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Donne's "Nocturnall" and Festival

Ann Hurley

"A nocturnall upon S. Lucies day, Being the shortest day" rewards an approach through that aspect of early modern life that gave visible shape to culture, which the Renaissance labeled "festival." Indeed, Donne more than many of his contemporaries, seemed particularly sensitive to the nature of festival, and the "Nocturnall" may well be a poetic distillation of some of that sensitivity. Additionally, the poem rewards scrutiny in the context of the topic of late Renaissance visual culture, as St. Lucy's Day was traditionally associated with celebrations of light and with invocations against afflictions of sight.

Donne's fascination with festival is particularly pertinent to the "Nocturnall" as he seems to have seen festivals as those visible and participatory moments in everyday communal life that provided a specific kind of insight. That insight led into an awareness of the amphibious nature of human life whereby man, who ordinarily participated in a variety of different communal, seasonal, psychic, metaphysical and divine worlds without being aware of them, might suddenly see and vividly experience that multilayered participation. To use a modern vocabulary, a festival was a "liminal" experience, subjecting its true participants to a consciousness of the dynamics of crossing boundaries and allowing those who participated most fully an access to a psychic growth that was ordinarily not available on a daily basis.[1]

On the other hand, it may not be too modern to speak of liminal spaces and psychic awareness when considering the "Nocturnall" as an instance of that approach to festival, as Donne himself used the word "liminal" and used it in just such a discussion of "festival." In a 1627/8 sermon preached at St. Paul's, he discussed, in language directly

relevant to the "Nocturnall," the curious way in which something perceived as a distinct and obvious threshold allowed for a fuller awareness of the nature of the experience leading up to and away from it. The passage is worth quoting in full:

> As *S. Augustine* sayes of the Sacrament of Baptisme, that it is *Limen Ecclesiae*, The threshold over which we step into the Church; so is Christmas Day, *Limen festorum*, the threshold over which we step into the festivall celebration of some other of Christs actions, and passions, and victorious overcommings of all the Acts of his Passion, such as his Resurrection, and Ascension; for, but for Christmas day, we could celebrate none of these dayes; And so, that day is *Limen festorum*, The threshold over which we passe to the rest. But the Sabbath is not onely *Limen*, or *Ianua Ecclesiae*, The door by which we enter into the Church, and into the consideration what the Church hath done, but *Limen mundi*, The doore by which we enter into the consideration of the World, how, and when the World was made of nothing, at the Creation, without which, we had been so far from knowing that there had been a Church, or that there had been a God, as that we our selves had had no being at all. And therefore, as our very being is before all degrees of well-being, so is the Sabbath, which remembers us of our being, before all other festivalls, that present and refresh to us the memory of our well-being (VIII, 157-158).

The function of festival, Donne appears to be saying, is to give shape to what we would otherwise take for granted, most particularly the miraculous nature of the very fact that we exist at all: "as our very being *is* before all degrees of well-being . . . so [festivall] . . . remembers us of our being. . . [and] present[s] and refresh[es] to us the memory of our well-being [italics mine]." The liminal space, opening us to what Donne isolates as the peculiar intensifying property of festival, is then critical in focusing our attention on what we would otherwise fail to see.

This particular passage is not unique in Donne's sermons; again and again he returned to the related topics of festival, ceremony, the

sacraments, ritual, and pondered the nature of their role in human life and particularly in human consciousness of that life.[2] To read the "Nocturnall," then, as what it announces itself to be, the articulation of the preparation for "a long nights festivall" (1. 42), is to read it in a context to which Donne himself had already given significant attention. Festival both organizes and informs the poem, which is in turn structured by the properties of festival, including the characteristic interruptive gesture that Donne normally accentuates, in this instance, death.

The situation of the poem, established by a speaker who is experiencing a liminal state without ever being fully conscious of it, is the traumatic experience of the devastating loss of a loved one who has, up until now, been for the speaker the source and meaning of life. Readings of the poem usually stress its psychic drama. Less frequently, they also stress its liturgical and ritualistic features. What is essential, however, is to understand how these—the personal and the ritual—are linked in festival and thus provide the force of the poem.

Initially that understanding is conveyed on a structural level, in the extraordinary compressions and expansions that characterize its tone and movement throughout. What the speaker does not realize, but what becomes more apparent, at least to the informed reader, is that the speaker's experience is not only the narrowly contracted, highly individualized one that he feels it to be, but something that expands out into the absolutely universal. The experience of death, so acutely radical as to be felt as deeply personal, is of course the one totally universal experience common to all living things. The knowledge of death, as distinct from the experience of it, is in turn specific only to man in his self-conscious awareness and God his creator. What the speaker does not understand, in his intensely personal awareness, is that the Church, the institutional meeting place of God and man, and the natural world, where God and man also meet, have, respectively, ritualized and seasonal features that accommodate death. The reader's, but not the speaker's, slowly growing awareness of these features provides the drama of the poem, while its context of festival, an experience which is at once personal and communal, supplies its resolution.

The personal aspect of the poem, both the fictional speaker's and its author, Donne's, has received much critical attention. Whether the poem was occasioned by the death of Donne's wife, the death of a loved daughter or treasured patroness, or by the accumulation of feelings of worthlessness in the face of stalled career expectations and humiliating poverty, or by a philosophical and temperamental fascination with the paradox of something created from nothing, or even by a near fatal attraction to suicide, the intensity of its effect has never been questioned.[3] The ritualized aspect of the poem has received less attention, although scholars have identified at least two areas, one liturgical the other theological, whose echoes permeate the poem.[4] For example, the poem takes its title (probably not Donne's, and therefore verifying contemporary awareness of this link) from the liturgy surrounding the divine office of matins, consisting of three nocturns, originally recited near midnight and often called *vigilae nocturnae*. Because there are five features to the nocturnals of matins, and because St. Lucy's office in particular was associated with the feast of the Blessed Virgin with whom the number five was connected, the five-stanza structure and five term refrains of the "Nocturnall" seem to derive from liturgy.[5] Within the more apparent five-part structure of the poem there is also a less obvious but more thematically pertinent three-part structure also derived from the liturgy celebrating matins. Not only were there commonly three nocturnals associated with matins but double feasts, like St. Lucy's, regularly allowed for nine. Moreover, the nine psalms of matins were often paralleled to the nine angelic choirs, reinforcing the divine aptness of this particular pattern. The nine-line stanzas of Donne's "Nocturnall," although not as immediately apparent as the five-stanza make-up of the poem, parallels this aspect of the matins liturgy. More pertinently, the thematic nature of matins, leading immediately into the dawning hour of lauds, associated with the movement from a dead world to renewal through grace, and often concluded after the third nocturn with a "Te Deum," also parallels the thematic content of the "Nocturnall" with its slowly returning "deep" renewal. Finally, in addition to the quintal and trinal features of the

nocturnals of matins, there was also an antiphonal structure to the readings, reinforcing the same pattern of reconciliation of oppositions that one finds in the thematic development of the "Nocturnall."

The liturgy surrounding the nocturnals of matins is at least obliquely concerned with the reconciliation of opposites, the central thematic concern of Donne's poem with its intense experience of the critical oppositions of night and day, dark and light, death and life, and nothingness and being. The second ritual, or religious concept, informing the "Nocturnall" is, however, not obliquely but directly focused on these paradoxes, and that is the religious concept of "kenosis," or the notion that in taking on human flesh in the Incarnation, Christ emptied himself of his divine glory, thereby demonstrating the ultimate paradox as he moved from being God, "I am that I am," to man, "I am not." Donne, like every well-informed theologian, was aware of this concept and its special relevance to his own philosophical and temperamental concerns is apparent in his sermons. In one passage he spoke of it at length: of the "fulnesse" of Christ in taking on the flesh of man, he said, "This was a strange fulnesse, for it was a fulnesse of emptinesse; It was all Humiliation, all exinanition, all evacuation of himselfe . . . But when it was done . . . lest the Crosse of Christ should be evacuated, and made of none effect, he came to make this fulnesse perfit, by instituting and establishing a Church . . . So that this is Christs fulnesse, that he is in a continuall administration of his Church... And so, of his fulnesse, all the Congregation receives too . . . that is, all the fulnesse that was in both his natures, united in one person" (*Sermons* IV,289), specifically both the "I am that I am" and the "I am not."

A. B. Chambers makes one inference from this passage explicitly and directly relevant to the preoccupations of the "Nocturnall": "since the basis of being merely human is not being, identification with Christ in his emptiness is the way to transform one's own nothingness into something-ness" (110). A second inference is even more pertinent: in Donne the preacher's eyes, man links himself with Christ through the Church. Redemption from the threat of singularity is achieved through awareness of the communal rituals that give shape to individual lives.

The passage quoted above concludes, "all the merits [of Christ's fulness] are derived upon us, in his Word, Sacraments, in his Church; which Church being to continue to the end, it is most properly said *habitavit*, in him, . . . all fulnesse, all meanes of salvation, dwell, and are to be had permanently, constantly, infallibly."

The speaker of the "Nocturnall" has, however, not even approached this level of conscious awareness, nor is the deep sense of vitality that informs the redemptive aspect of the poem at its conclusion given shape by any specific church festival or, even less, such consciously elaborated institutions as Church sacraments, Christian liturgy, or sophisticated theological concepts like kenosis. Instead, the poem operates at a far more primitive level, emphasizing (at first barely and in ostensibly peripheral fashion) the seasonal, or non-human but divinely informed, essentially vital property common to all festival, which gives shape to that vitality; and that seasonal aspect, God's festival, which it is man's duty to answer in his festivals, appears only obliquely, in the references to the Zodiac sign of the Goat, the lovers' "lust" and the returning "Sunne" of summer.

Nevertheless, the renewing vital force, and its connections both to festival and to the essential nature of the specifically human form of being, is forcefully present in the poem and present at its depth, in its very syntax, those verbal connections which in this poem affirm human consciousness as the connective force between human existence and the life force of the universe that man comes to know as God. In line 28, the as yet unperceived (by both speaker and reader) turning point of the poem, the speaker says, "I *am* by her death" (italics mine), articulating the poem's liminal essence: that it is "by her death"—that critical interruptive threshold—that he exists, for the moment, in his intense preoccupation with her death and for all time, in that death and life, the conclusion of the poem will imply, are part of the same unending continuum. Moreover, death is no more terminal than is the comma's pause following that statement. In a truth articulated by the parenthesis—"her death, (which word wrongs her)"—and thus graphically visible beneath the text and echoed by the next line, which we find in truth completes the thought—"Of the first nothing, the Elixer grown"—

, death is simply a marking point, a threshold (although as yet unconscious) of awareness that, just as God created life itself from the "first nothing," so He can create eternal life from the "nothings" of individual deaths. Indeed, it is from the apparent nadir of the poem—line 38, "But I am None"—that the first mention of "renew[al]" is made, again in a syntactical gesture that underscores the connective links between the vitality of God's universe and man's consciousness as the human aspect of that vitality. Human recognition of that fact, a state which the speaker will attain, but has not yet, is given shape by the other operative word in this stanza, "festivall." Again, specific festivals are not alluded to in the poem itself, but the essence of festive preparation surely is (as Donne's early readers recognized in titling his poem). The deeply felt human need for connection, the acutely human sense of despair occasioned by the numb terror that that need might not be answered, and the responding sense of regeneration working out of the depths of this despair and even against human will are the deep shaping forces of festival such that the articulation of that need is the beginning, the "prepar[ing]" towards the "long night's festivall" which is in fact this poem.

The poem works rather in the fashion of George Herbert's "The Collar" through a double vocabulary in that the speaker's words, ostensibly his own personal selection drawn out of his own immediate experience, are also God's words, having import on both the theological and the cosmic levels. The individual speaker's vocabulary and the theological vocabulary meet in the reader's growing awareness of that double reference. Thus, while the speaker struggles to confine a reference to the "lesser Sunne" to the ironic contrast between the "Sunne" which merely gives light, life, and force to the universe in contrast to his "Sunne," the lost loved one who gave such potent meaning to his life that she outshone even the cosmic body, the reader hears the echo of the Christian "Son" whose ceremonial life from its December nativity to its April resurrection parallels the time span of the poem. The speaker's effort to empty himself, to become a "nothing" and then a "None," becomes, then, for the discerning reader, a telling inversion of kenosis, as Chambers observed. Moreover, insofar as the

speaker's efforts to empty himself of all aspects of being are in complete ignorance of the theological implications of that emptying, that ignorance reinforces even more fully the divine significance of such an inversion. This inversion, however, it is important to stress, is not ironic but, in its liminal function, emphatically productive. Identification with Christ, even unrecognized, is the initial step toward the full understanding of the immensely purposeful nature of life under the divine plan. The tension between the speaker's radical attempt to extinguish life and the immutable vitality of that force whose very essence is that it cannot be extinguished is resolved through the reader's awareness that both efforts amount to the same thing, a celebration of life itself. The poem concludes by returning full circle to the opening lines but with one significant change. The verb "to be," buried in a contraction in the first word of the poem, assumes its rightful emphatic place as the concluding word and concluding thought of the poem—out of nothingness everything *is*.

The festal day of St. Lucy, blind patroness of sight and insight, is thus the perfect shaping festival for a poem that demonstrates the resiliency of life by stressing a speaker's blindness to that resiliency. Life asserts itself in spite of his denial of it, and asserts itself through the reader's conscious awareness of the seasonal, communal, and theological rituals in which the speaker actually participates. The poem can be seen as an opposition between an individual seeking nothingness and the cosmos whose essence is being. The former is represented through the speaker's personal experience and individualized voice; the latter through the suggestions of seasonal renewal and recurring patterns of the Zodiac. What resolves the opposition is the human consciousness of the discerning reader who recognizes the ritual nature of the speaker's experience. Its linguistic equivalent is the syntax of the poem which, through the linking and placing of specific words, graphically illustrates that resolution. Festival, which brings together the personal and the ritual, is the communal equivalent of human consciousness, the visible and participatory representation of communal discourse. "The Nocturnall," in its densely concentrated feeling and multilayered impli-

cations, is one of Donne's greatest achievements in giving poetic shape to personal feeling set within the communal eloquence of culture.

Wagner College

Notes

1. For the most extensive discussion of the liminal nature of festival and ritual see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969) and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

2. See such sample passages as *Sermons* I.45 ("All Lent, but the Vigill, the Eve of Easter: to so long a Festivall as shall never end, the Resurrection."); IV.315 ("all that which we call by the generall name of Religion, as it is the outward worship of God, is Ceremoniall and there is nothing more morall, then that some ceremoniall things there must be . . . because upon the Ceremoniall, much of the Essentiall depends too); IV.366 ("there is one *Moralitie,* that is the soule of all *Sabboths,* of all *Festivalls;* howsoever all *Sabboths* have a ceremoniall part in them, yet there is a *Morall* part that inanimates them all; they are all elemented of *Ceremonie, but* they [are] animated with Moralitie.")IV.310 ("And for the debt of prayer, God will not be paid, with money of our owne coyning, [with sudden, extemporall, inconsiderate prayer] but with currant money, that beares the Kings Image, and inscription; The Church of God, by his Ordinance, hath set his stampe, upon a Liturgie and Service, for his house . . . God heares the very first motions of a mans heart, which, that man, till,he proceed to a farther consideration, cloth not heare, not feele, not deprehend in himselfe"); and, on the limits of ceremony, VII.139-40("Christ is nearer us, when we behold him with the eyes of faith in Heaven, then when we seeke him in a piece of bread, or in a sacramentall box here . . . . The best determination of the Reall presence is to be sure, that thou be really present with him. Make sure thine own Reall presence, and doubt not of his"). Nor was Donne alone in this preoccupation. Festivals, both secular and sacred, were focal points, organizing the year and emphasizing its cyclical, over its chronological, nature. Not only did they order human lives, they also provided a principle of organization for human expression. Donne's *LXXX Sermons,* for example, when first published by John Donne Jr., were ordered according to the festivals on which they were delivered, rather than chronologically as they are in modern editions.

3. See as representative examples: Louis Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation,* 2nd ed. (215); John Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (402); Helen Gardner, *John Donne: The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets* (249-251); Herbert Grierson, *The Poems of John Donne* (2: 10); Arthur Marotti, *John Donne: Coterie Poet* (232-35); Gunter Kress, "Poetry as Anti-Language: A Reconsideration of Donne's 'Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day'," *PTL. A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Language* 3 (1978): 327-44; and John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art (* 172-4).

4. For example, A.B. Chambers, *Transfigured Rites in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1993),

pp. 115-125; and Clarence H. Miller, "Donne's 'A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day' and the Nocturns of Matins," *SEL* 6 (1966): 77-86.

5. Miller cites Baronius, an author cited by Donne, who matches the five features of matins with five functions listed by St. Paul: "*Cum convenitis, unusquisque vestrum Psalmum habet, doctrinam, Apocalypsim, linguam, interpretationem* [I Cor. 14:26]. Et vere in Matutino habemus Psalmos, Lectiones pro doctrina; Responsoria pro Apocalypsi, idest, revelatione; Evangelium pro lingua; Homiliam pro interpretatione . . ." The five-term refrains from the "Nocturnall" consist of the lines in which Love's "art did expresse / A quintessence [or fifth essence] even from nothingnesse," which is subdivided into the five-terms "privations . . . emptinesse . . . absence, darknesse, death" and their opposites "Life, soule, forme, spirit, whence they beeing have."