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"To furder or represse": Donne's Calling

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During the dark years of his fortunes' eclipse following his unauthorized marriage and dismissal from the service of Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper, *favor*, the patronage of some prominent and powerful benefactor, must have seemed to John Donne almost what, to a rather different ideological point of view, *money* seemed to Karl Marx some 240 years later. In a striking passage from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx speaks of how money, "being the external, common *medium* and *faculty* for turning an *image* into *reality* and *reality* into a mere *image*," determines that the man who has a vocation for study, but no money for it, has "no *effective*, no *true* vocation,"[1] while the individual with money for study, whatever his actual capacity for it, has an *effective*, a *true* vocation. In the patronage society that was his world, Donne found the favor of the great to be a similar indispensable actualizing medium. Chafed and frustrated by the necessity of suing and the disappointment of his ambitions, Donne nevertheless reacted by committing himself ever more desperately to laying hold of this "medium and faculty for turning an image into reality," opening himself to its power, cooperating with it, in the fervent hope that it would eventually come round, and help him realize his ambitions, actualizing his gifts in an effectual calling.

In this essay, I would like to explore one curious phenomenon of Donne's relentless pursuit of worldly favor: his application of tropes of divinity in the poetry of patronage. My interest in Donne's use of these tropes centers not in their transparent serviceability as a grammar of praise, but rather in their function as a story or scheme justifying to himself (and to anyone sharing his ideology) his applications for favor.

To those familiar with his career and writing, the heightened development of both worldly ambition and critical moral intelligence in Donne needs no demonstration. The combination of both traits at the same time can be a most uncomfortable possession. Of the texts I wish to examine, some provide evidence of the unease the rituals of suing for favor, exacted by his ambition, caused to his pride. Others suggest the rebellion of his ethical nature at the prospect of being involved in, or liable to accusations of, flattery. A possible

solution to these conflicts and embarrassments, for Donne as for any of us, is the construction of a schema or analogy of "the order of things," a representation of relationships and inherent values that authoritatively justifies needful behavior. In Donne's case, the authoritative justification turns heavily upon the Christian, and more specifically Protestant, conviction that *assurance* of calling requires both inward gifts and "allowance from men" to be "effective vocation."[2] However, this solution to the problem actually contributes additional anxiety when taken with utmost seriousness, as I believe Donne took it. While the necessity of "allowance from men" rationalizes personal ambition and application for the favor of the great, it also raises the ante for failure, since not only one's worldly hopes, but affirmation of one's spiritual state and favor with God now seem to ride on the achievement of "effective vocation." Moreover, elevating the activity of suing for favor to the status of a religious duty introduces a casuistry of conscience absent from the calculations of one who simulates or dissimulates in the mere service of *philautia*. Avoidance of hypocrisy demands congruence of inner conviction and outward performance: one must convince oneself that one's applications to the great are not only needful, but *right*. The resulting underlying disquietude inscribes itself in many of Donne's writings, rationalized but never fully allayed, from the earlier appeals for patronage through the sermons of the man once again on the ladder of preferment.

Engagement in the complicated and difficult process of catching the favor of a patron, the appeals, the compliments, the complex dance of abasing oneself before power, advertising at the same time one's compliance and one's gifts, produces enormous strain. Particularly great are the pressures felt by a finely honed, critical moral intelligence. So troublesome is the consequent anxiety for Donne, so insistent in its demands to be assuaged, that even from his comparative security once he had achieved a place through the king's favor, he turns to reflect on it. He does so as he meditates on the text for his first Paul's Cross sermon, delivered March 24, 1617, on the text of verse eleven of the twenty-second chapter of the book of Proverbs: "He that loveth pureness of heart, for the grace of his lips, the king shall be his friend." In opening this text to his congregation, the king's new friend, still finding his way in the course that so recently had become his through royal favor, worries "pureness of heart," the antecedent condition of favor, a great deal. It is the difficulty of truly assessing pureness of heart that commands Donne's earnest concern. In his long analysis of *puritas*, he spends a surprising amount of time on hypocrisy. In defining purity by contrast, he adduces as antithetical to the virtue not so much corruption of the affections as affectations of purity and the self-representations of false puritans, the Catharists and Cathari.

> It is not pureness, if it grew not in the Heart. The Hypocrite is the miserablest of all other, he does God service, and yet is damned. The shedding of our blood for God is not a greater service then the winning of souls to God; and the Hypocrite many times does that; his outward purity works upon them who cannot know it to be counterfeit, and draws them truely and sincerely to serve God. He does God service, and yet perishes, because he does it not from the heart. God shall take him away, *as a man taketh away dung, till it be all gone.* [I Reg. 14.10] (I.189-90)

So the end of the hypocrite is that hyperbolic annihilation, various tropes of which Donne had tried out as poetic figures in various songs and sonnets, and as depictions of himself and his condition in the bleak years of dashed hopes following his loss of his place as Egerton's secretary.[3] Even having gained a place, secured "allowance from men," and thus rendered calling effectual, one still faced annihilation, if the role one played proved false: if the actor personated a virtue that he did not possess.

The problem of hypocrisy faced here is a trace of that related problem of flattery which haunted Donne even earlier, as he penned his applications and encomia to the great ladies upon whose favor his hopes were frequently pinned from about 1607 until his final commitment to the church. Of course, Donne himself proved not to be the last who found the issues of flattery and hypocrisy problematic in these poems. His poetry of patronage, including many of the verse letters, was long the most neglected part of his poetic canon, and its neglect was at least partly owing to the offense given readers and critics who found repellent, and even blasphemous, his hyperbolic praises of prominent courtiers and great ladies.

Donne's reliance on hyperbolic praises based on fantastic theological conceits or elevated patterns of world-order, couched in the language that he himself repeatedly calls "the language of the schools," is the most characteristic and original aspect of his poetry of praise. And it is the aspect that has caused the most trouble for readers of his epideictic verse in the past. The problem is not simply a gap in cultural assumptions; readers who were Donne's contemporaries found some of his gestures shocking or disturbing (witness Ben Jonson's famous pronouncement "that Dones Anniversarie was profane and full of Blasphemies . . . if it had been written of ye Virgin Marie it had been something"[4]). Of course, not all reaction by Donne's earliest readers to his "descent in Printing . . . verse" was negative; widespread imitation of conceits and lines from the *Anniversaries* suggests the ambivalence of their contemporary reception and the widespread success of his demonstration of "the best that I could do."[5] But, taken for good or ill, it is this matter and idiom, hyperbolic praise couched in the language, not just of religious *adoration*, but of elaborately

reasoned doctrinal theology, that most strikingly measures the distance between Donne as the monarch of wit, and earlier and contemporary poetry of praise by such men as Drayton, Daniel, or even Chapman. My argument here is that some of these tropes of divinity constitute the central and characteristic matter of analogy and representation through which Donne re-creates and imposes meaning on his experience, and that they in fact articulate Donne's rationalization of his situation as suitor to the great and powerful: their analogy serves to quiet his anxiety of pride and conscience.

In a prose letter dated the first Saturday in March, 1607, Donne provides a paradigm for the fundamental argument of appeal, the pattern for many suits in verse and prose, tinctured with analogies drawn from the matter of divinity:

> SIR,
> Though my friendship be good for nothing else, it may give you the profit of a tentation, or of an affliction: It may excuse your patience; and though it cannot allure, it shall importune you. Though I know you have many worthy friends of all rankes, yet I adde something, since I which am of none, would faine be your friend too. There is some of the honour and some of the degrees of a Creation, to make a friendship of nothing. Yet, not to annihilate my self utterly (for though it seem humblenesse, yet it is a work of as much almightinesse, to bring a thing to nothing, as from nothing) though I be not of the best stuffe for friendship, which men of warm and durable fortunes only are, I cannot say, that I am not of the best fashion, if truth and honesty be that; which I must ever exercise, towards you, because I learned it of you: for the conversation with worthy men, and of good example, [sic] though it sow not vertue in us, yet produceth and ripeneth it.[6]

In this prose letter, Donne duplicates moves less surefootedly made in "That unripe side of earth," to the Countess of Huntingdon,[7] and in other appeals to great patronesses: he diminishes himself, thereby magnifying the grace shown by one who would befriend him; he conceives the relationship he desires under the guise of a theological trope, namely creation, further exalting the "strong" friend, who must thus condescend; he ostensibly continues his self-deprecation to assert what he in his position cannot offer in exchange for friendship—the "stuff" or material substance that go with both good fortune and *a* good fortune; but he then allows that he cannot claim to fail in the best "fashion," or kind of friendship, which is "truth and honesty." His emphasis on his own humility is thus undercut by what amounts to a satiric gibe implying that most people, or the world, would enter into a friendship only in the hope of material gain; since he can offer nothing but virtue and honesty, he cannot

expect to win friendship—unless the addressee is so rare a person as to understand the true values of things, and rightly appreciate what Donne offers. Self-deprecation placates the writer's sense of undervalued self-worth by issuing in oblique self-gratulation.

Finding the right tone and language combining appropriate compliment to the patron (or intended patron—an even touchier matter) and decorous, manly self-advertisement is a task of problematic delicacy. The problem is only compounded by the necessity of courting more than one patron in order to maximize one's chances: the fear that one will be found out and accused of mercenary behavior and betrayal are added to the private anxiety about flattery. As he had worried in a letter to Goodyer (*Letters*, pp. 100-05) about the propriety of writing in praise of the Countess of Huntingdon when he had in effect pledged his muse to the Countess of Bedford, so later, as it appeared that his prospects might be improving, Donne faced further problems keeping in favor with the Countess of Bedford because of his dependency on Somerset, whom Bedford hated.[8]

In this dilemma, the language of divinity and the distinctions of the schools afford Donne more than an extended range of hyperbolic vocabulary, on the one hand, and ingeniously intricate arguments, on the other. The hair-splitting distinctions and multiplied categories of scholastic divinity offer plausible and elegant refinements for his construction and rationalization of models of his relationship to his various patrons. These recherché points of reference gratified recipients of the praise by flattering their pretensions to intellectual acuity and avant-garde sensibilities. At the same time, the paradigms of theology would have seemed both to Donne and to his readers more satisfying and *convincing* than other kinds of reference—mythology, or the mundane activities and relations of the social or political world. Even when obviously used extravagantly or semi-playfully, such tropes would have seemed to embody or co-opt a higher truth which complimented the recipient of the comparison by a metaphysical endorsement of his or her status, and at the same time assuaged the anxiety of the flattery and condescension involved in the patronage game of role-playing and conscious self-representation.

Assuaged, but did not entirely eliminate. The traces of anxiety over appearing to engage in rank flattery mark heavily passages in "Madame, you have refin'd mee," addressed to the Countess of Bedford, and "Man to Gods image, *Eve*, to mans was made," a poem to the Countess of Huntingdon. In the former, only a stanza after applying to the lady conceits that he uses of Christ in a later sermon (*Sermons* 5.169), Donne backs off to disclaim the hyperbolic effect he creates:

> But these [epithets] (as nice thinne Schoole divinity
> Serves heresie to furder or represse)
> Tast of Poetique rage, or flattery,

And need not, where all hearts one truth professe;
Oft from new proofes, and new phrase, new doubts grow,
As strange attire aliens the men wee know. (ll. 61-66)

In the letter to the Countess of Huntingdon, he takes a directly challenging, even bullying approach to defuse criticism:

If you can thinke these flatteries, they are,
For then your judgement is below my praise. (ll. 49-50)

But conversely,

If they were so, oft flatteries worke as farre,
As Counsels, and as farre th'endeavour raise. (ll. 51-52)

Like the assertions of the hypocritical preacher of the Paul's Cross sermon exemplum of 1617, who, preaching a word he did not believe in, saved others while damning himself,

So my ill reaching you might there grow good,
But I remaine a poyson'd fountain still. (ll. 53-54)

Perhaps Donne's most revealing confession of his motives to praise comes in a verse letter to the Countess of Salisbury, written after he was in orders, (dated *August, 1614* in mss.).[9] The anxiety of producing an unsolicited discourse of praise is compounded this time, not only because now he is actually in orders.[10] He seems in this poem more acutely conscious of the fact that knowledge of his past poetry of patronage may make his praises sound venal, light, and insincere. He explains to Lady Salisbury that "by daring to contemplate you" he has learned "That there may be degrees of faire, great, good," and in fact, that

If in this sacrifice of mine, be showne
Any small sparke of these, call it your owne. (ll. 35-36)

The Countess is, like God, the fountain and creator of good, and so any good that, by contemplating her and her goodness, a creature like the poet can be inspired to give back, is simply a return on her largesse. The hyperbolic trope of school divinity sounds a bit too familiar, and Donne attempts to disarm objection with candor:

And if things like these, have been said by mee
Of others; call not that Idolatrie. (ll. 37-38)

The reason Donne's earlier praises of others do not negate his current praise of the Countess is first explained by a Biblical analogy: if man had been created first, he might well have used up "the best that he could say" in praise of "the third daies fruits, and flowers, and various greene"; so that if he could but repeat his tropes the next day on the sun, moon, and stars, he deserved no chiding for having praised in the same terms before what was, until then, the best that he had seen.

So though some things are not together true,
As, that another is worthiest, and, that you:
Yet, to say so, doth not condemne a man,
If when he spoke them, they were both true than. (ll. 47-50)

Just so, Donne's earlier praise was not "idolatry," worship of false gods, for when he praised Elizabeth Drury (and Lucy Russell, and Elizabeth Stanley, and Lady Carey, and Mrs. Essex Rich), he *meant* what he said in praise of the super-excellence and transcendent virtue of each; and each was, as far as he had seen then, not having known Catherine Howard, what he thought her to be. Again, a concept from school-psychology elucidates: "How faire a proofe of this, in our soule growes?" As all the good things that can be said about the vegetable and animal souls are "swallowed into" the immortal soul which subsumes and controls them, so appreciation of the qualities of lesser goods prepares the appropriate valuation of the highest, which in fact could not be grasped at all without such preparation.

Nor doth he injure those soules, which doth cast
The power and praise of both them, on the last;
No more doe I wrong any; I adore
The same things now, which I ador'd before,
The subject chang'd, and measure . . . .[11]

In the midst of this labored explanation, a striking analogy leaps forth:

. . . the same thing
In a low constable, and in the King
I reverence; His power to work on mee;
So did I humbly reverence each degree
Of faire, great, good, but more, now I am come
From having found their *walkes*, to find their *home*. (ll. 55-64)

The surface sense emphasizes comparative *degrees*: as I reverence temporal power whether in a Jacobus Rex or in a Dogberry as the same thing, so I reverence fairness, greatness, goodness in lesser paragons as in your transcendent self. But the lines confess a secondary construction: that Donne's reverence and adoration are ever drawn to *power*, and only power, especially *power to work on me*. In all his poetry of patronage, Donne in fact consecrated the tropes and hyperboles raked up from the tortuous reasonings and curious definitions of scholasticism to the praise of one thing: the social and worldly power that translates as "allowance from men," the means to employment. "Power to worke on mee" means the power to raise him to a position of influence, to afford him a scope for his talents that without help, he could not even dream of achieving.

Donne's use of the concept of God's empowering but inexplicable grace to encode his relations with his worldly patrons had a real basis in his experience, as well as a real congruence with his reading, training, and the way his mind worked. For him, this language could truly represent the operations and relations of his society as he saw them working. Not that he mistook Lucy, Countess of Bedford, or Somerset for God the Father. There is always in Donne's perception of analogy and relation an acute sensitivity to incongruity, to the ironic, the grotesque. Part of the energy of his tropes and metaphors comes from the surprise they engender, the pressure or strain of an extreme extension they entail. When we hear of such a comment as the remark on Somerset as the one by whom now almost all God's work in England will be done, Somerset as the "great instrument of God's providence in this Kingdom," --we want it to be sardonic, edged with irony.[12] And perhaps it was. But it was also, literally, true. When Somerset was the king's favorite, to a socially and religiously conservative observer like Donne it must have appeared that if God's work was to be done at all in the kingdom, it must be through Somerset and those he would favor, advance, and empower. As a realistic Christian, Donne knew too that the faithful must not neglect the means God offers in their time and place. Scripture and history showed God many times accomplishing great ends through unprepossessing, weak, foolish, and even base and wicked instruments. Knowing both his own powers and his scope, Donne did what he could to use the instruments at hand to increase the latter for the better exercise of the former.

In this enterprise, the concepts of School-Divinity itself— "the darknesse of the Schoole, . . . those perplexed and inextricable clouds of School-divinitie"[13]—were in a sense only a tool, a technique the moral status of which was determined by the ultimate purpose of its application. "As nice thinne Schoole divinity / Serves heresie to furder or represse,"[14] so Donne's verbal play in his suits for place, notice, and advancement may further Donne's

calling by securing for him "allowance from men." At the same time, though, this tool was the subtlest instrument yet created by man's mind in his attempt to comprehend his place, nature, and relation to the transcendent. The ability to press its analogies and categories into service to characterize and explain his worldly relations in that deadly serious dance of courtship, which had to be performed with such obligatory grace and *sprezzatura*, could prove a powerful anodyne to heart-burnings over the moral status of his course, and a potent reassurance of the essential rightness of the role as suitor and petitioner he found himself called upon to play.

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Notes

[1] *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972, 1978), pp. 104-05.

[2] See my treatment of this concept with particular application to the patronage situation in "Saving the King's Friend and Redeeming Appearances: Dr. Donne Constructs a Scriptural Model for Patronage," *YES* 21 (1991), 107-20. That assurance of calling depends upon "Gifts for the calling from God, and allowance from men" is the assertion of William Perkins, *Works* I (1612), 760; the analogy with "*effective* vocation" as defined by Karl Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* is striking.

[3] Donne's sermons will be cited parenthetically in the text, as above, from *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Donne's poems will be cited parenthetically by line numbers from John T. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). For the tropes of nothingness and annihilation, cf. "The Broken Heart," ll. 25-26; "Air and Angels," *passim*; "The Prohibition," ll. 9-15; "A Valediction of Weeping," ll. 1-13; "The Dissolution" (which, however, never uses the word, "nothing"); "Negative Love," *passim*; "A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day"; see also *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1977), pp. 65-66, 51, and elsewhere.

[4] *Ben Jonson*, eds. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), I, 133.

[5] See Donne's response in a letter *To Sir* G. F. (Goodyer), *Letters*, pp. 74-75; contemporary reactions are alluded to in Manley's and Milgate's critical editions (Frank Manley, ed., *John Donne: The Anniversaries* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1963], pp. 6-8; Wesley Milgate, *John Donne: The Epithalamions, Anniversaries and Epicedes* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978], pp. xxx-xxxiii); "The Legacy of Donne's Symbolic Mode" in the *Anniversaries* is studied by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Donne's* Anniversaries *and the Poetry of Praise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 307-370; echoes and imitations are assembled in A. J. Smith, ed., *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan

Paul, 1976); instances recorded on pp. 37-44, 48, 51-53, 56, 60-61 carry us to the end of the seventeenth century.

[6] *Letters*, pp. 65-66.

[7] Although Donne's authorship of this poem has been questioned, the correspondence of its outrageous hyperboles not only with Donne's characteristic manner, but with this unique pattern of self-representation and rationalization, which seems to me so deeply and idiosyncratically personal for Donne, argues for me his authorship. At least it seems to me that his ingenuity lies behind the text as we have it; its roughness and lack of finish may indicate that it has not received "the final hand." The high value of Donne's peculiar art of compliment in the patronage game is suggested by the evidence that sometimes, his models were taken over and reworked by someone else, as, for example, Goodyer is known to have done. On this last point, see Stanley Johnson, "Sir Henry Goodere and Donne's Letters," *MLN* 63 (1948), 38-43, and R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 166-68.

[8] See Bald, *Life*, pp. 294-95.

[9] Once again, as when Goodyer had suggested overtures to Lucy, Countess of Bedford, and later, to the Countess of Huntingdon, the idea that a poetic tribute would not be taken amiss was planted by a friend who enjoyed closer connections with the family of the potential patroness. In this case the contact was George Garrard (see *Letters*, pp. 259-61). Thus the tribute produced is presumably not sent entirely "cold" and at venture, but while the use of a more intimate intermediary preserves a certain decorum and may prepare the ground, it still entails a certain amount of real or assumed uncertainty and feeling of one's way by the writer.

[10] Compare the desire to distance himself from his poetic frivolities in comparison with "a graver course" in the letter to Goodyer, *Letters*, pp. 103-05, and the letter to Sir Robert Carr, sending the requested epicede on his friend, Marquesse Hamilton, but suggesting that it might be better for Carr to "smother it, and be that the sacrifice" (Milgate, *Epithalamions*, p. 209).

[11] Note that this is essentially the reason given in "The Good-Morrow," ll. 6-7, and "Aire and Angels," stanza 1, explaining earlier loves as preliminary anticipations, dim foreshadowings, types and figures of the present antitype. The recurrence of the argument in contexts of varying degrees of seriousness suggests the persistent fascination such logical explanation and categorization of behavior held for Donne.

[12] Quoted by J. B. Leishman, *The Monarch of Wit*, 6th ed. (London, 1967), p. 38.

[13] *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 9, 343.

[14] "Madame, You have refin'd mee," ll. 61-62.