuits in the Tower in the late Queenes time” that he mentions (in 1610) in *Pseudo-Martyr* (p. 46), and that probably corresponds with the visit to his uncle Jasper Heywood in prison that he is known to have taken with his mother at Christmas 1584.⁹ It is virtually certain that he owned a copy of Worthington’s *Rosarie of our Ladie*. And it is highly unlikely that he had not read Southwell’s *Moeoniae*, given its best-seller status. He may also have read Verstegan. In any case, between early 1607 and 1610 he wrote his own version of the Rosary/Corona, and apparently gave it that significant name (which appears in Harleian MS. 4955 and most other manuscripts, as well as the early editions, though three manuscripts have instead *The Crowne*). Why the Italian form of the name, rather than the Latin or the English? Possibly because Donne had read one of the Italian coronas mentioned by Martz, either that of Annibal Caro or Torquato Tasso, and grasped the possibility of fusing the Italian tradition of the corona, which was purely formal—a sequence of linked sonnets, where “the last line of each sonnet forms the first of the next, and the last line of the whole sequence repeats the line that began it” (Martz, p. 107)—with the religious corona or rosary tradition, with its focus on sacred biography as the connective tissue.

This was an extremely clever move; but the longer leap that Donne achieved in re-forming both traditions, one metrical, the other devotional, was to perceive how the new synthesis might be made acceptable in England. The task was, in effect, to create a new “Corone of our Lord,” as Worthington puts it, by including in the sequence only those moments of the life of Christ and his mother that were compatible with Protestant devotion. Thus from the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary Donne takes only six: *Annunciation*, *Nativitie*, *Temple*, *Crucifying*, *Resurrection* and *Ascention*, the last being emphatically the ascension of Christ and

⁹See Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 128-29.

not of the Virgin. To this he eventually added, in the opening sonnet, a theoretical preface, *Deigne at my hands this crown of prayer and praise*, which is first in appearance but last in composition. When the reader arrives at the end of *Ascension*, however, he finds himself returned to the first line of the first sonnet, which defines the genre and the tone of the project. The result is a poem that thematizes the idea of the rosary as a repetitive devotional exercise but does so by denying the reader the luxury of intellectual laziness. Everything in Donne's rosary is familiar, yet energizingly difficult; right out of the past, but snapped into new and dazzling focus.

To put this a different way: if Donne knew Southwell's sequence, and it would be surprising if he did not, he deliberately set out to reverse Southwell's strategy, by excising from his sequence all the poems in praise of the Virgin, all of the episodes of her life, except in so far as she is inseparable from the life of Christ. Thus *Annunciation*, *Nativity* and *Temple* correspond to the first, third and fifth mystery in Worthington, and the fourth, sixth and ninth poem in Southwell; *Crucifying* stands for all five of the dolorous mysteries in Worthington, those omitted by Southwell; and *Resurrection* and *Ascension* not only correspond to the first and second of the glorious mysteries in Worthington, but replace Southwell's conclusion with the death and assumption of the Virgin. Of these as poems Donne would have had no knowledge, since they had been tactfully suppressed by Busby in 1595, unless Donne's Catholic connections gave him inside knowledge; but of course their presence in the Catholic rosary had been authorized by Worthington's handbook. The sequence that Donne selected, therefore, was one that could appropriately be offered to Christ himself, as in the final line of the sonnet to Magdalen Herbert, "these Hymns, to his dear name address"; but it is noticeable that the Virgin remains the addressee of *Annunciation* and *Nativity*, whereas in the *Litany* he had addressed the stanza on the Virgin to Christ, and carefully limited her efficacy: "As he deedes were / Our helpes, so are her prayers; nor can she sue / In vaine, who hath such titles unto you" (Grierson, 1:339).

With the Virgin put in her place, so to speak, only at the beginning of the story, the *proportions* of Donne's corona were "reformed," and the act of redemption firmly resituated in the crucifixion, always a powerful image in Donne's imagination, as it never succeeded in being in Milton's. But we should pause for a moment on *Annunciation*. It seems clearly to imitate the paradoxes of Southwell's *Nativity* (see above) in its last four lines:

[Thou] wast in his minde, who is thy Sonne, and Brother;
Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea thou art now
Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mother.

This is to give the Virgin figurative priority to and figurative equality with her Son, an effect Donne might or might not have intended. If we imagine *Annunciation* as the first poem Donne wrote in the sequence, we can also imagine him, in early 1607, as still nostalgic for the Marian focus of the "Mysteries." Very soon he would write *The Annuntiation and Passion*, which in the manuscript tradition is explained as occasionalist, the two great historical moments happening to fall on the same day, 25 March 1608. In it, Donne imagines his soul *seeing*—the word is important—the joining of these two moments in one great circle:

She sees at once the virgin mother stay
Reclus'd at home, Publique at Golgatha;
Sad and rejoyc'd shee's seen at once, and seen
At almost fiftie, and at scarce fifteene.
At once a Sonne is promis'd her, and gone,
Gabriell gives Christ to her, He her to John;
.....
All this, and all betweene, this day hath showne,
Th'Abridgement of Christs story. (Grierson, 1:335)

"Sad and rejoyc'd shee's seen at once." One of the Joyful Mysteries and one of the Sorrowful Mysteries mysteriously blend, as a coincidence of the church's calendar.

In *La Corona* Donne produced (perhaps already had produced) another "Abridgement of Christs story," in which the sense of condensation, of compression, is expatiated on, is part of the mystery. *Annunciation* ends with a theological pun on the use of a stanza ("stanza" meaning "room" in Italian) to express an impossibility. Thou "shutt'st in little room," he (and the speaker could be either the poet or the archangel) tells her, "Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb." In *Nativity*, using the same conceit as in *The Annuntiation and Passion*, he demands: "See'st thou, my soul, with thy faith's eyes, how he / Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lie?" In *Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward* he would take the process to its logical conclusion, spending most of the poem on "that spectacle of too much weight for mee," the holes in the hands, the blood, the torn flesh, and only mentioning Mary as a late and secondary sight:

If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye...?
(Grierson, 1:337)

Temple (to which we shall return) stands for the moving domestic moment when Mary and Joseph lose track of their young son, and after three days searching, find him in the temple at Jerusalem instructing the Jewish scholars. But still meditating on miraculous compression, not on family drama, Donne wrote:

The Word but lately could not speake, and loe,
It sodenly speaks wonders, whence comes it,
That all which was, and all which should be writ,
A shallow seeming child, should deeply know?

And, in *Crucifying*, having slid the three years of Christ's ministry, and the era of his miracles, into the first four lines of his sonnet, Donne returns to the theme of impossible compression by stating that his enemies

unto the immaculate.
 Whose creature Fate is, now prescribe a Fate
 Measuring selfe-lifes infinity to'a span,
 Nay to an inch.

If we want to measure Donne's intentions for the use of his *Corona*, then *Temple* is a good place also to pause. In the sequence of seven sonnets, it is as close to the center as it can be. *Temple* corresponds to Worthington's fifth mystery, in Worthington's words "the finding of our Lord in the same Temple, when at the age of twelve yeares, he had bene lost three dayes." Having dropped the Purification and the Presentation, Donne chose this subject for a whole sonnet, we might infer, because of its emphasis on the intellect. The "Doctors" here, his word for the Jewish scholars, should remind us that it was also his word for the Fathers of the Church in his clever stanza on them in *The Litany*. Intellectual power is what the boy-Christ and the poet demonstrate. It is significant that Donne describes the boy as "Blowing, yea blowing out those sparks of wit, / Which him selfe on the Doctors did bestow," a version of the paradoxes of primacy and agency introduced in *Annunciation*. And of course it is "wit" that sparks the comparison. But perhaps it was also comparison with Verstegan's poem on the same topic that defined the way Donne saw the scene. Here is Verstegan's version, which also uses the term "doctors," but focuses almost entirely on Mary's maternal panic and relief:

Conteyning our Ladies fynding of Christe in the temple.

Sequestred love doth foster grief and ioy,
 Twixt feare of losse and hope of happy gaine,
 Such was her case that lost her litle Boy,
 Whose joy revyv'd in fynding him againe.
 In Temple once built by the wysest king,
 Where not til now the wise king took his place,

Who yet no kingly porte did thether bring,
 But wisdome uttred with a chyldish face.
 With lyke in yeares shee haply might him seek,
 But did him fynde with doctors in dispute,
 He left repose to fraudlesse myndes and meek,
 And took in hand wise folly to confute.¹⁰

Donne's frequent appeals to the visualization of these scenes, which might of course be nothing more than an aspect of the art of meditation, might also suggest that he had Worthington's book and its engravings before him as he wrote. In *Nativitie*, he demands of his soul a visual response: "Seest thou, my Soule, with thy faiths eyes, how he / Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lye?" And there, indeed, the child does lie in his little basket, instead of being "held" on his mother's lap as in the *other* illustration of the same scene, in Worthington's *Corona* for the Virgin. In *Temple*, it is Joseph who is urged to use his eyes. "Joseph, turn back; see where your child doth sit, / Blowing, yea blowing out those sparks of wit." And indeed, in the engraving, the child does sit, at a desk with its own curved seat. *Crucifying* combines the fourth *mysterium dolorosum*, where Christ carries his own cross, and the fifth, the crucifixion itself; here the speaker first addresses his own visual imagination: "Loe, where condemned hee / Beares his own crosse, with paine, yet by and by / When it beares him, he must beare more." Then, in the last two lines, he turns the page, as it were, and completes the painful story with admirable concision: "Now thou art lifted up." And in *Ascension*, I believe, there is a virtual ekphrasis of Worthington's illustration: "Behold the Highest, parting hence away, / Lightens the darke clouds, which he treads upon." These moments not only address the vexed problem of images in Christian devotional practice (and I have written before on Donne's steadfast refusal to give in to Protestant

¹⁰Verstegan's volume is available in *English Recusant Literature 1588-1640*, ed. D.M. Rogers (Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1970), Vol. 53.

iconoclasm), but also have the charming effect of directing the reader's attention away from the poet himself, always at the inflamed center of the Holy Sonnets, to the integrity and certainty of biblical narrative.¹¹

And lastly, what of the opening sonnet of *La Corona*, which must have been the last to be written? It was this sonnet that, surely, inspired Andrew Marvell's *The Coronet* and George Herbert's *A Wreath*, both of which address that *other* paradox, the one at the heart of devotional poetics itself. Is the writing of religious poetry spiritually legitimate? Does it constitute a form of works immune from Protestant dogma? Can it ever be free of too much pleasure in the thing itself, in the satisfaction of word and metaphor, of "seeking ... poetiqueness," as Donne put it in his *Litany*, inventing a word which nobody subsequently chose to use? In the opening sonnet of *La Corona*, Donne raises these issues in a specifically theological context: "The ends crown our workes, but thou crown'st our ends," a formula that might satisfy both Catholic and Protestant alike, and he ends the sonnet with a daring piece of Arminianism: "Salvation to all that will is nigh." The first person singular, sign of the sonnet's tendency to solipsism, the worried individual trying to negotiate a special deal for himself, has become, in the short space of this sonnet, part of the incorporate "we," the catholic church with a small c, indeed the human race.

Both Marvell and Herbert took up the issue of works in *The Coronet* and *The Wreath*, respectively, which are, of course, only single poems. They thereby completed the transaction in which Donne was engaged—transferring the rosary/corona concept from its use as a private devotional exercise to poetics, transforming it from a mental discipline to a thought experiment—but in the process they lost track of the saving grace of *La Corona*, its understanding of the meaning of sequence, however capable of

¹¹I should add that none of these things is true of the sixth sonnet, *Resurrection*, which in tone and egocentric focus is indistinguishable from many of the Holy Sonnets.

abridgement, its fidelity to the notion that the life of Christ is what the believer should dwell on, first and last. And we might do well to end with that sermon mentioned in the notes, the sermon that Donne preached to celebrate the death of James I. It is, in effect, another commentary on *La Corona* and everything that it drew on:

The Crown, which we are called to see him crowned with, his mother put upon him;

And here the marginal note reads simply: "Corona."

The Crown which his father gave him, was that glory, wherewith he was glorified, with the Father, from all eternity...: And the Crown wherewith his Father crowned his Humane nature, was the glory given to that, in his Ascension. His Mother could give him no such Crown: she her selfe had no Crown, but that which he gave her. The Crown that she gave him, was that substance, that he received from her, our flesh, our nature, our humanity; ... Or, the Crown wherewith his Mother crowned him, was that Crown, to which, that infirme nature which he tooke from her, submitted him, which was his passion, his Crown of Thornes; for so Tertullian, and divers others take this Crown of his, from her, to be his Crown of thorns; Woe to the Crown of pride, whose beauty is a fading flower, says the Prophet; But blessed be this Crown of Humiliation, whose flower cannot fade. Then was there truly a Rose among Thorns, when through his Crown of Thorns, you might see his title, Jesus Nazarene; for in that very name Nazarene, is involved the signification of a flower; the very word signifies a flower. (6:287)

"Doe not, with a vile crown of fraile bayes," wrote Donne in the opening sonnet of *La Corona*,

reward my muses white sincerity,
But what thy thorny crowne gain'd, that give mee,
A crowne of Glory, which doth flower always.

If we read (and teach) *La Corona* with sensitivity and knowledge, it too will continue to blossom.

Yale University

Figures

Thomas Worthington, *The Rosarie of our Ladie.*
Otherwise called our Ladies Psalter (1600)



ROSARIE. 11

The Natiuitate of our Lord.

AFTER the holie virgin returned to Nazareth, from visiting her cosin, her husband Ioseph perceiuing her to be with child, is much troubled in mind, and doubtful what to do. For on one side he feareth the law, if he conceale, that his wiues conceiuing is not by him: On the other side, he knoweth the virgin, his spouse, to be of so godlie, chaste, pure, and immaculate life, that he dare not accuse her, nor bring her into anie (be it neuer so smal) suspicion. She in the meane time being most hūble, and most modest, reueleth not, no not to her most deare husband, this so great a Mysterie, wrought in her by the powre of God. In fine Ioseph being iust, and holie, to auoide perplexitie, determineth secretly to leaue her: But while he thus thinketh, behold an Angel of our Lord appeareth to him in sleepe, saying: Ioseph sonne of Dauid, Feare not to tarie with Marie thy wife. For that which is conceiued in her, is of the Holie Ghost. And she shal bring forth a Sonne: And thou shalt cal his name I E S U S. For he shal saue his people from their sinnes.

A 6

5. *Mysterium gaudiosum.*

5. PATER NOSTER.

*The finding of our Saviour, when
he had bene three dayes lost.*

King Herod perceiuing, that he is de-
luded by the Sages, is excedding an-
gry, and sending a troupe of soldiars,
murdereth al the men-children, that are
in Bethlechem, and in al the borders ther-
of; from two yeares old and vnder, To
the number of fourteene thousand: vwho
al, by special privilege receiue crownes of
martyrdome. In the meane time Ioseph
is monished by an Angel, taking the child
and his mother, and parting the same
night, fleeeth into Egypt: and so is fulfilled
the prophesie of Esay: *Our Lord ascenderh
in a light cloude* (Christ being caried by his
mother a virgin) and *shal enter into Egypt:*
and the Idols of Egypt shalbe overthrowne be-
fore his face, and the hart of Egypt shal lan-
guish; verified by the falling downe of
Ishak, whilest Christ is in Egypt, which was
about the space of six yeares. Then Herod
dying, they returne into the land of Israel.
But hearing that Archelaus reigneth in
Iurie, for Herod his father, & they feare to
goe thither; and Ioseph being so warned
in sleepe, they repaire into the quarters of
Galilee, and dwell in Nazareth, vwhereof
our Saviour is called I E S V S of Nazareth:

4. *Mysterium dolorosum.*4. *PATER NOSTER**Our Sauour carieth his Crosse
towards Caluarie.*

THEN souldiers leade our Sauour (now condemned to death) from the indgement seate into the court of the palace, where they cal againe together the vvhole band, and pulling of the purple robe, which sticke fast in his former wvoundes, they drawe out more fresh bloud, and put on him his owne clothes, but leaue the crowne of thornes fast fixed in his head, both for his greater torment, and greater shaminie, lest perhaps he might appeare like no king at al, or should lacke a pillowe, to rest his head on, hanging on the crosse. And hauing in the meane time prepared a most terrible heauie Crosse, they lay the same vpon his backe, and so carie to the mount of Caluarie, representing him by the sight and weight of a huge & burden, before he come to be nailed theron. And yet much heavier to him is the continuall meditation of our sinnes, for vvhich he suffereth at this, especially our ingratitude, in that vve neither are about to imitate his example in taking our crosse, and following him, nor yet truly consider, vvhath he hath done for vs his miserable creatures and vnvvorthie servants.

5. *Mysterium dolorum.*

5. PATER NOSTER.

*Our Sauours crucifying, and
death vpon the Crosse.*

Coming to the toppe of mount Calua-
rie, in steede of such comfortable good
wine as vsually was geuen, to refresh and
strengthen the hartes of them that were to
die, they gave vnto our swete Sauour (al-
ready wearied and afflicted) vinegre mingled
with myrrhe and gal, vvhich vvhē he
had tasted, he would not drinke. Then
againe they put of al his clothes, with such
force and fiercenes, as bringeth more bloud
out of the innumerable vwoundes of his
sacred body, and so racking his armes and
feete, with great violence to the length of
the Crosse, with manye knockes of ham-
mers they faste him fast therunto, pear-
cing through the most tender vaines, sin-
ewes, flesh and bones, of both his handes,
and both his feete, vvhith great and rough
nails. And for more reproch and igno-
minie, they place vnto B. Sauour, between
two thieves, as though he were the wic-
kedest of them all, and put a title ouer his
head, containing his name, his countrie,
and the cause of his death, vvhich in He-
brew, Greeke and Latin, Iesus of Naza-
reth King of the Iewes. And so they set
vpon the Crosse, the foote falling into a hole
made for that purpose.

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THE CORONE

2. *Mysterium gloriosum.*

2. PATER NOSTER.

OF OVR LADIE.

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*The Natiuitie of the B. virgin;
and her life til she was espoused.*

Like as the morning driuing away the nights darknes, besides the light which it bringeth, fortheweth à greater light to be at hand: euen so after foure thousand yeares darknes in the whole world, first shineth the most pure virgin voide of al sinne, and ful of gràce: plainly signifying by her singular vertues, the true light and fountaine of al gràce (which lightened her, and al that be lightened) to be very nere at hand. For now is borne the singular spouse, ordayned to be the mother of God, who was so long since promised to her noble Ancesters; prefigured by manie miraculous Mysteries; fortold by Prophetical oracles; the renowned virgin without spott, borne of the blessed seede of the Patriarkes, of the excellēt race of the Prophets; of the holie stock of Leui, and of the Royal bloud of Iuda; euerie way adorned with al kind of generositie, and endued in the highest degree with molt cleare sanctitie because she is to conceiue, and beare the fountaine and flowre, the beginning and end of molt holie and true Nobilitie.

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