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The Religious Voices of Drummond of Hawthornden

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For a long time, critics viewed William Drummond as a first-class translator but a second-class poet, as one who carried the Renaissance ideal of imitation too far, producing poetry, as well as prose, which was little more than English renderings of European originals. More recent critics, however, have found that Drummond is more than a good translator, and that he clearly expresses his own personal and philosophical outlook in his imitations. An indication of this originality is how Drummond’s writing serves as a revealing barometer of the Scottish religious temperament during the first half of the seventeenth century. Although Drummond by his own wish took no active part in the religious conflicts of the period, his prose and poetry signal forces at work which stress moderation and individual belief over dogmatic assertions of doctrinal truth. To this end, Drummond’s religiosity takes form in three clearly identifiable yet related voices: there is Drummond the controversialist who speaks out against the extremism of his Presbyterian brethren, Drummond the pious Christian who stresses fundamentals as a way of uniting all Christians, and
Drummond the mystic who finds his own personal way to God. Drummond's literary activity spans the period from 1610, when he returned to Scotland from his legal studies in Bourges, to his death in 1649. Although Drummond's purposes go beyond immediate political and religious circumstances, much of his writing is still a response to contemporary events. Of particular concern to Drummond was the National Covenant of February, 1638, which, in affirming the Presbyterian shape of the Scottish Church, expressed for him the kind of extremism that leads to curtailment of religious liberty. It is with this concern in mind that Drummond spoke out in a number of tracts expressing the most obvious of his religious voices, that of the controversialist opposed to anything that compromises freedom of religious belief.

Most important of these tracts is *Irene: or A Remonstrance for Concord, Amity, and Love amongst His Majesty's Subjects*, in which Drummond argues that the subject’s absolute obedience to the prince curbs the human tendency to excess. Obedience to the prince, Drummond exhorts, "we should always embrace and follow . . . if we would enjoy a Civil Happiness," for "it is a Bridle, Helm, and Stay to our wild Perturbations and disordered Passions." While Drummond is not blind to the possible shortcomings of the prince, he still insists on moderation, such that if in the "Ordinances of Princes, there be many Things contrary to our Opinions," the only recourse is still "Remedies of Patience and Obedience"(p. 165). It hardly needs saying that behind what Drummond writes is the concept of the divine right of kings, that "it is not lawful for a Subject to be a Syndick of the Actions of his Prince in Matters of State", and that it must be left for God "to censure and judge the Actions of Princes, for whom alone they have immediately their royal power and sovereignty" (pp. 165-6). Drummond's obedience to a repressive king might seem far from laudatory, but he still sees the middle way of the Caroline Church as superior to the zealourness embedded in the National Covenant, by which, he asserts, "a Man or Nation is invassalled and thrall'd to obey and follow another Man's or Nation's pleasure" (p. 166), as the "Master beames of Religion . . . Faith, Hope and Charity, Meekness, Patience and Humility" are overcome by "Pride, Lust . . . [and] Oppression" (p. 170).

It is not, moreover, as if Drummond does not have some
pointed advice for his king. Drummond urges Charles to exercise love and patience in dealing with the Covenanters, and thus sends Charles a message not unlike the one he sends to the Presbyterian clergy: "The surest way, the most accommodated and fitting your Bounty," Drummond writes, "is clemency, that Virtue by which Princes approach nearest God Almighty" (p. 173). The prince's chief responsibility, Drummond contends, is to maintain harmony and liberty, to transform the troubles of his subjects into rest, "their Miseries into Prosperity, their Dissensions into Concord and Peace" (p. 173). Regardless, then, of whether Drummond speaks to king, bishop, or presbyter, he advocates a moderation which espouses the charity and understanding which he equates with being Christian. As he writes in Skiamaxia, "Among all the Sorts of People on the Face of the Earth, Christians should be of the most mild and peaceable Disposition, humble, gentle [and] ... charitable, not only towards those of their own Profession but even such who are without, and to all Men in general" (p. 191).

Drummond's argument for moderation and tolerance is explicitly theological, stressing as it does that difference is a crucial element in the divine order of things. We must take notice, Drummond observes in Irene, of how the "Sovereign Creator of this All" has made "nothing but in Order, and that not being but where there is a Difference and Diversity" (p. 171). There is in the world "not a Body ... that is not composed and existing with some Diversity" (p. 171). Diversity, however, is only part of Drummond's argument. Drummond also sees the world as possessing a unity that supports this diversity; there is, he writes, "a perfect Harmony in all this great Frame, and discording Concord [that] maketh all the Parcels of it delightful" (pp. 171-2). Difference, in other words, is necessary for harmony, and Drummond therefore writes how from diversity arises a "Beauty, so wonderful and amazing to our Eyes" (p. 172).

It is a simple step from the diversity of the natural world to diversity in human thought and to the question, if God determines the diversity of the world, why can there not be diverse ways to God, or, as Drummond phrases it, "why do we seek to find Men all of one Thought and one Opinion in Formalities and Matters disputable?" (p. 172). Drummond is unequivocal in answering his own question: "the Consciences of Men neither should nor will be forc'd by the Violence of Iron
and Fire; nor will Souls be compelled to believe that which they believe not" (p. 172).

For Drummond, God transcends mere doctrinal formulae. In the work, *Skiamaxia*, he expresses regret that the Christian religion has been reduced to "outward shows and Ceremonies... Babelings and Tautologies," to what he calls the "Disputations of more Labour than Profit" (p. 205). Similarly, in a *Remoras for the National League Between Scotland and England*, he bluntly states that "the Church of God is not established by humane Policy and Wit" (p. 188). Drummond's point is that there is nothing wrong with "human invention" so long as men recognize that no one set of rites constitutes the only way to worship God. What concerns him is when the externals are transformed into absolutes, and differences are replaced by dogmatism. It is because of these concerns that Drummond urges Christians, regardless of individual differences, to look for fundamentals that they all can share and to nurture within themselves the simple piety exemplified in the life of Christ. It is this call for a simple Christianity which comprises Drummond's second religious voice, and which really anticipates the relatively late public statements of his prose.

Important here are a number of poems in Drummond's volume of religious verse, *Flowres of Zion* (1623), which depict God as experienced through faith rather than through theological speculation. This message could hardly be more straightforward than when Drummond writes:

O soueraigne Excellence,  
Of Life of all that liues,  
Eternall Bounty which each good thing giues  
How could Death mount so hie?  
No wit this hight can reach,  
Faith only doth vs teach... 7

Evident here is the fundamental simplicity of the God-person relationship. There is an absolute impossibility to the question, "How could Death mount so hie?," coming as it does after the declaration, "O Life of all that liues." Not only does it point to the inadequacy of reason, but anticipates Drummond's own conclusion, "No wit this hight can reach, / Faith only doth vs teach." There are, very simply, intellectual limits beyond which
there is no positive theological frame of reference.

Suggestive, too, is Drummond's sonnet on the Sepulchre, which points to how these limits are most evident in the central Christian metaphor that death is life:

Life to give life depriued is of Life
And Death displai'd hath ensigne against Death;
So violent the Rigour was of Death,
That nought could daunt it but the Life of Life:
No Power had Pow'ru to thrall Lifes pow'ru to Death
But willingly Life hath abandon'd Life
Loue gaue the wound which wrought this work of Death,
His bow and Shafts were of the Tree of Life.
Now quakes the Author of eternall Death,
To finde that they whom earst he reft of Life
Shall fill his Roome aboue the listes of Death:
Now all reioyce in Death who hope for Life.
Dead IESVS lies, who hope for Life.
His Tombe no Tombe is, but new Source of Life.
("Vpon the Sepulcher of our Lord," ll. 1-14)

The metaphor is, of course, a conflation of three separate ideas, that through Christ's death comes life for man, that such life is really the death of life, and that one must die to life in order to live. What Drummond's sonnet suggests is the linguistic notion that the central teachings of Christianity can really only be expressed in metaphor. One must have recourse to what one knows, even if it only suggests what one does not know.

A good case could be made here that Drummond does not understand the scope and purpose of theology. Certainly his anti-rationalism runs counter to the fundamental understanding of Christian theology held from Anselm on—that theology seeks to explain faith, not that faith takes over where theology fails. Be that as it may, Drummond's position is still one of doing rather than thinking. He sees faith as demanding, choosing, promising, and willing; in other words, it demands action. While Drummond claims in "An Hymne of the Passion" that all God demands is "to beleue, a pure Heart Incense" (I. 68), he is quick to associate belief with the free acceptance of God through repentance. God might "low-deepe burie faults," but there is still a condition, "so yee repent" (I. 74). And it is not as if one has
forever to act; one must turn to God "while remorseless time doth grant you space" (l. 71).

Repentance, of course, is meaningless without a commitment to new life, which in a number of Drummond's poems is expressed as a turning away from the "false Delight" of the world. Again arguing for fundamentals, Drummond urges that one guard against vanitas, and remember that the world is a place of passing things. Echoing the age old theme of the *Ubi Sunt?*, Drummond talks in "Human Frailtie" of life as "a Good that never satisfies the Minde" (l. 1), "a Beautie fading like the Aprile flowres" (l. 2), and "a Pleasure passing ere in thought made ours" (l. 4). Wisdom, therefore, is to

"... flie the World, and what it most doth prize,
And Sanctuarie seeke, free to remaine
From wounds of abject Times."

("Worldes Ioyes are Toyes," ll. 6-8)

That human reason is clouded, that God asks so little, and that the world is forever passing away affirm for Drummond a further crucial feature of the God-person relationship. One must accept one's own insignificance beside God, and understand that faith remains, in the face of theological speculation, a leap into the unknown. Thus, while Drummond prays, as all Christians should, "guide mee in Lifes Night, thy light mee show," he exhorts us to keep in mind, "the more I search of thee, the lesse I know" (l. 14).

This leap of faith, however, seems not to be entirely satisfactory to Drummond, as his antirational bent leads into a third religious voice, that of the mystic. Rather than accepting the unknowability of God beside human limitations, Drummond, in a number of poems, as well as in the prose work, *A Cypresse Grove*, expresses a mystical bent in which the divine reality is immediately and passionately engaged. Having recourse to the neo-Platonic metaphysics of Ficino and Pico, and moving beyond fundamentals and orthodox Christian teaching to echo the speculative mysticism traceable from Augustine to Eckhart and John of the Cross, Drummond struggles to suggest a complete reality over partial realities, and a God which is more than the God of the Bible.

As with all mystics, Drummond writes, not so much with the
intention of describing what can only be experienced, but of inviting his reader to exercise his imagination to see the "vaste hights" of "true Beauties Face" (l. 12). Drummond asks that if the world is so glorious, what kind of glory must there be in God? It is, for Drummond, something far surpassing anything we can know; it "doth transcend all this great Alls vaste hights" (l. 7). The point is well made: the closer we move to knowing the "all" of the world, the closer we are to God.

Along with Platonic echoes, Drummond's mystical poems embody another major feature of mystical expression: the use of non-rational language to suggest that the God-experience lies beyond conventional thought. Drummond describes heaven, for example, as "where visiblie th'lnvisible doth raigne" (l. 10), and where, by comparison to earthly experience, "all Ioy is but Annoy, all Concord Strife" (l. 13). Such phrases are strikingly similar to the Pseudo-Dionysus' reference to "the dazzling obscurity of the secret Silence," and to what Nicholas of Cusa calls "the coincidence of opposites," which points to how mystical experience admits of all contradictions and moves beyond deductive reasoning to an immediate non-rational apprehension of the divine.

Among Drummond's most effective poems expressing this mystical viewpoint is "An Hymne of the Fairest Faire," which, phrased in the first person, is a rendering of Drummond's own encounter with God, at least as best he can describe it. In particular the poem gives a sense of the ecstasy and rapture associated with the mystical experience of the divine; as Drummond writes in the poem's opening lines,

I Feele my Bosome glow with wontless Fires,
Rais'd from the vulgar prease my mind aspireth
(Wing'd with high Thoghts) vnto his praise to clime,
From deepe Eternitie who callid foorth Time .... (ll. 1-4)

"An Hymne of the Fairest Faire" also underlines the central paradox of mystical experience, that those who have experienced the unitive life, while conscious in the depths of their souls of God's spiritual presence, are unable to describe this presence; orthodox labels such as God and Father fail them. So it is that Drummond talks of God as the "Essence which not mou'd makes each thing moue" (l. 5), and refers, later in the same poem, to
"God various in Names, in Essence one" (l. 23). Concomitant with this limitation of the mystic path is how the poem expresses a crucial problem for all Christian mystics, the need to reconcile a living, personal God with the self-contained, unmoved mover of Aristotle. And as in the case of every other Christian mystic, Drummond produces no complete reconciliation. Although Drummond describes God as "enstalled on a golden Throne" (l. 24), he depicts this throne, not with Biblical terms, but with the negative theology that by knowing nothing one knows that which is beyond knowing. Thus God's "golden Throne" lies "out-reaching Heauens wide Vastes, the Bounds of nought" (l. 25). That Drummond talks of God's throne as "transcending all the Circles of our Thought" (l. 26) points to how the divine lies beyond conventional understanding, which, as in the idea of "the Bounds of nought," turns back on itself in contradiction and paradox.

Like other poems, "An Hymne of the Fairest Faire" dwells on the Platonic notion of this world revealing the next. Drummond invokes God's assistance, for example, in the task of showing "by earthlie Beauties which wee see / That spirituall Excellence that shines in Thee" (II. 33-4). Equally important, though, is Drummond's conception of God as "essence," which echoes the mystical image, traceable to Plotinus and Origen, of the created universe as a series of divine emanations from God. Man must, through an ever-increasing awareness of the spiritual dimension of reality, work back to the source of this spirituality. In the idea of God as "essence" is also found the suggestion of Tillich's "God beyond God" typically expressed in the writings of the thirteenth-century mystic Bonaventura. It is this idea that lies behind Drummond's description of God as "Vncreat'd Beautie all-creating Loue" (l. 6): God is present in all things yet beyond all things. As Bonaventura describes God as "most perfect and immense, therefore within all, though not included in them,," Drummond refers to the divine as "All-where diffus'd, yet of this All no part."13

Much as Drummond's mystical voice is evident in "An Hymne of the Fairest Faire," its most explicit and most effective expression is in an early prose work, A Cypresse Grove (1623), which, as its title suggests, is a consideration of death and fear of death. Influenced, it seems, by the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola, A Cypresse Grove is patterned, as Louis Martz
has shown for much religious poetry of the period, after the threefold structure of Ignatian meditation, composition of place, understanding, and colloquy.  

According to Ignatius, composition of place, the first stage of meditation, demands the focusing of the "mind and thought . . . within the bounds and limits of the subject . . . either by imaginarie representation . . . or by a simple proposing and conceit of it." So it is that Drummond begins *A Cypresse Grove* describing how "when I have giuen my selfe to rest in the quiet Solitariness of the Night [I] found . . . my imagination troubled with a confused feare," which "interrupting Sleepe, did astonish my Senses, and raise mee, all appalled and transported in a sudden Agony and amazedness." "After manie fantastical glances of the woes of Mankind, and those encombrances which follow vpon life," he says, "I was brought to thinke on . . . the last of all dreadfull and terrible evils—Death" (II, 68). Consistent with Ignatius' own instruction that meditation must be on "a visible object," Drummond concentrates on death as a ravisher of all that is precious in earthly life.

In considering death, the second section of *A Cypresse Grove* follows the requirements of the second stage of Ignatian meditation, as outlined by the Jesuit Luis de la Puente, who describes how one is "to make severall discourses, and considerations about . . . [the] mysterie, inquyring, and searching out the Verities comprehended therein . . . in such sort that the Understanding may forme a true, proper, and entire conceipt of the thing it meditateth." In this second section, Drummond echoes the traditional attitudes of the *memento mori*, and concludes, "all wee can set our eyes vpon in these intricate mazes of life is but Alchimie, vaine Perspectiue, and deceiuing Shadowes" (II, 80).

Given that life is suffering, then, Drummond clearly suggests that one should detach oneself from life. Also in *A Cypresse Grove*, however, are statements suggesting a different view of earthly life. Drummond asks, for example, how the world can be anything less than perfect because it is the creation of a perfect creator? He is highly critical, moreover, of those who pursue ascetic contemplation as a means to spiritual awakening. He condemns how their "opacke imaginations, and inward Thoughtfulness . . . haue made them wearie of the worlds Eye" (II, 76). It is worth noting that the contradiction expressed in *A
Cypresse Grove repeats the contradiction evident in Drummond's religious poems generally. On the one hand, he writes poems dwelling on the vanity of earthly things, and, on the other, poems espousing a Platonic view of the world as a means to heavenly glory.

One value of A Cypresse Grove is that it suggests a resolution to this conflict, as Drummond talks of a natural order which determines the proper purpose and function of everything in the world. Drummond writes of God who "is the first Orderer, and marshalleth everie other Order. . . . Hee worketh powerfullie, bounteously, wiselie, and maketh Nature . . . doe the same" (II, 81). The suffering of life, therefore, does not indicate an evil in the world, but suggests man's misuse of the world in being too much taken with it. This error every individual must be made to see; hence Drummond's emphasis on the deceptiveness of the world. Such awareness is not, however, the end product, but a preliminary step in the path to God.

As in his mystical poetry, Drummond in A Cypresse Grove does not define God in orthodox Christian terms, but in the theosophical language of Platonism. Thus, Drummond implores the soul to rest,

... not satiate with what is in thyselfe, nor with all [that is] in the wide Vniuerse . . . vntil thou raise they selfe to the contemplation of that first illuminating Intelligence, farre aboue Time, and even reaching Eternitie itselfe, into which thou art transformed, for, by receiuing thou . . . art made that which thou receiuest (II, 91).

Telling here is how Drummond, in a way reminiscent of Eckhart, forgets the personal I-thou relationship to present the ultimate relationship between God and the individual as so close as to be identical; as he says a few sentences later, the soul's ambition is to "haue perfect Fruition of that All-sufficient and All-suffizing Happinesse, which is God himself" (II, 92). Again, too, one hears how the raising of the soul comes with knowing and discerning, for only through knowledge will one gain greater knowledge. "The more thou knowest," Drummond writes, "the more apt thou art to know" (II, 91). This movement from lower knowledge to higher knowledge is the mystical path to the unitive life with God.
Religious Voices of Drummond

Appropriately, then, the final section of *A Cypresse Grove* corresponds to the colloquy of Ignatian meditation. According to Ignatius, the meditative process climaxes with the soul being lifted up to speak directly to God, to hear Him speak, and to gaze on His glory. So, then, do Drummond’s ruminations on death transport him to the highest stage of mystical awareness, in which he is stripped of all worldly limitations. Drummond describes how his "senses began to giue themselues over to rest, leauing mee in a still and peaceable sleepe.... where the Minde awaking is carried with free wings from out fleshlie bondage" to discover the "great All." While Drummond uses essentially Platonic terms to describe God—"Supreme Wisedome," "all-sufficient Good," and "true Beauty" (II, 101), he underlines how the God he experiences is beyond description by noting how "the power of God neuer brought forth all that it can, for then were it bounded and no more infinit" (II, 104). It is with this in mind that Drummond notes how there "seemeth to be the Voice of Nature in almost all the Religions of the World," suggesting "one generall Judgement Throne" which takes form in all variety of "expiations, sacrifices, prayers, solemnities, and mystical Ceremonies" (II, 94). Such a statement, it hardly needs saying, is remarkable in an age not given to religious tolerance.

That Drummond’s religious feelings should be expressed in three such different voices affirms his own view that there are many ways to God. It is also true, however, that there is a common thread in Drummond’s religious voices. The liberty he espouses in his attacks on Presbyterianism is really a statement of his belief that logical block chopping will not lead to God, and this, in turn, finds its fullest expression in a rejection of orthodoxy for the mystical path. While Drummond seems out of step with his times, because of this, his religious searching is clearly a comment on religious developments of the age. In his belief that there was not one right way to God, he was a product of the Reformation and its concern with authority. But he also ran counter to the Reformation in rejecting the dogmatism that represented the worst of Reformation scholasticism and that became an authority little different from what it replaced.

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NOTES


4 Drummond himself did not sign the National Covenant until 1643.

5 William Drummond, "Irene: A Remonstrance for Concord, Amity and Love, amongst His Majesty's Subjects," in The Works of William Drummond (Edinburgh, 1711), p. 165. While it is true that Drummond's political and religious tracts were not published during his lifetime, it is believed that they were widely circulated in manuscript form. Subsequent references to this edition are inserted in the text.

6 See Rae's discussion, pp. 39-40.

7 William Drummond, "Faith above Reason," The Poetical Works of William Drummond of Hawthornden with "A Cypresse Grove," ed. L. E. Kastner (Manchester, 1913), ll. 4-9. All references to Drummond's poetry, as well as A Cypresse Grove, are taken from Kastner's edition. Drummond originally gave his short poems no titles. Kastner gives the poems titles based on each poem's general subject. I have used Kastner's titles.


9 "Contemplation of Inuisible Excellencies aboue, by the
Visible below, l. 7.


15 Quoted in Martz, p. 30.


17 Quoted in Martz, p. 34.

18 As Eckhart writes, "why did God become man? So that I might be born to be God—yes—identically God?" (Raymond B. Blakney [trans.], *Meister Eckhart* [New York, 1941], p. 194).