ENGL 125: Major English Poets
Professor George Fayen

Holiest Love: The Spiritual Valediction in "A Hymne to Christ"

by Alexandra Schwartz

Despite its title, John Donne's "A Hymne to Christ, at the Author's last going into Germany" seems to have more in common with his earlier valedictions than with a religious ode. The poem does not demonstrate the element of collective prayer that characterizes a hymn, nor does it possess the hymn's generalized lyrics that would enable one congregation to recite it with as much conviction and sense of individual connectedness to God than any other. Rather, "A Hymne to Christ" consists of Donne's entirely personal reflection on his relationship to a central figure in his life at a time of imminent departure from his home, a premise that is familiar from poems such as "A Valediction of my name, in the window" or "A Valediction forbidding mourning."

If those earlier works could be read as secular prayers begging the remembrance of a lover at a time of leave-taking, this work inverts this structure to create instead a religious love poem addressed to God as Donne prepares for death. Given such an alteration of the love poem's framework to depict a relationship in which Donne no longer holds the most power, a central question emerges: what are the new responsibilities and demands between poet and subject, or lover and beloved, and how to depict them? As he explores his newfound role as the more dependent of two lovers, Donne revises the valediction's inherent rhythms and tropes to express a different kind of relationship. In this new structure, love might not be best rewarded through mutual

devotion, but rather through the individual's pledging of himself despite the potential impossibility of connection with what he most desires.

In the first stanza of "A Hymne to Christ," Donne strips away the artistry from his conceit, inverting the use of a familiar technique to express a new kind of humility before the subject of his poem. The conceits in "A Valediction forbidding mourning" and "A Valediction of my name, in the window" take the form of subtle analogies, worked into the framework of the poem as a way of convincing the invoked lover to remain faithful to the poet while he is away. Donne introduces the compass conceit in the first poem with no more notice than the simple, "they are two so/ As stiffe twin compasses are two" (VFM, ll. 25-26). In the second, the conceit of the engraved window is not announced at all, but instead is present from the first line in the form of a concrete image from which the poet's discussion can emerge.

Such nuance is completely absent from the opening of "A Hymne to Christ," which Donne begins by clearly outlining his intended symbols:

> "In what torne ship soever I embarke,
> That ship shall be my embleme of thy Arke;
> What sea soever swallow me, that flood
> Shall be to mee an embleme of thy bloode" (ll. 1-4).

In the valedictions, the conceit acts—at least in part—as an effective method of persuasion towards the poet's purpose. If Donne's lover does not respond to his direct admonition, for example, not to mourn at his departure, expressing the idea with an image translates the concept into a concrete form that may be easier to accept. Here, any subtlety or indirectness is not necessary because the conceit's audience is not the poet's subject, but rather the poet himself, as Donne indicates by noting that the poem's symbols will be read only as "my embleme." By putting himself in the position of receiving

conceits as emblems of greater ideas, Donne effectively portrays himself as Christ's reader, using his own symbolic language to grasp the much greater concepts of his God's life and works.

In manipulating the motif of concealment that he introduces at the end of the stanza, Donne expresses hope at his potential to achieve closeness to God through the interpretation of the conceits that he himself constructs. The description of God, who "with clouds of anger do disguise/ Thy face" (ll. 5-6), is a more familiar kind of conceit, devoid of any explanation of the clear symbolism. Given Donne's new position as reader of his own symbols in order to understand God, the concrete image of clouds suggests the attempt to conceive of the divine in a way that would make him more easily perceptible to his worshipper, just as the image of a name in a window might help Donne's lover to remember him when his body is not near. The success of this method is evident as Donne continues his conceit of concealment with the declaration, "yet through that maske I know those eyes,/ Which, though they turne away sometimes,/ They never will despise" (ll. 6-8). By proclaiming his ability to see beneath the metaphorical mask that he has constructed as a way to understand God, Donne confirms his premise that is possible to draw closer to the divine through language.

Having addressed the changed role of poet to subject, Donne shifts in the second stanza to an exploration of his identity as a lover reeling from the intensity of a relationship that has had no precedent in his life. The role of lover is, of course, no more foreign to Donne than that of poet. Yet the position of addressing Christ necessitates the revision of all former assumptions he has expressed in earlier poetry. Donne declares himself ready to "sacrifice this Iland unto thee,/ And all whom I lov'd there, and who

lov'd mee" (ll. 9-10), recalling Christ's own literal self-sacrifice even as he hints at a most un-Christlike betrayal of those who have been faithful and generous to him.

What might make Donne so passionate as to renounce, unbidden, all of his many previous loves and affiliations, something that he never did in his valedictions? One answer lies in the revision of the established structure of the valediction to include a destination for the poet—evident from the start in the title's emphasis on "going into Germany"— in addition to a point of departure. Earlier valedictions served as farewells to a stationary lover as the poet moved, though perhaps only temporarily, towards unknown new adventures and perhaps even new romances. Donne counterbalanced his promises of return with caveats dependent on the nature of his journey, writing in "Valediction to his booke," for example, that "absence tryes how long this love will bee" (VthB, l. 58). The present scenario, then, presents a new kind of completed valediction in that it establishes a definitive break with previous earthly objects of affection, which will be replaced on the poet's journey by a new, infinitely more substantial love.

This promise of certain fulfillment on such a grand scale as the eternal and divine leads Donne to go further than ever in revising his previous conception of love's profundity. In "Loves Alchymie," Donne bitterly complained of the impossibility of his ever finding love's source:

> "Some that have deeper digg'd loves Myne then I,
> Say, where his centrique happinesse doth lie:
> I have lov'd, and got, and told,
> But should I love, get, tell, till I were old,
> I should not finde that hidden mysterie" (*Loves Alchymie*, ll. 1-5).

Donne's new proclamation, "now I goe,/ Where none but thee, th'Eternall root/ Of true Love I may know" (ll. 14-16) provides, in its corresponding image of true love being

found deep below the ground's surface, a direct refutation of such earlier skepticism. Whereas before, Donne's idea of the impossibility of tracking down love's center was confined by his definition of love as a physical phenomenon, evident in the word "got," searching for love through Christ gives him the necessary tools to be one of those who can dig deeper beneath transient, earthly love. That this process occurs in winter confirms the notion that only when the heat of physical passion, typically represented by summer, died, could the poet finally be receptive to the more satisfying, religious love.

If such ardor can be understood as the unprecedented intensification of Donne's previous capacity to love, the third verse sharply restricts this movement as the poet finds himself unexpectedly trapped by his passion. As the ecstatic lover of the second verse, Donne's expression of his devotion to God seemed to have an unstoppable forward impetus as he delved into previously untapped depths of emotion. Here, that impetus is suddenly halted as Donne faces the quintessential problem of fervent love: the desire to have it requited. Having pledged his love with no more guarantee of its being fulfilled than the assurance from the first verse that God, in not turning entirely away, might therefore be minimally receptive to him, Donne here finds himself in a crisis of captivity. "As thou/ Art jealous, Lord, so I am jealous now,/ Thou lov'st not, till from loving more, thou free/ My soule" (ll. 21-22), he implores God. The phrase belatedly re-envisions his voluntary journey away from his known life in the first and second stanzas as a force resulting from his entrapment in God's demand for love. This new perspective on his love points to the crux of what is at stake for Donne. Should he have renounced all former ties only to find that he did not do so of his own accord, but rather followed after a

destination that will ultimately hold no fulfillment for him, his life's journey will have been in vain.

The act of considering a relationship from the perspective of a lover dependent on his beloved's commitment puts Donne in the same place as the woman of his valedictions, and offers further insight into his new position of reliance. Unlike other love poems, the valedictions delineate an explicitly disjointed relationship between lovers: the man leaves, and the woman can either choose to wait until his return, if it comes, or to abandon him in turn for someone else. The situation and its outcome depend entirely on the man's absence, as Donne's own current position depends on God's distance and possible approach. Donne's protest that a distant God has trapped his soul in love could serve as his silent lover's response to him in "Valediction forbidding mourning;" while she remains trapped in her fidelity to him at home, she can rely on nothing more than his assurance that he will return, as Donne must now rely on the promise of receptivity that he has seen in God's eyes.

At the end of the third stanza, Donne envisions himself in the opposite situation, as a lover who has not only been accused of being unfaithful, but whose very unfaithfulness has been dismissed as unimportant. "O, if thou car'st not whom I love/ Alas, thou lov'st not mee" (ll. 23-24), Donne cries out to God in desperation. This assertion responds to the scenario that Donne had constructed in "Valediction of my name, in the window." As he considered the possibility of his abandoned lover beginning to engage in infidelity during her lover's absence, Donne relied on the metaphysical conceit of the name etched in the window to reassure himself that she would nonetheless remain faithful to him. From Donne's perspective in that poem, such a response to

infidelity did not suggest indifference, but rather freed his lover from her ties to him and lessened his own pain at her betrayal. Now that he is in the same position, however, Donne responds to such a thought with despair, interpreting it not through the intellectual structure of a conceit, but through the emotional reaction of his cry to God, driving far closer to the truth of the jilted beloved's pain.

Donne's response to this crisis of requited love is to reconfirm his own commitment to his beloved, this time asking nothing in return for his devotion. Logically, such a step might not make sense—one might expect the lover to continue to demand a confirmation of reciprocated love, and not to abandon all hopes of mutuality. However, Donne's renewed and solemn resolve at the beginning of the fourth verse to formalize his separation from the world in a "Divorce to All" (l. 25) confirms that the fulfillment of his love does not lie in its being requited, but simply in his giving of it without any demand for response. It is this giving that defines Donne's new take on his love for God. Having commanded God in the second verse to "Put thou thy sea betwixt my sinnes and thee" (l. 11) in a bid for exclusivity, Donne utterly transforms such a demand in the fourth verse. Now, when he speaks in the imperative, his request is that God "Marry those loves" (l. 26) of Donne's own past. Such a command does not merely acknowledge the impossibility of exclusivity, but indeed facilitates it by giving God multiple lovers.

This final renouncing of both his earthly loves and his hope for an exclusive love with God concludes in a final, paradoxical shift as Donne resolves to attain a closeness to the divine by isolating himself at the most difficult moment in his journey. It would seem that Donne's bill of divorce from his former loves, the culmination of the sacrifice of the

island promised in the second verse, has divorced him from God as well. After his command to "Marry those loves," God appears next in the third person, as Donne's wish has become "To see God only" (l. 30), and not to communicate with Him. That the poem is reaching its conclusion makes this all the more dramatic. Donne, who has been announcing from the start his intention to depart from the world, is at last doing it symbolically by departing from the page, and he is alone.

Yet Donne's voluntary isolation does not so much disconnect him from God as it reflects back all that he has learned in his preparation for this moment, the beginning of his journey to death. In the first verse, Donne sought to know God through the conceit of the mask; here, it is Donne who is masked by the conceit of the "Churches…that have least light" (l. 29). The inversion of this image suggests that Donne has at last achieved a more mature understanding of God's nature. As long as he is alive, he will always remain uncertain of God's attitude towards him. Instead of demanding that God turn himself to Donne, Donne can achieve both satisfaction and devotion by turning himself exclusively to God, even as it would appear that he is turning away. Such a conclusion revises the meaning of the final stage of his earlier valedictions: departure. Physical presence and communication, Donne argues, do not form the strongest bonds of love. Rather, the true achievement of love can only thrive if the love is kept hidden, and protected by apparent absence from any potential refutation. In preferring the "Everlasting night" (l. 32) of certain unrequited love to the "stormy dayes" (l. 31) of love's struggles which might diminish his feeling for God, Donne commits himself to a steadfast devotion that will not vary depending upon his or his lover's position, but will rather remain eternal.

John Donne wrote "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany" as he traveled abroad in 1619,[1] thinking that he was journeying forever away from England and into death. At the time, Donne chose to express his impending sense of mortality by examining and reaffirming his love for God at the cost of breaking with everything and everyone else that he loved in life, and at the risk of remaining unsure of God's love for him. As it happened, Donne did not die in 1619, but twelve years later, in 1632. In " Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse," a poem that scholars date to either Donne's illness in 1623 or to the actual year of his death,[2] Donne shows no sign of the passion and fervor that characterize "A Hymne to Christ." Instead, when he returns to the idea of appearing before God, he asks, "Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;/ As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,/ May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace" (HtG, ll. 23-25). The revival of the desire to be seen by God, seemingly abandoned at the end of "A Hymne to Christ," demonstrates much has changed in Donne's understanding of his relationship to God. In the earlier poem, the wish to be seen was that of a lover craving recognition and adoration from his beloved. Here, Donne at last wishes not to be looked upon as an individual, but as merely a blank prototype of humanity, ready to be accepted back to his creator whenever the time should come.

---

[1] John Donne, Complete English Poems ed. C.A. Patrides (The Everyman Library: London) 1994. P. 372.
[2] Ibid. P. 385.