



## What's Wrong with Mis-devotion? A John Donne Enigma

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Article abstract

The nominal purpose of this article is to develop a cogent and persuasive interpretation of the term “mis-devotion,” a coinage John Donne uses twice in his poems: once near the end of *The Second Anniversary* and once in the second stanza of “*The Relic*.” I also cite the two known examples of this term in Donne’s prose, from the final paragraph of *Biathanatos* and from a sermon he preached at St. Paul’s (21 May 1626); and I cite several closely related locutions, such as “mis-devout zeale,” from *Pseudo-Martyr*. On the surface, it soon becomes apparent that “mis-devotion” is always a nickname for the Roman Catholicism in which Donne was raised. But as soon as this recognition has been made, other problems of interpretation arise, many of them suggesting that “residual Catholicism” (to borrow an apt phrase from Jeanne Shami) continued to haunt his imagination. What begins as a lexical enquiry therefore ends with a speculative appreciation of how difficult it was, both personally and culturally, for Donne to repudiate the past.

# What's Wrong with Mis-devotion? A John Donne Enigma

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*The nominal purpose of this article is to develop a cogent and persuasive interpretation of the term "mis-devotion," a coinage John Donne uses twice in his poems: once near the end of The Second Anniversary and once in the second stanza of "The Relic." I also cite the two known examples of this term in Donne's prose, from the final paragraph of Biathanatos and from a sermon he preached at St. Paul's (21 May 1626); and I cite several closely related locutions, such as "mis-devout zeale," from Pseudo-Martyr. On the surface, it soon becomes apparent that "mis-devotion" is always a nickname for the Roman Catholicism in which Donne was raised. But as soon as this recognition has been made, other problems of interpretation arise, many of them suggesting that "residual Catholicism" (to borrow an apt phrase from Jeanne Shami) continued to haunt his imagination. What begins as a lexical enquiry therefore ends with a speculative appreciation of how difficult it was, both personally and culturally, for Donne to repudiate the past.*

*Le principal objectif de cet article est de développer une interprétation cohérente et convaincante du terme « mis-devotion » (dévotion erronée), qu'a créé Donne et qu'il utilise deux fois dans ses poèmes : vers la fin de son Second Anniversary, et dans la deuxième strophe de son « The Relic ». On examine également deux occurrences du terme dans la prose de Donne, nommément dans le paragraphe final de son Biathanatos et dans un sermon qu'il a prononcé à l'église Saint-Paul le 21 mai 1626. On retrace aussi plusieurs expressions apparentées, telles que « mis-devout zeale » (zèle dévotionnel erroné) dans son Pseudo-Martyr. Le terme « mis-devotion » apparaît graduellement comme un surnom du catholicisme romain, religion dans laquelle Donne a été élevé. Toutefois, une fois que l'on a compris cette première acception, d'autres problèmes d'interprétation surgissent, dont certains suggèrent qu'un « catholicisme résiduel » (expression empruntée à Jeanne Shami) ait marqué son imagination. Ce qui débute donc comme une enquête lexicale, s'avère être une avenue spéculative fructueuse pour comprendre combien Donne a pu, sur les plans personnel et culturel, trouver difficile de rompre avec son passé.*

The question of religious affiliation has gained striking prominence in critical, historical, and biographical writing about John Donne in the last generation or so; indeed, it would be fair to say that religion has overtaken and surpassed wit as the most contested issue in Donne scholarship. Negotiating the Reformation was of course difficult for someone born into an English Catholic family who would spend the last sixteen years of his life as a priest in the Church

of England. Situating Donne's religious orientation in this way puts a great deal of pressure on some of his metaphors, especially those that rely on a specifically religious context. I am referring here to the metaphors of canonization and of ecstasy, both of which Donne made famous as titles to exceptional poems in the *Songs and Sonnets*. It would be relatively easy, and quite worthwhile, to extend this pattern by referring to the "cloisters" and "tombs" of "Love's Exchange," the doctrine of transubstantiation in "Twickenham Garden," or even the flippant bequest in "The Will": "My faith I give to Roman Catholics."<sup>1</sup> On the present occasion, however, I want to focus on one enigmatic expression that needs to be reinterpreted with the context of Donne's religious affiliations in mind. I am referring of course to the coinage "mis-devotion" identified in the title above.

There is copious evidence in the Donne archive that the change from the old church to a new one was difficult for him. In "An Advertisement to the Reader" prefixed to *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne claims to be "derived from such a stocke and race, as, I beleeeve, no family, (which is not of farre larger extent, and greater branches,) hath endured and suffered more in their persons and fortunes, for obeying the Teachers of Romane Doctrine, then it hath done."<sup>2</sup> And the toll was indeed a heavy one. It included the protracted exile to Italy of one of his uncles, Ellis Heywood SJ, the imprisonment, torture, and deportation (1584) of another uncle, Jasper Heywood SJ, and the arrest of his younger brother Henry for the crime of harbouring a Catholic priest, followed by imprisonment in Newgate, where Henry would die of the plague (1593). Eventually Donne would take the view that God does not require excessive self-sacrifice of the kind his relatives had made. But the revision of his doctrinal position could not eradicate the memories of his boyhood and youth.

If the Reformation was a troubling phenomenon for Donne, his attitude towards it has been a troublesome question for his biographers and interpreters. John Carey took a strong position when he argued, in *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (1981), that after having been raised a Catholic, Donne in effect remained a Catholic for the rest of his life. Not a contented Catholic, mind you,

1. See John Donne, *The Major Works*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100, 105, 126. Subsequent references to the poems, unless indicated otherwise, are to this edition.

2. John Donne, *Pseudo-Martyr, Wherein out of Certaine Propositions and Gradations, this Conclusion is Evicted: That those which are of the Romane Religion in this Kingdome, May and Ought to take the Oath of Allegiance*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 8. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be placed in the main text in parentheses.

because in his own eyes he was an apostate, a status he earned because ambition led him to conform to what he thought the patronage network would require. Subsequent biographical readings have all been responses to, modifications of, or attempted refutations of Carey's point of view. Dennis Flynn, in *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (1995), made a case for a softer interpretation of Donne's relationship to his Catholic past, one in which Donne regrets having blemished the honour of his family. More recently, John Stubbs, in *Donne: The Reformed Soul* (2006), has argued that Donne was able to accept and adapt to Reformation values in ways that Carey had not foreseen.<sup>3</sup> Lucid and persuasive articles by Gregory Kneidel (on Donne's so-called conversion), Paul Stevens (on the pressure of nationhood on Donne's religion), Lukas Erne (on the location of "Show me dear Christ thy spouse so bright and clear" in the Donne canon), and Arthur Marotti (on Donne's troubled anti-Catholic rhetoric) have not settled the debate so much as shown why and how it matters.<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Shami has addressed these questions,<sup>5</sup> and has pointed out some of the errors of anachronism we are likely to promote if we carry out this task without historical awareness.<sup>6</sup> Relying on her compendious knowledge of the religious commitments Donne was willing to make in his sermons, Shami points out that the public ground he claimed for "our Church" was a moderate middle between opposite extremes: idolatry on the one hand, separatism on the other.<sup>7</sup> The Donne who appears in the paragraphs that follow interests me not so much because he is able to conform to either extreme, as because he is able to escape conformity.

3. See, respectively, John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber, 1981); Dennis Flynn, *John Donne and the Ancient Catholic Nobility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and John Stubbs, *Donne: The Reformed Soul* (2006; rpr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007).

4. See, respectively, Gregory Kneidel, "Donne's 'Via Pauli,'" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001): 224–46; Paul Stevens, "Donne's Catholicism and the Innovation of the Modern Nation State," *John Donne Journal* 20 (2001): 53–70; Lukas Erne, "Donne and Christ's Spouse," *Essays in Criticism* 51.2 (2001): 208–29; and Arthur Marotti, "John Donne's Conflicted Anti-Catholicism," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 101 (2002): 358–79.

5. See Jeanne Shami, "'Trying to Walk on Logs in Water': John Donne, Religion, and the Critical Tradition," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et réforme*, n.s., 25.4 (2001): 92.

6. See Jeanne Shami, "Labels, Controversy, and the Language of Inclusion in Donne's Sermons," in *John Donne's Professional Lives*, ed. David Colclough (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 135–57.

7. See Jeanne Shami, *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), 19–24.

### The return of the not-yet repressed

Donne uses the word “mis-devotion” only twice in his poetry, once very near the end of *The Second Anniversarie*, and once again in the second stanza of “The Relic.” It may very well be a coinage of his, because the *OED*, after giving a succinct definition, “mistaken or misdirected devotion,” records a fragment from *The Second Anniversary* (1612) as its first historical example. I will give a slightly longer excerpt, along with the observation that the site of writing is probably the cathedral city of Amiens, where Donne lived for several months between November 1611 and April 1612, having come to Picardy in the entourage of Sir Robert Drury.<sup>8</sup>

Here in a place, where mis-devotion frames  
 A thousand praieres to saints, whose very names  
 The ancient Church knew not, Heaven knows not yet,  
 And where, what lawes of poetry admit,  
 Lawes of religion, have at least the same,  
 Immortall Maid, I might inuoke thy name.  
 Could any Saint provoke that appetite,  
 Thou here shouldst make mee a french convertite.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, one thing wrong with mis-devotion is that it’s French, and because of historical circumstances of various kinds it’s also Roman Catholic. What complicates matters, in this example and in the next one too, is that mis-devotion is still attractive to the speaker, still in some sense *tempting*.

“The Relic” offers a far more famous instance of the same word. This is a poem which aims, quite brilliantly, at a refutation of what might seem obvious at first sight. The sexton who re-opens the speaker’s grave, only to find “A bracelet of bright hair about the bone,” will rush to the erroneous conclusion that “there a loving couple lies.” Erroneous, because the speaker and his Mary Magdalen

8. See R. C. Bald, *Donne and the Drurys* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 92.

9. *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, vol 6: *The Anniversaries and the Epicedes and Obsequies*, ed. Gary A. Stringer, John R. Roberts, et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 36. Subsequent quotations from the *Anniversaries* are from this edition and will be made in parentheses with line numbers indicated. Whenever I quote from old-spelling texts, usage of i/j, u/v, and long-s is silently modernized, and archaic abbreviations are silently expanded.

were able to perform the “miracle” of abstaining from sexual intercourse. And here is the very quotable segment of stanza 2 which includes my keyword:

If this fall in a time, or land,  
 Where mis-devotion doth command,  
 Then, he that digs us up, will bring  
 Us, to the Bishop, and the King,  
     To make us relics; then  
 Thou shalt be a Mary Magdalen, and I  
     A something else thereby. (130)

The setting of this poem is not Picardy in 1612, but some undeclared location in the future. Still, the desire to preserve hair and bone as relics is clearly reminiscent of Roman Catholic practices which Donne learned a great deal about as a boy, and which he would later critique in his theological writings. So, the unspecified connection between these two instances of “mis-devotion” lies in the apparent reference to Roman Catholicism in both. To go just a small step further, we might claim that the “prayers to saints” attributed to “mis-devotion” in *The Second Anniversary* and the veneration of relics alluded to in “The Relic” are similar errors, both of them characteristic of a system Donne is trying to renounce. The deeper connection, however, is at least as telling; in both instances the emotional result of the expression is powerful and attractive.

### Mis-devout zeale

To date, I have found only two specimens of the word “mis-devotion” in Donne’s prose. The first of these occurs in the last paragraph of *Biathanatos*, a text not published until 1644, though written much earlier, probably around 1610. In this work, Donne defends what he designates a “Paradox,” namely, the proposition that suicide might, under some circumstances, be an admirable or at least a permissible action. And he admits, as he reaches his conclusion, that some readers are likely to misunderstand him, especially those subject to “prejudice, or contempt of my weaknes, or mis-devotion.”<sup>10</sup> I believe he is

10. John Donne, *Biathanatos: A Declaration of that Paradoxe, or Thesis, that Selfe-homicide is not so Naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise* (London: John Dawson, [1644]), 2E2–2E2<sup>v</sup>.

alluding here to an idea he states more openly in the preface to this work: that his own position on suicide may have evolved as it did “because I had my first breeding and conversation with men of a suppressed and afflicted Religion, accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin’d Martyrdome” (C1). Despite the strikingly different context here, “mis-devotion” still does the work of referring to aspects of the Roman Catholic tradition.

The second occurrence in Donne’s prose comes near the beginning of a sermon he preached at St. Paul’s on 21 May 1626, a sermon in which he comments at length, and with admittedly “Polemical” intent, on the Roman Catholic errors, as he sees them, of prayers for the dead, Purgatory, and the proliferation of indulgences. He builds his critique by showing how each of these practices, though not endorsed anywhere in Scripture, evolved without great controversy in the early Christian church, only to be corrupted by the greed and ambition of recent Roman prelates. Prayers for the dead predate even Christianity, he argues: “the Jewes received impressions of the customes of the Gentiles, who were ever naturally enclined to this mis-devotion and left-handed piety, of praying for the Dead.”<sup>11</sup> Mis-devotion is still a kind of piety, but a misguided piety that Donne is not recommending to his congregation.

The prose text that I mistakenly thought would yield further specimens of my keyword is *Pseudo-Martyr*, the work most clearly aimed at the exposure of Roman Catholic errors, as Donne has come to see them. Although I did not find here what I had hoped for, some account of the failed search may be in order. In *Pseudo-Martyr* Donne supposes that a monarch in particular may be misled by excessive piety: “some Kings in a mis-devout zeale, and contemplation of the next life, neglected the office of government to which God had called them, by attending which function duely, they might more have advanced their salvation, then by Monastique retirings” (248). At this point, Donne and his first readers would be likely to think of Henry VI, and to remember his reputation for otherworldliness. The precise turn of phrase here, “mis-devout zeale,” is as close as this text will come to “mis-devotion.” But it is not an isolated example; indeed, it is flanked by dozens of key terms, both nouns and verbs, inflected with the prefix “mis.” When Donne worries about his own reputation, as he does in the preface to this work, he is nervous about being “open to many

11. John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 7:169.

mis-interpretations" (13). And he claims to be writing in part to prevent the "misconceivings" (13) of his critics. When he sets out his main thesis, he does so with the coinage "misencourage": "the Romane Religion," he argues, "doth by many erroneous doctrines misencourage and excite men to this vicious affectation of danger" (37). Offering to sacrifice one's life to God is admirable in itself, but it "may be corrupted and envenomed with distasteful mixtures," Donne believes, "especially in the Romane Church, which misinflames the minde to false Martyrdome" (100). In rhetorically similar passages, he uses the coinages "mis-provoke" (87) and "mis-incite" (87) to argue that Roman Catholics in his time and place are being encouraged to commit themselves to a martyrdom that is really a delusion.

The rhetoric of mis-plus-verb is not always as striking as in the examples I have been quoting. More usual patterns, "mistaking" (95), "misapplying" (96), and "mis-led" (266), are readily available. When a noun is similarly inflected, we get, for example, "mis-information" (145), a state of affairs under which it is difficult to maintain papal infallibility. On the specific issue of the Oath of Allegiance, Donne believes that "the pope was mis-informed, and so misledde by hearking to one partie onely" (233). This is not the place to situate (or resituate) *Pseudo-Martyr* in the canon of Donne's writings, or in the troubled history of the English Reformation. But it is the place to point out that, when Donne tries to evaluate his own relationship to Roman Catholic practice in 1610, his rhetoric amounts to a deconstruction of what he once believed. For this task he enlists the service of "mis-devout zeale" and its many kindred expressions.

The digital age has made it possible to situate Donne's use of "mis-devotion" in the context of usage by his contemporaries. The "search" function of Early English Books Online confirms the inference drawn earlier from the *OED* entry that Donne is the first recorded user of this word. But the most frequent user is Joseph Hall, whose twenty instances in print (if we include the spelling "misdevotion") outnumber Donne's by a margin of five to one. Chronologically, Hall is right behind Donne; his earliest use of the word appears in 1614, in a commentary on the story of the Golden Calf as told in Exodus. Hall expresses shock that the Israelites "were ready to give gold, not out of their purses, but from their very eares, to mis-devotion."<sup>12</sup> Here the reference is unmistakably

12. Joseph Hall, *Contemplations upon the Principal Passages in the Holy Story*, vol. 2 (London: H. L[owns] for S. M. Macha[m], 1614), I4.



to idolatry, as it is by extension in a later text, where Hall uses our keyword to chastise Roman Catholics. Conducting the worship service in Latin only Hall describes as “this Romish abuse” and he laments “that miserable blindnesse and mis-devotion which it must needs draw in after it.”<sup>13</sup> It’s clear that Hall’s usage is compatible with Donne’s, and perhaps that’s enough in itself. But it’s possible too that we’re encountering not just coincidence but influence. After all, it’s widely believed that Hall is the author of the prefatory poems, “To the Praise of the Dead, and the Anatomy” and “The Harbinger to the Progress,” that accompanied the *Anniversaries* when they were first published.<sup>14</sup> The authority for this attribution rests in part on Jonson’s cryptic observation, to Drummond of Hawthornden: “Joseph Hall the harbinger to Donne’s *Anniversary*.”<sup>15</sup> This is less than proof, but it is supported by circumstantial evidence, including the reliance of both men on the patronage of Sir Robert Drury and Anne, Lady Drury, during the years in question.

Joseph Hall’s is a special case, and for that reason I have singled him out of a small group of “mis-devotion” users. This group includes the already mentioned Scottish Laird, William Drummond, the nonconforming clergyman Daniel Cawdrey, and the famous author of *Eikonoklestes*, John Milton. As Milton declares forthrightly on his title page, he is writing a rebuttal of the so-called “king’s book,” *Eikon Basilike*, the text that took some very powerful strides in the direction of making a martyr out of Charles I. The whole process is repugnant to Milton; if Charles believed the royal chapel to be “*Gods house*,” Milton will retort that “the vanity, superstition, and misdevotion of [the] place was a scandal farr and neer.”<sup>16</sup> Inevitably, “misdevotion” has been pressed into political service, but even here it remains a synonym for idolatry.

13. Joseph Hall, *The olde religion a treatise, wherein is laid downe the true state of the difference betwixt the reformed, and Romane Church* (London: W. S. for Nathaniell Butter and Richard Hawkins, 1628), 15–16.

14. See *Variorum Edition*, 6:5–6 and 6:23–24.

15. “Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden,” in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. David Bevington, Martin Butler, Ian Donaldson, et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5:388.

16. *Eikonoklestes in answer to a book intitl’d Eikon basilike the portraiture His sacred Majesty in his solitudes and sufferings* (London: T.N., Tho[mas] Brewer and G. Moule, 1650), B4.

### The blessed Mother-maid

Donne scholars don't need to be reminded of Jonson's claim that the *Anniversarie* (he uses the singular) "was profane and full of blasphemies" and "that he told Mr Donne, if it had been written of the Virgin Mary it had been something."<sup>17</sup> The usual strategy for managing this rebuke is to cite Donne's variously recorded answer to it, to the effect that he wasn't writing to delineate a particular person (whom he hadn't met in any case) but "to say as well as I could,"<sup>18</sup> and then to outline what particular kind of idea (or ideal) Donne may have had in mind. But since the mid-twentieth century, some readers have taken the intelligent minority position by asserting that Jonson may have been, perhaps inadvertently, right about something. It's not so much that Donne should have written about the Virgin Mary, as that indeed he did. This view of the matter is implied by Marius Bewley, who argues that "What *The Anniversaries* are in effect celebrating—albeit *secretly*—is Donne's apostasy from the Roman Catholic Church."<sup>19</sup> I would be inclined to substitute "lamenting" for "celebrating," a change that Bewley virtually makes himself when he argues that the refrain "Shee, shee is dead; shee's dead" (*First*, 369 et passim) comes across "as a lamentation for the suppressed Church."<sup>20</sup> Bewley thinks he can detect implicit comparisons between Catholic and Anglican churches; that Donne is "in the process of making a qualified acceptance of the new Church, but the prejudice still seems markedly in favour of Rome."<sup>21</sup> Bewley has at least read the signs of spiritual struggle in this text and has given a plausible account of how and why Donne suffered in this way.

Patrick Cruttwell, in a book published soon after the appearance of Bewley's article, seems to have arrived independently at a similar interpretation. After noting that Donne had never met Elizabeth Drury, Cruttwell says that "in the poems she emerges as something very like the Virgin Mary."<sup>22</sup> For Jonson,

17. "Informations to William Drummond of Hawthornden," in *Works of Ben Jonson*, 5:361.

18. Letter to G.G. in *Letters to Several Persons of Honour* (London: Richard Marriot, 1651), 2H4.

19. Marius Bewley, "Religious Cynicism in Donne's Poetry," *The Kenyon Review* 14.4 (Autumn 1952): 626.

20. Bewley, 631.

21. Bewley, 626.

22. Patrick Cruttwell, *The Shakespearean Moment and Its Place in the Poetry of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Chatto, 1954), 74.

this is exactly what made the poems blasphemous, but Cruttwell is more generous when he describes the “devotional” quality of the symbolic pattern: “For Donne, the Roman Catholic who abandoned his church with such slow reluctance, this was a means of retaining, by ways allowable in Protestant England, the emotions which he would otherwise have expressed through worship of the Virgin and feminine saints such as the Magdalen or St. Teresa.”<sup>23</sup> Yes, Donne is guilty of wanting to have it both ways: in the passage specifically naming “mis-devotion” he supposes that “I might invoke thy name” (*Second*, 511–16) but then withdraws the suggestion at once: “the reader is being invited at the same time *not* to worship her as a saint (for that would be rank popery) and to feel the emotions which he would feel if he did so.”<sup>24</sup> Among the things wrong with the land of mis-devotion is the way it tempts the Christian soul to rely on old emotional patterns.

The “Immortall Maid” (*Second*, 516) addressed in the mis-devotion passage is on one level the long-gone Elizabeth Drury, but I think she must simultaneously be the Virgin Mary. This inference is never very far below the surface, and at times it is virtually explicit. When the speaker’s soul is enjoined to aspire upwards, the destination is clearly the next world:

Where thou shalt see the blessed Mother-maid  
 Joy in not being that, which men have said.  
 Where shee’is exalted more for being good,  
 Then for her interest, of mother-hood. (*Second*, 341–44)

“That, which men have said” is doubtless an allusion to the immaculate conception, the doctrine that the Virgin Mary, like her famous son, was conceived without original sin. This doctrine, though not given official standing until its promulgation by Pope Pius IX in 1854, was implicitly endorsed by St. Augustine but subjected to critical scrutiny by St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>25</sup> The precise details of the controversy are perhaps less important here than the opportunity they give to Donne: “the blessed Mother-maid” deserves our veneration, he implies, not only for supplying the matrix in

23. Cruttwell, 80.

24. Cruttwell, 81

25. “The Immaculate Conception,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911), 14:335.

which our Saviour could achieve human form, but for her exemplary goodness too.

In dealing with *The Second Anniversary* I have given unusual prominence to the work of Marius Bewley and Patrick Cruttwell, in part because I believe they have seen something of great importance about the poem, and in part because they have been unfairly sidelined by mainstream Donne scholarship. Neither Bewley's article nor Cruttwell's book appears in the index to, or the documentation for, the two books that have shaped subsequent study of the *Anniversaries: The Poetry of Meditation* by Louis L. Martz, and *Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise* by Barbara Kiefer Lewalski.<sup>26</sup> True, Bewley's article appears as an afterthought in Appendix 2 of Martz's book,<sup>27</sup> but only in order to be dismissed. Something similar happens in John Carey's *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art*, where Bewley's article is included in a list of critical positions that have led to "bizarre results."<sup>28</sup> Edward W. Taylor, in *Donne's Idea of a Woman*, mentions the thesis of Bewley's article as if doing so were sufficient refutation, and pays no attention whatsoever to Cruttwell.<sup>29</sup> The point I wish to make is that Bewley and Cruttwell, despite their subtle and engaging work on Donne, are cited infrequently and dismissively, or are not cited at all in many subsequent works that would have been likely to profit from such citation.<sup>30</sup> Even a critic such as Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, who believes she has discovered "an inherent theological uncertainty" in the *Anniversaries*, gives only the slightest mention of Bewley's article, none at all of Cruttwell's book.<sup>31</sup>

26. See Louis L. Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century*, revised ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), and Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

27. Martz, 353–55.

28. Carey, *Life, Mind and Art*, 102.

29. Edward W. Taylor, *Donne's Idea of a Woman: Structure and Meaning in The Anniversaries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 10.

30. The list includes Theresa M. DiPasquale, *Literature and the Sacrament: The Sacred and the Secular in John Donne* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), Jeffrey Johnson, *The Theology of John Donne* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), Acsah Guibbory, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and Stubbs, *Donne: The Reformed Soul*.

31. See Jill Peláez Baumgaertner, "Political Play and Theological Uncertainty in the *Anniversaries*," *John Donne Journal* 13.1–2 (1994): 33. Bewley's article is placed last, an afterthought again, in a list of eight critical works in note 3, but his position is neither outlined nor discussed.

Yet her conclusion, that “In a sense, the reader is watching the poem as it is being written and Donne as he is creating his own persona,”<sup>32</sup> would be readily compatible with Bewley’s argument and with Cruttwell’s. I find it alarming that a persuasive critical position, whether or not it is held to be right, can be so quickly marginalized and virtually silenced by subsequent scholarship.

I am not claiming that the *Anniversaries* are about the Virgin Mary to the exclusion of all else. Clearly there is a great deal going on in these poems: an attempt to face the challenge constructed by Copernicus and Galileo, for example; an attempt to think through the relationship between the body and the soul; and yes, the attempt to console grieving parents for the loss of their only child. But my task here is to comment on the *Anniversaries* only as they comment on the idea of mis-devotion. It seems to me inescapable that mis-devotion as it appears here is Roman Catholicism. So much can be readily inferred from the joke about the proliferation of prayers “to saints, whose very names / The ancient Church knew not, Heaven knowes not yet” (*Second*, 511–12). But it would be a mistake, I am convinced, to assume that Donne is here taking a dismissive attitude towards the religion in which he was raised. For him, such a feat would have been impossible. He is trying his best to reform. He won’t pray to the “Immortall Maid” because “thou wouldst not”; indeed, what he offers would be unacceptable “Did this Coine bear any other stampe, then his, / That gave thee power to do, me to say this” (*Second*, 522–23). Here Lewalski’s commentary is perfectly apt: “she [i.e., Elizabeth Drury] bears the divine image, and therefore the poet’s coin, his poem, also bears the divine stamp, for God is the source both of her power to do and the poet’s power to say.”<sup>33</sup> But the metaphor of coining might not rest as peacefully as this explication implies. In a letter to Sir Henry Goodyer, Donne says quite casually and with, I think, complete sincerity, that people are better off spiritually if they can stay with the church they grew up in: “You shall seldome see a Coyne, upon which the stamp were removed, though to imprint it better, but it looks awry and squint. And so, for the most part, do mindes which have received divers impressions.”<sup>34</sup> The metaphor would suggest that changing one’s religion is not an entirely voluntary project, or at least not

32. Baumgaertner, 33.

33. Lewalski, 302.

34. *Letters to Severall Persons of Honour*, O3–3<sup>v</sup>. Carey comments with great intelligence on this passage in “Donne and Coins,” in *English Renaissance Studies Presented to Dame Helen Gardner in Honour of her Seventieth Birthday*, ed. John Carey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 156.

one that can be completed by an act of will alone. Or, perhaps it can never be perfected, as the adverbs “awry and squint” would imply, a set of modifiers that could with some justice be taken to describe the speaker’s angle of vision in the *Anniversaries*. One thing wrong with mis-devotion, clearly, is that you can’t get rid of it no matter how hard you try.

### A miracle she was

“The Relic” is an enigmatic poem; its readers have been trying to solve the riddle for more than a century. The critical archive in this case includes a high proportion of conjectures unsupported by internal or external evidence. Herbert J. C. Grierson thought it “probable” that this text belongs to a “sequence of poems” addressed to Magdalen Herbert “in the earlier days of Donne’s intimacy with her in Oxford or London.”<sup>35</sup> The only clue Grierson had to work with was the appearance of Mary Magdalen’s name in the text, but that was at least a matter of substance. Very timidly, Theodore Redpath ventured “a very bold” interpretation of the line, “A something else thereby,” namely, “that people in that age of ‘misdevotion’ will take Donne’s bone for one of Christ’s.”<sup>36</sup> This idea was greeted with rhapsodic joy by William Empson, who claimed that the young Donne wasn’t a Christian “on one specific point only, that of denying the uniqueness of Jesus,”<sup>37</sup> and who pointed out that adherents to “the Family of Love believed that any man may become Christ.”<sup>38</sup> These suggestions have been taken up by David Wootton, who works out an extremely learned though entirely conjectural argument in support of the view “that Donne’s preoccupation with love and the religion of love [...] carried him so far that he bec[a]me a member of the Family of Love.”<sup>39</sup> For Wootton, the solution to the enigma lies exactly here: “the Family of Love believed that every Christian was a Mary Magdalen, a sinner rescued from sin; and that every Christian was reborn through faith as a Jesus Christ.” Never mind that the poem doesn’t

35. *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. Herbert J. C. Grierson (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), 2:47.

36. *The Songs and Sonets of John Donne*, ed. Theodore Redpath (London: Methuen, 1956), 109.

37. William Empson, *Essays on Renaissance Literature*, ed. John Haffenden, vol. 1: *Donne and the New Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 79.

38. Empson, 141.

39. David Wootton, “John Donne’s Religion of Love,” in *Heterodoxy in Early Modern Science and Religion*, ed. John Brooke and Ian Maclean (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31–32.

name Jesus Christ; never mind that we haven't a scrap of external evidence connecting Donne with the Family of Love. "This poem only makes sense if it is read in the context of Familism," Wootton declares.<sup>40</sup>

The conviction that she has discovered in "The Relic" an allusion to *The Song of Songs*, "the ultimate poem of oral sex," leads Achsah Guibbory to the view "that Donne's lovers are married."<sup>41</sup> And they certainly aren't a sexually abstemious couple, as the speaker would seem to suggest. When he says "Our hands ne'er touched the seals, / Which nature, injured by late law, sets free" (29–30), he must be joking: "that these lovers' hands never touched those seals does not mean that other anatomical parts did not either."<sup>42</sup> And Guibbory isn't the only reader who can't believe the relationship is unconsummated. Stephen Burt proposes "that the third stanza describes, not non-sexual love, but non-procreative sex. Perhaps he and she have been doing, together, the kinds of things that men can also do with men, or women with women."<sup>43</sup> Apparently we now live in an age where having sex with someone is no longer deniable. The Age of Clinton, let's call it. Just try saying the sentence, "I never had sex with that woman."

The bewildering critical archive attached to "The Relic" matters here only for the ways in which it might comment on the idea of mis-devotion. Grierson glosses the term by claiming that "Donne uses the word frequently"<sup>44</sup> and he gives two examples from the poems, the ones I've already quoted. Redpath's gloss is "false idolatry," to which he adds: "In view of what follows it is probable that Donne is here covertly attacking Roman Catholicism. The use of relics had been abandoned in all the Reformed churches."<sup>45</sup> For Empson, the term is a kind of protective coloration: "he only supposes it is in a time of 'misdevotion' that

40. Wootton, 37.

41. Achsah Guibbory, "'The Relique,' *The Song of Songs*, and Donne's *Songs and Sonets*," *John Donne Journal* 15 (1996): 28, 26.

42. Guibbory, 31.

43. Stephen Burt, "Donne the Time Traveller: Reading 'The Relic'," in *Shakespeare Up Close: Reading Early Modern Texts*, ed. Russ McDonald, Nicholas D. Nace, and Travis D. Williams (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2012), 179. Burt wants to enlist Guibbory's article in support of his position, but in fact he's making it up. There could hardly be a less appropriate adjective to describe sex between Donne and Ann More than "non-procreative."

44. Grierson, ed., 2:49.

45. Redpath, ed., 109.

[...] these objects will be worshipped as relics.”<sup>46</sup> Wootton takes no position on mis-devotion, though I think he needs to if he is to maintain the view that in “The Relic” Donne writes “in a fashion that seems straightforwardly incompatible with any orthodox religion.”<sup>47</sup> For Guibbory, “the idolatrous reverence of relics and saints” raises questions about the speaker’s “reverence” for the woman: “Perhaps this all-consuming passion is ‘misdevotion.’”<sup>48</sup> Burt points out that “mis-devotion” implies the possibility of its opposite: “true devotion.” Then he draws an appropriate distinction between public and private: “Only in a land with the wrong religion [...] would a worshipper beholden to these relics bring them before a clerical or national institution; perhaps someone with the right spirit would adore them at home.”<sup>49</sup>

I do not believe that a poem should have a paraphrasable prose meaning, and I celebrate poems for evading either/or questions and for giving us both/and answers. I still think the critical archive on “The Relic” is bewildering; not all of these interpretations can be right. Not even Donne can be attacking Roman Catholicism, disguising his own desire, and questioning his reverence for the woman all at the same time. Or can he? The hypothetical world of the poem allows him to put each of these possibilities into play, without settling firmly for any one of them.

For reasons that will be clear at once, I find myself closer to home in the company of Dayton Haskin than with other recent interpreters of “The Relic.” If Haskin has read the poem in the right spirit, then Donne “invites us to imagine a scene in which two persons powerfully attracted to one another in life, but never having crossed the boundaries set up by humanly constructed laws regarding sexuality, will rise from the grave in one another’s company.”<sup>50</sup> And then what happens? Well, Haskin isn’t proposing “a definitive reading (I do not believe there can be one).”<sup>51</sup> But even so, he will go on, some years later, to observe that “this is a great poem about the power of a potentially adulterous

46. Empson, 87.

47. Wootton, 41.

48. Guibbory, 39.

49. Burt, 177.

50. Dayton Haskin, “On Trying to Make the Record Speak More about Donne’s Love Poems,” in *John Donne’s ‘Desire of More’: The Subject of Anne More in his Poetry*, ed. Thomas Hester (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1996), 60.

51. Haskin, “On Trying to Make the Record Speak” 60.



attraction in human life—and one that wittily suggests an astonishing intimacy between two persons who entitle one another to enjoy this fantasy as a way of enhancing that power by holding it in abeyance.”<sup>52</sup> Here is yet another way of calling “The Relic” an enigmatic text. A clear solution to the puzzle would not enhance but rather diminish the joy of reading it.

What’s wrong with mis-devotion in “The Relic”? In this case mis-devotion strikes me as authoritarian: it “doth command” and that’s why it can get the result it wants from the bishop and the king. This might be simply laughable, if it didn’t so clearly point to the arguments advanced by Cardinal Bellarmine, and cited in *Pseudo-Martyr*, in support of the pope’s right to depose temporal authorities (i.e., kings) who don’t comply with his wishes. The poem ends with an almost cheerful celebration that is clearly personal, not at all ritualistic:

but now alas,  
All measure, and all language, I should pass,  
Should I tell what a miracle she was.

I think John Carey is right when he says, “Donne is claiming that she is *more* serious than religion’s mysteries: a human wonder.”<sup>53</sup> Mis-devotion is in fact not up to the task of making the great affirmation that this special love requires.

So, now that we’ve decided to repudiate the past, what are we going to do with it? This question has preoccupied leading thinkers in our culture since Nietzsche, but it was already present in a somewhat different form in Donne’s mind. One of the answers he gave to this question was to rename the religious worship of his own past as “mis-devotion.” This configuration of the past continued to haunt him, sometimes painfully, sometimes polemically, sometimes playfully. If Donne is among our heroes, we can be grateful that it did not overcome him, that instead he learned how to make art out of the spectres that wouldn’t go away.

52. Dayton Haskin, “The Love Lyric [Songs and Sonets],” in *The Oxford Handbook of John Donne*, ed. Jeanne Shami, Dennis Flynn, and M. Thomas Hester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 200.

53. Carey, *Life, Mind and Art*, 44–45.