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Winner of the 2012 Joseph M. Schwartz Memorial Essay Prize

PERILOUS STUFF:  
POEMS OF RELIGIOUS MEDITATION

**S**AINT George's Round Church (Anglican) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, has a tradition of inviting academics, not necessarily Anglican, to reflect on the spiritual dimensions of their own particular subject, partly as an interdisciplinary experiment. What, in our time, do the church and the academy have to offer one another? How does the discipline of each intersect with the other? In my own case, I spend much of my classroom time talking to students about Renaissance poems, many of them of course intensely religious or devotional, but the secular classroom often leaches away some of that intensity. However clear and comprehensive one might be about the context of the poem, or the biography of the poet, or the history of the controversy, or the tradition of the poetic conventions, it can be difficult to see why or in what way the issue matters so much, to disclose the peculiar energy and the life of the poem. The following meditations, now revised, were first offered at Saint George's during the course of four successive Sundays in Lent.<sup>1</sup> This new setting, involving the somber beauty and solemnity of Evensong during the Lenten season, seemed to cast new light on the poems, to allow them to speak with something of (what one imagines as) their own original authority and seriousness and weight or *gravitas*. The poems do not form any kind of conventional sequence or cluster, but while each has considerable merit on its own and, in fairly obvious ways, can stand alone, they also tend to comment on each other, sometimes in surprising and unpredictable ways.

Lent, of course, is a penitential season, a season of waiting, of preparation, of anxiousness — a season of spiritual peril. And while the selected poems were not written as Lenten meditations, they each cast light on a certain dimension of that spiritual peril. They are all, in their way, consolatory, though the consolations are of diverse kinds, and not all of them are very comforting or comfortable. Sometimes the only solace is the rather bleak or austere comfort of simply coming to a clearer understanding of the peril, a sharper apprehension of the nature of spiritual danger or anxiety or desolation. Most of the poems are from the English Renaissance, but two are by twentieth-century American poets, and the comparisons help to establish the timelessness of the issues, even as the cultures they issue from undergo a metamorphosis and grow, either together or apart.

My aim is not so much to explain the poems, or to chart their place in the history of ideas or of theology, or to abstract a meaning or a moral from each poem, or to mine the poem for evidence of the poet's biography

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or personality, or to educe a set of moral or spiritual equations such that the gloss would replace the poem and the poem itself could be discarded. Rather, I want to explore what it is like to dwell in the poem, to experience it, to feel its energies and its limitations, to get it by heart. For my ambition has less to do with reaching a set of conclusions or articulating a set of principles and more to do with submitting to a certain quality of experience — the experience of becoming possessed by the poem. Plato was right, I believe, to think of poetry as involving a kind of possession, and he was right to worry that such possession involves dangers. But allowing yourself to be possessed by a good poem also has advantages, most especially the educational advantage or opportunity to grow into an awareness of an intelligence that is wider, deeper, smarter than you are — to see the world, including the world of the spirit, in ways you could never do on your own, without such help.

**B**EFORE taking up “Holy Sonnets” 14 and 7 by John Donne, I want to examine briefly a kind of paradigm of the relationship between the poet and the reader. My example involves the greatest of poets, William Shakespeare, and one of the greatest of readers, Dr. Samuel Johnson. James Boswell reports an extraordinary meeting between Johnson and his physician, Dr. Brocklesby, about eight or ten days before Johnson died on 13 December 1784. Johnson, Boswell says, seeming depressed,

broke out in the words of Shakespeare:

“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased;  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;  
And, with some sweet oblivious antidote,  
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?”

To which Dr. Brocklesby readily answered from the same great poet,

“therein the patient  
Must minister to himself.”

Johnson expressed himself much satisfied with the application.  
(Chapman 1379)

There are several interesting points about this exchange. First, there is the charm of the physician’s ready response, his ability to participate in the

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pleasure of an apt quotation, saying — on cue — what the physician in the play (his counterpart) says, so that what might seem like a rebuff or a rebuke is actually a sympathetic identification with Johnson's spiritual mood. Brocklesby shares with Johnson a knowledge and a love of Shakespeare, and they both know that, in possessing such a quotation, Johnson already has a "sweet oblivious antidote" to hand. Whatever perilous stuff weighs upon his heart, it is cleansed or at least temporarily displaced by the poetry which he knows by heart. That he should summon up just these words from *Macbeth*, however, is yet more interesting, for they are spoken by a character who is clearly on his way to hell (if not already there), about another character, his wife, who is obviously already in hell. Lady Macbeth might well be a figure in Dante's *Inferno*, condemned for eternity to re-enact the moment after the murder of King Duncan, unable to sweeten her little hand with all the perfumes of Arabia or to wash away the spot of blood with the multitudinous seas. Macbeth, too, who thought he could "jump" the afterlife, has now discovered a perpetually meaningless afterlife of "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow." Why on earth should Johnson declare himself much satisfied with such voices from hell? Where is the comfort in that? What solace could be taken from the advice of a physician who simply declares that the patient must minister to himself?

There is always, of course, a measure of comfort to be had when you are feeling bad from knowing that at least someone somewhere is feeling a whole lot worse. But Johnson, we know from his own testimony and from what Boswell reports elsewhere, really did suffer from bouts of severe depression or melancholy and really did harbor grave concerns about his own salvation or damnation. The "perilous stuff" that weighs on the Macbeths' hearts includes murder and despair, and while Johnson is not guilty of the first of these, he may well entertain his share of the second — and it may, in fact, be the more perilous of the two. Despair, after all, is the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. It is part of Shakespeare's genius to be able to enter into the conscience of even his most supreme villains to explore the sorts of evasions of which they are capable. It is noteworthy that while Macbeth wants relief for himself and for his wife from their particular "perilous stuff," he does not seem to think this might involve repenting, or acknowledging any wrong-doing, or vowing to change his ways; he wants the antidote of oblivion, an erasure of the past, a plucking out of memory. The physician who tells him that "the patient must minister to himself" is perhaps suggesting that there is no magic eraser and no substitute for sincere soul-searching. Johnson, one imagines, knows this. He knows that there are perils even in the way you go about praying for relief from perils. And a good poem may not only provide you with a moment

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of spiritual communion; it may teach you about the nature of the difficulty of spiritual communion.

John Donne also knows this. And being the “Monarch of Wit,” he also knows that wit may even intensify the perils. Holy Sonnet number 14 is one of his most witty:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue,  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy,  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

It is not known exactly when Donne wrote his holy sonnets, but one educated guess places them in the period shortly before he was ordained as an Anglican priest in 1615, possibly sometime between 1609 and 1611.<sup>2</sup> Where Johnson worries about “perilous stuff” that weighs upon his heart, Donne seems to regard the heart itself as the peril — not a thing to be mended or repaired or cleansed but a thing to be re-done. He needs a transplant, not a pacemaker. In theological terms, the conclusion of the poem seems to represent a kind of extreme Calvinism. The heart or soul is utterly depraved, incapable of any good action, waiting only for God’s extreme make-over.

Donne’s violent paradoxes have made the poem famous. It is not merely God’s service (as the prayer book has it) that is perfect freedom, but God’s enthrallment, his imprisonment; it is not merely God’s love that makes the soul chaste, but God’s rape, his ravishment. The structure of the final couplet of the poem is a form of chiasmus or crossing, a kind of envelope structure: God’s action of enthralling and ravishing forms the outer sides of that envelope, while the speaker’s receipt of that action as freedom and chastity is nestled inside, at the end of line 13 and the beginning of line 14. And yet for all the apparent passivity of this speaker, the conspicuous wit of the paradoxes, their dazzlingly agile expression, their very neatness and perfection all draw attention to the prowess of the poet.

Something similar happens at the opening of the poem, similarly violent in the image of God as a battering ram and the heart as a fortress held

by the enemy, Satan. Even though the opening is theologically correct in addressing a three-personed God, the nature of that trinity has to share the spotlight with the witty consciousness that can wring infinite variations out of those three persons. The verbs of the second line glance at the operations of each of the persons: the Father knocks, the Spirit breathes, the Son shines (with a wink at a further pun on Son and Sun). In line four, the parallel verbs intensify the action: the Father breaks, the Spirit blows, the Son burns. And in the midst of all this there are further metaphors underlying the opening quatrain. The sort of character who seeks merely to mend pots and pans by breathing on them and shining them up and knocking them back into shape is a tinker. The sort of character who breaks metal down, who blows his fire with a bellows and burns things into new shapes is a blacksmith.<sup>3</sup> God, says Donne, you must stop tinkering and do some real work in the smithy — that is, in your spare moments when you are not already busy being a battering ram. Donne, in other words, may claim that his heart is incorrigible, pitiful, useless, but at the same time, the poetic voice that is a commanding presence in such lines is clearly electric with energy and wonder at its own working. How are we to reconcile these things? On the one hand, we have a sense of a soul that is utterly worthless and depraved; on the other hand, we have a monarch of wit operating at the height of his powers, dazzling his readers and delighting in his prowess. Are these two sides of the same coin? And if so, which side is Caesar's and which God's?

Donne does a better job of sorting out the sides in Holy Sonnet number 7, even though the opening of this poem is, if anything, even more violent, energetic, and commanding:

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow  
 Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise  
 From death, you numberless infinities  
 Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,  
 All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow,  
 All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,  
 Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes,  
 Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.  
 But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,  
 For, if above all these, my sins abound,  
 'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,  
 When we are there; here on this lowly ground,  
 Teach me how to repent; for that's as good  
 As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood.

The opening eight lines of the poem (the octave of the sonnet) present a vision of the apocalypse, not simply the meltdown of the individual,

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as in “Batter my heart,” but the meltdown of the universe. The biblical source of this vision is found in Revelation, Chapter 7. Donne’s angels are having a blast, summoning up not merely one soul to be made new but an infinite number of souls, or rather more accurately — since Donne characteristically compounds and pluralizes even his superlatives — “numberless infinities / Of souls,” all to be reunited with their “scattered bodies.” In fact, Donne’s apocalypse is also compounded, as line 5 makes clear: not one apocalypse but two, the one involving water, near the beginning of time, Noah’s flood, and the other involving fire, at the end of time, the Day of Doom: “All whom the flood did, and fire shall o’erthrow.” The rhetorical figure here is zeugma, the one verb “o’erthrow” being used to yoke together two radically dissimilar things, flood and fire, the past and the future. The line itself collapses time. And the next line marshals the agents of death, in what seems like an exhaustive inventory: “All whom war, dearth [that is, poverty and starvation], age, agues [including fevers and all forms of sickness], tyrannies, / Despair, [and] law . . . hath slain.” And then, just in case anybody got left out, a final group, the unlucky ones, done in by “chance.” And, finally, a whole new category, the lucky ones, “you whose eyes, / Shall behold God, and never taste death’s woe” (See 1 Cor. 15:51, “we shall not all sleep”). It is a brilliant achievement, packing an apocalypse into the small, neatly ordered room of a sonnet — a virtuoso performance, with Donne as conductor or maestro, exhibiting all the sprezzatura, the chutzpah, the wit that made him famous.

At the end of the octave God is reported to have said, “When the world is DONE, John, I’ll be the conductor. You better have other things on your mind, and to start with you will need to suppress or at least subdue some of that wit.” And Donne, accordingly, complies:

But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,  
For, if above all these, my sins abound,  
‘Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace,  
When we are there; here on this lowly ground,  
Teach me how to repent; for that’s as good  
As if thou hadst sealed my pardon, with thy blood.

These lines are among the most profound that Donne ever wrote. They are certainly among his quieter and calmer lines, as they eschew the pyrotechnics of wit and resist the impulse (ancient as well as modern) for a quick fix, for an Apocalypse — Now! The soul may be in distress, may feel itself inadequate, weak, or untrue, but it has, nevertheless, some important work to do in the here and now. In theological terms, Donne is looking for something less Calvinistic than Holy Sonnet 14 and closer to the Anglican *via media*, the middle way, a way that invokes “grace,” to be

sure, yet also finds a place for “works,” for something the individual soul must do, namely repent. For this reason, Holy Sonnet 7 is a poem fully appropriate to the penitential season of Lent. But that middle way, that vision of an Eternity that is every bit as much “here” as “there,” perhaps even more likely here, can also lead to a ground that is noticeably *not* holy, to a ground that is outside the *Holy Sonnets* and, in a sense, outside of any church. The middle way may be safe and secure, or it may also lead to its own perilous stuff.

**D**ONNE manages to compress a lot of significance, in Holy Sonnet 7, into the very simple contrast between “there” and “here.” “There” is the end of time, the apocalypse, the Day of Doom; “here” is the here and now of his own mortal existence. In addition, the contrast between “there” and “here” points to something fundamental about the nature of the Eternal. The Eternal cannot possibly start at the end of time. It cannot start anywhere, since by definition it just always is. It is therefore here, if anywhere. But what, exactly, is the nature of that “here”?

Christopher Drummond, in an extended commentary on *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, offers some fascinating remarks on a short section near the end of the first part of the pilgrimage, where the pilgrims Christian and Hopeful meet up with another pilgrim who is named “Atheist.” The first two pilgrims are traveling toward Mount Sion or the Celestial City, and Atheist rebukes them with the declaration that “There is no such place as you dream of in all this world” (Bunyan 174). He also explains the course of his own pilgrimage: “When I was at home in mine own country, I heard as you now affirm, and from that hearing went out to see, and have been seeking this City [these] twenty years, but find no more of it, than I did the first day I set out” (174). Not finding the Celestial City, Atheist has now determined, in a sort of ironic repentance, to turn around and head back towards the City of Destruction. Drummond offers two or three interesting comments on this little exchange. First, insofar as he seeks to “refresh” himself with the goods of this world, his atheism is now not pure. As Drummond argues, he now actually believes in and therefore “worships” the goods of this world: money, power, sex, fame, notoriety, or what have you. They are the things that cause motion in his soul (Drummond 52-4). Second, for at least a certain period of his life — twenty years in his case — Atheist was on a pilgrimage, and he *was* traveling in the direction of the Celestial City, and since in the terms of the allegory, the direction you are traveling is a sign of belief, Atheist was for a time himself a pilgrim — a very different sort of pilgrim, to be sure, but a pilgrim all the same. John Bunyan would not very likely have intended such a suggestion, but the

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structure of his narrative makes it all but unavoidable. As Drummond argues, “the allegorical vehicle of pilgrimage becomes more important than, in fact assumes dominance over, the doctrinal tenor Bunyan meant it to serve” (31). Atheism in certain forms is at least potentially or conceivably a form of spiritual discipline.

I mean to explore further this possibility of a religious atheism not by more discussion of *The Pilgrim's Progress* but by focusing on the short poem called “The Phoenix” by J. V. Cunningham. Cunningham, who once described himself as “a renegade Irish Catholic” (*Collected Essays* 353),<sup>4</sup> was born in Maryland in 1911. He was raised, however, on the plains of Montana, and it is the winter landscape of Montana that is present in “The Phoenix.” The legendary bird which is alluded to in the poem is said to be one of a kind. It is said to live for a period of 500 or 1000 years. In old age, resting on its nest of perfumed herbs, it catches fire from the rays of the sun, and a new phoenix arises out of the flames. There are various versions of the legend but all of them locate the bird “in some far country of the East, India, or Arabia, or Assyria” (Collins 239). Nobody ever mentions Montana. In late antiquity, the bird was said to live in the garden of Paradise, and it “was regarded as a symbol of eternity and of the survival of the soul after death, and for Christians it represented the Resurrection” (Collins 239). All of these possibilities are relevant to Cunningham’s poem:

“The Phoenix”

More than the ash stays you from nothingness!  
Nor here nor there is a consuming pyre!  
Your essence is in infinite regress  
That burns with varying consistent fire,  
Mythical bird that bears in burying!

I have not found you in exhausted breath  
That carves its image on the Northern air,  
I have not found you on the glass of death  
Though I am told that I shall find you there,  
Imperturbable in the final cold,

There where the North wind shapes white cenotaphs,  
There where snowdrifts cover the fathers’ mound,  
Unmarked but for these wintry epitaphs,  
Still are you singing there without sound,  
Your mute voice on the crystal embers flinging.

The first stanza of the poem presents the defining characteristics of the “Mythical Bird”: it burns up but is never consumed; it is always reborn



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from the ashes of its funeral pyre; its “essence” is immortal, a condition of “infinite regress.” These definitions are statements, but they are also exclamations, as the poet expresses his awe and amazement at this extraordinary bird.

The second stanza records an exhaustive and so far fruitless search for the bird in all of its theological meanings. The poet has found the phoenix neither in the breath of life, which can be so graphically visible in a frosty climate, nor in the last gasp of death, which may frost a mirror and which has sometimes been taken as an image of the soul departing from the body. And the dominion of death is repeatedly emphasized in the final stanza of the poem — the cenotaphs, the grave mound, the epitaphs, all of them dominated by a wintry landscape. The Montana scene is no doubt biographically connected to Cunningham’s own experience, but it also takes on a kind of universal significance — the modernist vision of bleakness, silence, and unbelief. The “fathers’ mound” may indeed refer to, or include, the poet’s own father, but the adjective is plural — many fathers — and it seems to extend all the way back to the Church fathers, to the patristic tradition that articulated the whole scope of Christian belief.

And yet, in spite of this atheistic vision, this sense of the death of the tradition and of the absence of God, the poet continues to assert, even to insist, yet more vehemently on the presence of the bird: “Still are you singing there without sound / Your mute voice on the crystal embers flinging.” These lines, of course, are riddled with paradoxes: the embers of fire are crystals of ice, and the singing is without sound. But though the search has been baffled, it has not been discontinued. There is a strong sense of energy, of active seeking, throughout the final two stanzas, which are all one sentence. The sentence does not stop at the normal stanza break at the end of stanza two, and the search does not really end with the final period either. Cunningham, here, is like Bunyan’s Atheist in the early-going, before he turns around.

A central clue to his purpose lies in the poem’s unique rhyme scheme, a five-line stanza, apparently rhyming *ababc*. But the fifth line is only apparently unrhymed. The “c” rhyme for line five is actually buried in the middle of line four in each case (varying/burying; told/cold; singing/flinging). And this hidden rhyme is a kind of auditory acting out of the theme of the whole poem. The experience of hearing the poem read out is the experience of hearing something you are not quite sure you heard, seeing something you cannot quite see, believing something you are not sure you believe. This is what it can feel like to be an atheist on a spiritual pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup>

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MY second poem on this subject, “Good Friday, 1613: Riding Westward,” takes us back to John Donne. In an interesting reversal, Cunningham, who is an atheist, is in a sense traveling east, while Donne, who is a Christian, is clearly traveling west, though he wishes he were not. Donne’s problem is quite explicitly identified in his title: on Good Friday his focus should be directed East to the scene and significance of the Crucifixion; instead, he is riding westward, literally and spiritually. Like *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, this poem sets up an equation between traveling (or being a pilgrim) and the state of one’s beliefs. The opening ten lines set up an analogy between the individual, as a microcosm, and the fixed planetary spheres of older scientific theory, the macrocosm:

Let man’s soul be a sphere, and then, in this,  
The intelligence that moves, devotion is,  
And as the other spheres, by being grown  
Subject to foreign motions, lose their own,  
And being by others hurried every day,  
Scarce in a year their natural form obey:  
Pleasure or business, so, our souls admit  
For their first mover, and are whirled by it.  
Hence is’t, that I am carried towards the west  
This day, when my soul’s form bends towards the east.

Each sphere in the Ptolemaic universe has an intelligence which guides its motion, and all of these are under the direction of the prime mover. But foreign influences can interfere with this universal harmony. Similarly, the individual soul is a sphere, which should be governed by intelligent devotion, that is, by faith, but that first motion in the soul can be — and often is — displaced by a fraudulent first mover, “Pleasure or business,” which carries the soul away from, rather than toward, God, in much the same manner that Bunyan’s Atheist, in his second phase, is carried away by other “refreshments.” Where, in his holy sonnets, Donne presents his plight as intensely personal, he here defines his position as merely one more instance of the general condition of humanity. We are all pre-occupied with pleasure or business and, therefore, tempted to allow one or both to become our prime mover. The scientific part of Donne’s analogy may be outmoded but the human part is up to date.

At line 11, Donne’s meditation turns, at least hypothetically, to the scene of the crucifixion:

There I should see a sun, by rising set,  
And by that setting endless day beget;  
But that Christ on this Cross, did rise and fall,

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Sin had eternally benighted all.  
Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see  
That spectacle of too much weight for me.  
Who sees God's face, that is self life, must die;  
What a death were it then to see God die?  
It made his own lieutenant Nature shrink,  
It made his footstool crack, and the sun wink.  
Could I behold those hands which span the poles,  
And turn all spheres at once, pierced with those holes?  
Could I behold that endless height which is  
Zenith to us, and to our antipodes,  
Humbled below us? or that blood which is  
The seat of all our souls, if not of his,  
Made dirt of dust, or that flesh which was worn,  
By God, for his apparel, ragged, and torn?  
If on these things I durst not look, durst I  
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,  
Who was God's partner here, and furnished thus  
Half of that sacrifice which ransomed us?

The description of Mary as “God’s partner,” who furnishes “half” of the sacrifice, gives to Mary the sort of prominence that she holds among Catholics, a reminder that Donne was himself born into a Catholic household. This whole long middle section of the poem is, of course, something of a meditation on the crucifixion, but it nevertheless continues the theme of riding westward because it is preoccupied with rationalizations, with giving explanations and excuses for why such a meditation is difficult or impossible. The answer to most of the questions — could I bear to see God “Humbled below us” or to see the hands of Christ “pierced with those holes” or to witness the misery of his mother — is no, I could not bear it. This is at least partly because of the intensely vivid imagery as Donne imagines the flesh of Christ made “ragged and torn” or the blood made into “dirt,” that single word capturing both the instant when the moisture of blood mingles with the dust to make dirt and the utter contempt which is emotionally expressed in the Crucifixion: Christ is treated like dirt. To really contemplate this, Donne argues, requires more courage than he can muster.

And this failure of courage is only partly owing to his recoil from the violence of the scene. When he says that the “spectacle” is of “too much weight for me,” he also means that the issues are too profound, too weighty, too much is at stake, for any steady or stable contemplation. There is too great a disparity between the “endless height” and the humiliation. The

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mind simply cannot hold them together, and the result is a belief which is baffled and checked. The best that Donne can hope for is a kind of memory of belief, a kind of substitute for the real thing, here and now.

Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,  
They are present yet unto my memory,  
For that looks towards them; and thou look'st towards me,  
O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;  
I turn my back to thee, but to receive  
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.  
O think me worth thine anger, punish me,  
Burn off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou mayst know me, and I'll turn my face.

This final section of the poem, even though it continues the process of rationalizations and excuses, ends with an extraordinarily effective and beautiful prayer.

The crucifixion, though present to his memory, nevertheless remains “from” his eye — that is, away from his eye, not within his sight, not accessible to his full contemplation or his belief. But he manages to turn this disabled belief, this ineffectual and ineffective pilgrimage, to his advantage by arguing, wittily, that the only reason he turns his back is to “receive / Corrections.” In Holy Sonnet 7, Donne asks God to teach him how to repent. Now he admits that, like an inattentive schoolboy, he has failed to learn the lesson, and he turns his back to be caned, to receive the punishment and correction that many inattentive schoolboys in Donne's day would have received from the schoolmaster. The punishment is corporal but also spiritual, and Donne may mean that his whole struggle with the question of belief — from the distraction of pleasure or business, to the failure of courage, to the inadequacy of his powers of attention — is all a form of punishment. But in the final three lines of the poem he turns, finally, from a sense of punishment to a beautiful petition for a new creation, a restoration:

Burn off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou mayst know me, and I'll turn my face.

It is characteristic of Donne's witty, argumentative poetry that even his most graceful prayer takes the form of a kind of plea-bargain. Found guilty as accused, Donne pleads for a limit to the penalty and a restoration of the divine image within him, so that — by God's grace — he may repent and, thereby, turn his face.

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To the perils of wit or evasiveness and the perils of atheism or baffled belief may be added the perils of grief and spiritual weariness or lassitude, topics of intense concern to Ben Jonson. Jonson and Donne were exact contemporaries, both born in 1572, and, like Donne, Jonson was for a time a Catholic, converting to Catholicism when he was in jail in 1598 and then returning to Anglicanism in 1610, marking his return in a particularly dramatic fashion by drinking off the whole of the communion cup. He was a proud man in many ways, especially proud of his role as a poet and an author, who published his *Collected Works* in 1616, astonishing his contemporaries (who wondered that anything so ephemeral as plays should attain the dignity of a *Collected Works*). In 1619 he was named Poet Laureate, and in 1623 he was among the group of friends who brought out the posthumous *Collected Works of William Shakespeare*. He was a man who took poetry seriously. Like Donne, therefore, he raises in a particularly acute way the dilemma of the great poet who would also be a penitent. On the one hand, he must strive to acknowledge his own humility and weakness; on the other hand, he must know that he has superb gifts and that he is obliged to use them. This dilemma is suggested by the commonplace phrase, "Owning Up," meaning both an acknowledgment of wrong-doing, a confession of sin, and an acknowledgment that your talents are not your own and that they must eventually be rendered up, returned to the one who is up, ten talents for five or four talents for two. The one option that is not recommended, as we know from the Parable of the Talents, is one talent for one: for that way lies weeping and gnashing of teeth. What, then, are the perils of "owning up" in both of these senses, especially if, like Donne or Jonson, you tend to belong in the five-talent category?

The experience of grief, of course, is a universal human experience, and it presents its own special challenges or perils. It is accompanied by any number of other feelings, not infrequently feelings of anger or regret or bitterness or unfairness. A grieving person may very well not be in a penitential mood — may, in the toils of premature loss or of unjust affliction, feel something rather the reverse, may feel, surely, that somebody up there ought to repent, but (in the words of another famous poet) "it ain't me babe!" And this sense of rebelliousness can be dispiriting. If the loss feels unjust and the universe is unfair, then what is the use? What is the use of anything, including repentance? And the spirit grows weary, disillusioned, inert. Or conversely, if the grieving person does feel repentant, feels that God is saying, "It is you — babe," that too can be debilitating. It can generate the sense that the loved one was taken away for our sins, and the more intense this experience, the more repentance feels locked in an un-retrievable past, lost in nostalgia or regret or despair.

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Ben Jonson confronts many of these feelings in his poem “On My First Son”:

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;  
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy,  
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,  
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.  
O, could I lose all father, now. For why  
Will man lament the state he should envy?  
To have so soon 'scaped world's, and flesh's rage,  
And, if no other misery, yet age!  
Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.  
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,  
As what he loves may never like too much.

This little epigram is one of the greatest poems in the English language, and it is therefore not easy to take it all in at one go. We can expand our sense of the poem by noting that not only is the *poem* highly compressed but so, too, is its title, and we might, therefore, try to fill in some of the elisions or gaps there. The poem is very short, but it also contains a sort of mini-poem within it, beginning with the words “here doth lie” in line 9, which is an epitaph within the epigram. The words are very close to the formula for an epitaph, a possible inscription on a tombstone: Here lies Benjamin Jonson, son of Ben Jonson. The title, then, might read, “On the Death of My First Son” or “A Farewell to My Dead Son.”

But this is also obviously a very emotional farewell. And some of the emotions are turbulent or disconcerting or even self-annihilating. The dead, says Jonson, in looking for a strategy for coping with his grief, really ought to be envied rather than lamented. And the reasons for envy present themselves so readily, so emphatically, and with such finality: to be able to escape from the rage of the world and the flesh, and from the misery of age. The dead are at rest, and they are resting in peace, and that peace is “soft.” Jonson would appear to be looking for the same thing that Macbeth and Samuel Johnson were looking for in the passage quoted from Shakespeare above: “some sweet oblivious antidote” to “cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff / Which weighs upon the heart.” And the oblivion he craves is not only physical but also psychological and spiritual: “O, could I lose all father, now.” The experience of losing my son is so overwhelming that I wish I had never been a father. I deny the very condition of fatherhood and I, therefore, deny my own identity. I could even deny all fatherhood, including that of God the Father. Our revised title clearly needs to be expanded further: “On the Intense Grief I Feel on the Death of

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My First Son” — or further, “On the Intense Grief and Perilously Near-Absolute Loss of Faith I Feel on the Death of My First Son.”

But even this is not enough. Jonson also recognizes that there is something wrong with these feelings, that they are in a measure perverse or sinful, and that his sin on this occasion is but a continuation of the sin which he has most grievously committed from “time to time,” that is, all the time — then and now: “My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy, / Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay, / Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.” Jonson further recognizes that the death of his son is not unfair but is, instead, “just.” The child was not owned by the father but merely “lent” to him, and whenever God chooses to call in the loan, to exact or demand his return, the day of payment, the fatal day, is nevertheless the “just day.” All this, of course, is standard Christian doctrine. The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord. But it can easily be viewed as purely arbitrary and, therefore, platitudinous, and if platitudinous, a rather meager consolation.

What makes Jonson’s poem unusual, however, is the very strangeness of the definition of sin it proposes: “My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy.” How could hope, which is one of the three theological virtues, be regarded as a sin? And what could Jonson mean by saying that he had “too *much* hope”? Christopher Drummond comments on a shrewd definition of hope offered by the philosopher John Locke, and then he explores its application to the situation described in Jonson’s poem:

Hope, Locke writes, “is that pleasure in the mind, which everyone finds in himself upon the thought of a profitable future enjoyment of a thing, which is apt to delight him.” The hope that Locke defines is of course not in itself a vice at all, but a justifiable, indeed necessary pleasure that can also easily tend to become excessive. Jonson is saying, then, that he took too much pleasure in his son, thought too much of his own future enjoyment of his son, wanted too much for his son to delight him. Locke’s definition also leads us to understand that Jonson is admitting that he may have thought too much of his son as a thing he could enjoy to his own profit, as if he were something that Jonson owned. (177)<sup>6</sup>

That such hope can be a transgression or a trespass is surely evident. It would not be the first time — or the last time — a parent wanted to live in and through the child, to have your son fulfill your own aspirations and dreams rather than his own destiny.

The final couplet of the poem offers an ethically sharper and more spiritually focused meaning for the simple word “like,” which is related to this new, particularized meaning of the word “hope”: “For whose sake,

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henceforth, all his vows be such, / As what he loves may never like too much.” Jonson is not saying that he will cease loving; indeed, his love for his son is manifest in virtually every line of the poem. But he is saying that it is possible to like “too much” — just as it is possible to hope too much, and for more or less the same reason. “Like” here is not a weaker form of love but something closer to its antithesis. “Like” is possessive and willful. You cannot do whatever you like with what you love. The object of love has its own integrity, its own freedom, and its own fate. And Jonson, in his solemn declaration of repentance at the end of the poem, acknowledges this fact, owns up to his particular transgression, and vows to reform himself. And we might try for a yet more encyclopedic title: “On the Repentance Demanded by My Sinful Reaction to the Death of My First Son.”<sup>7</sup>

Virtually everything this poem implies about the relation between Jonson and his son may also be applied to the relation between Jonson and his talent as a poet. To return to the epitaph within the epigram: “Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.” To get the full force of this remark, we need to recall Jonson’s investment (economic and spiritual) in his role as a poet — the point really of those few biographical details sketched above. No one ever asserted a more absolute claim to ownership over his own poetry. The locution “Ben Jonson his” is the very model of the possessive. Our standard practice, of course, is to abbreviate this to an “apostrophe s” (Ben Jonson’s), but the old form is much the more emphatic in its declaration of possession: “Ben Jonson *his* best piece of poetry.” And yet that claim, too, is being challenged and disciplined in this little poem. Jonson’s skill is evident in the density and compression of every line of the poem. It is evident, also, in the witty management of the multi-lingual puns: Benjamin is Hebrew for ‘child of the right hand’; “Rest in soft peace” translates the familiar Latin *requiescat in pace*, with the wonderfully tender addition of “soft”; “For whose *sake*” puns on the Anglo-Saxon etymology of the word “sake,” which means *sin*.<sup>8</sup> And the fourth — and most important — pun or play on words focuses on the meaning of “poetry” or “poet,” summoning up its Greek origins as a making, a maker. As Jonson recognizes that though he *made* his son, his son is but lent to him, so he also recognizes that though he *makes* his poems, they too are but lent to him. And they too will be exacted on the just day when he must render up the talents which were entrusted to him.

For a test case of that rendering I turn now to his prayer, “To Heaven,” a prayer that is at least partly about the act of praying and about the perils involved.

Good, and great God, can I not think of thee,  
But it must, straight, my melancholy be?  
Is it interpreted in me disease,



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That, laden with my sins, I seek for ease?  
O, be thou witness, that the reins dost know,  
And hearts of all, if I be sad for show,  
And judge me after: if I dare pretend  
To aught but grace, or aim at other end.  
As thou art all, so be thou all to me,  
First, midst, and last, converted one, and three;  
My faith, my hope, my love: and in this state,  
My judge, my witness, and my advocate.  
Where have I been this while exiled from thee?  
And whither rapt, now thou but stoop'st to me?  
Dwell, dwell here still: O, being everywhere,  
How can I doubt to find thee ever, here?  
I know my state, both full of shame, and scorn,  
Conceived in sin, and unto labour born,  
Standing with fear, and must with horror fall,  
And destined unto judgment, after all.  
I feel my griefs too, and there scarce is ground,  
Upon my flesh to inflict another wound.  
Yet dare I not complain, or wish for death  
With holy Paul, lest it be thought the breath  
Of discontent; or that these prayers be  
For weariness of life, not love of thee.

The last two lines here emphatically denounce and disclaim “weariness” and “discontent” as reputable motives for prayer, and they offer a firm answer to the questions raised in the opening. Can I think of God only when I am melancholy or when I am distressed and diseased? The passive constructions used in these opening two questions create an ambiguity about exactly who is asking the questions. “Is it interpreted in me disease” could mean that other people are inclined to be suspicious about Jonson’s motives and that they are the ones who suppose his prayers are a sign of the disease of melancholy — in much the way that prayer in our day is often interpreted as a pathology rather than a sign of spiritual health.

But it is also clear that such imputed motives have occurred to Jonson himself. Moreover, his own appraisal of his condition in the second half of the poem is nothing if not melancholy: “I know my state, both full of shame, and scorn, / Conceived in sin, and unto labour born, / Standing with fear, and must with horror fall, / And destined unto judgment after all.” These are not exactly cheerful words, and though they may seem entirely realistic (especially for those of us for whom the bloom of youth is only a distant memory), they are not exactly uplifting either. They might easily compete with Hamlet at one of his lowest points: “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world.” Jonson, un-

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like Hamlet, seems determined to sustain himself by a kind of Christian stoicism. He invokes the Roman poet, Ovid, whom he echoes in the lines about not having room on his flesh for another wound,<sup>9</sup> and he remembers that even St. Paul himself had cried out for relief: “O wretched man, that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:24, qtd. in Parfitt 517). For Paul, life in the body is a kind of death, but for Jonson, the desire to escape the body is not an option. What he seems to advocate sounds more like pure endurance:

Yet dare I not complain, or wish for death  
With holy Paul, lest it be thought the breath  
Of discontent; or that these prayers be  
For weariness of life, not love of thee.

Part of what is marvelous about these lines is their sustained energy and tone, evident especially in the rhythm of the lines, as the syntax pushes past the line ending at “death” and past the couplet ending at “breath” and past the line ending again at “be,” seeking resolution only in the climax of the final phrase, “love of thee.” This is an impressive ending and an impressive cadence, like a piece of music closing with a return to the tonic in the final note. But does this stoicism emerging out of melancholy really qualify as love? The passage clearly demonstrates poetic talent, but is it any more than that? Is Jonson merely returning to God the one talent that he was given? “Dear God, it was a brutal life, but I survived, and I herewith return your gift, signed your son, Ben.” Is the poet safe? Has God doubled his money?

To ask such questions is to catch a glimpse of the perilous stuff this poem deals with. The risk is perhaps much more explicit in the opening section of the poem which calls upon God to be a witness, testifying to the sincerity of the poet and judging whether he aims at anything other than grace. This is a risky business, for there will be no fooling an all-knowing judge, and any wavering, any false note or insincerity, will be detected. If Donne is on a right course when he asks God to teach him how to repent, it may appear that Jonson is presuming too much on the adequacy of his own talent. But in fact, like Donne, Jonson invokes the presence of God — “As thou art all, so be thou all to me, / First, midst, and last, converted one, and three” — and, like Donne in “Batter my heart three-personed God,” Jonson invokes the central mystery of the Trinity, in which one and three are convertible. These lines are very closely organized and are, therefore, worthy of a minute’s attention. The way in which God is “all” is defined in the next line: “First, midst, and last.” And the way in which this abstract theology enters the human realm is defined in the following line by the in-

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roduction of the three theological virtues — faith, hope, and love — each of the virtues made personal: “My faith, my hope, my love.” And finally, the petition “be thou all to me” is repeated in terms that define God’s actively tri-partite interest in the individual soul: “My judge, my witness, and my advocate.” The lines are wonderfully clever in the way they sing variations on the nature of the Trinity, each of the three lines referring to one and the same thing. At the same time, the prayers are wonderfully reverential and accepting, allowing the Trinity to expand and enter into the poem and into the poet’s heart. In terms of the structure of the line, the first statement takes four syllables (“First, midst, and last”), the next takes six syllables (“My faith, my hope, my love”) and the final one takes all ten syllables of the ten-syllable line (“My judge, my witness, and my advocate”). The poetic structures of “To Heaven” reflect a profoundly religious experience. Ben Jonson uses his poetic talent not only to understand his own nature and state but to open himself up to the divine, and his talent is therefore redoubled, while his soul magnifies the Lord. In the perilous business of devotional poetry, this sort of openness or acceptance may be as important as, and possibly even more important than, belief.

**D**ONNE and Jonson, however they may have flirted with Calvinism on the one hand or Catholicism on the other, were working within a specifically Anglican tradition. Indeed, they are among the founders of that tradition. They have behind them the monumental achievements of the Prayer Book and the English translations of the Bible, as well as theologians such as Richard Hooker, as they explore the possibilities of a middle way which might accommodate the claims of “works” and “grace” — without denying the efficacy of the one or the majesty of the other. George Herbert is another seminal poet in this tradition, learning his craft in part from Donne and Jonson (both some twenty years his senior) and bringing to it an astonishing poetic gift in the art of original metaphor, subtle stanza form, and a beautiful simplicity or plainness in diction. For Herbert, the “perilous stuff” of his own particular spiritual struggle is often focused on the question of his vocation, or service, his sense of his calling, as a priest and as a Christian. The issue is frequently less a matter of belief than of acceptance; but the acceptance at issue is not a matter of a relinquishing of human will, or choice, or intelligence. It rather calls for a re-alignment of all of these, which means, among other things, that Herbert must coordinate his calling as a Christian with his calling as a poet.

Before turning to Herbert, however, I focus attention again on a modern poem, this one by Helen Pinkerton, “Visible and Invisible.” As the modern perspective of Cunningham’s “Phoenix” helped to clarify

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certain dimensions of Donne's struggle in "Good Friday, 1613: Riding Westward," so this poem illuminates aspects of the spiritual discipline involved in acceptance.

In touching gently like a golden finger,  
The sunlight, falling as a steady shimmer  
Through curling fruit leaves, fills the mind with hunger  
For meaning in the time and light of summer.

Dispersed by myriad surfaces in falling,  
Drawn into green and into air dissolving,  
Light seems uncaught by sudden sight or feeling.  
Remembered, it gives rise to one's believing

Its truth resides in constant speed descending.  
The momentary beauty is attendant.  
A flicker of the animate responding  
Shifts in the mind with time and fades, inconstant.

If one were to regard this poem in the absence of its title, it might appear to be little more than a luxuriant description of the pleasures of a beautiful sunny afternoon. It might even appear to qualify as an example of what the French poet Paul Valéry called "pure poetry," a poetry in which "the musical continuity [is] never broken, in which the relations between meanings [are] themselves perpetually similar to harmonic relations, *in which the transmutation of thoughts into each other [appears] more important than any thought*" (*The Art of Poetry* 192).

But the title of this poem does matter, and so too, therefore, does the wider application of its thought. The title, of course, comes from the opening words of the Nicene creed: "I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And of all things visible and invisible." As with Cunningham's poem on "The Phoenix," a central clue to the theme of this poem is located in its rhyme scheme. If you pay attention only to vowels, the rhyme scheme is aabb: the short "i" in finger rhymes with the short "i" in shimmer; the short "u" in hunger rhymes with the short "u" in summer. But if you regard only the consonants, the rhyme scheme is abab: finger-hunger; shimmer-summer. The same pattern obtains in each of the next two stanzas. Because the rhyme is analyzed into separate components, the technical name for this is "analyzed rhyme."<sup>10</sup>

The strategy of analyzed rhyme is working in this poem to underscore the relation of the visible and the invisible — different but also inseparably intertwined. In other words, the poem is not offering an alternative to the creed but is exploring the nature of one of its central claims. The point seems to be that God did not make, or did not make only, two separate

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categories of things but that, in some sense, the visible and the invisible are aspects of each other. And in much the same way, so are the sensory and the ideal inextricably intertwined. The poem thus represents something of a challenge to Plato's notion of the "divided line," in which the material world, apprehended by the senses, is sharply separated from the world of ideas, apprehended by the intellect. Here it is the visual world of the senses, the sunlight falling through curling fruit leaves, which generates the mind's hunger for meaning, a fruit of an order similar to that welling up in the trees. And again, like the leaves, the mind also shifts and fades with time, "inconstant," incapable of registering more than a flicker of the animate, the soul, responding to the light.

What is constant is light, or rather the speed of its descent. Pinkerton invokes both the traditional metaphor of God as Light and the modern scientific account of its measurable speed, the constant that enables the perception of the relativity of mass and energy. What is interesting to me about the poem is that neither account, the scientific nor the theological, displaces the other (as so often happens in other discourses), nor does either disrupt the transient beauty of the scene — or its inherent mystery. The middle stanza does a remarkable job of describing the operations of light, "drawn into green and into air dissolving," without supposing that the light is in any sense, thereby, "caught." The Light just is, whatever the vicissitudes of our feelings, of our perceptions, our minds, our beliefs. It is beyond belief.

A second poem by Helen Pinkerton is more explicit about these matters. The first of a pair of "Holy Sonnets," it opens with a spiritual struggle, a questioning of God's "presence and intent." The middle of the poem continues to raise troubling questions about the very existence of God before turning to a remarkably serene prayer:

If you I look for, when my discontent  
Is more than tentative unhappiness,  
Are not the mere reply of mind in stress,  
Be with me casual and concomitant  
As gentle breathing in a midnight sleep,  
When no one bids the breast to rise and fall. (ll.5-10)

It is significant that this prayer begins in line 8, before the end of the octave, since a sonnet of the Italian form such as this ordinarily turns at line 9, in the break between octave and sestet. Here it is as if the prayer is holding octave and sestet together, just as the Holy Spirit presides over all hours of the day, even midnight, and the hope of the prayer — its open-mindedness — is sustained even though the mind's questions with respect to belief have not yet been answered.<sup>11</sup> In its calm acceptance of both the

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questioning and the hope, this poem is reminiscent of the very beautiful prayer from the Book of Common Prayer, invoking “the *tranquil* operation of thy perpetual providence” (italics mine).

Like Helen Pinkerton, George Herbert will eventually find his way to this sort of tranquility, though not without undergoing a considerable amount of agitation along the way. Herbert often treats the same subject in more than one poem and then adds a number to indicate the sequence. Thus, “Love III” has two predecessors. It is surely symptomatic of Herbert’s spiritual struggle that he wrote five poems called “Affliction.” Love is clearly outnumbered, if not outgunned. The reason for this is not simply that he felt afflicted more often than he felt loved (though that may very well be the case), but that he sees an opportunity. As Ben Jonson knows that he is melancholy and that it is his business to do something about it, so George Herbert understands that he must do something more with affliction than merely suffer it or endure it.

In the first and greatest of his affliction poems, “Affliction I,” he discovers that even his talents and abilities turn out to be a fundamental part of his affliction — that what he prided himself on as signal and significant virtues turn out to be perilous stuff. God’s power, he says, works to “cross-bias” him, attacking not only his weaknesses but also his strengths: “not making / Thine own gift good, yet me from my ways taking.” The very essence of his affliction involves his life as a scholar and a poet: “Now I am here, what thou wilt do with me / None of my books will show.” I don’t know if you absolutely have to be an academic to appreciate this dilemma, but it may help. A man who devotes his life to literature and letters may well be stunned to discover that his books are useless. It is surely a sobering reflection, for the man and for the poet.

Herbert’s strategy is to try out a series of responses, exhibiting in the process what Helen Pinkerton depicts as the shifting inconstancy of the mind. “Yet, though thou troublest me, I must be meek; / In weakness must be stout.” His first response is obedience and meekness, but this quickly shifts to rebellion and dissociation: “Well, I will change the service, and go seek / Some other master out.” And then finally, a return and a prayer: “Ah my dear God! though I am clean forgot, / Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.” This striking sentence, which concludes the poem, has to be one of most succinct expressions there is of the Anglican *via media*. Herbert is under an obligation to love God; he can fulfill that obligation only if God’s grace allows or lets him; he wishes to honor that grace by linking it to his own actively engaged commitment, his own work: “Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.” Since the risk is oblivion — he might be “clean forgot” — it is a perilous prayer, a risky business.

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But it is not the last word, because God is not only the object of love; God is love. And so we turn, finally, to “Love III.”

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
    Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
    If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
    Love said, You shall be he.  
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,  
    I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve.  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
    My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
    So I did sit and eat.

Since this poem refers to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, it is fundamentally an Easter poem. Some Herbert scholars have argued that the poem “celebrates not the sacrament in the visible Church but the final communion in Heaven,” which is referred to in Luke 12.37, “when God ‘shall gird himself and make them to sit down to meat, and will come forth and serve them.’”<sup>12</sup> This is possible, since the biblical passage and the poem both raise the issue of service, but the Bible is here talking about participants in the plural and about an unspecified “meat,” whereas the poem emphasizes “my meat” and an individual communicant. Moreover, St. Luke makes no mention of any discussion concerning the matter, and presumably there are no arguments in heaven (though it is not altogether clear why that should be so; it would surely be an addition to heaven’s many attractions if it allowed for a good argument now and again).

In any case, the argument or the dialogue presented in “Love III” is certainly one of its attractions, and the whole question about whether or not to accept the communion seems like a decidedly this-world sort of concern. Love’s offer is a given, so that the drama focuses on the question of acceptance, and the dialogue is one of the central devices whereby the poem achieves its unforgettable sense of intimacy and tenderness and solicitude. The two speakers, Love and the poet, establish a conversational

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communication before they reach the moment of the Eucharist — a communion before communion, if you like. This intimacy is also partly dependent on the structure of the poem, as it moves from the objectivity of narration and reported dialogue in the first stanza to the greater immediacy of direct dialogue in the second and third stanzas. And a similar process of intensification is evident in the use of couplets, reserved for the close of each stanza, though at this point we might also take note of Herbert's strategic use of varying line lengths. The poem consists of alternating lines of pentameter and trimeter, acting out or embodying something of the disproportion between the divine and the human. In the first stanza, the short lines, the trimeter lines, register the plight of the human soul, while divine love is manifest in the longer, pentameter line, though Love increasingly enters the short lines too. In the next two stanzas, the dialogue part, the two speakers share in both kinds about equally, though the close of the poem re-establishes the norm: pentameter for Love, trimeter for Herbert. The device of alternating lines here, like the device of analyzed rhyme in "Visible and Invisible," takes us close to the heart of the poem's theme. The sense of disproportion is precisely what makes the act of acceptance difficult.

At the same time, the sense of tenderness or solicitude makes any act of outright rejection equally difficult. The speaker in "Affliction I" makes a somewhat rash though perhaps heroic attempt to summon up his own ability to love. The speaker of "Love III" finds that the act of being loved presents even greater risks or more difficult demands. He is guilty of "dust" as well as of "sin," so that not only his errors and oversights and transgressions work against him, but also his very being, his mortality — his humanity. Herbert meets this difficulty through the use of one of his most brilliant metaphors, a figure rooted in the pun on "host," at once the Host of the communion and the host (or hostess) who is alert to every need of the guest. It is a figure that raises etiquette to the level of profundity. But it does this without overpowering the human soul, since the act of accepting an invitation is a positive act, an act of acceptance, which is simultaneously an acceptance of love, of the transcendent, and an acceptance of the human, of a self, soul and body, a body which has hands and eyes and which is capable of eating as well as thinking and arguing. Like Donne, Herbert finds that eternity is "here," and also like Donne, he explores the implications of that perception by depicting the intelligence of the individual soul as it works through argument and debate — even as it reaches a conclusion that is beyond argument.

The Canadian philosopher George Grant was fond of an aphorism that he discovered in the work of Simone Weil: "Faith is the experience that the intelligence is illuminated by love." And in one of his most important essays, he offers a sustained meditation on how that aphorism



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might — or might not — apply to the problem of “Faith and the Multiversity.”<sup>13</sup> His essay is a major contribution to the question of what, if anything, the modern academy and religion have to offer each other. And while that question is at the heart of the outreach at Saint George’s Round Church, it goes well beyond the scope of these meditations. For the present, it is sufficient to note that Weil’s aphorism as well as her favorite poem, Herbert’s “Love III,” have far-reaching implications for the nature of both academic study and religious devotion. Herbert once famously defined prayer in a poem that contains no fewer than twenty-seven different epithets for the act of prayer. At least some of these are clearly applicable to the works we have been considering by Donne, Jonson, Cunningham, Pinkerton, and Herbert himself: Prayer is “the Church’s banquet,” “God’s breath in man returning to his birth, / The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,” and an “Engine against the Almighty.” He also defined it, climactically, as “something understood.” For myself, at the end of a series of perilous meditations, I shall be satisfied if I have made some small progress in understanding what the poets “understood.”

## Notes

1) My thanks to the Rector of Saint George’s Church, Fr. George Westhaver, and to Dr. Gary McGonagill for inviting me to do the series.

2) Smith, citing Helen Gardner, records this guess in his notes on Donne’s *Divine Meditations* (624).

3) The multiple possibilities and metaphorical associations were the subject of an interesting critical debate in the 1950s. See J. C. Levenson, “Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*, XIV,” *Explicator* 11 (March 1953); George Herman, “Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*, XIV,” *Explicator* 12 (December 1953); and George Knox, “Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*, XIV,” *Explicator* 15 (October 1956).

4) This self-description appears at the beginning of Cunningham’s essay on Emily Dickinson.

5) For an interesting exploration of the persistence of the Christian heritage in several of Cunningham’s poems, see the essay by Francis Fike.

6) These comments on hope are from Drummond’s essay, “Belief and Poetic Structure: Jonson’s Epigrams on the Death of his Daughter and the Death of his Son.” He argues that the basic principle of the poem’s structure is the Sacrament of Penance (*In Defence of Adam* 172-82).

7) This omnibus title is close to the one supplied by Drummond (180), to whose wonderfully illuminating essay I am deeply indebted both for the idea that Jonson’s elliptical title needs expanding and for most of the points it needs to cover.

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8) Drummond comments perceptively on all of the bilingual puns in the poem, most crucially on etymology of *sake*, as cited in the OED: “guilt, sin; a fault, offence, crime. Often coupled with *sin*” (180).

9) George Parfitt’s edition of Jonson’s poems cites “Ovid, *Ex Pono* II.vii,41-2: ‘sic ego continuo Fortunae vulneror ictu, / vixque habet in nobis iam nova plaga locum’ (‘so I am wounded by Fate’s persistent blows until now I have hardly any room for a new wound’)” (517).

10) In his review of Pinkerton’s first collection, Winters explains the technique and draws attention to it in this poem (32).

11) I discuss this poem as well as “Visible and Invisible” at greater length in my *Sequoia* essay on Pinkerton (87-92).

12) This argument is made by Patrides in the notes to his edition of Herbert’s poems (192).

13) The essay by Grant was first published in the small periodical *The Compass*, no. 4 (Autumn 1978): 3-14, where he cites Weil’s aphorism, in his translation, as from *La Plesanteur et La Grace* (Paris: Plon, 1948): 148. The *Compass* version of the essay is now available in the recently published *Collected Works of George Grant, Volume 4* (385-402), as is a greatly expanded version which appeared somewhat later (607-639).

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