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A New Language: Apophatic Discourse in John Donne's *Devotions*

A Thesis Presented

by

JESSICA MARGARET FARRIS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
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Department of English

A New Language: Apophatic Discourse in John Donne's *Devotions*

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DEDICATION

To Mom, who received many anxious phone calls throughout this process.

To Greg, whose patience and encouragement made it all possible

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

A NEW LANGUAGE: APOPHATIC DISCOURSE IN JOHN DONNE'S *DEVOTIONS*

MAY 2023

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Not much ink has been spilled over John Donne's relationship to negative, or apophatic, theology. A few scholars have written about apophatic discourse in Donne's poetry and sermons, but, in general, the subject continues to be overlooked. This thesis seeks to (re)start the conversation by shedding light on *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, a text which has yet to be linked to the negative tradition despite its clear engagement in apophatic discourse. Indeed, throughout *Devotions*, Donne wields several apophatic strategies when speaking of God including via negativa, predicates of action, linguistic regress, paradox, and a consistent reliance upon metaphorical language. Each of these strategies uphold the two guiding principles of negative theology: the epistemic thesis which asserts that God is incomprehensible, and the semantic thesis which asserts that God is unspeakable therefore can only stand as the subject term in negative propositions. Significantly, my objective is not merely to qualify *Devotions* as an example of apophatic discourse; I also intend to contemplate the implications of qualifying it as such, namely how *Devotions* challenges the long-held assumption that apophasis requires the user to relinquish the body. Across the text, Donne's apophasis does not lead him to un-body; on the contrary, the body gains new importance as Donne imagines the risen body, the

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interpersonal body, the body that cannot be lost because it is an inextricable facet of

selfhood. Again, my hope is that this thesis will (re)start or (re)energize the conversation

around Donne's relationship to negative theology, a relationship that is much richer and

more extensive than current scholarship suggests.

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INTRODUCTION

John Donne earned many titles throughout his lifetime. To Sir Richard Baker, Donne was "a great Visitor of Ladies, a great frequenter of Playes, [and] a great writer of conceited Verses."[1] To Ben Jonson, he was "the delight of Phoebus, and each *Muse* / Who, to thy one, all other braines refuse."[2] To recusants, he was a "crafty and redoubtable courtier" while, to young poets, he was a "prophet of the intricacies of fleshly feeling."[3] He was a preacher, the Dean of St. Paul's, a trained lawyer, and, centuries later, a favorite lyricist of T. S. Eliot and William Butler Yeats. Indeed, the name Donne inspires plurality. Today we think of him as the preeminent metaphysical poet, or the prolific sermonizer, or the pointed satirist among other seemingly endless accolades. And yet not often included in this list is the title of negative theologian, a title, I argue, both well-deserved and too long denied; or perhaps it is more accurate to say *overlooked*.

Yes, it is not that scholars actively refute the apophatic dimension of Donne's work; in fact, there are a select few who have written on the very subject, namely Jennifer Nichols and Sean Ford. Evidently, two articles published over a decade ago and that circle around the same poems are easily lost within the ever-expanding sea of Donne scholarship. Negative theologian, unlike the myriad of other titles assigned to Donne, just never stuck. Not that it really matters, right? After all, what purpose does another label serve?

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[1] Sir Richard Baker, *A Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London, 1643), 156.

[2] Ben Jonson, "To John Donne," *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson* (London, 1616), 775.

[3] Sir Edmund Gosse*, The Life and Letters of John Donne* (London, 1899), II, 290.

A year ago, I might have agreed and dismissed the matter altogether; that is, until I read *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Prior to reading *Devotions*, all I knew about the text was the climactic, immensely quotable passage from the seventeenth devotion, the one which echoes through lecture halls and team-building seminars alike: "No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*" (87). I must hand it to Donne: this passage lives up to its legacy. I found myself needing to pause and stare wistfully out my bedroom window in order to digest what I had read— a sure sign of effective prose. But there was another moment in the seventeenth devotion that made me pause longer, made me a touch more wistful. It was the moment when Donne describes God as being "made of no *substances*" (89). Not quite as catchy as no man is an island, admittedly, but its implications are far more exciting in my opinion.

You see, it was at this time I started to detect a pattern: God is "made of no *substances*" sounded eerily familiar to me, as if Donne uses this exact phrasing elsewhere—and he does, kind of. Flipping through the text, I realized that Donne consistently discusses God in the negative. In the tenth devotion, God is described as "that which was not made of *Nothing*" (51); and in the sixth devotion, God is said to be "never asleep nor absent" (31). Over and over again, we are told what God is not, what God never does, a strange and conspicuous approach to discourse that I recognized as the apophatic mode. Broadly defined, the apophatic, or negative, tradition understands God to be utterly incomprehensible and inaccessible by way of positive language; the negative theologian "cannot say what God is; [they] can only say what God is not," a systematic process of denial known as via negativa.[4] In truth, via negativa is just one of the many

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[4] Joseph Buijs, "Attributes of Action in Maimonides," *Vivarium* 27 (1989), 85.

strategies that comprise the apophatic mode. Linguistic regress, predicates of action, Dionysian nothingness, paradox, and metaphor are all apophatic devices in that they adhere to the two central premises—that God is utterly incomprehensible and inaccessible by way of positive language. Throughout *Devotions*, Donne adopts and regularly employs each of these devices, revealing the text's apophatic character.

But this proved to be a personal revelation. As I alluded to earlier, only a few scholars have written about Donne's apophatic sensibilities, none of whom even mention *Devotions*. It is surprising to say the least. Once I had made the connection, it could not be un-made; my perspective of the text completely transformed. Donne's apophasis is a bright light, glaring to the point of invisible at first, but when the eyes adjust one cannot help but appreciate the contours. For this reason—and others that will emerge over time—negative theologian is not, I contend, another arbitrary label. Donne wields apophatic devices frequently and with purpose, and not merely in his poetry and sermons as current scholarship would suggest, but in his devotional prose as well. Through extensive close reading, I hope to bring this bright light into focus and contemplate a number of generative questions: what form does Donne's apophasis take? What function does apophasis serve in *Devotions*? And how does *Devotions* advance our understanding of what qualifies as negative discourse? Before any of these questions can be considered though, we must first answer: what exactly is negative theology?

An Historical and Theoretical Overview of Negative Theology

Allow me to conduct a brief history lesson—emphasis on *brief*. Negative theology boasts an extended genealogy, one that spans geographies and religious systems. Muslim,

Jewish, and Christian theism each preserve their own relation to the tradition, relations far too complicated to effectively compress here. So, I won't. Instead, I will supply a general picture of the development of negative theology, focusing on those key sources which pertain to our discussion of Donne and his perception of the apophatic mode.

Where to begin? While the initial germs of negative theology can be traced back to Pre-Socratic thinkers such as Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Herodotus, apophasis proper "begins in the speculative philosophy of late Platonism, in the typically Neoplatonic way of understanding the nature of the One and can be said to have reached its zenith [...] in the works of Proclus," the fifth-century CE philosopher whose writings played an instrumental role in helping transmit classical Platonic and Neoplatonic ideas through into the Middle Ages.[5] However, this Neoplatonic way of understanding the nature of the One refers to theories developed by Plotinus in the third-century CE, two centuries before Proclus. Plotinus, generally considered the founder of Neoplatonism, developed a "theory of the One beyond being, the first 'hypostasis,' source of all that is."[6] This theory claims that the first principle of the universe, which Plotinus names the One or the Good, transcends the categories of being and nonbeing. The One-Good constitutes a different kind of being altogether; a kind of being removed from Platonic levels of existence while also serving as the foundation of existence; a kind of being that resides outside of human reason and is therefore unknowable. Though not called as such by

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[5] Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 1.

[6] William Franke, "Apophasis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006), 63.

Plotinus, the One-Good is considered an analogue for divinity, that is, the being later scholarship would identify as God.

Fourth-century Athenian philosopher Gregory of Nyssa and his intellectual successor the late fifth-century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite adopt Plotinus's theory and magnify this idea of divine transcendence, or divine *otherness*, within the Christian faith. Dionysius, in particular, delineates two distinct methods of speaking about God: the positive (kataphatic) and the negative (apophatic). The positive approach maintains that "we can attain some knowledge of God, no matter how limited, by attributing all the perfection of the created order to him as its source."[7] The negative approach, on the other hand, "affirms God's absolute transcendence and unknowability to such an extent that no affirmative concepts, except that of existence, may be applied to him."[8] From a negative perspective, ascribing any sort of concrete attribute to divinity is a degradation of divinity: kataphasis treats God as accessible, as intelligible—a sentiment that to the negative theologian borders on profane. This is not to say that negative theology is a doctrine of giving up, of succumbing to the aporia of divinity and settling into resigned silence. The objective of kataphasis and apophasis is one and the same: to speak of God. Or in a metaphor Dionysius frequently borrows from Plotinus, to *sculpt* God. The real difference between kataphasis and apophasis is how each goes about the sculpting process and the respective boundaries they put in place to ensure success.

Following Eriugena's translation of Dionysian works in the ninth century, the apophatic mode gained considerable attention, influencing Christian Scholasticism

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[7] Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 2.

[8] Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 2.

throughout the Middle Ages and informing the philosophy of prominent theologians like Nicholas of Cusa and Meister Eckhart. Early Modern writers were drawn to negative mysticism as well and regularly engaged the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. As will be discussed in greater detail later, Donne's poetry and sermons are suffused with citations from both thinkers, indicating knowledge of and a sustained affection for the negative tradition.

History aside, let us be direct with our definition of apophasis. When painted with a broad brush, negative theology can be reduced to two guiding principles: the epistemic thesis and the semantic thesis. The epistemic thesis more or less restates Dionysius's position: "with respect to God's existence, we can know that God is; with respect to his essence, we can not know what he is and thus we can only know what he is not."[9] In short, we can be certain of God's existence, but not of God's essence; we know God *is*, but we do not know *who* he is. Isaac Franck puts it best: "man's highest knowledge of God is to know that we are unable to know Him."[10] God is fundamentally incomprehensible, he is a being unlike any other being and, as such, requires a new form of discourse.

This is where the semantic thesis comes in. The semantic thesis expands on the notion that we can only know what God is not, asserting that "only terms predicated negatively of God are meaningful; terms predicated positively of God are meaningless."[11]

[9] Joseph Buijs, "The Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1988), 727.

[10] Isaac Franck, "Maimonides and Aquinas on Man's Knowledge of God: A Twentieth Century Perspective," *Review of Metaphysics* 38 (1985), 593.

[11] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 727.

Positive language fails to capture the aporia of divinity because, beyond saying God exists, it assumes something we cannot possibly know. Positive language also creates a false equivalency by placing God on the same level as that which is able to be named, expressed, and understood: the same level as man. "God is said to be unnameable, unspeakable, invisible," and the only language that properly conveys this unspeakability is negation.[12] As apophatic scholar Denys Turner articulates, negation "is not to deny the truths which that discourse is capable of conveying, but [...] to denote their limitation [...] these negations merely exhibit the failure of our language."[13] Indeed, to say God is not *x* admits the inadequacy of *x*; *x* does not contain or describe God, God is beyond *x*—he transcends *x*. For this reason, negative discourse is often called "the language of unsaying" or "the language of disontology" in that it embraces the impossibility of naming and inspires a critical, anti-kataphatic vocabulary.[14]

Based on the epistemic and semantic theses alone, it is easy to mistake negative theology for an empty collection of nots—God is not this, God is not that, and so on and so forth into oblivion. The negative tradition must not be conflated with a straightforward process of denial: "one cannot simply settle for inverted theology either. Real negative theology would be equally ill at ease with a catechism of theological privatives."[15] Real negative theology, to echo John Peter Kenney once more, is a "spiritual exercise, a

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[12] Raoul Mortley, "The Fundamentals of the Via Negativa," *The American Journal of Philology* 103.4 (1982), 429.

[13] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39.

[14] Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

[15] John Peter Kenney, "The Critical Value of Negative Theology," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993), 442.

theological act, rather than a piece of speculation."[16] What lends life to the tradition is the

intellectual activity it demands of the user. To get an idea of this activity, consider A. H.

Armstrong's description of the negative mode:

> We must not be content to say that God is not anything. We must not only say, but experience and be aware, that he is not not anything either. If we go the whole way like this, we may experience a great liberation of mind, a freedom from language and concepts which will enable us to use them properly, in the endlessly critical way which I have indicated.[17]

Expanding on Armstrong's point, throughout negative discourse, there is a budding

awareness that God is *not not anything*. As Plotinus suggests, God is something unlike

any something we have ever known, existing in a third space between—or perhaps

above—somethingness and nothingness. Negative theology seeks to penetrate that third

space, a space outside of logic and language. The result is a mode of discourse that is

hyper-sensitive to the limitations of logic and language, that is *endlessly critical*, and

simulates a kind of liberation. William Franke names this liberation "apophatic

awareness."[18] Those who are apophatically aware remain "critical of all rational

formulations as inadequate to what they intend to describe," making it so "language can

no longer be used unself-consciously as having a direct grip on reality and as simply

delivering truth."[19] This process, or it is better to say *exercise*, is rigorous; it entails

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[16] Kenney, "Critical Value," 443.

[17] A. H. Armstrong, "Negative Theology," *Plotinian and Christian Studies* 24 (1977), 188.

[18] Franke, "Apophasis," 65.

[19] Franke, "Apophasis," 64.

relentless motion, an "agonizing business" of constantly turning back on one's

propositions as scholar Michael Sells illustrates:[20]

> As I attempt to state the aporia of transcendence, I am caught in a linguistic
> regress. Each statement I make—positive or negative—reveals itself as in need of
> correction. The correcting statement must then itself be corrected, ad infinitum.
> The authentic subject of discourse slips continually back beyond each effort to
> name it or even to deny its nameability. The regress is harnessed and becomes the
> guiding semantic force, the dynamis, of a new kind of language.[21]

Notice the motion depicted here. The negative theologian is always slipping back, always

self-correcting, always *regressing*. Regress, significantly, does not connote degeneration

or a relapse into underdeveloped thought in this context; rather, the regression of negative

theology is more of a systematic undoing. Every statement made about God is challenged

and unraveled to the fullest extent, a practice which renders a complex portrait of

divinity. As paradoxical as it sounds, linguistic regress *elaborates* just as it *undoes*. While

on the surface each denial seems to lead one further from God, the opposite is true:

movement away from speech, away from human reason is movement toward the

mystical, toward the divine. To again quote Armstrong, the apophatic thinker gains a

strengthened awareness "not of an abstract, contentless monadic simplicity [...] but of an

unspeakably rich and vivifying reality."[22]

All said, I want to return to Sells for a moment and his characterization of

negative discourse as a new kind of language. I have to agree: negative discourse is a new

kind of language, a language populated by a constellation of rhetorical strategies unique

to the apophatic mission. There is, of course, linguistic regress—that motion of turning

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[20] Armstrong, "Negative Theology," 184.

[21] Sells, "Mystical Languages," 2.

[22] Armstrong, "Negative Theology," 188.

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back, of scrutinizing each statement, and readily engaging in self-correction. The other

strategies are, as I mentioned, via negativa, predicates of action, Dionysian nothingness,

paradox, and a consistent reliance upon the metaphorical. Each device will be clearly

defined in the subsequent analysis where I hope to demonstrate the following: first, how

each device adheres to the epistemic and semantic theses; and second, how Donne wields

each device to advance his negative discourse. My position is, in essence, that Donne

adopts the apophatic constellation, that the new kind of language described by Sells is, in

fact, the language of *Devotions*.

Donne and the Negative Tradition

It must be acknowledged that I am not the first scholar to situate Donne in the negative

tradition. There are a few—and truly, I mean *few*—who come before me. In 2011,

Jennifer Nichols published her essay "Dionysian Negative Theology in Donne's 'A

Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day'" which, as the title implies, reads the poem "Nocturnall"

alongside Dionysian mysticism.[23] Specifically, Nichols argues that analyses of

nothingness in "Nocturnall" are often limited to an alchemical context; and while an

alchemical metaphor is certainly at work throughout the poem, it does not justify the

ending wherein the speaker "seems to stand in the same despairing darkness in which he

began." Another context is necessary to make sense of the narrative; otherwise the poem

merely imagines a "failed, abortive alchemy." The missing context, Nichols contends, is

negative theology. Given an apophatic framework, the despairing darkness transforms

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[23] For more on Dionysian negative mysticism, see chapter eleven of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 161-76; and Paul Rorem, *The Dionysian Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

from sheer absence to an encounter with the divine. Darkness, emptiness, nothingness become not a lack of being, nor even being itself, but something beyond being: a hyper-essential reality which only God can inhabit.

What's relevant to my argument is how Nichols legitimizes Donne's proximity to the negative tradition. For one, she establishes the enormous influence of negative mysticism, particularly Dionysian negative mysticism, on the West—an influence which flourished throughout the Renaissance. John Milton, Thomas Traherne, and Richard Crashaw are some of the more recognizable seventeenth-century figures known to wield Dionysian metaphors, likening God to either a dark radiance, or an absent presence, or a nothingness that is somethingness. As Hans Urs von Balthasar writes of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: "an original whole of such character and impact that none of the great theological thinkers of the following ages could avoid him."[24] There is a ubiquity to his ideas that Nichols makes clear; at the time Donne is writing, Dionysian negative mysticism is far from a fringe ideology—it is pervasive.

It follows then that Donne, too, should display an acquaintance with Dionysius. Many of his sermons, Nichols points out, cite the fifth-century philosopher by name and generally interact with his ideas; Donne similarly interacts with the ideas of Gregory of Nyssa. Such evidence is incontrovertible: Donne must have been, at the very least, passingly familiar with the work of Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa. What's more likely, however, is that he actually read both, especially considering the depth with which he

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[24] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 147.

discusses their thinking. Take for instance his 1625 sermon on Matthew 19:17. The

context around which Donne cites Dionysius reads:

> So that now these propositions are true, First, That there is nothing in this world
> good, and this also, That there is nothing ill: As, amongst the Fathers, it is in a
> good sense truly said, *Deus non est Ens*, *Deus non est substantia*, God is no
> Essence, God is no substance, (for feare of imprisoning God in a predicament) as
> it is said by others the Fathers, that there is no other Essence, no other
> Substance.[25]

The paradox articulated here, that God is no essence and no substance yet there is no

other essence and substance but God, is a precise distillation of Dionysius's position on

the matter. In Dionysian theology, nothingness denotes not nonbeing nor lack of being,

rather an *excess* of being. God is too much of something we do not understand and cannot

hope to perceive. Untethered from the Platonic levels of existence, God is at once

everything, everywhere, and inaccessibly remote; or as Donne phrases it, he is nothing,

no essence, and yet essence is nothing without him. Based on the above passage, we can

be certain that Donne is aware of negative mysticism; more than aware, he *gets* it. He

breaks down its central propositions with striking ease and lucidity.

 Of course, Nichols isn't alone in her juxtaposition of Donne and Dionysius. A

decade prior to her essay, Sean Ford published his own entitled "Nothing's Paradox in

Donne's 'Negative Love' and 'A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day'." Ford, like Nichols,

observes a distinctly Dionysian influence across the two poems, one of which also

happens to be "Nocturnall." In particular, he looks to Donne's configuration of the

paradox of nothing. At times, nothing is employed quite traditionally to mean true

absence, the void of being. And yet, in other moments, "Donne chooses to give this noun

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[25] John Donne, *LXXX Sermons* (London, 1640), 167.

the quality of substance and presence."[26] This notion, the somethingness of nothingness, is foundational to Dionysian negative mysticism. God is, after all, the nothing that is something. In trying to name him, we deny all that is worldly, but the denial itself becomes affirmation. Affirmation that he is, in fact, nothing of this world, rather something beyond.

Unsurprisingly, Ford historicizes his argument in a similar manner to Nichols, gesturing toward Donne's sermons as a treasure trove of apophatic citations. However, unlike Nichols, he locates traces of not only Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Gregory of Nyssa, but Nicholas of Cusa as well. We have good reason to suspect Donne was familiar with Cusa, particularly his 1440 doctrine *De docta ignorantia* (or *Of Learned Ignorance*).[27] The most famous of Cusa's work, *De docta ignorantia* represents a performative exercise, "a striving to attain an ignorance that is greater than learning, thus to gain access to an incomprehensible deity."[28] Cusa's approach runs parallel to Dionysian negative theology in the sense that both rely heavily upon the logic of paradox and *coincidentia oppositorum*. Cusa, though, constructs a unique model for responding to rhetorical, logical, and religio-mystico-metaphysical paradoxes, a model which Donne adopts in his poetry as Ford goes on to demonstrate. Rather than run away from or attempt to resolve the paradox, the Cusan response is to wholeheartedly embrace the

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[26] Sean Ford, "Nothing's Paradox in Donne's 'Negative Love' and 'A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day,'" *Quidditas* 22 (2001), 99.

[27] See Roy W. Battenhouse, "The Grounds of Religious Toleration in the Thought of John Donne," *Church History* 11.2 (1942), 217-48. Battenhouse finds that the doctrine of "learned ignorance," chiefly associated with Cusa, is widely held among early modern humanists. And while Donne does not explicitly cite Cusa in any of his sermons, there is considerable evidence to suggest his thinking is informed by *De docta ignorantia.*

[28] Ford, "Nothing's Paradox," 102.

contradiction at hand, just as Donne does in "Negative Love" and "Nocturnall." For brevity's sake, I will not reiterate Ford's analysis; I will only note that Donne's conception of nothingness in both poems does seem to balance—or embrace—two opposing meanings without showing partiality or allowing one to overtake the other.

Having surveyed the limited scholarship that reads Donne through an apophatic lens, you may have noticed a conspicuous gap. To be fair, there are a *plethora* of gaps that reflect how little attention this subject has received; however, I am specifically referring to the absence of *Devotions*—and Donne's prose work more generally. Despite the fact that a legitimate critical basis exists for placing Donne in conversation with the negative tradition, the discussion tends to fixate on his poetry and sermons, rarely turning an eye toward *Devotions*. It is hard to say why exactly; the fame of the text and its explicit theological drive makes for an ideal candidate, at least one would think so. But *Devotions* continues to be overlooked in the context of apophasis and, to some extent, scholarship at large—in his examination of Donne's apocalyptic style, E. F. J. Tucker describes *Devotions* as "a work that has been strangely neglected."[29]

Let us neglect no more. From here on in our gaze shall be firmly set on *Devotions*, a text which is replete with analytical possibilities. To me, the richest of these possibilities is undoubtedly the apophatic underbelly. In order to understand why, we must establish: what's so special about *Devotions*?

The Singularity of *Devotions*

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[29] E. F. J. Tucker, "Donne's Apocalyptic Style: A Contextual Analysis of 'Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,'" *Interpretations* 12 (1980), 96.

In late November 1623, Donne fell ill with what is speculated to be either typhus or

relapsing fever. He was left bedridden for three weeks, convinced—but ultimately

mistaken—of his impending death. It is at this time, fraught with bodily and spiritual

anxieties, he pens *Devotions*. Well, sort of. Donne writes in a letter to Sir Robert Ker that

he took advantage of his miraculous convalescence "to put the meditations had in [his]

sicknesse, into some such order, as may minister holy delight."[30] From this, scholars have

determined that Donne most likely "jotted down notes about his spiritual reactions to his

physical state, which he later incorporated into *Devotions*."[31] And he worked quickly as

the text was published in early January of 1624.

As many critics have noted, the nature of the composition and publication of

Devotions generates an interesting authorial perspective. There is something undeniably

private and personal about Donne's meditations.[32] On his presumed deathbed, he lays

bare every thought, every doubt, every fear as it naturally occurs; it is an introspective

discourse, an "anxious and restless" discourse, a discourse reflective of that which is

often confined to the individual mind.[33] And yet just as evident is a public orientation.

Joan Webber, speaking in broad reference to seventeenth-century conservative Anglican

prose writers, interprets the use of self-conscious first person as proof that "he is always

aware of the possibility that he is only holding the pen because he wants his words to be

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[30] Gosse, *Letters*, 249-50.

[31] Anthony Raspa, "Introduction," *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xvii.

[32] In *Holy Delight: Typology, Numerology, and Autobiography in Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Kate Frost argues that *Devotions*, at its core, remains oriented toward the self and personal discovery.

[33] Helen C. White, *English Devotional Literature (Prose) 1600-1640* (Madison: Haskell House Publishers, 1931), 254.

read, of the possibility that they will be read whether he so desires or not, [and] of the possibility that they ought to be read."[34] Webber goes on to add "[the conservative Anglican] offers himself, as Donne does in his *Devotions*, simultaneously to God and the world."[35] Private or public, *Devotions* is somehow both at once which is part of the reason why it is difficult for scholars to locate generic influences and models.

About a dozen potential influences have been identified, none are quite right. *The Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola is most frequently cited with its tripartite exegesis being the closest structural comparison. Even so, it is far from a perfect match. Divided into twenty-three sections, each of which is subdivided into a Meditation, an Expostulation, and a Prayer, *Devotions* is atypical of seventeenth-century devotional literature and, for the most part, remains completely unique to Donne. Still, though Donne seems to concoct this structure himself, he never employs it in any other work, making it all the more anomalous. Additional proposed models for *Devotions* include "spiritual autobiography, the 'holy soliloquy,' Richard Hooker's paradigm of repentance, and various models of Protestant meditation, including the occasional meditations of Joseph Hall."[36] Brent Nelson shrewdly notes that while these sources account for the "private, personal quality" of the text, they do not encompass the "rhetorical, public" aspect.[37] Of course, if we are to wonder where Donne might glean strategies for

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[34] Joan Webber, *The Eloquent "I": Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 12.

[35] Webber, *The Eloquent "I,"* 12.

[36] Brent Nelson, "Pathopoeia and the Protestant Form of Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions," John Donne and the Protestant Revolution*, ed. Mary Papazian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 248.

[37] Nelson, "Pathopoeia," 248.

addressing and captivating an audience, we need not wonder long. After all, when writing *Devotions*, Donne was at the height of his preaching career, having been the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral for just over two years. Janel Mueller even describes *Devotions* as an intersection of "preaching procedures and meditative ones."[38]

I bring all of this up to emphasize the singularity of the text. *Devotions* is unparalleled in the literary world which is perhaps why it is often excluded from critical conversations—I myself find the text quite intimidating as it is structurally, tonally, and stylistically unfamiliar. But this unfamiliarity is precisely why *Devotions* is so significant, especially to the study of negative theology. For one, *Devotions* captures the activity of the negative exercise in a way Donne's sermons and poetry are unable to. The introspective quality of the prose enables Donne to anatomize himself on the page. As readers, we experience each thought unfold alongside Donne, raw and unfiltered, making visible the agonizing business that is negative discourse—an agony which is largely obscured within a structured sermon or a few lines of verse.

What's more is there are profound implications that come with qualifying *Devotions* as an example of apophatic discourse. Namely, the text demonstrates that negative theology need not be antagonistic toward the material body; across the many meditations, Donne collapses the strict binary of finitude versus infinitude, challenging the long-held assumption that negativity must end in "pure un-bodying."[39] Indeed, the apophatic grammar of *Devotions* does not lead Donne to relinquish the body; on the

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[38] Janel Mueller, "The Exegesis of Experience: Dean Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 67 (1968), 3.

[39] Roland Faber, "Bodies of the Void: Polyphilia and Theoplicity," in *Apophatic Bodies*, ed. Keller and Boesel, 220.

contrary, Donne's conception of bodiliness evolves throughout the text. At first, he denounces the body as a lesser entity, a relic of the earth that will be lost in death. But the body gradually transforms as Donne is inspired to contemplate the risen body, the interpersonal body, the body that is equal to the soul. There is no un-bodying in *Devotions*; if anything, Donne gains a new appreciation for the body—a kind of re-bodying—confirming that apophasis does not demand its user to transcend material reality.

Yes, there is a lot to be said of Donne's apophasis, but my analysis cannot commence without first providing some scaffolding. While the overarching plot of *Devotions* is relatively linear, tracing Donne's sudden plunge into illness then slow emergence into health, the nature of his meditations is anything but. There is a capriciousness, or it is better to say a *fevered quality* to Donne's thinking, each meditation acting as a springboard into a certain set of engagements. Any given subject develops over the course of several devotions, temporarily abandoned only to resurface in a completely different part of the text. On account of this peculiar style, I was faced with two options: 1) structure my analysis by subject matter to increase clarity, or 2) structure my analysis chronologically to preserve the natural sense of progression. In the end, I settled on a hybrid approach, an approach which almost mirrors the feverishness of *Devotions*. There are some sections where I conduct a close reading of a particular devotion, addressing a variety of subjects as they naturally unfold; in other sections, my attention is directed at a single subject or theme which arises at various points in the text. Though untraditional, I find it the most efficient method of delivery for this thesis.

Finally, it must be stated that my reading is not a comprehensive analysis of *Devotions*, in all its stylistic, intellectual, literary, devotional, autobiographical, cultural complexity—there already exists an abundance of scholarship that serves this purpose well. Rather my objective is to track Donne's engagement with the apophatic mode of thinking, a topic which, as I've indicated, is dramatically understudied. I want to unearth a specific dimension of the text, and so my lens is necessarily narrowed.

CHAPTER I

"MISERABLE CONDITION OF MAN": ENTRANCE INTO *DEVOTIONS*

The First Devotion

It seems only right to start at the beginning; or, in the case of *Devotions*, the first

meditation. There is no preamble with Donne—no easing in, no sheepish toe-dipping.

"Variable, and therefore miserable condition of Man; this minute I was well, and am ill,

this minute," is his opening proclamation, greeting the reader with nothing less than

existential torment (7). Harsh, certainly, but it effectively sets the pace. *Devotions* is a

rigorous text that engages rigorous material. Convinced of his impending death, Donne

wrestles with the heaviest of subjects: the intercourse between body and soul, the death of

the physical self, the meaning of sin, and, above all, the nature of God. In our search for

apophatic discourse, it is this final theme, or perhaps better called a dilemma, that

demands attention. Let us examine how the first devotion primes the reader to consider:

who is God?

As previously quoted, Donne begins the first meditation by mourning the

variability of human health and the speed with which illness develops. Sickness is likened

to cannon fire in that the damage dealt is sudden and indelible. Importantly, this bodily

misery is "not imprinted by God" who "put a beame of *Immortalitie* into us." According

to Donne, it is our own doing (7). The stain of original sin makes it so we "not onely die,

but die upon the Rack" (7)—lying ill in bed, Donne naturally reaches analogically for the

appropriate instrument of torture for the position in which he finds himself. Observe how

Donne's first acknowledgement of God is an act of exoneration. God is distanced from

Donne's suffering as culpability is placed squarely on humanity's shoulders. Put plainly: man "execute[s] himselfe" (8).

While Donne's conclusion is uttered with a sense of finality in the meditation, his confidence quickly dissipates in the expostulation. Tonal shifts, it should be said, are characteristic of *Devotion*'s tripartite structure. Matthew Horn explains "the meditation is a soliloquy of sorts, using no scriptural texts and focusing on observations of natural phenomena and the flux of physical being. The expostulation and the prayer address God directly, weave Scripture into their texts, and express an attitudinal stance (deliberative in the expostulations and subordinate in the prayers)."[40] Yes, in the first expostulation, Donne turns to God directly and assumes a speculative temper, employing an almost Socratic line of questioning:

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

It reads like an interrogation: God, why have you not included these markers of spiritual health? Donne confesses his suspicion, or at the very least, his lack of understanding. It is unreasonable, baffling even, that the "first *Symptome* of [spiritual] sicknesse is Hell" and that "the first Messenger [...] doth not say, *Thou mayst die*, no, nor *Thou must die*, but *Thou art dead*" (9). How can Donne possibly hope to better himself if he is only made aware of his sin when it is too late? God's logic eludes him; at this moment, he cannot reconcile the decision with the deity.

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[40] Matthew Horn, "John Donne, Godly Inscription, and Permanency of Self in 'Devotions upon Emergent Occasions,'" *Renaissance Studies* 24 (2010), 365.

Eventually, though, the interrogation of God is suspended. Specifically, in the latter half of the expostulation, Donne announces: "*O my God, Job did not charge thee foolishly*, in his temporall afflictions, nor may I in my spirituall" (9). His phrasing alludes to an early but momentous verse in the Book of Job: "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing."[41] This parallel Donne draws between himself and Job is significant. Just as Job does not speak out against God for his suffering, so too does Donne acquit God of his illness—in the beginning, that is. Following his initial silence on the matter, Job does indeed speak out against God. In fact, he engages in a sustained dialogue about divine injustice which culminates in a confrontation with the Lord. Donne, similarly, begins by exonerating God in the meditation only to slip into doubt and spiritual disquietude in the expostulation. While he is quick to correct himself, his questions are far from answered and continue to develop across the subsequent devotions—Donne's confrontation with the Lord has only just begun.

However, for now, Donne finds some resolution. He realizes God "hast imprinted a *pulse* in our *Soule*, but we do not examine it; a voice in our conscience, but wee doe not hearken unto it" (9). Again, the blame falls on humanity—God supplies man with the means to recognize sin and it is we who fail to take advantage of these means. There are a few things worth noting here. First, Donne's willingness to revise. Donne acknowledges and seeks to amend his mistake of interrogating God, a mistake which is left visible to the reader. He does not rewrite the meditation nor remove his series of accusing questions as if to pretend these doubts never materialized. Instead, he turns back, admits his error, and

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[41] Job 1:22 (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

promptly offers "a correcting proposition, an unsaying."[42] In other words, he enters

linguistic regress. Of course, this is merely the first stage of a longer regression set to

unfold over the course of the entire text; so, at this point, the motion is clean and

simple—a quick edit to a relatively benign misunderstanding. Nevertheless, beyond the

first devotion, the waters grow murkier as Donne's slippages are not so easily reconciled.

The journey toward God, toward aporia, is marked by relentless negation and a radical

self-criticism that is nothing short of exhausting.

   I would also like to highlight the focus on actions. In trying to distinguish God's

character, Donne looks to how he provides for his creation, how he equips humanity with

all the necessary faculties to lead a pious life—faculties we refuse to employ. This

fixation on the verb, what God does rather than who God is, must be heeded for it is an

apophatic strategy that will emerge continuously throughout *Devotions*. In his

examination of the negative theology of Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Buijs

discusses "predicates of action" which "refer to the results or productions of an agent's

efficacy."[43] Unlike predicates of "definition, quantities, and dispositions," predicates of

action *can* be truthfully predicated of God in negative discourse. The reason: actions do

not make explicit claims about essence.[44] Sure, assumptions of essence may be culled

from actions, but actions alone say nothing. I will elaborate on the role of predicates of

action in a later section, particularly when we reach the twentieth devotion where Donne

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[42] Michael Sells, *Mystical Language of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3.

[43] Joseph Buijs, "The Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas," *The Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1988), 729.

[44] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 729.

directly addresses his use of this strategy. At present, just keep in mind that, despite

appearing kataphatic, predicates of action do not violate the negative exercise and remain

in accordance with the semantic thesis.

We now pivot to the end of the first expostulation where a striking metaphor

awaits. Immediately after his reflection on how humanity neglects the faculty to

apprehend and avoid sin, Donne concludes: "We are Gods *tenants* heere, and yet here, he,

our *Land-lord* payes us *Rents*; not yearely, not quarterly, but hourely [...] *Every minute he*

renewes his mercy" (9). This metaphor, God as a landlord, is the first of many to come.

As we will witness, Donne consistently analogizes God, comparing him to a landlord, an

author, a translator, a physician, and so on. I would like to suggest that this reliance on

the metaphorical, on figurative characterization, stems from Donne's aversion to the

concrete. By likening God to a landlord, Donne speaks of God without really speaking;

we might classify it as another method of unspeaking. Personally, I am swayed by C. J.

Insole's reading of Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God* (a text which examines the

function and influence of negative discourse within medieval Christian mysticism):

> I take it that Turner has in mind that our language cannot hope to describe or say
> anything true about God, and that metaphors are peculiarly suited to flagging this
> feature of language [...] we can use metaphor without having any substantial
> belief in what we are describing, and so without attempting to say anything true
> about the thing we are describing. It seems that for all Turner's fashionable
> enthusiasm for metaphor, there is an old empiricist prejudice lurking that
> metaphor is not a suitable vehicle for serious beliefs about the truth. Otherwise
> why would the using of metaphor be particularly appropriate to demonstrate that
> language was *failing*, rather than being a display of language's multivalenced
> virility?[45]

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[45] C. J. Insole, "Metaphor and the Impossibility of Failing to Speak about God,"
International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 52.1 (2002), 35–6.

Some context is required to understand Insole's point. In *The Darkness of God*,

metaphors are deemed instruments of apophasis in that "they succeed in conveying the

truths which they convey only on condition that they are recognized to be literal

falsehoods, for it is part of their metaphorical meaning that they are literally false."[46] To

be metaphorical is in itself an expression of deficiency, a failure to translate into literal

truth; at the same time, metaphors are also an expression of transcendence, of the

inability of concrete speech to capture and contain the subject. I find Insole's summary to

be a clear and concise distillation of Turner's position, far clearer and more concise than I

could provide.

I particularly appreciate Insole's idea that metaphors *flag* the limitations of

language because, I contend, this is exactly what occurs in the first expostulation.

Donne's metaphor of God as a landlord *flags* the limitations of language; it reaffirms

God's ineffability, of his status above and beyond the literal. To those who remain

unconvinced, who insist that the metaphor of God as a landlord is a kataphatic statement,

I counter by pointing out its blatant insufficiency. God is our landlord, and yet he pays us

rent. The metaphor doesn't work; it collapses in on itself, rendered void by paradox. This

immediate failure accentuates the gulf that lies between God and ourselves; even the

metaphorical, a tool designed for the distinctly un-literal and abstract, is unable to bridge

the gap, reinforcing the inadequacy of speech in the face of divinity.

Moving onto the prayer, we encounter another apophatic strategy. The very first

line reads, "O eternall, and most gracious *God*, who considered in thy selfe, art a *Circle*,

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[46] Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37.

first and last; but considered in thy working upon us, art a *direct line*, and leadest us from our *beginning* [...] to our *end*" (9-10). God is at once a circle and a direct line, the first and the last, the beginning and the end: he is a paradox. Of course, paradoxes, like metaphors, are not exclusive to the apophatic mode; in fact, they are a staple within seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry. Even so, paradoxes are a natural consequence of the negative exercise and possess unique apophatic capabilities that must be reckoned with. In her survey of negative theology in the Platonic tradition, Deidre Carabine remarks how apophatic discourse often "result[s] in an incommunicable knowledge which is exemplified in the paradoxical statements of those who have attempted to describe that which lies beyond the scope of linguistic expression."[47] Paradoxes exist at the edge of reason, "teetering on the brink of nonsense," and capture the moment when logic begins to break down.[48] As such, paradoxes are one of the few devices that come close to accessing God. Remember, in the mind of the negative theologian, God resides outside of logic and language and so, to achieve mystical union, one must seek liberation from logic and language. Paradoxes provide a sense of liberation, or partial liberation, in that they imagine a language untethered from logic.

Additionally, paradoxes circumvent kataphasis. To say God is both x and y when x stands in opposition to y is a form of negation; it is not an explicit denial as in via negativa, but the two premises ultimately cancel each other out. Perhaps cancel out is not the right way to put it as there is meaning within apophatic paradoxes. God can genuinely

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[47] Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Era* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1995), 9.

[48] John Peter Kenney, "The Critical Value of Negative Theology," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86 (1993), 442.

be both x and y because apophasis reserves "the logical rule of non-contradiction [...] for object entities" of which God is not.[49] God is a non-object or no-thing, *not not* anything, therefore the paradox is not contradictory when applied to him. Still, even though the paradox means something, it is not kataphatic since it delimits nothing within the objective sphere; God being both x and y when x stands in opposition to y is logically illegible, thus safeguarding the unknowability of God's essence. This unknowability is further safeguarded in the paradox from the first prayer given that x and y are metaphorical images (God is a circle and a line) rather than concrete qualities (e.g. God is good and evil).

All said, it must be acknowledged that Donne begins every prayer in *Devotions* with some version of the phrase "O eternall, and most gracious God" which includes two positive assumptions about God's essence—that he is *eternal* and *gracious*. The question becomes: does this perpetual return to kataphasis exile Donne from apophatic discourse? My response is an emphatic no. For one, the objective of the prayer is distinct from that of the meditation and the expostulation. To reiterate Horn's point, the attitudinal stance of the expostulation is deliberation whereas the attitudinal stance of the prayer is subordination. It makes sense then that apophatic discourse is primarily reserved for when Donne takes on the role of inquisitor, not of supplicant. This is not to suggest that apophatic discourse *only* emerges in the expostulation, but rather that it tends to flourish there.

Secondly, the presence of kataphasis is, for the most part, unavoidable. John Peter Kenney posits "the need for a kataphatic foundation" within negative discourse as it

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[49] Sells, *Mystical Language*, 4.

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"could not begin without a fairly well-grounded conception of the divine."[50] So while the extent of the kataphatic foundation varies from negative theologian to negative theologian, it is never fully absent. For Donne, his foundation happens to be the eternal and gracious nature of God, two fairly common assumptions within the apophatic tradition. God's eternal quality is especially common and can be observed in the discourse of apophatic thinkers such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Gregory of Nyssa, and Nicholas of Cusa.

I conclude my analysis of the first devotion with a reminder of what we have seen so far. We see Donne in dialogue with God, expressing his doubts while also being quick to turn around and correct his assumptions—the start of a longer, more complex regression. We see him wielding several apophatic devices to speak of God including metaphors, paradoxes, and predicates of action. We see him reveal the objective of the dialogue through allusions to Job, an objective which aligns with the negative exercise. The seeds of apophasis are germinating, far from full bloom, but present nonetheless. With that, I direct your attention to the second devotion where we may behold the next stage of growth.

The Second Devotion

In the first devotion, Donne lays bare a number of anxieties: the imminence of human suffering, how illness transforms the body, and the speed with which that transformation, or dissolution, occurs. In the second devotion, he fixates on this final item, this fear of rapidity. "And how quickly?" he asks in reference to his decaying body, "sooner then

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[50] Kenney, "Critical Value," 448.

thou canst receive an answer, sooner then thou canst conceive the question" (11).

Nothing is quite as immediate as physical death. Or put poetically, "the *Sunne* who goes

so many miles in a minut, The *Starres* of the *Firmament*, which go so very many more,

goe not so fast, as [the] *body* to the *earth*" (11). This anxiety over time, over creaturely

velocity, evolves across the second expostulation and prayer. For now, though, Donne's

outlook remains pessimistic. He understands embodiment as an unstable status,

perpetually on the verge of loss.

At this time, Donne also draws a hard line between the body and the soul, the

physical self and the spiritual self: "*Earth* is the *center* of my *body*, *Heaven* is the *center*

of my *Soule*; these two are the naturall place of those two; but those goe not to these two,

in an equall pace" (11). Note the inequality. The trajectory of the body and the soul are

distinct from one another, unbalanced even. While the body "falls down without pushing,

[the] Soule does not go up without pulling" (11). Throughout the meditation, and much of

the expostulation, there is an implied partiality toward the latter. The ease with which the

body falls down inspires dread within Donne; it perturbs him in a way the soul's

ascension to Heaven does not. Significantly, as Donne goes on to question God, his

perception of the body and its purpose matures. The experience of embodiment is not so

simple: it does not begin and end with death—not when you consider the risen body or

the interpersonal body. This refusal to release the physical self adds a dimension seldom

explored in the negative tradition, that of the *apophatic body*. But I get ahead of myself.

The subject of apophatic bodies can only be examined once the negative discourse of

Devotions has been thoroughly outlined.

So, let us turn to the second expostulation. Donne begins with a stipulation: "As *God calls things that are not, as though they were*, I, who am as though I were not, may call upon *God*, and say, *My God, my God*, why come thine anger so fast upon me?" (12). This line requires some parsing through. First, the statement "as though I were not" relates to an earlier discussion of proportion and size. Donne deems himself "little," as are all men in comparison to God or "infinitie," thus he acts bigger than himself by attempting to engage God (12). Second, once again, we see the fear of rapidity rise to the surface. Donne is explicitly interested in why God's anger is so *fast*, exposing the true source of his anxiety.

But, beyond his acknowledgement of size and speed, what's particularly fascinating is the general conclusion about the limitations of language. Donne warns us that things that are not will be called as though they are and vice versa, putting the reader on alert. Just as Donne will scrutinize and evaluate his vocabulary, we are invited to do the same. His preface is distinctly apophatic in tone, signaling that unique awareness and "critical self-consciousness" which is intrinsic to negative discourse.[51] So why is it positioned right before a positive assumption about God? God's actions, Donne declares, are a product of anger. It is kataphatic to say as much, to ascribe a concrete emotion to the transcendent. Phrased technically, it is a "predicate of disposition" which is in direct violation of the semantic thesis.[52] Nevertheless, we must heed the warning! Donne prepares us to challenge his language and, as we will soon witness, his kataphasis is

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[51] William Franke, "Apophasis and the Turn of Philosophy to Religion: From Neoplatonic Negative Theology to Postmodern Negation of Theology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60 (2006), 63.

[52] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 729.

quickly undone. Anger becomes the foundation upon which Donne slips, and backslides, and unravels: a platform for linguistic regress.

Look at how he struggles: "Surely it is not thou; it is not thy hand. The devouring sword, the consuming fire, the winds from the wildernes, the diseases of the body, all that afflicted Job, were from the hands of Satan; it is not thou" (13). The repetition of "it is not thou" sounds as if he is trying to convince himself. He cannot fathom the God of "communion, and consolation" and the God of "destruction, divorce, and separation" being one and the same (13). Here we observe a regression. Whereas Donne originally describes God as angry, he is now uncertain of this characterization. It does not suit his understanding of divinity, and so he displaces blame onto Satan. The return to Job is also worthy of mention. As in the first expostulation, Donne forms an implicit link between the suffering of Job and his own suffering. The parallel reminds the reader of the nature of the dialogue: Donne, like Job, is in a confrontation with the Lord, openly voicing his theological doubt and seeking resolution. In our analysis of apophatic discourse, the allusions to this particular biblical episode are critical, namely because they confirm that *Devotions* and the negative tradition share the same objective: to confront and understand God.

That said, let us proceed with the second expostulation. Directly after his final "it is not thou," Donne changes his tune: "It is thou; Thou *my God*, who has led mee so continually with thy hand [...] thou wilt not correct mee, but with thine own hand" (13). Donne, once again, edits himself. God is indeed responsible for the devouring sword, the consuming fire, and the diseases of the body. However, Donne's perception of this destruction has transformed. Rather than viewing God as a force of anger, he views him

as a disciplinary agent. He even goes so far as to compare God to a parent: "My parents would not give mee over to a *Servants* correction, nor my *God*, to *Satans*" (13). A sense of compassion undergirds this metaphor—punishment derived from familial love. We must not forget the journey it took to get here, a journey punctuated by linguistic regress. Donne begins by lamenting God's fast-acting anger, then amends his statement and shifts the blame elsewhere, only to reframe God's anger as correction. It does not matter that his language is positive because the motion of revision is in itself negative. Revisiting Sells's description: "Each statement I make—positive or negative—reveals itself as in need of correction. The correcting statement must then itself be corrected, ad infinitum."[53] The undoing is what makes the exercise apophatic; and, as demonstrated, Donne's immediate reflex is to undo.

Before transitioning to the prayer, there is one last aspect of the expostulation in need of scrutiny. If you recall the beginning of the second devotion, Donne expresses an anxiety over the speed of physical death. Having sorted through his misgivings about God's perceived anger, his attention now returns to the original premise: "I consider in my present state, not the haste, & the dispatch of the disease, in dissolving this body, so much, as the much more hast, & dispatch, which *God* shal use, in recollecting, and reuniting this *dust* again at the *Resurrection*" (13). The rapidity of bodily dissolution no longer disturbs Donne. Quite the contrary, it brings him peace to think that, though his death may be fast, his resurrection will be even faster. Here a larger theme emerges, that of resurrection. We will encounter this subject with increasing frequency across the subsequent devotions, its full significance not yet rendered. For now, though, these early

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[53] Sells, *Mystical Language*, 2.

inclinations toward resurrection show how Donne's perception of the body and the soul, specifically the unequal status of the body and the soul, is starting to shift. Resurrection suggests a return to corporeality, not a transcendence above it; the body has a role to play, a role that extends beyond death. We might look at the second devotion as groundwork being laid for Donne's eventual advancement of the apophatic body—more on that later.

Moving from the expostulation, I want to highlight the resemblance between the first and the second prayer, particularly in how they open. The first prayer begins by likening God to a circle and a line, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. The second prayer takes a similar approach: "O most gracious *God* [...] who hast not only waked mee with the first, but cald me up, by casting me further downe, and clothd me with thy selfe, by stripping me of my selfe" (13). God calls Donne up by casting him down, and clothes him by stripping him—again we are faced with a paradox. It is fascinating that each paradox appears at the same place in the first and second devotion, always towards the end as if the proceeding discourse—and its apophatic grammar— naturally leads Donne to the edge of logic. Equally fascinating is how the paradox of the second prayer, like the paradox of the first prayer, speaks in metaphor. But unlike the paradox of the first prayer, the second prayer also employs predicates of action, focusing on the verb rather than the adjective. Donne's paradoxes seem to be growing more apophatic in character as time goes on.

Also in the second prayer is the temporary conclusion of the linguistic regress. To refresh, Donne's initial reaction is to identify God as angry, but, by the end of the second expostulation, this label is effectively undone. Still, it isn't until the prayer that Donne makes the undoing official: "*There is no soundnesse in my flesh, because of thine anger*.

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Interprete thine owne worke, and call this sicknes, correction, and not anger" (14). The italicized portion paraphrases Psalms 38:3, and the non-italicized portion is Donne's critique of the verse. Call this sickness, correction, and not anger, he insists. The regression reaches a resting place. God does not act from anger but from correction, Donne determines. He finds solace in this language, a semblance of stability. Does it last? No. Correction soon proves inadequate and the regression continues as we will soon observe. If we look at the second devotion in isolation, however, the motion of relentless revision—that negative dynamis or potentiality of power—remains evident. The language of the second devotion is self-conscious, malleable, always at risk of revision: it is the language of apophasis.

I leave off with Donne's closing remarks: "O *my God*, who madest thy selfe a *Light* in a *Bush* [...] appear unto me so, that I may see, and know thee to be my *God*" (14). I draw attention to this moment because, even more than the allusions to Job, it plainly states the objective of the exercise. True, *Devotions* grapples with a range of subjects from health to metaphysics to cosmological space and so on. But the fulcrum on which the discourse rests is a simple request to God: "appear unto me." In his infirmity, Donne endeavors to know God, to understand God, to sketch a portrait of divinity free from human affections and illusions. His desire is the desire of a negative theologian; and, as we are beginning to recognize, so too are his methods.

Allusions to Job

"I have not the *righteousnesse* of *Job*, but I have the desire of *Job*: *I would speake to the*

Almighty, *and I would reason with God*," Donne declares at the start of the fourth

expostulation (21). Importantly, this is not the first allusion to Job in *Devotions*, nor is it

the last. The name surfaces repeatedly, referenced on at least ten separate occasions,

making Job one of the most prevalent biblical prototypes in the text. As readers, we must

ask ourselves: why? Why does Donne wed himself and his current experience to that of

Job? I've touched on the answer briefly in the first and second devotions, but I find the

fourth expostulation offers the clearest response: Donne has not the righteousness, but the

desire of Job—in other words, their objectives align. Donne and Job seek the same end:

to speak and ultimately reason with God, a God who, for both men, seems to punish

unjustly despite a lifetime of service and belief. *Devotions*, in effect, represents Donne's

attempt to enter into dialogue with the divine. We might even call it a confrontation, for

that is what it is for Job.

Indeed, the Book of Job culminates in an explosive showdown between Job, the

blameless man unjustly punished, and God, the one who punishes him. Unlike his friends

who blindly defend God's actions, insisting he must have done something to incur

retribution, Job remains unconvinced. He continues to express his skepticism on the

nature of divine justice, formulating "a presentation of doubts about God or those dark

intuitions about the destructive, inimical side of God."[54] And when God eventually

descends from heaven to face Job, he does not assuage his doubts whatsoever. Instead, he

"rebuk[es] Job for imagining that a human may dare call God to account."[55] Interestingly,

after Job withstands this rebuke, in a sudden—almost inexplicable—shift, God turns his

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[54] Jack Miles, *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 304.

[55] Miles, *God*, 305.

wrath on the friends who defended him, proclaiming, "for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."[56] In short, while at first God ignores Job's charges against him, he validates them by the end. It is for this reason "secular exegetes have often enough seen the Book of Job as the self-refutation of the entire Judeo-Christian tradition."[57] William Safire even goes so far as to dub Job "the original dissident" as he is, in a way, the first man to openly question God.[58]

Of course, this is a distinctly secular interpretation of Job and would have been unthinkably radical in the seventeenth century. If the commentaries of John Calvin are any indication, the Book of Job was largely read as "a model of perseverance and fortitude."[59] In his first sermon on the first chapter of Job, Calvin says this of Job: "It is good for us to have such examples, as shewe unto us howe there have bin other men as fraile as we, who neverthelesse have resisted temptations, and continued stedfastly in obedience unto God, although he have scourged them even with extremitie."[60] Again, the takeaway is perseverance in one's faith, not defiance. Although it is likely church authorities were aware of a potential subversive reading as most preachers avoided sermonizing on Job altogether—Theodore Beza's commentary (translated into English in

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[56] Job 42:7 (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

[57] Miles, *God*, 303.

[58] William Safire, *The First Dissident: The Book of Job in Today's Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992), 7.

[59] Derek W. H. Thomas, "Calvin's Expostulation of the Book of Job," *Christian Study Library*, date accessed April 24, 2023, https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/calvins-exposition-book-job#outline-learning-from-suffering.

[60] John Calvin, *Sermons upon the Booke of Job*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1574), A1r.

1589) describes the Book of Job as one likely to lead the reader into "shipwracke" because of its "many darke and hard places."[61]

I do not intend to suggest that Donne interprets Job as a religious dissident nor himself as one in *Devotions*. However, I do think the two share a healthy dose of theological skepticism brought on by a period of acute suffering. Donne, like Job, does not question the existence of God, rather he questions the character of God. And, like Job, he seeks a genuine answer. *Devotions* is not an indictment of God; the text does not register as accusing or condescending. Donne inquires upwards with both humility and passion, stretching toward knowledge he is sharply aware is just out of reach. Critically, Job, too, is aware of this unreachability. At the end of his confrontation with the Lord, he admits "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."[62]

The desire for dialogue, the looming questions and presentation of doubts, and the underlying appreciation of the aporia of divinity create a striking parallel between the Book of Job and *Devotions*. What I would like to put forth now is that the combination of these qualities also reveal an apophatic tenor. Similar to Job and Donne, the negative theologian craves communication with God and, through apophatic discourse, enters into an unceasing search for the divine. I would even go so far as to say that the plot of the Book of Job mirrors the process of the negative exercise: the story begins with Job engaging in an extended debate with his friends, challenging their assumptions about divine justice; only after Job has diligently countered these assumptions does God appear

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[61] Theodore Beza, *Job Expounded* (Cambridge, 1589), A6r.

[62] Job 42:3 (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

to him. Is this not the same trajectory as the negative theologian? Does the apophatic

thinker not relentlessly challenge kataphatic assumptions about divinity in the hope that

God will likewise appear to them? Admittedly, most negative theologians do not claim to

have successfully met God, but the ambition is there nonetheless.[63]

When it comes to expressing doubt, the connection to negative theology is even

more pronounced. The tradition is rooted in anti-dogmatism as concrete affirmations of

God are considered specious at best and idolatrous at worst. As such, practitioners of

apophasis exercise doubt with every attempt to speak of the divine. As A. H. Armstrong

speculates in "The Negative Theology of Nous in Later Neoplatonism," "if one pushed

the critical mysticism of Plotinus rather further than he would be willing to go himself, it

might come to consort very well with another kind of Platonism [...] the ultra-Socratic

Platonism of the Skeptical Academy."[64] There is a lurking resonance between the two

traditions, that of skepticism and apophasis. Where apophasis diverges is that it is always

guided by a "pragmatic sense of religious direction."[65] Certain truths are not up for

debate in negative discourse like that of God's existence and, in some cases, his

goodness. We might call it skepticism with guardrails as the negative theologian is

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[63] Early in the development of negative theology, Gregory of Nyssa argued against those who relegate God to a distant, inaccessible realm, insisting that divinity can be neither limited nor contained and must therefore be omnipresent; however, it is only through negative discourse that one can gain awareness of this omnipresence. As Charles Stang articulates in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Christian Mysticism*, "the promise of a brushing touch or faint glimpse of the divine is what distinguishes Gregory and, after him, Dionysius the Areopagite from [previous apophatic thinkers] Aetius and Eunomius" (170).

[64] A. H. Armstrong, "The Negative Theology of Nous in Later Neoplatonism," *Hellenic and Christian Studies* 3 (1983), 185.

[65] Kenney, "Critical Value," 442.

sufficiently protected from verging into blasphemy. Significantly, this unique brand of skepticism—skepticism driven and safeguarded by a larger spiritual force—is the same kind adopted by Job and Donne. Job, Donne, and the negative theologian each come to the table with pressing questions about God, and all three find a way to articulate these questions without abandoning their faith.

Finally, in terms of the aporia of divinity, we need not say much. How this subject relates to negative theology is glaring to the point of self-evident. After all, of the two central theses that inform negative discourse, the semantic thesis and the epistemic thesis, the latter "refers to our inability to know God's essence."[66] The negative theologian understands and accepts the fundamental incomprehensibility of God but continues to confront the dilemma regardless. The same is true of Job and Donne. While both look to reason with God, the feat is purely aspirational; neither actually succeed, at least not in the sense that they surmount the aporia through reason. Instead, they come to appreciate the irreducible complexity of divinity, the absolute transcendence of God.

My broader objective here is to demonstrate that, in *Devotions*, Job swings on two hinges. On the one hand, allusions to Job legitimize Donne by linking his position and approach to a recognizable biblical prototype. On the other hand, they remind the reader of the qualities just outlined—apophatic qualities. Whether intentional or not, Job serves as an analogue for the negative gesture and the frequent allusions to Job consistently reinforce Donne's apophatic sensibilities. As we proceed with our analysis of *Devotions*, I will continue to highlight moments where Job emerges if only to drive home the prominence of these sensibilities.

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[66] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 725.

But, before moving to the next section, I think it apt to mention that *Devotions* is

not the only text of Donne's to heavily reference the Book of Job. His 1631 sermon

entitled *Death's Duel* cites Job by name an impressive eight times. *Death's Duel* is

actually the last sermon Donne preached as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, delivered about

a month before his death. In his biographical account of Donne's life, Izaak Walton

describes the scene at Whitehall as follows: "Many that then saw his tears, heard his faint

and hollow voice, professing they thought the Text prophetically chosen, and that Dr.

Donne *had preach't his own Funeral Sermon*."[67] I bring this up to say that *Devotions*

and *Death's Duel* are both products of the sickbed, when Donne's body is failing and

death is creeping ever closer. While *Devotions* ends in restoration, this does not take

away from the fact that, throughout the text, Donne very much believes he is about to die.

It is therefore significant that, in each instance of near death, Donne looks to the Book of

Job. Perhaps because Job reflects most intimately the agony of bodily suffering; or

perhaps because Job offers hope in the form of his restored prosperity (though this

prosperity is hotly contested within modern scholarship); or perhaps because Job

represents the ability to vent one's fears and frustrations directly to God. Whatever the

reason, Donne, at the edge of his grave, feels a certain kinship with this character that

must not be ignored.

Apophatic Nothingness

Those scholars who have previously detected and written about apophatic strands in

Donne's writing are largely drawn to the theme of nothingness. As discussed in the

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[67] Izaac Walton, *The Lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert* (London, 1675), 68.

introduction, both Jennifer Nichols and Sean Ford recognize a Dionysian influence in the poems "A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day" and "Negative Love." Specifically, Ford observes how "Donne chooses to give [nothing] the quality of substance and presence, rather than using it to denote the absence of anything."[68] This paradoxical idea—the somethingness of nothingness—is rooted in negative mysticism, particularly Dionysian negative mysticism. According to the Dionysian tradition, "nothingness denotes not nonbeing but transcendence beyond the categories of being and nonbeing."[69] Nothingness is a different kind of being altogether, one that does not subscribe to the principles of logic, at least not any logic we can understand. Sound familiar? Indeed, the category of apophatic nothingness is the very same category that encompasses God. God transcends Platonic notions of existence while still ultimately existing; he dwells in that third space outside of being and nonbeing, the space which Dionysius calls nothingness.

Since Ford has already demonstrated how Donne's poetry upholds this apophatic formulation of nothingness, I would like to demonstrate how this formulation is likewise upheld in *Devotions*. To do so, I look to the fifth meditation wherein Donne reflects on his newfound solitude, a reflection that leads him to the following conclusion: "Meere *vacuitie*, the first *Agent*, *God*, the first *instrument* of *God*, *Nature*, will not admit; Nothing can be utterly *emptie*, but so neere a degree towards *Vacuitie* as *Solitude*" (25). Vacuity is impossible, Donne insists. Or to put it in more philosophically relevant terms, nothingness is impossible. There is no such thing as pure absence—nature, as it is

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[68] Sean Ford, "Nothing's Paradox in Donne's 'Negative Love' and 'A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day,'" *Quidditas* 22 (2001), 99.

[69] Jennifer Nichols, "Dionysian Negative Theology in Donne's 'A Nocturnall upon S. Lucies Day,'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 53 (2011), 356.

designed by God, does not allow for the absolute void of being. The closest we can get to vacuity, to nothingness, is the experience of solitude. On the surface, Donne's point here—and throughout much of the fifth meditation—is that loneliness, especially loneliness occasioned by illness, is a unique misery; it simulates an unnatural state, that of vacuity, and so the suffering is distinctly tortuous. However, if we plumb the depths of the line just quoted, we also find apophatic sensibilities lurking within.

So, let us unearth those sensibilities. "Nothing can be utterly empty": absence always entails some level of presence. Already we can see resonance between Donne's view of nothingness and Dionysius's. Nothingness is a misleading word in the eyes of Donne and Dionysius; despite how it is traditionally defined and used, nothingness is not necessarily a lack of somethingness. To echo Ford once more, nothing maintains the quality of substance and presence in Dionysian negative mysticism, the same of which can be said of *Devotions*. By rejecting the possibility of true vacuity, Donne rejects true nothing. Even that which we perceive as absence is not absolute—it is just a different kind of presence.

This perspective remains consistent across the entire text. Take for instance Donne's thoughts on the soul. In the eighteenth meditation, he asks "his soul is gone; *whither*? Who saw it *come in*, or who saw it *goe out*? *No body*; yet every body is sure, he *had one*, and *hath none*" (91). The soul is at once sensible and insensible—nobody can see it, yet everybody knows it is there. As a result, Donne wonders whether the soul is a "separate substance," an inhabitant of that third space between there and not-there (91). Of course, that separate substance, that third space is apophatic nothingness. The soul, like God, has a presence that cannot be equated to any other presence and so, to us, it is

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insensible—it is nothing. Additionally, in the twenty-first devotion, Donne restates his

earlier position on vacuity, assuring the reader that his opinion has not changed: "No

corner of any place can bee *empty*; there can be no *vacuity*" (111). All of this is to say

that, throughout *Devotions*, Donne's formulation of nothingness is firmly apophatic.

There is no absence without presence, but such presence is distinct, requiring a new

category.

Critically, discussing Donne's formulation of nothingness demands a discussion

of his fear of nothingness. A potential reason why Donne readily embraces the idea of

apophatic nothingness is that it caters to an acute anxiety of his: an anxiety over

impermanence. Scholar David Hirsch reads *Devotions* as a longing for the permanence of

self; Hirsch writes "by anatomizing the representative body to the limits of material

dissection, Donne attempts to discover a radical immutability of selfhood which could

refute his fear of dissolving into nothingness."[70] Yes, more than anything, Donne fears

total loss, total dissolution, total nothingness. We see this fear manifest quite plainly in a

few ways. One, Donne's abiding interest in atoms and atomist theory. "[The fever] doth

not only *melt* [man], but *Calcine* him, reduce him to *Atomes*, and to *ashes*; not to *water*,

but to *lime*," he asserts at the start of the second meditation (11). Atoms, as they were

understood in the seventeenth century, signify the lowest common denominator, the

smallest piece of matter that cannot be dissected any further. Thus, in asserting that a

fever reduces man to atoms, Donne implicitly counters the suggestion of total dissolution.

Even in death, we are still something—we are atoms. Selfhood remains unthreatened as

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[70] David Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies and Anatomies: Deconstructed Bodies and the
Resurrection of Atomic Theory," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 31 (1991), 71.

some part of the self, regardless of how miniscule, will always exist. To again quote Hirsch, the atom is "the limit to the self's deconstruction."[71]

Another aspect of *Devotions* which reveals Donne's desire for permanence is his continual reference to resurrection. These references only become more frequent, more insistent as the text goes on and as Donne's conception of bodiliness evolves—I will return to this point in my analysis of the apophatic body. Resurrection, similar to atomist theory, resists the disintegration of self. More than resists, resurrection is the very reinstatement of self, a rejection of death *ad infinitum*. Donne announces triumphantly in the fourteenth expostulation, there will come a "*day* of awaking me, and reinvesting my *Soule*, in *my body*, and my *body* in the body of *Christ*" (76). Death is figured as a temporary state, a state akin to being asleep and from which one need simply awaken. There is no permanent loss of self, only a momentary loss within the transition between this life and the next.

Nancy Selleck's interpretation of *Devotions* aligns with much of Hirsch's. Selleck also writes about Donne's desire for the permanence of self, although her reading of selfhood is inextricably linked to embodiment. Throughout the text, Donne displays an unwillingness to relinquish his body which is evidenced not only by his attraction to resurrection, but in his vision of the interpersonal body. Selleck cites the famous no man is an island passage where Donne claims "any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*" (87). The body maintains an innate openness, an interconnectedness, a dependence upon those other bodies which surround it. As Selleck explains, "Donne's emphasis on the fluid body figures not just change, but exchange—

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[71] Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies," 71.

not just personal flux, but interpersonal flux."[72] This emphasis on fluidity and interpersonal connection further affirms the permanence of self. The self, encapsulated here by the body, is forever entangled within a broader network—that of mankind. You cannot lose yourself because the self is something larger than you alone. One body is all bodies, one self is all selves.

Now, let us ask: how does Donne's anxiety over impermanence relate to apophatic nothingness? Well, it may be said that nothingness and impermanence are near synonyms. To lack permanence admits a certain lack of being, or an inevitable lack of being; and, traditionally, nothingness is defined as exactly that: a lack of being. But, as we know, Donne does not accept the traditional definition of nothingness. "Nothing can be utterly *emptie*": the statement denies the possibility of true absence, of true nothingness. Essentially, by adopting an apophatic formulation of nothingness, a formulation that ascribes presence to absence, Donne is able to assuage his fear of total dissolution. The self cannot dissolve into nothingness because there is no such thing. A level of presence always persists whether that be in atoms, in resurrection, in the interpersonal body, or in something even more mystical. The apophatic perspective appeals to Donne in that it promises the erasure of one of his deepest anxieties, that of impermanence. When viewed apophatically, to become nothing is not to scatter and vanish, but rather to enter a new category of being.

I acknowledge the subject of apophatic nothingness can be quite dizzying as it is equal parts philosophical, metaphysical, and literary. With this in mind, I will condense

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[72] Nancy Selleck, "Donne's Body," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 41 (2001), 157.

the proceeding analysis into two central takeaways. First, nothingness in *Devotions* does not mean nothing (as in lack of being). Donne employs an apophatic formulation of nothingness, a formulation which treats nothing not as absence, but as a different form of presence—a category beyond being and nonbeing that encompasses the divine. Second, by embracing apophatic nothingness, Donne effectively combats his fear of impermanence. If nothingness is simply a different form of somethingness, then Donne needn't worry over the loss of selfhood: true absence does not exist therefore the self cannot be lost, it can only be transformed. Having laid this foundation, we may now continue our journey through *Devotions* where we are certain to encounter this idea of apophatic nothingness again—especially in Donne's contemplations of God.

The Sixth Devotion

Thematically, the sixth devotion centers on fear. It begins with Donne announcing: "I observe the *Phisician*, with the same diligence, as hee the *disease*; I see hee *feares*, and I feare with him: I overtake him, I overrun him, in his feare, and I go the faster, because he makes his pace slow" (29). The return to rapidity is noteworthy. As articulated in the first and second devotions, the speed of physical death disturbs Donne; sickness seemingly comes on at once without warning, and the process of bodily dissolution that follows is equally swift. Five devotions later, the fear of rapidity transforms into the rapidity of fear. Fear itself is an experience of dreadful acceleration, Donne realizes; it quickens and accumulates in the face of another's fear, particularly his physician who makes it all the worse by trying to "disguis[e] his fear" (29). We can see this dreadful acceleration reflected in Donne's language: the slow parallel rhythm of "I see hee *feares*, and I fear with him" is followed by the quick triple rhythm of "I overtake him, I overrun him"; the

line then ends on the brisk, almost tripping along rhythm of "I go the faster" contrasted

by the unhurried spondaic rhythm of "because he makes his pace slow." The quickening

tempo makes it so Donne's fear *literally* becomes faster.

But what is it exactly that Donne is afraid of? Toward the end of the meditation,

he admits he "fear[s] not the hastening of [his] *death*," but rather "the increase of the

disease" (30). A reasonable enough answer, though incomplete. As Donne goes on to

reveal in the expostulation, he does not merely fear the increase of disease; he also fears

God. Unsurprisingly, it is the expostulation that draws our apophatic gaze. In confronting

his fear of God, Donne simultaneously confronts the character of God, arriving at a

number of distinctly negative conclusions.

However, before addressing these conclusions, allow me to provide some context.

The expostulation opens on the notion of fear as a stifling spirit, something that

suffocates and silences a person. Donne points to Ishbosheth, the king of Israel who

succeeded Saul and warred with David (see 2 Samuel 2-4), who "*could not speak*, *nor*

reply in his own defence to Abner, *because hee was afraid*" (30). The reference to

Ishbosheth then sparks a connection to Job: "It was thy servant *Jobs* case too, who before

hee could say anything *to thee*, saies *of thee*, *Let him take his rod away from me*, *and let*

not his feare terrifie mee, *then would I speake with him*, *and not feare him*" (30). Job, as

previously mentioned, is a familiar name in *Devotions*—one of the most familiar names,

in fact. There are few other biblical prototypes who emerge as frequently in the text.

While I do not seek to rehash my earlier argument, I do find it significant that Job—who

functions as a reminder of certain negative sensibilities—is cited just before Donne

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engages in apophasis. The timely citation seems to signal what is about to occur, alerting the reader to the unique mode of discourse: an apophatic mode.

Still, there is a more immediate reason Donne quotes Job in this moment, that being their shared fear. Yes, Donne, like Job, fears God. And what concerns Donne, or perhaps perplexes him, is how he can possibly hope to speak with God while living in fear of him. "Dost thou command me to *speake* to thee, and commaund me to feare thee; and do these destroy one another?" he wonders (30). Put differently, does his fear of God prevent him from speaking to God? Or can fear and dialogue exist together? A heavy theological question, undoubtedly, and one that inspires a rather lengthy analysis of God's character. The following is only a small portion of said analysis:

> I must then *speak* to thee at all times, but when must I *feare* thee? At all times to. When didst thou rebuke any petitioner, with the name of *Importunate*? Thou hast proposed to us a *parable* of a *Judge* that did Justice at last, *because the client was importunate*, *and troubled him*; But thou hast told us plainely, that thy use in that *parable*, was not, that thou wast troubled with our importunities, but (as thou sayest there) *That wee should alwayes pray*. [...] God will do this, whensoever thou askest, and never call it *importunitie*. Pray in thy bed at midnight, and God will not say, I will heare thee to morrow upon thy knees, at thy bedside; pray upon thy knees there, then, & God will not say, I will heare thee on *Sunday*, at *Church*; *God* is no *dilatory God*, no froward *God*, Praier is never *unseasonable*, *God* is never asleep nor absent (30-1).

This passage, as evidenced by the opening line, is explicitly interested in the temporal. When is Donne meant to speak with God and when is he meant to fear him? The two acts are placed in opposition to each other, suggesting incompatibility. Thus, Donne is forced to confront a paradox as he determines that both speaking with and fearing God are expected at all times.[73] To prove that we need to speak with God at all times, Donne offers the Parable of the Unjust Judge which tells the story of a persistent widow who

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[73] Donne expresses this same sentiment in "Holy Sonnet VI."

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bothers a judge until he grants her justice. As strange and potentially blasphemous as it sounds, the unjust judge represents God, and the parable encourages the reader to imitate the widow by displaying persistence in their communication with the Lord. The exact verse instructs: "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" (Luke 18:6-7).

It is this idea of ongoing dialogue with God that provokes a series of apophatic statements, the first of which being: "God will do this [heed one's prayers] whensoever thou askest, and never call it *importunitie*." The statement starts somewhat kataphatic, at least in the sense that it is phrased positively. Though, when scrutinized, "God will do this, whensoever thou askest" qualifies as a predicate of action since it only claims God will do this and not he is this. The second half of the statement, on the other hand, is more definitively negative. According to Donne, God will never call our persistence to speak with him importunity. This initial denial then leads to: "Pray in thy bed at midnight, and God will not say, I will heare thee to morrow upon thy knees, at thy bedside; pray upon thy knees there, then, & God will not say, I will heare thee on *Sunday*, at *Church*." Over and over again we are told what God will *not* say and, critically, we are never told what he will say. The referent, as such, remains perpetually open. It is a pristine example of via negativa—textbook, even.

Via negativa, which translates to *way of negation*, is exactly that: it is a *way*, a manner of passage toward the "hidden God" that is marked by negative language.[74] You see, via negativa can be thought of as the semantic thesis manifested, putting into practice

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[74] John Murphy, "Meister Eckhart and the Via Negativa: Epistemology and Mystical Language," *New Blackfriars* 77 (1996), 460.

this idea that only terms predicated negatively of God are meaningful. One must *unsay* in order to say something of God—God is not this, God is never this, God does not do this, God never does this, etc. As demonstrated above, Donne opts for the way of negation in the sixth expostulation, avoiding kataphatic assumptions while still claiming something of God.

Now we must ask: what is it that Donne claims of God? The answer comes at once and, again, takes the form of a series of apophatic statements: "God is no dilatory God, no froward God; prayer is never unseasonable, God is never asleep, nor absent." Four attributes are denied of God in quick succession: he is not dilatory, not froward, never asleep, and never absent. The commitment to negation is rigorous. Indeed, if we were to isolate the sixth expostulation from the rest of *Devotions*, Donne's apophasis would score high on the Sells's "performative intensity" scale—a scale invented to measure "the frequency and seriousness" of a text's negative language.[75] After all, "radical negative theology" is defined by "an exclusively negative language of God," and, at this time, Donne's language is thoroughly negative.[76]

Of course, a common critique of via negativa is that, ultimately, it is a road to nowhere. Denial after denial leaves only "a blank little pseudo-concept of God which signifies nothing." But this critique is easily countered; in fact, Dionysius does so with a single metaphor: "We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing

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[75] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 3.

[76] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 723.

aside they show up the beauty which is hidden."[77] Via negativa embodies this act of

clearing aside; it is corrosive—it strips away the unnecessary, all those names and

assertions which do not apply, bringing the user in closer view of true divinity. This is

precisely what Donne achieves here. Four obstructions are effectively cleared aside,

advancing his understanding of God by that much. Donne knows God is not dilatory, not

froward, never asleep, and never absent, all of which contribute to a more sophisticated

theological portrait.

Even so, some may still question Donne's choice to phrase each statement

negatively. Why not invert the claims? Instead of saying God is not dilatory nor froward,

say God is prompt and affable. And instead of saying God is never asleep nor absent, say

God is always awake and present. To that, my response is: remember who we're dealing

with. This is Donne. If he chooses to forgo positive language in favor of the negative, the

choice is purposeful. In this case, we can be even more certain it is purposeful because he

employs negative language eight times in a row—he wants us to notice. The question

persists: what function does negative language serve?

Significantly, negative language refuses to treat the subject as an object entity. By

denying specific attributes of the subject, that being God, there is an acknowledgement of

transcendence. God is nothing, or no-thing, a thing beyond things—we might call him "a

kind of metabeing."[78] This transcendent quality is diminished, if not totally lost, with the

use of positive language. To affirm something of God, even if it is something as mystical

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[77] Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York:

Paulist Press, 1987), 138.

[78] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 12.

as omnipresence, is to reduce God to the same logical and linguistic principles we apply to ourselves. Sure, Donne's claim that God is never absent implies a form of omnipresence, but by phrasing the claim negatively, he denies it is a form of omnipresence that we can understand—let alone articulate. God remains a non-object in this way, existing outside of the neat notions of presence and absence.

All said, the sixth devotion is the first instance of what most people consider to be traditional apophasis. When you search for negative discourse online, the top result is usually an example of via negativa, that diligent production of privative statements—God is not this, God is not that, and so on. As we proceed through *Devotions*, we will encounter this strategy often as Donne relies heavily on the language of denial when speaking of God. But I think it bears repeating that via negativa is only one limb of the negative exercise; there are a constellation of devices that comprise apophatic grammar, devices that Donne employs regularly like that of linguistic regress, predicates of action, Dionysian nothingness, paradoxes, and metaphors. Via negativa is an essential component of this constellation, but, again, it is one of many essential components.

The Seventh and Ninth Devotions

At this time, I would like to take a pitstop at the seventh and ninth devotions. I say pitstop because neither devotion requires an extensive analysis; rather there is a brief moment in each that contributes to our discussion of apophatic discourse. For chronology's sake, I will begin with the seventh devotion—or to be exact, the seventh prayer—then move to the ninth. But, before I address either, a quick refresher is needed.

As you may recall from the first and second devotions, Donne engages in the process of linguistic regression. In the first meditation, he labels God as angry but then

challenges this characterization in the expostulation, chiding himself for even questioning God. In the second expostulation, the label of angry unravels further as Donne displaces blame for God's destructive behavior onto Satan, only for him to realize that such destruction is indeed God's doing. However, whereas Donne initially views this destruction as God's *anger*, he concludes that this destruction is actually God's *correction*. By the end of the second prayer, Donne seems content with his assessment and the regression reaches a temporary resting place.

Now that we have arrived at the seventh devotion, though, the regression picks back up. Toward the end of the prayer, Donne remarks:

> No vehemence of sicknes, no tentation of Satan, no guiltines of sin, no prison of death, not this first, this *sicke bed*, not the other prison, the close and dark *grave*, can remoove me from the determined, and good purpose, which thou hast sealed concerning mee. Let me think no degree of this thy correction, *casuall*, or without *signification*; but yet when I have read it in that language, as a *correction*, let me translate it into another, and read it as a *mercy*; and which of these is the *Originall*, and which is the *Translation*; whether thy mercy or thy correction were thy primary, and original intention in this sicknes, I cannot conclude, though death conclude me (40).

Donne's use of negative language at the start of this passage is striking. True, negative language is not wielded here to speak of God's essence as is the principle of apophatic discourse, but it does surround Donne's relationship with God. *No* vehemence of sickness, *no* temptation of Satan, *no* guiltiness of sin can remove Donne from the good purpose of the Lord. I wonder if there is something to be said of how the divine naturally inspires the language of denial regardless of context—for Donne, does speaking theologically awaken an impulse toward negation? A fascinating premise, but unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this thesis.

The negative language leads to linguistic regression. I direct your attention to that second sentence where Donne talks about translation. "When I have read it in that language, as a *correction*, let me translate it into another, and read it as a *mercy*," he says. Correction is no longer acceptable to Donne, his language must be translated again, this time to the language of *mercy*. Translate, as it is used here, is synonymous with linguistic regression. To reiterate, linguistic regression entails turning back on one's propositions, a critical reevaluation of language which is precisely what Donne does in this passage. He turns back, reevaluates the language of correction, and offers a new proposition, that of mercy. What Sells would suggest, and what I would like to put forth now, is that this process of unsaying—this motion of turning back—is a symptom of the negative exercise. In attempting to speak of God, who is ineffable and inexpressible, Donne is consistently forced to confront the limitations of language, the insufficiency of his vocabulary. What results is a systematic undoing of each and every proposition, "an open-ended dynamic that strains against its own reifications and ontologies."[79] Yes, Donne is *straining against* his assertions, a process which causes anger to transform into correction and correction to transform into mercy. As Sells articulates: "apophasis cannot help but posit [God] as a 'thing' or 'being,' a being it must then unsay, while positing yet more entities that must be unsaid in turn."[80] Donne, clearly, is caught in this regression, in this relentless cycle of saying to unsay.

But, now that the regression has settled on mercy, we can shift to the ninth devotion. While the ninth devotion does not necessarily feature discrete apophatic

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[79] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 7.

[80] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 7.

devices like linguistic regression, via negativa, or predicates of action, it advances

Donne's apophatic discourse all the same. As we know, the negative tradition operates on

two guiding premises: the epistemic thesis and the semantic thesis. Of the two, the

epistemic thesis, which purports "the unknowability of God," is considered "the principle

tenet of negative theology."[81] Well, in the ninth expostulation, Donne directly addresses

this principle tenet, this unknowability of God, and expresses his agreement.

Specifically, in the ninth expostulation, Donne cites three books that will help

remedy his soul: the book of life, the book of nature, and scripture. It is the first two

books that speak to the epistemic thesis:

> O *my God*, (ever constant to thine owne wayes) thou hast proceeded *openly*,
> *intelligibly*, *manifestly by the book*. From thy first *book*, the book of *life*, never
> shut to thee, but never thoroughly open to us; from thy second *book*, the *booke* of
> *Nature*, wher though subobscurely, and in shadows, thou hast expressed thine
> own *Image* (49).

Our knowledge is limited, Donne affirms. The book of life is never thoroughly open to

us, we are unable to know all that God knows and certain truths will invariably remain a

mystery. One of these mysteries is, of course, God himself; the book of nature expresses

as well as it obscures God's image, making it so our perception of divinity is warped.

This latter point recalls the eighth prayer where Donne proclaims: "as we see thee [God]

heere in a *glasse*, so we receive from thee here by *reflexion*, & by *instruments*" (44). Our

awareness of God is mediated; we view him through a glass and observe his reflection in

phenomena such as Fortune and Nature, but we do not see God directly. There is a level

of inevitable ignorance, a gap of indiscernibility that separates us from God, or as

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[81] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 725.

William Franke frames it: "an unbridgeable gulf between the world of things and anything that can be their ground."[82]

So what can we know of God? According to Donne, only "that which is *written*," referring to the contents of the three books listed above, scripture being the only material text among them (48). The other two books are figurative and the implication seems to be that one may consult them through careful contemplation of the surrounding world. As such, *Devotions* can be thought of as a sustained effort to consult and interpret these mystical texts which, Donne admits, will never prove fully accessible. Donne's acknowledgement of this inaccessibility and his repeated emphasis on how we are unable to see God in his purest form indicate that *Devotions* accepts the epistemic thesis. Donne writes under the assumption that God is beyond our comprehension, that we do not possess the proper faculties to appreciate divinity. And while the ninth devotion is not the only place in the text which recognizes this fact, I find it to be one of the clearer, more plain-faced examples.

This concludes our pitstop at the seventh and ninth devotions, both of which add dimension to Donne's apophasis. The seventh prayer serves as a continuation of the linguistic regress that begins in the first and second devotions; Donne keeps turning back, keeps unsaying what he has said of God, utterly self-conscious of every proposition—a product of the negative exercise. And in the ninth expostulation, Donne admits in no uncertain terms that God is unknowable, confirming that *Devotions* adheres to the principal tenet of negative theology: the epistemic thesis. The deeper we descend into the text, the more visible, less ambiguous Donne's apophatic sensibilities become.

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[82] Franke, "Apophasis," 62.

CHAPTER II

"NO MAN IS AN *ILAND*": THE DEVOTIONAL SOLUTION

The Tenth Devotion

If you had to guess the very first sentence of the tenth meditation, would you guess a map

of cosmological space? The average reader: probably not. Anyone familiar with Donne

though should be less than shocked. Indeed, the tenth meditation begins with Donne

sketching out the order of the universe, capturing its breadth in a simple metaphor: "This

is *Natures nest of Boxes*; the *Heavens* containe the *Earth*, the *Earth*, *Cities*, *Cities*, *Men*"

(51). Nature, according to Donne, is a hierarchical nest of boxes, the heavens

representing the first and largest box within which all other boxes are contained. Should

the words themselves not effectively convey this model, fear not! The syntax illustrates it

quite plainly. We can think of each comma as the start, or perhaps even the hinges, of a

new box that the reader must open to discover what's inside. Gradually the contents

decrease in proportion with the first box containing the enormity of the heavens and the

last containing only men. This shrinking effect is reflected in the (in)completeness of

each clause as well. "The *Heavens* containe the *Earth*" includes a subject and a predicate,

while "the *Earth*, *Cities*" lacks a predicate, and "*Cities*, *Men*" lacks both a predicate and

an article. Each sentence is skimpier, less substantial than the last just as, from the

heavens to the earth to cities to men, each subject becomes less substantial.

Of course, as E. F. J. Tucker stipulates in his study of *Devotions*, "we should not

attempt to deceive our students into believing that every word and every punctuation

mark is the result of careful and deliberate placement."[83] However, heeding this caution, "one should also expect to find that a writer like Donne would inevitably carry his poetic sensibilities over into his prose."[84] The tenth meditation, I maintain, is especially keyed into these sensibilities, hence the masterful marriage of content and form. Just look at the sentence that follows:

> And all these are *Concentrique*; the common *center* to them all, is *decay*, *ruine*; only that is *Eccentrique*, which was never made; only that place, or garment rather, which we can *imagine*, but not *demonstrate*, That light, which is the very emanation of the light of *God*, in which the *Saints* shall dwell, with which the *Saints* shall be appareld, only that bends not to this *Center*, to *Ruine*; that which was not made of *Nothing*, is not threatned with this annihilation (51).

There's a lot to parse here, admittedly. Let's start by clarifying what is stated. Here Donne expands upon his model of cosmological space, specifying an arrangement of concentric circles which revolve around a common center or nucleus, a model similar to Ptolemy's armillary sphere.[85] That said, whereas Ptolemy imagines the center being inhabited by earth, Donne imagines the center being inhabited by decay and ruin.

It is at this time I would like to pause and perform a bit of scansion. In its totality, the sentence comprises 113 syllables which, as a numerical sum, is recognizably prime. Prime numbers have boasted a certain mysticism and "symbolic richness" since classical antiquity, namely because they invoke the quality of "irreducib[ility]."[86] It is no

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[83] E. F. J. Tucker, "Donne's Apocalyptic Style: A Contextual Analysis of 'Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions,'" *Interpretations* 12 (1980), 96.

[84] Tucker, "Donne's Apocalyptic Style," 96.

[85] Across his entire corpus, Donne displays an interest in circles and circularity. For instance, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," the dynamic between two lovers is rendered as a circular motion. Additionally, many of Donne's sermons liken God to a circle and, similar to the tenth devotion, depict a circular universe.

[86] Roland A. Laroche, "Popular Symbolic/Mystical Numbers in Antiquity," *Latomus* 54 (1995), 570.

coincidence then that Donne formulates his cosmology in so many syllables. After all, his

model is irreducible in the sense that it portrays the universe at its most elemental level,

that being an imminent bend toward ruin. Yes, ruin, which brings us to the next point.

Looking at the sentence as a whole, you will observe that ruin is mentioned twice: at the

end of the first twenty syllables and at the beginning of the final twenty syllables

respectively. The precision of the parallel suggests deliberateness. Donne returns to ruin

at the exact moment it first appears, rehearsing the inevitable: the bend.[87] Everything

bends towards ruin, he declares in both content and form. And, in the end, annihilation

prevails, claiming its position as the final word. At this moment, Donne's poeticism is

sharp, penetrative. We might ask ourselves: what about the tenth meditation draws this

quality out of him? Or to borrow the language of Tucker, why do his poetic sensibilities

emerge so acutely here?

     The answer, I argue, resides within that very same sentence; specifically, within

the portion not yet examined where Donne introduces the conceit of a garment. Anything

clothed in the light of God, or it should be said an *emanation* of the light of God, is saved

from ruin. Saints are appareled in this light, so too are "*Angels*" and "our *soules*" as

Donne indicates in the sentence that follows (51). Importantly, the light of God is defined

as that which we can imagine, but not demonstrate—two loaded verbs. According to the

OED, the period-appropriate definition of the term "imagine" is "to conceive in the

mind" (OED 1) while the meaning of "demonstrate" is "to establish the truth of (a

proposition, theory, claim, etc.) by reasoning or deduction" (OED 2a). Demonstrate

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[87] As the OED notes, 'ruin' is linked etymologically to the Latin *ruinare* (downfall) and is
also connected to the Latin verb *ruo ruere* (to fall).

implies a scientific approach, clinical and definitive. Imagine, on the other hand, is not fettered by logic; it is a product of the mind, of individual fancy—we might even call it the verb of art. Therefore, to say the light of God can be imagined but not demonstrated suggests that God cannot be accessed scientifically; divinity is not established in the same way a proposition, theory, or claim is established. We may only speculate on God, and such speculation requires imaginative faculties, the faculties of art. This is why Donne relies heavily on his poetic sensibilities when sketching out God's place in the order of the cosmos. He adheres to his own dictum and imagines rather than demonstrates, speaking of God in rhythmic, carefully balanced lines—lines that read more like verse than prose.

What I would like to propose now is that the demarcation between imagining and demonstrating, particularly as it relates to the light of God, can be thought of as an elaboration of the two guiding principles of the negative tradition: the epistemic thesis (the incomprehensibility of God) and the semantic thesis (the inadequacy of language when speaking of God). For one, in asserting that the light of God cannot be demonstrated, Donne rejects the notion of a scientific understanding of divinity. There are no antiseptic procedures that will allow for a pure, incontrovertible analysis of God. At most, we can imagine the light in our minds, ponder it in a distinctly symbolic manner; but even then we are not pondering the real light. If you recall, we receive an *emanation* of the light of God, further distancing us from the true source of our contemplation. The connection to the epistemic thesis is glaring: God is incomprehensible and, as such, we are limited to imagining an adumbration of him.

What about the semantic thesis? The rejection of "demonstrate" in favor of "imagine" does, to some extent, signal the inadequacy of language, at least in the sense that a scientific vocabulary is deemed unfit. However, to see where the semantic thesis really shines, let us take a closer look at the line: "Only that is *Eccentrique*, which was never made; only that place, or garment rather, which we can *imagine*, but not *demonstrate*." You will notice that Donne corrects himself mid-sentence as he realizes garment is a more suitable descriptor than place when it comes to the light of God: the emanation we receive is not so much a location as it is something that envelops us, protecting us from ruin like a coat protects us from the cold. Similar to the first devotion, the process of revision is left visible to the reader. Donne does not erase his original impulse toward place, rather we get to watch as he struggles with language, as he *unsays* his own proposition and offers a correcting statement. In other words, we get to see apophatic awareness in action. Apophatic awareness, to refresh, refers to a kind of critical self-consciousness that occurs when one is attempting to speak of God; to be apophatically aware is to be hyper-vigilant of the perils of language, of the inadequacy of language, while formulating discourse on the divine. Essentially, it is an awareness of and unremitting adherence to the semantic thesis.

Speaking of the semantic thesis, we must also address Donne's use of via negativa in the line just quoted. The eccentric subject, and that which was *never made*, is the emanation of the light of God. The phrasing, although indirect, is decidedly negative. To be never made is a denial of being or, better put, an assertion of transcendence beyond being. The light of God cannot be made because *made* implies worldliness, an emergence into being. This is not to say the light of God is nothing (in the traditional, non-Dionysian

sense); rather, God exceeds the categories of presence and absence, being and nonbeing—to recall Armstrong's description of the negative mode, God is *not not anything*. Donne confirms this interpretation in the final line of the passage where he employs via negativa once again, describing the light of God as "that which was not made of Nothing." The light of God is not made of nothing: so it is made of something? Yes, but by phrasing the claim negatively, Donne insists it is a somethingness we cannot understand nor apprehend. It is a somethingness beyond somethingness, a different category of somethingness altogether, which is why it can only be accessed through the vocabulary of nothingness.

While Donne's apophatic grammar in the tenth meditation is impressive in itself, what I find even more impressive are the conversations happening around it, conversations that are materialist in nature. In the introduction to *Apophatic Bodies*, Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel confront the perceived incompatibility between the apophatic tradition and materialism. There is a long-held assumption that because the negative exercise prioritizes speaking of God that it tends to cease speaking of the body. Infinitude and finitude are considered incongruous, two poles on opposite ends of a spectrum; as such, when one seeks to move closer to infinitude (like in negative discourse), one must necessarily move away from finitude. *Apophatic Bodies* represents a collection of essays that refute this assumption and prove negative discourse need not abandon the finite—or, more specifically, the body. In a later section, I will argue that *Devotions* is further proof of this fact as, throughout the text, Donne is able to maintain his grip on bodiliness even as he stretches and strains toward God. But, again, this is a subject for later.

For now, I would like to hang a lantern on a specific aspect of the tenth meditation that will add to our future discussion of apophatic bodies. Returning to Hirsch's analysis of atomic theory in *Devotions*, he remarks how "Donne's materialist concerns at times leads him, furthermore, to the controversial suggestion that the soul itself might be composed of atoms, or, at least might be material in a sense related to the body's physicality."[88] We can observe what Hirsch means at the beginning of the tenth meditation. Following the first two sentences (which we've studied at length), Donne proclaims: "All other things are; even *Angels*, even our *soules*; they move upon the same *poles*, they bend to the same *Center*; and if they were not made immortall by *preservation*, their *Nature* could not keepe them from sinking to this *center*, *Annihilation*" (51). In effect, "the soul is presented as a material substance which would decay were it not for God's special embalming skill."[89] This suggestion, the physicality of the soul, is a manifestation of larger materialist concerns as Hirsch points out. Essentially, the tenth meditation straddles negative theology and materialism at once— not an easy combination. But this just goes to show the singularity of *Devotions*; as we will discuss later, Donne manages to balance both the finite and the infinite throughout the text, producing apophatic discourse wherein the body is not an obstruction, but a site of mysticism and possibility.

I conclude by emphasizing how rich the tenth meditation is—rich with apophatic intrigue. We only touched on the first three sentences and that alone proved to be a wellspring. Donne's poetic sensibilities are heightened at this moment, especially when

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[88] Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies," 81.

[89] Hirsch, "Donne's Atomies," 81.

speaking of God who, he acknowledges, requires a unique mode of discourse. The light of God can be imagined but not demonstrated, accessed through faculties that are distinctly un-scientific—the faculties of art, of poetry. Within this sentiment we can locate traces of both the epistemic and semantic thesis: the idea that God is incomprehensible and beyond the reach of language. The semantic thesis also manifests quite explicitly in Donne's impulse to self-correct as well as his use of via negativa, each of which is employed in relation to God.

The Seventeenth Devotion

You need not read *Devotions* to encounter its language. Certain phrases have transcended the text, entering the realm of popular usage without many even realizing their Donnean origin. The most recognizable phrases are, of course, "no Man is an *Iland*" and "never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*" (87). What's interesting about these two quotations, besides being a nugget of timeless wisdom and one of Hemingway's more memorable titles, is their initial proximity to each other. Both come from the second half of the seventeenth meditation which is not so surprising, I suppose, since they deal with the same theme: the interconnectedness of mankind. Man is not an island, rather "a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*" (87). We are a collective entity, ever entangled, which is why when the bell tolls for one, it tolls for all. But the significance of the seventeenth devotion does not begin and end with mere quotability. Indeed, for those drawn to Donne's apophatic inclinations, the seventeenth devotion offers an abundance of material.

Consider the following passage from the meditation:

> 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 *sicknesse*, some by *warre*, some by *justice*; but *Gods* hand is in every *translation*; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that *Librarie* where every *booke* shall lie open to one another (86).

Once again, we see Donne attempting to understand God through metaphor, a strategy he employs frequently across the text: in the first devotion, God is likened to a landlord; in the fourth devotion, God is likened to a physician; and in the thirteenth devotion, God is likened to an author which, as it so happens, is the same metaphor articulated here. Well, to be exact, the seventeenth meditation likens God to an author, translator, and bookbinder of sorts. This consistent reliance upon the metaphorical, particularly when it comes to God, maintains an apophatic quality. It is a rejection of concrete language, of kataphasis, in favor of the figurative. And though metaphorical language is not always intended as such, it nevertheless functions as a method for speaking about God without making assumptions of essence. Or, put technically, metaphorical language more often than not adheres to the semantic thesis—I discuss this topic at length in my analysis of the first devotion.

With that said, I would like to take a closer look at the passage just quoted. The general conceit asserts that mankind is of one author, the author being God. Donne reinforces this idea through syntax, connecting each clause with a semicolon to create a single, unified sentence: a reflection of a single, unified species. Importantly, the syntax also reflects the impermanence of death. No chapter is ever torn from the book, Donne declares, rather it is translated into a new language, a better language. This better language, we soon learn, is resurrection. Essentially, the choice to prolong the sentence

through a series of semicolons mimics the experience of resurrection which is in itself a kind of prolonging, or a refusal to end. Resurrection is likewise evident in Donne's use of the verb *translate*; according to the *OED*, "translate" maintains a number of early modern valences: "to convert or render something from one language into another language" (OED 1b), "to convey or move (a person or thing) from one place to another" (OED 2a), "to transfer or move (the dead body or relics of a saint, ruler, or other significant person) from one place to another" (OED 8), and "to transfer (rulership, a country, etc.) from the possession or control of one person or people to another" (OED 9). The concept of translation extends beyond language and generally signifies movement from one state to another. Donne's use of translate therefore advances the theme of resurrection as, for the early modern reader, the verb invokes the motion of transformation—the very same motion of resurrection.

I will return to resurrection in a later section as it does bear weight on our discussion of apophatic discourse. For now, though, I want to concentrate on the characterization of God. What is revealed about God in this passage? Three things mainly: that he employs several translators (age, sickness, war, justice), that his hand is in every translation, and that his hand shall bind together the scattered pages for a special library where books lie open to one another. In effect, Donne justifies his metaphor of God as author/translator/bookbinder by looking to his actions, signified here by the hand. Yes, it is not God's mind or soul that Donne repeatedly references, but God's hand—a metonym for execution, or action, as clarified in the twentieth meditation. As previously mentioned, focusing on what God *does* is an apophatic strategy known as predicates of action; like metaphor, predicates of action are a manner of speaking of God without

making assumptions of essence, identifying only the results or productions of God's efficacy which are external to God himself. Donne's characterization of God as author/translator/bookbinder is, in this way, doubly apophatic in that it employs two negative strategies: metaphorical language and predicates of action.

There is also something to be said about the continual trying on of metaphors in *Devotions*. The transition from God as landlord, to God as physician, to God as author, to God as author and translator, and then finally back to God as physician in the twenty-third devotion is reminiscent of the process of linguistic regress. Donne seems to test out language as if shopping for a car; every so often he takes a certain metaphor for a spin, bringing it to its logical conclusion, only to abandon it for a new comparison a few devotions later. And, in the end, Donne doesn't purchase any of the options. He circles back to some metaphors, like God as author and God as physician, but there is no sense of commitment, no impression that he has at last determined God's identity. In fact, when Donne elaborates on each metaphor, he tends to reveal its insufficiency. If you recall the first devotion where Donne likens God to a landlord, he admits "and yet here, [God], our *Land-lord* payes us *Rents*" (9). The metaphor is flawed and unable to capture God, at least not with any precision—after all, if God were truly like a landlord, why would he pay his tenants rent? We may argue the same is true of the seventeenth mediation. God is likened to an author, but the actions described are not necessarily authorial. God is not depicted as writing (as he is in the thirteenth devotion when the author metaphor first appears), instead he employs translators and binds scattered pages together. Though these actions are generally related to book production, they are not indicative of authorship per se. Again, the metaphor proves imperfect.

Donne's examination of God in the seventeenth devotion extends beyond a single, albeit intricate, metaphor. Turning to the expostulation, there is a second passage of note:

> Is the *joy* of *heaven* no perfecter in itself, but that it needs the *soureness* of this *life* to give it a *taste*? Is that *joy* and that *glory* but a *comparative glory* and a *comparative joy*? not such in *it selfe*, but such in *comparison* of the *joilesnesse* and the *ingloriousnesse* of this *world*? I know, my *God*, it is farre, farre otherwise. As thou thy selfe, who art *all*, art made of no *substances*, so the *joyes* & glory which are with thee, are made of none of these *circumstances*; *Essentiall joy*, and *glory Essentiall*. But why then, my *God*, wilt thou not *beginne* them *here*? pardon O *God*, this *unthankfull rashnesse*; I that aske why thou *doest not*, finde even now in my *selfe*, that thou *doest*; such *joy*, such *glory*, as that I conclude upon *my selfe*, upon *all*. They that finde not *joy* in their *sorrowes*, *glory* in their *dejections* in this *world*, are in a fearefull *danger* of missing both in the *next* (89).

Donne wrestles with a complex question: is heaven only good in comparison to the evils of earth? No, he decides almost immediately, this cannot be the case. The glory and joy of heaven are not a comparative glory and a comparative joy. Like God who is made of no substances, the glory and joy of heaven are made of none of these circumstances (the circumstances being the sourness of life); they are essential glory and essential joy, perfect forms that transcend material suffering. What's striking about this passage is the prominent use of via negativa. God is made of *no* substances, essential glory and essential joy are made of *none* of these circumstances. To inhabit perfection, therefore, is *not to be made*. Donne's language recalls that of the tenth meditation where he describes the light of God as that which was not made of nothing. And yet here God is made of no substances which can be translated to God is not made of something. So, God is made of neither nothing nor something? Similar to how Donne talks of the soul in the eighteenth devotion, God is a *separate substance*—a substance beyond the categories of somethingness and nothingness. Keep in mind Donne's phrasing: he does not say God is *not* made of substance, he says God is made of *no* substance. God is made of something,

but the something is rendered as nothing. The phrasing is apophatic, drawing on a Dionysian formulation of nothingness where nothing represents a new or unfamiliar something.

The negative theologian would also take notice of Donne's self-consciousness in this passage. Observe how quick he is to correct himself and apologize for his language: "Pardon, O *God*, this *unthankfull rashnesse*; I that aske why thou *doest not*, finde even now in *my selfe*, that thou *doest*." Donne remains hyper-aware of what he asks of God and how he asks it, scrutinizing each statement almost as soon as it is articulated. This hyper-awareness is an apophatic awareness, to echo Franke's terminology; it is an awareness of the inadequacy and blatant vulnerability of language.

In short, apophatic devices are littered throughout the seventeenth devotion as Donne attempts to speak of God through metaphor, predicates of action, and via negativa. Additionally, the seventeenth devotion provides greater insight into Donne's apophatic awareness; he not only displays self-consciousness when employing concrete language, but figurative language as well—every metaphor he applies to God proves insufficient and is promptly switched out for a new comparison in subsequent devotions. This all goes to show that the significance of the seventeenth devotion must not be solely attributed to its quotability; "no Man is an *Iland*" and "never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*" are but two gems in a veritable treasure chest. The seventeenth devotion offers some of the more discrete examples of Donne's apophasis and, for that reason, its value is multiplied.

The Nineteenth Devotion

In the eighth devotion, Donne expresses his agreement with the epistemic thesis, acknowledging that our understanding of God is limited and that divinity, in its truest form, remains beyond our reach. In the nineteenth devotion, Donne does the same, only this time he expresses his agreement with the semantic thesis. The semantic thesis—that apophatic principle which emphasizes the inability of language to properly capture God—surfaces repeatedly throughout *Devotions*. We see it reflected in Donne's self-conscious narration, in his need to revise, and in his consistent implementation of via negativa. But nowhere is the semantic thesis quite so visible as the nineteenth expostulation.

Take for instance the opening line: "My *God*, my *God*, thou art a *direct God*, may I not say, a *literall God*, a *God* that wouldest be understood *literally*, and according to the *plaine sense* of all that thou saiest? but thou art also (*Lord* I intend it to thy *glory*, and let no *prophane mis-interpreter* abuse it to thy *diminution*), thou art a *figurative*, a *metaphoricall God* too" (99). You will notice Donne initially labels God as direct, then, wanting to expand upon this description, asks if it is acceptable to call him literal. We might speculate on who Donne is addressing here: Himself? God? The literary public? Or perhaps he seeks permission from all three. Whatever the case, it is clear Donne wields language warily. He perceives there to be things he can and cannot articulate, hence the question "may I not say." The parenthetical remark is further proof of such caution. Before Donne even utters the term metaphorical, he assures God that his language is intended solely for "thy *glory*" and must not be misconstrued. Donne, in effect, recognizes the risks; language, though it maintains a certain power (e.g. to glorify and to diminish), is also vulnerable. Words can be misinterpreted, or, as Donne puts it, abused.

What results is a level of critical self-consciousness, a hypersensitivity to the vulnerability of language, an *apophatic awareness*.

This apophatic awareness is also evidenced by how Donne characterizes the language of God. In the opening line, Donne determines that God is at once literal and metaphorical; or it is more accurate to say that God *speaks* both literally and metaphorically. "A God that wouldest be understood *literally*, and according to the *plaine sense* of all that thou sayest," implies that God's word can be taken at face value, that the language of God is unadorned, concrete, and cleansed of all embellishment. And yet, in the very next line, Donne proclaims: "A *God* in whose words there is such a height of *figures*, such *voyages*, such *peregrinations* to fetch remote and precious *metaphors*, such *extensions*, such *spreadings*, such *Curtaines of Allegories*, such *third Heavens* of *Hyperboles*, so *harmonious eloqutions*, so *retired* and so *reserved expressions*" (99). Now the language of God is abstract, almost inaccessible. Meaning is remote, tucked behind curtains of literary devices, and requires the listener to embark on a voyage. How can this be? How can the language of God be literal and metaphorical if the two are necessarily opposed? How do we reckon with this paradox? As Donne indicates, we don't. Some men perceive "*the reverent simplicity* of the Word" while others "the *majesty* of the Word," but rarely do men reconcile the existence of both (99). Our understanding is subjective, fractional; we are unable to comprehend the full breadth, the multidimensionality, of the language of God and instead privilege a single quality.

Even Donne himself is guilty of this. As the nineteenth expostulation continues, he disproportionately favors the metaphorical and, at times, argues for its superiority over the literal. He asks: "How much more often doth thy *Sonne* call himselfe a *way*, and a

light, and a *gate*, and a *Vine*, and *bread*, than the *Sonne of God*, or of *Man*? How much

oftner doth he exhibit a *Metaphoricall Christ*, than a *reall*, a *literall*?" (100) The

implication is that Christ prefers to express himself through figurative language, a

suggestion which grants certain authority to the metaphorical, making it appear more

divine than that of the literal. In truth, Donne has already established that the language of

God is both literal and metaphorical; so, if anything, Donne's estimation of Christ likely

reveals his own bias—the bias which he was apt to warn us of just a few lines earlier.

Of course, because Donne succumbs to that which he warns us of, some may be

tempted to read the nineteenth expostulation as an example of his obliviousness. But I

take a contrary stance. Indeed, I read the nineteenth expostulation as proof of Donne's

distinct awareness—an apophatic awareness—in the sense that he predicts his own

susceptibility. He understands that the language of God is paradoxical, that it transcends

the bounds of rational thought by being at once literal and metaphorical, and therefore

remains outside of our comprehension. And he knows that men are inclined to hear the

word of God as either this or that, not as both. Significantly, by stating all of this at the

forefront, Donne effectively tells on himself. He anticipates he will favor "the *majesty* of

the Word" and informs the reader beforehand. As such, when we witness Donne receive

the language of God, the language which he is "bold to call [his] comfort," we are

prepared to question its reliability (100). Is Donne truly and accurately representing

God's word? Or is his subjectivity seeping into the discourse and slanting it toward the

metaphorical? Based on Donne's preface, the latter seems the more probable of the two.

The epistemic thesis is certainly present here; Donne acknowledges that man

misinterprets the language of God, that we privilege either the literal or the metaphorical

quality of his word and, for that reason, we will never fully comprehend its meaning—

God remains out of reach in this way. But I believe the semantic thesis is even more

pronounced. The marriage of the literal and the metaphorical in God's dialect is a feat

which cannot be reproduced in our language as one necessarily cancels out the other. By

not only recognizing this fact, but by demonstrating it, exposing his own prejudice

toward the metaphorical, Donne reveals just how inadequate our language is, how far it is

from the language of the divine. There is no replicating the word of God, not with our

limited vocabulary. Donne summarizes the impossibility as follows: "What words but

thine, can express the inexpressible *texture*, and *composition* of thy *word*" (99).

Language fails in the face of the divine, and is this not precisely what the semantic thesis

seeks to convey?

Still, it must be addressed that the nineteenth devotion seems to diminish the

value of metaphorical language, a device which is central to the apophatic mode. Is

Donne implicitly denouncing negative strategies when he contends that men

disproportionately favor either the literal or the metaphorical quality of God's word? Is

he suggesting that metaphors alone cannot bring us in proximity to God? To some extent,

yes, he is suggesting that metaphorical language by itself is insufficient. But this opinion

does not oppose negative discourse. The negative tradition does not understand there to

be any one infallible approach to reach divinity; quite the contrary, the negative tradition

originates from an anti-dogmatist position, asserting that no human faculties can access,

comprehend, and speak of God. The strategies comprising the apophatic mode, such as

via negativa, linguistic regression, and metaphors, are approaches that adhere to the

epistemic and semantic theses, meaning they do not pretend to know more about God

than they actually do—these devices all recognize their own deficiency and, because they recognize this, they are deemed permissible by the negative theologian. Put otherwise, by pointing out the limitations of metaphor, Donne does not condemn the apophatic mode; he merely articulates what the apophatic mode already admits: that language, on the whole, is inadequate.

Essentially, my intention with the nineteenth devotion is to drive home Donne's self-consciousness, how he wields language with a level of caution that speaks to certain apophatic sensibilities. Like the negative theologian, Donne is sharply aware of the vulnerability of language and the ways in which words can be misconstrued. Language is flawed, imprecise, confined by logic, completely unlike the language of God. At once literal and metaphorical, the language of God is unintelligible to us; it is a dialect that cannot be reproduced as Donne goes on to demonstrate. Yes, the nineteenth devotion can be thought of as Donne proving the semantic thesis; he supplies a clear example of how human subjectivity distorts God's word, how we are utterly incapable of replicating that perfect balance between literal and metaphorical unique to the divine.

Predicates of Action

In his article "The Negative Theology of Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas," Joseph Buijs counters Isaac Franck's claim that both Maimonides and Aquinas practice a similar brand of radical negative theology. He does so by identifying and defining two premises at work in all negative discourse, the semantic thesis and the epistemic thesis, then demonstrates how Maimonides and Aquinas incorporate these theses differently. While the central takeaway of Buijs' analysis is that negative theology exists on a wider

spectrum than scholars like Franck assume—which is in itself a useful sentiment when discussing the negative theology of Donne—I would like to focus on his assessment of Maimonides. Naturally, you may be wondering: why? What does a 12th-century Jewish philosopher have to do with Donne? Good question. What Buijs reveals about Maimonides' approach to apophasis, I contend, illuminates certain aspects of *Devotions*, casting Donne's discourse in a distinctly negative light. Specifically, Buijs clarifies how Maimonides's implements predicates of action, an apophatic strategy which Donne also adopts.

First, though, some context is necessary. The semantic thesis, as we know, insists that positive language is inapplicable to divinity and so only terms predicated negatively of God are meaningful. This general principle inspires two separate but equally valid interpretations. The first interpretation (which we shall call S1) strictly asserts that "God cannot stand as the subject term in an affirmative proposition; God can only stand as the subject term in a negative proposition."[90] Put simply, statements about God may only be phrased negatively—positive language is never permissible. The second interpretation (S2), on the other hand, maintains "we cannot meaningfully talk about God by saying what he is; we can only meaningfully talk about God by saying what he is not."[91] Unlike S1, S2 allows for the possibility of positive language so long as it is not a description of what God *is*; and, as Buijs goes on to illustrate, Maimonides is a faithful practitioner of S2. Of course, the question remains: how can positive language be applied to God without violating the semantic thesis? Maimonides's answer: predicates of action. There

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[90] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 727.

[91] Buijs, "Negative Theology," 727.

are five kinds of predicates outlined by Maimonides: "those that signify (i) a definition, (ii) parts of a definition, (iii) qualities, including quantities, habits, and dispositions, (iv) relations, and (v) actions."[92] Of the five listed, only predicates of action can be truthfully affirmed of God in negative discourse. This is because predicates of action describe what an agent does rather than who an agent is, thus remaining in accordance with the semantic thesis. Indeed, they identify the "results or productions" of God's efficacy, not his "essence."[93]

Having established Maimonides' approach to the semantic thesis, let us turn to *Devotions* and consider Donne's approach. In particular, our attention will be directed at the twentieth meditation and expostulation. The meditation begins as follows: "Though *counsel* seeme rather to consist of *spirituall parts*, than *action*, yet *action* is the *spirit* and the *soul*e of *counsell*. *Counsels* are not alwaies determined in *Resolutions*; Wee cannot alwaies say, *this was concluded*; *actions* are alwaies determined in *effects*; wee can say *this was done*" (104). Note the emphasis on what can and cannot be said. Part of what distinguishes counsel from action is that "we cannot alwaies say" that counsel has reached a conclusion, but "we can [always] say" that an action has been done. Though Donne's point here is not in reference to God, you may already see a parallel between his line of thinking and S2. Counsel is dependent upon actions because actions produce tangible, and more importantly, articulable effects. To borrow Donne's exact wording, "*counsels* are not *counsels*, but *illusions*, where there is from the beginning no purpose to execute the determinations of those *counsels*" (105). Actions provide substance and

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92 Buijs, "Negative Theology," 729.

93 Buijs, "Negative Theology," 729.

meaning to counsel, they make counsel (which would otherwise be an "*illusion*") sensible, speakable. And it is this speakability of actions that brings the twentieth devotion in proximity to S2: both agree that actions are uniquely discernible and, as such, safely utterable. There is a level of certainty inherent in actions—after all, we need only refer to the effects for confirmation.

This link between Donne and S2 is further solidified when, inevitably, Donne relates his thinking to God: "Neither is *God* so often presented to us, by names that carry our consideration upon *counsell*, as upon *execution of counsell*; he is oftner called the *Lord of Hosts*, than by all other *names*, that may be referred to the other signification" (105). Here Donne observes that the names assigned to God regularly pertain to his actions, more so than they pertain to his counsel. As an example, he points to Lord of Hosts which the *OED* defines as "a frequent title of Jehovah in certain books of the Old Testament; apparently referring sometimes to the heavenly hosts, sometimes to the armies of Israel, and hence in modern use with the sense 'God of armies' or 'of battles'" (OED 3b). The name encapsulates God's militarism, his gathering of armies whether they be of heaven or of earth. It is, Donne suggests, a name of action—or "execution of *counsell*." Again, there is a certain speakability, a nameability, of actions that Donne urges us to recognize. God is "oftner" named this way for a reason; the reason being, of course, that actions are sensible (non-illusions) and therefore "we can say" this thing is true of him—it is by no means an assumption.

This sentiment bleeds into the expostulation as well, particularly when Donne proclaims:

> The *head* and the *hand* too, are required to a *perfit naturall man*; *Counsell* and *action* too, to a *perfit civill man*; *faith* and *works* too, to him that is *perfitly*

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spirituall. But because it is easily said, *I beleeve*, and because it doth not *easily lie in proofe*, nor is easily demonstrable by any *evidence* taken from my *heart*, (for who sees that, who searches those *Rolls*?) whether I doe *beleeve*, or no, is it not therefore, O my *God*, that thou dost so *frequently*, so *earnestly*, referre us to the *hand*, to the *observation* of *actions*? (106).

Once more there is a profound desire for the sensible, the demonstrable. Evidence taken from the heart cannot be seen by those who search these rolls, so where must evidence be taken from? Where can it be seen? According to Donne, we must listen to God who "so *frequently*, so *earnestly*, refer[s] us to the hand, to the *observation* of *actions*," urging us to seek proof in the tangible, or in that which is "easily said." This method echoes the logic of Maimonides as both understand actions to be an objective and therefore reliable source of information. And while Donne does not explicitly talk in terms of avoiding assumptions of essence, his logic does float around this idea, specifically with his claim that counsel and faith cannot always be articulated into language but actions and works can. In other words, we cannot always speak of the agent itself, but we can speak of the product of that agent. As asserted by Buijs, this is a distinctly negative way of constructing discourse that Maimonides—and now Donne—adopts. Still, what is fascinating about Donne's application is it extends not just to the contemplation and naming of God, it also extends to the contemplation and naming of man. Everyone should be evaluated as such, that is why God himself so often refers us to the hand.

All said, the twentieth devotion deals more with theory than with practice. If we want to witness Donne adhering to S2 in real time, we must turn elsewhere. Take the twenty-first expostulation for instance. It begins with a discussion of the "*senselesnesse* of *sinne*" and how God must speak loudly to reach those consumed by their own iniquity (112). Indeed, God's voice is a mighty voice: "Not onely *mightie in power*, it may be

heard, nor *mightie in obligation*, it *should* be *heard*; but mightie in *operation*, it *will* bee heard" (113). There are three aspects of God's voice laid out here: its power, its obligation, and its operation. In its power, God's voice "may be heard" while, in its obligation, God's voice "should be heard" and, in its operation, God's voice "will be heard." Though all three statements employ modal verbs, the first two, "may" and "should," express possibility and necessity whereas "will" expresses certainty. Thus, of the three, only the latter is guaranteed. Or, put differently, only in operation is our awareness of God's mighty voice assured. Much like the twentieth devotion, sensibility is directly attached to action; it *will* be heard in operation and, as such, can be spoken of. Donne seeks justification for his positive language in the same way Maimonides does, relying upon predicates of actions and the results produced by an agent. This notion is reinforced a few lines later when Donne asks, "And why, O *God*, doest thou not speake to me, in that *effectuall loudnesse*?" (113). "*Effectuall loudnesse*" is the key phrase here. God's loudness, the mighty and thunderous quality of his voice, can be appreciated through its effects. In particular, Donne points to Lazarus, John the Baptist, and Moses, all of whom are transformed when God "sp[ea]kest with a *great voice*" (113). Essentially, the action itself, God speaking loudly, produces acute effects in the material world that enable us to say this thing is true.

My larger aim is to demonstrate that Donne's focus on action, on operation, and on execution—all synonyms of *doing*—is a negative impulse. He admits that much about God, and the world more broadly, remains incomprehensible to us. Our faculties are limited, therefore we must depend on what is sensible to construct reliable discourse. Donne's logic aligns with that of Maimonides, logic which leads both men to implement

predicates of action: an apophatic device that prevents assumptions of essence by identifying only what a subject does and not who a subject is. Donne employs predicates of action all throughout *Devotions*, but it is not until the twentieth devotion that he defines his reasoning; and, as we learn, his reasoning is thoroughly apophatic.

The Apophatic Body

Finally, now that we have generally mapped Donne's use of apophatic devices across *Devotions*, we may turn our attention to the body. As I have hinted throughout my analysis, I want to put Donne's apophasis in conversation with his understanding of bodiliness. Why? I believe Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel explain it best. In the introduction to *Apophatic Bodies*, Keller and Boesel pose a vital question, one that targets a critical gap within the scholarship of negative theology:

As if speaking—and unspeaking—of God were not problematic enough, we want to know how we might speak (and unspeak) of God without necessarily ceasing to speak of the body. Is there a movement of thought and language toward the infinity of the divine that is not ultimately a movement away from the concrete finitude of the body?[94]

Observe the spectrum laid out here. On one end there is the infinity of the divine and, on the other, the concrete finitude of the body. Infinite versus finite, divine versus body; such Neoplatonic opposition is considered foundational to the apophatic mode. It makes sense, after all. In stretching toward the infinite—toward God—the negative theologian naturally loses touch with the finite. The body, in this way, proves an inevitable casualty of the exercise. More than a casualty, it is a hindrance—an obstacle to be overcome. To

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[94] Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel, "Introduction," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, ed. Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 3.

again echo Keller and Boesel, "the traditional agents of apophasis evince little interest in the material body, beyond the disciplines needed to quiet its cravings so as better to hear the mysteries of God's Word."[95] The material body is something to be quieted, it speaks over "that hidden silence," that mystical language of the divine.[96] Of the more famous proponents of this understanding is thirteenth-century German theologian, Meister Eckhart. Specifically, in his sermon *Nolite timere eos*, Eckhart states that "to enter the Godhead is to un-create creation and un-god God. This negativity ends in pure indifference, pure un-bodying."[97]

However, many scholars remain skeptical of this neat division between infinitude and finitude, especially when it comes to negative theology. *Apophatic Bodies*, for instance, features a collection of essays which dispute the assumed binarism undergirding the tradition. While each contributor looks to a different corner of the literary world, they all write in solidarity with the body, answering Keller and Boesel's original query in the affirmative. Negative discourse, they demonstrate, need not be antagonistic toward the body. And, furthermore, despite what has been historically touted, shedding the body (and bodily language) is not indicative of a higher level of apophasis. Succinctly put, abandoning the finite does not guarantee an audience with the infinite.

The points raised by several contributors in *Apophatic Bodies*, particularly John Caputo on the risen body, reframed the way I read Donne's *Devotions*. Where initially I saw struggle, failure even, to adhere to the negative gesture out of a stubborn longing for

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[95] Keller and Boesel, "Introduction," 2.

[96] Keller and Boesel, "Introduction," 3.

[97] Roland Faber, "Bodies of the Void: Polyphilia and Theoplicity," in *Apophatic Bodies*, ed. Keller and Boesel, 220.

embodiment, I now see an evolving definition of embodiment. I see Donne expressing a desire for physical permanence and trying to reconcile this desire with his expectation of death and dissolution. I see him coming to terms not with the rejection of materiality, but with a new sense of what it means to be material, to have a body.[98] Throughout the twenty-three devotions, the body is never effectively relinquished, rather it is transformed. Indeed, Donne's attempts to speak of God are not a movement away from the concrete finitude of the body, as Keller and Boesel question. In fact, the subject only broadens his imagination, inspiring him to contemplate the interpersonal body, the risen body, a body that does not bend or break before the aporia of divinity, but instead constitutes its own aporetic site. It is, in essence, the apophatic body that Donne develops.

Of course, before drawing any firm conclusions, it is important to sketch the contours of this development. Donne's relationship to the body, just like his relationship to God, evolves across *Devotions*. It remains in a constant state of productive unrest, at one moment seemingly resolved only to unravel in the next. While some may attribute the nonlinearity to Donne's indecision or distrust of his own methods, I would argue otherwise. Given the strict meditative structure and repeated use of negative strategies, the process demands a natural katabasis and anabasis. "I have cut up mine own anatomy, dissected myself, and they are gone to read upon me," Donne declares of his physicians and, based on the verb selection, his readership (45). He anatomizes himself for our inspection, constructing a discourse reflective of his internal dialogue, muddied with

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[98] Throughout much of his lyric poetry, Donne similarly refuses to disentangle the spiritual and the bodily, the sacred and the sensual. "The Ecstasy" is perhaps the clearest example of this refusal as Donne insists that love is at once a physical and spiritual experience.

contradiction. And though he is often driven to assumption, he is quick to correct himself and leaves that correction visible—a self-conscious impulse which, as we have discussed, is distinctly negative. All of this is to say that, despite instances where Donne seems to turn his back upon previous convictions or issue conflicting statements, the general trend of *Devotions* is consistent: from start to finish, the gap between body and divinity gradually shrinks—or perhaps it is better to say it blurs.

To begin, consider the first devotion wherein Donne readily adopts the Neoplatonic opposition of finitude versus infinitude as he marks a clear separation between body and soul. "Images of dissolution, dismay, and melancholy" consume his talk of the body, particularly the motif of dust and ashes, while the soul invites the language of elevation and excellence.[99] "I am more then *dust & ashes*," Donne insists, "I am my best part, I am my *soule*" (8). From the outset of *Devotions* there is a layer of body-transcending mysticism with the soul being deemed the best part, and arguably the only redeemable part, of our anatomy. The body becomes an analogue for the earth, for misery, for death while the soul signifies the opposite: heaven, enlightenment, and salvation. The spectrum alluded to by Keller and Boesel—divinity on one end and the body on the other—is staunchly upheld in the early stages of the text. The third expostulation puts it quite plainly: "I am not in Heaven, because an earthly bodie clogges me, and I am not in the Earth, because a heavenly *Soule* sustaines mee" (17). Clogs is the operative word here. The body clogs Donne; it is an obstruction preventing his ultimate

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[99] Anthony Raspa, "Introduction," in *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xxiii.

ascension, a weight limiting his movement upward. Eckhart would surely agree—to enter Godhead, after all, is to un-body.

Still, as much as Donne maintains the binary at this time, there are moments early on where the line blurs—brief moments, but conspicuous nonetheless. For instance, toward the end of the second expostulation, Donne proclaims: "I consider in my present state, not the haste, & the dispatch of the disease, in dissolving this body, so much, as the much more hast, & dispatch, which my *God* shal use, in recollecting, and reuniting this *dust* againe at the *Resurrection*" (13). This is the first, though far from the last, mention of resurrection in *Devotions*. Resurrection becomes a profound thematic strand, oft-repeated and thoroughly imagined. The fact that resurrection emerges as early as the second devotion shows Donne is already displaying resistance to letting the body go. Bodily loss is only temporary, he suggests, for God will recollect and reunite the dust of his physical form in the afterlife—and he will do so with great haste. Donne's abiding interest in resurrection is significant. John Caputo writes, "the risen body represents a refusal to be separated from the material body. It refuses to abdicate the body and insists on the reinstatement of the body even after death and in such a way as to transcend death."[100] So though Donne goes on to reinforce the soul versus body, infinite versus finite binary throughout the first batch of devotions, there is a lurking sense of uncertainty. We might say he is not fully convinced of the stark divide, or that he remains open to being convinced otherwise.

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[100] John Caputo, "Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid: A Hermeneutic of Bodies without Flesh," in *Apophatic Bodies*, ed. Keller and Boesel, 95.

It isn't until the sixth devotion that we can observe a shift in Donne's thinking. Specifically, at the end of the prayer, he triumphantly concludes:

> O *Lord*, as one, made so by thee, to thinke me fit for thee; And whether it be thy pleasure, to dispose of this body, this garment so, as to put it to a farther wearing in this world, or to lay it up in the *common wardrope*, the grave, for the next, glorifie thy selfe in thy choyce now, & glorifie it then, with that glory, which thy *Son*, our *Saviour Christ Jesus* hath purchased for them, whome thou makest partakers of his *Resurrection* (34).

First and foremost, while it is not immediately evident, the garment metaphor bears significance on the body/divinity binary. Donne recycles this metaphor often, using almost identical language each time; the body is always a garment, or something we are appareled in. However, in the tenth devotion, Donne applies this language—which is usually reserved for the body—to a new subject: the light of God. He states "only that place, or garment rather, which we can *imagine*, but not *demonstrate*, That light, which is the very emanation of the light of *God*" (51). The shared metaphor forges an implicit link between the body and the light of God. There is a kinship, something analogous about the two that permits the same comparison. No other subject is likened to a garment: the exclusive figurative association draws further attention to the pairing. Why is that the body, a thing previously deemed an obstruction to heavenly ascension, now on par linguistically with the light of God? From the sixth devotion to the tenth, the wall dividing the body and divinity, finitude and infinitude crumbles; it has not fully collapsed at this point, but its previous strength has substantially waned.

Beyond the garment metaphor, let us examine the two potential paths of the body spelled out in the above passage. God may either "put [the body] to a farther wearing in this world, or to lay it up in the *common wardrope*, the grave, for the next." The latter option suggests that the body is stored away for later use, that there is this world and the

next, both of which will see the body inhabited in some capacity. And, of course, ending on the subject of Christ's resurrection only strengthens this interpretation. The risen body is an inevitability, Donne contends; it is a glory purchased for us by Christ. There is a sense of certainty around resurrection, a certainty which only grows more pronounced as the text unfolds.

This certainty can be said to reach its peak in the fourteenth expostulation. Generally speaking, the fourteenth expostulation is concerned with time. Donne reflects on the "destinction of *dayes*" and how some days are holier, more critical than others— there are even specific "*Climactericall yeares*" in our lives (73). His thoughts resonate with Mircea Eliade's concept of "sacred time" which argues that the religious man "experiences intervals of time that are 'sacred,' that have no part in the temporal duration that precedes and follows them, that have a wholly different structure and origin, for they are of a primordial time."[101] As Eliade goes on to explain, the primordial time that sacred time seeks to capture and rehearse is that of the cosmogony which is precisely what Donne does in the fourteenth expostulation. Lying ill in bed, Donne realizes this is one of his critical days and so he pleads with God: "Let, O *Lord*, a *day*, be as a *weeke* to me; and in this one, let me consider *seven daies*, seven *critical daies*, and *judge my selfe*, *that I be not judged by thee*" (74-5). Essentially, Donne, too, seeks to capture and rehearse the cosmogony; he wishes to judge himself for seven days, mirroring the seven days of creation. While each day entails its own transformation of sorts, it is the fifth day that demands our attention.

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[101] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*: *The Nature of Religion,* trans. William R. Trask (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1957), 71.

And this *day* of *death* shall deliver me over to my *fift day*, the day of my *Resurrection*; for how long a *day* soever thou make that *day* in the *grave*, yet there is no *day* between that, and the *Resurrection*. Then wee shall all bee invested, reapparelled in our owne *bodies*; but they who have made just use of their former *dayes*, be super-invested with glorie, whereas the others, condemned to their *olde clothes*, their *sinfull bodies*, shall have *Nothing* added, but *immortalitie* to *torment*. And this *day* of awaking me, and reinvesting my *Soule*, in my *body*, and my *body* in the body of *Christ* (76).

The second expostulation imagines resurrection as a quick process, something God will execute with haste. But here the time between death and resurrection is nonexistent. Not one day passes; the process is immediate, atemporal even. Donne refutes the expectation of bodily loss entirely as the transition from one body to the next is rendered instantaneous. We are never, not even for a moment, without physical form. While this immediacy, or atemporality, speaks to Donne's fear of impermanence, it also speaks to how much his understanding of the body has evolved. The body is no longer a vestige of the earth doomed to dissolve into dust and ash, rather it is an inseparable facet of the self. Though the body may change, transforming from the sinful body (as Donne calls it) to the heavenly body, the fact remains: whether in life or the afterlife, we are always *embodied*. To exist without a body is not to exist at all.

Consider also this notion of reinvesting the soul in the body. The relationship between the body and the soul in the fourteenth devotion is a far cry from what it is in the first and second. Where initially a clear imbalance exists between the body and the soul—with the soul being the best part and the body an obstruction—there is now productive intercourse between the two. The body does not inhibit the soul in any way, the two are not opponents as Donne once thought. Quite the contrary, the language of investment suggests profit, a symbiotic mingling. Just a few lines before the quoted passage, Donne even says "if the *Soule* be leane, the marrow of the *Body* is but water; if

the *Soule* wither, the verdure and the good estate of the *body*, is but an illusion, & the *goodliest man*, *a fearefull ghost*" (73). Again, there is a symbiosis, a synergy between the body and the soul—the success of one directly relies on the success of the other. The soul, as such, is no longer situated higher than the body; both are essential and both are forecasted to return. In fact, if we jump ahead to the twenty-first devotion, Donne proclaims: "this *Resurrection* of my *body*, shewes me the *Resurrection* of my *soule*; and both *here* severally, of both together hereafter" (112). The body and the soul each undergo their own resurrection and, critically, each resurrection is contingent upon the other.

Donne's vision of the risen body and how this vision develops across the text challenges the assumption that apophasis must relinquish the body, that effective negative discourse requires one to un-body as Eckhart purports. Indeed, the risen body complicates the strict finitude/infinitude divide because it is at once finite and infinite. Caputo asserts "in one sense the risen body certainly does not repudiate the body" and remains "identifiably the same as the mortal body," but in another sense maintains an "immaterial" quality, a transcendent quality; it is "is the same body restored and extended to perfection, a 'spiritual body' without the limitations of the body."[102] Twice Caputo emphasizes how the risen body is the same body as before, and yet there is something undeniably different about it. The risen body is cleansed of corruptibility; it is a spiritual vessel. But we cannot say it is worldless, or that it sheds its worldliness completely. The risen body straddles the line between material and immaterial, finite and infinite, this world and the next. At once a novelty and an artifact, the risen body is a paradox.

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[102] Caputo, "Bodies Still Unrisen," 96.

Alongside the risen body, Donne also develops the interpersonal body. We have

talked about the interpersonal body briefly when discussing Donne's fear of

impermanence; I specifically cite and engage with Nancy Selleck's article appropriately

titled "Donne's Body" which conducts a comprehensive examination of this very subject.

Allow me to go into greater depth. In her article, Selleck establishes how Donne was

influenced by Renaissance physiology, particularly humoral theory which, as the name

suggests, maintains that good health is determined by the proper balance of several

humors in the body (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile). The humoral body "is

not a closed and self-regulating system," but "highly permeable and thus subject to—

even composed of—its environment."[103] In essence, there is a profound reciprocity

between the humoral body and its surroundings, "a necessary openness" that creates a

mutual dependence upon each other.[104] Vapors come into our body, and vapors are

released by our body; disease comes into our body, and disease is released by our body;

in this way, our body is an *interpersonal entity*, constantly affecting and being affected by

its context—a context which includes other bodies.

As previously mentioned, Donne's climatic no man is an island passage is the

clearest contemplation of the interpersonal body: "No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe;

every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*. If a *Clod* bee washed away by

the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of

thy *friends*, or of *thine owne* were: Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am

involved in *Mankinde*" (87). We can see that necessary openness, that highly permeable

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[103] Nancy Selleck, "Donne's Body," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 41 (2001), 151.

[104] Selleck, "Donne's Body," 157.

quality reflected here. The body, and selfhood more broadly, is not *entire of itself*, rather

we are inextricable from a larger network, that of mankind. No one is complete on their

own; such borders do not exist, not in this world of interconnectedness, of perpetual

exchange. I find it fitting that Donne employs a geographic metaphor, likening the

interpersonal body to the continent of Europe; as humoral theory posits, the body and the

land are intimately linked and this metaphor only strengthens the connection between the

two—the body figuratively becomes the land.

Donne's thoughts on vacuity, which we analyzed extensively in the context of

apophatic nothingness, contribute to the interpersonal body as well. Vacuity is an

impossibility, according to Donne, as "nothing can be utterly *emptie*" (25). The closest

we can get to true vacuity is solitude which is in itself an unnatural and uniquely

agonizing experience. Donne laments: "When I am dead, & my body might infect, they

have a remedy, they may bury me; but when I am but sick, and might infect, they have no

remedy, but their absence and my solitude [...] it is an *Outlawry*, an *Excommunication*

upon the *patient*, and separats him from all offices not onely of *Civilitie*, but of *working*

Charitie" (25). Again, Donne emphasizes the humoral body, the body whose

permeability poses a threat to those in proximity. But what I would like to emphasize is

this idea of civility, how isolation is framed as a dehumanizing event. To be alone is not

healthy, it is not natural, it even verges on irreligious (hence, *excommunication*). Divinity

itself is a plural entity, Donne points out: "there is a plurality of persons in *God*, though

there bee but one *God*; & all his externall actions testifie a love of *Societie*, and

communion" (25). A sense of togetherness, of interconnection, is fundamental to God's

vision of existence; thus, to be removed from society, from the interpersonal matrix, is to

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oppose God's vision. The interpersonal body is the ideal body, it is the body that is styled by and after God.

Similar to the risen body, the interpersonal body disrupts the neat division between finitude and infinitude; it maintains certain spiritual valences without sacrificing its materiality. As just demonstrated, the interpersonal body reflects the plural image of God and, therefore, boasts a kind of divinity. What's more is the interpersonal body, like the risen body, challenges the expectation of death and dissolution, asserting that the body is unable to be lost. Even in death, one is still *embodied* because we are inextricable from the larger body of mankind—that is why when the bell tolls for one, it tolls for all. The interpersonal body is a body-beyond-death.

Whether it is the risen body or the interpersonal body, the fact remains: throughout *Devotions*, Donne's apophatic grammar does not result in the loss of bodiliness. Indeed, the body actually gains new importance across the text as Donne realizes embodiment is not an obstruction to his ascension, but an essential component of selfhood. To strive toward God, toward infinitude, does not require one to overcome materiality so to speak, or to un-body as Eckhart phrases it. Both the risen body and the interpersonal body are proof of this: the risen body is at once finite and infinite, it is finitude perfected and extended into the realm of infinitude; the interpersonal body similarly collapses the finitude/infinitude binary as the body becomes something bigger than itself, something bigger than individual death. In effect, *Devotions* joins the rank of texts that defend the validity of the apophatic body, that dismantle the assumption that apophasis counteracts bodiliness and necessitates liberation from material reality. Some negative theologians do seek such liberation, but it is not a demand of the discourse. As

we see with Donne, the apophatic mode is more than compatible with materialist

concerns and can even facilitate diverse conceptions of bodiliness.

CONCLUSION

John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* is a text replete with analytical

possibilities. There is so much to say, so many avenues to explore as Donne confronts a

range of subjects from "the vicissitudes of human health" to "the mysteries of the pre-

modern cosmos."[105] My point is: it is easy to get lost in the pages of *Devotions*, lost in the

restless psyche of an afflicted man convinced of his impending death. For this reason,

certain dimensions of the text are eclipsed in modern scholarship, deemed less pressing or

perhaps even secondary. The apophatic grammar of *Devotions* is, unfortunately, one of

these neglected dimensions. In fact, across Donne's entire corpus, his apophatic grammar

has failed to garner substantial critical attention. This thesis attempts to mend the gap and

pay heed to a mode of discourse that Donne uses frequently and conspicuously. Yes, his

apophasis is by no means subtle—he wants the reader to notice and, as I have made clear,

it is about time we do.

Of course, unearthing and examining Donne's engagement in negative discourse

is a hefty undertaking, too hefty for one thesis to effectively say all that can be said. As

mentioned, Donne's apophatic grammar is not exclusive to *Devotions*, but spans his

poetry and sermons as well. A more comprehensive analysis would require an

intertextual approach, mapping the development of his apophasis across multiple works:

does his relationship to negative discourse evolve over time or remain relatively

consistent? Does it manifest differently in his verse as opposed to his prose? Also, how

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[105] Anthony Raspa, "Introduction," *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), xiii.

does Donne's negative discourse compare to that of his contemporaries? Does his approach align with other seventeenth-century writers known to invoke apophasis? Questions abound.

Nevertheless, I chose to focus on *Devotions* for a number of reasons, reasons I will reiterate here. First, when it comes to those scholars who have written about Donne's negative discourse, they do not cite *Devotions* at all—not even so much as a footnote. Despite its fame and explicit use of apophatic devices, *Devotions* has yet to be linked to negative theology which, I contend, is a grievous oversight. *Devotions* is a prime example of the negative exercise; the text is deeply personal, psychological, capturing Donne's interior state in striking detail—he quite literally anatomizes himself on the page. As a result, the reader sees the full activity of negative discourse: the turning around, the relentless revision, the persistent *self-consciousness*.

Indeed, Donne is a self-conscious narrator, wielding language cautiously, always aware of the limitations of his speech; this fact has long been accepted, argued persuasively by scholar Joan Webber several decades ago. However, what I propose in this thesis is that Donne's self-consciousness is also an indication of his apophatic sensibilities. Donne adheres to the two guiding principles of negative theology, the epistemic and the semantic theses, treating God as *incomprehensible* and *inaccessible* by way of positive language. Donne is constantly revising his statements of God, offering a series of correcting propositions, caught in a process known as linguistic regress. One such regression unfolds across the first half of the text where God's anger transforms into God's correction then transforms again into God's mercy. That said, Donne's self-consciousness, or what should be called his apophatic awareness, extends beyond

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linguistic regress, inspiring a constellation of apophatic strategies including via negativa, paradox, predicates of action, and metaphorical language: all devices that manage to speak of God while circumventing kataphasis. The frequency (and visibility) of these devices is a major reason why I trained my sights on *Devotions*, but not the only reason.

As much as *Devotions* adheres to the negative tradition, it also challenges certain assumptions about apophasis, expanding our understanding of this peculiar mode of discourse. Namely, *Devotions* dismantles the assumption that apophasis requires the user to relinquish the body and move away from all things material. Donne engages in apophasis but his relationship to the body, to materiality, only strengthens throughout the text. The body actually gains new importance as Donne imagines the risen body, the interpersonal body, the body that cannot be lost because it is an inextricable facet of selfhood. At once a physical and spiritual vessel, the body is not threatened by apophasis; the two are compatible, Donne demonstrates, and can advance the same dialogue.

It is for all these reasons that I narrowed the scope of this thesis, focusing my efforts on *Devotions*. I think of my objective as twofold: one, surveying Donne's use of apophatic devices in *Devotions* to qualify the text as an example of negative discourse; and two, considering the implications of qualifying *Devotions* as such. Admittedly, the second objective is incomplete. Sure, I contemplate how Donne unsettles the belief that apophasis must end in un-bodying (which is in itself cumbersome). But I will not pretend it is the only implication that may be drawn. Again, *Devotions* is a rich text that covers a lot of ground; as such, Donne's apophasis can be placed in conversation with not just the body, but several other themes. For instance, how might Donne's apophasis shape or influence his thoughts on cosmological space? Does his adoption of Dionysian

nothingness, a formulation which denies true absence, inform his vision of the universe at large? Even the first objective, the one which seeks to survey Donne's use of apophatic devices, is to some extent incomplete. I look at multiple examples of each device in the text, but not *every* example—my fine-toothed comb could be finer. What I mean to say is: the negative discourse of *Devotions* is far from exhausted; there are more moments to analyze, a deeper discussion to be had.

At minimum, though, I hope I have exposed a layer of *Devotions* too long hidden—hidden in plain sight, that is. To return to my earlier metaphor, the apophatic dimension of *Devotions* is a bright light: only intelligible once the eyes have adjusted. For me, I cannot help but appreciate this light; it has fundamentally transformed my perspective of the text. Every page is an encounter with some facet of Donne's apophatic grammar, whether that be linguistic regress, via negativa, paradox, predicates of action, metaphor, or Dionysian nothingness. The language of *Devotions* is the new language identified by Michael Sells: a self-conscious language, an abstract language, a language of negation, of *un-saying*. It is the apophatic language.

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