Devotional Method and Efficacious Reading in John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*

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Abstract John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* is an odd devotional text, and it seems especially so when attempts are made to speak of its spiritual efficacy for early modern readers. Donne's text does not conform to the standard devotional conventions of the period, whether employed by Catholic or Protestant devotional writers, and its peculiar emphasis upon recording a prolonged experience of suffering marks it as distinct from similar early modern works of "daily devotion," works that instead focus upon detailing protocols for devotion and not the emotional and psychological effects that result from enacting those protocols. This essay looks at the conventions that were typical of early modern devotional writing, using St. Ignatius of Loyola's Spiritual Exercises and Bishop Joseph Hall's The Art of Divine Meditation as representative examples of devotional writing in the period.

Key words John Donne; devotion; *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*; method; meditation

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John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) is unique as a devotional work because it is not a devotional method in itself for readers to use in the hopes of achieving their own spiritual recovery, but is rather an application of a method that its author never articulates. The convention of early modern devotional texts was to offer readers a detailed set of meditative protocols, or steps, as exemplified by such representative texts as *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola and Bishop Joseph Hall's *The Art of Divine Meditation*. In contrast to the conventional approach to constructing a devotional that Loyola and Hall employ, Donne in his Devotions only offers readers the effects of a method applied, a narration of sequential events in the recovery of a patient, but not the methodological program that would detail the means by which recovery might also be achieved by its reader. While the *Devotions* records a trajectory from physical and spiritual illness to wellness, the absence of any obvious method limits its potential efficacy as a devotional text. The *Devotions* is profoundly logocentric, idiosyncratic, and particular in a manner that contemporary, popularly used Jesuit and Protestant devotional exercises were not. Yet in his neglecting to provide his readers with just such a method, Donne may be resisting not merely a convention of early modern devotional writing but a theology of language that would locate

spiritual recovery in words—the supposed physical embodiment of prayerful petition and meditative focus—and not in prayer itself.

The most influential Catholic devotional text of the early modern period was St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* (1545, 1st Spanish edition; 1548, 1st Latin edition). In this work Loyola lays out the basic protocols of a devotional method that would be adopted and adapted by generations of later devotional writers, including John Donne. As the opening of St. Ignatius states(*Spiritual Exercises* 5):

By the term "Spiritual Exercises" is meant every method of examination of conscience, of meditation, of contemplation, of vocal and mental prayer, and of other spiritual activities... For just as taking a walk, journeying on foot, and running are bodily exercises, so we call Spiritual Exercises every way of preparing and disposing the soul to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul.

Ignatius would make clear that in using the term "spiritual exercises" he is referring to a variety of methods ("every method of examination") and not to any single one. And while he describes in the subsequent sections of the treatise what the devotee is to do at any particular juncture in the full course of the exercise, he does not provide readers with a description of his own personal responses to the exercise as a "method of examination," he does not offer readers a picture of a personal, idiosyncratic, and particular application of the method he describes and recommends for use. This is an important point to make here, since Protestant devotional texts in contrast both describe a method and model its use for readers. Following his opening discussion and definition of the term "spiritual exercises," Ignatius uses the imperative form and not the first person perfect tense. He does not narrate his specific experiences as a practitioner of this or any other method but instead describes in language intended to direct practitioners in how to apply the method. In the opening instructions for the first week of the program Ignatius carefully details the beginning protocols of the method in the imperative voice:

> First, in the morning, immediately on rising, one should resolve to guard carefully against the particular sin or defect with regard to which he seeks to correct or improve himself... Secondly, after dinner, he should ask God our Lord for the grace he desires, that is, to recall how often he has fallen into the particular sin or defect, and to avoid it for the future. (p. 15)

As this excerpt shows, Ignatius does not provide his readers with the results from following the protocols. He does not, in other words, construct for readers a narrative of his personal, idiosyncratic, and particular spiritual experiences during his use of the text and the devotional method it proscribes. Loyola offers instead a broadly accessible program that avoids universalizing his own devotional experiences as model or ideal experiences that all readers should seek to replicate. Unlike the devotional treatises in this Jesuit tradition, a tradition that began to take shape in the early to mid-sixteenth century, The *Devotions* record the applications of a devotional method, the experiences had as a result of following a set of protocols. But the specific protocols

Donne would appear to follow are not ever clearly and explicitly articulated in the same manner that Ignatius, for example, in his devotional treatise makes overt for the benefit of readers.

In *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice*, Joseph de Guibert shows that Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises exemplifies "very little of the character of spiritual treatises," which he argues tend to "expound principles of the interior life or develop ascetical or mystical doctrines." (De Guibert 109). De Guibert adds that the text "has nothing of the character of a spiritual treatise," since it is not "a series of exhortations or meditations such as the Middle Ages have left us in large numbers." Yet, he adds,

The special character of the book is clear. It is a series of practical directives, that is, of methods for examining the conscience, for engaging in prayer both vocal and mental, for deliberating or making a choice, and the like; and all these directives are intermingled with plans or outlines of meditations and contemplations. Hence the work is not an exposition to be studied, but a collection of diversified instructions intended to direct the performance of a certain number of interior exercises which are systematically organized. Therefore the *Spiritual Exercises* is a book not be read, but to be practiced. (De Guibert 110 – 111)

St. Igatius's devotional text evidences a shift in the history of devotional writing from strict treatise, which again according to de Guibert "expound[s] principles of the interior life," to the construction of a text whose guidelines and directions are intended "to be practiced," or enacted, the intentions of which are to be physically and psychologically embodied in the practitioner. Ignatius does not record his own experiences of working through the method he describes, but rather limits his involvement as a devotional writer in the lives of practitioners to formal, principled instruction. And while the *Spiritual Exercises* does not adhere, according to de Guibert to the typical generic conventions of spiritual treatises as exhibited by medieval treatises of this kind, it nonetheless is typical of devotional texts produced within and by catholic writers in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Donne's *Devotions* is organized into twenty-three "stations" with each station divided into three distinct subsections: a Meditation, an Expostulation, and a Prayer. This tripartite design on the surface appears to be modeled upon the structure of the well-known devotional work of the early seventeenth century, Ignatius's *Spiritual Exercises*, as Louis Martz first suggests and Thomas F. Van Laan later argues. Van Laan goes to great lengths to show the parallels between Donne's use of a tripartite devotional pattern and St. Ignatius's development of a three-part method or program of meditation. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises first asks devotees to compose a place in their minds on which to meditate, to analyze that place for its spiritual significance, and finally to enter into a colloquy with God. But Donne's text does not follow Ignatius's devotional method all that closely, and the different sections "do not," as Ramie Targoff recently reminds us, "always follow logically upon one another," and even more to the point, "although Donne moves through the days of illness chronologically, the narrative lacks an obvious forward thrust" (Targoff 131). Donne instead constructs an unfolding and much more overtly philosophical querying of his own convictions and

the posing of deeply existential questions, what Donne calls on the title page of the *Devotions* "*debatements with God.*" *This querying begins in the Meditation section and extends into the Expostulation section in which the specific questions he introduces are determined to have palpable and potentially dire spiritual implications. The* questions posed in this middle section are typically fraught with anxiety over a sense of his own sinfulness, self-doubt, and the growing belief that his health will not return and that recovery is not possible, either in the physical or spiritual sense. In the closing section of each station, Donne then offers a Prayer intended to provide some closure to the arduous questions posed and to introduce as a result a sense of emotional calm.

Despite the anxiety that pervades any reading of the *Devotions*, in their assessment of its overall ability to achieve such spiritual and emotional calm critics have tended to affirm its success as an efficacious devotional text. The *Devotions* resulted from John Donne's illness in late 1623, was published in early 1624, and has been read and interpreted by most early modern scholars as accomplishing just what its author appears to have intended for it to do: to allay the anxieties and fears that would prevent the devout from entering into deeper devotion to God. In the earliest assessment of the devotional efficacy of Donne's *Devotions*, Izaak Walton in his *The Life of Dr. John Donne* (1640) characterized the text as providing a picture of man's soul in conflict with itself and God, conflicts that are said to be beautifully and memorably resolved by the end of the work in what Walton calls "a Sacred Picture of Spiritual Ecstasies" (Walton 199). But Walton's seventeenth-century treatment of the text is not the only one to represent it as ultimately calming for readers. More recently, N. J. C. Andreasen claims to have shown it leads readers to a "fuller religious assent" and Janel Mueller describes it as a work that enacts a "spiritual resurrection." (Andreasen 207) Like Walton, the Devotions' first critic, these later critics have determined the work to be a devotional success.

These critical assessments by Walton, Mueller, and Andreasen are predicated upon an interest in generically classifying the text and to identifying its sources by carefully attending to its narrative structure and design. Yet these appraisals fail to consider the historical fact that early modern devotional writers and readers expected to find and use a detailed set of protocols that would guide them into a state of deeper devotion to God. Anthony Raspa, the most recent editor of a scholarly edition of Donne's odd spiritual aid, poses the following essential questions that would identify the parameters of inquiry that have been typical of critics' readings of the text: "Is Donne's Devotions a formal meditation... or is it not? If Devotions is not such an exercise, what is it? Does it have to be anything at all other than what is suggested by its obvious structure of twenty-three sections each split up into three parts, describing a medical case in 1623, and the thoughts about life and death it prompted in Donne's mind?" (Raspa xxiv – xxv). Ramie Targoff, too, in her more recent discussion of the text writes, "The assumption seems to be that if we can figure out what the Devotions is, we might discern how to read it most profitably." (Targoff 131). I would argue that Targoff's comment here, though intended to disparage such a question, is important, since it apprehends exactly the dilemma readers of this text have long faced.

Determining what the text is makes understanding its purpose possible.

In our efforts to answer Raspa's essential questions and Targoff's implied question, we might think to consult Donne's own description of the text and the purpose he had for it. Donne himself described his Devotions as a text that he intended readers would use for spiritual benefit, as he makes clear in a letter to his friend and frequent correspondent, Sir Robert Ker:

> Sir, Though I have left my bed, I have not left my bed-side, I sit there still, and as a Prisoner discharged, sits at the Prison doore, to be Gees, so sit I here, to gather crummes. I have used this leisure, to put the meditations had in my sicknesse, into some such order, as may minister some holy delight. (*Letters* 249)

Donne writes of the text "minister[ing] holy delight," of its conveying to readers some spiritual benefit sanctioned by God. The image he constructs in this letter to Ker, one of busily occupying himself with arranging "meditations had in my sicknesse," is of a man pausing in his recovery to compile in an intentional order those vivid and descriptive verbal remembrances that chronicled not only the course of his physical illness but also his corresponding spiritual recovery. Donne tells his friend that these meditations, then, as is consistent with their generic purpose, are intended to benefit readers through their power to evoke in readers a sense of the spiritual illness from which they too may be suffering, and in so doing draw a parallel between the speaker in the *Devotions* and readers. And then, following this, minister to them a recovery. Donne records here his hope that the *Devotions* would efficaciously minister to its readers, but not a confident belief that it would.

Early Modern Protestant meditative forms also had an influence upon the character of Donne's *Devotions*. Yet the influence of Protestant meditative practice only extends to the use of a pattern of some kind, an aspect of devotional writing in the early modern period that was neither uniquely Catholic or Protestant. One of the more popular Protestant devotional works of the first half of the seventeenth century was Bishop Joseph Hall's *The Art of Divine Meditation* (1606). Hall divides his text into two parts. In the first part—Chapters I-XXVII—Hall defines the two types of meditation in which a devotee might engage, "extemporal," which is "occasioned by outward occurrences offered to the mind," and "deliberate," which is "wrought out of our own heart... for the finding out of some hidden truth... or... enkindling of our love of God" (Martz 22 – 23). This opening set of definitions in Chapter II is followed by several chapters in which he details "the qualities of the person... that he be pure from his sins" (Chapter V); "the Circumstances of Meditation" (Chapters IX-XI), which includes a discussion of "place," "time," and "the site and gesture of the body"; "the matter" and "order" of meditation (Chapters XII-XIII); how the devotee is to enter the work (Chapters XIV-XV); a description of method (Chapters XVI-XVII); and finally the practice of meditation (Chapters XVIII-XXVII). Throughout Chapters I-XVII, Hall does not provide examples of what kinds of responses on the part of the devotee might be produced as a result of applying his method. He instructs

only in the language of the theoretical, like Ignatius does in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Beginning with Chapter XVIII, the text shifts away from the discussion of the formal devotional procedures and the proper ways to comport oneself while employing those procedures—what in my discussion of Ignatius's text above I referred to as the "imperative"—to include sample responses. This shift in content, from a detailing of formal concerns to providing readers with a representation of the experiences that might result from applying a formal method, also means Hall's text occupies the methodological and theological space between two competing soteriologies as we will see. This is significant since over the course of the early seventeenth century in England devotional texts increasingly reflected either an intentional working out of Catholic or Protestant soteriology or a difficultly managed mixture of both.

"First, therefore, it shall be expedient," Hall writes in the opening of Chapter XVIII, "to consider seriously what the thing is whereof we meditate, [thus]"; which is then followed by an example of what the devotee's response to the devotional program might sound like:

> What, then, O my soul, is the life of the saints whereof thou studiest? Who are the saints but hose which, having been weakly holy upon the earth, are perfectly holy above; which even on earth were perfectly holy in their Saviour, now are so in themselves; which, overcoming on earth, are truly canonized in heaven? What is their life but that blessed estate above wherein their glorified soul hath a full fruition of God? (Hall 89)

In this model hypothetical response, Hall's idealized practitioner engages in highly introspective and stirring self-questioning as prompted by the instruction to "consider seriously what the thing is whereof we meditate." As a prompt, this is what we might refer to as an open-form question; the question is not designed to elicit an evaluation or judgment regarding a specific theological matter or dilemma. Instead the question is intended to elicit an introspective response, which is, at first, no doubt largely non-verbal. The practitioner is pondering, not speaking in response to the question. Then after some indeterminate time has passed, the practitioner would presumably offer a description of "what the thing is whereof we meditate," thus establishing the matter that will be considered during the course of the full devotional program Hall has designed. But this open-form questioning is, in a very real way, unbound by emotional safeguards and cognitive parameters, thus making this questioning always potentially unsettling and deeply anxious.

Hall's text is not reassuring in the way the Ignatian might be perceived to be, with its naming of subjects in advance for scrutinizing and consideration. "First, in the morning, immediately on rising," St. Ignatius writes in the opening sentences of the section entitled "First Week" of instruction, "one should resolve to guard carefully against the particular sin or defect with regard to which he seeks to correct or improve himself." In contrast to Hall and the more mainstream Protestant devotional tradition *The Art* represents, Ignatius's text directs practitioners to "guard... against the particular sin or defect... he seeks to correct." Here too, the devotee would pause

for an indeterminate period of time to identify the "sin or defect" within him that he sought to locate and eliminate over the larger devotional course Ignatius details. He goes on: "Secondly, after dinner, he should ask God our Lord for the grace he desires, that is, to recall how often he has fallen into the particular sin or defect, and to avoid it for the future." Directing the devotee to ask "God our Lord for the grace" is nothing less than a scripted prayer—liturgical in nature and so devoid of the opportunity to improvise a prayer that is both relevant to the specific devotional task Ignatius names and succinct enough to serve as a focusing device, a function of language that had characterized Christian worship and devotion during much of the church's long history up until the printing and circulation of Luther's writings led to changes in the use and character of liturgy in the church. The Jesuit exercises offer practitioners more explicit direction and instruction regarding how to engage in the kind of self-scrutiny that leads one to eliminate sin and wrongdoing from one's life, while Hall's Protestant devotional only appears to provide such explicit instruction and direction.

Unlike Ignatian meditation, which derived from St. Thomas Aquinas' belief that sense data is the source of all knowledge, Protestant meditation, deriving largely from the psychology of St. Augustine, emphasized intense psychological scrutiny as the defining action of devotional reading. Louis Martz makes this significant distinction between the two competing traditions. For Protestant devotional readers, Martz writes,

> The hint of the presence of something like innate ideas in the deep caves of the soul leads directly to a long account of what might be called the dramatic action of Augustinian meditation. It is an action significantly different from the method of meditation later set forth by Ignatius Loyola and his followers; for that later method showed the effects of medieval scholasticism, with its powerful emphasis upon the analytic understanding, and upon the Thomist principle that human knowledge is derived from sensory experience. Ignatian meditation is thus a precise, tightly articulated method, moving from the images that comprise the composition of place into the threefold sequence of the powers of the soul, memory, understanding, and will, and from there into the affections and resolutions of the aroused will. But in Augustinian meditation there is no such precise method; there is, rather, an intuitive groping back into the regions of the soul that lie beyond sensory memories. The three powers of the soul are all used, but with an effect of simultaneous action, for with Augustine the aroused will is using the understanding to explore the memory, with the aim of apprehending more clearly and loving more fervently the ultimate source of the will's arousal. [13]

The *Devotions* exhibits some of the traits Martz describes of the character of Protestant meditation, especially as it differs from Ignatian, but as a devotional work it cannot be said to exemplify the Augustinian method in every sense. Further, the Devotions cannot be said to reject entirely the three-part Ignatian formulaic structure of (1) composition of a place or a scene in the mind, typically a station of the cross; (2) the posing of questions with respect to the spiritual significance and meaning of the scene composed; and (3) the entering into a colloquy with God, a kind of divine conversation in which the mind and spirit are put at rest. In the various stations of Donne's devotional text there are instances of each of these elements, though the elements are not so tightly grouped together in any sort of successive patterning. Fur-

ther, as Frost rightly points out, "The Devotions... offers no act of the presence of God, no attempt to present visualized scenes as matter for meditation, and no attempt to apply the senses to the matter as an aid to understanding." (Frost 9). Donne employs a three-part structure of Meditation, Expostulation, and Prayer in each station, but these individual subsections cannot be said to correspond too closely to the Ignatian devotional formula. We might be contented to agree with Helen Gardner's insightful point that Donne's conception of meditation or devotion was more inclusive or expansive than that of his contemporaries. As Gardner claims, "Donne meant something much more discursive, a less rigorous exercise than the Ignatian meditation." (Gardner 194)

The discrepancy between Ignatius's devotional method and Hall's is curious considering the expectation to receive clear and detailed instruction with which most readers approach a devotional text of any kind, particularly those devotional readers in the early modern period. Hall neglects to elaborate the protocols of his devotional method. What is characteristic of Hall's *Art* is characteristic of Protestant interpretive instruction in general: a profound and anxiety inducing lack of attention to how a reader of scripture or practitioner of a devotional method might use a text to achieve emotional, psychological, or spiritual calm. The efficaciousness of a devotional text was defined as a linguistically constructed process that, as Bishop Hall describes in Chapter XVI, "begins in the braine, descends to the heart, begins on earth, ascends to heaven." (Hall 87) Hall's description of the devotional experience characterizes it as both deeply intellectual ("begins in the braine") and at the same time emotional ("descends into the heart").

Unlike either St. Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises or Bishop Hall's *The Art of Divine Meditation*, Donne's *Devotions* is entirely an instance of a method applied, an example of an individual following a devotional program, which the careful structuring of spiritual despair and recovery into twenty-three stations is intended to demonstrate, though Donne never clearly articulates how. It is not a work that advocates or advances or promotes a specific or unique devotional method or that purports to be a method on its own. It is instead a narrative, a self-account of a method applied, and one to which readers are invited to bear witness or experience. This accounts at once for its oddly personal nature and, even more importantly as we shall see, for its epistemological status, a status that testifies to the importance of understanding the significant place "applied" devotional literature of the early seventeenth century occupies in the history of English literature.

【Notes】

1. Helen Gardner, in her "Introduction" to *John Donne: The Divine Poems* (Oxford UP, 1952), notes the 1548 Latin edition of the work received Papal approval, 1. Her comment is also cited in Thomas F. Van Laan, "John Donne's Devotions and the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises," *Studies in Philology*, 60 (April 1963): 191 – 202, 193. Louis L. Martz in *The Poetry of Meditation* (Yale UP, 1954), 3 – 10; Van Laan, "John Donne's Devotions and the Jesuit Spiritual Exercises." Targoff, 131.

2. Frost, 9.

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