

# RHETORICAL OR EXISTENTIAL: A DECONSTRUCTIVE READING OF THE QUESTIONABLE QUESTIONS IN JOHN DONNE'S HOLY SONNETS

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## 摘 要

本論文嘗試結合解構主義文學批評理論、存在主義有神論觀點以及語言哲學，以細讀強登（JOHN DONNE）的數首宗教詩作，剖析其語言修辭所透露的信仰訊息及其匱缺，兼而探討宗教語言的修辭特色與「非修辭」特性。本文首章闡明所持解構主義立場；次章建立閱讀策略；第三、四、五章分別細讀強登的三首宗教十四行詩，指出其修辭隱指之信仰矛盾處及其不安之源，並披露語言在面對信仰時之不足；第六章自其它詩人之宗教詩作回觀強登詩中所面對的修辭困境；第七章再度重新檢視宗教詩普遍所受的侷限與語言／信仰困境；第八章自詩人的其它作品中謀求解決之道，並融通第二章所建立之閱讀策略；終章除回應首章外，並自行坦承本文之「自我解構」處以為附筆，以忠實地呈現作者在研究本文主題時在語言與信仰方面之所獲。

## I

### A Deconstructive Perspective

A few words should be given for the stance or convictions that I have concerning literary criticism before I proceed to the methodology as regards the subject in question. For I feel obliged to point out that, as an end-of-the-20th-century Chinese reader of British literary work, I am inevitably exposed to the cultural milieu I am in, bound by time and space, where the imposition of the prevalent scholarship and also my personal literary inclination and intellectual disposition combine to form the posture I assume in reading a text alien to me in every aspect. I cannot deny or

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bypass those "backgrounding" determinants which "foreground" themselves when the reading activity is on. Honesty, one of the foremost deconstructive virtues, is observed even if it ineluctably exposes the Achilles' heel and incurs attack.

Yet the theory of "perpetual demystification of the illusion of fullness"<sup>1</sup> applies not only to the text at the hand of the critic but also to the critic's interpretation, which in turn forms a discourse never being able to have the claim to the monopoly of the interpretative task. The deconstructive critics have already seen to it that no unity, no coherence, and no stability exist in any literary writing. Even the expectation for those things becomes an error or irony in itself. The word "skepticism" always denotes a chain of negative associations: disruption, usurpation, overthrow, etc. But the negatives also imply presence of the positives. A multi-dimensional space, which rejects the hegemony of any single reading, is opened. In other words, under the deconstructive premise that any reading is a misreading, any reading distinctively contributes to the variety and complexity elucidated from, or disseminated by, the literary text.<sup>2</sup>

In the introduction to *Post-Structuralist Reading of English Poetry*, Richard Machin and Christopher Norris distinguished between two kinds of intention for the act of interpretation: the intention of the interpreter when constructing text, and the intention that is produced from within the structure of language, once its grammatical system gets under way.<sup>3</sup> The supremacy of the first over the second leads to deplorable subjectivism, a converse intentional fallacy on the part of the reader; while dominance of the second cannot but be seized by the consciousness of the first. It may not be necessary to overemphasize the intrusion of the reader's cognition in interpretation, but undoubtedly reading is anything but passive transliteration or reflection.<sup>4</sup> For one thing, a faithful, unrefracting reflection is close to impossible. The "I" who is reading has every moment to exert its identity; the innermost self that reaches out to grasp with a chain of intellectual presuppositions, literary expectations, and schematised views has its projection on the object of contemplation, meeting with the "otherness" in the world of the work read. Therefore a biographical interpretation can become

<sup>1</sup> That a text is never self-sufficient or self-present, never in itself a totalization of meaning or a concealment/unconcealment of a unitary sense is one essential concept of the deconstructionists. See respectively Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) 87-122; and Eugene Goodheart, *The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984) 7-15 for summarizing remarks.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Felperin, *Beyond Deconstruction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 200-23.

<sup>3</sup> *Post-Structuralist Reading of English Poetry*, eds. Richard Machin and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987) 7.

<sup>4</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness & Insight*, 2nd ed (London: Methuen & Co., 1983) 102-10.

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presumptuous and misleading. Of course, nothing is short of importance in understanding a text; the biographical, bibliographical, and textual information all help in one way or another. Yet they are not, and should not be, the only formulas for "opening" the text.

Deconstructively, a pre-opened text is "nothing." To quote J. Hillis Miller, "reading is ... the importation of meaning into a text which has no meaning 'in itself.'"<sup>5</sup> Therefore explication is only "a retracing to the non-origin."<sup>6</sup> The concept of "non-origin" connotes the denial of an independent, autonomous existence of the text, while on the other hand it brings into focus the irreconcilability and undecidability of innumerable alternative meanings as a result of the reading act. The rupture that deconstructive criticism tears up unbolts the sealed and protected magic box, releasing all the possibilities, including hope. I would rather cherish that hope as a tribute to the potentiality of the literary text. Since no fixed, predetermined signification is located within the work, and no interpretation is not somehow creative in terms of the reader's responsive understanding and dynamic participation, the reader is psychologically relieved of the problem of qualifications while he at the same time retrieves the right to a free interchanging with the text.

But the freedom doesn't exclude the so-called objective faithfulness to the "otherness" of the text. The critic cannot by any means get outside of the text, or neatly exercise the power of the text on his mind.<sup>7</sup> Reading is interchanging, a dialogue between the text and the reader, between the intertextuality of the experiencing subject in the text and the intruding, subjective reading "I." While the subjective reading "I" tries to coincide with or reproduce the speaking "I," the interchanging becomes hierarchical, discriminatory, and reductive. This, Barbara Johnson, following Roland Barthes, denominated as "the readerly," which is "constrained by considerations of representation: it is irreversible, 'natural,' decidable, continuous, totalizable, and unified into a coherent whole based on the signified." Johnson, like the other deconstructionists, valorized "the writerly," which is

infinitely plural and open to the free play of signifiers and of difference.

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<sup>5</sup> "Tradition and Difference," *Diacritics* 2 Winter 1972: 8-12.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 313-15. See also Derrida's famous article "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 278-82.

<sup>7</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure, II," *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert Con Davis (New York & London: Longman, 1986) 416-17.

unconstrained by representative considerations, and transgressive of any desire for decidable, unified, totalized meaning.<sup>8</sup>

But the writerly is not solipsistic. It can't be. Rather it points to an invigorating, dynamic relation between the text and the reading mind.<sup>9</sup> The reader's travail is not to recover one lost consciousness through re-formation, and the text is never looked upon as a mechanistic totality, each gadget and wire path subscribing to an autotelic function. Rather the analytical reading tries to "fragment" the seemingly balanced wholeness, "carefully teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text itself."<sup>10</sup> Notice that the "warring forces" are already within the text itself, not imposed or imported ad hoc.<sup>11</sup> The deconstructive reading is a reading out of the differences within the text, between what the text means, what it says, and what it does, and how. Rhetorical maneuvering and diplomatic sleight of hand might be employed in the dialogue, but the purpose ranges from questioning a closed attitude toward reading, attacking the self-complacent primacy of the established literary canon, to a democratic emancipation of multiple visions and proliferation of meanings — the greatest homage a reader can pay to a literary work. Thus the dialogue is only apparently pranksterly, destructive; it is in fact most solemn and constructive.<sup>12</sup>

Yet a dialogue itself assumes differences, marking the distance between the reader and the lurking, indefinable speaking subject. The hostility built over the space ignites anxiety on the part of the reader, who endeavors to approach the source of his critical

<sup>8</sup> "The Critical Difference: BartheS/BalZac," *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 441. See also Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 292.

<sup>9</sup> "Inertia needs unity (monism); plurality of interpretations a sign of strength," noted Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968) 326.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 441.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 158: "Reading . . . cannot legitimately transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to the word, outside of writing in general . . . There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside-text]."

<sup>12</sup> "It is a paralysis of thought in the face of what cannot be thought rationally: analysis, paralysis; solution, dissolution; composition, decomposition; construction, deconstruction; mantling, dismantling; canny, uncanny; competence, incompetence; apocalyptic, anacalyptic; constituting, deconstituting. Deconstructive criticism moves back and forth between the poles of these pairs, proving in its own activity, for example, that there is no deconstruction which is not at the same time constructive, affirmative," noted J. Hillis Miller in "The Critic as Host," *Deconstruction & Criticism*, by Harold Bloom et al. (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979) 251.

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energy with fastidious vigilance of resistance.<sup>13</sup> The result of such a deconstructive sensibility is reactive to, thus shadowed by, the kind of reading condemned by deconstructionists, for it cannot but choose to be different, to excavate the different, to pinpoint all the differences within the trajectory of its rhetorical strategies, and interweave them through reductive generalization. In order to be objectively open, it questions more than asserts, but then to question presupposes another type of assertion, assertion of ambivalence and disruptability of that ambivalence which slyly hides itself in the sleight of hand. Thus no reading is complete, impartial, short of prejudices -- including the reading which claims to be only questioning and unbolting. Though it may be too far to say that what we read is already in us, there is certainly a sort of "floating subjectivity": the writing "I" interchanges with the writerly "I" while the latter finds every temptation and every chance to replace the first and become the host.<sup>14</sup>

Here we meet with the discrepancies between theory and praxis. Insight and blindness are often existent side by side, even synchronically. Derrida's commentary on Rousseau, Roland Barthes' reading of Balzac, to name only a few, all revealed the interaction between critical blindness and critical insight: what is done contradicts what is meant, meaning turning back at the assertion.<sup>15</sup> For the immanence of language, the critic's interpretation never touches down; it's like the passing of the referent-signified ball from one series of signifiers to another. Hence the "saying of language" is

bound to an irrecuperable, unrepresentable past, temporalizing according to a time with separate epochs, in a diachrony. An analysis that starts with proximity, irreducible to consciousness of . . . and describable, if possible, as an inversion of its intentionality, will recognize this responsibility to be a substitution.<sup>16</sup>

Interpretations, in other words, are substitutions for what is never present; they are signs of signs.<sup>17</sup> Like the literary text interpreted, the critic's text also distinguishes itself by its specific mode of temporal and spatial existence, is governed by its intrinsic semiotic and syntactic patterns and logic, and carries with it certain degrees of

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," *Deconstruction and Criticism* 14-21.

<sup>14</sup> J. Hillis Miller in *Deconstruction & Criticism* 223-26.

<sup>15</sup> See De Man, *Blindness & Insight* 110-41 and Johnson in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 442-46.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968) 47.

<sup>17</sup> See also Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 289.

ambivalence and ambiguity which characterize the figurative nature of language. When the critic draws out the "warring forces" from the non-critical literary text, he simultaneously "turns the weapon of his language upon himself, in the mistaken belief that it is aimed at another" (De Man 110). The meandering of his tactics is irreversibly blindfolded to their own perceptive deficiencies, and finally language gets knotted in ambiguity and irony.

Yet it would be a loss to take the self-defeating critical text as futile or a mere error. The critical text is significant both in its interpenetrating relation with the literary text and in its own right as a literary artifact (discourse) and cultural phenomenon. While what we call the original is lost in the labyrinth of language (while we consider the guiding/elusive and revealing/delusive character of labyrinth), the efforts of subsequent tracings and traces place themselves in divergent relationships with the text, sparking off more introspective interchanging and colloquy between "I," "Thou," and "It," which amount to a freeplay that is supposed to be oriented toward a destination, but is in fact a progressing and expanding while each trace/substitution is irrevocably vitiated by an alien consciousness and so deviates. Each critical reading reads the intertextuality of the text and reads its own intertextuality within society and history. Thus each critical reading is metacritical and finally self-critical, exposing at first the inadequacy of and contradictions in the preceding readings (including the text's reading of itself),<sup>18</sup> then illustrating in a new reading a substitutive inadequacy and self-contradictions. The "inadequacy" results from an anachronistic intersection of different idiologemes — a historical, social, and political productivity of their times. Therefore what may seem to be deviation has bearing on the cultural dimension and weighs not only as a work of aesthetic "bricoleur"<sup>19</sup> but also as a valuable cultural utterance with anthropological interest. It should never be dismissed no matter how incongruous it may be with the "dominant" trends of readings.

With such a deconstructive perspective I approach my subject with scholastic caution and liberated competence. By "liberated" I mean the freedom I find when the bondage of traditional critical canons is left; when the critical text is no longer deemed parasitic to the non-critical literary text, thereupon finding itself enslaved

<sup>18</sup> "Any literary text, with more or less explicitness or clarity, already reads or misreads itself. The 'deconstruction' which the text performs on itself and which the critic repeats is not of the superstructure of the work but of the ground on which it stands," noted J. Hillis Miller in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 418.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 285: "If one calls the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur."

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by the ambition to concur with its center of reference;<sup>20</sup> and when the necessity of difference is acknowledged and appreciated.<sup>21</sup> Of course no excuse is expected for any turmoil resulting from the incompetence to handle or to take advantage of this freedom for the most illuminating and stimulating freeplay and intersection of idiologemes and epistèmès. What is to be expected rather is an honest demonstration of the context — the changing circumstances in which the literary work is read — of the text and of the new significance elicited from the inner disputables of the text.

## II Strategies Built

The strategies I use in this enterprise are conspicuously deconstructive. Different sets of opposites act as a double-edged scalpel to cut into the texture of the poems, subverting the apparent equanimity built on vulnerable rhetoric, and revealing the nakedness of a subject who is too aware of its nakedness in facing God. But the antithetical duos are tentative expedients, whose connotative meanings unfold deliberately during the process of debunking only to arrive at a zone of aporia, where the denotative boundaries of terms are delimited in dynamic and fluid relations. Words have meaning only when related with other words, and the relation, considering the infinite numbers of sign-substitutions, can never be a fixed, decisive one.<sup>22</sup> Thus the tools while operating as keys to open the text demonstrate their own limits, reflect on themselves, and then form ironies. The arguments they forward inevitably put into question their own premises and their own consistency. But they are functional. The process is the end in itself. The pleasure of watching a ballgame can't be replaced in any way by knowledge of the final score.<sup>23</sup> Here I propose no final score of course.

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<sup>20</sup> That critical writing is an invaluable happening in-and-of-itself — not a secondary phenomenon or mere instrument for communicating the already determined and validated Values is another central concept in deconstructive criticism. See Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* 167.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester P. 1982) 10-12.

<sup>22</sup> "Neither author nor critic can ultimately control the free play of signifiers in disseminating reference. No one escapes the chains of figurality, the flights of signifiers, and the network of differences in a writing," observed Leitch in *Deconstructive Criticism* 58.

<sup>23</sup> In *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) 63, Roland Barthes distinguished between four types of pleasure seekers who take their pleasures from reading in different ways and with different styles. Again to quote from

The first antithetical pair I employ is colloquy versus monologue, and closely related to it is the second pair — rhetorical questions versus existential questions. In her 1978 edition of the divine poems of Donne,<sup>24</sup> Helen Gardner appended to the Holy Sonnets printed in 1633 and those added in 1635 a subtitle: *Divine Meditations*,<sup>25</sup> and traced the structural origin of these poems to the tradition of meditation as systematized in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius Loyola in his book *Exercitia Spiritualia* (Gardner 1-liv). Gardner's contention has been argued over and controverted by Stanley Archer and Douglas L. Peterson respectively.<sup>26</sup> The problems involved in this connection are beyond my present concern. What engages my attention here is the last stage in the meditation of the Ignatian pattern — colloquy. Gardner quoted St. Ignatius on colloquy on sins:

Imagining Christ our Lord present before me on the Cross, to make a colloquy with Him, asking Him how it is that being the Creator, He has come to make Himself man, and from eternal life has come to temporal death, and in this manner to die for my sins. Again, reflecting on myself, to ask what have I done for Christ, what am I doing for Christ, what ought I to do for Christ. Then beholding Him in such a condition, and thus hanging upon the Cross, to make the reflections which may present themselves.

(Gardner liii)

The above quotation is, strictly speaking, not a colloquy. The term "colloquy" comes from the Latin "colloquium," whose verb is "colloqui," consisting of "col" and "loqui." "Col" means "together," and "loqui" means "speak, talk." Therefore "colloqui" denotes "converse with," and the noun "colloquium" means "a speaking together," a dialogue or conversation, which involves the exchangeability of the roles of an interlocutor and his audience, an outpouring and a response, questioning and replying, a bilateral communication.

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Leitch, "Critical readings are extravagant acts of fantasy abetted by seductive displacements, substitutions, and differences. None of this is a matter of choice, but of pleasure" (59).

<sup>24</sup> *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon P).

<sup>25</sup> This title has appeared in some of the manuscripts of Donne's poems. There is no way to find out whether they were given by Donne himself or by the transcribers. For the relation between these manuscripts and the later editions, see *John Donne: The Divine Poems* lvii-xcvi.

<sup>26</sup> See Archer, "Meditation and the Structure of Donne's 'Holy Sonnets,'" *English Literary History* XXVIII (June, 1961): 137-47; and Peterson, "John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and the Anglican Doctrine of Contrition," *Studies in Philology* 56 (1959): 504-18.



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Yet the Ignatian contemplation presents the role of an interlocutor only; there is the asking, but no apparent responding. Perhaps the last phrase "to make the reflections which may present themselves" offers a clue to the bilateral correspondence. Then the questions are not "real" questions; they are rhetorical questions, because the interrogator is himself the responder. His questions do not rise out of inner uncertainty and doubt, poured out for satisfaction of an impulse to unravel puzzles and obliterate knots of blindness, and proposed to one who may voice a reply. But those questions are just a rhetorical strategy phrased in the form of questions; their answers have in fact already existed in the mind of the interlocutor, either projected in questions themselves — the structure, diction, arrangement of words, and position in the context — which implicitly or explicitly point to the inevitability and certitude of an answer, or disseminated throughout the whole text, adding emotive impact to points of concentration.

When the poet-lover asks, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"<sup>27</sup> he is confident of the answer, though it is more than a single affirmation or negation. When the poet-prophet pronounces, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"<sup>28</sup> the question in fact becomes a summarizing climax built on the groundwork of all the preceding lines. And when the jealous husband in Browning's dramatic monologue expresses his courtesy, "Will't please you sit and look at her?"<sup>29</sup> it contributes to the picturing of the behavioral complacency matched with the psychological complacency of the speaker. Rhetorical questions are often opinion-oriented and emotion-packed. But of course being emotion-packed is the characteristic of not only rhetorical questions.

Existential questions, on the other hand, bring into focus one's concern for his existence: "Why do I exist?" "How do I exist in the jungle of torturing doubts and confusion, despair and intermittent hope?" with their alterations: "How can I have knowledge of God's overall purpose and His final salvation?" "Is death the end?" Existential questions arise from the inmost depth of being, squeezed from a sense of the finitude of the world and the dreary impasse of anxiety and desperation, and thrown to the Other who is deemed alienated and indifferent. Faith-shattering and faith-usurping as they are, these ultimate questions of life indicate a problematic, disharmonious personal relation with God, which puts in jeopardy the foundations

<sup>27</sup> It's the famous first line of Shakespeare's Sonnet XVIII.

<sup>28</sup> The last line of Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," *The Complete Works of Percy Pyshe Shelley*, ed. Rogar Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols. (New York: Gordian P, 1965) 2: 297

<sup>29</sup> "My Last Duchess," *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, ed. Roma A. King, Jr., 4 vols. (Athens: Ohio UP, 1971) 3:201.

of being, decenters the center of existence, and corrodes the meaning of life. In many cases the existential questions appear as obvious rhetorical strategies, and we see how the questions-raiser endeavor to make them as such while trekking through struggles and conflicts to come to an unconcluding conclusion which only reveals the undercurrent of despair and oppressiveness of pain. Yelling from the depth of the soul may be camouflaged as a passionate love murmur, yet the void which sends the echo back to its own sense of nothing can't be mistaken as a sign of affirmation.

Thus is formed the second double-edged reading scalpel: rhetorical/existential questions. But to pit against rhetorical questions, I limit the discussion of existential questions to those couched in the form of questions and examine the never-rigid relation between these two types of questions in the context of my reading of a few of Donne's most "disputable" holy sonnets. But the first dialectical pair is not to be left uncompleted. Monologue is talking alone, with no one present to make any response, as contrasted with colloquy. Put simply, when one hurls questions to the Infinite, then presumes to answer the questions by himself with reasoning and logical thinking, but he at the same time can't escape from the awareness of the inadequacy of the answering since there is no way to imitate the reply given by God, his questions are doomed to be existential. For he makes a monologue, talking to himself, asking and replying by himself, excluding the voice of God. Consequently the monologue, instead of resolving any doubt, leaves the speaker in quandary and fear, while in the colloquy one talks to/with God, his questions are answered, and for the whole poem the questions are just a rhetorical strategy serving to advance the pilgrim's progress. In other words, colloquy results in rhetorical questions while monologue results in existential questions. The strategies are thus built.

But how can we be sure that "the reflections which may present themselves" are or are not effects of divine actions? Does God answer to our doubts? It's the prayer's personal problem born by his personal witness. It's also a philosophical dilemma explored over centuries and still being argued. For our present concern, it is made into an interesting literary subject orienting the interpretation of some of Donne's divine poems. Namely, when the questions appear in Donne's devotional poems, is the speaker really asking and expecting answering? Are the questions the ultimate, unresolvable questions of life, the what-we-call existential questions, or are the questions the rhetorical tactics charged with religious emotions as illustrated in the above quotation from Ignatius? What is the relation between the two kinds of questions? Can language itself speak for the relation? Can we draw out anything from the rhetoric of the poems to illuminate the conclusion that the colloquy has happened or has never happened? Exploration into the above questions is the enterprise to be met in this paper.

### III

#### Presence and Absence of God

As due by many titles I resigne  
My selfe to thee, O God, first I was made  
By thee, and for thee, and when I was decay'd  
Thy blood bought that, the which before was thine,  
I am thy sonne, made with thy selfe to shine, 5  
Thy servant, whose paines thou hast still repaid,  
Thy sheepe, thine Image, and till I betray'd  
My selfe, a temple of thy Spirit divine;  
Why doth the devill then usurpe in mee?  
Why doth he steale, nay ravish that's thy right? 10  
Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,  
Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see  
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me  
And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.

(Gardner 6)<sup>30</sup>

The octave of this poem begins with "many titles" — authority of the Bible, and then proceeds to illustrate the speaker's biblical understanding of his relation with God: he was created, redeemed, sanctified by God; he is God's son, servant, sheep, image, and abode of the Holy Spirit. But in this understanding of "historical truth"<sup>31</sup> a gloomy sense of loss and frustration glimmers in the past verb tense of "the which before was thine" (line 4) and strengthens itself in the self-reproach: "till I betray'd / My selfe" (6). The self-reproach is soon cut short when the poem plunges into the two questions in the sestet: "Why doth the devill then usurpe in mee?" "Why doth he steale, nay ravish that's thy right?"

The static substantives in the octave are attacked by the aggressive verbs ("usurpe," "steale," "ravish") in the two questions, which carry with them a syntactic straightforwardness, tonal abruptness, and attitudinal audacity. These two

<sup>30</sup> All citations of Donne's divine poems are taken from Gardner's second (1978) edition.

<sup>31</sup> "A believer's relation to these narratives [in the Gospels] is neither the relation to historical truth (probability), nor yet that to a theory consisting of 'truths of reason,'" noted Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G. H. Von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 32e.

questions prove that the speaker who appropriates the scriptural figures cannot genuinely enter into the divine-human relationship as symbolized by those terms. Thus the "I" in the first six lines is the historical mankind as recorded in the Canon. The self-assertiveness of line 5 to line 7 exposes the urgency of the speaker's expectation for salvation while he is aware of the discrepancy between his scriptural knowledge and his (not mankind's) personal experiences defiled by his frailty. "My selfe" (8) splits from mankind; the remission of sins in "when I was decay'd / Thy blood bought that" cannot alleviate the black transgression of "My selfe." This is made plainer in line 11: "That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me." The antithetical last two lines become the cause of despair in line 12: "Oh I shall soone despaire."

Then what about the two questions in lines 9 and 10? The self-assertiveness in the first part of the octave and the incidental confession of self-betrayal in the second part make the two questions epilexis — questions as rebuke: firstly, since I am "by title" "thy sonne," why do you let the devil "ravish that's thy right?" and secondly, since "I betray'd / My selfe," so I suffer "the devill then usurpe in mee." The first implicit rebuke is directed toward God, and the second toward himself. The speaker is torn between protest and self-reproach. Furthermore, his anguish is accompanied by a sense of impotence: the active voice of "betray'd" in line 7 is replaced by his passivity to the devil in lines 9 and 10. Yet the expectations with which the poem begins still buttress the speaker, as shown in line 11 when he reckons on divine intervention. However, line 11 — "Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight" — is just a conditional presupposition, and the wish it carries is soon overshadowed by the next conditional presupposition which closes the poem:

Oh I shall soone despaire, when I doe see  
That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not chuse me,  
And Satan hates mee, yet is loth to lose mee.

Therefore this poem ends in an unresolved mix of diffidence, discontent, and despair. The first question amounts to: Why do you allow the devil to usurp in me? And the second question can be understood as: Why do you allow him to steal, nay ravish that which is your right? They carry much more than the emotional impact of rhetorical questions. They are real existential questions. "I shall soone despaire," because for the last two apparently oppositional, yet semantically similar clauses (lines 13, 14), the "I" cannot make out any "due," legalized answer. Existentially speaking, when one seeks to cite the authorities, and relies solely on reason and logic to deliberate conditions, he cannot

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release himself from his spiritual dilemma.<sup>32</sup> Faith needs something else. And this "something" is exactly what the poem subverts autonomously: "I resigne / Myself to thee" (1-2).<sup>33</sup>

Therefore this poem is a monologue. The "Thou" in the poem is externalized to the speaking subject; He is taken as an "It," on whom one can make objective reflections. Just as Kierkegaard observed:

The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing. Away from the subject the objective way of reflection leads to the objective truth, ... to abstract thought, to mathematics, to historical knowledge of different kinds; and always it leads away from the subject, ... If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe....<sup>34</sup>

When one externalizes himself to God, and prays to God as a conceptualized object, he fails to have an immediate, direct experience of God as personal, and he fails to enter a real personal encounter with Thou. But the subjectivity required for a living experience of God paradoxically results from one's emancipation from his ego. The self that one "could not earn for himself, he first receives — in its eternal and absolute validity — when he abandons it to God,"<sup>35</sup> and the act of faith is exactly the lived experience that the center of one's life is not in him.<sup>36</sup> Therefore the subjective reflections or the "inwardness" is when we resign our life unto Him as He personally lives it from within and becomes the ground of our being. The speaker in the above poem is lonely and hopeless, because God is "absent" when he tries to encompass God within stationary concepts and formulas and takes God as a Scriptural and theological entity only. His questions give vent to the most bitter existential protest to the nihilistic void in his own soul. Never can he answer his own questions.

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<sup>32</sup> "The Reason has brought God as near as possible, and yet he is as far away as ever," noted Søren Kierkegaard in *Philosophical Fragments or A Fragment of Philosophy*, trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1936) 36.

<sup>33</sup> "... for I / Except you'enthral mee, never shall be free" ("Batter my heart," Gardner 11).

<sup>34</sup> *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941) 178.

<sup>35</sup> Louis H. Mackey, "Søren Kierkegaard: The Poetry of Inwardness," *Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. George Alfred Schrader, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967) 79.

<sup>36</sup> Clyde Pax, *An Existential Approach to God: A Study of Gabriel Marcel* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972) 61.

Accordingly the meditation of this poem is braked at the structural completion of the sonnet, at its metric and rhythmic equilibrium, and at the culmination of a conflicting tension, at what Charles I. Glicksberg called achievements of “creative expression” — the poetical and aesthetic accomplishments, which ironically arise “out of the crisis of negation in the dark night of the soul,”<sup>37</sup> at the expense of a saving faith.

#### IV

#### Determinacy and Indeterminacy of God’s Retribution

If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree,  
Whose fruit threw death on else immortall us,  
If lecherous goats, if serpents envious  
Cannot be damn’d; Alas; why should I bee?  
Why should intent or reason, borne in mee, 5  
Make sinnes, else equall, in mee, more heinous?  
And mercy being easie, ’and glorious  
To God, in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee?  
But who am I, that dare dispute with thee?  
O God, Oh! of thine onely worthy blood, 10  
And my teares, make a heavenly Lethean flood,  
And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie.  
That thou remember them, some claime as debt,  
I thinke it mercy, if thou wilt forget.

(Gardner 8)

The three questions in the poem tailgate each other, reminding us of the despairing urgency of the first poem. The first question is based on an analogy — minerals, plant, animals — then tumbles out the speaker’s indignant perplexity with the exclamation “Alas.” The second question is related to the first one for the historical causality of “reason” and “tree,” “serpents.”<sup>38</sup> The third question points to the origin — “God.”

These three questions include in themselves respectively an antonymic pair and

<sup>37</sup> *Literature and Religion: A Study in Conflict* (Dallas: Southern Methodist UP, 1960) 81.

<sup>38</sup> It is written in Genesis 2:8-3:24 that Adam and Eve were expelled out of Eden by God for they were seduced by the serpent and ate of the fruit of the tree which opened their eyes and gave them knowledge of good and evil.

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contradictory elements which formulate a dialectical process: the beatitude of minerals, plant, and animals and the damnation of man; the equal sins and the more heinous sins; a merciful, glorious God and a wrathful, threatening God. The problem is: Why? Why injustice? These three existential predicaments may nudge one to the blind alley of life with no escape. But then with the appearance of an epilexis — “But who am I, that dare dispute with thee?” (9) — the three protesting interrogations are miraculously transformed into three rhetorical subordinates: they are “disputations,” instances of sacrilegious boldness. Therefore line 9 presents a rhetorical question, for the question explicitly intimates a forcible negative answer: I am worthless; I have no right to dispute with you. It's in addition functional: by destroying the ontological qualifications of these questions, it indirectly dissolves them.

The speaker of this poem begins with rationalistic dialectics, defending his rights with logic and self-righteousness, then moves to the self-negating humility and submission. He progresses from externalizing God, taking God as a third-person absentee (“his” and “hee” in line 8) to converting to God, facing God as a second-person “thee” (9). A momentous spiritual progress has been made. What is left to be done is repentance (“my teares”) and praying for redemption (“thine onely worthy blood”). And the greatest mercy expected is oblivion: “Lethean flood” (11).

But can the self-rebuke in line 9 really silence the soul's clamor and dissipate the triad objection in the first eight lines? Unfortunately the “black memorie” of line 12 has a double signification: it can be read as “your memory of my black sins” and also “my black memory of my black sins.” The polluted memory is projected onto the last two lines:

That thou remember them, some claime as debt,  
I thinke it mercy, if thou wilt forget.

These two lines has caused some disagreements among critics. In her commentary on the poems, Helen Gardner referred to one of Donne's sermons which quoted David standing in fear of God, entreating that God remember his sins in order to pardon them (69). Barbara K. Lewalski also cited the above sermon by Donne, but she added a passage from Psalm 25:7 where David asked God to forgive his sins, but remember him.<sup>39</sup> Therefore the “them” in line 13 was interpreted by Gardner as sins, whereas Lewalski interpreted it as the pronoun of “some” — sinners.

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<sup>39</sup> *Protestant Poetics and Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) 481-82.

According to Lewalski, line 13 can be paraphrased thus: Some people, of whom David has been one, ask you to remember them. And accordingly in the last line the object of "forget" should also be sinner, that is, "me." The last line is thus understood to be: I think it mercy, if thou wilt forget me. Lewalski adopted the Calvinistic doctrine of justification to verify her reading: God won't see the sinner and his sins, but will remember him in Christ (269-70). Another reader Patrick F. O'Connell also approved this reading, although he admitted that never in the Scripture are found records of men beseeching God to forget them, but only men's prayers to God for oblivion of their sins. Besides he emphasized that it was Donne's consistent all-or-nothing attitude which underlay this absolutism: since sinner was the personification of sins, forgetting the former was equal to forgetting the latter; the poet in despair asked for absolute self-annihilation, which was a descent to the blissful status of minerals, plant, and animals.<sup>40</sup> Thomas M. Catania, on the other hand, offered a revealing perspective. He thought that the end of this poem was "a neat joke," that the "them" in line 13 referred to the sinners, but the object of the verb "forget" was "my sinnes blacke memory." Thus the speaker implicitly identified the sinner with his sins, and finally Donne still implored God to forget him.<sup>41</sup>

I wonder why the above four critics never talked about another important word in line 13: "debt." In the Bible Jesus often uses the figure of loan and debt for man's sins. For example, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name...Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:9-12).<sup>42</sup> What is emphasized is not the pecuniary relationship between creditor and debtor, but this figure is used to commend clemency and bring about propitiation.<sup>43</sup> Priest Donne has also employed this figure:

[T]his blessed Spirit of consolation,...seals to our consciences a *Quietus est*, a discharge of all former spiritual debts, he cancels all them, he nails them to the cross of Christ.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> "'Both Adams Met in Me': A Reading of the *Divine Poems* of John Donne," diss., Yale U, 1978, 191-92.

<sup>41</sup> "John Donne: The Quarrel with Finitude," diss., Fordham U, 1981, 340-41.

<sup>42</sup> All citations of the Bible are taken from King James Version (New York: American Bible Society).

<sup>43</sup> See also Luke 7:41ff. and Matthew 18:21ff.

<sup>44</sup> *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984) 1:163.



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Therefore the "them" in line 13 refers to the sins, not sinners, for only sins are debt. The speaker of this poem concludes, "I think it mercy, if you forget my sins."<sup>45</sup>

Good as forgiveness is, oblivion is better — sounds like a piece of advice given by some columnist. But could the meticulous care taken by the speaking subject be the effect of the pollution of his black memory? In his memory are fright of curses, self-torture of reason, and wrath of God. The speaker's phobia is revealed in the last few lines: forgiveness is not enough, but complete oblivion is needed. Fear comes from memory, memory activates fear. When the speaker prays for God's oblivion, he is meanwhile asking God to help him forget. But just because he cannot forget, he is tenacious of that prayer, which is in turn soiled by his haunting memory. The "think" in line 14 is exactly an exertion of "intent or reason,"<sup>46</sup> and the ending couplet, like the three foregoing disputations, also includes a dialectical process. Though not in the form of a question, the couplet ends with a conditional clause, marking the sense of uncertainty and oscillation between those antipodal possibilities of assurance and dubiety, hope and despondency.

Then when we go back to the question in line 9 ("But who am I, that dare dispute with thee?"), we find concealed in it an ironic meiosis and bitter self-justification: how can one, base as he is, dare to dispute with you the King of kings? But "dispute" is never really erased through rhetoric, but it obdurately survives in disguise in the last two lines of the poem. The "dare" is also part of the overall irony, for "dare" and "dare not" dispute equally come from the fear of God's "sterne wrath" (8). The fear is concrete no matter whether the speaker dare or dare not.

This poem begins with a supposition "If," and ends with another supposition "if," which make the whole poem a suspended existential question, what Catania called an "unresolved meditation" (340). Engulfed in fear, the speaker of this poem tries to obtain a transcendent assurance by means of dialectical argumentation, which

<sup>45</sup> "Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions; according to thy mercy remember thou me for thy goodness' sake, O Lord" (Psalms 25:7). See also Jeremiah 31:34.

<sup>46</sup> In Donne's religious poetry "reason" is not absolutely denied its value. In fact reason can help one to know God, and then to be converted to Him: "Reason Your [God's] viceroy in mee, mee should defend;" but it can also divert one from a true belief: "But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue" ("Batter my heart, three person'd God," Gardner 11). What should be kept in mind is the limits of reason and the transcendence of faith:

Let not my minde be blinder by more light

Nor Faith by Reason added, lose her sight. ("A Litanie," Gardner 19)

See also *The Sermons of John Donne* 3:359.

pertains to the objective world. For the believer God is precisely beyond all structure and dependence, beyond all discussion of reasonableness or unreasonableness. Our appeal to God can be made only by faith, the appeal which is a seeking of the whole self for its center. It is not the rationalistic search for an ultimate hypothesis which can function as an answer to our problems (Pax 71). Like the egoistic voice in the first poem, this poem's speaker raises questions and presumes the answer. Though the answer is involved in the question, yet the question isn't a rhetorical question, for the answer isn't the "Answer."

V

**Limits of Religious Language: Analogy**

What if this present were the worlds last night?  
Marke in my heart, O Soule, where thou dost dwell,  
The picture of Christ crucified, and tell  
Whether that countenance can thee affright,  
Teares in his eyes quench the amasing light, 5  
Blood fills his frownes, which from his pierc'd head fell,  
And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,  
Which pray'd forgivenessse for his foes fierce spight?  
No, no; but as in my idolatrie  
I said to all my profane mistresses, 10  
Beauty, of pittie, foulnesse onely is  
A signe of rigour: so I say to thee,  
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd,  
This beauteous forme assures a pitious minde.

(Gardner 10)

This is a death fantasy. All the three questions appear in the octave, followed by the syntactic pattern of analogy "but as...so" of the sestet. Therefore different from the two previously discussed poems, this poem closes at a note of completion, a point of equilibrium, where questions are answered definitely, not with a conditional proposition, but with affirmation.

Yet this poem is a soliloquy. By its subjunctive mood, the first question produces an illusory, unrealistic air which however is charged with the urgency and immediacy

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caused by the word "present" (1). Then the weight falls on the word "What" — what would happen? The second question moves to the scene of Crucifixion, asking: "Whether that countenance can thee affright" (4). Lines 5 and 6 describe the dreadful countenance of Jesus crucified: tears, dim eyes, bloody frowns, and pierced head. Then a third question: "can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell" (7). In view of the second question in line 4, the answer to the third question could be affirmative, if it were not modified by the adjective clause of line 8: "Which pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight." In spite of its subordinate grammatical rank, line 8 weighs far more for the message it imports. It represents the answer to the above questions: For its mercy, that tongue will not adjudge me unto hell, and I therefore won't be frightened by the sight of the Passion even if it were the world's last night. Line 8 makes existential questions rhetorical: the answer is inherent in the question.

But the organic form of the sonnet isn't consummated yet. Moreover, a hidden, indirect answer seems unable to gratify the thirst of beings for "affirmative affirmation." Therefore one "no" is not enough, but after a pair of no's it seems necessary to have a convincing rational framework to prop up the emotional intensity. Here the way the speaker of this poem presents his reasons has stunned many critics. John Carey called it "blasphemy," and commented that the comparison of Jesus Christ with the profane mistresses proved Donne's argumentative collapse when his polluted mind became humiliatingly aware of its incompetence and reached its limits.<sup>47</sup> For Terry G. Sherwood there is a kind of dialectics in such an incongruous comparison, which "notes likenesses to embolden the differences." But Sherwood also observed that Donne, confounded by the residue of idolatrous love in his heart, was incapacitated to distinguish between the love of Christ and the love of his mistresses. Besides when one fixed too much attention on the physical, he was in danger of averting from the spiritual.<sup>48</sup> Catania on the other hand noted that the poet's recollection of his worldly love yielded him warmth and a sense of familiarity which tempered his fright at the sight of the tearful, bloodied image of Christ on the Cross; also, there was a beauty on the sad countenance of Christ which but reminded him of his human experiences of love (300-01).

All are very interesting interpretations. They share the view that the sestet of this poem is the result of Donne's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." It is spontaneous so that we can take it as the clinical confession of Mr. Donne,

<sup>47</sup> *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981) 47.

<sup>48</sup> *Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984) 150-51.

in order to read against his biography, then proceed to a psychoanalysis.<sup>49</sup> I believe that basically rhetoric, especially longer rhetorical maneuvers, is a kind of manipulation which involves the work of a certain purposeful selection. The analogy in this poem does not arise straight from the poet's subconscious and go unhindered through his ego and superego, to dump upon the paper; but it comes from the poet's choice, made through his will and consciousness. Undeniably the selection often tells about something which the poet is unaware of; yet when we try to apprehend the "something," we have to do so through the realization that such an expression is contrivance of the poet's mind; otherwise we lose the stance of criticism.<sup>50</sup>

My understanding of the rub is that lines 9 to 14 reason from irrationality. An idea which frequently appears in this poem is talk, e.g. "tell" (3), "tongue" (7), "said" (10), and "say" (12), which emphasizes the significance of voice — God's voice and the voice of self and soul. When we examine the voice of self, we inevitably encounter one characteristic of religious language. That is, when our language tries to describe or observe the Ultimate Existence which transcends the objective reality, it is however confined by its own structure and rules. In other words, when language tries to encompass the unencompassable with its system and logic, it ineluctably distorts or destroys the inconceivableness of the ineffable, for the ineffable can never fall into the network of grammar, concepts, or images. It is not a phenomenal subject or object, it is not structured within any explicit or implicit or fluid context. In fact we are unable to speak about God.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> It was also opposed by Rosemond Tuve in *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 172, n.24: "what seems to me overreading of Donne's interest in his own psychological complexities. . . The chief misinterpretation involved in turning Donne into a 'tortured' psychological sentimentalist seems to me an initial misreading of his subjects — as largely self-revelatory." A similar comment was made by William J. Rooney in "'The Canonization' — The Language of Paradox Reconsidered," *English Literary History* 23 (1956):38 when criticizing Cleanth Brooks' reading of "The Canonization" in "The Language of Paradox," *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harvest, 1975) 3-21: "The most immediately striking thing about his [Brooks'] analysis is that it begins from and never questions, the assumption that the poem ['The Canonization'] is natural speech . . . And nowhere is there even a hint of the real possibility of distinction between a serious statement by a writer and manipulation of verbal conventions, whether serious or otherwise, that is in itself pure artifice."

<sup>50</sup> ". . . reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language he uses" (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*).

<sup>51</sup> "When Marcel writes, 'When we speak of God it is not of God that we speak . . . ' he is not in any sense endorsing the position of the agnostic. He is rather protesting that

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However, I am aware that I am just now trying to express one feature of the Transcendent with language; or, to put it more precisely, I am trying to elucidate the specific relation between the Transcendent and our language. Language is the tool that I have to choose for communication for the time being. Or, to approach from another angle, I don't have the choice. What I can choose is the way of expression, which I call rhetoric, to approach as near as language permits the Holy One perceived by my narrow mind. Of the many rhetorical devices available, I adopt the one called by some "attributes of negative theology,"<sup>52</sup> while in this poem what Donne adopted is the analogy of attribution.

To attribute to God what belongs to man (anthropopathia), to predicate of the Last Things with the mundane affairs, and to represent the Infinite as the finite all point to a way of comprehension, but they do not point out the contents of that comprehension.<sup>53</sup> To choose the analogy means to choose the double restriction imminent in that figure: one is the disproportion between and incomparability of the two held together by analogy, one is the limitations of language itself. Therefore paradoxically analogy betrays antipodes by its inherent dialectical character. It is plausibility, irony, and finally absurdity.

Then when we return to the sestet of this poem, we find that absurdity has already existed in the analogical pattern. On the one side is the worldly ("profane") and the sensual ("mistresses"); on the other side is God, the Divine, the Holy One. Then we read another analogy in "Beauty, of pittie, foulness onely is / A signe of rigour" (10-11) — appearance and character, or form and contents. The keyword is "signe," so the external is not the internal, but it is a sign to the internal. Just as a road sign pointing to Mount A-Li is never the Mount itself, so is the relation between sensuous human love and God's agape, man's amorous fidelity and God's constancy, idolatry and pious resignation. Analogy exposes contrasts. Language

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our approach to God must not and cannot be to speak *about* God. We can only invoke him as our origin, our goal and our Ultimate Recourse" (Pax 72).

<sup>52</sup> These attributes function to negate and negate and negate the characteristics of the finite world until we may discern that which is beyond the finite. See Ian Ramsey, *Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases* (London: SCM P, 1957) 50-53.

<sup>53</sup> John Coulson, *Religion and Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1981) 154-55: "The metaphors and symbols which have traditionally expressed such experiences [of God] are not wholly *aberglaube* or anthropomorphisms: they cannot be reduced to adjectives, but remain words for which no further expressions are ever fully adequate. We have no other words to use. They succeed to the extent that they direct us to 'ultimate points of vision'." And quoted by Lewalski one passage given by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica*: "Similitudes drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatsoever we may say or think of Him" (76).

endeavors to transcend itself in conflicts and contradictions in order to approach the Ultimate.

Then the ending couplet reminds us of the questions in the octave. When soul faces the image of Christ Crucified, does it have fright only? No empathy or love?<sup>54</sup> When it contemplates the distress and agony of Jesus, it does not pity or repent, but just worries about hell? What appearance does a panicked, egoistic soul have? When self says to soul, "To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assign'd" (13), can the remark be directed to the soul? Or in view of the indexibility of looks and character, form and substance, does the beautiful or ugly one sees point to the goodness or ugliness of one's soul?<sup>55</sup> And again, may it also be true that horrid shapes appear to wicked spirits, and piteous mind shall see a beautiful form? Or when one thinks the form of Christ Crucified beautiful, he shall be pitied? When self intends to go beyond the phenomenal, to circumscribe the Absolute, in order to appease the frightened soul, language slips out of control, highlighting the limpness of self-soul.

And this poem is a soliloquy. That "tongue" (7) is silent, although it "pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight." Another expected analogy is that Christ would pardon the panicked soul just as He had pardoned his spiteful enemies. (Fear and spite are both negative feelings. How about soul and enemies? Analogy or antithesis?) Hence the consistency of analogical schemata in this poem: in the description and interpretation of the divine-human relationship, analogy of attribution or proportion has already been immanent in the design. In other words, the correspondence of the divine and the human is like correspondence of the two subjects held together by analogy, and the personal relationship between God and man must presuppose existence of an analogical relation. In this poem analogy strings together the ends and the means.

Then what about the existential and the rhetorical? The distance between them is the distance between similitude and identification, between form and substance, between mistresses and God. "And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell, / Which pray'd forgiveness for his foes fierce spight?" (7-8). The self wants to answer the existential question by rhetoric, but analogy only points to a direction of

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<sup>54</sup> "Was not his [Christ's] pity towards thee wondrous high, / That would have need to be pittied by thee" ("La Corona: Nativitie," Gardner 3).

<sup>55</sup> O'Connell 209: "In fact the appearance of Christ on the cross, covered with blood, dust, sweat, spittle, contorted by its torture, is far from beautiful in any usage of the word, . . . The self is in fact not yet completely free from his 'idolatrie,' since his image of Christ is of his own making."

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comprehending the answer; it can't be the answer itself. Can line 8 answer line 7? Existential or rhetorical? Yet the whole poem is just a presupposition: "What if this present were the worlds last night?" (1). Every minute we seize tenaciously with our life is the "present." Then this ultimate question of life will hang around as a never-ending nightmare! The answer to the question in line 4 is suspended because of the uncertainty involved in lines 7 and 8. Uncertainty is the source of fright. But, that "tongue" (7) doesn't say anything.

VI  
Grace

Are all the questions in Donne's holy sonnets existential? For there is no chance for them to become rhetorical? The above three poems demonstrate that all the questions involved in them are either problematic in themselves or problematized by their context, and all the answers or quasi-answers by their inherent indeterminacy are capable of overturning the quasi-rhetorical questions and transfiguring them into existential questions. Is it true that all the personal questions about divine-human relationship are fundamentally insoluble, because our language is certain to be mistaken and misunderstood, and rhetoric is certain to induce suspicions that do not exclude the contrary possibility? "But a voice / Is wanting, the deep truth is imageless," says Demogorgon.<sup>56</sup>

Then the initial problem we encounter is that of faith, or grace and faith. When the speaker in Francis Thompson's poem "The Hound of Heaven" asks:

Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn with it?  
My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;  
And now my heart is as a broken fount,  
Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever  
    From the dank thoughts that shiver  
Upon the sighful branches of my mind.  
Such is; what is to be?

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<sup>56</sup> *Prometheus Unbound* II. iv. 115-16, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2:221.

A voice replies:

All which I took from thee I did but take,  
Not for thy harms,  
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.  
All which thy child's mistake  
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:  
Rise clasp My hand, and come!<sup>57</sup>

When the subject in George Herbert's poem "Redemption" pleads for a renewed covenant, a voice answers, "Your suit is granted."<sup>58</sup> But one may refute that that kind of reply is also a rhetorical strategy, that in fact the poet employed a hypophora (raising questions and answering them), so naturally the voice of God in religious poetry is the voice of the poet himself. Rhetorical questions are answered by rhetorical answers: hence the inadequacy of the formal term "colloquy" or "dialogue" for religious poetry. It seems that the crux of the problem finally lies in a faith which is, for some, a final superb gift of God and a form of divine knowledge; and for others, a creative paradigm, which activates the imagination (Coulson 7).<sup>59</sup>

Just try to see if we can leave faith alone for a moment and approach the problem with concepts borrowed from contemporary literary criticism. Intertextuality is a term which denotes the transposition of various signifying systems into one another, and a literary work is deemed an intertextual construct — a product of cultural discourses of various sorts of insertions, references, echoes, and other cultural combinations — infiltrated or embedded by other texts.<sup>60</sup> Hence a literary text can never be a monoglossia; it is an intertextual sphere invaded by voices from innumerable other ideas, beliefs, sources of history — in short, a polyglossia. Take Yeats' "Among School Children" for example, there the voice of the moving subject is mixed with voices of nun, children, his mistress, philosophers, all together constructing the multilogic complexity and profundity of this poem. It is the same with religious poetry, where multi-voices gather themselves from various sources of

<sup>57</sup> *The Works of Francis Thompson*, 3 vols. (London: Burns & Oates) 1:111-12.

<sup>58</sup> *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970) 40.

<sup>59</sup> See also William F. Lynch, *Images of Faith: An Exploration of the Ironic Imagination* (London: U of Notre Dame P, 1973) 5-7.

<sup>60</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 59-60; also Leitch 59; Geoffrey Hartman, preface, *Deconstruction & Criticism* viii.



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light, including the source of the Holy Scripture. The many voices make possible a true colloquy between God and man.

But then the principle of selection may intervene as a result of interpretation. "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"<sup>61</sup> How can we be sure that the answer is absolutely from God, not partly from the aspiration of man? How can we procure the certainty that the certainty is not merely the wishful thinking of human imagination? The foregrounding of faith is necessitated.

Faith is: live in the light of God. According to the Bible, the belief in God is not the unilateral human work of will, reason, volition, or even imagination, but it is the work of God. The calmness that soothes our spiritual unrest, the joy that illuminates our dullness, the moments of incandescent lucidity that embalm our spirits, and the immediate blessings that a pious soul receives are all from the grace of God, by the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul says to the Philippians, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). It is the Son of God who gives us understanding so that we may know Him (1 John 5:20). "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God" (2 Corinthians 3:5). It's God who opens our heart as he opened the stony heart of Lydia of the city of Thyatira so that we worship him (Acts 16:14). And "no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Corinthians 12:3). In one of his sermons Donne said:

God sets up a light, ... he enlightens us with a knowledge, how, and when,  
and what to pray for, ... He fills us with good and religious thoughts, and  
appoints and leaves the Holy Ghost, to discharge them unto him, in prayer,  
for it is the Holy Ghost himself that prays in us. (Sermons 3:152)

Therefore "to turn to God" means to be oriented to God, to be converted to God. It is by the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit that our heart is turned, converted, and blessed.

Except thou rise and for thine owne worke fight,  
Oh I shall soone despaire, ...  
("As due by many titles," Gardner 6)

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<sup>61</sup> It's the last line of Yeats' poem "Among School Children," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

Preservation and salvation come from God. And repentance is also effect of God's working in man:

Teach mee how to repent

(“At the round earths,” Gardner 8)

Yet grace, if thou [soul] repent, thou canst not lacke;

But who shall give thee that grace to beginne?

(“Oh my blacke Soule,” Gardner 7)

Only

when towards thee [God]

By thy leave I can looke, I rise againe

(“Thou hast made me,” Gardner 13)

Only God's “all-healing grace and Spirit” (“Father, part of his double interest,” Gardner 12) can “Impute me righteous” “This is my playes last scene,” Gardner 7), otherwise all the efforts are spent in vain: “I, ... Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end” (“Batter my heart,” Gardner 11).

Then the words which express the faith in God, or praise God, or voice one's contrition also come from God's grace. In Herbert's poem “The Collar,” the subject complained about the “cable” of Christian institutions that restricted his pleasure-seeking conduct,

But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde

At every word,

Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child!*

And I reply'd, *My Lord.*

(Hutchinson 153-54)

The conversion happened when the speaker thought that he heard the vocation from God. This conversion bore witness to God's unconditional election and mercy. Therefore when the subject says “God said,” the meaning which underlies the rhetoric is that God has converted him, and the corollary of the conversion, which is the effect of God's “saying” to him, is that now he can say that God said .... So God called and made the sinner hear Him, then the penitent phrases his faith in poetical

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maneuvering in God's reply in Herbert's and Thompson's poems, we have to understand that colloquy or dialogue takes place when the poet or the speaker in the poem can hear "God said." Not all questions in religious poetry are un-purged of incredulity. "God said" is one of the ways to prove that the poem's speaking subject heard "God said," before he verbalizes the reply in the form of an assertive "God said." "God said" is the consequence of the dialogue.

But never in Donne's divine poems has appeared the rhetorical pattern of "God said," or "God replied." Is it the reason why the questions in his religious poems cannot be rhetoricized? Or is "God said" the only qualified rhetorical device that can testify to the colloquy? Otherwise the questions-raiser will never find an answer which does not turn out to be one given by himself and eventually demolish its own qualifications as an answer?

Let us read another poem by Donne.

**VII**

**Language as Interpretation**

**Hymne to God the Father**

**I**

Wilt thou forgive that sinne where I begunne,  
Which is my sin, though it were done before?  
Wilt thou forgive those sinnes through which I runne,  
And doe them still: though still I doe deplore?  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done, 5  
For, I have more.

**II**

Wilt thou forgive that sinne by which I have wonne  
Others to sinne? and, made my sinne their doore?  
Wilt thou forgive that sinne which I did shunne  
A yeare, or two: but wallow'd in, a score? 10  
When thou hast done, thou hast not done  
For, I have more.

III

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne  
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore;  
Swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy Sunne 15  
Shall shine as it shines now, and heretofore;  
And, having done that, Thou hast done,  
I have no more.

(Gardner 51)

The request in the last stanza of this poem — “Swear by thy selfe” — discloses the true cause of the speaker’s trepidation. He is desperate for a Voice. For poets like Donne, that Voice can never be represented in language or by any other voices, because of the three interpositions included in the representation. The first interposition comes from our reading of God’s Word; the second, from our translating of God’s Word; and the third, from our handling of poetical language and the aesthetic and metric restrictions imposed by the genre. These three interpositions make impossible any attempt to identify our voice with that of God. Even any attempt like that may become an act of betrayal and blasphemy.

Heare us, O heare us Lord; . . .  
.....  
Heare us, for till thou heare us, Lord  
We know not what to say.  
Thy eare to our sighes, tears, thoughts gives voice and word.  
O Thou who Satan heard’st in Jobs sicke day,  
Heare thy selfe now, for thou in us dost pray.  
(“A Litanie,” Gardner 24)

“Thou in us dost pray” — such a piety is self-effacing. But it is also possible for Satan to take the stage, and pollute the words that belong to God. In despair Job had cursed,

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was  
said, There is a man child conceived. Let that day be darkness; let not  
God regard it from above, neither let the light shine upon it.  
(Job 3:3-4)

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But the disaster that Job suffered was accorded with God's acquiescence. Job's distress, sorrow, and doubt incapacitated him from a true understanding of God's will, so he mourned:

Only do not two things unto me; then will I not hide myself from thee.  
Withdraw thine hand far from me: and let not thy dread make me afraid;  
Then call thou, and I will answer: or let me speak, and answer thou me  
... Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and holdest me for thine enemy?

(Job 13:20-24)

Apparently Job had mis-understood or mis-interpreted God's Word when in extreme straits:

If I had called, and he [Lord] had answered me; yet would I not believe  
that he had hearkened unto my voice ... If the scourge slay suddenly,  
he will laugh at the trial of the innocent.

(Job 9:16, 23)

In "The Crosse" Donne warned:

Crosse those dejections, when it downward tends,  
And when it to forbidden heights pretends.

(Gardner 27)

For Job the "forbidden heights" are disannulling God's judgement, darkening God's Word by "words without knowledge" (Job 40:8, 38:2).<sup>62</sup> But any kind of translation cannot but be interpretation, infiltrated by the subjectivity of the translator, and interpretation inevitably holds traces of comments. Donne is aware of the pitfall:

O decline  
Mee, when my comment would make thy word mine

("A Litanie," Gardner 19)

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<sup>62</sup> "God's first intention even when he destroyes is to preserve, as a Physicians first intention, in the most distastefull physick, is health; even Gods demolitions are super-edifications, his Anatomis, his dissections are so many re-compactings, so many resurrections; God windes us off the Skein, that he may weave us up into the whole peece, . . ." (*The Sermons of John Donne* 9:217).

In "Donne's Praise of Folly" Thomas Docherty described the "faithful reading" of Augustinian exegesis:

For Augustine, biblical exegesis depended upon an initial act of faith, a *credo* which framed the act of reading. Once "inside" this frame of faith, truth could be rendered directly to the heart of the reader, without the intervention of sceptical, critical consciousness. But this faith, in ridding us of interested intermediaries, also rids us of our own consciousness. Our voices are silenced, our readings unheard: we are supposed simply to hear the words of Scripture, as if they emanated from within, and to make no critical or even conscious response.<sup>63</sup>

However, reading or translation is a historicized act, whose "purity" is open to the mediation of the "impurities" ushered in by the self-presence of a reader; so

there can be no possibility of hygienic "sanity," no sanitization, of the text or of its reading. The name, identity or consciousness of a reader of the Bible or of a poem, say, enters to vitiate the purity or immediacy of the truth in the text's reading, giving in its place a "maculate" mediation or critical interpretation of the text (88).

In addition, the interpreter's comprehension of the Word may run its head up against the limits of language and become reconstructed by the grammar. The translation of God's Word is admittedly a matter of faith, which requires a divinely inspired revelation, but it also opens the way to "differential theology."<sup>64</sup>

The intervention of poetical language also complicates the problem. For critics like Charles Glicksberg and David Daiches the distinction between religion and poetry is self-authenticating. They believe that poetry is concerned with art, and art is never on a par with religion:

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<sup>63</sup> In *Post-Structuralist Reading of English Poetry* 86.

<sup>64</sup> See Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1984) 160-61. Another view can be found in Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 31e: "God has four people recount the life of his incarnate Son, in each case differently and with inconsistencies-but might we not say: It is important that this narrative should not be more than quite averagely historically plausible just so that this should not be taken as the essential, decisive thing? So that the letter should not be believed more strongly than is proper and the spirit may receive its due."

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... poetry operates differently. As it weaves its cumulative meaning through the use of all the resources of language, with image, symbol, cadence, rhythm, pattern, structure, as well as propositional meaning all playing their part in building up the reverberating whole, it gets behind belief to the human dilemmas that belief arose to cope with, even though it may be ostensibly basing itself on a given belief.<sup>65</sup>

The truth of poetry distinguishes itself by its specific mode of apprehending reality and its own kind of subjectivity. But for poets of the seventeenth century the problem posed by the difference between faith embodied in words and a work of art is quite different. George Herbert presented the conflict clearly in his poem "Jordan (II)":

When first my lines of heav'nly joyes made mention,  
Such was their lustre, they did so excell,  
That I sought out quaint words, and trim invention;  
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,  
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,  
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.  
.....  
As flames do work and winde, when they ascend,  
So did I weave my self into the sense. (Hutchinson 102-103)

The sensibility required for aesthetic effect, the creativeness involved in the invention of poetic patterns and imagery, and the final joy and self-satisfaction at achieving perfect expression produce in the poet somehow a sense of guilt that he might indulge in "idolatry" of his art and elevate himself over God. Besides, the presence of the reader also aggravates the poet's self-awareness. Hence Ben Jonson prayed,

Good, and great God, can I not thinke of thee,  
But is must, straight, my melancholy bee?  
Is it interpreted in me disease,  
That, laden with my sinnes, I seeke for ease?  
O, be thou witnesse, that the reynes dost know,  
And hearts of all, if I be sad for show,

<sup>65</sup> David Daiches, *God and the Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1984) 214. See also Glicksberg 71-72.

And judge me after: if I dare pretend  
To ought but grace, or ayme at other end.<sup>66</sup>

The “wreaths of fame and interest” may be guise of the temptations of Satan, and poison a true intercourse with God.<sup>67</sup> This of course was also perceived by Donne:

When wee are mov'd to seeme religious  
Only to vent wit, Lord deliver us.  
(“A Litanie,” Gardner 23)

Then how can we be certain that our prayer is identified with God’s Word? How can we guarantee that our translation/interpretation of God’s voice is “hygienic,” “sanitized”? But any guarantee might be access to “forbidden heights.”

O Lord deliver us  
From trusting in those prayers, though powr’d out thus.  
(“A Litanie,” Gardner 21)

God replied. But pious as the poet is, he cannot faithfully grasp God’s Word and fix it within the boundary of language. Our language is at most a faint echo:

Heare us, weake echoes, O thou eare, and cry.  
(“A Litanie,” Gardner 25)

The poet asked God to cry so that the echoes would be stronger and more precise, because weak echoes are easily impurified and garbled by cacophonies, and finally buried in jangling noise, becoming echoes lost.

Therefore never has been adopted the verbal device of “God said” in Donne’s religious poems. While even a distinct echo is difficult to have, let alone representation

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<sup>66</sup> “To Heaven,” *Ben Jonson*, eds. C. H. Herford, Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1970) 8:122.

<sup>67</sup> Andrew Marvell, “The Coronet,” *Complete Works of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 4 vols. (New York: AMS P, 1966) 1:87:

Alas! I find the Serpent old,  
That, twining in his speckled breast,  
About the flowers disguis’d, does fold  
With wreaths of fame and interest.



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of the original voice. But the difficulty has never alleviated the craving for that Voice. Then, what is the key to the dilemma?

VIII  
Colloquy Pitched in Silence

The longing for the Voice of grace and authority is based on the belief that only that Voice can work deliverance — atonement and salvation. That Voice is not only speech, but it is the action. Principally it is not descriptive or propositional, but it is performative. It is the power of action:

And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

And:

By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them  
by the breath of his mouth. (Psalms 33:6)

It is God in action, creating, revealing, redeeming. In one of his sermons in St. Paul's Donne acknowledged the power of God's Word in awe:

I consider, what God did with one word; with one *Fiat* he made all; And,  
I know, he can doe as much with another word; With one *Pereat*, he can destroy  
all; as hee spake, and it was done, he commanded and all stood fast; so he  
can speak, and all shall bee undone; command, and all shall fall in peeces.  
(*Sermons* 8:68)

The human voice, on the other hand, is responsive and demonstrative, demonstrating that we have heard the Voice of God and also responding to the Voice. That we have heard the Word of God cannot be verily testified just by any words we utter or vocalize. As the Voice of God is action, so man's response should consist in action too. For poets like George Herbert, Francis Thompson, and Henry Vaughan,<sup>68</sup> one of the actions of testimony is to be able to say "God said." For poets like John Donne, it is the change that miraculously happens to/in man when

<sup>68</sup> See Vaughan, "Regeneration," "Henry Vaughan: *The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976) 147-49.

he hears the calling which commits him and moves him to action. To present this change is to testify to God's work, and to testify to God's work is precisely to testify to the power of God's Word, to testify to the consummation of colloquy.

In the poem "A Hymne to God the Father," when the "I" asks, "Wilt thou forgive that sinne," he does not venture an answer "yes" or "no," then forward an analogy to boost the credibility or persuasiveness (as in "What if this present"); nor does he later cancel his question by negating himself so as to refrain from the sacrilege of "forbidden heights" (as in "If poysonous mineralls"). He says, "And, having done that, Thou hast done" (17).<sup>69</sup> The present perfect tense of the verb and verbal replaces the subjunctive verb form, and the declarative substitutes the optative and conditional, which means that the colloquy has been undertaken, God has replied, the power of God's Word has taken effect, "I have no more" (18) — he has been changed.

In another poem — "The Cross" — the speaker witnesses the omnipresence of the Cross everywhere. He says,

Who can deny mee power, and liberty  
To stretch mine armes, and mind owne Crosse to be?  
Swimme, and at every stroake, thou art thy Crosse.

(lines 17-19, Gardner 26)

The question needs no reply, or it has already been answered. Yet line 19 isn't the answer, but it proves that the answering has already been given, so the speaker can step out of his "self," enter into "Thou," and encounter the answer once again in "Thou," finding that it is the lived and living experience before, when, and after the question is asked. Faith never comes down to "mechanical understanding" or any intellectual or emotional predilection, but it has to do with how we live and die. It is

an orientation of the personality, to oneself, to one's neighbour, to the universe; a total response; a way of seeing whatever one sees and of handling whatever one handles; a capacity to live at a more than mundane level; to see, to feel, to act in terms of, a transcendent dimension.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Donne was fond of punning on his own name. Here "Thou hast done" can also mean "Thou hast Donne, that is, me."

<sup>70</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979) 12.

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It is participation in the essence of God, participation which is determined by our capacity to receive existence — our existence. It is, in all, the way we live and the experiences we are experiencing. The answer to our existential questions exists everywhere before the above questions are raised, and it is there for its own purpose. Therefore the above question needs no reply. The following line — “Swimme, and at every stroake, thou art thy Crosse” — presents the fact that the answer has already been given and been received before the construction of the question; the problem has already been settled before it is represented. The question is a rhetorical question.

In another view, the question is answered, so the questioner can get or see the answer that exists before the formation of the question. Thus we find a clue to the rhetoricizing of existential questions: answers to existential questions are disseminated before, when, and after the questions, and the answering is immanent in the text, between the lines, in the form of “silence.” Here the word “silence” is used tentatively for its ontological contrast with the vocalization of voice.<sup>71</sup> Signs and words point to human voice while silence of the blank between the written lines points to voice, what voice communicates, the operative power of voice, and what the power of voice implements, which miraculously and simultaneously take place. In silence everything speaks, and “Fire, Sacrifice, Priest, Altar be the same” (“A Litanie,” Gardner 17), where the transcendent encounters the secular, not by analogy; the elusive is made apprehensible, not through dialectical synthesis or reductive translation. In the voidness of silence the question is embraced by the answer. Søren Kierkegaard noted in *Philosophical Fragments* that faith requires an “act of letting go,” “a leap” (33-34). In silence one leaps over the existential mire of doubt, despair, and fear; with the “negative capability”<sup>72</sup> he leaps into the affirmative.

Therefore the fear in the “sinne of feare” (A Hymne to God the Father” line 13) results from the speaker’s being unable to let in the sound of silence, and the sin is the sin of being unable to listen.<sup>73</sup> He is unable because he cannot let go “intent or reason,” grammar or rhetorical devices, to leap into silence, humbly opening himself to the assurance of silence. For only when one immerses himself

<sup>71</sup> To quote from W. H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (New York: Random House, 1968) 136: “One might say that for Truth the word *silence* is the least inadequate metaphor, and that words can only bear witness to silence as shadows bear witness to light.”

<sup>72</sup> A well-known term from a letter of John Keats to George and Thomas Keats, 21 Dec. 1817, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958) 1:193-94. It is adopted here to mean the capability to remain content with half-knowledge or half-understanding “without an irritable reaching after fact & reason.”

<sup>73</sup> “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).

in telling silence, can his existential questions be stripped of the demonic uncertainty and be converted to rhetorical questions both in his own reflection and in the reader's re-reading. Rhetoric is the art of poetical figures in relief after the existential questions are resolved. Rhetorical or existential? There is no borderline between them but a fluid zone of difference which opens free for the reciprocity of both. When one attempts to answer what he cannot answer, the bumps he gets prove the existentialization of his questions. Only when colloquy really takes place, one listens, then existentialization dissolves. Perhaps for some reader the "leap" after the silence appears too abrupt or unconvincing, but such matters of reason and logic are precisely what the leap has already passed over. "Harkening to" is the ultimate triumph given to and possessed by men of faith.

## IX

### An Unconcluding Postscript

When God confounded the language of Noah's offsprings as punishment for the human pride displayed in the building of Babel (Genesis 11:1-11), men left off the construction and split up because they couldn't understand each other. The negative side of this event is the disagreement, confusion, and hostility which ensued after the dissemination of words. And men moved about on the surface of the earth like aliens to each other. An optimistic view, however, sees in the diversity of languages opportunities for apprehending the reality in different modes, each indispensable for re-seizure of the totality of meaning lost in the dispersion. Different mentalities and ideologies may lead to oppositional interpretations, but they are complementary to each other too, problematizing in each other the monopolistic dominance of normative approaches and disturbing the complacency of protected "transcendental" conventions. The disturbance is necessary if the sin of pride in building a tower that may "reach into heaven" is still to be condemned.

In the foreword to *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein discerned two spirits which activate streams of thought in the West:

That spirit expresses itself in an onwards movement, in building ever larger and more complicated structures; the other in striving after clarity and perspicuity in no matter what structure. The first tries to grasp the world by way of its periphery — in its variety; the second at its centre — in its essence. And so

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the first adds one construction to another, moving on and up, as it were, from one stage to the next, while the other remains where it is and what it tries to grasp is always the same.<sup>74</sup>

To juxtapose another passage from Derrida's *Writing and Difference*:

There are two interpretations of interpretation. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics and of onto-theology ... has dreamed of full presence, of reassuring foundation, of the origin and the end of play (292).

I quote the above passages without any intent to elevate one of the spirits or one of the interpretations over the other. As Derrida said, there is no question of choosing. Rather I hold both in respect for their complementary, or host-parasite, parasite-host relation.<sup>75</sup> The first spirit is revolutionary in terms of its daring exploration into frontiers invisible to the second. Its popularity in an era which features sensational democracy, self-subversive mutability, and aggressive progressiveness suppresses the second which, for the "immobility" of its goal, the "sameness" of its dreams, and the "obstinacy" of its pursuit, sinks to pain of reticence. The second is faith. When man roams around indulging in the pleasure of the freeplay of the world and of signs, forgoing the truth and the origin, he will soon be grasped by a nostalgia rising from his depth, which he hates to admit, for a unity united by an original source. The voiceless yearning is reflected in his attempt to make himself understood, in his acts of speaking and writing, in his desire to replace. Meaning can be dislocated, disintegrated, supplemented, and reiterated. God can be annulled, undone, and declared dead. But just as the talk of meaning is the talk of interpretation, so the talk of God is the talk of our attitude of living. Our language is but directed towards ourselves, ensnaring our own oscillation.

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<sup>74</sup> *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975).

<sup>75</sup> See *Deconstruction & Criticism* 249. The juxtaposition of the two passages doesn't imply that they are identical. I am aware that their relation is causal rather than analogical. The first spirit underlies the first interpretation, and the second spirit underlies the second interpretation.

To crown it all, I have to make the confession that I myself oscillate between the above two pairs of attitudes, between self-imposed confinement and transgressed freedom, between philosophy and poetry (art), between logocentrism and de-logocentrism which qualifies me for the logocentrism, between attempts to re-establish authority and claims to disrupt authority, between meaning as a property of the text and meaning as the creative experience of the reader, between a centripetal conception of God and a centrifugal aporia of pluralism, between intuitive clarity and opacity, between language and metalanguage, between sleights of hand and .... The list can be continued.

In "Satire III" Donne wrote:

doubt wisely; in strange way  
To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;  
To sleepe, or runne wrong, is. On a huge hill,  
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;  
And what the hills suddennes resists, winne so;  
Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,  
Thy Soule rest, for none can worke in that night.  
To will, implyes delay, therefore now doe:  
Hard deeds, the bodies paines; hard knowledge too  
The mindes indeavours reach, and mysteries  
Are like the Sunne, dazling, yet plaine to all eyes.<sup>76</sup>

That the dynamics of faith, what Donne called "Ague" in another poem,<sup>77</sup> come from the visibility ("plaine to all eyes") and invisibility ("dazling") of the object of faith I never doubt. And I also believe that an interminable movement of interrogation is the "nursery / Of musicke, joy, life"<sup>78</sup> for metaphysics, religion,

<sup>76</sup> *Donne: Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1929) 139.

<sup>77</sup> I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day  
In prayers, and flattering speeches I court God:  
To morrow I quake with true feare of his rod.  
So my devout fits come and go away  
Like a fantastique Ague: . . .

("Oh, to vex me," Gardner 16)

<sup>78</sup> "Elegie III: Change" in *Donne: Poetical Works* 75.

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and literary criticism. Thus I put myself in a situation which needs no justification because no justification is acceptable. But I am afraid I'm not immune from the practice of self-justification.

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