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Analysis of "Devotional Writing." in Achsah Guibbory, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006): 149-166.

Through his prolific prose, poetry, sermons, and hymns, John Donne established a rich, voluminous body of work concerning Christian faith and salvation. In her analysis of Donne's religious writing, Helen Wilcox examines how he uses the concepts of language and writing to elaborate on theological concerns. This takes on a number of different forms, from observation of the Word handed down from God to His believers, to devotional poetry addressed to God, to Donne's attempts to work through his own insecurities and uncertainties through religious meditations. The general framework she uses to address each of these forms of the poet's writing is defined through his own words, by the "three prepositions" he uses when encouraging believers to speak "of God, to God, and for God" (Donne, *Sermons* Vol. VIII, cited in Wilcox)¹. Wilcox draws on these three phrases to create broad, often overlapping categories in which to place Donne's religious works. However, these groupings are only loosely followed throughout the analysis, as many of his works take on multiple tasks of speaking in any combination of the three roles she mentions. She states that Donne's "sermons take on the awe-inspiring task of speaking 'for God,'" but does not elaborate much on this, putting significantly more emphasis on the first two prepositions (Wilcox 150). While her argument is well-reasoned and thoroughly supported by evidence from Donne's works, its scope is limited by the thesis, which focuses on the relationship

1. Unless otherwise indicated, as in other works cited by Wilcox, all citations of Donne are from the edition of his works denoted in the bibliography.

between rhetoric and religion, occasionally at the expense of analysis of other facets of his writing that provide important context.

Early on in the piece, Wilcox introduces the idea of the inherent limitations Donne faces in trying to explore Christian faith through mortal verbal expression; the “eternal Word” of God is “more complex than even the most beautiful and profound, yet finite and fallen, human words can express” (Wilcox 150). The struggle to overcome this indisputable shortcoming to fulfill the “duty” that Donne saw all believers as having to “blesse, praise, [and] speake” in devotion to their Lord characterizes much of his writing, which is often imbued with an almost desperate sense of inadequacy in the face of a “cornerlesse and infinite” God (Donne, *Sermons* Vol III, cited in Wilcox). While Wilcox touches upon this theme in the introduction of the article, she refers to it only sporadically throughout the piece and not particularly at length; however, it is one of the strongest ideas she suggests, one that would underscore many of the arguments she goes on to make.

One of the main features of Donne’s devotional writing that Wilcox points to is the “centrality of paradoxes,” the “impossible possibilities” that are the foundation of “the Christian faith, and of Donne’s fascination with it” (Wilcox 151). These contradictory statements, she argues, are how Donne grapples with the conflicting impulses present in any examination of faith, comparing him to the biblical Jacob, who was said to have “‘wrestled’ all night with God” (Wilcox 152) in search of His blessing. This point would have been better supported by further discussion of the contradiction mentioned earlier between Donne’s perceived obligation and inability to fully express faith in human terms. This conflict, and the broader conflict between the inherent failings of Man and his yearning for God’s salvation, permeates deeply throughout the Holy Sonnets and his other works, most obviously in Donne’s pleas to God to “break, blow, burn, and make [him]

new” in “Batter my heart,” and his desire to “burn... with a fiery zeale / ...which doth in eating heale,” expressed in “I am a little world” (Donne 177, 179). This discussion of the Holy Sonnets is also one occasion where Wilcox’s preposition-based categories blend into each other. They speak both “of God” and his infinite grace in allowing Jesus to “[bear] our punishment,” as in “Spit in my face,” and make appeals directly “to God,” as in “Batter my heart” (Donne 176).

Within the tripartite framework introduced earlier in the piece, Donne’s *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* are the clearest example of the poet speaking “to God.” This work is characterized by invocations, praise, questions, and at times, lamentations that teeter dangerously on the edge of being challenges. In keeping with her main argument about the relationship that Donne cultivates between writing and theology, Wilcox focuses on the rhetorical structure of the *Devotions*, which are themselves trisected into Meditations, Expostulations, and Prayers. In her analysis, each Devotion is “carefully structured, moving from contemplation through questioning to prayerful acceptance” (Wilcox 159). She uses the example of the 17th Devotion, which recounts the movement from a contemplation of funeral bells to an “agonized debate with God” (Wilcox 159). Donne asks whether sorrow and “the soureness of this life” are necessary to the process of joining Him in Heaven before ultimately coming to a grateful, resigned reconciliation with the thought of his own death. Wilcox’s discussion of Expostulation 19 gives the most thought to the notion of human fallibility that she introduced at the beginning of the article, arguing that Donne “attempts to imitate the grandeur of God’s language” before admitting “the inadequacy of human expression... to encompass divine language” (Wilcox 161). She quotes Donne’s explicit words here, citing his wonder when he marvels that no mortal speech “can expresse the inexpressible texture and composition” (Donne 347) of that of God.

This section of the article concerning the *Devotions* is the most indicative example of both the piece's strengths and shortcomings. The combination of Wilcox's analysis of the structure of the *Devotions* and her previous claims, backed up strongly and clearly with Donne's words, make it the most convincing evidence of her argument. However, this section is also where it becomes apparent that the narrowness of her thesis constrains the kind of analysis that she can credibly do on a subject that is ripe for further explorations. Because the central argument of the paper is squarely focused on language and rhetoric in relation to Donne's religious thought, Wilcox can devote only a short, perfunctory paragraph to the way the writer's material conditions influenced his spiritual musings. While she posits that he "transforms" the facts of his illness "into a meditation on human imperfection" (Wilcox 160), she quickly switches gears to return to the subject of Donne's use of language. The Meditations that spur the *Devotions*, that convey the insecurities the work most seeks to address, are most concerned with the questions of mortality, weakness, and human frailty. He writes of the "variable, and therefore miserable condition of Man," the loss of dignity he suffers because he "must send for the physician," and the dangers posed by "vapours most pernicious," both literally and as a metaphor for rumors and gossip (Donne 333, 338, 339). He contrasts this flawed nature with divine grace over the course of each Devotion. An analysis of the work that does not fully explore the conflict between these two states is not necessarily incorrect, but is surely incomplete.

By adopting Wilcox's technique of examining the features of individual Devotions but applying it to a broader analysis, one can find three distinct, yet interconnected, levels of thought in each. The first is an observation of the material, physical experience of mortal life, including the meditations on funeral bells, vapors and poisons, disease, and the experience of dying. Secondly, each Devotion culminates, of course, in discussions of spiritual and religious concerns.

Human frailty is contrasted with the “beam of immortality” God put into us; the imperfection of human artifice, with the “reverent simplicity” of His design (Donne 334, 347). The third level of analysis is rhetorical, which is what Wilcox’s article focuses on. She clearly makes the relationship between the latter two levels evident – that is, her criticism is a cogent, persuasive argument that explores the way that Donne’s rhetoric reflects and builds to his musings on faith and salvation. She does not discuss at much length, however, how the first of the three, the material observation, leads into the latter two. The movement through the Devotions that Wilcox describes as “from contemplation...to prayerful acceptance” (Wilcox 159) can also be viewed as the movement from physical concerns to religious ones. In this light, Donne’s linguistic endeavors can be seen as the bridge between the two. This is consistent with Wilcox’s assessment of Donne’s chief motive for writing, to “convey in language the experience of God” (Donne 150). If it is through God and His word that salvation is possible, it stands to reason that it is through writing and rhetoric that Man can most closely approximate transcending the mortal and attaining the spiritual. Overall, Wilcox’s points are rationally organized, well-sourced, and convincingly argued; however, the specificity of her thesis limits the scope of her article, resulting in an insightful but flawed analysis of Donne’s devotional writing.

[Works Cited]

Donne, John. *John Donne: the major works*. Oxford: Oxford U Press, 2008. Print.

Wilcox, Helen. "Devotional Writing." in Achsah Guibbory, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006): 149-166.