

*A “Metaphorical God” and the Book of Nature*  
*John Donne on Natural Theology*

God shows this inconsiderate man, his book of Creatures, which he may run and reade; that is, he may go forward in his vocation, and yet see that every creature calls him to a consideration of God. Every Ant that he sees, asks him, Where had I this providence, and industry? Every flower that he sees, asks him, where had I this beauty, this fragrancie, this medicinall virtue in me? Every creature calls him to consider, what great things God hath done in little subjects.

Sermon Preached upon Whitsunday<sup>1</sup>

In 1614, perhaps a little earlier, the soon-to-be ordained John Donne wrote an extended commentary on Genesis and Exodus that would be published after his death under the title *Essayes in Divinity*. The precise genre of the work has proven difficult to establish: Are these “essays” in the sense in which Michel de Montaigne and Sir Francis Bacon had used the word, or in the bare sense of attempts – in this case, Donne’s attempts to prepare himself to be a divine by undertaking more sustained and systematic engagement with scripture than he had yet done? Whatever the work may be, Donne takes time in his introductory reflections to contrast the Bible with God’s two other “books”: the mysterious “register of his Elect” and “another book subordinate to [scripture], which is *liber creaturarum*.” Citing the *Theologia Naturalis sive Liber Creaturarum* of the fifteenth-century monk Raymond of Sebond, Donne comments on the relative accessibility of this “book”:

And so much is this book available to the other, that *Sebund*, when he had digested this book into a written book, durst pronounce, that it was an Art, which teaches al things, presupposes no other, is soon learned, cannot be

<sup>1</sup> John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, 10 vols., ed. George Potter and Evelyn Simpson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1953–62), ix:236–37.

forgotten, needs no witnesses, and in this, is safer than the Bible it self, that it cannot be falsified by Hereticks.<sup>2</sup>

As a propaedeutic to a series of considered reflections on the Bible, itself likely conducted in preparation for his religious vocation, Donne tackles the subject of natural theology. This is by no means the only time he does so – in poetry or prose – but this subject has not received sustained critical attention.

In focusing our attention on Donne's view of natural theology, especially from 1614 onward, I wish to stress two convictions. First, considering Donne biographically, I argue that while there is important continuity in Donne's career (insofar as he engages with the book of nature throughout), his vocational turn in the years 1611–14 refocuses, reshapes, and intensifies that engagement: the skeptical and noncommittal attitude toward apprehension of the divine in the sensible world that can be traced in the *Songs and Sonnets* is replaced by a clearer and altogether more hopeful tone in the *Essayes*, with Donne further developing his insights about the book of nature in his sermons and the *Devotions*. Second, I argue that Donne's insights deserve to be included in historical studies of natural theology in early modern England and that his exclusion has been partly facilitated by scholarly emphasis on his earlier work, although this is changing.<sup>3</sup>

An understanding of Donne's engagement with natural theology helps to illuminate his fascinating relationship with the "new philosophy" in general and Bacon in particular.<sup>4</sup> Scholarship on the *Anniversaries* – poems that present the world as in a state of decay and human knowledge as feeble – puts Donne directly into conversation with Bacon, contrasting

<sup>2</sup> John Donne, *Essayes in Divinity*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal: McGill–Queens University Press, 2001), 9–10. Raspa seems to suggest in his introduction (xxxiii) that Sebond popularized the "three books" found in Donne's *Essayes*, but Sebond mentions only two: "Duo sunt libri, nobis dati a Deo." In Raimondus Sabundus, *Theologia Naturalis seu Liber Creaturarum* (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1966), 35.

<sup>3</sup> The change is evident in other ways in the appearance of new scholarly editions of Donne's prose and later works. Besides Raspa's 2001 edition of the *Essayes* – which he sees as a step toward correcting the twentieth-century preoccupation with "the witticism of [Donne's] verse" – Oxford University Press is now issuing new volumes of Donne's sermons; there is also a new edition of *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624) in *John Donne*, ed. Janel M. Mueller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 232–334. In tandem with these editions, a number of recent critics are more focused on Donne's intellectual context and contributions than were earlier generations and take up his later works.

<sup>4</sup> His most famous pronouncements about natural philosophy appear in the *Anniversaries* (1611–12), though the *Essayes* and *Ignatius his Conclave* both deal with the topic as well. On *Ignatius his Conclave*, see n. 91 below.

Bacon's empirical (and monarchical) optimism with Donne's relatively sober views.<sup>5</sup> Donne's view of the natural world, how well it can be known, how it is best studied, and *why* it is to be studied at all, is bound up with his view of natural theology, an enterprise that in early seventeenth-century England was poised for a spectacular transformation and meteoric rise in popularity. As my Introduction outlined, the new species of natural theology that developed in this climate (and which owed something to Bacon) would capitalize on the findings of empirical science in order to "demonstrate" the factuality of Christianity. In this chapter, I place Donne's natural theology in its late Renaissance context before comparing his views with those of Bacon, tracing how Donne provides an alternative vision for the apprehension of God through creation. This alternative natural theology rests on Donne's understanding of the relationships between God, nature, and the human inquirer, in which he differs fundamentally from Bacon. The creator that emerges in Donne's writings is not an arbitrary lawgiver whose existence and power can be inferred from scrutiny and dissection of the created world; instead, Donne's creator is a poet, and the natural world is a divine poem in which his wit and wisdom can be discerned by the willing and wondering reader.

### Natural Theology in Renaissance Europe

Just as writers in Renaissance Europe held a variety of views on the book of scripture – who could read and interpret it, and what kind of authority it possessed – they also held a variety of views on how and to whom the natural world might reveal theological truth. Before turning to Donne on the topic of natural theology, it is helpful to consider some of the major positions through which he was sifting in the years prior to his ordination: in particular, those of Sebond, Montaigne, Calvin, and Bacon. These

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Gimelli Martin argues that Donne sought to counter the optimistic program of empirical learning outlined in Bacon's *Advancement* by affirming the widely accepted *contemptus mundi* tradition, and Desiree Hellegers yokes that program with Bacon's monarchical absolutism, giving Donne (she argues) yet more reason to challenge Baconian thought in his elegy. See Martin, "The *Advancement of Learning* and the Decay of the World: A New Reading of Donne's *First Anniversary*," *John Donne Journal* 19 (2000): 164–66; and Hellegers, *Handmaid to Divinity: Natural Philosophy, Poetry, and Gender in Seventeenth-Century England* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 22–34. Since this body of work appeared, Ryan Netzley has argued in "Learning from Anniversaries: Progress, Particularity, and Radical Empiricism in John Donne's *The Second Anniversary*," *Connotations* 25, no. 1 (2015/16): 27–28, that the *Second Anniversary* (unlike the *First Anniversary*) argues for a "more radical empiricism" than Bacon's in challenging universals. Such a program would also undercut Baconian science by denying the reproducibility of the results of experimentation. On this tension in Bacon, see p. 39.

writers held a variety of views on the central questions of natural theology: (1) To what extent can knowledge of God be gained by means other than special revelation, and (crucially) can this knowledge *precede* saving faith, or is it available only to those with faith? (2) How is that knowledge best acquired: through deduction from first principles (or a *sensus divinitatis*) or induction from external observation? And (3) if the natural world is to be “read” for knowledge of its creator, how should this reading be conducted? As explained in the Introduction, at this time an older, allegorical understanding of nature’s relationship to the divine was gradually giving way to a view of nature as a web of causal relations generally evincing divine power and providence. Donne was among the earliest and most notable figures to consider the implications of this shift, already evident in the writings of Bacon.

Given the tendency of Reformation thinking to question human rational faculties as well as human agency, it is not surprising that the most ambitious recent work of natural theology known to Donne was written instead by a Catholic. Sebond (or Raimundo Sibiunda or Sebundus, d. 1436) was a learned Catalan monk whose *Liber naturae sive creaturarum* or *Theologia Naturalis* first appeared in print in 1484. The book exerted a significant influence on Renaissance Catholics and popularized the term “theologia naturalis” as denoting theology carried out by means other than special revelation.<sup>6</sup> In it Sebond made the strikingly optimistic claim that all necessary tenets of Christian faith could be inferred from the book of creatures alone:

This science teaches all men really to know without effort or difficulty all necessary truths concerning mankind: concerning both man and God and everything which is necessary to man for his health and flourishing, and in order that he may enter into eternal life.<sup>7</sup>

The book purports not only to prove infallibly God’s existence and perfection but also to demonstrate the Trinity without recourse to special revelation, making it among the most ambitious works of natural theology in Christian history. The book “contained all the key features of medieval natural theology,” reprising both scholastic arguments deducing God’s

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Woolford, “Natural Theology in the Late Renaissance” (PhD Diss., University of Cambridge, 2011), 150–52.

<sup>7</sup> Sebundus, *Theologia Naturalis*, *Prologus* 27: “Ista scientia docet omnem hominem cognoscere realiter sine difficultate et labore omnem veritatem homini necessariam tam de homine quam de deo et omnia quae sunt necessaria homini ad salutem et suam perfectionem et ut perueniat ad vitam aeternam.” Translations of Sebond are mine.

existence and more inductive consideration of the external world.<sup>8</sup> Another key feature of the *Theologia Naturalis* is the special precedence it gives to humans, as the image of God and the microcosm of the universe and therefore as the appropriate starting point for reasoning about the divine: "for man proves all things by himself." Though it rehearses medieval arguments, the book was at home – and frequently read – in the Renaissance.<sup>9</sup>

Sebond's work is now best known through Montaigne's *Apologie de Raymond Sebond*, published in the 1580 edition of his *Essays*, but Donne had at least some direct experience with Sebond's original. Montaigne wrote the *Apologie* after translating *Theologia Naturalis* for his father, emending parts of the introduction to make it less liable to the sanctions occasionally imposed on it by the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> His most famous emendation of Sebond is in writing that the book of creatures teaches "almost everything" where Sebond had emphatically claimed that it teaches "all things."<sup>11</sup> When Donne considers the book of creatures in opening his *Essays in Divinity*, he quotes Sebond as claiming that it "teaches al things," and he further cites a passage from chapter 166 (on the sufficiency of natural theology for salvation), before evaluating this claim.<sup>12</sup> Donne was thus familiar with Sebond's original argument and not only the mitigated version found in Montaigne's translation and his *Apologie*.

Montaigne's own attitude toward natural theology, and indeed all human knowledge, was famously skeptical, and his influence on Donne – especially early in his life – is well documented.<sup>13</sup> Montaigne has been called "the most apologetic of apologists," and arguably his essay on Sebond does more to undermine natural theology than to promote it.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Montaigne affirms that God can be seen in creation, asserting that "it is not credible that this whole machine should not have on it some

<sup>8</sup> Woolford, "Natural Theology in the Late Renaissance," 151.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 150; Woolford notes that the Latin text of the (originally Catalan-Latin) book was published at least four times by 1600 and at least thirteen times by 1648.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 151. The book was censored not for intellectual presumption but for Sebond's claim that the consummation of revelation was in scripture, which might undermine papal authority.

<sup>11</sup> M. A. Screech, "Introduction," in *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, ed. M. A. Screech (London: Allen Lane, 1991), xxiii–xxiv, lv, emphasis mine.

<sup>12</sup> Donne, *Essays in Divinity*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance Robert Ornstein, "Donne, Montaigne, and Natural Law," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 55, no. 2 (1956): 221–22; John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 231–60; and Harold Skulsky, review of *John Donne: Body and Soul*, by Ramie Targoff, *Modern Philology* 109, no. 3 (2012): 182–83.

<sup>14</sup> Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, ed. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958), 318–19.

marks imprinted by the hand of this great architect . . . He says himself, that his invisible operations he manifests to us by the visible.”<sup>15</sup> While not as sanguine as Sebond, Montaigne affirms that natural theology might function as a propaedeutic to faith if not a substitute for it:

Faith, coming to color and illumine Sebond’s arguments, makes them firm and solid; they are capable of serving as a start and a first guide to an apprentice to set him on the road to this knowledge; they fashion him to some extent and make him capable of the grace of God, by means of which our belief is afterward completed and perfected.<sup>16</sup>

If Montaigne spends the bulk of his *Apologie* attacking human knowledge and presumption, an attack that culminates in his famous *Que scay-je?* (What do I know?), this cannot safely be taken as canceling those earlier claims; rather, in the tradition of Pyhrronian skepticism, Montaigne advances competing claims and refuses to resolve the tension in one direction or another.

Perhaps surprisingly, Calvin’s treatment of natural theology can be seen in a similar light. Calvin considers natural theology most systematically in the opening sections of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1539–59), though he takes up the subject in commentaries and sermons as well.<sup>17</sup> Because of Calvin’s emphasis on the disastrous effects of sin on human reason as well as external nature, the question for him is not whether natural knowledge can give sufficient knowledge of the divine, or even whether it might lead one to faith, but whether natural knowledge has any theological worth at all – for instance, as edifying believers. Given this soteriological pessimism, the stress Calvin lays on natural theology, and the time he spends unfolding its operations, is intriguing. He asserts emphatically, first, that all humans have a *sensus divinitatis*, an innate sense of God’s existence and sovereignty, citing the most depraved atheists’ fear of the divine as evidence for this. (Notably, in the sections of the *Institutes* treating natural theology, 1.3.1–1.5.15, Calvin draws evidence from extra-biblical sources, mirroring natural theological reasoning.) Second, besides having “sowed in men’s minds that seed of religion,” God has also “revealed himself and daily discloses himself in the whole workmanship

<sup>15</sup> Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 326.      <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Calvin’s commentary on Psalm 19:1 (“The heavens declare the glory of God”) and sermon on Job 9:7–15 in John Calvin, *Sermons on Job* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 155–60.

of the universe."<sup>18</sup> Like Sebond, Calvin gives centrality of place in this general revelation to man, "not ineptly called . . . a microcosm because he is a rare example of God's power, goodness, and wisdom." The man who is "loath to descend within himself to find God" is therefore especially undeserving of pardon (I.5.3).

Throughout Calvin stresses the ubiquity of God's natural revelation. Morally depraved people cannot quash their inner sense of a divine creator; nor can intellectually deficient people fail to see God in creation, for "men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him." Although those with training in "astronomy, medicine, and all natural science" can "penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of divine wisdom," God's self-revelation in creation is such that all can see it: "Upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory," Calvin declares, "that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance" (I.5.1).<sup>19</sup> The division Calvin makes between virtuosi and the uneducated is interesting and would remain an important distinction in seventeenth-century natural theology.<sup>20</sup> Clearly he would side with those who held that God's wisdom, power, and goodness are visible enough to all regardless of scientific acumen. There is a clear echo here of Romans 1.20: "For [God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse."

But Calvin seems to undercut all the force of this claim in the *Institutes* when he goes on (as Paul had done in Romans) to describe the debilitating effects of sin, which obscures both the inner *sensus divinitatis* and the human capacity to infer God's existence and attributes from external creation. Immediately after discussing the *sensus divinitatis* in 1.3, he titles 1.4, "This knowledge is either smothered or corrupted, partly by ignorance, partly by malice." Due to these forces, the knowledge planted in the

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 51–52. Henceforth quotations from the *Institutes* will be cited parenthetically within the text by book, chapter, and section.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Calvin's engagement with natural philosophy, see Davis A. Young, *John Calvin and the Natural World* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> For instance, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, Robert Boyle would claim that to read the book of nature for theological meaning requires "something of Dexterousness and Sagacity that is not very ordinary" (*Occasional Reflections upon several subjects* [London, 1665], 18). By contrast, John Ray would claim in the preface to his influential *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* (London, 1691) that arguments for God drawn from "effects and operations, exposed to every Mans view" are not only "convictive of the greatest and subtlest Adversaries, but intelligible also to the meanest capacities."

human mind brings forth fruit in none (1.4.1). Similarly, the knowledge of God that all humans should infer from the created world, and especially from their very selves, is “buried” by depraved humans, who “substitute nature for God” (1.5.4). (Interestingly, in the course of this discussion Calvin avers that it is not, strictly speaking, wrong to say that nature is God, but that this is a harmful thing to say, because it “involve[s] God confusedly in the inferior course of his works [1.5.5].”) Adducing examples of “filthy” human speculation on the origins of the universe, motivated by the desire to “suppress God’s name,” Calvin concludes: “Although the Lord represents both himself and his everlasting Kingdom in the mirror [*speculo*] of his works with very great clarity, such is our stupidity that we grow increasingly dull toward so manifest testimonies, and they flow away without profiting us” (1.5.11). In referring to the natural world as a “mirror” – an image that recurs in his oeuvre and which Donne would also use – Calvin alludes to 1 Corinthians 13.12: “For now we see in a mirror darkly.” The emphasis for Calvin falls on the darkness.

In sum, Calvin builds a mounting sense of the tantalizing availability, even copiousness, of natural knowledge of the Creator and, at the same time, of how such knowledge is utterly useless to humans because of sin. This approach has been seen as a “*complexio oppositorum* . . . absolutely constitutive as a formal determination for Calvin’s theology,” that is, a dialectical antithesis in which both components still ultimately stand.<sup>21</sup> This strategy clearly shares some ground with Montaigne’s skeptical approach; but, in contrast with Montaigne’s negative emphasis on ignorance as the human condition, Calvin emphasizes humankind’s positive, willful burying of plain truth that ought to be easy to grasp. Both accounts of natural knowledge of the divine stand in stark opposition to the optimistic project of Raymond of Sebond, however, and their pessimism can be seen in Bacon’s treatment of natural theology early in the seventeenth century. Bacon introduces new threads into this old conversation, making it necessary to consider what he has to say about natural theology at some length. As he was an intellectual contemporary of Donne, Bacon has been compared and contrasted to Donne by a number of scholars, particularly on the topic of natural philosophy.<sup>22</sup> It is also crucial – both

<sup>21</sup> John Newton Thomas, “The Place of Natural Theology in the Thought of John Calvin,” *The Journal of Religious Thought* 15, no. 2 (1958): 123.

<sup>22</sup> See n. 5 above, as well as Robert Ellrodt, “Scientific Curiosity and Metaphysical Poetry in the Seventeenth Century,” *Modern Philology* 61, no. 3 (1964): 180–97; and Anthony J. Funari, *Francis Bacon and Seventeenth-Century Intellectual Discourse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 39–59.



for understanding Donne and for understanding the interplay between natural philosophy and theology at this important historical moment – to compare the two men's views on natural theology.

### Bacon on Natural Theology

Bacon deals with natural theology both explicitly and implicitly. The topic recurs explicitly throughout his writing career, from *Valerius Terminus* (1603) and *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) through the second edition of his *Essays* (1612) to the translated and expanded version of the *Advancement, De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum* (1623), whose ninth and last book takes up "the Legitimate Use of the Human Reason in Divine Subjects." Also pertinent are Bacon's views on the relationships between God, nature, and humankind, expressed in these works as well as the *De Sapientia Veterum* (1609) and the *Novum Organum*, published with Bacon's "Plan" for his *Instauratio Magna* (1620). If one believes that God has instituted an intelligible natural law, for instance, natural theology will proceed along different lines than if one believes natural phenomena to be God's arbitrary and wondrous works. And because natural theology involves humans asking nature to testify about the creator, it is similarly important whether nature lies passive and open to human investigation and manipulation or whether it (or she) has some revelatory – or obfuscating – agency in the process of human inquiry. These are topics on which both Bacon and Donne developed nuanced, and often diametrically opposed, positions. I focus here primarily on the views Bacon articulated before Donne pronounced on natural theology in his *Essayes in Divinity*, but because Donne also dealt with these topics in his poetry and other prose – particularly his sermons and the *Devotions* – I will not exclude Bacon's later works.

Like Montaigne and Calvin, Bacon places strict limits on natural theology in his explicit discussion of the topic. Unlike them, he does so largely to mark out territory for natural philosophy. In *The Advancement of Learning*, Bacon's first systematic taxonomy of human knowledge, he defines natural theology as "that knowledge or Rudiment of knowledge concerning GOD, which may be obtained by the contemplation of his Creatures" and declares that it "sufficeth to convince Atheisme; but not to inform Religion." This is why miracles are effective to correct superstitious people, but not to convince atheists, for the ordinary works of nature should be enough to prove that God exists. Crucially, nature cannot give

positive information about God's nature or will;<sup>23</sup> it can only demonstrate God's power and wisdom by the fact of its continued orderly existence and maintenance:

For [heathens] supposed the world to bee the Image of God, & Man to be an extract or compendious Image of the world: But the Scriptures neuer vouch-safe to attribute to the world that honour as to bee the Image of God: but onely *The worke of his hands*.

Thus Bacon distances himself from the idea of an analogical relationship between God and his works and from the macrocosm/microcosm idea that had still appealed to Calvin.

Bacon issues two further cautions: First, aspiring as it does to divine things, natural theology is "not safe," for humans should give to faith those things that are faith's, and second, the enterprise has long since been "excellently handled by diverse." Human scientific industry had much better be directed toward natural philosophy than toward such dangerously high aspirations, for "we ought not to attempt to draw down or submit the mysteries of God to our reason; but contrariwise to raise and advance our reason to the divine truth."<sup>24</sup> Seven years later, Bacon returns to the topic of natural theology in his essay "Of Atheism" (1612) and makes similar claims to those in the *Advancement*: again he asserts that the "order and beauty" of God's works are sufficient proof of God's existence, and he further affirms that "depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion."<sup>25</sup> Thus he leaves more room than does Calvin for natural theology to be of some use to those without Christian faith, but without the optimism of Sebond, and without any interest in seeing the undertaking drawn out further.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Oxford Francis Bacon*, iv:78–79. Besides this passage in *The Advancement of Learning*, see Valerius Terminus, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols. (London, 1857–74), iii:218: "If any man shall think by view and inquiry into these sensible and material things, to attain to any light for the revealing of the nature or will of God, he shall dangerously abuse himself." Bacon reiterates this notion many times, including in the "Plan" of the *Instauratio Magna* where he decries human presumption and urges empirical rigor in tracing "the Creator's footprints and impressions upon His creatures" ("vestigiorum & sigillorum Creatoris super Creaturas," *Oxford Francis Bacon*, xi:45).

<sup>24</sup> Bacon, *Oxford Francis Bacon*, iv:78–79. Similarly, in *De Sapientia Veterum* (1609), he refers to the "crime . . . of trying to bring the divine wisdom itself under the dominion of sense and reason" (*Works*, vi:752–53).

<sup>25</sup> Bacon, *Works*, vi:413. Though Bacon hoped to dissuade people from writing more works of natural theology, this passage was quoted as justification in works of natural theology written later in the century. See for instance Richard Baxter, *Reasons of the Christian Religion*, 31; and John Wilkins, *The Principles and Duties of Natural Religion*, 91.

Bacon never substantially alters his position on natural theology as an enterprise of august pedigree but limited use, but he further develops his thought on how one might or might not apprehend the divine in nature as he progressively sketches out his program for human science. One relevant aspect of this developing thought is his bracketing of final causes from scientific study, articulated in the *Novum Organum* (1620) and *De Dignitate* (1623). In classical (Aristotelian) philosophy, the final cause of a thing is the end for which it exists; and the presence of final causes in nature implies intelligible purpose rather than sheer mechanical causation. While not denying the doctrine of final causes, Bacon avers that it is wrong to attempt to uncover or study them scientifically,

for the handling of final causes in physics has driven away and overthrown the diligent inquiry of physical causes, and made men to stay upon these specious and shadowy causes, without actively pressing the inquiry of those which are really and truly physical; to the great arrest and prejudice of science.<sup>26</sup>

In declaring that final causes cannot by definition be uncovered by natural philosophy, Bacon precludes any natural theology that might proceed by looking for the intelligible purpose of physical phenomena.

It is characteristic of Bacon to redirect his reader's gaze from the spiritual world to the material: while study of the divine is presumptuous, no investigation of the material world is out of bounds.<sup>27</sup> Thus in *De Dignitate* he promotes science aimed at prolonging earthly life against those who would "make a scruple of it, as if this were a thing belonging to fate and Divine Providence," and he launches a defense of euthanasia in cases of irremediable disease and frailty that smacks of Epicureanism.<sup>28</sup> In the preface to *The Advancement of Learning*, he directly addresses religious objections to an ambitious scientific program by challenging one of the most often cited biblical expressions of the limitations of human learning, Ecclesiastes 3:11: "yet cannot man find out the work that God hath wrought from the beginning even to the end." Questioning the possibly damning implications of this passage for his program of comprehensive learning, Bacon writes,

Although he [the Teacher] doth insinuate that the supreme or summary law of Nature, which he calleth, The work which God worketh from the

<sup>26</sup> Bacon, *Works*, iv:363. See also the *Novum Organum* (*Oxford Francis Bacon*, xi:84–87).

<sup>27</sup> See my *Natural Theology in the Scientific Revolution*, 15–17.

<sup>28</sup> Bacon, *Works*, iv:383–87. It is telling that, among the ancients, Bacon sees the atomist Democritus as wiser than Plato and Aristotle in not intermixing physics and metaphysics (*Works*, iv:363–64).

beginning to the end, is not possible to be found out by Man; yet that doth not derogate from the capacity of the mind; but may bee referred to the impediments as of shortness of life, ill conjunction of labours, ill tradition of knowledge over from hand to hand, and many other Inconveniences, whereunto the condition of Man is subject. For that nothing parcel of the world, is denied to Mans enquire and invention: hee doth in another place rule over.<sup>29</sup>

We may note that in taking the “work which God worketh” to mean the “law of nature,” Bacon begs an important question that needs to be considered separately. His central point here, however, is that the entire natural world *can* in fact be comprehended by man. In his view, Solomon did not intend to limit the scientific enterprise in general but to warn individuals that they must carry out this enterprise humbly and collaboratively, over multiple generations. These limitations constitute no “contracting or coarctation, but that [humane knowledge] may comprehend all the universall nature of thinges.”<sup>30</sup> The word “comprehend” carries with it a sense of aggressive grasping and exhaustive thoroughness, and it is a word Bacon liked: the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites him three times in defining “comprehend” in these senses.<sup>31</sup>

Although there is a religious dimension to Bacon’s rhetoric, this is deployed in the service of his program for advancing knowledge. For instance, in differentiating scientific illuminati from those of lower social castes (and anyone still fumbling around with Aristotle), he repeatedly attributes to the natural philosopher a godlike or priestlike ability to read nature.<sup>32</sup> Here Bacon shows affinity with Calvin, who had averred that those trained in natural philosophy will see more deeply into nature than others – but Bacon downplays the theological end of seeing into nature that for Calvin would have justified the exercise. Instead, the mystical and religious-appearing powers possessed by members of Solomon’s House in the *New Atlantis* (1626) are powers over the natural world, illustrating Bacon’s paradoxical appropriation of religious ritual in the service of his vision for scientific reform, not unlike his paradoxical use of rhetoric itself.<sup>33</sup> This religious rhetoric does not serve any religious or mysterious

<sup>29</sup> Bacon, *Oxford Francis Bacon*, iv:6–7.      <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, iv:7.

<sup>31</sup> Bacon’s *Advancement* is cited in definitions 4.a: “To grasp with the mind, conceive fully or adequately,” and 8: “Of a space, period, or amount: To take in, contain, comprise, include,” and his *Essays* in definition 6: “To lay hold of all the points of (any thing)”; *OED Online*, s.v. “comprehend, v.”

<sup>32</sup> Hellegers, *Handmaid to Divinity*, 10–11.

<sup>33</sup> On Bacon’s view of rhetoric, see David Parry, “Francis Bacon and the Rhetorical Reordering of Reality,” in *Rhetor* 6 (2016): 1–17.

interest. It serves instead to motivate and glamorize the quest for comprehensive knowledge of "the universal nature of things," readily accessible to natural philosophers so long as they work methodically and collaboratively. In its emphasis on an initiated scientific elite, this aspect of Bacon's rhetoric also serves to promote and preserve social hierarchy, with King James or King Solomona at the top and the benefits of their knowledge filtering down to all humankind.

Two further aspects of Bacon's thought bear directly on natural theology: (1) his conception of a "supreme or summary law" of nature and, relatedly, (2) his view of the process by which that law is gradually apprehended through controlled experimentation and observation. Bacon's idea of natural law is distinguished, on one side, from scholastic notions of an intelligible rational principle immanent in nature and, on the other, from an extreme voluntarist position in which every natural phenomenon is a random act of God, which would make empirical science senseless. For Bacon, as John Gascoigne explains, this law of nature was "imposed by the will of the Creator on the Creation . . . Natural objects form some sort of pattern not because there is an organic bond between them but rather because they are regimented into formation by an outside force."<sup>34</sup> In *De Sapientia Veterum* (1609) Bacon asserts that there is doubtless "a single and summary law in which nature centres and which is subject and subordinate to God." But this law cannot be assumed or derived by the human imagination. Due to its arbitrary nature, humans must humbly observe nature, working slowly upward from those observations by induction toward a grasp of this law – and from there, if necessary, to the conclusion that God exists and is powerful. To overleap this law, reasoning from individual phenomena to God, is sloppy: those who reason thus "ascend by a leap and not by steps" as they would do if they acknowledged and examined the regularity of nature.<sup>35</sup> Bacon adds in his essay on atheism that this reasoning by steps from phenomena to divinity must also be comprehensive in order to be conclusive: "When the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them," he writes, "and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity."<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting "behold" is the English

<sup>34</sup> John Gascoigne, "The Religious Thought of Francis Bacon," in *Religion and Retributive Logic: Essays in Honor of Professor Garry W. Trompf*, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Christopher Hartney (Boston: Brill, 2010), 220.

<sup>35</sup> Bacon, *Works*, vi:730.      <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, vi:413.

cognate of the Latin “comprehend”: it is a type of seeing that carries with it the notion of “grasping” a thing in its totality.

The idea of a strictly regimented natural world whose behavior can be known only through observation comes through as well in Bacon’s discussion of natural theology in his essay “Of Atheism,” where he reasons that in these days of a resurgent atomic theory, it is yet more ridiculous than before to be an atheist, for an “army” of atoms could never produce such order and beauty as is seen in the world without a “divine Marshal.”<sup>37</sup> Given the arbitrariness of the relationships between the divine mind, the natural world, and the human mind, humans must study the divinely marshalled world by means of further marshalling. In *De Sapientia Veterum*, among other places, Bacon explains that matter must be “secured by the hands” and put to extremities in order to be known, for under these conditions it will “turn and transform itself into strange shapes, passing from one change to another till it has gone through the whole circle and finished the period; when, if the force be continued, it returns at last to itself”; and the natural philosopher thus discovers “the conditions, affections, and processes of matter.”<sup>38</sup> (*W*, 6:726). Bacon’s rhetoric of torture and vexation of nature has recently become one of the more notorious aspects of his thought, and it is one of the clearest places where his vision of human inquiry into the natural world – on the topic of divinity or anything else – differs from Donne’s.

### **Body as Book: Apprehension of the Divine through the Sensible in Donne’s Lyric Poems**

While Donne’s most explicit treatment of natural theology appears in *Essays in Divinity*, Donne (like Bacon) develops his thought on the relationships between God, nature, and humans in his other works as well, fleshing out a more robust and positive conception of natural theology than is available in that explicit discussion. In what follows I will consider, first, Donne’s ambivalent treatment of apprehension of the divine through the sensible in his lyric poetry and especially the poems that became *Songs and Sonnets*, a treatment that highlights Donne’s persistent interest in the question of how fallen and embodied humans might best grasp divine truth. Next I will turn to Donne’s increasingly

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, vi:413.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, vi:726.

explicit – and increasingly hopeful – engagement with the book of nature in the *Essayes*, *Devotions*, and sermons.

"I am a little world made cunningly," Donne opens the Holy Sonnet, making clear his commitment (if only at an aesthetic level) to the idea of the person as a microcosm of the universe, the idea that appealed so forcibly to Sebond and Calvin when they took up natural theology. This "little world," the human body, repeatedly appears in Donne's poetry as a book in which higher, more spiritual, realities might be read.<sup>39</sup> In his notorious *Elegy* 19, for instance, the speaker proclaims that clothed women are "like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made / For laymen," while their bodies "are mystic books, which only we / (Whom their imputed grace will dignify) / must see revealed." As was the case when Calvin considered the book of nature, there is a question here whether the physical "book" is accessible to a lay reader. In this poem, the book is hidden and obscure: the woman's body is a "revealed" text, accessible only to recipients of grace. But the body need not be a "mystic" book of revelation; it can also figure, more metonymically, the relatively accessible book of nature.<sup>40</sup> Consider the final stanzas of "The Ecstasy," where the speaker again addresses a lover:

To our bodies turn we then, that so  
Weak men on love revealed may look;  
Love's mysteries in souls do grow,  
But yet the body is his book.

(69–72)

The poem's speaker gives a surprising reason for the lovers to come together physically: so that an audience of "weak men" might observe them and therefore understand love. This strange but very Donnean exhibitionism<sup>41</sup> again underscores the poet's preoccupation, even in "secular" erotic verse, with (theological) revelation: how it unfolds, and to

<sup>39</sup> These poems cannot of course be taken as doctrinal manifestoes. Nonetheless, Donne's gravitation toward particular metaphors, I contend, suggests certain intellectual preoccupations on his part. Quotations of Donne's lyric poetry are taken from John T. Shawcross, ed., *The Complete Poetry of John Donne* (New York: New York University Press, 1968) and will be cited parenthetically within the text by line number.

<sup>40</sup> Donne's *Idios* in "Eclogue. 1613. December 26" states that man epitomizes the book of nature: "As man is of the world, the heart of man, / Is an epitome of Gods great booke / Of creatures, and man need no farther looke" (50–52).

<sup>41</sup> Compare the speaker's emphasis on visible love in "The Ecstasy" with these lines from "A Lecture upon the Shadow": "That love hath not attain'd the high'st degree, / which is still diligent lest others see" (12–13).

whom it is accessible. On this latter question, unlike the mysterious book in *Elegy 19*, the lovers' bodies in "The Ecstasy" are a book in which, as in Sebond's *liber creaturarum*, even laypeople can read love's mysteries.

That "love's mysteries" have a theological dimension is made clear in another poem exploring books and revelation: "A Valediction: Of the Book." In this poem, the speaker calls for his lover to write "our annals" in order to preserve their love in the face of his necessary departure. The resulting book, written in "cipher . . . or new made idiom," will not be readily intelligible to everyone, so that it can be saved for those who wish to preserve learning through a potential barbarian invasion. Of this book, the speaker declares:

Here Love's divines (since all divinity  
Is love or wonder) may find all they seek,  
Whether abstract spiritual love they like,  
Their souls exhaled with what they do not see,  
Or, loth so to amuse  
Faith's infirmity, they choose  
Something which they may see and use;  
For, though mind be the heaven where love doth sit,  
Beauty a convenient type may be to figure it.

(28–36)

These lines make an identification between "divinity" and "love" that may help illuminate Donne's view of natural theology (if not theology in general): To apprehend love, the parenthetical remark suggests, is to apprehend the divine. Here Donne's speaker avers that readers can gain such apprehension in the book of his own love, in two ways: They might access spiritual love directly, or they may grasp the "divinity" of love through physical beauty, "something which they may see and use." Given its positioning in the stanza, this latter route to divine knowledge seems to be the more common, perhaps the more appropriate, for humans not wishing to "amuse / faith's infirmity."

Though in these poems Donne builds up the body as a means of "reading" spiritual truth, in others he maintains the higher and greater value of invisible things, gradually creating his own antithesis between natural and special revelation. The speaker in "The Blossom," for instance, wryly asserts that "a naked thinking heart, that makes no show" will never move a heartless woman (27), placing the blame on the woman who cannot brook bodily absence rather than attempting to accommodate her human frailty. Similarly, in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" bodily absence is memorably belittled:



Moving of th' earth brings harms and fears,  
 Men reckon what it did and meant,  
 But trepidation of the spheres,  
 Though greater far, is innocent.

Dull sublunary lovers' love  
 (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit  
 Absence, because it doth remove  
 Those things which elemented it.

(13–16)

Far better than sensual sublunary love is a refined, spiritual "inter-assurance" that does not depend on physical sense. If love must be visible for the sake of those who in their infirmity cannot apprehend it in other ways, this does not mean that the body is love's native soil.

Indeed, the quest for what "elements" love – body or spirit – frequently animates Donne's poetry. The low view of the physical he entertains in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is replaced in "Love's Growth" with a more positive assessment of physical love:

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use  
 To say, which have no mistress but their Muse,  
 But as all else, being elemented too,  
 Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.

(11–14)

Here love is not only visible in and expressed through the physical but also "elemented," a rich word that here means "not so pure, and abstract" as they would say who have never loved bodily. Love, rather than being a spiritual reality merely adumbrated in the book of nature, is fundamentally partly physical. This is not only a witty observation about erotic love but a theological principle that Donne came increasingly to espouse as he slackened his hold on the dualist Greek assumptions of his youth.<sup>42</sup> Especially at their most Gnostic, such dualist views conflict with orthodox Christian theology, in which God was "elemented" in the incarnation, a mystery to which Donne returns repeatedly in both poetry and sermons. And while Protestants debated the extent to which such elementing (re) occurs in the Eucharist, the bread and wine themselves are "elements" in the sense in which Donne uses the word in a 1625 sermon to refer to the "*Elements of the Church, water and bloud*" that poured out of Christ's side

<sup>42</sup> Felecia Wright McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then: Body as Word and Sacrament in the Works of John Donne* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 28–37.

at his death, which Donne says are “The Sacraments of *Baptisme*, and of the *Communion* of [Christ].”<sup>43</sup> Donne’s increasing emphasis on the elemented nature of the divine has profound implications for his view of natural theology: There is no longer a chasm, as in Platonism, between “natural” and “theology.”

### Donne on Natural Theology

With these observations on Donne’s more serious engagement of the “elemented” nature of the divine, we turn to his explicit engagement of natural theology in the *Essayes* and other works written from 1611 onward. In the *Essayes* and elsewhere, Donne uses the book of nature as a governing metaphor for his discussion of revealed and natural knowledge of God. As discussed in the introduction, this well-known medieval trope casts the natural world as a book written by God, in harmony with scripture and likewise intended to be “read” for divine insights beyond the literal level. This holds for God’s works in scripture-history as well.<sup>44</sup> The trope was central to Christian natural theology through the Renaissance: “Liber Creaturarum” or “Book of [the] Creatures” is the alternate title and a controlling metaphor for Sebond’s *Theologia Naturalis*, for instance. Bacon refers to the “book of God’s works”<sup>45</sup> as well, though we have seen that in practice he did not generally approach nature looking for divine insights. While the Protestant tendency was to reduce the levels of meaning – often to only two – and to privilege the literal text, Scott Mandelbrote has shown that Protestants might add their own third “book,” the book of conscience, even as they called for increased attention to the literal.<sup>46</sup> Donne shows this Protestant tendency toward reduction when, at the end of his

<sup>43</sup> Donne, *Sermons of John Donne*, vi:288.

<sup>44</sup> For an instructive discussion of these two types of reading God’s works – synchronic and diachronic – see William G. Madsen’s *From Shadowy Types to Truth*, 4–5. (See also Harrison’s discussion of allegory and typology in *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Modern Science*, 129–37.) Though these are clearly different, it is also clear from this passage in the *Essayes* and another in the *Devotions*, to be discussed later, that Donne appreciates both ways of “reading” God’s works.

<sup>45</sup> Bacon, *Works*, iv:261. A number of Donne’s readers have noticed his use of this trope: see Evelyn M. Simpson, “Introduction,” in *Essays in Divinity* by John Donne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), xviii–xix and “Donne’s Spanish Authors,” *Modern Language Review* 43, no. 2 (1948): 184; Beatrice Batson, *John Bunyan: Allegory and Imagination* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), 119–20; Dennis B. Quinn, “Donne’s Principles of Biblical Exegesis,” *The Journal of English and German Philology* 61, no. 2 (1962): 313; McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then*, 9–10; and Attie, “Prose, Science, and Scripture: Francis Bacon’s Sacred Texts.”

<sup>46</sup> Mandelbrote, “Early Modern Biblical Interpretation and the Emergence of Science,” 106–8.

discussion of God's books in the *Essayes*, he condemns "too Allegorical and Typick" a reading of scripture (10).

Generally, however, Donne's discussion of God's books is characteristically ecumenical.<sup>47</sup> God has "two books of life," according to Donne: the "eternall Register of his Elect" mentioned in the biblical book of "*Revelation*, and else where," and the Bible itself. The eschatological context of the first of these puts readers in mind of the anagogical level of medieval interpretation, which pertains to last things. But Donne is careful to emphasize the impossibility of reading this book, averring it is "far removed from the search of learning" and explaining that the only way to access this mystical book is when its contents are "insinuated and whisper'd to our hearts . . . which is the Conscience it selfe." Donne may here anticipate the book of Conscience, by which means later Protestants might set bounds on biblical interpretation without recurring to more suspect authorities. To these two books of life, Donne then adds the subordinate *liber creaturarum*:

– The first book is . . . impossible; the second difficult; but of the third book, the book of *Creatures*, we will say the 18<sup>th</sup> verse [of Is. 29], *The deaf shall heare the word of this book, and the eyes of the blinde shall see out of obscurity*. And so much is this book available to the other, that *Sebond*, when he had digested this book into a written book, durst pronounce, that it was an Art, which teaches all things, presupposes no other, is soon learned, cannot be forgotten, needs no witnesses, and in this, is safer than the Bible it self, that it cannot be falsified by Hereticks.<sup>48</sup>

Here Donne digests a number of claims from *Sebond's* exuberant preface to the *Theologia Naturalis* and places them in a generally positive light: he concurs with *Sebond* that nature has broad appeal and is easier to interpret than scripture. He liked the paradox of a book that could be read by the illiterate – and the irony that *Sebond* had turned it back into a "written book" was clearly not lost on him. It is also noteworthy that Donne contradicts the idea of a scientific elite who are especially good at interpreting nature, put forward by both Calvin and Bacon.

Unsurprisingly given his early respect for Montaigne and his increasingly Protestant outlook at this point, Donne will not go so far as *Sebond* in affirming the efficacy of natural knowledge to arrive at all necessary Christian doctrines. To be sure, the book of nature teaches at least "an Unity in the Godhead" and "is enough to make us inexcusable, if we

<sup>47</sup> Anthony Raspa discusses this context in his introduction to the *Essayes*, xxxii–xxxiii.

<sup>48</sup> Donne, *Essayes*, 9–10.

search not further” (like Calvin, Donne alludes here to Romans 1.20). But the monk was “too abundant in affirming that *in libro creaturarum* there is enough to teach us all particularities of Christian Religion.”<sup>49</sup> This relative skepticism about natural theology may have motivated Donne’s entry of Sebond into his satirical *Catalogus Librorum Aulicorum* (c. 1603–11), where he irreverently attributes to the monk the imaginary *Manipulus quercuum, sive ars comprehendendi transcendentia* – *A Handful of Oaks, or, the Art of Grasping Divine Things*. The sophisticated courtier, Donne hints, too easily believes that knowledge of nature will make him a master of divinity.<sup>50</sup> In opening his *Essayes in Divinity*, probably several years later, Donne still sets careful bounds on the theological light shed by natural knowledge while affirming an important place for natural theology in the life of faith. He also urges, like Calvin and Sebond, the universal availability of that knowledge. In denying that nature teaches “all particularities of Christian Religion,” Donne leans in Calvin’s direction, but he does not here settle the question of whether natural knowledge might be of use to someone without faith, either as a propaedeutic to faith ultimately found in scripture (as Montaigne had allowed), or yet more optimistically, as a substitute for biblical revelation in certain cases. Donne continues to raise these issues both later in the *Essayes* and in his sermons.

Often, Donne preaches the relatively safer, Calvinist view: in a sermon dated April 19, 1618, for instance, he says,

For first there is in Man a knowledge of God, *sine sermone*, without his word, in the book of the Creatures . . . and so there is some kind of creation in us, some knowledge of God imprinted, *sine sermone*, without any relation to his word. But this is a Creation as of heaven and earth, which were dark and empty.<sup>51</sup>

In another given June 16, 1619, he explains that the “book of Creatures” provides “only such a knowledge of God as Philosophers, moral and natural men may have, and yet be very farre from making this knowledge

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Donne, *The Courtier’s Library*, ed. Evelyn Mary Simpson (London: Nonesuch Press, 1930), 33. Simpson renders this title *A Bundle of Oaks, or, the Art of Understanding Transcendentals*; I would argue that Donne’s choice of the word “comprehend,” with its etymological resonance of grasping, is significant and speaks to the “hand” in “manipulum.”

<sup>51</sup> John Donne, *The Oxford Sermons of John Donne*, ed. Peter McCollough, David Colclough et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013–), 1:90. It is a Protestant move on Donne’s part to stress that the “book of Creatures” is in some important sense not a book at all (“*sine sermone*”) relative to scripture.

any means of salvation."<sup>52</sup> And in another dated Trinity Sunday, 1624, he declares,

The voice of the Creature alone, is but a faint voice, a low voice; nor any voice, till the voice of the Word inanimate it; for then when the Word of God hath taught us any mystery of our religion, then the book of Creatures illustrates, and establishes, and cherishes that which we have received by faith.<sup>53</sup>

Interestingly, Donne begins this sentence with the more optimistic view that *liber creaturarum* is audible but faint; but a few words later he arrives at the more Calvinist position that there is no voice at all until faith is present. Still, he finds much to value in the book of nature: it illustrates, cherishes and establishes the tenets of faith once received. Additionally, his emphases are different from Calvin's: while Donne's nature is faint of voice, for Calvin, Nature was practically shouting the message about God, making humans all the guiltier for shutting their ears through sin.

Elsewhere Donne leaves this Protestant orthodoxy altogether, though timidly. The first cue that he is open to pre-fideal or extra-fideal natural theology occurs in the *Essayes*, when he turns to the topic of knowledge of God in his exegesis of Genesis 1.1. In a passage that shares ground with Bacon's *Advancement*, Donne relies on a seafaring metaphor to explain the difference between natural and revealed theology:

Men which seek God by reason, and natural strength (though we do not deny common notions and general impressions of a sovereign power) are like Mariners which voyaged before the invention of the Compass, [who] unwillingly left the sight of the land. Such are they which would arrive at God by this world, and contemplate him onely in his Creatures, and seeming Demonstration. Certainly, every Creature shewes God, as a glass, but glimmeringly and transitorily, by the frailty both of the receiver, and beholder: Our selves have his Image, as Medals, permanently and preciously delivered. But by these meditations we get no further, then to know what he *doth*, not what he *is*.<sup>54</sup>

In suggesting that nonhuman creatures show God in the manner of a mirror rather than a "Medal" – like Calvin, Donne alludes to 1 Corinthians 13.12 – Donne parries the difficult question of whether creation bears God's image (as in medieval natural philosophy) or simply

<sup>52</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, ii:253.      <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, vi:143.

<sup>54</sup> Donne, *Essayes*, 24. Interestingly, Bacon would use this same seafaring image in the preliminaries to the *Instauratio Magna* to illustrate the situation of humankind before the advent of scientific method, which frees them to sail to the New World: Bacon, *Oxford Francis Bacon*, xi:19.

demonstrates God's power and wisdom, as Bacon claimed in *The Advancement of Learning*. Donne is leery of the older view, affirming, on the one hand, that humans glean only "what [God] *doth*, not what he *is*" from contemplation of themselves and other creatures. On the other hand, the fact that humans cannot see God's image in creation does not mean it is not there. In any case, however dim and partial this knowledge, Donne's sailing metaphor in the passage suggests that natural knowledge has at least allowed some to set sail in the first place, and it may even be that some mariners have reached their destination in this way. Donne continues to explain that, just as the compass has enabled men to "dispatch Ulysses' dangerous ten years' travel in so many days," so too "doth Faith, as soon as our hearts are touched by it, direct and inform us in that great search of the discovery of God's Essence, and the new *Hierusalem*, which Reason durst not attempt" (*Essayes*, 24). An implication of this analogy is that one might arrive at "God's Essence" by natural means, just as Odysseus achieved his end after ten years' sufferings. Such a claim, even implicit, is striking, for even Thomas Aquinas thought that God's essence was unknowable.<sup>55</sup>

Nor is this the only time Donne suggests that those outside the faith might find a way in without recourse to special revelation: in a sermon dated December 14, 1617, Donne cites Isaiah (as he had in his consideration of the book of creatures in the *Essayes*) as attributing "the love of god to the gentiles, whoe coolde seeke god no where butt in the booke of Creatures," affirming that "yet god was found of them."<sup>56</sup> In a sermon dated June 16, 1619, after preaching on the difficulty of arriving at salvation by means other than special revelation, Donne allows that God's heavenly mansion may have "out-houses" for those "out of the Church" to whom nonetheless "salvation comes sometimes" through contemplation of nature.<sup>57</sup> And in one given January 28, 1626, he posits that nature might be a "competent refection" for "some moral men," though less liberal than the dinner laid out for Jews and Christians. Here he concludes:

To those who do open their eyes to that light of nature, in the best exaltation thereof, God does not hide himself, though he have not manifested to me, by what way he manifests himself to them. For, God disappoints none, and he is *The confidence of all the ends of the Earth, and of them who are afar off upon the Sea*.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> E.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Questions on God*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 136.

<sup>56</sup> Donne, *Oxford Sermons*, i:54. <sup>57</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, ii:253. <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, vii:305–6.

In sum, although often Donne espouses a more Calvinist understanding of natural theology, at times he is no less optimistic about the prospects for those who use natural light wisely than those Catholic forebears who espoused a *facere quod in se est* doctrine: all who do their best have nothing to fear.<sup>59</sup> A key concern here seems to be the plight of those "far off upon the sea," away from Christian lands, not unlike the residents of Bensalem in Bacon's *New Atlantis*. Rather than insisting, as Bacon would, that such people must still somehow gain access to special revelation, Donne suggests that natural theology might be enough.

### Donne and the Natural World

If Donne gives greater scope to natural theology than had Bacon – suggesting that people without special revelation might still be saved and leaving open the possibility that God left a direct impression on nature – he gives far less scope to empirical science deployed to non-theological ends. Bacon's fondness of "comprehension," and Donne's profound suspicion of it, epitomizes the difference between the two men. Donne titled his parody of Sebond's work *Manipulus quercuum, sive ars comprehendendi transcendentia*, a title that invokes images of manipulating and grasping, and he is known to have punned elsewhere on the "grasping/containing" and "understanding" senses of "comprehend."<sup>60</sup> In both his prose and poetry, he typically uses the word to emphasize the limits, not the reach, of human knowledge. This relative skepticism is tied to Donne's view both of human reason and the natural world; as he explains in the *Essays*, both the "receiver" (nature) and the "beholder" (man) of God's self-revelation in the natural world are frail and therefore cannot be expected to bring humans all the way to truth – at least not in the carefully controlled way that Bacon prescribes.

Bacon, we have seen, views natural theology as a process of careful induction from the facts of nature gradually upward, toward a "supreme or summary law of nature" that God instituted through an unfettered act of will. The recognition of this divinely marshalled order in the world leads to

<sup>59</sup> On this doctrine, often associated with Aquinas, see Alister McGrath, *Justitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 83–91. On Donne's relationship to Aquinas – a controversial figure in Protestant England – see Katrin Ettenhuber, *Donne's Augustine: Renaissance Cultures of Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 83–86 and 101–4.

<sup>60</sup> Annabelle Patterson, "John Donne, Kingsman?," in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 257.

knowledge of God's existence and power but is not enough to correct superstition or to convey God's will. Donne, by contrast, consistently attacks natural law in its various forms: in *Biathanatos* (1608) he attacks it chiefly as it applies to moral beings, on the grounds that the philosophers cannot agree about its definition, but he also attacks the notion of an "eternal decree for the government of the whole world."<sup>61</sup> Donne does not claim that there is no such law, but that if there is, it has little relevance for humans, who cannot know it. Along with natural law, Donne also strips away the careful gradations of knowledge so necessary to Bacon's inductive natural theology. In the *Essays*, Donne cautions that knowledge acquired "by degrees" in particular cannot reach divine truth: "God is impartible," he writes, "and only faith which can receive it all at once, can comprehend him" (25). He then undermines the suggestion that God can be "comprehended" at all in the human sense, declaring that nothing positive can be affirmed about God and reminding the reader, as Calvin had in the *Institutes*, how inaccurate have been all pagan attempts to characterize God by "oppos[ing] reason to reason" (29–40).

When the end of natural knowledge is not at issue, Donne generally opposes Bacon's natural philosophical method, which involves hounding and vexing nature. For one thing, likely for biographical reasons, Donne and Bacon held opposing views on the subject of literal torture, with Donne questioning whether torture can successfully elicit objective truth from a human victim rather than simply eliciting what the torturer wants to hear.<sup>62</sup> Donne semi-metaphorically extends this critique to torture for purposes of natural knowledge as well: "Racked carcasses make ill anatomies," reads the final line of "Love's Exchange."<sup>63</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that literary critics have pointed to Donne as a source of "poetic resistance" to the Baconian call for manipulation of a distinctly feminized nature by the elite male experimentalist.<sup>64</sup> Besides Martin's and Hellegers's readings of the *Anniversaries*, Anthony Funari has argued that in the

<sup>61</sup> E.g., John Donne, *Biathanatos* (New York: Facsimile Text Society, 1930), 33, 36, and 39. See Ornstein, "Donne, Montaigne, and Natural Law," 221–26.

<sup>62</sup> See Hellegers, *Handmaid to Divinity*, 24–25: Bacon was one of a very few allowed by the queen to torture prisoners, while Donne likely empathized more with suspected Catholics and conspirators. See also Funari, *Francis Bacon*, 40–46.

<sup>63</sup> Funari, *Francis Bacon*, 40 and 68; and McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then*, 40.

<sup>64</sup> On Bacon, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Brian Easlea, *Witch Hunting, Magic and the New Philosophy: An Introduction to Debates of the Scientific Revolution, 1450–1750* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1980), 241–52; and Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). On Donne's resistance, see Hellegers, *Handmaid to Divinity*, 22–54; and Funari, *Francis Bacon*, 7–8.



*Devotions* Donne provides an "anti-Baconian narrative" in which he "reimagines the drama being enacted between his physicians and his diseased body as predicated on human submission and Nature's willingness."<sup>65</sup>

Funari's emphasis on humans' relationship to Nature raises the question, central to natural theology, what exactly constitutes "nature": How do we best understand the day-to-day workings of the material world? Are these operations directly superintended by God or overseen by some agent or law inferior to God? If the latter, is this agent best conceived as a "she" or an "it"? Natural theology will proceed along very different lines depending on the answers to these questions: If every so-called natural phenomenon is in fact a miraculous act of God, natural theology – or any science based on observation of nature – is senseless. If, on the other hand, nature is rather an "it" than a "she," a summary law arbitrarily instituted by God, Bacon's method of inquiry is appropriate, and his assertion in *The Advancement of Learning* that natural theology does no more or less than to demonstrate God's power in ordaining and maintaining the cosmos is correct. Only when "Nature" becomes something more than a deterministic law and less than a series of inscrutable miracles is there space to understand nature more poetically, as Donne does, and thence to develop a natural theology more poetic than Bacon's.<sup>66</sup>

How does one articulate and engage with a Nature that is separate from God and cannot be reduced to a set of laws? One place where Donne begins provocatively to articulate his theology of nature is in the *Anniversaries*. For, along with the "new science" and Baconian optimism about human history, these poems implicitly question any straightforward program of natural theology along Baconian lines, suggesting instead that nature has some agency in the process of human reasoning about divine matters. In the *First Anniversary*, for example, after lamenting the catastrophic epistemological effects of the "new philosophy," Donne invokes the same image he uses in the *Essays* as emblematic of humans without the benefit of revelation:

<sup>65</sup> Funari, *Francis Bacon*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> For a seminal discussion of *Natura* in antique and medieval thought, see Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 106–27. Reflecting on the same body of texts, C. S. Lewis once observed that medieval poets believed that Nature "was not everything . . . there were things above her, and things below. It is precisely this limitation and subordination of Nature which sets her free for her triumphant poetical career." See his *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 38–39.

She [Drury] whom wise nature had invented then,  
 When she observed that every sort of men  
 Did in their voyage in this world's sea stray  
 And needed a new compass for their way;<sup>67</sup>

In the *Essays* the anxious sailors are attempting to navigate the world by reason alone, and the as-yet-uninvented compass is faith. Here, instead of being something supernatural, the compass was invented by “wise nature” and is Drury herself. Among her other balming actions, then, Drury helped humans to read the book of nature, or perhaps she was the book, for Donne then asserts that the world is a microcosm of her (236). It is only a few lines later that he summarily pronounces that the world is “rotten at the heart,” adding that its beauty – a key component in natural theology according to Bacon’s “Of Atheism” – is “decay’d or gone” (242, 249). It is not just natural knowledge that has been called into doubt by Drury’s departure and the advent of the new philosophy; the world’s ability to speak of higher things is gone as well.

In the *Second Anniversary*, Donne also calls contemporary iterations of natural theology into question, by attacking self-knowledge. Calvin gave humankind a central place in natural theology in the early chapters of the *Institutes*, and human self-knowledge is a chief foundation of Sebond’s *Theologia Naturalis*. Sebond’s subject as articulated in his prologue is “the book of nature: a doctrine concerning man, which is proper to man insofar as he is man, and which is necessary to all men, and both natural and suitable to mankind. Through this doctrine he is enlightened into knowing himself and his condition.” Sebond further insists that this doctrine is infallible

because it argues from those things which are verified for all men by experience, that is, by all the creatures, and by the nature of man himself. For man proves all things by himself, and by those things which he knows for certain by experience of the things themselves. For no one knows with more certainty, than by experience, and especially though the examination anyone can conduct of himself. And therefore this doctrine needs no other witness than man himself.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>67</sup> *The Variorum Edition of the Poetry of John Donne*, 8 vols., ed. Gary A. Stringer et al., vol. vi, *The Anniversaries and the “Epicedes and Obsequies,”* ed. Gary A. Stringer and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), lines 223–26. Henceforth all citations are from this edition and will be noted parenthetically within the text by line number.

<sup>68</sup> Sebond, *Theologia Naturalis, Prologus*, 26 and 33: “Sequitur scientia libri creaturarum, sive libri naturae, et Scientia de homine, quae est propria homini, in quantum homo est. Quae est necessaria omni homini, et est ei naturalis et conveniens. Per quam ipse illuminatur ad cognoscendum se ipsum et suum conditorem . . . Haec scientia arguit per argumenta infallibilia, quibus nullus potest

There is a striking discord between Sebond's optimistic opening attestations about self-knowledge and Donne's terse claim, opening his own epistemological considerations in the *Second Anniversary*: "Thou know'st thyself so little" (255).<sup>69</sup> It has been pointed out that Donne may mean here to pay tribute to the skeptical Montaigne.<sup>70</sup> In any case, here again Donne calls into question not just knowledge in general but a key source of natural theological knowledge in particular.

If the 1611 and 1612 *Anniversaries* only indicate how nature might once have pointed to truth, a year later Donne more hopefully adds to his picture of a Nature that can be recognized and understood to some extent, and of an inquirer with some ability to recognize and understand her. In the *Anniversaries* a female nature attempted to supply man with Elizabeth Drury as a "compass" in the world's sea. In "Good Friday 1613: Riding Westward," Donne figures nature as God's lieutenant:

What a death were it then to see God dye?  
It made his owne Lieutenant Nature Shrinke,  
It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.  
(18–20)

The image of nature as God's lieutenant is an interesting one, retaining some of the features of the traditional trope of nature as God's handmaiden: Both images are anthropomorphic, subordinate to God but able to act to some extent in their own right.<sup>71</sup> But "lieutenant" suggests a more willful, powerful agent. Like many others, Donne sometimes uses "God's lieutenant" to describe human kings and man in general in his capacity as "Vice-gerent over all Creatures."<sup>72</sup> The image of a lieutenant is also militaristic, suggesting that in serving God's creative purposes nature must combat antagonizing forces, whether of Satan or of chaos and decay. While

contradicere, quoniam arguit per illa, quae sunt certissima cuilibet homini per veram experientiam, scilicet per omnes creaturas et per naturam ipsius hominis. Et per ipsummet hominem omnia probat, et per illa, quae certitudinaliter homo cognoscit de se ipso per experientiam. Nulla autem certior cognitio, quam per experientiam, et maxime per experientiam cuiuslibet intra se ipsum. Et ideo ista scientia non quaerit alios testes, quam ipsummet hominem."

<sup>69</sup> Donne also suggests, in *Sermons*, ix:256, that even in his unfallen state – "in the time and school of nature" – man "understood himself less than he did other creatures," being able to name them but not himself.

<sup>70</sup> Ramie Targoff, *John Donne, Body and Soul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 100–1.

<sup>71</sup> Both Bacon and Boyle would revise the "handmaiden" analogy: Bacon regards science instead as "a Spouse, for generation, fruit, and comfort," while Boyle more moderately calls her "a Lady of lower Rank" than divinity. See Bacon, *Oxford Francis Bacon*, iv:32; and Boyle, *The Excellency of Theology Compare'd with Natural Philosophy* (London, 1674), preface. Donne's use of a masculine figure is unusual.

<sup>72</sup> E.g., *Sermons*, i:210, iv:252; and ix:374.

this militaristic understanding harmonizes with Bacon's description of atoms as needing a "divine marshal" if they are to produce the order and beauty observed in the world,<sup>73</sup> the harmony does not persist. In Bacon's view, matter is marshaled by an unintelligible (but discoverable) natural law at the whim of the creator. In Donne's, matter is marshaled by a mediating lieutenant with the will and agency to react unlawfully when Christ is on the cross. Further, and perhaps most obviously, Donne's lieutenant Nature seems less susceptible to sexualized conquest by the male scientist than Bacon's hounded Nature with her caves and recesses.<sup>74</sup> If Donne paints nature in the *Devotions* as a creative power whose complicity is required for the health and knowledge of the body, and in the *Anniversaries* as a benevolent entity attempting to communicate important truths to humans, in "Good Friday" nature is a more militaristic agent who carries out God's will in ordering matter and who shrinks in the event of God's death. All three of these "natures" share an agency and a morality that Bacon's nature lacks.

Regarding the kind of knowledge worth having, too, Donne's values are the reverse of Bacon's: Bacon, in cautioning readers of the *Advancement* against attempting "to fly up to the secrets of the Deity by the waxen wings of the senses," avers that "the contemplation of God's creatures and works produceth . . . having regard to God, no perfect knowledge, but wonder, which is broken knowledge."<sup>75</sup> Such broken knowledge, he suggests, had now better be left alone in favor of the complete knowledge such contemplation produces of the creatures themselves.<sup>76</sup> Donne, while not denying the imperfect nature of wonder as knowledge, would develop a more positive view of wonder, as in a sermon dated Easter 1625:

Admiration, wonder, stands as in the midst, between knowledge and faith, and hath an eye towards both. If I know a thing, or believe a thing, I do no longer wonder: but when I find that I have reason to stop upon the consideration of a thing, so, as that I see enough to induce admiration, to make me wonder, I come by that step, and God leads me by that hand, to a

<sup>73</sup> Bacon, *Works*, vi:413.

<sup>74</sup> See n. 64 above. Bacon, *Works*, iv:296: "For you have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings . . . Neither ought a man to make a scruple of entering and penetrating into these holes and corners." Bacon again uses imagery of "penetrating into nature," in *The New Atlantis* in *Works*, iii:165.

<sup>75</sup> Bacon, *Oxford Francis Bacon*, iv:8.

<sup>76</sup> Bacon, *Works*, iv:79: "Touching Divine Philosophie: I am so farre from noting any deficiencie, as I rather note an excesse."

knowledge, if it be of a natural or civil thing, or to a faith, if it be of a supernatural, and spiritual thing.<sup>77</sup>

Here again Donne casts the human knowledge-seeker as only one of the actors in a mutual exchange: even with natural things, the wondering human must be taken by the hand and led by God to "a knowledge." But the other, and it seems loftier, end of wonder is to acquire "a faith," knowledge's spiritual counterpart, which also starts with the wondering human mind. Far from being mere "broken knowledge," then, wonder plays a necessary role in a quest for truth leading both upward to God and downward into nature – but more importantly upward.

### Metaphorical Nature, Metaphorical God

Donne and Bacon differ, then, regarding humans' ability to achieve comprehensive knowledge of things and the role that nature plays in this process, as well as differing on why humans would want to acquire such knowledge in the first place. They also differ on the nature of knowledge itself. Not only is Donne's nature reticent under the methodical torture proposed by Bacon, her secrets are inherently such that they cannot be so extracted. This is because Donne's natural world, though disconcerted by the Fall, is still the creation of a "metaphorical God," rife with meanings that dissolve when the scientist begins to dissect it. While Bacon's natural world is emphatically susceptible to "explanation" in its etymological sense of "smoothing out" or "unfolding,"<sup>78</sup> Donne's invites instead an older way of reading that has been termed "glossative." Walter Ong contrasted this older view with the newer world "of ocularly construed 'evidence,' which violently contests in theory . . . the principle of *fides ex auditu*":<sup>79</sup> a glossative reader of nature instead piles up correspondences and analogies, drawing *fide ex auditu* on existing works, rather than dissecting nature and laying out her component parts so that all are visible. This metaphor of smoothing out and piling up is useful for understanding how Donne read God in his works: Like a human poet, the divine maker intends the book of nature to be legible, but only to audiences of a certain disposition, and

<sup>77</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, vi:265; see Dennis Quinn, "Donne and the Wane of Wonder," *ELH* 36, no. 4 (1969): 626–47.

<sup>78</sup> Stuart Peterfreund, "Imagination at a Distance: Bacon's Epistemological Double-Bind, Natural Theology, and the Way of Scientific Explanation in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *The Eighteenth Century* 41, no. 2 (2000): 110–12.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 111–12.

only when received as the poetry it is, with receptive wonder rather than parsing scrutiny.

Though more famous for his proclamations of natural death and decay, Donne can take more positive cues from the book of nature, as when he cites “natural story” in his sermons. On such occasions Donne emphasizes creation, new growth, and industry in the natural world rather than their opposites: Just as the banks of the Nile bring forth life when warmed by the sun, so God’s spirit acted on the world at creation; just as certain animals hatch their eggs merely by looking at them, so the *visio approbationis* of God that approved creation at the beginning can “produce and hatch” good in humans still.<sup>80</sup> When scripture itself appeals to the book of nature, moreover, Donne exerts himself to underscore the harmony between the book of nature and the book of scripture. For instance, he returns repeatedly to biblical references to the turtle-dove, drawing on natural history when he does so: The bird can represent a life of contemplation, he proclaims, for turtle-doves “live solitarily” (the sociable pigeon, by contrast, represents the active life); or the turtle-dove “may be an Embleme of Chaste widowhood; for, I think we find no Bigamy in the Turtle.”<sup>81</sup> Considering Song of Songs 2.12b, “The voice of the turtle is heard in our land,” he asserts that the bird’s groaning (*vox turturis*; in other sermons, *gemitus columbae*) is evidence of spring and natural regeneration, as the dove is identified with the holy spirit producing true repentance in humans. Though these insights can be found in patristic and later commentaries, it appears that Donne pursued information about the turtle-dove beyond these: “We learne by Authors of Naturall Story,” he writes, “and by experience, *Turturis gemitus indicium veris*, The voice of the turtle is an evidence of the Spring.”<sup>82</sup> He cites Pliny, but this assertion does not appear in Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia*, which in fact reports a different bird and a different season, and Pliny is therefore not cited on the turtle-dove in any commentaries.<sup>83</sup>

Perhaps to bolster what he knew to be a loose paraphrase of ancient “natural story,” Donne adds that the turtle-dove’s behavior should also be

<sup>80</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, ix:299.      <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, vii:282.      <sup>82</sup> Donne, *Oxford Sermons*, iii:108–9.

<sup>83</sup> Donne may well have been led to consult Pliny by Cornelius Lapidus, who in commenting on the same verse cites book 18 of Pliny’s *Naturalis Historia* on viticulture (*Commentarii in Canticum Canticorum* [Antwerp, 1657], 108): Lapidus cites a different chapter, however, and moves to Aristotle in asserting that the cuckoo’s song indicates the beginning of spring. *Naturalis Historia* 18.26, the chapter cited by Donne, reads in Philemon Holland’s translation (London, 1601), 597, “Doe but listen to the groning tune and pitifull mone that the Quoist and Stock-dove makes: and never think that the Sunnestead is past, before she have left singing.”

known "by experience," an authority typically given much more weight by Bacon. Such an appeal to the experience of nature is not a unique occurrence in Donne's sermons, moreover: Considering the famous injunction in Proverbs 6.6, "Go to the ant," Donne spends significant effort comparing the relative merits of ants and bees, drawing not only on Pliny and various church fathers but also citing a contemporary scientific experiment:

For in experience, when some men curious of natural knowledge, have made their Hives of glass, that by that they might see the Bees manner of working, the Bees have made it their first work to line that Glasse-hive, with a crust of Wax, that they might work and not be discerned.

While "it is a blessed sincerity, to work, as the Ant, professedly, openly," Donne concludes, many times spiritual work needs to be cloaked from the eyes of observers, and this can be seen in the bees.<sup>84</sup> Here Donne goes a step beyond the emblematic tradition in appealing to recently discovered "natural knowledge" in an effort to deepen and broaden the truth that might be gathered from the biblical text. It is telling that in this example the "curious" knowledge-seekers are thwarted (one recalls Donne's opposition to a Baconian program of forcing nature to give up her secrets); but by this very thwarting nature has provided a spiritual insight. In appealing to "experience" regarding bees and doves to draw out a spiritual truth, Donne anticipates, well in advance, the *Occasional Reflections* of Robert Boyle, who would make a point that his lessons be drawn from experience rather than from "the Fathers, or the Poets."<sup>85</sup>

Donne of course made no such exclusions and took an altogether more poetic view of creation than would Boyle. Donne occasionally reflects explicitly on God's poetic activity, both in the words of scripture and in his works in nature, and in particular on the question of whether God speaks literally or metaphorically in these two books.<sup>86</sup> Certainly in scripture God speaks both ways, though Donne's understanding of "literal" is older and broader than that favored by scientific reformers, in which there is always a simple one-to-one relationship between word and thing. In a sermon preached on Easter 1624, for example, he explains that the "literal sense is not always that, which the very Letter and Grammar of the place presents"; instead, the literal sense is "the principal intention of

<sup>84</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, iii:232.      <sup>85</sup> Boyle, *Occasional Reflections*, preface.

<sup>86</sup> Quinn, "Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," 315-17.

the Holy Ghost” in a particular passage.<sup>87</sup> In a similar vein, in terms of reading the natural world, Donne is suspicious of attempts to establish what John Wilkins would later call a “universal character,” to “express natures and essences” of things in naming them. Although this project had not yet been fully articulated when Donne was writing, he was aware of efforts in that direction and may have intended to indict Bacon himself when, in the *Essayes*, he identifies an “enormous pretending wit” who “undertook to frame such a language, herein exceeding *Adam*, that whereas he named every thing by the most eminent and virtuall property, our man gave names, by the first naked enuntiation whereof, any understanding should comprehend the essence of the thing, better than by a definition.”<sup>88</sup> Donne’s pessimism here is in line with his general suspicion of scientific efforts aimed at total comprehension: he leaves space instead for polysemy in the language both of scripture and of the created world.

From the recognition that creation is metaphorical arises an opportunity to understand the creator through humans’ own poetic activity. In his *Devotions*’ “Expostulation 19,” Donne celebrates a “metaphorical God,” in whose “words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors” that “profane” writers crawl in the dust by comparison. “Neither art thou thus a figurative, a metaphorical God in thy word only,” he adds, “but in thy works too. The style of thy works, the phrase of thy actions, is metaphorical.”<sup>89</sup> Donne asserts that God’s actions in human history as well as his works in nature are ripe for reading, but not in the way of Baconian explanation, nor yet in the way dictated by the old doctrine of correspondence. Donne’s natural world is instead a divine conceit, a “remote and precious metaphor,” to be understood only by some and carrying multiple, often surprising, meanings. These metaphysical meanings, rather than being compendiously laid down and known by humans beforehand, are the product of a lively and extemporaneous reason and must be received as such. To be sure, Donne relies heavily on correspondence (and particularly on the doctrine that man is a microcosm of the universe) in both his poetry and his prose,<sup>90</sup> but he

<sup>87</sup> Donne, *Sermons*, vi:62. See also *Essayes*, 39–40: “That also is not the literal [sense], which the letter seems to present, for so to diverse understandings there might be diverse literal senses; it is called literal, to distinguish it from the Moral, Allegorical, and the other senses; and is that which the Holy Ghost doth in that place principally intend.”

<sup>88</sup> Martin, “*Advancement and Decay*,” 167, following Evelyn Simpson.

<sup>89</sup> John Donne, *Selected Prose*, ed. Evelyn Simpson, Helen Gardner, and T. S. Healy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 102.

<sup>90</sup> McDuffie, *To Our Bodies Turn We Then*, 2–5.



uses the doctrine as an imaginative backdrop for his own poetic and theological reflections rather than asserting it philosophically.

In fact, he demonstrates that he realizes the doctrine does not hold at some level when he laments but does not discredit the demise of correspondence (along with the rest of the old science) in the *First Anniversary*:

The new philosophy calls all in doubt;  
 The element of fire is quite put out;  
 The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit  
 Can well direct him where to look for it.  
 . . . . .  
 The art [of astrology] is lost, and correspondence too,  
 For heaven gives little, and the earth takes less,  
 And man least knows their trade and purposes.  
 (396–99)

In the world of the *Anniversaries* themselves, Donne acknowledges these scientific changes, for instance, in having Elizabeth Drury's soul pass through purported location of the "element of fire" too quickly to say whether it was there or not (193–94). Though a facile reading of Donne's elegy might give an impression of him as a scientific reactionary, astute readers have recognized in him a sensitivity to new intellectual developments and a poetic elasticity that give the lie to this impression: He proves ready to exploit natural philosophy if it can give him metaphorical or metonymic access to the realities he hopes to convey.<sup>91</sup> And as far as the metaphysical implications of correspondence – that humans might map out eternal realities based on the sensible world – Donne's view of human reason is too low to accommodate such an ambition.<sup>92</sup> If the cosmos was patterned after the mind of God, that resemblance was obscured in the Fall, and humans' ability to discern it was impaired.

Given that the medieval ways of reading nature were unsatisfactory, the epistemological instability ushered in by the "new philosophy" might prove not a catastrophe but a poetic opportunity. The poet Donne responds to this opportunity in various ways: he celebrates the physical

<sup>91</sup> Ellrodt, "Scientific Curiosity and Metaphysical Poetry," 187–91; on Donne's engagement with the new astronomy in *Ignatius His Conclave*, see I. Bernard Cohen, *The Birth of a New Physics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 77–78 and Joanna Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England*, 330–33.

<sup>92</sup> It is important to recognize that "heaven" in the sense Donne uses the word in the *Anniversaries* does not refer to the divine or transcendental but to the cosmic heavens, which (he explains in the *Devotions*) shares a "common center" with the earth, and that center is "decay, ruin"; see Donne, *Selected Prose*, 99. So what is lost when in *The First Anniversary*, "The new philosophy calls all in doubt" is not nearly so great as what has been lost all along (205).

as a means of accessing the divine, explores the extent to which natural means can point to spiritual truth, and even emulates the activity of a metaphorical God with his own “remote and precious metaphor,” the so-called metaphysical conceit. Like the works of such a God, the terms of a conceit cannot be mapped out beforehand, nor can its full meaning survive if the reader attempts to reduce it to a single level. Instead, seemingly disparate things are brought together in ways that lend surprising insight, often with multiple layers of meaning. In this light, rather than “inventing” something in the newer sense of the word, “Copernicus in poetry” was emulating God’s original creative process.

From the foregoing survey of Donne’s treatment of natural theology, I hope it is clear that, while sharing in the general natural theological project of moving from sense perception to theological understanding, Donne’s emphases differ strikingly from treatments of natural theology such as Sebond’s, Calvin’s, and Bacon’s, as well as from works produced later in the century such as John Ray’s *Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation* and Richard Bentley’s Boyle Lectures. The blueprint for a natural theology that emerges in Donne’s writing is both less ambitious and more resilient than the variety that came into prominence after his death and would remain prominent for a century and a half. That type, predicated on a comprehensive program of human learning that Donne believed to be theologically and intellectually misguided, proved incapable of producing a universal, rational consensus on spiritual truth – a result Donne would likely have predicted. But rather than dismissing reason and the natural world as sources of spiritual knowledge and insight, Donne appealed to these with canny wonder, as a reader approaches a poem penned by an especially brilliant, self-revelatory author.