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"One, four, and infinite": John Donne, Thomas Harriot, and *Essayes in Divinity*

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The final paragraph of Part I of Donne's Fourth Prebend sermon, preached at St. Paul's on 28 January 1626/27, offers an image of those from "all the ends of the earth" seeking to apprehend God through the natural world. "Here is a new Mathematiques," Donne announces:

> without change of Elevation, or parallax, I that live in this Climate, and stand under this Meridian, looke up and fixe my self upon God, And they that are under my feete, look up to that place, which is above them, And as divers, as contrary as our places are, we all fixe at once upon one God, and meet in one Center; but we doe not so upon one Sunne, nor upon one constellation, or configuration in the Heavens; when we see it, those Antipodes doe not; but they, and we see God at once. (7:307)[1]

Donne's "new Mathematiques" is a witty projection of the shift from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican universe that initially

[1]All references to Donne's sermons, unless noted otherwise, are from the Simpson and Potter edition and are cited by volume and page number. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, eds., *Complete Sermons*, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 153-62).

emphasizes the spatial and temporal separation of those in this world whose center, according to the new philosophy, is no longer the earth, but the sun.[2] The peculiarities of elevation, parallax, climate, meridian, and constellation that locate Donne and those in the Antipodes are as "divers" and as "contrary" as is possible. The separation is heightened by Donne's paradoxical expression that in order to perceive the center, all must look up, and therefore away from one another. In developing the theorem of his "new Mathematiques," Donne calculates, not surprisingly, that only by fixing upon the eternal center that is God can the disparities of space and time be reconciled and, thus, can those who are separated in this world meet and be united. Yet, while Donne promotes a Copernican universe in this passage, he does so in a manner that shows his anxiety over this cosmological shifting of centers. For instance, although Donne and his antipodal cousins fix their gazes on the center that is above them, their relationship to one another is defined by the unnamed, yet palpable, space between them that constitutes the Ptolemaic center. Further, while Donne allows for a Copernican universe in this passage, he does so only by means of a translation from the physical to the metaphysical in which those who look up to the sun are to read it as God.

Long before the preaching of this Fourth Prebend sermon, however, Donne demonstrates a propensity for contemplating centers and a fascination with the implications. There is, of course, that center from "A Valediction forbidding mourning," defined by "the fixt foot" (27) of a compass, that determines by its firmness the justness of the arc scribing the relationship of the persona and

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[2]See Charles Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), especially pp. 108-110, in which he notes, "the identification of the sun with God is one of the concomitants of the Neoplatonic metaphysics, adduced to justify the new astronomy, appealing rather to the esthetic than to the mathematical demand made upon the new system" (p. 109).

his beloved.[3] There are also the centers imagined in "The Sunne Rising" and in "Loves Alchymie"; the former is the lovers' bed around which the sun makes its orbit, and the latter is the "centrique happinesse" (2) that lies deep in the mines of love. Perhaps the most salacious center in Donne's canon is that found in "*Loues Progresse.*" In proposing "The right true end of loue" (2), and as a consequence of his advice to "Preferre / One woman first, and then one thing in her" (9-10), the speaker of this elegy fixes on the bawdy pursuit of the woman's "Centrique part" (36).[4] The centers Donne imagines in these poems are, however, all conceived of within an essentially Ptolemaic conception of the universe.

By contrast, Donne's "*ELEGIE* On the vntimely Death of the *incomparable Prince*, HENRY" and his First and Second Anniversaries speak directly to the conflicts of shifting centers. The central conceit of the Prince Henry Elegy rests on the tension he establishes between two centers, the one reason and the other faith, that are now perceived to be rent apart because of the death of the Prince. The poem reveals the burden of Donne's intellectual need to synthesize reason and faith, Ptolemy and Copernicus, body and soul. In the wake of the discoveries of the new philosophy, Donne seeks to locate that place where "*Reason*, put t'her best *Extension*, / Almost meetes *Faith*, and makes both *Centres* one" (15-16).[5] In other words, the problem is not one of belief (Donne is certain of God's existence); the problem is one of how to situate

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[3]All references to Donne's poetry, unless noted otherwise, are from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1967), and are cited by line number.

[4]All references to the Elegies are from *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 2, The Elegies, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) and are cited by line number.

[5]All references to the Prince Henry Elegy are from *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 6, The Anniversaries and the Epicedes and Obsequies, gen. ed. Gary A. Stringer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) and are cited by line number.

these new observations of the heavens in relation to those celestial truths about which he was formerly certain, and to do so in a manner that has intellectual integrity. Likewise, it is in response to Donne's reading of Kepler and Galileo that he writes in "*The First Anniuersary*,"

> And new Philosophy cals all in doubt,
> The Element of fire is quite put out;
> The Sunne is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
> Can well direct him, where to looke for it.
> And freely men confesse, that this world's spent,
> When in the Planets, and the Firmament
> They seek so many new; they see that this
> Is crumbled out againe to his Atomis.
> 'Tis all in pieces, all cohærence gone;
> All iust supply, and all Relation. (205-14)[6]

Yet, in "*The Second Anniuersarie*," Donne instructs his soul, "Know that all lines which circles doe containe, / For once that they the center touch, do touch / Twice the circumference; and be thou such" (436-38). In the geometry of astronomical observation (as well as the geometry of theological speculation), Donne knows that the circumference is defined by the center; the peripheries of circles (and the peripherals of religion) make sense only in their extensions from and relations to the center.

In his Fourth Prebend sermon and in these poems, Donne's "new Mathematiques" is more than a superficial topical metaphor. For Donne and his contemporaries, how one reads the laws of Nature has profound implications for how one reads the Scriptures and, thus, for how one conceives both of the godhead and of the conduit for divine grace, that is the Church. At roughly the same time that Donne, in the poetic contexts of his First and Second

[6]All references to the First and Second Anniversaries are from *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol. 6, and are cited by line number.

Anniversaries and of his Prince Henry Elegy, was contemplating the shifting of cosmological centers, he was also writing his *Essayes in Divinity*.[7] Sometime between 1611 and 1615 Donne completed his *Essayes*, which he wrote as a demonstration of his intellectual fitness for ministry. In the years immediately following the radically new discoveries in astronomy, Donne is steeping himself in matters of biblical interpretation and religious controversy. Reading *Essayes in Divinity* in this context reveals Donne's development of a hermeneutic of the center, and it also exposes just how profoundly Donne understands the implications of the new philosophy, including the problems of the infinite. As Donne seems to indicate, the difficulty of manifesting, from the standpoint of practical theology, how humanity apprehends divinity is the same difficulty as calculating, from the standpoint of the new philosophy, how the finite expression of numbers and geometry articulates the infinite. One of Donne's own contemporaries and a fellow Englishman, Thomas Harriot, was immersed in the problems of expressing the infinite and infinitesimal as mathematic and spatial continuums. In fact, the verbal and conceptual parallels between *Essayes in Divinity* and Harriot's manuscript notes demonstrate the depth of Donne's familiarity with the new philosophy and, more importantly, illuminate the extent to which Harriot's materialism influences not only Donne's understanding of natural law, but also, by extension, the principles of his practical theology, especially with respect to his hermeneutic practice and his ecclesiology.

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[7]For the broader context of Donne's study of the new philosophy and of astronomy, see Coffin, esp. Chapter V, "The Rise of the New Philosophy," pp. 65-87; and Chapter VI, "The Moving of the Center," pp. 88-115.

DE INFINITIS

By the time he began writing *Essayes in Divinity*, Donne was familiar with Kepler's *De Stella Nova* (1606) and Galileo's *Sidereus Nuncius* (1610). Charles Coffin, in his *John Donne and the New Philosophy*, establishes that Donne's knowledge of the developments in astronomy extended beyond simple generalization and that in fact his study "had taught him something of its history; he knew that it had suffered rebuff and revision as well as enjoyed acceptance by some during the years that followed its promulgation."[8] "And, what is truly important," Coffin then adds, is that Donne "understood the alteration of the old system that the geometer effected in his diagrams made to represent the new order of the universe."[9] Donne had available to him, however, a more ready source than Kepler or Galileo regarding matters of natural philosophy and astronomy in the person of Thomas Harriot.

There are substantial reasons for believing that Donne and Harriot knew each another and exchanged ideas, despite the lack of any direct mention of one another in their respective writings.[10] Donne's life-long relationship with the Ninth Earl of Northumberland, Henry Percy, which began when Donne was about eleven years of age, would have provided him with ample

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[8]Ibid, p. 114.

[9]Ibid.

[10]One possible allusion to Harriot can be found in *Essayes in Divinity* when Donne reflects on the creation of the world and writes, "To make our approches nearer, and batter effectually, let him that will not confess this Nothing, assign something of which the world was made" (ed. Anthony Raspa [Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001], p. 34. All references to *Essayes* are from this edition and are cited by page number.) Harriot himself openly defied the notion that the world was created *ex nihilo*, and by way of repudiating this doctrine, he is known to have asserted repeatedly the commonplace from Lucretius (*De rerum natura*, 1.150) and Persius (*Satires*, III.83-84), "*ex nihilo nihil fit.*"

opportunity to interact with Harriot.[11] During the time that Donne was at work on *Ignatius His Conclave* and *Essayes in Divinity*, Percy was imprisoned in the Tower of London, and Donne would have had access to the Earl's impressive personal library, which included the most significant and recent publications on theology and the new philosophy.[12] During these same years, Thomas Harriot was living in a small house on the grounds of Percy's Syon House estate and was engaged in observations of the heavens using telescopes of his own construction.[13] Thus, given Donne's known interests in the new astronomy and his relationship with Percy, it is nearly impossible to think that Donne did not know Harriot and did not discuss natural philosophy with him, perhaps when they came to visit the Earl during the years he was confined in Martin Tower. It is even difficult to imagine, though no tangible evidence exists, that Donne did not look through Harriot's telescopes and view the heavens. However, Harriot's associations with Raleigh and Percy, both of whom were imprisoned in the Tower during the second decade of the seventeenth century, makes it easy to understand why Donne would not name Harriot in any of his early prose works. After all, Donne's desire to move in public circles would not

[11]For significant historical details relating to Donne's friendship with Percy, see Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 16, 83, 158-59, and 177. Also, R. C. Bald, *John Donne: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), notes that "Another possible link between Donne and Hariot was Hariot's pupil and correspondent Sir William Lower, who is twice mentioned in Donne's letters" (p. 229).

[12]For a discussion of Percy's collection of books, see G. R. Batho, "The Library of the 'Wizard' Earl: Henry Percy Ninth Earl of Northumberland (1564-1632)," *The Library* 15 (1960): 246-61.

[13]See John W. Shirley, *Thomas Harriot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), esp. chap. X, "The Mature Scholar," pp. 380-424.

have been served by highlighting an association with Harriot, who was suspected by many, including King James, to be an atheist.[14]

The thousands of pages that constitute Thomas Harriot's extant papers reveal the mind of a mathematician. The numerical equations and geometric drawings that fill the vast majority of these papers attest to Harriot's interest not only in numeric progression (especially as related to problems of formulating the infinite and the infinitesimal), but also in calculating correspondences between circles and triangles (as a means, in many cases, for addressing problems of navigation). Of the comparatively small amounts of prose contained in Harriot's papers, a significant portion of that prose consists of pages Harriot labels "*De infinitis.*"[15]

When Harriot sets before himself the problems of contemplating the infinite, he recognizes, on the one hand, that atomism opens possibilities for describing a universe of boundless time and space and, on the other, that it presents mathematical as well as logical difficulties for determining spatial and temporal continuity. The essential debate in Harriot's day was one between the established influence of Aristotle's theory of the universe and the developing reconfiguration of an atomic theory. In his *Physics*, Aristotle objects both to the continuity of atoms and, as a corollary, to an infinite universe. In particular, Artistotle reasons that since atoms, which are indivisibles, have no parts, they can

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[14]For discussions regarding Harriot's religious belief, see Jean Jacquot, "Thomas Harriot's Reputation for Impiety," *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London* 9 (1952): 164-87; John W. Shirley, *Thomas Harriot: A Biography*; and Scott Mandelbrote, "The Religion of Thomas Harriot," in *Thomas Harriot: An Elizabethan Man of Science*, ed. Robert Fox (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 246-79.

[15]The bulk of Harriot's manuscripts are housed at the British Library, and the largest section of the "*De infinitis*" papers are located at BL Add. MS 6782, ff. 362r-375r, while other related and relevant pages include: BL Add. MS 6784, ff. 359r-360r, 429r-430r; BL Add. MS 6785, ff. 190r, 192r, 436r-437r; and BL Add. MS 6786, f. 349v.

only come into contact with one another as whole to whole; therefore, atoms cannot form a continuum.[16] Yet, the new atomists, including Giordano Bruno, propose that while atoms are indeed indivisibles and thus have no parts, atoms are nevertheless defined by their limits (what Bruno calls their *termini* and what Harriot refers to as *minima*), which touch the limits of other atoms by an indivisible distance and, thereby, form a continuum.[17]

There is little doubt from looking through his notes that Harriot is drawn to an atomistic conception of the universe, and yet he clearly feels the tension of the logical and mathematical problems raised by the Aristotelian view. So, for example, at the top of the first page that forms the main body of his notes on the infinite, Harriot writes, "*De infinitis*" and "*De continuo*" in the upper left and right hand corners, respectively.[18] Aristotle's name then appears as the first word of the first paragraph, which expresses the philosopher's concerns regarding continuums, and this paragraph is followed by two drawings—the first is a representation of two separate cubes, and immediately below these figures appears a drawing of the two cubes joined together, forming a common plane between them. Thus, the second drawing provides a geometric representation of a continuum, but one that Harriot seems determined to reconcile with Aristotle. In addition, Harriot sprinkles throughout his often enigmatic *De infinitis* papers such phrases as "*Clava Herculis*" (from chapter 39 of Roger Bacon's *Opus tertius*, in which Bacon uses the phrase as a metaphor for the infinite divisibility of matter)[19] and "*Ratio Achilles*" (an

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[16]For a background discussion, see J. D. North, "Finite and Otherwise: Aristotle and Some Seventeenth Century Views," in *Nature Mathematized*, vol. 1, ed. W. R. Shea (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 113-48.

[17]See Hilary Gatti, *The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge: Giordano Bruno in England* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 57-65.

[18]BL Add. MS 6782, f. 362r.

[19]See BL Add. MSS 6782, f. 372r; 6786, f. 349v; and 6788, f. 566r.

allusion to Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the tortoise).[20] These references to scholastic and ancient thought show that Harriot is fascinated with the logical and mathematical contradictions that arise when one imagines, and attempts to describe, an infinite universe composed of finite matter. As a result, he provides geometric drawings and mathematical calculations not only to illustrate continuums of finite numbers and shapes that culminate in the infinite,[21] but also to propose that finite and infinite shapes can be moved both finitely and infinitely in time.[22]

On yet another of the *De infinitis* pages, Harriot draws a circle, labeling the center point *a* and three points along the circumference as *b*, *c*, and *d* (with lines connecting the center to each of the three points). He then explains that because a circle's circumference contains an infinite number of points, the center point must also be infinite in order for an infinite number of lines to pass from any given point on the circumference through the center. The dilemma, as Harriot recognizes, is how the center can be both a single point and yet be infinitely divisible. Or, as Hilary Gatti summarizes, "Given that an infinite number of lines can be

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[20]See BL Add. MSS 6782, ff. 367r and 368r; 6784, ff. 359r and 360r; and 6785, f. 437r. On Achilles and the tortoise, see Jonathan Barnes, "Zeno: Paradox and Progression," in *The Presocratic Philosophers*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Barnes (London & New York: Routledge and Paul, 1979), pp. 273-75.

[21]See, for example, BL Add. MS 6782, f. 364r, which contemplates the geometric progression of a vector; and also BL Add. MS 6782, f. 373r, which illustrates Euclid's demonstration that a circle, whose center is *a*, touches the line *bc* at no other place except *b*. The context for this latter example seems to indicate that Harriot is thinking of the circle moving along the line; thus, the infinite number of points that constitute the circumference of the circle will touch the infinite number of points that make up the line an infinite number of times. Harriot thereby seems to demonstrate that two finite shapes, namely a circle and a line, can represent the infinite.

[22]See BL Add. MS 6782, ff. 365r and 374r.

drawn from the centre to the periphery, it must either be supposed that the infinitesimals at the centre are less infinite in number than those on the periphery, or that they are divided by the lines."[23] Because both conclusions are logically absurd, Gatti offers a compelling argument "to establish the figure of *Harriot as philosophical sceptic*,"[24] as one who, as she argues is deeply influenced by Bruno,[25] works unsuccessfully to reconcile the atomism he seems so eager to prove with the Aristotelian thought in which he was trained.[26] The problem that preoccupies Harriot is how can the infinite be configured, or in more practical terms, how does the finite touch and even constitute the infinite?

In a theological context, Donne also concerns himself with circles and centers, specifically the ways in which the relationship

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[23]"The Natural Philosophy of Thomas Harriot," in *Thomas Harriot*, ed. Fox, p. 78.

[24]Ibid., p. 77.

[25]Gatti argues emphatically throughout her various works on Harriot that "the Northumberland circle as a whole [including Harriot] accepted the full Brunian thesis of an infinite, homogeneous universe" (*The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge* [London & New York: Routledge, 1989], p. 57). See also her "Minimum and Maximum, Finite and Infinite: Bruno and the Northumberland Circle," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 48 (1985):144-63; and "The Natural Philosophy of Thomas Harriot," in *Thomas Harriot*, ed. Fox, pp. 64-92. For an opposing view, see Stephen Clucas, "Thomas Harriot and the Field of Knowledge in the English Renaissance," in *Thomas Harriot*, ed. Fox, who argues that "although Gatti has worked closely with the Harriot manuscripts, she has been unable to find any more convincing arguments for Bruno's influence on the Northumberland circle than Yates" and that "she mistakes a generic similarity between Harriot and Bruno's arguments on infinitism for an actual borrowing" (pp. 98-99).

[26]Yet another page of *De infinitis* aptly illustrates this intellectual tension as Harriot first lists ten propositions regarding maximums and minimums and then scribbles at the bottom of the page, "Much ado about nothing. Great warres and no blowes. Who is the foole now?" (BL Add. MS 6785, f. 436r).

of the divine and human may be understood using the terms of geometry and mathematics. In that often quoted letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, dated May-June 1609, Donne complains to his friend regarding the debates over the Oath of Allegiance of "the Divines of these times" who are "become meer Advocates, as though Religion were a temporall inheritance" and who "write for Religion, without it."[27] In the final sentences of this letter, Donne pleads earnestly for a religious unity that can accommodate a diversity of Christian belief and practice. He imagines such a unity as "a Mathematique point, which is the most indivisible and unique thing which art can present, [and which] flowes into every line which is derived from the Center," for he adds, "God himselfe, who only is one, seems to have been eternally delighted, with a disunion of persons."[28] This image of a circle, with lines extending from the center to the periphery, is the very one that Harriot troubles himself with in his manuscripts, and Donne offers the geometric conundrum as a model for the Trinity in a manner that shows his own scepticism regarding singularity and exclusion in the Church. Donne also includes this same image in his verse letter "*To the Countess of* Bedford (Honour is so sublime perfection)," in which, as a means for explaining the unity of discretion and religion, he writes, "In those poor types of God (round circles) so / Religions tipes, the peeclesse centers flow, / And are in all the lines which all wayes goe" (46-48).[29] Again, it is the image of the lines

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[27] *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour (1651)*, ed. M. Thomas Hester (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles, 1977), p. 160.

[28] Ibid, pp. 163-64.

[29] See also Donne's sermon in which he explains the notion of a vocational calling using this same geometric figure: "If you carry a Line from the Circumference, to the Circumference againe, as a Diameter, it passes the Center, it flowes from the Center, it looks to the Center both wayes. God is the Center; The Lines above, and the Lines below, still respect and regard the Center; Whether I doe any action honest in the sight of men, or any action acceptable to God, whether I doe things belonging to this life, or to the next, still I must passe all through the

connecting the center and circumference that Donne presents as a symbol for unity in diversity.

Although Donne and Harriot are preoccupied with the perfection of the circle, as well as with the relationship of the circumference and the center, they both know that the circle does not fully answer the problems of practical theology or of practical science. Further demonstrating his knowledge of the mathematics and geometry of his day, Donne laments in "*The First Anniuersary*" the disproportion of the universe, noting that the course of the sun "is not round; nor can the Sunne / Perfit a Circle, or maintaine his way / One inche direct" (268-70) so that it moves instead "with a cousening line, / Steales by that point, and so is Serpentine" (271-72). And Donne then adds, "So, of the stares which boast that they do runne / In Circle still, none ends where he begunne. / All their proportion's lame, it sinks, it swels" (275-77).

For Harriot the problem of the universe's lack of circular perfection is realized on a page of notes on which he writes in the upper right-hand corner, "The problem of a rectiline rumbe infinitely turning about ye centre and yet the line finite and to be moved in an hour or any other given time."[30] Immediately below this statement Harriot includes a drawing of two circles, one directly above the other, and he connects the center points of each circle with a spiral line that forms the shape of a reverse "s." What Harriot imagines in this drawing is the line that a ship must follow as it moves, on the curved surface of the earth, between any two compass points. Thus, the movement of the rhumb-line begins in the top circle as a spiral, moving clockwise from the center. Of this image, he then notes, "to be made double to passe to two centers." In other words, Harriot doubles the image by adding the bottom circle, in which the rhumb-line, once it passes from the top circle to the bottom one, reverses its spiral arc, moving counter-clockwise

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Center, and direct all to the glory of God, and keepe my heart right, without variation towards him"(9:406-07).

[30]BL Add. MS 6786, f. 349v.

towards the second center. To the left of this drawing, Harriot includes the following list of notations: "Gordianus nodus, Labyrinthus Daedali, Clava Herculis." Further down the page he also writes, "Democritus his reason pro atomis," which seems to indicate, as Gatti asserts, that "the impenetrability of the Democritean atom thus appears as the solution which cuts through the tangled Aristotelian arguments about infinitely large and small quantities."[31] The drawing and the accompanying phrases reveal that Harriot is again contemplating the problem of infinity, but he is doing so on this occasion expressly in terms of the practical context of navigation. Harriot realizes, and illustrates, that the infinite movement in time of any finite object in space (such as the rhumb-line "infinitely turning about ye centre") creates not a straight line, but a spiral, or as Donne phrases it, a "Serpentine," a "cousening line." Harriot then discloses his anxieties concerning his expression of these ideas with a list that he writes at the bottom of the page: "Abyssus, Cerberus, Tenebrae Tartarae, Cimmeriae tenebrae." These phrases articulate Harriot's scepticism as a natural philosopher, and they may even point to his fears for the ways in which these concepts challenge religious orthodoxy. Donne also feels tension regarding the spiral line that defines the infinite movement of the finite, for although he uses the spiral to describe the progress from the physical world to the eternal truth of God, he never imagines such a line as the ideal, but rather as the unavoidable path that one must take in the fallen world.

Donne's Second Anniversary ("Of the Progres of the Soule") opens with a contemplation of the infinite in relation to the finite: "Nothing could make mee sooner to confesse / That this world had an euerlastingnesse, / Then to consider, that a yeare is runne" (1-3). He then introduces within the next few lines a series of similes, the first of which is that of "a ship which hath strooke saile" (7), in order to establish that "So strugles this dead world, now shee is

[31]Gatti, "The Natural Philosophy of Thomas Harriot," in *Thomas Harriot*, p. 80.

gone; / For there is motion in corruption" (21-22). It is the "motion in corruption" that accounts for the "cousening line" from the First Anniversary and that stands in direct contrast to the ideal progress of the soul that Donne promotes. In fact, the movement he contemplates throughout the Second Anniversary is that of the straight line progess of Elizabeth Drury's soul. Donne imagines her soul as a projectile fired from "a rusty Peece" (181), and once discharged, the weapon (that is, the body) "is flowen / In peeces" (181-82) so that the bullet/soul "is his owne, / And freely flies" (182-83). Further in the same passage, the young Drury's soul "Dispatches in a minute all the way, / Twixt Heauen, and Earth: she staies not in the Ayre, / To looke what Meteors thee themselues prepare" (188-91). Donne continues, "Shee baits not at the Moone" (195) and "Venus retards her not" (197), for in her spiritual state, she is one "Who, if shee meete the body of the Sunne, / Goes through, not staying till his course be runne" (201-02). He then adds, "ere shee can consider how shee went, / At once is at, and through the Firmament" (205-06). In response to Drury's example, Donne asks his own body-encased soul, "In this low forme, poore soule what wilt thou doe?" (290). Even though in this world he "look'st through spectacles," in which "small things seem great, / Below" (293-94), he urges his soul,

> But vp vnto the watch-towre get,
> And see all things despoyld of fallacies:
> Thou shalt not peepe through lattices of eies,
> Nor heare through Laberinths of eares, nor learne
> By circuit, or collections to discerne.
> In Heauen thou straight know'st all, concerning it,
> And what concerns it not, shall straight forget.
> (294-300)

While at a spiritual level Donne elevates and idealizes the progress of a straight line, he knows that in this world the soul remains attached to the body, and humankind is therefore

condemned to learn and live "through Laberinths" and "By circuit." Thus, in the essential downward movement which characterizes his anatomizing of the world in *The First Anniuersary* and in the upward movement which characterizes his progess of the soul in *The Second Anniuersary*, Donne establishes the poles of doubt and belief between which he negotiates the course of his thought. And he knows that the finite movement from the one to the other, as Harriot also knows, is traversed in this world by a "cousening line."

The spiral path to religious certainty is perhaps illustrated most clearly in Donne's "Satyre III." In the context of the sectarian differences and divisiveness addressed in this poem, Donne's religious scepticism is expressed when he advises, "doubt wisely, in strange way / To stand inquiring right, is not to stray; / To sleepe, or runne wrong, is" (77-79). Then, introducing the most familiar image of the poem, he writes:

> on a huge hill,
> Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will
> Reach her, about must, and about must goe;
> And what the'hills suddennes resists, winne so;
> Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,
> Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night.
> To will, implyes delay, therefore now doe.
> Hard deeds, the bodies paines; hard knowledge too
> The mindes indeavours reach, and mysteries
> Are like the Sunne, dazling, yet plaine to'all eyes.
> (79-88)

Positioned as it is at the top of "a huge hill," "Truth stands" and is "plaine to all eyes"; in other words, Truth can be seen clearly and directly.[32] However, the "Cragged, and steep" pathway to Truth

[32]At the bottom of an otherwise blank manuscript page, Harriot notes, "The truth when it is seen is knowne without other evidence" (BL Add. MS 6788, f. 131v).

affords no such unfettered, straight-line access. If viewed from above, the path ascending the hill of Truth would appear as a spiral on which those who make the journey "about must, and about must goe." Thus, the demands of "the'hills suddennes" and the human, and therefore finite, limitations that must be met with "hard deeds" and "hard knowledge" provide the only possibility for attaining the absolute, and therefore infinite, perspective of Truth. The idea here calls to mind again Donne's Fourth Prebend sermon, and the pronouncement of his "new Mathematiques." Following his assertion that he and those in the Antipodes "see God at once," Donne adds, by way of restatement, "How various formes of Religion passes us through divers wayes, yet by the very light and power of Nature, we meet in one God" (7:307). The light of Nature allows for a straight line discovery of God/Truth, yet the theological rhumb-line marking one's successful navigation through the waters of religious controversy can pass no other direction than "through divers wayes."

While it cannot be argued definitively that Donne had the particulars of Harriot's notes in mind during the years leading up to his writing of *Essayes in Divinity*, there can be little doubt that Donne's theological meditations (prose and poetry, as well as public and private) are deeply informed by the same problems of the infinite about which Harriot was thinking. When read as contemplations of the infinite, *Essayes in Divinity* shows Donne working towards a practical theology in which he imagines, and fashions, the movement from the temporal and spatial vagaries of this life to the clarity of the eternal. In other words, *Essayes* is not, as Arthur Marotti asserts, "a piece of mock- or comical-scholarship, parodying the methods of scriptural exegesis and mystical writing,"[33] but instead it is a treatise in which Donne, through his meditative engagement with the infinite, establishes

[33] *John Donne, Coterie Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 261.

his own hermenuetic principles and projects his conception of the Church.

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The opening paragraphs of *Essayes in Divinity* find Donne in a posture of humility as he sits at the door meditating upon the threshold of the "well provided Castle," that is, the Holy Scriptures (7). Contrasting himself with the "reverend Divines, who by an ordinary calling are Officers and Commissioners from God," and for whom "the great Doors [of the Castle/Scriptures] are open," Donne "must stoop and humble himselfe" to enter by way of "a litle wicket" (7). As his model of humility, Donne looks to Christ and (noting in the margin Matt. 11:29: "learne of me, that I am meke and lowlie in heart") describes the paradigm of ascent and descent that determines the space of his hermeneutic: "His [Christ's] humility, to be like us, was a Dejection; but ours, to be like him, is our chiefest exaltation" (7). As Donne explains, "it is not such a groveling, frozen, and stupid Humility, as should quench the activity of our understanding, or make us neglect the Search of those Secrets of God, which are accessible" (7). Donne's exegesis of the opening verses of Genesis and Exodus seeks to inscribe the intersection of the dejection of Christ and of the exaltation of humankind. It is in the contemplation of this intersection that Harriot's *De infinitis* papers shed light on Donne's thought in *Essayes*. In particular, Harriot's calculations of the infinite offer significant parallels with Donne's search of the accessible secrets of God, specifically, the spiral line (that is, the "hard deeds" and "hard knowledge" that characterize the necessarily circuitous, "cousening" path leading to Truth), and also progression (namely, the accumulation of finite words and deeds extending to the infinite Word).

In fact, it is the space between God's descent from the eternal to the temporal and Donne's own ascent from the finite to the infinite that he examines in the scripture text for Book I of *Essayes*, Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created Heaven and Earth."

Donne makes clear in the opening paragraph of *Essayes* that the activity of God calls for a meditative response. "Humility, and Studiousnesse," he writes, "(as it is opposed to curiosity, and transgresses not her bounds) are so near of kin, that they are both agreed to be limbes and members of one vertue, *Temperance*" (7-8). Within the tempering action of humbling oneself in order to gaze studiously at the infinite divine, Donne locates, through this paradox, the point of confluence: "It is then humility to study God, and a strange miraculous one; for it is an ascending humility" (8). He reiterates a similar paradox of contemplating the eternal in time at the opening of Book II, stating, "The Meditation upon Gods works is infinite; and whatsoever is so, is Circular, and returns into it selfe, and is every where beginning and ending, and yet no where either" (45).

In *Essayes in Divinity*, Donne seeks to locate the space where the divine and human touch, the pathway from this finite world to the infinite dwelling of God. He finds such a space in the writing itself. It is undoubtedly the "Serpentine" line of Donne's associative thought and use of paradox, as well as the array of scholarly references in the work, that leads Evelyn Simpson, in her "Introduction" to *Essayes*, to highlight the "fragmentary character" and the "much less polished" style of the text, adding as she does that the individual essays read "like the notes of a theological professor who is lecturing on Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus."[34] By describing the *Essayes* as lecture notes, Simpson rightly characterizes the excessive learning with which Donne has filled this work, but she overlooks, and thereby misrepresents, Donne's own stated intentions.

In the prefatory paragraphs of Book II of *Essayes*, Donne asserts, "Upon this confidence, and conscience of purposing good, I proceed in these Sermons; for they are such," adding that "these lack thus much of Sermons, that they have no Auditory" (47-48). Donne explicitly states that the only difference between these

[34] *Essays in Divinity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. x, xi.

writings and a sermon is the absence of an auditory, and thus he implies that the purpose of this work is precisely the same as that of a sermon.[35] Because Donne knows the difference between a lecture and a sermon,[36] he also knows that above all else a sermon should bring souls to God through a proper elucidation of the Scriptures.[37] Thus, while these essays constitute "private Meditations" and his auditory is absent,[38] the act of writing itself

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[35]See Michael Hall, "Searching and Not Finding: the Experience of Donne's *Essays in Divinity*" *Genre* 14 (1981), in which he argues that Donne "may have considered them 'essays' according to a well understood seventeenth-century meaning of the word: tentative efforts in an area in which the author is not an authority or expert, has not perfected his ideas and opinions, but is merely a beginner or an apprentice" (p. 424). See also Joan Webber, *Contrary Music* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), pp. 16-17, who argues that *Essayes* has a sermonic structure.

[36]In a Lincoln's Inn sermon from 30 January 1619/20, Donne informs the benchers at one point, "we are not upon a Lecture, but upon a Sermon, and therefore we will not multiply variety of opinions" (2:320). Donne offers an even more telling distinction between lectures and sermons in the opening paragraph of his marriage sermon for the Earl of Bridgewater's daughter when he specifies that "a Sermon intends *Exhortation* principally and *Edification*, and a holy stirring of religious affections, and then *matters of Doctrine*, and points of *Divinity*, occasionally, secondarily, as the words of the text may invite them; But *Lectures* intend principally *Doctrinal points*, and matter of *Divinity*, and matter of *Exhortation* but *occasionally*, and as in a *second* place" (8:95). While we may quibble with Donne that the "*matters of Doctrine*" and "points of *Divinity*" are not as occasional or as secondary in *Essayes* as we may wish, the exhortation and edification that Donne principally intends help us understand the effects he seeks to produce.

[37]For a good overview of the historical context, as well as Donne's application, of this idea, see Dennis Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," *ELH* 27 (1960): 276-97.

[38]Cf. Coffin, *John Donne and the New Philosophy*, in which he argues that the *Essayes* "were 'private' rather than public discourses, in which he

determines the space where he meets the divine. Donne's ascent in writing a study that meets the descent of God is the biblical/theological equivalent of what he attempts politically in *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610). In the dedicatory epistle of that work, Donne explains to King James, "Of my boldnesse in this addresse, I most humbly beseech your Majestie, to admit this excuse, that having observed, how much your Majestie had vouchsafed to descend to a conversation with your Subjects, by way of your Bookes, I also conceiv'd an ambition, of ascending to your presence, by the same way."[39] Just as Donne writes *Pseudo-Martyr* in order to meet the King in conversation, so through the meditative activity of writing *Essayes in Divinity* he fashions, through his "ascending humility," a place of dialogue with the godhead.

In her recent article discussing the spatial contexts of Donne's poetry, Lisa Gorton describes the "quality of tone" in "A Valediction forbidding mourning" as "emphatic, familiar, modern, immediate; and yet," she goes on to explain, Donne's "images of the cosmos reach outwards, and backwards."[40] It is this pattern of "outwards, and backwards," or of ascent and descent, that characterizes the space of Donne's hermeneutic in *Essayes* (and that he draws upon later in his sermons after being ordained as one of those "reverend Divines"[41]) specifically in terms of a consideration

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[Donne] wished to clear up in his mind certain fundamental religious problems" (p. 249).

[39] *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), p. 4.

[40] *JDJ* 18 (1999): 66.

[41] In his Hanworth sermon, Donne asks, by way of assertion, "How different are the wayes of God, from the ways of man? The eyes of God from the eyes of man? And the wayes, and eyes of a godly man, from the eyes, and wayes of a man of this world?" (4:170-71). Donne responds, to those patrons who form his auditory (principally James Hay and Henry Percy), that the worldly heights of title and rank only make us think "we see far," whereas to apprehend what "every man may see," that which

of the movement from the finite to the infinite that allows him to synthesize the tensions between contending sources of religious authority. In the remainder of *Essayes*, Donne unfolds the idiosyncracies of his method for approaching the Scriptures, by which he negotiates the destabilizing effects of religious rivalry. The position Donne takes in *Essayes* is akin to Joshua Scodel's characterization, in his discussion of "Satyre III," of "the free, inquiring self" who, "dependent on God as he seeks a beneficient relationship to the world," is "neither [a] 'decentered' subject nor the fully autonomous person imagined by the Enlightenment but rather a distinctive early modern *tertium quid*."[42] The center Donne seeks is not some flabby compromise, some unsatisfying, because ill-matched, mingling of Roman Catholic tradition and Protestant ingenuity. Instead, he works toward a hermeneutic that avoids losing itself in the peripheries of divisive wrangling by locating the center where those who are "divers" and "contrary" can meet, as well as by struggling to gain the difficult ground of the

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"man may behold afar off" (to quote the scripture text from Job 36:25), to achieve the perspective from which to fix on God, Donne writes, "he that will see this object, must lye low" (4:171). See also *Sermons* 10:52 and, especially, 7:308-309, in which Donne discusses the names of "Jesus" and "Christ" in terms of ascent and descent and the meeting of the divine and human.

[42]"John Donne and the Politics of the Mean," *John Donne's Religious Imagination*, eds. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Francis Malpezzi (Conway: University of Central Arkansas Press, 1995), p. 60. My own conclusions regarding Donne's hermeneutic of the center are substantially in agreement with Scodel's notion of the religious mean: "While in "Satire III" Donne transformed and endowed with intense religious significance both Aristotelian ethics and skeptical epistemology in order to articulate his personal vision of the true religious mean, the religious prose Donne composed after joining the English church draws eclectically and idiosyncratically upon classical, patristic, and Scholastic formulations in order to outline a less radical but still independent vision of the proper religious mean" (p. 70).

"cousening," spiral path leading to Truth. Accordingly for Donne, meditative dialogue, or devotional conversation, produces a theological continuum extending from his humble ascent to the divine descent that is reminiscent of Harriot's calculations for progressions of finite numbers that culminate in the infinite.

As a result, Donne's hermeneutic of the center is an interpretive method that is not only based upon, but that also promotes, union and community. He writes in *Essayes* that in the interpretation of the Scriptures "the Church hath wisely hedged us in so farr, that all men may know, and cultivate, and manure their own part, and not adventure upon great reserv'd mysteries, nor trespass upon this book, without inward humility, and outward interpretations," for he clarifies, "it is not enough to have *objects*, and *eyes* to see, but you must have *light* too" (9). The light that permits one to view the Scriptures fully, that is properly, is generated from both "inward humility" and "outward interpretations." Donne's method is one that avoids the extreme, on the one hand, of the "schismatical singularity" of separatists who eschew tradition and, on the other, of the Roman Catholics who subvert, as Donne sees it, the exercise of reason by affording the Church Fathers the same authority as scripture (in the Council of Trent rulings).[43] Donne's position establishes instead a model by which the individual and community are stabilized by the very tension that seeks to pull the other down. In other words, the self is realized in its willful participation in the Church, but only to the extent that the activities of both the individual and the Church observe their respective bounds in responding to the Word of God.[44]

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[43]For the broader context of Donne's objections to these rulings at Trent, see my "John Donne and Paolo Sarpi: Rendering the Council of Trent," in *John Donne and the Protestant Reformation*, ed. Mary Arshagouni Papazian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), esp. pp. 95-97 and 109-10 n11.

[44]Michael Hall, "Searching and Not Finding," argues, "Throughout the *Essays* Donne searches into many things, but he always returns to

Donne reiterates this issue of avoiding the extremes leading to divisiveness when, at the beginning of Book II of *Essayes*, he writes against those "who for ostentation and magnifying their wits, excerpt and tear shapeless and unsignificant rags of a word or two, from whole sentences, and make them obey their purpose in discoursing; The Souldiers would not divide our Saviours garment, though past his use and his propriety" (45-46). He then adds, "No garment is so neer God as his word: which is so much his, as it is *he*" (46). Yet, Donne goes beyond this assertion that the Word of God is God by insisting on the communal context of the Scriptures when he writes, "but the whole Trinity speaks in every word" (46). Thus, the community of the godhead that "speaks in every word" provides the individual members of the Church with a divine pattern for a dialogic continuum.

In the very next sentence Donne further explains the nuances of his hermeneutic principles:

> for the word of God is not the word of God in any other sense then literall, and that also is not the literall, which the letter seems to present, for so to diverse understandings there might be diverse literall senses; but it is called literall, to distinguish it from the Morall, Allegoricall, and the other senses; and is that which the Holy Ghost doth in that place principally intend. (46)

Relying in this passage on Aquinas' definition of literal interpretation (*Summa Theologiæ*, I.1.10), Donne emphasizes again the need to avoid "singularity," a pursuit of the letter that can produce a variety of interpretations "to diverse understandings." Singular interpretations, regardless of how much they proliferate among separate individuals, can never elevate one beyond the finite

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Scripture to get his bearings, to re-establish his purpose and position. The Bible, therefore, remains the central authority around which the *Essays in Divinity* are written, and it is an authority which Donne has no intention of undermining or subverting"(p. 427).

limitations of the self because such approaches to the Scriptures leave individuals isolated from one another. Conversation, however, marks the points of contact between diverse, finite ideas and thereby forms a continuum reaching to the descent of God. The literal interpretation ("that which the Holy Ghost doth in that place principally intend") is for Donne one of communal dialogue, that is, the Holy Spirit translates the Word that is the Trinity through the "inward humility" of individuals who themselves join with the Spirit-informed "outward interpretations" of the larger Church community.[45]

Part 4 of Book I of *Essayes*, in which Donne contemplates the meaning of the phrase "heaven and earth," illuminates the turnings of this interpretive course. Donne opens this final part of the first book by lamenting, "So natural is the disease of *Meum & Tuum* to us, that even contemplative men, which have abandon'd temporall propriety, are delighted, and have their *Complacentiam*, in having their spirituall Meditations and inventions knowne to be theirs" (38). By contrast, Donne includes himself among "Interlopers, not staple Merchants, nor of the company, nor within the commission of Expositors of the Scriptures," and from his humbled position he proposes to "attempt not any part actually possess'd before, nor disseise others," choosing instead "onely a little [to] refresh, what others have said . . . and then contemplate their immensity" (38). He contends that all of the divergent expositors of the words "heaven and earth" fall into the following categories: those who are "too supple and slack, and so miscarried with the streame and tide of elder Authority"; those who are "too narrow and slavish, and so coasting ever within the view and protection of Philosophy"; and those who are "too singular, and so disdaining all beaten paths" (38). Then, in the midst of providing a detailed recounting of the commentary from Chrysostom, Basil, Aquinas, and others, Donne details Augustine's view that "the Heaven signifies Angels, and the Earth *Materiam primam*, out of which all things were produc'd"

[45]See *Sermons* 8:268 and 9:245-46.

(39). In order further to illuminate Augustine's meaning, Donne draws upon Piccolomini (whom he calls "that late *Italian* Distiller and Sublimer of old definitions") and explains that *Materiam primam* is that which is "first and last; immortall and perishable; formed and formelesse; One, four, and infinite" (39).

The larger point here is the hermeneutic process that Donne is practicing. In short, Donne seeks to contemplate and thereby understand the divine by joining in dialogue with the myriad of opinions on these words of scripture. This hermeneutic process is the equivalent, in theological terms, of "a rectiline rumb infinitely turning about ye center and yet the line finite." As a result, the extensive references throughout *Essayes in Divinity* to the Latin Fathers, to the Schoolmen, to the commentaries of Pererius and Calvin, and to the writings of Pico, Johann Reuchlin, and Rabbis Moses (Maimonides) and Solomon (Rashi) are not only the proofs that Donne had "survayed and digested the whole body of Divinity,"[46] but they are also a demonstration of a hermeneutic following the spiral path to Truth. For Donne, the authority of the Scriptures is immediately apparent, but the interpretation and application of the Scriptures always occur along the ever-turning line of communal dialogue that can only be won through "hard deeds" and "hard knowledge."

Donne's insistence on the literal interpretation of scripture as that which the Holy Spirit principally intends is bolstered by the temporal configurations he employs in *Essayes*. In particular, Donne works within two conceptions of time—one in which he asserts the progress, or perfecting, of time, and the other in which he negotiates the tensions between biblical history and biblical prophecy. Both of these temporal configurations complement one another in that they both serve to define the nature and purpose of the Church in the world and in eternity.

In his 1628 Christmas sermon, Donne enumerates the means available for understanding God through a temporal progress that

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[46] *Pseudo-Martyr*, ed. Anthony Raspa, p. 13.

moves "from the light and notification of God, which we have in nature, to a clearer light, which we have in the Law and Prophets, and then a clearer then that in the Gospell, and a clearer, at least a nearer then that, in the Church" (8:306).[47] While he expresses this conception of time more succinctly in this sermon than he does in *Essayes*, the principles for the perfecting of time are clearly on Donne's mind throughout this earlier work. The Book of Creatures provides "the *Common law* by which God governs us" (88); that is, Nature is a text that can only be read properly by fixing on the Creator who is revealed in it. While ideally the Laws of Nature should be sufficient for governing human faith and practice, the degeneracy of humankind as a consequence of the Fall brought about the need for the Law and Prophets, the precise benefits of which Donne specifies in the closing paragraphs of *Essayes*: "one benefit of the Law was, that it did in some measure restore them towards the first light of Nature: For, if man had kept that, he had needed no outward law; for then he was to himself a law, having all law in his heart" (100), and further, "Another benefit of the law, . . . is, that it hath prepar'd us to Christ, by manifold and evident prophesies" (101-02). Even as the Scriptures restore "the first light of Nature" and prepare "us to Christ," they record not only the sweep of finite time, from the creation to the last judgment, but also the progression of time towards its fulfillment in eternity. As a result, Donne asserts in *Essayes*, "we have now a clearer understanding of the Scriptures then former times, (for we inherit the talents and travels [travails] of al Expositors, and have overlived most of the prophecies)" (29-30). The accumulation of learning over time that begins with an understanding of the Laws of Nature is being revalued by Donne in terms of Harriot's calculations of the infinite; however, for

[47]All of Part 3 of this sermon (pp. 306-09) offers a precise explanation of the details of this temporal progression, which seems especially poignant for a Christmas sermon since Christmas ends the waiting of Advent and celebrates the Incarnation.

Donne this revaluation must occur with an eye towards the clearer light of the Law and Prophets, the Gospels, and the Church. When exercised in this manner, the accumulation of learning over time becomes a curative by which the limitations of time are reduced through time, as one moves closer to the infinite.

While Donne maintains that the Scriptures point to the perfecting *of time*, he also confronts the problem of how to read and apply the Scriptures profitably *in time*. Donne holds the parameters of this problem before himself right from the opening of *Essayes* by citing the first verse of the first chapter of the first book of the Scriptures as his headnote and then quoting from the last book of the Scriptures in his opening sentence.[48] This span of time from Genesis to Revelation situates Donne's hermeneutic within the temporal parameters of human existence, which itself

[48]M. Morgan Holmes, "'Out of Egypt': Donne and Apocalyptic Re-Creation" *Christianity & Literature* 42 (1992), argues that this opening achieves two purposes: "The first is an assertion of the breadth and inclusivity of Donne's undertaking: an analysis of sacred history and revelation from beginning to end. The second and more crucial aim is an association of Donne's endeavor with Christ's apocalyptic revelation as the way to salvation" (pp. 32-33). Overall, however, I believe Holmes overemphasizes the apocalyptic implications of *Essayes*, and I disagree with her conclusions regarding Donne's pursuit of the disembodied spirit and of the self to the exclusion of the community (pp. 36-37). Later in Book I, Donne explains the phrase "in the beginning" both in Genesis and in the Gospel of John, and then he goes on to distinguish the differences between these two beginnings, the one "which we finde first placed of all the holy books" and the other "which we know to be last written of all" (16), specifying, "It is not then all *one* Beginning; for here [in Genesis] God *Did*, there [in John] he *Was*" (17). Donne repeats the same pattern at the end of Book I, in which he cites Genesis 1:28 in the final sentence and then quotes Revelation 3:20 in the opening sentence of the Prayer that follows.

emanates from God who, as both center and circumference, fulfills all time while existing beyond it.[49]

The human dilemma, of course, is fixing on (and thereby imitating) the infinity of God within the temporal limitations of past, present, and future. Donne's solution to the problem is to read the past (biblical history) and the future (biblical prophecy) in terms of the present,[50] such as in Part 2 of Book II:

> Lastly, descend, O my Soul, to the very Center, which is the very Pole, (for in infinite things, incapable of distinction of parts, Highest and lowest are all one) and

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[49]In his discussion of Donne's explication of the phrase "In the beginning," Michael Hall ("Searching and Not Finding") offers the following insight: "Donne is doing more here than merely playing with the Hermetic definition of God as a circle or sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. He is describing the rhetorical technique of his own discourse, which moves from this assertion to its demonstration and then returns....For Donne has demonstrated why the paradox surrounding the words 'in the beginning' cannot be resolved rationally but must be embraced by faith. He has moved from assertion to experience and in so doing has undermined the rational process by revealing its shortcomings and showing that there are things which lie beyond the powers of human reason. This is what Donne means by 'searching the Scriptures'" (pp. 429-30).

[50]Thus, in the *Divisio* of his Fifth Prebend Sermon, Donne describes Noah as a figure like Janus because "he hath a Prospect, and a Retrospect, he looks backward and forward, what God had done, and what God would doe" (8:112). He then elaborates, "For, as we have one great comfort in this, That Prophecies are become Histories, that whatsoever was said by the mouthes of the Prophets, concerning our salvation in Christ, is effected, (so prophecies are made histories) so have wee another comfort in this Text, That Histories are made Prophecies; That whatsoever we reade that God had formerly done, in the reliefe of his oppressed servants, wee are thereby assured that he can, that he will doe them again; and so Histories are made Prophecies"(8:112).

See also, *Sermons* 7:316.

> consider to what a land of promise, and heavenly *Hierusalem* God will at last bring thee, from the *Egpyt* of this world, & the most Egyptiacal part, this flesh. . . . And therefore, as he hath fulfilled that promise, *Out of Egypt have I called my Son* [Matt. 2:15]; So will he also perform it in every one of his elect. (83)[51]

The first thing to note in this passage is that the soul's descent to the center is also an ascent to the pole. Donne's explanation of this paradox is that in the realm of the infinite, a distinction of parts does not exist, and it is this paradox of center and circumference being one that he uses to speak of God's promise of a heavenly Jerusalem. Again, it is helpful here to think of Harriot's drawing of the rhumb-line "infinitely turning about ye centre," for, in particular, the line spirals away from the center in the top circle of the drawing until it touches the circumference (that is, the pole), and then, when Harriot proposes to double the image, the line begins immediately to spiral toward the center in the bottom circle. Thus, as the rhumb-line passes from center to pole and on to the next center, there is no longer a distinction of these parts in the infinite repetition of this movement.

The passage above from *Essayes* (Book II, Part 2) also illustrates Donne's earlier point in the treatise when he explains that "when God would excite his children, he uses to remember them that he is *that God which brought them out of the Land of Egypt*" (75). It is no wonder that for Donne "the art of *salvation*, is but the art of *memory*" (2:73), for as he explains in that Lincoln's Inn sermon, "When God gave his people the *Law*, he proposes nothing to them, but by that way, to their memory," and also, "when in instituting the *sacrament* of his *body and his bloud*, Christ presented it so, *Doe this in remembrance of me*" (2:73, 74). Even a

[51]Donne uses this same approach and the same analogy with Egypt and the Israelites in Prayer [I], pp. 104-05. For an insightful discussion of pp. 81-84 (pp. 74-76 in the Simpson edition) of *Essayes*, see Michael Hall ("Searching and Not Finding"), pp. 436-38.

natural man, such as Plato, "plac'd *all learning* in the memory" so that, Donne asserts, "Nay, he that hears no Sermons, he that reads no Scriptures, hath the Bible without book" (2:74). Through the perfecting of time in Nature, in the Law and Prophets, and in the Gospel, humankind remembers the history of what God has done and the prophecy of what God will do and thereby imitates in the temporal present the eternal present of the divine.[52] Thus, memory itself is a rhumb-line moving through all of time and thereby transcending the finite limitations of any given moment in time.

In a recent article in which he reads *Essayes in Divinity* and *Pseudo-Martyr* as companion pieces, Anthony Raspa demonstrates that "neither work reveals its true sense unless Donne can be clearly perceived in each as wrestling to grasp how things in time reflect the eternal, and how the eternal gives time its significance."[53] The struggle for Donne, as Raspa understands it, is not simply to find meaning in the ever-receding present moment, but also to discover where the temporal touches the eternal. For Donne, time meets timelessness in propagation, which, as he explains in *Essayes*, "is the truest Image and nearest representation of eternity. For eternity it self, that is, the Deity it self seems to have been ever delighted with it: for the producing of the three Persons in the Trinity, which is a continuing and undeterminable work, is a propagation of the Deity" (76). Through this mathematics of propagation, which is the theological equivalent of

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[52]John Chamberlin, *Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-Discourse Procedure in the Preaching of John Donne* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), argues that "this experience in the memory of the full meaning of God's words and actions is Donne's alternative to the topical reduction and legalistic regimentation of the Puritans" (p. 117).

[53]"Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Essayes in Divinity* as Companion Pieces," *JDJ* 18 (1999): 1. He notes further that while both works are exegeses, the two differ in that "*Pseudo-Martyr* is an exegesis of history, that is, of the Book of Creatures, ... and *Essayes* itself is an exegesis of two biblical passages" (p. 3). See also Raspa's "Introduction" to *Essayes*, esp. pp. xiii and xxxv.

Harriot's mathematical and geometrical progressions, the finite becomes the infinite, as the individual words and deeds of individual believers, which themselves constitute the continuum that is the Church, imitate and extend to the three persons composing the Trinity.[54]

It is in this context of the progression that leads to the infinite through propagation that Donne's discussion of numbers in *Essayes* can be best understood. For example, in the concluding section of Part 1 of Book II, "Variety in the Number," Donne first notes, "Numbring is so proper and peculiar to man, who only can number, that some philosophical Inquisitors have argued doubtfully, whether if man were not, there were any Number," and then warns, "Nothing therefore seems so much to indanger the Scriptures, and to submit and render them obnoxious to censure and calumniation, as the apparance of Error in Chronology, or other limbs and members of Arithmetick" (62). He then discusses the numerical problem related to Exodus 1:5: "So all ye soules, that came out of ye loynes of Iaakob, were seuentie soules" (Geneva Bible). The problem arises because Genesis 46:26 identifies the number of Jacob's descendants as sixty-six, and in Acts 7:14 Stephen says the descendants total seventy-five. As Donne offers various explanations to reconcile the numerical discrepancies, he inserts in his deliberations a comment about the significance of the number seventy, which is "composed of the two greatest Numbers (for *Ten* cannot be exceeded; but that to express any further Number you must take a part of it again; and *Seven* is ever used to express infinite)" (66).

[54]Donne goes on in *Essayes* to argue that propagation in this manner produces unity. As conceived, however, unity does not require sameness, for in fact the community is better served by individuals pursuing their own talents and callings (pp. 76-79).

This association of the number seven with the infinite, an association that can be traced to Philo,[55] also appears in several of Donne's sermons. In an aside offered to explicate the "seven abominations of the heart" cited in Proverbs 26:25, Donne states, "And, (by the way) the *Holy Ghost* at any time, had as lieve say *seventy millions, as seven*; for *seven* is the holy Ghosts Cyphar of infinite" (7:411), and by way of commentary on Proverbs 24:16, Donne explains in another sermon, "What sinnes soever God forgave mee this morning, yet since *the best* (and I am none of them) *fall seven times a day, God* forgives mee seven more sinnes, to morrow, then he did to day; and seven, in this *Arithmetike*, is *infinite*" (8:77).[56] In these sermons, Donne reads the number seven as a symbol for the continuum from the finite (that is, seven, seventy, and seven million) to the infinite. It is with just such an understanding of progression, one that echoes Harriot's own preoccupation in his notebooks, that Donne repeats Piccolomini's explanation of Augustine's *Materiam primam* as that which is "one, four, and infinite" (*Essayes* 39). Numerical progression, or what Donne equates throughout *Essayes* with propagation, is the means for humankind, not simply through physical reproduction, but also through deeds and words, to touch the infinite in time and space.

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[55]See *On the Account of the World's Creation Given by Moses*, esp. sections XXX-XXXIII, in which Philo asserts, among other things, that "7 is so constituted as to be the starting point of all plane and solid geometry, or (to put it concisely) alike of things corporeal and incorporeal" and that "There is only one thing that neither causes motion nor experiences it, the original Ruler and Sovereign. Of Him 7 may be fitly said to be a symbol" (Loeb Edition, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker [London: Heinemann, 1929], I:79, 81). I wish to thank Paul Stanwood for drawing my attention to this source.

[56]See also *Sermons* 8:40-41, in which Donne's explanation of the four creatures mentioned in Revelation 7:5-8 leads him to a contemplation of the Trinity (thus four and three implying the number seven) and of the ministers and members of the Church (a "greater number" that moves toward the infinite).

Thus, in the very act of penning these essays/sermons, Donne creates his own progression by which through a propagation of his finite words (one, four, and seven), his meditations recreate the Word that is eternal.

Donne's claims in *Essayes* related to propagation register his concern for the Church, in which time finds its linear culmination (from Nature, from the Law and Prophets, and from the Gospel); in which past and future are realized in the present; and in which the Word and Sacraments affect the propagation of the eternal in this world. This is what Donne prays for in *Essayes* when he expresses his desire to God that his soul "*produce Creatures, thoughts, words, and deeds agreeable to thee*," but only, he adds, "*within the pale of thy Church*" (43), and later when he petitions, "*O God, thou hast multiplied thy children in me, by begetting and cherishing in me reverent devotions, and pious affections towards thee, . . . But let me, in despite of Me, be of so much use to thy glory, that by thy mercy to my sin, other sinners may see how much sin thou canst pardon. Thus show mercy to many in one*" (104, 105). In his 1622 Gunpowder Plot sermon, Donne states, "If the Center of the world should be moud, but one inche, out of the place, it cannot be reckconed how many miles this Iland, or any *buildings* in it, would be throwen out of their places."[57] Donne's hermeneutic is a persistent struggle to locate and remain fixed upon the eternal center because Donne knows that if Christians shift one inch from it, then the Church cannot be the Church, for without this "new Mathematiques," those who are isolated from one another, either by distance or by doctrine, can never meet in communion.

Thoughout *Essayes in Divinity* Donne draws upon pagan writers, Jewish writers, and Roman Catholic and Protestant writers alike because his larger purpose is not to define the peripheral limitations of sectarian allegiance. Instead, his purpose is to locate the center from which he can move along the spiral line that will

[57] *John Donne's 1622 Gunpowder Plot Sermon*, ed. Jeanne Shami (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1996), p. 63.

bring him to the Word that is God and the community that is the Trinity. Thus, Donne also relies on the astronomy and materialism of Thomas Harriot because he knows that sound theology requires sound natural philosophy; the first step along the path that leads to the infinite truth of God is that of coming to terms with the workings of Nature, which in revealing the Creator are made clearer in the light of the Scriptures and the Church. What Donne is promoting then in *Essayes* is what might be described as a theological atomism, in which the progression of finite activities, the "hard deeds" and "hard knowledge" that characterize Christian faith and practice, establish a continuum that finally culminates in the infiniteness of God. Yet, while Donne accepts significant elements of Harriot's natural philosophy, neither Donne nor Harriot adopts these new concepts at the expense of completely rejecting Aristotelian thought and older configurations of the universe. In fact, both strain in their writings to synthesize the new with the old. Harriot's *De infinitis* papers portray the mind of a mathematician who, in seeking to understand the physical properties of the universe and the natural laws that govern the movements of finite objects (such as ships), returns again and again to the logical and mathematical conundrums that perplex him in seeking to describe the infinite and the infinitesimal as continuums. Donne's *Essayes in Divinity*, as well as other of his writings, projects his idealism as he acknowledges that straight lines and perfect circles belong only to the realm of the infinite and that those in the fallen world are subject to the corrupt motion of the "cousening line." Harriot's spiral line, then, affords Donne a concept for clarifying his understanding, first, of the natural world, and then, by extension, of the Scriptures (in developing his hermeneutic of the center) and of the Church (by conversing with the full choir of voices who have shaped it) in discovering the path (one, four, and infinite) to God.

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