

ABSTRACT

ZUMBACH, ERIC HUDSON. "Is the Pacific Sea my home?": John Donne's *Hymns*.
(Under the direction of M. Thomas Hester.)

Scholars have traditionally regarded John Donne's three *Hymns* as independent works of devotional or meditative verse. This study proposes that Donne's *Hymns* are read properly as a tripartite sequence, one which addresses the poet's desire for a spiritual union with Christ. Before that union may occur, Donne must "tune the Instrument" of his soul by submitting his fallen will to the will of Christ. The *Hymns* are that "tuning," that labor of submission. As they unfold, the *Hymns* present the drama of Donne's piety wrestling with his aggressive will, and his transformation from a self-serving rake dedicated to his "Iland" of "false mistresses" into a Christ-serving religious. Until the last line of the *Hymns*, Donne seems to have won spiritual security: he has prayed for release from his "Iland," he has "embrace[d]" the body and blood of Christ, and he has confessed his "sinne of feare," despair. However, the final line of the *Hymns*, "I have no more," seems to unravel Donne's spiritual work. His final perplexing, ambiguous line could indicate (among many other meanings) that he has fully transformed, or that he has abandoned the enterprise altogether. "I have no more," an enunciation of Donne's fallen will, proves if anything that the work of the soul is never complete.

“Is the Pacific Sea my home?”: John Donne’s *Hymns*

by

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BIOGRAPHY

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John Donne's verse, and his biography, divide unevenly into two canonical classes, or biographical chapters—the profane and the sacred. Sir Richard Baker's prolific rake, the “great *Visiter* of Ladies,” “great frequenter of Plays,” and “great writer of conceited Verses”¹ who penned verse suitable to his personal disposition—the profane *Songs and Sonets*, the *Elegies*, *Epigrams*, and *Satyres*—has been relegated to a class apart from the soberer divine, Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, widower, and accomplished devotional poet (even though this artificial distinction between Jack Donne and Dean Donne, which is the invention of Donne's own wit, fails to account for the so-called profane verse Donne penned after ordination, or the sacred verse penned before). Donne's dichotomous portrait of the artist as a matured man fails to describe accurately the trajectory of his poetic career, and fails to accord with what may be gleaned about Donne's poetic character from his verse. As “The Canonization” or “A Hymne to God the Father”² proves, Jack Donne survived 1615, and Dean Donne always existed. Central to this study is the conviction, certainly not new with me, that whenever we encounter Donne in verse, always he is somewhere between the theater and the pulpit.

Helen Gardner maintains, in the introduction to her edition of *The Divine Poems*, that “the root of Donne's religious development can be seen in the third Satire . . . it is

¹ From Baker's *A Chronicle of the Kings of England*, page 156, quoted in: *John Donne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. A. J. Smith. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 126.

² I refer to the *Hymns* by the shortened titles suggested by the *Donne Variorum* committee.

significant that his first religious poem is not a divine poem, but a satire.”³ What Gardner calls Donne’s “religious development”—the genesis of Donne’s theological equanimity—exists alongside a second development in the third Satire: the development, in verse, of John Donne’s wit. As M. Thomas Hester argues in his study of the *Satyres, Kinde Pitty and Brave Scorne*, part of the genius of the third Satire is the great balance Donne maintains between *laus et vituperatio*, between “kinde pitty” and “brave scorne.” The logic of the third *Satyre*, which preserves the distinction between opposites while simultaneously synthesizing them into one cogent structure, is applied often in Donne’s verse. The careful balance Donne keeps in that poem between pity and scorn is matched by the balance, in the *Hymns*, between the profane and the sacred. After the third *Satyre*, Donne’s *Hymns* express most eloquently his capacity to articulate oppositions, and to bring them together without destroying the elements or the logic of the opposition. The couple, pity/scorn, is analogous to, but not fungible with, sacred/profane, body/soul, Catholicism/Anglicanism.⁴ In each case, Donne’s mind seems always to seek the middle, synthesizing path. This, what Gardner calls “the conception of virtue as the means between two extremes,”⁵ is the character of Donne’s wit, and the logic of the third Satire.

Though profaneness may be found in Donne’s sacred *Hymns*, the *Hymns* are nonetheless rightly grouped with the divine poems. The poet’s attempt in the *Hymns* to negate the wit of the third *Satyre*, to dissolve the profane utterly in the sacred, sanctifies the *Hymns*. *Holy Sonnet*, “Oh, to vex me,” in which the frustrated speaker confesses that “contraryes meete in one” (1), for example, can be read as a prolegomenon to the

³ *John Donne: The Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), xix.

⁴ In the case of this last opposition, the elements are not “pure” opposites, but mutually exclusive, which makes them even more difficult to negotiate than, for instance, pity and scorn.

⁵ *The Divine Poems*, xxvii.

Hymns.⁶ As the *Hymns* progress from the witty, conceited verse of *Christ* to the mostly muted, transparent devotional verse of *Father*, they unfold the unfinished drama of Donne's dissolution of the profane, his conversion from wit to piety, from Jack Donne to Dean Donne. As Gardner phrases it,

The transformation of the Jack Donne who wrote the *Satires* and *Elegies* into Dr. John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's, was not the result of a sudden revelation of truths, unknown before, or of any sudden moral revulsion. There is no trace of any period of religious or moral crisis in Donne's works. The change was a gradual one, brought about by the circumstances of his life, and the maturing of his mind and temperament.⁷

Although Gardner's implication that Donne's transformation was in any way successful, outside of the occupational sense, seems doubtful, Donne was attempting a change, and the *Hymns* document his attempt, his "religious or moral crisis." The *Hymns* are not the result of Donne's spiritual crisis, but the agony of the crisis as it occurs. The imminence of death is the "emergent occasion" for what Gardner calls Donne's "change" in the *Hymns*. This transformation is the necessary preparation of the soul before death, the final "tuning" (*Sickness* 4) to be undertaken before the "last going," that will render the poet, if not worthy of salvation, at least ready to present himself before Christ. Donne's "tuning" in the *Hymns*, or his transformation, is the submission of his prescient and witty but profanely fallen nature to Christ. His will, that which satisfies his nature, and his wit, that which expresses his nature, must be brought into conformity with Christ's nature. As Louis Martz points out, "Conformity with the will of God" is the "ultimate goal" of the

⁶ All citations of Donne's Divine Poems are taken from Gardner's edition of *The Divine Poems*.

⁷ *The Divine Poems*, xx.

Christian, and Donne's means of defeating his "sinne of fear" and "intellectual pride."⁸ At the moment Donne covers his fallen nature with the blood of Christ in *Sickness*, he avers that submission to Christ provides the only answer; fallen nature cannot be destroyed, only tamed.

John Donne's *Hymns* are, if we accept Petrarch as a poetic model, the necessary completion of the *Songs and Sonets*—the final justification, by Christ, of Donne's exuberant, youthful poetry, his "*primo giovenile errore*."⁹ The *Hymns*, like the *Songs and Sonets*, are expressions of the speaker's desire for another, although the texture of that desire changes, as does the other. In the *Songs and Sonets*, the speaker's paradoxes and frustrations are often the disruptions common to all lovers, usually dangerous only for the body, easily dissipated by solitude, sexual release, or (in the case of those poems concerned with woman's inconstancy) simple ignorance. The *Hymns*, addressed to Christ and not to a lady or to the lady's other lover(s), are also studies in misery and fear, yet the pleasures are eternal, as are the penalties. Nevertheless, both genres are concerned with the same acts: courtship, marriage, and physical union. In *Christ*, Donne proposes a divorce to the world and, to placate his jealousy and God's, a remarriage to Christ. In *Sickness*, Donne wishes to be "wrapp'd" (26) in Christ's mantle, and longs for an "embrace" (25) between his soul and Christ's blood, analogous to the parodic mingling of blood in "The Flea," or the union of souls in "The Extasie." As "The Extasie" suggests, Donne may believe that spiritual union with Christ and physical union

⁸ Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, rev ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 132.

⁹ Francesco Petrarca, *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime sparse and Other Lyrics*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 37.

with a woman who is wholly loved are analogous; Donne plays with this blasphemy in *Christ*, and finally overcomes it in *Father*.

The *Hymns* constitute a tripartite sequence addressing Donne's desire for union with Christ. As Donne himself is bound to temporality, his passage from the beginning of the *Hymns* to the end, is conducted through time. Therefore one appropriately approaches the *Hymns* as a progressive, linear sequence. In *Christ*, his sealed "bill of my Divorce to All" (25), Donne declares his desire for a spiritual union with Christ. However, Donne's pious desires are inauthentic: false motivation undoes the sincerity of the poet's devotion. Fear of death at sea inspires Donne's professions of love for Christ: it is only "to scape stormy dayes" that compels Donne to "chuse an Everlasting Night" (28). Outside of suicide, which is simply not an option for Christians, Donne cannot "chuse an Everlasting Night"—death chooses him. (Or, in Donne's case, it does not: Donne survives his trip to the Continent.) Because Donne cannot bring about spiritual union with Christ by will alone, or by "chus[ing]," the *Hymns* proceed. In *Sickness* Donne undergoes, to enable the spiritual marriage, a purification of his body. Before he takes his place among the "Quire of Saints" (2) and becomes a part of "thy Musique" (3), Donne must "tune the Instrument here at the dore" (4) of death and Judgment. Donne meditatively tunes his "Instrument" by emblematically shrouding his corrupted flesh with Christ's redemptive purple blood, which, though not equivalent to spiritual union, makes Donne *like* the flesh of Christ's flesh, and the blood of Christ's blood. Death, fear, and sin are the principle players (aside of Donne and Christ) in *Christ* and *Sickness*. Though obviously not the priest who marries the Christian soul to Christ, death (in the service of the divine) "arranges" that marriage; the "summoning" of Everyman by Death in *The*

Summoning of Everyman is an appropriate analogy. Yet Donne, like Everyman, fears life's most terrifying inevitability. That fear, strongest in *Christ*, weakens—yet never disappears. Replacing that “sinne of fear” (*Father* 13) is a fear of sin. Donne knows his own unsuitability as a *sponsa Christi*, and therefore he fears his passage through death to “th'Eternall root” (*Christ* 14) may lead him instead to an eternal nothing. Nevertheless, Donne's love for Christ moves the *Hymns*, and gives him strength to await and confront his death; but Donne's love for Christ is impeded by other loves. The love poet who has “cast his fainter beames of love” (*Sickness* 26) on the pleasures of the world and the flesh is not entirely ready, or able, to jettison those pleasures. Furthermore, because he knows that he has so enjoyed those pleasures, the poet fears that his sins will make him unsuitable for Christ. The devotional poet, like the profane singer of the *Songs and Sonets*, struggles with his natural “contraries.” The task of Donne's *Hymns*, though, is not a reconciliation of his contradictory desires, of his “erected wit” with his “infected will,”¹⁰ of his reason with his desire, but the submission of his will and desires to Christ's.

To this end Donne prays for a bill of “Divorce to All” in *Christ*, desirous of dissolving his ties to temporal pleasures, but it is only in the final four words of the *Hymns*—“I have no more” (*Father* 18)—that Donne does finally turn away from the finite and towards the infinite. Fear and sin—the source of the agony of Donne's transformation—roughen his passage through the *Hymns*. Still waters are restored, “stormy dayes” (*Christ* 28) are “scape[d],” in *Father*. In a disarming reverse catechism, Donne asks, and asks again, if God will “forgive that sinne” (1, 3, 7, 9); always God

¹⁰ “The Defence of Poesy,” *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 106.

answers “Yes.” In fact, that “Yes” Donne seeks *is* the good news of the Gospels. Having received and understood God’s answer, God “haste done” (17) and Donne has “no more.” Although Donne in *Father* appears to submit his will to God’s, his startling demand that God “swear by thy selfe” (15) and the repeated puns on his name signify at least the persistence of his wit. Donne may have renounced his love for the world, figured in *Christ* as an “Iland” (8), but he has not surrendered profane self-love, the “I-land.” The frequent appearance of “I” in the *Hymns* is worth noting: 31 times in 76 lines. He can barely go two lines without writing “I.”

The intensely personal, if not self-obsessed, character of the *Hymns* not only disrupts the submission of Donne’s will to God’s, but also causes the *Hymns* to “fail” as hymns. Hymns serve a manifold purpose, but primarily they bring a congregation together, to strengthen the binding tie of religion. Through hymns congregations voice their “wholehearted measure of praise to the Lord God Almighty”¹¹—an attribute missing in the first two *Hymns*. Puttenham, for example, notes the epideictic nature of the hymn, the “honour” of “extraordinarie and diuine praise, extolling and magnifying [the gods] for their great powers and excellencie of nature in the highest degree of laude.”¹² In fact, he notes pagan hymns were

the first forme of Poesie and the highest and the stateliest, and they were song by the Poets as priests, and by the people or whole congregation as we sing in our Churchs the Psalms of *Dauid*, but they did it commonly in some shadie groues of tall tymber trees: In which places they reared aulters of green turfe, and bestrewed

8. ¹¹ Bernard Seton, *Our Heritage of Hymns*, (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1984),

¹² George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (Kent: Kent State U P, 1970), 42.

them all ouer with flowers, and vpon them made their bloody sacrifices, (for no kinde of gift can be dearer then life). (45)

Though Donne in *Christ* and *Sickness* does not directly praise God, he does embrace the sacrificial element of the hymn. After replacing the “alters of green” with a “torne ship” (1) and a sea of blood, Donne in *Christ* offers up himself and his “Iland” (8) for sacrifice to Christ. In *Sickness*, Donne adorns himself (in lieu of flowers) with thorns and the blood of Christ, and again offers himself as a sacrifice to Christ on the altar of “this bed” (8). Were Donne not steadfastly following Christian tradition, his two attempted sacrifices might appear to be a strange form of devotional atavism. However, Donne’s sacrifices are as necessary to the process of sanctification in his *Hymns* as the sacrificed steer were to the pagan’s. To the Christian, the sacrifice and the altar are both Christ’s, and the hymns often celebrate Christ’s sacrifice; the acknowledgement of Christ’s Cross, blood, and thorns in stanzas 5 and 6 of *Sickness* affirms this. In the *Hymns*, therefore, Donne writes a double, reflexive sacrifice: a sacrifice of himself to Christ, and of Christ for mankind. In *Father*, a double sacrifice marks the apical moment: “Sweare by thy selfe,” which was already done at the Crucifixion, “that at my death thy Sunne / Shall shine as it shines now, and heretofore” (15-6).

Although Donne fulfills Puttenham’s sacrificial requisite, he does not sing his first two *Hymns* as a priest to a congregation, nor does he give the two *Hymns* to his congregation, nor does he set them to an instrument other than his own voice. To better the art of the performance of the praise of God, hymns are commonly set to music. Of Donne’s three *Hymns*, only *Father* was originally set to music and performed by a congregation or choir, when Donne commissioned John Hilton to prepare a setting for

Father,¹³ a “most grave and solemn Tune . . . often sung to the *Organ* by the *Choristers* of St. *Paul*’s Church, in [Donne’s] own hearing, especially at the evening service.”¹⁴

Despite that, Barbara Lewalski claims that *Father* fails to fulfill the generic requirements of the conventional hymn because it lacks the “sense of an exalted praise of God.”¹⁵ To the contrary, Donne’s faith in Christ’s boundless mercy at the hymn’s close affirms and praises Christ’s love and the message of the Gospels. Lewalski aptly calls Donne’s two other *Hymns* “occasional meditations” (280-1). Neither was set to music, nor sung by any choir or congregation; neither shows Donne concerned with singing the praises of Christ. Certainly though, Donne sings his first two *Hymns* as a priest, but only to himself. Both *Christ* and *Sickness* are hymns “to mine owne” (*Sickness* 29)—or, rather, not hymns at all, but meditations, which may as well be termed “private hymns.” Furthermore, as “occasional meditations,” *Christ* and *Sickness* document two discrete events in Donne’s life; their biographical function, if anything, precludes the conventional hymn.

* * *

John Donne’s dangerous voyage into Germany in May of 1619 has all of the characteristics of a trauma. Sea travel, particularly through waters where a ship might meet Spaniards, pirates, and Spanish pirates, was dangerous. As the two sermons and one hymn that came out of Donne’s experience witness, Donne had little confidence in the fitness of his ship, and did not expect a safe return. Preaching at Lincoln’s Inn on

¹³ For a thorough examination of the Hilton setting, see: Brian Morris, “Not, Siren-like, to Tempt: Donne and the Composers,” in *John Donne: Essays in Celebration*, ed A. J. Smith (London: Methuen Co. Ltd., 1972), 219-258.

¹⁴ From Izaak Walton’s *The Life of Dr. John Donne*, reprinted in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, together with Death’s Duel* (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 2000), v.

¹⁵ Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1979), 263.

April 18, 1619, Donne delivered his “Sermon of Valediction at my going into Germany”¹⁶ on “Remember now thy Creator in the dayes of thy youth” (Eccles. 12.1), the thrust of which is “repent, and be ever-ready to be granted eternal life, for God may grant you eternal life sooner than you expect.” The sermon’s final paragraph contains Donne’s touching valediction to his congregation: “if I never meet you again till we have all passed the gates of death, yet in the gates of heaven, I may meet you all.” After having safely landed, Donne preached on June 16 “Two Sermons, to the Prince and Princess Palatine, the Lady Elizabeth at Heydelberg” (*Sermons*, I.250) on the text “For now is our salvation nearer than we believed” (Rom. 13.11). There seems to be a pattern here.

Christ relies on the same tropes as that sermon. But Donne’s sermons, unlike his hymn, are written for public edification, performing the drama of his anxiety on a public stage. The moral Donne draws before, and from, his travels, when delivered before a congregation, is a moral allegory depicting the turmoil of the Christian soul. The hymn, however, is private, confessional. Neither priest nor angel bears the message of this hymn to Christ; here Donne addresses Christ directly. But here the hymn, in one sense, fails to be a hymn: hymns, like sermons, are public documents, written for the congregation. Hymns *are* often meditative, or confessional, but not so intensely private, if only to maintain their public character. Furthermore the hymn concerns the event of the author’s own “last going into Germany,” which can be read as an allegory, but is nevertheless explicitly biographical. However, in *Christ* allegory and biography converge. The preparation of Donne’s soul for death, the transformation from sinner to

¹⁶ *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), I.235.

penitent, supplies the biographical context. Donne's voyage into Germany (in the service of God and king) is a useful metaphor for the submission of his will to divine authority. Donne's passage into Germany, the "last going" after which will follow no other goings forth, embarks at the outset of *Christ*, but does not end until the shore on which Donne will perish in the final hymn. All Christians must undergo the same process.

Christ begins with a series of alternating Old and New Testament images, composing the stage for a sort of "typological drama" (Lewalski 254):

In what torne ship soever I embarke,
That ship shall be my embleme of thy Arke;
What sea soever swallow mee, that flood
Shall bee to mee an embleme of thy blood. (1-4)

By drawing images from the journey he prepares to undertake, the poet projects Christ into the journey, as if to sanctify his passage. Although Christ will not be present in the flesh on Donne's ship, the "embleme" of Christ's redemptive blood, in the sea (and considering "The Crosse," in the ship, in the mast, in over-passing birds) *will* be present. When the speaker has crossed miles of sea, and is a few hours' journey from home, he can comfort himself with the thought that his "torne ship" is an emblem of that sound ship, the Ark. What sustained the Ark, and what will sustain the speaker, is divine love. If that "torne ship" sinks, and if the sea swallows the poet, the water that floods his lungs will be the cold, salt sea. But grace transforms the sea; even if the sea silences the poet, the poet will be embraced by the inviting warmth of the blood of Christ.

Lewalski argues that "Donne here adapts a common emblem to his own purposes: his own ship becomes a tempest-tossed, flood-threatened vessel on the storm-wracked sea

of life” (280). The vessel on which Donne traveled into Germany was no “torne ship,” though his anxiety may have convinced him otherwise—in this case Donne’s ship does “become a tempest-tossed, flood-threatened vessel.” However, Donne’s point here is that all ships are “tempest-tossed, flood-threatened ships,” not because man has yet to perfect the art of sea travel, but because ships, like men, are susceptible to the faults of mortality. Furthermore, if one places Donne’s ship in that “typological drama,” next to Noah’s Ark and the ship of Christ, the insecurity of Donne’s vessel is quite evident. Donne’s ship becomes safe for him only if he perceives in his ship signs of “thy Arke.” The “typological drama,” then, excludes Donne: he imagines himself not as “a new Noah about to experience a new Flood in a new Ark” (Lewalski 280), but as a man who will be “swallow[ed]” by the flood of Christ’s mercy. Such a reading of the first stanza diminishes some of the morbidity often ascribed to this hymn. The harsh image of death-at-sea which opens the poem, and the “great holocaust” of the sacrificed “Iland” (8) are, as R. V. Young observes, Donne’s means of satisfying his longing for “an intense, consuming, and exclusive love relationship with God”¹⁷: death may be horrible to contemplate, but the gift of God is eternal life. The crucial Christian image, Christ on the Cross, may seem morbid, but is in fact an image of the expression of Christ’s love for man, and the mercy which will save all mankind. The great sacrifice Donne offers up to Christ, neither morbidly nor resentfully, imitates the sacrifice Christ made.

Although Donne willingly makes his sacrifice in imitation of Christ’s sacrifice, Christ hides his face behind a “maske” (6) of clouds:

Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise

¹⁷ R. V. Young, *Doctrine and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Poetry: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 100.

Thy face; yet through that maske I know those eyes,

Which, though they turn away sometimes, they never will despise. (5-7)

But Christ cannot hide: his radiant eyes penetrate “through” the clouds of mortal unknowing, and illuminate the poet. Those rays of light prove that Christ’s eyes, though they may turn aside, “they never will despise” (7). To prove to Christ the sincerity of his devotion, Donne announces the purpose of his *Hymn*, indeed, of all three *Hymns*: to abandon his own will and desire, and to replace them with Christ’s.

I sacrifice this Iland unto thee,

And all whom I lov’d there, and who lov’d mee;

When I have put our seas twixt them and mee,

Put thou thy sea betwixt my sins and thee.

As the trees sap doth seeke the root below

In winter, in my winter now I goe,

Where none but thee, th’Eternall root of true love I may know. (8-14)

Even the rhyme scheme of the first quatrain emphasizes Donne’s willingness to jettison his will—“thee,” “mee,” “mee,” “thee,”—as the speaker begins with “thee” and returns to “thee,” Christ, the Alpha and Omega, circumscribes “mee” in the cycle. Donne began his life with Christ, then devoted himself to himself, and now in the promise to “sacrifice this Iland” he devotes himself anew to Christ. Those four lines perfectly describe the trajectory and the purpose of Donne’s *Hymns*: the return of the wayward vessel to Christ.

The poet’s promise to “sacrifice this *I-land* unto” Christ is necessary. The poet can only achieve union with Christ if he passes through death, for to become *sponsa Christi*, the soul must be freed from the confinement of the flesh. When the body, the

“Iland,” perishes, those relationships that bind the poet to the island, England, perish too. But Donne must sacrifice more than himself and his fatherland: “Iland” signifies the entire world, indeed any existence that does not include Christ. Just as islands are surrounded by water and alienated from the complete, whole continents, Donne’s “Iland” is surrounded by the “stormy” waters of sin, death and fear, which alienate him from the complete, whole grace of Christ.¹⁸ Therefore, the continent to which Donne travels is an “embleme” for Christ, and the “sea” an “embleme” for the blood of Christ that will prepare Donne for his final mooring in Christ. Once freed from “all whom [he] lov’d there, and who lov’d” him, the poet can freely pledge himself to a new marriage, a new covenant. As in the Christian wedding ceremony, wherein the priest asks the bride and groom to accept one another “forsaking all others,” Donne must forsake all former amorous conquests. Donne does so because Christ has already set out, in Matthew, the conditions for this marriage: “If any man will follow me, let him forsake himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” Donne will, in the “winter” of his years, forsake himself, so that he may know “th’Eternall root of true Love.”

However, only so much can be done by the poet. Although Donne will put between himself and the world metaphoric “seas,” only Christ can put His actual sea of “bloode” between the poet and his sins. It is not enough to renounce sin—those sins must be forgiven, which can only be done through the grace of Christ. Donne has forsaken his conquests and ambitions already; now he desires Christ to forget any knowledge of those conquests, absolving the poet of the burden of his youthful errors. In Holy Sonnet “If poysonous mineralls,” Donne petitions:

¹⁸ One might argue, by extrapolation, that the Earth too is an “Iland,” separated from the *primum mobile* by the outer spheres.

O God, Oh! of thine onely worthy blood,
And my teares, make a heavenly Lethean flood
And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie;
That thou remember them, some claime as debt,
I thinke it mercy, if thou wilt forget. (10-14)

In *Christ* Donne asks Christ again to drown his sins in that “heavenly Lethean flood,” which will dye Donne’s black soul to white. This desire for absolution, for a grace that will make the poet as pure as Christ, gives him strength to carry out his difficult sacrifices.

But the hymn turns argumentative in the third stanza, even threatening, while simultaneously pitiful:

Nor thou nor thy religion dost controule,
The amorousness of an harmonious Soule,
But thou would’st have that love thy self: As thou
Art jealous Lord, so I am jealous now,
Thou lov’st not, till from loving more, thou free
My soule: Who ever gives, takes libertie:

O, if thou car’st not whom I love alas, thou lov’st not mee. (15-21)

The poet’s “harmonious Soule” sounds the same tone as Christ’s; Christ gives his grace freely, and Donne, though he cannot merit grace, does desire it. Donne’s contrapuntal “amorousness,” his natural, self-preserving desire for the finite graces of life, the world, and pleasure, disrupts his harmony with Christ. But that “amorousness” also desires divine grace—it desires all forms of satisfaction, secular and sacred. Therefore Donne’s

“amorousness” disrupts not only his harmony with Christ, but also his psychological harmony, his mental and emotional stability. Because neither Christ nor his religion “dost controule” Donne’s desires, Donne may freely devote himself to whatever he wishes. But Christ, a “jealous Lord,” would “have that love” all to himself. The soul cannot cease “loving more” without the aid of Grace, hence: “whoever gives, takes libertie.” Christ has the power, over Donne’s soul, to “have that love”—this is operative grace, the correction of the misdirected soul. Donne is evidently not yet freed from “loving more”; it follows that Christ must not love him. What the “harmonious Soule” has here is a virtual paradox: if God is jealous, why did he create man with the capacity to love persons and things more than he loves God? Donne cannot love Christ until Christ takes away Donne’s capacity to love. While the poet remains in the world, and while he has the capacity to love, he will love the world. However, if Donne has “an harmonious Soule,” i.e., a soul in harmony with Christ, then he will have no desire for the world that overwhelms his desire for Christ. Men were created with the capacity to love and freely, but not to the detriment of their love for Christ. Although Christ may not “controule” Donne’s love, Donne should. The burden (and the penalty) rests on Donne himself—if he discovers that his idolatrous devotion to “profane mistresses” (“What if this present” 10) crowds out his devotion to Christ, he must rectify that situation himself with (for example) contemplation of “the picture of Christ crucified” (3), proof of Christ’s love for humanity, one of greater worth than any other. Men are naturally drawn to “loving more” those who are present—that is, loving the visible is easier than the invisible. Donne must learn “to see God only” (27), to make Christ as present or as visible as “those fainter beames of love” (23).

Donne's rather tiresome display of the frustration of his soul is too demanding for piety. Indeed, the stanza reads like a formal, if repetitive, argument, the conclusion of which is both pitiful and aggressive: "O, if thou car'st not whom I love, alas, thou lov'st not mee." The implication here is that if Christ does not do as Donne wishes, then Christ must not love Donne, which is a tone perhaps antithetical to the purpose of a hymn addressing the submission of the speaker's will to Christ's. That threat, and the poet's pitiful tone, are both ironically designed, as is the praise in the first stanza, to inspire Christ's love. Donne knows that Christ loves him, indeed that Christ *is* love, and he knows that he will never, fearing the penalty of Hell, abandon his own love for Christ. What, then, is occurring here? An explanation, if not the model, for Donne's counterintuitive tactic in this stanza can be found in Sidney:

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my pain;
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know;
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain;

I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe. (41, 1-5)

Donne's *Hymns* are, like Sidney's sonnets, confessions of "woe," written to arouse pity, and to win from pity, grace. But Sidney's "woe" is painted, an affectation, whereas Donne's woe is actual. Regardless of the difference between the physical "grace" Sidney desires and the spiritual grace of Donne's desire, both poets enunciate their readiness for grace, the willingness to accept all that they may, from Stella or Christ, "obtain."¹⁹

¹⁹ Dwight Cathcart, *Doubting Conscience* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975) makes a similar point: "This confrontation of Donne's speaker with his God in the religious poetry leads into the same kind of argument found in the *Songs and Sonets*. . . . Contention is paramount in [the religious poems]; whatever else they show about Donne's speaker, they show that his faith was only with

In his deep frustration, Donne expresses his readiness for Christ to “Seale then this bill of my Divorce to All, / On whom those fainter beames of love did fall” (22-3). Doing so, Christ will “Marry those loves which in youth scattered bee / On Fame, Wit, Hopes (false mistresses) to thee” (24-5). The poem itself aims to be that “bill of Divorce,” a document, that Christ must “seale,” or consecrate, to make legal. In some sense, Donne asks Christ to consecrate a document with his own merit, just as Donne asks God to “swear by thy selfe” (15) in “A Hymne to God the Father.” As a legal divorce, this document is doubly binding: it will prohibit, by dissolving, Donne’s love for the world’s “false mistresses.” Donne’s divorce is, thinking etymologically, a religion, a tie that binds Donne to Christ. The act of binding is (put more accurately) an incorporation of Donne’s “fainter beames” into the source of all light, the Son. Donne’s brighter and “fainter beames” possibly recall the convention of the Petrarchan lady’s sun-like eyes.²⁰ That the “fainter beames of love” were in “youth scattered” suggests the scattered loves of Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse*. One might find in Donne’s desire to have his Petrarchan scattered loves converted into a whole and true love for Christ good evidence to argue that Donne conceived, in his soberer years, of his juvenile verse as immature. The *Hymns*, then, mark the beginning of his as yet completed spiritual maturation.

Once Donne dismisses his desire for “false mistresses,” the imagery of the hymn turns from the brightness of Christ, to darkness:

Churches are best for Prayer, that have least light:

To see God only, I goe out of sight:

difficulty arrived at and that, although he has arrived at what must be seen as a clear and final faith in God and in his own virtue, there are still things to be argued” (157-8).

²⁰ The Petrarchan flavor of Donne’s Christ in *Christ* becomes most evident when compared to the “amazing light” (5) of Christ’s eyes in the *Holy Sonnet*, “What if this present.”

And to scape stormy dayes, I chuse an Everlasting night. (26-8)

The prominence of darkness in these closing lines is difficult to explain. Gardner notes that Donne's first sermon to the court after he returned from Germany examined a text from Amos 5.18: "Woe unto you that desire the day of the Lord! . . . the day of the Lord is darkness, and not light" (107). In the prophecy of Amos, the dark day of the Lord will hold just punishment for the sins of Israel. Donne's "Everlasting night" is not a dark day at all, but the calm darkness of the night that follows that day. Continuing with the typological considerations of the first stanza, "Everlasting night" is the moment of mercy that follows the just affliction of the "stormy days," not "totally un-Christian"²¹ at all, but totally un-Jewish. If, as Gardner argues, "[Donne] takes his usual view [in his sermon] that the afflictions of this life are 'corrections'" (107), then the darkness of the dark day that "corrects" Donne, preparing him for an "Everlasting night," is analogous to the dark church in which Donne prays for "correction." In Thomas More's *Utopia*, the Utopian churches are darkened, so as to intensify religious fervor. Both darkenses, the artificially (i.e., with curtains, etc.) darkened church and the day darkened by storm, prepare Donne to confront the real darkness of the mercy of Christ.

The absence of light in the final stanza should not be conflated with the darkness of St. John of the Cross' "*noche oscura*,"²² nor with the darkness of the senses eclipsed by the soul on the *via negativa*, nor even with the darkness of the soul wedded to Christ. *Christ* may be "*about* the mystical experience,"²³ or may precede a longed-for experience, but does not seem to narrate an actual mystical experience:

²¹ John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 219.

²² St. John of the Cross, *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Willis Barnstone (New York: New Directions Books, 1978), 38.

²³ Frank J. Warnke, *John Donne* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 114.

That union and transformation of the soul in God which is only then accomplished when there subsists the likeness which love begets—this union—takes effect when two wills, the will of God and the will of the soul, are conformed together. Thus the soul, when it shall have driven away from itself all that is contrary to the Divine Will, becomes transformed in God by love.²⁴

By “sacrifice[ing] this Iland,” Donne “chuse[s]” the “*noche oscura*”; the *Hymns* narrate Donne’s difficult passage towards “union and transformation.” However, Donne lacks the essential zeal and discipline of the travelers on the *via negativa*—Donne seems so nonchalant in the final stanza, unperplexed, confident. He commands Christ to “Seale then this bill,” to “Marry those loves,” and to cast out the “false mistresses,” but does not seem too willing to labor himself. Aside of the imperative, which may indicate only confidence, the real impiety—the place where Donne most asserts his own will—is in “chuse,” a verb spoken by Donne’s irreverent *alter ego*, the “slippery ironist.”²⁵

The word “chuse” confuses the purpose and the meaning of *Christ*. By choosing to “sacrifice this Iland,” Donne chooses to be with Christ—but he cannot “chuse” “Everlasting night.” The choice is Christ’s alone. Donne’s will “chuse[s]”; the choice made by Donne’s will, usurping Christ’s prerogative, signifies that the will has not yet been fully submitted, or conformed, to Christ’s will. Donne’s soul may be ready to launch into the “Everlasting night” of death, but Donne’s will still insists on choosing. John Carey reads “chuse” as proof that “this is a poem about committing suicide,” and notes that “By embracing death in order ‘To see God only’, Donne takes upon himself the glamour of martyrdom” (218). And so “Donne manages to . . . arrogate to himself, at the

²⁴ St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* trans. David Lewis (London: T. Baker, 1906), 77.

²⁵ See note 56 below.

poem's end, both the majestic finality of pagan suicide and the Christian martyr's thirst for union with God" (219). But the poem offers no evidence to support Carey's assertion. Even his earlier *Biathanatos*, the product of an intellect devoted to sophomoric showmanship, proves not that Donne was suicidal but that he was witty. Even if one takes Donne seriously, and believes that he contemplated suicide (why not?), one fact remains: contemplation is a far cry from action, especially in the case of suicide. That argument aside, the self-sacrifice Donne "chuse[s]" in *Christ* is the necessary self-sacrifice all Christians must undergo: "If any man will follow me, let him *forsake himself*, and take up his cross, and follow me." Self-sacrifice is not suicide, nor is it necessarily "the glamour of martyrdom." To equate martyrdom with dying "To see God only" ignores that all Christians die to see God only, all Christians "thirst for union with God." Furthermore, as Gardner has pointed out through a passage from Amos, "Everlasting night" does not signify "finality" but the eternity of Christ's love. Carey's argument seems focused on the persistence of Donne's will. Suicide and martyrdom are both (in Carey's argument) chosen deaths. Although Donne's will asserts itself in the final lines of *Christ*, he does not however choose death. In the next hymn death, in its youthful state, sickness, chooses Donne.

In *Christ*, Donne accomplishes only an expression of intent: he tells Christ what he wants, what he "chuse[s]," but must wait for an answer. The answer never comes in the *Hymns*; indeed, Donne will know what night he has merited only after he ceases being. Nevertheless, he embarks—although the path he follows (however flooded, cloudy, or stormy) finally falls short of the austere deprivation of the *via negativa*.

* * *

Donne composed “Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse” during a grave illness in 1623 that also inspired the composition of *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.²⁶ Just as some speak of Milton’s divine afflatus, one might speak here of Donne’s morbid afflatus—and of the *Hymns* as his *ars moriendi*. However, in *Sickness* Donne’s attentions are on his illness, the threshold through which he can see the shadow of his death, and not on death itself. Donne withholds directly gazing on “my death” until line 15 of “A Hymne to God the Father.” Until then, death remains “the undiscover’d country,”²⁷ an unknown and unknowable inevitability, to which he travels.

That Donne’s hymn was written “in my sicknesse” suggests two things: that his sickness was the occasion for this piece of occasional verse, and that the hymn occurs in the context of that sickness. The hymn is born of Donne’s illness—a symptom, so to speak, but symptomatic of his illness in the manner of an antibody. Donne has attendant “Physitians” to treat his flesh; the hymn itself, “the ultimate tuning of the “Instrument” which was John Donne,”²⁸ treats his soul’s sickness:

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,
Where with thy Quire of Saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy Musique; As I come
I tune the Instrument here at the dore,
And what I must doe then, thinke now before. (1-5)

²⁶ As my dating of the hymn suggests, I agree with Gardner’s argument proposing acceptance of the dating of *Sickness* derived from Sir J. Caesar’s papers, as opposed to the “extreme inherent probability” (134) of Walton’s dating.

²⁷ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, ed. William Alan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill, (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1942), 3.1.79.

²⁸ Louis L. Martz, *The Anchor Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Verse*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), I:xxxv.

Donne knows, because of his illness and his mortality, that he is “comming to that Holy roome,” where the “amorousness of [his] harmonious soule” will be made to accord with Christ’s “Musique,” and so he must “tune the Instrument” of his body and soul “here at the dore.” According to Christian Platonism, “The individual soul is harmonious at birth,” Clay Hunt points out, “but it is made discordant by the experience of life in the flesh and it must therefore be reharmonized before it enters heaven” (97). To tune (or “reharmonize”) the soul Donne must (as he suggests in stanzas 5 and 6) be bathed in the redemptive blood of Christ; to tune the body, Donne must die. Once the vessel of the body breaks, the soul is freed. Such is the use of sickness: to alert man to the imminence of death, so that he may confess and “passe mildly away” (“A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” 1).²⁹ *Sickness*, particularly in the final two stanzas, joyously affirms that fact. The “holy Roome” to which Donne travels will contain his soul for the duration of its “Everlasting night,” just as the tinier “Roome” of the coffin will contain the soul’s vessel. The “Musique” that Donne will intone there with the “Quire of Saints” can neither be heard nor made by Donne in his fallen state. What divine register Donne can make, he makes “here at the dore,” with the hymn, which is itself the music of Donne’s tuning. That is, the music of the hymn is analogous to the accidental music one hears at the symphony fifteen minutes before a piece begins.³⁰

Donne represents the tuning of his soul, in the first stanza’s final line, as thinking. As the hymn unfolds, as Donne thinks, the music of the hymn, which tunes Donne’s soul, is made. *Sickness*—indeed all of Donne’s verse—can be thought of as the music of his

²⁹ All citations of Donne’s secular verse are from the Patrides edition.

³⁰ Lewalski argues that Donne defers his singing until he can join his voice together with the “Quire of Saints.” It seems likelier that Donne’s tuning *is* his singing; the hymn is, in many senses, rehearsal.

thinking. The thinking that unfolds in the hymn is sympathetic with the logic of the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Donne divided his *Devotions* into 23 chapters,³¹ and “digested” each chapter into three sections:

1. MEDITATIONS *upon our Humane Condition*.
2. EXPOSTULATIONS, *and Debatelements with God*.
3. PRAYERS, *upon the severall occasions, to him*.³²

Each chapter, in the fashion of a sermon, explicates a text, each being one of “The Stations of the Sickness.” *Sickness* replicates this format in miniature. The six stanzas divide into three sets of two: the first set of stanzas meditates upon Donne’s condition, his illness and imminent death; the second set of stanzas accounts the worth of sickness and death; the final two stanzas are a prayer to Christ, begging grace and the resurrection of Donne’s soul. The text Donne explicates in *Sickness* may be the first line of the hymn, which is more or less a station of the sick. Although there is no direct evidence to suggest this, it might appropriately be an exegesis of John XI.4: “And Jesus hearing it, said unto them: ‘This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God: that the Son of God may be glorified by it.’” All of John XI, in fact, which witnesses the death and resurrection of Lazarus, pertains to *Sickness*; no less apropos than verse 4 is verse 25: “I am the resurrection and the life.”³³

The knowledge that his sickness is for the glorification of Christ, and that Christ is “the resurrection and the life,” informs Donne’s meditation on his condition.

Therefore, the meditation begins not with the physical fact of his illness, but with the

³¹ Matching the year of his illness, perhaps.

³² John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, together with Death’s Duel*, (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 2000), 1.

³³ Many scholars have urged various “texts” for *Sickness*; see Novarr, *The Disinterred Muse* 179-83 for a summary of their arguments.

confident declaration that he is “comming to that Holy roome.” Only in the second stanza does Donne address sickness directly:

Whilst my Physitians by their love are growne
Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne
That this is my South-west discoverie
Per fretum febris, by these streights to die. (6-10)

The “Physitians,” who “by their love are growne / Cosmographers” read and interpret the signs of Donne’s illness that are apparent on his flesh. Their love for their profession transforms them into readers, like “Cosmographers,” of influences and elements, and like lovers they read Donne’s body that lies supine “on his bed.” The diagnostic roving of the “Physitians” over Donne’s flesh uncovers his “South-west discoverie / *Per fretum febris*” (“through the strait of fever”). Donne’s doctors are secular prophets announcing a last baptism of the body by the fire of Donne’s raging fever. “Tuning” here becomes burning: the fire of fever will eventually reduce the flesh to the dust and ashes from which the flesh was made. The “South-west discoverie,” through the straits of fever, ironically, provides a safe passage for Donne’s soul to escape its confinement in the flesh.³⁴

The main clause of the second stanza occurs in the third stanza. The second stanza consists of a series of four dependent clauses addressing Donne’s sickness and the labor of his “Physitians,” leading to the beginning of Donne’s expostulation:

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;

³⁴ Novarr makes a similar case: “the physicians take [*per fretum febris*] to mean that he will die of the raging heat of his fever, that the fever is the path to his death; for Donne himself, death is the narrows to be traversed in order to reach resurrection” (*The Disinterred Muse* 183).

For, though their currants yeeld returne to none,
What shall my West hurt mee? As West and East
In all flatt Mapps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection. (11-15)

The analogy between the map and the body as reproductions, or imitations, of the world or of the heavens suggests the microcosm/macrocosm convention found often in Donne's verse. In that analogy, as it appears in *Sickness*, is a possible reference to Luke 5.31: "Jesus said to them: 'They that are whole need not the physician: but they that are sick'." Maps present the macrocosm not as it really appears, but in two-dimensions, with divisions, such as latitudinal and longitudinal lines, national borders, the boundaries between land and sea, and the demarcation of the spheres. The map of Donne's body, broken up by straits, laid out "flat on this bed," requires the aid of the physician to make it whole by drying up the raging straits of fever. To make whole the map of Donne's soul, he requires a physician more skilled than the medical doctor. To make one the West and East of Donne's soul, the map must be "paste[d] . . . upon a round body" (*Sermons* VI:59)—Donne counsels the "flat soule" to apply itself to the round "body of the Gospel of Christ Jesus, and conforme thee to him" If a person applies himself to the Gospel, his flat conception of reality will become whole, and his death will be met with a Resurrection, but not, according to the sermon, until the application to the Gospels has occurred. Before that application, East and West remain distant. Donne mentions in the final stanza of *Sickness* that he has "preach'd thy word" (28), but that is not sufficient to bring West and East, death and Resurrection together. His counsel is two-fold:

application and conformity. Donne may have applied himself, but he lacks the last half of his own teaching: the conformity of his will to Christ.

Despite that lack, Donne “joys” to see his death, the end of sinning, and the possibility of his Resurrection. Through the threshold of illness, Donne can see his “West,” his “returne to none,” that will not harm him, for his west and his east “are one,” his death and his Resurrection “touch.” Donne’s “joy” is the character of his expostulation. Though the doctors are engaged in Donne’s preservation, Donne still (however tentatively) “joys” to see death. “Joy” could signify Donne’s desire for death, his desire to dismiss the “Physitians” so that his fever may complete its course, but the doctors remain at Donne’s bedside. Arnold Stein seems to believe in the authenticity of Donne’s joy. He finds here “no fear, or no fear that is not subdued by a stronger force,” and in fact urges that Donne’s “joy is more exuberant and varied [than in *Father*], not neglecting the last opportunity for humor on the last subject. And the joy is expressed in a strange, sober, spontaneous *hilaritas*, celebrating, in the doing, what is about to be done.”³⁵ Faith that Resurrection into Heaven will follow death provides Donne with “stronger force” than fear; or, at least it should. However, faith only counteracts the fear of what will occur after death. Donne’s question, “What will my West hurt mee?” emphasizes that the fear that wracks Donne concerns the “hurt” of death, the fact of the pain associated with the moment of cessation of being. Donne cannot escape biological fact. “Straits” are narrow, confining, and dangerous—passage through the “straits” of death will not only hurt Donne, but destroy him. He is, after all, suffering, febrile. He cannot escape pain, for he aches already. The “exuberant” *hilaritas* of the martyr

³⁵ Arnold Stein, *The House of Death: Messages from the English Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 109.

gleefully striding to the scaffold has no analogy in Donne's comparatively muted "joy"—muted by fever, if not by fear.³⁶ Nothing in *Sickness* indicates that Donne has accepted more than the inevitability of his death. "Since" Donne must die, he submits himself to the act of tuning. "Joy," then, is possibly no more than Donne's attempt to make the best of the submission of his will to God's.³⁷

Donne's "joy," however defined, governs his passage through the straits of illness, between life and death. Donne's illness is a liminal position, leaving him always caught between two places, events, or objects:

life	death
sick bed	holy Roome
hymn	thy Musique
now	then
Tree	Cross
Adam	Christ
sweat	blood
thorns	Crowne
down	raise

³⁶ Nor has it an analogy elsewhere in Donne's verse. Donne (gently?) ridicules the death-hungry martyr in "A Litanie":

And since thou so desirously
 Did'st long to die, that long before thou could'st,
 And long since thou no more could'st dye,
 Thou in thy scatter'd mystique body wouldst
 In Abel dye, and ever since
 In thine, let their blood come
 To begge for us, a discreet patience
 Of death, or of worse life: for Oh, to some
 Not to be Martyrs, is a martyrdome. (83-90)

³⁷ Hunt aligns Donne's "joy" also with "the joy and excitement of the actual explorer who has at last found the long-sought westward passage to the Orient." Hunt later argues that the joy of discovery and the joy of contemplating resurrection were analogous to Renaissance readers (102-4).

Illness places Donne on the threshold between these two columns. The strait of fever separates life from death, the Earth from the “holy Roome,” i.e., the left column from the right. Stein collapses the temporal signifiers “here” and “then” in order to urge that Donne’s hymn avoids as much as possible the “ambiguity or paradox” (105) inherent in the act of preparing a soul for an afterlife the character of which is unknown to the preparer. Stein’s reading seems unwarranted by the hymn: Donne explicitly distinguishes between the “here” of his sickness and the “then” of his afterlife. “Here” and “then” cannot be co-incidental, nor can East and West, until the “flatt Mapp” of the soul has escaped its flatness. Donne’s three *Hymns* describe this escape as a movement from the left column to the right; to that effect, I might add to the column “I embarke” from *Christ* and “the shore” from *Father*. Here, in the middle hymn, Donne represents his middle passage. But the task of this hymn is not reconciliation of these opposites. It is simply their presentation. The presentation of these loci suggests the question Donne seems to pose in stanza 4, “Where do I belong?”:

Is the Pacifique Sea my home? Or are
 The Easterne riches? Is *Jerusalem*?
Anyan, and *Magellan*, and *Gibaltare*,
 All streights and none but streights are ways to them,
 Whether where *Japhet* dwelt, or *Cham*, or *Sem*. (16-20)

“The meaning of the stanza is this: there is no earthly home.”³⁸ The Earth’s seas, which hold for the sea-borne nothing but troubles; the “riches” of the east which are but gold and gems; the holy city, which has historical interest, but is nevertheless worthless compared to the New Jerusalem; the straits and the discovery of the world through the

³⁸ From George MacDonald’s *England’s Antiphon*, 1868, quoted in Smith 460.

straits—all finally “yeeld returne to none,” all are vanity and vexation of spirit.

According to Martz, in final line of stanza 4 “Donne suggests the universality and the inevitability of those straits,” that is, pain and death, “which face every man who seeks his ultimate home” (*Anchor* xxxiv). The tripartite structure of *Sickness* (imitating the *Devotions*) and of the liminality of the hymn is intended not as a refutation, but as an addition to Martz’s reading of the hymn’s meditative structure, as informed by Edward Dawson. Martz, at the end of his analysis, condenses his six-stage meditative reading of the hymn into the three elements of the rational soul, “memory, understanding, and will” (*Anchor* xxxv). Memory, understanding, and will are analogous to meditation, expostulation, and prayer. Furthermore, the progressive nature of the meditative act—the tuning of Donne’s “Instrument”—suggests the advancement by Donne from the sick-bed to the “Holy roome,” from the “flatt Mapp” to the reality of grace.

Donne prays in the final two stanzas for aid from Christ that will enable him to complete his advance. The final two stanzas of *Sickness* are Donne’s supplication, to Christ, that he “finde both *Adams*,” Adam and Christ, “met in me.” The typological superimposition of Adam and Christ in Donne, contracts the two periods of Christian history, and the justice of God and the mercy of Christ, into one hyperdetermined image:

We thinke that *Paradise* and *Calvarie*,
 Christs Crosse and *Adams* tree, stood in one place;
Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;
 As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,
 May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace. (21-5)

The hill of Calvary was once the hill of Eden; the wood of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil was fashioned into the cross upon which Christ was crucified. Though quite “conceited,” the condensation of these images is not Donne’s invention. As Joseph E. Duncan has shown, Donne’s figure of the geographic coincidence of “*Paradise and Calvarie*” can be traced back to medieval iconography.³⁹ The Fall and the Crucifixion were already thought to occur “in one place”; they do not occur in one moment, however. “The coincidence is temporal as well as local,” Young points out, “. . . from the divine perspective” (105). Paul, in his epistle to the Romans writes that through Adam’s transgression of the one commandment came many commandments, came sin and death. But, “where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (5.20); that is, “from the divine perspective” Calvary instantly superseded Paradise, transgression was met instantly with grace. The images Duncan reproduces were originally designed to provoke meditation on the instantaneous nature of Christ’s mercy. For instance, Duncan’s figure 6 featuring Adam and Eve hesitant with the fruit in their hands while standing below the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, at the top of which is Christ on the Cross, signifies that even before Adam and Eve have tasted the fruit, and they will, Christ has died for their sins. Donne is aware of the instantaneous nature of Christ’s mercy, but he cannot perceive that nature because he is human.

Donne’s request that the Lord “looke” and “find both *Adams* met” in the mingling of Christ’s redemptive blood with Adam’s sweat suggests that he cannot see that meeting of Adam and Christ himself, and needs the Lord to “looke” and see it for him. In God’s eyes, whether or not “both *Adams* me[e]t” in Donne is immediately evident. Donne, who

³⁹ Joseph E. Duncan, “Donne’s ‘Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse’ and Iconographic Tradition,” *John Donne Journal* 3.2 (1984): 157-180.

cannot know, has only his supplicant “May”: “May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace.” Donne was born bathed in the “first *Adams*” sweat. He chooses the “last *Adams* blood.” But there is a problem with Donne’s desire to superimpose Christ and Adam: how might Donne pare away corrupted nature, unless he wipes away Adam’s sweat? The answer lies in the motivation for Donne’s “tuning”: Donne lacks the capacity to rid himself of the taint of original sin. However, he may conform his Adamic self, his will, to the service of Christ’s will. In the final stanza he reminds himself, and Christ perhaps, that he has already attempted to conform his will to Christ’s by preaching the Gospels, even though such reminders are insufficient. Donne’s “sinne of feare,” the belief that he cannot be freed from sinning more and the fear that he cannot be forgiven completely makes incomplete this initial application of his will to Christ’s. Donne’s will, when conforming, conforms only weakly. Donne may preach Christ’s words, but he does not fully apply the Gospel to himself.

The second half of Donne’s prayer continues to implore the Lord to “receive” Donne, to resurrect him, and welcome him into heaven: “So, in his purple wrapp’d receive me Lord, / By these his thornes give me his other Crowne” (26-7). Donne wishes to cloak himself in Christ’s mantle, which will cover the sweat of Adam, and to exchange his thorns for Christ’s “Crowne,” so that he may become an apt imitation of Christ. By figuring himself first as a synthesis of both Adams, and then as an image of Christ, Donne is asking God to recognize that he is one of God’s children, that he belongs with Christ. Indeed, as Donne notes, he has by occupation chosen a life with and for Christ. But Donne here does more than remind Christ that he has faithfully disseminated the Gospel to “others soules.” The rhetorical and spiritual faculties of sermonizing which

Donne exercised upon his congregation he here exercises upon himself. *Sickness* is both text and sermon, by Donne, delivered to himself, with the intent of completing his unfinished application to the Gospels. In the final line, Donne reduces his text and sermon, the hymn itself, into one line: “Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down” (30). The final line of *Sickness* recapitulates John XI.4: Donne has not been cast down into his sick bed for the glorification of death—rather, he has fallen ill for the glorification of Christ. That knowledge sustains him, reassuring him that the Lord will raise what he “throws down.”

At the close of Hunt’s lengthy analysis of *Sickness*, he re-presents the hymn as “essentially a debate between Donne’s Body and his Soul, between the claims of the worldly desires of his suffering flesh and the other-worldly appetites of his mind” (117). His argument, however, seems more applicable to the *Hymns* in general, and their tension between the worldly *Christ* and other-worldly *Father*. *Sickness*, caught between the two, is not so much the stage for the debate between the body and the soul, as it is the vessel which bears them both towards the East. Body and soul in *Sickness* are hardly at cross-purposes; both must be “tuned,” both “joy” and tremble, both anticipate Resurrection and union with Christ.

* * *

Although resigned to death and desiring marriage to Christ, Donne is as yet unable to proceed to that “Holy roome.” In “A Hymne to God the Father,” Donne’s final attempt at reconciling himself with what he “must doe then,” he confesses that a “sinne of feare” impedes his acquiescence to Christ. All of the turmoil of *Christ* and *Sickness* is reduced, in *Father*, to a series of simple queries, posed to Christ, to which Donne already

knows the answers. The answer to each of Donne's questions is always already given in the Gospels, by Christ on the Cross, and his affirmation, the *bona adnuntiatio*, stands. Because Donne knows the answer, given on Good Friday, to all of his questions, it seems that what Donne seeks is not information but reassurance. Donne knows that God can forgive "that sinne where I begunne" (1), original sin. God can forgive inveterate sinning, the sins "through which I runne, / And do run still" (3-4), and the sin of evil influence, which has "wonne / Others to sinne" (7-8). God can forgive even the sin of hypocrisy, the "sinne which I did shunne / A yeare or two; but wallowed in, a score" (9-10). When God stayed the hand of Abraham, when God did not stay the hand of the soldiers on Calvary, His mercy was made evident. Donne knows this, just as he knows that God is commensurate to the depth of his creation's depravity. The fact that Christ's answers to Donne's questions are not contained in the hymn indicates that Donne not only has the knowledge of Christ's mercy, but can apply that knowledge to his own condition—this marks the beginning of the submission of Donne's will. The will that sins, and in despair agonizes over whether or not Christ may forgive those sins, finally accepts the truth of Christ's mercy.

Donne's motivation for posing his questions to Christ is found in the refrain of the first two stanzas: "When thou hast done," when God has forgiven Donne's sins, "thou hast not done, / For, I have more" (5-6). The pun on Donne's surname intensifies the line's poignancy:⁴⁰ "When thou hast [Donne]," that is when God has forgiven

⁴⁰ Not only for Donne, but for others: "The degree to which the poem's puns were heard or read as autobiographical utterances depended, of course, on the auditor or reader: what friends like Garrard and Goodyer could have perceived as personally expressive a more general audience might have understood as the conventional language of religious experience." (Arthur F. Marotti, *John Donne, Coterie Poet* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986], 281-2).

Donne's sins, making him worthy of Christ's love, "thou hast not [Donne], / For I have more," more sins, and more of the world, implying that Donne has resigned himself to his nature.⁴¹ Donne's overwhelming fear of dying with the burden of his sins still weighing heavily on his soul is rendered obsolete by Christ's mercy. Humans are imperfect; Donne cannot cease sinning. This fact Donne must be prepared to accept. His resignation, however, is no joyous liberation. Christ's affirmations, in the first two stanzas, are not enough. At the close of the first two stanzas, Donne is left with only his "more," his sins and his compulsion to sin again.

The metrical neatness of the first two stanzas, and the care Donne takes to preserve that order, seems overstated. Pairing well with the formal, inquisitive mood of the hymn, the ascending rhythm of stanzas one and two is perfectly crafted. All lines are end-stopped, and all caesuras are post-fourth syllable. The slow, progressive iambic pentameter, with short rhymes ending lines 1, 3, and 5, and with rising inflections ending lines 2 and 4, set in the rhyme scheme A B A B A B, not only amplifies the iambic meter (with the short A and long B), but suggests a gentle, sustained melody. The placidity of stanzas 1 and 2 would seem to clash with the turbulent waters of the verse. But Donne maintains some serenity, suggesting perhaps profound resignation to his nature. The sins Donne confesses are ultimately sins for which he has no recourse but confession. As long as he lives, these sins and his will to sin persevere. The sin that Donne *can* change, his "sinne of feare," surfaces in stanza three, disrupting the gentle meter entirely.

⁴¹ Although the hymn does not entirely merit such a reading, Wilbur Sanders' argument that Donne's pun on his own name is proof of his irrepressible, witty *alter ego* has a certain attraction (*John Donne's Poetry* 144), particularly if the pun is considered part of Donne's resignation to his nature. Miner, similarly, finds the pun "indecorous," a "disruption" ("Donne, Decorum, and Truth" 34). Novarr calls it "irreverent . . . casual, throwaway punning" (*The Disinterred Muse* 186). The pun disrupts, however, not because it is an ill-timed joke (imagine a congregation suddenly breaking into a smile in the middle of singing this hymn), but because it is true. That is, "done" and Donne, like "sunne" and Son in line 15, are interchangeable.

Between stanzas two and three, the hymn and Donne's tone change. The hymn shifts from the placid, elegantly-metered ascending rhyme of his mounting queries, to something less regular, more conversational. Donne confesses that the sinne which most troubles him, his gravest sin, is a "sinne of feare, that when I have spunne, / My last thred, I shall perish on the shore" (13-4). "Sinne of fear" is despair, a belief that Christ cannot satisfy Donne's sins, and consequently his doubt about the possibility of his own resurrection. It is the spinning, not the thread, to which Donne clings so tightly. Donne worries that at the moment of his death he will simply "perish," completely destroyed, after he has, in the manner of the Fates, "spunne [his] last thred." After he has completed his last deed, and after his natural desires which drove him not only to sin but also to write devotional verse and to preach, cease their clamoring, Donne fears he will simply become nothing—i.e., he will "have no more," as opposed to the almost Whitman-esque all-having of stanzas 1 and 2. The death that terrifies Donne, therefore, is not Christian death, the "strait" through which he shall discover Christ, but pagan, biological death, the complete cessation of being, the "last going" which is not the submission of the will, but the total destruction of the will.

Donne's fear that he "will perish on the shore" revives for a moment the sea passage imagery that binds the three *Hymns* together. At this point in *Father*, the image system seems nearly borne out: in *Christ*, Donne embarked; in *Sickness*, he traveled through the straits of his passage; finally, in *Father*, Donne sees the shore. The shore of *Father* is the shore for which Donne set out in *Christ*, death's shore. For Donne to rejoin Christ he must die, for on Earth there is no lasting reunion with Christ—indeed, on Earth nothing lasts. And so, as Donne comes nearer and nearer to shore, achieving the process

of his transformation becomes ever more crucial. Indeed, it is only in the final few lines that Donne succeeds.

“Swear by thy selfe,” Donne insists, “that at my death thy sonne / Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore” (15-6).⁴² As Gardner notes, in *Father* “Donne constantly uses the Sun as a type of God’s mercy. That mercy is manifested in his Son” (110). In his insistence that the sun of God’s Son’s mercy shine thereafter as it has heretofore, Donne calls for the “clouds of anger” in *Christ*, which seem to have followed him through the *Hymns*, to dispel, revealing the full force of Christ’s glory. Gardner points out the reference here to Abraham’s fear of “an horror of great darkness” at the moment of death, and also makes a note of one passage in the Hebrew Bible in which God swears by himself, and Paul’s discussion of that passage in his epistle to the Hebrews, in which God chose to swear by himself because he had nothing greater than himself upon which to swear. Donne insists that God swear by himself if only because the vows they exchange are more important than any vows Donne has ever taken. Though Donne’s demand that God “swear” may seem shocking, the fact that Donne swears as well—that they swear together, really—lessens the shock of that line.

Their mutual swearing amounts to a covenant: Donne demands that God forge a separate covenant to be honored at “my death,” stipulating that at Donne’s death, Christ will continue to “shine” in all of his glory, and so Donne when he dies will “perish,” but not eternally. That covenant has a double seal—the seal of God’s word, and the seal of Donne’s death. Donne proposes that God do the one thing he could do to alleviate all of

⁴² George MacDonald addresses the pun on sun/Son succinctly and thoroughly: “In those days even a pun might be a serious thing: witness the play in the last stanza on the words *son* and *sun*—not a mere pun, for the Son of the Father is the Sun of Righteousness: he is Life and Light”: quoted in Smith, *John Donne: The Critical Heritage* 461.

Donne's fears of death: swear by himself, he who is Truth itself, that all will be well.

Donne's proposal, like Christ's affirmations in the first two stanzas, is already finished: God some 1600 years prior made himself flesh, and swore by himself, at the Crucifixion. "Having done that," Donne admits, "Thou hast done, / I have no more" (17-8). Once Donne concedes that "Thou hast done, / I have no more," his transformation comes to a close. By the mercy of Christ, Donne's will is grafted onto holy will, onto "th'Eternal root of true Love." Here it is useful to reexamine the image of the "flatt map" in *Christ*, and specifically the often quoted passage from the Sermons used to gloss this image:

In a flat Map, there goes no more, to make West East, though they be distant in an extremity, but to paste that flat Map upon a round body, and then West and East are all one. In flat soule, in a dejected conscience, in a troubled spirit, there goes no more in the making of that trouble, peace, then to apply that trouble to the body of the Merits, to the body of the Gospel of Christ Jesus, and conforme thee to him, and thy West is East, thy trouble is tranquility of Spirit. (*Sermons* VI:59)

Donne reads and follows in the *Hymns* a typological map that describes (as in *Christ*) two "lands": Adam's and Christ's. The sea voyage from Adam's land in the West to Christ's in the East marks the spiritual change from Donne's fear of the "clouds of anger" and swallowing "flood," to his love of "those eyes" that "never will despise." At the moment of Donne's final concession in the *Hymns*, the extreme distance of East from West diminishes. By accepting the "Gospel of Christ Jesus," and by having "no more" will than what "conforme[s]" Donne to Christ, the "flat Map" of Donne's "dejected conscience" and "troubled spirit" becomes finally "tranquility of Spirit."

* * *

The first two stanzas of *Father* are an exposition of Donne's sins, an anatomy of his second sickness, his Kierkegaardian "sickness unto death," despair. "The torment of despair," according to Kierkegaard,

is . . . not to be able to die. So is has much in common with the situation of the moribund when he lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is not to be able to die—yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available.⁴³

Donne may fear death, but death will disable his will to sin. However, Donne has not death, but has "more"—"have" seems to be the most important word in *Father*.

"Hav[ing] more" is not living, for what is life without Christ? Nor is it death. One might call Donne's station a zombification, a sickness of the soul that, like his fever, ensnares him between life and death, leaving him with nothing, "no more." To dissolve this despair, the "sinne of feare," Donne needs only faith. Faith, defined by Kierkegaard, is "that the self in being itself and in willing to be itself is grounded transparently in God" (213). However, when Donne resigns himself to his nature, then relinquishes everything in the hymn's final line, he rejects not only his lapsed self, but also that part of him capable of perseverance in faith. Donne cannot be "grounded transparently in God" (213) because he has nothing to ground which he has not already forfeited. To say that God "hast done" means very little if actions are the measure of a man. If Donne refuses all action, then what good is he? Which of the two readings proposed above stands? Has Donne submitted his will to Christ, or has he succumbed finally and (in the world of the *Hymns*) eternally to despair? The answer lies somewhere between the two.

⁴³ *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, trans Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1954), 150-1.

The *Hymns* mark the transformation of a man governed by his will into a man governed by the will of Christ. To that end Donne has offered himself as a sacrifice, repressed his fallen nature (as best he could) with a desire to imitate the suffering of Christ, applied himself to the Gospel, and finally, after confessing his sins, and after confessing the gravest sin of all, delivered himself *tabula rasa* to Christ. Nevertheless, “I have no more,” the climax of the *Hymns*, is simply too vague to serve this spiritual enterprise well. Does Donne have “no more” because the awesome mercy of Christ has excised his will to sin—making that final line a joyful affirmation of Christ’s mercy? Or has Donne simply given up on himself? The hymn offers no solid evidence for either. The erroneous reading of line 18, “I feare no more,” would clarify these ambiguities. But what Donne wrote clarifies nothing by admitting everything.

As the reader reads the *Hymns*, he is fooled into believing that the drama enacted before him on the page occurs at the pulpit. “I have no more,” however, indicates that the reader has been taken nearer to the theater than perhaps he ever suspected. Such an argument does not mean to dilute the poignancy of the *Hymns*; to the contrary, part of Donne’s poetic art is playful gravity, and grave play. His last line, if anything, reaffirms Donne’s commitment to the play.

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