The influence of John Donne on Peter Sterry has hitherto been unnoted. This is not surprising given the theological and political differences between the Anglican Dean of St. Paul’s and the Puritan adviser to Oliver Cromwell. But Sterry was quite familiar with the writings of John Donne, and although for poetical inspiration he turned to George Herbert, for meditations on the art of dying, he found in Donne a powerful model to emulate.

In May 1672, nearly forty years after Donne’s death, Peter Sterry lay dying among his congregation in London. He was suffering from what he knew would prove a terminal illness. His health had always been poor, as his letters with their frequent references to fatigue and disease reveal. Sterry was not well enough to write, and he turned to his closest amanuensis—his daughter Frances—and dictated to her. The outcome was a treatise on “The State of a Saints Soul and Body in Death,” which Sterry did not live to finish. The treatise survives in part in the hand of Frances; a more extended version, but still incomplete, appeared in print in 1683. It is one of the most eloquent statements on the **Ars Moriendi** in seventeenth-century theological imagination.

At the very outset of the treatise, Sterry recalled the following: “A Holy Divine, when he was dying, lay upon his Death-Bed, singing this often over; *Now I shall sin no more*” (449). This “Holy Divine” was none other than John Donne, who according to Izaak Walton composed “A Hymne to God my God, on My Sicknesse” when he was
literally on his "Death-bed," and "A Hymne to God the Father" in his former "sicke-bed." This information had appeared in Walton's Lives, a revised edition of which was published in 1670. Sterry read Walton's description of Donne's death, but ill as he was, his memory failed him and he mistook the latter poem for the divine's "Death-Bed" composition. In "A Hymne to God the Father," Donne wondered whether God would forgive him his sins of which, as the refrain repeated, there were many more than he could count. The concluding stanza resolved the tension, and Sterry translated Donne's conviction into a statement of hope. He trusted that he, along with his congregation, would learn to treat death in a manner similar to the "Holy Divine":

O dying Saints, break forth into singing! O all ye Saints rejoice, and triumph at every thought, at every approach of Death. . . . Now sing of death, and say in your songs every one of you, as you lie upon your Death-beds: I shall sin no more. (450)

As Sterry continued his dictation, the image that came to dominate "The State of a Saints Soul and Body in Death" was of death as love. Indeed, from the first words, where he listed the ten points he would explore in the treatise, Sterry urged that "Death hath nothing of wrath in it; but is all divine love unvailing itself" (434), and a few pages later, added that "the Death of a Saint [is] the flame of God, the fire of Divine Love" (437). He called on his congregation to enjoy death: "O Saints have pleasure in Death" (452), and to love it, "O Sweet, O beautiful, O precious, and blessed Death!" (458). Regularly, Sterry recalled John Donne, his mentor of joy, and towards the end, evoked the tuning image of the first stanza in "A Hymne to God my God," the correct "Death-bed poem: "Break forth then, O ye Saints, into singing, both living, and dying, tune your last breath to this song of the Lamb" (495).