Time, History and Typology in John Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*

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In his first major published work, *Pseudo-Martyr* of 1610, John Donne's main interest was to develop a working idea of the Christian Church as a temporal phenomenon.¹ He was not so much interested in the Church as an organization in our sense of the word as structure and management. Rather, he was interested in it as an institution that approximated as much as possible the divine intentions of a God for his people when, scattered over the face of the earth at different times and in different epochs, they congregated together in a social structure to keep his word fully alive. Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*, therefore, was an immensely public work by a profoundly private man, touching on one of the central issues dominating the religious-political thought of his times. In the work, Donne sought to devise for himself and for his readers, both Catholic and Protestant, a viable idea of the church as a temporal thing. How, in time, *Pseudo-Martyr* asks, did the Lord take onto himself the trappings of an organization? Moreover, it was not so much the trappings in the shape of broad lines and details that interested Donne; rather, he was concerned with the manner in which the Lord transferred himself out of his individual person in the realm of eternity into his likeness of a Christian collectivity in the dimension of time.

Written only four years after the Gunpowder Plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament with everybody in them (1605), *Pseudo-Martyr* was a work supposedly inspired by James I's writings.² Ostensibly, it was meant to attempt to convince Roman Catholics that they could take the Oath of Allegiance to James as a temporal ruler, without betraying their loyalty to the spiritual authority of the popes. It was also written by a witty, probably not easily lovable, middle-aged ex-Catholic of confused, limited reputation. This man had been jailed nine years earlier because he dared to marry secretly the wrong woman for love.³ In addition *Pseudo-Martyr* was written by an author who had so far composed two books only for himself, one on suicide and the other on the despicable character of courtiers.⁴ He had not yet published anything except two insignificant prefatory poems in the

collections of highly reputable writers like Ben Johnson.⁵ Donne, however, had apparently once circulated sexy love poems privately in manuscript. In these, he left the unmistakable impression that he had slept with many women; but later, once married, he appeared to become an undoubted one-woman man, even with the death of his wife in 1617 when he was only forty-five.

Pseudo-Martyr was therefore an *entrée en scène* in the field of publication by a thirty-eight-year-old would-be writer who probably thought that it was time that he got respectably into print. To that limited *coterie* of friends who knew and respected Donne, the work must have appeared not so much ambitious as wierd, but somehow fitting the so-far revealed personality of the man who produced it. *Pseudo-Martyr* explained to English Catholics how, in perfect conscience, they could live with several papal declarations telling them and all Catholics in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe that they were free to be disloyal to their non-Catholic monarchs, and even assassinate them at will, if they found it expedient. Donne's *panacea* to English-Catholics was simply to ignore the permission given by the popes as a mere exercise of unjustified, unfounded temporal power. *Pseudo-Martyr* told English Catholics to take the Oath of Allegiance, to retain their spiritual loyalty to the spiritual authority of Rome, and to stop putting the hangman's rope around their necks at the public execution place at Tyburn outside London. To maintain the temporal authority of the papacy as well as its spiritual authority, Donne argued, was not worth the price of being unstrung from the hangman's rope when you were three-quarters strangled, of being disemboweled, and the of having your body cut up and its parts dissolved in a cauldron of boiling oil. Even if you were an innocent like Robert Southwell, and even if a Roman canonization half-automatically awaited you for your pains, Donne, the brother of a young man Henry Donne who died in prison for hiding a priest⁶, considered the fate as pseudo-martyrdom, and as unjustified and useless. Perverseley, what *Pseudo-Martyr* says is that the spiritual authorities of both London and Rome are perfectly correct.

Perversely, too, *Pseudo-Martyr* is little concerned with the Oath of Allegiance which it doesn't often mention. *Pseudo-Martyr* is the longest single prose work by far that Donne ever wrote. It is also the only one to which he truly bestowed the documentary pretensions of early humanist learning. But few are the passages among its 425 *quarto* pages that bring up the phrase "Oath of Allegiance." Nor, for all this, does *Pseudo-Martyr* deal with the passions, human love or women in the guise of romance or the humours that would have assured an author success in the early seventeenth century for his coming-out book. Rather, *Pseudo-Martyr* is Donne's penultimate argument about how he could be conveniently English and peacefully Christian. Donne was maternally the descendant of Saint Thomas More's

sister; he was the nephew of the Jesuit Jasper Heywood who headed the underground Society of Jesus in England in 1581; he was the son of the very aged, ever-Catholic Elizabeth Heywood who lived out the last years of her life in his Anglican Deanery in London, and who died only three months before him.⁷ And in *Pseudo-Martyr* Donne turns his personal argument with past and present history into a public statement for all times. For, *Pseudo-Martyr* responds to this proposition: after his crucifixion, the Lord came down from the Cross and sensibly went back up to heaven where he belongs: What kind of fellow is he when he nevertheless continues to wander over the face of the earth in the persons of Englishmen, Frenchmen and Italians, in the fifth century, or in the tenth century, or in 1610?

In January of 1610, when *Pseudo-Martyr* was put on sale by the bookseller Walter Burre in his shop at the sign of "The Crane" in St. Paul's Churchyard, the question was thought so vital that *Pseudo-Martyr*, with its known eighty-two surviving copies, appears to have had a press run larger by far than anything else Donne published in his lifetime.⁸ The work by Donne most unpopular in our own times may have been the most popular in his. This is true even though the work very pretentiously contains something like a couple of thousand allusions and marginal annotations, and even though the criticism of the last one hundred years has been that the work is unreadable. By contrast, among Donne's other works published in his lifetime, the first English edition of the ugly, distasteful *Ignatius His Conclave* published in the very next year, 1611, which is surely much more fun to read than *Pseudo-Martyr*, appears to survive in only eleven copies; and, the deeply lovable *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* of 1624, with the haunting peel of its tolling bell in the seventeenth meditation, appears to have come down to us in only 24 copies.⁹

As Donne unwound the central thesis of his long work, he considered the church little in terms of its hierarchy and customs. The orders of the clergy and the regulations of the Church were not very much among his concerns, and the reader is struck by the absence of references to the *Canons and Constitutions* of the Anglican Church that had only just been revised and published.¹⁰ Even lower among his concerns were the relationships of priests and bishops with the king, and the fewness of references to James whom the work is defending, and to whom it is most personally addressed, is embarrassing. What did, in fact, concern Donne deeply was the expression of the will of the Christian God in the form of the Church through the days, years, and decades of its existence. For Donne, the way in which things existed in time expressed God's manifestation of himself outside the boundaries of eternity, and the existence of the Church showed God speaking directly to men. It was this dialogue of the eternal in and with the temporal in the form of the church that concerned Donne in his otherwise out-sized, inflated political tract. Perversely and ironically, this

pretentious inflation of the work outside the normal limits of political tract writing, which obscures Donne's entry as a public figure into the field of published literature, is otherwise pivotal in our understanding of his ideas as a man for the rest of his life. If, in *Pseudo-Martyr*, the treatment of time in Donne's idea of the Christian Church shares its place with issues like grace and salvation, it is nevertheless by far more important than they are in providing him with the basic framework to understand that Church. Time is the optic glass through which Donne peers at the nature of the Church as best he can. Time also provides him with the delicate and yet solid conceptual framework to explain it.

In dealing with the question of the church and time in *Pseudo-Martyr*, therefore, how Donne perceived time itself is extremely important. Briefly, it may be said that Donne understood time in two ways, historically and typologically. Historically, time was for him a series of events: in time the years came and went, and people and happenings filled them. Then, typologically, time was a series of events with different levels of meaning. What came and went could have more than one meaning depending on how deeply a man penetrated into it. Roughly, for the sake of contrast and illustration, we might consider how modern men consider time in two ways also. Normally, today, no matter what our ultimate metaphysical commitments, we consider time first as the outcome of a number of stellar eruptions. These eruptions produced the planets whose motions created the accidental order of night and day and of tomorrow and yesterday. We then numbered the days for practical reasons into weeks and years. Second, we also tend to formulate our ideas about time in relation to our place in it. We think that our place in the stars' order of eruptions sprang from the further accident of biological evolution. By contrast, Donne's view of time was less eruptive and evolutionary than ours, and more man-centred and visionary. Time for him could be encompassed by the events of human history. Time was marked not by astronomical eruptions but by social sophistication. Its origin was connected with the idea of the primitive innocence of men in a long-passed, but still clearly visible tribal state. Moreover, for Donne the Bible was a source of historical fact for one whole part of the tribal past, namely, that of Israel. And, as typology was the instrument to understand the Bible, it became also the instrument to understand history. In our current view of time, there is much room for chemistry, physics and biology. For Donne in *Pseudo-Martyr*, by contrast the lowest rung in the ladder of time was social history. At the end of time, there did not lay the possibility of another eruption and the creation of another galaxy. Rather, there lay the certainty of eternity which constituted the ultimate mystical meaning of creation.

History and typology, which are Donne's two perspectives for the consideration of time, are of course closely related in the history of ideas. They

were different aspects of the same moral or philosophical problem. The science of history has never been inherently exclusive of, or antithetical to, the science of typology; nor vice versa. History is always somehow, either in Renaissance Protestant typology or Catholic anagogy, the first level of meaning in things. History is the empirical fact on which rest the interpretative levels of typology and anagogy. History is the concrete clue to the allegorical, anagogic and mystical meanings by which the Christian Lord manifests himself to his intelligent creatures. And yet, in spite of this close link between history and typology, in *Pseudo-Martyr* Donne saw history standing on its own terms as well.

As Donne contemplated its events, history had a certain autonomous character related to and yet independent of anagogy and typology. And this element of history was related, to his tribal view of the origin of human society. Men had once lived as happy savages in a primitive tribal state. They had been happy in spite of the fact that, with the exception of the ancient Jews, most of them had lived their ancient ways without Revelation and the Bible. There is a decidedly evolutionary social process in human history that forms part of his approach to time. The passage of time and its devolution through the years had as its purpose for Donne the culmination of the social process. The end of the happy primitive state, made up as it was of a well-meaning collection of tribal men, was in the long run to receive Revelation and become a Christian Kingdom. The events in the course of the happy history of the equally happy savage man led to the manifestation of God in the temporal phenomenon of a church. On pages 83 and 84 of the first edition of *Pseudo-Martyr*, Donne writes

Certainely all power is from God; And as if a compagnie of *Savages*, should consent and concurre to a civill maner of living, Magistracie, & Superioritie, would necessarily, and naturally, and Devinely grow out of this consent (for Magistracie and Superioritie is so naturall and so immediate from God, that *Adam* was created a Magistrate, and he deriv'd Magistracie by generation upon the eldest Children and (as the Schoolemen say) if the world had continued in the first Innocency, yet there should have been Magistracie). And into what maner and forme so ever they had digested and concocted this Magistracie, yet the power it-self was *Immediately* from God: So also, if this Companie, thus grown to a *Commonwealth*, should receive further light, and passe, through understanding and Law written in all hearts, and in the Book of creatures, and by relation of some instructors, arrive to a saving knowledge, and faith in our blessed Saviours Passion, they should also be a *Church*, and amongst themselves would arise up, lawfull Ministers for Ecclesiastique functions, though not derived from any mother church, & though different from all the diverse Hierarchies established in other Churches: and in this State, both Authorities might be truly said to be from God.

For its part, Donne's approach to typology was no less relevant to his understanding of the temporal phenomenon of the Christian Church than his view of history. Typology was a major instrument that enabled him to grasp the significance of the Church as an event governed by the passage of time. The rules of typology were an immediate reflection of the manner in which the Bible contained and manifested its truth; they were an instrument of certitude in a transient world. The levels of meaning in the Bible supplied the ground rules of the sciences by which Revelation was exposed. Hand in hand with the Revelation of the Bible, therefore, typology had important historical implications. It served to clarify the Christian God's expression of himself not only in the Scriptures but also in the Church. Typology was instrumental in explaining the nature of his manifestation of himself in the form of the church in the contemporary seventeenth century. As the Lord was in the Bible, so had he somehow to be in the present world. And typology was a condition of history as much as it was of the Bible.

Therefore, as Donne argued with the Jesuit Robert Bellamine, or with the Oratorian Caesar Baronius, his chief opponents in *Pseudo-Martyr*, typology was an instrument of debate as much as of certainty.¹¹ It was not merely a tool of biblical exegesis but an instrument of modern political science as well. Typology not only served to uncover the nature of the repository of spiritual authority of the contemporary state; it also informed the Christian on the nature of temporal state power. And as Donne grappled with the arguments of a few hundred other Catholic adversaries like Azorius, Binius, Ceparius, and Castro, and as he seemed to take on the entire Counter-Reformation to get it to leave King James alone, typology became even for him the instrument to distinguish between the power of the two swords of spiritual and temporal authorities.¹² To the Christians whom Donne's work cumulatively describes, those unconvinced English Catholics whom Donne would have look at the world of Britain with his eyes, the two powers were made clear by typology. There was no need to be martyred uselessly for ignoring the application to the present of the tool of typology the Lord had given men in the past to understand his word in the Scriptures. The typology of the Bible enabled the Christian to distinguish effectively between the two powers and their two cruel swords. Contemporary history repeated the spiritual pattern of events recorded in the Bible, and in this way it allowed Revelation to repeat its messages that powers were separate. On page 365 of his text, Donne reprimands his Catholic adversaries with his major typological and historical ideas about the two powers in the forefront of his argument. He accuses them of ignoring the prototypes of the Bible in their condemnation of the very idea that England could have a spiritual power in any way independent of Rome:

Nor doe they [the Catholic Controversialists] for this *Timpany*, or *false conception*, by which *spiritual* power is blowen up, and swelled with *temporall*, pretend any place of *Scripture*, or make it so much as the putative father thereof. For they doe not say, that any place of *Scripture* doth by the literall sense thereof, immediately beget in us, this knowledge, *That the Pope may depose a Prince*; but all their arguments are drawne, from naturall *reason*, and *discourse*, and *conveniencie*. So that, if either the springe which moves the first wheele, or any wheele by the way be disordered, the whole Engine is defeated, and made of no use.

To use Donne's expression, "the spring" that really moved "the first wheel" was, therefore, certainly not the false arguments of his Catholic opponents. It was what he identified towards the middle of his work as Protestant "Conscience" and "Rectified Reason" (pp. 168-169). Rectified reason enabled the Christian to identify the correct "form" of the Church at any given moment in time, whether in England, France, Italy, or elsewhere (p. 167). the correct form of the church in any historical moment and place was always adapted to the realities of contemporary secular power with which it had to live. But Donne went even further than that. At a certain point in social development, the socially sophisticated mind could become international. It was possible, Donne told English Catholics, to adhere loyally to the Government of one nation and adhere loyally to the spiritual authority that had evolved in another. All of this is present in Donne's extensive use of the analogy in the old scholastic argument about the link between the body and soul. He applied that analogy repeatedly to the union, or rather to the disunity, of temporal and spiritual powers (pp. 30, 32).

Donne's view of the Church as a temporary phenomenon in *Pseudo-Martyr* was, therefore, fairly unique. He tried to maintain the character of the Church as constant by claiming a typological, mystical character for it. But at the same time, in terms of the ancient scholastic conceptions of matter and form, and of body and soul, he allowed various justifiable expressions for the structure of the Church throughout human history. There was only one soul possible to all the correct churches of human history. That soul was Revelation – and that is why Donne is so unconcerned with details of Church organization in *Pseudo-Martyr*. However, the soul could inhabit as many bodies as there were kinds of Christian temporal secular states. History could allow many valid Christian Churches to exist, not only chronologically throughout the past, but in a variety of national sates in the present as well. In this way, for Donne, time allowed various images of the same eternal truth to exist linearly through history and to coexist together in the present.

Such an approach undoubtedly put Rome in its place. In the short run of things, *Pseudo-Martyr's* help to the defence of English liberty against the papacy was certainly welcomed. But the seeds of trouble in Donne's approach are soon evident to anyone who reads his book. Donne never wrote the final Chapters of *Pseudo-Martyr*, No. 13 on the supremacy in France of the Kings of France, and No. 14 on the independence of England from the conversion of its early kings to Roman Christianity. He tells us in his "Advertisement" that the titles of these chapters, printed in his table of contents had circulated among his friends with the titles of the other chapters, and they were causing dissension among those who read them.¹³ He records that some people thought he should write the chapters and some thought not. He never tells us what the objections were; however, we can easily imagine them.

First of all, the last king of France to die, Henri III de Valois, had been assassinated in a Protestant-Catholic plot, and Henry IV de Navarre, the ruling king of France, was a convert to Catholicism, and he had submitted by his conversion to spiritual claims of papal authority. Second, when Ethelbert the tribal King of Kent was converted to Christianity by the Italian Augustine of Canterbury, he brought a good part of southeast England into the realm of Roman spiritual authority. All these characters were already present in the earlier chapters of Donne's pages. Donne's chapter headings nos. 13 and 14 suggest that contemporary England was asking the papacy for no more political independence than what it gave Henri IV of France and Ethelbert of Kent when they accepted Roman spiritual authority. However, the spiritual authority to which Henri and Ethelbert submitted entailed also their acceptance of some form of temporal papal authority. Donne's final chapters, if written, would have involved him the hopeless task of asking the papacy to grant England the independence it accorded to France and Kent, without also required England's submission to Rome.

Perhaps it is not idle to consider that for the English political cause at stake, the two chapters would have been too much of a good thing. Donne had probably to be silenced; whatever the case, he did not write them. His very internationalism may have appeared to make the wheel of history turn faster than the politics of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation could accept. Perhaps, the chapters, if written, would have ended up subverting the ostensible end of defending James I for which the book was written. In a political fight in which assassination and military intervention were the norms of conduct, there was a limit to how much a perverse maverick thinker like Donne could tell everyone that everybody could be right if they tried. Donne's message in *Pseudo-Martyr*, in spite of some of his virulent anti-Catholic diatribes, was coming perilously close to telling Christians to love one another as Christ had loved them.

For writing such a book, Donne has been described by many modern critics as ambitious. *Pseudo-Martyr* they say, was the tactic of a climber, of an awkward would-be courtier grovelling for James' favor.¹⁴ Rather, *Pseudo-Martyr* was the first public statement of a literary figure who never knew how to meet the world – this, in spite of the fact that he had been sufficiently well-born to meet it on its own courtier's terms. *Pseudo-Martyr* was not motivated by courtly ambitions, but by exactly the opposite. It is a tribute to Donne's publicly discomfiting, unapproachable inner self that since 1610 the book has never been republished except in a facsimile edition in 1974 almost 400 years after its first edition. The book leaves everyone feeling uncomfortable, and, in spite of what Simpson, Keynes, and Bald say, it is no more unreadable than Hooker's *Laws* or Bellarmine's *De Controversiis*.¹⁵

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Notes

- 1 The text is that of the Cambridge University Library copy, Shelf Mark Syn. 6.61.31, of the first edition, 1610, of *Pseudo-Martyr* printed by William Stansbury and published by Walter Burre.
- 2 In "The epistle Dedicatorie," Sig. A^r, Donne writes that James' tracts against Rome inspired him to undertake the writing of *Pseudo-Martyr*, the latest being *An Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance* printed in London in 1609, one year before *Pseudo-Martyr*.
- 3 Donne was at first confined to the Fleet. In *John Donne, A Life*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), R.C. Bald describes Sir George More's anger at the poet's secret marriage to his daughter, and Donne's subsequent imprisonment (p. 135, *passim*).
- 4 The works are *Biathanatos* probably written in 1608 and published in 1647, and *The Courtier's Library*, or *Catalogus Librorum*, probably written in the early years after Donne's imprisonment, and published by his son John as an appendix to the 1650 edition of the *Poems* (*vide* Bald, *Life*, pp. 145 and 216, and Sir Geoffrey Keynes' *Bibliography of Dr. John Donne*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 226).
- 5 The prefatory poem to the 1607 edition of Johnson's *Volpone*, entitled "Amicissimo et meritissimo Ben: Ionson;" and also "The Expiration" in Alfonso Ferrabosco's book of *Ayres* printed in 1609.
- 6 The priest was William Harrington whom Donne's younger brother had hidden in his chambers at Thavies Inn in Oxford. Henry Donne was apprehended in 1593 and died in prison in the same year (Bald, *Life*, pp. 58–59).
- 7 Bald describes the last months of Donne's mother in *Life*, pp. 524–525.
- 8 With about forty surviving copies, the edition of *LXXX Sermons* in 1640, after Donne's death, appears next to *Pseudo-Martyr* to have been the largest edition of one of his works in the seventeenth century (Keynes, *Bibliography*, p. 65).
- 9 According to the pre-run of Volume I, as yet unpublished, of the revised *STC* in the Cambridge University Library, nos. 7026, 7027, 7033, and 7033a; and Keynes' *Bibliography*, pp. 15–19, and "Introduction," Donne's *Devotions* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), pp. xli–xlii, only eleven copies of the first English edition of *Ignatius His Conclave* (1611), and only twenty-four copies of the first edition of *Devotions* (1624) survive.
- 10 *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall agreed upon, 1603* of the Church of England (London, 1604).
- 11 Baronius (b. Sora, Naples, 1538; d. Rome, 1607), was one of the first followers of St. Philip Neri, the founder of the Oratory, and was the author of *Annales Ecclesiastici*, 7 Vols. (Cologne, 1601–1608), which covered apologetically the entire history of the Roman Church.