

P O E M S

BY JOHN
DONNE

With an Introduction by Elizabeth Howard

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“TURN THE SOUL AROUND”

Introduction

“Let man’s soul be a sphere.” To the modern ear, the opening line of John Donne’s poem “Good Friday, 1613, Riding Westward” (p.156) sounds like a petition. It is, however, first and foremost, a proposition, like the beginning of a Euclidian proof. If in geometry class we write, “Let there be a triangle, $AB\Gamma$,” Donne proposes in the same way, “Let there be a sphere, a soul sphere.” Or, as we might say today, “Let’s imagine, for sake of argument, that man’s soul were a sphere.” What would follow? For Donne, a whole host of possibilities, including the kind of essential movement that the soul would take on: a turning. Donne connects the natural movement of the sphere to the theological movement of the soul; rotations and orbits map onto the activity of repentance, imaginatively expanding the connotations of *tsbu*, the Hebrew word for “repentance,” which literally means “to turn around.” In the end, of course, the proposition that opens the poem grounds the poem’s major petition: the propositional statement “Let man’s soul be a sphere” transforms into the heart’s (and poem’s) earnest prayer, “Yes, Lord! Let my soul be a sphere! Let it turn towards you!”

The pairing of the orbiting sphere and the reformation of the soul is the argumentative crux of “Good Friday, 1613.” The pairing also

illustrates one of the signature rhetorical tropes of the English metaphysical poets: the conceit, in which the tethering of two unlikely things by their seemingly accidental qualities makes for a surprising and probing comparison. Donne's holy week meditation on Christ's death on the cross provokes him to investigate how to turn his soul from business (traveling westward) back to Calvary (the poem's east), and his investigation opens up many new lines of inquiry, including planetary motion and its linguistic connection to wandering, stellar movement, navigation, compasses, and the soul's progress towards God. One of Donne's few dated poems, "Good Friday, 1613" describes both the discrete experience of a personal Good Friday's reflection in his life and the shared struggle of all Christians as it asks how we participate in the miracle of turning our soul in a God-ward direction.

The Poet's Life

Some, like Donne's early biographer Izaak Walton, describe the personal trajectory of Donne's life as more-or-less of an arc from the wanton hedonism of youth to a mature, sincere love for God with age—a movement from the passionate poet to the pastoral priest. The arrangement of the second edition of Donne's *Poems* in 1635 mimics this biographical progression with Donne's "Songs and Poems" gathered at the beginning before the "Holy Sonnets." I'd like to think that the rough-and-tumble organization of the 1633 edition is more historically descriptive, if we want to use the ordering of Donne's poems to map his biography. Walton's elegant narrative arc is overly simplistic, particularly because scholars have dated examples of devotional poetry incredibly early in his life and some of his more erotic poetry rather late in his career. Nonetheless, scholars agree that the general trajectory of Donne's spiritual life moves towards public piety as he becomes the dean of St. Paul's (old) cathedral and towards private intimacy with God, particularly in wrestling through crushing

INFINITATI SACRUM
AUGUSTI, 1601

METEMPSYCHOSIS
POEMA SATYRICON

Epistle

Others at the porches and entries of their buildings set their arms; I my picture; if any colors can deliver a mind so plain and flat and through-light as mine. Naturally at a new author I doubt, and stick, and do not say quickly, good. I censure much and tax; and this liberty costs me more than others. Yet I would not be so rebellious against myself, as not to do it, since I love it; nor so unjust to others, to do it *sine talione*. As long as I give them as good hold upon me, they must pardon me my bitings. I forbid no reprehender but him, that like the Trent Council, forbids not books, but authors, damning whatever such a name hath or shall write. None write so ill, that he gives not something exemplary to follow, or fly. Now when I begin this book, I have no purpose to come into any man's debt; how my stock will hold out, I know not; perchance waste, perchance increase in use. If I do borrow any thing of antiquity, besides that I make account that I pay it to posterity, with as much, and as good, you shall

still find me to acknowledge it, and to thank not him only, that hath digged out treasure for me, but that hath lighted me a candle to the place. All which I will bid you remember (for I will have no such readers, as I can teach) is, that the Pythagorean doctrine doth not only carry one soul from man to man, or man to beast, but indifferently to plants also: and therefore you must not grudge to find the same soul in an emperor, in a post-horse, and in a macaron; since no unreadiness in the soul, but an indisposition in the organs works this. And therefore, though this soul could not move when it was a melon, yet it may remember and can now tell me at what lascivious banquet it was served. And though it could not speak, when it was a spider, yet it can remember, and now tell me, who used it for poison to attain dignity. However the bodies have dulled her other faculties, her memory hath ever been her own; which makes me so seriously deliver you by her relation all her passages from her first making, when she was that apple which Eve eat, to this time when she is she, whose life you shall find in the end of this book.

THE PROGRESS OF THE SOUL

First Song

I.

I sing the progress of a deathless soul,
Whom Fate, which God made, but doth not control,
Placed in most shapes; all times before the law
Yoked us, and when and since in this I sing;
And the great world to his aged evening,
From infant morn through manly noon I draw;
What the gold Chaldee, or silver Persian saw,
Greek brass, or Roman iron, is in this one;
A work to outwear Seth's pillars, brick and stone,
And (holy writ excepted) made to yield to none.

II.

Thee, eye of Heaven, this great soul envies not;
By thy male force is all we have begot.
In the first east thou now begin'st to shine,
Suck'st early balm, and island spices there;

And wilt anon in thy loose-reined career
At Tagus, Po, Seine, Thames, and Danaw dine,
And see at night thy western land of mine;
Yet hast thou not more nations seen than she,
That before thee one day began to be;
And, thy frail light being quenched shall long, long outlive thee.

III.

Nor, holy Janus, in whose sovereign boat
The church and all the monarchies did float;
That swimming college and free hospital
Of all mankind, that cage and vivary
Of fowls and beasts, in whose womb Destiny
Us and our latest nephews did install;
(From thence are all derived, that fill this All)
Didst thou in that great stewardship embark
So divers shapes into that floating park,
As have been moved and informed by this heavenly spark.

IV.

Great Destiny, the commissary of God,
That hast marked out a path and period
For everything; who, where we offspring took,
Our ways and ends seest at one instant; thou
Knot of all causes; thou, whose changeless brow
Ne'er smiles nor frowns, O vouchsafe thou to look,
And show my story in thy eternal book.
That (if my prayer be fit) I may understand
So much myself as to know with what hand
How scant or liberal this my life's race is spanned.

HOLY SONNETS

I. LA CORONA

*D*eign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise,
Weaved in my lone devout melancholy,
Thou, which of good bast, yea, art treasury,
All-changing unchanged, Ancient of days;
But do not with a vile crown of frail bays
Reward my Muse's white sincerity,
But what thy thorny crown gained, that give me
A crown of glory, which doth flower always.
The ends crown our works, but thou crown'st our ends,
For at our ends begins our endless rest;
The first last end now zealously possest,
With a strong sober thirst, my soul attends.
'Tis time that heart and voice be lifted high,
Salvation to all that will is nigh.

II. ANNUNCIATION

Salvation to all that will is nigh;
That All, which always is all everywhere,

Which cannot sin, and yet all sins must bear,
 Which cannot die, yet cannot choose but die,
 Lo, faithful Virgin, yields himself to lie
 In prison in thy womb; and though he there
 Can take no sin, nor thou give, yet he 'll wear,
 Taken from thence, flesh, which Death's force may try.
 Ere by the spheres time was created, thou
 Wast in his mind (who is thy son and brother,
 Whom thou conceiv'st) conceived; yea, thou art now
 Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother,
 Thou 'st light in dark, and shut in little room
Immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb.

III. NATIVITY

Immensity, cloistered in thy dear womb,
 Now leaves his well-beloved imprisonment,
 There he hath made himself to his intent
 Weak enough, now into our world to come;
 But oh, for thee, for him, hath the inn no room?
 Yet lay him in this stall, and from the orient
 Stars and wise men will travel, to prevent
 The effect of Herod's jealous general doom.
 Seest thou, my soul, with thy faith's eye, how he,
 Which fills all place, yet none holds him, doth lie?
 Was not his pity towards thee wondrous high,
 That would have need to be pitied by thee?
 Kiss him, and with him into Egypt go,
With his kind mother, who partakes thy woe.

IV. TEMPLE

With his kind mother, who partakes thy woe,
 Joseph, turn back; see where your child doth sit
 Blowing, yea, blowing out those sparks of wit,
 Which himself on the Doctors did bestow;
 The Word but lately could not speak, and lo
 It suddenly speaks wonders: whence comes it,
 That all which was, and all which should be writ,
 A shallow-seeming child should deeply know?
 His Godhead was not soul to his manhood,
 Nor had time mellowed him to this ripeness;
 But as for one which hath a long task, 'tis good
 With the sun to begin his business,
 He in his age's morning thus began,
By miracles exceeding power of man.

V. MIRACLES

By miracles exceeding power of man
 He faith in some, envy in some begat,
 For, what weak spirits admire, ambitious hate;
 In both affections many to him ran,
 But oh! the worst are most, they will and can,
 Alas! and do, unto the immaculate,
 Whose creature Fate is, now prescribe a fate,
 Measuring self-life's infinity to a span,
 Nay, to an inch. Lo, where condemned he
 Bears his own cross with pain; yet by and by,
 When it bears him, he must bear more and die.
 Now thou art lifted up, draw me to thee,

And, at thy death giving such liberal dole,
Moist with one drop of thy blood my dry soul.

VI. RESURRECTION

Moist with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul
 Shall (though she now be in extreme degree
 Too stony-hard, and yet too fleshly) be
 Freed by that drop, from being starved, hard, or foul;
 And life, by this death abled, shall control
 Death, whom thy death slew; nor shall to me
 Fear of first or last death bring misery,
 If in thy life's book my name thou enroll:
 Flesh in that long sleep is not putrefied,
 But made that there, of which, and for which, 'twas,
 Nor can by other means be glorified.
 May then sin sleep, and death soon from me pass,
 That, waked from both, I again risen may
Salute the last and everlasting day.

VII. ASCENSION

Salute the last and everlasting day,
 Joy at the uprising of this Sun and Son,
 Ye, whose just tears or tribulation
 Have purely washed or burnt your drossy clay;
 Behold the Highest, parting hence away,
 Lightens the dark clouds, which he treads upon.
 Nor doth he by ascending shew alone,
 But first he, and he first, enters the way.
 O strong Ram, which hast battered heaven for me,

Mild Lamb, which with thy blood hast marked the path,
 Bright torch, which shin'st, that I the way may see,
 Oh! with thy own blood quench thy own just wrath:
 And if thy holy Spirit my Muse did raise,
Deign at my hands this crown of prayer and praise!

HOLY SONNETS

I.

As due by many titles, I resign
 Myself to thee, O God. First I was made
 By thee and for thee, and, when I was decayed,
 Thy blood bought that the which before was thine;
 I am thy son, made with thyself to shine,
 Thy servant, whose pains thou hast still repaid,
 Thy sheep, thine image, and, till I betrayed
 Myself, a temple of thy Spirit divine.
 Why doth the devil then usurp on me?
 Why doth he steal, nay, ravish that's thy right?
 Except thou rise, and for thine own work fight,
 Oh! I shall soon despair, when I shall see
 That thou lov'st mankind well, yet wilt not choose me
 And Satan hates me, yet is loth to lose me.

II.

O! my black soul, now thou art summoned
 By sickness, death's herald and champion,
 Thou'rt like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
 Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled;
 Or like a thief, which, till Death's doom be read,
 Wisheth himself delivered from prison;
 But, damned and hauled to execution,

EPIGRAMS

Hero and Leander

Both robbed of air, we both lie in one ground,
Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drowned.

Pyramus and Thisbe

Two by themselves each other love and fear;
Slain, cruel friends, by parting, have joined here.

Niobe

By children's births and death I am become
So dry, that I am now mine own sad tomb.

A Burnt Ship

Out of a fired ship, which, by no way
But drowning, could be rescued from the flame,
Some men leaped forth, and ever as they came
Near the foe's ships, did by their shot decay;
So all were lost, which in the ship were found,
They in the sea being burnt, they in the burnt ship drowned.

Fall of a Wall

Under an undermined and shot-bruised wall
 A too bold captain perished by the fall,
 Whose brave misfortune happiest men envied,
 That had a tower for tomb his bones to hide.

A Lame Beggar

I am unable, yonder beggar cries,
 To stand or move; if he say true, he lies.

A Self-Accuser

Your Mistress, that you follow whores, still taxeth you;
 'Tis strange that she should thus confess it, though 't be true.

A Licentious Person

Thy sins and hairs may no man equal call;
 For as thy sins increase, thy hairs do fall.

Antiquary

If in his study he hath so much care
 To hang old strange things, let his wife beware.

Disinherited

Thy father all from thee by his last will
 Gave to the poor; thou hast good title still.

Phryne

Thy flattering picture, Phryne, 's like to thee
 Only in this, that you both painted be.