Both Shakespeare and Donne wrote epitaphs for themselves and on commission—material evidence of attitudes toward memorialization that bear comparison with the representation of epitaphs in their literary work. But the business of writing epitaphs did not engage Shakespeare’s heart as it did Donne’s. While economics may partly account for this difference—Shakespeare being more independent financially and hence more free to distance himself from the customs and obligations of aristocratic patronage—the epitaphs they wrote for themselves suggest that their skepticism about future memory may have mattered as much as their sensitivity to their social positions. Donne is skeptical about memory in a way that causes him to appropriate and revise the fashion for monumentalization. But while he may seem skeptical of epitaphs in his lyric poetry, he is committed to them in practice. Indeed, Donne’s exceptional intensity regarding these valedictory markers manifests his skeptical anxiety regarding the value and veracity of both retrospective and prospective memory. By contrast, Shakespeare has equanimity. In both life and work, he laughs skeptically at the memorial aspirations of epitaphs, although even he acknowledges their disturbing power.

The Seductions of Memory

In funeral monuments, the distinction between retrospective and prospective memory matters inasmuch as the epitaphs chiseled into them glance back at the course of the dead person’s life and look ahead toward posterity and salvation. Donne’s sense that both retrospective and prospective memory are fraught with perils affects his approach to commemoration; it is, therefore, worth revisiting his
conflicted view of personal memory before discussing his composition of epitaphs, both real and poetic. Donne seldom reminisces. He says as much to Mistress Cokain in a letter: “[N]othing could trouble me more, then to write of my self.”¹ For those who think of Donne as narcissistic and egotistical, unable to anatomize anything other than his own exquisite sensibility, Donne’s reluctance to delve into his own past may come as a surprise. How does a writer so sensitive to internal weather manage to craft a thoughtful, introspective voice without ever disclosing an incident from childhood or from his family life? Well, hardly ever.

The half dozen occasions when Donne lets his guard down and remembers details about people close to him stand out in every Donne lover’s mind. Who can forget the allusion in Pseudo-Martyr to his presence “at a Consultation of Jesuïtes in the Tower, in the late Queenes time?”² Who can forget the picture of his wife “stupefied” by her brood of sick and dying children? In a letter to Sir Robert Drury in 1614, Donne writes, “I have already lost half a child, and with that mischance of hers, my wife fallen into an indisposition, which would afflict her much, but that the sicknesse of her children stupefies her: of one of which, in good faith, I have not much hope.”³ The opening of Biathanatos was mentioned earlier, when Donne, speculating about his “sickly inclination” toward suicide, surmises that one reason for it may be “because I had my first breeding and conversation with men of a suppressed and afflicted religion, accustomed to the despite of death and hungry of an imagined martyrdom.”⁴ These windows into Donne’s past are so rare that they serve as useful reminders of how differently from us Donne views memory.

For Donne, individual memories are sirens, tempting the wayfarer with dangerous nostalgia.⁵ In an early sermon, Donne warns his parishioners against the blandishments of reverie:

And therefore in this survey of sin, thy first care must be, to take heed of returning too diligently to a remembrance of those delightful sins which are past; for that will endanger new. And in many cases it is safer to do (as God himself is said to do) to tie up our sins in a bundle, and cast them into the sea; so for us to present our sins in general to God, and to cast them into the bottomless sea of the infinite mercies of God, in the infinite merits of Christ Jesus; then by an over-diligent enumeration of sins of some kindes, or by too busie a contemplation of those circumstances which encreased our sinful delight then