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“Death doth touch the resurrection”:
Remapping Purgatory in Donne’s “Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness”

Introduction

John Donne was a 17th century Anglican poet and priest, one of the Caroline Divines whose contributions to the English church helped establish its “self-confidence and inner strength” in staking out a middle way between the extremes of Roman Catholicism and Puritanism.¹ These Divines “set themselves to proclaim to the world what they believed Anglicanism to be”;² that is, to define and embody a distinctive Anglican ethos in the aftermath of the bitter divisions of the English Reformation. This ethos was unique among European Protestantism in that it remained “somehow redolent of Catholicism while . . . still Reformed.”³ John Donne brought this Anglican ethos to bear on the concept of death, a frequent subject of his poetry, sermons, and devotions. Death rituals and remembrances had been dramatically altered by the Reformation rejection of purgatory, an alteration which Donne—an adult convert from Roman Catholicism—may have experienced with greater anguish than his fellow Divines.⁴ The vacuum left by purgatory in Donne’s religious imagination becomes fertile ground for a creative and distinctly Anglican reimagining of death. Donne remaps

¹ JRH Moorman, *A History of the Church of England* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1963), 233-4.

² *Ibid.*, 233.

³ Owen Chadwick, *The Spirit of the Oxford Movement: Tractarian Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8 (cited in the lecture delivered at Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, PA, 18 October 2020).

⁴ Perhaps the most famous and explicit arguments linking Donne’s death-anxiety to his earlier Catholicism come from literary critic Stephen Greenblatt and Donne biographer John Carey, though the connection appears in many essays about Donne. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 10-45. John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981).

purgatory, bringing its torments and preparatory function into the present life and infusing it with hope, as its reward of eternal salvation is assured by Reformation doctrines. This paper will explore Donne's view of death in "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness," a poem composed on his deathbed⁵ and reflecting a mature, richly imagined, and uniquely Anglican theology of death.

Purgatory in Post-Reformation England and in Donne's Religious Imagination

As mentioned above, Donne was an adult convert to Protestantism. He was raised in a Roman Catholic family of impressive lineage, his mother a direct descendant of St. Thomas More and his ancestry populated by "the foremost group of intellectuals in early sixteenth-century England, internationally famous, and devout Catholics."⁶ Following the Reformation, Roman Catholic identity calcified in an atmosphere of reactionary theology, persecution, and discrimination; thus, Donne's childhood in a prominent Catholic family would have significantly shaped his early religious identity.⁷

⁵ The date of this poem is sometimes disputed. Donne's first biographer, his friend Izaak Walton, dates it just weeks before Donne's death in 1630. Later scholars have sometimes attempted to place it alongside Donne's earlier *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* in 1623 because its setting is a sickbed, and because Donne's only other Hymn was written at this earlier date. However, I am persuaded by arguments for the later date. Walton was constantly with Donne at his deathbed, as was Henry Wotton, the man responsible for the publication of Donne's poems after his death. Wotton, like Walton, dated the poem 1630 in its posthumous publication, and it seems unlikely that Donne's deathbed companions and literary executors would have made such a mistake. Further, the tone of *Devotions* is ardently hopeful of recovery, whereas "Hymn to God, my God" has made its peace with death. Finally, "Hymn" shares language and imagery with Donne's final sermon, "Death's Duell," indisputably dated and preached just weeks prior to his death, representing a cohesiveness to his deathbed reflections. However, even if this hymn were composed in 1623, one may still view it from the lens of a deathbed poem, as Donne's *Devotions* indicate his belief that his illness would take his life. See Evelyn M. Simpson, "The Date of Donne's 'Hymne to God My God, in My Sickness,'" *The Modern Language Review* 41, no. 1 (1946), 9-15, and Izaak Walton, *The Life of Dr. John Donne (1640)*, in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Death's Duel, and The Life of Dr John Donne* (New York: Random House, 1999), 205.

⁶ Carey, 11.

⁷ This point has not been lost on his biographers, some of whom saw Donne's conversion as an insincere act of mere vocational ambition, since jobs and social status were difficult for Roman Catholics to attain. Carey is typical of this view, organizing his biography around the dual themes of Donne's apostasy and ambition. Others have taken a more nuanced view, attempting to take Donne's conversion at face value but identifying a conflicted Catholic conscience running through his works. For an overview

Purgatory was a crucial aspect of this identity, both for its centrality in Catholic practice and for its prominence in Donne's particular lineage. Donne's ancestor Sir Thomas More had famously defended the doctrine against its Reformation detractors in his *The Supplication of Souls*. There, More attempted to "prove the existence of purgatory from reason, the Fathers, and Scripture," as well as point out the necessity of purgatory for a vital connection between the living and the dead.⁸ More imagined countless tormented souls in purgatory, abandoned by the prayers of the living and horrified that "the hole world wold clene forget us."⁹

For centuries, the English conception of death had centered on purgatory. For all its abuses by the medieval church, purgatory had also served the important function of holding the living and the dead in continuity through ritual and prayer. However, such continuity was decisively severed in the Reformation. Cranmer's 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*, for example, omitted prayers for the dead from its burial liturgy. Instead, its funeral procession began with a scriptural proclamation of resurrection, an assurance that the dead were not tormented in purgatory and awaiting intercession, but were already risen with Christ.¹⁰ Further, Article XXII decisively stated:

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping, and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a

of the debate around Donne's conversion, see Ronald Huebert, "What's Wrong with Mis-devotion? A John Donne Enigma," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance Et Réforme* 41, no. 2 (2018), 97-112.

⁸ Rainer Pineas, "Thomas More's Controversy with Simon Fish." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 7, no. 1 (1967), 21.

⁹ Quoted in Ryan Hackenbracht, "Mourning the Living: Surrey's 'Wyatt Resteth Here,' Henrician Funerary Debates, and the Passing of National Virtue," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance Et Réforme* 35, no. 2 (2012), 61.

¹⁰ "The Ordre for the Buriall of the Dead," *1552 Book of Common Prayer*, Accessed at http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1552/Burial_1552.htm

fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.¹¹

Donne sided with the Reformers against purgatory and broke with his Catholic upbringing in his first publication, a 1610 polemic called *Pseudo-Martyr*: “So all discourse of Purgatorie seemes to me to bee but the *mythologie* of the Romane Church, and a morall application of pious and vseful fables.”¹² The loss of those fables, however, was felt acutely: “In the world of the 1552 book the dead were no longer with us. They could neither be spoken to nor even about, in any way that affected their well-being. The dead had gone beyond the reach of human contact, even of human prayer.”¹³

In his sympathetic portrayal of Donne’s conversion, Reid notes, “It is hard to come well out of leaving a persecuted minority to join the church of its oppressors.”¹⁴ Donne’s conversion from Catholicism and his family lineage may indeed have been hard, and may have meant that he felt the loss of purgatory more acutely than his Anglian contemporaries. His works revealed a “lifelong fixation on death and decay”¹⁵ seemingly to bridge the void left by purgatory in the Protestant imagination. On one side of this bridge is Donne’s Reformed theology, with its assurance of salvation by grace through faith and the immediacy of a post-death resurrection to glory. On the other side of this bridge is Donne’s creative remapping of purgatory. In Donne’s poetic handling,

¹¹ “The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of 1571.” *The Book of Common Prayer* (2019). Anglican Liturgy Press: 2019. Accessed at <http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/63-Articles-of-Religion.docx>.

¹² John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr* (1610), 106. Accessed at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A20647.0001.001?view=toc>

¹³ Abram Steen, “‘remembrest right’: Remembering the Dead in John Donne’s ‘Songs and Sonets.’” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance Et Réforme* 33, no. 2 (2010), 93-94.

¹⁴ David Reid, “John Donne,” *The Metaphysical Poets* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

¹⁵ Alexis Butzner, “‘I Feare thee More’: Donne’s Devotions and the Impossibility of Dying Well.” *Studies in Philology* 114, no. 2 (2017), 333.

the preparatory work of purgation no longer takes place on the other side of eternity, but on this one, in the sickbed meditations of the dying and the personal piety of the living. The connection between death and life is no longer in the ritual prayers governing purgatory, but within the individual's own soul as it vascillates between fear of death and hope of resurrection. Purgatory is no longer other-worldly, but this-worldly; it is domesticated and interiorized, much like Anglican personal piety. Donne's final sermon, preached shortly before his death, makes explicit his vision of a domesticated purgatory: "Where do these ghosts [that is, the souls awaiting purgation] reside? In a realm under the earth? In a special place set aside for purgation? No, here in this world, a world that is an enormous charnel house, where we await resurrection."¹⁶ How does this remapped purgatory appear in Donne's deathbed poem, "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness", and how does it represent an Anglican ethos?

*Donne's View of Death in "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness"*¹⁷

Since I am coming to that holy room,
Where, with thy choir of saints for evermore,
I shall be made thy music; as I come
I tune the instrument here at the door,
And what I must do then, think here before.

Whilst my physicians by their love are grown
Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie
Flat on this bed, that by them may be shown
That this is my south-west discovery,
Per fretum febris, by these straits to die,

I joy, that in these straits I see my west;
For, though their currents yield return to none,
What shall my west hurt me? As west and east

¹⁶ John Donne, "Death's Duell," in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, Death's Duel, and The Life of Dr John Donne* (New York: Random House, 1999), 171.

¹⁷ John Donne, "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness," *Poetry Foundation Online*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44114/hymn-to-god-my-god-in-my-sickness>.

In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.

Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are
The eastern riches? Is Jerusalem?
Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar,
All straits, and none but straits, are ways to them,
Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem.

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;
By these his thorns, give me his other crown;
And as to others' souls I preach'd thy word,
Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
"Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down."

Donne repeatedly engages in what Targoff calls poetic "brinksmanship,"¹⁸ traversing the very edge of death then retreating to the comforting doctrine of the resurrection. This brinksmanship holds life and death, assurance and torment, in perpetual tension evoking purgatory itself. In this way, Donne "perform[s] the sacred task previously performed by catholic ritual"¹⁹ of maintaining a vital connection between life and death. As he does, he also holds in tension the Reformed and catholic identities of his Anglican ethos.

Such tension is evident in many of Donne's works, particularly his Holy Sonnets and his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, in which he meditates on his progressing illness and fear of death with his characteristic brinksmanship and emotive, palpable tension. "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness" demonstrates a similar dynamic tension, yet its tone is more settled and less fearful than in Donne's early works,

¹⁸ Ramie Targoff, *John Donne: Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 133.

¹⁹ Steen, 95.

representing a mature theology of death by one who has spent most of his adult life wrestling with its torments. Gone is the melancholic angst and terror of a younger Donne, and present instead is a bright, even playful hope for a resurrection that evokes a sense of grand adventure.

One source of this adventurous tension is Donne's east-west imagery. Donne compares his dying body to a map, a favorite metaphor of his and one he employs often in his sickbed meditations in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.²⁰ In this poem, Donne's doctors read his map to discover a "south-west" passage by which he will surely die. Donne must travel "*per fretum febris*"; that is, "by the straits of fever" to the heat of the south and the decline of the west. Yet paradoxically, Donne rejoices at the discovery of this fatal passage: "Having by this metaphor expressed the worst, Donne, by the same metaphor begins to redeem the worst. For . . . what lies beyond the straits of their 'south-west discovery' is not annihilation but the new and unimagined world of the Pacific Ocean."²¹ Donne ponders the tension between west and east, death and resurrection, a tension ultimately resolved in paradox. For if Donne is a two-dimensional map, his westernmost and easternmost edges are actually the same place. Donne's western journey by the straits of fever is not only one of decline, but of discovery. "What shall my west hurt me? As west and east / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death doth touch the resurrection."

²⁰ As a young man, Donne participated in several sea explorations to Spain and the Azores, introducing him to the world of cartography, exploration, and navigation. Reid, 20. For map and exploration metaphors in Donne's *Devotions*, see 4, 8, 16, 19, 37, 103, 116.

²¹ Malcolm Guite, *Faith, Hope, and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 105-117. Accessed at https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2017/03/31/mapping-new-worlds-john-donne-and-the-power-of-metaphor-2/#_ftnref

Donne then calls forth similar tensions in a series of paradoxical theological images depicting the transfiguration of all his worldly torments in Christ's redemption. Each of these apparent polarities are discovered, like the edges of a map, to represent the same paradoxical reality. For example, Donne claims that "Paradise and Calvary, / Christ's cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place"; that is, the tree-origin of all human sin and suffering finds its final resolution in the same place, now transfigured into the tree-redemption of the cross of Christ. Similarly, "the first Adam's sweat" evokes the consequence of the fall in Donne's body, both the toil of work and the pain of sickness. Yet this bodily sin-sickness will find its resolution in its embrace by another bodily fluid, the "last Adam's blood," that is, the blood of Christ. Donne's suffering, represented by "these his thorns," is the means by which he receives Christ's "other crown." And in his final verse, Donne preaches his own sermon to himself, ministering to his own soul the paradoxical reality of resurrection by way of death: "that he may raise, the Lord throws down." Chadwick has noted that "in Donne, we may find some of the best Reformed theology, whether pastoral or dogmatic. There is no question of repudiating the Reformation. And yet the air is fresh."²² These verses demonstrate the fresh air of Donne's Reformed theology. Indeed, there is no question of repudiating the Reformation. Donne delivers a series of potent images of the gracious salvation of a sinner solely by the merits of Christ.

And yet these images also convey the tension of purgatory, remapped onto the terrain of a living body in a private drama of suffering and salvation. The poem's many tensions portray dying as a state of limbo, a transfiguring journey, a sort of purgation. Donne is traversing the straits between the western realm of death and the eastern

²² Chadwick, 8.

promise of eternal life; his deathbed torments are being transfigured from sweat to blood, from thorns to crown. But this remapped purgatory is thoroughly Protestant, infused with the Reformation certainty of resurrection hope. Donne is confident that all his sufferings as a descendant of the first Adam will be redeemed by the blood of the last Adam, Christ. There is no hint of uncertainty of Donne's final destination, no need of Catholic ritual to hasten or alter his journey, no delay between death and salvation; the feverish straits by which Donne must traverse death will surely bring him to life, for "death doth touch the resurrection."

Furthermore, this remapped purgatory is distinctly uniquely domestic, this-worldly, and interior, just as the English Reformation brought personal piety out of the monasteries and cathedrals and into the everyday lives of lay people through Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*. Donne imagines eternal life itself as a domestic space: "that holy room." As he awaits passage into that room, he imagines himself "here at the door," inhabiting a similarly domestic space. Donne's work on this side of the door is one of preparation for the holy room, a domesticated picture of preparation for heaven. But the preparatory imagery is not that of otherworldly batterings of the soul in some ethereal purgatory, but of the earthy task of tuning his "instrument"—that is, his life—for the moment when he "shall be made music." On this side of the door, Donne must also engage in the interior task of thought: "what I must do then, think here before." Thus in this opening stanza, the passage from death to life is as simple as passing from one room to another. Purgatory—that place of readying one's soul for eternal life—is solidly on this side of the door and remarkably ordinary, setting one's hands and one's mind toward heavenly preparations.

The domestic motif continues in the next stanza, which reveals that even the dramatic voyages and grand theological paradoxes of the poem are situated within a domestic space: Donne's sick body lying "flat on this bed." In *Devotions*, Donne meditates frequently on the flat sickbed as the location of a divine drama of death and resurrection. For example:

When God came to breathe into man the breath of life, he found him flat upon the ground; when he comes to withdraw that breath from him again, he prepares him to it by laying him flat upon his bed. . . . A sickbed is a grave . . . where I must practice my lying in the grave by lying still, and not practice my resurrection by rising anymore.²³

Here again in "Hymn," the bed is a domestic place rendered sacred. Donne lies on his bed, flat as a map to be read by his physicians, yet this map represents the paradoxical convergence of death and resurrection. Again, the location of the soul's preparation for eternity has been radically domesticated. One is no longer readied for eternity through purgatory torments, prayers, or indulgences, but through supine submission to God in one's most ordinary spaces. Anglican personal piety similarly hallowed the humble bedchamber, as the morning and evening prayers of the daily office were assumed to be prayed at bedside.²⁴ The final plea of the poem, "So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord" imagines Donne received into glory wrapped in Christ's royal purple garments; yet because of the poem's settings, these wrappings also evoke Donne's bedsheets,²⁵ transfigured.

²³ Donne, *Devotions*, 13.

²⁴ See Hester Lees-Jeffries, "'Thou Hast Made This Bed Thine Altar': John Donne's Sheets" in *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*, edited by Faini Marco and Meneghin Alessia (Boston: Brill, 2019), 277.

²⁵ In Donne's time, bedsheets often served a dual purpose as the funeral shroud of one who died in bed; Lees-Jeffries, 271. Izaak Walton tells the story of Donne commissioning an etching of him tied in his bedsheets like a funeral shroud, his "pale and dealike face . . . purposely turned toward the East." Walton, 217.

Conclusion

Donne's Catholic background had imprinted the concept of purgatory in his religious imagination. The loss of purgatory for Donne represented more than a transfer of denominational identity; it represented a discontinuity between life and death and a new anxiety about the soul's readiness for heaven. While Donne rejected the doctrine of purgatory with his Reformed contemporaries, he retained its vital functions, creatively remapping its contours into a distinctly Anglican landscape. The purgatory purpose of soul-preparation became a matter of personal suffering and domestic piety among ordinary people in domestic spaces. The purgatory continuity between the living and the dead was reimagined as the paradoxical coexistence of death and resurrection rooted in the Reformed assurance of salvation. Aspects of this remapped purgatory appear throughout Donne's many works on death, but appears in particularly mature and richly imagined form in his deathbed poem, "Hymn to God, my God, in my Sickness." There, Donne invites the reader with him as he traverses the straits of death, only to discover at journey's end the glorious paradox that "death doth touch the resurrection."

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