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John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*—The Sequel: *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

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I have used this leisure, to put the meditations had in my sicknesse, into some such order, as may minister some holy delight.
John Donne[1]

This essay's title indicates its modest proposal: that new light can be shed upon Donne's 1624 tour d'force in metaphysical prose when it is viewed as a kind of sequel to his miscellany of sacred sonnets. That proposal and its proofs will be seen to lend support to Mary Papazian's contention that "Instead of being simply a meditative exercise on sickness, the *Devotions* rather presents a dramatic account of the speaker's fall into affliction, one that shares much with Donne's impassioned religious poetry."[2] In a sense, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* becomes Dean Donne's valedictory to Sonneteer Donne.

Frank Warnke has said that "The central theme of the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* is human sinfulness, as symbolized by proneness to physical diseases, and the necessity of divine grace."[3] In my view, however, the *Devotions*' central theme is essentially the same as that of Donne's sonnets—the effects upon a susceptible Christian of what might be called "spiritual malaise." This psychological condition has been clinically described in the annals of modern as well as seventeenth-century medicine. Going largely untreated in Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, it is considerably ameliorated if not cured in his *Devotions*.

Both of Donne's works have long been suspected of having possibly served as self-therapy for their author; what can be more confidently argued is that both are ultimately directed towards the psychical and spiritual health of readers—for their "holy delight." Both the sonnets and the prose exercise are products of a psychical personality accustomed to transforming his life (and even his death) into art: "like his poet rival," Ben Jonson, John Donne

is a "creative ego[ist]."[4] Also like Jonson he is the consummate artist, expressing the chaos of the human condition by means of highly structured literary forms.

In order for me to be able to develop my hypothesis it is necessary that readers willingly suspend their disbelief and consider the *Holy Sonnets* and the *Devotions*, not as autobiography, but as autobiographical *fictions*, as dramatizations of the Donnean "I" that are of special critical interest because they may be as much fictive as factual—"'made' thing[s]," as Kate Gartner Frost puts it,[5] "self-fashionings." Obviously, a proposition of this kind is easier to accept in the case of the *Sonnets*, which, unlike such devotional poems as "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward," for the most part *discourage* an insistently autobiographical reading. Beginning with its title, *Devotions*, of course, seems to *invite* such a reading (even though the meditator never mentions his name). Subverting a simplistic autobiographical reading, however, is the reader's sense that real life scarcely lends itself to a tidy tripartite stucture of Meditation / Expostulation / Prayer. Even Donne's subtitle notes that the "seuerall steps in [his] Sicknes" have been "Digested" into their present form. Evelyn Simpson, then, is guilty only of understatement and underestimation when she "suspect[s] the writer of artifice.[6] Thus, if we are more interested in John Donne's craft and sullen art than in the intimate personal histories of the (spiritually) rich and famous, we need not be Waltonian readers, anxious to learn "the most secret thoughts that then possessed [the great man's] soul, paraphrased and made public.[7] The truth of *Devotions*, as Professor Frost has succinctly and insightfully noted, is that of poetry.[8]

Evelyn Simpson views the elaborate planning of the *Devotions* as a flaw, confounding the reader's desire to perceive the work "as the natural overflow of Donne's religious feelings."[9] Simpson misses the point that John Carey gets when Carey affirms that "[Louis] Martz's notion of the relationship between the formal meditation and the creation of the self as a character on the stage of an internal drama is epitomized in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* . . . ."[10] Mary Papazian goes so far as to call *Devotions* a "poetic drama."[11]

Elsewhere I have argued that the genius of the *Holy Sonnets* is that they are "sick poems in the service of preventive medicine;" that together they paint a composite portrait of a victim of what Robert Burton categorized as "religious melancholy" and modern psychiatry diagnoses as (to use a familiar but now outdated term) the "manic-depressive syndrome;" that this miscel-

lany of sacred poems in effect constitutes a "case study of a disease of the times and thus a negative lesson in holy living."[12] Here I propose that the *Devotions*, on the other hand, constitute a positive lesson in holy dying, a typically Donnean innovation upon the tradition of *ars moriendi*. (In this I find myself in disagreement with Professor Frost's learned study, which I had not seen when this essay first took shape several years ago.) In my view both the *Holy Sonnets* and *Devotions* exemplify the principle that the general thrust of seventeenth-century devotional literature is more public than private, that writers of devotional texts tend to perceive their works not so much as confessional as exemplary and hortatory, as vehicles for the diagnosis of spiritual malaise and as sources of remedies, as, in the end, acts of *caritas* more than of self-expression.[13]

For such acts to be efficacious, they must first rivet readers' attention by graphically portraying the symptoms of the disease. Thus the persona of the *Holy Sonnets* describes himself as being "vexed" by "contraries," as being "inconstant" and "humorous" and "distempered," oscillating between hope and fear: "So my devout fitts come and go away / Like a fantastique ague."[14] Such mood swings, Robert Burton notes, are symptoms of the psychological condition he knew as "religious melancholy."[15] (Burton's clinician-succesors now label it a "bipolar affective disorder.")[16] Of interest, then, is the opening exclamation of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*: "Variable, and therefore miserable condition of man." Here Donne's persona refers specifically to the frightening fact that one moment he is in good physical health and the next grievously ill, but another important motif of the *Devotions* is the variability of mankind's psychological state as well. In our minds, he complains, we "assist the sickness . . . antedate the sickness . . . make the sickness more irremediable by sad apprehensions." Thus we "wrap a hot fever in cold melancholy, lest the fever alone should not destroy fast enough . . . except we joined an artificial sickness of our own melancholy, to our natural, our unnatural fever" (7, 8-9).

In "Devotion I," then, Donne's meditator proves himself to be something of a seventeenth-century psychologist, diagnosing himself as a victim of melancholy. That he is able to do so is a positive sign: the persona of the *Holy Sonnets*, though he exhibits similar symptoms (if often in more aggravated forms) is largely unable to get a clear fix on his condition, making his prospects for recovery doubtful. Moreover, he lacks the professional help of the *Devotions*' persona, whose physicians (in Meditation XII) confirm their patient's self-diagnosis: "They tell me it is my melancholy" (78). The angst-

ridden speaker of the *Holy Sonnets* imagines his "black soul" being "summoned / By sickness, death's herald, and champion" ("Oh my black soul!"). The Donnean persona of the *Devotions*, though not without morbid apprehensions of his own, understands that it is his inherent melancholy that is the main source of the "horrid and . . . affrightful" images of death that bedevil him (97).

If it is assumed that the dynamics of the *Holy Sonnets* are much like those of other such collections in that their speaker is to be understood to represent a single rather than multiple persona, it becomes evident that, in whatever order one reads Donne's poems, one experiences a series of brief encounters with a sorely afflicted centered consciousness. For example, within the space of a single poem like "Oh, to vex me, contraries meet in one" or "If faithful souls be alike glorified" the Donnean persona swings between profound depression and what can look very much like sheer mania. Sometimes such mood swings take place between sonnets: for example, the nearly hysterical conclusion of "As due by many titles"—"Oh I shall soon despair"—being followed (in Grierson's ordering) by the relatively composed beginning of "Oh might those sighs and tears." Moreover, compounding the confused and confusing psychical space that is the *Sonnets*, a few poems (like the "wholesome meditation" "Wilt thou love God, as he thee") do exhibit some degree of spiritual equanimity.

In whatever order Donne's sonnets are read, then, readers will encounter disorder—disorder within or between or among poems. Despite a number of ingenious scholarly efforts to decipher the "design" of the *Holy Sonnets*, the only *manifest* design exhibited in Donne's miscellany is to be found within individual poems in the formal structure of the Italian sonnet itself. And even that well-wrought form is under constant pressure from its psychologically and religiously explosive content. Thus, the ordering principle of this gathering of sonnets is in fact disorder—spiritual as well as psychical disorder—disorder that is mirrored in the non-arrangement of Donne's poems.

Such mental disorder, compounded of anxiety, ambivalence, alienation, and depression, is present in the *Devotions* as well, but the spiritual foundation of that work is no more seriously threatened than its rhetorical arrangement. As Professor Papazian has observed, ". . . whereas the *Holy Sonnets* 'reveal that Donne experienced tormented doubt of his salvation in a way not dissimilar to . . . Calvinist despairers', in the *Devotions* the speaker's awareness of his election 'from the beginning' causes him to

experience a very different sort of anxiety . . . his fear of causing continual offense to God."[17] Moreover, the structural integrity of the *Devotions* is ever in evidence, its twenty-three episodes or exercises composing a well-made "plot" with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Each triptych of Meditation, Expostulation, and Prayer constitutes a kind of resolved "scene" in an ongoing medical drama. The *Holy Sonnets*, then, remain deconstructed and that is one source of their power; the *Devotions* are reconstructed and that is one source of *their* power.

In "Devotion VI," for example, the anxiety expressed by the doctor communicates itself to his patient, who wryly notes: "I observe the physician with the same diligence as he the disease; I see he fears, and I fear with him; I overtake him, I overrun him in his fear . . . "(35). Donne's diction recalls that of his holy sonnet, "Thou hast made me," in which the persona wails: "I runne to death, and death meets me as fast." In the Expostulation of "Devotion VI," however, this fear of death is displaced by the fear of God, a debilitating fear absorbed by one that is spiritually revivifying: "O my God, thou givest us fear for ballast to carry us steadfastly in all weathers" (40). Moreover, in the Prayer that follows, emotion is transmuted into doctrine: "Let me not therefore, O my God, be ashamed of these fears, but let me feel them to determine where [thy Son's] fear did, in a present submitting of all to thy will" (42). The persona-patient's anxiety is not, however, patly laid to rest, for the next devotion begins, "There is more fear, therefore more cause" (43). But soon he is able to take some small comfort from the fact that his physician intends to consult others (43).

Not only is this patient attended by medical experts—so unlike the almost pathologically isolated speaker of the *Holy Sonnets*—but he also has the services of what Robert Burton calls "a spiritual physician" (29). One category of cures for religious melancholy recommended in the *Anatomy of Melancholy* is "hearing, reading of scriptures, good Divines, good advice and conference, applying God's words" (950). The "good Divine" of the *Devotions* is Dr. Donne himself, who interlaces his meditations, expostulations, and prayers, with holy scripture and "God's words," who "confers" with himself about his spiritual as well as his physical well being, and who offers himself "good advice." That religious melancholy can thus be "counterposed," as Burton notes, "with confortable speeches, exhortations, and arguments" (950) the persona of *Devotions* seems well aware, but the *Holy Sonnets*' speaker in only a few instances seems to perceive.

Three of Donne's sonnets— "Why are wee by all creatures waited on," "Wilt thou love God, as he thee," and "Father, part of this double interest"— are relatively conventional: they are what Burton would classify as "wholesome meditations." But only these three. What helps to make Donne's collection so compelling, so inventional, is that in the sixteen other sonnets his persona is more likely to display his ignorance or misunderstanding of Christian doctrine. For example, in "At the round earth's imagined corners" he worries that it may be too late to call upon "God's grace"— seemingly unaware of the Christian commonplace confidently asserted by Burton: "No time is over past, 'tis never too late" (955). This victim of religious melancholy can even contradict himself, in one sonnet ("Oh my blacke Soule") proclaiming the purifying power of Christ's blood, and in another ("At the round earth's imagined corners") treating that power as if it were only a possibility rather than a promise. Certainly he exhibits absolutely no sense that he is one of the elect, which, as Paul R. Sellin and Mary Papazian convincingly argue, is characteristic of Donne's "public persona" in the *Devotions*.[18]

The public persona of the *Holy Sonnets*, however, is an incompetent spiritual physician because he is too confused and overwrought to heal himself. A part of his problem is his fascinatingly perverse egocentricity, which makes him capable at one moment of manic presumption— such as, in "At the round earth's imagined corners," personally calling for The Last Trump—and the next moment falling into a depression so deep that he presents himself as the greatest sinner this side of Satan. It is small wonder that throughout Donne's sonnets his speaker is profoundly alone. The only stage upon which these fourteen line dramatic vignettes are enacted is that of his ego. All of his speeches are dialogues of one. When other human beings come to mind— despicable generic "Jewes," "profane mistresses," "idolatrous lovers"—they are dismissed as quickly as they have been conjured up, and the poetic and psychical focus returned to the persona himself.

By contrast, the persona-patient of the *Devotions*, though he can complain that "the greatest misery of sickness is solitude" and that "Solitude is a torment which is not threatened in hell itself" (30), is in fact attended. Entering the stage of his sickroom is, first, his physician, followed by that practitioner's consultants, followed by the King's own doctor. Indeed the ailing James I himself, though not physically present, figures prominently in the ruminations of "Devotion VII," and his son, that "most excellent prince," is something of a presence by virtue of the fact that the prose sequence is

dedicated to him and to "preserv[ing] alive [Charles's] memory." Moreover, other real human beings are close at hand in the *Devotions*: in an affecting passage the persona-patient mentions that "Where I lie I could hear the psalm [being sung in a nearby church] and I did join with the congregation in it" (105).

More important than the physical presence of other human beings in the *Devotions* is the speaker's growing empathy with them. One factor that makes the *Holy Sonnets* so dramatic and agonizing is that their speaker, weltering in the intermittent hell of his own ego, finds no exit from his religious melancholy. But the persona of the *Devotions*, initially preoccupied with his traitorous body, his troubled thoughts, and his uneasy heart, begins to recognize the existence of other sufferers, then to identify with them, to empathize with them, and finally to bless them. James Winney is surely right when he suggests: "It would be hard not to sense some special significance in the fact that Donne's recovery begins" with the tolling of another's funeral bell in "Devotion XVI."[19] Nor is it surprising that the magnificent "no man is an island" passage (108) is the most freqently quoted statement of the *Devotions*, indeed of all of Donne's works: we recognize that there is a kind of transcendent health in it. To be "involved in mankind" is more than a piety: it is a profound truth of human nature and of the human condition. Revivified by that truth, Donne's persona-patient, up until now preoccupied with the prospect of his own death, finds himself able to pray for his dead neighbor: . . . and I pray not without faith; so I do charitably, so I do faithfully believe, that [his] soul is gone to everlasting rest, and joy, and glory" (116). Thus another's holy dying becomes an inspiration for holy living, as the patient and his physicians, "after a long and stormy voyage, see land" (122).

Like Lazarus, Donne's persona rises from his bed in "Devotion XXI." He realizes the dangers of a relapse (in "Devotion XXIII"), but appears to understand that, as Burton puts it, "God often works by contrarieties, he first kills, and then makes alive, he woundeth first, then healeth, he makes man sow in teares, that he may reap in joy; 'tis God's method" (976). The persona patient of the *Devotions* has come to comprehend— unlike the persona patient of the *Holy Sonnets*—that we are not the world, but that we and the world shall, as Burton joyfully proclaims, "end like a Comedy, and we shall meet at last in heaven and live in bliss together" (963).

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, then, is the penultimate act of the divine comedy of John Donne, wherein are largely resolved most of the complications that lent such dramatic tension to its earlier acts, including the

act we now think of as his *Holy Sonnets*. That comedy, like *Everyman*, serves as a kind of morality play—a "closet morality," perhaps— to which we might in our imagination assign the title—John Donne, Un-Donne, Re-Donne.

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Notes

[1] Quoted in Evelyn M. Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 244.

[2] "Donne, Election, and the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*," *HLQ* 55 (1992), 617.

[3] *John Donne* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), p.101.

[4] E. Pearlman, "Ben Jonson: An Anatomy," *ELR* 9 (19:9), 374.

[5] *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's* Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990), p.22.

[6] Simpson, p.251.

[7] Izaak Walton, "The Life of Dr. John Donne," in *John Donne's* Devotions upon Emergent Occasions (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1969), p. xxvi. All quotations from *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* will follow this edition, with page numbers given in parentheses in my text.

[8] Frost, p.28.

[9] Simpson, p.251.

[10] *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 10 [italics added].

[11] Papazian, p.608.

[12] Roger B. Rollin, "'Fantastique Ague': The *Holy Sonnets* and Religious Melancholy," in *The Eagle and the Dove: Reassessing John Donne*, eds. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1986), p.131.

[13] Elaine B. Safer, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," *A Milton Encyclopedia*, eds. William B. Hunter *et al* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979), 6:27.

[14] "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meet in one," *The Oxford Authors John Donne*, ed. John Carey (Oxford / New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), pp.288-89. All quotations from the *Holy Sonnets* will follow this edition.

[15] *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, eds. Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan Smith (New York: Tudor, 1927), pp.866ff. All quotations from Burton will follow this edition, with page numbers given in parentheses in my text.

[16] Edward A. Wolpert, "Major Affective Disorders," in *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry / III*, ed. Harold I. Kaplan *et al*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkens, 1980), II: 1323ff.; Mortimer Ostow, "Religion and Psychiatry," *Ibid.*, III: 3205-6.

[17] Papazian, 612.

[18] Paul R. Sellin, *So Doth, So Is Religion: John Donne and Diplomatic Contexts in the Reformed Netherlands, 1619-20* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1988), p.177; Papazian, 684 5.

[19] *A Preface to Donne*, rev. ed. (New York: Longman, 1981), p.177.

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