

# The mission of departure: overcoming silence, and the legacy of posthumous image. John Donne's marble effigy and his final sermon, *Deaths Duell* (1631)<sup>1</sup>

KATE VERVAIN

*John Donne (1572-1631) – poet, preacher, and many things in between, spoke in his final sermon: 'we come into a world that lasts many ages, but we last not'.<sup>2</sup> While life is impermanent, artistic legacies endure; Donne's poetry in the current era is the subject of much scholarship. His death however would have been little written about some four centuries later if not for the fact Donne conducted a series of final preparations to shape his reputation posthumously. This article considers the changing format, or second life, of two artefacts: Donne's final sermon, once oratory, now textual, and his marble statue, modelled on a dying, soon to be lifeless body, now a solid representation of his continuing cultural presence and his belief in resurrection.*

The statue of John Donne which stands in St Paul's Cathedral is notable for not only surviving the Great Fire of 1666, but for its provenance in a ritualistic animation of death: a figurative theatre of death enacted by Donne in the weeks prior to his passing. Donne, although on his deathbed, had the impetus to counter the moment he would be silenced by death: his voice may be soon lost but he would permeate his death with a legacy of his own design. Izaak Walton, Donne's acquaintance and biographer, regales how Donne's trusted physician, Simeon Fox, suggested to Donne the creation of a valedictory monument. Donne, days from passing, resolved upon the idea. The surprising vigour and precision with which an ailing man conducted the preparatory work for a monument in his likeness is captured in the energy of Walton's description:

Donne sent for a carver to make for him in wood the figure of an urn, giving him directions for the compass and the height of it; and to bring with it a board, of the just height of his body ... then without delay a choice painter was got to be in readiness to draw his picture ... in his large study, he brought with him into that place his winding-sheet in his hand, and having put off all his clothes, had this sheet put on him, and so tied with knots at his head and feet, and his hands so placed as dead bodies are usually fitted, to be shrouded and put into their coffin, or grave. Upon

---

<sup>1</sup> I will refer to the sermon date as 1631, consistent with the given date of Donne's death as 1631; however the sermon is published with the date 25 February 1630 as the Julian calendar, used in England at that time, did not mark the legal New Year until 25 March.

<sup>2</sup> John Donne, *Deaths Duell*, in *John Donne on Death* (London: Hesperus Press, 2008), p. 67.

this urn he thus stood ... [his face] was purposely turned towards the East, from whence he expected the second coming of his and our Saviour Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

The ambitious energy was characteristic of Donne (Fig.1), and it was not his only triumph over grave physical impairment. Weeks before his death in 1631, Donne delivered a breathtaking final sermon, performed in front of King Charles I, subsequently remarked upon as though it were his own funeral sermon, and posthumously entitled *Deaths Duell*. It would stand to reason that a man who so infused his artistry with discourse upon the challenge of death and resurrection would not vacate mortal life without one final crowning comment upon the subject. Previous near fatal illness in 1623 spawned the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, and severall steps in my Sicknes*, a series of meditations in which he grapples with the restrictions of illness and the immediacy of fear pertaining to physical relapse. Impending death therefore, and its menace of silencing, proved highly influential in collating the last thoughts of one of England's most extraordinary poets.



Figure 1: Unknown artist, portrait of John Donne, engraved by Pierre Lombart, circa 1622, oil on canvas (St Paul's Cathedral; © The Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral)

---

<sup>3</sup> Isaak Walton, *Walton's lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert, and Dr. Robert Sanderson* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884) pp. 74-75.

Whilst both the statue and the sermon text are indelibly a product of Donne's confrontation of death, the sermon deals with the prospect of transition between this world to the next, and the paradox that particular belief harbours against the notion of human life as a continual 'living death' – as a series of deliverances from one death to another, daily, weekly, stage by stage: 'our birth dies in infancy, and our infancy dies in youth, and youth and the rest die in age'.<sup>4</sup> The sensory legacy of the sermon has its own transition: initial presentation of the sermon hinged on a theatrical element aimed at auditory processing, while latterly the structure of Donne's rhetoric emerges in a different way: in published form it is readable and therefore repeatable in the mind, inducing a familiarity that in turn reveals technicality not apparent to the ears. The sermon's true life is, of course, as it is spoken and heard, and in that sense it can only live once.



Figure 2: Nicholas Stone, funerary effigy of John Donne in St Paul's Cathedral, 1631-32, marble (St Paul's Cathedral; © The Chapter of St Paul's Cathedral)

---

<sup>4</sup> Donne, *John Donne on Death*, p.68.

The statue found its origin in the same concerns as the sermon, but it is a palpable symbol of successful resurrection. It has developed two functions: as a substitute solidification of Donne's presence to be left in this world, and to portray his transition to everlasting life. It does not speak to the imagination with quite the same appeals as the sermon, but is steeped in early modern tradition of memorial, honour, individualism and communal morality. It serves as a prolonging of Donne's artistic and theological legacy in a form that is resolute and visually processed by the mind without complication. In a glorious occurrence of happenstance, the statue proved none more symbolic than by being the single monument to survive the Great Fire intact when the flames hit St Paul's Cathedral (save some scorch marks to its base). There is something particularly compelling in the statue's resurrection from the flames that destroyed Old St. Paul's to its current home in the south choir aisle of Christopher Wren's restored St Paul's.

Death pervaded Donne's life in every way possible: born into a Catholic household, he witnessed the persecution of his brother during the Reformation. Later, the grief he undoubtedly felt when converting from Catholicism to Protestantism during the 1590s was processed in many of his poems. High mortality rates, and the passing of close family, meant that death became a spiritual and intellectual challenge to Donne. His *Songs and Sonets* are infused with death, as are his prose writings and sermons – although death was a fairly common theme to preach upon. Yet death in his oeuvre was purposeful; it was not an admission of defeat. To confront death, to integrate death into his artistry, was to see past death and thus see past the limits of life.

Discussion of Donne's end of life, and his infatuation with death in his works, is doubly potent for the reason he led more lives than most. For someone who is perhaps unfairly deemed as obsessed with death, it is hard to imagine a more vivid or successfully regenerative life than the one Donne led. He was master of reinvention, of contraries, and of complexities – some of which do not find understanding even in this day. He was variously a Catholic, a Protestant, a soldier, a Member of Parliament, a poet, a lawyer, and in 1621 gained the Deanery of St Paul's, obviating his bothersome youth, and securing a reputation as one of the most revered preachers of his time.

Death was not merely a matter of expiration, but a theological complexity and dilemma. Pertinent to Christian death in this era was the immortality of the soul, redemption and resurrection. Orthodox Christian belief in the early modern period understood that upon death the soul would continue to heaven (or perhaps hell), to be later reunited with the body at resurrection. John Carey draws attention to Donne's predicament in relation to the separation of the soul from the body after death, suggesting that Donne was 'deeply averse to the prospect of being split up into body and soul, and surviving only in some flimsy

form like ectoplasm',<sup>5</sup> and that 'his ego demanded'<sup>6</sup> he should be as whole in heaven as he was on earth. The process of bodily death, interment, and the state of the body troubled Donne; on the prospect of putrefaction he writes in a sermon dated 1627:

I shall not be able to send forth so much as an ill ayre, not any ayre at all, but shall be all insipid, tastelesse, savourlesse dust; for a while, all wormes, and after a while, not so much as wormes, sordid, senselesse, namelesse dust.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this was the same dust of decomposition that in a sermon a year earlier had a more active function: once the dust of buried flesh had nourished grass and creatures, it would be re-collected by God to 'recompact that body, and then re-animate that man, and that is the accomplishment of all'.<sup>8</sup> The problem for Donne was the inability to be able to comprehend what awaited him; that whilst he could, in this world, conceive, express and endure the mercurial ways of nature, he did not know what 'degree of glory'<sup>9</sup> God would bestow upon him in heaven.

Donne wrestled too with the idea that 'the soul died, or slept, with the body, and remained in the grave until the Last Judgement'.<sup>10</sup> The consensus among Protestant theologians was that the soul (without its body) was dispatched to heaven immediately after death to await resurrection and the reintegration of the body, yet there existed concurrent belief that the soul slept before resurrection.<sup>11</sup> Donne believed both positions variously throughout his career: taking holy orders forced him to adopt the orthodox standpoint that there was immediate separation before resurrection, but there still remained for Donne the problem that the soul could not survive properly without the body.<sup>12</sup>

The body mobilizes the soul; this thought was integral to Donne in creating a structure for his hypotheses. In Paradox XI he writes that, 'the *soul* it seems is enabled by our *Body*, not this by it'<sup>13</sup>: that the perfections of the body feed the mind. He frequently approaches spiritual dilemmas using bodily or architectural tropes either to embolden an argumentative framework or to carry a sentiment. *Deaths Duell* opens with an analogy based around architectural structure and God as the foundation of our souls: 'the body of our

---

<sup>5</sup> John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 222.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> John Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. by John Hayward (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1946), p. 611.

<sup>8</sup> Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 608.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.611.

<sup>10</sup> Carey, p.162.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.40.

<sup>12</sup> Carey, p.162.

<sup>13</sup> Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p.345.

building',<sup>14</sup> while death is assigned bodily 'jaws and teeth'.<sup>15</sup> Donne's work often carries an anatomical semantic currency; in 'A Valediction: of my Name, in the Window', for instance, we discover the lines: 'The rafters of my body, bone/Being still with you, the Muscle, Sinew, and Veine,/Which tile this house ...'.<sup>16</sup> In 'The Damp' we find: 'Will have cut me up to survey each part/When they shall finde your Picture in my heart'.<sup>17</sup> The sustained metaphorical focus on anatomy assigns an athleticism to the rigours of thought; an energetic momentum that may be otherwise difficult to capture. This imagery also links somewhat to Donne's altered stance on the idea of 'sleep' before resurrection: sleep is an impasse; it is simply not active enough for Donne – he doesn't allow death as inertia in his work.

Donne's concern with death and its absorption into his artistry should not therefore be viewed merely as morbid fantasy, but as an attempt at mastery of the unknown. The *Devotions* are infused with frustration that 'the long and regular work'<sup>18</sup> of maintaining personal health ultimately meets an insuperable 'torment of sickness'.<sup>19</sup> The lack of command over the interpretation of such illnesses is problematic for Donne: it is not being able to name or understand the infliction that is almost as agonising as the physical suffering. He writes: 'But in a minute a Canon batters all, overthrows all, demolishes all, a *Sickness* unprevented for all our diligence, unsuspected for all our curiositie'.<sup>20</sup> The lessening of control over one's knowledge and physicality is what particularly troubled Donne: it was, after all, a restriction on the extent of his perspective.

The publication of *Deaths Duell* shortly after its oration followed the six previous publications of Donne's sermons in his lifetime, with the wider folio of 156 sermons published posthumously in 1640, 1649, and 1661.<sup>21</sup> Much of Donne's poetical work is difficult to date with precision as it was seldom published formally; instead Donne distributed the poems in manuscript form among acquaintances and admirers. William Caxton introduced print publication to England in the 1470s, yet for the next two hundred years or so, manuscript publication held superiority in the view of many, including Donne, who proclaimed after publication of the *Anniversaries* in 1611-1612, 'Of my Anniversaries, the fault that I acknowledge in my self, is to have descended to print anything in verse'.<sup>22</sup> Whilst no manuscript of *Deaths Duell* survives, it has

---

<sup>14</sup> Donne, *John Donne on Death*, p.63.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p18, ll. 28-30.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.47, ll. 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.507.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Peter McCullough, 'Donne as Preacher', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne* ed. by Achsah Guibbory, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.167.

<sup>22</sup> Donne, Letter to George Gerrard, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1612, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p.463.

been suggested that Donne did in fact prepare one and intend for its printed publication, bestowing upon that work an afterlife.<sup>23</sup>

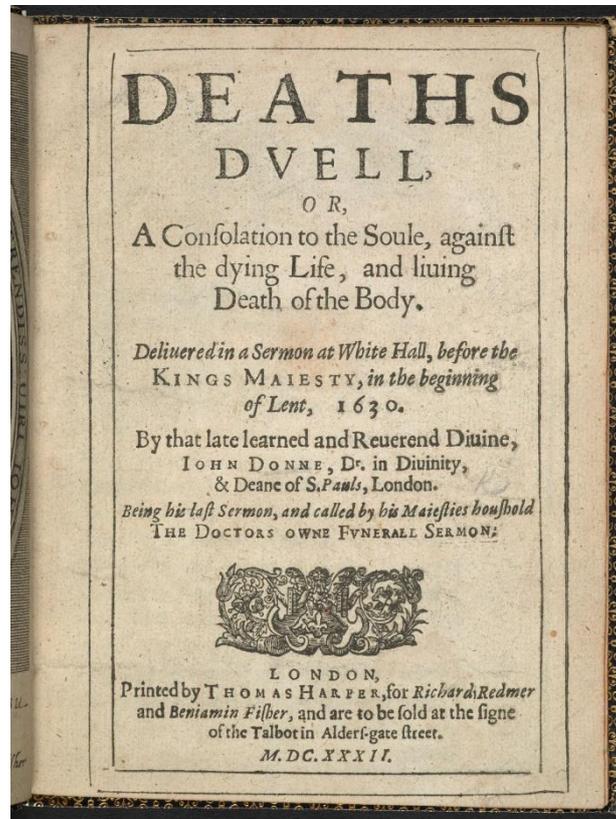


Figure 3: *Deaths Duell*, John Donne, title page engraved by Martin Droeshout, published 1632 (The British Library; © British Library Board: C.53.k.19)

The sermon was not titled by Donne however, but by a publisher: *Deaths Duell, or, A Consolation to the Soule, against the dying Life, and living Death of the Body* (Fig.3). The full, extended title reveals that his Majesty's household termed the oration *The Doctors Owne Funerall Sermon*, a claim repeated in Walton's biography: namely that Donne 'had preached his own Funeral Sermon', enabling the sermon's reputation which abounds to this day.<sup>24</sup> The sermon is thus foremost remarkable in having gained immediate prophetic status, largely due to the congregation's shock at Donne's withered appearance and their consternation that the figure standing before them was not wholly present. Walton imagines the collective reaction to the sight of Donne emerging into the pulpit – 'Do these bones live?'<sup>25</sup> – and draws upon the congregation's apprehension to surmise that 'many of them thought he presented himself not to preach mortification by a living voice, but mortality by a decayed body, and a dying face'.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Jonquil Bevan, 'Hebdomada Mortium: The Structure of Donne's Last Sermon', *Review of English Studies* 45.178 (1994), p. 188.

<sup>24</sup> Walton, p.72.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Delivered during Lent, 25 February 1631, *Deaths Duell* preaches upon a verse from the Psalms, ‘And Unto God the Lord Belong the Issue of Death’ (Ps. 68: 20). The sermon’s basis evolves around three considerations of that phrase, so that it variously means the deliverance from death, the manner of death, and the processes leading to everlasting life; succinctly: ‘from death, in death, and by death’.<sup>27</sup> Having spent the winter on his sickbed in Essex, Donne resolved to travel to London to fulfil his employment as one of the Lent preachers appointed to attend the king – a position he had kept for many years. Not only had Donne written the sermon in extreme illness, but he had to draw upon the stamina required to deliver it: in addition to memorising the lengthy script, a performative vigour was necessary to animate the speech for sustained visual and aural audience immersion. The early modern sermon developed from classical tradition of oratory and rhetoric, and was imbued with drama and exhortation.<sup>28</sup> Early modern sermons, Peter McCullough explains, ‘competed far more directly than has ever properly been understood with public theatre and courtly masque in Donne’s London’,<sup>29</sup> and it was requisite that sermons were delivered entirely from memory as ‘auditories took a dim view of any preacher who addressed them from notes’.<sup>30</sup> The average sermon Donne wrote would equate to about twenty pages in modern print, and when spoken, would last at least an hour.<sup>31</sup> The preached sermon as transcended from the written sermon demonstrates that the word must live not only on the page, but be able to withstand elocution.

If, as John Carey suggests, Donne’s aim, ‘when he writes about death, is to make it more active and positive than life, and so negate its deathliness’, then it would stand to reason that in animating death, he sought to make a vibrant physicality of death.<sup>32</sup> In one of the most striking passages of *Deaths Duell*, Donne fuses the cessation of life with the beginning of life, deeming birth and death inextricable. Once again using anatomical language, he draws upon our entrance to life to prove his point: the womb is inimical to life, it harbours the threat of death as we have yet to survive gestation; moreover whilst in it, we are even less conscious than when we sleep. The womb does not support life, but rather death itself, for it delivers us from one death to another: ‘in our mother’s womb we are dead, so as that we do not know we live’,<sup>33</sup> so that our ‘birth and entrance into this life is *exitus à morte*, an issue from death’.<sup>34</sup> The womb as receptacle is perilous for if we do not escape it, it will kill us: ‘is there any grave so close or so putrid a prison[?]’.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Donne, *John Donne on Death*, p.65.

<sup>28</sup> McCullough, p.167.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.172.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

<sup>32</sup> Carey, p.200.

<sup>33</sup> Donne, *John Donne on Death*, p.65.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

Donne augments his prison trope further into the speech, drawing upon the inherent contradiction of being discharged from the womb, yet still attached by the cord: the introduction to living sees us manacled like a prisoner. It was an idea that Donne pursued a decade earlier, in a Lent sermon dated 1621: ‘Doth not man die even in his birth? The breaking of prison is death, and what is our birth, but a breaking of prison?’<sup>36</sup> Yet the idea of ‘the manifold deaths of this world’ as one period of life superseded by another, links strongly not to decay, but to Donne’s own regenerative nature.<sup>37</sup>



Figure 4: Nicholas Stone, funerary effigy of John Donne in St Paul’s Cathedral, 1631-32, marble (St Paul’s Cathedral; © The Chapter of St Paul’s Cathedral)

If death ‘threatened to turn him into an inanimate object’ then Donne would pre-empt that silencing and prepare for his likeness to be made in stone, securing his endurance as insensate matter at least.<sup>38</sup> Impregnated with the pre-death ‘theatre’ anecdote however, his statue becomes less an inanimate object and more of a living tale. Donne’s white marble statue (Fig.2 and Fig.4) was sculpted by Nicholas Stone – mason to both James I and Charles I – and installed in the cathedral within eighteen months of his death. Funerary monuments in post-Reformation England were an effort to maintain the public image of prominent figures and ensure the continuity of their presence. Whilst manifest in social practices observing

---

<sup>36</sup> Donne, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p.602.

<sup>37</sup> Donne, *John Donne on Death*, p.69.

<sup>38</sup> Carey, p.230.

ritual of death, the statues did not function only as a creation of memory, but as a mode of exemplification to remind others of the moral fortitude of the deceased.<sup>39</sup>

Donne's effigy in particular is steeped in the message of resurrection, of triumph over death (and of life): he is sculpted – as per his design – rising from an urn. This sculpture partly influenced a seventeenth century mode for funerary monuments to signify resurrection, and like Donne's, posed in an upright position and shrouded.<sup>40</sup> In the cathedral, Donne is positioned facing eastward in anticipation of the second coming of Christ. His face is peaceful; it peers out from the winding sheet - a traditional burial dressing which would be tied at the head and at the foot. On Donne's effigy the upper knot assumes the appearance of a crown.

It was not Donne's nature to relinquish his passion to the corrosion that precedes death, and to adapt one of his metaphors: 'It is not in *mans body*, as it is in the *Citie*, that when the *Bell* hath rung, to cover up your *fire*'.<sup>41</sup> Donne's desire for success, his desire to understand beyond boundaries, and his desire to prepare for the Last Judgment provoked a study of death not as finite, but infinite. By examining Donne's later sermons, we review his concluding thoughts formed by a remarkable life; by examining the monument which stands in the place he achieved his earthly glory, we review his afterlife - now four hundred years later.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

Donne, John, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. by John Hayward (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1946), p. 611

Donne, John, *John Donne on Death*, foreword by Edward Docx (London: Hesperus Press, 2008), p. 68

### Secondary Sources

Bevan, Jonquil, 'Hebdomada Mortuum: The Structure of Donne's Last Sermon', *Review of English Studies* 45, no. 178 (1994), pp. 185-203

Carey, John, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)

Houlbrooke, Ralph, *Death, Religion, and the Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

---

<sup>39</sup> Nigel Llewellyn, 'Honour in Life, Death and in the Memory: Funeral Monuments in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1996), p.180.

<sup>40</sup> Houlbrooke, p.350.

<sup>41</sup> Donne, *Devotions, Meditation XXIII, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p.550.

Llewellyn, Nigel, 'Honour in Life, Death and in the Memory: Funeral Monuments in Early Modern England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (1996), pp. 179-200

McCullough, Peter, 'Donne as preacher' in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. by Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 167-181

Walton, I., A. H. Bullen & W. Dowling, *Walton's lives of Dr. John Donne, Sir Henry Wotton, Mr. Richard Hooker, Mr. George Herbert, and Dr. Robert Sanderson* (London: George Bell & Sons, 18