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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ  
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Scripture and the Limits of Language:  
The Voice of the Preacher in the Sermons of John Donne

by  
Patricia Mary Howison

A thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
and Research, University of Ottawa  
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## Abstract

In this thesis I propose to examine the extent to which Donne in his sermons draws attention to his own and Scripture's language as language, and thereby addresses the complexities and paradoxes of human speech. Donne interprets Scriptural language by translating that language, rendering it in other, analogous forms in order that his hearers may come to a fuller apprehension of truth.

The first chapter introduces some of the paradoxes of language which concern Donne in his sermons. Scripture exhibits various modes of speech, and Donne uses the occasion of preaching on texts from within these different modes to focus questions about language which arise out of the particular characteristics and concerns of the mode. In each case, he demonstrates that the mode reveals truth and yet at the same time conceals it, for while language may image truth, it is not itself wholly true.

Chapter II examines Donne's interpretation of the Old Testament historical narratives which relate the story of the world's creation. In these sermons Donne discusses the nature of man as the image of God and of man's language as an imaging of truth, and concludes that Scripture's history speaks of temporal events in order to image a mysterious and extra-historical truth.

Chapter III is concerned with Donne's interpretations of the gospels, Scripture's biographical narratives. In this mode, temporal events are focussed around Christ, and the question of incarnation--the Word/Lógos himself speaking in human words and through human actions--sheds new light on the relationship between seen and unseen truth. In his sermons on

the gospels, Donne examines various manifestations of Christ, and demonstrates that the truth of the gospels' words is dependent on the Word himself who informs all language.

Chapter IV examines Donne's sermon series on Psalm 32, a wisdom text in the confessional mode. Here Donne discusses the problematic relationship between God and the individual. He demonstrates that confession of self need not be mere autobiography; though it speaks of the present experience of the individual; it also bears witness to the general truth of God's working in all men. Self-confession, then, may be also a confession of God.

Chapter V is concerned with Donne's treatment of the essentially discursive and expository New Testament epistles. In his sermons on the epistles, Donne explores how metaphoric speech can be used in propositional discourse to enrich and enliven it. He also suggests that argument (metaphoric and non-metaphoric) is, in the end--like all speech--partial.

Chapter VI is a discussion of Donne's approach to prophetic texts. Here again, he concentrates on the language of his text as he addresses the question of how vision and prophecy may be expressed in terms of history and ordinary human understanding.

In the case of each of these five modes, despite his eloquent and elegant translations of Scripture's speech with his own metaphors and analogies and paradoxes, Donne concludes that finally he has no words fully adequate to image God. The solution to this, for Donne, is to continue to speak of God and to translate his words--but at the same time, to seek to translate Scripture's truth also into action by living in conformity with it.

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*Non ut illud diceretur, sed ne taceretur.*

Augustine

On the Trinity V, ix, 10

## Chapter I

### Scripture and the Problem of Language

For, nor in nothing, nor in things  
Extreme, and scatt'ring bright, can love inhere.

"Aire and Angels"

In his sermons as in his poetry, John Donne's genius is reflected in his deliberate use of language as both a creator and a resolver of tension. The language of Donne's sermons is paradoxical, not only because it employs formal paradox but also because it exploits the unexpected incongruities and symmetries of language. The prose of these sermons draws attention to itself as language, thereby raising fundamental questions about the nature of words as forms for meaning. However, the tension which characterizes Donne's speech is always controlled, and as such it becomes an important element in the careful rhetorical strategy by which he interprets the Scriptures. Donne's wit and skill are evident in the way he uses language in his preaching, but at the same time he makes it clear that "eloquence is not our net ... onely the Gospel is"; the task of the preacher is "not novelty, but edification."<sup>1</sup> Donne's sermons reflect his awareness of the power of his own eloquence, but they also express his commitment to preaching as interpretation of the Scripture for the sake of the congregation.

There has been much critical interest in Donne as preacher, in the

principles by which he interprets Scripture in his sermons, and in the theological contexts that those interpretations reflect. Evelyn Simpson discusses Donne in relation to medieval allegorists and emphasizes his commitment to the "literal sense" of Scripture; she argues that for Donne the symbolic meaning of Scripture "did not replace the literal one-- rather, it interpreted and enriched the poor obscure fragments of historical truth."<sup>2</sup> Helen Gardner too comments upon Donne's principles of exegesis, and notes particularly the primary importance to his reading of Scripture of a literal sense which includes within it figurative and parabolic senses.<sup>3</sup> Donne's principles of interpretation have been studied by Dennis Quinn, who emphasizes Donne's indebtedness to medieval traditions of exegesis.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Winfried Schleiner has pointed out the important relationship between Donne's imagery and medieval hermeneutic, particularly that of Hugh of St. Victor.<sup>5</sup>

Many commentators have, through their discussions of Donne's exegetical practice, addressed the question of whether Donne may be identified as "medieval" in outlook, or whether he is best understood as "modern" and forward-looking. Schleiner, Quinn and others have identified a strong Augustinism in Donne's sermons, and argue for his still-firm attachment to medieval and Catholic thought and spirituality.<sup>6</sup> Other critics have chosen to see in Donne a more strongly "Renaissance" personality, and have emphasized the sense of the individual in Donne's sermons. W. Fraser Mitchell recognizes medieval elements in the sermons, but argues too that because of his emphasis upon the application of his text to the individual, Donne also has affinities with Puritan preachers. Mitchell remarks on

Donne's "scrupulous attention to the rhetorical forms of the sacred text," and sets Donne apart from other metaphysical preachers because he used his eloquence to persuade and not merely to embellish.<sup>7</sup> Charles Coffin sees in Donne a "predisposition to disregard authority" and "an awareness of self as the supremely important and interesting fact of life and the instrument of our conceptions of divinity and truth"; Michael Moloney remarks on Donne's openmindedness toward the new science, but emphasizes that he was at the same time "thoroughly and unshakably medieval in his cosmology," and found himself caught in the conflict between medieval and Renaissance aesthetics and ethics.<sup>8</sup> Gale Carrithers has identified in Donne an existential outlook which is characterized by "the involvement of the whole man in the religious situation," and emphasizes corresponding existential themes and structures in Donne's sermons.<sup>9</sup>

Barbara Lewalski's recent insightful examination of specifically Protestant influences on seventeenth-century literature sees Donne as marking the beginning of a new poetics even while adhering to older patterns of exegesis. Lewalski argues that Donne's regard for the eloquence of Scripture and for the value of the literal words of his text reflects the new Protestant focus on the historical, typological reading of Scripture and on its application to the individual Christian.<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere, Lewalski has also pointed out how the very structure of Donne's sermons displays a peculiarly Protestant outlook by embodying a Protestant form of meditation in which characteristically the "self" plays a central role.<sup>11</sup>

Many interesting discussions of Donne's sermons have resulted, like Lewalski's, from a perception of the specific relationship of the form of

Donne's prose to his theological contexts. John Chamberlin argues that Donne's application of the principles of grammar, dialectic and rhetoric demonstrates his rejection of contemporary Puritan sermon theory and his affiliation with earlier commentators like Augustine.<sup>12</sup> A.C. Partridge, on the other hand, insists that while Donne appeals to the "literal sense" of the traditional exegetical scheme, he in fact elaborates his texts by a definitely modern imagination and intuition, and employs poetic speech emotively to communicate his state of mind.<sup>13</sup>

The extent to which Donne uses syntax and diction consciously to image his and his hearers' processes of thought has been demonstrated by Joan Webber, who, like Lewalski, emphasizes the key role that the "self" plays in Donne's sermons as indicative of an emerging Renaissance awareness of the individual.<sup>14</sup> Other studies of Donne's sermons with an essentially stylistic focus have been more concerned to account for Donne's use of language and rhetoric in terms of his own characteristic themes and emphases. Recently, Terry Sherwood has suggested how a number of recurring paradigms in Donne's work may provide a way of understanding his epistemology.<sup>15</sup>

Much, then, has been done to further our understanding of the ways in which Donne's prose style relates to his assumptions about the nature of his task, and to his perception of the relationship between man and God and between man and the world around him. The quality of Donne's formal language as language, his diction as poetic and metaphoric, and the imaging of his ideas in the particular forms of his speech, have been demonstrated amply by analyses of various sermons. Donne's ideas about

the specific forms of language, their function, and their relation to his theology, have not been so often noted.<sup>16</sup> Language mediates between Donne and the writer of the text he interprets and between himself and his congregation, but those words are of course received and translated in different ways by different people. The great irony--and paradox--of language is, as Donne recognizes, that while it offers seemingly endless possibilities for imaging and formulating meaning, all meaning is inevitably compromised by the attempts to concretize it. Donne is aware that even the language of his authoritative text, Scripture, is partial, as is the language of its interpreter; any interpretation, then, any translation of the text, will in some measure contain elements of misinterpretation and inaccurate translation of that meaning.

That some degree of misinterpretation is inevitable does not, however, cause Donne to abandon the task of interpretation or to despair of its value. On the contrary, his realization that linguistic formulae are incomplete paradoxically confirms his assurance concerning the completeness of the truth that words seek to reflect, and intensifies his desire to demonstrate that unifying truth.<sup>17</sup> The double nature of language--that it images truth and yet is not itself wholly true--is focussed particularly for Donne by specific problems that face him as he interprets Scripture. To preach God's word is also, for Donne, to explore the mystery of words, for by its very nature Scripture makes explicit the paradoxes of human speech which so fascinate him. Christian tradition, of course, assumes that the author of all of Scripture is, in a more than metaphorical sense, God himself. Yet the literal transmission of the words of Scripture is

through human agents, human authors who wrote individual books and letters which are "Scripture" and which conform to its generic description, but which are also expressive of such various modes of speech as, for example, historical narrative, prophetic oracle, and pastoral epistle. For Donne each of these modes manifests both the inadequacies of the form that human speech gives to truth and the unimpeachable (if unseen) word of God that underlies and unifies all of Scripture's human writings. For the Christian tradition, within which Donne stands, the stakes are very high, for deformed as it may be by man's words, the truth of Scripture still is the voice of God himself, and thus must not be mistaken or misheard.<sup>18</sup>

The assumption that all of Scripture is expressive of both the voice of God and the voices of men substantially complicates the task of its interpretation. The authority of any genre of human writing is of course to be weighed and questioned; the authority of the genre "Scripture," God's writing, is unimpeachable. Is it possible then to construct a valid interpretation, to discern the authoritative voice of God--as Scripture's interpreter must--when in the same text there are various and sometimes conflicting human authorities? For Donne, the answer to this is "yes": even as one reads what is literally a single text, it is still possible to acknowledge two authors and even two or more levels of discourse.<sup>19</sup> Donne relies upon the properties of Scripture, properties which are not necessarily "written into" the text but which are taken on faith. He recognizes that the ambiguities of the Scriptural text as it is before him, its enigmas, paradoxes and even apparent contradictions, pertain to

and are expressive of the mode of the individual text, but that textual difficulties such as these do not bear upon or threaten the intrinsic unity of Scripture's truth.

The traditional paradigm constructed by interpreters to acknowledge Scripture's ambiguities and its dual authorship was of course that of allegorical exegesis.<sup>20</sup> To embark here upon a discussion of the complicated history of exegesis of the Bible in terms of levels of meaning would be only to repeat what has been discussed so ably and thoroughly before.<sup>21</sup> It is impossible, however, to avoid introducing into this study the related problems of literalism and literal readings of Scripture, for Donne's traditional assumption that the truth of Scripture is essentially unified carries with it the implication that no Scriptural text can be understood merely by its "letter," in isolation from other Scriptural texts.

By Donne's time the principles of allegorical interpretation, which sought to extrapolate from texts their relationship to other texts and other (often eccentric) paradigms of Christian teaching, had long been subject to abuse, and certainly the Reformation's renewed emphasis upon a historical interpretation of Scripture was a much-needed corrective to those often absurd extremes.<sup>22</sup> But strict adherence to the letter of the text--particularly when, as Donne points out, it is a human "letter" speaking of divine truth--can also become tyrannous, and can result in equally absurd literalistic extremes. Donne appeals to the "literal sense" of Scripture often, but for him "literal" is more than a technical term in an exegetical scheme committed to a search for levels of meaning.

Not does Donne allow that medieval fourfold scheme to circumscribe his figurative interpretations of Scripture, which recognize the variations in the modes of Scriptural speech and explore the different facets of language with all their complexities and inadequacies. For Donne, no text can be schematized successfully by either a literalist or an allegorist, for no paradigm, no single form, can fully account for the enigmatic nature of Scriptural speech.

The same variation in modes of speech within the unity of Scripture which gave rise to the allegorical schemes of exegesis provides Donne with an opportunity to consider the complexity of language as he interprets Scripture for his congregation. As a way of grouping Donne's sermons and focussing on the particular questions about language and rhetoric drawn to the fore by particular Scriptural modes, I have classified Scripture into five modes. Chapter II examines Donne's interpretation of Old Testament historical narratives; Chapter III is concerned with Donne's response to the biographical narratives of the New Testament gospels; Chapter IV discusses Donne's interpretation of some of the poetic wisdom literature of the Old Testament; Chapter V is concerned with his treatment of the essentially discursive and expository New Testament epistles; and Chapter VI examines Donne's interpretations of Scripture's prophetic, oracular texts, of which there are both Old and New Testament examples.

In preaching on texts within each of these modes, Donne found himself confronting central questions about the nature of Scriptural language, questions which arise in part directly out of the particular characteristics

and concerns of the mode. The Old and New Testament narrative forms-- history and gospel--imply questions about "story" and about how stories which are also Scripture are to be understood both as signs and as themselves historical truth. Wisdom literature, particularly the confessional psalms, with which many of Donne's sermons on wisdom texts are concerned, questions how a highly compressed and metaphoric form of speech may speak of God by revealing and interpreting the poet's self. The New Testament epistles, on the other hand, address the question of language as propositional argument, and suggest the limitations and the capabilities of rational discourse. The prophetic books place perhaps the greatest demand upon language, for, by speaking of that which is mysteriously outside the realm of human experience, they ask questions about how to use words to image things which are unknown and in some sense unknowable by man in his present state.

I have made no attempt in my discussion to survey the entire corpus of Donne's sermons. Rather I have, for each of the five modes, chosen sermons from Donne's canon which are exemplary of his method of interpretation and rhetoric, and whose texts invite consideration of their own mode of speech. Throughout his sermons, by his sensitivity to the varying forms of Scriptural speech, Donne demonstrates that each of these forms is but a form, and is in the last analysis inadequate, expressing only partial glimpses of a central and unvarying truth. Donne's acknowledgement of the double nature of Scripture and of the double nature of language--that they both create and resolve tensions, reveal and conceal truth--underlies his entire rhetorical strategy.

Because he acknowledges the final inadequacy of language, Donne is able to circumvent the serious interpretive hazard of allowing one's own prejudices and perceptions so to dominate that the resulting interpretation is but an abuse of the text. If the language of the text itself is but a partial reflection of truth, then the language of the interpreter must be even more so, and thus any claim an interpreter may make to offer an authoritative reading must be qualified by his admission of the limitations of his perception and of the form he gives to it. Any narrowly literalistic reading of a text which claims to be the single definitive reading, then, would be, according to Donne's categories, a misconstruction of the text, and a misconception of the interpreter's own role as interpreter. Donne, as an interpreter of Scripture, stands before his congregation not as an authority, nor as a censor through whom only the appropriate readings are filtered. When he preaches, Donne is very much a "translator," standing between his text and his audience and mediating that text to them.

To translate from one language to another is to take one set of forms and change them into another set, one which reflects with integrity that which is signified by the first set, and which will be apprehended more easily than that first set by the ones for whose sake the translation is being made. When Donne translates the form of Scripture's meaning into other, analogous forms, he takes on a twofold task which demands both a sensitivity to the integrity of the text and its meaning, and also a consideration of the problem of the form of the text and of his own words about it. All interpretation seeks to recognize and discuss the content

of a text, but Donne seldom confines his attention to content; recurrently he addresses himself to the manner of Scripture's discourse. Interpretation that is translation, like Donne's, responds not only to what a text says but also to how it says--those things, to what kind of language it uses, and to how successfully that language mediates truth.<sup>24</sup>

Because it is by nature mediatory, interpretation that is consciously translation is also consciously oriented toward its audience. The rhetoric of Donne's translations, like the rhetoric of Scripture itself, is directed not only toward effecting an immediate audience reaction but also toward calling up in the members of that audience an ongoing response to and participation in the demands of the text. Translation of the text always seeks transformation of the text: by offering alternate forms, analogues and paraphrases of old forms, Donne's translations acknowledge the transiency of form, and look ahead to the future possibility of transformation in which all forms will become new. There is also in Donne's sermons a corresponding desire for the transformation of his audience, that through his translation of a text they may be inclined to listen in a new way to the voice of that text. For Donne, to interpret the text of Scripture is always to interpret also himself and his hearers, the context into which--and for the sake of which--that text is spoken.

At some level, of course, Donne's interpretation of Scripture--his exegetical method--raises questions primarily doctrinal and theological. But his treatment of the differing modes of speech which appear in Scripture (and which appear too in all writings and all texts), and his recognition of the diversity of Scripture's human authors and their ways

of speaking truth, demand that we consider Donne's literary concerns in the sermons as no less important than his theological ones. That Donne is concerned to speak of the literary quality of Scripture naturally reflects his poetic sensibilities, but it is also an integral expression of his basic assumptions about theology and epistemology, about God, and about how man is to seek knowledge of him. Donne's interpretations of his texts--his translations of them--emerge not from abstract questions about doctrine and the nature of God, nor from theoretical debates about the nature of interpretation, but from the very words of the text before him, words common to all human speech, by which and from which all theology and all doctrine are made.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Sermons of John Donne, 10 vols., ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953-62) II, 307; VII, 329. All further quotations from Donne's sermons will be from this edition, and will be indicated by volume and page numbers in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn M. Simpson, A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) 271. For Simpson's discussion of various medieval elements in Donne's thought, see also 112-31.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Gardner, "The Limits of Literary Criticism," The Business of Criticism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) 136-39.

<sup>4</sup> Dennis B. Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 61(1962) 313-29. For a more detailed presentation of Quinn's argument, see his "John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and the Traditions of Biblical Exegesis," diss., University of Wisconsin, 1958.

<sup>5</sup> Winfried Schleiner, in The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), discusses the medieval concept of vox et res (163-200).

<sup>6</sup> Schleiner delineates various "fields of imagery" in the sermons, and traces important medieval and patristic influences (63-162). Dennis

B. Quinn, in "Donne's Christian Eloquence," ELH 27(1960) 276-97, rpt. in Seventeenth-Century Prose, ed. Stanley Fish (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 353-74, examines the influence of Augustine's On Christian Doctrine on Donne's preaching. For the importance of Augustinism in Donne, see also Patrick Grant, The Transformation of Sin: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne (Montreal and London: McGill/Queen's University Press, 1974) 40-72; Terry Sherwood, "Reason in Donne's Sermons," ELH 39(1972) 353-74.

<sup>7</sup> W. Fraser Mitchell, English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson: A Study of its Literary Aspects (1932; New York: Russell & Russell, 1962) 188.

<sup>8</sup> Charles M. Coffin, John Donne and the New Philosophy (1937; New York: Humanities Press, 1958) 216; Michael Francis Moloney, John Donne: His Flight from Medievalism (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1944) 66-7, 195. The classic argument for Donne's reliance upon medieval theology and philosophy is Mary Paton Ramsay's Les Doctrines Médiévales chez Donne, le Poète Métaphysicien de l'Angleterre, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1924). Louis I. Bredvold responds to Ramsay's work in "The Religious Thought of Donne in Relation to Medieval and Later Traditions," Studies in Shakespeare, Milton and Donne, University of Michigan Publications, Language and Literature I (New York: Macmillan, 1925) 191-232. See also Mary Paton Ramsay, "Donne's Relation to Philosophy," A Garland for John Donne, ed. Theodore Spencer (1931; Gloucester, Mass.:

Peter Smith, 1958), 101-20.

<sup>9</sup> Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972) 38-9. For his notion of "existentialism," Carrithers relies upon and cites Paul Tillich. Throughout his work on Donne, Carrithers emphasizes the ongoing relationship between preacher and people as confirming man's ongoing search for God and for truth.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, Donne's "Anniversaries" and the Poetry of Praise: The Creation of a Symbolic Mode (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) Chapter III. As a contrast to Lewalski's view, see Louis L. Martz's study of the influence of Ignatian forms of meditation on Donne's work, The Poetry of Meditation (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954).

<sup>12</sup> John S. Chamberlin, Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976).

<sup>13</sup> A.C. Partridge, John Donne: Language and Style (London: André Deutsch, 1978) 209-32.

<sup>14</sup> Joan Webber, Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne

(Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963); The Eloquent "I": Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose (Madison, Milwaukee, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> Terry G. Sherwood, Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1984). See also Michael Hall, "Searching the Scriptures: Meditation and Discovery in Donne's Sermons," New Essays on Donne, ed. Gary A. Stringer (Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 57 [1977]) 211-38; William J.J. Rooney, "John Donne's 'Second Prebend Sermon'--A Stylistic Analysis," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 4(1962) 24-34, rpt. Seventeenth-Century Prose, ed. Stanley Fish (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 375-87.

<sup>16</sup> One critic who has commented insightfully upon these matters is Heather Asals, "John Donne and the Grammar of Redemption," English Studies in Canada 5(1979) 125-39.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, "St. Augustine's Rhetoric of Silence: Truth vs. Eloquence and Things vs. Signs," Journal of the History of Ideas 23(1962) 175-96, rpt. in his Renaissance and Seventeenth-Century Studies (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964) 1-28. Mazzeo argues for the basically platonic conception of On Christian Doctrine, in which he says Augustine postulates that because words are but signs of a transcendent reality, the ultimate movement of man's restoration to God will be from words to silence and from signs to realities.

<sup>18</sup> Lewalski (Protestant Poetics 31-44) discusses "biblical poetics,"

a term which she credits to Ernst Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953). Curtius outlines patristic theories of the arts, of grammar and rhetoric, and demonstrates the influence of biblical models on literature of the Middle Ages. Lewalski's chapters on biblical poetics examine the history of biblical genre theory, the general recognition of the Bible as poetic, and the influence of the Pauline justification for poetry: "... speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; Lewalski 37).

<sup>19</sup> David L. Jeffrey, in "Chaucer and Wyclif: Biblical Hermeneutic and Literary Theory in the Fourteenth Century," University of Ottawa Quarterly 53(1983), provides a provocative discussion of Wyclif's formulation of this paradoxical characteristic of Scripture. Jeffrey argues that Wyclif recognizes for Scripture a distinctive grammar and logic--in which, for example, "A may be non-A"--and that the ultimate truth of which and according to which Scripture speaks is not permeable by Aristotelian logic (379ff.).

<sup>20</sup> Israel Baroway, in "The Bible as Poetry in the English Renaissance: An Introduction," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 32(1933), argues that allegorical interpretation was originally a "defense erected in the middle ages to nullify the power of poetry," but that in the Renaissance, through the transvaluation of allegory as a mode of interpretation, the Bible came to be recognized as imaginative litera-

ture, and "allegory" became a source for creative imitation (478).

<sup>21</sup> See Beryl Smalley, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages (1952; Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964). The classic study of fourfold exegesis is Henri de Lubac's Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatre Sens de l'Écriture, 4 vols. (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1959-64). For a discussion of patristic and medieval sign theory and its relation to the interpretation of Scripture, see Marcia L. Colish, The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968).

<sup>22</sup> On the important distinction between "typology," which has a historical basis, and "allegory," which is an essentially unhistorical approach, see Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., Typology and Seventeenth-Century Literature (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1975). Galdon discusses typology in relation to the biblical view of history and demonstrates that it is a response to the extremes of allegorization.

<sup>23</sup> A useful discussion of the recognition of a "double literal" sense which arose in the fifteenth century is Karlfried Froehlich, "'Always to Keep the Literal Sense in Holy Scripture Means to Kill One's Soul': The State of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century," Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 20-48. Froehlich distinguishes between an absurd and legalistic "literal" and a primary or "God-intended" "literal" sense.

Donne's definition of the literal sense echoes the latter:

that also is not the literall, which the letter seems to present, for so to diverse understandings there might be diverse literall senses; but it is called literall, to distinguish it from the Morall, Allegoricall, and the other senses; and is that which the Holy Ghost doth in that place principally intend.

(Essays in Divinity, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952] 40). See also Gardner, "Limits of Literary Criticism" 137, and the discussion of Donne and the meaning of "literal," Chapter VI below.

<sup>24</sup> Lewalski, in Protestant Poetics, argues that the Protestant reliance on Augustine recognizes his view that art may be used according to Scriptural models and principles, and that seventeenth-century writers were conscious imitators of Scripture's speech (214ff.).

## Chapter II

### Story as Image:

#### Donne and the Interpretation of Scriptural History

Thou art so truth, that thoughts of thee suffice,  
To make dreames truths; and fables histories.

"The Dreame"

Scripture's books of history provide Donne with a particularly clear focus for the interpretive problems resulting from the diversity of language and modes of speech within Scripture. Biblical historical narratives, such as that of Genesis, recount incidents and episodes of the past and--like any history--reflect their own set of presuppositions about the significance of those temporal events. In this case, such presuppositions are determined primarily by the fact that these histories are also "Scripture," and are complicated further by the dual authorship that Christian interpretive tradition assumes for Scriptural history.

To speak of Genesis, for example, as a "history" is to acknowledge that it is in some sense a factual account of past events, and Donne insists that this is a necessary acknowledgement. To treat Genesis as less than historically valid and to ignore its literal sense, he writes, is "dangerous, because if we do so there, we have no history of the Creation of the world in any other place to stick to" (VI, 62). At the

same time, however, the events of the creation as recounted in Genesis are not historically verifiable, nor can they be evaluated in relation to other accounts of the same occurrences. That one of the authors of Scriptural history is God, whose authority is unquestionable, removes the need to verify the truth of the creation narrative. The question facing Donne as he interprets Genesis, however, remains one of how it is possible to read a single text in terms of two different authors. To interpret such a text, Donne recognizes that he must interpret events which have occurred in the past and yet which also are occurring--manifesting and recreating meaning--in the present. He must find a way to speak of that which is itself spoken obliquely, and in so doing he explores the very nature of the historical events which appear in Scripture both as related by man and as translated by God himself.

1. The History of Creation: Speaking of the Dark Places

(Genesis 1:2, St. Paul's, Whitsunday 1629)

Of Donne's extant sermons, three are expositions of texts from the first chapter of Genesis, a passage he refers to as "this history, this mystery of the Creation" (IX, 94). These three sermons will form the basis for my discussion of Donne's treatment of Scriptural history.<sup>1</sup> His explicit acknowledgement of the relationship between "history" and "mystery," an acknowledgement which is highlighted particularly by the creation narratives, signals his concerns about language and interpretation. Donne is interested always in discovering principles for the "exposition of darke

places" (IX, 95)--such as the story of the world's creation--and in how to express the meaning of those "darke places" without compromising their essential mystery.

Donne's introduction to a Whitsunday sermon on Genesis 1:2--"And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"--is a "generall consideration" of the kind of mystery found in this text (IX, 92-95).<sup>2</sup> He appeals to Augustine in this section and quotes and paraphrases extensively from books twelve and thirteen of the Confessions, which discuss Genesis chapter one. Augustine too found it difficult to understand this text; he laments, "Scripsit Moses & abiit, a little Moses hath said, and alas he is gone" (IX, 94).<sup>3</sup> But, Donne points out, although Augustine "found, that divers senses offered themselves, he did not doubt of finding the Truth" (IX, 94). Augustine assumes that there is an essential unity of truth, and that God, who is "Truth it selfe," underlies all the "divers senses" assigned to the words of the text by human interpreters. Donne paraphrases Augustine's resolution of interpretive disagreements:

since divers senses, arise out of these words, and all true, Quid mihi obest, si aliud ego sensero, quam sensit alius, eum sensisse, qui scripsit? What hurt followes, though I follow another sense, then some other man takes to be Moses sense? for his may be a true sense, and so may mine, and neither be Moses his ... Where divers senses arise, and all true, (that is, that none of them oppose the truth) let truth agree them. But what is Truth? God.

(IX, 94-5)

These Augustinian principles of interpretation, Donne concludes, lead to a "liberty of reading Scriptures according to the Law of liberty; that is,

charitably to leave others to their liberty, if they but differ from us, and not differ from Fundamentall Truths" (IX, 95). Because they assert the existence of "Fundamentall Truths," Augustine and subsequent interpreters in his tradition are able to proceed with assurance through the bewildering array of readings and glosses upon their texts.<sup>4</sup>

Donne too relies upon this "law of liberty" as he interprets Genesis 1:2 for his congregation in the Whitsunday sermon. By choosing not to preach on the more "timely" New Testament account of Pentecost events and instead speaking of the "spirit of God" moving upon the face of the waters at the beginning of time, he is introducing the troubled issue of the relation between the "literal" or historical reading of an event and its "spiritual" significance. Donne explicitly raises this issue in his statement that he intends to discuss the text,

first, literally in the first, and then spiritually  
in the second Creation; first how the Holy Ghost  
moved upon the face of the Waters in making this  
world for us, And then how he moves upon the face of  
the Waters againe, in making us for the other world.

(IX, 93)

In the words of this Scripture, as he reads them and as he translates them for his hearers, Donne sees that "history" and "mystery" converge and are one.<sup>5</sup>

For Donne, as for Augustine, the fundamental insight upon which a valid interpretation of such a text is to be built is that all understanding is given by God, and that different interpreters may be given different measures of understanding at different times. As long as

charity is served, and as long as an interpretation "agrees with other Truths, that are evident in other places of Scripture" (IX, 95), diversity in the precise interpretation of a passage is not a problem. Such diversity is simply a condition that prevails for the interpretation of texts which are at best opaque. Though trends in interpretation and interpretive principles change, God, who "hast writ nothing to no purpose" and who "wouldst be understood in all: But not in all, by all men, at all times," never changes (IX, 94). Echoing the words of Augustine, Donne writes that God is "the light of mine eyes, in this dark inquisition" (IX, 94), "the light, that enlightned every man, any man, that comes into this world" (IX, 95).<sup>6</sup> Therefore, he asks, "Why should any man presse me, to give him the true sense of Moses here, or of the holy Ghost, in any darke place of Scripture?" (IX, 95). It is possible, Donne writes, to find "a true sense of any place" (IX, 95), but the true sense, the Truth itself, is only in God, and man's speech about God is for now only a single truth, which may differ from other single truths--but which images too the underlying unity of all truth.

2. The Making of Man (Genesis 1:26, To the King,  
at Court, April 1629)

Genesis 1:26, which describes the creation of man by God, has become the locus classicus for discussions of man as maker and as user of words: "And God said, Let us make man, in our image, after our likeness." In the two sermons Donne preached on this verse, he uses its

few words as the basis for an entire systematic and ethical theology. He discusses the nature of God as the triune Creator, the nature of man as fallen creature, the image of God in him as man's consolation, and Christ, himself the very image of God, as man's redemption. This detailed construction is not, for Donne or for the interpretive tradition in which he stands, merely vain or ornate elaboration of a single point. It is instead his response to the demands of the genre with which he is working: the very nature of Scriptural history requires that its interpreter recognize its words and stories as reflections of its divine authorship, mysteriously encompassing all truth. The entire history of man-- that which is the source of his identity in the present--is summarized in this text. By expanding the few words of Genesis 1:26 into an extended exposition, Donne is not digressing or drawing other meanings into the text; he is translating it, rendering in other--and in this case, more detailed--forms that which is already in the Scriptural text.<sup>7</sup>

Donne preached both of his sermons on Genesis 1:26 in the spring of 1629, before the King at Court (IX, 47-91). Since, as Evelyn Simpson remarks, the two sermons "form a carefully planned whole," I shall here consider them as a single work in four sections.<sup>8</sup> Donne begins by explaining that each word of Genesis 1:26 designates a "quarter of the world," and he organizes the sermon around an elaborate metaphor in which interpretation and Christian knowledge become a voyage for whose bounds the four essential points of doctrine--the four subdivisions of his sermon--constitute the east, west, north and south (IX, 49). "By application, by fair, and just accommodation of the words," Donne

illustrates how in this text, "we have the whole world in contemplation" (IX, 49).

Many other histories of the world and theories and myths about its origins have of course been written, but Donne points out the uniqueness of the Genesis narrative. For,

if a Livy or a Guicciardine, or such extensive and voluminous authors, had had this story in hand, God must have made another world, to have made them a Library to hold their Books, of the making of this world. Into what Wire would they have drawn out this earth? Into what leafe-gold would they have beate out these heavens?

(IX, 47-8)

Even the volumes that are written as commentaries upon Moses' account of Creation are, writes Donne, themselves "scarce lesse then infinite," and perhaps "clogge the world with unnecessary books" (IX, 48). Moses' words are unique among all other histories and commentaries upon histories, not merely because they are brief and without elaborate detail, but because in their brevity and simplicity they contain meanings "scarce lesse then infinite," the "gold" of which Donne speaks, not yet beaten out into the "leaf" with which books are decorated.

The worth of Moses' words and the wealth of meanings they contain are inestimable. Donne calls them a "frame" which gives structure and form and context to all history and all language:

never such a frame, so soon set up, as this, in this Chapter. For, for the thing it selfe, there is no other thing to compare it with. For it is All, it is the whole world. And for the time, there was no other time to compare it with, for this was the beginning of time.

(IX, 47)

Donne is speaking literally here of the immensity of the created universe to which the text refers, but he is also suggesting something about the very words of the Genesis narrative. When Moses wrote of the creation, he wrote (as it were) ex nihilo, having neither time nor event with which to compare it, because the creation was itself the very beginning of time and of temporal event.<sup>9</sup> Moses' words are truthful, says Donne, because "the holy Ghost hovered upon him," and because he wrote conscious of his status as a man in the image of God. Donne illustrates this with a series of parallels:

God did no more but say, let this and this be done;  
 And Moses does no more but say, that upon Gods saying  
 it was done. God required not nature to help him to  
 do it: Moses required not reason to help him to be  
 beleaved. The holy Ghost hovered upon the waters, and  
 so God wrought: The holy Ghost hovered upon Moses too,  
 and so he wrote.

(IX, 48)

Donne's play upon "wrote" and "wrought" underscores the analogy: God's action in creating the world by his word, "Fiat," is imaged in Moses' action of writing about that creation and, in turn, Moses' writing is so like creation that his words have become authoritative for the Christian tradition.

For Donne and his tradition, Moses' words are inspired Scripture, and as such are not only words about God but are also "God's words," set apart from the ordinary words of ordinary men. Yet, because the making and using of language is itself a reflection of God's creative act, and because every man is a reflection of God, even the attempts of an ordinary man to speak of God are assumed to derive directly from God, from a

timeless beginning that human experience cannot fully comprehend. Subsequent writers speak about God, using language as Moses did, but these must speak always after Moses and after his commentators, in the light of what has been said and thought about those first words. This multiplication of words and books; the beating out of gold into the thinness of leaf, causes an increasing distance between God's creative Word and man's language. But still the analogy holds: Moses' words are like God's words, and in the same way the words of faithful men are, too, like God's words.

Donne extends this analogy later in the sermon when he turns to discuss the role of the preacher in ministering to fallen man. He explains that God speaks "to the Angels of the Church, to his Ministers; he says Faciamus, Let us, us both together, you and we, make a man; join mine Ordinance (your preaching) with my Spirit, (says God to us) and so make man" (IX, 58). But the "making of man" which God and the preacher effect together, as Donne sees it, is not at all like the "making of man" Moses describes in Genesis 1:26. The preacher is called to "make man" with God, not to create man but to recreate him, to aid in redeeming him from the fall in which he wilfully unmade himself.<sup>10</sup> And just as the preacher seeks to draw his hearers to be shaped anew according to the image in which they were first made, so too he shapes his words in such a way as to reflect the analogies between men's words and God's Word.

It is his assurance that these analogies hold that causes Donne to state concerning the Creation that "there is no other thing to compare it with," and then, in defiance of his own logical conclusion, to present

a series of parallel explanations and comparisons. The phrase "that earth" appears six times in an extended parallel construction that comprises one long sentence. In this construction, Donne moves from the past, in which for thousands of years men could not discern the form of the earth, through the present, in which men had just been able to "compass" it, toward the future, in which Donne foresees that the earth will no longer have places "unpeopled" (IX, 47). He then moves to a different kind of comparison, remarking that even to "cast it all but into a Mapp" (another similitude) takes many months. To build a garden on an actual plot of earth takes many years, and to speculate upon the possibility of countless worlds and the "manifold Sphears of the Planets, and the Starres" is to invite a never-ending labour. Then, after expanding these comparisons through a series of parallel propositions concerning the realms of time and space, Donne returns to the bare simplicity of the Genesis narrative, with Moses' few syllables describing God's six days of creation. The whole world, Donne reminds his hearers, is contained in these few words (IX, 47). His responsibility as a preacher remains, however; he must learn to translate these words by constructing analogies and comparisons as he seeks to "make men" by rendering God's word intelligible to them.<sup>11</sup>

#### i. The East: Man and the Making of Language

Donne's exposition of Genesis 1:26 begins with the "East," the compass point at which, he says, "this world beganne; the Creation was in the east" (IX, 50). And, he adds, "there our next world beganne too,"

for Christ, God's son, rose in the east to his "Pinacle," "his exaltation (as himselfe calls it) the Crosse" (IX, 51). The word "faciamus" then is to be understood as having at least two significations, one relating to the historic first creation and the other to the second, the recreation and redemption of man by Christ's sacrifice.<sup>12</sup>

Echoing a well-worn exegetical point, Donne also explains that the single word "faciamus," because it is in the first person plural, is a "manifestation of the Trinity" (IX, 51). The "three elements, which God is" form the "Subject of supernaturall philosophy, Divinity," and so, Donne explains, they are the elements "(if we may so speake) which make God, that is, constitute God, notifie God to us, Father, Sonne, and holy Ghost" (IX, 51). God is (in this qualified sense) made for man through language in that man's words may express and reflect his nature. Donne writes that the Trinity is "the first letter in his Alphabet, that eye thinks to read his name in the book of life" (IX, 51). The Trinity is so essential to man's vocabulary, Donne continues, that all experience, knowledge and learning are meaningless without it, for "he hath not learnt to spel, that hath not learnt the Trinity" (IX, 51). The success of man's attempts to speak truth depends not upon how much he knows, but upon what he knows: the unadorned and unlearned simplicity of "faciamus" will always confound the expectations of "extensive and voluminous authors," in part at least because it is that simplicity of speech, with its lack of attempt to explicate and analyze, that makes the text mysterious.

As he continues his discussion of the text's evidence for the

Trinity, Donne again appeals to a distinctively Scriptural logic and sense of chronology when he argues that the Genesis 1:26 "faciamus" is the Bible's first intimation of the Trinity, despite the fact that the word used for "God" in verse one of the same chapter, "Dii" or "Bara Elohim," implies a plurality in God.<sup>13</sup> He writes:

though we read that in that first verse, before this in the twenty sixth, yet Moses writ that, which is in the beginning of this chapter, more then two thousand years after God spake this, that is in our text: so long was Gods plurall, before Moses his plurall; Gods Faciamus, before Moses Bara Elohim . So that in this text, begins our Catechisme.

(IX, 57)

Note that Donne takes "Bara Elohim" as Moses' words, but "Faciamus" as God's word; that is, Donne is implying here that when Moses transcribed God's speech, he literally transcribed it. "Faciamus," "Let us make," is God's formulation and not Moses', a formulation made two thousand years before Moses came to narrate the events.

Donne pushes this insight to its limit, eventually arguing that Genesis 1:26 is prior to Genesis 1:1, even though logically, in the course of writing a narrative, Moses would have had to write verse one before verse twenty-six. Donne's logic is, however, perfectly consistent. He assumes from the beginning that God's word stood--and continues to stand--independent of Moses' words. Thus, for Donne the interpreter and user of Scriptural language, time and temporal logic are to be seen as relative not to man's (or Moses') chronology, but to God and to the order of his creative Word.<sup>14</sup> Man's "making" of his own understanding through language is always and only dependent upon God's prior making of him.

The notion that it is by his speech that man is able to "make" meaning is one to which Donne returns repeatedly in this sermon. For example, still in his discussion of the Trinity, he writes that

the root of all is God. But it is not the way to receive fruits, to dig to the root, but to reach to the boughs. I reach for my Creation to the Father, for my Redemption to the Sonne, for my sanctification to the holy Ghost: and so I make the knowledge of God, a Tree of life unto me.

(IX, 52)

Quite literally, by his very words, Donne is "making" the knowledge of God a tree of life when he establishes that very metaphor, beginning with "the root of all is God." The clearest iconographical echo here is of Genesis 2:9 which describes the two distinctive trees God placed in the garden of Eden. Again Donne makes explicit the distinction between, on the one hand, God's making of the world, of man, Eden, and the tree of life which stood in that garden, and, on the other, the recreation of man, who after the fall regains paradise only by his acceptance of God's grace in Christ. In the first paradise, as Scripture tells it, the knowledge of God was a tree of life: because of man's fall, that knowledge came to be mediated through God's word and through men's words, and so the "tree of life" in Genesis becomes instead an image of life and a metaphoric structure by which man can describe the triune nature of God.

Another metaphor Donne uses to speak of the Trinity is that of a "seale," an "impression" and even the "specifique forme" set upon man in the "Faciamus" which is simultaneously the word and the act by which God made man in his image (IX, 54). As he did with the "tree of life"

metaphor, Donne speaks both of the past first creation of man and of his present redemption as a new creation. The very same "seale," that of the Trinity, is "re-imprinted upon us, in our second Creation, our Regeneration, in Baptisme, (Man is Baptized In the name of the Father, of the Sonne, and of the holy Ghost)" (IX, 54). This re-imprinting of God's seal is effected through the speaking of the name of the triune God in baptism: again, language may "make" man, but this making depends upon that "specifique forme" which already is there in man, imprinted by God in the first creation.<sup>15</sup> The sacramental speaking of God's triune name images God's making of man by his word, but at the same time it depends for its efficacy not upon the magical speaking of a name, but upon God's prior word.

Donne goes on to distinguish "names," which embody man's creation of his world, from "formes," which only God can make.<sup>16</sup> He does this by explaining why it is that although their belief in the Trinity marks the "distinctive character" of Christians and sets them apart from pagan and Jew, they are not called "Trinitarians." Donne explains that the Trinity is the Christians' form, but not their name; they are called "Christians" because "the name of Christ involv'd all," and thus "in the profession of Christ, the whole Trinity is professed" (IX, 55). A name denominates or identifies, but it can only utter what is already there, in the form which God made: the name "Christ" implies the whole doctrine of the Trinity, the basic form God imprinted upon man.

For Donne, as for the Scripture he interprets, when man names he is to do so as an imitation and reflection of a pattern which already

stands. God himself created according to this paradigm, for, as Donne explains, at creation, for everything that God made, "he saw it was good; good because it answered the pattern, the Image; good, because it was like to that" (IX, 74). That is, the pattern, the Image which is already in God's mind, is the standard by which all created things were evaluated, and is for man the standard by which the analogies he makes using names and words are to be judged. Donne writes that "the name and profession of a Christian, is but a superficial outside, sprinckled upon my face in Baptisme ... if I have not in my heart, a sense of the holy Ghost" (IX, 56). If the form is not consciously invoked, then the name does not speak truly. When Adam named the beasts, Donne points out, he named truly, for this act was a symbol of his authority over them and a symbol of his faculty of understanding, which is the image of the Father: only because the image of God was in him could Adam name "every creature according to the nature thereof."<sup>17</sup> Donne reminds his hearers again and again that language is never primary creation; if it speaks truth, it is always secondary, a response to and a translation of the form given it and its speaker by their Creator.

One of the models by which Donne explains the operation of human language as an image of God's creative word is that of synecdoche, the figure of speech "by which a more comprehensive term is used for a less comprehensive or vice versa" (OED). "Christ," then, is a synecdoche which stands for the whole of the triune God. In the same way, the sign of the cross is "an abridgement, and a Catechisme of the whole Christian Religion"-- as, presumably, the Catechism is an abridgement of the complexities of

Christian doctrine (IX, 56). Genesis 1:26, as Donne has pointed out, is itself an abridgement of the whole body of Christian teaching, and it speaks in a kind of language which is itself an abridgement of that employed by "extensive and voluminous" human authors. The name "Christian" is in turn a shorthand expression for a whole set of beliefs, and the catechism a short form of an involved system of thought and doctrine.

Donne's synecdochal model, however, which demonstrates again and again that the part may stand for the whole, is not merely a syntactical convenience; it is qualified and made distinctive by the fact that it turns upon a strongly incarnational Christology. Christ is in name the "abridgement of the Trinity," the expression of unity and diversity resolved, but he is so also in his form. He said of himself, "I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me" (John 17:6): as the Son, he both is the image of the Father and manifestly is the Father, is God. Christ both images the pattern and is the pattern: he is the form, the word and wisdom (the Logos) of God, and he is also the figure, the perfect shape that issues from that form. Donne's discussion of the operation of the language of his text relies upon his dual perception of synecdoche and incarnation, in which the part may stand for the whole, not only as a figure of speech, but as a reflection of the very form of truth. Donne's language, in turn, which employs its own witty shorthand and metaphoric conceits, reflects this same view of language, that because language is like creation, modelled after the few words God spoke in that creation, even its simplest and briefest formulations may image many things and translate a manifold truth.

ii. The West: Naming as Making

In the second point of the compass, "our West," Donne expands this synecdochal structure, in which parts imply larger structures of meaning, by discussing the next word of his text, "Hominem," and Scripture's various names for man. Donne counts four Hebrew names for man, and "of these foure, three doe absolutely carry misery in their significations" (IX, 61): "Ish" denotes that man is but a sound or a noise; "Enosh" means misery or even oblivion; and "Cheber" is the word for man used by the prophet who wrote "I am the man that hath seen affliction, by the rod of God's wrath" (IX, 62; Lam. 3:1). The first name of man, however, is Adam, "red earth," and this, Donne says, is "the name to which every man must refer himselfe, and call himselfe by" (IX, 62).

Donne's whole discussion of the meaning of Hominem is an elaborate expansion of the name Adam, and he begins by using a series of parallel metaphors to illustrate how a name may define the relationship between the namer and the named. He writes, echoing the association of man with "red earth," that "man is but an earthen vessell. 'Tis true, but when we are upon that consideration, God is the Potter" (IX, 62). He continues, "I am as well content to be a sheep, as a Lion, so God will be my Shepheard: and the Lord is my shepheard: To be a Cottage, as a Castle, so God will be the builder ... To be Rye, as Wheate, so God will be the husbandman" (IX, 63). Man's underlying form, the image of God and the relationship to God that that form imprints upon him, does not change, though the names by which man is called do vary. A series of metaphors, like the ones

Donne here invokes, underscores this point: nothing can precisely express or manifest the relationship between man and God, but a number of other relationships are like it, and so Donne applies the Scriptural metaphors of vessel, sheep, building and grain as a way of imaging what he has named as man's "intrinsic forme," the imago dei.

When he comes to discuss the signification of man's name, "red earth," Donne draws attention to the importance of discerning its metaphoric senses, and he opens by addressing his audience directly in the words of Genesis 3:19, "Pulvis es, Thou art earth." He reminds his hearers that, as earth is one of the four elements that make up all matter, man is literally made of earth; for "God made man of earth, not of ayre, not of fire" (IX, 63). In death, too, man is literally earth, and at that point his name no longer matters, whether it was Adam or Enosh, lord or slave, for even by the epitaph, one cannot "know which is the dust it speakes of, if another have been laid before, or after, in the same grave" (IX, 63). Donne speaks here in strongly visual terms, and it is evident that, for him, God's actually and historically having formed man by his own hands from the dust of the ground is as much a part of the truth of man's name "earth" as are any of its figurative and homiletic interpretations.

Donne follows this literal reading of the text with an eloquent and poetic discussion of its metaphoric and figurative implications. The earth of which man is made is red, he explains, with "a rednesse that amounts to a shamefastnesse, to a blushing at our own infirmitie" (IX, 64). There is also a second redness to this earth, that of the blood of

God's son: "so we were red earth in the hands of God, as redness denotes our general infirmities, and as redness denotes the blood of his Sonne, our Saviour, all have both" (IX, 64). The redness of the earth from which Donne understands that man quite literally was made is, then, not only a descriptive detail. That literal fact of the earth's redness is itself a signification of both guilt and blood, but, as Donne hastens to explain, "the blood of our own souls, by sinne, was not upon us, when we were in the hands of God" (IX, 65). The redness of Adam, then, the evidence of his need for grace and redemption by Christ, was upon him at his creation and his naming--but it was not imprinted upon him as was his form, the imago dei. Importantly, Adam's redness, which is part of his very name, is not a predetermination of his fall; it is only a foreshadowing.<sup>18</sup>

This distinction between foreordination and foreshadowing is crucial, for Donne, for it permits him to maintain that names do not determine: they can only image what is already there in the form. The form God gave to man included free will--and thus the potential for fall--and so he gave man a name to accord with that form, a name which speaks of both fall and redemption, the literal, historic creation of man from the stuff of earth and his metaphoric recreation by Christ. The fine distinction between foreordination and foreshadowing, which allows that a thing (like red earth) may signify (but not dictate) something which has not yet occurred, is one whose blurring figurative interpretation always risks. Conventional, temporal logic cannot penetrate this kind of history and this kind of language, and so in this sermon Donne insists that it is

only through unconventional notions of time that Scriptural history can be understood.<sup>19</sup>

Donne goes further in expanding the notion of Scriptural history and how it relates to Scripture's names and other figurative language when he moves into a more fully poetic mode of interpretation, very much in the tradition of medieval spiritual exegesis.<sup>20</sup> In this passage Donne describes the whiteness and purity of Christ, moving back and forth between the Old and New Testaments in order to illustrate the iconography of both white and red. He cites, for example, the bride's words from the Canticle of Canticles, that "my beloved is white and ruddy," and then refers to the prophecy of Isaiah in which God's servant finds his garments stained and says "I have trodden the winepress alone," "all the redness, all the bloud of the whole world is upon me" (IX, 65-6; Cant. 5:10; Is.63:1).

By constructing his prose in such a way that one reference flows into another, Donne makes the Bridegroom and the one with stained garments and Christ all one, subtly linking wine and blood (both man's and Christ's) so that they are almost completely identified. And, too, just as he has demonstrated that a single name may have many variations and significations, so he reminds his hearers that names (unlike forms) can be changed. The whiteness of Christ, writes Donne, "doth ... worke through our red, and makes this Adam, this red earth, Calculus candidum, that white stone, that receives a new name" (IX, 66; Rev. 2:17). That new name will reflect the renewed image of God in man and will be the final name for man, "that name, renewed, and manifested, which was imprinted upon us, in our elections, the Sonnes of God; the irremoveable, the undisinheritable Sonnes of God" (IX,

67). In that last day to which Donne points, the day of recreation, man's name will be imprinted upon him as a seal, in the same way as his form, the image of God, was imprinted upon him at the first creation. In the conclusion of his consideration of the "West," Donne looks forward to the possibility that in the end names and words may be not only reflections of the forms God gave to things and to man, but also that they may be complete, and themselves wholly true.

### iii. The North: Man's Speech as Image

The third point in the "compasse" of Donne's sermon is the north, the direction from which a "wind of comfort" blows and brings to man the consolation that though he is but red earth, still "this earth hath a nobler forme, then any other part or limbe of the world. For, we are made by a fairer pattern, by a nobler Image, by a higher likenesse", (IX, 70). There are in Genesis 1:26 two apparently synonymous expressions of that "nobler forme," for the text reads that God created man "in our Image," and "after our likeness." These phrases, with their "words, which seem divers," says Donne, illustrate "the variety which the holy Ghost uses here, in the pen of Moses" (IX, 70). Scripture's language must be examined carefully, he writes, for "nothing is to be neglected as little, from which great things may arise" (IX, 71). In support of this interpretive principle Donne cites a series of theological controversies that have turned on simple phrases and points out how often "strife was but for a word" (IX 71). He is not suggesting of course that the establishment of doctrine depends upon a mere variation in a letter of the alphabet.

However, doctrine does depend on that which the letter signifies, and so Donne insists that "there can be no word thought idle, in the Scriptures" (IX, 73). God does not use language carelessly, and so man is neither to use nor to interpret language in a frivolous or thoughtless way.<sup>21</sup>

So, Donne adds:

therefore I blame not in any, I decline not in mine  
own practise; the making use of the variety, and  
copiousnesse of the holy Ghost, who is ever abundant,  
and yet never superfluous in expressing his purpose,  
in change of words.

(IX, 73)

However, Donne does not suggest that, in making use of the "copiousnesse" of Scripture--a diversity unified by the single authority of the Holy Ghost--Scripture's interpreter can assume that same unity for his own "abundant" speech. Donne reminds his hearers again that upon a question of variation in word order at the Reformation the whole Church was split. "How much," he asks, "Sola fides and fides sola, changes the case?" (IX, 71). "Words that seem divers" in human formulations, such as doctrinal statement, usually are diverse, and so the resulting interpretations and disagreements about those interpretations will only further diversify--and further divide the Church. No gloss or commentary can ever image and embody truth as Scripture itself does. Donne's discussion of the subtleties of "divers words" illustrates the limitations of man's language, itself so imperfect that it cannot adequately explain how it is that in Scripture "words that seem divers" may in fact be speaking a single truth.

In an apparent reversal of tactics, however, after taking over a

hundred lines to explain the importance of acknowledging variations in expression, Donne himself declines to acknowledge this one. In his treatment of Genesis 1:26, he writes that he will interpret the text by "taking the two words for this time to be but a farther illustration of one another, Image, and likenesse, to our present purpose, to be all one" (IX, 73). Any explanation which he might give for the variation in phrasing here would "possesse all our time"<sup>n</sup> and to little purpose. In order to speak of distinctions made in Scripture, Donne would himself have to make further distinctions, and "to raise divers observations, upon these words, which seem divers," and so risk a false and misleading diversity and subsequent superfluosness of expression (IX, 70). Donne's strategy here is a result of his central insight about the troubling nature of words and their diversity.<sup>22</sup> Because they are imperfect images of truth, words always reflect that truth from various angles, and thus they take on sometimes misleadingly various forms. Still, man has no choice but to use that language, with all its inherent ambiguities, and so strive to express the unity of truth that lies beneath its diversity.

Donne begins to address the specific question of what it means that man is made in the image of God by repeating his earlier parallel between God's creation of the world and Moses' recording of it. The way in which Donne employs verbal mirroring in his own prose emphasizes the point: "God appointed Moses to make all that he made according to a pattern. God himselfe made all that he made according to a pattern." Further, Donne says that when God created the world, he "had deposited, and laid up in himselfe certaine formes, patternes, Ideas of every thing that he made. He

made nothing of which he had not preconceived the forme, and predetermined in himselfe, I will make it thus" (IX, 73-4). And for everything that God made, Donne writes, "he saw it was good; good because it answered the pattern, the Image ... like that forme, which was in him for them" (IX, 74). The forms or images which God appointed for the things he made were true, and God's creation of the world according to them illustrates for Donne the right use of images.

There is always the possibility that images may be used falsely, however, and it is this false use that writers and speakers and interpreters risk as they use language. God gave men images, Donne writes, "for imitation; he forbad them in danger of adoration" (IX, 75). The images with which men can work--words and names--must be understood and used as images and not as forms in their own right. As Donne remarks, "What a drowzinesse, what a lazinesse, what a cowardlinesse of the soule is it, to worship that, which does but represent a better thing then it selfe?" (IX, 75-6). An image itself is not inherently false or wrong, for "there is no more danger out of a picture, then out of a history, if thou intend no more in either, then example" (IX, 76). But although Donne warns his hearers to "dishonor not God by an Image in worshiping it" (IX, 76), he knows that man's intentions and his corresponding actions are impure and do in fact dishonour God with the false use of images.

Impure though he and his actions may be, man still holds a unique position in creation: he was made in God's image--not by God's "Fiat," "Let there be man," but by his "consultation and deliberation," "Let

us make man" (IX, 48). Man is also unique among God's creatures in that, after making, God "forbore to say that he was good"; instead, his conformity to the pattern by which God made him "was to appeare after in his subsequent actions" (IX, 74). Because man was made according to a unique form, God's image, he is governed by a unique set of standards. In making man as he did, explains Donne, God "hath imprinted in him a faculty of will, and election." When Balaam's ass spoke, it exercised "no faculty, no will in it selfe"; when man speaks, however, though his faculties and will are also God's agents, they are "an agent in another manner, then the tongue of the beast" (IX, 75). When Balaam's ass spoke, "God forced it to that it did," but God does not force man, and the will that man has gives him the freedom to use his faculties, God's image in him, for true or false ends.<sup>23</sup>

That man makes false use of images, and even of the image of the creator God which was imprinted on him, is central to Donne's understanding of man's use of language and of his imagination.<sup>24</sup> His frequent plays upon the words "imagine" and "imaginary" in this sermon make it clear that he would have his audience distinguish between the value of "image" and the value of "imagination." Because man rejected the form that God intended for him; he began to take true images and make of them vain imaginations, substituting his own constructs for God's form. Earlier in this sermon, Donne criticized those "subtile men" who have, "with some appearance of probability, imagined, that ...there are many earths, many worlds, as big as this, which we inhabite" (IX, 47). While he does not necessarily condemn such speculation, his point is clear. Man imagines;

God creates. God images himself in man; man vainly (and often inaccurately or idolatrously) imagines God according to his own perceptions.<sup>25</sup> God imputes righteousness and whiteness to man through Christ: man imagines for himself a whiteness which Donne says turns out to be "but a white of leprosie" (IX, 70). He even calls those he sees as misinterpreting Scripture "imagers" (IX, 78). Man's imagination, for Donne, is characterized by its propensity to assume for man a role that is not his, that of creator, and to fail to recognize that he himself is the image of his own creator, and that--as the products of an image--all his own inventions are themselves images and reflections, and not creations.

#### iv. The South: Imagination and the Image of God

In the fourth and final direction of the sermon, the "south," Donne discusses how the image of God resides in man and what this image "confers, and derives upon man" (IX, 76). He begins by discarding the possibility that "image of God" refers to a bodily likeness between man and God. This interpretation of the text, he insists, is imaginary, the result of "over literally taking those places of Scripture, where God is said to have hands, and feet, and eyes, and eares" (IX, 77). Pictures and images of God must not be mistaken for God himself; the body is an "outward case" which contains God's image, just as the Host which is received in the sacrament is a symbol and an outward expression of Christ's body but not the actual transsubstantiated flesh of Christ (IX, 77).

Donne explains this distinction between image and substance further, extending the metaphor of the "outward case":

the Table, and frame and shrine for this Image of God, is inwardly and immediately the soule of man. Not immediately so, as that the soule of man is a part of the Essence of God; for so essentially, Christ onely is the Image of God.

(IX, 79)

The image of God is not identical with man's soul, but the two are as closely related as the form of the seal is to the wax in which it is imprinted.<sup>26</sup> Returning to a metaphor he used earlier in the sermon, Donne explains that "this Image is in our soule, as our soule is the wax, and this Image the seale," and thus "no Image, but the Image of God can fit our soule" (IX, 80). Only God's seal, his image, can truly signify man.

Donne expands this metaphoric explanation by comparing the seal of God with human, temporal seals. He demonstrates that such seals are too narrow or too shallow to give form to man. For example, princes are sealed with a crown and not a miter, because, although they are "supreame heads of the Church," they do not administer the sacraments and so have no right to the bishop's seal. Labourers can appropriately be sealed with a cross which signifies labour and industry, but not with a rose or a bunch of grapes, which would signify "ease, and plenty in age" (IX, 80). These seals are external marks which have been imposed upon or adopted by a man, and which relate more to his role or position than to his essence. God's seal upon man, his image, seals "all men, Prince, and People; Clergy, and Magistrate" (IX, 80), and signifies the

very nature and essence of man. It is like a tangible, visible seal in wax, but it remains unseen; men may learn to interpret its meaning and even to feel the effects of its authority, but it is, for now, a mystery unseen and inexplicable.

Precisely because it is not fully explicable, the intangible seal of God's image is often confused with the wax in which it is imprinted, man and his faculties. No one would conflate a cross stamped in wax with the actual labourer it signifies, yet often people take matter, the substance of man's inventions, as creations, themselves true. "We should wonder," Donne writes, "to see a man, whose Chambers and Galleries were full of curious master-peece[s], thrust in a Village Fair to looke upon sixpenny pictures, and three farthing prints." Yet man too often is just this unwilling to discern between a true image and his own imaginations of truth, and so while the "master-peece," God's image, is already his, still he "endure[s] the decay of fortune, of body, of soule, of honour, to possesse lower Pictures; pictures that are not originalls, not made by [the] hand of God." The image of God, writes Donne, "is more worth then all substances; and we give it, for colours, for dreames, for shadowes" (IX, 80, 81). That God's image is in man does not mean that "the soule of man is a part of the Essence of God" (IX, 79), but that image in him does signify truly and thus gives man a form for understanding truth. His own vain imaginings, by contrast, image only himself, and thus are but reflections of reflections of reflections.

Despite the distance between man's imaginations of truth and truth itself, it is possible for man to use his faculties and abilities in such

a way as to image God clearly before men, and thus translate him to the world. The proper "office of an Image or Picture," Donne writes, is "to bring him, whom it represents, the more lively to our memory" (IX, 83). So, too, language that attempts to image God's truth can bring God "the more lively to our memory," and can also point ahead to the hope that in the new creation man will be "made the Image of God intirely" (IX, 86). Donne's discussion of this recreation of man in God's image provides a summary of his response to the questions of man's use and interpretation of language and of history.

In speaking of the image of God in the redeemed man, Donne cites Scripture's "expressions of this impression, these representations of this Image of God" (IX, 86). He quotes I John, II Peter and Acts to describe Christians as "the sonnes of God; the seed of God; the offspring of God; and partakers of the divine nature" (IX, 86). By identifying these metaphors as "expressions of an impression," Donne emphasizes the fact that even Scripture's language is at two removes from truth, for it is an image of an image, the result of the form which was already shaped by God.<sup>27</sup> Yet despite the limitations of human speech, Donne maintains that it is possible for him by his preaching "to transport you, by occasion of these words, from this world to the next" (IX, 50). In other words, because he is "wrought upon by grace in Christ Jesus," he can momentarily transcend the limits language imposes to affirm that "a Christian is made the Image of God intirely" (IX, 86). That man can be "Deiformem hominem, man in the forme of God," is a "mysterious, and a blessed metamorphosis, and transfiguration" (IX, 86), in which Christ, who alone is the true image of God, renews

man's form (morphē) and bridges the distance imposed by language. Donne's syntax reflects this: in the end he speaks not of man being made in the image of God, but says instead that he will be "made the Image of God intirely."

Donne goes on to explain how in heaven this transformation--a translation of sorts, from one set of human words to a more perfect Word--will occur. In heaven, he writes, man will

conceive an unexpressible association, (that's too far off) an assimilation, (that's not neare enough) an identification, (the Schoole would venture to say so) with God in that state of glory.

(IX, 89)

When two things are identified, they are "unexpressible" because expression would itself stand in the way of identification.<sup>28</sup> In his own expression of what he shall be when he is in glory--that is, identified with God--Donne makes it clear that language, because its nature is to mediate, prohibits complete identification of one thing with another--though some forms of language, like metaphor, strive for such identity. In heaven, Donne writes, God

shall make me, (otherwise a clod of earth, and worse, a darke Soule, a Spirit of darkenesse) an Angell of Light, a Star of Glory, a something, that I cannot name now, not imagine now, nor to morrow, nor next yeare, but, even in that particular, I shall be like God.

(IX, 89)

By moving through metaphors to a final reference to himself as a "something," Donne underscores the central point of the sermon: what man shall be in heaven cannot be named or spoken or imaged, and so it certainly cannot

be imagined by him, who is Adam, a "clod of earth." Donne's use of the word "something" in this passage marks a momentary and purposeful rejection of metaphor by which his hearers are pointed beyond the "occasion of these words" to the "next world."

Donne began this pair of sermons with a discussion of history, Scripture's story of man's creation, and then moved through an explication and description of events and concepts which are supra- or extra-historical. In the end, however, he returns to the practical and expressible concerns of a seventeenth-century English preacher, and exhorts his congregation to allow God to "conforme us to his Image, in a holy life" and to attend to "the assiduity of Preaching, and the personall, and exemplary piety and constancy in our Princes" (IX, 91).<sup>29</sup> What gives meaning to history and to the temporal events of the present and the past is the understanding of the extra-historical pattern which, Donne has explained, underlies visible events. Here again is synecdoche: the "parts" which man sees, dark fragments of event by which it seems he is circumscribed, may be understood through a knowledge of the whole, and thus themselves be seen as (however mysteriously) expressive of that whole.<sup>30</sup>

The historical narratives of Scripture provide man with a context for the events which he experiences in the present. They also function as a reminder to man of how he is to act in the face of those events.

Donne writes:

to remember, to recollect our former understanding,  
 and our former assenting; so far as to do them,  
 to Crown them with action, that's true goodnesse  
 ...The wiseman places all goodnesse in this faculty,  
 the memory. (IX, '84)

He continues, "all goodnesse is in remembring, all goodnesse ... is  
 in bringing our understanding and our assenting into action" (IX, 85).

But Scriptural history's appeal to memory is a unique one, for it  
 demands not only that man remember what is past, but also that "what-  
soever thou takest in hand, remember the end, and thou shalt never doe  
amisse. The end cannot be yet come, and yet we are bid to remember  
 that" (IX, 84-5).<sup>31</sup> Scripture's history--its chronology, like its  
 language and its logic--is its own. Man may, through Scriptural history,  
 remember the future, because in some sense it is already present with  
 him, signified and manifested in the image of the three in one that he  
 bears.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the central importance of the creation narrative in Donne's sermons, see Frederick A. Rowe, I Launch at Paradise: A Consideration of John Donne, Poet and Preacher (London: Epworth Press, 1964). Rowe outlines Donne's treatment of the creation story, and sees it as a "traditional, conventional element in his preaching" (131).

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Bible will be from the King James Version.

<sup>3</sup> Moses' authorship of the Pentateuch was a basic assumption of the Christian interpretive tradition until this century. Donne discusses Moses as the author of Genesis in Essays in Divinity, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 10-13.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine's notion of the Word/Logos present in and informing all human words is explained by Marcia L. Colish, The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968). Colish explains that for Augustine, because of the Incarnation, language--though still limited by the human condition--is reborn for God's work. She characterizes Augustine's idea of Christian speech as being one of "redeemed rhetoric" which presumes the underlying truth of verbal expression and which thus signals "a new covenant between speech and knowledge" (19-20).

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between history and mystery in the Christian interpretive tradition finds expression particularly in typology. See

Joseph A. Galdon, S.J., Typology and Seventeenth-Century Literature (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1975), particularly chapter II. On the importance of typology in Donne's exegetical practice, see Helen Gardner, "The Limits of Literary Criticism," The Business of Criticism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959) 142-3; she contrasts "true typology" with "degenerate allegory." Erich Auerbach's essay, "Figura," Archivum Romanicum 22(1938) 436-89, trans. Ralph Manheim, in Auerbach's Scenes from the Drama of European Literature (New York: Meridian Books, 1959), also addresses the Christian notion of history which "derived its compelling force from its inseparable bond with the faith." Auerbach writes that "figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons ... separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time ... Only the understanding of the two persons or events is a spiritual act" (53).

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, Confessions, trans. R.S. Pine-coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961) XII, 18; Pine-coffin 295-6.

<sup>7</sup> Many critics have remarked on Donne's method of commenting on a text by circling around the meaning of its individual words. Evelyn Simpson sees this as reflecting a mode of understanding that is intuitive rather than rational (A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962] 76); Joan Webber argues that "the symbols--the words of the text--give the sermons ... a central unity around which the associative pattern of his thought can flow" (Contrary Music: The

Prose Style of John Donne [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963] 20); A.C. Partridge, in John Donne: Language and Style (London: André Deutsch, 1978), writes that the "complex elaboration of an idea is at the core of Donne's circling round meaning of a word and testing its semantic aspects" (223). For a discussion of the rhetorical significance of Donne's concentration on seemingly unimportant words, see Michael Hall, "Searching the Scriptures: Meditation and Discovery in Donne's Sermons," New Essays on Donne, ed. Gary A. Stringer, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 57(1977) 211-38.

<sup>8</sup> Evelyn M. Simpson and George R. Potter, eds., The Sermons of John Donne, IX, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Rowe remarks upon the importance to Donne of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, and suggests that his emphasis upon this evidences his "sustained condemnation of nihilism," and his pervasive and radical "distinction between nothing and something" (I Launch at Paradise 135-6).

<sup>10</sup> Commentators who have stressed the importance of Donne's sense of his vocation as preacher include William R. Mueller, John Donne: Preacher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962) and Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972). For a discussion of the importance of patterns of creation in Donne's thought, see Terry G. Sherwood, Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought (Toronto, Buffalo,

London: University of Toronto Press, 1984). Sherwood emphasizes the degree to which God's recreation of man through Christ and through his ministers follows the pattern of original creation, and the centrality of the Word to both creation and recreation (5-6).

<sup>11</sup> Bettie Anne Doebler, in "Donne's Debt to the Great Tradition: Old and New in His Treatment of Death," Anglia 85(1967), remarks that in the Augustinian view of the Bible, to which Donne adhered, "the significance of Scriptural history lay in its revelation of man's creation, fall, and redemption, all three aspects which are simultaneous and continuous also in the life of the individual" (15). Donne as preacher seeks to draw his hearers into active participation in that Scriptural history: Barbara Lewalski, in "Typological Symbolism and the Progress of the Soul in Seventeenth-Century Literature," Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), sees that Donne's typological reading of Scripture's history reflects the new Protestant emphasis on the relation of the self to God, and "invites his listeners to consider themselves direct antitypes of the Old Testament types" (83).

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Rowe traces Donne's use of the "faciamus" topos in his sermons (I Launch at Paradise 149-52).

<sup>13</sup> Donne comments also on the importance of "Elohim" as plural in Essays in Divinity, 26.

<sup>14</sup> On the relation between the grammar of Scripture and its notions of history and truth, see Heather Asals, "John Donne and the Grammar of Redemption," English Studies in Canada 5(1979), who notes Donne's comments on Hebrew, which "hath no present tense" (VII, 62) and which is indifferent to "the linguistic formulation of the material of our life--the present time" (131-2).

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the traditional image of the seal, particularly as it applies to baptism, see Winfried Schleiner, The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970) 104-21.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Chamberlin, in Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), points out how Donne's interest in the relation between words and things issues in an interest in names and naming (105-8).

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 2:19. Chamberlin (Increase and Multiply 108, 123) remarks on Donne's concern with words as revealing the nature of things and notes other references in the sermons to Adam's naming the creatures according to their natures at II, 78 and especially IX, 256, where Donne writes: "all creatures were brought to Adam, and because he understood the natures of all those creatures, he gave them names accordingly. In that he gave no name to himselfe, it may be by some perhaps argued, that he understood himselfe lesse then he did other creatures."

<sup>18</sup> E. Randolph Daniel, in "Reconciliation, Covenant and Election: A Study of the Theology of John Donne," Anglican Theological Review 48(1966), recognizes Donne's rejection of supralapsarianism. Daniel does argue, however, that Donne's theology exhibits strong Calvinist leanings, and that he did in fact preach the doctrines of predestination and election. He concludes that Donne does stand alone, in that his doctrine of reconciliation "united a covenant theology," influenced by Reformed and Scotist traditions, with "the classical Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone" (29-30).

<sup>19</sup> Concerning the radical nature of the Christian conception of history, see Jean Daniélou, "The Conception of History in the Christian Tradition," Journal of Religion 30 (1950). Daniélou writes that "the essential affirmation of Christianity is the decisive character of the fact of the Incarnation ... but nothing was more foreign to ancient thought than this importance given to a single event. For it, that which is real is that which is capable of repeating itself" (171). The substance of history is both real and hidden, "primarily the sacred history of the great works of God" (177); it is also, Daniélou stresses, "inherently intelligible in light of God's former manifestations of himself" (173).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan as a figure for baptism, "Sermons on New Testament Lessons," trans. R.G. MacMullen, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff (1887; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) Sermon LXXXI; Schaff 503. See also Augustine's figurative and poetic

interpretation of Christ's two parables about vineyards, The Wicked Husbandmen and The Labourers (pp. 373-4).

<sup>21</sup> As Lewalski points out, Donne often appeals to Scripture as the model for his own eloquent speech (Protestant Poetics 220-2). See also VIII, 270-3; V, 287; and II, 170-1.

<sup>22</sup> John Chamberlin comments helpfully upon this exegetical problem "that so puzzled the Fathers--whether or not pairs of synonyms designate different things." Chamberlin observes that "Donne is inclined rather to suppose that the difference in name does not change the nature" (Increase and Multiply, 123). The Holy Ghost's eloquence allows him to use two expressions, "to be two beames, two branches, two effects, two expressions" of a single truth (V, 287). See also Donne's discussion of synonymous expressions, IX, 226-7.

Donne also comments upon the problem of finding in Scripture diverse names for one person. In Essays in Divinity he writes:

if Esau, Edom, and Seir were but one man; Jethro and Revel, etc. but one man, which have no consonance with one another, and might thereby discredit and enervate any History but this, which is the fountain of truth; so Synagogue and Church is the same thing, and of the Church, Roman and Reformed, and all other distinctions of place, Discipline, or Person, but one Church, journeying to one Hierusalem, and directed by one guide, Christ Jesus.

(51)

<sup>23</sup> A careful and systematic study of the elements of Donne's orthodox Anglican theology is Itrat Husain's The Dogmatic and Mystical

Theology of John Donne (1938; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970).

In his chapter on Donne's soteriology Husain observes that for Donne faith and works were interdependent (96), and that Donne's belief in man's free will caused him to regard man's works and natural faculties as being of value; Husain sees that Donne firmly rejects Calvinist predestination, and concentrates instead on God's mercy and love. Cf. the argument of E. Randolph Daniel, note 18 above.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the Renaissance conception of the imagination, see William Rosky, "Imagination in the English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic," Studies in the Renaissance 5 (1958). Rosky stresses that for the Renaissance, the "good" imagination is always the controlled imagination; for the most part, because the imagination is dependent upon the senses, it is highly susceptible to corruption and distortion (49-73).

<sup>25</sup> Donne discusses the problem of even the godly man's "imagined God" earlier in the sermon, IX, 51-2.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Henriksen, in "Donne's Orthodoxy," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 14 (1972), cites Donne's careful definition here of the image of God in man as evidence for his rejection of mysticism and its notion of the "divine spark in man" (10).

<sup>27</sup> Commenting upon the nature of Donne's own metaphoric speech,

Laurence Stapleton, in "John Donne: The Moment of the Sermon," The Elected Circle: Studies in the Art of Prose (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), writes that "logic is the substratum of emotion for Donne," and that his metaphors and images function more often on the level of analogy, and not as "direct impression" (27); Donne's metaphors are "an effort to present logically, as well as concretely, a hypothetical relationship rather than a similarity" (28).

<sup>28</sup> Compare Ernst Curtius' account, in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), of the "inexpressibility topos" which was standard in classical eulogy, particularly in the eulogy of rulers. It consisted in the speaker's emphasizing his inability to cope with the subject in order to praise more highly that subject (159). Clearly there are affinities with Donne's comment here, for his expressed inability to speak effectively magnifies his praise of God.

<sup>29</sup> In relation to this movement of the sermon to exhortation, see Dennis B. Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 61(1962). Quinn emphasizes that "it is most historical and most accurate to think of Donne's sermons as spiritual, or, specifically, tropological exegesis. Their central concern is the Christian soul. Donne applies the text to his auditory" (326).

<sup>30</sup> Concerning the view of history which figural interpretation

reflects, Erich Auerbach writes that "events are considered not in their unbroken relation to one another, but torn apart, individually, each in relation to something other that is promised and not yet present" ("Figura" 59). See also Paul Ricoeur's insightful essay, "Christianity and the Meaning of History," in his History and Truth, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965). Like Donne, Ricoeur addresses the questions of the "parts" and the "whole" of history: Ricoeur writes that "the Christian meaning of history is therefore the hope that secular history is also a part of that meaning which sacred history sets forth, that in the end there is only one history, that all history is ultimately sacred" (94).

<sup>31</sup> Among the many commentators who have discussed the importance of memory as man's primary faculty for knowing God is Achsah Guibbory, in "John Donne and Memory as 'the Art of Salvation'," Huntington Library Quarterly 43(1980). Guibbory compares Donne's admonition to "remember the end" to Bonaventure's concept of memory; for Bonaventure, memory is a "likeness of eternity whose indivisible present extends to all time," since it "retains the past by recalling it, the present by receiving it, the future by foreseeing it" (The Mind's Road to God, cited by Guibbory 268). Guibbory argues for Donne's Augustinian Platonism, writing that for Donne "memory's supreme value lies in its ability to re-establish the link between man and God" (268), and quotes at length from one of Donne's sermons on the penitential Psalm 38 in support of his position (II, 74).

### Chapter III

#### The Word Manifest in Words:

#### Donne and the Interpretation of Gospel

The Word but lately could not speake, and loe  
It sodenly speakes wonders, whence comes it,  
That all which was, and all which should be writ,  
A shallow seeming child, should deeply know?

"La Corona"

The questions about the nature and use of language which Donne addresses in his commentary on Genesis 1:26 recur in a different form in the Scriptural mode "gospel," and in this new context they demand of the interpreter a renewed consideration of their implications. The four gospels are, like Genesis and the other history books, a form of historical narrative, and like all histories they recount events in an attempt to interpret them and uncover their meaning. The gospel is a very specific kind of history, however, for it has a sharply biographical focus; its express purpose is to speak of the words and actions of Christ and thereby reveal his nature and the meaning of his presence in history.

In On Christian Doctrine I, xiii, Augustine points out the important analogy between the incarnation of God in history and the incarnation of thought in speech, and Donne acknowledges and emphasizes this same analogy throughout his sermons.<sup>1</sup> The familiar Johannine formulation of

the nature of Christ is the authority for that analogy: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). John's metaphor of the Word makes it appropriate, then, to speak of the incarnation as a kind of translation, for in the incarnation the God who first translated his power into a word that created the heavens and the earth translates himself into a living, breathing Word. That Word, clothed in flesh, moves as God's perfect image in the finite world of time and space.<sup>2</sup> The task of gospel, therefore, is in fact to translate a translation, to render God's eternal Word as it is manifest in Christ in human words that will tell a meaningful story. As words about the Word, the gospel accounts of him are necessarily a less perfect image of God than is the Logos himself. At a still further remove from the perfect word is the language of the preacher, like John Donne, who must translate the words of the gospel (already a translation) into other words. The preacher is responsible, then, to image not only God, but also Christ the Word and, as well, the words of the gospel; in order to do so, he must find a kind of language sufficiently reflective that it is able to render the multiple facets of meaning contained in "God's word."<sup>3</sup>

Every word about another word is, of course, a retranslation and not just a simple clarification, for in fact language is never simple or straightforward. And when the word that is to be translated is the Logos, God's perfect spoken word, the difficulties multiply. Language may be ultimately revelatory, as the four gospels ultimately are of Christ, but because words are by their nature mediators, their ability to reveal is

limited by the fact that they must first conceal, standing between meaning and its interpreter. That is, the interpreter cannot directly experience a verbal truth; a word is first spoken and only then can its signification be considered. The Augustinian analogy between language and incarnation is apparent again, in that the paradox of language--that it must both reveal and conceal--is also the paradox of incarnation. Though Christ is the "perfect Word" of the Father, even his own generation could not experience God directly in him. Seeing him, they saw only his body, his characteristics and his actions, and hearing him they heard only his words. The gospel narratives demonstrate that God reveals himself to man by first concealing himself in the garment of humanity, flesh. And, as a form of God's word, the gospels themselves work in the same way, with the same restrictions. Their narratives can only reveal Christ by revealing those things that cover him: his words and actions and attributes. But while they are describing the appearances of Christ, the gospels are also asking their interpreter to strip away those coverings and find the real subject of their discourse, the truth of the Word that lies beneath.<sup>4</sup>

Like the gospels, Donne's sermons function within the limitations imposed by having to speak of the coverings of Christ's essential nature. In response to those limitations, Donne translates Christ for his congregation by translating those very coverings, and not simply by attempting to uncover Christ and thereby reducing the gospels' image of him to bare doctrinal statement and theological proposition. He recognizes that "gospel"--like all Scripture--already is a translation, the image of an image. As a result, he so constructs his sermons that they reflect the

relationship between those two images--one, Christ as God's perfect image, and the other, the narrative which concerns Christ, a human imaging of him. And although Donne's ultimate homiletic purpose is to reveal the "content" concealed in the gospel "forms," his recognition of the essential interaction between form and content, image and proposition, narrative and interpretation, transforms his own language and rhetorical structures and in so doing enriches even the most basic content he seeks to convey.<sup>5</sup>

Texts from the gospels afford Donne a particular opportunity to explore the relationship between form and content and the perplexities of the fact that language necessarily conceals even as it reveals. The gospels speak of the various manifestations of the hidden Logos, and different gospel texts recount the variety of these manifestations in different ways. In this chapter I shall examine Donne's responses to five kinds of expression of the Logos, found in five gospel texts. First, in his exposition of John 1:8, Donne discusses how an abstract metaphor such as "light" can be a covering for Christ. Then, in a sermon on Matthew 3:17, Donne approaches the revelation of the Logos from a second perspective, that of the outward witness to Christ by God's direct speech, "this is my beloved son." A third testimony to Christ which the gospels recount and which Donne discusses is that of Christ's own human actions, as in John 11:35 where it is said that "Jesus wept." A fourth expression of the hidden word is found in the gospel records of Christ's own words concerning himself and his authority, and in this context Donne discusses Matthew 5:8, one of the Beatitudes from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. The

fifth and final sermon I shall discuss here is Donne's exposition of Matthew 9:2, which describes how Christ forgave and then healed a paralytic man. This last, the witness of miracle, is the most evidently powerful of all the outward evidences of God in Christ, and comes the closest of all these expressions to being a pure revelation of the Word of God. In each case, however, the context and significance of the text as "gospel" makes explicit the paradoxical relationship between expressed words and the hidden word, between outward manifestation and hidden truth.

1. The Word in Metaphor (John 1:8, St. Paul's, Christmas Day 1621)

The paradoxes of incarnation which fascinate Donne and which are analogous to the paradoxes of language are focussed especially by the Johannine vision of Christ as the co-creative and eternal Word of God. Donne preached three sermons on a single verse from the prologue to John's gospel, "He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light" (John 1:8). The first of these sermons, delivered at St. Paul's on Christmas Day 1621, illustrates particularly well Donne's preoccupation with the multiple valences of Scriptural language, for it is constructed around a twofold question that concerns the meanings of one particular word, "light."<sup>6</sup> Donne sets out to discuss "what, and who this light is, (for, we shall finde it to be both a personall light, (it is some body) and, otherwise too, a reall light, (it is some thing)".

(III, 351). Interpreting the significance of the "light" metaphor is crucial to an understanding of the text, and indeed of the gospel itself, for, Donne explains, John's "whole Gospell is comprehended in the beginning thereof" (III, 348).

Like Moses' words describing the creation, John's few words about the Logos encompass whole worlds of significance. Donne points out to his hearers that the prologue to John's narrative is in fact a direct echo of the beginning of another story, for "the first booke of the Bible, Genesis, and the last booke, (that is, that which was last written) this Gospell, begin both with this word, In the beginning" (III, 348). After explicating briefly the doctrinal implications of the similarities between John 1:1 and Genesis 1:1, Donne extends the literary parallels between the two passages:

and as in the first creation, vesper & mane dies unus,  
The evening and the morning made the day, evening before  
morning, darknesse before light, so in our regeneration,  
 when wee are made new Creatures, the Spirit of God findes  
 us in naturall darknesse, and by him we are made light in  
the Lord.

(III, 353-4)

Donne's application of the metaphor of the day and night of creation to John's prologue implies his acknowledgement of the essential connection between the creation of the world and its recreation by the incarnate Word. The story is to be told anew here in the gospel, in which evening and morning, darkness and light, are invested with another level of significance. Donne's creation metaphors testify to the original light of creation, and to the regenerative light of the historic Christ; at the same time they also image the light of rebirth in the present, in Donne and his hearers

who "are made light in the Lord."<sup>7</sup> By evoking various historical and extra-historical contexts for his text, and by drawing out literary parallels to express those contexts, Donne demonstrates the continuing expansion of the notion of history and event which that narrative teaches.

Donne's detailed treatment of his chosen text further illustrates this principle of the expansion of meaning in and through language. Two simple questions form the basis of this sermon--"Who, and What this light is"--and Donne's answers to them are equally straightforward: "either it signifies Essentiall light, Christ Jesus, (which answers our first questions, Quis lux ...) or it signifies the supernaturall light of Faith and Grace, (which answers our second question, Quid lux ...)" (III, 352-3). Donne's identification of the light as Christ and as faith, however, follows his involved discussion of disagreement among commentators concerning this very problem. His discussion of these disagreements initially seems an unnecessary and complicated digression, for he prefaces it with the admission that there is all but "generall, and unanime consent" about the identity of the light in John 1:8 (III, 352).<sup>8</sup> But after making this assertion of general agreement concerning the passage, Donne goes on to point out that in other verses of John's prologue--verses he does not here discuss--light has been variously interpreted, and often taken to be a reference to the light of nature or natural reason. He refutes this reading, but at the same time carefully qualifies his refutation: "now, it is true that they may have a pretence for some ground of this interpretation in antiquity it selfe," he writes, but maintains that such an interpreta-

tion is dangerously subject to error (III, 352). A few lines later, he allows that it is often useful "to present the plenty, and abundance of the holy Ghost in the Scriptures ... to induce the diverse senses that the Scriptures doe admit" but he continues to insist that such reading can be a sign of "spirituall wantonnesse" (III, 353). He concludes concerning the complexities of such interpretive disagreements that "when you have the necessary sense, that is the meaning of the holy Ghost in that place, you have senses enow, and not till then, though you have never so many, and never so delightfull" (III, 353).<sup>9</sup>

The complexity of Donne's disavowal of "finding more than necessary senses" indicates that this passage is more than just a ground-clearing for the sermon's fundamental assumption that the light in John 1:8 is Christ and the working of Christ. Donne insists upon the "necessary sense," the "meaning of the holy Ghost in that place," as the norm for interpretation and the proper alternative to pointlessly diverse readings of a text. This proposed alternative is Christian interpretive orthodoxy, but it is striking in Donne's context because of his unusual formulation of it.<sup>10</sup> He writes that the interpreter understands enough when he has the "necessary sense," but "not till then" (III, 353, emphasis added). That is, although one might normally assume that the "necessary sense" is the first and most evident one and that further senses are superfluous extrapolations of meaning, in fact what Donne suggests is that the "necessary sense" might emerge late in the interpretive process, perhaps even as a result of the many "delightfull" senses the interpreter has discovered. Donne does not discuss whether the corollary to this is

true, that once the interpreter has arrived at the "necessary sense," the diverse senses are to be discarded as having served their purpose. However, by his formulation and statement of his interpretive principles, he has both denied the validity of extraneous senses assigned to the word light in John's prologue, and affirmed the general principle of the value of finding "many and delightfull" senses for a text.

These essentially poetic insights into language's inherent ambiguities and complexities inform Donne's own strategy for the interpretation of John 1:8; Donne's exposition of this text is an exploration and an expansion of the single word light.<sup>11</sup> Donne begins with the single (and one could assume necessary) sense, that "light therefore, is in all this Chapter fitliest understood of Christ" (III, 353). He further qualifies this statement when he appeals to Augustine, saying that "Christ is not so called Light, as he is called a Rock, or a Cornerstone; not by a metaphore, but truly, and properly" (III, 353). Donne explains that although John the Baptist is at times called "light," as are all the apostles and all the faithful, all these were "but light by reflexion, by illustration of a greater light," implying that light in these contexts is but a metaphor. Christ, on the other hand, Donne calls "true light," "light so, as no body else was so; so, as that hee was nothing but light" (III, 354). His insistence that Christ was "nothing but light" helps to explain his statement that the reference to Christ as light is non-metaphoric: because there is in Christ nothing other than light, the element of comparison or likeness which is essential to metaphor is disallowed.

Donne complicates his argument further when he comes to speak of

Christ as he appeared in human flesh. He points out that just as when Moses received the Law, though his face became too bright to look upon, he was still not "all light," so too "Christ Jesus himself, who fulfilled the law, as man, was not so" (III, 354). Because of the infirmity of the flesh, even "the nature of man, in the best perfection thereof, is not vera lux, tota lux, true light, all light" (III, 354). By taking on this flesh, then, Christ himself "admitted some shadowes," and even in his transfiguration his body was not made "thorough light." Still, Donne sees that Christ is to be considered "all light" and that he suffered his divine nature, which is "nothing but light," "to appeare and shine thorough his flesh, and not to swallow, or annihilate that flesh" (III, 354). Christ is essentially "all light," and his taking on of flesh does not compromise that, nor does his divinity compromise or annihilate his flesh. If one takes the principle of incarnation as seriously as Donne does, one must see that a merely metaphorical conception of Christ as light is inappropriate and inadequate.

Yet the fact remains that words like light do have metaphorical weight, and, in an apparent betrayal of his own careful disclaimers, Donne constructs this whole sermon around poetic and metaphoric reflections upon his text. He warns, as always, of the dangers of diverse interpretations, writing that "the more lights there are, the more shadowes are also cast by those many lights" (III, 353)--and then goes on to introduce into his own exposition "many lights." This may serve as a paradigm of Donne's strategy in this sermon: first there is a disavowal of metaphorical speech, and then a reliance upon it. Donne begins by

asserting clearly that Christ is "true light, all light," and then expands and unfolds the meaning of light until it becomes apparent that light also signifies Christ's working through faith and grace. Donne also points out that the sun is the fountain of another kind of light, and that reason and nature are lights of this order (III, 356).

Similarly, Christ is the fountain of supernatural light, and the lights of faith and grace flow from him. Donne reminds the ordinary believer that he too is light, the "light of the world"; still other light is provided by Scripture and its commentators (III, 353f.). Such diversity of lights risks a corresponding diversity of shadows, as Donne has pointed out. But he demonstrates also in this sermon, whose richness and breadth of vision emerge from its complex interweaving of the language of light and shadow, that "many shadows" perhaps do not always signal only error.<sup>12</sup>

Although shadows and ambiguities do emerge as a result of the poetic discourse in this sermon, the use of beautiful and poetic language is in fact authorized by the example of Scripture itself.<sup>13</sup> Donne explains:

it is true, we have not a Demonstration; not such an Evidence as that one and two, are three; to prove these to be Scriptures of God; God hath not proceeded in that manner .... But yet these Scriptures have so orderly, so sweet, and so powerfull a working upon the reason, and the understanding.

(III, 358)

That is, the majesty and the harmony of the Scriptures are their own evidence, and Donne claims that anyone reading the Scripture, being moved

by their eloquence and consistency "would believe it, and he would know why he did so" (III, 359). He goes on to emphasize that the success of Scripture's eloquence is in part dependent upon its hearer, and he uses the analogy of two men who may be walking along the same shore and seeing by the same light, and yet one may pick up pebbles and cockle shells and the other precious pearl and amber (III, 359). That is, although the evidence of truth lies all around--in the world, in the Scripture and in Donne's own sermon--it is up to the hearer to seek the pearls, the things of true worth.<sup>14</sup> The "curious vanities" that kindle but "an applause in Atery flatterers" (III, 360) are only "speckled shells," in themselves worthless and misleading, and Donne exhorts his hearers to listen and extract from eloquent speech the things of true value.

In the passage that follows, Donne simultaneously pursues and undermines his own rhetorical strategy. He calls upon his hearers' knowledge of God, their "light of reason," not by means of rational discourse, but--paradoxically--by appealing to their capacity for delight in wit and in moving speech. Donne argues that the way to shine the light of reason upon the interpretation of a text is to dispense with objectivity altogether, and instead to "creep humbly into low and poore places ... accompany [Christ] in a persecution ... follow him into the Garden ... follow him to the place of his scourging" (III, 360-1).<sup>15</sup> This is the kind of eloquent appeal against which Donne himself warns, and by using it he is risking the confusion of "many shadows." It is a calculated risk that Donne takes, however, knowing that only by denying to his hearers the safe distance that rational objective discourse

affords can he move them to an affective apprehension of the truth he is seeking to convey. With explanation and exposition he could tell his congregation about true interpretation; by moving them through the various senses of "light" in the direction of conformity with the text's essential light, Christ himself, Donne teaches a different kind of interpretation of Scriptural language, one that finally does not depend on words, ~~metaphoric~~ or non-metaphoric.

After thus concluding the first section of his exposition, in the rest of the sermon Donne proceeds schematically, arranging his discussion around four "pairs of lights," "some of those many and divers lights, which are in this world, and admit an application to this light in our Text, the essentiall light, Christ Jesus; and the supernaturall light, faith and grace" (III, 362). Here Donne describes the lights of the essence of God and the glory of the saints, the lights of faith and nature, the lights of the sun and moon and of fire, and the lights of precious stones and of reflection. These lights are of course secondary to the "necessary" sense of the text which Donne has already clearly stated and explicated. Still, fully half the sermon is devoted to these various light metaphors. It is as if the "essential light" with which Donne opens--and which is, as he has emphasized, not a metaphor--gives light to the other metaphoric possibilities of the text. The recognition of Christ as the essential and true light informs all the other metaphoric lights and makes it possible to talk about them.

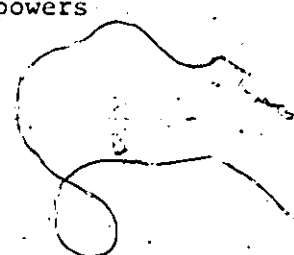
Donne's understanding of the nature of "essential light" also makes it possible for him to structure his rhetoric as he does, for it enables

him to employ the various other lights, and, as he explains, to allow these other "pairs of lights" to bear witness to the essential light. In the same way, his own predominantly metaphorical use of the images of his text also bears witness to the essential light, Christ. There is in this structure a reciprocal relationship, in which the necessary sense of the text validates the diverse metaphors, and the metaphoric readings in turn bear witness to the necessary sense by enriching and expanding it. This reciprocating relationship between modes of language is also a reflection of the historic relationship to which John 1:8 refers. John the Baptist, who "was not that light," "was sent to bear witness of that light" by his own kind of light; in turn, Christ's presence and actions validated the Baptist's ministry.<sup>16</sup> Donne's exposition of this text turns upon his recognition of the paradox of both this historical reciprocity and the ongoing reciprocal relationship between outward appearances and essential truth. Christ is "essential light," and yet "outward things apparel" him (III, 368); however, they do so not because he needs their covering, but because those who look upon him need the witness that his outward appearances provide. At the same time, those who look upon the "outward things" must rely upon the unseen truth of God's essence to help them interpret that visible witness.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, while Donne's metaphors of light apparel Christ the essential light, and in some measure illumine him, in the end Donne concludes that his metaphoric speech is but a reflected light, and that it is only in the essential light of Christ that any other beams of light may be seen at all.

2. The Word in God's Voice (Matthew 3:17,  
St. Dunstan's, Trinity Sunday 1624)

The principle that "outward things apparell God" forms an important base for another of Donne's sermons on the gospels. On Trinity Sunday 1624 he preached on Matthew 3:17, "And, lo, a voice came from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (VI, 132-49). In the opening words of this sermon Donne places his text in relation to the outward observances of the Church, defending the tradition of appointing particular Scriptures to particular liturgical festivals. He points out that as the words of his text represent the testimony of God the Father to Christ at his baptism, they are evidence for the Trinity and thus are an appropriate consideration for Trinity Sunday.

Donne's insistence upon placing the historic event of his text in the context of the present life of the Church underscores his emphasis upon the importance of outward observances as signs of God's truth. He draws a parallel between Christ's baptism, which he says is the gospel's first manifestation of the Trinity, and the Church's ongoing practice of baptism, which is an outward expression of the difficult doctrine of the Trinity (VI, 133). In Matthew's narrative, one outward observance (Christ's baptism) opens the way for a second manifestation of God (the voice from heaven) that itself bears witness to truth (the mystery of the Trinity). And, as always for Donne, the whole matter of signs and outward testimonies is closely allied with questions of language. The gospel narrative establishes a pattern: the testimony of God's voice empowers



Christ to do the "ordinary work which he came for"--preaching--and Christ's words in turn substantiate and manifest the mysteries of God (VI, 136).

Donne himself participates in the extension of this pattern by his preaching, his own words which witness to God's voice and to Christ's testimony concerning it. In his treatment of Matthew 3:17, Donne proceeds through the text word by word, elaborating each in turn and extracting from each many possible significations. This method is potentially dry and pedantic, but in Donne's hands the constraints that might seem inevitable to such a strategy disappear, in part because he does not permit the form of the words to preoccupy him. He is convinced of the value of language as a signifier of truth, but at the same time he insists that one cannot substitute the form of the word itself for the truth it conveys. Those who complacently rely on the ceremony of baptism, says Donne, misuse the sacrament for they substitute a religious observance for true faith, and as a result are but "white-lim'd Christians, Christians on the out-side" (VI, 138). In the same way, those who allow words--the signs of truth--to become in themselves dictators of truth misuse language.

To interpreters who would ignore the overall witness of Scripture and construe its individual metaphors in such a way as to serve their own interests, Donne says:

behold thou hast an immortall soule, which must have  
spirituall food, the Bread of life ... and cannot  
be emprisoned and captivated to the comparison of  
a Lilly that spins not, or of a Bird that sows not.

(VI, 139)

Donne establishes an important interpretive principle here: a Scriptural comparison like "consider the lilies of the field" is to be interpreted always and only in the context of the larger truth to which it bears witness and not simply in terms of its own isolated metaphors. The strategy of this particular sermon, a close word-by-word analysis of the text, is a subtle demonstration of Donne's point. Although by proceeding in this way Donne clearly risks the very "emprisonment" against which he has warned, he circumvents this danger by allowing for a diversity of readings for each word, and by evoking countless Scriptures that echo the same word in other places.<sup>18</sup> Donne's standard for the exposition of these single words is twofold: he considers the words themselves as they testify to God's truth, but he also acknowledges the presence of truth itself, God's voice that echoes through the words and through all of Scripture, and in turn testifies to them.

The essential dependence upon God of the outward witnesses of language and creation is made particularly clear in Donne's exposition of his text's reference to "a voice from heaven." The voice, writes Donne, is a middle way between "two other wayes of imprinting the knowledge of God in man," the first being the way of Creatures, "a darke and weake way," the second, "that powerfull way, the way of Miracles" (VI, 142). The creation's witness is incomplete, for "the voyce of the Creature alone, is but a faint voyce, a low voyce; nor any voyce, till the voyce of the Word inanimate it" (VI, 143).<sup>19</sup> Miracles too are incomplete, but in a different way: their weakness as a witness lies in their apparent power, which is as likely to deceive and mislead the undiscerning observer as

it is to teach an unseen truth. Donne reminds his hearers that Scripture records many false miracles such as those worked by Pharaoh's sorcerers, false signs that point not to God but to the workers of the miracle. The "darke witness" of Creation and the dangerously deceptive witness of miracles, "these, and all between these, are uneffectuall without the Word," concludes Donne (VI, 142).<sup>20</sup>

In his discussion of the significance of his text, Donne is careful to maintain a balance between affirming on the one hand the value of the visible and evident testimony to truth found in baptism, in the words of Scripture and in language itself, and insisting, on the other hand, upon the need for the unseen Word of God to "inanimate" all of these witnesses. This is in fact the balance--and the paradox--of incarnation: the very flesh by which the unseen is made visible is also that which conceals the essence of God from man. Both words and the Word--both the evidences and the essence of truth--are necessary, Donne emphasizes, and in perfect balance they are mutually enriching and enlivening.

Donne's appeal to the authority of the "middle way" of God's voice and Word as the standard for the interpretation of individual signs offers at least a theoretical solution to the perplexities of interpretation, but his very acknowledgement of those perplexities is, too, a calculated and insistent reminder that in practice they are not so easily resolved. Men's words are not always well-balanced, nor are men's voices always in harmony. The voices of men, writes Donne, "have indeed but diminished the dignity of the Doctrine of the Trinity, by going about to prove it by humane reason, or to illustrate it by weak and low comparisons" (VI, 134).

Later in the sermon, he expands on this notion of "low comparisons" by listing the blasphemies of heretics who describe the Trinity as "a Rolle of Wax spread, or a Dough Cake rolled out," or "a nest of Boxes, a lesser in a greater, and not equall to one another" (VI, 144). He condemns these "voyces from amongst us," the inventions of those who seek "to expresse, and to make us understand the Trinity, in pictures, and in Comparisons," all of which are subject to abuse (VI, 144). Although he admits that at first such comparisons and expressions "had no ill purpose," Donne argues that all such images easily become idols, and--with characteristically biting wit--he uses the Roman Church's reverence for St. Peter as an example (VI, 145).<sup>21</sup>

Donne concludes that there is only one way in which to resolve such various and discordant voices, and that is to "evermore rest ... in that voyce which came from heaven" (VI, 145). Only God knows Christ fully, and so it is only his voice that can make Christ fully known; even if it were possible for a man to know Christ fully, that knowledge would remain for him "an unexpressible mystery, no man could reveale it" (VI, 144). Yet Donne is left with the fact that man must speak, for language is his given means of expression. So, although sometimes there are voices, such as that of Matthew 3:17, which are "miraculously formed by God," Donne explains that God also has left ordinary means for conveying mystery, "the same voice from heaven, the same word of God, but speaking in the ministry of man," even in the present sermon (VI, 145). This assurance concerning the value of human speech does not represent Donne's attempt simply to dispense with the ambivalence concerning men's words and voices

that he has deliberately reflected in this sermon. This ambivalence is his point and his argument: man must continue to speak, must risk making poor and weak and even emprisoning comparisons, knowing all the while that that which his language strives to express is, finally, inexpressible.

In the closing section of the sermon, a gloss on the words, "This is my beloved son," Donne uses again his word-by-word method of analysis. At this point, however, this method has renewed rhetorical force, for it has now become a demonstration of Donne's central insight about language, that one cannot place much faith in human words. Paradoxically, his painstaking gloss on the text could be taken to imply the exact opposite, that individual words are able to define the ultimate meaning of the text. But because Donne's analytic methodology is here coupled with an evident distrust of language, it in fact functions as a denial of its own presuppositions. When Donne glosses and defines each word, he offers for it not one but a variety of interpretations and readings. He points out how even the most revered of the authorities who have interpreted these words at times disagree, or at least offer several valences of meaning for each word. For example, in discussing the word "my" in God's "this is my beloved son," Donne makes the point that Christ is also Abraham's son, the Virgin's son, and David's son. Too, he reminds his hearers that all creatures are in some sense God's sons (VI, 147). That is, at the same time that Donne seeks to demonstrate the constancy of the Word that provides the foundations for men's words, he still acknowledges the multiple valences of meaning for individual words. Earlier in the sermon, he had

argued that only the Word gives life to the testimony of creatures and of miracles; here he presents the corollary, that the individual words even of Scripture, though they are "inanimated" with God's word, can be only mediators and partial reflectors of truth.

Donne's explicit discussion of the inadequacy of human speech, together with the contradictions he has subtly incorporated into his own method, reflects his awareness of the complexities and the paradoxes of his own task as a preacher. At the close of the sermon, his final resolution of these paradoxes occurs outside the realm of argument and proposition. As he did in the sermon on John 1:8, here he offers insight into language and interpretation calculated to transform the interpreter's entire point of view on the text and on his own reflections about the text.

After Donne finishes his formal gloss on Matthew 3:17, he moves back and recapitulates the whole story into which that text fits. But in doing so, he changes the subject of the story, putting his hearers in the place of Christ, admonishing them to "ascend to that growth, which your Baptisme prepared you to," and promising that "the Holy Ghost shall descend upon you, as a Dove" (VI, 149). This is language of another sort, not only because it is poetic rather than propositional, but also because it ceases to interpret and begins instead to be interpreted, to cause the preacher and the hearer both to be subject to the words that are spoken and to participate in the story that they tell. Language, faint and dim mediator of truth though it is, may be redeemed, not by an interpreter who finds the perfect comparison or the indisputable

interpretation of mystery, but rather by a hearer who enters into a "holy conversation," in which, Donne promises, God "shall breathe a soule into your soule, by that voyce of eternall life" (VI, 149).

3. The Word in Christ's Humanity (John 11:35, Whitehall, the first Friday in Lent [1622/3])

Donne's discussions of the events that the gospels narrate consistently reflect his interest in their overall context as elements in the portrayal of the dual nature of Christ and of the events and actions of his life. In a Lent sermon of 1622 or 1623, he preached on John 11:35, "Jesus wept," a text which describes simply the silent witness of Christ to himself by an action neither miraculous nor startling but human and ordinary (IV, 324-44). Donne's concern with the ways in which unseen truth may be manifested is as central to his treatment of this simple text as it is to his exposition of texts such as Matthew 3:17 which describe some divine or extraordinary event. "Without outward declarations," Donne asks, "who can conclude an inward love?" (IV, 331). His obvious point is that Christ's weeping is to be understood as such an outward declaration--but there is a further reason for pausing over this rhetorical query. The disparity between Christ's outward appearance of such evidently human frailty as that described in John 11:35, and the essentially divine nature which John elsewhere ascribes to him is highlighted in the paradox that "Jesus wept."<sup>22</sup> John's report of Christ's tears is a particularly good example of the great mystery of Christ's nature, for its simplicity draws attention to the almost inconceivable

incongruity of the fact that God himself wept over the death of a friend. It is this very incongruity that renders this text opaque for an interpreter approaching it with purely propositional and discursive reflexes. In his interpretation of "Jesus wept," Donne explores the unexpected interplay between inner truth and its outward manifestation, underscoring as he does so the inadequacies of a propositional approach to such a text as this.

The central paradox that Donne explores in this sermon is the truth that without declaring himself to be man and showing the frailty of his flesh, Christ could not have revealed himself to be God. Although Christ's tears are human tears and as such are signs of grief and sorrow, Donne explains that they are also signs of other hidden things. He argues that Christ's tears are threefold, and that this single reference to his weeping in John 11:35 encompasses all the tears and their significations that Scripture attributes to Christ. The gospels report that Christ wept three times, once here, over the death of Lazarus, again later over the fate of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41), and a third time during his passion on the cross. Donne explains that in these three incidents are reflected three essential elements of Christ's nature and office: "the first were Humane teares, the second were Prophetical, the third were Pontificall, appertaining to the Sacrifice" (IV, 325). All three are to be seen in his weeping over Lazarus.

The rationale that Donne proposes for this threefold reading of Christ's tears is formulated poetically. He writes that the tears of John 11:35 are a spring, Christ's tears over Jerusalem are a river, and

his tears upon the cross are a sea; and, "because the Spring flows into the River, and the River into the Sea, and that wheresoever we find that Jesus wept, we find our Text ... we shall looke upon those lovely, those heavenly eyes, through this glasse of his owne teares" (IV, 326). This passage explains nothing in rational terms, but is rather an account of how the text works, and as such it functions also as a reflection of Donne's own proposed method of interpretation. He proceeds through this sermon by way of association and metaphor, concentrating on the images of tears and weeping, and expanding these notions until they become the centre of the sermon; this is like the method of his exposition of John 1:8, in which the word light focusses the entire sermon.<sup>23</sup> The images of spring, river and sea which Donne uses to describe the symbolic possibilities of his text are effective not because of their logical connections to tears and weeping, but because they are poetically compelling.

Although this sermon has obvious emotional appeal, its poetic movement is at the same time calculated and rhetorically subtle. Donne states his purpose in his opening lines, claiming that though

a great personage may speake of his Passion, of his blood; My vicarage is to speake of his Compassion and his teares. Let me chafe the wax, and melt your soules in a bath of his Teares now ... be willing to heare him, that seeks not your acclamation to himselfe, but your humiliation to his and your God; not to make you praise with them that praise, but to make you weepe with them that weepe.

(IV, 324)

The conscious eloquence of this introduction appears to be preparing

Donne's audience for an emotionally charged and even theatrical sermon. The sermon's overall effect, however, is not one of drama for drama's sake, for while its eloquence may at times evoke tears, its final concern is to correct the tendency to self-indulgent melancholy. Donne's hearers are to weep "with them that weep," but they are also to learn to weep with him that weeps, Christ; according to the example of his tears. Christ's tears are a sign of his own mysterious nature as God incarnate, but because they are the tears of God incarnate, they also provide man with a pattern for imitation.

That Donne points out the dual significance of Christ's tears, that they are a sign of God and a model for man, reflects his ever-present concern with the paradigm of incarnation. At the simplest level, Christ wept over Lazarus' death in order to declare his humanity, even though at the same time his divine nature was about to express itself in "the greatest Miracle that ever he did, the raising of Lazarus, so long dead" (IV, 326). That miracle "it selfe declared sufficiently his Divinity" (IV, 327); the weeping, then, spoke equally of his humanity. But Christ's tears were shed not simply as a witness to the frailty of his own flesh; Donne emphasizes that Christ weeps as every man should weep, but as only a man without sin is able to weep. His tears were not "inordinate" but were tears of "natural tenderness," and as such, Donne insists, "they were teares of imitation, and we may, we must weepe teares like his teares" (IV, 331). There is a perpetuating relationship between Christ's tears and man's, in which Christ weeps as man weeps and as man should weep, and man is by that weeping in turn exhorted to weep as

Christ, in reflection of his perfect humanity, wept.<sup>24</sup> Christ as man wept to redeem tears, and Christ's tears--signs of his humanity--redeem man.

Donne comforts his hearers, too, with the reminder that in Christ's weeping is contained the promise that in the last day he "shall wipe all teares from thine eyes" (IV, 344; Rev. 7:17). The force of Donne's argument here is gentle but compelling, like the evidence of Christ's tears which have not the sacrificial efficacy of his blood, yet they have this, that "the blood was drawne, the teares were given" (IV, 331). Christ's humanity and divinity flow together in Donne's poetic translation of the two simple words of his text, illustrating both the complexities and the strange symmetries of God made man.

In his description of multiple reflections of tears and humanity, ours, and Christ's, Donne's interest in the significance of appearances is always implicit. He makes this concern explicit in a later section of the sermon in which he discusses death and its appearances, and describes how even the hand of a great king is in death unable "to nip or fillip away one of his own wormes," while the brain of a wise counsellor can "produce nothing but swarmes of wormes and no Proclamation to disperse them" (IV, 333). Donne's portrayal of the evidences of death here displays the power of his vivid imagination working through eloquent rhetoric to persuade its hearers that they should weep at the misery of death.<sup>25</sup>

This passage draws Donne's audience up to a height of passion and compassion so that they will weep, and so their tears will bear witness

to a new acknowledgement of their mortality and their need for repentance.

Although the tears so induced may evidence Donne's hearers' acceptance of the truth of his words, they may also be but a response to the emotional force of his appeal. This dilemma is as perplexed as Donne's own persistent ambivalence about the value of eloquence and of his own use of language. Late in the sermon, he offers as a rationale for his endeavours to bring his audience to "weepe with them that weepe" the explanation that "all teares have this degree of good in them, that they are all some kinde of argument of good nature, of a tender heart" (IV, 340). Eloquence has value, because to cause people to weep even in response to the rhetorical force of a sermon is to bring them to the beginning of understanding. The necessary next step, however, is that they learn to weep according to Christ's pattern, for the things that caused his tears, man's fallenness and isolation from God, and his consequent subjection to sin and death.

Throughout this sermon, Donne has described Christ's weeping and man's in an attempt to demonstrate the wonder of John's two simple words that speak of the tears of God.<sup>26</sup> Christ submitted himself to the limitations imposed by the vestiges of humanity such as his tears signify, but at the same time those very tears are able to speak through his humanity and bear witness to the nature of God which was also in him. The witness of Christ's tears, a single weeping in which two realities are held, is finally a paradoxical witness testifying to the Incarnation, itself a paradox. Donne closes his sermon on this note, pointing out

that the best tears, "godly teares," are always paradoxical, "for godlie sorrow is Joy ... To conceive true sorrow and true joy, are things not onely contiguous, but continuall ... they consist together, they are all one, Joy and Sorrow" (IV, 343).

If Donne has by force of his eloquence caused his hearers to weep, he has also by his preaching caused them to consider the value and the meaning of those tears, and to recognize that weeping (like all outward expressions) is a sign, and can mean many things. Their weeping can indicate only self-indulgent melancholy; it can also come as the expression of a "godly and tender" heart, and signify a new awareness of the true source of grief. Donne's sermon is in this sense evidence for its own argument, that sorrow--both Christ's and man's--may be transformed into a thing of joy. And, too, because by the form of its rhetoric it acknowledges the multiple significations of all tears, it is further a demonstration of Donne's repudiation of propositional discourse as a way of interpreting the gospels' rendering of the mystery of incarnation.

4. The Word in Christ's Preaching (Matthew 5:8,  
Candlemas Day [1626/7])

While in some of his sermons, such as his exposition of John 11:35, Donne calls into doubt the sufficiency of a propositional approach to religious truth. Which is essentially apropositional, he is himself a master of rational discourse, and he demonstrates this in another gospel

sermon on Candlemas Day of 1626 or 1627 (VII, 325-48). The sermon is an exposition of Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," and in it Donne uses the question of purity to pursue his questions about language and interpretation. His strategy here is a propositional one in which he moves through a dialectic of true and false, working out a model for what is pure by carefully weighing and balancing various possibilities of interpretation for the text. There is, however, a troubling question which underlies this dialectic, and which in fact shapes the entire conception of the sermon more fully than does Donne's evident concern with the definition of purity. Throughout his exposition Donne asks both implicitly and explicitly whether the human heart and the expression of it can ever be truly pure.

In the first few lines of the sermon, Donne questions the possibility of human purity by raising the problem of the purity even of Christian ritual, so much of which is descended from pagan practice. In what is at one level an evident defense against Puritan attacks on "popish" practices in the Church of England, Donne reasons that "it is a perverse way, rather to abolish Things and Names, (for vehement zeale will work upon Names as well as Things) because they have been abused, then to reduce them to their right use" (VII, 325). Here in the opening paragraph, Donne plants the seed from which the whole sermon will grow. "Things and Names," actions and words--both man's and Christ's--have been subject to interpretation and abuse, and thus are, strictly speaking, impure. Things and names are not, however, to be discarded because of this impurity. Instead they are to be reinterpreted and translated and perhaps thereby reclaimed.

Donne reminds his hearers that Christ himself "took his own where he found it," redeeming for the Church's use "those ceremonies, which himself had instituted in the first Church of the Jews," the same ceremonies which "the Gentiles had purloined, and prophaned, and corrupted after" (VII, 326).

The question of purity, then--of how to decide what is of value and what is to be discarded, what is "right use" and what is not--functions as more than just a dialectical structure for this sermon. It also determines Donne's choice of focus for its content. For example, when Donne introduces the context of Matthew 5:8 as Christ's Sermon on the Mount, he does so in terms of the matter of right use of Scripture itself.<sup>27</sup> He acknowledges that there is some doubt as to whether the sermon recorded in Matthew is the same as the one recorded in Luke, or whether Christ repeated essentially the same sermon on different occasions. After weighing the various possibilities Donne resolves the matter not by proffering a synthetic exegetical solution but rather by drawing from an essentially textual problem a homiletic point about the value of repeating the same truths in different contexts (VII, 329-30). Donne resolves a similar trivial dispute when he considers the discrepancy between Luke's and Matthew's narratives concerning "the Auditory, to whom Christ preached this Sermon," when he concludes that the Church has a responsibility to preach to all people, whether learned or simple (VII, 330). In both of these cases, Donne sifts through extraneous and often petty arguments to arrive at a practical and useful conclusion. Part of the interpreter's task, he demonstrates, is to learn the right use of the

words and details of his text, to "try heavenly, and earthly things" (VII, 337) in order to discern what will conduce to true purity and what will merely entangle the interpreter in "imaginary and illusory purities" (VII, 334).

The rest of the sermon contains Donne's treatment of the contents of Matthew 5:8. He proceeds by carefully balancing heavenly against earthly things, in order to discard unnecessary disputes and vain interpretations and come closer to a "pure" reading of the text. Donne speaks, too, of such purity as characteristic of the best interpretation of events. He explains that the blessedness that comes to the pure in heart is not only "an accumulation of all that is Good," it is also the happiness of their understanding that "even those things, which have in them, Aliquam rationem mali, some tincture, and name of ill, (as sicknesses of body, or vexation of spirit) shall be good to them, because they shall advance them in their way to God" (VII, 339-40). According to Donne, purity--in reading and in living--is the result of having learned how to interpret and how to see.

While Matthew 5:8 does promise that those who are truly "pure in heart" will finally see God, it does not address the question of whether any human is in fact "pure in heart," nor does it specify how it is possible to see God. In relation to this latter point, Donne discusses the theological dispute concerning whether God can ever be seen in his essence, and, if so, whether "bodily eyes" or "spiritual eyes" are necessary for that sight. Using the same careful and balanced methodology he has used throughout the sermon, in this passage Donne acknowledges various

points of view concerning the sight of God, and discards overcurious readings of the text.<sup>28</sup> In his own conclusions about how one might see God, he reflects his desire that theological speculation be rightly used, and so cut across the illusory purity of oversubtle points, discerning between those things that matter and things that do not. For Donne, the right use of "Things and Names" expresses the right use of the will-- and that leads inevitably to the sight of God:

therefore in all the works of your senses, and in all your other faculties, See ye the Lord; Heare him in his word, and so see him; Speak to him in your prayers, and so see him; Touch him in his Sacrament, and so see him; Present holy and religious actions unto him, and so see him.

(VII, 346)

Donne does not end the sermon with this exhortation, however; instead, he comes full circle and returns to remind his congregation of the principle with which he opened his discourse, that "it is a perverse way, rather to abolish Things and Names ... because they have been abused" (VII, 325). After all of his careful argumentation and explanation of how purity is to be reached, Donne deliberately returns to the unavoidable fact that things and names have been abused. Things and names are not pure and never will be, and yet because man depends upon them for his knowledge of God and his expression of that knowledge, they cannot be abolished even in the quest for purity.

In the closing paragraph of this sermon, Donne echoes his early assertion of principle, and this time his words have new force as he speaks of his own present struggles to use a language that has been bent and misused. As he attempts to describe what kind of eyes could possibly

behold God, he confesses, "I would say something of the beauty and glory of these eyes, and can finde no words, but such, as I my selfe have mis-used in lower things" (VII, 348). Donne here acknowledges that his language--as all language--has been pressed into the service of something less than pure. This admission provides a powerful conclusion precisely because it expresses the paradox of that sermon as a paradigm of the paradox of all speech, that it is necessary and yet always inadequate.

That Donne essentially retracts his own words while at the same time continuing to offer them to his hearers demonstrates and establishes an important standard for Christian eloquence.<sup>29</sup> Earlier in the sermon Donne explains that "to comprehend, is not to know a thing, as well as I can know it, but to know it as well as that thing can be knowen" (VII, 345). Similarly, to use language wisely or purely is not to speak as well as John Donne can speak; it is to speak as well as it is possible to speak at all, seeking to use words according to the measure of their ability to reflect truth. As Donne explains, the power of language resides not in the ability of the speaker but in his acknowledgement of the frailty of his words: "God is best seen by us, when we confesse that he cannot be seen of us" (VII, 343). Words will never be pure, for it is always true that they will have been "mis-used in lower things." The use of language that is most pure, then, acknowledges impurity and discerns that, because words are earthly things attempting to express heavenly things, their expression will be always and only partial.

The Church, then, must continue to observe ceremonies whose source is

not pure and to participate in rituals that have been subject to abuse; in the same way, too, Donne continues to use a rhetoric whose elegance and eloquence render it susceptible to corruption and misinterpretation. As he does so, however, he draws attention to the essentially impure foundations of all speech, and so leaves his hearers not with a profession of the truth of his own words but with a confession of his own ongoing quest for purity and for the sight of God. He concludes concerning the vision of God that "our best expressing of it, is to expresse a desire to come to it, for there onely we shall learne what to call it" (VII, 348). Purity of speech and purity of the expression and witness of God come only with the admission of impurity, the confession of and conformity to God's word to man.

5. The Word in Christ's Miracles (Matthew 9:2,  
Candlemas Day [undated])

In a Candlemas Day sermon on Matthew 9:2, Donne again confronts the mysterious and perplexed relationship between truth and the spoken word, and suggests how the impurity of human speech may be translated and perhaps transformed by the speech of Christ, himself the true Word of God. The text upon which this sermon is based is from Matthew's story of the healing of a paralytic man, though the verse does not itself refer directly to the man's physical healing: "and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee" (X, 65-83). While Donne does focus in this sermon upon the divine power of

Christ's action, he does so in an unexpected way, as reflected in his choice of Matthew 9:2 as his text. Donne deliberately constructs this sermon around aspects of Matthew's story other than that of the man's physical healing; in so doing he implicitly challenges his hearers' presuppositions about what "miracle" in fact is, and about the nature and role of Christ's words in the working of miracle.<sup>30</sup>

One of the most striking rhetorical devices of this sermon is Donne's persistent use of the metaphors of clothing and "enwrapping." He speaks, for example, of the paralytic as having "but a soule in a sack, it hath no Lims, no Organs to move" (X, 69). In another place he reminds his hearers that the apostles and the church were "enwrapped in prayer" and thus protected by God (X, 72). He remarks too that the love and respect of godly men "shall be an armour of prooffe to thee" (X, 72). Donne also uses the metaphor of clothing or covering to describe how the friends who brought the paralytic before Christ themselves perceived Christ. These friends had a certain kind of faith, Donne writes

though not an explicite faith of all those articles, which we, who from the beginning have been Catechized in all those points, are bound to have, yet a constant assurance that Christ could, and that he would relieve this distressed person, in which assurance, there was enwrapped an implicite faith even of the Messias, that could remove all occasions of sicknesse, even sin it selfe.

(X, 71)

The immediate, superficial trust in the human person of Christ enwraps a deeper or "implicite" faith in the Messiah, a faith which at the time was concealed even from the friends of the paralytic. The man Jesus and

their faith in him temporarily distracted them from recognizing him as Messiah; paradoxically, the human flesh which the Messiah assumed at the same time revealed God to them more fully than they could have imagined.

Donne's image of God clothed in the garment of flesh is of course a metaphor for the Incarnation. The incarnate Christ himself is clothed, too, in the garments of story and gospel, image and metaphor. Donne discusses the perplexities of Christ being so clothed when he characterizes the error of self-referential interpreters as being that of seeking Christ only where they want to find him and seeing him only in those garments they wish to have him wear. Donne writes:

we care not for him in S. Peters Hospital, where he excuses himselfe, Aurum & argentum non habeo, Silver and gold have I none; but in the Prophet Haggais Exchequer we doe, where he makes that claime, Aurum meum, All the gold and all the silver is mine.

(X, 67)

These and other images and stories of Christ that Donne mentions in this passage are the outward forms that enwrap Christ; any interpreter who desires fully to understand Christ, then, must accept his sometimes strange guises and seek to understand them in the light of both the visible and invisible aspects of his nature. However, as Donne remarks, people are not always willing to reflect so carefully upon the meaning of coverings and appearances--"as though the different formes of Religion, were but the fashions of the garment, and not the stuffe, we put on, and we put off Religion, as we would doe a Livery" (X, 67). The forms of religion, like the words and actions of Christ, are the "stuffe" of truth and not

merely its fashion; and, so, however unsuitable or unwieldy the interpreter may consider that stuff to be, he must accept it for the sake of the substantial truth enfolded in it.<sup>31</sup>

The first half of Donne's sermon on Matthew 9:2 is a discussion of the garment of narrative in which Matthew has clothed Christ. Although Donne does use this occasion to teach principles of faith in this first part of the sermon, he concentrates his discussion upon the story's details of time, place and character. He points out that although Christ offered miracles to allow people to "see Grace to be offered unto them," preaching was his "principall meanes" (X, 69). Donne accordingly constructs his interpretation of the miraculous events of the story, not around Matthew's narrative detail but around a close analysis of Christ's own words, "My son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee."

Donne encourages his congregation to see these words as a catechism, Christ's "instruction for this new Convertite, and adopted Son of his," and as he elaborates the major points of that catechism it becomes clear that his own method is deliberately catechistical.<sup>32</sup> He interjects into his discussion three different series of questions that correspond to the three lessons of the catechism he identifies in Christ's words, and also supplies the appropriate answers for those questions (X, 78, 80). Donne concludes this section of the sermon with a fourth catechism in which he exhorts his congregation to draw close to God:

that which Christ does to his new adopted Sonne here, the Wiseman saies to his Son, My Son in thy sicknesse be not negligent; But wherein is his diligence required, or to

be expressed? in that, which followes, Pray unto the Lord, and he will make thee whole; But upon what conditions, or what preparations? Leave off from sin, order thy hands aright; and cleanse thy heart from all wickednesse. Is this all? needs there no declaration, no testimony of this? Yes, Give a sweet savour, and a memoriall of fine floure, and make a fat offering.

(X, 81; Ecclus. 8:9)

By stripping away the vestments of story and asking a series of direct questions about the meaning of that story, Donne is able to uncover some of the narrative's underlying truth which concerns the mysterious relationship between Christ, his words and actions, and God.

That Donne has presented first a narrative and then its interpretation--first a garment and then the body which it covers--is simply a variation of the wellworn homiletic method of first clarifying the primary meaning of a text and then explicating its doctrinal content.<sup>33</sup> However, Donne's conclusion to the Matthew 9:2 sermon reflects a significant innovation which throws light back over the whole story and gives new meaning to both narrative and interpretation. Donne ends his exposition by speaking of the conclusion of Matthew's story of a miracle, and offers a resolution of that narrative and its interpretation--the story and the catechism drawn from it. This resolution mirrors that found in the events retold by his text.

Matthew's narrative reports that after Christ catechized his new convert by forgiving his sins--an outright declaration to the surprised and angered Pharisees of his claim to be Messiah--he acted again, and healed the man of his paralysis. In this last act, says Donne, "he joynes both together; he satisfies the patient, and he satisfies the beholders too" (X, 83). Donne sees that the words of forgiveness that

Christ spoke earlier in fact were themselves a healing. Christ's second action is but the manifestation of that "implicite" healing, the demonstration and even the translation of its authority for the sake of those observers with blunted perception, and with little recognition of the significance of even what they could see.

Central to Donne's understanding of both miracles of healing in Matthew's story is his express acknowledgement that Christ performed them "only by his word, without any naturall, or second means" (X, 83). Christ's word, which speaks both temporally and eternally, encompasses both the story (the paralytic and his desire for wholeness) and its interpretation (the Pharisees and their desire for explanation), and thus shatters the conventional notion of how narrative and interpretation are related to each other.<sup>34</sup>

Earlier in the sermon Donne had suggested the importance of the same idea in the terms of another circular relationship, that which obtains between bodily sickness and sin:

and therefore to breake that circle, in which we  
 compasse, and immure, and imprison our selves, That  
 as sinne begot diseases, so diseases begot more sinnes,  
 impatience and murmuring at Gods corrections, Christ  
 begins to shake this circle, in the right way to  
 breake it.

(X, 79-80)

By his word of forgiveness, Donne says, Christ broke the sin and thus the sickness of the man.<sup>35</sup> The word of Christ that heals the paralytic is also, in the context of Matthew's story as story, the singular word that alone is able to break into the circle of narrative needing interpretation that needs to be clothed again in narrative. By his word, Christ briefly

"unclothes" himself by revealing his identity as Messiah; he also unclothes the paralytic and frees him from the sack of disease that was his body. Unexpectedly, Christ's word unclothes the Pharisees too, for by it, Matthew remarks, Christ "took knowledge of their thoughts; for they had said nothing, and he says to them, why reason you thus in your hearts?" (X, 82). And Donne's closing exhortation makes it clear that the same word unclothes even the hearers of the sermon, in that it calls upon them to remove "all disguises, and palliations of our former sins, by true confession" (X, 83).

In the instant of Christ's speaking the word, for the paralytic, his friends, and the Pharisees, narrative and interpretation, event and signification, become one and the same. In that moment, Christ's word was able to break the cycle of narrative and interpretation and thus transform the present and limiting relationship between language and its meaning. However, Christ's word as spoken is to be distinguished from Christ's word as transmitted, for as transmitted in Matthew's gospel, it reflects the limitations of all human language. One of those limitations is that Christ's speech to the paralytic, unlike God's creative Fiat which was instantaneously spoken, apprehended and obeyed, requires interpretation and so is subject to the possibility of misinterpretation and misapprehension.

Donne and his hearers are, inescapably, interpreters of Christ's speech, for they come late to the story, and can never be part of that instant in which one Word changed all words. Donne's solution to the distance and false categories this situation creates is to offer to his

hearers at least the possibility of altering their relationship to the narrative by their becoming participants in it through a conformity with its demands. Donne writes that he and his hearers can interpret more faithfully and understand more fully "by presenting our diseased and paralytique souls to Christ Jesus," and in so doing "endeavour to bring him to his Dimittuntur peccata, to forgive us all those sins, which are the true causes of all our palsies" (X, 83). The kind of understanding Donne recommends here requires that one forego objectivity and so learn to enter in a new way into interpretation of the story, allowing oneself to be acted upon by it, even as were the paralytic man, the Pharisees, and all the witnesses of Christ's miraculous healing word.

The gospels' witness to truth is given substance by the fact that they speak of Christ himself, and describe the events and words by which he may be recognized to be God incarnate. A mysterious and extra-historical reality is always implicit in the gospels, but their explicit focus is on history, the actual events and actions and audible words of Christ. The various witnesses to Christ which the gospels call upon--God's voice, Christ's human actions, his preaching and his working of miracles--are external witnesses, evidence "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled" (I John 1:1).

Though they too are limited, the gospels are unique in Scripture because they do report these direct encounters between man and God, and

because they transcribe the words of Christ heard by not just one inspired individual but by whole crowds of very ordinary people. The evidence of God, however, is not always so immediate, and in other Scriptures it is clear that in many cases God's actions and words speak through memory more than through experience. The problems of translating God's word as spoken in the past to someone else, transmitted through a tradition and then held in memory, are intense; the writer and interpreter of this kind of manifestation of God's word faces a formidable--and qualitatively different--challenge from that presented by "gospel." Donne's sermons on wisdom literature address this challenge by concentrating upon the words of the individual self about God, and the words of God spoken to that self.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Augustine writes:

How did He come except that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us?" It is as when we speak. In order that what we are thinking may reach the mind of the listener through the fleshly ears, that which we have in mind is expressed in words and is called speech. But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us. (I, xiii)

(On Christian Doctrine, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. [Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1958] 14). For a contemporary discussion of the relationship between the Word/Logos and the human spoken word, see Walter J. Ong, S.J., The Presence of the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 176-91.

<sup>2</sup> Roslie L. Colie, in Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), discusses the centrality of the Logos idea to the concept of paradox: "a Word in which all other words were implicit, a word totally containing all the other members of the class of being ... allows for both unity and infinite variety and relates, by a kind of immanence theory, all things to one surreal essence, the logos itself" (27-8). Cf. A.E. Malloch, "The Techniques and Function of the Renaissance Paradox," Studies in Philology 53(1956) 191-203, who argues that although paradox appears to have a conceptual base, in fact it has only a verbal base.

<sup>3</sup> Colie extends the analogy between God's creation and the poet's, again emphasizing the importance of the Logos concept, and underlining

the limitations of speech. She writes: "God's creative problem was ; to make flesh of the Word; the poet's, to make word and words of the mortal flesh--in other words, God's incarnation must be reworked, worked the other way, so that the transient experiences of the mutable body may lay some claim to immortality. Both unions of word and flesh are incomprehensible" (141).

<sup>4</sup> For a provocative discussion of the relationship between narrative and interpretation, particularly in terms of obscure narratives such as those of gospel and parable, see Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1979). Kermode argues that interpretation is "an intrusion always, and always unsuccessful"; it is the "enigmatic and exclusive character of narrative" that it "banish[es] interpreters from its secret places" (27, 33-4).

<sup>5</sup> Augustine's influence on Donne in this matter of the relation of signs and things has been thoroughly examined and documented. See, for example, Dennis B. Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," ELH 27(1960) 276-97, repr. in Seventeenth-Century Prose, ed. Stanley Fish (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 353-74, and Heather Asals, "John Donne and the Grammar of Redemption," English Studies in Canada 5(1979) 125-39. Asals discusses Donne's Augustinism, making the point that "the prose argues the presence of the Word in words, and the poetry demonstrates (or represents) the Word in words" (125).

<sup>6</sup> The other two sermons on John 1:8, Midsummer Day 1622 (IV, 145-62) and October 13, 1622 (IV, 210-34), both concern the person and calling of John the Baptist.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick A. Rowe, in I Launch at Paradise; A Consideration of John Donne, Poet and Preacher (London: Epworth Press, 1964), discusses the imagery of light in this John 1:8 sermon and its relation to the Genesis creation narrative (145f.).

<sup>8</sup> In a sermon preached Easter Monday 1622, on II Corinthians 4:6, Donne remarks that "in all the Scriptures, in which the word Light is very often metaphorically applied, it is never applied in an ill sence ... Christ is the light of the world, and no ill thing is call'd light" (IV, 103).

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter VI below, 213-216, for a discussion of Donne's treatment of the "principal sense" of a text.

<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of this sermon, Helen Gardner interprets Donne's rejection of the reading of light in John 1:8 as reason to be evidence for Donne's rejection of "spiritual" readings of the text ("The Limits of Literary Criticism," The Business of Criticism [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959] 138-9).

<sup>11</sup> John S. Chamberlin, in Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne (Chapel Hill: University of North

Carolina Press, 1976), discusses the preaching methods of Donne and his Anglican contemporaries and notes their reliance upon patristic and figurative exegesis, and their high regard for individual words "and the multiple significations spread out in networks of interrelated meanings throughout all of Scripture" (104). Such a methodology, Chamberlin argues, is a reaction against the Puritan sermons, which employed a topical logic and tended to reduce the text to a series of doctrinal commonplaces (95-108).

<sup>12</sup> A useful insight into Donne's tendency to concentrate on individual words in a text is provided by Michael Hall, "Searching the Scriptures: Meditation and Discovery in Donne's Sermons," New Essays on Donne, ed. Gary A. Stringer (Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 57 [1977]). Hall writes that Donne's exploration of single words functions to "open a text outward and to encompass a larger portion of Scripture and experience"; "on other occasions the act of exploration may lead only to contraction of meaning and limiting of signification, even to clearing the words of the text" (219, 233). In either case, however, Donne "seems less concerned with the more usual rhetorical tactics of refutation and confirmation than with exploration and understanding. His method is to seek out common interpretations and areas of agreement and redefine the words of a text for himself and the congregation" (228).

<sup>13</sup> Augustine remarks of Scripture that its eloquence comes not only from the beauty of its words but also from the truth that informs them,

and offers this model of eloquence to the Christian orator: "for one who wishes to speak wisely, therefore, even though he cannot speak eloquently, it is above all necessary to remember the words of Scripture. The poorer he sees himself to be in his own speech, the more he should make use of Scripture ... He shall give delight with his proofs when he cannot give delight with his own words" (On Christian Doctrine IV, v [Robertson 122]).

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Henricksen, in "The Unity of Reason and Faith in Donne's Sermons," Papers on Language and Literature 11(1975), cites Donne's parable of the men walking by the seashore as an example of his treatment of the contrast between right and abused reason (24-5).

<sup>15</sup> In his designation of Donne's prose as "self-consuming," Stanley Fish discusses Donne's repeated subversions of his own rhetorical strategies (Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature [Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972]). Fish makes the response of Donne's audience central to the very structure of the sermon, arguing that by his self-consuming tactics, Donne undermines the "supposed subject" of the sermon--the text--and reveals the "true subject" to be ourselves, the hearers (63). The sermon's true structure is thus conformity with Christ, a structure which demands that the hearer abdicate normal rational modes of understanding a text (49). Helen Gardner, however, objects strenuously to Fish's view of Donne's prose, pointing out that he draws large conclusions from a very small

sample. Gardner stresses Donne's emphasis on clarity--the clarity he finds in Scripture's own eloquence--and she emphasizes that Donne himself rejects false rhetoric as misleading (In Defence of the Imagination [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982] 89-94). While I concur with Helen Gardner's emphasis upon Donne's concern for clarity, and agree too that he would not have had his audience merely harassed and bewildered by his sermons, my own examination of the sermons has revealed Donne's repeated and deliberate defeat of the hearer's conventional expectations. This strategy is by no means misleading; it does, however, cause the hearer to apprehend in a new way that the best interpretation of the Scriptural text is conformity with it, not just an objective reading of it.

<sup>16</sup> Luke 7:19ff.; see especially v. 22.

<sup>17</sup> The visible witness is particularly emphasized in the Roman Church's commitment to outward forms; the unseen truth of God is stressed in the Puritan commitment to the "inner voice" in each individual. For an illuminating discussion of Donne's poetics as expressive of his adherence to a via media between these two positions, see Heather Asals, "David's Successors: Forms of Joy and Art," Proceedings of the PMR Conference 2(1977). Asals writes that "to Donne's way of thinking the mystery of the relationship between the outward voice and the inward voice (verbum) clothed in it finds precedence in the relationship between John Baptist and Christ" (33).

<sup>18</sup> This of course is a reflection of Donne's assumption of the validity of typological interpretation and the notion of history it implies; it also expresses his belief in the value of words as signs and the association of verbal creation with Incarnation. Michael Hall remarks that as a result of Donne's grammatical methods, "the reader's recognition is thus drawn out and renewed by the elaboration of the words' own revelatory fullness" ("Searching the Scriptures" 158).

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Henricksen relates Donne's emphasis on the insufficiency of the "voice of the creatures" to his essential position that because of the fall, the natural means of knowing God--reason, reading the book of the world--has been perverted and that thus supernatural means--such as the Scriptures--are necessary ("The Unity of Reason and Faith" 21-2).

<sup>20</sup> Donne's use of "Word" throughout this sermon is purposely ambiguous, and is enriched by this ambiguity. "Word" refers variously to the Scripture, to Jesus Christ, to the eternal creative Logos, to the literal words of God's voice recorded in Matthew 3:17, and even to the sermon being preached. My own use of "Word," then, also carries these multiple references. For a discussion of the various levels of meaning traditionally assigned to "Word of God," see Walter Ong, The Presence of the Word, 179-91.

<sup>21</sup> See the discussion of the link between imagination and idolatry, Chapter II above, 43-5.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. John's references to the divine nature of Christ: John 1:1-18; 5:39-47; 6:35; 8:12; 10:7-11; 12:46; and 14:6.

<sup>23</sup> William R. Mueller, in John Donne: Preacher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), remarks on two of Donne's sermons whose structures are determined by a central water analogy, this one on John 11:35, and a penitential psalm sermon on Psalm 38:4 (142ff.).

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of the John 11:35 sermon as an illustration of the "paradoxical riddle that emptiness is fullness," see Terry Sherwood, Fulfilling the Circle: A Study of John Donne's Thought (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1984) 119-22. Sherwood emphasizes that for Donne, God's emptying himself in the Incarnation is a model for man's contrition; man's conformity to Christ's self-emptying is "to know Christ crucified experientially within oneself," and is "the sum of saving knowledge" (121).

<sup>25</sup> Joan Webber, Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), comments upon Donne's use of the macabre as a dramatic device in his sermons, one which fulfills one of the preacher's functions, that of "shaking the soul" (95, 105-6).

<sup>26</sup> Rosalie Colie offers the useful insight into the relationship between paradox, wonder and modes of speech, that "the genre and rhetoric of paradox, since it exists, like love, in order to conjoin disjunctive

elements and states of being, and to elicit the wonder appropriate to such a state of being, are proper manipulations of the lame language by which men attempt to approximate their sensations of love's transcendence, whether that transcendence be momentary or eternal" (Paradoxia Epidemica 141).

<sup>27</sup> See Donne's comment, in an exposition of Mark 16:16, on preaching on Christ's own words: "the best texts that we can take, to make Sermons upon, are as this text is, some of the words of Christs owne Sermons" (V, 263).

<sup>28</sup> Augustine sheds a practical and homiletic light on this text and the matter of how to see God in On the Trinity, trans. Arthur West Haddan, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff (1887; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) vol. III. Augustine writes that because God is not "a body to be searched out by carnal eyes," "except He is loved by faith, it will not be possible for the heart to be cleansed, in order that it may be apt and meet to see Him" (VIII, 4; Schaff 118).

<sup>29</sup> Dennis Quinn, in "Donne's Christian Eloquence," outlines Donne's indebtedness to Book IV of Augustine's On Christian Doctrine for his rhetorical model (353-62).

<sup>30</sup> In her introduction to John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), Evelyn Simpson

notes Donne's practice of choosing off-centre texts from the passage on which he is preaching. This, she says, is to avoid the danger of lessening the power of a Scripture by too much repetition: "Donne avoided this difficulty by studying carefully the whole passage in which his chosen theme is stated and then selecting as his actual text a verse which would lead up to and suggest the verse which he actually wished to impress on the minds of his hearers" (9). Simpson uses his choice of John 1:8, "he was not that light," over John 1:9--the heart of the passage, "that was the true light"--as an example of Donne's practice.

<sup>31</sup> In Essays in Divinity, ed. Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), Donne writes, "No garment is so near God as his word: which is so much his, as it is he" (39). For Donne, words--garments though they may be--are clearly not to be disregarded.

<sup>32</sup> Joan Webber discusses the tradition of catechistical dialogue in religious prose and discourse, and illustrates Donne's use of this pattern of speech (Contrary Music 101). See Sermons VIII, 174; II, 356; and III, 113.

<sup>33</sup> The general structure of Donne's sermons--detailed analysis of the text; illustration with proofs and examples; and reconstruction of the text from its parts--relies upon classical and patristic models, as shown by Herbert H. Umbach, "The Rhetoric of Donne's Sermons," PMLA 52(1937) 354-58. In this regard, see also Harry Caplan, Of Eloquence: Studies in

Ancient and Medieval Rhetoric, eds. Anne King and Helen North (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), who remarks that Donne's sermons "yield surprising discoveries of spiritual similarity with the sermons of the Middle Ages" (50). Caplan describes the medieval sermon method, which reflects a strong scholastic influence in its use of definitions and distinctions, as being "to unfold the sermon from the internal essence of the truth with which it was concerned by explaining the text and by deducing associated lines of thought" (44).

34 An illustration of the unending circle of narrative and interpretation is the view of Frank Kermode, that interpretation is always an intrusion upon narrative, and thus the end result of any interpretation, any reading, is always disappointment. "World and book," Kermode writes, "it may be, are hopelessly plural, endlessly disappointing; we stand alone before them" (Genesis of Secrecy 145).

35 On Donne's use of the traditional association of sickness with sin and healing with grace, see Winfried Schleiner, The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970) 68-85; Troy Dale Reeves, "Sana me Domine: Bodily Sickness as a Means of Grace in Donne's Sermons and Devotions," American Benedictine Review 33(1982) 270-5:

## Chapter IV

### The Language of Confession:

#### Donne and the Interpretation of Wisdom Literature

##### (Sermons on Psalm 32)

Then turne  
O pensive soule, to God, for he knowes best,  
Thy true grieffe, for he put it in my breast.

"Holy Sonnets" VIII

Of Donne's one hundred and sixty extant sermons, forty-eight are based upon texts from Scripture's wisdom books and of these, two-thirds are expositions of texts from the Psalms. Donne preached three separate sermon series on penitential psalms, a series of six sermons on Psalm 6, eight on Psalm 32 and six on Psalm 38.<sup>1</sup> Although he did preach on texts from Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes, the emphasis upon the Psalms in Donne's canon indicates that his interest and sympathy are not with the purely sapiential or aphoristic aspect of wisdom literature as much as with the confessional tradition that many of David's psalms represent.<sup>2</sup> The seven psalms traditionally identified as the "penitential psalms"--6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143--are especially reflective of this confessional mode of wisdom.<sup>3</sup> Conventional penitential themes, such as sorrow for sin, despair caused by present suffering, and the desire for reconciliation with God, are also strongly confessional

themes. The Psalmist's descriptions of his penitence speak eloquently also of his personal experience of guilt and grief.

Scripture's penitential psalms are more than just confessions of self, however; they are also confessions of God and professions of the Psalmist's faith in him and in his mercy. Still, in the penitential psalms the writer's consciousness of God is coupled with a high degree of self-consciousness, and his awareness of his own affective response to his suffering is as intense as his desire to discover God's purpose in allowing that suffering. Paradoxically, then, the subject of these psalms is both the profession of God and the profession of self. The Psalmist attempts to speak of an essentially unknown and unseen God, and to reveal him by speaking of what he does know, himself--but in so doing he risks allowing the truth about God to be circumscribed and even distorted by his own fallen and self-centred concerns.

The tension that this paradox creates presents a number of particular complexities for the interpretation of penitential psalms. Precisely because they express such an evident preoccupation with self, they demand a rigorous and objective consideration of the significance of their context as Scripture. The nature of Scriptural confession is perplexed, for if it is to be understood as Scripture--and hence authoritative--it must be seen to transcend the human self. In this sense, it is perhaps more true of confession than of some other modes of Scriptural speech that its best interpretation is one that is consciously translation. While it does alter the forms of speech, translation assumes for its text an objective meaning or content which it does not alter. The interpreter who

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seeks to translate a penitential psalm takes as his premise an underlying structure of truth which is independent of the psalm's immediate concern with the particular and subjective experience of the self.<sup>4</sup> If confessions such as those found in the penitential psalms may be translated into other forms of expression, then, they can be seen to rise above self-reference. In seeking new forms for the expression of content, interpretation that is translation seeks also to change the Psalmist's account of his present and individual experience and to render it in a form which bespeaks a general, universal truth.

In his sermons on the penitential psalms, Donne addresses this question of how an individual's confession of self may escape the charge of self-indulgence and self-enclosure if it becomes also a confession of God. Throughout his commentaries on these psalms, Donne refers repeatedly to II Samuel 12 and compares David's response to the prophet Nathan's tale of a wealthy man who had commandeered from a poor man the one lamb he owned; to the confessions expressed in David's penitential psalms.<sup>5</sup> David responds to this reported injustice with an instant legal judgement, sentencing the rich man to death. But his understanding of Nathan's story is severely limited, for David fails to perceive that in fact Nathan is speaking figuratively about the injustice David himself had committed when he took Bathsheba, the wife of one of his own military commanders, and then had the man killed. David's interpretation, which takes the particular events of the tale at face value, is clearly inadequate, and Nathan

himself delivers the definitive interpretation of his own story when he reveals it to be a parable by announcing to David, "Thou art the man!"<sup>6</sup>

David's preoccupation with his own power and pleasure blinded him to the fact that the story was in fact a translation of the events of his own guilty situation. But the moment Nathan's "Thou art the man!" translates the identity of the anonymous "wealthy man," David understands and accepts Nathan's interpretation, confessing simply, "I have sinned against the Lord" (II Samuel 12:13). The parable, then, is interpreted three times: first, inadequately, by David; then, authoritatively, by Nathan; and finally Nathan's interpretation is itself interpreted by David's confession.

When he discusses this event, Donne points out that until David had confessed his guilt, he could not "understand his state" nor interpret the parable (IX, 381). Here, confession is interpretation--and, in the case of Nathan's parable, it is the best interpretation, for it is the one that recognizes the essential relationship between the parable's description of particular events and its general reference to principles of truth and justice which apply to all men. David's confessional interpretation is focussed neither upon an abstract generalization of the situation (as was his first legal interpretation of the story) nor upon a guilty preoccupation with himself as "the man." By his confession David is freed from both extremes, and Nathan in turn is able to offer him the redemption of his situation by promising him God's forgiveness (II Samuel 12:13). Because--as the II Samuel narrative demonstrates and Donne emphasizes--confession can function as interpretation, it is also a form

for instruction concerning the meaning of a text or an experience, and thus is not merely a variant form of autobiography.

#### 1. Speaking of the Self: Autobiography and Confession

This chapter examines Donne's eight sermons on Psalm 32, a series in which he focusses particularly clearly on the interpretive problem of balancing autobiography against instruction in the confessional psalms. Donne's express concern in this series is to address the question of the nature of confession, something he does not do explicitly in the Psalm 6 and Psalm 38 series; here his interest in the nature of confession is provoked and made necessary by the central theme of Psalm 32 itself, the contrast between the experiences of keeping silent about guilt and of acknowledging that guilt before God.<sup>7</sup>

In his treatment of the meaning of confession in this psalm and elsewhere, Donne makes clear the extent to which the confessional tradition participates in the Scriptural tradition of wisdom and instruction in wisdom. The notion of "wisdom" in Scripture is profoundly ethical, and is characterized by a desire to live according to God's law, by a capacity to "wait patiently for the Lord" and trust in him, and by the recognition that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."<sup>8</sup> The considered and aphoristic reflections contained in the book of Proverbs clearly teach wisdom in this sense; in his exposition of David's confessional Psalm 32, Donne demonstrates that this text too provides authoritative instruction in Scriptural wisdom.

Donne's insight concerning the value of confession as a mode of instruction in David's psalms provides him with a critical and objective viewpoint for analyzing these texts; it also provides him with a model for his own approach to teaching the penitential psalms. David instructs through confession, and so Donne in turn employs a vivid and dramatic rhetoric of confession in order to clarify his expository arguments. One commentator who has noted the importance of Donne's dramatic approach to these texts is Dennis Quinn, who remarks upon Donne's relentless emphasis on physical images in the Psalm 38 sermon series as expressive of his attempt to "reveal the affective meaning, the fully realized meaning of the text."<sup>9</sup> In relation to the Psalm 6 series too, Quinn notes how Donne dwells on the fear and weakness of the unrighteous man in order to bring the congregation "to experience the psalm spiritually rather than understand it or grasp its moral."<sup>10</sup> In the Psalm 32 series too Donne appeals to his hearers through compelling accounts of the experience of guilt and suffering. But what may appear to be passionate moments of self-revelation are not sudden outbursts at all; rather, they are part of a deliberate and calculated rhetorical strategy which Donne pursues throughout the Psalm 32 series.<sup>11</sup>

All through his exposition of Psalm 32, Donne illustrates the necessary balance between autobiography and instruction. He notes the importance of both elements in the text of the psalm, which he remarks is titled "Davidis Erudiens," "David's Instruction,"<sup>12</sup> and yet contains passages which express not wisdom but despair:

When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through  
 thy roaring all the day long.  
 For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my  
 moisture is turned into the drought of summer.

(Ps. 32:3-4)

As part of his instruction for his hearers, Donne, like David, deliberately includes passages which speak of his own struggles with sin and guilt.<sup>13</sup>

For example, in the first sermon of the series he writes:

but because I can have no testimony, that this generall redemption belongs to me, who am still a sinner, except there passe some act betweene God and me, some seale, some investiture, some acquittance of my debts, my sins ... for my recovery from my disease ... by [Christ's] comming to me, by spreading himself upon me, as the Prophet did upon the dead Child, Mouth to mouth, Hand to hand. (IX, 261)

In the second last sermon of the series, this same confessional tone occurs again:

Deliver me, O Lord, from my sins, pardon them, and then returne to thy first purposes upon me; for I am sure they were good, till I was ill; and my illnesse came not from thee; but may be so multiplied by my selfe, as that thou mayest bit me and bridle me so, as that I shall not come near thee. (IX, 390)

In both of these passages the confessional nature of Donne's speech is underscored by his reversion to first person. Joan Webber has commented upon the importance of Donne's use of the first person throughout his sermons as representative of his "pulpit self," and as such combining "the immediacy of the 'I,' in varying degrees, with the ceremonial and symbolic nature that he attributes to himself as intermediary between God and man." Webber outlines the various ways in which Donne uses the

first person; at its most basic, "the 'I' simply facilitates the making of a point."<sup>14</sup> In other passages, though, Donne's persona becomes so closely identified with himself that he becomes the persona, a symbol whose "human qualities are wholly submissive to this symbolic portrayal."<sup>15</sup> His use of the first person in the "confessional" passages of the Psalm 32 series falls somewhere between the two. By referring to himself in these passages, he includes himself with his hearers as he identifies and describes emotions and experiences common to all people. Webber suggests that at times Donne uses his persona to develop a "meditation that is entirely his own" and in which "the audience could only have shared vicariously."<sup>16</sup> In these penitential passages, however, in imitation of the model he identifies in Psalm 32 as a model for instruction, Donne's persona speaks of the general human need for repentance, and not only of Donne's individual sin. His rhetoric, then, operates not to exclude his hearers from his experience, but rather to draw them into it and to encourage them to conform to the response to God that it describes.<sup>17</sup>

The single most striking passage of Donne's rhetorical use of confession in his exposition of Psalm 32 occurs in the third sermon of the series, his discussion of the psalm's fifth verse. Here, following the authority of St. Jerome, Donne appends two words to his text: the text reads "I will confesse my sinnes unto the Lord, Domino confitebor," and Donne adds, "adversum me," "against my selfe" (IX, 298, 310). By choosing to acknowledge these two words as part of the text, and by extending their use of the first person through his own, Donne adds

emotional force to his discussion:

the more I finde Confession, or any religious  
practise, to be against my selfe, and repugnant  
to mine owne nature, the farther I will goe in  
it ... The more I say against my selfe, the more  
I vilifie my selfe, the more I glorifie my God.

(IX, 310)

He follows this statement of principle with his own example and his own confession. In a passage which suggests that he is tempted to find himself-- and not confession--"repugnant," he writes:

Depart, in withholding thy Sacrament, for I am  
leprous enough to taint thy flesh, and to make the  
balme of thy blood, poyson to my soule ... And if I  
be too foule for God himselfe to come neare me, for  
his Ordinances to worke upon me, I am no companion  
for my selfe, I must not be alone with my selfe; for  
I am as apt to take, as to give infection; I am a  
reciprocally plague; passively and actively con-  
tagious; I breath corruption, and breath it upon  
my selfe.

(IX, 311)

The mounting force of the metaphors by which Donne describes himself in this passage is remarkable. Donne is not only explaining despair; by his intense application of these metaphors to himself he is also manifesting despair and at the same time moving his hearers to experience it with and through him in order that they might learn to look beyond their present circumstances to God, who alone can answer that despair.

As this confessional passage continues, however, Donne begins to shift ground, and although he sustains his use of first person, he moves away from metaphor into propositional statements of his own unworthiness, claiming that "I have deserved to be dis-inherited," "I have deserved to be annihilated" (IX, 311). Finally, in his ultimate admission of

unworthiness, he writes, "I am not worthy to stoop down, to fall down, to kneele before thee ... So farre doe I confesse Adversum me, against my selfe, as that I confesse, I am not worthy to confesse" (IX, 311). In one sense, of course, this is Donne's final dramatic expression of the extremity of his guilt, and as such marks the rhetorical height of the passage. In another sense, this admission has exactly the opposite effect, for by it Donne turns the entire passage of confession back on himself and exposes its essential impurity; that is, he undermines any autobiographical element his confession might reflect and uses his words instead to warn his hearers and to instruct them about the dangers of false confession. As Donne points out, to concentrate obsessively upon the self, even in despair, is to despair of God and to doubt his presence; paradoxically, then, all confession--which purports to admit humility--in fact has the potential to bespeak pride.<sup>18</sup>

Yet despite the fact that a true or pure confession is so foreign to man, so much "against his self," that it is unworthy of God, confession is still necessary. Donne writes:

be that still thought best, that is most Adversum nos, most against our selves, That that most layes flat the nature of man, so it take it not quite away, and blast all vertuous indeavours.

(IX, 311)

Here Donne has exchanged Adversum me for Adversum nos, and by so doing he emphasizes the fact that his confessions of his own weakness are a confession of the weakness and despair of all men. Notably, too, his movement away from the first person singular follows his disavowal of the worthiness of his confession, and so substantiates that disavowal and focusses his

hearers' attention away from himself.

The structure of Psalm 32 itself provides Donne with a model for this method of teaching. He writes:

so have you the whole mystery of  Davids Confession, in both his Acts; preparatory, in resenting his sinfull condition in generall, and survaying his conscience in particular; And then his Deliberation, his Resolution, his Execution, his Confession; Confession of true sins, and of them onely, and of all them, of his sins, and all this to the Lord, and all that against himselfe.

(IX, 311-2)

That is, an eloquent and impassioned confession is not its own end; it is merely preparatory to the more important step of turning to God with that confession and seeking his mercy. David's resentment of himself is only a part of the attitude of confession as Donne sees it, for when Donne begins to speak in terms of "we" and not "I," he also reminds his hearers that such resentment of self is not to be so intense as to "blast all vertuous indeavours." Confession must also affirm the self as it is redeemed before God, for each self is made in the image of God, and thus even in its worst moments is reflective of God.

Donne's emphasis upon the self as the image of God has immediate implications for our understanding both of Psalm 32 and of Donne's treatment of the psalm. If the self is God's image, it is never autonomous; its existence and its experience have value only because they reflect God. Thus confession of self may, in Donne's eyes, escape and transcend the trap of self-reference which may seem inevitable to this mode of speech.<sup>19</sup> It is this insight which allows Donne to counter the possibility of a merely emotional or affective reading of Psalm 32, even while he

includes passages that have obvious emotional appeal. In his role as a preacher, whether he assumes a confessional or autobiographical voice or persists with a propositional and instructional method, Donne strives to achieve a balanced mode of speech which reflects that of his text. As a preacher here, he is neither an instructor nor an ordinary despairing man with whom his hearers are fully to identify. He seeks, rather, to present himself as an image of both these things, and as such, he is also a reflection of the Psalmist.

Donne's presentation of himself in the Psalm 32 series is parallel to what he understands as David's presentation of himself in the psalm.<sup>20</sup> In the first sermon of the series, Donne speaks of David as "so great a Master" (IX, 251), and notes the importance of the psalm's title, "David's Instruction." Donne goes on to explain that David is a wise teacher who recognizes the truth of Augustine's observation that "we cannot truly love any thing, but that we know," and so teaches things which are "in-intelligible" and "unconceivable" "in such notions, and by such lights, as may enable us to see it, and know it in this life" (IX, 251). Donne writes that in Psalm 32 David "applies himselfe to us" (IX, 264) in three steps, first by "instruction in fundamentall things," then by speaking of the blessedness of the next world, and finally by offering "an earnest, an evidence of this future and consummate Blessednesse."

The third step which Donne identifies in David's teaching, the "earnest of future Blessednesse," is the assurance that "Christ dyed sufficiently for all the world, That Christ offers the application of all

this; to all the Christian Church, That the Holy Ghost seals an assurance thereof, to every particular Conscience well rectified" (IX 264). Donne emphasizes the importance of this third movement in David's teaching, the application of redemption to the self, when he explains that not only does God not impute sin to him, but further, "the Lord shall not suffer me to impute sinne to my selfe" (IX, 262). Therefore, he writes:

I shall not hope, that Originall sin shall not be imputed, but feare, that Actuall sin may: not hope that my dumbe sins shall not, but my crying sins may; not hope that my apparant sins, which have therefore induced in me a particular sense of them, shall not, but my secret sins, sins that I am not able to, returne and represent to mine owne memory, may: for this Non Imputabit, hath no limitation.

(IX, 263-4)

Donne's use of the first person here mirrors his emphasis upon the individual's experience of God. For Donne, teaching and preaching both must move beyond simple instruction in matters of doctrine, to stress the application of that doctrine to the self.

The centrality of Donne's concern for the self in his sermons indicates the extent to which Donne's interpretations of Scripture focus upon the relationship between God and the individual. Dennis Quinn is one critic who has identified Donne's exegesis as primarily tropological, commenting that "a sense of Christ's relation to the individual soul is for Donne the essence of faith itself." Quinn argues that Donne's use of the Scriptural text derives essentially from the "Augustinian conception of the Bible as a spiritual instrument."<sup>21</sup> Certainly, that Donne's interpretation of Psalm 32 is heavily tropological is obvious

in the first sermon of the series, in which he emphasizes David's instruction as culminating in an appropriation of Christ's forgiveness to the individual soul. Similarly, in the conclusion to this first sermon, Donne stresses the importance of the individual when he ends by exhorting his hearers to be without guile in their spirit (IX, 264).

Donne's emphasis upon the individual does not, however, lead to mere moralizing. In his study of Donne's exegesis, Quinn makes an interesting distinction which is relevant here when he explains how much Donne is unlike Calvin, "who set the tone for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exegesis," and who "finds a natural morality in the advice and example of David and Job."<sup>22</sup> In both Calvin and Luther Quinn identifies a prosaic and practical tendency which assumes that "knowledge of one's own weaknesses and temptations teaches one what to avoid and what to seek," and that "the life and sayings of David are more useful than the popular lives of the saints."<sup>23</sup> Quinn argues that Donne's Augustinian approach to Scripture leads him to perceive between the Psalmist and all Christian souls "a sacramental relationship, not a purely natural one."<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, Quinn expands this observation by explaining that, for Donne, David is a "type of fallen humanity" whose words do not only "convey and illustrate morality"; rather, "David is moral instruction in his symbolic reflection of Adam and Christ."<sup>25</sup>

As a preacher, Donne is concerned to communicate the extent to which David's experience is the experience of all men, and so in his sermons he seeks to make David's fear, despair and consolation real to his hearers in order that they may be able to identify with David and thereby be

drawn to Christ. As Joan Webber argues, Donne's use of the first person in these sermons functions to invite identity between the writer of Scripture, the preacher, the congregation and all men.<sup>26</sup> Webber notes that this sense of identification between the preacher's words and the experience of the congregation is also encouraged by Donne's use of a prose style which deliberately seeks "release from the requirements of grammar in order to seem to reach closer to the actual movement of thought and imagination."<sup>27</sup>

The extent to which Donne permits any literal identification between David and himself in the Psalm 32 series is, however, strictly controlled by the overall structure of his logic. His passages of confession, despite being written in the first person with the intensity of self-confession, are not autobiography but instruction. William Rooney makes a similar observation concerning the rhetorical strategy of Donne's Second Prebend sermon, which Rooney identifies as focussing upon Donne's "illustrative projection of the speaker himself as afflicted humanity."<sup>28</sup> Such a form of argument of course risks melodrama, but Donne's sermon avoids this pitfall, as Rooney observes, "because personal affliction and passive endurance, while emerging as the real theme of the sermon, are in intention only a countertheme."<sup>29</sup> That is, Donne's proposed theme--here, confidence in God--is never relinquished as the ultimate end of the sermon's logical argument. In the same way, in the Psalm 32 series the structure of Donne's ideas provides the framework and the justification for the form of his rhetoric. Donne's

repeated and explicit acknowledgement of Psalm 32 as confessional and as--like all confessions--potentially problematic, establishes a standard of objectivity by which an apparently autobiographical psalm can be interpreted as also a psalm of instruction.

Donne underscores the dual nature of a confessional psalm when in the sixth sermon of the Psalm 32 series he explains that the psalm, Davidis Erudiens, "David's Instruction," is by Rabbinic tradition alternatively titled "Leb David, Cor Davidis, The opening and pouring out of Davidis heart to them, whom he instructs" (IX, 350). The preacher, too, participates in this Scriptural model of instruction by confession; Donne writes that "True Instruction is a making love to the Congregation" and concludes that "wee have no way into your hearts, but by sending our hearts" (IX, 350). Like David, then, who did not spare himself when he wrote his psalm, Donne says that for preachers,

to preach out of our owne history, so farre, as to declare to the Congregation, to what manifold sins we had formerly abandoned our selves, how powerfully the Lord was pleased to reclaime us ... to preach our selves thus, to call up the Congregation, to heare what God hath done for my soule, is a blessed preaching of my selfe.

(IX, 279)

The preacher, then, has a public role and a public responsibility--and, like the prophet who speaks the word of God to his own generation, when he speaks he is not a "private person" (IX, 285). If he neglects this responsibility, Donne says, "the blood of a whole Parish shall be required at my hand, because I forbore to speak plainly of their sinnes, and Gods judgement" (IX, 285). He exhorts all preachers to "let this be all our Discretion, as Discretion is wisdome, that we use no Discretion"

(IX, 285). The categories of what is discreet and what is wise are completely altered here as Donne explains that the preacher must discard the conventional wisdom that would have him keep silent about his sin. For the sake of his hearers, the preacher is (like David) to engage in an apparently foolish indiscretion by confessing his unworthiness and the commonality of sin between himself and his hearers. By projecting himself as everyman, "afflicted humanity," the preacher can redeem personal confession from the despair of inevitable self-reference.

The importance of preaching as instruction for the whole community is illustrated particularly well by the fourth sermon of the Psalm 32 series, in which Donne makes use of the conventional and accessible preaching tool, the exemplum.<sup>30</sup> He explains the dangers of straying from God by likening the man who goes outside the church to one who swims in a flood, "but into more and more water" (IX, 319), and the man who foolishly prays only for temporal blessings to one who buys only "unwholesome hearbs" from an apothecary (IX, 323).<sup>31</sup> But while in the exposition of Psalm 32:6 Donne uses sermon exempla in conventional ways to explicate the sense of his text, he does not lose sight of his principle that "True Instruction is a making love to the Congregation" (IX, 350).

## 2. Instruction by the Self: Precept and Example

There is in Donne's sermons an unusual combination of ordinary preaching methodologies with intense and dramatic innovation, but Donne never subverts the primacy of reason, even in his most meditative and confessional passages.<sup>32</sup> For Donne, as Terry Sherwood observes, "the

words 'consideration' and 'meditation' are virtually interchangeable and fall within the sphere of reason," and thus even in non-argumentative passages, "the syllogism is rarely dismembered completely."<sup>33</sup>

In the Psalm 32 series, Donne confronts the issue of how in the rhetoric of a sermon emotional appeal can meet and serve the needs of intellectual appeal when he proposes as his--and the Psalmists'-- model for teaching the traditional, rational model of precept and example. At the beginning of the second sermon of the series, he writes that "all wayes of teaching, are Rule and Example ... The Example makes that that is proposed for our learning and farther instruction, like something which we knew before" (IX, 274).<sup>34</sup> Rule and example are like "the body and soule of Instruction," Donne explains; so David's confession of suffering is the example which is necessary to animate the rule and make it alive for the hearer (IX, 274). Donne explains that Psalm 32 is ordered according to this model. The precept established in verses one and two--"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven ... and in whose spirit there is no guile"--is followed in the rest of the psalm by

the other fundamentall, and constitutive element  
of Instruction, Example; And by Example [David]  
shews, how far they are from that Blessednesse,  
that consists in the Remission of sinnes, that pro-  
ceed with any deceit in their spirit.

(IX, 275)

In the second sermon of the series, Donne explains how the model of precept and example which David applies in Psalm 32 appears throughout Scripture. Even the creation of the world, he writes, may be understood as a manifestation (an example, as it were) of "certaine Idea's, and

formes, and patterns" in the mind of God (IX, 276). There are, Donne claims, "no Books in the world, that doe so abound with this comparative and exemplary way of teaching, as the Scriptures doe" (IX, 276). He supports this contention by tracing Scripture's use of the word "exemplum" and by citing a series of instances in Scripture in which individuals propose themselves as exemplary in some way (IX, 276-80). Christ taught through parables and exempla, and is himself the great example for imitation. Donne points out that St. Paul and Solomon also offer themselves as patterns (IX, 278-9). He develops an extended analogy between David's psalms and Ecclesiastes, where Solomon "confesses things there, which none knew but himselve, and ... preaches himself to good purpose, and poures out his owne soule" (IX, 279).

In general, then, a truth is proved or disproved by example in Scripture as it is anywhere else. There is, however, a significant exception to this pattern which sets Scriptural speech and logic apart from secular methods of argument and instruction. In the words of Isaiah, Donne points out this exception, asking "To whom will yee liken God, or what likenesse will yee compare unto him?" and concludes that "there can be no example, no patterne to make God by" (IX, 277; Is. 40:18). The logical paradigm of precept and example which holds for most human speech and reasoning cannot account for God, for no example can be fully adequate to explain or illustrate God. By acknowledging this, Donne also implicitly acknowledges that the nature of reason and instruction is always finally subject to God's authority as the ultimate and essential Rule. Man's speech, even when it is only an attempt to provide an example

or illustration of God, is always limited.

Donne points out a second way in which Scripture qualifies the accepted method of instruction by example when he reminds his hearers that conventional and secular wisdom would maintain that "a wise man must never speak much of himself; It will argue, say they, a narrow understanding, that he knows little besides his own actions, or else that he overvalues his own actions" (IX, 278).<sup>35</sup> In Scripture, however, wise men do propose themselves as examples, as David does in Psalm 32. Donne describes the unconventional manner in which David offers himself as an example, writing that

he labors not to shew his reading, but his feeling;  
not his learning, but his compunction; his Conscience  
is his Library, and his Example is himselfe, and he  
does not unclasp great Volumes, but unbutton his owne  
breast, and from thence he takes it. (IX, 278)

In Scripture's terms, the fact that David labours to show his feeling does not reflect his overvaluation of himself or his experience. Donne explains that David's proposition of himself as example does not reflect his desire to choose himself above others; David and other wise men in Scripture choose themselves in order to ensure that "they doe not spare, nor forbear themselves more then other men" (IX, 278).

On the contrary, David's confession of self recorded in Psalm 32 and in other penitential psalms in fact conduces to "his owne shame." At the same time, however--and this is the crux of Scripture's innovative use of precept and example--David's confession conduces to God's glory (IX, 278). That is, precept and example become more than just a model for the systematic application of principles of learning. The conventional

paradigm is transformed by Scripture, which paradoxically affirms the value of self as an example of truth and the value of individual experience as conducing to the glory of God, and yet reminds man that nothing can ever be adequate as an example or even an illustration of God.

Man is not finally either an example or an illustration of God, however, and in this the paradox both intensifies and resolves: man is God's image. The tension inherent in the confessional psalms is the same tension which strains all human attempts to speak of God or of the self. Man is made in God's image, but he has by his fall distorted that image, and so his is a double nature. Donne explains that man finds himself to be like the mule, "engendred of two kinds," "composed of a double, a heavenly, and earthly nature, and thereby bound to duties of both kinds, towards God, and towards men, but to be defective and barren in both" (IX, 376). It is only by recognizing these limitations and tensions within his own nature that man can come to self-knowledge--and Donne emphasizes that "no study is so necessary as to know our selves" (IX, 257).<sup>36</sup>

Donne also points out, however, that man tends to resist self-knowledge, as he resists recognizing his own limitations, for he is characteristically "negligent and lazy, in inquiring of things, which belong to the way" (IX, 256). Because of this, Donne explains, it is often only through adversity that man is able to know himself: "so when the hand and sword of God hath pierced our soul, we are brought to a better knowledge of our selves, then any degree of prosperity would have

raised us to" (IX, 256). Donne illustrates the role of adversity in the gaining of self-knowledge with the example of David, "who first said in his prosperity, He should never bee moved; But, When, sayes he, thou hidest thy face from me, I was troubled, and then I, cryed unto thee O Lord, and I prayed unto my God; Then; but not till then" (IX, 256-7). The penitential psalms, then, which describe David's response to adversity, are expressive not of autobiography but of the self-knowledge which the experience of adversity brings.<sup>37</sup> It is clear, too, from Donne's example of David and from his further example of Peter, who expressed his self-knowledge in the words "Lord thou knowest that I love thee" (IX, 257), that for Donne true self-knowledge is always to know the self as it is in relation to God.

Dennis Quinn notes in relation to Donne's sermons on Psalm 6 that Donne's emphasis on the role of memory in the psalm is congruent with his understanding that Psalm 6 "reflects the soul in the act of seeing itself and hence seeing its origin."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in his exposition of Psalm 32, Donne endeavours to remind man of his beginning, of "his letters, his Alphabet; how he was spelled and put together, and made of body and soule" (IX, 385). The premise upon which man's understanding of his experience is to be built is that he is God's creature whose value and worth derive from the fact that he was made in God's image. Donne explains that the "proud man hath no understanding" but displays an "absurdity, that height of strange ignorance"; although "he hath seene halfe his owne time burnt out and wasted, and yet hee dreames of an eternity in himselfe" (IX, 385-6). Such illusions about finding "eternity in the self" prohibit

self-knowledge, } according to Donne. For him, "the end of knowing our selves, is to know how we are disposed for that which is our end, that is this Blessednesse [ie. forgiveness of transgressions]" (IX, 257).<sup>39</sup>

God's knowledge of man's frailty and fallenness, then, alone can provide the context for true self-knowledge--and that renewed self-knowledge is in turn the context that gives value and purpose to confession. Donne's emphasis upon self-knowledge reflects his recognition of the tradition of Christian Socratism in which knowledge of the self implies--and even is--the knowledge of God.<sup>40</sup> True confession expresses both self-knowledge and the knowledge of God; because it acknowledges the self's relation to God, to its own conscience, and to the world around it, confession is able to remind man of his beginning and his ending, and thus to provide a continuous gloss upon the middle of the narrative, the present experiences and circumstances of the individual.

### 3. Understanding the Self: Reason and Faith

Donne's concern with the value of the image of God in man and with the ways in which that image allows man to overcome the limitations of self-reference appears in a central role in the sixth and seventh sermons of the series, which examine the respective roles of faith and reason in man's apprehension of God. In this context, Donne reminds his hearers that Psalm 32 is a "Psalm to rectifie the understanding" (IX, 382), and goes on to explain that the essence of a rectified understanding is balance. One must of course recognize one's own fallenness as such (cf. IX, 301); at the same time, however, man must also "value aright the dignity of his

nature, in the Creation thereof according to the Image of God, and the infinite improvement that that nature received, in being assumed by the Son of God" (IX, 378).

In his exposition of Psalm 32:7, Donne explains that the dignity of man's nature, that which raises him above the horse and the mule, is his capacity for understanding. Because the beasts do not have understanding, Donne remarks, "it is impossible that ever they should have faith" (IX, 372). When man neglects the image of God in him, "we are our selves become Beasts," and Donne bids his hearers instead to "consider the dignitie of thy soule, which onely, of all other Creatures, is capable, susceptible of Grace" (IX, 374). Later in the sermon, Donne speaks of the understanding as "the receptacle of Faith" (IX, 386).<sup>41</sup> If, however, "by a wilfull drowsinesse, and security in his sins" a man gives over "the debatement, the discussing, the understanding of the maine of his believe, and of his life," abandoning his capacity for understanding himself, he abandons also his capacity for knowing God in whose image he is made (IX, 385).

When man neglects or ignores his capacity for understanding, he leaves himself vulnerable to despair concerning himself and concerning God. In the sixth sermon of the series, an exposition of Psalm 32:8, Donne warns his hearers that "the Devill hath not so powerfull an instrument, nor so subtile an engine upon thee as thy selfe" (IX, 364). Pre-occupation with one's own fallenness, with "the worst man in the world, our selfe" (IX, 364), is irrational and leads only to despair. Earlier in the series Donne had explained that "to accuse my selfe of sin, after God hath pardoned me, were as great a contempt of God, as to presume of that

pardon, before he had granted it" (IX, 272).

As the answer to such obsessive self-accusation, Donne offers instruction and reason: he writes that "thus farre hath our blessed Lord assured us, That he will make us understand, which is his Instruction de credendis, what to Beleeve" (IX, 366). Despair is answered with the understanding of God's promised favour which "sanctifies, nay more than sanctifies, glorifies all the Eclipses of dishonour, makes Melancholy cheerefulnesse, diffidence assurance, and turnes the jealousie of the sad soule into infallibility" (IX, 367).<sup>42</sup> The knowledge of self which Psalm 32 reflects and encourages in its hearers is, then, a knowledge premised upon the image of God in man and upon man's capacity to understand himself and his individual experiences in relation to the larger context of God and his instruction to all men.

True understanding of self, then, leads to an understanding of the mysteries of faith. One of these mysteries is that of the relationship between confession of self and God's response to that confession:

I acknowledge my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity  
have I not hid. I said, I will confess my trans-  
gressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the  
iniquity of my sin. (Ps. 32:5)

Donne comments on this fifth verse of Psalm 32 that "this is the Sacrament of Confession; So we may call it in a safe meaning; That is, The mystery of Confession; for true Confession is a mysterious Art" (IX, 296). Confession for the Protestant Donne is not a sacrament by virtue of its being a mystery guarded by the Church, whose outward manifestation has some magical efficacy. Rather, confession is mysterious because it is opaque

and because it is full of paradoxes that confound human expectations. "Therefore," writes Donne, "doe we speak of the mystery of Confession; for it is not delivered in one Rule, nor practised in one Act" (IX, 297). It is neither pure autobiography--though its form may be autobiographical--nor pure instruction--though its ultimate end may be to instruct. The self expressed in it is neither just an individual nor just a symbol of all men. Confession in its truest sense is not "delivered in one Rule"--it is but one example which illustrates an unchanging rule, and so there may be many confessions providing many examples of that same rule.

One of the reasons that confession as it appears in Scripture is so mysterious to man is that the rule which confession exemplifies is itself a mystery. Man is accustomed to the rules which apply to temporal existence, rules which dictate, for example, that "in this world, though I multiply sins, yet the Judge cannot punish me, if I can hide them from other men, though he know them; but if I confesse them, he can, he will, he must" (IX, 296). In this earthly sense, the action of confession achieves justice, for unless he confesses, the guilty person cannot be punished. In contrast to this is the "mystery of the kingdom of heaven," which exemplifies a different rule, God's rule, in which common justice is transcended by the power of mercy. The mystery of the kingdom of heaven, explains Donne, is

that no man comes thither, but in a sort as he is  
a notorious sinner ... That onely the Declaring,  
the Publishing, the Notifying, and Confessing of  
my sins, possesses me of the Kingdome of heaven.

(IX, 296)

Donne recognizes this mystery at the heart of Psalm 32. Confessions like David's, which illustrate Scripture's precepts concerning justice and mercy and the relationship between man and God, seek to profess and reveal God through coming to understand the self. Self-revelation is thus translated into a revelation of the nature of God, and in this translation the self too is transformed by the recognition of its own nature as God's image redeemed in Christ.<sup>43</sup>

Even when it has the purest of intentions, however, because confessions like that of Psalm 32 are expressed in human words by human voices and addressed to a human audience, they are always in some measure compromised. An audience easily forgets that confession is a mystery, and listens greedily for self-revelation, the evident or apparent meaning of that confession. Certainly any preacher who uses himself as an example takes this risk:

there is a case, in which the notoriety of my sins does harme; when my open sinning, or my publishing of my sin, by way of glory, in that sin, casts a scandall upon others, and leads them into tentation; for so, my sin becomes theirs, because they sin my sin by example.

(IX, 296)

As Donne points out here, there is a danger that the one who confesses himself will forget that his confession is a mystery, and that as a result he too will misinterpret the experience he is seeking to express, and indulge in a destructively acute awareness of his sin—and thus in despair.<sup>44</sup> A confession which concentrates upon the "notoriety of sins," and not upon God's mercy, is proud and self-indulgent, and in the end is only a false confession which, ironically, further separates

its speaker from the God he purports to seek.

Throughout his discussion of the nature of confession, Donne attempts to strike a balance between the two equally dangerous extremes of, on the one hand; wrongly concealing sin and, on the other, concentrating obsessively upon the need to reveal it. Human intentions in confession are as impure and inadequate as is the language to which all confessions and all human expression are bound. Donne confronts this dilemma by acknowledging it as a general problem and confessing it to be also a particular problem:

When the Preacher preaches himselfe, his owne sins,  
and his owne sense of Gods Mercies, or Judgements  
upon him, as that is intended most for the glory of  
God, so it should be applied most by the hearer, for  
his own edification; for, he were a very ill natured  
man, that should think the worse of a Preacher,  
because he confesses himselfe to be worse then he knew  
him to be, before he confessed it. (IX, 280)

At times in his exposition of Psalm 32, Donne assumes the role of one making a confession, and thus far at least he may be understood as "preaching himself." He admits that telling his sin "by way of a good tale, or by boasting in it, though it be a revealing, a manifesting, is not a Confession" (IX, 305). But Donne recognizes and teaches that true confession is a mystery and is not to be taken at face value as frivolous self-revelation. When in his public sermon persona he confesses sin, then, Donne does so (in his own terms) with impunity, using the first person and dispensing with conventional discretion in order to teach by example the "sweetnesse" of true confession in which one comes not only to know the self but also--mysteriously--to know the God who

made the self. David's confession of self translates God into human terms; Donne, too, by preaching himself, uses the terms of his own experience as a way of translating and making real the mysterious abstract truth of God's dealings with man.

There is another mystery to confession, as Donne points out in the conclusion to the fifth sermon in the Psalm 32 series: its effect upon the one who confesses is as paradoxical as its effect upon the hearer or interpreter. When a man confesses he is assured of two apparently contradictory things: that God

will compass us ... with songs, with a joyfull sense of our perseverance, but yet with cries too, with a solicitous feare, that that multiplicity and hainousnesse of our sins may weary even the incessant and indefatigable Spirit of comfort himselfe, and chase him from us. (IX, 349)

That is, confession reminds man simultaneously of his own sin and of God's mercy, and, paradoxically, surrounds him with an awareness of both. Donne remarks that the structure of the book of Psalms itself is an image of this dual "compassing about." He notes first that David "begins this Book with Gods blessing of man, so he ends it with mans praising of God" (IX, 255). He explains how Psalm 32 itself reflects this overall structure, for it opens by declaring the blessedness of "he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered," and concludes with an exhortation to praise and "be glad in the Lord."

In his own exposition of Psalm 32, Donne further emphasizes this "compassing" structure. He opens by explaining that out of this assertion of blessedness the rest of the psalm grows:

Philosophers could never bring us to the knowledge, what this Summum bonum, this Happiness, this Blessedness was. For they considered only some particular fruits thereof; and it is much easier, how high soever a tree be, to come to a taste of some of the fruits, then to digge to the root of that tree: They satisfied themselves with a little taste of Health, and Pleasure, and Riches, and Honour.

(IX, 254-5)

With characteristic visual wit, Donne reminds his hearers that the root of the tree that bears these good fruits is not below, in the ground, but rather above, in heaven; it is "Christ Jesus, who is the root of all" (IX, 255). This blessedness, the assurance of Christ's forgiveness of sin, prepares the hearer to interpret the psalm's confession of despair and to place it in the right perspective.

Donne's exposition of the final verse of the psalm completes the frame he has given to his interpretation of David's confession, both by echoing David's exhortation to "be glad in the Lord," and by recalling the metaphors he himself had used in his exposition of the first verse. He writes that "this is the roote of our three Branches, the foundation of our three Stories ... Mercy, Compassing mercy" (IX, 410). He exhorts his congregation to "hold up a holy chearfulness in thy heart" and

let the world see, that all this growes out of a peace, betwixt God and thee, testified in the blessings of this world ... and then thou hast that Portion, which growes out of this root, in this Text, Mercy shall compasse him about that trusteth in the Lord.

(IX, 411)

Donne has "compassed" his discussion of Psalm 32 with discussions of blessedness and praise, and with metaphors for God's compassing mercy-- but he reminds his congregation too that the nature of God's mercy is

at times as much a mystery as confession itself. "Prosperity and Adversity, Honour and Disgrace, Profit and Losse, the Lords-Giving and the Lords Taking, doe all concurre to the making up of this Paile, that must Compasse us," Donne explains: "there must be nailes in the Paile, as well as stakes, there must be thornes in the hedge as well as fruit trees" (IX, 410). As an image of this, Donne recalls for his hearers the mysterious book that God gave Ezekiel to eat; it was "written within and without, with Lamentations, and Mournings, and Woes; but when he eate it, he found it in his mouth as sweet as honey" (IX, 408). The sorrows that come to the righteous, like the confession David makes in Psalm 32, are in the end as sweet as honey--but they are still, in the present, sorrows.

Donne illustrates the mystery of suffering further with the example of Christ himself, who was "the one Man without any sin" and yet was still "A man of sorrowes, and acquainted with Griefe" (IX, 407-8; Is. 53:3). For Donne, Christ is not simply a comforting illustration of how even the most righteous do indeed suffer, nor is he a universal type or symbol of the suffering man. Donne writes of Christ that even "his Actions are more then Examples, for his Actions are Rules" (IX, 281). David, in his confession, may be an example or even a type of all men; Donne, too, in his role as preacher, may offer himself and his life as an example of the experience of all men. But only Christ rises above the paradigm of precept and example by becoming both--and thus changing both. As always, for Donne, it is the wonder of the Incarnation that transforms everything.<sup>45</sup> Christ's self-revelation does not "signify".

or "conduce to" the glory of God: it is the glory of God and the revelation of his nature. He speaks the words which reveal God, and he is the very Word of God.

In Christ, the confession of self and the confession of God are one and the same, a revelation which by its mercy redeems self-revelation by lifting it above the circular despair of self-reference. The "reciprocal plague" is healed and the power of its infection broken by recognizing "all that comes, to come from God" and seeing that "every piece serves to the making up this Paile" which encompasses the confession. Confession is then no longer enclosed, for it is not limited and blinded by self-centred perceptions. The memory of past mercy and the promise of future blessedness provide a beginning and an ending for all confession, and so the middle--the present experience of adversity and suffering--may be by that context translated into speech which signifies God and not just the self. To understand the form of self-confession as translated into confession of God is to apprehend also that there is a translation of the self confessed, and of the one who learns to hear in that confession not autobiographical detail but instruction in truth. The final resolution of self with God, image with substance, is found fully only in the Incarnation of Christ, but Donne demonstrates that in the penitential psalms it may be at least glimpsed, heard faintly in the self's cry to God newly translated into a shout of joy.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Potter and Simpson have dated these three sermon series as follows: the Psalm 38 series (II, 49-163), because it was described in the Folio as "Preached at Lincoln's Inn," must be pre-1621; the Psalm 6 series (V, 318-89; VI, 39-61), "though undated, could be assigned with some confidence to the years 1622 and 1623"; the Psalm 32 series (IX, 250-411), they conclude, belongs to a "later period of his ministry," most likely the winter of 1624-5 ("Introduction" IX, 34-7).

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Grant, in The Transformation of Sin: Studies in Donne, Herbert, Vaughan and Traherne (Montreal and London: McGill/Queen's University Press, 1974), sees Donne's concern with man's fallenness, sin, and the penitential psalms as evidence for his Augustinism (56-60). Other commentators regard Donne's emphasis upon penitence and contrition as expressive of his essentially Protestant outlook. See, for example, William H. Halewood, The Poetry of Grace: Reformation Themes and Structures in English Seventeenth-Century Poetry (New York and London: Yale University Press, 1970) 58ff.; and Douglas L. Peterson, "John Donne's Holy Sonnets and the Anglican Doctrine of Contrition," Studies in Philology 56(1956) 504-18.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski, in Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), discusses the centrality of the Psalms in the evolution of a biblical

poetics. Lewalski comments that the Psalms were seen as representing "an epitome of human emotions" (42); the seven penitential psalms were regularly identified with a particular genre, and "among Protestants they were generally regarded as meditations" (46). She remarks, too, upon Donne's adherence to this literary tradition of reading the Psalms as prayers, and adds that he also recognizes that such prayers may be meditative, instructive, or both (48).

<sup>4</sup> In a sermon on Matthew 19:17, Donne comments upon the problem of self-knowledge as self-enclosing: "blessed are they that inanimate all their knowledge, consummate all in Christ Jesus ... All knowledge that begins not, and ends not with his glory, is but a giddy, but a vertiginous circle, but an elaborate and exquisite ignorance" (VI, 227).

<sup>5</sup> Donne refers to this story eight times in sermons on the penitential psalms. See especially II, 126; V, 304; IX, 269; IX, 381; and for his comparison of David's confession to Nathan with his confessional psalms, see IX, 280.

<sup>6</sup> II Samuel 12:7. See Donne's discussion of Nathan's pronouncement in a sermon on Luke 23:40 (266).

<sup>7</sup> Neither Psalm 6 nor Psalm 38 directly addresses the problem of confession as such, except in verse 18 of Psalm 38, a text on which Donne does not preach. In a sermon on Psalm 6:4-5, Donne remarks on the importance of man's confession to God as restoring God's image in him

(V, 371); preaching on Psalm 38:9, Donne again emphasizes man's need to confess his sins to God (II, 159). In both cases, Donne's primary reference is to the private confessing of sin.

<sup>8</sup> For Old Testament characterizations of wisdom, see Prov. 1:7; 2:6; 24:5; 12:1, 5; Job 32:6-11, 18-20; and Jer. 9:23f. See also the description of Wisdom in Proverbs 8, in which wisdom is exalted into a hypostasis, and has obvious connections with the Logos principle, which is articulated in the prologue to John's gospel. For discussions of Old Testament wisdom, see Gerhard von Rad, Wisdom in Israel, trans. James D. Martin (London: SCM-Press, 1972) especially 53-110; Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, 2 vols., trans. J.A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967) vol. 2, 80-94. Eichrodt emphasizes the importance of wisdom in the Hebrew tradition as not only skill in practical affairs, but also deriving from and expressive of "the purpose and order discernible in the cosmos" (83).

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," ELH 27(1960) 276-97, repr. Seventeenth-Century Prose, ed. Stanley Fish (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 366.

<sup>10</sup> Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence," 370-1.

<sup>11</sup> Joan Webber, in Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), suggests that in some cases Donne "is clearly thinking of his own individual life and soul,"

and she notes that sometimes he does, however briefly, present himself "in a personal outburst which has behind it the force of passion", (117-8).

<sup>12</sup> Donne notes the importance of the psalm's title elsewhere in the series: IX, 250; IX, 273; IX, 350; and IX, 382.

<sup>13</sup> Passages which speak particularly intensely of the struggles of the individual--and perhaps of Donne himself--appear elsewhere in his sermons on the Psalms. See, for example, II, 52-3; II, 62f.; VI, 308; and IX, 304-5.

<sup>14</sup> Webber, Contrary Music 115.

<sup>15</sup> Webber, Contrary Music 120.

<sup>16</sup> Webber, Contrary Music 118-9.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Wesley Harland, in "Mimetic Process in the Sermons of John Donne," diss., University of Western Ontario, 1983, argues that as Scripture itself is mimetic of God, so too the preaching of Scripture is to be mimetic, using concrete examples. Harland emphasizes the importance of the dramatic monologue in Donne's sermons, and suggests that Donne's use of the first person may be understood as biblical impersonation: "Donne does not flaunt versions of himself so much as represent different biblical persons or responses, which all contribute

to the unfolding of providential history" (58).

<sup>18</sup> In another context, Stanley Fish comments upon this problem of the speaker protesting humility and in fact bespeaking pride. Contrasting the Puritan preacher with the Anglican preacher, Fish writes: "it is by calling attention to itself that his [Donne's, the Anglican preacher's] prose becomes a vehicle of humility, for its most spectacular effects are subversive of its largest claims ... The prose of the Puritan sermon, by way of contrast, is self-effacing in style, but self-glorying (in two directions) in effect, for by making no claim to be art, it makes the largest claim of all, that it simply tells the truth"

(Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature [Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972] 70).

<sup>19</sup> In a sermon on penitential Psalm 6, Donne writes: "God hath imprinted his Image in our soules ... If we shut doores, if we draw Curtaines between him and his Image, that is, cover our soules, and disguise and palliate our sinnes, he goes away ... But if we lay them open, by our free confessions, he returnes againe; that so, in how ill case soever he finde his Image, he may wash it over with our teares, and renew it with his own blood ... that he may refresh and re-engrave his Image in us againe" (V, 371).

<sup>20</sup> On the importance of David as a model for the human voice announcing the Word of God, see Heather Asals, "David's Successors:

Forms of Joy and Art," Proceedings of the PMR Conference 2(1977) 31-7.

On the traditional identification of David as Scripture's poet, see Barbara Lewalski, Protestant Poetics 39-53.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis Quinn, "John Donne's Principles of Biblical Exegesis," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 61(1962) 326-7. See also Donne's comments on the importance of applying the Bible to the self, II, 308 and III, 367.

<sup>22</sup> Quinn, "Donne's Principles" 327.

<sup>23</sup> Quinn, "Donne's Principles" 327.

<sup>24</sup> Quinn, "Donne's Principles" 328. Lewalski remarks upon Calvin's emphasis on the historical reality of David as an individual. In this typological reading, Calvin acknowledges that "David was dimly conscious that he was also describing another, for he speaks of himself in hyperbolic language" (Protestant Poetics 118). So, while Lewalski sees in Calvin's interpretation a much less rigid understanding of David than Quinn does, she too makes clear the great distance between Calvin and the medieval allegorical or sacramental conception of Scripture's words.

The difference between Donne and Calvin may be illustrated by a passage from Calvin's commentary on Psalm 32: in this psalm, he writes, David "applies this evidence of the divine goodness for his own benefit, and the benefit of the whole Church, that from it he may teach himself and them what constitutes the chief point of salvation." In his comments

on verse 5 of this psalm, he writes:

The phrase upon myself, or against myself, intimates that David put away from him all the excuses and pretences by which men are accustomed to unburden themselves, transferring their fault, or tracing it to other people ... And thou didst remit the guilt of my sin. This clause is set in opposition to the grievous and direful agitations by which he says he was harassed before he approached by faith the grace of God. But the words also teach, that as often as the sinner presents himself at the throne of mercy, with ingenuous confession, he will find reconciliation with God awaiting him. In other words, the Psalmist means that God was not only willing to pardon him, but that his example afforded a general lesson that those in distress should not doubt of God's favour towards them ... Should any one infer from this, that repentance and confession are the cause of obtaining grace, the answer is easy; namely, that David is not speaking here of the cause but of the manner in which the sinner becomes reconciled to God. Confession, no doubt, intervenes, but we must go beyond this, and consider that it is faith which, by opening our hearts and tongues, really obtains our pardon ... Or, to speak more simply, David obtained pardon by his confession, not because he merited it by the mere act of confessing, but because, under the guidance of faith, he humbly implored it from his judge. Moreover ... the same method of confession ought to be in use among us at this day, which was formerly employed by the fathers under the law.

(Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 5 vols., trans. James Anderson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949] vol. 1, 521, 531-2). See the discussion of Donne's treatment of this same verse, 122-6 above.

<sup>25</sup> Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence" 322-3.

<sup>26</sup> Joan Webber, in The Eloquent "I": Style and Self in Seventeenth-Century Prose (Madison, Milwaukee, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), contrasts the "conservative Anglican" with the "radical Puritan." She argues that while the Puritan is concerned with the "facts" and allows his identity to be defined by history and its immediate events, the

Anglican understands himself as a microcosm or even a symbol, part of a larger (and unseen) order, and thus recognizes the complexity and even ambiguity of his own existence. In such a view, there is an essential interrelatedness between all men, and all of creation, in which the speaker mirrors his hearers who mirror all men who in turn mirror the order of creation (3-14).

27 Joan Webber, Contrary Music 70.

28 William J.J. Rooney, "John Donne's 'Second Prebend Sermon'-- A Stylistic Analysis," Texas Studies in Literature and Language 4(1962) 24-34, repr. Seventeenth-Century Prose, ed. Stanley Fish (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 384.

29 Rooney, "'Second Prebend Sermon'" 384.

30 On the importance of the exemplum in English preaching traditions, see Joseph Albert Mosher, The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England (1911; New York: AMS Press, 1966); Charles Sears Baldwin, Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400) (1928; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959) 228-57; and Gerald Robert Owst, Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters and of the English People, 2nd rev. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961) 149-209.

On the Puritan use of illustrations and exempla, which was for them subordinated to the discursive presentation of abstract propositions, see Perry Miller, The New England Mind, The Seventeenth Century (Cambridge,

Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963) 356-9.

<sup>31</sup> Donne uses numerous exempla in this sermon, including those of the nurse (IX, 319), London Bridge (IX, 321), and the stage (IX, 325). Winfried Schleiner notes Donne's apt use of the emblem and the popular fable elsewhere; in "The Hand of the Tongue: Emblematic Technique in One of Donne's Sermons," English Miscellany 25 (1975-6) 183-90.

<sup>32</sup> Terry Sherwood, in "Reason in Donne's Sermons," ELH 39 (1972), examines a section from the Psalm 32:8 sermon and argues that even in predominantly metaphoric passages, "Donne's eloquence subserves rational meaning" (366). On the interplay between intellectual and affective or emotional appeal in Donne's sermon rhetoric, see also John Chamberlin, Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976). Chamberlin examines the Psalm 32:1 sermon in detail and describes its overall structure as "a complex interaction of two basic procedures," the grammatical approach of making distinctions and the topical approach of making associations. Chamberlin insists that it is Donne's use of grammatical procedures based on medieval principles of concurring, distinguishing and correlating, that "extends and sustains" the development of his ideas in this sermon. In terms of sermon structure and the process of Donne's own thought, Chamberlin sees topical association or strictly thematic concerns as secondary.

<sup>33</sup> Sherwood, "Reason in Donne's Sermons" 362-3.

<sup>34</sup> Donne also refers to examples as patterns which appeal to the memory and emphasizes the importance of patterns later in this sermon (IX, 275-6), and in the Genesis 1:26 sermon (IX, 73-4). Robert L. Hickey, in "Donne's Art of Memory," Tennessee Studies in Literature 3(1958), remarks on Donne's use of examples, analogies and illustrations to evoke memory in his listeners, to appeal to that faculty which Donne associates with goodness and the Holy Ghost (31, 33; cf. Sermons IV, 528).

<sup>35</sup> For a helpful discussion of contemporary notions of wisdom, see Eugene F. Rice, Jr., The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom (1958; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973). Rice contrasts ancient and medieval concepts of wisdom with the Renaissance ideal, which he identifies as increasingly secularized, a movement away from wisdom's traditional, "exclusive preoccupation with divine and Christian things" (209). Humanist wisdom, concludes Rice, is "an autonomous and active moral virtue which defined man's dignity and described the highest degree of perfection of which human nature is capable" (215).

<sup>36</sup> Augustine comments on the relationship between man as God's image, wisdom, and self-knowledge in On the Trinity, trans. Arthur West Haddan, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff (1887; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) vol. 3. Augustine writes that "this trinity, then, of the mind is not therefore the image

of God, because the mind remembers itself, and understands and loves itself; but because it can also remember, understand, and love Him by whom it was made. And in so doing it is made wise itself" (Book XIV, chap. 12; Schaff 191).

37 Jeanne M. Shami, in "Donne's Protestant Casuistry: Cases of Conscience in the Sermons," Studies in Philology 80(1983), affirms Donne's recognition of the relationship between wisdom and adversity when she argues that Donne elaborates his points and exhorts his hearers, ~~not~~ by examples of perfection, of prophets or saints, but "usually in terms of imperfect and struggling examples" in order to "temper the vehemence of excessive zeal and the diffidence of excessive discretion" (56).

38 Quinn, "Donne's Christian Eloquence" 365.

39 A quite different perspective on self-knowledge is that of John Calvin, who writes:

Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy--this pride is innate in all of us--unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgement must be measured.

(Institutes of the Christian Religion, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960] I, i, 2). That

is, for Calvin man can know himself only if he knows God's goodness and in contrast recognizes his own foulness. Donne, on the other hand, consistently teaches that man may know God by knowing himself by knowing God: there is a perpetual and reciprocating relationship between man and God whose emphasis is on the renewal and restoration of the image of God in man, and on the value and the indelible character of that image.

Rosalie Colie also emphasizes the differences between Donne and Calvin concerning self-knowledge when she discusses paradox, Donne's characteristic mode, as the expression of a new seventeenth-century epistemology, in "The Rhetoric of Transcendence," Philological Quarterly 43(1964). She sees the concern with knowing the self, as expressed by the writers of Renaissance paradox, not as moral self-examination (in a medieval or Reformation sense), but as "the self-conscious effort to understand understanding, their own and that of mankind" (154).

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the Christian nosce teipsum, see Etienne Gilson, The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy, trans. A.H.C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940) 209-28. See also the remarks made by Dennis Quinn in "Donne's Principles" 327.

<sup>41</sup> For one point of view on Donne's understanding of the relationship between faith and reason, see Irving Lowe, "John Donne: The Middle Way: The Reason-Faith Equation in Donne's Sermons," Journal of the History of Ideas 22(1961). Lowe argues that "Donne maintained a balance between

reason and faith from first to last," and that "mere reason apprehends the goal; rectified reason compasses the leap" (392 n. 18; 394).

<sup>42</sup> Jeanne M. Shami, in "Donne on Discretion," ELH 47 (1980), emphasizes Donne's awareness of the dangers of despair, and his attempts to circumvent them by assuring his hearers of God's mercy. She sees the Psalm 32 series, then, as "a dramatic resolution of doubt," which teaches Donne's hearers not only "what they must know, but how they can come to know" (58).

<sup>43</sup> Such self-knowledge in the light of God is also a paradox, as Donne points out in a sermon delivered at King James' funeral, on Song of Songs 3:11:

Thou mayst know, that thou art the happyest of men,  
in this world, and yet not know thy self ... To  
finde that no murmuring at Gods corrections, no  
disappointing of thy hopes, no interrupting of thy  
expectations, no frustrating of thy possibilities  
in the way, no impatience in sicknesse, and in the  
agony of death ... this is to goe forth, and see  
thy self, beyond thy self, to see what thou shalt be  
in the next world.

(VI, 286)

<sup>44</sup> On the connection between the false sense of sin and despair, see IX, 268. See also Donne's comments on despair: IX, 305; IX, 262-3; and II, 53.

<sup>45</sup> In relation to Donne's statement here that Christ's "Actions are Rules," Jeanne Shami argues exactly the opposite point to my own. She

writes that "even in considering a singularly good example (i.e., Christ) Donne recognizes that it is the very singularity of the example that renders it ineffective" because it "makes it more difficult to imitate" ("Donne's Protestant Casuistry" 58). In support of her position Shami cites from one of Donne's Psalm 38 sermons, in which he states that in this exposition he will not spend time speaking of Christ's sufferings, and encourages his hearers rather "to meditate of the sufferings of Christ, when you are gone, then pretend to expresse them here." He explains that "the passion of Christ Jesus is rather an amazement, an astonishment, an extasie, a consternation, then an instruction" (II, 132). But this does not mean that Christ's example is invalid as a mode of instruction; as in the Psalm 32 sermon, it is clear that Donne's point is, rather, that the wonder and amazement caused by Christ's example redefines the very notion of instruction and demands from the hearer a different mode of understanding.

## Chapter V

### Language, Argument and Proof:

#### Donne and the Interpretation of New Testament Epistle

To our bodies turne wee then, that so  
Weake men on love revealed may looke.

"The Extasie"

The New Testament epistles, like the Old Testament wisdom books, have as a central concern practical matters of faith and conduct. The epistles are of course written to specific persons and churches in response to specific situations and questions. Unlike Old Testament wisdom literature, however, which also often addresses particular situations and individuals, the New Testament epistles are primarily discursive, and are seldom heightened by passages of narrative or poetic speech.<sup>1</sup> The primary purpose of these books is to instruct, less by confession and story and example than by explaining and clarifying the significance of the events of Christ's life in relation to the subsequent life of the Church. Many and various problems arose when the apostles and the Church began the attempt to translate into life and doctrine that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled" (I John 1:1). To say with John, the writer of three short epistles, that "the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness" is one thing: to

inquire into the exact nature of that life and its precise relation to its manifestations is quite another (I John 1:2). It is, nevertheless, these specific questions of interpretation and definition that the early church epistle writers had to address.

Because the concerns of the epistle writers were so practical and immediate, their mode of speech was primarily expository. The Pauline epistles, especially those addressed to the Romans and to the Galatians, with their careful application of legal terminology and argumentation, are a particularly good example of this striving for clarity. All of the New Testament epistles, however, demonstrate a high degree of self-consciousness about their task of interpreting the events of Christ's life and death, and this self-consciousness sets them apart from the gospels, which also function as interpretation. Whereas interpretation of events is implicit in the narrative of the gospels, in the epistles the interpretation is explicit. The events that occupy the attention of the gospel writers are assumed as basic fact by the epistle writers, who go on to speak not in parable and sign but rather about them in an attempt to explain their significance to people trying to live in conformity with their truth.

Donne addresses questions of the nature of expository language-- words which explain other words or events--in the introduction to a sermon on I Corinthians 16:22, in which he offers a three-part analogy between the kinds of speech demonstrated by man and the kinds of speech in God. He emphasizes the importance of inquiring into the nature of language, reminding his hearers that "Christ is not defined ... by any

word so often, as by that very word, The Word, Sermo, Speech" (III, 292). The three kinds of speech in man are Sermo innatus, "which the thought of man reflecting upon it selfe produces within, He thinks something"; Sermo illatus, "that speech which is occasioned in him by outward things, from which he drawes conclusions"; and Sermo prolatus, "that speech by which he manifestes himselfe to other men" (III, 292). Donne explains that there are three corresponding kinds of speech in God, "and Christ is all three." The Sermo innatus is God's eternal Word, Christ as the second person of the Trinity; the Sermo illatus is God's word "occasioned by the fall of Adam, which is his Decree of sending Christ, as a Redeemer"; and the Sermo prolatus, "His speech of manifestation and application of Christ, which are his Scriptures" (III, 292).<sup>2</sup>

The Sermo prolatus, Scripture that speaks of Christ, is, then, a manifestation of a manifestation, a word about a word already translated once. In an earlier chapter, we have seen the particular relevance of this observation to the gospels; in the case of expository Scriptures, such as the epistles, it is pivotal. The epistles do not purport to manifest Christ even to the degree that the gospels do. Rather they seek to express something about Christ and about God's manifestation of him. The discursive mode of the epistles reveals truth by speaking about revelation, thus consciously placing itself at one more remove from the Sermo illatus, the actual experience of Christ's advent.

This is not to imply that the discursive mode of the New Testament is in any way an inferior bearer of truth; on the contrary, the whole

point of Donne's analogy between man's speech and God's is that while all of Scripture is a "word about a Word," a concession to language-bound man, as such it is also a mediator. Because it speaks of Christ as the pre-existent Logos (God) and as the Redeemer (man), Scripture "make[s] this God and man ours" (III, 292). At some unseen and inexplicable level, it binds God and man as it speaks of both the mysterious and invisible Logos and his manifestation in the historical Jesus of Nazareth. When Scripture employs propositional and expository discourse, it consciously exploits the interaction between literal events and their hidden signification in an attempt to explain the nature of that relationship and to translate into a different kind of speech the words about the Word.

1. Doctrine as the Explanation of Mystery (I Timothy 3:16  
Whitehall, Lent, February 16 [1620/1])

Donne focusses upon this necessary yet problematic meeting of mystery with manifestation in a Lent sermon on another verse from a Pauline epistle, I Timothy 3:16:<sup>3</sup>

And without controversy great is the mystery of  
godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justi-  
fied in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto  
the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received  
up into glory. (III, 206-24)

Here, says Donne is "enough to employ all the day, and all the dayes of our life" (III, 206), for the verse contains all the essential points of faith. Here is the compass that Christ the essential Word (the Sermo

innatus) went, from being "humbled in the flesh" (and thus Sermo illatus) to being "received up into glory." Here too is the compass of the written word (Sermo prolatus), from the chaos and darkness of Genesis to "Saint John, in clearnesse, in a Revelation." And finally, in this text is also "the compass of all time, as time was distributed in the Creation, Vespere & mane; darknesse, and then light: the Evening and the Morning made the Day" (III, 206). Thus it is, Donne concludes--setting in place the framework for the entire sermon--that "Mystery and Manifestation make the Text."

After this expansive and eloquent introduction to the enormous compass of his text, Donne proceeds with a carefully methodical exposition of it. Because "mystery" and "manifestation" are the two parts of the text, he says, "our parts therefore, are but two" (III, 207). The purpose of Paul's words, he explains, is straightforward: the words form "a sufficient Instruction to Timothy, to whom this Epistle is sent, and to us, to whom it is sent too, that thereby we might know how to behave our selves in the House of God, which is the Church of God, the pillar and ground of Truth" (III, 207). Simply, then, the one who wishes to know how to behave must know two things: first, "that such a Mystery of godlinesse there is," and second, what that mystery is. That God has translated his essence into a human existence is taken as given by Donne, as it is by Paul. Paul interprets that mysterious event by a discursive treatment of the various steps in its manifestation, translating each into doctrine which is a mystery and yet to be believed. Donne takes Paul's interpretation and

in turn translates it, spelling out for his congregation Paul's definition of "mystery" and its function in the life of the Church.

In his own sermon structure, then, Donne follows the structure of his text, for he proceeds as Paul does by way of definition, expounding the "mystery of godliness" by classifying it and enumerating its various facets. As if to dispense with mystery and clear the way for his subsequent discussion of its manifestations (and the relevant doctrine), Donne begins--again like Paul--with the proposal that the mystery of godliness is "Doctrine without controversie." Donne glosses the mystery of godliness by a verse later in I Timothy which refers to mystery as "faith in a pure conscience."<sup>4</sup> So while godliness is a mystery--something "not present, not obvious, not discernable with every eye" (III, 207)--it is also identifiable as essential "doctrine of Salvation," and as such is for Donne necessarily "matter without controversie" (III, 210). Mystery is by definition that which is hidden, yet Donne's emphasis here suggests that mystery is as much a profession as it is a secret. He writes that godliness is, simply, "to profess the Gospel of Christ Jesus sincerely, and intirely," and then reminds his hearers that that very profession is "Mysterium, opertum, & apertum, hid from those that are lost, but manifested to his Saints" (III, 210).

The question of how to perceive mystery and of how to recognize its manifestations, then, becomes for Donne a question of faith. He appeals to the traditional distinction between faith and reason as ways of knowing God, citing Augustine that "That which Christ hath plainly delivered, is the exercise of my Faith; that which other men

have curiously disputed, is the exercise of my understanding" (III, 207-8). That is, there can be no controversy about that which Christ himself "plainly delivered"; it is "the hand of man that induces obscurities; the hand of God hath written so, as a man may runne, and read" (III, 208). Any controversies that arise concerning these things are the result of unnecessary arguments and disputes perpetrated by the "overcurious." By insisting upon "the interlineary glosses, and the marginal notes, and the variae lectiones, controversies and perplexities," these overcurious "wise men" create a kind of false mystery and in so doing ignore both the mystery that God has presented and the manifestations he has provided (III, 208).<sup>5</sup>

Mystery and perplexity, then, are not at all the same thing for Donne: the mystery of which Paul speaks in I Timothy is free of controversy because it is part of an order to which controversy and the kind of scholastic disputation Donne condemns are irrelevant. Mystery is not permeable by logic, and so Donne writes that:

if I must get Heaven by a Syllogism, my Major is Credo in Deum Patrem, I believe in God the Father;  
 ... And my Minor shall be, Credo in Deum Filium, I believe in God the Son ...; And my Conclusion, which must proceed from Major & Minor, shall be Credo in Spiritum Sanctum; I believe in the Holy Ghost.

(III, 209)

The great "mystery without controversy" is faith itself, and it is through faith that the Church, as a manifestation of mystery, "proposes to me all that is necessary to my salvation, in the Word, and seals all to me in the Sacraments" (III, 210). The multiplication of creeds and

oaths and subtle points of doctrine--which Donne with some irony calls the "mystery of iniquity"--is for him a denial of true mystery, for it represents an attempt to make faith (and in some ways God himself) subject to human reason.<sup>6</sup> For Donne, it is always "the Text that saves us," not the glosses and the notes and the variant readings (III, 208). Donne's premise in this sermon is that "Mystery and Manifestation make the Text" (III, 206): mystery (not perplexity) and manifestation (not explanation) together form a sufficient witness to truth.

In the second section of the sermon, Donne continues in a methodical exposition of this text by treating in order the six manifestations of mystery that Paul lists. In each case he takes what is essentially a point of basic Christian doctrine and clarifies it with examples and illustrations from other places in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> For example, he approaches the first point, that "God was manifest in the flesh," by reminding his hearers that the attributes of God have always been manifested in his works. He cites Psalm 19:1, that "the heavens declare the glory of God," and the example of Old Testament prophets and miracles to support his point (III, 211-2). God's manifestation of himself in the flesh is analogous to these earlier expressions. But the Incarnation is a much greater mystery, and so Donne asks, "must not I ... come now with Zachary's dumbness, not to speak at all in this Mystery?" (III, 212). He appeals then to "that which he who onely knew this Mystery, hath said, Verbum Caro factum est, The word was made flesh" (III, 212). It is, as ever for Donne, Scripture that manifests mystery best, and it is with Scripture's words that mystery is best spoken.

Donne does more here than simply clarify the importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation, however. He concludes this passage of explanation by insisting that the most important manifestation of God in the flesh occurs

when the love of him corrects in thee the intemperances of adorning thy flesh, of pampering thy flesh, of obeying thy flesh, [for] then especially is this Epiphany, God is manifested in the flesh, in thy flesh.

(III, 213)

The movement from other Scriptural examples through an exposition of the point in question to a direct application of the manifestation to the individual characterizes each of the six points Donne covers. In each case, he demonstrates that that element in the mystery of faith can be discussed with reference to God's other manifestations of himself, and can be made apprehensible through the action and example of individuals. In this methodical classification of mystery, Donne is very conventional, and in this sense the content of his exposition reflects a straightforward doctrinal orthodoxy.

Yet it is just such an attempt to classify and define mystery that Donne early in the sermon condemned in those he described as workers of the "mystery of iniquity." The desire to categorize mystery and spell out points of faith, Donne explained, finally results in a situation in which, for example, one must not only believe in the efficacy of the Sacrament, but also, absurdly, "swear to the Frangitur & teritur, that he broke the flesh of Christ with his teeth, and ground it with his jawes" (III, 211). And so in order to avoid this eventuality, Donne places within his basic structure of classification and definition

passages which use another kind of language, and which thereby imply that he uses his chosen method only with reservation.<sup>8</sup>

When Donne comes to discuss how far mystery is revealed in his text, he asserts that at the very least the hearer of this verse knows that God was "manifest in the flesh" and "justified by the Spirit." He points out, as well, that everyone who saw God manifest in Christ "saw enough to make them sure that it was Caro mortis, mortall flesh" (III, 213). But just as the interpreter of the I Timothy text sees the statement "God was manifest in the flesh" without fully comprehending its mystery, so too those who saw Christ saw Caro mortis, and not the essential mystery of Christ. The mystery of incarnation resides not in what was seen by those who saw Christ in the flesh, nor even in what was not and could not be seen; the mystery, rather, is in the relationship between what was seen and what was not seen but believed. For

though he were Panis de caelo, Bread from Heaven,  
yet himself was hungry; and though he were fons  
perennis, an everlasting spring, yet himself was  
thirsty ... and though he were Dominus vitae, the  
Lord of Life, yet Death had dominion over him.<sup>9</sup>

(III, 213-4)

Knowing by faith that Christ is the "bread of heaven" and an "everlasting spring" makes his hunger and his thirst--otherwise a normal human condition--a mystery.

By constructing paradoxes like this throughout his sermon, Donne underlines the essential paradox of the Incarnation and emphasizes the mystery that resides in the relationship between what is apparent and

what underlies that appearance.<sup>10</sup> Christ's identity was "justified by the Spirit," not in explanation and rationalization but "in tongues: and not in dark and ambiguous speeches, nor in faint and retractable speeches, but in fiery tongues; fiery, that is, fervent; fiery, that is, clear" (III, 214). Like the simple profession of faith that Donne identifies with godliness (III, 210), these tongues are clear and "without controversie," but they are at the same time mysterious. Neither the tongues of Pentecost nor the miracles of Christ provide the usual kind of rational evidence to support a proposition, and yet both do function as evidence. In order to emphasize this strangeness, Donne again uses paradoxical and parabolic speech. He writes that Christ was justified

when Nature his Vicegerent gave up her sword to his hands;  
when the Sea shut up her selfe-like Marble,  
and bore him; and the Earth opened her selfe like a book,  
to deliver out her dead, to wait upon him.

(III, 215)

The New Testament miracles are evidential and they are manifestations of God, but like the text that bears witness to them they are also a mystery. The evidential value of a miracle, like that of a Scriptural text, rests not in its apparent working (and not in its literal wording) but in the apprehension of the relationship between the appearance and the meaning, the sign and the signified.<sup>11</sup>

Donne again addresses the essential link between mystery and manifestation later in the sermon in an extended passage that relies almost entirely upon paradoxes. In his discussion of the fifth manifestation

listed in his text, that Christ was "believed on in the world," he explains that it was a "great work" to believe:

That that Jesus, whose age they knew, must be antedated so far, as that they must believe him to be elder then Abraham ... That that Jesus, whom they knew to be that Carpenters Son, and knew his work, must be believ'd to have set up a frame, that reached to heaven.

(III, 220)

People can "know" one thing through the evidence presented to them, but here they are asked to believe another, in some cases despite that same evidence. Donne asks,

was it not as easie to believe, that those teares which they saw upon his cheeks, were Pearles; that those drops of Blood, which they saw upon his back, were Rubies: That that spittle, which they saw upon his face, was ennamel ... As to believe that from that man, that worm, and no man ... ingloriously executed as a Traytor; they should look for glory, and all glory, and everlasting glory?

(III, 220-1)

There is of course a figurative sense in which Christ's tears "are" pearls and his blood-rubies, and Donne plays upon this common poetic apprehension as he underscores the paradoxes of belief. He knows that a tear is not a pearl, just as he knows that an inglorious worm cannot be the source of everlasting glory. Yet the metaphor of pearls and tears is true for the hearer who perceives the connection between the poles of the metaphor.

In an analogous way the connection between an inglorious man and eternal glory is also true, though for Donne the Incarnation is a historical event and thus not just metaphoric. But it is like metaphor, because its truth, like the truth of metaphor, resides in the relation-

ship between two things and not in one thing or the other. In metaphor the apprehension of that relationship comes in a moment of poetic insight that eludes rational categories; the truth of the Incarnation, the connection between the "inglorious man" Jesus and divinity, also defies rational comprehension.<sup>12</sup> As Donne asks,

if any State, if any Convocation, if any wise Man  
had been to make a Religion, a Gospel; would he  
not have proposed a more probable, a more credible  
Gospel, to mans reason, then this? (III, 221)

The point of Donne's rhetorical question is that the Gospel is improbable, and no more rationally credible than is the statement that the drops of Christ's blood are rubies. As Donne stated early in the sermon, the only syllogism that can operate here is the Credo.<sup>13</sup>

The overall structure of Donne's sermon operates as an apparent attempt to define the "mystery of godliness" and categorize its manifestations. But within that carefully logical superstructure, Donne consistently employs metaphoric and paradoxical language to play upon the very words "mystery" and "manifestation" that he purports to define. Donne does not deny that the attempt to establish a rational basis for faith must be made, and that doctrine and theological formulations can speak truly. But mystery is mystery, and Donne warns repeatedly of the dangers inherent in trying to lay it bare. It is the "controversies and perplexities"--not the mysteries--that "undo us" (III, 208). Because it seeks to explain and simplify truth in order to make it accessible to reason, a strictly rational mode of interpretation

fails as translation because it fails to render its text accurately. It may make the literal words clear, but the essence of the text--that it is a mystery--is hopelessly obscured.<sup>14</sup>

Not only does such interpretation fail as a translation of the text; because it refuses to acknowledge mystery, it also fails to offer to its hearer the possibility that he himself might be "translated" and his understanding transformed. "Your best Evidence," Donne argues, is to know by faith that "you are already co-assumed with Christ Jesus into glory" (III, 224). If the hearer can make the necessary leap to perceive with faith that what he sees and what is offered him as truth (though unseen) are congruent, his perception of what mystery is will be radically altered. The rational literal evidence demanded by the workers of the perplexed "mystery of iniquity" that Donne discussed earlier in the sermon is not the best evidence. To insist upon explanation, and upon the "frangitur & teritur" (III, 211) of the Eucharist, causes mystery to collapse into an absurdity which by its insistence on explanation closes itself to faith and yet at the same time makes itself unable to withstand rational inquiry. An interpreter with such reflexes becomes caught in his own categories, and as he tries to force them upon the text, that text becomes to him more and more a closed book, and his own faculties for interpretation become more and more circumscribed by himself and his presuppositions about what is possible.<sup>15</sup>

In this sermon, Donne combines discursive argument with parabolic and paradoxical language to demonstrate that even bare doctrine as presented in I Timothy 3:16 cannot be approached through inflexible rational

categories. Donne also makes the point, however, that even the most poetic speech is inadequate. He concludes the sermon with a discussion of Christ's being "received into glory," and reminds his congregation that "this which we are fain to call glory, is an inexpressible thing, and an incommunicable" (III, 222). It is not comparable to anything that is perceived or named as glorious on earth, and thus not even metaphor can quite express it.

Donne finally describes this glory as being an inversion of human expectations or imaginations:

The glory of Gods Saints in Heaven, is not so much to have a Crown, as to lay down that Crown at the Feet of the Lamb. (III, 224)

This Lamb "dwells in luce inaccessibili, in a glorious light which you cannot see here" (III, 224). For now, he is hidden in a mystery. Thus Donne exhorts his hearers not to seek to comprehend or explain that mystery, nor even finally to express or describe it. They are instead to "glorifie him in that wherein you may see him, in that wherein he hath manifested himself" (III, 224), to accept those manifestations as manifestations; signs of a hidden truth. The Gospel, concludes Donne, is transmitted not by cleverness, rational endeavour or poetic eloquence, but by being manifest in the lives of individuals by their faithful employment of the "Beams of Glory, Honour, Favour, [and] Fortune" they have been given (III, 224).

2. The Role of Metaphor in Logical Proof (Galatians 3:27,  
Preached at a Christening [undated])

In choosing I Timothy 3:16 as a sermon text, Donne chose a verse clearly exemplary of Paul's attempt to present doctrine as unequivocally and in as straightforward a manner as possible. However in some of his other sermons on the epistles, Donne chose to preach on texts which are no less concerned with theological rigour but whose language is primarily metaphoric rather than propositional. In an undated christening sermon, for example, Donne took as his text Galatians 3:27, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (V, 151-67). Although Paul speaks in metaphor when he terms baptism the "putting on" of Christ, the epistle as a whole is constructed as a polemic in which Paul opposes a Judaizing faction within the Galatian church.<sup>16</sup> Donne recognizes the essential mode of Galatians, and opens his exposition of the metaphoric Galatians 3:27 by stressing its role in the propositional structure of the epistle: "this text is a Reason of a Reason; an Argument of an Argument" (V, 151).

Though the words of Donne's chosen text, taken on their own, appear to be simply an explanation of the act of baptism, in fact, as Donne explains, they do form the concluding proof in a series of arguments:

The proposition undertaken by the Apostle to prove, is, That after faith is come, we are no longer under the Schoolmaster, the law. The reason, by which he proves that, is: For yee are all the Sonnes of God by faith, in Christ Jesus; And then the reason of that, is this text, for all yee that are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. (V, 151).

The process of reasoning which Donne outlines here is not immediately obvious from the Galatians text itself, in part because Paul's language-- which includes phrases like "schoolmaster," "sons of God" and "put on Christ"--is metaphoric language. These metaphors are not directly explained by Paul, but are themselves intended to function as explanation; they represent Paul's chosen method for translating his propositions. Donne's task as the interpreter of these words is to translate Paul's metaphors, and by so doing to translate and clarify Paul's statements of essential Christian doctrine.<sup>17</sup>

After outlining the context of his text, that it is a "Reason of a Reason," Donne moves directly into a metaphor of his own, suggesting that Paul's series of reasons, his progress toward a central concluding proof of salvation, is figuratively a journey. The chain of propositions in this passage, says Donne, describes

the progresse of a sanctified Man, and here is his standing house; here is his journey, and his Lodging; his way, and his end. The house, the lodging, the end of all is faith ... To be sure that you are in the right way to that, you must find your selves to be the Sonnes of God; And you can prove that, by no other way to your selves, but because you are baptized into Christ.

(V, 151)

Donne continues his analogy, explaining that the Jews had the Law as a schoolmaster "to direct them, but we are at our journies end," "as that we are in possession of Christ" (V, 151). So, Donne concludes, instead of relying upon the Old Testament Law as a guide, "thus far then we are directed by this Text, (which is as far, as we can goe in this life)" (V, 152-3). That is, not only may the logical progression of thought

contained in the passage be described in terms of a journey, the passage itself becomes a guide for the ongoing "progresse of a sanctified Man" (V, 151). Establishing the various proofs that bear on the Christian's relation to God is but one step in a longer pilgrimage, and Donne emphasizes throughout this sermon that to win the argument, to prove the point that because of faith the Christian is no longer subject to the schoolmaster Law, is not the same as reaching journey's end.

Although it is but a step in the direction of truth, Paul's assertion that "as many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ", expresses a necessary and fundamental proposition of faith, "that which the Apostle takes to be that which is granted on all sides, and which none can deny" (V, 153). Establishing a fixed principle is essential, Donne maintains, because "all proofes must either arrest, and determine in some things confessed, and agreed upon, or else they proceed in infinitum" (V, 153). After having demonstrated that Galatians 3:27 is the basis for a whole series of logical suppositions, however, Donne then traces backwards through the series, opening his text up again with a new set of metaphors. He writes that by "putting on Christ," Christians are made "the seed of God," which is to be sown in the field of the world. The "good seed" are "the Children of the kingdome," who are thus "translated even into the nature of God" (V, 153).

Although Donne speaks of Paul's thought in terms of logical categories, then, he at the same time relies upon metaphor in his endeavour to clarify that logic.<sup>18</sup> The metaphors of journey and of agriculture are obvious examples of this reliance. Moreover, as Donne's insistence on

applying the language and categories of argumentation even when he is dealing in metaphor suggests, logical argument can itself function as a kind of metaphor, as it does in this sermon. That is, however clear and precise its formulations may be, the fact remains that propositional discourse is analogous to or reflective of truth: logical argument is as like to truth as "putting on Christ" is to baptism, no more and no less. In this sermon, Donne uses the language of argument as he would use a metaphoric structure, exploiting its strengths even as he points out its weaknesses and limitations. Because he recognizes that propositional discourse does not prove truth any more definitively than does metaphoric discourse, Donne is also able to recognize that his text participates simultaneously in metaphoric and propositional speech, and that the logical argument of Galatians chapter three is in fact sustained and clarified by the metaphor in verse twenty-seven.

Through his emphasis upon argument and logic, Donne's introduction to this sermon sets up for his hearers a particular set of expectations concerning the kind of attempts at persuasion he is going to make. However, because this same introduction consciously employs metaphoric language, it also frustrates those expectations. Understood as a pattern of metaphors, the references to argument and logic, together with the more obvious metaphors of journey, warn that the order of this sermon will not be dictated or abstracted by theological propositions, nor will its conclusions be subject to conventional definition in theological terms. Indeed, Donne emphasizes throughout this introduction that not all things which are to be taken as true are necessarily written or

even able to be expressed in writing. The moral part of the Old Testament Law, for example, "beganne not to have force, and efficacy then, when God writ it in the tables, but was always, and always shall be written in the hearts of Men" (V, 152). Even if God had never been "pleased to give that declaration" of the Law, or if the written Law could perish, the spirit of that Law has always bound men and always will. Donne points out that the writing of the Law gives direction and is a sign of God's goodness, like this Galatians text which is also a guide. But it is the truth that language seeks to reflect that is binding upon man, and never the form of the language itself.

Donne's skepticism about the ability of language to define truth with final precision is also apparent throughout the body of his exposition of Galatians 3:27. He divides the sermon into two "considerations" which parallel the two sections of his text, one dealing with what it means to be baptized and the other with what it means to "put on Christ." The order of Donne's sermon in fact reverses the order of the points in the text, for he begins with an amplification of the sense of "to put on Christ." The phrase is a metaphor of clothing, and Donne proceeds for seven pages almost entirely by a network of metaphors related to clothing. He opens by explaining that the verb induere is "to cover so far, as that Covering can reach," and, unlike a glove which covers only the hand or a hat which covers only the head, "Christ, when he is put on, Covers us all" (V, 153). Donne reminds his hearers that the prodigal son was clothed by his father in a robe which was able "to cover all his defects" (V, 154). Adam and Eve, by contrast, in trying

to clothe themselves and cover their shame, could "provide nothing but short Aprons" (V, 154), but God "doth not onely cover Originall sinne ... but he covers all our actuall sinnes, which we multiplie every day" (V, 155). Donne speaks, too, of the garment Christ himself wore, and suggests that as it was "seamlesse, and intire," so too the Christian's garment "which is Christ Jesus, that is, our sanctification, should be intire, and uninterrupted, in the whole course of our lives" (V, 156).

The notion of the seamless robe which Christ wore and which he now figuratively is, is one that Donne pursues at some length. He explains that induere in this verse implies a twofold clothing, for "we may put on Christ so, as we shall be his, and we may put him on so, as we shall be He" (V, 158). "We are not to put on Christ, onely ~~as~~ a Livery" for that would only make us servants, and that much was possible under the Law. The putting on of Christ "so as we shall be He" is beyond the power of the Law, for it is a kind of transfiguration "to have those garments of Christ communicated to us which were as white, as the light" (V, 159). Donne explains that the way to put on Christ's righteousness is "by imitation, and conforming our selves to him" (V, 159), and that the result of this putting on is that "we shall find restored in us, the Image of the whole Trinity, imprinted at our creation" (V, 160). But the transformation itself, the event by which "we shall be He" and God "shall use us in all things, as his sonne" (V, 160), cannot be explained.

The sacrament of baptism, then, is the act by which this mysterious and transforming putting on of Christ is evidenced to the Church. It is

a necessary sign because, "as we cannot see the Essence of God, but must see him in his glasses, in his Images, in his Creatures, so we cannot see the decrees of God, but must see them in their duplicats, in their exemplification, in the sacraments" (V, 161). Baptism comes between the Christian's election, for which it acts as a seal, and his sanctification, for which it is "an instrument, and conduit" (V, 160). Donne sees that as a single event, baptism "signifies our dying, and buriall with Christ", it also signifies an ongoing process and stands for "all the acts of our regeneration" (V, 161). Reversing then the syntax of the comparison, Donne points out that "in that large sense, our whole life is a baptisme" (V, 161). But although life may be likened to baptism, and in some sense baptism may be likened to life, "the very sacrament of Baptisme, the actuall administration, and receiving thereof," is never to be taken at face value as being itself a literal regeneration.

In relation to the possibility of understanding baptism in a literal and not sacramental sense, Donne describes an "ill custome" that arose in the early church from an "excessive advancing" of the teaching concerning the importance of baptism, in which the sacrament was deferred until just before death in the mistaken belief "that all sins were absolutely forgiven in Baptisme" (V, 162). The literalism reflected in this custom results in its own legalism, a subjection again to Law--the very thing both Donne and Paul argue baptism was instituted to abolish. Baptism is to be understood as part of the order of grace,

not of Law. Even when those who speak for the child "ly in their  
owne behalfe; perchance they doe not believe" (V, 166),

as the Sacrament of the body, and bloud of Christ,  
is, in some sense, and in a kinde, the body, and  
bloud of Christ, says Augustine, so in the sacrament  
of faith, says he, (that is, Baptisme) there is some  
kinde of faith.

(V, 166)

Baptism is a sign of grace, graciously offered "as well to the unworthy  
as to the worthy Receiver" (V, 163). It is a metaphoric act, and so to  
say "we are baptized into Christ" is no less--and no more--metaphoric  
than to say "we have put on Christ."

Paul's metaphor, then, of putting on Christ is a way of explaining  
the significance of a literal event, but it also helps to remind us  
that literal events are not only what they appear to be. Baptism is a  
metaphor, and as such it is not to be translated as absolute forgiveness  
of sin, nor is it to be understood as magically efficacious, independent  
of the intentions and beliefs of the one being baptized. It is metaphoric,  
and so its efficacy lies not in the act itself and not merely in the  
doctrinal statement to which it bears witness, but in the mystery of  
faith that binds act and meaning, seen and unseen.

That a carefully considered series of propositions, such as that  
contained in Paul's epistle to the Galatians, should rest finally upon a  
metaphor--and, indeed, that the Church's assurance of its freedom from  
the Law should rest upon a metaphoric act--does not bother Donne at all.<sup>19</sup>  
On the contrary, it is the very basis of his assertion that the Church  
must recognize its freedom from the Law. To perceive baptism as a

metaphoric act leaves room for the operation of grace; to perceive it as a literal act circumscribes the whole sacrament by Law, demanding that all prescribed conditions be perfectly fulfilled, and robbing the sacrament of its efficacy if they are not. Baptism is a metaphoric expression of truth, and in Galatians 3:27 Paul chose to explain this metaphor with another. Donne's interpretation in turn also denies the claims of literalism and affirms his (and the Church's) freedom from its legalism by affirming metaphor--mysterious though it may be--as an appropriate and faithful translation of truth.

3. Metaphor as Argument (I Corinthians 15:26,  
Whitehall, March 8 [1621/2])

In a sermon preached during Lent of 1621 or 1622, Donne again chose a Pauline text that operates through a central metaphor. This time, however, the text does not form part of a propositional argument as Galatians 3:27 does. The text for this Lent sermon is I Corinthians 15:26, "the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (IV, 45-62). The context of this verse is one of instruction, for in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians Paul is explaining the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ and looking ahead to the end times. The Apostle's teaching here is not by way of logical argument, however; instead, the entire passage is built around a pattern of metaphors of kingdom, battle and triumph.

Still, Donne's assessment of this text is that it is "part of an

argument for the Resurrection" (IV, 56), and he uses the idea that the verse is "a Text of the Resurrection" (IV, 45) as the focus of his sermon. Donne has taken as his subject the Resurrection, despite the fact that this is a Lent sermon, and he explains his choice by the fact that "all Lent, is but the Vigill, the Eve of Easter," and marks the preparation for resurrection and triumph (IV, 45). During the Lenten time of preparation, Donne writes, the faithful "must dye this death, this death of the righteous, the death to sin, before this last enemy, Death, shalbe destroyed in you, and you made partakers of everlasting life in soule and body too" (IV, 45). Describing death as the last enemy helps to explain the paradoxical "death of Death" which is promised to man by Christ's death and resurrection, but it does not attempt to persuade in the same way that Paul's explanation of baptism in Galatians does. Donne insists upon applying the term "argument" to this text, however, and by doing so suggests that the category of argument itself must be re-examined. Paul's writing here is not formally an argument at all. Yet because this text does seek to express some truth about God, Donne regards it as Paul's attempt to image God's argument and God's method of persuasion.

Donne explains that this text is "part of an argument for the Resurrection" by establishing that

it is a faire intimation, and testimony of an everlastingnesse in that state of the Resurrection (that no time shall end it) that we have it presented to us in all the parts of time; in the past, in the present, and in the future. We had a Resurrection in prophecy; we have a Resurrection in the present working of Gods Spirit; we shall have a Resurrection in the finall consummation.

(IV, 56)

The best proofs of final resurrection are that there have been resurrections in the past, and that there is a present resurrection working in the Church. This kind of proof is part of "God's method"; God explains one event by another, one truth in the context of the whole truth reflected in Scripture.<sup>20</sup> Donne refers to Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones to illustrate how God clarifies the unknown through something already known and understood. He writes,

thus far God argues with them à re nota; from that which they knew before, the finall Resurrection, he assures them that which they knew not till then, a present Resurrection from those pressures. (IV, 57)

The method of God's argument here is to proceed from the known to the unknown, as any good logician would. In God's logic, however, even a prophetic vision can become a form of argument, for God--unlike the mere logician--is able to use not only words but also things and events as signs and as instruments of argument.<sup>21</sup>

Donne of course cannot use things as signs and so is limited to using language as his system of signification. He is nevertheless able to apply in part the same method he has identified as God's when in his discourse he too moves from the known to the unknown. This is hardly an innovative mode of argument, of course, but the fact that Donne has drawn attention to it as "God's method" and then self-consciously applied it in his own interpretation suggests that it is worthy of note. Donne's sermon text, I Corinthians 15:26, itself strives to explain a mystery--an unknown--by a structure that speaks in terms of familiar

things, "that Metaphor which the Holy Ghost chooseth to expresse that in, which is that there is Hostis, and so Militia, an enemie, and a warre" (IV, 46). Donne translates this pattern of metaphors into what he terms a "paraphrase," which he works out not around the actual words of the text, but rather around the images conjured by its military metaphors.<sup>22</sup> In his paraphrase, Donne speaks (as Paul's metaphors do) in familiar terms, explaining that

there is an enemy: though that enemy shall not overthrow it [the kingdom of heaven], yet because it plots, and workes, and machinates, and would overthrow it, this is a defect in that peace.

(IV, 46)

Donne's exposition of his text is an expansion of it, an extension of its metaphoric description of the state of God's kingdom and of the status of its great enemy, death.

Donne sets up his paraphrase of the text in seven steps, the first six of which are concerned with the imperfect present state of the kingdom. In the seventh step Donne speaks of the promised final destruction of the enemy.<sup>23</sup> The military metaphor is much more evident in the first six steps than it is in the seventh, and in some cases the metaphor dictates the structure of the paraphrase. In the fifth and sixth steps, for example, Donne is explaining how Death remains an enemy despite the fact that it has become a part of the natural order. He writes that Death "was an enemy in invading Christ, who was not in his Commission, because he had no sin; and still he is an enemie, because still he adheres to the enemy" (IV, 54). Death invades "our best lights, our understandings, and benights us there, either with ignorance

before sin, or with senselesnesse after." These are unfair tactics, Donne claims: "to come in at the window by the way of sin, is not deaths Commission" (IV, 55). And Death as the last enemy is especially dangerous, for,

in an enemy, that appeares at first, when we are or may be provided against him, there is some of that, which we call Honour: but in the enemie that reserves himselfe unto the last, and attends our weake estate, there is more danger. (IV, 55)

Death is "an enemie that is so well victualled against man, as that he cannot want as long as there are men, for he feeds upon man himselfe" (IV, 46). The scenario of wartime enemies, the destruction of cities and the desire for peace that Donne constructs here is representative of the mode of much of this sermon. In his paraphrase he uses familiar events, the res nota to which Paul himself refers, in order to clarify the implication of the Apostle's statement that Death is man's last enemy.

In the seventh stage of his paraphrase, however, Donne discusses the Resurrection, and for this there is no military metaphor. He begins here by speaking of resurrections that have occurred in the past, and he is particularly interested in Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones which are raised to life (Ezek. 37:1-14). By this vision, Donne explains, Ezekiel was reassured that God would also raise his people from the "death" of present calamity. The method of God's argument in this vision is the same method Donne has identified elsewhere: God acted "to prove, by that which they did know, which was the generall resurrection, that which they knew not, their temporall restitution" (IV, 61). There is,

however, a shift in the logic here, for the ground, the known thing by which the unknown is to be substantiated, is a prophet's vision. The res nota upon which the whole argument is based is itself a mystery.

In order to explain how this vision functions as a proof, Donne cites Tertullian, reminding his congregation that even "if the vision be but a comparison, yet if there were no such thing as a resurrection, the comparison did not hold," and, further, "if there were no resurrection to which that Parable might have relation, it were no Parable" (IV, 61). That which is seen--in this case, the dry bones rising to life--has meaning because of that which is unseen. It is the unseen "generall resurrection," which was "alwaies knowne to them, alwaies beleevd by them," that makes "their present resurrection from that calamity, the more easie, the more intelligible, the more credible, the more discernable to them" (IV, 61). But "generall resurrection"--here the res nota--is not something known in the way that the war and enemies of the earlier metaphors are. Resurrection is not a ground for comparison in the terms of conventional logic because it is known only by virtue of faith. The metaphors to which Donne referred in the first six steps of the paraphrase clarify the ways in which death is like an enemy and life on earth like warfare, but when he moves on to speak of the perfected state of God's kingdom, the end of all warfare, comparison to familiar things becomes impossible. Nothing in known experience can provide an adequate account of dry bones rising to life, or of how those who "dwell in the dust" are able to "awake and sing" (IV, 62).

By his method here Donne illustrates that poetic speech is unable to supply metaphors for heaven. He also demonstrates that discursive speech fails when it endeavours to apply logical methods to proofs supplied by visions and prophecy. There is no argument for resurrection, and any attempt to proceed logically from the known to the unknown is confounded by too many unknowns. Parables and visions, Donne points out, are grounded on something mysterious and unknown, the perception of which depends upon faith. He writes,

Let therefore Gods method, be thy method; fixe  
thy self firmly upon that-beliefe of the  
generall resurrection, and thou wilt never doubt  
of either of the particular resurrections, either  
from sin, by Gods grace, or from worldly calami-  
ties, by Gods power. (IV, 61)

Known things--"present calamities"--are to be understood through unknown things. In what Donne terms "God's method," the moment of understanding comes with the perception of this unexpectedly reversed relationship between the known and the unknown, a relationship in which the hearer suddenly perceives that even that which he has always assumed he knew contains an element of the unknown.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for example, while the promised destruction of Death can be clarified through metaphors of war, the present experience of warfare and destruction may be understood--"known"--in a new and fuller way by faith through the perception of an unseen but promised final triumph. By its appeal to faith this kind of reasoning translates and redefines both what it is to know and what it is to speak of that knowledge. The interpreter who operates according to the methods of such logic does not seek to translate only

texts through analogy, metaphor and paraphrase; instead, he strives as Donne does to "translate" the hearer, to cause him to change the syntax of his understanding in order that it may conform more fully to the language of the text.

Donne closes his sermon with a passage on the final resurrection, "of which, when all the Apostles met to make the Creed, they could say no more, but Credo Resurrectionem, I beleeve the Resurrection of the body" (IV, 62). He acknowledges that "in going about to expresse it, the lips of an Angell would be uncircumcised lips, and the tongue of an Archangell would stammer," and so, he concludes, "I offer not therefore at it" (IV, 62). Instead, he adds, "in respect of, and with relation to that blessed State, according to the doctrine, and practise of our Church, we doe pray for the dead; for the militant Church upon earth and the triumphant Church in Heaven" (IV, 62). This prayer is for Donne translation of the highest order, for while it is at one level a rendering of the text and a clarification of its argument, it demands at the same time that the hearer change his accustomed categories for understanding a text. By translating an argument into a prayer and a confession of inadequacy, Donne alters his relation to the text he seeks to interpret, and acknowledges that he translates best when he does not speak at all, understanding that what he knows he knows only in part.

## 4. Metaphor, Proposition and the Limitations of Argument

(I Corinthians 13:12, St. Paul's, Easter Day 1628)

Donne's model and authority for the kind of translation he practises is the Apostle Paul, himself an interpreter who is aware of the limitations of his sight and his knowledge. In an Easter sermon of 1628, Donne took for his text Paul's eloquent statement of his partial knowledge, I Corinthians 13:12:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but  
then face to face: now I know in part;  
but then shall I know even as also I am  
known. (VIII, 219-36)

This verse appears at the end of Paul's famous discourse on charity, but it is more an expression of promise and consolation than it is a logical conclusion to the chapter. Paul provides no explicit definition of the relation of verse twelve to the themes which are central earlier in the passage, and at first glance these words seem to be but an afterthought. Implicit in the parallel constructions in verse twelve, however, is the same logical comparison between the orders of "now" and "then" which the whole passage reflects. In this chapter, Paul proposes charity (agapē) as an ideal, suggesting as he does so that the realities of human life and expressions of love do not often correspond with that ideal.<sup>26</sup> Thus, his statement that "we know in part, and we prophesy in part" (I Cor. 13:9) accords well with his descriptions of charity, which demonstrate that in the present, we also love "in part."

Although the subject of Donne's sermon text here is enigma and partial

knowledge, the formal structure of his exposition of I Corinthians 13:12 is far from obscure. This sermon has a highly logical structure, built around Paul's distinction between now and then. In his discussion of each order, Donne deals first with the "sight" of God and then with the "knowledge" of God, thus dividing the sermon into four sections, an examination of the sight of God now and the sight of God then, and an examination of the knowledge of God now and the knowledge of God then. In each section, Donne approaches his subject in three steps--the "place," the "medium" and the "light" by which man is able to understand God in that particular dispensation--and rehearses this orderly structure at regular intervals to clarify for his congregation how his argument is developing.<sup>27</sup>

In his explanation of the various ways of knowing God, Donne acknowledges that his own sermon--like all sermons--is part of the order of "now." He writes:

Now (Now in a glasse, now in part) is intended most especially of that very act, which we do now at this present, that is, of the Ministry of the Gospell, of declaring God in his Ordinance, of Preaching his word. (VIII, 219)

As part of the present order, preaching also has a specific purpose in relation to the future: that is,

that therefore you may the better know him, when you come to see him face to face, then, by having seen him in a glasse now, and that your seeing him now in his Ordinance, may prepare you to see him then in his Essence. (VIII, 220)

This sermon then is to be understood as Donne understands it, as a

glass which reflects a part of truth but which at the same time bears witness to the promise of a full perception of truth in the future. Even while he speaks of enigma and mystery, Donne's clear and careful organization of this sermon evidences his rejection of false obscurity and his conviction that truth must be spoken as clearly as possible.

Donne's insistence on the importance of clarity in rational discourse is illustrated by the distinction he makes between "seeing" and "knowing" God. He begins by speaking of the sight of God, explaining that the whole world is a theatre in which men may see God, and that "there is not so poore a creature but may be thy glasse to see God in" (VIII, 224).<sup>28</sup> "That which we see in a glasse, assures us, that such a thing there is" (VIII, 223), and so, Donne writes, a man "must pull out his own eyes, and see no creature, before he can say, he sees no God" (VIII, 225). Man's reason provides sufficient light for him to see that there is a God, although of course in the present order it is still partial sight: no man, "remaining a mortall man, and under the definition of a mortall man, [is] capable of seeing [God's] Essence" (VIII, 231-2). Still, the sight of God which man glimpses in the mirror of the world is essentially undistorted; unlike water, which "gives a crookednesse, and false dimensions to things that it shewes," in the glass of the world there is a "true sight of God, though it not be a perfect sight, which we have this way" (VIII, 223).

If seeing God--having this "true sight" that is afforded man by creation--were enough, there would be no need to speak of God or to preach a sermon. But this sight of God, however clear it may be, is

not enough, for man is a reasonable creature who seeks always to know. Donne reminds his hearers that "the difference between the Reason of man, and the Instinct of the beast is this, That the beast does but know, but the man knows that he knows" (VIII, 225). Man must reflect upon what and how he sees, and he does so inevitably through language. He is responsible for using that language as precisely and as accurately as possible, and so Donne too--"knowing that he knows"--speaks carefully and logically about how to see and know God, even as he recognizes that "we know God; that is, Believe in God in this life, but by aenigmaes, by darke representations, and allusions" (VIII, 226). Even his most rigorous applications of logic and precise language are but "allusions, or similitudes, or representations of God" (VIII, 226). And although he might wish to think that his logic is presented as evidence to man's reason, in fact all speech about God is presented to man's capacity for faith. Donne equates knowledge of God in the present order with belief in him: "to know God" is "to make him our God," and that comes only through faith, "the application of the Gospell to our selves" (VIII, 228, 229). And, Donne adds, "faith it self, is but aenigma, a dark representation of God to us" (VIII, 230). So no matter how carefully constructed a theology or a systematic discourse or sermon may be, in the end all language is partial.

Throughout this sermon, Donne demonstrates that though language is finally imprecise, the preacher must still struggle to achieve clarity. He does so in part by drawing attention to subtle but important distinctions that must be made when defining the terms of his discourse. Donne's

early distinction between the "true" sight of God and the "perfect" sight, for example, recurs later in the sermon when he explains that "as God knowes me, so I shall know God; but I shall not know God so, as God knowes me. It is not quantum, but sicut; not as much, but as truly" (VIII, 235). This subtle manipulation of meaning which occurs through a minor shift in syntax appears again in the sermon when Donne explains that in the glass of creation "we may see God directly, that is, see directly that there is a God" (VIII, 223).

Donne also consciously manipulates language and demonstrates the enigmatic nature of its fine shades of meaning when he speaks in paradoxes. For example, when he explains how God could be present in hell, he writes:

even there God is; and so much more strangely then  
in any other place, because he is there, without any  
emanation of any beame of comfort from him, who is  
the God of all consolation, or any beame of light  
from him, who is the Father of all lights. (VIII, 223-4)

In passages like this, Donne strains his hearers' capacity for faith by emphasizing the incredulity of his subject. That God who is all good should be present in hell is already hard to imagine. That the "God of all comfort" could somehow be in a comfortless hell and not change it by virtue of his presence there is even more so. The content of the second statement is no different from that of the first, but the paradoxical form of its language translates an abstraction already strange into an image which is all but inconceivable, and which resists rational inquiry. However carefully speech is formulated, and however finely its

distinctions are conceived, as Donne demonstrates, those same words also function to obscure truth and to complicate its perception.

When Donne moves from his discussion of the present order to his consideration of what is to come, he abandons the strategy by which he sought to demonstrate that language and its logic are inadequate, and begins instead to state directly that he cannot express what and who God is. He remarks that "he that asks me what heaven is, meanes not to heare me, but to silence me; He knows I cannot tell him" (VIII, 231). Donne also cites Augustine, who describes a visionary conversation he had with his mother before her death, in which "we came to the consideration of our owne mindes, and our owne soules, and we got above our own soules ... and we could consider God then, but then wee could not see God in his Essence"<sup>29</sup> (VIII, 232). That is, even during their moments of transcendent vision, Augustine and Monica were still limited to speech about God, to attempting to express the inexpressible.

One such inexpressible reality is the "light of glory," and when in the conclusion to his sermon Donne comes to describe it, he does so by constructing a series of comparisons by which he avoids having to decide what to call this light. He writes:

To this light of glory, the light of honour is but  
a glow-worm; and majesty it self but a twilight; The  
Cherubims and Seraphims are but Candles; and that  
Gospel it self, which the Apostle calls the glorious  
Gospel, but a Star of the least magnitude ... I cannot  
tell, what to call this light. (VIII, 232-3)

The comparisons fail--as Donne knows they will--and so he must propose a name for the light of glory. Proposition too fails--as Donne knew it

would. In the struggle to understand and to speak of God, the interpreter will always be faced with enigma, and so Donne advises that he recognize and accept that "the best knowledge that we have of God here, even by faith, is rather that he knows us, than that we know him" (VIII, 230). The interpreter who perceives this will see too that the best commentary he can make upon his text will not be primarily an expression of "comprehension," which Donne defines as knowing a thing "as well as that thing can be known" (VIII, 235). Instead, his knowledge and his words about that knowledge will derive their meaning from a context of love. The knowledge of God in heaven, Donne writes, "shall be a knowledge so like his knowledge, as it shall produce a love, like his love, and we shall love him, as he loves us" (VIII, 235).

Donne foresees, too, a further "translation" of this conflation of love and knowledge, for

by knowing, and loving the unchangeable,  
the immutable God, Mutabimur in immutabilitatem,  
we shall be changed into an unchangeableness.

(VIII, 235)

For the time being, words and their meanings are mutable, and man's perceptions about language, themselves mediated through language, also change. In the face of such mutability, Donne offers to his hearers the consolation of this final translation, from the present and limited context of "now" into the larger order of eternity. "Then," in that order, texts will become transparent, and interpreters will no longer puzzle over why Paul illogically placed a comment on the enigma of

partial knowledge at the end of an eloquent discourse on the nature and value of charity; "then," the essential connection between knowledge and charity, between interpreting truth and loving it, will be clear.

In the present, however, the text remains opaque, and its interpreter is faced with an enigma. Donne's interpretation of this text reflects his conclusions that the best response to enigmatic texts is not to construct systematic explanations, nor to reflect upon one's own capacity for knowledge, nor even to reflect upon one's capacity for charity. The Christian, says Donne, is to see and know God "contemplatively, by knowing as he is known, and Practically, by loving, as he is loved" (VIII, 236). To insist upon talking about God and talking about charity is in the last analysis a deflection; it is a refusal to see that that light which lightens man's perception cannot be classified by man as "a light which is His" or "a light which flows from him, no, nor a light which is in him" (VIII, 220). The only light by which this text may finally be understood is, simply, "that light which is He himself," for which there are no words and about which there can be no argument.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There are of course occasions of poetic speech in the New Testament epistles; see for example Paul's use of allegory in Gal. 4:22-31; his hymn in praise of Christ, Phil. 2:5-11; and his rhetorical description of an ecstatic vision, II Cor. 12:2-5.

<sup>2</sup> This threefold structure clearly reflects the importance of God's image in man as being one of Trinity; it echoes also Donne's continued acknowledgement of the presence of the Word, the Logos, in all words.

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I will assume the Pauline authorship of the letters to Timothy; this was the traditional view, which Donne reflected, and which was current in Biblical scholarship until the nineteenth century. On the authorship of the epistles to Timothy, see A.T. Hanson, The Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2-11.

<sup>4</sup> III, 210. Cf. I Tim. 3:8-9: "Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."

<sup>5</sup> In "Donne and the Wane of Wonder," ELH 36(1969), Dennis Quinn examines the importance of mystery and wonder to Donne's theology and epistemology. Quinn notes Donne's grasp of the traditional meaning of "wonder," and quotes him as follows:

the first step to faith, is to wonder, to stand,  
and consider with a holy admiration, the waies  
and proceedings of God with man: for, Admiration;  
wonder, stands as in the midst, betweene knowledge  
and faith, and hath an eye towards both.

(VI, 265)

That is, mystery as mystery, and as God has presented it, has value because "it arouses in the reader a desire to understand." Quinn argues that, for Donne, while "the clarity of literal language satisfies the intellect by giving knowledge," "the obscurity of figurative language stimulates the intellect to search further by causing wonder" (631, 630).

<sup>6</sup> Donne's brief treatment of the "mystery of iniquity" in this sermon is difficult. This is in part because he ignores the specifically eschatological context of this Pauline expression (II Thess. 2:7), and applies it loosely to his own structure. The obscurity of his argument is also in part related to the intentional and extreme literalism with which he insists that the mystery of iniquity is "greater" than the mystery of godliness because there are, literally, many more articles of faith involved in the iniquitous and "subtill" "Schoole-points" (III, 211 cf. 207). This of course extends Donne's distinction, between true mystery and mere perplexity, but the use of the term "mystery of iniquity" does confuse matters. At the very least, it draws attention to the difficulty of defining "mystery" at all, and increases the sense of how mysterious even the discursive interpretation of such matters must be.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemund Tuve, in Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery: Renaissance Poetic and Twentieth Century Critics (1947; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), points out that for the metaphysical imagination the process of definition can itself become a rich source of tropes and figures (299-309).

<sup>8</sup> Donne's subversion of his own strategy here is analogous to what Stanley Fish identifies as his intentional defeat of his hearers' ability to remember details. In Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1972), Fish argues that Donne offers apparently discrete mnemonic aids in his sermons, only to withdraw them and dispel the illusion of memory and certainty. Fish sees this as evidence of Donne's Augustinism, which operates in the sermons to encourage "a growing awareness of God's immanence," and which denies rational and locative categories of memory because it "makes all places and things one" (49).

<sup>9</sup> Compare with this Augustine's articulation of the same paradox: "He who had power to do such things, vouchsafed to be in need ... The Bread was hungry, as the Way fainted, as saving Health was wounded, as the Life died" ("Sermons on New Testament Lessons," trans. R.G. MacMullen, A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff [1887; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979] vol. VI, sermon LXXIII; Schaff 473).

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful and perceptive discussion of the relationship between mystery and poetic speech, see Walter J. Ong, S.J., "Wit and Mystery: A Revaluation in Medieval Latin Hymnody," Speculum 22(1947). Ong examines Aquinas' recognition of the fact that "metaphor, which seems to be a device distinctive of poetry and foreign to the physical and mathematical sciences and to metaphysics and logic, turns up time and again in Christian theology" (324).

<sup>11</sup> Dennis Quinn, in "Donne and the Wane of Wonder," notes that "Donne consistently distrusts miracle as a normal approach to God and belief" (636). In an Easter sermon on Heb. 11:35, Donne himself writes that, though God "glorifie himselfe sometimes, in doing a miracle, yet there is in every miracle, a silent chiding of the world, and a tacite reprehension of them, who require, or who need miracles" (VII, 374).

<sup>12</sup> Like the connection between the two poles of Erich Auerbach's "figura," the understanding of the connection between two discrete realities--whether in figure, metaphor or the Incarnation itself--is a "spiritual act." In terms of perceiving the truth of the Incarnation and of figural interpretation, this moment of insight is also a moment of faith ("Figura," Archivum Romanicum 22(1938) 436-89, trans. Ralph Manheim in Auerbach's Scenes from the Drama of European Literature [New York: Meridian Books, 1959] 53).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Thomas Browne's appeal to faith in understanding mysteries:

"I can answer all the objections of Satan, and my rebellious reason with that odd resolution I learned of Tertullian, Certum est, quia impossibile est" (Religio Medici, ed. James Winny [Cambridge: At the University Press, 1963] I, 9; Winny 11).

<sup>14</sup> Walter Ong writes of the peculiar and obscure nature of poetic speech, and of its "inability to survive the abstraction which is the peculiar condition sine qua non of human understanding" ("Wit and Mystery" 325). Further,

a poem resists the very abstraction by which we would understand it. Abstraction, in one way or another, destroys it, dissolves it away. So we must content ourselves largely with simply apprehending the poem by reading or hearing it read, and as for any strict understanding of a poem, we must content ourselves with thinking and talking around it.

("Wit and Mystery" 326)

Dennis Quinn also addresses the problem of the impenetrability of metaphor--and particularly of the metaphysical conceit--when he describes wonder as the traditionally appropriate response to obscure speech:

knowledge takes place when the beholder grasps a similarity between two apparently dissimilar things--one of them representing the other. The implication is, further, that the connection between the representing image and the object represented is by no means clear and the beholder in encountering this obscurity is led to wonder.

("Wane of Wonder" 632)

<sup>15</sup> In a sermon on Psalm 65:5, Donne discusses the importance of enigmatic speech in Scripture, particularly as used by Christ:

They were Visions, they were Similitudes, not plaine and evident things, obvious to every understanding, that God led his people by: ... And in this way of teaching, our Saviour abounded, and excelled; for when it is said, He taught them as one having authority, And when it is said, They were astonished at his Doctrine, for his word was with Power, they refer that to this manner of teaching, that hee astonished them with these reserved and darke sayings, and by the subsequent interpretation thereof, gained a reverend estimation amongst them, that he onely could lead them to a desire to know, (that darke way encreased their desire) and then he onely satisfie them with the knowledge of those things which concerned their salvation.

(VII, 315-6)

Quinn ("Wane of Wonder" 644) suggests that Donne's attitude toward mystery and parabolic speech be contrasted with Luther's. In an exposition of John 3:7-8, Luther makes it clear that he distrusts the poetic nature of parabolic speech, and would prefer to interpret metaphors as rational analogies. He explains that when Christ told Nicodemus that he must be "born again," he used the example of the wind that "bloweth where it listeth" as "an understandable and clear illustration from nature." Luther emphasizes that "with the help of this physical and clear illustration the Lord taught Nicodemus to believe even where he fails to grasp." Luther does not recommend pursuing enigmas or exploring "the mysteries for which God the Father demands faith" (Sermons on the Gospel of St. John, trans. Martin H. Bertram, Luther's Works, 54 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957] vol. 22, 292, 295, 297).

<sup>16</sup> See the general introduction of F.F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982)

<sup>17</sup> Gale H. Carrithers, Jr., in Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972), notes that this sermon particularly illustrates Donne's principle of being "not upon a Lecture, but upon a Sermon" (II, 320). The sermon does not argue for baptism, says Carrithers; rather, "it explores the nature of baptized life" (113-4).

<sup>18</sup> On Donne's reliance upon the concretion of metaphor and its immediate emotional force, see Carl Braun Sennheim, "John Donne: Poet in the Pulpit," New Essays on Donne, ed. Gary A. Stringer (Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 57 [1977] 249-50, 258); and George Williamson, "Donne and the Poetry of Today," A Garland for John Donne, ed. Theodore Spencer (1931; Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), who writes that "at all times [Donne's] style sought to make 'apprehensible by sense' what was not 'comprehensible by reason' but might terminate in intellectual equivalents" (161). For a contrasting view of Donne's use of metaphor in his preaching, see Terry G. Sherwood, "Reason in Donne's Sermons," ELH 39(1972) who sees Donne's notion of "'meditation' and metaphor as rational" and notes "Donne's compulsion, manifest everywhere in the sermons, to explain the analogues in his metaphors" (365).

<sup>19</sup> Such reliance upon metaphor would, of course, bother other seventeenth-century writers, like Hobbes, who profoundly distrusted all polysemous language. Joan Bennet discusses the movement away from

the acknowledgement of mystery and a new desire for rigid definition of meaning in "An Aspect of the Evolution of Seventeenth-Century Prose," Review of English Studies 17(1941). Bennet remarks upon the evident new interest in the perceived world as being not because it was "an adumbration of the eternal," but because "it could be known and managed to man's advantage" (281). She contrasts this with Donne, who in the sermons uses "not arguments but illustration," and whose notion of definition--unlike that of some of his contemporaries--rested upon verbal wit and medieval habits of multiple levels of exegesis (285f.).

<sup>20</sup> This of course reflects the same theological, epistemological and historical presuppositions as typology and typological interpretation. See Chapter II above, n. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, in On Christian Doctrine (trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. [1958; Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1978]), makes it clear that God uses things and people as signs, such that those signs become types. Things like the "stone which Jacob placed at his head" and the "beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son" "are things in such a way that they are also signs of other things" (I, ii; Robertson 8). Augustine later remarks that although there are among men signs--like banners and military music--which appeal to the sense of sight or hearing, "words have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives ... However, Our Lord gave a sign with the odor of the ointment with which His feet were anointed; and the taste of the sacrament

of His body and blood signified what He wished; and when the woman was healed by touching the hem of His garment, something was signified" (II, iii; Robertson 35-6).

<sup>22</sup> John S. Chamberlin, in Increase and Multiply: Arts-of-discourse Procedure in the Preaching of Donne (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), explains the patristic and Augustinian use of "paraphrase" in developing a text into a sermon discourse. Chamberlin distinguishes this from the scholastic method of "division" of the text, and observes that in Donne's preaching, "the words of the text are distributed in the divisio by either paraphrase or division, but more often by division" (110). When he does paraphrase a text, Chamberlin demonstrates, Donne "does not, then, extemporize, but, anticipating and recapitulating, picking up the thread of coherent meaning again and again as he reads on, he moves continuously through the words of the text" (110).

<sup>23</sup> Ronald E. Hughes, The Progress of the Soul: The Interior Career of John Donne (New York: William Morrow, 1969), comments that this seven-part sermon "becomes a hieroglyph of Augustine's anti-creation, the undoing of creation in six steps followed by an eternal seventh day" (181-2).

<sup>24</sup> In his Christmas sermon on John 1:8, Donne writes that "for, a regenerate Christian, being now a new Creature, hath also a new facultie

of Reason: and so believeth the Mysteries of Religion, out of another Reason, then as a meere naturall Man, he believed naturall and morall things" (III, 359).

<sup>25</sup> Heather Asals, in "John Donne and the Grammar of Redemption," English Studies in Canada 5(1979), identifies in Donne the recognition of God's logic, discrete from the pretended logic, or sophistry, of man. Asals writes that for Donne, "the language of the Logos is Logic," and "redemption lies the way of that logic, mapped out by the rigors of grammar more than rhetoric" (133). Only when we come to apprehend the mysterious unity in diversity that is the Trinity, she writes, "do we learn to read the language of the Word in the school of the Holy Ghost (by the Holy Ghost's grammar, understanding Christ and by Christ's logic understanding the Father, all together)" (135).

<sup>26</sup> On the different kinds of love, Augustine writes:

I call "charity" the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God; but "cupidity" is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God.

(On Christian Doctrine III, x; Robertson 88)

Compare with this Donne's remarks in a sermon on Revelation 20:6:

"man was borne to love; he was made in the love of God; but then man falls in love; when he growes in love with the creature, he falls in love" (VI, 69-70):

<sup>27</sup> John Chamberlin notes the "multiplying" structure of this sermon (Increase and Multiply 121); William R. Mueller, in John Donne: Preacher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), remarks upon the "fine mathematical precision" of this sermon which is built around one central image of light (133).

<sup>28</sup> Winfried Schleiner, in The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), discusses the traditional imagery of the "eyes of the soul," and the association between vision and knowledge. I Corinthians 13:12 is a primary source for this imagery, and Schleiner examines Donne's exposition of this text as illustrative of his use of the imagery of spiritual vision and the conventional theatrum mundi topos (137-56).

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, Confessions, trans. R.S. Pine-coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961) IX, x; Pine-coffin 196-9. Marcia L. Colish, in The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), sees Augustine's account of his conversation with Monica as a premonition of the time when "all languages, whether literally or figuratively verbal, will cease" (49).

## Chapter VI

### The Language of Vision:

#### Donne and the Interpretation of Prophecy

The ends crowne our workes, but thou crown'st our ends,  
For, at our end begins our endlesse rest.

"La Corona" I

The prophetic books of the Old and New Testaments evidence another mode of Scriptural speech, that of dream and vision and oracle. Although each of Scripture's prophets wrote within the context of his own time and place, all of them sought to image the meaning of their individual and particular histories by something mysteriously beyond the confines of chronology. In some cases--notably that of the Old Testament prophecies about Israel's political and military life--the veracity of a prophetic vision may be confirmed or substantiated by the events of history. However, although some of these writings can in some measure be explained in terms of concrete historical events, there is no assurance that the full significance of any prophecy can be thus known.

Donne remarks, citing Irenaeus, that "it is the nature of prophecy to be secret, till it be fulfilled" (X, 42). In the case of the New Testament book of Revelation, to which Donne is referring here, the relationship between prophecy--that which is hoped for and believed upon--

and history--that which is seen and experienced--is as yet entirely obscure. Donne reminds interpreters concerning Revelation that no one can "undertake to the Church, that he hath found the certaine, and the literall sense as yet, nor is sure to do it, till the prophecies of this booke be accomplished" (X, 42). Donne's implication is that, at least in the interpretation of Old Testament prophecies, some "certaine" sense, the specific historical reference, can be determined. Even there, however, there can be no simple set of correspondences between what was foretold and what has come to pass, for although one set of circumstances may be seen to be accomplished, there may be others which are not--and thus there may be other levels of meaning in the words of the prophecy which remain hidden. More perhaps than any other of the Scriptural modes of language, prophetic speech defies its interpreter's attempts to translate it.

The problematic relationship between history and prophecy, between what is seen and what is as yet unseen, is a central concern, both implicit and explicit, in Donne's sermons on prophetic texts. As a preacher, he addresses the immediate problems and pressures of the world around him, discussing current theological and doctrinal disputes and political events and intrigues. But he speaks also of the world of the text,<sup>1</sup> and so speaks--as must all interpreters of Scriptural prophecy--of the apocalypse. This is the promised "end time" which is in truth no time at all, but rather a conflation of temporal history with visionary prophetic fulfillment. The prophets' own reflections of apocalypse are but dark and partial, and so their interpreters' dilemma

is a perplexing one. How is one to speak of a time and place that defy temporal and spatial classification? As Donne confronts this interpretive crux--for such it is--he faces too the relative inadequacy of his speech to express "a new heaven and a new earth" through a grammar and a syntax that are bound by time. In his translations of prophecy, Donne is expressly aware that he is addressing something not only unknown but also unknowable by him in his present state--and thus, perhaps, finally untranslatable.

1. Literalism and Prophetic Speech (Revelation 20:6,  
St. Paul's, Easter Day in the Evening 1624)

Donne explains some of his interpretive principles in relation to prophetic writings in the introduction to an Easter sermon on Revelation 20:6, "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection" (VI, 62-80). He opens his exposition of this text with the warning that

in the first book of the Scriptures, that of Genesis, there is danger in departing from the letter; In this last book, this of the Revelation, there is as much danger in adhering too close to the letter.

(VI, 62)

The letter of any text, as it is ordinarily understood, is neither to be taken as absolute nor to be ignored. The book of Revelation, a text with primarily prophetic and not historical references, is thus misread if it is taken as literal history. At the same time, Donne insists that in interpreting any text, the "literall sense is alwayes to

be preserved"--but then adds the initially confusing corollary that "the literall sense is not alwayes to be discerned" (VI, 62). Donne explains this confusion when he defines the "literall sense" as

not alwayes that, which the very Letter and Grammar of the place presents, as where it is literally said, That Christ is a Vine, and literally, That his flesh is bread ... But the literall sense of every place, is the principall intention of the Holy Ghost, in that place.

(VI, 62)

Interpreters like to assume that the "very Letter and Grammar of the place" present some measure--and even the greatest measure--of the truth of the text. But the Holy Ghost, Donne explains, writes in various modes, and sometimes the "letter and grammar" are not the keys to understanding the Scripture:

his principall intention in many places, is to expresse things by allegories, by figures; so that in many places of Scripture, a figurative sense is the literall sense, and more in this book [ie. Revelation] then in any other. (VI, 62)

The literal sense, then, according to this construction, is not necessarily identified with the letter at all; that literal meaning which is "alwayes to be preserved" is to be discerned as simply "the principall intention of the Holy Ghost in that place."<sup>2</sup>

A hermeneutical principle that proposes determining the primary sense of a text on the basis of the Holy Ghost's "principall intention" presents many interpretive hazards. Donne speaks of these hazards when he describes interpretive errors at two extremes, the error of too rigidly adhering to the letter, and the error of completely ignoring it.

He explains that

to depart from the literall sense, that sense which the very letter presents, in the book of Genesis, is dangerous, because if we do so there, we have no history of the Creation of the world in any other place to stick to.

(VI, 62)

An assurance concerning the creation of the world and the beginning of the history of man's relationship with God comes from the grammar of the text, its normally apprehended literal sense. Thus, to construct figurative and allegorical readings without attending to the historical letter, which is the text's essential context, would be a serious misinterpretation of it.

At the same time, however, for the interpretation of a book of prophecy, like Revelation, Donne explains that "so to binde our selves to such a literall sense in this book, will take from us the consolation of many spirituall happinesses, and bury us in thè carnall things of this world" (VI, 62). In relation to prophetic texts, then, the interpreter risks an equally inappropriate reading if he allows himself to be bound to a literal-historical context, for history is not the primary context of a prophetic book. To be bound by history when reading prophecy is to deny prophecy's basic premise, which is that history--the time-bound sequence of events--will one day be replaced by the new order of eternity. To allow history to circumscribe the interpretation of a prophecy is to be buried in the "carnall things of the world," to close off perhaps the most profitable avenues of interpretation, and to deny oneself "the consolation of many spirituall

happineses" that prophecy affords.

Donne goes on to demonstrate how an overindulgence in literal reading signifies a corresponding overindulgence in the self. Even "very many ... very learned" interpreters fell into this error on occasion. For example, when some interpreters read of those who are to live and reign with Christ for a thousand years, they fixed upon a literal interpretation--which Donne says resulted in an "evident falshood"--that "there should be to all the Saints of God, a state of happinesse in this world, after Christs comming, for a thousand yeares" (VI, 62-3). Further, Donne writes,

yet others have dreamed on, and enlarged their dreames to an enjoying of all these worldly happineses, which they, being formerly persecuted, did formerly want in this world, and then should have them for a thousand yeares together in recompence. (VI, 63)

The error of such interpreters is in trusting without discernment in the letter of the text--and, too, of trusting in the value of worldly happiness.

Donne's choice of the word "enjoyment" here recalls Augustine's important distinction between the use and the enjoyment of Creation, a distinction that Donne himself echoes throughout this sermon. Augustine writes that "if we are not to be shackled by an inferior love," "we should use this world, and not enjoy it."<sup>3</sup> In a similar way, Donne condemns the enjoyment of the wrong things, which here results in a misreading of the text which infers that it promises worldly comforts. An imagined construct--one which issues from the self and the desires of the self--is never, for Donne, an appropriate or faithful interpretation of a text.

Throughout this sermon, Donne addresses the matter of how to remain faithful to the literal sense of a text while not becoming bound by its "very Letter and Grammar." His exposition of Revelation 20:6 is a demonstration of the necessary balance between literal and figurative senses, and of the dangers inherent in allowing an unbalanced reading of a text to dominate an interpretation. He begins by acknowledging that "thus far then the text is literall, That this Resurrection in the text, is different from the generall Resurrection" (VI, 63). That is, the word "first" in the text may be taken at face value as indicating that there is at least one other and later resurrection. Donne maintains too that this implies that the text refers not to the final physical resurrection at the last day, but to some spiritual resurrection that occurs in this life. He lists three expositions of the phrase "first resurrection" that have been "authorized by persons of good note in the Church." These are, first, that it refers to the Church's resurrection from persecution; second, that it is a resurrection from the death of sin; and third, that it is the resurrection of the soul in heaven in which it is "removed from the distance, and latitude, and possibility of tentations in this world" (VI, 63-4). Donne expounds all three of these traditional readings, and explains the doctrinal implications of each.<sup>4</sup> Then, encouraged by "the occasion of the day, which we celebrate now, being the Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Christ Jesus," he also proposes a "fourth sense, or rather use of the words" (VI, 64).<sup>5</sup>

This fourth "use" that Donne proposes is that "this first Resurrection

should be the first fruits of the dead; The first Rising, is the first Riser, Christ Jesus," a reference to Paul's metaphor of Christ as the "first fruits of them that slept" (VI, 64; I Cor. 15:20, 23). Early in the sermon, Donne had set forth guidelines for any figurative or secondary interpretation--"that it destroy not the literall sense, that it violate not the analogy of faith, that it advance devotion"--and his own "fourth use" falls within these guidelines (VI, 63). He adds, however, that he intends his suggestion "not indeed as an exposition of the words, but as a convenient exaltation of our devotion" (VI, 64).

After introducing some of the problems connected with reading and interpreting a figurative text, Donne goes on to expound the various senses of the text, while continuing to draw attention to his concern about the nature of interpretation. In the first section, which deals with the "first resurrection" as a resurrection from persecution, Donne opens by commenting that the expositor who put forth this interpretation did so "in part well towards the letter of the place" (VI, 65). Here he focusses attention upon the model of the letter of a text and its figurative meaning--which might be spoken of as its spirit--and then goes on to use this model throughout the sermon in an ongoing analogy between interpreting a text and understanding the world.<sup>6</sup>

One of the themes to which Donne applies this analogy, and to which he returns repeatedly in this sermon, is that of the dangers of ignorance. Even persecution, he writes, was not the worst that could

happen to the Church:

your greater affliction was, as you were long before,  
in an insensibleness, you thought your selves well  
enough, and yet were under a worse persecution of  
ignorance, and of superstition, when you ... did  
not know your low estate, or that you needed a  
Resurrection.

(VI, 67)

Donne had explained earlier how assuming the sufficiency of the "very Letter and Grammar" of a text leads to overly literal and often mistaken interpretations. Here he points out errors in the perception of life and of events in the world which are like those errors in reading: thinking oneself "well enough" signals a refusal to see beyond the letter of present experience, and results in even greater "insensibleness," which is a much more insidious threat than that of actual persecution from without.

The other kind of misreading that Donne has discussed in the introduction to this sermon--that of being "transported" by "imaginary intimations" of the text (VI, 62)--also has its analogy in a faulty interpretation of the world. He speaks of those who will not participate in the first resurrection because they have "worshipped the Beast and his image" (Rev. 20:4), having allowed themselves to be "transported with vain imaginations of his power" (VI, 68). To think oneself "well enough" and stubbornly refuse to see beyond the letter of the text is to fall into one snare, that of submitting to pride and unjustified self-satisfaction; to extrapolate from the letter and lose oneself in imaginary and frivolous readings is to fall into another snare, one which also signals a submission to the desires of the self.

That there is a necessary balance between letter and spirit, between the extremes of literal and figurative interpretation, is a theme that echoes and re-echoes throughout the Revelation 20:6 sermon. In his exposition of the second sense of "first resurrection," Donne again warns of the "insensibleness" whereby we fall "so low, as that we think not, that we need, know not, that there is a resurrection" (VI, 69). In such a fall there is the same ignorance of context, of one's own condition, that Donne pointed out earlier. He extends the point in this second section with a strongly Augustinian construction, writing that

man was borne to love; he was made in the love of God; but then man falls in love; when he growes in love with the creature, he falls in love ... it is a blessing to glorifie God, in the right use of his creatures, but to grow in love with them, is a fall.

(VI, 69-70)

This echoes again Augustine's distinction between the use of creation and its enjoyment. To fall in love with the creature, with the "very Letter" of the text, instead of loving God and seeking out the "principall intention of the Holy Ghost" in that text, is to fall away from the possibility of faithful interpretation. Just as "it is not evidence enough, to prove that thou art [spiritually] alive, to say, I saw thee at a Sermon" but only "that spirit, that knowes thy spirit, he that knowes whether thou wert moved by a Sermon ... knows whether thou be alive or no," so when one reads only according to the appearance, the letter of the text, one may miss much of the truth of that text.

In the third section of the sermon, Donne's implicit analogy

between reading a text and reading the world of experience and events becomes even more pointed as he refers often to the role of words and the choice of words in understanding the world. He remarks of the third sense of "first resurrection"--that it refers to the soul's resurrection to heaven after the death of the body--that, "now, a Resurrection of the soule, seemes an improper, an impertinent, an improbable, an impossible forme of speech" (VI, 74). If the soul cannot die, how can it be said to rise? Yet Donne insists that expositors of this sense of the text have neither "mistaken nor miscalled the matter," and he goes to some length to explain that it is not necessary to speak of a literal death in order to speak of a resurrection. Because--and Donne cites St. Cyril here--strictly speaking, a resurrection is a "second Rising to that state, from which any thing is formerly fallen," it is possible to say that "the returning of the soule to him, from whom it proceeded at first, is a Resurrection of the soule" (VI, 74-5).

Donne goes on to explain that there is a kind of death of the soul in the present life, in that the soul is constrained by the needs and desires and weaknesses of the body. For now, the soul

must act, but what this body will give it leave to act, according to the Organs, which this body affords it ... If the body oppresse it selfe with Melancholy, the soule must be sad; and if other men oppresse the body with injury, the soule must be sad too.

(VI, 75)

The body, in this world the necessary image of the soul, is--like the letter of a text--a potential snare.<sup>7</sup> Donne writes, citing Augustine,

that when the soul in her present state considers this world,

she rests upon such things as she is not sure are true, but such as she sees, are ordinarily received and accepted for truths: so that the end of her knowledge is not Truth, but opinion, and the way, not Inquisition, but ease.

(VI, 76)

Like the interpreter who binds himself to an inappropriately literal sense of a prophecy, in this life the soul too often wearies of "the trouble of seeking out the truth," and so "returnes to her owne darknesse, because she is most familiar, and best acquainted with it" (VI, 76).

Seeking out the "principall intention of the Holy Ghost" in a text or in the world, finding a balance between the right use and the inappropriate enjoyment of all creation, is so demanding that many are content with the letter of the present order, and choose to "escape the paine of debating, and disputing" by "sleeping out" their lives in a dream of ignorance and sin (VI, 76).

Donne moves on then from explaining the three conventional expositions of his text into what he has called his proposed "fourth use" of its words. There are various resurrections--and even physical resurrections--mentioned in Scripture, Donne admits, but "Christ is the first Resurrection; others were raised; but he only rose; they by a forraine, and extrinsique, he by his owne power" (VI, 77). Christ's spirit was not imprisoned or confined by his body as is ordinarily the case with man. Christ raised himself, translating his body by the power of his spirit, and as he is "the onely cause of his owne Resurrection," so too he is the "onely cause of our Resurrection" (VI, 78). Christ's resurrection offers to all men the possibility of resurrection from that

darkness with which they are too familiar, from the letter of events which binds them and from the vain imaginations that transport them. Donne demonstrates this by rehearsing the three traditional expositions of his text to show that "blessed and happy are we, if we referre all our resurrections to this first Resurrection Christ Jesus" (VI, 78). The resurrection from all forms of death, writes Donne, is to "have thy recourse to him, to Christ" (VI, 78-9): all levels of interpretation of the text are concluded and included in Christ--and in him all false imaginings and self-serving constructions of it are done away.

In the last analysis, then, whether or not Donne's proposed use of the text is valid depends not upon the worth of the words themselves but upon the "first Riser" of whom they speak. By referring all the levels of interpretation of this prophetic text to Christ, the one who participates fully in both human history and the extra-historical order that prophecy images, Donne adds a further valence to his discussion of the letter that is "alwayes to be preserved." The "single interpretation" which Donne proposes by his fourth use of this text functions as a synthesis or resolution of many interpretations, but it is not a reduction of the text. It allows the other expositions to stand, but enriches and enlivens them by seeking to include in itself all possibilities which remain within the "analogy of faith." For Donne, this reading comes as close to reflecting the "principall intention of the Holy Ghost" as he can come, not because he considers the "very Grammar" of Revelation 20:6 to indicate that the words must refer to Christ, but because all of

Scripture, for Donne, is concluded and resolved in incarnation--and all of its language is best translated by that paradox that encompasses, and thus is able to render, all letters of all texts.

2. Historical Reference and Prophetic Speech (Micah 2:10,

Preached at the Churching of the Countess of Bridgewater [1621 or 1623])

In the Revelation 20:6 sermon, Donne presents three interpretations of his text, interpretations which he resolves in his proposed fourth use, but which still offer three alternative expositions of the text's meaning. Donne's presentation of the three reflects his recognition of these various readings, for he carefully outlines each one and then explicates Revelation 20:6 according to its particular assumptions. It is possible, however, to consider that a threefold interpretation need not offer alternative interpretations, but instead may illustrate a progressive understanding of the text. Donne proceeds according to such a model in a pair of sermons on an Old Testament text from the minor prophet Micah, who told Israel to "arise and depart; for this is not your rest" (Mic. 2:10; V, 184-215). In these sermons Donne discusses the importance of distinguishing between "what is" and "what is not," and he does so in part by outlining a threefold interpretation of Micah 2:10 that reflects the evolution in the understanding of "rest" as it develops through the course of both Scriptural history and his own exposition.

Both of these sermons bear the title "Preached at the Churching of

the Countess of Bridgewater," and it is obvious that the two are parts of a single longer exposition of Micah 2:10. In their editorial introduction to the volume in which this exposition appears, Potter and Simpson remark that it was probably divided by Donne himself, and the first section--whose subject would have been "very unsuitable for the churching of any lady"--is probably an expansion of one or two paragraphs from the original version.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, then, these two sermons will be considered as forming two sections of a single sermon. The first section comprises Donne's treatment of the "principall and literall sense" of the words, their reference to Micah's historical threat as spoken to the Jews of his time (V, 185-97). The second section treats second and third "acceptations" of the text--that it addresses the Church, and as such is "an alarm, to raise us from the sleep, and death of sin" (V, 198), and that it addresses all men, "with reference to the Consummation of all, to the rising at the generall Judgement" (V, 184). Donne's organization of his exposition clearly follows a temporal sequence, as it moves from the Old Testament Jews through the Church militant to the promise of the Church triumphant at the last day. There is too a doctrinal sequence here which corresponds to the historical one, in which Donne treats first the Old Testament covenant of Law and then the New Testament covenant of grace, and finally looks ahead to the general resurrection which will be the consummation of all of God's covenants with man.

In the first section of his treatment of the text, Donne speaks almost exclusively of the historical application of Micah's words. He

begins by explaining that his discussion of the historical sense of the text will fall into four parts. First, he identifies the words as a rebuke that the Jews "are fallen from their station ... implied in the first word, Arise, for then they were fallen." Second, Donne considers that the Jews are bid to arise "though they lik'd that state into which they were fallen, which was a security, and stubbornnesse in their sins." Third, he points out that "they are not rais'd to their former state and dignity, from which they were fallen, they are not rais'd to be established, but it is arise, and depart." Finally, Donne concludes that by Micah's words "God precludes them from any hope," for "there is no intimation, no hope given, that they should have rest any where else, for as they were to rise, onely to depart, so they were to depart into Captivity" (V, 185-6).

A peculiar negative logic operates in each of these four sections of Donne's exposition, as he emphasizes that his text makes its points only by implication. For example, when Micah tells Israel to arise, he is at the same time implying that they had fallen, and that they must recover from this fallenness. Similarly, the implication of the word "depart" in the text is that the Jews were not to stay even in the place they had assumed to be theirs. Moreover, implicit in Israel's being told that now even the promised land itself was not their "rest," is God's anger with the Jews. Thus, in his treatment of the historical reference of Micah 2:10, Donne repeatedly approaches the meaning of what is said by the text through an explication of what is not said but

implied, and through an elaboration of the text's own direct statement of "what is not."

Donne continues this negative logic when he speaks of the prophet who uttered these words. He explains that

this Prophet was no upstart, no sodain, no transitory Man, to passe through the streets with a Uae, Uae, Wo, wo unto this City, and no more ... He was no suspicious Man out of his singularity ... He was no particular man ... so, as that he addressed his prophecies upon Judah onely.

(V, 191)

Donne goes on to say that this text is "not a prophecy limited to Idolatry, and the sins against the first Table," nor is it "a timorous prophecy, directed onely to persons, whom a low fortune ... had depress'd and dejected" (V, 192). Donne establishes the integrity of Micah and his words, then, by explaining what they are not. Whatever his unwilling hearers may prefer to think, Micah cannot be dismissed as "an upstart, a singular person" whose "threatnings are rather Satvricall, then Propheticall, or Theologicall" (V, 192). Yet, as Donne points out here and throughout the sermon, people too often prefer what is not to what is. They look at a prophet and prefer to see a madman, or they look--as Israel did--at Canaan and choose to see it as their rest. But for Israel to dismiss the prophet's words and choose instead an illusory rest is for them to embrace "Imaginary comforts, which they had framed, and proposed to themselves" when they allowed themselves to become "content with this world" (V, 191).

As in the examples above, Donne expounds his text in part by speaking of the things the text says only by implication. He also uses a second

method of exposition, however, in which he speaks of the things that the text says are not so. He glosses the word "this" from the statement "this is not your rest," explaining how the people of Israel had assumed that the promised land was their rest. They were "confident in their term, their state in that Land, that it should be perpetuall" (V, 194), and so began to flatter themselves, and "say to themselves, Why, 'tis no great matter; we may doe well enough for all that, though our Religion be chang'd" (V, 193). What they imagined to be was not so, for they chose to ignore another part of "what is," that "God had sworne to them an inheritance permanently there, but upon condition of their obedience" (V, 196). Thus, "when they so rebelliously broke all conditions," God was justified in departing from his obligations under his covenant with them. A principle of literal justice, eye for eye and tooth for tooth, operates here: because Israel failed to live up to her oath, God could revoke his.

In his discussions of the meaning of the Old Testament concepts of covenant and the promised land, Donne is explaining Israel's history. At the same time, however, he reminds his hearers that this is a prophetic text, and as such not only speaks of the temporal events of Israel's past life but also points ahead to another series of events and even to another kind of time. Donne reflects this double awareness of the mode of his text in his conclusion to the first section of this sermon, in which he refers to a New Testament text that echoes the "very Letter" of Micah's prophecy, but which also signifies a very different "departing":

here was a Nunc dimittis, but not in pace; The Lord lets them depart, and makes them depart, but not in peace, for their eyes saw no salvation; they were sent away to a heavy captivity.

(V, 197)

Donne makes it clear that if they are seen in a purely historical context, Micah's words to Israel are a dead end. When the prophet states that Canaan is not Israel's rest, he offers nothing else as rest instead, and so Israel must depart only into the Babylonian captivity. But understood in their context as prophecy, Micah's words do signify something more. Donne's exposition of this moment in Israel's history, the breach of her covenant with God and the frustration of his mercy, points ahead to a better covenant of which Micah speaks by implication, and which Simeon sees in the infant Christ when he proclaims, "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation" (Luke 2:29-30; cf. V, 197). If, as Micah says, this is not to be the rest for God's people, then something else must be; if the conditions of the old covenant could not be fulfilled, then there must by God's mercy be a new covenant whose conditions can be met.

The assumption upon which Donne bases the second section of his sermon is the assumption of the New Testament covenant of grace, under which man's repentance will always bring God's forgiveness, as he has sworn that, "as I live I would not the death of a sinner" (V, 197). Donne adds, too, that under this new covenant, "he doe not onely make a new contract with us, but give us withall an ability, to performe the condi-

tions, which he requires" (V, 197). In the second section of the sermon, Donne moves beyond "the principall and literall sense" of the text to discuss specifically its prophetic implications. He applies the same negative logic here as he did in the first section, explaining of the text's word "Arise" that "when we are bid arise, we are told, that we are faln," and "secondly, we are bid to doe something, and therefore we are able to doe something" (V, 198). Third, the text bids, "then not to be idle, when we are up, but to depart"; and, finally, man is to depart because "Rest, (your Rest) is not here; not in that, which is spoken of here" (V, 199). The points of Donne's discussion here are analogous to the four points of his exposition of the text's historical reference.

There is a significant difference in this second part of the sermon, however; for although Donne still uses logic that works by implication, here he more expressly directs his hearer forward from what is not to what is. He writes, for example, that "since God sends us away, because our Rest is not here, he does tacitly direct us thereby, where there is Rest" (V, 199). Donne also modifies the second of the four points, ~~that~~ God's people were to arise from their wilful neglect of the covenant. In his adaptation of this point to the New Testament context, Donne speaks of man's inability to fulfil a covenant with God, but stresses God's mercy upon man's fallenness as he reminds his hearers that when God "bids thee rise, he enables thee to rise" (V, 204).

The tone of Donne's application of this negative reasoning is also

altered in the second section of the sermon. Negative formulations such as "this is not your rest" become in Donne's historical discussion condemnations, whereas here they are expressions of mercy. Even their form itself bespeaks mercy: Donne discards both mild bitterness and condemnation as ways of reproaching a congregation and then explains that

God hath provided a way here, to convey, to imprint this increpation, this rebuke, sweetly, and successfully; that is, by way of counsaile: by bidding them arise, he chides them for falling, by presenting the exaltation and exultation of a peacefull conscience, he brings them to a foresight, to what miserable distractions, and distortions of the soule, a habite of sinne will bring them to. (V, 201)

He continues, "it is Gods way, and we are willing to pursue it; to shew you that you are Enemies to Christ, we pray you in Christs stead, that you would be reconciled to him; to shew you, that you are faln, we pray you to arise" (V, 201). Discussing "what is not," then, can also be a way of discussing "what is." In their purely historical context, as they spoke to Micah's Israel, these words could say only "this is not your rest"; however, as Donne demonstrates by his exposition, in the light of the new covenant and its promise of grace, these words speak strongly too of the hope that somewhere else there is the possibility of rest.<sup>9</sup>

However, even if interpreters "give these words their spirituall sense" (V, 209), Donne insists, this is not yet "rest." In an elaborate negative structure he explains that rest

is not here at all: not in that Here, which is intimated in this Text; not in the falling, that is Here; for sinne is a stupidity, it is not a rest; not in the rising that is Here, for this remorse, this repentance, is but as a surveying of a convenient

ground ... to erect a building upon; not in the departing that is here, for in that, is intimated a building of new habits, upon the ground so prepared, and so a continuall, and laborious travaile, no rest.  
(V, 209)

There can be a certain ease of conscience found in remorse and repentance in this life, Donne explains,

yet, as when we journey by Coach, we have an ease in the way, but yet our rest is at home, so in the ways of a regenerate Man, there is an unexpressible ease, and consolation here, but yet even this is not your rest.  
(V, 209)

In the final movement of the sermon, Donne comes to discuss the consolation that is a departing, not without rest (as the Jews had to depart) and not merely into "the way towards Rest" (which is the departing of sinners); this third departing is, rather, "into Rest it selfe" (V, 209), and represents the final resurrection to glory. But in order "to present this eternall Rest," Donne says, "we must a little invert the words, to the departing out of this world, by death, and so to arise to Judgement; Depart, and arise" (V, 210). This is not only an inversion of the words; as Donne points out, it is also an inversion of ordinary expectations, for "it is a consolation, and yet it is a funerall" (V, 209). Death itself is not "your rest," for it is not so final as many have imagined.

The central question still remains, however: what is "rest?" Donne's hearers know by now that it is neither Old Testament covenant nor the promised land, neither the world and its goods nor repentance

and renunciation of them. "All the Rest of this life," Donne tells them, playing on the double sense of "rest," "even the spirituall Rest, is rather a Truce, then a peace, rather a Cessation, then an end of the war" (V, 213). They know the paradox that "a Man may be at a security in an opinion of Rest, and be far from it; A man may be neerer Rest in a troubled Conscience, then in a secure" (V, 214). In the state of rest, Donne tells his hearers, "we shall no more need this voice, Arise, and depart, because we shall be no more in danger of falling, no more in danger of departing from the presence, and contemplation; and service, and fruition of God" (V, 198). Finally, he says, "to end all, though there be no Rest in all this world, no not in our sanctification here, yet this being a Consolation, there must be rest some where" (V, 215).

In other words, Donne simply does not attempt to describe rest or heaven except by implication, using negative constructions. "Eternal rest" is essentially unknowable and untranslatable--and yet it is, and so must somehow be spoken. If the language of what is not is able to convey its opposite, that which is, then it is a language worth using (cf. V, 201). But while this language speaks of what is not in order to express what is, it is not like the language of vain imagination, which as Donne has demonstrated puts forward fabrications and pretends that they are the truth. For Donne, because such imaginings are circumscribed by the self, they will never reflect what is, but will always see only what they would like to be true.

As there is a difference between what truly is and what man would

like to be, so too Donne makes an important distinction between what is not now and what is not yet. "Let us attend that Rest," he writes, "as patiently as we doe the things of this world, and not doubt of it therefore, because we see it not yet" (V, 215). While vain imagination focusses upon what is not, flattering itself into the belief that it is, faith and faithful obedience recognize that what is not, is not, and focus instead upon what they know to be true, though it may be not yet apparent.<sup>10</sup> To interpret Micah 2:10 only as history assumes that it speaks merely of what is in the present, and thus draws from it only evidence of the failures and the lack of rest that the present world embodies. Even in its present experience of grace and new covenant, the Church finds itself only "on the way towards Rest" (V, 209), still weighted with the knowledge that that which surrounds it is not, and never can be, its rest. It is only as this text is seen in its context as prophecy--that mode of speech which is concerned always with what is not yet--that it can be understood fully.

As a way of imaging the difference between what is not and what is not yet, and thus drawing out for his hearers the consolation of prophetic speech, Donne refers to the Old Testament story of Lot's wife. Citing Augustine, he writes

here we are still subject to relapses, and to looking back; Memento uxoris Lot, Ipsa in loco manet, transeuntes monet, Shee is fixed to a place, that she might settle those, that are not fix'd; Ut quid in statuam salis conversa, si non homines, ut sapiant, condat? to teach us the danger of looking back, till we be fix'd, she is fix'd.

(V, 214)

To look back at the city that is being destroyed, to cling to imagined securities and former assumptions about what is, is to delude oneself and to prevent oneself from moving forward, departing from the "principall and literall interpretation" which issues only in captivity. To look forward, to be fixed upon the prophetic promise of what is not yet but assuredly will be, is indeed to "arise and depart" as Micah urged.

In his own speech here, Donne echoes the prophetic mode, assuring his hearers that "not Nature, not Sea, nor Land, is our surety, but our surety is one, who is already crown'd, with that Resurrection" (V, 215). Prophecy and prophetic speech do not adhere to conventional notions of chronology. Even as it speaks of the end times, prophecy struggles to image also what already is, here, Christ, the one who is "already crown'd."<sup>11</sup> In this struggle, the limitation that prophetic speech encounters is the limitation of all human language, its own "very Grammar" which dictates that it speak merely in sequence and conventional syntax, of something that was or of something that is not or will be-- and not of something that participates simultaneously in all three tenses.

3. Vision, Revelation and Prophetic Speech (Revelation 7:9,  
Preached to the Earl of Exeter, and his Company, in his Chapel  
at Saint John's, June 13 1624)

In a sermon of June 13, 1624, Donne preached on a text which describes an event that is not yet, part of a vision that appeared to

St. John on Patmos (VI, 150-67). The text is Revelation 7:9:

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands.

(VI, 150)

Donne opens--as he often does when expounding a prophetic text--with a discussion of some principles of interpretation. Here, as in the Revelation 20:6 sermon, he warns of the danger of overcuriosity, and states that in his exposition, "we take the plainest way ... that in which, the best meet, and concur" (VI, 150). This standard interpretation, continues Donne, is that "this part of the book of the Revelation, is literally, and primarily, the glorious victory of them, who, in the later end of the world, having stood out the persecutions of the Antichrist, enter into the triumph of heaven" (VI, 151). Donne adds, however, that it would not be "overcurious" to recognize that the text also

extends it self to all, by way of fair accommodation, who after a battel with their own Antichrists, and victory over their owne enemies, are also made partakers of those triumphs, those joyes, those glories.

(VI, 151)

Donne's explanation of how he moves from the primary sense of this text to a second level of interpretation incorporates the metaphor of "extension," and extension-- together with its related ideas of expansion, growth, increase and multiplication--is central to the metaphoric conception of the entire sermon. The sermon's text speaks of "a great multitude, which no man could number," and Donne accordingly focusses

in his exposition upon questions of quantity and measure. But while throughout the sermon he uses the language of numbers, figures, multiplication and quantity, he returns again and again to his text which speaks of something that cannot be numbered.

Even in his preliminary explanation of the outline for this exposition Donne makes the point that to measure the contents of this text--even by the convenient and accepted practice of making divisions in its exposition--is a kind of folly:

we are then upon the contemplation of the joyes of heaven, which are everlasting, and must we wring them into the discourse of an houre? of the glory of heaven which is intire, and must we divide it into parts?

(VI, 151)

What an interpretation of Revelation 7:9 should discuss, and what Donne himself wants to address in this sermon, are essentially qualitative and not quantitative questions. For the sake of organizing a coherent exposition, he gives in to the necessary convention of measures and divisions. Even as he establishes the divisions of his exposition, however, Donne reflects his unease about "weighing and measuring" a text, particularly one which speaks directly of something that "no man could number."<sup>12</sup> He discusses Revelation 7:9 in two parts, "first, the number, the great number of those that shall be saved; And then, the glorious qualities, which shall be imprinted on them, who are saved" (VI, 151). First he interprets the text in terms of quantity; then he moves on to discuss the qualitative truth that the text images.

In the first part of his treatment of the quantity of the "great

multitudes," Donne describes "the sociableness, the communicableness of God." God is not and never has been alone, says Donne; even

very good grammarians amongst the Hebrews, have thought, and said, that that name, by which God notifies himself to the world, in the very beginning of Genesis, which is elohim, as it is a plurall word there, so it hath no singular: they say we cannot name God, but plurally.

(VI, 152)

To say that God is named only "plurally," however, is very different from saying that there is a "plurality of Gods" (VI, 153), and in making this distinction Donne demonstrates how the conventional language of quantity and plurality breaks down. He writes that

the Romans mis-took infinitely, in making 300 Iupiters; Varro mis-took infinitely, in making Deos terrestres, and Deos caelestes, sub-lunary and super-lunary, heavenly, and earthly Gods.

(VI, 153)

The error that is made in naming "300 Iupiters" is not a three hundredfold error, it is an infinite error: its mistaking of truth cannot be measured. Because God cannot be divided and counted, as the pagans tried to do, Donne writes, one must speak of God's "plurality" by speaking also of his singularity: "God was from all eternity collected into one God, yet from all eternity he derived himselfe into three persons" (VI, 153). Donne uses this statement of the central doctrine of the Trinity and of the mystery which surrounds the Christian triune God to illustrate how categories and definitions of quantity and plurality are confounded by paradoxical truth.

After discussing the Trinity, Donne then expands his point that "God

was so far from being alone" by describing the creation itself as a paradigm of God's extension of himself. He writes that when God had made the earth and the sky, he had proclaimed it "good," but "when he had made All, peopled the whole world, brought all creatures together, then he was very glad ... then the good was extended into very good." (VI, 154). Because even the "visible and discernible world," the very infinity of the stars, was not enough for God, says Donne, he created the angels too, so many that "arithmetique lacks numbers to expresse them, proportion lacks Dimensions to figure them" (VI, 154). And, then, finally, God "enlarged his love, in making man" (VI, 154).

At this point, Donne reverses his strategy of approaching creation in terms of multiplication and expansion, and demonstrates how even such plurality as is evident in creation may be contracted into oneness. Man, as God made him, is unique within creation, for God conceived man to be a creature in which God "might enjoy all natures at once, and have the nature of Angels, and the nature of earthly Creatures, in one Person" (VI, 154). And Donne emphasizes further that God made this singular creature out of his own oneness, for "God, in his whole counsail, in his whole Colledge, in his whole ~~society~~, in the whole Trinity, makes man, in whom the whole nature of all the world should meet" (VI, 154).

Even more significant than this unifying creative act, however, is the contraction of plurality which occurs in the Incarnation. Donne describes the Incarnation using the language of weights and measures, writing that God

made Christ, God and Man, in one person, Creature and Creator together; One greater then the Seraphim, and yet lesse then a worme; Soveraigne to all nature, and yet subject to naturall infirmities; Lord of life, life it selfe, and yet prisoner to Death; Before, and beyond all measures of Time, and yet Born at so many moneths, Circumcised at so many days, Crucified at so many years; Rose againe at so many Hours.

(VI, 155)

Although Christ, God incarnate, is "beyond all measures of time," man still must apply those measures to him, for he sees only in temporal sequence who and where Christ was at a certain hour and day and year. Man can speak of plurality, of a Creator and a creature, or of a Creator or a creature, but of that mysterious singularity, the two together in one person, he cannot adequately speak.

From this expression of singularity and contraction, Donne moves on to expand again into a discussion of multiplicity. At Pentecost, the birth of the Church,

the holy Ghost came so as that they were enabled, by the gift of tongues, to convey, and propagate, and derive God, (as they did) to every nation under heaven.

(VI, 155)

"So much does God delight in man," Donne explains, that he "calls, and wooes, and drawes by thousands, and by whole Congregations" (VI, 155). Donne continues to move back and forth between plural and singular, from multiplication and expansion to division and contraction, as he speaks of the preaching that is to draw these thousands. In the example he uses to illustrate how "contrary to flesh and blood" is the Christian religion, Donne employs a syntax and a series of concepts which themselves both multiply and contract:

that this body should be eaten by fishes in the sea, and then those fishes eaten by other men, or that one man should be eaten by another man, and so become both one man, and then that for all this assimilation, and union, there should arise two men, at the resurrection ... this resurrection is an incredible thing.

(VI, 156)

There is something more absurd in flesh and blood's preoccupation with literal-minded distinction than there is in the "foolishness of preaching" against which human reason rebels. Resurrection may be an "incredible thing," but it is not essentially absurd: what is absurd is to take something which is truly incredible, like the resurrection, and attempt to evaluate it in terms of the size and form of the bodies involved.

Absurd teachings will always propagate, however, and Donne reminds his hearers that in the early church, "pestilent Heritiques, grew to a great number" but "scarce any two or three amongst them, were of one opinion" (VI, 156). Here again Donne extends the structure of his ideas into the structure of his syntax, speaking in a way which reflects the multiplicity he is describing.

Iranaeus, about one hundred and eighty yeers after Christ, may reckon about twenty heresies; Tertullian twenty or thirty yeares after him, perchance twenty seven; and Epiphanius, some a hundred and fifty after him, sixty; and fifty yeare after that, St. Augustine some ninety.

(VI, 157)

Yet despite this apparently uncontrolled multiplication of false teaching, only a few years after Augustine, "there was no man alive, that held any of these heresies" (VI, 157).

There is a kind of multiplication which counters that of heresy, a

paradoxical growth which answers to laws other than those of arithmetic. It works inversely, contrary to all calculable speculation. According to this principle of multiplication, for example, if "one man should be executed, because he was a Christian ... all that saw him executed, and the Executioner himself, should thereupon become Christians" (VI, 157).

Donne is not here setting up an equation, even an inverse one, whereby one death can issue in so many lives; instead, he is arguing for God's faithfulness, for the quality of God's love for his people. And although that cannot be measured, yet Donne concludes, "this is argument abundantly enough, that God had a love to man, and a desire to draw man to his society, and in great numbers to bring them to salvation" (VI, 157). In this abundant argument, Donne uses quantities as evidence, as a way of arguing for a certain quality. God's faithfulness to his people is extensive, as Donne has shown; it is also paradoxical in the way it answers to the rules of multiplication and plurality, for its very extensiveness cannot be predicted or formulated by any equation.

In the second part of his discussion of quantity, Donne continues to show how plurality as we conceive it is adapted by God into his logic, and collapsed into a singularity which speaks more of quality than of numbers. In this section he discusses the verses preceding Revelation 7:9, in which St. John "had seene the servants of God sealed" (VI, 158). The sealing of the faithful in St. John's vision seems to be limited to "a great number, one hundred forty four thousand" (VI, 152), twelve thousand from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Yet the "great

multitude" of verse nine, "they who were made partakers of all this after, were innumerable" (VI, 152). So, Donne explains, God's enumeration of the faithful must not be a literal numbering, and thus "we may justly take this number of twelve and twelve thousand, for an indefinite, and uncertain number" (VI, 161). "If we should take the number to be a certaine and exact number, so many, and no more," Donne continues, "this number hath relation to the Jews onely" (VI, 161). However, the Church maintains that "by Gods grace, there may be an infinite number of soules saved, more then those, of whose salvation, we discern the ways, and the meanes" (VI, 161). Because God's mercy cannot be "confined" or determined by exact numbers, Donne concludes, "truly, even those places, which are ordinarily understood of the paucity of the Jews, that shall be saved, will receive a charitable interpretation, and extension" (VI, 162).<sup>13</sup>

At the end of this long section on the quantity of the multitudes who will stand "before the throne and before the lambe," Donne includes a brief discussion of Christ's warning that "the way to heaven is narrow, and the gate straight" (VI, 152; Matt. 7:14). Donne had opened this sermon by warning of the dangers of "that broad, and boundlesse way" of interpretation, which leads to "those various, and manifold senses, which Expositors have multiplied, in the handling of this place" (VI, 150). Yet he recommends too a "charitable interpretation, and extension" of Scriptural text (VI, 162), and speaks with the Psalmist of God's word as a gate, and his "Commandement" as "exceeding broad" (VI, 164; Ps. 119:96). St. John's vision of the new Jerusalem, too, promises that

there are "twelve gates, three to every corner of the world; so that no place can be a stranger, or lacke accesse to it" (VI, 163). If, then, as Donne says, "every wound of [Christ's] admits the whole world," in what sense is Christ spoken of as a "narrow gate?"

Donne's answer to this question functions as a transition between his discussion of numbers and quantities and his concluding section on the quality of eternity. He writes, citing Augustine, that

Christ is not a narrow gate, so as that the greatest man may not come in, but called narrow, because he fits himselfe to the least child, to the simplest soule, that will come-in: not so strait, as that all may not enter, but so strait as that there can come in but one at once.

(VI, 164)

The distinction Donne is making here is parallel to one he makes in his I Corinthians 13:12 sermon.<sup>14</sup> There he explains that though in heaven men will know as God knows (sicut), they will not know as much as (quantum) God knows (VIII, 235). In the Revelation 7:9 sermon, Donne makes a similar distinction as he resolves a series of contradictions based on quantitative categories in terms of quality. The "narrow gate" is not narrow by virtue of how many people it will admit; it is narrow rather so that it may discern, qualitatively, how true and how faithful are those who seek entrance by it. As Donne explains,

in a word, it is not strait to a mans selfe, but if a man will carry his sinfull company, his sinfull affections with him, and his sinfull possessions, it is strait, for then he hath made himselfe a Camel, and to a Camel Heaven gate is as a needles eye.

(VI, 164)

The visual effect of this image is based upon quantity, that because of

its many burdens the camel is literally too large to fit through the gate. But in fact the figure images a truth about quality: as Donne makes clear, it is not that the burdens are too bulky, it is rather that they consist of "sinfull company," "sinfull affections" and "sinfull possessions." Quantity here, then, becomes a metaphoric structure by means of which a truth about quality may be expressed.

That quantity may function as a metaphor for quality is in fact the underlying strategy of the whole sermon. Of the final section of the sermon, in which he had proposed to discuss "the glorious qualities, which shall be imprinted on them, who are saved" (VI, 151), Donne now says that it "must not be a Part, admit it for a Conclusion" (VI, 165). After moving through the metaphor of quantity, he finds himself having to speak directly of the quality of glory, of which he says, "it is beyond our Conclusion, for it is our everlasting endowment in heaven: and if I had kept minutes enough for it, who should have given me words for it?" (VI, 165). That is, no quantity of time could have measured to him the words to express something that is infinite.<sup>15</sup>

Donne's solution to this dilemma of having to conclude what is "beyond our Conclusion" is to paraphrase the words of his text. In doing so, he employs the same structures of negative implication that he used in his exposition of Micah 2:10. For example, he paraphrases the Revelation 7:9 phrase "you shall stand" by writing,

here you stand, but you stand upon Ice, perchance in high and therefore in slippery places ... But when you stand before the Throne, you stand ... before the Lamb: who having not opened his mouth, to save his owne fleece,

when he was in the shearers hand, nor to save his own life, when he was in the slaughterers hand, will much lesse open his mouth to any repentant sinners condemnation.

(VI, 165-6)

He paraphrases further, "you shall stand amicti stolis, (for so it follows) covered with Robes, that is, covered all over: not with Adams fragmentary raggs of fig-leafes, nor with the halfe-garments of Davids servants" (VI, 166). Donne speaks here, as he did in the Micah sermon, of what is not in order that he may better describe something of what is.

Donne continues with this strategy in the closing paragraphs of the sermon, in which he returns briefly to the language of quantity and demonstrates how, while it is not itself truth, it can function as an image of what is true. He speaks of Israel which, after years of wandering in the wilderness, "after the waters of bitterness ... came to seventy (to innumerable) palmes," and compares to this the Church, in which

after these bitter waters, which God shall wipe from all our eies, we come, to the seventy, to the seventy thousand palms; infinite seales, infinite testimonies, infinite extensions, infinite durations of infinite glory.

(VI, 166-7)

For Donne, quantities, exact numbers, weights and measures, are best understood as metaphors: the levels of meaning in metaphoric speech multiply--like the seventy into seventy thousand into infinite numbers of palms--and yield a better conception of the truth that cannot be quantified. Donne closes the sermon by bidding his hearers to

chide me for so lame an expressing of so perfect a state, and when the abundant spirit of God hath given you some measure, of conceiving that glory here,

Almighty God give you, and me, and all, a reall  
 expressing of it, by making us actuall possessors  
 of that Kingdome, which his Sonne, our Saviour Christ  
 Jesus hath purchased for us, with the inestimable  
 price of his incorruptible blood.

(VI, 167)

The only measure that is accurate is the one that God supplies; the only standard of accuracy that pertains is the one, highly imprecise in the context of ordinary figuring, that is reflected in the abundance of the inestimable grace of God.

Prophetic texts are inherently obscure, and because they resist conventional modes of interpretation, they lead many interpreters to despair of ever rendering them clearly. The form of Donne's interpretation, however, circumvents such despair, for it seeks to acknowledge and affirm the essential obscurity of prophetic words, not as an obstacle to understanding, but as a source of consolation for the interpreter, a freedom from the burden of having to uncover a definitive sense for the text in order to perceive truth. "We see through a glass darkly" is thus for Donne an encouragement, especially as it is coupled with the promise of a day in which we will see "face to face," and in which no text will be obscure. Though the "very Letter and Grammar" of a prophecy may speak only of condemnation, Donne demonstrates that it is possible to see beyond "such a literall sense" and so gain "the consolation of many spirituall happinesses" (VI, 62). It is only when the interpreter recognizes that he can never make that text transparent and despairs

even of his own language that he can begin to understand the full sense of the text, and thus allow himself and his hearers its true comfort.

In his sermon on Revelation 20:6, "Blessed is he that hath part in the first resurrection," Donne writes that in that resurrection, the soul

reads without spelling, and knowes without thinking, and concludes without arguing; she is at the end of her race, without running; In her triumph, without fighting; In her Haven, without sayling ... She knowes truly, and easily, and immediately, and entirely, and everlastingly.

(VI, 76)

Spelling and thinking and arguing are but ways to an end. Prophetic texts are made up of letters and words, and give rise to thought and argument--but they also seek to reflect the end to which those ways are directed, and in which the need for them will be done away. Prophecy comments upon the meaning of history, whose measure of time is after all only a measure; it glosses temporal events in terms of another order and seeks to express a truth that is everlasting, beyond all measure.

After his eloquent discourse on the measureless time in which all will "read without spelling," however, in the final section of the Revelation 20:6 sermon Donne begins once again to speak of history and its events. It is the historic life, death and resurrection of Christ that for Donne substantiate the promises of prophecy. The greatest consolation is not in the secure knowledge of past events and evidences, nor in weights and measures, nor even in ecstatic visions of heaven, however eloquently rendered. The truest consolation is in the meeting of history with prophecy, letter with spirit, of knowledge and interpretation

with love and charity, the meeting and fusion of man with God in Christ. The Incarnation alone offers a clear image of the truth that man will someday become fully the image of God that he now only imagines, and will "know without thinking" that language he now only translates.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the traditional notion of the world as text, see Ernst R. Curtius, European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953) 302-47. Winfried Schleiner, in The Imagery of John Donne's Sermons (Providence: Brown University Press, 1970), examines the imagery of the book of the world as it appears in Donne's sermons (94-103).

<sup>2</sup> See Karlfried Froehlich, "'Always to Keep the Literal Sense in Holy Scripture Means to Kill One's Soul': The State of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century," Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977) 20-48. Froehlich outlines the evolution of a double sense of "literal" in fifteenth-century exegetical practice. The "literal sense" could be either negative-- as when it became absurdly literalistic, tied to the human letter of the text--or positive, as when it was seen to reflect a primary, God-intended sense of the text. This second kind of literal, then, admitted also figurative readings, as does Donne's definition of "literal."

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (1958; Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1978) I, iii-iv; Robertson 9-10. Augustine writes, "if we who enjoy and use things, being placed in the midst of things of both kinds, wish to enjoy those things which should

be used, our course will be impeded and sometimes deflected, so that we are retarded in obtaining those things which are to be enjoyed, or even prevented altogether, shackled by an inferior love."

<sup>4</sup> Frank Kermode remarks of allegory that it is "the patristic way of dealing with inexhaustible hermeneutic potential" (The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative [Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1979] ) 44. Donne's exposition of this prophetic text, which acknowledges multiple levels of meaning, may also be seen as a way of exploiting the "hermeneutic potential" of an essentially obscure text.

<sup>5</sup> Donne's application of the word "use" here should be compared with Augustine's specific sense of "use"--see n. 3, above.

<sup>6</sup> In Contrary Music: The Prose Style of John Donne (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), Joan Webber discusses the importance to Donne of the Word (the Logos) in the world, and of the metaphors of book and grammar as used to speak of the physical world. She writes that "Donne is unusual in so stressing that most familiar commonplace, the Book of the Creatures, as continually to imply that man is a word speaking words, a book within a book" (125). Webber interprets this, Donne's "literary view of the world," as being expressive of his desire to see the world in terms of art, or even to see art as the world: "because he assumes that words and combinations of words have a validity nearly equal to that of things, he can make any word or construction or

grammatical term into a symbol as meaningful as anything in the physical world" (128). Winfried Schleiner, however, disagrees, and argues that Webber "goes beyond what can be demonstrated from Donne's use of a traditional analogy to make a traditional point" (Imagery of Donne's Sermons 98). Schleiner stresses that Donne's purpose in using the world-book analogy is theologically didactic. Certainly, in the context of Donne's overall emphasis as a preacher, it seems that to read these analogies in his work as an attempt to narrow the gap between art and life is to make secular an essentially theological rhetoric.

<sup>7</sup> The interdependence of body and soul, the physical and the spiritual, has long been recognized as a theme in Donne's poetry; it has been noted, too, as a concern in the sermons (Evelyn M. Spearing, "Donne's Sermons and Their Relation to his Poetry," Modern Language Review 7 [1912] 47-8). Lindsay A. Mann, "The Marriage Analogue of Letter and Spirit in Donne's Devotional Prose," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 70(1971), suggests that for Donne marriage is a figure for the union between body and soul, and, further, that "the relation within human faculties, a key to Donne's theory of preaching and of poetry, is another important analogue of the conception of marriage. Similarly, reason and faith, and the letter and spirit of Scripture are married" (607).

<sup>8</sup> Potter and Simpson, The Sermons of John Donne, "Introduction" V, 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> The notion of Scripture speaking truth by implication and by concealing it in "what is not" has some affinities with Erich Auerbach's insights concerning the nature of Scriptural narrative. In Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), Auerbach compares Homeric narrative with Biblical narrative:

the personages speak in the Bible story too, but their speech does not serve, as does speech in Homer, to manifest, to externalize thoughts--on the contrary, it serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed. God gives his command in direct discourse, but he leaves his motives and his purpose unexpressed.

(11)

He writes, further, that

the stories are not, like Homer's, simply narrated "reality." Doctrine and promise are incarnate in them and inseparable from them; for that very reason they are fraught with "background" and mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning ... Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon.

(15)

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur discusses the role of enigma and obscure speech for the Christian notion of history in "Christianity and the Meaning of History," in his History and Truth, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1965). Ricoeur says that the evident, progressive history which we see around us is "imbued with another history ... Hence the Christian is the man who lives in the ambiguity of secular history but with the invaluable treasure of a sacred history

whose 'meaning' he perceives" (94). Ricoeur's insights about the relationship between what is and what is not yêt are remarkably congruent with the notions of history and prophecy that Donne expresses:

Faith in meaning, but in a meaning hidden from history, is thus both the courage to believe in a profound significance of the most tragic history ... and a certain rejection of system and fanaticism, a sense of the open. But in return it is essential that hope always remain in direct contact with the dramatic, disquieting aspect of history. It is precisely when hope is no longer the hidden meaning of an apparent nonsense, when it has freed itself from all ambiguity, that it comes back to rational and reassuring progress and heads toward stagnant abstractions. Thus it is necessary to remain attentive to this existential schema of historical ambiguity, situated between the rational schema of progress and the supra-rational scheme of hope.

(96-7)

<sup>11</sup> In "Time and Liturgy in Donne, Crashaw and T.S. Eliot," Mosaic 12 (Winter 1979), P.G. Stanwood discusses liturgy as that which "memorializes or signifies a past action in order to give it a present and continuing significance" (91). Donne, Stanwood argues, "is fascinated in the sermons by time and space, and by their liturgical interpretation" and he "regularly elaborates the contrast between eternity and finite time" (94, 95). Further, "he characteristically links the literal, moral and spiritual levels, managing to fuse them with considerations of time past, time present and time future until meaning and time both reside in simultaneity" (95). Donne's favourite image of the circle--many examples of which are enumerated in Milton Allan

Rugoff's Donne's Imagery: A Study in Creative Sources (1939; New York: Russell & Russell, 1962). 64-73--stands as a hieroglyph of the unity of all time and place in God. In a sermon on Psalm 63:7, Donne writes:

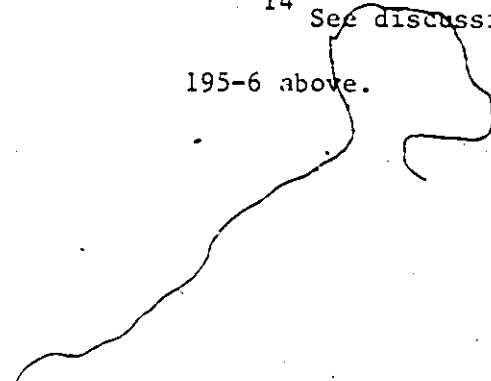
fixe upon God any where, and you shall finde him  
 a Circle; He is with you now, when you fix upon  
 him; He was with you before, for he brought you to  
 this fixation; and he will be with you hereafter,  
 for He is yesterday, and to day, and the same for ever.

(VII, 52)

<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Hope Nicolson, The Breaking of the Circle: Studies in the Effect of the "New Science" upon Seventeenth-Century Poetry, rev. ed., (1960; New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), remarks on the movement of the new science toward quantity, mistaking it for infinity; this was the result, she demonstrates, of science's growing apprehension of the vastness of the world, an apprehension which seems to have blinded it to the qualitative nature of knowledge and the objects of knowledge (155-65).

<sup>13</sup> Donne also discusses the symbolic nature of numbers in Scripture in Essays in Divinity, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), where he comments that "numbring is so proper and peculiar to man, who only can number, that some philosophical Inquisitors have argued doubtfully, whether if man were not, there were any Number" (55).

<sup>14</sup> See discussion of this point in the I Corinthians 13:12 sermon, 195-6 above.



<sup>15</sup> See Gale Carrithers, Jr.'s discussion of the language of Donne's sermons as an attempt to express the inexpressible in Donne at Sermons: A Christian Existential World (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972). Carrithers stresses the existential element in Donne's sermons--and in all sermons--as he states that in Donne's preaching, truth is most accessible "as a way of life" (33). He writes that "the sermon may well of all generic forms be the most fundamentally open-ended or inconclusive or contingent ... Donne clearly knows his sermons are not conclusive, either because all will have to be done over again, or there will be a continuing, incremental effect in 'your meditations'" (30). Walter J. Ong, S.J., in a review of Carrithers' work, agrees that Donne's major preaching concerns are "existential," and adds that the results any sermon aims at are, finally, metarhetorical. ("Gospel, Existence, and Print," Modern Language Quarterly 35 1974, 69).

See also Thomas F. Merrill, who approaches the language of Donne's sermons from a distinctly theological point of view in Christian Criticism: A Study of Literary God-Talk (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1976).

Merrill explains that "God-talk"--a term coined by John Macquarrie--"possesses a clear-cut stylistic distinctiveness that is physically observable" (44). Merrill argues that, "with its logical impropriety, its resistance to traditional patterns of conduct, its exploitation of positive ambiguity for hermeneutic potential, and its overall commitment to a non-empirical logical authority, God-talk inevitably inspires bafflement, confusion, mystery and a sense of the half-understood" (94).

While Merrill's contention that speech about God is qualitatively different from speech about ordinary realities, and his recognition that Donne's language exploits paradox and ambiguity are helpful, he overstates his case. In their emphasis upon the "open-endedness" of the sermons, both Merrill and Carrithers tend to neglect the overall context of Donne's preaching. Donne is, as Helen Gardner emphasizes, concerned with clarity and opposed to false and misleading rhetoric (In Defence of the Imagination [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982] 90). There is an enormous difference between paradox, which (as Roslie Colie points out in Paradoxia Epidemica 27-8) images and teaches truth, and mere confusion, perplexity and contingency. Truth, for Donne, is not contingent; when he cannot express a truth, he says so.

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