

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Generally, religious poems are looked upon as merely the poet's device in his act of worshipping and praising God for His kindness with no additional values. Dr. Samuel Johnson even persists a harsh criticism that the intercourse between God and the human soul cannot be poetical; therefore, religious poetry gives a limited kind of pleasure. He criticizes the metaphysical poets, including John Donne, for searching so much after the things beyond physics. In view of his argumentation that great thoughts are always general, Johnson insists and feels certain that fondness for the unusual could only produce trivial ideas (Winny 50). Thus, for him, man's addressing his Creator and pleading mercy to his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer.

Yet, for Donne, there are highly appreciation of the other critics. In Helen Gardner's opinion, if the love poet is creating an image of himself in love, the divine poet like Donne is creating an image of himself at prayer. She adds that religious poetry is needed, because without the poet's influence of the spiritual man the world of poetry would be poorer, and the imagination of life would be narrowed (xvi). For Donne, there is also Leishman's argumentation that in

creating divine poems, John Donne carefully analyzes his experiences. Though he is a philosophic or metaphysical poet, he is still a poet, because he always tries to communicate the concrete experience itself (White 84). The writer of the thesis agrees to this and believes that John Donne's divine poems, including his "Holy Sonnets", are altogether poetical and religious; and that they are worthy to analyze since they give an image of a complete man--not only in physical, but also in spiritual field--with his inner conflicts to recognize and comprehend his Maker better. This is also the reason for the writer to take the "Holy Sonnets" for her study--she desires to follow Donne's paths and to taste the fruit of such process, so that she herself is finally able to delve into God's truth.

The themes presented in "Holy Sonnets" are actually led to one point only, that is, Donne's stages in understanding God better. In spite of the limitations of the genre, the themes help the poet to characterize himself and help the readers to more powerfully present the Creator through their imagination. The divine poems of John Donne are suspected by critics to be written during the poet's years of illness, disappointment, financial dependence, and perpetual anxiety. The "Holy Sonnets" clearly reflects this, and the poet's disturbed spirit is mirrored in the passionate outburst of feeling and the roughness and violence of expression as seen in nearly all the sonnets here. Donne is really pouring out his hard struggle through "Holy Sonnets"; he functions it as

an instrument to transfer his real experience and conflicts to his readers. So is the reason why the writer of the thesis considers "Holy Sonnets" as the ones bearing the private experience of the poet himself. John Donne himself is the spokesman of "Holy Sonnets", the best proof that makes the sonnets so much real, smashing, and interesting.

During his long way of the "Holy Sonnets", Donne applies Spiritual Exercise greatly. The writer of the thesis takes the source about it from Helen Gardner's book, in which concise information about the Spiritual Exercise in the form of traditional meditation is found. The essence of meditation is an attempt to stimulate devotion by the use of the imagination. The method of meditation was systemized in the sixteenth century by St. Ignatius Loyola. A meditation on the Ignatian pattern consists of a preparatory prayer, two 'preludes', and a colloquy. The first prelude is what is called the *compositio loci*: the seeing 'with the eyes of the imagination'. The second prelude is petition 'according to the subject matter' (Gardner 1).

The reason for Donne's using Spiritual Exercise is somehow related to his biography. According to Carey, the first thing to remember about Donne is that he was born a Catholic in 1572; the second, that he betrays his faith (15). Carey adds that the working of the Spiritual Exercise can be traced so clearly in the "Holy Sonnets" that their presence in Donne's mind when he was writing is beyond doubt. T.S. Eliot refers rather strangely to the 'stock of images' which

Ignatius and Donne have in common. Donne uses the *compositio loci* and he follows it with prayer or colloquy as the Exercises prescribe (50). It is worth noticing that even though Donne deserts the Roman Catholic Church and eventually accepts Anglicanism in 1615, the influence of Catholicism is sometimes felt in his work, such as the Ignatian meditation he employs in most of the "Holy Sonnets". Because of his desertion of the Catholic Church, he is called an apostate. Donne chooses this, and by doing so he must face the mental oppression and hard disagreements from his devout Catholic family and friends until his death in 1631. But Donne does not suddenly sober down when he accepts Anglicanism and is ordained as an Anglican priest at the age of forty-three. "The passion with which he had courted those whom he called his 'profane mistresses' became sublimated in a fearful longing for union with God. In his later years the lust of the spirit demanded satisfaction no less than the lust of the flesh had done in the heyday of the blood" (Hayward 9). Another important event in Donne's life happens when he elcpes with Anne More in 1601. It is, then, the death of Anne in 1617 that causes Donne to contribute a sonnet as part of the "Holy Sonnets": "Since She Whome I Lov'd, Hath Payd Her Last Debt" (sonnet 17).

The series of "Holy Sonnets" consists of 19 sonnets. Yet here the writer only chooses 13 of them which she considers the: most impressive and the best representatives in showing each stage of Donne's spiritual struggle to approach God with

his metaphysical way. Donne believes that his Maker is beyond physics, yet he makes effort within his limitations as a human being to ask grace from God in order that he is given the capability to altogether use his wit and intelligence—besides God's grace—to understand Him.

Critics give different opinions to order, select, and group the nineteen sonnets of "Holy Sonnets". Some assume that they were all written at the same time, but the rest disagree to this. It is explained that the common method of adopting "Holy Sonnets" is by continuing to use its original old Roman numbers. The same method is applied by the writer of the thesis to add the original Roman numbers at the foot of each sonnet for reference in the thesis's Appendix part. In the first edition of "Holy Sonnets", twelve sonnets were printed in 1633. The four more sonnets were added in the second edition of 1635, and later, the last three sonnets were taken from the Westmoreland manuscript and were also included in the series.

Furthermore, critics agree that the sonnets are not a single set of poems; instead, they form a set of twelve, a set of four, and three separate poems. The first twelve sonnets are said to form a coherent set of poems. The first six are a short sequence on the familiar theme of the Last Things, death and judgement. Then the later six are on two aspects on a single theme, love. Sonnets 7-9 are concerned with the mystery of the Creator's love for His creatures, and sonnets 10-12 reverse the theme—they are on the love man

owes to God and his neighbours. Going further, the next four sonnets added in 1635 at first seem to be merely 'separate ejaculations'; later, they prove to be four sonnets on a single theme, sin. On the other hand, the three sonnets taken from Westmoreland manuscript are positively unconnected with each other, and they do not follow the traditional meditation anymore. They are highly personal, more analytic and not as devotional as the previous sonnets are (Gardner xxxix-xlii).

To avoid confusion, the writer of this thesis uses consecutive numbering to renumber the "Holy Sonnets". The whole poems are renumbered from number 1 to number 19. Therefore, when she takes only four sonnets to represent Chapter II, she will only mention their numbers as sonnet 2, 4, 11 and 16. The selected sonnets of Chapter III cover sonnets 7, 8, 10, and 11. In Chapter IV, the writer takes sonnets 14, 15, and 16 to analyze. Chapter V, the last chapter of the main body discusses sonnets 17 and 19 as the representatives of the Westmoreland group that serve as the closing gate of the tough and long searching of Donne for his goal to understand God better. Afterwards, the thesis will be closed by the chapter of Conclusion of the whole analysis.