John Donne’s HOLY SONNET 10

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Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurped town, to another due,  
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captivated, and proves weak or untrue,  
Yet dearly’ I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betrothed unto your enemy,  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

In Holy Sonnet 10 ("Batter my heart, three-personed God") John Donne ponders the mystery of a God who is distant and invisible, yet can be experienced intimately. Donne’s religious poems, by portraying human sinfulness as the inevitable inconsistency of a faithless human lover estranged from a beloved God, suggest that “loving God . . . can be as troubled and varied an experience as that depicted in his secular love poetry” (Wilcox 150). In her reading of “The Bait,”
Hamilton asserts that Donne’s poetry is distinguished by its “rejection of conventional sentiment and the exploration of paradox” (13). Donne’s contradictory conceits of enthralled freedom and ravished chastity, which famously appear at the end of Holy Sonnet 10, have received the widest critical attention. However, the insistent opening line is also critical to the poet’s strained efforts to breach the gap between man and God, a feat the poem accomplishes through the use of illicit grammatical structures and an incongruous militaristic lexicon.

Diagramming the first line of the poem will serve to identify the grammatical units Donne employs in it:

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Batter my heart, three-personed God; for, you
you (implied) imperative
batter my heart verb phrase
three personed God appositive
you pronoun
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The first line of the sonnet is structured as an imperative, with an implied, unspoken “you”—that is, “[You] Batter my heart”—as its grammatical subject. The line thereby performs the unspeakable and invisible nature of God, the addressee of the poem, by the use of the silent imperative form. Immediately following that first phrase, however, the poet addresses the “three-personed God” using an aberrant grammatical structure: the insertion of an appositive phrase without a visible noun referent. Such a structure would normally render the appositive defunct; given that an appositive is dependent for its meaning upon proximity (i.e., apposition) to a parallel noun referent. However, Donne addresses the syntactical anomaly of the decapitated appositive by surgically correcting it through the implied “you” of the imperative; or conversely, the grammatical invisibility of the imperative is rendered visible by the appositive, “three-personed God.” The line then ends with the second-person pronoun “you,” which functions as an incarnation of the silent, absent “you” at the beginning of the line, and provides the third substitute—all in the space of one line—for the name of God. The imperative, the appositive, and the pronoun, three interdependent grammatical structures that normally function by being juxtaposed to their noun referents, are destabilized by the line’s absent subject, the unspeakable “I am” of Old Testament divinity; however, a structure of mutual dependence supplies the needed referent of each grammatical absence. In this way, the poem grammatically renders its thematic content of separation and connectivity by means of its very form.

These three references to God that are present in the sonnet’s first line can be further understood in relationship to the three parts of the Christian Godhead, the
“three personed God.” The unseen, unspeakable subject of the imperative references the invisible but omnipresent nature of God the Father; the representational proximity of the appositive stands for the supportive and definitional purpose of God the Holy Spirit; and the visible, dangling pronoun performs the incarnational role of God the Son. The sonnet’s grammatical allusions to the trinity concept reflect not only the fixture of Christian doctrine that constitutes the mysterious identity of God, but also the three-in-one Godhead intimacy that emblematizes the two-in-one divine–human relationship coveted by the poet. In this way, the poem’s syntax illuminates the paradoxical nature of an omnipotent but interdependent God, with whom the poet yearns for an experience of intimacy comparable to the unity of the holy trinity.

Yet the figure of intimacy built through the grammatical structure of the opening line is threatened by the incongruent nature of its militaristic lexicon. The logic of the first line’s use of “batter,” which means to break down or break through by force and against your opponent’s will (as in battle), is paradoxical. The concept of requesting, or demanding, to be battered, as established by the imperative form of the line, undermines the very meaning of the word batter. The poet is demanding that God enter him—or “make his temple in [my] breast” as he puts in Holy Sonnet 11 (“Wilt thou love God, as he thee?” line 4)—but to do so against the poet’s own sinful will and reason, which is not just captive, but “captivated” (8). Donne portrays the struggle to achieve the divine–human connection as a battle fought by a masochistic strategy of passive aggression and enforced receptivity, which is necessitated by humanity’s inherently flawed, unfaithful nature, which “proves weak or untrue” as it is “betrothed unto [God’s] enemy” (8, 10). The second line of the sonnet rejects the comparatively gentle techniques God has previously employed to correct the speaker—“for you / As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend”—and calls instead for God to “o’erthrow” the willing poet by “force” (4). Donne demonstrates “implicit hopefulness” (Wilcox 165) about the seeming impossibility of divine–human intimacy because he views its realization as dependent upon God’s goodness and greatness being able to “batter” man’s sinful resistance and “ravish” him into salvation.

The sonnet opens with a figure of militaristic incursion and closes with sexual penetration, a combination of phallic images that Donne designs into metaphorical architecture capable of bridging the gap separating humanity from divinity. Grammatical anomalies and a paradoxical lexicon are the mortar holding the stones of that bridge together. The spiritual mystery of an invisible yet intimate God is deciphered by Donne in this poem—de-ciphered in the sense that the mystery is written as un-writable, a visible absence, which is nevertheless knowable due to the juxtaposition or apposition of man and God made possible through the
paradoxical miracle of forceful salvation, which mimics the nature of Christ’s
death on the cross—itself both violent and voluntary.

In Holy Sonnet 15 (“I am a little world made cunningly”), Donne despairs
that “black sin hath betrayed [him] to endless night” (3). But in Sonnet 10, Donne
imagines a place of contact between full illumination and full shadow, that area just
surrounding a heavenly body at the apex of an eclipse known as the penumbra,
a phenomenon during which the brilliance of the sun and the darkness of the
moon achieve a powerful and transformative—if momentary—unity. Through
the indispensable tools of grammatical gymnastics and paradoxical logic, Sonnet
10 asserts that celestial divinity can be made visible through the illumination it
graciously casts around the benighted souls of earth-bound humanity when their
orbits miraculously align in the course of salvation.

Works Cited
