“This Image of My Humiliation”: Writing and Reading Embodied Illness in John Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

by Erin Boss

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-Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes

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Introduction: An Occasion for John Donne’s Devotions

The great paradox of illness is that embodied suffering is an inevitable shared experience of mortality, but at the moment suffering occurs, the embodied experience appears unshareable. Sickness is profoundly ordinary, in the sense that any one of us will experience it in multiple iterations, many times over, but each experience of sickness is unique and particular to the perceptions and interpretations of its host. When the sick patient attempts to communicate their experience, language mediates and transforms the experience. In spite of the distance created between the experience of illness and the experience of witnessing another’s illness, however, many writers turn to sickness as a motivating theme of personal narratives, as does John Donne in his prose work, Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.

Donne’s Devotions constructs a container of one speaker’s isolating experience of illness that transports the reader, through formal moves that create an extended present tense to reflect the consuming effect of illness on the body, as close as possible to the experience of illness itself. Donne wrote Devotions during an acute illness and recovery in late 1623 and published it within several weeks; believing himself to be on his deathbed with what most scholars agree was probably typhus, Donne wrote feverishly, and within the month of his convalescence, the Devotions entered the Stationers’ Register (Frost, “John Donne’s Devotions” 421; Lund 533). The work is divided into twenty-three chapters, or “stations,” each of which follows a tripartite form that begins with a “Meditation” on Donne’s physical condition and the conditions of mortality more broadly, an “Expostulation” that connects the physical to a spiritual dimension, and a “Prayer” that concludes as a sort of “becalmed petition” to God (Targoff 131). The text explores not only the physical agony of the disease’s progression and eventual remission, but
opens questions about the spiritual meaning of suffering, the presence and absence of others and of God, and the temporal location of the body and self during sickness. These questions feel universal, in the sense that the text’s readers have been, currently are, or necessarily will be ill, but simultaneously highly individual and personal.

Donne’s recursive style of tackling these philosophical quandaries affirms this universal promise of having a body: at times, it will be sick, and eventually, it will die. This condition of mortality, a result of Adam and Eve’s first transgression in the Garden of Eden, is declared in the first meditation of Devotions: “O miserable condition of man! which was not imprinted by God, who, as he is immortal himself, had put a coal, a beam of immortality into us, which we might have blown into a flame, but blew it out by our first sin … So that now, we do not only die, but die upon the rack, die by the torment of sickness” (Donne 3). For Donne, the root misery of original sin is that of mortality, and it is “multiplied” by the afflictions of sickness. The consequences of the Fall, then, are increased exponentially in the bodily suffering that so often precedes and accompanies death. Sickness becomes the crown jewel of original sin’s cursed regalia, which each person necessarily inhabits by virtue of their own incarnation.

Donne is not alone in pondering the inevitability of sickness, the greatest misery of mortality. Over three centuries later, Susan Sontag writes as the opening metaphor to her landmark work that famously critiques the ways illness becomes metaphor, “Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obligated, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place” (3). Sontag continues on to explore the ways language and the beliefs it encodes obscure the experience of illness and increase the suffering of those who are ill,
and she focuses in particular on how the illnesses of tuberculosis and cancer acquire the connotations of linguistic metaphors in which they are mired. For Sontag, the “healthiest” way to inhabit illness, which each of us must inevitably do from time to time, is to do so without the distortions begat by metaphor. Yet even Sontag’s opening lines illustrate the difficulty of communicating illness literally, without resorting to the kind of refractory language wherein “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together,” to borrow Samuel Johnson’s 18th century critique of metaphysical poetry’s conceits. Thus, thinkers such as Donne seem more inclined than Sontag to view language as a creative vehicle that itself constructs meaning rather than as a semantic barrier that obscures meaning.

The question of language’s mediation of experience is of course central to the theoretical currents of the late 20th century, and Elaine Scarry takes up the issue of pain’s incommunicability in her foundational work, *The Body in Pain*. Hearing about or reading about another’s pain is like encountering “the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth” (Scarry 3). As Scarry articulates, while the person who experiences pain encounters undeniable certainty about that pain’s presence and severity, the person who witnesses another’s pain but does not experience it firsthand encounters irrefutable doubt about that same pain’s presence and severity (4). Jessica Tabak notes that John Donne seems to anticipate Scarry’s argument in the closing meditation that concludes the narrative he has constructed of his illness: “Diseases which we never felt in ourselves come but to a compassion of others that have endured them; nay, compassion itself comes to no great degree if we have not felt in some proportion in ourselves that which we lament and condole in another” (Donne, *Devotions* 145; qtd. in Tabak 168). A witness’s understanding of another’s
suffering amounts only to “compassion,” used here in a way that indicates pity when the two parties cannot claim shared experience. The sick patient, then, is alone in their experience of suffering, alienated from witnesses by the boundaries of their own body and the gap language leaves between experience embodied and experience communicated.

Despite his claim that “compassion” could move a witness or a reader only a limited degree if they have not experienced the suffering that someone else describes, Donne moves with great effort and speed to record and publish the written account of his illness that began in November of 1623. For a writer who generally eschewed print publication and whose poetic works, during his lifetime, were predominantly circulated in manuscript form, the rush to publish was already odd; in light of the above passage within Devotions from its final Meditation, it seems even odder and raises the question of what is to be gained from the transformation of the sickness into the written word. Donne, it seems, both observes the limitations of reading about what one has never experienced, but also sees a possibility in it: the encapsulation of self through formal moves of the written word, and how this self may speak to a future reader to construct a portrait of mortal experience.

Donne’s dedicatory epistle to Prince Charles, son of King James I, outlines what I identify to be his most explicit statement of intent to publish Devotions and ties it to a description of the book as both child and as embodied surrogate. Douglas Pfeiffer notes that Renaissance humanist thinkers latched onto a Western tradition of both of these commonplaces and inserted themselves into the longstanding convention of anthropomorphizing books that stretches into antiquity (12). Donne’s dedicatory epistle describes the Devotions as a child, coming into the world with Donne in this, his third “birth” as he resurfaces from illness, as well as “this image of
my humiliation,” denoting a kind of textual surrogate through which Donne will continue to live after his mortal life.

Donne therefore asserts the ability of the Devotions to allow him to live on within his surrogate: “…as I have lived to see (not as a witness only, but as a partaker), the happiness of a part of your royal father’s time, so shall I live (in my way) to see the happiness of the times of your Highness, too, if this child of mine, inanimated by your gracious acceptation, may so long preserve alive the memory of Your Highness’ humblest and devotedest, John Donne” (Devotions 2). Donne acknowledges that he will not persist in his mortal life to witness the entirety of Charles’s reign when he ascends to the throne upon his father’s death; however, the book, offered to Charles, “may so long preserve alive the memory” of Donne. In this way, the book becomes not only Donne’s child, but his surrogate, his embodiment when his body decays.

Donne’s project in Devotions appears almost Christological. Christ inhabits a mortal body as divinity incarnate and as an extension of God the Father; read in concert with the metaphor Donne constructs in Station 17 of God the Father as the author of humanity, the book can be understood as a body. Donne, the author of this book that he also identifies as his child, inhabits its pages as the spiritual speaker of the physical words. Donne’s attempt seems Christological in the sense that Devotions creates a type of crucifixion for his body, mangled and on display for the public: “this image of my humiliation” (Devotions 2).

In my reading, the book as a textual surrogate for Donne the patient must be “inanimated” by the reader, implied as a kind of physician who must interpret the progression of the disease. In another layer to the metaphor of book as surrogate, the book becomes the body, and the reader becomes the animating spirit as she embarks on a hermeneutic dance with Donne’s linguistic account. The dedicatory epistle anticipates that he will be “inanimated” by the
addressee, Prince Charles. This use of “inanimated” reflects a now obsolete definition, to endow with life (“inanimate, v.”). In this way, the author’s everlasting life as sustained within the book is not a given, and certainly not a static presence. Instead, the author within the book must be continually resurrected and reinvented by an active readership. The letter’s sender writes the epistle, but the addressee must meet the writer in soulful rapture by expending time and mental fortitude in the act of reading. Similarly, Devotions constitutes an attempt to capture a snapshot of Donne’s body in a moment of profound suffering, but the resulting image is only brought to life by the active reading of the book’s recipients. Donne thus constructs into his writing spaces for the reader’s response.

Donne’s determination to write and publish Devotions as a public account of his illness represents a textual embodiment of his own corporal suffering, and his formal techniques for transmitting the ordeal of illness through written language serve as his greatest attempt to forge connection in the face of his sickbed’s profound isolation. I enter a scholarly conversation about the particular temporal landscape of Devotions and ground my reading of Donne’s formal moves as a response to the solitude Donne laments and the connection to others he seeks. In order to accomplish my argument, I first read the sections of Devotions where solitude echoes the most clearly alongside repeated calls for connection, then explicate Donne’s theory of written communication from sections of Devotions, his letters, and his poetry, and finally move into an exploration of how the text’s temporal fixation on the present moment evokes a particular readerly immersion and textual renewal to ensure the narrative speaker’s survival, if only in the imaginations of his readers.
“The Greatest Misery”: Donne and the Solitude of the Sickbed

“As sickness is the greatest misery, so the greatest misery of sickness is solitude…”

-Meditation 5

Donne begins the fifth meditation of Devotions with a comparative premise that is also self-contradictory: in the same way that sickness is the greatest misery, the true greatest misery, an element nested within the broader experience of sickness, is solitude. The premise constructs itself initially by conscripting the reader into its own correctness; the fact of sickness as the greatest misery is not up for debate. The first half of the sentence recalls the assertion Donne has already proven in the first meditation: “O multiplied misery! we die, and cannot enjoy death, because we die in this torment of sickness” (Devotions 3). As a result of humanity’s fallen state, death is an inevitability, but even this greatest tragedy is marred and accentuated by the bodily torment of sickness. Indeed, Donne has spent the first four meditations illustrating the agonies illness inflicts upon a mortal patient: illness strikes suddenly and seemingly randomly, reflecting the body’s cursed proclivity for unpredictable variability; with incredible speed, illness diminishes the patient in physical ability until the very senses fail; it reduces the human form, originally intended as an upright and erect testament to the firmament of heaven, to the supine or prostrate position of the sickbed, mirroring the body’s eventual position in the grave; and it annihilates the patient’s ability to think, striking down the very mind that animates the body. If removed from its context as the opening line of the fifth meditation, “sickness is the greatest misery” appears a summative statement of the Devotions to this point. Donne, however, does not permit the argument of his first four meditations the status of an independent clause, and instead, the assertion arises as a dependent claim to the subsequent conclusion of the premise: the
greatest misery of the greatest misery is, in fact, solitude. Donne returns to this point in this Station and others to explore the peculiar, layered cruelty of being sick in the midst of terrible aloneness.

Social isolation of the sick both has grounding as an early modern disease containment strategy and also flies in the face of the era’s cultural and religious practices for visiting the sick. Caitlin Holmes cites a pamphlet by 17th century physician Steven Bradwell and Anglican bishop Lancelot Andrewes as two examples of Donne’s contemporaries who advocate, publicly, that disease containment efforts should include isolation and confinement (150-151). Social interaction, however, was an important practice and carried particular significance for those who were bedridden. The Book of Common Prayer outlined the practice of the minister visiting parishioners who fell ill (Targoff 133). Certainly Donne, who was then the Dean of St. Paul’s, would have visited members of his congregation at various moments of their poor health; now that Donne himself is ill, he is therefore all too aware of the absence of others. Drawing largely from journals and personal correspondences from the mid-17th and early 18th century England, historian Olivia Weisser outlines the importance of other visitors in the early modern sick room. Attention from loved ones and visitors to the sickbed, Weisser argues, were believed to have an important positive effect on the ill patient’s recovery (108). Donne, sequestered in the deanery, is deprived of the healing benefits of loved ones attending his bedside.

In support of the vastness of solitude’s misery, the fifth Meditation illustrates how isolation is a perversion of natural order God has imposed upon his creations. Solitude is so cruel and unusual a punishment that it is “not threatened in hell itself” (Donne 26). Even in damnation, the damned are in good company, but in mortal life, those confined to the sickbed face a desolate and lonely sentence while their loved ones fear their infectiousness. Outside the bounds of hell,
in the world of mortal life, community is posited as a divine pattern, and the Meditation offers supporting examples of the trinitarian threeness of God, the creation of Eve to accompany Adam, the abundance of angels, and the sheer number of creations in the universe. Even those who hate solitude “are not solitary, for God, and Nature, and Reason concur against it” (27). Plurality is divinely harmonious, while solitude is posited as perversely discordant.

Aloneness’s proximity to emptiness appears, in Donne’s writing, as an example of the Augustinian principle of evil as privation. To Augustine, God’s declaration to Moses in Exodus 3.14, translated in the King James Version as, “I am that I am” and which Henry Bettenson translates from Augustine’s Latin as “I am HE WHO IS,” signifies God’s nature as one who exists, and supremely so. God exercises his own divine existence to bring creations from nothingness to substance, and the divine’s inherent goodness, to Augustine, means evil cannot be found in substance, all of which comes from God’s creation, but instead arises from absence, or lack of substance: “Thus to this highest existence, from which all things that are derive their existence, the only contrary nature is the non-existent. Non-existence is obviously contrary to existence. It follows that no existence is contrary to God, that is to the supreme existence and the author of all existence whatsoever” (473). If it is through God’s benevolence that all things have existence and presence, then it is in absence, in lack, that evil flourishes; lack of others’ presence leaves the patient, in their solitude, closer to emptiness and thus vulnerable to evil.

The speaker of Meditation 5 craves the return to the divine order by way of the comfort of familiar company during his time of greatest need. Herein, an additional contradiction arises. The infectiousness of the illness, which has confined Donne to his study and prevents him from attending to his own needs, also deters those who would normally lavish their care and sympathy to assist in the tasks he cannot accomplish. Here is an assertion of something undeniably human,
a fundamental pain of the fact of illness: absence of loved ones from the sickbed increases, by exponents, the misery of the ailing patient. Donne writes with venom, “When I am dead, and my body might infect, they have a remedy, they may bury me; but when I am sick, and might infect, they have no remedy but their absence, and my solitude” (Devotions 26). When dead, the infectious body can be disposed of, a simple solution, but when alive, it must be avoided, and certainly the people with whom Donne associates follow this mandate, leaving him alone. He is horribly aware of his own loneliness: “…this makes an infectious bed equal, nay, worse than a grave, that though in both I be equally alone, in my bed I know it, and feel it, and shall not in my grave” (27-28). The inhabited reality of solitude is a direct response to absence, and the longing for witnesses during a time of acute suffering colors each sentence of the Meditation’s prose.

In the absence of others, the Devotions overall focuses with a frenetic minuteness on the speaker’s self. William Ober notes the “degree of egocentrism” that permeates Donne’s Devotions, but arguably the focus on the self is at least in part a result of the destitute social situation the ill patient finds himself in. Ober observes that Donne’s wife, Anne More, had died a few years before the occasion of Donne’s illness, leaving behind two adult children and five younger children who would be orphaned if Donne had died; he then attributes the lack of family mentions or discussion of what could happen to them to the possibility that Donne accepted the illness as a demonstration of God’s will (23). In contrast with Ober’s reading, I instead view Donne’s focus on himself as an intentional textual turn to reflect the resounding loneliness of a sickbed with no visitors. Just as the “remedy” for Donne’s infectiousness is others’ absence from his side, the remedy to their absence is a textual obsession with his own solitude.

Although Donne does not offer specific mentions of his family members or other loved ones, he does contemplate others’ presence, even in their absence, and appeals for humanity’s
fundamental interconnectedness. In perhaps the most famous passage of *Devotions*, Donne hears the bells ringing and reflects:

> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were: any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee. (103)

The solitude experienced in the *Devotions* is so painful precisely because it goes against his nature as a connected being. The famous seventeenth Meditation finds its speaker considering humanity’s interdependence, and it concludes that the death of any other person presents a permanent loss to everyone else. Others will be born, but each person brings something different to the experience of this life; once someone has died, no other person can ever replicate their unique presence. Donne relates this to the collective actions of the church and the importance of the congregation. In his bed, Donne is apart from the congregation, but the sonorous ringing bells remind him of a collective presence that stands just at a distance.

> Just as the sonority of ringing travels beyond the embodied bell, reminding Donne of the interconnectedness of humanity, Donne uses the written word to transport his voice beyond the confines of his sickbed and to escape from the solitude of his illness, into a congregation of readers. Station 4 of the *Devotions* explores the idea that Donne’s thoughts can reach beyond the confines of his corporeal isolation in the deanery. In the Meditation, Donne imagines the body as a world unto itself, and himself as its creator. Just as humans are God’s creations, Donne’s thoughts are his creatures: “...my thoughts reach all, comprehend all. Inexplicable mystery; I their creator am in a close prison, in a sickbed, anywhere, and any one of my creatures, my
thoughts, is with the sun, and beyond the sun, overtakes the sun, and overgoes the sun in one pace, one step, everywhere” (19-20). The greatest threat to his thoughts is posed by the disease, portrayed as a monster or demon; the etymology of “monster,” with its root in the Latin “monstrum,” denotes a portent or omen of an oncoming disaster (“monster, n., adv., and adj.”). The metaphor of writing down his “creatures” as a way of preserving them from the monstrous portent disease may bring illustrates Donne’s attempt to preserve his physical body in the material form of the book before death enacts its decay. As Donne externalizes and preserves his meditations, and readies them to be shared with others, he forges the very sort of communion he lacks from his sickbed.

“Of One Author”: Writing and Connection to the Congregation of Readers

“…all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated…”

-Meditation 17

Writing and publishing the Devotions permits Donne to achieve his most profound act of reaching others, and he undertook the task expeditiously; he composed the text rapidly, writing during late November and December 1623, and published it at the beginning of January 1624 (Frost, “John Donne’s Devotions 430). As the dean of St. Paul’s, Donne was certainly accustomed to writing sermons to preach regularly to his congregation, but Mary Ann Lund observes that even though Donne engaged in a regular practice of crafting sermons of 7,000 to 10,000 words, the speed with which he composed Devotions was extraordinary (533). Donne’s
punctuality indicates the seriousness of his endeavor to send his recorded experience into the world.

The act of writing and its implied readership also appear, to Donne, to be essential to his recovery. Later in the same essay, Lund, illustrating how Donne marks time and place during the period of his convalescence, quotes a letter Donne wrote to an unnamed Lord that accompanied a copy of the newly-published *Devotions*. The letter compares life to the written word and its grammar and identifies writing as an essential component to Donne’s healing:

It [life] is like a Sentence, so much as may be uttered in a breathing: and such a difference as is in Styles, is in our lives, contracted and dilated. And as in some Styles, there are open Parentheses, Sentences within Sentences; so there are lives, within our lives. I am in such a Parenthesis now (in a convalescence) when I thought my self verie near my period. God brought me into a low valley, and from thence shewed me high Jerusalem, upon so high a hill, as that he thought it fit to bid me stay, and gather more breath. This I do, by meditating, by expostulating, by praying; for, since I am barred of my ordinarie diet, which is Reading, I make these my exercises, which is another part of Physick. And these meditations, and expostulations, and prayers, I am bold to send to your Lordship.

(Donne qtd. in Lund 541)

While Lund analyzes the passage with a focus on “parenthesis” as the site of convalescence, the letter also introduces writing overall as a metaphor for life and a practice toward health. The way Donne endeavors to “gather more breath” is precisely through the written words of his *Devotions*. The text addresses both audiences with whom Donne hopes to connect: God and his social sphere. Throughout *Devotions*, Donne addresses God directly, and the text thus functions as a direct line of communication between himself and the divine, but through its publication and
dissemination with others, Donne also connects with the social congregation from whom he has been isolated.

Frost observes that this same letter to the unnamed lord “plays upon elements of structure and discourse in the book,” and she thus observes the convention of metaphorizing language that recurs throughout *Devotions* (*Holy Delight* 43). In particular, Donne returns to the image of the book and its grammar as a metaphor for time; Meditation 14 reflects on time and its ephemerality by relating it specifically to the linear flow of a sentence:

If this imaginary, half-nothing time, be of the essence of our happinesses, how can they be thought durable? Time is not so; how can they be thought to be? Time is not so; not so considered in any of the parts thereof. If we consider eternity, into that time never entered; eternity is not an everlasting flux of time, but time is a short parenthesis in a long period; and eternity had been the same as it is, though time had never been. (83)

Donne uses the syntax of language to portray human life, and it is therefore absolutely essential that this contemplation occurs within the written word itself, so that the book can become Donne’s surrogate. Thomas Festa identifies Meditation 14 as “a self-conscious reflection on writing” that correlates to the seventeenth Meditation’s metaphor of the Last Judgment as God, figured as an author, binding together scattered pages (378). It is this very self-conscious reflection on writing that allows Donne to find a way of escaping his solitude by sending his other self into the world in the form of a book.

Writing becomes a practice of moving toward community, but also offers a metaphor of togetherness in the image of humanity as a book authored by God. In the seventeenth Meditation’s great declaration of interconnectedness, Donne contemplates the actions of the church concerning others as actions that also concern him, since the religious congregation is one
community united in God. God is then compared to an author who writes the lives of mortals as chapters in a book; translation into another language describes the movement of the soul from the body to heaven after death (Devotions 102). The placement of this analogy right before Donne’s assertion that “No man is an island” signifies that the writing act is symbolically important to connectivity, and the metaphor binds together God, the author, and humanity, the chapters of the book. Donne’s most significant moment of resolution between his feeling of solitude and desire for company during his illness thus occurs in the explicit comparison to writing itself.

Writing as a connective practice finds additional grounding in the personal correspondences Donne carried on throughout his life. Donne’s explicit stance on the metaphysics of written communication emerges perhaps most clearly in his letters. In a letter to his friend Sir Henry Goodyer, Donne compares the delivery of his letters to the delivery of the very essence of himself:

I send not my Letters as tribute, nor interest, nor recompense, nor for commerce, nor as testimonials of my love, nor provokers of yours, nor to justifie my custome of writing, nor for a vent and utterance of my meditations; for my Letters are either above or under all such offices; yet I write very affectionately, and I chide and accuse my self of diminishing that affection which sends them, when I ask my self why: onely I am sure that I desire that you might have in your hands Letters of mine of all kindes, as conveyances and deliverers of me to you, whether you accept me as a friend, or as a patient, or as a penitent, or as a beadsman, for I decline no jurisdiction, or refuse any tenure. (Donne, Letters 94)
The professed objective of Donne’s written correspondence is to convey and deliver himself to his addressee, and the idea that his words are able to transport his soul to his addressee appears in his other works. Indeed, Donne’s well-known verse letter to Sir Henry Wotton begins, “Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls, / For thus, friends absent speak.” The arrival of the letter heralds the arrival of the writer’s soul, embodied in the written word, and the reader’s interaction with the ghostly voice of the letter engenders an intimacy between souls that even the physically intimate act of kissing cannot attain. Written communication, in this instance, achieves a greater togetherness than even sexual passion.

An important detail of Donne’s above letter to Goodyer is the comparison of the writer as “patient,” a move that constructs a physician/patient relationship to metaphorize the reader/writer relationship. The writer transcribes their thoughts into words in the form of a letter, just as the patient transforms their symptoms into words to share with the physician; the reader interprets the letter, just as the physician interprets the symptoms. The implication of the reader as physician is particularly significant since physicians are the only visitors Donne receives during his acute illness of 1623.

Although the fifth station of the Devotions recounts Donne’s solitude throughout its Meditation and Expostulation, it also records the first appearance of Donne’s personal physician at his bedside. Caitlin Holmes notes that the chapter is titled in Latin, “Solus adest,” which translates roughly to, “He is present alone,” but is subtitled contradictingly, in English, “The Physician Comes” (Holmes 163). It is in fact Donne’s solitude in the sickbed that necessitates the visit of the worldly physician but that also best prepares him, spiritually, for the visitation of the spiritual physician, God; in addition, the solitude of illness propels Donne to creatively transmit
his suffering by way of the published word to an implied third physician, the reader. These three physicians each offer something unique.

Donne has ruminated in the fourth Meditation, however, on his anxieties about calling the physician at all, and this section provides a basis for interpreting “physician” as both doctor and God. It perturbs Donne that some animals seem to have an instinct for consuming healing herbs, but humankind has no such instinct and must rely on the expertise of a physician when sickness strikes (20). Donne experiences further anxiety that seeking the advice of a physician, over the teachings of the Lord, is a blasphemy; he cites the story of Asa Baasha, King of Israel, who “sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians” (2 Chronicles 16:12). He ameliorates his concern by citing Ecclesiasticus, wherein the writer admonishes, “Then give a place to the physician, for the Lord hath created him; let him not go from thee, for thou hast need of him” (Ecclus 38:12; qtd in Donne, Devotions 22-23). Donne concludes the expostulation with a confession that he longs for the physician’s “presence” but still puts his faith in the power of God to heal him (23).

The Prayer of Station 4 thus introduces the idea that “physician,” to Donne, carries two meanings: the medical practitioner, who offers bodily care, and God himself, who offers spiritual care. In this duality of meaning, the idea of the “physician” bridges Donne’s concerns about his social isolation, with the physician being his only visitor, and with the possibility of the spiritual “visitation” from God.

This dual meaning of physician also finds canonical grounding in the scriptural instance where Christ identifies himself as a metaphorical physician. In the Gospel of Mark’s record of Christ’s ministry in Capernaum, Jesus receives criticism for the company he keeps, and he justifies his actions as always oriented toward those who need him most:
And when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Mark 2:16-17)

Christ uses the analogy of a physician, who is most needed when ill, to describe his own ministry, which is most needed by those who are “sinners.” This New Testament passage is implicitly present in Stations 4 and 5 of the Devotions. Certainly Donne’s critical illness is a moment he identifies as his greatest need of attention from both the physician of the body and the physician of the soul.

I propose that the image of the physician carries a third implied meaning in what Donne insists the reader must do as they engage with the text. Donne writes his experience of illness in the Devotions, but the reader must observe it, carefully, and re-member the experience, just as the physician observes, with diligence, Donne’s disease at the beginning of the sixth Meditation. Indeed, Donne himself employs an interpretive method to his own illness in Prayer 7, in effect modeling what not only the medical physician must do to his body, but what the reader must do to the text. He addresses God and speculates if his illness is a “correction” for his former sins or a mercy to bring him back into line, and he employs interpretive reading and translation as a metaphor to describe his mental deliberation:

Let me think no degree of this thy correction casual, 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 original, and which is the translation; whether thy mercy or thy correction were thy primary and original intention in this
sickness, I cannot conclude, though death conclude me; for as it must necessarily appear to be a correction, so I can have no greater argument of thy mercy, than to die in thee and by that death to be united to him who died for me. (Devotions 45)

Here Donne enacts the kind of interpretive model he expects of his readers. It may be impossible for a reader to conclude the “original intention” in the text, but regarding the text from multiple angles, considering multiple meanings, seems part of the work of a devoted reader, even bringing them into a kind of union with the writer. The healing potential of the reader’s work is also implicit, since the physician must observe the patient’s symptoms to find ways of alleviating suffering and conceivably curing the affliction. Likewise, the reader reconstructs Donne’s written experience and, in doing so, offers a healing potential to the multiplied misery of the patient’s isolation.

This third metaphorical meaning of “physician,” denoting the reader, adds intrigue to Donne’s decision to publish the Devotions in print. In a fashion similar to his contemplation over the necessity of calling the earthly physician, Donne contemplates, in the dedicatory epistle to Devotions, whether it would be “enough, that God hath seen my devotions,” echoing his longtime habit of avoiding print publication. Parallel to Donne’s hesitation to call the medical physician is Donne’s hesitation to publish in print. Indeed, Donne’s 1611 prose work Ignatius His Conclave includes a note from “The Printer to the Reader” that makes clear the author’s reluctance to put his work into print:

Doest thou seek after the Author? It is in vain; for hee is harder to be found than the parents of Popes were in the old times: yet if thou have an itch of guessing, receive from me so much, as a friend of his, to whom he sent his booke to bee read, writ to me. “The Author was unwilling to have this booke published, thinking it unfit both for the matter
which in it selfe is weighty and serious, and for that gravity which himself had proposed and observed in an other booke formerly published, to descend to this kinde of writing… At last he yielded, and made mee owner of his booke, which I send to you to be delivered over to forraine nations, (a) farre from the father: and (as his desire is) (b) his last in this kinde. (333)

While some scholars have argued that Donne withheld his work as a result of an attitude about the baseness of the reading public, favoring instead the elitism of his close circles, Kate Frost offers a correction that, instead, Donne was discriminatory about which works reached print publication due to his own “knowledgeable respect for the power of print, paying close attention to those efforts he deemed publishable and withholding others as either unwise or unworthy” (Holy Delight 39). It is not, therefore, the reading public that Donne felt unworthy of his poems, but instead his poems unworthy of mass readership.

The necessity of these readers/physicians is illustrated in Donne’s seventh Expostulation. Donne contemplates the apostle Paul’s imprisonment in Rome and the fact that the apostle’s only regular visitor was Luke, whose occupation was one as a physician (2 Tim. 4.11). Donne justifies this visitor and takes it a step further to argue that if one was good, more would potentially be better: “We take Saint Luke to have been a physician, and it admits the application the better that in the presence of one good physician we may be glad of more” (Devotions 42). The way Donne can ensure these visitations is to send his words into the world, just as he does his personal letters.

Donne leaves behind a legacy of epistolary correspondence that upholds the importance he places on this kind of communication through the repeated theme of delivering himself to his addressee. Arthur Marotti’s chapter for The Cambridge Companion to John Donne argues that
Donne, in his letters, exercises a particular self-reflexivity that makes explicit both his relationship to the letter’s addressee and the epistolary form itself, and these moments of “metacommunication” can be coagulated to piece together “a theory of epistolary communication that applies to much of Donne’s other writing” (40). Marotti goes so far as to cite one of Donne’s letters to Sir T. Lucey, in which Donne begins, “this writing of letters ... is a kind of extasie, and a departure and secession and suspension of the soul, which doth then communicate it self to two bodies” (Letters 11) and argues that “the letter, for Donne, most closely approached his dream of perfect communication” (Marotti 40). The very form of the letter, to Donne, offers the best opportunity of closing the gap between speaker and listener. The words on the page, imbued with the soul of the writer, commune with the consciousness of an active reader to induce a kind of alchemical relationship.

Applying what Marotti names as Donne’s theory of epistolary communication to Donne’s other genres occurs perhaps most obviously in his poem “The Ecstasy,” in which the possibility of souls’ communion outside of bodies, expressed in the letters to Goodyer and Wotton, and the very language of the letter to Lucey come together within the poetic landscape. In the act of writing a letter, Donne sends his words beyond his bodily limitations to be received by a loved one; in “The Ecstasy,” the poetic speaker and a lover lie silently side by side while their souls, disembodied, hold a conversation in which the physical distance between “I” and “thou” disappears, and the two personages instead become “we.” The souls align so perfectly in meaning and voice that an imagined eavesdropper figured in the poem is unable to distinguish the words of one from the other. Lynne Magnusson observes that this poem “highlights how the premises of a language constantly condition and constrain not only mimesis, or how anything so unusual as an ‘extasie’ can be represented, but also communication, or how intersubjective
dialogue can be effectively conducted” (185). Magnusson particularly observes the poem’s distinction between what she calls “body” talk, and the limits of ordinary conversation, with the radical oneness of “soul” talk. Linguistic friction, the possibility of misinterpretation, and the other bumbles of language disappear in this mystical state of rapture that transports souls beyond their fleshly boundaries.

Donne’s theory of communication, articulated in his letters and extended as a thematic concept in his poetic work, raises the question of difference of form when applied to his *Devotions*. A personal letter is composed under a particular rhetorical situation of the writer directly addressing a specific intended audience. Similarly, “The Ecstasy” depicts two poetic personages who have a preexisting relationship and manage a synchronized out-of-body experience. A print publication such as *Devotions* finds public readership across time and space with no relationship to Donne; thus, how can he possibly expect the kind of intimacy he engenders within friendship and love in his personal life? I believe the idea is transferable because of the very similarities in Donne’s epistles and *Devotions*. Marotti notes the frequency with which Donne refers to his letters as “meditations” (41). Far from focusing on interpersonal news and gossip, Donne’s letters offer him an opportunity to speculate philosophically with friends and intellectuals. In a parallel, writing *Devotions* offers Donne the opportunity to speculate on his mortal condition and connect it to a litany of philosophical quandaries. Unlike his letters, however, the print publication of *Devotions* opens his work to a wide readership. Donne’s private illness suddenly becomes public spectacle, but the reward is to enter himself back into the community of the faithful from which his infectiousness has exiled him.

The radical possibility that Donne’s written *Devotions* can transport his soul beyond the solitude of his sickbed, in a parallel to how the lovers in “The Ecstasy” reach rapture outside of
their bodies, clearly has a hold on the isolated speaker who suffers alone in illness. Donne was famously scrupulous about the dissemination of his writing and generally refrained from print publication; indeed, Marotti is well known for identifying Donne as a coterie poet whose verse was circulated mainly among a small circle of intellectuals. Donne, in a nod to the possibility that print publication is a gratuitous gesture, writes in the dedicatory epistle to *Devotions*, “It might be enough, that God hath seen my devotions” (2). Donne seems to speculate that God is a more-than-adequate audience, but he continues on to justify its publication: “but examples of good kings are commandments; and Hezekiah writ the meditations of his sickness, after his sickness” (2). Frost, interpreting the dedicatory epistle along with the letters that accompanied early copies of Donne’s *Devotions*, argues that his decision to publish it aligned with his rationale for publishing sermons, in that it contained instructional value as well as speaking to the conflict between the English and Roman churches, topics that carry public religious implications. In addition, she argues that *Devotions* assumes “a structure that refers directly to Donne himself—to the structure of his life, his role within the church, his place within God's universe” (*Holy Delight* 45). The form of the prose work itself denotes a kind of embodiment, a possibility that the book can become a vessel for his soul and thus offer a relief from sickness’s solitude.

The idea that the author of *Devotions* speaks from the words he has written feels notably contrary to the standpoint of 21st century readers who have passed through the seeming event horizon of last century’s high theory. Any structuralist or poststructuralist student is likely to combat the notion that Donne comes alive through his text by pointing to Roland Barthes: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142). Whereas to
Barthes, the author dies in the act of writing, to Donne, the act of writing is the very thing that brings him to life.

The image of the book as a living, breathing entity, particularly one that holds the spirit of its author, feels largely unfamiliar in the 21st century, but it was certainly a 17th century commonplace. Writing two decades after the publication of Donne’s *Devotions*, John Milton expresses the life contained within the book in his argument against print censorship, *Areopagitica*: “Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a viol the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them” (492). This particular use of “potencie” is cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the “potential” for life (“potency, n.”); what can ignite this possibility is the reader’s action of taking up the book. The reader’s mental activity of performing the text combined with the writer’s “living intellect” that created the text breathe life into the book’s activity.

The possibility of soulful, communicative rapture between the writer and a diffuse audience is most likely, to Donne, in the invitation to the reader into the difficult act of reading a work that demands presence, attention, and persistence even in the face of intellectual gymnastics. Magnusson, examining Donne’s poetry, letters, and sermons, argues that “linguistic code itself – the particularities of early modern English and especially of its grammar – is an important part of the context shaping Donne’s verbal performance” (185). The syntactical structure of Donne’s writing, in Magnusson’s view, allows him to craft a communication with the reader as much as the meanings of the words themselves.

Returning to Donne’s expression of doubt in the twenty-third Meditation, cited in my introductory section, I in fact argue that Donne’s syntax and formal moves craft communication
with the reader more effectively than his words. Since a description of a disease will elicit nothing but compassion, which “itself comes to no great degree if we have not felt in some proportion in ourselves that which we lament and condole in another,” Donne must construct another method of inviting the reader to inanimate his text (Devotions 145). It seems that the nineteenth Station offers an interpretive key.

Meditation 19 opens with Donne’s team of physicians themselves becoming “patients, patiently attending when they should see any land in this sea, any earth, any cloud, any indication of concoction in these waters” (Donne, Devotions 116). Again, Donne’s play on physicians and patients makes its appearance. The use of “patient,” in this sense, plays on its use as a noun and on multiple definitions of the word as an adjective that means exercising patience as one must do in calm periods of waiting and in enduring pain (“patient, adj. and n.”). The physicians must be quietly watchful of Donne as he endures his illness, but they must also, to some degree, endure the pain alongside him as they attempt to interpret his symptoms.

Straightforward description, however, seems inadequate to communicate the full depth of experience. Donne instead metaphorizes the watchful period of time described in Meditation 19, and in the Expostulation that follows, he expresses metaphor as a divine method of God:

My God, my God, thou art a direct God, may I not say a literal God, a God that wouldst be understood literally and according to the plain sense of all that thou sayest? but thou art also (Lord, I intend it to thy glory, and let no profane interpreter abuse it to thy diminution), thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God too: a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious elocutions, so retired and so reserved expressions,
so commanding persuasions, so persuading commandments, such sinews even in thy milk, and such things in thy words, as all profane authors seem of the seed of the serpent that creeps, thou art the Dove that flies. Oh, what words but thine can express the inexpressible texture and composition of thy word… (Devotions 118)

Certainly Donne reads the word of God as literal and “plain,” but he also observes the interpretive layers that arise from the very artistry of God’s language. It is only if the meanings of the words are read in concert with the figurative nature of language and the text’s formal decisions that the reader can appreciate the “inexpressible texture.” To express the inexpressible, to bring the physician into accompaniment with the patient on the long voyage of illness, to create a space between the lines where writer and reader can spiritually commune, Donne must also operate not only literally, but through the very form of his composition.

“This Unnatural, Natural Day”: Devotions and the Protracted Present

“…dost thou take away all consideration, all distinction of days?”

-Expostulation 14

If Donne recognizes that the reader/physician will always have some degree of doubt regarding the description of the writer’s/patient’s symptoms, the challenge then becomes for Devotions to locate some way of transmitting the experience of illness that does not merely rely on a description of the physical symptoms of illness. Instead, as in “The Ecstasy,” the writing must create a space where the very spirit of the ill writer can transcend the isolation of the sickbed and commune with the spirit of the reader. As Donne writes in the dedicatory epistle, Prince Charle’s “gracious acception” has the possibility to inanimate the words. The reader
therefore undertakes the responsibility of breathing life into the container of the book, in the same way that, to Donne, the spirit animates the body. If the reader is the animating spirit, the book is the ill body, and the formal elements of the text construct a surrogate of the patient’s physical suffering. Most prominently, Donne’s attention to verb tense recreates a temporal dislocation in the perceived prolongation of the present moment that, as the reader moves from page to page, recreates the patient’s sense of illness’s perpetuity.

I want to return, for a moment, to the letter Donne sent to the unnamed lord with an early copy of Devotions, in which Donne writes, “And as in some Styles, there are open Parentheses, Sentences within Sentences; so there are lives, within our lives” (Donne qtd. in Lund 541). Donne’s sickness and convalescence is such a life within a life, an interruption in the ordinary flow of mortal days. As sickness descends on the body, the patient becomes suspended within a sudden “parenthesis” nested within the figurative sentences of life. Whereas healthy time might be understood as a continuous movement of one sentence to another as they build a paragraph, illness is instead an abrupt aside that halts the progression of the narrative. To demarcate this rupture, Devotions brings the reader into an indeterminate interval where the present tense dominates, subordinating past and future as it elicits the forever-now of illness.

The concept of illness’s sense of suspended time lurks at the very surface of Devotions. Anne Boyer, in an essay exploring the displacement in time she felt during her cancer treatments in 2014, enters a conversation with Donne’s Devotions set within her own illness’s “longue durée.” Boyer writes of her own need to track the strange passage of time during illness by marking off a calendar on her wall, comparing her X’s to “prisoner’s tallies,” and declaring that she “looked for any accounting system that would be a way to wrangle the days, many of which I can’t remember” (191). Sick time to Boyer is nebulous, in many ways refusing the logic of
quotidian delineation, and she relates her experience to what Donne calls “this imaginary, half-nothing time” (*Devotions* 83). Yet Boyer observes that even the title of Donne’s work “has an argument that illness is, among other things, a set of temporal events. What occasions have emerged are a symptom, two symptoms, a physician, two physicians, a panic, a death, or a cure” (194). Although these occasions invariably happen in illness’s duration, they don’t mark the ordinary progression one would expect of life’s milestones, which might be observed with anything from a weekly church service to annual holidays. Instead, events of the disease constitute an embodied experience in which, to Boyer, “time acquires a compelling texture for the sick” (195). Donne enacts this texture in his very disavowal of time’s warped and distorted substance as felt from the vantage point of the sickbed.

Boyer is not alone in observing Donne’s project of reproducing the texture of sick time in *Devotions*; scholars have noted the centrality of time to the very structure of the prose work. Clara Lander has argued that the significance of the twenty-three Stations is that they correspond to the number of days of John Donne’s acute illness, and that the Meditation, Expostulation, and Prayer correspond to morning, afternoon, and evening of each day (90). Frost offers a correction that Landers’s speculation is based in “doubtful historicity” but that “her perception of an underlying framework to the *Devotions* that is based on symbolic number and the progression of time is accurate” (*Holy Delight* 109). In contrast with Lander’s reading of the Stations as a literal progression of twenty-three days, Frost notes the prose’s creation of “an extended sense of the present time” and the rarity of the text’s use of past tense (*Holy Delight* 138). For Frost, the correspondence of the Stations to literal days is far less important than the way Donne recreates illness’s uncertain period of stasis that feels so distinct from the typical trajectory of his life.
Like Frost, I read *Devotions* as an illustration of a sick man’s suspension in mortality, frozen in the liminality of the isolated sickbed, as opposed to an account of the literal passing of days that accompanied his illness. My reading largely aligns with that of Ramie Targoff, who notes the “immersion” into which the *Devotions* plunges the reader as it recreates “the pressure of the disease” within the writing itself (137). To Targoff, Donne writes the account of his illness in a way that mirrors the quality of illness “as a bodily experience in its deceleration of the present so that each hour of the day can seem endless in its tedium or pain” (145). Tabak adds to this reading in her interpretation of the disordered temporal narrative of *Devotions*. Tabak views the difficulty of Donne’s written forms as a method meant not only to reflect his own mental anguish, but to recreate in the reader the difficulties he experiences throughout his illness (168). In other words, what Targoff calls “the pressure of the writing” evokes, in Tabak’s reading, a symptom of pained difficulty in the reader that emulates the bodily suffering and subsequent temporal dislocation experienced by the text’s speaker in the throes of illness.

The very opening lines of Donne’s first Meditation inaugurate the scrambled temporality of the ill body through its sudden tense change from past tense – a rare occurrence in the *Devotions* – to the present tense: “This minute I was well, and am ill, this minute” (*Devotions* 3). “I was well” operates as a simple statement of the state of health the speaker used to occupy. The simple past tense’s implication that wellness is contained in a previous iteration of self is complemented by the second predicate succeeding the comma, “and am ill,” which inaugurates a new tense and, with it, a new state of being that the speaker will inhabit for the remainder of the *Devotions*. The substance of the sentence almost implies “used to be” and “currently,” but these modifiers are not included. The repeated adverbial phrase, “this minute,” destabilizes the sense
of the moment indicated and its position in either the past or the present. These temporal stations appear, in fact, to be the same.

Timothy Harrison provides a reading of this line as a reflection of Donne’s philosophical framework of time, rooted in the ancient Greek question of the instant of change. Harrison describes the ancient philosophical dilemma of locating the instant when change occurs by providing the example of a body changing from rest to movement: “It is unclear at what point in time that change took place, since it did not occur when the body was resting and it has already occurred when the body is moving” (910). If the instant of change is an indistinguishable moment, then it is impossible to locate the precise minute Donne changed from well to ill; indeed, Harrison reads the same opening lines of Meditation 1 as illness and wellness occurring in the same “minute” (923). “This minute” becomes an unidentifiable point in time that Donne shifted from the wellness of the past into the illness of the present. Instantaneously, it seems, the present moment has transformed him from the healthy version of himself into the ill version of himself.

The second Meditation expounds on Donne’s assertion of the quickness of illness’s transformation by demonstrating precisely what transformation he means and using spoken language as the very metaphor for its speed. Donne contrasts humanity’s changes from one emotional state to another, induced by any number of feelings, with the change of one physical state to another, induced by illness:

Man, who is the noblest part of the earth, melts so away, as if he were a statue, not of earth, but of snow. We see his own envy melts him, he grows lean with that; he will say, another’s beauty melts him; but he feels that a fever doth not melt him like snow, but pour him out like lead, like iron, like brass melted in a furnace; it doth not only melt him,
but calcine him, reduce him to atoms, and to ashes; not to water, but to lime. And how quickly? Sooner than thou canst receive an answer, sooner than thou canst conceive the question … (Devotions 8)

This passage explicates humankind’s variable condition claimed in the first Meditation. Humanity’s emotional state is subject to the alterations of envy or desire and compared to the gentle melting of snow into water, a process that maintains the integrity of the original element and merely changes its form. In contrast, physical illness transforms the patient’s very being. The body’s susceptibility to disease results not only in a melting of form, but in an elemental reduction “to ashes,” recalling the Order for the Burial of the Dead in the Book of Common Prayer, to be recited as earth is cast upon the deceased body: “We therfore committe hys bodye to the grounde, earthe, to earthe ashes, to ashes, dust, to dust, in sure, and certein hope of resurrection to eternall lyfe.” Physical illness, in other words, fulfills the promise of the Fall, that “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3.19). Importantly, the text highlights Donne’s rhetorical question of how quickly the elemental transformation of a living body to a sick body may occur. He offers the immediate response, “Sooner than thou canst receive an answer, sooner than thou canst conceive the question.” A simple comma splices the first assertion, that the bodily transformation happens sooner than a linguistic answer appears, from the second assertion, that in fact, the speaker can no sooner imagine the question itself than the transformation has occurred; the comma may represent a mere breath, the quickness with which the speaker changes his mind in how to describe the transformation’s speed. In this instance, the speaker’s use of the present tense seems to contain both an implied future (“When will the transformation occur?”) and an inherent past (“It has already happened”), coming to represent an all-consuming yet ephemeral “now.”
This present tense’s effect on the reader recalls the passage from Meditation 14 in which Donne deliberates on the quickness with which one moment passes into another. The present inherently implies a future that will eventually materialize, but the present also slips nearly instantaneously into the past, marking its own ephemerality:

All things are done in some place; but if we consider place to be no more but the next hollow superficies of the air, alas! how thin and fluid a thing is air, and how thin a film is a superficies, and a superficies of air! All things are done in time too, but if we consider time to be but the measure of motion, and howsoever it may seem to have three stations, past, present, and future, yet the first and last of these are not (one is not now, and the other is not yet), and that which you call present, is not now the same that it was when you began to call it so in this line (before you sound that word present, or that monosyllable now, the present and the now is past). (Devotions 83)

The present is so fleeting that it appears impossible to distinguish it from the immediate future or past. In writing, however, Donne creates a kind of preservation of the present that recreates in the reader moments which have indeed passed, moments which are “not,” but that also hint at the possibility of a cyclical future that in fact relapses into the past. The present’s impermanence contrasts with illness’s perceived perpetuity, even while the repeated use of the present extends illness’s suspension in an otherwise straightforward progression of days.

The days of illness bleed into one another, and Donne observes that illness’s time cannot be rushed. In the nineteenth Meditation, Donne compares the period of illness to periods of waiting; physicians wait to see land, figured as the convalescence, in the midst of a stormy voyage, figured as the sickness. The disease is then portrayed as a fruit whose ripeness cannot be rushed, and Donne questions why they should choose to look for any kind of regular progression
“in a disease, which is the disorder, the discord, the irregularity, the commotion and rebellion of the body? It were scarce a disease if it could be ordered and made obedient to our times” (Devotions 116). Even nature, says Donne, whose forward movement through the seasons reflects the perfection of divine creation, cannot be rushed by human desire. If the natural seasons, which themselves need to follow the course set before them, resist acceleration or deferral, it seems to follow that the disease, which follows no predictable course of progression, falls outside the control of both its patients and physicians. Donne’s affirmation of disease’s disordered nature reflects a pious acceptance of either recovery or death on God’s timeline, a mystery shrouded in the time of illness.

Donne’s acceptance and submission here reflects the oft-cited poetic dictation in Ecclesiastes: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Eccles. 3.1). Donne seems to accept that there will be a time for his death, just as there has been a time for his birth (Eccles. 3.2). The task of both writer and reader is to sit in the doldrums until a new wind fills the sails. In the nineteenth Prayer that follows this Station’s metaphors of waiting, Donne writes his acceptance of God’s timeline: “… Whether thou do the work of a thousand years in a day or extend the work of a day to a thousand years, as long as thou workest, it is light and comfort. Heaven itself is but an extension of the same joy; and an extension of this mercy, to proceed at thy leisure, in the way of restitution, is a manifestation of heaven to me here upon earth” (124). As the critical days of illness pass and Donne experiences his strength begin to return to him, he recognizes that God alone has control over the timeline of his recovery – a healing at God’s “leisure” – and writes toward a spiritual presence near the end of his sickness’s solitude.
The same quotation’s observations that whether God “do the work of a thousand years in a day or extend the work of a day to a thousand years” offers an additional interpretive lens to Donne’s protracted present tense. The illness defies the well person’s sense of time passing, and one day may feel like a prolonged series of years, or, alternatively, years may pass in the blink of an eye. For the reader, the actual duration of Donne’s illness is unclear, since, as Frost notes, *Devotions* contains few explicit references to time in the external world (*Holy Delight* 138). The reader is thus brought into the turbulent temporality of the 17th century disease until, near the end of *Devotions*, Donne begins to hope that he moves toward recovery.

Even convalescence, however, cannot banish the sense of illness’s persistence, and Donne spends the final, twenty-third Station contemplating the possibility of relapse. Again, a protracted present moment arises in the final Meditation as Donne recalls the watchful waiting of a patient who has mourned “through all those long days (days and nights, so long as that Nature herself shall seem to be perverted, and to have put the longest day, and the longest night, which should be six months asunder, into one natural, unnatural day)” (*Devotions* 145-146). The period of illness becomes one amorphous block of time that concentrates the experience of the summer solstice’s longest day with the winter solstice’s longest night. All distinctions between the “occasions” of which Donne has written seem to blur into one behemoth of a day.

Although the disease appears to have elapsed into the past tense, Donne writes of his fear of relapse and the dangers it would bring. The twenty-third Station, rounding out the *Devotions*, in fact brings the reader back to the very beginning, where the “this minute” appears reversed but unstable. Whereas Meditation 1 found the speaker ill, despite being well a moment ago, Meditation 23 finds him well, despite being ill a moment ago. Donne even resurrects the opening
idea from the first Station of health as a “long and regular work” that is maintained by meat, drink, air, and exercise (Devotions 3). He writes in the twenty-third Station, “Though you have by physic and diet raked up the embers of your disease, still there is a fear of a relapse; and the greater danger is in that” (145). The memory of illness haunts the patient, who can’t help but contemplate the possibility of its return, and the past therefore haunts the future.

The twenty-third Prayer completes the cyclical temporality and extended present of Devotions by repeating the “this minute” of the opening line even as he enumerates his fear of relapse. Donne appeals to God to extend mercy and preserve the forward trajectory of his physical health and spiritual fortitude:

Since therefore thy correction hath brought me to such a participation of thyself (thyself, O my God, cannot be parted), to such an entire possession of thee, as that I durst deliver myself over to thee this minute, if this minute thou wouldst accept my dissolution, preserve me, O my God, the God of constancy and perseverance, in this state, from all relapses into those sins which have induced they former judgments upon me. (Devotions 151)

The “this minute” in which Donne hopes to be preserved is finally one of wellness. The reciprocity of the written word in Donne’s epistolary theory of communication is illustrated again here, since Donne delivers himself to God, but the preservation of Donne’s current state is dependent on God’s acceptance, just as the preservation of his textual surrogate in the Devotions is dependent on the recipient’s “gracious acceptation.”

The move to send Devotions to the printers, rather than letting the work stand as a private entreaty between himself and God, implies the very necessity of a public readership to extend this acceptation. Donne wishes for God to preserve him in health, and he also wishes for his
book to preserve his surrogate in the world, long past his death. The fulfillment of his desire, however, is, as always, dependent on the reader’s participation.

**Conclusion: Textual Afterlife**

It is fitting that the final Prayer returns the reader to the first Meditation; the textual decisions that mirror one another in each of these sections enact Donne’s project of preserving himself in the surrogate of his book. If the reader so chooses to turn back to the beginning of the *Devotions*, as the twenty-third Station structurally bids her to do, then the forever-now of illness finds itself in an eternal return, constantly replaying the public display Donne offers of his sick body. The potential for new readers, or for old readers to return to the text multiple times, enlivens the image Donne leaves behind. Indeed, Targoff speculates that a central intention of *Devotions* is to record “a narrative of sickness and recovery that can, in every reading, be renewed” (153). Each reading, in turn, transports the ill speaker and the physician/reader from the depth of the disease’s critical days to the brink of convalescence, and regardless of the number of times this protracted present moment is rehearsed, it always finds the speaker once again recovering, once again concerned about the possibility of relapse.

The reader may do well to remember where the third chapter of Ecclesiastes lands on God’s temporal position: “That which hath been is now; and that which is to be hath already been; and God requireth that which is past.” (Eccles. 3.15). To Donne, God’s eternity has no place for the “imaginary half-nothing” of time, and the difference between centuries becomes negligible. In divine eternity, a reader who encounters *Devotions* in 2023 is transported to that same container in which the 1623 writer composes each line. Each reader who animates Donne’s
experience, then, becomes an asynchronous companion to the writer who formerly found himself alone in the deanery of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

The closeness of “present” to “presence” could not have escaped notice of Donne, forever aware of language’s punning potential. The present tense of the prose brings the speaker into proximity with his readers, even across the span of centuries, and the text reenacts, in live time, each occasion of Donne’s illness of late 1623. As the reader assumes the role of physician, reading and interpreting what Tabak calls Donne’s “contemplative difficulties,” she must render the syntactical symptoms of the text legible to her own imagination, just as the medical physician must translate the manifestations of illness into a diagnosis. Reading’s project of meaning-making brings something in the words, which would otherwise remain inert, to life; Donne must have hoped, if not believed, that this living thing would be some essence of himself.
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