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**Turning Inside Out: Reading and Writing Godly Identity in Seventeenth-Century  
Narratives of Spiritual Experience**

A Dissertation Presented

by

MEGHAN CONINE SWAVELY

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2018

English

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**Turning Inside Out: Reading and Writing Godly Identity in Seventeenth-Century  
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A Dissertation Presented

by

MEGHAN CONINE SWAVELY

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## ABSTRACT

### **TURNING INSIDE OUT: READING AND WRITING GODLY IDENTITY IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NARRATIVES OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE**

MAY 2018

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Writing about personal experience was a central component of early modern Protestant devotional practice. It was also, this dissertation argues, a creative and social practice through which the godly imagined and crafted their own spiritual identities and constructed interpretive communities into which these identities might be accepted and valued. Exploring the ways in which seventeenth-century Protestants examined interior experience and transformed interiority into a legible expression of the spiritual self, this project proposes that believers used spiritual autobiography to substantiate the intangible and invisible signs of God's grace, employing narrative and imaginative structures to render idiosyncratic personal experiences familiar, shareable, and recognizably Christian.

Spiritual autobiographies are often approached as transparent records of past experience or as sources of information about the spiritual lives of believers. By contrast, this project reads personal narratives as literary texts and as creative exercises in spiritual interpretation. In order to draw out and examine the fictive and transformative elements of these "truthful" documents, I explore the autobiographical "experience" narratives of Dionys Fitzherbert (c. 1580-1641), Agnes Beaumont (1652-1720), and John Bunyan

(1628-88) alongside more ostensibly literary or innovative texts like John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) and, most experimentally, the spiritual narratives constructed by characters in John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671). I argue that the process of creating and structuring godly identity through autobiographical writing cultivated spiritual assurance by providing imaginative access to inaccessible salvific truths. Looking specifically at texts that were written for circulation (in print or in manuscript, for friends or for the public), I further investigate the social functions of these deeply introspective texts, arguing that autobiographical writing allowed individuals to affirm personal godliness through shared interpretations of events and communal validation. The project complicates the notion of an "inward turn" in Protestant spirituality and alternatively offers the concept of turning the self "inside out": using the text to place the self on display, seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers materialized subjective experience and forged godly identities through the processes of sharing their stories with like-minded believers.



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## INTRODUCTION

Writing in her diary in the mid-seventeenth century, Anne Venn (bap. 1627, d. 1654) longs to “see” her spiritual condition as God does. She confesses a “secret...desire” that the Lord would “search and try my reins and my heart, and...reveal it to my soul, that I might see what was in the bottome of my heart, even as he saw it, and that to that end he would please to turn the very inside of my heart outward, and anatomize it before my eyes.”<sup>1</sup> Wishing to understand the hidden, intangible condition of her soul, Venn considers the physical contents of her heart, imagining the possibility of discovering visible, material evidence of her spiritual state. Why would Venn imagine that an “anatomy” or dissection of her heart would uncover evidence of her spiritual condition? What did she think she might she find there?

During a journey recorded in his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), John Bunyan wonders whether he might be able to turn dry ground into puddles of rain. In the early stages of his narrative, Bunyan recalls being frequently “hot” with the “temptation...to try if I had Faith by the doing of some miracle.” If he truly had God’s grace, Bunyan thought, he might use it to “say to the puddles that were in the horse pads, *Be dry*; and to the dry places, *Be you the puddles*.”<sup>2</sup> Bunyan ultimately resists the desire to test his salvation, fearing a failed effort would confirm his lack of faith. Yet he yearns

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Venn, *A Wise Virgins Lamp Burning; or Gods sweet incomes of love to a gracious soul waiting for him* (London, 1658), 74. Venn’s diary was published posthumously; the volume’s title page claims it was found in her closet (study) after her death. Anne was the daughter of John Venn, a London silk merchant, parliamentarian, and regicide. The Venns attended puritan meetings in secret while Anne was young, and she later became actively involved in an Independent congregation at Fulham.

<sup>2</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18.

for some sort of outward, visible demonstration of the status of his soul: where can Bunyan turn for proof of his salvation? How can he know he is saved?

In “The Church-Porch” (published in *The Temple* in 1633), George Herbert challenges his reader to “Dare to look in thy chest” as part of a Christian regimen for disciplined behavior.<sup>3</sup> Herbert recommends maintenance of the soul through attentive self-examination:

Summe up at night, what thou hast done by day;  
And in the morning, what thou hast to do.  
Dresse and undresse thy soul: mark the decay  
And growth of it: if with thy watch, that too  
Be down, then winde up both; since we shall be  
Most surely judg'd, make thy accounts agree.<sup>4</sup>

Herbert’s association of examining the soul with dressing and undressing, winding a watch, and making accounts suggests that spiritual self-scrutiny should be part of a regular daily routine. His instructions also present the soul as something tangible—a substance that (like Venn’s image of an embodied spirituality) may be adorned, stripped, measured, wound like a watch, and finally, reckoned. The reader must care for the soul much as one might care for the physical body: he must “dresse and undress” it and, while doing so, “mark the decay / And growth” that each day brings. In prompting the reader to “summe up,” “mark,” and take “accounts,” Herbert’s lines present what is found in the soul as empirical data—spiritual evidence that can be observed, analyzed, and recorded, and later, read and “judg’d.” Yet how, precisely, might one access this spiritual evidence?

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<sup>3</sup> George Herbert, “The Church-Porch,” *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), l. 141.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert, “The Church-Porch,” ll. 451-56.

Are there “signs” of grace lurking in the soul? And if so, how can they be observed, recorded, and communicated?

The excerpts from Venn, Bunyan, and Herbert above, despite spanning half a century in time (and emerging from authors who differ in social standing, religious practice, and literary intent), share a fundamental concern with self-examination as a Christian duty. They also, however, highlight the epistemological frustration that accompanies this search for knowledge that is ultimately inaccessible. “But how can you tell you have Faith?”: it is a question driving Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, asked explicitly in his narrative of spiritual conversion and fueling countless autobiographical and devotional texts written by seventeenth-century English Protestants. Bunyan asks how believers might know if their personal experience of “Faith” truly reflects their status as one of God’s “elect,” or as one who will achieve eternal salvation. To ask the question “How can you tell you have faith?” is to conduct three major personal, theological, and epistemological interrogations simultaneously: *Do I have faith? Can I know if I have faith? By what means* can I detect whether I have faith or not? But Bunyan’s query also forges a written record, intended for print and publication, and for circulation amongst other believers. How, Bunyan’s question then further asks, can I *tell* I have faith? How might I render my spiritual state legible? By what means can I communicate or demonstrate my faith to others (and myself)?

This dissertation investigates the ways in which narratives of personal spiritual experience from seventeenth-century England engage with the above questions of faith. It focuses most heavily on issues of knowledge, interpretation, and communication, examining methods of “reading” the self for signs of God’s grace and producing an

acceptable and satisfying testimony of those signs. It is a difficult process of accommodation through which a writer of spiritual autobiography creates from subjective, lived experience a legible expression of the Christian self. To what sorts of experiences did early modern Protestants turn to read the self and the spiritual state? How was that self expressed through writing? What types of imaginative structures did writers use to describe and shape their intangible souls? How did they present their spiritual identities in ways that might be understood by both writer and reader alike?

### **Self-Examination, Evidence of Experience, and Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England**

Spiritual self-examination was a central element of devotional practice for English Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Believers were concerned not with themselves *per se* but with cultivating a personal relationship with God by reflecting on their sins and blessings. Calvin believed that man develops a better understanding of God through self-knowledge, or through a recognition of one's own insufficiency *without* God. He explains that "no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of the divine," because by recognizing our own ignorance and depravity, we find that "righteousness rest[s] in the Lord alone." It is only when man becomes displeased and dissatisfied with himself that he will lift his thoughts to God and "seriously aspire" to faith and divine knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Heavily influenced by Calvin's doctrine of "double knowledge"—knowledge of both God and the self, and of each

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 36-7.

through the other—English divines prescribed a sort of spiritual stock-taking in which believers held their own actions and thoughts against God’s law for evaluation.<sup>6</sup> Lewis Bayly, for example, recommended a nightly meditation that divided the day’s experiences into sin and grace:

Sit down a while before thou goest to bed, and...call to mind what sin thou hast committed that day against God or Man, and what good thou hast omitted; and humble thy self for both. If thou findest that thou hast done any goodness, acknowledge it to be God’s grace, and give him the glory: and count that day *lost* wherein thou hast not done some good.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing God’s grace through one’s own good deeds, and conversely considering the day to be “lost” in the absence of such goodness, Bayly’s Christian reader was encouraged to fully submit self to God and to examine lived experience as an expression of the soul.

Self-examination, then, was a tool for reflection, repentance, and spiritual reform. It was also, in the context of seventeenth-century experimental theology, a process of investigation and discovery. “Experimental theology” or “experimental Calvinism” was a highly influential and distinctly puritan brand of piety that operated through personal experience and, more radically, promoted what Kathleen Lynch calls a “self-generated authority” for the elect in determining matters of the soul.<sup>8</sup> Ministers like William Perkins taught that a “just and serious” study of oneself would enable a believer not only to reflect on his or her relationship with God but also to determine one’s own salvific fate: it

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<sup>6</sup> D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35-6. See also R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), which is an indispensable resource for examining Calvin’s influence on English Protestant divines (specially William Perkins).

<sup>7</sup> Lewis Bayly, *The practice of pietie directing a Christian how to walk, that he may please God* (London, 1616), 312-13.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7-8.

is through careful self-examination that “we may see what is our estate before God.”<sup>9</sup> This type of self-scrutiny was not only a productive exercise—it was a duty of the faithful Christian. While Calvinist theology taught that divine knowledge remains ultimately hidden from man’s view, God’s will was thought to be, to some extent, “adapted” for human understanding through scripture and through signs of his providence in the world. By applying scripture to personal experience, believers learned to “read” the self in a new way. We thus find in a number of texts efforts to outline a stable set of signs or steps on the path to salvation to guide believers in such self-reading efforts and enable them to assess their individual status as elect or reprobate.<sup>10</sup> Self-examination became a process of collecting these “signs” for interpretation.

What counted as a “sign” or “mark” of salvation for these believers? For early modern English Protestants, true faith was expressed through the emotions—through a subjective personal experience of God’s grace. Contemporaries used the term “experience” to identify a profound internal encounter with God, in which divine truth (as revealed through scripture) was seen to apply directly to the self. In the epistle preceding his collection of “Spirituell experiences” confessed by members of the godly community, Vavasor Powell explains that it is through internal, personal experience that faith

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<sup>9</sup> William Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience* (1596), in *William Perkins, 1558-1608, English Puritanist: His Pioneer Works on Casuistry*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. de Graaf, 1966), 71.

<sup>10</sup> Perkins was the most influential source of these guides. See especially *A Golden Chaine, or the description of theologie containing the order of the causes of salvation and damnation* (London, 1591); *A Treatise Tending Unto a Declaration Whether a Man Be in the Estate of Damnation or in the Estate of Grace* (London, 1590); and *A Case of Conscience: The Greatest that Ever Was; How a Man May Know Whether He Be the Child of God or No* (London, 1592). Perkins also condensed his “order” of salvation into a graphic table, annexed to *A Golden Chaine*, for “them which cannot read.” On Perkins’s table, see Erin Sullivan, “Doctrinal Doubleness and the Meaning of Despair in William Perkins’s ‘Table’ and Nathaniel Woodes’s *The Conflict of Conscience*,” *Studies in Philology* 110 (2013): 533-61. For the puritan “morphology of conversion” developed in guides like Perkins’s, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963).

manifests within the believer—that “amongst the various wayes of Gods teaching, *Experience* is one of the chiefest; for that is the inward sense and feeling, of what is outwardly read and heard.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, these inward “feelings” are not mere human responses but revelations received directly from God through the spirit. Experience is “a Copy” of God’s law and word “written by the Spirit of God upon the hearts of beleivers.”<sup>12</sup> The concept of experience, then, curiously straddles the divide between interior and exterior space, and between subjective and objective data. Experience originates from without but is felt within; it is also both indistinct “feeling” and written “copy” of divine truth. As Powell continues, his notion of “experience” reinforces this essential ambiguity by taking on an evidentiary value: “That Christian believes strongest,” Powell claims, “that hath *Experience* to back his faith.” If experience, or “inward sense and feeling,” is to provide proof to “back” faith, it must be capable of being observed and demonstrated. Powell’s definition of experience, then, suggests that the search for signs of salvation involves both an inward and an outward turn. For personal experience to be recognized as a “copy” or “mark” of grace in the soul, it must in some way be made legible, or taken out of the murky confines of interiority and into the shared interpretive space of Protestant spirituality. My project explores this notion of experience as legible *evidence* of faith or salvation, looking to autobiographical texts to understand how believers came to recognize signs of God’s grace in interior experience

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<sup>11</sup> Vavasor Powell, “Epistle to the Sober and Spirituall Readers of this Booke,” in *Spirituall Experiences of Sundry Believers held forth by them at severall solempne meetings* (London, 1653), A1v [signed “A2”]. *Spirituall Experiences* was the first anthology of conversion narratives printed in England; several others would soon follow. See Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography*, ch. 3 (121-78).

<sup>12</sup> Powell, “Epistle,” A2r. Alec Ryrie explores the contours of Protestant emotions in *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See especially his discussion of the role of emotions in determining salvation, 39-48.



and to use those signs to show (to others and to themselves) that they believe “strongly.” What, exactly, *is* a true Christian experience for Powell and his readers, and how, Bunyan might ask, can you tell you are having it? How can experience be perceived and documented so as to provide “evidence” of faith?

It is against this backdrop of self-examination and personal experience as evidence of divine truth that this thesis explores the practices and functions of spiritual autobiography in seventeenth-century England. I present the imaginative processes of writing as tools for crafting spiritual identity—that is, for moving from the “inward sense and feeling” of personal experience to outwardly recognizable signs of God’s grace. Autobiographical writing became, for the godly, a way to compile the results of their soul-searching endeavors and to negotiate the relationship between inner and outer experience. Even though it “seems,” as Tom Webster has pointed out, “a step too natural to mention to move from self-examination to the spiritual journal” or other sorts of written accounts, formal advice on the godly life rarely mentioned writing, specifically, as a means through which spiritual examination might take place.<sup>13</sup> As Alec Ryrie has observed, the volume and variety of written texts on personal spiritual matters that survive from the early modern period is remarkable because “lay people’s pious writing had little Scriptural warrant or earlier Christian precedent.”<sup>14</sup> Ministers certainly instructed the faithful to take stock of their spiritual condition through self-reflection and, in a few cases, by keeping written records of their sins and of God’s mercies and punishments. Yet detailed guides for journal-writing and models for formal spiritual

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<sup>13</sup> Tom Webster, “Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality,” *The Historical Journal* 39 (1996): 33-56 (38).

<sup>14</sup> Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 298.

autobiography did not appear in print until the mid-seventeenth century—long after people were already writing them.<sup>15</sup> We are “forced to admit,” as Ryrie puts it, that spiritual autobiography emerged “nearly or fully independently, in many different forms, by many dozens and probably many thousands of early modern Protestants.”<sup>16</sup> While sub-genres like conversion narratives would eventually become systematized and, in many communities, be employed as formal elements of church membership, the practice of writing personal experience in England seems to have developed more organically in response to some sort of spiritual need (or multiple needs) that arose in the religious climate.

Scholars have proposed a number of possible explanations for this so-called “autobiographical turn,”<sup>17</sup> some attributing the trend to newly distinct notions of interiority and individuality in the period and to complementarily introspective modes of Protestant piety. Personal documents like the diary or spiritual journal, for example, provided spaces for cataloguing one’s sins and graces, enabling the faithful to keep a close watch on their own souls.<sup>18</sup> But while early modern Protestants did write about their experiences in order to recognize and repent their sins, they were also writing to establish

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<sup>15</sup> The most extensive advice on diary-keeping can be found in John Beadle’s *Journal or Diary of a Thankful Christian* (1656). It is also worth noting that the most famous model for Christian spiritual autobiography, Augustine’s *Confessions*, did not appear in an English Protestant edition until 1631 (or in any English language translation until 1620). See Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 300-301 and Andrew Cambers, “Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing in England, circa 1580-1720,” *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007): 796-825 (798-99).

<sup>16</sup> Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 301.

<sup>17</sup> I borrow the phrase from Hindmarsh: see *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 18, and see also 17-22 for his discussion of the “turn” to autobiography in the period.

<sup>18</sup> The diary perhaps provided a personal and Protestant alternative to the Catholic confessional: see Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 301; Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart: A Study of European Religious Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 49-50; and William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1938), 96.

patterns. That is, they did not write simply to catalogue their experiences but to process and analyze them—to discover by *creating* the signs of God’s work on their souls that ministers encouraged them to find. By constructing images, analogies, and, importantly, narratives of their experiences, writers developed a practice of spiritual sign-collecting that responded to the need to find evidence in experience: to record experience was also to structure and transform it. With attention to this constructive function of recording experience, many readers find in Protestant self-writing a site for self-fashioning, a space in which writers shaped and defined their own spiritual identities. While experimental Calvinists seeking signs of salvation must “fashion” themselves according to the accepted trajectory of a godly life outlined by their religious culture, the individual writer still, as Margo Todd argues in her important work on Samuel Ward’s diary, makes choices in framing personal experiences, actively forging a godly identity through the text.<sup>19</sup> The diarist or autobiographer has an opportunity not only to record personal experience but also to create a meaningful *narrative* of those experiences. The impulse to do so is not surprising since, as Webster points out, the very idea of the “godly self” for early modern Calvinists was “structured through a narrative” of various stages on the path from God’s call to faith toward salvation.<sup>20</sup> Writing about the self (and later, rereading what one has

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<sup>19</sup> Margo Todd, “Puritan Self-Fashioning: The Diary of Samuel Ward,” *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 236-64, 264. See also Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); Webster, “Writing to Redundancy”; and on early modern self-fashioning more broadly, Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>20</sup> Webster, “Writing to Redundancy,” 43. On narrative and spiritual identity, see also Hindmarsh, “Religious Conversion as Narrative and Autobiography,” *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 343-68; Brian Home, “Theology in the Narrative Mode,” *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 958-75; and Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, esp. 312-14, 409-27. Charles Taylor discusses narrative more broadly as an “inescapable feature of human life” in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989):

written) might thus have provided a tool for assurance as it helps the writer to recognize familiar spiritual patterns in his or her own experiences. It also provided space and license for the believer to compose one's own identity, or as Kate Narveson has argued, to "fix" that identity "in one's own handwriting."<sup>21</sup>

Early modern Protestants used writing, then, to lend structure to spiritual interiority, to promote self-awareness, and more radically, to create and maintain one's own godly identity. We should also keep in mind, however, that writing itself is, in principle, a *social* practice. What can we learn about Protestant spirituality when we consider written records of spiritual experience as spaces not only for capturing interiority, but also for putting interiority on display? I by no means wish to suggest that all spiritual self-writing was written with a specific audience in mind, although it does appear that even supposedly "private" texts like spiritual diaries and journals were often shared and circulated within families or spiritual communities.<sup>22</sup> Rather, writing about personal experience is a social act because it seeks, in various ways and for various reasons, to project the self out into the world through a medium that renders interiority legible and sharable. For some writers, accounts of spiritual experience were intended only for personal use; others wrote and subsequently destroyed their papers so as to ensure their privacy. But even the urge to destroy self-writings stems from a recognition of the written as *potentially* sharable. And writing for one's personal records preserves interiority in a form that can be shared with an older version of the self, after the

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"our lives exist," Taylor observes, in a "space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer" (47).

<sup>21</sup> Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers*, 121.

<sup>22</sup> See Cambers, "Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing."

immediate sensations of personal experience have faded. It is worth asking, then, when examining personal texts that do survive, why the practice of not just fashioning but *exposing* the self was so integral to Protestant spirituality. How might the process of crafting a visible, recognizable godly identity help the believer to cultivate spiritual assurance?

### **Critical and Theoretical Approach**

My thesis will contribute to critical work in four major areas: early modern epistemology and representation (as discussed above); the practice of spiritual life writing (and the forms, conventions, and functions that govern it); the experience of seventeenth-century Protestant faith (and the communities and cultures surrounding it); and notions of interiority and subjectivity in early modern England—especially as understandings of “selfhood” intersect with spirituality. In emphasizing the religious, social, and literary functions of the narratives at the center of my work, I add to a scholarly conversation that complicates the connection between a growing body of autobiographical texts in the early modern period and the emergence of a modern notion of selfhood or individuality.<sup>23</sup> The label “spiritual autobiography”<sup>24</sup> is somewhat misleading. We tend to think of autobiography as a history of the writer’s earthly life, in which the writer takes the lead

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, John Jeffries Martin’s challenge to the Burckhardtian notion of early modern individuality and autonomy in *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and, in contrast, Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> I use the term rather loosely to encompass a variety of texts, primarily because I have not found it useful to draw sharp distinctions between what we might consider subgenres (conversion narrative, narratives of spiritual trials, defense narratives with spiritual aims, etc.). Many critics avoid referring to “autobiography” during the seventeenth century altogether as the term was not coined until 1809; labels such as “life writing,” “self-writing,” and “ego-documents” have taken its place in many studies, especially those that broaden our ideas of what sorts of texts can reveal information about the self. I choose “autobiography” here because it is a useful term for conveying the narrative aims of the texts I study.

within a narrative structure encompassing a natural trajectory from birth to their present. Seventeenth-century spiritual autobiography rarely tells a complete life story. While early memories are often present and important in these texts, personal history is less detailed than one might expect. Because the self was understood to function within the order of divine providence, texts recognized as spiritual autobiography from this period chronicle a godly relationship, not a life. Rather than asking the question “Who am I?,” the spiritual autobiographer asks, “How does my life fit into God’s plan?”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, early modern Protestants tended to distrust the idea of individuality in the modern sense. While modern sensibilities might lead us to expect an autobiographical text to be replete with displays of distinctive selfhood and assertions of original thought or behavior, the seventeenth-century spiritual narrative leans more toward self-abnegation. Finding the human self to be a “pit of ugliness” and sin, the believer asserts a more attractive identity by submitting entirely to the power and will of God.<sup>26</sup> Personal idiosyncrasies were downplayed or reconstructed in order to conceptualize experiences within an accepted framework of godly behavior.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps paradoxically, though, the central concern of these texts is the examination and presentation of an ultimately personal “essence” of existence—the individual conscience or spiritual state—and thus the focus must be inward on the self. While the notions of expressing the self through a standard religious framework and of

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<sup>25</sup> Owen C. Watkins, *The Puritan Experience* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 227.

<sup>26</sup> Katharine Hodgkin, *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 23.

<sup>27</sup> See Hodgkin, “Autobiographical Writings,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern English Literature and Religion*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Helen Wilcox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 207-22 (211-16). Hodgkin finds that the “ideal” of spiritual autobiography is “to reach a point where self is nothing” (211).

the suppression of individuality in favor of conformity seem to (and partly do) exemplify the new-historicist view of the early modern self as shaped by social, political, and religious context,<sup>28</sup> this influence does not erase all evidence of a sense of subjective inwardness in these texts. I tend to side with Katharine Maus on this issue: “our [modern] suspicion of privacy, inwardness, subjectivity, soul, and so forth—our conviction that such terms beg to be debunked,” Maus argues, “has less to do with their inherently unsatisfactory features than with our sense of what counts as a satisfactory explanation.”<sup>29</sup> I would rather suggest that narratives of spiritual experience complicate the distinction between “inward” and “outward” selves: for the early modern self-examining Christian, externally imposed frameworks of expression become internalized, and a sense of place within the godly community and participation in a divine plan is an essential part of assessing interior experience.<sup>30</sup>

Identity in spiritual autobiography, then, emerges as both private and “public”: when a believer decodes his or her experiences as signs of election (or as moments which provoke doubt as to that election), that individual participates in a community of believers who are doing the same thing. When a written account of experience is produced and circulated (whether in print or manuscript), that sense of a communal identity is strengthened. Narratives of personal experience were often shared—even

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<sup>28</sup> See especially Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self Fashioning*.

<sup>29</sup> Katharine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 27.

<sup>30</sup> Narveson makes a similar point about interiority and community in *Bible Readers and Lay Writers*, suggesting that “it is possible to have a sense of godliness that is not individualistic, to share in communal practices, and nonetheless to desire deep and heartfelt personal conformity to the godly ideal” (79). I argue that spiritual autobiography demonstrates this possibility, and that these texts blur the line between private and public identity.

diaries and journals, which, much like letters of the period, did not always hold the sense of privacy we typically assume from them. In a recent article, Andrew Cambers discusses puritan culture and the social web of diaristic spiritual self-writing. Writing was encouraged by religious leaders, friends, books, and sermons; texts were modeled after others; texts were read as part of family devotion and also circulated within the godly community.<sup>31</sup> Other spiritual autobiographies were written specifically for publication, with explicit communal goals (to comfort, to instruct) and sometimes implicit political or social agendas (to craft a particular public persona, to promote a sectarian agenda, to defend oneself against slander or misrepresentation). Such social and communal functions of spiritual autobiography inform Kathleen Lynch's recent efforts to "reclaim" the genre as "a crux of social as well as personal identity" in *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (2012).<sup>32</sup> My work will further Lynch's project, but with particular emphasis on the way social impetus and function influence the interpretive and representative processes of the writing itself.

Recognizing spiritual self-writing as simultaneously a private devotional practice ("Am I saved?"), an exercise in interpretation ("How can I know I am saved?"), and an act of participation within a community ("How can express my salvation to others?") is essential in addressing the complexity of these texts. In balancing the interplay of these features and functions, I hope to avoid the two "dangers" of studying spiritual

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<sup>31</sup> Cambers looks specifically at the encouragement and circulation of self-writing within families and communities in "Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing in England, circa 1580-1720." *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007): 796-825; his *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript, and Puritanism in England, 1580-1720* (2011) more broadly establishes godly reading as a communal practice, challenging traditional views that connect Bible reading and Protestantism with interiority and individuality. See also Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers*, on the social nexus of Protestant reading practices.

<sup>32</sup> Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography*, 30.



autobiography that Bruce Hindmarsh identifies in *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative* (2005) as marking opposing extremes for reception of that type of text. One danger is that of “naivety”—that in reading personal narrative, we too readily accept the writer’s account as “innocent factual reporting: the history of a life by the one who lived it,” or we privilege it as a simple translation of inner truth. The opposite danger, then, is that in seeking to avoid this straightforward, literal approach by recognizing autobiography as a creative and interpretive act, we apply endless varieties of theoretical lenses that ultimately risk distorting the text and its subject; for some, this is a move toward “theoretical preoccupation or even solipsism.”<sup>33</sup> If we overemphasize the social function of these texts or the structural framework of conversion that guides interpretation of experience, we may discredit the private “truth” of the experience altogether. Certainly, finding a middle ground between these extremes presents a challenge, and a reader can never definitively distinguish between fact and fiction in a text that claims to present subjective, personal experience. While I do approach the spiritual autobiographies at hand partially as socially oriented literary texts (i.e., texts that assume readership, and texts that organize lived experience into narrative structures), I also wish to emphasize that there is much at stake, personally, in these texts. While influenced by convention and the need to assert accepted beliefs, these writers are nonetheless participating in what is essentially a search for truth. We cannot lose sight of the honest, sincere effort to produce an accurate examination of the self that fuels many of these texts. I find Dean Ebner’s suggestion in *Autobiography in Seventeenth-Century England: Theology and the Self* (1971) to ring true: that “the self...is *experienced* in categories furnished by a

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<sup>33</sup> Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narrative*, 3.

culture.”<sup>34</sup> If my aim is to understand how identity was felt or interpreted by a person at a particular time, the way that person chooses to organize and express that identity deserves my closest attention. That the life depicted in a text may not present an accurate, factual record of the writer’s history is important to keep in mind, but it seems more significant to observe that human life is often truly felt or experienced through the lenses of belief, tradition, and social or political structure (*not* at the expense of a sense of interiority).

The texts I discuss organize and express interiority through a variety of lenses and frameworks. This variety will guide my thesis to participate in several exciting branches of recent scholarship on Protestant spirituality. In exploring ways in which spiritual experience is expressed somatically, my work contributes to a growing body of scholarship on embodiment, interiority, and spiritual experience—on the use of physical metaphor to describe spiritual interiority and the implications of such metaphor on how religiosity was *felt*.<sup>35</sup> In analyzing ways in which worldly experience was read for signs of personal election, I engage with work that explores the pervasiveness of providential Calvinism in early modern English thought.<sup>36</sup> In exploring texts that focus on periods of

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<sup>34</sup> Dean Ebner, *Autobiography in Seventeenth-Century England: Theology and the Self* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1971), 11 (my emphasis).

<sup>35</sup> On the body and self-knowledge in early modern literature and culture, see Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); and David Hillman, *Shakespeare’s Entrails: Belief, Scepticism and the Interior of the Body* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For a specific look at medical metaphor in narratives of conversion and spiritual experience, see Helen Smith, “Metaphor, Cure, and Conversion in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 67 (2014): 473-502.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, studies of popular print and providential marvels and punishments in Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005). Paul S. Seaver demonstrates the influence of providential

“trial”—physical, mental, social, or legal—I add to a discussion of suffering and despair in spiritual autobiography, and more importantly, to the productive function of “trying” or testing experiences in these narratives. I argue that periods of trial or crisis present particularly urgent experiences for spiritual interpretation as they initially threaten to shake belief in a providentially ordered world.<sup>37</sup> I also participate in a scholarly movement to recognize and analyze the literary complexity of autobiographical and relational texts that are all too often approached as transparent “voices” from the past rather than creative and fictive endeavors.<sup>38</sup> Throughout, I will emphasize that efforts to “order” experience result in community formation through shared interpretive processes, and that “identity” emerges as one establishes a place for oneself within that community. Yet I will also keep in mind the potential dangers involved in such interpretation of self: if human senses and perception are faulty, can we trust in the “stabilizing” frameworks for spiritual self-expression noted above? If the self expressed through spiritual autobiography is always a product of (limited) human interpretation and understanding, what does the writing actually achieve?

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thought in Nehemiah Wallington’s notebooks in *Wallington’s World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985).

<sup>37</sup> On despair and anxiety as central features of both spiritual autobiography and Calvinist theology itself, see John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). On crisis and trial as a productive starting point for constructing a new, “saved” version of the self through grace, see Katharine Hodgkin, “Introduction,” *Women, Madness, and Sin*, and Hodgkin, *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Spiritual Autobiography* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010). On crisis survived as a sign of election or God’s providence, see Seaver, *Wallington’s World*.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Frances Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Brooke Conti, *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014).

The autobiographers I study seem highly aware of the problem that faulty human perception poses for cultivating spiritual assurance. Their attempts to mitigate this limitation participated in what Katharine Maus has identified in the early modern period as an “urgent” interrogation of “the sense of discrepancy between ‘inward disposition’ and ‘outward appearance.’”<sup>39</sup> Anxiety over this discrepancy permeates the literature of the period, and it is encapsulated in the excerpt from Venn’s diary that opened this essay: Venn’s desire to turn her heart inside-out suggests that she suspects there is some sort of inward truth there that cannot be seen or understood from the outside. Maus acknowledges that attention to, in Hamlet’s words, “that within which passes show” is certainly not a new concept in the period, and rather questions why it should “so rarely seem to ‘go without saying’” in such a wide variety of early modern texts. Maus turns to “the far-reaching political, religious, and economic realignments that constitute the English Reformation” for an explanation of the tension: she addresses debates over ceremonial church practices, prayer forms, and vestments, as well as issues of public profession versus inward belief or conscience.<sup>40</sup> I agree with Maus that the idea of “inward truth” gained particular significance amidst these debates, but I would like to push the argument in a direction that explores the written text as “outward show” of “inward truth.” Spiritual self-writing, I argue, participates in the inner/outer discrepancy in a unique way, translating sensory data (how one perceives oneself) into inward truth (the interpretation of that perception as relates to salvation) and back into outward show

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<sup>39</sup> Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, 14.

(in writing). The Protestant emphasis on self-examination thus makes the relationship between what is visible and invisible particularly urgent.

### **Organization and Scope**

The texts discussed in this thesis offer spiritual readings of singular, unpredictable, and profoundly significant events in their writers' lives. I focus on narratives of personal crisis—accounts that seek to explain, justify, or interpret disruptive and confusing experiences as spiritually productive events and signs of God's grace. I begin with John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), an exercise in spiritual self-examination conducted during and following Donne's encounter with a near-fatal illness in 1623. Charting the progression of the disease on his body, Donne uses each stage of his illness to explore the correspondingly dangerous conditions of his spiritually "sick" soul. His thirteenth meditation, for example, on the physical "spots" by which his illness "declares it selfe" is followed by an expostulation that recognizes the "spotted" soul inside.<sup>41</sup> But Donne's text offers more than a helpful metaphor (bodily experience) through which we might understand and express spiritual truths. Rather, in studying his body as an "effigy" through which God renders the soul "discernible," Donne situates his spiritual identity firmly within physical experience, retraining his senses to "feel" the effects of God's grace within him (119).

Yet Donne's body is a sick body, and an ever-changing one, making it a highly unstable source of material evidence for godly identity. Donne finds himself baffled by

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<sup>41</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 67-71. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

the suddenness of his illness: “this minute I was well,” he observes, “and am ill this minute.” For all the care, preparation, and attention Donne provides, his “variable” body ultimately escapes his control (7). But even as the body oscillates in Donne’s text between a stabilizing framework for spiritual observation and an uncanny entity that resists his efforts to “know” it, the very unpredictability of physical experience becomes a site for exploring the mysteries of the divine. I argue that the *Devotions*, which cycles from meditation, to expostulation, to prayer, and back in response to each of Donne’s successive bodily symptoms or changes, approaches “selfhood” as an interpretive process, finding assurance and stability in the ongoing practice of relating body to soul.

In chapter two, I turn my attention from the practices of reading and interpreting personal experience to the act of *speaking* from those experiences: how and why did early modern Protestants use language and the text to express the conditions of their souls? Quite often, language appears to be a source of disappointment and frustration for these writers; spiritual autobiographers face the seemingly impossible task of putting what is felt into satisfyingly representative words. This was certainly the case for Dionys Fitzherbert, whose narrative of spiritual trial serves as a case study for my chapter. Written in 1608 (but revised and embellished for years afterward), Fitzherbert’s narrative is a very early example of puritan spiritual autobiography that appeared long before the surge of such writings associated with mid-century English radicalism.<sup>42</sup> Her narrative

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<sup>42</sup> The main narrative of the account is dated 1608, but the manuscript includes various papers that were inserted over time. In 1633, Fitzherbert donated copies of her manuscript in the Bodleian and Sion College libraries; she continued to add materials to those copies through 1638. See Katharine Hodgkin’s introduction to Fitzherbert’s text in *Women, Madness, and Sin in Early Modern England: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) for details on the manuscript’s components and dating. All references to Fitzherbert’s text refer to Hodgkin’s edition and will be cited parenthetically.

takes on a conventional trajectory of the Christian put to the test, but as such it is particularly dramatic. Her period of affliction (received as madness by those who witnessed it but experienced as spiritual trial by Fitzherbert herself) was marked by delusion, hallucination, and the pangs of extreme despair. Fitzherbert rejects the labeling of her experience as madness, but admits that from the outside, spiritual despair is difficult to see. Sufferers “are not able to give an account how it began with them”; they will “do and speak...ridiculously” as “their misery is impossible to be uttered” (151). “No tongue,” Fitzherbert repeatedly asserts, “can sufficiently express” the true experience of despair (or of its release).

“Impossible” though it may be, however, “uttering” Fitzherbert’s condition is precisely the aim of her text. Fitzherbert’s narrative is particularly urgent in its endeavor to convince the reader of the spiritual origin and orientation of her affliction. Because despair looks very much like madness, and because even spiritual despair was a potential sign of both election and reprobation, the correct interpretation of Fitzherbert’s experience was quite literally a matter of life and death. What is interesting is that she commits that matter to the reader to be “examine[d]” and judged, offering the text as an alternative and more accurate material representation of her internal crisis to replace the misleading way in which it was originally made manifest (175). Emerging from a period of spiritual despair that disoriented her mind and caused members of her community to doubt her judgment, Fitzherbert appeals to collective interpretation to validate her profession of faith. My discussion of Fitzherbert’s case exposes the exterior thrust of seventeenth-century spiritual life writing, complicating the primacy of individual experience and interpretation in recognizing signs of salvation that is traditionally

associated with experimental Calvinism. I argue that Fitzherbert's text cultivates assurance by creating opportunities for shared interpretive experiences across the page.

The texts I examine in chapter three also appeal to the reader for shared interpretation, but in a rather different way. Where Fitzherbert strives for transparency and authenticity—for a text that will allow the reader to see her experience *just* as it was—the narratives of Agnes Beaumont and John Bunyan render their personal experiences recognizable through the crafting of familiar spiritual stories. In 1674, Beaumont, a young member of the Baptist congregation at Bedford, and Bunyan, her pastor, found themselves involved in a sensational community scandal. Rumors that the two were having an affair escalated into charges of patricide against Beaumont when her father, who disliked Bunyan, suddenly and unexpectedly died. Bunyan obliquely addresses the scandal in several paragraphs of added material in a fifth (1680) edition of his *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*<sup>43</sup>; Beaumont provides her own detailed account in a manuscript that would later be published as *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*.<sup>44</sup> While their tactics and occasions for writing were quite different, what we find in both of these narratives is an attempt to transform, through storytelling, a singular, distressing and potentially discrediting experience into a recognizable sign of God's grace.

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<sup>43</sup> Bunyan responds in general to “rumors” of his sexual promiscuity, but because the Beaumont affair was so highly public, it likely helped provoke his self-defense. This is especially likely if Bunyan's added material was included in the fourth edition of *Grace Abounding*, which is no longer extant but would probably have coincided more closely with the scandal itself.

<sup>44</sup> The two extant manuscripts of Beaumont's narrative are undated (and it is possible that neither is the original copy). The events of her story took place in 1674, but references in the text to occurrences in the months following her father's death suggest that quite some time had passed before the manuscript was written. Her narrative was first published posthumously in 1760.



Claiming the attacks on his character as accepted and *expected* persecutions of the Christian saint, Bunyan's self-defense contextualizes unfavorable earthly circumstances as further evidence of his spiritual election. Beaumont's interpretive storytelling similarly restructures earthly crisis into spiritual sign, narrating the legal trial she stood for her father's murder as a divinely orchestrated manifestation of an internal trial of faith. Beaumont and Bunyan's impulses to incorporate their crises within conventional narratives of Christian experience respond to a Protestant understanding of life as a story—a journey that forges a winding but conventional path toward assurance and salvation. As their texts demonstrate, the crafting of narratives lends structure to personal spiritual experience and provides a space in which seemingly negative earthly events and positive or productive spiritual signs might coincide. Importantly, though, spiritual storytelling fictionalizes personal experience, *creating* evidence of godly identity even as it seeks to uncover it. Showing how Beaumont's and Bunyan's texts both embrace and, more subtly, resist narrative as a vehicle for truth, I explore early modern puritan identity as a powerful but somewhat suspect product of story and relation. Narratives can build truths, but they can also be manipulated; ultimately, narrative emerges in these texts as a structure that lends the illusion of evidence to spiritual experience but that only imaginatively and provisionally verifies it.

My interest in the relationship between narrative and truth extends into chapter four, which considers John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* as a meditation on spiritual interpretation and a dramatization of the challenges of reading and writing experience in a fallen world. Reading Milton's dramatic poem alongside the autobiographical narratives featured in this thesis, I understand Samson's experience as a sort of case of

conscience: imprisoned and despairing, Samson dwells on the state of his relationship with God, listens to and assesses claims made by his various visitors, and ultimately learns to read his situation for signs of God's continued favor. But while the play invites us to follow Samson's development as the productive and regenerative work of spiritual trial, it ultimately frustrates that reading by withholding confirming evidence of his godly identity. Where the autobiographical texts explored in my first three chapters offer the controlling influence of a narrative voice to structure reader reception, Milton employs the dramatic form to leave judgement in the reader's hands. My discussion takes up the critical debate over Samson's destruction of the Philistine temple (divinely inspired? self-motivated?) not to attempt a definitive answer, but to explore why such a debate over the most significant detail of Samson's story is possible. How can one be sure one's actions are in line with a divine plan? I propose that *Samson Agonistes* both problematizes and *necessitates* the creation of spiritual narratives, exposing the limitations of human interpretive practice but also urging us to continue that practice. This tension between the limitations and possibilities offered by spiritual interpretation as an epistemological practice reflects back on the autobiographical texts discussed in chapters one through three and guides my work throughout the thesis.

## CHAPTER 1

### GOD'S BODY-WORK: READING BODY AND SOUL IN DONNE'S *DEVOTIONS UPON EMERGENT OCCASIONS*

I know that in the state of my *body*, which is more *discernible*, than that of my soule, thou dost *effigiate* my *Soule* to me.<sup>45</sup>

For the early modern Protestant, God was both invisible and visible. That God's essence was incomprehensible and divine truth hidden from man's eye was an unquestionable tenet of faith. But the discerning Christian observer nonetheless saw God everywhere. Nehemiah Wallington saw God's hand in the sudden death of a "jolly fellow" who failed to keep the Sabbath day in 1639. The man, wishing to drink and "maintain sport on the Lord's Day," cut down a tree to set up as a maypole, but his plans were thwarted: "in the morning he driving his three horses down the hill...the tree not being tied fast...so fell over [that it] beat out the fellow's brains upon the ground."<sup>46</sup> For Wallington, such a death, while frightening, was appropriate and meaningful. Wallington's God was deeply—tangibly—involved in the daily lives of men, and his world was one that demonstrated providential order.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 119. All subsequent references to *Devotions* are to Raspa's edition and are cited parenthetically.

<sup>46</sup> Paul S. Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 57.

<sup>47</sup> Alexandra Walsham's *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) presents providence as "the very kernel and keystone of Christian life and thought" for reformist theologians (8), and her examination of providential stories in popular print shows that a belief in God's intervention in human affairs extended far beyond the pulpit.

When Wallington records human events as indicative of God's will, he participates in a system of belief that sees evidence of the Creator in the created world. According to Calvin, failure to recognize God's presence in creation is impossible. "Men cannot open their eyes," Calvin claims, "without being compelled to see him," and while God prevents us from ever truly comprehending his nature or essence, his creation contains "unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance."<sup>48</sup> Divine order is present not only in the nature of the created world but in God's active governance of it. In such a world, nothing happens by chance. Calvin explains:

Suppose a man falls among thieves, or wild beasts; is shipwrecked at sea by a sudden gale; is killed by a falling house or tree. Suppose another man wandering through the desert finds help in his straits; having been tossed by the waves, reaches harbor; miraculously escapes death by a finger's breadth. Carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs on his head are numbered [Matt. 10:30] will look farther afield for a cause.<sup>49</sup>

Calvin's examples do not offer themselves up to easy interpretation like Wallington's; when Wallington's "jolly fellow" is killed by the very object with which he sinned (the maypole), divine retribution is, for the providentially minded observer, obvious and neatly packaged. What Calvin demonstrates is a faith in providence so absolute that even

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<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 52. For Milton, atheism is similarly unfathomable: "[God] has left so many signs of himself in the human mind, so many traces of his presence through the whole of nature, that no sane person can fail to realize that he exists" (*Christian Doctrine* 1.2, 1145). The goodness of God's purpose is also transparent (even if the purpose itself is obscure). "It is indisputable," Milton continues, "that all the things which exist in the world, created in perfection of beauty and order for some definite purpose, and that a good one, provide proof that a supreme creative being existed before the world, and had a definite purpose of his own in all created things." All references to Milton's works refer to *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: The Modern Library, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 199.

when events seem most happenstance, we must trust in “God’s secret plan.”<sup>50</sup> It is in sudden, surprising events that God is at his most visible and invisible: his power is dramatically displayed, though his intentions or divine ends may be lost on human understanding. Yet even while Calvin insists that it is not for men to “rack our brains about God” or seek to solve his mysteries, he admits that “anyone” who acknowledges God “will look farther afield for a cause.”<sup>51</sup> We use what we know of God’s providence to interpret what we see.

Early modern Protestants, then, understood the world as one that could be *read*. The natural world functioned according to divine principle, and to study it was to study God’s handiwork. Daily events were significant not only for their immediate effects, but also for what they revealed about God’s plan. Moreover, as the sudden deaths cited by Wallington and Calvin show, worldly events were read for signs of God’s plan as it applied to individuals. Efforts to read deaths and tragedies as punishments for sins committed by those who suffer reflect fantasies of legible souls. If the material world revealed God’s divine plan, a person’s material experiences within that world might reveal God’s plan for that person’s salvation. In *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (2005), Julie Crawford argues that monstrous births described in pamphlets and broadsheet ballads epitomized such fantasies. Texts relating “strange news” and “wondrous” incidents of women giving birth to deformed children presented those births as punishments for sins of the parents (and most often the mother).

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 61, 199. As Sarah Rivett demonstrates in *The Science of the Soul in Colonial New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), Calvin attributes a human desire for learning to man’s fallen condition: “humans have a limited capacity to resist the allure of divine mystery” (3). Central to Calvinism, Rivett argues, is a tension between “the limits of knowledge and the transgression of these limits” (25).

“The monster’s body,” Crawford claims, “was a demonstrable testament to error—sin condemned in the flesh.”<sup>52</sup> The birth of the monster was a physical, legible manifestation of sinful (and invisible) interiority.

A body did not have to be monstrous or unusual to demonstrate divine work. Quite the opposite: the human body itself was, in its divine craftsmanship, an image of its creator or, as Jonathan Sawday has described it, “an exercise in divine self-representation and self-portraiture.”<sup>53</sup> When Milton writes of the “human face divine” in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, for example, he means it literally.<sup>54</sup> The impulse in the period to define monstrous bodies as providential punishments, then, is hardly surprising: deformation in the human frame threatens to disrupt this correspondence between God and man. As Sawday and others have documented, early modern anatomical study was religiously as well as scientifically motivated.<sup>55</sup> That is, an examination of the human body revealed not just how the body was put together and how it functioned, but how *God* put it together and how *God* enabled it to function. Fascinatingly, the Protestant belief in God as an “active” creator who remains continuously involved in governing his creation meant that God also acted upon and within the living human body.<sup>56</sup> The implications for self-

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<sup>52</sup> Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 20.

<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 96.

<sup>54</sup> Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3.44.

<sup>55</sup> See especially Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned*, chapter five: “Sacred Anatomy and the Order of Representation” (85-140). Other considerations of the “sacred” impulses of anatomical practice can be found in Devon L. Hodges, *Renaissance Fictions of Anatomy* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Richard Sugg, *Murder After Death: Literature and Anatomy in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Calvin on providence in Chapter XVI of the *Institutes*. Calvin rejects the idea of God as a “momentary” creator in favor of God as “Governor and Preserver” of “everything he has made” (197-8).

examination were immensely influential on the way the spiritual self was understood and expressed in the early modern period. Not just *the* body but *my* body became a site for observing divine knowledge.

The result was an embodied experience of spirituality: faith was both belief and feeling. The term “experience” as it is understood and emphasized in Protestant spirituality encapsulates this conflation of knowing, feeling, and observing. Experience, if we return to Vavasor Powell’s definition, is a sort of “felt” knowledge—an “inward sense and feeling, of what is outwardly read and heard”; it is also the *evidence* that “back[s]” faith, which suggests that this “inward sense” is also capable of being observed or demonstrated.<sup>57</sup> The physical intensity with which autobiographical writers claim to feel God working within them is remarkable. John Bunyan’s heart “shakes” and he feels himself “all on a flame” as he begins to feel the pangs of repentance; he expresses the impact of biblical passages as “a seizure upon my spirit” and feels his “bowels to yearn towards [God].”<sup>58</sup> Frequently, sin is described as a physical weight under which Bunyan “sinks,” and after a profound moment of spiritual revelation near the end of his narrative, he recalls a lifting of that heaviness: “Now did my chains fall off my Legs indeed, I was loosed from my affliction and irons.”<sup>59</sup> Sin for Sarah Davy is “drowsiness” in her soul, during which she is in danger of being “lulled asleep by Satan in a sinful security,” while spiritual “refreshment” from that sleepiness occurs when God “enters into [her] heart.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Vavasor Powell, *Spiritual Experiences of Sundry Believers held forth by them at severall solempne meetings* (London, 1653), ii-iii.

<sup>58</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30, 48, 55.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>60</sup> Sarah Davy, *Heaven Realized, or the holy pleasure of daily intimate communion with God, exemplified in a blessed soul* (1670), in *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*,

Agnes Beaumont experiences “heart-ravishing visits” from God and “pour[s] out [her] soul” to him; Anne Wentworth is “enabled in his power to roll myself on top of him.”<sup>61</sup> The convergence of spiritual and physical experience expressed in the language of these texts is not unique to autobiography in the period. Images of the body consumed by spiritual pain or ecstasy mark seventeenth-century devotional poetry across religious sensibilities, from the imagined bending, breaking, and battering of the speaker’s heart in John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets* to the sustained figuring of the human heart as a dwelling place for God, receptacle for his love, or tablet on which his name might be carved in George Herbert’s *The Temple*.<sup>62</sup> Invisible, intangible God could be materially observed—if only in the imaginations of these writers—through physical interactions with his human creation.

To dismiss such physical descriptions of spiritual experience as conceptually helpful metaphor would be to ignore the complex and increasingly fraught body-soul relationship as it was understood (and debated) in the early modern period. The body certainly provided a useful set of words and images through which to describe the soul—an entity that resisted human efforts to define and represent it.<sup>63</sup> But the significance of

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ed. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 165-79 (170, 171).

<sup>61</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, ed. Vera J. Camden (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1992), 48, 51; Anne Wentworth, *A Vindication of Anne Wentworth, tending to the better preparing of all people for her larger testimony, which is making ready for public view* (1677), in *Her Own Life*, 180-96 (187).

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, “Good Friday,” “Sepulchre,” or “Mattens” in *The Temple: Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations* (1633), *The Works of George Herbert*. ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 38-39, 40-41, 62-63.

<sup>63</sup> As Richard Sugg puts it in his opening to *The Smoke of the Soul: Medicine, Physiology and Religion in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), “[n]othing was so essential, and nothing so elusive” as the nature of the soul in early modern religious thought (1). Early modern philosophers and theologians debated the substance of the soul itself, its location within and relationship to



attention to the body in self-examining spiritual texts moves beyond the borrowing of words and images. The precise nature of the relationship between body and soul was anything but clearly defined in the period, and theories remained in flux as scientific endeavor brought forth new ideas about the body. What is clear is that in turning inward, seventeenth-century writers seemed to be as fascinated with the functions and appearances of their bodies as with the conditions of their souls, and frequently, experiences are expressed in both spiritual and physical terms. The body and soul were two components of a partnership that constructed early modern ideas of selfhood, with both components created by and subject to God. Helen Smith's work on the language of cure and conversion argues that once we take physical metaphor seriously, religious narratives reveal spiritual development as a "visceral experience" and "constitute a moment at which the distinction between the thought and the felt wavers."<sup>64</sup>

Such blending of thought and feeling, soul and body was vital to John Donne's understanding of selfhood and man's relationship with God.<sup>65</sup> A 1619 sermon vividly portrays a union of spiritual and corporeal man:

In the constitution and making of a natural man, the body is not the man, nor the soul is not the man, but the union of these two makes up the man; the spirits in a man which are the thin and active part of the blood, and so are of a kind of middle

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the body, the method through which it enters and leaves the body, and its experience at the point of and after death. Sugg's study is the most recent (and thorough) account of these debates.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Smith, "Metaphor, Cure, and Conversion in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 67.2 (2014): 473-502 (476, 477). The spiritual significance of the heart provides a useful locus for considering this fuzzy distinction between thought and feeling. In the *Institutes*, Calvin locates true belief in the heart: we must understand God, not with the type of knowledge that "merely flits in the brain," but that "takes root in the heart" (62). Alec Ryrie identifies the heart as central to Protestant spiritual life: hard hearts are "melted" by God's grace, and the believer constantly battled feelings of drowsiness or dullness that "could creep into your heart unnoticed" (20). See Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Ramie Targoff's *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008) provides a succinct overview of soul-body theories as they relate specifically to Donne's work (see especially 6-21).

nature, between soul and body...they do the office to unite and apply the faculties of the soul to the organs of the body, and so there is a man.<sup>66</sup>

Characteristic of Donne's writings on man is a refusal to voice the body-soul union in terms that elevate the soul as man's true self unfortunately trapped in an earthly body.<sup>67</sup> Rather, for Donne, man is only man by nature of the partnership of body and soul. The two components are bound in the passage above by a sort of spiritual blood. The image of mingled spirits and blood running through the body is useful for understanding felt faith. It also suggests reciprocal experience: this "middle nature" substance serves to "unite and *apply* the faculties of the soul to the organs of the body" (my emphasis). Application suggests contact and connection; it also conveys a sense of practicality. Donne finds in the body a practical mode for operating and expressing the soul. When soul is applied to body, it is not just bound—it is bound for a purpose. Donne's body serves the purpose of allowing his soul to function materially on earth.<sup>68</sup>

Part of the material function of Donne's body is its capacity to be read and interpreted for signs of salvation and spiritual development. This function forms the framework for Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), an exercise in spiritual self-examination that chronicles the stages of a sickness Donne experienced in November and December of 1623. Each "station" of the illness is considered in a three-part analysis: a meditation on a particular physical experience or observation on the

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<sup>66</sup> John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-62), 2:261. All further references to Donne's sermons are to Potter and Simpson's ten-volume edition and are cited parenthetically.

<sup>67</sup> The conventional idea of soul and body in opposition registers (and is debated) in the seventeenth-century revival of soul-body dialogue poems, of which Marvell's "A Dialogue Between the Soul and Body" is the most famous. See Nigel Smith's introduction to the poem in *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Smith, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 61-63 for a brief overview of the dialogue genre.

<sup>68</sup> Importantly for Donne, this is a union and function that God intended: man "is not sent into this world to live out of it but to live in it." See *Sermons*, 7:104.

progression of the disease, an expostulation that explores the spiritual significance of what is happening in the body, and a prayer that seeks some sort of resolution or acceptance of the (physical and spiritual) situation at hand. That Donne used his illness as an occasion to reflect on his spiritual state is by no means unusual: sickness was generally understood by Protestants to be a spiritual as well as physical affliction.<sup>69</sup> According to the Book of Common Prayer, illness was a visitation from God. A special prayer service for the sick prompted the minister to ask God for healing of both body and soul, and importantly, for correction—that is, for the sufferer to “profit” from the experience.<sup>70</sup> God sent sickness as a test of the patient’s faith through times of pain and despair. This test could be, as the prayer service suggests, “profitable” in that it prompts the sufferer toward spiritual reflection and repentance. A sick body is a reminder of the sick, sinful soul that dwells within it. But this view of sickness as a divine tool tended to produce accounts in Protestant literature that disregard the body’s condition in favor of exploring spiritual sickness and health.<sup>71</sup> Donne’s account teems with physicality and with intensely emotional responses to what he sees as the physical condition of man in the world. If man is, by nature, a soul united with a body, he cannot possibly self-examine without considering body and soul simultaneously. For Donne, the states of body and soul are intertwined, and he finds in the body the soul “applied”—to return to

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<sup>69</sup> Stephen Pender notes that sickness was understood in similar ways across religious confessions. Anglican and non-conformist Protestants as well as Roman Catholics treated physical illness as an opportunity to demonstrate faith and patience and to “sift through one’s spiritual inventory” (220). See Pender, “Essaying the Body: Donne, Affliction, and Medicine,” *John Donne’s Professional Lives*, ed. David Colclough (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 215-24. One important Catholic variation was the belief that physical suffering on earth could reduce time spent in purgatory after death: see Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 133.

<sup>70</sup> Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 133-34.

<sup>71</sup> Targoff provides a useful survey of such literature in *John Donne, Body and Soul*, ch. 5.

the language from his sermon—for practical examination. He knows, as he admits to God late in the *Devotions*, “that in the state of my *body*, which is more *discernible*, than that of my soule, thou dost *effigiate* my *Soule* to me” (119).

This “effigy” in the body, however, is not a static image; it is also, importantly, not an explication, but a representation. According to the *OED*, to “effigiate” is “to present a likeness of; to portray, represent by a picture or sculpture.”<sup>72</sup> While the noun forms of “effigy” and “effigies” were used more frequently in the period, the *OED* records only one use of the verb “effigiate” before Donne’s 1624 *Devotions*. Donne’s use of this uncommon form of the word places emphasis on God’s activity and thus, on his sustained material involvement with his creation. As God actively *effigiates* Donne’s soul through his body, Donne must respond by actively engaging in interpretive self-examination, considering not only what is suggested about the soul through the physical representation, but also what is suggested about the body when it is understood in terms of the soul. An effigy must be read—it requires interpretive *work* on the part of the observer. But as Donne’s *Devotions* take the reader through “severall steps in [his] Sicknes” or the stages of his disease’s progression, the text reads and interprets a *changing* body. The body’s vulnerability to change is never far from the writer’s attention. From the text’s opening sentence, we hear that man’s physical condition is

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<sup>72</sup> The invocation of sculpture is quite useful here, as it calls to mind scriptural images of God as a potter, shaping man as if he were clay (Isa. 64:8 or Jer. 18:1-11, for example). The image of the self as a vessel shaped and reshaped by God is typical of autobiography, often echoing the power God the potter has to improve upon his clay creation (as in Jer. 18:3-6: “I went down to the potter’s house... The vessel he was making was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done?”). Emphasis is typically placed on the potter’s prerogative to do what he wants with his clay, as well as his unquestionable creative intentions, despite their obscurity. Donne reworks the trope to consider God’s act of physically shaping man as a means through which divine knowledge is communicated—through which the potter’s intentions are made visible (though obliquely) in the form of the vessel.

“variable.” Donne is startled by the suddenness of his altered condition: “this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute” (7). God’s effigy of the soul in the body is a constantly changing one, which requires an attentive, sustained effort of reading and interpretation from the self-examining Donne. As representation, the body will never reveal divine truth transparently: consistent study brings fallen man as close as he can get to knowledge of God and self.

How does one achieve body literacy? And more importantly, how does one develop the skills needed to read one’s *own* body? Matthew Horn suggests that Donne takes the position of spectator in the *Devotions* so that he may “distance himself from his body” in order to examine it. For Horn, such distance serves the additional function of enabling Donne to transform his body into a new sort of textual self and relocate his identity from within his degenerative material body to within the “unchanging mind of God,” thus achieving a sense of self permanency.<sup>73</sup> While I will argue later in this chapter that Donne’s practice of textualizing the body (reading and writing it) are, as Horn suggests, associated with a sort of stability of identity (and that the writing process is indeed transformational), I do not think Donne’s engagement with these practices can be understood in a way that separates them from the physical experiences of an embodied self. We have already seen that the union of body and soul is of utmost importance to Donne in understanding not only human selfhood but also the way that self must function within a material world. Donne’s writing also demonstrates marked anxiety toward the possibility of separating body and soul, even temporarily.<sup>74</sup> A 1626 sermon considers the

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<sup>73</sup> Matthew Horn, “John Donne, Godly Inscription, and Permanency of Self in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *Renaissance Studies* 24.3 (2009): 365-80 (368).

<sup>74</sup> Scholarship has emphasized the frequency with which concerns over the separation of body and soul at death (and specifically, what happens to the soul during the period of time between the body’s death and

idea of distancing the soul from the body in order to advance the soul in divine knowledge. Donne is speaking here on physical temperance—on the importance of keeping the body a proper dwelling place for the soul. An overabundance of flesh on the body encumbers the soul: “[t]he lesse flesh we carry,” he explains, “the liker we are to them (i.e. God and angels) who have none.” (*Sermons* 7:13) But Donne is talking about flesh “of our owne making”—flesh we have created through excessive eating, drinking, and indulgences that “pamper” the body (7:12). The flesh we have been given by God, on the other hand, is essential for housing the soul, and in an important turn, Donne moves to condemn acts that have the opposite effect on the body: specifically, extreme fasting and self-flagellation. While the soul “requires not so large, so vast a house of sinfull flesh,” it does require a house, and Donne rejects any act that seeks to elevate the soul through denial of the body—acts that “so wither, and shrinke, and contract the body, as though the soul were sent into it, as into a prison, or into fetters, and manacles, to wring, and pinch, and torture it” (7:13). The temperate man is he who “makes his body obsequious, and serviceable to his soule, but yet leaves his soule a body to work in, and an Organ to praise God upon...for they must serve God joyntly together, because God having joyned them, man may not separate them” (7:14).<sup>75</sup> We see here again the unity

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resurrection) surface in Donne’s writing. Such anxieties are most commonly found in the sermons but also appear at several points in the *Devotions*. I am more concerned here with the idea of a living form of body-soul separation—with what happens when one faculty is suppressed in favor of the other.

<sup>75</sup> Donne’s echo of biblical language on marriage and divorce (and of the traditional Christian marriage ceremony) seems deliberate. Elsewhere in his sermons, Donne speaks of the body-soul union as a marriage and death as divorce (brought upon man by man through sin), though this divorce is more a temporary separation: “As far as man is immortal, man is a married man still, still in possession of a soul, and a body too; And man is for ever immortal in both; immortal in his soul by preservation, and immortal in his body by reparation in the resurrection. For, though they be separated...they are not divorced” (*Sermons*, 7:10). Donne’s conception of a “marriage” between body and soul evokes ideas of partnership; it also calls to mind the idea of two becoming one (and, even more provocatively for the body and soul, two becoming “one flesh”).

and balance Donne values in the soul-body connection, along with an emphasis on the practical function of the body. If anything, Donne's language more forcefully condemns the practice of physical self-denial than self-pampering: physical indulgence is "artificiall," "slothfull," and "sinfull"; harming and depriving the body to the extreme is "mad," "devilish"—"inhumane" (7:13-14).

Especially important in the passage above, though, is the specific practical function of the body as an "Organ to praise God upon." "Organ" is a carefully chosen word. It invites us to consider the body as an instrument through which the soul can communicate, but it is also a reminder of the living physicality (in the sense of a bodily organ) that is necessary for a soul, in Donne's thinking, to communicate with God. We can further imagine praise as the music issued forth when the soul plays upon its organ-body. Music is produced not from a musician or instrument alone, but from the expression of the musician's talent as it joins with the instrument. Praiseful "music" also invokes the senses—it is sensory evidence of the soul's otherwise imperceptible faith. For Donne, it is not enough for man to praise God in his soul. Since body and soul are united by God and for the purpose of serving God, faith must be sensibly demonstrated. This nexus of comprehension, sensation, and communication is *experience*—faith that is simultaneously known, felt, and expressed.

It seems, then, that approaching Donne's analytical position in the *Devotions* as an intellectually divorced "spectatorial stance"<sup>76</sup> from which he can observe and read his body risks obscuring the physicality of Donne's processes of self-examination, reading, and writing. If we approach self-analysis in the *Devotions* by imagining a disembodied

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<sup>76</sup> The phrase is Horn's (368).

self gazing down upon the body to engage in intellectual practices that will organize a disordered (sick) materiality, we make three problematic assumptions. First, and most significantly, that identity is located in an entity that is (or can be made) distinct from the body; second, that this entity (presumably, the soul) is capable of producing praiseful music without an organ; and third, that the body can, ultimately, be translated into a closed, ordered, text.<sup>77</sup> We might consider a similar problem of disembodiment that Donne explores through the suspension of two lovers' souls in "The Extasie." The poem opens with two lovers trying to connect through their physical senses (through "firmly cimented" hands and eyes "thred / ...upon one double string" [5-8]).<sup>78</sup> As these efforts prove insufficient "to make us one," the lovers' souls move out of their bodies to "negotiate" (5-8; 10, 17). On the surface, this period of "extasie" seems to help the lovers achieve union: two souls become one to form an "abler soule" (43). But the poem emphasizes that the achievements of the souls are purely intellectual breakthroughs,

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<sup>77</sup> Horn's argument is that the process of writing the *Devotions* "culminates in Donne's turning his body into a collage of signs, turning the collage into a text, and storing the text in the unchanging mind of God" (368). It is the finality of the end product—the assumption that Donne's text represents a self in its entirety, or that the text is a static "culmination" of selfhood—that I take issue with here.

<sup>78</sup> All references to Donne's poetry are from C. A. Patrides, ed., *The Complete English Poems of John Donne* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1985) and are cited parenthetically by line numbers. Renaissance theories of perception held that eyes sent out invisible beams; perception happened when the beams struck the observed object and returned an image of it to be imprinted on the spectator's eye. In Donne's image, then, the lovers gain as much physical connection from gazing as they do from holding hands:

Our hands were firmly cimented  
 With a fast balme, which thence did spring,  
 Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred  
 Our eyes, upon one double string;  
 So to'entergraft our hands, as yet  
 Was all the meanes to make us one,  
 And pictures in our eyes to get  
 Was all our propagation. (5-12)

The union achieved from both sources, though, is incomplete: "entergraft[ed]" hands are bound but still separate ("cimented with a fast balme" highlights the lingering distinction between the hands, as they need a substance to hold them together), and reproduced pictures of each individual lover in the other's eye is pitted against a more united form of "propagation"—offspring that would be the product of *both* lovers.



limiting their love and union to the realm of the theoretical. “This Extasie doth *unperplex*,” the speaker exclaims, “and *tell us* what we love”; the lovers now “*know*, / Of what we are compos’d” (29-30; 45-46, my emphasis). Love, at the level of soul alone, is known but not felt or somatically expressed. Further, the segment of the poem that features souls suspended from their bodies is haunted by the image of the bodies they leave behind: “Wee like sepulchrall statues lay; / All day” (17-18). The image reminds us that bodies need souls to animate them, but it also associates the idea of a disembodied soul with death. What the souls learn through their ecstasy is not enough; souls must “descend / T’affections, and to faculties, / Which sense may reach and apprehend” (65-66).<sup>79</sup> That is, the knowledge of love must be experienced and expressed through their bodies in order to truly comprehend it and make *living* use of it. “Loves mysteries in soules doe grow,” the poem acknowledges, “But yet the body is his booke” (71-72). The book of the body translates the soul’s “mysteries” and makes them accessible to human understanding.

The closing lines of “The Extasie” illustrate the finally complete experience of union that is achieved when soul and body work together by telling the reader what such union might look like:

And if some lover, such as wee,  
Have heard this dialogue of one,  
Let him still marke us, he shall see  
Small change, when we’re to bodies gone. (73-76)

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<sup>79</sup> The word “descend” here might initially evoke ideas of debasement of the flesh—that the soul must unfortunately descend (lower itself) to the impurity of the body. I read it rather as a grounding than a fall: the soul returns home to the flesh, where the idea of love can be transformed into the experience of it. Targoff similarly argues that returning to bodies is not “a concession to ‘weake men’ who require ocular proof before they can believe in love,” but an act of functional necessity as “we cannot love without them” (*John Donne, Body and Soul*, 57).

Targoff reads in “the playful confusion...of singulars and plurals” in these lines the speaker’s hint that the union enabled through the flesh is a sexual one: the poem moves from hand-holding in the opening lines to a more complete consummation at the end.<sup>80</sup> I support this reading, but I think it is more pertinent here to observe that whatever form this embodied union takes, it displays “small change” from the joining of the disembodied souls for one who “marks” the lovers. That is, the embodied union is a legible expression of ideological love. In contrast to the purely physical sensory experience of the lovers at the beginning of the poem, the bodies are now functioning as instruments of the souls. It seems important, moreover, that Donne does *not* explicitly define the physical action taking place in these closing lines—we are encouraged to read them as a blurring of spiritual and physical activity (and as *activity*, not a finished act). And while the speaker’s presentation of this simultaneously spiritual and physical act of love as something a spectator might “marke” may seem strangely voyeuristic, it reminds us of the body’s function as a witness to the soul in the world.<sup>81</sup>

Understanding and sensing, it seems, go hand-in-hand for a full experience of love. Religious experience for Donne, I argue, involves a similar synthesis of the faculties of soul and body; in the *Devotions*, the physical and spiritual are fused in such a way that spiritual “signs” are collected as they are sensed, and those felt signs must be interpreted and expressed in order to fully understand and make use of them. In his second prayer,

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<sup>80</sup> Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 57.

<sup>81</sup> Specifically, Donne’s sermons emphasize the important role the body plays in expressing inward faith to others. “[A]n inward acknowledgment of Christ is not enough,” Donne warns in a 1618 sermon preached at Lincoln’s Inn. He prompts his listeners to use their bodies to testify their faith: “If the heart were enough, God would never have made a mouth; And...if the mouth were enough, God would never have made hands; for...no voice more audible, none more credible, then when thy *hands* speak as well as thy heart or thy tongue; Thou art then perfectly awaked out of thy sleep, when thy words and works declare, and manifest it” (*Sermons*, 2:228).

Donne asks God for guidance as he undertakes this type of self-examination. He acknowledges sickness as an opportunity for communication between himself and the divine, as he has been “cald...up” by being “cast...further downe.” The patient’s withdrawal from worldly affairs and influences during illness has taught him how to refocus his identity and reception of the world around him toward divine ends: God has “clothd me with thy self, by stripping me of my self, and by dulling my bodily senses, to the meats, and eases of this world, hast whet, and sharpned my spirituall senses, to the apprehension of thee” (13-14). Here, Donne employs a common trope of conversion narrative: the breaking down of an old self in order to welcome a new, regenerated self in God.<sup>82</sup> What makes Donne’s image of the stripping of the self remarkable is that he figures the process as a moment in which God, essentially, teaches him how to *read* somatically. That is, Donne acknowledges that in order to examine himself for signs of God’s grace, he must use his “spiritual senses”—a phrase that conflates the physical and the spiritual and imagines the soul as something that can feel. The senses must be refocused; they must be retrained to use sensory data to “apprehend” God, pushing beyond the immediate (surface-level) meaning of what is observed in order to see and sense with the soul.

Looking back at the meditation and expostulation that precede Donne’s second prayer, we see this refocusing of the senses in action. Station two begins with an

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<sup>82</sup> In scripture, the concept is figured as a physical transformation: God promises to Ezekiel to remove his “stony” heart from his body and replace it with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). Ryrie presents this transformation as central to understanding early Protestant emotional life in *Being Protestant*, 17-26. Spiritual autobiography often emerges out of a period of crisis or perceived dismantling of the self (in sickness, madness, despair, or other cases of personal trial) in order to rebuild a more godly self through writing. As Katharine Hodgkin notes in relation to madness, a breakdown of self offers a position from which to build identity afresh—to “fashion a new self out of a time of crisis” (26). See Hodgkin, *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

announcement that at this point in the disease, “[t]he strength, and the function of the Senses, & other faculties change and faile” (11).<sup>83</sup> The terrified patient lists his ailments: “In the twinkling of an eye, I can scarce see; instantly the tast is insipid, and fatuous; instantly the appetite is dull and desireless: instantly the knees are sinking and strengthless” (11). The immediacy of Donne’s writing (each symptom happens “instantly”) gets at the heart of what makes disease so frightening. The body is suddenly not functioning as it should, and this deviation from the norm happens so quickly that the patient can hardly conceive what is happening. Focused on the body’s physical experience, the meditation presents these symptoms as evidence that on earth, “*Man*, who is the noblest part of the *Earth*, melts so away, as if he were a *statue*, not of *Earth*, but of *Snowe*” (11). The expostulation moves to consider spiritual implications of his failing body. “My God, my God,” the speaker asks, “why comes *thine anger* so fast upon me? Why *dost thou* melt me, scatter me, powre me like water upon the ground so instantly?” (12, my emphasis). God is identified as the agent of change in the patient’s body. It is when Donne turns to read his changing body through its connection with his soul (that is, when he senses spiritually) that he is able to transform a purely material experience into, for Donne, a fully, *humanly* physical one—one that is understood as an effigy of the soul. As the expostulation progresses, God’s “anger” becomes God’s “correct[tion],” and the quickness of physical deterioration in illness becomes a sign of “the much more hast, & dispatch, which my *God* shal use, in recollecting, and reuniting this *dust* again at the *Resurrection*” (13). Once Donne identifies this interpretive practice as a sharpening of his

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<sup>83</sup> Each set of meditation, expostulation, and prayer constitutes a “station” in Donne’s text; these stations are titled according to the progressing states of Donne’s body, and the titles are compiled into a table of contents of sorts at the beginning of the text. Interestingly, the titles are listed in the shape of a poem, presenting the sick body right away as a text to be interpreted.

“spiritual senses” in the prayer that follows, he returns to the specific bodily senses at stake in his meditation, reorienting them spiritually:

My tast is not gone away, but gone up to sit at  *Davids table, To tast, & and see, that the Lord is good: My stomach is not gone, but gone up, so far upwards toward the Supper of the Lamb, with thy Saints in heaven, as to the Table, to the Communion of thy Saints here in earth: my knees are weak, but weak therefore that I should easily fall to, and fix my self long upon my devotions to thee. (14)*

Donne here stubbornly resists the traditional formulation of a metaphorical stripping of the physical self in order to focus on spiritual matters; instead, he situates spiritual experience firmly within the body, attuning his senses of taste, appetite, and touch to his spiritual needs.

The subsequent lines of the prayer further suggest that spiritual experience can have a transformative impact on the body:

*A sound heart is the life of the flesh; & a heart visited by thee, and directed to thee, by that visitation is a sound hart. There is no soundnesse in my flesh, because of thine anger. Interpret thine owne worke, and call this sicknes, correction, and not anger, & there is soundnes in my flesh. (14)*<sup>84</sup>

Donne associates the soul with the heart, as did most of his contemporaries, an association grounded in biblical language.<sup>85</sup> These lines linguistically emphasize the interplay between soul and body through the selected scriptural echoes (Donne considers “sound” hearts—read: souls—in Prov. 14:30 alongside “sound” flesh in Psa. 38:3). More importantly, the commentary with which Donne extends the biblical references asserts the power of spiritual interpretation to transform the state of the body. I noted above that illness was considered a visitation from God, capable of prompting self-examination and

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<sup>84</sup> The italicized lines incorporate language taken directly from scripture: here, Donne refers to Prov. 14:30 and Psa. 38:3.

<sup>85</sup> In fact, Prov. 14:30, from which “A sound heart is the life of the flesh” is a direct quotation, suggests that a sinful heart spreads physical corruption to other parts of the body: the verse continues, “but envy is the rotting of the bones.”

repentance. Since a “sound heart” gives life to the body, and God’s visitation (during illness) to the heart/soul produces soundness in that heart/soul, sickness paradoxically becomes “the life of the flesh.” Donne asks God to “interpret thine owne worke, and call this sicknes, correction, and not anger, & there is soundness in my flesh.” While the speaker of Psalm 38 (who declares, “There is no soundness in my flesh”) asks for forgiveness and seeks spiritual redemption to hasten his healing, Donne imagines his flesh made sound through interpretive and linguistic power: to “call this sickness, correction” is to transform the sick body into a well one.

But who is performing the interpretation? The passage discussed above moves seamlessly from biblical quotation to Donne’s own voice, and from phrases that accord interpretive authority variously to God’s word in scripture (“A sound heart *is* the life of the flesh”), to God communicating directly with Donne (“*Interpret thine own work, and call this sickness, correction, and not anger*”), and to Donne himself (“...& there *is* soundness in my flesh”) (all italics mine). When Donne invites God to “call this sickness, correction, and not anger,” the source of interpretive authority is even further obscured: the text directly addresses God, but we have just heard Donne’s own writing make the same shift from anger to correction in the preceding expostulation. What this passage achieves is a deliberate blurring of distinctions between soul and body, thought and feeling, sickness and health, reading and writing, God’s text and Donne’s text. In the rest of this chapter, I demonstrate how Donne’s *Devotions* persistently pushes and complicates the boundaries between these seemingly binary pairs. I argue that Donne’s repeated blurring of binaries embraces a search for knowledge that is, for man, embedded in a constantly changing, often obscure material world, where certainty is never attainable

but always to be sought. The space of the *Devotions* is one in which “truth” is always found in the form of a text (or effigy) in need of exegesis, and stability of self and identity are located in the *processes* of self-examination and spiritual interpretation themselves.

### **Spiritual Senses, Interpretation, and the Problem of Anatomy**

I suggested above that Donne, in the second station of his *Devotions*, presents self-examination as a process of reorienting the senses. That is, the suffering patient strives to retrain his senses to push beyond the immediate material context of what he feels and observes to perceive the spiritual implications of that sensory data. An understanding of “self” emerges as perception and interpretation forge connections between body and soul, man and God. Here, I would like to take a closer look at what it means for Donne to sense with the soul, and at the implications of such a practice for interpretation within the material world. I will then consider the human body as a particularly complex material site for spiritual observation by considering Donne’s efforts to “read” his body in the *Devotions* within the broader context of seventeenth-century anatomical study and practice. What sort of knowledge can be extracted from the physical book of the human body? And how should it be read?

The text of the *Devotions* is not the first space in which Donne explores the notion of “spiritual senses.” A 1620 sermon preached at Lincoln’s Inn on Job 19.26 (“And though, after my skin, wormes destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God”) gave Donne an occasion to explore the sensory experience of seeing God in the afterlife. The fate of the body after death and its role in the resurrection is an enormous preoccupation

of Donne's eschatological writings. His exegesis of this verse in Job is fiercely engaged with asserting God's ability to recollect the bodies of his believers after death—God “reunites in an instant armes, and legs, blood, and bones, in what corners so ever they be scattered”—despite physical corruption in the grave (*Sermons* 3:109). Further, Donne insists that each believer's soul, after departing the body at the moment of death, will reunite with that same body again at the resurrection. If this reunion seems impossible (Donne has just detailed the utter deterioration of the body into dirt that will be “trod away upon the ground” and caught up in the various “revolutions of dust”), Donne revels in the incredulity the idea generates: it is “the most inconsiderable consideration, and yet, *Ego*, I, I the same body, and the same soul, shall be recompact again, and be identically, numerically, individually the same man” (3:109).<sup>86</sup>

The sermon on Job 19.26 is critical for understanding Donne's belief in a bodily resurrection and his rather idiosyncratic emphasis on the individual integrity of a specific body and soul in reunion after death. This view may have been controversial, but for Donne, it is not surprising.<sup>87</sup> We have seen that in Donne's view of human selfhood, “the

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<sup>86</sup> Donne similarly revels in the idea of scattered bodies reuniting at the resurrection in *Holy Sonnet* 4: “At the round earth's imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise / From death, you numberless infinities / Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go” (1-4). The speaker's wonder at such a reunion is emphasized by the redundancy of “numberless infinities” and by the long list of methods through which the bodies are imagined to be “scattered” that follows: flood, fire, war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies, despair, law, chance (5-7). The quick pace of Donne's run-on lines recalls the sermon's suggestion that God achieves this body-soul reunion “in an instant.”

<sup>87</sup> The belief in a bodily resurrection was not unusual in Donne's day; it was, however, a topic omitted from the authoritative text of the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England (see Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 169). The church did not officially confirm or deny bodily resurrection, and as Targoff points out, the omission of the originally drafted assertion that “to all that be dead their owne bodies, flesh, and bone shalbe restored” from the *Articles* reflects ambivalence surrounding the issue. The specific form in which a body might enter heaven was a highly debated topic. More typical than Donne's image of a resurrected body that was “identically, numerically, individually” the same as his earthly body were views that bodies underwent some sort of purifying transformation before meeting God. Donne identifies several competing views of resurrected bodies in his 1620 sermon on 1 Corinthians 15:50 (See *Sermons*, 3:114-33).



union of [body and soul] makes up the man” (*Sermons* 2:261). That the same body and soul that first formed this union on earth be joined again after death ensures that Donne the man (body and soul) on earth is equal to Donne the man (body and soul) in heaven. Selfhood remains intact.

Importantly, it is this “same man”—body and soul reunited—that will *see* God at the resurrection. As the sermon proceeds to the final construction of its biblical text (that “in my flesh shall I see God”), Donne considers what it might be like to experience sensation within a resurrected body. To see God, Donne suggests, is to simultaneously see God alone and see everything else, for man is finally able to see all things “as they are”: “I shall see nothing but God, and what is in him,” Donne says, but “when we shall see God, *Sicuti est*, as he is, we shall see all things *Sicuti sunt*, as they are; for that’s their Essence, as they conduce to his glory” (3:111-12). As everything exists by and for God, seeing God is seeing all, and seeing all is seeing God. Once God becomes the object of man’s sight, that perfect object perfects the vision; sight is purified of the imperfections in human perception brought on by sin. Perfected vision opens a direct path to knowledge, free from the distortions, reflections, or “glasses” through which man must see and learn on earth. It follows that the knowledge enabled by purified sight also allows man to consider himself in relation to God. In *The Theology of John Donne* (1999), Jeffrey Johnson rightly associates the sight of God with not just divine knowledge, but self-knowledge in Donne’s visions of the resurrection. Citing Donne’s formulation that “in seeing God, we shall see all that concernes us, and see it alwayes,” Johnson explains that “the seeing of God determines one’s spiritual condition and defines who one is in

relation to the Creator.”<sup>88</sup> Thus as seeing created things “as they are” reveals the connection between those things and God, this sight also identifies and enables the union between the (created) self and God.<sup>89</sup>

In the sermon on Job 19.26, though, the union more emphatically at stake in the experience of seeing God is that between the resurrected body and soul. When the sight of God perfects man’s vision, it perfects the way in which body and soul work together. God is seen, Donne explains, with the soul—with the “eyes of [man’s] understanding” (3:112). Job looks forward to seeing God not because of the sensory experience of seeing itself but for the sight to be seen: “He is glad of seeing, but not of the sense, but of the Object...this sight that *Job* speaks of, is onely the fruition of the presence of God, in which consists eternal blessednesse” (3:110-11). Free from the material world, to “see” no longer means to encounter images, but rather to receive truth, or to enjoy and participate in God’s presence. Sensation happens through the soul. What function, then, remains for the resurrected body? In a surprising passage that threatens to undermine the body’s worth to the soul after so carefully asserting its central role in the resurrection, Donne admits that the soul alone sees God with absolute clarity; fleshly eyes do nothing to improve the vision. While “[w]e shall see the Humanity of Christ with our bodily eyes, then glorified,” Donne reminds us that “flesh, though glorified, cannot make us see God better, nor clearer, then the soul alone hath done” (3:112). But we learn that the body is anything but superfluous in this experience of seeing God. Donne is at his most

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<sup>88</sup> Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 85-86.

<sup>89</sup> The sermon Johnson cites was given on Candlemas Day, probably 1626/7, on Mat. 5.8, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (7:13). See Johnson, 85-88 for an extended discussion of the importance of sight in Donne’s sermons. Johnson identifies a “reciprocal exchange of vision, both seeing and being seen, that enacts the divine/human relationship” in Donne’s religious poetry and prose and demonstrates that union with God is also imagined at the moment in which man faces God’s gaze (87).

rhetorically powerful when he imagines the moment in which the flesh makes this divine encounter:

But as an indulgent Father, or as a tender mother, when they go to see the King in any Solemnity, or any other thing of observation, and curiosity, delights to carry their child, which is flesh of their flesh, and bone of their bone, with them, and though the child cannot comprehend it as well as they, they are as glad that the child sees it, as that they see it themselves; such a gladnesse shall my soul have, that this flesh, (which she will no longer call her prison, nor her tempter, but her friend, her companion, her wife) that this flesh, that is, I, in the re-union, and redintegration of both parts, shall see God. (3:112)

At the moment in which Donne seems closest to freeing the soul from its need for the body, he forcibly reasserts their interdependence. The two components are first formulated as parent and child, and then as friends, companions, and married partners. The parent-child analogy poses that the body is similarly “flesh” of the soul’s “flesh,” forging an unexpectedly material connection in a vision of the immaterial world. Most significantly, it is the body’s participation in the sight of God that allows for Donne, *himself*, to be fully present: despite his soul’s unaided capacity to see and know God entirely in the afterlife, it is only when the body rejoins the soul that “this flesh, *that is, I*, in the re-union, and redintegration of both parts, shall see God” (my emphasis). It seems that Donne cannot imagine being present as himself, as “I,” in the afterlife without experiencing the sight of God through both flesh and spirit.

I would like to return to my claim that at the moment in which body and soul see God, these two components finally work together in ideal harmony. Donne’s idea of a “glorified body” is one that, while “identically, numerically, individually” the same as its earthly counterpart, has been cleansed of its sinful corruptions through the physical decomposition it undergoes in the grave. It is on this point that Donne is able to rectify two seemingly contradictory biblical verses in his companion sermon to the sermon on

Job 19.26. The second sermon, delivered during the same 1620 Easter term at Lincoln's Inn, addresses 1 Corinthians 15.50 ("Now this I say brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God").<sup>90</sup> Donne begins by rejecting as "errors" a number of competing interpretations of the verse that vary from Simon Magus's denial of the resurrection altogether and the Gnostic belief in a resurrection of the soul alone, to the theories of Eutychius, who held that resurrected bodies "should not have any of the qualities of a *naturall body*," but that they were "so rarified, so refined, so attenuated, and reduced to a thinnesse, and subtlenesse, that they were aery bodies, and not bodies of flesh and blood" (3:114).<sup>91</sup> By contrast, Donne's glorified body is "the *same* body, and yet not *such* a body"—it is a body of flesh and blood (the same flesh and blood that inhabited the earth), but of a new quality (3:118). Specifically, Donne explains that the "flesh and blood" that Paul warns "cannot inherit the kingdom of God" is flesh in the service of flesh, or sinful flesh: "It is summarily, all those works which proceed meerly out of the nature of man, without the regeneration of the Spirit of God; all that is *flesh and blood*, and *enmity* against God" (3:131). At the resurrection, the bodies of God's elect are "glorified" and "prepared" for God, making a transformation in quality but not substance (3:132). The sermon concludes that this distinction between types of "flesh and blood" allows for the compatibility of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15.50 (that "flesh

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<sup>90</sup> The two sermons are frequently discussed in conjunction, both in examining Donne's views on the resurrection and in exploring Donne's exegetical and rhetorical style. See, in particular, Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 18-21, and Jeanne Shami, "Squint-Eyed, Left-Handed, Half Deaf: Imperfect Senses and John Donne's Interpretive Middle Way," *Centered on the Word: Literature, Scripture, and the Tudor-Stuart Middle Way*, ed Daniel W. Doerksen and Christopher Hodgkin (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 173-92 (185-86).

<sup>91</sup> Donne argued elsewhere against the notion that man will become like the angels, exchanging a fleshly body for an "aery" one. In his first prebend sermon (1625), Donne warns that man should not wish himself an angel, "because he should lose by that wish, and lack that glory, which he shall have in his body." Man might become angel-like in his *soul*, but angels "shall never attaine to be like us in our glorified bodies" (*Sermons* 6:297).

and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”) and Job’s in Job 19.26 (that “in my flesh shall I see God”). In doing so, Donne describes the transformation of flesh and blood in somewhat purgatorial terms:

*Jobs* flesh can see God, and *Pauls* cannot; because the flesh that *Job* speaks of hath overcome the destruction of skin and body by wormes in the grave, and so is mellowed and prepared for the sight of God in heaven; And *Pauls* flesh is overcome by the world. *Jobs* flesh triumphs over *Satan*, and hath made a victorious use of Gods corrections, *Pauls* flesh is still subject to tentations, and carnalities. (3:132)

In other words, Paul refers to the flesh and blood of the sinner on earth, while Job looks forward to seeing God in his glorified flesh after its resurrection. It is the “destruction of skin and body” in the grave that transforms Job’s earthly body into a glorified one.

Donne speaks of this process as one in which the body is “mellowed” and “prepared” for God; he also suggests that this flesh has made “victorious use of Gods corrections.”

When this “corrected” body rejoins its soul, to return to the sermon on Job 19.26, it is able to reform the body-soul partnership without imposing the limitations of earthly flesh upon the resurrected soul’s perfect perception. Job, Donne, or any resurrected self achieves pure spiritual sensation—observation leading directly to knowledge or truth rather than to an interpreted (and potentially false) reading of truth through limited human perception on earth and via the representative and reflective glasses of the material world. For Donne, a glorified body is one in which the senses and faculties have been purified, allowing the body to function entirely in service to the soul.

In addition to asserting the body’s participation in the resurrection, then, the sermons on Job and 1 Corinthians have a number of important things to say about sensation, interpretation, and the flesh. First, we learn that for Donne, the senses play a critical role in the afterlife: the sight of God is what leads to divine and self-knowledge.

It is for this reason that Donne emphasizes the presence of his “faculties” within the resurrected body-soul throughout the sermon on Job 19.26. The words “body,” “soul,” and “faculties” echo together through a central section of the sermon in which Donne imagines what constitutes “*Ego*” or “I” in Job’s claim, “I shall see God”:

The same integrity of body and soul, and the same integrity in the Organs of my body, and in the faculties of my soul too; I shall be all there, my body, and my soul, and all my body, and all my soul (3:109)

I am here; I, body and soul; I, soul and faculties (3:110)

*Ego*, I, body and soul, soul and faculties, shall say to Christ Jesus, *Ego sum*, Lord, it is I (3:110)

In each phrase, the “faculties” are aligned with the soul, with the first passage drawing an implicit comparison between the organs that make up the body and the faculties that make up the soul. “I,” though, always entails the union of body, soul, and faculties. In the same central section of the sermon, Donne affirms the scholastic position that man’s “sensitive faculties” concern the soul more than the body, but that “to some purpose, and in some measure, *all* the senses shall be in our glorified bodies, *In actu*, or *in potentiâ*, say they, so as that we shall use them, or so as that we might” (3:110-11). As we have seen, Donne associates the “purpose” and “measure” of the bodily senses with selfhood in the resurrection and with a purification of the body-soul connection. This association raises a second key feature of the pair of sermons: that the function of the sensitive faculties is central to the union of body and soul, and thus to selfhood. In earthly man, Donne imagines that the faculties are the specific site at which soul is bound to body. As addressed earlier in this chapter, Donne’s notion of a “spiritual blood” binds soul and body together by “apply[ing] the faculties of the soul to the organs of the body” (*Sermons* 2:261). The faculties thus make functional use of the organs of the body for sensing;

since the body is earth-bound and not yet glorified, faculties on earth are shrouded by the veil of fleshly imperfection and sin. To summarize, then, with a third point: sensation in the afterlife (in a glorified body) is a process in which the soul receives sensory information “as it is,” or as it relates to God. That is, sensation leads to truth. On earth, the soul is hindered by the necessity to sense *through* the body, and thus through its imperfections.

When Donne speaks of sharpening his “spiritual senses” in the second prayer of the *Devotions*, then, the phrase is charged with a specific understanding of the central role sensation plays in meeting God, and, I argue, it sets the text to the task of “seeing”—as far as is possible—with the clarity of a resurrected, purified body and soul. That is, the text becomes a space in which Donne seeks to transform his earthly, sensory experience into a corrected, spiritually sensed one. In the sermons, Donne recognizes that true, complete self-knowledge comes from seeing oneself in relation to God, as all created things are seen “as they are” when considered “as they conduce to [God’s] glory.” Since this perception is only fully achieved through death and resurrection, Donne’s efforts in self-examination are necessarily a continuous struggle—the journey, as Donne famously puts it in “Satyre 3,” “about” and “about” the “huge hill, / Cragg’d, and steep” upon which “Truth stands” (79-81). Calling his illness a “correction,” Donne aligns the experience of disease with God’s “correction” or glorification of the body in the grave. Scholars concerned with the autobiographical nature of the *Devotions* have pointed to many ways in which the text anticipates the author’s death. Most frequently, it is framed as a confessional narrative that seeks to set Donne’s record straight in some way, or that establishes a written record that, as Kathleen Lynch puts it, “promised to represent the

self after death.”<sup>92</sup> I propose that the *Devotions*, a text highly concerned with interpretation of the material world at “this minute” through spiritual means, looks forward to an afterlife in which interpretation is no longer necessary. But it does so as a reminder to both writer and reader that the duty of self-examination *now*, on earth, requires a careful training of the senses to extract spiritual meaning from material experience, serving as a sensory rehearsal for death through interpretive practice. For Donne, making “victorious use of Gods corrections” on earth means striving *toward* spiritual sensation—getting as close as possible to a perfect understanding of the material world through the spiritual.

The first section of this chapter explored the ways in which seventeenth-century Protestants (Donne included) read their material surroundings for signs of divine truth or intention. The material world was thought to provide the sensory evidence needed to construct a reading of the spiritual order that governs it. In the discussion of spiritual senses above, though, I suggest that for Donne, a correct reading of the material world comes from understanding the material as it relates to the spiritual. This position essentially reorders the knowing process: knowledge of God informs knowledge of the created world that reflects its creator. The two ideas arrive at what seems an impasse of human (flawed) understanding: man does not have access to God’s plan, so he must read signs of it in the natural, created world; however, man cannot fully understand the

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<sup>92</sup> Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 71. Brooke Conti reads the text as a more personal preparation for death: she highlights Donne’s strongly asserted orthodoxy in the *Devotions* and explores the text as an attempt to “counter the religious doubts that appear to have assailed him on what he expected would be his deathbed” (148). See Conti, “Donne, Doubt, and the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *John Donne Journal* 22 (2003): 145-64.



material world until he sees God and thus sees material things “as they are” (which only happens through glorification in death). For Donne, this epistemological challenge is less an impasse than a paradox from which a productive, sustained practice of spiritual interpretation emerges. The *Devotions* demonstrates that an understanding of self and God on earth requires a reciprocal relationship between the material and the spiritual: the material world is read to understand spiritual truth, but one can only come to an understanding of the material world (things “as they are”) in light of spiritual knowledge. The text simultaneously reads the soul through the body and the body through the soul. Through such practice, intellectual mastery is not the end result (nor is it the goal). Donne’s investigative process in the *Devotions* may not bring writer or reader to fully understand materiality or spirituality, but rather to find truth in acknowledging the relationship between the two.

In the *Devotions*, Donne seems to recognize the experience of physical pain as a potential barrier to man’s ability to discern spiritual truth from the material world. If the material world is, in fact, a readable reflection of divine order, the subjective experience of the human body makes that reading especially difficult. Milton’s “human face divine” is a rather idealistic picture of man made in God’s image: when the body does unexpected things, and especially when its organs and systems begin to fail, it is hard to see order within it. Sickness further reveals the problem that arises from relying on the material world for tangible evidence and signs of truth. If the signs are there, they are often obscure—and always fleeting. Donne’s subjective account of sudden physical illness sits uncomfortably alongside contemporary attempts at reading material circumstances as they occur *outside* of the self. How might Donne’s susceptibility to

illness be read by a nonconformist pamphleteer, for example, or by anyone with a particular grudge against the Dean of St. Paul's or his family? How can one know whether to read a sudden death or "monstrous" birth as damning punishment for sinfulness or as a spiritual test or trial of the faithful?<sup>93</sup> While the material experiences of others might initially seem straightforward (according to one's own perspective of the situation), personal physical hardship disorients one's understanding of the material world and challenges even the most steadfast believer's confidence in reading the signs. Or, as Donne demonstrates in the *Devotions*, personal distress raises the stakes of sign-reading and exposes the difficulty of processing physical evidence.

The first station of the *Devotions* proposes and then dismantles the idea that the physical body, in its material context, can be readily understood through an empirical collection of sensory data. In the first meditation and expostulation, Donne appears to set up a contrast between knowable body and unknowable soul. He expresses the problem of understanding the soul in physical terms that highlight the soul's *lack* of materiality (and thus inability to be discerned). After a meditation that laments the body's subjection to the torments of "sodaine shakings," "flashes," and "darkenings of his senses" that serve as "pre-apprehensions and presages" of illness (and augment the pain of the disease), the

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<sup>93</sup> Moreover, it seems likely that such occurrences and tragedies did not provoke the same degree of interpretive and judgmental force outside of the public arena and the realm of pamphlet warfare. In contrast to the sensationalized birth abnormalities discussed in Crawford's *Marvelous Protestantism*, we might look, for example, at Margaret Hoby's more personal encounter, recorded in her diary on August 26, 1601: "this day, in the afternone, I had had a child brought to [me] that...had no fundament, and had no passage for excrementes but att the Mouth: I was earnestly intreated to Cutt the place to se if any passhage Could be made, but, although I Cutt deepe and searched, there was none to be found" (161). Hoby does not comment further on the child, but it appears that she approached the situation practically and surgically, rather than fearfully and interpretively. See *The Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599-1605*, ed. Joanna Moody (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1998). Lena Cowen Orlin similarly contrasts the "poignancy of Hoby's intimate contact with personal tragedy" with the way such tragedies were treated as "wonders" in public literature (256). See Orlin, "Chronicles of Private Life," *Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500-1600*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 241-264.

expostulation expresses a longing to feel such sensory warnings of sin in the soul (7-8).

“Why,” Donne asks,

is not my *soule*, as sensible as my *body*? Why hath not my *soule* these apprehensions, these presages, these changes, those antidates, those jealousies, those suspicions of a *sinne*, as well as my body of a *sicknes*? why is there not always a *pulse* in my *Soule*, to beat at the approach of a tentation to *sinne*? why are there not alwayes *waters* in mine eyes, to testifie my spiritual sicknes? (8)

When applied to the soul, warning signs of sickness appear useful: one might recognize a particular action or thought as sinful and thus avoid committing it altogether. Instead, the soul, immaterial and incapable of producing tangible signs of its condition, wanders blindly into spiritual sickness.

But the expostulation develops a rather different perspective. Donne’s expostulations are tricky: this middle step in each devotion is that in which the most complex analytical “work” is being performed.<sup>94</sup> Expostulations feature a speaker who argues with scripture, his body, his soul, and God himself—and these debates typically result in some sort of interpretive transformation or correction. In the first expostulation, the neat dichotomy between a material body that experiences sensory evidence of its

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<sup>94</sup> As Janel Mueller points out, each expostulation faces the difficult task of moving from meditation (in which decay and disorder feature prominently) to the calm “spiritual vision and surrender” of Donne’s prayers (4). Brooke Conti recognizes the expostulations as the “emotional center” of the *Devotions* (152), while Gary Kuchar points out that the movement from meditation to expostulation is one from “overly self-referential and solipsistic” logic to that which is more ambitiously “sacramental and dialogic” (169). With attention to the style of Donne’s prose, Joan Webber points out the questioning sentence structure of the expostulations and identifies “murmuring” as the section’s “key word” (193). Analytically, emotionally, linguistically, and structurally, the expostulations are combative and transformative. See Mueller, “The Exegesis of Experience: Dean Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67 (1968): 1-19; Conti, “Donne, Doubt, and the *Devotions*”; Kuchar, *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2005); Webber, *Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963). The expostulations are also spaces in which Donne frequently cites and wrestles with Scripture, contributing to the exegetical style several scholars have pointed to in arguing for an influence of a distinctly Protestant meditative tradition on Donne’s text: see Mueller, and on Donne’s Protestant vs. Catholic influences in general, Narveson, “The Devotion,” *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 308-317.

condition and an immaterial soul that cannot know its own state does not quite hold up in the face of Donne's inquiry. As Donne begins to describe the fate of his unsensing soul slipping into sin, he immediately challenges its immateriality with somatic imagery: "I run, I flie into the ways of tentation, which I might shun; nay, I break into houses, wher the plague is" (8-9). The force of such a startling image (which, as Targoff notes, was even more startling for the contemporary reader for whom the plague was an imminent threat<sup>95</sup>) is amplified by the forceful entry of the language of embodiment. At the precise moment in which Donne attempts to distinguish his intangible soul from his tangible body, a corporeal image of the experience of sin manifests the difficulty, for Donne, of imagining the soul divorced from its physical expression. The passage continues in a dizzying account of the development of spiritual sickness that both denies and attests to the soul's sensory experience:

I fall sick of *Sin*, and am bedded and bedrid, buried and putrified in the practice of *Sin*, and all this while have no presage, no pulse, no sense of my *sickness*; O heighth, O depth of misery, where the first *Symptome* of the sicknes is Hell, & where I never see the fever of lust, of envy, of ambition, by any other light, then the darkness and horror of *Hell* it self (9)

Clearly aligning sinfulness with sickness, the passage collapses the distinction between bodily and spiritual experience even as it ostensibly seeks to voice that distinction: the soul's inability to sense material warning signs of sinfulness paradoxically leaves the sinner in the material experience of being "bedded and bedrid, buried and putrified." More subtly, the patient's claim to have "no presage, no pulse, no sense of my sickness" is undermined by the pulsing beat of the line's repetition and alliteration. These puzzling lamentations bring the speaker to a sharp turn in the expostulation's analytical thrust

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<sup>95</sup> Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 140.

(signaled, as it often is in this text, by the simple word—mid-sentence—“but”) in which the argument is corrected: “but...Thou hast imprinted a *pulse* in our *Soule*, but we do not examine it; a voice in our conscience, but we do not hearken unto it” (9). Donne’s somatic imagining of the soul leads to an understanding of the conscience as something that can be *heard* through careful listening and the soul as something that can be *felt* through self-examination. As readers, we hear and feel Donne’s spiritual experience in the language and rhythm of his writing, which prepares us to accept his reinterpretation of the soul.

The remaining segment of this first expostulation continues to situate the soul within the realm of material experience by presenting it as vulnerable to manipulation through physical means. The “pulse” in the soul goes unnoticed not because we are incapable of feeling it, but because “[w]e talk it out, we jest it out, we drinke it out, we sleepe it out” (9). When sensory experience is attuned solely to the body’s needs or desires (i.e. when one has not trained one’s “spiritual senses”), the soul suffers; actions of the body, it seems, are capable of influencing the soul.<sup>96</sup> As the text moves forward, not just (bodily) man but God is imagined to engage in a physical interaction with the soul, and God’s influence is strikingly direct. Through language that echoes Herbert’s comparison of the soul to a watch that must be wound in “The Church-Porch,” Donne

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<sup>96</sup> This understanding of direct body-soul influence is, of course, not unique to Donne. Despite emerging challenges to the Galenic model of health and bodily function, humoral theory still saturated medical thought at the time of Donne’s illness (which is evident from the descriptions of his medical treatments in the *Devotions*). Humoral theory, as Nancy Selleck explains, “posits a profound connection and reciprocity between body and soul” (152). See Selleck, “Donne’s Body,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 41 (2001): 149-74 on the implications of humoralism for the sense of selfhood Donne’s writing exhibits. On humoral theory and selfhood more generally, see Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

attests to man's ability to sense God through his conscience by asserting the absurdity of an alternative inability: "But will *God* pretend to make a *Watch*," Donne asks, "and leave out the *springe*?...or wil God make a *springe*, and not *wind* it up?" (9). Here, Donne's image conceptualizes the soul as something tangible (a watch spring wound by God), but it also reverses the body-soul influence formula observed above. When man functions properly, the movement of the soul (spring) should influence the function of the body (watch). The expostulation leaves the reader with a more assured understanding of the workings of the soul than those of the body: what sort of watch does not respond to its ticking parts?

As the first expostulation destabilizes the proposed dichotomy between knowable body and unknowable soul, it also reminds us that the body's capacity to sense its sickness in the first meditation did not necessarily produce a reading of its state that was usable. The "apprehensions" and "presages" Donne wishes for his soul in the expostulation are only conceived as useful when they are warnings of sin. In the meditation (and in the context of the body's illness), they are associated with horror and helplessness: it is a "multiplied misery" that "we die, and cannot enjoy death, because we die in this torment of sicknes; we are tormented with sicknes, & cannot stay till the torment come, but pre-apprehensions and presages, prophecy those torments, which induce that *death* before either come" (7). Apprehension leads to melancholy, considered in the period a form of physical malady that could enhance illness. As addressed earlier in this chapter, the first meditation opens with an assertion that man, in his materiality, is "variable," and *instantly* variable. Donne's statement that "this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute" certainly, as many critics have pointed out, emphasizes the suddenness of

sickness and the vulnerability of the body to abrupt change. But there is an added layer of horror that Donne's language expresses here: in drawing our attention to the verb "to be" through his alternating conjugations (the speaker *was* well but now *is* ill, all in the same moment), Donne also highlights the connection between his bodily state and his "being" or sense of self. To be able to move from self-definition as "well" to "ill" in an instant is a shock to the system: Donne's idea of human selfhood as embodied selfhood translates a blow to the body as a blow to one's identity. And while the expostulation suggests that careful examination of the soul might be productive in avoiding sin, careful attention to the body seems futile in the meditation. For all man's effort to regulate the body through study, measurement, and diet—"We study *health*, and we deliberate upon our *meats*, and *drink*, and *Ayre*, and *exercises*, and we hew, and polish every stone, that goes to that building"—we cannot prevent the fact that "in a minute a Cannon batters all, overthrowes all, demolishes all" (7). Before the most diligent eyes of observation, the body transforms unexpectedly, baffling our attempts to define and control it.

Even more threatening to the stability of an embodied selfhood is the recognition that physical ailment (and eventually, death) is self-inflicted. If man is miserable because he is susceptible to disease and death, he is more so because he might have been immortal—might have "blowen" the "*beam of Immortalitie*" put into him by God "into a *flame*"; instead, man "blew it out, by our first sinne" (7). Man's complicity in his own illness registers repeatedly in Donne's text and features most prominently in his tenth meditation, in which the disease has been found to "steale on insensibly," giving no further signs as to what the illness might be and how it might be treated (51). Donne imagines the disease as a conspiracy within his body: "[T]he *pulse*, the *urine*, the *sweat*,

all have sworn to say *nothing*, to give no *Indication* of any dangerous *sickness*” (52). It is as if the patient’s body has turned against the patient’s will to assist the disease, threatening to dissociate body from self. For Jonathan Sawday, Donne’s “treasonable body” is “bound within a newly fashioned dualistic universe in which ‘it’ had begun to exist as distinct from ‘we’”—the body (in Donne’s time and in his text), Sawday argues, “worked according to its own rules,” and these rules were unknown to the subject.<sup>97</sup> In Sawday’s account, Donne finds his diseased body to be “a place of treachery,” not merely escaping Donne’s understanding but deliberately resisting it.<sup>98</sup>

It is important to note, though, that the views of the body upon which Sawday develops his argument are all presented in Donne’s meditations—his sudden, visceral reactions to the experience of his disease that are entrenched in the material world. While such reactions certainly point to “the new instability which had come to surround the body,”<sup>99</sup> Donne spends the bulk of his *Devotions* laboriously confronting and qualifying those views, correcting and reinterpreting his fear of treachery within his body to find, instead—and quite surprisingly—God’s grace. In the tenth station, for example, Donne’s concern with his body’s secrecy in the meditation serves as a reminder of the danger of secret or suppressed sinfulness in the expostulation. Donne recognizes that God is able to search hearts and see all sins within them, but that God “lovest better” to learn of man’s sins by confession (54). Confession, whether bodily or spiritual, is purgative:

As *Phisicke* works so, it drawes the *peccant humour* to it selfe, that when it is gathered together, the weight of it selfe may carry that humour away, so thy *Spirit*

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<sup>97</sup> Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned*, 35-36. See ch. 2, “The Renaissance Body: From colonization to invention” (16-38) for Sawday’s broader examination of Renaissance ideas about the body and about the extent to which it might be “mastered” through scientific study.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



returns to my *Memory* my former sinnes, that being so recollected, they may powre out themselves by *Confession*. (54)

The analogy between secrecy within the body and secrecy within the soul is a productive reminder to the patient of the importance of opening one's heart to God and confessing one's sins. Indeed, this emphasis on confession and exposure resurfaces in station thirteen, in which Donne compares the "spots" or marks of disease that appear on his body to the marks of sin on his soul: "the *spotts* that thou hatest," Donne acknowledges in the expostulation, "are the *spotts* that we hide" (69). But by presenting the body's supposed secrecy in light of its spiritual counterpart (unconfessed sin), the passage above also mitigates the physical threat through its metaphorical effect. The disease is no longer conspiratorial, but rather uncontained, or disorganized, like sin in an unexamined soul.<sup>100</sup> Due to the conflation of earthly physician and heavenly healer (Christ) throughout the *Devotions*, the comparison of "physicke" to "spirit" also proposes that God's grace, which enables and maintains both healers, might have ultimate control over both "peccant humours" and suppressed sins. Moreover, the analogy highlights a system of (divine?) order that will be inevitably reinforced: the humour, gathered "to it selfe," is expelled by its own weight, while sin, recollected, pours itself out.

Through writing his *Devotions*, Donne, it seems, finds order in disorder. In *Divine Subjection: The Rhetoric of Sacramental Devotion in Early Modern England* (2005), Gary Kuchar notes that Donne, seeking to read and communicate his experience of illness, looks for God "in the most chaotic of places: the body's organs and fluids."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> In his commentary on the *Devotions*, Anthony Raspa notes that isolation and containment were critical to the process of medical purgation of an overabundant humour. The physician had to collect the particular disruptive humor "and no other, or risk endangering the health of the purged person by reducing his healthy quantity of another humour" (154).

<sup>101</sup> Kuchar, *Divine Subjection*, 153.

Kuchar argues that Donne transforms his incomprehensible body into a source through which he can come to know God through the sacramental power of language. With Kuchar, I find that Donne's text does not simply reflect, but rather "registers and *responds to*" a growing sense of the body's incoherence that arose amidst scientific investigation of the body and new medical practices in the seventeenth century.<sup>102</sup> But while Kuchar explores language as a means through which Donne is able to "demystify" the body,<sup>103</sup> I propose that it is the body's mystery that encourages and enables Donne to find God within it. Faced with mysteries of material existence, Donne is reminded of the mysteries of his faith and is presented with an opportunity for reflection upon the spiritual world. Finding grace or divine order within the disordered sick body does not reveal to the writer or reader of the *Devotions* how the body works. Rather, the text explores how God works within the body, or how the material and spiritual worlds correspond. A mystery alone might baffle the mind; two analogous mysteries produce Donne's point of entry for strengthening his understanding of both through sustained examination—which leads to comfort and assurance rather than demystification.

In the discussion of Donne's first devotional station above, I explored the interpretive shift or correction that emerges through the move from meditation to expostulation. We might return to that station to look more closely at the way Donne's tripartite structure in the *Devotions* expresses the shift from material experience, to corresponding spiritual experience, to better (but incomplete) understanding of both. If reinterpretation is a product of expostulation, what is the role of prayer? Returning to the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 152, my emphasis.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 153.

first station (which pits physical sensation against spiritual sensation), we see that Donne's first meditation and expostulation present us with an inverse relationship between the sensitive faculties of body and soul. The body cannot help but sense its decline into sickness but also cannot seem to control its fall, while the soul has potential to prevent spiritual sickness (sin) but is not aware of its warning signs. The material experience of the body has led the speaker to a better understanding of the soul: the body's hypersensitivity to disease points out the relative imperceptibility of sin for the soul, which teaches the speaker that he must develop a stronger spiritual self-awareness. It is man's material self-obsession that overshadows the soul's capacity for sensation. We "jest," "drink," and "sleep" out the voice of conscience. By highlighting the connection between physical and spiritual suffering, the expostulation also identifies sin as a cause for pain and illness in the material world. The transition from meditation to expostulation gives the speaker space and perspective to consider what the body's pains might signify. In her illuminating study of Donne's style in *Contrary Music* (1963), Joan Webber describes the transitions of Donne's devotional stations as shifts in conceptual and temporal framework.<sup>104</sup> The body, Webber explains, is always at the center of the meditations' concerns, and man is considered solely within his natural environment: Donne speaks as a man who is self-aware, but only to the extent that he can compare himself to other animals and his natural surroundings. In Webber's formulation, the expostulations move man (and his experience) into a Christian frame of reference, in which "man's misery and that of the world are given a cause...and a cure."<sup>105</sup> Sin is

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<sup>104</sup> Webber, *Contrary Music*, ch. 7.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

identified as the root of man's physical suffering, and man's experience within a world bound by time is shown to have "eternal significance."<sup>106</sup> Physical suffering is reinterpreted as the result of sin, which may not lessen the pain itself, but mitigates the misery by exposing it as God's correction, which is just.

The language of the first expostulation, though, suggests not only a significance of bodily signs but a convergence of the sign and the thing it signifies. In using physical imagery and the language of embodiment to describe the soul's experience of sin, the expostulation establishes a causal link between man's spiritual and bodily state as well as a blurring of boundaries between the two. The prayer solidifies this convergence. Through a comparison of the prose style of invocations in the Book of Common Prayer with Donne's style in his prayers, Webber suggests that the prayers of the *Devotions*, in praising God as merciful, find "relief" and "stability" in the "ordered and immediate discipline of the Anglican church."<sup>107</sup> The prayers, Webber argues, resolve the paradoxes and problems of the meditations and expostulations through the metaphor of translation. Using the seventh station as an example, she demonstrates that physical suffering is reinterpreted as God's "correction" in the expostulations, then translated into God's "mercy" in the prayers.<sup>108</sup> Such paradoxes (suffering is merciful, for example) are, as Webber points out, central to Donne's religion (and to Christianity in general). Webber's sense that these "resolved" paradoxes in the prayers bring "relief" and "stability" to the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 196. Brooke Conti also reads submission to Anglican orthodoxy in the *Devotions* in *Confessions of Faith in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), though she emphasizes the author's anxiety to conform to the state church for reasons of public and spiritual identity rather than the comfort such structures might have provided for the patient-speaker of the text. See ch. 2, "Conversion and Confession in Donne's Prose," 50-73.

<sup>108</sup> Webber, *Contrary Music*, 199-200.

text, though, provokes further consideration of what, specifically, interpretation (or “translation”) has achieved for the body and where the stability is coming from. As physical experience works, in the expostulation, to teach both speaker and reader about the soul, the new understanding of the soul returns, in the first prayer, to clarify the meditation’s initial observations of the body. If physical signs of illness are understood as God’s correction, they are not simply reinterpreted as beneficial (and therefore merciful) pain. Instead, they become sensory experiences through which God communicates with man. In Donne’s first prayer, in which the languages of physical and spiritual suffering have merged, the patient recognizes that “Thy voice received, in the beginning *of a sickness, of a sinne*, is true health” (10, my emphasis). God’s voice is heard through physical and spiritual symptoms. Physical experiences are no longer held in contrast to spiritual experiences—man (body and soul), Donne’s language suggests, simply has variously *interpretable* experiences. In such a view, the warning signs of physical illness—so agonizing in the meditation—are welcome occasions for contemplating the physical-spiritual convergence, and thus for examining the self in relation to God.

“[E]nable me by thy grace,” Donne prays,

to looke forward to mine end, and to look backward to, to the consideration of thy mercies afforded mee from the beginning; that so by that practise of considering thy mercy...I may come to a holy consideration of thy mercy, in the beginning of all my actions here. (10)

The process of spiritual self-examination, of moving from physical pain experienced as misery to that experienced as mercy, brings the patient to “true health.” The prayers are not quite “stable”—each completes one station of the *Devotions*, only to confront the reader with a new physical trial in the proceeding meditation. But a sense of stability does emerge in the acknowledgment of a correspondence and convergence between the

material and spiritual worlds and in the patient's acceptance of physical unpredictability as an occasion for exploring it. If the prayers, then, acknowledge and accept paradoxes of belief, they are also paradoxical in their function: in the prayers, questions about body, soul, and self raised in the meditations and expostulations both are and are not settled. That is, they are not necessarily solved or answered, but they appear approachable through interpretive practice, made possible through God's "writing" on the body or in the natural world.

We might revisit what it means for Donne, late in the *Devotions*, to identify his body as "discernible" by looking at the text's reciprocal reading of body and soul (i.e. reading both the spiritual through the material and the material through the spiritual) in another way—by considering the difference between body-as-data and body-as-text, or between truth and representation. Such an approach highlights the place of Donne's study of the sick body within the broader context of increased scientific and philosophical attention to the body in the early modern period. Even if Donne's text never fully "demystifies" his physical condition, the text begins with and is fueled throughout by an effort to more fully understand the way in which a puzzling component of material experience fits into the larger (divine) order. The vulnerable, unpredictable body that brought Donne through the experience of sudden illness and unexpected recovery produces the "emergent occasions" of his *Devotions*: whatever else the text achieves, it is primarily a series of spiritual analyses of physical conditions. The far reach of Donne's analogies have brought a number of readers to identify the body as a secondary concern of the text—as a vehicle through which Donne explores more pressing or complex concerns such as the

political “body” of the state or the author’s public identity.<sup>109</sup> While such readings are indispensable for illuminating the rich political, social, and religious contexts for Donne’s metaphors, they downplay the significance of the body itself as a subject of inquiry. It is important to recognize the body’s own capacity to compel the writing and investigative processes, especially since Donne was certainly not alone in devoting such energy and urgency to the spiritually-influenced study of the human body during the period. What does Donne’s investigation of his own body have in common with the anatomical study of another person? How does Donne’s approach depart from such empirical investigations? What sorts of “truths” can be found in the body’s materials?

As a site for observation and analysis, the body both provides and withholds objective, material “evidence” of self and experience. In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry discusses the body’s relationship to certainty and observable knowledge. She posits that “at particular moments when there is within a society a crisis of belief...the sheer material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty.’”<sup>110</sup> Scarry recognizes, for example, that in war, the intangible, uncertain construct of “winning” becomes more real when the “compelling reality” of injured or dead bodies lends the notion its substance or certainty.<sup>111</sup> Injured bodies can be seen, touched, counted; winning cannot. Scarry’s theory may shed light on the physicality of spiritual

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<sup>109</sup> Most recently, Kathleen Lynch has argued that Donne is more concerned with the “threatened health” of the state than with that of Donne himself (*Protestant Autobiography*, 60). Brooke Conti claims that Donne is most interested in “reassert[ing] his orthodoxy in order to counter the religious doubts that appear to have assailed him on what he expected would be his deathbed” (“Donne, Doubt, and the *Devotions*,” 148). Conti returns to the issue of Donne’s allegiance to the Church of England in *Confessions of Faith*, ch. 2.

<sup>110</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

autobiography discussed earlier in this chapter. Understanding the body as a potential site for examining divine knowledge amidst seventeenth-century debates in religious ideology and practice, a writer might seek to know God directly by reading the elusive, intangible soul through the “realness” of the body. It is the tangible “fact” of physical condition that prompts Ann Venn’s desire to see inside her heart for material evidence of grace or sinfulness—theological constructs that are difficult to imagine with precision. But what happens when the body itself is in crisis? When a body is felt to be at every moment on the brink of disaster and dissipation—of melting, as Donne suggests, like snow? Does the body’s vulnerability complicate its capacity for producing evidence or “material factualness” from which to borrow?

Nowhere in the *Devotions* does Donne present the body as a collection of evidence to be read for truth more explicitly than in his ninth meditation. The patient’s disease has progressed, and the physician has assembled a team of medical professionals to assist in diagnosis and treatment. The sick Donne submits himself to their scrutiny with a startling image of self-exposure: “They have seene me, and heard me, arraign’d mee in these fetters, and receiv’d the *evidence*; I have cut up mine own *Anatomy*, dissected myself, and they are gon to *read* upon me” (45-46). The doctors will produce a “reading” of the state of Donne’s illness from the physical appearance of his body and the symptoms he has reported. In this passage, though, Donne imagines himself as a very specific sort of body-as-text: the dissected body on an anatomy table. In doing so, Donne creates a complicated image that associates not only text with body, but also reader with anatomist and reading a text with the anatomical study of a dissected body. The image holds marked significance within what Jonathan Sawday has termed the Renaissance



“culture of dissection.”<sup>112</sup> Sawday notes that an “urge to particularize” marked scientific endeavor during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; this urge extended into social, cultural, and literary practices as well.<sup>113</sup> At the center of this culture of dissection was the anatomized human body, cut into pieces for the empirical collection of information that would help reveal its mysteries. The 1543 publication of Vesalius’s *De humani corporis fabrica* opened a period of anatomical discovery motivated as much by religious as scientific impulse. The idea was that as the human body expressed the divine, man might map out divine mysteries within the body’s interior.<sup>114</sup> God is inaccessible; the body, on the other hand, can be opened, exposed, peered into, rooted through, observed. Empirical data can then be ordered into knowledge.

Donne’s image of his “own *Anatomy*” destabilizes this notion of the body as evidence even as it invokes it. His vision of self-dissection imagines a body of “evidence” that might reveal the truth of his disease to his physicians and suggest remedies. But how does one perform one’s *own* dissection? The image is unsettling first because of the tension between dead body (implied by dissection) and living body (Donne, the patient) that it contains. If the body’s physical interior was thought to contain observable evidence as to how it functions—functions physically and spiritually, that is, as the two were intertwined—it is evidence that is *empirically* accessible only through the opening of a corpse. Donne’s image of an (impossible) self-anatomy thus carries with it a degree of irony as it voices a complex fantasy: that of gaining access to the interior of

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<sup>112</sup> Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned*, especially ch. 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>114</sup> Sawday draws the comparison between mapping the body and geographical exploration, suggesting that for seventeenth-century natural philosophers, the body was “territory, an (as yet) undiscovered country” (23).

another living person (allowing the physicians to see Donne's interior), along with that of the ability to demonstrate one's interior *experience* directly to another (free from the difficulties of expression and communication).

Donne's understanding of the body and, specifically, the sick body, though, adds another layer of tension to his anatomical image. That tension might be explored in the context of what seventeenth-century anatomists thought dissection could achieve. In *Renaissance Fictions of Anatomy* (1985), Devon Hodges explains that the primary ambition of Vesalius and his followers in revolutionizing anatomical practice was to cut through representations of the body in words and books to study the thing itself. Public dissections in London were traditionally conducted through a curious dissociation of theory and practice. Barber-surgeons performed the cutting, while a more learned physician lectured on the cadaver's structures from a distance.<sup>115</sup> As Hillary Nunn and others have pointed out, these dissections "demonstrated rather than explored the corpse," as the lecturing physicians typically relied on the texts of Galen or other ancient medical authorities, while the surgeon used the body merely as a "visual aid."<sup>116</sup> Calling presiding physicians "jackdaws aloft in their high chair, with egregious arrogance croaking things they have never investigated," and the barber-surgeons "ignorant," Vesalius took on both roles himself.<sup>117</sup> His goal was to further empiricize dissection—to rely less on authoritative texts and more on the authority of what is found in the body itself. The

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<sup>115</sup> Devon Hodges, *Renaissance Fictions of Anatomy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985).

<sup>116</sup> Hillary Nunn, *Staging Anatomies: Dissection and Spectacle in Early Stuart Tragedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

effort was fueled, as Hodges points out, by a belief that such an approach would “negate false representations of reality and present the unadorned truth.”<sup>118</sup>

Vesalius’s views of anatomical study sit comfortably with the epistemological method of Donne’s *Devotions* in a number of ways. First, both believed in a system of correspondence that brought them to seek divine order within the human body. Second, both operate by personal, sensory experience. Vesalius insists on performing his own dissections, discovering (and demonstrating) “truths” about the body as he examines them; Donne structures his investigations around a set of twenty-three personal observations of his experience of illness that he can proceed to interpret. Donne relies heavily on the authoritative text of Scripture and on the work of various theologians, but he does so as an aid for interpreting the data he has collected. One cannot imagine, though, that Donne would expect bodily dissection (actual or metaphorical) to provide a way of getting at “unadorned truth,” free from representation. The body, as God’s book, as the soul’s book—as effigy—is always representational. Donne’s physicians have “receiv’d the *evidence*” and will now “*read upon*” him, but in suggesting that what the physicians will produce is, in fact, a “reading” of his condition (an interpretation, not a mystery revealed), Donne reminds his reader that the body can be read, but never fully *known* in the material world.

In Donne’s living anatomy, part of the difficulty in “reading” his condition lies in the body’s state of disorderly illness. With the body’s complexity in mind, Donne seems to doubt his physicians’ success in using his “anatomy” to pinpoint and cure his disease in the ninth meditation. He knows that “ruine and destruction” are “manifold, and

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<sup>118</sup> Hodges, 3.

perplexed” and that illnesses are “infinite” (46). The meditation presents the body of knowledge of disease as a cancerous growth itself: we discover new illnesses so quickly that there are more varieties of sickness and fever to which man is subject than medical practitioners can name. Donne’s anxiety is palpable: “[H]ow intricate a work then have they,” he muses, “who are gone to consult, which of these sicknesses mine is, and then which of these fevers, and then what it would do, and then how it would be counterminde” (46). Sickness presents an epistemological crisis. If disease defies our attempts at naming and categorizing, how can we seek to understand and manage it?

Later in the text, though, Donne clarifies his skepticism toward anatomical study by exposing its fundamental insufficiency for understanding the experience of man—a being in constant flux, and a being that is both body *and* soul. In station twenty-two, Donne’s disease has subsided, and his physicians “consider the root and occasion, the embers, and coales, and fuell of the disease,” seeking finally to eliminate the cause of illness and ensure future health. Donne, again, doubts. First considering physical existence alone in the meditation, Donne calls his body a “ruinous...farme” that requires “continuall labour” to maintain it:

Neither is our *labour* at an end, when wee have cut downe some *weed*, as soon as it sprung up, corrected some *violent* and dangerous *accident* of a *disease*, which would have destroyed *speedily*; nor when wee have pulled up that *weed*, from the very *root*, recovered *entirely* and *soundly*, from that *particular disease*; but the whole *ground* is of an *ill nature*, the whole soile *ill disposed*; there are inclinations, there is a propensnesse to *diseases* in the *body*, out of which without any other *disorder*, *diseases* will grow. (116)

At this point in the *Devotions*, Donne has repeatedly asserted man’s susceptibility to change and decline and the fleeting nature of the material world. Here, we are reminded that the condition of Donne’s body at “this minute” will not be its condition at another,

and that while a study of that body in its current state may enable the physician to pluck the root of this particular disease, such practice cannot foresee what will happen to the body in the future.<sup>119</sup> Donne's awareness of *flux* as a defining feature of man's state on earth will resurface in a 1627 sermon as what contrasts man from God: man lives in a "continuall declination into a not being, because he is in continuall change, and mutation," while "onely the name of God is *I am*" (*Sermons* 8:145). Even if Donne's physicians observe his body over the period of time of his illness, the data they receive is like a set of still images captured of an action or event—and of one event in a series of events.

More importantly, the physician is working with "soile" that is of an "ill nature," or a body that can never truly be healed on earth. As Donne closes his meditation and moves to expostulation, he recognizes that "[t]o cure the *sharpe accidents of diseases*, is a great worke; to cure the *disease it selfe*, is a greater; but to cure the *body*, the *root*, the *occasion of diseases*, is a worke reserved for the great *Physician*"—God (117-18). The reason it is so difficult for the earthly physician to identify the "root" and "occasion" of sickness is that "*sinne* is the *root*, and the *fuell* of all *sickness*": the body's symptoms and conditions reflect or "effigiate" the sins within, but only in representation. In acknowledging this limitation, Donne's account not only doubts his own physicians' capacities for establishing a cure; it also poses an epistemological challenge to the claims of medical anatomical study. "[W]hat am I put to," Donne asks, "when I am put to *consider*, and *put off*, the *root*, the *fuell*, the *occasion* of my *sickness*? What *Hypocrates*,

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<sup>119</sup> Flux is, in fact, one of the defining features of a humoral theory of the body: influenced by what is taken in and expelled, the body is constantly changing according to its context. See Nancy Selleck's important discussion of the "material embeddedness of self and surround" suggested by humoral theory in "Donne's Body," esp. 150-53.

what *Galen*, could shew mee that in my *body*? It lies deeper than so; it lies in my *soule*” (118). As the soul is inaccessible to the earthly physician or anatomist, so is the true root of sickness. But Donne obscures this “root” even further, because as the passage continues, sin is found in a place even “deeper” than the soul. Sin (both Donne’s particular sins and man’s original sin) is in the body-soul union that makes a man:

that which destroys *body & soule*, is in *neither*, but in *both together*; It is in the *union* of the *body* and *soule*; and, O my *God*, could I *prevent* that, or can I *dissolve* that? The *root*, and the *fuell* of my *sickness*, is my *sinne*, my *actuall sinne*; but even that *sinne* hath another *root*, another *fuell*, *original sinne*; and can I *devest* that? (118)

Donne’s frequent references to the “root,” “fuell,” and “occasion” of sickness in the meditation and expostulation work to destabilize those terms and transform their meaning. The station’s initial announcement that the physicians consider these aspects of the disease and “seek to purge or correct” them comes to reflect a rather futile endeavor as “root,” “fuell,” and “occasion” grow more strongly associated with the spiritual cause of sin, over which the earthly physician has no medical control. Sin also defies man’s epistemological control. Donne’s attempt at self-demonstration in cutting up his “own *Anatomy*” fails to expose the true cause of his illness: it cannot be revealed, or “devest[ed],” no matter how thoroughly the body is examined. The repetition in Donne’s interrogative structure and sound (“could I prevent that...can I devest that?”) reinforces the limitations of man’s control over the body—both in curing it and in knowing how it works.

But what the text offers is not, ultimately, a sense of epistemological frustration concerning the gap between truth and representation. That gap, of course, persists, but in his *Devotions*, Donne transforms fundamental human uncertainty from a problem into an

opportunity for spiritual growth. It is at the close of the twenty-second expostulation that Donne calls his body a “discernible” means through which God “effigiate[s]” Donne’s soul to him, but it is important to note that this effigy does not dispel the obscurity of the “root” of sickness/sin addressed above. In his most explicit challenge to the claims of empirical anatomical practice, Donne asserts that “no *Anatomist* can say, in dissecting a *body*, here lay the *coale*, the *fuell*, the *occasion* of all *bodily diseases*”—the anatomist is looking for sensory, empirical evidence, but the “root” is something intangible, stemming from the union of body and soul that makes man in the first place, and makes him sinful. The problem with anatomy, it seems, is objectivity: if the “unadorned truth” of the body’s physical condition lies in the correspondence between body and soul, both the body’s and the soul’s conditions must be examined simultaneously—a practice that can only be subjective. Donne explains:

And though no *Anatomist* can say, in dissecting a *body*, here lay the *coale*, the *fuell*, the *occasion* of all *bodily diseases*, but yet *a man* may have such a knowledge of his owne constitution, and bodily inclination to *diseases*, as that he may *prevent* his *danger* in a great part: so though wee cannot assigne the *place* of *originall sinne*, nor the *Nature* of it, so *exactly*, as of *actuell*, or by any diligence *devest* it, yet having *washed it* in the water of thy *Baptisme*, wee have not onely so cleansed it, that wee may the better look upon it, and *discerne* it, but so *weakened* it, that howsoever it may retain the *former nature*, it doth not retaine the *former force*, and though it may have the *same name*, it hath not the same *venome*. (119)

As he does so often in the *Devotions*, Donne here sets up a body to soul metaphor that quickly collapses to a point where the two become one. As the physical source of all disease cannot be pointed out in a dissected body, “so...wee cannot assigne the place of originall sin”; the echo of earlier language of “devest[ing],” however, reminds the reader that the search for the root of bodily disease *is* the search for the source of original sin. We should have both spiritual and physical disease in mind, then, when we approach

Donne's image of baptismal cleansing, which, importantly, not only spiritually cleanses but perceptually clarifies sin—so “that wee may the better *look upon* it” (my emphasis). Washing a mysterious object may not remove the mystery, but it may allow for it to be seen more clearly, and thus to more closely contemplate it and to come to the fullest *possible* comprehension of it. Donne's self-examination in the *Devotions* is, itself, a sort of baptismal cleansing. Washing away the film of physically- or earthly-oriented human perception by examining physical experience in light of spiritual knowledge allows for a fuller understanding of the body and materiality, which in turn brings greater spiritual knowledge. And once the physical condition is considered in its correspondence with the spiritual, sickness, like sin washed by baptism, is “weakned”—“howsoever it may retain the *former nature*, it doth not retain the *former force*, and though it may have the *same name*, it hath not the same *venome*.” Self-examination—of both body and soul—mitigates suffering and allows for growth and assurance.

### **Writing and Reading the *Devotions***

Donne recovered from his illness in early December 1623. On January 9, 1624, the first edition of the *Devotions* was entered into the Stationers' Register.<sup>120</sup> It is possible that such a close encounter with death put urgency into Donne's publication efforts and accounts in part for the quick appearance of the text in print. But why *this* text? Donne was generally averse to print publication and preferred to circulate his work in manuscript within close circles. The few works that were published with Donne's

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<sup>120</sup> Raspa's introduction to the *Devotions* provides a detailed overview of the text's publication history and circumstances. See especially xlv-liv.



authorization were done so at the request of patrons (the *Anniversary* poems, for example) or to serve a specific political or social function (*Pseudo-Martyr*, as well as several sermons). The *Devotions* marks the first (and only) time Donne published writing that was ostensibly and intensely personal.<sup>121</sup> In a letter to Sir Robert Ker written sometime between Donne's recovery and the text's printing, Donne explains that he used his time spent in recovery "to put the meditations had in my sickness, into some such order, as may minister some holy delight."<sup>122</sup> What sort of "holy delight" did Donne envision? Why did Donne think it was important to circulate this very intimate text to a larger public audience?

While we cannot know for sure Donne's answers to these questions, we can consider the experience of reading the *Devotions* and speculate as to what sort of spiritual function it might have served a contemporary Christian reader. The book proved to be quite popular, going through five editions within the first fifteen years of its publication (including a second edition in the first year). Often, narratives of personal experience, especially of experiences of physical and/or spiritual trial, serve as demonstrative reassurance of God's deliverance. The very position of the writer—recalling the experience of suffering after that suffering has ceased—is a testament that pain can be

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<sup>121</sup> The term "personal" should be clarified here. As Donne's readers have noted, *Devotions* reveals little about the author's life beyond the circumstances of the disease that serve as topics for each devotional station. However, as Kate Gartner Frost rightly explains in her chapter on Donne and autobiography in *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), early modern spiritual autobiography was rarely individualistic. If Donne's voice sounds more like a Christian "everyman" than a specific individual, it is most likely intentional and certainly not unusual: the writer sought to rise above individuality as a true imitator of Christ (38). I agree with Frost, but I would add that the *tone* of the text is intimately personal: Donne's reactions to and efforts to process or interpret his physical symptoms seem authentically anxious and urgent, as this chapter has demonstrated. On personal aspects of *Pseudo-Martyr*, which includes an autobiographical account of Donne's conversion, see Conti, *Confessions of Faith*, ch. 2.

<sup>122</sup> Cited in Raspa's introduction to *Devotions*, xvii.

survived, and that one might even emerge from the experience of pain with greater strength or clarity. The reader can take the writer's narrative as an example of both God's trials and grace, providing comfort that the reader is not alone in his or her suffering as well as hope that the suffering will soon pass. There is something different at play in Donne's *Devotions*, though. The reader might be comforted by learning of Donne's recovery, yet the narrative ends with an acknowledgment that recovery is not final—that relapse is not only possible, but probable. Physically, Donne suspects in his final meditation, there is “greater danger” in a relapse, while spiritually, relapsing into sin suggests that the patient “prefers sinne before grace, and Satan before God” (121, 125). While the expostulation determines that God's mercy is “infinite” and the prayer asks for that mercy to come again in the event of a relapse, the text is left open-ended and the patient vulnerable. The final station continues the cyclical structure of the preceding devotions, suggesting that closure and relief are not quite the “holy delight” that the book might bring to a reader.<sup>123</sup>

Instead, Donne's text is practical. It is not an example; it is an exercise—one in which both writer and reader may take part, and one that might be taken up again and again. The function of Donne's *Devotions*, I argue, is less exemplary (i.e. hear what I have survived and observe how I survived it) and more instructively participatory (i.e. I am struggling; join me as I work through the struggle). The first meditation opens abruptly and urgently—“this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute”—and this sense of immediacy, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, is sustained throughout the text.

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<sup>123</sup> “Cyclical” is the term readers typically use to describe the structural pattern of the *Devotions*: the speaker encounters a problem, struggles with it, and comes to accept it, only to encounter a new problem and begin the process again.

One effect of the immediacy is, as Ramie Targoff has noted, that in reading, we are forced into the “midst” of Donne’s disease and “made to feel as if we are witnessing the very instant that the disease manifested itself.”<sup>124</sup> This participation in feeling Donne’s disease seems important, especially given Donne’s observation in his final meditation that “*compassion* it selfe, comes to no great *degree*, if wee have not *felt*, in some *proportion*, in *our selves*, that which wee lament and condole in another” (121). Donne writes in a way that might help his reader to feel the physical and emotional effects of disease along with him, prompting a fuller understanding of the writer’s experience (recalling the concept of “experience” as *felt* faith). But if Donne is bringing his reader into the sensory moment of the disease, he is also inviting the reader into the moment of interpretation. In writing about his physical symptoms as they occur, Donne further creates the effect of pouring out his *responses* to those symptoms as they occur, allowing each station to make immediate, incomplete or unpolished commentary in an earthly meditation that is then reinterpreted in the more spiritual expostulation and made acceptable in the prayer. In doing so, Donne models the process of reading and interpreting the material world for spiritual signs: he reacts, he despairs, he makes and recognizes mistakes, he reconsiders, he moves forward. The effect is that the reader shares not only Donne’s experience of illness but also the experience of reading material signs for spiritual significance. Perhaps Donne’s urgent publishing of *Devotions* reflects an attempt to preserve the freshness of his experience and thus heighten this sense of participatory intimacy within the text.

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<sup>124</sup> Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul*, 139.

As Donne meditates upon his earthly experience and asks God to help him read the book of his body for divine truth, his record of that process encourages his reader to do the same, not only because all men will experience their own suffering, but more broadly because man will only gain knowledge of God and self through continuously reading the world as spiritual text. It is the reading process that Donne's *Devotions* offers to its reader, not some sort of product of that reading. Leaving his recovered self open to the possibility of relapse, Donne leaves both body-text and written text necessarily unfinished. Quite often, *Devotions* is read as a textual "self" of sorts—an effort on Donne's part to leave a written record, to grasp at self permanence as sickness reminds him that the material world is fleeting, or to craft the spiritual identity that will mark his public memory.<sup>125</sup> In contrast, I suspect that for Donne, there was nothing quite permanent about the self or even about what writing could represent. We have explored Donne's view of the material world (and man within it) as in a perpetual state of flux. In the fourteenth meditation of the *Devotions*, we see the text itself grasping at fleeting existence, only to find that language cannot preserve what time will shape:

All things are done in *time* too; but if we consider *Tyme* to be but the *Measure of Motion*, and howsoever it may seeme to have three *stations*, *past*, *present*, and *future*, yet the *first* and *last* of these *are* not (one is not, now, & the other is not yet) And that which you call *present*, is not *now* the same that is was, when you began to call it so in this *Line*, (before you found that word, *present*, or that *Monosyllable*, *now*, the present, & the *Now* is past...) (71)

Even as Donne attempts to comment on the impermanence of material existence, he recognizes that the experience of writing and reading his commentary is similarly subject to time's influence, and his words unravel along with the "truths" they seek to crystallize.

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<sup>125</sup> Selleck ("Donne's Body") is a notable exception to this tendency. Her convincing argument against the idea that Donne writes for self-permanence, autonomy, or power highlights the very different model of selfhood suggested by the humoral understanding of the body that Donne appears to have held.

But this is not necessarily problematic. Although Donne insists on a sort of continuity of self that extends to the afterlife (a reunion of body and soul in heaven), it is a new, “glorified” self, or in the metaphorical terms of Donne’s celebrated seventeenth meditation on the tolling of the funeral bells, a “translated” self. Donne imagines:

*All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume; when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torne out of the booke, but translated into a better language; and every Chapter must be so translated; God emploies severall translators; some peeces are translated by Age, some by sickness, some by warre, some by justice; but Gods hand is in every translation; and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves againe, for that Librarie where every booke shall lie open to one another*  
(86)

Donne is not writing a self, but rather reading himself as written by God, the “one author” of mankind. Any attempt at self-permanency through writing would be to resist God’s translations. What Donne achieves through his cyclical structure of *Devotions*—that of returning to meditation, expostulation, and prayer for each station, resisting finality—is *analytical* stability: his text preserves the quest for meaning, not meaning itself. If Donne’s *Devotions*, as Kate Narveson, for example, has suggested, tells us “something about the way early modern identity was conceived as something that could be composed, and could be fixed in one’s own handwriting,” it seems that what is “fixed” in this text is a system of correspondence between the material and spiritual world, between man and God.<sup>126</sup> *Devotions* offers its readers not a self but a living analogy through which the self can be understood—my body is as my soul—opening infinite possibilities for extension and application.

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<sup>126</sup> Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

## CHAPTER 2

### **SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE: AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION AND INTERPRETIVE AUTHORITY IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS OF DIONYS FITZHERBERT**

In 1606-07, Dionys Fitzherbert, a daughter of a gentry family from Oxfordshire, fell into a state of severe but ambiguous physical, mental, and spiritual distress. During her affliction, Fitzherbert experienced delusions, spoke blasphemously about God, feared that she would be burned to death, and lost much of her grip on the sensory realities of the world. Despite these symptoms, which fit most contemporary definitions of madness or melancholy, Fitzherbert would later vehemently insist that her experience was that of a spiritual trial and thus categorically distinct from other forms of physical and mental disorder.<sup>127</sup> The difference, as she explains in the manuscript account of her experience that she wrote upon recovering, is one of source and sequence: when one suffers from melancholy, “the body, being overladen with thick and dull humours, by little and little oppresses the heart and spirit,” whereas in cases such as her own, affliction “first of all falls violently upon the heart and distracts the spirit.” With the spirit so oppressed, it is “no marvel if all the rest go out of frame” (151).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> The precise differences between madness, melancholy, and religious despair were not clearly established and often debated in the period. Katherine Hodgkin provides a useful overview of these debates as they relate to Fitzherbert’s account in her introduction to *Women, Madness and Sin in Early Modern England: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 55-73. On early modern madness and melancholy generally, see Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Jeremy Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

<sup>128</sup> My discussion of Fitzherbert’s narrative refers to Hodgkin’s text in *Women, Madness and Sin*, with page numbers cited parenthetically. Hodgkin presents an exact transcription of the original manuscript alongside a modernized reading text. Since Fitzherbert’s spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure could be quite erratic, all references here are to the modernized version.

Establishing the spiritual foundation of her affliction is one of the primary stated aims of Fitzherbert's written account—a manuscript collection that includes a personal narrative of the crisis, numerous prefatory addresses written by Fitzherbert herself and one from a clergyman, and several letters directed to specific readers. The manuscript, intended for wide circulation within Fitzherbert's social network, seeks to refute the “miserable imputation of madness” and to correct those who “are too ready with the rest to attribute [her suffering] to melancholy or I know not what turning of the brain” (149). And yet, Fitzherbert is acutely aware that such interpretations are not only possible but probable when encountering one in her situation. “True it is,” she acknowledges, “that oftentimes [spiritual sufferers] will both do and speak so ridiculously, that even the most staid mind cannot almost abstain from laughing at them, although in this condition, their misery is impossible to be uttered” (151). Failure to understand the spiritual foundation of another person's affliction, Fitzherbert suggests, exposes a problematic gap between what is internally experienced and what can be externally expressed and communicated: spiritual despair is such that language struggles to grasp it, and so when the sufferer attempts to speak, it unsurprisingly comes out all wrong.

Religious experience *resists* linguistic representation—not only in the moment it occurs, but also as the reflecting autobiographer attempts to put past experiences into words. The struggle to express the recalled misery of religious despair (and, conversely, to express the wonder of God's mercy in providing relief from it) surfaces repeatedly throughout Fitzherbert's account. The difficulty of adequately expressing spiritual experience is treated extensively in the preface from which the quotations so far are taken; it also interrupts Fitzherbert's attempts at description and explanation at multiple

points in the primary narrative and letters. The reader is left wondering, for example, what Fitzherbert cuts from a memory of delusional thinking, concerned that were she to continue, “[t]here would be no end to write the miserable confusion of [her] thoughts” (197). The sense is that she suspects her misery could not be shaped, could not be condensed into a written form that would communicate it efficiently and purposefully, or worse—that the insufficient words she must choose, irremediably removed from their “truth” within, would sound simply like the speech of a madwoman. The “miserable confusion” of her *thoughts* committed to *words* might cause the narrative to spin out of control. Writing later of her recovery, Fitzherbert herself imagines what she might add to the narrative if, as she wishes, her “mouth were open and [her] heart made large to express in some measure his wonderful working” (229). Relief from spiritual pain survived is, like despair, imagined as too expansive to commit to words: Fitzherbert’s heart is not large enough to process it, her mouth cannot open wide enough to let it out. And importantly, the problem, as Fitzherbert sees it, does not stem only from her own particular deficiencies of writing or articulation: “no tongue,” she repeatedly asserts, “can sufficiently express” the misery of her affliction or the subsequent mercy through which God releases her from it.<sup>129</sup>

Pushing against this emphasis on the inadequacy of writing and speech to represent spiritual matters is the fact that “sufficiently” expressing the sufferer’s misery and God’s mercy is precisely what Fitzherbert’s narrative sets out to do. The success of Fitzherbert’s account (that is, its success in demonstrating that she has experienced and

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<sup>129</sup> See, for example, 185 (“no tongue can sufficiently express the misery of it”), 195 (“Who can be able to describe the manifold subtleties [Satan] used to beguile me with?”), or 249 (“The woeful effects of a troubled conscience wrapped in despair, who is able to express? No, madam, there is no tongue can declare it”).



survived a spiritual trial) is entirely dependent upon the writer's ability to effectively communicate her intimate—though invisible—relationship with God to her readers. Fitzherbert took great care in recording, revising, presenting, and preserving her narrative; it quickly becomes clear in examining the text that her story is intended as *evidence*, as a written testimony of the state of the writer's soul that will explain and, ultimately, prove that God has both tried and saved her.<sup>130</sup> How effectively she demonstrates her spiritual suffering and salvation also, of course, determines the success of the text's other expressed intention, which is to comfort the godly reader who might undergo a similar experience. Fitzherbert's narrative can only function to console the "true mourners" reading it if those readers believe that the writer is, herself, a "true mourner," or that her experience is authentic.<sup>131</sup> The text, then, holds in tension the urgent need for transparency with the elusive nature of that which Fitzherbert would make transparent—spiritual experience. That tension manifests, for example, in Fitzherbert's stated plan to "pour out my very soul to demonstrate the unspeakable goodness of God" to her reader: the ambiguity of what it might mean to "pour out" one's soul is held in contrast to the precision associated with demonstration, while written demonstration must be particularly challenging when the phenomenon in question is "unspeakable" (161).

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<sup>130</sup> Fitzherbert's narrative exists in three manuscript versions: the original manuscript, written in her own hand, and two fair copies. Fitzherbert deposited the scribal copies in two separate libraries (the Bodleian and Sion College; the Sion College Library was later absorbed into the Lambeth Palace library) in 1633 for preservation and circulation, and later delivered the original autograph version to the Bodleian as well. Significant revisions were made from the original to the circulating copies, and various epistles and prefaces were added to the main narrative over time. For a detailed history of the manuscripts and account of the variances between them, see Hodgkin, ed., *Women, Madness and Sin*, 73-92. The nature and effects of particular revisions will be discussed when relevant throughout this chapter.

<sup>131</sup> In one of several prefaces to the main narrative, Fitzherbert directs her comments to "all the true mourners in Sion." She hopes to "bring some joy, comfort or assured hope" to those mourners' "grieved minds, by seeing the inestimable mercy of God and his infinite goodness upon such an object" (159).

In the previous chapter, I addressed the challenges involved in reading tangible signs from the material world in order to understand the intangible, invisible, interior world of the soul. Here, I consider the challenges of projecting that understanding of the soul back outward—of using legible, exterior signs to express and communicate religious experience. Dionys Fitzherbert claims to be convinced of the spiritual nature of her period of affliction and thus of her status as one of God’s elect.<sup>132</sup> But her urgency in communicating that conviction through writing suggests that Fitzherbert’s identity or reputation within the godly community is both precarious and of utmost importance to her sense of spiritual selfhood. In a letter that precedes the main narrative of her affliction, Fitzherbert promises to write only the “truth” of her interior experience of the crisis, and what she claims that truth will accomplish is remarkable:

But concerning the truth of the things here related, the Lord that searcheth the hearts and knows I dare not lie is witness how sincerely and uprightly I have delivered it, as I did and do take all things to be; neither have I written anything but what the true sense and feeling of my heart indited: and I make no question but that any Christian observing mind that was then about me will see so evident demonstrations and infallible grounds of these things that they will no whit doubt the truth of them, neither can make any other application of them. (147)

Those who witnessed her crisis, Fitzherbert claims, and found it to look very much like one thing (madness/illness) will, after reading her account, find those same recalled observations to be the “infallible grounds” of another (spiritual trial).<sup>133</sup> Fitzherbert’s

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<sup>132</sup> As Mary Morrissey has pointed out, the “trial of faith” Fitzherbert claims to have experienced was considered a step on the road to assurance of salvation, occurring after the initial call to faith but before the believer is fully assured of election. In establishing the spiritual foundation of Fitzherbert’s affliction, then, the narrative “confirms her election” (12). See Morrissey, “Narrative Authority in Spiritual Life-writing: The Example of Dionys Fitzherbert (fl. 1608-1641),” *The Seventeenth Century* 15 (2000): 1-15.

<sup>133</sup> While her prefatory materials address the manuscript to any “Christian Reader” and suggest that her story might be made useful to anyone who wishes to read it, the main narrative and attached letters make clear that the primary imagined audience for Fitzherbert’s writing consists of those personal acquaintances who have in some way witnessed her crisis (and who may have judged her harshly or been offended by her words and/or actions).

project, then, is to use writing to close the gap between the “true sense and feeling of [her] heart” and the external “demonstrations” through which her interior experience was made (however misleadingly) manifest.

This chapter explores the importance of writing and sharing spiritual experience within seventeenth-century Protestant communities, arguing that shared spiritual interpretations of worldly events and personal crises were critical not only to community formation but also to an individual’s religious identity and assurance of salvation. Fitzherbert’s account of her experience of spiritual despair makes visible the social and exterior thrust of seventeenth-century spiritual life writing: while the Protestant (and, especially, puritan<sup>134</sup>) emphasis on personal experience and self-examination did, as many have argued, give rise to narratives that were intensely introspective, these texts were also used to forge important interpretive connections between writers and readers.<sup>135</sup> These texts that turn inward are also, importantly, texts that turn the self *inside-out*—that seek to transform interiority from something hidden into something that can be seen and shared, and thus more fully experienced and understood. Using Fitzherbert’s manuscript as a case study, I address the growing popularity of written, sharable accounts of spiritual affliction in the seventeenth century, arguing that these texts both demonstrate and complicate the primacy of individual interpretation in recognizing signs of salvation

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<sup>134</sup> Fitzherbert was a conforming Anglican; in fact, she argues strongly against separation from the Church of England in a letter to a friend living in Leiden at the end of her manuscript (275-77). She was, however, fervently religious, which set her apart from her more moderately and conventionally pious family. Claims that she had been “brought up in all wantonness and ignorance” (229) and that her first “calling” led her away from “all those vain pleasures my age was subject to” (117), along with her attention to issues such as the importance of scriptural study and the problem of hypocrisy, align Fitzherbert with forms of piety associated with the “hotter sort” of Protestants.

<sup>135</sup> For general studies of self-examination, introspection, and individuality in the period, see Introduction, 9-12.

generally associated with experiential Calvinism. I explore the strategies through which Fitzherbert attempts to put the “true sense and feeling of her heart” on display and assert her experience as authentic, with particular attention to the tension that develops in the text between exposure and inexpressibility. Finally, I consider Fitzherbert’s urgency in *sharing* her understanding of her spiritual trial as a demonstration of the importance of (correct) reading, interpretation, and fellow feeling in the experience of seventeenth-century Protestant faith. Throughout, this chapter will point to the written text as a bridge between interior and exterior experience, and thus an essential component to both individual and communal religious identity.

### **Navigating the Labyrinth of Experience: Trials of Faith, Trials of Interpretation**

To foreground our investigation of these issues, it is first necessary to consider the circumstances of Fitzherbert’s crisis and to situate her interpretation of this experience within the context of seventeenth-century Protestant belief. Fitzherbert’s text seeks to communicate a specific interpretation of her experience of despair—that her suffering was part of a spiritual trial, and that her survival of that trial is a testament to God’s wonderful and particular grace. To understand how the text works to achieve this goal, we must understand how Fitzherbert’s faith simultaneously encouraged and discouraged her interpretation, while simultaneously encouraging and discouraging Fitzherbert herself as the authoritative reader of her own experiences. The following discussion takes a closer look at what happened to Fitzherbert during the six months of her affliction and considers how her experience of despair fits within the broadly Protestant understanding of earthly affliction and, more particularly, contemporary puritan views of spiritual

despair. It then explores the problems those theological views raise for the lay practice of interpreting personal experience for signs of God's grace.

The crisis itself occurred when Fitzherbert was twenty-eight years old and living as a waiting gentlewoman in the household of "my Lady of Huntington," most likely the dowager Countess Katherine Dudley.<sup>136</sup> According to her story, Fitzherbert's trouble began with a simple lie. It was customary for each of the waiting gentlewomen of the house to present the Countess with a gift on New Year's Day; Fitzherbert, not having received the money she was expecting from her father, was unable to purchase one. Embarrassed, she feigned illness to avoid attending the holiday festivities. Fitzherbert terms her deception "folly" and notes that any who knew her would be surprised to hear that such a matter (i.e. the social discomfort of her financial predicament) had been the source of her breakdown, since her friends knew "by experience in far greater occasions how little such a matter could have moved me" (181). Still, her mind became "fully possessed" with considering the lie she had told—now recognized as "sin"—and what the repercussions might be were she discovered (183).

Determined to keep her lie a secret, Fitzherbert decided that her only course of action was to pretend to recover from her supposed illness little by little. During this "recovery" period, one of the ladies of the house brought Fitzherbert a baked apple; she ate it, forgetting, as she writes, that apples were considered bad for digestion and

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<sup>136</sup> The Countess's house is one of many noble households in which Fitzherbert was positioned in her teens and twenties. As Hodgkin notes, living away from one's immediate family in other households was common for young women of the gentry as it provided useful training in housewifery. In Fitzherbert's case, leaving home appears to have been in part motivated by a family dispute over her own refusal to marry. Fitzherbert remained single throughout her life. See Hodgkin, ed., *Women, Madness, and Sin*, 20-24 for an overview of the houses in which Fitzherbert served and possible identities for their various members.

therefore might exacerbate the symptoms of wind colic (the illness she was feigning). As she ate the apple, Fitzherbert felt that the core had uncomfortably stuck in her throat, which “troubled” her and quickly escalated to an overwhelming sensation of both physical and spiritual panic. Imagining that she been, essentially, caught in the act of her lie, she perceived her choking as divine punishment: “and I, who now thought everything was a judgment of God upon me for my sin, persuaded myself [the apple core] was gone up into the uvula of my mouth, and that undoubtedly it could never be gotten from there, but it would kill me” (183). This “terror of conscience,” as Fitzherbert describes it, made her vulnerable to Satan’s manipulations, which led quite abruptly to a series of delusions, fears, and suicidal temptations that marked the period of her affliction.

Fitzherbert’s recollection of the apple incident is remarkable in a number of ways. Psychologically, it is fascinatingly complex. The apple, thought to aggravate the illness Fitzherbert only claimed to have, ironically causes physical harm to the healthy Fitzherbert. If the sticking of the core *exposes* sin to the choking Fitzherbert, it also threatens to further *conceal* her lie from others who might attribute her rejection of the apple to her supposed illness. Such concealment augments Fitzherbert’s sinfulness: what pulled her into “that maze of sin and mischiefs,” Fitzherbert admits, was that her concern was “rather how to hide my sin than fly to God for remedy against the same” (183).<sup>137</sup> The episode also provides a rather startling example of the potential for spiritual sign-

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<sup>137</sup> Concealment of sin was considered toxic to spiritual health. Despite formal opposition to the Catholic practice of confession, recognizing and admitting one’s sins was a critical component of Protestant spirituality. Some Protestants created lists of particular sins (recorded in notebooks or simply mentally acknowledged through daily reflection); others confessed sins to ministers or friends. Admitting to sins was the first step toward repentance, while concealing sinfulness might be a sign of reprobation. See Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 55-59. Fitzherbert’s concern with concealment recalls Donne’s consideration of the “spots” (sins) of his soul: “the spots that thou hatest, are the spotts that we hide” (*Devotions*, 69).

gathering to lead the faithful into despair and paranoia. The apple sticks in Fitzherbert's throat; she interprets the troubling blockage as a sign of God's judgment for sin; recognizing her sinfulness, she imagines that the core can never be removed (and thus, presumably, that she will never be forgiven).<sup>138</sup> The perceived appropriateness of the form of divine punishment heightens its psychological force.

More importantly for the current discussion, though, Fitzherbert's explanation of the incident plays a significant role in introducing the narrative as one of spiritual trial. Fitzherbert does not make clear whether her interpretation of the apple core sticking in her throat as a direct manifestation of God's judgment for her sin belongs only to her memory or persists at the moment of writing. But her recollected response is enough for the reader to attribute Fitzherbert's movement into disordered thinking to an uneasy conscience. As we have seen in seventeenth-century records of providential punishments in the previous chapter, Fitzherbert's initial fear of God's physical intervention would likely not have been read as far-fetched.<sup>139</sup> The imaginative proximity of the apple to the original lie Fitzherbert told (that she suffered from a digestive disorder) justifies her reaction to the incident within providential logic, inviting the reader to accept sin and guilt as the foundation of the mental crisis that followed.<sup>140</sup> The story also takes a distinctly earthly event (choking on an apple) and infuses it with divine significance,

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<sup>138</sup> On the relationship between Calvinism and paranoia, see John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>139</sup> Recall, for example, Wallington's record of the sinner who was providentially killed by the very maypole with which he intended to break the Sabbath (see chapter 1, 26-27).

<sup>140</sup> The connection between the apple and Fitzherbert's sin is further strengthened by the apple's obvious associations with original sin.

preparing the reader to receive any other physical effects or sensory manifestations of her disorder in the same way.

Thus Fitzherbert's narrative repackages the onset of her affliction not as a disorder in the body that leads to mental distress (as many around her apparently took it and as melancholy was often understood in the period) but rather as a spiritual terror prompted by a recognition of her own sinfulness and a fear of what that sinfulness means for the state of her soul.<sup>141</sup> The subsequent events of her narrative (her raving speeches, her erratic behavior and occasional vomiting, etc.) are thereby presented as external manifestations of the spiritual turmoil within.<sup>142</sup> Fitzherbert calls her affliction a "humbling" from God—and a just one. Having grown "too secure and puffed up," Fitzherbert retrospectively sees the seeds of her affliction in her own thoughts and behavior. While she isolates the New Year's lie as the "folly" that sends her on her downward spiral, she recognizes that she made herself vulnerable to such a sin by having "embraced this world too much and fashioned myself like it" (179). Since an event she identifies as her "first calling" at age fourteen, Fitzherbert claims to have lived a godly life, and with markedly more piety than that exhibited by her family and friends. While others her age were engaging in "vain pleasures," Fitzherbert was indoors, reading the scriptures and completing devotional exercises. Living with other young women in the

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<sup>141</sup> Melancholy was generally attributed to an imbalance or disturbance in the humoral system, though the specific causes and effects of those disturbances could be wide-ranging, as Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) demonstrates. See Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 202-429. Fitzherbert does not appear to challenge this understanding of melancholy, but rather to distinguish her experience as something entirely separate—a spiritual suffering that is both sent and healed by God.

<sup>142</sup> Interestingly, references to vomiting are removed in the fair copies of Fitzherbert's manuscript. Hodgkin attributes the omissions to an apparent interest in downplaying the physical or medical aspects of Fitzherbert's illness (vomiting may suggest that that her affliction has a bodily, not spiritual, foundation), but notes that this trend is not entirely consistent (*Women, Madness and Sin*, 84-85).



Countess's house, however, Fitzherbert was distracted by worldly interests: growing "profane," she began to substitute secular for spiritual reading materials and to neglect her prayers and meditations. Fitzherbert was careless with her soul, allowing Satan to find her "unawares and unprovided," and thus susceptible to his manipulations.

In interpreting her mental breakdown as a spiritual "humbling," Fitzherbert situates her experience within a framework of belief that understands suffering as integral to a Christian's life on earth. Calvin calls such suffering "bearing the cross" and holds that affliction makes man Christ-like: "we share Christ's sufferings in order that as he has passed from a labyrinth of all evils into heavenly glory, we may in like manner be led through various tribulations to the same glory." Bearing affliction faithfully was considered a Christian duty. "Why should we exempt ourselves," Calvin asks, "from the condition to which Christ our Head had to submit, especially since he submitted to it for our sake to show us an example of patience in himself?"<sup>143</sup> While Christ suffered voluntarily and innocently, man is made to suffer to punish him for his sins. He also suffers to break his disobedience. For Calvin, earthly affliction was both a worthy punishment and a tool through which God improved upon man and strengthened his faith. God's will, Calvin asserts, is to put the godly to a "definite test," provoked by man's "stupid and empty confidence in the flesh" which must be checked:

[God] can best restrain this arrogance when he proves to us by experience not only the great incapacity but also the frailty under which we labor. Therefore, he afflicts us either with disgrace or poverty, or bereavement, or disease, or other calamities. Utterly unequal to bearing these, in so far as they touch us, we soon

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<sup>143</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 702. For a useful discussion of suffering in Calvin's theological works, see Jan Frans van Dijkhuizen, "Partakers of Pain: Religious Meanings of Pain in Early Modern England," *The Sense of Suffering: Constructions of Physical Pain in Early Modern Culture*, ed. Dijkhuizen and Karl A. E. Enenkel (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 189-220.

succumb to them. Thus humbled, we learn to call upon his power, which alone makes us stand fast under the weight of afflictions.<sup>144</sup>

By causing the godly to suffer, God is able to show man that he must put his faith entirely in divine power, as man's own strength is shown to be insufficient.<sup>145</sup> Seen in this way, the experience of affliction and recovery might even become a sign of divine favor: the elect are educated and humbled through the experience of suffering, whereas in the case of the reprobate, God's lesson would not stick.<sup>146</sup>

At least in theory, then, affliction attains a productive function for the faithful early modern Protestant: suffering kept pride in check and reminded man of how much he needed God, encouraging stronger faith. Autobiographers were quick to claim this spiritual benefit for their own experiences. With "due consideration," Richard Norwood writes in his autobiographical *Confessions* (written 1639-40), "I may say...that even these [temptations] have wrought together for the best, and that it is good for me that I have bene afflicted."<sup>147</sup> Agnes Beaumont's late-century spiritual narrative echoes Norwood's sentiment nearly word for word.<sup>148</sup> In a letter to Fitzherbert that precedes her narrative, Dr. Edward Chetwynd (1577-1639), evangelical preacher and Dean of Bristol,

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<sup>144</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 703.

<sup>145</sup> Hodgkin suggests that "madness," in the logic of this system of divine checks and trials, was the appropriate form for Fitzherbert's personal affliction to take: Fitzherbert, a bookish woman who claims she was "puffed up too much even with knowledge," lost her mind because it was her mind that gave her pride and vanity. See *Women, Madness and Sin*, 43 and Fitzherbert's letter to "Mr. H.," 229-30.

<sup>146</sup> The suffering reprobate might, for example, curse God for his hardships and fall into final despair (a condition that will be addressed shortly).

<sup>147</sup> Richard Norwood, *Confessions* (1639-40), in *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 153.

<sup>148</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont* (1674), ed. Vera J. Camden (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1992), 37: "[God] hath caused all to work together for good to my poor soul, and hath often given me cause to say it was good for me that I have been afflicted." Beaumont and Norwood's accounts recall Psalm 119:71 ("It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes") and Romans 8:28 ("And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose").

calls Fitzherbert a “great gainer” from her ordeal, and one who will “reap” the benefits of heaven “even from that heaviness” (129).<sup>149</sup> This language of personal benefit and spiritual improvement would become conventional in trial of faith narratives throughout the century, and the notion was key within the emerging genre of consolatory literature to which Fitzherbert intended to contribute.<sup>150</sup> Insisting that affliction was good for her soul might console and encourage a reader in a similar situation, but it also helped to transform Fitzherbert’s crisis from something that may have seemed suspiciously idiosyncratic into a more recognizable Christian experience. When Fitzherbert claims that it “pleased God to humble” her, that her story of crisis and despair will demonstrate the “goodness” of God, and that it was her faith that drew her “out of the labyrinth wherein Satan had entangled me,” she imagines her ordeal within the specific framework of the Christian path to salvation and as an experience that, far from singling her out as “mad,” she shares with all those who “bear the cross” with Christ.<sup>151</sup>

It is significant, though, that these acknowledgements of God’s “goodness” are recorded after the sufferer has been, as Fitzherbert puts it, drawn “out of the labyrinth” of affliction. Reaping the benefits of affliction depends heavily upon the sufferer’s ability to

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<sup>149</sup> Chetwynd is the clergyman Fitzherbert consulted in Bristol upon her recovery. A letter to Chetwynd in the manuscript suggests that he was the first person to read Fitzherbert’s account and that Fitzherbert welcomed his advice in revising it. See “Letter to Dr Chetwynd” in *Women, Madness, and Sin*, 145-7.

<sup>150</sup> While we do not know how deeply read Fitzherbert was in this genre at the time of writing her narrative, Fitzherbert does reveal that one text in particular played a major role in helping to strengthen and reassure her during the time of her recovery—John Freeman’s *The Comforter: or, a Comfortable Treatise* (London, 1600). Fitzherbert suspects that this book, a gift from her doctor’s wife, was given to her “by the providence of God to this especial end” of helping her to regain her strength (219).

<sup>151</sup> Integral to the puritan search for signs of election was an understanding that the true Christian’s personal experiences would fit into a generally accepted pattern of godly life. Unusual or ambiguous experiences were a source of anxiety unless recognized as a potential expression of a step on the path to salvation. Note that Fitzherbert’s language further seeks to standardize her experience: the language of “humbling” is highly conventional, while the image of the human mind as a “labyrinth” was a favorite of Calvin’s.

recognize affliction as divine intervention and to respond to it accordingly. John Donne likens this response process to that of currency exchange. In the seventeenth meditation of his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Donne calls affliction a “treasure,” but one that is only valuable when put to practical use:

No man hath *affliction* enough, that is not matured, and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that *affliction*. If a Man carry *treasure* in *bullion*, or in a *wedge of gold*, and have none coined into *currant Monies*, his *treasure* will not defray him as he travells. *Tribulation* is *Treasure* in the *nature* of it, but it is not *currant money* in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our *home, heaven*, by it.<sup>152</sup>

As wealth is only valuable if it can be put to beneficial use, so affliction only serves its purpose if used to make the sufferer more “fit” to receive God’s grace. But while utility is certainly important here, Donne’s analogy places primary emphasis on the process through which the “treasure” is made useful—the coining of current money from gold. To coin money is to contextualize wealth, to reconfigure and understand it in relation to its significance within the context of the economy that prevails. Likewise, tribulation becomes “current” when it is understood in its spiritual context (the context in which the true Christian understands his life’s events); only then can man be humbled by it. If affliction was a test of faith, among the most important elements of the faith being tested was the believer’s capacity for spiritual interpretation of earthly experiences. In other words, the test could only be “passed” if it was correctly understood as such.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Donne, *Devotions*, 87.

<sup>153</sup> Bunyan would later demonstrate the importance of spiritual interpretation as a tool for enduring and profiting from the trials and tribulations faced on the journey to salvation in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678): the House of the Interpreter, where pilgrims learn to read and interpret various images, scenes, and situations, is Christian’s first (and, arguably, most significant) stop upon passing through the gate on the way to the Celestial City. Christian learns to apply spiritual knowledge to make spiritual of scenes that are initially misleading (highlighting, as Thomas H. Luxon has argued, “the undependability of images and things”); he is also instructed to remember the lessons learned so that he may make use of them along his way. Most importantly, Christian is taught to think from the perspective of the “things that are not seen” and are “eternal,” which might alter the apparent significance of experience on earth (75). The Interpreter’s

Objectively, learning to appreciate earthly affliction for its spiritual significance seems as easy as reading scripture or paying attention during church services. The message itself is clear: suffering on earth is deserved because man is sinful; suffering on earth is God's test of man's faith; passing that test will strengthen man's relationship with God. But practically, the personal experience of affliction could be an interpretive quagmire. This is only partly because earthly suffering was as likely to function as divine punishment or judgment of the reprobate as it was to serve as a spiritual "test" of God's elect—a test which, itself, was also a form of punishment, blurring the theological lines between the two. More significantly, understanding the spiritual function (and potential benefit) of suffering is an especially difficult task to complete from the experiential inside. We have seen, for example, in the visceral reactions of Donne to his illness in the meditative sections of his *Devotions* that personal pain and earthly affliction can baffle the mind and pose particular challenges to the powers of interpretation of even the most devout, theologically informed, and dauntingly articulate Christian. The more immediate physical circumstances of affliction are likely to demand one's attention and may blind the sufferer to the potential spiritual benefits of pain or loss. While it is the duty of the godly to come to an understanding of such trials (as Donne works toward in his expostulations and prayers), the task can be exceedingly difficult and, presumably, overwhelmingly frightening at times.

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exercises are twice described as a source of "profit" (72). See John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That which is to come*, ed. Roger Sharrock (London: Penguin Books, 1987); Thomas H. Luxon, "Calvin and Bunyan on Word and Image: Is There a Text in Interpreter's House?" *English Literary Renaissance* 18 (1988): 438-59. On interpretation in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, see also Stanley E. Fish, "Progress in The Pilgrim's Progress," *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1971): 261-93.

Affliction could be particularly disconcerting if, like Dionys Fitzherbert, the believer suffered from religious despair. Fitzherbert's initial terror of conscience led her into a condition that looked and sounded like madness (she behaved and spoke erratically) but that Fitzherbert herself describes as a sort of spiritual darkness—a period in which she felt herself “fallen from the favour of God the Prince of Princes, [her] only friend, without whose grace [she] neither can nor [does] desire to live an hour” (149). Contemporary readers would have recognized this state as an episode of religious despair. For the devout Protestant, “despair” did not refer simply to a general state of unhappiness or discouragement in one's religious devotions. Rather, spiritual despair was a dreaded (and sinful) condition of desperation in which a believer's faith threatens to uproot entirely. The despairing Christian fears specifically, as Robert Burton puts it in his famous *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), upon the “great occasion” of personal salvation, often despite the fact (or, as Burton seems to suggest, because of the fact) that she is “otherwise very zealous and religious.”<sup>154</sup> Overcome with guilt for her sins, the believer suddenly fears that she has been forsaken by God, that she is not a member of the elect, that she faces an eternity in hell.

Despair might occur as a very natural response to the confusing experience of physical or worldly affliction. As we have seen in the discussion of illness in the previous chapter, Protestant theology taught that affliction—brought upon man by God as spiritual

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<sup>154</sup> Burton, *Anatomy*, 396. While Burton allows that the “principal agent and procurer of [despair] is the devil,” he holds that those believers who are especially devout and “precise” are most susceptible to it. Despair is likely when the soul becomes terrified by predestination and the prospect of reprobation, and when believers take pains to “trouble and puzzle themselves about those questions of grace, free will, perseverance, God's secrets” (398-9). Burton further blames “thundering ministers” who “speak so much of election, predestination, reprobation” that they “rent, tear and wound men's consciences” (399-400). For Burton, it is often those who have “least cause”—believers who have “tender consciences” and who frequent lectures and sermons—who fall into despair (400).

punishment and trial—presented an opportunity for self-examination and reflection on the state of the soul. When man is brought low by suffering, it is easy to see how such an examination could yield dangerous results. But one need not experience illness or a devastating worldly loss in order to feel “pressed downe with the waight of his sinnes”: as we have seen with Fitzherbert, the feeling might come when the believer is least expecting it, when she is feeling “too secure” and thus vulnerable to “slide” into sin. “Sliding,” Fitzherbert claims, is a “proper term” for the onset of her affliction because she was unprepared for the fall and thus was unable to brace herself to resist despair. “For as he that slides,” she explains, “falls into that danger without stay which was never thought of, even so did I, without any purpose or thought of what I did” (181). Fitzherbert gives the impression that when she realized what she had done (lied to the Countess and continued to misrepresent herself as ill), her own capacity for sin and deceit surprised her. The guilt that she felt in reflecting on this sin led her to fear for her soul. If sin had come so easily to her, how could she possibly be one of God’s elect? Would she ever stop sliding? Could her sins be forgiven?

Whether initiated by severe pain and loss or by a sin as seemingly trivial as Fitzherbert’s lie, the path to despair, then, typically moves through the Protestant practice of self-examination: the believer, overwhelmed by the sins she has recalled, becomes incapable of recognizing God’s grace. And since despair itself was considered sinful (in that it denied or put a limit on God’s capacity for mercy), continued reflection on the state of the soul could lead the believer into a dangerous downward spiral as sins piled up and reprobation seemed increasingly likely.<sup>155</sup> William Perkins, one of the most

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<sup>155</sup> This potential for devout believers to become “trapped” by introspection fuels John Stachniewski’s argument in *The Persecutory Imagination* that Calvinism itself, in its insistence on God’s division of

influential Puritan theologians of the early modern period, acknowledges that maintaining one's faith in the face of affliction is no easy task as the sufferer is led to "feel" his unworthiness before God in a profound way:

when a man neither seeth, nor feeleth his sinnes, then to say he beleueeth in Gods mercie, it is an easie matter; but when a man shall feele his heart pressed downe with the waight of his sinnes, and the anger of God for them; then to apply Gods free mercie to his soule is a most hard matter: for then it is the propertie of the cursed nature of man, to blaspheme God, and to despaire of mercie.<sup>156</sup>

For Perkins, falling into despair is human nature: "cursed," fallen man has a limited understanding of God's grace, and so in times of suffering, it is "a most hard matter" to see how that grace might be his own. An episode from John Bunyan's spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666) illustrates the way an awareness of sin might limit man's capacity for faith in God's mercy. Bunyan describes a bout of despair that emerges from a combination of earthly affliction (physical illness) and subsequent self-examination. After being "suddenly and violently seized with much weakness in [his] outward man," Bunyan is moved to consider his "state and condition":

But I had no sooner began to recall to mind my former experience of the goodness of God to my Soul, but there came flocking into my mind an innumerable company of my sins and transgressions... At the apprehension of these things, my

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human beings into the firm categories of elect and reprobate and its tendency to provoke obsessive self-examination and reflection on sins, was "conducive to despair" (27). Stachniewski suspects that this doctrine of double predestination (to damnation or grace) terrorized the believer who was made aware of the sinfulness of his soul and who understood that he had no influence over his own lot. The fear that hell might be unavoidable "invaded the most intimate thought processes" and "actively persecuted its host" (7). Burton features prominently in Stachniewski's study due to his quite direct connection of predestination—or rather, the overemphasis on predestination from the pulpit—with despair. And such arguments were apparently not lost on even the most devout: the most memorable personal example is Nehemiah Wallington, whose notebooks recount no fewer than ten episodes of suicide attempt or temptation. His concern that in taking his life he would "bring a slander upon our religion" and cause others to "speak ill of our profession" suggests that even Wallington realized that many would be quick to blame his rather strict adherence to Calvinist principles for leading one down that path. See Seaver, *Wallington's World: A Puritan Artisan in Seventeenth-Century London* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 22.

<sup>156</sup> William Perkins, *A golden chaine, or the description of theologie containing the order of the causes of salvation and damnation* (London, 1591), 585.



sickness was doubled upon me, for now was I sick in my inward man, my Soul was clog'd with guilt, now also was all my former experience of Gods goodness to me quite taken out of my mind, and hid as if it had never been, nor seen.<sup>157</sup>

The problem here is not that Bunyan became aware of his soul as sinful—such an awareness is the goal of self-examination in that it leads the sinner to repent—but that his awareness “clog’d” his soul and blinded him from seeing signs of God’s grace or his capacity to forgive those sins. We have, of course, seen another example of physical illness leading to an examination of the “sick” soul within Donne’s *Devotions*. Held side by side, any given devotional stage in Donne’s text and the episode from Bunyan illustrate the dual opposing fates to which a suffering man reflecting on his relationship with God might, as Calvin puts it, “succumb”: to prayer and trust in divine order, or to the blinding awareness of sin and fear of reprobation.<sup>158</sup>

This tendency for awareness of one’s sins to lead the believer to despair of God’s mercy is precisely why the spiritual significance of despair was so complicated. Reflection upon sin was a major component of everyday Protestant devotional practice, and the experience of sincere, heartfelt sorrow for those sins was directly courted by believers, even as despair in its extreme form was feared and to be avoided. The challenge was to experience the pangs of despair without giving oneself over to it entirely—to feel the weight of one’s sins without being crushed by that weight. Indeed, despite warning the faithful that man’s own “cursed” nature would lead him into a sinful state of despair, Perkins taught that experiencing *some* degree of despair for one’s sins

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<sup>157</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 72-3.

<sup>158</sup> Bunyan’s despair was temporary and eventually lifted; indeed, his spiritual autobiography is marked by several such episodes. His depiction of God’s grace as “hidden” behind sin in the mind, though, is typical of personal records of despair, regardless of the outcome.

was spiritually necessary. It is, as Alec Ryrie identifies, the central paradox of Protestant faith that “you can attain forgiveness only when you confront the full horror of your sin; you can only be redeemed when you recognize that you are beyond redemption.”<sup>159</sup> In *A golden chaine, or the description of theologie* (1590), a popular guide to recognizing signs of election or reprobation in personal experience, Perkins identifies sorrow for sin as a step in the process through which God “prepareth the heart that it may be capable of faith.”<sup>160</sup> Perkins’s theology of despair builds on Calvin’s understanding of the productive function of affliction and applies it specifically to the issue of salvation. Where physical affliction (like illness) or worldly calamity (like financial ruin) might break, as Calvin puts it, man’s “stupid and empty confidence in the flesh” and demonstrate the importance of faith in bearing troubles on earth, the spiritual despair of an afflicted conscience reveals the vulnerability of the soul and the necessity of God’s grace for salvation. A “holy desperation” cultivated through reflection on sin, Perkins explains, “shewes us the damnation that is due unto us: and by this means, it makes us dispaire of salvation in respect of our selves: and thus it inforceth us to seeke for helpe out of our selves in Christ.” From this explanation, though, it is clear that Perkins has in mind a specific form of despair that is quite different from that which blinds man from seeing God’s capacity for forgiveness: here, Perkins imagines that man, overwhelmed by sin, will think himself unworthy of forgiveness but will eventually recognize that God

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<sup>159</sup> Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 38.

<sup>160</sup> Perkins, *A golden chaine*, 586-89.

can forgive any sin in his elect. Despair in this form is, according to Perkins, “the very way to grace.”<sup>161</sup>

Perkins, then, like most other Protestant theologians who addressed the topic, taught that man can experience despair in two forms: the productive sorrow felt by the elect and the utter despair into which the reprobate may be drawn. There are two major distinctions. First, the elect experience despair in a form that, while potentially severe, is only temporary, a transitional experience on the way to true faith and assurance of salvation. God, through his mercy, will put an end to Satan’s torments of his elect; the despairing reprobate, on the other hand, might fall to suicide or commit the sin against the Holy Ghost—a final turning from God and renunciation of belief which, according to scripture, was the only sin that God would not forgive.<sup>162</sup> This final rejection of God highlights the second important distinction between the two forms of despair. Temporary despair in the elect is directed toward the self, rather than toward God: that is, the elect recognize and despair of their *own* sinfulness but do not lose faith in *God’s* goodness or his capacity for mercy toward sinners. As Perkins puts it, man is humbled when he falls

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<sup>161</sup> Perkins, *A commentarie or exposition, upon the five first chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Cambridge, 1604), 229.

<sup>162</sup> The notorious “sin against the Holy Ghost” was a source of much anxiety for the godly, as it was both the only sin that “will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” and, for puritans, considered a sure mark of reprobation (Matt. 12:32). Scripture distinguishes this unforgiveable sin from all other sins and blasphemies but its ambiguous description as “blasphemy” against the Spirit led to much debate over its precise meaning (Matt. 12:30-32, Mark 3:28-30, Luke 12:8-10). According to Calvin, “they sin against the Holy Spirit who, with evil intention, resist God’s truth, although by its brightness they are so touched that they cannot claim ignorance” (*Institutes*, 617). Perkins likewise emphasizes that man sins against the Holy Ghost when he “knowingly” and willfully rejects God after he has been enlightened by the truth: “it is done contrary to the illumination of the Holy Ghost: It is a set, and a stubborn, obstinate malice done knowingly, against God and against Christ, and that after illumination. . . It is a general, or totall defection, and Apostasie from God.” See Perkins, *An abridgment of the whole body of divinity extracted from the learned works of that ever-famous and reverend divine, Mr. William Perkins*, ed. Thomas Nicols (London, 1654), 191-92. Most commentators agreed that the sin against the Holy Ghost was the only sin that the elect could not commit. The anxiety surrounding the sin against the Holy Ghost was primarily caused by the experiential trouble of determining whether or not such a sin had been committed, and by the soteriological stakes of doing so (since committing it would indicate reprobation).

“out of all hope ever to attaine salvation by any strength or goodnesse *of his owne*” (my italics). The true believer despairs of his own sinfulness, but holds on to his faith and turns desperately to God for help anyway. Thus the “holy” despair that marks the path of the elect towards salvation is distinguished from the utter despair of the reprobate, who turns away from God entirely.<sup>163</sup> Again, despair itself was considered a sin, but it was a sin that would be forgiven in the elect as the godly could never completely despair of God’s mercy. The temporary despair of the elect was often called a troubled conscience or, more significantly, a “trial of faith”—terminology that places emphasis on what is tested (the conscience, faith) through despair and the transitory or transformative nature of the experience rather than on the despair itself.

In framing her story as a narrative of spiritual trial that threatened and then reinstated her belief in her own election, then, Fitzherbert not only rejects the label of common madness by attributing her affliction to divine purposes. She also, importantly, claims the experience as a specific form of despair that provides *evidence* of her election (to both reader and writer). And, in navigating the interpretive complexity of despair itself, Fitzherbert documents her own capacities for meaningful spiritual interpretation which, if convincing, will further support the case for her election: only a true Christian would be able to look beyond the earthly discomfort of her experience to understand it as a means through which to receive God’s grace.

### **“So near as may be judged”: Approaching the Limits of Human Interpretation**

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<sup>163</sup> Burton, too, acknowledges this distinction between “final” and “temporal” despair: “final is incurable, which befalleth reprobates; temporal is a rejection of hope and comfort for a time, which may befall the best of God’s children” (*Anatomy*, 394).

Considering the interpretive distinctions addressed above, the soteriological stakes of despair were momentarily high. Despair was an event that could play a transformative role in the paths of both the elect and the reprobate, and it was an experience which, once interpreted, could be a highly indicative marker of one's spiritual fate. Puritans like Perkins taught that temporary despair was a *necessary* step toward true faith and assurance of salvation, while final despair was a *clear* sign of reprobation.<sup>164</sup> Learning to interpret despair was thus a critical means through which one might attempt to answer the central question of Calvinist spiritual life ("How can I know I have faith?") as the experience of spiritual despair was a potentially pivotal sign of either election (as a trial of faith) or reprobation (as utter despair, leading to a rejection of God). This "doubleness" in the theological significance of despair as a sign highlights two important aspects of the lived practice of experiential Calvinism.<sup>165</sup> First, the complexity shows that while the doctrine of predestination neatly labels human beings as either saved or damned, the paths through which the elect and the reprobate reach those fates may not be categorically separate. It is possible that signs of the two opposing spiritual conditions could manifest in (outwardly and, for a time, perhaps inwardly) identical forms.

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<sup>164</sup> In practice, however, understanding what qualifies as "final" despair was not as clear as Perkins suggests. Theological discussions of religious melancholy or despair in the period often refer to suicide, for example, as a potential outcome of extreme despair and a firm sign of reprobation. Erin Sullivan, however, points out that responses to the famous case of Francis Spira (a sixteenth-century Italian Protestant who took his own life) complicate this notion: see Sullivan, "Doctrinal Doubleness and the Meaning of Despair in William Perkins's 'Table' and Nathaniel Woodes's *The Conflict of Conscience*," *Studies in Philology* 110 (2013): 533-61.

<sup>165</sup> John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco identify a "doubleness of vision" associated with predestination and sign-hunting, as any given life event theoretically had the potential to indicate election or reprobation. See their introduction to *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xiv. Erin Sullivan engages with the term specifically as it applies to the double meaning of despair in "Doctrinal Doubleness," 533-61.

Second, the dual significance of spiritual signs such as despair draws attention to the critical role of personal interpretation in the experience and practice of Calvinist spirituality. Methodical “paths” to salvation like Perkins’s *A golden chaine*—complete with earthly signs that one might have reached a particular step and that might contribute to full assurance—often conjure images of seventeenth-century lay Puritans as intellectually and imaginatively stifled, formulaic in their attempts to conform their lives and thoughts to the systems and standards outlined by various divines.<sup>166</sup> But if the broad outline of the conventional spiritual journey was largely scripted, the movement from experience to significance to communication of that significance was certainly not. Narratives of specific episodes of spiritual trial like Fitzherbert’s document the rigorous and often urgent interpretive process (aided by scripture, religious advisors, self-examination, etc.) through which an experience becomes a sign, along with the challenging creative process through which a writer might demonstrate that his or her interpretation of that sign is correct. Whether a dually significant experience like despair is taken as a sign of election or reprobation depends largely upon the narrative the sufferer constructs of it—upon how the experience is perceived, analyzed, and expressed. Erin Sullivan asserts that the need to clarify the “double vision” of signs like despair resulted in “the total embrace of active, even aggressive personal testimony” of spiritual experience, suggesting that while the believer is passively subject to God’s will and to his

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<sup>166</sup> Perkins was the most prolific (and most influential) English writer of these guides for recognizing the signs of salvation. Along with *A golden chaine*, his *A case of conscience the greatest that ever was* (London, 1592) and *A treatise tending unto a declaration, whether a man may be in the estate of damnation or in the estate of grace* (London, 1590) were widely circulated. Arthur Dent’s more approachable (and enormously popular) *The Plaine Mans Path-way to Heaven* (London, 1601) sets out to identify the marks of a godly life more specifically for the common reader; this task would be later taken up by Bunyan in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and other writings.

or her own preordained fate, a human being exerted *interpretive* agency by “forcefully activating the spiritual narrative that he most believed in.”<sup>167</sup> If Calvinist sign-hunting encouraged a painstaking and methodical examination and observation of the self in order to understand one’s relationship to God and his salvific plan, it also necessitated a form of spiritual self-fashioning for the believer who must choose between competing interpretive possibilities and who would then share her experience meaningfully with others. As Sullivan points out, however passive the Calvinist believer’s theological position might be within the divine plan, religious practice required that “the nature of God’s decrees was articulated through the agency of human voices” (537). Salvation was the dictate of divine will; *assurance* of salvation relied upon the authority and capacities of human powers of interpretation and expression. And, since Protestants believed that God communicated signs of his will in the form of personal revelation through the conscience, it was the individual believer who was best able to discern ambiguous marks of grace on his or her own soul.

It is this reliance upon personal experience of grace and one’s perception and interpretation of that experience for assurance that affords Fitzherbert a voice of authority in her narrative. The Protestant primacy of “experiential knowledge” in spiritual matters theoretically superseded social structures of authority like gender or class, enabling a woman like Fitzherbert to speak for herself.<sup>168</sup> As Dr. Chetwynd admits, Fitzherbert’s

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<sup>167</sup> Sullivan, “Doctrinal Doubtfulness,” 536-37.

<sup>168</sup> A large body of scholarship has been devoted to early modern women’s writing and Protestantism in recent decades. See Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Protestant Movements” and Jane Couchman, “Protestant Women’s Voices” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allyson M. Poshka, Jane Couchman, and Katherine A. McIver (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 129-48, 149-170 for surveys of these studies. As both Wiesner-Hanks and Couchman point out, however, not all men accepted women’s speech and writing (a woman’s authority was always complicated by the scriptural

first-hand encounter with despair renders her a more valuable and authoritative speaker on the nature and significance of spiritual trial than Chetwynd—Dean of Bristol—himself: experience results in the sufferer’s “learning,” and Chetwynd finds himself Fitzherbert’s “debtor” for what she has in turn taught him (141, 131). The value of personal experience renders social hierarchy nearly obsolete in matters of the soul, and Chetwynd thus uses his letter to participate in and learn from the example before him by summarizing and explicating Fitzherbert’s own views from the vantage point of a student (or, at least, of a *fellow* Christian).<sup>169</sup> Throughout the letter, Chetwynd checks his own opinions parenthetically (“methinks”) and reminds the reader of Fitzherbert’s own apt interpretations (“as you say,” “as you acknowledge”), conveying a sense of submission to Fitzherbert as having the final word (129, 133, 135).<sup>170</sup> He begins his letter by acknowledging his own shortcomings: “If I mistake (as I may), I persuade myself your own self will be soonest able to find the error in anything, and to instruct both yourself and me and others farther” (131). In this way, Chetwynd’s letter models how Fitzherbert hopes her reader might respond to the narrative of her affliction: Chetwynd reads closely, comes to a new spiritual understanding of the crisis (despite what he considers the natural

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notion of woman as the “weaker vessel”), and the notion that experiential authority applied to women as well as men was certainly not experienced by all women in equal ways.

<sup>169</sup> Of course, the very existence of Chetwynd’s letter and its prominent placement near the beginning of Fitzherbert’s collected papers reminds us that experiential authority could not completely trump social hierarchy: why include Chetwynd’s letter at all if not to validate the (female, lay) author?

<sup>170</sup> These parenthetical insertions and others like them are characteristic of Chetwynd’s style in the letter. Quite often, Chetwynd adds in parentheses direct references from Fitzherbert’s account to support his own commentary on it; the effect is that the letter takes Fitzherbert’s text as authoritative, and his references seem anxious to prove that his own views are in line with Fitzherbert’s story (and, possibly, to demonstrate that he has made himself thoroughly familiar with the narrative). See, for example, the level of detail on 135: “Indeed those speeches and conceits which that while possessed you (as that you were Antichrist, and must be laid in the Charterhouse, and touching your name, and dying, and stealing of your clothes, and burning; with the rest, as that men were Gods, and to die only to be so burnt as you) and it is plain they came all from Satan...”



surface-level response<sup>171</sup>), and then, importantly, learns a lesson about God's grace and goodness. Chetwynd's emphatic indebtedness to Fitzherbert for helping him to understand her experience of spiritual trial (and thus to come to a better understanding of the workings of God's grace) reminds the reader that earthly signs of God's will can be ambiguous and are often misread; careful interpretation can reveal grace hiding behind an earthly façade of misery and disfavor. And, Chetwynd suggests, since Protestant spirituality locates the individual conscience as the site through which one communicates with God, Fitzherbert (or any like sufferer) herself is the appropriate reader of her own experiences.

Yet Fitzherbert's frequent and urgent appeals to the reader to read carefully and form "charitable" opinions of her story suggest that she does not take as a given whatever authority she theoretically holds by speaking from experience. She "activates" her narrative not quite "forcefully" (to borrow Erin Sullivan's terms), but imploringly. In fact, it is in moments of asserting her authority that Fitzherbert's writing becomes wordy and uncertain—anxious to validate her narrative but hesitant to claim access to the truth. A fairly lengthy passage from the introduction to Fitzherbert's main narrative presents the meaning of her experience as a negotiation between several sources of observation and interpretation. I quote the passage in full below to illustrate both the confusion of

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<sup>171</sup> Fitzherbert went to Bristol (and to Chetwynd in particular) soon after her recovery to share her story and seek advice in writing her account. Chetwynd admits that had he heard of her case through an encounter with Fitzherbert in the midst of her affliction (or, presumably, through an outside observer), he would have misjudged: "The issue, and [God's] manner of proceeding, how ascertaineth us of his meaning; though perhaps had you come before yourself had learned by his grace to make the use of it, my want of experience or feeling in those cases might happily have made me more perplexed touching your estate, which now you have so discovered" (131).

interpretive authority that marks Fitzherbert's manuscript and the meandering style her writing takes on when addressing issues of authenticity:

Therefore I do most instantly desire whosoever shall read or know it attentively to mark the manner of everything: my own case that I was in, the cause that moved me so to speak, with every other matter that shall arise. For I do acknowledge the sin is so great and grievous I have committed in this my fall, that if you do not circumspectly note and weigh every matter you may judge as uncharitably as any that were beholders of it. But remember they could censure but by that they heard and saw; the heart is only known to God, who only knows whether that [which] proceeds from it be maliciously done or spoken, or if it come from that deceit the heart is possessed withal; for everything is aggravated much by the doing and mind wherewith it was done. And I desire you not to think that I speak with this purpose to lessen my sin in appearance; for I protest before the majesty of God that I will (so near as he shall give me memory and assistance) deliver it in the same manner as it was done, as I appeal impartially to them that saw and heard it. And first, to show (so near as may be judged) that I was no hypocrite in my former profession (so near as can be judged, I say, because it is the most hard and difficult thing that may be discerned until God the searcher of hearts do manifest the same), I will declare my whole life, from the first professing of religion until this day, as I take to witness all those which have known me from time to time. (Fitzherbert 175)

For one writing from Fitzherbert's position, a strategic appeal to the reader might point out that spiritual experience is best understood by the person who experienced it, and that conclusions should not be drawn from observations of *what* happened alone, but rather from hearing a first-hand account of *why* or *how* it happened. Such an argument would speak to the importance of the conscience or unmediated experience of God that is so critical to Protestant faith, as well as to the general understanding that God's signs are often ambiguous and require careful interpretation. That argument is somewhat present here, but each time Fitzherbert gets close to making this claim of personal, experiential interpretive authority, she immediately qualifies it. Her heart is of central importance, but the heart is "only known to God"; she will deliver her account exactly as it happened *if*

God gives her “memory and assistance” to do it; she will show her sincerity in her faith, but only “so near as may be judged” since, again, only God can search the heart.

Fitzherbert’s own capacity for self-knowledge is not the only issue at stake here. While she insists that those who witnessed her crisis and judged her “uncharitably” did so because they “could censure but by that they heard and saw,” she certainly does not seem willing to dismiss outside observers as insignificant in matters of spiritual interpretation. Rather, she intends to “appeal impartially to” and “take to witness” those who have known her to corroborate the truth of her story, even as she acknowledges the necessity of hearing the account from her own perspective. And we must not forget that the primary purpose of the written account—as well as the focus of the appeal in this passage—is to convince the reader by way of the text: it is critical that “whoever shall read or know it” will “mark,” “note,” and “weigh” the details of her narrative in order to understand the experience as she does. If personal experience is the foundation of spiritual knowledge, why is the reader’s close engagement with the text and opinion on her condition so important? Why must Fitzherbert fight so fiercely to be believed?

We might consider these questions by investigating an “outside” reading of Fitzherbert’s crisis that significantly impacted her state of mind during the experience and appears to have influenced her decision to write. During a pivotal encounter at the height of her crisis, a visiting preacher interpreted Fitzherbert’s affliction as a potential sign that she was not a true Christian, or not a member of God’s elect. Brought in by Fitzherbert’s brother, presumably to provide comfort and spiritual healing to his despairing sister, the preacher was asked if he thought Fitzherbert’s condition might be experienced by one of God’s elect on the journey toward salvation. Rejecting the idea, the preacher “answered

that his opinion was that God would keep his from such blasphemies” (173). A truly saved Christian, in other words, could not possibly be suffered to fall so low.

This “cruel sentence” was a shock to Fitzherbert. Even as her mind unraveled and she was in her “greatest extremity” of despair, the memory of her former faith and calling had been, Fitzherbert recalls, a source of strength—“the rock from which I could not be moved” (167). But while her initial calling was for Fitzherbert herself the foundation of a continued hope for God’s mercy in the face of affliction, it became, through the preacher’s interpretation, further evidence of her status as reprobate. Observing Fitzherbert’s current state and hearing of her despair, the preacher suggested that what she thought or claimed was her calling had potentially been in error: “‘It may be,’ said he, ‘that you were an hypocrite and so dissembled in your former profession’” (167). That is, if her current delusions and blasphemies were indicative of reprobation, Fitzherbert’s former professions of belief must have been false, or without the substance of true faith.

Both Katharine Hodgkin and Mary Morrissey have pointed to this encounter with the preacher as centrally important to understanding Fitzherbert’s affliction and her narrative account of it. Morrissey observes that Fitzherbert’s account of her affliction reads in many ways as a direct response to the preacher’s comments: she writes to prove him wrong. Fitzherbert “proves” her interpretation, Morrissey argues, through the narrative itself, employing generic conventions that structure the experience in a way that adheres to the Protestant theological understanding of spiritual trial. To Morrissey, Fitzherbert’s use of structural and thematic means to “exert authorial control” over her experience “challenge[s] us to be more alert to the deliberateness” and “artfulness” of

early modern spiritual narratives.<sup>172</sup> For Hodgkin, the preacher's influence can be seen in Fitzherbert's insistence throughout the narrative on "integrity as a point of unconditional certainty." To the preacher, Fitzherbert's current blasphemous speech could not possibly issue from a truly faithful heart and mind, so her past professions of faith must have been false while her current state serves as an authentic expression of her interior. Fitzherbert is challenged, then, to show that her past and her present outer states, however externally different, could both be stages in the manifestation of an elect soul. In emphasizing throughout her account that she knew—even in her worst moments—that she had once been a true believer, Fitzherbert rejects the preacher's charge of hypocrisy and dissembling by instead affirming continuity of self, to which hypocrisy is opposed.<sup>173</sup>

While both readings make important points about the need for and means through which writers of spiritual narratives claim and demonstrate interpretive authority over their experiences, they fall short of addressing the full significance of the preacher's charge of hypocrisy and the challenges that charge presents for making truth claims about the self. If Fitzherbert's crisis indicates that she is not elect, as the preacher suggests, it would mean that her earlier professions of faith must have been hypocritical in one of two ways. Fitzherbert might have been a hypocrite by deliberately pretending to be faithful before the crisis—by putting on an outward show of piety to hide an inner state of corruption. Her current (at the time of her conversation with the preacher) state of despair would expose her past claims to faith as inauthentic. The term "hypocrite," however, was

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<sup>172</sup> Morrissey, "Narrative Authority," 3-4, 12.

<sup>173</sup> Hodgkin, *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 116-17. See also Hodgkin's discussion of hypocrisy and self continuity in *Women, Madness and Sin*, 50-52.

also used by early modern Protestants to indicate a specific spiritual condition in which a reprobate falsely believes himself to be one of the elect. The second possibility the preacher's charge proposes, then, is that Fitzherbert's crisis exposes her past professions of faith not as intentionally performed, but as genuinely mistaken. If hypocrisy was defined by a disconnect between form and substance—between what one is like on the outside and what one really is on the inside—it was thought that that difference could potentially result from a failure to truly know *oneself*.

While ministers warned constantly about the dangers of being deceived by the “wolf in sheep's clothing” (and about the spiritual peril that such a wolf himself will face), autobiographical accounts suggest that it was the second form of hypocrisy that was most troubling to the individual believer.<sup>174</sup> That the reprobate might *look* very much like the godly on the outside is dangerous indeed, but that the reprobate might also *feel* and *think* in much the same way as the elect does is terrifying: in such a condition both onlooker and self are deceived. Hannah Allen, a merchant's wife whose experience of religious despair and presumed “madness” bore striking similarities to Fitzherbert's, for example, fears in her most desperate moments that Satan has tricked her into thinking she was elect: he “made me believe my condition was good when I was a cursed Hypocrite.”<sup>175</sup> Richard Norwood oscillates between confidence in his practices of self-examination and fear that “there was some sin which I had not yet found out”; he is reluctant to speak candidly with his minister, “supposing that if I should lay open all, I

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<sup>174</sup> The image of the wolf in sheep's clothing was commonplace in early modern warnings about hypocrisy, with biblical precedent in Jesus's “Sermon on the Mount”: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15).

<sup>175</sup> Hannah Allen, *Satan his Methods and Malice Baffled* (1683), in *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*, ed. Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 197-210 (203).

should be rejected of Christians as a reprobate.” Despite having experienced conversion and “comfortable communion of [God’s] holy spirit,” Norwood acknowledges the possibility that God has merely “lifted me up to make my fall the more terrible,” or given him the impression of election in order to provide a clearer sign of reprobation when Norwood subsequently rejects God’s mercy.<sup>176</sup>

Puritan minister Thomas Shepard spoke frequently of “gospel” or “evangelical” hypocrites—those who unintentionally misrepresented themselves as elect because they were “close deceivers of their own souls.”<sup>177</sup> Shepard’s phrase highlights the desperation of such a condition: how can one deceive one’s own soul? And if the soul itself is deceived, will self-examination be of any help? The fearful condition of “unconscious” hypocrisy was in line with Perkins’s doctrine of “temporary faith,” which held that many reprobates did, in fact, experience several of the same signs of grace that the elect experienced, potentially (and, it seems, easily) leading them to mistakenly believe they would be saved. A predestined reprobate may be called to faith, but it was an “uneffectuall calling” and provided only a “taste” of God’s goodness; the reprobate may also develop a belief in the promises of God’s grace, but it is a “confused” belief. Perkins marks the necessary distinctions: he explains, for example, that the reprobate with temporary faith believes generally that “some shall be saved” but is never assured that “he himself particularly shall be saved.” But these distinctions are so subtle that it seems highly unlikely that they could be practically discerned. And indeed, the point is that they were typically not discerned: Perkins warns that reprobates are “often so like [the elect],

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<sup>176</sup> Norwood, *Confessions*, 150-52.

<sup>177</sup> Quoted in Michael McGiffert, ed., *God’s Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard’s Cambridge* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 17-18.

that none but Christ can discern the sheepe from the goates, true Christians from apparent Christians.”<sup>178</sup>

Fitzherbert’s preacher does not accuse her of hypocrisy in any specific form—that is, of “dissembling” consciously or unconsciously. But the introduction of the term brings with it (to Fitzherbert’s own situation *and* to the narrative) the concerns about interpretation and representation that surround it. When Fitzherbert’s preacher accuses her of hypocrisy, the prospect challenges more than her interpretation of her crisis. While the charge certainly forces her to demonstrate her integrity or sincerity through her writing, that task is complicated by the fact that her narrative is itself a “profession” that may or may not accurately represent the true substance of her experience. The threat of hypocrisy—conscious or not—renders all forms of representation suspect. Fitzherbert must make the “true sense and feeling of [her] heart” visible to demonstrate that her faith was consistent throughout her experience, but how can she do that in a way that is unmediated by potentially false forms of representation?

Of perhaps even greater consequence, though, is hypocrisy’s associations with self-deception. Can the reader trust that Fitzherbert has access to the “true sense and feeling” of her own heart? Fitzherbert herself admits that she can explain herself only “so far as may be judged”: only God’s truth is infallible, and she can never *quite* know it. In her interpretive preface, Fitzherbert is able to reject the charge of hypocrisy and claim

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<sup>178</sup> Perkins, *A Treatise Tending Unto a Declaration*, 1-26. See also R. T. Kendall’s chapter on Perkins and temporary faith in *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 67-76. Bunyan would later dramatize the plight of the self-deluded hypocrite through the character of Ignorance in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Ignorance, like Christian and Hopeful, arrives at the gates of the Celestial City expecting to be admitted, but, unlike Christian and Hopeful, finds he has no “certificate” (of election). Christian and Hopeful are led through the gates, while Ignorance is bound and deposited through another door, apparently leading to Hell. The dreamer-narrator’s closing comments are a chilling reminder of the difficulty of predicting one’s own election: “Then I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven” (216-17).



that she “confidently denied” it, “always affirming constantly that I believed unfeignedly whatsoever I had professed” (167-9). But the main narrative suggests that the preacher’s words were formative in the progression of Fitzherbert’s affliction and that they haunted her throughout the experience. In fact, in its passionate references to the preacher at three separate points in the manuscript, her writing gives the impression that Fitzherbert remains haunted by those comments even at the point of writing. As she recalls near the opening of her narrative, the preacher’s words are “what did most cruciate and afflict my soul”: they proposed an interpretation of her affliction “which shut the door of all hope from one in my state, who was ready to pronounce it upon myself and lay the burden of it on my own soul” (173). The haunting possibility of unwitting hypocrisy leaves issues of interpretive authority shrouded in doubt. Whatever theoretical power the doctrine of temporary faith held in encouraging careful self-scrutiny in issues of the soul, it had the potential effect of destabilizing all self-knowledge that emerged from such devotional practice. As Michael McGiffert has poignantly observed, the idea that one might be unaware of one’s own hypocrisy, when “pressed to its logical conclusion . . . made hypocritical one’s perception of one’s own hypocrisy and so destroyed the cognitive basis of assurance.”<sup>179</sup>

Given the considerable amount of anxiety that centered on the issue of hypocrisy for early modern Protestants, then, it seems likely that the preacher’s comments in Fitzherbert’s narrative would unfortunately put both the reader and the writer immediately on guard. The reader is reminded that Fitzherbert, like any other human

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<sup>179</sup> McGiffert, ed., *God’s Plot*, 18.

being, is limited in her capacity to truly understand her situation and to accurately represent it. The writer is no less aware of those shortcomings, rendering the autobiographical stance a quite vulnerable position indeed. But if Fitzherbert's ability to speak truthfully from experience is challenged by the notion of hypocrisy, it is made further problematic by the nature of her experience of spiritual despair itself. Despair is a disorder of both the soul and the *mind*—a condition in which a believer's mind is preoccupied by sin, leaving her incapable of recognizing signs of God's grace in her soul. The temporary duration and ultimately productive function of a trial of faith do nothing to mitigate the pain or severity of the experience of that despair as it is happening. If this experience manifests as a type of "madness," it is hardly surprising: religious despair turns the mind upside-down. For a Christian like Fitzherbert who experienced God's "call" at age fourteen and considered that call a sign of election, the possibility of reprobation threatens to shatter not only her sense of self but the entire fabric of her reality. What if I am not who I thought I was? What if all that I thought I knew was false?

Indeed, many contemporary depictions of the Christian in despair might just as easily have represented insanity. For Burton, despair is "a mixture of all feral maladies, tyrannical tortures, plagues, and perplexities," and a condition so debilitating that many sufferers "in their extremity think they hear and see visions, outcries, confer with devils, that they are tormented, possessed, and in hell-fire, already damned."<sup>180</sup> Spenser creates an image of such a sufferer in *The Faerie Queene* (1590) when Redcrosse finds the knight Trevisan fleeing from the "villen" Despair: Trevisan is "all senceless and aghast," "staring wyde / With stony eyes," and standing "Astonisht...as one that had aspyde /

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<sup>180</sup> Burton, *Anatomy*, 404, 406.

Infernall furies, with their chaines untyde.”<sup>181</sup> Fitzherbert’s symptoms, as she remembers them, likewise slip easily between fear of reprobation (that is, of an eternity in hell) and delusion or hallucination of that which she fears. Thoughts of hell and of herself as sinful transition to thoughts that she is actually in hell or is in league with the devil. Fearing that her sin was worse than anyone else’s, she concludes that she is “therefore ... an adversary to God” and “a firebrand of hell”; fearing her fate was to burn in fire, she pictures that fate “with a conceit no less bitter than if I had already felt my flesh to fry in it” (185, 197). And for Fitzherbert, delusions about her relationship with God (i.e. I am not elect as I once thought I was) apparently transitioned into delusions about her relationship with the world around her. In her worst moments, she no longer believed she was her parents’ child, thought she had stolen her possessions, and suspected that the social orders that had structured her understanding of earthly life (“the distinction of states, magistrates ordained for the defence of the oppressed, ministers for the comfort of the afflicted,” for example) were “no such thing, but these things were feigned to deceive such as I am” (191). A shock to the foundation upon which one’s identity is based reverberates along all of the interpretive lines through which humans make meaning, and is likely to leave the sufferer, like Trevisan, “staring wyde / With stony eyes” at a world now utterly unfamiliar.

When Trevisan stares “as one that had aspyde / Infernall furies, with their chaines untyde,” it is not only because he has seen what was unfamiliar, but because he supposedly had, according to the Protestant understanding of despair, directly

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<sup>181</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590), ed. A.C. Hamilton, rev. ed. (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), I.ix.23.1-3, 24.1-5, 28.15.

encountered the devil or one of his agents. Despair was widely considered to be the work of Satan, who tempted and manipulated the believer into doubting God's grace. Spenser's Despair is a "cursed wight," a "man of hell" who approaches "as Snake in hidden weeds"; his most distinguishing feature is his "cunning" as he attempts to persuade his listeners to abandon all hope and end their lives.<sup>182</sup> Hannah Allen described her despair as a period in which Satan "cast in horrible, blasphemous thoughts and injections into [her] mind."<sup>183</sup> Allen's story of despair describes a self under siege as she is "assaulted" with Satan's temptations and led into delusional thoughts and suicidal actions through his deceits and suggestions. Fitzherbert describes "delusions of Satan" that held her in a hellish "bondage"; it is Satan who continues to "lay open the hideousness of my sin before me," seeking to drive Fitzherbert to "utter despair" (185, 187). Spiritually vulnerable after neglecting her devotions, lying, and feeling the shame of her sins weighing on her conscience, Fitzherbert leaves herself unprotected from the "roaring lion" who "goes about seeking whom he may devour" (179).<sup>184</sup> Her depiction of Satan as a sort of thief in the night who steals his way into a vulnerable mind was commonplace. John Freeman, whose book *The Comforter* Fitzherbert read during her recovery, warns that Satan uses our own weaknesses to his advantage, seizing on moments of insecurity to turn doubt into despair.<sup>185</sup> Clergyman Richard Sibbes explains that Satan "abuses"

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., I.ix.28.4-8, 29.1-9.

<sup>183</sup> Allen, *Satan his Methods and Malice Baffled*, 200.

<sup>184</sup> See 1 Peter 5:8-9. The need for vigilance to protect the soul from the prowling enemy was important enough to Fitzherbert to reference this verse at the opening of her manuscript as well: "Be sober and watch: for your adversary the devil as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (111).

<sup>185</sup> Freeman, *The Comforter*, 164. David Como argues that Freeman's text was influential in helping Fitzherbert to frame her experience as one of "Satanic temptation": see *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 135-6; Morrissey makes a similar connection in "Narrative Authority," 6-7.

Christians with “false representations of Christ” in order to keep the soul “in darknesse.” It is Satan’s goal, Sibbes suggests, to bring man away from God and into the devil’s own “cursed condition” by bringing the believer low enough that he rejects God and loses faith entirely.<sup>186</sup>

That the devil is responsible for holding Christians in the “bondage” of despair helps to clarify several aspects of the Protestant understanding of the condition. First, the connection with Satan emphasizes despair’s inherent sinfulness. Sin itself was considered a result of devilish temptation to think, act, or speak in ways that offend God; the Christian in despair is tempted by Satan to distrust God and doubt his mercy. Second, and perhaps paradoxically, Satan’s role helps to explain despair’s spiritually productive purpose. While Protestants believed that Satan had the power to enter and manipulate their hearts and minds, they also believed that he did so only with God’s permission. If God permits Satan’s assaults, those torments must be in some way instrumental in God’s divine plan.<sup>187</sup> But the belief that the despairing Christian suffers from thoughts that were, as Hannah Allen tellingly puts it, “injected” into the mind also reminds us of the mind’s vulnerability: it presents interiority as something that can be tampered with, personal thoughts as things that can be somehow *impersonal*. Throughout her narrative, Fitzherbert differentiates between thoughts that were “hers” and those that belonged to Satan. That she is recalling these thoughts from moments in her past creates a dizzying effect for the reader trying to keep up with what is being thought by whom and when. She writes, for example, that “the preacher wrought so much with me that I did yield to

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<sup>186</sup> Richard Sibbes, *The bruised reede, and smoaking flax* (London, 1630), “Preface,” sig. a5r-v.

<sup>187</sup> See Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, ch. 2, esp. 32-39.

whatsoever he said; but God knows was far from any true feeling of what I said or did”: the first half of her sentence portrays passionate thought and emotion, while the second half denies that she *truly* felt it at all (187). In order to claim that she experienced the temptations of Satan, she must disclaim her own thoughts as originating outside the self. The effect is to further destabilize the voice of authority of one who writes of an experience with despair. How authoritative is the voice of experience when that experience was one of disordered thought? And, if Satan was capable of manipulating the sufferer into despairing thoughts of reprobation during her affliction, could he perhaps be further deluding her into the false security of misperceived recovery? Is there a clear line between affliction and spiritual health?

At the point when a believer turns to write an account of spiritual despair, then, she is emerging from a period of extreme intellectual and emotional vulnerability, shaken by the pain and horror of despair itself, as well as by the awareness of her own susceptibility to sin and devilish manipulation. That vulnerability poses a particular challenge to the processes of writing and interpretation, as the writer must reflect not only upon thoughts from the past, but on thoughts that were disordered, painful, and, according to contemporary belief, possibly not even her own. The space between Fitzherbert’s distracted mind in despair and her more alert mind in recovery widens the already problematic gap between experience and narrative in autobiography. The retrospective autobiographer never writes from inside the moment of her experiences, but in the case of despair, her access is even further limited by despair’s tendency to render the self unrecognizable.

Finally, it seems likely that recovery (release from delusion) itself might come with baggage, complicating the writer's perspective of assurance. Moving from certainty of reprobation (and, Fitzherbert's narrative makes clear, reprobation does *feel* certain in times of despair, even if it ends up being temporary) to renewed confidence in election was conceivably as jarring as the reverse movement, and was probably not as swift a process as narratives of spiritual trial suggest. Fitzherbert's narrative announces her recovery in the space of one sentence, preceded by a sentence in which Fitzherbert remains deep in the grips of delusion:

And then my father being to ride from home the week after Whitsuntide, there began a new fear, that certain I should be burnt while he was away, and that therefore he purposed to stay so long, because he would be sure to have it done before he came again. But lo, then did God out of his infinite goodness and compassion behold me from above, working out my deliverance from this so lamentable state, by calling to my remembrance my former faith in him; and that undoubtedly I had before this, with a faithful mind though subject to much infirmity, truly served God... (217)<sup>188</sup>

The disjunction between the first and second sentences in this passage creates the impression that Fitzherbert's recovery from despair was instantaneous—that one moment she was convinced she would die, and the next “undoubtedly” aware that she was a “true” servant of God. But as Morrissey has pointed out, the suddenness and passivity of recovery in Fitzherbert's narrative is conventional in narratives of spiritual trial, intended to identify God as the sole agent lifting the sufferer from despair and to glorify him for doing so.<sup>189</sup> The pages that follow in the narrative show that this recovery was not as

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<sup>188</sup> The expectation that she would be burned for her sins (and the fear that her family members and friends were conspiring against her to make it happen) was the most consistent delusion recorded in Fitzherbert's account, lasting, as is evident here, through to the very end of her affliction.

<sup>189</sup> Morrissey, “Narrative Authority,” 7. Morrissey explains that “by drawing out the period of illness and confusion, the writer demonstrates that all human means to recovery were attempted and that all failed. The

absolute as its initial, conventional announcement suggests. Fitzherbert proceeds to describe a more prolonged period of recovery that involved “many and very great combats in my soul,” further temptations from the “adversary,” and even a relapse (219). And while Fitzherbert claims that only a few days later she “had perfectly recovered the peace of conscience and use of [her] former faith and hope,” Satan haunts her closing paragraph, “ever ready” to tempt her again. For someone who had just emerged from six months of delusions, hallucinations, and suicidal temptations, the prospect of Satan’s return must be terrifying. How can Fitzherbert maintain peace of conscience? Can she be sure her recovery will last?

**“I take from you that experience which your case hath learned me”: Authenticity, Shared Interpretation, and Fellow Feeling**

Of course we cannot know how confident Fitzherbert truly felt in her election once her despair was lifted, nor can we be sure that she never again experienced the symptoms of an afflicted conscience. What we do know is that her immediate course of action upon recovering from affliction was to travel to Bristol to consult with divines about her case (this is where she met Dr. Chetwynd) and to “take the course I have now done,” or write her story (223).<sup>190</sup> Fitzherbert records this journey at the very end of her narrative as she recalls how she responded to her perception that Satan stood “ever ready” for another

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abruptness of the transition from sickness or despair to spiritual health and happiness excludes those human agencies from the cure.”

<sup>190</sup> Fitzherbert’s phrase is ambiguous, but as Hodgkin points out, the statement’s placement at the end of the narrative suggests that “the course” Fitzherbert refers to is her writing of the narrative itself (*Women, Madness, and Sin*, 53). I would add that her intention to take that course “by God’s grace” (“the next day I went to Bristol, meaning by God’s grace to take the course I have now done”) further supports this reading. It was conventional for early modern writers of spiritual narrative (especially women) to emphasize that they write only through God’s grace or with his assistance; Fitzherbert does this throughout her manuscript.



chance to tempt her into despair. Writing the narrative is the final step in a series of communicative and expressive practices that appear to have soothed Fitzherbert and aided in her recovery. She finds comfort in reading, singing songs, “keeping company” with her sisters, and praying, but discovers that “too much thinking...dulled me and made me unapt to a true relenting sorrow,” or unable to repent for and acknowledge her sins without panic (221).

Hodgkin suggests that Fitzherbert is quick to write because she “urgently needs to distance herself” from the more unsettling aspects of her experience and to demonstrate her lucidity in commenting on theological matters, a lucidity that would in itself support her interpretive stance on her own case.<sup>191</sup> But Fitzherbert seems less interested in stepping outside herself than in forging connections between herself and others, and less interested in asserting her reading *per se* than in inviting the reader to make that interpretation *with her*. Fitzherbert writes her experience with a deliberate intention to circulate it; that she bypasses the more common practice of journal writing to sort through her spiritual condition and instead acts on the impulse to create a public text suggests that what was therapeutic for Fitzherbert in her recovery was the prospect of writing an account that would be *shared* with others.<sup>192</sup> I close this chapter by proposing that the process of writing and sharing accounts of spiritual affliction creates interactive

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<sup>191</sup> Hodgkin, ed., *Women, Madness, and Sin*, 54.

<sup>192</sup> This is not to suggest that journals were necessarily private texts, or that clear generic or functional lines can be drawn between the spiritual diary and other forms of personal narrative. On the contrary, diaries were often shared and discussed with family members or friends, and were occasionally published upon the writer’s death as examples of godly lives. Andrew Cambers has shown that formal elements of early modern spiritual journals (such as notes to the reader, messages to the writer’s children, and structural features like tables of contents and indexes) suggest that many were written with potential audiences in mind. See Cambers, “Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing in England, circa 1580-1720,” *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007): 796-825. Fitzherbert’s text, though, is marked by a particularly urgent public function, explicitly aware of her readership throughout and, I argue, dependent upon that readership for establishing truth.

spaces through which “evidence” of election emerges from shared interpretation of signs that, considered on one’s own, may seem dangerously subjective. I suggest further that Fitzherbert, keenly aware of the limitations of her interpretive authority, explores tactics to invite the reader to participate in her interpretation of her despair, seeking to supplement her (insufficient) “profession” with textual evidence of the “true sense and feeling” of her heart. I argue that texts like Fitzherbert’s seek to establish authenticity through the experience—across the text—of community through recognition and fellow feeling.

I have suggested in the previous section that many of the anxieties of Fitzherbert’s text—her concern to disprove the preacher, her hesitancy to claim access to truth, her urgent insistence upon her own sincerity—highlight the complicated relationship between Protestant faith and personal profession in early modern England. For Calvinists, the human intellect was needed to interpret divine truth that was only communicated through signs, and the human voice was needed to articulate the meaning derived from such interpretation, but both human intellect and human powers of representation were irreparably flawed. While it was possible for man to attain assurance of salvation through personal interpretation of God’s signs, communicated to him through experience, it was also possible for man to misinterpret those experiences—to think he had received signs when in fact he had not. It was further possible for man to misrepresent himself as having received signs of grace, even if he knew or suspected his experience to be the contrary. Thus the practice of Protestantism simultaneously relied upon and deeply mistrusted profession as a basis for forming and maintaining religious communities, and the act of

publicly identifying oneself as a “true” Christian was never a simple task. The Protestant individual must bear witness to the experience of faith; to do so, however, that testimony must not merely claim belief or election but somehow demonstrate the sincerity and legitimacy of that claim.

Holding in tension the urgent need to demonstrate her election and the limitations of her own capacity to understand God’s truth, Fitzherbert’s manuscript provides a fascinating space for exploring the ways in which writing might function as a tool for both discovering and representing sincerity of faith. In her study of pain and human creation, Elaine Scarry proposes that physical pain, as man’s only interior state with “no referential content,” both resists and insists upon external representation. Pain, Scarry explains, has no object in the external world: desire is desire *for* something, love is love *of* someone, and so on, while physical pain simply *is*. This “objectlessness” makes pain almost impossible to be expressed through language or any material form, and yet it is this very state of inexpressibility that urges the creative act.<sup>193</sup> Spiritual anguish, while perhaps taking on a variety of “objects” at specific moments (fear *of* reprobation, desire *for* salvation, guilt *for* sin), is similarly challenging to represent materially in that its referential content is, itself, intangible or insubstantial. Like physical pain, the pain of spiritual uncertainty (or indeed, the conscious state of any variety of spiritual experience) resists substantiation because it is primarily concerned with the state of the believer’s soul—an “object” that is both intangible and ultimately unknowable. Pain, in Scarry’s formation, urges the sufferer to “move out and away from the body” by inventing new

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<sup>193</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5, 161-62.

linguistic possibilities that might accommodate it. We might look to the outpouring of narratives of spiritual experience in early modern England to propose that for experimental Calvinists, encouraged to be ever attentive to their internal experiences of God's truth, spiritual experience might have worked in a similar way. As objectifying pain (through language, through art, through the making of artifacts) helps to mitigate its physical aversiveness by locating its meaning in a created object outside of the body, so the writing of spiritual experience might alleviate the believer's spiritual uncertainty by exporting the "proof" of her election into a space outside of her own murky interiority. Diarist Anne Venn longs "to turn the very inside of [her] heart outward, and anatomize it before [her] eyes"—to transform her spiritual "self" into something external and tangible that she can perceive through her senses and thus better understand.<sup>194</sup> Her diary is itself the manifestation of that desire.

Fitzherbert recommends an appeal to objective reasoning and sensory evidence for the treatment of those who suffer from spiritual anguish. In her preface to the "Christian Reader," she claims to have assisted (in the years following her own affliction) in the recovery of a delusional woman who believed she "had no head nor hands to help herself" out of despair.<sup>195</sup> Fitzherbert countered this delusion through empirical evidence: she "by sensible experience made [the sufferer] feel and confess she had both," breaking through the woman's disordered *belief* in her missing body parts by forcing her to sense the *fact* of the material objects of head and hands. It is through this sort of sensory

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<sup>194</sup> Anne Venn, *A Wise Virgins Lamp Burning; or Gods sweet incomes of love to a gracious soul waiting for him* (London, 1658), 74.

<sup>195</sup> This preface (149-157 of Hodgkin's edition) is not dated, but its content suggests that it was written some years after the crisis, between the writing of the main narrative (dated 1608) and Fitzherbert's depositing of the two copied manuscripts in the Bodleian and Sion College libraries (1633).

demonstration of the potential for mental error that Fitzherbert claims “you shall be better able to let them know how much they may be deceived in their opinion, that they are out of the favour of God” (153). Finding, as Fitzherbert puts it, “satisfaction by their senses” affords stability for the unsteady mind. Perhaps Fitzherbert’s trust in the senses provided impetus for transforming her interior experience into a sort of textual object (her manuscript) that might be directly and materially examined—distanced, to some extent, from the dangers of delusion or hypocrisy through the illusion of objectivity. At the opening of her main narrative (the account of the crisis itself and the earliest dated composition in the manuscript), Fitzherbert deliberately presents her crisis to the reader as a text that might be scrutinized. She prepares the reader not quite for a personal explanation of what happened but for a textualized version of the experience itself—a collection of data that can be analyzed and finally, judged:

And I do assuredly trust in God that as he of his infinite mercy hath cleared my conscience of that sin my soul trembles to think of, so will every one that duly shall examine my fall: the manner of it, the mind when I first fell into it, with every other circumstance most needful to be marked. (175)<sup>196</sup>

In Fitzherbert’s formulation, the textualized fall (her narrative) becomes an accessible stand-in for the intangible condition of her heart, which, as we have heard elsewhere in the narrative only God can read and “clear.” The sense is that just as God, by looking closely at Fitzherbert’s soul, accepts her for salvation, so will the reader, by looking closely at the details of Fitzherbert’s text, pronounce her as elect.

There are two important implications here. First, in suggesting that the subsequent pages will somehow allow readers to see and judge for themselves such elements of her

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<sup>196</sup> “That sin” Fitzherbert’s “soul trembles to think of” is the sin against the Holy Ghost—the “unforgivable” turning away from God that would have indicated final despair and reprobation.

crisis as “the mind when I first fell into it,” Fitzherbert claims for her account a simultaneously subjective and objective perspective, allowing her to capitalize on the interpretive authority of personal experience while limiting the potential for hypocrisy. That is, the account, we are told, will show the reader how Fitzherbert felt and thought, but also, by implication, how the crisis truly *was*, since the text supposedly makes the correct interpretation of it accessible to any reader. Proceeding to enlist God’s assistance in writing the account and, elsewhere in the manuscript, claiming God as her “witness how sincerely and uprightly I have delivered it,” Fitzherbert presents her text as a more accurate material representation of her internal experience to replace the disordered speech and behavior through which it was previously made manifest (147). The text strives, it seems, toward an effect of objective subjectivity—to create the illusion that the text presents a reliably accurate portrayal of Fitzherbert’s interior, fending off the possibility of hypocrisy through efforts in authenticity.

What evidence of authenticity does the text provide? Perhaps most effective is the raw, unpolished nature of the main narrative itself, which moves relatively uncensored through detailed recollections of quite disturbing delusions. While revisions were certainly made from Fitzherbert’s autograph manuscript to the fair copies, the revisions are more concerned with the unpleasant physical details of Fitzherbert’s experience than with the extent of her mental disturbance. References to vomiting, for example, and to the occasional binding of her wrists to the bed during treatment were removed in the fair copies, but no efforts were made to downplay her seemingly “mad” delusions that the sun would never go down, that no one else in her household ate or slept, or, perhaps more significantly, that “there was no God but such as Mr. C. [her doctor] was” (193). Given

Fitzherbert's interest in refuting accusations of madness, her willingness to acknowledge such disordered thinking demonstrates her commitment to telling the truth, however damning it may initially appear.<sup>197</sup> The generally unkempt prose of the main narrative may also work in Fitzherbert's favor here. While Hodgkin finds the "labyrinthine form of the narrative, its circlings, repetitions and exclusions" to be "destabilizing and disruptive" in the text, we might alternatively consider the potentially desirable effects of the narrative's lack of strong linguistic or structural control: raw, unpolished prose creates the illusion of "true feeling" on paper, unmediated by the transformative effects of strategic language. "Words cannot express" the extent of Fitzherbert's misery in despair or relief in recovery; authentic experience, it seems, cannot be methodically structured. The difficulties Fitzherbert faces in expressing her feelings create the impression that her internal experience surpassed the confines of organized language, and thus that she may truly have felt the grace of God. When these impressions are made stylistically through the text rather than argued explicitly by the writer, the reader is able to supplement Fitzherbert's profession with seemingly objective "evidence" of her interior state collected from the reading process, increasing the likelihood of a favorable response to the narrative.

But returning to the passage addressed above, we must secondarily consider what Fitzherbert's comments about her text and her conscience suggest about what the reader's favorable response might *do*. By holding her readers in a surprising analogy with God

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<sup>197</sup> Indeed, the genre demands that she make a seemingly paradoxical argument: that she was truly quite "mad," but never actually *mad*. That is, Fitzherbert's claim is that she experienced despair, which disordered her mind, and which was inflicted upon her as part of a divinely sanctioned spiritual trial—not that her mind was never disordered in the first place. Her narrative must claim the experience of madness, but only as it fits within an acceptable narrative of suffering as experienced by the elect.

(“as [God]...hath cleared my conscience...so will every one that duly shall examine my fall”), Fitzherbert lends a remarkable degree of significance to the reader’s interpretation of her text. A shared understanding of the crisis within her community, it seems, would serve to further alleviate her conscience in some way. As the text continues, Fitzherbert “most instantly desire[s]” her reader “attentively to mark the manner of everything” and to “circumspectly note and weigh every matter,” offering up her account for scrutiny and judgement (175). Indeed, she does not merely invite the reader’s careful interpretation, she “instantly” [i.e. urgently] desires it, suggesting that whatever spiritual peace she has gained through recovery from her affliction cannot quite be complete while her godly reputation within the community remains tenuous.<sup>198</sup> Communal acceptance must have been a particularly vexed issue for Fitzherbert, who in many ways stood outside of the social norms of her time. Fitzherbert was unmarried by choice at the time of her crisis and remained so throughout her life, in order to dedicate herself more fully to God. This was an unusual path for a woman of her class, and it apparently caused tension within her family in matters of financial inheritance and social connections.<sup>199</sup> Fitzherbert’s

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<sup>198</sup> Fitzherbert uses the word “instantly” to describe her desire to be understood at several places in the manuscript: here, for example, in her general appeal to the reader on 175, as well as in an epistolary plea to Mr. Hall to convey her recovery and interpretation of affliction to others of her acquaintance (241). Hodgkin glosses these uses of “instantly” as apparent mistakes for “earnestly” (and Fitzherbert is certainly concerned with conveying her sincerity throughout the text), but it is worth noting the now archaic uses of “instantly” to mean “urgently,” “persistently,” or “pressingly,” all of which seem equally appropriate to the mood of Fitzherbert’s text (OED). Fitzherbert’s letter to the unidentified “Mr. Hall,” for example, “instantly” entreats him to communicate her recovery to her acquaintances, and especially to her Catholic (or Catholic-leaning) friends, who Fitzherbert fears might blame her affliction on her Protestantism. The sense that she must quickly and emphatically (while also, of course, sincerely) correct their interpretations so as to save them from this “error” (241) supports my understanding of the social urgency of spiritual life writing.

<sup>199</sup> See Hodgkin, ed., *Women, Madness and Sin*, 9-10. Fitzherbert’s manuscript includes a letter addressed to the Church of England on behalf of “the poor despised virgins” (unmarried women) who, according to Fitzherbert, have been neglected and condemned by the church and community (121-27). The decision to remain single for religious reasons was uncommon but not unheard of for a woman like Fitzherbert; for an overview of recent historical work on female singlehood in the period, see Isaac Stephens, “The Courtship and Singlehood of Elizabeth Isham, 1630-1634,” *The Historical Journal* 51 (2008): 1-25.



religious devotion further alienated her from her family by its fervor alone: while her parents and siblings were church-goers, Fitzherbert suggests that her own piety was more intense, more central to her daily life.<sup>200</sup> It seems likely that forging social connections along spiritual lines provided for Fitzherbert a sense of belonging and community that was not always available to her in the realms of family and domestic life. While it was common for early modern women to develop a sense of social purpose or community involvement through piety (which, to some extent, suspended structures of gender inequality), those ties must have been of particular significance for an unmarried woman who was somewhat at odds with her family and was certainly subject to disapproval for her chosen path. Indeed, Elspeth Graham emphasizes social acceptance as a primary interest of the narrative, pointing out that by establishing Fitzherbert's affliction as the work of God and her behavior during her affliction as "spiritually sanctioned," it also makes a case for "the legitimacy of her rejection of familial and social norms of behavior and of accepted gender and sexual roles."<sup>201</sup>

But if the urgency of her self-presentation as spiritually sanctioned is in part motivated by social and communal factors, Fitzherbert's writing suggests that the reverse is also true. That is, the urgency of her appeal to the reader for acceptance and support appears integral to her experience of spiritual assurance and her godly sense of self. For all its attention to the individual conscience as the site of man's communion with God, early modern Protestantism encouraged social and communal forms of piety as much as it did introspection and private devotion. Godly conference and fellowship were central to

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<sup>200</sup> See above, 90 n. 134.

<sup>201</sup> Elspeth Graham, "Women's Writing and the Self," *Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209-233 (225).

the experience of Protestant faith. Conversing with like-minded believers was often experienced as akin to fellowship with God himself, while too much solitude was considered dangerous or suspicious.<sup>202</sup> Recent work in puritan studies and on women's spiritual networks is directing scholarly attention away from the assumption that early modern Calvinist belief fostered alienation or individualism to understand the importance of community and counsel in maintaining faith and establishing a godly identity.<sup>203</sup> Andrew Cambers, for example, has shown that godly reading was often a communal practice—that families and like-minded friends read and discussed scripture together, suggesting that religious belief and identity was in part “socially constructed and maintained.”<sup>204</sup> Believers also read and shared personal spiritual writing, circulating manuscript diaries, memoirs, and prayerful exercises as part of the practice of piety.<sup>205</sup> Indeed, such communal exchange was encouraged as useful in strengthening personal faith. Clergyman Richard Sibbes explained that the sharing of personal experiences was “a course much tending to the quickning of the faith of Christians” as one person's experience of grace could stand as evidence of God's love to help another believer in a

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<sup>202</sup> On the importance of Protestant conference and fellowship, see Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 390-97. Solitude is often associated with spiritual danger in personal narratives: see, for example, Donne's fifth station in *Devotions* on the misery of isolation during sickness and the importance of friends as God's “instruments” on earth (24-29). The importance of Christian community also informs Donne's seventh station addressing the consultation of his physicians and his seventeenth and eighteenth stations on the tolling of the funeral bells (35-40, 86-97).

<sup>203</sup> See, for example, Cambers, “Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing” and *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in England, 1580-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Mary Morrissey and Gillian Wright, “Piety and Sociability in Early Modern Women's Letters,” *Women's Writing* 13 (2006): 44-59; and Diane Willen, ““Communion of the Saints’: Spiritual Reciprocity and the Godly Community in Early Modern England,” *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 27 (1995): 19-41.

<sup>204</sup> Cambers, *Godly Reading*, 9.

<sup>205</sup> On diary sharing, see especially Cambers, “Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing.”

moment of temptation or suffering: “every experiment of God’s love,” Sibbes insists, “should refresh our faith upon any fresh onset” of personal trial.<sup>206</sup>

For puritan-minded believers in particular, sociability appears to have been rooted in a commitment to what Diane Willen calls “spiritual reciprocity,” or the practice of turning to fellow members of the godly community for mutual support and assistance toward edification and assurance. This “communion of saints” helped to ease the sorts of anxieties that might lead to spiritual despair (through friendly reassurance or the sharing of similar doubts, for example), but it also, Willen argues, became a “mark of godliness” and “distinguished the godly community from society at large.”<sup>207</sup> Abram C. Van Engen has more thoroughly explored this idea of reciprocity as potential evidence of election in *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (2015), but with specific emphasis on what he calls “reciprocal affections,” or “fellow feeling” amongst believers. Scripture commanded the godly to sympathize with one another. Christians must “rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep” (Romans 12:15); they must also “remember them that are in bonds, as though ye were bound with them: and them that are in affliction, as if ye were also afflicted in the body” (Hebrews 13:3). But as members of the godly community followed these commands, fellow feeling became both a duty and, once performed, a sign that those involved might belong to God’s elect. The capacity to sympathize with other Christians (and, conversely, to *receive* sympathy from other Christians) demonstrated godliness through both a willingness to

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<sup>206</sup> Sibbes, *The soules conflict with it selfe, and victory over it selfe by faith* (London, 1635), 313-14.

<sup>207</sup> Willen, “Spiritual Reciprocity,” 19, 40.

respond to the scriptural injunction for Christian unity and a mutual affirmation of the sorts of feelings and experiences that were considered godly.<sup>208</sup>

Fitzherbert uses personal letters attached to her narrative to hold her readers accountable for the duty to recognize and sympathize with the experiences of other Christians. Appealing specifically to each reader's commitment to "charity," she asks that the reader apply his or her love for God to Fitzherbert's own case, suggesting that a "charitable" response to the narrative (and thus to the experience it narrates) is the only natural response for a true believer. Fitzherbert appeals to "Lady W," for example, "of whose virtue, worthiness and excellent discretion I have had such good experience as I do no whit doubt of your most Christian and charitable censure and judgment upon my lamentable state": in closely binding Lady W's Christianity to a favorable judgment of the narrative, Fitzherbert reminds her that sympathy is both a virtue and something that is expected of a member of the godly community. Sympathy is also, Fitzherbert shows anyone who may read her letter to "Mistress S," an essential component of the spiritual reciprocity of Christian fellowship. She opens the letter with a blessing that models the spiritual benefit that one might give *and* receive through the "communion of saints":

The God of all consolation and peace, which comforteth us in all our afflictions and temptations that we may be able to comfort others, be with you, most noble and no doubt elect widow, who doth not only give entertainment to the prophets of God but also to his meanest servants, being a place of refuge and rest [where] they may by this means gather comfort after their conflicts with Satan. Of which you have had also your portion... (261)

Fitzherbert's words are undoubtedly meant to express sincere gratitude to a woman who had, apparently, shown comfort to her during her affliction. But they also recognize that

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<sup>208</sup> Abram C. Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3.

this charitable treatment was not (or should not be) a response that stemmed particularly from the woman's kind nature, but was rather an example of a good Christian participating in the reciprocal network of sympathy and consolation that binds the godly community. God comforts the individual who has had her "portion" of affliction; she in turn comforts others, who then pray for God to be with her (and, presumably, start the cycle afresh by assisting the next Christian in need).

In asserting that Mistress S is "no doubt elect," Fitzherbert associates evidence of election (it is, at least, evident to Fitzherbert herself) with this cycle of fellow feeling. Other letters present opportunities for the recipients to demonstrate their belief in God's mysterious work by acknowledging that he has worked through Fitzherbert: addressing "Mr Hall," for example, she insists that "the admirable works of God in this kind I know to you are no wonders, as one that is acquainted and constantly conversant in them, and therefore will easily believe what I do write" (229). She implies here that Mr Hall will recognize in her story the sort of "admirable works of God" with which he is already familiar; acknowledging God's work in Fitzherbert's case might provide further evidence of his faith in a divine order that may initially seem inscrutably "wondrous." Taken together, Fitzherbert's appeals in these letters (and elsewhere in the manuscript) to the reader's charity, duty, belief, and interest in demonstrating election in soliciting responses to her narrative document a collective path to assurance navigated by the members of a community of like-minded believers—members who might, through shared experiences, feelings, and interpretations, work together to recognize signs of salvation. In closing his letter to Fitzherbert, Dr. Chetwynd explains that he writes in order show her "how thankfully I take from you that experience which your case hath learned me" (143). His

words express gratitude for knowledge gained, but his literal language of “taking” the experience—combined with the act of giving his letter—more importantly depicts a reciprocal network of spiritual edification. Quite as Donne’s “owne *Charity*” tells him he “owes” the man for whom the funeral bell tolls a “good opinion” of his salvation for providing him with “benefit and instruction,” Chetwynd willingly provides for Fitzherbert precisely what she is looking for: approval and validation of her anxious claims of experiential grace and authenticity.<sup>209</sup> Perhaps the impulse to write stems from the desire not only to *represent* a beneficial spiritual experience, but to *create* a new, shared experience of spiritual interpretation that strengthens assurance for both writer and reader.

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<sup>209</sup> Donne, *Devotions*, 92.

### CHAPTER 3

#### GOD'S STORYTELLERS: TRUTH-TELLING AND TRUTH-CREATING IN THE NARRATIVES OF JOHN BUNYAN AND AGNES BEAUMONT

When the fifth edition (1680) of John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* appeared in print, it contained substantial additions to the text first published fourteen years earlier.<sup>210</sup> The new material addressed accusations that Bunyan was "a Witch, a Jesuit, a High-way-man, and the like" and, of most apparent significance, that he was a womanizer who had "my *Misses*, my *Whores*, my *Bastards*, yea *two wives at once*." Bunyan insists that "slanders and reproaches" of this sort "trouble [him] not," but the text makes clear that his claim of indifference is not exactly true: while he brushes past the charges of witch, Jesuit, and highwayman with a simple assertion of "innocence," Bunyan defends himself against sexual misconduct at length and with great vehemence.<sup>211</sup>

Bunyan's defense is, as N. H. Keeble writes, "almost obsessive" in its "particularity," and quite insistent in its attempt to present his behavior with women as "entirely proper."<sup>212</sup> "It is a rare thing," Bunyan writes, "to see me carry it pleasant towards a Woman"; he "abhor[s]" "the common Salutation of women," and further finds

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<sup>210</sup> *Grace Abounding*, originally published in 1666, went through six editions during Bunyan's lifetime. The enlarged fifth edition was printed in 1680; Bunyan added material to the third (undated) edition as well. It is possible that some or all of the fifth edition's enlargements were included in the fourth edition, but there are no extant copies. For a brief textual history, see the introductory material in John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>211</sup> Bunyan, *Grace Abounding*, 84-86. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>212</sup> N. H. Keeble, "'Here is her Glory, even to be under Him': The Feminine in the Thought and Work of John Bunyan," *John Bunyan and his England, 1628-88*, ed. Anne Lawrence, W. R. Owens, and Stuart Sim (London: Hambledon Press, 1990), 131-48 (140).

it “odious” and “unseemly” for men and women to engage in the sorts of everyday interactions that others considered “but a peice of Civilitie” (86).<sup>213</sup> Not surprisingly, the inserted material has primarily attracted attention from critics interested in Bunyan’s relationships with women and in the ways in which women and femininity figure in Bunyan’s writings.<sup>214</sup> Certainly women, cast here and elsewhere in Bunyan’s work as potential sources of temptation and sin, do not “fare” well in Bunyan’s text.<sup>215</sup> But while the defense may suggest much about Bunyan’s personal and social insecurities and about his gendered understanding of spiritual life, it also, in its anxious response to threatening stories circulating about Bunyan within his community, raises questions about the relationship between narrative, truth, and spiritual interpretation in seventeenth-century Protestant belief. Further, its placement within the text of *Grace Abounding* transforms the episode of rumor and scandal into a matter of selfhood—one that, by infusing it with

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<sup>213</sup> Bunyan refers specifically to the touching of a woman’s hand upon meeting, and to the practice of the “holy kiss” (Rom. 16:16: “Salute one another with a holy kiss”), which he suggests has been abused.

<sup>214</sup> The defense is frequently cited as evidence of Bunyan’s supposed discomfort with women and of his tendency to view femininity as a force that must be resisted by men (and overcome by women) on the road to spiritual development. Keeble, for example, remarks that Bunyan’s “determination to resist and avoid physical contact with women at all costs, invests them with a . . .potently dangerous allure and disturbing mystique” (“‘Here is her Glory’,” 140). Kathleen Lynch finds in the passage an example of Bunyan’s tendency to discuss the spiritual life in masculine terms, and finds the material in line with his “determination to preserve the patriarchal structure of the church” (77): see Lynch, “‘Her Name Agnes’: The Verifications of Agnes Beaumont’s Narrative Ventures,” *ELH* 67 (2000): 71-98. On women and the feminine in Bunyan’s writing more broadly, see Keeble, “‘Here is her Glory’”; Margaret Olofson Thickstun, “From Christiana to Stead-Fast: Subsuming the Feminine in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*,” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 30 (1990): 387-409; Tasmin Spargo, “Contra-dictions: Women as Figures of Exclusion and Resistance in John Bunyan and Agnes Beaumont’s Narratives,” *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedzoy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 173-84; and Margaret J. M. Ezell, “Bunyan’s Women, Women’s Bunyan,” *Trauma and Transformation: The Political Progress of John Bunyan*, ed. Vera J. Camden (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 63-80.

<sup>215</sup> Christopher Hill, *A Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628-1688* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 302. A notable exception to Bunyan’s exclusively male-oriented writings is the second part of his *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1684), published several years after the first (and after several years of ministering to a congregation), in which Bunyan turns his attention to the female pilgrimage and to the spiritual benefits of family and community.



the concerns that drive and pervade Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, becomes involved in the text's ongoing search for evidence of salvation and its effort to communicate that evidence to others. What is the defense doing in *Grace Abounding*? How does Bunyan's discussion of the scandal build upon the text, and conversely, how might the text serve to influence public response to rumors about Bunyan's behavior?

Before answering these questions, we must first come to terms with Bunyan's "obsessive" denial of sexual misconduct and understand why this accusation demanded such close attention. Defending himself against allegations of sexual scandal would have been especially pressing for Bunyan as a leader of a nonconformist congregation. Rebellious in their rejection of traditional (and state-sanctioned) forms of worship, sectaries in seventeenth-century England were seen by many to threaten not only the political and religious establishments but also the social order. Contemporary anxieties about the seductive powers of charismatic preachers, the secrecy of church meetings, and the "disorderly" conduct of women who attended such meetings against the wishes of their fathers and husbands meant that the sects were often plagued with rumors of sexual scandal.<sup>216</sup> Discomfort with the role of desire in sectarian worship bred suspicion and, as Tasmin Spargo has demonstrated, could bring "the spiritual yearnings of a dissenting woman [to be] read in connection with the supposed carnal desires of the dissenting minister."<sup>217</sup> This would have been a particular concern for congregations like Bunyan's that were largely female. Bunyan was well aware of such suspicions and took care to

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<sup>216</sup> See, for example, Rachel Adcock's chapter on "Female Baptists in the Popular Imagination" in *Baptist Women's Writings in Revolutionary Culture, 1640-1680* (Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 29-68.

<sup>217</sup> Tasmin Spargo, "The Fathers' Seductions: Improper Relations of Desire in Seventeenth-Century Nonconformist Communities," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 17 (1998): 255-68 (256-57).

distance himself from religious groups and beliefs particularly associated in the public imagination with licentiousness.<sup>218</sup> Still, he no doubt understood that it was not only possible but easy for his detractors to get the wrong idea and to read his influence as seduction, to confuse spiritual desire with carnal desire. Charges of “Witch,” “Jesuit,” and “High-way-man” could threaten Bunyan’s reputation among those who may be susceptible to rather sensational claims, but allegations of sexual scandal offer a particularly compelling narrative of Bunyan’s influence—one that plays into social anxieties, invents little and, instead, spins and reinterprets the already apparent reality.

It is appropriate, then, that Bunyan responds to this alternative reading of his character by reinforcing his own narrative—that is, by incorporating the scandal into his already well-received spiritual autobiography. Publishing his self-defense as an addendum to *Grace Abounding* allows that text—a narrative of his spiritual conversion and a testimony of his faith—to stand as evidence to support the truth of his claims of innocence. In his study of the “social history” of truth, Steven Shapin observes that humans accept new information as a function of trust and plausibility, given what we already know about the source of the information and about the world around us. Building on William James’s notion that truth lives “on a credit system,” Shapin writes that as we receive knowledge, the information interacts with the “working picture of the world” that we carry with us, accepting the knowledge as true “only in light of *everything*

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<sup>218</sup> In particular, Bunyan attacked the (loosely defined) Ranters, who believed themselves free from sin because they acted through the spirit, and the Quakers, whose views of the spirit and the divine light of Christ within all men Bunyan denounced as “delusions.” Bunyan often lumped Quakers and Ranters together. See Bunyan, *Some gospel-truths opened according to the Scriptures* (London, 1656). On Ranters, see Nigel Smith, ed., *A Collection of Ranter Writings: Spiritual Liberty and Sexual Freedom in the English Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 2014). On Bunyan’s conflicts with the Quakers, see Ann Hughes, “The Pulpit Guarded: Confrontations between Orthodox and Radicals in Revolutionary England,” in *John Bunyan and his England*, 31-50.

*else [we] know* which bears upon the validity of that picture.”<sup>219</sup> We can apply this process to the transmission of narratives—and, in Bunyan’s case, gossip. A story is likely to be accepted as valid if it suits the reader’s (or listener’s) understanding of the characters involved and the settings in which they operate. The allegations against Bunyan may sound plausible against a backdrop of distrust of nonconformist religion, but held against the narrative of *Grace Abounding* that casts Bunyan as a reformed sinner, a member of the elect, and a man “in pain...to bring forth Children to God,” they lose considerable force (81).

Addressing the scandal within the space of autobiographical narrative also invites Bunyan to defend himself more expansively through broad characterization, rather than through a more limited style of direct denial of specific, alleged acts. While readers have speculated as to the actual events that prompted Bunyan’s defense, the text itself does not name or allude in any specific way to his slanderers or his supposed “Misses” and “Whores.”<sup>220</sup> Bunyan speaks only in broad terms of women, men, and “foes” and addresses his own behavioral *tendencies*, avoiding reference to any specific activities in which he is rumored to have engaged. One effect of this tactic is to trivialize the accusations: these slanders are commonplace, it seems, and do not merit direct, individual engagement (the sensational but dismissive language of “my *Misses*, my *Whores*, my *Bastards*, yea *two wives at once*, and the like” accentuates this effect). But generalizing his response to the accusations also acts to safeguard Bunyan’s character and personal

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<sup>219</sup> Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6, 37.

<sup>220</sup> Bunyan’s comments are generally thought to have been triggered, at least in part, by a controversy surrounding Agnes Beaumont, whose story will be discussed at length below.

narrative against a variety of competing rumors that have already circulated or that may emerge in the future. Rather than refute a specific claim concerning a particular woman, he crafts an image of a man unlikely to engage in *any* act of sexual misconduct—one who avoids “company alone” with all women at all costs. In doing so, he creates a single personal narrative of John Bunyan with Woman that might be held against multiple specific, alternative narratives circulating about him. Calling to “witness” those friends who might corroborate his behavioral evidence, Bunyan sketches a character for his jury of readers that could not plausibly fit the narratives of any slanderous accusations against him (86). He further strengthens this impression by establishing continuity between the new character sketch and the Bunyan of the preceding pages of *Grace Abounding*. In announcing that God, for example, has “made me shie of women from my first Conversion until now,” Bunyan reminds the reader that he is a faithful Christian convert and, more importantly, recalls all of the spiritual work involved in the conversion process that the text has already shared (86). The defense, now colored by the emotional force of Bunyan’s recalled episodes of conversion, increases its credibility.

The context of *Grace Abounding* thus helps Bunyan to invalidate the accusations against him through the workings of narrative plausibility. But Bunyan is not satisfied merely to *discredit* the disruptive narrative; he further *lays claim* to it by weaving the accusations into his own story of salvation. Bunyan is eager not only to refute the charges against him but also to contextualize them as part of his personal Christian experience. The defense reconceives community gossip on a grander scale: the scandal takes its place in Bunyan’s conversion narrative as one of the devil’s many attempts to shake the reformed Christian’s assurance and pull him back into sin. Slanderous accusations are

introduced not as opinions formed about Bunyan but as tools used by Satan “to overthrow my ministry”; Bunyan’s accusers are Satan’s “instruments,” whose minds have been “stir[red] up” with the devil’s inventions (84). This is no longer a story of the public versus John Bunyan, but of Satan versus the faithful but vulnerable Christian, of evil versus good. Pointing out that “it belongs to my Christian Profession to be vilified, slandered, reproached, and reviled,” Bunyan appropriates the narratives cast against him by transforming them into further signs of his own election, and episodes within his own tale (85). Framing the scandal in this way, Bunyan is able to embrace and make soteriologically meaningful an experience that initially threatens to shake his faith. A story that once threateningly rewrote Bunyan’s personal significance is again rewritten in a way that propels and reinforces the original narrative (Bunyan’s own story of conversion and the bumpy road to salvation).

In adding the defense to a new edition of his spiritual autobiography, then, Bunyan takes care not only to defend himself (personally and socially, within the world) from slander, but to defend his soteriological narrative from competing sources of “truth” that might challenge his own. We can identify in the passage an impulse toward narrativization—that is, to hold the experience of slander (and the story created by it) against Bunyan’s own narrative of salvation and to incorporate it into his personal story. The impulse to transform everyday experiences or surprising accidents into spiritually significant episodes in one’s life story fueled much of the personal writing of seventeenth-century believers. Alec Ryrie has argued that writing became a central component of early modern Protestant spirituality partly because of its ability to create these sorts of narratives, and thus to help believers understand the “stories” of their lives.

Ryrie explains that Protestants understood their lives as “courses,” or as individual journeys toward an “ultimate, pre-ordained destiny.” The path one’s life took could be crooked and fraught with roadblocks, but the destination (salvation, for the elect) is unchanging and must be reached.<sup>221</sup> This life-as-journey concept plays out quite explicitly in Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), in which Christian must leave his home to travel toward the Celestial City, facing spiritually symbolic obstacles and navigating difficult terrain in order to follow “the way.”<sup>222</sup> To understand one’s life as a journey was also to understand it in distinctly narrative terms. In viewing their lives as courses, Ryrie writes, Protestants were “incubating the novel idea that every Christian life story was, in fact, a story: a coherent and progressive narrative in which the Spirit providentially led the believer on a winding but sure path to Heaven.” Writing provides the outlet for these stories to take shape.<sup>223</sup>

Literary scholars and theologians acknowledge the centrality of narrative to the experience of Judeo-Christian spirituality: Jewish and Christian theologies are, as Brian Home puts it, “profoundly eschatological and, therefore, narrative in character.”<sup>224</sup> But narrative holds a special significance for experimental Calvinists whose personal stories have, in a sense, already been written by divine providence, whose narrative ends cannot

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<sup>221</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 409.

<sup>222</sup> On the significance of “the way” in Bunyan’s allegory and its relationship with Christian’s “progress,” see Stanley Fish, “Progress in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1971): 261-293.

<sup>223</sup> Ryrie, 409, 312. It is important to clarify that these Christian “life stories” were stories of *spiritual* development that progressed toward spiritual ends or revelations. The “coherent progressive narrative” Ryrie identifies was not to be found in one’s earthly experiences themselves but rather in the spiritual significance implied by those experiences.

<sup>224</sup> Brian Home, “Theology in the Narrative Mode,” *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 958-75. Home’s essay provides a useful survey of recent studies in narrative theology.

be changed, and who believed their life experiences could be read as episodes that push (however mysteriously) toward those ends. Understanding one's personal story was for seventeenth-century Protestants closely and complexly linked to the search for evidence of salvation. Writing that story through autobiographical endeavors involved a rather delicate process of uncovering and, necessarily, *producing* evidence of divine truth. On the one hand, writing one's own spiritual narrative was in fact a process of reading and retelling *God's* story. It is, as Bunyan puts it at the start of *Grace Abounding*, simply a "relation of the merciful working of God upon [one's] soul" (6). But in the process of "relating" the narrative God has written for him, a writer also selects, shapes, and repackages life experiences in order to demonstrate how he came to see those experiences as "God's work" and to convince the reader that he has read God's story correctly. New experiences (like Bunyan's scandal) solicit new narrative efforts, as they provide new textual moments that might push the story forward—or change the course of the narrative entirely. Conversely, one's understanding of one's own narrative provides a lens through which to receive and understand the new experiences as they occur. Experience, in theory, provides evidence that can be read to uncover patterns in one's life and form the life story, but, once written or imagined, the story can take on an evidentiary force itself. Understanding oneself to be saved, the believer may use the already uncovered patterns to interpret new experiences (or reinterpret past experiences), embracing narrative force as a vehicle for truth.

We cannot know exactly how Bunyan's mind processed the scandal in which he found himself involved, but his incorporation of that scandal into *Grace Abounding* certainly seems to capitalize on this evidentiary power of narrative progression: within

the story of his spiritual autobiography, the attacks against him are easily reinterpreted (by both writer and reader) as evidence of Bunyan's salvation. This is not to suggest that Bunyan's presentation of the scandal as an attack from Satan is some sort of rhetorical ploy to convince the reader of his innocence (though it certainly would be rhetorically effective for a Christian reader). Rather, the episode illustrates the influence narrative progression could hold over the process of spiritual interpretation and the extent to which Bunyan and his readers apparently understood their spiritual lives in narrative terms. If Bunyan's contextualization of the scandal is effective in arguing his case (and his republication of *Grace Abounding* suggests that he thought it would be), it is because both writer and reader accept and expect a standard narrative trajectory of the Christian life and are likely to take as "truth" the significance of an event that best suits that story.

In the discussion that follows, I explore the relationship between narrative, self-knowledge, and spiritual assurance within a system of belief that encouraged its adherents to see their lives as stories and to read the events of their lives as connected episodes that both develop and reveal those stories. I am particularly interested in connections between narrative and evidence: how are personal, human stories used as evidence of divine truth? What sorts of stories were convincing, and why? How and why did earthly events provoke the crafting of narratives? What role might a narrative understanding of one's life as a Christian play in uncovering evidence of election and cultivating spiritual assurance? In looking closely at not only the stories believers told of their lives but also the ways in which they composed and presented those stories, I further investigate the transformative power of literary craft and the significance of that power as



part of the practice of experimental Calvinist spirituality. How do spiritual storytellers negotiate the uneasy balance between truth-telling and truth-*creating* in writing religious experience? What do their narrative practices and strategies suggest about the way early modern Protestants processed evidence from their earthly experiences? And what, in particular, might the formal elements of storytelling offer for cultivating spiritual assurance that diary-keeping, meditation, or other practices of self-examination might not?

For a case study, I turn to the personal narrative of Agnes Beaumont, a member of Bunyan's Bedford congregation and, as we learn from her story, one of the rumored "Misses" that likely provoked Bunyan's defense in *Grace Abounding*. Beaumont's narrative tells the remarkable story of a young woman's persistent effort to attend a February 1674 church meeting at Gamlinghay despite her father's disapproval, the dispute with her father that ensued, and her father's sudden death in the midst of the controversy.<sup>225</sup> Her tale, known currently as *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont*, recounts the hardships she faced during the conflict with her father and in the aftermath of his death, and attaches spiritual significance to those events through the effects of interpretive storytelling. We will see that much like Bunyan, Beaumont processes and embraces misfortune by contextualizing it as an expected and productive component of her Christian experience or life "course." But Beaumont's relative lack of spiritual authority or access to institutional or communal support renders interpretive

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<sup>225</sup> The Beaumonts were landowning farmers who lived in Edworth, a small village in Bedfordshire. Agnes lived in a small farmhouse with her father, John Beaumont, while her brother and his heiress wife lived in a larger house nearby. At the time of the events in Agnes's narrative, John Beaumont had passed most of his work on to his son and kept no servants; Agnes, in the absence of her deceased mother, was her father's primary caregiver and companion. For a detailed account of Agnes Beaumont's life, family, and community, see Patricia L. Bell, "Agnes Beaumont of Edworth," *Bunyan Studies* 10 (2002): 7-28.

evidence a much more critical and complicated issue in her text than in her pastor's efforts at self-defense. Where Bunyan straightforwardly claims that his scandal will "increase [his] glory," Beaumont uses her text more carefully and imaginatively to demonstrate her experience as revelatory of God's grace. Below, I explore the relationship between Beaumont's earthly story of hardship and the spiritual claim of election that the story puts forth, looking closely at the interpretive and representational practices that seek to establish the validity of the latter. Following the lead of historian Natalie Zemon Davis, I turn my ear to the "fictive" elements of Beaumont's account, investigating the creative strategies and imaginative impulses that shape her experience into a convincing demonstration of its veracity.<sup>226</sup> Because the "veracity" most at stake in Beaumont's text, however, is that of her faith, the narrative shaping in which her text engages is not only representational but integral both to the writer and to the Christian reader's reception of truth. Relying upon the shaping influence of providential signs and the narrative and conceptual frameworks of scripture to identify and validate her godliness, Beaumont's text shows that for the soteriologically minded early modern Calvinist, distinctions between story and reality were not only uncertain but also often unnecessary and inappropriate in the search for personal truth. Beaumont's story, we will see, not only relates but more fundamentally establishes and verifies her spiritual identity through the narrative connections it forges.

As Beaumont's tale is still largely unfamiliar, I provide an overview of its major events and primary characters here. Beaumont became a member of the Bedford church in 1672. Her personal connection with Bunyan began about two years later when the

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<sup>226</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).

twenty-one-year-old Beaumont, single and living with her widower father, quite scandalously accompanied Bunyan on horseback to a church meeting for which she could obtain no other form of transportation. Missing a meeting was “like death” to Beaumont, who was occasionally kept from attending by her wary father.<sup>227</sup> But Beaumont “prayed hard” to God before this particular meeting, and her father reluctantly agreed to let her go (41). Her plans to ride with Mr. Wilson (a church member and family friend), however, fell through, leaving Beaumont broken hearted but still desperate to go.<sup>228</sup> Praying that God might “make some way or other for my going,” Beaumont encountered Bunyan, who was riding alone on horseback and had unexpectedly stopped at her brother’s house on his way to Gamlinghay (43).

While Bunyan would eventually carry Beaumont to the meeting, this seemingly providential event was met at first with hesitation on Beaumont’s part and flat out refusal on Bunyan’s. The sight of Bunyan caused both “sorrow” and “joy” in Beaumont who feared he would deny her request for a ride due to the perceived social impropriety of such an offer. She was right: Bunyan was “cutting” as he refused her, saying that he knew her father would be “grievous angry” if he took her along on his horse (43). Beaumont explains that there were those in the town who had “incensed” her father against Bunyan—as Bunyan himself was apparently aware (44).<sup>229</sup> Her bold response that she

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<sup>227</sup> Agnes Beaumont, *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, ed. Vera J. Camden (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1992), 41. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

<sup>228</sup> Bell identifies Mr. John Wilson as an early member of the Bedford Meeting who later transferred to the Hitchin Congregation and was appointed pastor. See Bell, “Agnes Beaumont,” 21.

<sup>229</sup> Later in the text, Beaumont records the words of one such “evil-minded man in the town”: “I have stood and heard him say to my father, ‘Have you lived to these years to be led away with them? These be they that lead silly women captive into houses, and for a pretense make long prayers’” (62). Beaumont’s father occasionally attended the Bedford meetings with her; his disapproval of Bunyan appears to have been on a personal level, in response to rumors, rather than a spiritual one.

would “venture” her father’s anger if Bunyan agreed to carry her reads like a turning point in the story: choosing her spiritual well-being over her duty to obey her father (and, as she likely understood, her reputation in the community) was quite a risk indeed, and one, as Beaumont would find out, with serious personal and social consequences.

Unsurprisingly, Beaumont and Bunyan became the objects of a fair amount of community gossip. A “priest” identified as Mr. Lane witnessed their ride together—watching “as if he would have stared his eyes out”—and spread “wicked” reports through the town that Beaumont and her married pastor were having an affair (45).<sup>230</sup> It is clear from Beaumont’s story that Bunyan was already a figure of controversy at this time, and Lane’s actions were no doubt influenced by the rumors that had been circulating about him. A loyal minister of the Church of England, Lane would also have been at odds with dissenters in Bedford and may have jumped at the chance to discredit Bunyan’s ministry. But as Beaumont’s recent editor Vera Camden explains, the horseback ride itself would have been seen by Beaumont’s contemporaries as an “outrageous carnal opportunity.” Riding behind Bunyan would have required close physical contact and, as some apparently feared, invited sexual stimulation.<sup>231</sup> Beaumont insists that Lane’s claims of misconduct were “altogether false” (45). While she admits to feeling pride in riding behind “such a man as he was,” she reports speaking only of “the things of God” as they traveled to the meeting (44). Beaumont felt the very real effects of gossip and of her decision to care for her soul above her earthly position, however, upon returning to her father’s house and finding the door locked. Cold, wet, and dirty (she had had to walk part

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<sup>230</sup> Bell offers Anthony Lane, ordained in 1670 and serving as a minister in Langford at the time of Beaumont’s scandal, as a possible identity for “Mr. Lane.” See Bell, “Agnes Beaumont of Edworth,” 19.

<sup>231</sup> See Camden, “Introduction,” *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont*, 17.

of the way home, “ploshing through the dirt”), she called in at her father’s window, only to be turned away (46). Beaumont “should never come within his doors again,” her father insisted, unless she promised to stay away from Bunyan and his church (46-47).

Upon her father’s refusal to let Beaumont back into their home, Beaumont faced an agonizing choice between her physical and spiritual comfort. Unwilling to meet her father’s demands, she was forced to spend a freezing February night alone in prayer in the family’s barn. Over the next two days, she took some refreshment at her brother’s house, but returned to seek her father’s acceptance again and again. Each time, her father dismissed her as a “hussy” and refused her, once threatening to throw her into the pond (54, 58). Beaumont tries to reassure herself that her “soul is of more worth” than her father’s protection, that in her “eternal inheritance” she “had a better portion than silver or gold” (57, 53). These moments of spiritual clarity, however, gave way to the reality of her social and economic position. In need of shelter and, as she realized, entirely dependent on her father, Beaumont eventually gave in and (miserably) promised him to “never go to a meeting again, as long as you live, without your consent” (58).<sup>232</sup> Not only giving up the possibility of returning to church but now also feeling “Peter like” for doing it, Beaumont mourned her condition by “crying about as if my very heart would have burst asunder with grief and horror” (56, 60).<sup>233</sup>

Seeing his daughter’s distress once she was back in the house, John Beaumont showed signs of relenting, and the two were somewhat reconciled. He died, however, of

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<sup>232</sup> As yet unmarried, Beaumont was economically dependent on her father’s estate. John Beaumont voices the power he holds when he threatens to “never give [Agnes] a penny as long as he lived”; his daughter’s response captures the vulnerability of her position: “Thought I to myself, ‘What will become of me? To go to service and work for my living is a new thing to me; and so young as I am too. What shall I do?’” (52)

<sup>233</sup> Beaumont refers to the apostle Peter’s denial of Christ after his arrest. See Matt. 26:69-75.

“a pain at [his] heart” in the middle of the following night, without warning and before they had the chance to come to a suitable agreement (65). Agnes found that her troubles were only just beginning as the petty neighborhood gossip that had been circulating about her escalated into charges of patricide. A Mr. Feery, who had heard about Beaumont’s horseback ride with Bunyan and about the dispute with her father that followed, accused her of murder by poison. Her domestic controversy became a public and life-threatening one as she found herself standing trial for her father’s death. Beaumont’s narrative records in detail the proceedings of her trial—the coroner’s investigation, the calling of witnesses, the reactions of the jury. Most interestingly, it also preserves Beaumont’s own testimony and documents her mentality while preparing for and enduring interrogation. Beaumont was cleared of all charges (there was never any real evidence against her), but her account of the trial highlights the vulnerability of Beaumont’s position in the community as both a woman and a dissenter. Accused of murder because she had the audacity to disobey her father and to risk her reputation in order to service her soul, Beaumont recognized that her word would mean little if the jury found Feery’s story plausible.<sup>234</sup> Had Beaumont been convicted, she would have been burned at the stake.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Feery cites the argument between Beaumont and her father when questioned about his accusations during the trial; we learn late in Beaumont’s narrative, however, that he had also been disappointed in “some design” he had on Beaumont in the past, which offers another motivation for his attack. The implication is that he had been interested in Beaumont as a wife for either himself (his wife was deceased, but he was much older than Beaumont), or for his son. See Bell, “Agnes Beaumont of Edworth,” 19-20 for more information on the Feery family.

<sup>235</sup> Burning was the traditional seventeenth-century punishment for women found guilty of petty treason, a charge that included the murder of a lawful superior, such as a husband or father. See Matthew Lockwood, “From Treason to Homicide: Changing Conceptions of the Law of Petty Treason in Early Modern England,” *Journal of Legal History* 34 (2013): 31-49. On patterns of early modern domestic crime, see J.A. Sharpe, “Domestic Homicide in Early Modern England,” *The Historical Journal* 24 (1981): 29-48. On women, crime, and punishment in the period, see Jenny Kermode and Garthine Walker, eds., *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

Until very recently, Beaumont's connection with Bunyan has been largely responsible for preserving her narrative in critical memory. Twentieth-century scholarship generally valued the narrative, Vera Camden acknowledges, "as a footnote to Bunyan studies, an interesting glimpse into one of the various controversies which surrounded John Bunyan in his lifetime."<sup>236</sup> Two recent editions of the text, however, have helped to revive interest in Beaumont herself and in her narrative on its own account.<sup>237</sup> Readers are now taking a closer critical look at the narrative, which dramatizes the experience of a young, unmarried woman who must navigate the often conflicting demands of patriarchal authority, societal expectation, and religious belief, as an indispensable resource for studying the domestic and spiritual practices of an early modern woman and the dynamics of her social world. Camden, one of the first to resuscitate the narrative in the late twentieth century, casts Beaumont as a feminist hero of sorts, reading her text as a "domestic instancing" of the dissenting spirit of the late-seventeenth century: "like Bunyan himself," Camden argues, "who resisted the fathers of the Established Church, Beaumont resists patriarchal authority to obey her conscience."<sup>238</sup> Tasmin Spargo explores Beaumont's narrative as "the story of a daughter attempting to negotiate a position of dutiful obedience to two rival father figures—her own father and Bunyan, her pastoral father." She argues that the authority of Beaumont's voice in the text interrogates the period's "implicit connection between divinity and

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<sup>236</sup> Camden, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>237</sup> Camden's 1992 edition was published as part of the Early Women Writers 1650-1800 series by Colleagues Press; Stachniewski and Pacheco's 1998 publication in *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies* presents Beaumont's narrative in the context of spiritual autobiography (and alongside Bunyan's).

<sup>238</sup> Camden, "Introduction," 1, 20. See also Camden's "Domestic Dissent in the *Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont*," *History of European Ideas* 11 (1989): 211-24.

patriarchy.”<sup>239</sup> Spargo has also drawn attention to the problematic excesses of Beaumont’s spiritual desire, exploring the text’s circulating stories and gossip as attempts to explain away “that which threatens existing orders of knowledge and power.”<sup>240</sup> Adjusting the critical focus on Beaumont’s story from Bunyan’s controversy to Beaumont’s own, these studies highlight the often conflicting power relations that shaped Beaumont’s experience and have generated interest in the text’s voicing of an early modern woman’s struggle for independence through spiritual dissent.

Beaumont’s narrative further documents the way standards of acceptable female behavior could limit a seventeenth-century woman’s access to the comforts of spiritual practice, despite the gender inclusiveness that nonconformist spirituality theoretically offered. It presents obedience as a fraught issue for women whose domestic, social, and religious obligations were often in conflict, highlighting the complexity of a woman’s choice to commit herself to a spiritual life.<sup>241</sup> That access to religious choice was gendered in the Beaumonts’ community is made clear, for example, in Agnes’s interactions with her brother after being locked out of her father’s house. The younger John Beaumont was sympathetic to his sister’s cause and appealed repeatedly (though unsuccessfully) to their father on her behalf. He also took Agnes in when she needed rest and food. As their father continued to refuse her, however, John made clear to Agnes that she was under no circumstances to yield to their father’s demands: “you are now brought upon the stage,” John told his sister, “to act for Christ and his ways” (56). While Agnes

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<sup>239</sup> Spargo, “Contra-dictions,” 179, 183.

<sup>240</sup> Spargo, “The Fathers’ Seductions,” 266.

<sup>241</sup> Bernard Capp discusses Beaumont’s “irreconcilable moral obligations” in “Gender, Conscience and Casuistry: Women and Conflicting Obligations in Early Modern England,” *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700*, ed. Harald Braun and Edward Vallance (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 116-31.



agreed with her brother and firmly believed that she would never sacrifice her soul by giving in, her position was much more complicated than John's idealistic formulation allowed. Agnes was bound to her father for economic stability and social acceptance in a way her brother was not. And of course, obedience to male figures of authority was the duty of a Christian woman in the Beaumonts' world. In the choice between God the father and her earthly father, there is no option in which Agnes can *entirely* "act for Christ."

In drawing much needed attention to the intersections of early modern women's domestic, social, and religious lives as dramatized through Beaumont's text, however, feminist studies like Camden and Spargo's tend to obscure the specific spiritual context of the narrative, or at least to push that context into the background. If Agnes Beaumont's narrative documents the worldly challenges she faces as a woman in the world, it does so in an effort to claim those hardships as part of the writer's personal Christian experience and to explore the significance of her suffering as part of her salvation story. While Beaumont no doubt felt the social complexities of her situation, and while the interpretive clarity with which she later recorded these events was likely somewhat removed from her immediate experience of them, the narrative Beaumont went on to write confidently presents her experience as one of "fiery" spiritual trial—a story that will witness to her experience of both "sore trials and temptations" and God's "teaching and comforting presence" (37-38). It is important to keep in mind, then, that whatever else Beaumont's narrative reveals about the economic and social conditions that shaped her experience, it most explicitly claims to record a series of events that were deliberately "dispensed"

upon Agnes for her own spiritual edification.<sup>242</sup> And, because it thus records not merely events but spiritual “exercises” sent from God, her testimony makes the implicit claim that the receiver of these divine “dispensations” is one of God’s elect. As we saw from Dionys Fitzherbert’s account of spiritual trial in the previous chapter, a trial of faith was seen as God’s way of (deservedly) punishing his true believers for their sins, of testing their faith in difficult times, or of teaching them to rely more fully upon his grace.<sup>243</sup> The experience of such a trial provided spiritual comfort in retrospect as the believer, having survived the affliction, could recognize signs of God’s graceful presence. While Beaumont’s story can be said, then, as Tasmin Spargo has written, to “domesticate” the spiritual, it just as certainly spiritualizes the domestic, reading events of home and community as providentially significant and divinely ordered.<sup>244</sup>

Beaumont’s awareness that her misfortunes are under God’s control surfaces throughout her narrative. God warns Beaumont that she will have “something to meet with” by sending relevant scriptures through her mind; he also comforts her in times of prayer, encouraging her to “think it not strange concerning the firey trials that are to try [her]” (38, 48-49).<sup>245</sup> Even in the most frightening moments of her murder trial when faced with the prospect of death, Beaumont recognizes God’s providential hand at work.

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<sup>242</sup> “Thus I have told you,” Beaumont writes in closing her narrative, “of the good and evil things that I met with in that dispensation” (83). “Dispensation” captures Agnes’s sense of receiving her sufferings directly from a higher power, but it also infuses the crisis with a sense of meaningful order (the word was commonly associated with the special administration of divine providence).

<sup>243</sup> Fitzherbert’s experience with despair was a humbling trial sent to rekindle her devotion after she had grown “cold,” “profane,” and “too secure” (179).

<sup>244</sup> Spargo, “The Fathers’ Seductions,” 265.

<sup>245</sup> See 1 Peter 4:12 (“Beloved, think it not strange...”). The next verse tells the believer to “rejoice” in such a trial, “inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”

From a passive perspective that had become conventional in narratives of spiritual experience, she watches her life unfold before her as if on stage in, to use Thomas Beard's phrase, a "theater of God's judgments": "I see my life lay at stake," she recalls, "for I did not know how far God might suffer [Feery] and the devil to go" (74).<sup>246</sup> Statements like these remind the reader that earthly affliction is part of God's plan. But they also remind us that this is a story of election made manifest through the experience of spiritual trial. Beaumont, in the authorial position, obviously did *not* lose her life, and thus was not relinquished to Satan as a reprobate. Throughout the narrative, Beaumont's recorded hardships are infused with an evidentiary quality, announced as they are in the text's opening sentences as spiritual "exercise[s]" that would "work together for good to [Agnes's] poor soul" (37). Beaumont claims that "the more trouble and sorrow" she has experienced, "the more of God's presence" she has felt as well; the reader is prompted, then, as the narrator's sufferings accumulate, to read Agnes less as a victim of earthly misfortune and more as an exemplary and even fortunate Christian whose faith has been tried and reaffirmed (37).

The trouble with examining Beaumont's story as a narrative of evidentiary spiritual experience is that in many ways, it defies the expectations with which we have come to approach these sorts of texts. Bernard Capp proposes that critical interest in Beaumont's text has been relatively low in part because "Agnes's voice remains hard to position within the main strands of autobiographical writing in the period," and

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<sup>246</sup> The early modern understanding of providence enabled such a view of God's direct involvement of earthly events. Thomas Beard recorded acts of divine intervention in a collection he titled *The Theatre of God's Judgments* (London, 1597). See also Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (1999); Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (2005); and pages 26-30 of this thesis.

particularly within the types of spiritual writing with which early modern women most frequently engaged.<sup>247</sup> Beaumont does not quite speak with the prophetic voice of many nonconformist female writers, nor does she rely upon the recommendation of a male pastor or family member to endorse the truthfulness of her text.<sup>248</sup> She also does not write the conventional conversion narrative that is exemplified in Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* or that Beaumont herself would likely have delivered in front of her Bedford congregation in order to gain membership.<sup>249</sup> Her text is not a collection of signs that led her to understand her identity as one of God's elect or that first opened her eyes to the goodness of God's grace. Instead, Beaumont begins her narrative from a position of faith that has already been tested through "many and great trials" and that has been well maintained through regular prayer and spiritual self-examination (37). It was typical for Beaumont, she claims, to receive "great consolations" from God when a trial was upon her, and she had already experienced the "sweetness" of God's promises upon being carried through such a trial (38). She is not blindsided by suffering like Fitzherbert, who, quite conventionally, finds herself "sliding" into sin and suddenly overtaken by the

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<sup>247</sup> Bernard Capp, "The Travails of Agnes Beaumont," *Women, Agency and the Law, 1300-1700*, ed. Bronach Kane and Fiona Williamson (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 113-124 (121).

<sup>248</sup> Capp separates Beaumont from period's "prophetic" women writers who "wrote as God's mouthpiece" on the grounds of her distinctly personal concerns (she does not, for example, deliver divine warnings for her community). While Beaumont makes no explicitly prophetic claims in her narrative, however, her readings of providential signs of things to come in her own life lend an implicitly prophetic quality to her voice, as I address in the next section of this chapter. See Capp, "Travails," 121; and on the prophetic voice in early modern women's writing, Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>249</sup> Agnes officially joined the Bedford congregation in 1672, two years before the events of her narrative took place. The delivery of an oral testimony of faith was a standard membership procedure in Bunyan's church. The Bedford Church Book records in November 1672 that "the desires of Sister Behemont to walk in fellowship with us was propounded and was received at the next church meeting" (see Kathleen Lynch, "'Her Name Agnes,'" 74).

“roaring lion” (Satan), who “walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”<sup>250</sup> While her father’s death was certainly a shock, Beaumont seems to have understood the nature of her experience the entire time—or at least, that is the impression the text creates. Her story does recount moments of spiritual sorrow and doubt, particularly after giving in to her father’s demands and, as Agnes sees it, denying Christ. But she never appears to lose faith completely: she turns to prayer in these moments and receives assurances from God that she would not be “tempted and afflicted above what [she] was able” (63). Accused of murder, she knows herself not only to be innocent of the crime but also to be entirely “clear in the sight of God” (72). And, understanding that she may face death anyway, she is able to believe that she would die a martyr: “if I did burn at a stake,” Beaumont recalls consoling herself, “the Lord would give me his presence” (75). This confidence stands in sharp contrast to the often paralyzing doubt and despair that marks much of the spiritual writing of the period, as we saw with Fitzherbert in the previous chapter and as is on display in Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. Fitzherbert’s trial strips away not only her confidence in God’s favor but even her ability to pray for his help: God rejects prayer from a despairing heart, she fears, and thus she cannot “dare” to “present [her]self before his majesty to do it.”<sup>251</sup> Bunyan’s uncertainties famously persist to the very end of his narrative: his conclusion is riddled with fears and sins that have continued to plague him even after conversion and throughout his ministry. Beaumont’s closing remarks, on the other hand, sound defiant: “mock on,” she invites the members of her community who continue to suspect her of misbehavior, for “there is a day a coming will clear all” (83).

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<sup>250</sup> Fitzherbert, 181, 111.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

Kathleen Lynch calls Beaumont's decision to start her narrative from a position of assurance an "unfortunate departure" from the conventions of Bunyan's conversion narrative, which likely served as a model for her writing.<sup>252</sup> By "transgressively" starting her story from "the wrong end," Lynch explains, Beaumont offers her personal spiritual assurance as evidence of the truthfulness of her text, which, as the events of her own story suggest, was likely not enough to cultivate communal verification or support.<sup>253</sup> If Beaumont's profession of faith within her community was insufficient to ward off the slander provoked by her ride with Bunyan or her father's death, her claims of assurance were unlikely to convince a reader to take her written testimony seriously. Familiar with rumors that damaged the reputations of both Agnes and the minister whose church validated her claims to godliness, readers of the narrative were probably prepared to distrust Beaumont's voice. As Lynch puts it, "[t]he life in the text was challenged by deep-seated cultural anxieties about the life of the flesh."<sup>254</sup> It is certainly possible that, as several modern readers of Beaumont's text have suggested, the narrative's departures from convention and Beaumont's own self-assuredness can account for the fact that the text did not reach print publication until 1760, forty years after Beaumont's death.

Bernard Capp finds it "not very surprising" that the narrative remained unpublished in Beaumont's life as it "conformed neither in content nor style" to the "standard form" and

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<sup>252</sup> Bunyan's influence on Beaumont's writing is apparent in a number of textual echoes. Critics typically point to Beaumont's assertion that "there was scarce a corner in the house, or barns, or cowhouse, or stable, or closes, under the hedges, or in the wood, but I was made to pour out my soul to God" (39), which appears to answer Bunyan's preface to *Grace Abounding*: "Remember, I say...your tears and prayers to God; yea, how you sighed under every hedge for mercy...Have you forgot the Close, the Milk-house, the Stable, the Barn, and the like, where God did visit your Soul?" (5). Beaumont also echoes Bunyan as she describes scriptures that "run" through her mind and "sound" in her heart.

<sup>253</sup> Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 215-16.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

“tight set of conventions” that spiritual autobiography had developed in the seventeenth century.<sup>255</sup> Capp further supposes that Beaumont’s “stubborn independence” would have made contemporary readers “uncomfortable,” and that the challenge her story presented to the gender politics of her day would have been too “unsettling” to allow the community to embrace the narrative.<sup>256</sup> Beaumont was “too self-confident,” Lynch similarly proposes, for her story to be celebrated by her own nonconformist community, her spiritual authority left too much in question by the social circumstances of her experience. It is only years later—once sufficiently removed from both the disruption of rumor and the perceived social threat of Beaumont and Bunyan themselves—that Beaumont’s story could be publicly promoted as a model of godly behavior.<sup>257</sup>

There is no evidence, however, that formal publication was Beaumont’s aim, and we cannot be sure that her tale was rejected by her community simply because it did not immediately find its way into print. Her story does not read like one that was written to be printed or intended to reach a large audience. Its tone is distinctly conversational, the voice fresh, engaging, and unguarded. As Capp has noted, the narrative has “the flavor of an oral account,” probably preserving the sort of language Agnes used to repeat her story over and over to her closest acquaintances.<sup>258</sup> Indeed, there is evidence from the text itself that Agnes had been sharing her story with friends and discussing the significance of her experiences before putting her account down in writing. She draws attention throughout to details and incidents whose significance did not become apparent until later, when

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<sup>255</sup> Capp, “The Travails of Agnes Beaumont,” 124.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 124, 122.

<sup>257</sup> Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography*, 219.

<sup>258</sup> Capp, “The Travails of Agnes Beaumont,” 115.

someone pointed them out in conversation.<sup>259</sup> The intimacy of Beaumont's language suggests that her written narrative was intended for a similarly close audience of friends—probably other women—within her congregation who likely would have been in the practice of sharing and interpreting their personal stories and spiritual experiences. Many of Beaumont's sentences begin with “So,” “Well,” “Now,” and variations of “To tell you the truth,” preserving the conversational, unpolished language of intimate storytelling that also lends a sense of familiarity to the writer-reader relationship. The earliest extant manuscript of the narrative has no markings of formal presentation.<sup>260</sup> It is untitled, has no paragraph divisions, and features erratic punctuation and spelling. Beaumont does not offer any particular reason for recording her tale in writing beyond telling the reader (whom she addresses directly as “you”) “of the good and evil things” that she met with during her experience (83). While she addresses the rumors that have circulated about her when appropriate in the text, she makes no explicit indication that her writing is offered as a “correction” of public opinion as, for example, Dionys Fitzherbert so ardently did.<sup>261</sup> Rather, she offers her story as simply that—a story, and one from which she seems to assume both her innocence and her godliness will be taken as self-evident or directly manifest.

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<sup>259</sup> Sister Prudon, for example, is said to have identified the prophetic significance of one of Agnes's dreams (40). See also Beaumont's comments about the same dream (67); and on the threatening words of her accuser, Mr. Feery, that “nobody took notice of...till afterwards” (69).

<sup>260</sup> Camden writes that this manuscript is “very likely” Agnes's original text, but it is possible that both extant manuscripts are fair copies. See Camden, “Introduction,” 7. Lynch provides a detailed discussion of the manuscripts and of the circulation and publication history of the text in “Her Name Agnes,” 88-93.

<sup>261</sup> See the prefatory material to Dionys Fitzherbert's manuscript in *Women, Madness and Sin: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), esp. 149-171. Fitzherbert wishes to correct the popular reading of her spiritual despair as “madness,” not only for herself but for all those who have experienced such distress.



Beaumont's text, then, offers a relatively unmediated opportunity to explore a seventeenth-century believer's efforts to claim and communicate the truth of her spiritual condition through providential storytelling.<sup>262</sup> Eschewing the niceties of formal presentation and missing the conventional "proofs" of veracity provided by supporting documents, prefatory analyses, or, for women, deference to the proper male figures of authority, Beaumont's story had to stand on its own as spiritual testimony. And it certainly appears to have done so successfully. If the narrative's delayed publication does expose the social pressures that may have initially kept Beaumont's testimony from being publicly accepted as truth, it also attests to the ultimate effectiveness of the story itself. It is Agnes's own testimony, not the rumors and misinterpretations that prevailed at the time of her crisis, that remained relevant. The Reverend Samuel James first published the narrative in a volume called *An Abstract of the Gracious Dealings of God, with several Eminent Christians, in their Conversion and Sufferings* (1760). The title confirms Beaumont as an "eminent Christian" and her experience as an example of God's "gracious dealings." James's preface announces that readers will find in the collection records of "high [spiritual] attainments," which should be met "with acceptance from those who desire to live much in communion with Christ."<sup>263</sup> The volume went through ten editions and became, Vera Camden tells us, "something of a nonconformist

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<sup>262</sup> By calling our encounter with Beaumont's story "unmediated," I do not wish to imply that the text provides direct access to the experience itself (this is, of course, impossible), but rather to her interpretation and representation of it. Beaumont's efforts to interpret and communicate personal experience do not appear to be as heavily influenced by the dictates of formal conventionality or explicit public function as the records of, for example, clerical figures from the period writing for the edification of their parishioners, prospective church members who must demonstrate their conversion in specific ways, or writers who simply seek publication. And yet we will see that the stories she tells *are* conventional, which opens a discussion of the sorts of thought patterns that serviced spiritual investigation and reflection (and why these patterns grew to be conventional in the first place).

<sup>263</sup> Samuel James, *An Abstract of the Gracious Dealings of God, with several Eminent Christians, in their Conversion and Sufferings* (London, 1760), iv, i.

classic.”<sup>264</sup> Beaumont’s own narrative was popular enough for the Reverend Samuel Burder to republish it in 1801 as a separate tract. Burder’s new title, *Real Religion: exemplified in the singular experience and great sufferings of Agnes Beaumont, of Edworth, in the County of Bedford*, further validated Beaumont’s spiritual experiences as “singular,” “great,” and, importantly, “real.”

James, Burder, and the audiences who kept Beaumont’s text in demand apparently found in Beaumont’s story itself, which recorded no evidence of public or formal support from her immediate community and, indeed, gave hints to the contrary, convincing evidence of Beaumont’s election and of the spiritual significance of her crisis. Her editors were willing to provide the masculine and ministerial validation of promoting the text, inaccessible to Beaumont during her lifetime, presumably based on the persuasiveness and clarity of her writing alone.<sup>265</sup> Yet surprisingly little scholarly attention has been devoted to exploring *how* Beaumont crafts such narrative evidence or what the text reveals about the interpretive and creative process of finding in experience a convincing, soteriologically oriented story. Interestingly, in an effort to present Beaumont’s narrative as something more than just a “good story,” recent critics of the text have neglected one of its primary contemporary generic contexts: that of providential storytelling.<sup>266</sup> Camden’s approach to the text, for example, as “an unusually candid record of a domestic crisis” that provides a “valuable inlet into the seventeenth-century

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<sup>264</sup> Camden, “Introduction,” 9.

<sup>265</sup> That the story was preserved in manuscript for nearly a century after it was written (and for forty years after Beaumont’s death) also attests to the narrative’s value within Beaumont’s circle, regardless of its lack of immediate formal support.

<sup>266</sup> G. B. Harrison edited the first modern edition of Beaumont’s text in 1929, recognizing it as a story “too good to be forgotten” (Camden, “Introduction,” 9).

family” downplays the narrative’s more literary qualities. While it is true, as Camden writes, that “Beaumont’s gift for story telling does more than entertain or edify,” we must keep in mind that the practice of storytelling itself was integral to the seventeenth-century spiritual experience. For believers who recognized distinct patterns of experience in the lives of the elect (and the reprobate), telling a “good story”—a Christian story—of one’s life was quite literally a matter of life and death. Spargo similarly laments that Beaumont’s writing “has been read and processed as a story,” suggesting that such attention has erased some of the text’s historical specificity and “irregularity.” Yet when we take the text seriously as a story, and consider storytelling as an epistemological and spiritual practice, Beaumont’s narrative and stylistic efforts become central components in fully appreciating the document’s historical, spiritual, and social contexts and in understanding how it works as a text. How does Beaumont present *her* story as God’s truth?

In the following discussion, I will take a closer look at Beaumont’s style and narrative practices to consider how she offers a tale of the most traumatic days of her life as a story of God’s work on her soul. In doing so, I argue that while Beaumont’s form, genre, and voice may not have been conventional for her time, the investigative and interpretive processes at work in her writing showcase conventionally Puritan attitudes toward providential order, correspondence between the earthly and spiritual worlds, and the narrative trajectory of a Christian life. In their introduction to Beaumont’s text in *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco note that in situating her spiritual narrative so vividly within her domestic and social surroundings, Beaumont’s story offers a glimpse into not just the dynamics of her

world, but “the mentalité with which puritans inhabited” the conditions and structures of that world.<sup>267</sup> Through a discussion of Beaumont’s interpretive and storytelling strategies and of what those strategies reveal about the way experimental Calvinists processed spiritual evidence, I identify that “mentalité” as one driven largely by narrative—one that approaches everyday occurrences as components of both one’s personal salvation story and, by extension, the story of God’s grace.

### **Crafting Providence in Beaumont’s Narrative**

Before the major events of her narrative took place, Agnes Beaumont had a dream about a fallen apple tree in her father’s yard. In the dream, the tree was hit by a “very sudden storm of wind,” which “blew this tree up by the roots.” “I run to it,” Agnes recalls,

as it lay upon the ground, to lift it up to have it grow in its place again. I thought I see it turned up by its roots, and my thoughts stood lifting at it as long as I had any strength, as it lay upon the ground, first at one arm, then at another, but could not stir it out of its place to have it grow in its place again; at last left it, and run to my brother’s to call help to set this tree in its place again. And I thought when my brother and his men did come, they could not make this tree grow in its place again. (41)

The dream is clearly presented as portentous. Some of her dreams, Beaumont believed, were sent “of God,” which she retrospectively realized were meant to “signify something” (40-41). She links the dream of the falling tree directly to the event of her father’s death, a connection initially made by a friend (Sister Prudon) in whom Agnes had confided. Though Agnes had not realized the significance of the dream at the time, she would later recognize it as one of a number of signs she had received from God that

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<sup>267</sup> Pacheco and Stachniewski, “Introduction,” *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, xxxix.

she would soon have “some hard thing to meet with” (39-40). The dream, that is, was a divine warning of an approaching spiritual trial.

Opinions (both learned and popular) about the significance of dreams in the seventeenth century were various and divided. Though contested, the belief that dreams might be of supernatural origin and that they could even represent a direct communication with God was certainly still current in theological discussions, and rather widespread in the popular imagination.<sup>268</sup> This belief was perhaps most publicly visible in records of “visionary” or “prophetic” (and in many cases, apocalyptic) dreams associated with the sectaries of the civil war period.<sup>269</sup> But seemingly providential or revelatory dreams also appear frequently in the more intimate settings of experimental spiritual autobiography, suggesting that early modern Christians turned to dreams as potential sites for self-examination and sources of personal spiritual understanding. And while we must approach dream records with the understanding that some details of a dream are likely to have been misremembered, omitted, or even directly altered through the process of constructing from the experience a meaningful narrative, we might explore

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<sup>268</sup> See Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 128-32; and Patricia Crawford, “Women’s Dreams in Early Modern England,” *History Workshop Journal* 49 (2000): 129-41. Janine Rivière examines controversies surrounding beliefs in the supernatural origin of dreams in “‘Visions of the Night’: The Reform of Popular Dream Beliefs in Early Modern England,” *Parergon* 20 (2003): 109-138. For more on early modern dream theories, see the essays collected in *Dreams, Dreamers, and Visions: The Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Ann Marie Plane and Leslie Tuttle (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); and Peter Holland, “‘The Interpretation of Dreams’ in the Renaissance,” *Reading Dreams: The Interpretation of Dreams from Chaucer to Shakespeare*, ed. Peter Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 125-146.

<sup>269</sup> Rivière supposes that the religious and political uncertainties of the mid-seventeenth century in particular led many people “to look to dreams for an answer” (“Visions of the Night,” 111).

these constructed narratives and the uses to which they are put as exercises in the creation of knowledge, self-discovery, or spiritual self-expression.<sup>270</sup>

For Beaumont, who, I argue, records dreams as evidence of the workings of divine providence, dream narratives create a space through which to map personal experience onto God's plan. Beaumont's belief in the supernatural origin of dreams was likely a source of personal comfort in making sense of the death of her father. If dreaming of the fallen apple tree was truly a warning of her father's impending death, it was also (retrospectively) an assurance that his death was predetermined, and thus that both John Beaumont's life and Agnes's own were under God's control.<sup>271</sup> Beaumont reminds the reader of her dream as she narrates the experience of finding her father collapsed on his chamber floor:

And I run to him, screaming and crying, "Father, Father,"; and I put my hands under his arms, and lift at him to lift him up, and stood lifting at him, and crying till my strength was gone, first at one arm, then at another. As some afterwards said, my dreaming of the apple tree did signify something of this. There I stood, lifting, and crying, till I was almost spent... (67)

Within the narrative of such an unexpected, chaotic event, the dream reference is a reminder of divine providence—an effort to reestablish a sense of order in a world that momentarily seems to have lost it. The reader is expected to recall the details of Agnes's dream, in which the dreaming Agnes "stood lifting at [the fallen tree] as long as I had any strength, as it lay upon the ground, first at one arm, then at another" (41), directly echoing the language and imagery used to describe the moment of John Beaumont's death. The "arms" or branches of the tree become her father's arms, and Agnes finds her strength

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<sup>270</sup> Patricia Crawford takes a similar approach in "Women's Dreams," 129-30.

<sup>271</sup> Crawford proposes that dreaming, by assuring Agnes that God was "overseeing her life," may have further helped her to "come to terms with her own unresolved guilt for her defiance of her father" ("Women's Dreams," 136).

insufficient to restore tree or father to its proper place. As in the dream, Agnes then runs to her brother for help; as in the dream, her brother and his servants arrive but are not successful. The two stories—dream narrative and death narrative—correspond so closely that both are heightened in significance within the text, augmenting, to the providentially minded reader, the invocation of divine order. Within the text, the experience of John Beaumont's death validates the *spiritual* experience—in the sense of experience as evidence, as felt faith—of Agnes's dream, which in turn supports her reading of her father's death as spiritual trial. God puts his believers to the test, but their trials are in his hands; Beaumont presents her dream as evidence of such guidance in her own life.

The reader's familiarity with the dream upon reading the account of John Beaumont's death further influences his or her reception of the actual event as it unfolds. There is no real potential for suspense here; we know from Agnes's opening pages that her father will die. But the prophetic dream instills in the event of John Beaumont's death a more distinct sense of determinacy that extends to the written text itself. Beyond knowing what will happen, we receive the actions of Agnes, her father, and her brother as though they were providentially *bound* to commit them. When we read Agnes's account of the predetermined episode, we further accept its recreation of the text of the recounted dream as a mark of truth. Fulfilling the reader's expectation of correspondence between the spiritual and earthly worlds (here represented by the dream sequence and the earthly event it precedes), the episode endows Agnes's voice with an illusion of accuracy (her account is *just* as the prophetic dream predicted). As the reader recognizes John Beaumont's death as a direct reenactment of Agnes's dream—and thus as an unfolding of

divine prophecy—he or she comes to recognize Agnes herself not only as a reliable narrator but as a vessel for communicating God’s truth.

Even as she quite actively writes her story, then, and fashions her spiritual identity in doing so, Beaumont’s account gives the impression that it is God’s story, not merely her own, that she is both living and telling. She calls her ordeal a divine “dispensation.” More importantly, I argue, the story she tells of that ordeal convincingly *demonstrates* the guiding hand of God through the effects of literary craft, offering “evidence” of spiritual significance that a like-minded reader is unlikely to miss. Indeed, the most defining feature of Beaumont’s interpretive style is that she avoids outwardly didactic commentary and, instead, provides the reader with suggestive providential experiences that make the relevant interpretive claims for her. Prophetic dreams are one example of these experiences. Dreams, if we allow them the potential for supernatural origin and the degree of authority that many believed them to have, hover between self-conceived and divinely ordained truth, between interior thought and exterior “fact” of godly design. By strategically incorporating hers into her narrative of spiritual trial, Agnes Beaumont offers dreams as complex but powerful sources of interpretive evidence—evidence that seems simultaneously objective and undeniable (due to its supposed divine origin) and profoundly personal (in that it occurs entirely within the dreamer’s own mind). Dreams might provide evidence, then, of both divine providence and individual experience: they are both internally and externally significant, brought upon the dreamer from an external and authoritative source but received and experienced within.

The recording of dreams moreover puts Beaumont in a seemingly prophetic position without explicitly claiming such authority: it is through the unfolding of the



story itself that her dreams are revealed to be portentous, and thus that her father's death emerges as an element in God's plan for her own spiritual development. As part of the text, dream narratives function as material evidence of spiritual trial that a reader seems to collect alongside Agnes herself, rather than through explicitly doctrinal or directive remarks. Patricia Crawford supposes that because of the dreamer's potential position as prophet or visionary, writing dream stories could provide an early modern woman with "access to her own knowledge," which, because of social restrictions on women's voices, had little other opportunity to emerge.<sup>272</sup> Because dreams blur the line between collected evidence and interpretation, and because records of prophetic dreams are simultaneously God's stories and dreamer's own, the telling of dreams could further provide indirect access to the position of spiritual interpretive authority that a male (and especially, ministerial) writer might more directly claim. The dream makes Beaumont's point for her, and its validity and authenticity are implied by common providential belief, not asserted by her own questionable (because of Beaumont's specific situation within the community, but also because she is female) authority.

If dreams establish a correspondence between God's will and Beaumont's own experience, prayer structures that correspondence as one of cause and effect. When news arrives of Bunyan's church meeting at Gamlinghay, Agnes falls into prayer for two things: first, that God "would please to make way for my going [to the meeting], and make my father willing," and second, that he would "please to give me his presence there at his table" (41). Both prayers were "grant[ed]," Agnes claims, as she ultimately prevails on her stubborn father for permission and finds the church service to be "a feast of fat

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<sup>272</sup> Crawford, "Women's Dreams," 138-39.

things,” receiving “such a sight of Jesus Christ that brake my heart to pieces” (42, 45). Prayer is also held responsible for Agnes’s presence at the meeting in the first place. Realizing that her ride had fallen through, Beaumont prayed that God would “put it into the heart of somebody to come this way,” staging Bunyan’s “unexpected” arrival as a providential answer to her prayer request (43). By anchoring the events of her story in the providential logic of divine warnings and answered prayers, Beaumont’s narrative imposes order and meaning on everyday occurrences, finding and creating spiritual significance through her narrative efforts.

Most significantly, Beaumont’s text establishes providential order through the pervasive use of scripture as an authoritative interpretive gloss on her experience. As I have stated above, Beaumont’s writing gives the rather unconventional impression that she understood her experience to be a spiritual trial as the event itself was occurring. And yet, even her awareness is presented as evidence of God’s work as it is paradoxically divorced from her own creative or discerning capacities: understanding is forced *upon* her through divine communication, typically in the form of recalled verses of scripture that are “suddenly” brought to her attention. Biblical passages that refer to periods of trial and deliverance pulse through the text as a sort of refrain, identifying for the reader the significance of events as they occur in Beaumont’s narration, and mirroring Beaumont’s own experience of “receiving” them in her mind. In her darkest periods, Beaumont hears God’s promise that “In six troubles I will be with thee, and in seven I will not leave thee,” and recalls that “When thou goest through the fire, I will be with thee; and through the waters, they shall not overflow thee” (63, 74).<sup>273</sup> When she needs courage to stand trial,

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<sup>273</sup> See Job 5:19; Isaiah 43:2.

scripture reminds her of the perseverance of saints: “The righteous shall hold on their way, and they that have clean hands, shall grow stronger and stronger” (76).<sup>274</sup> These passages “run through” or “drop upon” Beaumont’s mind, suggesting that divine agency is at work even at the level of Beaumont’s own thoughts. Incorporating scripture in this way allows Beaumont to present the events of her experience and their spiritual interpretations through a sort of dialogue between Beaumont herself and the voice of God, with scripture providing a storehouse of evidence through which to validate her spiritual story.

Quite often, God’s word speaks to Beaumont’s situation in a manner that is not just comforting but spiritually constructive or consequential, as when, for example, she is locked out of her father’s house:

But these and many frightful thoughts came into my mind, as this, how did I know but that I might be knocked on my head in the barn before morning; or if not so, I might catch my death by the cold. . . Thought I, “It may be so indeed, it being a lone house, and none near it; and it is a very cold night, I shall never be able to abide in the barn till morning.” But at last one scripture after another came into my mind to encourage me in that work, as that word, “Pray to thy father that seeth in secret, and thy father that seeth thee in secret shall reward thee openly.” (48)

Scripture comforts Beaumont when faced with the prospect of spending a cold and solitary night in the family’s barn. But it also provides an opportunity for her to enact the familiar biblical injunction that the pious Christian pray to God “in secret,” when no one is watching.<sup>275</sup> The reference reconfigures Beaumont’s situation of physical crisis as the ideal setting for spiritual development. Moreover, this interpretive transformation instills

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<sup>274</sup> Job 17:9.

<sup>275</sup> The relevant verse here is Matthew 6:4, but solitary prayer is also modeled by Christ throughout the New Testament.

in Beaumont's unfortunate position a sense of providential purpose. As Agnes realizes that she did have "need to go pray to my heavenly father indeed," and as she emerges the following morning having received "heart-ravishing visits" and "the spirit of faith and prayer" from her savior, her banishment from the house becomes a productive episode in God's plan. Agnes is no longer a daughter turned away from her father's house but one fortunately brought into the house of her heavenly father—no longer a woman who has lost her earthly path but a believer who has found her spiritual one.

Scripture, then, appears to direct Beaumont's emotional responses to the events surrounding her father's death and her murder trial, but also to shape the trajectory of the narrative itself. Beaumont encounters scripture's formative influence at nearly every corner her narrative turns. That she is able to recall a relevant biblical passage for nearly every situation she faces, for every thought that troubles her, is a testament to the degree to which Beaumont had apparently internalized God's word and understood her own experience to directly correlate with what she had read within it. It is no surprise that early modern Protestants received inspiration and direction for understanding the narrative trajectories of their lives from the stories they read or heard about in the Bible. In scripture, the believer found holy characters to emulate, examples of sinful behaviors to avoid, and, most importantly, a narrative arc of sin and suffering on earth giving way to grace and redemption through Christ in the afterlife that provided a hopeful lens through which to understand the challenges of human life. But scripture was more than a set of illustrative examples to which a reader might turn for guidance. More profoundly, it was a tool for identity construction and transformation, and the most pious readers did

not learn *from* it so much as connect *with* it.<sup>276</sup> The godly both internalized the text and saw themselves within its pages. English Protestant divines encouraged the devout to “feed” upon and “digest” their biblical readings, to apply and incorporate the text within themselves. Puritan minister Samuel Clarke, for example, compares the studious believer to the “bee” that “sucks honey out of every flower” and the “stomak” that “sucks some wholsom nourishment out of the food that it receives into itself”: “so doth an holy heart,” Clarke writes, “convert and digest all [scriptural reading] into spiritual and useful thoughts and meditations.”<sup>277</sup> These metaphors highlight the importance of using what one reads in the Bible to one’s own spiritual benefit, or of reading productively. But they also address scripture as something that becomes a part of the self, a vital nutrient that a reader “sucks” in and that becomes incorporated in that reader’s subjective experience. Indeed, Clarke suggests that the believer’s “frame” is substantially changed through the process. Reading and “digesting” scripture before bed, he claims, influences the content of one’s dreams (for the better) and ensures that “we shall finde our hearts in the better frame when we awake.”<sup>278</sup> Reading the Bible, Protestants believed, should and did substantially refashion the heart.

For some, internalizing scripture meant reading to the point of memorization, so that the word of God might infiltrate one’s thoughts and actions. Such appears to have been the case for Agnes Beaumont. The seamlessness through which Beaumont moves between her own thoughts and words and nearly verbatim biblical quotations suggests

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<sup>276</sup> On Bible reading and identity construction, see Kate Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), especially ch. 3.

<sup>277</sup> Samuel Clarke, *An antidote against immoderate mourning of the dead* (London, 1660), 41.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

that she knew at least her favorite scriptural passages by heart. That she does not always feel the need to clarify where her words end and where scripture begins suggests not only that she expected her readers to easily recognize her references, but perhaps also that the distinction is not entirely important or even clear to herself.<sup>279</sup> Indeed, the Christian notion of the heart as a fleshy tablet on which the Gospel is inscribed suggests a fusion of self and Word that the believer would not wish nor be able to separate.<sup>280</sup> Memorization was, for the godly, not merely an intellectual aid but a means through which God's word could be stored organically within the self and that would, ideally, "take root there."<sup>281</sup> As Kate Narveson has shown, memorization and intensive reading prepared the believer for transformative meditation: internalizing scripture meant that God's word could be carried into devotional practice through which one's reading would "bear fruit."<sup>282</sup> But biblical language and stories further seem, for some, to have become integral to subjective experience itself. When Beaumont, writing of a time of sorrow, "remember[s]" that "God brought me up out of this horrible pit before night, and set my feet upon a rock," we see a blending of scriptural record with personal thought and memory that shows God's language operating at the level at which believers understood their lives and made sense of themselves and their experiences (62). Echoing the language of Psalms 40:2 but offering that language as part of her own memory rather than as a useful passage

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<sup>279</sup> Beaumont frequently recalls scriptures that comforted her in hard times, but biblical language also enters her narrative unannounced. Establishing her habit for prayer, for example, she recalls that "Many times in a day would the Lord lead me into his banqueting house, and his banner over me was love," directly echoing Song of Solomon (Canticles) 2:4 but allowing those words to slip into the natural logic and structure of her own sentence.

<sup>280</sup> See Eric Jager, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 13-15, 139.

<sup>281</sup> Ryrie, *Being Protestant*, 278.

<sup>282</sup> Narveson, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers*, 20, 82-83.

on which to meditate, the distinction between Beaumont's own experience and that of the psalmist collapses, suggesting that Beaumont has not only internalized her Bible but has come to perceive and remember her own life in biblical terms.<sup>283</sup>

If believers absorbed the word of God by reading scripture, then, they also allowed themselves to be *absorbed* by its narratives, and indeed, Beaumont's narrative works as one of spiritual experience precisely because she imagines it so vividly (and, for her reader, so familiarly) within the storied landscape of the Bible. The devout were instructed to apply what they read in their Bibles directly to their own experiences, reading scripture "not," clergyman Lewis Bayly advises, "as matters of *Historical* discourse: but as if they were so many *Letters* or *Epistles* sent downe from God out of heaven unto thee."<sup>284</sup> Believers inserted themselves into the stories they read, and they came to understand the narratives of their own lives as intertwined with those of scripture. Eric Auerbach has written that this is the particular nature of the scriptural text—that the biblical narrative "seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history."<sup>285</sup> Readers do not straightforwardly learn from such a text so much as become a part of it, restructuring the way they perceive individual experience in order to align it with an encompassing biblical schema.

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<sup>283</sup> Psalms 40:2: "He brought me also out of the horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon the rock, and ordered my goings." Ironically, Beaumont recalls that after she was brought out of the "pit," "many a good word" of scripture "had come in upon" her heart, but she has forgotten them.

<sup>284</sup> Lewis Bayly, *The practice of pietie directing a Christian how to walk, that he may please God* (London, 1613), 312. See Narveson's chapter on "Application to the Self: Reading and the Restructuring of Identity" in *Bible Readers and Lay Writers*, 79-99; Rylie, *Being Protestant*, 270-281; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), especially ch. 2.

<sup>285</sup> Cited in Home, "Theology in the Narrative Mode," 967.

The personal records of early modern Protestants, who depended upon the Bible as a revelation of divine truth and mined its pages for insight into their own experiences, certainly offer evidence of Auerbach's notion of scripture as "universal history." But for the soteriologically minded Calvinist, allowing oneself to become "absorbed" by the universality of scripture could in fact become a process through which the self was found or reaffirmed. Sarah Davy's account of her conversion in *Heaven Realized* (1670), for example, relies upon profoundly personal connections with several biblical figures to articulate the spiritual highs and lows of her movement toward God, but also to investigate her spiritual condition by aligning her narrative with characters who were typologically saved, damned, or converted. When she imagines herself responsible for her brother's death—it was a divine punishment, she believed, sent from God on the day she failed to keep the Sabbath—she identifies quite predictably with Cain, who murdered his brother and was cursed by God. Davy fears she has "fallen from grace" and, like Cain, finds this punishment too much to bear. But her language in drawing this connection suggests that she not only finds her condition similar to that of Cain but looks to his case as a means through which to understand the significance of her own: "This was a sad and great burden upon my spirit," Davy recalls, "and I thought my sins was so great I *must* cry out with Cain, 'My punishment *should be* greater than I can bear.'"<sup>286</sup> Davy modifies the text of Genesis 4:13, in which Cain laments that his punishment "*is* greater" than he can bear. Though she ostensibly quotes Cain's words and cries "with" him, her own cry is one of searching apprehension as she finds in scripture an unfortunate

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<sup>286</sup> Sarah Davy, *Heaven Realized, or the holy pleasure of daily intimate communion with God* (1670), in *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 165-79 (171, my italics).



model with which her own experience “must” correspond. As Cain’s punishment was more than he could bear, her own “should be” likewise unbearable. Elsewhere in the narrative, Davy finds hope for grace in her meditations on the psalms of David, Job’s deliverance, and the fates of various biblical figures whose hearts are “opened” by God. As Davy oscillates between “longing” to share the experiences of these figures and speaking her own experiences through their words, her narrative both searches for evidence of salvation and interpretively constructs that evidence by recognizing herself in what she reads.<sup>287</sup>

What Stephen Greenblatt has written of Tyndale—that the Bible served as “something external to himself in which [Tyndale] could totally merge his identity”—is perhaps not idiosyncratic but may rather describe an emerging Protestant spirituality that would become equally obsessed with understanding scripture and with understanding individual personal experience.<sup>288</sup> Scripture provides a more reliable perceptive and interpretive frame for human experience as the believer, according to Greenblatt, “gives up his sense of his own shaping powers” and allows the sacred text to “absorb the ambiguities of identity...into a larger, redeeming certainty.”<sup>289</sup> What seems almost paradoxical is that for experimental Calvinists, allowing one’s identity to be subsumed by scripture could potentially have the effect of *strengthening* one’s sense of self: the Bible’s universal history both “absorbs” and “redeems,” ideally replacing the uncertainty of human existence with, for the believer who “merges” successfully, the stability of assured

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<sup>287</sup> Davy “longs” to be “such a one” as the spotless soul of Canticles 4:7 and “desires” that “the Lord would be pleased to open my heart as he did Lydia’s” in Acts 16:14-15.

<sup>288</sup> Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 111.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

election. To understand the world as a manifestation of God's word was to allow God's word to tell one's own story, but to do so successfully was to recognize God in the self. The reality, of course, is that individual experience *is* singular and uncertain, and the recognition and acceptance of a universal Christian identity was as likely to lead to anxiety or despair as to a sense of spiritual assurance.<sup>290</sup> But perhaps it is this disjunction between individual self-awareness and the ideal of Christian universality that pushed believers toward the autobiographical endeavor. Spiritual autobiography, that is, might be seen as an exercise in writing oneself *into* the biblical narrative, or in actively cultivating the assurance that comes from recognizing biblical patterns of experience in one's life. Narrative offers a means through which to shape and interpret personal experience, but it also has a way of normalizing what is singular by shaping it according to particular expectations; spiritual narrative, by imagining a place for one's personal story within conventional stories of Christian experience, allows both writer and reader to find familiarity in even the most unusual of occurrences. It is this combination of effects (narrative's ability to create meaning and familiarity) that transforms Agnes Beaumont's sensational story of sexual scandal and patricide into what became a "classic" tale of the workings of God's grace. Beyond demonstrating her piety or God's particular communication with Beaumont during her trial, the scriptural echoes in Beaumont's text also serve as guideposts in mapping out her own experience along the narrative lines of biblical story.

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<sup>290</sup> On the anxieties associated with comparing oneself to a universal standard of elect identity, see John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Literature of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

For Beaumont, it was especially critical to employ Christian narratives through which to imagine the most socially damaging aspects of her experience: her refusal to submit to her father and her scandalous horseback ride with John Bunyan. Her accounts of these controversial episodes are rich with scriptural echoes and providentially suggestive, boldly transforming what her community saw as transgressive into what a Christian would understand as the workings of God's plan and an expression of his grace. Beaumont was no doubt aware of the social impropriety of her choice to ride on her married pastor's horse, no matter its spiritual motivation; she also understood that it was this ride that set the unfortunate events of her narrative in motion. Rather than downplaying the act that led to charges of adultery and, later, patricide, her narrative embraces the significance of this important event but employs it instead as the onset of her *spiritual* trial. First, it is important to recall that Bunyan arrives at Agnes's brother's house that day by accident—not on purpose to carry Beaumont to the meeting or as part of any arranged plan. As I have discussed above, Bunyan's arrival is presented as an answer to Agnes's desperate prayer for a ride to church, establishing God's hand in her encounter with Bunyan and thus opening the door to a spiritual interpretation of the experience that followed. Yearning for a way to travel to the meeting and emphasizing her "broken heart," Beaumont addresses the desire that her detractors had mistakenly associated with Bunyan himself and relocates it firmly within her spirituality (42-43). And yet, her account of the ride itself is not entirely innocent. Beaumont admits that her heart was "puffed up with pride" while riding with Bunyan, and that she was "pleased that anybody did look after me as I rode along." Again, however, her pride is emphatically spiritual, hatched from the security of knowing God had answered her

prayer and from the “honor” of riding behind “such a man” as her pastor (44). The experience of pride is conventional in spiritual narratives, particularly in those of spiritual trial: it was thought that God tested his elect in times of greatest security, when the believer, as Dionys Fitzherbert experienced it, “had forgotten to be watchful.”<sup>291</sup> After admitting to her own “high thoughts,” Beaumont explains that “as [the reader] will understand,” her pride “had a fall” (44).<sup>292</sup> Rather than straightforwardly defend an act that her community found to be inappropriate, Beaumont contextualizes its impropriety through the interpretive lens of Christian narrative. Her account rewrites her “scandalous” act as a more acceptably sinful story: that of the pride and fall of God’s elect.

Ideologically, Beaumont’s refusal to give up her church meetings and submit to her father’s wishes is easily contextualized within the narrative of Christian experience. The godly are commanded to love God more than their fathers and mothers (Matthew 10:37) and to forsake all worldly goods, relations, and responsibilities in order to follow Christ (Luke 14:16-33).<sup>293</sup> Practically, of course, the issue was much more complex, especially for a dependent woman like Beaumont whose life depended upon her father’s acceptance and care. Forsaking family for Christ was complicated further by the early modern understanding of a divinely instituted authority of fathers within their households. A patriarchal narrative might consider Beaumont’s disobedience to her father a rebellion against the authority that fathers derived from God—against, that is, an

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<sup>291</sup> Fitzherbert, 179.

<sup>292</sup> The idea of experiencing pride before a fall is taken from Proverbs 16:18; Beaumont’s sense of being “puffed up” with pride is a conventional biblical echo (the phrase can be found in countless autobiographies from the period and is commonly used in the Geneva and King James translations of the New Testament).

<sup>293</sup> Upon ultimately entering the house, Beaumont recalls the then “dreadful” injunction, “He that forsaketh not father and mother and all that he hath, is not worthy of me” (58). Her language conflates Matthew 10:37, Luke 14:26, and Luke 14:33.

earthly manifestation of divine order. This is likely the way her actions were understood by those who scandalized her within the community. Beaumont's account, which draws explicit parallels between Beaumont's earthly and heavenly fathers throughout, shows that the demands of her two father figures were in conflict and thus presents her actions as a casuistic choice, privileging her duty to God over that to her father. But even if the correct choice was clear to Beaumont, it was not necessarily obvious to those around her who did not understand the source of the conflict, and especially to those who did not approve of the nonconformist means through which she chose to obey God. Perhaps for these reasons, Beaumont most explicitly employs the parallel between earthly father and heavenly father to narrate her choice between two benefactors and two sources of refuge, rather than between two figures of authority to whom she owes obedience. In doing so, her narrative avoids explicitly addressing the complicated issue of feminine duty and rather reframes her disobedience as a less problematic Christian rejection of earthly comforts in favor of spiritual ones.

The episode of Agnes's exile from her father's house develops through repeated references to keys, doors, and inheritance, setting up an imaginative contrast between the kingdom of heaven and the "kingdom" of John Beaumont's house. When Agnes first returns home, she finds the door to be "locked with the key in it" (46). This was unusual as John Beaumont typically brought the key into his chamber if he went to bed before his daughter's return, so as to slip it to her from the window. The closed door immediately brings Agnes to consider another door that might one day be closed to her: "How if I should come at last," she fears, "when the door [to heaven] is shut and Jesus Christ should say to me, 'Depart from me I know you not'" (47). On the one hand, this

connection serves as a warning for Agnes to look to the salvation of her soul. Again, Beaumont's world is imagined as one of providential spiritual significance. Moving Beaumont immediately to pray "to God, that Jesus Christ will not shut me out," the association between her father's closed door and the unknown gates of heaven appears less suggestive coincidence than direct, divinely orchestrated correspondence and a component of her spiritual trial. But the parallel is also one of valuative contrast. John Beaumont's closed door reminds her of Christ's much more important door, as any Christian reader would recognize, and defiance thus becomes a more straightforward biblical imperative. Rejecting earth for heaven carries less social and emotional baggage than rejecting father for Christ. Moreover, choosing the spiritual comforts of prayer in the cold barn over the warmth and protection (and spiritual emptiness) of the house, Beaumont casts her disobedience as an admirable and scripturally prescribed acceptance of personal hardship. When her father threatens to "never give [her] a penny as long as he lived," Agnes finds comfort in the hopes of an "eternal inheritance" from God, insisting that her "soul is of more worth" than the shelter her father withholds (52, 53, 50).

Agnes writes that on the following day, her father locked the door each time he left the house, noting on four separate occasions that he kept the key securely in his pocket (50, 51, 52, 57). In her most dramatic encounter with her father, Agnes seizes the key but not without putting herself in physical danger. Seeing that her father has left the door open with the key in it, she takes the key and pushes her way inside, only to have the door slammed against her: "if I had not been very quick," Agnes recalls, "one of my legs had been between the door and the threshold" (54). Her father then follows her outside, threatening to throw her into the pond if she did not return the key. Becoming

increasingly impatient, John Beaumont rather cruelly holds the key out in front of his daughter, soliciting her promise and weakening her resolve (57-58). Agnes's acute awareness of the key and its inaccessibility is a constant reminder of her powerlessness. It also, if we consider Agnes's exclusion from the house as an earthly reflection of her possible exclusion from heaven, sets up an intriguing parallel between her father's acceptance and God's grace: the key, like God's grace, cannot be seized but must be given. However, the contingency of John Beaumont's offer, along with the harsh physicality of his dominion over his key and kingdom, turns the parallel into somewhat of a parody, leaving Beaumont's house less a mirror of heaven than a perverse earthly alternative to God's kingdom and freely bestowed grace.<sup>294</sup> Again, Agnes's disobedience is reframed as a rejection of earth for heaven, but this time in a way that places the woes of choosing the world on vivid display.

And yet, it is just as John Beaumont (and the protection he offers) becomes least appealing in the text that we find Agnes submitting to him—at least in word. Reaching a breaking point, Agnes promises her father to “never go to a meeting again, as long as you live, without your consent,” and is finally allowed to enter the house. Her reflections on reentering the house, however, open three productive interpretive angles through which to re-anchor her narrative in the Christian imagination. First, we have already seen that Agnes aligns her situation with that of the biblical apostle Peter, who denied his association with Christ after his arrest but would immediately repent, and who

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<sup>294</sup> Beaumont draws a direct comparison between her father and Christ, who she hopes will not “shut [her] out” on the last day, but her repeated references to keys in doing so also invokes the apostle Peter, to whom God offers the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19). Early modern protestants understood Peter's authority to represent that of God's ministers on earth, which may invite a further comparison between John Beaumont (and his house) and John Bunyan (and his church) in Agnes's text.

exemplified in seventeenth-century puritan rhetoric God's grace toward the sinful elect.<sup>295</sup> Beaumont pronounces herself "Peter like" in her weakness, but the connection also recalls the well-known (for her audience) narrative of Peter's sorrow and penitence, and of Christ's special prayer that his faith would not ultimately fail. That Christ predicts Peter's denial further lends a sense of providential inevitability to Agnes's own actions through the comparison.<sup>296</sup> Beaumont's account of her wretched experience in the house also reinforces the text's sustained contrast between physical and spiritual comforts and further demonstrates her own desire for the latter. Ironically, Agnes enters the warmth and shelter of the house to find that "all [her] comforts and enjoyments" were immediately "gone" and understands that even if her father could give her "thousands of gold" it would do her no good (58, 60). Whereas there once was "scarce a corner in the house, or barns, or cowhouse, or stable, or closes" in which Agnes did not "pour out [her] soul to God," she now "filled every corner of the house and yard...with bitter sighs and groans" (39, 60). Echoing the language of the earlier passage, Beaumont shows that earthly comforts can only be enjoyed when infused with God's grace; without it, the house is an empty space to fill with spiritual pain.<sup>297</sup> Beaumont resituates her spiritual

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<sup>295</sup> While early Protestants were uncomfortable with the importance Catholics placed on Peter as a figure of authority (and model for the papacy), the sinful and repentant Peter came to exemplify the nature of election for the godly in the seventeenth century. Karen Bruhn explains that "Peter's denial of Christ exemplified how even those chosen by God may fall into sin, but will escape ultimate damnation because their chosen status has given them the ability to repent properly" (42). Peter's capacity for repentance after sin was held in contrast with reprobate sinners like Judas who truly lost faith. See Bruhn, "Reforming Saint Peter: Protestant Constructions of Saint Peter the Apostle in Early Modern England," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33 (2002): 33-49.

<sup>296</sup> Matthew 26:33-35, 69-75.

<sup>297</sup> Both passages echo Bunyan's prefatory address in *Grace Abounding*: "Have you forgot the Close, the Milk house, the Stable, the Barn and the like where God did visit your Soul?" (5).



experience within the physical landscape of her home, depicting the very realness of God's presence in her life by documenting the tangibility of its absence.

Most significantly, Beaumont's account of her submission makes sense of both her acceptance of her father's demands and her father's subsequent death by linking the two events providentially. Four times Beaumont explicitly limits the promise her father asks of her by the condition of his life: to return to his house, she must promise "never to go to a meeting again, as long as [her father] lived" (50, 57, 58). Regardless of whether or not this was the specific condition of John Beaumont's demand, Agnes's repetition of these terms feels deliberate and emphatic in the text.<sup>298</sup> Because her father does not live long enough to enforce the agreement—which would have Agnes act against her own conscience—there is a sense in which John Beaumont appears to have "invited his own providential death."<sup>299</sup> But importantly, Agnes relies upon the direct revelation of scripture to establish these providential implications. Feeling helpless and essentially imprisoned in her father's house, Agnes calls out to her God in desperation, "Lord, what shall I do? What shall I do?" Her scriptural answer, as usual, "drops" immediately into her mind, but its cryptic nature is rather unsettling: "There shall be a way made," the word of God tells her, "for you to escape, that you may be able to bear it."<sup>300</sup> Later, just as she is helping her father into bed, Agnes hears that "The end is come, the end is come, the time draweth near."<sup>301</sup> Insisting that the words were "dark" to her and that she "could

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<sup>298</sup> Pacheco and Stachniewski similarly note that the terms are "heavily reiterated," identifying an "almost sinister" power that Agnes appears to "hold...in reserve" ("Introduction," *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies*, xl).

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> See 1 Cor. 10:13. The verse promises the godly that they will not be tempted or tested above what they are able to bear.

<sup>301</sup> Camden identifies a reference to Amos 8:2 here ("The end is come upon my people of Israel"), while Stachniewski and Pacheco note that "Beaumont is disconcerted when the words ('the End is Come') do not

not tell what to make” of them at the time, Beaumont allows her story to fulfill God’s word without explicitly passing her own judgment on her father’s actions (which might complicate her position of innocence and her status as passive vessel for God’s providence). By anchoring the suggested providential interpretation of her father’s death in scripture, Beaumont also steels herself against the guilt that she apparently felt upon recognizing what she saw as divine intervention on her behalf. “I will promise you that I will never go to a meeting again, as long as you live,” she had told her father, “not thinking what dolor and misery I brought upon myself in so doing.” Her “dolor and misery” would come, in large part, from denying Christ, but Agnes’s belief in a providentially ordered world was likely to have left her with a sense of her own culpability (58).

Beaumont’s narrative reveals two “escapes” that God would make for her: first, the practical escape of her father’s death, which frees her to follow her conscience and worship as she chooses, and second, her own escape from death as she is exonerated from the charges of patricide that are brought against her. The prayers and concerns Beaumont records throughout the murder trial frame the accusations as Satan’s efforts to break her spirit and the trial itself as God’s final test of her faith. She sees that death may lie ahead of her as she “did not know how far God might suffer [Feery] and the devil to go,” and prays that God will “carry [her] above the fears of men, and devils, and death itself” (74, 75). As the court proceedings require that Agnes detail the events of the days leading up

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derive from a scriptural text” (278 n. 210). Yet Beaumont’s words appear to most closely echo Ezekiel 7, which details God’s divine judgments to come and features the phrases “the end is come,” “the day draweth near,” and variations of the two as refrains running through the text. The assessment that these words are not brought to Agnes through scripture is incongruous with her style. It is possible that she patches together phrases from multiple areas of scripture here, as she does elsewhere in the narrative.

to her father's death and of the fatal night itself, Beaumont's record of the trial becomes a culmination of the various physical and spiritual hardships she has thus far related. And because her testimony aligns so closely (in some cases, word for word) with the descriptions of those events that we have already heard, Agnes's voice is again infused with a sense of reliability and accuracy (78-80). Agnes's familiarly worded and framed testimony capitalizes on the structure of providential correspondence between interpretive elements of her storytelling (dreams, recalled scriptures, prayers) and actual events (her father's death, Bunyan's sudden appearance on horseback) that has guided the narrative thus far, endowing her speech with an illusion of otherworldly truth. Most importantly, the opportunity to return to and summarize the events of Agnes's conflict with her father and his subsequent death through the record of her court testimony allows the murder trial to pass judgment on both Agnes's worldly and spiritual fates. Because the trial comes as a culmination of the conflict with her father over her religious practice (which was never resolved), we must accept her success as proof of her spiritual success as well. Indeed, after hearing the jury's verdict, the presiding coroner closes the case with a declaration that curiously combines commentary on Agnes's innocence with a testament to her general spiritual well-being:

So the coroner comes to me, and takes me by the hand, "Come, sweetheart," said [the coroner], "do not be daunted, God will take care of thy preferment, and provide thee a husband, notwithstanding the malice of this man; and bless God for this deliverance, and never fear but God will take care of thee. But I confess these are hard things for one so young as thou art to meet with." (80)

At this point, the coroner has already pronounced Feery's accusations as "defamation"; he would go on to affirm that all involved were "well satisfied of [Agnes's] innocency" (80, 81). And yet, in speaking with Beaumont herself, he frames her acquittal as a

“deliverance” for which she should “bless God,” placing emphasis on the spiritual nature of her experience rather than on the facts of the case. The statement affirms the innocence of Agnes’s soul as much as her actions, insisting that God will “take care” not only of Agnes but of her “preferment.” The coroner refers specifically to his belief that God will somehow “provide” a husband for Agnes, but his suggestion that God will take over this office from the deceased John Beaumont recalls the text’s interests in an “eternal inheritance” through faith when one’s worldly circumstances are uncertain. Blending the interests of Agnes’s spiritual and earthly crises, her trial account seeks to bring her story toward a productive and progressive narrative end—to read the circumstances of her experience as evidentiary components in the story of her worldly and eternal deliverance.

### **“There is a day a coming will clear all”: Narrative Contingency and the Limitations of Storytelling**

On trial for her life and in front of members of her community who had ultimate power over her fate, Agnes Beaumont tells a convincing story of her innocence. In communicating her experience to an audience of readers, she imagines her experience within the narrative frameworks of scripture and providential revelation, telling a convincing story of her election by crafting literary evidence of God’s grace. In many ways, Beaumont’s text exposes the extent to which experimental Calvinists put their faith in narrative as a conduit for divine knowledge. Framing her tale as revelatory of both scriptural truth and providential judgement, Beaumont creates from lived experience a truth that can only be found by moving beyond the realm of facts and into the imaginative landscape of interpretive story. And yet, as Beaumont’s account progresses beyond what

should be its climax—the pronouncement of Agnes’s innocence and the correspondent lifting of her spiritual trial—the narrative exposes its own vulnerabilities, unsettling the work it has performed in establishing truth by documenting the unpredictability of its reception and transmission. After hearing the jury’s verdict and being released from all charges of murder, Agnes’s immediate reaction is to offer *more* evidence—evidence she feels might provide tangible proof of her innocence to those involved with her trial. Drawing the court’s attention to the physical fact of John Beaumont’s body, she invites the coroner to confirm the cause of death through anatomical study: “if you are not at all satisfied,” she insists, “I am freely willing that my father should be opened. As my innocence is known to God, so I would have it known to you” (80). Agnes’s innocence is, of course, already known to the coroner, and he assures her that there is “no need” to further examine her father’s body. But her acquittal is based on testimony, which Agnes has already found to be an unreliable means for conveying the truth in her community: rumor and false testimony, we must remember, has nearly cost Agnes her life. Already acquitted, Agnes still grasps for material evidence that might lend a more tangible sense of closure to her case. She understands that “go which way it will” with her fate, “a great many” in the town will still believe in her guilt; an autopsy could perhaps invalidate such beliefs (75).

The autopsy, of course, was never performed; moreover, we cannot be sure that the results from such a procedure would be in any way conclusive. The uncertainty of this textual moment—of the image of John Beaumont’s never-opened body that may or may not have provided material evidence to clear Agnes’s name—hovers over the narrative and somewhat destabilizes the spiritual truth it seeks to proclaim. In yearning for tangible

evidence of her worldly innocence, Agnes unwittingly reminds the reader that the physical world can never provide substantial proof of the greater innocence at stake in the text—that of her soul. Moreover, if we are to read Beaumont’s legal trial as the culmination of a trial of her faith, her cry for physical proof hints at a latent concern for the efficacy of her storytelling. At the same time that Beaumont appears to put trust in her story’s correspondence with scripture and with the narratives constructed by providential signs throughout her experience, she also seems highly aware that narratives are vulnerable. To tell one’s story was to profess one’s own truth, but also to put that truth in the hands of those who would read or hear it. In Beaumont’s case, the reception of her story had to compete with the slanderous rumors already circulating about her, which calls attention to the constructed and thus contingent nature of any such narrative truth claims.<sup>302</sup> Would Agnes’s listeners and readers believe her story? And if they did not, how might this affect Agnes’s own sense of the spiritual identity she has put forth?

Beaumont’s concern for the reception of her story was certainly not misguided. It took only a month after her father’s funeral for suspicions to resurface and for Agnes to find herself once again the subject of “hot” reports (82). New rumors claimed that Agnes had not only confessed her guilt but that she was “distracted”; those who were still interested in her relationship with Bunyan insisted that the two were now married and reaping the benefits of their joint murder plot (82, 84). Mr. Feery is said to have blamed Agnes for the entirely unrelated incident of a house fire in the town (84). The propagation of these stories extends beyond the formal end of the narrative itself in supplemental

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<sup>302</sup> Kathleen Lynch suggests that Beaumont’s “appetite to engage in the process of constructing her role in the community” may have exacerbated suspicions about her character by drawing attention to this instability of narrative truth (*Protestant Autobiography*, 216).

concluding paragraphs added to the fair copy of the manuscript. The closing statements, and especially the added paragraphs, are frenzied: the sense is that the rumors continued in full force and that Agnes's writing tries to keep up—tries desperately to keep these stories under the interpretive control of her own narrative. But as Agnes rather ironically admits that she, too, "could not but tell [the gossip] to several myself, and it did serve to divert me sometimes," the text's careful distinction between the townspeople's rumors and her own truth threatens to collapse. Beaumont's seemingly confident assurance that "there is a day a coming will clear all" is countered by the strain of a lifetime of stories that will continue to muddy her identity before God's judgment can "clear" it. Her narrative of spiritual trial and manifest election has, we have seen, withstood the test of time, but the instability of its ending exposes the potential limitations faced by believers who would turn to providential storytelling to understand the events of their lives and move toward assurance of election. How must the narrative change as new experiences threaten to disrupt it?

We might likewise question the degree to which Bunyan's narrative efforts were effective in cultivating and maintaining spiritual assurance. If Bunyan's understanding of the narrative trajectory of his life enabled him to make sense of tribulation, his writing suggests that it also *bound* him to do so. Bunyan realizes that his personal narrative provides a space in which to incorporate his attack, offering a ready-made spiritual significance for it and adding episodic support to the narrative itself. But the choice to revise his autobiography and print a new edition that addresses the scandal could also point to his own narrative's vulnerability. That Bunyan felt it necessary to "enlarge and correct" *Grace Abounding* by inserting the defense suggests that the rumors threatened to

diminish or detract from the validity of his story, and that they must be reinterpreted before they overwhelm or distort his own truth.<sup>303</sup> And if the contextualized attacks (Satan's persecution) provide further evidence of Bunyan's election, their status as evidence also illustrates the contingency and instability of the experiential process of sign-collecting. In order to accept the scandal as an appropriate component of his narrative of salvation ("it *belongs* to my Christian Profession to be villified,"), he must also admit that this component was not there before: "these slanders," Bunyan writes, "I glory in, because...should I not be dealt with thus wickedly by the World, I should *want* one sign of a Saint and Child of God" (85, my italics). Even as Bunyan's discussion dismisses the charges against him as lies and slanders, his text becomes indebted to them for narrative support. This relationship ensures that while Bunyan's defense may successfully invalidate the rumors, it simultaneously preserves them: the newly revised narrative both subsumes the competing story and, in doing so, maintains its visibility. Accepting persecution as a sign of grace, Bunyan boldly professes to "bind these lies and slanders to me as an ornament" (85). But if the "ornament" is a manifest sign of his election, it is also a material reminder to the reader the narrative has been challenged. Narrative "truth"—especially narrative autobiographical truth—is never final: its creative power may be able to adapt and incorporate new scenarios, but it also *must* do so in order to stay relevant. The insertions simultaneously reconfirm Bunyan's truth and destabilize it through the very fact of their necessity. How many more revisions will be needed as

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<sup>303</sup> The title page of the 1680 edition announces that the text is "Corrected and much enlarged now by the Author, for the benefit of the Tempted and Dejected Christian." Other new material appears in this edition, but the twelve-paragraph defense is the most substantial addition.



stories continue to surface, or as life continues to challenge the narrative? At what point do we stop trusting Bunyan's voice?

In her discussion of *Grace Abounding's* exemplary function within the Bedford community, Kathleen Lynch points out that the act of narrating (and, especially, printing) one's life story as revelatory of election holds the writer accountable for *maintaining* that story. "Once this conventional story of selfhood is told," Lynch writes, "the stakes are raised for any departures from the set forms," leaving the "truth" of a story of conversion or spiritual trial vulnerable to the interpretive pressures of subsequent events.<sup>304</sup> Bunyan's story is particularly vulnerable to rumors of sexual scandal because those rumors, in attacking his character and reinforcing anxieties about the seductive powers of nonconformist ministers, threaten his legitimacy as a preacher. Bunyan claims the experience of teaching and transforming the hearts of others as his greatest proof of God's grace. In preaching, he recalls feeling "as if an Angel of God had stood at my back to encourage me," finding his strongest assurance of faith through his spiritual connection not only with God but with others in his ministry:

O it hath been with such power and heavenly evidence upon my own Soul, while I have been labouring to unfold [the Protestant doctrine of faith], to demonstrate it, and to fasten it upon the Conscience of others, that I could not be contented with saying, I believe and am sure; methought I was more then sure, if it be lawful so to express my self, that those things which then I asserted, were true. (79)

In converting others, in bringing others to faith in Christ, Bunyan's own faith is strengthened and his soul receives "evidence" that "those things which then I asserted, were true." In threatening his effectiveness as a minister, then, attacks on his character also attack a source of his spiritual assurance and a critical component of his conversion

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<sup>304</sup> Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography*, 185.

story. Bunyan himself may know that he is not guilty of the misconduct of which he is accused, but a threat to his ministry is a threat to the fabric of his spiritual identity, and to the story of election that he has been telling both himself and his community. And yet, if unsuccessful (because recognized as unwarranted), the threat further secures Bunyan's identity and election. The stakes, then, are remarkably high, and we hear a note of anxiety cutting through the self-righteous tone with which Bunyan dismisses those who would turn his flock against him:

So then, what shall I say to those that have thus bespattered me? shall I threaten them? shall I chide them? shall I flatter them? shall I entreat them to hold their tongues? no, not I: were it not for that these things make them ripe for damnation that are the authors and abettors, I would say unto them: *report it!* because 'twill increase my glory. (85)

The tension between what Bunyan would or could say and his refusal to do so reflects the precarious nature of Bunyan's narrative endeavor. His story must refute *and* embrace the competing narratives that "bespatter" him, rejecting their truth claims but allowing them to offer those claims. Slander identifies Bunyan as a persecuted Christian, but only if it is recognized as slander and not truth. The confidence of Bunyan's desire for others to "report" his sins and thus "increase [his] glory" is undercut by his excuse for *not* encouraging this after all (his supposed concern for his enemies' souls). And while Bunyan claims he will not threaten his enemies, his assertion that their actions "make them ripe for damnation" certainly *sounds* like a threat: Bunyan cannot quite let his enemies off the hook here as he recognizes the potential consequences of their stories on his own.

For both Bunyan and Beaumont, the spiritual practice of providential storytelling offers a means through which to structure life experiences as revelatory of God's grace.

By offering interpretive narration as evidence of spiritual truth, both Beaumont's account of spiritual trial and Bunyan's self-defense call attention to the way in which identity was, for early modern experimental Calvinists, a product of story and relation, and to the important role imagination could play in the process of spiritual self-examination. And yet, even as both accounts work to push the experiences of their lives toward an elective narrative end, their efforts to compose and maintain those narratives in the face of misinterpretation and rumor expose the shortcomings of narrative—always contingent, always open to manipulation—as a vehicle for spiritual truth. Beaumont closes her narrative with a paragraph that jarringly moves from a viewpoint of past self-assuredness to one of present spiritual disappointment. After recalling her confidence in the face of her enemies during her time of trial, she admits to currently wishing “I was as well in my soul as I was then” (83). That she is apparently not “well” at the time of writing may betray disillusionment—may reveal the elusiveness of spiritual assurance in a world that must rely upon the uncertain practice of interpretation, correspondence, and the reading of signs for knowledge. Or it may, more optimistically, explain Beaumont's decision to write: to continue to reap the benefits achieved from recognizing providence in one's personal experiences, seeking to maintain wellness through the process of sharing one's story.

## CHAPTER 4

### JUSTIFIABLE TO MEN? SEARCHING “TH’ UNSEARCHABLE DISPOSE” IN MILTON’S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

In 1929, G. B. Harrison published and titled the first modern edition of Agnes Beaumont’s narrative of spiritual experience and, in doing so, changed the course of its critical reception. Appearing as *The Narrative of the Persecution of Agnes Beaumont in 1674*, Harrison’s edition highlights a set of concerns that would become central to later engagements with the text: the challenging dynamics of Agnes’s domestic and social worlds and the hardships (or “persecutions”) she faced as a woman and a dissenter within her community. Camden’s 1992 edition again presents Beaumont’s text as persecution narrative, adopting Harrison’s title and introducing the story as one of (spiritually motivated) resistance to patriarchal structures of authority.<sup>305</sup> Stachniewski and Pacheco (1998) resituate Beaumont’s account in the context of spiritual autobiography, but they likewise keep the now standard title and emphasize Agnes’s “domestic persecution for her faith.”<sup>306</sup>

Margaret Ezell has argued that the titles of these modern resuscitations of Beaumont’s story direct a specific experience of reading the text that is not necessarily encouraged (or, at least, is not the *primary* experience encouraged) by the original manuscript sources.<sup>307</sup> The earlier of the two extant manuscripts, which is possibly

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<sup>305</sup> Vera Camden, ed., *The Narrative of the Persecutions of Agnes Beaumont* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1992).

<sup>306</sup> John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco, eds., *Grace Abounding with Other Spiritual Autobiographies* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxxix.

<sup>307</sup> Margaret J. M. Ezell, “Domestic Papers: Manuscript Culture and Early Modern Women’s Life Writing,” *Genre and Women’s Life Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. Michelle M. Dowd and Julie E. Eckerle (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 33-48 (38-39).

written in Beaumont's own hand, is untitled. The early eighteenth-century fair copy, likely transcribed before Beaumont's death in 1720 or shortly after, is more formally and interpretively presented and provides clues as to how its earliest readers received and valued the narrative. A title page presents the text as "Divine Appearances, Or a Very Wonderfull Account of the Dealings of God with Mrs. Agnes Beaumont"; a heading on the first page reiterates the "Wonderful Dealings of God" with Beaumont and affirms that the text was written by Agnes "her self."<sup>308</sup> The fair copy's title, as Ezell explains, showcases Beaumont's relationship not with those who "persecute" her but with God whose guiding hand orchestrates the challenges she encounters. It suggests that the story, moreover, will emphasize "not the personal suffering and social shame" of her tale "but the 'wonderful' nature of the events" that occurred and thus Agnes's own spiritual triumph.<sup>309</sup> In directing our attention to "appearances" of the divine in Beaumont's story, the early title further prepares the reader for spiritual interpretation of the events recorded, shifting our focus away from the earthly realities of Agnes's circumstances and toward the significance they hold for her spiritual condition. Classifying Beaumont's text as a "persecution" narrative, on the other hand, undervalues the interpretive complexity of the writing and oversimplifies the issue of Agnes's social defiance.

But while Ezell's reading rightly links the "wonder" emphasized by the early manuscript to the positive outcome of Beaumont's experience and to her own remarkable success in withstanding spiritual trial, we should further note that Beaumont's text is also "wonderful" in its (apparently successful) attempt to provoke a sense of wondering awe

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<sup>308</sup> Vera Camden provides images of the title and first pages of the fair copy in her introduction to Beaumont's text: see Camden, "Introduction," 10-11.

<sup>309</sup> Ezell, "Domestic Papers," 39.

in the reader at the surprising way in which God bestows grace upon the elect. Introducing Agnes's experience as one of "wonder," the early manuscript title highlights the text's imaginative association with an early modern fascination with wonders, "marvels," and prodigious events, and with the literatures that emerged from that fascination.<sup>310</sup> This association extends to episodic narratives of spiritual experience more broadly. Like travel narratives, "true relations," and pamphlets on "monsters" and other "curiosities," narratives of spiritual trial most often concern themselves with the unfamiliar or unexpected—with events or experiences that initially threaten to disrupt one's understanding of the world or of the self. More specifically, they engage with what we might see as life's accidents: events like illness (Donne), mental breakdown (Fitzherbert), or sudden death (Beaumont) that are unpredictable, and, in the moment of experience or witness, seemingly without cause or purpose. But in a providentially ordered world, accidents of all kinds are understood less as sites for confusion and more as opportunities for *establishing* the cause or purpose that at first appears lacking. As Michael Witmore demonstrates in *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England* (2002), accidental events prompted the writing of interpretive narratives; indeed, it is only within a narrative framework, Witmore observes, that it is possible to recognize a particular occurrence as accidental. For seventeenth-century Protestants, a belief in the world as a theater of God's judgments "fostered a culturewide enterprise of narrating...unexpected events with an eye toward their intrinsic drama and

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<sup>310</sup> On early modern wonder and wonder literatures, see Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991); Julie Crawford, *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (2005); and Julie Sievers, "Literatures of Wonder in Early Modern England and America," *Literature Compass* 4 (2007): 766-83.

providential meaning.”<sup>311</sup> Narratives of spiritual trial, which explore traumatic or confusing personal experiences as manifestations of God’s grace, likewise attempt to move what is startling or unusual from the realm of the unknown into, if not the known world, at least the context of deliberate, interpretable action.

Paradoxically, accidents and wonders were particularly powerful sources of divine knowledge for early modern experimental Calvinists *because* of their apparent inscrutability. It was the very unfamiliarity and incongruity of the disruptive experience that necessitated a search for its hidden significance and narrative coherence, giving accidents an “unusual epistemological force.”<sup>312</sup> If all action on earth is ultimately elemental in God’s design, extraordinary events must hold extraordinary providential meaning. Providentialism was not necessarily challenged by a recognition of the natural causes at work in accidents or wondrous occurrences; on the contrary, such discovery led to more productive providential inquiry as wonder shifted from *how* such an event could happen to *why* it might have happened under particular circumstances. To the providentially minded observer, accidents inspire what Witmore identifies as “anagogic wonder,” or an “awed apprehension of a deeper...spiritual meaning” that “can shape events without suspending the natural processes at work in the world.”<sup>313</sup> A similar type of wonder can be found at work in narratives of spiritual experience. As episodes of spiritual trial, personal “accidents” were not unnatural or unprecedented occurrences but rather surprising experiences that disrupted one’s sense of identity or of the narrative

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<sup>311</sup> Michael Witmore, *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-35.

trajectory through which one's life was already understood. Such a disruption prompts inquiry into how that experience might express divine intent and thus cohere with one's personal narrative after all. If wonder at the unexpected moves the observer toward knowledge, the questioning Protestant on trial asks not how an event came to be but why it happened *to me*, and at this particular time. Such questions cannot be answered but must rather be explored through narrative efforts to incorporate accidents into a more coherent and what we might call retrospectively predictable scheme.

When wonderful events are embraced as part of a personal experience of God's providence, however, several significant epistemological tensions emerge. The first is a result of the providential accident's "categorical instability" as both factual occurrence (the actual event that happened) and fictional idea (the newly *significant* event as framed within a spiritual narrative).<sup>314</sup> Since making providential sense of earthly events requires interpretive work and narrative styling, the sort of knowledge that such efforts can produce always hovers between the realms of truth and fiction, knowledge and imagination. This indeterminacy of the providential event's status as knowledge is theoretically at odds with one of the primary goals of spiritual examination: to cultivate assurance through a convincing recognition of God's grace in one's life. In the matter of personal salvation, is narrative an ultimately satisfying vehicle for truth?

Second, the simultaneously private and public nature of the events and circumstances surrounding personal spiritual trial raises the stakes of providential interpretation and complicates the means through which knowledge is attained. Spiritual trial is not experienced in a vacuum: while the personal effects of crises like those

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<sup>314</sup> The phrase is Witmore's (5).



experienced by Agnes Beaumont, Dionys Fitzherbert, and John Donne may be intensely private and subjective, their interpretations are necessarily shaped by the external circumstances in which they occur. They are challenged, moreover, by the often contradictory interpretations of the event that are proposed by those who witness the experience from the outside. For puritans in particular, who regularly shared their experiences with families, friends, and spiritual advisors and for whom the human capacity for mistaking signs of election presented a very real and constant fear, assurance was quite often cultivated through participation in the “communion of saints,” or through the formation of shared interpretations within the godly community.<sup>315</sup> Thus we find Fitzherbert reaching out across the text in “most instant desire” for her reader’s acceptance—for approval, that is, within her community to corroborate her own reading of personal spiritual trial.<sup>316</sup> Fitzherbert’s case poses a particular challenge to shared interpretation: her “madness” was, she admits, especially “public” and “known to many,” but in a way that made the “true” source of her distraction “undiscernible in the eye of the world.”<sup>317</sup> The public manifestation of Fitzherbert’s condition (madness) was generally interpreted as a providential punishment from God, while Fitzherbert’s private experience (religious despair) was a potential sign of election. Fitzherbert’s task is to bridge the gap between what she experienced and what others witnessed, reinforcing personal conviction by aligning it with communally recognized truths. How does one make

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<sup>315</sup> See Diane Willen, “‘Communion of the Saints’: Spiritual Reciprocity and the Godly Community in Early Modern England,” *Albion* 27 (1995): 19-41; Abram C. Van Engen, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Andrew Cambers, “Reading, the Godly, and Self-Writing in England, circa 1580-1720.” *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007): 796-825.

<sup>316</sup> Dionys Fitzherbert, *Women, Madness and Sin: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 175.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, 151.

internal experience apparent to members of the religious community? How does the individual believer learn to trust the authority of personal experience in the face of alternative interpretive possibilities? What if one's own experience and or conviction is not simply misunderstood but rather misguided or self-serving?

Finally, narrating unexpected events as episodes of personal significance is particularly challenging because it requires the new narrative to fit within the existing story of self that early modern Protestants were, as I have argued in the previous chapter, continuously in the process of writing. Because the godly were busy writing stories of election or of their experiences of God's special favor, this process involved the rather counterintuitive interpretive turn of embracing the unexpected as expected, and misfortune as a sign of grace. Moreover, narrative interpretations of these sudden experiences must also allow for—and accept the unknowability of—what happens *next*. As an episode within a story of salvation that is finished only in death, an interpretation of spiritual trial must narrate both a connection to the past and a path forward, establishing for the event a function of, as Donne puts it, God's active "correction."<sup>318</sup> While an account of spiritual trial might gesture *toward* renewed confidence in one's faith or a "victory" of sorts over one's own spiritual weakness, it cannot exactly end with a sense of interpretive finality. Rather, the narrative must look ahead to a time when personal salvation *will be* fully revealed—Beaumont's "day a coming" that "will clear

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<sup>318</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), 14. See also Molly Murray, "The Radicalism of Early Modern Spiritual Autobiography," *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. Adam Smyth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 41-55: "[Spiritual autobiography] presents the authorial self in relation to, and in terms of, both the sinful life that preceded the moment of writing and the new life that the writing portends...the spiritual autobiographer re-narrates and recuperates the past in order to anticipate the as-yet-unnarrated future" (41).

all” but that meanwhile leaves her own story at the mercy of its readers and of her own memory.<sup>319</sup> The uncertainty Beaumont expresses at the close of her narrative as she wishes she were “as well in my soul” as she was when her experience was fresh acknowledges this gap between the seemingly “known” of the narrative and the ultimately unknowable truth of salvation. Beaumont’s account remains “wonderful” because her text simultaneously makes meaning and reveals its own incapacity to *confirm* that meaning. Wonder at the unexpected prompts inquiry, but while that inquiry may serve to bring the believer closer to an understanding of God and of his or her place in a providentially ordered world, the end product is not quite knowledge but perhaps simply belief, which makes way for acceptance of the unknown.

John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* (1671) is not a personal account of spiritual experience, nor does it narrate the significance of a wonderful display of God’s providence as witnessed by the author. But in “staging” the process of shaping narratives in response to extraordinary events in the lives of an individual believer (Samson) and the members of his tribe, the dramatic poem speaks meaningfully to the epistemological concerns of interpreting spiritual experience addressed above.<sup>320</sup> Milton’s reworking of the Samson story of Judges 13-16 begins and ends with unexpected events that its characters are tasked with interpreting: the blinding and imprisonment of the once heroic Samson and his later (heroic?) destruction of the temple at Gaza. The reader, importantly, is distanced

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<sup>319</sup> Beaumont, *Narrative*, 83.

<sup>320</sup> Milton’s “dramatic poem” is written in the form of Greek tragedy, but it was never intended for the stage. He discusses his use of the tragic form in a preface to the work: see *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: The Modern Library, 2007), 707-09. All references to *Samson Agonistes* and Milton’s other works are to the Modern Library edition and will be cited parenthetically by line or page number, as appropriate.

from the “facts” of both events (Samson is already “a prisoner chained” when the play opens, while the final catastrophe occurs off-stage), casting a spotlight on the narrative acts through which they are recalled, described, lamented, or celebrated (7). What we witness as readers is not physical action but interpretive movement from shock and despair at Samson’s unfortunate position and horror at the “accident” of his destruction at Gaza to a narrative of God’s providence that allows for and, indeed, justifies both.

And yet, the interpretive efforts of the play’s characters are repeatedly problematized by the play itself. Engaging with the Judges story in dramatic form, Milton refuses to explicitly endorse any of the narrative acts his work produces, leaving it to the reader to weigh and consider the multiple perspectives voiced by his characters to extract meaning from Samson’s experience. This is a difficult task as the text’s ironies and inconsistencies relentlessly poke interpretive holes in the narrative lines that the play initially appears to promote. The text’s interpretive instability is, of course, infinitely multiplied by the ultimate inaccessibility of what its characters seek to interpret: the will of the divine and the workings of divine providence. Yet while the text does, in Stanley Fish’s terms, resist a “master narrative” and render Samson’s act of pulling down the pillars “radically mysterious,” it does not, as I will argue, “render us incapable of performing the task we are assigned.”<sup>321</sup> The reader’s interpretive task is only impossible if that task is, as Fish suggests—and as countless readers have attempted to perform—to determine with finality the nature of Samson’s climactic act and thus pass sentence on Samson’s own spiritual condition and heroic status. Rather, *Samson Agonistes* challenges the reader to recognize the gap between spiritual narrative and divine knowledge, to

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<sup>321</sup> Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 472, 464.

examine the relationship between divine revelation and human imagination, to acknowledge our own interpretive limitations, and then to recommit to a rigorous (and interpretive) search for truth anyway.

### **“O change beyond report, thought, or belief!”: Samson on Interpretive Trial**

The primary conflict in criticism on *Samson Agonistes* concerns the legitimacy of Samson’s act of pulling down the pillars at Gaza and thus his debatable heroic status.<sup>322</sup> Is Samson’s final act divinely inspired? Can he know for certain that it is? Can the reader know? Or does Samson act in his own interest, exacting personal revenge over his enemies? How should the reader respond to Samson’s destruction of the Philistines (and himself)? Is Samson a hero of faith, a type of Christ?<sup>323</sup> An “outmoded” hero whose actions contrast Christ’s negatively?<sup>324</sup> Does he represent the radical, long-suffering puritan saint?<sup>325</sup> Or is he a “flawed tragic agent” who brings about his own “doom”?<sup>326</sup>

How we read Samson’s final act largely depends on how we understand what happens to him through the course of Milton’s drama. The traditional view sees spiritual progress in Samson’s character, or a process of repentance and regeneration that prepares

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<sup>322</sup> Alan Rudrum provides a useful (though biased) overview of these debates in “Milton Scholarship and the Agon over *Samson Agonistes*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65 (2002): 465-88.

<sup>323</sup> See, for example, F. Michael Krouse, *Milton’s Samson and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); and John M. Steadman, “‘Faithful Champion’: The Theological Basis of Milton’s Hero of Faith,” *Anglia* 77 (1959): 12-28.

<sup>324</sup> John Carey reads Samson as a false or “outmoded” hero in *Milton* (London: Evans Brothers, 1969) and *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968); he reprises that argument with contemporary force in “A Work in Praise of Terrorism?: September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*,” *TLS* (6 September 2002).

<sup>325</sup> See David Loewenstein, “The Revenge of the Saint: Radical Religion and Politics in *Samson Agonistes*,” *Milton Studies* 33 (1996): 159-80.

<sup>326</sup> Irene Samuel, “*Samson Agonistes* as Tragedy,” *Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes in Honor of John S. Diekhoff* (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), 235-57 (241).

him to fulfill his divinely appointed role as Israel's deliverer.<sup>327</sup> Responding in part to Samuel Johnson's famous critique that the play lacks a "middle," regenerationist critics propose an internalized plot that follows Samson's developing spiritual awareness.<sup>328</sup> If Samson is regenerated, it follows that he pulls down the pillars by divine inspiration (to which he has been made newly receptive) and thus emerges from the play victorious and heroic. Opponents of this view cannot accept that the play, which obscures Samson's motives and highlights his thirst for vengeance, champions the violence of his final act.<sup>329</sup> Samson thus becomes a false hero or negative model for the reader, his choice to act violently and "of [his] own accord" a fallen and tragic alternative to the patient and nonviolent resistance of the Son in *Paradise Regained*.<sup>330</sup> Such readings tend to dismiss the idea that Samson makes regenerative change from the play's opening to his death.

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<sup>327</sup> Regenerationist readings include, for example, Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978); Anthony Low, *The Blaze of Noon: A Reading of Samson Agonistes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974); and Steadman, "'Faithful Champion.'" John T. Shawcross's *The Uncertain World of Samson Agonistes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001) recognizes the drama as deliberately ambiguous but finds Samson regenerated through faith despite the uncertainties of a fallen world.

<sup>328</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* 139 (16 July 1751): "[the play] must be allowed to want a middle, since nothing passes between the first act and the last, that either hastens or delays the death of Samson."

<sup>329</sup> John Carey was one of the earliest revisionist critics to challenge the traditional view (see n. 324 above). See also Joseph Wittreich, *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986) and *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2002); Derek N. C. Wood, *"Exiled from Light": Divine Law, Morality, and Violence in Milton's Samson Agonistes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); and Samuel, "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy." Elizabeth Sauer's "Discontents with the Drama of Regeneration" "troubles" what she calls "neo-Christian" and regenerationist readings but is less concerned with establishing Samson as a negative model than with resisting efforts to "read the poem into conformity with Christian thought" (128). See Sauer, "Discontents," *The New Milton Criticism*, ed. Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 120-36.

<sup>330</sup> In Judges 16:28, Samson prays to God to strengthen him before pulling down the temple pillars. Milton eliminates this prayer; a messenger rather reports that Samson "stood, as one who prayed / Or some great matter in his mind resolved" and announced a new "trial" of his strength that he would perform "of my own accord" (1637-44). Wittreich makes much of Milton's decision to replace the biblical prayer with what he sees as a "thinly veiled threat," arguing that the change "casts a dubious eye on the whole matter of Samson's rousing motions coming from God" (*Interpreting*, 73-77). Radzinowicz, emphasizing Milton's belief in free will, sees Samson's act as a choice (made of his "own accord") to follow God's command (*Toward Samson Agonistes*, esp. 176, 339-347).

Others find that if he does change, those changes are insubstantial or even push him negatively toward a “second fall.”<sup>331</sup>

Given the centrality of the question of Samson’s spiritual regeneration to traditional criticism on *Samson Agonistes*, it is surprising that few studies have looked specifically at the play alongside early modern spiritual autobiography. The primary exception is a 2005 article by Elisabeth Liebert, which turns to the cyclical patterns of hope and doubt in autobiographical works like Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*, Thomas Shepard’s *Autobiography*, and Cotton Mather’s *Diary* to better elucidate the “internalized plot” of *Samson Agonistes* and to account for what appears to be a “lack of linear progression” within that plot.<sup>332</sup> Liebert acknowledges that the relevance of spiritual autobiography to Milton’s drama has not been entirely overlooked. On the contrary, it has become common to read in Samson’s experience that of the early modern puritan saint who must learn patience in the face of hardship, and because autobiographies document this experience so vividly, the texts provide useful examples through which to contextualize Samson’s internal distress. As Liebert points out, however, these discussions tend to draw connections between the actual, lived experiences of the anguished puritan and those depicted in Milton’s Samson without considering what spiritual autobiography may reveal about the imaginative structuring of that experience.<sup>333</sup> Looking closely at the nonlinear narration of puritan autobiographical writing and comparing that narration to the voicing of Samson’s experience, Liebert responds to the persistent efforts of revisionist critics to “decentraliz[e] the issue of

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<sup>331</sup> Wittreich, *Interpreting*, 80.

<sup>332</sup> Elisabeth Liebert, “*Samson Agonistes* and Spiritual Autobiography,” *Parergon* 22 (2005): 131-57.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-36.

regeneration,” proposing that unwillingness to recognize Samson’s spiritual growth as comprising the poem’s “middle” results from “unease with a structure that remains implicit rather than visible.”<sup>334</sup>

While I generally agree that Samson’s oscillations between despair and faith imitate “the often-frustrated movement in spiritual autobiography from sight of self to sight of God,” I would clarify that Samson’s movement from self to God involves an *interpretive* movement from narrative disorder to order, thus allowing for a recognition of and trust in God’s providence. Because Samson’s spiritual development is shown to be a distinctly interpretive process through which he is prompted to recognize within the story of his downfall a narrative of God’s justice and, potentially, forgiveness, I find it useful to read *Samson Agonistes* alongside autobiographical narratives like those explored in this thesis that respond to a specific personal crisis as an experience of spiritual trial. In doing so, I argue that Samson’s reorientation of his physical experience toward a spiritual narrative prompts the reader to understand his ordeal as a trial of faith and to contextualize Samson’s “rousing motions” as a lifting of that period of trial that paves *the way* for “corrected” action, regardless of how we interpret Samson’s final act. I further propose that the practice of narrating episodes of personal spiritual trial in seventeenth-century puritan communities provides a useful context through which to read the interactive and discursive structure of *Samson Agonistes*. For early modern puritans, interpreting personal spiritual experience, as I have demonstrated throughout this thesis, was often subject to communal influence and public function, and the process of recognizing grace in the soul could involve revelation and collective recognition as much

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 134.



as introspection. In *Samson Agonistes*, interactions with the Chorus, Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha, in various ways, provide discursive spaces through which Samson can offer, test, revise, and ultimately demonstrate his readings of the work of God on his soul.

While I will argue in the final section of this chapter that the obsessive efforts of Manoa and the Chorus to narrate Samson's death at the play's close in fact highlight the ultimate *unknowability* of the soul and of divine providence, their involvement in the interpretive process dramatizes the social nexus of spiritual experience in Milton's world, raising the stakes of self-examination and demonstrating the need for spiritual self-expression in puritan communities.

Even as the play prompts this productive, regenerative reading of Samson's affliction and return to God's favor, however, it ultimately frustrates our commitment to it by withholding satisfying evidence of Samson's reconnection with the divine. Just as Samson appears to move out of despair, achieve spiritual self-awareness, and once again engage in intimate conversation with God, the reader's vantage point for interpreting Samson's experience becomes further and further obscured. Milton's drama offers a *possible* reading of Samson's experience as regenerative spiritual trial but ultimately refuses to confirm that reading, calling into question all that we have taken as truth. The contrast between the reader's increasing uncertainty and the remaining characters' (the Chorus and Manoa's) interpretive frenzy at the close of the play highlights the insufficiency and vulnerability of human narrative as a means for understanding the divine, but also affirms its essentiality. Our stories may be imperfect, but they are necessary for making meaning in a fallen world. *Samson Agonistes* forces readers to

confront our own interpretive limitations in the face of the divine and to consider how we might move as close as possible to inspired knowledge on earth.

Samson's opening soliloquy is marked by a sense of disjunction between the past and the present, a rupture caused by the unexpected event of his blinding and imprisonment. Like Donne, "surpriz'd with a sodaine change" at the onset of disease and acutely aware that "this minute I was well, and am ill, this minute," Samson is preoccupied with "what once I was, and what am now" (22).<sup>335</sup> For Samson, whose life has been laid out in narrative terms since before he was born, this change is particularly disruptive because it offers an inappropriate end to his story:

O wherefore was my birth from Heaven foretold  
Twice by an angel, who at last in sight  
Of both my parents all in flames ascended  
From off the altar, where an off'ring burned  
As in a fiery column charioting  
His godlike presence, and from some great act  
Or benefit revealed to Abraham's race?  
Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed  
As of a person separate to God,  
Designed for great exploits, if I must die  
Betrayed, captive, and both my eyes put out,  
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze,  
To grind in brazen fetters under task  
With this Heav'n-gifted strength? (23-36)

Samson asks not why he has been betrayed but rather how the reality of his current state ("Betrayed, captive, and both my eyes put out") could possibly fit the "design" for his life that had been "ordered," "prescribed," and "foretold" by God. Contrasting a current image of himself as the "scorn and gaze" of his enemies with the storied "godlike

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<sup>335</sup> Donne, *Devotions*, 7.

presence” of the angel who, in the sight of his parents, foretold his “great exploits” and returned to heaven “all in flames,” Samson’s query probes what appears to be a break not only in his own narrative but in the earth’s outward reflection of divine order. His “Heav’n-gifted strength” is unsuitably “Put to the labor of a beast” (34-5). Samson merges the ideas of divine disorder with narrative incongruity to present his life as a promise unfulfilled. “Promise was,” he observes,

that I  
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;  
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him  
Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,  
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke (38-42)

Shifting his perspective into the third person, Samson moves even further into the imaginative realm of story, lamenting the fabled “great deliverer” with whom those familiar with the stories of his past would be disappointed to find “eyeless” and “in bonds.” Samson the self-reflecting sufferer becomes more distinctly Samson the tragic character as he recognizes the weird symmetry of his captivity under the same “yoke” from which he should have delivered his people: it is through narrative irony that he can best express his disorientation.

Countering (but not alleviating) Samson’s existential shock at the seeming withdrawal of God’s promise is his terrifying realization that this might all be his fault. “[W]hat if all foretold,” Samson wonders, “Had been fulfilled but through mine own default...?” (44-5). Of course, Samson knows that the immediate cause of his captivity was a vulnerability he brought upon himself, “weakly” revealing the “holy secret” of his strength to his Philistine wife (50, 497). But because Samson is a person “ordered and prescribed” to do God’s work, the relationship between divine providence and his own

actions is difficult to sort out, for the reader and for Samson himself. Samson's recognition of fault—that he may have no one “to complain of but myself”—identifies his weakness as sin and his current situation as a “fall” from prosperity (46, 55). He voices this in distinctly puritan terms: “Proudly secure,” the Samson of the past had, as Milton's contemporary readers would have recognized, “fitted” himself for such a fall (55).<sup>336</sup> This language suggests the possible contextualization of Samson's experience as one of (deserved, but also temporary) spiritual trial, intended to punish his sins, correct his perspective, and bring him to a more acute sense of spiritual awareness. But while Samson's narrative pushes in this potentially productive and providential direction, he is unable to make the interpretive move himself—unable to rectify what he sees as an either-or dichotomy of his past (divinely inspired) and present (fallen) selves. Samson recognizes that he should not “rashly call in doubt / Divine prediction,” but his suspicion that his own actions have somehow nullified that prediction (“what if all foretold / *Had been fulfilled but through mine own default?*”) exposes a limited understanding of the means through which divine providence can work (43-45, my emphasis).

As Liebert has demonstrated, Samson's inability to come to terms with what he once “was” and now “is” derives from a fixation on physicality: the “bifurcating self” explored in Samson's opening soliloquy, Liebert explains, “is little more than a complex of bodily experiences.”<sup>337</sup> This leads Liebert to find in Samson's fallen condition a problematic focus on the earthly self, or an idea of “self...imagined apart from any

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<sup>336</sup> Fitzherbert, 179: “I was grown too secure and puffed up...I had fitted myself too much for so dangerous a fall.” Alec Ryrie insightfully explains that “security,” for the early modern puritan, was “the corrupt doppelgänger of...assurance”: it was an “ill-grounded conviction” of one's own godliness, but unlike true assurance, it encouraged spiritual laziness. See Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>337</sup> Liebert, “*Samson Agonistes* and Spiritual Autobiography,” 144.

relationship with God.”<sup>338</sup> But Samson *is* imagining himself in relationship to God—just not in the correct way. That is, he insists on reading physical experience as a visibly obvious, identical marker of his spiritual condition: his earthly failure, because it ostensibly leads Samson in a direction opposite to what has been foretold, must indicate a change in God’s plan. Samson is quite concerned with his spiritual state, but he wrongly subjects his relationship with God to an earthly oriented and logical narrative of his physical experience. As a puritan reader would understand, it is only when one learns to compose first a narrative of the *soul* that the physical experience of suffering on earth might be tolerated. And as we have seen, the spiritual logic of God’s trials forges narratives of grace that manifest (physically, visibly) in often the most unexpected and seemingly disordered of ways.

Samson’s spiritual short-sightedness is demonstrated through his overestimation of strength as the source of his downfall and of physical sight as essential to witnessing the divine. Acknowledging the insufficiency of physical strength “without a double share / Of wisdom,” Samson appears on the verge of subsuming physical markers of identity to spiritual ones: “God,” Samson realizes, “when he gave me strength, to show withal / How slight the gift was, hung it in my hair” (58-9). But as if recoiling from the clarity this formulation offers—that strength on earth, like hair, is trifling, compared with the true spiritual gift of God’s favor—Samson casts it off as God’s mysterious “dispensation,” “above [his] reach to know,” replacing the challenging spiritual truth with the more mundane and earthly conclusion that “strength is my bane, / And...the source of all my miseries” (63-4). Had Samson pushed his analysis further, an understanding of physical

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<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 145.

strength as “slight” compared to spiritual strength might have helped to mitigate the distress of what he calls his “chief” misery, loss of sight (66). Recognizing light as the “prime work” of God, Samson sees his blindness as a “total eclipse,” not just of the visible world but of life itself, to which light is “necessary” (70, 81, 90). But when Samson questions why sight was “confined” to “such a tender ball” as the eye, he fails to learn the appropriate lesson:

Since light so necessary is to life,  
And almost life itself, if it be true  
That light is in the soul,  
She all in every part, why was the sight  
To such a tender ball as th’ eye confined?  
So obvious and so easy to be quenched,  
And not as feeling through all parts diffused,  
That she might look at will through every pore? (90-97)

If Samson could learn from the vulnerability of his physical strength (hung in his hair) that physical gifts are “slight,” what might he learn from the easily “quenched” sight of his eye? Samson cannot yet recognize that the “light” within the soul is of a different order—that outward sight is inconsequential when compared with that of the “inward eyes” with which he must learn to see (1689).<sup>339</sup> Finding in blindness “a living death,” “a moving grave,” a life “In power of others, never in my own,” Samson continues to allow

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<sup>339</sup> Milton distinguishes between inward and outward blindness in his *Second Defense of the English People* (1654): blindness of the “inmost faculties,” he asserts, “obscures the mind, so that you may see nothing whole or real,” where his own blindness “merely deprives things of color and superficial appearance.” While inward sight allows for “intellectual vision,” it also, most importantly, allows for spiritual clarity: “May I be entirely helpless...provided that in my shadows the light of the divine countenance may shine forth all the more clearly. For then shall I be at once the weakest and the strongest, at the same time blind and most keen in vision” (1083).

his physical experience to compose his identity and direct his life, failing turn to spiritual experience as a means through which to regain autonomy and purpose.<sup>340</sup>

Samson's Danite friends are similarly unable to transcend the physical reality of Samson's changed condition, finding in the sight of their tribesman an incomprehensible image of disorder. When the Chorus enters, the sight of Samson at rest, in chains, and dejected contrasts jarringly with the heroic and active Samson they hold in their minds. Their disorientation is such that "This, this is he" is quickly countered by a less certain "Can this be he?," leading the speaker to challenge his own ability to perceive the scene in front of him ("Or do my eyes misrepresent?") (115-24). The problem is that Samson's physical appearance and activity once visibly reflected what the Danites (and Samson) believed to be his spiritual status as divine instrument: the Chorus's depiction of Samson as now lying "at random, carelessly diffused," with "unpropped" head and "ill-fitted

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<sup>340</sup> Milton considers and rejects the idea of blindness as "a living death" (*Samson*, 100) in his nineteenth sonnet:

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide,  
"Doth God exact day labor, light denied?"  
I fondly ask; but patience to prevent  
That murmur soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best; his state  
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait." (7-14)

Recognizing what Samson cannot—that "God doth not need / Either man's work or his own gifts"—the speaker redefines service as acceptance of God's will and patience to bear his "mild yoke." Alluding to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30, the speaker initially fears that his inability to make use of God's gift (poetic genius, presumably, for Milton) would bring "death," as he is no longer capable serving his master in the only way he assumes he can. It is his reorientation from (earthly) works to faith, or spiritual patience, that allows the speaker to accept his present situation a new model of service to God. See also Milton, *Second Defense*: "Not blindness but the inability to endure blindness is a source of misery" (1080).

weeds,” is physically descriptive but also interpretively revealing of the inappropriate and disorderly way in which God’s supposed favor is now made manifest (118-22). Samson’s state is a “change beyond report, thought, or belief”—an affront, that is, to the Chorus’s memories of Samson, to the stories reported about him, and, importantly, to the belief in a divinely ordered world to which Samson’s physical presence once attested (117). As such, Samson’s case becomes an “example”—a “mirror” through which the Danites might reflect on their own mortality and on man’s relationship with the divine:

O mirror of our fickle state,  
Since man on earth unparalleled!  
The rarer thy example stands,  
By how much from the top of wondrous glory,  
Strongest of mortal men,  
To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fall’n. (164-69)

That Samson, once strongest and most glorious of men, can fall to “lowest pitch of abject fortune” turns earthly order upside down. The Chorus, recognizing this “rare...example” of “our fickle state,” participates in Samson’s experience through a shared sense of providential disruption and narrative discontinuity that troubles expectations and thus causes self-reflection. And yet the Chorus, like Samson, remains stuck in a then-now dichotomy. Samson is “The glory *late* of Israel, *now* the grief”: division is reinforced by the poetry itself, with Samson’s incompatible identities dividing the line and the alliteration of “glory” and “grief” emphasizing transformation and contrast (179, my emphasis). Again, this dichotomy assumes essential change in Samson’s role based on the physical, outwardly perceivable reality of his changed circumstances. Even the “Counsel or consolation” offered by the Chorus is voiced in physical terms: the Danites bring “salve” to Samson’s “sores,” as “apt words have power to ’suage / The tumors of a troubled mind, / And are as balm to festered wounds” (184-6).



The Chorus brings consolation to Samson by encouraging reflective narration—by prompting him to speak about his past and thus to search for connective threads between past and present.<sup>341</sup> Their presence also serves to move Samson out of the “deadly swarm” of his own “restless thoughts” by forcing him to recall and consider his place within a community of believers. Though spiritually beneficial, this is not a pleasant process. While Samson is “revive[d]” by the visit, his immediate response is one of “shame” to have “like a foolish pilot...shipwrecked / My vessel trusted to me from above” (187, 198-99). Acknowledging his own foolishness three times in the space of six lines, Samson still problematically concerns himself with the writing of his earthly story, fearing that he is now “sung and proverbied for a fool / In every street” (198, 201, 203-4). But in identifying shame as a greater misery than blindness, which has thus far consumed his thoughts, Samson begins to reconsider his condition in a way that moves beyond its immediate physical constraints (195-7).<sup>342</sup> Because Samson’s earthly role within his tribe—a Nazirite, and called to serve God by delivering his people from oppression—is also one of divine function, turning outward enables Samson to begin the process of reorienting his experience toward its divine (rather than physical and worldly) significance.

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<sup>341</sup> Liebert observes an “unusual reversal of roles” in Samson’s interaction with the Chorus, noting that where spiritual autobiographers typically wrote for the “comfort and edification” of their readers, the Chorus solicits autobiographical narratives from Samson in order to develop Samson’s own spiritual awareness (147). As I have demonstrated throughout this thesis (and especially in the case of Dionys Fitzherbert), however, self-awareness often develops *through* the process of self-demonstration for autobiographers, and thus the Chorus’s role is only “unusual” if we take the explicit, public aims of autobiographies as their sole functions. I would also argue that the Chorus *does* receive comfort and edification, to some extent, from Samson’s experience as they take over narrating his life at the end of the play.

<sup>342</sup> Mary Ann Radzinowicz makes a similar point in *Toward Samson Agonistes*, suggesting that since blindness is a “symbol of [Samson’s] powerlessness” in his first soliloquy, moving beyond it here is a move toward regained agency (29-30).

Importantly, this transition also encourages Samson to consider a place for his sufferings within Israelite history and thus to see precedent for his experience. When Samson reflects upon Israel's continued servitude despite his past heroic deeds, the Chorus recalls a list of unappreciated deliverers from the past to whom Samson might compare his own plight. Fish describes this move as one of "rhetorical domestication," an attempt by the Chorus to "make the present into something that has already happened, an event at once predicted and rendered intellectually manageable by a formula ready and eager to account for it."<sup>343</sup> For Jane Collins, who builds upon Fish's reading, this effort to familiarize Samson's experience amounts to "intellectual sloth"—a refusal to grapple with the reality of Samson's particular situation by instead establishing easy and "convenient truths."<sup>344</sup> Certainly the play invites us to interrogate the Chorus's interpretive procedures, as I will address in the final section of this chapter. But we should recognize here that exemplarity or comparison itself would not necessarily have been seen as a "lazy" mode of interpretation for Milton's puritan contemporaries, who were in the habit of drawing connections between their own lives and biblical models and who were often troubled by seemingly singular experience. While the choral move is, indeed, one toward intellectual manageability by writing a narrative for Samson that is more easily recognizable or familiar, that move productively prompts Samson to contextualize his experience within an encompassing providential pattern. As Samson aligns himself with other neglected champions, he is encouraged to subsume the

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<sup>343</sup> Fish, *How Milton Works*, 437.

<sup>344</sup> Jane Collins, "Authorial Providence and the Dramatic Form of *Samson Agonistes*," *Spokesperson Milton: Voices in Contemporary Criticism* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 179-89 (183-84).

significance of their common earthly fate to that of the divine will they are tasked to promote: “Of such examples add me to the roll,” Samson allows, but concludes that “Me easily indeed mine may neglect, / But God’s proposed deliverance not so” (291-2).

Finally, in drawing Samson out of the particularity of his experience and encouraging reflection on his relationships with God and community, the Chorus helps to expand Samson’s limited understanding of the parameters of providential order. We have seen that Samson, in his opening soliloquy, was problematically unable to conceive of a narrative of divine providence that might encompass both his past and his present selves. He saw his own “default” as provoking not divine punishment and correction but a definitive change in God’s plan, and he further dismissed the “will / Of highest dispensation” as hopelessly “above [his] reach to know” (43-45, 60-62). When his complaint that strength and wisdom had been “proportioned ill” within him threatens to place blame on God’s order, however, the Chorus warns him to “Tax not disposal,” observing that “wisest men / Have erred, and by bad women been deceived” (210-11). While the Chorus oversimplifies Samson’s error by blaming “bad women,” the goal is again to uplift Samson by encouraging him to identify with others who have made similar mistakes. The observation also, however, emphasizes that Samson’s act was in fact a human *mistake*, not the unavoidable product of a divinely “disposed” or assigned flaw. Taken together, these suggestions encourage Samson both to expand his understanding of providence to incorporate man’s freedom to choose (and choose wrongly) and to accept that perhaps his own wrong choice did not “wreck” his “ship” but merely send it temporarily off course (198).

The Chorus's next consideration of divine providence influences Samson profoundly, but not in the way they had intended. Searching for a narrative that might explain Samson's "intimate impulse" to marry outside of his tribe, the Chorus pronounces God's ways as "Just...and justifiable to men," promoting both a trusting and unassuming approach to understanding divine governance. Since God "made our laws to bind us, not himself," man should not seek to read and evaluate providential order according to earthly standards, no matter how *unjust* God's actions may initially appear (293-4, 309-10). God may lead his followers in whatever direction he chooses, the Chorus suggests, regardless of the sorts of human restrictions that would have forbade Samson from marrying either of his wives. To assume otherwise, the Chorus explains, is to "confine th' interminable / And tie him to his own [earthly] prescript" when we should instead recognize that heaven operates through its own mysterious ways (307-8). The argument may, indeed, "justify" God's prompting of Samson in an unusual direction, but only in that it justifies God's operation *outside* of typical human means of justification. It is this important application of the Chorus's comments that Samson is able to productively apply to his own situation and his sufferings.

Samson does not immediately respond to the Chorus's commentary on divine providence, but his encounter with his father suggests that he has taken the Danites' suggestions to heart. When Manoa enters and sees Samson "in low dejected state," his immediate reaction is structured by a (now familiar) past-versus-present dichotomy of Samson's condition. Lamenting this "miserable change," Manoa, like the Chorus before him, also sees in Samson's fallen state a universally significant image of man's changeable fortune and vulnerability:

O miserable change! Is this the man,  
 That invincible Samson, far renowned,  
 ...  
 Himself an army, now unequal match  
 To save himself against a coward armed  
 At one spear's length? O ever-failing trust  
 In mortal strength! And O what not in man  
 Deceivable and vain! Nay what thing good  
 Prayed for, but often proves our woe, our bane? (340-51)

Like Samson, Manoa responds to this sense of earthly disorder and change by questioning divine providence and doubting the logic of God's plan. Why, Manoa asks, did God grant my prayer for children, knowing (as he must) that this gift would bring misery? Unable to move past the sense of finality he ascribes to Samson's fallen state, Manoa wonders how it could have been for "this"—for a champion "glorious for a while, / ...then in an hour / Ensnared, assaulted, overcome..."—that God "selected" Samson and sent his angel to foretell his birth (361-5). Manoa's limitations are precisely those with which his son has grappled earlier in the play; Samson, however, now knows better. Emboldened, he instructs his father to "Appoint not Heavenly disposition," and, most importantly, he explains that "Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me / But *justly*" (373-5, my emphasis). Where personal fault had initially, to Samson, indicated a break from God's favor, his appreciation of justice now allows him to take responsibility in a more spiritually productive way. To "appoint" divine order is to assign blame, but also to limit it—or, to use the Chorus's words, to "confine th' interminable" to human expectations (307). Samson cannot yet see a path in which he might fulfill his role as Israel's deliverer, but in accepting his suffering as "just," he is no longer closing himself off from God's plan. In fact, his language suggests that he is beginning to see spiritual order in the seeming disorder of his earthly experience. His "servile mind" in submitting

to Dalila is “rewarded well with servile punishment,” his physical captivity and loss of slight apt punishment for the “true slavery” and “blindness” of his sin (412-8).

Samson’s change of perspective is further developed as it is tested. Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha offer opportunities to ensnare Samson with earthly temptations or with modes of thought that run counter to the spiritual direction to which he must orient his mind.

Manoa offers physical freedom: he plans to seek Samson’s release from Philistinian captivity through ransom. The offer is that of a father who wishes to protect his son and thus is certainly well intentioned. But it is unwittingly problematic in that it offers earthly comfort to mitigate what Samson now understands to be a spiritually necessary punishment for his sin against God. “Spare that proposal, father,” Samson replies, and “let me here, / As I deserve, pay on my punishment; / And expiate, if possible, my crime” (487-90). Samson knows he must resist an earthly deliverance from his suffering as he has begun to understand his narrative as it relates to the will of the divine. The puritan reader, moreover, would recognize in Manoa’s offer of “ransom” a distinctly physical alternative to the spiritual ransom for sin that would be offered to man through Christ in the future.<sup>345</sup> Of course we cannot fault Manoa’s character for a discrepancy of which he cannot possibly be aware. But the contrast seems deliberate, pitting human agency against divine deliverance and allowing Samson an opportunity to choose to submit to God’s plan, whatever the outcome.

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<sup>345</sup> See *Paradise Lost*, Book III: “[Man] with his whole posterity must die / . . . unless for him / Some other able, and as willing, pay / The rigid satisfaction, death for death” (209-12). The ransom storyline is one of Milton’s own creative additions to the Judges account in *Samson Agonistes*.

The issue of Manoa's ransom becomes especially pertinent when we consider Samson's experience in light of narratives of spiritual trial. It was conventional in trial of faith narratives to draw contrast between God's saving grace and the futile attempts of human agents to bring the sufferer out of despair or affliction. Identifying God as the only agent of relief for the soul produced evidence for the godly of a spiritual *source* or purpose for their crises. Puritans understood that conversion and spiritual assurance were achieved through God's grace alone, and through no effort of their own or of any other human being. The lifting of spiritual trial (which brought the sufferer out of despair, renewed one's faith in God, and offered evidence of election) must likewise be wrought by God through the holy spirit. As Mary Morrissey has demonstrated, accounts of spiritual trial reflect this belief in their narrative structures: "by drawing out the period of illness and confusion, the writer demonstrates that all human means to recovery were attempted and that all failed. The abruptness of the transition from sickness or despair to spiritual health and happiness excludes those human agencies from the cure."<sup>346</sup> Morrissey finds this strategy at work in Dionys Fitzherbert's account of spiritual despair, which details her fears and delusions that persisted despite the efforts of Fitzherbert's doctor and friends to comfort her, finding abrupt release only when God "work[ed] out [her] deliverance...by his divine spirit."<sup>347</sup> We have seen that Donne draws a similar contrast between his earthly doctors who will never find the true "root, "fuell," or "occasion" of his sickness and the "great *Physician*" (God) who cures through grace.<sup>348</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Mary Morrissey, "Narrative Authority in Spiritual Life-writing: The Example of Dionys Fitzherbert (fl. 1608-1641)," *The Seventeenth Century* 15 (2000): 1-15.

<sup>347</sup> Fitzherbert, 217. See also Chapter 2, p. 126 of this thesis.

<sup>348</sup> Donne, *Devotions*, 117-18.

Even Agnes Beaumont, who actively procures her own liberty by standing trial for her father's murder and offering a convincing statement of her innocence in the courtroom, insists that she succeeds not on her own merits but because God "did convince [the jury] of my innocency." Her acquittal is less a revelation of earthly truth than a spiritual "deliverance" by God.<sup>349</sup>

If we understand Samson's experience as one of spiritual trial, then, it is appropriate for Samson to likewise reject a physical "release" to his father's house that could never adequately solve the spiritual crisis at work within him. That Manoa's offer of ransom in *Samson Agonistes* is, like the efforts of human agents in trial of faith narratives, insufficient to truly deliver his son is emphasized by the ironic timing of his success. Manoa's report that he may, indeed, be able to procure Samson's freedom arrives immediately after Samson leaves to perform at the festival (which, as the knowledgeable reader understands, will end in his death). As he shares his news with the Chorus, his distinctly physical vision of salvation for Samson ("It shall be my delight to tend his eyes, / And view him sitting in the house") is twice interrupted by the sounds of Samson's performance at Gaza, which Manoa and the Chorus would later recognize as the product of God's own deliverance (1490-91, 1472, 1508). Refused by Samson, and working entirely counter to the progress of Samson's renewed trust in God, Manoa's ransom appears futile, naïve, and ultimately demonstrative of the need to instead submit fully to God's grace and providence.

Dalila, like Manoa, wants to move Samson out of prison and into her home, and, like Manoa's ransom, her offer is in part one of physical comfort to mitigate Samson's

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<sup>349</sup> Beaumont, 81, 80.



sufferings. Dalila, too, wishes to “tend about [Samson] to old age” and to provide her husband with the “delights” and “solaces” of “leisure and domestic care” (925, 915-917). But Dalila primarily seeks forgiveness, and while her sensuality presents a temptation Samson must resist as she approaches, she is most dangerously seductive in her use of worldly rhetoric to excuse her betrayal. Assessments of Dalila’s character have placed her anywhere along a spectrum from “opportunistic deceiver” to “deeply wronged wife.”<sup>350</sup> Is Dalila sincerely penitent, or is she simply making excuses and displacing blame? And if we accept John Ulreich’s assumption that Dalila “means what she says,” is what she says/means worthy of Samson’s and the reader’s sympathies?<sup>351</sup> On the surface, Dalila’s arguments are convincing and understandable, especially if we are sensitive to the plight of a woman caught between the conflicting demands of multiple sources of (male) authority. Finding herself “girt...round” by Philistinian magistrates and priests who pressed her with “all the bonds of civil duty / And of religion,” Dalila was forced to choose between the loyalties she owed to both her husband and her country.<sup>352</sup> Despite Samson’s protests that Dalila, as his wife, “wast to leave / Parents and country” for his

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<sup>350</sup> Linda Gregerson, “Milton and The Tragedy of Nations,” *PMLA* 129 (2014): 672-87 (674); William Empson, *Milton’s God* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961), 211. For an overview of critical responses to Dalila and of the challenges of interpreting her role in *Samson Agonistes*, see Shawcross, *Uncertain World*, chapter 5 (65-80).

<sup>351</sup> John C. Ulreich, “‘Incident to All Our Sex’: The Tragedy of Dalila,” *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 185-210.

<sup>352</sup> Stella Revard argues that Dalila is “bound to double allegiances” in “Dalila as Euripidean Heroine,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 23 (1987): 291-302. While I argue that the play devalues Dalila’s sense of moral conflict because it is not guided by an examination of conscience, I find Alan Rudrum’s protest that “neither in pre-Christian Israel nor in Milton’s time would a woman in her situation be seen as having double allegiances” to be misguided. Surely the literature on conscience and proper conduct for women in Milton’s time suggests that the issue was much more complicated than Rudrum claims. See Rudrum, “Milton Scholarship,” 478, and by contrast, Bernard Capp, “Gender, Conscience, and Casuistry: Women and Conflicting Obligations in Early Modern England,” *Contexts of Conscience in Early Modern Europe 1500-1700*, ed. Harald E. Braun and Edward Vallance (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 116-31.

own “protection,” a seventeenth-century reader was likely to be receptive to issues of divided loyalties, which had become especially pressing during and after the British civil wars. These cases were particularly challenging for a woman, whose often conflicting loyalties to state and religion were further complicated by those she owed to male authorities. While the issue was more complicated than most advice literature suggests, early modern discourses on the conscience taught that since a woman owed a “higher duty to the law of God” than to her husband, there were situations in which wifely disobedience might be excused.<sup>353</sup> In this light, Dalila’s argument initially seems justified by the discourses of conscience with which an early modern reader would have been familiar.

The key word here, however, is *conscience*. In morally conflicting situations, puritans turned inward to what Milton called God’s “umpire conscience,” the internal spiritual faculty that would lead man to salvation if he “will hear” it.<sup>354</sup> Dalila, on the other hand, presents her dilemma as a case of conscience without showing any signs of an inward turn. She is afflicted not by the pangs of conscience that prompted her to serve her God and country but by the “powerful arguments” of human authorities through which she was “Solicited, commanded, threatened, urged” to act (862, 852). In Dalila’s submission to worldly influence, Samson is presented with a mirror of his own weakness: if Dalila was wrong to yield Samson’s secret to the Philistine authorities, Samson was equally wrong to confess that secret to his wife. The difference is that Samson acknowledges his wrongdoing as a sin against God and suffers profoundly and internally

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<sup>353</sup> Capp, “Gender, Conscience, and Casuistry,” 122.

<sup>354</sup> *Paradise Lost*, 3.195.

because of it. Immediately following Samson's confession of utter despair—of "torment" that "fester[s] in 'th'inmost mind" (606-651)—Dalila's composed and evasive apology remains comparatively stuck in the earthly repercussions of what she has done. It fails, that is, to make a true examination of conscience. Dalila cannot recognize this—her religion is one of idolatry, not of "the living God"—and thus her penitence, though perhaps sincere in regretting the consequences of her actions, is to Samson nothing more than "smooth hypocrisy" (872). By allowing Samson the opportunity to distinguish between matters of conscience and worldly concerns, the episode with Dalila further exposes the problem of allowing oneself to be defined by physical and earthly circumstance. Repulsed by Dalila's continued susceptibility to outward constraints on her choices (and reminded of his own such susceptibility in the past), Samson is prompted to renew his commitment to acting according to God's will.

The encounter with Harapha gives Samson the opportunity to voice that commitment and to test his willingness to act on it. Harapha is Milton's creation. Father of the biblical giant Goliath, he is a picture of Philistinian hypocrisy: Harapha is "bulk without spirit vast," or all surface with no substance (1238). Samson presents himself as Harapha's opposite:

Then put on all thy gorgeous arms, thy helmet  
And brigandine of brass, thy broad habergeon,  
Vantbrace and greaves, and gauntlet, add thy spear  
A weaver's beam, and seven-times-folded shield,  
I only with an oaken staff will meet thee... (1119)

Harapha's taunts are empty, his lack of spirit emphasized by the excess and ornament of his physical armor. Samson, blind and bound, offers himself instead as a force of divine justice, confident in his ability to fight with "only an oaken staff" because his "trust" is

not in weaponry but “in the living God” (1140). Rejecting the outward advantage Harapha would hold in a fight between them, Samson now fully embraces *inner* experience as the marker of his identity, imagining a place for himself within a physically unlikely but spiritually necessary narrative of God’s providence made manifest. Samson’s strength, he suggests, will emerge not as a component of his physical self but as “the power of Israel’s God” working through him: strength is no longer a source of personal pride for Samson but a means through which to attest to the spirit within.

Most importantly for Samson’s interpretive development, Harapha solicits a final autobiographical narrative from Samson that allows him to connect his past and present along spiritual lines. Harapha mocks and belittles Samson, using physical and earthly circumstances as proof that his divine favor was “feign[ed]” (1135). Calling Samson “a murderer, a revolter, and a robber,” Harapha defines his adversary in worldly terms, identifying his deeds by the objective reality of their consequences and judging them according to human laws.<sup>355</sup> Reading Samson from the outside, Harapha moreover offers a summary of his adversary’s condition that could have been voiced by Samson himself in the play’s opening scenes:

Presume not on thy god, whate’er he be,  
Thee he regards not, owns not, hath cut off  
Quite from his people, and delivered up  
Into thy enemies’ hand, permitted them  
To put out both thine eyes, and fettered send thee  
Into the common prison, there to grind  
Among the slaves and asses thy comrades,  
As good for nothing else, no better service  
With those thy boist’rous locks, no worthy match

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<sup>355</sup> For an overview of the contemporary political and religious contexts through which Samson’s actions may have been justified, see R. W. Serjeantson, “*Samson Agonistes* and ‘Single Rebellion,’” *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 613-31.

For valor to assail, nor by the sword  
Of noble warrior, so to stain his honor,  
But by the barber's razor best subdued. (1156-67)

Harapha's pronouncement echoes not only the themes of Samson's earlier self-evaluation (physical condition as a transparent marker of spiritual identity, servitude as debasement, blindness and imprisonment as preventative of service, the ignobility of his fall to Dalila), but also the very language with which these concerns had been spoken. "Grind[ing]" in the "common prison," "fettered" and "cut off" from his God, Samson is presented with the personal narrative he himself had once composed, guided as it was by earthly event and physicality. To this narrative, Samson offers an alternative that employs spiritual logic to create a sustained identity through his relationship with God. The same God who "gave me / At my nativity this strength," Samson insists, is in charge of both his present and his future:

All these indignities, for such they are  
From thine, these evils I deserve and more,  
Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me  
Justly, *yet* despair not of his final pardon  
Whose ear is ever open; and his eye  
Gracious to readmit the suppliant... (1168-73, my emphasis)

Having progressed from seeming disorder to order—from astonishment at his fallen condition to a recognition that it is "just"—Samson's narrative can now move forward: his fall is just, "yet" having endured his punishment, he *may* return to God. It is with confidence in this potential for God's mercy and acceptance that he offers himself entirely as God's champion.

### **Samson's "rousing motions": Recognizing the Limitations and Possibilities of Spiritual Narrative**

Samson's submission to a spiritual narrative of self that persists despite the changing conditions of his physical life is articulated most forcefully in his final physical appearance in the play. A public officer has arrived to command Samson's performance at a Philistinian festival—a ritualistic feast to honor Dagon. Samson refuses on religious and then on personal grounds, arguing that Hebrew law forbids his attendance (“I cannot come”) and further that a performance would disgrace him (“I will not come”) (1321, 1332). When the officer warns Samson to “Regard thyself,” Samson's answer boasts of a newly defined selfhood that the officer cannot understand:

Myself? My conscience and internal peace.  
Can they think me so broken, so debased  
With corporal servitude, that my mind ever  
Will condescend to such absurd commands? (1334-37)

In refusing to submit to the officer's commands, Samson more importantly refuses to submit his spiritual identity—his “conscience and internal peace”—to the “debased” and “absurd” demands of physical experience.

Yet Samson *does* attend the festival, not because of any threats or persuasions on the officer's part, but in response to some sort of internal revelation that renders him “content to go” (1403). The change of mind is abrupt, occurring somewhere in the space of only seven lines that separate Samson's insistence that human commands are not binding and his decision to “go along” with the messenger (1376, 1384). Samson echoes the Chorus's earlier lesson on divine prerogative, admitting that God “may dispense with me or thee / Present in temples at idolatrous rites / For some important cause”; God's laws for man, we recall, do not bind God's own providential design, and thus he may lead his believers to break laws if necessary (1377-89). The suggestion is that the “rousing motions” that immediately follow Samson's comment prompt him in such a direction—

that his abrupt decision to attend the festival responds to a sudden “intimate impulse” to do so from God (1382, 223).

But Samson does not explicitly make that claim, and Milton’s play does not confirm it. Upon experiencing his “motions,” Samson’s speech slips into interpretive ambiguity:

Be of good courage, I begin to feel  
Some rousing motions in me which dispose  
To something extraordinary my thoughts.  
I with this messenger will go along,  
Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonor  
Our law, or stain my vow of Nazarite.  
If there be aught of presage in the mind,  
This day will be remarkable in my life  
By some great act, or of my days the last. (1381-89)

The terms of Samson’s transformation are pointedly vague: he feels “*Some* rousing motions,” which dispose his thoughts to “*something* extraordinary,” and prepares himself for “*some* great act,” his use of qualifiers betraying the indeterminate nature of whatever inspiration he has received (my emphasis). That what lies ahead may perhaps be “great,” “extraordinary,” and “remarkable” in no way suggests an appropriate moral or ethical reading for Samson’s actions, nor does this language imply that Samson plans to do God’s work. All we can decipher from such imprecise terms is that the event to come will hold special significance; the nature of that significance will not “*dishonor*” Samson’s religious vows, but as to what it may in fact honor or achieve we are left completely in the dark. As Samson prepares to go, he continues to voice his plans only in negative terms. He will participate in “nothing...Scandalous or forbidden in our Law,” and his friends will hear “nothing” of Samson that is “dishonorable, impure, unworthy / Our God, our law, my nation, or myself” (1408-9, 1423-25). It does not seem, however, that

Samson is deliberately evasive, but rather than he himself is unsure what will happen next. He is “content” and resolute as he enters an unknown realm of possibility, but whether that confidence stems from divine inspiration or personal resolution we cannot be entirely sure.

Samson leaves with the officer, and we hear of him only by report (and through subsequent interpretations of that report) for the remainder of the play. Just at the moment, then, that Samson appears to emerge victorious from his period of spiritual trial and to recommit his life to the will of God, the reader is distanced from his experience and from Samson’s own interpretive responses to those experiences. In *How Milton Works* (2001), Stanley Fish addresses this movement from interpretive anticipation to mystery as the ultimate intellectual tease. The play tempts us with its various interpretive possibilities, Fish asserts, only to strip what should be its clarifying and climactic moment of any certain markers of meaning.<sup>356</sup> Fish, like many readers, makes much of the “radical” mystery of Samson’s final act, which we receive at several removes and through equivocating language. The catastrophe occurs offstage, and thus Manoa, the Chorus, and the reader receive only the eyewitness testimony from a messenger. It is not clear how much of this testimony is the messenger’s own as he admits receiving some of it second-hand “from such as nearer stood” (1631). From this back-of-the-crowd messenger, we hear that Samson, after performing various feats of strength, requested to rest between the pillars that supported the “spacious theater” where the festival was held. In the Judges narrative, Samson prays for divine assistance: “O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once

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<sup>356</sup> Fish, *How Milton Works*, esp. 447-455, 472-73.



avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.”<sup>357</sup> Milton omits this prayer, his messenger reporting instead that “with head a while inclined, / And eyes fast fixed [Samson] stood, *as one who prayed, / Or some great matter in his mind revolved*” (1637-8, my emphasis).

When he moves to pull down the pillars, Samson voices his intentions in similarly ambiguous terms:

At last with head erect thus cried aloud,  
“Hitherto, lords, what your commands imposed  
I have performed, as reason was, obeying,  
Not without wonder or delight beheld.  
Now of my own accord such other trial  
I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater;  
As with amaze shall strike all who behold.” (1639-45)

We hear no prayer, and we hear no motive for the destructive act that follows; we hear only that Samson acts “of [his] own accord,” which could mean two entirely different things. Joseph Wittreich, reading Samson’s announcement literally, insists that the phrase “of my own accord” works to “silence the notion that [Samson] here acts in his public person and in accordance with divine command.”<sup>358</sup> But acting of Samson’s “own accord” and acting on behalf of God are not necessarily mutually exclusive. We have just heard Samson identify his “conscience” as his true “self,” suggesting that any act that comes from Samson himself comes also from his sense of what accords with God will. We should also note that it is a “trial” of Samson’s “strength” that he offers of his “own accord”; Samson has already made clear in his encounter with Harapha that he considers his strength to be equal to “the power of Israel’s God” (1150-51).<sup>359</sup> The play, then, offers

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<sup>357</sup> Judges 16:28.

<sup>358</sup> Wittreich, *Interpreting*, 143.

<sup>359</sup> Samson could also be acting of his “own accord” by freely choosing to follow God’s will. “Having outwardly ‘obeyed’” the Philistine lords, Mary Radzinowicz explains, Samson obeyed his inner imperatives and undertook ‘of my own accord such other trial...of my strength, yet greater’ (*Toward*

ambiguous evidence that can be used to support either an inspired or a personal and human motivation for Samson's act, frustrating the reader's desire for meaning and leaving our interpretive stories incomplete.

But perhaps this is part of the point. If Samson does receive divine inspiration for pulling down the pillars—if his “rousing motions” do, in fact, represent true spiritual experience—there are no plausible circumstances under which the audience (Samson's onstage audience and the reader) can witness that experience along with him. Spiritual conversion, divine inspiration—these are, by definition, internal experiences, capable of being made only imperfectly manifest through outward, sensory demonstration. By moving the reader further and further away from Samson's interior in the final scenes of the play, Milton does not withhold definitive evidence of his experience but rather reinforces the fact that this evidence can never be ours. We have seen that even as writers of spiritual autobiography narrate the moment in which their sufferings are lifted—in which they truly feel the power of God's grace—they deny that words can ever accurately capture the interior experiences they describe. If Samson were to tell us more about his “rousing motions,” and if he were, in fact, to pray for God's assistance, can we be sure our interpretative efforts would be better off?

Given the reader's increasing recognition of the limits of human interpretation in spiritual matters, the enthusiasm and certainty of the play's final interpretive narrative of Samson instead has an unsettling effect. The Chorus and Manoa, eager to understand Samson's act at Gaza as the fulfillment of his divine role as Israel's deliverer, transform

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*Samson Agonistes*, 263). See also Low, *Blaze of Noon*: “at the last he acts of his ‘own accord,’ freely choosing his end, but supported and directed by God” (203).

the messenger's "eye-witness" and "particular" account of death and destruction into an extraordinary narrative of spiritual victory. The Chorus and Semichorus narrate not only what they did not see but what they *could* not see, imagining the event not as it appeared but as it might signify the workings of divine providence:

While [the Philistines'] hearts were jocund and sublime,  
Drunk with idolatry, drunk with wine,  
And fat regorged of bulls and goats,  
Chanting their idol, and preferring  
Before our Living Dread who dwells  
In Silo his bright sanctuary:  
Among them he a spirit of frenzy sent,  
Who hurt their minds,  
And urged them on with mad desire  
To call in haste for their destroyer;  
They only set on sport and play  
Unwittingly importuned  
Their own destruction to come speedy upon them. (1669-81)

Refusing to acknowledge the objective uncertainties of the scene the messenger has just described, the Semichorus assigns to physical circumstances spiritual values, crafting a more satisfying narrative of Samson's (and God's) victory by infusing the event with providential logic. Finding interpretive safety by pushing Samson's experience even further into the realm of fiction, the Semichorus imagines their hero in legendary terms: his force is that of the "ev'ning dragon," the "eagle," or, most significantly, the phoenix, "vigorous most / When most unactive deemed" (1692, 1695, 1699-1707). By aligning Samson with familiar but also mythical symbols of power and retribution, the Danites both elevate his story above the limitations of fact and circumstance and transform the unexpected event of his destruction of the temple into an occasion that seems, like the phoenix's rebirth, expected and inevitable.

While the Chorus expands upon the messenger's account to build cosmic significance for Samson's act, Manoa cleanses and stabilizes it. Taking over Samson's own efforts to craft for himself a stable identity through his relationship with God, Manoa replaces the disruption of Samson's death with a narrative of his continued divine favor: what is "best and happiest yet" in Samson's supposed deliverance of Israel is that he did it all "With God not parted from him, as was feared, / But favoring and assisting to the end" (1718-20). His tidy narrative, however, is challenged by the physical reality of the details it seeks to gloss over:

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail  
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,  
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair,  
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.  
Let us go and find the body where it lies  
Soaked in his enemies' blood, and from the stream  
With lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off  
The clotted gore. (1721-28)

Manoa's assessment insists on an absolutely positive response to Samson's death, but he seems to protest too much. The "nobility" and fairness of his vision is moreover immediately confronted by the rather startling image of Samson "soaked in his enemies' blood." Just as Manoa must wash the "clotted gore" from Samson's body, his narrative seeks to wash the stain of interpretive uncertainty from his son's memory, preserving a cleaner but necessarily more fictionalized version of the past.

But what is most problematic about Manoa's interpretive energy is that it seeks to preserve Samson's identity in human, earthly terms, and that while Manoa does derive meaning from Samson's death, he refuses to truly learn from it. Manoa plans to bring Samson "Home to his father's house":

there will I build him

A monument, and plant it round with shade  
Of laurel ever green, and branching palm  
With all his trophies hung, and acts enrolled  
In copious legend, or sweet lyric song.  
Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,  
And from his memory inflame their breasts  
To matchless valor, and adventures high:  
The virgins also shall on feastful days  
Visit his tomb with flowers, only bewailing  
His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,  
From whence captivity and loss of eyes. (1733-44)

Samson, who spent his last hours and Milton's entire play learning to reject physical markers of identity for spiritual ones, becomes in Manoa's vision an idol, solemnized by a monument and visited on feast days. Once again Samson is defined through memory by his "acts" and "adventures," and his captivity and blindness again become something to "bewail." The stasis of this image is moreover entirely antithetical to the action Samson had hoped his "deliverance" might provoke. Samson had once lamented the Israelite preference for "bondage with ease" over "strenuous liberty"; here, we see Manoa bound to the ease of a convenient memory, unwilling to take on the strain of a more strenuous, spiritually guided interpretive practice that might lead to Israel's liberation.

If the play exposes the limitations of human efforts to interpret divine providence, then, it certainly does not imply that we should give up the fight. On the contrary, while the narratives of Manoa and the Chorus are imperfect, the play warns against two less attractive alternatives: "horrid spectacle" and moral relativism. The messenger's initial reaction to witnessing Samson's final act is one of utter confusion and distress:

O whither shall I run, or which way fly  
The sight of this so horrid spectacle  
Which erst my eyes beheld and yet behold;  
For dire imagination still pursues me. (1541-44)



to promote what Milton's readers would have seen as falsehood<sup>360</sup>—that ultimately inspires the writing of human stories despite our limited perspective and despite the epistemological challenges of reading divine providence. Exposing the practice of spiritual interpretation as both essential and potentially dangerous, *Samson Agonistes* encourages our commitment to a rigorous and discriminating search for truth that evaluates the multiple perspectives of our world and turns within for inspiration.

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<sup>360</sup> While the point Dalila makes about the transmission of narratives is certainly true, her proposed heroic identity is seen as false because it glorifies an idolatrous religion. Regina M. Schwartz identifies idolatry as the “limit” of Milton's ideas on toleration in “*Samson Agonistes: The Force of Justice and the Violence of Idolatry*,” *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 632-48.

## CONCLUSION: READING, WRITING, AND SPIRITUAL ASSURANCE

Just before Samson pulls down the pillars of the temple at Gaza in *Samson Agonistes*, he announces his act as a “trial” or “show” of his strength—one that “with amaze shall strike all who behold.”<sup>361</sup> The words “trial” and “show” both suggest that something will be revealed or made apparent through Samson’s actions; “trial,” moreover, carries connotations of evidence or proof. But what is it that Samson’s onlookers, the play’s characters, and the reader actually see? What is made apparent or evident through his deed?

For Stanley Fish, the answer is “nothing.” Samson promises a revelatory show but instead delivers a “spectacle,” “a surface without depth, an emptiness, a lack just where a plenitude (of explanation, justification, and illumination) is most required.”<sup>362</sup> Fish is surely correct in identifying the primary source of uncertainty surrounding Samson’s final act: it is, in fact, merely a physical or external representation of whatever is going on inside Samson’s mind and soul. I would counter, however, that “plenitude” is precisely what this show provides, just not in the way Fish desires or expects it. The plenitude offered by the spectacle of Samson’s act is one of possibility—of multiple and multiplying responses to an earthly event that may or may not be a show of God’s providence. By refusing to justify Samson’s act, the play renders it *justifiable*, or open to interpretive efforts that might confirm and promote any number of evaluations. We have

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<sup>361</sup> John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: The Modern Library, 2007), ll. 1643-45. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>362</sup> Stanley Fish, “Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*,” *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 556-86 (585).



certainly seen such interpretive plenitude in the critical heritage of the play. But we also see it in the narratives of Samson's death that the Messenger, Manoa and the Chorus produce. Samson's tribesmen extend and expand the "brief" report that "Samson is dead," infusing the "facts" of the accident with an abundance of meaning that the ambiguous event readily, if only provisionally, accepts.

The indeterminacy of this climactic event comes as the play's final corrective to Samson's limited understanding of how divine truth is made manifest on earth. Whatever Samson thought his performance might reveal, his human "show" would always be a representation, or a text that must be read. While Milton's play follows Samson's spiritual development, as I have argued, in a way that parallels the interpretive processes of Protestant autobiography, Samson does not ultimately offer his own meaningful narrative of personal experience to the reader or his tribe. His death, as Elisabeth Liebert points out, "denies him a last opportunity to rearrange the events of his past into a neat autobiographical account."<sup>363</sup> For Liebert, Samson's act at Gaza is, itself, "a reading, an utterance," that replaces the autobiographical narrative and actively presents his strength as "the power of Israel's God." But this is Liebert's reading, not Samson's, for Samson merely acts, once again allowing his deeds to speak for him and assuming their significance would be self-evident. The reality is that while Samson's deeds certainly impress upon his audience, the Samson of Milton's play holds little control over what those impressions might be.

Faulting his tribesmen for "persist[ing] deaf" in response to his past exploits against the Philistines, Samson begins the play with an assumption that divinely inspired

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<sup>363</sup> Elisabeth Liebert, "Samson Agonistes and Spiritual Autobiography," *Parergon* 22.2 (2005): 131-157.

actions accurately and inherently reflect their intentions (248). If the Israelites had not been moved to act for their own liberty from Samson's heroic examples, it was not through any fault of his own: "The deeds themselves, though mute," Samson insists, "spoke loud the doer" (249). But in assuming that deeds can "speak" for themselves, Samson does not seem to understand the difference between speaking loudly and speaking clearly or meaningfully. Samson's deeds certainly appear to have spoken loudly and forcefully to his tribesmen throughout his life: "That heroic, that renowned, / Irresistible Samson" was the stuff of Israelite legend (125-26). But they also spoke loudly to his enemies, prompting Harapha to seek in person the "prodigious" Samson of whom he had heard "such noise" and "loud report" (1088-90). Samson's deeds, to Harapha, "spoke" the "doer" as "a murderer, a revolter, and a robber"—a "notorious" "league-breaker" who acted alone in defiance of the (human) laws that should have restrained him (1180, 1186, 1184). Samson was, of course, more concerned with how his deeds spoke to his own people, but Harapha's account provides an extreme example of the unpredictable ways in which actions can be "heard" or read. And much like Harapha, the Israelites only heard what Samson's deeds "spoke" of their human agent—of Samson the man, not of Samson the inspired deliverer. Wishing to "prevent / the harass of their land" that would result from their support of one who had defied their worldly oppressors, Samson's tribesmen remained unaware (willfully or not) of how his deeds may have spoken their divine "doer" and prompted righteous action (256-57).

Providential acts and experiences of God's grace are, *Samson Agonistes* demonstrates, potentially powerful but highly unstable sources of divine knowledge on earth. They do not, themselves, *speak*, but rather must be spoken *for*. Speaking for the

simultaneously “mute” and “loud” experiences of their spiritual lives is, quite simply, the project of each of the spiritual autobiographers discussed in this thesis. Because any supposed display of God’s will that is made apparent to man is necessarily representative and textual, the practices of careful reading and imaginative writing or interpretation were not only aides to seventeenth-century devotion but essential modes of thought through which believers navigated their always significant, always justifiable everyday lives. But in considering the interpretively ambiguous *Samson Agonistes* alongside texts of personal spiritual autobiography, it important to realize that admitting to the ultimate inscrutability of Samson’s (or anyone’s) salvific state and to the multiple voices with which his final deed “speaks” would have been a deeply unsatisfying and troubling conclusion to draw for seventeenth-century readers who were engaged in their own quests for spiritual assurance. Experimental Calvinists believed not only that their life experiences could be read but also, importantly, that they could and should be read *correctly*. For the modern (and objective) critic who delights in the intellectual challenges of multiple explanations, ironies, and textual instabilities in *Samson Agonistes* or any spiritually interpretive text, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that the “truth” at stake in narratives of spiritual experience was of monumental importance to the Protestant writers and readers involved. This is not to suggest that we are somehow missing the point of *Samson Agonistes* by destabilizing it, but rather to emphasize the significance of the play’s instability for contemporary readers who would have found their own experiences quite vividly displayed in the emotional contours of Samson’s relationship with God. How would a seventeenth-century Protestant respond, for example, to the ease with which Harapha reads Samson’s super-human strength as witchcraft, or “black

enchantments” (1133)—a frightening reminder of the susceptibility of human experience to the manipulations of both God and the devil? Or to Dalila’s haunting alternate identity of Samson as “an irreligious / Dishonorer of Dagon,” invalid only as a matter of perspective and belief?

John Bunyan voices his concern with the “double-mouthed” transmission of events and experiences in a fallen world quite memorably in *Grace Abounding*. Recognizing that, from a multicultural perspective, Christianity may in fact be a particularly cunning “story” among the narratives that “so many ten thousands” of non-Christians in other countries have crafted of their own deities, Bunyan is tempted to doubt the validity of the faith he yearns so earnestly to embrace. “Every one doth think his own Religion rightest, both Jews, and Moors, and Pagans,” Bunyan admits, asking the terrifying question: “and how if all our Faith, and Christ, and Scriptures, should be but a think-so too?”<sup>364</sup> The reality of multiple perspectives of the very nature of divine order and human experience flies in the face of the believer who trusts God’s presence and will to be reliably reflected in the earthly world. If “Jews, and Moors, and Pagans,” Bunyan wonders, believe so firmly and yet are wrong, could the same not be true of Christians? In a world guided by sharply divergent systems of belief, how can one fully trust what one “thinks” is right?

Readers are often struck by the “modernity” of Bunyan’s query, which threatens to deconstruct the very basis of religious belief.<sup>365</sup> What is faith if not a “think-so”? Is

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<sup>364</sup> John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, ed. John Stachniewski and Anita Pacheco (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>365</sup> See, for example, Kathleen Lynch, *Protestant Autobiography in the Seventeenth-Century Anglophone World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 183. Christopher Hill, on the other hand, contextualizes Bunyan’s queries as “commonplaces of Ranter libertinism,” though many have questioned whether the Ranters as a group (for whom we might identify “commonplaces” of thought) actually existed. See Hill, *A*

Bunyan disillusioned by the insubstantiality of spiritual truths? The answer, however, is no (or at least, not ultimately): Bunyan's fear is a "temptation," and temptations are, in spiritual autobiography, obstacles to true faith and knowledge that must be met and overcome. And surprisingly, insupportably, Bunyan finds proof of his Christian truth in what is essentially a product of the "thought" that he had once found suspect:

Truly I then found...the Great God was very good to me, for to my remembrance there was not any thing that I then cried to God to make known and reveal unto me, but he was pleased to do it for me, I mean not one part of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, but I was orderly led into it; me thought I saw with great evidence, from the relation of the four Evangelists, the wonderful work of God in giving Jesus Christ to save us, from his conception and birth, even to his second coming to judgment: me thought I was as if I had seen him grow up, as if I had seen him walk thorow this world, from the Cradle to his Cross... (35)

Bunyan's thoughts, his record suggests, are not filled with readings or interpretations of Christ and scripture but with visual "evidence" and revelation from God; he counters the insubstantiality of religious belief with concrete images that transform inner experience into exterior *witness* of truth. "Thinking" he was "as if" he had seen this evidence, Bunyan seems to grope for the assurance that such a sensory experience might offer but that remains a fantasy, even if a spiritually inspired one. And yet his account suggests that it is the very fantasy, the imaginative visualization of God's grace, that offers Bunyan spiritual peace. Assurance, perhaps, is to be found in the act of establishing truth, of assigning a "voice" to God's providence, of forging a fictional or representative but ultimately satisfying spiritual identity for the self.

Throughout this dissertation, I have explored the challenges faced by the seventeenth-century godly who sought to find and demonstrate, through reading and

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*Turbulent, Seditious, and Factious People: John Bunyan and his Church 1628-1688* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 75-77.

writing experience, tangible proof of the ultimately intangible truth of religious faith. As representation, the autobiographical text can never truly encompass the profound experience of spiritual revelation or offer, as Dionys Fitzherbert had hoped, the “evident demonstrations and infallible grounds” of personal salvation.<sup>366</sup> And yet as we have seen, early modern believers seem to have trusted in the transformative powers of narrative, imagery, analogy, and readerly charity to outwardly verify their personal, interior, felt experiences of God’s grace. To imagine spiritual experience *is*, this thesis proposes, to substantiate it, for as Elaine Scarry observes, “it is impossible to imagine without imagining *something*.”<sup>367</sup> Writing spiritual experience may not produce a visible copy of the heart’s interior as Anne Venn had so desired, but it provides the structures and spaces in which to imagine that evidence and the opportunity for constant engagement with the creative and substantiating process. The practice of shaping and sharing spiritual experience thus radically validates salvific truth even as it crafts and creates it.

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<sup>366</sup> Dionys Fitzherbert, “Letter to Dr Chetwynd,” in *Women, Madness and Sin in Early Modern England: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 147.

<sup>367</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 162 (my emphasis).

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