

DONNE AND HOPKINS IN THE PATRISTIC-HUMANISTIC TRADITION

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*POETICA THEOLOGICA*: DONNE AND HOPKINS IN THE  
PATRISTIC-HUMANISTIC TRADITION OF THEOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, I have argued that John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) and Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1918) are not simply forms of devotional literature or spiritual autobiography, but constitute works of theology in their own right. From a contemporary perspective, such a claim may seem to entail a gratuitous revisioning of the theological tradition, but I mean it as a hermeneutic retrieval. It is often assumed in scholarly circles that logic and the dialogical arts have always been the natural allies of theology. As a result, the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* are typically viewed as supplemental to theological study; they are "soft" literary works that serve to exemplify the "hard" truths of scholastic divinity and sectarian dogma. My claim is that the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* are theological in the classic sense precisely because they are literary and devotional, spiritual and autobiographical. Donne and Hopkins are poet theologians writing in a patristic-humanistic strain of the theological tradition. Instead of giving priority to the logical-dialectical orientation of systematic theologians and modern philosophers—whether in affirmation of or resistance to such an orientation—they follow the example of church fathers like Origen and Augustine and Christian humanists like Erasmus and Valla by treating matters of divinity in a distinctly literary, existential, and dramatistic manner. To be more specific, they seek to tell the truth at the lively intersection of *exegesis* and *poesis*, engaging an inventive hermeneutic set within the bounds of authority and tradition so as to participate responsibly in divine re-creation.

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*vere Dominus est in loco isto, et ego nesciebam*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Christian Theology and the Literary Arts

Philosophy cannot produce an immediate effect which would change the present state of the world. This is not only true for philosophy but for all specifically human endeavors. Only a God can save us now. The only possibility remaining to us in thought and in poetry is to remain available for the manifestation of this God or for the absence of this God in our decline.

--Martin Heidegger<sup>1</sup>

The following study is an attempt to chart the interconnection of language, self, and God in the poetry and prose of John Donne (1572-1631) and Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), with special attention given to Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) and Hopkins's *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (1918). These works by Donne and Hopkins are of particular interest because of the way that they have been received in literary-critical circles. Given that the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* treat matters of theology poetically, they would seem to comprise a hybrid form of literature, blending genres and subject matter that are typically kept distinct and separate. Instead of engaging with the apparent hybridity of these works, however, scholars have tended to fall back on the modern genres of devotional poetry or spiritual autobiography, treating the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* as distinctly literary-psychological works with important albeit elusive theological underpinnings. According to this critical approach, the emphasis has typically fallen on either the literary style, with poetically-oriented readers seeking

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Der Spiegel*, 31 May 1976. Quoted in Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2003): 215.

to indicate how the language reflects or gives shape to the experience of the author and/or reader, or on the latent propositional content, with theologically-oriented readers attempting to clarify the underlying doctrinal influences and/or sectarian loyalties of the author by putting relevant passages in relation to works of a more discursive nature within the philosophical-scholastic tradition of theology.

Rather than continuing to read the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* in this way, vacillating between a “soft” poetic spirituality and a “hard” philosophical theology, I would like to suggest that these works occupy an important place within a rich, yet often overlooked, strain of the Western theological tradition. It is often assumed that theology is governed by logic and metaphysical thinking and, of course, this is true if we are to favor the kind of rationalistic divinity that emerged with Abelard during the twelfth century and eventually reached its height at universities like Paris and Orleans in the mid-thirteenth century. However, for many patristic, medieval and humanistic writers, the grammatical and rhetorical arts provided the proper mode for theology rather than logic and dialectic.<sup>2</sup> I would like to suggest that Donne and Hopkins worked as theologians

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<sup>2</sup> I began thinking of theology along these lines after reading McLuhan’s Ph.D. thesis, “The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time” (1943) during a stay at Cambridge University. In order to account for the general confusion surrounding the debates between Gabriel Harvey and Thomas Nashe in the sixteenth-century, McLuhan sought to understand the relationship between grammar, rhetoric and dialectic in historical perspective. Surveying all the major works on the language arts from the pre-Socratics to Francis Bacon, McLuhan made the claim that “Harvey and Nashe, are at bottom, and on the surface, owing to a reconstitution of ancient rivalries between dialectics and rhetoric” (2006 42). McLuhan’s study provides an important interpretive framework for rethinking the Western theological tradition. As we shall see, the early humanists did not abandon theological study as such. What they did was alter the intellectual ground of learning, privileging grammar and rhetoric over dialectic, just as the church fathers had done. This is why they could reject metaphysical thinking with its

within this patristic-humanistic orientation even as they were influenced in various ways by scholastic works. Augustine's grammatical-rhetorical approach to theology in the *Confessions* helps to capture the difference. Donne and Hopkins, following Augustine, practiced divinity as poets rather than philosophers and did so because they were pastor-priests opening themselves and their readers to a relationship with the living God rather than scholar-philosophers attempting to grasp the divine essence in words.

As will become clear, I am not suggesting a determinate link between Augustine, Donne, and Hopkins that could be proven according to the typical methods of source criticism. Nor am I seeking to override the important distinctions to be made between these authors, their works, and the socio-political contexts within which they wrote. My intention is to draw out a kind of family resemblance between these writers that, on the one hand, is characteristic of an often overlooked strain of the theological tradition and, on the other hand, heuristic for discovering alternatives to metaphysical thinking in occidental literatures. In other words, the significance of considering these writers in combination is that together they bring to light a poetic emphasis in theology that has largely gone unnoticed from the Renaissance onwards. Augustine, Donne and Hopkins were all deeply influenced by metaphysical thinking, but they refused to allow it free reign in their language and life. This was not a sign of intellectual weakness on their part or lack of scholarly discipline. They simply placed their confidence in something other than the *logos* of Greek wisdom for relating humanity and divinity. Their recourse is

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grounding in dialectic while at the same time upholding a grammatically and rhetorically based theology. I realized after reading McLuhan that Charles Trinkaus had made similar observations in the mid-seventies and had set an important precedent for more recent studies. See Trinkaus (1970); Stinger (1977); O'Malley (1993).

instructive. Rather than surrendering to doubt and uncertainty at the point that words fail to render up the Word, they devoted themselves to a biblical poetic, rhetoric, and hermeneutic and the result, often overlooked in both literary and theological scholarly circles, was a distinctly non-metaphysical way of thinking not only about divinity, but also humanity.

### **The Big Picture: Ontotheology and the End of Metaphysics**

Martin Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and the "god of the philosophers" in his lecture "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics" (1957)<sup>3</sup> provides a strategic entry point for my study of Augustine, Donne and Hopkins. In this lecture, Heidegger not only rehearses the "end of metaphysics" and along with it transcendental subjectivity and speculative theology, but also inspires a yearning for what (or who) might take the place of metaphysical god and man. Surveying the philosophical tradition from the pre-Socratics to Nietzsche, Heidegger observes that philosophers and theologians alike have tended to associate human and divine being according to the *logos* of Greek wisdom and have done so, strangely enough, while stressing the ontic difference between God and man. Supposedly, the deity enters philosophy as an absolute Other, the Being who differs from beings because of its status as the first cause and generative ground (e.g. Aristotle's *causa sui*). And yet, philosophy cannot think this difference as such because "the god of philosophy" makes its appearance not as a startling non-derived Other, but as an all-too familiar conceptual Same. Rather than arriving on its own terms from beyond, the god of philosophy emerges from within the bounds of logic, "that kind

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<sup>3</sup> Published as part of *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1969).

of thinking which everywhere provides and accounts for the ground of being” (Heidegger 59). As a result, the transcendent *theos* becomes assimilated to human *ontos* precisely at the point that the former is upheld as absolute Other. Indeed, the deity is believed to reign universally from on high, but it ultimately serves to reflect humanity back to itself, functioning as an “idol that meets the measure and serves the needs of human thinking” (Carlson 61).

This contradiction poses obvious problems for the traditional alliance between Greek philosophy and Christian theology, but it also helps to clarify the characteristic difficulties of Western spirituality. Heidegger observes that “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to [the] god [of the philosophers]. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god” (Heidegger 72). One of the main difficulties with ontotheology is that it fails to give way to an authentic and lively spiritual life. Rendering the deity static and impersonal and limiting theology to the capacity of human reason, it produces a religion of technique and control that serves to expand and extend the ego rather than open up space for the living God. The god of the philosophers may seem to provide the conditions for rational certainty, ontic stability and technological mastery, but since it has little “room for that which overflows comprehension, it distorts our understanding” of humanity and divinity alike (Westphal 2002 263).

Seeking a solution to this problem, Heidegger recommends a kind of “god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy,” suggesting that such thinking might be “closer to the divine God” (Heidegger 72). He does not specify what he means

by “the divine God” and he is reluctant to elaborate on what form such “god-less thinking” might take, but this is understandable given the precedent set by earlier critiques. Such a radical subversion of metaphysics is difficult even to begin to imagine because the god-less efforts of other thinkers seem only to have reinforced the kind of thinking that they purported to demolish.

For Heidegger, the difficulty “lies with language” (73). “Our Western languages,” he submits, “are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way.” At this point in his argument, Heidegger seems merely to reinforce Nietzsche’s claim concerning the apparent impossibility of thinking beyond the “*constraint of language*” (1967 283).<sup>4</sup> And yet, just when it appears that he has given up hope of suppressing metaphysical thought and escaping the illegitimate reign of the god of philosophy, he entertains the possibility of certain non-metaphysical alternatives: “It must remain an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with an exclusive brand of metaphysics . . . or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance” (73). On the one hand, Heidegger is clear that the language of metaphysics would assimilate the deity to a logical same even at the point that it seeks to uphold absolute difference, and yet on the other hand he hints at the possibility of giving voice to theological matters in such a way as to remain faithful to the freedom and initiative of “the divine God.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche perceived a tight connection between (rational) language and (metaphysical) divinity. In *Twilight of the Idols* he claims that “grammar” and the idea of “God” go hand in hand, suggesting that the latter would disappear if only we were to give up faith in the former (2005 170).

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth summary of Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, see

## Heidegger's Legacy: Critical Theory and the Rise of Postmodern Theology

Heidegger's critique of metaphysics has been highly influential in the West and in large measure has determined the course of philosophical and theological inquiry throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Most significantly, his critique has helped to legitimize a subversive philosophy from "below" devoted to ending the reign of metaphysical god and man. The early work of Derrida is exemplary in this regard. Following Heidegger, Derrida affirms the impossibility of ontotheology and draws attention to the tragic consequences of aspiring to it. At the same time, he extends the critique to Heidegger himself, suggesting that Heidegger implicitly affirms the metaphysical tradition in his "godless" rejection of it. That is, instead of providing an alternative to ontotheology in his critique, he remains "trapped in a kind of circle" because he was working "within the inherited concepts of metaphysics" (Derrida 1978 280, 281). For Derrida, it could not have been otherwise: "There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics" because "every borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics" (280, 281).<sup>6</sup> Giving up the need for a way out, Derrida joins a chorus of other postmodern voices advocating psychological and social remedies that pay homage to the theoretical inevitability yet practical impossibility of metaphysics. His contribution is innovative in its own way, but it is also representative. Derrida recommends two distinct strategies for living under the regime of metaphysics, one negative, the other affirmative: we can either continue

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Benson (2002) 178-82.

<sup>6</sup> In this way, Derrida recalls Nietzsche's conviction that "*Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off*" (Nietzsche 1967 283).

looking upon “the impossible presence of the absent origin” with nostalgia like Rousseau or we can turn away from this “impossible presence” with Nietzsche and enter into “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation” (292).

More recently, philosophers and theologians working in the continental tradition have been led to question the priority of metaphysics and the existential compromise that it would seem to necessitate. Following the lead of figures like Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Jean-Luc Marion who signaled a “theological turn”<sup>7</sup> in their phenomenological work, some have even begun to consider alternatives to metaphysical thinking and the kind of language and life that it encourages.<sup>8</sup> Among them is John Caputo who has recently posed a series of questions concerning theology and the religious life that are indebted to Heidegger. Inspired by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy who once asked, “Who comes after the subject?,” Caputo wonders ““Who comes after the God of metaphysics?” or ‘What comes after onto-theo-logic?’” (Caputo 2002 2).<sup>9</sup> Caputo

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<sup>7</sup> See Dominique Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” *Phenomenology and the “Theological” Turn: The French Debate*, trans. Bernard George Prusak. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000): 3-15.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, see John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Indianapolis: U of Indiana P, 1999); Merold Westphal, ed., *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought* (Indianapolis: U of Indiana P, 1999); Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*. Malden MA: Blackwell, 1999); John Caputo, ed., *The Religious* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2002). For other recent works that question the priority of metaphysics for theology, see Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1999); and Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> See Nancy (1991) 5 and Caputo (2002) 2. The term “subject” when applied to human identity is notoriously tricky. The chief reason is that it has two contrasting

provides an interesting approach for answering his own line of questioning. In an effort to take Heidegger's own desire for alternatives seriously, he critiques Heidegger's totalizing view of metaphysics, suggesting that the "objection to the ontotheological tradition" is itself quite traditional. According to Caputo, there have been numerous other figures throughout Western history—among them Paul, Pascal, Luther, Kierkegaard—who have self-consciously resisted the god of the philosophers. Given the totalizing nature of the tradition they opposed, such dissenters have typically been viewed as enigmatic, individualistic and unconventional in their thinking. However, joined by their longing for alternatives, they seem to form a loosely defined tradition of their own—what Caputo calls a "prophetic counter-tradition" (2002 2). The philosophy of religion has typically "concerned itself with offering proofs for the immortality of the soul and for the existence of God, and with identifying and analyzing the divine attributes." To those writing in the prophetic counter-tradition, however, such God-talk is of little use:

The God of traditional philosophy of religion is a philosopher's God explicating a philosopher's faith, to be found, if anywhere, only on the

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definitions, one philosophical-psychological and the other political-religious. See Balibar (1991) 33-57. When Jean-Luc Nancy asks "Who comes after the subject" he means "subject" primarily in its philosophical sense, whether it be the Cartesian-Kantian "transcendental subject" or the Lacanian "divided subject." "Metaphysics" is an equally slippery term. Following Heidegger, Caputo associates classic metaphysics with ontotheology—that is, the kind of thinking which assumes the commensurability of logic, Being in general and Being in the Highest. Thus the question "Who or what comes after the god of metaphysics" is at the same time asking "What comes after onto-theo-logic?" (Caputo 2002 2). As Caputo points out, his question is "analogous" to Nancy's because ontotheology and philosophic subjectivity both find their origin in metaphysical thinking. Unless indicated otherwise, I shall work with the philosophical sense of "subject" as well as the Heideggerian definition of "metaphysics."

pages of philosophy journals, not in the hearts of believers or the practice of faith. This philosopher's God is a creature of scholastic, modernist, and Enlightenment modes of thinking that deserve nothing so much as a decent burial. (3)

What distinguishes this tradition from its philosophical-scholastic counterpart is not only a manner of thinking but also a style of speaking and writing. The common conviction among philosophers and theologians of the prophetic counter-tradition is that "religious matters" are to be "treated differently and on their own terms." As a result, the "objectifying tendencies, the preoccupation with cognitive certainty, the confusion of religious life with assenting to certain propositions prove to be almost entirely irrelevant" (3). What matters is a distinctly religious language suited to the "hearts of believers" and "the practice of faith" (3).

### **Prophetic Resistance and Pastoral Responsibility**

Caputo's concept of a prophetic counter-tradition is particularly helpful for considering alternatives to metaphysical god and man. Not only does it perturb modern assumptions and attitudes concerning the relationship between metaphysics and theology, but it also opens up possibilities for theological study in a post-metaphysical age. Moreover, it stimulates reflection concerning the relationship between language and theology, suggesting that the distinctiveness of a Kierkegaard or Pascal or Luther is not only spiritual, but also linguistic. Most significantly, however, Caputo's notion of a prophetic counter-tradition seeks to resolve Heidegger's open-ended question concerning the relationship between language and metaphysical thinking. For Caputo, the nature of

Western languages is *not*, in fact, marked with an exclusive brand of metaphysics. The dominance of metaphysical thinking seems difficult to deny, and yet there are important voices in the theological tradition that have stood in opposition to it, seeking to define theology in distinctly Christian-religious rather than philosophic-scholastic terms.

With Caputo, I am interested to distinguish alternatives to metaphysical theology, but not strictly in terms of a so-called “prophetic counter-tradition.” Again, Caputo’s interpretation is helpful in many ways, but it is also limiting. The difficulty is that many who have championed the freedom of a living God and sought to cultivate a more vital spirituality and heart-centered faith have spoken pastorally from the center rather than prophetically from the margins. While theological thinkers like Pascal and Kierkegaard were relatively obscure in their own age and as a result tended to be misunderstood and were often maligned, other figures like Ambrose, Chrysostom, Gregory, and Bernard stood closer to the official centre, occupying official positions of authority in the church of their day. Indeed, there is something distinctive about the theological practice of such writers and it has something to do with their use of language. However, the distinctiveness is not determined chiefly by a rhetoric of cultic resistance. What defines their approach is a common conviction that theology is a discipline that joins head and heart, knowledge and love, word and spirit, and is best grounded in the grammatical and rhetorical arts rather than in logic and dialectic.

Augustine exemplifies this approach in the *Confessions* and helps to distinguish a pastoral Donne and Hopkins from a prophetic Pascal or Kierkegaard. That is, Donne and Hopkins, following Augustine and other patristic, medieval and humanistic writers,

practiced theology as poets and preachers rather than logicians and scholars. They were more than intellectuals speaking to other intellectuals; like the prophets and apostles of Scripture, they were preachers and teachers ministering to and within the faith community. Their chief concern was not to satisfy inquiring minds, but to help restore ailing souls and cultivate fallow hearts. In other words, they had a responsibility to the whole person rather than the mind alone. And so, they opened themselves to the living God of the Scriptures, seeking to respond rather than rationalize, participate rather than prove. To be sure, they were influenced by metaphysical thinking, but they did not give it first priority. In the main they drew upon the poetic, hermeneutic and rhetorical resources of language, engaging a theo-logic that took the form of confession, meditation, song, sermon, doxology, prayer—much of what Heidegger recognized as needful yet lacking in the modern era.

### **Poetic Theology in Historical Perspective**

In order to appreciate Donne and Hopkins along these lines, it will be useful to outline a brief history of poetic theology, beginning with Augustine.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the

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<sup>10</sup> I have found the work of Marshall McLuhan, Henri de Lubac, and Debora Shuger to be particularly helpful in the development of this outline, specifically, McLuhan's Ph.D. thesis "The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time" (1943) recently published as *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko P, 2006); de Lubac's seminal work *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 2 vols. (1959; Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 1998); and Debora Shuger's *Sacred Rhetoric* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988). My brief history of poetic theology is indebted to these works. McLuhan provides the general historical contours. His study of the trivium suggests that patristic, medieval and humanist theologians based their writings in the grammatical and rhetorical arts rather than dialectic and, as a result, practiced theology as exegetes, poets and orators motivated by moral-spiritual concern rather than logicians seeking after new and unknown truths of a metaphysical nature. De Lubac helps to develop the nature of

twentieth century, scholars working in the humanities have tended to assume with Heidegger that logic and the dialectical arts have been dominant from Plato onwards. Northrop Frye gives voice to this assumption in *Words with Power* (1990):

With many qualifications, we may still take the expulsion of poets from Plato's *Republic*, and the contemptuous reference to the mythological way of thinking in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, to represent a subordination of poetic and metaphorical to dialectical language which has dominated Western culture ever since, however often the direction of the dialectic has changed. From Plato and Aristotle to the Hellenistic philosophies, from them to Christian theology and scholasticism, and from there to the secular ideologies of our own time, democratic or Marxist or whatever, the ascendancy of dialectician over poet has been relatively constant. (33)

Marshall McLuhan's study of the history of the trivium, recently published as *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko P, 2006), suggests a very different scenario. Like Frye, McLuhan claims that the "history of the trivium is largely a history of the rivalry among [the language arts] for ascendancy" (2006 42). However, he goes on to suggest that grammar and rhetoric along with the associated fields of poetry, hermeneutics and literary study have enjoyed long periods of ascendancy in Western culture and often, surprisingly, at the prompting of prominent theologians and churchmen.

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grammatical theology in his analysis of patristic and medieval exegesis and Shuger expands upon the connection between rhetoric and theology in her study of the "Christian grand style" from Augustine to Donne.

Augustine is an exemplary figure in this regard. In McLuhan's estimation, Augustine practiced theology not in such a way as to perpetuate the "subordination of poetic and metaphorical to dialectical language" (Frye 33). On the contrary, he "determined the mode of theology as that of grammar" rather than dialectic and upheld the "the ideal theologian" as a kind of Ciceronian orator rather than metaphysician (McLuhan 2006 7). In her seminal work *Sacred Rhetoric* (1988), Debora Shuger makes a similar claim, treating stylistic and "psychagogic" matters in tandem. Rather than following Plato and other classical philosophers in their "suspicion of rhetoric and poetry," Augustine abandoned "the Classical intellectualist tradition with its hierarchical faculty psychology in favor of a more unified picture of mental activity, one in which feeling, willing and loving become closely interrelated" (Shuger 44-45, 46). The language of rhetoric and poetry became important to Augustine, especially in theological discourse, because it served to "transform the heart and will, turning them toward love of God and neighbor" (48). It is true that Augustine guarded against the "claim that rhetoric can determine . . . emotional response" and he did so by insisting that "true passion and eloquence flow from the interior motions of the Holy Spirit," but he did not "reject the deliberate devices of trope, figure, rhythm, and amplification." Rather, he oriented them to the purposes of theology, setting out the conditions for a "rhetorical theology and a theological rhetoric" (223). In this way, Augustine helped to give shape to a "theocentric humanism" that looked to the literary arts for its primary mode of expression (189).

This may seem like an unusual perspective given the typical association made between Augustine and Plato. Many scholars characterize Augustine as a "Christian

Platonist” who sought to unite “the God of Revelation with a metaphysical understanding of the categories of Being” so as to achieve an “onto-theological alliance” (Cary ix; Kearney 1994 116).<sup>11</sup> However, within the broader scope of McLuhan’s history of the trivium and Shuger’s study of sacred rhetoric, Augustine and those he influenced resisted a dialectically-based theology even as they were drawn to it in certain ways and this was because they understood Christianity chiefly as a religion of faith grounded in the authority of Scripture. At times they longed to transcend all that would stand in the way of an immediate gnosis of divine presence, and yet they ultimately accepted the creaturely conditions of language, practicing theology as a literary rather than logical art.

Henri de Lubac helps to clarify Augustine’s grammatical-rhetorical view of theology in *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture* (1998)<sup>12</sup>, extending the observations of McLuhan and Shuger to other church fathers and medieval theologians coming before and after. According to de Lubac, the literary arts lie at the heart of theology for Augustine and other “poet theologians” like Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, Bernard and Gregory, because “Scripture constituted the very ‘grounds for theology’” rather than simply “‘a theological link of the highest importance’” (de Lubac 1:25). The practice of theology for such writers was about interpreting Scripture with a view to human-divine intimacy rather than speculating on the nature of a metaphysical beyond so as to flee the vicissitudes of time and experience (1:27). Throughout their poetry, sermons, and prose writings, they devoted themselves to the “sacred eloquence” of

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed study of the relationship between Christianity and Platonism in Augustine, see Menn (1998) 73-195.

<sup>12</sup> First published in French in 1959.

Scripture and sought not only to provide a deeper appreciation of its mysteries, but also to imitate its rich poetic style, writing primarily for the purpose of spiritual conversion and moral edification rather than scholarly understanding. Bernard stands out as an important example among the later fathers of the church. Nicknamed the *Doctor mellifluous*, he practiced theology by interpreting-inventing the divine eloquence of Scripture, seeking to (re)turn himself and his audience/reader to Christ. For Bernard, divinity was not a matter of “gratifying oneself intellectually in a knowledge . . . that would remain completely objective, leaving the heart unchanged” (de Lubac 2:174). On the contrary, this “would be an illusory knowledge.” What Bernard sought to communicate in his theological *praxis* was the “old doctrine,” the ancient teaching of Scripture that is “always affirmed in a lyrical mode and in a renewed experience” (2:175).

In a post-Enlightenment context, the thought of a theology that is not already oriented by metaphysics is difficult to imagine; and yet, the idea of a grammar-rhetoric that refuses the ascendancy of metaphysical thinking seems no less extraordinary. What is often lost on modern readers, as de Lubac’s study helps to show, is that patristic and medieval theologians did not interpret the Scriptures on the basis of an encompassing methodology conditioned by referential thinking.<sup>13</sup> In their practice of “spiritual

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<sup>13</sup> O’Keefe and Reno help to bring this point home in *Sanctified Vision* (2005). They observe that “Most modern readers hold a referential theory of meaning, which assumes our words and sentences are meaningful insofar as they successfully refer or point” (8). The fathers do not share this assumption. For them, the biblical text does not “acquire meaning because of its connection to *x*; it confers meaning because it *is* divine revelation. Scripture is ordained by God to edify, and that power of edification is intrinsic to scripture” (12). As such, they move “within, across, and through the text, exploring its unifying potency.” Modern readers tend to struggle with patristic exegesis because they “move in the reverse direction,” assuming that “something akin to the modern theory of

exegesis,” they opened their hearts and minds to the shaping influence of Scripture, treating the biblical text as “the orienting, luminous center of a highly varied and complex reality, shaped by divine providence” (O’Keefe and Reno 11). It is true that some of the fathers understood language as a product of the Fall and associated polysemy with the judgment of Babel<sup>14</sup>; however, they also believed that the language of Scripture, though subject to postlapsarian, post-Babel reality, is at the same divinely inspired and somehow has a mysterious “power to illuminate and disclose the order and pattern of all things” (O’Keefe and Reno 11). Interestingly, owing up to the limitations of language did not simply leave the fathers pining for a long lost identity with the Absolute. Nor did it lead them to devalue the words of Scripture or seek to transcend them through some kind of Christian version of Plato’s dialectic. Rather, taking confidence in the re-creational work of the Spirit mediated by the divine eloquence of the Word<sup>15</sup>, they interpreted the Scriptures so as to participate<sup>16</sup> responsively in relationship with the living

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meaning as reference—either to history or to doctrinal propositions—animated the exegetical practices of the fathers” (12).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* 2.4ff. For the relationship between language and fallenness in the Christian and continental traditions more generally, see Kevin Hart (1989) 3-33 and James K. A. Smith (2000) 1-184.

<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, Augustine not only associates language and interpretation with the Fall and Babel, but also with the goodness of creation and re-creation, a theme that is repeated in Donne and Hopkins.

<sup>16</sup> In Plato’s philosophy, there is a close connection between participation (*methexis*) in divinity and dialectical ascent. The difference in the patristic-humanistic tradition is that humanity’s responsive participation is based on Christ’s prior participation in humanity in the Incarnation and is grammatical and rhetorical rather than dialectical. This is because the incarnate Word draws the heart like an “eloquent and persuasive man” and invites response in the same poetic-rhetorical mode (Donne *Sermons* 1:313). The kind of participation here may be more closely related to the *koinonic* sharing or partaking of 1 Pet. 1:4 than Platonic *methexis*. There is no effort to escape language and history in order to arrive at the truth. Rather, these are the very

God.

Origen, one of the early masters of poetic theology and an important influence on Augustine, speaks to the interconnection of reader, text, and Spirit in his homily on

Numbers:

We cannot say of the Holy Spirit's writings that there is anything useless or unnecessary in them, however much they appear obscure to some. What we ought rather to do is to turn the eyes of our mind toward Him who ordered this to be written and to ask of Him their meaning. We must do this so that if there is weakness in our soul, He who heals all its infirmities may heal us, or so that if we are his children in understanding, the Lord may be with us guarding his children and may nourish us and add to the measure of our age. . . . For it is in our power to be able to attain both health from weakness and manhood from childhood. It is, then, our part to ask this of God. And it is God's to give to those who ask and to open to those who knock. (Origen 247)

In the same context, Origen concedes that the biblical text can be read as "a narrative of what happened and was over and done a long time ago," pertaining "in no way to us when it is told" (248), but this is to do violence to its nature as the Word of God. For Origen, as for most patristic and medieval theologians, the Spirit is the author of the Scriptures and speaks through them to give shape to the moral-spiritual life of the reader

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conditions within which divinity calls and humanity answers. See Shuger (1988) 234-35.

and the faith community.<sup>17</sup> It was the responsibility of the exegete not only to reflect upon what had been said at a literal-historical level, but also to recognize and amplify what the Spirit is saying within, across and through the text, drawing out senses of a more spiritual nature so as to encourage an openness to, transformation by, and sharing in the love of God.<sup>18</sup> Origen invites his reader to join him in this kind of ethical-spiritual-interpretive work in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: “Let us stretch forth the hands of our soul as of our body to God, that the Lord, who gave His Word to the preachers with great power . . . may also give us the Word with His power, by whom we may be enabled to make clear from our treatise a sound understanding of the name and nature of love and one suitable for building up of chastity” (Greer 220). Origen’s approach to hermeneutics helped set the course for patristic and medieval theology. The wellspring of theology—spiritual exegesis—was thought to track in a kind of divinely inspired eloquence with the exegete commenting upon the Scriptures in such a way as to clarify and heighten the rhetorical intent of the text, moving listeners and readers into the

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<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, Origen writes of the divine authorship of Scripture: “[I]f any one ponders over the prophetic sayings with all the attention and reverence they deserve, it is certain that in the very act of reading and diligently studying them his mind and feelings will be touched by a divine breath and he will recognise that the words he is reading are not the utterances of man but the language of God; and so he will perceive from his own experience that these books have been composed not by human art or mortal eloquence but, if I may so speak, in a style that is divine” (*On First Principles* 4.1.6 265).

<sup>18</sup> For a helpful overview of patristic exegesis along these lines, see O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision* (2005). Concerning the interconnection of edification, transformation and the spiritual senses, McNally notes that the “spiritual senses” traditionally involved a *conversio* or conversion, “allegory from the past to the present Christ, tropology a reform of each life by the act of Christ, anagogy a reform of the present by the future” (453). McNally expands: “Allegory signifies a conversion of intellect, tropology of morals, anagogy of desires. Allegory builds up or edifies faith, tropology charity, anagogy hope. Allegory is the sense of dogma, tropology of moral, anagogy of mysticism” (453).

way of truth.<sup>19</sup>

While the grammatical-rhetorical approach to theology remained ascendant throughout the so-called middle ages, a significantly different emphasis arose in the schools in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—an emphasis upon dialectic and disputation rather than biblical interpretation and moral-spiritual growth. At first, this shift was felt at a moral and spiritual level. The focus continued to be on Scripture, but in a way that privileged human judgment rather than humility of heart. De Lubac writes, “In the course of the twelfth century dialecticians in their quest for the ‘vera scripturarum scientia’ changed the order of things. The *studium lectionis* decidedly surpassed the *humilitas cordis*, and the authority of the sacred text appears effaced in their eyes before human judgment” (1:104). By the end of the twelfth century, dialectics began to take over in theology: “The sentences of Peter the Lombard . . . displace[d] the Bible from the center of *studium*, and by the end of the following century Aristotle had already started to displace the Lombard. From this time on the divergence widens. Theology with dialectic, and Scripture with the Fathers, tend to travel more and more on different levels” (McNally 450-51).

The new theology received sharp criticism from conservative theologians. Bernard made his aversion known in his critique of Abelard: “In France we have a theologian who is taking his rise in place of an old master, and right from the time he came of age he has dabbled in the art of dialectics, and now he is making an

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<sup>19</sup> Frances Young explores this hermeneutic-homiletic strategy in relation to John Chrysostom’s homilies on 1 Corinthians. See Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (248ff).

unwholesome shambles of the pages of Sacred Scripture” (qtd. in de Lubac 1:28). Writers like Bernard castigated the “modern dialecticians” for their endless discussions, lack of piety, and “failure to hold fast to the writings of the Fathers in their explication of Scripture” (1:72). The problem was not dialectic as such—the theological tradition had always made room for logic and disputation—but rather the supreme authority of dialectic in theological matters.<sup>20</sup> As reading practices became oriented to metaphysical questions and disputations rather than meditation, edification, and prayer (1:51-52), the practice of theology became more and more disconnected from a living exegesis and spirituality. It also had little place for mystery and the initiative of a living God. When dialectic finally won out over grammar and rhetoric in the schools during the mid-thirteenth century, the doctrine of multiple senses, with its focus on the “divine eloquence” of the Scriptures, was finally eclipsed by a variant of scholasticism that took the form of “tracts and summas and . . . huge ponderous works” (1:72). The result was a theological method preoccupied with solving metaphysical problems rather than attending closely to the Scriptures and participating responsively in relationship with God.

It was the humanists of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—notably Coluccio Salutati, Lorenzo Valla, and Desiderius Erasmus—who attempted to return

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<sup>20</sup> “Spiritual men were anxious about the situation,” writes de Lubac: “Generally speaking, it was not that they were enemies of all dialectic. They were well aware that the Christian intellect had always made use of it. It is an excellent weapon against heresy. But the dialectic of the ‘innovators’ was applied to another kind of problem. It assumed a higher order of importance. It sometimes made claims that bore witness to a veritable ‘hubris’” (1:62).

theology to its grammatical-rhetorical roots.<sup>21</sup> Following the critiques made by the poet theologians of the patristic-medieval era, the humanists disparaged the metaphysical theology of the schools while working more positively to revive the interpretive-inventive approach of biblical and patristic writers. Given typical notions of Renaissance humanism, it may seem unusual to associate humanistic writing with the discipline of theology. Ever since the Enlightenment, scholars have tended to characterize Renaissance humanists as modernizing figures who helped to usher in a more rational and secular age.<sup>22</sup> Of course, there is some truth to this perspective; however, what has

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<sup>21</sup> This was initially a suspicion I had based on my reading of de Lubac's study of patristic and medieval exegesis and Trinkaus's study of humanistic theology (as well as some of the primary sources that they cite) from the perspective of McLuhan's history of the trivium. It is well known that Renaissance humanists were critical of scholastic dialectic and attempted to revive a model of learning on the basis of classical grammar and rhetoric. Less well known, but generally accepted among Renaissance scholars is that the "study of the Church Fathers formed an integral part of the humanists' overall agenda" (Stinger 2001 473). What continues to be overlooked or misunderstood is that 1) patristic and medieval theologians were mainly grammarians and rhetoricians in their practice of theology rather than proto-schoolmen (de Lubac); and 2) Renaissance humanists attempted to revive not only the humanities based on the *paedeia* of pagan antiquity, but also the grammatical-rhetorical divinity of the fathers (Trinkaus). Of course, there was as much revision in this kind of revival as there was retrieval, but what draws a church father like Augustine together with a humanist like Valla is their common concern for a divinity based in the grammatical and rhetorical arts rather than dialectic. Studies by Stinger (2001), Rice (1988), and D'Amico (1988a) have confirmed my initial hunch concerning the literary connection between patristic and humanistic theology. In particular, Stinger observes that the Italian humanists not only (re)discovered the original writings of the fathers, but also saw them as an important precedent for their own work since these writings had been "fundamentally shaped by the same literary and rhetorical traditions [that they] were reviving" (2001 474).

<sup>22</sup> The recent historical designation "early modern" seems to fall within this tradition of scholarship. Writing in the mid-nineteen sixties, Bouwsma noticed that interpretations of Renaissance humanism had changed very little since the time of Burckhardt. He admits that the "standard conception" initiated by Burckhardt had not commanded "universal agreement" among critics, but he goes on to suggest that it had "determined the issues in a long and intense dispute" down to his own day of scholarship.

come to be known as the early modern period was not only an age when frustrated skeptics worked to undermine scholastic authority and begin anew on more rationally acceptable grounds. It was also a time when Christian scholars and churchmen looked to tradition and sought to develop a way of living and learning around the Scriptures and the ancient teachings of the fathers. So it was with many of the humanists.<sup>23</sup> Writers like Salutati, Valla and Erasmus disparaged the schoolmen not in an effort to undermine theological study *per se*. On the contrary, they were frustrated by the hegemony of logic and dialectic in the schools and sought to revive a form of patristic and medieval theology based in the grammatical and rhetorical arts.<sup>24</sup> Valla gave pointed expression to

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He describes the normative interpretation of Renaissance humanism as follows: “[H]umanism . . . incorporated new values and a new philosophy of life; and it pointed ahead to certain highly significant achievements of modern thought: to liberalism, to critical and rational habits of mind, and, by its shift of attention from heaven to earth, to the modern sciences of man and nature” (1966 5-6).

Bouwsma’s description continues to be relevant. Recently, Marshall Grossman, following Joel Fineman, has argued that poets like Shakespeare, Spenser, Donne, and Milton anticipated recent theoretical developments in psychology, going so far as to suggest that “psychoanalysis . . . is the theoretical expression of Renaissance poetic subjectivity” (Grossman xvii).

<sup>23</sup> Debora Shuger makes a similar point: “By the sixteenth century, the secular Renaissance is moving in the direction of autonomous reason and scientific objectivity; the religious Renaissance, however, vigorously reaffirms dogmatic faith, affective inwardness, and sacramentalism. The early modern period is also the Age of Orthodoxy” (1988 249).

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that the humanists were enemies of reason and logic. Rather, they aspired to the “Sophistic ideal,” drawing on the dialectical arts “to arrange and order what is already known” rather than “discover truth” (McLuhan 2006 44). According to McLuhan, this use of dialectic is exemplified in the works of such disparate writers as Gorgias, Cicero, John of Salisbury and Bonaventure. What draws these writers together is not their rejection of dialectic but their subordination of dialectic to grammar and rhetoric. Following Plato and Aristotle, scholastic theologians saw it the other way around, with grammar and rhetoric subordinate to dialectic. For example, the great Parisian theologian Jean Gerson attacked the poetic theology of the humanists because it turned “an accessory into a primary matter.” A theologian is permitted to engage in

this endeavor in his influential work on Latin composition, *Elegantiae*, in which he praised the eloquence of all the leading Latin and Greek fathers, from Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus and Chrysostom in the East to Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome in the West. Since the fathers had “dressed those precious gems of the divine Word with the gold and silver of eloquence,” Valla believed that divinity was primarily a literary rather than logical art. In his estimation, those who were “ignorant of eloquence” were “entirely unworthy of speaking concerning theology” (qtd. in Trinkaus 1988 338-39).<sup>25</sup>

It is difficult to appreciate the perspective of those who turned to the *studia humanitatis*<sup>26</sup> for their intellectual and spiritual sustenance and this is mainly because

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literary study, he suggested, but “only in passing for his own recreation or those of others.” Under these conditions, “it is a praiseworthy pursuit, for it refreshes a mind fatigued by theological studies” (qtd. in Rummel 1995 35).

<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere Valla contended that the scholastic principle of *analogia entis* was the root of the problem, and offered a critique of scholasticism that is remarkably similar to Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology. In his study of Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic theologians, Valla observed that “the relation of proportionality that justified . . . a logical transfer [between humanity and divinity] was occurring between two levels of being that were convergent ontologically, but at the same time, infinitely divergent in essence. Between the two extreme points of the analogical relation (‘nature’ and ‘supernature’) there was a *minimum* of identity and a *maximum* of absolute difference” (Camporeale 112-13). This apparent contradiction “brought Valla to the consequent assertion of the absolute and unbridgeable difference between ‘the opinions of the philosophers’ and the ‘mysteries of revelation’”; in his estimation, “the divine *logos* of revelation remains incommensurate with the finite *logos* of Greek wisdom” (118). What was needed was a revival the *germanus theologandi modus* of the church fathers, an approach to theology that was based in the literary arts (118ff). For more on Valla in this light see Stinger (2001) 475-76. See also Trinkaus (1988) 3:327-48 for further discussion on the humanist resistance to dialectic and metaphysical thinking in scholastic theology.

<sup>26</sup> Kristeller was one of the first scholars since Burckhardt to define Renaissance humanism according to the original meaning of the Latin term *humanista* and its vernacular equivalents in Italian, French, English and other languages. See Kristeller (1962) 21-22; (1964) 150. Scholars now generally agree that “the term *humanista* denoted a student or teacher of *studia humanitatis*, that is, a curriculum focusing on language skills” (Rummel 1995 11), in particular grammar, rhetoric, poetry and history.

their teachings were not reducible to a conceptual system or set of ideas.<sup>27</sup> While they offered a *copia* of perspectives and examples, they rarely put forth a single, totalizing theory.<sup>28</sup> As could be expected in a time of transition, there were certain exceptions. For instance, Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, two of the most well known humanists from the Florentine Academy, considered themselves to be serious philosophers writing in the Platonic tradition and while they attended to classical texts with the same enthusiasm as their humanist peers, they also remained dedicated to their more immediate scholastic heritage. Like Plato, they paid close attention to their *elocutio*, seeking to engage in a kind of poetic philosophy, and yet also like Plato they tended to assume the priority of logic and the dialectical arts (Kristeller 1948 8). Pico and Ficino proceeded

from the problem of the rational definition of being, in accord with which knowledge endeavors to attain “surety” or “certainty” by anchoring these in abstraction, as universals, in the non-historical. Everything which is revealed through the senses appears as a reflection of “ideas,” of the rational concepts which constitute the eternal cause of the appearance.

The meaning of words is located in the logical transcendence of what the

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For more on this term and the history of its usage, see Trinkaus (1983) 364-403; Stephens (1990) 15-22; Kohl (1992) 185-209; Stinger (2001) 473.

<sup>27</sup> Bouwsma points out that “humanism was not a philosophy of life; it was an educational discipline. . . . [The] Renaissance humanists [were] men of literature rather than ideas” (1966 13). Kristeller and Randall suggest a similar view: “the polemic of the Humanists against the teaching of the schools was largely a struggle between one field of learning and others and not, as it often appears, between a new philosophy and an old” (4).

<sup>28</sup> On this point see Kahn (1986) 374-86.

senses reveal; so man is raised through this rational process to a vision of the eternal, to being by and for itself. (Grassi 1980 115)

In general, however, humanist writing followed a very different trajectory. Most who involved themselves in the revival of humane letters were decidedly non-dialectical and non-metaphysical in outlook. Rather than seeking to overcome the mediation of words by ascending “through [a] rational process to a vision of the eternal,” they advocated “the primacy of poetic language and the philosophical function of metaphor in its opposition to rational, defined thought” and did so in the interests of theological study (Grassi 1980 111).<sup>29</sup> This brought about a significant reversal in divinity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Where the schoolmen had taken their cues from the Greek philosophical tradition and subordinated grammar and rhetoric to logic and dialectic, the humanists who desired a more open and expansive theological practice advocated a form of learning centered in the *studia humanitatis* and along with it a more ethically involved,

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<sup>29</sup> Kristeller observes that the *studia humanitatis* of the fifteenth-century excluded theology as one of its disciplines (1962 22). Of course, this is true if we are to define theology in medieval scholastic terms, but it is clear that many of the humanists were deeply interested in theological study. It seems to me that they did not exclude theology so much as orient it to the *studia humanitatis*. In other words, they practiced theology not as logicians or metaphysicians, but as grammarians, rhetoricians, poets and historians. Kristeller himself notices this strategy in the writings of Petrarch and Valla:

The opposition to medieval logic and natural philosophy found in many of the Humanists was far from being in opposition to the Church or to the Christian religion. . . . Petrarca, in posing as the defender of religion against the atheism of his Averroist opponents, or Valla, in appealing from philosophical reason to blind faith, is obviously trying to detach theology from its dangerous link with Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics and to join it instead with his own different type of learning, with eloquence or with Humanistic studies. (Kristeller and Randall 4-5)

spiritually vital and socially grounded perception of self and God.<sup>30</sup>

According to McLuhan, this approach to theology found its ultimate expression “in the work and influence of Erasmus, the restorer of patristic theology and of the grammatical humanistic discipline on which it rests” (42). It is easy to overlook a figure like Erasmus in the theological tradition since he had little use for scholastic theology and seemed to advocate a more rational, worldly approach to learning generally. However, like many of his humanist contemporaries, Erasmus held the discipline of theology in the highest esteem and reacted against the modern dialecticians or “schoolmen”<sup>31</sup> for reasons that had little to do with establishing a newer, more improved rationalism.<sup>32</sup> In fact, what he disdained was the dominance of logic and metaphysical thinking in theological study since it tended to foster intellectual pride and unnecessary quibbling. The grammatical-rhetorical theology of the fathers encouraged a very different sensibility:

In olden days the Christian philosophy was a matter of faith, not of

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<sup>30</sup> Salutati argued that the “*studia humanitatis* and the *studia divinitatis* are so interconnected that true and complete understanding of the one cannot be had without the other” (quoted in Trinkaus 1970 560).

<sup>31</sup> Erasmus uses this epithet often and, given his strident polemical stance, it tends to misrepresent what it would disparage. It is clear, however, that in the schools of theology “Aristotelian logic and metaphysics were [used] . . . to systematize truth as a coherent and objective entity . . . [and] faith was understood as composed of a series of propositions which could be analyzed intellectually and ordered into an objective science” (Stinger 57). These qualities are precisely what humanists like Erasmus deplored.

<sup>32</sup> That Erasmus disparages the schoolmen with the term “*moderni*” is telling; doubtless, Erasmus would have been as critical of a Descartes or Hobbes in the seventeenth-century as he was of a Thomist, Scotist or Okhamite in his own day. And yet, “Liberal interpreters recognized in Erasmus their own ideas, ideals, and values. He appeared to them as a secularizer of the spirit and a prophet of positivism; a precursor of modern education and of research unhampered by dogmatic tutelage; a champion of freedom of thought and press; a rationalist like Montaigne or Voltaire, and a skeptic like Descartes” (Hoffmann 16).

disputation; men's simple piety was satisfied with the oracles of Holy Scripture, and charity . . . had no need of complicated rules. . . . Later, the management of theology was taken in hand by men nurtured in humane learning, but mainly in those fields of learning which today we commonly call rhetoric. Gradually philosophy came to be applied more and more, Platonic first and then Aristotelian, and questions began to be asked about many points which were thought to pertain either to morals or the field of speculation about heavenly things. At first this seemed almost fundamental, but it developed by stages until many men, neglecting the study of the ancient tongues and of . . . literature and even of Holy Writ, grew old over questions meticulous, needless, and unreasonably minute. . . . By now theology began to be a form of skill, not wisdom; a show-piece, not a means toward true religion; and besides ambition and avarice it was spoilt by other pests, by flattery and strife and superstition.

Thus at length it came about that the pure image of Christ was almost overlaid by human disputations; the crystal springs of the old gospel teaching were choked with sawdust . . . and the undeviating rule of Holy Scripture, bent this way and that, became the slave of appetites rather than the glory of Christ. At that point some men, whose intentions certainly were religious, tried to recall the world to the simpler studies of an earlier day and lead it from pools most of which are now sullied to those pure rills of living water. To achieve this object, they thought a

knowledge of the tongues and liberal studies (as they call them) were of the first importance, for it was neglect of them, it seemed, that brought us down to where we are. (Erasmus 1987 196-97; qtd. Hoffmann 5-6)<sup>33</sup>

In Erasmus's view, theology had been poetic and hermeneutic from the outset precisely because it was grounded in biblical study with a view to piety. The church fathers not only accepted this literary-spiritual emphasis, but also cherished it, devoting their training in rhetoric and the liberal arts to the service of theology. Erasmus hints that some patristic and medieval theologians flirted with ontotheology in their love for Plato and Aristotle, but generally they were constrained by the Scriptures and returned time and again to biblical ways of wording and interpreting that give shape to the religious affections (joy, hope, sorrow, and love) and move the whole person—heart, soul, and mind—into a dynamic, responsive relationship with God. Eventually the dialectical method of the schools took over and became synonymous with theology, but Erasmus holds out hope in his own context for a retrieval of true divinity, guided by those “recall[ing] the world to the simpler studies of an earlier day” based on “a knowledge of the tongues and liberal studies.”

Erasmus expands on the tradition of poetic theology in the *Enchiridion*, not only privileging the theological *praxis* of “the Fathers” over “modern theologians,” but also

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<sup>33</sup> Vives took a similar view of the theological tradition: “Let me give warning, now, at the threshold, since human sinfulness has matured all over the world . . . there is no need of greater sharpness of criticism, (but rather as it were of some blunting), not that men should become devoid of practical wisdom, but that they should develop more sincerity and simplicity, and for that reason, become wiser, not more astute. Our life will become so much the more happy, the less it is strained by deceit and Sophism, the more like it becomes to the life of men of old, whose rectitude and simplicity of mind rendered them worthy of conversation with God” (Watson 47).

commending his reader to the eloquence of “Divine Wisdom” in Scripture:

If your interest in sacred doctrine revolves more about what is vital and dynamic rather than merely dialectical, if you incline more toward what moves the inner man than to what leads to empty arguments, then read the Fathers. Their deep piety has withstood the test of time. Their very thoughts constitute a prayerful meditation, and they penetrate into the very depths of the mysteries they propound. I do not mean to condemn modern theologians; I am merely pointing out that in view of our purpose, namely, a more practical piety, they are hardly to be recommended. Let us not forget that the Divine Spirit has its own manner of speaking and its own figures of speech. Learn these from the very outset. The Divine Wisdom speaks to us and, like an attentive mother, adjusts Her language to our infancy. For the tiny infants She provides milk and for the sick, herbs. To receive solid food you must grow up to spirituality. She lowers Herself to your humility. You must raise yourself to Her sublimity. To remain like an infant is unfortunate. Unending illness is reprehensible. Pluck the marrow from the broken bone: meditation upon a single verse gives more nourishment, brings more wisdom, than a continued repetition of the whole psalm. (Erasmus 1964 37)

Erasmus cared deeply for the letter of the text, as his painstaking work on editions of the *Novum Testamentum* would suggest. Even so, it was the spirit of the text that mattered most in the work of theology because it put the reader in a dynamic relationship to God,

extending the meaning of the text into the life of prayer, meditation, and worship where the divine mysteries are not so much commented upon as they are participated in.<sup>34</sup>

Rather than combating the abuses of scholastic theology by setting the conditions for a more rigorously logical approach, Erasmus tapped into “the crystal springs of the old gospel teaching” and dedicated himself to those fields of learning that he believed were most conducive to theological study: literature, rhetoric and the “ancient tongues.” In this way, he sought to stimulate a “theological life” rather than merely stir up “theological disputation” (Erasmus 1964 28).

### **Refocusing: Poetic Theology and Literary-Critical Practice**

Given Heidegger’s thoroughgoing critique of metaphysics and the influence it has had in the humanities throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, it is often taken for granted that metaphysical thinking has reigned without interruption from Plato onwards. And yet, the theory and practice of many patristic, medieval and humanistic theologians suggest otherwise. It is true that theology has mutated at times into ontotheology, but dialectic with its affinity for metaphysical thinking has not always been ascendant in the theological tradition. In fact, as we have seen, theologians in the West

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<sup>34</sup> Erasmus comments on the importance of the spiritual senses for theological study earlier in the *Enchiridion*: “I would suggest that you read those commentators who do not stick so closely to the literal sense. The ones I would recommend most highly after St. Paul himself are Origen, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. Too many of our modern theologians are prone to literal interpretation, which they subtly misconstrue. They do not delve into the mysteries, and they act as if St. Paul were not speaking the truth when he says that our law is spiritual. There are some of these theologians who are so completely taken up with these human commentators that they relegate what the Fathers had to say to the realm of dreams. They are so entranced by the writings of Duns Scotus that, without ever having read the Scriptures, they believe themselves to be competent theologians. I care not how subtle their distinctions are; they are certainly not the final word on what pertains to the Holy Spirit” (Erasmus 1964 37).

have framed their work, more often than not, in literary rather than logical terms.

I would like to suggest that Donne and Hopkins occupy an important place within this patristic-humanistic strain of the theological tradition and, as such, help to imagine alternatives to metaphysical theology. The difficulty of appreciating such a perspective within the field of literary study is that most models of literary criticism continue to be governed by categories that assume the priority though impossibility of metaphysical god and man. This is particularly true of early modern scholarship. While there are many examples that stand out, from Stanley Fish's dialectical aesthetics in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972) and Stephen Greenblatt's cultural poetics in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) to Marshall Grossman's Lacanian theory of literary history in *The Story of All Things* (1998), Richard Lanham's "rhetorical view of life" in *Motives of Eloquence* (1976) is particularly instructive, exemplifying the way that metaphysical thinking continues to dominate in critical theory precisely at points where the resistance to it is most keen. Before turning to Donne and Hopkins, it will be helpful to examine Lanham's literary-critical approach. Indeed, poetic theology poses a challenge to the philosophical-scholastic tradition, but as we will see, it also calls into question contemporary models of literary criticism, perturbing underlying assumptions concerning the relationship between language, self, and God.

On the surface, Lanham's "rhetorical view" seems to have much in common with the patristic-humanistic approach to theology since it "begins with the centrality of language." Like the poet theologian, the "social self" or "*homo rhetoricus*" conceives of reality in textual and dramatic terms. He does not find himself "alienated from his

language” like the serious philosopher (5). Given his love of words and his general distaste for a conceptual and speculative approach to reality, he is “committed to no single construction of the world” (4). Rather, he “accepts the present paradigm and explores its resources” for living a truthful life. Moreover, he does not seek “an identity outside time and change,” but understands himself as “centred in time and concrete local event” as well as “social situation” (4).

The difficulty is that Lanham associates theology with a conception of philosophy that stands in complete opposition to the rhetorical life. The philosopher-theologian, or what Lanham refers to as the “central self” or “*homo seriosus*,” has little concern for life at a socio-historical level and instead pushes through “language to a preexistent, divinely certified reality beyond” (5). Throughout his study, Lanham clearly favors the rhetorical life, criticizing metaphysical thinking for its failure to make good on its claims. That is, rather than opening out into an encounter with “essential reality,” it results in an “ontological vacuum” (8). Instead of “freedom,” it produces “tyranny.” At the same time, however, Lanham does not simply write off the philosophical-theological ideal. Even though it is not possible to achieve, it remains significant because the failure in attempting to achieve it stimulates libidinal forces from below and the result is a renewal of rhetorical play and pleasure.<sup>35</sup> In this way, the central self comes to function as a kind of ego ideal in Lanham’s readings, an illusory standard of perfection to which the ego

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<sup>35</sup> This recalls Derrida’s Nietzschean remedy to the problem of metaphysics. Instead of attempting to live an impossible ontic-epistemic immediacy, he recommends “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.” See pp. 7-8 above.

aspires yet never arrives.

Of course, from a philosophical-theological perspective, the impossibility of arrival would pose a serious problem. From Lanham's rhetorical perspective, however, it constitutes a kind of solution. The rhetorician senses that arrival would only bring about death and the end of desire and yet he also knows that desire will not come in the absence of an ideal. What is required is a way of stirring up desire while at the same time preventing the possibility of arriving to the ideal which gives rise to desire in the first place. For Lanham, desire manifests itself with greatest freedom precisely at the point the ideal is unmasked as the illusion that it is and the poet is free to "dip back into the pleasurable resources of pure play" (5). The ideal remains, but now no longer as a real possibility. Instead it functions as a catalyst for ever-new and ever-intensifying desires.

In essence, Lanham's reading assumes with Derrida and other poststructuralists that language is, in fact, "marked by the exclusive brand of metaphysics"; texts can be deconstructed and their pretensions demystified, but there are no forms of utterance that can simply escape the specter of metaphysics. Thus, for the "*homo rhetoricus*" who perceives all too well the vacuity of the metaphysical tradition, the only option is to engage in a form of "god-less thinking." But under the reign of metaphysics, there is no "god-less thinking" that can simply "abandon the god of philosophy" and draw closer to "the divine God." Presumably there is only one god, the god of philosophy, now unmasked as a grand illusion of human origin. And, by extension, there is only one self, the subject, now revealed as inherently divided from itself rather than homogeneous.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> This is precisely what Feuerbach argued more than a century earlier in *The*

The vision of a higher and more unified self, united with and legitimized by Being in the Highest, is and always has been an illusion, an illusion that continues to be of benefit if only for enabling the conditions of a more broken, fragmented and, therefore, genuinely dynamic sense of self.

What would it mean, however, for a writer to take on a rhetorical view of life and yet remain a serious theologian? Until recently, this question has been almost unthinkable because Western intellectuals have long assumed that the dialectical arts and metaphysical thinking are primary. But the poetic theologian begins with different assumptions. Instead of seeking after stability of being in dialectical ascent or giving way to pure becoming in skeptical negation or rhetorical play, he fashions himself as a responsive “me”—an *interloqué*<sup>37</sup>—who comes into existence through the formative call of the living God and shares in human-divine relationship according to a biblical poetic, rhetoric, and hermeneutic.

As McLuhan and Shuger suggest, Augustine helped to set the conditions for this grammatical-rhetorical approach to theology in the fourth century and his influence was felt not only into the later middle ages, but also during the Christian Renaissance when humanists like Erasmus attempted to revive the poetic divinity of the fathers. The significance of Donne and Hopkins is that they help to distinguish the continuing

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*Essence of Christianity* (1841): “Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then . . . makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject. . . . Man has no other aim than himself” (1956 29-30).

<sup>37</sup> I have borrowed this term from Jean-Luc Marion who argues that human being, in phenomenological terms, is formed according to the claim of the Other rather than a self-determining “auto-appeal” (2002 137). Unlike the philosophical “subject” or “self” which are products of metaphysical thinking, Marion’s designation is helpful for highlighting the responsive, participative and heart-centered nature of poetic theology.

influence of poetic theology at unlikely points during the modern age. Where Donne sought to revive the patristic-humanistic approach in the early seventeenth century at a time when Christian humanism was waning in England and a new age of Reason was beginning to set in, Hopkins practiced a kind of poetic theology in the late nineteenth century when Enlightenment rationality was at its height and biblical studies was dominated by the historical-critical method. Like the poet theologians that preceded them, these writers were neither positivistic nor skeptical concerning matters of divine truth, but rather confessional, interpretive and dramatic; rather than striving for epistemic mastery and ontic stability in dialectical ascent, they endeavored to participate responsively in relationship with God through the grammatical interpretation and rhetorical invention of Scripture.

### **Outline of Chapters**

Augustine gives voice to these priorities in a particularly poignant way in the *Confessions* and his example is helpful for noticing similar qualities in Donne and Hopkins. In chapter 1, I shall seek to extend James Smith's "pro-ductive" reading of Augustine and attend to passages in the *Confessions* that ostensibly affirm the creaturely conditions of language and understand interpretive activity as a vital creational task rather than simply an effect of the Fall. For Smith, the significance of this non-Platonic aspect of Augustine's thinking is that it provides a corrective to dominant hermeneutic models that seek either to recapture an immediate presence now lost to human experience or relinquish the goal of immediate presence even while continuing to remain haunted by its ghostly shade. Indeed, Augustine's account of conversion in the *Confessions* is not what

we would expect from a metaphysical theologian. At the point of divine encounter, Augustine openly confesses perplexity and wonder, bearing witness to a deity who arrives as a mysterious and unbidden Stranger rather than an encompassing conceptual Same. It is true early on in the *Confessions* that he seeks an established connection between *logos*, *ontos* and *theos*, but at Cassiciacum he discovers God in a way that upsets all his expectations. Instead of existing as the fruition of a protracted exercise in logic, Augustine's God speaks into the heart and makes his entrance not as a dominating idea, but as a personal creator and redeemer who invites human participation and collaboration in relationship.

Since Augustine encounters God at a textual-historical "low" rather than a conceptual-metaphysical "high," he is careful to resist a program of pure and unfettered rationality after his conversion. Instead of seeking a more absolute and essential ground from within and above that would enable him to master his world from without, Augustine owns up to his existential brokenness and meditates consciously on his inability to measure out the infinite spaces between himself and God. At the same time, he opens himself to the language and reality of interpersonal relationship and takes the Scriptures and the ongoing interpretive activity of the Christian faith community as his ground for living. Where he had always assumed that the subject position was primary, he comes to discover himself as a "me" at the point of conversion, interpellated by the voice of a divine Other speaking to his heart through the words of Scripture. For Augustine, the significance of this interpellation is not that it ensures a life free of anxiety or instability, but that it provides him the freedom to participate responsively in

relationship with a living God, the kind of freedom that he exercises in his spiritual exegesis of Genesis 1 in Book 13.

Chapter 2 begins with a critique of the longstanding scholarly practice of treating Donne's religious works in polemical-sectarian terms, with Augustine drawn in as support. The difficulty of this critical approach is that it works against the generally poetic-communal nature of Donne's theology as well as Augustine's. As Jeffery Johnson points out, the "many recent critical attempts to identify Donne's sectarian allegiance" are not particularly helpful because Donne, like Augustine, refuses to get caught up in "the religious/political wranglings of his time." In fact, as *Satyre III* suggests, he seems to take a distinctly irenic approach to doctrinal matters, placing the emphasis on unifying essentials rather than "schismaticall" singularities and developing what Gadamer calls an "historically effected consciousness" in his quest for "true religion." The Augustine that matters to Donne is the Augustine of the *Confessions* who practiced theology as a poet, hermeneut and homiletician rather than as a metaphysician. In this respect he seems more closely aligned with humanists like Erasmus rather than sectarian thinkers of either a Roman or Reformed outlook.

Donne gives expression to this approach most poignantly in the *Devotions*. Throughout, he resists the search for a lasting human-divine identity grounded in logic or sectarian authority and, instead, seeks to uphold God's freedom to enter human life at all points on his own terms. For Donne, the language arts—specifically poetry, rhetoric, and hermeneutics—are integral to trustful participation in human-divine relationship. God's arrival cannot be established by creaturely means, but it is attended by words that permit

rather than preclude creaturely involvement. The living God of the Scriptures is a “metaphoricall God” who reveals himself in distinctly grammatical-rhetorical ways and invites relationships on the same basis. And so, rather than attempting to overcome language through dialectical ascent so as to enjoy the immediacy of God’s presence, Donne writes to and of God in the creaturely manner by which he has been addressed, involving himself and his reader in a human-divine relationship according to the “word-work” of the cross.<sup>38</sup>

These themes are developed further in a final chapter on Gerard Manley Hopkins. In the context of nineteenth-century rationalism, Hopkins struggled to share Donne’s expressed enthusiasm for practicing divinity as a literary art. In fact, in many of his early prose writings, Hopkins not only experiments with an ontological theory of language, but also gives voice to a distinctly scholastic view of theology. What fascinates in a reading of *The Wreck*, however, is the curious absence of metaphysical thinking as well as the surprising presence of divinity on poetic terms. Rather than striving to fuse human and divine being in the *logos* of Greek wisdom or implying the impossibility of such an enterprise through his poetic *praxis*, Hopkins aligns himself with Augustine and Donne by participating responsively in the transformative word-work of the cross, not only giving expression to such a poetic transformation at certain points, but also symbolically enacting it through an extended oxymoron, the trope of the God-man, Christ.

The critical history of the poem has little to say about this dynamic of the poem.

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<sup>38</sup> The term “word-work” is my own and plays on Donne’s appreciation of God’s metaphorical style in both word (Scripture) and work (salvation history), a style that Donne, following the church fathers, means to imitate in his own theological *praxis*. See pp. 143-44.

Most scholars characterize *The Wreck* as a theological poem, but they assume a paradigm of theology that is more akin to ontotheology. As a result, the poem tends to be viewed as either a successful literary demonstration of metaphysical theology or a hopelessly futile attempt to instantiate the divine Word in words. What gets overlooked in this tradition of scholarship is that Hopkins has something to say about poetic divinity in the poem itself. The poet plainly admits the impossibility of capturing the divine essence in words and does so while affirming an approach to divinity that welcomes “Fancy” as well as considerations of a stylistic “how.” It is true, as F. R. Leavis points out, that Hopkins’s language intends to do something for poet and reader and part of what it does is perform a religious conversion. More than that, however, Hopkins practices a kind of theo-logic that encourages participation in relationship with God. Like Augustine and Donne, Hopkins fashions himself as a responsive “me” rather than predicating “I” and writes not so much to enact a psychological remedy for his distress, but to move himself and his reader into the self-giving way of Christ.

## CHAPTER 1

### ***Veritas in cor meum: Creation, Hermeneutics and the Heart-Centered Theology of Augustine's Confessions***

You are my God, my Life, my holy Delight, but is this enough to say of you? Can any man say enough when he speaks of you? Yet woe betide those who are silent about you!  
--Augustine<sup>1</sup>

Predication must yield to praise.  
--Jean-Luc Marion<sup>2</sup>

James K. A. Smith's treatment of hermeneutics in *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (2000) provides a helpful starting point for considering Augustine's literary approach to theology and, by extension, the patristic-humanistic divinity of Donne's *Devotions* and Hopkins's *The Wreck*. I shall begin this chapter with a brief overview of Smith's heuristic reading of Augustine and then extend it in my own reading of the *Confessions*, drawing out a cluster of themes that help give shape to a distinctly Christian form of theology based in the sacred eloquence of Scripture. Indeed, there are many signs throughout the *Confessions* of the metaphysical Augustine who would synthesize Christian revelation and Greek wisdom and give priority to a sanctified Platonic dialectic. However, as Smith points out, there is another Augustine who welcomes the self-giving love of God in Christ and engages a form of divinity that participates responsively in this same love according to a

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Pine-Coffin. (New York: Penguin, 1961): 23.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors Text*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995): 106.

biblical poetic, hermeneutic, rhetoric.

Smith begins his study by considering how various philosophers and theologians have understood the relationship between hermeneutics, subjectivity and theology and perceives two different yet interrelated schools of thinking. On the one hand, there are those “who consider hermeneutics to be the result of the Fall” and believe it is possible to retrieve a “primal immediacy” between self and God by stepping “outside our human situation/ality and overcom[ing] the conditions of history and finitude” either now (Lints, Koivisto) or in the future (Pannenberg and Gadamer) (Smith 2000 63). These thinkers, writes Smith, stand within the “dominant Western interpretive tradition.” Whether living triumphalistically in the present or comporting themselves to the future in anticipation, they “dream of full presence, of ascending to the Absolute Infinite Unconditioned, the *Eidos* or its Christianization as the ‘God of metaphysics’” (135).

On the other hand, there are those who “understand hermeneutics as fallen but have no desire or dream of overcoming or escaping this situation” (Heidegger and Derrida). These thinkers view “interpretation as part in parcel of being human” but construe hermeneutic activity as “structurally fallen and violent” (88-9). While they claim to “have no memories of a prelapsarian paradise nor any expectations of an eschatological heavenly city,” they view naming, reading, interpreting, speaking, writing, etc. as violations or intrusions. Smith suggests that this characterization of linguistic-hermeneutic activity betrays “another vestige of the modern tradition of immediacy, for it is only if one is looking for immediacy and full presence that the finitude of interpreting . . . is considered a lack, a fall, an impurity” (127). For Derrida, as for Heidegger,

“presence is not, is *not*, never was,” and yet the “ghost of full presence” is ubiquitous (128, 89).

Smith argues that both of these interpretations of interpretation “contradict an integral Christian understanding of human finitude and language” (18). Following Augustine, Smith sets to work on a different interpretive model, “sketching the contours of a philosophic hermeneutic that considers language and finitude on the basis of an affirmation of the goodness of creation” (18-19). It may seem unusual to consider Augustine in this light because scholars have traditionally understood him as an early contributor to the “long philosophical story of ascent to the Absolute and Unconditioned” (21). There is good reason for this perspective. Drawing mainly upon the *Confessions*, Smith observes that language, for Augustine, is time-bound and “represents a rupture, a disruption of immediacy and an interruption of a private interiority” (142). Likewise, “hermeneutics, as the interpretation of signs, is construed as a task of fallen humanity who ‘labors on earth.’” As a result, redemption entails, among other things, an escape from language, hermeneutics and temporality. As the soul ascends in its return to God and climbs out of the temporal order, rising to the eternal, it comes to enjoy once again a “prelapsarian immediacy where language, and hence interpretation, is absent” (143, 142). Augustine is obviously indebted to Plato for this aspect of his thinking.

At the same time, however, Smith suggests that there is “*another* Augustine” who has been neglected by the dominant philosophical-theological tradition. What often gets overlooked or ignored by philosophers and theologians alike, he argues, is Augustine’s insight into “the temporality of human be-ing and language with his affirmation of the

fundamental goodness of creation” (23). Smith is clear that Augustine’s theology is deeply influenced by Platonism. Indeed, Augustine associates language and hermeneutics with the Fall and suggests the possibility of returning to a situation of contemplative repose in God’s presence. But he does not go so far as to equate finitude with fallenness; nor does he envision reconciliation with God on the basis of dialectical ascent. “In a fundamental divergence from the Platonic schema,” writes Smith, “Augustine’s Christian commitments lead him to affirm the general goodness of existence and thus the goodness of creation” (147). Accordingly, “fallenness is not to be attributed to matter *qua* matter nor to the embodied human person *qua* embodied or finite” (147). “Rather than such a ‘substantial’ understanding of sin and evil,” says Smith, “Augustine unceasingly emphasizes an ‘intentional’ understanding of sin.” That is, “bodies are . . . sinful . . . insofar as they are ‘enjoyed’ rather than ‘used.’” As a result, interpretive activity is not so much the product of a sinful “nature.” Rather, it constitutes creaturely work that may or may not be abused.

Given this creational emphasis in Augustine, Smith, following John Burnaby, is sharply critical of the “system which generally goes by the name of ‘Augustinianism.’” It is “in great part a cruel travesty of Augustine’s deepest and most vital thought” (Smith 133, 135; Burnaby 231). In an effort to retrieve Augustine’s creational view of language, self and God, Smith suggests an interpretive approach that is designed to reflect the Augustinian hermeneutics he is seeking. The apparent discrepancy in Augustine’s thinking

does not call for a solution or leveling; it is not a matter of harmonization.

Rather, it invites us to take up Augustine's thought in a productive reading that reads Augustine on his own terms: a demythologizing or deconstructing of Augustine, which ought never to be understood as a *de*-struction, but much rather as a *pro*-duction that grants us another Augustine. (147)

Given the dominant philosophical-theological tradition which tends to concentrate on the Platonic features of Augustine's thinking, such an approach would function not only as a reading of "Augustine on his own terms," but also "a reading of Augustine against himself." By interpreting Augustine's "devaluing of temporality, finitude, and language against the horizon of his fundamental affirmation of the goodness of creation," Smith hopes to provide the philosophical foundations for a new mode of interpretation, "an Augustinian hermeneutics that affirms embodiment and understands interpretation as a 'creational task'" (148). According to this perspective, fallenness would no longer be understood as "a structural or ontological aspect of the world but rather a historical or accidental brokenness that befalls a good creation" and hermeneutic activity would no longer "be construed as necessarily violent but rather as the space that opens the possibility for connection . . . with the other" (113). In this view, hermeneutics is "affected by the Fall," but is not simply a "product of the Fall" (148). Rather, it is "an aspect of human be-ing that is primordially good and remains such in a postlapsarian world, and therefore . . . is not to be . . . understood as a state of affairs to be 'overcome'" (148). "Such an 'interpretation of interpretation,'" writes Smith, "revalues embodiment and ultimately ends in an ethical respect for difference as the gift of a creating God who

loves difference and loves differently” (148). It also opens up “a space where there is room for a plurality of God’s creatures to speak, sing and dance in a multivalent chorus of tongues.”<sup>3</sup>

Smith’s understanding of Augustine’s hermeneutic is both provocative and compelling and makes an important contribution to recent discussions concerning the non-Platonic features of Augustine’s theology.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, I shall seek to elaborate Smith’s reading of “Augustine against himself,” attending specifically to the *Confessions*. At the same time, my perspective will be shaped by a slightly different set of concerns. After a long tradition of viewing Augustine through a Platonic lens, the prospect of other interpretive possibilities is refreshing, but my main concern is not the development of “philosophical foundations for a creational hermeneutic.”<sup>5</sup> What interests me is the way that Smith’s *pro*-ductive reading of Augustine helps to detect a grammatical-rhetorical

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<sup>3</sup> Smith has recently elaborated his *pro*-ductive reading of Augustine in *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (2002) 114-50.

<sup>4</sup> In *Temporality, Eternity and Wisdom* (1999), Calvin Troupe has expressed dissatisfaction with “the terms of the debate over the alleged influence of Neoplatonism” (7). He is not alone. See Starnes (1990) 284-5; O’Donnell (1985) 45-47, 92-96; and Hartle (1986) 232. Instead of continuing to operate within the structure of terms and assumptions that make up the dominant scholarly debate, Troup advocates a rhetorical approach, focusing on “the text in its context allied with rhetoric” (7). Troup’s study is significant and his notion of incarnational rhetoric in chapter 3 harmonizes nicely with Smith’s creational hermeneutic. For a critical history of Augustine’s relationship to Plato and Platonism see Troup 33-5 and Menn (1998) Part 1. For other works that examine Augustine’s grammatical-rhetorical approach to theology and/or philosophy, see Sutherland (1990) and Johnson (1976). Scott MacDonald provides a good example of a Platonic-dialectical approach to Augustine’s theology in “The Divine Nature” (2001) 71-90.

<sup>5</sup> Despite his recourse to Augustine, Smith assumes that “interpretation remains inextricably linked to the Fall and to fallenness” throughout the Western “theological and philosophical tradition” and he therefore presents his creational hermeneutic as though it stands in radical disjunction from interpretations of interpretation that have preceded his own (18).

emphasis in a neglected strain of the theological tradition, namely the poetic theology of the church fathers, Christian humanists, and pastor-priests like Donne and Hopkins. It is important to remember that Smith's other Augustine has not always been viewed as entirely other. As McLuhan and de Lubac have pointed out, Augustine centered his theology in the literary arts rather than dialectic and did so not simply despairing of a metaphysical beyond, but participating in a divine mystery through the symbolic action of faith, hope and love. Of course, Augustine had an important influence on the development of a philosophical-scholastic theology, but until the twelfth century, he was received mainly as a poet theologian who practiced divinity as a homiletician rather than a dialectician.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine's poetic approach to theology is exemplified in numerous passages of the *Confessions*, but it finds poignant expression in Book 13. Scholars have long been perplexed by the last three books of the *Confessions*. In comparison with the autobiographical nature of Books 1-10, the interpretive commentary of Books 11-13 comes across as an add-on or afterthought. I would suggest that the last three books, and Book 13 in particular, are unintelligible when viewed in radical disjunction from Books 1-10. What Augustine narrates concerning his experience with God in the first part of the *Confessions*, he comes to perform interpretively, rhetorically, poetically in the final book through his spiritual exegesis of Genesis 1:1-8. The biblical heart-soul plays a crucial role in both the narrative and the performance. It is in the heart-soul that Augustine encounters the living God in personal relationship and it is from the heart-soul that he

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<sup>6</sup> See "Introduction," pp. 12ff.

engages the Scriptures through confession, meditation, expostulation, prayer and praise. The result is a heart-centered theology that is conditioned not only by the literary arts, but also by an ethics of love, wisdom, piety and humility. While Augustine speaks to such a theology in various ways throughout Books 1-10, he comes to enact it in Book 13 even while continuing to comment implicitly on the poetic-hermeneutic process. Rather than characterizing interpretation as a sign of fallenness and polysemy as the legacy of Babel, Augustine associates his spiritual exegesis of Genesis with the prelapsarian command<sup>7</sup> to be fruitful and multiply and does so while refusing the epistemic immediacy that he associates elsewhere with Edenic and/or heavenly bliss.

### **The Augustinian Heart: Knowing and Being**

Throughout the critical history of the *Confessions*, scholars have devoted much time and energy to capturing the precise relationship between the teachings of Plato, Plotinus and Porphyry and Augustine's approach to theology. The influence of Platonism on Augustine's writing is undeniable, but his stated resistance to the Greek philosophical tradition often gets overlooked. It is true that he theorizes a possible connection between thinking and being at various points throughout the *Confessions* (for instance, see 7.17, 9.10, 10.41, 11.11). At the same time, however, he relates his desire for the end of desiring according to a dialogic interchange that never resolves into ontic sameness. At every turn, Augustine intensifies rather than diminishes the paradoxical tension of human-divine relationship. Moreover, he tends to associate stability of being with relational fullness rather than ontic-epistemic immediacy. While Augustine is clearly

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<sup>7</sup> See Gen. 1:28. Interestingly, this command is repeated after the Fall in Gen. 9:1, 7.

indebted to the Platonists for various aspects of his theology, he has no interest in overcoming finitude or writing himself out of temporality. Instead, he puts down roots within the liminal, fiduciary situation of human existence and frequently owns up to significant limitations in his religious epistemology even as he seeks to gain a better understanding of himself in relation to God.

One of the most significant ways that Augustine departs from the Platonists in the development of his theology is through his psychology of the heart-soul.<sup>8</sup> The Augustinian heart-soul is noticeably different from the Platonic mind-soul. Each seems to gravitate to an ontic center, but where the mind-soul perfects itself in singularity and stasis and seeks to transcend historical and social reality, the heart-soul is variable and remains open to lived experience in all its many forms. Even though the heart-soul is

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<sup>8</sup> O'Donnell observes that Augustine's use of the word heart (*cor*) "is demonstrably influenced by contact with its scriptural employment; it is [for Augustine] an expression for the indivisible, authentic center of human life, where the tensions of a sinful world are most clearly felt. The term is, as others have observed, unphilosophical, . . . but it is eminently scriptural and Augustinian" (1992 2:13). Along similar lines, William Bouwsma suggests that the "primary organ in Augustinian anthropology is not so much that which is highest as that which is central; it is literally the heart (*cor*), whose quality determines the quality of the whole" (1990 26).

Following his biblical precedent, Augustine makes no sharp distinction between the heart and soul and, in fact, like the psalmists and wisdom writers, seems to conflate them at significant points through poetic parallelism. For instance, at the beginning of 1.5, Augustine wonders to whom he shall "turn for the gift of [God's] coming into [his] heart" and eventually comes around to addressing God himself: "My heart has ears ready to listen to you, Lord. Open them wide and *whisper in my heart, I am here to save you.*" Two sentences later he substitutes the soul for the heart: "My soul is like a house, small for you to enter, but I pray you to enlarge it. It is in ruins, but I ask you to remake it." The soul that Augustine associates with the heart is significantly different from the soul that the Platonist associates with the mind. The latter is distinctly rational and somehow elevated above the bodily senses, suggesting an immediate relation to God (see Menn 146). For a thorough analysis of the biblical heart, see the entries for *kardia* in Kittel (1964-76) and *leb/lebab* in Botterweck (1973-).

central to the self—“it is in my heart that I am whatever I am” (10.3 209),<sup>9</sup> declares Augustine—it does not provide a “fixed origin,” “fundamental ground” or “reassuring certitude” from which “anxiety can be mastered” (Derrida 279). Insofar as it has definite ontic boundaries, Augustine’s heart is mutable and at times deeply conflicted. Early on, Augustine relates how his heart had strayed from God and become the motive for various forms of rebellion and infidelity (2.2; 2.4; 3.2; 4.12). He also recounts how this waywardness caused him so much distress that he eventually developed a need for his “heart [to] find refuge from itself” (4.7 78). “Where could I go,” he wonders, “yet leave myself behind? Was there any place where I should not be a prey to myself?” Augustine experiences profound relief at the point of conversion as he returns to his heart-soul to find that God had “rescued” it and drained “dry the well of corruption” within (9.4 185-6; 9.1 181). But this does not alleviate his desire for heart-rest.<sup>10</sup> In fact, paradoxically, connection with God at this point only seems to intensify his desire for God.

The heart-soul not only vies for the ontic center but also has an important connection to knowledge. Typically we would identify the heart with the affections and think of it as subordinate to the mind or intellect. Yet, the Augustinian heart-soul, like its biblical precedent, has a different quality. It not only comprises the seat of the emotions,

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<sup>9</sup> Citations to the *Confessions* are from Pine-Coffin’s translation (1961). I shall quote by book and section as well as page number. Italics indicate biblical allusion or quotation unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine begins the *Confessions* expressing a desire for heart-rest: “The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you” (1.1 21).

but also a region of the self where cognition and emotion intersect.<sup>11</sup> Other faculties join together in the heart-soul as well such as volition, memory and conscience.<sup>12</sup> In its multifaceted openness to the Other, the heart-soul comes to know in a variety of ways rather than just one. The understanding it achieves is as affective as it is intellectual, as ethical as it is volitional. For Augustine, the heart-soul is not simply an emotional wellspring; more significantly it is a complex hub where all the faculties come together and interconnect.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the philosophical mind-soul also has an important connection to epistemology, but typically of a rational kind only. This is a problem for Augustine because it fails to treat the whole person in relation to God. Moreover, it neglects the moral-spiritual dimension of a theological life. And so, Augustine acknowledges that

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<sup>11</sup> Emotion: “I always looked for things to wring my heart and the more tears an actor caused me to shed . . . the more delightful and attractive I found it” (3.2); “Tears alone were sweet to me, for in my heart’s desire they had taken the place of my friend” (4.4); “I had heart only for sighs and tears, for in them alone I found some shred of consolation” (4.7); “[T]he heart is drenched in tears and life becomes a living death because a friend is lost” (4.9). Cognition: “My heart has ears ready to listen to you, Lord. Open them wide and *whisper in my heart, I am here to save you*” (1.5); O God, you are the Light of my heart, the Bread of my inmost soul, and the Power that weds my mind and the thoughts of my heart” (1.13); “Anxiety about what I could believe as certain gnawed at my heart” (6.4); “Then O, Lord you laid your most gentle, most merciful finger on my heart and set my thoughts in order” (6.5); “we trod the wide, well-beaten tracks of the world, and thought jostled thought in our hearts” (6.14).

<sup>12</sup> Volition: “[I]t must be a resolute and whole-hearted act of the will, not some lame wish which kept turning over and over in my mind” (8.8; see also 8.10-11 for an association of a “torn heart” with indecision); Memory: “My heart lies before you, O my God. Look deep within. See these memories of mine, for you are my hope” (4.6; cf. also 2.4 and 6.2); Conscience “My heart was full of bitter protests against the creations of my imagination” (7.1).

<sup>13</sup> Debora Shuger makes a similar observation, arguing that Augustine “jettisons the Classical intellectualist tradition with its hierarchical faculty psychology in favor of a more unified picture of mental activity, one in which feeling, willing, and loving become closely related” (46).

“much of what [the philosophers] say about the created world is true,” but he suggests that they are limited in their capacity to tell the truth because they “do not search with piety for the Truth, its Creator” (5.3 94). From Augustine’s perspective, piety or what he refers to elsewhere as love and/or wisdom, is the wellspring of true knowledge and emerges from a well-centered heart rather than an elevated mind. The difficulty with rational thought is that it tends to work at the expense of piety. So while the philosophers lay claim to intellectual mastery and “think themselves as high and as bright as the stars,” they fail to realize that their “*hearts* grow benighted” (5.3 94 italics mine). They “can predict an eclipse of the sun so far ahead,” but they “cannot see that they themselves are already in the shadow of an eclipse.” For Augustine, God does not make himself known to those who can solve challenging intellectual problems. He “come[s] close only to men who are humble at heart” and those who have opened themselves to the wisdom of Christ (5.3 94; see also 11.31 280).

### **Wisdom: Knowing and Loving**

It might be helpful to draw on another set of Augustinian terms in order to capture the difference between the rational epistemology of the philosophers and Augustine’s moral-spiritual approach. From 3.4 where Augustine writes of how Cicero’s *Hortensius* had “altered [his] outlook on life” and caused him to “love wisdom itself, whatever it might be” (59), Augustine begins to distinguish between two kinds of knowledge, *scientia* which is based on logical analysis and rational judgment and *sapientia* which is based on heavenly wisdom and interpersonal love.<sup>14</sup> As the *Confessions* progress,

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, see 4.15, 5.3, 6.7, 7.20, 8.1, 13.18. Scholars tend to define *scientia*

Augustine shows a marked preference for the latter.

One of the important qualities of *sapientia* is that it unites knowledge and love rather than separating them or subordinating one to the other.<sup>15</sup> The significance as it pertains to the relation between epistemology and divinity is that reason and rationality never have the final say. In fact, at some points, they may have nothing to say at all.

After considering the *scientia* of the philosophers, Augustine prays to God:

O Lord God of truth, if a man is to please you, surely it is not enough that he should know facts like these? Even if he knows them all, he is not happy unless he knows you; but the man who knows you is happy, even if he knows none of these things. And the man who knows you, and knows these things as well, is none the happier for his knowledge of them: he is happy only because he knows you, and then only if he has knowledge of you and honours you and gives you thanks as God and does not become fantastic in his notions. (5.4 94-95)

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and *sapientia* in the *Confessions* according to Augustine's definition in *On the Trinity*, books 8-13 where he associates the former with knowledge of temporal matters and the latter with contemplative love for God. For helpful commentary on the relationship between *scientia* and *sapientia*, see Gilson (1960) 127-32; Bourke (1984) 53-62; Stock (1990) 273-78; and Harrison (2000) 4-19.

<sup>15</sup> Marcia Colish makes a similar point with respect to the combination of joy and truth in the *Confessions*:

Joy in the truth is an arresting idea, but from a logical point of view it is slightly out of order. Why should joy and truth be linked in this way? One tends to think of joy primarily in the moral context, as the concomitant of the possession of the good. On the other hand, one tends to think of truth primarily in an epistemological context, as the goal of knowledge. Augustine's combination of these two notions is not accidental. By interweaving truth and joy . . . he is expressing in terminal form one of his favorite ideas, the interdependence of morality and cognition. (37)

*Sapientia* is highly distinctive, and yet, paradoxically, it is far more open and embracing than *scientia*. It is free to make use of many things, but it never attributes its epistemic enjoyment to the things it uses.<sup>16</sup> While it is not irrational or anti-scientific, neither is it conditioned by rational science. It is a form of knowledge that works towards relational fullness while resisting the temptation of epistemic closure. As such, *sapientia* comes to know its object often at the very point when human intellection has exhausted itself.<sup>17</sup> DiLorenzo observes that “For St. Augustine, any increase in knowledge about God and the soul that does not, at the same time, encourage increasing awareness of the limitations of the human intellect comes to naught” (DiLorenzo 17). For this reason, “Dialectics, chief discipline of reason among the ancient philosophers, must yield to the laws of a new guide, namely, a Christian confessional rhetoric that suffuses and modifies the rational work of dialectics in the discovery of truth” (1). *Sapientia* plays an important role in setting forth this “new guide” because it resists the hegemony of dialectic while

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<sup>16</sup> I am alluding here to Augustine’s well-known distinction between use (*uti*) and enjoyment (*frui*) from Part I of *On Christian Doctrine*. Smith observes that the “essence of sin, for Augustine, is a kind of idolatry by which we enjoy what we ought to use; that is, we substitute the creature for the Creator” (2000 217). While *scientia* has an important epistemic role, it tends toward idolatry when divorced from *sapientia* because, in the absence of piety and love for God, it seeks to collapse the boundaries between subject and object by establishing a fixed ratio.

<sup>17</sup> In this respect, sapiential knowledge allows for a kind of skepticism. Quoting 2 Cor. 5:7, Augustine writes: “But as yet we are light with faith only, not with a clear view. For our salvation is founded upon the hope of something. Hope would not be hope at all if its object were in view” (13.13). Elsewhere, he says, “Now we see your Word, not as he is, but dimly, through the clouds, like a confused reflection in the mirror of the firmament, for though we are the beloved of your Son, what we shall be hereafter has not been made known as yet” (13.15). The modern reader may recoil at this point, given the very real possibility of empty hopes in the absence of rational certainty. Augustine treats this problem in *On Trinity*, arguing that it is possible to love God (knowing in the *sapiential* sense) while lacking knowledge of him (in the scientific sense) (8.4.6; 14.2.4).

encouraging the use of all the arts in truth-telling.

Augustine's distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* becomes particularly pointed in Book 7. From his reading of the Platonists, Augustine had achieved a certain scientific notion of God:

I was certain both that you are and that you are infinite, though without extent in terms of space either limited or unlimited. I was sure that it is you who truly are, since you are all the same, varying in neither part nor motion. I knew too that all other things derive their being from you, and the one indisputable proof of this is the fact that they exist at all. (7.20 154)

Even though Augustine was “certain of these truths” and could talk “as though he knew the meaning of it all,” he was unfamiliar with divine wisdom. The Platonists knew of the divine Logos and its power to create and enlighten, but they did not know that “*the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us*” (7.9 145; see John 1:14). Nor were they aware that “*he dispossessed himself and took the nature of a slave, fashioned in the likeness of men, and presenting himself to us in human form; and then he lowered his own dignity, accepted an obedience which brought him to death, death on a cross*” (7.9 145; see Phil. 2:7-8). And so, while the Platonists had “prompted [Augustine] to look for truth” and their teachings were consistent with the truths of Scripture in many respects (7.20-21 154-55), they had little to say about the brokenness and self-giving love of “Christ, who is the Way and the Word of God” (5.3 93). “None of this is contained in the Platonists’ books,” writes Augustine:

Their pages have not the mien of the true love of God. They make no mention of the tears of confession or of *the sacrifice that you will never disdain, a broken spirit, a heart that is humbled and contrite*, nor do they speak of the salvation of your people, *the city adorned like a bride*, the foretaste of your Spirit, or the chalice of our redemption. In them no one sings *No rest has my soul but in God's hands; to him I look for deliverance. I have no other stronghold, no other deliverer but him; safe in his protection, I fear no deadly fall*. In them no one listens to the voice which says *Come to me all you who labour*. They disdain his teaching because *he is gentle and humble of heart. For you have hidden this from the wise and revealed it to children*" (7.21 156).

What the Platonists lacked, as Marcia Colish points out, was "the doctrine of the Incarnation, by which man may receive the power to share in the life of God in and through the conditions of temporal existence" (Colish 30). According to Colish, the humility of the biblical Christ in his Incarnation is what ultimately precipitated Augustine's conversion to Christianity and helped give shape to his view of "redeemed rhetoric" and "rhetorical theology" (17). By "uniting divinity and humanity in the Word made flesh," God made possible a relation between himself and human beings that reconciles "love, time and language" (26, 21). Rather than forever attempting to bring God close through dialectic, Augustine discovers that God himself had come close in Christ as a kind of poet and rhetorician, speaking to "man as man" and inviting participation in divine eloquence such that "human words may take on divinity, thereby

bringing man and the world back to God” (26).

Augustine sees it as providential that he had studied the books of the Platonists before he had encountered the Scriptures. It was not that they had provided a rational prolegomena, as is often assumed. The Platonists helped to draw out the supreme distinctiveness of God’s wisdom precisely by what was lacking in their philosophy:

[Y]ou wished me always to remember the impression [the Platonists] had made on me, so that later on, when I had been chastened by your Holy Writ and my wounds had been touched by your healing hand, I should be able to see and understand the difference between presumption and confession, between those who see the goal that they must reach, but cannot see the road by which they are to reach it, and those who see the road to that blessed country which is meant to be no vision but our home. For if I had not come across these books until after I had been formed in the mould of your Holy Scriptures and had learnt to love you through familiarity with them, the Platonist teaching might have swept me from my foothold on the solid ground of piety, and even if I had held firm to the spirit in which the Scriptures had imbued me for my salvation, I might have thought it possible for a man who read *nothing but the Platonist books* to derive the same spirit from them alone. (7.20 153-54)

Augustine had come to presume much according to his scientific grasp of things, but he was unable to confess the love and wisdom of the living God with an open, undivided heart. The problem with *scientia* was that it had little power to stem his intellectual

presumption and redress the human inclination for intellectual pride. Augustine was not lacking in erudition as a young man and the Platonists appealed to him because he had “wish[ed] to be thought wise” and was “full of self-esteem.” What he needed, however, was “charity” and the “solid ground of piety” and these he discovered only after being “chastened by Holy Writ” and “formed in the mould of [the] Holy Scriptures” (7.20.154-55). It was only then that he learned to confess true wisdom, bearing witness to the knowledge-love of God in such a way as to become involved in it personally.

Again, it is important to emphasize that Augustine does not reject scientific knowledge outright. The section on time in Book 11 provides a good example of his scientific rigor. He is simply careful to observe the limitations of *scientia* and draw attention to the dangers of allowing it to dominate, especially in theological study. When *scientia* has the final say in matters of divinity, it gives way to a contradiction, serving to highlight the power of human reason while presuming to put God’s sovereignty and wisdom before all things. From his own experience with Manichaeism, Augustine had come to see that a theology grounded in *scientia* has a tendency to totalize its vision, forcing all things—physical and spiritual alike—into the cramped dimensions of a purely rational scheme.<sup>18</sup> A scientific theologian like Mani may happen upon certain truths, but

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<sup>18</sup>DiLorenzo notices that Augustine associates intellectual pride in the *Confessions* with both scientific rationalism and imaginative literalism (17). When *scientia* becomes an end unto itself, the distinction between rational science and imaginative literalism all but disappears. Augustine describes this phenomenon in terms of his experience of Manichaeism, distinguishing it from the Christian witness:

The Church demanded that certain things should be believed even though they could not be proved, for if they could be proved, not all men could understand the proof, and some could not be proved at all. I thought that the Church was entirely honest in this and far less pretentious than the

because of his thoroughgoing rationalism, he tends to go wrong even when he is most right. This is not a problem in itself because love “shows indulgence even to failings of this sort” (5.5 96). The problem is that Mani “poses as teacher, sole authority, guide, and leader of all whom he could convince of his theories, leading his followers to believe that they [are] following no ordinary man, but [the] Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> Presiding as a transcendental Subject in a world reduced to rational dimensions, Mani claims to have the absolute truth in hand; this is deeply problematic from Augustine’s perspective and it is one of the reasons why he parts ways with the Manichees.

### **Heart: Self and Other**

The Augustinian heart-soul, with its affinity for wisdom, piety and confession also lends itself to a significantly different understanding of self-other relations. Where the mind-soul presumes a self that is centered in a single, unchanging essence and capable of standing on its own from this privileged position, the heart-soul presumes a self that is decentered and capable of giving itself to others and receiving others into itself. That is, when Augustine turns to his heart-soul, he discovers himself not as a self-sufficient “I,” but as a “me,” interpellated by the Word of the divine Other. This is precisely what he had not experienced as either a Manichee or Platonist. Early on, Cicero’s exhortation to “love wisdom itself, whatever it might be” set Augustine “burning with fire,” but his search for wisdom eventually brought him to a dead-end

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Manichees, who laughed at people who took things on faith, made rash promises of scientific knowledge, and then put forward a whole system of preposterous inventions which they expected their followers to believe on trust because they could not be proved. (6.5 116)

For Augustine’s criticism of imaginative literalism, see 7.1, 7.14, 13.6.

<sup>19</sup> See Harrison (2000) 7-10 for a helpful discussion of Manichean scientism.

because “the name of Christ” was nowhere to be found among the philosophers and theologians. And yet, even at that time, the name of Christ could be found inscribed on/in his heart-soul:

Lord, from the time when my mother fed me at the breast my infant heart had been suckled dutifully on his name, the name of Your Son, my Saviour. Deep inside my heart his name remained, and nothing could entirely captivate me, however learned, however neatly expressed, however true it may be, unless his name were in it. (3.4 59)

As Augustine comes to remember the name of Christ and explore its meaning, he begins to hear the voice of Wisdom speaking within his heart-soul. “Your word,” prays Augustine, struck into my heart and from that moment I loved you” (10.6 211). That God begins to reveal himself in this way does not bring Augustine’s search for wisdom to a swift conclusion. Augustine resists for some time because the encroachment of otherness seems to threaten the sovereignty of his “I.” And yet, to his surprise, Augustine experiences the initiative of the Other at the point of conversion not as a violent, unilateral act of exclusion (or inclusion), but as an invitation to participate in becoming, an invitation that gives him freedom to pursue intimacy with God while guarding against idolatrous self-satisfaction.

After his conversion, Augustine seems to work against his calling at times by attempting to overcome the creaturely conditions of language. For instance, in Book 9 Augustine recounts how he and his mother had come together in the “presence of Truth” to consider “what the eternal life of the saints would be like” (9.10 197). “[W]e laid the

lips of our heart to the heavenly stream," says Augustine, the stream "that flows from your fountain, *the source of all life which is in you*, so that as far as it was in our power to do so we might be sprinkled with its waters and in some sense reach an understanding of this great mystery." Augustine believes that they achieved some success in their endeavors. Having "ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees up to the heavens themselves" and then turning inward to their "own souls," they "passed beyond them to that place of everlasting plenty, where [God] feed[s] Israel forever with the food of truth." While they "spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of [their] hearts, for one fleeting instant [they] reached out and touched it." And yet, their success did not and could not last. Augustine concludes this sentence by drawing our attention to the unrelenting evanescence of his vision. As the presence of the Word departs even before it has a chance to appear in words, Augustine and Monica utter a "sigh" and return "to the sound of [their] own speech, in which each word has a beginning and ending."

Throughout this passage, Augustine seems to suggest the possibility of human-divine immediacy even if denying it within spatio-temporal existence. Nevertheless, Augustine's poetic-hermeneutic practice suggests a less than straightforward Platonic interpretation. That Augustine chooses to describe this episode about a supposedly silent, contemplative encounter with divine reality is curious. What would be the significance of describing an event that cannot occur in or through language? Surely, Augustine does not mean for his reader to use *these* words to launch into a transcendent beyond. The rich poetic quality of this passage seems to suggest otherwise as does his inventive

recontextualization of certain biblical passages.

Augustine's failure to find a satisfactory resolution to this dilemma would seem to leave him in a double-bind, striving after an ideal that is by its very nature impossible to attain. And yet, from another perspective it seems to open the way to knowing and loving God in a completely different way. Even epistemic failure has relational value for Augustine. When he retreats from the spiritual heights at Ostia, he must forfeit the possibility of a fixed ratio between himself and God within time. The sacrifice that Augustine experiences in this situation gives rise to melancholy, but not despair, and this is partly because he has welcomed the *humilitas* of Christ and discovered in the incarnation that the way upward proceeds downward in the divine economy. Given his philosophical proclivities, Augustine may have longed to identify with God through the rationalism of the Platonists. But as it was, he could not find the rational *logos* that would enable him to ascend to an immediate vision of the thing itself and finally silence the contingent words of his heart-soul. His desire for immediacy notwithstanding, Augustine confesses to God and does so at the juncture of grammatical exegesis and poetic-rhetorical invention. Drawing on the language of Scripture and the Christian interpretive community, he practices theology by engaging responsively and inventively in relationship with God.

### **Language: Truth and Method**

Augustine's social and historical view of language and hermeneutics is fundamental to his sapiential, heart-centered theology. It is clear throughout the *Confessions* that Augustine desires to tell the truth and that words for him have an

important role to play in the telling, but he maintains that language is a phenomenon of social interaction and convention rather than ontology.<sup>20</sup> He makes this point early on in his account of how he learned to speak:

I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they had named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name which they gave to it. . . . So, by hearing words arranged in various phrases and constantly repeated, I gradually pieced together what they stood for, and when my tongue had mastered the pronunciation, I began to express my wishes by means of them. In this way I made my wants known to my family and they made theirs known to me, and I took a further step into the stormy life of human society. (1.8 29)

Not all scholars have understood this passage as evidence against an ontological view of language. In fact, Wittgenstein aligned it with the latter, viewing it as embodying the long-standing picture-view of the “essence of human language”: “Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands” (Wittgenstein 1.1). I would suggest, however, that Wittgenstein’s reading has less to do with Augustine’s representation of language and more to do with mitigating certain modern philosophical anxieties.<sup>21</sup> The irony is that Wittgenstein fails to see the

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<sup>20</sup> Eugene Vance suggests that Augustine upholds “the arbitrary nature of the bond between signifier and signified sign” and associates the onto-linguistic unity of Cratylism with the pride of Babel (1982 21-22). Troup’s discussion of 1.8 in relation to Saussurean linguistics is also instructive (152).

<sup>21</sup> For more on Wittgenstein’s misreading of this passage, see Kirwan (1989) 186-

similarity between Augustine's account in the *Confessions* and his own view of language in *Philosophical Investigations*. Augustine is not indicating how he learned the predetermined meaning of words and *ipso facto* the objective realities that they render up. Quite the contrary, he is describing how he learned to play the language game of linguistic correspondence in "the stormy life of human society." Augustine and Wittgenstein agree that there is no inherent, single, one-time connection between sign and thing and that if a connection exists between sign and thing, it does so based on convention rather than "essence."

One of the reasons for the contingency of language, in Augustine's view, is that words are affected by the Fall. Interestingly, however, Augustine does not exempt Scripture from this condition. Given the admiration Augustine had for philosophy and his frustration with its limitations, it might be tempting to think that he turns to Scripture in order to complete the *scientia* of the philosophers with a more sophisticated hermeneutic *scientia*, thereby enabling the kind of transcendence he had been searching for as a Platonist. This is precisely what Paul Jay suggests:

With the language of the Word woven thoroughly into his narrative, Augustine's past could be represented in a language he believed could literally transform (and authorize) its meaning. Recounting what had 'passed away' into fallen images in the language of scripture, Augustine sought to elevate the empirical events of his life to a level at which its meaning became "transcendent." In its role both as prodigal son and confessing writer, the subject in and of the *Confessions* is thus presented as a transcending being, elevated in part by the scriptural language of its text. (1048)<sup>22</sup>

Jay's argument is compelling if we are to privilege a Platonic reading of the *Confessions*,

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<sup>22</sup> For a similar perspective, see Grossman 56-84.

but a very different perspective emerges if we attend to “another Augustine.” When Augustine finally comes to “prefer the Catholic teaching” and entrust himself to the “authority of the Scriptures,” he shows no interest in gaining epistemological access to a fixed, transcendent realm of meaning. Instead, he simply embraces the testimony of the Christian discourse community and attests to its usefulness for relational life on all levels. “Unless we took things on trust,” he says, “we should accomplish absolutely nothing in this life” (6.5 116-7).<sup>23</sup> Augustine’s trust in Scripture and the Christian interpretive community is neither rational nor irrational, but fiduciary.<sup>24</sup> He submits himself to biblical authority with a prior history of his own, looking for a knowledge that will merge with his own existential convictions. The authority of Scripture, he says, is something that he “needed to believe” because of a prior “belief in God’s existence.” In this respect, reason and dialectic have a role to play in doctrinal assent; they provide a certain rationale for faith commitment and help to make sense of what is believed. At the same time, however, the *aporia* of yielding to a socio-historical textual authority is unavoidable.

From this perspective, Augustine’s assent to biblical authority does not launch him beyond fiduciary bounds into an immediate encounter with God. Quite the contrary, Scripture’s truths manifest themselves through the continual exercise of Christian faith. There is no way for Augustine to prove that the scriptural testimony is absolutely true

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. 6.5 with Augustine’s account of how he learned to speak in 1.8. Also cf. *The City of God* 11.3 where this notion becomes the platform for Augustine’s view of biblical authority.

<sup>24</sup> Troup speaks to this well in his concluding comments on Augustinian faith: “Belief does not precede the ability to reason, but it always precedes understanding” (172).

either prior or subsequent to faith. Nor, for that matter, is there any way for him to verify that his interpretation of the scriptural testimony is correct in any final sense. Augustine must deny the hegemony of reason and rationality and risk what the philosophers fought so fervently to overcome: delusion, instability, variableness, naiveté. And this is precisely how he proceeds. Augustine commends himself to authority willingly, even confidently, but without the assurance of a thoroughgoing rational demonstration.<sup>25</sup> While it is true that dialectic helps Augustine to make sense of what he grasps by faith, it does not enable him to ascend to an intellectual realm that renders fiduciary commitment obsolete.

From a scholastic-philosophical perspective, Augustine's fiduciary approach would seem to undermine the capacity of Scripture to function as a stable source of truth. After all, how can the words of Scripture convey the truth if their truth-value is dependent on *pistis* rather than *gnosis*? If we are to exercise a poetic-rhetorical perspective, however, we find that it clarifies Augustine's own definition of biblical authority. In Book 12, Augustine relates how he would write a book of "highest authority" if he were called on by God:

[I]f I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend. I would write in this way than impose a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others, even though they contained

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<sup>25</sup> This anticipates Augustine's well-known principle from *On Trinity*: *credas ut intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).

no falsehood that could give me offence. (12.31 308)

From Augustine's perspective, the writers of Scripture do not communicate truth by projecting one permanent, univocal meaning. On the contrary, they provide the communicative boundaries for an inventive exegesis of true meaning(s) and encourage the ongoing participation of the discourse community in truth-telling. Michael McCarthy makes a similar point in his recent article, "Augustine, the Bible, and the Practice of Authority" (2007). According to McCarthy, Scripture, for Augustine, is not simply "a fixed text to be decoded" (328), "a sacred object" requiring a "learned expert to teach others its steadfast meaning across time" (327). Rather, it is more like "the context of a live encounter" (328). The kind of authority it has is "diffuse, relational, responsive, and dependant on multiple contextual factors" and "its efficacy derives from its quality as a living voice, calling the hearer into capacious dialogue. Because of this dialogical quality, the authority of scripture lies in its power as a personal appeal, as an opening to the divine other, and as an invitation to engage the reality thus revealed" (327). Thus, from Augustine's perspective, the exegete (like Ambrose) scans the pages of Scripture with his eyes, but explores its meaning within his heart-soul (6.3.114). At the same time, s/he opens his heart-soul and allows the voice of Wisdom to guide the direction of his reading/writing.

Augustine encapsulates this dynamic in 12.3 where he wonders "how [he] should . . . know whether what [Moses] said was true" and answers himself by shifting his attention to the living Truth who speaks within:

If I knew [this truth] . . . it could not be from [Moses] that I got such

knowledge. But deep inside me, in my inmost thought, Truth, which is neither Hebrew nor Greek nor Latin nor any foreign speech, would speak to me, though not in syllables formed by lips and tongue. It would whisper, 'He speaks truth.' And at once I should be assured. In all confidence I would say to this man, your servant, 'What you tell me is true.' (11.3 256)

When Augustine provides an interpretation of Scripture he is not attempting to arrive at “a single true meaning” that “would exclude all others.”<sup>26</sup> Rather he is setting out to discover “whatever truths he [is] able to apprehend.” And he does this by reading/writing the words of Scripture in his heart-soul in such a way as to engage in a co-operative truth-act.

James O'Donnell helps to clarify this aspect of Augustine's grammatical-rhetorical approach. Beginning with a provocative translation of *poiema* in John 3:21—“He who *makes* the truth comes to the light”—and relating it to Augustine's own echo of the verse in 10.1, O'Donnell suggests that Augustine not only seeks to convey the truth in the *Confessions*, but also, in some sense, to produce it:

The truth that Augustine made . . . had eluded him for years. It appears before us as a trophy torn from the grip of the unsayable after a prolonged

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<sup>26</sup> According to Vance, “Augustine believed that the meaning of Scripture is strictly autonomous—dependent of the temporal, verbal signs by which it is expressed, and such atemporal meaning must be grasped by the reader in a direct process of illumination” (1986 41). This seems to run counter to Augustine's own stated intentions. When Augustine interprets Genesis 1, he has no interest to grasp “*the* meaning” somewhere above and beyond the level of language (*italics mine*). Scripture has many meanings and all of them are discovered at the level of the text.

struggle on the frontier between speech and silence. What was at stake was more than words. The ‘truth’ of which Augustine spoke was not a mere quality of a verbal formula, but veracity itself, a quality of a living human person. Augustine ‘made the truth’—in this sense, became truthful himself—when he found a pattern of words to say the true thing well. But both the ‘truth’ that Augustine made and the ‘light’ to which it led were for him scripturally guaranteed epithets of Christ, the pre-existent second person of the trinity. For Augustine to write a book, then, that purported to make truth and seek light was not merely a reflection upon the actions of his life but pure act itself, thought and writing becoming the enactment of ideas. (1992 xvii)

O’Donnell’s footnotes to this passage are instructive. He acknowledges that his “translation may seem deliberately tendentious” because it appears to imply that “the truth does not exist until it is made.” However, after providing an etymology of truth in a variety of European languages, he points out that “‘Truth’ in our sense [of a metaphysical category] is not a native concept in any of [these] languages.” O’Donnell suggests that Augustine is tracking in an ancient conception of truth that perceives no inherent contradiction between interpreting and inventing, finding and making. Again, Augustine is deeply interested in telling the truth, but the truth that he tells is “not a mere quality of a verbal formula, but veracity itself, a quality of a living human person.” And this is why he chooses to confess from an existential-textual “low” rather than theorize from an essential-ideological “high,” developing his theology as heart-centered poet and exegete

instead of a mind-centered dialectician.

### **Conversion and the Literary Arts**

Augustine's heart-centered approach to theological truth-telling becomes particularly important in the conversion narratives of Books 8 and 9. At the beginning of Book 8, he attends to the relationship between Scripture and conversion and considers how the former leads to the latter once the biblical "words . . . [are] firmly planted in [the] heart" (8.1 157).<sup>27</sup> Concerning the conversion of Victorinus, Augustine writes "O Lord . . . how did you find the way to his heart? He read the Holy Scriptures . . . and made the most painstaking and careful study of all Christian literature" (8.2 159-60). Later he expands this heart theme in his description of Alypius's conversion:

After saying this he turned back to the book, labouring under the pain of the new life that was taking birth in him. He read on and on and in his heart, where you alone could see, a change was taking place. His mind was being divested of the world, as could presently be seen. For while he was reading, his heart leaping and turning in his breast, a cry broke from him as he saw the better course and determined to take it. (8.6 168)

Augustine then goes on to relate his own conversion experience indicating how his "heart [was] torn between several different desires" until the singing of a child—or what he thinks is the singing of a child—caused him to turn the "eyes of [his] heart" to Rom. 13: 13, 14 (8.10 175; 8.12 177). "In an instant," says Augustine, "as I came to the end of the

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<sup>27</sup> This recalls Augustine's earlier reflection on how the inscription of Christ's name in his heart prevented him from becoming carried away with pagan philosophy.

sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled” (178).

At the beginning of Book 9, Augustine shifts his attention to the heart-soul’s involvement in the expression of praise. Having just related his own experience of conversion, he calls out to God in the language of the Psalms, “Let me praise you in my heart, let me praise you with my tongue. *Let this be the cry of my whole being: Lord there is none like you*” (9.1 181). This is not the first time Augustine has cried out to God in psalmic praise. In fact, he begins the *Confessions* by quoting from Psalm 144.3 and 146.5: “*Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty? How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom!*” (1.1 21). The significance is that Augustine is led to respond to a heart-centered hermeneutic encounter with God not by attempting to transcend the creaturely conditions of language that make such a hermeneutic possible, thereby collapsing the boundary between human being and Highest Being. Rather, he roots himself in these conditions and continues to fashion himself as a heart-centered hermeneut, adopting the language of Psalms to express his gratitude to the living God. In this respect, Augustine’s praise-prayer language stands in marked contrast from the dialectical approach of the Greek philosophical tradition and suggests much about the alternative nature not only of Augustine’s spirituality, but also his divinity. Augustine’s God is not “religiously otiose” like the *causa sui* of onto-theology; rather he is a “Creator who evokes prayer, sacrifice, awe” (Westphal 268).

It is important to notice that the new focus on the praising heart-soul does not suggest the obsolescence of exegetical heart-work. Quite the opposite, Augustine praises

God by selecting words from the biblical text that are rooted in his heart-soul and spelling out their significance for himself and his reader. This was something that he could not do prior to his conversion. Early on in the *Confessions*, when his skill in the arts of grammar and rhetoric was beginning to manifest itself, Augustine was unable to use his “wits and his tongue” to praise God “in the words of . . . Scripture” and find “support [for his] heart” (1.17 38). But in Book 9, ironically at the point that he abandons “the profession of rhetoric,” he finds the ability to praise God from his heart-text because God has “rescued [his] tongue” just as he had previously “rescued [his] heart” (9.4 185). Here, Augustine signals a new kind of poetic-rhetoric. Where Plato and other classical philosophers had “set reason and emotion in opposition, with the result that passionate oratory appear[ed] inherently deceptive, a device for bypassing and negating rational argument,” Augustine favors a more “unified picture of mental activity, one in which feeling, willing, and loving become closely interrelated” (Shuger 44-45, 46). Under this new configuration, rhetoric “does not circumvent rationality but enables it, stirring the will to desire what the mind already approves” (46). Thus, Augustine does not give up the grammatical and rhetorical arts at this point in the *Confessions* so much as he provides them with new coordinates. Even the classical poets continue to be of relevance. He has “nothing against the words” of a Homer or Virgil; “they are like choice and costly glasses” (1.16 37). What he rejects is a grammar and rhetoric anchored in pride and self-interest rather than piety and love.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to Troup, “Augustine attempts to sanctify rather than mortify rhetoric” (7). What he rejects is “the rhetoric of the Second Sophistic” with its “emphasis on delivery and pleasing use of language to the exclusion of substantial meaning” (14,

Augustine builds on this theme in 9.4. At the outset of this section, he recalls his post-conversion experience and how he often “cried out to . . . God” when he read the “Psalms of David . . . those songs of a pious heart” (186). He then focuses on the fourth psalm and provides a retrospective reading of his original conversion to God, remembering how he had hardened his heart-soul by setting it on shadows and lies (187). Commenting on Psalm 4:2, he writes,

[I]t was in my inmost heart, where I had grown angry with myself, where I had been stung with remorse, where I had slain my old self and offered it in sacrifice, where I had first purposed to renew my life and had placed my hope in you, it was there that you had begun to make me love you and had *made me glad of heart*. It was my eyes that read these words, but my soul that knew their meaning. (188)

The grammatical-rhetorical quality of this passage is extremely rich. Augustine not only offers an interpretation of Psalm 4, but also provides a poetic response to God concerning an original interpretation of Rom. 13:13, 14. The fascinating thing is that the heart-soul embodies this intratextual-inventive-interpretive complex. It seems that the Augustinian heart is a kind of communicative crucible in which reading and writing, present and past,

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16). Rather than choosing between the idealism of the Platonist or the nominalism of the Sophist, Augustine, “like Cicero, . . . operates self-consciously and elegantly with an open philosophical approach that integrates wisdom and eloquence in rhetoric” (27). See also Sutherland (1990) 142-45, 152; Shuger (1988) 41-42; Colish (1968) 21-28; and Eco (1984) 33. This contrasts significantly with Quinn’s understanding of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy/theology in the *Confessions*. According to Quinn, “Augustine searches for the truth through dialectical method” (658); “rhetoric is the dialectical or analytical feature in eloquence necessary for . . . a reasoned account of claims (75-6).

self and other are dialogically connected. Jacques Lacan once claimed, quite famously, that the “unconscious is structured like a language” (*Écrits* 737). Augustine is suggesting something similar with respect to the heart-soul, although with significantly different assumptions regarding self-other relations. The heart-soul falls under the reign of the signifier, but not in frustrated desire for an illusory transcendental signified. Indeed, all is communicated from within heart-bounds, and yet the heart-soul itself is *interloqué*, claimed and thus conditioned in certain ways by the Other from the outset. As Augustine says in apostrophe to God, “whatever good I may speak to men you have heard it before in my heart, and whatever good you hear in my heart, you have first spoken to me yourself” (10.2 208).

This interconnection of heart and text is a powerful heuristic and enables Augustine to draw out numerous textual/existential transpositions. For instance, Augustine not only considers the biblical text in and from his heart, but also views his life as an unfolding narrative that is to be read by and written for the heart:

O Lord, since you are outside time in eternity, are you unaware of the things that I tell you? Or do you see in time the things that occur in it? If you see them, why do I lay this lengthy record before you? Certainly it is not through me that you hear of these things. But by setting them down I fire my own heart and the hearts of my readers with love for you, so that we all may ask: *Can any praise be worthy of the Lord's majesty?* I have said before, and I shall say again, that I may write this book for love of your love. (11.1 253)

This passage is remarkable for the way that it defends against the pretensions of *scientia* without disparaging *scientia* altogether. At the outset Augustine begins with scientific concerns and casts doubt on what he tells in his personal history since God is “outside time in eternity” and can “see in time [all] the things that occur in it.” In the process he acknowledges the fundamental *aporia* between his words and God’s vision. The irony is that he apostrophizes his doubt openly to an eternal God, deliberately foregrounding not only the absurdity of his language use, but also the inadequacy of his understanding. We might expect Augustine to try and resolve this dilemma since the relationship between language, self and God is so central to his project. And yet, this is precisely what he does not do. Instead of attempting to understand fully and signify correctly by intensifying his scientific approach or throwing up his arms in defeat at the point of failure, he gathers what he can from his head and descends to his heart-soul, articulating a sense and meaning in terms that only the heart-soul can use and benefit from.

The term “record” in the above passage is easy to overlook, but it is important for understanding Augustine’s dual perspective on his own heart-text. “Record” derives from *recordatio* which is related to the Latin for heart (*cor*). As Eric Jager points out, Augustine uses *recordatio* and its cognate verb, *recordari* to signify a kind of interior writing that we would now associate with memory and conscience (Jager 2000 30).<sup>29</sup> What this suggests is that the record of Books 1-9 is an interpretative response to the

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<sup>29</sup> “O Lord my God, is this not the truth as I remember it? You are the Judge of my conscience, and my heart (*cor*) and my memory (*recordatio*) lie open before you” (5.6 98). See 10.8 for a similar connection between heart and memory.

heart-text of memory and conscience.<sup>30</sup> Augustine re-cords by exegeting the memory-narrative of his heart and the words that God has inscribed on the heart. In the process, he implores God to speak into his heart while he reads/writes so that he can convey the true meaning of his heart-text:

Look into my heart, O God, the same heart on which you took pity when it was in the depths of the abyss. Let my heart now tell you what prompted me to do wrong for no purpose, and why it was only my own love of mischief that made me do it. (2.4)

My heart lies before you, O my God. Look deep within. See these memories of mine, for you are my hope. You cleanse me when unclean humors such as these possess me, by drawing my eyes to yourself and saving my feet from the snare. (4.6)

The significance of Augustine's re-cordance is its sapiential bearing. Augustine is not interested to provide an objective, scientific rendering of his life like we might expect of a modern autobiographer. He reads his heart-text selectively and interprets what he finds according to the promptings of Wisdom.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, he fashions his interpretation in

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<sup>30</sup> In turn, Augustine's interpretive response becomes a text that he then reads and rereads. Commenting on 10.4, Stock suggests that Augustine "read and reflected on Confessions 1-9 while composing book 10" (1996 11). He also observes from *Retractions* 2.6 that Augustine "was as deeply moved by rereading his account as when he wrote it."

<sup>31</sup> Augustine elaborates this kind of selective exegesis in his discussion of *recordatio* in 10.8:

The memory is a great field or spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which are conveyed to it by the senses. In it are stored away all the thoughts by which we enlarge upon or diminish or modify in

such a way as to “fire [his] own heart and the hearts of [his] readers with love” for God. In this way, Augustine blurs the boundaries between historical narrative and psalmic praise, hermeneutics and poetry, suggesting that the interpretive self who re-cords a personal history in the presence of God is at the same time a poetic-rhetorical self who writes to inflame the heart with love for God.

### **Hermeneutics and the Theological Life**

When Augustine comes to his interpretation of Genesis 1 in the final three books of the *Confessions*, he continues to elaborate upon this view of language and hermeneutics. At the beginning of Book 11 he informs his reader that he wants to “understand the meaning” of Genesis 1:1 and represent this meaning as accurately as possible (11.3 256; cf. also 13.15 322). At the same time, he draws attention to the partiality of his own interpretation, asserting the inevitability of countless interpretations/meanings. At one point, he even affirms the interpretations of those who consider his own exegesis of Genesis 1:1 to be false (12.30 307). Augustine explains why polysemy and hermeneutic variance are important for declaring the “true meaning”

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any way the perceptions at which we arrive through the senses, and it also contains anything else that has been entrusted to it for safe keeping. . . . When I use my memory, I ask it to produce whatever it is that I wish to remember. Some things it produces immediately; some are forthcoming only after a delay, as though they were being brought out from some inner hiding place; others come spilling from the memory, thrusting themselves upon us when what we want is something quite different, as much to say ‘Perhaps we are what you want to remember?’ These I brush aside from the picture which memory presents to me, allowing my mind to pick what it chooses, until finally that which I wish to see stands out clearly and emerges into sight from its hiding place. (10.8 214)

See also 10.24, for how this interpretive process in the memory relates to Augustine finding God in the heart.

of Scripture:

I listen to all these arguments and give them thought, but I will not engage in *wordy disputes, such as only unsettle the minds of those who are listening*. The law is intended for edification, *and it is an excellent thing, where it is applied legitimately*, because its end is charity, *based on purity of heart, on a good conscience and a sincere faith*. Christ our Master well knows which are the two commandments on which, he said, *all the law and prophets depend*. O my God, Light of my eyes in darkness, since I believe in these commandments and confess them to be true with all my heart, how can it harm me that it should be possible to interpret these words in several ways, all of which may yet be true? How can it harm me if I understand the writer's meaning in a different sense from that which another understands it? All of us who read his words do our best to discover and understand what he had in mind, and since we believe that he wrote the truth, we are not so rash as to suppose that he wrote anything which we know or think to be false. Provided, therefore, that each of us tries as best he can to understand in the Holy Scriptures what the writer meant by them, what harm is there if a reader believes what you, the Light of all truthful minds, show him to be the true meaning? It may not even be the meaning which the writer had in mind, and yet he too saw in them a true meaning, different though it may have been from this. (12.18 295-6)

Here Augustine highlights the ambiguous relationship between poetic invention and

hermeneutic discovery<sup>32</sup> and does so in such a way as to enact what he has described. Firstly, he puts the interpretive emphasis on interpersonal dialogue with God rather than on the specific words of Scripture themselves. For Augustine, dialogic exchange plays a fundamental role in the exegetical process because it is the living Word who is his “Light . . . in darkness” rather than a linear sequence of words. So even while he attends to the words of Scripture, quoting directly from 1 and 2 Timothy and the gospel of Matthew, he does so from within his heart-soul and in such a way as to direct his heart-soul to the person of Christ who is both the What and Way of truth. Secondly, he suggests a version of polysemy that allows for words to mean in a variety of ways while still remaining within the realm of truth. Augustine wants to establish the true meaning of the text but since truth emerges in time and includes an ongoing participatory response to a divine interlocutor, it is far too complex to be contained in words, once and for all. For this reason, truth, whether it is found in Scripture or in his own life-text, is always matched to time-bound selves and always emerges through the inventive selection of the exegete as

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<sup>32</sup> Marshall Grossman argues that “Augustine’s allegory disguises . . . semiosis as a hermeneutics, purporting to interpret a language of God that it rhetorically generates” (72). This interpretation is plausible if we are to privilege Platonic dialectics, but Augustine himself shows little concern for distinguishing sharply between semiosis and exegesis. Of course, this might simply indicate a failure on Augustine’s part to see what seems so patently obvious to the late modern reader—i.e. that language is generative of meaning rather than a vehicle of truth-telling. But this seems hardly likely when we consider that Augustine encourages hermeneutic plurality and diversity based on an ethics of *caritas*. While the opposition of truth and invention is certainly relevant from the perspective of post-Enlightenment rationality, it does not make much sense from an Augustinian perspective. Throughout the *Confessions*, Augustine performs the roles of exegete, homiletician, and poet all at the same time. Instead of practicing a strictly scientific form of exegesis, matching individual words to a single, determined meaning, he incorporates the Scriptures into the I-Thou dialogue of his heart, interpreting the text for himself and his reader in such a way as to cooperate with and collaborate in truth and wisdom.

he listens intently to the living Word within his heart-soul.<sup>33</sup> Thirdly, he anchors the meaning of Scripture in the law of love. Biblical language is intended for the edification of persons rather than the satiation of inquiring minds. Its end is love, says Augustine. From this perspective, a true interpretation, or what Augustine calls “legitimate application,” not only requires erudition but also “purity of heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.”<sup>34</sup>

This contrasts significantly with a scientific view of hermeneutics. The interpreter who restricts himself to the concerns of *scientia* approaches his subject logically and attempts to match his interpretation to the correct, univocal meaning in one-

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<sup>33</sup> The significance of Augustine’s notion of polysemy is its textual-existential orientation. That is, from Augustine’s perspective, the multiplicity of meaning in words has as much to do with the nature of text as it does with the nature of moral-spiritual reality. Augustine elaborates his view of polysemy in 13.24:

I know that a truth which the mind understands in one way only can be materially expressed by many different means, and I also know that there are many different ways in which the mind can understand an idea that is outwardly expressed in one way. . . . Scripture presents [a] truth to us in one way only, and there is only one way in which the words can be shaped by the tongue. But it may be understood in several different ways without falsification or error, because various interpretations, all of which are true in themselves, may be put upon it. (335)

<sup>34</sup> Augustine makes a similar argument in 12.25 and 12.30. Interpretations that do not result in charity contradict the root message of Scripture and are therefore an “offence against the very charity for the sake of which [the writer] wrote every one of [his] words.” Concerning the various interpretations proposed for Genesis 1:1 by his exegetical peers, Augustine writes: “For all the differences between them, there is truth in each of these opinions. May this truth give birth to harmony, and may the Lord our God have pity on us so that we may apply the law legitimately, that is, to the end prescribed in the commandment, which is charity undefiled. This same charity obliges me, if I am asked which of these opinions was held by Moses your servant, to admit that I do not know.” He concludes with a prayer: “[L]et us love one another, and if our thirst is not for vanity but for the truth, let us likewise love you, our God, who are the Source from which it flows.” Cf. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.36: “Whoever thinks he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them in such a way that his understanding does not build up the twin love of God and neighbor has not yet understood them at all.”

for-one ratio. Augustine himself uses the example of single authorial intent to illustrate this linear hermeneutic. He does not reject the concept of authorial intention outright. In fact, he affirms its value and even provides his own definition of the concept in 12.18 and 12.31. In the process, however, he turns what we typically mean by authorial intention on its head. Again, from Augustine's perspective, an author who writes a book of "highest authority" intends by "writ[ing] . . . in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in [the] words whatever truths he was able to apprehend" rather than "impos[ing] a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others." As such, authorial intention includes not just the one truth we have discovered, but "every truth that we can deduce . . . and others besides that we cannot, or cannot yet, find in them but are nevertheless to be found." Augustine's argument is rhetorical-polemical rather than theoretical-propositional. He does not seem concerned for authorial intention *per se*. He is trying to identify with an audience that is fixated on singular authorial intent. So he works within the paradigm of authorial intention but in such a way as to transform it along sapiential lines. His argument can be paraphrased as follows: "If authorial intention is the thing that guarantees truth, then we ought to attribute all true meanings to authorial intention, otherwise important truths and the people who find/invent them will get left out. So, for argument's sake, let's say that Moses did, in fact, have all the possible truths in mind at the point of signification (this may sound facetious, but it is not). We know that Moses intended the truth and spoke according to this intention. Thus, when we find a true meaning in the text, it is entirely appropriate to attribute it to Moses, the intender and teller of truth."

From Augustine's perspective, the scientific concern for single authorial intent is problematic because it creates a rift between knowledge and love, treating the former as the essential kernel and the latter as an extraneous husk. The result is an interpretive method that suspends the spiritual experience of the interpreter in the interests of objectivity. The goal of scientific exegesis is to reconcile signifiers with a fixed transcendental signified and for no other purpose than the intellectual satisfaction that such retrieval brings. On a purely theoretical level, Augustine is willing to grant that individual interpretations may be able to arrive at a single intended meaning of a given sequence of words, but he hastens to point out what happens when such a meaning has been determined once and for all. Most obviously, the single-minded exegete ends up propagating his one absolute truth to the exclusion of all others, turning a potential interpretive harmony into a battle for ideological hegemony. But insofar as hermeneutic activity is related to psychology and spirituality, his propagation of one absolute truth also entails the propagation of one absolute self. This is the chief difficulty with scientific exegesis and it goes to the heart of Augustine's criticism of *scientia* generally in the *Confessions*. If *scientia* is allowed to have absolute reign over truth, reality, and meaning, it provides the knowing and/or interpreting self with (the illusion of) thinking-being autonomy. At the moment that the single-minded exegete lays claim to the absolute truth, he erases the crucial distinction between the Highest Being of his study and his own being, presumably achieving the status of a predicating Subject that is capable of totalizing perspectives.

To the scientific exegete, Augustine's hermeneutic would come across as faulty

and unreliable. In particular, his notion of polysemy would appear to completely undermine the stability of textual meaning and along with it the viability of scriptural authority. And yet, what appears as confusion (or perhaps casuistry) from the scientific perspective modulates into fruitful paradox when viewed in a sapiential light. Indeed, when the language of Scripture is inscribed in the heart, it opens up the possibility of contact between self and God, but not because it eradicates ontic difference. Scripture is sapientially heuristic. Instead of enabling the mind to know a Highest Being with scientific breadth and depth, it encourages a hermeneutic that allows for a heart encounter with the living God. Even more, however, it galvanizes an ongoing process of becoming, encouraging the reader/writer to live by the Spirit in confession, prayer, meditation and praise.

### **Spiritual Exegesis: Interpretation of Interpretation**

The relational-transformative orientation of Augustine's hermeneutic is crucial for understanding the allegorical interpretation of Genesis in Book 13. Attending to the last three books of the *Confessions*, O'Donnell suggests an overall progression from God's patriarchal transcendence in Book 11 to his pneumatic immanence in Book 13 as well as a corresponding progression from estrangement to communion between divine Creator and human creature (1992 251). We might add that there seems to be a corresponding shift from the scientific exploration of time in Book 11 which serves to emphasize human separation from God to the sapiential participation in God's Word in Book 13 which serves to highlight human-divine intimacy in the life of the church. In this respect, Augustine's allegory is not an attempt to grasp the eternal reality that had eluded him in

Book 11, thereby enabling the writer/reader to escape the fallen realm of finitude once and for all. Rather, it involves a creaturely participation in conversion, a responsive cooperation in the Creator's redemption of humankind. Building upon Paul's analogy in 2 Cor. 4:6—"For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"—Augustine writes as an active participant in the *ongoing* re-creative work of the Spirit, practicing a hermeneutic that intends to stimulate and deepen the writer/reader's reconciliation with God.<sup>35</sup>

Augustine not only symbolically enacts this kind of re-creational hermeneutic, but he also comments on it throughout. For Augustine, re-creation, like the original creation, partakes of God's goodness and involves a biblical hermeneutic that emerges from Edenic blessing. That Augustine associates language and hermeneutics with a prelapsarian situation may suggest a move on Augustine's part to introduce the conditions for a Christian version of epistemic immediacy. However, in Augustine's conception, the biblical text does not somehow enable the exegete to cross the bar from time to eternity such that "the being of man's becoming [is finally] disclosed" (Grossman 72). Indeed, he seems to suggest the possibility of human-divine immediacy in the future,

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<sup>35</sup> According to Stock, Augustine "sees the person who writes in 397 engaging in a process of self-redefinition rather than setting down a definitive version of the life" (1996 16). What is involved in books 1-9 is an "ethics of interpretation." Augustine's "primary objective was to describe the manner in which his life had changed, not to produce a text. In moving from life to text and back to life, his concern was ethical before it was literary, and it was literary only in combination with ethics" (17). We could say something similar of Book 13, only here the distinction between life and text begins to break down and the Augustine who would live a new life is at the same time the Augustine who would write a new life.

but Scripture does not serve to bridge the gap and provide the conditions for arrival in the present. Like the firmament of the heavens, Scripture serves to obscure as much as it reveals. While the soul has been called out of darkness and is now “all daylight” (13.12 319), “we are [as yet] light with faith only, not with a clear view. For our salvation is founded upon the hope of something. Hope would not be hope at all if its object were in view” (13.13 320). The “not yet” of hope and faith is crucial to Augustine’s view of spiritual exegesis. When we read the Scriptures, we do not do so as though we were scanning the very face of God. Only the angels can see God in this way:

For ever they gaze upon [God’s] face and there, without the aid of syllables inscribed in time, they read . . . [his] will: they choose it to be theirs: they cherish it. They read it without cease and what they read never passes away. For it is God’s own unchanging purpose that they read, choosing to make it their own and cherishing it for themselves. The book they read shall not be closed. For them the scroll is not furled.

(13.15)

Instead of gazing upon God as he is, “we see [him] . . . dimly, through the clouds, for though we are the beloved of [the] Son, *what we shall be hereafter has not been made known as yet*” (13.15 323). In our present situation, “Deep still calls to deep” (13.13 319); we cannot achieve perfect consummation while time endures. We “must be content with the light of the moon and stars,” because if we look upon the face of God before our “sight is fortified,” we “will be left in a night of utter darkness” (13.15 323;18 326). “[W]e shall be like him [when] we shall see him,” says Augustine, “but that time is not

yet.”

At the same time, the biblical text does not simply frustrate human-divine relationship in the present by its failure to bridge a consummate “then” with a partial and imperfect “now.” For Augustine, the language of Scripture and the kind of interpretation that it would evoke involves a kind of fruitfulness that is in keeping with creational goodness. This is why he attends to the words of God’s messengers in the Scriptures and seeks to imitate their way of truth-telling:

The words of your messengers have soared like winged things above the earth beneath the firmament of your Book, for this was the authority given to them and beneath it they were to take wing wherever their journey lay. There is no word, no accent of theirs that does not make itself heard, till their utterance fills every land, till their message reaches the end of the world. And this is because you, O Lord, have blessed their work and multiplied it. (13.20 328)

In this passage, Augustine performs an allegorical reading of the creation of winged creatures on the fifth day, associating the winged creatures with the words of God’s messengers (i.e. the prophets and apostles). Rather than characterizing the abundance of winged words as a sign of postlapsarian confusion and frustration, Augustine associates them with prelapsarian fruitfulness. At first, Augustine’s emphasis on a winged word that emerges from the oblivion of the sea to connect heaven and earth may seem to indicate a desire on Augustine’s part to recoup the immediacy of Eden. But again, Augustine continues to uphold the impossibility of immediacy, even as he associates the language of

God's messengers with the goodness of creation. Indeed, there are "truths that are fixed and defined and are not enlarged further." "These are the lights of wisdom and knowledge," says Augustine. And yet, "the workings of these same truths in the material order are numerous and varied. They multiply and grow, one giving birth to another, and this happens because you, O God, bless their reproduction" (5.20 328). For Augustine, the words of God's messengers do not collapse the boundary between humanity and divinity, time and eternity, finitude and infinity. Nor do they leave "the human race, forever chafing for knowledge in the profound depths of its ignorance, buffeted by the storms of its pride, and never at rest from its surge and swell" (5.20 329). Instead, they multiply and grow in accordance with the original goodness of creation. And they continue to enjoy this quality within a postlapsarian existence. Indeed, they are undoubtedly affected by the Fall; and yet they are not simply the sign of an original immediacy now lost. Rather, in accordance with their original goodness, they now serve a remedial purpose, helping to "cure [the] . . . bitterness and sickness" of the world (5.20 328).

Augustine picks up on the same idea in his discussion of God's command "*to increase and multiply on the earth*" (13.24 334; see Gen. 1:28). On a literal level, "the command to increase and multiply applies to all species which are reproduced from seed." On an allegorical level, this same command refers to the reproductive nature of language and interpretation:

I know that a truth which the mind understands in one way only can be materially expressed by many different means, and I also know that there

are many different ways in which the mind can understand an idea that is outwardly expressed in one way. Take the single concept of the love of God and our neighbour. How many different symbols are used to give it outward expression! How many different languages have words for it and, in each of them, how many different forms of speech there are by which it can be conveyed! . . . On the other hand, consider the verse, 'In the Beginning God made heaven and earth'. Scripture presents this truth to us in one way only, and there is only one way in which the words can be shaped by the tongue. But it may be understood in several different ways without falsification or error, because various interpretations, all of which are true in themselves, may be put upon it. (13.24 335-36)

In 5.20, Augustine had suggested that the words of God's messengers are part of a good creation. Here, he extends his interpretation of interpretation, assigning a positive value to the polysemic nature of Scripture and associating interpretative variety with creational goodness. Again, the association of polysemy and spiritual exegesis with Edenic blessing does not suggest a desire on Augustine's part to recapture an original "metaphysics of presence." The ability to "give expression in many different ways to things which we understand in one way only and to understand in many different ways what we find written obscurely in one way" comes from God's blessing at creation and, when practiced with faith and hope, involves a participation in God's creative purposes (13.24 336-37).

### **Spiritual Exegesis: Creation and Re-creation**

As Augustine enters into his allegorical interpretation, it is clear that his

exegetical praxis has an important connection to his psychology of the heart-soul. At the very outset, he calls out to God and in his presence reconsiders the manner in which he had been called into new life by God:

As I call upon you, do not desert me, for you came to my aid even before I called upon you. In all sorts of ways, over and over again, when I was far from you, you coaxed me to listen to your voice, to turn my back on you no more, and to call upon you for aid when, all the time, you were calling to me yourself. (13.1.311)

It is significant that Augustine begins his allegorical interpretation in this way. The kind of hermeneutic activity that he will now involve himself in extends directly from the way in which he has been encountered by God. Charles Taylor has suggested that “Augustine was the first to make the first-person standpoint fundamental to our search for the truth” (*Sources* 133). This is apparently not true in Book 13 or at least not in any straightforward way. Augustine does not characterize himself as a constituting subject capable of grasping the truth through some sort of intellectual process. As we have seen, Augustine’s conversion and his encounter with Scripture at the point of conversion do not establish the grounds for ascending to God on the same basis that he had attempted to do as a Platonist. Indeed, as he calls out to God in this passage, he is an “I” addressing a “Thou,” but his apostrophe is conditioned by the original, interpellating voice of the one he addresses. Even when Augustine was prompted to “call upon [God] for aid,” it was God who was doing the prompting, coaxing him to “listen to [his] voice.”

As we have seen, re-creation and the hermeneutic activity that goes along with it

have an important grounding in the goodness of creation. Something similar could be said of re-creation as it pertains to the relationship between self and Other. “[B]efore I was,” Augustine says a little farther on in the same section, “you were: I was nothing, that you should give me being. Yet now I am; and this is because out of your goodness you provided for all that you have made me and all from which you have made me” (13.1.311). It seems that Augustine’s conversion involves a process that patterns itself on the way in which he had originally been brought into being by God. There are passages in which Augustine seems to anticipate something like the Cartesian *cogitio*, but this is not one of them. Here, he actually seems to veer sharply from a Cartesian line of thinking. It is not “I think: therefore I am,” but “I am addressed: therefore I am.” In a way Augustine is partial to the subject position—“yet now I am,” he declares— but he also recognizes that his “I” is conditioned by his “me” and this conditioning is not outgrown or transcended once his “I” has been determined as such. Like the heavens and earth, Augustine is unable to “make any claim on [God] by [his] own deserts” (13.2.312; 13.3.313). He is brought into being as a “me” and grows into an “I” on the basis of how he has been called—that is, according to “the abundance of [God’s] . . . goodness” and his self-giving love (13.4.313).

In an important respect, Augustine’s notion of selfhood in this passage has much in common with Jean-Luc Marion’s concept of the *interloqué*. Challenging the tradition of post-Cartesian subjectivity, Marion argues that the self is constituted as a “me” rather than an “I,” as an “*interloqué*” rather than a transcendental subject. “[W]hen the claim interpellates *me*,” says Marion, “the *I/me* that it imparts to me thus designates not any

autonomous and unconditioned transcendental *I*, but rather only the interpellation itself” (Marion 1991). As a result, “nothing can be said of the *interloqué* . . . that would not first be determined by the claim.” The significance is that the self is founded neither as an autonomous constituting subject nor as a broken subject “haunted by the ghost or shade of his ideal vision of himself” (Fineman 1986 298). Instead, “the *interloqué* provides the beginning . . . that abolishes the subject: selfhood is initially wounded by the fact that, before the self can constitute itself the claim has already exiled it outside its ‘mineness.’ The wound that originally tears selfhood obscurely manifests the origin itself—the *interloqué*” (244-45).

It is somewhat odd that Marion would describe the originary overcoming of the transcendental “I” in such violent terms because the denial of autonomy may just as well be a gift as a wound and this is precisely how Augustine characterizes it. Nonetheless, Marion’s observations are illuminating, especially when it comes to the responsive and participative quality of Augustine’s view of selfhood and human-divine relationship. Augustine is an *interloqué* rather than a transcendental subject. Again, that he characterizes himself in these terms at the beginning of his allegorical interpretation is important. Augustine’s allegory of Genesis is a responsive participation in a spiritual re-creation.

As we move into the second section, we come to see that this same principle of calling and response applies to creation generally. For Augustine, there is a significant difference between simply existing in the created order and existing in lively response according to an original calling:

Had the spiritual creation in its incipient state, deserved of you even the fluidity and darkness which was all that it then was? It was like the depths of the ocean and it would have remained in that state, estranged from your likeness, unless that same Word had turned it towards its Creator and made it light by casting his own brightness upon it, not in equal degree with yourself, but allowing it to take form in your likeness. For, just as, to a corporeal being, to be is not the same thing as to be beautiful, in the same way, to a created spirit, to live is not the same thing as to live wisely (13.2 312)

By associating the spiritual creation in its “incipient state” with the “fluidity and darkness” of the “depths of the ocean,” Augustine is not suggesting that it somehow originates in a fallen state. On the contrary, even the “primal, formless state” of creation is sustained in God’s goodness (13.2 312). The significance here is that creation actively responds to God’s Word rather than merely subsists in it. “The good of the spirit,” he says, “is to *cling to you* for ever so that it may not, by turning away from you lose the light which it gained by turning towards you and relapse into that existence which resembles the dark depths of the sea” (312). For Augustine, the problem with “that existence which resembles the dark depths of the sea” is less ontological than ethical. Again, all that God creates is good and yet not all that God creates clings intentionally to the Creator in response to his Word. That which turns away from God towards the dark/depth/sea becomes sinful because it finds its ultimate enjoyment in something other than God.

Of course, this emphasis on clinging and turning to God has a special significance for the human spirit in Augustine's spiritual interpretation. "In our souls," he says, "we too are a spiritual creation":

*Once we were all darkness, because we were turned away from you our Light, and in the remnants if [sic] our darkness we labour on until, in your only-begotten Son, we become your justice and are made as the everlasting hills, high in holiness. For, then, we were deep in our sin, like a fathomless ocean: we were not your justice but ourselves under sentence of your judgements. (13.2. 312-13)*

Here, Augustine not only provides a synopsis of his allegorical interpretation of Genesis, but also comments implicitly on the significance of the allegory. Again, he is not suggesting that humans come into being in a primordial state of evil. Augustine is clear: it is from the "abundance of God's goodness that . . . creation exists" and this is true of both spiritual and corporeal natures (13.1 311). However, it is one thing merely to exist in God's goodness and quite another to become responsive to God's Word and actively cling to the Creator. And so, the distinctions between light and dark, height and depth, mountain and sea serve to highlight two different spheres of intention and action rather than being. Either the heart-soul resists the Word that would draw it to God and lives in a state of idolatrous self-satisfaction or it clings to God at his invitation and learns to enjoy him even as it labors on in "the remnants of . . . darkness." Of course, Augustine is recommending the latter, but it is important to notice that he is doing more than conveying a point of doctrine or proving a theological truth. He is also praying to God

and we discover him in the process of performing precisely what he praying. The effort to draw out a spiritual connection between the original creation and his own re-creation itself involves a lively response to God's invitation to participate in a new kind of reality.

Augustine elaborates this kind of re-creative activity in sections three and four, focusing specifically on the way that the heart-soul "in its state of fluidity and darkness" rises up "to the place where Spirit moved over the waters" (3.7 314). While "our passions, our loves, the unclean leanings of our own spirits . . . drag us downward in our love for the world," the Spirit "pours out [love] in our hearts" and draws us upward "so that we may lift our hearts to [God]" (13.7 315). "Love," says Augustine, "is the weight by which I act":

It is in your Gift that we find our rest. It is in [the Spirit] that we enjoy you. The place where we find rest is the rightful one for us. To it we are raised by love. To it your Spirit lifts us up, lowly creatures as we are, from the *gate of death*. It is in goodness of will that we find our peace. . . . To whatever place I go, I am drawn to it by love. By your Gift, the Holy Ghost, we are set aflame and borne aloft, and the fire within us carries us upward. *Our hearts are set on an upward journey*, as we sing the *song of ascents*. It is your fire, your good fire, that sets us aflame and carries us upward to the peace of the heavenly Jerusalem; it was *a welcome sound when I heard them saying, We will go into the Lord's house*. (13.9 317)

Here, Augustine suggests further implications for his understanding of self as it pertains to the re-creative activity of the Spirit. Augustine is not only *interloqué*, the one who is

addressed, but also *bien-amie*, the one who is loved. Strangely, work and rest, action and passion, freedom and grace go together in this configuration. Augustine acts consciously and intentionally and does so in a particularly lively way and yet the ground of his action exists from without rather than within. Likewise, he determines to go places, setting his heart on an upward journey, but he is drawn rather than self-directed, and composes songs on the journey rather than syllogisms. The grammatical and rhetorical arts are crucial to such an existence. Augustine's poetic-hermeneutic rendering in this passage is not short hand for a dialectical process that would collapse the boundaries between *ontos* and *theos* through a rationally-oriented *logos*. Augustine is practicing a kind of theology to be sure, but he is doing so responsively, and his response is made in the same poetic-rhetorical terms in which he has been addressed. Indeed, he discovers himself most truly in the claim of the Other, but he experiences this claim at a creaturely level and it comes not through a violent act of exclusion or assimilation, but as a calling to participate in a new life already begun.

It is difficult to deny a Platonic resonance in Augustine's spiritual exegesis of Genesis. That is, Augustine's juxtapositions between light and dark, height and depth, mountain and sea, spirit and flesh seem to recall Plato's contrast between a dark cavernous underworld of shadow and illusion and an upper world of light where the Object of contemplation can be gazed upon as it is in itself. However, the precise nature of the juxtaposition and the meaning attached to it is more Pauline than Platonic. Instead of working towards the light/height/spirit while striving finally to exclude or eliminate the dark/depth/flesh, Augustine draws these images together and the complex realities

they signify to form a dynamic paradox. The significance of his strategy is that it stimulates a transformation of self while resisting epistemic closure. Indeed, there is an overall upward thrust to the interpretation. The Word illuminates the dark deeps and causes them to reflect the brilliance of their Creator and the Spirit hovers over the waters and draws them upwards into the Fountain of Life. In each case, the heart-soul is the center of attention. Like the watery depths, it is encompassed by the Spirit and set ablaze by the Word, ascending ever increasingly to the divine presence. The important thing is that Augustine continually circles back to fold in the order of dark/depth/flesh, leaving himself and his reader to contend with what Paul calls the “old man” even in the process of ascent.

This dynamic is apparent throughout Augustine’s allegorical interpretation. While there is a steady movement upwards to the last day of creation and divine rest, there is also a return to the dark, fleshly deeps on each day of creation along with new forays into the illumined, spiritual heights. For instance, in his reading of the first day of creation when God formed the heavens and earth and the light and darkness, Augustine shifts from the heart-soul’s carnal earth/darkness to its spiritual heaven/light:

We were veiled in the darkness of ignorance. For *you have chastened man to punish his sins and the wisdom of your decrees is deep as the abyss*. But because your Spirit moved over the waters, your mercy did not abandon us in our misery. You said: *Let there be light. Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. You told us to repent. You commanded light to be made. In our sad mood we thought of you; in the land of Jordan we

remembered you, O Lord. We remembered you in Christ, in the mountain high as yourself, who humbled himself for us. We realized how hateful our darkness was. We turned to you, and light was made. And so it is that *once we were all darkness, but now, in the Lord, we are all daylight.*

(13.12.319)

On the second day, he begins with the dark and earth-bound uncertainties of human knowledge, but then ascends to where God's Book can be read in the firmament of the heavens (13.14-15 320-22). On the third day, he moves from the "bitter sea of humanity" to the dry land where God's faithful reside and on the fourth transfers the faithful to the heavenly firmament where they become guiding stars for the rest of humanity, shining out with emblematic significance (13.17-18 324-6). On the fifth day he shifts from the sea with its swarm of "moving things" to the intermediary space between sea and firmament where the birds take flight and become messengers who arbitrate between the Book of the firmament and the turbulent waters of humanity below (13.20 328-9). On the sixth day, he returns to the exchange between incredulous-sea and believing-land, but this time he moves upward, distinguishing between the "living soul" who has begun to believe and the servant of God who will function as a "pattern to the faithful by . . . rousing them to imitation" (13.21 329-30). On this same day, Augustine identifies the messenger of God as a vehicle of conception and propagation who causes God's word to proliferate throughout the world.

Augustine's interpretation is an inventive one to be sure, but its inventiveness is configured not as the production of a transcendental subject, but rather as the creaturely

participation of an *interloqué*. Augustine is engaged in a process of re-creation and his allegorical reading of Genesis is part of this process. Rather than attempting to transform his reader through an interpretation that seeks either to transcend the text, shifting from a mediated word to the immediacy of contemplative silence (with Socrates) or regulate it, relocating the words of Scripture to some sort of divine transcendental signified in a one-for-one correspondence (with Cratylus), Augustine foregrounds the rich poetic and polysemous nature of Scripture and engages with the text as a creaturely participant in God's re-creative purposes. Augustine's reading of Genesis suggests that interpretation, specifically allegorical interpretation, is at least part of the goodness of creation and is amenable to the new creation initiated by Christ. And so, Augustine lifts his heart-soul to God "for fear that it may play [him] false" and asks that God would "[b]anish its darkness" so that he can interpret wisely (13.6.315).

By reading Augustine in this way, I am not meaning to overwrite the Platonic elements of his work. For Philip Cary and others distinguished scholars, Augustine was a "Christian Platonist" who sought to unite "the God of Revelation with a metaphysical understanding of the categories of Being" so as to achieve an "onto-theological alliance" (Cary ix; Kearney 116; see also Menn 73-195). However, what shall we make of Augustine's association of language and hermeneutics with creational goodness and his strong resistance to human-divine immediacy? Indeed, it is possible to view the transformative movement in Augustine's spiritual interpretation from darkness to light, depth to height, flesh to spirit according to a Platonic dialectic, thinking of it as an effort to raise the reader's consciousness above the level of language to encounter the presence

of God in its resplendent fullness. It seems to me, however, that Augustine the poet, hermeneut, and homiletician writes in order to equip those who are greeted by the Other in the existential depths according to an unexpected language event. Throughout his interpretation, Augustine desires to mitigate his fallen condition rather than overcome his creatureliness. And so he forms a creaturely response to a God who has communicated in creaturely ways, participating morally, ethically, spiritually in a truth that has descended in the flesh and draws him upward. His participation is as homiletical as it is exegetical and poetic. “I wish to act in truth,” says Augustine, “making my confession both in my heart before you [O, Lord] and in this book before the many who will read it” (10.1 207). Why does he lay his “lengthy record” before God if God is “outside time in eternity”? Augustine himself provides the answer: “O Lord . . . by setting [it] down, I fire my own heart and the hearts of my readers with love of you. . . . I have said before, and I shall say again, that I write this book for love of your love” (11.1 253).

In the next chapter, I will consider how this other Augustine influenced Donne in the development of his own poetic theology. Scholars have long recognized Augustine’s influence on the writing of Donne, but rarely has this influence been understood in terms of a poetic theological orientation. Undoubtedly, Donne was a keen philosophical thinker and was quite capable of engaging in doctrinal debate, but he refused the strategies of polemicist and dialectician alike. While he shows high regard for philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and draws on a variety of scholastic theologians, making use of their writings throughout his religious prose, he also stands in the “tradition of Christian resistance to Greek philosophy,” especially in his repudiation of “rational hegemony,

rational control" (Taylor *Sources* 116). Donne, like Augustine and other Christian thinkers, is no enemy of reason, but neither does he view reason as the sole guarantor of truth. In fact, he suggests in a variety of places that "reason by itself could just as well be the servant of the devil" and easily leads to "idolatry" if left unchecked (116). Donne's involvement in this "tradition of Christian resistance" or what John Caputo calls the "prophetic counter-tradition" is what sets him apart not only from the schoolmen, but also Roman and Reformed polemicists. Instead of seeking to achieve ontic stability through theo-logic means, Donne, following "another Augustine," finds his ontic center in the "me" of the heart-soul and participates responsively in an ongoing process of conversion to God, practicing theology on the dynamic yet unpredictable boundary between reading and writing, interpretation and invention, meditation and prayer.

## CHAPTER 2

### ***Fili, da mihi Cor: The Eloquence of Scripture and the Practice of True Religion in John Donne's Devotions***

God is best found, when we seeke him, and observe him in his operation upon us.

--John Donne<sup>1</sup>

Men live Tropes and Figures as well as speak them.

--Samuel Shaw<sup>2</sup>

John Donne's religious works have enjoyed much critical attention since the seventeenth century and have yielded a variety of perspectives. However, as Jeffrey Johnson points out, Donne has rarely been treated as a "theologian in his own right" (Johnson ix). Prose works like *Essays in Divinity*, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, and the *Sermons* "have been discussed . . . for the purpose of highlighting their devotional nature" (ix), but they have typically not been understood as significant contributions to the discipline of theology. In Johnson's view, the main reason for this is that Donne scholars have tended to think of theology as a "speculative" discipline that is marked by "logical reasoning" and manifests itself in a "fully articulated polemic system" (ix). Donne's writing is devotional rather than theological because it is literary, expressive and occasional rather than logical, speculative and systematic. I would suggest that the longstanding distinction between devotional and theological discourse in Donne

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<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson. Vol. 5. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1962): 83-84.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Shaw, *Words Made Visible or Grammar and Rhetorick Accommodated to the Lives and Manners of Men* (1679; Menston, England: The Scholar Press, 1972): 34.

scholarship is misleading. In what follows, I attempt not only to characterize Donne as an important “theologian in his own right,” but also to draw out the alternative nature of his work in divinity, suggesting, contrary to recent scholarship, that Donne’s religious writing stands in an ancient tradition of theology that privileges the literary rather than logical arts.

Before exploring Donne’s poetic approach to theology, it will be helpful to clarify the kind of metaphysical thinking that has dominated Donne scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century. Curiously, scholars have tended to recapitulate the religious debates of the seventeenth century in their criticism by adopting the “systematizing mentality” of Protestant and Catholic theologians alike (Bouwsma 1990 120). This early modern “systematizing mentality” is exemplified by Sir Tobie Matthew’s 1620 English translation of Augustine’s *Confessions* and the polemical responses it evoked in William Crompton’s *Saint Austin’s Religion* and Matthew Sutcliffe’s *The Unmasking of a Masse-monger*. In his “Preface to the Pious and Courteous Reader,”

Matthew criticizes the Protestants for mistranslating works by Augustine . . . in a way that favored the Protestant churches, . . . claiming that “the Church of [Augustine’s] time, were [sic] fully agreeable to that of the Catholik *Roman Church* at this day; as that of our Adversaryes is wholly different.” (Papazian 2003 72)

Crompton and Sutcliffe responded by attacking Matthew’s “popish translation” and setting out a defense of the Reformed distinctives of “grace over works” and “fallen man’s inability to choose the good without God’s grace” (Papazian 2003 73-74). Clearly,

what mattered most to theologians like Matthew, Crompton and Sutcliffe in translating or interpreting a text like Augustine's *Confessions* is reinforcing one's religious affiliation and defending against opposing doctrinal views. This seems to be particularly true of Sutcliffe who was responsible for founding "a polemical college at Chelsea" where "learned divines [could] study and write in maintenance of all controversies against papists" (Papazian 2003 85).

Strangely, scholars in the twentieth century have proceeded with similar concerns in their reading of the *Essays*, *Devotions* and *Sermons*, seeking to identify Donne's true "sectarian allegiance" by lining up his religious works with Roman or Reformed orthodoxy (Johnson x).<sup>3</sup> And interestingly, Augustine has continued to play an important role in distinguishing between Protestant and Catholic perspectives. For instance, in *Fulfilling the Circle* (1984), Terry Sherwood takes a Catholic-scholastic view of Donne's religious epistemology, disparaging the tendency among certain "modern critics"—namely Louis Brevold, Herschel Baker and Hiram Hayden—to interpret "Donne's religious intensity" according to "an Augustinian tradition of spirituality" that is based on "anti-Thomistic Renaissance skepticism and fideism" (35). In Sherwood's view, these critics mistakenly "accepted a distorted Reformation emphasis upon the non-rational in Augustine" and, as such, overlooked Donne's "pointed rejection of rational skepticism"

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<sup>3</sup> Papazian helps to outline the contours of this critical approach. For perspectives that view Donne as "a crypto-Catholic for whom the Jesuit influences of his early life remained forever present," Papazian recommends essays by Dennis Flynn, Anthony Raspa, Robert Young, Thomas Docherty, John Carey, and Thomas Hester (604, 617). By contrast, Protestant perspectives that treat Donne as a "Calvinian with sympathies to sister Reformed churches on the Continent" can be found in essays by E. Randolph Daniel, Barbara Lewalski, and Paul R. Sellin (604, 617).

and his “defence of reason in the sermons” (22). In opposition to this line of criticism, Sherwood calls attention to “reason’s primary role” in Donne’s writing which he believes is “congenial to both Augustine and Aquinas” and argues that Donne’s religious epistemology extends from the late medieval scholastic tradition.

The polemical-sectarian orientation of Sherwood’s Catholic-scholastic reading is regrettable given Donne’s own “desire to rise above the divisive wrangling that characterized the Church of his day” (Johnson x). However, the main difficulty with his approach, as Johnson might put it, is that it “suffers the risk of theological misinterpretation” (x). Sherwood’s reading is fruitful in many respects and helps to clarify an important influence on Donne’s religious writing that often goes unnoticed. And yet, it also creates confusion around what it helps to draw out most clearly. Sherwood’s Catholic-scholastic reading is problematic not because of his emphasis on reason *per se* or even his attempt to associate Donne with certain scholastic theologians. It is true that Donne argues in many passages for the importance of the logical arts, going so far as to suggest in one sermon that “*Religion is reason and Logique*” (*Sermons* 5.104). The difficulty is that Sherwood excludes too much for the sake of coherence, leaving the reader to center on one aspect of Donne’s theology as though it were the whole. Those like Brevold, Baker and Hayden who supposedly argue for an “anti-Thomistic Renaissance skepticism and fideism” in Donne may not have the key to his religious epistemology, but neither does Sherwood with his emphasis upon “reason’s dominant powers” (3). Donne could be as skeptical of the capacity of reason as he could be affirming. For instance, in a funeral sermon preached on John 11:21, Donne argues

that all knowledge—whether natural or spiritual—is “imperfect”:

What one thing do we know perfectly? Whether wee consider Arts, or Sciences, the servant knows but according to the proportion of his Masters knowledge in that Art, and the Scholar knows but according to the proportion of his Masters knowledge in that Science; Young men mend not their sight by using old mens Spectacles; and yet we look upon Nature, but with *Aristotles* Spectacles, and upon the body of man, but with *Galens*, and upon the frame of the world, but with *Ptolomies* Spectacles. Almost all knowledge is rather like a child that is embalmed to make Mummy, than that it is nursed to make Man; rather conserved in the stature of the first age, than growne to be greater; And if there be any addition to knowledge, it is rather a new knowledge, than a greater knowledge; rather a singularity in a desire of proposing something that was not knowne at all before, than an emproving, an advancing, a multiplying of former inceptions; and by that meanes, no knowledge comes to be perfect.

(*Sermons* 7.260)

Donne’s view of Christian knowledge, like Augustine’s, is not only complex, but also seemingly contradictory and, as a result, fails to line up well with the emerging theological systems of the day. In one respect, Donne seems to favor a Catholic-scholastic view, maintaining the importance of reason and the dialectical arts in theological matters. At the same time, however, he calls attention to the fiduciary ground of human understanding and the impossibility of achieving epistemic closure. Elsewhere,

he cautions against “a naturall Logique in man . . . that strays into uncharitableness” and argues instead for an epistemology grounded in love rather than logic, a form of knowledge intended for moral and spiritual edification rather than intellectual satisfaction (*Sermons* 8.314). The problem with Sherwood’s Catholic-scholastic reading is not that it fails to grasp the correct ideological orientation of Donne’s religious writing, but rather that it seeks for such a correspondence in the first place, suggesting the possibility of defining Donne’s theo-logic in a methodic and systematic way.

The same difficulty arises with readings of Donne that draw on a Protestant-fideistic understanding of Augustine. Mary Papazian’s recent work on Donne’s soteriology provides an instructive example from this perspective. Following William Halewood, Papazian argues that Donne “turns to Augustine and his *Confessions* in order to reassert for his parishioners Augustine’s predestinarian theology—a theology based on original sin and man’s dependence on divine grace” (2003 78). As Papazian observes, one of the distinctive features of this “predestinarian theology” is its opposition to a Roman Catholic understanding of salvation. “[W]e must not forget,” she says, “that Protestantism’s embrace of a conception of man as completely dependent on God’s mercy for salvation . . . defines a fundamental divide between Roman Catholicism and all forms of Protestantism” (79). From Papazian’s perspective, Donne, following Augustine, focuses on the doctrines of “original sin, election, perseverance, and grace” in order to stress “man’s sinful nature and absolute dependence on God’s grace” (67). As such, he stands in direct opposition to the Roman Catholic understanding of salvation and instead sides with “his fellow divines,” believing that the “Church of England is in the

Augustinian tradition, with Luther and Calvin as intermediary steps" (70, 72).

As in the case of Sherwood's approach, Papazian's reading is problematic not because it gets Donne entirely wrong, but because it misconstrues the overall significance of what it gets right. It is true, as Johnson observes, that Donne is "extremely careful in his discussions of grace to specify . . . that the initiative for and the bestowing of grace belong to God alone" (124). However, he "also expresses his contention that the grace of God can be resisted." Moreover, he suggests an important role for human works in the salvific process. While "God hath not left me to my selfe" and "hath come to my succour", writes Donne, "[He] hath not left out my selfe; He hath been my Helpe, but he hath left some thing for me to doe with him, and by his helpe" for "Helpe alwayes presumes an endeavor and co-operation in him that is helped" (*Sermons* 7.63).

Elsewhere, Donne even seems to border on a semi-Pelagian position, suggesting the importance of human responsibility in the salvific process. Exhorting his parishioners to a more vibrant participation in the Christian life, he declares, "Thou shalt be an Agent in thine own salvation" (*Sermons* 9.356).

Johnson quotes a lengthy passage from Donne's Whitsunday sermon on John 16:8-11 to highlight the communal and participative emphases of Donne's soteriology. It is worth citing here as well:

If it were possible to beleeve aright, and yet live ill, my faith should doe me no good. The best faith is not worth Heaven; The value of it grows *Ex pacto*, That God hath made the Covenant, that Contract, *Crede & vives*, onely beleeve and thou shalt be safe. Faith is but one of those things,

which in severall senses are said to justifie us. It is truly said of God, *Deus solus justificat*, God only justifies us; *Efficientur*, nothing can effect it, nothing can worke towards it, but onely the meere goodnesse of God. And it is truly said of Christ, *Christus solus justificat*, Christ onely justifies us; *Materialiter*, nothing enters into the substance and body of the ransome for our sins, but the obedience of Christ. It is also truly said, *Sola fides justificat*, Onely faith justifies us; *Instrumentaliter*, nothing apprehends, nothing applies the merit of Christ to thee, but thy faith. And lastly it is truly said, *Sola opera justificant*, Onely our works justifie us; *Declaratorie*, Only thy good life can assure thy conscience, and the World, that thou art justified. As the efficient justification, the gracious purpose of God had done us no good, without the materiall satisfaction, the death of Christ had followed; And as that materiall satisfaction, the death of Christ would do me no good, without the instrumentall justification, the apprehension by faith; so neither would this profit without the declaratory justification, by which all is pleaded and established. God enters not into our instrumental justification, that is onely Christs; Christ enters not into our instrumental justification, that is onely faiths; Faith enters not into our declaratory justification, (for faith is secret) and declaration belongs to workes. Neither of these can be said to justifie us alone, so, as that we may take the chaine in pieces, and thinke to be justified by any one link thereof; by God without Christ, by Christ

without faith, or by faith without works; And yet every one of these justifies us alone, so, as that none of the rest enter into that way and that meanes, by which any of these are said to justifie us. (Sermons 7.228; Johnson 130)

The difficulty of a passage like this one for the sectarian-minded reader is that it refuses to play by the standard rules of theological polemics in the seventeenth century. Somehow Donne feels at liberty to maintain a doctrine of “justification by God alone, Christ alone, faith alone and works alone” while allowing the seeming discrepancy of such a claim to stand (Johnson 131). Donne’s paradoxical approach to salvific matters is remarkable, especially if we are to consider it within the polemically-charged religious and political context of the seventeenth century. Instead of treating Reformed proponents of God’s sovereignty and divine grace and Roman proponents of free will and human works as opposing factions in a religious debate and then proceeding to arbitrate between them in a judicial manner, Donne takes a more embracing perspective, allowing each community of interpreters to bear witness to an important truth despite the apparent inconsistency. And so, it is true, as Papazian argues, that Donne draws on the Protestant doctrines of election and justification, distinguishing sharply between Creator and creature and stressing the impossibility of salvation without divine intervention. And yet, at the same time, he makes room for a cooperative role in human-divine relationship and for this reason seems closely allied with certain Catholic theologians who argue for an active human role in the salvific process.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson’s discussion of prevenient and subsequent grace in the sermons is

It is difficult to know how to proceed when faced with Donne's paradoxes. What does it mean for a writer to affirm in one context that "*Religion is reason and Logique*" while asserting in another that "all knowledge is . . . a child that is embalmed to make Mummy" (*Sermons* 5.104; 7.260)? And what does it mean for him to uphold in one passage the priority of God's sovereignty in salvation, while emphasizing elsewhere the need for human effort in the salvific process, claiming that "*God* requires something, some assistance, some concurrence, some cooperation" (*Sermons* 5.362; 4.186)? Perhaps ostensible discrepancies of this nature can be reconciled, although it is difficult to imagine that such a resolution could be achieved by making recourse to official Catholic-scholastic teaching or the emerging systems of Protestant theology in the seventeenth century. Whatever the case, "simply arguing away or trivializing, or simply ignoring the evidence against any unified interpretation" will not do (Baumlin 1991 47).<sup>5</sup> Such a categorical approach not only fails to capture the complexity of Donne's theology, but also creates the impression that the production of Donne's religious writing was driven mainly by ideological concerns and that its chief purpose was to convey the author's preferred intellectual orientation and/or doctrinal teachings.

With Sherwood and Papiazan, I would agree that Augustine is crucial for understanding Donne's religious works, but if we are to treat Donne "seriously as a religious thinker" and view him as "a theologian in his own right" (Johnson ix), the

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particularly helpful for capturing the paradoxical nature of Donne's soteriology. See Johnson (1999) 119-148.

<sup>5</sup> According to Baumlin, it is problematic "to throw a conceptual blanket over the whole of Donne's writings. . . . For when one banishes or attempts too neat a resolution of contradiction . . . one reduces and thereby distorts an ideologically complex set of texts to a singular worldview—to a singular rhetoric" (47).

Augustine of Roman or Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth-century will be less than helpful. There is “another Augustine” who is more pertinent to the study of Donne’s theology, an Augustine who helps to draw out “another Donne” who had little use for ideological posturing within the faith community and preferred to practice divinity as a poet, orator, and hermeneut rather than sectarian polemicist.

### **Donne and “Another Augustine”**

Donne’s commentary on the *Confessions* provides important clues to his theological vision. Many of the passages that were considered in the first chapter in connection with Augustine’s poetic theology show up repeatedly in Donne’s writing and typically for the purpose of developing a distinctly grammatical-rhetorical approach to theology. For instance, Donne consults Augustine’s meditation on authorial intention, polysemy, and dialogue with God in order to convey the importance of listening to God’s voice in and through the words of Scripture rather than fixating on single authorial intention:

*S. Augustine* puts himself earnestly upon the contemplation of the Creation, as Moses hath delivered it; he findes it hard to conceive, and he sayes, *Si esset ante me Moses*, If *Moses* who writ this were here, *Tenerem eum, & per te obsecrarum*, I would hold him fast, and beg of him, for thy sake, O my God, that he would declare this work of Creation more plainly unto me. But then, sayes that blessed Father, *Si Hebraea voce loqueretur*, If *Moses* should speake Hebrew to mee, mine eares might heare the sound, but my minde would not heare the voice; I might hear him, but I should

not heare what he said. (*Sermons* 6.10.218)<sup>6</sup>

Donne also draws from Augustine's allegorical interpretation of Genesis in a sermon preached at St. Paul's on Whitsunday in 1629 (*Sermons* 9.92-108). Throughout this sermon, Donne cites various passages from Books 11-13 of the *Confessions* in order to clarify for his own audience the difference between literal and spiritual interpretations, the role of charity in reconciling interpretive differences, the goal of edification in the interpretive process, the necessity of love and peace for acquiring knowledge of God, the interrelationship between the books of nature and Scripture, and the distinction between rational comprehension or "natural" understanding and interpersonal, fiduciary knowledge.

Donne not only follows this other Augustine by the letter, quoting many passages directly and drawing out a fitting application for his readers/listeners, but he also joins him in spirit, making Augustine's method his own where he does not cite his work explicitly. For instance, in a sermon preached on Easter day in 1623, Donne provides a strong critique of "singular . . . schismatical opinions" even as he seeks to cultivate an ancient form of poetic theology that grows and multiplies under the guidance of the Spirit:

The Holy Ghost is a Dove, and the Dove couples, paires, is not alone;  
 Take heed of singular, of schismatical opinions; and what is more  
 singular, more schismaticall, then when all Religion is confined in one  
 man's breast? The Dove is *animale sociale*, a sociable creature, and not

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<sup>6</sup> See also *Essays* 15-16 where Donne quotes the same passage in order to distinguish between knowledge by faith and knowledge by reason alone.

singular; and the Holy Ghost is that; and Christ is a Sheep, *animal gregale*, they flock together: Embrace thou those truths, which the whole flock of Christ Jesus, the whole Christian Church, hath from the beginning acknowledged to be truths, and truths necessary to salvation; for, for other Traditionall, and Conditionall, and Occasionall, and Collateral, and Circumstantiall points, for Almanack Divinity, that changes with the season, with the time, and Meridionall Divinity calculated to the height of such a place, and Lunary Divinity, that ebbes and flowes, and State Divinity, that obeyes affections of persons, *Domus Israel*, the true Church of God, had need of a continuall succession of light, a continuall assistance of the Spirit of God, and of her own industry, to know those things that belong to her peace. (*Sermons* 4.349)

Donne lets his reader know much about his theological orientation in this passage. True divinity is not formed around “singular . . . schismaticall opinions” and the high-minded scholars who propound them. Rather, singularity and schism are the fruit of rational argumentation and this is a problem because, as Donne suggests elsewhere, “Arguing is heretiques game” (*Metempsychosis* l. 118).<sup>7</sup> The creational imagery of this passage is significant and offers an important corrective to the tendency of both scholastic theology and the “new Philosophy” to analyze and dissect. The true theologian participates responsively in God’s re-creational purposes, encouraging a form of life and learning patterned on the fruitfulness of marital fidelity and social kinship rather than the illusory

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<sup>7</sup> All references to Donne's poetry will be to John Shawcross' edition (1968) and will be referenced parenthetically in the text according to line number.

stability of scientific thinking and individual autonomy. Moreover, true religion is found in the “whole Christian church” rather than “one man’s breast.” The theologian is not a self-generating individualist. On the contrary, he allows himself to be defined by the Scriptures and traditional teachings of the church and participates responsively in a kind of re-creational coupling, pairing and flocking together.

There is an important paradox at work here and it is quite easy to miss. At first a theology that centers on “those truths, which . . . the whole Christian Church, hath from the beginning acknowledged to be truths” would seem unduly restrictive. However, Donne associates this kind of divinity with spiritual fruitfulness and a dynamic community of faith. Embracing those truths that have been acknowledged from the beginning does not bring an end to theological study around a body of doctrine grasped once and for all. On the contrary, it is just the beginning of a life of learning and growth. Given that theology is rooted in an interpretive community and proceeds within the bounds of tradition, the theologian is first and foremost a hermeneut rather than a dialectician and seeks to make contemporary sense of ancient truths for the purpose of moral-spiritual growth rather than epistemic satisfaction. By contrast, a divinity that is “singular” and “schismaticall” hunts down new and unknown truths. The goal of such an approach is a more thoroughgoing consistency and unwavering constancy, principles that would seem to afford a robust theo-logic. However, the unexpected result is a form of divinity that “changes with the season,” following the “ebb and flow” of time and place and “obey[ing] the affections of persons.”

Donne continues this line of thinking in *Essays in Divinity* where he laments the

“disputations, and misapprehensions” of Protestants and Catholics alike, regretting the passing of an earlier age when “all had one appetite, and one food, one nostril and one perfume” and looking forward in hope to a time when such a “*savour of life unto life*” might allure and draw those to us, whom our dissensions, more then their own stubbornness with-hold from us” (*Essays* 52). For Donne, the division between Protestants and Catholics is the result of an overly ideological habit of mind. The difficulty is that both sides are unable to appreciate the polysemic nature of Scripture—specifically the rich variety of “Names” scattered throughout—and fail to recognize the importance of interpreting the text in a manner that maximizes the meaning rather than narrows it to one single point. That Scripture bears witness to divine truth does not mean that all should be united in one form. On the contrary, according to “the variety of Names in the Bible it selfe” (49), God has “admit[ed] of variety” in his church, a plurality that allows the church to “branch out East and West” without suffering a radical schism since each part draws “her vegetation from one and the same ground, Christ Jesus” (48, 50). It is true that Christ’s “dearly beloved Spouse, and Sister, and daughter, the Church . . . in her latter Age [has] suffer[ed] many convulsions, distractions, rents, schisms, and wounds,” but not because of its inherent diversity (48-49). The problem is the “severe and unrectified Zeal of many” who quest after uniformity and “impose necessity upon indifferent things, . . . averring that every degree, and minute and scruple of all circumstances which may be admitted in either belief or practice, is certainly, constantly, expressly, and obligatorily exhibited in the Scriptures” (49).

Of course, Donne is not so ecumenically minded as to affirm all forms of

doctrine and practice uncritically. He contests the “specious super-edifications” of the “Church of Rome,” calling their additions “dangerous,” “scandalous,” “slippery” and “declinable into Idolatry” (51). And yet, since the Roman Church keeps its “right foot fast upon the Rock Christ,” Donne refuses to “pronounce that she is not our Sister” (50). “[W]e shall best conserve the integrity of our own body,” he says, “if we laboriously build upon her, and not tempestuously and ruinously demolish and annul her . . . cherish and foment her vitall and wholesome parts, then either cut, or suffer them to rot or moulder off” (50). Moreover, while he believes that the “form of Gods worship, established in the Church of England [is] more convenient, and advantageous then of any other Kingdome,” he also laments how the English Church had become “utterly despoil’d of Ceremonies” and this deficiency seems to be as serious as the Roman Church’s straying into “infinite expansions and Subdivisions” (51). What Donne desires, ultimately, is a reunification between all parts of “the whole catholick Church” that have not “destroyed the foundation and possibility of salvation in Christ Jesus” (51-52). It is certainly not apparent in his own day and it may not be attainable as an historical actuality in the near future but, for Donne, it is nonetheless true that the “Church, Roman and Reformed, and all other distinctions of place, Discipline, or Person, [are] but one Church, journeying to one Hierusalem, and directed by one guide, Christ Jesus” (51).

### **Donne as a Poetic Theologian**

Johnson contends that Donne is a theologian in his own right and my intention is to join him in this claim, but the nature of Donne’s contribution is important to clarify. It seems to me that the poetic and irenic orientation of Donne’s writing would suggest that

his theological work along with his appreciation for Augustine is best understood in terms of the revival of the *studia humanitatis* in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, rather than the official teachings of Catholic or Protestant theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Like Erasmus and other early humanists, Donne looks to Augustine and other church fathers not so much to align himself with contemporary sectarian parties or to defend contemporary doctrines by proof-texting works like the *Confessions* as to appreciate and imitate a literary mode of theological learning and living. There is little evidence to suggest that Donne was a close-reader of humanist writers like Erasmus, but it is clear that his *theological praxis* was profoundly affected by the humanist reforms that took hold in England in the sixteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Even where he quotes from scholastic theologians, Donne frames his theology according to the literary approach of the patristic *antiqui* rather than the dialectical outlook of the scholastic *moderni*. Inasmuch as his religious poetry and prose is influenced by official doctrines that were used by dogmatists in religious debate, Donne does not himself practice a dialectical-polemical theology; nor does he draw us into his writing and engage us there only to point us to a more sanctioned theological source for its meaning. Donne had an ear for a variety of contemporary religious thinkers, both Roman and Reformed, and he attended to biblical and patristic texts in ways that rarely matched the ideological concerns of religious sectarians. For Donne, theology was not only about gaining a better understanding of God, but also participating responsively in human-divine relationship.

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Sloan makes a similar claim in *Donne, Milton and the End of Humanist Rhetoric* (1985), characterizing Donne as a humanist rhetorician rather than a late scholastic dialectician (xi).

And so, he involves both himself and his reader in a fruitful process of discovery that is at once interpretive and inventive, a process that begins in an attentive reading of the Scriptures and theologians of antiquity and ends in the transformation of hearts and minds.

The literary-critical work of T. S. Eliot is helpful for further clarifying Donne's poetic approach to theology as well as his resistance to metaphysical god and man. During the early twentieth century, Eliot returned time and again to Donne's poetry, seeking to explain its significance for the philosophical tradition generally as well as its relevance for life in the modern age. In Eliot's view, Donne made for an interesting study not because of his conformity to existing categories of thinking, but because of his power of anticipation and revision in matters pertaining to knowledge and selfhood. According to Eliot, Donne had not only managed to anticipate the Cartesian revolution in important ways, shifting from the "ontologism" of the scholastic philosophers to the "psychologism" of the moderns, but he did so in a way that prevented him from falling victim to the "dissociation of sensibility" brought on by Cartesian rationality and "the pseudo-science of epistemology" (Eliot 1993 81-83). Allowing his mind freely to turn upon itself in the complex processes of perception, Donne refused the retreat inward as Descartes had done, severing head from heart, soul from body; instead, he sought to enact "a direct sensuous apprehension of thought" in his poetry, "a recreation of thought into feeling" (Eliot 1975 63). If Donne's poetry was "metaphysical," it was so in a psychological rather than scholastic sense<sup>9</sup>; it functioned "both to fix and make more

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<sup>9</sup> Some of Donne's earliest critics disparaged his poetry for its apparent

conscious and precise emotions and feelings in which most people participate in their own experience, and to draw within the orbit of feeling and sense what had existed only in thought” (Eliot 1993 50-51).

Of course, Eliot’s “psychologism” and “dissociation of sensibility” are no longer fashionable and have long since disappeared from our critical vocabulary, and yet the concepts themselves continue to be relevant for considering the uniqueness of Donne’s approach to issues of knowledge and selfhood. For instance, following Eliot, we might wonder further what enabled Donne to convey a sense of psychological unity, marrying head and heart, thought and emotion, while at the same time resisting the drift towards either ontological stasis or epistemological mastery. How was it that he could allow the mind such a generous measure of self-reflexivity even while resisting the “new Philosophy” which encouraged each man to forget “Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne” and become a self-sufficient “Phoenix,” resting in the conviction that “there can bee / None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee” (*Anatomy of the World* ll. 205, 215-18)?

It seems that in matters pertaining to knowledge and selfhood—the constitutive themes of modernity—Donne was neither a strict conformist nor a defiant revolutionary, but rather a tradition-sensitive improviser. Instead of deducing from first principles established either by authority or reason, he proceeded according to the rhetorical

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scholasticism. For instance, Dryden accused Donne of “affecting the metaphysics” with his “nice speculations of philosophy” and Drummond for attempting “to abstract [poetry] to Metaphysical ideas and Scholastical quiddities.” For these critics, Donne was “a kind of poetic Schoolman, instilling into verse the same intellectualism and slightly perverse logical vitality as the Schoolmen had instilled into philosophy” (Alvarez 1961 119). Eliot transformed the disparaging epithet “metaphysical” into a positive term, giving it a psychological-existential orientation rather than a philosophical-scholastic one.

principle of *inventio*, respecting memory and imagination, authority and creativity in equal measure and seeking for ways to connect “matters lying far apart and, apparently, most dissimilar” (Vico 1965 24). Perhaps this is why Donne can seem like a modern and medieval wrapped into one. Not only does he appear to strain after the psychological orientation of the post-Cartesian era, but he at the same time seems to retreat to an earlier less enlightened age, self-consciously resisting the urge to sink forever into his soul-mind in order to establish a stable and lasting sense of being.

I would suggest that the kind of creative thinking that Eliot perceived in Donne’s psychological and spiritual outlook is also at work in his theology.<sup>10</sup> Again, Donne was a theologically oriented writer, but he was no schoolman. Nor was he simply parroting the doctrines set forth by Roman or Reformed camps. The effort to align Donne with the teachings of either Protestant or Catholic authority may give us a better understanding of Donne’s exposure to the religious-ideological milieu of the seventeenth-century, but it does little to distinguish the unique nature of his theology. Indeed, as Johnson points out, the “eclecticism” of Donne’s theology “defies assigning him too precise a sectarian definition” (146). And yet, what makes his theology difficult to define is not simply that it “develops from an idiosyncratic blend of ideas and authors,” but that it seeks to appreciate such ideas and authors on their own terms while making them morally and spiritually vital to a community of faith. Strangely, Donne manages to be innovative and experimental precisely at points where he seeks to be faithful to texts of tradition and

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<sup>10</sup> Eliot himself could not appreciate this connection. In fact, in an essay on Lancelot Andrewes, he laments that Donne was among those of an earlier age who was forced to “seek refuge in religion from the tumults of a strong emotional temperament which can find no complete satisfaction elsewhere” (1972 352).

authority. He does not simply agree or disagree with his theological sources. Instead, he looks for ways to make them useful, disposing them for the purpose of edifying himself and his reader rather than participating in a debate or substantiating an argument. It is Donne's power of anticipation and revision that fascinates. On the one hand, he looks back with the Christian humanists to the poetic theology of the fathers while working hard to resist the tendency of scholastic thinking to confine matters of divinity to logical discourse. On the other hand, he looks forward to the existential outlook of late modernity, but does so while protecting against a Cartesian variant of metaphysics. Where Descartes reduces God to a rational construct precisely at the moment that he seeks to draw the Other in, Donne takes a responsive stance towards the living God, seeking not only to remain attentive to God's originating, creative voice reverberating through the Scriptures and the tradition of interpretation that had grown up around them, but also to respond inventively within the bounds of his calling.

### **Poetic Theology and *Satyre III***

*Satyre III* provides an early sketch of Donne's poetic approach to theology.<sup>11</sup>

Following Richard Strier, I would agree that there is indeed an Erasmian spirit that pervades the poem, but this spirit has little to do with the supposed "radicalism" of the poem or the putative "boldness" and "free-thinking" of Donne's persona (Strier 283). If

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<sup>11</sup> It has been proposed by Paul Sellin that Donne's *Satyre III* was composed late because of certain references in the poem which Donne would most likely not been able to make prior to 1620 (Sellin 275-312). However, in recent consultation with the editors of the new Variorum edition of Donne's *Satyrtes*, Brent Nelson notes that "by around the turn of the sixteenth century the five poems that we generally call the 'satires' were completed and circulating as a set in the same order that they are printed in today" (Nelson "Courtship" 6).

Donne shows an indebtedness to Erasmus in *Satyre III*, it is in the way that he projects a kind of theological learning based in the literary arts. That Donne chooses to write a poem rather than a tract or treatise in order to express the nature of “true religion” is significant. Instead of excluding the emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of life, setting forth a scientific method of divinity, Donne chooses to work within these parameters, drawing both himself and his reader into a dramatic experience of theological learning. It is true, as Richard Newton points out, that Donne “force[s] upon the reader a mental reenactment of the search which . . . [he] requires” (435). In this respect, the meaning of the poem is to be found not only in the discursive message, but also in the poetic medium. At the same time, the theological approach that Donne sets out through his fictional persona is precisely the kind of method that Erasmus had so strenuously recommended a generation before. Rather than encouraging a sectarian habit of thinking or resorting to the dialectical method of the schools, Donne centers his approach in a hermeneutic of trust, turning to the voices of Scripture, tradition and authority not only to affirm the truths to which the fathers themselves had assented, but also to outline the interpretive-inventive process by which they had discovered such truths in the first place.

The poem begins with a moral critique of religion, contrasting the complacency of early modern Christians with the ethical rigor of ancient philosophers. The speaker confesses his perplexity over the stubbornness of the world’s “worn maladies” and the apparent impotence of “our fair mistress Religion” to offer a “cure” (ll. 4-5), fearing that the rigorous virtue of the ancient philosophers might end up outdoing the religious

devotion of his Christian contemporaries:

Alas,  
 As we do them in means, shall they surpass  
 Us in the end, and shall thy father's spirit  
 Meet blind philosophers in heaven, whose merit  
 Of strict life may be imputed faith, and hear  
 Thee, whom he taught so easy ways and near  
 To follow, damned? (ll. 9-15)

We would think that it is advantageous in religious circles to have a set of instructions that is “near / To follow,” but the difficulty of doctrinal formulations is that they can often be a little too near to follow. Indeed, as Donne’s speaker points out, a Christian’s “devotion” ought to be as worthy “As virtue was to the first blinded age” and “heavenly joys as valiant to assuage / Lusts, as earth’s honor was to them” (ll. 6-9), but devotion to authority all too frequently results in moral inertia and self-flattering contentment.

Despite his critique, the speaker does not side with the “blind philosophers.” Instead he returns to a contemplation of his “fair mistress Religion,” renewing his meditation on the difficulty of discovering where “true religion” might be found. It is common for religious factions to lay claim to the truth, and yet instead of practicing a religion that could be called true, they seem to participate in a kind of self-satisfying reduction of the truth. That is, having assumed a particular sectarian identity, they live as though they have arrived once and for all and so limit their sense of divinity to one particular religious expression. Thus, Catholic Mirreus loves fair Religion’s “rags” and, “Thinking her unhoused” in England, “Seeks her in Rome,” resting content “because he knows that she was there a thousand years ago” (ll. 43-46). Calvinist Crantz, on the other hand, refuses to “be enthralled” by “such brave Loves” and achieves peace of mind

through agonistic resistance (l. 49). Instead of the lavish aesthetic of Catholic sacramentalism, he upholds a form of rustic plainness, “judg[ing] / No wenches wholesome but coarse country drudges” and chooses to love “her only, who at Geneva is called / Religion, plain, simple, sullen, young, / Contemptuous, yet unhandsome” (ll. 50-54). The *via media* of Anglican Graius is no less problematic. Graius “stays at home” and “Embraceth her whom his godfathers will / Tender to him” not because he believes that religion in England is necessarily more true, but because

Some preachers, vile ambitious bawds, and laws,  
Still new like fashions, bid him think that she  
Which dwells with us is only perfect. (ll. 55-60)

Even those who attempt to detach themselves from these various religious factions tend to generate self-satisfying reductions of their own. For instance, the skeptic Phrygius finds his religious identity by way of absolute negation, abhorring “All, because all cannot be good” while the libertine Gracchus chooses a strategy of positive inclusion, loving “all as one” (ll. 63, 65). On the surface, Phrygius and Gracchus seem more sophisticated in their approach to doctrinal matters, riding above the difficulties of factionalism by either refusing or accepting all forms of religion. And yet, their philosophies prove to be no less parochial. Phrygius’s radical exclusion may seem to deny the false identity of sectarian allegiance and Gracchus’s radical inclusion may seem to erase the pernicious boundaries that exist between factions, but they do so even while establishing their own allegiance of one.

The speaker continues his critique near the end of the poem where he cautions the reader against submission to political and religious authority. “Fool and wretch,” he

says,

wilt thou let thy soul be tied  
 To man's laws, by which she shall not be tried  
 At the last day? Oh, wilt it then boot thee  
 To say a Philip, or a Gregory,  
 A Harry, or a Martin taught thee this? (ll. 93-97)

Of course, the answer that these rhetorical questions call forth is a resounding “no.” The speaker suggests that “man’s laws” are inherently limiting when it comes to seeking true religion. To think that true religion manifests itself in the authoritative teachings of political and religious leaders is misleading. It is like entrusting oneself to the “easy ways” of the fathers. The inclination is to submit to the absolute word of a “Philip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin,” but as the speaker points out, true religion does not match the dimensions of any particular political, theological, or ecclesiastical system. In fact, as the speaker suggests, to be “humble” to the power of political-religious authority in the world is to engage in idolatry. Instead of equipping the soul for relationship with “God Himself” (l. 110), devotion to worldly power tends to preclude human-divine relationship because it has a propensity to treat the mediation of authority as an end unto itself. The speaker’s warning in this section is pointed. If obedience to power and authority is carried far enough, it will lead to destruction and despair, uprooting the soul and giving it over to the “tyrannous rage” of politico-religious power.

The speaker’s solution to this problem is significant though somewhat perplexing. He begins to formulate a solution after critiquing the “easy ways” of the fathers and challenging his reader to fear the possibility of unsuspecting damnation. Indeed, it is fearful to think that one’s accepted means of salvation may lead directly to hell, but the

speaker's purpose is not to incapacitate the reader with anxious questions concerning the destiny of his soul. Quite the contrary, fear becomes the axial point of an overall transformation of values. Where we would typically associate religious fear with weakness and timidity, the speaker invests it with a sense of strength and honor. "This fear," he says, entails "great courage and high valor." As he proceeds, he continues to modify his terms. Adventurers may dare to face the dangers of war and make themselves prey to "leader's rage, to storms, to shot, to dearth" and explorers may dare to "dive seas and dungeons of the earth" and brave the extreme cold of "frozen North discoveries," but such daring does not call upon true courage. "Courage of straw!" cries the speaker.

Here, the typical values of the age are completely overturned. Of course, the message is ironic in a way because Donne's colorful description lends itself to a celebration of wayfaring adventure. And yet the celebration is in the service of a thoroughgoing critique. The speaker proceeds by addressing the adventurer as a "desperate coward" and goes on to interpret his attitude and actions as a sign of disgrace rather than honor:

wilt thou seem bold, and  
 To thy foes and His (Who made thee to stand  
 Sentinel in His world's garrison) thus yield,  
 And for forbidden wars, leave the appointed field?

The speaker's purpose here is to restore his reader to true courage and equip him to resist the spiritual foes that he tends to treat as friends (ll. 28-42). There is indeed a battle going on, but the implied reader is unable to see where the battle lines have been drawn. Not only does he fail to put up a good fight in the "real" battle, but he actually yields to the enemy in fear, abdicating responsibility at the very moment he believes that he is

most “bold.” Rather than striving after new and unknown worlds with militaristic and scientific confidence, those who are truly courageous will “stand / Sentinel” and fight from a fixed position in God’s “garrison,” waging war with his true enemies: the world, the flesh and the devil.

The difficulty, however, is that achieving a proper sense of religious courage does not itself enable one to know where to stand exactly. Where, after all, is “true religion” to be found? The speaker addresses this difficulty as he continues to unfold a remedy to the problem of religious complacency:

doubt wisely; in strange way  
 To stand inquiring right is not to stray;  
 To sleep, or run wrong is. On a huge hill,  
 Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will  
 Reach her, about must, and about must go;  
 And what the hill’s suddenness resists, win so;  
 Yet strive so, that before age, death’s twilight,  
 Thy soul find rest, for none can work in that night.  
 Hard deeds, the body’s pains; hard knowledge too  
 The mind’s endeavors reach, and mysteries  
 Are like the sun, dazzling, yet plain to all eyes. (ll. 69-88)

Having critiqued the various religious factions of his day and the psychology of sectarianism generally, the speaker suddenly startles his reader into a new awareness by interposing a spiraling vertical dimension to the “Truth.”

In context, the speaker seems to be recommending a distinctly philosophical rather than religious solution to the problem of sectarianism.<sup>12</sup> This is signaled by the association of epistemology (i.e. “doubt wisely;” “hard knowledge;” “mind’s endeavors”)

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<sup>12</sup> Hester argues that “the circularity of the progress around the hill in combination with the rectilinear movement up it . . . reproduces the spiral motion which ancient, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy alike delineated as emblematic of the motions of the rational soul of man” (1976 101).

and ontology (i.e. “soul find rest”) with the imagery of ascent. In particular, Donne’s metaphor of the hill of truth recalls Plato’s analogy of the cave from *The Republic* in which Socrates narrates an intellectual journey from the fallen world of common experience with its delusions and “passing shadows” up a “steep and rocky ascent” to an ontic-epistemic apotheosis where reality can be seen “just as it is” (Plato 1955 280). Socrates describes this journey in ways that closely parallel the speaker’s description of the ascent up the hill of truth. The sojourners begin as “prisoners” who have had “their legs and necks . . . fastened [so] that they can only look straight ahead of them” (278). From their childhood onwards, they have been told that the shadows they see in front of them are “in all respects real” (279). Eventually they recognize the lie of tradition and authority, break free from their bonds, and look upwards to the mouth of the cave. Initially dazzled by the light and inclined to withdraw and take refuge in a familiar shadowy underworld, they grow accustomed to the brightness and find it easier to see the “objects themselves” (280). And so they begin to make the “ascent into the upper world,” the “upward progress of the mind into the intelligible realm” (282). There are many distractions along the way, but when “the eye of the mind gets really bogged down in a morass of ignorance, dialectic gently pulls it out and leads it up.” Arriving to the mouth of the cave, the prisoner is finally free. His mind has been “turned away from the world of change” and he can now “bear to look straight at reality” and see it “just as it is” (282, 280).

Indeed, Plato’s dialectic seems to be closely related to the arduous struggle up the hill of truth in *Satyre III*. However, there are more contemporary philosophical

connections to consider. For instance, the speaker's exhortation to "doubt wisely" and "stand inquiring right" seems matched to a growing desire in Western culture during the seventeenth century to sweep away the foundations of an education based on the authority of ancient authors and begin anew on more rational grounds.<sup>13</sup> Descartes's pioneering work in *Discourse on Method* (1637) provides a good example and resonates strongly with the ascent to truth in Donne's poem.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning of the *Discourse*, Descartes relates how he had gradually become skeptical of his education in the humanities because it "embarrassed [him] with so many doubts and errors":

I have been nourished on letters since my childhood, and since I was given to believe that by their means a clear and certain knowledge could be obtained of all that is useful in life, I had an extreme desire to acquire instruction. But so soon as I had achieved the entire course of study at the close of which one is usually received into the ranks of the learned, I entirely changed my opinion. For I found myself embarrassed with so many doubts and errors that it seemed to me that the effort to instruct myself had no effect other than the increasing discovery of my own ignorance. (5)

Given his uncertainty, Descartes decides to give up "the study of letters" and "resolv[es]

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Toulmin suggests that Descartes's philosophical pursuits were motivated in part by the need to rise above the political and religious fighting between Protestants and Catholics in the seventeenth century. See Toulmin (1996) 124-26. From this perspective, Donne's persona in *Satyre III* and Descartes seem to have much in common. As we will see, however, Donne's strategy for a more peaceful situation is radically different than Descartes's.

<sup>14</sup> All references to Descartes's *Discourse* are to David Weissman's edition (1996).

to seek no other science than that which could be found in [himself]" (8). The difficulty with "reading the literature of the ancients" is that it stands in the way of a genuine search for the truth (6). Out of a "desire to learn to distinguish the true from the false" and "to see clearly . . . and to walk with confidence," Descartes decides that it is better to "make [himself] an object of study" rather than the "literatures of the ancients" because he is unable to find anything in the latter that could give him "settled convictions" (8). And so, casting skepticism on that "which he had only been convinced by example and custom," he begins "little by little" to deliver himself of "many errors which might have obscured [his] natural vision and rendered [him] less capable of listening to Reason" (8).

Descartes' rejection of ancient literature and his trust in reason and self seems closely related to the speaker's apparent philosophical solution in *Satrye III*. Descartes eventually comes to isolate himself both intellectually and socially, not only retreating inwards to the mind-soul where he could be guided by reason alone, but also retreating from the social, religious and political spheres, shutting himself up alone where he could avoid the distractions of society and divest himself of all "cares or passions." Alone with his thoughts and "free to follow his own ideas" (9), Descartes sets to work on a new method of science, believing that a rational scheme based on "a foundation which is entirely his own" is far better than one based on the work of "various masters" (11). He does not reject opinion outright. Descartes is willing to continue observing the received teachings of authority and tradition while he works out his methodology on a purely rational basis. However, he does so with the intention of eventually making the commonplaces of authority and tradition "conform to the uniformity of a rational

scheme” thereby enabling him to decide once and for all which ones were true and which ones were not (10). The problem from Descartes’ perspective is that scholastic and humanistic learning alike are vulnerable to ideas based on the probability of opinion rather than pure reason. In an effort to mitigate this problem Descartes initiates an entirely different approach, establishing the priority of logic and rational discourse by insulating it from the arts of language and science that are based on “example and custom.” The goal is absolute certainty. He would accept as true only “what was presented to his mind so clearly and distinctly that he could have no occasion to doubt it.” (13).

The significant difference between the dialectical strategies posed by Plato and Descartes and the spiraling ascent to “Truth” in *Satyre III* is that Donne makes recourse to the voices of authority and tradition precisely at the point that they seem to fail. Seeking true religion not only involves striving relentlessly, but also remaining “unmoved,” choosing one place to stand rather than many, and asking “thy father which is she”:

unmoved thou  
 Of force must one, and forced but one allow;  
 And the right; ask thy father which is she,  
 Let him ask his, though truth and falsehood be  
 Near twins, yet truth a little elder is;  
 Be busy to seek her, believe me this,  
 He’s not of none, nor worst, that seeks the best. (ll. 69-75)

This passage comes directly before the speaker’s exhortation to “doubt wisely” and engage in a lively, almost athletic, ascent to truth. Here it would seem that the speaker is confused about the way forward, wavering on the fault-line between medieval authority

and modern autonomy, actively advancing the “new Philosophy” that “calls all in doubt,” while at the same time retreating to an earlier less enlightened age, making recourse to the binding relationships of “Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne” (*The First Anniversarie* ll. 205, 215). Is it possible to reconcile the speaker’s call to steadfastness and a posture of inflexible resolve with the invitation to doubt, inquire, and search? Indeed, the imagery is perplexing in this section of the poem, but it is important to grasp the conventional paradox upon which Donne is drawing. The speaker’s critique of sectarian thinking is significant and seems to resonate with a distinctly modern outlook, but the arduous journey up the hill is predicated on remaining “unmoved” in relation to one’s calling. Here the speaker recalls the militaristic image of “standing / Sentinel” in God’s “garrison.” Such a position not only suggests moral daring and unswerving devotion, but also submission to God and obedience to his will. In this way, the speaker encourages a religious identity based on divine calling rather than individual autonomy. The one who searches for true religion does so confidently, even boldly, yet also responsively, conditioned at the outset by a word of divine conscription.

At the same time, the truth-seeker lives an historically embodied existence. Instead of seeking to establish a private, mystical connection between God and the soul, he is a participant in the *vita activa*, rooted in social, political and ecclesial life. The practice of divinity requires steadfast commitment based on a divine calling, but it also necessitates one place to stand and involves listening to the voices of tradition and authority. The speaker is not being cynical when he concludes his critique of factionalism and sectarian thinking by asserting the need for choosing one way. Nor is he

being facetious when he exhorts the reader to “ask thy father” where true religion is to be found. It is important to recognize here that the emphasis is not on establishing the correct body of doctrine or the one true church once and for all as much as it is simply indicating the practical necessity of standing somewhere in particular and seeking counsel from that position by hearkening to a tradition of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Along with Scripture, the present voices of authority and the past voices of tradition provide important fiduciary parameters within which to search for religious truth. At first this is puzzling given the speaker’s earlier scorn for the “easy ways” of “thy father’s spirit,” but the problem of religious complacency and spiritual self-satisfaction does not originate with the influence of a “father.” The difficulty is psychological and spiritual in nature and results from the aggressive enforcement and thoughtless acceptance of particular authorities and traditions as instantiations of divine truth. And so, from Donne’s perspective it is important to welcome a word from “thy father” and to heed the words of other fathers in the Christian tradition and this is because trust rather than suspicion is the rudimentary posture of the one who would participate in religious truth-seeking.

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<sup>15</sup> Others have read *Satyre III* as a reflection of Donne’s religious beliefs and sectarian allegiance (or lack thereof) rather than a general strategy for pursuing true religion. See Baumlin (1990) 67-85; Hester (1994) 201-18; Moore (1969-70) 41-49; Slights (1991) 91-95; and Strier (1993) 283-322. If we are to read the poem biographically, Hester seems correct when he suggests that Donne “finds ‘No where’ in England a church ‘true and faire’” at the point of writing (1991 97). But this is not really the point of the poem. As we know, Donne eventually chose one place to stand and came to reflect what Daniel Doerksen has recently referred to as a “moderate Calvinist conformity” (2003 12-34); at the same time, he continued to consult all the fathers (see below), and this would have surely included those patristic and medieval sources that had given shape to his Catholic upbringing. On the basis of the strategy that Donne outlines in *Satyre III*, we should not be surprised that his later religious works would seem to fluctuate between Roman and Reformed extremes.

Donne conveys a similar view of divinity in a sermon preached at Lincoln's Inn on Ps. 38.4: "For mine iniquities are gone over my head, as a heavy burden, they are too heavy for mee." While this sermon was composed and delivered long after Donne completed *Satyre III*, he repeats some of the same language and implies a comparable frame of reference:

Good ways, and good ends are in the plurall, and have many examples; else they are not good; but sins are in the singular, He [that] walk'd in the way of his father is in an ill way: But carry our manners, or carry our Religion high enough, and we shall finde a good rule in our fathers: Stand in the way, says God in Jeremy, and ask for the old way, which is the good way. We must put off *veterem hominem*, but not *antiquum*; Wee may put off that Religion which we think old, because it is a little elder than our selves, and not rely upon that, it was the Religion of my Father. But *Antiquissimum dierum*, Him, whose name is, He that is, and was, and is for ever, and so involves, and enwraps in himself all the Fathers, him we must put on. (*Sermons* 2.103)

There are important hints in this passage concerning the danger of the father's "easy ways" in *Satyre III*. Donne places the emphasis above on the plurality of "our fathers" rather than the singularity of "my Father," suggesting that conforming to the latter is problematic given that "sins are in the singular" (italics mine). It seems that the problem with the son's deference to the father in ll. 11-15 of *Satyre III* is not that he has a place for tradition, but that he has thoughtlessly acquiesced to the parochial view of one

father—his own. The speaker later exhorts the reader to “ask thy father” where true religion may be found since “truth a little elder is,” but clearly this is not enough. In fact, as Donne points out above, it might be entirely appropriate to “put off that Religion . . . which is a little elder, and not rely upon that,” since it is merely the “Religion of my Father.” And yet, true religion will surely escape the one who does not have ears for “all the Fathers.” The speaker of *Satyre III* agrees: to “Ask thy father” is a good place to begin the search for true religion, but even more important than this is to “Let him ask his.” The implied plurality of fathers in this line is crucial for understanding the ensuing ascent up the hill of truth. It suggests an approach to divinity that is based in a hermeneutic of trust rather than suspicion since an individual’s search for truth proceeds within the bounds of a received tradition.

Such an approach to divinity is radically different from the metaphysical thinking of the Greek philosophical tradition. The speaker of *Satyre III* suggests that progress in knowledge can be made and it is important to “Keep the truth which thou hast found” (l. 89), but this is not somehow akin to achieving epistemic mastery according to a properly conceived metaphysic. That is, in the process of ascent, the speaker does not gradually acquire the confidence of the Cartesian scientist who has found the key to absolute certainty or the Platonic philosopher who gazes upon the thing-itself such that the boundaries between *ontos*, *theos* and *logos* begin to dissolve. On the contrary, he continues to gain sustenance from the voices of tradition and authority even as he pursues divine truth. Where Plato and Descartes, each in his own way, show an aversion for texts of tradition and authority and the socio-historical realm of *communis sensus*, calling for a

dialectical ascent to the “thing itself,” the speaker encourages his reader to engage energetically in the expansive and catalytic way of “all the Fathers.”

In this way, Donne sets out the parameters of a hermeneutic process that is radical in two seemingly contradictory senses of the term: rooted and revolutionary. Harkening to the voices of tradition and authority plays an important role in the search for true religion, but it does not somehow provide the truth-seeker with a final word. Rather, considered in concert together, the fathers form a necessary horizon for reflecting on the “Truth,” enabling an intellectual and spiritual process that requires many hermeneutic passes, rather than a direct dialectical ascent upward. It is important to notice that the process of ascent in *Satyre III* never opens out into a situation of final completion. Nor does it entail steady progress from beginning to end. The emphasis throughout is on a kind of hermeneutic activity that attends to a *copia* of perspectives within the bounds of an unfolding interpretive tradition. In this respect, the finding of truth in the poem is more akin to poetic and rhetorical invention rather than dialectical ascent since the finding of truth occurs at a socio-historical level and in the midst of a polyphony of voices. While the speaker is harshly critical of factionalism and sectarian thinking, he recognizes that theological understanding comes from “below” rather than “above.” A search for “true religion” requires biblical, fiduciary and ecclesial bounds and this is true at all stages of the search.

Ultimately, the goal of such a grammatical-rhetorical approach involves choosing “God Himself to trust,” but the speaker does not press us to choose between God and his

Word on the one hand and the language of authority and tradition on the other.<sup>16</sup> This becomes clear as the speaker shifts to a discussion of power represented by a mighty stream that originates at a “calm head” and cascades to the sea below. Here, the emphasis is no longer on a search for truth, but rather a proper relation to political and ecclesiastical authority. And yet, the speaker suggests that comporting oneself appropriately to such figures of authority, learning to “rightly obey power,” has something to do with participation in a religion that is true. The speaker makes it clear at the outset of this section that devoting oneself to specific political and religious authorities is unhelpful since such reverence is an “excuse for mere contraries” and so leads to singularity of opinion and from there to schism. And yet, it is impossible simply to escape the influence of such authority figures. Rather than recommending either absolute submission or spontaneous revolt, the speaker suggests a posture that resonates well with what he has said earlier concerning the necessity of standing in one place and consulting the fathers. To respect the “proper bounds” of power is to root oneself like so

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<sup>16</sup> Donne’s perspective here is similar to Gadamer’s in his discussion of “historically effected consciousness” and the “I-Thou relation” in *Truth and Method* (1989). The speaker’s openness to “God Himself” in *Satyre III* parallels his openness to the fathers. Concerning his relationship to God, the speaker forgoes a preemptive understanding of divinity (i.e. an “easy” interpretation) that would “rob [God’s] claims of their legitimacy” and instead endeavors “to experience Thou as Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something” (360, 361). This does not mean that the speaker seeks to do “blindly what the other desires.” Rather, the “openness to the other” that he exercises simply involves a recognition “that [he] . . . must accept some things that are against [him], even though no one else forces [him] to do so” (361). The speaker takes a similar posture to tradition. Rather than “smoothing out [texts] beforehand, so that the criteria of [his] own knowledge can never be called into question by tradition,” he allows “tradition’s claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to [him]” (361).

many delicate “flowers that dwell” at the “calm head” of the “stream” of power that flows from God himself. In this peaceful setting, voices of authority stimulate growth and vitality, but no single authority provides the sustenance that is required for living the religion that is true. The situation here is similar to the one who seeks after true religion by consulting “all the Fathers” rather than resting in the “Religion of my Father.” While heeding the voices of authority, such a person finds himself devoted ultimately to “the *Antiquissimum dierum*, Him, whose name is, He that is, and was, and is for ever” and this is because the Ancient of Days infuses his power into all expressions of political and religious authority, just as he “enwraps in himself all the Fathers” and the truths to which they bear testimony (*Sermons* 2.103).

Those who practice religion in this manner “thrive and do well” because they have discovered a way of entrusting themselves to God rather than singular authorities even while allowing the voices of authority to play a positive role in matters of divinity. However, when they “leave their roots,” and become inordinately attached to “a Philip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin,” they end up adopting an ill-conceived Absolute and begin to track in the way of idolatry. The consequences are dire. Giving themselves over to the “stream’s tyrannous rage,” they tumble down the hill “Through mills, and rocks, and woods,” eventually becoming lost at sea (ll. 106-108). Such is the demise of those who choose “men’s unjust / Power from God claimed, then God himself to trust” (ll. 109-110).

### **Poetic Theology and the *Devotions***

Given that *Satyre III* and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* comprise different

genres written at different times under unique circumstances, the connection between them may not be altogether obvious. And yet there are important points of continuity with respect to overall theological vision. What Donne briefly outlines in *Satyre III* concerning a patristic-humanistic approach to theology, he returns to and expands significantly in the *Devotions*. Perhaps less obviously, yet no less significantly, he continues to resist the sectarianism of religious thinkers like Mirreus, Crantz, and Graius who love to engage in “uncharitable *disputations*” (*Devotions* 106). For instance, in Expostulation XVI, Donne laments that the ceremony of bells has led to division and dissension in the church and prays for ecclesial harmony: “Lord let us not breake the *Communion of Saints*, in that which was intended for the *advancement* of it; let not that pull us asunder from one another, which was intended for the assembling of us, in the *Militant*, and associating of us to the *Triumphant Church*” (84). He also celebrates plurality and multiplicity in the divine economy, seeking the “great *Helpe*” of God “not from *corners*, nor *Conventicles*, nor *schismatical singularities*, but from the association, & communion of [his] *Catholique Church*, and those persons, whom thou hast always furnished that *Church* withall” (39). Elsewhere, he wonders when it shall be God’s “pleasure to put an end to . . . *quarrels*, for *spirituall precedences*” and when the church will come to accept a divinity of “*Order*” rather than “*Ambition*,” a divinity that affords a “*place* to every one, but not *contention* for place” (106).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Given Donne’s explicitly irenic outlook, it is odd that scholars have tended to think of the *Devotions* “along Roman Catholic/Protestant lines,” reading it as a “work of meditation in *either* the Loyolan or the Protestant tradition” (Nelson 2003 248; Papazian 1992 603, italics mine). Essays in the Loyolan tradition of meditation include Martz (1954); Van Laan (1963); Andreasen (1965); Abrahamson (1983); Raspa (1975); and

As Elena Levy-Navarro observes, Donne's irenic stance in the *Devotions* is relatively unique for the period:

Donne's desire to see the church in such expansive terms cannot be understood if we rely too heavily on the terms of recent historiography of the Stuart period. Insofar as such terms require us to place Donne in the limiting context of contemporary polemical debates, we will not be able to see the multiple ways he seeks to break down the barriers that divided the church of his day. (287)

The reason why "we cannot define [the *Devotions*] by turning to any of the religious-political categories used to describe the emerging factions of [the] day" is because "Donne writes in a purposefully anti-polemicist way" (274). Unlike "militant Protestants" who "saw the world in dualistic terms as a struggle between true and false religions" or "avant-garde conformists" who "employed exclusionary rhetoric" to defend against their puritan opponents, Donne attempts to "create a more devout and thus quiescent church membership" in the *Devotions*, exercising "pastoral concern" and striving after a broad "religious consensus" (Levy-Navarro 275-76, 277, 274, 286).

Donne takes an "anti-polemicist" stance, resisting such "divisive categories as those used in polemical works of the day" and refusing to involve himself in a form of religious propaganda and politicking that would serve only to further divide "puritan" from

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Sullivan (1988). Studies based on a Protestant poetic include Mueller (1968); Goldberg (1971); Cox (1973); Papazian (1992). Only Morrissey suggests that "Donne borrows from *both* Catholic and Protestant meditative theory" (28, italics mine). Rather than seeking to defend "Donne the Puritan or Donne the Arminian," it might be more helpful to "assess how and why" a work like the *Devotions* can "allow for such extremes" (Shami 392).

“papist,” Calvinist from Laudian (285). Instead, he adopts the perspective of his persona in *Satyre III*, making his priority “true Religion” throughout (*Devotions* 102).<sup>18</sup>

This is not to suggest that Donne’s interest is merely to subvert polemicists and politicians or navigate a middle course between sectarian extremes. His purpose in the *Devotions* is more positive, lively, and hopeful. Throughout, Donne<sup>19</sup> attempts to make theological sense of his suffering and affliction, drawing on a variety of biblical and patristic sources while encouraging both himself and his reader to embrace “God Himself” in all of life’s “emergent occasions.” Given the devastation of religious war on the continent during the 1620s and the increasingly fractious nature of sectarian debate in England, it would have been tempting for Donne to treat matters of divinity in a more scholarly manner, taking sides in religious partisanship according to a sectarian polemic or seeking escape in contemplative solitude. However, following his strategy in *Satyre III*, Donne only roots himself more firmly in the patristic-humanistic tradition, practicing a theology whose *logos* is grounded in the literary arts of poetry, rhetoric and hermeneutics. His method in the *Devotions* is similar to Augustine’s in the *Confessions*. Rather than looking for security in one right interpretation or seeking immunity at the

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<sup>18</sup> See Deschner (2003) 293-313 for another helpful perspective on Donne’s irenicism.

<sup>19</sup> Nelson notices a tendency in the critical history of the *Devotions* to focus on the expressive-existential status of Donne’s “I” (2003 248). Without intending to blur the distinction between author and persona or diminish the “ostensible rhetorical purpose of the work” (2003 248), I shall use “Donne” to signify the exemplary persona of the *Devotions*. My sense is that the poetic-rhetorical effect of the *Devotions*, unlike *Satyre III*, depends in part on authorial *ethos*. It is true that Donne’s work is neither the “curious” product of an “anxious and restless mind” nor “a unique revelation of a unique mind” (White 254; Sparrow *Devotions* xxiii). Nevertheless, similar to Augustine’s *Confessions*, it forms a kind of “holy soliloquy” that is intended to be exemplary and useful for edification (Narveson 118-119).

ontic-epistemic apotheosis of dialectical ascent, Donne puts a variety of interpretations in play, heaping up biblical and patristic sources around *topoi* related to his experience and the Passion of Christ. Proceeding from private meditation to open expostulation before God, Donne tosses and turns from exegetical seriousness to rhetorical play, seeking for truths in a manner that not only finds him attending to the voice of the living God, but also enabling him to become a collaborator in the new creation. Even where his language is ostensibly discursive and didactic, he does not mean simply to catechize or arouse curiosity in his reader.<sup>20</sup> His purpose is to move the heart to participate in a life of truth, stimulating a responsive participation in an ongoing, unfolding transformation in relationship with God.

Donne makes the poetic orientation of his theology clear in Expostulation XIX of the *Devotions* where he addresses himself to the “*figurative, a metaphoricall God*” of the Scriptures, a God

in whose words there is such a height of *figures*, such *voyages*, such  
*peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors*, such *extensions*,  
such *spreadings*, such *Curtaines* of *Allegories*, such *third Heavens* of

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<sup>20</sup> As Nelson points out, critics tend to focus on the “discursive function” of the *Devotions*, emphasizing either the “personal reflection of the mind of the author” or a logical perspective “applied to the function of teaching by example” (Nelson 248-49). See Arndt (1990): 43; Andreasen (1965): 211; Rollins (1994): 53; Frost (1990): 332. With Nelson, I would argue that Donne writes primarily to “*move* his audience” rather than teach or instruct (249). At the same time, he means to engage the whole person—heart, soul and mind—in living truths of a theological nature. Rather than excluding intellectual matters of divinity, Donne addresses them openly, but does so as part of a unfolding transformative process at an existential level. His aim is a phronetic kind of knowledge, what Philip Sidney calls “ἀρχιτεκτονική”—that is, “the knowledge of a man’s self [and of God] . . . with the end of well-doing and not of well-knowing only” (29).

*Hyperboles, so harmonious eloquitions, so retired and so reserved expressions, so commanding perswasions, so perswading commandments, such sinewes even in thy milke, and such things in thy words, as all prophane Authors, seeme of the Serpent, that creepes, thou art the dove, that flies. (99)*<sup>21</sup>

Just prior to this passage, Donne recognizes that God is also “*direct*” and “*literall*” in the Scriptures, but he is careful to avoid privileging the “*plaine sense*” of all that he says, as though he were primarily interested to practice divinity in dispassionate, objective ways. The style of Scripture serves to move the reader into a life of truth rather than dress up a discursive message. As in *Satyre III*, Donne directs the reader’s attention upward in this passage, but here the movement is more ostensibly grammatical and rhetorical in orientation, configured in terms of the poetic and polysemic nature of the Scriptures and the eloquence of the Holy Spirit, “the *dove*, that flies.” What makes the eloquence of Scripture distinctive, setting it apart it from the writings of “*prophane Authors*,” is that it sets the pattern for a theology that unites word and act, *logos* and life.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, God is “a *figurative*, a *Metaphoricall* God” not only in his “word,” but also in his “workes” too. “The *stile* of thy *works*,” says Donne, “the *phrase* of thine *Actions*, is *Metaphoricall*”:

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<sup>21</sup> Donne admires the eloquence of Scripture in similar terms throughout the sermons. For instance, see *Sermons* 6.56; 8.273; 10.103.

<sup>22</sup> Drawing on Auerbach, Gerard Cox points out the similarity between Donne’s treatment of “type,” “figure” and “allegory” and Tertullian’s view of “*figura*.” According to Auerbach, Tertullian conceives of “*figura*” as “something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical. The relation between the two events is revealed by an accord or similarity” (1984 29; qtd. in Cox 334; see Tertullian’s *Adversus Marcionem* 3.16).

The *institution* of thy whole *worship* in the *old Law*, was a continuall *Allegory*; *types & figures* overspread all; and *figures* flowed into *figures*, and powred themselves out into *farther figures*; *Circumcision* carried a *figure* of *Baptisme*, & *Baptisme* carries a *figure* of the *purity*, which we shall have in *perfection* in the new *Jerusalem*. (100)

Here, Donne characterizes God himself as a kind of theologian, practicing divinity as a poet and giving shape to spiritual-ecclesial life through “*types and figures*” and a “continuall *Allegory*.” Rather than remaining aloof in the rarified purity of a transcendental signified, God involves himself at the level of the signifier, speaking and acting among his people in “*figures* [that] flow into *figures* and pour themselves out into *farther figures*.” At the same time, he initiates a transformation from old to new, causing the dark oracle of “*Circumcision*” to uncoil forward and upward into the “*purity*” of “*Baptisme*” and the “*perfection*” of the “*new Jerusalem*.”

The writings of the fathers are crucial to Donne’s view of poetic theology in this section. The eloquence of Scripture, he says,

hath occasioned thine ancient *servants*, whose delight it was to write after thy *Copie*, to proceede the same way in their *expositions* of the *Scriptures*, and in their composing of both *publicke liturgies*, and of *private prayers* to thee, to make their accesses to thee in such a kind of *language*, as thou wast pleased to speake to them, in a *figurative*, in a *Metaphoricall language*. (100)

Herein lies another important connection to *Satyre III*. Consulting “all the Fathers,”

Donne observes that the difference between “truth and falsehood” in divinity is not only a matter of doctrinal content, but also literary form. That is, the truth that is “a little elder” is more than a line in a syllogism or an ideal so pristine that it cannot be uttered aloud. Indeed, “Truth stands” on a “huge hill” and “he that will / Reach her, about must, and about must go,” but the revolution upward in the fathers is not so much an anxious wrestle to pin down the truth once and for all as it is a stimulating venture to open up God’s many truths again and again in ways that enable a full-bodied participation in situation and circumstance.<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that the fathers could join together their “*expositions of the Scriptures*”—the traditional ground of patristic theology as de Lubac and McLuhan point out—with the composing of “*publicke liturgies, and . . . private prayers.*” Donne’s perspective here is distinctly Erasmian. By associating the writings of God’s “ancient *servants*” with the “*figurative*” and “*Metaphoricall language*” of the Scriptures, he is suggesting that patristic theology was grammatical and rhetorical rather than dialectical in orientation. The fathers were not simply extending the Greek philosophical tradition in Christian terms. Rather, their theological writings were “nurtured in humane learning, . . . in those fields of learning which . . . [are] commonly call[ed] rhetoric” (Erasmus 1987 196).

The example of the fathers is significant in Donne’s mind. Unlike more philosophical and rationally-oriented thinkers who are inclined to ask “questions meticulous, needless, and unreasonably minute” (Erasmus 1987 197), patristic writers

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<sup>23</sup> Reinhold Friedrich perceives a similar connection between the ascent to truth in *Satyre III* and Donne’s grammatical-rhetorical strategy in the *Devotions*. See Friedrich (1978) 68-69.

were delighted to speak to/of God in the manner in which they found themselves addressed by God in the Scriptures—that is, in “a *figurative*, in a *Metaphoricall*” style. From Donne’s perspective, the same ought to be true for all theologians. He implies this in his own poetic *praxis* throughout the *Devotions*, moving seamlessly from biblical exegesis and theological reflection to more devotional modes of expression like meditation, confession, expostulation, and prayer. However, he makes it explicit in a sermon preached at Whitehall in 1618:

The style of Scripture is a diligent, and an artificial style; and a great part thereof in a musical, in a metrical, in a measured composition, in verse. . . . [T]hen are we *Musicum Carmen in modo*, musick to the soul, in the manner of our preaching, when in delivering points of Divinity, we content our selves with that language, and that phrase of speech, which the Holy Ghost hath expressed himself in, in the Scriptures: for to delight in the new and the bold terms of Hereticks, furthers the Doctrine of Hereticks too. (*Sermons* 2.170-71)

This passage resonates well with Donne’s poetic view of theology in the *Devotions*. The juxtaposition of the eloquent “style of Scripture” with the “new and the bold terms of Hereticks” is revealing. Biblical eloquence does not consist of a primitive form of divinity that is to be superseded by a more rational and discursive mode of commentary. For Donne, this would entail a heretical pattern of thinking. Instead, the language of Scripture is to be embraced and implemented in theological practice. Following the fathers, Donne “deliver[s] points of Divinity,” according to the “diligent” and “artificial

style” of the Scriptures. Rather than developing a specialized vocabulary, seeking after “new and bold terms” that have the power to instantiate divine truth, he contents himself “with that language, and that phrase of speech, which the Holy Ghost hath expressed himself in,” a poetic and rhetorical language that is no less truthful for all its artifice.

Of course, there is the possibility that Donne is striving to assimilate divinity to humanity on different terms. That is, the argument for a theology modeled on God’s own language may seem to suggest a desire on Donne’s part to unite *ontos* and *theos* through a literary rather than logical grammar. As James Baumlin points out, Donne’s “virtuoso performance” in Expostulation XIX could be understood as a “rhetorical display-piece” that not only calls “attention to its own artifice,” but also “celebrate[s] God’s eloquence by attempting to match it” (Baumlin 50). According to this perspective, Donne would be verging on idolatry in his practice of divinity since he would be overwriting the Scriptures, “adding his own words to God’s” (50). And yet, Donne does not seem intent on rivaling divine eloquence in the hope of supplanting it, transforming “an old rhetorical model into a vehicle of brilliant self-presentation” (Sullivan 58). Scripture is sophistic in a way since it is creational and “world-building” and there is an analogous “sophistic movement” to Donne’s own language use (Baumlin 9). However, Donne’s theology does not make for “a counterfeit Creation” as though he were competing with God or writing “against a background of doubt” (*Sermons* 4:87; Baumlin 9). Nor does it imply an “incarnational rhetoric” that seeks to guarantee divine presence in language (Baumlin 9). Rather it serves as a creaturely response to God’s invitation to participate in his

transformative word-work.<sup>24</sup> Donne can “imitate [the divine] *Copie*” without at the same time competing with God because he is seeking to respond to a calling delivered at a creaturely level rather than create or substantiate truths from the subject position.<sup>25</sup>

This is one of the significant differences between ontotheology generally and the poetic theology of the patristic-humanistic tradition. Heidegger observes that theologies influenced by metaphysical thinking tend to elide the otherness of the Other because they strive for adequation on the basis of human reason and ratio. For a patristic-humanistic theologian like Donne, however, the language of divinity has little to do with objectivizing God from a stable, impervious, subject position. God brings everything into being according to his Word—uniting form and act, word and work—and yet he

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<sup>24</sup> As I note in the Introduction, the term “word-work” (my own) plays on Donne’s appreciation of God’s metaphorical style in both word (Scripture) and work (salvation history), a style that Donne, following the fathers, means to imitate in his own theological *praxis*. See pp. 142-44 above.

<sup>25</sup> Building on John Poulakos’s ontological model of classical rhetoric, Baumlin suggests that Donne’s works are marked by a “dynamic interplay” between “four major rhetorical perspectives,” an incarnational rhetoric that is oriented to the “real world” of Aristotle, a transcendental rhetoric that is oriented to the “ideal world” of Plato, a sophistic rhetoric that is oriented to the “possible world” of Gorgias, and a skeptical rhetoric that is oriented to the “unknowable world” of Pyrrho (6). Baumlin’s reading is helpful because it attends to the complexity of Donne’s works and helps to clarify the ideological underpinnings of longstanding critical debates in Donne scholarship. At the same time, however, it fails to capture a certain unity in Donne’s theological vision. That Donne’s language is “ideologically complex” and works against a “singular worldview” does not mean that it betrays a lack of “consistency in thought and attitude” (7). It seems to me that Baumlin’s four rhetorical perspectives are problematic for capturing Donne’s grammatical-rhetorical approach to theology because they are determined by categories derived from the Greek philosophical tradition and favor the priorities of ontotheology. At no point is Donne caught between creating truth out of words and reflecting truth in words. Nor does he vacillate between idealizing truth in the “self-effacing language of transcendence” and abandoning truth altogether according to a thoroughgoing skepticism. What makes Donne’s theology in the *Devotions* unique is that it is oriented to a grammar-rhetoric that does not assume the hegemony of dialectic and metaphysical thinking.

speaks in a way that invites participation in the realization of truth, meaning, and significance. Rather than communicating in univocal fashion, God speaks and acts in multivalent, dialogic ways, establishing human being as *interloqué* and inviting lively response in an unfolding process of becoming.

Of course, Donne is not somehow immune to the temptations of ontotheology. At numerous points in the *Devotions* he suggests a longing to secure his *ontos* in *theos* through the ratiocinative power of *logos*. For instance, in Meditation I, Donne praises the “honour which Man hath by being a *little* world” and the capacity he has to “study” to his own health, “polish[ing] every stone, that goes into that building” (7). Elsewhere, he praises the dignity of humankind, characterizing “*Man*” as a “*great world*” whose thoughts are “*creatures* that are borne *Gyants*: that reach from *East* to *West*, from *earth* to *Heaven*, that doe not onely bestride all the *Sea*, and *Land*, but span the *Sunn* and *Firmament* at once” (20). At the same time, however, Donne acknowledges the absurdity of normalizing such a vision. The difficulty is that the powers of the human intellect ultimately fail to guard against spiritual and physical disaster. Donne laments that “in a minute a Cannon batters all, overthrowes all, demolishes all; a *Sicknes* unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiosie . . . summons us, seizes us, possesses us, destroyes us in an instant” (7). Indeed “mans . . . extent & proportion” seem “great” and his “soaring thoughts, his compassing thoughts” seem to “reach all, comprehend all,” but in the end he “shrinks himself, and consumes himself to a handfull of dust” and is subject to the “ignorance” and “thoughtlessness of the *Grave*” (20-21).

In isolation, such claims could easily be understood as the ramblings of a

disillusioned idealist, but Donne ultimately resists the kind of thinking that would leave him oscillating between the poles of rationalism and skepticism, certainty and doubt. Instead, he opens himself to other epistemic possibilities within the horizon of tradition and authority. The motive for theological work is not the greatness of man in his supposed ability to “reach all, comprehend all.” It lies in the sovereignty of the living God who has set the conditions for human-divine relationship and invited participation according to a prescribed “Method” of prayer, confession, obedience and self-sacrifice (22). Donne provides the ground-work for such an orientation in Expostulation I. Having asserted the incommensurability of human and divine being, since “*proportion* is no measure for *infinitie*” (12), he discovers his identity in an originating event of divine interpellation: “[H]ow little soever I bee, *as God calls things that are not, as though they were*, I, who am as though I were not, may call upon God, and say, My God, my God [. . .]” (12). In context, Donne is simply expressing a rationale for expostulating to God concerning the “Miserable distribution of Mankind” (12). In the process, however, he ends up projecting a relationship between self and God that informs his theological approach throughout the *Devotions*, an approach that stands in marked contrast to theologies marked by metaphysical thinking. In a certain respect, Donne’s assertion—“I, who am as though I were not, may call upon God”—could be taken as a critique of Cartesian divinity just before its time. Rather than seeking to build on a foundation of his own making, inferring divinity from the substantiating nexus of the *cogito*—“I think; therefore I am”—Donne takes the calling of God as the condition for selfhood and human responsiveness to God’s calling as the condition for theological activity. His “I” is not a

founding subject that predicates a world of objects. In fact, it is nothing before it is called by God. More primary than a conscious, intentional, predicating “I” is a “me” formed by the interpellating voice of the Other.<sup>26</sup>

Donne expands in Station III. Having taken to his bed because of the advancement of his sickness, he laments that he can no longer enjoy the “priviledge, and advantage” of a “Mans body” which is “of an erect, of an upright form, naturally built, & disposed to the contemplation of *Heaven*” (14-15). Here, Donne expresses a feeling of helplessness and alienation. His bed is like a grave and all that he says “but a varying of his owne *Epitaph*” (15). This is not a situation that would seem conducive to relationship with God or the work of divinity. Interestingly, however, Donne sets out the parameters of his theological *praxis* precisely at the point of self-surrender. In Prayer III, he writes,

O most mightie and most merciful *God*, who though thou have taken me  
off my feet, hast not taken me off my foundation, which is *thy selfe*, who  
though thou have removed me from that upright forme, in which I could

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<sup>26</sup> Papazian’s Protestant reading of the *Devotions* is helpful for drawing out the primacy of “me” in Donne’s work. According to Papazian, Donne does not represent “an Everyman who undergoes an experience common to all mankind” (1992 603). Rather, he “creates a speaker . . . who seems to be a special kind of character, one who . . . is elect ‘from the beginning,’ and who undergoes an experience peculiar to his kind” (603-604). This is an important distinction as it relates to self-fashioning. Indeed, Donne considers himself to be one of the “elect” at numerous points in the *Devotions* (see pp. 10, 49, 81). The difficulty with Papazian’s reading is that it fails to account for the cooperative role that Donne gives to this “special kind of character” who is interpellated by God. Donne’s speaker may be “a special man” given the nature of God’s claim upon him, but he does not seem “infallibly ‘assured’” or convinced of “a salvation that will ‘never’ fail,” as Papazian claims (1992 610). Nor does he simply convey “the emotions attendant on Perseverance” as though his poetic is merely expressive rather than transformative (612). Insofar as Donne’s speaker is primarily “me,” claimed and called out by God, he also fashions himself as a cooperative agent in the salvific process, as we shall see.

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; As thou hast made this *bed*, thine *Altar*, make me thy *Sacrifice*; and as thou makest thy *Sonne Christ Jesus* the *Priest*, so make me his *Deacon*, to minister to him in a chereful surrender of my body, & soule to thy pleasure, by his hands. I come to thee, *O God, my God*, I come unto thee, (so as I can come, I come to thee, by imbracing thy comming to me) (18).

At this point in the *Devotions*, Donne feels that he has little choice but to leave off an active pursuit of God since he has been confined to his bed. And yet, there is an important sense in which his act of surrender forms a kind of pursuit. Donne is “taken off his feet,” and yet, paradoxically, he has not been “taken off his foundation,” which is God’s “*selfe*.” Fully established, yet unable to enjoy the “upright forme” that is fitting for heavenly contemplation, Donne turns to the living God in the receptive word-work of prayer, worship, and sacrifice, making a “chereful surrender of . . . body & soul to [God’s] pleasure, by his hands.” This is not simply a devotional flourish on Donne’s part. Rather, he is setting the stage for a theology that is both biblical and patristic. The concluding sentence of the passage above is crucial: “I come unto thee . . . by imbracing thy comming to me.” Here, Donne affirms the importance of his “I” finding its way to God, but he also reminds his reader that God occupies the primary subject position and therefore has a definitive claim on his life. At the same time, he makes room for a

participative role in human-divine relationship. God is indeed the primary Subject, but this does not mean that his “coming” somehow cancels out Donne’s “embracing.” Again, there is no competition for the subject position in the patristic-humanistic tradition of theology. Donne’s “I” is based in his “me” and therefore “come[s] to thee” from the point of “thy coming.” Donne puts the emphasis on the freedom of the living God to come on his own terms. And yet, the terms by which he comes create the conditions for human participation in relationship with God, an “embracing” that is linked dialogically to God’s “coming.”

In our reading of Augustine’s *Confessions* in Chapter 1, the priority of a confessional “me” rather than a predicating “I” suggested a theological orientation centered in the biblical heart-soul rather than the philosophic mind-soul. A similar pattern can be discerned in the *Devotions*. The self, for Donne, is heart-centered: “How little of a *Man* is the *Heart*, and yet it is all, by which he is.” Where the mind-centered self would predicate monologically from a stable, invulnerable subject position, the heart-centered self comes alive in the predicate position and grows into a kind of subject by participating responsively in dialogue with the Other. Again, the “I” that “call[s] upon God” in Donne’s formulation has no claim on the Other and is not in full possession of itself. In fact, at the outset, the ontic status of Donne’s “I” is questionable since it is “as though [it] were not.” Similar to Descartes at the beginning of the *Meditations*, Donne initially experiences his “I” as though it were the product of a dream or illusion. And yet, instead of treating this as a problem, attempting to substantiate his “I” more fully by assuming or projecting some version of the *res cogitans*, Donne puts the emphasis on growth in

human-divine relationship, coaching his nascent “I” into the substantival “may be” of becoming as he calls out from the liminal space between despair and hope, “*My God, my God* [. . .]” (12).

So it is with Donne’s heart-self. God “declarest unto man, what is his *Heart*” in the Scriptures (58), but he declares in a way that invites rather than suppresses interpretive-inventive activity. That is, having heard God’s calling in the language of the Proverbs, “*My Sonne, give mee thy heart,*” Donne responds by making a detailed search of the Scriptures for the heart that he will give. Having considered numerous passages from a variety of perspectives, he finally lands on a “middle” kind of heart, a “*melting* heart, and a *troubled* heart; and a *wounded* heart, and a *broken* heart, and a *contrite* heart” (59). This heart is neither “so perfit, as to bee given” nor “so desperate, as not to bee accepted” (59). Rather, it is a heart “that the very giving mends” it. We could think of this as another variation of Donne’s earlier expression, “I come to thee . . . by imbracing thy comming to me.” The “*melting,*” “*wounding,*” “*breaking,*” and “*contrition*” that he has experienced as a result of his sin and sickness is God’s “*Way*” of drawing Donne to a divine “*End*” and, therefore, stand as evidence of the “*earnest of [the] Spirit in [his] heart*” (59-60). And yet God’s “*Way*” is marked by Donne’s own involvement poetically, rhetorically, hermeneutically. Donne’s heart is not only a dwelling place for God, but also an horizon for actively responding to his word-work.

### **Donne’s Theological Praxis in the *Devotions***

It may be that Donne has important and interesting things to say *about* a poetic-patristic orientation to theology in the *Devotions*. The question is how to characterize his

theological *praxis*. That is, *in what way* does the language of the *Devotions* enable participation in relationship with God? I have suggested that *Satyre III* provides a rough outline of a patristic-humanistic approach to theology, but nowhere in that poem does Donne attempt to practice what he preaches. Rather than symbolically enacting a responsive participation in divinity, Donne writes to move his reader to a point where such participation could be possible. In this respect, we could say that *Satyre III* serves as a prolegomena to poetic theology rather than an actual performance of it. The *Devotions* is different. Not only does Donne continue to set out the parameters of his theological *praxis*, but he also seeks to carry it through in each station. The difficulty comes in charting the performance. Donne's language is propositional in places, but always in a provisional way. Rather than attempting to conceptualize divine truths as though they were objects to be seized and stored away, Donne writes so as to encourage perceptual activity and move his reader to participate in a transformation from an old way of thinking and living to a new one. Part of the transformation comes in Donne relocating himself and his reader to the predicate position, defining the self as a responsive "me" rather than an assertive "I." But Donne also projects a transformative experience from this position, working in a language that is as inventive as it is interpretive.

Given the therapeutic orientation of the *Devotions* and its connection to re-creation and spiritual transformation, Stanley Fish's concept of the "aesthetic of the good physician" is helpful for clarifying Donne's approach. Attending to a variety of sources in "western literature and philosophy," most notably Augustine, Fish defines the "good

physician” as “a philosopher, minister, teacher, or even deity” whose “status, . . . strategy and intentions are always the same: he tells his patients what they *don't* want to hear in the hope that by forcing them to see themselves clearly, they may be moved to change the selves they see” (3). Donne plays on the metaphor of the good physician throughout the *Devotions*<sup>27</sup> and in ways that seem to parallel Fish’s conception. Rather than providing an “ego-satisfying experience” by mirroring opinions his readers already hold or addressing them “within the categories and assumptions of received systems of knowledge” (Fish 18, 1), Donne seeks to perplex, frustrate and disrupt expectations and does so in the interests of a “total reorientation” (23). In Donne’s own words, he seeks

to trouble the understanding, to displace, and discompose and disorder the judgment . . . or to empty it of former apprehensions, and to shake beliefe, with which it had possessed it selfe before, and then, when it is thus melted to pure it into new molds, when it is thus mollified, to stampe and imprint new formes, new images, new opinions in it. (*Sermons* 2:461)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> According to Augustine, Christ is “at once the Physician and the Medicine” since he set out “to cure men” by “applying Himself” as the remedy (*On Christian Doctrine* 15). Donne builds on this insight, extending the metaphor to the entire Trinity. For instance, in Expostulation IX, he describes the “*blessed and glorious Trinity*” as a “*whole Colledge . . . and yet but one Phisician*” (48). Donne is even more specific in Expostulation XXIII. There he describes the “*mightie Father*” as the “*Physitian*,” the “*glorious Sonne*” as the “*physicke*” and the “*blessed Spirit*” as a kind of apothecary who has “*prepared and applied*” the remedy (122).

<sup>28</sup> Donne’s language here is similar to Erasmus’s for describing the rhetorical method of the preacher. According to Erasmus, the preacher “first tears out of his listener’s souls the roots of evil thoughts and the wicked seeds of impious doctrine from whence sprout bitter fruits; and he demolishes the building erected on a bad foundation; he scatters the tares that have sprouted and ruins the badly begun edifice. In place of what has been torn down and destroyed he plants good seedlings and erects a building that will not yield to the tempest” (*Ecclesiastes* 5:789e-f; qtd. in Shuger 130).

Ultimately, what Donne is after in the *Devotions* is a “transformation” or “conversion” that moves readers from an “egocentric view” with its idolatrous tendencies to a “theocentric” view that opens out into a dynamic relationship with God (Fish 6).

The difficulty with Fish’s model for capturing Donne’s theological *praxis* is that it associates the “aesthetic of the good physician” with a Platonic-Augustinian dialectic rather than a Christian-Augustinian grammar-rhetoric. The difference is crucial. Instead of tending to the heart and encouraging attentiveness to Scripture and other texts of tradition, Fish’s good physician counsels the abandonment of opinions and values and devotes his energies “to the purification of the soul, to the raising of the eye of the mind to the point where it is congruent with Reality” (18). Rather than seeking truth by participating responsively in relationship to God, he advises self-reliance, urging the mind-soul to “raise itself to the point where the truly and wholly real once again comes into view” (7). In Fish’s view, the good physician rejects the language of rhetoric because it would “contain or corral truth” thus “discourag[ing] an active self-critical participation in the search for truth” (19). What is required is a dialectical “movement of the soul . . . toward an experience of truth” (19). Of course, the good physician writes, but he does so in a language that draws attention to the impossibility of words to signify properly. Paradoxically, the language of the good physician is “self-consuming.” Rather than expressing the truth, it launches the reader into an immediate encounter with truth at the point that it fails, shifting “the pressure and attention from the work to its effects, from what is happening on the page to what is happening in the reader” (3-4).

Again, Fish’s perspective is helpful in certain ways. Donne has no intention of

using language so as to “contain and corral truth” and he is ultimately interested in the “making of better persons” rather than “better poems” (4). And yet, the “good physician aesthetic,” for Donne, is not “finally an anti-aesthetic” (3). As indicated in Expostulation XIX, Donne takes a positive view of rhetorical language, celebrating the eloquence of Scripture and its power to transform.<sup>29</sup> Fish’s dialectical model of the good physician would suggest that the only way for language to succeed both morally and epistemologically is for it to fail mimetically. A Christian-Augustinian grammar and rhetoric suggests something very different.<sup>30</sup> Where the philosopher-theologian would

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<sup>29</sup> In a sermon delivered at St. Paul’s in 1621, Donne upholds this same view of rhetorical language while critiquing “the Platonique Philosophers” who “thought it a profanation of God to speak to God” (*Sermons* 8.338). The entire passage is worth citing in connection with Donne’s approach to theology that unites poetry, divinity, and the heart:

Some of the Platonique Philosophers thought it a profanation of God, to speak to God; They thought, that when our Thoughts were made Prayers, and that the Heart flowed into the Tongue, and that we had invested and appareled our Meditations with words, this was a kinde of Painting, and Dressing, and a superfluous diligence, that rather tasted of humane affections, then such a sincere service, as was fit for the presence of God; Onely the first conceptions, the first ebullitions and emanations of the soul, in the heart, they thought to be a fit sacrifice to God, and all verball prayer to be too homely for him. But God himself, who is all spirit, hath yet put on bodily lineaments, Head and Hands, and Feet, yea and Garments too, in many places of Scripture, to appear, that is, to manifest himself to us: And when we appear to God, though our Devotion be all spiritual, as he is all spirit, yet let us put on lineaments and apparel upon our Devotions, and digest the Meditations of the heart, into words of the mouth. God came to us *in verbo*, In the word; for Christ is, The word that was made flesh. Let us, that are Christians, go to God so, too, That the *words of our mouth*, as well as the *Meditations of our heart*, may be *acceptable to him*. (*Sermons* 8.338-39)

<sup>30</sup> Plato’s dialectic, as Fish points out, “aims at the transformation of the soul-mind into an instrument capable of seeing things in the phenomenal world for what they really are (turning things upside down), imperfect and inferior reflections of a higher reality whose claim on our thoughts and desires is validated as earthly claims are

privilege the mind-soul, attempting to instantiate truth in words once and for all or prepare the reader for an immediate experience of truth in contemplative silence, Donne as poetic theologian focuses on the heart-soul, seeking to engage the reader in a dialogic, transformative encounter with God according to a biblical poetic, rhetoric and hermeneutic.<sup>31</sup>

It seems to me that the best analogies for appreciating the word-work of the *Devotions* come from other prose works by Donne, specifically the *Sermons* and *Essays*.

For instance, in a sermon preached on Christmas Day, 1628, Donne writes,

All comes from God's hand; and from his hand, by way of hand-writing,

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discredited" (7). This differs significantly from the view of dialectic that emerges when grammar and rhetoric are ascendant—i.e. “the orderly disposition of things in the phenomenal world” (7). Rather than aiding in the discovery of new and unknown truths, a dialectic oriented to the literary arts provides a way of arranging truths that have been discovered through grammatical exegesis and rhetorical invention. Interestingly, Fish characterizes the “Platonic doctrine” as “obviously Christian” (6). With Debora Shuger, I would suggest that Fish has inappropriately conflated Greek philosophy with Christian theology while at the same time confounding rhetoric and dialectic: “Fish follows the more traditional path of exalting dialectic at the expense of rhetoric,” but at numerous points in his study “the very qualities he attributes to dialectic”—most especially the transformative nature of Christian literatures in the early seventeenth century—“actually belong, according to both antiquity and the Renaissance, under rhetoric” (Shuger 6).

<sup>31</sup> Nelson, borrowing from Shuger, suggests that Donne's strategy in the *Devotions* is “pathopoeic.” Rather than attempting to “teach a right way of thinking,” Donne seeks to “stimulate the affections and reform attitudes in order to incline his audience to a right way of living” (Nelson 251). Nelson's perspective here is helpful. Indeed, the language of the *Devotions* serves to move readers rather than merely instruct and this helps to place it in the tradition of the “Christian grand style.” However, Donne's heart-centered approach is not strictly oriented to the affections. He may not offer an “intellectualized defense” in the *Devotions*, but neither does he shy away from intellectual matters. What matters to Donne is the whole person in relationship to the living God. I would suggest that *pathopoeia* is one element of Donne's patristic-humanistic approach to theology. Indeed, Donne is a “pastor-preacher” who seeks to “move his audience to greater devotion” (249), but he moves in such a way as to unite the faculties rather than keep them distinct and separate. In other words, the transformation Donne has in mind is as much a matter of knowing God as loving him.

by way of letter, and instruction to us. . . . God writes to me . . . and that letter I will open, and read that letter; I will take knowledge that it is Gods hand to me, and I will study the will of God to me in that letter, and I will write back again to my God and return him an answer, in the amendment of my life, and give him my reformation for his information. (*Sermons* 8:305-306)

The dialogic of reading and writing, information and reformation in this passage provides fitting coordinates for Donne's theological *praxis* in the *Devotions*. Again, Donne does not direct himself or his reader to a sphere of truth beyond the bounds of language or the condition of hermeneutics. Rather, he finds himself addressed by God in the Scriptures and this address forms a kind of prescription for healing and wholeness. At the same time, Donne's response is crucial to the success of the therapeutic process. He must "write back again and return him an answer," matching his "reformation" to God's "information." This dialogic is implied throughout the *Devotions*, but Donne makes it explicit in Expostulation IX where he describes God as a "Phisician" who has provided a remedy for spiritual disease "*openly, intelligibly, manifestly by the book*" (48, 49). The members of the Trinity consult and prescribe to remedy the disease, but Donne understands himself as an active agent in the healing process, a responsive participant who not only submits himself to a divine "consultation" through "confession," but also contributes to the healing process by searching the Scriptures for a remedy, turning it into "*phisick*" (since God "*intendest all for phisick*) where others would find only "*poyson*" (49).

The particular form of remedy that Donne highlights in the *Devotions* is the word-work of the cross. For Donne, the death of Christ is not only a point of doctrine to be studied, but also a stylistic remedy to be practiced. Throughout the *Devotions*, Donne reads the letter of the cross, “study[ing] the will of God to [him] in that letter,” and “write[s] back again” in the manner by which he is addressed, not only repeating the “information” of the cross, but also involving himself in a cross-like “reformation.” Again, the *Sermons* are helpful for clarifying Donne’s approach in the *Devotions*. In a sermon on Lamentations 3:1, Donne characterizes the “death of Christ” as a kind of divine “hand-writing” or “*Chirographum*” that demands a human response:

Beloved, the death of Christ is given to us, as a *Hand-writing*; for, when Christ naild that *Chirographum*, that first hand-writing that had passed between the Devill and us, to his Crosse, he did not leave us out of debt, nor absolutely discharged, but he laid another *Chirographum* upon us, another Obligation arising out of his death. His death is delivered to us, as a *writing*, but not a writing onely in the nature of a peece of *Evidence*, to plead our inheritance by, but a writing in the nature of a Copy, to learne by; It is not onely given us to reade, but to write over, and practise; Not only to tell us *what* he did, but *how* we should do so too.

All the evils and mischiefes that light upon us in this world, come (for the most part) from this, *Quia fruimur utendis*, because we thinke to injoy those things which God hath given us onely to *use*. God hath given us a *use* of things, and we set our hearts upon them. And this hath a

proportion, an assimilation, an accommodation in the death of Christ. God hath proposed *that* for our *use*, in this world, and we think to enjoy it; God would have us doe it over again, and we think it enough to know that Christ hath done it already; God would have us *write* it, and we doe onely *read* it; God would have us *practise* the death of Christ, and we do but *understand* it. The *fruition*, the enjoying of the death of Christ, is reserved for the next life; To this life belongs the *use* of it; that use of it, to *fulfill his sufferings in our bodies*, by bearing the afflictions and tribulations of this life. (10:196)<sup>32</sup>

In this passage, Donne extends Augustine's distinction between "use" and "enjoyment" from *On Christian Doctrine* into the fields of ethics and hermeneutics, suggesting an important connection between "practice" and "writing."<sup>33</sup> While the death of Christ is

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<sup>32</sup> The OED defines "chirograph" generally as a "document formally written, engrossed, or signed." More specifically, it also signifies an "indenture," an "obligation or bond given in one's own handwriting," or a form "in which the will of the Papal See is expressed in writing." The example from Cowel (1727) is particularly suggestive of Donne's cooperative view of Christ's "*Chirographum*":

Anciently, when they made a Chirograph or Deed, which required a Counter-part, as we call it, they engrossed it twice upon one Piece of Parchment contrary-wise, leaving a space between, in which they wrote in great Letters, the word Chirograph; and then cut the Parchment in two, sometimes even, sometimes with Indenture, thro' the Midst of the Word.

<sup>33</sup> Donne's distinction between writing and reading is similar to Roland Barthes' concept of readerly and writerly texts. In *S/Z*, Barthes maintains that "evaluation finds . . . precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the "writerly" (*le scriptible*). Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. . . . Opposite the writerly text is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly (*le lisible*)" (4). Donne would make himself and his reader into a producer (writer) of the cross rather than a consumer (reader). Of course, Donne's theory differs from Barthes's in that it intends moral-spiritual participation in divinity rather than

given as a kind of “Hand-writing” from God “to plead our inheritance by,” it is not to be received passively, enjoyed in contemplative satisfaction. Rather, it is a “writing in the nature of a Copy to learn by.” It is to be translated rather than read, practiced rather than understood. It not only “tell[s] us *what* he did, but *how* we should do so too.”

This passage provides an important perspective for considering Donne’s theological *praxis* in the *Devotions*. Having read God’s handwriting in the Scriptures, specifically the “*Chirographum*” of Christ’s atoning death, Donne seeks to rewrite it for his own situation and other occasions like it, performing an *imitatio Christi* at the point of composition. At numerous points, Donne meditates on the death of Christ, but he writes at all points from the perspective of the cross, working out his theology not only in the disinterested voice of the scholar, but also the voice of Christ pleading with the Father: “*My God, my God, why [ . . . ]*.” He also seeks to harmonize the traditional stations of the cross with the “stations” of his sickness, suggesting points of similarity between Christ’s passion and his own suffering, while also seeking to interpret his affliction cross-wise.

The boldness with which Donne expresses his participation in divinity is remarkable and might seem presumptuous in a way. However, his confidence comes in his identity as *interloqué*. Rather than fighting for the subject position or fleeing from it in shame, Donne involves himself in the manner by which he has been addressed, as one who has been invited to participate responsively in God’s transformative word-work. The “children of God know how to resolve and make liquid all [God’s] Actions,” writes Donne in the *Essays*: “They can spie out and extract Balmes, and Oyles from his

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erotic “jouissance.”

Vinegers; and supple, and cure with his corrosives. Be he what they will, they will make him Mercifull, if Mercy be then wholsomest for them” (*Essays* 62). Again, God is a good physician who has his own unique remedy for sin and sickness.<sup>34</sup> But he prescribes in such a way to as to invite the contribution of the patient in the therapeutic process.

Donne turns this theme to prayer elsewhere in the *Essays*:

O God, as mine inward corruptions have made me mine own *Pharaoh*,  
and mine own *Egypt*; so thou, by the inhabitation of thy Spirit, and  
application of thy merit, hast made me mine own Christ; and contenting  
thy self with being my Medicine, allowest me to be my Physician. (75-76)

The crucifixion of Christ is a kind of stylistic medicine, prescribed by God in the Scriptures and interpreted-invented by Donne according to situation and context.

Donne’s approach is similar in each station of the *Devotions*: his initial inclination is to associate the suffering brought on by spiritual and physical disease with divine judgment. As he draws his attention to the cross, however, he discovers the conditions for a new kind of wording-living. The afflictions of this life are indeed a “scourge,” but they are “corrections” that “scourge us into the way” to God:

Let me think no degree of this thy correction, *casuall*, or without  
*signification*; but yet when I have read it in that language as it is a  
*correction*, let me translate it into another, and read it as a *mercy*; and  
which of these is the *Originall*, and which is the *Translation*, whether thy  
*Mercy*, or thy *Correction*, were thy primary, and original intention in this

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<sup>34</sup> For the connection between sin and sickness and the good physician motif, see Goldberg (1971) 507-517.

sicknes, I cannot conclude, though death conclude me; for as it must necessarily appeare to bee a *correction*, so I can have no greater argument of thy *mercy*, then to die in *thee*, and by that death, to be united to him, who died for me. (40)

“Translation” in this passage not only evokes the grammatical-rhetorical orientation of Donne’s theology, but also indicates an important connection between hermeneutic activity and moral-spiritual involvement. That is, Donne not only asks God for the permission to translate his affliction as a form of mercy, but he also performs such a translation at the very moment of his request. He begins by reading his disease in the language of judgment, but soon finds that he requires a different kind of word-work to receive the goodness that God has for him. The terministic order of judgment with its accompanying vocabulary of sin and disease is significant because it guards against a “*casuall*” interpretation of God’s correction, but it does not ultimately lead to renewed health. Donne overcomes the problem by consulting a different lexicon with a new order of terms. He trains himself in the language of mercy and translates his experience accordingly. Under this new configuration, sickness and sin offer a kind of consolation because they now stand as signs of God’s unexpected and astonishing intervention. Where solitude was once fearful, it now becomes a special instance of visitation and where disease was once threatening, it now becomes a unique manifestation of health.

This is how Donne configures his theological *praxis* throughout the *Devotions*. He makes the death of Christ his focus, but instead of simply conveying the doctrinal significance of the cross, leading his reader to a detached, doctrinal acceptance of divine

mercy, Donne writes in such a way as to use-practice the cross, encouraging both himself and his reader to perform a “reformation” in response to God’s “information.” In the passage above, Donne fashions himself as a responsive “me” (Christ “died for me,” he says); and yet, he experiences God’s initiative as an invitation to practice the death of Christ rather than simply enjoy it intellectually. That is, God’s “mercy” does not exempt Donne from involvement in Christ’s death. Rather it forms an “argument” that compels him to participate. And so, Donne responds cross-wise, writing not only to commemorate the death of Christ, but also to dramatize it.

To describe in fine detail how Donne’s transformative remedy gets worked out at each stage in the *Devotions* would require more space than this chapter will allow. However there are three examples that I would like to highlight. The first comes in Expostulation II where Donne attempts to make sense of the first signs of his sickness. Here, he struggles to understand why God’s anger comes upon him so quickly, leading him to question whether it is even God who is responsible for his affliction. “Surely it is not thou,” he says; “it is not thy hand. The devouring sword, the consuming fire, the winds for the wildernes, the diseases of the body, all that afflicted *Job*, were from the hand of *Satan*; it is not thou” (13). However, no sooner has Donne arrived to this conclusion, than he perceives God’s work in his affliction. “It is thou,” he says; “Thou *my God*, who hast led mee so continually with thy hand, from the hand of my Nurce, as that I know, thou wilt not correct mee, but with thine own hand” (13). Rather than suffering at the “hand of *Satan*,” he has “fallen into the hands of God.” At this point, Donne begins to play out the word-work of the cross, merging a scene of mortification

with resurrection: "For by that mercy, I consider in my present state, not the haste, & dispatch of the disease, in dissolving this body, so much, as the much more hast, & dispatch, which my God shal use, in recollecting, and reuniting this *dust* again at the *Resurrection*." To be sure, Donne continues to perceive "dissolution, destruction, divorce, and separation" in his sickness, but now he is able to see God at work in it such that his suffering becomes the gateway to new life.

Donne continues to play out his grammar-rhetoric of the cross in Prayer II, addressing himself to a "gracious God, who pursuest and perfitest [his] own purposes." Thou "hast cald me up," he says, "by casting me further downe, and clothd me with thy selfe, by stripping me of my selfe" (13). Here, Donne not only repeats the metaphorical "stile of [God's] Actions," playing on Paul's analogy of taking off an old self and putting on a new Christly self (Rom. 6:5-9; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10), but he also reinvents it for his own situation, mingling God's calling up and casting down so as to symbolically enact an ascent to God at the point that he tumbles to destruction. The consonance in "cald," "casting" and "clothd," as well as "self" and "stripping" is particularly powerful in the way that it joins situations that would typically be viewed as irreconcilable. What could a calling upward have to do with a casting downward, a clothing of the self with a stripping of the self? The reconciliation of these seeming opposites is found at the cross where humiliation merges with exaltation, judgment with mercy, death with life.

Donne practices a similar hermeneutic when considering the loss of his appetite. Rather than plunging him into malaise and discontent, the dulling of his "bodily senses to

the meats, and eases of this world” serves to sharpen his “spirituall senses, to the apprehension” of God. His “tast is not gone away, but gone up to sit at  *Davids table, To tast, & see, that the Lord is good*” (14). His “stomach is not gone, but gone up, so far upwards toward the  *Supper of the Lamb, with the Saints in heaven, as to the Table, to the Communion of thy Saints heere in earth.*” Interestingly, Donne concludes this section by recommending his practice of biblical eloquence to his divine interlocutor, gently coaching God to follow his example. “Interpret thine owne worke,” he says, “and call this sicknes correction, and not anger, & there is soundness in my flesh”; “transferr my sinnes, with which thou art so displeased, upon him, with whome thou art so well pleased,  *Christ Jesus, and there will be rest in my bones*” (16). It may seem bold for Donne to provide God with a lesson in hermeneutics, but this exemplifies the dialogic nature of his theology. What he reads in the “*Chirographum*” of the cross, he “writes back again” in a similar manner, answering God’s “information” with his “reformation.” As Donne knows from his own theological practice, there is no transcendental signified that will finally make the signifiers stick, and so, there is a chance that God will not read his situation in a manner that would lend itself to reconciliation. As a result, Donne channels his own word-work into confession and prayer, requesting that God continue his practice of reading his sin and sickness according to the transformative figure of the cross. Donne gives no indication that God will in fact answer his prayer on these terms. However, it seems that such vulnerability is crucial to a relationship with the living God. Instead of bringing closure by highlighting doctrinal essentials or seeking to guarantee what God will or will not do on the basis of a rational scheme, Donne opens himself to

the living God of the Scriptures, making himself available to the initiative of the Other at all points even as he seeks to participate on the terms by which he has been addressed.

Another important example of Donne's strategy occurs in Station VI where Donne comes to reflect on the nature of his fear. At the outset of his expostulation, he characterizes fear as "a stifling spirit, a spirit of *suffocation*" that incapacitates and renders a man speechless (30). The paradox, however, is that Donne makes this claim in the process of speaking to God and this causes him to wonder if he has not lured him into a double-bind: "Shall a feare of *thee*, take away my devotion *to thee*? Dost thou command me to *speake* to thee, and commaund me to feare thee, and do these destroy each other?" (30). At this point, Donne begins to redefine his fear, combining it with a new order of terms. Rather than allowing his fear to signify estrangement from God, he reorients it to grace and mercy and in the process discovers that his fear is precisely what enables him to call out to God:

Pray in thy bed at midnight, and God wil not say, I will heare thee tomorrow upon thy knees, at thy bed side; pray upon thy knees there, then, & God will not say, I will heare thee on *Sunday*, at *Church*; *God* is no *dilatory God*, no froward *God*; Praier is never *unseasonable*, *God* is never asleep nor absent. But, *O my God*, can I doe this and *feare* thee; come to thee, and speak to thee, in all places, at all houres, and *feare* thee? Dare I aske this question? There is more boldness in the *question*, then in the *comming*: I may doe it, though I *feare* thee; I cannot doe it, except I feare thee. (31)

As Donne continues, his language becomes increasingly hopeful and trusting. By the middle of the expostulation, fear no longer stands as a threat to communion with God, but the very means of establishing it. It is a grace to help Donne keep on course since “God givest us feare for ballast to carry us stedily in all weathers” (32). “Thou wouldst ballast us,” says Donne, “with such sand, as should have gold in it, with that feare which is thy feare; for the feare of the Lord is his treasure.” At this point, Donne subtly reads his own fear into “thy fear,” transforming his anxiety into divine assurance. Indeed, there is “a feare, of which [he] may not be afraid”; it is the fear that Christ possessed in his passion when he made a “showe of fear” even though he was “declared . . . by himself to be God” (34).

Of course, Donne is not suggesting that all forms of fear are good. “There is a feare which weakens men” and a “feare that is a punishment of former wickednesses, & induces more.” However, Donne does not allow this interpretation of fear to dominate. Nor does he seek dialectical escape from the messiness of competing interpretations. Instead, he sticks with his sources and rhetorically invents an interpretation of fear that will enable him to find God in his situation of suffering and affliction. And he finds him in his practice of the cross. While fear would typically be a sign of estrangement from God, Donne guides his fear to Gethsemane and Golgotha and becomes caught up in a transformation from affliction to consolation. “[I]n *thy feare, my God,*” writes Donne, “my feare . . . is *hope, and love, & confidence, and peace,* and every limbe, and ingredient of *Happinesse* enwrapped” (33). He concludes Expostulation VI by reasserting his hermeneutic of mercy, speaking to God confidently from a point where he

had previously been reduced to fearful silence:

I lie heere possest with that feare, which is *thy feare*, both that this sicknesse is thy immediate correction, and not meerey a *naturall accident*, and therefore fearefull, because *it is a fearfull thing to fall into thy hands*, and that this feare preserves me from all inordinate feare, arising out of the infirmity of Nature, because thy hand being upon me, thou wilt never let me fall out of thy hand. (33)

A final example of Donne's transformative strategy comes in Station XIII where Donne has become plagued by spots all over his body. This is an especially poignant section of the *Devotions* for appreciating Donne's theological *praxis*. At the outset, Donne defines the spots as a sign of "infection" and "malignitie" and confesses his disappointment, suspecting that his disease may be "*remedilesse*" (67, 68). "O poore stepp toward being well," he cries, "when these *spots* do only tell us that we are worse than we were sure of before" (68). As Donne turns to God in expostulation, he begins to make a thoroughgoing search of the Scriptures wondering what his spots may mean. He considers a variety of possibilities, and along the way discovers that his spots do not necessarily indicate God's absence or disfavor. In fact, they may be the first signs of recovery since God "healst our *wounds*, and yet leavest *scarres*" (69). And yet, there are spots that God detests—that is, "the spotts that we hide." The important thing is to make a "*voluntary confession*" of such spots since we "become *Idolators* of our owne staines" when we seek to cover them up. "Till wee tell thee in our sicknes," says Donne, "wee think our selves whole, till we shew our *spotts*, thou appliest no *medicine*." For Donne,

confession is crucial because it leads to a “gracious Interpretation.” As Donne opens himself further to the good “*Phisician*” at the end of his expostulation, he enacts the very interpretation that he hopes from God, transforming judgment into mercy and correction into comfort:

Even my *spotts* belong to thy *Sonnes* body, and are part of that, which he came downe to this earth, to fetch, and challenge, and assume to himselfe. When I open my *spotts*, I doe but present him with that which is *His*, and till I do so, I detaine, & withhold *his right*. When therefore thou seest them upon me, as *His*, and seest them by this way of *Confession*, they shall not appear to me, as the *pinches of death*, to decline my fear to *Hell*; (for *thou hast not left thy holy one in Hell*, thy *Sonne* is not there) but these *spotts* upon my *Breast*, and upon my Soule, shal appeare to mee as the *Constellations* of the *Firmament*, to direct my Contemplation to that place, where thy Son is, thy *right hand*. (69-70)

Here, Donne’s spots are no longer indications of God’s abandonment. Rather, they are special “markes” and “tokens” of his visitation. According to this pattern of interpretation, all of Donne’s symptoms of illness become signs of intimacy: “These heates, O Lord, which thou hast broght 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 own *Name*, and conveyed thyself to mee.” Donne concludes with a plea which functions as yet another symbolic enactment of God’s mercy: “Onely be thou ever present to me, O my God, and this *bed-chamber* and thy bedchamber shall be all one

room, and the closing of these bodily *Eyes* here, and the opening of the *Eyes* of my *Soule* there, all one *Act*.”

These instances of transformative word-work are by no means exceptional in the *Devotions*. On the contrary, they exemplify the strategy of each station. From meditation through expostulation to prayer, Donne moves his reader from a situation of desperation to consolation, anxiety to peace through the paradoxical grammar-rhetoric of the cross. Given this general pattern, we might assume that the *Devotions* would close on a note of assurance or certitude in some ultimate sense. And yet, this is precisely what does not happen. In fact, Donne seems to guard against full closure in his closing prayer. In part, this is because of the occasional, episodic nature of Donne’s poetic theology. From the outset, Donne has not been working his way gradually to a static, immutable truth. Rather, he has been engaging himself and his reader in a living truth, encouraging an ongoing participation in the new creation initiated by the sacrificial love of Christ. And so, while “each individual devotion moves from anxiety to peace, the overall progress of the work” is similar to the *Confessions* in that it “is not characterized by . . . a continual movement upwards that culminates in peace in the final devotion” (Papazian 1992 610). Strangely, the general uncertainty at the end of the *Devotions* is a sign of hope rather than despair. At each stage, the application of divine “*Correction*” has engendered an interpretation of mercy rather than judgment and this has given way to a poetic “participation of [God’s] selfe” for both author and reader (*Devotions* 126). But Donne knows that his “*customs of sinne*” are “slippery” and that there is the possibility of “*relapses* into those *sinnes*” that had “induc’d [God’s] former judgements.” And so, he

concludes by calling upon God not only to preserve him in his present state, but also to abide with him if he should fall away. The lack of closure wrought by Donne's final confession and supplication helps to reinforce the kind of divinity that he has been practicing throughout. It leaves open the possibility of falling away from God and this seems to indicate an underlying anxiety, but it also holds out an enduring opportunity to continue in the way of "everlasting Mercy," encouraging a dynamic and ongoing rewriting/use/practice of the *Chirographum* of Christ.

In the next and final chapter, I shall continue to develop these themes in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, focusing specifically on *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. There is much that distinguishes Donne from Hopkins, but what draws them together is their status as poetic theologians. The challenge of appreciating this comparison is significant. Most readers treat *The Wreck* as a theological poem, but fall back on the philosophical-scholastic tradition for their understanding of theology. What often escapes their notice, however, is that Hopkins gives voice to a distinctly poetic approach to divinity in the poem itself. At the same time, he symbolically enacts such an approach through his use of metaphoric language, specifically the oxymoron. Rather than straining after an unconditioned Absolute, writing to define the essence of divinity in the manner of a dialectician, he takes on the role of hermeneut, poet, and orator, seeking to participate responsively in human-divine relationship according to God's claim and calling. As in the *Confessions* and *Devotions*, the sacrifice of Christ lies at the heart of his strategy. Hopkins reads-writes a Christly *Chirographum*, seeking to practice/use the self-giving love of Christ, rather than understand/enjoy it. If Hopkins were to comment

on the language of his poem without having to answer the rationalistic demands of his age (or ours), he might put it this way: "That is Christ playing at me and me playing at Christ, only that is no play but truth" (Hopkins *Sermons* 154).

### CHAPTER 3

#### ***Cor ad cor loquitur: Confession, Conversion and the Figure of the Cross in *The Wreck* of G. M. Hopkins***

That is Christ playing at me and me playing at Christ, only that is no play but truth.

--G. M. Hopkins<sup>1</sup>

A new poetic language can serve to find a way back to the God of Abraham. And that is what one sees in Hopkins . . .

--Charles Taylor<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapter, I argued that Donne's religious works, specifically "Satyre III" and *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, are best appreciated within a patristic-humanistic strain of the theological tradition. As poet-priest, Donne practices a distinctly grammatical-rhetorical form of divinity oriented to the heart-soul. His approach is at once conservative and revolutionary. Donne has an ear for the "fathers," but he does not simply defer to them as though a correct interpretation could establish "true religion" once and for all. Instead, the voices of tradition and authority provide the conditions for a re-creative theological *praxis* that is carried out on the boundary of grammatical exegesis and rhetorical invention. The language of an authoritative text like the Bible is important not because it affords a kind of ontotheology or launches the mind-soul into dialectical ascent. Rather, it invites an interpretive-inventive approach to theology, encouraging a responsive participation in relationship with God through the word-work of confession,

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<sup>1</sup> G. M. Hopkins, *Sermons and Devotional Writings* (London: Oxford UP): 154.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP): 757.

meditation, expostulation, and prayer. From this perspective, Donne follows “another Augustine” from the *Confessions* who writes as a poet, rhetorician and hermeneut, engaging the Scriptures within the bounds of authority and tradition so as to involve himself and his reader in a kind of theological learning that is at the same time a kind of theological living. In what follows, I shall argue that Hopkins tracks in this same patristic-humanistic tradition of theology and does so most ostensibly in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*.

At first, it may seem unusual to suggest a kinship between Donne and Hopkins based on a common approach to divinity. There is little evidence to suggest that Hopkins read the religious works of Donne, and Hopkins shows a preference for metaphysical thinking that Donne did not share. As we have seen, theology and the literary arts go hand in hand for Donne, which partly accounts for the difficulty of identifying his work with either the conventional or emergent theological systems of the period. Hopkins, on the other hand, felt that metaphysics and Greek philosophy were natural allies in his effort to establish “*an enlightened Christianity*” during his university days (Hopkins *Further Letters* 16-17)<sup>3</sup>, and he eventually came to enjoy a stable sectarian identity in his conversion to Roman Catholicism while gaining a settled theological outlook through his training as a Jesuit.

These differences in sensibility and overall outlook are significant.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, however, there is “another Hopkins” who projects a style of theology that parallels

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<sup>3</sup> See Brown (1997) 1-43.

<sup>4</sup> For other notable contrasts between Donne and Hopkins based on style and religious orientation, see Duncan (1959) 91-102 and David Morris (1953) 20, 23, 33, 35.

Donne's in striking ways. Louis Martz and Helen Gardner once suggested a similarity between Hopkins and writers of the seventeenth century like Donne on the basis of an Augustinian-Loyolan tradition of meditation.<sup>5</sup> I would agree that Hopkins and Donne are comparable along these lines, but it seems that the connection goes beyond a specific meditative practice defined in scholastic-sectarian terms and is more generally related to a mutual affinity for treating theological matters in the literary, heart-centered manner of the church fathers and early Christian humanists.

The difficulty of appreciating such a connection is that readers of Hopkins, as of Donne, typically associate the discipline of theology with metaphysical thinking and/or religious dogma and use this definition as a key to the meaning of his literary works. Again, Donne scholarship tends to be governed by a polemical spirit, with scholars making recourse to official systematic theologies—whether Roman or Reformed—in order to establish Donne's true sectarian allegiance. The situation is slightly different in Hopkins' case since his religious identity is quite obvious; and yet, the priority of the philosophical-scholastic tradition remains constant in the criticism. Given that Hopkins was attracted to Greek philosophy in his youth and developed a taste for scholastic theology after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, scholars are inclined to attribute a metaphysical motive to his poetic work with some arguing for a positive view of his literary theo-logic in relation to the poems and others using the poetry as a platform for a thoroughgoing critique. In the positive-religious strain, Hopkins' poetry tends to be read

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<sup>5</sup> See Martz (1954) 4, 321-27 and Gardner (1952) xxi-xxx, I-IV. For other comparative studies of Donne and Hopkins, see Leavis (1932) 167-74; Stevenson (1959) 300-20; and Bump (1985) 303-29.

against the background of relevant devotional or doctrinal contexts such as the method of Ignatian meditation, the writings of Duns Scotus, or Jesuit theology with scholars suggesting either explicitly or implicitly that the language accurately represents or embodies important theological and/or metaphysical truths.<sup>6</sup> In the skeptical strain, readers draw attention to the incompatibility of poetry and theology, highlighting the impossible attempt to reconcile language with a stable metaphysic so as to enjoy unmediated access to God.<sup>7</sup>

### **Metaphysical Theology and Criticism of *The Wreck***

The critical history of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* exemplifies this trend of scholarship. Readers have long recognized *The Wreck* as a kind of theological poem, but have differed significantly in their views of the nature of theology and poetry and the relation between them. Some who would affirm the compatibility of these modes generally but question the highly metaphoric nature of Hopkins' wording, suggest the need for a more rational approach suited to the telling of sacred truths. John Robinson argues in this vein, extending Robert Bridges' famous critique of *The Wreck* as a "great dragon folded in the gate" (1918 104).<sup>8</sup> According to Robinson, Hopkins' language in

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<sup>6</sup> Good examples of this critical approach include Andreach (1964); Chevigny (1965) 141-53; Cotter (1972); Downes (1959); Martin (1957); Peters (1948).

<sup>7</sup> See Armstrong (1993) 420-39; Korg (1977); Miller (1977); Sprinker (1981); Motto (1984); and Meyer and Salmon (1993).

<sup>8</sup> In Bridges' view, *The Wreck*, like most of Hopkins' poetry, fails to abide by the rules of a "continuous literary decorum" (1918 96). Bridges accuses Hopkins' poetry of "occasional affectation in metaphor," "perversion of human feeling," and "exaggerated Marianism" and deplors "the naked encounter of sensualism and asceticism" as well as Hopkins' efforts to "force emotion into theological or sectarian channels" (96). In Bridges' opinion, such poetic tactics constitute the "rude shocks" of a "purely artistic

the poem is deficient because of an “overturn of normal values”; this subversion of the norm, or what he calls elsewhere a “coup,” is felt most keenly in the oxymoronic patterning of “stanza 21 where God is approved as hunter and where the snowstorm becomes . . . a bounty of petals” (119). Robinson rejects “Hopkins’ attempt to carry us with him in his view that there is creative love and redemption in misery in pain.” For him,

the damage to the poem lies in the fact that the imaginative grip which Hopkins has on reality . . . is abandoned in a crude and unsatisfactory exchange: spinning snow is now flowers, Death is lovely, the old problem of why a loving God should permit suffering is no longer being seriously acknowledged in the poem because the terms in which its last third is written forget that suffering was ever that at all. (121)

Robinson has some positive things to say about the language of *The Wreck* in relation to its theological outlook. In fact, he is quite enthusiastic about the first part of the poem, but this is because the wording in this section is “rigorously logical; every stanza develops the idea of the double nature of experience, of making and unmaking, of fixity and change, of birth and death” (115). To Robinson’s way of thinking, Hopkins would

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wantonness.” They make for “Oddity and Obscurity,” aberrations in Bridges’ mind that “were not a part of [the poet’s] intention” since Hopkins “is always serious” and “always has something to say.” Elsewhere, Bridges expresses his perplexity over “the mixture of passages of extreme delicacy and exquisite diction with passages where in a jungle of rough root-words, emphasis seems to oust euphony” (99). For Bridges, as for Robinson, poetry must follow a neoclassical poetic of intelligibility, striking a balance between all extremes. Affectation and perversion must be cast out and replaced with earnestness and normality. Oddity and obscurity must give way to familiarity and clarity. In short, poetry must follow the official rules of convention, semantics, and sanity.

do better to practice a more rational poetic, keeping the standard metaphysical categories distinct and avoiding the association of realities that are obviously incompatible.

Others who affirm the theology of *The Wreck* take a more positive view of Hopkins' poetic *praxis*, arguing that the words of the poem comprise a kind of divine knowledge that makes God's presence thoroughly immanent. For these readers, Hopkins' metaphoric language serves to unite *ontos* and *theos*; it is "not only *about* something, but *is* also, in some way, itself that very thing" by virtue of its sacramental or mimetic power (Salmon 1983 89). Virginia Ellis and James Finn Cotter provide helpful examples of this ontotheological perspective. According to Ellis, Hopkins' poetic technique comprises

a sacramental method, a visible sign of an invisible God, in all its aspects working to incarnate the great mystery in words. . . . [I]t is a method in which The Real Presence, as in the Eucharist, is not merely symbolized, but is present in that which represents it. . . . The poems do not merely point beyond themselves to a vague concept of an unseen God, do not merely make statements about him, but are, in every aspect of diction, rhythm, syntax, imagery, so thoroughly and immediately immanent. (23)

Cotter takes this view to the extreme, arguing that *The Wreck* forms a linguistic gnosis such that "Christ is made . . . present" in the "concreteness of the language and imagery" (155). He contends that

the one Word-made-man is known in his multiple roles from the first line of [the poem] to the last. The one Christ is the aim and mark of the entire

ode. Gnosis of his nature and of his heroic deeds is the reason of its being. His is the mystery . . . into which his adherents are initiated and through which, after mystic knowledge is revealed, the garland of victorious new life is bestowed. (153)

For readers like Ellis and Cotter, the language of *The Wreck* is theological precisely because it is metaphorical. It affords what Derrida would call a “metaphysics of presence.”<sup>9</sup> The signifiers of the poem are perfectly integrated with a transcendental signified; the word in *The Wreck* is the Word.

In opposition to this line of criticism, J. Hillis Miller and Michael Sprinker take a skeptical view of the poem’s theology, emphasizing the intensely metaphoric, and thus catechrestic, nature of Hopkins’ language use. Leading the charge, Miller devotes his attention to the way that the language of *The Wreck* necessarily deconstructs itself, thereby frustrating Hopkins’ putative attempt to grasp God’s presence in a pattern of figures and tropes. With Robinson, he recognizes the poem’s theological orientation and offers a critique of the poet’s language use, but instead of calling for a literary style more suited to epistemic clarity and ontological distinctness, he uses the poem to critique Western metaphysics and theology generally, arguing that *The Wreck* exemplifies the impossibility of language to establish a relationship between self and God.

Miller adopts Hopkins’ concepts of underthought and overthought<sup>10</sup> to highlight

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<sup>9</sup> See Derrida (1976) 49.

<sup>10</sup> In a letter to A. W. M. Baillie, Hopkins contends “that in any lyric passage of the tragic poets . . . there are—usually; I will not say always, it is not likely—two strains of thought running together and like counterpointed; the overthought that which

the inherent clash between metaphysics and metaphor in *The Wreck*. In Miller's view, the overthought of the poem provides "a version . . . of western metaphysics in its Catholic Christian form. In this text the Word governs all words, as it governs all natural objects and selves" (1976 58). By contrast, the underthought "is a thought about language itself. It recognizes that there is no word for the Word, that all words are metaphors—that is, all are differentiated, differed, and deferred." Miller sums up the contradiction between "theological overthought" and "linguistic underthought" in "Nature" (1977):

The theological thought depends on the notion of an initial unity that has been divided or fragmented and so could conceivably be reunified. The linguistic underthought depends on the notion of an initial bifurcation that could not by any conceivable series of linguistic transformation, such as those that make up the basic poetic strategies of Hopkins' verse, reach back to any primal word. There is no such word. (449)

From Miller's perspective, Hopkins strives after metaphysical presence in *The Wreck*, but ends up producing metaphors that can only bear witness to the absence of a desired presence. As a result, the poem ultimately "turns on a recognition of the . . . failure of poetic language" (1976 59). Sprinker carries Miller's reading to its logical conclusion:

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everybody, editors, see . . . and which might for instance be abridged or paraphrased . . . the other, the underthought, conveyed chiefly in the choice of metaphors etc used and often only half realized by the poet himself." Hopkins refers to the "underthought" elsewhere as an "echo or shadow of the overthought, something like canons and repetitions of music, . . . an undercurrent of thought governing the choice of images used" (*Further Letters* 252-3).

Hopkins' poem is "neither immanent nor incarnational; it is not a form of gnosis" (Sprinker 64). Rather, it is a "world structurally parallel to but ontologically distinct from objects"; it "is bound within what Nietzsche called the prison-house of language" (65).

Kinereth Meyer and Rachael Salmon take a similar critical approach, casting the poem's theology in a skeptical light; however, they take a significantly different view of Hopkins' *poesis*. Following Miller and Sprinker, they agree that the poem exemplifies the impossibility of uniting self and God through the referential power of a rational *logos*, but suggest that *The Wreck* accomplishes "positive spiritual work" nonetheless (258). Meyer and Salmon base their approach on a distinction between devotional and theological language: "The language of theology talks about its object in an attempt to define its essence, while the language of devotion . . . attempts to make something happen" (235).<sup>11</sup> They acknowledge that "devotional modes such as prayer and meditation . . . function to specify meaning," but suggest that such modes are designed "to bring about change." Devotional language "does not merely, or even primarily, point to meaning, but itself acts" (236).

According to Meyer and Salmon, the figurative language of *The Wreck* is chiefly devotional; while the poem is theological and metaphysical in overthought, it encourages

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<sup>11</sup> Meyer and Salmon develop their devotional theory of language around Mary Louise Pratt's literary adaptation of speech act theory in her *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse* (1977). They also draw from Pratt's main influences, John Searle's *Speech Acts* (1970) and J. L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words* (1975). For earlier functionalist views of Hopkins language, see Leavis (1932) and Richards (1929; rpt. 1987). For a later perspectives, see Motto (1984) and especially Marucci (1994) who reads *The Wreck* from a classically rhetorical perspective even while interacting with contemporary critical theory.

a “process of turning to God” on the level of underthought.<sup>12</sup> Granting that Hopkins most likely considered his text as a first hand account of a “past moment of conversion” (239), they argue that he becomes “immersed in language in a way which . . . leads to the re-occurrence of the original experience.” Subsequently, the poet “does not directly preach, or teach the ‘truth,’ but rather leads [himself] and the reader into the workings of language” (234-5). Meyer and Salmon have little concern for religious conversion, traditionally conceived; they are convinced, however, that the language of the poem—in particular, its failure to refer properly—can draw the reader into the “sin” and “salvation” of the reading-writing process: “one may come to confront a terrifying loss of mastery” in the poem “and realize, at the same time, one’s responsibility for reading and uttering” (239).

**“Wording it how”: *The Wreck* as Poetic Theology**

While this trajectory of criticism is understandable given Hopkins’ early attraction to metaphysics as well as his later training in scholastic theology, it fails to account for Hopkins’ distinctly poetic approach to theological matters in *The Wreck* and is thus comparable in effect to the tendency in Donne scholarship to read along strictly ideological lines. Put simply, the standard literary-critical approach, formed as it is around an intellectual tradition that privileges metaphysics and the dialectical arts, fails to do justice to the poem as a form of theology in its own right.

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<sup>12</sup> Meyer and Salmon “disagree with [Miller’s] metalinguistic description of the underthought.” “Miller’s approach, they say, “remains within the problematics of ‘meaning,’ and it fails to examine the positive spiritual work which the awareness of a lack of mastery can do” (258).

Again, scholars agree that theology is crucial to understanding *The Wreck*, but they are divided on the overall significance. Of those who take a positive view of Hopkins' theology, some regret that the language of the poem is not more rational and discursive and therefore suited to his ostensible theological aims (Robinson), while others contend that the wording is amenable to metaphysical thinking (Ellis and Cotter). Of those who take a more skeptical view of the poet's theology, some argue that the poem exemplifies the impossibility of divinity given that all forms of language are metaphoric rather than metaphysical (Miller and Sprinker), while others distinguish between devotional and theological forms of language, preferring the former to the latter for discussing the distinctly poetic elements of *The Wreck* given that they have a performative rather than predicative function (Salmon and Meyer).

The importance of all these readings is that they treat *The Wreck* as a theological poem. The difficulty is that they associate theology with metaphysical thinking and the dialectical arts, leaving the language of poetry to succeed or fail on terms set by the philosophical-scholastic tradition. Indeed, if this is the kind of theological vision that rules *The Wreck*, Miller's critique is apt: the rich metaphoric quality of the poem surely undercuts the metaphysical message. And yet, it is not clear that the poem is governed by such a vision. Miller's deconstruction of *The Wreck* provides a helpful critique of metaphysics generally, but tends to read too much of the philosophical-scholastic tradition into the overthought of the poem. Moreover, it elides potential alternatives since it relies so heavily on metaphysical thinking for its critique. Meyer and Salmon seem to redress this hermeneutic difficulty with their devotional emphasis, but ultimately

work within the same intellectual horizon. For Meyer and Salmon, as for Miller, metaphysics is treated as practically essential though theoretically impossible. As a result, the poem at best encourages a spiritual exercise enacted in a metaphysical void; at worst, it signals the inevitability of a self divided from itself, from others, and from God. My sense is that the poem invites a more hopeful view of humanity and divinity in relation to the language arts.

While readers have had much to say about the theological content of *The Wreck*, they tend to assume a metaphysical orientation for the poem's theology simply because the poem deals with theological subject matter. What is often overlooked is that Hopkins has much to say about the relation between language and divinity in the poem and his claims concerning this relation do not reflect the beliefs of an aspiring metaphysician, at least not in any straightforward way. In fact, they evoke a distinctly patristic-humanistic approach to theology, grounded in the literary arts and centered on the heart-soul. Throughout the poem, Hopkins openly acknowledges the impossibility of rendering the Word in words. Indeed, he refers to God as the "Ground of being" (l. 254)<sup>13</sup>, but he also insists that this very same God is "past all / Grasp" (l. 255). Elsewhere he writes that "God, three numberèd form" is "Beyond saying sweet" and "past telling of tongue" (l. 69), and the "heaven of desire" is beyond reach, for its "treasure [was] never eyesight got, nor was ever guessed" (l. 208-209).

Interestingly, Hopkins' confession of uncertainty and his affirmation of mystery

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<sup>13</sup> All references to *The Wreck* are from *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, edited by Catherine Phillips. I shall quote by line number. If the line is not specified, I shall indicate it in parentheses.

do not give way to a pessimistic outlook. Nor does his recognition of mimetic failure leave us haunted by the ghost of metaphysics, forcing us either to gaze upon “the impossible presence of the absent origin” with nostalgia or turn away from this “impossible presence” to enter into “the joyous affirmation of . . . a world . . . without truth” (Derrida 1978 292).<sup>14</sup> Mystery and uncertainty, for Hopkins, are vital for theological truth-telling. Indeed, they frustrate dialectical ascent to the god of metaphysics, but they are the very ground for theology in the patristic-humanistic tradition, stimulating trust and openness before the living God of the Scriptures. Similar to Augustine in Book 13 of the *Confessions*, Hopkins frames his poetic approach to divinity in creational terms. Unlike the philosopher or theologian who resists creaturely embodiment by centering on an autonomous mind-soul and striving to ascend dialectically to an unconditioned Absolute, Hopkins recognizes himself as a heart-centered *interloqué* addressed by the Creator and called out to take part in a new creation. While Hopkins may have had metaphysical ambitions, longing to prove divinity in a rational way, he does not express such ambitions in *The Wreck*. As we shall see, he writes responsively, bearing witness to the creative word-work of God by interpreting-inventing it for re-creational purposes.

Following the precedent set by Miller, I would like to build on Hopkins’ distinction between overthought and underthought in my own reading of *The Wreck*. However, where Miller perceives a contradiction between these levels of thought in the poem, I would suggest a contrapuntal relation. That is, the overthought and underthought

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<sup>14</sup> See pp. 7-8, 30-31 of the Introduction.

are different and can therefore be distinguished, but the difference is in the service of an overall harmony rather than discord. On the level of overthought, Hopkins actively attends to the “how” of his wording and welcomes “Fancy” in the telling of divine truth (ll. 229, 218). In no way does he suggest a need to overcome hermeneutics or the metaphoric nature of language so as to render up a transcendental Word once and for all. Rather, his expressed desire is to “spell” the truth of Christ grammatically and rhetorically so as to involve himself intentionally in a transformation already underway. Hopkins not only indicates this explicitly in overthought, but also dramatizes it implicitly in underthought. Meyer and Salmon are helpful on this point: the underthought of *The Wreck* does perform a kind of spiritual conversion. However, rather than emerging implicitly and involuntarily as a humanistic recourse to the disappearance of God, the performance comes in response to a divine calling at a creaturely level and is enacted positively through an extended oxymoron, the trope of the “martyr-master,” Christ.

### **Overthought: Outlining a Poetic Approach to Theology**

According to Walter Ong in *Hopkins, the Self, and God* (1986), Hopkins was deeply influenced by “Augustine’s sense of God’s presence to the interior human person,” but for historical-cultural reasons was unable to think-write in terms of the grammatical-rhetorical orientation of the *Confessions* with its “assertive parallelisms, expostulations, and other conspicuous tropes and figures” for speaking of human-divine relationship (19). Living in an age when the literary arts were ubiquitous, Augustine turned to “the biblical tradition to develop an urgent sense of the human interior or heart in confrontation with the living God and simultaneously with itself.” Hopkins, by

contrast, lived in “the period after Romanticism” when writing was “less conspicuously rhetorical, less residually oral” (20); rather than approaching matters of humanity and divinity according to a biblical grammar-rhetoric, he engaged a logic-dialectic devoted to “introspection” and “the particularity of the self” in relation to the other. Thus, according to Ong, Hopkins was indebted to Augustine in a way, but his view of self and God was primarily influenced by a modern form of metaphysics oriented to/by the transcendental ego. For Hopkins, as for other writers after Kant, the self is a unique, idiosyncratic “interior to which all else is in some way exterior and ‘other’” (33); it is also an “ultimate, existential point of reference” for all exteriority, providing a basic horizon for encountering the other, most especially God-as-other (27, 144). Language is crucial to this “framework of self-in-relation-to-God,” but not according to the classical performative-histrionic orientation of the *Confessions* (144). Rather, words, even poetic words, provide an ontic connection between subjective interior and objective exterior, ultimately facilitating “the interior union of the human person with God” (144).

There is much that rings true about Ong’s general reading of Hopkins, particularly if we allow the poet’s philosophical reflections to guide us.<sup>15</sup> What fascinates in *The Wreck*, however, is that Hopkins actively resists the kind of language that makes for metaphysical God and man and refuses to allow his view of divinity to take shape within

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<sup>15</sup> At numerous points in his journals and devotional writings, Hopkins reflects on the nature of human-divine relationship within the horizon of an “*I and me*” that he senses “above and in all things” (*Major Works* 282). He also calls for a revival of philosophical idealism in “The Probable Future of Metaphysics” while advocating a realist grammar in his essay on “Parmenides” (*Journal* 23, 127). For a commentary on and critique of Hopkins’ linguistic realism in his early essays, see Korg (1977) 977-86 and Armstrong (1993) 420-39.

the horizon of a transcendental “I.” Moreover, he upholds the literary arts in his representation of self and Other, writing in the language of confession, prayer, expostulation and praise while highlighting the freedom of the living God in human-divine relationship.

Stanza 1 sets the conditions for Hopkins’ poetic approach to divinity. In his essays and devotional writings, Hopkins has a tendency to conflate “*I* and *me*” as though subject and predicate were grammatically and ontologically identical. At the outset of *The Wreck*, however, he makes an important distinction between first person and third person, treating his interpellated “me” as prior to his speaking “I.” Writing in the present tense, Hopkins conditions his “I” according to the call and claim of the living God. Indeed, his use of language suggests personal, egoic involvement from the outset of the poem. What he highlights, however, is the surprising and astonishing initiative of a divine “Thou” in relation to “me”:

Thou mastering me  
 God! giver of breath and bread;  
 World’s strand, sway of the sea;  
 Lord of the living and dead;  
 Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,  
 And after it almost unmade, what with dread,  
 Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh? (ll. 1-7)

Interestingly, Hopkins shows little concern for establishing the autonomy of a disembodied, transcendental “I” in these first seven lines. In fact, he makes no mention of his “I” at all. Instead, he fashions himself as a “me,” mastered, bound, fastened, and touched by “Thou.” Moreover, he attends to the whole person—spirit and flesh, body and soul—rather than some sort of “interior positive reality” (Ong 33). Hopkins’

vulnerability in these lines is striking, if not a bit unsettling. Such radical openness to the Other would seem to overdetermine the self, rendering it void of authentic freedom and agency. And yet, these lines do not serve to cancel out the human subject. In fact, paradoxically, they seem to set the stage for a positive assertion of “I” in line 8: “Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.” The significance in the context of the stanza as a whole is that Hopkins comes to occupy the subject position as a receptive, responsive agent, working within parameters that are given by “Thou” rather than determined by “I.”

Hopkins’ spiritual reflections—in particular, his writings on the *arbitrium*—are helpful for clarifying the “me”-centred subjectivity that shows up in the first stanza of *The Wreck*. Reminiscent of Augustine and Donne, Hopkins is clear concerning the primary initiative of a divine “Thou” in relation to the human “I”: from creation to the *eschaton*, it is God who “carries the creature to or towards the end of its being” (*Sermons* 154). However, there “must be something,” he says, “which shall be truly the creature’s in the work of corresponding with grace: this is the *arbitrium*, the verdict on God’s side, the saying Yes, the doing-agree” (154). For Hopkins, this saying “Yes” or “doing-agree” is an expression of human freewill—the symbolic act of an “I”—but the expression is receptive and responsive rather than self-determining. It involves a “seconding of God’s designs” and “is like taking part in [our] own creation, the creation of [our] best selves” (197). From one perspective, the “simple act of the *arbitrium*” arises from God’s grace and is therefore “divine stress, holy spirit, and, as all is done through Christ, Christ’s spirit” (154). In other words, it is all about the initiating word-work of “Thou.” And yet, insofar as the *arbitrium* “is action, correspondence, on the creature’s” part, it constitutes a

cooperative “act in Christ,” a word of “aspiration in answer to [divine] inspiration” (158).

We could say that the assertion of “I” in stanza 1 is cooperative rather than constitutive and stands as Hopkins’ aspiration in answer to God’s inspiration. By writing “I,” Hopkins does not mean to assert his independence in a reactionary way as though he were “establishing a border between himself . . . [and] an ‘other’ outside the self” (Ong 29). Indeed, there is a clear distinction between “I” and “Thou” in this stanza, but Hopkins says “I” in recognition of the ways that the Other has claimed him and called him out. This grammar of self and God is crucial for appreciating Hopkins’ practice of poetic theology in *The Wreck*. Ultimately it frames the entire poem, configuring the wording throughout according to an “I” responding to “Thou” from the predicate position. At the same time, it helps to frame Hopkins’ continued reflection on the I-Thou relation on the level of overthought, specifically his meditation on the poetic-rhetorical way in which the “I” participates responsively in relationship to “Thou.” At each point, this reflection can be read back into his own poetic *praxis*. Hopkins fashions himself not as a foundational, predicating “I” attempting to understand the essence of divinity. Rather, like he had in his conversion and like the nun had in the storm, he reads/writes from a predicated position as *interloqué* and does so to sound out realities that are given by the living God rather than grasped at by metaphysical man.

The responsive nature of Hopkins’ “I” comes into sharper focus in stanza 2:

I did say yes  
 O at lightning and lashed rod  
 Thou heardest me truer than tongue confess  
 Thy terror, O Christ, O God;  
 Thou knowest the walls, altar and hour and night:  
 The swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod

Hard down with a horror of height:  
And the midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress. (ll. 9-16)

Here, Hopkins shifts to the past tense, apparently reflecting on a prior experience of conversion. At the outset, Hopkins plays on the *arbitrium*, the saying “Yes,” the “doing-agree” that comes in response to God’s grace. Clearly, he means to assert from the subject position and to highlight the doing of his “I.” Moreover, he indicates an important relationship between a strongly stressed “I” and what is said. However, he has not subtly shifted away from the responsiveness of stanza 1. The “yes” of Hopkins’ “I” implies a dialogic interchange in human-divine relationship, an interchange that is initiated by “Thou” and answered by “I.” Indeed, Hopkins says “I,” but he implies the primary status of “me” in relation to “Thou” given that his “yes” emerges as a reply to the initiative and ostensible invitation of the Other.

As the stanza continues, the implied priority of “me” in Hopkins’ voicing becomes that much more pronounced. The “I” says “yes” not to what would apparently unite it with “Thou,” thereby establishing a fixed relation between *ontos* and *theos*. On the contrary, the “I” welcomes a kind of “terror” and “horror” and “stress,” an experience that would seem to make for estrangement from God and dissolution of self. And yet, the “I” in this stanza is not in the position of determining the conditions for selfhood or a relationship to the Other. The “I” can say “yes” to what threatens from without because it is already open to “Thou” calling to “me.” Here, Hopkins finds himself in a position that is not unlike Augustine’s at the point of conversion. He embraces the word of the Other and proceeds on the basis of faith and trust rather than epistemic certainty. And what he experiences at the point of assent is a terrifying displacement and deferral.

However, the experience ultimately results in a kind of reclamation of self through the Other. Here, Hopkins hints at what will become the theme of the entire poem. The “I” says “yes” not to an annihilation of self-as-subject, crushed under the weight of divine stress, but to a participation of self-as-*interloqué* in the sacrificial love of God. The option here is not between self-effacement before God or “absorption of self into God” (Ong 38). Hopkins “sets himself to self-fulfillment through emptying himself so as to open himself to God” (39). In this way, he gives his “I” an *a priori* openness to the Other even as he suggests an active role in human-divine relationship through participation in the self-giving love of Christ.

Hopkins clarifies this point by drawing out a subtle comparison between Christ’s suffering and his own throughout the latter half of the second stanza. The experience of “lightning and lashed rod” is “Thy terror” in at least two senses. Not only does it suggest a painful transformation of self initiated by God, but it also evokes the dread that God himself undergoes in the Passion of Christ. And so, it is true that the imagery of “walls, altar, and hour and night” primarily refers to an original place of conversion in Hopkins’ experience. And yet, it also calls to mind the garden of Gethsemane where Christ submits to the will of the Father and welcomes the “stress of selving in God” (*The Major Works* 289). Indeed, Christ knows the “swoon of a heart that the sweep and the hurl of thee trod / Hard down with a horror of height” (ll. 14-15). He has attended to it in the poet’s agonizing “doing-agree,” but more importantly he has suffered it in his own assent at the cross. The description in these lines is simultaneously christological and autobiographical. Following Christ, Hopkins calls to the Father in a prayer of

expostulation, his “midriff astrain with leaning of, laced with fire of stress” (l. 16). His identification with Christ’s suffering in this passage is not simply a meditative, spiritual exercise as some scholars have suggested. It is a form of theological word-work that welcomes God’s initiative to save and participates actively in the salvific process. And this is partly what Hopkins means to do in the writing of *The Wreck*. Rather than setting out an ancillary pattern of devotion or conveying a doctrine of salvation for the purpose of contemplative enjoyment, he receives the sacrificial love of God by sharing in it, structuring his experience in Christly ways and, in anticipation of the nun’s cry in the storm, christening his “wild-worst / Best” (l. 192).

Having given voice to the relationship between self and God in the first two stanzas, Hopkins proceeds by reflecting on the relationship between language and divinity in stanza 3, considering the process of turning to God in relation to the “spell” of writing (l. 20). Continuing to chart the situation of the second stanza in which he “did say yes . . . at lightning and lashed rod” (ll. 9-10), Hopkins begins the third stanza by recalling the moment when he was caught between “the frown of [God’s] face” and “the hurtle of hell” (ll. 17-18). Just as he had associated the earlier stages of his conversion experience in stanza 2 with Gethsemane, he represents the latter stages in this stanza as the forsaken no-place of Golgotha where Christ calls out “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). Crippled by the apparent double-bind of an ominous “Before” and a formidable “Behind,” he gropes for a solid foundation, wondering “where, where was a, where was a place?” (l. 19). With an abrupt turn, he tells us that he “whirled out wings that spell / And fled with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host”

(ll. 20-21). He then shifts to the present tense and addresses his own heart, saying “you were dovewinged, I can tell, / Carrier-witted” (ll.22-23). At this point, he “sings the praises of a heart which . . . was able to ‘fling’ itself to God,” as Meyer and Salmon put it (Meyer and Salmon 240). But he then catches himself and declares that he is “bold to boast” (l. 23). Reflecting back, he recalls how he once flashed “from the flame to the flame” in distress and shifts to consider how he now towers “from the grace to the grace” (ll. 24-25). In this way, Hopkins assures us that his “fling of the heart” was a movement that was governed by God’s grace rather than his own will to power.

This stanza can be read in a variety of ways. On one level, it provides further commentary on a past moment of conversion. The key for this type of reading lies in the fact that the past tense is used nearly throughout. Those who view the poem in this way interpret “that” in line 20 as a demonstrative and “spell” in its chronological sense as “a period or space of time of indefinite length” (OED). For instance, W. A. M. Peters, W. H. Gardner and Peter Milward argue that “spell” points back to the period of time in Hopkins experience in which he was held by hell hurtling behind him and God’s frowning face before him.<sup>16</sup> This is a plausible interpretation and well-suited to the autobiographical aspect of the poem. I would suggest, however, that “spell” in this stanza also refers to the act of reading-writing, interpreting-inventing with “that” serving as a relative pronoun.<sup>17</sup> According to this view, Hopkins “whirled out wings” in literary

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<sup>16</sup> Peters (1948) 157; Gardner (1961) 54n; and Milward (1968) 27.

<sup>17</sup> The phrase “whirled out wings that spell” has enjoyed a variety of interpretations in the critical history of *The Wreck*, but it is generally understood in one of three ways: “Either at that time, ‘I whirled out wings’ which effected a conversion; or ‘I

ways, not only seeking to “discover or find out” the truth of Christ hermeneutically, but also “tell” it in such a way as to “charm, fascinate and bewitch” his heart poetically and rhetorically (OED). Again, Hopkins reflects a process of past conversion in this stanza, but the description conditions a contemporaneous occasion of confession and praise. In this respect, Hopkins not only writes autobiographically, but also comments implicitly on the writing of his own poem, setting out the parameters of a poetic theology that plays on the line between grammatical exegesis and rhetorical invention.

Robert Boyle has argued that the whirling out of wings in this passage is symbolic of the cross (335). While there is very little about Boyle’s interpretation that plays to poetic-theological understanding of Hopkins’ language, it is helpful nonetheless. Indeed, by whirling out wings, Hopkins makes the figure of the cross, a figure that spells by imitating the sacrificial love of God while inventing it for a new situation. This goes to the heart of Hopkins’ practice of theology throughout *The Wreck*. Hopkins not only welcomes divine salvation in a language of confession and praise, but also seeks to participate in a Christly language that transforms the trap of “Before” and “Behind” into a human-divine embrace.

Clearly the heart plays an important role in Hopkins’ poetic theology since it is

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whirled out wings’ that, like a magical incantation, made flight possible; or ‘I whirled out wings’ that gave language to, spelled out, the import of the experience” (Meyer and Salmon 240). The dominant interpretation of “spell” is “during that time.” It seems to me that the majority of Hopkins’ critics have rendered “spell” in its temporal sense because of referential and logical motives. As Elisabeth Schneider points out, the line becomes “forced, pretentious and scarcely English when ‘spell’ is used without an object” (110). When “spell” is interpreted as “during that time,” it is, at the very least, grammatically correct.

with a “fling of the heart” that the “I” flees to the “heart of the Host.” As in Augustine and Donne, the connection between theology and poetic language involves the biblical heart-soul rather than philosophical mind-soul. In stanza 3, Hopkins does not write to teach or instruct in the strict sense or launch the mind-soul into dialectical ascent. Rather he sets out the pattern of the cross in the figure of spread wings and spells in a way that moves the whole person in relationship to God. In context, there is nothing to suggest that Hopkins’ grammar-rhetoric stands as an implicit effort to collapse the boundary between humanity and divinity. Again, the “I” is not self-centered in its feeling and finding, doing and saying. Hopkins continues to write in a responsive position and this becomes all the more apparent with the introduction of the heart. For Hopkins, the heart is akin to “me” since it is the “mother of being” (l. 140).<sup>18</sup> It exists in primordial openness to the initiative of “Thou” and expresses itself ideally as a receptive and responsive “I.” The difficulty, of course, is that the heart is also “unteachably after evil” (l. 141), and tends to shut itself away from the influence of the Other. It might be tempting to think that *The Wreck* constitutes an effort to transcend this postlapsarian situation, but the fleeing with a fling of the heart in stanza 3 is not about eliminating evil or escaping the vicissitudes of time and experience. The heart finds its home in the “Host,” but Hopkins continues to be “mined with a motion, a drift” that “crowds and . . .

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<sup>18</sup> Hopkins’ characterization of his heart as “the mother of being” is suggestive of Mary’s vulnerability before God at the annunciation as well as her willing participation in the conceiving of the Son. Ong expands on the theological significance: “Mary’s response, her free assent to conceive and bear the Son, because of its pivotal place in salvation history, becomes a paradigm for all human beings, men as well as women, in every free response they make to God’s grace on any occasion” (86).

combs to the fall” (ll. 27-28). Rather than attempting to overcome this situation, Hopkins returns to the original site of creation in “me,” opening himself to divine re-creation from this same point. The significance here is that Hopkins participates in this return by imitating the way in which “Thou” addresses “me.” At the same time, he spells in such a way that his “I” can rise up with his heart in a fling to God.

In terms of Hopkins’ theological *praxis*, then, the third stanza serves to outline a poetic version of the *imitatio Christi*. Hopkins seeks to share in the sufferings of Christ as he “flash[es] from the flame to the flame,” and this involves an exercise of human will, but an act that is grounded in grace since Hopkins’ “doing-agree” emerges from a Thou-receptive heart rather than an I-assertive mind. As Hopkins continues by having his “I” flee to “heart of the Host” with a “fling of the heart,” he does not end up competing with God as though a divine act of re-creation were somehow at odds with human participation. Rather, Hopkins welcomes “Thou” from the predicate position by imitating-inventing the sacrificial love of God. In the process he discovers, rather surprisingly, that his “flash[ing] from the flame to the flame” does not terminate in “terror” and “horror.” Instead it transforms into a “tower[ing] from the grace to the grace,” setting his whole person—heart, soul, and mind—on an upward ascent to God. Again, I would suggest that the process here is one that Hopkins attempts to play out across the entire poem. Throughout *The Wreck*, Hopkins writes responsively from the heart, practicing divinity in the manner by which he has been called out by God. At the same time, he writes to move his heart and the heart of his reader into the way of Christ and the truth of the cross.

Hopkins continues to build on the relationship between poetic theology and the heart in stanzas 6-8 where he comments on the origin of the “stress” that he had first mentioned in stanza 2. Throughout the first three stanzas, the relationship between “I” and “Thou” can seem to imply a direct and unmediated relationship between self and God. We learn in stanza 6, however, that the “stress” which Hopkins had experienced in his conversion, the divine “pressure” by which “guilt is hushed” and “hearts are flushed” does not come directly from “heaven” (ll. 32, 46). Rather it is mediated by time and circumstance as well as the ongoing witness of the faith community. The stress “dates from day / Of [Christ’s] going in Galilee,” originating in a “Warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey; / Manger, maiden’s knee; / The dense and the driven Passion, and frightful sweat” (ll. 49-51). Here, Hopkins recapitulates what he has said to this point concerning his conversion experience, associating the stress that he had experienced in his encounter with God with the Passion of Christ. But at this point he gives the relationship between “I” and “Thou” an historical dimension, opening up an horizon of tradition that is necessary to theological living since its neglect causes the “faithless [to] fable and miss” (l. 48). The feeling and finding of stanza 1 is not simply a matter of direct mystical experience. Nor is the assent of stanzas 2 and 3 simply an outworking of a private spiritual experience. Rather the saying “yes” to God comes in response to divinity embodied in occasion and circumstance and passed down by tradition. That is, the “stress” of God’s “touch” and “terror” from the first two stanzas begins in the “discharge” of Christ’s birth and Passion and “rides time like riding a river,” eventually “swelling” to a “high flood” in the heart and then breaking “out with it” in a stammer of

confession and praise (ll. 54, 55, 57). The “stress” is not experienced in an immediate way. It was “felt before” in the mystery of the incarnation and it was passed down in the faith community to figures like “Paul” or “Austin” who felt it over again whether “once at a crash” or in “lingering-out sweet skill” (ll. 55, 77-78). This has important implications for reading *The Wreck*. The “I” that responds to “Thou” from “me” in stanza 1 is a creature of religious and socio-historical existence. Of course this is implied since Hopkins speaks confessionally in the shared, poetic language of the Scriptures. However, it is made explicit in the overthought of stanzas 6-8. Like Augustine and Donne, Hopkins embraces the creaturely conditions of language, history, and social experience. It would be tempting to rise above the river of time and circumstance in dialectical ascent, but Hopkins allows this river to flow in and through his heart, attending to divinity as an embodied exegete and homiletician rather than a disembodied mystic or metaphysician.

Hopkins continues to clarify his theological praxis on the level of overthought in “Part the Second.” After treating the initial sinking of the *Deutschland* in stanzas 11-17, he admonishes his heart, associating its response to the tragedy of the wreck with the formation of words:

Ah, touched in your bower of bone  
 Are you! Turned for an exquisite smart,  
 Have you! Make words break from me here all alone,  
 Do you!—mother of being in me, heart.  
 O unteachably after evil, but uttering truth,  
 Why, tears! is it? tears; such a melting and madrigal start!  
 Never-eldering revel and river of youth,  
 What can it be, this glee? the good you have there of your own?  
(ll. 137-44)

Hopkins' heart is "touched" and "turned" not simply because of a sinking ship but because of the way that this disaster has been worded by the "towering prophetess" who is introduced at the end of stanza 17. That is, Hopkins interrupts his narrative of the wreck in order to tell us what a particular wording of wreckage has done to his heart.<sup>19</sup> Similar to the way that the heart bursts forth in confession in stanza 7, the nun's speech in the storm touches and turns his heart and makes words break from him. The tears that flow like a "Never-elderling revel and river of youth" bring about a poetic-theological event; they give rise to "a melting, madrigal start" that, in the immediate context, lead to questions of "Why" and "What," and later to hermeneutic considerations regarding the nun's "meaning" (l. 193) and the "how" of her "Wording" (l. 229). In one respect, Hopkins is responding to the tragedy of the wreck and the way that it had been "told" by a "virginal tongue" (l. 135). At the same time, he is responding to the language of his own poem and the way that it has given word to the wreck. In a sense, Hopkins is elaborating here what he had spoken of more cryptically in stanza 3—that is, the way his "I" affects his "me" through a "spell" that causes it to "fling to God." The connection between language and the heart in stanza 18 is significant and helps to clarify the theological *praxis* of *The Wreck*. Hopkins means to tell the truth to be sure, but it is the historically-situated heart that he addresses rather than a disembodied mind. And in addressing the heart, he seeks for words that will bear witness to the astonishing mystery of God's grace and serve to touch, turn and hurl the self to "To the hero of Calvary,

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<sup>19</sup> There are passages in Hopkins' journal that show he was easily moved by such "wordings." See especially pp. 195, 218.

Christ, 's feet" (l. 63).

The example of the nun is particularly important in *The Wreck*. Hopkins seems to view the nun as an ideal poet theologian. In stanza 24, Hopkins returns to the issue of the nun's utterance and relates what she "told." He says that "She to the black-about air, to the breaker, the thickly / Falling flakes, to the throng that catches and quails / Was calling 'O Christ, Christ come quickly'" (ll. 189-91). The peculiarity of Hopkins' account, here, is that the nun is described as calling out to the storm rather than to Christ himself. This is accentuated by the string of prepositional phrases which comes directly after the subject "She." The nun pleads for Christ to come, but she does so by entreating the source of her distress. The next two lines are particularly astounding: "The cross to her she calls Christ to her, christens her wild-worst / Best." By calling out to the storm, the nun welcomes it as her salvation. She interprets the "rash smart slogging brine" as a kind of theological solution (l. 148). And she not only reads the storm in this way; she also re-writes it, "christens" it, treating her situation of despair as an instance of Christly comfort. Indeed, there is a sophistic quality about the nun's strategy, and yet she is not inventing a psycho-spiritual remedy against a background of uncertainty and doubt. The nun cries out so as to take part in the sacrificial love of God. And so, her word is a "finding and sake / And cipher of suffering Christ" and it is of her own "make," but it is a word that stands as aspiration in answer to divine inspiration since God himself "scores [the mark] in scarlet . . . on his own *bespoken* / Before-time-taken, dearest prized and priced" (l. 169-71, 73-74; italics mine). The nun is *interloqué*. She reads in the storm the rhetoric of Christ and the appeal of the cross and so writes Christ into the wreck, viewing

the storm as the situation of the cross itself. This is the “majesty” that Hopkins admires in the nun’s utterance (l. 193). Hopkins wonders “what did she mean?” precisely because she spells multivalently as a poet rather than clearly and precisely as a logician (l. 193). She does not validate the presence of Christ epistemologically and then petition him. Rather, she charts the storm *as* Christ; she faces the “sea-romp” and sees the structure of salvation within it.

There is more to say about the grammatical-rhetorical approach of the nun as it relates to Hopkins’ theological praxis, but it will be best to draw this out in relation to the underthought. Again, my argument is that the message on the level of overthought and the medium on the level of underthought stand in a contrapuntal rather than contradictory relation. For this reason, it is impossible (and undesirable) to divorce the overthought and underthought. Our reading thus far bears this out. We have focused on Hopkins’ poetic theological vision, but have touched on his praxis in order to clarify it. In the section that follows, there will be opportunity to return to and expand Hopkins’ theological vision as we consider the language of the poem. For now, it is important simply to appreciate the poetic theological orientation that Hopkins gives expression to in *The Wreck* and to notice the way that it deviates from the philosophical-scholastic tradition. Rather than striving after a metaphysics of presence like a latter-day scholastic theologian, Hopkins writes in the patristic-humanistic tradition, seeking to give evangelical shape to the heart-soul while encouraging existential involvement in the truth of Christ. Again, Hopkins means to tell the truth and he chooses to tell it in a poetic way, but *The Wreck* is not a prose+ornaments construction, inviting readers to contemplate the

theological kernel once the poetic husk has been stripped away. If we were to use Donne's terminology we might say that Hopkins works in a poetic medium in order to write/practice/use the truth of Christ rather than merely read/understand/enjoy it. Attending to the "information" of Scripture, he interprets-invents it for his own situation, answering the "information" with his own "reformation."

### **Underthought: Symbolic Action and the Grammar-Rhetoric of the Cross**

At the beginning of this chapter, we explored the way that readers of *The Wreck* have struggled to reconcile Hopkins' theology with his poetry because of a tendency to associate the former with metaphysics. In the section that followed, we examined the difficulty of this approach as it relates to the overthought of *The Wreck*. Hopkins does not work from a theological orientation based in metaphysical thinking and the dialectical arts; on the contrary, like Augustine in the *Confessions* and Donne in the *Devotions*, he takes a distinctly literary approach, seeking to participate responsively in human-divine relationship according to a biblical poetic, rhetoric and hermeneutic. In this final section, I'd like to consider how the poetic theology of *The Wreck*, voiced on the level of overthought, informs the underthought of the poem.

The metaphoric intensity of Hopkins' language has long fascinated scholars and has led to a variety of interpretations ranging from the incarnational to the skeptical to the sophistic: that is, for some, the language of the poem has the power to instantiate the one true "transcendental signified," thus affording a kind of Edenic immediacy (Cotter and Ellis); for others it falls out in a proliferating chain of signifiers that exemplify the division and frustration of Babel (Miller and Sprinker); for still others it forms a

rhetorical way of coping with Babel and the disappearance of God (Meyer and Salmon). Miller's poststructural reading of *The Wreck* has set the course for the most recent discussions. According to Miller, words require a transcendental Word in order to refer properly; the problem is that there "is no masterword for the Word, only metaphors of it, for all words are metaphors, displaced from their proper reference by a primal bifurcation" (1976 55). The primal bifurcation that Miller refers to, here, is the Fall and Babel. In Miller's view, Hopkins would seek to establish a linguistic "link between creator and created" (54), but the

words of human language . . . [are] born of some primal division, a fall from the arch and original breath into the articulate. This fall has always already occurred as soon as there is human speech. Words have a tendency to proliferate endlessly their permutations by changes of vowel and consonant as if they were in search for the magic word that would be the Word. (56)

In the end, Hopkins' words, like the nun's in stanza 24, fall "back into the Babel or babble, the confusion of tongues introduced by Babel and confirmed by the gift of tongues at Pentecost" (55).

According to Miller, this failure of Hopkins to capture divine essence in the language of his poem has important implications for the kind of self that he communicates. Given the metaphoric status of language and its inability to render up the truth, the "individual self" that would seek union with Christ is "incapable of ever being more than a metaphor of Christ—that is split off from Christ" (58). It would hope for a

transformation upwards; the problem is that all “transformations” in language move “sideways” along an endless chain of signifiers that are perpetually cut off from a transcendental signified (58). And so, rather than bridging human being and Highest Being, the language of *The Wreck* only serves to exacerbate the postlapsarian estrangement between self and God. That is, the more Hopkins “affirms himself” in the language of the poem, seeking to identify his “I” with a Christly “Thou,” “the more he affirms his eccentricity, his individuality, his failure to be Christ, or Christlike” (58).

Miller has good reason to critique a poetics borne of ontotheology, but it is peculiar that he would demand a stable metaphysic for language to refer properly and for the self to thrive in relationship to God. Equally strange is the effort of readers like Salmon and Meyer to build a hermeneutic around this requirement, treating mimetic failure as the primary condition of poetic language even as they seek to shift the theoretical ground from reference to performance.<sup>20</sup> On the level of overthought, Hopkins openly declares the impossibility of achieving heaven or grasping God in language and this admission does not leave him to dwell on the failure of his language to connect word and thing, sign and thought, signifier and transcendental signified. Rather, Hopkins holds out an important theological purpose for his language even as he renounces mimetic mastery; at the same time, he actively perturbs our sense of the semantic norm with his

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<sup>20</sup> In *Mined with a Motion* (1984), Marylou Motto suggests a similar perspective, contending that Hopkins’ “words are revisionary” (162). Instead of standing in for an external experience or event, “they attempt to retrace . . . what remains of the event now largely concealed.” Moreover, they “hope to *reinvoke* the lost experience and validate its significance or primacy.” The language of *The Wreck* does not “define a past presence,” but fills “the vacancies created by the presence of loss.”

poetic inventiveness. Jacob Korg characterizes the “phonetic and rhetorical patterns” of *The Wreck* as “linguistic deviations” since they convey “their meaning through an effect of contrast with the expected pattern” (985n). Indeed, Hopkins’ language deviates from a certain standard of meaning, whether conceived of in terms of a “continuous literary decorum” (Bridges) or a “transcendental signified” (Miller). But he was no sophist writing against a background of doubt and despair. Hopkins takes a posture of hope in *The Wreck*. He transgresses the norm with his “passing freaks and graces” (Hopkins *Letters* 89), but the violation serves a transformative purpose.

One of the most common types of “linguistic deviation” in *The Wreck* is the compound construction, a figurative device that Hopkins deploys over fifty times. W. H. Gardner observes that “compound epithets” in poetry often “degenerate into terse and metrically convenient prose statements without a trace of verbal magic” (126), but *The Wreck* stands as a notable exception to this rule. Hopkins “belonged to that relatively small class of poets . . . who, not content with the language as they find it, tend in varying degrees to create their own medium of expression” (116). Hyphenation is a revolutionary tactic in *The Wreck*. When Hopkins says that his heart is “Carrier-witted” or that “Providence” is “lovely-felicitous,” we are not met with any “conventional flatness” (126). Nor do we find anything common or familiar about “fall-gold mercies,” a “lush-kept plush-capped sloe,” “black-about air,” “widow-making . . . deeps” and “white-fiery and whirlwind-swivellèd snow.” On the contrary, we discover something that is profoundly unconventional and unfamiliar. We are startled rather than satisfied by such constructions. And what strikes us as extraordinary is not simply a matter of deviancy.

As F. R. Leavis puts it, Hopkins' so-called "blemishes" are productive rather than damaging; they are "essential to the [poet's] aim and achievement" (Leavis 132).

Hopkins "is really difficult," he says, but "the difficulty is essential." He is seeking "to get out of his words as much as possible unhampered by the rules of grammar, syntax, and common usage" (132). His "words and phrases are actions as well as sounds, ideas and images"; they are "dramatic" (140).

Something similar can be said concerning the various neologisms and phonetic correspondences in the poem. "Lovescape" is a good example of Hopkins' coining technique. Although this term is "analogous to 'landscape,'" it also "denote[s] the wounds of Christ" (Gardner 121) and, as such, combines two ideas that are typically not associated. In this one word, Hopkins gathers together meanings from religious, aesthetic and geographic sources. The result is a particularly noticeable and incongruous combination. We are not only compelled to see the event of the cross as a type of landscape but also are led to see the natural world and the human body as a pattern of the cross. There are phonetic correspondences in the poem that have a similar effect. For instance, in the first stanza Hopkins' refers to God as the "giver of breath and bread." The terms "breath" and "bread" are not typically aligned in conventional forms of language, but Hopkins deliberately knits them together through alliteration. The result is a "new medium of expression"; "two nouns, whose near identity now strikes us for the first time, become variants of a single root idea—something essential to life" (Korg 983).

I would suggest that the productive and transformative nature of Hopkins' poetic language accords with the vision of theology that he gives expression to on the level of

overthought. Rather than striving after the putative immediacy of Eden or inadvertently exemplifying the fragmentation of Babel, Hopkins engages a biblical grammar-rhetoric, seeking to respond faithfully to a living God. This is not a covert strategy on Hopkins' part to satisfy the god of metaphysics on literary terms. Sprinker is right: the language of *The Wreck*—perhaps most especially the cruciform wording of stanza 28—proliferates without finally landing on some sort of original or primary expression. But such a proliferation does not constitute a sign of the Fall or Babel as though fruitfulness and multiplicity were really a sign of malignant growth. On the contrary, it highlights the creatureliness of human language while suggesting the importance of human involvement in re-creation. Like Augustine and Donne, Hopkins takes a re-creational approach in *The Wreck*. His language is grounded in a good creation and plays a part in creaturely fruitfulness and multiplicity. At the same time, it forms a kind of conversion to God and participation in the new creation inaugurated by Christ.

Hopkins' re-creational poetic is embodied in the symbolic action of the poem's narrative and metaphor. If we stand back to get an overall impression of *The Wreck* in terms of its narrative structure, we can perceive a redemptive pattern based on the mythic structure of Scripture. Northrop Frye observes in *The Great Code* (1981) that "the entire Bible . . . is contained within a U-shaped story," moving from creation in the opening chapters of Genesis downward through a fall and then upwards again into a re-creation in the final chapters of Revelation. This U-shape story governs the spiritual autobiography of "Part the First" and is recapitulated in the account of the wreck in "Part the Second." In both cases, Hopkins works in a grammatical-rhetorical orientation. As Northrop Frye

points out, “Mythical and typological thinking is not rational thinking” (*Great Code* 174). Rather than stimulating a soulish ascent to contemplative heights, the U-shape story provides hermeneutic coordinates for a transformation of the heart, enabling Hopkins (and his reader) to read-write himself into the *heilgeschichte* of God’s people. The redemptive narrative is not a mythic stand-in for metaphysics; nor is it a variant of modern therapeutics. It is a creaturely means of participating in human-divine relationship and sharing in a re-creational act.

Hopkins introduces his redemptive narrative strategy in “Part the First.” He begins in the first stanza on a high note by celebrating a good and loving Creator who provides for his creation, not only marking the boundaries of the world and exercising sovereignty over life and death, but also tending to individual creatures—in particular the poet—with the affection of a father. However, near the end of this stanza Hopkins speaks of something within him that “almost unmade” God’s good doing (l. 6). This confession introduces a downward movement in the narrative with the second and third stanzas opening out on a hellish underworld marked by bondage, darkness, disorientation and violence. In these stanzas, the distinction between Creator and creature modulates into division and discord. The God who was celebrated in the first stanza as a tender and loving Other is now presented as wrathful and terrifying; he bears down on the poet with “lightning and lashed rod,” his “sweep and hurl” treading him “Hard down with horror of height” (ll. 10, 14, 15). At this low point, Hopkins finds himself caught between the “frown of [God’s] face” and the “hurtle of hell” (ll. 17, 18), and he gropes about desperately trying to find a place to stand.

No sooner have we reached this low point, however, than the narrative suddenly leaps upward as Hopkins flees with a “fling of his heart” to Christ, “the heart of the Host” (l. 21). Where his heart had swooned in stanza 2, it now springs to life, taking flight in “dovewinged” inspiration and “tower[ing] from the grace to the grace” (ll. 22, 24). The joyful movement upward through the imagery of fleeing, dancing, flying and towering brings a kind of closure to the U-shape in “Part the First,” but Hopkins goes on in stanzas 4-8 to reflect on the significance, continuing to unfold the redemptive *mythos* of Scripture as it applies to his own experience. We learn in stanza 4 that there was something deceiving about the hellish circumstances of stanzas 2-3. While Hopkins was “mined with a motion, a drift” that “crowds and . . . combs to the fall” (ll. 27-28), he was “roped with, always, all the way down from the tall / Fells or flanks of the voel, a vein / Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ’s gift” (ll. 30-32). Interestingly, the proffer-pressure-principle-gift by which “guilt is hushed” and “hearts are flushed” does not come directly from heaven, like we might assume (l. 46). Rather it wells up from below, finding its origin in the Incarnation and Passion of Christ. Here we discover that the ascent of his heart in stanza 3 had an underlying motive of divine origin. Hopkins had known where to go because the bodily and historical “discharge” of the gospel in Christ’s “going in Galilee” had found its way into his heart and risen to a “high flood,” eventually gushing out with a “Word” that “flush[es] the man,” “Brim, in a flash, full!” (ll. 54, 50, 55, 59, 61, 62). Coming full circle, Hopkins ends “Part the First” on a high note with renewed praise for God and the mysterious way that he extends mercy, bringing new life from his “dark descending” (l. 72).

In “Part the Second,” Hopkins continues to extend the U-shape of Scripture, but now in relation to the sinking of the Deutschland and the confession of the nun. With dark foreboding, he begins in stanza 11 by paying homage to the seeming sovereignty of Death:

‘Some find me a sword; some  
The flange and the rail; flame,  
Fang, or flood’ goes Death on drum,  
And storms bugle his fame.  
But we dream we are rooted in earth—Dust!  
Flesh falls within sight of us; we, though our flower the same,  
Wave with the meadow, forget there must  
The sour scythe cringe, and the blear share come. (ll. 81-88)

This meditation “from below” prepares us for the horrifying nightmare of the wreck in the stanzas that follow. Interestingly, much of the language that Hopkins uses in “Part the First” concerning his own spiritual experience, recurs in “Part the Second” to describe the wreck. For instance, in stanza 13, the ship “sweeps” into the storm, “Hurling the Haven behind,” and becomes overwhelmed by the “infinite air” which is “unkind” (ll. 97, 98, 100). This recalls the “sweep” and “hurl” of God in stanza 2 that treads the poet “Hard down with horror of height.” The chiming effect between these lines not only serves to draw an analogy between Hopkins’ spiritual experience and the sinking of the ship, but also to accentuate the descending movement of the narrative. Hopkins continues in stanzas 13-18, giving the storm a sinister depth and darkness: the sea is “flint-flake, black-backed in the regular blow”; the wind sits “Eastnortheast, in cursed quarter”; the snow is “Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivellèd” and spins to “the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps” (ll. 101, 102, 103, 104). This is a demonic environment. The passengers struggle to climb into the rigging, but the “shrouds”

provide little comfort as they shake “in the hurling and horrible airs” (l. 120). At the beginning of stanza 16, a note of hope is sounded as a “man, handy and brave,” tries to rescue the “wild-woman-kind below” by drawing them up into the rigging (ll. 123, 122). However, the narrative plunges downward again as this man is suddenly “pitched to his death at a blow,” swinging for hours “to and fro / Through the cobbled foam fleece” (ll. 124, 126-27).

The beginning of stanza 17 drives the narrative of “Part the Second” to its lowest point:

They fought with God’s cold—  
And they could not and fell to the deck  
(Crushed them) or water (and drowned them) or rolled  
With the sea-romp over the wreck. (ll. 129-32)

Hopkins’ description in these lines is merciless. Staggering about on the sinking ship, the passengers are completely overwhelmed by “God’s cold” as they are thrown violently to the deck, eventually tumbling overboard to drown. And yet, like “Part the First,” the story takes an abrupt turn at the lowest point. The narrative surges upward at the end of stanza 17 in the figure of a “prophetess” who “tower[s] in the tumult” (l. 136), tolling out the name of Christ above the roar of the storm. Hopkins pauses in stanza 18 to reflect on the poetic-rhetorical effect. Strangely, the nun’s word, like Christ’s gift in stanzas 7 and 8, causes “words to break” from him as he writes (l. 139), words that flow into tears like a “Never-eldering river” (l. 143). What Hopkins had discovered in the existential hell of stanzas 2 and 3, the nun gives voice to in the storm. Even though she is blinded by the “rash smart slogging brine” (l. 148), she “sees one thing, one / Has one fetch in her: she rears herself to divine / Ears” and calls for her master, Christ, whose name rings out and

rides “over the storm’s brawling” (ll. 149-51, 152). Similar to “Part the First,” we discover a certain illusion in the cruel tragedy of the storm. In the language of stanza 4, the nun is “mined with a motion” that ultimately descends to death and destruction, but in an unexpected twist, she rises up to a mountainous height. She is “Tárpéian-fast” against the “blast” and shines out in the storm as a “blown beacon of light” (ll. 231-32), declaring the gospel of Christ “To the men in the tops and the tackle” and serving as a “bell to . . . Startle the poor sheep back” (ll. 152, 247-48).

Again, it is important to appreciate the overall significance of this mythic pattern. Hopkins does not mean for the redemptive narrative of *The Wreck* to stand in for an encompassing metaphysic. Nor does he write in despair of divine presence, seeking recompense through a pleasing aesthetic. The overthought helps us to appreciate the function of the poem’s narrative. Throughout the poem, Hopkins gives his language a dialogic orientation, identifying his poetic wording as a personal response to a living God formed around a heart-centered “me” rather than mind-centered “I.” Mystery is not a threat to this vision of life and language because Hopkins’ poetic theology is not ultimately in the service of apodeictic certainty. What matters is involvement in the existential reality of human-divine relationship with its priority of moral-spiritual becoming rather than ontic stability and/or epistemic mastery. Indeed, Hopkins is interested to tell the truth in his extension of the U-shape narrative of Scripture and there are categories to his typological reading-writing, but the categories are “liquid rather than solid” (Frye *The Great Code* 174), and he tells the truth by symbolically enacting rather than rationally proving it.

Hopkins' strategy is not only evident in the redemptive narrative of *The Wreck*, but also in its metaphoric structure. Coming in closer to the poem, we discover a more concentrated figurative patterning that takes the incongruous shape of the oxymoron. It is important to appreciate the connection between this oxymoronic patterning and the U-shape narrative of the poem. We could say that Hopkins uses the oxymoron trope to compress the creation-fall-redemption sequence into a more intense form, giving the impression across the poem that the fall from creation into a watery abyss and the rise from the same abyss to new creation are in some sense identical. Neoclassical critics like Bridges and Robinson have found this aspect of the poem objectionable because it seems to conflate categories that we would otherwise keep separate and distinct. But again, Hopkins' purpose is not to establish the validity of a fixed orientation like a logician. Of course, the oxymoron has a kind of rhetorical function and this has led readers like Franco Marucci to suggest that the Hopkins seeks to "prove . . . an oxymoron" in the poem; he tries to show that "the *tempest* is *fair weather*, that its *inclemency* is *fruitful*, that the *ruin* of the harvest is its *sowing*" (110). It is true: Hopkins would have us believe that God's "terror" in "Part the First" and the storm in "Part the Second" are signs of salvation rather than damnation. However, he does not seek to *prove* an oxymoron, at least by rationalistic standards.<sup>21</sup> Rather, he plays the poet-rhetorician, providing the conditions for a total re-orientation.

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<sup>21</sup> Given the grammatical-rhetorical orientation of Marucci's work, it is peculiar that he would speak of proving an oxymoron. Recalling Leavis and Richards, Marucci investigates the "'artificial' and rhetorical devices" of Hopkins' poem in terms of "functionality and contextuality" rather than "accessoriness and contingency." He

Throughout "Part the First," the oxymoron shows up most poignantly in relation to the poet's experience of God. The oxymoronic pattern hinges on two opposing orders of spiritual-theological meaning, one that corresponds to an experience of God's "mastery" and the other which corresponds to an experience of his "mercy." God is a master; he is a God of "lightning and lashed rod" whose "sweep and . . . hurl" tramples down the poet with a "horror of height" (l. 10, 14, 15). Hopkins swoons under the burden of this God; his "midriff" is "astrain with leaning of, laced with the fire of stress" (ll. 14, 15). He is boxed in by "The frown of [God's] face before him" and "the hurtle of hell" behind him and is "mined with a motion, a drift" which "crowds and . . . combs to the fall" (ll. 17-18, 27-28). But God is not all "stress" and "stroke" (ll. 42, 44). He is also a "giver of breath and bread" (l. 2). He is a "place" of refuge for fleeing hearts (l. 19). His presence may instill a sense of "dread" or "terror" (ll. 6, 12), but he enables the poet to "tower from the grace to the grace" (l. 24). While the "fall" threatens from without, Hopkins is "roped with . . . a vein / Of the gospel proffer, a pressure, a principle, Christ's gift" (ll. 27, 30, 31-32).

The language of stanza 9 falls into a similar pattern. On the one hand, God is dreadful. He is "lightning" and "winter" and a strict "Father" who is called upon to "Wring thy rebel, doggèd in den, / Man's malice, with wrecking and storm" (l. 70, 71,

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contends that "the frequently blamed richness of figures, the even inflationary rhetoric of the poem, perform . . . the function of *conveying* and intensifying the deep sense, breaking a path into the sclerotized sensibility of the reader and providing the emotional and intellectual stimuli necessary to appropriate that sense" (50). Marucci wants to show that this "deep" or "true" sense is communicated to the reader primarily through a rhetorical and figural "summoning of the heart" and a corresponding "deactivation of reason" (41).

67-68). On the other hand, he is merciful. He is “love” and “warm” and the “fondler” of hearts (l. 70, 71). But there is a notable difference between the language of this stanza and the others preceding it. Throughout the early stanzas of “Part the First,” Hopkins clearly distinguishes between God’s mastery and mercy, usually progressing in some way from the former to the latter. For instance, in stanza 3, Hopkins shifts from a situation of agonizing distress to one of divine consolation through the imagery of flight. He “whirl[s] out wings that spell / And fle[es] with a fling of the heart to the heart of the Host” (ll. 20-21). In this way, he moves in stages from one order of experience to another. But in stanza 9, this type of sequence is not present. Here, Hopkins brings together mastery and mercy into one linguistic unit. The incongruity is felt most keenly in the last line: “Hast thy dark descending and art most merciful then” (l. 72). Hopkins declares that God is most merciful when he is most masterful, when he wrings “doggèd” hearts with “wrecking and storm” (ll. 67, 68). His kindness comes to fruition in the dark descent of his wrath. God is not simply “lightning *and* love . . . a winter *and* warm” (l. 70, italics mine). He has an electrifying love and gives off a wintry warmth.

At first, this may seem wildly outrageous and from a certain perspective it is. Nevertheless, it is a reasonable response to the astonishing love of God at the cross. Christ is the first wreck; it is his “dense and driven Passion” and “frightful sweat” that opens up space within the Godhead for human-divine relationship. Given that God reveals himself and his purposes in the humiliation and death of Christ, it makes sense that he would be found most poignantly in situations of distress and despair. God does not stand aloof from the world’s troubles; on the contrary, he makes himself vulnerable to

them in Christ, giving himself over to “wrecking and storm” and a “dark descending” (ll. 68, 72). It is not too unusual to claim, then, that “guilt is hushed by” the stroke and stress of God and that “hearts are flushed by” his terrible wrecking (l. 46).

However, the significance of Hopkins’ oxymoronic patterning has less to do with defending points of doctrine and more to do with responding to and participating in the transformative, self-giving love of Christ. Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic view of the oxymoron is helpful for appreciating the re-creational nature of Hopkins’ language use. According to Burke, the oxymoron is not merely aesthetic or ornamental in sacred writing, but constitutes a strategy of conversion and rebirth. The ultimate expression of oxymoronic conversion can be found in the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Christ

offers a basic conversion concept for a total transvaluation of values whereby the signs of poverty were reinterpreted as the signs of wealth, the signs of hunger as the signs of fullness, and present weeping was characterized unmistakably as the first symptom of subsequent delight. By this translating device, danger-situations were not merely converted down-wards: They were rephrased precisely as *comfort-situations*. . . . Jesus phrased his admonitions as invitations. (*Permanence* 155-6)

It can also be seen in the conversion of the apostle Paul:

[Paul’s] revelation . . . was marked by a radical shift in his scheme of values. Old linkages were ripped apart, new linkages were welded, brutally, in accordance with the new creative device which had suddenly come upon him, precisely as if the pattern of a new invention had sprung

into his head . . . whereby the categories of his thinking were reassorted.

(156)

Burke's view of oxymoron in these passages is significant because it suggests a kind of theological truth-telling that is poetic in orientation and transformative in effect. Christ told the truth not by reinforcing the *status quo*, but by employing a "translating device" that "reinterpreted the signs" of the age in startling and unexpected ways. Paul practiced theology in a similar way. It was not just that the message had changed in his conversion to Christianity. Paul had discovered a "new creative device" in relationship with God, a "pattern of new invention . . . whereby all the categories of his thinking were reassorted." Jesus and Paul were poet theologians. Rather than striving to nail down the "divine essence" in words, they stimulated responsiveness in human-divine relationship and helped facilitate a conversion to the living God through oxymoronic reversals.

Hopkins employs a similar strategy in *The Wreck*. "Part the First" serves as a kind of spiritual autobiography, but Hopkins does not express himself and his experience with God in a flatly mimetic way; rather, he opens himself in confession and symbolically enacts a conversion according to "the new creative device which had suddenly come upon him." The oxymoron helps to facilitate this confession-conversion. On the one hand, it allows Hopkins to own up to the "danger-situations" in his life that seem to alienate him from God. At the same time, it permits him to reinterpret the signs of danger as the signs of comfort. This two-pronged approach has a theological rather than therapeutic aim. Hopkins confesses that his heart is "unteachably after evil" and this would seem to leave him trapped within a demonic category of experience; and yet, in

confession, the evil that he finds in himself paradoxically leads to God because Christ himself willingly suffered and overcame it. It is the salvific word-work of Christ that introduces the oxymoronic pattern of invention, enabling “the signs of poverty [to be] reinterpreted as the signs of wealth, the signs of hunger as the signs of fullness, and present weeping was characterized unmistakably as the first symptom of subsequent delight” (Burke *Permanence* 155-6). Hopkins extends this pattern into his own experience and the event of the wreck as an interpretation-invention of Christ’s word-work. The oxymoron is a way for Hopkins to welcome God on his own terms rather than simply cope with his disappearance. It enables him to embrace divinity precisely at points that would seem to preclude it.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Hopkins shows a preference for the oxymoron in his prose writings. For instance in a letter to Bridges he writes:

A Catholic by mystery means an *incomprehensible certainty*: without certainty, without formulation there is no interest . . . the clearer the formulation the greater the interest. At bottom the source of interest is the same in both cases, in your mind and in ours; it is the *unknown, the reserve of truth beyond what the mind reaches and still feels to be behind*. . . Christ is in some sense God, in some sense he is not God—and your interest is in the uncertainty; to the Catholic it is: *Christ is in every sense God and in every sense man, and the interest is in the locked and inseparable combination, or rather it is in the person in whom the combination has its place*. Therefore we speak of the events of Christ’s life as the mystery of the Nativity, the mystery of the Crucifixion and so on of a host; the mystery being always the same, *that the child in the manger is God, the culprit on the gallows God*, and so on. Otherwise, birth and death are not mysteries, nor is it any great mystery that a just man should be crucified, but that God should fascinate—with interest of awe, of pity, of shame, of every harrowing feeling. (*Letters* 187-88, italics mine)

It seems to me that the fascination and “ecstasy of interest” which Hopkins finds in the oxymoron is closely related to Burke’s dramatistic view of the trope. That Hopkins links this ecstasy to the “inseparable combination” of God and man in the person of Christ

Of course, from one perspective, this kind of strategy can be expected given Hopkins' grounding in the Christian faith. However, from another perspective, it is quite unconventional. Although Christianity is structured around this confessional-conversional principle, it tends to preclude it in its institutionalized forms. As Burke points out, "religion . . . [tends] to move towards the hygiene of allopathic science" (*Attitudes* 46n). That is, it "confronts the threat of danger with an antidote of assurance," striving to handle it "by head-on attack"—hence, the attempt in "non-tragic" forms of religion to "abolish" rather than "attenuate" the reality of evil (45n-46n). Through certain bureaucratic pressures, sin comes to be viewed as an ultimate threat to reconciliation, and as such, is handled through strategies of elimination or avoidance. Hopkins rejects this approach outright, viewing it as an inadequate way of confronting the problem of evil both in himself and in the world. Instead, he follows the pattern of the cross, practicing a language-life of "self-sacrifice." In this way, Hopkins does not seek to prove an oxymoron; rather, he welcomes the self-giving love of God by imitating it, setting out a Christly grammar-rhetoric for redressing the existential hell which he finds both in himself and in his reader.

Hopkins continues to develop his oxymoronic strategy in "Part the Second."

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suggests that his interest in the "martyr-master" is based in a moral-spiritual / poetic-rhetorical matrix rather than the amalgam of metaphysics, epistemology and logic-dialectic. This is particularly relevant for understanding the underthought of *The Wreck*. The figurative language of the poem does not constitute a form of gnosis, establishing an isomorphic connection between word and objective reality. If it refers it does so in relation to an inscrutable mystery. For Hopkins, the oxymoronic nature of the Incarnation, Passion and Crucifixion proves very little about divinity. Its purpose is to move the heart into the way of Christ.

Throughout this section of the poem, he seeks to translate the tragedy of the wreck into a kind of divine comedy. His approach becomes especially pointed in the transformative rhetoric of stanza 21. Here, Hopkins begins by locating the five nuns in a situation of hellish estrangement. They are “Loathed for a love men knew in them” and “Banned by the land of their birth” (ll. 161-62); the “Rhine refused them” and the “Thames would ruin them” (ll. 163). In this way they participate in the dilemma of stanza 2 where Hopkins is caught between “The frown of God’s face” and the “hurtle of hell” (ll. 17-18). The nuns are threatened from all sides and have no place to stand. Surely, they are compelled to wonder, “where, where was a, where was a place?” (l. 19). As the “Surf, snow, river and earth / Gnashed,” they are made to endure the torments of hell, the estrangement of “outer darkness” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”<sup>23</sup>

But as soon as Hopkins names the wreck as a situation of mastery, he “whirls out wings,” so to speak, and reverts to the vantage point of heaven. He takes on the perspective of Christ, the “Orion of light” and “martyr-master” who views the wreck from “above” by virtue of his masterful victory over death, but also from within given his identity as a martyr (ll. 165, 167). This perspective changes the terministic order of the entire stanza. Already we are compelled to feel a certain incongruity in “martyr-master.” But then Hopkins twists the language completely by deliberately confusing the linguistic patterns associated with the situations of heaven and hell. While Christ, the divine hunter, surveys the storm through the notch of his redeeming bow, the “Storm flakes” of the

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<sup>23</sup> For Christ’s description of hell as a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” see Matt. 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30; Lk. 13:28.

tempest become “scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers” (l. 168). In fact, as they scatter through the air, “sweet heaven [becomes] astrew in” them (l. 169). From this perspective, the wreck is not simply an intermediary space between this world and the next; it is somehow the scene of heaven itself. “Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivellèd snow / Spins” and *heaven* becomes strewn with vernal flowers (ll. 103-104). The airs are no longer “hurling and horrible” in this place (l. 120); on the contrary, they are gentle and comforting, whispering a god-spell for those with ears to hear.

Hopkins carries this strategy into stanza 23 where he says that the five nuns “Are sisterly sealed in wild waters, / To bathe in [Christ’s] fall-gold mercies, to breathe in his all-fire glances” (ll. 183-84). Here, the poet combines three separate and ostensibly incompatible rationalizations within the single image of the sea—death, marriage and baptism. Although this combination is striking, it is not unique to Hopkins. For instance, in the anchoritic romance, *The Passion of St. Margaret*, water imagery is used to connect situations of torture, purification and sexuality. This connection becomes especially pointed when Margaret is submerged in a vat of water by her evil suitor Olibrius. She cries out to Christ:

King of all kings, break my bonds, so that I and all who see it may praise and worship you. May this water be soft and mild for me and grant that it be a bath of joy and baptism at the font-stone, the blessing and light of eternal salvation. Let the Holy Spirit come down in the image of a dove, and bless these waters in your blissful name. Bind with baptism my soul to yourself, and cast from me every sin, and bring me to your bright

chamber, bridegroom of joy. I here receive baptism in the name of the beloved Lord, and his precious Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God in goodness enclosed and undivided. (Savage and Watson 301-302)

From Margaret's perspective, her torture at the hands of Olibrius is both erotic and purgative. She calls out to Christ in much the same way that the nun cries out to her master-martyr: "Bind with baptism my soul to yourself, and cast from me every sin, and bring me to your bright chamber, bridegroom of joy." This transformative strategy is closely related to Hopkins' oxymoronic patterning in the last lines of stanza 24. The nuns are "sealed in wild waters" in at least two senses. They are not only enclosed in a watery grave, but are also made secure in baptism. They are like the "lives" that "were washing away" in stanza 15, at once dissolved into the diabolical deeps and purified by sacred immersion. And as they "bathe in his fall gold mercies" they prepare for their blissful union with Christ, the time when they will enter his "bright chamber" and "breathe in his all-fire glances." By combining the religious and erotic orders of experience with the imagery of destruction, Hopkins views the wreck in eschatological perspective. That is, he envisions an entire process from wrecking to repair and then returns to the beginning with the perspective of the end. This return is enacted in the oxymoron trope. As Hopkins fuses the devastation of sea and storm with the vocabulary of sexual union and baptism, he names a situation in terms of its fruition. The wreck *is* a site of erotic intimacy because it *results* in a heavenly marriage. The violence of "wild waters" is comforting because it terminates in baptismal purification.

Oxymoronic reversals abound in *The Wreck*. In fact, whether explicitly or

implicitly, they inform every line of the poem. Hopkins works out a whole series of antithetical pairings in *The Wreck* that can be charted as follows:

<i>Demonic Imagery</i>	<i>Apocalyptic Imagery</i> <sup>24</sup>
<i>Hell</i> : “the hurtle of hell” (3). <sup>25</sup>	<i>Heaven</i> : “sweet / heaven was astrew in them” (21); “jay-blue heavens” (26); “heaven of desire” (26); “heaven-haven” (35).
<i>God’s mastery</i> : “Thou mastering me God” (1); “Mastery” (10); “A master, her master and mine” (19); “martyr-master (21); “master of the tides” (32).	<i>God’s mercy</i> : “most art merciful then” (9); “Make mercy in all of us” (10); “the million of rounds of thy mercy” (12); martyr-master (21); “fall-gold mercies” (23); “With a mercy that outrides” (33).
<i>Death</i> : “Lord of living and dead” (1); “goes Death on drum” (11); “To the shrouds they took” (15); “He was pitched to his death at a blow” (16); “Drawn to the life that died” (23); “Breathe, body of lovely Death” (25); “lord it with living and dead” (28); “throned behind Death” (32).	<i>Life</i> : “Lord of living and dead” (1); “Drawn to the life that died” (23); “lord it with living and dead” (28); “new born to the world” (34).
<i>Downward way</i> : “Hard down with horror of height” (2); “And it crowds and it combs to the fall” (4); “all the way down from the tall / Fells or flanks of the voel” (4); “dark descending” (9); “Lower than death and the dark” (33); “passion-plungèd” (33).	<i>Upward way</i> : “I whirled out wings that spell” (3); “tower from the grace to the grace” (3); “A prophetess towered in the tumult” (17); “she rears herself” (19); “the call of the nun / To the men in the tops. . . rode over the storm’s / brawling” (19); “hoary-glow height”

<sup>24</sup> “Demonic” and “apocalyptic” are terms that Northrop Frye uses in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) to describe two poles of experience in the literary universe, one that corresponds to “the world of nightmare and the scapegoat, of bondage and pain and confusion” and the other to “the heaven of religion” (147, 141). Frye’s Romantic vision with its Blakean emphasis on the “human form divine” is potentially misleading when applied to *The Wreck*. For Hopkins, the apocalyptic and demonic are not simply “categories of reality in the forms of human desire” or lack thereof (141). According to their biblical origin, they also have a kerygmatic or evangelistic function, serving to reshape the heart from without and move it into a reality beyond human imagining. Nevertheless, Frye’s terminology is useful for charting the antitheses of *The Wreck* along spiritual-theological lines.

<sup>25</sup> I have quoted by stanza rather than line in this chart.

	(26); "still higher" (26); "giant risen" (33); "rose" (35).
<i>West</i> : "dappled-with-damson west" (5); "Away in the loveable west" (24).	<i>East</i> "crimson-cressed east" (35).
<i>Winter/Fall</i> : "there must / The sour scythe cringe and the blear share come" (11); "Into the snow" (13); "Wiry and white-fiery and whirlwind-swivelèd snow" (13); "snow" (21); "Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers" (21); "fall-gold" (23); "is the shipwrack then a harvest, / does tempest carry grain for thee?" (31).	<i>Summer/Spring</i> : "though our flower the same / Wave with the meadow" (11); "Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers" (21); "pied and peeled May!" (26); "A released shower" (34); "dayspring" (35).
<i>Sea</i> : "the sea flint-flake" (13); "the widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps" (13); "the breakers rolled on her beam" (14); "cobbled foam-fleece" (16); "buck and flood of the / wave?" (16); "rolled / With the sea-romp" (17); "the inboard seas" (19); "endragonèd sea" (27); "master of the tides, / Of the Yore-flood" (32); "Stanching quenching ocean" (32)	<i>Sky</i> : "dappled-with damson west" (5); "jay-blue heavens appearing" (26); "moth-soft Milky Way" (26).
<i>Night</i> : "And frightful a nightfall" (15); "Night roared" (17); "night, still higher" (26).	<i>Day</i> : "folded rueful a day" (15); "dayspring" (35); "life's dawn" (20).
<i>Dark</i> : "dark descending" (9); "the dark side" (12); "She drove in the dark" (14); "Lower than death and dark" (33).	<i>Light</i> : "Glow, glory" (5); "Starlight" (5); "rocket and lightship, shone" (15); "Orion of light" (21); "beacon of light" (29); "Jesu, heart's light" (30); "Not a doomsday-dazzle in his coming nor dark as he / came" (34); "let flash to the shire" (34); "brightening" (35).
<i>Cold</i> : "They fought with God's cold" (17).	<i>Warmth</i> : "Warm-laid" (7); "charity's hearth's fire" (35).
<i>Old Age</i> : "Hope had grown grey hairs" (15).	<i>Youth</i> : "Never-eldering revel and river of youth" (18); "new born to the world" (34);
<i>Weakness</i> : "faithless fable and miss" (6); "Idle for ever to waft her" (14); "They fought with God's cold-- / And they could not" (17).	<i>Strength</i> : "only the heart being hard at bay, / Is out with it!" (7-8); "in his triumph" (27); "throned . . . with a sovereignty" (32); "outrides / The all of water" (33); "fetched in the storm of his strides" (33).

<i>Blindness</i> : “Blinds her” (19); “never eyesight got” (26).	<i>Clear-sightedness</i> : “but she that weather sees one thing, one” (19); “There was a single eye! / Read the unshapeable shock night” (29).
<i>Dimness</i> : “the down dugged ground-hugged grey” (26); “womb-life grey” (7); “the dimness of us” (35).	<i>Coloration</i> : “dappled-with-damson” (5); “lush-kept plush-capped sloe” (8); “he scores it in scarlet” (22); “ruddying of the rose-flake” (22); “jay-blue heavens” (26); “Blue-beating” (26); “crimson-cresseted” (35); “rose” (35).
<i>Violence</i> : “lashed rod” (2); “sweep and hurl of thee”; “trod / Hard down with horror of height” (2); “Swings the stroke dealt” (6); “Wring thy rebel . . . with wrecking and storm” (9); With an anvil-ding” (10); “crash” (10); “Some find me a sword; some / The flange and the rail; flame, / Fang, or flood” (11); “there must / The sour scythe cringe and the blear share come” (11); “widow-making unchilding unfathering deeps” (13); “beat the bank down” (14); “ruinous shock” (14); “they shook in the hurling and horrible airs” (15); “carved with cares” (15); “He was pitched to his death at a blow” (15); “(Crushed them) . . . (and drowned them)” (17); “The rash smart slogging brine” (19); “Surf, snow, river, and earth / Gnashed” (21); “he scores it in scarlet” (22); “With the gnarls of the nails in thee, niche of the lance” (23); “electrical horror” (27); “Do deal . . . Let him ride” (28); “shipwrack” (31); “storm of his strides” (33); “heaven-flung” (34); “royally reclaiming” (34); “Drowned” (35).	<i>Tenderness</i> : “dost thou touch me afresh? / Over again I feel thy finger and find thee” (1); “love” (9); “fondler of heart” (9); “melt him” (10); “lingering-out swéet skill” (10); “under thy feathers” (12); “breasting the babble” (17); “Ah touched in your bower of bone” (18); “the mother of being in me” (18); “Christ’s lily” (20); “lamb’s fleece” (22); “the Passion is tenderer in part” (27); “Moth-soft Milky Way” (26); “lovely-felicitous Providence / Finger of a tender of, O of a feathery delicacy” (31); “with a love glides” (33); “A vein for the visiting of the past-prayer” (33); “The Christ of the Father compassionate” (33); “heart-fleshed” (34); “Not a dooms-day dazzle in his coming” (34); “Kind” (34); “not a lightning of fire / hard-hurled” (34); “charity’s hearth’s fire” (35).
<i>Solemnity</i> : A mood implied throughout the description of the wreck..	<i>Playfulness</i> : “dandled the to and fro” (16); “sea-romp” (17).
<i>Fear</i> : “what with dread” (1); “terror” (2); “horror” (2); “swoon of a heart” (2); “guilt is hushed by” (6); “frightful sweat” (7); “electrical horror” (27).	<i>Joy</i> : “What can it be this glee?” (18); “Joy fall to thee, father Francis” (23)
<i>Motion</i> : “sway of the sea” (1); “swirling and hawling” (19); “wild waters” (23);	<i>Stasis</i> : “fastened me flesh” (1); “I steady as a water in a well” (4); “wé dream we

"motionable mind" (32).	are rooted in earth" (11); "I was at rest" (24); "kept thee" (30); "Ground of being, and granite of it" (32).
<i>Negation</i> : implied in the "no" of the storm, death and God's punishment.	<i>Affirmation</i> : "I did say yes" (2).
<i>Diffusion</i> : "lives at last were washing away" (15); "rolled / With the sea-romp over the wreck" (17).	<i>Enclosure</i> : "World's strand" (1); "roped with" (4); "the bay of thy blessing / Not vault them . . . not reeve / even them in?" (12); "rope's end round the man" (16); "the inboard seas" (19); "sealed in wild waters" (23); "The recurb and the recovery of the gulf's sides / The girth of it and wharf of it and the wall" (32)

In most of these pairings, there is the implied or expressed notion that the demonic and apocalyptic are, in some sense, woven together. That is, the terror of God's mastery with its connection to the fiery wasteland of hell is somehow a sign of mercy that leads to the vernal bower of heaven. The identification of these contrasting orders is so strong in places that it is difficult to distinguish between the demonic and apocalyptic. By the end, we are left wondering if divine mastery with its connection to violence, darkness, human impotence, and death is not *really* a form of mercy with its connection to tenderness, playfulness, enlightenment and life. But the question here is not one of proving an ontology. It is more about structuring a way of life. At the pivotal moment when Hopkins says that "Storm flakes were scroll-leaved flowers, lily showers—sweet heaven was astrew in them," we are invited to view the demonic in terms of apocalyptic. This does not suggest a blurring of categories. Quite the contrary, the distinction between such orders of experience is as important as the identification for the oxymoron to have its effect. Thus, Hopkins is not suggesting some sort of marriage of heaven and hell. Rather he is bringing two opposing realities together in the paradoxical manner that they

existed at the cross and does so for the purpose of sharing in the transformative work of Christ. The oxymoron is Hopkins' aspiration in answer to divine inspiration. It configures the taking off of an old self and the putting on of a new.

It should be noted that the oxymoronic patterning of *The Wreck* is extremely complex. Hopkins does not merely combine a series of categorical opposites; he also cross-combines them. For instance, the line "warm-laid grave of a womb-life grey" suggests the imagistic orders of warmth, death, life, and dimness. The juxtaposition of "grave" and "womb" establishes the primary pattern of incongruity in this line. But there is also a secondary form of incongruity between the terms "warm" and "grey," the former corresponding to the apocalyptic sense and the latter to the demonic. A typical oxymoron would entail a simple combination of opposites, but here Hopkins constructs a composite variation of the trope, drawing together various verbal and imagistic orders in order to cross-combine them.

The complexity of Hopkins' patterning is evident in an additional way. In a number of places, the opposing orders of heaven and hell are combined within one body of imagery. We have already seen how Hopkins does this with the image of water in stanza 23, but it is a strategy that he employs elsewhere as well. For instance, the image of fire combines the experience of wrath and wrecking with the experience of comfort and assurance. This is made explicit in stanza 9 where Hopkins enjoys God's "lightning" as a type of soothing warmth. But it is implied throughout the poem. Early on, the poet is "laced with the fire of stress" and "flashes from the flame to the flame" (2-3), but it is in this way that he "breathe[s] in [Christ's] all-fire / glances." Hopkins requests that God

“forge” his will in man “With an anvil- ding / And with fire,” but this is simply to call out for Christ, the “maiden-furled / Miracle-in-Mary-of-flame,” “Our heart’s charity’s hearth’s fire.” And even though “Death” makes use of “flame, / Fang and flood,” he apparently acquires these devices of wrecking from a heavenly realm, since the “heaven of desire” “Glows” and is “belled with fire” (23, 5, 26).

This oxymoronic patterning is fundamental to theological meaning in the poem. I had suggested at the beginning of this section that the underthought and overthought in *The Wreck* have a contrapuntal rather than contradictory relation. The nun’s prophetic wording in the storm as well as Hopkins’ wording in stanza 28 exemplify the harmony of medium and message in the poem. Again, Hopkins fashions the nun as an ideal poet-theologian as she reads the storm cross-wise, “Wording it” in the style of “him that present and past, / Heaven and earth are word of, worded by.” In amazement, he attributes a kind of “majesty” to her wording and calls upon the Spirit of Christ to inspire a satisfactory interpretation (ll. 194-96). The theological outlook of the nun is conventional enough, but the incongruity of her style is astonishing. Facing the “black-about air . . . the breaker, the thickly / Falling flakes” (ll. 189-90), she seems to call out to the source of her distress even while seeking relief from it. This would seem perverse in a way. However, Hopkins acknowledges in stanza 29 that the apparent transgression is partly the point. The nun’s heart was right: she was able to see God at work in what would otherwise suggest his disappearance. The significance of the nun’s wording is not that it renders up the divine presence, but that it rhetorically “christens” what we typically understand as a sign of God’s absence. She utters Christ outright and the incongruity has

a transformative effect, moving the heart into the self-giving love of the cross. In this way, the nun exemplifies Hopkins' poetic approach to theology on the level of overthought; at the same time, her word crystallizes the underthought of the poem, compressing the U-shaped pattern of Scripture into the incongruous, oxymoronic figure of Christ.

Something similar can be said of Hopkins' own efforts to utter Christ outright in stanza 28:

But how shall I . . . make me room there:  
Reach me a . . . Fancy, come faster—  
Strike you the sight of it? look at it loom there,  
Thing that she . . . There then! The Master,  
*Ipsē*, the only one, Christ, King, Head: (ll. 217-21)

Readings of this stanza have typically fallen out into two conflicting lines of interpretation. Some have argued that Hopkins successfully renders up God's presence in these lines.<sup>26</sup> Others have argued just the opposite, claiming that Hopkins and the nun fail to connect their words with a transcendental Word.<sup>27</sup> While these readings have

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Schneider claims that "Christ had appeared to the nun, not in a subjective or imagined vision, but as a real miraculous presence" (27). Extending Schneider's reading, Peter Milward contends that Hopkins found "words to express the inexpressible." That is, looking through the eyes of the nun, he discovers "the right word . . . to express his vision," uttering "Christ himself, who gives meaning as the divine Word to all human events" (1968 129, 130). The difficulty of defending such an interpretation should be obvious; ultimately, it serves to "demonstrate the futility of . . . mak[ing] a claim for presence in ordinary metaphorical language" (Salmon 1983 108n).

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Michael Sprinker argues that the "series of names for Christ ('the Master, / *Ipsē*, the only one, Christ, King, Head') shows how the denominating function of language can only produce a proliferating chain of figurative expressions for the things named. No single expression is primary or original, giving rise to all the others; the words are merely metonymic substitutions for each other" (116). This view is equally problematic given that it assumes the priority of metaphysics and demands a "primary or

engendered a fruitful debate concerning the power and limits of mimesis, they overlook the most significant mode of theological utterance in *The Wreck*. In their determination to uncover the precise object of Hopkins' "wording," dutifully respecting the rules of a referential poetic and ontological grammar, they fail to appreciate that the poet, like the nun, utters Christ by rhetorically enacting the self-giving love of God at the cross. This is the word of *The Wreck* as a whole. In narrative, Hopkins outlines the U-shaped story of Scripture which is emblematically represented in Christ, "Our passion-plunged giant risen" (l. 263). At the same time, he extends an oxymoronic pattern throughout *The Wreck*, a poetic-rhetorical design that is meant to emulate the incongruous shape of the "martyr-master." When Hopkins calls out the various names for Christ in the fourth and fifth lines, he has not succeeded in grasping the Word in words. Nor has he simply failed in mimetic mastery. Rather, he contracts the re-creational word-work of the poem into single figures and tropes, each with a Christly turn. And the transformative effect is key. As in the rest of the poem, Hopkins interprets-invents a series of names so as to receive the grace of God in a moment of ruin and wrecking. He tells the truth so as to keep troth, voicing a response that reciprocates God's love by symbolically enacting it.

Similar to the *Confessions* and *Devotions*, *The Wreck* concludes on a note of exhortation and hope rather than confirmation and assurance. "Let him easter in us," writes Hopkins, "be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east [. . .]" (278-79). There is no final closure here. Instead, we are left in the responsive position that Hopkins himself had assumed at the beginning of the poem, encouraged to move into original" expression for Hopkins' language to succeed.

the substantial “would be” of Christly becoming rather than rest in a one-time substantial “is” or “was” of self-being. By his own admission, Hopkins found it difficult to allow the love of Christ to become the “moving power and spring of [his] verse” (*Letters* 66). Somehow he felt that it would be a “sacrilege to do so.” And yet, this is precisely what he does in *The Wreck*. Rather than writing of theological matters dispassionately from an objective distance, he gives voice to the love of God in Christ, rendering himself vulnerable and alive to the living God who “stirs [his] heart sensibly.”

## CONCLUSION

While God's lovers will always continue to seek and desire him whom their soul loves, they have already been found, because already sought and desired, by him whom their soul loves. Their *eros* occupies a middle space, a two-way street between action and passion, yearning and welcome, seeking and receptivity.

--Richard Kearney<sup>1</sup>

In this study, I have argued that Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* and Hopkins' *The Wreck of the Deutschland* are not simply forms of devotional literature or spiritual autobiography, but constitute works of theology in their own right. From a contemporary perspective, my thesis may seem to entail a gratuitous revisioning of the theological tradition, but I mean it as a hermeneutic retrieval. It is often assumed in scholarly circles that logic and the dialogical arts have always been the natural allies of theology. As a result, the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* are typically viewed as supplemental to theological study; they are "soft" literary works that serve to exemplify the "hard" truths of scholastic divinity and sectarian dogma. My claim is that the *Devotions* and *The Wreck* are theological in the classic sense precisely because they are literary and devotional, spiritual and autobiographical. Donne and Hopkins are poet theologians writing in the patristic-humanistic tradition. Instead of giving priority to the logical-dialectical orientation of systematic theologians and modern philosophers, they follow the example of church fathers like Augustine and Christian humanists like Erasmus by

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001): 79.

treating matters of divinity in a distinctly literary and dramatic manner. To be more specific, they seek to tell the truth at the lively intersection of *exegesis* and *poesis*, engaging an inventive hermeneutic set within the bounds of authority and tradition so as to participate responsively in divine re-creation.

In order to provide some context for appreciating Donne and Hopkins along these lines, I began in chapter one with a reading of Augustine's *Confessions*, drawing out the distinctive features of his poetic approach to divinity. There is little doubt that Augustine was deeply influenced by Platonic thinking and we see evidence of it throughout the *Confessions*. However, he also consciously resists the Platonists and their dual promise of epistemic mastery and ontological stability. As James K. A. Smith points out, there is "another Augustine" who guards against the metaphysical science of Platonism and actively cultivates a literary-existential approach to theology. At the point of conversion, this other Augustine gives up on the intellectual presumption of the philosophers and opens himself to an encounter with the living God. The literary arts are instrumental in the turning. Rather than continuing to seek after God in solitary, dialectical ascent, Augustine embraces the authority of Scripture and situates himself within an interpretive community, taking on a confessional poetic, rhetoric, and hermeneutic. The resulting theological orientation combines what would otherwise seem incompatible. On the one hand, Augustine makes space for the otherness of the living God and fashions himself as a heart-centered *interloqué* rather than mind-centered subject. On the other hand, he seeks to participate in human-divine relationship from this responsive position, interpreting-

inventing the Scriptures—specifically the creation narrative of Genesis 1—so as to share in God’s re-creational purposes.

Turning to Donne’s *Devotions* in chapter 2, I sought to draw out the similarities between Augustine and Donne in terms of their poetic-theological approach. Scholars have long recognized the influence of Augustine on Donne. However, they typically cast Augustine in a sectarian light and draw on his writings to support either a fideistic-Protestant or scholastic-Catholic view of Donne’s religious writing. The difficulty of this approach is that Donne is generally irenic in outlook and borrows from Augustine for reasons that have little to do with religious politicking. What seems to matter most to Donne is Augustine’s existential, dramatic, literary approach to theology rather than the particular doctrines that he formed in reaction to the so-called heretics. Like Augustine, he associates the language of divinity with a grammar-rhetoric of multiplicity and re-creation. In this respect, Donne’s appreciation of Augustine is best understood in terms of the humanist preference for the patristic *antiqui* over the scholastic *moderni*. His aim, however, is not simply to reiterate the teaching of the fathers or to ornament well-worn doctrines. Instead, he strives to imitate their manner of theological discovery and invention.

Donne provides an early sketch of his poetic approach to divinity in “Satire III.” While admiring the philosophers for their ethical rigor and critiquing the rampant sectarianism of his day, Donne ultimately favors the inventive hermeneutic of the fathers, recommending an existential approach to divine truth within the bounds of tradition and authority. In the *Devotions*, Donne not only expands upon this approach, but puts it into

practice. Continuing to follow the catalytic way of the fathers, Donne writes at the paradoxical juncture of interpretation and invention, seeking both to appreciate and imitate the “metaphoricall God” of the Scriptures who transforms the heart according to the grammar-rhetoric of the cross. For Donne, as for Augustine, theology is not a matter of transcending the creaturely limitations of language so as to capture the divine essence once and for all. Rather it is a matter of embracing and involving himself and his reader in the transformative word-work of the living God.

In chapter 3, I continued to explore these themes in Hopkins’ *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. Interestingly, most scholars have viewed *The Wreck* as a theological poem, but typically not in relation to the patristic-humanistic strain of the theological tradition. Whether in affirmation or critique, readers tend to assume the priority of the more dominant scholastic tradition in their treatment of Hopkins’ poetic theology. Either the poem successfully matches metaphor to metaphysics or it exemplifies the impossibility of such a venture. Drawing on Augustine and Donne, I countered this view by arguing that Hopkins does more than merely succeed or fail in scholastic divinity. It is true that he shows a preference for metaphysical thinking in his undergraduate essays and spiritual writings, but he takes a different turn in *The Wreck*, practicing divinity as a living witness rather than impartial judge. As in Augustine’s *Confessions* and Donne’s *Devotions*, the grammatical-rhetorical arts are central to the theology of *The Wreck*, as is the biblical heart. Resisting the priority of the mind-soul in the philosophical-scholastic tradition, Hopkins takes a heart-centered approach, fashioning himself as a responsive participant in human-divine relationship. Rather than attempting to grasp the divine essence in

words, he opens himself to the living God in confession and takes part in divine re-creation through an inventive hermeneutic bounded by tradition and authority. The result is a narrational structure and metaphoric patterning that serve to transform rather than substantiate, moving the poet and reader alike into the self-giving way of Christ.

What is the overall significance of a project like this? In one respect, I believe that I have made an important contribution to the critical history of the *Confessions*, *Devotions* and *The Wreck*, drawing out neglected elements in each by situating them within a wider theological and philosophical context. More importantly, however, I have helped advance the current literary-philosophical discussion concerning the nature of religion and theology in our post-metaphysical age. While generally affirming Heidegger's critique of ontotheology, I have argued that the "hermeneutic of suspicion" it has helped to establish in the humanities has tended to elide important alternatives to metaphysical thinking within the Western tradition. While critical and cultural theorists like Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida have drawn attention to the illusions and dangers of metaphysical thinking and living, they have tended to assume the practical necessity of ontotheology in the interests of critiquing it and have therefore proceeded as though metaphysics is somehow an essential condition of human being with which we are to contend in an ongoing way. I have taken a less critical, more appreciative approach. Following writers of the so called "religious turn" in phenomenology, I have argued that ontotheology and metaphysical thinking have not always been dominant and, in fact, have been constantly challenged throughout the Western tradition. It is true that Augustine, Donne and Hopkins share an attraction to ontotheology in many of their

writings, but they are also joined by their resistance to this same orientation, a resistance that is motivated as much by existential concern as poetic sensibility. Thus, while all three can be accused of metaphysical thinking at points, they project an entirely alternative view at others, placing the priority on human becoming rather than being, the biblical heart rather than the philosophical mind, the literary arts rather than logic and dialectic, and the living God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jesus rather than the god of philosophers and scholars.

There are strengths and weaknesses to all approaches. The chief drawback to mine is that it fails to do justice to the *Confessions*, *Devotions* and *The Wreck* as cultural artifacts. Rather than considering these works in their immediate historical setting, I have lifted them from this setting and compared them in a way that neglects the social, political and religious circumstances that contributed most directly to their production. Furthermore, I have deliberately avoided reflecting on the influence that these works surely had in popular and critical reception. My intention is not to elide these important considerations. I assume that there were social, political and religious forces that led to the development of such works and I also assume that these works had a role in shaping the culture within which they were received. I have simply devoted myself to a different set of concerns. Rather than carrying out a “thick description” of the *Confessions*, *Devotions* and *The Wreck*, paying close attention to the material conditions of each work, I have taken a wider and hyperopic view, seeking to highlight a cluster of themes, ideas and attitudes that make up a distinctly literary, non-metaphysical approach to theology,

an approach that not only unsettles our assumption of a pervasive logocentricism in the Western tradition, but also helps to revision divinity for a post-metaphysical age.

In a certain respect, my approach can be compared to the philosophical-literary work of Richard Kearney. In *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (2001), Kearney associates himself with “that new turn in the philosophy of religion which strives to overcome the metaphysical God of pure act” and sets for himself the question that we began with in the introduction: “what kind of divinity comes after metaphysics?” (2). With Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and Caputo as dialogue (and sparring) partners, Kearney seeks an answer to his question through a strategy of hermeneutic retrieval. That is, he interprets a variety of religious texts—from texts of Scripture like Exodus and the Song of Solomon to Nicholas Cusa’s *Triologus de Possest*—seeking to discover/invent certain “lost meanings . . . within and between . . . the texts themselves” (8). One of the important meanings he retrieves is the “eschatological”—that is, the sense of a “God who possibilizes our world from out of the future” and who invites human beings, or *personae*, into “the space of the possible” to take part in the coming of things to be (1, 4). For Kearney, the kind of divinity that comes after metaphysics is the God of the possible who “reveals history to be a divine venture, and human adventure” (5).

The themes of Kearney’s work are similar to my own: theology in the “eschatological” sense is creational rather than ideological, covenantal rather than conceptual, performative rather than constative, poetic rather than discursive, interpretive rather than epistemic. The significant difference is that Kearney focuses on little-known writers and imagines his work as comprising a “counter-tradition of readings.” In this

respect, Kearney follows Caputo by attending to a kind of “prophetic counter-tradition.” By contrast, my strategy has been to focus on literatures that are obviously traditional, canonical, and patriarchal and to draw out a kind of non-metaphysical theology from within these literatures despite their alleged logocentrism. Again, Augustine, Donne and Hopkins are deeply influenced by the rationalistic god of the Greek philosophical tradition, but they also resist at significant points and pose alternatives to metaphysical thinking. It seems to me that the reason for the resistance and the alternatives has chiefly to do with pastoral-priestly responsibility rather than prophetic dissent. Augustine, Donne and Hopkins practice a poetic theology not because they were reactionaries contributing to the formation of an esoteric counter-tradition, but because they were pastor-priests seeking to encourage, edify and transform in the exoteric main. Rather than satisfying inquiring minds in a scholastic manner, they cared for hearts and souls, writing in such a way as to equip themselves and their readers for living the Christian life.

While my study of Augustine, Donne and Hopkins makes an important contribution to traditional scholarship and contemporary literary-philosophical theory, it serves more as a prolegomena than an exhaustive account. My intention for future work is to expand the scope of my study to include a chapter on a reformed or evangelical poetic-theological work such as George Herbert’s *The Temple* (1633), John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* (1666) or John Newton’s *An Authentic Narrative* (1764). I would also like to explore the nature of dialectic and logic in the patristic-humanistic tradition. There is little doubt that philosophical-scholastic theology privileges the dialectical arts in the interests of metaphysical clarity and coherence, and that those working in the patristic-

humanistic tradition resist this priority even while being attracted to it in various ways. At the same time, there is a form of dialectic that has little to do with seeking after adequation or escaping to a transcendental signified. When grammar and rhetoric are ascendant in the work of theology, dialectic still comes to play, but instead of inclining to what Sean Burke calls the “transcendental lure,” they serve to establish hermeneutic parameters for fruitful interpretation-invention and aid in arranging an effective poetic-rhetorical *dispositio*. This is an important aspect of poetic theology in the work of Augustine, Donne and Hopkins and I would imagine it would be true of Herbert, Bunyan and Newton as well. Such writers mean to tell the truth—living and whole—and this requires distinctions to be made and boundaries to be upheld. There is the very real possibility of something called “heresy,” but the problem tends to be treated in dramatic rather than scientific terms. That is, instead of simply countering the reductionistic thinking of the heretics with ever more subtle arguments and calling that theology proper, the poet theologian uses dialectic to guard the traditional mysteries of faith from over-refinement and to open up space for participating responsively in relationship to the living God through the poetic, rhetorical, and hermeneutic arts.

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