In his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, John Donne provides a powerful psychological analysis of the nearly fatal illness he suffered from late
November to early December 1623 (Raspa xiii–xiv, xl–lvi). Published almost immediately afterward in January 1624, this collection of twenty-three three-part “meditations” presents Donne himself as both an object of his own study and as an example to others of the precariousness of human existence. Reading himself as a “text” to understand his disease both literally and figuratively, Donne means for his reader to read his account of his own “reading” as a text and to incorporate this “literary” experience into his own life (Webber, *Contrary Music* 123–42; Curtius 302–47, esp. 323).

Perhaps nowhere in the *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* is the metaphorical connection between reading texts and inner development more forcefully stated than in *Meditation 17*, “the pivot on which the whole volume turns” (Andreasen 215). But to understand this connection fully, the reader must first come to terms with three of the controlling metaphors in Donne’s text: the tolling of a death bell, the activity of literary translation, and the mining of gold. Although the significance of the ringing bell and literary translation has received some mention in the scholarship on this work (Raspa xix, xxiii, 170; Webber, *Eloquent “I”* 40, 47), the third metaphor, the mining of gold, has received almost no discussion, even though it ties the other two together and is crucial for properly excavating and using the buried treasure of Donne’s thought.

Donne begins *Meditation 17* with his famous tolling bell image: “Now, this Bell tolling softly for another, saies to me, Thou must die” (Raspa 86). Donne then shifts somewhat abruptly to a discussion of the universality of the church to explain why someone else’s death knell might interest him as well as other people. When the Church “buries a Man, that action concerns me,” says Donne, because “All mankinde is of one Author, and is one volume.” Here the reader meets the second controlling metaphor of *Meditation 17*, which presents the idea that all men are interconnected by being separate pages bound together in the same book (The Book of Man) written by the same author (God). Donne, however, gives the commonplace Renaissance metaphor of the Book of Man a new twist by suggesting “when one Man dies, one Chapter is not torn out of the booke, but translated into a better language” (Raspa 86; emphasis in original). God employs several “translators” (age, sickness, war, justice) for this “literary” activity in which death becomes the ultimate translation.

Donne now moves into the heart of his argument by combining the implications of bell-ringing and translation. Clearly, the tolling of the bell is a potential memento mori for anyone who hears it, including Donne and the reader: “The Bell doth toll for him that thinkes it doth […]” (2; emphasis in original). Translation, then, involves not just death itself but also the appropriation of that death by someone else.

The authorization of this “translation” or appropriation of a death announcement belonging in the first instance to someone else is explored in the remainder of *Meditation 17*. Donne begins the final section of his
argument by maintaining that anyone has the right to make use of someone else’s death if he or she does so properly, as the affliction or death of anyone is potentially a treasure too valuable to be wasted. To explain this paradox, Donne makes use of gold in the final controlling metaphor of his discourse:

If a Man carry treasure in bullion, or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into currant Monies, his treasure will not defray him as he travells. . . . Another Man may be sicke too, and sicke to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a Mine, and be of no use to him; but this bell that tells mee of his affliction, digs out, and applies that gold to mee: if by this consideration of anothers danger, I take mine owne in Contemplation, and so secure my selfe, by making my recourse to my God, who is our onely securitie. (Raspa 87; emphasis in original)

The death or translation signaled by the tolling of the bell here becomes gold buried in a mine, of no value to anyone unless dug out and applied to someone else who knows how to make proper use of it.

For Donne, the idea of a “proper use” of anything, but of gold, in particular, would almost certainly involve the ideas of that most famous of the Church Fathers, St. Augustine. Estimating that Donne referred to the early theologian more than seven hundred times in his sermons alone, Evelyn Simpson and George Potter point out that “St. Augustine is above all others the Father to whom Donne turned most constantly” (10:346). And there is one text in particular where Augustine brings together ideas of proper use, gold mining, and the literary activities of proper reading and translating: On Christian Doctrine. Donne, of course, knew this text well and made extensive use of it in his later work (Mueller 15; Schleiner 61, 171). Specifically, in book 2 of On Christian Doctrine, Augustine defends the legitimacy of a religious appropriation of secular learning by citing the famous biblical example of the expropriation of Egyptian gold by the Israelites leaving Egypt:

Just as the Egyptians had not only idols and grave burdens which the people of Israel detested and avoided, so also they had vases and ornaments of gold and silver [. . .] which the Israelites took with them secretly when they fled, as if to put to a better use. They did not do this on their own authority but at God’s commandment, while the Egyptians unwittingly supplied them with things which they themselves did not use well. (2.40.60)

In the same way, says Augustine, Christians have the right to expropriate the learning of the pagans, which is, “as it were, their gold and silver, which they did not institute themselves but dug up from certain mines of divine Providence” (“Quod eorum [. . .] aurum [. . .] quod [. . .] de quibusdam metallis [. . .] eruerunt divinae providentiae”). In other words, pagan texts “may be seized and converted to Christian uses” (accipere atque habere licuerit in usum convertenda christianum”) (Raspa 87).

A comparison of Augustine’s comments with the last sentence of Meditation 17 shows several direct verbal correspondences, the first of which involves buried gold. When Donne writes that “another Man may be sicke too [. . .] and
this **affliction** may lie in his **bowels**, as **gold** in a **Mine**, and be of no use to him; but this **bell** that tells mee of his **affliction**, digs out, and applies that **gold** to **me** [. . .],” he seems to be rewriting (“translating”) Augustine’s assertion that Christians have a right to expropriate pagan learning just as the Israelites were justified in “converting to a proper use” Egyptian gold “dug up from certain mines” (“Quod eorum tamquam aurum [. . .] quod [. . .] de quibusdam metallis [. . .] eruerunt”) because the Egyptians failed to make proper use of this gold [“non bene utebantur”]. Here Donne’s “**gold** in a **Mine**” corresponds directly to Augustine’s “aurum [. . .] de quibusdam metallis,” just as “digs out” seems to reflect Augustine’s “eruerunt.” Borrowing the latter’s basic idea of legitimate confiscation of misused gold, Donne changes slightly the circumstances of the “digging.” In the Donne passage, the “**gold**” of someone else’s affliction is buried in a mine when the other person fails to understand properly the value of his or her “**gold**”; but the tolling of the bell, as a memento mori, “digs out” this gold and applies it to Donne (and by extension, to the reader), if he or she understands (translates) the significance of the ringing of any bell announcing the death of any man. True gold mining, then, involves both the hearing of the bell and understanding (translating) its meaning properly.

Understanding its meaning properly, of course, means making proper use of the memento mori image, and this idea of proper use suggests, in turn, a second set of verbal correspondences between the two texts. For both Donne and Augustine, the right of possession depends on the possessor’s making proper use of someone else’s unmined, or at least recently mined, but misused gold. The point is emphasized by the frequent repetition of words for “use” in Augustine’s passage (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.40.144–45), where the noun form **usus** is employed five times, and the adjective **utilis** and verb **utor** once each. Similarly, Donne says that the other person’s sickness, like gold buried in a mine, may “be of no use to him; but this bell [. . .] digs out, and applies that **gold to mee**” (Raspa 87; emphasis in original). The gold now belongs to Donne, but only so long as he uses it correctly. Consequently, although the pagans first possessed their learning, although the Egyptians first owned their gold, and although the bell first tolled for someone else, this learning/gold/affliction ultimately belongs to the party that can make best use of it.

What is involved here, of course, is what Augustine calls figurative or allegorical reading. Indeed, Augustine’s discussion of Egyptian gold in book 2 of *On Christian Doctrine* is primarily meant to justify a theory of interpretation, which involves “translating” a literal level of meaning into a deeper level of understanding available only to a Christian reader, that is, only to a reader properly equipped to make correct use of a pagan text (Bright; Dawson). Augustine concedes that pagan writing contains important truths, but feels that its most important truths are hidden from its pagan readers, who, as it were, can only read texts literally. Christians, however, says Augustine, can read these works not only for their obviously pagan meaning but also for their hidden or deeper religious truths that “divine prov-
idence” has “buried” in them. From Donne’s standpoint, then, the tolling of a death knell may be understood literally to refer to the death of someone else, even though it “be of no use to him”; but its real meaning can only be properly understood, its buried treasure [“as gold in a Mine”] properly utilized, if someone hearing the bell translates its meaning [“digs out, and applies that gold”] by perceiving it to be a warning of his or her own death.

ROBERT JUNGMAN

Louisiana Tech University

Copyright © 2007 Heldref Publications

WORKS CITED


