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Musicum Carmen: Temporal Singers and the Extemporal Song

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In the first sonnet of *La Corona* Donne's poet-speaker implores his divine audience to reward his muse's "whighte Sinceritye" not with a conventional but ephemeral crown of "frayle Bayes" but rather with "A Crowne of Glory which doth flowre alwayes."[1] Responding to these lines, F. W. Brownlow comments, "Surely, though, Donne does not expect us to think that salvation might hang upon a set of poems?"[2] Trivializing the salvific power of verse and smudging the white sincerity of Donne's muse, Brownlow questions whether a poet ever so careful about language *really* meant what he wrote. The failure to recognize that many in the early modern period might have considered the poet's work a sacred vocation is startling, as is the failure to recognize that any work done in the right way is sacred. Consider for a moment the Parson's brother, that true toiler, a plowman who scattered dung and would thresh and dig for Christ's own sake, often charging his poorer neighbor no money. While this mucky work might be considered lowly, Chaucer clearly understood its spiritual value. He presents the plowman as an exemplar of perfect charity, one who

[1] *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne, Volume 7, Part 2: The Divine Poems*, gen. ed Jeffrey S. Johnson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), p. 5. All quotations from Donne's *Divine Poems* will be from this edition and hereafter cited in the text by line number.

[2] F. W. Brownlow, "The Holy Sonnets," in *Donne and the Resources of Kind*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Damien Grace (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 90.

understands the importance of loving God and neighbor. Yet a literary critic can be dismissive of the spiritual value of the poetic vocation, dismissive of the power of "a set of poems." Ultimately understanding Donne's "Vpon the Translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister" can help us resolve the "puzzlements"[3] Brownlow finds in Donne's request for a heavenly crown as the poem echoes numerous statements by various writers in the early modern period about the power of poetry to save or damn reader and author; as it underscores Donne's recognition of the analogous relationship between the priestly and poetic vocations, seen most clearly through a comparison of the language of Donne's sermon on Ezekiel 33.32 and "Vpon the Translation"; and most significantly as it conceptually and dramatically presents his aesthetic of divine poetry and its spiritual ramifications in the poem.

"Vpon the Translation" defines the work of the Christian poet as Donne praises this translation of the paradigm of divine poetry, the Psalms of David. Donne, after all, believed the Psalms "were made, not onely to vent *Davids* present holy passion, but to serve the Church of God, to the worlds end."[4] In praising this translation by Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, Donne expounds on the source of Christian poetry, makes clear the responsibilities of the poet, and suggests the role of poetry in the spiritual edification of the Body of Christ, the Church. In essence, "Vpon the Translation" is the key to understanding Donne's view of the salvific nature of poetry. A poem of praise and thanksgiving, it gratefully acknowledges God's gift of a poetic translation of the Psalms, bestowed through God's Instruments, Sir Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert, poets and translators. In "John Donne's Apology for Poetry" Lynette McGrath has cogently argued that Donne's sermons contain "a fund of material illustrating his views on poetry," and she convincingly extracts material from his prose "to outline and make coherent the kind of apology for poetry Donne himself

[3] Brownlow, p. 90.

[4] *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-1962), 2.1.55. All quotations from the sermons are from this edition and will hereafter be cited in the text by volume, sermon number, and page number.

might have made" (italics mine).[5] Yet Donne did compose just such an apology, one that should not be overlooked, and we can find in "Vpon the Translation" a rationale for divine poetry that is very much in sync with other such statements in the period.

Early modern readers probably would not have felt Brownlow's compulsion to question Donne's statement. They would have encountered such views before as well as literary examples of the power of poetry to damn or save. We need only remind ourselves of those wind-blown lovers Paolo and Francesca and how they secured their place in their infernal tempest by their reading. Certainly prefaces to religious poetry in the seventeenth-century point to the poet's ability to damn or save readers. In "The Author's Preface" to *Silex Scintillans* Vaughan argues that "he that writes *idle books*, makes for himself another *body*, in which he always *lives*, and *sins* (after *death*) as *fast* and as *foul*, as he did in his *life*." Such a writer, he asserts, continues to corrupt others long after his death.[6] The writer in the "Preface to the Reader" in Crashaw's *Steps to the Temple* maintains that both Augustine and Herbert believe that "every foot in a high-borne verse, might helpe to measure the soule into that better world." The same preface complains there are poets "whose onely business in verse, is to rime a poore six-penny soule, a Suburb sinner into hell."[7] Clearly from this perspective a poet's vocation can effect the salvation or damnation of souls.

Pervasive in the period was a poetic aesthetic for "high-borne verse," poetry inspired by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps this aesthetic was most clearly articulated by the French Huegenot poet and hexameralist, Guillaume Salluste Sieur Du Bartas. A minor work, *L'Uranie*, (1574) tells us much about attitudes toward divine poetry. His influence on British writers has been documented by Sidney Lee, Lily Bess Campbell, Anne Lake Prescott, and Susan Snyder.[8] His aesthetic was

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[5] Lynette McGrath, "John Donne's Apology for Poetry," *SEL* 20.1 (Winter 1980): 74-75.

[6] *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p 140.

[7] *The Poems English, Latin and Greek of Richard Crashaw*, ed. L.C. Martin (1927; corrected rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 75.

[8] Sidney Lee, *The French Renaissance in England* (1910; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 335-355; Lily Bess Campell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), pp. 74-92;

channeled through the conduit of his many translators, primarily Josuah Sylvester but others as well (though not all translations survived), including King James I when he was on the Scottish throne and Sir Philip Sidney.

L'Uranie is relevant here as it dramatizes the conversion experience and education of its poet-protagonist through the intercession of Urania, transformed from the muse of astronomy to the muse of Christian poetry. She exhorts the poet to accept her as his guide. Compared to a pilgrim who has lost his way, the poet-protagonist had prostituted his muse by flattering the unworthy and singing the praises of wanton love. Urania abjures this poetic, warning him he will damn himself and spiritually harm his readers since poetry imprints the good or evil of the poet on his audience. Nine-voiced and wearing a seven-fold crown, Urania acknowledges God to be the source of all poetry, "the Author of sweet *Composition*."[9] The divinely inspired poet, a member of the Church Militant, is God's soldier in the spiritual battle between good and evil. Railing against those who misuse their poetry Urania asserts, "I cannot brook to see Heav'ns King defied / By his owne souldiers, with his own Munition" (st. 20). Like a seal leaving an imprint on wax, the poet impresses "both good and euill motions" upon the soul of the reader (st. 40-41). Edified by Urania, the poet-protagonist learns his obligations to God, neighbor, and self. The poem presents the creed of the Christian poet and provides a compendium of contemporary beliefs about the role of Christian art and the responsibilities of the artist A conduit of the Holy Ghost, the poet must

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Anne Lake Prescott, "The Reception of Du Bartas in England," *Studies in the Renaissance* 15(1968): 144-173; Anne Lake Prescott, *French Poets and the English Renaissance: Studies in Fame and Transformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 167-239; Susan Snyder, "The *Divine Weeks* in English Literature: Reception and Influence," in Volume I of her edition of *The Divine Weeks and Works of Guillaume de Saluste, Sieur du Bartas, Tr. Josuah Sylvester.* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 72-95.

[9] *Bartas, His Devine Weekes and Works*, tr. Joshua Sylvester (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1965), stanza 20. All quotations from Sylvester's translation will be from this edition and hereafter cited in the text by stanza number.

help others achieve harmony with God and thus earn a heavenly crown that never fades.

Admiring "sweet Bartas" and appreciative of his "sugared lines," Anne Bradstreet asserted his fame would last "while stars do stand, / And whilst there's air, or fire, or sea, or land."[10] While her hyperbolic prediction did not bear fruit and the French poet is not much read these days, his influence, through the efforts of his many translators, notably Sylvester, was pervasive for a time and his works had a significant impact on early modern British religious verse. As a result, Donne's poetic audience would probably not agree with Brownlow's contention that Donne would not expect us to believe salvation could rest upon a set of poems. Certainly Donne in "Vpon the Translation" makes clear how poetry can bring both author and audience in tune with God so that they may eventually become part of the divine eternal harmony.

Important as well in terms of context is Sidney's *Defense*. McGrath correctly looks at the commonality between Sidney's and Donne's ideas about poetry. Both, she notes, make a distinction "between the value of poetry put to good use and the injurious effects of poetry that is abused by bad men," a distinction the muse Urania also made.[11] McGrath argues that "Donne certainly intended to apply in his poetry what Sidney says poetry should do–-by 'representing, counterfeiting or figuring forth' an action in order to teach, delight, and move men to take that goodness in hand which otherwise they would not fully perceive."[12] Yet, frustratingly, she looks *only* at Donne's sermons for his apology for poetry and not to a poem directed to Sidney and his sister which does exactly that. Certainly Donne's "Vpon the Translation" conceptually and dramatically illustrates the way poetry should teach, delight, and move the will to virtuous action.

While McGrath looks at numerous passages in Donne's sermons that articulate his concepts about poetry, we need very specifically to look at the language and imagery of Donne's 1618 Lenten sermon on Ezekiel 33.32 since it strongly resembles that of "Vpon the Translation." He is

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[10] *The Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed., Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 10, 15, 205, 207.

[11] McGrath, p. 73.

[12] McGrath, p. 76.

concerned with the ministerial vocation in the former and the poetic vocation in the latter.

One of the major imagistic patterns in both sermon and poem is the tuning metaphor. Sidney and his sister have harmoniously been made one by the Spirit and in their unity function as God's instrument (12-16). Christ, who reconciled God and fallen humanity, reintroduced harmony into a world jarred by the dissonant effects of original sin, tuning both macrocosmic and microcosmic spheres (24-53). In his sermon Donne notes that the voice of the minister is to be a "love-song," which iterates the Word and, thus, re-tunes the sinner:

> God made this whole world in such an uniformity, such a correspondency, such a concinnity of parts, as that it was an Instrument, perfectly in tune: we may say, the trebles, the highest strings were disordered first; the best understandings, Angels and Men, put this Instrument out of tune. God rectified all again, by putting in a new string, *semen mulieris*, the seed of the woman, the *Messias*: And onely by sounding that string in your ears, become we *musicum carmen*, true musick, true harmony, true peace to you (2.7.170).

The passage beautifully and succinctly encompasses all time as Donne encapsules creation, the angelic rebellion, humanity's paradise lost and that paradise regained through Christ as he defines the minister's role in bringing his congregants back into harmony with the divine, a postlapsarian experience of prelapsarian harmony made possible through the sacrifice of God's dual-natured son. Looking at the language of sermon and poem, we are reminded Donne has two Christian vocations, minister and poet, both using words in the service of the Word. Both vocations, he believes, have the potential to bring God's postlapsarian creatures into harmony with the divine, transforming the sour note of sin to the sweet music of *caritas*. The power that enables both to do so is the power of the Holy Spirit. Donne acknowledges in his sermon that "the Holy Ghost hath spoken in those Instruments, whom he chose for the penning of the Scriptures, and so he would in those whom he sends for the preaching thereof" (2.7.171). In the poem, Donne's speaker praises "heauens high holy muse" (31) who whispers the Word to David and to David's successors. For Donne, the source of preaching and poetry is the same. So are the responsibilities of both–

the edification of the body of Christ in love. Through sermon and poem, the preacher and poet tune the members of the body of Christ in love so that they can at last come to sing the "extemporall song" (51) that transcends the limits of time and sounds God's praise eternally.

Both preacher and poet should make use of the language of Scripture. Preachers should "content our selves with that language, and that phrase of speech, which the Holy Ghost hath expressed himself in, in the Scriptures" rather than to "delight in the new and bold termes of Hereticks" and further their doctrine (2.7. 171-2). The poem also justifies the use of the conventional language and conventional situations of Scripture. Those who "dare /Seeke new expressions, doe the circle square" (1-2) and thrust a "cornerlesse and infinite" God into "strayt Corners of poore witt" (3-4).

Just as the preacher must be as a love song both *in re*, in matter, and *in modo*, in manner, and must instill "holy delight" with a "pleasant voice" (2.7. 166-67), so the poet must treat "The highest matter in the noblest forme" (11). Both preacher and poet are compared to John the Baptist, who was also filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1.15) and whose voice was God's chosen instrument. In his sermon Donne compares the voice of the minister to the voice of John the Baptist. As John, the minister is "*Vox*, voyce; not A voyce, but The voyce, the voyce of that word, and no other; and so, he is a pleasing voyce, because he pleases him that sent him, in a faithful executing of his Commission, and speaking according to his dictate; and pleasing to them to whom he is sent, by bringing the Gospel of Peace and Reparation to all wounded, and scattered, and contrite Spirits" (2.7.172). In his poem, Sidney and his sister are "Two that make one John Baptists holy voyce" (17). Their voice cries out "sweetly" (35) in the wasteland of previous hoarse and harsh English translations. Like David's Psalms, these translations are "in formes of Ioye and art" (34). Donne, in a sermon on Psalm 38.2, comments on both the joyful and artistic qualities of the psalms as he notes that God

> gives us our instruction in cheerfull forms, not in a sowre, and sullen, and angry, an unacceptable way, but cheerfully, in *Psalms*, which is also a limited, and a restrained form; Not in an *Oration*, not in *Prose*, but in *Psalms;* which is such a form as is both curious, and requires diligence in the making, and

> then when it is made, can have nothing, no syllable taken from it, nor added to it" (2.1. 49-50).

So, too, the preacher's "love song." He must become "*Carmen musicum*, a musical and harmonious charmer, to settle and compose the soul again in a reposed confidence, and in a delight in "God" (2.7. 166-67). Sermons must not be preached "rudely, barbarously, extemporally; but with such meditation and preparation as appertains to so great an imployment, from such a King as God, to such a State as is his Church" (2.7.167). He must preach with "holy delight" for only then will his audience receive "the more profit." The preacher's concern should be to move them, and affect them for when the preacher's "words become works, this is a song to an instrument" (2.7.167). Both preacher and poet are concerned with teaching, delighting, and moving the will to virtuous action.

We can, as McGrath has illustrated, gather Donne's prose statements to understand his concept of poetry, but we absolutely must look at "Vpon the Translation" as his apology for divine poetry. A poem about song, both temporal and extemporal, it makes clear the inspiration, the purpose, the qualities, and the rewards of temporal song It presents a poeticized *Defence of Poesy.* Its subject is the source, the method, and the end of Christian poetry. And like Sidney's apology, it emphasizes the need for poetry to teach and delight. Like Herbert, Donne seems to recognize that "verse may finde him, who a sermon flies."[13] So he emphasizes not only the way in which the translation teaches us what and how to sing but the way in which delight plays a role in teaching.

But the poem moves beyond theorizing and is more helpful and more delightful as a result. Donne in comparing David the poet and Solomon the preacher observes, "Poet, and Preacher, proceed in these wayes in both, Rule, and Example, the body and soule of Instruction" (9.12.274). McGrath argues that Donne "agrees with Sidney that in a poem the poet creates a fictional example through which the poem's instructive purpose is enacted."[14] Such is exactly the case with "Vpon the Translation," a concrete and dramatic presentation of Christian aesthetics. In its fictional framework, the poem becomes the fulfillment

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[13] *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (O xford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 6.
[14] McGrath, p. 88.

of a cycle, evidence that one reader of the Sidneian Psalms has been taught, delighted, and moved to virtuous action–the offering of the sacrifice of prayer and praise just as Sidney and his sister were taught, delighted, and moved to the virtuous action of translating David's Psalms. Donne's poem is an act of the will, loving God because it has been affected by Christian poetry. Our speaker experiences the tuning process through his reading and then goes on to become God's instrument. As a result, he raises his voice in poetic praise of God and is inspired to present that praise in yet another work of art which will tune others. The poem is a dramatic manifestation of the way in which "high borne verse," poetry inspired by the Holy Spirit, leads to spiritual delight, the way in which the forms of temporal song move him and his readers to virtuous action so that one day they will receive the reward of eternal joy.

Donne, as reader, has learned from the translation of the Psalms by Sidney and the Countess, but he has also learned from their deaths, their translation to a heavenly realm, the reward of their literary efforts. Paraphrasing another Donnean work, the deaths of Sidney and his sister do not mean they were chapters torn out of a book. He reminds us in his *Devotions* that God is the great author and "All *mankinde* 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."[15] So Philip Sidney and Mary Sidney Herbert have been "translated" into a Pentecostal tongue understood by all singers in the realm of the Church Triumphant. And here Donne also comes to terms with his own mortality, "when hence *wee* part" (italics mine) and his own possible translation, "Wee may fall in with them, and sing our part" (55-56). If death awaits him, so does his translation to a better language, so does that eternal crown, the endless song. In a sermon on The Book of Judges 5.20, Donne notes that this world began with a song and so will the next, if we count the beginning of the next from the coming of Christ, which "was expressed on Earth, in divers Songs," Mary's Magnificat, Zachary's Benedictus, and Simeon's Nunc dimittis. Donne asserts, "This world began so, and the other; and when both shall joyne, and

[15] *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 86.

make up one world without end, it shall continue so in heaven, in that Song of the *Lamb*" (4.7.180). Just as the songs of Mary, Zachary, Simeon, and David's many successors are the beginning of the Song of the Lamb, just as the songs of Scripture "Tune us," and "give us a Harmonie and Concord of affections" (180) so Donne suggests "Vpon the Translation," "La Corona," and other divine poetry can lead to the Song of the Lamb for author and reader. Such poetry is deemed both a gift from God and a way to serve God. The poet's work, inspired by the divine ("if thy holy Spirritt my Muse did rayse") should lead its audience to love of the immutable. For writers like Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, Vaughan, and Bradstreet, who believed a supernatural force lifted them beyond the limits of mortal self, the genesis of a poem subsumes divine as well as human experience. Poets following in the footsteps of the poet-protagonist of *Urania* believe God is the ultimate author and critic of their verse, and they are his instruments in leading members of the Church Militant to membership in the Church Triumphant. At the end of the Urania poem the muse in her seven-fold crown (a number Donne refers to as "the holy Ghosts Cyphar of infinite" (7.16.411) suggests the poet be concerned not about the Laurel Crown but rather "his high praise, who makes the Heau'ns go round, / The Mountains tremble, and darke Hell to quake" (st. 55).Thus, the ultimate reception of poetic works transcends the sublunary as God judges the poet's lines and life. Like David's psalms or their translations, verse that sings the highest matter in the noblest form tunes the audience and brings them into harmony with the divine. The fame these authors desire is not earthly but rather that of which Phoebus speaks in Milton's *Lycidas*, the one pronounced by the eternal critic and judge.

Critics like David Novarr and Arthur Marotti see Donne's motivation in composing the poem as self-advancement as he tries to secure the deanship of St. Paul's.[16] Gary Stringer, responding specifically to Novarr, vehemently disagrees with this position, suggesting such an argument accuses Donne of "blasphemy, of invoking the name of the

[16] David Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 157. Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), pp. 276, 284-85.

'Eternal God' in a cynical careerist ploy."[17] Raymond-Jean Frontain has convincingly argued that "the poem functions beyond the limited and venal fashion that Novarr and Marotti describe."[18] Indeed, what the poem actually suggests is that Donne's concern was not temporal self-advancement but spiritual. Joan Faust has described Donne's *Devotions* as a spiral stairway to heaven.[19] For Donne both psalming and preaching can be stairways to the eternal for singer/preacher and for readers and listeners. Just as David's psalms were love songs to tune others, just as the Sidneys' translation was such a love song to bring others into harmony with God, so Donne's *musicum carmen*—the love songs of his divine poems and his sermons—are meant to tune his audience. For Donne temporal singers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, use their poetry or prose to sound God's harmony to the disharmonious soul. Creating fit music on this earthly pilgrimage, they strive to lead others to the extemporal song, the Song of the Lamb, "Learnt the first hower that wee see the king" (52).

Frontain has argued one of Donne's concerns in the poem is "the ongoing reformation of the English church," having lost an influential leader with the death of the Countess" and that we see in the poem Donne's "offer to share both as poet and preacher in the continuing reform."[20] In this sense poem and sermon go beyond transforming the individual but have an impact on Church and State. As David,"*the sweet Psalmist of Israel*" had "employed his faculties for the conveying of the God of Israel, into the Israel of God" (9.11.252) and as Sidney and the Countess "shewe vs Islanders our Ioy, our king" (21) so Donne would employ his faculties in his role as poet and priest to transform Britain, the new Israel, into the nation of God and further the cause of the Protestant Reformation.[21]

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[17] Gary A. Stringer, "Donne's Dedication of the Sidney Psalter," *JDJ* 27 (2008), p. 203.

[18] Raymond-Jean Frontain, "'Translating Heavenwards': "Upon the Translation of the Psalmes' and John Done's Poetics of Praise." *EIRC* 22(1996), p. 104.

[19] Joan Faust, "Donne's (Spiral) Stairway to Heaven." *JDJ* 36(2017): 153-172.

[20] Frontain, p. 105.

[21] A strong Protestant aesthetic was also at the heart of poet-translator Josuah Sylvester's work. His choice of works to translate makes clear his concerns for

If we understand Donne's defense of divine poetry as presented in the poem and understand its context, then when a literary critic asserts Donne surely could not have meant salvation hinges upon a set of poems, we would respond that Donne and others in the period surely could mean exactly that.[22]

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a reformed church as do his original poems, including his anti-tobacco polemic, *Tobacco Battered*. Cf. Frances M. Malpezzi, "Sylvester Militant: Battling Tobacco for God and Country," *Allegorica* 24(2003): 70-79.

[22] Originally scheduled for the 2022 John Donne Conference, the panel on "Vpon the Translation" was planned to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Mary Sidney Herbert's death. When the 2022 conference became one of Covid's many victims, the panel was carried over to 2023, and my history with the poem was able to come full circle. Indeed, my end truly is in my beginning. Long ago, before Mary Sidney Herbert entered the popular imagination through Deborah Harkness' trilogy *A Discovery of Witches* (2011-2014) or its ensuing tv series (2018-2022) or Naomi Miller's novel, *Imperfect Alchemist* (2020)*,* even before the John Donne Society came into existence, I was at the University of Nebraska in the early 70s working on a dissertation on the "tuning" poets, those who saw poetry as a way to return postlapsarian souls to harmony with God. I included a chapter on Donne's "Vpon the Translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister." I was surprised at the time to find how little had been written about the poem since it is such an important statement by Donne about divine poetry. A number of years later I met Raymond-Jean Frontain at Gulfport and was delighted to learn he shared my belief about the poem's significance. When he eventually settled in Conway, AR, we became and remain the 2-member Arkansas contingent of the John Donne Society, and we remain convinced of the importance of the poem. The poem has received more attention in recent years. Most notably the Colloquium on the poem at the 2007 Donne Conference, the subsequent publication of that excellent material in volume 27 of the *John Donne Journal*, Robert Reeder's insightful response to the 2023 panel, and the material Frontain has presented and published over the years have led us to a better understanding of the poem and Donnean poetics. I'm humbled and gratified to have been included in the 2023 panel and this subsequent publication.