

## Donne's Annihilation

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I

“For his art did express / A quintessence even from nothingness, / From dull privations and lean emptiness.” This is how John Donne, in his 1612 “A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy’s Day,” describes the divine power of love.<sup>1</sup> Love can squeeze out of nothingness, from the leanest emptiness, a quintessence. Nothingness is a threat to material beings—they might cease altogether to exist—but the threat is not absolute; some things, the speaker in this lyric asserts, can be evacuated to nothingness, but then reborn into a new life: “He ruined me, and I am re-begot / Of absence, darkness, death—things which are not” (17–18). How is one “ruined” and then “re-begot”? The relationship between ruin and re-begetting that emerges across the caesura in line 17 is not a concern limited to the realm of love in Donne’s works; it is also a central concern of the Holy Sonnets, especially the relationship between “ravishment” and being made new in “Batter my heart.” This essay claims that we must understand the convergence of ruin and re-begetting before we can properly diagram Donne’s concrete concerns with martyrdom and the annihilation of the will. Martyrdom and self-annihilation are limit cases for the relationship between devotion and labor; they raise the possibility that certain kinds of devotion orient themselves toward forms of passivity that require a release from labor and an evacuation of the will. Can one labor actively to beget oneself again through the ruining or annihilation of the self that takes place in martyrdom? If so, can this labor be exemplary, an action that others can follow? Or can one only be passively “re-begotten” in a singular process that could never be mimetically reenacted? Through an examination of annihilation and ravishment in Donne we can begin to answer these questions.

Nothingness, as a metaphysical category, natural scientific phenom-

enon, and state toward which our decaying bodies tend, occupied Donne throughout his life. But nothingness and re-begetting are perhaps never so strongly on his mind as in what he calls the ultimate “image of his *Humiliation*,” the series of meditations and prayers that Donne wrote under the title *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. At the center of this work, Donne’s tenth meditation turns from a moving request for a divine remedy for his illness to a cosmology that introduces his theory of annihilation. Turning from his dwindling body to the nothing we are made of and the nothing to which we return, Donne longs to be “re-begot”:

This is *Natures nest of Boxes*; The *Heavens* containe the *Earth*, the *Earth*, *Cities*, *Cities*, *Men*. And all these are *Concentrique*; the common *center* to them all, is *decay*, *ruine*; only that is *Eccentricque*, which we can *imagine*, but not *demonstrate*, That light, which is the very emanation of the light of *God*, in which the *Saints* shall dwell, with which the *Saints* shall be appareld, only that bends not to this *Center*, to *Ruine*; that which was not made of *Nothing*, is not threatened with this annihilation. All other things are; even *Angels*, even our *soules*; they move upon the same *poles*, they bend to the same *Center*; and if they were not made immortal by *preservation*, their Nature could not keepe them from sinking to this *center*, *Annihilation*.<sup>2</sup>

In the Renaissance, the term *annihilation* could refer to a process of emptying the soul that prepares for union with God, or to an obliteration of individual reason or will that could initiate action in the world.<sup>3</sup> But it could also mean, as it does most immediately in this passage, material decay or ruin. Through this elaborate image of “Natures nest of Boxes,” Donne develops a theory of “Concentrique” circles in which decay or ruin is the center of them all, and nothingness is that out of which they are made. In Donne’s cosmology, the pull of the center draws all material entities back to it as they orbit; the center of nothing sucks decaying souls, angels, and bodies inwards and only God’s “Eccentricque” light remains “not threatened with this annihilation.” It is the realm of that light toward which Donne’s desire to be re-begotten draws him.

The “Nothing” for Donne is, then, both that which being approaches as it undergoes the process of annihilation and that from which being originates. Everything but God is created within a circle from a nothing of which God is not made, and everything within that circle is driven to decay; it is *ex-*

and *a-nihilo*, a dark echo of his poem “The First Anniversary: An Anatomy of the World”: “We seem ambitious, God’s whole work t’undo; / Of nothing he made us, and we strive too, / To bring our selves to nothing back” (155–57).

The conjunction of annihilation and martyrdom frames the ultimate concern of this essay: whether there is in Donne a specific kind of labor by which the self in devotion or martyrdom can be evacuated to nothing and then “re-beget” itself in a new form. The ravishment and passivity found in genuine martyrdom present one way of escaping the pull of annihilation in Donne. In other words, annihilation (emptying the soul so that God can enter) provides one route along which Donne imagines the possibility of immanently escaping another definition of annihilation (decay to nothingness). This essay, then, reconsiders Ramie Targoff’s claim that annihilation is “inconceivable” in Donne’s writing by asserting that we might envision annihilation itself as a strategy for Donne in certain instances.<sup>4</sup> The question with which we must grapple is whether this overcoming can be exemplary action or whether it can only take the form of singular passivity.

Donne’s interest in decay and its overcoming are vital for an understanding of annihilation and the longing for union with God. Likewise, my focus on annihilation allows us to grasp the productive, antimimetic model of martyrdom that Donne elaborates with such subtlety and that critics still have not fully appreciated. I do not so much emphasize instances in Donne where we see a longing to look past material decay to find an incorruptible and eternal core;<sup>5</sup> rather, I focus on moments where we witness his poetic thought seeking a path—a line of flight—from the concentric to the eccentric, a path that requires a paradoxical experience of annihilation in hopes of re-begetting the self in and with God. This is why annihilation and eccentric re-begetting can teach us much about martyrdom and the complex relationship between activity and passivity in a martyr’s dying for and into God.

To address these concerns, I first survey the semantic richness of the term *annihilation* in Donne’s prose. Then I turn to a reading of “Batter my heart” to explore whether we can associate annihilation and ravishment with labor and work, or whether we must understand them as experiences of passivity. In the final section, I address the problem of martyrdom in Donne directly by demonstrating what true martyrdom looks like in Donne’s works, particularly in *Biathanatos* (a “charitable” interpretation of self-homicide) and *Pseudo-Martyr* (a tract arguing that English Catholics should take the Oath of Allegiance). It is a passive martyrdom that arrives as an event but cannot be recommended as exemplary political action to be willfully sought or imitated. Donne’s critique of contemporary Catholic martyr-

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

## II

In addition to the centripetal decay annihilation exhibits in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, annihilation can take several other meanings for Donne. It sometimes serves as a translation for the Greek *kenosis* or Latin *exinanitio* in his sermons and in *Biathanatos*. *Kenosis* occurs only once in the Bible (Philippians 2:7), despite the fact that it became central to discussions of Christology throughout the Middle Ages and into the Reformation. In that passage, *kenosis* names the process by which Christ empties himself of his divinity in order to become incarnate in human flesh. *Exinanitio* (from *ex-inanire*, to empty out) is the Vulgate translation of *kenosis*, and Donne, one of the first to use the term *exinanition* in English, is sensitive to annihilation's relationship to Christ's own *kenosis*.<sup>6</sup>

Donne is certainly not the only one in the period to link the idea of annihilation as *kenotic* self-emptying with forms of nothingness both material and metaphysical. Pierre de Bérulle, a contemporary of Donne's, differentiates three forms of *nihil* in his writings on abnegation, in his *Opuscules de piété* (1644): the nothingness out of which we were created; the nothingness in which we are placed because of sin; and (with reference to Philippians 2:6–11) the nothingness that we have to accomplish, in imitation of Christ's *kenosis*, in order to transform ourselves.<sup>7</sup> Annihilation for Bérulle is the solution to the fact that human beings are constituted by the nothingness of sin. Only annihilation can lead to union with God. In his thinking on annihilation, Bérulle found influential texts by Benet of Canfield, an English mystic who converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism before joining recusant communities in Belgium and Paris.<sup>8</sup> Benet of Canfield proposes that the only remedy for the nonbeing or nothingness of the human creature (in comparison with God's perfect being) is to annihilate oneself and abide firmly in one's own nothingness: "and of our owne Nothing, as hath been shewne, examin whether yow haue duely annihilated your self."<sup>9</sup>

Likewise Donne, who was probably familiar with at least Benet of Canfield's text, conflates the first two forms of nothingness we find in Bérulle.<sup>10</sup> Bodily decline in Donne is a movement toward nothingness that is bound up with the nothingness of sin, rather than a purely material decay.

But a different form of annihilation offers itself as a possible solution. In *Biathanatos*, for example, Donne writes, “Christ said this now, because His passion was begun, for all His conversations here were degrees of exinanition.”<sup>11</sup> In this instance, Donne uses annihilation—exinanition—to designate an evacuation of the self that mimics Christ’s life and language (“conversations”) as sacrifice and passion, and which might be the model for escaping the nothingness of sin and bodily decay. In another context, at the end of Meditation 20, using alchemical terminology for the purgation, breakdown, and ultimate dissolution of matter, Donne describes something like a new humility, a declination and then clearing out of the will: “I am ground even to an attenuation, and must proceed to evacuation, all waies to exinanition and annihilation” (*Devotions*, 106). As Anthony Raspa has made clear in notes to his edition of *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, this passage moves from attenuation (“the first step in purgation . . . , a process for slipping a patient down of his excess humoral fats”) to evacuation (“an expulsion of material from the body”) to exinanition (“complete emptying of the patient’s venomous humors”) and then finally to annihilation (“evaporating out of existence” [181]). (Elsewhere *exinanition* and *annihilation* are synonymous.) Though Raspa has associated this vocabulary exclusively with purgation and alchemy, it seems likely, given Donne’s own use of *exinanition* as a translation of *kenosis*, that Donne is also describing a process of mystical annihilation, an annihilation that reduces the self to nothing in order to overcome the material decay and sinfulness that “attenuation” and “evacuation” can only forestall.

In addition to decay and exinanition, moreover, *annihilation* in Donne’s sermons can designate the mere destruction of a person, either his literal loss of life or his being forgotten by God. In a Lenten sermon at White-Hall (1626), Donne proclaims, “[F]or if it were in your power to annihilate this whole world, God were no worse than when there was a world, yet if God neglect you, forget, pretermitt you, it is a miserable annihilation, a fearfull malediction.”<sup>12</sup> God’s “neglect” of a person leads to a kind of annihilation, and so too does an individual’s excessive confidence in his relationship to God:

First then, Prodigality is a sin, that destroys even the means of liberality. If a man wast[e] so, as that he becomes unable to relieve others, by this wast[e], this is a sinful prodigality; but much more, if he wast[e] so, as that he is not able to subsist, and maintain himself; and this is our case, who have even annihilated

our selves, by our profuseness; For, it is his mercy that we are not consumed. It is a sin, and a viperous sin; it eats out his own womb; . . . It is *peccatum Biathanaton*, a sin that murders itself. (*Sermons*, 1:155, 1615)

In this third meaning, then, annihilation registers a forgetting by God or an improper self-dissolution. To be forgotten by God is to become nothing in sin. Prodigal sin empties out the self, but not in a positive sense; annihilation by profuseness is mere waste. Sin of this kind “eats out his own womb”; it is a self-murdering sin (*peccatum Biathanatos*). Annihilation can, therefore, also mean the exact opposite of *kenosis*: not emptying the self to nothing to make space for the divine in the soul, but rather wasting the self to nothing through sin: “There is an annihilation in sin; *Homines cum peccant, nihil sunt*; Then when by sin, I depart from the Lord my God, *in whom only I live, and move, and have my being*, I am nothing” (*Sermons*, 4:120, Easter Monday, 1622).

These uses illustrate how annihilation in Donne shifts semantically from a theory of matter’s ruination to a vocabulary of *kenosis*, sacrifice, and destruction that blurs action and passion as a person turns to nothing. Annihilation in Donne manifests that which we hold in common with all earthly beings, the capacity to sin and to decay into the earth of which we are made and against which we define ourselves. But annihilation tears us away from our human community and identity—a tearing away that can signal a proper or improper dissolution, a martyrdom for and communion with the divine or a wasteful destruction without union.

### III

In Holy Sonnet 14, “Batter my heart,” the form of annihilation that Donne encounters is the slow painful decay wrought by sin and the failure to feel God’s presence. When confronted with this kind of annihilation at the hands of sin, the poet turns instead to demand another kind of annihilation: destruction and ravishment by God. The speaker in “Batter my heart” hopes to inhabit an eccentric space of pure and chaste being. Donne’s sonnet works through a fundamental element of Christian conversion: that renunciation of oneself, dying to oneself, is prerequisite for being reborn in and as a different self. But Donne pushes beyond this understanding of conversion. By demanding that a rupturing event of God’s presence annihilate him, the

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

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

The sonnet grapples with a paradox: that the response to domination by sin is to demand a martyring ravishment so extreme that the speaker might attain a state of grace and eccentricity. Perhaps by way of registering this paradox formally, the sonnet initiates from its first word, “Batter,” a dual track for the brutality invoked. *Batter* signifies not only violence. It can also mean to paste together or to fix, and occasionally even to exchange.<sup>13</sup> Break me into nothing, the poet seems to say, but make this annihilation a re-collection of me in wholly new form. Thus from the first utterance the text locates a nexus of making and unmaking, putting together and breaking apart: to unmake the sinful life bound toward annihilation is to open up the possibility of a radical new life, one that perhaps only martyrdom and “ravishment” might achieve.

The sonnet makes this ravishment appear to be the achievement of a particular sort of labor—a mental and physical labor, perhaps, of self-abnegation. But the verse confronts us with the problem of whether ravishment itself can be achieved and experienced as an activity of the self or must be construed as a passion of the self’s undoing. In the idiom that Donne’s *Devotions* has so far helped us develop, we can read the speaker in Donne’s “Batter my heart” as seeking to create an eccentric self free of sin and decay and utterly “new,” by way of summoning his own “usurp[ation],”

“imprison[ment],” and (sexually) violent shattering. Yet the sonnet also displays that the willful working toward martyrdom may bar the speaker from the sacred violence that would annihilate and remake him.<sup>14</sup>

Following upon this imperative to “Batter my heart,” the speaker temporalizes this violent relationship to God, stating that “as yet” God has moved but to “knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend,” the wrenching tripled accents linking lines 2 and 4 as the past and future. The speaker demands that God hereafter “break, blow, burn and make me new,” create a “me” that would be perpetually new and not subject to sinful decay—the sonnet registers a desire not for gradual self-reform, but rather for a rupture in self so total that the self can be destroyed and completely remade, entirely freed from the material decay and spiritual devastation of the former self. These binaries of past and future modes of being (knock/break; breathe/blow; shine/burn; mend/make new) seem themselves to be ontologically linked, though, despite the emphasis on rupture; “break, blow, burn” are intensified versions of “knock, breathe, shine,” rather than drastic departures in the characterization of divine action. The intensified verbs, however, mark a particular shift in divine gender from a maternal God (mending) to a paternal one (breaking). The speaker longs for a God who would no longer help mend but would break him totally. Line 3 evokes further the radicalness of the speaker’s demand. In order to “rise and stand,” the speaker requests that God “o’erthrow” him.

In “Batter my heart,” we witness a wish not just to be hurled into an abyss of divine de-creation, but also a desire that this eradication of selfhood allow the speaker to “rise and stand.” The gendered language of resurrection, self-abnegation, and destruction throughout the poem is necessarily fraught with sexual overtones, intimations that will later be brutally consummated in the final line’s “ravish[ment].” The double entendres that suffuse the first quatrain soon turn into (no less eroticized) metaphors of colonial and monarchical struggle that shift figurations of the speaker, too, between feminine and masculine imagery, reinscribing the battered heart within a sociopolitical discourse. The subject of line 5, “I,” is displaced from its action by an entire poetic line, a line that characterizes the speaker as “An usurped town to another due,” whose only action is to “Labour to admit you.” The speaker, according to this figure, is a town that has been taken over and colonized by another. The speaker wishes that he could merely genuflect in self-evacuation as God breaks into his “town” and inserts his “viceroy,” but the speaker cannot himself actively begin this process. So we light upon a possible answer to our initial question: annihilation of the will



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

Donne's demand for divine violence, in other words, fails because it wills its own destruction and does not begin with a destruction of the will itself. In this beautifully disciplined poem, the speaker still remains too much in control of his own annihilation, as it were—a problem nicely embodied by the elision of the “I” in line 9, “Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,” in which the pronunciation of the “I” must, for prosodic necessity, be suppressed at just the moment when the speaker describes the desired link between active and passive love (love/would be loved), willed love for God and release into divine love. If the poet can suppress the pronunciation of the “I” for prosodic necessity, perhaps abnegations of the “I” take place through self-control, the discipline of meter in this instance. This is not a criticism of the poem—it is what the poem beautifully and disturbingly reveals to us: that poetic making itself may prepare for but ultimately marks the lack of the self-annihilation required for martyrdom.<sup>15</sup> Donne imagines elsewhere, in his prose writings on martyrdom, a divine violence so perfect that the will itself would become passive.

The former town having been broken, blown, and burned in “Batter my heart,” God would empower his own prince to make a “new” town and rule over it. But just as this strategy for self-destruction and remaking is figured metaphorically through military terms, it becomes unclear whether this rule will lead to a pure body (“town”) for the speaker, or whether the new regime will also envelop or tend toward sin (“viceroy” etymologically contains the pun of vice-roy, that is, sin-king as well as vice-king). Similarly, the passive verb in line 8 (“is captived”) does not sufficiently clarify the nature of the new regime, since this “three-personed God” is himself invoked through a ritual of sexual incursion and masochistic brutality.

This ambiguity is translated within the narrative of sexual drama that becomes especially noticeable in the third quatrain, as the speaker begs his God—since the speaker is “betrothed unto [God’s] enemy”—to “break that [matrimonial and narrative] knot again.” It is not clear, though, who is the husband and who the bride in this metaphor for the entanglement of life in the sin that makes it decay. We know from the first quatrain that the speaker’s desire for destruction and dissolution of the self is embedded within a yearning to assert himself, to “rise and stand.” But we also read that the speaker wishes God to “batter [his] heart” and colonize his “town,” and these feminized self-presentations continue in a misogynistic

mode as the speaker figures himself as the one who needs to be “defend[ed],” “divorce[d],” and “imprison[ed].” In the final couplet this gendered, eroticized, brutal struggle is completed, as the feminized or homoeroticized speaker closes, “for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.”<sup>16</sup> The speaker wishes to be enthralled and enslaved, seized and violated, in order to become truly “free” and “chaste.” The speaker’s desire must be beaten and broken in order that it can be pasted back together, burned until the carnal sin is scorched out of it so that such intense desire can, resurrected “new,” be redirected exclusively toward God. To overcome this absence of God that the speaker feels, he demands the ultimate, overwhelming presence: ravishment. *Ravish* is likely a postclassical Latin derivation from classical Latin *rapere*, which, as Gordon Teskey has reminded us in a discussion of allegorical violence, “is a literal translation of *harpazein* in the Chaldean Oracles and in Proclus’s commentary on the *Parmenides*, where it denotes an act of violent seizing by which beings are returned to the One.”<sup>17</sup> Ravishment makes the divine present within the poet and thereby unites him with divinity.

Only through this kind of sacred violence, the sonnet offers, can life be reconciled with God. This violence does not just emerge as a “strangely directionless and unmotivated energy of articulation,” as Brian Cummings has argued; Donne is articulating such violence as a way to overcome a life defined by sinful decay, a possibility that the poem ultimately presents as tentative and in need of further revision.<sup>18</sup>

Donne is considering the possibility that violence may not offer the presence of God for which the speaker hoped; violence that annihilates the self, indeed, may be recuperated within a narrative of the self. The final inability of brutal self-rupturing and remaking to salve the absence of God in “Batter my heart” in any way that might offer salvation or grace bespeaks an anxiety in the face of predetermined grace in the sonnet. The speaker “would be loved fain” by his God, but the violence summoned therefore darkly hints that such love is a kind of “feign,” an invention or falsification. Indeed, it is perhaps more accurate to say that it is not sacred violence itself but rather the willful demand for such violence that the poem moves us to suspect. Such a demand makes ravishment falsely appear to be an exemplary experience one can seek out. Think back to the shock of the sonnet’s opening imperative: “Batter my heart.” How could one demand that God annihilate oneself? The poem is not expressing skepticism toward self-annihilation in general, but it makes us look awry at the will that would so confidently demand ravishment as a model for union with God. The sonnet

thus negatively images a form of self-annihilation proceeding from a “prevenient violence” (to borrow a phrase from Teskey) that would rid the self of the will and all its labors in preparation for the unexemplary experience of ravishment in devotion.<sup>19</sup> Annihilation without labor, devotional passivity that can be neither communicated nor copied, is the eccentric beyond toward which the poem beautifully and disturbingly gestures. This eccentric beyond seems to promise a release from the labor of poetic making itself, from the discipline of meter, yet it is a lesson that Donne learns—and perhaps most effectively teaches—immanently through the form of this sonnet.

What we see in “Batter my heart” is a movement toward the martyrdom of ravishment. Donne’s conceptualization of self-annihilation is rooted in his understanding of grace: to have the possibility of being successful—that is, to have the possibility of true self-emptying or martyrdom—one must be released from the will, must make space in the self that is passive enough to receive God. “Batter my heart” fails to be about the experience of self-annihilation; that is its greatest success, what it reveals most intimately. In what follows, I reveal that Donne’s critique of such false desires and demands underwrites his critique of Catholic martyrdom, but also allows him concretely to outline a model of martyrdom that he revalues positively. At the end of this essay, we will see, in Donne’s reflection on Samson, that his revaluation of martyrdom also opens up the possibility of a revaluation of divinely inspired violence against a political entity.

#### IV

Donne’s ultimate purpose in his prose writing on martyrdom, and especially in *Biathanatos*, is to outline a productive model of martyrdom, one that we are only in a position to understand if we grasp the relationship between passion and action that “Batter my heart” performs. John Carey recently began a review of John Stubbs’s biography of John Donne with the following past conditional: “John Donne is remembered as a great Elizabethan love poet, some would say the greatest love poet in the English language. But he might easily, had things fallen out differently, have been remembered as a Catholic martyr.”<sup>20</sup> We make a mistake if we do not take this counterfactual statement seriously. In order to distinguish more clearly the forms of martyrdom that Donne condemns and those that he finds productive, I examine first some comments by Donne in a sermon of his on conversion. Donne’s theory of conversion, at least here, gives us a key to understanding his thinking on martyrdom, a key already glimpsed in our reading of “Bat-

ter my heart”: the homology between Christ’s passion and our passivity. The conceptual importance of this connection will become more apparent, but this linking of conversion to martyrdom should seem something less than surprising from the start. After all, it was something like a conversion that saved Donne, unlike most of the rest of his family, from being remembered as a Catholic martyr, a fact to which Donne himself alludes in the preface to the 1610 publication of *Pseudo-Martyr*.<sup>21</sup>

In one of his last sermons preached at St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1628, Donne takes as his proof-text an isolated part of Acts 28:6: “They changed their minds, and said that he was a God” (*Sermons*, 8:312). The “he” referenced here is Paul, and the sermon is a meditation and celebration of Paul’s conversion, but interestingly the proof-text refers to a change (the Vulgate has *converto*) not so much in Paul but in those he has encountered during his shipwreck on the island of Malta on his way to be tried in Rome. Donne’s sermon will circle around and ultimately focus in on the grammatical, narrative, and theological conjugation of *change*. What does it mean to change one’s mind, to convert to a new belief, a novel structure of piety?

Donne develops a complex affective and theological description of conversion and relates it to rapture and martyrdom. Early in the sermon, he describes Paul’s own conversion as follows: “[God] gave him a Rapture, an Extasie, and in that, an appropinquation, an approximation to himself, and so some possession of Heaven in this life” (8:313). Here, we see conversion initiated by an ecstasy that has at its core what Donne calls “appropinquation”—Paul is approximated to himself, and whether that self is God or Paul’s true self remains purposely ambiguous, because it’s both. But this rapturous ecstasy and attendant appropinquation, this going out of oneself to become approximated to one’s true self in God, is the annihilation and re-begetting of Paul in this life.

As the sermon proceeds, Donne elaborates on the aftermath of conversion with a reference to Denys the Areopagite:

as S. Denys the Areopagite expresses it, *A Deo doctus, non solum divina discit, sed divina patitur*, (which we may well translate, or accommodate thus) He that is thoroughly taught by Christ, does not onely beleieve all that Christ sayes, but conformes him to all that Christ did, and is ready to suffer as Christ suffered. Truly, if it were possible to feare any defect of joy in heaven, all that could fall into my feare would be but this, that in heaven I can no longer expresse my love by suffering for my God, for my Saviour. (8:320)

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

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

*They changed*, sayes our Text; not their mindes; there is no evidence, no appearance, that they exercised any, that they had any; but they changed their passions. Nay, they have not so much honour, as that afforded them, in the Originall; for it is not *They changed*, but *They were changed*, passively; Men subject to the transportation of passion, doe nothing of themselves, but are merely passive. (327)<sup>22</sup>

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

Donne's account of conversion's passivity is essential for his discussion of martyrdom. After all, we should recall that Donne's quotation from Dionysius bases our openness to being like Christ in *divina patitur*: to suffering divinely or like the divine. I have shown that Donne carefully considers the desire for and failure to achieve this passivity in "Batter my heart." True martyrdom is rooted in conversion: one must encounter one's death as something one could never labor toward, choose, or will. As with grace, Donne's understanding of martyrdom requires the clearing of a space for a pure passivity of reception in which the infinitude of the divine can be realized and made present in the finite. But what does this clearing look like in Donne's writings on martyrdom?

This question has generally not been asked before because the majority of writing on Donne and martyrdom, from critics as different as Deborah

Shuger and Annabel Patterson, is consistent in emphasizing Donne's abiding skepticism toward martyrdom.<sup>23</sup> Donne's argument in *Pseudo-Martyr*, urging English Catholics to take the Oath of Allegiance while retaining their inner loyalty to the spiritual authority of Rome, has seemed like a conservative surrender to James I, a "remarkable act of submission to the system."<sup>24</sup> I argue, in contrast, that one of Donne's main purposes in these tracts, and especially in *Biathanatos*, is to outline a true form of martyrdom rather than to dismiss martyrdom altogether. Donne's critique of martyrdom is only directed against a martyrdom that does not glorify Christ exclusively: "I have a just and Christianly estimation, and reverence, of that devout and acceptable Sacrifice of our lives, for the glory of our blessed Saviour" (*Pseudo-Martyr*, 8). In Donne's estimation, undergoing martyrdom because of a longing to obey the authority of the church or to follow an exemplary model cannot but turn into a false form of sacrifice. This is not to say that Donne thinks that an unexemplary martyrdom free of willing is necessarily in conflict with or disconnected from questions of political efficacy or fidelity to community. It is a claim that only asserts the annihilation of the individual will as a prerequisite for true martyrdom. It proposes that martyrdom itself cannot be a political action that a free individual willfully plans and executes. In Donne's reading, Catholic martyrdom is sullied by a pope who "serves his own ambitions to your destruction" (240); it thus only amounts to a state-sponsored death. Institutionalized martyrdom, proposed as exemplary political intervention, serves merely to create a position of passivity to the state, not the true passivity by which God may destroy the will and the self can be approximated to the divine. Donne is unconcerned to describe this productive martyrdom as Protestant, even if its outline becomes visible through a critic of contemporary Catholic practice.

*Biathanatos* was published only after Donne's death, and against his purported wishes; in its first printed edition from 1644, it was dedicated to Philip Herbert, whom Nigel Smith has described as "the decidedly mystical Earl of Pembroke, patron of various brands of radical Puritanism."<sup>25</sup> It was not a text that Donne, when closest to James I, would have wanted the world to see, and the fact that it was dedicated to a radical Puritan mystic in its first printing is just one sign of why it might have disturbed the Anglican establishment. But there is also a disturbing philosophical and political problem at the core of these considerations that Donne's writings never fully resolve: how we can consider an experience of passivity as initiation for an action in acts of martyrdom? How can we even describe the sacrifice of martyrdom or

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

In *Biathanatos*, Donne seeks to awaken “charity” in interpreting the sacrifices of martyrdom. He argues that “self-homicide” can appear in the world in a form that is not sinful or heretical (46). Selectively appropriating and departing from the arguments against suicide found in Augustine and Aquinas, Donne posits there is a natural inclination or drive toward self-extinction, “a desire of dying which nature had bred” (78).<sup>26</sup> By the end of his treatise, Donne goes so far as to claim, with reference to a genealogy of arguments from Philippians 1:23, Augustine, Lombard, Serarius, and Aquinas, that the desire to be dissolved—“*cupio dissolvi*”—in Christ is the greatest perfection (“that than which none can be greater”):

But when he [Augustine] comes to that than which none can be greater, he says then, the Apostle [Paul] came to *cupio dissolvi*. For, as one may love God with all his heart, and yet he may grow in that love, and love God more with all his heart, for the first was commanded in the Law, and yet counsel of perfection was given to him who said that he had fulfilled the first commandment, so, as St. Augustine found a degree above that charity which made a man *paratum ponere*, which is *cupere*, so there is a degree above that, which is to do it. This is that virtue by which martyrdom, which is not such of itself, becomes an act of highest perfection. (166–67)<sup>27</sup>

*Cupio dissolvi* is “that virtue by which martyrdom, which is not such of itself, becomes an act of highest perfection.” Here Donne is citing Lombard on Augustine’s concept of charity, which Lombard divides into five categories: beginning, proficient, perfect, more perfect, and most perfect; perfect charity is glossed as being ready to die for another, in Donne’s reading. *Cupio dissolvi*—pure self-sacrifice—has an even higher degree of perfection than willingness to die for a neighbor—it is the most perfect form of charity, and it defines true martyrdom, making it into an act of highest perfection. Within the logic of *Biathanatos*, at least, there is a natural tendency to self-murder or self-sacrifice which is in constant conflict with the institutions of state and church that require live bodies and agents, and this natural inclination is perfected in the true martyrdom that releases the self from the will.

The illustrative instance of self-homicide as true martyrdom in *Biathanatos* is Christ himself: with the divine immanent within him, Christ had

the proper inspiration to “give up his soul before he was constrained to do so,” and all who imitate this action of unconstrained self-sacrifice “imitate this act of our Saviour” (173). “Giving up his soul”—giving up his will and releasing himself into God’s—initiates martyrdom in Donne’s thinking, and any “constraining,” whether by labors of the will, by desires for mimetic similarity, or by an institution like state or church, ruins the real, passive imitation of Christ’s self-sacrifice. This is the reason, *pace* Brad Gregory’s work on early modern martyrdom, that martyrdom in Donne cannot be *exemplary*: it requires a form of passivity that any model of martyrdom based on the idea of intentional imitation of an action cannot capture. Gregory argues that “the extremism of martyrdom should be understood not as a fanaticism of the fringe, but as exemplary action.”<sup>28</sup> This analysis, however, does not account for Donne’s model. We should instead think of true, charitable martyrdom in Donne as a fanaticism that seeks an unexemplary passivity so extreme it requires a violence that one cannot seek out, work toward, or advocate.

Donne analyzes many biblical examples to illustrate the paradox of martyrs who are types of Christ but not examples to be followed. For example, “the passive action of Eleazar,” Donne notes with reference to the martyr of 1 Maccabees 6:46 who opened himself to execution rather than eat pork, is similar to Christ’s sacrifice insofar as it is a self-exposure to destruction (187). Eleazar’s martyrdom reveals an annihilation of the will; this is the only way Eleazar could achieve “passive action.”

Samson, the Jewish judge and martyr who pulls down the Temple of Dagon, provides the case of martyrdom Donne dwells on longest after Christ. Blinded and imprisoned, Samson kills himself and his Philistine captors in the Book of Judges. Turning to commentaries that range from Augustine to Calvin and Pererius, among others, Donne argues that it was the “special inspiration from God,” the infusion of the Spirit into Samson and the annihilation of Samson’s will, that made Samson a true martyr. Donne concludes that Samson died “with the same zeal as Christ, unconstrained; for in this manner of dying, as much as in anything else, he was a type of Christ” (182). Donne insists on this true, unconstrained form of martyrdom characterized by divine inspiration.

But how do we know if someone is like Samson or Christ—a martyr or religious zealot moved by truly divine inspiration—or just a person claiming to be inspired for political or personal reasons, a demagogue or madman? In the single mention of Samson in *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne writes:



And this secret and inward instinct and moving of the holy Ghost, which the Church presumes, to have guided not only these martyres, in whose forwardnesse these authors have observed some incongruity with the rules of Divinity, but also Sampson, and those Virgines which drowned themselves for preservation of their chastity, which are also accounted by that Church as martyres; although (I say) this instinct lie not in prooffe, nor can be made evident. (35)

With these words, Donne emphasizes the problem of how one might interpret or know inspiration, how spectators to martyrdom can determine whether they have witnessed true divine inspiration or mere conceit. To return to the language of conversion, how can anyone know whether conversion has taken place, whether another person has passively been changed? This passage powerfully articulates for us a problem regarding what it would mean to prepare oneself for a death that one could never really choose and that others can never truly know. Donne's meditations on Samson also conflate the violence of self-sacrificial martyrdom with divinely inspired violence against the state, since Samson irrevocably enacts both at once.

In his famous treatise on secular authority, Martin Luther claims that being filled with the Holy Spirit requires grace, and with this Donne would agree. But Luther continues to claim, in an oft-quoted citation, "[I]f you want to act like Samson, then first become like Samson."<sup>29</sup> And here Donne's consideration of martyrdom has led us to an essential point that we have to consider when thinking about violence to self or to state that is claimed to be God's will: how does one *become* like Samson? And what would it mean to become *like* Samson if his martyrdom can never be exemplary? Is there an activity or labor one could undertake to annihilate one's own will and make way for the passivity of divine inspiration? If so, does one actually become like Samson? Or does divine inspiration just happen, an event for which there can be no intellectual or physical preparation and around which similarities are projected in a retrospective narration that effaces the singularity of *this* martyrdom? Though Donne does not offer easy answers to these questions, he makes it clear that martyrdom for him could never be exemplary in the sense of a model to follow. One cannot labor or train to become like Christ or Samson. One can only be opened passively to that appropinquation in which one becomes like God by losing oneself, by undergoing a conversion—a transformation of self through its

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

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

Still pray we for a peaceable life against violent death, and for time of repentance against sudden death, and for sober and modest assurance against distempered and diffident death, but never make ill conclusions upon persons overtaken with such deaths; *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis*, to God the Lord belong the issues of death. And he received Samson, who went out of this world in such a manner (consider it actively, consider it passively in his own death, and in those whom he slew with himself) as was subject to interpretation hard enough. Yet the Holy Ghost hath moved Saint Paul to celebrate Samson in his great catalogue, and so doth all the church. (*Sermons*, 10:248, 1631)

Donne lays bear the interpretative difficulties that Samson’s death presents. This is for Donne a “subject to interpretation hard enough”: was Samson’s sudden death, and the martyrdom that death brought, the way in which Samson was “issued” into passive sacrifice and united with God? Or was Samson being punished for a zeal that destroyed him and many others? The difficulty of this passage centers on the phrase recorded cryptically in parentheses: “consider it actively, consider it passively.” The caesura dividing each directive gives us little help. We are left to wonder whether we must consider Samson’s sudden violence actively and then passively, in temporal progression or as dialectical paradox, or whether we must hold it in our minds both actively and passively at the same time, as an irresolvable parallax. We cannot know if Samson’s will was annihilated and God passively moved him, or if he labored to achieve his action of martyrdom and destruction. Thrown back on the necessity of “interpreting” the spectacle of Samson’s martyrdom—“consider it actively, consider it passively”—we find that Donne has anticipated questions that generations after him would find of the utmost importance, most immediately looking ahead to Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*.<sup>30</sup> By enjoining us to consider Samson, Donne presents us with an aporia; we cannot know the source of Samson’s martyrdom, but we must consider it as potentially both action and passion. In that interminable consideration, we

must never forget that Samson cannot be exemplary; his martyrdom, if it is true, must be considered in its passive singularity. The only way out of this aporia is to be like Paul in Donne's description, to be released from the labor of interpretation by divine inspiration: "Yet the Holy Ghost hath moved Saint Paul to celebrate Samson." As with martyrdom, however, one cannot work to be moved in this manner.



## Notes

- 1 *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins, rev. ed. (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 2010), lines 15–16. All quotations from Donne's poems are from this edition, cited by line numbers.
- 2 John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 51; hereafter cited in the text as *Devotions*.
- 3 For a contemporary example of this usage, with which Donne was likely familiar, see Benet of Canfield, *The rule of perfection contayning a breif and perspicuous abridgement of all the wholle spirituall life, reduced to this only point of the (will of God)* (Roan [i.e., Rouen], 1609), 13.
- 4 Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 122: "The impulse to cancel out one's own existence, like the desire to deny God's existence, is finally inconceivable."
- 5 For a version of this reading, see David A. Hedrich Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the Resurrection of Atomic Theory," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 31, no. 1 (1991): 69–94, at 75.
- 6 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), s.v. *exinanition*, n.
- 7 Pierre de Bérulle, *Opuscules de piété* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1997), 148, 226–28, 344–46. See also, Bérulle's first published work, *Bref discours de l'abnégation intérieure* (originally written in 1597), collected in *Oeuvres complètes du Cardinal de Bérulle*, 2 vols. (Montsoul, Fr.: Maison d'Institution de l'Oratoire, 1960), 2:644–77.
- 8 Jean-Yves Lacoste, ed., *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1:201.
- 9 Canfield, *Rule of perfection*, 166.
- 10 See Nigel Smith, "What's Inside? Donne, Interiority, and Independency," in *John Donne and Modernity*, ed. Robert Ellrodt, Armand Himy, and Margaret Llasera (Nanterre: Université Paris-X, 1995), 25–35, at 31.
- 11 John Donne, *Biathanatos*, ed. Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin (New York: Garland, 1982), 171; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.
- 12 *Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953–62), 7:363, First Sunday in Lent 1626/27; hereafter cited in the text by volume, page number, and date (when possible).
- 13 For dictionary definitions that support this paronomasia, see, e.g., the entry for *muto*,

*mutas, mutare* in Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae*, 4th ed. (London, 1584), where “exchange” and “batter” are used as synonyms. And see the early 1620–23 entry for *clinch* in Henry Mainwaring, *Nomenclator Navalis*, published as *The Seaman’s Dictionary* in *The Life and Works of Sir Henry Mainwaring*, ed. George Ernest Manwaring and William Gordon Perrin, 2 vols. (London: Naval Records Society, 1920–22), 2:127: “To Clinch is to batter or rivet a bolt’s end upon a ring, or turn back the end of any nail so as to make it fast at the end which is driven through; we also call that part of the cable which is seized about the ring of the anchor the clinch of the cable.”

- 14 Targoff comments that Donne confronts in this sonnet the self-annihilation that he so feared throughout much of his earlier poetry and prose, and she canvases some of the different meanings that *nothing* takes on in Donne’s prose (*John Donne, Body and Soul*, 121–22). Though I find Targoff’s reading of this sonnet very helpful, I disagree that there is no desire for annihilation in “Batter my heart”; the poem’s intense fascination with divine violence exceeds a desire for “the repair of what already exists” (122).
- 15 Compare Stanley Fish’s claim that Herbert’s poems “become the vehicle of their own abandonment” when we recognize that Christ is the substance of all things and the performer of all actions; *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 157–58.
- 16 For the history of critical interpretations of this moment as heterosexual or homosexual sexual violence, see Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 50–54.
- 17 Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 18 n. 24. Teskey cites Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958), 48 n. 1 and 40 nn. 4 and 5 as the origin of this analysis of *rapere* in *In Parmenidem*, bk. 5, col. 1033, line 27, in Proclus, *Procli philosophi Platonici opera inedita*, ed. Victor Cousin, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1864).
- 18 Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 397. I agree with Cummings’s insightful evaluation that “the violence [in “Batter my heart”] is over-determined, as if in compensation for the marked absence of the violent intervention of grace.”
- 19 See Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 18.
- 20 John Carey, “Love and Heresy in John Donne,” *New York Review of Books* 54, no. 10, June 14, 2007, 59.
- 21 *Pseudo-Martyr: Wherein out of certaine propositions and gradations, this conclusion is evicted. That those which are of the Romane religion in this Kingdome, may and ought to take the Oath of Allegiance*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 8: “I have beene ever kept awake in a meditation of Martyrdome, by being derived from such a stocke and race, as, I believe, no family . . . hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, then it hath done.” Further citations are given parenthetically in the text.
- 22 For a reading of Donne’s analysis of grace and passivity in this sermon, see Cummings, *Literary Culture of the Reformation*, 416–17.
- 23 See Debora Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics,*

- and the Dominant Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 159–217; and Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 100–113. For more recent versions of this argument, see Jesse M. Lander, *Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145–79; and Rebecca Lemon, *Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006), 107–36.
- 24 Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, 103. For readings that emphasize a more equivocal or critical Donne, see Nancy E. Wright, “The *Figura* of the Martyr in John Donne’s Sermons,” *ELH* 56, no. 2 (1989): 293–309; Susannah Brietz Monta, *Martyrdom and Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 131–50; and Adam H. Kitzes, “Paradoxical Donne: *Biathanatos* and the Problems of Political Assimilation,” *Prose Studies* 24, no. 3 (2001): 1–17. Olga Valbuena, in “Casuistry, Martyrdom, and the Allegiance Controversy in Donne’s ‘Pseudo-Martyr,’” *Religion and Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 49–80, has recently argued that Donne’s defense of casuistry in pushing for Catholics to sign the Oath of Allegiance under James I after the Gunpowder Plot went hand in hand with his redefinition of martyrdom as a “living martyrdom,” a taking up of the cross of *this* life’s sufferings.
- 25 Smith, “What’s Inside?,” 34.
- 26 See the helpful commentary in the introduction to Rudick and Battin’s edition of *Biathanatos* on Donne’s radical departure from Aquinas’s comments in the *Summa Theologiae* that “everything naturally loves itself, and it is thus proper for everything to keep itself in being and resist decay as far as it can” (1), though Donne will cite Aquinas twice at just the moment when he defines the desire to be dissolved.
- 27 Donne returns to this phrase, *cupio dissolvi*, throughout his sermons. Katrin Ettenhuber, *Donne’s Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), has located a particularly large number of references in the sermons of 1625 and 1626 (145 n. 19). The phrase is a reference to the Vulgate translation of Philippians 1:23: “coartor autem e duobus desiderium habens dissolvi et cum Christo esse multo magis melius.”
- 28 Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8.
- 29 Martin Luther, “On Secular Authority,” in *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, ed. Harro Höpfl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22.
- 30 For a suggestive argument that Milton was likely influenced by Donne’s commentary on Samson in *Biathanatos*, see George F. Butler, “Donne’s *Biathanatos* and *Samson Agonistes*: Ambivalence and Ambiguity,” *Milton Studies* 34 (1997): 199–219.

