TRANSLATING HEAVENWARDS:
"UPON THE TRANSLATION
OF THE PSALMES"
AND
JOHN DONNE'S POETICS OF PRAISE

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FEW SCHOLARS WHO treat John Donne’s “Upon the translation of the Psalms by Sir Philip Sydney, and the Countesse of Pembroke his Sister” do not see its spiritual integrity made questionable by the presumed circumstances of its composition. Although the poem praises the translation of the Psalms begun by Sir Philip Sidney before 1585 and completed by Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, before 1600, it clearly could not have been written until after the countess’s death more than twenty years later. The poem’s stimulus, David Novarr claims, was Donne’s learning on 13 September 1621 that he was to be nominated by King James to the deanery of St. Paul’s cathedral and his using the countess’s death less than two weeks later as the occasion to ingratiate himself with her influential son and heir, the third Earl of Pembroke, and thus assure himself the election:

The poem is not a disinterested tribute to work done long before. Donne’s quest for the deanery led him to seize the occasion of the Countess’s death to communicate a private tribute to Pembroke. The poem he wrote is more a verse epistle than it is eulogy or elegy, and that explains its limited availability and circulation. Here, more than in any other poem that he wrote after his ordination, Donne’s motive was the motive behind his earlier poetry of patronage—self-advancement. (157)

Arthur Marotti reinforces Novarr’s conclusion, observing that “however seriously Donne took the instructive role of the psalm translators (‘They tell us why, and teach us how to sing’ [22]), Donne obviously intended the poem primarily as an
encomiastic offering, like the verse letters to Lady Bedford, and demonstrated that he was not unwilling, before he won the ecclesiastical preferment he desired, to exercise himself in this mode” (285).

The poem, however, not only resists description by its most immediate occasional circumstances but elevates encomia—a poetic mode that Novarr and Marotti appear to find suspect—to the highest spiritual function of poetic language. In a Candelmas Day sermon inspired by Romans 13.7, Donne defines prayer and praise as the two things due God; “all our Religion,” he insists, “is Praise” (4: 307). The confluence of prayer and praise in the Book of Psalms (“The Book is Praise, the parts are Prayer”) is a mystery that he meditates upon in another sermon when he marvels at

this concurrence of these two parts of our devotion, Prayer and Praise, that they accompany one another[;] nay this coincidence, that they meet like two waters, and make the streame of devotion the fuller; nay more then that, this identity, that they doe not onely consist together, but constitute one another[].

(5: 270)

Like La Corona and A Litanie, “Upon the translation of the Psalms” enacts this “concurrence” of prayer and praise. The poem goes further, however, in modeling a cosmic economy or dynamic of poetic praise; to borrow what Donne says of the Sidneys’ translations, his poem tells readers why and teaches them how to sing. While Donne’s circulating praise of the countess immediately after her death possibly influenced his elevation as Dean of St. Paul’s, the poem functions beyond the limited and venal fashion that Novarr and Marotti describe. The “occasion” of the poem is more likely the ongoing reformation of the English church that, upon the death of the countess, lost one of its most vigorous leaders, and Donne’s offer to share both as poet and preacher in the continuing reform. The particular skill that he understood he could bring to the work of reform is the same gift of poetic language that the biblical David, Moses and Miriam, as well as the Sidney translators, had already brought to the task. For not only is “Upon the translation of the Psalms” both Donne’s most precise definition of what he hoped to accomplish through his religious poetry and his most complete poetic statement of the religious power and spiritual economy of praise; it may be as well a revealing meditation by the dean-elect upon what he anticipated accomplishing from the pulpit of St. Paul’s.