

Donne's Annihilation

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I

“For his art did express / A quintessence even from nothingness, / From dull privations and lean emptiness.” This is how John Donne, in his “A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day,” describes the divine power of love. Love can squeeze out of nothingness, from the leanest emptiness, a quintessence. Nothingness is a threat to material beings—they might cease altogether to exist—

enon, and state toward which our decaying bodies tend, occupied Donne

and *a-nihilo*

dom is more valuable when seen not primarily as an anti-Catholic Protestant polemic but rather as an attempt to theorize martyrdom, not reducible to confessional division, as a product of a singular self-annihilation that Donne glosses as an approximation to divine will.

II

In addition to the centripetal decay annihilation exhibits in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, annihilation can take several other meanings for Donne. It sometimes serves as a translation for the Greek *kenosis* or Latin *exinanitio* in his sermons and in *Biathanatos*. *Kenosis* occurs only once in the Bible (Philippians 2:7), despite the fact that it became central to discussions of Christology throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation. In that passage, *kenosis* names the process by which Christ empties himself of his divinity in order to become incarnate in human flesh. *Exinanitio* (from *ex-inanire*, to empty out) is the Vulgate translation of *kenosis*

poet in this sonnet labors to initiate a true re-beggetting that could lead to divination. He works to achieve total self-dispossession in order to be possessed by God.

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.

may be an activity, but it cannot be actively initiated. Instead, God must destroy the very will that could initiate such self-emptying and force that annihilation on the self that cannot free itself from sin.

Donne's demand for divine violence, in other words, fails because it wills its own destruction and does not begin with a destruction of the will itself. In this beautifully disciplined poem, the speaker still remains too much in control of his own annihilation, as it were—a problem nicely embodied by the elision of the "I" in line 1, "Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain," in which the pronunciation of the "I" must, for prosodic necessity, be suppressed at just the moment when the speaker describes the

mode as the speaker figures himself as the one who needs to be “defend[ed],” “divorce[d],” and “imprison[ed].” In the final couplet this gendered, eroticized, brutal struggle is completed, as the feminized or homoeroticized speaker closes, “for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.” The speaker wishes to be enthralled and enslaved, seized and violated, in order to become truly “free” and “chaste.” The speaker’s desire must be beaten and broken in order that it can be pasted back together, burned until the carnal sin is scorched out of it so that such intense desire can, resurrected “new,” be redirected exclusively toward God. To overcome this absence of God that the speaker feels, he demands the ultimate, overwhelming presence: ravishment. *Ravish* is likely a postclassical Latin derivation from classical Latin *rapere*, which, as Gordon Teskey has reminded us in a discussion of allegorical violence, “is a literal translation of *harpazein* in the Chaldean Oracles and in Proclus’s commentary on the *Parmenides*, where it denotes an act of violent seizing by which beings are returned to the One.” Ravishment makes the divine present within the poet and thereby unites him with divinity.

Only through this kind of sacred violence, the sonnet offers, can life be reconciled with God. This violence does not just emerge as a “strangely directionless and unmotivated energy of articulation,” as Brian Cummings has argued; Donne is articulating such violence as a way to overcome a life defined by sinful decay, a possibility that the poem ultimately presents as tentative and in need of further revision.

Donne is considering the possibility that violence may not offer the presence of God for which the speaker hoped; violence that annihilates the self, indeed, may be recuperated within a narrative of the self. The final inability of brutal self-rupturing and remaking to salve the absence of God

thus negatively images a form of self-annihilation proceeding from a “prevenient violence” (to borrow a phrase from Teskey) that would rid the self of the will and all its labors in preparation for the unexemplary experience of ravishment in devotion. Annihilation without labor, devotional passivity that can be neither communicated nor copied, is the eccentric beyond toward which the poem beautifully and disturbingly gestures. This eccentric beyond seems to promise a release from the labor of poetic making itself, from the discipline of meter, yet it is a lesson that Donne learns—and perhaps most effectively teaches—immanently through the form of this sonnet.

What we see in “Batter my heart” is a movement toward the martyrdom of ravishment. Donne’s conceptualization of self-annihilation is rooted in his understanding of grace: to have the possibility of being successful—that is, to have the possibility of true self-emptying or martyrdom—one must be released from the will, must make space in the self that is passive enough to receive God. “Batter my heart” fails to be about the experience of self-annihilation; that is its greatest success, what it reveals most intimately.

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ter my heart”: the homology between Christ’s passion and our passivity. The conceptual importance of this connection will become more apparent, but this linking of conversion to martyrdom should seem something less than surprising from the start. After all, it was something like a conversion that saved Donne, unlike most of the rest of his family, from being remembered as a Catholic martyr, a fact to which Donne himself alludes in the preface to the publication of *Pseudo-Martyr*.

In one of his last sermons preached at St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1633, Donne takes as his proof-text an isolated part of Acts 9:18: “They changed their minds, and said that he was a God” (*Sermons*, 1633: 100). The “he” referenced here is Paul, and the sermon is a meditation and celebration of Paul’s conversion, but interestingly the proof-text refers to a change (the Vulgate has *convertito*) not so much in Paul but in those he has encountered during his shipwreck on the island of Malta on his way to be tried in Rome. Donne’s sermon will circle around and ultimately focus in on the grammatical, narrative, and theological conjugation of *change*. What does it mean to change one’s mind, to convert to a new belief, a novel structure of piety?

Donne develops a complex affective and theological description of conversion and relates it to rapture and martyrdom. Early in the sermon, he describes Paul’s own conversion as follows:

Rapture and ecstasy lead to a conversion, and in that conversion Paul experiences an approximation to Christ: in the wake of conversion, one's faith is defined in part by one's ability to "conform" to Christ. This approximation means to conform to all Christ did, to suffer like him, to give up one's life. Appropriation is for Donne a condition of zeal in which the uncharitable self is annihilated and opened to suffering. "Conforming" to Christ, as *imitatio Christi*, presents a paradox, since such conforming is fundamentally antimimetic if we think of imitation as an activity. Conversion is defined by passively undergoing an approximation to Christ, yet Christ cannot be truly exemplary since no one can undergo this approximation by one's own will.

At the center of the sermon, Donne links his analysis of conversion and the appropriation of Christ with his discussion of change:

They changed, says our Text; not their mindes; there is no evidence, no appearance, that they exercised any, that they had any; but they changed their passions. Nay, they have not so much honour, as that accorded them, in the Originall; for it is not *They changed*, but *They were changed*, passively; Men subject to the transportation of passion, doe nothing of themselves, but are meere passive. ()

Picking up on the middle passive voice of the Greek verb that "they changed" translates, Donne insists that conversion itself is an experience of passivity. One does not choose to convert; change is not an active choice in which one exercises one's will freely. Donne's theory of conversion is modeled on his theory of grace as an experience of being "merely passive."

Donne's account of conversion's passivity is essential for his discussion of martyrdom. After all, we should recall that Donne's quotation from Dionysius bases our openness to being like Christ in

Shuger and Annabel Patterson, is consistent in emphasizing Donne's abiding skepticism toward martyrdom. Donne's argument in *Pseudo-Martyr*, urging English Catholics to take the Oath of Allegiance while retaining their inner loyalty to the spiritual authority of Rome, has seemed like a conservative surrender to James I, a "remarkable act of submission to the system." I argue, in contrast, that one of Donne's main purposes in these tracts, and especially in *Biathanatos*, is to outline a true form of martyrdom rather than to dismiss martyrdom altogether. Donne's critique of martyrdom is only directed against a martyrdom that does not glorify Christ exclusively: "I have a just and Christianly estimation, and reverence, of that devout and acceptable Sacrifice of our lives, for the glory of our blessed Saviour" (*Pseudo-Martyr*,). In Donne's estimation, undergoing martyrdom because of a longing to obey the authority of the church or to follow an exemplary model cannot but turn into a false form of sacrifice. This is not to say that Donne thinks that an unexemplary martyrdom free of willing is necessarily in conflict with or disconnected from questions of political efficacy or fidelity to community. It is a claim that only asserts the annihilation of the individual will as a prerequisite for true martyrdom. It proposes that martyrdom itself cannot be a political action that a free individual willfully plans and executes. In Donne's reading, Catholic martyrdom is sullied by a pope who "serves his own ambitions to your destruction" (); it thus only amounts to a state-sponsored death. Institutionalized martyrdom, proposed as exemplary political intervention, serves merely to create a position of passivity to the state, not the true passivity by which God may destroy the will and the self can be approximated to the divine. Donne is unconcerned to describe this productive martyrdom as Protestant, even if its outline becomes visible through a critic of contemporary Catholic practice.

Biathanatos was published only after Donne's death, and against his purported wishes; in its first printed edition from 1633, it was dedicated to Philip Herbert, whom Nigel Smith has described as "the decidedly mystical Earl of Pembroke, patron of various brands of radical Puritanism." It was not a text that Donne, when closest to James I, would have wanted the world to see, and the fact that it was dedicated to a radical Puritan mystic in its first printing is just one sign of why it might have disturbed the Anglican establishment. But there is also a disturbing philosophical and political problem at the core of these considerations that Donne's writings never fully resolve: how we can consider an experience of passivity as initiation for an action in acts of martyrdom? How can we even describe the sacrifice of martyrdom or

the violence of religious zealotry without using the language of will, choice, and action?

In *Biathanatos*, Donne seeks to awaken “charity” in interpreting the sacrifices of martyrdom. He argues that “self-

the proper inspiration to “give up his soul before he was constrained to do so,” and all who imitate this action of unconstrained self-sacrifice “imitate this act of our Saviour” (). “Giving up his soul”—giving up his will and releasing himself into God’s—initiates martyrdom in Donne’s thinking, and any “constraining,” whether by labors of the will, by desires for mimetic similarity, or by an institution like state or church, ruins the real, passive imitation of Christ’s self-sacrifice. This is the reason, *pace* Brad Gregory’s work on early modern martyrdom, that martyrdom in Donne cannot be *exemplary*: it requires a form of passivity that any model of martyrdom based on the idea of intentional imitation of an action cannot capture. Gregory argues that “the extremism of martyrdom should be understood not as a fanaticism of the fringe, but as exemplary action.” This analysis, however, does not account for Donne’s model. We should instead think of true, charitable martyrdom in Donne as a fanaticism that seeks an unexemplary passivity so extreme it requires a violence that one cannot seek out, work toward, or advocate.

Donne analyzes many biblical examples to illustrate the paradox of martyrs who are types of Christ but not examples to be followed. For example, “the passive action of Eleazar,” Donne notes with reference to the martyr of Maccabees : who opened his mouth and said, I will not forsake the law of my fathers: therefore he was killed in the furnace of fire: and he was rewarded with a kingdom for evermore. (1 Maccabees 2:61-62)

annihilation—that renders the initiation of the act of martyrdom a form of passive openness.

In his final sermon, “Deaths Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body,” a sermon that some have called Donne’s own self-elegy, he pauses to reflect again on Samson in this context:

Still pray we for a peaceable life against violent death, and for time of repentance against sudden death, and for sober and modest assurance against distempered and discontent death, but never make ill conclusions upon persons overtaken with such deaths; *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis*, to God the Lord belong the issues of death. And he received Samson, who went out of this world in such a manner (consider it actively, consider it passively in his own death, and in those whom he slew with himself) as was subject to interpretatione l

must never forget that Samson cannot be exemplary; his martyrdom, if it is true, must be considered in its passive singularity. The only way out of this aporia is to be like Paul in Donne's description, to be released from the labor

mutas, mutare in Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae*, 4th ed. (London, 1796), where “exchange” and “batter” are used as synonyms. And see the early 17th-century entry for *clinch* in Henry Mainwaring, *Nomenclator Navalis*, published as *The Seaman’s Dictionary* in *The Life and Works of Sir Henry Mainwaring*, ed. George Ernest Manwaring and William Gordon Perrin, 2 vols. (London: Naval Records Society, 1903–1904), 1: 100: “To Clinch is to batter or rivet a bolt’s end upon a ring, or turn back the end of any nail so as to make it fast at the end which is driven through; we also call that part of the cable which is seized about the ring of the anchor the clinch of the cable.”

Targo comments that Donne confronts in this sonnet the self-annihilation that he so feared throughout much of his earlier poetry and prose, and she canvases some of the different meanings that *nothing* takes on in Donne’s prose (*John Donne, Body and Soul*, 1996, 100). Though I find Targo’s reading of this sonnet very helpful, I disagree that there is no desire for annihilation in “Batter my heart”; the poem’s intense fascination with divine violence exceeds a desire for “the repair of what already exists” (100).

Compare Stanley Fish’s claim that Herbert’s poems “become the vehicle of their own abandonment” when we recognize that Christ is the substance of all things and the performer of all actions; *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 100–101.

For the history of critical interpretations of this moment as heterosexual or homosexual sexual violence, see Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 100–101.

Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 100–101. Teskey cites Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), 100 n. and 101 nn. and as the origin of this analysis of *rapere* in *In Parmenidem*, bk. 1, col. 1, line 1, in Proclus, *Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita*, ed. Victor Cousin, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1864).

Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 100. I agree with Cummings’s insightful evaluation that “the violence [in “Batter my heart”] is over-determined, as if in compensation for the marked absence of the violent intervention of grace.”

See Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 100.

