

= Devotions upon Emergent Occasions =

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions , or in full Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions , and severall steps in my Sicknes , is a prose work by the English metaphysical poet and cleric in the Church of England John Donne , published in 1624 . It covers death , rebirth and the Elizabethan concept of sickness as a visit from God , reflecting internal sinfulness . The Devotions were written in December 1623 as Donne recovered from a serious but unknown illness ? believed to be relapsing fever or typhus . Having come close to death , he described the illness he had suffered from and his thoughts throughout his recovery with " near super @-@ human speed and concentration " . Registered by 9 January , and published soon after , the Devotions is one of only seven printed works attributed to Donne which were printed during his lifetime .

The Devotions is divided into 23 parts , each consisting of 3 sub @-@ sections , called the ' meditation ' , the " expostulation " and a prayer . The 23 sections are chronologically ordered , each covering his thoughts and reflections on a single day of the illness . Famously , the 17th devotion , Meditation XVII , includes the phrases " No man is an Iland " (often modernised as " No man is an island ") and " ... for whom the bell tolls " . The work as a whole is considered similar to 17th @-@ century devotional writing generally , and particularly to Donne 's Holy Sonnets . Some academics have also identified political strands running through the work , from a polemic Arminian denunciation of Puritanism to advice to the young Prince Charles .

= = Background = =

Donne was born on 21 January 1572 to the elder John Donne , a wealthy ironmonger and one of the wardens of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers , and his wife Elizabeth . After his father 's death when he was four , Donne was , instead of being prepared to enter a trade , trained as a gentleman scholar ; his family used the money his father had made from ironmongering to hire private tutors who taught him grammar , rhetoric , mathematics , history and foreign languages . Elizabeth soon remarried to a wealthy doctor , ensuring that the family remained comfortable ; as a result , despite being the son of an ironmonger and portraying himself in his early poetry as an outsider , Donne refused to accept that he was anything other than a gentleman . After study at Hart Hall , Oxford , Donne 's private education eventually saw him study at Lincoln 's Inn , one of the Inns of Court , where he occupied his time with history , poetry , theology and " Humane learning and languages " . It was at Lincoln 's Inn that Donne first began writing poetry , looking upon it as " a life @-@ sign or minor irritation " rather than something that defined him .

In November 1623 , Donne fell seriously ill . London was the scene of a ' spotted ' or relapsing fever , which hit its victims unexpectedly and left them conscious but physically helpless . What disease Donne suffered from is not known . Writers have suggested typhus as a likely culprit , but Donne 's writings on the subject reference multiple diseases . Clara Lander , writing in *Studies in English Literature 1500 ? 1900* , suggests that the typhus may have exacerbated the enteritis Donne had suffered from since childhood .

Donne was of the opinion ? as were many others of the age ? that illness reflected a state of internal sinfulness , and constituted a visit from God . Despite being ordered to rest , he insisted that a pen and paper be given to him , and he wrote down his impressions of the disease . After his recovery , in December , these became Devotions upon Emergent Occasions , one of his few published prose works , and also one of only seven printed works of which he acknowledged authorship . Written with " near super @-@ human speed and concentration " , the work was registered with the Stationers ' Company by 9 January 1624 . It was published that year , and again in 1634 and 1638 . The full , albeit rarely used , title is Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions , and severall steps in my Sicknes .

= = Contents = =

Structurally , Devotions consists of 23 chronologically ordered sections ? representing the length ,

in days , of Donne 's illness . Each one contains a ' meditation ' , in which he describes a stage of his illness , an ' expostulation ' containing his reaction to that stage , and finally a prayer in which he makes peace with the disease . In the five editions published during the 17th century , the book opens with a Latin preface , titled " Stationes , sive Periodi in Morbo , ad quas referuntur Meditationes sequentes " . Also 23 sections long , each line of the preface is followed by what purports to be an English translation of the Latin . Joan Webber argues that these lines constitute a poem , in dactylic hexameter ; David Novarr disputes this , arguing that Stationes " has none of Donne 's customary wit , drama , and imagination " . Instead , it represents the Stations of the Cross , or supplicatio stativa . Mary Arshagouni , writing in Modern Philology , argues that the stationes indeed constitute a poem ? or , at least , something more than a mere table of contents . The Latin lines play @-@ off the English translations , and contain nuanced meaning not found in the English that better represents the sections to which they refer .

Following the stationes , the 23 meditations begin . Each section , taken in an isolated way , follows the same pattern : Donne states some element of his illness or treatment , and then expands upon his statement to develop a theme that culminates with him becoming closer to God . Perhaps the most famous of the meditations is Meditation XVII , which begins with the statement :

Nunc lento sonitu dicunt , Morieris (Now this Bell , tolling softly for another , saies to me , Thou must die) .

This statement , or title , is then expanded on . Donne first concludes that he may not be aware that the bell is tolling , saying " hee for whom this Bell tolls may be so ill , as that he knowes not it tolls for him ; And perchance I may thinke my selfe so much better than I am , as that they who are about mee , and see my state , may have caused it to toll for mee , and I know not that " . This is then expanded with the realisation that , even if the bell is tolling for others , it is a matter of concern for Donne , as :

No man is an Iland , intire of it selfe ; every man is a peece of the Continent , a part of the maine ; if a Clod bee washed away by the Sea , Europe is the lesse , as well as if a Promontorie were , as well as if a Mannor of thy friends or of thine owne were ; any mans death diminishes me , because I am involved in Mankinde ; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls ; It tolls for thee . [Donne 's original spelling and punctuation]

Donne then argues that if someone dies , anyone has the right to use their death as long as they do so valuably , considering it a treasure . He writes that :

If a man carry treasure in bullion , or in a wedge of gold , and have none coined into currant Monies , his treasure will not defray him as he travells . Tribulation is Treasure in the nature of it , but it is not currant money in the use of it , except wee get nearer and nearer our home , Heaven , by it . Another man may be sicke too , and sick to death , and this affliction may lie in his bowels , as gold in a Mine , and be of no use to him ; but this bell , that tells me of his affliction , digs out , and applies that gold to mee if by this consideration of anothers danger , I take mine owne into contemplation , and so secure my selfe , by making my recourse to my God , who is our onely securitie .

The death of an individual ? signified by the tolling of the bell ? is thus a treasure buried at the bottom of a mine : only of value if it is given to someone who makes good use of it . In this he refers to the work of Augustine of Hippo , specifically On Christian Doctrine , in which Augustine describes the knowledge of pagans as gold and silver : something that can be involved in Christian purposes if appropriated properly . Donne , twisting this idea , is arguing that the death of any individual is something others can learn from , should they understand it properly .

= = Style and meaning = =

Stylistically , the Devotions is an example of 17th @-@ century devotional writing , and has been compared by Roger Rollin , professor of literature at Clemson University , to the Holy Sonnets and considered , in effect , a sequel . In the context of 17th century devotional writing , Rollin uses the Devotions to demonstrate that , in his view , such writings were " more public than private , [serving as] vehicles for the diagnosis of spiritual malaise and as sources of remedies " . Lander argued that the full title signifies " growth of the spirit through physical ordeal " , and in doing so draws on the

devotional works of Joseph Hall . Thomas F. Van Laan , writing in *Studies in Philology* , draws parallels between Donne 's style and the Ignatian exercises : a set of structured mental exercises designed to bring an individual closer to understanding God .

A number of literary theorists have approached the Devotions as politically themed . Richard Strier , in particular , identifies the Devotions as an " Arminian polemic " , arguing that it was highly atypical of Donne to actually publish works , rather than merely let them circulate amongst friends . Both before and after ordination , Donne actively resisted publication , normally only publishing works that had been the result of a commission , such as *The Anniversaries* or *Pseudo-Martyr* . The Devotions , however , were " literally rushed " into print , with the volume being handed to the printers a month after he had recovered from his disease . Strier argues that Donne 's rationale for publishing the Devotions matches his rationale for publishing a sermon , the *Encaenia* , the same year , to assert the importance of " places , and of dayes , and of all outward meanes " , because he felt some sense of urgency about what he had to say . This is coupled with Devotion XVI , in which Donne explicitly comes out against Puritanism and is simultaneously " purposely militant " , deliberately frustrating the other extreme from Puritanism , where " the Arminianism and the polemical anti-puritanism of the volume becomes explicit " .

Dave Gray and Jeanne Shami , writing in the *Modern Language Quarterly* , argue that it was not just a work of political rhetoric but a work of political advice , aimed at Prince Charles , to whom it was dedicated . The political situation at the time was complex , as King James was ill and Charles attempting to gain control of the government . Gray and Shami highlight the noted line " No man is an island " ; while most interpret it spiritually , they argue that it was a reminder to the prince and his advisors that " even private actions have public consequences " . The veiled nature of the political references was deliberate ; it allowed the work to be acceptable to the censors , but accessible to Charles and those close to him . In the event that they rejected the underlying message , it would also be accessible to other prominent and influential political figures .

Lander argues that the structure of the work is itself symbolic . As well as the division of the poem into 23 parts , each signifying and describing one day of Donne 's illness , each part is itself split in three ? representing the Trinity . The use of three elements ? Meditation , Expostulation , and Prayer ? also matches the three services found in the Book of Common Prayer , a common influence on devotional writers of Donne 's era .

= = Critical response = =

The Devotions have received a mixed reaction from critics . Evelyn Simpson described it as " a curious little book " , and wrote that " [a] s a manual of devotion [the Devotions] compares unfavourably with the Devotions of Bishop Andrewes or the Holy Living of Jeremy Taylor . It is too introspective , too metaphysical , too much overloaded with learning of different kinds " . Helen C. White described it as the output of an " anxious and restless mind " .

Arshagouni , on the other hand , describes the Devotions as

Donne 's most mature , perhaps most complex work : a remarkable , sustained prose poem that not only expresses conflicting and powerful internal emotions but also consciously provides its readers with a touching model of the experiences of God 's elect in confronting the inexorable course of human sinfulness that characterizes life on earth .

Helen Wilcox writes that " the mixture of elaborate rhetoric , painstaking argument , and the frank details of his melancholic ' ridling distemper ' creates a particularly powerful impact " and draws particular attention to Meditation XVII , noting that despite the apparent self-interest of the Devotions , that piece highlights Donne 's recognition of the ultimate interconnectedness of humanity . Meditation XVII was also the focus of Robert Jungman , who , writing in *American Notes and Queries* , noted it as the most forceful statement of Donne 's theme in what was ultimately a " powerful psychological analysis " .

In wider popular culture , several phrases from the Devotions , particularly Meditation XVII , have become commonly quoted , including " No man is an island " (often modernised as " No man is an island ") and " ... for whom the bell tolls " . Thomas Festa , writing in *Notes and Queries* , identifies

similarities between Thomas Browne 's Christian Morals and Donne 's Meditation XIV .