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Absence in Donne's Holy Sonnets: Between Catholic and Calvinist

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Diana Benet is among those readers of seventeenth-century devotional poetry who have pointed out that, in George Herbert's *The Temple,* from time to time God answers the poet's desperate pleas for grace and forgiveness.[1] Herbert's doubts and anxieties are often lengthy, God's answers brief. Yet toward the end of several key poems we hear that second voice speak, resolving the poem and with it resolving the poet's doubts. We find no such answering voice in any of Donne's Divine Poems, although perhaps it is fair to say that there is more hopefulness in the poet's voice at the end of his three late hymns than in the main sequence of Holy Sonnets, which were probably written at a time of heightened anxiety in 1609 or earlier. As Helen Gardner argues in her Oxford English Text edition of the *Divine Poems*, in which she establishes their correct order, these twelve poems form a sequence.[2] They are meditations, in what was originally a Catholic, even a specifically Ignatian, mode. The case for Catholic influence on Donne's meditative method was strongly and persuasively made by Louis Martz, in his *Poetry of Meditation* (1952), which appeared

[1] *Secretary of Praise: The Poetic Vocation of George Herbert* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984).

[2] *The Divine Poems of John Donne*, ed. Helen Gardner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952; 1978).

two years after Gardner's edition.[3] Yet in the Holy Sonnets there is none of the spiritual progress that properly belongs to Ignatian or related styles of Catholic meditation, either within any individual sonnet or within the sequence as a whole. We find no journey from hell to heaven, from sinfulness to grace, from fear to hope, from sickness to salvation. Although the speaker is obsessed by his efforts to seek out the presence of God and, having found Him, to beg for His grace and forgiveness, he never receives an answer. God remains absent, His voice silent.

Subsequently, of course, other scholars such as Halewood and Lewalski have argued that Donne's meditative method is not Catholic after all, but Protestant.[4] Although I find their arguments generally unpersuasive, especially in the case of Donne, I would nevertheless agree with them that in one sense Protestantism has a strong presence in the Holy Sonnets. Oddly, it characterizes not the method used but the method's failure. What has struck me again and again over the years as I have read and taught the Holy Sonnets is that they are pervasively Catholic in method, yet at the same time that they are deeply influenced by Calvinism in their doubts and anxieties. That paradox is what I propose to address here. Why does Donne sound like an apprentice Jesuit following all the traditional methods of the Ignatian exercises at the same time that he sounds like a guilt-ridden Scottish Presbyterian closeted in his private room, examining his inward conscience for signs of election, yet fearful that he will prove to be among the

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[3]Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954; 1962). Although less immediately applicable to the present case, for the broad Catholic medieval background to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious verse, see also Rosemond Tuve's many books and articles, especially *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

[4]William Halewood, *The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes in English Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1970; Barbara K. Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

reprobate, for whom there is no hope? At this time in his life he seems to be neither Jesuit nor Presbyterian, but lost somewhere in between the two.

The Holy Sonnets are almost too familiar to need quotation, but one of the properties of great poetry is to reward repetition. The feasters in the royal halls of Homer's *Odyssey* have heard the familiar tales of Troy many times before, but they never tire of calling on their poets to sing them again. Each time we hear such poems they renew themselves. So, let us consider Donne's Holy Sonnet 2 (according to Gardner's numbering) as a typical instance of the paradox I have mentioned:

> OH my blacke Soule! Now thou are summoned
> By sicknesse, deaths herald, and champion;
> Thou'art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
> Treason, and durst not turne to whence hee's fled,
> Or like a thiefe, which till deaths doome be read,
> Wisheth himselfe delivered from prison;
> But damn'd and hal'd to execution,
> Wisheth that still he might be'imprisoned. (1–8)

In the opening octave we find, among other things, all of the Ignatian meditative techniques that Martz has outlined. Indeed, none of the poems Martz discusses, by Donne and by other seventeenth–century devotional poets, including the *Anniversaries*, so thoroughly answer to the Ignatian method as the Holy Sonnets. There is composition of place: Donne imagines himself at the point of death, facing an impending judgment for which he feels unready. There is composition by similitude: Donne uses powerful analogies of treason, theft, and imprisonment to flesh out and give vivid substance to what might otherwise seem too abstract and too distant, thus appealing to the reader's heart and feelings. T. S. Eliot called such images "objective correlatives" and argued that their use was basic to strong poetry, Donne being one of his models. There is, if somewhat indirectly in this case, application of

the senses: the scene is vividly painted; we see it and feel it just as the condemned prisoner whom Donne evokes might do. There is the use of the three higher intellectual faculties, as defined by St. Augustine in *de Trinitate* and elsewhere, which gives the sonnet its basic structure: memory recalls and evokes the scene, drawing upon stored up texts and images; reason analyzes it; will will shortly be appealed to in the impending sestet to help the speaker form the resolution to change and amend his life.

But unlike a proper Ignatian resolution of amendment, something breaks down in the sestet. The expected sequence of spiritual progress from repentance to conversion fails to take place, despite the speaker's strenuous efforts:

> Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke;
> But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?
> Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
> And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
> Or wash thee in Christs bloode, which hath this might
> That being red, it dyes red soules to white. (9–14)

The general answer to Donne's sinful predicament is set forth in the sestet. Christ can provide the soul with prevenient grace. He has already made efficacious atonement for man's sin through His death and resurrection. His blood can effectually wash penitents clean of their guilt. All these comfortable things are known to Donne in a general sense. In fifty years of reading him I have never found any evidence in his work that he doubted the existence of God or the reality of Christ's saving grace. But he did often doubt that God could be found or be reached by any particular individual, namely himself. He lacked the assurance that Christ's saving mercy might be awarded specifically to him for the remission of his sins. Suppose the Calvinists were right, as they argued at the Synod of Dort in 1618–19, with the support of King James I of England, that grace is offered to some but not to all, and that for those to whom grace is offered it is irresistible? The high point of Calvinist

influence in England fell in the early years of the seventeenth century, before it gradually faded away.

Donne himself was part of the mission led by Viscount Doncaster that James sent to Holland in 1619–20. We do not know for certain if Donne sympathized in his heart with this mission, which explored the possibility of an alliance between England and the continental Reformers in the Thirty Years War, as Paul R. Sellin has argued,[5] but at least it can be said that Donne was not so antipathetic to Calvinism as to dissociate himself from the venture. In *Satyre III*, he portrays Truth, who is also the true Church, as a light shining from the mountaintop. But will the searcher who strives toward her, and with great difficulty "about must, and about must goe," ever succeed in reaching her? Similarly, in the late sonnet "Showe me deare Christ," Donne recognizes that one true Church exists, and only one, but which of the three chief claimants is it? Suppose Donne were to choose wrongly, or to take a wrong turn in his solemn quest? As confirmed by the Council of Trent, Catholics as well as Protestants agreed that prevenient grace is necessary before a man can even begin to seek further grace. St. Augustine writes in his *Confessions* that God dwells outside of the created universe in a "region of unlikeness" and that therefore no seeker can ever find Him; instead God must first find us. So it all comes back to a confidence that He will choose to find us, in order that we may find Him.

The early biographers of Donne acknowledged that there were Catholic influences on him during his youthful years. He had a devoutly Catholic mother; he had two Jesuit uncles who visited the family on the English Mission; he had a brother who died in prison for the crime of harboring a Catholic priest. But from the time of Izaak Walton the Catholic connections were brushed under the rug as something not quite suitable to be spoken about,

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[5] *So Doth, So Is Religion: John Donne and the Diplomatic Contexts in the Reformed Netherlands, 1619–1620* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988).

until John Carey usefully raised the matter in what I consider to be an otherwise eccentric biography.[6] In recent years Dennis Flynn has done yeoman work investigating the issue of Donne's Catholicism in true scholarly fashion, in numerous articles and in his book *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility.*[7] But so far Flynn's writings have touched mainly on Donne's youth and early manhood. His published work has not yet reached the later years, although he has hinted in various places that at some point in his life Donne must have betrayed or abandoned his Catholic origins and, after he took Holy Orders in the Church of England and began preaching sermons, become a dedicated Anglican. In a speculative essay, "Donne the Survivor," Flynn suggests that Donne may have felt the same kind of guilt that survivors feel when they manage to live through a calamity that kills most of their family, friends, and co–religionists.[8] The result is a kind of irrational guilt. Why should I survive when others die? What did I do to deserve a better fate? He cites psychological studies that have been done on Holocaust survivors. His article is suggestive, but as yet he has provided no time scheme for these hypothesized events. How, when, and in what spirit did Donne abandon his Catholicism? Was he gnawed by guilt, was he resigned, was he relieved, or was he perhaps a joyful convert to his new faith? Until

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[6]*John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Carey begins his first chapter dramatically: "The first thing to remember about Donne is that he was a Catholic; the second, that he betrayed his Faith" (p. 15). But it is not clear that Carey altogether understands the implications of Donne's "apostasy," as he calls it, because by the end of his book he is arguing that Donne was too intelligent to believe any of that Christian stuff, whether Protestant or Catholic.

[7](Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995). See also Flynn's numerous essays.

[8]"Donne the Survivor," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, ed. Claude Summers and Ted–Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), pp. 15–24. Bruno Bettelheim is among the authorities Flynn cites.

more evidence is brought forward, we can only conjecture, mostly on the basis of the tone of his extant writings. But what Flynn's article makes clearer than Walton's *Life* is that the transition from the Catholic Church to the Church of England cannot have been easy or untroubled. It was not just a case of the profligate Jack Donne, that "great visitor of ladies," becoming Reverend Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's. There was also the more problematic conversion of John Donne, faithful Catholic, into John Donne, conforming Anglican, once fearful of visiting the court lest he be betrayed and now the King's obedient servant and the loyal client of the Duke of Buckingham.

I have been thinking about the joint presence of Catholic method and Calvinist anxiety in Donne's main sonnet sequence for many years. I planned to write something about it—the present article, in fact—after I met the deadline for a review essay that included R. V. Young's *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry*.[9] Perhaps the central point Young makes in his excellent book is that all of the great seventeenth-century devotional poets sought, above all, to place themselves in the presence of God. The whole purpose of devotional poetry is to find God and to come into His presence, and by publishing the poems to help others to do the same. According to Young the devotional poets sought God in three main areas, which may be summed up as Grace, the Sacraments, and the Bible. But most of them had to confront the grave issue raised by Martin Luther at the beginning of the Reformation: namely, that the true, living God is a *Deus absconditus*, an absent God, Who cannot be reached in this world. That teaching deeply influenced the Reformation and, *mutatis mutandis*, still influences our own postmodernist world 500 years

[9] *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan*, Studies in Renaissance Literature, vol. 2 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000). The review article mentioned in the text appears in *Religion and Literature* 36 (2004): 99–107.

later, most famously in the theories of Jacques Derrida on presence, absence, and *différance*. As I reread Young's book for review, I marked one passage that exactly fitted the essay I planned to write next: "If the grace of God is the presence of His life in the human soul, then the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation of the elements of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass is an assurance that God is objectively and factually (*ex opera operato*) present to the communicant. Any tampering with this teaching...raise[s] doubts about the accessibility of God's grace" (p. 83). Put succinctly, the doctrine of Real Presence in the Sacrament is the surest guarantee of entering into God's presence.

One of the three sections of Young's book, "Meditation and Sacrament in Seventeenth–Century Poetry," modifies and takes much further the work of Malcolm MacKenzie Ross, who earlier pointed out that there was a gradual draining away of the liturgy and the sacraments from the devotional poetry written over the course of the seventeenth century.[10] This occurred often for very practical reasons, such as the fact that Henry Vaughan could not attend church during the years that he wrote *Silex Scintillans* because the Church in which he believed had, in effect, been banished from England by the Roundheads. So Vaughan was obliged to meditate privately at home or in the woods and fields, and his poems reflect those circumstances. We can expect no tours of church buildings in his poems, no meditations on the sacraments, such as we find in Herbert's *Temple*. John Donne, however, is an exception to the hypothesis that this development took place gradually over the course of the century and reached its crisis during the interregnum—because, of course, Donne grew up a Catholic and already suffered from what amounted to internal exile. For all we know, Donne as a young man may have been a

[10] *Poetry and Dogma: The Transfiguration of Eucharistic Symbols in Seventeenth Century English Poetry* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954).

Church Papist, especially during the years when he worked for Sir Thomas Egerton in a semi-governmental capacity. That would have involved his attending an Anglican church on Sundays, something that need not have troubled a believing Catholic so long as he inconspicuously refrained from receiving communion. Donne was already suspect because of his Catholic background and family history, but there was no compelling reason for anyone to betray him if he kept a low profile and conformed outwardly. From a practical standpoint there was not much to be gained by turning in a Recusant who owned no estates subject to confiscation.

But it was hard to remain a faithful Catholic in England during those years. In a place like London there were few opportunities safely to attend mass or receive the sacraments, even covertly. Moreover, when speaking about the sacraments, Young only considers the sacrament of communion. According to the Church of England, there are only two sacraments, baptism and communion, and instead of transubstantiation Anglican theologians speak of consubstantiation, a different and vaguer formulation. According to the Catholic Church there are seven sacraments. The two of most concern to someone who wishes to free himself from bondage to sin and guilt are confession and communion. As far as I am aware, the sacrament of confession has rarely or never entered into discussions of Donne's religious poetry. Yet I believe it—or its absence—is central to understanding what is going on in the Holy Sonnets. In my most recent book, *Aspects of Subjectivity*, I discuss how the practice of confession changed over the course of centuries from the early Church through the Middle Ages and down into the Reformation. These changes, and the subsequent abolition of auricular confession in most Protestant denominations, had enormous cultural consequences. One may read the impact in such works as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Everyman*, and *The Faerie Queene*. I shall not attempt to recapitulate what I said in my book, but instead want to consider what the impact may have been on Donne.

Martin Luther retained the practice of annual auricular confession in the early Lutheran Church in Germany, although he denied it sacramental status. He considered it useful for keeping order and unity in the church and for readmitting into the ecclesial community those who fell away from it. Similarly, the first Anglican bishops, although they considered removing formal confession altogether as a Catholic abuse, retained it in The Book of Common Prayer as an option for those who felt a psychological need for it. It appears in the prayerbook in two places: as a preparation for worthily receiving The Lord's Supper and as a preparation for death and judgment. In the event, however, there is no evidence that confession before receiving the Lord's Supper was ever noticeably practiced in the Church of England, until the Oxford Movement of the late nineteenth century revived it in a few High Church circles. Numerous anecdotes suggest that at least informal deathbed confession of sins to a visiting minister was common among English Protestants. Sidney's deathbed confession is a familiar instance. Such a last confession was not sacramental but was thought to be a good way to help prepare and guide the soul into a suitable state of repentance and contrition before death.

As it happens, the present writer was born and bred an Episcopalian and later attended an Episcopal prep school, Kent. Typically, I think, no one ever suggested to me that I should go to confession in my younger days at St. James the Less in Scarsdale, which laid a foundation and did me real good in life, but which nonetheless Flannery O'Connor might jokingly have named "The Social Church of the Unexamined Life." The subject was not raised, for me at least, until I attended Kent, which in those days was fairly High–Church. There was incense, genuflection, a vigil light, and a splendid large Crucifix against the wall above the altar, things I had never encountered before. As I recall, the Headmaster recommended confession on a purely voluntary basis, as would be proper for Anglicans, and in my last year or two I confessed a few times. I went on to Harvard, where I discovered on Riverside Drive in Cambridge an even higher Anglican church run by a

religious order known as the Cowley Fathers. That they were out of step with the wider Episcopal Church at that time is evidenced by the tale I heard that they had to remove the Sacrament from the altar and hide it whenever their bishop came over from Boston and paid them a visit, because the bishop did not countenance genuflection and they wished neither to quarrel with him nor to watch him dishonor the Sacrament. A few years later at Harvard I became a Catholic. But I have experienced confession in both Churches. I mention this because even among Catholics in America today, in the aftermath of Vatican II, confession is not much considered or often practiced. Many seem to think it unnecessary; some probably regard it as an outmoded method of ecclesiastical tyranny and thought control. One of the most prominent recent books on the history of confession takes for granted the common sociological view, that confession is chiefly or entirely a means of social control, a method of persuading people to behave as the political and ecclesiastical authorities want them to behave, by means of what sociologists call positive reinforcement and Freud calls introjection.[11]

My own historical studies have persuaded me that such was not the case. Confession simply was not ordered in a way that could have ensured such complete and oppressive social control. At the time of Luther's Reformation there were plenty of well-known abuses in the Church. But abuse of confession as a means of social control was not a burning issue. Luther's chief objection was that it was impossible to confess all one's secret, inward, private sins, especially the hidden lusts and desires of the heart. The strict demand that to ensure his salvation a man must attempt to do the impossible was Luther's root problem. He found confession as it was practiced by Catholics more troubling than consoling. Therefore he thought it should be reserved for open sins against the social order, commonly known as breaking the peace. My own

[11]See Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

experience—and this is why I have evoked those earlier autobiographical details—is that it is normal to experience considerable reluctance and resistance before confessing, to put it off from one day to the next, to find all sorts of excuses for delay. Then the longer you put it off, the harder it is. But having once dragged oneself to confession there is a wonderful easing of the burden of sin, a freeing of the conscience, a sense of relief, joy and gratitude for God's forgiveness. Nor does the practice give the priest any perceptible control over you. How could it? All of us have sympathized with or enacted the experience of a child who commits some mischief and perhaps first evades or lies about his culpability, which although it seems easier at the time only makes things worse. At last the child puts aside his evasions, confesses what he has done, and feels great relief, joy, and renewal of love. We have a built-in psychological need to go through this sometimes unpleasant process in order to reach, on the other side, comfort and relief that would otherwise be at least uncertain and, in the case of friends or of parents who have died, even unattainable.

Donne's Holy Sonnets not only fail to achieve resolutions of amendment or similar acts of will. They also fail to evoke the Sacraments as the proper goal—or at least, for a Catholic, as essential stages along the way toward the goal—of such meditative exercises. Let us take as a deliberately flawed yet largely accurate portrayal of such meditative exercises the weekend retreat so vividly presented in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* Joyce mocks the whole process by omitting the most essential of St. Ignatius' Four Last Things, so that instead of the retreat's being a progression from consideration of death, judgment, and hell moving toward the promise of heaven, it remains bogged down in the ugly hellfire of Stephen's guilty conscience. Nevertheless, even this deeply flawed retreat is designed to point toward a definite outcome. Driven by the fear of hell, although unfortunately not comforted by the hope of heaven or by assurances of divine love and forgiveness, young Stephen is persuaded to make a sacramental

confession of his sins and then to attend mass and receive communion. That is a normal outcome of an Ignatian retreat. There are no signs that the speaker in Donne's Holy Sonnets ever considers such a sacramental outcome from his meditative sequence, however, although confession is the obvious way for a Catholic to cleanse himself of his sins and receive grace in order to reunite himself with God. In parallel fashion, with appropriate differences, the Anglican George Herbert, toward the end of "The Church," meditates on the Four Last Things. Having passed through them he accedes to Christ's loving offer at the beginning of "Love (3)" to remove the guilt of his "dust and sin," and closes this final poem with the Anglican version of a sacramental cure, which in turn points toward the great banquet in heaven: "So I did sit and eat." These are the last words spoken in "The Church," marking the end of this stage of Herbert's journey.

For a Catholic deep in bondage to sin, however, formal confession is a necessary step along the way to communion, and both are necessary steps along the way toward God in heaven. As I have suggested, it can be psychologically difficult to approach the confessional, yet this initial difficulty is displaced by relief from the burden of guilt. More important, sacramental confession offers an assurance and a certainty of forgiveness otherwise lacking, since Catholics believe that through it God's grace works, as in Communion, *ex opera operato*. As long as the sinner is basically contrite, he need not worry about every last little inward scruple or plumb the depths of subjectivity endlessly wondering whether God has heard him or has completely forgiven him. Yet the thought of making his confession and receiving communion, or even the possibility of resorting to the sacraments at some time in the future when the opportunity presents itself, is entirely absent from Donne's sequence.

When I first undertook this essay my working assumption was that Donne despaired and remained locked within his own mind because confession was simply unavailable to him, living in England as he did. His mother chose to leave England late in life

rather than abandon her faith, but Donne chose to remain there with his wife and his growing family, hostages to fortune. As Flynn points out, however, in his recent essay "Conjecture in the Writing of Donne's Biography," it would be a "ludicrous notion that John Donne, with a growing family, desperately in need of regular income, would be unable to find any employment for thirteen years," which is what the consensus of recent Donne scholarship amounts to.[12] Flynn does not hint what he thinks Donne may have been doing during those years to occupy his time and feed his family, but the most obvious reason for details to remain scant is that Donne was continuing in some way his earlier connections with patrons belonging to the ancient Catholic nobility. He would not have dared to mention such activities in his letters. If he did retain these connections, then, although confession and attendance at mass may have been only occasionally available to him, they would not have been altogether inaccessible.

If Donne would not have dared to mention his Catholic connections in his letters, neither, it might be argued, would he have openly mentioned any possible resort to the Catholic sacraments in his poems. True, but there were many ways for Donne to get around this difficulty by indirection if a sacramental solution were on his mind. It is hard to imagine that the thought of such a direct and simple solution to his problems would leave no inferential traces. There is, however, not the least hint in any of the sonnets that he was thinking of resorting to the sacraments. Whatever the reasons, the complete absence of the sacraments, whether from necessity, inward discouragement, or gradually changing religious views, is clearly reflected in the Holy Sonnets. Evidently the poet cannot find God's grace and presence in the sacraments, so they must be sought for by some other, less certain

[12]Flynn, "Conjecture in the Writing of Donne's Biography, with a Modest Proposal," *Fault Lines and Controversies in the Study of Seventeenth–Century English Literature*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted–Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), p. 56.

means. Since these means are purely individual, private, internal, and subjective, rather than liturgical or sacramental, more Protestant than Catholic, yet accompanied by an inability to trust in the efficacy of the Anglican sacrament of communion, then Donne could never have been quite certain of the real presence or efficacy of grace. With the whole Church of England including the King and the bishops inclining in those years toward Calvinism, the only certainty for a doubting individual thrown back into his inward mind was the assurance of the elect that God's grace had been given to him personally. Or, conversely, such an individual might experience the despair of the reprobate from whom grace is withheld and denied. For someone drifting in the wilderness between churches, the path from guilt and despair to renewed hope would be especially doubtful and uncertain.

The sermon in which Donne some twenty years later speaks most fully of the difficulties of finding God and coming into His presence is his third sermon, preached at St. Paul's on 13 October, 1628, on the text of John 1:8, "He was not that light, but was sent to beare witnesse of that light."[13] In the first of the two earlier sermons expatiating on this verse, Donne tells us, he treated "that light," which is Christ. In the second he treated John the Baptist, the witness of that light. In the third and last he proposes to treat what he calls the "*problematicall part, why* so evident a thing as light, and *such* a light, required testimony of *man*" (210). The upshot is that God chose not to reveal Himself directly to most men, and that even most Christians are blinded to direct perception of Him Who is Truth. Even among Protestants after the Reformation "there is a damp, or a cloud of *uncharitablenesse,* of *neglecting,* of *defaming* one another; we deprave even the *fiery,* the *cloven tongues* of the Holy Ghost...So that still there need more witnesses, more testimonies of this light" (213). God, Donne

[13] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), Vol. 4, Sermon 8.

declares, "allowes us to *doubt*, and to be *afraid* of our *regeneration*, ...nor must we build upon any testimony in our selves, till other men, that see our life, testifie for us to the world" (215). Therefore, no Christian should expect God to address him personally, or to imagine himself capable of interpreting the Bible privately. To enforce this lesson of dependence upon human testimony, God required even "the first Christians...to aske the Jewes, *which* books were those Scriptures" (217). So God reveals himself directly only to the prophets; all others must look to the testimony of men. True, it would be sinful not to follow our inward conscience, yet "it is a greater sin, not to labour to recover the conscience," by the advice and teaching of those whom God has put over His church (222). They may sometimes speak wrongly, but we have no other guides.

At this point Donne the preacher vehemently and explicitly denies the necessity of auricular confession: "Neither is this to erect a *parochiall papacy*, to make every minister a *Pope* in his own parish, or to re-enthrall you to a necessity of communicating all your sinnes, or all your doubtful actions to *him*; God forbid. God of his goodnesse hath delivered us, from that bondage, and butchery of the conscience, which our Fathers suffered from *Rome*, and *Anathema*, and *Anathema Maran-atha*, cursed be he till the Lord comes, and cursed when the Lord comes, that should go about to bring us in a relapse, in an *eddy*, in a whirlpoole, into that disconsolate estate, or into any of the pestilent errors of that Church" (222–23). So much for auricular confession. The Book of Common Prayer allows it, but evidently, some 20 years after he wrote the Holy Sonnets, the Dean of St. Paul's condemns it. True, if one parses Donne's words closely he will discover that as usual Donne the preacher does not, in fact, depart from the teachings of the Church of England. He says only that it is not *necessary* to confess to a priest, and that it is not necessary to confess "*all* your doubtful actions"—precisely the kind of impossible scrupulosity against which Martin Luther had inveighed. But no doubt any but the very closest reader or auditor would take Donne's forbidding

harangue as absolutely condemning any sort of confession to a minister. He would be a brave member of this congregation indeed who ventured to come around after hearing this sermon to ask the Dean of St. Paul's to hear his confession, with Donne's *"Anathema Maran-atha"* still ringing in his ears.

Donne concludes this sermon with a long peroration on the theme that God offers his grace for salvation to all. I will omit recapitulation of it here, since it goes on brilliantly at great length, but I will say that Donne seems to be arguing to convince himself, as well as his hearers, that Calvin was wrong in saying that some are subject to an eternal decree of reprobation. And Donne admits that it remains a mystery why some reject God's proffered grace. If he feels no doubts about this problem in his own mind, at least he understands from personal experience that there will be many lingering doubts in the minds of his congregation.

I want to close by considering in the light of what we have been discussing one of Donne's most powerful poems, Holy Sonnet 10. When we reach this sonnet we are nearing the end of the sequence, yet few readers would imagine that Donne has yet left sin, guilt, or despair behind him. (Nor will he in the two sonnets that remain.) As with Sonnet 2, Donne's method in Sonnet 10 is pure Ignatian meditation, composed of a triple analogy or composition by similitude that proves, on looking backward from its close, to be the unfolding of a single ancient analogy, the marriage of God and the soul.

> 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,
> Labor 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 dearly'I love you, and would be lov'd fain,
> But am betroth'd unto your enemie,

> Divorce me,'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.

Twenty years after, Donne the preacher may have come to terms with the Calvinist conundrum, but it still dominates this sonnet. The speaker depicts himself as enthralled, bound, captived, enslaved. He has no shred of free will that might allow him to repent or change. St. Paul speaks of bondage to sin but says that baptism frees us from Adam's guilt. By grace and atonement we are transformed from slaves into errant sons. But Donne remains a slave to sin and Satan. Nothing but divine force and violence, which he represents in his strong verbs and in his famous and shocking image of a divine rape rather than a divine marriage, can tear him from this captivity. This is as much as to say that it will take something like Calvin's irresistible grace to free him from his bondage, the kind of grace that leaves no room for cooperation or for willing consent. Such a grace is very different from either Catholic or Anglican prevenient grace, the term most critics of the poem mention in this connection. Prevenient grace is grace that comes before and enables the soul to seek further grace. Donne's wished–for grace is a grace that irresistibly wrests the supplicant from one master only to enslave him to another. His despairing fall into such Calvinist thought patterns arises, I think, from his despair of availing himself of any external means to free himself from sin, specifically the sacraments of confession and communion, which are so far distant from his thoughts that no hint of them ever enters the sequence. To draw a last parallel with *A Portrait of the Artist*, it is as if Stephen Daedalus had been driven into a frenzy of guilt by the priest's powerfully imagined depiction of hell and then was denied all access, present or future, to confession or communion.

Thus my working hypothesis is that the peculiar mixture of Catholic method and Calvinist despair that informs the Holy

Sonnets must be due to the unavailability of the sacraments—either Catholic or Anglican—at that period in Donne's life. One can only conjecture as to the reasons for this unavailability. Yet as Flynn argues, conjecture is a tool scientists have found essential for the advancement of knowledge. Once the conjecture has been put forward, other scholars are at liberty either to refute it or to confirm and build upon it. My conjecture is that Donne's growing family responsibilities and his consequent inability to leave England permanently was making it harder and harder for him to live his Catholic faith. To some degree he could conform outwardly, as a Church Papist, but at some point the evidence we have suggests that he must have decided he could no longer remain a practicing Catholic, which by definition involved the increasingly risky need to receive from time to time the sacraments of confession and communion. The risk of receiving the sacraments imperiled not only Donne himself but his wife and children, who depended on him and might have been pulled down along with him. True, Catholics believe that in an emergency, in the absence of a priest, one may confess his sins privately to God, with the intention of making a formal confession later if at all possible. But after some length of time that would lead to the same mental difficulties we read in the sonnets. Inward repentance and absolution become more and more subjective and uncertain. Repeated delay turns insensibly into evasion. Presumably at some point, perhaps while Donne was writing the sonnets, he decided that he could no longer receive the sacraments of the Catholic Church, but he was as yet unwilling or unable to believe in the validity of the sacraments of the Church of England. Confession in the Church of England, even for those who tranquilly accepted its authority, was at the time little more than a sop for those who could not manage to ease their guilt privately. And the Lord's Supper, although officially a sacrament, did not claim to present the real and substantial Body and Blood of Christ. Convinced or lifelong Protestants of most persuasions would not worry about such matters. A faithful Anglican like George Herbert could find

grace and comfort in Christ's personal forgiveness and the Lord's Supper, but a lapsed or lapsing Catholic would have to come to terms with the doctrines and assumptions of a different religious culture.

Eventually Donne did come to terms. He is said to have resisted the King's insistence that he become a minister in the Church of England for a year or more, then finally consented. His reasons for delaying are not known. Ordination is a serious vocational decision about which anyone might hesitate. The most critical point for someone who had been a Catholic most of his life, however, is that as an Anglican minister Donne not only had to receive communion but to give it; he had to preside over the celebration of the Lord's Supper. He would have to believe not only that the Anglican Church was the one true Church, but that its sacraments were valid. It would be far easier to square it with one's conscience to preach sermons that accorded with the King's political directions than it would have been to preside over the Lord's Supper if Donne had any doubts of its validity. His third sermon on John 1:8, like his other sermons, reveals no such doubts. One trusts that it was so. As Donne said, it is a sin to violate one's conscience and a worse sin not to form one's conscience in accordance with truth and the best authority and witness.

It is fair to say that Donne's spiritual perplexities produced a sonnet sequence not very useful for those looking for devotional exercises to improve their souls, in the way that George Herbert's poems could be used for such a purpose by later admirers such as Henry Vaughan and John Wesley. Donne's sequence portrays a soul mired by guilt and anxiety, and it ends where it began, without access to grace, consolation, or amendment. Conceivably the Holy Sonnets could be turned upside down, and read as negative *exempla* of how not to proceed in the spiritual life. But it is doubtful that Donne would have wished his readers to take them so, or indeed that any such approach to Donne's struggles would not implicate the reader in the kind of prideful holier–than–thou spirit that Jesus condemns in the Pharisee who visits the Temple to

pray. Better to say, "God be merciful to me a sinner" than "I thank thee, that I am not as...this publican" (Luke 18:10-14). In any case, out of Donne's inward turmoil and his inability to find the certainty of grace issued some of his best poetry. As the New Critics once argued, powerful poems need tension, complexity, and sometimes ambiguity. In a religious exercise such discordances and doubts should, if possible, be resolved at the close. In a successful poem or a poetic sequence perhaps they need not. We should be grateful for the magnificent poetry that Donne left us, the Divine Poems as well as the *Songs and Sonets*, and hope that he managed to resolve his inward tensions and spiritual conflicts before the end of his life, if not before the endings of his poems.

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