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John Donne's Holy Sonnets: poetry of despair

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JOHN DONNE'S HOLY SONNETS:

POETRY OF DESPAIR

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

JOHN DONNE'S HOLY SONNETS POETRY OF DESPAIR

by Portia Hassanzadeh

This thesis proposes that John Donne's Holy Sonnets are poems of despair rather than devotion. It examines the tensions created by the misuse of biblical language, by unresolved paradox, and by unsuccessful meditation. These elements combine to form poems that express doubt in God rather than assurance of God's mercy and salvation.

Traditional criticism of Donne's devotional poetry has overlooked the religious tension created by the above devices. Examination of the biblical language, paradoxes, and types of meditation reveals that the Holy Sonnets are not typical religious verse at all, but are rather expressive of doubt in God and His promises. The poems portray a man in the midst of spiritual crisis who was not comfortable with his faith. The sonnets express the tensions that Donne felt in his relationship with God, and explore many of the problems inherent in any relationship between the human and the Divine.

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Chapter One

Poetry of Despair

John Donne's life was in many ways reflected in his poetry. Although the legends of his two separate lives, the pre-conversion "Jack Donne" versus the post-conversion "Dr. John Donne," are seen today as oversimplistic myths, there actually was a distinct turning point in his life, against which all of his Divine Poems must be measured: his conversion from the Roman Catholic to the Anglican church. Donne was born and raised Catholic, and studied the Catholic faith in his formative years. Then, as a young adult, he abandoned his native religion for the safer, more expedient, Anglican church, in which he became an important figure later in life. It is possible, of course, to regard this shift in allegiance as simply one of cunning, coldhearted self-interest; the young Donne was ambitious, and a Catholic had little hope of worldly success in the England of Donne's day. However, although fear and practical concerns no doubt played a part in Donne's decision to change his religious position, he did not undertake his conversion lightly. He made a rational decision to accept the doctrines of the Anglican church, and to reject those of the Catholic church. While this decision was intelligently reasoned, Donne had some difficulty accepting the change emotionally. It is clear from "Satire II" and Pseudo-Martyr

that Donne intellectually accepted the change (Carey 30); it is equally clear from much of his religious verse that he struggled for years with the emotional and spiritual side of his conversion.

The Holy Sonnets were written during a time of spiritual crisis. They are clever and witty and complex, like all of Donne's verse. However, they carry an undertone of deep spiritual dissatisfaction and anguish. It is quite clear from these poems that even at the time they were written, years after his conversion, Donne was still a deeply troubled man. Gardner dates the earliest sonnets in 1609; Donne formally converted to the Anglican church about 1597. He had rejected his old faith yet was not comfortable with his new faith. Rather than offering a statement of mature spirituality, the Holy Sonnets represent "a series of efforts to experience those states of feeling that either precede or are concomitant with contrition" (Peterson 508). There is accordingly a great deal of tension in these poems. All of Donne's poetry bears his trademark use of certain tension creating devices--metaphysical conceits, "hard lines" of enjambment and awkward meter, frequent dialectics. The Holy Sonnets variously use all of these devices, as has been pointed out by many critics. What has been less acknowledged is that Donne created further tension by the use of some strictly religious devices. He quotes, alludes to, and sometimes even misquotes the language of the

Bible. He uses biblical language in a very nontraditional, often intentionally theologically incorrect, and occasionally absurd manner to indicate his tension. Furthermore, the poems feature frequent unanswered questions and unresolved paradoxes. In fact, the sonnets are themselves paradoxes, because they represent the thoughts of a man who is seeking God, although God has already revealed Himself to him, who is asking God for things that He has already provided. Like the use of biblical language, this is a biblically based device. The words of Jesus, as well as much of the rest of the Bible, are full of paradoxes. However, while Jesus, and even Paul, explain the paradoxes so that they can be resolved with a step of faith, the paradoxes of Donne, and the sonnets themselves, are unresolvable. The reader is unable, as Donne was unable, to answer the questions or the doubts raised by the paradoxes. While the language and paradoxes of the Bible are usually used by religious writers to enhance faith, Donne imitates biblical paradoxes in a perverted fashion to express religious doubt. Finally, Donne mixes various forms of meditation. He uses both Catholic meditation, as described by Louis Martz, and Protestant meditation, as described by Barbara Kifer Lewalski in various sonnets. However, he never offers a complete meditation in either traditional form. His meditations are thus unsuccessful, or at least incomplete.

Although meditation itself is a genre rather than a tension producing device, Donne's refusal to stick to the rules and traditions of meditation, and to the traditions of religious poems in general, does create tension in and of itself.

By way of contrast, George Herbert, a protege and contemporary of Donne's, may be taken as an example of a traditional religious poet. T.S. Eliot differentiates between two types of divine poets. "I call 'religious' what is inspired by religious feeling of some kind; and 'devotional' that which is directly about some subject connected with revealed religion. . . . Herbert [is] positively devotional" (Listener 3/26/30, 552). Donne is only vaguely religious, while Herbert's devotional poems frequently deal with the speaker's spiritual problems and with the problems inherent in maintaining a relationship with God. Like Donne, Herbert's poems display a certain amount of poetic and religious tension. However, unlike Donne's work, Herbert's poems characteristically lead to a resolution of sorts. In "The Collar," for example, Herbert's speaker goes through a period of rebellion in which he considers "slipping the collar." Yet as he raves and grows "more fierce and wilde," God speaks to him. His rebellion abruptly ends, and he willingly returns to God. Halewood uses this poem as an example of an effective resolution in a divine poem. "The assertion, the almost antic busyness of human will, gives a challenge to the

divine power to bring quiet, and the power to bring quiet manifests itself in response. The end of Herbert's poem The Collar [sic] is perhaps the clearest possible example: 'Me thoughts I heard one calling, Child, / And I reply'd, My Lord'" (24). This is merely one of the most famous examples from The Temple of the way in which Herbert reaches a resolution with God. In fact, the pattern of The Temple has the speaker going through trials, only to return fully to God and to serve the church by the end. Additionally, Herbert's references to the Bible are much more straightforward and literal. In "The Collar," he alludes to the disobedience of Adam and Eve and the fall of nature: "No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted? \ . . . but there is fruit, / And thou hast hands." He also alludes to the Passion: "Have I no harvest but a thorn / To let me bloud?" In these examples, allusions add depth and richness of meaning, calling upon the universality of the speaker's experience and his likeness to Christ. This type of resolution and biblical reference is traditional and conventional; it is the hallmark of most religious poetry.

Donne's poetry, on the other hand, has neither of these elements. God does not call out to Donne as He does to Herbert; instead, Donne argues with God. As Margaret M. Blanchard points out, "His God speaks to Herbert whereas the Divine in Donne does not speak. . . . Surely then, Herbert's greater confidence in his God is due to his feeling that God

is speaking to him, reassuring him of His presence and of their relationship simply by His 'words.' In contrast, Donne's religious poetry reflects most often a dialectic within himself rather than a dialogue with Divinity--not necessarily because he does not believe that his God can speak to him, but because he does not trust that he is close enough to hear" (38, 39). We never find Donne hearing the voice of God saying, "Child"; instead, we find Donne asking to be raped by God so that he may obtain some sort of spiritual oneness with the divine power.

Herbert's religious verse has much in common with other Seventeenth-century religious verse, and with religious verse throughout the ages. Donne's Holy Sonnets, on the other hand, lack sufficient resolution to make them typical. It could be said that they are less about a relationship with God than they are about the impossibility of such a relationship. Herbert surmounts his difficulties to be reconciled to God; Donne ends with his difficulties multiplied. At least one critic, Douglas Bush, finds Herbert more spiritually effective than Donne. "Whereas Herbert can enter into and act upon our own being, most of Donne's religious poetry remains an external object of intellectual study" (40). However, it could be said as well that Donne speaks to those in times of crisis or doubt, or to those who do not accept easy answers, while Herbert offers the traditional religious solution.

Contrary to what one might expect from religious verse, God does not personally appear at all in the Holy Sonnets. He is mentioned and alluded to, even argued with, but He has no personality or presence. As Fausset says, "To struggle with God, to assault him [sic] with questions and demands, appeals and intercessions, was the only way in which Donne could come near to the reality he sought and ease the frenzy of his mental solitude. Just as in his earlier years he had never been a poet of ideal beauties but of actual truths wrung out of life in the warfare of sense and intellect, so now he enjoyed no immediate sense of God but only the agonized doubts, the ecstatic hopes of pursuing Him" (133, 4). The sonnets are poems about man's search for God, not about God. They tell us very little about God, but much about Donne and human nature. "Readers of the Holy Sonnets encounter an archetypal human crisis that they themselves have experienced or that they could imagine themselves experiencing--the individual's struggle to establish some kind of efficacious relationship with God. For anyone beyond the state of spiritual innocence, such a struggle must be fraught with anxiety-inducing possibilities. These possibilities are displayed, indeed maximized, in the Holy Sonnets" (Rollin 134). The sonnets are thus works of art that anyone can relate to; however, they are not traditional Christian poems.

Even Donne's use of the sonnet form is nontraditional.

Susan Linville makes a comment on Sonnet IX that holds true in a general sense for many of the sonnets. "Instead of employing the octave to develop the problems of fallenness and estrangement, and the sestet to resolve these, the sonnet reverses this process and concludes by refuting what it initially seeks to affirm. The turn in line 9, instead of initiating the process of emotional and intellectual release, introduces extreme tension and an anguished outcry --tension and anguish that are sustained" (150). M.M. Mahood likewise comments on the use of the sonnet form. "This feeling of tension, of man's middle state, gives a perfect form to many of the Holy Sonnets in which either the octave or the sestet expresses human potentiality, the other part his failure to achieve greatness" (123). The sonnet form is used in a nontraditional manner, to create tension without resolving it, whereas a Petrarchan sonnet usually poses a question or problem in the octave, and then resolves it in the sestet. Donne never resolves his problems, and thus concludes his poems at a point where he is no closer to God than he was when he began.

Because of the spiritual tension created by these elements, it seems clear that Donne did not write traditional religious lyrics. Indeed, many of Donne's struggles with the nature and idea of religion and of God seem almost modern. In fact, some of Donne's poetry is almost anti-religious rather than being religious at all.

His Holy Sonnets depict the struggles of a man who had some deep problems both with his native religion and his adopted religion. He is unable to believe the promises of God or to accept the mercy of God. He is tormented by bearing too much of the burden for his own salvation, and this tension creates elements in his poetry that are not typically Christian. Douglas Peterson comments on the element of fear that is present in Sonnet III(W); his comments are applicable to the fear of damnation that is present in many of the sonnets. "Unless we realize that for the Anglican fear alone is not sufficient for salvation, that in fact, unless fear is transcended by love, it is damning, we are unable to appreciate the terrible irony of the concluding line or to recognize that the sonnet is an admission of near-despair" (517). Indeed, the sonnets as a whole are closer to an admission of despair than to an admission of faith.

An analysis of the uses of biblical language, paradox, and types of meditation used in the Holy Sonnets reveals just how unsure Donne was of his faith. Because the sonnets ask questions and pose dilemmas that are never answered, there is a strong sense that Donne felt that his questions were unanswerable. Even the answers that God has provided--the Bible--were not accepted by Donne in a straightforward manner. He twists the biblical references and allusions that he uses. Furthermore, he uses paradox as a device to

pose difficult, if not impossible, questions of his own. Finally, he uses some elements of traditional meditation throughout the sonnets, but is unable to complete any meditations successfully. Thus he is unable to use either of the resources at his command--the Word of God, or personal prayer--to resolve the paradoxes and doubts that suffuse the Holy Sonnets with an air of doubt and despair.

Chapter Two

Biblical Language

Throughout the Holy Sonnets, Donne naturally uses a good deal of biblical allusion and direct biblical language. It would be curious for a devotional poet to do otherwise. Goldknopf makes the point that all metaphysical religious poets use imagery as part of a dialectical struggle to create tension. Speaking of Vaughan, he states that "the imagery is often referenced to the Bible, which means that the image brings a ready-made context, sometimes an entire narrative situation, in its train. And as the image fades the meaning brightens" (52). The same is true for Donne in his use of biblical language. However, Donne consistently uses biblical terms in doctrinally inappropriate ways. Sometimes he carries a biblical image to an extreme, as when he imagines himself as the Bride of Christ, and asks God to rape him (Sonnet X). Sometimes he contradicts meanings that are explicit in the Bible, as when he uses "light" as a negative rather than a positive term (Sonnet IX). Sometimes he implies doubt about biblical promises, as when he says that it is almost "as if" Christ's blood can pardon him from sin (Sonnet IV). Sometimes he chooses words that have unexpectedly negative as well as positive connotations, as when he describes himself as a "sheep" who has a tendency to wander away from the fold (Sonnet I).

Sometimes he twists biblical language to imply his unredeemed status, as when he describes himself as a "usurped towne" instead of a city set on a hill (Sonnet X). In short, he seldom uses biblical language in a biblical spirit. By quoting or referring to the Bible, ostensibly to prove his own salvation, as much to himself as to his reader, he more often reveals doubt about his relationship with God.

Unconventional use of this language is too frequent to be accidental. Instead, Donne deliberately uses this device to express dissatisfaction with simplistic, conventional religious answers to complex psychological, spiritual, or theological problems. As Gilman points out, any poet who attempts to write religious poetry sets himself an impossible task, because he is talking about an eternal God Who is greater than human understanding. "Words are ill equipped to describe the ineffable and the invisible; they attempt to mediate between the speaker and his experience, but when they enter the realm of the spirit--which is governed by a greater Mediator--they cannot communicate the immediate unity of the soul with God" (173). One way that Donne deals with this difficulty is by using direct biblical language and biblical interpretation in a distorted fashion to make his point about the problems inherent in a spiritual relationship, thus creating a unique sense of tension between the human experience that we all know, and the

divine experience, of which we know no more than a shadow. In other words, Donne uses the Bible itself to cast doubt on the possibility of sustaining an ideal relationship with God. Specifically, Donne plays against the Bible, rather than simply quoting it, to create a poetic tension, by his use of biblical language in the Holy Sonnets. This tension indicates that Donne may have had deep doubts about God and about himself as a Christian at the time of the writing of the sonnets.

Sonnet I

Like most of the other Holy Sonnets, Sonnet I presents an overt message of dissatisfaction with the speaker's spiritual relationship and presents a sharp sense of the ambivalent feelings the speaker has about God. In the third line of the poem, the speaker offers several traditional reasons why he should "resigne" himself to God--he was made "By [Him], and for [Him]." The former is an obvious reference to the creation, but interestingly enough, the direct reference is more likely to the Book of Revelation than to the book of Genesis. "Thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). It is significant that Donne chooses a verse from the book of the Apocalypse. A sentiment which one would expect to be purely comforting becomes also a reminder of the end of the earth and the judgement of God. Instead of choosing a verse

from the beginning of the Bible and the beginning of time to remind himself of the motivation for his responsibility to God, Donne chooses a verse from the end of the Bible and the end of time to remind himself of the danger of not fulfilling that responsibility. The parallel structure of "by thee" and "for thee" indicates not only that the speaker feels a responsibility to do as God pleases, but also that God, as Creator, has a responsibility to His creation. Donne does not need to mention that he is created for God; by explicitly pointing this out, he seems to indicate that because he exists for no other reason than to please God, God has a responsibility toward him as well. However, Donne's responsibility to God is the major point. After the creation came the fall; Donne alludes to this when he says, "I was decay'd." The speaker's debt to God is again emphasized--"[God's] blood" bought back what belonged to God in the first place. This is a standard reminder of the sacrifice of Christ.

Donne continues this traditional litany of his debt to God in a similarly traditional fashion. However, the three images that he uses to describe his relationship to God carry increasingly fearful and negative biblical connotations. All three of the images--son, servant, and sheep--are given great structural importance. They are placed in parallel positions, they are in the emphatic first position in each line, they are stressed syllables, and they

are linked by alliteration. Donne begins by reminding God, "I am thy sonne," and the reader is reminded that God has promised, "I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters" (2 Cor. 7:17, 18). However, this reference also serves as a reminder of the parable of the prodigal son. No matter how gracious the father, the son has the final responsibility of remaining in a relationship, or the father is powerless to help the son. This image also allows the poet to pun on son/sun. This pun is often used as a reminder that Christ, as the Son, is the Light of the world. Here, it reminds us that Donne, as a son, is required to shine also. "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:43; Divine Poems 65).

The second image, that of the "servant," likewise appears to be positive, at least in the sense of the conventional Christian cliché of being a "servant to God." As in line four, God has "bought" Donne with His blood, and therefore Donne is a slave or servant. The reference is specifically to Paul--"a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ" (Tit. 1:1). The Christian is, however, called to be more than a servant. "Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son" (Gal. 4:7). This command brings a chilling reminder of the servant's unstable position in relationship to the master. In the parable of the servants given talents, for example, the servant who is given one

talent and fails to make good use of it is stripped of all that he has. And the master says, "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:14-30). Like the son, the servant is responsible for avoiding damnation. And like the image of the son used above, this usage implies doubt about God's mercy and about the ease of maintaining a satisfactory relationship with Him. What should be comforting becomes threatening.

The third of the parallel images refers to one of the most comforting and beautiful metaphors in the Bible--that of Christ as the Good Shepherd. Donne is "[God's] sheep." In the parable of the sheep, Christ says that a shepherd "rejoiceth more of that sheep [that went astray], than of the ninety and nine which went not astray" (Matt. 18:13). The parable is a reminder of the idea expressed in the beginning of the sonnet that mankind is made for the pleasure of God. However, it is also another reminder that it is possible to stray from the protection and mercy of God. In another biblical passage it is stated that God will divide the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:32). Although the sheep will be saved, by implication there are goats that will be damned. So even this comforting image carries a threat to those who do not do as they should; thus the final effect of the image is to undercut, rather than support, a simplistic sense of God's mercy.

Overt mention of the speaker's doubts about his spiritual state begins in line seven. "Till I betray'd / My selfe, [I was] a temple of thy Spirit divine." Donne fears that he is like Judas and Peter, who betrayed Christ. Because he is made in the image of God (line 7; Gen.1:27), when he betrays God he betrays himself. Paul says that "your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost . . . for ye are bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Yet the speaker fears that he was--past tense--a temple, and no longer is. And God also has promised that "if any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy" (1 Cor. 3:17). From barely hinting at dissatisfaction in the first few lines of the sonnet, the speaker has come to the point of explicitly referring to his doubt of his current relationship with God.

Finally, Donne begins to reveal the real theological problem of the poem--that God seems to have given up, and Satan has control of the speaker's life, thus damning him to hell. As this possibility is broached, Donne abandons direct biblical references, whether positive or negative, altogether. He instead uses words that are more commonly secular than biblical. The devil does "usurp" and "steal" what belongs to God. The abandonment of direct biblical references for secular language demonstrates Donne's point: that although the speaker belongs to God by right of creation and right of purpose, the devil is in control and thus is unrightfully claiming ownership. In a sense, it is

God's fault for allowing this to happen. According to the Tenth Article of Anglicanism, man is powerless to "turn himself . . . to faith." Therefore, as Donne indicates, God has the responsibility to re-steal Donne's soul from the usurper.

In the last five lines of the sonnet, Donne presents a metaphor of himself as the Bride of Christ. Yet this is not the traditional happy image. Instead, Donne uses wording here that he repeats in several other sonnets--the Bride of Christ being raped. Here, he says that God is allowing Satan to "ravish" him, although he is by right wedded to God. The speaker is presented as a helpless female, being stolen away from her groom by an interloper, while the husband refuses to "stand and for [his] owne worke fight." The final paradox is that God, although He loves His Bride (mankind), will not "chuse" the speaker, while Satan, hating the Bride, will not give the speaker up. Donne carries the biblical metaphor to an extreme in his frustration with what he sees as God's inaction in a time of crisis. After hinting throughout that he fears for his salvation, he makes it clear that he feels that God has not lived up to His responsibilities as Father, Master, and Shepherd. He finally comes to the point of contradicting the Bible directly--he states that God "wilt not chuse me." Yet God promises that "as many as received him [Christ], to them he gave power to become the Sons of God, even to them that

believe on his name" (John 1:12). If Donne says he is saved, then he is. Yet he is unable to resolve his own doubts, instead remembering that "many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14). He fears that he will remain a prodigal son, a faithless servant, a lost sheep, and a stolen bride.

Sonnet IV

Donne offers another example of his inability to accept the expressed promises of God in Sonnet IV. This sonnet is a study in contrasts--it moves from its grand, earth shattering opening to a personal and contemplative ending. And as A.C. Partridge says, it "contrasts the sonorous, prophetic language of the Old Testament with the peace of the Pauline doctrine of redemption" (132). Donne begins with his vision of the Apocalypse. St. John says that he "saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth" (Rev. 7:1). Donne prefers to deal with modern science--his earth is "round," with "imagin'd corners." This change allows Donne to make a clever play on the traditional idea of the four corners of the earth. The command to the trumpets to "blow" sounds glorious and wonderful--the word itself comes at the end of the first line for particular emphasis, and it is further set off by a caesura in the unusual position after the ninth syllable. However, in the Book of Revelation, we learn that when the final trumpet blows, the four angels are loosed "to slay the third part of

men" (Rev. 9:15). This certainly brings a grim picture to what would otherwise be an inspiring image. In like manner, the command to the "numberless infinities / Of souls" to rise and join their bodies presents a grand visual and emotional image. Again the word "arise" is emphasized by repetition, caesuras, and end line position. The reference is to the resurrection of the dead in Christ--typically a hopeful reminder. "The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first" (1 Thess. 4:16). "Numberless infinities / Of souls" shall rise in this manner. According to this vision, the prognosis for mankind in general would seem to be good.

However, Donne remembers, and reminds us, that not all those who are dead are in harmony with God. There are those for whom the resurrection from the dead means being finally cast into hell. Those whom "the flood did . . . o'erthrow" were condemned by God to die because of their disobedience to Him. Only the righteous family of Noah was saved; the rest died in a state of sin. Likewise, those whom "the fire shall o'erthrow"--a reference to the third of the earth that shall be "killed, by the fire, and by the smoke, and by the brimstone, which issued out of the mouths" of the four angels (Rev. 9:18)--may not be saved at the time of their death. In fact, those who die by any of the means that Donne mentions--and he mentions many--may be destined for

hell. R. E. Pritchard comments that the catalogue of deaths that Donne presents here is actually four pairs of opposites. "Sudden and multitudinous deaths, individual and natural deaths, death by the will of others or oneself, [and] death by impersonal legal process or its opposite, chance" are linked, one pair to each of the four angels (348). Besides those who die, even those who will not, those "whose eyes, / Shall behold God, and never taste deaths woe," may be doomed, depending on what their relationship is to God. As Christ says in the verses that Donne refers to here, "Whosoever shall be ashamed of me and my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory. . . . But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:26, 27). Even such a seemingly innocuous reference carries with it the threat of eternal damnation.

After alluding to the possible damnation of many, Donne begins to make the poem more personal, and to worry about his own future state. He says, "Let them sleepe," which is a term frequently used in the New Testament for those who are dead in Christ, and he will "mourne a space." The word "mourn" is used in the beatitudes: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:5). Yet Donne does not seem to anticipate being comforted. Instead, he identifies with Paul, who mourned because he was the "chief

among sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). Unlike Paul, Donne is unable to realize God's forgiveness of his many sins. "If above all these, my sinnes abound, / 'Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace, / when wee are there." Yet even realizing that he must ask forgiveness before the Apocalypse, whether in his case it should be by his own personal end or the end of the world, Donne fails to ask forgiveness as Paul does. Instead, he asks God, "Teach mee how to repent." His sorrow should teach him how to repent, for mourning without repentance is useless in God's eyes. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

Finally, Donne offers a twisted biblical reference that provides us the clue to his spiritual problem--he says that if God will teach him to repent, it will be as good "as if thou hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood." It is stated explicitly in the New Testament that Jesus' blood does bring pardon and forgiveness to those who believe in Him; indeed, that is the implicit message of the entire New Testament, a fact that Donne apparently overlooks here. "Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him" (Rom. 5:9). Donne, unable to believe totally and unconditionally in this salvation and to repent for his sins, is in danger of encountering the very wrath that Jesus died to save him from. Roston finds the line appropriate; he says that Donne finds his

resolution and "sole comfort" not in "the vision of an omnipotent, kingly God dispatching thousands to perform his bidding, but [in] the intimate and personal relationship of thy blood and my pardon" (63). This reading fails to take into account that Donne is not satisfied with or accepting of the promises of God. It would be more appropriate to say that Donne would like to be able to depend on that "intimate and personal relationship" but is unable to do so because of his intimate and personal doubts.

Donne's vision of the apocalypse is terrifying and powerful, rather than anticipatory and comfortable, because he lacks the ability to do exactly what God requires to assure himself of his salvation. Since he cannot accept the redemptive power of the blood of Christ, he cannot repent. Since he cannot repent, he cannot be sure of his salvation. Since he cannot be sure of his salvation, he looks forward to Judgment Day with mixed emotions. The end of time is something that the saved can look forward to, but it is a terrifying prospect to the damned. "The hour is coming, in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28, 29). When the four angels sound their trumpets and Donne must come face to face with God, he fears that he will be on the side of those who have done evil, and consequently be cast into eternal

damnation.

Sonnet VII

"And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews! And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head" (Matt. 27:29, 30).

"Spit in my face yee Jewes" offers one of the most memorable of all of Donne's uses of biblical imagery. The words that he uses refer to some of the most emotional and powerful verses in the New Testament. From the opening lines of the sonnet the reader is struck with the violence, visual imagery, and direct allusion to the Crucifixion of Christ. The language of the opening lines is almost direct quotation from the gospels. Roston points out that the poem uses "shock tactics" to involve the reader. Donne gives us a "new picture of the event, which contradicts the normal assumptions brought to the poem. Instead of the resigned and suffering Jesus of Gospel tradition, humbly bearing the cross upon His back in expiation of the sins of mankind, we are confronted with a bitter, exasperated Christ, taunting His persecutors to redouble His torments. What has happened to the traditional Lamb led willingly to the slaughter?" (167). Roston has aptly described one of the masterful effects of this poem. It is even more effective

when we realize that Donne is painting his untraditional portrait with biblical imagery.

The particular actions of Jesus' tormentors that Donne chooses to list are significant in that they refer to specific complaints that the Jews had against Jesus. The Jews did spit on Jesus, because they considered Him to be a heretic, guilty of the sin of pride, of presuming to be equal with God. His side was pierced even after His death, because they gave Him not even the customary respect they would have for the dead. Furthermore, out from the hole in Christ's side flowed water and blood, twin symbols of the way that Christ's blood purifies and cleanses from sin. The term "buffet" is not used in any of the gospels, but it does recall to mind Paul's assertion that he is given "a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure" (2 Cor. 12:7). This points out Paul's need to be reminded of his humanity and humility, to keep him from the sin of pride. Likewise, the word "scoff" is not used in the Gospels, but it is clear that the Jews were scoffing when they sarcastically called Jesus the "King of the Jews." It is ironic that they intended this phrase as sarcasm, because no one could seem less kingly than Christ at that moment, yet He was in fact the King of the Jews. Again, they intended to puncture His pride and His false sense of elevation. Pilate did literally "scourge" Christ, as a particularly painful

punishment. In addition, the writer of Hebrews says that "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb. 12:6). After all this, the phrase "crucifie mee" is anticlimactic, coming at the end of the line, without particular stress, although it was the climax of the biblical account.

Donne chooses the particular phrases mentioned above because he is not talking about Christ, he is talking about himself. He deserves to be spat on, for presuming to act as though he were equal to God. He deserves to have his side pierced, although the blood that comes out has no power to cleanse. He deserves to be buffeted, to be reminded that he should not be "exalted" in his own sights. He deserves to be scoffed at, because he acts kingly without justification. He deserves to be scourged, as God has promised to all the sons whom He loves. Finally, he deserves to be crucified for his sin, because "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and Donne has "sinn'd, and sinn'd." Donne purposely chooses words and phrases that relate to his own sin, as well as to the crucifixion of Christ.

These first few lines of the sonnet are vaguely reminiscent of the twenty-second Psalm. This psalm is the only place in the Bible in which a character identifies in great detail with the crucifixion of Christ by means of prophecy. David laments that God has forsaken him (22:1), and that he is misused by others because of his

righteousness. He prophesies many of the things that will happen to Jesus at the Crucifixion. He will be laughed at and mocked because God does not deliver him (22:7, 8); he will have his hands and feet pierced (22:16); he will be thirsty (22:15); and for his garments lots will be cast (22:18). David, like Donne, unwittingly identifies with Christ. Yet Donne chooses different images than David does in making his comparison. This is because David, like Christ, was an innocent victim of others, persecuted because of his righteousness. Donne, on the other hand, sees himself as deserving of the punishment that Christ faced, although he is not called on to actually be punished in the same way.

Donne points out the central irony in the Christian scheme of redemption--all men sin, and the only Person ever to live without sin is the One who is punished. Although to the Christian it is clear that Christ died for our sins, Donne neglects to point that out. He says that "by my death can not be satisfied / My sinnes," yet he again ignores the central redeeming fact that Christ's death can satisfy his sins. Donne refuses to accept God's promise, and continues dwelling on his own unworthiness--instead of being devoted to Christ, he does "crucifie him daily." Donne perhaps fears that his iniquity is too great for Christ's death to help. As the writer of Hebrews says, there are those for whom it is impossible "to renew them again unto

repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh" (Heb. 6:6). Donne, as usual, fears that he is one of the damned, having gone too far to receive even God's mercy.

As though not wanting to face the implications of his reference to the verse in Hebrews, Donne immediately shies away from the personal tone of the poem to talk more about God in general. He does admit that he will "[God's] strange love still admire," but then goes on to point out objectively some things about the incarnation of Christ. Donne compares Christ to Jacob, who put the skins of newly slaughtered goats on his hands and face, to fool his father into blessing him in place of his hairier brother Esau. Jacob's motives were not the purest--he acted "to supplant, and with gainful intent." Furthermore, God had already promised him that he would have the blessing, so if he had been willing to trust in God's promises and wait, he would have gotten what he wanted anyway in the end. Jacob is rather like Donne, who finds himself guilty of acting in God's place, and being unable to believe God's promises. However, Donne here compares Jacob, not very aptly, to Christ. Just as Jacob disguised himself, "God cloth's himselfe in vile mans flesh." Yet Donne neglects to mention that God does this to save rather than deceive mankind. The comparison is quite odd, and not explained by Donne enough to make any sense according to traditional Christian

philosophy. Because of this, the comparison tells us more about the poet than it does about the subject of the poem. The only motivation that Donne can assign for God's actions is so that "Hee might be weake enough to suffer woe." As above, Donne deliberately misses the point that Christ acted to save man, and Donne himself. Instead, he curiously seems to propose that God's reason for becoming a man was to be so weak that he would be crucified. This recalls us to the reference to the Jews mocking Christ, a reference that Donne makes at the beginning of the sonnet. They believed that Christ would have defended Himself if He could have. Thus, the reason that He didn't save Himself must have been because He was weak, rather than because He was strong. Donne, like the Jews, can himself assign no better motive to Christ's actions. Just as he says he does, Donne commits the same sins as the Jews that are responsible for Christ's death; like those Jews he crucifies Christ without accepting the salvation that God offers because of Christ's sacrifice. Like them, he is damned unless he can respond to Christ's sacrifice.

Sonnet IX

In this sonnet, Donne again reflects on the end of the world. This time, he tries to convince himself of his salvation by using reason. However, according to biblical standards, his reasoning is faulty, and he thus does not

succeed in proving anything about his eternal fate. Donne attempts a meditation on the crucified Christ. He pictures His face: "Tears in his eyes quench the amasing light."

Light is often used throughout the Bible. It can be a neutral term, as in "God said, Let there be light; and there was light" (Gen. 1:4). It can be a term of goodness, as in "In him [Christ] was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1: 4, 5). However, the word "light" is almost never used for something evil or even potentially evil. Yet Donne says that Christ's tears quenched the "amasing" ("fearful"--Shawcross 343; "terrifying, dreadful"--OED 265) light. The word is certainly used in an ambiguous sense, if not a downright negative sense. The light could refer to the light of Christ's life, which was snuffed out temporarily by His crucifixion. Yet His tears did not quench that light, and the light was quenched only until the resurrection. The light could also refer to the light of the fires of hell. Christ tells us several times that there is an eternal fire prepared for the damned, that could, by extension, cast a fearful, terrifying, and dreadful light. In this sense, the term is certainly applied to something negative, upsetting biblical precedent. Donne is undercutting the possibility of resolution when he uses biblical terms in ways opposite of their biblical sense.

Donne continues with a visual image of the crucifixion scene. "Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell." Christ's blood is certainly central to the assurance of salvation, as noted above. Yet Donne does not deal with the cleansing or redemptive powers of the blood, but only with the fact that the blood, from the head pierced by the crown of thorns, gives Christ a "beauteous forme." Certainly the mere fact that Christ's head bled is not an adequate reason for Donne to assume that He has a "beauteous forme" which assures a "pitious minde," which then assures Donne's salvation. In fact, Christ as here described could be one which could "affright." The only way in which this visual image could be beauteous is if one takes into account the emotional and spiritual comfort provided by the knowledge of Christ's sacrifice. Donne, however, does not deal with this aspect of the Crucifixion at all, but only with the physical scene.

After creating a repulsive and frightening picture of Christ, Donne attempts to show how the image indicates his salvation. Christ's "tongue" cannot "adjudge thee unto hell, / Which pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight." The crowd that condemned Jesus to death instead of Barrabas is described as "fierce" (Luke 23:5). Yet Christ prayed for their forgiveness: "Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Shawcross also glosses this to refer not only to Christ, but

also to all "those who turn the other cheek" (34). This interpretation is debatable, but even if it is accurate, the fact that Christ prayed for His spiteful enemies, and commands us to do the same--"Love your enemies, . . . and pray for them which despitefully use you" (Luke 6:27, 28)--does not prove that Christ will forgive Donne.

Donne's final attempt to convince himself of his salvation is the dubious assertion that "to wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd, / This beauteous forme assures a pitious mind." Again, rather than supporting this line of reasoning, biblical evidence contradicts it. Paul states that "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Therefore, he can appear as beauteous as Christ, although he is the personification of evil. And as we have seen, the physical description of Christ presented by Donne is hardly "beauteous." Furthermore, as Gardner points out, there was in Donne's time substantial argument about whether Christ could have been assumed to be physically beautiful (Divine Poems 71). Those who argued that Christ was unattractive used the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53:2 as their evidence. "He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him." Regardless of the merits of the arguments on either side, Donne is certainly on shaky ground when he bases his assurances of his salvation on the physical appearance of Goodness versus the physical

appearance of Evil. In this meditation, Donne has the proper evidence to prove that he is saved--reliance on the blood of Christ. However, since he ignores this and relies instead on faulty, non-biblical reasoning about Christ's "forme," he again succeeds in proving only that he is in doubt as to his own salvation. If "this present were the worlds last night" and Donne had nothing better to offer to God than this rational fallacy, he would be in dire straits indeed.

Sonnet X

Of all of the Holy Sonnets, "Batter my heart" is perhaps the most well known, and certainly the most hotly debated. Much attention has been given to the three conceits contained in the poem, one per quatrain. Arguments center on whether the three images are unified, and therefore appropriate, or whether they are too disparate, making the sonnet a failure. Regardless of the arguments used on each side, it is clear that a certain unity is provided by the fact that each of the metaphors is biblical. Each of the images takes a biblical promise, and carries the implications of it to extremes, thus asking God to do more than He has promised.

In the opening line of the poem, the poet fears that he is hard-hearted, and thus asks his "three person'd God" to "Batter [his] heart." Many critics (Louthan, Herman, and

Knox, among others) have attempted to compare each of the three actions of God to one member of the Trinity. Arthur Clements, however, does a persuasive job of arguing that attributes of each Person are present in each action, thus giving multiple facets to each word (484-5). Donne reminds God that He has promised to "knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend" while Donne wants Him to "breake, blowe, burne and make [him] new." J.C. Levenson explicates the first quatrain to refer to God as a tinker or artisan, who shapes Donne in various ways (Explicator 3/53). This is consistent with the biblical image of God as a potter and His people as clay (Jer. 18:6).

Clements also points out that the word "knock" introduces the later metaphor of the Bridegroom, as it is in the Song of Solomon that this archetype is first introduced. "I sleep, but my heart waketh: it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, saying, Open to me" (Song of Solomon 5:2). In addition, Christ has promised to knock--"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). Although Christ is waiting, this promise still requires a human response. Christ will knock, but Donne must hear His voice, and open the door. This is not enough to content the poet; he would prefer that Christ use "[His] force, to breake." Perhaps he has in mind the words of David: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit:

a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Psalm 51:17). In David's case, his own sorrow and repentance have broken his heart and spirit; in Donne's case, he passively expects God to do the breaking for him.

In the same manner, the Holy Spirit, traditionally the "breath" of God, has promised to "breathe." Christ appeared to His disciples after the resurrection, and "breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost" (John 20:22). However, this mild action is not enough for Donne. He wants the Spirit to "blowe." Ironically, God has already promised this also, by likening the Spirit to a wind. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the spirit" (John 3:8). Donne's reaction to this promise is rather like the reaction of Nicodemus, to whom the words were addressed: "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). Donne is not doubting the sense of the words, as Nicodemus was, but he is doubting their power. He beseeches the Holy Spirit to "blowe" with more power, again to force him to be "born of the spirit." He cannot find the response within himself, and so he wants God to do more.

The third request that Donne makes is directed primarily to Christ. Christ is the Light which "shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. . . . That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh

into the world" (John 1:5, 9). Again, Christ's role is passive--shining as a guide--which forces Donne to be active--seeking and responding to the source of the light. Donne would prefer that Christ "burn" him. John the Baptist has promised that Christ will burn--"he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable" (Luke 3:16, 17). Donne may be asking for more than he knows. While we are told that baptism by fire is something that all have to go through, those who are determined to be "chaff" will be consumed by it, in the eternal fires of hell. The word "burn" carries connotations of eternal damnation; in short, Donne is going too far in his request. Because he cannot respond to the light by seeking it out, he wants God to increase the strength and power of that light to burn him, but the implication here is that he will burn in hell.

The final promise that Donne wants God to verify is that He will "seeke to mend." Christ is the Healer throughout the New Testament. But Donne does not want to be healed; he wants to be made over again. Ironically, God has promised to do this already, if man's response is right. In his conversation with Nicodemus, Christ also said that "except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). God requires that Donne be made new in

order to be saved. So Donne is pleading for something that he should already have. If he has not yet been made new, God has issued the invitation and Donne must respond in faith in order to be "born again." God has done as much as He will. As Paul states, the rest is up to man. "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:23, 24).

The second major metaphor of the poem is Donne's comparison of himself to "an usurpt towne." The image of a city is appropriately biblical. However, the city that Christ describes is one that should be a shining example to others. "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" (Matt. 5:14). Donne's city may well be set on a hill, but it is hardly the light of the world. Instead, it is a "usurpt towne," taken over and controlled by the enemy. This image implies that although the speaker rightfully belonged to God, he has lately surrendered to the enemy. Donne again claims the passive role--he has been taken over, supposedly by no fault of his own, and although he will "labour to admit [God]," it is "to no end." Donne's complete abdication of personal responsibility is suspicious here. "Reason" has been taken over, and is thus no longer a trustworthy guide. The proper use of reason was extremely important to thinkers of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries. Indeed, Donne's

poetry often struggles between the purely rational, and his emotional reaction to reason. Throughout the Holy Sonnets, for example, reason tells him that he should be saved, but as we have seen there is some evidence that he is unable to actually believe this. He has good grounds for not trusting reason. Throughout the Gospels, people who trust their reason when they react to Christ are never right. In fact, Christ occasionally rebuked others for using reason instead of faith. "There were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God only? And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts?" (Mark 2:6-8, italics mine; like exchanges can be found in Matt. 16:7-8, Mark 8:16-17, and Luke 5:21-22). Donne is "captiv'd" because he is attempting to use reason rather than faith to give himself back to God.

The final image of the poem is one of the most shocking in all of the Holy Sonnets when it is carried to the full extent of its implications. Donne compares himself to a faithless bride, who has left her true lover to become "betroth'd unto [her] enemie." Parish comments that the bride here is the "Princess" of the city, representative of "Reason, or the Soul" of the city (300). More importantly, the Church is explicitly called the bride of Christ in the

Book of Revelation--"I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife" (Rev. 21:9), as well as implicitly in the books of Jeremiah and Song of Solomon, and in several parables told by Christ. Like many of the biblical images that Donne chooses, this one implies a threat to him. Although Christ calls Himself the "bridegroom" in positive contexts ("Can the children of the bridechamber fast, while the bridegroom is with them?" (Mark 2:19), he also relates the parable of the five faithless virgins. Because they were lazy and neglected to tend their lamps, they were absent when the bridegroom arrived, "and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not" (Matt. 25:10-12). Donne is much like the faithless virgins, but his fault is even worse. Instead of just forgetting his duties, he has "betroth'd" himself to Satan. William Mueller compares "Donne's adulterous female town" to the wife of Hosea. In this context, Gomer, Hosea's wife, left him to become a prostitute. Gomer never gives up on her, and lovingly accepts her back when she falls on hard times. Hosea's "relationship to his wife was like Yahweh's relationship to Israel: both Gomer and Israel had been unfaithful and sold themselves into slavery; but as Hosea forgave freely, so, he reasons, does God forgive freely" (314). Donne implores God to accept him in the same way.

However, he again proves more passive than his Old Testament counterpart. While Gomer and Israel returned to their mates when they became suitably destitute and desperate, Donne does not even do that. He carries his passivity to an extreme when he asks God, in rather violent terms, to steal him away. Donne makes no offer to extricate himself. Instead, he asks God, "Take mee to you, imprison mee." And if that is not enough, he asks God, as the rightful bridegroom, to rape His errant bride, thus possessing Donne fully while Donne remains passive. In a supreme example of taking biblical implications past the limit of logic, he claims that he shall never be "chast," unless God ravishes him. Parish additionally points out that the word "chast" is an allusion to the word "chasten" in Revelation. "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev. 3:19). According to this reading, Donne is again asking God to do something that He has already promised He will do. The request thus becomes a measure of Donne's lack of faith in his relationship with God. Donne would like to coerce God into a position of being unable to claim, in any sense, that "I know you not" when the day of the wedding arrives.

Sonnet XI

Of the sonnets to be examined here, Sonnet XI offers the most traditional use of biblical language. Gardner's

sequence of sonnets places this toward the end of the series, perhaps because it sums up the messages of the previous ten sonnets. However, this sonnet lacks much of the biblical and psychological tension demonstrated by the earlier sonnets, as images and references are strictly conventional. It is an impersonal meditation on a standard subject--God making Himself Man to save mankind. Unlike most of the other sonnets, this poem lacks a personal tone.

The first clearly biblical image in the poem is that of the body as a "Temple" of the Holy Spirit. As noted above, this is a direct reference to I Corinthinans 6:19. The first four lines of the poem introduce this image as the first stage in the meditation. The idea of the body as temple is not central to the subject of the poem, and the implications of the image are not explored. It appears as though Donne wanted a standard phrase to place in the opening of his poem, and chose this one without much reason.

The next biblical reference introduced is indeed central to the theme of the poem. Donne cleverly expands the notion of God as Father, who "begot" one Son, and chose the rest by "adoption." The very first chapter of the New Testament, Matthew 1, lists the genealogy of various Old Testament figures, showing who begot whom, and tracing Christ's lineage back to Abraham. The key to this chapter is that Christ's lineage is traced through Joseph, who is no

more than Christ's adopted father. By use of the words "begot" and "begetting," as well as a rather lame pun on "begonne," Donne calls the biblical passage to mind. He thus offers an oblique comparison between Christ, who was adopted by Joseph when His real father was God, and the rest of mankind, who is adopted by God. The comparison strengthens the overt message of the poem--that God is to be loved and praised for all He has done for man. When the Holy Spirit enters into someone, "[he has] received the Spirit of adoption, whereby [he cries], Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15). Although he does offer a witty play on words, Donne uses this biblical image in a conventional and traditional way, to reinforce traditional sentiments about God.

Donne next compares Christ to a "robb'd man" who finds his possessions sold. We were "stolne" by Satan, and Christ was slain to free us. Donne does not carry his metaphor through to its proper conclusion--he says that the man [Christ] was given the choice to "lose or buy't [us] again." Yet he never explicitly states that what Christ chose was to buy us back from Satan, and the price was His own life. Donne usually explores his metaphors thoroughly and carries them through to their logical conclusion, but he fails to do so in this case. It is possible that he intended us to be reminded of the parable of the householder who sent servants to check on the husbandmen who were overseeing his vineyards. After having several

servants killed or beaten, the owner decides to send his son because, he says, "'They will reverence my son.'" Yet he was killed even more readily than the others for the sake of his inheritance (Matt. 21:33-40). This parable is like Donne's metaphor in that the man was robbed, and "The Sonne . . . was slain." However, the match is not exact; in Donne's version we are the "stolne stuff" while in the parable we are the murderers. Yet reference to this parable is the best way to explain how the son's being slain has anything to do with the property being stolen, since Donne does not make the connection within the body of the poem.

The final couplet of the poem plays upon the opposition of man's being made in God's image while Christ became Man. The former is an obvious reference to the creation in Genesis chapter one. Because "God created man in His own image," He gave him "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth on the earth" (Gen. 1:27, 28). God made man like Himself with godlike power over the rest of the earth. As Donne says, this is "much." Yet Christ's sacrifice of godhead for humanity is "much more." Again in this instance Donne is content with a clever play upon words, without offering any reasons why it is important that Christ became Man. The Incarnation is an important and inexplicable subject not just because Christ was "begot" as a Son, or because He was "slain." However, Donne does not

go into the subject at all deeply in this meditation.

This sonnet lacks any real insight into its subject, as well as any touch of personal response. Satan has stolen us from God, and Christ presumably bought us back; no human response is mentioned or seen as important. Given this objective, albeit incomplete, summary of the Incarnation, it is not surprising that this sonnet lacks the compelling passion and tension of the other sonnets examined. A major reason for this lack is the absence of biblical allusion used to heighten tension. Donne has written a sonnet that lacks biblical tension, one of the key elements of many of the better sonnets; the sonnet lacks psychological tension as well. Yet the poem also fails as an objective meditation because the connections between major ideas are missing. Therefore, compared to the greatest of Donne's sonnets, this one must be judged a failure.

Sonnet XII

This sonnet, the last in Gardner's cycle of twelve, offers less biblical tension than many of the other Holy Sonnets. However, it does feature a detailed conceit turning on the comparison of God's will to a will as a document of law. The biblical language of this sonnet is extremely involved and very witty as it puns on several words and offers several paradoxes. The idea of comparing God's will to a legal will and testament is not new with

Donne. In fact, the metaphor is biblical. In the Book of Hebrews, the author writes: "For this cause he [Christ] is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth" (Heb. 9:15-17). Donne, in his usual way, carries this metaphor to an extreme to make a point.

Donne begins the sonnet with the image of Christ as a testator who leaves half of his "interest" to Donne. This interest is in the kingdom of God. Although Donne does not mention it, the kingdom of God can be twofold also--a kingdom on earth and a kingdom in heaven. It is the kingdom of heaven that Donne is interested in, because the kingdom on earth will pass away. "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15). Christ keeps His Godhead, but gives to us "his death's conquest." Paradoxically, what Christ's death has conquered is death itself. He "died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him" (I Thess. 5:10). As the passage in Hebrews quoted above points out, a testator must die before his heirs can receive their inheritance. So too Christ died to leave us heirs.

Donne carries the metaphor further by speaking of the "two Wills" of Christ. This is an obvious pun on the idea of God's will and a will and testament. Yet Christ Himself did have two wills. As Donne points out, He "was from the worlds beginning slaine"--Revelations 13:8 describes Him as the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." It was God's will from the beginning of time that Christ should be sacrificed. However, in the garden of Gethsemene, Christ prayed, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). His will was different from the will of the Father, although the eternal will of God ultimately triumphed.

The two wills also refer to the two Testaments of the Bible. The first will is the will of the Law, and the second is the will of grace. Donne states that God's "Sonnes" invest both wills. This calls to mind the parable of the lazy servant who wasted his master's talent and was cast off because of it (Matt. 25:14-30). This reference serves to remind the reader that the talents of God, the will of God, the Law of God, and the grace of God should not be wasted, but must be invested to insure a future in the Kingdom of heaven. Donne again expands his conceit to include the metaphor of the law. In one context, the law is what controls the making of wills. In the biblical sense, the Law is part of the will of God, under the first "will"

of the Old Testament. People argued in Paul's day about fulfilling the requirements of the Law (c.f. Gal. 3:10-12), and Donne states that "men argue yet / Whether a man those statutes can fulfill." Donne agrees with Paul that whether it is possible to live by the law or not, "None doth." Yet the second will of God--"thy all-healing grace and Spirit"--has overridden the first--"law and letter [that] kill"--to grant salvation. As Paul says, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2); "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (II Cor. 3:6). The conceit has been carried to its logical conclusion, where the interest of Christ, His death as Testator, and the two wills unite to provide salvation.

Unlike the rest of the poem, the final couplet breaks with biblical tradition. Donne says, "Thy lawes abridgement" is part of the gift of salvation. Yet Christ makes it clear that we should "think not that [He had] come to destroy the law, or the prophets: [He has] not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). Paul does, however, abridge the law. "All the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Gal. 5:14). Perhaps this is why both Gardner (Divine Poems 74) and Shawcross (346) gloss "thy last command" to refer to Christ's commandment "that ye love one another" (John 13:34). Hughes glosses the reference in the same way, and

points out that the biblical references in the sonnet move from the "law-preoccupied epistles to the Galatians and Hebrews, to St. John, 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 21:20)" (189). The movement is particularly appropriate since the sonnet attempts to move from law to grace and love. The quote from John is indeed the final commandment, added on to the list of the ten commandments handed down to Moses. Yet it is not the final command of Jesus according to two of the Gospels. Matthew and Mark report that Christ's final command was: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19). Furthermore, the final command of God, not just of Christ, would have to be the call for the judgment of the world, and the closing of the book of life mentioned in Romans 13:8 (quoted above). Finally, the "last Will" of God within the context of the poem is the testament of grace. Donne could have meant any or all of these things by the final couplet. Confusing the issue is the fact that "[God's] lawes abridgement, and [God's] last command / Is all but love" (emphasis mine). The reading of the final couplet that best takes this puzzling fact into consideration is this: "The mere abridgement of the Law along with the promise of judgment is everything, yet it lacks love. Therefore, let the last Will of the testament of grace overcome the Law and

the judgment." In his usual manner, Donne is offering a complex plea for God to remember His promises of grace when the end of the world arrives.

Sonnet I (W)

In this sonnet, Donne uses the death of his wife as the central element in a meditation on his relationship with God. Although there is no doubt that Donne truly mourned his wife, he does not desist from his usual dialectic with God even as he discusses her death. In addition, he continues his misuse of biblical language in reference to his own spirituality. As Partridge points out, "His mingling of sensuous and biblical imagery reflects an undoubted instability of the passions" (138). It might be added that this is a strength, rather than a fault in the poem, as it was no doubt done deliberately. Donne begins the sonnet with a recitation of past events--"Since she whom I lov'd, hath payd her last debt . . . my good is dead." The referent of the word "good" is ambiguous; it could refer, among other things, to Donne's own conscience. One of the most obvious meanings is as a direct reference to Donne's wife. While Donne is conventional in calling his wife his "good" (we still use the phrase "better half" today), the word that he chooses reminds us that Christ says not to call anyone "good"--"there is none good but one, that is, God" (Matt. 19:17). This is a reminder of one of the points of

the poem: a loved one can point the way to God, but if that loved one is seen as too "good," then he or she can distract one from God. Indeed, Donne says that he need not worry; since "her Soule [is] early into heaven ravished, / Wholy in heavenly things my mind is sett." These lines offer another example of the metaphor that Donne uses repeatedly that compares a person to the bride of Christ who has been "ravished" by Him. It is curious that Donne would use this particular term about his own wife. Perhaps he feels that this time God was the "enemie" who stole his betrothed (c.f. Sonnet X). After this lengthy recitation of events, Donne concludes that since he has no earthly temptations, he can concentrate on heavenly things. Saint Paul has made it clear that this is what Donne should have been doing all along: "Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth" (Col. 3:2).

Donne next attempts to prove that his admiration for his wife led him to seek God. He creates an elaborate metaphor that compares God to refreshing water. Donne first states that admiring his wife "whett" his thirst for God. In the same way that she showed God to him, "streams do shew the head." The continuation of this metaphor is clever and complex, because the idea of God's word and grace as a stream is found throughout the Old Testament. "There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High" (Ps.

46:4; see also Isa. 30:28 and 33; Amos 5:24). The pun is doubled when God is compared to the "head" of the stream, because Christ is "the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18). Having set up a complex set of comparisons, where Donne's wife is a stream that leads to the stream of God of which Christ is the head, Donne then reveals his problem with the situation. "Though I have found thee, and thou my thirst hast fed, / A holy thirsty dropsy melts mee yett." Donne uses language like the psalmists, who declare: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God" (Ps. 42:1, 2) and "My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, In [sic] a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). However, both of these psalms imply that God satisfies the thirst of the seeker. Donne has no such comfort. Although he has all the streams of God from which to drink, "a holy thirst dropsy melts [him] yett." The sestet offers no solution. Donne says that he cannot "begg more Love." In a brief reference to his recurring metaphor of Christ as bridegroom, he says that God already "dost woe" his soul. God offers to trade Himself for Donne's wife; as Jesus commanded, Donne should "follow [Him]; and let the dead bury their dead" (Matt. 8:22). Like the man whom Jesus spoke to, Donne is unwilling to part with his wife for God. In an expansion of the bridegroom metaphor, Donne reminds us that "the LORD, whose name is

Jealous, is a jealous God" (Ex. 34:14). In fact, God fears Donne's love for "Saints and Angels, things divine." Although God certainly is jealous and demanding of respect, Donne's implied portrayal of Him as an insecure bridegroom, driven to distraction by the imagined faithlessness of His bride, is a far from conventional image. Indeed, this comparison tells more about Donne than about God. God has already promised that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God" (Rom. 8:38, 9). God is not the one who fears that "Saints and Angels," or even the "Worlde, flesh, yea Devill" will replace Him in Donne's affections; Donne is the one who is afraid. Although he tries to make the point that his wife's life pointed him toward God, and her death left him with nothing to do but seek God, it is clear that his wife, both in life and death, proves a distraction and a competition with God. Donne is already unsatisfied with the trade that God offers of her soul for His, and so he is a bride on the rebound, ready to be seduced away from the bridegroom by any attractive temptation that comes around.

In the cases above, we have seen that Donne uses biblical imagery to imply doubt in God's mercy and efficacy as often as he uses biblical language for comfort and

assurance. In an ironic manner, what is intended to bring man closer to God does just the opposite, giving Donne reason to doubt. At times Donne uses the Bible literally; at times he rejects or at least overlooks biblical promises; at times he finds negative instead of positive implications in biblical language. The Bible is God's primary means of communicating with man. Since Donne represents the Bible as being problematic for him, and since God never speaks or appears in any of the Holy Sonnets, it is clear that Donne did not find that God spoke to him in any clear or direct way. The overall effect is to show us a man for whom the Bible was something to be explored rather than accepted conventionally, although he was troubled rather than reassured by many of the conclusions he drew. Doubt and fear are prevalent in the Holy Sonnets; there is little of joy or reassurance in Donne's use of biblical language. We can only assume that at the time of the writing of the sonnets, Donne was not comfortable with his own spiritual state.

Chapter Three

Paradox

Paradox is a central component of the Christian religion. Christ frequently spoke in paradoxes, as did Saint Paul. Indeed, as Judith Dundas comments, "Does not religion itself appear as nothing but paradox to the rational understanding? . . . It is, in fact, only through paradox that man learns to know a God who perpetually plays the game of wit, by writing metaphor into the universe, establishing the system of correspondences, and, in general, astonishing man with relationships that only supreme ingenuity could devise" (95). Thus it is not surprising that paradox is one of the most common elements of metaphysical poetry, and occurs frequently throughout the Holy Sonnets. Donne's paradoxes, in fact, echo or imitate the sound of biblical paradoxes. There is a key difference, however, between Donne's paradoxes and biblical paradoxes. New Testament paradoxes are either explained by the speaker, or can be understood by a "leap of faith." Donne's paradoxes, on the other hand, are often irresolvable by logic, or even by faith. As Wall comments, "The subject of Donne's Holy Sonnets is, therefore, not a movement of the speaker toward resolving his relationship with God, but instead an exploration of the paradoxes of the Christian life on earth" (191). In fact, the sonnets pose some of the central unanswered questions of Christianity. Why did God

create man? Why is there evil in the world? Although these questions are not raised as paradoxes in the New Testament, they could be said to be some of the important unspoken paradoxes of Christianity. While these issues are not presented in paradox form, they are also not directly answered in the Bible. Donne was apparently dissatisfied with the answers that he did receive, because he again poses the great questions of human existence in the form of unresolvable paradoxes in the Holy Sonnets.

God frequently speaks to man through paradoxes. Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible contain frequent paradoxes. In particular, many of the messages that Christ gave to His followers were in the forms of parables or paradoxes; thus the true meaning of many statements was hidden. Christ explained many of His more mysterious utterances to His disciples, and others were explained and explored by writers of the Epistles. Paul created some paradoxes of his own, but they are also frequently explained. Even those paradoxes that are not overtly explained in the New Testament are comprehensible. Paradoxes explore the complicated and mystical realm of the relationship between God and man. They do not, however, leave the seeker in any doubt as to what the true explanation of the paradox is, or as to what God's meaning is. Unlike Donne's paradoxes, biblical paradoxes indicate the complexity of the Christian relationship without casting

doubt upon God or His ways of working.

When Christ says, in the Beatitudes, "Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:21) or "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:5), He is speaking in paradoxes. Yet it is obvious that the apparent discrepancies can be explained by separating the spiritual from the worldly. The "poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:4), the humble, meek, and prideless, will come into an inheritance as the children of God, and will thus be happy. Those who mourn for their sins and the sins of the world will be comforted by God's forgiveness. Expanding the wording of these cryptic phrases can bring complete understanding. Christ intended to call His listeners' attention to the difference between the spiritual and the worldly; that is why He used paradox rather than straightforward statements. Yet a discerning listener finds no discrepancy of logic, and can completely resolve these paradoxical statements. The rest of Christ's paradoxes can be understood in a like manner. One of the more notable ones is: "He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it" (Matt. 10:39). Again Christ is drawing a distinction between spiritual and physical life--he who abandons eternal life for the "good life" here on earth, will lose eternal life; he who prizes eternal life in Christ above physical life will gain eternal life. The paradox is apparent rather than

real.

Paul also wrote in paradoxes. In his case, however, paradox was used to explore paradoxical human nature as often as it was used to explain something about God. The most famous example is from Romans chapter 7. Paul goes to great lengths to explain some things that could be viewed as paradoxes: "Is the law sin? God forbid. . . . Was that which is good made death unto me? God forbid" (vss. 7, 13). Although he finally explains that the law was perfect and did what God intended, he is still left with the paradox of his own behavior under the law and under grace. "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (vs. 15). While this would seem to be a recurring unresolvable paradox of human nature, Paul does resolve it by explaining why it occurs. "Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. . . . So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin" (vss. 20, 25). Paul has explained the paradox by again creating a distinction between the spiritual and the worldly.

Donne's paradoxes, on the other hand, cannot be resolved simply by redefining terms or relying on the simple distinction noted above. When Donne faces Paul's dilemma about his behavior, for example, he finds no simple solution; he is left with a paradox. He explores this question in Sonnet III(W). While most of the sonnets have a

short, one or two line paradox presented in them, some of the other sonnets are extended paradoxes in themselves. They create paradoxical scenarios which are then worked out to absurd conclusions. Sonnet III(W) is both. It is filled with paradoxes, it ends with a paradox, and it arrives at the conclusion that Donne is himself a paradox. Gardner numbers it as the last of her series, and as such it provides a summation of all the ways that Donne uses paradox. Every line has a paradox.

Oh, to vex me, contraries meete in one:
 Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
 A constant habit; that when I would not
 I change in vowes, and in devotione.
 As humorous is my contritione
 As my prophane Love, and as soone forgott:
 As ridlingly distemperd, cold and hott,
 As praying, as mute; as infinite, as none.
 I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day
 In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:
 To morrow'I quake with true feare of his rod.
 So my devout fitts come and go away
 Like a fantastique Ague, save that here
 Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare.

Donne uses a series of paradoxes to describe his behavior: he is a bundle of "contraries." Even Donne's constant habits were created by "Inconstancy." The opposites that make up his behavior appear thick and fast in the body of the sonnet--he is "cold and hott," "praying" and "mute," "infinite" and "none." Donne does not address God here, but rather himself. He castigates himself for the things that make him a memorable poet: "As humorous is my contritione /

As my phrophane Love." Yet even in describing this as a problem, he continues to do what he deplores. The final couplet of this poem, and thus the final resolution of all of the Holy Sonnets, is another witty paradox. His "devout fitts" are likened to "a fantastique Ague." Yet this disease is the reverse of a normal ague: "Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare." In presenting this as the resolution to his paradoxical personality, Donne does not find a true solution. As Peterson points out, by believing that fear is his highest good, Donne is missing the point of the Anglican religion (517). Fear of God is not supposed to be an end in itself, but rather should lead one to a closer, and thus more secure, relationship with God. However, since Donne's paradoxical behavior prevents him from developing a continuing closeness, he is left with nothing more to rely on than a travesty of faith: fear. This fear is expressed throughout the Holy Sonnets by his frequent use of paradox. Donne finds not only himself, but God and His universe to be paradoxical. When Donne says that "contraryes meete in one," he could be referring to God as well as to himself. He poses many of the great questions of Christianity and of mankind in the sonnets, yet never finds satisfactory answers. This final sonnet finds him puzzled by his own behavior; the sonnets as a whole find him puzzled by God's behavior. Perhaps in Sonnet III(W) he is repenting, or considering repenting, of treating God as a paradox. As

Roston comments, "The wit is muted. He is no longer amused at the paradox, nor delighted at displaying his mastery of labyrinthine reasoning. Instead, the paradox expresses a weary admission of the complexity of human fickleness and the deviousness of Satanic temptation" (91). Yet although he ends by placing the blame upon himself, this does not negate the weight of all the doubts he expresses in the form of paradoxes throughout the Holy Sonnets.

Sonnet I as a whole poses one of the unanswered questions of Christianity. Since God made man for Himself and then went so far as to die to prevent his "decay," why does He not simply use His power to keep His "owne worke" safe from sin? Donne states the double paradox in the final couplet: "I doe see / That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me. / And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee." The second half of the paradox is easily explained--Satan keeps the souls that he hates in order to defy God. The first half, however, is a question that mankind has struggled with for centuries. It has to do with God's motives in creating man in the first place. Why did He bother to create man just to give him over to sin and Satan? If He is indeed all powerful, why does He not just vanquish Satan and rule man openly? And how does salvation happen anyway? Has God chosen some from the beginning of time, and forsaken others? What role do free will or predestination play in the issue? Article XVII of the

"Articles of Religion" in the First Book of Common Prayer states that "Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour." This was the Anglican attempt to answer the questions. Yet Donne appears unsatisfied even with this explanation. If God loves "mankind," why does He only choose to save some? And if He only chooses some, how is any individual, particularly Donne, able to be sure that he has been chosen? Wall says that Donne "explores the paradoxes of redemption: that he is helpless and resisting and requires God's action against both himself and the forces of evil, and that he can never know of the outcome short of the grave before which the outcome must be decided" (202). In fact, Donne assumes that he has not been chosen--"yet wilt not chuse me." Here lies the origin of many of Donne's doubts--he cannot be sure of his salvation, and he cannot be sure of God, because of God's apparent caprice in choosing some and leaving others. The paradox that informs this sonnet, and that appears in the final couplet, is incapable of resolution, either by faith or logic. Thus Donne is left, and leaves us, with a question rather than an answer.

Sonnet II again offers a pair of paradoxes. In this

case, however, the first paradox deals with grace and repentance, and is horrible and irresolvable, while the second deals with Christ's sacrifice, and is wonderful and incomprehensible by man's mind. Donne finds himself facing death, and fears for his "blacke Soule." The first paradox questions his salvation. "Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke; / But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?" Again the paradox is inspired by the Thirty-Nine Articles. "The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will" (Article X). Again Donne is uncomfortable with this doctrine. He is thus left with the paradox that one needs to repent in order to receive grace, yet one needs grace in order to repent. The fundamental questions that underlie this paradox have to do with the mystery of salvation. If one can do no good without God's grace, why try to live as a godly man at all? Why worry about repentance when God is the only one who can lead man to repent? Why not simply be passive? Donne felt these responses within himself, and felt the temptation to just give up. He was unable to answer his questions within the context of this sonnet, although he did move from his

first damning paradox to the second miraculous paradox of the final couplet. "Wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might / That being red, it dyes red soules to white." This paradox is again unresolvable. The human mind cannot fully comprehend how the blood of Christ saves us from damnation. Yet the paradox is marvelous; we wonder at a God who conceived such a way of salvation. The question left unanswered is about the nature of the Godhead, not about the potential damnation of mankind. The blood of Christ and its power are fitting subjects for meditation, although the couplet still does not answer the question posed earlier. Even if the blood of Christ saves the soul, how does the soul obtain that salvation in the face of God's apparent inaction and our inability to act? The deeper paradox remains unanswered and troubling to Donne.

Sonnet IV likewise offers a paradox in place of resolution in the final couplet. "Teach mee how to repent; for that's as good / As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood." As discussed in Chapter Two, Donne here denies the promises of the New Testament about the power of Christ's blood. He does, however, restate the paradoxes of the two previous sonnets. Although Christ had sealed pardon with His blood, it does Donne no good without his being taught to repent. Therefore, to Donne, it is only as if Christ had sealed his pardon. The correct divinely inspired response is still missing. This paradox indicates that

Donne feels that God has provided for the salvation of mankind collectively, without providing for the salvation of any specific individual, namely Donne himself. He is not content with the promises of the Bible because they do not seem to pertain to him; he is thus left with only doubt.

In Sonnet V, Donne explicitly poses some of the questions that have bothered mankind throughout the ages. Out of all God's creations, evil as well as good, why is man the only one damned? Why does "intent or reason" make sin so horrible? Since mercy is so easy for God, why doesn't God offer it more? And finally, how can a mere man dare even to ask the Almighty God such questions? These questions are not stated as paradoxes in the sonnet, yet because they have no answers, they make the sonnet itself into a paradox and explore the paradoxical nature of man's relationship to God. A.L. French comments on this same idea as it appears in Sonnet IX. "The paradox then is that of the infinitely merciful and loving Being who can yet send people to eternal damnation. This is, of course, a central Christian paradox, but can we say that Donne is facing it as a paradox? or [sic] is he circling around it uneasily, half-aware that to be fully lucid about it would be to admit something that reason can't explain nor faith (for him, at least) overcome?" (113). Why does God bother with man at all? And since He does bother, why doesn't He do a better job of it? Again Donne is able to find no answer to his

questions. Biblical paradoxes seem simplistic indeed when compared to a paradox such as this. Donne indicates a need for answers, rather than just accepting the idea that faith covers all paradoxes.

Death is another subject that has fascinated men from the beginning of time. Yet in the Christian scheme of things, death is itself a paradox. Sonnet VI explores the question: "Death thou shalt die." As Wolfe and Daniels comment, "Donne's usual treatment of the paradox of life and death is to dwell upon the Christian doctrine that death opens the way to eternal life. In Holy Sonnet X [Grierson's numbering], however, he reverses (or compounds) this paradox by presenting death in the image of a being who will die" (116). If everyone has an eternal life of some sort, either in heaven or hell, then death, at least in the sense of eternal oblivion, does not exist. Yet much of man's energy is spent dealing with the idea of death in some form or another. If no one really dies, then death is simply an illusion. Yet it is the central, most controlling illusion of life. Much art, philosophy, cultural traditions, superstitions, and religion is based upon the concept of death. Thus, while it may be true that death is "slave to Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men," it is paradoxically also true that "Fate, chance, kings, and desperate men" are slaves to death. Although death might be simply an illusion, much of the business of life revolves around that

illusion. Thus death has a reality in that it affects life, even if it has no reality in itself. So even if Donne is right in asserting that death will die, it has a tremendous effect on all else. Even Donne's personification of "Death" creates a paradox. If there is no death, then how can it die? In effect Donne is asking one of the unanswered questions of human existence. Why did God create death? And in so asking is implicitly questioning God's benevolence.

The manner in which Christ's death replaced the deaths of all people who believe in Him has been termed the "Mystery." Indeed it is a mystery how the death of the only sinless Man could be the punishment for all the sins of mankind. Surely it was a mystery for Donne. As Hughes comments, "Donne primarily stresses the absolute paradoxicality of Christ. The Atonement is an affront to human reason" (185). He explores the question in Sonnet VII. "For I have sinn'd, and sinn'd, and onely hee, / Who could do no iniquitie, hath dyed." Donne leaves the fact unstated that, although at the time of the writing of the sonnet "onely" Christ had died, eventually Donne also will die. This raises the question of what use atonement is if we are all going to die anyway. It is additionally paradoxical, and even seems unfair, that one man should be punished for the sins of another. Donne is puzzled by the way in which God has set up atonement. While it would seem

logical for each person to bear the punishment for his own sins, Donne realizes that "By [his] death can not be satisfied / [His] sinnes." It is revealed in the New Testament that Christ was to be the sacrifice for all sins. Yet it cannot be explained in human terms why this system works. Again Donne has stated in paradox form one of the things that has frustrated and occupied theologians for centuries. He deals with the same question in the form of a paradox in Sonnet XII. Donne calls Christ "this Lambe, whose death, with life the world hath blest." It took the death of Christ to create eternal life for mankind. Again it is impossible to understand exactly how this happens, although it is biblically stated that it does happen. Donne is left with a paradox instead of a logical statement to explain the atonement.

Sonnet VIII is an example of an unstated paradox. The sonnet as a whole deals with a paradox of human existence, yet the sonnet itself does not state a paradox in so many words. The paradox is that God has set up nature so that physically strong creatures are in subjection to physically and morally weak man. To carry the paradox further, even Christ, the Creator, and strongest Man of all, placed Himself in subjection to man, whom He created. Thus man, the weakest and least deserving of all creation by being the only creature that sins, becomes the creature to whom all of nature is in subjection. By repeating questions about God's

system of ordering the universe, Donne shows that such ordering is paradoxical. M.E. Grenander comments upon the cumulative paradoxes in some detail.

Lines 2-4 take up the paradox that the elements (earth, air, fire, and water), which furnish "life and food" to man, are superior to him: they are more pure, simple (whereas man is a mixture), and hence further from corruption. In lines 5-10 the speaker considers another paradox: beasts, more powerful and less sinful than man, yet are subdued by him. . . . Lines 11-12 reveal the reason for the subjection of the elements and the animals to man: created nature has placed them under his rule. Finally, in lines 13-14, comes the most amazing paradox of all. God is completely without sin, hence does not deserve abasement; and he is of course not bound by the natural chain of being, since he created it. Yet he chose, in the person of Christ, to die for men, who are his creatures, in that he created them, and his foes, in that they killed him (42).

Although Grenander claims that this series of paradoxes progresses to produce "an emotion of deepening wonder," it is more likely that Donne used paradoxes to imply confusion or doubt, to show that this ordering of the universe is not logical. Donne could have shown "wonder" by other means; a string of unresolved and unresolvable paradoxes is much more negative than expressive of "wonder." In a logical ordering of the universe, the weakest should be on the bottom of the hierarchy, while God has placed the weakest at the top. Thus the validity of the great chain of being is itself called into question, and with it God's wisdom.

Donne offers a paradox in place of a resolution in the couplet of one of his most controversial and interesting

sonnets. As we've already seen, Sonnet X presents the speaker as a town usurped and a bride kidnapped by the enemy. As a final solution to his dilemma, Donne ends the sonnet with a double paradox. "For I / Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee." The first paradox touches on another reality of human existence. Man is always slave to something. He can be slave to his own desires, or to an addiction, or to God. It can be argued that freedom is just an illusion; one is always slave to something. Donne sees that it is better to be a slave to God than to sin, yet he is passive in his captivity. He thus cannot even act to choose his master; he is at the mercy of conflicting forces. He asks God to "enthrall" him, that he might be a slave to God rather than to Satan. The second paradox carries a similar meaning, although it is couched in stronger terms. Only by being raped can Donne be chaste. In other words, God must possess him completely before he can be cleansed of his sinful human nature. The paradox turns on the implied metaphor of the speaker as the Bride of Christ. Yet the comparison is carried to an extreme, creating the paradox wherein rape creates chastity. Knox terms this the "conversion paradox." "The necessity of forceful overpowering and violent reshaping means that one dies so that he may live, loses that he may gain" (2). Yet these paradoxes in the Bible are not carried to extremes, as

Donne's paradoxes are. Again Donne is passive. He realizes that he will be possessed by one power or another, and prefers to be the paramour of God rather than of Satan. It is usually seen as a good thing to be possessed by God, and to be loved by Him and in a position to serve Him. However, by setting up a paradox that creates an either/or situation, Donne seems to be choosing the best of two bad alternatives. He must be possessed by Satan or God; very well, it is better to be possessed by God. The creation of a paradox leaves unspoken the idea that it would have been better if God had provided a third alternative, a situation in which man could be truly free, without needing to be a slave or to be raped by anyone.

A similar paradox is found in the final line of Sonnet II (1635). This time, instead of being enslaved or raped, Donne is eaten. "And burne me o Lord, with a fiery zeale / Of thee'and thy house, which doth in eating heale." The paradox is that the fire of God heals by consuming. The fire cleanses rather than destroys. The paradox is, in this case, strictly biblical (c.f. I Pet. 1:7; I Cor. 3:13-15; Jas. 5:3). "The striking paradox of the sonnet's last three words would have been strengthened, for the contemporary reader, by the scriptural associations of the image of fire eating through human flesh" (Delany, 7). However, the overall effect is again negative, because the resolution of the poem is a paradox. The reference is to the "trial by

fire" that cleanses every man; yet the placement of the paradox in the final line concludes the sonnet with a reference to suffering. Like the rape and enslavement references above, the effect is negative. A paradox, even one which can be solved and understood, is not a resolution but a problem. Donne shows no more enthusiasm for being eaten than he does for being raped or enslaved, although they seem to be his only alternatives.

Sonnet IV (1635) does not have any overtly stated paradoxes. It does, however, allude to a paradox in the Christian faith. If God is good and loving, why does He permit evil and sorrow to torment mankind? Donne implies this question by first referring to the souls that suffer in a Dantesque hell. After considering the damned, he asks how he can know that his "minde's white truth" is true? The conclusion: "Turne / O pensive soule, to God, for he knowes best / Thy griefe, for he put it into my breast." The great question is implied in the couplet. Why does God allow sorrow and doubt and evil to assail His people, those who desire to be godly? This question is the only "resolution" that Donne finds for his musings about hell and how to avoid it. He never directly asks God, yet he does wonder. God created a system whereby He would cause sorrow to a sincere soul, thus causing the soul to turn to the One who caused the sorrow in the first place. It is a pattern for Christian masochism. By concluding the sonnet with the

reference to God as the cause of sorrow, Donne implies frustration and anger with God. His question is unspoken, yet it resonates throughout the sonnet. Many philosophers have tried to understand why a benevolent God would create evil and sorrow and make them the main motivators of mankind. Donne asks his own question without finding any answer.

By his use of paradox, Donne asks many of the eternal unanswered questions of Christianity. It does not imply doubt of God to explore issues. However, it does imply doubt of God to make questions and problems with His system of creation a main part of one's discourse with Him. Nearly all of the Holy Sonnets consist of either stated or implied paradoxes that raise fundamental questions. Although paradox is a major component of the Christian religion, Donne's use of paradox differs considerably from the use of paradox in the Bible. Donne uses paradox to imply doubt of God's plan and control. He asks, over and over again, the questions that cause people to doubt God. He is unable to supply answers himself, and he does not accept the answers that God has provided. Thus he is left in a state of deep doubt and confusion about God, His nature, and His purposes for mankind. One paradox would imply interest and curiosity in the things that God has not chosen to reveal; frequent and unresolvable paradoxes imply much more--a fundamental doubt of God.

Chapter Four

Meditation

In the seventeenth century, religious meditation was an integral part of every Christian's spiritual life, whether Catholic or Protestant. Religious poets used many of the elements of meditation to structure their poetry. Over the past several decades, two major systems of meditation have been outlined by critics. The first to be identified was the Augustinian or Ignatian meditation, which is based on Catholic theology. The groundbreaking work on this subject in relation to John Donne's poetry is The Poetry of Meditation by Louis Martz, published in 1954. In 1979, Barbara Kifer Lewalski published Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric, which proposes a purely Protestant type of meditation, also with reference to Donne's poetry. Until Lewalski's study, critics generally agreed with Martz that all seventeenth-century religious poetry was Catholic in terms of its meditative structures. Lewalski, however, is very convincing in her description of Protestant meditation. Naturally both Martz and Lewalski propose that their particular system of meditation is the key to understanding Donne's poetry. Both critics find their systems to be applicable to much seventeenth-century devotional poetry. The controversy is especially interesting in Donne's case. Here is the case of a poet

with personal traditions both Catholic and Protestant. Even on the surface it would seem likely that there are both Catholic and Protestant meditative elements in Donne's poetry. It is overly dogmatic to assert that Donne's religious verse is either entirely Catholic or entirely Protestant in the meditative tradition that it follows. The Holy Sonnets, in particular, blend elements of Ignatian and Protestant meditation, as befits poems written in time of spiritual crisis. Rather than following one system of meditation, Donne uses the sonnets to explore different types of meditation, none of which he finds satisfactory. Furthermore, as many of the sonnets have no fitting resolution, they become almost parodies of meditations, or at least representations of failed meditations, because they do not lead the speaker toward God.

Louis Martz was the first critic to identify the influence of meditation on the poetry of the seventeenth century. While previous critics had attempted to trace Donne's influence on Herbert, and Donne's and Herbert's influence on the later poets, Marts proposed that the similarity between the metaphysical poets was a result of their using meditation as a source in common for all of their religious poetry. Marts traces the practices of meditation back to St. Ignatius of Loyola, who developed a "regular sequence of beginning, middle, and end: preparatory steps; meditation proper, divided into 'points'; followed by

'colloquies,' in which the soul speaks intimately with God and expresses its affections, resolutions, thanksgivings, and petitions" (27). The preparatory steps include the "composition of place" (27) as well as the "premeditation" which charts out the intended meditation so that the end is foreseen. In other words, the meditator is to determine in advance what he will contemplate and what he will petition for as far as his own spiritual needs go (37). The meditation proper involves "a studied and foreseen movement according to the 'three powers of the soul' (Ignatius 20): the memory, the understanding, and the will, in a natural and almost inevitable sequence" (34). Finally, "with this trinity of powers integrated through meditation, the climax, the aim and end, of the whole exercise is achieved when the soul thus reformed is lifted up to speak with God in colloquy and to hear God speak to man in turn" (36). This is the conclusion of the meditation, when the soul gains spiritual benefits of the meditation by direct communication with God.

Martz applies this system to metaphysical poetry by redefining terms and showing how the elements might appear in a poem. "We should expect to find a formal meditation falling into three distinguishable portions, corresponding to the acts of memory, understanding, and will--portions which we might call composition, analysis, and colloquy" (38). Meditation is particularly suited to poetry, because

both forms of expression satisfy the same "natural, fundamental tendency of the human mind--a tendency to work from a particular situation, through analysis of that situation, and finally to some sort of resolution of the problems which the situation has presented" (39). Given this definition of the result of meditation, it is odd that Martz can state that the Holy Sonnets "are, in the most specific sense of the term, meditations, Ignatian meditations" (53). The sonnets frequently lack any sort of resolution, and many end with more problems than they begin with. Martz does acknowledge that Donne's poetry frequently falls into a sub-genre of meditational poetry: the poetry of self-examination. "It is clear that Donne and Herbert, for instance, are adept at singling out their dominant temptations, and that their poetry is in part a record of their attempts to 'exercise' themselves in defense against these temptations. In his religious poetry Donne deals with two dominant vices: the 'sinne of feare' which he was still combating in one of his last hymns, and the sin of intellectual pride" (132). Thus the Holy Sonnets are a "blend of fear and love" (147). Yet in conclusion Martz makes statements that do not apply to most of the sonnets. "Thus the process of self-scrutiny does not end in self-contempt, but moves beyond this to a recovery of self-esteem; self-contempt is only a half-knowledge: full self-knowledge demands a recognition of the incalculable value of

the Image which lies beyond and beneath all deformity" (152). If these types of contentment and reassurance are the universal end of Ignatian meditation, then Donne's meditations are frequently flawed, if they are meditations at all.

In contrast to the theory of Augustinian meditation, Barbara Kifer Lewalski suggests that "the primary poetic influences upon the major devotional poets of the century are contemporary, English, and Protestant" (5). There are two key elements that characterize Protestant meditation and that serve to differentiate it from Catholic meditation: "a focus upon the Bible, the Word, as guiding the interpretation of the subject and providing meditative models; and a particular kind of application to the self" (148), or what she elsewhere identifies as "the painstaking analysis of the personal religious life" (13). As we have seen, both elements are important throughout the Holy Sonnets. As in Augustinian poetry, there are two major categories of Protestant meditation: occasional and deliberate. However, the aim of Protestant meditation is focused differently. "The Protestant concern in both categories of meditation is to trace the interrelation between the biblical text and the Christian's own experience, so that the one is seen to be the reflection or manifestation of the other. . . . The Christian's experience is to comment upon the biblical text, and the

text upon his experience" (154). Either of these categories could have meditations beginning from one of three things--the Word, the self, and the creatures (155). Lewalski states that the most common by far of these is the Word, or the Bible. In Donne's sonnets, however, the self is paramount, with only a few sonnets beginning with the Word, and even fewer with the creatures. Additionally, meditation upon the self has three of its own subcategories:

"meditation upon one's own sins and upon the evidences of one's regeneration, undertaken as a regular duty of watchfulness and repentance or as preparation for communion; meditations on the radical sinfulness and corruption of the heart as a preparation for conversion; and meditation upon experience--God's providences, afflictions, and graces impinging upon one's own life" (158). Again, the Holy Sonnets offer examples of each of these types. Lewalski specifically finds that "the nineteen 'Holy Sonnets' have some affinities with Protestant exercises analyzing the meditator's spiritual condition, in that they set forth and probe certain states of soul and a wide range of emotions the speaker experiences as he regards his own sins and searches for evidences of his election" (170).

Lewalski identifies two key differences between Protestant and Ignatian meditation. The first is the Protestant emphasis on the Bible. The second is the way in which the meditation is applied to the self. "In these

continental kinds, the meditator typically seeks to apply himself to the subject, so that he participates in it. . . . The typical Protestant procedure is very nearly the reverse: instead of the application of the self to the subject, it calls for the application of the subject to the self" (149). Despite specific differences, all meditation has some elements in common. The ultimate goal of all meditation is to bring the meditator closer to God. Whether the meditation is focused on some element of the Bible, an event in history, an event in the speaker's own life, some attribute of God, or some part of His creation, the meditator is always trying to learn more about God and to bring the self into subjection to God. Meditation should facilitate the spiritual relationship. As Martz says, "The end of meditation is the state of 'devotion'" (15). Donne frequently ends his meditations with less devotion than he begins them. It is only occasionally true for him that meditation accomplishes its stated end; more often, his meditations fail to bring him in any way closer to God. Instead of meditating on what brings him closer to God, he meditates on the vast, apparently unbridgeable chasm, that separates him from the Divine Being. Even Gardner comments on the pain Donne expresses in the Holy Sonnets: "The note of anguish is unmistakable" (xxxi).

The Holy Sonnets are entitled The Divine Meditations in the edition of 1635. It is clear from their subject matter

and their devotional ideas that they are intended to be meditations of some sort, what Martz calls "the poem of the mind" (The Poem of the Mind 4). Yet they are not easily categorized as one type of meditation. Although Martz defines them as Catholic, and indeed uses them to exemplify Ignatian meditation, and Lewalski defines them as Protestant, some have more elements of one type, and some have more of the other. Additionally, few, if any, of the sonnets are wholly suited to be examples of successful meditations of either type. The sonnets do not deliberately set out to accomplish a certain task, and then complete that task with application to the self. In fact, they frequently move away from rather than toward resolution. Richard Hughes comments that Donne does not "fulfill the implications of meditation, the re-creation of the self through the autoexercise of the trinity within" (175). Therefore, although they contain elements of both Ignatian and Protestant meditation, they are not successful meditations under either definition. It is more appropriate to say that they are failed meditations, or that they explore ideas of meditation without being complete meditations, or even that they are evidence that meditation does not work in bringing the soul closer to God.

Donne's meditations fall into several categories. There are some that are occasional meditations on such events as sickness and death. Others are on standard

subjects for meditation, such as the order of creation or the end of the world. Still others are self-analytical, without addressing God or even referring to Him. The rest are on random subjects. However, the Holy Sonnets consistently fail in several ways to meet the expectations of either type of meditation. Donne frequently uses the composition of place to set up a metaphor or conceit that he follows throughout the sonnet. This is acceptable in Martz's definition. "Practices of 'composition' or 'proposing' lie behind the vividly dramatized, firmly established, graphically imaged openings that are characteristic of the poets we are considering" (31). Yet Donne never "premeditates" or determines the end of the meditation at the beginning. The meditations thus appear to be uncontrolled and random, rather than leading up to an inevitable resolution. In fact, many of the poems lack any sort of resolution in the colloquy, and thus fail as Catholic meditations. In a like manner, they lack the most important elements of Protestant meditation. Although Lewalski claims that "as meditations these sonnets most closely resemble those regular Protestant exercises of self-analysis which involve a review of the soul's own state and the experiences and evidences of God's actions within it" (265), they do not actually meet the criteria for Protestant meditations. While many of the sonnets are based on biblical ideas and even offer direct biblical reference, the

way in which the reference is used is often directly opposed to the spirit of the Bible or of meditation, as seen in Chapter Two. Additionally, while many of the sonnets are very personal and apply the subject of the meditation to the self, there is no evidence that any of the meditations bring the meditator closer to God. Thus, the meditations are neither Catholic nor Protestant, nor are they effective in demonstrating a growth of closeness with God. At least one critic, Wilber Sanders, feels that the Holy Sonnets are not at all meditative in tone. "In many of the Holy Sonnets, there's something hysterically out of control. . . . For all the intimacy of its matter, the manner is inescapably public: fortissimo throughout, with very little you would want to call a nuance. It sounds as if God is at the other end of a public address system in an empty stadium" (130). At times, it actually sounds as though Donne is not sure that even God is listening.

Certain topics were standard for meditation. These subjects were frequently meditated on as well as used for meditational poems. Donne wrote several sonnets that fit into this category. Sonnet IV contemplates the end of the world; Sonnet VII examines the crucifixion; Sonnet IX is about both of the above, Sonnets V and VIII consider the order of creation; and Sonnet VI is about death in general. Note that these six sonnets on prescribed subjects are grouped together by Gardner; type of meditation is one of

the ways that she determined the order of her sequence.

Sonnet IV, "At the round earth's imagin'd corners," is one of the only examples of a complete, albeit unsuccessful, meditation in all of the Holy Sonnets. Its subject is the last things. It has a striking composition of place, with a visual image of the angels blowing the final trumpets and the dead rising from their places of rest. Because of this beginning, this sonnet is closer to being an Ignatian meditation than a Protestant meditation. Even Lewalski comments that "this sonnet is one of the two or three which exhibit the full Ignatian meditative structure" (268). Nevertheless, the sonnet fails biblically, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, because its final line denies what the Bible accepts as truth. There is a progression from memory--lines one through eight--through understanding--lines nine through twelve--to will, or the colloquy--line thirteen. Donne restates what the Bible says about the dead, then applies it to himself when he asks to mourn. He finally reaches the application of the meditation when he asks, "Teach mee how to repent." Yet although the meditation has most of the required elements of an Ignatian meditation, it fails. The final two lines undercut the effect of the meditation on the soul, because they reveal that the meditator has a gross misunderstanding of salvation when he says it is "as if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood." Thus the sonnet moves away from effective

repentance and resolution to a state of doubt and misunderstanding that is not worthy of a complete meditation.

"Spit in my fact yee Jewes" likewise begins with a stunning compositio loci. The frequent vivid verbs at the beginning place the meditator on the spot. As Roston comments, "The sharpness of each word fulfils the Ignatian injunction to exploit all five senses in attempting to feel upon one's own flesh the flagellation or torture of the martyr in its full particularity" (167). Yet the verbs and images are biblical, so we have a blend of Ignatian and Protestant meditative practices. This sonnet does not as clearly follow an Ignatian progression. In fact, what should be the colloquy falls in lines five and six. Yet the application of the subject to the self, or the self to the subject, is never completed. Instead of allowing the sight of the Crucifixion to spur him on to repentance, Donne backs away from this obvious resolution. Instead, he concludes with the statement that the Crucifixion proves that Christ "might be weake enough to suffer woe." Given the strong beginning of the sonnet, this is itself a weak ending, especially since Donne uses the conditional "might" rather than "will." To be a proper mediation, in either the Ignatian or Protestant mold, the sonnet should conclude with Christ's strengths spurring the meditator on to a closer relationship with Him. Instead, Donne concludes with a

statement about Christ's weakness, thus undercutting the possibility of a completed, successful meditation.

Sonnet IX combines the two previous subjects. It begins with a composition of place concentrating on the "worlds last night." It then moves to the "picture of Christ crucified," and attempts to use this image to prove salvation. Again the meditation is a combination of both the Ignatian and the Protestant--it roughly follows the pattern of memory, understanding, and will, while being biblical. However, as in the previous sonnet, Donne fails to apply the subject to himself. He begins with personal application and repentance--"as in my idolatrie / I said to all my profane mistresses . . . " yet he fails to complete the repentance and turn to God. He meditates on Christ crucified, but not on the implications of the meditation for his own soul. He withdraws from the personal at the end of the poem, and simply concludes with the fallacy that Christ's "beauteous forme assures a pitious mind." The meditation is not completed according to either standard.

Sonnet V is neither an Ignatian nor a Protestant meditation, although it is a meditative poem. It begins with a question, skipping the composition of place. The first eight lines could be called either memory or biblical reference. Since these lines are phrased as questions, they must be answered in the sestet in order for the poem to be a resolved meditation. Yet Donne never answers, or allows God

to answer, the question of why he should be damned, or why God threatens him. Instead, the application to the self, or the colloquy, is another question: "Who am I, that dare dispute with thee?" This question is a step toward penitence on Donne's part. He carries it further by asking God to "drowne in it [His blood] my sinnes blacke memorie." Instead of asking to be washed and forgiven of his sins, which would be the logical conclusion, Donne backs away from such commitment. He chooses rather to ask that God "forget." The lack of personal commitment in the matter again undercuts a chance for a strong resolution. Thus this sonnet on the order of creation misses being a complete meditation. The questions posed in the beginning are not answered, and the response of the meditator is incomplete.

A second sonnet on the traditional subject of the order of creation is Sonnet VIII. This sonnet is clearly an Ignatian sonnet on the prescribed subject. It begins with a question, but it is a question that serves as a composition of place. Lines two through eight serve as memory, when Donne comments specifically on the order of nature. Lines nine through fourteen comprise understanding, when the subject is applied to life. Yet commitment of the will and a colloquy are completely absent from this sonnet. Donne has performed half of the meditation, while leaving out the most important parts. Thus we have his ideas on a standard subject, without any personal application to himself. The

resolution fails to answer the question of the first line, and fails to offer anything but a paradox as an explanation for the order of creation. Although the sonnet follows half of the steps of Ignatian meditation without a problem, the important half that gives the meditation meaning is never attempted.

The final sonnet that deals with a standard subject for meditation is Sonnet VI. The nature of death was considered a fitting subject for meditation to increase humility and fear of God. Like the previous sonnet, "Death be not proud" is an objective meditation, with no application to the self. There is an effective composition of place in the opening line, with memory and understanding being mingled for the rest of the sonnet. There is no colloquy or application to the self of the subject of the meditation. Instead, the final line of the poem is a paradox: "Death thou shalt die." Although this is a resolution of sorts, tension is maintained by the fact that the resolution is a paradox. Since the poem is not applied to the self, and since it ends in a paradox, it is not a fully realized meditation, but rather the first half of a meditation.

In addition to meditations on frequently prescribed subjects, Donne included five occasional meditations in the Holy Sonnets. These deal with his sickness and imminent death (Sonnets II, III, and I [1635]); the current status of his deceased father's soul (IV [1635]); and the death of his

wife (I [W])). Sonnet II at first glance appears to follow the standard pattern of an Ignatian meditation. It begins with an effective composition of place: "Oh my blacke Soule!" The octave is the memory section. Donne compares his soul to a pilgrim and a thief. He applies understanding to the situation in lines nine and ten. "Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lacke; / But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?" Although the final four lines constitute the colloquy, Donne avoids answering this question. This leaves an unresolved tension to the meditation. Donne's application to self is a series of choices, rather than a declarative statement about what he should or will do. His soul could make itself black, or red, or could wash itself in Christ's blood. Yet as noted in Chapter Three, Donne ignores the grace of God that is needed for his soul to repent. Thus the answer to his question would provide a fitting colloquy to the meditation. Yet Donne again avoids resolution by offering a series of choices and ending with a paradox: that Christ's blood, "being red, . . . dyes red soules to white."

Sonnet III was written during the same serious illness as sonnet II, according to Gardner's sequence. It is likewise an occasional meditation on the approach of death. Additionally, it is another example of an Ignatian meditation as far as its structure is concerned. Lewalski points out, however, that the sonnet has Protestant forms as

well. "The speaker vividly imagines himself at the moment of death, but not by evoking a deathbed scene in the manner of an Ignatian compositio loci. Instead, the speaker calls upon the very familiar biblical metaphors of life as pilgrimage and as athletic race" (268). The composition of place is set in the opening metaphor: "This is my playes last scene." Memory follows in the biblical metaphor of the last mile of a race, and a description of the deeds of "gluttonous death." Line seven begins the understanding section, when Donne acknowledges his fear of God. Donne wills his sins to fall to earth with his body, so that his soul might take flight to heaven. Finally the colloquy asks God to "impute [him] righteous, this purg'd of evil, / For thus [he leaves] the world, the flesh, and devill." Like most of the other sonnets, this resolution is inadequate. Donne should allow his fear, expressed in line eight, to lead him to repentance and hope in God's mercy. Instead, his only personal commitment and application is to trust that he will somehow manage to shake off all of his sins, and that after death he will be free of the world, flesh, and devil. Thus although the poem follows that standard for Ignatian meditation, it fails in its end. Because Donne fails to turn to God for help, his firmly stated assurance of salvation at the end rests on tenuous ground. An effective colloquy would take the steps necessary to bring the meditator closer to God, and thus offer real assurance

of salvation.

The third occasional sonnet that addresses the subject of Donne's illness and death is Sonnet I (1635). This sonnet is perhaps the closest out of all of the Holy Sonnets to being a fully resolved Ignatian meditation. However, the resolution is still incomplete. Catholic meditative practices are followed closely in this sonnet. The opening provides a composition of place. Donne again begins with a question that he does not answer: "Thou hast made me, And [sic] shall thy worke decay?" The remainder of the octave provides an example of memory and understanding, as Donne recalls his past and looks toward the future. He sees "Despaire behind, and death before" him. He applies his will in lines nine through twelve, as he looks to and addresses God, and acknowledges that he can not alone his "self, sustaine." The couplet is the colloquy, as he pleads with God to "like Adamant draw [his] iron heart." Although the final line of the poem is clever, implying many things both about God and about Donne, he still does not answer his opening question. Nor does he resolve the poem in a position of faith and security in God. Instead, he asks God to move him, and then ends the meditation without God's answer. Since one of the features of the colloquy is God's response to the meditator's petition, this sonnet lacks one of the most important resolving elements of an Ignatian meditation. Although the structure is followed closely, and

the meditation appears to be resolved and complete, even this sonnet represents a failed rather than a successful meditation.

Sonnet IV (1635) is a meditation on the afterlife of Donne's father. Like the meditations on death, this was a standard type of meditation recommended by teachers, frequently performed on the anniversary of a loved one's death. Like the previous occasional poems, this sonnet fits well into the pattern of an Ignatian meditation. The composition of place in the first three lines of this sonnet is more direct than in most of the sonnets. Rather than just introducing the subject or a metaphor, Donne imagines the setting in heaven, where "if faithfull soules be alike glorifi'd / As Angels, then my fathers soule doth see." Although this type of meditation was standard, Donne adds a unique twist by beginning the poem in doubt: "If." He does not assert either that faithful souls are glorified in heaven, or that his father's Catholic soul qualifies as faithful. Nevertheless, he continues the sonnet as if accepting the premise. In fact, in the understanding portion, lines five through eight, he carries the premise further to speculate on whether departed souls can see into the minds of those left behind. He ends the understanding section with a personal question about how he personally will appear to them, and then, in a change from Ignatian form, performs the memory section out of order. Donne

recalls the fate of souls in a Dantesque hell. The couplet of the poem provides will, yet the ending is clearly unresolved and tension producing. Instead of answering any of his questions--the "ifs" in lines one and four, and the personal question in line eight--he exhorts himself to turn to God. Donne then blames God for creating grief, particularly his grief, in the first place. Thus instead of finishing the sonnet with an affirmation of devotion to God like that of the departed faithful souls, Donne ends by blaming God because He created damnation and grief. The colloquy is not used to resolve the doubts of the poem, but rather to pose the largest question of all. The meditation ends with doubt and blame, not faith.

The final occasional meditation is on the subject of Donne's wife's death. Unlike the other occasional meditations, Sonnet I (W) is a Protestant rather than an Ignatian meditation. The subject of the poem is applied closely to the speaker throughout, and the formal elements of Ignatian meditation are missing. Donne uses the subject of his wife's death to show how both her death and her life pointed him toward God. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Donne then misuses biblical language to show how his desire for God is incomplete and unsatisfied. Donne implies that his lack of satisfaction is God's fault as much as his. While God "dost woe [his] soul, for hers offering all thine," He has still not done enough. Furthermore, the final couplet

of the poem portrays a God obsessed with petty jealousy. Donne implies that God took his wife out of jealousy for Donne's affections, and that God lives in a state of fear "lest the World, fleshe, yea Devill putt [Him] out." Thus the meditation moves from a position of faith in God despite the circumstances, to blaming God for those circumstances, and finally ends with what is almost a blasphemous taunt to God claiming that He cannot even hold on to His children. As Stachniewski comments, "This is the anthropomorphized Protestant God who will not tolerate sharing human devotion with saints and angels, let alone women" (687). The meditation accomplishes the opposite of its intention, and ends with less resolution than it begins with.

While some of the Holy Sonnets are quite objective and others are more personal, there are two that fall into the category of being pure self-examination. Sonnets III (1635) and III (W) are meditations not on God, but solely on Donne's sin. In fact, God is not addressed or even referred to in these poems; the poet is the only subject. Sonnet III (1635) is neither Ignatian nor Protestant. Instead, it is a lament, centered on the pitiable state of the speaker. Donne meditates on himself, yet is not effective in this meditation. A meditation of self-examination should lead the meditator to a catalogue and confession of his sins, and subsequent repentance. Thus even something self-centered should lead to God. Donne's meditation, however, is more in

the vein of self-pity. He acknowledges that the meditation is wasted, and longs to "mourne with some fruit" instead of having "mourn'd in vaine." He begins to be specific about his sin by mentioning "Idolatry," and states that he now does "repent." Yet from this promising beginning in the octave, he dissolves into feeling sorry for himself. In the sestet he reveals that his true cause of sorrow is that he does not even have "the remembrance of past joyes, for reliefe / Of comming illls." Thus his grief leads him not to repentance and reunion with God, but only to self-pity. "To (poore) me is allow'd / No ease." What had promise as a fruitful meditation degenerates into something worse than useless, as the meditator's problem is compounded rather than solved.

Sonnet III (W) is similar. In this sonnet, Donne catalogues his "contraries" in some detail, pointing out the paradoxes in his nature and behavior. Like the previous sonnet, this one is neither Ignatian nor Protestant, nor does it address God. After meditating on just how bad he is, Donne ends not with the positive step of repentance or of any type of resolution, but with another paradox. Indeed, the witty metaphor of the final couplet reveals a misunderstanding of God's grace and of Anglican and Catholic theology. As expanded in Chapter Three, Sonnet III (W) is itself a paradox without resolution. As such, it is a failed meditation. It exposes some of the faults of the

meditator, but without the positive movement of resolving the problem. Donne seems content with living with his problems, or at least seems to despair of any effective solution; he does not even use the meditation to appeal to God for help.

There is a final group of sonnets that defies placement into a particular category of meditation. In these sonnets, Donne meditates on whatever occurs to him as a promising subject. Like the more traditional pseudo-meditations above, however, these are not successful meditations, but rather attempts that fail, as both Ignatian and Protestant meditations, for an amazing variety of reasons. Sonnet I is Protestant in nature. As noted in Chapter Two, the entire sonnet is firmly grounded on biblical language. In addition, the subject is closely applied to the speaker. Indeed, the self is one of the subjects of the poem from the first line: "As due by many titles I resign / My selfe to thee, O God." However, the biblical references carry negative connotations, and the resolution in reference to the self is incomplete. The final couplet presents a paradox rather than a solution. Therefore, the poem fails to meet the desired ends for a Protestant meditation, as Donne ends in doubt and confusion rather than in harmony with God. "I shall soone despaire, when I doe see" that "thou wilt not chuse me." Although the sonnet contains the two key elements of a Protestant meditation, it remains a

failed meditation since it ends in despair.

Sonnet X, "Batter my heart," is remarkably similar as a meditation. Again the sonnet is biblical (see Chapter Two), and again it is highly personal. Each of the three metaphors is used to expand on Donne and his situation, and to illustrate his relationship to God. Yet the metaphors used strongly indicate tension between Donne and God, and what should be the resolution of the sonnet intensifies rather than resolves the tension. The couplet is a paradox that expresses violence and fear instead of indicating a healthy relationship or even the potential for a healthy relationship. "For I / Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee." With the tension inherent in such an image, this sonnet is not meditative in tone, but rather illustrates what happens when a poet carries meditation on biblical images and clever word plays a bit too far. John Stachniewski comments that "while the form and subject of the poem implies [sic] the strait-jacketing of theological propriety, other thoughts and emotions peep out: suspicion, resentment, refusal to subject himself entirely to the divine will. And the range of God's characterization is extended to include jealousy, a distorted perspective on events, and a capacity to violate the apparent autonomy of His creatures" (690). A poem which reveals all this can hardly be a successful meditation.

Sonnet XI is a mixture of Protestant and Ignatian

meditational forms. The metaphors of the sonnet are biblical. Yet the tone of the sonnet is objective rather than personal, even though the soul is exhorted to "digest . . . this wholesome meditation." Additionally, some of the elements of Ignatian meditation are present, although the meditation is not complete. The first line of the poem, "Wilt thou love God, as he thee!" provides a strong compositio loci as the subject is addressed in a direct manner. The majority of the sonnet, from lines one through twelve, corresponds to the memory section. Donne meditates on and reviews a series of biblical references to God. However, the final couplet is all that comprises the understanding section, when Donne briefly reflects, "'Twas much, that man was made like God before, / But, that God should be made like man, much more." The understanding is incomplete, because the implications of the statement are not explored. Finally, there is no personal application of the ideas or understanding, thus the will or colloquy is absent entirely. If a soul is to grow to "love God, as he thee," then personal application and response must be a part of the meditation, rather than simply a list of some of God's actions. Although the meditation is fine as far as it goes, it is incomplete and thus not a full success.

Sonnet XII follows a similar pattern. It is somewhat biblical, turning on a witty pun about the will of God as a legal testament and as His choice for man. This sonnet has

less of an Ignatian structure than the previous one, however. There are no parts corresponding to the Catholic steps for meditation. Yet it is not fully realized as a Protestant meditation either, since it lacks personal application of the subject to the self. Instead, this sonnet is a mere intellectual exercise, with witty comparisons and puns informing the structure. There is no attempt at a personal resolution, but simply an objective statement forming the couplet. As explored in Chapter Two, the couplet is problematic because the "last command" is ambiguous and could refer to any number of things. "Thy lawes abridgment, and thy last command / Is all but love; Oh let that last Will stand." The conceit is carried into the very last line of the sonnet. Donne is so preoccupied with his own cleverness that he neglects to learn any sort of meditative lesson or to make any personal application to the subject. Thus this meditation is appropriate as far as it goes, but is finally incomplete.

"I am a little world made cunningly" likewise turns on a clever conceit wherein Donne compares himself to a world made up of both baser and finer elements. The sonnet is not obviously Protestant: there is little reference to the Bible, and the conceit turns on scientific rather than religious ideas. It does not correspond well to the structure of an Ignatian meditation. There is, however, personal application made throughout the sonnet; if put in

Ignatian terms, it could be said that the final eight lines of the poem comprise the colloquy. But even with the majority of the poem being dedicated to petition, there is no effective resolution. After asking to be "drown'd," washed, and "burnt," presumably in order to be cleansed, Donne concludes the poem with a paradox rather than with an affirmation of hope in salvation. He says that God's "fiery zeale . . . doth in eating heale." As noted in Chapter Three, the image is biblical, and the paradox resolvable. Yet by ending the colloquy with such a violent paradox instead of with hope or praise, Donne undercuts the effect of his petition. He does not indicate any faith that his wishes will be carried out, nor that the end will be positive even if God does cleanse by fire and water.

None of the Holy Sonnets can properly be called completed meditations in either the Ignatian or the Protestant sense. For various reasons, each sonnet fails at being a well resolved, completed meditation. Some have a few elements of meditation, yet lack other important elements; others have the structure of a meditation without being resolved enough to be effective. Donne uses a combination of meditational forms, sometimes sticking very closely to the three part Ignatian structure, sometimes using the more biblical and personal Protestant meditation. It is clear that he was interested in meditation and experimented to a degree with different types and subjects

of meditation. Yet with all this variety, none of the meditations are successful. Either Donne felt that meditation was an ineffective way of communicating with God, or he found that meditation did not meet his spiritual needs at the time of writing the sonnets. The latter appears more likely for several reasons. For one thing, meditation was an accepted exercise at the time, according to both Lewalski and Martz, and it would be natural to expect Donne to utilize the genre in his devotional poetry. Moreover, Donne himself, later in life, wrote Devotions upon Emergent Occasions, in part a manual on meditation. He also used meditation frequently in the Holy Sonnets and other poems, such as "Goodfriday 1613" and "A Hymne to Christ." That these "Divine Meditations" do not work in the case of the Holy Sonnets seems to be due to Donne's own confusion and tension at the time he wrote them. His relationship with God was presumably so unresolved during that period that his poetry likewise lacks spiritual resolution.

Chapter Five

Struggle with God

Devotional poetry is uniquely personal. It reveals the theological and personal beliefs of the poet, and it often demands a personal response from the reader. Often it requires a response from God as well. John Donne's Holy Sonnets are notable examples of devotional poetry. They contain the elements that one would expect from a Christian poem--biblical references and types of meditation. They contain the elements that one would expect from John Donne--paradox, wit, and tension. However, they do not contain one of the most important elements of a devotional poem--evidence of devotion to God. Because of the ways in which biblical language is twisted, paradoxes are left unresolved, and meditative structures misapplied, the Holy Sonnets reveal more about a problematic struggle with God than about a reciprocal spiritual relationship. The above elements combine to show us something about Donne's Christianity at the time he wrote the sonnets. It is clear from the unresolved tensions in the poems that Donne harbored many unresolved tensions in his relationship with God. God is distant and violent in the sonnets, not in any sense the personal loving Father promised by Christianity. It is clear that Donne feared God more than he loved Him, and was unable to reconcile his image of the Lord and righteous

Judge of the universe with the idea of a compassionate Father and Friend. Donne experienced great personal religious tension in his own life when he converted from Catholicism to Anglicanism. Perhaps he was unable to reconcile the God he knew as a Catholic with the God he knew as a Protestant. Perhaps he feared that he had made the wrong religious choice, from self-interested motives, and was thus in danger of damnation. Perhaps he feared that if Protestants are saved, Catholics are damned, or vice-versa, thus damning either his parents or himself and his wife eternally. Or perhaps he was just confused about a God who could create two churches and place them in competition with one another, therefore causing pain to be inflicted and life to be lost in Christ's name. Whatever the case, Donne had some serious intellectual, emotional, and spiritual problems to work out during and after the time of writing the Holy Sonnets.

It is clear that one of the tension creating situations in Donne's life was the conflict he felt between the two churches which offered such different systems of belief and such different styles of life. The questions he struggled with are raised directly in what is perhaps the most difficult and interesting of the Holy Sonnets, "Show me deare Christ." Besides raising the issue of Catholicism versus Protestantism, this sonnet offers perhaps the most extreme misuse of biblical language and paradox, as well as

being a perfect example of a failed meditation. The appearance of all of these elements in one poem lends Donne's questions and doubts an air of urgency, as well as of tension and unresolvability. Sonnet II (W) is among the most critically controversial of all of Donne's devotional poems. Discussion centers on the interpretation of the two churches described in the octave. Was Donne, at this late date in his life, still in doubt as to whether the Catholic or Protestant church was the true "spouse" of Christ (Grierson, ii 235)? Or was he implying that there is a sharp contrast between the "Church promised in Scripture and the Church as it appears in the world and throughout history" (Gardner 122)? The two need not be mutually exclusive. Donne appears to be expressing puzzlement as to whether either of the two faulty human institutions could be what Christ intended. God must have failed somewhere in setting up His Church, Donne seems to imply. At any rate the question is carried to extremes in Donne's use of the metaphor of the Church as the Bride of Christ, who is "most pleasing" when she is "embrac'd and open to most men."

The image of Christ as a divine cuckold is all the more shocking since it appears in a sonnet with strong meditational aspects. "Show me deare Christ, thy spouse, so bright and clear" constitutes a strong Ignatian opening, which introduces the subject, the petition, and a composition of place. The central image of the poem is

biblical, and the tone is personal--Donne is asking about the subject for his own understanding. Thus the sonnet is a Protestant meditation. Yet because of the strong compositio loci and a clear memory and understanding section (lines two through ten), it is also Ignatian. Many attempts have been made to biblically identify the women spoken of in this section of the sonnet. There is "she, which on the other shore / Goes richly painted"--the Catholic church. Then there is the other woman, "which rob'd and tore / Laments and mournes in Germany and here"--the Protestant church in both Lutheran and Anglican forms. Helen Gardner has pointed out numerous examples of biblical women, from Lamentations to Revelation, who answer some part of the descriptions of these women (79, 80, 121-127). However, there is no single biblical reference that corresponds to either woman.

Although their sources are not certain, Donne asks questions about these women, questions that represent fundamental concern about the Church. As in many of the other sonnets, these questions have no answer, and thus form one of the paradoxes of human existence. Donne asks, "Is she selfe truth and errs? now new, now'outwore? / Doth she,'and did she, and shall she evermore / On one, on seaven, or on no hill appeare?" The one hill is either Mount Moriah (Gardner 80) or the old Jerusalem (Pollard 18); the seven hills are the city of Rome, and "no hill"

refers to Geneva; it also probably indicates that Donne is giving up on the idea of a physical location for the Church at all. He really wants to know if the true Church described in the Bible can be found in the human institutions that he sees. It seems to him unlikely, and thus he questions what constitutes the true Church. How is man to find salvation and truth when the only examples he has of how to live are so faulty? Why didn't God create at least one institution that could be free of sin and could illuminate the way to Him? These are questions asked throughout the ages, and Donne finds the same paradox here. What is man to do in response to this lack? "Like adventuring knights / First travaile we to seeke and then make love?" For Donne, God has not revealed the answers, leaving him with nothing more than paradoxes.

The final four lines constitute the colloquy section, when a curious plea is made to God. "Betray kind husband thy spouse to our sights, / And let myne amorous soule court thy mild Dove, / Who is most trew, and pleasing to thee, then / When she's embrac'd and open to most men!" The reference to the Dove is found throughout the Song of Songs, which is often read as an allegory of Christ's love for the Church. Donne's use of sexual metaphors in reference to God and the Church is nothing new. In this sonnet, however, it is Donne and all of mankind that are having relations with the Bride of Christ, rather than Christ who is affirming His

Godhead by having relations with man. In an absolutely literal sense, the Bride of Christ must be "open" to as many as possible to attract man to the kingdom of God. In a figurative sense, however, it is blasphemous to suggest that man should have sexual intercourse with Christ's spouse. The biblical metaphor is carried to an extreme when taken too literally. The final couplet presents this image, and thus offers a paradox in place of resolution. A woman cannot be true to her husband and yet a whore to other men. Yet paradoxically Christ's bride is "most trew, and pleasing to thee" when she is doing just that. Thus the colloquy section of the sonnet, which should reaffirm faith, instead presents an unresolvable problem. In Donne's eyes, God has not done a good job of ordering a world and creating a church in which this sort of tension is inherent. Thus the biblical image becomes absurd, the meditative structure becomes meaningless, and an unresolvable paradox is the only thing left.

This sonnet clearly shows how misuse of biblical language, unresolved paradox, and failed meditation all work together to express one of the central tensions in Donne's life. While, as shown in the previous chapters, all of the sonnets use some of these factors to create tension, this sonnet provides the finest example of how strongly all three elements work together to create a "devotional" poem that expresses what is in fact a lack of devotion and an excess

of doubt. As Bredvold says, "He [Donne] never found the one true church he had been seeking for" (213). Besides being an interesting illustration of Donne's problems in deciding between the Catholic and Protestant churches, the sonnet implies lack of faith in the Church as a whole, and thus lack of faith in God.

John Donne was never able to be wholly a Protestant or wholly a Catholic. He retained some of each religion throughout his life. "So did Catholic and Protestant join-- or perhaps I should say with greater accuracy that Donne refused to sunder them" (Jackson 50). The sonnets reveal this element of his nature, and an understanding of his own personal religious tensions is important for an understanding of his devotional poetry. Dennis Flynn comments that the "middle period" of Donne's life, when he was undergoing his spiritual crisis, "like the whole of Donne's life and work, cannot be comprehended apart from the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism that continued to polarize English religious life during the first decade of the seventeenth century" (178). Donne was a product of his age, and was not alone in struggling with religious issues. He did, however, in the Holy Sonnets, give one of the clearest and most interesting portraits in all of English literature of a soul in crisis.

The combination of tension producing elements throughout the Holy Sonnets undercuts any possibility of a

reader's taking them seriously as theological statements. Although they show us much about Donne, they show us little about God. Instead of growing in devotion or knowledge, a reader, like Donne himself, finds himself puzzled by word games and by elements that undercut the ostensible message of faith that a devotional poem should have. Wilber Sanders describes this sensation:

When you consider the pitch and timbre of the Holy Sonnets as a whole, it's impossible not to feel that they either dispense, or would like to dispense, more than a little gloom themselves; and that their author would have been offended at anyone who refused to take them seriously--more seriously, indeed, than he himself seems prepared to do. The reader, consequently, is always getting caught out with an ill-timed smirk on his face; or alternatively, plunged into somber meditation in deference to the poet's earnestness, he becomes irritatingly aware that the mercurial gentleman is now disposed to be merry. This rapid oscillation of feeling--a kind of uncontrolled ironic tic--has the effect of prompting reflections not altogether reassuring upon the stability of the faith the poetry proffers us, and misgivings about the impulse that is carrying Donne towards religion (121).

By his consciously non-traditional uses of biblical language, paradox, and meditation, Donne created a series of sonnets that are lacking in resolution. In the same fashion, Donne himself most likely lacked resolution in his relationship with God. He appears to have been left with paradox rather than solution, with questions instead of answers, with despair instead of faith. Donne's Holy Sonnets are not devotional at all in the usual sense of the word. Throughout the poems Donne does the very thing that

he is trying not to do--he struggles and strives with God rather than submitting to Him. His conscious misuse of Biblical and Christian tradition expresses the tension that he finds in his relationship with God. Furthermore, throughout the sonnets he places the blame for this state of affairs on God, as well as on himself. Even when he ostensibly blames himself, there is an undercurrent of fear and resentment towards God because He is not doing more to help Donne.

Although many of Donne's struggles and doubts are revealed throughout the Holy Sonnets, these problems should not be viewed as character flaws on his part. They simply reveal him to be all too human, with a deep understanding of human fallibility and the difficulty of maintaining a relationship with God. J.B. Leishman remarks that it was "his great strength as a preacher that he was peculiarly able to understand, and to help others to understand, just what St. Paul meant when he described himself as the chief of sinners" (263). It is one of his great strengths as a poet that he was able to capture so perfectly the agony and struggles inevitable when the human attempts to sustain a relationship with the Divine; when a fallible man attempts to commune with Infallibility; when a soul attempts to live as a Christian.

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