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"Singing Our Part": Donne, Poetry, and the Completion of the Circle

Raymond-Jean Frontain

Written relatively late in Donne's poetic career, "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" proves a magisterial statement about the nature of poetic language and the place of the individual talent within a poetic tradition. As such, it provides the scholar with as much of Donne's religious poetic as he seems to have been willing to promulgate, and, being among the last poems that Donne is known to have composed, may be read as a valedictory poetic summa or apologia.[1] Most provocatively, the poem provides the culminating expression and, even, marshals a resonant orchestration, of multiple poetic conceits to which he returned repeatedly in his career, thereby raising for closer inspection one of the most significant patterns in his carpet.

"Upon the translation of the Psalmes" begins by reiterating two conundra with which Donne wrestled throughout his career:

> Eternall God, (for whom who ever dare
> Seeke new expressions, doe the Circle square,

[1] Critical consensus holds that the reference in line 51 to the Countess's "translation" means that the poem was written sometime after her death on 25 September 1621; see the summary of scholarship on this matter in *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 2, The Divine Poems*, ed. Jeffrey S. Johnson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020), pages 836-37. On the circumstances of Donne's final poems, see David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); on *Sidney* see 150-57 especially.

> And thrust into strait corners of poore wit
> Thee, who art cornerlesse and infinite)
> I would but blesse thy Name, not name thee now [.][2]

The first conundrum concerns the nature of wit, or, rather, the need to find the proper balance between the valuable faculty that draws illuminating parallels between the material and spiritual realms of existence, and the lamentable attempt by a writer to impress his audience with his verbal ingenuity by going to linguistic extremes. In Donne's *A Litanie*, the speaker invokes "Those heavenly Poets," God's "Eagle-sighted Prophets," who, by harmonizing the Old and New Testaments, "did unite, but not confound" those entities; the speaker in *A Litanie* beseeches the Prophets to "pray for mee, / That I by them excuse not my excesse / In seeking secrets, or Pöetiquenesse" (*Lit*, 64-72). To unite without confounding or blurring disparate elements seems similarly to be the aim of Donne's poetic conceits, and it is the "confounding" merely for rhetorical flourish ("Pöetiquenesse") without revealing the hidden unity of the various elements that makes for a brittle, mannered poetic operation.[3] Similarly, in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" the speaker dismisses any attempt to "Seeke new expressions" for God by which the poet may advertise his own verbal ingenuity. Such an effort is futile in that, like the mathematician's or philosopher's attempt to square the circle, such linguistic operations only succeed in reducing to "strait corners" what is "cornerlesse and infinite." Readers like Samuel Johnson who have complained about the excesses of Donne's conceits fail to recognize the extent to which Donne himself, understanding the danger of reaching for the *ne plus ultra* of wit, sought to hold in check that highly mannered and potentially wayward poetic faculty.

The second dilemma raised in the opening lines of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" concerns the challenge of finding words for

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[2] Quotation of Donne's verse is from John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. C. A. Patrides, Everyman's Library Edition (1985; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

[3] Was Donne thinking of Marino's and Guarini's conceits? On Donne's love-hate relationship with Petrarchan and French baroque imagery, see Donald L. Guss, *John Donne, Petrarchist: Italianate Conceits and Love Theory in* The Songs and Sonets (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966).

the inexpressible—in this case, for God Himself. The speakers of so many of the lyrics collected in the *Songs and Sonets* betray a similar anxiety concerning the beloved woman. For example, "All measure, and all language, I should passe, / Should I tell what a miracle she was," concludes the lover/speaker of "The Relique" (32-33). One might even say that the dynamic of the Donnean conceit is suggested by the challenge faced by the speaker of "Aire and Angels": "For, nor in nothing, nor in things / Extreme, and scattring bright, can love inhere" (21-22). That is, how can one find the words with which to draw a successful analogy for something as essential yet incorporeal as love without going to either one extreme or the other? The poet, like the speaker-lover, must employ a comparison with an item in the material sphere in order to render the pulsating wonder of something in the immaterial sphere. When love is, paradoxically, as palpable as it is inexpressible ("If ever any beauty I did see, / Which I desir'd, and got, t'was but a dreame of thee"; "The good-morrow," 6-7), it is little wonder that Donne's speakers—as in the case of "The Extasie" (22-29)—must rely upon an anonymous witness to substantiate the miracle that the speaker struggles to find words to express.

This determination to meet the challenge of expressing the ineffable is driven, in large part, by Donne's biblically-inspired concern with the nature of word and name. "Names are to instruct us, and express natures and essences," Donne notes in *Essayes in Divinity*,[4] but how is one to express the essence of the incorporeal and unknowable? In the Book of Genesis, Adam shares in the divine act of creation by naming the animals (Gen. 2: 19), whose nature he can identify. But it is that same linguistically driven power over subordinate creatures that makes it impossible for the speaker of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" to attempt to name the Creator Himself, "Eternall God," who, conversely, expresses His power over His creatures by naming them. ("I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine," Yahweh says to Isaiah.[5])

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[4] Donne, *Essayes in Divinity*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 27.

[5] Isaiah 43: 1. Quotations from the Bible are from *The Holy Bible*, Authorized (King James) Version (Nashville: Gideons International, no date). Additionally, see Yahweh's telling Moses "I know thee by name" (Exod. 33: 12, 17). On the power of calling the Lord "by name," see Jeremiah 14: 7-9.

Similarly, in *The First Anniversarie* Donne faults the world for dying because it has forgotten the name of Elizabeth Drury:

> For as a child kept from the Font, until
> A Prince, expected long, come to fulfill
> The Ceremonies, thou unnam'd hadst laid,
> Had not her coming, thee her Palace made:
> Her name defin'd thee, gave thee forme and frame,
> And thou forgetst to celebrate thy name.[6]

The Prince who functions as godfather and, quite possibly, bestows his own name on the infant, typologically suggests Christ, whose Incarnation made flesh the divine Word and redeemed humankind. To forget the name of Elizabeth Drury is to forget the very mystery of salvation.

Conversely, addressing the Countess of Bedford "On New-yeares day," Donne expresses his inability to "name, know, or expresse a thing so high" as the Countess, which—when he himself is so inconsiderable as to measure "not an inch"—would be attempting to "measure infinity" (29-30). Like the speaker of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," the speaker of the verse epistle must content himself with praising the Countess, not naming her; his praise (that is, his poem) functions as a prayer (35). Praying to, by way of praising, the source of meaning in a speaker's life—whether Almighty God, a beloved woman, or a powerful member of the aristocracy dispensing social favor or grace—is as close as Donne ever comes to resolving this conundrum in his poetry.

Both conundra raised in the opening five lines of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," thus, deal with the nature of language. That both of these issues apply more specifically to poetic language is suggested by the tradition in which, in the next movement of the poem, the speaker places himself. "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" is unique among Donne's poems in that it situates the speaker-poet in a

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[6] *First Anniversarie* 33-38. On Donne's reliance upon the biblical concepts of name and word, see Raymond-Jean Frontain, "'The Name of Shee': The Biblical Logocentrism of Donne's *Anniversaries*," *PMPA: Publications of the Missouri Philological Association* 22 (1997): 28-39.

tradition that extends back to the originary source of language, the Holy Spirit who breathes into and speaks through Its chosen vessel (*prophetes*, one who speaks for another). In "Upon the translation," Donne boldly places himself in a tradition of poet-prophets whose mission is to reform—ecclesiastically and spiritually, but, even more impressively, materially—the sin-shattered universe and restore it to its prelapsarian integrity.[7]

In Donne's history of religious poetry, the Holy Spirit "fell" (8) upon David, the reputed author of the Book of Psalms, and later inspired Sidney and Countess to translate those same Psalms into English, thereby advancing the Reformation of the English church. The membership or composition of that church is implied by the sudden use of the first person plural pronoun in line 20, where the speaker (apparently a poet-divine) and an unspecified number of others (presumably his readers-congregants) emerge as the last link in a chain of inspiration that unfolds across the millennia. (The Sidneys "tell us *why*, and teach us *how* to sing," 22.) By joining with the speaker-poet-divine in singing the Sidneys' translation of the Psalms, the reader-congregant prepares him/herself to sing "th'Extemporall song" (51) that, after the souls of the righteous are assembled in Heaven at the end of time, they will join with the angelic choir to sing for all eternity.[8]

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[7] "Upon the translation" is remarkable for modeling the "circle of praise" that informs Donne's *Anniversaries* and suggests how Donne hopes that his occasional religious verse might influence his readers; see Raymond-Jean Frontain, "Translating Heavenwards: 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes' and John Donne's Poetics of Praise," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 22 (1996): 103-25. On Donne's contribution in the poem to Christian ideas of harmony, see Frances M. Malpezzi, "Christian Poetics in Donne's 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes,'" *Renascence* 32 (Summer 1980): 221-28, and Jill Baumgaertner, "'Harmony' in Donne's 'La Corona' and 'Upon the Translation of the Psalmes,'" *John Donne Journal* 3 (1984): 141-56.

[8] The levels of song in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" are of piece with the stages of literary tradition mapped by the poem. And it should be noted that Donne's willingness in this poem to place himself in a specific literary tradition is all the more extraordinary a gesture for being so unique in his canon, placing him at odds most notably with that "pert" Italian, Dante. In the course of the *Divine Comedy* the pilgrim Dante engages directly with the spirits of Virgil, Homer, Ovid, Lucan, Statius, and Pierre della Vigne, among others, thereby dramatizing the ways in which Dante the Poet aligns himself with, and

"Upon the translation of the Psalmes" is, thus, the repository of several of Donne's most important ideas about poetry. First, the poem is the portrait of a world enlivened primarily by poetry or song. Donne posits the existence of three interrelated choirs. The angelic choir breaks into song when it witnesses that the members of the human choir have been united in praise of the Creator by David and have been given the means to sing the Psalms in English by the Sidneys. Rather than the cacophony of voices that shattered the prelapsarian harmony of the cosmos—originated by Adam and Eve's first sin and dramatized in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11: 1-9)—the cosmos returns to its original harmony when the voices of the blessed join those of the angelic choir in eternal praise of the Creator, thereby forming the third

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then revises or challenges, elements of his predecessors' poetics. (For Dante's building his epic on these intertextual encounters, see Teodolinda Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the* Comedy [Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1984].) Donne's dialogues with his antecedents, conversely, are never dramatized—as when Donne silently absorbs and transforms Ovid in the *Elegies*, Virgil in *Metempsychosis*, Petrarch in the Holy Sonnets, Dante in the *Second Anniversary*, Marlowe and Raleigh in "The Bait," or Augustine in the sermons, leaving his reader to recognize and appreciate his seemingly offhanded maneuvers as he adapts and extends what he has inherited, pushing poetry toward greater possibility. Although he may expect his reader to recognize and applaud his sprezzatura, he absorbs his predecessors' poetic ethos so deeply into his own poetic that he does not need to call attention to what he is doing. In "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," however, Donne places himself squarely as the current inheritor of a tradition that begins with the Holy Spirit; descends through David, Moses and Miriam, and John the Baptist; and is mediated by the Sidneys. In no other text does Donne so overtly—indeed, boldly—claim the mantle worn by his predecessor(s). On Donne's identifying himself in opposition to Dante, see his letter to Henry Wotton, reprinted in *Selected Prose*, chosen by Evelyn Simpson and edited by Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), page 110. And on David as the Renaissance model of the religious poet, and on the tradition understood to descend from him, see, among others, Lily B. Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), chapters 5-6; Heather Asals, "*Davids* Successors: Forms of Joy and Art," *Proceedings of the Patristic, Mediaeval and Renaissance Conference* 2(1977): 31-37; and Anne Lake Prescott, "Forms of Joy and Art: Donne, David, and the Power of Music," *John Donne Journal* 25(2006): 3-36.

and ultimate choir, those singing "th'Extemporall song." Cacophony—which began when Adam and Eve fell into sin and which has been intensified across the millennia as countless human voices cry out their presumptuous desires ("babble," or the debased language employed by humans since the destruction of the Tower of Babel)—ends with the sudden cessation of Time at the Second Coming as the blessed, singing harmoniously as a newly formed cosmic choir, are translated out of the temporal sphere into Eternity.[9]

The second major idea about poetry celebrated in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" is distilled in the phrase "Make all this All" (23), which for Donne proves to be the essential action of poetry. "Perfection is in unitie," the speaker of "Elegie: Loves Progress" (9) notes. However sardonically that speaker may intend this, the principle that he asserts consistently proves only too true for Donne elsewhere in his poetic canon. In the love poems, for example, the male speaker seeks perfection by uniting with the beloved woman, proposing that they "Be one, and one another, All" ("Lovers infinitenesse," 33).[10] Not only can love make "one little roome, an every where," but if the lovers "Love so alike, that none doe slacken, [then] none can die" ("The good-morrow," 11, 20-21). That is, the unity of the lovers allows them to escape the imperfection mirrored by sickness, death, and physical corruption. Donne finds a way to transcend the vicissitudes of living in a fractured, divided world by achieving exact reciprocity of affection; unity with the beloved allows both the speaker and the woman to transcend the humiliating rigors of imperfection.

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[9] In the opening stanza of "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," the speaker anticipates the moment when he will enter "that Holy roome, / Where, with thy Quire of Saints for evermore, / I will be made thy Musique" (1-5), much as in the *First Anniversarie* Elizabeth Drury joins the choir of the saints, thereby becoming "a part both of the Quire, and Song" (10).

[10] The paradox of All/Nothing that runs through the love poems is most evident in "A Nocturnall on S. Lucies day." In "A Valediction of weeping," the mapmaker's ability to paint the continents of "Europe, Afrique, and an Asia" on what had been a blank ball, and thereby "quickly make that, which was nothing, All" (10-13), suggests in reverse the power of the beloved woman's tears to dissolve the speaker's world.

Not surprisingly, in his poems of compliment Donne celebrates the extent to which certain members of the aristocracy exist in a state of perfection because alchemically they have achieved a perfectly proportionate unity of component parts. "[I]n one All unite," Donne says of Lady Bedford ("You that are she and you," 26), while the verse letter "You have refin'd mee" proves an extended meditation upon the perfect balance of every virtue in the Countess in so evident a manner that "all hearts [that is, observers] one truth professe" (64).

> If good and lovely were not one, of both
> You were the transcript, and originall,
> The Elements, the Parent, and the Growth,
> And every peece of you, is both their All.
> So'intire are all your deeds, and you, that you
> Must do the same thinge still; you cannot two. (55-60)[11]

Most famously, Elizabeth Drury, who was the magnetic force "to draw, and fasten sundred parts in one" (*First Anniversarie*, 221-22), was "all this All" (*Second Anniversary*, 376). If sin is humankind's ambition "Gods whole worke t'undoe" and reduce the All to Nothing (*First Anniversarie*, 155-57), then virtue is the means by which the shattered pieces of the prelapsarian harmonious whole can be reassembled or reunited and their original coherence restored.[12] Intending to juxtapose the perfection that lies in unity with the fragmentation that is the result of sin, Donne rhymes "all" with "fall" in the elegy for Prince Henry (49-

[11] "Since separation / Falls not on such things as are infinite, / Nor things which are but one, can disunite," Donne says in his epithalamion for the Lady Elizabeth and Count Palatine (47-49). Donne's praise of the perfection of "all in all" runs through his epicedes and obsequies. I cite just a few instances at random: "if all things be in all" (*Satyre* V, line 9); "yet all are in all" ("Sir, more then kisses," 32); "as all th'All must" ("To Mr. R. W.", 27); "always in all deeds all" ("A Letter to the Lady Carey, and Mrs. Essex Riche, From Amyens," 36).

[12] Analyzing the sermon preached on 18 April 1626 on John 14: 2 in which Donne anticipates how after death all souls will be united in harmony with God, Andrew Hadfield observes that "Donne's apocalyptic imagery imagines the end of everything in heaven as God binds all together" (*John Donne: In the Shadow of Religion* [London: Reaktion Books, 2021], p. 75). The poet's attempt to "Make all this All" is an imitation of the divine act of re-creation that will take place at the end of time.

50). In *La Corona*, Christ is the "All, which alwayes is All every where" ("Annunciation," 2).

Poetry, the speaker of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" asserts, represents humankind's ability to "Make all this All"—that is, to reveal the underlying coherence of divine creation that the Holy Spirit (which brooded or "moved" over the primordial waters and brought order out of chaos in Genesis 1: 2) first wrought and that humans have subsequently undermined. The religious paradox of two-in-one (as opposed to the sacrilege of dividing the primal one into two) dominates the poem. The brother and sister team of Moses and Miriam (46) is a manifestation of the double tongue of flame that betokens divine inspiration (8-9), as well as an anticipation of the later coupling of another brother and sister in Donne's own England, Sidney and the Countess, as joint creators (14-16). And, although some psalms "have other Authors," Christians traditionally refer to them as "*Davids* all" (47-48). What is more, Donne's poem is built upon a pattern of dual or bi-part actions: "sung / The highest matter in the noblest forme" (10-11); "both translated, and appl'd it too, / Both told us what, and taught us how to doe" (19-20); "They tell us *why*, and teach us *how* to sing" (21); and "In forms of joy and art does re-reveale / To us sweetly and sincerely too" (34-35). Most profoundly, the performance of the same act a second time ("re-reveale") is at the heart of the "re-formation" or Reform of the English church in Donne's day (40-41).

In a poem that emphasizes the mystery of two-in-one—that is, division healed by individuals discovering the shared purpose of praising their Creator as divergent voices sing together harmoniously—Donne undertakes one of the most audacious maneuvers of his poetic career by demonstrating in the final two lines of his poem exactly how the poet can unite without confounding. Anticipating the moment when all three choirs will be conjoined to sing "th'Extemporall song," Donne "tunes" his readers-congregation to ensure that "when hence we part / We may fall in with them [the Sidneys], and sing our part" (55-56). In a poem composed of twenty-eight rhyming couplets, the human poet Donne reenacts the paradox of two-in-one by employing an identical "rhyme" in the final couplet; like the prophets, he unites, but without confounding, in this instance by drawing upon two readily available yet radically different meanings of the word "part." In the first use (line 55), the word means to depart or take one's leave of, a meaning that is

appropriate in a poem that celebrates the death of the Countess, who has departed the earthly realm and, Elizabeth Drury-like (*First Anniversary*, 7-10), made her progress to heaven. But in the second use (line 56), the word means to perform an assigned role, as an actor plays a part in a play, or, in this case, as every individual contributes to the harmony, rather than dissonance, of the cosmos by joining in praise of the Sidneys and, thus, anticipates singing his/her part in the cosmic chorus praising God through eternity.[13] It is the wit of the poet to harmonize both meanings without confounding them.

If "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" opens with a rejection of human attempts to square the circle (and thereby impose imperfection on perfection), it closes with a demonstration of how poetry allows humans to close or complete the circle, thereby achieving the perfection that lies in unity.[14] For it is the second meaning of "part" that suggests how the poet completes the circle that "make[s] all this All." Even though "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" is initially addressed directly to "Eternall God," the poem is actually intended to

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[13] Exploring Donne's "affinity with a 'contented' conformity that endorsed the established church not simply as a compromise but as a well-reformed institution uniquely fitted to edify and promote true worship, and to avoid the errors of extremists on either side," Kate Narveson notes that "like other contented conformists, Donne values congregational worship because it makes possible a mutual strengthening of faith, and because its abundant multiplicity of means and witnesses is a key part of assurance"; "Piety and the Genre of Donne's *Devotions*," *John Donne Journal* 17 (1998): 107-36, quotations on pp. 109 and 113. Although Narveson is concerned primarily with the *Devotions*, her comments on "contented conformity" go far in explaining the importance of communal singing in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," where individual voices are celebrated for blending with and reinforcing one another.

[14] There is a confidence about the power of poetry in "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" and the great hymns that is lacking in Donne's earlier poetry where, for example, the speaker of "Satyre II" laments that "my words none draws / Within the vast reach of th'huge statue lawes" (111-12), and the speaker of "The triple Foole" is flummoxed, not to find relief for "loving, and for saying so / In whining Poetry" (2-3), but to have his pain intensified—the antithesis, in fact, of the "circle of praise" demonstrated in the *Anniversaries*. In "Upon the translation of the Psalmes," written on the eve of his elevation to the deanery of St. Paul's, Donne seems finally able to articulate confidently the role of poetry within the divine plan.

make Donne's implicit interlocutor aware of his/her responsibility for contributing to the tuning of the world—that is, playing one's part in the process that restores the sin-shattered world to its primal state. The poem is an oral performance designed to entice readers to fall in with Donne and sing "*our* part" (emphasis added). Every individual has a part to sing in the extemporal song if prelapsarian harmony is to be restored, and Donne the speaker-poet-divine volunteers to lead his reader-congregation forward to join in the great Venite.[15]

The final image of the poem is of the readers-congregation falling into line behind the speaker-poet-divine as he, Moses-like, leads them to the Promised Land of re-formed harmony, "translating" the poetic remains of the Sidneys.[16] *Translation* is "the hagiographic term for the removal and relocation of the hallowed remains of a saint."[17] By leading

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[15] The essential function of many of Donne's poem is to elicit a response from the interlocutor. This is why I have been frustrated by readers like Arthur Marotti (*John Donne, Coterie Poet* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986]), who sees the poem as serving the entirely venal purpose of winning the support of the Countess of Pembroke's son, the influential third Earl of Pembroke, for Donne's elevation as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, a promotion that did indeed take effect just weeks after the Countess's death and, presumably, Donne's circulation of his poem. Every element of the poem supports, not Donne's advancement in the Church, but the disparagement of human pride that attempts to square the circle and, rather, the advancement of the humility required to restore the world's prelapsarian harmony in which all the choirs sing the same song praising the Creator rather than individual voices promoting themselves and fostering cacophony.

[16] Contemplating the inevitability of death in the *Devotions*, Donne employs the metaphors of all-as-one and of death-as-translation when he asserts that "All *mankind* is of one *Author*, and is one *volume*; when one Man dies, one *Chapter* is not *torne* out of the *booke*, but *translated* into a better *language*; and every *Chapter* must be so *translated*"; *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (1975; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), page 86. I am grateful to Dayton Haskin for first calling my attention to this passage; see his "Is There a Future for Donne's 'Litany'?", *John Donne Journal* 21 (2002): 51-88, especially pages 76-77.

[17] Guy P. Raffa, *Dante's Bones: How a Poet Invented Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 16. For analogous literary use of this meaning of *translation*, compare Dante, *Paradiso* 14.83 (Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Everyman's Library/Knopf, 1995), and

his congregants-readers in a song praising the Sidneys, Donne in effect "canonizes" the Sidneys, building in his poem a "pretty roome" to house those remains ("The Canonization," 32). What is more, he extends the circle of praise, further tuning the world, bringing it closer to its prelapsarian harmony, and anticipating how the blessed will sing "th'Extemporall song" in heaven.[18] The speaker-poet-divine helps to bring the various choirs into harmony and "make all this All." He teaches the choral part that Protestants in England ("us Islanders," 21) must sing on earth.

A poem that began by disparaging human efforts to square the circle concludes by Donne's poetic effort to complete the circle. Humankind fell from prelapsarian harmony into the dissonance of sin but might return to cosmic harmony if all join in singing "th'Extemporall song." "Upon the translation of the Psalmes" anticipates just such a choir of creatures singing praise of their Creator through eternity. For praise, the speaker has noted, is all that one can do when one is unable to "name" or put into language what is inexpressible. Like the speaker of "A Valediction forbidding mourning," the speaker of "Upon the translation of the Psalmes"—who began his poem by dismissing human efforts to square the circle—can say that God's "firmness makes my circle just / And makes me end, where I begunne."[19]

The Peony Pavilion, Malagar

Spenser, *Faerie Queene* 5.7.29 (*The Faerie Queene*, revised second ed., ed. A. C. Hamilton et al [Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007], 558).

[18] An additional meaning of "translation" pertains directly to how travelers might be changed while abroad as they adapt to local customs and values. Donne's friend Sir Thomas Roe went to seemingly absurd lengths to maintain his Englishness and strenuously resisted being "translated" as he traveled through Mughal India; see Nandini Das, *Courting India: Seventeenth-Century England, Mughal India, and the Origins of Empire* (New York: Pegasus, 2023), page 157. In a similar vein, the Sidneys' "progress" to Heaven likewise sees them "translated," much as the poet/speaker hopes to "translate" his readers/congregation as he leads them forward singing praise of the Sidneys.

[19] "The Meditation upon Gods works is infinite," Donne observes in *Essayes in Divinity*, "and whatsoever is so, is Circular, and returns into it selfe, and is every where beginning and ending, and yet no where either" (45).