

*Writing Epitaphs For Death:  
The Work of Herbert's "Church-monuments"  
and Donne's "A Nocturnal"*

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In his massive volume of collected inscriptions, *Ancient Funerall Monuments* (1631), the poet and antiquarian John Weever records the epitaph of a woman buried at St. Michael's church in Cornhill:

Here lyth the body of *Iohn Bootes* wiff  
Dissoluyd by deth to her fyrst matter dust;  
Who from the cares of this world departyd her liff,  
The twenty third day of the monyth of August,  
On thowsand fyue hundryd and seuen, beyng  
threescore yeerys old iust. (416)

The woman's Christian name is not given, but we learn that she died on (or perhaps soon after) her sixtieth birthday, August 23, 1507. Through the closure afforded by the simple rhyme, the epitaph's last word links her age to her original and final substance, dust. The particular justness of her death date coinciding with that of her birth underscores the universal justness of the body's return to its "fyrst matter, dust." Here, the terrible sentence given to Adam and Eve after the fall – "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (*Gen. 3:19*) – appears in a comforting aspect. The woman's death is a release from her body, from "the cares of this world," and from the bounded particularity of her individual "liff," which turns out to have been a brief, turbulent interval the otherwise continuous line connecting origin to end, first to last, dust to dust.

As a *memento mori*, John Bootes's wife's epitaph is decidedly gentle, more a lullaby than a gaping death's-head. But through its language of the body's return to the "first matter, dust," the inscription serves the epitaphic function of instructing the living in how to think about death (Scodel 30-31). The interplay of the particular (the

husband's name, the date of death) with the common ("this world," "dust") encourages its reader to see the individual in terms of the universal, and to view earthly life from the perspective of eternity. According to Weever, gazing on such inscriptions at once teaches and allays the fear of death, simultaneously encouraging "repentance" and rejection of the world, and inspiring "a forefeeling of immortality" (9). The inscription asks its audience to let go of ties to the particular deceased and to contemplate the common fate of dissolution, and the miracle of life after death. We may hear an echo of its language and movement in the Anglican order for burial, included in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "We here commit this body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of resurrection."

Despite the consolatory hope of resurrection, the thought of physical dissolution was by no means a universally comforting one – nor was it meant to be. Josh Scodel writes of traditional epitaphic formulae:

Classical epitaphs often represent the dead speaking from their tombs, sometimes only to deny that anything but dust remains of them. Thus in one Latin inscription the deceased proclaims from the grave, "I was a knight, now I am dust made from a knight," while in another, the deceased informs the reader, "If you ask who I am, behold I am dust and dried up ash." [...] Often describing themselves in shockingly visual terms as corpses at various levels of decomposition, the dead proclaim some version of the *memento mori* formula: "Such as you are, such was I/ Such as I am, such shall you be." (3-31)

Such "somber messages" ultimately "make the tomb not only a memorial to the dead but also a charitable exhortation to the living to remember their own end and repent" (Scodel 31). By the 17th century, funerary inscriptions employed tropes like the voice from the grave with decreasing frequency, but old graves still stood, and in the late 16th and into the 17th century, epitaphic rhetoric, themes, and tropes made their way into literary reflections on death of all kinds – a capacious genre to which Harry Morris gives a capacious name: "the *timor mortis-memento mori* lyric" (1035). This essay examines two poems that fit snugly if not solely under that rubric: George Herbert's "Church-monuments" and John Donne's "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's day, being the shortest day." While neither counts as a true literary epitaph, both invoke the genre of funerary inscription: Herbert's poem is set among (other) monuments and inscriptions; moreover, the second line – "Here I intombe

my flesh" – strongly echoes the deictic *hic iacet / here lies* formula of the grave. Donne's speaker names himself, and the whole poem, as the "epitaph" (9) of the "dead and interred" (8) world, and each stanza is organized around one or more "I am" statements, which may be fruitfully be read as instances of the first-person "voice from the grave" topos that Scodel notes. Though no reader would dispute either poem's link to funerary inscriptions, most scholars do not engage directly with the poems' epitaphic aspects. Criticism of Donne's poem in recent years has opened up new ways of thinking about "A Nocturnal" as a document of spiritual crisis, but has done so by focusing intensely on the alchemical motif that structures the poem's middle three stanzas (see especially Dolan, Frost, and Zimmer). Criticism of "Church-monuments" has similarly focused on a central image – the anticipated dissolution of the speaker's body – and since Joseph H. Summers' influential reading, on the concomitant "dissolution" of the poem's lines, sentences, stanzas, and sounds (133-5; see also Fish and Harman).

As a genre, epitaphs establish a unique speaker-addressee relationship and impose a particularly difficult set of interpretive demands. On the one hand, strong deictic indicators like "here" and "this" and the frequent use of the present tense ("here lies," "I am," "you are") force the verse's situation on reader's own here-and-now. The mode of address is often imperative; like Coleridge's ancient mariner, epitaphs literally command attention. Weever translates the opening lines of inscription on the tomb of Edward, the Black Prince:

Who so thou be that passeth by;  
Where these corps entombed lie:  
Vnderstand what I shall say,  
As at this time speake I may.  
Such as thou art, sometime was I,  
Such as I am, such shalt thou be.  
I little thought on th'oure of death,  
So long as I enjoyed breath. (120-121)

Even with epitaphs that avoid the use of the second-person, the reader may feel interpellated by the force of stark declaration and direct address, and this force could be said to inhabit the genre as a whole. On the other hand, however, epitaphic address is inherently paradoxical, since the person indicated by the "here lies" or the speaker of the "I am" are absent from the here-and-now. An epitaph like that of John Bootes's wife or Prince Edward commands that you look *here* and *not-here*, at the same time.

Reading "Church-monuments" and "A Nocturnal" against the language of inscription, I argue that the strong spatial and temporal claims made by the poems, like those made by epitaphs, ultimately point beyond themselves. Both poems conceive of strongly descriptive, epitaphic language as transformative, for the speaker and potentially the reader. Each poem is organized around a central emblem of mortality – dust, in Herbert's case; nothing-ness, in Donne's – to which all other images and categories are compared. In both poems, intense description and re-description of a single image is a means, rather than an end. Like the heavily deictic, constative statements ("I am," "here lies") and "shockingly visual" first-person accounts of decomposition of funeral inscriptions, these poems claim to name the hard truth of what *is* and of what will be. Their priority, however, lies beyond the naming of truths, in the adjustment of the earthly self to the perspective of eternity enabled by the practice of meditating on death.

### Locating "Church-Monuments"

Here *lies*, writes Scott Newstock "serves as the common, even the principal declaration of an epitaph" (1).<sup>1</sup> The declaration identifies a person, or a body, and a location. "Here lies" rarely, however, functions within a straightforward statement. Though it points emphatically, the object of its pointing perpetually melts away: who or whatever lies here is not the person, or even the body, that once was. Moreover, this phrase points towards multiple locational possibilities: is "here" the body itself; its "narrow house," the grave; or the monument above it, which may claim to preserve, here in graven text, the identity of the deceased?<sup>2</sup> In a literary epitaph that only purports to be inscribed on stone these problems multiply. They multiply again in the many early modern texts outside of epigraphy proper that borrow tropes and formulae from the genre. Though it announces identity as presence, the phrase also always signifies absence. John Bootes's wife is (and is not) in the grave; she is (and is not) in the epitaph cited above.

George Herbert's "Church-monuments" has been rightly classified as a meditation on death (Martz 141-143; Wilcox 234-235), but rarely examined as a specifically epitaphic meditation. But it, too, instantly raises the question of who or what lies where. The first line begins with a temporal indicator; the second with a spatial: "While that my soul repairs to her devotion, / Here I intombe my flesh" (lines 1-2). "Here" most literally indicates "among the monuments," where the speaker positions

himself to pray. Stanley Fish claims that the word "here" also points to the body itself entombed in itself, and Barbara Harman suggests that the word must also have metatextual resonance: the poem itself is, in some sense, also the body's tomb (113). The point is not to choose among these possibilities, but to note them: "here" is a word under pressure, and its directional force is an open question. We may proceed through poem reserving, in the back of our minds, the questions of *where* "here" points toward, and *what* it points out.

In Reformation England, committing a body to the earth was not an end, or "the" end. As John Donne explains from the "grave" in his "Epitaph on himself" (to the Countess of Bedford): "Parents make us earth, and souls dignify / Us to be glass; here to grow gold we lie." "Gold" is the counterpart of the more common epitaphic "dust" – substance refined through decomposition, made pure, prepared for new life. Donne plays with his reader's expectations for a poem labeled an "epitaph." The biblical notion of a living body as "dust" was common enough, and Donne here combines it with an alchemical metaphor. Just as the dead body becomes more dust-like as it breaks down, so the heavy elements become more like gold in alchemical purification. In an alchemical context, the verb "to calcine" means to reduce thoroughly, to annihilate and purify, through heat. The earthy dross of the body becomes more powdery and less self-integral after death; this process is all part of the purification, the making-gold, of the soul. For Donne, being "here" is a necessary step in the process that ends with spiritual salvation. Herbert's "intombing" his living flesh is likewise a means, and the lines that follow make up the first of four purposive clauses (each starting with the word "that," in lines 2, 7, 18, and 24), which detail his ends – which are pedagogical rather than alchemical:

While that my soul repairs to her devotion,  
Here I intombe my flesh, that it betimes  
May take acquaintance of this heap of dust  
To which the blast of deaths incessant motion,  
Fed with the exhalation of our crimes,  
Drives all at last. (1-6)

These lines could be *précis* or "argument" for the rest of the poem. Each of the following stanzas reiterates the speaker's will that the body become present to dust, as the soul seeks to become present to God.<sup>3</sup> This stanza emphasizes the pressures of time: the speaker wants his body to gain sooner, rather than later ("betimes"), the kind of self-knowledge epitaph-readers glean from exemplary warnings like Prince

Edward's: "I little thought on th'oure of death, / So long as I enioyed breath." Of course, such knowledge is inevitable – the body will "take acquaintance of this heap of dust" in the end.

At least part of the speaker's body's activity in the "school" (7) of the monuments involves the reading of actual epitaphs.

Therefore I gladly trust  
My body to this school, that it may learn  
To spell his elements, and finde his birth  
Written in dustie heraldry and lines. (6-9)

The poem's temporal orientation shifts: the body must contemplate "this heap of dust" not only as his inevitable future, but as his origin, his birth. Curiously, he is to learn this lesson in family history by reading the words and signs of family history, the "dustie heraldry and lines" that proclaim the names, stations, and genealogies of the deceased. These signs are "dustie" because, to borrow Weever's term, they are "ancient." They are dusty because they name and point to the bodies beneath, now nothing but dust themselves; over time, written names and coats of arms all lose their one-time significance, and come to signify one thing: "dust." They are dusty, too, because they are written in dust:

Which dissolution sure doth best discern,  
Comparing dust with dust, and earth with earth.  
These laugh at leat, and Marble put for signes,  
To sever the good fellowship of dust,  
And spoil the meeting. What shall point out them,  
When they shall bow, and kneel, and fall down flat  
To kiss those heaps, which now they have in trust? (10-15)

John Weever's answer to such a question would have been instant and emphatic: "My book!" Weever, William Camden, and other antiquarian epitaph collectors felt their work had a certain urgency, since gravestones, like all man-made edifices, tend towards decay. Reformist zeal had, in the preceding century, aided the natural (but very slow) entropic process of ruination, and Weever laments that in more than one churchyard, inscriptions are "all torne or worne out" (Weever 658). Antiquarians' efforts at committing inscriptions to paper were aimed at granting immortality to monuments, which they saw in turn as preserving the "honourable memory of many vertuous and noble persons" and ensure the continued prominence of the "families [...] descended of these

worthy persons" (preface).<sup>4</sup>

There is no evidence that Herbert read Weever's text, though perhaps he knew of its existence; it was published two years before his death (as its title suggests, Weever's book is as much a "hieroglyph" as Herbert's poem, since it takes its form from its object of representation: the books entries and sections are so many stones in so many churchyards). Whether or not the poet responds to the collector, "Church-monuments" mocks the impulse behind *Ancient Funeral Monuments*, just as dust and earth laugh at jet and marble. In Herbert's poem, jet and marble monuments are "put for signs" of the identities and stations of the dead. Weever's book claims to perform a similar semiotic and social function, but more securely and at a remove; the eponymous ancient funeral monuments are signs of signs. Both monuments and *Monuments* seek to point out individual identities and to uphold social distinctions. But these identities and distinctions, Herbert says, have no meaning. Even while the monuments stand – even while the body lives – persons, high or low, came from, return to, and are dust. The body reading heraldry and inscriptions is dust reading dust, dissolution discerning dissolution. This is more than mere acquaintance; this is the body's inauguration into "the good fellowship of dust," whose prerequisite is humble self-knowledge. The little heap of dust melts into the larger, "the world being reduced to one great heap of dust" (Hammond 13).

What the poem figures spatially may also be understood temporally. As the little heap of dust melts into the larger, the priority on the *present* that having a body almost necessarily entails (prone, as bodies are, to hunger, sickness, desire, weakness, and fatigue – in a word, to *lack*) also melts away. Origin reconnects to end; dust to dust. The erasure of the present, of "life" in the ordinary sense, corresponds with the erasure of personal and family history; as Harman notes, in the crumbling of the monuments, even the "record of a separation between origins and ends will be obliterated" (114). The poem's final eight lines, in which the speaker directly addresses his body, bring what has, so far, been a vision of the hereafter in line with the present moment, the here-and-now:

Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem  
And true descent, that when thou shalt grow fat,  
And wanton in thy cravings, thou mayst know,  
That flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust  
That measures all our time; which also shall  
Be crumbled into dust. Mark here below  
How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,  
That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall. (17-24)

The “when” these lines anticipate seems to be, at first, the immediate future: a phase of increased embodiment, a paradoxical mixture of grossness and insufficiency.<sup>5</sup> But as the lines unfold, a fine chain of sonic interconnections propels the reader from one time scheme to another. The present, the near future, and the eventual future emerge, distinct from one another now, but tending towards indistinction: *While* I pray; *when* thou shalt; which also *shall*. “All our time” cannot be divided up into discrete segments; its phases and units fade and crumble away under our efforts to discern them.

The momentary wobble in line 20 – does “which” refer to “glass” or “time” (or even, tautologically, to “dust”) – quickly resolves itself, but its ambiguity adds another wave to the rising tide of dissolution. The body’s time is measured by the disintegration of the body’s substance; put differently, the body’s time is the body’s substance. An hourglass made of sand, the body measures out earthly time but also collapses. In its collapse, it allows the lifespan of man to mingle with the eternal stillness of the dust. Time collapses as well, as the lines sift through and past the “while” of duration towards the “when” of what will be. Minutes (particles of time) can measure eternity no better than dust (particles of substance) can measure God’s “stature.”<sup>6</sup> But these units are what human experience grants. In the image of earth as a great “heap of dust” Herbert begins to see eternity. In the coldness and stillness of ash, he begins to see eternal rest. And in the spelling lesson of stanza two, he begins to see a single word – which grants him access, albeit indirectly, to the Word (see Kelleher, 47-64).

This brings us back to the questions of *where* and *what*. All the “here lies” declarations of the jet and marble monuments will eventually dissolve; they are sliding back towards their first matter, dust. But the “here I entombe” of line two does not crumble. It expands. The poem itself becomes a limitless “here,” pointing to itself and to its vast, dusty contents. If the poem is an epitaph for the material part of the self, it is also an epitaph for matter itself.

One question remains, and it is one I will take up differently and somewhat more in depth with Donne’s poem: the question of *when*. With its marked orientation towards the body’s future, and glance towards its past, “Church-monuments” resists the relentless emphasis on the present moment that epitaphic rhetoric frequently promotes. This is in keeping with the speaker’s desire to destabilize and de-prioritize the present, and to dissolve distinctions of time as well as those of place and person. But most readers of the poem notice, though with varying degrees of interest, one distinction is maintained throughout: the division between the body and the soul

(Wilcox 236, note 2; Harman 112-113).

The poem’s first word – “while” – splits the present time into two simultaneous realities, the devotion of the soul, and the activity of the body *here* in the text.<sup>7</sup> The “meanwhile” structure opened up by the first line subordinates the lessons of the body to the off-page activity of the ecstatic soul. This structure asserts itself again in line 17 (“while I pray”), and again, with a slightly different emphasis, in line 18 (“when thou shalt grow fat”). The soul is elsewhere entirely, and the thinking, speaking part – the mind, the self? – hovers near the body, but on the point of departure; it is as though “I” will not be present in the time foreseen: “When thou shalt grow fat/ and wanton in thy cravings.” If the temporal structure of separation and simultaneity extends into the posthumous future, then the vision of dissolution is subordinate to another erasure of distinctions, happening elsewhere on a higher and utterly incommensurate plane.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the vast heap of dust that the poem displays must melt away. It, too, is put “for a sign” of what is absent or what cannot be represented: infinity and eternity. But for Herbert, an earthly sign is not the thing itself. A heap of dust cannot measure eternity, no matter how many grains accumulate.

### The Speaking Grave - “A Nocturnal”

In the “Epitaph on Himself,” Donne points out the strangeness of a common “custom” (1) in funerary inscriptions: “when we are speechless grown, to make stones speak” (2). Actual inscriptions likewise underscore the strangeness of their own fictional status as “speech.” The epitaph of John Paynter (d.1540) begins: “For the loue of Iesu pray for me, / I may not pray now, pray ye / That my peynes lessyd may be” (Weever 160). The question here is not *qui parle*, but *quand*. “Now” is the time of Paynter’s (and Paynter’s stone’s) speech – but also of Paynter’s eternal speechlessness. The only words he can “produce” are, as it were, pre-recorded. But the utterance rings out as a fact of the present, not an artifact of the past. Like the spatial indicator “here,” the temporal “now” of the epitaph slides away under scrutiny: it points simultaneously at the moment of the verse’s first utterance (itself often a fictional situation), at the moment of the present reading, and at all the successive moments of all the successive readings that have been and will be.

Whenever else it may be, it is clear that this “now” is neither in the life, nor the afterlife of the speaker. It represents speech during a liminal period in the trajectory from earthly life to eternal. But, as the point of view preserved in stone and text, this



liminal period has a kind of immortality. It repeats whenever the extended timeline of the speaker's being dead coincides with the brief moment of reading.

"A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day" speaks from the point of view of just such a liminal period, after death and before new life, but it makes the extraordinary claim that this period is not going to end. Each of the five stanzas features at least one present-tense self-description: "...me, whom am their epitaph" (9), "I am every dead thing" (11) "I am re-begot / Of absence darkness, death – things which are not" (17-18), "I, by Love's limbeck, am the grave / Of all: that's nothing" (21-22) "I am by her death (which word wrongs her) / Of the first nothing the elixir grown" (28-29), and "But I am none" (37). Most of these statements identify the speaker with a particularly pure and absolute form of nothingness (a word Donne may have originated), but in the first the speaker claims to an "epitaph." He follows this claim with an injunction:

Study me then, you who shall lovers be  
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring,  
For I am every dead thing  
In whom love wrought new alchemy... (10-12)

These lines name the poem as a *memento mori* for lovers. Every subsequent "I am" re-instates the poem's status as a voice from the grave. Its speaker is absent from the world, and present only in the speech he has left behind, and only to reader, whom he hails as one about to embark on the course of life he himself has departed.

The first and last lines of the poem amplify the sense that the immediate present has been dislodged from the ordinary flow of time: "Tis the year's midnight, and it is the day's" (1) and "Since this/ Both the year's and the day's deep midnight is" (45). As in a true epitaph, the endless present has a clearly sealed-off past, a history. The third stanza looks back on what once was:

Oft a flood  
Have we two wept, and so  
Drowned the whole world, us, two; oft did we grow  
To be two Choases, when we did show  
Care to aught else; and often absences  
Withdrew our souls, and made us carcasses. (22-27)

The effects of love prefigure those of death, which makes the whole world into a chaos and a carcass (in the speaker's private cosmology of grief – which aligns with the conditions of the exterior world in the first stanza but not in the fifth – she is the missing sun, and the swallowed-up, entombed "sap" and "balm" and "life" of the world). The fourth stanza re-connects the speaker's history to his present state, the initiating cataclysmic event and constant condition of which was "her death" (28). The first lines of the fifth stanza insist that this present has no future, though the exterior world will regain both light and life: "my sun" (37) will not renew, though "the lesser Sun / At this time to the Goat is run / To fetch new lust..." (30-40).

The last lines of the fifth stanza introduce a different kind of temporality. But before turning towards the poem's tentative orientation towards a possible future, it is worth considering the *substance* of the present moment the poem claims for itself, and its speaker. As in "Church-monuments," "A Nocturnal" posits an equivalence between its central image (nothing) and its time scheme (now). What is the nature of this nothing? As stanza four emphatically declares, the speaker does not belong in the category of created, corruptible things made from mixed matter and spirit, which as Augustine wrote "can neither [...] be said absolutely to be or absolutely not to be."<sup>10</sup> Even a low form of being – a beast, a plant, a stone – has properties and urges. Such things can qualify as "nothings," but their nothingness is comparative rather than absolute (Elsewhere, Donne writes: "If we bee compar'd with God, our *Being* with his *Being*, we have no *Being* at all, wee are *Nothing*" [Sermons, 111.8.187, cited in Smith 7]). The same stanza tells us he is not an "ordinary" (35) nothing, like a shadow; since a shadow's existence depends on a "light" (36) and an obstructing "body" (36). He is not even the "first nothing," the formless substrate to which God, at the Creation, gave life and form. He is rather the "elixir" of the first nothing, and the "quintessence even from nothingness."<sup>11</sup> Given the poem's ever-deepening plunges of transformative reduction, this is a technical rather than a hyperbolic claim. The speaker has regressed to the absolute, insubstantial nothing that precedes the *prima materia*; he is "the opposite to all creation" (Booth 205). The speaker occupies a state of nothingness outside social and seasonal temporal cycles, and outside (because prior to) the trajectory running from creation to death to resurrection.

Comparison between the speaker's present condition, his past life, and his reader's lives is a standard feature of epitaphs, explicitly as well as implicitly. Prince Edward's inscription continues:

I had gold, siluer, wardrobes, and  
 Great treasure, horses, houses, land:  
 But now a caitife poore am I,  
 Deepe in the ground, lo here I lie.  
 My beautie great is all quite gone,  
 My flesh is wasted to the bone.  
 My house is narrow now and throng,  
 Nothing but Truth comes from my tongue:  
 And if ye should see me this day,  
 I do not thinke but ye would say,  
 That I had neuer beene a man;  
 So much altered now I am.

We may hear a resonance with Donne's "were I man" (30) in the last four lines. After this nadir, the inscription once more turns back to its audience. The epitaph's initial command had two parts: "Vnderstand what I shall say" and learn what "shalt thou be." Behold, and know thyself. The final lines, by contrast, ask for intercessory prayer:

For Gods sake pray to th'heauenly King,  
 That he my soule to heauen would bring.  
 All they that pray and make accord,  
 For me vnto my God and Lord;  
 God place them in his Paradise,  
 Wherein no wretched caitife lies.

The prayers of the living will release the deceased from his present state, as "a caitife poore" under the ground. Their prayers win his, and he asks God to place the charitable living, when they die, "in his Paradise / wherein no wretched caitife lies." Scodel notes a similar call for "edifying reciprocity" (123) in the penultimate couplet of Donne's "Epitaph on himself": "Hear this, and mend thyself, and thou mend'st me / By making me being dead, do good to thee" (21-22).

Though far less explicitly, the final stanza of "A Nocturnal" also shifts from its fixation on the lost past and present death, to the possibility of new life. After his final self-negation, at the start of stanza five – "But I am none" (37), the answer to the long hypothetical beginning "were I a man" (30) in the previous stanza – the speaker of "A Nocturnal" also renews his address to the audience:

You lovers, for whose sake the lesser Sun  
 At this time to the Goat is run  
 To fetch new lust, and give it you,  
 Enjoy your summer all:  
 Since she enjoys her long night's festival,  
 Let me prepare towards her, and let me call  
 This hour her Vigil and her Eve, since this  
 Both the year's and the day's deep midnight is. (37-45)

This stanza is tightly organized around a frame of paired words: "Enjoy"/ "enjoys"; "Since" / "since"; "Let; "let." The new injunction – "enjoy" – gets picked up in the next line: "Since she enjoys her long night's festival." This line is ambiguously poised; its opening conjunction potentially attaches it to the lovers' activities, or to the speaker's. Significantly, this line signals an important change in the poem's temporality: the long night of "now" becomes the justification for their future pleasures, and the motivation for his "vigil." When that preposition recurs, in line 46, the present is once more asserted – the poem returns to the same "deep midnight" in which it began – but it is no longer limitless. Once again, the temporal and material (or, really, ontological) converge. In this final stanza, the poem's exhaustive litany of *named* "things which are not" gives way to *unnamed* things-that-will-be: "this hour" becomes a "vigil," an "eve," the year's deep midnight becomes a space of watchful anticipation.

Though the final eight lines are not as clear-cut a prayer as the last six in Prince Edward's epitaph, they nevertheless ask for a kind of relief – the lovers' enjoyment seems to be a precondition for the speaker's entry into a new phase of waiting, and his re-naming of "midnight" requires their permission: "Let me prepare towards her, and let me call..." It is as though they, by participating in earthly time the way earthly lovers do (by not dwelling on or in this epitaphic poem with its arresting, arrested speaker) these lovers will actually speed up the time between "this hour" and his final destination, "her":<sup>12</sup>

One last epitaph, from the grave of Nicholas and Elizabeth Borne, in Edmonton:  
 Of death we haue tastyd the mortall rage,  
 Now lying both togeddir vndyr this ston;  
 That somtym wer knytt in bond of Maryage  
 For term of lyff, too bodys in on.  
 Therfor good peple to God in thron  
 Prey, from the on body too sowlys proceed,  
 The temporal maryage euerlastyng succeed.

The hope expressed here lurks behind the final stanza of "A Nocturnal." In life, the world was made and un-made by "her" presence and absence. To re-join her in "marriage everlasting" will un-make the negation and nullification that the rest of the poem performs.

### Conclusions - "Death, thou shalt die"

In a sermon on the Book of Job, John Calvin writes (in Arthur Golding's 1574 translation): "Although it farre surmount all our vnderstanding, and bee a verie straunge thing, that God shoulde make vs newe agayne when wee bee turned intoo duste: yet notwithstanding hee will restore vs, euen when wee shall haue beene turned too nothyng" (141). Herbert closes his poem "Faith" with a reiteration of the same doctrine: What though my bodie runne to dust? / Faith cleaves unto it, counting ev'ry grain / With an exact and most particular trust, / Reserving all for flesh again." And Donne, in his final sermon, echoes Calvin:

This death of incineration and dispersion is, to natural reason, the most irrecoverable death of all; and yet *Domini Domini sunt exitus mortis*, unto God the Lord belong the issues of death, and by recompacting this dust into the same body, and reanimating the same body with the same soul, hee shall in a blessed and glorious resurrection give me such an issue from this death as shall never pass into any other death, but establish me into a life that shall last as long as the Lord of Life himself. (Calvin 383-4)

Resurrection undoes the work of incineration, dispersion, and even, as Donne writes elsewhere in the same sermon, nullification. "Dust" and "nothing" are temporary states. The speakers of the epitaphs and epitaphic poems considered above use language as away of orienting themselves, and their readers, away from the idea of death, and towards the perspective of eternity. All of these texts conjure up and sustain images of the grave – figured as dissolution, decay, dust, nothingness – but these images are not ends in themselves. Facing death and exploring its physical and metaphysical contours allows the speakers and their readers to reorient themselves towards eternity. In "Church-monuments," contemplation of the vanity of earthly distinctions among times, places, and persons leads to a vision of a vast, uninterrupted heap of dust, which in turn shadows forth eternity. In "A Nocturnal," the same voice that creates a world and a self of nothingness adopts a new vocabulary, one that admits to the possibility of

a future beyond death, however unknowable that future is.

So why epitaphs? Both Donne and Herbert had other ways of exploring death; both in fact wrote poems that explicitly adopt the perspective of eternity. Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud," and Herbert's "Death" fully inhabit the point of view towards which "A Nocturnal" and "Church-monuments" aim. It seems to me that each poem is a monument, not to its speaker, but to death itself. Or rather, to what Donne termed, in the full titled of Deaths Duell, "the dying life, and the living death of the body." To death, and to earthly substances and temporalities and "little lives" which death defines, as their limit and last visible horizon.

The here and now of Herbert's poem is a space and time of death: a field of inanimate dust and ash. The speaker, already half-turned away, nevertheless details its texture, its crumbling of time. So doing, he memorializes his own death, as though saying: "Here lies my body – and here lies my death," since that body contains death like a seed. Donne's speaker clings far more tenaciously to his here and now, creating in the poem's first thirty-seven lines a monument to grief and to his own "dead" self, hollowed out by grief. Herbert's dissolution and Donne's death-through-grief are transient states, like the identities and lives commemorated in funeral inscriptions. As it is depicted in epitaphs, life is a brief and turbulent interval holding apart origin from end and dust from dust. In these poems, death is another such interval, holding apart earthly life from the life of the world to come. Such intervals are all the speakers of "Church-monuments" and "A nocturnal" know, though they accept their basic unreality on faith. Death shall die, but it is worth memorializing. To commemorate death is to commemorate what it means, or meant, to have had an earthly life at all.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Newstok goes on to note that "Even those epitaphs that decline the invocation of 'here' usually make some other spatial gesture, often with another indicator, such as 'this' – as in the earliest epitaph in English (1370) 'Hundyr / Yis grave lys John ye smyth' " (38) and that "Other significant epitaphic formulae certainly exist, but they invariably incorporate some pointing or indicative gesture" (40).

<sup>2</sup> On the social and political aspects of Weever's activity see Scodel, 16-17, Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* 271-277.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout, I refer to the poem's stanzas, though the stanza breaks in the printed edition of 1633 are not present in manuscript (see Martz 142). Most students of the poem are familiar with the stanzaic version, and stanza numbers are a simple way of referring to particular moments in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Weever promotes an organized and status-based system of memorializing the dead, as a means of perpetuating the hierarchical social systems of the living.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert frequently uses "dust" as an emblem of embodiment and mortality. In poems like "Dulness" and "The Temper" (I) it signifies heaviness, over-substantiality; in poems like "The Church-floore" and "Death," the mortal body made of dust is insubstantial and easily blown away. Wilcox provides a useful note on Herbert's use of "dust" (xliii), which Hammond points out is a "distinctive Herbertian word" (10).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. "The Temper" (I):

Wilt thou meet arms with man, that thou dost stretch  
A crumme of dust from heaven to hell?  
Will great God measure with a wretch?  
Shall he thy stature spell?

<sup>7</sup> This differs greatly from the situation of "The Temper" (I). In that poem, devotional activity catapults the whole self upward, while embodiedness and all it stands for – sin, death, insignificance – drags the whole self downward, to dust and hell.

<sup>8</sup> I pose this as a hypothetical because of the force of several other poems in *The Temple* – especially "Faith" and "Love" (II) not considered in this study. In those poems, dust/the body is not finally separated from the soul/the self.

<sup>9</sup> Donne is also quite possibly the originator of the word "nullification;" the first usage cited in the OED is his final sermon, *Deaths Duell*. Roy C. Booth discusses both words in his article "John Donne: Ideating Nothing."

<sup>10</sup> *Confessions* VII.xi.17, trans. Henry Chadwick.

<sup>11</sup> As Dolan and Frost point out, to return to one's "first matter, dust" is to await new life, a belief that Donne elsewhere expressed in alchemical language reminiscent of the language of stanzas two, three, and four in "A Nocturnal." But this speaker specifically claims that he is not the first nothing; he is its "elixir."

<sup>12</sup> See Scodel 123, note 25: "In *Essays in Divinity*, probably completed in 1614, [Donne] claims that 'discreet' prayers to 'hasten' the Last Judgment may 'benefit' the dead suffering the 'solitude of the grave.'"

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