Relationality, Impossibility, and the Experience of God in John Donne’s Erotic Poetry

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How does theology name the experience of God in the context of human relationships—specifically, relationships of erotic love? While many contemporary theologians have focused on ways in which relational harmony mediates the experience of God, this article explores ways in which relational ambiguity mediates the experience of God. It suggests that the erotic verse of seventeenth-century poet and priest John Donne offers important resources in the search for ways to attend to divine disclosures within the absences and impossibilities of erotic relationality. In-depth, constructive readings of two Donnean love poems (“The Good Morrow” and “A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy’s Day”) highlight eros’s power to give rise to experiences of the hiddenness and revealedness of God with(in) the absence and presence of the beloved. With its close interplay of form and content, Donne’s poetry enacts relational impossibility from within, thereby inviting interpreters into participatory understandings of eros’s revelatory aporiae.

Introduction

In a perceptive 2003 essay, Edward Russell questions the extent to which “relational” theological anthropologies speak adequately

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to the realities of human experience. While Russell commends relational theologians for challenging overly rationalistic and individualistic modern accounts of selfhood, he critiques their tendencies to overlook sin and suffering, idealize interpersonal encounter, and dismiss the boundaries of the self. Russell’s argument could probably be summed up with the following indictment: relational theologies, on the whole, do not adequately take into account the role of negation in human life. The present essay begins with this basic critique, but takes it in a new, constructive direction. It tries to show that the poetry of seventeenth-century poet and Anglican priest John Donne may serve as a unique counterbalance to the idealizing impulses of much relational theological discourse.

What is meant by “relational theology”? Russell describes a relational theological anthropology as one in which “the self is construed primarily in relational categories—the person’s relation to God, others, self and the world.”

Broadly speaking, then, a contemporary relational theological approach is one in which *encounter* functions as a central, organizing motif in Christian theological reflection. In such theologies—many of which are dubbed “postmodern”—interpersonal and communal relationships are often said to be revelatory of a relational, Trinitarian God of love in whose image humanity is created and in whose presence humanity dwells.

Russell argues compellingly that relational theological approaches to the doctrine of humanity inappropriately obscure sin, suffering, embodiment, and finitude. But it might also be noted that, on the whole, relational theologies tend to frame personal and communal encounter in terms of unity, wholeness, presence, and mutual joy, and to underplay elements of fragmentation, void, absence, and impossibility. The danger here is a facile, caricatured account of relationality that leaves little room for affirming the potential co-inherence of negation and revelation in interpersonal contexts. This threat is perhaps especially real for those treatments of eros in which sexual difference is said to overcome through the delightful, integrating, and whole-making communion of (hetero)sexual encounter.

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2 Russell, “Reconsidering Relational Anthropology,” 168.
At first glance, it may seem that an effectual corrective here would be a robust discussion of the impossibility of the “tout autre” through analyses of the writings of such “apostles of the Impossible” as Jacques Derrida or Jean-Luc Marion. In this article, however, I try to show that a poetic route may prove helpful. Specifically, I suggest that the erotic verse of the early modern poet and preacher John Donne—for whom “theology . . . was erotic, and the erotic theological” proves an invaluable resource in the search for creative, compelling ways to attend to divine disclosures within the ambiguities, absences, and impossibilities of erotic relationality.

Donne’s lyrics expose the impossible aporiae implied in erotic interpersonal communion and the experience of God as mediated thereby. As I hope to demonstrate below, for the speakers of two of Donne’s most celebrated love poems (“The Good Morrow” and “A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy’s Day”), eros becomes a space of deeply counterexperiential yet profoundly revelatory impossibility in which interpersonal attunement and alienation, closeness and distance, grow in direct proportion. The co-inherence and co-intensification of absence and presence in the relation with the beloved becomes the site for an attestation of the experience of the absent-present God. Further, with its close interplay of form and content, Donne’s poetry does not so much describe interpersonal impossibility from without as enact it from within, thereby inviting interpreters into intuitive and performative understandings of ways in which eros’s aporiae mediate the experience of the divine. Donne’s love poetry, then, opens up space in which to attend to the theological significance of Dei (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001). While critical attention has been paid to the hetero- and androcentrism implied in such theologies, the idealized conflation of union, presence, and pleasantness in erotic and spiritual experience has gone largely unquestioned.


interpersonal impossibility in a way many contemporary relational theologies do not. It does so largely by pushing interpretation beyond merely conceptual frameworks into the realm of a dynamic, participatory hermeneutic.


Questions of space and place had a special kind of importance in John Donne’s cultural milieu. In addition to the sense of de-centeredness brought on by the Copernican Revolution, early moderns were also forced to contend with the implications of colonial expansion into the New World. Seventeenth-century England rather suddenly found herself both spinning around the sun and swelling across the Atlantic. For her poets, “error and exile from a stable centered home” and a sense of “radical indeterminacy” became “the subsequent condition of writing.”6 This sense of banishment is quite evident in Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets* (a collection of fifty-five love poems), in which his speakers often give poetic voice to the aporetic experience of the other by exposing the uncanny paradoxes of space and time, motion and rest, and permanence and change.

Such is the case in the poem “The Good Morrow,” in which Donne’s speaker seeks an absolute merger with his beloved that would bring him surety and stability. In spite of the fact that this poem shows no obvious religious meaning, it is possible to read the speaker as groping not only for an experience of secure, all-encompassing oneness with his lover but also for an experience of divine providence in which safety from mutability, evil, and mortality is secured. In my reading of this poem, I hope ultimately to show that the speaker’s manipulations of space and time, use of religious metaphor, intensifying tone of both anxiety and assurance, and ambiguous final words seem to indicate that the sought-after experience of amalgamated quietude is both obtained and not obtained: it is remembered in the imminent past and anticipated in the imminent future, but never unambiguously realized in the waking present. Thus the time between already and almost, and the space between unity and estrangement, become sites of both erotic and spiritual desire. Poetic discourse on

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the possible-impossible experience of eros becomes the occasion for a subtle but poignant naming of the possible-impossible experience of the divine. The poem begins:

I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' Den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, 'and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.7

Bed is the place; the occasion—the speaker’s awakening next to his lover. Immediately the reader’s imagination is drawn to the transitional space between sleeping and waking, darkness and dawn; thus, change—or even, as Docherty argues, revolution8—is established from the start as a key theme in the poem.

In the first two lines the speaker seems content, untroubled, and childlike in this transitional space. In asking his beloved, “What did we do before we loved?” the poet “seems to accept that he does not—cannot—know his lover (or his lover’s past) entirely. Instead he meets the morning with innocent fantasy and curiosity, as if paying a kind of marveling, rapt attention to the surprise of good feeling.”9 That this is a profound experience of intimate interpersonal connection is underscored by the imagery of breastfeeding, calling to mind an infant’s half-remembered pleasurable utopia before the awareness of differentiation between self and other has emerged. The assonance and alliteration of the phrase “sucked on country pleasures, childishly” (l. 3) is striking; it moves the lips, cheek, and tongue in ways that mimic the very action it describes, inviting the reader to experience bodily the pleasurable memory of a nourishing, calm, safe, and content space in which interpersonal difference and distance do not exist.

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7 This and all subsequent quotations of Donne’s poetry are from C. A. Patrides, ed., The Complete English Poems of John Donne (London: J. M. Dent, 1985). I have modernized some of the spelling and punctuation, for the greater understanding of readers.

8 Docherty, John Donne, 41.

9 Susannah B. Mintz, Negotiating the Threshold: Self-Other Dynamics in Milton, Herbert, and Donne (Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 1996), 64.
The reference in line four to the myth of the Seven Sleepers’ Den introduces a religious thematic. According to legend, seven Christian youths sought refuge from the persecution of Decius (c.e. 249) in a cave, sleeping there safely and soundly for nearly two hundred years. In adding the topos of miraculous divine protection and providence to that of infant-mother fusion, not only does the poet reference the bliss of infantile interpersonal oneness and delight, but also the contentment of divine providential care in which danger is escaped and the march of time halted. The swaddling experience of the human mother is linked with the enveloping experience of the divine.

The speaker goes on to declare these merged, divinely protected, deeply comfortable spaces totally subordinate to the love now enjoyed (ll. 4–6)—a picture of Platonic ideality. The present experience of eros is more amalgamated than the interpersonal merger of the unweaned child and more secure than the children in the Seven Sleepers’ Den.

However, subtle details in the stanza problematize the speaker’s idealized pronouncements, and intimate a scarcely discernable anxiety that will grow as the poem continues. That the speaker has to wonder at all about what his lover did before they met only drives home that they are separate selves with separate histories that can never be fully known or shared. This gradually growing worry is observable in that whereas the stanza had opened with a sense of togetherness (“we”), it ends with a statement on the speaker’s separateness from “thee.” Moreover, the Seven Sleepers’ Den reference undercuts the speaker’s idealized pronouncements about the superiority of waking and the inferiority of sleeping: in the myth, slumbering (not waking) is the space and time of immutable safety. Thus, fantasy-like union and swaddling divine presence are pronounced, but the poem’s movement (its change or awakening) toward differentiation has the effect of unsaying these declarations and exposing the speaker’s dawning experience of interpersonal paradox. Strong insistences of oneness expose the state of twoness, and when miraculous stories of God’s

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10 In lines six and seven the beloved is the Idea of Beauty of which all earthly beauties are imperfect reflections.

11 Also, to the extent that the “time” before an infant is weaned is experienced as timeless, and inasmuch as the “time” of the children in the Seven Sleepers’ Den “stood still,” the speaker suggests that the current experience of erotic attachment is eternal.

12 Mintz, Negotiating the Threshold, 67.
providential protection are invoked, even as examples, awareness of danger and evil is never far away. The poet continues:

And now good morrow to our waking souls,  
Which watch not one another out of fear;  
For love, all love of other sights controls,  
And makes one little room an everywhere.  
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
Let maps to other, worlds on worlds have shown,  
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

At the start of the second stanza the lovers have emerged from childhood dreams to the “now” (l. 8) of erotic adult attachment. Their “souls,” which are greeted by the speaker, gaze not at one another “out of fear” (l. 9). Upon this pronouncement, themes of separateness (two souls gazing) and danger (fear) surface again, and the tone of the poem becomes more acute—even, according to Susannah Mintz, “shockingly” so:

No longer are the speaker’s thoughts concerned with innocent, unadulterated pleasure, but—somehow shockingly—with the very possibility of adultery itself. The negation (“our waking soules . . . watch not one another out of feare”) reveals, precisely because it denies, a worry about past experiences and future trustworthiness. . . . While many critics take the speaker at his word, supporting his bid for the strength of the relationship (“we are not afraid of anything”), I hear these lines as an anxious disavowal of a fear that intimacy might require an uncomfortable level of surveillance.13

The text continues to both affirm and negate the possibility of secure interpersonal union: an interlocked gaze intensifies the lovers’ attunement; but, at the same time, worries of betrayal and abandonment bubble up and have to be explicitly disowned.

As the stanza continues, the space of the lovers’ sought-after merger is both contracted and expanded. Reality’s scope is so radically narrowed that only the beloved (or, perhaps, love itself) can be seen (l. 10), while love, by making “one little room, an everywhere” (l. 11) implodes the universe and explodes the bedroom simultaneously.

13 Mintz, Negotiating the Threshold, 68.
These crushing and diffusing forces mirror the interpersonal dynamics at work between the lovers, who negotiate the ambiguous space between a merger that would suffocate the self and an abandonment that would disperse it. The expansion-contraction may quell the speaker’s fears and anxieties by siphoning all reality to the present moment and place of love—in effect, making the bedroom a kind of eternal, cosmic cloister\textsuperscript{14} not so different from the Seven Sleepers’ miraculous cave. The lines implicitly invoke divine providential care by expressing trust (albeit tentative) that a safe space for love, free from outside threats, will be provided. But implosion-explosion also gives rise to images of violence and destruction caused by forceful movement in opposite directions. Both here and everywhere, both safe haven and danger zone, the space of eros proves superlatively ambiguous.

The lyric “I” goes on to contrast his and his beloved’s all-encompassing “world” to the discoveries of other worlds (l. 12), and the worlds that are representations of those discoveries (l. 13). But just as dismissing fear announces fear’s presence (l. 9), rejecting other worlds only suggests that the lovers’ world is not, actually, “everywhere.” Discourse thus functions simultaneously as affirmation and negation, mirroring the aporetic theme(s) of the poem.

The declaration “let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one” (l. 14) introduces a tone of sinister chaos. As the word “possess” retained its association with demonic possession in Donne’s time, the speaker seems to wonder whether he and his beloved are absolute masters of a hellish or heavenly world. Furthermore, that they govern a world at all undermines the earlier emphasis on a kind of divine protection and ordering in which selves could slumber in deep and peaceful relinquishment of control. Perhaps, then, the experience of divine providence is as ambiguous as the experience of eros, and the line between the presence and absence of evil disturbingly indistinct. The speaker’s statement that each “hath” and “is” “one world” ushers yet more multiplicity into what is supposed to be a singular, perfectly enmeshed bedroom/cosmos, and seems to implicitly highlight a basic, irremediable separateness while explicitly insisting on interpersonal fusion. While enmeshed tranquility may have blessed the past bliss of childhood (stanza 1), the “now” of the lovers’ present (stanza 2) makes

the speaker resigned to its absence, yet expectant for its arrival. The final stanza reads:

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears, 15
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;
Where can we find two better hemispheres,
Without sharp North, without declining West?
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I 20
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.

The remarkable assonance and mirroring in the opening line of the third stanza make it “the highest point of feeling in the poem.”15 The reflective form matches the content: each lover, still facing the other in a locked gaze, perceives the self in the pupil of the other’s eye even while looking at the face of the other. The space of eros’s union is, here, an infinite Platonic16 play of perception’s reflection and reflection’s perception. But even at this zenith of oneness, Donne’s speaker is compelled to reaffirm the fidelity and honesty of both lovers (l. 16), which has the effect of revealing separate faces which signal separate hearts which house separate intentions, whether true or untrue.

These faces are then dubbed two halves of the same globe (l. 17)—another Platonic reference to lovers’ complete union.17 However, once more, the individuality and threat inherent in the conceit itself destabilizes the admission of total (comm)union. First, in regards to individuality: if the lovers’ faces are two hemispheres of one globe, then they are necessarily facing away from each other. This is a situation that necessarily interrupts the very condition of the possibility for the englobing union in the first place, namely, the lovers’

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16 “Platonism is suggested simply by the fact that we are dealing here with reflections. Each lover has two manifestations—himself and the reflected self in the other lover’s eye—and thus each has both a physical and an ideal, or shadow, existence.” G. R. Wilson, Jr., “The Interplay of Perception and Reflection: Mirror Imagery in Donne’s Poetry,” Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900 9, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 107–121, at 109.
17 In Plato’s Symposium, Aristophanes explains that humans were once joined to each other with four arms, four legs, two heads, and so on, resulting in a power which Zeus found threatening enough to destroy by cutting them in half. Since then humans have traversed the earth, flinging themselves into the limbs of the other human half who would bring wholeness again.
unifying eye-to-eye gaze. Here attunement and alienation intensify together, and somewhat tragically: in their unified perfection, the lovers can no longer see each other.

Second, as noted by C. A. Patrides, in Donne’s time “North was associated with evil; West, with death.” Thus the third stanza, like the first two, contains a subtle reference to something sinister—to a danger that lurks disturbingly close to the ideal toward which the lovers so strive. The danger is, of course, referenced as a negation; the hemispheres of the lovers’ world are said to exist sans death and evil. But the mere mention of these lurking terrors forces attention to them, and broaches the question, again, of providence: the speaker seems to search for not only a unifying, all-encompassing, eternal space and time of eros, but also a space and time in which safety from mutability, evil, and death is secured.

Death, sex, uncertainty, and incompleteness dominate the poem’s last three lines (while the juvenile utopian delight that began the poem seems worlds away). Line nineteen is a reference to the second-century Roman physician Galen, who held that death is caused by an imbalance of the body’s elements. Donne’s speaker closes with the statement that if both lovers are indeed one, and if they can match perfectly their love, they will neither “slacken” (an indirect phallic allusion) nor “die” (an oblique reference to both death and orgasm). The conditional that begins line twenty makes explicit the uncertainty that has haunted the poem from the start. The unstable juxtaposition of death and eternal union names the ambiguous worry concerning the possible co-inherence of eros and annihilation (a theme to be treated below). The final line’s conceit—which makes immutability an endless erection and immortality a kind of coitus ad infinitum with climax forever deferred—renders the changeless space and endless time of the lovers’ union both certain and uncertain; it is infinitely realized, and yet, not.

What does Donne’s “The Good Morrow” intimate about the dis closiveness of interpersonal encounter that modern relational theology generally does not? Donne’s lyrics expose both the ecstatic and the agonistic elements of love in a way that makes both of these dimensions important, even intrinsic, to the theological meaning of eros. Through a subtle interplay of form and content, both the possibility

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18 Patrides, Complete English Poems, 49, n. 18.
and the impossibility of knowing fully (and being fully known by) the beloved are attested to in the poem, and both are tied in an indirect way to the experience of desiring God's eternal, inescapable, sustaining presence—itself a longing imbued with ambiguity. In Donne's poem, the negations inherent in erotic relating become as revelatory as the unifying, positive dimension of it. A tension is thus created between fear and desire that becomes ingredient to the way in which the experience of God is named.

By contrast, in contemporary relational theologies, interpersonal and communal merger tend to be associated with divinity, while individuation and separation are associated with the fall and with death. In other words, differentiation and oneness are placed on opposite ends of a spectrum: the former is either ignored or lamented as being temporary and sinful, while the latter is extolled as present foretaste and final destiny. For example, in the relational theological ontology set forth by Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, that which hinders or limits full union with the other is attributed to sin, whereas in the eschatologically-constituted “hypostasis of ecclesial existence,” humanity becomes fully “catholic,” a “single whole” with the world, existing “without division” with every “concrete being.” On Zizioulas's model, separateness has no place in truly ecclesial existence. What is missing here, and what “The Good Morrow” helps bring to light, is an acknowledgment that alienation may be as important and revelatory as attunement when it comes to the transformative experience of God in the context of the encounter with the knowable-unknowable human other. In Donnean theo-erotic poetics, we are given a complex vision of the tragic yet divinely disclosive co-constitution (and co-intensification) of interpersonal estrangement and intimacy.


There is a “profound fear” evident in Donne’s erotic verse, notes Achsah Guibbory, “that in wanting ‘more,’ Donne may be left with nothing.” This may, in fact, be an understatement, especially if the

21 Zizioulas, Being as Communion, 58.
The poem under consideration is “A Nocturnal Upon St. Lucy’s Day.” This poem—which laments the loss of a lover who has died—brings into relief love’s power not only to leave a person with nothing, but to (re)make that person into (a) nothing. At the same time, the poem’s rich liturgical structure and underlying theological motifs render it one of Donne’s most poignant expressions of the experience of divine absence. The speaker’s voice is that of a former someone who, ruined and re-made by love (and the loss thereof) into a “quintessence” of “nothingnesse” (l. 15), waits in the abyss he has become for a luminous renewal that will never arrive (l. 37), but “towards” which he nevertheless “prepare[s]” (l. 42). The poem resists easy categorization in terms of both genre and theme, inviting a wide, multilayered interpretive lens that attends carefully to the poet’s nuanced renderings of the experience(s) of both erotic and religious impossibility. The first stanza reads:

'Tis the year’s midnight, and it is the day’s,
Lucy’s, who scarce seven hours herself unmask’d;
The sun is spent, and now his flasks
Send forth light squibs, no constant rays;
The world’s whole sap is sunk;
The general balm th’ hydroptic earth hath drunk,
Whither, as to the bed’s feet, life is shrunk,
Dead and interr’d, yet all these seem to laugh,
Compared with me, who am their epitaph.

In announcing that it is “the year’s midnight” (l. 1) and “the day’s, / Lucy’s” (l. 2), the speaker begins by spatially and temporally contextualizing his speech, and, in so doing, prefigures much of the thematic content of the poem. It is December thirteenth—the feast day of St. Lucy's Day.
Lucy, and, according to the Julian calendar, the longest night of the year. On the ecclesiastical calendar, this date falls on the second or third week of Advent, the season in which the church prepares for the coming of the Messiah. In the seventeenth century, December thirteenth was also the traditional date of the winter solstice, “when the sun entered the sign of Capricorn, the first of the three astrological Houses of Death.” To these observations we must note that the first two words of the poem’s title (“A Nocturnal”) signal “the divine office, and in particular the canonical ‘hour’ of matins, consisting of three nocturns, originally recited at (or near) midnight and often called vigiliae nocturnae.” The ancient, solemn office of Matins represents a Holy Saturday-like vigil in which the church awaits—in dark, entombed silence—the dawn of resurrection, the coming of the sun/ Son. These profound underlying resonances with the church’s liturgical calendar and offices (as well as the zodiacal calendar) combine to paint a picture of a speaker whose locale is utter darkness and death, and whose hour is the day’s (and year’s) deepest, longest night.

Lines three through seven slowly sink the reader into the bowels of this nadir. The sun is “spent” (l. 3); the stars (“flasks”) are inconstant, barely visible (l. 4); the thirsty earth has “drunk” the organic vitality (“sap,” “balm”) of all living things (ll. 5–6), causing them to shrivel (l. 7). The rhythm—“slow, deep, resolute”—is dirge-like. The regular s and z sounds combine to create a hissing, buzzing repetitiveness—“a

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24 The patron saint of those who are blind, Lucy’s name is derived from lux, lucis, and means “light-bearer.” Her feast day “signals the return of sunlight to the dark winter world,” thus, she “was associated [in Donne’s time] both with the Incarnation and with the Parousia.” Kate Gartner Frost, “Preparing Towards Her: Contexts of ‘A Nocturnal upon S. Lucies Day,’” in Hester, ed., John Donne’s “Desire of More,” 149–171, at 154.


27 In the Office of the Church of Jerusalem, Sunday Matins terminates with solemn gospel readings in the Grotto of the Holy Sepulchre.

28 “Since the liturgical day is a microcosm of the liturgical year and of the whole temporal pattern of salvation, matins, observed at the day’s darkest hour, reflects the season of Advent (which occurs at the ‘year’s midnight’) as well as the preparation for the Second Coming. And in the timeless cycle of the liturgy, matins is followed by the hour of lauds, wherein the Church joyfully offers praise and thanks for the return of the day.” Frost, “Preparing Towards Her,” 156.

29 Stein, John Donne’s Lyrics, 179.
kind of deathly background hum to which the speaker returns every few syllables.” 30 Yet Donne’s speaker is the “epitaph” of this great, entropic collapse (ll. 8–9), making him “a verbal manifestation, or shadowy and textual representation of the death of the year itself; he is the presentation of the present moment of death and thus becomes some kind of death of death.” 31 Being and non-being define the speaker, whose (non)identity consists of a textual attestation to radical extinguishment.

The second stanza begins with the speaker inviting witnesses (readers) to “study” him:

Study me then, you who shall lovers be 10
At the next world, that is, at the next spring;
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new alchemy,
For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness, 15
From dull privations, and lean emptiness;
He ruined me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death: things which are not.

By calling forth the attention of all would-be lovers to himself, the poet identifies eros as the origin of his own demise. The hyperbolic statement “I am every dead thing” (l. 12) directs the observers’ attention to the appropriate place(s). The line also carries within itself its own cancellation, 32 underscoring the mutually constitutive relationship between existence and non-existence that defines the speaker’s (non)being.

As Kate Gartner Frost helpfully explains, alchemical nothingness—the subject of lines thirteen through fifteen—is (in Donne’s time) achieved when “Materia Prima” is pulverized and mixed with “the First Agent” and morning dew, forming “compost.” This substance

31 Docherty, John Donne, 97–98.
is gently heated in a “Philosopher’s Egg,” causing “death,” “mortification,” “putrefaction”—that is, separation into “male” (sulfur) and “female” (mercury) elements, “which interact and are then themselves lost.” The alchemical process results in a black, crystalline residue called the “Mercury of the Wise.”

Donne’s speaker calls himself the “quintessence” (purest derivative) from this “nothingness” (l. 15); the child “of absence, darkness, death; things which are not” (l. 18). It is unclear here whether being “re-begot” of quintessential separation and void negates negation and thereby announces a kind of “return to Materia Prima and to rebirth and a new Genesis,” or whether it rather “obviates all hope of existence, let alone regeneration.” Either way, it seems clear that the poet’s origin and condition lie in radical annihilation. He continues:

All others, from all things, draw all that’s good,
Life, soul, form, spirit, whence they being have; 20
I, by love’s limbec, am the grave
Of all that’s nothing. Oft a flood
Have we two wept, and so
Drowned the whole world, us two; oft did we grow
To be two chaoses, when we did show 25
Care to aught else; and often absences
Withdrew our souls, and made us carcasses.

The thrice-emphasized “all” of line nineteen, as well as the four sources of being in line twenty, contrast starkly with the poet who, in the “limbec” (flask) of love, is made “the grave / Of all that’s nothing” (ll. 21–22). Here, as Ben Saunders notes, “nothing begins to acquire the weight of the all, becoming a new and paradoxical essence of negativity.” Yet this being-as-entombment suddenly mediates the departed beloved; our poet, in line twenty-two, begins speaking to his absent lover in reminiscence of the “all-encompassing unity and wholeness” they once enjoyed. But their unity and wholeness is recalled not as life-giving but obliterating: in a “stupendous reversal of Genesis,” the poet and his lover flood the world (ll. 22–24), become the chaos

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33 Frost, “Preparing Towards Her,” 152.
34 Frost, “Preparing Towards Her,” 149.
36 Saunders, Desiring Donne, 166.
37 Miller, “Donne’s ‘A Nocturnall,’” 86.
before its creation (ll. 24–26), and are made soulless carcasses—a lifeless original pair (ll. 26–27). Interpersonal union is so powerfully destructive that it annuls divine action, un-creates the world.

Stanza four contains more hyperbolic “extensions of the inextensible” as the poet continues his process of self-definition via negation:

But I am by her death (which word wrongs her)  
Of the first nothing the elixir grown;  
Were I a man, that I were one,  
I needs must know, I should prefer,  
If I were any beast,  
Some ends, some means; yea plants, yea stones detest,  
And love; all, all some properties invest;  
If I an ordinary nothing were,  
As shadow, a light and body must be here.

No “ordinary nothing” (l. 35), the speaker is “of” the utter non-existence of the world’s unformed substrate (l. 29). Neither man nor beast, plant nor stone, her departure has rendered the poet darker than a shadow—a kind of black hole into which light and time are sucked and distorted. Guibbory expounds: “As she is the ‘light’ and the ‘body’ upon whom he depended for both presence and illumination, her death has left him not only physically and emotionally emptied (he is not even a shadow, since there is neither her body nor her light for him to reflect) but also in a state of spiritual darkness, cut off from the light, as if he has lost the only means he had in this world of apprehending God.”

Guibbory sees in “Nocturnal” a statement on the power of love (and the loss thereof) to sink one into a space devoid of the divine. And yet there is deep irony in the speaker’s self-definitional via negativa: as no “ordinary nothing,” he is unique, distinguished. The speaker is, after all, a “nothing” who has (or is) a voice that speaks a testimony of love’s obliterating cruelty. There is individuality to this Godforsaken nothing—perhaps even creation ex nihilo. “This nothing,” notes Sean Ford, “remains infinitely determinate and infinitely indeterminate.”

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inasmuch as the more insistent the poet becomes regarding his state of nothingness, the more it seems he has become a special kind of (non)something. Annihilation and creation are here mutually intertwined, and the naming of the experienced absence of the divine light has itself become a subtle testament to divine creativity.

While the poem’s clear associations with Advent (which looks forward to the appearance of the Savior) and Matins (which anticipates the sun’s ascent from the East and the Son’s ascent from the grave) might lead readers to expect a happy, unambiguous resurrection/renewal, the fifth and final stanza dashes all such hopes for restoration:

But I am none; nor will my sun renew.
You lovers, for whose sake the lesser sun
At this time to the Goat is run
To fetch new lust, and give it to you,
Enjoy your summer all;
Since she enjoys her long night’s festival,
Let me prepare towards her, and let me call
This hour her vigil, and her eve, since this
Both the year’s, and the day’s deep midnight is.

It seems there will be no renewal of the “sun” for this curious “none” (l. 37). In line thirty-nine, the audience to whom the speaker directs his testimony is explicitly addressed for a second time. Our poet’s resigned injunction may be paraphrased thus: “Enjoy your summer’ (l. 41) all you lovers whose ‘lesser sun’ 41 (l. 38) disappears only temporarily so as to fetch and deliver ‘new lust’ (l. 40) from ‘the Goat’ 42 (l. 39). I, meantime, keep ‘vigil’ (l. 44) this endless midnight hour, all the while ‘prepare[ing] towards her’ (l. 43)—the mysterious ‘she’ whose light my eyes shall never behold.”

The final stanza leaves the poet in an eternal, absolute darkness that nevertheless becomes a space of testimony and expectancy. Even though the speaker accepts that he shall forever abide the non-appearance of the “sun,” he nevertheless “prepare[s] towards her”

41 By “lesser sun” (l. 38) is meant the real sun. The speaker’s own “sun” (l. 37), we infer, is either his departed lover or God the Son—although the association is deliberately fuzzy. This makes the experience of the indefinite absence of God and that of the lover virtually indistinguishable.

42 Goats were associated with lechery in Donne’s time. See Patrides, Complete English Poems, 92, n. 39.
(l. 43), dubbing the dark, endless eve her “vigil.” In view of the witnesses to whom the poet directs his speech (ll. 10, 38), this declaration becomes an attestation to the ways in which eros endlessly destroys and renews hope at each moment. At the same time, the poem’s theological/liturgical scaffolding—that is, the ways in which it is shaped by Christian thought, ritual, and symbol such as the via negativa, Advent, the Office of Matins, and Holy Saturday—make it a site in which a profound naming of the experience of the absent (or, perhaps, coming) God can emerge.

In some ways, the emphasis on futurity in much relational theology seems not unlike the sense of erotic and eschatological indeterminacy at the heart of “Nocturnal.” For example, in Stanley Grenz’s relational theology, humanity’s sexual drive toward bonding “leads ultimately to the eschatological community that constitutes the new humanity in fulfillment of God’s intentions from the beginning. Consequently, the relational ‘self’ is sexual. This ‘self’ consists of the person-in-bonded-community.”43 Grenz’s focus on the relational, sexual self as eschatological allows for a certain measure of ambiguity in the experience of communion; our fellowship is, as yet, incomplete. Yet Grenz is silent on the implications of this incompleteness built into relationality, and his focus remains centered on foretastes of ultimate fulfillment in present experiences of communal bondedness and wholeness.44 By contrast, Donne’s “Nocturnal” leans into the profound and potentially disclosive nature of absence, waiting, alienation, and anxiety in relational contexts. What emerges in this poem’s complex interplay of form and content is a nuanced, erotic rendering of Holy Saturday in which the experiences of annihilating absence and uncanny hope are both co-constitutive and co-intensifying.

Conclusion

Unlike many theologies that treat of erotic relationality, Donne’s love poetry does not provide a conceptual rubric by which to understand the relevancy of human relationships for theology. It offers no explanation of how the incompleteness of sexual difference is overcome through joyful, whole-making, male-female sexual encounter; no discussion on Trinitarian perichoresis and human communion. It does, however, suggest implicitly that the theologically disclosive

power in erotic love lies not just in its tendency to evoke experiences of union, joy, and generativity, but, more paradoxically, in its capacity to bring about profoundly ambiguous experiences in which attunement with and alienation from the beloved (and the divine) are inextricably intertwined. Along with such relational theologians as John Zizioulas and Stanley Grenz, Donne attests to the importance of erotic relationality in Christian theology, identity, and spiritual experience. But to talk of bonding Donne would add rupture; to fulfillment, depletion; to oneness, estrangement. By linking the relational to the impossible, Donne’s poetry constitutes a problematization of the intimate experience of the human other (and the experience of God as it arises therein). Such a problematization holds the potential to deepen the paradoxicality, profundity, and honesty of relational theological discourse, and to open up space for reframing how humanity experiences and names toward God in relational contexts—especially contexts of erotic love.

Additionally, Donne’s erotic verse functions so as to call the reader to a kind of hermeneutical attentiveness in which she becomes creatively beholden to the poet’s testimony of the ecstatic-agonistic experience(s) of both love and God. In other words, the Donnean love poem embodies and invites participatory interpretation. In taking up this invitation, the reader becomes wrapped up in a kind of ambiguous sharing in the ambiguous relationality that is the very topic of the poem. In puzzling over emotional undercurrents that seem to run counter to the poem’s pretense; in abiding the temporality of the poem—reading and speaking in sequence stanzas, lines, and words that fold backward, stretch forward, invert, expand, disappear; in suffering the poem’s concurrent clarity and opaqueness, the ways it both compels and repels—the reader comes to see that she is involved in the poem’s enactment of its subject. “Infinite speech,” writes James Carse, “does not expect the hearer to see what is already known to the speaker, but to share a vision the speaker could not have had without the response of the listener.”45 Donne’s erotic poems—in their performances of paradox, their embodiments of aporiae, and their invitations to attentive, creative, participatory interpretation—stand as important resources for any theology that would attempt to render well the impossibilities implied in erotic interpersonal communion and the experience of God as it emerges therein.
