

ABSTRACT

To Ask “fit things fitly”: The Prayers of John Donne’s
Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

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John Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* is often read alongside the many devotionals that shaped religious life during the early part of the seventeenth century. One subset of this literature, however, has often been overlooked: the array of devotional manuals purporting to provide instruction on the art of Christian prayer. When considered alongside this tradition, it becomes apparent that the prayers in Donne’s *Devotions* can be read as evidence of its author’s participation in the project of the prayer manualists, as well as his simultaneous departure from them in one key area of concern: the importance of the pray-er’s distinct voice. As his comments on prayer in his sermons and the prayer-texts in the *Devotions* illustrate, while Donne agreed with many of the central components of seventeenth-century prayer theory, his adoption of an adapted Augustinian prayer voice highlights the importance of the pray-er in the act of divine supplication.

To Ask "fit things fitly": The Prayers of John Donne's
Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In his novel *The Book of the Dun Cow*, Walter Wangerin, Jr. writes, “‘Done,’ when it is well done, is a very good word.” While time and wisdom will eventually tell whether or not this thesis on Donne has truly been done well, it is, at the very least, done—a fact that begs a grateful response. First and foremost, I want to thank my thesis committee, whose comments on (and patience with) my early drafts helped me to correct several missteps that would have taken me down some very tangled paths indeed. I also wish to thank the organizers of the Midwest Conference on Christianity and Literature for allowing me to present the early stages of my first chapter at the April 2012 meeting. The Chapel in North Canton lent me their library as a study space during the summer of 2012, when I did the greatest part of my writing—a generosity for which I am also grateful. Finally, my deepest appreciation is due to the family and friends who supported me in the long research and writing process—especially my colleagues in the English department at Baylor, my parents, and my wife Brittany, who graciously sacrificed the first two months of our marriage to many a night of writing and revision.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In late 1623, John Donne, Dean of St. Paul's in London and popular poet and court preacher, contracted a nearly fatal case of what biographers now assume to have been typhus. During his subsequent recovery and convalescence, Donne began setting down in writing his sickbed meditations, composing a set of twenty-three prose devotions that translated his descent into sickness, treatment, and eventual recovery into a metaphor for the spiritual journey of the soul from sin to salvation. In his progression from health into sickness and then back again, Donne, so widely recognized now for his ingenious capacity for metaphor, saw an image of the sinner's struggle with the spiritual disease of sin and the healing power of the Great Physician. After his recovery was complete, this set of writings was quickly revised, prepared for publication, and released to the reading public in 1624 under the title *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. The book became fairly popular following its release, despite its above-average length—as Brooke Conti notes, it went through five editions in the seventeenth century, drawing little critical attention but meeting with considerable success among laypersons (366). With the turn of the eighteenth century, however, the work fell into obscurity until interest in Donne's poetry was revived during the first half of the twentieth century. Since then, scholars have begun paying increasing attention to his prose, seeking to articulate its connections to his poetry and how his accomplishments in both forms inform our understanding of the mind that originated them.

While the *Devotions* have not received nearly so much attention as Donne's poetry, it is still the author's most discussed prose work. Although a thorough and updated scholarly edition is wanting, and while full-length studies are almost absent (one notable exception being Kate Gartner Frost's *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*), past decades have seen a steady stream of articles analyzing the structure, content, and contexts of the *Devotions*. The work continues to be of interest primarily to students of literature, theology, and church history, and its influence can be seen through the comfortable familiarity of a handful of passages—most notably those in Devotion XVII, whose statements on the interconnectedness of mankind have provided titles to Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Thomas Merton's *No Man is an Island*. Though it is still only gradually coming to be recognized as an indispensable piece of the English literary canon, Donne's deathbed chronicle continues to exert an ever-increasing influence alongside the thundering, violent beauty of its author's better known poems.

One of the book's most unique qualities is its structure, which, while appearing to have been influenced by several devotional traditions, does not belong wholly to any—a fact that, as Conti notes, “baffled” early twentieth-century critics (370). As mentioned above, it is divided neatly into twenty-three separate devotions, each of which corresponds to one stage in Donne's illness or convalescence. Each devotion is then further divided into what the title page describes as “Meditations upon our Humane Condition...Expostulations, and Debatelements with God,” and “Prayers, upon the several occasions, to him.” Donne scholars have proposed a number of bases for this threefold division; however, as will be discussed later, it seems probable that one influence was

Aristotle's threefold division of rhetoric into the categories of forensic, epideictic, and deliberative—a model that suggests that the prayers parallel the “deliberative” mode, which seeks to articulate and facilitate the realization of what ought to be done.

In the scholarly literature, the first two sections of each devotion—the meditations and expostulations—have tended to receive a majority of the attention, while the third—the prayers—has been disproportionately neglected. While some critics make passing reference to a prayer here or there, no one has yet conducted a critical analysis of the prayers as a subset of texts-within-the-text, despite the fact that, in their content and style, they are both similar to each other and markedly distinct from the rest of the work. Some scholars have come close to doing so; Herbert H. Umbach's *The Prayers of John Donne*, for instance, anthologizes a selection of prayers from the *Devotions* (along with excerpts from Donne's *Essays in Divinity*, *Divine Poems*, and letters and sermons), introducing them with what the title page describes as “an Essay on Donne's Idea of Prayer” (though it might be more accurately explained as a gathering of quotations on the subject of prayer from Donne's letters and sermons interspersed with occasional, brief asides from the editor). More substantial is the second chapter of Jeffrey Johnson's *The Theology of John Donne*, which draws upon Donne's comments on prayer in his sermons to argue that “for Donne prayer, and specifically public prayer, is an activity so central to Christianity that for him it transcends sectarian allegiances” (39). Neither piece of scholarship, however, is wholly satisfying in its treatment of the prayers themselves. Umbach relies mostly upon laudatory remarks or summary statements in his sparse commentary, while Johnson references the prayers more often as proof texts for Donne's

claims in his sermons than as texts that are, in and of themselves, worthy of consideration.

Thus, in the grand tradition of attempting to remediate areas of scholarly silence, I wish to give the Prayers in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* their due consideration. Of course, such a suggestion is not without its pitfalls; prayer as a subject of academic inquiry has seldom fared well, likely for some of the same reasons pointed out by Cynthia Garrett in her study of seventeenth-century prayer manuals:

Those religiously inclined perhaps consider prayer beyond criticism, while students of intellectual and religious history may consider it somehow beneath criticism. But a more specific reason for the neglect of English prayer guides lies in their marginal position among current academic disciplines. Because they provide popular instruction rather than doctrine, they have escaped the notice of students of theology; because they rarely treat sectarian issues, they have proved of little interest to historians of religion; and because they have been regarded as lacking the literary character and tradition of other Renaissance prose forms, such as the meditation or sermon, they have also been largely neglected by literary critics. (328)

It is, in fact, in response to Garrett's final suggestion—that prayer, and specifically Renaissance prayer, has been largely ignored because of its lack of “literary character and tradition”—that this thesis is written. To the contrary, I would like to suggest that, upon close examination, Donne's prayers exhibit both a correspondence to two vibrant traditions of prose—namely, those of the Renaissance prayer manuals and the more ancient Augustinian devotion—as well as the hallmarks of an innovative mind whose reshaping of those traditions produced a set of texts that are at once both spiritually edifying and aesthetically delightful. Furthermore, by considering Donne's written prayer texts as participating in the larger project of the seventeenth century devotional manualists, I hope to underscore the degree to which the *Devotions* might be understood

as an intentionally didactic work that its author consciously shaped and made available as the teaching gift of a devoted pastor to his spiritual flock.

In this thesis's first chapter, I will draw attention to the ways in which Donne's theories on prayer are generally in agreement with that of the majority of the Renaissance prayer manualists. Devotional manuals as a category were a widely popular genre during the seventeenth century, and they gave rise to the development of a number of sub-genres, including manuals for prayer. As Philip C. McGuire notes, such manuals "schooled the devout man to compose his own prayers...adapt[ing] the topics, places, and figures of the art of rhetoric to the act of gathering material and casting it into prayer, and they provided 'moulds' or models to be used as guides for one's own prayers" (65).

While the *Devotions* contain little in terms of direct instruction on the method of prayer, I contend that the prayers therein are intended, in part, to act as models by which Donne's readers might learn the forms and content most appropriate for the delicate art of divine supplication. Donne's affinity with the prayer manualists, while fairly evident in the prayers themselves, is made all the more apparent when one considers his own frequent and eloquent sermons on the topic of prayer. Thus, using Cynthia Garrett's thorough study of the prayer manual tradition as a framework, I will draw upon Donne's sermons to illustrate his clear awareness of and interaction with the dominant strains of thought that shaped that tradition.

In the second chapter, I will then turn to the prayers themselves as a means of considering how Donne departed from the conventions of the prayer manualists, conscientiously modeling a language of prayer that is based upon that found in

Augustine's *Confessions* and *De Doctrina Christiana*¹; however, as I will show, Donne did not simply replicate the Augustinian methodology, but adapted it, inflecting his prayers with the idiosyncratic characteristics of what has come to be known as Donne's "metaphysical" style. By examining the style and content of the prayers themselves, I will also seek to answer the question, "If the prayers in the *Devotions* can be viewed as a set of didactic texts, then what exactly was Donne hoping to teach through them?" In doing so, I intend to bring a new degree of clarity to Donne's professional role not only as a craftsman of literary texts (for which he is already well-recognized), but also as a teacher and pastor whose ministerial calling shaped his publication efforts no less than his literary career.

In what is doubtlessly the most famous passage from the *Devotions*, Donne writes, "No Man is an Iland, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine" (87). For Donne, neither the merits nor the failings of any man can be considered without attention to the manifold forces that shape him and are shaped by him. Unfortunately, figures of literary prominence run the dangerous risk of being turned into monoliths by their admirers, somehow standing above the influence of their age; however, an alternative (and, I contend, more rewarding) path lies in considering how individuals such as Donne both recognized and made use of their sacred, contiguous connection to their fellow man in order to learn from and instruct him. This is, in fact, among the oldest roles of the poet-priest, and one that is foreshadowed in the disciples' words to Christ: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

¹ In the Works Cited, this work appears under its English title, *On Christian Teaching*.

CHAPTER TWO

John Donne and the Seventeenth-Century Prayer Manual Tradition

In a sermon delivered on December 12, 1626, at the funeral of Sir William Cokayne, John Donne preached the following words discussing the difficulty of maintaining focus during hours of private devotion:

...When we consider with a religious seriousnesse the manifold weaknesses of the stronger devotions in time of Prayer, it is a sad consideration. I throw my selfe downe in my Chamber, and I call in, and invite God, and his Angels thither, and when they are there, I neglect God and his Angels, for the noise of a Flie, for the ratling of a Coach, for the whining of a doore; I talke on, in the same posture of praying; Eyes lifted up; knees bowed downe; as though I prayed to God; and, if God, or his Angels should aske me, when I thought last of God in that prayer, I cannot tell: Sometimes I finde that I had forgot what I was about, but when I began to forget it, I cannot tell. A memory of yesterdays pleasures, a feare of to morrows dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine eare, a light in mine eye, an any thing, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spirituall things, perfect in this world. (VII.10.271-86)

Donne's description of prayer in this passage is remarkable for a number of reasons.

First, it replicates in prose the same self-abasing, self-deprecating humility that characterizes many of Donne's best religious poems, especially the "Holy Sonnets." His candidness is uncanny, moving beyond a mere explanation of prayer in the abstract to portray the preacher's own poignant struggles against himself in his periods of private prayer. In this, it is an excellent example of Donne's pastoral sensitivity, his care to present himself not as a pontificating pedagogue (such a presence would hardly be welcome at a funeral, one might expect), but as a fellow Christian trudging alongside his flock in the midst of divine mystery. The passage is also remarkable in the insight it

provides us into Donne's personal devotional practice—a topic that will be discussed at greater length in the pages to follow. For now, however, it is worth noting that the practice of extemporaneous prayer that Donne describes here was not without controversy in the seventeenth century, though the majority of dissention surrounded the use of unpremeditated prayers in public services of worship—a practice that Donne largely condemned. Even in private prayer, however, Donne elsewhere suggests a measure of restraint, apparently favoring the careful composition of one's own prayers as opposed to the spontaneous speech of extemporaneous speech.

What is most significant about this passage, however, is not what it tells us about either Donne's sermonic or devotional practices, but rather what it suggests about the weight that he placed on prayer itself as an essential component of the Christian life. His aim is not so much to provide a definition or description of prayer as it is to prove that there is “nothing, nothing in spiritual things, perfect in this world.” It is to this end, then, that he selects prayer as his subject—as his logic sets it, if prayer is imperfect, then surely all other “spiritual things” must also be prone to imperfection. What this passage ultimately tells us, then, is that Donne considered prayer to be of paramount importance to the Christian life. For him (and, indeed, for many of his fellow Englishmen), prayer was the centerpiece of Christian worship from which all other devotional practices, public or private, drew their sustenance—a position he makes clear at the outset of another of his sermons, in which he declares simply and forcefully, “Prayer is our whole service to God” (V.18.1-2).

Although his conviction regarding the importance of prayer was strong, Donne was not alone among his early modern contemporaries in his high esteem for prayer. In

fact, the seventeenth century's fascination with prayer is responsible for the relatively short-lived yet influential rise of a specialized genre of devotional manuals whose widespread popularity helped to standardize and characterize the nature of early modern Christian worship. Many of these manuals specifically focused on providing theological teaching and practical instruction on the nature, purpose, and proper performance of Christian prayer. By articulating a set of biblical theories, explanations, and practices for prayer, manuals such as Robert Hill's *Pathway to Prayer*, Elnathan Parr's *Abba Father*, and George Downname's *A Godly and Learned Treatise of Prayer* sought to provide their readers with the tools necessary to successfully submit themselves and present their concerns before the magisterial presence of the Christian godhead.

As with many developments in seventeenth-century England, the prayer manual phenomenon was largely catalyzed by two powerful historical developments: the English Reformation, which had forever changed the character of England's religious identity during the previous century, and the increasing popularity and availability of printed books, made possible by Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press around 1440. Before these events, there were prayer manuals of a sort. As Ramie Targoff notes, prior to the creation of the Book of Common Prayer,

...[literate worshippers] purchased Books of Hours or Primers, personal devotional manuals encompassing nearly all of their liturgical and domestic needs. A typical Primer included a selection of daily and occasional prayers; contents ranged from the Penitential Psalms and the Hours of the Virgin Mary to special petitions to be recited upon entering the church or going to bed. Even before the advent of printing, Primers were produced in a wide variety of styles that depended largely on the nature of illustrations. (19)

Nonetheless, these manuscripts were, like most manuscripts, usually the luxury of the "literate worshippers who could afford books" (Targoff 19), typically being too

expensive to be owned by members of the common laity. The invention and eventual widespread adoption of the printing press, however, slowly but surely increased the availability and decreased the expense of owning personal copies of such texts.

Furthermore, the Reformation, with what Cecile M. Jagodzinski identifies as its emphases on “Bible reading...cultivation of a sense of personal sin...[and the] search for a direct relationship with God” (1), encouraged Protestant worshippers to seek better ways to manage their personal devotional exercises. It is this emphasis on the “unmediated relationship between the individual and God” that Cynthia Garrett argues led to “a demand for collections of prayers in the vernacular and gave new impetus to arguments over the purpose of prayer, particularly private prayer” (329). As Targoff notes, prior to the Reformation, “the ownership of religious books in English could be treated as incriminating evidence in cases of heresy” (20); however, by Donne’s time, a number of handbooks providing instruction on and examples of vernacular (and markedly Protestant) prayers had already been published, and others would follow.¹

While Donne himself did not compose a prayer manual per se, even the most cursory overview of his writings makes clear that prayer shaped the style and content of many of his works. For example, the text of his early *Essayes in Divinity* (which presents a young Donne working through many of the theological controversies that would later influence his adoption of Anglican Protestantism and his entrance into the pastorate) is occasionally punctuated (and also appended) by a handful of prayers in which he, Augustine-like, shifts his tone from expository prose into an address to the “onely

¹ In addition to those listed above, other significant examples include Samuel Hieron’s *A Helpe unto Devotion* (1612), John Preston’s *The Saints Daily Exercise* (1629), John Clarke’s *Holy Incense for the Censers of the Saints* (1635), though there are many more besides.

Eternall God” whose Spirit providentially guides his disputations (19). In this we see the importance that Donne placed on prayer as a vital element of theological inquiry—the same that Walton, Donne’s earliest biographer, describes in his account of Donne’s initial studies in divinity: “...in that disquisition and search he proceeded with humility and diffidence in himself; and by that which he took to be the safest way; namely, frequent prayers, and an indifferent affection to both parties” (25). Also, many of the most poignant, masterful, and well known verses from his *Divine Poems*, such as “A Hymn to Christ, at the Author’s Last Going into Germany,” “Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness,” and the “La Corona” and “Holy Sonnets” cycles, similarly take the form of direct addresses to God. Finally, there are the many sermons in which Donne addresses the topic of prayer—but more will be said about these below.

However, while the *Essayes*, *Poems*, and sermons provide us with an understanding of how Donne saw prayer as a tool for theological disputation, a form of verbal performance, and a subject for spiritual instruction, his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* provides the clearest representation of Donne’s own devotional practice of private prayer. As mentioned above, Donne composed the *Devotions* as he was convalescing after a severe case of what is now assumed to have been typhus. In a letter to Robert Ker written during the same period of recovery, Donne makes reference to his composition of the book, declaring his intent to use “this leisure to put the meditations had in my sickness into some such order as may minister some holy delight” (100). Based on this brief description, which is the only one we have in which Donne indicates his motivation for composing the work, it’s clear that Donne first conceptualized the *Devotions’* content as a personal devotional exercise, perhaps as means of preparing his

soul for what appeared to be his impending death. Then, only after he began to recover, did he set about writing down “the Meditations, had in [his] sickness” and preparing them for publication. Thus, while the book is not a strictly contemporaneous record of Donne’s progress through his sickness, its form and substance are likely intended to mirror that experience.

But the *Devotions* is even more than a record of Donne’s own private meditative practices; in fact, when one considers his description of the work in his letter to Ker, it begins to become evident that it was, from the beginning of its composition, intended to be a text with a didactic purpose.² This is made clear by an inquiry into what Donne might have meant when he wrote that he wished for the book to “minister some holy delight” to its readers. Unfortunately, Donne provides few clues for the meaning of the phrase “holy delight” within the context of the letter, though a handful of scholars have attempted to explain it nonetheless. Cox, for example, suggests that the “holy delight” to which Donne refers can be identified as the believer’s “spiritual assurance that his sins have been absolved by God,” which leads him to group the *Devotions* with the many “manuals for repentance” endorsed by the Church of England in Donne’s day (350). Frost, on the other hand, whose book *Holy Delight* borrows its title from Donne’s letter, suggests (albeit indirectly) that the phrase signifies an outward expression of the writer’s own delight achieved through the process of spiritual autobiography (37). When we look for instances of the phrase elsewhere in Donne’s writings, however, we discover that he

² I use this term hesitantly, knowing that popular critical thought suggests that didacticism is an undesirable property for serious literature; however, in the sense that a didactic text can be defined as one that has “the giving of instruction as its aim or object” (*OED*), I see no reason to eschew such texts, since to do so would in fact result in the disposal of most of the best and most well-loved literature in any period, especially the seventeenth century.

typically uses it to signify the delight that results from a preacher's effective delivery of spiritual teaching. In one sermon, for example, as Donne discusses the qualities of an effective preacher, he suggests that such a one ought to preach not only "sincerely," but also "acceptably, seasonably, with a spiritual delight, to a discreet and rectified congregation, that by the way of such a *holy delight*, they may receive the more profit" (II.7.106-10, emphasis added). Elsewhere, he writes that the early Fathers "had a *holy delight* to be heard, and to be heard with delight" (VIII.5.696, emphasis added). In yet another sermon on the subject of preaching, Donne argues that "it is a good art to deliver deep points in a holy plainness and plain points in a *holy delightfulness*" to the congregation. (IX.9.78-9, emphasis added). In all such instances, Donne's use of "holy delight" has little to do with any component of the individual's religious experience; rather, it consistently denotes the intended received effect of the preacher's sermon on his audience. Thus, when Donne explains his desire for the *Devotions* to produce a "holy delight" in its readers, it is most likely that he is highlighting the work's intended didactic nature; just like a well-wrought sermon, the *Devotions* sets out to make known "the Word, that Word which is the soul or all that is said, and is the true Physic of all their souls that hear" (V.1.760-4).

With this didactic purpose of the *Devotions* in mind, we are then justified in beginning to consider how the work fits into the larger context of seventeenth-century didactic devotional literature. As one might expect, much of the recent scholarship on the *Devotions* has focused on uncovering and explaining this context. Frost helpfully describes the circumstances that gave rise to the seventeenth-century resurgence of

devotional literature, which had last seen its heyday in the breviaries and liturgical books of the Middle Ages:

After the unhappy lacuna proceeding from the sixteenth-century emphasis on religious polemic, the literary stage was prepared by the beginning of the seventeenth century for a renaissance of devotional literature. Thoroughly Protestant forms and conventions had been established, and a generation of great Anglican divines was waiting in the wings...Best of all, an avid reading public had formed, and weekly fair days at St. Paul's churchyard were thronged with citizenry who manifested strongly independent tastes. (4)

This flourishing of devotional writing gave rise to several subgenres of the form, many of which have been associated with the *Devotions* in the scholarly literature. Conti, for instance, notes that the presentation of several of the work's earliest editions aligned the book with the tradition of *ars moriendi* (in Latin, "the art of dying")—texts whose intended purpose was to instruct the reader in the procedures necessary to achieve a "good" Christian death (367).³ Morrissey, on the other hand, sees in "Donne's willingness to surrender his soul and the fear of relapsing into sin when once again faced with daily temptation" the influence of the Ignatian meditative tradition (31). Most often, however, critics espouse views similar to Friederich's: that the *Devotions* is "not an *ars moriendi* in the generalizing fashion" nor "a prescription for inducing a particular attitude, as Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*," but rather "an atypical hybrid among the devotional literature" (51).

³ Conti's bibliographic description of these editions is worth noting: "One copy of the second edition, for instance, is bound in an apparently seventeenth-century leather cover that bears an interesting device: a skull, surmounted by a winged hourglass, beneath which a scythe and shovel are intercrossed with the usual pair of bones. This particular copy is also bound up with Donne's 1627 sermon on the death of Lady Danvers...which contains an account of that woman's holy life and holy death...Moreover, the two editions of the *Devotions* published after Donne's death both bear on their title page the famous engraving of Donne in his burial shroud" (367).

However, in the scholarly examination of this “hybrid” of influences, the *Devotions*’ correspondence with the seventeenth-century prayer manual tradition has been consistently overlooked. The probable reasons for this are manifold. First, it must be conceded that prayers only comprise a portion of the *Devotions*’ text. Thus, the tradition cannot be wholly in conversation with the works’ totality; for the root influences that formed the *Devotions*’ meditations and expostulations, readers must look to other traditions. Secondly, the prayers typically do not garner the same degree of scholarly interest as the rest of the text, nor are they as commonly anthologized or as highly praised. The ninth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, for example, includes the Meditations IV and XVII and the Expostulation XIX, but none of the prayers. Thirdly, while much has been written on the devotional literature that influenced Donne’s time (Louis L. Martz’s *The Poetry of Meditation* and Helen C. White’s *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion* being two significant examples), very little scholarship dealing with the particular concerns and practices of the prayer manualists has been produced. Finally, as the reasons cited by Garrett in the introduction suggest, prayer in general is not often taken seriously as a suitable subject for academic inquiry, usually because scholars consider it to be either too high or too low a form to fruitfully analyze. Nonetheless, when we begin to consider Donne’s own theory of prayer as he explains it in his sermons and as he practices it in the prayers themselves, we start to see that the *Devotions* is clearly participating in the same theological and intellectual project as the books that comprise the seventeenth-century prayer manual tradition.

In her article “The Rhetoric of Supplication: Prayer Theory in Seventeenth-Century England,” Cynthia Garrett provides what is perhaps the best description of this

tradition to date, conducting what she describes as “a critical interdisciplinary study of the more prominent English prayer guides, particularly those written during the period from 1600 to 1660 when interest in private prayer was at its height” (328). While the purpose of Garrett’s study is to illustrate how “the seventeenth-century English prayer manuals reveal a complex theory of prayer which acknowledges, at times even embraces, the contingent and imperfect nature of communication with the divine” (329), she builds her argument around an examination of four common premises that formed the basis of this theory:

1. A view of prayer as a form of art that “require[es] not only practice but preparation, study, and instruction” (330).
2. The necessity of “fervency”—that is, “intense, emotional involvement with God”—for successful prayer (338).
3. An ambivalent reluctance “to resign the use of set prayers from Scripture or popular contemporary collections and the careful composition of one’s own devotions in favor of a strictly spontaneous, internal invocation of God” (349).
4. The use of a specific “language of prayer” that is “in some way distinct from other kinds of language or expression” and “appropriate to communication with God” (355).

Although these premises by no means comprise an exhaustive definition of the prayer manual tradition, they are helpful in their formulation of many of the foundational principles that shaped the writings of the prayer manualists. As Garrett points out, though these themes “betray an intense ambivalence over God’s nature, human emotional experience, and the possibility of communication between human and divine beings”

(329), they nonetheless represent a red thread connecting the many efforts of seventeenth century churchmen to concretize Christianity's ambiguous teachings on the art of prayer. Thus, when we consider how Donne's sermons and other writings on prayer exhibit his close affinity to these themes, his place alongside the Renaissance prayer manualists becomes apparent.

As stated above, the first premise of the prayer manualist was a view of prayer as an "art." In his article on the connections between seventeenth century prayer and poetry, McGuire similarly identifies this position, noting, "Devotional writers of the early seventeenth century considered private prayer an 'art,' an activity whose elements, principles, and operations were rational and communicable" (65). Of the many definitions of "art" provided by the *OED*, one seems to best encapsulate the meaning of the word as it applies to prayer: "a practical application of knowledge" or, more specifically, "something that can be achieved or understood by the employment of skill and knowledge." Thus, prayer as an art requires both "knowledge" and "skill"—knowledge about how to pray effectively and skill in its execution. Knowledge was what the Renaissance prayer manualists sought to provide their readers. Skill with prayer, on the other hand, presumably developed through the standard means: consistent and reflective practice.

In his sermons, Donne espouses a similar view of prayer as an art, the practice of which requires certain knowledge of what speakers, audience, subjects, and situations are most appropriate. In one sermon, Donne explicitly identifies a list of "certain limitations" on prayer: that "every godly man shall pray"; that the prayer must be directed "unto [God]," and neither "beyond him" nor "short of him"; that the proper subject of

prayer is only “that which hath been formerly expressed, not whatsoever our desires, or our anguish, and vexation, and impatience presents or suggest to us”; and finally (if somewhat ambiguously) that prayer ought to occur “In a time when [God] mayest be found” (IX.14.16-29). Significantly, Donne is relatively permissive for his time in addressing *where* to pray—while he argues that “it is a more acceptable and more effectual prayer, when we shut our doors, and observe our stationary hours for private prayer in our Chamber” and that “the greatest power of all, is in the public prayer of the Congregation,” he allows that “a man may pray in the street in the fields, in a fayre” (VII.12.409-14). He is also quite free about the medium of prayer; whereas several of the devotional manuals of the day were insistent that prayer consisted of “talk, conversation, speech, and conference with God” (McGuire 64), Donne held that of all the “means between God and man...[prayer] hath most ways and addresses. It may be mental, for we may think prayers. It may be vocal, for we may speak prayers. It may be actual, for we may do prayers. For deeds have voice” (V.12.43-7).

Further evidence that Donne conceived of prayer as a form of art might be seen in the way in which the threefold structure of the *Devotions* seems to replicate (in an inverted order) Aristotle’s threefold division of the art of rhetoric. As Aristotle frames it, rhetoric can be subdivided into deliberative rhetoric, which serves to “either exhort or dissuade,” *forensic* rhetoric, which “is either accusatory or defensive,” and *epideictic* rhetoric, which aims to either “praise or blame” (33). It is clear that Donne, whether consciously or not, adhered to these three ends in his construction of the *Devotions*; the meditations, which praise God for his grace in the midst of the vicissitudes of Donne’s sickness, are epideictic in nature; the expostulations, which are simultaneously the points

of greatest tension and the most heavy-laden with Scriptural evidence of God's actions and character, take on the forensic task of both attacking God's apparent inconsistencies and defending him from such assaults; and the prayers, which seek to invoke God's physical and spiritual intervention, are deliberative, dealing as they do with establishing a course of right and just action. The apparent correspondence between these threefold divisions suggests that Donne likely considered prayer to be a kind of sub-species of deliberative rhetoric, distinguished from others in that it alone sought to address the Almighty.

In this sense, Donne's conception of prayer is in agreement with another aspect of the prayer manualists' view of prayer as an art: that the pray-er's knowledge and skill served to achieve a particular end. As McGuire points out, the precepts suggested by the prayer manuals "were organized either to praise God or, more frequently, to persuade him" (65); however, Garrett notes that this latter persuasive purpose was tempered by the knowledge that "there are prayers God either cannot or will not hear, prayers that for some reason go amiss" (331). Thus, the prayer manualists (and, indeed, Donne as well) tended to view God as "at best, difficult to reach and, at worst, inclined to reject any communication which, for reasons not readily ascertainable, displeases him" (332). Prayer, then, had to be crafted in such a way as to have the highest chance of successfully persuading its audience—God—to listen and respond.

For Donne, too, a prayer is effective "when one Petition hath taken hold upon God, works upon God, moves God, prevails with God, entirely for all" (V.18.30-31); however, the key to the pray-er's success is found in the second defining characteristic of the prayer manual tradition: the necessity of "fervency" or "extreme emotion" in prayer

(338). Readers familiar with Donne's "Holy Sonnets" will recognize "extreme emotion" as indicative of Donne's interactions with God in those poems—particularly, extremely *violent* emotion. While his prose prayers do not often reach to the same heights of violence, Donne's theory on the practice of prayer does, particularly in his discussion of what he calls "religious impudency" [V.18.9]. "Earnest Prayer," he writes, "hath the nature of Importunity. We press, we importune God in Prayer...We threaten God in prayer...And God suffers this Impudency, and more. Prayer hath the nature of Violence" (V.18.2-12). Donne's argument here is not entirely new; as he goes on to argue, "In the publique Prayers or the Congregation, we besiege God, *saies Tertullian*, and we take God Prisoner, and bring God to our Conditions; and God is glad to be straitned by us in that siege" (V.18.12-5, emphasis added). According to Donne, then, prayer is a sort of battering ram with which the believer besieges the gates of heaven. In such a view, it is not only the force of the individual blows, but also their consistent repetition, that succeeds in breaking down the communicative barriers between God and man. As he writes in another sermon, "It is not enough to have prayed once; Christ does not only excuse, but enjoin Importunity" (VII.10.444-5).

In his examination of the *Devotions*, Johnson touches briefly upon the importune nature of Donne's prayers for spiritual comfort and healing. According to Johnson, "because [Donne] is acutely aware of the temptations of the flesh and the failings of the will, Donne not only relies upon, but also demands God's own promises of mercy" (57). Such demands crop up throughout the *Devotions*, striking a strongly divergent tone than the more submissive requests found in the sermonic prayers. More often than not, Donne invokes the Scriptures not only as a reminder to himself of God's mercies, but also as a

reminder to God of his promises to *give* mercy. For example, in Prayer III, Donne invokes divine comfort by referencing Psalm 41:3, declaring, “I come in the confidence, & in the application of thy servant Davids promise, *that thou wilt make all my bed in my sickness*” (18). In Prayer IV, as well, Donne goes so far as to suggest that God’s refusal to offer him healing would constitute an unjust withholding of mercy:

Thy Sonn went about healing all manner of sicknesses...Vertue went out of him, and he healed all, all the multitude (no person incurable) he healed them every whit, (as himself speaks) he left no reliques of the disease; and will this universall Phisician passe by this Hospitall, and not visit mee? not heale mee? not heale mee wholly? (24)

Even in his consistent insistence at the conclusion of most of the prayers that God should act for the sake of Christ, one cannot help but feel that Donne is relying upon the Son as an invocative trump card intended to add one final weight in his favor to the balance of God’s mercy and justice.

The manualists’ emphasis on the importance of importunity and repetition goes hand-in-hand with the third defining characteristic of the prayer manual tradition: its endorsement of premeditated, scripted prayer over improvised, extemporaneous prayer. In the seventeenth-century English church, the question of whether or not to encourage extemporaneous prayer was a controversial one, spurring debates about the appropriateness of extemporaneity in both public and private devotion. Its proponents supported it for a number of reasons, both theological and political. Scripted prayer, some argued, was perceived not only as a less affective means of communicating with God, but also as an instrument of enforced conformity. As Kristen Poole points out, “[i]n extemporaneous prayer...sectarians no longer adhere[d] to scripted discourse, [were] no longer actors according to religious ritual and liturgy sanctioned by national church

authorities” (52). Thus, the freedom to break from form meant the freedom of self-determination—an impulse that the Reformation had certainly encouraged. Targoff similarly notes the separatists’ opposition to scripted worship, noting that “what to the establishment represented a successful mechanism for edifying large numbers of people was to the non-conformists a spiritually deadening imposition upon minister and congregation alike” (37). John Milton even weighed in on the debate in his *Eikonoklastes*, arguing that “set forms of prayer...imprison and confine by force, into a Pinfold of set words, those two most unimprisonable things, our Prayer and that Divine Spirit of utterance that moves them” (189). With their strong resemblance to more manifestly Catholic forms of worship, even the revised prayers of the Book of Common Prayer still struck many sectarians as too “popish” to support.

Nonetheless, church apologists writing within the prayer manual tradition asserted the importance of “set forms” as a means of giving God due reverence, particularly in the sphere of public worship. Hooker was notably one of the leading defenders of the English Church in this matter, asserting that Cranmer’s Prayer Book was not, as his opponents suggested, “an unperfect book, culled and picked out of that popish dunghill, the Mass book full of all abominations” (qtd. in Targoff 38), but rather a helpful aid both to devotional effectiveness and against the unintentional affirmation of heresy. As Targoff further notes, Hooker’s defense of set forms’ capacity to instill sincere devotion in

...the internal realm...seems to extend Cranmer’s hope that the worshipper’s inward self would not simply adopt but deeply assimilate the formalized prayers of the church...By sprinkling these prayers on the road to heaven, the Prayer Book not only encourages the worshippers’ outward performance of devotion, but secretly and imperceptibly transforms their inward nature. (55-6)

Once again, Donne's comments on this matter in his sermons place him in agreement with the prayer manualists. In one of the several Lenten sermons Donne delivered to King Charles I and his court, he addresses the topic of extemporaneous prayer by way of an analogy, comparing the Christian's prayer to that of a subject before his sovereign. Addressing the king directly, he explains:

You would scarce thank a man for extemporal Elegy, or Epigram, or Panegyric in your praise, if it cost the Poet, or the Orator no pains. God will scarce hearken to sudden, inconsidered, irreverent prayers. Men will study even for Complements; and Princes and Ambassadors will not speak to one another, without thinking what they will say...Let not us speak to God so (Praying is our speaking to God) not extemporally, unadvisedly, inconsiderately. (IX.9.225-33)

It is clear here that Donne's apparent opposition to extemporaneous prayer is rooted in the foundational premise that prayer is a form of art, a craft by which the pray-er takes "pains" to compose an address to which God will likely "hearken." He strongly asserts that God has little interest in prayers that are merely the product of a fleeting thought—in fact, prayers that are "sudden" and "inconsidered" are consequently "irreverent," betraying a lack of proper respect and fear on the part of the supplicant. The God of such passages is more majestic King than loving Father—a dichotomy that Garrett notes as being characteristic of much seventeenth-century prayer theory (334). Thus, If the pray-er hopes to gain access to his throne room, he must not presume upon God's grace, but instead come prepared with both words and forms of due reverence.

Elsewhere, Donne compares the supplicant's preparation of his prayer to the clean beast's chewing of the cud, writing,

All cleane beasts had both these marks, they divided the hoofe, and they chewed the cud: All good resolutions, which passe our prayer, must have these two marks too, they must divide the hoofe, they must make a double impression, they must be directed upon God's glory, and upon our good,

and they must passe a rumination, a chawing of the cud, a second examination, whether that prayer were so conditioned or no. We pray sometimes out of sudden and indigested apprehensions; we pray sometimes out of custome, and of communion with others; we pray sometimes out of a present sense of paine, or imminent danger; and this prayer may divide the hoofe; It may look towards Gods glory, and towards our good; but it does not chew the cud too; that is, if I have not considered, not examined, whether it doe so or no, it is not a prayer that God will call a sacrifice. (VI.1.470-82)

Nonetheless, as the passage that opens this chapter illustrates, Donne's practice of prayer seems to exemplify what Garrett identifies as "the tension...between a definition of prayer as cry and instructions on how to manufacture this cry" (345). In his description of his own private devotions, Donne does not present himself in the act of carefully composing or reading a tightly constructed, formulaic exercise. Instead, he "throw[s] [him]self down in [his] chamber," "call[s] in and invite[s] God and his angels thither," and "talk[s]...as though [he] prayed to God," despite the many distractions that draw his thoughts away from worship and supplication. The prayers in the *Devotions*, on the other hand, exemplify the more careful, conservative method that Donne most directly advocates elsewhere. What are we to make of this apparent contradiction in Donne's prayer theory?

One explanation may be that Donne is maintaining a distinction between public prayer, for which extemporaneity would be inappropriate, and private prayer, for which it would be allowed; however, Donne's dictum that "a precedent meditation, and a subsequent rumination, make the prayer a prayer" (VI.1.489-90) does not seem to be particularly restricted to the public sphere. In fact, given the biblical text that provides the basis of his discussion of the importance of premeditation and rumination—namely, the penitential Psalms—it seems far likelier that Donne was speaking in relation to the

same personal and private mode of David's own prayers. Peter E McCullough suggests another possible explanation, seeing many of Donne's comments on prayer as serving a primarily political purpose. McCullough traces Donne's political treatment of prayer to William Laud's appointment as the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, after which his policy of "subordinat[ing] preaching to prayer" began to hold considerable sway at court (199). Laud's was a position to which Donne was firmly opposed, and he made this opposition clear in a sermon delivered to the king at White-Hall on April 1, 1627; however, as McCullough points out, the sermon "was a near disaster for Donne" because of its expression of deliberately anti-Laudian ideas, among them being the primacy of preaching (199). McCullough suggests that, in the wake of the sermon's political fallout,⁴ Donne intentionally avoided preaching "politically charged opinions." Instead, his post-1627 sermons that touch on political topics simply "parrot Laudian truisms, like the primacy of prayer over preaching" (202). If we accept McCullough's analysis of Donne's apoliticized preaching, then we are justified in receiving Donne's sermons on prayer with a dose of skepticism when they treat the topic's politicized aspects, such as the debate over extemporaneity versus careful, premeditated composition. It is possible, then, that Donne, whose verse expresses a handful of markedly moderate viewpoints,⁵ saw no harm in either extemporaneous or premeditated prayer, and simply adapted his emphasis based upon the audience to whom he preached. However, while evidence that

⁴ According to McCullough, Donne "was commanded by Laud to produce a copy of the king's scrutiny, and to justify himself in an interview with him" (199).

⁵ Perhaps the most familiar example of such a viewpoint can be found in his "Satire 3," which, though radical and forceful in its tone, presents the rather moderate argument that "true religion" (l. 43) is not to be found easily in "Rome" (l. 45) or "Geneva" (l. 50) (or even England, for that matter), but is rather the result of its lifelong pursuit: "Truth stands, and he that will / Reach her, about must, and about go" (ll. 80-1).

Donne consistently, actively, and publicly endorsed extemporaneous prayer is sparse, it's quite clear from his poems, letters, and prose that he considered carefully composed prayer to be a cornerstone of his personal devotional habit, and one that contributed to an attitude of due reverence.

For many of Donne's contemporaries, the key to facilitating due reverence in prayer consisted of the use of intricate prayer formulae—frameworks that provided the structure of effective prayer while still allowing the worshipper to supply the prayer with idiosyncratic, individuated substance. McGuire describes these formulae in detail, noting that they typically consisted of “a preface...and three major components—confession, invocation, and thanksgiving—which were organized either to praise God or, more frequently, to persuade him” (65). The preface, McGuire explains, usually served the dual purposes of presenting the pray-er's request for “audience, assistance, and acceptance by God” and “convinc[ing] God to hear his prayers” by “demonstrating the speaker's knowledge in matters religious.” The “confession” that followed could adhere to one of three common forms: the confession of faith, which was “essentially a statement of belief in Christian truths,” the confession of praise, which expressed thanksgiving, and the confession of “one's sins and the punishment resulting from them.” The pray-er would then proceed to the invocation, which could take the form of either a “petition,” in which “one asks God to supply a want or continue his blessings,” or a “deprecation,” a “prayer against evil.” Finally, the prayer would conclude with an offering of thanksgiving, though some made distinctions between “thanksgiving,” being “a response to [God's] goodness,” and “praise,” being a response to God's “power and glory” (McGuire 65-7). Of course, this structure was a fluid one, and “in practice, the

confession, invocation, and thanksgiving were omitted, condensed, or expanded to fit the circumstances and intentions of the speaker” (67). Nonetheless, in concert these elements would ideally succeed in providing the pray-er with a reliable, efficacious model for approaching the Almighty.

McGuire has already examined the influence of these structures on the devotional poems of Jonson, Donne and Herbert; however, when one examines the prayers in the *Devotions*, one finds similar correspondences. Most of the prayers begin with a lengthy and labyrinthine preface (often indistinguishable from the confession, though the pattern varies from prayer to prayer) that showcases Donne’s deep and complicated articulation of God’s nature and past actions. For example, in the *Devotions*’ opening prayer, Donne begins with an elaborate geometrical conceit that paradoxically attempts to consider God’s existence both within and outside of time itself:

O eternall, and most gracious *God*, who considered in thy selfe, art a *Circle*, first and last, and altogether; but considered in thy working upon us, art a *direct line*, and ledest us from our *beginning*, through all our wayes, to our *end*, enable me by thy *grace*, to looke forward to mine end, and to looke backward to, to the considerations of the mercies afforded mee from the beginning.... (10)

In fact, many of the prayers’ prefaces similarly provide elaborate and paradoxical relationships as the foundation for Donne’s requests for mercy, such as in Prayer XIV, in which Donne describes God as one “who, though thou didst permit darkness to be before light in the creation, yet in the making of light didst so multiply that light, as that it enlightened not the day only, but the night too” (76). As will be examined at greater length in the next chapter, the prefaces of the *Devotions*’ prayers contain many of the strongest transpositions of Donne’s idiosyncratic style of poetry onto prose forms.

After each preface, Donne typically proceeds directly to an invocative petition begging God for both physical and spiritual mercy. In most cases, these petitions form the largest segment of the prayer, usually containing a bundle of supplications intricately bound together by a subtle weave of interconnecting thought. The multiplicity of prayerful imperatives highlights the seriousness with which Donne viewed prayer; even in presenting his requests, the pray-er must first invoke God's aid in knowing what best to pray *for*. For example, in the first prayer, Donne begins by first asking God to "enable me by thy grace to look forward to mine end, and to look backward too, to the considerations of thy mercies afforded me from the beginning...that by that practice...I may come to a holy consideration of thy mercies" (11). Only then, after God has aided him in the development of a divine perspective, is Donne confident in asking him to "Deliver me therefore...from...vain imaginations" of despair in the midst of his sickness and to "keep me still established" in God's presence and protection (11-2). Throughout the rest of the prayers in the *Devotions*, Donne moves through similar progressions, inflecting the entire work with a distinct sense of dependence on and supplication to the divine.

The fourth and final characteristic of the Renaissance prayer manual tradition that Garrett identifies is the use of a specific "language of prayer" that is "in some way distinct from other kinds of language or expression" and "appropriate to communication with God" (355). In particular, manualists stressed the importance of avoiding language that might have the appearance of being self-aggrandizing. In this area of prayer theory, however, Donne proves to be much more of an innovator, adopting a prayer-voice that is highly distinct and idiosyncratic. The ways in which Donne executed this innovation will

be the focus of the next chapter, in which I will explore how Donne departs from the prayer manual tradition, looking to the Augustinian tradition for an alternative model of prayer language.

Nonetheless, there are still several ways in which Donne's apparent embrace of many of the prayer manualists' central premises might affect our understanding of both the character of the *Devotions* and the man who wrote them. One of the greatest ways in which this relationship can change the way readers approach the *Devotions* is by strengthening the argument that the text is a didactic work, composed with some intention of modeling a reverent and effective devotional practice. This in turn helps to explain one potential motivation for Donne's decision to create an account of a private sickness, replete with details of both medical and spiritual unsightliness, and turn it into an Ebenezer for public contemplation. Izaak Walton, Donne's enthusiastic biographer, suggests as much in his account of the *Devotions*' preparation in publication, describing the work as:

...a book that may not unfitly be called a Sacred Picture of Spiritual Ecstasies...which book, being a composition of meditations, disquisitions, and prayers, he writ on his sick-bed; herein imitating the holy Patriarchs, who were wont to build their altars in that place where they had received their blessings. (59)

Though the image of an altar is Walton's, not Donne's, it serves as a fitting metaphor, since it is both a marker of an individual's past experience of God and a present reminder of his presence and the importance of maintaining his worship. In the *Devotions*, Donne provided his readers with all of these.

Finally, such a view may help to redeem Donne from the accusations of self-serving performance that are occasionally leveled against him. Whatever else Donne was

and has since been known for, the meticulous care with which he constructed both his sermons and the *Devotions* make clear that his identity as a pastor determined not only his daily pursuits, but also his literary production. Following his entrance into the ministry, Donne never published a work that could not be linked to some pastoral purpose, and the early reception of many of those works suggests that they found their niche not solely among the literati, but also among the common parishioners entrusted to his pastoral care. Though it may be dedicated to the Prince, the *Devotions* was also a book for the people, perhaps more clearly so than any of Donne's other works. Thus, by recognizing the ways in which it responds to a public need for devotional instruction, teachers, scholars, and readers of Donne may come to appreciate the *Devotions* as a vibrant, living text that still seeks to teach.

CHAPTER THREE

The Augustinian Style of the *Devotions*' Prayers

In the previous chapter, I outlined the several correspondences between Donne's theories on prayer as articulated in his sermons and the accepted understandings of prayer that were propagated by prayer manualists during the early seventeenth century; however, if Donne's *Devotions* were merely another typical entry into an already established and recognized tradition, its achievement would hardly be worth commenting upon, let alone celebrating. Even if it represented the best of what that tradition could achieve (as perhaps it does), it might still have fallen by the wayside and out of popular and critical memory had it not been for one defining characteristic: its complex, idiosyncratic style. Though early modern commentary upon the *Devotions* is lacking, the little that there is suggests as much. Edward Chamberlain, for example, in a letter to Sir Dudley Carleton, praises the *Devotions* for its "many curious...conceits, not for common capacities, but surely full of piety and much true feeling" (qtd. in Conti 367). Modern commentators, too, have paid increasing attention to the *Devotions*' style; for instance, one chapter of Joan Webber's *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* is dedicated to an exploration of the topic, while Don Noel Smith has written compellingly about "the intricate merit of the work" (3). On a more general level, Donne has (at least since Eliot) been recognized and taught primarily as a stylist, and an influential one at that. With these considerations in mind, an investigation of the manner in which Donne's indelible style leaves its unique mark upon the complex (if often quotidian) practice of private prayer is warranted.

In the final section of her essay on the seventeenth-century prayer manual tradition, Cynthia Garrett suggests that early modern devotionalists aimed to, among other objectives, “identify a language of prayer in some way distinct from other kinds of language or expression” (355); however, despite the manualists’ near-universal insistence that prayer consisted of more than an artful combination of genuflection and linguistic performance, they seemed to have all faced what proved to be an impossible task: imagining a spiritualized form of prayer that transcended the very language in which the human being’s understanding of himself, his world, and his God are rooted. As Garrett notes,

...the prayer manualists hold fast to words, to the sign, as the only possible means of expressing ourselves to God. Though they may wistfully admire the entirely mental or spiritual communication of angels and mystics, they cling to human language. (355)

Thus, the seventeenth-century prayer manual tradition seems wrapped in a paradox, as it both “exposes difficulties inherent in all language and communication” and simultaneously “offers a vision of the possible power of language to transcend human limitations and approach the divine” (Garrett 356).

In many cases, however, the difficulties of language overcame its promise as many of the prayer manuals shied away from taking linguistic risks. Despite the Reformation’s encouragement of a personal faith, many worshippers still felt that

...[t]he individuality of private prayer, necessary as evidence of the Protestant’s personal faith in God, becomes threatening to God’s omnipotence when it seems to issue in an individual language and style calling attention to a self distinct from God. (Garrett 347-8)

The same cannot be said of Donne, however. While Donne’s language and style are more conservative in the prayers than in the meditations and expostulations, he still exhibits a remarkable willingness to “play” within the form. Instead of conforming to the

standardized, dry, and formulaic use of language exhibited by many of its contemporary devotional guides, Donne's work attempts (and largely succeeds) at modeling a subtle, artful, and lively use of language that seeks to concretize and enliven the arid abstractions to which prayer is so easily prone. In particular, throughout the *Devotions*' prayers we see Donne consistently and conscientiously adapting the style of a precedent and genre-defining work—Augustine's *Confessions*—to manifest the defining characteristics of what has come to be known as his “metaphysical” style in prose, resulting in a method of prayer that accentuates the individual, distinct voice of the Christian's communication with and submission to God.

Though most novice students of Donne will be familiar with the basic features of his “metaphysical” style, a quick overview of the history and definition of the term may help to anticipate any confusion over its use in the pages to come. Although Donne never referred to his own poetic style as “metaphysical,” the term has a centuries-old pedigree, and though it began (in Eliot's words) as “a term of abuse, or as the label of a quaint and pleasant taste” (669), it has now been accepted as descriptive of both Donne's verses and those of the poets who followed in his stead (i.e. Herbert, Carew, Crashaw, Vaughan, Marvell, Cleveland, and Cowley). Countless lists of the defining characteristics of metaphysical style have been put forward, any number of which are capable of providing an adequate picture of the movement's general elements. One of the better of these definitions can be found in J.A. Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, which identifies the “marks of 17th c. metaphysical poetry” as follows:

...arresting and original images and conceits...wit, ingenuity, dextrous use of colloquial speech, considerable flexibility of rhythm and meter, complex themes...a liking for paradox and dialectical argument, a direct manner, a caustic humour, a keenly felt awareness of mortality, and a

distinguished capacity for elliptical thought and tersely compact expression. (508)¹

Such characteristics represented in many ways a response to (as well as a departure from) the classical style that was introduced most strongly into the language by Petrarch and his English translators and imitators. Unsurprisingly, the sharp turn away from conventional understandings of poetry drew fire from several literary gatekeepers who, in an odd example of critical irony, helped to define the very style they denigrated. Dryden, for instance, accused Donne of “affect[ing] the metaphysics, not only in his religious poetry, but also in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign” (qtd. in Dickson, 193). Meanwhile, Johnson’s harsh judgment accused Donne and his school of being “men of learning” for whom “to show their learning was their whole endeavour” (qtd. in Dickson, 193). Even up through the mid-nineteenth century, literary critics were less than enthusiastic about the violent asymmetry of Donne’s verse. For instance, George MacDonald, the influential Victorian pastor, novelist, fantasist, and man of letters, writes that Donne’s “play with ideas... so far from serving the end, sometimes obscures it almost hopelessly: the hart escapes while he follows the squirrels and weasels and bats” (115). It was not until T.S. Eliot’s 1921 review of Herbert J.C. Grierson’s *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* that Donne (and, to a lesser extent, his poetic progeny) began to enjoy a revival—boosted, no doubt, by the mid-century rise of

¹ Though this is by no means a comprehensive list, it does provide a more than adequate survey of the major points of Donne’s style. Other lists (such as that which can be found in Robert H. Ray’s *A John Donne Companion*, which lists nearly twenty unifying features) may prove particularly helpful when analyzing poetry in particular. I have chosen the *Penguin Dictionary*’s list precisely because, save for one of its constituents (“flexibility of rhythm and meter”), it is a useful tool for describing both the poetry that made the style famous *and* the prose that shares that poetry’s stylistic characteristics.

the New Criticism, to which Donne's complex and intricate prosody was highly conducive.

However, while interest in Donne's poetry grew steadily throughout the twentieth century, interest in his prose lagged behind. As a result, while Donne's poetry was lauded for its style, his sermons and other prose works were read primarily as glosses on the poems, as evidence for ongoing debates about Donne's theological persuasions, or as sources of biographical trivia. Scholars have written about the *Devotions*' structure, influences, psychology, theology, etc., but attention to the work's style has been scant. For one reason or another, critics have been hesitant to acknowledge it as the result of a crafting process as intentional and fruitful as that which produced the poetry for which Donne is best known. Even Smith, who ostensibly sets out to illustrate the manifold ways in which "Donne gave careful attention to the artistry of *Devotions*" (4), ultimately walks upon the well-trodden paths of structural analysis. However, given what I will suggest to be Donne's remarkably complex and conscientious employment of language on a stylistic level, a turn from the broader structure of the *Devotions* to its intricately arranged details is necessary to provide a deeper understanding of the work's subtlety and power.

The logical place to begin such an examination is by asking what prior stylistic traditions may have influenced Donne's own literary voice. Here, at least, we seem to have a clear antecedent in Augustine's *Confessions*, the text that has virtually set the standard for Christian meditation through the centuries. Even a cursory survey of Donne's sermons and theological writings reveals that he had a deep and abiding interest in Augustine. As Potter and Simpson have already convincingly illustrated, while "[t]he

Bible... was Donne's great and primary source," his next great influence was the Early Fathers, and of the many whom he channels in his writing, "St. Augustine is above all others the Father to whom Donne turned most constantly" (346). Of all of Donne's sermons, only five do not make mention of Augustine, and Potter and Simpson estimate the total count of Augustinian references in Donne's sermonic corpus to total about 700 (346).

Donne's attraction to Augustine is hardly surprising. As Potter and Simpson note, he was drawn to "Augustine's warm humanity, and displayed an interest in his life and personality which he does not show for any other Father" (348). Beyond this admiration, Donne further identified with Augustine on a biographical level; in the *Confessions*' account of the bishop of Hippo, Donne "saw a parallel between the sins and failures of his own youth and those of Augustine...when he considered the amazing change from sinner to saint in Augustine, he took courage for himself" (Potter and Simpson 348). Both men began their professional lives aiming for worldly success, but became increasingly troubled by questions of faith that eventually led them to commit themselves to theological study and, later, to vocational service within the Christian faith—for Augustine, the Roman Catholic Church, and for Donne, the Church of England. In many ways, then, Donne sought to style his own ministerial career after that of Augustine, drawing primarily upon the *Confessions* as the primary witness of his foregoer's example, though evidence suggests that he had a familiarity with not only that work, but also *De Civitate Dei*, the *Sermons*, *Enarrationes* on the Psalms, *De Doctrina Christiana*, and the *Epistles* (Potter and Simpson 354).

There is thus little conjecture about the extent to which Donne's theology and ministry were profoundly shaped by his role model; however, the *Devotions* serve as strong evidence that the defining characteristics of Donne's literary style were also influenced by Augustine's own. In particular, we might note three ways in which Donne appears to have been influenced by the *Confessions*' tone alongside its content. First, though Donne is commonly recognized as being an innovator in his use of brilliant conceits, it is clear that his use of this device was formed in part as an adaptation of Augustine's own use of metaphor as a means of substantiating the abstractions of Divinity. Second, both Augustine and Donne seem to revel in their acknowledgment of and confrontation with the apparently paradoxical nature of Christian truth. Finally, Donne seems to have conscientiously emulated Augustine's rhetorical principles (as well as his defense of those principles in the Fourth Book of his *De Doctrina Christiana*), though he can also clearly be seen adapting that usage, punctuating his predominantly Ciceronian prose with moments of blunt, Senecan directness. In the prayers in particular, these adoptions and adaptations result in a prayer-voice that is highly distinct, standing in marked contrast to the prayer manualists' insistence that prayer ought to foreground God at the expense of the pray-er's acknowledgment of self.

The first element of Donne's style that highlights both his indebtedness to the Augustinian tradition and the foregrounding of voice in the prayers is perhaps the one for which he is most famous: the conceit—"a fairly elaborate figurative device of a fanciful kind which often incorporates metaphor, simile, hyperbole, or oxymoron" (Cuddon 165). In most cases, the power of a conceit lies in its ability to appeal to the reader's knowledge of the figurative relationship being described—the comparison between the sign and

signified relies upon both the writer's and the reader's understanding of the former. Thus, as Augustine argues in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, in the task of biblical exegesis, "Ignorance of things makes figurative expressions unclear when we are ignorant of the qualities of animals or stones or other things mentioned in scripture for the sake of some analogy" (44). While Augustine's emphasis here is on biblical interpretation, the implication for the creation of figurative expressions is clear: one must select figures that are both appropriate to the truth being illustrated and accessible to one's audience. The *Confessions* serves as a convincing illustration of Augustine's own employment of figurative language as a means of communicating difficult spiritual truth, replete as it is with metaphors drawn from both scriptural and non-scriptural sources.

Of course, it would be impossible to suggest, let alone prove, that Donne's use of the conceit figure was something inherited directly from Augustine; however, given Donne's familiarity with his work, it is likely that he patterned his own employment of figurative language, at least in part, after the model of the *Confessions*. It is thus not surprising that Donne looks to many of the same sorts of sources—biblical, natural, philosophical, etc.—for figures by which he can illuminate his own experience. Thomas J. Morrissey has partially addressed the role of the *Devotions*' metaphors in his essay on Donne's juxtaposition of the self and the meditative tradition that informed his writing. According to Morrissey, the conceits that Donne employs in the *Devotions* serve a twofold purpose:

Donne's use of metaphor accentuates both his individuality as a man and artist and his membership in the Christian Communion. The sheer ingenuity of Donne's metaphors...demonstrates his desire to display his creativity and wit. At the same time, Donne uses metaphors both to attain and to express his understanding of the metaphysical implications of his condition. (35)

In other words, Donne's use of figurative language is carefully balanced to both showcase his capacity for ingenious, creative figures of speech while simultaneously paying homage to the longstanding traditional belief that God speaks through figures and signs—for example, through biblical typology, or through the objects and movements of the natural world. In some cases, then, Donne's metaphors appear to be original, whereas, in others, he intentionally draws upon traditional, familiar symbols to reflect his connection to the historical Christian tradition (Morrissey 35). Webber, meanwhile, convincingly argues for Donne's conscientious ordering of the conceits throughout the three sections of each devotion, noting the meditations' focus on "man and the creatures," the expostulations' examination of "not misery but God," and the prayers' turn to "the stability of that church in which Donne found as much relief and rest as was possible for him" (194-201).

While both Morrissey's and Webber's analyses help to inform our understanding of the role of the *Devotions*' conceits in a broad sense across the entire work, they overlook the effect that they have on the practice of prayer itself as Donne sought to model it for his readers. In the first place, it is quite clear from Donne's choice of sources for his metaphors that he agreed with his contemporaries in their insistence that prayer ought to be biblically grounded. In many of the *Devotions*' prayers, we see Donne artfully (if somewhat loosely) mining the Bible for images and symbols that might help him to interpret his suffering into sacramental terms for his readers. For instance, in the prayer that closes out the second devotion, Donne reaches into the Old Testament for an image that will allow him to recognize and acknowledge the presence of God in the midst of his suffering. Recalling the famous passage from Exodus, Donne prays,

And, O my God, who madest thyself a Light in the Bush, in the midst of these brambles, & thornes of a sharpe sicknesse, appeare unto me so, that I may see thee, and know thee to be my God, applying thy selfe to me, even, in these sharp and thorny passages. (14)

In an immediate sense, the image is an apt one; however, his prayer here takes on all the more significance when considered in connection to the entirety of the work. The thing that Donne prays for here is, in fact, the very thing he sets out to achieve in the devotions that follow: a revelation of God's presence and care amidst the "sharp and thorny passages" of Donne's sickness. As the prayers' first biblical conceit, it sets the tone for the many conceits that follow, suggesting to the reader (and also, perhaps, to God himself) the imminence of God's unexpected appearances. Furthermore, Donne's deft cooption of the image of the burning bush succeeds in maintaining the delicate balance between worship of God on one hand and the foregrounding of the pray-er's wit on the other.

Another instance of Donne's use of biblically based conceits occurs in the *Devotions'* Prayer VII, in which Donne turns to the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness for an interpretive key to his distaste for God's sanctifying correction. As his physician calls for more help as his patient's condition worsens, Donne prays against despair, asking God to lessen his fear of physical and spiritual chastening:

O eternall, and most gracious God, who gavest to thy servants in the wilderness, thy Manna, bread so conditioned, qualified so, as that, to every man, Manna tasted like that, which that man liked best, I humbly beseech thee, to make this correction, which I acknowledg to be part of my daily bread, to tast so to me, not as I would but as thou wouldst have it taste, and to conform my tast, and make it agreeable to thy will. (39)

Once again, we see Donne move from a recollection of God's past deeds as recorded in the Bible to a supplication for mercy in the present. This use of the Bible is notably different from that in the scripture-laden expostulations, in which Donne almost always

cites holy writ either as evidence in his deliberations with God or, on some occasions, as a kind of verbal riff upon a particular word or theological concept.² In legal terms, the prayers cite the Bible less as evidence and more as precedence. In a style reminiscent of Augustine, Donne suggests that, by referring to God's merciful deeds in the past, the pray-er might invoke a similar dispensation of mercy unto himself in the future.

Elsewhere, Donne extends figurative relationships that are touched on in Scripture, expanding them in ways that lend them more power and significance in the light of his own experience. For instance, in Prayer XIII, Donne, reflecting upon the spots that bear witness to the illness in his body, prays,

These heates, O Lord, which thou has brought upon this body, are but thy chafing of the wax, that thou mightest seale me to thee; These spots are but the letters, in which thou hast written thine owne Name and conveyed thy selfe to mee.... (70)

Several components of this image have biblical origins; Paul writes to the Ephesians that they were "sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance" (1:13-14), and both the Old and New Testaments are replete with images of God writing his law and name upon the hearts of men. Donne's genius here is in his artful combination of these elements, combining biblical images of scribing and sealing to suggest not only the link between the two, but particularly how they intersect in the particular spiritual state of the pray-er.

In most cases, though, Donne's biblical conceits may be read as relatively conventional, signaling little in the way of creative innovation. In addition to invoking

²The entirety of Expostulation XI, for example, is essentially a long, intricate fantasia on the word "heart," in which Donne masterfully knits together over a dozen biblical passages containing the term. Such passages are strong evidence of Donne's inclination towards biblical synthesis, to say nothing of his exhaustively capacious memory.

the sacred, however, he also includes a number of non-biblical conceits as well, which once again have the effect of inflecting the text with his particular voice. The very first prayer, in fact, opens not with a conventionally biblical image, but with a geometrical conceit (expressed similarly elsewhere by Nicholas of Cusa):

O eternall, and most gracious *God*, who considered in thy selfe, art a *Circle*, first and last, and altogether; but considered in thy working upon us, art a *direct line*, and ledest us from our *beginning*, through all our wayes, to our *end*...(10).

In keeping with the typical characteristics of the prayer manual tradition, this short opening constitutes the part of the prayer that McGuire (borrowing from John Clarke's *Holy Incense for the Censers of the Saints*) identifies as the "compellation," which serves the purpose of establishing the pray-er's "knowledgeableness in matters religious" (65); however, instead of looking towards biblical sources, Donne reaches into the extrabiblical Christian tradition to articulate an understanding of God's simultaneous eternity and activity within time.

Morrissey readily acknowledges the presence of such secular metaphors in the second and third sections of each devotion; however, his conclusion regarding them is simply that, because they "occur with less frequency" in these sections, they serve to "soften the startlingly idiosyncratic nature of the first section's metaphors and thereby brin[g] the *Devotions* as a whole more in line with tradition" (39). Had this been Donne's intention, however, one might be justified in wondering why he included any original or adapted conceits in the first place, when he could have simply switched entirely to the "traditional" metaphors of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. Their very presence suggests a more conscientious presentation of the self than most readers would have expected to appear in a prayer-text.

Furthermore, the mixed origin of the metaphors in the prayers suggests a much more complicated understanding of the interplay between God and the world, complicating Webber's insistence that the prayers are designed to emphasize the Church, while the meditations emphasize the created order (184). On the contrary, such references suggest a view of God as maker of and provider for *all* of Creation—a view that is of vital importance if the pray-er hopes to be the recipient of any substantial, efficacious outpouring of God's goodness. Both Morrissey and Webber suggest, albeit unintentionally, that such figurative language is ultimately more in service to the structure of the *Devotions* as a text than to that text's claims about the God to whom it is addressed; however, when we consider them in light of the overarching purpose of prayer in particular—the movement of God's hand—it becomes apparent that they are, in fact, making a theological statement about the dominion of God's providence—namely, that it makes no distinction between religious and secular matters, but extends over all. The frequent mixture of conceits, often within the same prayer, only serves to further emphasize this claim. Thus, Donne can root his supplications for mercy in images such as the circle's representation of God's perfection or the wax's symbolization of the Holy Spirit's seal and still be as confident in expecting deliverance as if he had cited Scripture itself.

Such is the case for the longer conceits; in some cases, however, Donne's use of such metaphors is brief, even flashy, further suggesting the spark of wit over reverent obeisance or theological suggestion. In such passages, Donne's voice becomes its most pronounced, drawing both the reader's and God's attention to the clever inventiveness of the figure and the rich sonorousness of the language itself. In Prayer IX, for example,

Donne prays, "...be thou my witnes...that at more poores than this slacke body sweates teares, this sad soule weeps blood" (50). Though the line is short, its stylistic impact is significant; the conceit is multi-layered, linking two startling images ("sweating tears" and "weeping blood") together within the structure of a compact simile. As with many of Donne's "as...so..." constructions, the simile cleverly seeks to translate his experience from the physical to the spiritual. Even Donne's word choice signals this tension, with hard labial stops ("pores," "body," "blood") signaling bodily concerns, while a steady stream of sibilant s-words culminates with the attention on Donne's "sad soul." While such carefully crafted lines may well have gone unnoticed by many of Donne's casual readers, there can be no doubt that Donne himself was well aware of the energy and wit that went into shaping. Thus, their appearances within the typically plain and direct form of prayer ultimately serves to accentuate the unique role of the pray-er not only in uttering prayers, but in instilling them with both beauty and delight.

A second source of this beauty and delight in Donne's prayers comes from his frequent employment of paradox—a feature that characterizes much of his other writings and comprises a part of his innovative contribution to the aesthetics of metaphysical style. Once again, while paradoxes were infrequently described or even acknowledged by many prayer manualists, Donne appears to have taken a page from the *Confessions* in his deliberate and consistent employment of them. As a brief reading of the *Confessions* reveals, paradox (or at least Christian truths' appearance as such) is foundational to the work's method as a whole; such is evident as early as the book's first section, in which Augustine struggles to understand the relationship between one's knowledge of God and one's ability to rightly pray to him:

For it would seem clear that no one can call upon Thee without knowing Thee, for if he did he might invoke another than Thee, knowing Thee not. Yet may it be that a man must implore Thee before he can know Thee? But, *how shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? or how shall they believe without a preacher? And, they shall praise the Lord that seek Him*, for those that seek shall find; and finding Him they will praise Him. (3)

In most cases, Augustine's descriptions of apparent paradoxes arise from the tension that exists between the finitude of human knowledge and the infinitude of the God who is to be known. More often than not, these tensions are left unresolved, giving way not to logical explanation, but, significantly, to the surrender of prayer, such as the Augustinian response to the passage above: "Let me seek Thee, Lord, by praying Thy aid, and let me utter my prayer believing in Thee" (3).

Again, Donne clearly shares in Augustine's predilection for using paradox as a starting point for theological meditation. In fact, he was so drawn to paradox as a rhetorical form that he devoted an entire book to the subject: the often-overlooked *Problems and Paradoxes* (published only a few years after the *Devotions*). In this book, Donne provides a helpful explanation of why he finds paradox to be a useful (and spiritually fruitful) device:

All the riche benefits which we can faine in concord is but an even conservation of things; in which evennes we may expect no change nor motion; therefore no encrease or augmentation, which is a member of motion. And yf this unity and peace can give increase to things, how mightily is Discord and warr to this purpose which are indeed the only ordinary parents of peace. Discord is never so barren that it affords no fruit.... (19-20)

As Donne frames it, discord (of which paradox is one species, dealing as it does with the meeting of two ostensibly self-contradictory ideas) carries within itself the potential for growth, movement, and change, whereas concord (which results from the meeting to two like things) only has the potential to sustain current states. Without conflict between

opposing forces, new developments (i.e. virtues, resolutions to religious controversies, empires, or opinions) would be stifled amidst a dull tedium of consistency. Thus, Donne ultimately arrives at the very Aristotelian conclusion that “the Discord of extreames begett all vertues; but of the like things ther is no issue without miracle” (21). On a theological level, such a position is perhaps what one would expect from one whose conversion was characterized by what Walton described as “an indifferent affection to both parties” (25). In terms of style, it led Donne to employ paradox frequently throughout his works—especially when he is trying to cast a fresh light on an otherwise exhausted notion.³

In his comfort with and frequent use of paradox, Donne makes a marked departure from the usual style of his seventeenth-century contemporaries. As Garrett notes, despite prayer manualists’ “insistence on the essential and unproblematic unity of God’s nature, the instructions for private prayer...reveal the problems inherent in praying to, if not conceiving of, a compound God” (334). While most devotionalists opted to either attempt clumsy reconciliations of incongruities in God’s character or completely ignore such conflicts, Donne addresses the disparity between God’s nature and Man’s

³ A familiar example of Donne’s use of paradox can be seen in the sestet of his tenth Holy Sonnet, in which he uses the figure to highlight the inverted relationship between Man’s bondage to sin and his redemption by God:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain:
But am betroth’d 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.

(*John Donne’s Poetry*, “Holy Sonnet 14”, ll. 9-14)

understanding head-on, trusting that such “discord” will only resolve itself if it is brought to the forefront of both thought and prayer.

As with his conceits, Donne begins deploying paradoxes early on in the *Devotions*, quickly establishing his comfort with the tensions inherent in discourse with the divine. In fact, the geometrical conceit that begins the first prayer (see above) also simultaneously functions as one such paradox, identifying God as both a “Circle” and a “direct line.” In this case, the apparent incongruity between these two claims is explained by God’s differing modalities: he is presented as circular in his unified, eternal self while appearing to the human as a progressive being bound by and active within linear time. However, this passage is relatively unique in its neatness and subject matter. The majority of Donne’s prayerful paradoxes steer clear of addressing the mysteries of God’s character, focusing instead on the subject that seemed of particular interest to Augustine: the inverted way in which God’s actions appear to Man’s diseased perception. For example, in Prayer II, Donne addresses God as one who

hast not only waked mee with the first, but cald me up, by casting me further downe, and clothd me with thy selfe, by stripping me of my selfe, and by dulling my bodily senses, to the meats, and eases of this world, hast whet, and sharpned my spirituall senses, to the apprehension of thee... (13-14)

By juxtaposing the bodily deteriorations affected by God (casting down, stripping, and dulling) with their opposite, spiritual effects (calling up, clothing, and sharpening), Donne highlights a discord between God’s beneficent, sanctifying action and the limited way in which it is understood by the fallen human mind—the result being a trusting esteem for the former and a cautious distrust for the latter. The same occurs in the next

prayer, in which Donne once again reinterprets his physical difficulties as spiritual blessings, identifying God as he

who, though thou have taken me off of my feet, hast not taken me off of my foundation, which is thy selfe, who, though thou have removed me from that upright forme, in which I could stand, and see thy throne, the Heavens, yet hast not removed from mee that light, by which I can lie and see thy selfe, who, though thou have weakened my bodily knees, that they cannot bow to thee, hast yet left mee the knees of my heart; which are bowed unto thee evermore... (18)

As before, we see Donne using paradox to upend human perception, illustrating the divine mercy and goodness at work behind the weaknesses of the material world.

The prayers contain several similar instances of paradox, most of which resemble those above in their emphasis: the equation of physical deterioration with sanctification. In almost all cases, these paradoxes appear in series—an indication of the rhetorical function they serve for Donne's secondary audience, his readers. When the first item in such series appears, it requires the reader to pause and decipher the apparent contradiction that has been proposed. The delight imparted is thus one of novelty, of the genius of the pray-er made manifest. But this is only the starting point. From here, each series progresses, often employing identical or similar grammatical structures and closely related images in the same patterns. Thus, the reader begins to anticipate the inversion; the delight imparted thus becomes one of fulfilled expectations. In the process, Donne subtly trains his readers to begin to look beyond earthly difficulties and recognize the hand of the God who ordains them, all while gently foregrounding his own inventiveness and voice as the principle pray-er.

Finally, Donne's particular voice in prayer is also marked by in his use of a controlled vacillation between densely layered, complex Ciceronian syntax and periodic

instances of what Cuddon notes as the “tersely compact expression” of Senecan style. The prayers’ careful balance of intricate, ornate, and lengthy passages with moments of simple directness calls to mind Augustine’s discussion in Book Four of his *De Doctrina Christiana* of the importance of properly utilizing what he terms the “grand” style reserved for “important matters,” the “moderate” style for and the “restrained style” for “small matters,” and the “mixed style” for “intermediate matters” (123). Though the focus of Augustine’s instruction is the oral teaching of Christian truth, Donne cleverly applies it to the written word and, more specifically, to the means and ends of Christian prayer.

Augustine begins his discussion of eloquence by examining the biblical writers, and most especially Paul, whom he identifies as “the paragon of Christian eloquence” (110). According to Augustine, the biblical writers’ didactic effectiveness derives not only from their inimitable position as deliverers of God’s Word, but also from their ability to carefully consider the rhetorical means by which to communicate it. In the same way, he urges the preacher to present his teaching in such a way that he is “listened to with understanding, with pleasure, and with obedience” (123). This chiefly involves distinguishing between higher ideas, which require a “grand style” aimed at moving the audience; intermediate matters, which require a “mixed style” aimed at evoking delight; and lower ideas, which require a “restrained” style aimed at instruction. While his prescriptions on the particular applications of these three styles are at times labyrinthine in their complexity, it’s clear that, in the end, he advocates the use of all three:

Nobody should think that it is against the rules of the art to combine these styles. On the contrary, our discourse should be varied by using all three, as far as is possible without impropriety. When a speech carries on in a single style, it is less absorbing for the listener, but when there is a

transition from one style to another, it has a smoother flow, even if it is rather long. (137)

It is thus not unexpected that Donne, in his prayers, puts into practice Augustine's dictum to vary his style, particularly when he wishes to highlight a change in the nature of his message. In Donne, however, the combination is not that of the "grand," "mixed," and "restrained" styles of Augustine, but rather that of the ornate, periodic Ciceronian style and the direct, at times even violent impactfulness of Senecan style. Throughout the prayers, Donne's careful blend of these two styles helps to sustain the prayers' tension between reverence and importunity on a broader level while simultaneously increasing the impact of certain key moments in the prayers for both his divine and human audiences. It is important to note that Donne's use of a looser Ciceronian style in the prayers is relatively unique in the *Devotions*—a fact that has not gone unnoticed by critics. For example, in her analysis of the turn from the meditations' and expostulations' compactness to the relative laxity of the prayers, Webber suggests that the change signals a movement toward resolution:

The difficulties set forth in the curt Senecan style of the meditations, and questioned and wrestled with in the expostulations, are brought here to resolved paradoxes whose finality is emphasized by a modified Ciceronian style. (196)

Webber, however, overemphasizes the degree to which the prayers might be read as true "resolutions." In fact, when contrasting moments of Senecan directness are inserted within this more fluid framework, they often mark points of particular tension within the prayers—the same tension that underlies Donne's very theory of importunity's essential role in the task of divine supplication.

In order to understand how these Senecan interjections function, we must first explore the effects of the prayers' broader Ciceronian framework. The most florid

examples of this style often occur in the first few lines, as Donne begins to lay the foundation upon which he will eventually plant his requests. Since the function of this portion of the prayer is to establish an appropriate sense of humility and gain the attentive ear of the Almighty, Donne's choice of periodic syntax is an apt one; by frontloading each prayer with a litany of descriptive clauses about God's character, he softens the blow of the imperatives to come. Furthermore, since the full meaning of the sentence is often left unrevealed until the final word or phrase, the audience (whether God or Man) must attentively anticipate, through the gradual accumulation of ideas, the semantic lynchpin that will lock them all into place. Such syntax makes each sentence its own exercise in suspense, with the tension only relaxing when a thought has grown to its fullest completion.

While examples of such openings can be found throughout the *Devotions*, Prayer VIII in particular contains what is perhaps the clearest instance of Donne's Ciceronian approach:

O eternall and most gracious God, who though thou have reserved thy tresure of perfit joy, and perfit glory, to be given by thine own hands then, when by seeing thee, as thou art in thy selfe, and knowing thee, as we are known, wee shall possesse in an instant, and possesse for ever, all that can any way conduce to our happiness, yet here also in this world, givest us such earnestes of that full payment, as by the value of the earnest, we may give some estimat of the tresur, humbly, and thankfully I acknowledge, that thy blessed spirit instructs mee, to make a difference of thy blessings in this world, by that difference of the Instruments, by which it hath pleased thee to derive them unto me. (44)

This introductory sentence, which runs just over two full pages in the second 1624 edition and contains 128 words, four levels of subordination and several instances of coordination, is padded so thoroughly in the Ciceronian mode that the subject and verb—"I acknowledge"—don't even appear until almost one hundred words have past. Before

Donne even makes clear what the sentence's grammatical focus is, he has already stuffed his introductory phrases with no less than eight theological claims about God's character and his interactions with mankind⁴—a suitable fulfillment of Clarke's requirements for the "compellation" portion of prayer.

But his purpose here is not solely the display of his rhetorical or theological prowess; nor can such passages be wholly understood simply as private exchanges between God and Man. Instead, the unspoken presence of a third party—Donne's reader—markedly changes the function of these long Ciceronian passages, giving them a public purpose as well. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, while Donne appears to have been comfortable with the use of extemporaneous prayer in times of private devotion, he nonetheless advocated for the careful composition of one's own prayers, especially in public circumstances. Thus, in composing his own model for the practice of prayer in the *Devotions*, we can assume that he would have wanted to exemplify that same practice to his readers. In their syntactical and semantic complexity, the prayers' Ciceronian passages best represent the product of such labor—a subtle but resonant reminder of the importance Donne placed on premeditation's role in prayer both private and public.

When Donne sets aside the use of such carefully constructed and lengthy statements, then, turning instead to simple, direct, and often forceful assertions, one of the

⁴ (1) God is "eternall." (2) God is "most gracious." (3) God has kept "perfit joy" and "perfit glory" to be given by him. (4) The believer will eventually see and know God as he is. (5) When the believer does so, God will give him the aforementioned joy and glory. (6) This joy and glory will constitute all that can conduce his happiness. (7) This possession will be forever. (8) In this world, God gives the believer foretastes of his perfect joy and glory. (9) He does so in order that the believer may estimate the high value of the true, eternal, and heavenly treasure.

effects is a reduction in the prayers' sense of artifice, of the spiritual and communicative confinement for which Milton and others disparaged premeditated prayer. More often than not, such passages occur during or in close proximity to each prayer's central request. As Donne approaches the point of urging God's intervention, his sentences shorten, he simplifies his syntax, and he ceases to describe God in the declarative voice, instead invoking him in the imperative. His tone is no longer one of supplication, but rather of importunity, as he demands God's action, such as in Prayer I's "Deliver mee therefore, O my God, from these vaine imaginations" (10), the Prayer IV's "Heale mee, O Lord, for I would bee healed" (23), or Prayer IX's "Looke therefore upon me, O Lord, in this distresse" (50). These moments of direct, imperative address mark the crux of each prayer, the moment at which Donne turns from courting God's favor to attempting to wrest from him a boon or blessing.

Finally, these moments also produce a similar effect to that of the conceits and paradoxes: they bring the pray-er's presence to the forefront, emphasizing his role in the exchange. While the focus of the prayers' Ciceronian passages is almost always either God's nature or his interactions with his people, Donne's importunate demands place Donne himself, in all his need, at the center of the reader's attention; it is his circumstance that forms the basis of each prayer, and it is he who must dare to beg God to act on his behalf. Only after he has presented his request to God does the focus shift away again—usually, to Christ, "who did, and suffered so much, that thou mightest, as well in thy Justice, as in thy Mercy, doe it for me, thy Sonne" (19).

Consideration of these three components of Donne's style—his combination of both biblical and extrabiblical conceits, his engagement with the paradoxical nature of

Christian faith, and his blending of Ciceronian and Senecan styles—suggests that Donne intended them to work in concert to model a method of prayer that is in several ways distinct from that practiced and advocated by the seventeenth-century prayer manualists, despite his general agreement with them on the basic principles of private prayer. In the first place, because he models his own voice after that of Augustine, using both the example of the *Confessions* and the precepts of *De Doctrina Christiana* as a basis, Donne frames prayer as a devotional act that is deeply connected with the Christian tradition. That Donne echoes Augustine is an indication that, unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not wish to break or deemphasize the link between himself and the Catholic traditions that preceded his time.

Nonetheless, Donne's prayers still exemplify the very Protestant notion that communication with God is not solely something that occurs in concert with other believers, but is also based profoundly in an independent, personal, and private relationship. By refusing to relegate himself to the background of his prayers, but instead foregrounding himself through the use of a pronounced and recognizable voice, he models a method of prayer in which private personhood provides a legitimate starting point for divine supplication. Thus, while the Christian's private prayer is on one hand deeply connected to the historical traditions that undergird it, it is also permissive of a distinct and personal voice. In the end, what makes the style of the *Devotions*' prayers is not its beauty, power, or wit—though they are certainly exemplary expressions of all three—but rather the way in which they articulate the delicate balance between the communal and the personal, the traditional and the innovative, and ultimately, between

the majesty of God and the grace that is made manifest in the believer's freedom to come before him as nothing more than Man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have aimed to show that the prayers of Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* lie at a critical juncture of seventeenth-century theological thought. On the one hand, I have shown that Donne's theories on prayer as articulated in his sermons and, to a certain extent, as exemplified in his prayers themselves, are in the main congruous with those of the prayer manualists who sought to answer questions of public concern about prayer in the wake of the English Reformation. On the other hand, the *Devotions*' prayers clearly depart from the prayer manual tradition in their espousal of a strong, unique, and idiosyncratic voice that ultimately serves to accentuate the importance of the pray-er's presence in the act of divine communication. This voice, which I have argued is an adaptation of the Augustinian voice with which Donne would have been familiar from his reading of the *Confessions*, is perhaps the feature for which the *Devotions* is most famous, and will doubtlessly continue to be a part of what makes the work so delightful, powerful, and instructive for generations of readers to come.

It is no coincidence, but rather a strongly emphatic sign, that the structure of the *Devotions* is such that the book ends with a prayer, at the outset of which Donne describes God as he who, "though thou beest ever infinite, yet enlargest thy selfe, by the Number of our prayers, and takest our often petitions to thee, to be an addition to thy glory, and thy greatnesse, as ever upon all occasions" (126). To Donne, then, it is apparent that prayer is far more than mere supplication or a means of invoking the power

of the Almighty. Rather, it is a grace and a blessing, a way for the Christian to participate in and contribute to that chiefest of ends, the glory of God. In addition to this, it is also the lifeblood of the spiritual life, the surest means by which the believer can hope to endure the vicissitudes of human life, whether physical or spiritual. As the conclusion of Donne's final prayer suggests, it is prayer itself that facilitates endurance and gives hope to the Christian to not fall to sin, but instead glorify God and enjoy him forever:

Though the rockes, and the sands, and the heights, and the shallowes, and the prosperitie, and the adversitie of this world do diversely threaten mee, though mine owne lackes endanger mee, yet, O God, let mee never put my selfe aboard with Hymeneus, nor make a shipwracke of my faith, and a good Conscience; and then thy long-livd, thy everlasting Mercy, will visit me, though that, which I most earnestly pray against, should fall upon mee, a relapse into those sinnes, which I have truely repented, and thou has fully pardoned. (127)

Amen.

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