

INTRODUCTION

What follows are notes written by Stephen Booth on John Donne's "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward." Booth is an emeritus professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. He's an expert in seventeenth century poetry and one of the greatest Shakespeare scholars of the twentieth century. He's famous for an edition of Shakespeare's Sonnets in which he annotates Shakespeare's poems in much the same way he annotates Donne's here.

Booth's notes are as raw as they are bulky. What he did was set out to look up everything that it occurred to him to look up—and to gloss everything he thought might need glossing. He reported all that he found out—including the results of investigations that produced nothing of value. For instance, Booth notes what day of the month Good Friday fell on in 1613; had it fallen on an *otherwise* significant date like April 1 or March 25, the answer would have been worth thinking about, but as far as I can see the actual date is not worth paying attention to.

The text of "Good Friday, 1613" provided here reproduces the earliest printed text of the poem—the 1633 text, printed two years after Donne's death. Donne's contemporaries would have seen few significant distinctions between it and the modernized text available to you in Donald R. Dickson's Norton Critical Edition (2007). Capitalization, punctuation, and spelling were not yet at all standardized in the seventeenth century and so were not yet available to writers as efficient means of Giving Hints of nuances to THERE readers. Since writers and printers spelled and capitalized casually, writers could not expect readers to pay any attention to their spelling or to what and whether they capitalized or failed to capitalize. Thus there is no significant difference between *Soule* and *Spheare* in line 1 of the 1633 text of "Good Friday, 1613" and *soul* and *sphere* in a modernized version. The same is true of *mans* and *man's* in the same line (the use of an apostrophe to signal the possessive function of an *s* was a novelty in the early seventeenth century—an unnecessary, and thus effectively meaningless, affectation). Never try to dredge meanings from Renaissance orthographies. And never assume validity in apparent limitations on meanings that derive from accidents that occurs when a modern reader—brought up on the idea of substantively informative spelling and punctuation—reads a text.

These notes may seem overwhelming at first, but don't let them either panic or intimidate you. They are intended to help contemporary readers like yourself understand how Donne's poem worked on the minds and ears of his contemporaries. They are meant to help you comprehend what a marvellous, complex, and beautiful poem "Good Friday, 1613" truly is.

Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward.

1 Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
2 The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
3 And as the other Spheares, by being growne
4 Subject to forraigne motion, lose their owne,
5 And being by others hurried every day,
6 Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:
7 Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit
8 For their first mover, and are whirld by it.
9 Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West
10 This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.
11 There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,
12 And by that setting endlesse day beget;
13 But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,
14 Sinne had eternally benighted all.
15 Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
16 That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
17 Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
18 What a death were it then to see God dye?
19 It made his owne Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
20 It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.
21 Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
22 And tune all spheares at once peirc'd with those holes?
23 Could I behold that endlesse height which is
24 Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,
25 Humbled below us? or that blood which is
26 The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
27 Made durt of dust, or that flesh which was worne
28 By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?
29 If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
30 Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
31 Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus
32 Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?
33 Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
34 They are present yet unto my memory,
35 For that looks towards them; & thou look'st towards mee,
36 O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;
37 I turne my backe to thee, but to receive
38 Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
39 O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
40 Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
41 Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
42 That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

NOTES

Title: The manner of the title is that of a journal heading or the heading of a letter; compare a letter headed “July 4, 1876 on the evening train from Philadelphia”; the title presents the poem as a record of specific thoughts on a specific occasion and implies that what follows will be both informal and personal.

Good Friday, 1613 Good Friday, 1613 was on April 2.

1. *Let mans Soule be a ...* The words make a prayer-like opening: “Please allow man’s soul to be ...” However, the completed clause—*Let mans Soule be a spheare*—makes the speaker sound like a logician presenting the “givens” of a problem; compare “Let X be the number of apples in an isosceles triangle subtracted from pi ...”

Spheare The sense of *sphere* activated by the preceding echo of math and logic problems is the geometrical one (number one in the excerpt from *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* quoted below); as a reader progresses, however, other senses of *sphere* become pertinent; for instance, the next few lines get some casual energy because planets (spheres) move in spheres (areas proper to them). (All the senses given in the following list were current in Donne’s time. That does not, however, mean that all of them were evoked by the context of these lines. [Consider, for instance, the word *mean* in the preceding sentence of the paragraph you are reading now; you are well acquainted with *mean* meaning “the middle point” and *mean* meaning “malicious,” but you would not, I assume, suggest that a reader’s understanding of the verb “to mean” in “that does not ... mean that all of them were evoked” is colored by either median or malicious connotations or—for that matter—by the now-obsolete verb “to mean” meaning “to lament”].)

sphere (sfeer) n. [OF. *espere* (F. *sphere*), fr.. L. *sphaera*, Fr.. Gr. *sphere* sphere, ball] **1. Geom.** A body of space bounded by one surface all points of which are equally distant from a point within called its *center*. **2.** Any globe or globular body, esp. a celestial one. **3. Astron. a.** The apparent surface of the heavens (half of which forms the dome of the visible sky). **b.** In ancient astronomy, one of the revolving spherical transparent shells in which stars, sun, planets, and moon were supposed to be set. **4.** Circuit or range of action, knowledge, or influence, compass; province; place or some scene of action or existence. **5.** Rank; order of society; social position or class. **6. Obs.** An orbit. **7.** The atmosphere; the heavens.

Note that spheres are perfect (are complete, finished, self-contained entities); they are at once endless and incapable of augmentation (cannot be added-on-to). (The idea of circularity never leaves the poem.)

Having warned you not to loose your common sense, I suppose it is safe to reproduce *Webster’s* definitions of *soul* too. Except for number 9, all senses were current in Donne’s time:

soul (sohl) n. [AS. *sawel*, *sawl*.] **1.** An entity conceived as the essence, substance, animating principle, or actuating cause of life, or of the individual life, esp. of individual life manifested in thinking, willing, and knowing. In many religions it is regarded as important and separable from the body at

death. 2. The physical or spiritual principle in general, esp. as informing the universe. 3. Man's mortal and emotional nature, esp. as manifested in or communicated by what he writes, composes, etc. 4. The seat of real life, vitality or action. 5. The leader; moving spirit; also, the embodiment. 6. Courage; spirt; fervor; spiritual force. 7. A person as, *a kind soul*. 8. A disembodied spirit. 9. [cap.] *Christian Science*. A synonym for God.

2. *Devotion is the intelligence that moves:*

intelligence The context of *sphere* dictates that this word be understood in the quasi-technical sense it had in Ptolemaic cosmology: "governing spirit." Ptolemy, an astronomer of the second century A.D., devised the system of making sense of the heavens that was standard until the mid-sixteenth century, when the heliocentric (sun-centered) Copernican system was proposed and began to supersede the geocentric (earth-centered) Ptolemaic one. By Donne's time Copernicus's theory—the one modern astronomy so far continues to confirm—was generally accepted, but the concepts and elaborate ideational machinery of Ptolemy were still available to talk with. (They still are; we say "sunrise" when we should say "earth dip"; and "to be in seventh heaven" is still proverbial.)

In the Ptolemaic system, the earth is thought of as the center of the universe. Around it revolve seven "planets": the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn; each of those moves in its own sphere and is moved by an *intelligence*, a governing spirit (usually thought of as an angel). Beyond them are the "fixed stars" (i.e., those that *appear* to stay in one place from month to month and year to year). During the Middle Ages a new final element was added to Ptolemy's scheme: an outer sphere, called the *primum mobile*, the "first mover" (see line 8); that ultimate outer sphere encircles everything in the universe; it is the mover and director of all the Inner intelligences that move and direct the inner spheres; it keeps everything in ceaseless, orderly motion—except the ordinarily firm, still Earth at the center. (I have grossly simplified all this—first, to save time and space, and, second, because I do not really know what I'm taking about.)

3–4. Note the incidental political metaphor in *Subject to forraigne* and the casual, insignificant coloration it retroactively gives *the other Spheares*.

Forraigne (the fourth and fifth syllables of line 4), has complex rhyme-like ideational relation to *other* (the fourth and fifth syllables of line 3). *Forraigne* could not replace *other* in line 3 ("foreign spheres" would not make the sense "other spheres" makes; in "other spheres" *other* stresses separateness, but asserts essential likeness and implies fellowship [compare "Donner, Blitzen, and the other reindeer"]). However, *other* could satisfactorily substitute for *forraigne* in line 3 (compare "They play by other rules"; in that assertion *other* stresses essential difference as well as separateness).

4. *motion* This too is a technical term in astronomy. A fair gloss on *growne / Subject to forraigne motion* is "draw into other orbits." The reference is to variations in the orbital paths of heavenly bodies when they come close enough to another such body to be affected by what post-Newtonian theorists call gravity.

(See *moves*, *devotion is* in line 2; *motion* conflates an echo of the substance of *moves* and an echo of the sound of *devotion is*.)

5. *being by* Although the echo is not substantively informative, note that *being by* inverts *by being* in line 3. Both here and in line 3, *being* is, as it usually is in Renaissance verse, a monosyllable (“beeng”).

by The word indicates only agency, but by meaning “next to” pertains as well.

every day “daily” (but the idea has substantively incidental pertinence to astronomy)

- 5–6. These two lines conflate the two analogous topics: (1) heavenly bodies pulled off their proper annual courses; (2) people who get so caught up in mundane matters that they rarely remember their own values and purposes.

6. *forme* “nature” (but, in this context, colored by a special sense whereby, in Scholastic philosophy, *form* designates the essential determinant principle that makes something itself as opposed to the “matter” that composes it; *form*, thus is to matter as astronomical intelligences are to the planets [spheres]. Note that the natural movement of the planets through our sky is from East to West; don’t forget that as you go through the poem).

This line may, for Donne’s contemporaries, have carried casual reminiscence of a sixteenth-century Papal decree that all Roman Catholics must take holy communion once a year at least; from minimalist observances of that rule came the term “Easter Communion”—a term that referred to the one church service per year attended by people who did not otherwise have anything at all to do with public worship. (I got all the “Easter Communion” stuff from Chapter 23 of *In Search of God and Self* by Donald J. Wilcox.)

7. *businessse* The word “business” had not yet begun to narrow toward specifying commercial activity as opposed to any other practical enterprise. It also still had the connotations that “busyness” has.

so “in the same way [that astronomical bodies grow subject to foreign motions]”

8. *first mover* (1) “*primum mobile*” (2) “God” (the “unmoved mover” of Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy)

whirld (1) “turned round and round” (2) “made dizzy” (note that the sound of “whirled” is all but identical with the sound of “world”).

9. Although, since the speaker is *Riding Westward*, this line must be understood literally, the obvious connection between going west—going into darkness as the sun does at the western horizon—and dying was traditional.

Hence “therefore” (but presented in a context to which its spatial sense—the sense it has in phrases like “to go hence”—pertains). This poem—a poem concerned with logical relation, with relationships in time, and with spatial relationships—gets a lot of incidental energy because many of the words it uses to indicate one kind of relation are just as commonly used to indicate one or both of the others. For examples in addition to *hence*, consider *then* (which indicates logical conclusion in line 1 of a poem that goes on to

present paradoxes about time), and *Yet* in line 15 (where it means “nonetheless” but follows hard upon *eternally* in line 14), and *as* (which means “like” in line 3—a line succeeded immediately by lines to which time pertains urgently—and which means “while” in lines 33 and 36; the *as* construction in line 36 is, by the way, urgently like, the same *as*, the one in line 33); also see *present* and *yet* in line 34.

carried (1) “borne on horseback” (2) “moved involuntarily”

10. *This day* (1) “Good Friday” (2) “today” (as on any other day)

Soules forme “soul’s nature,” “soul’s natural bent” (note, however, that the expression could—if context did not dictate otherwise—just as well label precisely the element with which it is here pointedly contrasted: the body—here moving westward in opposition to the inclinations of the soul—can be, and had often been, called the soul’s form—that which give it physical shape, gives it physical form).

Jerusalem is east of England.

Christian churches are traditionally built so that, when the congregation faces the main altar, they face east. If one were in church on Good Friday, one would almost inevitably be facing east.

In the Vulgate (the Latin Bible translated by St. Jerome), *oriens*—“the rising sun” and, by extension, “the East”—is an epithet for Jesus (the noun derives from *orior*, which means “to rise,” “to get out of bed,” “to sprout”; “to grow”; “to begin”; and “to be born”). See Luke 1:78 where Jesus is called *oriens ex alto*, which the Authorized Version (abbreviated “AV” and commonly called the King James Bible) translates as “the dayspring from on high.” (All my Bible citations are to AV.)

Note the etymologically accidental presence of the sound of *East* in “Easter.”

11. *should* (1) “would be able to” (2) “ought to,” “have a duty to”

a Sunne The overt reference is to the star around which the earth revolves, but, since there is only one sun visible as such on earth, it is called *the sun*. The use of *a* here makes *a Sunne* suggest “the son”—Jesus.

On Good Friday Jesus climbed up a hill carrying his cross and then climbed the cross; then, three hours after noon, he died.

- 11–14. To the traditional Christian paradoxes in the lines, their context adds that of seeing the sun set in the east.

- 11–32. Notice that the verb tenses jump around (e.g., *set*, *beget*, *see* [15], etc. are in the present; *did rise and fall*, *made ... shrink*, etc., are in the past). Notice too that the jumps are not confusing or particularly noticeable.

13. *But that* “If it were not that”

Note the complex incidental relationship of *that* and *this*. *That* could replace *this*, but *this* could not replace *that* (because, in *But that*, *that* is a conjunction [compare “We could eat now, except that we have no food”]).

15. *Yet dare I/almost be glad* These words stand momentarily alone (do so with or without the comma after *glad*). They thus momentarily refer to gladness that Jesus was crucified—the gladness justified by lines 11–14. However, as the momentarily unreasonable presence of *Yet*, *almost*, and *dare* acknowledge, there is inevitably something wrong with the idea of being glad that somebody was nailed to a cross.

I do not see Although these words come to say “I do not behold,” they, like the first phrase of the line, stand momentarily alone (before the sentence continues in line 16); they are momentarily capable of suggesting “I do not understand.”

16. *of too ... “which is of too ...”*

weight “sadness,” “heaviness” (but with an incidental pertinence to the idea of carrying—an idea to which the word *weight* relates by virtue of its simple literal sense).

17. *Who* This word, which momentarily signals the start of a question, turns out later in the line to mean “he who.”

selfe life “life itself” (the phrase inverts the usual idiom and, until the developing context defines *selfe life* as “life itself,” the phrase can send a reader’s mind on a momentary search for a way in which it relates to *Who sees Gods face*. *Selfe life* can therefore infuse the line with a logically free-floating reference to the paradox by which God is his own creator).

The line as a whole echoes the nearly universal notion that human beings are constitutionally too weak to withstand the sight of a deity. In the JudeoChristian tradition, the classic statement of the idea occurs in Exodus 33 during a conversation between God (who has thoughtfully come disguised as “a cloudy pillar” [9]), and Moses. Moses says, “I beseech thee, show me thy glory” (18); God promises to show Moses both his works and mercy; then the account of God’s reply continues in verses 20–23:

²⁰And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me and live. ²¹And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: ²²And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: ²³And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts; but my face shall not be seen.

Although the foregoing paragraph does justice to the full substance of line 17, the context of the poem at large generally complicates, and is generally complicated by, any mention of the word *face*. Consider the following.

The idea of turning one’s face toward, or away from, God, God’s ways, and the proper path recurs from one end of the Bible to the other. So does the idea of God’s turning his face toward his friends and from his enemies. (Any Bible concordance will give you hundreds of examples if you should want to check.)

Gods face also pertains to all Donne’s stuff about the sun. In Numbers 6, where God is giving lessons on how to run a religion, he tells Moses the

particular words that Moses is to teach priests to say when they wish to bless the people:

²²And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, ²³Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, ²⁴The LORD bless thee and keep thee: ²⁵The LORD make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: ²⁶The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. ²⁷And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.

Also note Matthew 17:1–9 (Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration):

And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart, ²And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light. ... ⁹And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell this vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead.

18. Note that, since God is *selfe life*, is life itself, to see him die would be not only to die but to see all life perish too.

19. *his owne Lieutenant Nature* “nature, which is God’s lieutenant”

shrinke “flinch, draw back as if fearful of horrified.” The following line activates to *shrink* in the more general sense, “to contract suddenly.”

20. *footstool* For the idea of the earth as God’s footstool, see Isaiah 66:1: “Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest?”

winke This word had not yet developed its current sense (the Dickensian sense in which it refers to closing one eye in a flippant, frivolous gesture of conspiracy). To wink meant “to close one’s eyes.” (“To wink” also had an evidently rare sense in which it meant “to flinch”—was a synonym of “shrink” in the sense primary in line 19. Since the eclipse at the moment of Jesus’s death is so evidently the topic here [see the following note], the idea that the sun joined the earth in its spasm is at most incidental, but it makes the experience of reading the sentences that much richer, that much more eventful.)

19–20. These lines refer to the earthquake and eclipse Matthew 27 reports as accompanying the Crucifixion (the sixth hour is noon; the ninth, 3 pm):

⁴⁵Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. ... ⁵¹And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent

Note that, whereas in lines 1–10 man’s soul was likened to a planet, these lines report an instance in which the earth and the sun imitated the pathetic fallacy and responded like human beings.

21–22. *hands which span the Poles ... peirc’d* Note that the earth’s poles (the North and the South) can be imagined as pierced by the earth’s axis (as they are by a pole-like metal rod on a revolving model of the globe). In lines 21–22 we are offered images of hands that span the poles of the earth and of hands pierced with nails (long, thin pieces of metal).

Remember the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost are a single being in three persons.

22. *tune* One of the several surviving seventeenth-century non-authorial manuscript copies of the poem (the MS now at Trinity College, Dublin) reads *turne*. Both words fit the context very well. *Turn* obviously fits the context established in lines 1–8. And *tune* would introduce the altogether pertinent astronomical/philosophical idea of “the music of the spheres”—the very popular, ultimately Pythagorean concept of a music inaudible to morals and generated by the harmoniously coordinated movements of heavenly bodies through the sky. Shakespeare exploited the notion in *The Merchant of Venice* 5.1.60–65 (Riverside text), a passage that demonstrates the poetic utility of the idea (Lorenzo is talking to Jessica; he has just sent a servant for the house orchestra):

There's not the smallest orb which thou beholds't
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring tot the young-ey'd cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

I can see no way of deciding between *tune* and *turn* in line 22 of “Good Friday, 1613.”

23. By a complex combination of relationships in sound and relationships in sense, *endlesse height* casually conflates *endlesse day* (line 12) and *eternally benighted* (line 14).
24. *Zenith* *OED* gives and illustrates these four pertinent senses of *zenith*: (1) the highest point of the celestial sphere [that is, in the arch of the sky] as viewed from any particular place; (2) the point on the horizon at which a heavenly body rises; (3) the highest or culminating point reached by a heavenly body; (4) the highest point or state, the culmination, the acme. (For the fourth sense, the figurative one, *OED* gives this illustration from a Donne sermon: “Gods suffering for man was the Nadir, the lowest point, of Gods humiliation; mans suffering for God is the Zenith, the highest point of mans exaltation.”)

Antipodes The word derives from the Greek words for “opposite” and “feet.” *OED*'s definitions are these: (1) Those who dwell directly opposite to each other on the globe, so that the soles of their feet are as it were planted against each other; especially those who occupy this position in regard to us; (2) those who in any way resemble the dwellers on the opposite side of the globe; (3) places that are to each other as the people in (1) are, or the place directly opposite to another; especially the region directly opposite to one's own; (4) the exact opposite of a person or thing (*OED*'s earliest example of (4) is from 1641, but it gives an example of such a use of the singular —“antipode”—from 1631; however, I think *Antipodes* in this line operates in sense (4) [as well as in other senses] and is thus an earlier example of sense (4) than any *OED* knows about).

our The curiously independent Trinity MS, that gives *turne* in line 22, gives *to'our* here. So does the Penguin editor. I suspect that *to'our* (a

monosyllable—“towr”—that would have sounded just like the standard monosyllabic pronunciation of “tower”) *might* be what Donne wanted; he would presumably have liked the incidental pertinence of the sound of “tower” in a line about height. On the other hand, reading *to’our* limits the line to reporting the complexly paradoxical theological/cosmological “fact” that the location of heaven and the heavens is up from here and from the Southern Hemisphere as well. Most MSS and all early printed texts give *our*, and that reading offers *not only* the paradox of direction (because *to* can govern both *us* and *our Antipodes* [compare such constructions as “to him and me”]), but another paradox as well: “that height, which is Zenith to us and is our Antipodes (that is, is simultaneously antipodal to us).” I doubt that Donne would have wanted to give up the effects of that locution either. Once again, I don’t know which of the two Donne “intended,” but the weight of textual evidence is with *our* rather than *to’our*. (If I were you, I would ignore both this note and my earlier foray into textual scholarship.)

Don’t forget that *that ... height* in line 23 can refer not only to the *primum mobile* and to the Holy Ghost and to God the Father, but to Jesus as well.

26. *seat* “abiding place”—in particular “the organ or part of the body in which a particular faculty or power or function ‘resides.’”
27. *Made* The Trinity MS I’ve mentioned twice before (the one that has *turne* and *to’our*), gives *Make*. I don’t see that it matters substantively here whether one reads *Made* or *Make*.

dust See Genesis 2:7: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” “We ... commit his/her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust” was, as it still is, part of the burial service of the Church of England.

worne Note that the phrase *rag’d and torne* in the next line presents a synonym for a sense of *worn* quite different from the one it has here.
29. *durst ... durst* “dared ... would dare” *Durst*, a now-obsolete past tense and subjunctive of “to dare,” conflates the sounds of *durt* (that is, “dirt”) and *dust* (line 27).
30. *his miserable mother* John 19:25 says that Mary was present at the crucifixion of Jesus.
33. *from mine eye* “out of my sight,” “not visible to me.”
34. *present* Context makes *present* indicate place (as in “The cat was present at the coronation”)—but *present* keeps company here with *yet*, a “time” word.

yet (1) “now no less than before” (2) “nonetheless”
35. *that looks toward them* The simple metaphoric assertion that “the memory recollects them” is wittily heightened by the then-current medical theory that the “seat” of the memory is at the back of the skull. (In one of his sermons, Donne says that “the art of salvation is but the art of memory ... Plato placed all learning in the memory; we may place all religion in the memory too. All knowledge that seems new today, says Plato, is but a remembering of

that which you soul knew before. All instruction which we can give you today is but the remembering you of the mercies of God, which have been new every morning.” [*The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. C.R. Potter and E.M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley, 1952–620), II.73–74. I have modernized the quoted sentences. Not only that, but I have gratefully stolen this entire parenthesis from Donald Friedman.])

- 36–42. In the Church of England, the prescribed Old Testament lesson for the evening service on Good Friday was, and still is, Isaiah 53—a supposedly prophetic passage supposedly fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Its language (for instance, “form,” “his stripes,” “turned every one to his own way,” “the travail of his soul” [Renaissance pronunciation did not make the distinction we make between “travail” and “travel”]). and the particulars (for instance, “we hid ... our faces”), are occasionally, variously, and vaguely pertinent to the language and topics of this poem—particularly to those of the poem’s closing lines. This is Isaiah 53:

¹Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? ²For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. ³He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD had laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. ⁸He was taken from prison and from judgement: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off our of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. ⁹And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. ¹¹He shall see of his travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

37. *I turne my back to thee* Don’t forget that this assertion stands alone for a split second before one reads the next three words (and that the line—the line as completed by *but to* [that is, “only to”]) *receive*—stands alone in one’s consciousness for the slightly longer time during which one’s eye goes to the other side of the page where the first word of the next line causes the clause to make the third of the three assertions it makes in passage).

37–38. The completed couplet presents a metaphor of flogging; to receive his lashing, a prisoner was stripped to the waist and tied by the wrists of his outstretched arms; an officer then gave him some specified number of lashes across his back.

Note that Jesus was beaten with his “scepter”; this is Matthew 27:29–30:

²⁹And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews: ³⁰And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head.

38. *leave* “leave off,” “stop.” (Although it may be foolhardy to do so, I want to point out that *leave* occurs here in a poem about travel and about death; both of those are topics to which “to leave” meaning “to depart” pertains. Moreover, *leave* occurs in the immediate context of *tree*; the *oriens* passage in Luke 1:78 [see the note on line 10], is an explicit echo of another supposedly prophetic passage in the Old Testament: Zechariah 6:12, in which words that the Vulgate translates as *Ecce vir, Oriens nomen eius et subter eum oriatur* appear in the AV as “Behold the man whose name is The Branch; and he shall grow out of his place”; also note Isaiah 53.2 [quoted above in the note to lines 36–42].)

39. *O thinke mee* echoes *Let mans Soule be* (“think man’s soul as if it were”)—and also contrasts with it. In context of the poem’s title, both sound like the introductory phrases to prayers. *Let mans Soule be* turns out to introduce matter quite different. *O thinke mee* turns out indeed to introduce a prayer, but that prayer’s imperatives sound more presumptuous than prayerful.

Note, however, that we do at last get the prayerful gesture toward which the poem has made several false starts (lines 39–42 *are* a prayer—even though they are hardly humble in manner). Over and over again in this poem a false start turns out to be a true one. Compare the facts that, since the world is round, going west is also going east and that Jesus (who fell low in climbing a cross), rose from the dead—was brought to life by death.

This is as good a place as any to note that this poem is full of paired opposites: rise and set (in line 11); rise and fall (13); west and east (9–10); day and night (12, 14); life and death (17–18); gladness and sadness (15–16); zenith and antipodes (24) ... and, finally—and in another dimension of thought—the fact that Donne makes turning to Christ *feel* like an act of despair.

40. *deformity* Don’t forget the technical (and here contextually alien) use of *form* introduced in line 6.

41. *thine Image* (1) “my power to keep you in my mind’s eye” (2) “me” (remember Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in his own image”).

42. *turne my face* (1) “turn my head” (to face you) (2) “look east” (3) “go east” (4) “turn from temporal, mundane things”—and, perhaps, (5) “die” (Note that in context of flogging *turne my face* suggests the idea of “turning the other cheek” from Matthew 5:39 [in the Sermon on the Mount]: “Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Note too that this poem revolves upon different manifestations of the idea of turning.)

After you have read the speaker's final devout promise, consider that, in riding westward on Good Friday, the speaker is going in the same direction as the sun. Remember also that the world is round. Will it matter whether the speaker does turn his face?

I also find myself intrigued during this poem by the word "journey"—a word that does not occur in the poem but which encapsulates two of its central concerns. A journey is a trip, more particularly, one day's travel; the word derives from the French word *jour*, "day," and, most directly from the Old French word *journee*, "a day's work" (i.e., "a day's travail" [consider "journeyman"]), "a day's travel."