

THANATOPSIS: DEATH AND MEANING IN JOHN DONNE'S
DEVOTIONS UPON EMERGENT OCCASIONS AND DEATH'S DUEL

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ABSTRACT

THANATOPSIS: DEATH AND MEANING IN JOHN DONNE'S *DEVOTIONS UPON EMERGENT OCCASIONS* AND *DEATH'S DUEL*

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This thesis considers the representation of death in John Donne's later prose works *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) and *Death's Duel* (1630). Donne's meditations on mortality interrogate the relationship between material bodies--his own and that of James VI and I--and language. Identifying the corpo-real as semiotically disruptive, Donne effectively deconstructs King James's textual embodiment of absolute sovereign power. As the power of the state church and his own discursive authority as preacher depend upon the belief that Scripture represents God's Word, Donne recuperates the representativity of the linguistic sign through poetically figuring the body of Christ, the divine *Logos*. By both close reading and reconstructing the socio-political contexts of *Devotions* and *Duel*, this thesis examines the interrelations among thanatos, representation, and discursive and material power as articulated in two significant early modern texts.

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Betty King

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Introduction

In his biography of John Donne, Izaak Walton recounts that, shortly before his death, Donne posed for a drawing as his own shrouded corpse:¹

Several charcoal fires being first made in his large study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand, and having put off all his clothes, had this sheet put on him, and so tied with knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed as dead bodies are usually fitted, to be shrouded and put into their coffin or grave. (xlv)

Donne physically prefigures his demise in order to create a public and personal *memento mori*, a mnemonic representation that symbolically presents the absence of death:

In this posture he was drawn at his just height; and when the picture was fully finished, he caused it to be set by his bedside, where it continued and became his hourly object till his death, and then was then given to his dearest friend and executor Dr. Henry King, [. . .] who caused him to be thus carved in one entire piece of white marble, as it now stands in [St Pauls] church. (xlv)

Similar to his later texts *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* and the sermon *Death's Duel*, Donne's macabre simulation expresses a desire for thanatopsis, and the comprehension of mortality both as a generalized abstraction and a personal impending material absence. Thanatopsis, according to *The Century Dictionary*,

combines the Greek words for “death” and “a sight,” and means a “view of death.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the same etymology for thanatopsis, but defines it as “a contemplation of death.” The conceptual link between the two definitions is the activity of seeing. Contemplation is “the action of beholding, or looking at with attention and thought” (*OED*)--the prolonged regard of an actual object, or the “mental viewing” (*OED*) of images or symbols to concentrate sustained thought on a particular subject. Thus thanatopsis signifies the mental or physical viewing of images, symbols or signs in the ideation of death. To view his death Donne makes use of Renaissance thanatological symbolics, in this instance the *beatus*, an effigy signifying the body “empty of earthly life, show[ing] none of the signs of dissolution [. . .] [with] the attitude and expression of eternal rest, in peaceful expectation of the Last Day” (Ariès 247). Donne’s intelligible representation of thanatos, as Sir Thomas Browne writes, “obscures” death’s absence with the presence of the material sign: “The variety of monuments hath often obscured true graves” (290).

Thanatopsis, however, always entails the mistaking of a sign for the inexpressible reality of death. Donne’s *memento mori* articulates the nullity of thanatos through representing his future material dissolution by a likeness of his present body. But substantive reality of the effigy’s referent, Donne’s annihilation, remains unfathomable and elusive. Instead, the symbolics of death reveal at once the limits of mortality and representation. In the attempt to make signs designate the unsignifiable, the workings of representation--the substitution of an original presence with a sign, and the non-identity of signifier and signified--are exposed.

Donne's *memento mori* is intended to facilitate the apprehension and the imaginary containment of death's absolute destructive force. A similar attempt to domesticate conceptually the persistent reality of thanatos is the association of death's universal power with the particular exercise of socio-political power. In early modern English culture, material power was often imagined to translate into a personal power over death itself. The sovereign's body, for example, was symbolically invested with an imagined immortality co-extensive with the putative eternal existence of the commonwealth. This fictive perpetuity serves both to express and legitimate the monarch's power to, as King James asserts, "make of their subjects like men at the Chesse" (*Works* 308). Similarly, Christ's immortality, his "peculiar" "perogative [. . .] not to die this death, not to see corruption" (*Duel* 173), symbolizes the absolute power, as both creator and destroyer of human life, of God the Father. *Devotions* and *Death's Duel*, Donne's crucial meditations upon his future corporeal absence, consider the relation of these two fabulous bodies--the body of King James VI and I, and the body of Jesus Christ--to power and thanatos.

The movement of Donne's meditative focus from his own body to the bodies of James and Christ suggests that cultural discourses, which construct correspondences among the bodies of subjects, sovereign and saviour, and political and religious systems, are instrumental to Donne's self-understanding of embodiment. Both the English early modern state and church were figured as *corpus mysticum*,² the former a monarchic corpus constructed out of the individual bodies of subjects, and the latter as constituting, with continental Protestants, the mystical body of Christ: "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all

the members of that one body, being many, are one bodie: so also is Christ" (1 *Cor.* 12.12). A different, yet related mode of representation common to the early modern period employs synecdoche and the "universal" human body³ to order and make comprehensible large abstract systems, such as the cosmos or geographical territories. In *Devotions*, for example, Donne tropes the catastrophic disasters described in Scripture as symptoms of a seriously ill body: "The heavens have had their dropsy, they drowned the world, and they shall have their fever, and burn the world" (63).

In the doctrine of correspondence, the microcosm of the human body is related to various macrocosms as part to whole, where "either the whole can represent the part or the part can represent the whole" (Burke, *Grammar* 504). In *Nature's Work of Art*, an extensive analysis of the "man as a little world" trope in Renaissance writings, Leonard Barkan suggests that microcosm-macrocosm representations were ubiquitous because in the early modern period the "essential and typical view" (2) of the body was as a naturally "complete and finite system, highly complex but at the same time familiar and immediate" (3). Early moderns, argues Barkan, out of an "urge to understand the cosmos and man's place in it" consciously "distort[ed] the truth" of the "purely concrete human body" (3), projecting the sure reality of the body onto otherwise incomprehensible abstractions.

Phineas Fletcher's description the experience of embodiment in *The Purple Island* (1633), an allegorical poem that compares man to the topography and settlement of an island, problematizes Barkan's general assumption that early moderns regarded the body as offering "familiar and immediate" knowledge:

A place too seldome view'd, yet still in view;
Neare as our selves, yet farthest from our care;
Which we by leaving finde, by seeking lost;
A forrain home, a strange, though native coast;
Most obvious to all, yet most unknown to most. (1.34)

Fletcher here identifies the body *qua* body as a radical alterity, as offering a non-knowledge that is, as Jean Luc Nancy writes, “not negative knowledge or the negation of knowledge; [. . .] simply the absence of knowledge, the absence of the very relation of knowledge, whatever its content” (203). In fact, Fletcher’s emphasis on the paradoxical presence and alterity of the body anticipates post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theories of corporeal subjectivity.

For Jacques Lacan the apprehension of the body as a “complete and unified system,” which Barkan assumes *a priori*, replaces the subject’s fragmented and partial experiential reality only through imaginary identification with a unified and unifying signifier (specular image, or linguistic sign) “posited at a distance, fixed, identical and substantial” (Lingis 160). The external metonymic identification produces “a model of bodily integrity, of outsideness, which the subject’s experiences can never confirm” (Grosz 43), and a sense of displacement in which the body is both “Neare as our selves, yet farthest from our care.” For the subject, then, the body is “constructed by language, by cultural practices encoded in language, and by visual images which mesh with systems of language” (Gent 6). Thus the ideological values of unity, coherence, and harmony are simultaneously assigned to the human body and the social-political environment through symbolic

representations such as the microcosm-macrocosm metaphor.

The imagination of the corpus as a coherent totality is, however, always susceptible to subversion by the experiential reality of the material body. In *Devotions*, Donne describes his body as fragmented by his illness : “Why dost thou melt me, scatter me, pour me like water upon the ground so instantly?” (14). Elaine Scarry argues in relation to Donne’s texts that disease “appropriate[s] the body away from its inhabitant [. . .] by shutting out language” rendering the body “mentally unenterable” (Scarry 86). The insistent physicality of the sick body disrupts the unifying force of language, destroys the relation of signs to sense. In my thesis I argue that the immediate presence of the body, not only sensibly “shut[s] out language,” but entirely defamiliarizes signification, the actual semantic mechanics of the sign. Donne’s contemplation of his mortality--the ultimate somatic disarticulation--in *Devotions* and *Death’s Duel* interrogates the process of representation itself: its necessity, its efficacy and its failure.

My suggestion that Donne questions the ontological status of representation is at odds with Michel Foucault’s influential statements about the status of signs in the early modern episteme. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argues that during the Renaissance signs were understood to be essentially connected to their referents: words were intrinsically coextensive with things, and not “an arbitrary system” (35). Foucault’s generalization constitutes an effective contrastive introduction to his study of representation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but is greatly misleading in relation to the early modern period. “If it is true,” Richard Waswo argues in *Language and Meaning in the Renaissance*, “that the idea of language

as an “arbitrary system” was by no means generally accepted in the sixteenth century, it is also true that this idea had been continually advanced by different kinds of theorists since the middle of the fifteenth”(69). Scepticism regarding the referentiality of signs is suggested, for example, by Michel Montaigne and Robert Browne’s comments on rhetoric, and Francis Bacon’s and popular writer Thomas Tany’s projects for the construction of a universal language to correct the ambiguities of existing discourse.⁴

Foucault’s generalization not only disregards contemporary debates regarding representation, but disables the application of his most important argument--that power and knowledge are ineluctably connected--to the analysis of early modern texts. Insofar as representation is crucial to the production, articulation, and dissemination of knowledge, Foucault’s identification of a unified “universal” theory of the sign in the Renaissance implies an untenable assumption that knowledge/power relations, both individual and institutional, were also uncontested. My present study identifies Donne’s examination of the relationship of the sign and his corporeality as producing a denaturalization of the very “fundamental codes of a culture--those governing its language, its schema of perception, its exchanges, its values, the hierarchy of its practices” (Foucault xx) in which power inheres. In *Death’s Duel* Donne evinces an acute consciousness of the sign’s crucial role in the constitution of religious faith and the stability of institutional Protestantism. Similarly, in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne identifies and subverts the symbolic and imaginary foundation of early modern sovereignty.

To argue that John Donne articulates an oppositional politics in his later

devotional writings challenges the portrait of Donne as a monarchist and High Anglican conservative first constructed by his seventeenth-century biographer Isaac Walton. Most twentieth-century critics similarly characterize Donne as a committed royalist. John Carey states, in his biography *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, that the “adulation of king and court which streamed from Donne’s pulpit” (100) stems from his “unqualified allegiance to [King] James” (101). Important socio-historical studies of Donne by David Aers and Gunter Kress, and Arthur Marotti also stress Donne’s apparent conservatism. Aers and Kress, drawing on Mark Curtis and Michael Waler’s studies of the “alienated intellectual” in Stuart England, argue that because of his Catholic background, Donne could not identify with Puritan radicals or be “committed to an ideologically based critique of his society” (46). Marotti’s reconstruction of the coterie socio-literary environment identifies Donne’s textual production as primarily “self-advertis[ment]” (14) directed towards social advancement within the élite community.

More recent scholarship, however, has sought to avoid such totalizing narratives regarding Donne’s politics or self-identity, emphasising instead recurring textual disjunctions, contradictions and ambiguities, and the specific historical conditions of literary production. David Norbrook, for example, suggests closer attention to the particular rhetorical structures and historical contexts of Donne’s writings would “qualify the view of his unequivocal absolutism” (6), as the so-called “stream of adulation” contains within it trenchant criticisms of royal policy and civil power relations. Jeanne Shami also asserts that there is an “imbalance in Donne criticism” (380). Shami argues that Donne’s later prose works have “largely been

ignored" (382), or mistakenly used as "straightforward, unequivocal, and easily understood" glosses "on Donne's poetry and earlier writings, to confirm a biographical profile, or to support generalizations about Donne's beliefs" (384). Like Shami, I assume that Donne's later prose works are not transparently evidential documents, but rather significant and sophisticated cultural performances in their own right. My thesis traces, via both close reading and the reconstruction of their socio-political contexts, the rhetorical, conceptual and ideological tensions permeating *Death's Duel* and *Devotions*, without attempting to generate a totalizing portrait of the biographical Donne or the Donnean corpus.

In chapter one I contend that in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, written late in 1623, Donne's scepticism regarding representation and subjective knowledge of his body, and his conclusion that the relationship between "names" and "things" "is as perplexed in sicknesses as in any thing else" (*Devotions* 5) develops into a significant critique of King James VI and I's textual embodiment of absolute sovereign power. Jonathan Goldberg, in his influential study, *James I and the Politics of Literature*, identifies the echoes of the king's politicized language--James's "stile of *Gods*"--in Donne's writing as a sycophantic imitation of the monarch, and evidence that "Donne's self-constitution is absolutist" (219). In contrast, I identify the intertextual connections among the *Devotions* and texts authored by James as Donne's subversive *appropriation* of royal words. In so doing I both support Curtis Perry's contention that "[King] James did not have--could not have had--full control over the received meanings of his own public image" (7), and call into question the current critical consensus regarding Donne's politics.

Devotions, I argue, is a complex inquiry into the relationship of the sign, the sovereign body, and God that ultimately deconstructs the king's claim to be a "man of God, and God of men," and thus the metaphysical foundation of James's theory and symbolic practice of absolutism.

Chapter two locates Donne's disassociation of "names" from "things" in *Devotions* within what I contend is its relevant historical context: the debates among sixteenth and early seventeenth-century ecclesiasts regarding signification, and the relationship between the words of Scripture and the divine Word. In *Death's Duel*, a sermon delivered at St. Paul's shortly before his death in 1630, Donne's attempt to redress the hermeneutic instability of Scripture once again discloses the incommensurability of representation, the ephemeral material body, and the divine. The liminal instability of the linguistic sign's representativity, as Donne is aware, threatens his own discursive empowerment as exegete of God's Word, and disables the comprehension of mortality in Scripture's narrative of salvation and resurrection. Thus, I argue, Donne manipulates late medieval *memento mori* and *imitatio Christi* conventions to cleave provisionally signifier and referent, and recuperate words as an effective means to apprehend God and understand thanatos. Donne's *imitatio Christi* culminates in the sensual figuration of Christ's passion, a re-presentation of the *Logos* that ensures the significance of the biblical text. As I note, however, by re-animating Christ in language, Donne displaces God, the transcendental, always absent referent, from the economy of the sign. Thus, by enabling his listeners to imagine they "hang upon him that hangs upon the cross," Donne at once revivifies and nullifies God in the same rhetorical move, producing instead his own apotheosis as poetic "maker."

A Note on Texts

I have reproduced the orthography of my source texts throughout, whether facsimiles of the original early modern texts or modernized editions, and have made no attempt to normalize spellings in either case.

Notes

¹ The historical accuracy of Walton's biography is the subject of scholarly debate. R.C Bald points out Walton makes many errors of chronology, and often manipulates documentary evidence in order to create a coherent, unified narrative. Walton's *Life*, however, written from what he "heard Donne himself [say] of his earlier experiences" and from what he gathered from the spoken or "written reminiscences of some of Donne's friends" (Bald 12-13) conveys, if not historical truth, the "truth of discourse, of what is said about how lives are constituted by the actions [and words] of others" (Goldberg 214).

Although she dismisses Walton's famous account of the making of the death portrait as "melodramatic" and "inherent[ly] improbable" (44), Donne scholar Helen Gardner does allow that the narrative has a "core of truth" (45): a sketch of Donne clad in a shroud was drawn according to Donne's specifications. The portrait was made either while Donne was alive or soon after his death. Used as the cartoon for the St. Paul's marble monument, the sketch was also copied by engraver Martin Droeshout for the frontispiece to the 1632 edition of *Death's Duel*.

² Ernst H. Kantorowicz, in *The King's Two Bodies* traces the complex interrelated development of political and religious *corpus mysticum* images and institutional organization:

Infinite cross-relations between Church and State, active in every century of the Middle Ages, produced hybrids in either camp. Mutual borrowings and exchanges of insignia, political symbols, prerogatives, and rights of honor had been carried on perpetually between the spiritual and secular leaders of Christian society.

(Kantorowicz 193)

See especially 193-232.

³ The “universal” human body used a model for the microcosm/macrocosm system is the male, Christian, Anglo, élite body. As the metonymy of the body politic implies corporeal sameness or interchangeability, the microcosm/macrocosm correspondence also serves to construct as deviant, and exclude from political participation the bodies of “foreigners,” women, and the poor.

⁴ Relevant texts include: Robert Browne's *Treatise upon the 23. Of Matthewe* (London 1582); Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning* (1605); Thomas (TheaurauJohn) Tany's *The discussive of the Law & Gospell betwixt the Jew and the Gentile in Salem Resurrectionem* (London 1655).

Chapter One

“this man of God, and God of men”: John Donne's

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions and the Corpus of James VI and I

John Donne's first impulse after recovering from a near fatal bout of “spotted fever” in 1624 was to translate his physical experience into language. “Though I have left my bed,” writes John Donne in a letter to Sir Robert Ker,

I have not left my bedside. I sit there still, and as a prisoner discharged sits at the prison door to beg fees, so sit I here to gather crumbs. I have used this leisure to put the Meditations, had in my sickness, into some such order as may minister some holy delight.

(qtd. in Gosse 2:189)

The “crumbs” Donne here mentions were subsequently published as *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*. *Devotions*, written during a slow convalescence from a serious illness, is a complex “Meditation[]” on the ephemerality of the natural body. Donne's pressing desire to write *Devotions*, to use words to “order” his experience of illness, is symptomatic of what I will argue is the foremost preoccupation of the text itself: the relationship between material bodies--his own and that of James VI and I--and the power of textuality.

In the preface of *Devotions* Donne identifies himself as being born three times:

I have had three births; one, natural, when I came into the world; one, supernatural, when I entered into the ministry; and now, a

preternatural birth, in returning to life, from this sickness. (3)

King James is identified as entirely responsible for Donne's "supematural" birth and life as preacher: "In my second birth, [King James] vouchsafed me his hand, not only to sustain me in it, but to lead me to it" (3). Expostulation VIII of *Devotions* expands on James's role in Donne's religious career, characterizing the monarch as a Christ-like, earthly representative of God:

I, who was sick before of a vertiginous giddiness and irresolution, and almost spent all my time in consulting how I should spend it, was by this man of God, and God of men, put into the pool and recovered: when I asked, perchance, a stone, he gave me bread; when I asked, perchance, a scorpion, he gave me a fish; when I asked a temporal office, he denied not, refused not that; but let me see that he had rather I took this. (54)

In this narrative James guides Donne to the church, substituting the spiritually destructive "stone" and the "scorpion" of secular advancement in the court with the holy "bread" and "fish" of the ministry.

James's desire, however, that Donne enter the church appears to have been prompted by an awareness of his considerable intellectual and rhetorical skills, rather than a concern for the state of Donne's soul. Isaac Walton reports that James, after denying a request for a court appointment made on Donne's behalf by his patron and current royal favourite, the Duke of Somerset, said "I know Mr. Donne is a learned man, has the abilities of a learned divine, and will prove a successful preacher; and my desire is to prefer him in that way, and in that way I will

deny you nothing for him” (qtd. in Gosse 2:60). Donne's “learned” abilities had already proven useful to the king in the controversy surrounding the statute of 1606 ordering English Catholics to take an Oath of Allegiance denying the papal power to depose kings and release subjects from obedience to the monarch. James wrote *Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance* in response to papal breves commanding Catholics to refuse the Oath and the condemnation of the Act by noted Catholic theologian Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (McIlwain lix).¹ Donne's addition to the dispute was the treatise *Pseudo-Martyr*, subtitled “wherein, out of certain propositions and gradations this conclusion is evicted, that those which are of the Roman Religion in this Kingdom may and ought to take the Oath of Allegiance.” Both James's and Donne's texts about the Oath display a significant awareness of the possibilities for empowerment through the manipulation of textual representation.

James, for instance, states that he wrote the *Apologie* so that the “hearts” of his “good and naturall Subjects” “may remaine established in the trewth” as he has “nakedly here set downe” (*Writings* 131). James's “trewth” is, primarily, that the Oath of Allegiance is exclusively a “civill matter,” and its aim is to “separate” obedient subjects from “unfaithful Traitors”:

Amongst which [new legislation pertaining to Roman Catholics passed in 1606 parliament] a forme of OATH was framed to be taken by my Subjects, whereby they should make a cleare profession of their resolution, faithfully to persist in their obedience vnto mee, according to their naturall allegiance; To the end that I might hereby make a

separation [. . .] betweene all my good Subjects in generall, and vnfaithfull Traitors, that intended to withdraw themselues from my obedience. (*Writings* 86)

As “God's lieutenant,” James claims authorship of secular law, including “general laws made publicly in Parliament” (*True* 72) such as the Act of 1606. The *Apologie*, then, is James's supplement to his previous text, the Oath itself, and together they are intended to construct and produce discursively “good Subjects.” The Oath, a written formula that describes a putative state of “naturall allegiance,” coerces subjects to “make a cleare profession” of belief in a fictitious, naturalized power relation. James's supplementary text reinforces this mode of subjugation through defining and limiting the “true” intention and result of the Oath: the “seperation” between the “good Subjects” and the “unfaithfull Traitors.”

That a king would personally (albeit aided by various scholars) undertake to write and publish a laborious and substantial text defending government legislation is an unusual occurrence in English history, but not, however, unusual for King James.² Called by contemporary historians “Britain's most scholarly king” (Sommerville 58), James published, as Scottish and English monarch, three other major works of political theory besides the *Apologie*,³ the *Basilikon Doron*, a manual of statecraft addressed to his son Henry; and numerous poems, devotional tracts and scriptural commentaries. In his writing, James sought to construct his identity as absolute sovereign,⁴ and, as in the *Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance*, to produce the “good” and “natural subjects” necessary to enforce his monarchic power.

Along with displaying his knack for royal flattery in the dedication of *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne explicitly identifies James's texts as mechanisms that reproduce and disseminate his sovereign presence:

Of my boldnesse in this addresse, I most humbly beseech your
Majestie to admit this excuse, that having observed, how much your
Majestie had vouchsafed to descend to a conversation with y o u r
Subjects, by way of your Bookes, I also conceiv'd an ambition, of
ascending to your presence, by the same way, and of participating, by
this meanes, their happinesse, of whome, that saying of the Queene
of *Sheba*, may bee usurp'd: Happie are thy men, and happie are
those thy Servants, which stand before thee alwayes, and heare thy
wisedome [. . .]. (4)

Donne's strategy here is indeed "bold": by appropriating James's strategy of enforcing political subjugation through textuality, Donne means his text to have a similar affective power on the monarch. *Pseudo-Martyr* is explicitly named by Donne as a textual instrument designed to exact from James a career "ascen[t]" to a court appointment.⁵ Donne further names his work as a supplement that is "infused" by James's authority:

The influence of those your Majesties Bookes, as the Sunne, which
penetrates all comers, hath wrought uppon me, and drawen up, and
exhaled from my poore Meditations, these discourses [. . .]. (3)

Shining with the rays of the royal "Sunne," Donne's intertext appears to partake in the discursive power of royal writing. Donne's appropriation, or in Curtis Perry's

terms, “usurpation” (41) of the king's empowered textuality was, it seems, successful: *Pseudo-Martyr* brought Donne to James's attention as a useful man with “learned abilities,” a connection that ultimately led to Donne's entrance and advancement in the church.

At St Paul's, Donne continued to deploy textual “masculine perswasive force” (*Elegies* 103) that he ostensibly learned through following royal example. The source of Donne's textual empowerment, however, changes. As minister Donne is inspired and authorized by a Son other than James:

[Christ] himselfe was anointed for [preaching], *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed mee to preach*: His unction was his function. Hee was anointed with that power, and hee hath anointed us with part of his owne unction: *All power is given unto me, sayes he, in Heaven and in Earth*; and therefore (as he adds there) *Go ye, and preach*: Because I have all power, for preaching, take yee part of my power, and preach too. (*Sermons* 4.195)⁶

Christ's directive to preachers invests Donne's words with divine power, and this power has material potency, an idea Donne expresses with impressive rhetorical energy. Because “God directs [their] tongues” (3.328)

His Ministers are an Earth-quake, and shake an earthly soule; They are the sonnes of thunder, and scatter a cloudy conscience; They are as the fall of waters, and carry with them whole Congregations; 3000 at a Sermon, 5000 at a Sermon, a whole City, such a City as Nineveh at a Sermon [. . .]. (3.396)

Imagined to be the “anointed” temporal representative of God’s transcendental power, the preacher’s words, as the Word, should have a cataclysmic effect on the minds and behaviour of listeners.

Donne's assertion that ministers are Christ's anointed representatives and exegetes, inevitably suggests that they could claim a discursive authority to rival the king's, and thus potentially legitimate politically oppositional or subversive preaching. This implication was not lost on James, whose *Directions for Preachers*, issued in 1622, dictated the subjects that could be lawfully addressed from the pulpit.⁷ Ironically, the king chose Donne, who emphasised in hyperbolic terms the divinely authorized rhetorical power of ministers, to defend the controversial act of censorship. Donne did so in a cautious sermon delivered September 15th of the same year.⁸

Wee enjoy gratefully, and we use modestly the Priveledges which godly Princes, out of their pietie have afforded us, and which their godly Successors have given us againe by their gracious continuing of them to us; but our Profession of it selfe, naturally (though the very nature of it dispose Princes to a gracious disposition to us) exempts us not from the tye of their Laws. (4.198)

Donne here concedes that the power of ministers to rouse a “whole city” through their words, is fettered by the “tye of [the king’s] law.” The parenthetical inclusion, however, “though the very nature of it dispose Princes to a gracious disposition to us,” is a suggestion, in an otherwise politically orthodox sermon, that the

“Privileges” granted by secular rulers rightfully belong to preachers by the “nature” of their office as God's exegetes. Thus while Donne acknowledges that ministers are subject to the temporal laws of the monarch, he retains a limited discursive prerogative for his “Profession” as Christ's earthly successor.

The equivocal complexity of Donne's later writings reflects his fraught position as a preacher under the rule of King James. Although often expressing religious and royal orthodoxies, Donne's writings also contain substantial, subtle political commentary. In a letter to Robert Carr written February 1624, just prior to the publication of *Devotions*, Donne displays a sharp awareness of his politically delicate position, both as God's minister and James's subject. Donne expresses to Carr concern that his presentation of *Devotions* to Charles could imply a critique of the Prince and the monarchy, “whether there be any uncomliness or unseasonableness in presenting matter of devotion or mortification to that Prince, whom I pray God nothing may ever mortify but holiness” (qtd. in Gosse 2:189). Donne's nervousness about royal reception suggests he was aware his text could be seen to contain both political and spiritual “matter.” In spite of Donne's own anxiety over the politics of the *Devotions*, many early modern scholars regard the text as primarily spiritual or psychological autobiography (Harding; Sherwood; Ober; Arndt), the continuation of Donne's putative “tour d'force [sic] in metaphysical prose” (Rollin 51), or even as exemplary proof of how “piety and poetry transcend politics” (Arshagouni 244).

Other critics have given serious consideration to the politics of Donne's text, and identified various ways in which the work appears to address contemporary

issues such as the royal policy regarding the marriage plans between Charles and the Spanish Infanta (Cooper), or the Prince's reliance on counsel from the king's favourite, Lord Buckingham (Gray). Those critics identifying the text's political resonance support their analysis with reference primarily to Donne's use of the macrocosm/microcosm topos, and his explicit descriptions of the sickness and healing of his body as corresponding to insurrections and unrest in an imaginary state.

While *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* arguably does contain such topical allusions, it also pointedly critiques the metaphysical ground of King James's theory and practice of royal absolutism. Identifying the disjuncture of the body, God, and representation, Donne denies that the individual monarch constitutes a unique materialization of God. The notion crucial to James's royal absolutism is stated in the *Devotions'* preface, wherein Donne names James "man of God, and God of men." This chiasmus succinctly articulates the foundation legitimating James's political authority, and its easy grammatical symmetry does the ideologically necessary work of obscuring the scandalous metaphysical claim it describes.

The radical inversion, the substitution of divine being for mortal man, effects the imaginary transfiguration of the king into God incarnate, a "little GOD [made] to sit on [God's] throne" (James, *Works* 12). Although flesh and blood, the monarch professes to be ontologically different from other men, participating in the transcendental essence of God. This unique property is located in the physical body of the king. Because he is the actual progeny (however distant) of the former ruler the king becomes God incarnate on earth through genealogical succession, invested with secular powers proportionate to God's absolute power.

James, in a speech before parliament 1609, asserts that, as king, he has secular power equivalent to God's:

Kings are iustly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of Diuine power vpon earth: For if you wil consider the Attributes to God, you shall see how they agree in the person of a King. God hath power to create, or destroy, make, or vnmake at his pleasure, to giue life, or send death, to iudge all, and to be iudged nor accomptable to none: To raise low things, and to make high things low at his pleasure, and to God are both soule and body due. And the like power have Kings: they make and vnmake their subiects: they haue power of raising, and casting downe: of life, and of death: Iudges ouer all their subiects, and in all causes, and yet accomptable to none but God onely. (*Works* 307-08)

For absolute power to translate into monarchical control over the state, for James to “exercise a manner or resemblance of Divine power upon earth,” the king’s divinity must be made intelligible through the signification of material signs. In *A Paterne for a Kings Inauguration*, James describes the “regall ornaments together with their signification” (*Writings* 248) that symbolically present the sovereign’s transcendental power: “royall robes” represent monarchic power of judgement, the crown the “marke of [the king's] eminencie aboue all others” (*Writings* 238), the scepter “represents the Kings authority” (*Writings* 240), and finally, the sword signifies the “punishment of the wicked in defense of the good” (*Writings* 249). The latter symbol, control of an armed force, is the most significant, since it is the threat

of physical violence that ultimately founds political power.

The “sword,” the necessity for the monarch to control a reserve of force, also indicates the paradoxical relationship between the material trappings of power and the actual, organic body of the king they clothe. If the king is thought to rule by divine right, these external trappings are ostensibly the natural expression of his divine essence: “That since Kings are in the word of GOD it selfe called Gods, as being his Lieutenants and Vice-gerents on earth, and so adorned and furnished with some sparkles of the Diuinitie” (*Works* 281). But the king's ownership of the “insignia regalia” is first dependent on others accepting him as the finite corporealization of God's infinite, unthinkable being, a belief procured only through representational, if not physical, persuasion. Thus for the discourses of royal absolutism to be convincing and effective the monarch must manipulate a circular economy of signification to create the illusion he is a divine sign⁹ grounding a chain of signifiers that at once designate and produce political power. To effect his translation into a sign of God's transcendent power, James constructs a textual corpus that persuasively represents both God and his embodied self, thus occluding the mundane singularity of his organic body. In *Devotions*, Donne dismantles James's textual strategy, through the identification of the incommensurability of representation with both the natural body and absolute divinity. In place of James's quasi-divine textual corpus, Donne presents a monarchical body that is a replaceable, fleshy mannequin, the temporary and arbitrary locus for the abstract power of Dignity.

Donne's deconstruction of the relationship among the sovereign body, God,

and signs is engendered by his observation that his own body in sickness resists complete linguistic expression. In *Devotions* Donne identifies his sickness as a rehearsal of death, as illness entails his removal from active life, but does not deliver him to eternity with God: "Miserable, and (though common to all) inhuman posture, where I must practise my lying in the grave by lying still, and not practise my resurrection by rising any more" (18). The "greatest misery of sickness is solitude" (30) because alone and ill, Donne cannot use language to become the communicator of divine "praise": "in the door of the grave, this sick bed, no man shall hear me praise thee. Thou hast not opened my lips that my mouth might show thee thy praise, but that my mouth might show forth thy praise" (20). Donne's proper role as articulator of God's message and exegete of the Word is curtailed by his bodily failing.

Instead, Donne is caught in an intermediate, static location between his mortal identity and eternal spiritual life: Donne states "As yet God suspends me between heaven and earth, as a meteor; and I am not in heaven because an earthly body clogs me, and I am not in the earth because a heavenly soul sustains me" (20-1). "Suspended," Donne is dependent on the words of others to deliver him "home," to re-present him to God through their "prayers": "my friends may carry me home to thee, in their prayers in the congregation" (19). Similarly, God must be made present to Donne through the sacrament, the "seal" or material symbol of Christ's body that ratifies divine grace: "thou must come home to me...in the seal of thy sacrament" (19). Donne's weak body necessitates that reliance on the sign's ability to make present the "real."

Donne's greatest preoccupation during his illness, however, is precisely the limitations of the sign, a concern engendered by his body's lack of cogent signification. Anxious for visible manifestations of his illness, Donne complains that his body is silent, and does not communicate: "The pulse, the urine, the sweat, all have sworn to say nothing, to give no indication of any dangerous sickness" (64). Instead, Donne's sick body offers a resistant mass, a material presence of undifferentiated multiplicity: "venomous and infectious diseases, feeding and consuming diseases, and manifold and entangled diseases made up of many several ones" (24). These multiple diseases of the body can neither be "name[d]," nor "number[ed]," since the body refuses signification, ordering, and categorization: "we see the masters of that art can scarce number, not name all sicknesses; every thing that disorders a faculty, and the function of that, is a sickness" (57). The sick body exceeds and elides language and thus resists the "remedy" of representation: "O miserable abundance, O beggarly riches! how much do we lack of having remedies for every disease, when as yet we have not names for them?" (24). Donne's body in sickness has a disturbing presence that cannot be known through language.

Donne's meditation on his semiotically disruptive body reveals an inadequacy intrinsic to the mechanism of representation itself:

the names will not serve [physicians] which are given from the place affected, the pleurisy is so; nor from the effect which it works, the falling sickness is so; they cannot have names enough, from what it does, nor where it is, but they must extort names from what it is like,

what it resembles, and but in some one thing, or else they would lack names; for the wolf, and the canker, and the polypus are so. (57)

While some diseases can be named according to their location, or their “effect,” the prodigious mutability of the body’s substance demands that names be “extort[ed],” or wrongfully obtained through relationships of resemblance. The physical resemblance identified, Donne suggests, is “but in some one thing,” an arbitrary choice made from a limitless number of possible comparisons. The diseased body is not itself denoted in this final form of “naming,” but instead a sign that signifies another referent is applied provisionally to limit and fix its excessive materiality. Language is unable to represent accurately the singularity of a living body without violently transforming it into fragmented and objectified matter. Donne identifies a rarefaction of signs occurring in relation to his body, a particular instance that confirms for him a general scarcity of signs in relation to “things”: “that question whether there be more names or things, is as perplexed in sicknesses as in any thing else; except it be easily resolved upon that side that there are more sicknesses than names” (57). The corpo-real constitutes an absolute presence that eludes the denotation and the meaning produced by signification.

The presence that loses the body to language, signals to Donne the ephemerality of embodiment. Donne identifies his sick body as having meaning only insofar as it proleptically signifies his future absence in death. For Donne, this mortality reveals God, as origin and ending of his carnal existence. The changes he discerns in his weakened body are the “seal” and “letters” denoting God:

These heats, O Lord, which thou hast brought upon this body, are but

thy chafing of the wax, that thou mightest seal me to thee: these spots are but the letters in which thou hast written thine own name and conveyed thyself to me; whether for a present possession, by taking me now, or for a future reversion, by glorifying thyself in my stay here, I limit not, I condition not, I choose not, I will not, no more than the house or land that passeth by any civil conveyance. (88)

Donne here describes his body in terms suggesting the “seale of the living God” represented in *Revelation*: “And I looked, and loe, a lambe stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundreth fourty and foure thousand, having his Fathers Name written in their foreheads” (XIII). Donne's sickness announces his approaching “[redemption] from the earth” that will place him in the direct presence of God (*Rev.* XXII).

In *Revelation*, however, the meaning of the “seale,” God's name, remains a secret: “His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crownes, and hee had a name written, that no man knew but he himselfe” (*Revelation* XIX). Similarly, in characterizing his sick body as inscribed with “letters” that contain God's name, Donne does not suggest that they provide a positive description or a proper name of the divine. The single letter, the *gramma*, is itself without meaning, but, in arbitrary conjunction with other letters, is the medium through which meaning is produced: “a certain number of meaningless letters, which then come together in the word, but in each of the letters the word is not present” (de Man 41). The “letters” on Donne's body reveal the arbitrary conventionality of signs in general, and the corollary nonidentity of sign and referent. Arbitrary, finite, limited and limiting, the

material sign is incommensurate with the absolute being of divinity; God cannot be signified in predicative language, and exceeds semantic or conceptual determination. Instead, the “letters,” in their very lack of meaning present an apophatic designation, a “figuration of the unfigurable itself” (Derrida 119), signifying the impossibility of representing the putatively pure meaning and absolute presence of God. Donne's body “seale” is, as in *Revelation*, a “secret manifestation” (Derrida 119), a negative denotation of the holy enigma that is origin, end, and meaning of his corporeal being.

The inevitable failure of signs to represent the divine evidenced by his sick body, seriously “infects” Donne's faith in the material signifiers employed in “the association and communion of thy Catholic church” (48). Donne articulates the necessary and central role of referential stability in his religious belief. For his salvation, Donne must

associate thy word with thy sacrament, thy seal with thy patent; and
in that sacrament associate the sign with the thing signified, the
bread with the body of thy Son so as I may be sure to have received
both, Son, that he, and all the merits of his death, may, by that
receiving, be buried in me, to my quickening in this world, and my
immortal establishing in the next. (48)

To be Christ's “ark,” “monument,” and “tomb,” and thus to receive life eternal in God, Donne must rely completely on signification to make intelligible absolute divinity. The “sacrament,” and the “bread,” are not the Holy Spirit, or the transubstantiation of Christ's body, but signs that must both signify and convey their transcendental

referents to the faithful. Donne's silent and unnamable body, however, has betrayed the irreducible gap between "the sign [and]the thing signified," and the impossibility of representing divinity. This somatic disclosure not only destabilizes the association of God's Word and presence with the material signs of Protestant liturgy, but also undermines the theological legitimation for absolute monarchical power.

The legitimation of James's theory of absolutism depends upon the belief that he materially represents God: "Kings [are] the breathing Images of God upon earth" (*Works* 248). Echoing James, Donne also calls monarchs divine images: "Though kings deface in themselves thy first image in their own soul, thou givest no man leave to deface thy second image, imprinted indelibly in their power" (52). The terms "image" and "imprint" suggest that, like wax, which bears the convex shape of a concave seal, James ostensibly is a sign retaining an essential link with its transcendental referent. The imprinted image, as Florence Dupont explains, constitutes both representation and material trace of the original form:

Regarding the technique of taking impressions, what is fabricated is neither an arbitrary sign nor a metaphorical sign in which the signified resembles the referent. It is a sign that is a part of its referent. (Dupont 408)

The doubled nature of the "image," both representation and essence,¹⁰ accurately describes James's absolutist theory of monarchy: he is both "God's lieutenant," and a "little GOD." But, Donne argues, James cannot be a "breathing Image" of the absolute because kings "have physicians continually about them, and therefore sickness, or the worst of sicknesses, continual fear of it" (51); he can neither be, nor

properly signify God because of his mutable physicality:

Are they gods? He that called them so cannot flatter. They are gods, but sick gods; and God is presented to us under many human affections, as far as infirmities: God is called angry, and sorry, and weary, and heavy, but never a sick God; for then he might die like men, as our gods do. The worst that they could say in reproach and scorn of the gods of the heathen was, that perchance they were asleep; but gods that are so sick as that they cannot sleep are in an infirmer condition. A god and need a physician? (51)

Monarchs cannot claim to be divine because they are mortal and, as “sick gods,” kings are also unable to “present[]” properly the immortal, absolute nature of God. Corpo-reality is an *always already* sick body that announces its future absence, and thus kings --chronic bodies, subject to the corruption and the eventual dissolution of their materiality in time--cannot present a true “image” of God.

In his identification of the corporeal king's inability to embody and represent God, Donne articulates the scandal of the theory of absolutism described by the rhetorical inversion, “man of God, and God of men.” Thus for James, the believability, and the realization of absolute rule depends upon the construction of a textual corpus that supplements and effaces his problematic organic self, and makes intelligible the abstract state power he claims to embody. To effect this, James characterizes his discursive production as an act of somatic re-production, endowed with bodily form and substance. In the preface to *Basilikon Doron*, James writes:

it onely rests to pray thee (charitable Reader) to interpret fauourably this birth of mine, according to the integritie of the author, and not looking for perfection in the worke it selfe. As for my part, I onely glory thereof in this point, that I trust no sort of vertue is condemned, nor any degree of vice allowed in it: and that (though it be not perhaps so gorgeously decked, and richly attired as it ought to be) it is at the least rightly proportioned in all the members, without any monstrous deformitie in any of them. (Works 11)

As Daniel Fischlin points out, James's body was "frequently depicted by anti-royalists as enfeebled and deformed" (Fischlin 4), and writing here appears to offer James the possibility of creating an imaginary entity morphologically perfect, and unafflicted with any "monstrous deformitie" attendant on corporeality. The eidolic sovereign body can then persuasively constitute the sign of inherited divine power.

In his 1609 speech before parliament, James inadvertently articulates the paradox intrinsic to the monarchical political system that necessitates this elaborate discursive strategy of somatic representation. Although ostensibly God's temporal representation, with the ability to "make and unmake [his] subjects" (*Works* 308), James's domination (and his funding) is dependent on persuading others of his right to power. In asking for monetary aid, James reveals his own subjection to the will of parliament:

in peace I must minister iustice vnto you, and in warre I must defend you by Armes: but neither of these can I do without sufficient meanes, which must come from your Aide and Supply. I confesse it is farre

against my nature to be burthensome to my people: for it cannot but
grieue me to craue of others, that was borne to be begged of. (*Works*
319)

Through an “effect of loue” (*Works* 318), a “natural” political relationship, James's demand for material support should be met, but to produce this “effect” he must rearticulate the legitimating foundation of his royal power, which he does through presenting his auditors with his textual corpus:

As ye made mee a faire Present indeed in presenting your thankes
and louing dueties vnto mee: So haue I now called you here, to
recompence you againe with a great and a rare Present, which is a
faire and a Christall Mirror; Not such a Mirror wherein you may
see your owne faces, or shadowes; but such a Mirror, or Christall,
as through the transparantnesse thereof, you may see the heart of
your King. (*Works* 306)

James offers parliament an exchange: the sight of his royal “heart,” in return for the “dueties” of his “good and loving Subjects.” Donne notes, in the dedication addressed to Charles I of a sermon preached and, by royal commandment, published in 1626, that James frequently employed the trope of the mirror to articulate and reinforce his authority:

It was a *Metaphor* in which, your *Majesties Blessed Father* seemd to
delight; for in the name of a *Mirroir*, a *Looking Glasse*, he sometimes
presented *Himselfe*, in his publique declarations and speeches to his
People; and continued *Metaphor* is an *Allegory*, and holds in more.

(7.72)

Donne's observation that the "Allegory [...] holds in more" is indeed accurate, as James's "Christall mirror" and visible "heart" constitute a symbolic matrix that effectively signifies absolute monarchy, and describes the theory of representation underwriting his discursive manipulations.

The figural "heart" James offers resonates on both metaphorical and literal levels in the early modern complex discourses associated with the body.¹¹ Aristotelianism, the dominant theory of the body during the medieval period, understood the heart as the primary organ of the body: the seat of the soul, cognition and imagination, as well as the source of physical life (Stevens 267). Aristotle's theory remained influential throughout the Renaissance, although in a form modified by Galenic medicine, and problematized by the nascent scientific discourse of William Harvey (Stevens 271). Thus, when James announces that his words make visible his "heart," he suggests that he is presenting a view of the literal, physical muscle, the source of his thought processes and corporeal vitality.

As well as denoting a physiological site, James's "heart" signifies metaphorically. In versions of the anthropomorphized state, the king was figured as the "heart," the center of the body politic; in *Devotions* Donne states "the heart alone is in the principality, and in the throne, as king, the rest [of the body] as subjects" (70). James's linguistic revelation also suggests the Protestant understanding of the heart as the receptor of God's unwritten, transcendental law: Christ is "our Epistle, written in our hearts, knowen and read of all men; [. . .] written not with inke, but with the spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart"

(2 Cor. 3). In his speech, James exploits the symbolic centrality of the heart in theological discourse, transforming it into a powerful emblem of his status as temporal representative of God. All Christians have God's unwritten law inscribed in their hearts, but as the "heart" of the political body, James articulates this law as state policy. Thus, James's textual *écorché* cannily conjoins his organic body with his sovereign power, reminding his auditors that the "effect of love" he demands is due to his divinely ordained authority.

The imaginary instrument that reveals the royal "heart," is, in effect, an impossible material object: a "mirror" that does not mirror, but instead is transparent as "crystal." James's careful delimitation of the metaphor suggests he desires his words to be both "glass," that is, disappear into the reality of their referents, and a "mirror," a pattern that produces conformity in his listeners. The first notion, that language is a transparent medium, is one James repeatedly articulates in his writing, assuring his readers that he will "vtter matter, rather then wordes" (*Works* 290) and that his words are void of semantic ambiguity, or rhetorical artifice: "I am onely to deliuer now vnto you matter without curious forme, substance without ceremonie, trewth in all sinceritie" (*Works* 290). James often insists that his "tongue should be euer the trew messenger of his heart" (*Works* 280), and claims the spontaneity of his composition results in an unsophisticated form requiring extensive interpretive activity on the part of his listeners: "And therefore the matter which I deliuer you confusedly as in a sacke, I leaue it to you when you are in your chambers, and haue better leysure then I can haue, to ranke them in order, euey one in their owne place" (*Works* 290).

James's suggestion that his artless discourse invites interpretation is belied by the emphasis he places on the careful preparation of royal texts. In the *Basilikon Doron* James counsils Henry to adopt an unadorned, candid style:

In your language be plaine, honest, naturall, comely, cleane, short, and sententious, eschewing both the extremities, aswell in not vsing any rusticall corrupt leide, as booke-language, and pen and inke-home termes: and least of all mignard and effæminate teames. (*Works* 46)

James, however, also states that rigorous revision and self-censorship are necessary to produce the requisite aura of “naturall” sincerity: “letting first that furie and heate, wherewith they were written, coole at leasure; and then as an vncouth iudge and censour, reusing them ouer againe, before they bee published [. . .]” (*Works* 48). Texts that appear transparent as “Christall,” the direct presentation of “matter,” are the result of diligent self-regulation, and these discursive manipulations, James explains, are necessary in order to control the reception of monarchical writing: “Speeches should be so cleare and voyd of all ambiguitie, that they may not be throwne, nor rent asunder in contrary sences like the old Oracles of the Pagan gods” (*Works* 280). Through his apparently “plaine” style, James attempts to limit the meanings available to his auditors, and thus, the interpretation of his texts.

Hermeneutic instability is particularly threatening for James, because he requires his texts, like the Oath of Allegiance, to produce subjects obedient to his sovereign desires. James's choice of tropological instrument in the speech of 1609,

reflects his textual needs, connecting linguistic transparency, the unmediated conveyance of the real, with “that which exhibits something to be imitated; a pattern; an exemplar” (*OED*). In the dedicatory sonnet of *Basilikon Doron*, James describes his text as a mirror which will (if effective) shape and regulate his heir apparent according to his father's will:

Lo heere (my Sonne) a mirrour viue and faire,
Which sheweth the shaddow of a worthy King.
Lo heere a Booke, a patterne doth you bring
Which ye should preasse to follow mair and maire.
(*Writings* 1)

In the same work, James figures God as a mirror, the source and producer of material reality:

by the right knowledge, and feare of God [. . .] ye shall know all the things necessarie for the discharge of your duetie, both as a Christian, and as a King; seeing in him, as in a mirrour, the course of all earthly things, whereof hee is the spring and onely moouer. (*Works* 12)

In both instances of James's use of the trope, the mirror is an original pattern that, if effective, controls the viewer's subjectivity and reality. James's strange “Christall Mirror,” therefore, describes a theory of representation in which signs constitute a form of the real capable of shaping the mind and behaviour of the reader and, by extension, the political subject. The potency James accords words is crucial because he depends upon representation to construct and persuade his subjects of the substantive reality of his imaginary corpus, the fantastic ontological

justification of royal absolutism.

Notwithstanding his description of language as a controllable, affective form of the real, James ends the speech of 1609 with “three wayes yee may wrong a Mirroure,” a concise outline of the serious weaknesses inherent in his textual strategy of persuasion. The first two ways are related to the difficulty of hermeneutic control, inadvertent and intentional “perversion” of the meaning of James's words, resulting in the loss of authorial intention:

First, I pray you, looke not vpon my Mirroure with a false light: which yee doe, if ye mistake, or mis-vnderstand my Speach, and so alter the sence thereof.

But secondly, I pray you beware to soile it with a foule breath, and vncleane hands: I meane, that yee peruert not my words by any corrupt affections, turning them to an ill meaning, like one, who when hee heares the tolling of a Bell, fancies to himselfe, that it speakes those words which are most in his minde. (*Works* 325)

James here identifies the “false light” and “foule breath” of exegetical instability latent in all texts, the impossibility of creating representations “cleare and voyd of all ambiguitie.” The third way to “wrong a Mirror” mentioned is the most significant. James's allowance that his textual mirror is “brittle” indicates the serious possibility that his words will not affect his listeners:

And lastly, (which is worst of all) beware to let it fall or breake: (for glasse is brittle) which ye doe, if ye lightly esteeme it, and by

contemning it, conforme not your selues to my perswasions.

(*Works* 325)

Textual impotence dangerously threatens absolute power. The failure of James's text to produce natural subjects who "conforme" to his will is at the same time the shattering of his textual corpus, and the disastrous disintegration of his imaginary embodied sovereignty.

Donne, aware of James's fondness for the mirror trope, borrows the metaphor for his own use in *Devotions*: "A glass is not the less brittle, because a king's face is represented in it; nor a king the less brittle, because God is represented in him" (51). The "brittle" nature of the textual mirror, its hermeneutic instability, marks its inability to supplement adequately the organic body of the king, to represent a "king's face." James, too, is "brittle," perishable and ephemeral, because he is corporeal and subject to the corruption of time. Therefore, Donne argues, the king cannot constitute the earthly image of God. Unable to replace his natural body with a fantastic somatic construction, James is identified by Donne as separate and inevitably divided from his discursively realized sovereign power: "Here the head lies as low as the foot; the head of the people as low as they whom those feet trod upon; and that hand that signed pardons is too weak to beg his own, if he might have it for lifting up that hand" (18). The power of the political "head" is negated by the weakness of the natural "hand," and the mortal similarity between the two exposes James's spurious insistence on bodily singularity.

Donne continues his interrogation of the individual monarch's relationship to power through reference to the figure of the phoenix. In Christian art, the mythical

bird was used to denote Christ's singularity as God incarnate, his death and resurrection (Kantorowicz 388). Early modern continental and English jurists borrowed the symbol of the phoenix from Christological writing to express the unique status of the individual monarch. The "phoenix was [. . .] a 'natural' one-individual corporation, a 'Corporation sole' which was at once immortal species and mortal individuation, collective *corpus politicum* and individual *corpus naturale*" (Kantorowicz 394). Similarly, in the juridico-political doctrine of the king's two bodies, the person of the king was incorporated with the entire commonwealth, thus participating in the apparent immortality of that body. The phoenix, the symbol of a divine, unique, and politically powerful body, was used by James as a personal emblem denoting his royal absolute power.

In his poetical tragedy written in 1585, memorializing his late favourite, Esme Stewart, James describes the Phoenix as essentially different from ordinary, interchangeable "men":

For as to geir, lyke chance as made you want it,
Restore you may the same againe or mair.
For death of frends, although the same (I grant it)
Can nocht returne, yet men are not so rair,
Bot ye may get the lyke [. . .] (*Workes* Giiii)

Simon Wortham, commenting on this passage, notes that James's description of mundane and indistinguishable "men" presents "a relativistic, anti-absolutist logic of exchange which matches 'like' for 'like,' which happily takes similar for the same" (Wortham 19). In contrast, the Phoenix is singular and unique:

[. . .] my Phoenix rare, whose race,
Whose kynde, whose kin, whose offspring, they be all
In her alone, whome I the Phoenix call.
That fowle which only one at onis did liue [. . .]
(*Workes Giii*)

The rarity of the Phoenix is rooted in her body proper, in the coincidence of entire species and individual that results in her being both mortal and immortal, self-originating and regenerating. Although Esme Stewart is ostensibly the mythical bird of the title, James, as Wortham notes, identifies his text as both the medium and the issue of the Phoenix's rebirth (Wortham 19). Having immolated herself because of the "crueltie" of common men, and her despair at being separated from the king, the phoenix is revived once more in James's verse: "I her praise reviuē" (*Workes Giii*).

James appropriates for his text, as medium, and himself as author, the essential singularity and power of the mythic bird, thus associating himself with the perfect sign of the absolute monarch. Du Bartas, in the dedicatory introduction to his translation of James's early poem "Lepanto," named the king the "Phoenix escossois" (Du Bartas, qtd. in McClure 97), suggesting that James's textual exchange was effective and noted by his contemporaries. Translated into James's theory of monarchy, the phoenix signifies the king's bodily uniqueness as the incarnation of the divine, and his resulting comprehensive material power.

Donne names the phoenix, James's personal symbol, only in order to deny its existence, and to introduce an alternate conception of political authority. In his meditation on the material and the celestial world's multiplicity, on "all plural things,"

Donne states: "I think, I need not ask leave to think, that there is no phoenix; nothing singular, nothing alone" (31). Donne, here, pointedly dismisses James's fiction that his organic body embodies transcendental divinity, the notion of transubstantiation necessary to the legitimation of royal absolutism. Instead, Donne presents a relational, non-essential understanding of monarchic power. In his discussion of the need for the king to enter into consultation, Donne, in a subtle rhetorical manoeuvre, conflates the expedience of multiple advisors with the possibility of multiple sovereigns:

It diminishes not the dignity of a monarch that he derive part of his care upon others; God hath not made many suns, but he hath made many bodies that receive and give light. The Romans began with one king; they came to two consuls; they returned in extremities to one dictator: whether in one or many, the sovereignty is the same in all states and the danger is not the more [. . .] as the state is the happier where businesses are carried by more counsels than can be in one breast, how large soever. (43)

Donne's relativistic model of power, where "whether in one or many, the sovereignty is the same," is in radical contradistinction to James's assertion of divine essence. Instead of the power of God embodied in the singular, unique body of the monarch through metaphysical necessity, Donne implies that power is "a pure quality adrift" (Marin 440), extrinsic to, and only arbitrarily signified by the body of the individual king.

Donne's rejection of monarchical singularity for equivalent or interchangeable

structures of political authority and power, resembles anti-royalist contractual theories of government mentioned in and out of parliament during James's reign. Sir John Eliot, writing while imprisoned by James in the Tower ostensibly for disrupting the House of Commons, states that

forseeing...in respect of the infirmitie of their natures, men could not heare and live, [God] thus prepared a medium between them, a Moses, to be the keeper of the law, a deligate, a substitute, for the administration of the government. (qtd. in Russell 105)

Eliot, here, characterizes the monarch, not as representative of God, but as a delegate, administrator and "keeper" (rather than author) of the law. Eliot's description implies that James's royal power is not an expression of an essential trait, but is instead dependent on his fulfilment of political responsibilities.

Jonathan Goldberg argues that, in his later religious writings, Donne consistently "celebrated James as God's instrument" (215), becoming in effect, a conservative interlocutor of monarchical policy: "Donne found a voice in the royal favor; there he found his words" (213). In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne does indeed often echo the words of King James; however, Donne appropriates James's language in order to articulate both tacit and explicit anti-absolutist sentiments. Donne's meditations on his body in sickness engender significant doubts as to the ability of signs to signify the body and absolute being of God: *Devotions* indicates that "signs tell[] us nothing about being; the mute signs and the commandments of semiology close off ontology" (Hardt 65). Focusing then on the inevitable sickness of the king's "brittle" natural body, Donne argues that it

too is unable to constitute a temporal representation of God.

Moreover, Donne's identification of the inadequacy of representation radically destabilizes James's discursive construction of an imaginary royal corpus, a textual "little GOD" believed to embody the transcendental power James claims as absolute monarch. Neither the unique incarnation and representation of God in his organic body, nor in his textual somatic construction, Donne identifies James as an arbitrary and exchangeable locus for political power. In a sermon preached before James's successor in 1629, Donne describes a divine kingdom of parity: "all that rise to the right hand [of God], shall be equally Kings" (9.64). *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* thus also allows for, if not a republic of kings, at least the possibility of an otherwise ordered profane kingdom.

Notes

¹ James first published his defense of the Oath anonymously in 1607 as *Triplici Nodo, or Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance*. A revised edition was subsequently published in 1609 under the title *An Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance First set foorth without a name: And now acknowledged by the Author, the Right high and Mightie Prince James*. For a detailed discussion of the *Apologie's* publishing and reception history, and the heated controversy regarding the Oath of Allegiance, see McIlwain lvii-lxxix.

² For discussions of James's unique identity as both monarch and author, see Jenny Wormald, "James VI and I, *Basilikon Doron* and the *Trew law of Free Monarchies*; the Scottish context and the English translation"; J.P. Sommerville, "James I and the divine right of kings: English politics and continental theory." Both are in Linda Levy Peck ed., *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 36-54 and 55-70. See also Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier's "James VI and I and the Literature of Kingship" in *The True Law of Free Monarchies and Basilikon Doron*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 1996) 13-33.

³ *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598 published anonymously, 1603, 1616); *A Premonition to all Christian Monarches, Free Princes and States* (prefixed to the revised edition of the *Apologie*, 1609); *A Defense of the Right of Kings, against Cardinall Perron* (published in English, 1616). Most of James's writings, including the *Basilikon Doron*, his scriptural commentaries, and selected poems, were published together in later editions of *The Workes of the most High and Mighty*

Prince, James, By the Grace of God Kinge of Great_Brittaine France & Ireland Defendor of ye Faith &c: Published by James [Montagu] Bishop of Winton & Deane of his Mats Chappell Royall, London (first published, 1616).

⁴ The extent to which James believed in, or what he meant by, absolute monarchical power has recently been the topic of scholarly discussion. For two opposing views, see J.P Sommerville's "James I and the divine right of kings" and Conrad Russell's "Divine Rights in the Early Seventeenth Century" in *Public Duty and Private Conscience_in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. John Morrill, Paul Slack and Daniel Woolf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 101-120.

⁵ The first line of the *Pseudo-Martyr* dedication further suggests Donne had a complex and politically ambivalent motivation for writing the treatise: "As Temporal armies consist of Press'd men, and voluntaries, so does they also in this warfare, in which your Majestie hath appear'd by your Bookes." Donne does not specify whether he is "Press'd" to write *Pseudo-Martyr* by his desperate career situation, or writes out of a sincere belief in the necessity of the Oath. For a close analysis of the text's equivocal politics, see Annabel Patterson's "John Donne, kingman?" in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 251-72.

⁶ Interestingly, this description of verbal power is found in the 1627 sermon that resulted in Donne's being called to account before Charles I. The editors of Donne's sermons, Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, remark that the sermon may have caused offense because of "references somewhat lacking in respect to Henrietta Maria, Charles's Queen" (*Sermons* 7.41). At the very least,

however, Donne's vivid description of his discursive potency would not have endeared him to Charles as a humble subject. This episode is also notable because, in a distraught letter to Sir Robert Ker, Donne indicates his sermons were less articulations of personal faith than political texts consciously written in "service" to the king: "I hoped for the kings approbation heretofore in many of my Sermons; and I have had it. But yesterday I came very near looking for thanks; for, in my life, I was never in any one peece, so studious of his service" (rpt. in *Sermons* 7.39).

⁷ James specifically issued the *Directions* to silence those (mostly Puritan) preachers who criticised his failure to support the Palatinate's struggle in Europe, and the proposed Spanish match. From the king's perspective, controlling what ministers could say from the pulpit was crucial because sermons were heard by a large and attentive audience. As Potter and Simpson point out, in Donne's London listening to preachers was a popular pastime:

Sermons were inordinately long, judged by modern standards, and lasted one, two, or even three hours. Men moved from one church to another to hear different well-known preachers, and compared critically the soundness of the doctrines preached, and the style, eloquence, and fervour of the preacher. They took notes of sermons which they liked, and expanded them at length. (*Sermons* 4.16)

⁸ John Chamberlain notes that, to his listeners, Donne appeared less than enthusiastic about James's censorship measures:

On the 15th of this present the Dean of paules preached at the Crosse to certifie the Kings goode intention in the late orders

concerning preachers and preaching, and of his constancie in the true reformed religion, which the people (as shold seeme) began to suspect; [. . .] but he gave no great satisfaction, or as some say spake as yf himself were not so well satisfied. (Chamberlain 2.451)

James, however, was pleased with Donne's sermon, and immediately ordered its publication.

⁹ For the discourse of royal absolutism to be effective, it is necessary that James be believed to be a sign that is ontologically co-extensive with its transcendental referent. James, as a sign that does not participate in the divine essence, would simply be an arbitrary and exchangeable representative of God without legitimate claim to absolute material power. In chapter two, I discuss in greater detail the conflicting theories of the sign in the early modern period and their implications with respect to the material representation of God.

¹⁰ In *Mustapha*, Fulke Greville also employs the metaphor of the impress in relation to kingship. Rossa's political will becomes the King's because she impresses her desires in Soliman's "soft weaknesse":

For Princes humors are not like the *Glasse*,
Which in it shewes what shapes without remaine,
And with the body goe, and come again:
But like the *Waxe*, which first beares but his owne,
Till it the seale in easy mould receiue,
And by th'impression onely then is knowne.
In this soft weaknesse Rossa prints her art,

And seeks to tosse the Crowne from hand to hand;

Kings are not safe whom any understand. (2.1.33-40)

Greville here makes clear that the impress is not an external signifier unconnected to the signified, as is the reflective “Glasse.” Instead the impressed image is both “Waxe” and “seale,” Soliman’s humors and Rossa’s political machinations.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of heart iconography in early modern theological and political discourses, see Scott Manning Stevens’ “Sacred Heart and Secular Brain” in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997) 264-82.

Chapter Two

“hang upon him that hangs upon the cross”: Death and the Word

in John Donne's *Death's Duel*

On February 25, 1631, John Donne returned to London to preach his last sermon. Donne had spent the winter in Essex suffering from what would prove to be a fatal illness. According to Izaak Walton, Donne's body had been markedly altered by his sickness:

And when, to the amazement of some beholders, he appeared in the pulpit, many of them thought he presented himself not to preach mortification by a living voice, but mortality by a decayed body, and a dying face. [. . .] And yet, after some faint pauses in his zealous prayer, his strong desires enabled his weak body to discharge his memory of his preconceived meditations, which were of dying; the text being, “To God the Lord belong the issues of death.” (Walton xlii)

Walton's description of the visible, physical signs of Donne's immanent death provides a poignant context for the contemporary reader of *Death's Duel*. The central issues of the sermon itself are also revealed by Walton's words: the possibility of knowing of death through the recollection of “preconceived meditations,” and the inescapable reality of mortality that promises the annihilation of the body and mind that remembers. In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne's insistence on the referentiality of the sign and the irreducible fissure

between the “sign [and] the thing signified” dismantles, as I have argued in Chapter One, King James’s claim to be an immanent sign of God and the sovereign’s textual embodiment of absolute sovereign power. In this chapter I identify Donne’s separation of signifier and referent as informed by debates in contemporary Protestant hermeneutics regarding the ontological status of the word. The notion that the word does not essentially correspond to “the thing signified” undermines both the hermeneutic stability of Scripture and Donne’s strategy of employing traditional *memento mori* emblems to locate thanatos within the field of representation. Donne redresses the evacuation of meaning from Scripture engendered by the disjunction between word and referent through the mnemonic device of the *imitatio Christi*. By constructing a sensible image of Christ in language, Donne resanctifies Scripture, and allows for the comprehension of death’s absence within a Christian narrative.

The topic of *Death’s Duel*, as Walton notes, is “the most inglorious and contemptible vilification, the most deadly and peremptory nullification of man, that we can consider” (177): the becoming invisible of the physical body and the concomitant “nullification” of self. Two lines from Psalm 68 are the text of the sermon, which Donne tropes as constituting a “building” of faith: “*He that is our God is the God of salvation*” and “*And unto God the Lord belong the issues from death.*” The first line, “*He that is our God is the God of salvation*” Donne names as the entire “body” of the building, the necessary ontological ground for Christian belief, both in its particular content, and generally, as a metonym for Scripture in its entirety. The second line of the text, “*And unto God the Lord belong the issues from*

death,” in conjunction with the “divers acceptations of the words [of the line] amongst our expositors,” constitutes the “foundations,” “buttresses,” and “contignations” of the “body” of the “building.” Donne’s naming of “divers acceptations” as equally crucial to the building’s structure as the biblical text itself foregrounds the necessary centrality of hermeneutics to Protestant doctrine. The “acceptation” is a consensual belief in the received meaning of a text, thus implying that the will of God is not immediately communicated in the words of Scripture, but requires interpretative activity on the part of the exegete. The words of Scripture signify and mediate the Word of God, and thus there is a necessary gap between the linguistic text and its referent, the holy Word itself.

Exactly how Scripture mediated the Word was a contentious issue for sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestants because, as Donne articulates in a sermon delivered in 1625, God “must be worshipped according to his will” that can be known only with reference to the words of Scripture:

That as there is a God, that God must be worshipped according to his will, That therefore that will of God must be declared and manifested somewhere, That this is done in some permanent way, in some Scripture which is the Word of God, That this booke, which we call the Bible, is, by better reasons then any others can pretend, that Scripture [. . .] (9:355)

Donne here articulates the pseudo-logic supporting the belief that Scripture is God’s Word. But the premise “there is a God,” who “must be worshipped according to his will” does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that Scripture is the “declar[ation]”

of that divine will. Only by conjecture, “by better reasons then any others can pretend,” is the bible identified as the true Word.

In spite of the weakness of the argument that “proves” Scripture articulates God’s will, Protestant dogma insisted that sacraments and ceremonies be based directly on the words of the biblical text. William Perkins, a late sixteenth-century popularizer of Protestant theology, articulates a truism when he writes: “Neither do we believe a thing, because the church saith it is to be believed: but therefore we do believe a thing, because that which the church speaketh, the scripture did first speak” (649). Protestant theologians and ecclesiasts, in disputes about church doctrine, debated what exactly the Scripture “did first speak,” and accused those with different interpretations of “mak[ing] the scriptures a nose of wax and a tennis ball” (Hutchinson 42). Discussions of Scripture’s meaning necessarily raised questions regarding semantics. Language itself, Donne writes in a sermon of 1629, is a central preoccupation of Protestant hermeneutics: “Words, and lesse particles then words have busied the whole Church” (9:71).

In publications intended to aid Protestant readers in interpreting Scripture, two conflicting models of the sign are offered simultaneously. The first is described by the rhetorician Thomas Wilson in his 1615 treatise, *Theological Rules, To Guide Us in the Understanding and Practise of Holy Scriptures*. Wilson uses a series of organic metaphors to describe the words of Scripture as having meaning lodged within the material *grammé*:

In every scripture there is some thing visible, and something invisible, there is a body, and a spirit or soule, the letters, sillables, and wordes

be visible, as the body; but the soule, and invisible part is the sense and trueth wrapt and infoulded in the wordes, which are as the barke, ryne, or bone, the meaning within is as the roote, and juce, or as the marrow. (Wilson, *Theological* 3)

The language of Scripture is the Word: the immanent meaning, the “Spirit” infuses the linguistic signs, the “Body.” The assumption, however, of ontological participation between sign and thing, of the immanent real, presence of the signified, suggests that all the words of Scripture should be read literally, even those sections that are contrary to Protestant faith as a whole. As well, by analogy, semantic unity implies the material signs of the sacraments are substantively real, that, for example, the bread and wine of the Eucharist literally “infould[]” the body of Christ.¹

Protestants, however, generally rejected the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation.² The notion that the words of Scripture always have a literal meaning, was also deemed inexpedient because as, Edmund Grindal, Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1570s, explains “if you follow the bare words [of Scripture], you will soon shake down and overthrow the greatest part of the christian faith” (40-1). Thus, a second definition of semantic and sacramental signs as referential and non-identical with things signified was necessary to supplement the theory of ontological co-extension. Identifying words as infused with Spirit, Thomas Wilson also describes Spirit as external to, and signified by words: “of things to be knowne, words are notes or markes, leading the minde to the comprehension of the thinges” (Wilson, *Dictionary Ar*). As signifiers, words can have single or “more then one

figurations” (Wilson, *Dictionary* A2v) with the result that the meanings of specific biblical words can differ depending on opinion: “these explications [of the words of Scripture] which I do give, may differ in termes from such explications, as yee shall finde in other mens Writings of the same wordes” (Wilson, *Dictionary* A2v). The specific, contextual meaning of a word, Wilson here implies, is actually an “acceptation,” a consensual belief in a particular interpretation.

Adding to the hermeneutic difficulty entailed by the multiple meanings of single words is the semantic ambiguity engendered by tropological usage. The words of Scripture present “thinges,” the Word of the Holy Spirit, to the “minde,” but do so both literally and figuratively. In *Devotions*, Donne identifies God as “a direct God [. . .] a literal God, a God that wouldst be understood literally and according to the plain sense of all that [he] sayest.” But the Holy Ghost also often displays the rhetorical savvy of a “good Courtier” (*Sermons* 4:347):

a figurative, a metaphorical God too; 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 curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles [. . .] (*Devotions* 124).

Reading the stylistically sophisticated Scripture and distinguishing between its literal and figural language is always a subjective, interpretative act. “To one man,” Donne concludes,

that argument that binds his faith to believe [Scripture] to be the word of God is the reverent simplicity of the word, and to another

the majesty of the word; and in which two men equally pious may meet, and one wonder that all should not understand it, and the other that any man should. (*Devotions* 125)

The identification of Scripture as made up of signifying “notes” necessarily produces hermeneutic instability, both because single signifiers have multiple meanings, and because words can be used figuratively.

The hermeneutic problem of identifying and distinguishing between Scripture’s “plain sense” and its tropological style to produce a consistent interpretation and apprehension of God’s Word, was “an important basis for the notorious splintering among the developing Protestant sects” (Waswo 208). Theoretically, readings of Scripture were to be judged in relation to the “analogy of faith,” Calvin’s interpretation of Paul’s dictate: “let us prophesie according to the proportion of faith” (*Rom.* 12), whereby no reading of Scripture should contravene Protestant articles of faith (Porter 164). The only admissible source for the articles of faith, however, is the Scripture itself, whose interpretations the articles are supposed to adjudicate. Thus the “analogy of faith” itself does *not* enable exegetes to break the hermeneutic circle and legitimate their interpretations. Interpretations contrary to those of the institutional church could be supported with reference to Scripture because, as John Hales, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, writes in a sermon of 1617, “it is no hard thing for a man that hath wit, and is strongly poffett of an opinion, and refulute to maintaine it, to finde fome places of Scripture, which by good handling will be woed to caft a favourable couterenance vpon it” (A4v).

Like Hales, Donne holds the indeterminacy of Scripture responsible for

divisive doctrinal disputes within the Protestant church, and the manipulation of the biblical text for secular advancement. In a sermon of 1625, Donne complains “every means between God and man, suffers some adulteratings and disguise”:

The Sacrements have fallen into the hands of flatterers and robbers. Some have attributed too much to them, some detracted. Some have painted them, some have withdrawn their natural complexion. It hath been disputed, whether they be, how many they be, what they be, and what they do. The preaching of the word hath been made a servant of ambitions, and a shop of many mens new-fangled wares.

(5:232)

As noted above, in *Death's Duel* Donne identifies the conjunction of the Scripture and its “divers acceptations of the words amongst our expositors” constitutes the “body” of the “building” of Protestant faith. The manipulation of Scripture for secular advancement “rob[s]” Scripture of its putatively sacred meaning, and foregrounds the contingency of biblical hermeneutics. Thus, the preaching of the “flatterers and robbers” seriously undermines the integral foundation of institutional Protestantism in general, and in particular, Donne's attempt to know the reality of death through exegesis of Psalm 68.

While Donne voices concern about the interpretive difficulties attendant on the basing faith on Scripture, he emphatically denies the legitimacy of radical Protestants like John Everard who claim direct knowledge of God's Word through the pseudo-mystical agent of individual “imagination” or “enthusiasm.” Imprisoned by Laud for Familism, Antinomianism and Anabaptism (Hill, *World* 149), Everard

denied the necessity for the mediation of Scripture among God and believers, and the orthodox doctrine and authority of the state church, insisting that “The dead letter is not the Word, but Christ is the Word” (149).

In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, as I have argued in chapter one, Donne displays a scepticism similar to Everard’s regarding the ability of the “dead letter” to represent God’s absolute presence. Surprisingly, however, Donne warns his congregation against presuming direct mystical with God: “you are not to looke for Revelations, nor Extasies, nor Visions, nor Transportations” (8:46). Instead Donne urges the “embrace [of] the Medium, that is, the Ordinances of the Church” (8:229) to ground faith. Furthermore, while in *Devotions* the semiotic disruption of his material body revealed the inadequacy of the sign to denote the divine, Donne also emphasises the necessity of the body and signs to provide knowledge of God. The material “Medium” of representation is necessary precisely because it is phenomenally apprehended. The only way for mortals to know God, Donne argues, is through sensible signs that sensually represent God’s invisible “Essence”:

for, as howsoever a man may forget the order of the letters, after he is come to reade perfectly, and forget the rules of his Grammar, after he is come to speake perfectly, yet by those letters, and by that Grammar he came to that perfection; so, though faith be of an infinite exaltation above understanding, yet, as though our understanding be above our senses, yet by our senses we come to understand, so by our understanding we come to beleieve. (9:357)

Here Donne names the physical body, which cannot itself be signified, “name[d] or

“number[d]” (*Devotions* 57), as the critical receptor of signs through which the divine is made intelligible. Moreover, Donne's trope—learning to “read” and “speak” through the “order of letters”—privileges the written Scripture, specifically Scripture glossed and codified by the state church into “rules of Grammar,” as the mode of representation that produces “perfect[]” belief in God.

Donne's insistence on the efficacy of material signs, however, is significantly qualified. “[F]or our knowledge of God” in heaven, Donne writes in the Easter day sermon of 1628, “God is our medium, we see Him by him” (8:220). On earth, God is only known imperfectly through the mediation of “darke representations and allusions.” God is seen, not directly, but “in a glasse, that is, by reflexion” (8:220). The relationship between the “obscure representations” in the “glasse” and God, is, as Donne explicitly states, enormously ambiguous:

But how doe we see in a glasse? Truly, that is not easily determined.

The old Writers in the Optiques said, That when we see a thing in a glasse, we see not the thing it selfe, but a representation onely; All the later men say, we doe see the thing it selfe, but not by direct, but by reflected beames. (8:223-23)

In the theory of the “old Writers,” the “glasse” offers “not the thing it selfe,” but a representation. The notion vaguely ascribed to “later men” suggests the visual ray explanation of sight proposed by natural philosopher and theologian Roger Bacon at the end of the thirteenth century, and still accepted as accurate in the seventeenth. Vision, Bacon argues, originates with the object, “which send's its visible qualities through the intervening air” via an invisible ray that physically

touches the observer's eye (Lindberg 340). In his description of gazing lovers in *The Extasie*, Donne draws on this theory of sight to depict vision as producing a quasi-material connection: "Our eye-beames twisted, and did thread/ Our eyes, upon one double string" (*Elegies* ll7-8). The theory of the "later men" is one of ontological participation: the "beames" of God are reflected by the "glasse" to the viewer.³

The ambiguous working of the mirror is a metaphor for the two conflicting theories of the sign in Protestant hermeneutics. In the same sermon of 1628, Donne states that because sight is "the Noblest of all the senses," all senses should be considered forms of visual perception: "[a]ll the senses are called Seeing" (8:221). Because words constitute sensible signs, hearing or reading the words of Scripture is a visual activity, similar to the viewing of the mirror. Thus the notion of the glasse providing not the "thing itself," corresponds to the semantic assumption that "words are notes or markes, leading the minde to the comprehension of the thinges" (Wilson, *Dictionary* sig. Ar), while the description of the glasse containing the "reflected beames" suggests the theory of the immanent signified in the word itself.

Donne notes the contradiction between these two descriptions of the sign, but refuses to adjudicate between them, only stating that both provide evidence that the "thing itselfe" represented in the "glass" exists:

It is a uselesse labour for the present, to reconcile them. This may well consist with both, That as that which we see in a glasse, assures us, that such a thing there is, (for we cannot see a dreame in a glasse, nor a fancy, nor a Chimera) so this sight of God, which our Apostle sayes we have in a glasse, is enough to assure

us, that a God there is. (8:223)

Donne here implies that because both theories of representation equally give assurance of the existence of God, it is unnecessary to “reconcile” or choose one over the other. Later, however, Donne refers to the hermeneutic instability of Scripture, implying a notion of signs as “representation onely”:

The most powerful meanes [to know God] is the Scripture; But the Scripture in the Church. Not that we are discouraged from reading the Scripture at home [. . .] First learne at Church and then meditate at home, Receive the seed by hearing the Scriptures interpreted here, and water it by returning to those places at home. (8:227)

The injunction to “first learne at Church” would be unnecessary if the words of Scripture were the immanent, “reflected beames” of God’s “Essence.” The interpretation of Scripture, as a text made up of referential signs with multiple significations and subject to rhetorical manipulations, must be controlled to assure conformity to institutional doctrine. Otherwise, Scripture, and by extension, the Protestant religion, is in danger of becoming, in Donne’s words, “a shop of many mens new fangled wares.”

The theory of the ontological co-extension of words and things circumnavigates the problem of the hermeneutic circle by, in effect, denying that interpretation is necessary to understand Scripture: the meaning of the Word is immanent in the word. When the sign signifies meaning, rather than containing it, however, external adjudication is necessary to produce institutionally authorized “acceptations” of the biblical text, as Donne’s instruction to “first lerne” Scripture at

church demonstrates. At the same time, however, the church, as William Whitaker, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge asserts, must avoid “mak[ing] the authority of scripture depend upon the church, and so in fact make the scripture inferior to the church” (101-2) like the misguided and corrupt “papists” do. Thus, in *Death's Duel*, to support his claim that Psalm 68 contains truth about the reality of thanatos, Donne attempts to demonstrate that the will of God is “declared and manifested” in Scripture through grounding the biblical text in the material real.

The most persuasive manifestation of God and assurance that Scripture denotes the “will of God,” Donne argues, is the confluence of Scripture and the real in the divine decree, “one of the eternal purposes of God whereby events are foreordained” (*OED*). The decree is God’s prophetic noted in Scripture and realized in the material world: “All manifestation is either in the word of God, or in the execution of the decree; and when these two concur and meet it is the strongest demonstration that can be” (175). Donne gives as an example of God’s Word become real the assertion in the New Testament that Christ’s undecayed body was foretold by the prophets:

so in our present case Peter proceeds in his sermon at Jerusalem, and so Paul in his at Antioch. They preached Christ to have been risen without seeing corruption, not only because God had decreed it, but because he had manifested that decree in his prophet, therefore doth Saint Paul cite by special number the second Psalm for that decree, and therefore both Saint Peter and Saint Paul cite for it that place in the sixteenth Psalm. (175)

Christ's resurrection without "seeing corruption," foretold in the Scripture, constitutes a visible sign of God's existence. Donne's signifying chain of sermons, citations, and prophetic words reveals, however, that the risen Christ has only a textual, not a sensible, presence. The "execution" of God's decree, itself "manifested" in the Old Testament, is only described in a text. Rather than serving as the "strongest demonstration" of the existence of God, the divine decree foregrounds instead the difficulty of escaping the hermeneutic circle.

Donne provides a second example in *Death's Duel* of a sensible sign in which the material real and the Word of God converge: himself as an embodied, obedient "child" of God:

when therefore I find those marks of adoption and spiritual filiation which are delivered in the word of God to be upon me; when I find that real execution of his good purpose upon me, as that actually I do live under the obedience and under the conditions which are evidences of adoption and spiritual filiation; then, so long as I see these marks and live so, I may safely comfort myself in a holy certitude and a modest infallibility of my adoption. (175)

Donne asserts the evidence for his "spiritual filiation" is that he lives "under the conditions" dictated by the Word. His Christian actions are, like words, visible "notes or marks, leading the minde to the comprehension of the thinges" (Wilson, *Dictionary Ar*), specifically, the "holy certitude" of the divine and the "modest infallibility" of his belief that he is the child of God. Once again, however, Donne's attempt to ground his faith in the real evinces a circular logic: God's "conditions" are

known solely through Scripture, and the words of Scripture are believed to be the Word only if Donne first has the “marks” of “spiritual filiation,” that is, faith that God exists and is his creator. Furthermore, Donne’s tangible physicality is compromised. As Walton relates, Donne delivered *Death’s Duel* visibly “marked,” not with the “infallibility” of Scripture and doctrine, but with his with own impending dissolution in death. Thus, in offering his embodied self as evidence of God’s existence, Donne presents instead “mortality by a decayed body, and a dying face” (Walton xlii). The “nullification” of thanatos, however, is precisely what Donne is attempting to render comprehensible through his interpretation of the divine text.

After death, Donne’s visible “markes” that denote God’s existence will disappear along with his physical body. The complete absence attendant on death problematizes both the identification of his body as a sure sign of God’s existence, and the conceptualization of death, since, as Donne insists, one must “see” permanent signs in order to “know” divine mysteries. Because the body becomes invisible in death, it provides no “notes” through which the mind can apprehend the reality of mortality or what follows, salvation and resurrection. Donne argues that God’s miraculous reanimation of Ezekiel is comprehensible because there remained sensible signs of Ezekiel’s previous presence:

God seems to have carried the declaration of his power to a great height, when he sets the prophet Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, and says, ‘Son of man, can these bones live?’ as though it had been impossible, and yet they did; the Lord laid sinews upon them, and flesh, and breathed into them, and they did live. But in that case there

were bones to be seen, something visible, of which it might be said,
Can this thing live? (177-78)

In contrast, the future invisibility of mortal bodies, the absence of any material remainder that can be seen, engenders doubt as to the reality of the resurrection:

But in this death of incineration and dispersion of dust, we see nothing that we call that man's. If we say, Can this dust live? Perchance it cannot; it may be the mere dust of the earth, which never did live, never shall. It may be the dust of that man's worm, which did live, but shall no more. It may be the dust of another man, that concerns not him of whom it was asked. (178)

The dissolution of the physical body, because it results in there being “nothing” to be “see[n],” obstructs the comprehension of death in relation to Christian faith. In *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne identifies the living body as semiotically disruptive because it constitutes an undifferentiated, unsignifiable presence. Donne here suggests that the body in death also threatens the order of representation in its absolute absence. Because the body disappears, “[p]erchance” the textual narrative of the resurrection has no relation to the corpo-real.

Donne attempts to address the cognitive problem engendered by death’s absence through language that gives imaginative presence to the material signs or traces that signify, not the complete absence of thanatos, but rather the becoming-nothing of death. To locate death within the field of representation, and allow for the visualization and, theoretically, the comprehension of mortality, Donne presents to his listeners images associated with the *memento mori* tradition, the memory art that

utilizes “emblems” to enable the “custody or retaining of knowledge” by “reduc[ing] conceits intellectual to images sensible, which strike the memory more” (Bacon 2:15:3).

The source for Donne’s mnemonic imagery is the macabre iconography of medieval *transi* literature,⁴ which focuses on the putrefaction of the corpse and, as Pierre De Nesson does in the fifteenth century, connects the body’s decay with conception in the womb: “O most foul conception / O vile, fed on infection / In the womb before your birth” (qtd. in Ariès 120). Like Nesson, Donne identifies the female body as a “body of death” (169). Since existence necessarily contains within it the constant threat and destiny of non-existence, the originating womb is necessarily both source of life and the ultimate grave:

our very birth and entrance into this life is *exitus à morte*, an issue from death, for in our mother’s womb we are dead, so as that we do not know we live, not so much as we do in our sleep, neither is there any grave so close or so putrid a prison, as the womb would be unto us if we stayed in it beyond our time, or died there before our time. (167-68)

The interior of the mother’s body provides “infect[ed]” bloody sustenance, and is the source of “cruelty,” carnal appetite, and bodily instinct:

There in the womb we are fitted for works of darkness, all the while deprived of light; and there in the womb we are taught cruelty, by being fed with blood, and may be damned, though we be never born. (168)

The womb signifies somatic, finite existence, prefiguring with its “darkness” and lack of light, the invisibility of the body in its future absence.

Material existence, paradoxically, is an entrance from the “body of death” into the “manifold deaths” of physicality, and ultimately, non-existence:

this issue, this deliverance, from that death, the death of the womb, is an entrance, a delivering over to another death, the manifold deaths of this world; we have a winding-sheet in our mother's womb which grows with us from our conception, and we come into the world wound up in that winding-sheet, for we come to seek a grave. (170)

The “winding sheet” of the living flesh becomes what the *transi* literature explicitly and vividly figures: “naught but filthiness,/ Mucus, spittle, rottenness, /Stinking, rotten excrement” (qtd. in Ariès 121). Donne, too, focuses on the decomposing corpse, describing death, not as a singular, terminal event, but as a gradual dissolution, a serial, sensible transmutation from material presence to complete obliteration and “dispersion”:

for us that die now and sleep in the state of the dead, we must all pass this posthume death, this death after death, nay this death after burial, this dissolution after dissolution, this death of corruption and putrefaction, and vermiculation, and incineration, and dispersion in and from the grave [. . .] (173)

The mutation of the corpse is emphasised by Donne because it is only through representing the tangible traces left on the body by death that the nullity of thar atos

itself can be signified and thus apprehended. Donne here calls on his listeners both to visualize and identify with the rotting corpse, to utilize what William Engels terms “projective memory” (67) and imagine their own future death and decomposition.

Donne’s primary signifier for bodily dissolution is the agent of “vermiculation,” the worm:

Miserable riddle, when the same worm must be my mother, and
my sister and myself! Miserable incest, when I must be married
to my mother and my sister, and be both father and mother to
my own mother and sister, beget and bear that worm which is all
that miserable penury. (176)

The “miserable riddle” is that Donne harbours within his own body the source of his physical dissolution. In naming the worm “mother,” Donne once more refers to the maternal body as the source of fleshly life and death. Early modern natural philosophy believed that worms spontaneously gestated in menstrual blood, “women[']s putrified flowers,” (Fenton 99) and thus, in a grotesque sense, are “born” to women—Donne’s “sister” worm. Moreover, the worm is Donne himself, as worms were also believed to be engendered by the rotting human body they devour. Donne at last visualizes himself as joined with, and incorporating the feminine “body of death,” as “begetting and bearing” his “own mother and sister” worm. In so doing he symbolically presents to his listeners his own absence in death.

Donne’s “miserable riddle” of the worm, however, also reveals the limited effectiveness of his *memento mori*. When Donne actually “begets and bears” the worm, his “mouth shall be filled with dust” (176): death is the ultimate silence, an

abyss that envelops the body and its discourse. Donne's strategy of symbolizing thanatos fails because his signs actually denote the past presence of the living body, not the future complete absence of death. Thanatos can only be represented as a present body, however corrupted. When the living, speaking Donne describes himself as the worm, silenced by death, the gap between the words he speaks and the reality they are supposed to represent is tangible.

To render death intelligible requires the representation of "that which grounds and precedes all images, forms, and perceptions" (Creswell 187): the absolute absence of death which is also the absolute presence of God. Thus, Donne must emulate John, and "turn to see the voice" (*Rev.* 1) of God, sensibly apprehend the Word, and come "face to face" (*1 Cor.* 13) with the *Logos*. This paradoxical event can only be realized through the contemplation of Christ, who is both man and God, simulacrum and original. The embodiment of God, Christ is the confluence of "the Essentiall Word" and "the very written word," as both speaker and referent of the biblical text: "Christ spoke Scripture; Christ was [. . .] living, speaking Scripture. Our Sermons are Text and Discourse; Christs Sermons were all Text" (7:400). The trace of Christ's physicality, Donne emphasises, remains in the linguistic signs of the biblical text, thus ensuring that they too are materializations of the Word:

therefore, when he refers them to himselfe, he refers them to the Scriptures, for though here he seem onely, to call upon them, to hearken to that which he spoke, yet it is in a word, of a deeper impression; for it is *Videte*; *See* what you hear. Before you preach any thing for my word, *see it, see it written*, see it in the body of

the Scriptures. (7:400)

The written trace of Christ's physicality, however, as Donne is aware, is subject to hermeneutic ambiguity, the surety of the initial union of sign and signified is lost without the ground provided by the material presence of Christ. Therefore, Donne seeks to re-construct Christ's presence in language. Drawing on the form of the medieval *imitatio Christi* wherein one is asked to identify dramatically with the life of Christ, Donne exhorts his listeners to remember their recent past in relation to the narrative of Christ's last day as described in Scripture, and imaginatively witness and participate in the passion itself.

The procedure of remembering the two histories, personal and liturgical, as one, conflates the sacred and the profane, at once sacralizing mundane events, and transposing the "supermiraculous" events of Scripture into a familiar context:

Take in the whole day from the hour that Christ received the passover upon Thursday unto the hour in which he died the next day. Make this present day that day in thy devotion, and consider what he did, and remember what you have done. (186).

Donne's *imitatio Christi* is explicitly intended as a monitory mnemonic, whose "aim is to warn and to bring about a desired behaviour" (Mapping 67). Christ's interrogation by Pilate should be matched by the listeners with a self-examination of conscience, a recollection and repentance for the "sins of thy bed to the sins of thy board":

Hast thou been content to come to this inquisition, this examination, this agitation, this cribration ["sifting" (*OED*)], this pursuit of thy

conscience; to sift it, to follow it from the sins of thy bed to the sins of thy board, and from the substance to the circumstance of thy sins?

That is time spent like thy Saviours. (188)

By remembering the day's activities in relation to Christ's as described in Scripture, the listeners mimetically experience the Saviour's last day on earth.

To "[m]ake this present day [truly] that day," Donne argues, his listeners must not only imaginatively imitate Christ, but also mirror Christ's physical actions. For a true "conformance" to the Saviour, the congregation must "literally" and "exactly" substitute their own bodies for Christ's absent one:

At night he went into the garden to pray [. . .] In that time, and in those prayers, was his agony and bloody sweat. I will hope that thou didst pray; but not every ordinary and customary prayer, but prayer actually accompanied with shedding of tears and dispositively in a readiness to shed blood for his glory in necessary cases, puts thee into conformity with him. (187)

The paralleling of the immediate, individual past, with Christ's textual life, transforms the linguistic representation of the Scripture into sensible images of a real event, through superimposing the experiential quality of personal memory onto the "dead letter" of the text: "Our meditation of his death should be more visceral, and affect us more, because it is of a thing already done" (188). Through the contemplation of the *imitatio Christi* mnemonic, the description of Christ's death in Scripture will be conjoined with the individual's actual memories of "thing[s] already done." Having become a personal memory, the passion can then be summoned up

and relived to “affect” the listener “visceral[ly]” once more.

The matching of recent and historical past also facilitates the idealization of Christ’s crucifixion in the present moment. Switching from past to present tense, Donne constructs before his listeners the emblem of Christ on the cross, utilizing the rhetorical strategy of *enargeia*, which Erasmus defines as “when we do not explain a thing simply, but display it to be looked at as if it were expressed in colour in a picture, so that it may seem that we have painted, not narrated, and that the reader has seen, not read” (qtd. in Bath 54). The grammatical change and the use of *enargeia* affects a transformation in the experience of the listeners, who move from the recollection in memory of Scriptural events to the immediate, material apprehension, through a linguistic, specular image, of Christ’s death:

Towards noon Pilate gave judgement, and they made such haste to execution as that by noon he was upon the cross. There now hangs that sacred body upon the cross, rebaptized in his own tears, and sweat, and embalmed in his own blood alive. There are those bowels of compassion which are so conspicuous, so manifested, as that you may see them through his wounds. (189)

Donne enjoins the listener to continue matching their bodies to Christ’s, as they did in memory, thus making them immediate participants in the imaginary crucifixion and death of Christ:

There we leave you in that blessed dependency, to hang upon him that hangs upon the cross, there bathe in his tears, there suck at his wounds, and lie down in peace in his grave, till he vouchsafe you a

resurrection, and an ascension into that kingdom which He hath prepared for you with the inestimable price of his incorruptible blood.

(189)

Donne's words produce the sensation in the listeners that they "hang upon him who hangs upon the cross," embrace the real, broken and bleeding body of Christ.

In dying with Christ, Donne's listeners experience a termination of physical life that is not a complete annihilation but instead a spiritual transfiguration. On the cross, Christ gives "up the ghost" to God, not because of the ephemerality of his human body, but because of his "contract" with the Father:

And then that Son of God, who was never from us, and yet had now come a new way unto us in assuming our nature, delivers that soul (which was never out of his Father's hands) by a new way, a voluntary emission of it into his Father's hands; for though to this God our Lord belonged these issues of death, so that considered in his own contract, he must necessarily die, yet at no breach or battery which they had made upon his sacred body issued his soul; but *emisit*, he gave up the ghost; and as God breathed a soul into the first Adam, so this second Adam breathed his soul into God, into the hands of God.

(189)

Through his death, Christ instantiates the covenant of grace between God and man, superseding Adam, whose "breach of contract" (Hill, *Covenant 7*)--breaking of the original covenant--first engendered mortality. Thus, in imaginarily participating in Christ's body, Donne's listeners can "lie down in peace in his grave," experience

Christ's death, which is, because he paid the "inestimable price of his incorruptible blood," the vehicle for their life eternal in God.

Through enabling his listeners to unite holy image and felt presence, and "hang upon him that hangs upon the cross," that is, project their experiential physicality onto the events described in the words of the New Testament, Donne recreates the crucifixion in the materiality of the present moment. The experienced immediacy of Christ on the cross revitalizes the signifying power of the biblical text, rendering sensible the *Logos* that grounds Scripture. In life Christ was immortal Word, mortal flesh, and linguistic text. Re-presented in Donne's words, Christ unites once more "Spirit" and "Letter" of Scripture, and gives assurance that the absence of death leads to presence in God.

The positive power of Donne's holy emblem assumes language operates in a mode different from both the semantic theory of referentiality and of immanent correspondence. Donne's words neither signify beyond themselves to God, nor are they the "reflected beames" of the divine. Here the meaning of the word is the affect it has on the listener. Philip Sidney's description of the potency of poetry applies equally to Donne's devotional language: both "yeeldeth to the powers of the minde an image" that is "not wholly imaginative," but also "substantial[]" (8), that can "strike, pearce" and "possesse the sight of the soule" (14). Donne's Christ is not a mimetic reproduction in that there is no extant original he copies. The "Application" of Donne's verbal emblem, its affect on the listeners, is "most divinely true, but the discourse it self fained" (Puttenham 21): his verbal image is not a representation "leading the minde to the comprehension of the thinges," but is itself the real, the

actual “thing[].” Thus Donne is a poet in George Puttenham’s sense, one who “make[s]” the real out of “nought”:

A Poet is as much to fay as a maker. And our Englifh name well conformes with the Greeke word [. . .] they call a maker *Poeta*. Such as (by way of refemblance and reuerently) we may fay of God: who without any trauell to his diuine imagination, made all the world of nought, nor alfo by any paterne or mould. (19)

Puttenham’s assertion that the power to create through language is a profane version of God’s “diuine imagination” of the world also appropriately characterizes Donne’s creative activity in *Death’s Duel*. Although he leads his listeners through the *imitatio Christi* to the experience of the crucifixion, Donne himself does not participate. Standing apart as the creator and controller of the event, Donne identifies himself as acting the part of God: “Now thy Master (in the unworthiest of his servants) looks back upon thee” (187). By reanimating Christ and impersonating God, Donne’s constructs for himself a ground that infuses his own discourse with divine presence, thus assuring the meaning of Scripture and legitimating his hermeneutic activity.

As Maurice Blanchot points out, however, to assign to language complete presence is to “undermine[] and overturn[] everything” because “there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond” (181). In both the notion of referentiality and ontological participation the sign theoretically exists in relation to a transcendental Other. In Donne’s manipulation of mnemonic imagery, the word as both signifier and signified replaces or makes superfluous the divine

“Essence,” negates the necessity of locating meaning in the transcendental Word. Thus, paradoxically, by reinstating the sacred significance of Scripture, Donne destroys the possibility of it constituting the “declared and manifested” evidence of God’s being.

The disjunction Donne identifies in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* between the material signifiers of church doctrine and their transcendental referents was noted by other Protestant divines, and the hermeneutic impasse engendered by the fissure between words and “things” prompted contemporary debate regarding the “perplexed and difficult” (Whitaker 275) relationship between Scripture and the holy Word. Attempting to understand mortality within the Christian narrative of salvation and resurrection, Donne addresses the interpretive instability of the biblical text through presenting his material being as the sensible referent denoted by the signifiers of Scripture. As the ephemerality of his failing body actually only serves to foreground the difference between the textuality of Scripture and the corpo-real, Donne re-animates the materiality of Christ, re-presents the “Essential Word” that grounds the signification of the biblical signs, thus ensuring the *always already* fraught “meaning” of his own discourse.

As the “maker” of the *imitatio Christi*, Donne effectively is what James I aspires to become: a mortal “little GOD” (James, *Works* 12) “who without any trauell to his diuine imagination, made all the world of nought, nor alfo by any pateme or mould” (Puttenham 19). To enforce his theory and practice of royal absolutism James attempts to present himself as a sign with an essential, intrinsic correspondence to the transcendental divine. James’s self-representation as the

“Image” of God, however, is undone by his mortality, the unavoidable frailty attendant upon corporeality: as Donne notes, James cannot be “a god and need a physician” (*Devotions* 51). In *Death’s Duel*, Donne legitimates his discursive power, and ensures the meaning of his Scriptural exegesis, not by claiming to be a sign of God’s absolute “Essence,” but rather through becoming a producer of signs that are both signifier and substantive referent. Donne’s union of image and *Logos* in the sensible emblem of the passion displaces God entirely from the economy of representation, thus allowing Donne to appropriate the Word to stabilize and sacralize his own profane discourse.

Notes

¹ Richard Waswo notes that Luther distinguished between the signifying mode of words and that of sacraments. The word, for Luther, has immanent meaning or divine essence, while the sacraments signify beyond themselves to divine mysteries (242). Sixteenth century English Protestants, following Erasmus and Calvin, assumed that “words ‘signify’ just as signs and figures do” (252). Thus assumptions regarding the workings of linguistic representation were also made about sacramental signs.

² Orthodox Protestants followed Calvin in regarding the bread and wine of the Eucharist as external, “visible signs, which represent the body and the blood to us and to which the name and title of the body and blood is attributed” (Calvin qtd. in Pelikan 192).

³ As noted in chapter one, King James names himself the reflected “Image” of God to both describe and legitimate his putative inherited absolute power (*Works* 310). James also identifies the texts through which he constructs his monarchic corpus—the imaginary embodiment of his sovereignty—as a “Christall mirror” (*Works* 306). In both uses of the trope, James assumes the “reflected beames” theory of the mirror, in that the theory and practice of royal absolutism necessitates the king constitute an ontologically co-extensive sign of the divine. The sovereign becomes a particular incarnation of God on earth, and invested with secular powers proportionate to God’s absolute power, through genealogical succession: divinity is immanent in the king’s body proper. Donne’s critique of James’s claim to absolutism, however, implies both the “reflected beames” and the “representation

only” theories of the mirror. James is a “brittle,” and thus inadequate “glass” (*Devotions* 51), because he cannot constitute a reflection, in the sense of representation as essence, of the immortality of God. As well, Donne identifies James’s textual “mirror” as “representation only,” subject to hermeneutic instability and thus unable to sufficiently supplement the problematic organic body of the king.

⁴ Phillip Ariès identifies the “grim expressionism” (114) of the *transi* imagery as common primarily to fourteenth to sixteenth century representations of death (110). Ariès associates the *transi* with the *contemptus mundi* meditative tradition, characterizing it therefore as a monitory mnemonic image. Although Donne’s use of corpse imagery does inevitably suggest the vanity of earthly life, my foremost interest here is his use of the *transi* to render visible the invisibility of death.

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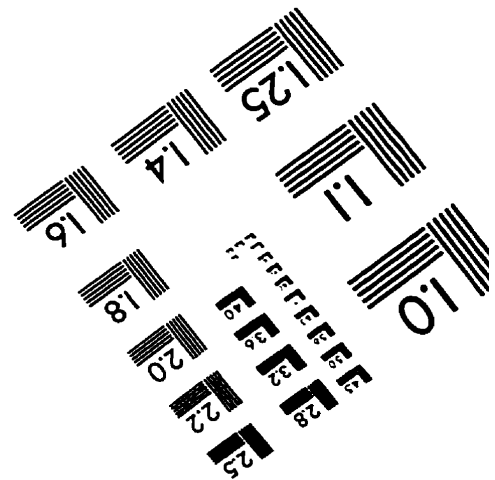
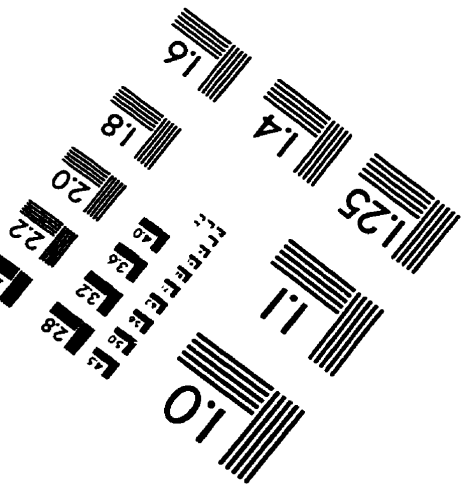
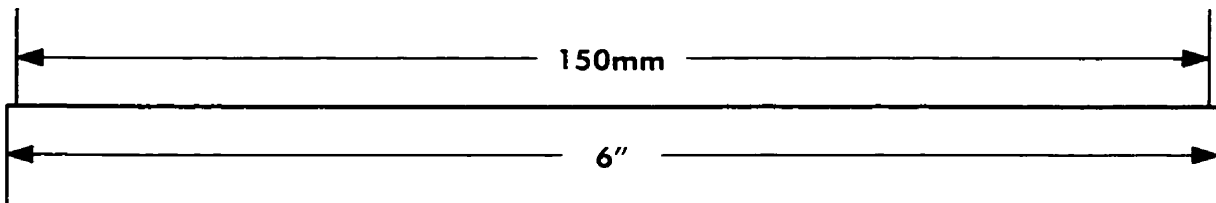
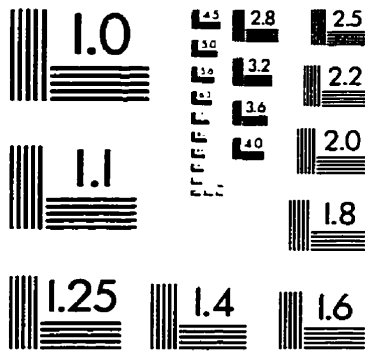
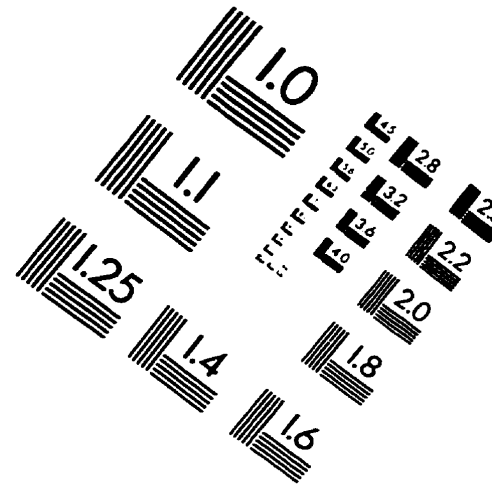
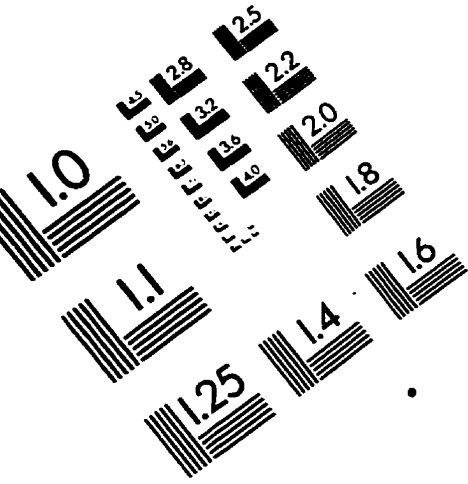
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