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978-0-521-17442-8 - The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England

Gary Kuchar

Excerpt

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## *Introduction: Of Sighs and Tears*

Christianity is nothing if not a vast technology of mourning. From David's psalms, to Jeremiah's lamentations, to Jesus' weeping, to Magdalene's tears, Christian scripture draws much of its power of fascination as a religious and literary document from its representations of grief. The fascination elicited by these and other scriptural depictions of sacred sorrow is testified to by the many devotional and artistic traditions they helped engender. In such traditions, Christians are encouraged to generate, temper, interpret, and signify a bewildering array of different forms of mourning – many of which are thought to constitute the very medium by which God makes himself present to the soul. While traditions of religious sorrow are especially characteristic of the later middle ages, post-Reformation culture did not exorcise itself of the medieval fascination with sacred grief so much as it complicated what was already a complex set of practices. The European Reformations introduced into devotional life a series of competing discourses about how one should make sense of the most intimate aspects of one's religious experience as affective in nature. In early modern England, as in virtually all parts of medieval and Renaissance Europe, religious sorrow remained ubiquitous – be it the godly sorrow that works repentance, the sadness for Christ's agony, called *compassio*, or the despair of perceived damnation. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, the ubiquity of such forms of sorrow in early modern England, literary critics have remained primarily interested in more secular forms of melancholy, especially the kinds one finds on the public stage. While the recent turn to religion in literary studies has begun to correct this, we still do not understand the cultural work performed by discourses such as the "poetry of tears," nor do we adequately comprehend the literary power wielded by such traditions.

*The Poetry of Religious Sorrow in Early Modern England* seeks to explain the cultural and literary significance of poetic depictions of Christian grief from Robert Southwell's *St Peters Complaint* (1594) to Milton's *Paradise*

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*Lost* (1674). My primary goal is to demonstrate how poems which explore religious sorrow have a tendency to address the most pressing theological, metaphysical, and literary issues in the post-Reformation era. In other words, I seek to explain how in the process of expressing what repentance, *compassio*, or despair feel like as lived experiences, early modern English poets find themselves addressing the most vital doctrinal and philosophical issues of the post-Reformation period. As a result, poems which explore these issues reveal a great deal about the dynamic relations between theological commitment, poetic practice, and faith as felt experience in the period.

The theological complexity and poetic vitality that are characteristic of many Renaissance accounts of sacred grief are made possible by the way religious sorrow operates within Christian thought as a discourse rather than just as a theme. In early modern England, as in Christian culture more broadly, religious grief is not simply one or another affective state; it is a set of discursive resources which allow writers to express the implications that theological commitments have on the lived experience of faith. Thus, while it may not be shocking to discover that early modern poems on devout sorrow engage questions about salvation or soteriology, it is surprising to learn that such poems also address questions of identity and difference, time and finitude, Eucharistic presence, the gendering of devotion, the nature of testimony, and how one predicates God. Yet all of these determinative issues, and others, get addressed in early modern poetry through the lens of religious sorrow. Properly understood, devout sorrow is less an emotional state than it is a language – a grammar of tears, so to speak.<sup>1</sup>

And like any language spoken for 1,600 years across many countries, the language of Christian sorrow developed various dialects – the differences among them becoming most significant within western Christianity in the post-Reformation period. The language of sacred sorrow becomes increasingly complicated in the wake of post-Reformation conflict, not only through Reformation debates over justification but also through the development of competing literary and artistic traditions. In the post-Reformation era, the art of interpreting one's sorrow can be excruciatingly complex as competing doctrines and literary – exegetical traditions collide and intersect. Poems about Christian sorrow are often theologically contentious because poets seek to understand “holy mourning” within one rather than another theological or devotional code; or, more radically, poems can be contentious because they interrogate rather than passively versify traditions of religious sorrow, sometimes

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demystifying them, sometimes mourning their passing, sometimes expressing their enormous power. In other cases, poems can be creatively syncretic, drawing together doctrines and genres normally thought to be antithetical to one another. As a result of shifting religious contexts, and the contests of meaning taking place between them, one of the primary tasks of early modern religious poetry is to give expression to the complexity of devout grief as an experience while, in most cases, seeking to work towards a coherent interpretation of it.<sup>2</sup> It is a key claim of this book that the poetry of religious sorrow derives much of its literary power from this complex and dynamic theological context. Given the doctrinally charged nature of religious sorrow, poems on the topic reveal a great deal about their authors' theological preoccupations, their oftentimes agonistic relationship to previous poets or traditions, and about the lived experience of early modern faith.

The conceptual flexibility of devout sorrow as a discourse, rather than a set of static affects, rests on the way it is viewed as a particular form of communication – the way it is understood as a key component of what Augustine calls *homo significans*. The Latin emblemist Herman Hugo encapsulates this point in his 1624 work, *Pia Desideria*, when he declares: “My longing sighs a mystick Language prove.”<sup>3</sup> According to this widely held view, religiously mediated sorrow is not one species of emotion among others, but rather it is the most elemental form in which a suppliant's relationship to God is “set forth.” In other words, devout sorrow is understood in early modern English poetry, and religious culture more generally, primarily as a mode of divine communication and only secondarily as an autonomous psycho-physiological experience. That is to say, the emotional dimension of devout sorrow as a set of personal “feeling tones” is subordinated to the intersubjective dimensions of sorrow as a sacred language. John Hayward articulates this view in his 1623 treatise, *Dauids Tears*, when he asserts that “teares are the language of heaven; they speake strongly to God, hee heareth them well . . . Therefore . . . whensoever I sin, I will write my supplication for pardon with tears.”<sup>4</sup> By depicting religious grief as a “language,” early modern culture insisted on the dialogical nature of the phenomenon. In a state of sacred grief, Hugo and Hayward imply, one is speaking and being spoken to, one is both calling and being called; and the conversation taking place is thought to be more important than any other conversation one will ever have, for it expresses nothing less than the status of one's soul. Bearing such a linguistic view of religious grief in mind, the title of this book refers not only to poetic depictions of religious sorrow, but also to the way that

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devout grief is understood in the period *as* a kind of “divine poetry,” as a “grammar,” revealing – at the level of affect – what Luther calls “the Alien Word.”

The significance of devout sorrow as a discourse reflects its enormous conceptual and historical complexity. As a theological concept and a devotional theme, devout grief emerges out of a rich history of scriptural, literary, devotional, exegetical, iconographical, and doctrinal traditions. This complexity provided early modern poets with a sophisticated language for expressing the increasingly complicated experience of sorrow itself. As well, the discourse of holy mourning offered the necessary resources for reflecting on the most significant issues of the post-Reformation period, not only those issues directly affecting the *ordu salutis*, but also basic theological questions about the relation between the human and the divine. In this way, post-Reformation controversies helped shape how poets predicate the relation between the orders of nature and grace – giving rise, in the process, to the kinds of intertextual relations with previous poets and traditions which occur in and between works such as George Herbert’s *The Temple* and Richard Crashaw’s *Steps to the Temple*.

## 2 CORINTHIANS 7

The practice of employing holy mourning as a medium for addressing theological questions is made possible by the way godly sorrow is first theorized by St. Paul. Virtually all post-scriptural depictions of devout sorrow, be they penitential or Christological, owe something to the modality of sorrow St. Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 7. In this passage, Paul begins the long process of theorizing many of the Old Testament exhortations to holy sorrow in Christian terms.<sup>5</sup> Thus in order to understand the literary and cultural significance of poetic depictions of godly grief in Renaissance England, it is first necessary to see how Christian exegetes interpret the concept of godly sorrow that Paul forwards.

In the second letter to the Corinthians 7:9–11, St. Paul justifies the sadness he inspired in his auditors in a previous letter by distinguishing between two kinds of sorrow: one that is according to God and one that is according to the world:

Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing,

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that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, *what* clearing of yourselves, yea, *what* indignation, yea, *what* fear, yea *what* vehement desire, yea, *what* zeal, yea *what* revenge!

From patristic commentaries to Reformation exegeses, St. Paul's distinction between two fundamental modalities of sorrow is not understood as deciding between two emotions or sensations (like pain or anger), but between two distinct ways of attuning oneself to God – two different orientations toward the Word. As a result, the distinction functions as much more than a static opposition between emotions; it serves as a medium for addressing different existential compartments. In *The City of God*, for example, Augustine distinguishes between Christian and Stoical disciplines by claiming that for pagan philosophers such as Cicero the wise man cannot be sad, while the wise Christian is defined by the way he “laments what he ought to be” but is not.<sup>6</sup> Adducing 2 Corinthians 7, Augustine argues that grief is not simply an affect, but a way of making oneself available to oneself as an object of knowledge. According to Augustine's model of the Christian subject, a supplicant knows herself as a Christian by knowing that God knows the character of her sadness.

Like Augustine, John Chrysostom offered a highly influential account of the way Paul “philosophizeth” about sacred sorrow or *penthos*.<sup>7</sup> The Greek father placed particular emphasis on the existential implications of 2 Corinthians 7, suggesting that godly sorrow reveals the basic modalities of Christian experience as such. According to Chrysostom, godly sorrow reveals the states of care and fear which produce a “clearing” of the soul, a vindication on the order of a verbally expressed defense or *apologia*. The *apologia* of the soul that occurs through godly sorrow grounds the general view of devout melancholy as a language. Through this *apologia*, the Christian undergoes a radical change in how he experiences himself as an object of God's gaze and judgment:

“For behold” [Paul] saith, “this self-same thing, that ye were made sorry after a godly sort, what earnest care it wrought in you” . . . Then he speaks of the certain tokens of that carefulness; “Yea,” what “clearing of yourselves,” towards me. “Yea, what indignation” against him that had sinned. “Yea, what fear.” (ver. II) For so great carefulness and very speedy reformation was the part of men who feared exceedingly . . . “Yea, what longing,” that towards me. “Yea, what zeal.”<sup>8</sup>

Augustine's and Chrysostom's views of the Christian soul as essentially sorrowful in nature get richly developed in medieval traditions of affective piety. Medieval practices are often characterized by the way they express the experience of God's love as complexly bound up with conflicting

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emotions of joy and sorrow, emotions which counter-intuitively coexist at one and the same moment. This combination of opposing feelings in one state led the late fifth-century commentator John Climacus to coin the neologism *charmolypti* or joy-sorrow as a way of denoting *penthos*.<sup>9</sup> Such terms denote the way that godly sorrow was thought to inscribe the inscrutable paradoxes of Christian faith, particularly the simultaneous coexistence of God in man. From such a perspective, one understands the mysteries of incarnationist thought at the level of affect rather than just at the level of cognition. According to the eleventh-century commentator John of Fecamp, for example, the excessive abundance of God's love often expresses itself as weeping, thereby revealing the soul's claim to grace through an affectively mediated form of divine proclamation as in the following petition for tears: "give me a visible sign of your love, a wet fountain of continually flowing tears, that these very tears also may clearly proclaim your love to me and that they may say how much my soul loves you since because of too much sweetness of your love, my soul cannot keep itself from tears."<sup>10</sup> In such accounts, tears are a virtual form of *kerygma* – a proclamation of the divine will whose excessive force overflows the soul's limited ability to contain or bear the overpresence of *amor Dei*.

Early modern conceptions of devout grief come in the wake of such patristic and medieval responses to 2 Corinthians 7. John Donne, for example, develops the epistemological implications that Augustine and Chrysostom see in Paul's thought when he claims that devout grief works on the soul as though the sorrowing soul were "a window, through which [God] may see a wet heart through a dry eye" (*SD* 6.49). Viewed this way, godly sorrow is a means of deepening one's sense of being an object of the deity's gaze – as in James 4:9–10: "Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up." For Donne, this phenomenon of feeling oneself "in the sight of the Lord" is profoundly and unknowably mysterious. As a result, he adds "wonder" to the end of Paul's "chain of Affections," emphasizing that godly sorrow is a primary means by which God communicates himself to the human soul:

according to that chaine of Affections which the Apostle makes . . . godly sorrow brings a sinner to a care; He is no longer carelesse, negligent of his wayes; and that care to a clearing of himselfe, not to cleare himselfe by way of excuse, or disguise, but to cleare himselfe by way of physick, by humble confession; and then that clearing brings him to an indignation, to a kind of holy scorne, and wonder, how that tentation could work so. (*SD* 8.206)

By placing wonder at the end of Paul's "chain of Affections," Donne conforms to the longstanding view that devout melancholy "is subject to the law

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of the secret.”<sup>11</sup> The opacity of godly sorrow as a phenomenon leads Donne to describe it as a “tentation” or spiritual trial leading to a wondrous recognition of the limits of human understanding and thus to a deepened sense of what lies beyond and before such understanding.

The mysteriousness of godly sorrow that Donne acknowledges both causes and results from the way the Christian subject is thought to be carried away by godly sorrow’s transformative force, its reorienting power. In the experience of such sorrow, the supplicant is taken into areas of experience that have nothing, or little, to do with intention. One does not generally will godly sorrow into happening any more than one wills oneself to fall in love. It happens to us, more than because of us. At best, one prepares for it, readying oneself for its arrival so as to be appropriately hospitable should it come. This is what is meant by the common idea that godly sorrow is a gift, a *donum lacrimarum* or *gratia lacrimarum*. The exact nature of this gift constitutes a central crux of post-Reformation thought: Can such a gift be refused or lost? Does its reception lead to an intrinsic transformation of the soul or does it signal how God extrinsically perceives the soul? And if such a gift brings one closer to God, how does the process work exactly? How, for example, does it alter one’s experience of time? If one does not directly will godly sorrow into happening, in what sense, if any, does it involve a retrospective choice? And what is the temporal modality of retrospective “choosing” exactly? Such questions exert significant pressure on both the rhetorical forms and devotional/theological themes of early modern religious poetry.

## KENOSIS

From early Christianity on, the vindication of the soul by means of godly sorrow occurs through another kind of “clearing” than the *apologia* that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 7. Godly sorrow is also thought to work by emptying the soul in a way that imitates Christ’s kenosis in Philippians 2:7, his voiding of his divinity during the Incarnation: “God emptied [*ekenosen*] himself, taking the form of a servant.”<sup>12</sup> Donne links the work of godly sorrow expressed in Corinthians to the ethos of self-emptying predicated on Philippians when he declares that

my holy tears, made holy in his Blood that gives them a tincture, and my holy sighs, made holy in that Spirit that breathes them in me, have worn out my Marble Heart, that is, the Marbleness of my heart, and emptied the room of that former heart, and so given God a *Vacuity*, a new place to create a new heart in. (*SD* 9.177)

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This emptying of the soul through godly sorrow is understood by Donne and other influential commentators not just as a purification in the sense of a moral cleansing, but also as a change in one's existential relation to and conceptual reorientation towards God. According to such accounts of Paul, godly sorrow empties the Christian soul so that a fundamental reconstitution of being and thus a new way of perceiving the world can occur. Godly sorrow is thus bound up with the work of the negative in two closely related senses: it destroys the old, worldly person, clearing the way for a regenerate soul; and in doing so, it renders palpable the abyssal difference between human and divine, even as it draws them together. In other words, godly sorrow deepens the Christian's sensitivity to the otherness of God as a way of generating a paradoxical form of intimacy with him. In many early modern poems on godly sorrow, as in many exegetical commentaries, this process of coming to know God by not knowing him occurs through the work of the negative, through the grammatical operations of negation. As a result, godly sorrow is understood first and foremost as a mystery of grace, a "tentation" that is believed to be one of the most intimate and determinative encounters with the will of God. The notion that godly sorrow performs the work of the negative makes it an ideal concept for exploring how the difference between human and divine is felt as a lived experience rather than as an abstract postulate. Through the kenotic language of godly sorrow, the grammar of tears is thought to signify God's presence within the soul while, at the same time, deepening one's experience of his radical difference from all forms of empirical apprehension.

The communicative dimensions of godly sorrow make possible the wide range of discursive uses to which it is put in early modern poetry. Because godly sorrow is a dynamic concept with theological, epistemological, literary, psycho-sociological, and ethical consequences, it functions as a nodal point or key *topos* through which poets address other doctrinal and literary issues which might not seem directly related to it. The articulation of these consequences in early modern poetry and the agon between poets and traditions that occurs in the process are the subjects of this book.

That important intellectual work gets carried out in discussions of godly sorrow is evinced by John Donne's extraordinary sermon on John 11:35 "Jesus Wept." In this sermon, Donne sees Christly sorrow as requiring a more radical conception of identity than the one offered by scholasticism: "To conceive true sorrow and true joy, are things not onely contiguous, but continuall; they doe not onely touch and follow one



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another in a certain succession, Joy assuredly after sorrow, but they consist together, they are all one, Joy and Sorrow. *My tears have been my meat day and night*, saies *David*" (*SD* 4.343). In this passage, Donne flouts the Aristotelian principle of identity that A is not not A that Thomas Aquinas uses in order to account for the paradox of pleasurable grief. According to Aquinas, remembering sad things "causes pleasure, not in so far as sad things are the contrary of pleasurable, but in so far as one is now delivered from them."<sup>13</sup> Sadness and joy may coexist accidentally, says Aquinas, but they cannot coincide substantially. Despite his deep sympathies with Aquinas, Donne insists that godly sorrow cannot be understood through Aristotelian logic or the mediations of time; it is grasped through the paradoxes of incarnation or not at all. Donne thus sees godly sorrow as a sensation in which the mysteries of the Incarnation are acknowledged at the level of affective experience rather than known through cognitive apprehension. By offering a more radically paradoxical account of godly sorrow than that offered by the categories of the *via antiqua*, Donne presents what is, in effect, a Protestant deepening of the kind of paradoxical thinking visible in medieval monastic traditions – the sort of thinking that led Climacus to coin the term *charmolypi*. For Donne, as for Luther and the monastic tradition in which the German Reformer was first schooled, godly sorrow is an incarnationist language that speaks the Christian paradoxes which confound human thought.

To put this another way, godly sorrow is a discourse that allows writers to theorize how the relationships between divine and mundane worlds are registered at the level of affect. According to Nicetas Stethatos, for example, writing in the early Greek tradition, godly sorrow both reveals and works to overcome the disjunctions between flesh and spirit. Devout tears, he insists, are gateways between the human and the divine:

Tears are placed as a frontier for the mind between corporeity and spirituality, between the state of passion and the state of purity. As long as one has not received this gift [of tears], the work of his service remains in the outward man and there is no way that he can acquire even the smallest sense of the service hidden in the spiritual man. But when he begins to leave the corporeity of this world and to pass into the realm which is within visible nature, he will immediately arrive at this grace of tears. From the very first stage of this hidden life his tears will begin, and they will lead him to the perfect love of God. And when he arrives there he will have such an abundance of them that he will drink them with his food and drink, so perpetual and profuse are they. That is a certain sign for the mind of its withdrawal from this world and of its perception of the spiritual world.<sup>14</sup>

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Godly sorrow is thus a liminal site; it deepens the Christian's awareness of the mortality of the flesh as a paradoxical way of opening a path beyond it. In this respect, holy mourning names the affective modalities of repentance – the emotional dynamics of re-orientating the subject from a worldly to a spiritual compartment, from a visible to an invisible reality. These dynamics are understood as the linguistic means by which one establishes a relation with the radical interiority of a God who is, as Augustine says, “more inward than my most inward part, higher than the highest element within me” (*interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*).<sup>15</sup>

In the wake of post-Reformation controversy, the process of knowing oneself as a Christian subject through the communicative power of godly sorrow is opened to reinvention and question. The poetry of religious sorrow in early modern England participates in this opening of the question of what it means to experience oneself as a subject of faith through the medium of holy affects. Poets such as Herbert, Donne, and Marvell help reinvent the language of godly sorrow for a culture that is highly aware of, and is thus wrestling over, its many dialects.

## COMPUNCTION

Throughout the middle ages and Renaissance, the change in existential orientation identified with godly sorrow often goes by the name “compunction,” which Origen defines as a “lasting affliction of the soul fed by the consciousness of sin and by the traces it leaves in the soul.”<sup>16</sup> According to Gérard Vallée, monastic conceptions of *compunctio* constitute a key bridge between medieval and Reformation cultures insofar as monastic doctrines of compunction closely relate to Luther's notion of *Anfechtung* or spiritual tribulations testing the status of one's soul. This bridge between medieval and Reformation devotional cultures is primarily located, Vallée claims, in “a certain quality of the experience of God . . . that type of experience [which] emphasizes the passive element in man's relation to God and [which] underlines the fact that man is being acted upon from outside.” In such an experience, “God's action predominates, disconcerting man and spurring him on.”<sup>17</sup> Vallée's assertion is borne out by a key similarity in both Protestant and Catholic poems on godly sorrow in early modern England: almost all poems on the topic emphasize kenotic passivity as the experiential attitude proper to the reception of justifying grace; one must undergo a pricking, broaching, or wounding of the heart before anything salvific can follow.