Donne's Wit of Redemption: The Drama of Prayer in the *Holy Sonnets*

by John N. Wall, Jr.

JOHN DONNE'S *Holy Sonnets* exhibit as clearly as any of his poems what Louis Martz calls a "continually shifting series of dramatic moments . . . temporary conclusions . . . but all only 'for a moment final'."[1] If Donne's lovers in the *Songs and Sonnets* restlessly pursue a still moment of enduring consummation, his *persona* of the *Holy Sonnets* strives for a sense of harmony with the divine, a foretaste of eternal rest, which seems most elusive when it is nearest at hand:

> At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
> Your trumpets, Angells, and arise, arise
> From death, you numberlesse infinities
> Of soules
> . . . . . .
> and you whose eyes,
> Shall behold God, and never tast deaths woe.
> But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space[2]

Frequently in these poems the speaker reaches a point of union, or reconciliation, with God, only to retreat from it in the next

[1] Louis L. Martz, *The Wit of Love: Donne, Carew, Crashaw, Marvell* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1969), pp. 26, 38.

[2] John Donne, *Divine Poems*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford, 1952), p. 8. All quotations from Donne's religious poetry are from this edition.

line; if, as in a few sonnets, he sustains a sense of harmony throughout, he inevitably loses it in the next poem of the series.

With this shifting of dramatic stances comes a heightening and releasing of tension, a rapid alternation of emotions, which gives to these poems their distinctive stylistic flavor. Although the dramatic movement within the sequence is central to the vision of the Christian life which Donne presents in the *Holy Sonnets,* it has received little attention in recent studies. Instead, following Martz's and Helen Gardner's arguments that these poems are meditations designed to heighten emotion, most accounts address only that aspect of their complex emotional movement. Thus, Douglas Peterson builds on Miss Gardner's division of the first twelve of the *Holy Sonnets* into two groups of six by arguing that the first group arouses fear of God, while the second group expresses love of God. The speaker is thought to advance from fear to love, a movement essential to the expression of "contrite sorrow," which is the subject of the remaining sonnets.[3] A similar sense of progression is described by Arthur Henry Bell, although he substitutes Atonement for Contrition as the underlying goal of this progression.[4] While these readings may be at least partially correct—the speaker does seek to be at one with God, and he feels contrite at various times in Donne's sequence—they simplify the complexity of dramatic movement in the *Holy Sonnets.* The sonnets "This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint" and "Death be not proud, though some have called thee" of Miss Gardner's first group express not fear but rather confidence that the speaker's load of sins will fall away at death, and that death itself will be conquered at the Day of Judgment when "wee wake eternally." There is also no real progress between the first and the second group of six sonnets, since the sonnet "If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree" makes the same petition as the sonnet "Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you":

[3] Douglas L. Peterson, "John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and the Anglican Doctrine of Contrition," *SP*, LVI (1959), 506.

[4] Arthur Henry Bell, "Donne's Atonement Conceit in the *Holy Sonnets*," *Cresset*, XXXII (1969), 15–7.

O God, Oh! of thine onely worthy blood,
And my teares, make a heavenly Lethean flood,
And drowne in it my sinnes blacke memorie. (ll. 9–11)

Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee. (ll. 11–4)

While dramatic movement is a central feature of the *Holy Sonnets*, progress is not. The speaker constantly changes his strategy of approach to God; he alternately laments and aspires, but never rests long in any one stance. Ultimately, his movement is circular, not linear: his despair is never without a move toward hope; his hope, never without a move toward despair.

The subject of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* is, therefore, not a movement of the speaker toward resolution of his relationship with God, but instead an exploration of the paradoxes of the Christian life on earth. My first purpose in this essay is to clarify the various stances taken by the speaker in the *Holy Sonnets*, and his movement from one stance to another as he turns and returns this paradoxical situation. The speaker strives, on the one hand, for peace with God; on the other, he is aware that he is powerless to effect reconciliation. He knows that he cannot know the outcome of this drama of redemption short of death; he also knows that he must be included in God's plan of salvation while he is alive, or he will not be included at all. My second purpose is to indicate the close affinity between these dramatic stances and the various forms of Christian prayer, especially as they are illustrated in the Psalms. Finally, I wish to move to a wider consideration of the understanding of the Christian life which Donne presents through his *Holy Sonnets*.

The intensity and rapidity of dramatic movement central to Donne's presentation of the Christian life in the *Holy Sonnets* is visible within individual sonnets as well as between succeeding sonnets. In contrast to the Catholic meditative poetry of Southwell and Crashaw, in which the goal of the speaker is loss of self in contemplation of God's saving acts, the movement of Donne's

speaker is always toward self-conscious pleading for application of those actions to himself. In her important study of Donne's *Anniversaries*, Barbara Lewalski has pointed out that this interest in "finding the whole of salvation history traced in one's own soul" is the distinctive goal of a non-Ignatian tradition of meditation exemplified in the devotional manuals of Richard Rogers, Joseph Hall, and other seventeenth-century English divines. She helps to locate Donne within this tradition by pointing out that in his sermons Donne speaks as a *persona* "in whom the pattern of salvation was manifested."[5] This concern of the speaker is clearly demonstrated in the first of the *Holy Sonnets*, which, as Peterson indicates, "poses the problem that the sequence attempts to resolve."[6] Here, the speaker moves from passive acceptance and praise of God's actions for all mankind to active, desperate appeal for God to act again in his own, individual behalf:

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

Peterson suggests that in the first ten lines of this poem the speaker satisfies "the preliminary requirements of repentance by a declaration of faith and an acknowledgement of sin," and in the last four lines seeks "the grace that is essential to contrite

[5] Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Donne's* Anniversaries *and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton, 1973), see especially pp. 73–107.

[6] Peterson, p. 511.

sorrow." This reading overlooks the dramatic shift in tone which occurs at the break between the octave and the sestet in the Petrarchan form. Martz's three-fold meditative division is also present here;[7] the first two parts of the division make up the octave, while the third part of the division corresponds to the sestet. The first four lines represent an *anaphora* in the strict liturgical sense, a "commemoration of the work of redemption,"[8] a remembering of the salvation history. The second four lines shift to the present tense to describe in Biblical terms the speaker's understanding of his relationship with God; the speaker is God's "sonne," His "servant," His "sheepe," and the "Temple of [His] Spirit divine." The octave thus presents the speaker in a reconciled relationship with God through confession, the action of the memory and the understanding. But the quiet tone of these lines of accord and assent is broken sharply by the shift to questioning which opens the sestet. The note of separation in line seven—"till I betray'd / My self"—anticipates this shift from the passive, relaxed tone of the octave to the active, concerned, inquisitive tone of the sestet, which builds to the insistent, lamenting tone of the conclusion. The will is unable to respond, and so the speaker retreats into the fear that though God "lov'st mankind, [He] willt'not chuse me."

In terms of the dramatic movement of the poem, more changes here than just the tone of the speaker's voice. The entire poem is an address to God, yet the voice of the octave speaks not just for the individual *persona* but also generally and symbolically for all mankind that God "lov'st well" and thus has reconciled to Himself. The speaker of the sestet is more personal and particu-

[7] Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation* (1954, rev. ed. New Haven, 1962), p. 43. Martz's claims concerning the meditational origins of this three-fold structure and Donne's derivation of it from Catholic sources have been challenged by Stanley Archer in "Meditation and the Structure of the *Holy Sonnets*," *ELH*, XXVII (1961), 137–47. While not dealing specifically with the issue of Donne's knowledge of Ignatian devotional manuals, Patrick Grant has rescued Martz's three-fold pattern of poem division by locating precedents for it in the writings of St. Bernard, in "Augustinian Spirituality and the *Holy Sonnets* of John Donne," ELH, XXXVIII (1971), 542–61.

[8] Francis Procter and Walter Howard Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer* (1901, rpt. London, 1965), p. 445.

larized, a concrete, specific individual at a definite time and place who realizes that God's reconciliation with mankind may not include him. This is not to say that the speaker actually changes at the sestet, but that his role shifts from general spokesman giving thanks for the forgiveness of mankind to anxious individual concerned for his own particular place in the history of salvation. The poem is essentially dramatic; it is cast in the form of a speech to God about the state of the speaker's relationship to God. In the poem, this relationship is constantly open to question.

The first of the *Holy Sonnets* thus exhibits a pattern of shifting tone and dramatic stance which is carried out in many variations in the succeeding eighteen *Holy Sonnets*. The tension present at the end of the first sonnet is picked up again in the octave of the second sonnet:

> Oh my blacke Soule! now thou are summoned
> By sicknesse, deaths herald, and champion (ll. 1–2)

But the sestet introduces God's grace and repentance, and as a result, the sonnet ends on a note of harmony and resignation in hope and praise:

> Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
> That being red, it dyes red soules to white. (ll. 13–4)

This movement toward renewed harmony and assurance is amplified in the third sonnet in which the speaker faces his death directly and with quiet confidence, as the end of a long journey. Gone is the consternation which greeted even the suggestion of death in the sonnet "Oh my blacke Soule! now thou are summoned":

> This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint
> My pilgrimages last mile; and my race
> Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace,
> My spans last inch, my minutes last point,
> And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt
> My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space,
> But my'ever-waking part shall see that face,
> Whose feare already shakes my every joynt (ll. 1–8)

There is a slight note of apprehension here, but it is caught up in the calm joy which comes with the confidence that with death sin and the chance of new sin are left behind, the ongoing question of the speaker's relationship with God at issue no more:

> So, fall my sinnes, that all may have their right,
> To where they'are bred, and would presse me, to hell.
> Impute me righteous, thus purg'd of evill,
> For thus I leave the world, the flesh, and devill. (ll. 11–4)

The line ending this sonnet echoes the prayers at Baptism, that sacrament which begins the process of salvation, and with it the struggle against "carnall affeccions," a struggle ended only as here in death.

This sonnet thus sustains a tone of reconciliation throughout, a note of joy which is picked up in the octave of the next sonnet with the speaker's triumphant call for the final Day of Judgment: "At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow / Your trumpets, Angells." But it cannot last; with the sestet, the speaker loses confidence in his reconciliation and intercedes for more time in which God can help him achieve true assent to God's Love:

> But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space,
> For, if above all these, my sinnes abound,
> 'Tis late to aske abundance of thy grace,
> When wee are there; here on this lowly ground,
> Teach mee how to repent; for that's as good
> As if thou'hadst seal'd my pardon, with thy blood. (ll. 9–14)

With this expression of doubt that he is a member of the company of the reconciled, one of those included in the salvation history, the speaker is back where he was at the end of the first sonnet—a lamenting seeker after reconciliation.

This sense of the loss of reconciliation, after it seemed solidly achieved, is one of the basic patterns of dramatic movement in the *Holy Sonnets*. Also present in some of the sonnets is its opposite, the achieving of reconciliation, often in the face of overwhelming odds. At other times a sense of either hope or despair is briefly sustained. The sonnet "At the round earths

imagin'd corners, blow" establishes the context in which this dramatic movement in the *Holy Sonnets* takes place. If, as it seems likely, the first six of the *Holy Sonnets* were meant to be part of a set of seven sonnets on the Last Things,[9] then the sequence is incomplete because it lacks a sonnet affirming that the speaker will be present after the Final Judgment to share in the joys of God's kingdom. Instead, beginning with the retreat to "this lowly ground," Donne's interest centers on the situation of the individual in this world where the issue of inclusion in the salvation history for an individual must be decided. Lacking either Catholic purgatory or Protestant certainty of election, seventeenth-century Anglican theology made even more important man's relationship with God in this life. In this context, the subject of the sonnet which takes the place of a concluding sonnet in a sequence on the Last Things is highly significant. In the midst of an affirmation that even his own death is not enough to atone for his sins, the speaker points to his ingratitude for God's action on his behalf: "They kill'd once an inglorious man, but I / Crucifie him daily, being now glorified" (ll. 7–8). It is the speaker's persistent hardness of heart which necessitates the continuation of his appeals to God.

In the six sonnets which make up the second half of Miss Gardner's first group of twelve *Holy Sonnets*, these appeals follow a pattern roughly parallel to that displayed in the first group of six.[10] Both groups are meditations on the Last Things; as with

[9] See Gardner's introduction to Donne, *Divine Poems*, pp. xv–lv. Her argument is supported by Grant, p. 555. This point sheds some interesting light on Miss Gardner's recovery of the placement of the sonnet "To E. of D. with six holy Sonnets" before the *Holy Sonnets* instead of before the "La Corona" sequence. In this prefatory sonnet, Donne writes, "I send as yet / But six . . . the seaventh hath still some maime" (ll. 7–8). While the subjects of Sonnets 1 to 4 of the *Holy Sonnets* correspond exactly to traditional prescriptions for meditations on the Last Things (see Martz, *Poetry of Meditation*, p. 26), Sonnets 5 and 6 treat possible impediments to the speaker's salvation rather than affirm that he is among the redeemed. The "maime" alluded to in the prefatory sonnet may well refer to this turn back into the "lowly ground" in which the speaker of these sonnets lives in hope and fear, unable to make final assertion of confidence in his redemption.

[10] I am grateful to my colleague, M. Thomas Hester, for first suggesting this point to me.

the first group, the second series stops short of celebrating the speaker's participation in the joys of Heaven. Both sonnets "As due by many titles I resigne" and "Spit in my face yee Jewes, and pierce my side" deal with the speaker's confession of his sins, while the sonnets "Oh my blacke Soule! now thou are summoned" and "Why are wee by all creatures waited on?" lament the miseries of earthly human existence. Further, the sonnets "This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint" and "What if this present were the worlds last night?" both present the speaker in contemplation of the hour of his death. The sonnet "At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow" of the first group, in which the first turn back to "this lowly ground" was signaled, is paralleled in the second group by the sonnet "Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you," in which the speaker intercedes for action needed on God's part if the speaker's call to be taught how to repent is to be fulfilled. Finally, the sonnets "If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree" and "Wilt thou love God, as he thee! then digest" give thanks for God's actions on man's behalf to make possible man's avoiding the pains of hell, and the sonnets "Death be not proud, though some have called thee" and "Father, part of his double interest" praise God's actions through which man may come to share in the benefits of His kingdom. But, as in the first group, the second series of meditations on the Last Things again fails to move the speaker to any conclusive affirmation that he, personally, will share in the joys of Heaven. The closest he can come is to affirm that God's law is of love, and to plead, "Oh let that last Will stand!" The succeeding *Holy Sonnets*, added later in Donne's life, recapitulate the same themes and patterns; age, for Donne, did not bring lasting assurance of his inclusion in the salvation history.

In the arena of this world, the speaker of the *Holy Sonnets* thus explores dramatically the complexities and paradoxes of redemption, both in its general sense as a promise of God for His people and in its specific sense as an action which must take place in the life of every man. The general patterns of dramatic movement used in the first few sonnets are repeated again and again in the later poems. Donne's sequence of *Holy Sonnets* thus becomes

emblematic of the Christian life as Donne understood it. In this view, man's relationship with God is essentially one of change, of tension, of harmony, and of falling away from harmony. In spite of its uncertainty, it must be worked out in this world, for after death it cannot be changed either for the worse or for the better.

When seen in light of the shifting patterns of tone and dramatic movement in the Psalms, this basic uncertainty about the state of an individual soul's relationship with God, exhibited in the shifting dramatic movement of the *Holy Sonnets*, is revealed to be squarely in the midst of Judaeo-Christian traditions of prayer. From the days of the Fathers, the Psalter has been a part of the regular public and private worship of the church;[11] Donne's own high regard for the Psalms is well documented.[12] If read sequentially in the traditional way as the work of one author ("The songs are these, which heavens high holy Muse / Whisper'd to *David, David* to the Jewes"),[13] the Psalms exhibit that pattern of alternating praise, thanksgiving, confession, and intercession characteristic of the dramatic stances taken by the speaker in the *Holy Sonnets*. Especially important for the intensity of dramatic feeling in the *Holy Sonnets* is the genre of Psalms called the lament. Psalm 13 is typical:

Howe longe wylt thou forget me O Lorde? for ever?
how longe wylt thou hyde thy face fro me?
Howe longe shall I seke councell in my soule? and be so vexed in myne hert?
howe longe shall myne enemye triumphe over me?

[11] It, of course, also lies behind the patristic and Reformation traditions of spirituality offered as sources for Donne's subject and mood in the *Holy Sonnets* by Bell, Grant, Lewalski, and Ruth C. Wallerstein, in "Studies in Donne," a little-known but valuable unfinished work edited by Barbara Hillyer Davis, Diss. University of Wisconsin, 1962.

[12] In his second Prebend sermon, Donne points to David as a model of the Christian poet: "*David* was not onely a cleare Prophet of Christ himselfe, but a Prophet of every particular Christian; He foretels what I, what any shall doe, and suffer, and say." See Evelyn M. Simpson's discussion of Donne and the Psalter in her introduction to Donne's *Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels* (Berkeley, 1967), pp. 5–9. The second Prebend sermon occupies pages 94–114 of this edition.

[13] John Donne, "Upon the translation of the Psalmes by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister," ll. 31–2.

Consydre, and heare me (O Lorde my God) lyghten myne eyes, that
I sleape not in death.
Lest myne enemye saye: I have prevayled agaynst hym:
for yf I be cast downe, they that trouble me wyll rejoyse at it.
But my trust is in thy mercy, and my hert is joyfull in thy salvacyon.
I wyll synge of the Lord because he hath dealt so lovyingly wyth me.
Yea I wyll prayse the name of the Lorde the moost hyest.[14]

Here, the essential elements of the most distinctive of the *Holy Sonnets* are present, including the lamenter's description of himself and his need, his naming of his enemies, his recognition that he has no power over them, and his demand that God act on his behalf against his enemies. Present also is the poetic realization of a dramatic contention with God. This contention makes possible a movement in tone from despair to assurance as the speaker first demands and then accepts God's actions on his behalf.[15]

The full pattern of the lament-Psalm is visible in several of the *Holy Sonnets*, including one of the most familiar, "Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you." Here the speaker states his condition and names his captor:

> I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,
> Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,
> . . . . . .
> Yet dearely'I love you, and would be lov'd faine,
> But am bethroth'd unto your enemie (ll.5–6, 9–10)

He also demands God's action in his behalf:

> Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
> As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
> . . . . . .
> Divorce mee, 'untie, or breake that knot againe,
> Take mee to you, imprison me. . . . (ll. 1–2, 11–2)

Finally, he moves to an acknowledgment that he is open to God's actions: "for I / Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, /

[14] Great Bible translation, as used in the Book of Common Prayer.

[15] See Harvey Guthrie, *Israel's Sacred Songs* (New York, 1966) for a review of the varieties of forms in the Psalms.

Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee" (ll. 12–4). The language here expresses the essential paradox at the heart of Christian redemption, that the speaker is powerless to effect that which he desires. The imagery of this sonnet and of the sonnet "Since she whome I lovd, hath payd her last debt" reflects this paradox by inverting the usual conventions of language and action in Elizabethan sonnet cycles. In secular love sonnets, the actors have clearly-defined roles; the speaker actively seeks to overcome his beloved's passive resistance and convert it to passive yielding. In the *Holy Sonnets*, the one to be overcome is the speaker himself, who requires God's action to render passive his rebellious hardness of heart, or to defend him in his helplessness from the activity of the devil. It is through the various activities of prayer—praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and especially lament—that the speaker is made ready to receive the action of God, whenever and however it comes.

The goal toward which the speaker in the *Holy Sonnets* works to open himself is God's repeating in him in microcosm the universal salvation history of mankind. One of the contexts for the dramatic action in the *Holy Sonnets* is what C. A. Patrides calls the "grand design of God,"[16] the Christian view of history. Even as the sonnet "As due by many titles I resigne" begins with a recapitulation of human history from Adam through Christ to the speaker, with the implication of the end of all things yet to come, so all the sonnets of this sequence take for their arena the full sweep of Christian history. The sonnet "If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree" recalls the beginning of Christian history in the "tree, / Whose fruit threw death on else immortal us." Several of the sonnets invoke the Christ-event, which stands at the central point in Christian history, while others extend the scope of time in the *Holy Sonnets* to include "the worlds last night," the end of all time in the coming of God's kingdom.

In addition, if the sweep of human history is part of the arena for the dramatic action of these poems, then so are all of creation

[16] C. A. Patrides, *The Grand Design of God: The Literary Form of the Christian View of History* (Toronto, 1972). See especially pp. 70–98.

and all creatures, at least in so far as they participate in God's actions in human history for the redemption of the world. The sonnet "At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow" extends the geography of these poems horizontally, while the sonnet "Wilt thou love God, as he thee! then digest" extends the space upward to incorporate heaven and God "by Angels waited on." The sonnet "If faithfull soules be alike glorifi'd," by including "hels wide mouth," moves downward to complete the geography of the Christian universe. The sonnets "If poysonous mineralls, and if that tree" and "Why are wee by all creatures waited on?" bring in the lower orders of animal, vegetable, and mineral creation, while the sonnets "At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow" and "If faithful soules be alike glorified" incorporate into the world of these poems all other men, including both the quick and the dead.

As background for the dramatic movement in the *Holy Sonnets*, the speaker thus presents the entirety of creation and history in their involvement in God's plan of salvation in an attempt to locate himself within that plan. The universal salvation history becomes particularized through the image of the world-stage: "This is my playes last scene." The macrocosm of creation becomes particularized through analogy with the microcosm: "I am a little world made cunningly." The pattern of dramatic movement in the *Holy Sonnets* is, finally, based on that "testing pattern" identified in Elizabethan drama by Thomas B. Stroup.[17] Even as the Christian Eucharist is a drama in which the universal salvation history is represented and so made open to individuals in the present time of its celebration, so in the *Holy Sonnets* the speaker's life takes place in a particular moment in time on the stage of the world at a particular intersection of the macrocosm of creation with the salvation history. At that point, the speaker's life becomes a process of testing, through which if successful the speaker is incorporated into the promises of salvation made by God and worked out by Him in human history. In the process

[17] Thomas B. Stroup, *Microcosmos: The Shape of the Elizabethan Play* (Lexington, 1965).

of testing, the salvation history must be repeated in the speaker-as-microcosm if it is to be open to him. But even as the Eucharist is participated in over and over in a person's life, so the speaker in the *Holy Sonnets* goes through the testing pattern several times in the course of Donne's sequence. Although he moves from doubt through knowledge to confidence, he cannot sustain his sense of reconciliation, and must repeat the pattern again and again. In this light, the *Holy Sonnets* display dramatically the powers of the speaker's wit turning and returning the paradox of Christian redemption.

Each of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* is thus a sharply realized dramatic monologue in the testing drama through which the speaker hopes to pass into inclusion in the last act of the salvation history. To achieve this, the speaker calls on God by assuming several roles identifiable with the five basic types of prayer. In this process of meditative prayer, the speaker poses at once as spokesman for all mankind, giving thanks and praise for the inclusion of man in God's plans for the future of His creation, and as an individual sinner seeking through confession, petition, and lament inclusion in those plans. He explores the paradoxes of redemption: that he is helpless and resisting and requires God's action against both himself and the forces of evil, and that he can never know of the outcome short of the grave before which the outcome must be decided. He moves constantly from hope in God's promises to despair of his own inclusion, and back again. He also exemplifies in this movement his own resistance to inclusion. Seen as prayers, the *Holy Sonnets* embody what Donne said of his own prayer:

> I turne to hearty and earnest prayer to God, and I fix my thoughts strongly (as I thinke) upon him, and before I have perfected one petition, one period of my prayer, a power and principality is got into me againe. . . . The spirit of slumber closes mine eyes, and I pray drousily; Or . . . the spirit of deviation, and vaine repetition, and I pray giddily, and circularly, and returne againe and againe to that I have said before.[18]

[18] John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley, 1962), X, 56.

If there is movement in these poems, except in and around the problem they treat, it is not toward resolution but toward acceptance of the problem. Although Donne wrote his *Holy Sonnets* over a period of some ten years,[19] he ended the sequence, finally, on just this note of acceptance. The last sonnet "Oh, to vex me, contraryes meete in one" summarizes the movement and the theme of the entire group:

> Inconstancy unnaturally hath begott
> A constant habit; that when I would not
> I change in vowes, and in devotione.
> . . . . . .
> I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day
> In prayers, and flattering speaches I court God:
> To morrow I quake with true feare of his rod. (ll. 2–4, 9–11)

Yet the mood at the end of this sonnet is one of peace with life lived in this way. Donne's distinctive understanding of the Christian life is no less profound or more deeply felt than that expressed by other religious poets of the time. If we are fully to appreciate the complexity of religious faith in the seventeenth century, we must accept that for Donne "here / Those are my best dayes, when I shake with feare."

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[19] Thus Gardner, pp. xliii, 78.