

## Strategies of Persuasion in Donne's Devotions

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**M**OST devotional works are important only to religious sympathizers. Some such works may arouse the interest of psychologists and sociologists, and in a few cases that of historians and literary scholars once the writings are sufficiently dated. Yet John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* has gained more popularity than any other English work in that genre, and while the interest in the poet Donne accounts for a good deal of that popularity, it is hardly the only explanation for reprints and extensive excerpts.

Donne's work is an atypical hybrid among the devotional literature. It is not an *ars moriendi* in the generalizing fashion of Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying*, neither is it a prescription for inducing a particular attitude, as Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* and its various sequels attempt to do. The *Devotions* are far less structured than even highly personal revival tracts, which nevertheless always impose a standard pattern upon the individual event (my life was disorganized; I placed Christ into its center; my life now is meaningful). And yet they are much more formally arranged than a typical religious autobiography.

A very literal reading of the title reveals much of the nature of Donne's work. His devotions are superimposed upon various occasions which unpredictably arise, and hence they become responses to emergencies. Formal devices are used to structure a disturbingly chaotic, crucial experience in the author's life, as he was struck by (presumably) a typhoid epidemic to which he nearly suc-

cumbed.<sup>1</sup> Two extreme attitudes toward life simultaneously contrast and merge. Each individual fate is merely another variation of the universal fate of mankind, and hence the series of twenty-three devotions, each one divided into meditation, expostulation, and prayer, leads the patient from "the first alteration, the first grudging of the sickness"<sup>2</sup> through crisis and vicarious experience of death to restoration and a feeling of rebirth; but everything which happens to an individual also happens to him alone, without warning, sense, or order, and hence the patient agonizes in his human isolation until he may leave, still deeply troubled, the prison of his sickroom.

It seems that for most modern readers the formal structure serves as a background against which the scintillating personality of Donne appears most strikingly. So John Sparrow comments in the introduction to his *None-such* edition, that the *Devotions* are "extraordinarily interesting as a unique revelation of a unique mind [which] shows us the intensity and the complexity of Donne's feelings."<sup>3</sup> But unfortunately such a reaction works in two ways. What is exciting to one reader becomes a dubious display of mental acrobatics to another one, and the issue of sincerity is certain to be raised again and again.<sup>4</sup> Sincerity has been a criterion for literary value since the Romantic era at least, especially for works dealing with ethical and religious matters.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence the reader is often eagerly searching for glimpses of "real life," for "true confessions" embedded in the artifacts of baroque prose, and he is just as eager to find something to be "not true," hence insincere. While such a response may be rewarding for the reader, especially if he wants to confirm certain notions of his own, it oversimplifies the author's relation to his work. It is useful to note what Roy Pascal has termed the central and most complicated problem of autobiography, namely, that the autobiographer is not relating facts, but experiences.<sup>6</sup> Such experiences are complex fusions: An ultimately significant event

merges with (and possibly also resists) the self's retrospective perception of it and subsequently undergoes the shaping process of rhetorical expression. Truth ultimately will have to be invented if it is to be communicated to an audience.

How closely John Donne identified with the self of his *Devotions* remains uncertain. In his dedication to Prince Charles he describes his recovery as a third birth, after his natural birth and the entry into ministry; furthermore, as a birth during which he himself has fathered a son in the form of the book which now he presents to the son of his sovereign (p. 3). That of course is mannerist ingenuity, and yet it sincerely indicates the significance the completed *Devotions* must have had for their author. The following discussion suggests that the process of formulating the *Devotions* means coming to terms with a variety of crucial experiences brought forth by and in the course of the sickness. The alienation from the community and even from himself through an unknown disease and the need to respond to unexpected occasions force the patient to define himself in the fluctuating movements of his inner life. As in some of Donne's major religious poems — "Goodfriday, 1613. Riding Westward," "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse" — discoveries emerge in the course of movements; aesthetically successful completions signify that intellectually or emotionally adequate solutions to problematic situations have been found.

In Devotion Six the at first completely open question of the nature of fear has to be resolved through trial and error. Devotions Sixteen, Seventeen, and Eighteen guide the patient into a vicarious experience of death, whereby a universally valid pattern slowly unfolds. Expostulation Nineteen finally proceeds in opposite fashion: a seemingly stable situation, the celebration of the final recovery from sickness, becomes transformed into a flexible religious alertness, which is what life truly ought to be for

the believer. Reinventing the sickness in literary terms incorporates its impact into the self's living consciousness.

Only in fairly recent times have we come to distinguish fear from dread (in the sense of existential anguish, or *angst*). In Devotion Six, "The physician is afraid," the term "fear" has to denote both conditions. In more than one way this inclusiveness proves to be an advantage in delineating the various kinds of fear which the patient attempts to sort out.

The occasion for this particular devotion seems to be the normal worries of a sick man:

I observe the physician with the same diligence as he the disease; I see he fears, and I fear with him; I overtake him, I overrun him, in his fear, and I go the faster, because he makes his pace slow; I fear the more, because he disguises his fear, and I see it with the more sharpness, because he would not have me see it. He knows that his fear shall not disorder the practice and exercise of his art, but he knows that my fear may disorder the effect and working of his practice. (pp. 35-36)

Here a psychic state is shaped into a dramatic scene: an almost musing yet tense beginning, followed by a startled realization and a panicky race toward possible disaster; a sudden halt at the agonized awareness of the physician's necessary deceit and of its futility; a more orderly reflection in the second sentence, though sharpened by a desperate wit. But the meditation's pattern of parallels, contrasts, and antinomies intrigues and confuses even more than the representation of an inner turmoil. The syntactical organization implies orderly arrangements, but the passage in its entirety does not accomplish such an order.

A look at that Renaissance style which makes the most elaborate use of isocolon and balance, the euphuism of Lyly and his followers, helps to clarify the peculiar rhetorical organization of Donne's Devotion. In the euphuistic debate (whether within the self or between two persons) parallels and antitheses are used to set attitudes in opposition to each other. The conflict's resolution is always left to chance, to external forces, or to preconceived decisions; it does not grow out of the inner movement of

the debate. In the end the two sides remain exactly in their starting positions, like monolithic boulders compacted of commonplaces.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the syntactical arrangements in Meditation Six always develop toward an individual resolution, even when the motion does look like a pendulum swing. The meditation's beginning quoted above appears to circumscribe the kinds of fear that physician and patient experience, and yet it does not lead to a closer understanding between the two positions. Each sees the other as through a glass wall without communication of touch or speech, though the movements parallel each other. The reader senses a distinct progression but is at a loss to define it, just as the patient knows that the sickness moves within him but is unable to know its exact course. Antinomies compare fear to physical infirmities: "as wind in the body will counterfeit any disease . . . so fear will counterfeit any disease of the mind" (p. 36). Finally a sequence of corrections and contraries ("It shall seem love . . . and it is but a fear; . . . A man that is not afraid of a lion is afraid of a cat") leads in its conclusion to an admission of total ignorance of the nature of fear: "I know not what fear is, nor I know not what it is that I fear now; I fear not the hastening of my death, and yet I do fear the increase of the disease; I should belie nature if I should deny that I feared this; and if I should say that I feared death, I should belie God" (p. 36).

The inner darkness is more frightening than any open threat. But with his ability to spell out the paradoxical pains of fear the patient has caught himself in midair. Now he at least can attempt to order and to separate his fears from his trusts, hence there is hope that fear must not necessarily mean destruction.

It is important for the development toward hope and possible rescue that the "object" of the typical meditation, "God, who possesses and distributes infinitely," has not been reached consciously. The patient's mind has fastened on God almost by accident while groping for different

phrasings for the pains of fear. At the end of the meditation the confusions calm themselves at least to a temporary peace. The last sequence of troubling images corrects itself toward a consoling conclusion:

As then every cold air is not a damp, every shivering is not a stupefaction; so every fear is not a fearfulness, every declination is not a running away, every debating is not a resolving, every wish that it were not thus, is not a murmuring nor a dejection, though it be thus; but as my physician's fear puts not him from his practice, neither doth mine put me from receiving from God, and man, and myself, spiritual and civil and moral assistances and consolations. (pp. 36-37)

Often the patient longs for a genuine sense of community between men and between God and man, as he loses his bearings in his sickroom isolation. This urge increases in a climate of fear and uncertainty. The patient still remains trapped between the rebellious murmurings of divergent inner voices and the claustrophobic "stifling spirit, a spirit of suffocation" (p. 37), which is the first definition of fear in *Expostulation Six*. While the meditations are determined by the patient's states of mind and by his surrounding circumstances, the expostulations tend to generalize by way of scriptural analogy and exegesis. The reader sees less of the patient and more of the diligent student of the biblical text. Within that textual analysis, however, human extremities and the fear provoked in such situations are vividly expressed. After the fear of suffocation, now instances of fears of hunger, of being devoured, of physical nakedness, of violence, and of being sent away succeed each other in rapid dialogues on textual quotations:

[May we] not fear famine, though we fear not enemies? *Young lions do lack and suffer hunger, but they that seek the Lord shall not want any good thing.* Never? Though it be well with them at one time, may they not fear that it may be worse? *Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil?* says thy servant David. Though his own sin had made them evil, he feared them not. No? not if this evil determine in death? Not though in death . . . (pp. 38-39)

The imaginary quest leads to a preliminary answer which is found in "the mystery of the right use of fear"

(p. 39). The biblical examples attest to proper Christian fear, which is very different from normal human fear, and show how the patient's inability to distinguish between those two kinds had thrown him into panic, the worst fear of all. With that realization the expostulation almost becomes jubilant: "But in thy fear, my God, and my fear, my God, and my hope, is hope, and love, and confidence, and peace, and every limb and ingredient of happiness enwrapped; for joy includes all, and fear and joy consist together, nay, constitute one another" (p. 40). The patient finally distinguishes between proper fear of God, or awe, and inordinate human fear; he has progressed from unpremeditated and confused states of mind controlled by his sickness to careful speculation and learning and finally to joy, peace, and a modified certainty. The reader can empathize since he has witnessed the patient's victory over dependency through the joy of the thinker who has found his solution, and he actively participates since he had been invited to join the argument of the expostulation, if not the more emotional search of the meditation.

In place of the extremities of fear now the biblical example is that of the fearful joy of the women at Christ's empty tomb. That end once marked a new beginning, and so "this fear [is] the root of wisdom" (p. 41). The prayer brings the expostulation to fruition as it summarizes, "so give me, O Lord, a fear, of which I may not be afraid," (pp. 41-42), and it indicates the final reward of that fear in God: "and whether it be thy pleasure to dispose of this body, this garment, so as to put it to a farther wearing in this world, or to lay it up in the common wardrobe, the grave, for the next, glorify thyself in thy choice now . . ." (p. 42).

The biblical work whose method comes closest to such a search for the right kind of fear probably is *Job*. Job is granted the final vision of cosmic power and order because of his insistent attempts to overcome inner and outer chaos. Success comes after a complete commitment to the

question, and not within a logical or emotional system for getting answers. Because of thematic similarities as well as in respect to the open-ended method, one may also think of Kierkegaard's "dialectic lyrics" *Fear and Trembling*, where various meditations on Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son attempt to define man's need for an absolute faith. The result shows direction, but it is expressed in terms of an inconclusive and constant movement.

Analyzing the phenomenology of suffering, Paul Ricoeur has written: "Man enters into the ethical world through fear and not through love. . . . Nevertheless, that dread contains in germ all the later moments, because it conceals within itself the secret of its own passing; for it is already ethical dread and not merely physical fear, dread of a danger which is itself ethical and which, at a higher level of the consciousness of evil, will be the danger of not being able to love any more, the danger of being a dead man in the realm of ends."<sup>8</sup> When the patient prays at the end of Devotion Six that his fears be used to rectify him until they have "inflamed and thawed my former coldnesses and indevotions" (p. 42), such a danger of spiritual death apparently has been recognized already as the greatest threat. And indeed as the sickness approaches the crisis (Dev. 14) and suspends the patient in sleepless isolation (Dev. 15), his distance from the human community and the uncertainty about the relationship with the divine lead him to a simulated experience of death in the sequence of Devotions Sixteen to Eighteen.

Therefore it is not a baroque attraction to the Christian paradox of life as death, life in death, and life through death, which explains the fictive dying — "The bell rings out, and tells me in [my neighbor], that I am dead" (title of Dev. 18) — but the evergrowing sense of the self's rebellious unworthiness which makes death appear the only possible consequence. Sickness becomes equated with guilt, and when the sense of guilt has reached unbearable proportions it can be washed away only in a rebirth. For



the rhetorical development it is of course fortunate that the era in which Donne wrote provided ample training to express such movements; yet regardless of any tendencies of the age, within the *Devotions* the sequence is an essential and integral part and not a gratuitous ornament.

Racked by fever and sleeplessness, the patient becomes prepared to experience his own death. Like a message from the distant community of man the ringing of a bell reaches his ears. It is not the joyous sound of Easter bells, like those which recall Goethe's Faust from the brink of suicide, but rather the opposite: "Here the bells can scarce solemnize the funeral of any person, but that I knew him, or knew that he was my neighbour: we dwelt in houses near to one another before, but now he is gone into that house into which I must follow him" (p. 102). Whether a neighbor has actually died remains uncertain; connections to the outside world are tenuous, and no report confirms the conjecture. But the patient's imagination operates so vividly that one hardly doubts the funeral's actual occurrence; more so as the event and all subsequent reflections happen within a mind with which the reader is already intimate.<sup>9</sup> As the differences between what is true, what might be true, and what is imagined become indistinct, the immediate present of a purely spiritual experience in turn becomes at least as real as the various possibilities of a distant "objective reality." The two planes almost touch, which makes the reality of the spiritual truth more easily acceptable even to a sceptical reader.

The three devotions which are unified by the theme of the ringing bells progress from the past to the present and future, from the possible to the real, from vicarious events to personal experience, from symbol to consequential action. Devotion Sixteen centers on vicarious assistance offered through the deaths and sufferings of other persons. The key word appears in the title, "I am daily *remembered* of my burial in the funerals of others" (p. 102, my italics). The experience of death is still distanced, and therefore

the meditation turns to intermediary agents as it lists instances where something is effectively, if not justly, done by proxy: to correct children, other children are punished in their stead; others may pay the debts we owe; we can be executed by attorney; man may be a doctor to teach mortification by example (p. 103). The effectiveness of such parallel actions depends on the belief in an essential inner harmony and in correspondences among God's creations.

In this almost leisurely fashion the stage is prepared for the ultimate experience of death. There is something altogether too easy, something almost fatuous in those little exemplary tales told by "convenient authors" or transmitted through popular lore; it may recall the playfulness which characterizes Sir Thomas Browne, but it seems ill-fitted to a work which does not see man as *homo ludens*. The indeterminate tone of Meditation Sixteen is therefore partly caused by the disproportion between the detached manner of narration and the weight and urgency of its content.

The significance of the neighbor's assumed death is vaguely felt, but it is not yet understood. Analogies and exempla therefore lack commitment. Quite possibly the patient has not yet overcome a last reluctance to follow his inner command: to accept a dead man who is being carried to his grave as one's paraclete and guide has grim implications. "A man extends to his act and to his example . . . and this continuing of ringing after his entering [the church as corpse] is to bring him to me in the application" (p. 105). After having admitted the bond the speaker draws back as if in fear of that final step: "But O my God, my God, do I that have this fever need other remembrances of my mortality? Is not mine own hollow voice, voice enough to pronounce that to me? Need I look upon a death's head in a ring, that have one in my face? or go for death to my neighbour's house, that have him in my bosom?" (p. 105)

Only in the less anxious attitude of the prayer which concludes Meditation Sixteen does he accept his "dead brother" as guide. The horrors of mortification begin to pass, and the neighbor appears as one of the blessed in Abraham's bosom rather than as a lifeless corpse, and so the patient can also see his own expected death as the beginning of a new life: "if this be the hour of my transmigration, I may die the death of a sinner, drowned in my sins, in the blood of thy Son; and if I live longer, yet I may now die the death of the righteous, die to sin; which death is a resurrection to a new life" (p. 107). Now the path has become visible.

In Devotion Sixteen the imagined reality of death had become distinctly possible; Devotion Seventeen now calls out, "thou must die" (p. 107), and belief changes to a necessary and universal certainty. The famous meditation of that devotion is a sequence of metaphoric variations on the theme of universal redemptive responsibility, where each part comes to stand for the whole. All men are members of the same body; they are chapters, pieces, and translations belonging to the same library; all are parties to the same litigation; and finally, the bell rings out that all men together make up man's world and worth:

Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (pp. 108-09)

Once the proper direction has been found, images and associations do not contradict or qualify each other any more but arrange themselves in complementary sequences.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless the final concern remains always with the patient and his urgent needs. The meditation's last metaphor poignantly elaborates, "affliction is a treasure," and focuses on the "excusable covetousness" in

using the tribulations of oneself and one's fellow man to foster spiritual awareness (p. 109).

Expostulation Seventeen shows still more dramatically how movements toward universality and transcendence remain connected to the concretely positioned self of the speaker. He "for whom this bell tolls" is now fully accepted as guide without inner opposition; he has "become a superintendent," is made to "come home to me, and in this sound give me the strength of healthy and vigorous instruction" (pp. 109-10). Through the tolling of his neighbor's bells the patient is uplifted into a spiritual immediacy that reaches across biblical space and time. Reiterations in the present tense create a visionary reality:

. . . I hear this whole concert. I hear thy Jacob call unto his sons . . . I hear thy Moses telling me, and all within the compass of this sound . . . I hear thy prophet saying to Hezekiah . . . I hear thy apostle saying . . . I hear that which makes all sounds music, and all music perfect; I hear thy Son himself saying, *Let not your hearts be troubled*; only I hear this change, that whereas thy Son says there, *I go to prepare a place for you*, this man in this sound says, I send to prepare you for a place, for a grave. (p. 110)<sup>11</sup>

Considered rhetorically, the final reversal is more telling than the transcendence. It shows the need to leave the high spiritual level in order to return to the earthbound actuality. Even though vision may reach holy action, it still needs a concrete context; it can exist only by contrast, at least if it is addressed to an audience which cannot be expected to sustain religious intensity indefinitely. Donne prevents a collapse of the transcendent experience by changing from the divine chorus back to the neighbor's actual death-scene; whereas the reader's uncontrolled fall would shatter the sublime effect, this equally rapid flight returns him to the familiar environment of the patient. It is a sign of great narrative skill not to end a vision which actually transcends the narrative on an equally transcendent, and therefore probably elusive, plane, but to incorporate it in the established structure without weakening or even qualifying it.

The return also points to the remaining tensions which still have to be resolved before the final acceptance and ascent: "But, O my God, my God, since heaven is glory and joy, why do not glorious and joyful things lead us, induce us to heaven? . . . Why has thou changed thine old way, and carried us by the ways of discipline and mortification . . . ? (pp. 110-11). Though the patient accepts God's will and apologizes for his "unthankful rashness," his physical sufferings still oppress him more than they guide him to a conscious acceptance of his condition.

Most of the prayers reaffirm and fuse the lessons of meditation and expostulation. The conclusion to Devotion Seventeen does not follow the pattern, since here the patient is finally able to put aside his own plight and pray with true Christian charity for the soul of his, or of any, afflicted fellow man: "And being thus, O my God, prepared by thy correction, mellowed by thy chastisement, and conformed to thy will by thy Spirit, having received thy pardon for my soul, and asking no reprieve for my body, I am bold, O Lord, to bend my prayers to thee for his assistance, the voice of whose bell hath called me to this devotion" (pp. 112-13). His concerns have finally risen to a spiritual level where they truly become part of the interdependence of all things. A noticeable progression in Christian charity lies in the movement from "this bell, that tells me of his affliction, digs out and applies that gold to me" (p. 109), to "how few minutes soever [his soul] have to remain in that body, let the power of thy Spirit recompense the shortness of time, and perfect his account before he pass away" (p. 113). As one critic interprets it, "his religious assent becomes so complete that he not only understands and accepts, but he also acts. Escaping from his own worries and concerns, he prays for the dead man. Through charitable exchange and substitution, each helps the other."<sup>12</sup>

"The bell rings out, and tells me in him, that I am dead" (p. 114). The title of Devotion Eighteen, the last one in

the sequence united by the funeral bell's tolling, states what the patient has just come to accept with a tremendous effort. The devotion therefore has little to do with death any more; it rather expresses a release of tension after a great exertion, a sudden change and transformation of the sort some people experience as nervous laughter. This is not to say that the meditation's theme, the movements of the soul after death, is humorous; but it is here often treated in the manner of a wild-goose chase which reminds one of the rapid movements in the early secular writings. "His soul is gone, whither? Who saw it come in, or who saw it go out? Nobody" (p. 114). "St. Augustine studied the nature of the soul as much as any thing . . . and he sent an express messenger to St. Hierome, to consult of some things concerning the soul" (p. 115). Like a flight through limbo, "blown away with profane dust, with every wind" (p. 117), the meditation takes to various directions until, rather schematically, Donne formulates distinctions in the nature of the soul. Contrasting the decay of the "soul of sense" and the "soul of vegetation" with the endurance of the "immortal soul," he discards in his final movements toward the Christian mystery of life-in-death both previous methods of development, cogitation (the soul of vegetation, uncontrolled action, the physical sickness) as well as meditation (the soul of sense, conscious intellectual effort) for contemplation which rests with God (the immortal soul).

The prayer now realizes the aim of that whole series of devotions. Characteristically it still — or again — shows slight doubts and misgivings, but the willing affirmation of death has become a powerful source of strength: "Thou presentest me death as the cure of my disease, not as the exaltation of it; if I mistake thy voice herein, if I overrun thy pace, and prevent thy hand, and imagine death more instant upon me than thou hast bid him be, yet the voice belongs to me; I am dead, I was born dead, and from the first laying of these mud walls in my conception, they have

mouldered away, and the whole course of life is but an active death" (p. 120).

The change from bodily difficulties through the alembic of a doubting and forming mind to spiritual reality is epitomized by the hope for a resurrection in the flesh as the dramatic fusion of earth with heaven. Despite its seriousness the topic does not lack a certain whimsicality: "yet, without all disputation, we upon earth do know what thy saints in heaven lack yet for the consummation of their happiness, and therefore thou hast afforded us the dignity that we may pray for them" (p. 121). The saints' physical deficiencies elevate man and build him a bridge to the angels while simultaneously the human perspective serves as a recall to earth. The spirit has conquered the flesh and now can pray for its admission to heaven! And so the patient once again finds himself in suspended animation, but this time he has found conscious wisdom. He has successfully fused action with contemplation, and each now benefits the other.

Before and during the crisis the patient had tried to find his way from isolation and confusion to a sense of community and assurance. Even though in the last devotions he is on his way to a full recovery, such an integration has not been fully accomplished; the sickness by now has become emblematic of the sinful human condition in general, and therefore it cannot be overcome as simply as one overcomes a fever.

Only Meditation Nineteen shows at first a sense of definite and finite order. "At last the physicians, after a long and stormy voyage, see land: they have so good signs of the concoction of the disease, as that they may safely proceed to purge" (p. 122). The meditation takes the title's "concoction" as its key word. The proper patient is the one who *is* patient and who therefore calmly accepts his ordained passage within nature's flow. Impatience "cannot hasten the ripening" in the course of a natural order, and hence even less that of a disease, "which is the disorder

. . . and rebellion of the body" (p. 122). The devotion reiterates statements of nature's perpetual rightness, and man with all his turmoils finally enters the eternal cycle in a time-and-season affirmation modeled on *Ecclesiastes*: "Reward is the season of one man, and importunity of another; fear the season of one man, and favour of another; friendship the season of one man, and natural affection of another; and he that knows not their seasons, nor cannot stay them, must lose the fruits: as nature will not, so power and greatness will not be put to change their seasons . . ." (p. 123)

It appears almost as if an excess of confusion now were to be succeeded by excessive rest, even by complacency. But everything changes in the following expostulation, the longest single section of the work. As the physicians initiate the cleansing movements after they have become certain of a positive concoction, so the expostulation takes to new directions after the meditation's statement of fruition. Dynamic changes begin immediately with the first sentence: "My God, thou art a direct God, may I not say a literal God . . . but . . . thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God too" (p. 124). The distinction is of course in itself not surprising after a long sequence of devotions for whose development the typological significances of sickness were of decisive importance; *everything* becomes emblematic as one is forced into a state of isolated reflection. But now the dualities in meaning become the springs on which the expostulation rapidly begins to turn. God's metaphorical nature is instantly dramatized into a flight of the divinity's infinite attributes:

Thou art . . . a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious elocutions, so retired and so reserved expressions, so commanding persuasions, so persuading commandments, such sinews even in thy milk, and such things in thy words, as all profane authors seem of the seed of the serpent that creeps, thou art the Dove that flies. (p. 124)



The effect is dazzling. It recalls baroque ceilings, where fresco images, volutes, and galleries all fly toward the center of infinity. The variations in the divine word are transformed into a total motion as solemnity gracefully blends with lightness. After the sonorous "peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors," the alliteration in "third heavens of hyperboles" prepares for the summersault of "so commanding persuasions, so persuading commandments."

Donne celebrates simple understanding in complex language, wonders simply at the divine words' depths, and fuses both in dramatizations from the *Vitae Patrum*: "there are places that thy servants Hierom and Augustine would scarce believe (when they grew warm by mutual letters) of one another, that they understood them, and yet both Hierom and Augustine call upon persons whom they knew to be far weaker than they thought one another (old women and young maids) to read the Scriptures, without confining them to these or those places" (p. 125).<sup>13</sup>

As the possibilities of figurative meanings extend from the divine word to actions and to the nature of Christ, the sense of flow increases, "and figures flowed into figures, and poured themselves out into farther figures" (p. 125). But suddenly, just after an expression of thanks for "a discovering of land from sea after a long and tempestuous voyage," the water image reveals its full metaphoric power as it destroys the speaker's easy security: "But wherefore, O my God, hast thou presented us the afflictions and calamities of this life in the name of waters? so often in the name of waters, and deep waters, and seas of waters? must we look to be drowned?" (p. 126). During the tense explorations into the meaning of water images Donne quotes from Psalms Thirty-Three and Forty-Six, both hymns of praise which celebrate God's power over the primordial forces of the depth. The whole search for a refuge when "affliction is a sea too deep for us" (p. 127) is analogous

to patterns of recovery from distress in the Psalms, maybe most clearly comparable to that in Psalm Thirty-Two:

For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me:  
 my moisture is turned into the drought of summer.  
 I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity  
 have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions  
 unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin.  
 For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee  
 in a time when thou mayest be found: surely in the  
 floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him.  
 (vv. 4-6, Authorized Version)

"Thine ark, thy ship" (p. 127) is the refuge, but that also implies a constant navigating upon troubled seas, no rest and no permanent going ashore in the world. "It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord," the patient quotes from *Lamentations* (3:26). And in that sense he finally comes to consider the "certain clouds and recidences" (p. 126), which the physicians observed as signs of the sickness' abating: "Let me return, O my God, to the consideration of thy servant Elijah's proceeding in a time of desperate drought; he bids them look towards the sea; they look, and see nothing. He bids them again and again seven times; and at the seventh time they saw a little cloud rising out of the sea, and presently they had their desire of rain" (p. 129). Fear of drowning is counteracted by baptism and the promise of resurrection, frustration and sterility become relief.

The cloud rises out of the sea, and so new life emerges from the very same element which before had brought turmoil. This is perhaps the most significant comment on the final meaning of sickness in the *Devotions*. Everything mysteriously and unexpectedly does become fulfilled, but unless one looks again and again, no cloud will appear. "On a huge hill,/ Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will/ Reach her, about must, and about must goe," Donne had written years earlier in "Satyre III."<sup>14</sup> A definite goal is there, but there is no definite approach to it. All man can do is respond as fully as possible to the emergent occasions. For Donne the artist that also means

having to respond as complexly and as ingeniously as possible.<sup>15</sup>

Just like his severer critics Donne concerned himself with the problematic relation between faith and artistic ingenuity. About fifteen years before writing the *Devotions* he expressed the two opposing attitudes toward religious wit in two different poems. The warning in "A Litanie,"

When wee are mov'd to seeme religious  
Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us,

finds its answer in a verse letter to the Countess of Bedford:

Discretion is a wisemans Soule, and so  
Religion is a Christians, and you know  
How these are one; her yea, is not her no.

Nor may we hope to sodder still and knit  
These two, and dare to breake them; nor must wit  
Be colleague to religion, but be it.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Devotions* as well as in nearly all his later works Donne chooses the belief in an ultimate unity of religious and aesthetic truths.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Robert C. Bald, *John Donne. A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 450-55.

<sup>2</sup>Title of Devotion One. All text references to John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959).

<sup>3</sup>Introduction to John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923), pp. xxii-xxiii.

<sup>4</sup>See for instance T. S. Eliot's "Lancelot Andrewes," rpt. in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), and Evelyn M. Simpson, *A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 251. D. K. Ziegler's case against Sir Thomas Browne, *In Divided and Distinguished Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1943), is the most thorough negative argument on grounds of sincerity against a major writer of the period.

<sup>5</sup>See Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), *passim*.

<sup>6</sup>*Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup>Only very long quotations could do justice to the overflow of euphuistic copia, but the following short excerpt from a dialogue in *Euphuus* which according to modern expectations ought to be an emotional high point may indicate the degree

of rhetorical fixation. Lucilla, for whose sake Euphues had betrayed his friend Philautus, now in turn bids the hero be on his way: "Curio, yea Curio, is he that hath my love at his pleasure and shall also have my life at his commandment; and although you deem him unworthy to enjoy that which erst you accounted no wight worthy to embrace, yet seeing I esteem him more worth than any he is to be reputed as chief. The wolf chooseth him for her make that hath or doth endure most travail for her sake. Venus was content to take the blacksmith with his polt-foot. . . ." Euphues' answer is an inconclusive counter-listing: "And in that you bring in the example of a beast to confirm your folly you show therein your beastly disposition, which is ready to follow such beastliness. But Venus played false. And what for that? . . . Shall the lewdness of others animate thee in thy lightness?" (John Lyly, *Euphues*, ed. M. W. Croll and H. Clemons [New York: Dutton, 1916], pp. 82-83).

- <sup>8</sup>*The Symbolism of Evil*, transl. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 30.
- <sup>9</sup>We have become increasingly accustomed to literary creations of subjective reality in objective terms. Cf. Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le Labyrinthe*, where the whole plot, the fate of a soldier wandering through winter streets, happens with all its modifications and alternatives inside the author's mind; or the metamorphoses of Stencil and the fates of V in Thomas Pynchon's *V*.
- <sup>10</sup>The greatest instance of such a development in Donne's work is the fourth stanza of the "Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," which was possibly composed at the same occasion.
- <sup>11</sup>Plato's concept of *anamnesis*, in which a transcendent state of recollection moves man beyond time and mortality, may best describe this visionary accord. See Richard Kuhns, *Structures of Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 117 and *passim*.
- <sup>12</sup>N. J. C. Andreasen, "Donne's *Devotions* and the Psychology of Assent," *Modern Philology*, 62 (1964), 215.
- <sup>13</sup>Janel M. Mueller has pointed out in "The Exegesis of Experience: Dean Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*," *JEGP*, 67 (1968), 16-17, how in the first sermon after his recovery, Easter 1624 at St. Paul's, Donne continued the discussion of literal and figurative meanings.
- <sup>14</sup>*The Complete Poetry*, p. 25.
- <sup>15</sup>See also Arnold Stein's excellent "Notes on Donne's Religious Thought," in *John Donne's Lyrics. The Eloquence of Action* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), pp. 217-22.
- <sup>16</sup>*The Complete Poetry*, p. 364 and p. 225.