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"In cypher writ": The Design of Donne's *Devotions*

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Kate Gartner Frost, *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's* Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. Pp. xvi, 178, 13 illustrations, 5 charts.

Kate Frost has written a provocative and thoughtful study of Donne's *Devotions*, one of the first—and few—full length treatments of this remarkable and curious work. Her title borrows Donne's own phrase in his letter to Sir Robert Ker of January 1624: "Though I have left my bed, I have not left my bed-side. . . . I have used this leisure, to put the meditations had in my sickness, into some such order, as may minister some holy delight."[1] In the five principal chapters of her book, Frost is concerned to place the *Devotions* within the tradition of devotional literature, to describe its significance as "spiritual autobiography," and in the closely argued chapters 3–5, above all to urge a typological and numerological structure, a plan that Donne is alleged self-consciously to have contrived. This highly wrought scheme, while perhaps obvious to Donne's contemporaries, has been mostly lost to us; Frost's chief task, therefore, is to recover and explain the pattern and the intention of the *Devotions*. Her discoveries, especially in connection with numerological design, may seem to some readers overly ingenious and possibly tendentious; for once one begins to see number patterns, they are, like Browne's *quincunx*, everywhere. Yet Frost sets out her arguments, often very persuasively, with serious and determined conviction.

Frost begins by reviewing the tradition of devotional literature in the late Renaissance and earlier seventeenth century in England, rightly observing, I think, the very tangential relationship of the *Devotions* to St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercises*. The immediate occasion of the *Devotions*, which covers only a brief three-week time span, is Donne's near mortal illness. His concentration on the states of this illness, with its crisis and recovery that lead to a spiritual progress "in no way attempts the rigid classification of the

Ignatian model" (p. 8). Frost regards Donne's *Devotions* as belonging to a much larger tradition of devotional literature—"a masterpiece in the tradition of self-scrutiny" (p. 14)—a contribution to what we have come to understand as "spiritual autobiography"; and it follows the inspiration of Augustine, Abelard, and Dante—even ultimately the Psalmist. Such autobiography is directed away from the self and toward "the timeless presence of God" where "the past is significant only as evidence of the workings of Providence. And the recounting of that past becomes in itself an act of devotion" (p. 21).

Donne's life and experience must be seen as representative or symbolic of humanity in general, and for this reason the figure of Hezekiah (see Isaiah 38), so frequently invoked in the *Devotions*, is a typological pattern of the entombment and resurrection of Christ. By participating in the iconographic tradition of Hezekiah, Donne thus can identify himself with the common experience of all Christian believers. But Hezekiah, Frost explains, appears in the *Devotions* not only as a type of the individual Christian soul, but also as a figure of the Christian monarch. Drawing upon the considerable literature that represents the Tudor and Stuart monarchs as fulfilling the type of the good King Hezekiah (p. 55), Frost urges us to recognize both the political implications and as well the personal ones; Donne's emphasis on the figure of Hezekiah, first mentioned in the Dedication to Prince Charles, "reveals not only his identification of that ancient king with James Stuart but also with himself in his role as divine poet" (p. 61). Frost follows these reflections with an important section of careful typological unraveling of Isaiah 38, the events of which can be matched against the circumstances depicted in the *Devotions*.

Such a use of typology, with its quite convincing analogizing, may prepare us to look further at Donne's formal structure and his presumed schematization in the writing of the *Devotions*. Donne was fascinated by numbers, the "mystical mathematics" of his age, and, in a rapid survey of some principal texts, Frost demonstrates this affinity: repeated reference to "seventy" in *Essayes in Divinity* (book 2), and to the number patterns of such poems as "The Computation," "A Lecture Upon the Shadow," and so on. But the most crucial and original part of Frost's study occurs in her chapter on "Structural Significance in the *Devotions*" to which everything else in the book seems a prelude or "An Afterword." Now Frost aims to show how the *Devotions* is constructed according to an elaborate, obviously self-conscious numerological design.

We are urged to see the *Devotions* as a whole work, not in selections or in discrete units—surely a proper admonition for anyone who would seek to describe its complex interconnections. One cannot easily summarize the conclusions of this analysis, or necessarily even to agree with all of them, but a sample may give some idea of how Frost proceeds. The Latin "table of contents" or *Stationes* that precedes the *Devotions* is alleged to be a poem of twenty-two lines in dactylic hexameter, but broken up into twenty-three parts to form headings for the twenty-three sections of the *Devotions*. Frost sees twenty-two as especially significant, for this number—that of the letters in the Hebrew and Greek alphabets—marks the total number of chapters in the Book of Revelation as it does also in Augustine's *City of God*, and in other works. Frost notes that the "poem" contains 359 syllables, or hexameter feet, one syllable or foot short of perfect circularity. This number is said to include the title (but is the title really part of the poem?), a number that "reflects the diurnal movement of the sun" (p. 124); this is "short time," as Frost observes, recalling A. Kent Hiett's reading of Spenser's "Epithalamion," where one must stop before achieving perfection.[2] Connections are made with astrological time, both for Hezekiah and Donne; for Donne approached the gate of Capricorn in 1623, and so did Hezekiah, for whom the sun had stood still. The number twenty-three (the chapters of the *Devotions*) is, says Frost, a traditional number of conversion, "a turning back along the ecliptic course of one's life" (p. 126). Twenty-three, like twenty-two, is an incomplete number (though 23 may be understood as 2+3, or 5, a number of justice, which urges repentance).[3]

Frost provides charts to illustrate Donne's hexaemeral week—six days falling short of the perfect seventh: so the twenty-three parts can be distributed by fours with a final three ($4 \times 5 = 20 + 1 \times 3 = 23$), or a twenty-three hour day, falling short of the full twenty-four. Moreover, in a most ingenious plotting of Donne's life, Frost shows 1572, the date of Donne's natural birth and then in parallel the numbers of the sections of the *Devotions* to correspond to principal events of his life. Thus Devotion 8 is next to 1594 when Donne is twenty-three, a convert from Rome, and enjoying a "supernatural birth"; and Devotion 17 occurs in 1622–23 when he is fifty-one, and so Devotion 23 must belong to the putative sixty-nine year old Donne, a year before he would have lived seventy years (in 1640), at which time he would enjoy his heavenly birth and "write" Devotion 24.

There is much more interpretation along these lines; and if one grants Frost her basic premise—that number symbolism of this particular sort is

necessary for understanding the structure and the meaning of the *Devotions*—then the book is wonderfully full of new insight. Frost writes with confidence, great clarity, and coherence. But many readers will balk at her computations and complain that she is pushing her thesis too hard and too far. Yet she undoubtedly has much to say about the *Devotions* that is immensely relevant, most of all about our need for seeing Donne through his contemporaries' eyes insofar as this is possible. I would raise three quibbles which might pass the notice of other reviewers: Donne may not have preached on the penitential psalms in the two years before his illness in 1623 (p.100), but perhaps much earlier (or later). Frost is referring to those eight sermons on Psalm 38 which Potter and Simpson are unable to date accurately.[4] It is natural of course that he might refer to the number seven in his discourse on this or any one of the seven penitential psalms. Further, the reference to the hours of devotion (p. 108 and n. 13) might better refer to John Cosin's *Collection of Private Devotions* (1627), which means to be a supplement to the Book of Common Prayer, and which does provide for the seven commonly recognized Hours, including an office for the Ninth Hour (or mid-afternoon). This point might not change Frost's rejection of Clara Lander's effort (in her Ph.D. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1968) to interpret the three-part Devotion in order to correspond to "Morning, Afternoon, and Evening Services of the Book of Common Prayer"; but it might help to complicate and to enrich the entire issue. Finally, I am doubtful whether the *Devotions* should be linked to the liturgical year, beginning with Advent and the onset of Donne's illness, or with the lectionary, intriguing as these suggestions seem (p. 124 and passim). The *Devotions* do not appear to refer explicitly to the Advent season or to the winter solstice, though one might wish to urge some metaphorical connection. But these are small points indeed in a work of such ambition and engagement.

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Notes

[1] *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour* (1651), in *Selected Prose*, chosen by Evelyn Simpson, ed. Helen Gardner and Timothy Healy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), no. 36, p. 156.

[2] See A. Kent Hiett, *Short Time's Endless Monument: The Symbolism of the*

Numbers in Edmund Spenser's "Epithalamion" (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 4.

[3] Frost's book appeared shortly before the important study of "The Latin 'Stationes' in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*" by Mary Arshagouni (Papazian), in *Modern Philology* 89 (1991): 196–210. Arshagouni urges us to look carefully at the Latin text for clues to the sense of what follows in the Devotion itself. She also demonstrates the essential unity and spiritual direction of Donne's "sustained prose-poem" (210), and so corroborates Frost's conclusions, though from a different perspective.

[4] See *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), especially vol. 9; and cf. my "Donne's Earliest Sermons and the Penitential Tradition," in *John Donne's Religious Imagination: Essays in Honor of John T. Shawcross*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Frances M. Malpezzi (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), 366–79.