John Donne's Commemorations

Our second reading today came from *A Sermon of Commemoration for the Lady Danvers*, which your former preacher John Donne delivered at Chelsea Old Church on 1 July 1627. Donne had missed the funeral a week earlier due to prior commitments – we don't yet know what exactly. Lady Danvers was an old friend, and Donne's preaching may have come about either at her own request, or perhaps at that of her youngest son, the poet George Herbert – whose poems, alongside Donne's own Holy Sonnets, would shortly be recognised as the greatest English devotional verse of theirs, or perhaps of any, age. Lady Danvers was in fact the recipient of some of Donne's sacred poems years earlier, which he sent to her in manuscript; he seems to have greatly admired and respected her as a mother, patron, and friend. Magdalen's other children by her first husband, Sir Richard Herbert, were almost as over-achieving as George. To name only two: Edward, later Lord Herbert of Cherbury, was the philosopher, ambassador, and poet who famously competed with Donne to write the most obscure poem; and Sir Henry Herbert was a successful courtier who rose to be Master of the Revels under both Charles I and II. Magdalen oversaw her children's education and entry into the adult world after the death of Richard Herbert; but eventually in 1609 she married for a second time. Eyebrows rose among the gossips of London at the substantial age gap between Sir John and his bride – born in 1584/5, Sir John was around twenty-four, his bride twice as old. Yet theirs seems to have been a complementary and happy marriage, lasting sixteen years until the death of Lady Danvers' death in the summer of 1627.[1]

How can John Donne's own acts of commemoration, and in particular his sermon for Magdalen Danvers, speak to us as, happily, we commemorate him today? For Donne, in fact, unlike many of his contemporaries, the duty of commemoration seems to have been a complicated, even a difficult task, moving him to even greater self-consciousness than usual for this most sophisticated writer and speaker. Why was this? And how did Donne overcome his scruples, when, late in his life, he came to preach what would be his only sermon entitled '*of Commemoration*'? It was in this sermon that Donne was finally able to fulfil, as he put it, his 'two Workes for this day … *To instruct the Living*, and then *To commemorate the Dead*' (all quotations of the sermon are from *Sermons*, ed. Potter and Simpson, vol. VIII, sermon 2, with spelling modernised). To fulfil these two purposes, and to unite them, Donne would bring the past life of his friend Magdalen to bear on the future lives of her family, friends, and neighbours, as he addressed them in Chelsea, in July 1627, and would find in her

[1] Twenty-two years after the death of his first wife, Danvers was appointed to the commission nominated to try Charles I. He signed the king's death warrant, despite, according to John Aubrey, being 'a great friend of the King's party and a patron to distressed and cashiered Cavaliers' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*).

life a way to illuminate the promise of, in the words of St Peter's second epistle, 'new heavens and a new earth' (3.13).

The arts of commemoration were extremely developed in the late sixteenth century; indeed, Donne might have said, *over*-developed. Speeches of praise, celebration, and commemoration were central to the humanist education system: reading and imitating them was how you would acquire the eloquence required for service at court, or in the church, or the legal world. It also became one of the marks of poethood, in a culture where the only money to be had from the exhausting business of writing – other than playwriting – was by dedicating verse to rich patrons, who expected to be celebrated and have their loved ones remembered. Many of Donne's friends were prolific commemorators. To take one of the most famous: Ben Jonson – dramatist, friendly rival of Shakespeare, and eventually Poet Laureate – poured most of his considerable poetic energy into 150 epigrams of praise and commemoration, which he published as *Epigrams Book I* in his huge folio *Works* of 1616. (Jonson never got round to Book II, but the intention was certainly there!) Donne certainly knew Jonson's poems, which remain one of the most potent acts of commemoration in English poetry. But he also knew that, to some of their contemporaries, Jonson's publication was seen as a massively self-aggrandising act – indeed, an act of a *self*-commemoration of unprecedented proportions. Here is a clue, I think, to one of the scruples Donne felt about commemorative writing: that it promoted the image and interests of the writer himself, as much as of the person who was commemorated.

Yet Donne's 'lifelong disinclination to commemoration', in the words of the scholar David Novar, had other causes besides a concern for reputation. Donne resisted or refused requests, even from his closest friend, Sir Henry Goodyere, who asked him for an elegy for an old friend. Neither did he write on Goodyere's own death, or that of his most important patron, the Countess of Bedford; and he even 'barely wrote' in his letters about the death of his younger brother Henry from plague in 1594, as Donne's most recent biographer, Katherine Rundell, has noted.[2] (Henry had been arrested for concealing a Jesuit priest and died from the plague caught in Newgate prison.) We know that Donne could offer witty and dazzling praise to the living, since his relationship with Lady Bedford had been initiated and maintained through verse letters. (These mingled ingenuity, flattery, and subtle acknowledgements of the dangers of courtly life, especially for women.) Perhaps Donne felt more able to offer praise when his words were half of an ongoing dialogue? We know the witty Countess wrote her own verse, though very little has survived. Commemoration would cause difficulties in their relations when, in 1609, Donne was prompted to write elegies for two of her kinswomen who had died suddenly. One of these poems was poorly received, and Donne had to try again. But to sum up: it is really very striking, given Donne's enormous powers as a poem of love, as a satirist, and as a verse

[2] *Super-Infinite* - an excellent introduction to Donne's life and also, especially, to his poetry.

correspondent, that he shied away from commemorative writing. I suspect two reasons may have been at play. First, that he may have struggled to grieve to order; and second, that for a poet of his startling originality, it was difficult to live up (or is it down?) to the highly conventionalized expressions that were expected from elegists. We can see the latter when, in 1611, he agreed to commemorate the fourteen-year-old daughter of his wealthy patron Sir Robert Drury. Though he turned in the agreed elegy, Donne also produced alongside it a 474-line meditative poem, *An Anatomy of the World*. Elizabeth Drury is the ostensible subject; but after calling her the 'world's soul', Donne abstracts her entirely. Indeed, so absolute and abstracted was this poem's praise that Ben Jonson reportedly 'told Mr Donne, if it had been written of the Virgin Mary it had been something' (Jonson, *Conversations with Drummond*).

Of course, between his troubled commemorations for Lady Bedford and his preaching of *A Sermon of Commemoration for the Lady Danvers* in 1627, Donne took holy orders – becoming, in 1616, your preacher, and, in 1621, Dean of St Paul's. Even then, in an era when senior clergy often preached commemoratively, Donne seldom did so. Compare Lancelot Andrewes, Dean of the Chapel Royal, whose posthumous *XCVI Sermons* contain no fewer than ten commemorations of King James's survival of the Gunpowder Plot, and eight for the King's survival of the Gowrie Conspiracy (a ninth was never printed). By contrast, Donne's preached *once* on the Gunpowder Plot, in 1622, a year after James had appointed him to the Deanship;[3] and he gave a single *ex officio* funeral sermon at St Paul's Cathedral, in 1626, for the former Lord Mayor, Sir William Cockayne. With the sermon for Magdalen Danvers that makes three surviving commemorative sermons – notably few, especially if we note that Donne accepted invitations to preach off-rota on other kinds of occasions: three weddings, four baptisms, and eight or nine miscellaneous private occasions.[4] Of course, during his ministry he spoke many times of 'commemoration' and remembrance, using those very words. But this was always in relation to the holy days and festivals of the Church, or its liturgy or rhythms of worship – and so sometimes to St Paul, on whose feast day he preached at the cathedral – but not to people or events in the sense we might think of as commemorative.

Nevertheless, in 1627 Donne would be preach memorably in commemoration of Lady Magdalen, whom he had known for over twenty-five years. In 1625 Donne had lodged with Sir John and Lady Danvers during a visitation of the plague in 1625, and despite the sombre cause of his stay, would doubtless have enjoyed the famous hospitality and sociability of their household, and seen

[3] This was an especially difficult brief, since Donne was tasked with commemorating a Catholic-led assassination plot at the same King James, the intended target, was intent on forging a political alliance with Catholic Spain.

[4] In 1624, and probably in two other years, Donne did also preach an 'anniversary' sermon at his parish church of St Dunstan's-in-the-West, for which a sum of money had been left by a 'Mr Adams'. The surviving sermon (probably 1624) mentions Adams only in the final paragraph, and even then Donne is notably un-commemorative: 'his [Adams'] intention was not […] to be yearly mentioned himself' (but that his posterity and neighbours should distribute money to the parish, as Adams had done).

personally how Magdalen encouraged her family in its devotions. She would 'hast[en] her family' to Church and on the Sabbath, and the same night lead the household in 'a general … a cheerful singing of *Psalms*', for instance. To have a sermon preached at your funeral (or the week after, in this case) was in 1627 neither particularly common nor unusual; it was, though, still the province of the well born, and it would not be until the later seventeenth and early eighteenth-century that England saw what the historian Ralph Houlbrooke has called as the 'heyday' of the Anglican funeral sermon. Like other Protestant preachers, Donne was aware of the need for caution around funerary oratory. Reformation polemics against praying for the dead had cast a long shadow – as Donne, a former Catholic, was only too aware – and, as a compromise, most Protestant funeral sermons postponed any mention of the deceased until some forty-five or fifty-minutes into the hour. Even then, some preachers said little or nothing individual to the deceased, while others spoke only of what they could personally vouch for from their own experience. Donne adopted this latter approach strategically in the *ex officio* funeral sermon he gave in 1626 for Mayor Cockayne, where he mentions approvingly the deceased's devotions at St Paul's, which the Dean had personally witnessed during services.[5]

When it came to Lady Danvers, Donne had witnessed her life for a quarter of a century. Perhaps it was this very long friendship that gave him the impetus to reflect anew on the duty of commemoration; perhaps he may even have felt it was not only his duty, but also his friend's final gift to him – an opportunity to be reconciled to a task which in the past he had scrupled at. We heard in our second reading that Donne's preached his sermon – the first forty-five minutes of it – not about the past, but about man as a '*future Creature*' – we look forward, out of a desire of move, an expectation of 'new heavens and a new earth'. After an impassioned exploration of these promises, Donne turns to Lady Danvers in the language of testimony and witness. He can, he says (twice) 'testify' to Lady Danvers. Yet even now, Donne seems to hesitate, to hedge, even to be about to step away yet again from commemoration. His auditory may be expecting 'some picture, some character of her *person*', he says; yet, after all, what is the need, since 'she was no stranger to them that hear me now; nor scarce to any that may hear of this hereafter, which you hear now, and therefore, much needs not, to that purpose'. Here, we can see not only Donne's self-consciousness about his task coming to the fore, but also his scrupulous sense of his duty as a preacher as he seeks to edify his listeners by testing their motives. It may seem almost perverse. But I think Donne is being steadfast in questioning what we are looking for when we look back – what we might seek in hearing him speak of Lady Danvers. Those gathered in Chelsea all knew her, knew of her, or loved her; now she is gone from them, and whatever he can say must be partial, incomplete. He emphasizes at length that a *full* commemoration of everything about Magdalen is not in his power. Playing on one of his favourite words – *all* – Donne says that he: 'would do her all *right*, and *all* you that good, if I could, to say *all*'.

[5] As noted by Peter McCullough in his analysis of the Cockayne sermon (in *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, ed. P. McCullough, E. Rhatigan, and H. Adlington).

These repetitions of 'all' weave together commemoration and the preacher's duty to edify his listeners: to 'do her *all* right' would at the same time to do his auditory good. So the loss of Magdalen, her loss (though also her gain, through her trust in God) can then become their gain; her past, a guide to their future.

Still, he insists, he *cannot* do 'all'; and in fact all he will do is simply reactivate their memories: 'thus much I may *remember* some, and *inform* others'. Here 'remember' is transitive (an early modern English usage, now lost) meaning to *remind* rather than to *recall*: Donne will *remind* those who knew Magdalen of what is already in their memories. Thus, it will be the auditory themselves who *co*-mmemorate Lady Danvers, together, as they bring her back into their memories. This will give credence to Donne's own testimony – attest its truthfulness, helping to reduce his own scruples, perhaps; and perhaps even some of their own – but will also make their memories serve the larger purposes of God, seen through Magdalen's life, and in the words and gestures of the preacher. Many years earlier, at Lincoln's Inn, Donne had preached of how 'the art of *salvation*, is but the art of memory' (*Sermons*, II.73), following St Augustine in the idea that God elects to dwell particularly in our faculty of memory, so that to find God again is in a sense to remember Him. Donne's commemorative task, as preacher, thus becomes to bring his listeners to remembrance of God through their memories of Magdalen Danvers, her past life and the present moment of preaching both pointing to the future promise of 'new heavens and a new earth'. In that newness, that fullness, when God shall be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15), then, finally, there will be a true commemoration of *all*. In perhaps his most personal touch, Donne extends Magdalen's famous hospitably and sociability to the future of the auditory: those gathered to remember her (and hear of her, however briefly) are to be welcomed by her into the same promise of heaven, just as she shared her household and hospitality with others. Though Donne must, finally, abstract from Magdalen herself, she has provided him with a pattern for their own spiritual regenerations: for by an 'active imitation, of her *Moral*, and her *Holy virtues*' they will meet once more 'in that *kingdom*, which hers, and our Saviour, hath purchased for us all'. 'Well done good and faithful servant', Donne tells her using Jesus's words from the Parable of the Talents: '*enter into thy masters joy*'. And, surely, just as Magdalen Danvers' gifts of wit, of generosity, and of care for her family, were remembered by Donne as a pattern of the future; so too we can remember Donne himself, the encouragement he felt in these words he spoke to his friend Magdalen, as he must have reflected on his own gifts – of language, of eloquence, of persuasion, and finally of commemoration as exhortation. These he turned to such good ends, in all the pulpits from which he spoke. And we give thanks for those talents, as we commemorate him here today.

*

In the decade following Donne's death in 1631, he became, ironically, a key focal point for two new genres, or forms, of commemorative writing. One was the printed collection of a single author's poetry. The earliest editions of Donne (1633, 1635) came garlanded with elegies of commemoration in praise of his eloquence and accomplishments. The edition of 1635 ordered Donne's poems as if to suggest an Augustinian transformation from the young Jack Donne (author of the daring *Songs and Sonnets* and *Elegies*) to the sober Dr Donne (author of *Holy Sonnets* and hymns). This kind of semi-biographical arrangement was not then the norm, but would quickly become an influential model, including for Milton's *Poems* (1645). The other genre for which Donne's life became central was of course biography: Izaak Walton's life of Donne, first printed in Donne's *LXXX Sermons* (1640), would later be published independently alongside the 'Lives' of other clergymen, transmitting Donne's life to new generations.

Philip West
Somerville College, Oxford