
At the Threshold between Life and Death. Time of
Transience and Transition in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*
and *First Book of Sonnets* by Andreas Gryphius*

Pomiędzy życiem a śmiercią. Czas przemijania i przejścia w *Holy Sonnets*
Johna Donne'a i *Pierwszej księgi sonetów* Andreea Gryphiusa

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Abstract. The article focuses on a comparison of selected pieces of John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and Andreas Gryphius' *First Book of Sonnets* as examples of *meditatio mortis*. It presents the similarities of form and content between these two cycles, and traces possible inspirations for their creation in the analysis of both poets' religious pathways, facets of their biography with accentuation of experiences of death and transience, and their interest in spiritual and carnal processes accompanying the last moments of existence.

Keywords: *vanitas*, transience, meditative poetry, Baroque, John Donne, Andreas Gryphius, sonnet

Abstrakt. Celem artykułu jest porównanie wybranych utworów należących do *Holy Sonnets* Johna Donne'a i *Pierwszej księgi sonetów* Andreea Gryphiusa jako przykładów *meditatio mortis*,

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jak również przedstawienie podobieństw ich formy i treści. W tym celu analizie poddane zostały aspekty biografii obu autorów, ze specjalnym uwzględnieniem doświadczeń śmierci i przemijania, uwarunkowań wiary oraz ich szczególnego zainteresowania poświęconego cielesnym i duchowym procesom towarzyszącym ostatnim chwilom egzystencji.

Słowa kluczowe: *vanitas*, przemijanie, poezja medytacyjna, barok, John Donne, Andreas Gryphius, sonet

Exposure to time and transience as an integral element constituting the human condition form a thread that continually appears on the canvas of literature. In some periods, the thread seems to thicken, and collective interest related to *vanitas mundi* and *miseria humana* reflecting the turmoil of historical events becomes one of the leading subjects in all of the arts. The Baroque preoccupation with death and ephemeral nature of a mundane world led to well-known proliferation of works meticulously dealing with various aspects of it. Among those, despite the differences of cultural circles and traditions, an often fascinatingly similar approach to these themes can be found in poetry of John Donne (1572–1631) and Andreas Gryphius (1616–1664).¹

While the pairing at first glance might appear seemingly unorthodox and the research on their connection is scarce,² with the analysis of work and biographical background of both authors, a related view of mankind's fate and way of describing it emerges – with their attention centred on profound portrayal of the final stage of existence and moments of liminality between the immanence of life and transcendence of death.

Donne, revered already in his era by a circle of contemporaries as a “totally original and matchless poet” (Carey, 1981, p. 9), became well-known for his love lyrics. And although his concern with love is rich and ample, Constantinos Apostolos Patrides remarks in his edition of Donne's work that he was in fact the foremost English poet – as well as the greatest English prose-writer – of death. Although other Metaphysical poets of his time treated spiritual and transcendental happenings including passing away with great interest, Donne's occupation with this subject exceeds that. He was “much possessed by death” (Carey, 1981, p. 198), and his love of it “undeveloping, constant, permanent, fixed” (Patrides, 1985, pp. 30–31). However, by no means in terms of worship or glorification, the recurring undertone

¹ John Donne's work may not be straightforwardly classified as belonging to the Baroque era; however, it has been read and discussed in terms of its baroque connections. An extensive example can be found in: Hugh Grady, *John Donne and Baroque Allegory: The Aesthetics of Fragmentation*, Cambridge 2017.

² Brief comparisons concerning works of Donne and Gryphius: Gerd Hemmerich, *Metaphysische Leidenschaft. Zur Lyrik von Andreas Gryphius und John Donne*, *Text+Kritik*, 7/8 (1965), pp. 18–23; John Michael Cohen, *The Baroque Lyric*, London 1963, pp. 166–169.

of anxiety and fear of an abrupt end came from his own experiences. Born into a Catholic family when Catholics were persecuted and seen as a danger to the state, Donne found himself in the centre of a bloody storm since the young age. At the time of his adolescence, many Catholic prisoners were subject to horrifying tortures, and in some cases their suffering made into a gruesome spectacle – with methods including public vivisections of living victims. It is known that Donne attended some of the executions (Carey, 1981, pp. 16–19). A young man of vast talents and ambition, he sought success in a worldly career available only to an Anglican, and after a period of struggle chose apostasy from the Catholic church. That decision came with a high price – it immensely contributed to his moods of despair in the coming years, and constituted one of the fields of inner contradiction in his writings. Donne’s advancement in society failed after he married a woman of status higher than his own. It resulted in casting him out of the spheres he managed to enter, and putting him in a rather precarious situation for years, until he regained his position through ordination in the Church of England in 1615. Two years later, sudden and premature death of his beloved wife in childbirth depressed him deeply (Reid, 2000, p. 13). Anxiety and alienation are understandably continuing notes of his poetry, sermons and other writings. During his life, his poetry circulated only as a manuscript, as Donne most likely despised the prospect of being known as a professional poet (Pebworth, 2006, p. 25).

Andreas Gryphius, labelled nothing less than “the greatest poet as well as the greatest dramatist of the seventeenth century in Germany” (Spahr, 1993, p. IX) by some scholars, created in a variety of genres – among them sonnets, epigrams, tragedies, comedies and satires. His biography bears certain similar accents to Donne’s fate. A childhood marked by misfortunes, spent in the town of Glogau in Silesia during the Thirty Years’ War, a period of time when Silesia became a pawn in the game of interests between Sweden, the German emperor and Poland (Mahlmann-Bauer, 2020, p. 428) and an arena of religious fights. Gryphius father, a Lutheran archdeacon, died suddenly when the boy was only four years old; he lost his mother at the age of eleven, in 1628. In the same year, majority of Glogau’s protestants were either converted to Catholicism by force or expelled, among them his step-father. In the later years, he had the fortune of pursuing a wide range of studies at the University of Leiden, remaining there from 1638 to 1643 and later accompanying young noblemen on the so-called *Cavaliers tour* to France and Italy. During that time his first collection of poetry, the *Lissaer Sonette* (1637), was published, followed by *Son- undt Feyrtags Sonette* (1639) and the *First Book of Sonnets* (1643), with partly recurring lyrical pieces such as “VANITAS, VANITATUM, ET OMNIA VANITAS / Es ist alles gatz eytel” (“All is vanity”). The sonnet begins with lines unequivocally expressing his stance towards the material world:

Ich seh' wohin ich seh / nur Eitelkeit auff Erden/ Was dieser heute bawt / reist jener morgen ein/	I see wherever I turn only vanity on earth. What one man builds today, another tears down tomorrow. ³
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The piece became one of Gryphius' most renowned poems, representing the theme of *vanitas mundi* that became the trademark of his work. To some of his interpreters, Gryphius may appear as "the most perfect expression of Baroque's pessimism" (Ott, 1985, p. 318).

Even in these short opening lines, one of the main problems of Baroque lyric is clearly expressed: the concern with time. The present ("heute"/"today") is set against the future ("morgen"/"tomorrow"), construction against deconstruction. As Blake Lee Spahr notes,

also concrete Time as it is measured must concede to abstract Time. Light will not only yield to darkness, but the darkness of this world will become the light of the hereafter [...]. (Spahr, 1993, p. 29)

Interestingly, both Donne and Gryphius repeatedly chose the time on the verge of living and dying as the framework of their sonnets, the moments of liminality between immanence of present life and future transcendence of death.

Could Gryphius know Donne's writings? The German author took keen interest in the execution of Charles I of England in 1649, and a tragedy based on his life and fate, entitled *Ermordete Majestät oder Carolus Stuardus, König von Groß Britannien* [*Murdered Majesty or Carol Stuart King of Great Britain*], was finished by 1650. Gryphius translated devotional writings of Sir Richard Baker, who authored a *Chronicle of the Kings of England* (1643) and was an Oxford acquaintance of Donne, describing him as "not dissolute, but very neat; a great visiter of Ladies, a great Frequenter of Playes, a great writer of conceited Verses" (Guibbory, 2006, p. 6). The poet was favoured and valued by King Charles I, albeit for a short time – it was the moment of Donne's highest influence. Moreover, in 1619, Donne travelled to Germany as an official chaplain of the embassy, sent by James I to the German princes with a grand entourage of lords, knights and gentlemen (Carey, 1981, pp. 216–217). It is not very likely that Gryphius encountered the Metaphysical's poetry, but through his interests in English court matters and history, he could have at least come across Donne's fame as a sermon preacher.

³ Translation: Schindler, 1971, p. 16.

In Donne's *Holy Sonnets* (published in 1633) and Gryphius' First Book of Sonnets,⁴ both authors dedicate their special interest to detailed portrayals of thoughts, emotions and visions of a man facing his passage: still in the weakened body, yet in the state of transition into the realms of God; struggling with physical pain, but soon to rise beyond the material limits.

That specific time of human life, and specifically the possible benefits of its deepened contemplation, has been a subject to long-lived literary and religious debates. While any form of perception of death and transience falls into the category of *memoria mortis*, reflecting specifically upon the process of dying can be understood under the notion of *meditatio mortis*. Denis the Carthusian (1402–1471) spoke of “six fruits” born from meditating about death; he recommended especially directing one's attention towards imagining the state of a man lying in combat with it, as it shall bring the perceiver benefits and “salutary fear” of death. Thomas More was convinced that “profit and commodity cometh unto man's soul” as a result of “deep conceived fantasy of death in his nature” (Ott, 1985, p. 137). Furthermore, motif of *vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas* was exceptionally emphasized by Jesuit poets. *Meditatio mortis* can be also seen as a visualisation of strife happening shortly before dying, and furthermore of all the processes happening in the physical body, *corruptio in carnis*.

A very good example of such setting can be found in several of Gryphius' Sonnets from the First Book. In five of them he depicts the course of an illness in the form of a personal statement (the lyrical subject speaks in the first person) and reports of the upcoming end: Sonnet IX “Threnen in Schwerer Kranckheit”, Sonnet XLV “Threnen in Schwerer Kranckheit” (notably, the theme's intensity is even heightened by its repetition), Sonnet XLVI “An die Freunde”, Sonnet XLVII “An die vmbstehenden Freunde”, and Sonnet XLVIII “An sich Selbst”.⁵ Such proliferation of *vanitas* self-portraiture was in fact rarely witnessed, and unusual even in the German Baroque (Spahr, 1993, p. 31).

In the IX Sonnet, “Threnen in Schwerer Kranckheit / Trawrklage des Autoris” [“Lament of the Author during His Severe Illness”], Gryphius paints a poignant picture:

⁴ As well as his earlier collections of poetry, as some of them were included already among the “Lissaer” sonnets. However, in some cases changes were implemented in later editions.

⁵ Source of Gryphius' poems: Andreas Gryphius: *Gesamtausgabe der deutschsprachigen Werke*. Band 1, Tübingen 1963, edited by Marian Szyrocki and Hugh Powell.

Ich bin nicht der ich war/ die kräfte sind
 verschwunden.
 Die glider sind verdort/ als ein durch brandter
 graus.
 Mir schawt der schwartze tod zu beyden
 augen aus.
 Ich werde von mir selbst nicht mehr in mir
 gefunden.
 Der Athem will nicht fort/ die zunge steht
 gebunden.
 Mein hertz empfindet schon den letzt vnd
 höchsten straus.
 Ein jeder der mich siht/ sieht das mein
 schwaches haus/
 Der leib ein brechen wird/ noch inner wenig
 stunden.
 Gleich wie die wiesenblum lebt wen das licht
 der welt
 Hervor bricht/ vndt noch ehr der mittag
 weggeht/ fält;
 So bin ich auch benetzt mitt threntaw
 ankommen.
 So sterb ich vor der zeitt. O erden gutte nacht!
 Mein stündlin laufft zum end/ itzt hab ich
 ausgewacht
 Vnd werde von dem schlaff des todes
 eingenommen.

I am not what I was. My strength has
 disappeared!
 My limbs are dry and crumbling like a piece of
 burned-out coal.
 Look into my eyes and see how death awaits
 his prey,
 Of me now naught remains to see but skin and
 bone.
 My breath has ceased its rhythm; my tongue
 now moves no more.
 My heart alone will not concede that final
 struggle yet,
 Who looks at me can plainly see that this weak
 house,
 My body, must, within a few short hours,
 collapse.
 Just as the wild flower early with the light of
 day
 Appears, and yet, before the hour of noon, is
 dead,
 So I have come, shrouded with a dew of tears,
 And so I die before my time. Oh Earth,
 farewell!
 The hour hand speeds by, now I have waked
 too long, and must be carried off by sleep-
 bestower Death.⁶

The lyrical subject, consumed by illness on his deathbed, reflects upon his physical struggle with the withering, failing body. The time factor is heavily accentuated: the carnal collapse within a few hours (“Der leib ein brechen wird / noch inner wenig stunden”); the ephemeral nature of human existence, compared to a flower appearing and dying within a day; finally, the premature arrival of death (“So sterb ich vor der zeitt”). It is a lamentation of a man who finds himself in between dimensions: still alive, yet life’s force has already abandoned him. Does Gryphius share his own feelings and experiences? That remains disputable. It is known that the author frequently suffered from illnesses and accidents (Spahr, 1993, p. 30), as well as witnessed multiple deaths of people dear to him. Marian Szyrocki mentions in his analysis of the sonnet that it may have even resulted from Gryphius’ overindulgence while celebrating *Fasching* (carnival) (Szyrocki, 1959, p. 74). The Sonnet “An die vmbstehenden Freunde” can be definitely seen in an autobiographical light, as the

⁶ English translation after: Schindler, 1971, p. 165.

poet mentions deaths of his sister and brother that occurred in 1640, a period when he also fell ill himself. On at least two occasions, doctors gave him up for lost, and as Blake Lee Spahr remarks, Gryphius' experience was too real to masquerade as a pretence; his poetry mirrors his own suffering (Spahr, 1993, p. 37). It is difficult to estimate to which degree his poems could be read in an autobiographical light, as they belong to a much wider tradition, evident in the whole of Europe at that time. The seemingly intimate, personal tone of Gryphius' writings could be employed in a character of a sermon. In the 17th century, the human susceptibility to illness was widely seen as not only a physical occurrence, but above all as a result of sin and soul's distancing from God. Gryphius dedicates ample attention to the processes occurring in the physical sphere during the time of passage towards transcendent stage of existence. Sonnet XLVIII. "An sich Selbst" ["To Himself"] opens with a very direct and bold introduction:

Mir grawet von mir selbst / mir zittern alle Glieder
 Wen ich die lipp' und naß' und beider augen kluft
 Die blindt vom wachen sindt / des athems schwere luft
 Betracht' / undt die nun schin erstorbnen augen-lieder:
 Die zunge / schwartz vom brandt felt mitt den worten nieder/ [...].

The first line "Mir grawet von mir selbst" ["I am terrified of myself"] is followed by a rich list of ailments of the body: the blindness of eyes, heaviness of his breath, the tongue turned black from inner burning, making speech difficult or impossible – it is an indication for the reader, that the lyrics present inner thoughts and happenings. Later, the lyrical subject mentions that his flesh already smells of a tomb ("das Fleisch reucht nach der gruft"), and he expresses painful awareness of the body ("Das sitzen ist mein todt / das liegen meine pein" ["Sitting is my death / lying my agony"]). Such depictions of grim carnal phenomena of transience, accompanying the transition from this world, form a recurring theme. In other sonnets of the First Book, Gryphius writes about "emaciated body" and "withered hands" ("abgezehrter leib", "verdorrte hände", Sonnet LXVII "An die vmbstehenden Freunde"), feeling pain and fear of more of them approaching ("ich sitz in tausend schmerzen; Und tausendt fürcht ich noch" ["I sit in a thousand pains; And I am afraid of a thousand to come"], XLV "Threnen in Schwerer Kranckheitt"). The attention towards decay of the flesh as a sign of transience and vanity of the world has a long tradition in German literature, reaching the Middle Ages and emergence of the *Frau Welt* allegory. The notion of a deceptive mundane world (*mundus*) and all its charms fused with the figure of an adored lady from the *Minnelieder* (courtly love songs). In lyrics and the visual arts, *Frau Welt* was sometimes depicted as an attractive female on the front, and a decaying corpse in the back, with worms, snakes

and stench coming out of it; in a song “Ein beispel von einem weib wz uorn schön und hinden schäüzlich” (“An example of a woman beautiful in front and ghastly behind”) 15th-century poet, Michel Beheim describes seeing “das aller schönest weip ” during a horse ride, and only after a while recognizing her deteriorating exterior on the other side (Stammler, 1959, p. 47).

Gryphius does not refer directly to such figure in the discussed lyrics, however, he portrays the time of transition as a stage of simultaneous living and decay: in Sonnet XLVII, he even refers to his flesh as already lying and rotting in more than one grave (“Mein fleisch der Elterngabe / Ligt nuh mehr schon vnd fault nicht nur einem grabe”) as a reminiscence of loss of his brother and sister.

As John Michael Cohen observes, Gryphius “luxuriates [...] in the spectacle of corruption” (Cohen, 1963, p. 44), while John Donne is sparing in physical imagery in his poems on death, and more effective in its use; “for Donne even the decay of the flesh is a metaphysical proposition”, and his purpose lies in lifting carnal object into the world of ideas (Cohen, 1963, p. 45). Comparing to Gryphius, Donne relies more on the intellectual parameters of envisioning the timeline of the soul – its worldly existence, death and resurrection.

In the second⁷ of the *Holy Sonnets*, “Oh My Black Soul!”, likely created as a testimonial of an actual sickness in 1608 (Gransden, 1954, pp. 127–128), Donne writes:

O, my black soul, now thou art summoned
 By sickness, Death's herald and champion;
 Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
 Treason, and durst not turn to whence he's fled;
 Or like a thief, which till death's doom be read,
 Wisheth himself deliver'd from prison,
 But damn'd and haled to execution,
 Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.
 Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;
 But who shall give thee that grace to begin?
 O, make thyself with holy mourning black,
 And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;
 Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might,
 That being red, it dyes red souls to white.

Speaking of sickness, the poet seems to avoid referring to its symptoms and workings in the body. Instead, he focuses on the spiritual side of this experience. The poem is filled with dramatic fluctuations of colours, symbolizing changes that

⁷ According to the revised sequence.

the soul may undergo on its pilgrimage to purity, meditating on sin and repentance. The shifts and mentioned fluctuations characterize the whole cycle of *Holy Sonnets*, reflecting the liminal setting of the pieces in the final moments of life, anticipating the hereafter. For Donne, like for many other Baroque thinkers and poets, life was a flux (Cohen, 1963, p. 16), and resulting unpredictability and potential immediacy of judgement lead to anxiety well captured in Sonnet II. Matters of dating and ordering of the whole cycle have been widely disputed and remain ambiguous.⁸ However, it is realistic to assume that they were composed in a volatile period between the years 1609–1611, and some of them after his ordination and wife's death in 1617.

How does the poet imagine his final moments and resurrection? In the *Holy Sonnets*, Donne is left alone with God, death, sin and the decay of his body; the outer world vanishes from the sight of his “dim eyes” (Holy Sonnet XIII). The feelings, notions, states conveyed are often contradictory, reflecting the state of a soul in war with itself. Repeatedly, a powerful octave tends to modulate into a minor key in the sestet, the transition marked by exclamations or conjunctions marking a modification of the initial emotion – “Onely...” – Holy Sonnet I, “Yet...” – Holy Sonnets IV, XIV, XVI; etc. (Davies, 1994, p. 61). In the Holy Sonnet VI (“Death Be Not Proud”), Donne portrays a paradox, occurring in the final moments of life – out of depths of suffering and decay, at the moment of ultimate dissolution of flesh, vulnerability and brokenness, a human being arises to the very highs of its possible existence:

Die not, poor death, not yet canst thou kill me; [...]
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die.

In the eternal presence of God that a soul achieves, death ceases to exist. “One short sleep” that separates a man from perishing, usually a fear-striking staple of *memento mori* rhetoric, here transforms into an element of narration with an affirmative, positive connotation. The time of trial becomes the celebration of triumph and liberation from limits of existence. In a way, Donne's aim was to negate death by removing its deathliness and turning it into a self-aggrandizing act (Carey, 1981, p. 219). The same idea can be found in Gryphius' Sonnet XXXIV, “An einen Vnschuldig Leidenden”: “Er lebt in dem er stirbt / er steigt in dem er fällt” [“He lives, as he dies / He rises, as he falls”].

Also, in Sonnet XXXVI, “An seinen H. Bruder” (addressed to his late Brother), Gryphius conveys a very similar message:

⁸ For a detailed discussion, see: Stringer, 2005, pp. 133–145.

Entschlaffen/ nicht erwürgt/ verschickt / doch nicht verlohren.
 Verreist/ doch nur voran/ sind diese so der welt
 nun gutte nacht gesagt/ vnd in dem wolckenzelt
 Da keine drangsall mehr ihn ihren sitz erkohren
 Hier wahren sie recht todt/ dort sindt sie newgebohren.
 [...] Wir machen alles schwarz. Es scheint in vnserm leidt
 Als wen der glaub' in vns erloschen vndt gestorben.
 Wir reden mitt dem mund als weren sie bey Gott.
 Dis laugnet vnser thun/ in dem wir ihren todt
 So klagen als wen Leib vndt Seele gantz vertorben.

Those, who said “good night” to the world, are neither lost nor strangled; the poet points out that “they were truly dead here” and are reborn in the new seat. For this reason, excessive mourning (“wir machen alles schwarz” [“we make everything black”]) is in fact misplaced – there is a mismatch between speaking of the deceased as if they were united with God, and at the same time actively contradicting that belief through behaviour showing despair and lack of faith.

Visions of repentance, sin, and afterlife inevitably brought questions of religious views. Both Donne and Gryphius, having experienced persecutions and strifes on the basis of their beliefs, opt for a balanced tone in these matters: Gryphius, an irenicist believing in need of harmony and unity between all Christians, avoided politicizing his faith (Mahlmann-Bauer, 2020, p. 420); Donne was “always for a comprehensive position, never for the dogmatic exclusions that inspire the devout to kill and be killed”, seeking rational moderation (Reid, 2000, p. 18, 27).

To properly understand Donne’s and Gryphius’ cycles of poems, it is vital to consider influence of Ignatius Loyola’s spiritual meditations on both authors. Interesting similarities can be observed in that matter. As a boy, Donne was taught to revere Jesuits;⁹ he later not only disliked them, but also authored and published a bold satire against them – *Ignatius His Conclave* – written in Latin to reach the public in and outside of England. It takes a form of a debate in hell, where St. Ignatius Loyola and the Jesuits seem to rival the Devil himself and are in the end granted a new Hell in the moon (Carey, 1981, pp. 34–35). What might seem as a clear stance, was in fact much more complex. Donne has never fully abandoned the teachings and emotionalism of the Catholic church. Particularly in the *Holy Sonnets*, he seems to retreat into the programme of Spiritual Exercises devised by St. Ignatius Loyola, frequently recommended to Catholics by their confessors

⁹ Two of Donne’s uncles, Ellis and Jasper Heywood, became Jesuits. Jasper lead the Jesuit mission in England and was imprisoned and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered in 1583. At the age of 12, Donne visited his uncle in the Tower (Carey, 1981, pp. 20–21).

(Carey, 1981, pp. 49–51). It remains unanswered whether he took the whole course of exercises, but the method of self-examination and structure of composition (memory), analysis (understanding) and colloquy (affections, will) distinctly appear in the Holy Sonnets, and three of manuscripts of these poems in fact entitle them as “Devine Meditations” (Martz, 1954, pp. 43–53). While Gryphius – loyal to the Augsburg confession – saw Jesuits as opponents of confessional settlement and reconciliation, he displayed a well-documented affinity for their poetry (Schindler, 1971, p. 144). Many of his sonnets show technique similar to the pattern of a formal meditation, and they may have been written as a result of devotional exercises. Two of Donne’s and Gryphius’ sonnets display a great similarity in theme, imagery and tone, and both consider reflecting upon death of Christ on the Cross. Donne’s Sonnet VII begins with a dramatic, direct exclamation:

Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side,
 Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie me,
 For I have sinn’d, and sinn’d, and onely he,
 Who could do no iniquitie hath dyed [...].

Parallel, echoes of these lines seem to appear in Gryphius’ sonnet “An den am Kreuz aufgehentkten Heyland” [“On the Crucified Saviour”]:

Hier will Ich gantz nicht weg: Laß alle Schwerter klingen
 Setz Spiß und Sebel an/ brauch aller Waffen macht
 Brauch Fewr/ und was die Welt fur unerträglich acht
 Mich soll von Christi Creutz kein Todt noch Teuffel dringen.

(I will not leave this spot; draw all your clattering swords,
 Put to me pike and sabre, use all your force of arms,
 Use flame, use torture past enduring – to no avail,
 From Jesus’ cross can neither death nor devil force me.¹⁰)

In both poems, speakers make themselves dramatically present at the scene of Christ’s death, and their tone and heightened emotional involvement create a very personal ambience.

Gryphius’ and Donne’s preoccupation with death, which could even seem pathological at first, was most likely influenced by the religious practice of meditation on death – especially in the detachment of the mind, that carefully observes painful processes occurring in the final stage of life in the spheres of the body and spirit. While Gryphius vividly analyzes the signs of carnal deterioration and decomposition,

¹⁰ Translation after: Schindler, 1971, p. 144.

Donne was worried about the perspective of being scattered and fragmentary, feeling himself disconnected from the body of the world (Carey, 1981, p. 220).

For Gryphius and Donne, a human being lives at the limited mercy of time. Facing the suddenness of death is imminent. What could appear to be a vision of a distant future, can turn into a present experience in a blink of an eye. The *Holy Sonnets* document an inner struggle with doubt and fear, rooted in this unpredictability. In the opening line of Sonnet IX, the speaker asks a question that weighs heavy on him: “What if this present were the world’s last night?” – his time is running out, and he searches consolation in contemplating the picture of the crucified Christ. Sonnet III, “This Is My Playes Last Scene” concentrates on the subject of final moments of life, comparing them to a closing scene of a play.

There is an ambiguity in the poet’s stance towards the desired form of abandoning this world. In Holy Sonnet III, Donne envisions that “gluttonous Death will instantly unjoint / My Body, and Soul”. It may seem that if he had such possibility, he would choose an instant death and instant rebirth – due to his obsession with the potential difficulties of resurrecting the flesh, that begins to decay right after the soul’s departure. But contrary to that view, the writer himself did not wish for a transition imperceptible to his senses. In a letter to his friend Sir Henry Goodyer, he stated:

I would not that death should take me asleep. I would not have him merely seize me, and only declare me to be dead, but win me, and overcome me. When I must shipwreck, I would do it in a sea, where mine impotency might have some excuse; not in a sullen weedy lake, where I could not have so much as exercise for my swimming. (Carey, 1981, p. 201)

Although Donne even confessed to having certain inclination for suicide and thoughts of martyrdom in the treatise *Biathanatos*, he was in fact dismayed and repelled by the prospect of his life’s end. Despite the anxiety shown in the poems, the process of parting from this world in Donne’s writings is not simply bleak and sad: he finds it challenging, not mournful (Carey, 1981, pp. 200–201). During a severe bout of relapsing fever in 1623, in a very short time he wrote and published *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, a collection of sermons, letters and poems – all of them a brilliant testimonial of clarity and reflection upon his condition.

In 1631, Donne in fact did depart in a way he described as preferred. Gravely ill with a stomach cancer, he managed to prepare himself as he intended – posed for his own monument, and found strength to preach his final sermon before the king in the chapel of Whitehall, later entitled *Death’s Duel* (Targoff, 2006, p. 225). His hopes for a challenging, honourable passage were fulfilled. The transition of Andreas Gryphius occurred, in a way, with suddenness he so often described. As

Schindler (1971, p. 17) notes, “At the age of forty-seven, on 16 July 1664, while performing his office of syndic at a session of the landed estates, he suffered a fatal heart-attack, and died soon afterwards. He was mourned as Germany’s greatest dramatist”.

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